

Introduction

Jeremy Dibble
Durham University
Email: jeremy.dibble@durham.ac.uk

With the death of William Sterndale Bennett in 1875, Britain mourned the passing of a much-respected musician, teacher and composer. Indeed, such was the high regard in which he was held that his friend, colleague and one-time fellow student, Sir George Macfarren (who succeeded him both as Principal of the Royal Academy of Music and Professor of Music at Cambridge University), marked the passing of his colleague with a specially composed orchestral *Idyll in Memory of William Sterndale Bennett*, performed by the Philharmonic Society in July of that year. Contemporary journals also paid tribute to him, mainly featuring authors who had known him or who had been taught by him at the RAM and he was honoured in concerts nationwide, particularly through his piano music and orchestral overtures. While Bennett remained a highly respected figure, his music fell increasingly into neglect. In 1903, as part of major series of biographical articles featuring seminal figures in British musical life, the editor of *The Musical Times*, Frederick George Edwards, issued a major biographical account of the composer in three parts in May, June and August of 1903. Though previous articles had outlined Bennett's career, this was the first significant account of his life and achievements together with a list of works. Edwards's account, however, was rendered largely redundant by the publication of the biography of Bennett by his son James Robert Sterndale Bennett in 1907, who had been working on it since 1881,¹ a work full of detail but, typical of the time in which it was issued, without references to sources. This still remains the only biography of the composer, in itself an indication of the *lacuna* which exists in current literature and the need for a modern, comprehensive critical study. In the same year as the publication of J. R. Sterndale Bennett's work, Ernest Walker's short appraisal of Bennett in *A History of Music in England* established the *topos* of Bennett's early promise and the plaudits he received from Mendelssohn and Schumann but one of unrealized potential. 'A classicist in his failings as well as his virtues',² Walker's verdict remained unaltered in Westrup's revised and enlarged edition of 1952. For the centenary in 1916, Bennett's most fervent proselyte was Charles Villiers Stanford who produced a lengthy article for *The Musical Quarterly*,³ drawing chiefly on (and personally acknowledging) J. R. Sterndale Bennett's earlier biography. Writing in his capacity as Professor of Music at Cambridge, and a later successor to Bennett in that office, Stanford had known and admired Bennett in the early 1870s as an undergraduate at the university. His article was, in part, a recollection of those

¹ J. R. Sterndale Bennett, *The Life of William Sterndale Bennett* (Cambridge: University Press, 1907), i.

² E. Walker, *A History of Music in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 280.

³ C. V. Stanford, 'William Sterndale Bennett: 1816–1875', *The Musical Quarterly* 2/4 (Oct. 1916), 628–657.

impressionable years, but, more significantly, it pleaded for a fresh assessment of Bennett's contribution to British music in a climate which was itself prone to re-evaluation, perhaps because of the oppressive political condition of the First World War, when feelings of nationalism were more exaggerated, but also because the broader retrospect of musical creativity in Britain was now such that Bennett's music had a new and more authoritative resonance. As Stanford remarked of Bennett and Samuel Sebastian Wesley:

Bennett's most famous contemporary, Samuel Sebastian Wesley, had a more powerful temperament, and a greater grasp of big climax and of choral effect; but he practically confined himself to church music, a form which Bennett rarely touched and with which he had little to do, except by request, and for occasional functions; and with pianoforte, chamber and orchestral works he had little active sympathy. Wesley was essentially an experimenter. Bennett was not. Wesley was more masterful than masterly, Bennett more masterly than masterful. But these two men together, albeit opposite poles both in nature and in style, were the first-fruits of the Renaissance of English music.⁴

After the First World War, Bennett's music quickly fell into neglect. Herbert Thompson, in his article on the 'Cambridge Festival of British Music' in 1932, was moved to remark that the one glaring omission in an otherwise rich array of creative talent represented was that of Bennett, and in his own university to boot!⁵ When Frank Howes came to write *The English Musical Renaissance* in 1966, it is clear that Walker's views of 1907 had advanced little. Although Howes admitted to Bennett's 'pioneering' work, his verdict was, nevertheless, 'that all of it is mostly Mendelssohn without any infusion of the romantic spirit of the times is, however, correct and undeniable'.⁶ What is more, by relegating Bennett's work as a composer to four preliminary pages of the book (in which discussion of the musical literature features minimally), Howes went as far as to diminish Stanford's evaluation.

Yet, while Howes's book was reiterating many of the old *topoi* of the so-called English Musical Renaissance, there were others keen to paint a very different picture. William S. Newman was much more positive, describing Bennett in 1969 as 'the most successful and notable sonata composer in mid-Romantic England'.⁷ Proper acquaintance with Bennett's real stature was left to two scholars, Geoffrey Bush (of London University) and Nicholas Temperley (of the University of Illinois). They tirelessly paved the way for a new era of scholarship in music of the Victorian period with a special interest both in reassessing as well as promulgating Bennett's music. Bush's paper for the Royal Musical Association on Bennett's solo piano works was typical of his advocacy,⁸ as were other shorter articles on the chamber and orchestral music.⁹ In 1972, moreover, selected chamber and piano works formed the first *Denkmal* of

⁴ Stanford, 'William Sterndale Bennett: 1816–1875', 632.

⁵ H. Thompson, 'The Cambridge Festival of British Music', *The Musical Times* lxiv (July 1923), 489.

⁶ F. Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966), 39.

⁷ W. S. Newman, *The Sonata Since Beethoven* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 577.

⁸ G. Bush, 'Sterndale Bennett: The Piano Works', *PRMA* (1964–1965), 85–97.

⁹ See G. Bush, 'Sterndale Bennett: A Note on His Chamber and Piano Music', *The Musical Times* cxiii (June 1972), 554–556 and 'Sterndale Bennett and the Orchestra', *The Musical Times* cxxvii (June 1986), 322–324.

Bennett's music for the Musica Britannica series.¹⁰ Temperley's early pioneering papers on 'Domestic Music in England', 'Mozart's Influence on English Music' and 'Mendelssohn's Influence on English Music',¹¹ were preparatory to more specific articles on Bennett's lieder and his relationship with Schumann.¹² Bush's and Temperley's promotion coincided with their collaboration in a further *Denkmal* in 1979, 'English Songs 1800–1860' which included four songs by Bennett,¹³ after which Temperley embarked on a major series of editions with Garland in the 1980s which featured Bennett's works along with important editorial commentaries. These volumes placed Bennett's work in the wider context of the symphony, concert overture and 'London Pianoforte School'.¹⁴ A more critical perspective, furthermore, was given to Bennett's music in the *Athlone History of Music in Britain* (edited by Temperley) published in 1981, a publication which signalled an important departure from the dated standpoint of Howes and, since 1990, with Martin Outhwaite's critical edition of Bennett's unpublished Piano Concerto in F minor,¹⁵ the composer has been the focus of three important Ph.D. studies including Rosemary Williamson's *William Sterndale Bennett and His Publishers*,¹⁶ a major research project which gave rise to the landmark publication of *William Sterndale Bennett: A Descriptive Thematic Catalogue* by Oxford University Press in 1996, an invaluable account of all the extant primary and secondary sources of Bennett's music. Howard Smithers, in his *History of the Oratorio*, made a buoyant if brief allusion to Bennett's most significant choral work, *The Woman of Samaria* (sufficiently popular in its time for Macfarren to quote the chorus 'God is a spirit' at the end of his *Idyll*). Temperley (with Yunchung Yang) has also produced *Lectures on Musical Life: William Sterndale Bennett* (2006), an edited volume of the composer's lectures in London, Sheffield and Cambridge which provides an invaluable account of Bennett's musical perception of history and, as the editor has put it himself, 'the influence of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic leadership on the taste of consumers of music, regardless of economic or social factors'.¹⁷ Most recently Peter Horton, who is well known for his study of S. S. Wesley and his editions of Wesley's anthems for Musica Britannica,

¹⁰ G. Bush (ed.), *Sterndale Bennett: Selected Piano and Chamber Music*, Musica Britannica Vol. 37 (London: Stainer & Bell, 1972).

¹¹ See N. Temperley, 'Domestic Music in England', *PRMA* (1958–1959), 31–47, 'Mozart's Influence on English Music', *Music & Letters* 42/4 (Oct. 1961), 307–318 and 'Mendelssohn's Influence on English Music', *Music & Letters* 43/3 (July 1962), 224–233.

¹² See N. Temperley, 'Sterndale Bennett and the Lied', *The Musical Times*, cxvi (Nov. 1975), 958–961 and (Dec. 1975), 1060–1063 and 'Schumann and Sterndale Bennett', *Nineteenth-Century Music* 12/3 (Spring 1989), 207–220.

¹³ G. Bush and N. Temperley (eds), *English Songs 1800–1860*, Musica Britannica Vol. 43 (London: Stainer & Bell, 1979).

¹⁴ See N. Temperley (ed.), *William Sterndale Bennett: Three Symphonies*, Vol. 7 *The Symphony 1720–1840* (New York: Garland, 1982); *The Overture in England 1800–1840* (New York: Garland, 1984); *William Sterndale Bennett: Works for Pianoforte Solo 1834–1876*, Vol. 18 *The London Pianoforte School 1766–1860* (Garland: New York, 1985).

¹⁵ M. Outhwaite, 'The Unpublished Concerto for Pianoforte and Orchesta in F minor by William Sterndale Bennett' (MMus dissertation, University of Reading, 1990).

¹⁶ R. Williamson, 'William Sterndale Bennett (1816–75) and His Publishers: Some Aspects of the Production of Music in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England' (PhD dissertation, University of Nottingham, 1995).

¹⁷ N. Temperley (ed.) with Yang, Yunchung, *Lectures on Musical Life: William Sterndale Bennett* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 1.

contributed an important chapter on Bennett as a pianist-composer to *The Piano in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* edited by Therese Ellsworth and Susan Wollenberg,¹⁸ and we look forward to the prospect of a major monograph on the composer by him in the next few years.

It is evident therefore that, since the 1960s, Bennett has enjoyed an upsurge in scholarly attention. However, in featuring Bennett as 'BBC Composer of the Week' during this bicentenary year, the first time Bennett has enjoyed such an honour, the limited number of extant commercial recordings made this venture feasible largely through the addition of specially recorded items of unrecorded repertoire. There is clearly more to be done to promote a performing tradition of Bennett's music in order to give greater vitality to scholarly research. Nevertheless, awareness of his immense musical contribution to British and to German musical life in the nineteenth century is now much greater, and while there is still much to be discovered and debated about the nature of Bennett's life and music, there is no longer any need for apology or defensiveness about the value of his artistic originality. It has therefore given me particular pleasure to edit (and contribute to) this issue of *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, for, in marking the bicentenary of Bennett's birth, it has offered me the chance to work with some of the leading scholars on the composer's music as well as to raise the profile of this outstanding and diverse figure.

¹⁸ See P. Horton, 'William Sterndale Bennett, Composer and Pianist', in *The Piano in Nineteenth-Century British Culture*, ed. T. Ellsworth and S. Wollenberg (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 119–148.