

George Frederick Bristow – America’s First Great Classical Composer
by Andrew Hartman

The history of classical music in America in the 19th century has often received short shrift from music historians. The received wisdom has been that American classical music began with the Second New England School, or “Boston Six”. This group of composers, educated in European (primarily German) music schools and using European models, created the first compositions worthy to stand with their European counterparts. However, their music was completely derivative and did not reflect a truly “American” style, crafted on native musical influences. As late as the 1890s Antonin Dvorak, during his American sojourn, echoed this sentiment to a reporter. Thus it was left to a new generation of composers in the 20th century to forge a recognizably American classical style. These composers, including Gershwin, Carpenter, Ives, Copland, and Bernstein, used elements of American folk, musical theater, jazz, Native-American and African-American music to create the American classical tradition. This narrative has been so ingrained in the literature that few question it ... but is it accurate? Were there really no distinctively American classical composers in the 19th century? Were the “Boston Six” (Horatio Parker, George Chadwick, Amy Beach, Edward MacDowell, John Knowles Paine, Arthur Foote) the first professional American composers?

Obviously, this article’s title suggests that I do not totally share the standard interpretation of America’s classical timeline. Yet the claims for George Bristow are not meant to be provocative or controversial. They merely reflect my considered opinion within a particular definitive context of what constitutes a great American classical composer. There are certainly other candidates who could lay claim to the title. Anthony Philip Heinrich is one. Heinrich was born in Bohemia in 1781. In 1810, he was stranded in Boston by the loss of his economic fortune precipitated by the Napoleonic Wars. He decided to stay in America and make a living with his music. He is considered the first “professional” American composer and was named by one critic “the Beethoven of America”. Father Heinrich, as he came to be called in old age, had an important impact on early American musical life. He was chairman of the committee that formed America’s first professional orchestra in 1842, now known as The New York Philharmonic. As early as 1817 he gave either the first or second (accounts vary) performance of a Beethoven symphony in America. Heinrich’s unusual compositions frequently referenced the American wilderness and natural themes, including his most famous piece, “The Ornithological Combat of Kings” which has been recorded. Although he had some success as a composer, including some concerts devoted to his own works, he died a neglected figure in 1861. Despite his undoubted importance to American music, Heinrich’s late arrival in America (he was thirty years old), his lack of composition in most of the traditional classical forms, and his lack of enduring influence preclude him from the distinction I have claimed for Bristow.

A second candidate would certainly be Stephen Foster. The “Father of American Music” was born in Pittsburgh in 1826 and spent his whole life in America. Foster wrote over two hundred songs including some of the most famous ever written in the USA. It is safe to say that there are few Americans who don’t know his work, and songs such as “Oh Susanna”, “Beautiful Dreamer” and “My Old Kentucky Home” (still sung at the Kentucky Derby every year), are so well known they have achieved the status of American folk songs. In terms of popularity, Foster is certainly the first great American *composer*, but his work consisted almost exclusively of songs, thus disqualifying him as a *classical* composer in the generally accepted definition.

A third candidate to be considered is William Henry Fry. He was born in Philadelphia in 1813, the son of a newspaper publisher. By the 1830s he was writing overtures, and by the 1840s he was composing operas. His opera “Leonora” is considered to be the first grand opera composed by an American, and it had a run of twelve performances in Philadelphia. Fry also composed several programmatic symphonies including the “Santa Claus” symphony, and “Niagara” symphony which have been recorded. Four of his symphonies were played by the French conductor Louis Antoine Jullien during his tour of America with his orchestra in 1853-1854. Jullien represents a point of

contact between Fry and Bristow, as Jullien also played Bristow's music (including movements of the "Jullien" symphony that Bristow dedicated to him). It was during Jullien's tour that a controversy between Fry and two newspaper critics over the failure of American orchestras to play and encourage American composers dragged Bristow into the controversy and led to his temporary resignation from the New York Philharmonic.

In 1853 Fry gave a series of lectures on music and made the following statement. *"Until this Declaration in Art shall be made – until American composers shall discard their foreign liveries and found an American school – and until the American public shall learn to support American artists, Art will not become indigenous to this country, but will only exist as a feeble exotic, and we shall continue to be provincial in Art. The American composer should not allow the name of Beethoven, or Handel, or Mozart to prove an eternal bugbear to him, nor should he pay them reverence; he should only reverence his Art, and strike out manfully and independently into untrodden realms, just as his nature and inspirations may invite him, else he can never achieve lasting renown."*

Fry's championing of American composers and his corpus of works which includes operas, symphonies and other standard classical genres certainly secures his place in American musical history as one of our first classical composers. However, the music of Fry which I have heard does not to my mind rise to the level of quality to place him in the front rank of composers. Which brings us to the subject of this article, George Frederick Bristow.

George Frederick Bristow was born in Brooklyn, New York (now part of New York City, but then a separate city), in 1825. His father William, a recent immigrant from England, played the piano and clarinet, as well as doing some conducting. He was his son's first teacher and instructed the young prodigy in piano, violin, counterpoint, harmony and composition. A family visit to England in 1832-1833 allowed the boy if briefly to study with Sir George McFarren. By the age of seventeen, young George Bristow joined the newly formed New York Philharmonic in the first violin section. With a short hiatus in the 1850s, he would remain there until 1879. This position proved invaluable to Bristow, exposing him to the greatest European compositions, and the great conductors and musicians who worked with the orchestra during these years. Bristow played under music directors Ureli Corelli Hill (who studied with Louis Spohr), Theodore Eisfeld, Carl Bergmann and Leopold Damrosch. A review of the Philharmonic's archives reveals programs including Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Weber, Spohr, Hummel, Mozart, and many other top tier composers, giving Bristow an invaluable grounding in the classics, unique to any American composer up to that time.

The indefatigable Bristow not only played with the orchestra for over thirty-five years, he also became conductor of two choral societies, The Mendelssohn Union and The New York Harmonic Society, as well as several church choirs. In 1854 Bristow also commenced a long career teaching music in the New York Public School system. His legacy was such that even today, there is a "George F. Bristow school", Public School #134 in New York City. Bristow also performed in the orchestra that accompanied Jenny Lind on her legendary tour of America in the 1850s. Lastly, he founded three different societies to promote and protect the interests of American composers and musicians. With all of this feverish musical activity, he somehow found time to compose an impressive corpus of well over one hundred works including two operas, five symphonies and oratorios on a grand scale not previously seen in America.

An inspection of Bristow's compositions reveals that fully one third were choral pieces, including many short or occasional works for his own choirs. There is also a sprinkling of chamber works, a few of the then fashionable potpourris on operatic themes, some overtures, over a dozen songs, over two dozen pieces for solo piano, and some pedagogical piece.

His most notable achievements include the symphony # 2 ("Jullien") op. 24, the symphony # 3 in F Sharp Minor op. 26, the "Arcadian" symphony op. 50, the "Niagara" symphony op. 62, the opera "Rip van Winkle" op. 22, and the "Oratorio of Daniel" op. 42. All of these compositions exhibit a grand scope, melodic gift, professional craftsmanship and brilliant orchestration previously unknown in America. Most of them also pre-date all but a handful of early pieces by the "Boston Six", primarily by the eldest of that group, John Knowles Paine, who is typically mentioned as the first outstanding American classical composer.

The Major Recorded Works of George Frederick Bristow

Much of Bristow's oeuvre remains unrecorded. Fortunately however, we do have recordings of three of his five symphonies, his grand "Oratorio of Daniel", the "Winter's Tale" overture and the overture to his opera "Rip van Winkle." Let us examine these works in greater detail.

Symphony # 2 (Jullien) – This symphony owes its genesis to the tour of America by the French conductor Louis Antoine Jullien. In 1853-1854 Jullien took the unusual step of touring America with his own orchestra, and commissioning and playing works by American composers. In gratitude for the commission, Bristow offered the symphony's dedication to the conductor, who played movements from it on his tour. Bristow put aside composition on his ambitious opera "Rip van Winkle", based on the story by Washington Irving, to fulfill the Jullien commission. The opera had its premiere in 1855.

The symphony # 2 opens with stormy chords that grab one's attention immediately. A brooding opening theme commences in the orchestra's lower registers and is followed by a contrasting lyrical second theme. A classic sonata form movement follows with a finely crafted development section. Obviously Bristow knew his Beethoven from years of playing him with the New York Philharmonic. There are moments in this movement that recall elements of Beethoven's early symphonies.

Rather than a Beethovenian scherzo, Bristow opts for a delightful, dance-like Allegretto second movement with two contrasting sections. The composer reduces his forces here, silencing the brass and striving for a chamber orchestra feel. The grand Adagio third movement was considered by critics, and by Jullien, the highlight of the symphony. It consists of three appealing themes, each fully developed and explored. Bristow the melodist comes to the fore here. After this bucolic movement Bristow storms into a thrilling finale, opening with a driving, rhythmic motif quickly contrasted by a more lyrical, Mendelssohnian second theme. After the two themes are repeated, Bristow launches his development, building up the momentum. After a pause, the composer launches a "Grandioso" march theme which alternates with the driving opening theme of the movement, before combining with it for a thrilling conclusion.

Overture to "Rip van Winkle" – The opera "Rip van Winkle" was premiered in 1855, at a time when American opera was in its infancy. The composer revised the work in 1878, shortening the overture and making other significant changes. It is the 1855 version of the overture which concerns us here. It begins with a tripartite A-B-A slow section which includes a pompous fanfare for the "A" section and a melody used in an aria from Act II in the "B" section. A lively sonata form Allegro section follows including three charming themes, most likely quotations from the 1855 version of the opera. The published score is of the 1878 version. This delightful overture makes one lament the lack of a complete recording of the opera. One would think this a perfect project for the Naxos American Classics series.

Winter's Tale Overture – In 1856, after finishing his symphony and opera, Bristow turned his energies to composing this overture as a curtain-raiser for a theatrical production in New York of Shakespeare's fanciful play. The overture is written as a series of vignettes describing different scenes in the play, and contains a wealth of melodies and inspired orchestration. It begins with a memorable melody that gets the audience in a receptive frame of mind for what will follow. This is succeeded by a classic storm music section (think Rossini), a delicate melody in the woodwinds, a fanfare like theme complete with fife and drum, and a yearning clarinet melody. This bubbly piece is then rounded off by an accelerando which leads to the curtain being raised. The overture reveals Bristow's melodic gifts and orchestration at their best.

The Symphony # 2, "Rip van Winkle" overture, and "Winter's Tale" overture are all on a delightful disk on the New World Records label conducted by Rebecca Miller with the Royal Northern Sinfonia.

Symphony # 3 in F Sharp Minor – op. 26 – In 1858, Bristow composed his third symphony, the last he would compose for several years. He would spend the next decade focusing on oratorios and other choral works. The sonata-form opening movement starts with a striding Allegro theme. Then the solo harp (which will play an important role in the symphony) introduces a contrasting theme. The two themes are repeated and then developed, before the harp returns to bring the movement to an unexpectedly delicate close. The Nocturno second movement is a noble Andante of great beauty with many felicitous orchestral touches. The Scherzo is subtitled "The Butterfly's Frolic" and owes much to Mendelssohn's elfin music.

Mendelssohn was an extremely popular composer with the conservative New York Philharmonic audiences and American music critics of the mid-nineteenth century. His frequent appearances on Philharmonic programs certainly reflects this. His symphonies were widely played and his oratorios were considered the gold standard for "modern" large scale choral works. Indeed when the New York music critics wanted to give the highest praise possible to Bristow's "Oratorio of Daniel" they compared it to Mendelssohn's "Elijah". Bristow obviously knew Mendelssohn's music well and was greatly influenced by it. The sonata-form finale opens with a dark-hued melody that seems to take us to a Walpurgisnacht revel. A lighter contrasting theme follows. Then, in an early and progressive use of the cyclical symphonic form, the solo harp returns, recalling the opening movement. The themes are then repeated and developed before a rousing finish. The Symphony # 3 has been recorded by Neeme Järvi and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra on the Chandos label.

Symphony # 4 "Arcadian" – This symphony from 1872 has an interesting genesis. Bristow had recently completed the large-scale cantata "The Pioneer" for soprano, bass, chorus and orchestra. At the same time he received a commission from The Brooklyn Philharmonic (of whom Bristow was a member, as he was of the New York Philharmonic), for a symphony. This was apparently the first symphony commissioned by an American orchestra from an American composer. Bristow jumped at the opportunity, but it certainly wasn't for financial reasons as the impoverished orchestra could only pay him \$100. Wanting to fulfill the commission quickly, and possibly considering that the paltry sum involved excused him from delivering a fully original work, he decided to reuse music from "The Pioneer". Since the music from his cantata was programmatic, Bristow hit on the idea of a programmatic symphony, almost a symphonic poem in four movements. He had recently had exposure to such a program symphony when the New York Philharmonic had played Raff's Symphony # 3 "Im Walde".

The opening movement is titled "Emigrants Journey Across the Plains." It opens with a solo viola meant to evoke the forbidding prairie landscape the pioneers had to cross. After this melody is fully stated by the orchestra, a lyrical second theme arrives as the hope of the pioneers for a new life lifts

their spirits. Bristow employs his typical sonata form structure but ends the first movement with a return to the stark solo viola as the exhausted pioneers stop for the night.

The second movement is titled "Halt on the Prairie". This Andante Religioso uses the melody from Tallis' Evening Hymn to depict the spiritual gratitude of the settlers as they give thanks to the Lord for seeing them safely through the day and for the anticipated blessings of the new land.

The third movement is titled "Indian War Dance and Attack by Indians". Here Bristow pulls out all the orchestral stops to graphically depict the whooping Indians as they conduct their war dance. There are whirling strings, pounding drums and the tinkle of the triangle as the natives attack. A second theme depicts the heroic settlers as they bravely resist the natives, before the Indians resume their attack. It must be said however that Bristow's Indian attack is more light-hearted than bloodthirsty, as if the composer is winking at the listeners and reassuring them that all will be well. It is interesting to think that this symphony premiered four years before Custer's last stand at The Little Bighorn, so the horrors of the Indian Wars for both sides were very immediate to the audience. Bristow would have thought it in bad taste to be too realistic.

The finale is titled "Arrival at the New Home, Rustic Festivities and Dancing". After fighting off the Indians, the settlers move on and arrive at their new home. A joyous theme welcomes them which develops into a lively dance of celebration. This enables Bristow to end his symphony on a cheerful note, despite the serious struggles depicted earlier.

The "Arcadian" symphony is program music at its best. There is always a whiff of the theater about Bristow's music, and I say that in a complimentary way. Music may serve many purposes including intellectual reflection, solace from grief, religious adoration and emotional inspiration but its primary purpose is entertainment. Bristow never forgets this. After its premiere in Brooklyn, the New York Philharmonic played it, and Asger Hamerik programmed it in Baltimore the following year. This symphony, along with "The Pioneer", is also his most American piece to date, evoking characters, landscapes and feelings peculiar to the American experience. He would not write another symphony until the 1890s when his choral "Niagara" symphony would be premiered shortly before his death. Regrettably the "Niagara" symphony has not been commercially recorded. The "Arcadian" symphony was recorded by the noted American conductor Karl Krueger, with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and issued under the auspices of Krueger's "Society for the Preservation of the American Musical Heritage". Perhaps only the Louisville Orchestra's First Edition Recordings has done more for American classical music recording.

The Oratorio of Daniel – Bristow's oratorio based on the stories of the book of Daniel, and premiered in 1867, was destined to be the greatest triumph of his career. The libretto was by the composer's friend William Hardenbrook. It included four stories from Daniel, interspersed with excerpts from the Psalms, quotations from the prophets, and some newly composed verse by the librettist. The reviewers were ecstatic in their praise. The New York Herald reviewer wrote "As the handiwork of an American composer, The Oratorio of Daniel reflects the highest credit to our country in the realms of art, and there are few, if any, composers in Europe at the present day who are capable of writing anything equal to it." The New York World critic declared "Daniel is by far the most masterly work that an American composer has yet produced, and we judge it will rapidly make its way into the accepted repertory ... That it is a remarkable opus and destined to bring the author's name prominently into the list of those whom we delight to term "great living composers" seems clear enough." Several critics compared it not unfavorably to Mendelssohn's "Elijah". One can sense an element of national pride in these reviews, but it is clear that Bristow's work created a sensation.

The Oratorio is divided into two parts. Part One includes three sections, "The Babylonian Captivity", "Nebuchadnezzar's Dream" and "The Fiery Furnace". Part Two includes "Nebuchadnezzar's Second Dream", "Nebuchadnezzar is Turned into a Beast" and "Nebuchadnezzar Regains His Sanity".

"The Babylonian Captivity" opens with an orchestral introduction depicting the captivity of Israel. A somber and portentous section depicts the sufferings of the Israelites. This leads to the first chorus "By the Rivers of Babylon" as the Israelites lament their fate and, in a quicker section, question how they will ask the Lord to rescue them. A recitative and aria follows for Azariah, one of the four noble Israelite boys, along with Daniel, Meshach, and Abednego called to Babylon by the King to be instructed in court practices. Azariah sings that Israel must return to the Lord and not abandon him for the wicked splendors of the Babylonian kingdom. A final chorus by the Israelites reinforces the idea that Israel's salvation can only be gained by being true to the Lord.

The second section begins with a brief recitative between Daniel and Arioch, an advisor to Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel declares he will speak to the King and gain his favor by advising him. Then the four noble boys sing a quartet imploring the Lord to help them gain salvation. A brief recitative informs us that an angel appeared to Daniel in a night vision. In the following aria the angel sings that Daniel will be touched by a light from God and will abide with the most high. The Lord will deliver him. In this beautiful aria Bristow captures the wonder and awe of the Lord's intervention.

King Nebuchadnezzar then asks Daniel to interpret a disturbing dream he had the previous night that none of his wise men were able to decipher. Daniel in his aria recounts the dream of a statue with a head of gold, arms of silver, thighs of bronze, and feet of clay. He declares that it means the kingdom of Babylon will fall and that only the kingdom of God will endure forever. Bristow captures Daniel's blessing of the name of God with a beautiful melody that is most affecting. The King is so impressed he makes Daniel his top advisor and decrees that henceforth the God of the Israelites must be respected in the kingdom. The four Israelite nobles sing a quartet thanking God for his mercy and protection, and the chorus of Israelites rounds out the section with a soaring chorus declaring that those that trust in the Lord will always find salvation.

The third section begins with a recitative by a herald declaring that all must bow down to a statue of the King or be thrown into a fiery furnace. A chorus of Babylonians then sings the praises of Nebuchadnezzar and his golden statue. A chorus of Chaldeans then informs the King that there are some who refuse to bow to idols. The King angrily declares that the three Israelite friends of Daniel be punished. The defiant young men declare that God will deliver them, but even if he did not they would not bow down to a statue. The angry Babylonians enthusiastically endorse the punishment for the unbelievers who do not worship the King. In the furious chorus "Cast them into the Fire" Bristow shows his dramatic skill.

The Israelites are cast into the fire, but over shimmering strings and delicate winds an angel appears and in a tender arioso comforts the men that they will not be burned, but will instead be saved by the Lord. The amazed King cannot believe his eyes. "Didn't we cast them into the fire?" he asks. How can it be that they have survived, and who is the fourth who walks with them? He bows down to the power of the Lord who has delivered those who believed in him. In a final chorus the people praise God's power and loving kindness, bringing Part One to a conclusion.

Part Two opens with a recitative in which King Nebuchadnezzar narrates to Daniel a second disturbing dream he had. The King trusts Daniel's interpretive vision to give him an honest interpretation. Daniel declares that the dream foretells that the King will be driven from his kingdom, lose his reason and live among the beasts until he can accept that there is only one King, and that is the Lord. In a forcefully striding aria, Daniel sings that the King must break off his sins and show mercy to the poor if he is ever to gain peace and tranquility.

Over a hushed organ line, the chorus quietly intones that the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. This quote from the Psalms shows that what is most pleasing to the Lord is not lavish material sacrifices, but an abasement of one's spirit before God's might till true humility is achieved. The King however is not ready for this and he haughtily declares "Is this not great Babylon that I have built?" His answer from the angel is a driving aria, "I am the Lord thy God." Bristow's forceful melodic line here leaves no doubt who he thinks is the stronger in this confrontation.

A stormy chorus with frequent brass fanfares follows as the people sing "Drive him from men and let him dwell with the beasts of the fields." A duet between the two angels rejoices over the broken power of Lucifer whose wickedness has been cut to the ground. Bristow here exhibits some lovely intertwining of the voices in this finely crafted number.

A brief orchestral section follows, quoting the "I am the Lord thy God" melody, then the King finally acknowledges the error of his ways. He declares that he has lifted up his eyes to the Lord, has found forgiveness and regained his reason and place among men. In a penitent aria he blesses the never ending majesty of the Lord's kingdom and sings his worshipful praises of him. He who had walked in pride has abased himself before the Lord and now praises and extols the King of Heaven.

The final chorus, in a suitably majestic vein, declares that even the mighty must give unto the Lord what is his due.

There is little doubt that "The Oratorio of Daniel" is Bristow's finest and most ambitious work. He labored over it for two years and its ecstatic reception from audiences and critics alike was his greatest triumph as a composer. The subject matter of "Daniel", that of the hubris of the powerful giving way to humility, must have been particularly resonant with the composer, who had suffered the arrogance of critics and European immigrant musicians because of his American background.

The "Oratorio of Daniel" was recorded by the Albany Pro Musica (APM) at a live concert in 1997. It was subsequently issued on a two CD set by the group. The credit for the realization of this project goes to APM's late music director and conductor, David Griggs-Janower. He tirelessly edited and prepared a performing edition of "Daniel" from a microfilm copy of the manuscript held by the New York Public Library. He also organized, cast and conducted the performance at the Troy Music Hall in New York. I purchased my copy of the set from APM. It is very well performed by orchestra, chorus, and soloists, and the sound is good.

As of my last enquiry, the APM had exhausted their stock of the CD, but it would certainly be in their interest to produce more copies if demand warranted. For that reason I would suggest that interested parties contact Albany Pro Musica and request that they do just that (<http://www.albanypromusica.org/>).

There are obviously many more fascinating works by Bristow to be discovered. Chief among these are the opera "Rip van Winkle", the oratorio "Praise to God", the "Niagara" choral symphony # 5, and a Mass in C Major. Although we are lacking recordings of these works, what we do have is certainly enough to place Bristow at the forefront of American classical composers of the mid-nineteenth century. His compositions, taken with his years as a performer, conductor, educator, choral director and spokesperson for American musicians make him richly deserve the title "America's First Great Classical Composer."

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