

Introduction

Iain Quinn
The Florida State University
Email: iquinn@fsu.edu

*Is it too much to ask that the profession of music should have as honourable a status and recognition on equal terms with those of Law and Medicine?*¹

Stephen Stratton

During the nineteenth century the role in society of English organists and organ builders changed and took on a strong national identity. The upheavals of the Industrial Revolution had caused apprehension in many professions, as traditional bases of social or intellectual support seemed to be disappearing.² But many features of the ‘organ world’ as it is seen by people of the twenty-first century had their origin in this period of ambition, self-questioning and competition. The community of Victorian organists took decisive steps towards re-envisioning their profession in ways that reached far beyond the organ loft. One of the most important developments was the founding of an active professional association – the College of Organists – in 1864, which gave a new status to musicians, many of whom had been treated dismissively in society. Moreover, musical figures in parish churches, cathedrals, town halls and educational institutions brought members of this world into a closer relationship with communities about them through developments in organ building, the development of concerts and changes in liturgical practice. In such ways organists built a broad sense of how their music served the public that lasts to the present day.

For much of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, the organist was the leading musical figure in towns and cities throughout Britain and exerted considerable influence on numerous aspects of musical life. The importance of their civic role helps to explain many of the key aspects of their work, as well as the scholarly practice that was to become a lasting part of the profession’s identity. As organists typically combined a church post with private, sometimes institutional, teaching and adjudicating, they were in constant demand, and became pivotal figures locally, regionally and often nationally. To this end, as well as out of financial necessity, the organists were amongst the most well trained musicians, able to turn their hand not just to playing but also to conducting, organ design, music criticism and numerous administrative roles. For much of the century there was no clear path for their training other than the apprentice system, in which a young musician is taken under the wing of a learned senior colleague; in

¹ Stephen Stratton, *Monthly Journal* [Incorporated Society of Musicians], December (1888).

² Cyril Ehrlich, *The English Musical Renaissance 1860–1940* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 12.

addition to this system there was a thriving industry of published primers for advice on playing. However, standards of performance varied considerably, and the discipline that we now readily associate with music in the Anglican tradition was extremely rare, as many commentators, not least S.S. Wesley,³ discussed through regular publication. Reform and alignment of expectations was to come, but not in a singular action or as the result of a particular crisis. Rather it materialized because of a perceived need for improvement in standards, so that organists could hold their heads high alongside members of the serious professions, medicine and law. Indeed, one might answer Stratton's question above with the rejoinder 'but *was* it too much to ask?' and in the case of the organist's profession 'are we still asking the same questions now?'

A noteworthy distinction that organists made quite deliberately was an ambition to chart a self-determined path. Indeed, they could often act decisively because they played a core repertoire that was not dependent on collaboration with other musicians. In many respects, the artistic path they ventured upon was noble in the truest sense, as it set musicians who were at the centre of civic music making largely apart from the musical mainstream. One could argue that shaded by velvet drapery in lofts high above the masses, organists were already removed from the *hoi polloi* of musical culture, and some wanted to press their idealism further. If organists were to be true leaders within communities, then the acquisition of respected credentials was crucial in providing tangible evidence to support their re-envisioned role.

The old system of testimonials recommending organists had proven to be problematic in the new age, and often resulted in players of significant ability, especially women, being ignored. It is partly in response to this problem that the idea of what would eventually become the Royal College of Organists (initially College of Organists) took hold in the minds of a handful of London organists. Through the rigorous and demanding examinations devised by the college, organists were now to be assessed on practical, theoretical and historical matters. Furthermore, the diplomas offered by the College would serve as professional benchmarks for professional reputation.

Andrew McCrea's article discusses the establishment of the College of Organists, an institution that to this day stands alone as a body devoted to one instrument under the patronage of the sovereign. Fellowship of the Royal College of Organists remains a coveted qualification. Tests on music history, sixteenth- and eighteenth-century counterpoint, including fugue, score reading, aural examinations and the completion of excerpts of chamber works (amongst other skills) came to form essential parts of the organists training. This training supported the cultivation of a profession that did not simply rely on the playing of solo repertoire but rather engendered a culture whereby a 'professional organist' was by reputation a well-rounded musician of superior tutelage. The early years of the College exemplify the assiduity of the few in favour of the professionalization and increased status that were ultimately to enhance the reputation of the British organist worldwide.

Beyond examination and self-regulation, the organization made possible numerous advancements in complementary fields that facilitated headway, not only for organists but also for those who held a developing appreciation of

³ See Samuel Sebastian Wesley, *A few Words on Cathedral Music* (New York: Hinrichsen Edition, 1965)

their art. Significant developments occurred as a result of the increased size of instruments, the adoption of two-octave C–C pedalboards (after decades of inconsistent compasses), and the advent of a British instrument built along ‘symphonic’ lines. This progression enabled composers to consider a more expansive tonal palette that could result in works that were no longer largely governed by sectional changes of registration. However, many organist-composers followed a curiously independent path, and it is here that the value placed on self-perception is especially evident. With a paucity of substantial compositions from the previous century, and in particular a lack of home-grown solo organ works in the admired sonata form, organist-composers redressed the balance of the repertoire by writing works that could serve multiple ends. Iain Quinn’s article addresses these development and the multiple areas of style and influence that were brought to the fore through what might be considered if not a professionalization of the repertoire certainly an intentional elevation of it.

Rather than capture contemporary continental trends of organ composition, they took stock of historical precedent and crafted a genre that could be styled a ‘portfolio sonata’ – e.g. a work that could have a classically inspired first movement, a typically easier central movement often in a Mendelssohnian vein, and a scholarly fugue typically modelled on Bach to conclude. The sonatas, including examples by many of the significant figures of the century, also followed the lesson-sonata tradition that was already well known in Britain, whereby when one learned the piece one also learned the instrument and vice versa.

Stylistically there were multiple compositional influences, drawing on inspired models from the past, including Mozart and Beethoven as well as Mendelssohn, whose absence from British organ circles was deeply lamented.⁴ In the words of Henry Chorley, writing in 1854 on Mendelssohn’s passing, ‘The fountain is dry – the familiar book is closed ... no more great works shall be produced’.⁵ But for many it was the ‘beginning of the end’ to the xenophilia⁶ that had long gripped Britain, with Handel and Haydn’s continued elevation and the influence of the large number of Italian musicians at work, not least in the opera houses. As such, the organist-composers in part re-invented their own repertoire, filling in the vacant spots on the library shelf with new works inspired by old models whilst at the same time nurturing homegrown talent. Evidence from discussions in the critical press demonstrates that this style of work was warmly embraced.

The organ compositions of William Russell are especially important in relationship with the works that were inheritors of Classical (and indeed Baroque) traditions. As John Kitchen notes in his article in this issue, the voluntaries appear to have been well received whilst being quite audacious works for the period. This success should be borne in mind when considering the classical influences on the mid-Victorian sonatas as well as the public reception to Russell’s works and the influence they may well have had on later publishers and publications. High-quality pieces that are within the grasp of many players are always in demand. The importance of assumed solemnity in last movements that follow more jocular sections is especially noteworthy, as it reinforces the

⁴ See Nicholas Temperley ‘Mozart’s Influence on English Music’, *Music and Letters* 42 (1961): 307–18.

⁵ Henry F. Chorley, *Modern German Music* (London: Smith, Elder, [1854]): I, 404.

⁶ See Nicholas Temperley, ‘Xenophilia in British Musical History’’, in *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies*, Vol. 1, ed. Bennett Zon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999): 4.

sentiment that composers who write for the church could not be 'mere musician(s)' but rather professional church musicians.⁷ In this regard, Russell was a forerunner of many organists (and indeed ecclesiologists) for whom the aesthetic response to repertoire was of paramount concern. In an age where many church organists also found ready employment in secular venues, the influence on Sunday morning repertoire (and one must also assume improvisations), could be alarming, hence the need in many anthologies to distinguish between works that were appropriate for 'concert' from those that were for 'church/liturgical' use, not least so that services ended with a 'serious' work.⁸

As noted above, new or substantially rebuilt instruments offered increasing possibilities to composers of solo repertoire, but we also see a maturation of the organ part in liturgical works that were heard throughout the country. More than simply doubling vocal parts, as had typically been the case before, the organist progressively played an independent role, with styles of writing that drew on the new tonal resources as well as (generally) tempered influences from secular genres. In anthems of S.S. Wesley and John Stainer we see this style elegantly developed, and with it a parallel need for organists to be skilled accompanists, which many would have been from their other musical endeavours. This tradition of advanced accompaniment skills, begun in the Victorian era, continues to this day, and we can trace a lineage of increased technical demands from Walmisley through Wesley–Stainer–Stanford–Harwood–Howells–Leighton and Britten to Tippett and numerous recent composers. However, the use of the organ not only as a vehicle for specific word-painting but as a medium for conveying the greater meaning of the text was allied to both the development of the instrument and, equally important, the heightened creative sophistication of liturgical composers. Nicholas Thistlethwaite's article follows this development and the close relationship of the advancement in organ design with an increasingly independent use of the instrument in liturgies, a parallel that one might suggest bears relation to the symbiotic relationship of French organ construction under Aristide Cavallé-Coll and the compositions of César Franck.

The desire was continually sought for art in all forms that epitomized exemplary creative endeavour, not least in the church, and is highlighted in the commentary offered by William Gladstone in 1884:

It will be evident then, I think, that the spirit of one who writes for the Church must not be that of a mere musician. He must be this, but he must be something more. His office has some analogy to that of the preacher. He, too, has to select, expound, and illustrate his text, to dive into its inner meanings, and clothe it in a vesture of song ... [His work] must be founded on canons of taste and right feeling that will endure fluctuations of fashion. This, I think, our best musicians feel.⁹

The appreciation of continental composers and particular compositional models (especially the sonata and fugue) that were above 'fluctuations in

⁷ William Henry Gladstone, 'Music as an Aid to Worship and Work', *The Official Report of the Church Congress, Held at Carlisle* (London: Bemrose and Sons, 1884): 310.

⁸ Numerous organ anthologies were published during the nineteenth century, not least by Novello, and it was typical to find a contents page that classified works by 'concert' or 'church/liturgical' use.

⁹ William Henry Gladstone, 'Music as an Aid to Worship and Work', *The Official Report of the Church Congress, Held at Carlisle* (London: Bemrose and Sons, 1884): 308–17.

fashion' also influenced programming trends in the concert world. The 'town hall tradition' of bringing orchestral works to communities (where there was no easy access to orchestral performances) through transcriptions for the organ is today well known. However, in the twentieth century a campaign for original repertoire, or indeed a course against transcribed repertoire, beclouded the original intention of figures such as W.T. Best, Edmund Chipp and later Edwin Lemare, each of whom worked in civic settings and performed numerous transcriptions. Best's doctrine was to bring the finest repertoire to his audiences regardless of provenance, and on several levels his approach was decidedly more ingenious than ingenuous.

Why indeed should a community be deprived of Beethoven, Mozart or Haydn symphonies when they could be stylishly played on the organ? Further, with a precursor as eminent as Liszt striving to promote the works of many popular as well as lesser-known composers in his piano performances, the civic organists were simply following a well-trodden path. Moreover, the role of the transcription in programmes as well as church services, though sometimes queried in the nineteenth-century press, symbolizes a larger concern to advance the cause of the instrument as a medium for 'serious' music making. Although one might wonder at the wisdom of asking an organist to perform the slow movement of a Haydn symphony in a transcription for organ as part of the audition for a liturgical post, one can also see the enlightened side of desiring music of the 'top drawer' to be included in Divine Service. If one could sing Haydn liturgically then why not play his music as a voluntary? As Temperley has demonstrated, the Mozartian overlap was already evident in compositions.¹⁰

The rise of organ recitals can be seen as a major innovation in nineteenth-century concert life. Barbara Owens has shown that the recital scene in America evolved in ways markedly different from that in Britain, since recitals featured multiple organists, a tradition that never quite took hold in Britain and remains rare today. Programmes were less dependent on transcriptions of operatic repertoire, or indeed on works from the orchestral canon, than were Best's Liverpool performances, for example. We see an impartial approach to the repertoire, which was not seeking to assert a 'work concept' ideal, as can be identified in Britain where the supremacy of specific forms (sonata and fugue) is in greater evidence. Rather than establish a new model of programming, as the British organist-composers did (especially Best, whose formula rarely changed), there is an especial receptivity to current trends and individuality, and an ultimate openness and encouragement to foreign performers and composers. This is manifest later in the era with the influence of Alexandre Guilmant (whose works were also in vogue on the other side of the Atlantic) and ultimately Marcel Dupré, who were both warmly received in America. The historical difference between the two countries' liturgical life, as well as the use of the organ in concert settings is sufficient to allow for comparative analysis, although the engagement with the public is impressively similar as performers on both sides of the Atlantic sought a loyal constituency.

William Gatens asks us to consider 'the possibility of composers whose temperamental inclinations and creative aspirations correspond[ed] closely with the condition set by the functions and sentiments of the liturgy'.¹¹ Indeed, we

¹⁰ Temperley 'Mozart's influence on English Music'.

¹¹ William J. Gatens, *Victorian Cathedral Music in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 45.

could justifiably consider many organists under this supposition in a broader context. Partly through their training, partly through their ecclesiastical environs, and partly through the knowledge that they belonged to a tradition that extended back to ancient Greece, organists were (and arguably remain) in a profession that was greatly respected yet culturally, educationally and sociologically set apart from other musical professions. Although the psychology of the organist is not considered here, the characteristic of the diffident, studious musician is indubitably present from the Victorian period to the present; throughout this issue we see countless examples in which their professionalism was imbued with an ardour and fortitude that was commensurate with Victorian ideals of betterment, worthiness and advancement.

This issue allows for a study of key areas of musical endeavour that were central to the life of many Victorians. We can see evidence of a deliberate advancement of a profession that heretofore had been treated dismissively by many in society. The areas of their enquiry were far reaching, from composition to organ building and from programming trends to liturgical and aesthetic preferences, each holding distinct importance to nineteenth-century musical practice. The founding of a unique body in the form of the College of Organists was a particular accomplishment, and supported by an august roster of senior figures in the national establishment, it was to become a beacon of excellence revered around the world. It is in large part this broad portfolio of musical endeavour that allows the profession of the organist to stand apart in so many respects, for organists were not engaged in a single pursuit since many were musical polymaths by pragmatic necessity. The developments and pivotal historical events of this extraordinary era of professional advancement are discussed in detail through these essays, and the reader, perhaps encountering many figures for the first time, will see how a spirit of idealism pervaded their activities.