

Choral Review – Stanford and Howells Remembered – The Cambridge Singers – Directed by John Rutter – Wayne Marshall (organ)

Reviewed by Tobin Sparfeld, DMA, teacher and conductor

Though released in 2020, *Stanford and Howells Remembered* is a delightful reissue of recordings made in 1992. They have been remastered and this two-disc set includes additional unreleased recordings from that period.

The Cambridge Singers were founded in 1981 by their director, John Rutter. In addition to his work as a conductor, Rutter is also an honoured composer and music editor. Formed primarily for the purpose of releasing professional quality recordings, the Cambridge Singers have released over forty albums over its distinguished tenure. This album consists of 29 vocalists.

There are many reasons for a recording to focus on these two composers as a group. Though born in Dublin, Charles Villiers Stanford moved from Ireland in 1870. After studying music at the University of Cambridge, Stanford later became one of the founding professors of the Royal College of Music in 1882. During his tenure there, he taught Herbert Howells as one of his many composition students. Both were accomplished teachers during their lifetimes. Stanford's students include Vaughan Williams, Holst, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Bridge, Bliss and Gurney, while Howells was a teacher to Robert Simpson, Gordon Jacob, James Bernard, Paul Spicer, Madeleine Dring and Imogen

Holst. Stanford referred to Howells at one point as his 'son in music', while Howells wore the signet ring bequeathed to him by Stanford until his death in 1983. And while both were prolific composers in many genres, they are primarily recognized today for their contribution to the sacred choral art.

The album was recorded in Ely Cathedral and its Chapel in February 1992 and was conducted by John Rutter. The first disc features compositions by Stanford and is introduced by a *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* dating from 1904. The *Magnificat* is a radiant setting featuring a cherubic solo by soprano Caroline Ashton and an arpeggiated organ accompaniment in its upper register. This followed by the *Nunc Dimittis*, a more reserved and declamatory movement with a baritone solo. This is one of three previously unreleased selections on this album.

Next is an unaccompanied part-song with text by Mary Coleridge, *When Mary Thro' the Garden Went*. This simpler homophonic account of Mary on a still Easter morning has subtle changes through its strophic setting, saving its most toilsome harmonic travails for the final verse. This is followed by *I Heard a Voice from Heaven*, a simple dignified anthem that is an extension of an earlier piece Stanford composed for the funeral of a friend.

Stanford's *Latin Magnificat* is the largest and most significant of the previously unreleased recordings on this album. It was composed in 1918 and dedicated to Hubert Parry who had died that year. It is quite reminiscent of Bach's *Singet dem Herrn*, with its opening melismas over sixteenth notes, double-choir format, polyphonic texture and rich harmonic setting. There are meaningful sectional shifts as the text changes, reverent awe for the 'Quia fecit' text, with stern regal utterances in triple meter and for the 'fecit potentiam', hopeful salutations during the 'et exaltavit', and a vibrant 'Gloria Patria' in the style of the opening section

that bookends this glorious movement.

Next are Stanford's earliest setting of the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*, dating from 1879 and in the key of B-flat. The *Magnificat* has an almost symphonic-like structure and alternates textures from unison to intricate four-part harmony. Meanwhile, the *Nunc Dimittis* is much simpler and is almost exclusively for the tenor and bass voices.



John Rutter

The first composition on the second disc is Herbert Howells's *Requiem*. Howells had started composing this well-known work for a cappella double choir as early as 1932, but it was never published until 1980. Much of the music for the *Requiem* was used for another larger work by Howells, his *Hymnus Paradisi*,

composed after the death of Herbert's son in 1935 from spinal meningitis. Two texts are from the actual Latin Requiem mass itself, while the rest come from the Burial Service of the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*. In this work we can hear the departure from and yet reliance on the influence of earlier English composers such as Stanford. The stateliness and reserved nature remain as well as the late Romantic harmonies. Yet in Howells's writing, we see more of an insistence on soaring melodic lines, some of which grapple amongst each other to create more extended dissonance.

Other well-known works follow, including the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* from Howells's *Gloucester Service* of 1946. Biographer Christopher Palmer refers to this setting as one of three that 'tower above the rest'. The doxology for each is built from the same material and builds to a climax before resolving peacefully.

The most turbulent composition on the album is *The Fear of the Lord*. Described in the liner notes (perhaps Rutter himself) as 'highly-charged', the work was composed by an 83-year-old Howells and dedicated to John Rutter and the choir of Clare College Cambridge in 1976. The active organ part, complicated rhythms and acerbic harmonies stand in stark contrast to the next anthem, *Like as the Hart Desireth the Waterbrooks*. While there are some slight intonation issues with this particular recording, its sumptuous and impressionistic organ harmonies have made it a favourite of anthems.

The concluding work of the album is Howells's hymn, *All My Hope*. It is the best-known of Howells's seven hymn tunes and the melody itself is called *Michael* after the composer's son. The final verse includes a descant added by Rutter himself and, according to the liner notes, 'receiv[ed] the composer's warm approval'.

As one would expect from The Cambridge Singers, the recording features wonderful singing. The soloists are excellent, and

the choir sings expressively in both soft and loud sections. Intonation and blend are largely fantastic, and any imperfections therein are momentary. Organist Wayne Marshall plays deftly and adds to the recording's merit, though there are passages where the organ slightly overwhelms the choir. It should be mentioned that the tempos of most of these works are noticeably faster with Rutter than under the direction of others. Other recordings of Howells's *Requiem* and *Like as the Hart* are considerably longer than on this album. Despite the homogeneity of the selections, there is a good variety of difficulty of the settings, with simpler anthems including much unison alongside much more challenging works. The programming of the album also gives a reasonable amount of contrast between tempi and harmonic structure. The album is therefore highly recommended to anyone with even a passing interest in English church music.

Perhaps most compelling is the thread that connects all of the performers of this recording—a connection reaching from Charles Stanford to Herbert Howells, his pupil, to a young John Rutter collaborating with Howells, and from Rutter to his organist and singers. It serves to illustrate the powerful tapestry of choral music stretching across the fabric of time, one to which readers of this publication delightfully conjoin as well as the choral artists of future generations we encounter along the journey.

Edited by Karin Rockstad, USA



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