

John Stainer's Contributions to Sacred Music During the Romantic Era

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Abstract

Sir John Stainer (1840-1901) was a prominent British musician and scholar of the 19th century. His contributions to music, especially in ecclesiastical settings are vast. This research highlights and discusses some of his main accomplishments and contributions, and how they relate to the era of Romantic music. This research also seeks to delve into why his work was of consequence to the development of music during the Romantic era, particularly in regards to sacred music. To fully justify why Stainer is significant as a composer, this paper investigates aspects of his organ, choral works, and service music and how they impacted the realm of music at his time. Works that are specifically discussed are his well-known cantata, *The Crucifixion* and his anthem, *For God So Loved the World*. Various other anthems, carols and service music are also mentioned. Audio examples of specific works are also included. Methodology predominantly consists of primary and secondary sources, and independent score study and analysis. Additionally explored are facets of Stainer's musical career (especially at St. Paul's Cathedral). Stainer is considered to have substantially raised the standard for cathedral music and choir schools, especially in England. He set a precedence of excellence in cathedral music. This is notable because the advances that he made in Anglican sacred music are still very much relevant today. His works continue to be studied and used in church, choral, academic, and concert settings.

Keywords: John Stainer, Romantic, Sacred Music

1. Introduction

When considering the age of Romantic music, consequential musical examples, such as Beethoven's sonatas and symphonies, Schubert's lieder, Chopin's nocturnes, and Liszt's virtuosic transcriptions are among those genres in the forefront of study and examination. Much less emphasis seems to be placed on sacred music during this time. Many artists and musicians have considered the Church universal to be somewhat notoriously slow to change and adapt to cultural shifts and progressions in the arts. However, it is difficult to deny the observation that sacred music has been exceedingly significant to many world cultures throughout history. Sir John Stainer's (1840-1901) musical career vastly contributed to the advancement of sacred music during the Romantic era. His oratorio, *The Crucifixion*, is an especially enduring work that represents many of the compositional strides he made in sacred music. Stainer also strived to bring about much higher standards in the performance and rendering of ecclesiastical music in England. His efforts resulted in the improvement of sacred music in English cathedrals during the 19th century, and its development as a Romantic art worthy of recognition.

Stainer began his musical training and career as a choirboy at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England. At the age of 16, he was appointed as the first organist at St. Michael's College at Tenbury, a school for the training of church choristers in music and classical education.¹ After his training at Oxford, Stainer held numerous other positions (including those in Cambridge and at the University of London), and, in 1872, was appointed organist at St. Paul's

where he began his musical studies some 25 years earlier. Stainer's background, education, and musical experiences, especially at St. Paul's, proved to be influential to the rest of his career.

Stainer is not solely remembered for his work in any one discipline, but rather for his contributions to various areas of musical knowledge and expertise. He made his mark on the musical world not only as a composer, and choirmaster, but also as an educated and accomplished organist, scholar, educator, textbook author, editor, and musicologist. His compositions and written works cover an extensive range of categories. His musicological and scholastic books include such examples as *Early Bodleian Music*, *Dufay and His Contemporaries*, *Music of the Bible*, and textbooks dealing with the subjects of composition, music theory, harmony, and his important manual on organ technique entitled *The Organ*. Stainer's compositional creations include a myriad of oratorios, cantatas, anthems, services, carols, hymns, psalters, and secular madrigals and songs. Stainer's well-rounded output and his diverse career helps to explain the success he had in bringing a new level of importance and artistry to the sacred music of the English cathedrals.

2. St. Paul's Cathedral

A discussion of Stainer's advancement, improvement, and raising of standards of choral music at St. Paul's Cathedral alone could possibly suffice in demonstrating the immense strides that were made by Stainer, and the resulting impact on the realm of cathedral music during the nineteenth-century. These improvements and standards have been carried over into sacred English music even up to the present time. Stainer is considered by many cathedral scholars to be one of the greatest reformers and visionaries of cathedral music in England.

Stainer is remembered as having raised the standard of the choir of St. Paul's to the point where it was, and still is, considered to be one of the finest choirs in England. Upon becoming organist and choirmaster at St. Paul's, Stainer found the conditions of music life in the cathedral to be far from satisfactory. He immediately began to set about the presumably daunting task of completely reorganizing and improving the execution of liturgical music at St. Paul's. One of the most significant reformations Stainer accomplished was the reintroduction of the choral celebration of Holy Communion. He insisted on a high standard for its proper rendering, especially in contrast to the attitude of disorganization with which it had been treated prior to his arrival (regular choir rehearsals were not common before Stainer came to St. Paul's).² In addition to the choral celebration of Holy Communion, Stainer also saw to the institution of orchestral services, which included performances of such works as Mendelssohn's *St. Paul* and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*.

While at St. Paul's, Stainer instituted regular rehearsals for the choir and increased the size of the choir from 12 choristers to 38, and from 12 men to 18.³ The voluminous domes of St. Paul's create unique acoustics when compared with Norman and Gothic counterparts, such as the famous Westminster Cathedral, and York Minster, Canterbury, and Ely Cathedrals. The cavernous spaces of St. Paul's lend themselves exceptionally well to the presence of a large choir. Stainer identified this benefit, and thus increased the size of the choir. Stainer also established a more abundant and prominent use of the choir in the context of the church year and choral services.⁴

Another way in which St. Paul's became a musical beacon and standard for the other Cathedrals was the importance and emphasis placed on the musical training of young people in its choir school. Stainer oversaw the completion of a new choir school for St. Paul's, which opened in 1875. Under Stainer's direction, St. Paul's choir school became a model by which other English Cathedral choir schools (such as the aforementioned York Minster, Canterbury, and Ely Cathedral) emulated. By training cathedral musicians at an early age, Stainer ensured increased quality of the choirs of St. Paul's.

3. John Stainer's Compositions

Even though Stainer did compose some secular madrigals and songs, his creative emphasis and achievements can certainly be considered as being predominately in the realm of sacred music. This can be accounted for (at least in part) by his apparent dedication to the Christian faith, which is evident in so much of his writings and correspondence. Stainer's sacred works are too numerous to mention in their entirety. Though heavily criticized in his day for what his contemporary, and some more modern, critics considered "sentimental" and "sugary" harmonies, retrospectively, one can see the overarching picture of just how substantial this prolific composer's contributions were.⁵ His hymns, hymn arrangements, and harmonizations are still sung frequently throughout the United Kingdom in the standard Anglican hymnal, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, and can also be found in some

American hymnals. Examples of his most well known hymn arrangements and harmonizations are his versions of the Christmas carols, *The First Noel* and *Good Christian Men Rejoice*. He also contributed numerous anthems, service settings, oratorios, and solo organ works to the cathedral canon. Stainer's choral and congregational works demonstrate his ability to compose singable, memorable, and attractive melodies and then enrich them with the full resources of nineteenth-century harmony.⁶

There is a dramatic aspect to Stainer's sacred choral works not often seen in the sacred works of his predecessors. This is the result not only of his musical vocabulary, but also largely because of his choice of texts, many of which were taken from the New Testament of the Bible. The descriptive quality of the New Testament passages afforded Stainer the opportunity to exercise his dramatic compositional talent.⁷ Stainer's appreciation of literature and apparent knowledge of the Bible led him to explore texts not as frequently chosen by earlier composers. He utilized sacred texts from such sources as Job, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Ecclesiastes, the Book of Wisdom, Baruch, the Gospels, the Epistles, and Revelation.⁸ Some of these texts are found in the Apocrypha, which are sacred texts not included in either the Old or New Testaments. The natures of many of the Biblical texts (from both the Old and New Testaments) chosen and used by Stainer are quite engaging, poignant, and assertive in their content. The dramatic tenor and bass duet in *The Agony*, utilizes texts found in the New Testament books Matthew and Mark. (Example 1)

The musical score for "The Agony" is presented in five systems. The first system is marked "Allegro. M.M. ♩ : 120." and includes a Tenor part and piano accompaniment. The lyrics for the first system are "And they". The second system continues the lyrics "laid their hands on Him, and took Him, and". The third system is marked "ad lib." and includes the lyrics "led Him a-way to the high priest. And the high priest". The fourth system is marked "Slow BASS (a voice in the choir). mf" and includes the lyrics "ask-ed Him and said un-to Him, Art Thou the Christ, the Son of the". The fifth system is marked "BASS SOLO. Slow. cresc." and includes the lyrics "Bless-ed? Je-sus said, I am: and ye shall". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more active bass line in the left hand.

Example 1. *The Agony*, tenor and bass parts⁹

Stainer made plentiful use of contemporary harmonies to evoke an immediate response and relation to these texts on an emotional level. Many examples of this are found in his oratorio *The Crucifixion*.¹⁰ This facet of Stainer's compositional style reflects what so many other composers were exploring at the time. In the chorus *From the*

Throne from *The Crucifixion*, Stainer dramatically scores the text “They shouted against me” and the exclamatory “Crucify!”. (Example 2) These aspects of Stainer’s compositions are important elements in the development and definition of sacred Romantic music. However, they are also compositional elements that (when compared with secular works of his contemporaries) Stainer might not have chosen to exploit to his full capacity as a composer, due to the nature of sacred music in the context of worship in the nineteenth-century.

Example 2. From the *Throne*, SATB parts¹¹

Reflected in his compositions is a delicate balance between the Puritan movement to return sacred music to its plainchant roots and the musical explorations of the Romantic era.¹² His own spiritual beliefs helped his music to be truly religious, but in all his work he was not attempting to copy others but to create his own style, even though it may not always be easily apparent.¹³ Stainer himself beautifully summarized his philosophies and approach to music in his 1899 article entitled “The Influence of Fashion on the Art of Music”:

Fashion is only the fringe of the robe of art, the hem of the garment of that mighty power which moves among the struggling mass of mankind, teaching them to value and cultivate those higher qualities and tastes which call forth into life and light a hidden store of tenderness, sympathy, and brotherhood. The gentle and refining influence of art can, indeed, make a man something even better than a reasonable or clever being - namely a loveable being... And of all the branches of art, not one is more capable of realizing this lofty aim than that which hovers round the cradle, is the handmaid of worship, the pleasure of the home, and hymns its farewell over our grave - Music.¹⁴

If one studies Stainer’s life and musical career, one may see that he was instinctively a modernist. In a spoken address to the Church Congress at Leeds in 1872, he made a plea for representing the best music of all periods in the choice of music for worship services, including the most modern. “There are some ancient melodies,” he said, “which lived before harmony (in the modern sense of the word) was invented, which have come down to our time in all their original simplicity... I do not, however, mean to say that modern chords should not be used.” In response to criticism of his use of more modern harmonies and compositional tools, Stainer stated: “I only ask that modern

music shall have its proper place assigned to it, side by side with the old, and I only preach that those who call themselves church-composers should aim at something better than bygone styles”¹⁵

No discussion of Stainer’s music would be complete without further exploration of his most enduring composition- his oratorio, *The Crucifixion*. This work, containing the beloved chorus *God so Loved the World*, continues to be a staple of church choirs throughout England and the United States. Interestingly, this work has endured as a choral standard despite being denounced by Victorian, and quite a few subsequent, critics. In his book *The Music of the English Church*, Kenneth R. Long, whose views are representative of many of Stainer’s contemporary critics, denounces *The Crucifixion* as “squalid music”.¹⁶ Many critics have condemned his use of chromaticism and harmonies, especially in the context of this work. Stainer himself even stated that he wished the work had never been published because he considered the choral parts to be too easy.¹⁷ However, in hindsight, one can study and see today the mark and impression this composition has made on church music. In his article in a 2006 issue of the magazine *Organists’ Review*, Jeremy Dibble summarizes the general shift in attitudes towards Stainer’s abilities as a composer: “It is high time that his [Stainer’s] proper place in the annals of the Victorian era was recognized, not only as a scholar and a critic (for which he has always retained admiration) but also as a composer of genuine substance and individuality.”¹⁸

The Crucifixion can be considered relatively accessible, as far as larger sacred choral works are concerned. It uses modest resources and does not require an orchestra. This work, subtitled *A Meditation on the Sacred Passion of the Holy Redeemer*, is usually performed during the liturgical season of Lent, specifically, during Holy Week. It is scored for a full chorus, soli for tenor and bass, and organ. The choral parts, predominately homophonic, are uncomplicated and the organ part, though requiring a competent performer, is thoroughly idiomatic for a late nineteenth-century Romantic English organ of moderate dimension.¹⁹

During the Romantic era, organ accompaniments for choral works, such as *The Crucifixion*, became more innovative due to the development and advancement of the organ in England. Such advances included the invention of the swell and the arrival in England of the full pedal board. The swell is a mechanism by which greater dynamic contrast is achieved on the organ, which adds to the color and dimension of the choral accompaniments, and thus, the choral parts themselves. In many of his choral works, such as *The Crucifixion*, Stainer, alongside his contemporaries, employed the organ in a more independent fashion.²⁰ Stainer utilizes dramatic organ introductions to help introduce themes and set the mood for many of the choral pieces, as well as lengthy and dramatic organ interludes. *Fling Wide the Gates*, a chorus from *The Crucifixion*, includes an expressive two page solo organ prelude, which encompasses a wide range of timbres and dynamics. (Example 3)

Example 3. *Procession to Calvary*, organ²¹

4. God So Loved the World

The Crucifixion, consisting of twenty pieces, follows the familiar models of many historical English oratorios and cantatas, established by great works such as Handel's *Messiah*. Between the liberal sprinklings of hymns, five of which are meant to be sung with the congregation, are recitatives, choruses, a tenor/bass duet, and of course the anthem *God So Loved the World*. This anthem is an excellent example of Stainer's work and represents some of the ways that he used elements dubbed as "Romantic". As previously mentioned, Stainer is considered to have had a great skill for using nonconventional texts in his works and setting them to music in a way that greatly reflects and enhances the lyric content. Because this piece is included in an oratorio dealing with the passion of Christ, Stainer and W. J. Sparrow Simpson used of text directly from the New Testament of the Bible. The text is taken from the well-known verse of New Testament scripture- John 3:16-17. (Example 4)

Harmonically, Stainer utilizes several interesting ideas that complement the emotional characteristics of the piece. Most prominent is his use of dissonance, especially in use of the fourth in suspended chords. In the second measure of the piece, with the opening phrase "God so loved the world", the tenors sing an A against the basses' G in part of a D suspended chord. This tension resolves to a D major chord, followed by a lengthy rest in which this resolution is made all the more effective by giving the listener time to digest the richness of the sounds. (Example 4) One can imagine how the acoustics of a cathedral, such as St. Paul's, would so greatly enhance the effect of this tension and resolution.

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

From the "Crucifixion"

Quartet or Chorus

J. STAINER

Andante, ma non lento *cresc.*

SOPR. *mf* God so loved the world, God so loved the world, that He

ALTO *mf* God so loved the world, God so loved the world, that He

TENOR *mf* God so loved the world, God so loved the world, that He

BASS *mf* God so loved the world, God so loved the world, that He

ORGAN *p* (For rehearsal only, *ad lib.*) *cresc.*

mf gave His on - ly be - got - ten Son, that who - so be - liev - eth, be -

mf gave His on - ly be - got - ten Son, that who - so be - liev - eth, be -

cresc. liev - eth in Him - should not per - ish, should not per - ish, but

cresc. liev - eth in Him should not per - ish, should not per - ish, but

Example 4. *God So Loved the World*, SATB parts, mm. 3-4²²

Most obvious to both the listener is perhaps Stainer's dramatic use of extreme dynamics. The work starts introspectively with the dynamic marking of *piano*. The first phrase is then repeated with a *crescendo*. This concept is used throughout the anthem, being particularly effective on the phrase "should not perish". As this phrase repeats, it *crescendos*, growing to *forte* with the ascending melodic line "but have everlasting life", which repeats four times. The piece climaxes at the end of this phrase with a *rallentando* to a fermata on the last note (life). The phrase "God so loved the world" is then repeated three times, *decrescendo* to the dynamic marking of *ppp* on the last repetition. (Example 5)

Example 5. *God So Loved the World*, SATB parts²³

5. Conclusion

During Stainer's life, *The Crucifixion* grew so popular that it became a household work known by millions of people in spite of its critical reception. Over a century later, it still lives on as a favorite choral work for its balance of pragmatism, pure romanticism, and religious sentiment.²⁴ Stainer's use of dynamics, along with *rubato*, emotionally charged harmonies, and striking melodies, certainly help to make this piece, in addition to many of his other compositions, memorable.

It may be hoped that scholars, critics, performers, and educated listeners are, in fact, more objective in the assessment of Stainer's works, and conceivably be able to recognize his artistry as a composer as well as a notable contributor to the art, pedagogical techniques, and intellectuality, of sacred Romantic music. Stainer was able to successively find a balance between the formerly restrictive styles of music in worship and the highly emotive and imaginative secular works of other nineteenth-century composers to create beautiful and tasteful sacred works categorized as Romantic.

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