

Blest pair of sirens

Hubert Parry (1848 - 1918)

Charles Hubert Parry was born in Bournemouth. He began writing music from an early age but it was not until 1880 that he achieved national recognition, when his piano concerto was performed at the Crystal Palace. With the success of *Blest pair of sirens* seven years later his reputation was secured, and from then on he received a constant stream of commissions for new works. He wrote prolifically all his life, as the catalogue of his music shows; the last entry, *Five miniatures for piano*, is listed as opus number 224.

Blest pair of sirens was written in 1887 and is a setting of Milton's Ode, 'At a solemn music'. It was first performed by the Bach Choir, conducted by Sir Charles Stanford, and proved to be a milestone in Parry's fortunes and in the revival of English music. Its originality, passion and fluent technical mastery were quite unprecedented at that time. Notwithstanding the importance of fine composers such as Boyce and Wesley, England had not produced a composer of truly national reputation since Purcell's death two hundred years earlier. In 1894 Parry was appointed Director of the Royal College of Music. He was knighted in 1898 and made a baronet five years later.

With the enormous political, social and musical upheavals of the twentieth century, Parry's Victorian style and sentiment seemed increasingly out of place and his music suffered an almost inevitable decline in popularity. Today he is remembered for only a handful of works - the ever-popular *Jerusalem*, the *Six songs of farewell*, the hymn-tunes *O praise ye the Lord* and *Dear Lord and Father of mankind*, the cantata *Blest pair of sirens* and the superb anthem *I was glad*. This last piece was composed for the coronation of Edward VII in 1902 and has been sung at every coronation since, a distinction it shares with Handel's *Zadok the priest*, written in 1727 for George II's coronation. Though the rest of his music is now largely forgotten, his legacy lives on. Parry and Stanford, through their tireless efforts as composers, performers and educators, were mainly responsible for the raising of musical standards in this country, thereby laying the foundations for the renaissance of English music which reached its full flowering with Elgar and a whole new generation of English composers. Without their inspiration and leadership, Elgar might well have been a lone figure in the musical wilderness.

programme notes by John Bawden

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