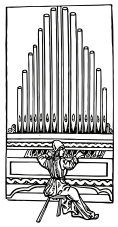

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Booklet Notes

for

Pax Britannica

ORGAN MUSIC IN Britain from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has not, on the whole, had a good press. Actually it has too seldom had a press at all. Moreover, save for Elgar's *Sonata in G*, it is far less likely to turn up on recital programs than are many organ works written during the same period in Continental Europe. Yet a large amount of it possesses great worth, and warrants reviving.

The most common objections to it – in such few commentaries as have appeared – are that it consists of third-rate Mendelssohn, and that it is little more than sentimental syrup. Neither objection can long outlast protracted and comprehensive acquaintance with it. Admittedly, Mendelssohn's own example (both as performer and in connection with his own six organ sonatas) continued to exercise a profound influence on British organists in the decades after his early death. It could hardly have failed to do so, given the ten visits that he made to Britain; given the popular British triumph which he achieved in 1846 with *Elijah*; and given his fluency in the English tongue. But to dismiss British organist-composers from the post-Mendelssohn generations as mere imitators of the German genius is to undervalue the individual voices – and the frequent awareness of later European musical developments – which their best output reveals. As for accusations of undue sentimentalism, it is true that such musicians could on occasion lapse into hearts-and-flowers cosiness such as tends to irk later minds. Yet let us remember G.K. Chesterton's warning that 'the miserable fear of being sentimental is the meanest of all modern terrors.' What impresses the diligent student of the composers enshrined on this CD is the sheer range of mood which their organ pieces encompassed, from ebullient jocularity to grim sorrow.

We tend to overlook how central to musical life before the Great War the organ actually was in the United Kingdom and, for that matter, in most of Europe. Back then, 'the king of instruments' – as Mozart had called the organ – attracted a mass audience, in a way that for most Western nations of the twenty-first century is unimaginable. Usually listeners in pre-1914 Britain, as well as across the Channel, obtained their first exposure to the great symphonies and operas not primarily via orchestral concerts or the theatre, but in one of three ways: through piano-duet arrangements suitable for

home use; through brass bands (whether as listeners or as players); and through attending organ recitals.

Much of the music heard here is a good deal harder to perform well than its appearance on the page might suggest. From the player it requires an art that conceals art. British composers of this period, whatever their medium (Delius being the chief exception to the rule), showed in their publications a consistent punctilio. Most of this CD's works, however uncluttered their writing can seem at first glance, contain so many instructions to the organist – so many specifications as to dynamics, tempo, registration (often), and (always) phrasing – that they demand a certain firmness in performance. Accordingly, they fare best when rubato is treated as a planned incident rather than as a default mode. As the Prom Concerts' long-time maestro Sir Henry Wood used to say, 'robbed time' (the literal meaning of *tempo rubato*) should be paid back.

Appropriately enough, the composer of God Bless the Prince of Wales was himself Welsh: **Brinley Richards**, the son of an organist in Camarthen. Young Richards' enterprise and pianistic talent took him to Paris and there to the ranks of Chopin's students. Although he later had a distinguished if uneventful career teaching piano at London's Royal Academy of Music, *God Bless the Prince of Wales* – his musical contribution to the Caernarfon (formerly Carnarvon) Eisteddfod of 1862 – ensured his wider fame. Unusually for a best-selling song, it possesses two different sets of words: the Welsh-language original by John Cieriog Hughes, known to contemporaries as 'the Robert Burns of Wales'; and an English-language version by Yorkshire poet George Linley. Both versions extolled the future Edward VII's marriage to Denmark's Princess Alexandra. ('Sea-king's daughter from over the sea,' Lord Tennyson called her in a welcoming ode.) So vast a success did *God Bless the Prince of Wales* achieve – there are transcriptions of it for piano, organ, and military band – that 'Brinley' long remained one of the most popular Christian names for Welsh babies. Could the Sydney songwriter Peter D. McCormick have remembered *God Bless the Prince of Wales* when, in 1878, he produced *Advance Australia Fair*? The resemblance between the two melodies' conclusions is striking.

Sir William Sterndale Bennett earned, as a youth in Leipzig, the profound respect of Mendelssohn (who, when the young Englishman timidly asked, 'May I come to be your pupil?,' responded 'No, no, you must come to be my friend') and of Schumann (who dedicated to him his *Symphonic Studies*). After returning to Britain in 1849, he threw himself into musical administration – he spent his last years in London as the Royal Academy of Music's principal – with results deleterious to his compositional energy. On occasion, nonetheless, he did still put pen to manuscript paper: as with this hymn-like Voluntary in E flat, from a collection of six such works (the remaining five were by other composers) which the Novello imprint published in or around 1871. In most phrases Sterndale Bennett calls for swell-pedal use, then something of a novelty in British organ music.

Generally historians speak of **Sir Edward Elgar** as an example of late blooming; and, indeed, he was forty-two before he attained his first significant popular acclaim with the Enigma Variations of 1899. Still, his eleven *Vesper Voluntaries*, all written in 1889 and sold the following year to the Orsborn and Tuckwood publishing house – for a flat fee of five pounds, Elgar's biographer Jerrold Northrop Moore revealed – have nothing of

the tyro about them. On the contrary, they show how the young Elgar was already recognisable as Elgar and as no-one else. His individuality is manifest in No. 3, with the opening theme's sinuous charm, touched by regret even in F major; with the steady rhythmic tread; with the repeated thematic sequences; and with the idiomatic manual and pedal textures, deriving from personal experience as organist in Worcestershire.

If **Sir John Stainer** followed in Sterndale Bennett's footsteps as an overworked administrator, he withstood better than the older man the resultant pressures upon his creative faculty. His 1887 Passiontide oratorio *The Crucifixion* has never gone out of print, and continues to win choristers' esteem, despite critics' sneers (rumour credits one London college with the graffito 'What do you think of Stainer's Crucifixion?' 'A very good idea'). The title *Impromptu* could well lead audiences to expect Chopinesque quicksilver capriciousness, but both Stainer's opening and his conclusion are slow and despondent, though the central passage is decidedly agitated. Intimations of hymnody occur here also, as in the Sterndale Bennett work. Stainer wrote the *Impromptu* during 1897 while holidaying at Menton ('Mentone', Victorian holiday-makers called the place) on the French Riviera.

A native of Birmingham, **Henry Alexander John Campbell** studied at the Royal Academy of Music, and thereafter worked as organist at two Anglican churches: St Andrew's in Caversham, Berkshire; and the Barnet Parish Church in Hertfordshire. Though he specialised in writing songs (solos, duets, and choruses), his brief *Moderato grazioso* of 1898 confirms that when it came to the organ he had a penchant for unobtrusively forlorn discourse.

Sir Charles Villiers Stanford—Irish-born, German-trained, English-domiciled — shared with Stainer and Sterndale Bennett great prominence in administrative life. The roll-call of Stanford's students reads like a *Who's Who* of British music, including as it does Holst, Vaughan Williams, Frank Bridge, John Ireland, E.J. Moeran, Herbert Howells, Sir Arthur Bliss, and Sir Eugene Goossens. But he dedicated himself with at least equal tenacity to creative work. Nowadays all too little of Stanford's vast oeuvre is heard, except for his choral music, which continues to be a staple of Anglican cathedrals in Britain and its former empire. Among his approximately four dozen published organ pieces, the shorter ones perhaps represent him at his most consistently inspired. Op. 101 No. 6 dates from 1907 and is founded on the hymn melody *St Columba* (Hibernian in origin), generally sung either to words beginning 'O breathe on me, O breath of God' or to words beginning 'The King of Love my shepherd is'.

William Wolstenholme was one of two congenitally blind English organists of the Victorian-Edwardian era (the other being his almost exact contemporary Alfred Hollins). The good opinion among colleagues which Wolstenholme inspired can be conveyed through a single anecdote: when he needed to undertake the written examination for his Oxford BMus, Elgar willingly acted as his scribe. But in compositional terms Wolstenholme remained his own man, as this suitably gentle *Communion* from 1897 – one of at least two works by him with that title – indicates. Closer analogues to it than anything in Elgar are the mellow yet always dignified miniatures of France's Alexandre Guilmant, who gave several organ recitals in England, and who was the first organist-composer of consequence to tour America.

Born in London to an English mother and a Sierra Leonean father, **Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** (another Stanford student) became a hero of British choral societies with his 1898 oratorio *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, which continued to vie in fame with *Elijah* (even with *Messiah*) until World War II. When Coleridge-Taylor visited the USA – newspapermen there called him 'the black Dvořák' – he met Theodore Roosevelt and Booker T. Washington; but his original naïveté in selling *Hiawatha* outright for fifteen guineas doomed him to a genteel impoverishment that continued until pneumonia killed him in his thirty-seventh year. His journalistic soubriquet fitted him, because he adored Dvořák's music and freely conceded his own stylistic debt to it. *This Melody in D*, dating from the same year as *Hiawatha*, evinces the Czech master's attributes in its folk-like pentatonicism, and is all the more engaging for that.

The prevalent child and youth mortality rates imparted to Victorian and Edwardian people an acute awareness, which we have largely lost, of life's transience. ('Death,' Malcolm Muggeridge aphoristically complained of his own era, 'has replaced sex as the forbidden subject.') Diseases that in today's affluent cultures are little more than encyclopaedia entries – diphtheria, cholera, typhoid, syphilis, tuberculosis, typhus, infantile paralysis, enteric fever, puerperal fever – were viewed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with justified dread. Wealth could not deter them. Joseph Chamberlain's first and second wives both died in childbirth (a statistic that notably curbed Beatrice Webb's eagerness to become Chamberlain's third wife); cholera slew Portugal's King Pedro V and two of his brothers within a few weeks during 1861. It can scarcely be surprising, then, that the epoch's composers should have been, by our standards, preoccupied with funerals and bereavements. Burial is the third in **Sir Alexander Mackenzie's** 1882 set of three organ works, its two companions being called respectively Baptism and Wedding. Edinburgh-born, Mackenzie played the violin during his youth in the central German town of Sondershausen, where the orchestral programs included novelties by Liszt (the *Faust Symphony*) and Wagner (the *Tristan* Prelude). Subsequently, Mackenzie came to know Liszt quite well, and this association can be perceived in *Burial's* idiom, which also at times suggests Berlioz. Truly Lisztian is the C-major apotheosis occurring before the music dies away with repetitions of the soft, recitative-like opening material. Mackenzie's niece, incidentally, was the novelist and Nuremberg Trials reporter Rebecca West.

Charles John Grey, from Diss in Norfolk, taught at the Royal College of Music and produced around sixty organ solos, including two sonatas, one in A major and the other (heard here) in G minor. We do not know which of the two came first; both predate 1914. The present work has three movements: first, a short but forceful introduction with hints of Wagnerian or Franckian chromaticism; then a serene, lilting interlude (marked *Pastorale*) dominated by solo stops; and to finish, a quick and fierce rondo – at times verging on the operatic – which scarcely pauses for breath until the last phrases, with their tense oscillation between major and minor keys.

Stanford's great rival **Sir Hubert** (in full, Charles Hubert Hastings) **Parry** – the two men, whom posterity has tended to view as conjoined twins, had a difficult, periodically tempestuous relationship – was even more prolific than Stanford as a composer, and far better loved as a man. Disarmingly unpretentious, he felt sincere astonishment when *Jerusalem* (1916) became, de facto, Britain's second national anthem. (He told *Jerusalem's* first conductor: 'Here's a tune for you, old chap. Do what you like with it.' Bertie

Wooster could not have spoken more casually.) Parry's *Elegy in A flat* – written four years before *Jerusalem* – honours his wife's brother: Sidney Herbert, the eleventh Earl of Pembroke, who had served as a junior minister during the 1886-1892 prime ministership of Lord Salisbury. This solemn musical rumination takes after Elgar's *Nimrod* in its triple metre, its major key, and its melodic line's almost vocal expressiveness.

Between the 1840s and the 1880s **Charles Edward Stephens** was organist at six London churches (all Anglican): St Mark's in Myddleton Square, Finsbury; Holy Trinity in Paddington; St John's in Hampstead; St Mark's in Hamilton Terrace; and two other Paddington establishments, St Clement Danes' and St Saviour's. From 1857 comes Stephens' *Adagio non troppo*, which gives the impression that he had tried to write out from memory Beethoven's *Egmont Overture* and had been prevented from exactly reproducing his model by his own persistent ideas. Like that overture, Stephens' composition is in F minor, contains repeated pauses for dramatic effect, and exhibits histrionic panache in pitting dramatically loud passages against dramatically soft passages. But whereas the Beethoven concludes in a victorious spirit, Stephens ends the *Adagio non troppo* with a pianissimo F-major triad in which no victory is audible.

Charles William Pearce served as organist at St Clement's, Eastcheap, London. He also taught at Trinity College, and served as Cambridge University and Royal College of Music examiner. When carrying out this last role, he proved autocratic even by the criteria of an age which seldom over-indulged in pedagogical lenity. A 1997 encyclopaedia of British church musicians says in its entry on Pearce: 'Candidates feared his ruthless exposure of their inadequacies.' His churchyard *Meditation*, from 1896, bears an epigraph taken from a poem entitled 'Burial of the Dead' by John Keble, the Oxford Movement clergyman friend of John Henry Newman (though unlike Newman, Keble never converted to Rome). Pearce selected the following lines: 'Gently lay him down / Within some circling woodland wall / Where bright leaves, reddening ere they fall, / Wave gently o'er the waters brown.' As with Mackenzie's equally poignant utterance, so here, there are signs of Liszt's style, both in the harmonic progressions and in the general atmosphere of hard-won resignation.

Londoner Alfred Rawlings operated not only under his own name but also under a bewildering profusion of pseudonyms, some male, others female. All the music (most of it vocal) listed in library catalogues as being by 'Max Dressler,' 'Gustave Dumas,' 'Florence Fare,' 'Edith Fortescue,' 'Stanley Gordon,' 'Hamilton Henry,' 'Marcus Hope,' 'Louis Jasper,' 'Gladys Melrose,' 'Guy Morriss,' 'Tito Natale,' 'Edward Saint Quentin,' 'Ivan Stephanoff,' 'Horace Templeman,' 'Jules Thérèse,' 'Lionel Tree,' and 'Constance White' is in fact from Rawlings' pen. The tripartite *Allegro con spirito* (1898) echoes Schumann's piano music (especially *Scenes from Childhood* and *Album for the Young*) in the outer sections' brisk and jolly march rhythms, while the far less martial middle section requires dramatic alternations between the Great and Swell manuals.

Dame Ethel Smyth demonstrated great enjoyment of life in her breezy, combative memoirs and in her activism for female suffrage, which latter cause led to her composing the *March of the Women*. (When this activism's wilder forms landed her in prison, several of her fellow activists sang the march, while she herself awed the visiting Sir Thomas Beecham by 'beat[ing] time in almost Bacchic frenzy with a

toothbrush.') But any tendency to dismiss her musicianship as clowning should be squelched forthwith. Hers was a deadly serious creative talent; how serious, can be ascertained by the present recording's chorale prelude, described by Indiana University scholar Sarah M. Moon as dating from the 1880s (although it did not reach print until 1913). When writing this prelude, Dame Ethel very clearly had in mind Bach's *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ* (BWV639). From that source, she derived the notion of a slow-moving, supplicatory treble part combined with pulsating left-hand semiquavers and with mostly stepwise pedal-board quavers. She also echoed BWV639's repeated dissonances on accented passing notes. The fact that her prelude survives comparison with her model testifies to her ability. *Du, O schönes Weltgebäude* is a title which defies smooth rendering into English: 'You, o beautiful edifice of the world' might be a tolerably accurate translation.

Rivalling Alexandre Guilmant's eminence as a concert organist was **William Thomas Best**, whose executant brilliance took him not only to Europe but to Australia (in 1890 he inaugurated the Sydney Town Hall's organ). He won plaudits from Liszt and from the customarily hypercritical Hans von Bülow. When not voyaging, Best gave in St George's Hall, Liverpool, three recitals each week for almost four decades. He habitually performed organ arrangements of music written for other media; but his most accomplished original compositions display a vigorous muse – even if the New Grove's 2001 edition did loftily dismiss them as 'unimportant' – and the boisterous Christmas Postlude '*Sit laus plena, sit sonora*' exemplifies his gift. The Latin words (their English equivalent would be something like 'Let praise be full and loud') have no Yuletide connection; they come from a verse in Lauda Sion, St Thomas Aquinas' hymn for the mid-year feast of Corpus Christi. Best has founded his entire postlude upon a joyous, succinct theme in which the interval of a falling fifth predominates. The result mingles grandeur with surging excitement, and Best saves his coup de theâtre for the climax: he flings defiantly at his listeners a fortissimo chord of the flattened leading note, in this case G major, since the tonic key is A major. It is as if he wished to confirm that meticulous craft can dwell in true amity alongside flamboyant showmanship.

With luck, this anthology will win some more enthusiasts for a repertoire too commonly neglected. At least one present-day organist finds Kingsley Amis' 1982 description of Victorian verse to be equally applicable to Victorian-Edwardian organ music. Amis discerned, underpinning such verse, 'a very firm set of assumptions about the pre-eminence of technique, the poet's duty to be as lucid as the occasion permitted and the perils of affectation and self-indulgence … One of the things that stops the Victorians being too accessible to us is their trick of making us look rather shabby.'