



William Sterndale Bennett

(1816-1875)

Bach Factfile:

- Key player in the 19th century English première of Bach's St. Matthew Passion
- Close friend of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy
- Founder and President of The (English) Bach Society, London October 1849
- 200th Anniversary in 2016

THE ENGLISH ST. MATTHEW

- In perspective and published as an edited version of an article by Margaret Steinitz LBS Journal "Bach Notes", March 2004

"In previous editions of *Bach Notes* we have often reflected together upon the events that are synonymous with the revival of interest in Bach's music in the 19th century, especially in Germany. With the 150th anniversary of the first English performance of the St. Matthew Passion celebrated in 2004, we had an irresistible opportunity to revisit the events that inspired the Bach revival in Victorian England and the lives of the people involved. Over time these events have acted as the catalyst for musicians to get back to *Bach in its original form* in the new Elizabethan era of the last half-century in Britain, and in the process I hope to show in this article how we have in fact come *full circle* in one way.

The story so far... in Germany

The date that is generally accepted now when Bach first presented the St. Matthew at Leipzig is 11 April 1727, revised later for a performances in 1736 and 1742.

After that the work lay dormant sadly until the young Mendelssohn revived it at Berlin on 11 March 1829, albeit truncated. By all accounts the reception to the performance was mixed, ranging from '*an extraordinary sensation in the educated circles*' (Eduard Devrient¹) to '*out of date rubbish*' at further presentations elsewhere from the 1830s onwards. After these events Mendelssohn embarked upon his travels perhaps to take stock, including England in his itinerary where he had the opportunity to meet and work with like-minds here. Later appointed conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in 1835, the industrious composer was then well placed to continue his Bach revival and in 1841, the first St. Matthew in Leipzig after Bach's death was performed in the Thomaskirche, which Mendelssohn conducted. By this time, other contemporary 'giants' were joining the movement to give Bach the recognition they thought he was due.

¹ Devrient was a singer and actor at the Berlin Singakademie who persuaded Mendelssohn to conduct the revival of the St. Matthew

The support of Schumann and Brahms

Composer Robert Schumann (1810-1856) used his skills as an editor and journalist to extol the genius of Bach's music in his *'Neue Zeitschrift für Musik'*² and that great 19th century contrapuntalist Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) showed in his own vocal works how his youthful research on the music of earlier composers in the library at Hamburg had borne fruit, beginning a fascination for the music of Schütz, Gabrieli and above all JSB that became life-long. However, Brahms also experienced the difficulties others had listening to the music of the Leipzig Cantor. In a letter to his beloved Clara Schumann in the 1860s, he noted after a performance (probably in Vienna), "Our third concert, the Christmas Oratorio, went very well. At least the chorus and I enjoyed ourselves. However, the critic here found Bach very hard going." By the time Brahms wrote this, Robert Schumann and others at Leipzig had already successfully founded the Bach Gesellschaft ten years earlier, a Society whose purpose was to publish the complete works of Bach³.

While doubts abounded outside Germany in Continental Europe, what would the reception of Bach's music, and the St. Matthew Passion in particular, be here in England? Here's some background to help us assess the situation.

Victorian England in the 1850s

The St. Matthew's English première was of its time. The country was prospering and the British Empire expanding. While the largest gathering of the population was still to be found in rural communities, the agricultural sector based there found itself having to cater for an ever-growing demand for cheap food by the flourishing and gradually expanding towns and cities.

Abroad, Britain was regarded as the most powerful nation on earth with its influence to be found in all four corners of the world, and the country continued to bask in the achievements of its military heroes like the Duke of Wellington⁴, who also became godfather to Queen Victoria's and Prince Albert's⁵ seventh child, Prince Arthur.

After years of being kept at arms-length by successive governments, mostly because of his German birth and the inherent undue influence he might have exercised over the Queen in British matters of State, the Prince Consort's stock reached new and better heights and his gifts most brilliantly reflected in the Great Exhibition of 1851.

Prince Albert's passion for art and culture was to earn him the reputation as *the* authority on the exhibition of art and sculpture so that the public could share the nation's treasures. He encouraged the Queen to love the music of Handel and both were devotees of Mendelssohn, who played to them on visits to Britain; he composed a *Te Deum* and was an accomplished organist. The Prince's Thuringian upbringing brought us the Christmas tree, but he was often homesick for the pine forests, lakes and streams of his youth so in 1848 Queen Victoria purchased Balmoral Castle up in the Highlands of Scotland. The Castle was set in landscape that reminded the Prince of his former homeland, Saxe Coburg and Gotha south/south east of Eisenach (Bach's birthplace) in Thuringia, and at the centre of Lutheran Germany.

However, Prince Albert's fusion of German administrative flair and cultural principles with the industrial, socio-economic and entrepreneurial inventiveness of 19th Century England would have all contributed to the

² This helped to provide the Leipzig memorial to Bach unveiled in April 1843.

³ See Chapter VII, *The new Bach Reader* ed. David & Mendel and rev. Christoph Wolff (1998)

⁴ Who defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo, 1815

⁵ The Prince Consort

provision of an appropriate background against which the St. Matthew could be premièred here...but sung in English!

The first English St. Matthew

The (English) Bach Society⁶ was founded in London by Sir William Sterndale Bennett in October 1849 and he was also its President. He was a friend of Mendelssohn and Schumann, the former having invited him to Leipzig and he became very familiar with the score of the St. Matthew Mendelssohn used at Berlin in 1829. However, it was another 25 years before Bennett directed a performance of Bach's great Passion in England, while in the meantime others had put their toes in the water here and introduced segments of the work.

Sterndale Bennett directed "*what is claimed to have been the first performance of the St. Matthew Passion in Britain at the Hanover Square Rooms* ⁷ on 6 April 1854, though the New Philharmonic Society presented a very short selection from it two weeks earlier in St. Martin's Hall." ⁸ Mendelssohn's 1829 revival was the inspiration for this complete performance, with the English translation by the eighteen year-old Helen Johnston, published later in 1862 in an edition of the work by Bennett. The review in the Illustrated London News on 25 April 1854 said '*the Passions-musik failed to produce the expected effect; it was found dry and heavy, and was very coldly received. Bach is a great and time-honoured name; but his vocal music is very little known in England, and what is known hardly seems to justify the veneration of his classical admirers.*' ⁹ Clearly not yet a fan! The Prince Consort did not attend the première, but a later performance given on 23 March 1858 in St. Martin's Hall, while Sterndale Bennett went on to become Professor of Music at Cambridge (1856) and Principal of the Royal Academy of Music (1866).

English or German, that is the question?

With Sterndale Bennett's presentations and his later edition, there began the tradition of performing the St. Matthew in English regularly in this country, some of them from around 1870 onwards being of gargantuan proportions in terms of the musical forces used¹⁰. It is a rich tradition and one that has brought the work into the lives of generations of people all over the country since. However, like so many good and seemingly effective intentions, the St. Matthew has suffered from the editor's knife and the translator's 'licence' like no other over the years in numerous attempts to provide a *singable* English translation, an endurable length and stay true to the composer's creation. Much of the meaning of the text is lost in an English translation, combined with the translator's licence, and this is evident in Helen Johnston's version. Others followed.

However 'nothing ventured, nothing gained' and while Bennett's performance would 'cut no ice' today, it certainly made people think, broke new ground and was a significant staging post in the British journey to Bach for which we should be very grateful. A century later...

Original Bach

Paul Steinitz directed what is regarded as a major turning point in the quest to get back to '*Bach in its original form*', the reason he founded the London Bach Society. This was the UK première and a complete performance of Bach's Matthäus-Passion (1736) in its complete and original German form

⁶ Later wound up. Dr Paul Steinitz founded a completely new Society devoted to JSB on 7 Nov 1946 called London Bach Society, whose 70th anniversary is in November 2016.

⁷ Hanover Street, W1 in the heart of London's Mayfair. The building has since been destroyed.

⁸ Chapter on Performances and Performance Styles 'Bach's Passions' P. Steinitz, publ. Elek London 1979.

⁹ 'Bach's Passions' P. Steinitz, publ. Elek 1979

¹⁰ See 'Bach's Passions' P. Steinitz publ. Elek 1979

given on 22 March 1952 in the Priory Church of St. Bartholomew-the-Great,
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