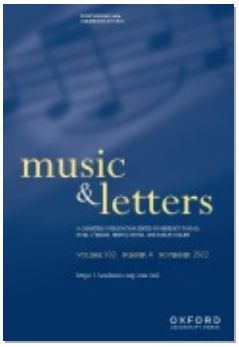
Arthur Sullivan: A Life of Divine Emollient by Ian Bradley (review)



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Arthur Sullivan: A Life of Divine Emollient. By Ian Bradley. Pp. xii + 214. Spiritual Lives. (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2021. ISBN 978-0-19-886326-7. £30.00.)

'The *Spiritual Lives* series features biographies of prominent men and women whose eminence is not primarily based on a specifically religious contribution … giving special attention to his or her religious contexts, convictions, doubts, objections, ideas, and actions', according to the series description (p. ii). Previous subjects include Margaret Mead, John Stuart Mill, Mark Twain, Theodore Roosevelt, Christina Rossetti, and Queen Victoria, and the roster of figures who might be reconsidered in this light seems endless. The only musician so far in the series is Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900)—and certainly no 'specifically religious contribution' underpins his reputation. So far so good. But is there sufficient documentation of Sullivan's spiritual life to substantiate a treatment of the sort Ian Bradley has attempted? His approach accords precisely with the series description, but the results are singularly unpersuasive. Bradley is a wonderfully lucid writer; and he has clearly done his homework: scouring Sullivan's diaries and correspondence, his knowledge of the relevant secondary literature is comprehensive. He musters all of this to produce a wonderfully concise and insightful biography, but it reads as if it were a hammer wielded by someone who seems to think every piece of historical evidence is a nail. Even the vaguest reference to God or the church in Sullivan's writings is interpreted here as evidence of Sullivan's religious commitment, which he regularly characterizes with phrases like 'simple, trusting, Christian hope' (p. 23; these adjectives reappear *passim*). Church music is 'his first love' (p. 53). For instance: 'The music that he heard in the parish church enthused and excited young Arthur Sullivan even more than the marches played by the military bands on the Sandhurst parade ground' (p. 20). At one point, Bradley goes so far as to remark on Sullivan's 'generally liberal theology' (p. 100). Would Sullivan even have recognized what Bradley is describing?

As evidence that '[George] Grove almost certainly helped to shape Sullivan's simple boyhood faith into something more theologically nuanced and biblically informed' (p. 68), Bradley considers Sullivan's 1873 oratorio *The Light of the World* and Grove's assistance with its libretto. 'It is clear from what [Sullivan] did write that his faith was much simpler and surer than Grove's, and much less assailed by doubts and scepticism' (ibid.). This may be clear to Bradley, but it is not at all clear to me. Bradley is probably correct that the libretto was shaped by George Grove; it seems impossible to have been compiled by the composer on his own, as nothing in his correspondence shows any evidence of such a comprehensive command of Scripture. But evidence amassed by Bradley for Sullivan's faith often sounds more like mere pleasantries, the discourse of a cultural Anglicanism—a society in which the vocabulary of Christian charity is merely the *lingua franca*.

The lack of 'doubts and scepticism' in Sullivan's writings seems more readily explained as an indifference to faith altogether than to an assuredness of eternal rest. Granted, he could converse in that way at exactly the moments one would expect—bereavements within his circle: 'Now, in your prayers night and morning, pray that your dear mother may have joined your father in God's eternal Rest, and that you all may lead such lives on earth that hereafter you may be taken to where our hope is they are', he wrote to his grieving nieces and nephews (p. 23). But talk is cheap. Repeated assertions notwithstanding ('clearly being the product of a clear and sincerely held faith' (p. 102)), Bradley has not met the burden of proof.

While Bradley is to be commended for devoting so much space to the music itself, his lack of musical training sometimes shows through. 'Intense chromaticism' (p. 116) is hardly a proper description of Sullivan's famous song 'The Lost Chord': its departures from the strictly diatonic are significant because they are used so sparingly. Bradley opts, too, for colourful descriptions that will either speak powerfully to the reader or fail to move at all, save perhaps raising a smile:

> The lyrical but gentle [hymn tune] GOLDEN SHEAVES perfectly fits William Chatterton Dix's harvest hymn 'To Thee, O Lord, our Hearts we Raise in Hymns of Adoration' with its rich imagery of bright robes of gold adorning the fields and the valley standing so rich with corn that they are singing. Sullivan provides this pastoral hymn of thanksgiving with a melody so appropriate and vivid that you can almost smell the newly mown hay and hear the threshing machines as you sing it (p. 106).

There is always the danger of conflating Sullivan's liturgical music and sacred oratorios with his spiritual condition, as if a composer cannot set a text movingly unless he also genuinely believes it. Bradley seems too ready to assume that Sullivan would not have written such works if he had not felt them in his soul, when they were at the same time a means of furthering his career prospects and his income. That he would choose sacred themes for his festival commissions says less about

Sullivan and more about the festival culture for which he was writing, structured around performances of perennial favourites like *Messiah* and *Elijah*. Despite Bradley's reading of it, *The Prodigal Son* (Three Choirs Festival, Worcester, 1869) breaks no new ground, but is a natural outgrowth of the Mendelssohn tradition, and exploits a similar scriptural eclecticism. *The Light of the World* (Birmingham, 1873), *The Martyr of Antioch* (Leeds, 1880), and *The Golden Legend* (Leeds, 1886) are all works of a composer fulfilling the demands of his audience, not one preaching from his heart. Whether these themes burn in his soul or not simply cannot be demonstrated from an examination of the scores. Where Bradley sees confirmation of his argument, others might as easily see Victorian cultural Christianity enacted through music, and nothing more. Similarly, the fact that Sullivan wrote hymn tunes—no matter how 'perfectly' they fit any particular text—is not proof of a sympathetic spiritual disposition. Bradley has already covered much of this material in another book, *Lost Chords and Christian Soldiers: The Sacred Music of Arthur Sullivan* (London and Norwich, 2013); it is superior to this newer work because it does not labour under the need to prove a thesis regarding an inner life. As Bradley himself remarked in *Lost Chords*, 'it is important not to over-spiritualize Sullivan. He was not a saint or a mystic, but neither was he the shallow, worldly, hedonistic gambler and womanizer that he has so often been portrayed' (ibid. 187). And yet the 'gambler and womanizer' is manifest in the documents, so perhaps we cannot completely discard that image.

Everyone who knew the man seems to have agreed that Sullivan was genial and congenial, extremely generous and empathetic to all he encountered. Whether these traits have a spiritual origin, however, seems impossible to discover. In an exhaustive examination, Bradley seems not to have found any incontrovertible evidence that Sullivan had active stirrings within his soul. The closest thing to a 'smoking gun' betraying genuine religous commitment is Sullivan's 1861 refusal of a position as organist for a German Lutheran congregation in London 'on religious grounds' (p. 53), which Bradley interprets as evidence of 'strong Anglican affiliations' (ibid.). That may be; but as the offer came through an important contact, Otto Goldschmidt (husband of Jenny Lind), this might just as easily have been a face-saving way to decline a position that he didn't want for any number of reasons. He had just returned from three years at the Leipzig Conservatory, so perhaps he knew he would be unhappy with more Lutheran liturgy. Or maybe he didn't want to be tied down to the particular congregation and its situation, or its organ. Speculation? Certainly, but no more than Bradley's evidence throughout this biography.

Bradley devotes considerable space to George Grove and his influence on Sullivan—so much so that one might wish to see Grove appear in this series. His faith struggles would benefit from as sympathetic a biographer as Bradley. (Elgar would be another rewarding entry in this series, especially considering work already done by Charles McGuire, Byron Adams, and others.) That is not to say that there is no room for Sullivan in the *Spiritual Lives* series. The problem in this volume is that Bradley has pushed too aggressively for too narrow a sense of what Sullivan's 'spiritual life' could have been. Instead, he might have presented Sullivan as a remarkable example of the gifted artist floating along in a culture in which the church was not only established, but in which at least a lip service to Christian morality and ethics was a prerequisite for social standing. Sullivan is particularly interesting because he could go through the motions so effectively without leaving any trace to establish whether he ultimately cared at all.

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Non guardare nei miei Lieder! Mahler compositore orchestratore interprete. By Anna Ficarella. Pp. xiv + 176. Studi e saggi, 33. (Libreria Musicale Italiana, Lucca, 2020. ISBN 978-88-5543-033-3, €32.)

In the musicological (sub)discipline of 'source studies', questions arise that are not strictly methodological but instead concern goals. What is the aim when musical sources become *objects* of research rather than functioning as *tools* of research? One possible answer is that only by taking sources as research *objects* they can be used consciously as research *tools*. Traditionally, scholars pursuing source studies aim to understand a work through clarifying, and gathering knowledge about, creative practice. The 'compositional process' is specifically referenced, as scholars trace the work's emergence: from the early stages of musical invention (sketches, plans, schemes) through to the intermediate phases of composition (drafts, short scores, preliminary scores) and later stages, for instance of orchestration (full scores and parts), and then to preparation for publication (fair copies, proofs, corrections),