

Stanfordian Thoughts
A periodical series of reflections on recorded and unrecorded works by Stanford
by Christopher Howell

4. Irish Rhapsody No. 5

Stanford completed his Fifth Irish Rhapsody, op.147, on 11 February 1917. It was “dedicated to the Irish Guards (officers and men) and to the memory of the Colonel-in-Chief, the late Earl Roberts”. Details of the striking, colourful and sometimes controversial career of “Colonel Bobs” can easily be found. Stanford’s own programme note for the premiere at the Royal Albert Hall on 18 March 1917, conducted by Sir Landon Ronald, stressed the march-like nature of the outer sections¹. The first section makes use of “The Return from Fingal”, a song from the Petrie collection which Stanford had included in *Songs of Old Ireland* (1882). Alfred Perceval Graves’ words for this arrangement begin:

*Moan ye winds, ye caverns call,
“Orro, orro!” to our sorrow,
While we bear ’neath one black pall
Brian, Murrough, from Fingal.*

In this arrangement, Stanford gives the music a steady, implacable tread.

The second melody in the first section of the Rhapsody is from Moore’s *Melodies*. Thomas Moore’s words begin:

*Oh for the swords of former time!
Oh for the men who bore them,
When, arm’d for Right, they stood sublime,
And tyrants crouch’d before them.*

Stanford’s setting of this in *Moore’s Melodies Restored*, op.60 (1894) is a forthright, chordal one.

The central section, described by Stanford as a “dirge”, also uses two themes. The first, called “O’Connor’s Lament” in the Petrie collection, appears in *Irish Songs and Ballads* (1893) with words by A.P. Graves beginning:

*Sweet Isle, O how our hearts uleap,
Once more to mark thee mount the deep,
Unfolding to greet our gaze
Haunt after haunt of bygone days.*

Stanford’s voice and piano setting, which he also orchestrated, is tenderly appropriate. In the Rhapsody he mainly uses the haunting opening motive as a mood setter, while he quotes and develops his second theme more fully. This is “The Green Woods of Truigha”, the last of *Moore’s Melodies Restored*. It did not appear in Moore’s original publication, for which the music had been arranged by Sir John Stevenson. Moore added it as a postscript in memory of Stevenson. The poem begins:

Silence is in our festal halls,

¹ Jeremy Dibble: *Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician*, Oxford University Press 2002, p.437.

*Sweet Son of Song! thy course is o'er;
In vain on thee sad Erin calls,
Her minstrel's voice responds no more.*

This tune must be a front runner for the most beautiful of all Irish melodies. Stanford's voice and piano setting is simple but moving. Among his very last works was a highly atmospheric version for violin and piano (c.1923). In the Rhapsody, after the powerful, colourful sounds of the previous section have died down, he introduces it on the solo string quartet, to unforgettable effect.

The last section of the Rhapsody makes further use of "The Return from Fingal" and "Sweet Isle", as well as introducing another, more jubilant melody, "Michael Hoy", again from *Moore's Melodies*. Moore's last verse is probably closest to the world situation in 1917:

*Like clouds of night the Northmen came,
O'er the valley of Almhin low'ring;
While onward moved, in the light of its fame,
That banner of Erin, tow'ring.
With the mingling shock ring cliff and rock,
While, rank on rank, the invaders die:
And the shout that last o'er the dying pass'd
Was "Victory! Victory!" The Finian's cry!*

Sir Landon Ronald thought enough of the Fifth Rhapsody to conduct it again in Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool in November 1917, while Stanford himself conducted it in Bournemouth on 22 May 1918. It also had an outing in the United States, where it was heard on 7 June 1917 in the third of the concerts comprising the annual festival of the Lichfield County Choral Union. This festival was entirely sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. Carl Stoeckel and was held in the "Music Shed" on their estate in Norfolk, Connecticut. 75 members of the New York Philharmonic were drafted in and admission was free. The first concert of the 1917 festival was conducted by Frederick Stock. Arthur Mees took over for the other two. Present in the audience at the third concert – which also included the American première of Grainger's "The Warriors" – was Walter Damrosch. Damrosch had been performing Stanford's Irish Symphony with a certain assiduity for a good many years, but does not seem to have been inspired to take up the new Rhapsody. The commendation for the work by the critic of *The Sun*² ended, indeed, with something of a backhander.

Sir Charles Villiers Stanford contributed a Piano Concerto to the Norfolk festival two years ago and is well known to American music lovers. His new Rhapsody is dedicated to the Irish Guard in memory of its first Colonel, no less a personage than "Little Bobs of Badahur", as Mulvaney called him, but known in the records of fame as Lord Roberts ...

Of Sir Charles Villiers Stanford's new rhapsody it can only be said that the old melodies are still beautiful and that the orchestration is very good. A suave and comfortable composition, it will well serve as a filler in miscellaneous programme.

The Rhapsody has never been published, but a score and parts could be hired and it turned up occasionally over the years. The BBC Genome site shows that it was broadcast from Belfast on 4 March 1934, conducted by Peter Montgomery, and on the national programme on 25 February 1938 when Leslie Woodgate, mainly remembered as a chorus master, conducted. Post-war, it was given

² *The Sun*, New York, 10 June 1917

on 17 March (St. Patrick's Day) 1960 by Vilem Tausky, who introduced it as well as conducting it. Could Richard Itter have taped this, I wonder?

Next came the flurry of interest in Stanford from the 1980s which resulted in many revivals by the Ulster orchestra and BBC Northern Ireland, as well as the Chandos series of the complete Symphonies and Irish Rhapsodies. It is interesting to discover that, while Chandos had Vernon Handley conduct throughout, several other conductors were involved in the BBC project. Handley's August 1986 recording of the Fifth Rhapsody, for example, was preceded by a broadcast on 16 April 1986, repeated on 18 June, in which Maurice Handford conducted the Ulster orchestra. Handford conducted it again on 13 January 1988. Once the Handley recording was out, it was broadcast periodically, while further broadcasts took place under Pierre-André Valade, on 25 October 2006, and by Howard Shelley on 23 June 2014, also with the Ulster Orchestra. These present thoughts have been stimulated by the opportunity to compare the Shelley performance with the Handley recording.

I have quoted parts of the poems that originally accompanied Stanford's piano and voice settings of these tunes because I believe they are inseparable from the character of the melodies as conceived by Stanford. They give a clear indication of the proper tempi, and the reader who has the Handley recording on his shelves can easily test whether the words fit the tempo and character he gives the music. I have already discussed this question in my [review](#) of the Chandos set of the Rhapsodies. I stated there that Stanford's own rudimentary 1916 recording of part of the First Rhapsody seems to support my view that it should go considerably slower, and I indicated a preference for Nicholas Braithwaite's Lyrita recording of the Fourth. Whatever you think of Handley's performances, you must surely agree that it is a great pity, in view of the potentially popular appeal of this music, that alternatives are so few on the ground. The only development since 2004 has been the appearance of the far preferable version of the Third by Gemma Rosefield and Andrew Manze on Hyperion – see my [review](#). So does the Howard Shelley performance, if you can access it, improve the situation with the Fifth?

Out of fairness, it should be said that Handley has the orchestra play very well and is responsive to the colours of Stanford's orchestration. His straight-down-the-line, strict-tempo approach has a formal elegance which some might feel is more than enough for the work in hand. "Suave and comfortable" it certainly is.

If Shelley goes beyond this, it is not so much a matter of tempi, since his performance is longer by a mere few seconds. Without playing fast and loose with the music, he is much more imaginative in shaping and colouring the various sections. He makes the music tell a story, he gives it a moving, poetic dimension beyond Handley's grasp. He also shows that the way to treat Stanford's sometimes exuberant brass writing may not be to contain it within decent limits, as Handley does, but to give it an almost Berliozian ring. I still think the first section is too fast, but Shelley finds more space around his tempi, is freer as he moves from one section to the next. It is time he was engaged to conduct some Stanford on disc.

Since writing the above, I have had the opportunity to hear the performance conducted by Pierre-André Valade. Though the broadcast date was 25 October 2006, the actual concert took place on 22 October. I have decided to present this as a postscript, rather than unpick what I have already written to incorporate a discussion of the Valade performance, because I feel that, while it is extremely interesting, I would not urge readers to seek it out in preference to Shelley or even Handley.

The first point of interest lies in the conductor's background. Pierre-André Valade is French, born in 1959. His website lists a large repertoire consisting substantially of contemporary music. It is difficult to know whether his forays into classical and romantic music represent specific interests, or whether they simply indicate a willingness to take on pieces that orchestral managements or broadcasting stations ask him to do. Be that as it may, his repertoire of music that might provide a key to interpreting Stanford reads somewhat curiously. To start with, he may be the only conductor whose repertoire contains Brahms and Stanford in equal measure – one short piece each. In Brahms's case, this is the Haydn Variations. Similarly, apart from some concerto accompaniments, his Mendelssohn is limited to The Hebrides. He has conducted just one symphony by Schumann (no. 2). Working backwards, he has conducted one symphony by Schubert (no. 5), two by Beethoven (nos. 5 and 8), none by Mozart, one by Haydn (no. 90). Of the nationalist schools roughly comparable to Stanford, he has conducted Dvořák's fifth and Svendsen's first, no Tchaikovsky or Grieg except concerto accompaniments, no Sibelius. Obviously, this does not mean that he does not know most of the "standard" symphonies and other orchestral works that he has not conducted, nor that he does not wish ever to conduct them. Obviously, the word has got around with orchestras and managements that he's a contemporary man.

All the same, I think the fact that Valade's basic repertoire is totally different from Handley's or Shelley's does impact on the performance. This is the sort of interpretation René Leibowitz might have given us. In the first section, Valade goes for a racy, pacy manner. Even more than Shelley, he stresses Stanford's brass writing and also finds spots of orchestral colour elsewhere that the other two keep well in check. The result is almost an Irish Witches' Sabbath. All the evidence is that Stanford did not intend this, but it is interesting to find that the music can be tweaked so as to take such a view. Valade is then very free with the central section. Sometimes he moves ahead passionately, at times he draws back. In general, he seems to want to extract a degree of cinematic lushness from the music. Stanford breathes purer Irish air in either of the other performances. Valade then whips up the last section, but then holds back for the final return of "Sweet Isle".

In the last resort, I have to say that this is unidiomatic, but I shall return to it. It has plenty of kick and it reveals unusual aspects of the music. It also suggests that, if and when Stanford is played as often as he ought to be, his music might prove amenable to a surprisingly wide range of interpretation.

Christopher Howell © 2018

Previous articles

1. [Phaudrig Crohoore: An Irish Ballad for chorus and orchestra, op.62](#)
2. [Chamber Music with Strings](#)
3. [The Second Violin Concerto: Did the full score ever exist?](#)