

Amateur Orchestra vs. Professional Singer: A Footnote in the History of Musical Pitch

The adoption of French *diapason normal* (and subsequently A440) by professional orchestras in England—with Henry Wood’s Queen’s Hall Orchestra leading the way—is a story that has already been told.¹ The lingering of high pitch for decades among amateur ensembles is less well documented. In the course of our research for a new edition of Charles Villiers Stanford’s orchestral song cycles *Songs of the Sea* and *Songs of the Fleet*, my co-editor Edison Kang and I came across an incident in which an exchange of vituperative letters in the musical press made the public very much aware of this professional/amateur divide.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Stock Exchange Orchestral and Choral Society had a high profile among London’s amateur musical organizations. Dating back to the 1880s, the orchestra and male chorus sported a list of patrons at the very top of the musical establishment, and they gave their periodic concerts in the Queen’s Hall. For the winter concert on February 5, 1907, the organization had engaged the celebrated baritone Harry Plunket Greene to sing Stanford’s popular *Songs of the Sea*. This work (premiered at the Leeds Festival in 1904, and extremely popular at the time) was ideally suited for the Stock Exchange Society—featuring male choir and orchestra—and it had been composed for Greene; moreover, the composer was secured to conduct the work. All of this amounted to a very significant event in the Society’s season, so one can understand the consternation and anger of the Society’s members when after the rehearsal the composer and soloist decided to remove *Songs of the Sea* from the program and to replace it with some of Stanford’s earlier songs. The reason for this change was the high pitch of the Stock Exchange Orchestra. It had been about a decade since the London professional orchestras had moved down to “low pitch” (around A439, but not standardized); as documented by Alexander J. Ellis in 1880, London pitch had varied considerably, but was generally very high.² In the 1870s and 80s there were notable instances of singers refusing to perform at such a high pitch, including Sims Reeves, Christine Nilsson, and Adelina Patti.³ Thus when “Z. (A Member of the Orchestra)” wrote to *The Musical News* shortly after the Stock Exchange Society concert, he compared Plunket Greene (although without naming him) with the temperamental artists of a bygone age:

“Sir,—in my youthful days I used occasionally to read heartrending stories of the vagaries and caprices of the fashionable ‘prima donna,’ but now we are to enjoy the fun of seeing ‘mere man’ take up the same undignified meth-

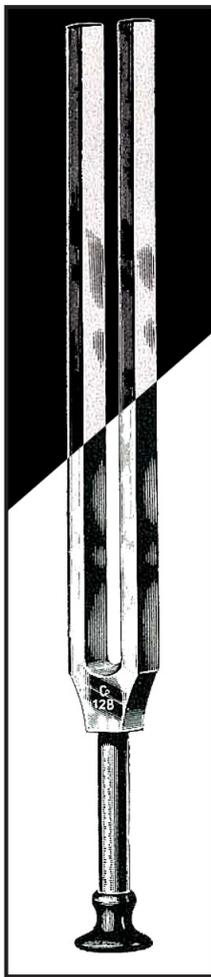
ods of procedure. I am moved to address you thus after our experience at the Queen’s Hall on February 5th, when a well-known baritone, who had successfully rehearsed his songs with the orchestra, did not hesitate to disappoint a crowded house because the orchestra was playing at the old high pitch instead of the *diapason normal*! He rehearsed at the higher one without any difficulty, and quite as well as he usually sings.

“The Secretary had to announce that the parts were a semitone too high, and the *Times* the next day announced that, as ‘the band parts were in an impossible key,’ he could not sing. The band parts were those printed and issued by the publishers, so it was not the fault of the Society giving the concert that they were not to the singer’s liking.

“The incident may be a very small one, but it is not every singer who can, or should, take five numbers out of a programme because the pitch is one-third of a tone higher than he prefers. Courtesy towards one’s audience should surely be observed, even at the appalling expense of one-third of a tone up.”⁴

This, together with a letter signed merely “AUDITOR,” touched off a heated correspondence in the next several issues—invited, indeed, by the editorial note following the first salvo: “Our columns are open to Mr. Plunket Greene.” In fact, Stanford beat Greene to it, with a letter in the following issue stating, “it was a physical impossibility for them to be sung at high pitch, as I wrote them for low pitch up to the limit of Mr. Plunket Greene’s range.”⁵ After the rehearsal (from which Stanford was absent) Boosey & Hawkes had supplied a set of manuscript parts transposed down a half-step for just such a situation; as the works had not been rehearsed in the more awkward new keys, Stanford reported that “both I and the officers of the Society had no hesitation in declining the great risk of playing them at sight, and preferred to postpone the performance to a later date.”⁶

Greene did in fact perform the songs, with the altered parts facilitating his preferred pitch, at the Society’s “smoking concert” on March 20 (on a program that also featured the young Josef Szigeti as violin soloist), but in the meantime he had increased the communal tension with his lengthy rejoinder in *The Musical News*. In it he denied that the February rehearsal had gone well, claiming that he had sung “part with half-voice, part an octave lower, singing out only when it was necessary to give leads, and when the chorus sang, except when it was essential, not singing at all. If this variegated performance really commends itself to ‘Z.’ as fit to be repeated in public, I do not envy him his



(continued on next page)

(continued from previous page)

complacent musicianship.⁷⁷ Greene did not hold back on his ad hominem attacks: “If he has no better knowledge of his own musical instrument than of mine, I am sorry for those members of the orchestra who sit in his immediate vicinity.”⁷⁸ The Secretary of the Society, S. J. Spurling, wrote in the same issue, regretting that a member of the orchestra should have aired his grievances publicly: “It would have been better had ‘Z.’ taken the trouble to acquaint himself with the true facts of the case before rushing into print to make a laughing-stock of himself and to insult a great artist.”⁷⁹ (Given the masthead of patrons of the Society, Spurling may well have felt compelled to side with the professionals over his players.)

Z. was not ready to acquiesce: indeed, despite the reference to the “true facts,” it was undeniable that Greene had not sung the work that the society had clearly anticipated with enthusiasm—the most popular new work that would fit precisely their male choir and orchestra. Z. responded, denying Greene the apology he had demanded. He remarks that Greene “makes a mistake in saying that ‘low pitch is practically universal in England.’ That is not the fact, as every orchestral player knows.” If Greene thought otherwise, it betrayed his lack of experience with amateur ensembles. Indeed, the debate centers on the *noblesse oblige* expected of the professional and the performing conditions that were inevitably the lot of amateur ensembles: the wind players were not able to invest in new instruments to bring the pitch down to the new standard. Indeed, even with professional orchestras, this changeover had sometimes been financed by an outside benefactor.¹⁰

Z. writes that Spurling’s letter “is couched in such ‘slog-ging’ terms, to the effect that I am not entitled to an opinion or any knowledge, that I feel the force of the common saying that ‘two blacks do not make a white,’ and so prefer to resign my seat in the orchestra; this I have promptly done, rather than retort in kind.” Further, he invites Greene to seek him out at home if he wants further satisfaction, noting, “Mr. Spurling can give him my address.”

The anonymous Z. was the loser as the musical professionals circled the wagons. Both Spurling and Greene wrote to respond, deploring “a lack of loyalty to his society, his conductor, and his committee” (Spurling) and his unwillingness to do the gentlemanly thing and withdraw his charges (Greene).¹¹ There was but one last communication—the longest in the whole affair—in which Z. takes a number of parting shots. In a letter published just after Greene did finally perform the songs with the society, Z. insisted that true professionals ought to be able to accommodate any

reasonable situation that confronts them: “[Greene] gives particulars to show how extremely difficult it would have been for the orchestra of one hundred and ten performers to play from the transposed MS. at sight... but we hear nothing of his being willing to sing them from the printed parts; in fact, one hundred and ten may be inconvenienced so that

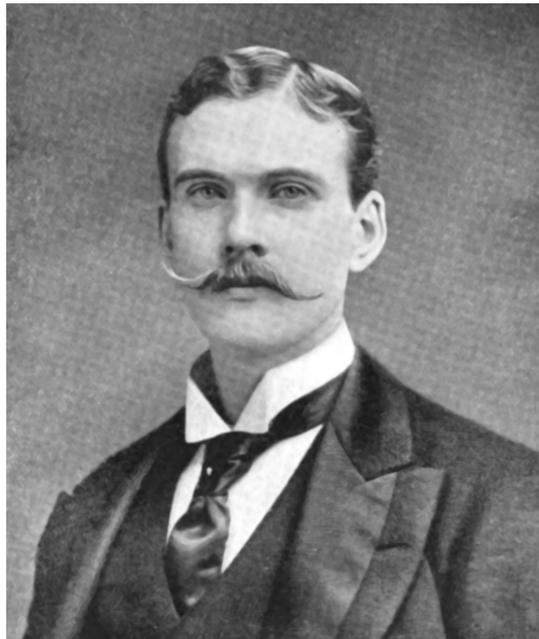
he may not.”¹² He holds up the incident as a dangerous precedent: “if we are to admit the possibility of a repetition of such an incident as that of February 5th, then we must always be willing to make our announcements with the proviso that So-and-so will sing ‘if he thinks fit to do so.’” Then comes a significant revelation: “I have been credibly informed that Mr. Plunket Greene has sung those same five songs at the high pitch elsewhere!... If he had been as loyal to his professional engagement to the Society as I have been to my colleagues this matter would never have arisen.”¹³ Greene performed *Songs of the Sea* far and wide after he premiered it at the Leeds Festival in 1904; although the pitch at the premiere was the low “New Philharmonic Pitch” (as the players were all imported from London),

it is extremely likely that some of those other provincial performances were at high pitch—and although the editors of the *Musical News* invited Greene’s response, none was forthcoming.

Z.’s implication is that Greene was more willing to break an engagement with an amateur society than with a professional one. There may be a simpler explanation, as there is evidence elsewhere that Greene’s voice was somewhat unpredictable. When Stanford followed up the successful *Songs of the Sea* with *Songs of the Fleet* in 1910, he scrupulously avoids any pitches higher than Greene’s top E-flat (*Songs of the Sea* occasionally ascends to E); just with this slightly lower tessitura, Stanford has circumvented the high/low pitch issue.¹⁴ Beyond that, however, he included *ossia* alterations to the vocal line in order to avoid sustained higher passages, particularly in the slow central movement, “The Middle Watch.” In fact, Greene’s biography of Stanford reveals that at the premiere of *Songs of the Fleet*, this movement had to be taken down a whole tone, even though it had worked in its original key when reading through it at Stanford’s piano.¹⁵ It was published only in its original key, and Greene’s account is the only documentation of this alteration.

Eventually, of course, newly manufactured instruments were constructed for the new “standardized” pitch and the high-pitch instruments on the second-hand market declined. Ideally such situations pitting the vocalists against the in-

(continued on next page)



Baritone Harry Plunket Greene
(Photo printed in *Munsey’s Magazine*, May 1896)

News and Announcements from AMIS Members

MICHAEL LYNN (professor of Baroque flute and recorder at Oberlin Conservatory) has been taking part in an interdepartmental performance and history project at Oberlin, which he has described in “The Development of the Flute in 19th-Century France” in *The Flutist Quarterly* (Summer 2016, pp.20–25). The project’s goal is to help flutists and pianists, both modern and historical, gain an appreciation for the virtually unknown repertoire for the flute in mid-19th-century France and to acquaint them with the wonderful instruments in use at that time. Lynn worked with colleagues Alexa Still (flutist), David Breitman (fortepiano), guest lecturer Tom Moore (Florida International University), and members of the music history department, using rare early editions of music, many from the Selch Collection.

The University of Tennessee Press has published a Second Edition of **RALPH LEE SMITH**’s book, *The Story of the Dulcimer*. The original edition was published in 1986 and has long been out of print. The book covers the mountain or Appalachian dulcimer rather than the hammered dulcimer. It is regarded as a leading authority in its field.

The **FREDERICK PIANO COLLECTION** in Ashburnham, Massachusetts, has acquired two more Erard pianos since March 2016. The earlier piano is reputed to have belonged to one family since it was purchased new, in 1859. After undergoing considerable tuning, voicing, and regulating, the piano was chosen for the opening concert of the Historical Piano Concerts series’ thirty-second fall season.

The more recent Erard, vintage 1895, was also in one family until the Fredericks purchased it. Delivered to the Collection in late July, it has joined a continuum of six other Paris Erards in the building.

Of potential interest is an 1846 Breitkopf & Härtel concert grand, in need of a fair amount of tender loving care, delivered to the Fredericks’ home in July. Pianos of this make and model are known to have been *purchased* by Franz Liszt and by Robert Schumann, for Clara, at a time when such important musicians (especially Liszt) were often given pianos by the manufacturers. It remains to be heard what this instrument will sound like when restored.

Meanwhile, the Piano Collection was busy, as during most summers, with visits by individual musicians and groups of students and music lovers, and a pair of recitals in August by Central Conservatory of Beijing pianist Yuan Sheng, uncharacteristically playing Bach on Mike Frederick’s personal harpsichord by Joel Katzman, Amsterdam, after a double-manual harpsichord by Ruckers, Antwerp (1638), *au petit ravalement*, in the Russell Collection, Edinburgh University.

The first concert, consisting of Bach’s flute sonatas, featured Baroque flutist Mary Oleskiewicz. For the second, of Bach’s French Suites, Dr. Sheng alternated between the harpsichord and the 1840 Erard from the Frederick Col-

lection, to suggest what such Bach proponents as Chopin and Mendelssohn may have heard when playing Bach on pianos of their time, since both are known to have owned Erard pianos.

For more details about the Frederick Piano Collection and its concert series, please visit the website at <http://www.frederickcollection.org>

(“Pitch,” *continued from previous page*)

strumentalists would be consigned to history. At least now the professional/amateur class divide has changed: while pitch battles continue, it seems now that the amateur ensembles are much more likely to play at A440 than their professional counterparts.¹⁶

✉ James Brooks Kuykendall
Erskine College

Notes

1. See, for example, Bruce Haynes, *A History of Performing Pitch: The Story of “A”* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002), pp. 355-59; for an intriguing account of the motives behind Henry Wood’s advocacy for low pitch, see William B. Ober, “George Clark Cathcart, M.D. (1860-1951) and Concert Pitch” in *New York State Journal of Medicine* (1966) pp. 2302-05.

2. Alexander J. Ellis, “On the History of Musical Pitch” (1880), reprinted in *Studies in the History of Musical Pitch*, ed. Arthur Mendel (New York: Da Capo, 1968), pp. 11-62; see pp. 29-33 and 42-48.

3. A useful summary from the pages of the *Musical Times* is Percy A. Scholes, *The Mirror of Music 1844-1944* (London: Novello & Co and Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 406-09.

4. *The Musical News* (Feb. 16, 1907), p. 172.

5. *The Musical News* (Feb. 23, 1907), p. 196.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *The Musical News* (Mar. 2, 1907), p. 218.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. See, for example, Henry J. Wood, *My Life in Music* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1946), p. 67; and Simon Purtell, “‘A souvenir of my deep interest in your future achievements’: the ‘Melba gift’ and issues of performing pitch in early 20th-century Melbourne,” in *Grainger Studies* 1 (2011), pp. 75-95.

11. *The Musical News* (March 16, 1907), p. 271.

12. *The Musical News* (March 23, 1907), p. 295.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

14. The one E that appears (“The Little Admiral,” m. 107) is marked as an *ossia*—the only instance in which the *ossia* is higher than the main text—and is doubled in the orchestra.

15. Harry Plunket Greene, *Charles Villiers Stanford* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1935), p. 145.

16. Bernard Holland, “Singers join in a lament about rising pitch,” *New York Times* (Jan. 1, 1989).