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SONGS OF THE SPANISH GYPSY

by Bill Adams, (Chairman of the George Eliot Fellowship)

One day in May 1873 a curious letter was delivered to the Lewes's London home. Couched in the most formal terms, it read:

Mr. C.V. Stanford presents his compliments to "George Eliot" and hopes he may be excused for troubling him (sic) with the following request. He has lately finished writing music to three songs from "The Spanish Gypsy", namely "Bright Fedalma", "Spring comes hither", and "Came a pretty maid", and hopes eventually to complete the music to the whole subject. He trusts that it may not be thought too much if he asks for permission to publish the songs he has already written: and if the author would add permission to publish the remainder when completed, he would feel doubly grateful. The songs have received the approval of several good judges, and so he hopes that they may prove adequate to their subject.¹

On 29th May a reply was despatched to Mr. Stanford in Cambridge with, one feels, a tongue in the cheek:

Mrs. G.H. Lewes (George Eliot) presents her compliments to Mr. C.V. Stanford and begs to say that she has no objection to the publication

We should forgive Stanford his formality: he was, after all, a young twenty-one year old student at Trinity College, Cambridge, and the recently appointed organist of the college chapel. His illustrious career in English music was only on the first rung of its ladder - and he was, of course, addressing one of the country's most famous literary figures.

Stanford eventually composed eight songs based on lyrics from *The Spanish Gypsy* but, for some reason, publication was delayed. Meanwhile, George Eliot and G.H. Lewes continued to circulate amongst their eminent Victorian peers. Almost exactly four years later Lewes's diary records a visit to Cambridge to see their friends there, among them several Fellows of Trinity College. Two especially close were William George Clark, the Public Orator, and Henry Sidgwick. Both these men had suffered loss of religious faith and had honourably resigned their college appointments as a result; they doubtless received strong moral support from the Leweses. It was Sidgwick who (earlier, in 1873) had introduced George Eliot to another Fellow, F.W.H. Myers who had recorded his famous conversation with her in the college garden when, as he said,

Taking as her text the three words 'God, Immortality, Duty', she pronounced with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the *first*, how unbelievable the *second*, and yet how peremptory and absolute the *third* I listened, and night fell; her grave majestic countenance turned toward me like a sibyl's in the gloom

During the weekend there was a service at Trinity College Chapel and among those noticed by the visitors was - Stanford. Whether this encounter provided the incentive we shall never know - but the first three of Stanford's songs were published by Novello, Ewer and Co. that year and the other five by Chappell and Co. a year later in 1878. The songs were designated Opus 1.

The publication was greeted with some enthusiasm. Of the first three songs a reviewer in the 'Musical Times' wrote that he 'did not remember to have seen anything from Mr. Stanford's pen which has given me more pleasure. The genuine feeling they display, their appropriateness to the text - in a word, their eminently musicianly character - deserve all commendation.'

Notwithstanding, the songs receded from the public memory.

In the George Eliot Fellowship interest was revived over one hundred years later when a study group led by Mrs. Jocelyn West-Burnham B.A. M.Litt. gathered in

1990 to discuss *The Spanish Gypsy*. The existence of the songs was mentioned by our knowledgeable Vice Chairman, Kathleen Porter, and it was decided to find out more about them. The search led, via Mr. Christopher Robinson, Chairman of the Elgar Society, to Dr. Frederick Hudson of Newcastle University and, through him, to Dr. Lesley Gordon who provided copies of the songs held in the University library.

The songs are:

No.

1. Blue Wings
2. Day is Dying Nos. 1-3 published by
3. Sweet Springtime Novello, Ewer and Co. 1877
4. Spring Comes Hither
5. Came a Pretty Maid Nos. 4-8 published by
6. The World is Great Chappell and Co. 1878
7. Bright O Bright Fedalma
8. The Radiant Dark

The songs have been shown to the distinguished musicologist, accompanist and founder of the Songmakers Almanac, Graham Johnson. His definition of a good song is one in which the words and music are a perfect match and having a light texture, songs having the same relationship to orchestral pieces as water colours have to oil paintings. He commended three of the songs, especially 'Came a Pretty Maid' which has a flavour of Gilbert and Sullivan, and 'Sweet Springtime' which, although somewhat twee, has that acceptable 'water colour' touch. 'Bright O Bright Fedalma' illustrates one fashion of the age towards portrayal of the exotic in words and music (for example Verdi's 'Aida', and 'Hiawatha' by Coleridge Taylor). Stanford's attempt to set George Eliot's verse is also a reflection of the interest of nineteenth century England in European, and especially German, culture. Many of the poems of Goethe (of whom G.H. Lewes had written a successful biography) were set by Schubert and others to create the famous tradition of German lieder. Stanford's settings in the majority of the songs had failed to achieve this effect, possibly as a result of a combination of his immaturity and the florid nature of some of George Eliot's verse which made it not a good choice for setting, for want of delicacy. Some of the music is likewise overblown and sentimental. Finally, Graham Johnson drew attention to two later and perhaps more successful settings of another poem by George Eliot, 'Sweet evenings come and go, love' by Coleridge Taylor (1898) and Rutland Boughton (1908).

Stanford made some interesting dedications on his manuscripts. Numbers 4,5 and 7 are inscribed to G.F. Cobb, number 6 to Herbert E. Thorndike and number 2 to Miss Sophie Löwe.

Gerard Francis Cobb (1838 - 1904) was a contemporary of Stanford at Trinity College. Stanford had formed and conducted the Cambridge Amateur Vocal Guild whereas Cobb was President of the Cambridge University Musical Society. The two bodies amalgamated in the 1870's, no doubt bringing Stanford and Cobb into close collaboration. Cobb (another Fellow of Trinity College) was a prolific composer of church music and songs, whose work has been destined to obscurity as far as the general public is concerned. He held ecumenical views regarding religion, and he was from 1869 for 25 years a Junior Bursar of Trinity College.

Herbert Thorndike (1598 - 1672) was an eminent scholar and divine. Elected Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge in 1620, he became Bursar in 1642. His family were out of favour with the Puritans during the Civil War and his brother John went in exile to America where he helped to found the settlement at Ipswich, Massachusetts. Thorndike was obliged to give up his Cambridge appointments and he was for a time vicar of the village of Claybrooke, Leicestershire. The eminent Victorian churchman Cardinal Newman regarded him as 'the only writer in the English church who held the true catholic theory of the Eucharist'.

The religious attitudes of these two men and their similar careers as College Bursars may have attracted Stanford's interest, especially in relation to *The Spanish Gypsy*.

As regards the dedication to Miss Sophie Löwe, the probable candidate is a young lady whom the Leweses heard singing at a morning concert at the Lehmann's house, according to Lewes's journal for April 20th 1877. Strangely, there is another candidate for this dedication. Sophie's aunt, Johanna Sophie Löwe or Loewe (1816 - 1866) was a prima donna and a much more famous singer than her niece. She was a favourite of Verdi until they quarrelled over his opera 'Ermani' in 1844. Just before the presentation of his new opera 'Macbeth' she retired in 1848 and married Prince Lichtenstein. She did not sing in public again. However, during her career, her speciality was singing lyric drama - which is, of course, an exact description of *The Spanish Gypsy*.

The emergence of these songs has been interesting. They have pointed up the Leweses' close associations with the Cambridge intelligentsia, especially the Fellows of Trinity College, and they have provided some glimpses of the early career of Sir Charles Villiers Stanford whose teachings had so much influence on twentieth century music composition in this country.

It is hoped that a public performance of the three best songs will be arranged as soon as possible.

¹. Acknowledgement is due to Yale University Press (GEORGE ELIOT LETTERS, Vol IX, pages 96/97, edited by G.S. HAIGHT) and to London University who owns the ms.