Review: Sir F. A. Gore Ouseley

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THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

JULY 1, 1896.

SIR F. A. GORE OUSELEY.*

PERHAPS there may be some who think that the life of the late Oxford Professor of Music must have been too uneventful and barren of incident to call for a lengthy biography. But Mr. Joyce has proved himself an admirable biographer; he has told the simple story of Ouseley's career in a manner which makes it certainly delightful reading. He has special qualifications for the task; his grandfather was tutor to Ouseley when a lad of fifteen, his father (Mr. Wayland Joyce, rector of Burford) was one of Ouseley's most intimate friends and advisers, and it is probable that Ouseley's choice of Tenbury as a site for his college was due to a wish to be near to one whom he valued so much. When the author of this biography succeeded his father as rector of Burford, which is within an easy drive of St. Michael's College, he inherited much valuable correspondence, notes, sketches, and other subject-matter, and he could, of course, be constantly in communication with those residents at St. Michael's who loved their Warden so well.

All that Mr. Joyce himself has done is so well done that we almost regret that he introduced appendices by other hands. All musicians are aware that Ouseley was a very remarkable child, and numerous stories have long been current as to his extraordinarily keen ear and musical sensibility. But in the account given by his sister, Miss Ouseley, of his childhood, several things are unintelligible as related by her; for instance, when five years old he was modulating from C minor to D flat minor, and in a report of the conversation with his sister she is said to have asked, "Why did you first strike the chord of C minor before you went to A sharp?" He replied: "Because I thought it sounded so pretty." We confess to be fairly beaten by this "going to A sharp" (p. 20). A little farther on Miss Ouseley writes that the child had been playing *the cadence of D*, and after repeating it two or three times he dwelt upon the following chord of the *added sixth*, bass G, with B flat, E and G in the treble stave above; but this is not a chord of the added sixth at all. On the same page she relates that "when asked to go from B sharp to C flat, he immediately remarked that they were the same note"; this fact is

new to us; the child then innocently gave as a reason for their being one note that there was "no black note between them on the pianoforte"—this would, of course, make E and F and B and C the same note! Yet these cases are given to show that the child's replies were always "direct to the point." It seems also to us that very undue astonishment and praise are lavished on a simple repetition of C three times, followed by B! But setting aside an ample margin for the exuberant admiration young Ouseley received from his relations and their friends, it is impossible not to see that he had real genius; and when we compare the rich promise of his youth with the achievements of his mature age we are driven to the conclusion that something must have stood in the way as a bar between him and the high pinnacle of fame as a composer and executant which seemed to await him. Mr. Joyce's second chapter explains the mystery: instead of throwing himself into the musical world and securing the very best training it could possibly give him, Ouseley determined to go up to Oxford in the ordinary way, and then take Holy Orders. His mind had now of course to concentrate itself on the necessary classics and mathematics, and, in our humble opinion, he never recovered the loss of strict musical study at this critical period of his life. After due preparation he went to Oxford, where his musical gifts were fully appreciated. Many good stories of his pranks, when a high-spirited undergraduate, are to be found in Mr. Joyce's pages; we will not spoil his readers' pleasure by quoting them here. Ouseley's career as an undergraduate was not marked by anything very extraordinary, and having taken his B.A. degree he lived for two or three years in London, and then was ordained deacon, being licensed to a curacy at the Church of St. Barnabas, Pimlico, soon to be desecrated by the notorious anti-Puseyite riots. It is probable that at this church he conceived that strong dislike to Gregorian music which he retained for the rest of his life. He also felt some repugnance at the ritualistic practices then carried out in St. Barnabas. He was never afterwards a "ritualist" in the present acceptation of the term, although he thought nothing could be too beautiful for the services of the church. He remained to the day of his death what is now called an old-fashioned high-churchman.

In looking back upon the ten years which passed between Ouseley's determination to take orders and his entrance into church work as a pastor, every musician must naturally be tempted to look upon them as lost time, because unfruitful musically. We all know that from fifteen to twenty-five years of age the musician who desires to excel must practically be a slave to the technique of his art. Yet, on the other hand, when reading Mr. Joyce's most sensible remarks on this subject, we are constrained to admit that the path of life which Ouseley then

* "The Life of Rev. Sir F. A. G. Ouseley, Bart., M.A., Mus. D., &c." By F. W. Joyce, M.A., Rector of Burford. With portraits and illustrations. Methuen, 36, Essex Street.

laid out for himself was, in its way, most valuable and important—it certainly was then most uncommon, if not actually unique. The example he was about to set, as a graduate both in arts and music, as a baronet who esteemed it an honour to be a professor of music, as a church dignitary who could hold his own in a theological argument and then compose music for the next choral festival, was one deeply needed by the nation fifty years ago. Mr. Joyce states that when Ouseley took his Mus. Bac. degree, “some of the authorities in the University remonstrated with him. Not only did they point out that it was unfitting to take a lower after a higher degree, a Mus. Bac. (in 1850) after an M.A. (in 1849); but they seem to have urged that a man in his rank and position should scorn to take any musical degree at all” (p. 85). But in this respect Ouseley had not only to contend with contempt for musicians as a class, but also with the surviving tradition in the University of a strict order of precedence in degrees, that of Doctor of Divinity taking the highest rank, Doctors of Law and Medicine following next, then came Masters of Arts, below them Doctors of Music, then Bachelors of Arts, and, finally, Bachelors of Music. So firmly established was this etiquette, and so rigidly was it observed by our ancestors, that in one college, which shall be nameless, the Doctors of Divinity not only received higher stipends as Fellows, but, on proceeding into the Common Room after dinner, they sat at a separate table on a slightly raised platform, from which exalted position they smoked churchwarden pipes and sipped strong ale with greater self-respect than graduates in *lower faculties*! An old and well worn story may be repeated as illustrating this *caste* among graduates. When the Rev. Dr. Dodd was convicted of forgery, an M.A. remarked in his Common Room that it was a disgrace to an English University that one of its Doctors should be hanged; but a venerable D.D. interrupted him by saying, “Egad, Sir! it might have been worse; for you must remember, Sir, *he was only a Doctor in Civil Law!*” In setting his face against such absurd but at that time very real distinctions, Ouseley inaugurated a new phase in the life of English music, for which musicians, and the country generally, cannot be too grateful.

Henceforward it was no longer to be a discredit to a well-bred and well-educated man to become a *bonâ fide* musician, or to receive fees and a stipend *as such*. The musical profession generally did not at all endorse Ouseley's appointment as Professor to the University of Oxford, which took place in 1855, he being then just thirty years old, and having been in Deacon's orders nearly six years; he was, it was said, a *mere amateur*, though no doubt to some extent gifted and accomplished. This antipathy of the musical profession, forty years ago, to the entrance of “fine gentlemen” into its

ranks is lightly and delicately handled by Mr. Joyce; but it was very widespread, and doubtless was one reason why Ouseley did not receive that encouragement in the musical world which might very likely have drawn out his powers and have urged him to make greater efforts and aim at a higher standard as a composer. Some twenty years ago a well-known musician, since deceased, used in his weaker moments to boast that he was the only *gentleman* in the profession; in saying this he had not the least intention of casting a slur on Ouseley's escutcheon, he merely ignored him as being a “rank outsider.” But let it be freely acknowledged that to Ouseley, though placed in the exceedingly difficult position of being in one sense a professional musician, while at the same time he was a good country parson and Cathedral dignitary, we largely owe the improved intellectual and social position of musicians. He felt that some test of general education would be necessary if musical graduates were to be duly respected in their own Universities, and he followed Dublin and Cambridge in the imposition of a literary examination, either Responsions, or Higher Locals, or School Delegates'. The choice thus given to candidates did not altogether turn out beneficially; it was found that by a little dexterity candidates could reach the musical examinations without a knowledge of any language but English; therefore for the last few years a special *preliminary examination for students in music* in any two of five given languages has been made compulsory with the best results. There has been no symptom of a falling off in the class of candidates, as prophesied by some of our newspapers; quite the reverse; and Ouseley's example of taking a *lower* degree after a *higher* has become remarkably common: not a year passes without several men being presented for their Mus. Bac. degree attired in the gown and hood of M.A. This is the more remarkable if it be remembered that for several years the late and the present Professor in Oxford were the *only* living graduates in arts and music, by examination. Perhaps the upward social tendency of the musical profession has now reached its proper limit; it would, perhaps, be an ideal state of things “if every gentleman were a musician and every musician a gentleman”; but we hope there is no truth in the story that a fashionable conductor lately expressed a doubt whether he ought to conduct the “Sinfonia Eroica,” on the ground that Beethoven was not a gentleman! There need be no fear on this point, for wherever genius or talent is found it will always be assisted and helped up into its proper social sphere; not, perhaps, because society duly views a man of genius as a Prince among minds, but because society is exceedingly selfish, and is always ready to reward liberally and treat kindly any sort of animal which conduces to its pleasure.

The abilities and, perhaps, too, the physical strength of Ouseley were much taxed by his two-fold existence. Whilst doing his best for his University as a musician, he was pouring out liberally his private means on behalf of the college and church which he was building and founding. He had selected a most picturesque site, and on it he raised one of the most beautiful churches (for its size) to be found in England; nor is the college itself less remarkable for the elegance of its architecture. After his death, when his friends were subscribing and raising funds to add to the slender endowment he was only able to bestow on it, the question was often asked—What is the good of St. Michael's College? The very wording of this question witnesses to the utilitarianism of our age. We do not at all wish it to be thought that in our opinion the college is of no use; we do sincerely sympathise with its founder in his desire to raise "a thing of beauty" as an offering to God, not for the admiration of men, and to gather within its walls efficient musicians to carry on a daily full choral service, not for the pleasure of a large congregation (the church was often empty), but as offering and devoting his and their special gifts to God's glory. Yet it cannot be denied that it was a fatal mistake of Bishop Wilberforce to discourage Ouseley from building his church and college near Oxford (p. 83), where its influence would have been more widespread, and where unquestionably it would have received liberal pecuniary support. The Bishop's action is the more unaccountable and inconsistent if it is true that he was afraid, or unwilling, to have in his diocese an ex-curate of St. Barnabas, Pimlico.

The present isolated block of buildings near Tenbury gives a visitor the impression of a sort of cross between a monastery and a music school. This is, no doubt, exactly what Ouseley intended St. Michael's to be. He more than once said that he did not want it to be a large popular boys' school. On the other hand, its remote position cannot have a good effect on the musical education of the chorister-boys within its walls. They are too far off from any great centre of art-energy; where can they hear Beethoven's, Schubert's, or Schumann's symphonies? or the finest operas? or the choicest chamber music? Gibbons, Blow, Purcell, Wise, Boyce, Hayes, and others may be very satisfactory in their way; but a constant, almost daily reiteration of such composers' music cannot tend to expand young musical faculties.

Sir Frederick Ouseley devoted all he possessed in lands and money to the service of the Church of England, but the Church seemed to be very reluctant to bestow any one of its pecuniarily valuable offices on him; it was not till he had reached the age of sixty-one that he received an appointment with a stipend—namely, a Canonry in Hereford

Cathedral; but as he had practically to rebuild the house attached to his office, it is doubtful whether he profited by it at all. Two years after this first substantial recognition of his worth and generosity he died suddenly of heart disease; he had suffered from it for several years.

The story of his last days and hours is told by his biographer with a touching simplicity; and here we wish we could bring our review to a close, for all that Mr. Joyce has said of Ouseley is so true and so well said that it needed no addition. But two chapters are appended on Ouseley "as a musician," from the pen of the gifted and amiable organist of Hereford Cathedral, himself an old St. Michael's chorister. He describes with truth the unsatisfactory condition of church music in Ouseley's earlier days, but we confess to being considerably puzzled by the statement that "the older music created by the English mind at its sanest moment was purely ideal." Perhaps Tye, Tallis, Bird, and Gibbons are alluded to; but is the English mind less sane than it was in their time? And is their music "purely ideal"? What is purely ideal music? And is not Mr. Sinclair allowing his affection and enthusiasm for his late friend to run away with his better judgment when he writes: "He was always a master of form, deeply learned in all the various modes adopted by the great composers." Ouseley was always regular in his periods and phrases, but as far as we remember he only turned out about half-a-dozen movements in binary form, and the book which he published on "Form" certainly does not testify to any "deep learning" on the subject. In speaking of Ouseley's *Services and Anthems*, Mr. Sinclair says: "Many are of a most elaborate nature, containing magnificent instances of contrapuntal writing which are only to be compared with the finest examples of the Madrigalian period"; this is rather a high-flown panegyric! The volume of *Services and Anthems* he published when twenty-eight years of age (1853) is full of blunders in harmony and faults in counterpoint of the most elementary kind. In later years he certainly improved greatly, a comparison of the 1853 volume with his contributions to the "Collection"—the first volume of which was published eight years later (1861), and the second five years later still (1866)—shows the change in the character of his technique to be very marked. But even then some of his best anthems are over-weighted with a ponderous fugue generally built on a well-worn if not commonplace subject. "No man had a higher ideal in music for the church than he had," says Mr. Sinclair, and he adds farther on that Ouseley "sought a style which should at once be lofty, devotional, passionless, and ethereal." No doubt "magnificent specimens of contrapuntal writing," and of fugal writing too, may be "lofty and passionless"; but is a stretto by inversion, or an answer by augmentation,

or double counterpoint at the tenth, so very "devotional and ethereal"? We are seriously afraid that if we had to choose between a daily use of Ouseley's "ideal" music and what Mr. Sinclair terms "the flimsy church music of to-day," we should unhesitatingly pledge our allegiance to the "flimsy music of to-day" as exemplified by Garrett, Stanford, C. H. Lloyd, Martin, Gadsby, Prout, and others. Sullivan has become a confirmed writer of comic operas, but have there ever been two anthems more "devotional and ethereal" than "I will mention the lovingkindness of the Lord" and "Who is like unto Thee"? We evidently do not place before us the same ideal as Mr. Sinclair, so we will say no more: Ouseley's fame will not be enhanced by his too enthusiastic criticisms. But Mr. Sinclair is himself doing a good work; he is the right man in the right place at Hereford Cathedral; for, notwithstanding his admiration for his late friend, he welcomes new contributions to Church music, and they receive from the choir he directs, and from his masterly accompaniments on the organ, a rendering which is at once as "devotional and ethereal" as could be desired by those intimate friends of Ouseley to whom this admirable and well-written biography recalls vividly and affectingly the figure, manner, and very talk of one whose life was a model of simplicity, generosity, and self-devotion.

FROM MY STUDY.

THE card, with autograph inscription, now reproduced, was addressed by Madame Christine Nilsson to a critic who had written approvingly of her representation of the character mentioned. I scarcely need state that the Swedish artist's *Marguerite* was, at one time, the most refined and, generally, the most successful in her repertory. It sadly deteriorated during the later part of her career.

The second reproduction is of interest just now because the original shows the handwriting of Clara Schumann. Madame Schumann sometimes played selections from the Sonatas of Scarlatti at the Popular Concerts, and it was her custom to indicate her choice by quoting the opening bar, or bars, of each for the benefit of the programme annotator.

On further examination of the MSS. kindly presented to me by Miss Sabilla Novello, I find that, at one time, her distinguished father intended writing a biography of Mozart, and took active steps to carry out his purpose, which, however, he ultimately abandoned. While moving in the matter, Vincent Novello naturally sought to obtain materials from Attwood, the great master's pupil; but his request for information met with an unsatisfactory reply. Like the knife-grinder, Attwood had no story to tell. Here is a copy of his

letter, written at "Norwood, Surrey," and dated May 19, 1828:

"My dear Sir: I shall be most happy to give you all the information in my power, but doubt much my ability to answer your expectations on so interesting a subject. It is now forty-two years since I took my farewell of my much revered master, and, not having calculated upon writing his life, I confess I cannot (at least immediately) recall to my mind the particulars you require. When the hurry of the season is over, I hope to have the pleasure of meeting you, when, probably, more may be elicited than I can at present anticipate. Wishing you every success in your meritorious undertaking, I remain, my dear Sir, Yours very truly, Tho^s. Attwood."

On the same subject, Novello communicated with Thomas Adams, and received the following response, headed "Camberwell, November 6" (year omitted):

"My dear Sir: I know not what satisfactory apology can be offered for my tardiness in replying to your very gratifying letter. Negligence I cannot plead; for, like many more persons, I have daily remembered what ought to be done, though I have omitted to perform it. May I hope that this candid avowal of my fault will induce you to overlook it, and to believe that, though my acknowledgement of the elegant compliment you have paid me in the dedication is much too late, I have still duly appreciated your politeness.

"Accept my congratulations on your having entered on a task at once so useful and so delightful as that of drawing up a complete biography of Mozart. Its utility will be felt by every musical student who aspires to excellence. The splendid example will awaken his enthusiasm, and call forth all his powers. Its delight will be experienced by yourself. I can readily imagine the ardour with which you will engage in your work, and the pleasure you will experience in tracing every circumstance connected with the pursuits and habits of him who has been as justly as beautifully designated 'The Shakespeare of music.'

"Though it is not very probable that I can produce any addition to such very extensive sources of information as you already possess, I will not, believe me, neglect your request. It would give me abundant pleasure to be instrumental in bringing before the public any fresh information, however trivial, on a subject so dear to every true musician.

"My admiration of Mozart and Haydn is unbounded. When satiated with the productions of other writers, I can always turn to their pages with the same delight as if they were perfectly new to me. There is a freshness about their compositions which we vainly seek elsewhere, and which arises from their most astonishing fertility of imagination. They were certainly the two most variously gifted musicians the world ever saw. But I must not