

## STERNDALE BENNETT: AN OCCASION FOR CONGRATULATION

by E.D.Mackerness

Few of Spohr's friends and acquaintances in England can have held the composer in higher esteem than did William Sterndale Bennett. When the two men first met, Spohr was at the height of his powers, while Bennett had as yet to make his mark. But over the years their relationship bore fruit in several ways, with Bennett enjoying the privilege of a confidence which lasted until Spohr's death and Spohr in a later period being invited to compose a symphony for the Philharmonic Society of London when Bennett was conductor. In the case of both composers it has been difficult to arrive at a reliable estimate of their true genius because of the recalcitrance of concert-promoters and the lukewarm attitude of some performers and critics. Fortunately, more and more representative examples of Spohr's work are coming before the public. But of Bennett it still has to be said that the vicious circle is not yet broken - his music remains neglected because of its supposed lack of 'general appeal' while at the same time declared to be hardly worthy of inclusion in the concert programmes because musicians do not perform it!

Until recently, few of Sterndale Bennett's compositions were ever broadcast, and his name is not conspicuous in the record catalogues. Certainly the four-part 'God is a spirit' (from The Woman of Samaria) is on disc, and three other items come to mind; a piano solo, 'January' forms one band of 'English Keyboard Music 1760-1860' (Alan Cuckston: RCA LHL1 5101): some exquisite songs, Op.23 and Op.35, appear in a Rare Recorded Edition presentation, performed by Meryl Drower and Antony Brahms SRRE 165): and the Piano Sonata No.1 is played by the American musicologist James Sykes on Orion Master Recordings (ORS 7 5182). Up to now, the front-line recording companies have fought shy of taking a chance with Bennett, in spite of the fact that he has been honoured by inclusion in the Musica Britannica series. Scholarly interest in his achievement owes much to the fine editorial work of Geoffrey Bush and Nicholas Temperly; the latter's extremely level-headed assessment of Bennett's status in the New Grove is a model of meaningful analysis.

Perhaps a 'revival' is in prospect; if so, Bennett's admirers will probably find it harder to carry the day than did the disciples of Ludwig Spohr at an earlier stage if only because his oeuvre is less impressive. Be that as it may, we can at least express our gratitude for two recent musical events of some consequence to those interested in the music of the Victorian age. In 1986 Radio 3 put on a series of programmes in which Malcolm Binns performed all of Sterndale Bennett's piano concertos, accompanied by the Ulster Orchestra under Hilary Davan Wetton. It was a happy idea to preface these Sunday evening concerts with readings from C.V.Stanford's reminiscences of Bennett: and to many listeners such items as the 'Naiades' overture and 'Paradise and the Peri' - to say nothing of the symphonies - may well have come as a revelation. But one of the symphonies is now available on an LP disc, issued under the aegis of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKM 861) and is coupled with the Fourth Piano Concerto in F minor (Malcolm Binns). The orchestra is the Milton Keynes Chamber Orchestra, of which Hilary Davan Wetton is the permanent conductor.

This recording is of special importance because it enables us at long last to discover from repeated hearings whether there is much truth in the claim that Sterndale Bennett was little more than a kind of

'repro' Mendelssohn whose talent was at best that of a skilled and not very original mimic. It is as well to bear in mind, of course, that this Symphony is the work of a very young composer who showed little interest in avant garde experimentation; dating from the year (1834) which brought forth Berlioz's 'Harold in Italy' and Wagner's 'Die Feen' it belongs to an ethos which is definitely not that of Brahms, Bruckner and Liszt. In Bennett's music, feelings of tenderness and restraint predominate over Angst or yellow melancholy. But this does not detract from the essential musicality and fertility of his inventiveness. It does not take the listener long to identify a distinct 'voice' which is that of Sterndale Bennett and no one else. To dismiss him as an imitator of Mendelssohn is beside the point; for how could a habitué of Mendelssohn's household fail to be influenced in one way or another by the musical atmosphere which prevailed there? In fact, the G Minor Symphony betrays other presences - some passages of it might plausibly be attributed to Schubert (In the Piano Concerto, incidentally, there are strong hints of Schumannesque harmonies, not to mention one sequence which appears to have been lifted out of the 'Moonlight' Sonata!). Indeed, the clarity of Bennett's orchestration and the adroitness with which he manages one climax after another reveals a kind of expertise that seems distinctly Viennese in character, the music as a whole being anything but 'academic' - a pejorative epithet often applied unthinkingly to Bennett. The inner movements - an energetic scherzo and a meditative pastorale - are well-proportioned and unpretentious. The bustling and dynamic finale does, admittedly, suggest that the spirit of Mendelssohn is guiding his pupil's hand; but even here the element of predictability is negligible, and one notices the skill with which the composer obtains the maximum of effect from his orchestral forces. The procedures may seem familiar, but the musical thought is newly minted.

The fourth of Bennett's piano concertos is usually remembered on account of the second (Barcarolle) movement, which at one time was a favourite teaching piece, like Bennett's song, 'Maydew'. As the opening tutti reveals, this is an altogether grander work than the Symphony. But unlike some of his contemporaries, Bennett does not subordinate everything to the demands of the solo part. This is obviously designed to show off the performer's technical skills, yet the orchestral fabric against which it is set avoids the 'infilling' to be found in similar scores by other composers. The Barcarolle, for instance, makes use of several ingenious accompanying figures heard on the horns, clarinets and solo flute - played in this version with faultless precision. To prevent this otherwise peaceful interlude from descending into somnolence, Bennett introduces an agitato section before the final recurrence of the main 6/8 theme. Throughout, it need hardly be said, Malcolm Binns's technique is exactly suited to the task of realising the nature of Bennett's individual keyboard style; the elaborate arpeggiations and capriccio-like motifs are delivered with impeccable articulation and in the last movement the virtuoso manner is captured completely. It might be argued that Bennett has a tendency (as here) to dwell over-long on themes which yield their identity at first hearing and thus suffer by repetition; on the other hand Bennett's mastery of melodic evolution is such that this objection hardly needs to be insisted on.

This Milton Keynes recording is an excellent introduction to Sterndale Bennett's idiom at its most mature. The standard of performance leaves very little to be desired since the ensemble is excellent and the various instrumental sections - particularly the lower strings - are allowed, in true chamber style, to assert their presence. The wind playing, quite frankly, can only be described as delicious - there is no other word for it! If occasionally the upper strings

exhibit a somewhat sharp 'edge', it is worth remarking that Bennett's across-the-strings writing is every bit as tricky as Mendelssohn's. All the same, this première recording is a fine tribute to the enlightened enterprise of the Milton Keynes Orchestra and its conductor. It would be gratifying to be able to announce that they have further ventures of this kind in hand; but members of the Spohr Society know only too well the factors likely to stand in the way of that.

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