

# Our First Hundred Years

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A MUSICAL reader of *The Illustrated London News* for Saturday 31 October 1874 might have read the following paragraph:

The new musical association which has recently been founded now numbers 125 members, and its meetings will begin next Monday afternoon, at the Beethoven Rooms, 27, Harley-street, Cavendish-square. It is hoped that, later, a permanent home may be found at Burlington House. At the conclusion of the ordinary business of the association, Dr. W. H. Stone, M.A., F.R.C.P., will read a paper "On extending the compass and increasing the tone of stringed instruments:" this will be illustrated by a quartet of stringed instruments fitted with Dr. Stone's and Mr. Meeson's elliptical tension bars. Mr. H. R. Bosanquet, M.A., of King's [recte St. John's] College, Oxford, has also promised a paper "On temperament, or the division of the octave." The Rev. Sir Frederick Gore Ouseley, Bart., Mus.Doc., Professor of Music at the University of Oxford, has accepted the office of president. The vice-presidents are George Grove, Esq.; John Hullah, Esq.; George A. Macfarren, Esq.; William Spottiswoode, Esq., F.R.S.; and Professor Tyndall, F.R.S. The honorary secretary is Mr. C. K. Salaman.

The curious thing about this paragraph is that it does not mention the man who had been the prime mover in the formation of the Association and its first secretary for a few months until Salaman took over, and who was to be its second president when Ouseley died after fifteen years of office: John Stainer. (I suspect the reason for the omission was that Stainer had drafted the paragraph himself.) He generously described his relationship to Salaman in his account of the genesis of the Association, published in *The Musical Times* in 1901:

On one of Dr. Pole's<sup>1</sup> visits to Oxford—I think at the time he came to take his Mus.Doc. (1867)—I had the pleasure of meeting him at Dr. Corfe's<sup>2</sup> house. After dinner (or lunch) we were sitting in the garden talking 'shop'. It was on this occasion that I stated to Dr. Pole that I thought there ought to be a musical society on the same lines as our *learned societies*. He encouraged the idea, and I promised that if ever I lived in London I would try and carry it out.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Pole, remembered for his book *The Philosophy of Music*, by profession a civil engineer like George Grove, and actually Professor of Civil Engineering at University College, London, when he took his Oxford B.Mus. and D.Mus.

<sup>2</sup> Corfe was organist of Christ Church.

<sup>3</sup> *The Musical Times*, xlii (1901), 91.

Stainer's appointment as organist of St. Paul's in 1872 gave him the opportunity he wanted. The help of another scientist, Pole's friend William Spottiswoode, President of the Royal Society, the most venerable of British learned societies, was enlisted, and Spottiswoode invited a score or so influential musicians and musical physicists to his house, 50 Grosvenor Place, on 16 April 1874.<sup>4</sup> Science was well represented, with John Tyndall, Charles Wheatstone and Alexander Ellis (who was then working on his translation of Helmholtz), as well as Spottiswoode and Pole and the reader of our very first paper, at the Beethoven Rooms on 2 November 1874, W. H. Stone, an extraordinary man who was both physician and physicist and a collector of, and brilliant performer on, a number of wind instruments. George Grove also must be reckoned among the ambidexterous. But there were besides Stainer some musicians of pure blood among our founding fathers: John Hullah, George Macfarren, Joseph Barnby, William Chappell, George Osborne—and Charles Salaman to whom, according to Stainer's *Musical Times* account, the infant Association was more indebted than to anyone else:

Salaman took up the matter warmly, and by his work, and tact, and knowledge of musicians, backed by W. Spottiswoode, he really placed the Association on the sound basis on which it now stands. The idea was mine, but the construction was his; all praise to him!

Salaman was a pianist, composer, conductor and lecturer: a good but not outstanding all-rounder. What he did excel in was getting things started: chamber-music concerts, amateur choirs, and above all an institution which has a special interest for us, the Musical Society of London of which he was the honorary secretary from its foundation in 1858 till 1865. This was essentially an orchestral concert-giving society, founded on the ruins of the short-lived New Philharmonic, but its original objects were further ranging:

To promote social intercourse among its members and with musicians of this and other countries; to form a musical library for the use of members; to hold conversazioni, on which papers on musical subjects might be read, and subjects of musical interest discussed; to give orchestral, choral, and chamber concerts, and occasionally lectures; to afford the opportunity of trying new compositions; to publish occasional papers calculated to extend the theoretical and historical knowledge of music.

As an anonymous critic commented rather sceptically on the occasion of the Society's first concert:

<sup>4</sup> See *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, i (1874–5), iii.

To accomplish so many objects will demand judicious management, a genuine love of art, a spirit of union, and a superiority to all selfish and interested views or motives. With all these, the society may do great things; without them, it will do nothing.

It began with more than 600 members but within a year or two of Salaman's resignation of the secretaryship it ceased operations. That was in March 1867, the year of Stainer's after-dinner chat with William Pole at Oxford, and it seems extremely probable that the decline and fall of the Musical Society of London may have put into his head the idea of a musical society with a limited object, a single target, 'a musical society on the same lines as our *learned* societies'.

As we have seen, it was seven years before he could realize that idea, but things then moved rapidly. The informal meeting at Spottiswoode's house produced a provisional committee with Stainer as secretary, which met there again six days later to draw up rules for presentation to an inaugural meeting in the board room of the South Kensington Museum on 29 May. This was chaired by John Hullah and nineteen founder-members were enrolled; within a couple of months another fifty had joined, Charles Salaman had taken over the secretaryship from Stainer, and a very able businessman, Arthur Chappell of the publishing, concert-promoting and piano-manufacturing firm, younger brother of William Chappell, had agreed to be our first treasurer. The first General Meeting of members, on 4 August 1874, was chaired by Alexander Ellis but elected Ouseley as president. It resolved that the society's title should be

MUSICAL ASSOCIATION, FOR THE INVESTIGATION AND  
DISCUSSION OF SUBJECTS CONNECTED WITH THE ART AND  
SCIENCE OF MUSIC

and that its members should consist of

practical and theoretical Musicians, as well as those whose researches have been directed to the science of Acoustics, the history of Music, or other kindred subjects.

The public announcement of the Association's formation had already made it clear that

No concerts or musical performances of any kind are to be given, but the object of the meetings will be to read original papers and to discuss all matters relating to the art.

The original annual subscription was one guinea.

I have dwelt at some length on the origins of our Association because they explain the course on which the Association was originally set. It was to be a learned society, concerned with the 'Science' as well as the 'Art' of music. But in the England of 1874 'musical science' meant acoustics, and musical 'learning' was displayed in counterpoint or chromatic harmony. If you studied 'old music' you were an 'antiquarian'—a word which generated overtones of dilettantism; more than 30 years later the then equivalent of *Music & Letters* was called *The Musical Antiquary*; even in Germany the term 'musikalische Wissenschaft' had been introduced only a decade earlier by Chrysander, who had to explain and defend it in the introduction to the first of his *Jahrbücher* in 1863. That very first paper of W. H. Stone's was scientific, but at least it was enlivened by a string quartet 'fitted with elliptical tension bars'. During the rest of the session members enjoyed papers on 'Temperament; or, The Division of the Octave', 'Illustrations of Just and Tempered Intonation' and 'The Fallacies of Dr. Day's Theory of Harmony; with a Brief Outline of the Elements of a New System'. Sedley Taylor put forward 'A Suggested Simplification of the Established Pitch-Notation', Stainer dealt with 'The Principles of Musical Notation', and Alexander Ellis exhibited 'a Mesotonic Harmonium, playing from seven flats to seven sharps, by a new stop-action'. All this—or most of it—was good, solid stuff, but the then editor of *The Musical Times* took a poor view of it. He complained that 'all this has in reality nothing to do with music . . . if the Council of the Society think with us that some practical result should be achieved by these meetings, a vigorous course of action will be at once necessary'.<sup>5</sup> But Council did not think with him, and in the next Session some of the very same physicists were back at the lectern, holding forth on 'Standards of Musical Pitch', 'the Graphic Method of Representing Musical Intervals', and so on.

On the other hand, when the musicians took over they paddled in very shallow water. Ouseley offered some 'Considerations on the History of Ecclesiastical Music of Western Europe', Salaman spoke on 'Musical Criticism' and W. A. Barrett on 'Music in Cathedrals'. They seem to have been incapable of intensive and disciplined thought about musical topics, or indeed of selecting topics that demanded or lent themselves to intensive and disciplined thought. But things slowly—very slowly—changed and the *Proceedings* of our

<sup>5</sup> *The Musical Times*, xvii (1875–6), 552; for other jaundiced comments see also pp. 169 and 200.

hundred years show the streams of musical antiquarianism, musical history, musical criticism feeding each other, deepening and increasing their power. Ebenezer Prout was a notable pioneer, and Stainer himself in 1895 read a paper on 'A Fifteenth-Century MS. Book of Vocal Music in the Bodleian Library, Oxford'—which was, I need hardly say, the Codex Canonici 213, from which he afterwards published a selection of transcriptions made by his son and daughter. From the point of view of 80 years later, it is a terrible paper—treating fifteenth-century music in terms of the nineteenth century; but it was 'scientific' in intent, it was pioneering work, and it was illustrated by four Dufay chansons which (he tells us in *Dufay and his Contemporaries*) 'were played on violas to the members of the Musical Association, who evidently listened to them not only with interest, but genuine pleasure'.

It was long before Britain could show anything in the field of *Musikwissenschaft* comparable with the contents of the *Vierteljahrsschrift* run by Chrysander, Spitta and Guido Adler; yet Germany—so far as I can discover—had no society like ours. Here I think we may claim absolute priority, for the Dutch Vereeniging voor Noord-Nederlands Muziekgeschiedenis, founded a few years before us, was originally a purely publishing society concentrating on Dutch music of the period from Obrecht to Sweelinck—the counterpart, in fact, of the British Musical Antiquarian Society of 1840–47, founded by William Chappell to publish English music of the Elizabethan-Jacobean period, plus Purcell—though the Dutch Vereeniging widened its activities later and is still very much alive and flourishing. However in 1899 the Germans launched their Internationale Musikgesellschaft and both the Musical Association and the Dutch Vereeniging quickly became affiliated to it; our members received the *Zeitschrift* and *Sammelbände* with English wrappers as the 'Monthly Journal' and 'Quarterly Magazine of the International Musical Society', there was a fair proportion of material in English, and during this period—with such men as Barclay Squire, Fuller Maitland and Edward Dent among its members—our Association markedly widened its outlook.

By far the greatest changes the Association has undergone—not only in the general standard of its papers—have been those of the last 30 years. When in August 1944 the King commanded 'that the Association shall henceforth be known as "The Royal Musical Association"', the total number of members was 243; the previous session it had been less than 200. It is now between 700 and 800. Aged 29, 'Anthony C. Lewis, Esq.' was probably by far the youngest member; few

of us were under 40 and the front row of chairs was commonly occupied by venerable figures leaning forward with hands cupped to their ears to catch each erudite word. It was the perfect type of a 'learned society'. Tea and buns before the paper had not yet been superseded by sherry. The changes that have taken place have been the result of various factors—mainly, no doubt, developments in the universities: the enlargement of music faculties or departments and the revitalizing of syllabuses in the older ones and the proliferation of new universities. But even the wider musical public became far more interested in the music of history than it had ever been before the War; it babbled of 'the Baroque', learned what 'musicology' is (and unfortunately learned to recognize any writer of inaccurate gramophone-sleeve-notes as a musicologist). The wind of change was blowing favourably and blew the Association into adventurous activities. It had never published anything but its own *Proceedings*, but in 1951, seizing the pretext of the Festival of Britain, it embarked on the publication of *Musica Britannica*. Ten years later it began to publish the *R.M.A. Research Chronicle*. I need hardly mention our association with the British Museum in the publication of the Beethoven 'Kafka sketch-book' in 1970, and with St. Michael's College, Tenbury, in publishing a facsimile of Handel's 'working score' of *Messiah* in this centenary year.

I have been deliberately refraining from mentioning names and paying amply deserved tributes to presidents, honorary secretaries, editors and others who have played dynamic and creative roles in all changes. But I must draw attention to the fact that it was that once youngest member, Anthony C. Lewis, Esq., when he became president twenty years later, who was primarily responsible for two important innovations within the Association itself: the institution of student memberships and the conception of annual conferences, with a concentration of papers making it more worthwhile for members to come for long distances, with social gatherings enabling one to meet one's colleagues, and with a 'concert or musical performance' of the kind the Association foreswore at its inception. Another, more recent, innovation has also belatedly acknowledged that musical learning is no longer a near-monopoly of London, Oxford and Cambridge as it was in the early decades of the Association; our Northern Chapter is now in its second highly successful year, and the North Midlands Chapter held its first meeting last November.

New growing-points and expanding membership have brought with them problems—for instance, the impossibility of printing all papers *in toto* in the *Proceedings* without further

inflating their cost and hence our subscription rates. But we are keenly alive to them and also to the need for certain constitutional reforms. Among other things, Council feels it should guard against a natural tendency to self-perpetuation—just as recent presidents have felt that the honour of office should not be held too long. Ouseley was president for fifteen years, Stainer for twelve: how much they must have learned if they absorbed and retained all the knowledge to which they were exposed! Too much for weaker minds to take in.

So these remarks are not only centennial but in one respect valedictory. This is the last Annual Conference I shall have the honour and pleasure of presiding over. I think it has been a very successful one. And I hope I shall be able to absorb both knowledge (in the back row of the stalls) and sherry at quite a number of yet more successful ones.