William Sterndale Bennett (1816 to 1875)

a lecture by Robert Webb

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure to be able to deliver this lecture to you despite the COVID-19 restrictions although the additional challenges of delivering a lecture via zoom have made the preparations more interesting than they might have been.

I have been asked to talk today about the Sheffield born composer William Sterndale Bennett. I myself am a choral director, organist and occasional composer and I have been conducting the Sterndale Singers who bear his name for some 15 years or so. However, the connection of Sterndale Singers to Sterndale Bennett is a slightly tenuous one. When the choir was formed by a group of friends singing together, they had to choose a name. Sterndale Rd was nearby, and they remembered that was a composer named Sterndale Bennett with some connection to Sheffield, and therefore decided on the name The Sterndale Singers. It may be, or perhaps not, a matter of regret the choir has not spent years studying and performing his choral music, but in 2016 we did put together a concert to celebrate his bi-centenary, and in the process of researching the his life and music to deciding what to put in the programme, I seemingly became an expert in his life and works, and hence have the pleasure speaking to you about him now.

One of the things that truly marks Sterndale Bennett out from the crowd, is that he appears to be the only notable classical composer who was born in Sheffield. I suspect this has more to do with the fact that most English musicians of the time were connected to cathedrals, and of course, Sheffield Parish Church did not become a Cathedral until 1914, than a lack of culture in Sheffield, but cannot be sure. It is somewhat ironic, however, that his birth here is his only connection. As you will hear, he left at the age of 3, and I am not sure if he ever returned!

During the course of this talk, I will run through his biographical details, although the Wikipedia article about him is remarkably comprehensive in this regard, and you may well have already read it knowing you were hearing this talk today or indeed might have it open on your screen as you listen. More interestingly, I will try to tell you something about the background to his career to put his life and works into a historical context, and discuss the attitudes to his music at various times through history by reference to contemporary reference works, and explore why it is that most of his music has been forgotten, and many musically knowledgeable people have never heard of him and although some church musicians from a certain era may have come across one of his choral works, they probably know no others.

To quote from a book called simply “Music” by Sir Henry Hadow (who incidentally also has a connection to Sheffield - the music department of the university, until about 2005, was housed in 'Hadow House' at the top of Taptonville Road) which was published in 1946 by Oxford University Press, part of the Home University Library series:

> “Sterndale Bennett, whose early concertos and overtures showed promise of high achievement, would have been one of the leaders of English music if we had not choked his genius with the entanglement of official duties.”

Despite this, he is a significant and important figure in English music.

William Sterndale Bennett was born in 1816 in Sheffield the third and only son of Robert Bennett, the organist of Sheffield parish church, later to become the cathedral. In addition to his duties as an organist, Robert Bennett was a conductor, composer and piano teacher.

William came into the world at time when classical music in England was at a low ebb. Not since Henry Purcell died in 1695 or Handel in 1759 had the country seen a truly great composer. Most of the English composers around this time were connected with Cathedrals and wrote mainly sacred music, much of it now forgotten. Continental Europe had much more success, and I should mention in particular Felix Mendelssohn, who was born in 1809, was already showing promise, and was to become an important influence on young William.

Sadly, Bennett's mother died aged only 27 when he was two, and his father a year later in 1819. Fortunately, his paternal grandfather was able to take the orphaned boy into his care in Cambridge. John Bennett sang as a bass Lay Clerk in the choirs of King's, St John's, and Trinity Colleges in Cambridge and through his grandfather's influence, William entered the choir of King's College Chapel aged 8 in February 1824. He showed a remarkable prodigious talent and, after only two years at Kings, at the age of 10, he was accepted into the newly founded Royal Academy of Music. The entrance examiners were so impressed by William's talent that they waived all fees for his tuition and board. He remained there for the next 10 years, studying violin, piano (on which he excelled) and composition.

An interesting aside here, although he didn't study singing, the 14-year-old lad was cast in the role of the page boy Cherubino in the Academy's 1830 performance of the marriage of Figaro. This role would, of course, usually have been played by a woman, so the choice to cast a boy may be because his singing was held in such renown. However, it was not a success: the Observer wryly commented, "of the page ... we will not speak" but acknowledged that Bennett sang pleasingly and to the satisfaction of the audience. The Harmonicon, a popular music magazine of the time, however, called his performance "in every way a blot on the piece".

It is evident, however, that Bennett was exceptional in his piano studies, and in composition. He wrote his first Piano Concerto (No 1 in D^m) aged 17 and gave its first public performance at an orchestral concert in Cambridge on the 28th of November 1832. I will play you a short extract from this piece to give you an idea of his music. Listen out in particular to the brilliance of the piano playing, and try to imagine a young 17 year old prodigy, who you've never seen before playing this - his own composition.

EXTRACT 1. Piano Concerto No 1 in D minor

This performance was extraordinarily well received. So well, in fact, that by Royal command he played it again in Windsor Castle in April 1933 for King William IV and Queen Adelaide. The authorities at the Royal Academy was so delighted with the work and its reception that they published it at the Academy's expense as a tribute. A further performance followed in London in June 1833, and the critic of The Harmonicon wrote of this concert:

> The most complete and gratifying performance was that of young Bennett, whose composition would have conferred honour on any established master, and his execution of it was really surprising, not merely for its correctness and brilliancy, but for the feeling he manifested, which, if he proceed as he has begun, must in a few years place him very high in his profession.

Thus William cemented his early reputation as a brilliant young composer with a great future in front of him. Not only this, but in the audience was none other than his great inspiration Felix Mendelssohn who was so impressed by the young composer and pianist that he invited him to the Lower Rhenish Music Festival in Düsseldorf. Bennett apparently asked, "May I come to be your pupil?" to which Mendelssohn replied, "No, no. You must come to be my friend".

It is significant that it was Mendelssohn who saw the young performer. English musicians adored Mendelssohn and Leipzig... in Bennett's lifetime. Henry Fothergill Chorley (good name) wrote a lot of literature idealising Leipzig and Mendelssohn in particular...including his Music and Manners in France and Germany (London, 1841). Leipzig is idealised. It is worth mentioning that Elgar (who was born in 1857) wanted to study there in the 1870s and 80s but didn't have enough money and ended up as a violin teacher in Malvern and Worcester instead (a common tale of English musicians!)

But I digress:

During his final three years at the Academy, Bennett continued composing and performing and winning accolades. He played his second and third piano concertos for the Philharmonic Society in 1835 and 1836, and the first performance of his overture named for Lord Byron's Parisina was described as "the best thing that has been played at the Society's concerts". Sterndale Bennett was firmly on the English musical map.

In 1836, he at last managed to take up Mendelssohn's offer and, with the help of a subsidy provided by the piano maker John Broadwood, made his first journey to Germany to attend the Lower Reinisch Music Festival where saw Mendelssohn conduct the first performance of his oratorio *Saint Paul*. What an honour to see your idol in such a situation. Whilst there, as well as cementing his friendship with Mendelssohn, he became close friends with Robert Schumann, with whom he spent a lot of time, and indeed in 1837 Schumann dedicated a set of symphonic studies to the young Englishman. When Bennett left for home after this first trip, Mendelssohn wrote to their mutual friend, the English organist and composer Thomas Attwood:

> "I think him the most promising young musician I know, not only in your country but also here, and I am convinced if he does not become a very great musician, it is not God's will, but his own".

A statement that was to prove remarkably prescient.

During his second visit to Germany, Bennett played his first concert there, performing his fourth Piano Concerto at the Leipzig Gewandhaus amidst the tremendous applause of the Leipzigers (Mendelssohn's words) and conducted several of his overtures. Again, imagine the joy for the young man – experiencing such a reception in the city of his dreams!

Bennett began teaching at the Academy in 1837 (aged just 21) a role he took very seriously, but managed two more extended trips to Germany. During this time his friendship with the German composers deepened, and it is also during these trips that he felt most at home and was in an atmosphere conducive to composition. He continued to be well thought of and received accolades which he may not have got in England. He also commented upon the significant difference he had noticed between and towards musicians in Germany and England. In 1940, after returning from a successful performance in Leipzig, he wrote to his publisher there bemoaning this situation:

> "You know what a dreadful place England is for music; and in London I have nobody who I can talk to about such things, all the people are mad with [Sigismond] Thalberg and [Johann] Strauss, and I have not heard a single Symphony or Overture in one concert since last June. I sincerely hope that Prince Albert ... will do something to improve our taste."

It is interesting here to note the reference to Prince Albert: Bennett evidently hoped the German Prince might do something to improve the situation of music in England

In between these inspiring trips to Germany, Bennett was continuing to teach at the Royal Academy, with a life far removed from his German experiences, and where he found less and less time to compose, soon stopping pretty much altogether. His last trip, in 1842 when he was 26, was a shorter one due to his being engaged to one of his pupils who he married in 1844. A phrase often quoted about the change in his life at this time goes:

> Composition gave way to a ceaseless round of teaching and musical administration.

I don't think that this tells the whole story though. An interesting quotation from the 1928 Grove dictionary is mirrored in other references:

> "neither Schumann nor Bennett could foresee the stultifying influence which a professional life in Victorian England must exert on the sensitive musical nature of the latter."

I think that added to the teaching he had to do to earn a living, it was not simply over work that caused a falling off of creativity, but also discouragement and the lack of a strong external stimulus. In the 1930s he had responded to the admiration of his English and German colleagues, above all Mendelssohn, and found the atmosphere in Germany conducive to composition. However now there was an absence of due recognition in England, Mendelssohn's death in 1847 affected him deeply, and whilst his individual and exceptional style and ability as a pianist was still recognised, he appeared in concert only periodically, and composed only the music he needed for teaching – a few piano pieces.

So, sadly, the career of this exceptionally highly regarded brilliant young composer seemed to have come to a premature and unfortunate end.

However, the story of Sterndale Bennett's influence on the life of English music does not end with this sad hiatus in his composing, and it is perhaps the work he did after this, that was more significant.

Before I carry on, I think that another musical break is in order. This is an extract from his Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra, which he performed in Leipzig in 1842. Again, listen to the amazing piano playing.

EXTRACT*: *Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra

So, what of the rest of Bennett's life – and what are the achievements which were so important?

The first is his saving of the Philharmonic Society of London when he became a director in 1842. The Society was already somewhat "Germanic" in outlook. As early as 1817 it commissioned Beethoven to write a Symphony for them, but this - the Ninth Symphony - did not emerge until 1822. There is a wonderful photograph of the heads of the Philharmonic with the autograph score held aloft. in

1820, Louise Spohr conducted the orchestra, supposedly famously introducing baton conducting to England. However, by the time Bennett joined, the society's finances were perilous. Inspired by his own experiences in Germany, particularly of good quality chamber recitals, he persuaded Mendelssohn and the violinist Louis Spohr to perform with the society's orchestra attracting full houses and much needed income, thus putting the Society back on an even keel. He even persuaded Mendelssohn to conduct his Third (Scottish) Symphony in London just two months after its world premiere in Leipzig, and in 1844, Mendelssohn conducted the last six concerts of the society's season (including his own works and some of Bennett's) thus cementing its financial position even further.

However, his relationship with the Philharmonic took a turn for the worse: in 1846 one Michael Costa was appointed as the Philharmonic's conductor, and this met with much disapproval from Bennett: Costa was devoted to Italian opera and was not a fan of Bennett's friends, the German Masters. Bennett wrote to Mendelssohn on 24th July that year

> "The Philharmonic Directors have engaged Costa ... with which I am not very well pleased, but I could not persuade them to the contrary, and am tired of quarrelling with them. They are a worse set this year than we have ever had."

The situation deteriorated further in 1848 with an initially minor disagreement with Costa over his interpretation at the final rehearsal of Bennett's Overture *Parisina*, which inflated into a furious row, beginning a permanent rift between them. Bennett, disgusted at the societies failure to back him up, resigned.

There is, though, a silver lining to this cloud, and another of Bennett's great achievements. He had long been a great admirer of J S Bach, his enthusiasm for which was very likely in the first instance kindled by Mendelssohn, who did so much to open the eyes of his contemporaries to the grandeur of Bach's genius. And so, after his resignation from the Philharmonic Society (aged still only 33), Bennett founded the Bach Society for the study and practise of Bach's music, inspiring a renewal of interest in the works of the great master. In 1854, conducted the first English performance of the Saint Matthew Passion. In this he was definitely following in Mendelssohn's footsteps: He famously, at the age of just 20, revived the passion in Berlin. Would such a revival had occurred in London otherwise? Possibly, but we should be grateful for Bennett's vision at that time.

In 1853 Bennett received a life-changing job offer: the conductorship of the Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts – an amazing opportunity. You would think that this would have been Bennett's dream job, and he would have jumped at the chance, but he turned it down. It is not certain why he declined it, but I think that his loyalty to his new Bach Society, and to music in London in general had something to do with it. Also it is said that he did not have time to make alternative arrangements for his pupils, to whom he was also loyal. It is also possible that recent knocks to his confidence may also have had an effect on him, but whatever the reason, one can only muse on what might have been had he been bold enough to take up the post.

All was not lost, however. In 1854 Costa (he who had caused Bennett to leave Philharmonic) left the Orchestra and was succeeded by Richard Wagner who led one controversial 1855 season: he caused something of a furore with his highly showy style of conducting with big tempo changes - something quite outside the Mendelssohn tradition and of which Bennett would have disapproved. (Henry Smart reviewed a performance in the Times in 1855 describing it). Following this interesting year. Bennett was elected to return to take over the conductorship. At his first concert he was again able

to use his German influences, bringing over Clara Schumann to be the piano soloist in Beethoven's Emperor Concerto, her first appearance in England, and also in his first season, he presented the premiere of Schumann's *Paradise and the Peri.*

However, his stewardship not entirely a happy one. Many leading members of the orchestra were also in the orchestra of the Italian Opera House in London now run by his nemesis Costa, who, it seems, took to arranging schedules for his musicians which made rehearsals (and sometimes performances) for the Society impractical. There were other issues also, and the historian of the orchestra, Cyril Ehrlich, is particularly uncomplimentary about this period:

> "Verdi was in Milan, Wagner in Dresden, Meyerbeer in Paris, Brahms in Vienna, and Liszt in Weimar. London had the richest of audiences, and was offered Sterndale Bennett."

Ouch!

Ehrlich also writes about the premiere of Schumann's *Paradise and the Peri*. By engaging Jenny Lind as soloist, and with Prince Albert in the audience, the concert brought in a substantial subscription, but was musically disastrous (and was not helped by the chaos of a seriously overcrowded venue). One member of the audience thought Lind's voice was "worn and strained" and that there would have been "vehement demonstrations of derision had not the audience been restrained in the presence of Royalty". Newspaper critics were scarcely more complimentary. Bennett persevered however, and continued in the post for 10 years.

He still had problems to contend with, however: his feud with Costa was not over, and in 1858 the autocratic Earl of Westmorland (the original founder of the Royal Academy where Bennett was still teaching, decided to arrange a subscription concert for the Academy to include a Mass of his own composition, to be conducted by Costa and using the orchestra and singers of the Opera, over the heads of the Academy directors. Bennett resigned from the RAM at this overbearing behaviour thus ending a 20 year devoted teaching career there.

However, he was not without work. 1856, the same year as becoming the Philharmonic's conductor, Bennett had been appointed Professor of Music at Cambridge University, despite some misgivings…

All Bennett's early work, for which he was known and admired, is instrumental, and it was expected that the Professor of Music at Cambridge would be an experienced composer of choral music. It seems that the then Provost of King's College, Revd Oaks, did not support the appointment due to what he perceived as a lack of Bennett's experience in this area. This extract from a letter Bennett wrote to Revd Oakes in February 1856 makes interesting reading:

> *I am extremely indebted for your note of this morning, and am much flattered that my pretensions to the Music Professorship, should have met with so much attention at your hands, although I am unable to gain your ultimate support. Without, for one moment, attempting to trespass upon the position of Dr. G. Elvey, in your estimation, I may be allowed to say for myself that my chances have hitherto led me to compose principally, for chamber and concert-room, but that I believe my musical education has not left me un-fitted for composing in the sacred style, when called upon to do so – and I shall never cease to feel that whatever I at present do as a musician may be traced to the early influence of being a Chorister in the Chapel of your College. I remain, Reverend Sir, Yours Respectfully William Sterndale Bennett".*

Whether or not this letter had any influence on the appointment is not documented, but he was successful.

And these various factors prompted a return of Bennett the composer: the expectation that he would write sacred choral music at Cambridge, combined with the accolade of becoming Professor, and being appointed the Philharmonic's conductor, combined with occasional commissions, inspired Bennett to return to composing, although somewhat sporadically, and, it has to be said, without his early self-confidence.

He wrote his first sacred anthem *Lord, who shall dwell* which was first performed in the University Church in Cambridge, only months after his appointment and many other anthems quickly followed. In 1858 he wrote the large-scale choral work *The May Queen*, for the opening of Leeds Town Hall and in 1862 an Ode for the opening of the International Exhibition in London that year. This prompted a further spat with Costa who was in charge of the music for the Exhibition, but refused to conduct it, so someone else had to take up the baton for this piece. Perhaps the most significant works of this later period are the Symphony in G minor (1864) the sacred Cantata *The Woman of Samaria* written for the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival of 1867 from which comes "God is a Spirit" his best known choral piece.

This calls for another musical interlude. The Sterndale Singers performed this piece in the Bi-centenary concert, and I have a recording. Its simplicity, and easy attractiveness perhaps explain why it alone remained in the canon of performed music for so long.

EXTRACT God is a Spirit

Sterndale Bennett's last big achievement began in 1866 when he was appointed Principal of the Royal Academy of Music (although to rub salt in the wounds the job had been first offered to the dreaded Costa – but he had demanded a higher salary than they could afford).

Once again however, the post proved a potential poisoned chalice. The Academy, as with the Philharmonic years before, was in a financially perilous situation. In 1864 and 1865 it had been temporarily saved from bankruptcy by grants from the government, authorised by Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer, but in 1866 the new chancellor, Disraeli, refused to renew the grant. The directors of the Academy decided to close it but Bennett, with the support of the faculty and students managed to become chairman of the board and was able to win the grant back. He then spent 7 years in complex negotiations with various public bodies to secure its financial future. If this wasn't enough, he also had to improve its reputation. When he began his tenure as Principal, only 17% of orchestral players in Britain had studied there and none of the orchestra at Covent Garden were alumni. Bennett successfully improved its reputation and popularity, and if he had not achieved what he did, the Academy would not have survived.

Towards the end of his life, Bennett began to be properly recognised for his achievements. He was awarded honorary degrees from both Cambridge and Oxford universities, the Philharmonic Society awarded him its Beethoven gold medal in 1867 and in 1871 he was knighted by Queen Victoria. In 1872 he received a public testimonial before a large audience at St James's Hall, London and the money subscribed at this event founded a scholarship and prize at the RAM, which is still awarded. There is an English Heritage blue plaque at the house in 38 Queensborough Terrace, London, where he lived during many of his later years.

Bennett died aged 58 on 1 February 1875 at his home in St John's Wood, London. According to his son the cause was "disease of the brain"; unable to rise one morning, he had fallen into a decline and died within a week. He was buried close to the tomb of Henry Purcell, in Westminster Abbey, and "God is a Spirit" was sung. The first concert of the Philharmonic Society's season that year began with a tribute: pieces from his unfinished music for Sophocles's tragedy Ajax, and a complete performance of The Woman of Samaria, for which the choir was provided by the Academy, and Joseph Joachim played Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. The final concert of that season included an Idyll in memory of Bennett composed by his old associate George Alexander Macfarren.

So, that is the life of William Sterndale Bennett – a varied and important one.

But the question remains – why do we not hear his music played now if he was such a young genius?

Before I address this, let's hear some more of it. Here is an extract from his later Symphony in G minor, composed when he was 48 in 1864.

EXTRACT Symphony in G minor

To understand why the music of such a prodigious young genius has fallen into obscurity we perhaps need to investigate further what it was that prompted such a positive reaction to his early work, what it was about his music that astonished people so, what his own influences and intentions were in his music, how he developed as a composer through his lifetime, and perhaps most importantly, the attitudes of critics, and musical tastes since he died.

I have already mentioned that Bennett was born at a time when music in England was at a very low ebb. Most of the composers around that time were writing solely for cathedrals and churches.

Also, this was a time when prodigies were exceptionally popular: think of Mozart, Mendelssohn, and in England, William Crotch had supposedly played all the organs in Cambridge by the age of 2 or 3! This is doubtless untrue, but proves that prodigies were very popular in a time of virtuosi. We can add to the list other piano virtuosi Chopin, Liszt, Ignaz Moscheles, Robert Schumann, Clara Schumann, and Carl Reinecke (all from Leipzig). Is it surprising then that a young Englishman from the Academy which had been running for only four years with such a talent was welcomed with such enthusiasm and open arms.

But why has his music fallen out of favour, when it was so well received?

First question, the nature of the music itself: is it good?

Bennett's main influence in his piano writing was, of course, Felix Mendelssohn, but he was also greatly influenced by Mozart. He was disdainful of more modern composers from the start and throughout his life, perhaps an odd stance for a young composer to take. The truly great composers add to what came before: Beethoven begins in the classical style of Mozart but introduces new sounds, new textures, new concepts, new music. Even Mendelssohn, though his early works lie very much in the classical tradition, developed through his lifetime. Bennett did not develop stylistically in this way, so this is one reason, but this alone should not consign him to the historical dustbin.

So back to the question of the quality of his writing, in the context of the time.

I am going to turn to the entry in the 1878 First Edition of the Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, and the entry on Sterndale Bennett written by Heathcoat Statham a composer and church musician. Bennett commands 9 columns of close type in this four volume dictionary.

The section on his piano music begins:

> his complete sympathy with this instrument, his perfect comprehension of its peculiar power and limitations, are evident in almost everything he wrote for it…
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> In his treatments of the piano he depends little upon cantabile passages which are only by convention a part of the function of the piano and his writings are mostly episodical his sources of effect lie more in the use of glittering staccato passages and arpeggio figures.

You will have heard this in the passages I played earlier. To continue:

> Speaking more generally, his piano works are characterised by an entire disdain of the more commonplace sources of effect: they are never noisy or showy and there is not a careless note in them; the strict and fixed attention of both player and listener is demanded in order to realise the intention of the music addressed mainly to the intellect and the critical faculty, never to the mere sense of hearing.
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> As a whole Bennett's piano music is remarkably difficult in proportion to the number of notes used, from that delicate exactitude of writing which demands that every note should have its full value, as well as from the peculiar way in which his passages often lie for the hand, and which demands the greatest evenness of finger power.
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> Hence his works are not popular in the present day with amateurs who prefer what will enable them to produce more thrilling effects with less trouble, but their values as studies and models for pure style is hardly to be surpassed.

So, the author appreciates Bennett's music but the technical prowess required to play is is making it unpopular. A handy comparison here is the pianist composer Carl Reinecke (who became director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra when Bennett turned it down) who is judged rather more kindly by posterity than Bennett. Reinecke's piano music can be very difficult but there's a lot that is accessible - he is well known to piano grade students as a result. Further, Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words are, unlike Bennett's, challenging, but well within the span of an amateur audience and this was getting bigger and bigger in England in the nineteenth century. Consider also the popularity of the piano - a quintissentially but not of course exclusively English instrument thanks to John Broadwood and Sons (they who sponsored Bennett's first trip to Germany), who made pianos for many famous figures including Mendelssohn, and Beethoven).

An entry from A History of Music in England written by Ernest Walker in 1907 back up this view:

> Almost all his piano music as fallen, as it were, between two stools; there is not enough intellectual or emotional content for the pianist who is not specially interested in technique as such, and the average pianist who is so interested prefers music that, while being less difficult, sounds more so.

The Grove article continues:

> Compared with the writings of Beethoven or even of lesser composers who following in his steps have transferred the symphonic style to the piano, such works as those of Bennett

> have of course a very limited range nor have they the glow and intensity which Chopin for example was able to infuse into what is equally a pure piano style, but as specimens of absolutely finished productions entirely within the special range of the piano, they will always have the highest artistic interest and value; an appreciation of their real merit being almost a test of true critical perception.

I like the suggestion here that if you don't like the music, it's your fault for not being clever enough. But it is still well regarded.

I like especially this final passage:

> When the school of composers who tumble notes into our ears in heaps, any way, have had their day, and it is again recognised that musical composition is a most subtle and recondite art, and not a mere method of jumbling sounds together to signify this or that arbitrarily chosen idea, it is probable that Bennett will receive much higher credit than has yet been accorded to him as an advanced thinker in music.

Perhaps this will still happen.

So that is the view in 1878. If we fast forward to 1928, we find that the Grove Dictionary has expanded to five volumes, and again Heathcoat Statham is writing about Bennett, but he now has only 4 columns, and the text is somewhat bigger. The article begins:

> Bennett's more serious work as composer is almost completely neglected now. Of the works for or with orchestra which belong to what may be called his Leipzig period, only occasional revivals may be heard; ~~His choral music maintains a precarious foothold in the repertoire of provincial choral societies and church choirs.~~ But his refined, at its best Mozart like, writing for the piano has been obliterated by the rich romanticism of the 19th century schools led by Chopin and Schumann. Bennett, as a writer for the piano, might be summed up as the composer who evaded the influence of Chopin. Too much stress has been laid on the influence of Mendelssohn in his work. His failure to produce a lasting impression in his piano music was not the result of copying Mendelssohn so much as of his remaining untouched by the developments of style and technique characteristic of his time. This was partly due, as has been suggested, to the circumstances in which his later life was passed, partly to personal limitations. He withdrew into himself; His sensitiveness became fastidiousness and a delicate genius contracted into a narrower talent.

So now, the blame for the music falling out of favour is firmly laid at the door of his lack of development as a composer. ~~He does go on to praise his work in education and other areas commenting that throughout his life he stood for purity and art, and his work and life raised the position of the musical artist in the esteem of his contemporaries.~~

In 1980 the New Grove dictionary was published - now 20 volumes – and in this much larger work, the article on Bennett is again longer – 8 columns. By now, Bennett's music has been forgotten for nearly a century, and there is more analysis of why:

> Several writers have used the word “purity” in assessing his work. Like his fellow romantics Mendelssohn and Schumann he saw himself as a fighter for what was good and true in the musical tradition he had inherited, against the mounting threats of commercialism, vulgarity and virtuosity. With perhaps misguided puritanism he was determined not to be corrupted by the innovations of Thalberg and Listz, of Meyerbeer and Berlioz, of Chopin, or even of Schumann. His style bears a natural resemblance to that of the one romantic composer he did wholeheartedly admire, Mendelssohn. Yet his model was not even Mendelssohn, but Mozart, as he confessed in a lecture delivered at Cambridge in 1871. This self-inflicted deafness to current musical sounds required a degree of conscious restraint that interfered with spontaneous expression.
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> For all that, Bennett's composed some excellent music, and the best of it, the orchestral works of his youth that so greatly impressed Schumann, is now all but unknown. Few piano concertos between Beethoven and Brahms are as successful as Bennett’s in embodying the classical spirit, not in a stiff frame to deck with festoons of virtuosity, but in a living form capable of organic growth, and even of structural surprise.
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> Bennett has been called a musician’s musician. More specifically, he is a pianist's musician, like Chopin. Much of the fascination of his piano pieces lies in their mastery of the natural potential of the instrument. Instead of pretending that the piano can sustain great lyrical melodies, he made use of its percussive qualities to create a beautiful tapestry of subtly varying tone colours. Never did he permit himself the least concession to the Gallery; he seems on the contrary to be talking to himself, or only to those who fully appreciate and sympathise with his point of view. His character pieces have often a dryness and sometimes a harmonic ruthlessness that pleased the connoisseur but put off the crowd.

So, here, there is at least an appreciation of his skill. Perhaps knowledge of his piano music lies only with pianists who appreciate this sort of challenge.

I will turn now to his looking at his choral music, written during his time in Cambridge – is this viewed any more positively I hear you ask?

Sadly not, although again, views have changed over time. The article in the 1878 Grove is quite positive, in a guarded way:

> His cantata, the May Queen, displays the most refined in artistic writing, both in regard to the effectiveness and spontaneous character of the choruses, the melodic beauty of the solos, the strongly marked individuality imparted to the music of the different personages, and the charming and piquant effects of the orchestral accompaniment stop
>
> The Woman of Samaria is less spontaneous in character, and its style and treatment does not appeal to the popular mind; But it will always be delightful to musicians, and to those who hear considerately and critically. It is in general construction very much modelled on the style of Bach, whose peculiar power Bennett has successfully emulated.

OK, As a choral conductor I'm not entirely convinced by this analysis but let's put this on one side for a second and see what Earnest Walker said in 1907?

> Some of the anthems are melodiously expressive without, however, possessing the distinguishing features of the best church compositions of Goss or Wesley, but by common consent the oratorio is Bennett's most typical work in the ecclesiastical field. In the search for examples of Bennett's talents as a composer, the Woman of Samaria does not help us find them. The work is decorously dead. The libretto is totally lacking in any artistic vitality, and nearly all the music is similarly steeped in conventionalism. It is refined in its feeble way, but, curiously enough, even Bennett's technique fails him more or less; The elementary dull devices of the opening chorale chorus are as unlike Bach's methods (with which they have been sometimes, astoundingly, been compared) as anything can be, and, indeed, the whole work is a sad legacy from the mature pen of the young genius who had written the *Naiads* Overture more than 30 years before.

Not a good prognosis here.

How about the 1928 Grove:

> His choral music maintains a precarious foothold in the repertoire of provincial choral societies and church choirs.

And that's it! Dismissed in one sentence.

So, on to the 1980 edition:

> Bennett possessed no special flair for choral music, the medium in which his services were most in demand in later life. His cantata and oratorio, though far more popular in the late 19th century than his instrumental works, seemed now quite faded, partly, it must be said, because of the ineptitude of their texts. This Victorian flavour attaches also to his church music. The only anthem that survived until recent times was the quartet *God is a spirit* from *The Woman of Samaria*.

So, no encouragement there.

Part is this comes down to the attitudes to music at the time, and what had come during the 20th century. Composers like Charles Villiers Stanford and Charles Wood wrote an immense amount of popular, good works. The organs and singers in the cathedrals were better than those when Bennett was writing, and the early 20th Century revival of Anglican Church Music was extraordinary. Once Herbert Howells was on the scene, with a whole new genre, the mediocre Victorians did not stand a chance. There are notable exceptions – some of the music from Bennett's time was significantly better, and has stood the test of time, but sadly, not most of his.

I encountered personally much of his choral music when planning the bi-centenial concert, and a couple of years ago, the Sterndale Singers did a performance of excerpts from the *Woman of Samaria*, for the Classical Sheffield Festival. I am more of a fan of Victorian Church music than many of my colleagues, but even I was struggling at times to pick the best of the crop. I had a similar task many years ago when a choir I directed was asked to do a concert for the inauguration of the Stainer Society in Oxford – trying to find the best bits. With the Woman of Samaria, by selecting the most interesting sections, and missing out a lot of it, we produced a 40 minute programme that was well received.

Mendelssohn's sacred choral anthems have survived much better, but this could simply be because he is Mendelssohn! I have to say that I am not a great fan. There are similarities between the two (as you would expect) but I also find Mendelssohn uninspiring, and much of it turgid, and dated.

One final thing to throw into the mix here: it is worth saying that the Grove dictionary was quite Anglo-centric at a time of far greater national partisan sentiment than is now familiar, but there is a contradiction - even though national pride was much more of a thing, English musicians, usually poorly paid and of low status, were derided because 'foreign' musicians were more popular and maybe 'exotic'. David Golby, a contemporary musicologist makes the point in his 2004 book Instrumental Teaching in 19th Century Britain, that the English especially were music 'consumers' not 'producers' but that this was a self-fulfilling prophesy. An interesting thought – especially now.

So there we have it: a young genius, a prodigious virtuosic pianist, in the first flush of youth, inspired by Mozart and Mendelssohn, found himself producing a few pieces which lit up the musical world of London and Leipzig. Unfortunately, his own insistence on avoiding what he considered to be undesirable modern writing resulted in a lack of development as a composer, and once the early accolades died down, and he had to settle into the drudgery of life as a musician in Victorian London, his early promise ended. His early music fell out of fashion, and into relative obscurity.

Is this fair?

That because of what people have though before, we, as an audience, don't get to hear some of this music.

We are lucky as listeners in the 21st century to have access instantly to more recordings than ever before. As musicians, with a bit of searching, we can usually find on-line scores which have been out of print for decades.

There has been more interest in the last couple of decades in the historical context in which music was written, and indeed performance practises and socio-economic circumstances which defined the music at the time, and Bennett's bi-centenary did provoke a revival of sorts.

I would like to believe that the dismissive attitude to Bennett's music might change with a continuing growing awareness of his work. In preparing this talk I have listened to more of his compositions than I ever believed I would, and they are enjoyable. I could imagine orchestras and pianists having fun performing the piano concertos, they are only half an hour long and would add lightness and jollity to many a concert programme, and the purely orchestral music is perfectly pleasant. I would not advocate to much of it in one sitting, as it is simply not as interesting as it could be, but in small doses, I think it adds positively to our musical experience.

One project which has been in the back of my mind for some time – closer to the front now than it was - is to produce a new addition of the Woman of Samaria, correcting what I perceive to be some of its greatest shortcomings, which might appeal to a modern audience more open to such things. Who knows, you may get to hear it in Sheffield sometime in the next decade.

I will leave you with a final recording Come live with me – a part song written in 1846 to a text by Christopher Marlowe. It is the better one of two which appear in a collection which is still published, and is sung by the Sterndale Singers. I hope you enjoy it.

EXTRACT Come live with me