

THE BLAGROVES: AN ENGLISH MUSICAL DYNASTY

by Philip L.Scowcroft

THE Blagrove family has claims to be reckoned as an English musical dynasty. The “founder” of the dynasty, in a musical sense, was Richard Blagrove of Nottingham, a violinist and the author of *A New and Improved System to the Art of Playing the Violin*, published in 1828. By that time he had sired two sons, both of them musical.

Henry Gamble Blagrove, born in Nottingham on 20th October 1811, was, like his father, a violinist. His gifts as such appeared very early in life, as he performed at Drury Lane Theatre from the age of six. He studied with Spagnoletti in 1821 and then, as one of the first intake of pupils at the Royal Academy of Music (1823), with the principal, William Crotch and John Baptist Cramer. From 1830 to 1837 he was a member of Queen Adelaide’s Private Band and it was at the Queen’s suggestion that he went to Germany in 1832-34 to study with Spohr in Kassel. He was reckoned one of Spohr’s finest pupils, although Walter Macfarren thought him “cold”, both as a player and as a personality.

Spohr’s activities as a teacher have received less attention from observers than his violin playing and compositions, but violinists came from far and wide to be taught by him. One of the most renowned of his pupils was Ferdinand David, leader of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra under Mendelssohn’s baton and far from contemptible as a composer.

Back in England, Henry Blagrove was in demand, playing in opera orchestras in the metropolis, for Jullien, who brought the institution of the promenade concert to this country, at provincial festivals and at concerts in London including many as a soloist at the Philharmonic Society’s concerts between 1831 and 1867, at which the music of Spohr was often to be heard at that period. During this time he performed Spohr’s violin concertos Nos. 2, 7, 8, 11 and 12 as well as sharing the limelight in the two double violin concertos, Opp. 48 and 88, and also the Quartet Concerto, Op.131 in its London premiere in 1846.

He led the state band for Queen Victoria’s Coronation in 1838. He returned to the Royal Academy as a Professor of the Violin and, perhaps most notably, at least as far as the historian of musical institutions is concerned, established the first regular series of public chamber concerts in London, modelled on the Parisian *soiree musicale*. The first of these took place on 7th November 1835; the following March he began a similar series, the Quartett Concerts, jointly organised with Joseph Dando. These lasted until 1859 but Henry’s connection with them ceased in 1843 when he founded Blagrove’s Quartet Concerts.

According to the history of the Philharmonic Society: “In 1868 the touchy Henry Blagrove refused to lead the orchestra because the directors never gave him any solos to perform”! Perhaps by this stage his powers were in decline as most of his outings as a concerto soloist date from the 1840s and 1850s.

Henry married Etheldreda Combe in 1841. She bore him three children but she pre-deceased him in 1869, just three years before Henry’s death in London on 15th December 1872, following a stroke he suffered while playing in a private concert. His compositions included exercises, studies and a few solos, all for the violin; but it may be that his brother Richard had slightly more fame as a composer.

Richard (junior) was born in Nottingham in either 1826 or 1827 and died there on 21st

October 1895, having in the interim married and sired two sons who assisted him in his concerts, thus giving us a musical dynasty of three generations. He was initially a viola player and studied with Henry Hill at the Royal Academy from 1837; later, between 1856 and 1890, he succeeded Hill as Professor of the Viola at the Academy. He played viola in some of his brother's concerts and for the Philharmonic Society.

More unusually he took up the concertina which had been invented by Wheatstone in 1829 and was one of its earliest virtuosi. He played a solo at the Hanover Square Rooms in 1842 and formed a concertina quartet with Giulio Regondi, George Case and A.B.Sedgwick, which made its debut, again at the Hanover Square Rooms, on 12th June 1844.

Like so many virtuosi of whatever instrument (including, and perhaps most notably, Spohr, of course), he composed – short pieces in the main – for concertina and persuaded George Macfarren to write for him a Quintet for concertina and strings (was this performed at one of Henry Blagrove's chamber concerts, I wonder?). Macfarren is also credited with composing Two Romances (1856 and 1859) for concertina and piano and, for the same duo, a Barcarolle (1859).

Returning to Richard's own compositions, he also apparently produced a Toy Symphony (A Village Fete), a "symphonic burlesque" for narrator and orchestra, scored for trumpet, percussion, bells, cuckoo, nightingale, piano and strings. In listing it the BBC Catalogue of Orchestral Music muddies the water slightly by assigning brother Henry's dates to Richard, but there seems to be no reason for doubting the latter's authorship of this. I do not know for what occasion it was written; maybe it shared a programme with the Toy Symphony long attributed to Joseph Haydn?

Richard, too, had connections with Spohr. In 1888 he published arrangements for concertina of two movements from Spohr's violin duos; the *Andante* from Op.39/2 and the *Larghetto* from Op.67/2. Much earlier he played the viola in the 1852 Philharmonic Society performance of Spohr's Double Quartet No.2, Op.77 in which brother Henry led the first quartet.

Incidentally, another musician with Spohr links, the violin virtuoso Bernhard Molique (1802-69), composed a concertina concerto in the 1850s but in his case it was written for Regondi and not Blagrove.