

The Five Organ Sonatas of Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924)

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Although much has been written about Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, it is still difficult to understand why, (apart from his Anglican Cathedral church music) so little of his large output of over 200 compositions has remained to be performed. Since it is a well-known fact that none of us experience musical selections quite the same, I ask the reader to keep in mind that the intention of this submission is to only address the results of my own personal experience with Sir Charles Stanford's Five Sonatas for Organ. It is my hope that this short essay will inspire others to explore these neglected Organ Sonatas.

Charles Stanford was born in a very musical family. His father, a lawyer in Dublin, was an amateur cellist and a noted bass singer, good enough to be chosen to sing the title role in Mendelsohn's *Elijah* at the Irish premiere in 1847. His mother, an accomplished pianist, was capable of playing the solo parts in concertos at various concerts in Dublin. Stanford's parents encouraged the young boy's talent for music, employing a number of different teachers to provide him with instruction in violin, piano, organ and composition. Nevertheless, Stanford's parents felt it beneficial that he pursue a university education as well, leading towards a degree in law. Even though Charles tried very diligently to satisfy his parent's wish, he was unable to subdue his passion for music. He not only pursued his music study in Britain but early on started travelling to the continent every year to further increase his knowledge about a wide range of music subjects. It is quite obvious that his choice as teacher, composer and performer was the right one as he became very proficient in many different genres of composition. In fact, as one of his former students Vaughan Williams is reported to have said: Stanford could adopt the technique of any composer he chose. (Choral Music edited by Arthur Jacobs, page 268)



(It is worth noting, in view of his study in Leipzig and Berlin, that his interest for study in Germany might have originated with his early teachers, three of whom had been students of Ignaz Moscheles, a Bohemian pianist of German parents, who spent a number of years in Britain. Moscheles returned to Germany in 1846 accepting the position of professor of piano at the Leipzig Conservatory.)

An examination of the Sonatas soon reveals that Stanford utilizes many chorale-like phrases frequently as principal and/or as secondary material. Except for those melodies clearly identified and labelled by Stanford himself, I have decided not to identify any others. As many chorales have different text associations based on denominational history, I felt it best to let the reader identify the melody based on their own experience.

Sonata No. 1 in F, Opus 149 (Dated: May 1917)

Dedicated to “my old friend Alan Gray” (1855 – 1935). (without subtitle).

The first movement (Allegro molto moderato) in common time, opens in F major and is basically in Sonata form, it also has some affinity with the style of the Organ Sonatas of Josef Rheinberger (1839-1901), who in addition to the usual concluding fugue most of his Organ Sonatas would also periodically include a fugal section in the first movement.

The principal theme is a two measure Chorale-like phrase in quarter notes which is once restated complete with slight modification, then part of this motive is used for a number of measures ending with a C major chord. (*The same two measure Chorale theme returns in the third and final movement, giving a cyclical structure to this sonata.*) Following this, Stanford continues to develop this material for a page and a half (with the addition of a “trumpet call” on another manual). The exposition section then gets dynamically very soft while it is used as a modulating bridge, preparing for the second theme in the tonic minor.

This second theme consists of a two measure Fugato subject in sixteenth notes ending in four quarter notes, with the countersubject entering before the subject is complete. The opening sixteenth note section of the Fugato subject continues to appear frequently in different voices and there is interplay between it and the principal Chorale theme with episodes based on both. Part of the countersubject in augmentation serves as preparation for the recapitulation (in which one can almost hear shades of Stanford’s English style choral writing). A final restatement of part of the main and secondary themes signals the recapitulation proper and with the inversion of the “secondary theme” adding further interest, the movement ends very quietly on a single E flat.

The second movement (Tempo di Menuetto) in the relative major of f minor is very interesting as it is perhaps one of Stanford’s most light-hearted movements for organ. The opening features a dancelike motive in three-quarter time (modified and related to the principal theme of the first movement). This motive is stated sequentially twice and is extended by a two measure eighth note passage in tenths. Stanford then continues to develop both parts of the subject separately as well as combining them in such a way so that the main theme is never far away. The development section uses many different modifications such as, inversion, imitation and modulation. Duplet is changed to triplet motion and added to soprano, alto and/or pedal parts in turn. The movement concludes after a number of repetitions of the main thematic material and finishes quietly with a restatement of the two measure opening motive.

The third movement (Allegro maestoso) in common time, returns to the key of F minor and is basically an Introduction and Fugue (the same as many Rheinberger Sonatas). The Introduction uses the same Chorale-like phrase as the first movement. Whereas the first movement starts in F major and ends in F minor, this third and final movement starts in F minor and ends in F major (beginning with the “bridge” passage introducing the fugue subject).

In contrast to the first movement, where the quarter note Chorale-like phrase repeats a number of times without interruption, here it alternates each statement with passage runs in triplets and sixteenths (some of which are derived from the countersubject of the fugato subject of the first movement). After two “Solo Reed” additions, the section concludes with a modulation to F major, which introduces the key for the fugue subject (*the fugue subject being related to the Chorale by using the same three note opening*).

The Fugue begins with a fairly strict exposition that features a real answer and a “dotted rhythm” countersubject. As the movement continues, parts of both themes are used to create episodes. An

imitative passage based on the opening quarter-note motive leads to the dotted rhythm countersubject of the fugue over a final re-statement of the fugue subject in augmentation in the pedal. The recapitulation is prepared for by a repeated three note opening of the motto motive and is then established by the Chorale-like subject beginning at the final “Maestoso”. After the addition of a “Solo Reed”, the sequential three note opening of the Chorale subject is heard again a number of times before this third and final movement ends on Full Organ.

Sonata Eroica No. 2, Opus 151 (Dated: August 1917)

Dedicated to “Charles Marie Widor and the great country to which he belongs”.

The first and third movements of this Sonata refer to two specific battlegrounds where the French troops faced some very fierce and costly battles during the First World War. Even though Stanford does not quote the French National Anthem in its entirety anywhere in the three movements, it does appear in various guises throughout.

The first movement (Allegro moderato) in G minor and in three-four time is subtitled “Rheims”. The main theme is similar to a tune composed by Jean Tisserand in the 15th century, the text of which denotes new life and Resurrection. Stanford may have chosen this tune to relate it to the importance of the great Cathedral at Rheims, which in addition to its religious function, was (historically) the site for the crowning of the Kings of France.

The first line presents the main theme in octaves concluding with a perfect cadence and this unison theme re-occurs regularly throughout the movement in various voices. After the first line, Stanford uses sixteenth note passage work (relating it to some of Widor’s Symphonies for Organ) and while it does not quote the Marseillaise directly, it uses its melodic rhythms frequently. The different themes alternate between extreme agitation (designating the hostility of war) and quiet reflection during periods of rest.

Stanford continues to add new material in the middle section, visiting a number of keys (such as E-, Ab+) and it is then developed and held together by reminders of the opening material. This development even returns to G minor briefly; nevertheless, the movement concludes with a stately reminder of the main theme in G major.

The second movement (Adagio molto) in E flat major in common time presents two distinctly different themes. I suggest that Stanford might have intended this as part of a “Requiem Mass” setting (to deal with the many deaths on the battlefields). In that case, the first meditative theme might function as the Introit: “Requiem aeternam”, while the second theme, with its agitated dotted rhythm motive, depicting the horrific reality of the continued conflict, would be considered the Sequence: “Dies irae”. This agitated second theme is fairly extensive and appropriately questions the reason for all the suffering of both, soldiers and civilians. Stanford in that way expresses the extreme emotions generated by the war, using the same four note opening motive for both subjects. In the loud and boisterous second section, he uses punctuating chords supported by sixteenth notes passage in the pedal to denote “The day of wrath”. This in

turn is followed immediately by a four measure imitative polyphonic counterpoint and a re-statement of the dotted half-note section, this time in A-flat major. From here on, the Chorale-tune enters (in part) now and then, prepared for by polyphonic imitation and is periodically interrupted by the dotted half-note motive, sometimes in diminution. Toward the end there is a complete mood

change by the use of once again the same four note motive. This then takes us back to the very beginning and the movement ends as it began, with the “Requiem aeternam”

The third movement, subtitled Verdun. The battle for Verdun was one of the fiercest and costliest battles between the French and German armies during the First World War and with the constant attacks and counterattacks cost an estimated 1,000,000 lives, without gaining any advantages on either side. This movement is designated “Allegro moderato” and quotes the French Anthem melodically and rhythmically more strongly than any of the other movements. It opens with a few loud chords which are followed immediately by agitated two part scale-like passages in sixteenths. The chordal sections continue to alternate with fast moving sixteenth note episodes which include parts of the French National Anthem. Stanford then develops the themes using modulation, sequence and imitation. Although the movement does contain many quiet sections, it is generally loud and the Sonata ends with the complete first line of the “Marseillaise” (beginning with a Solo Trumpet).

Sonata Britannica No. 3 in d minor, Opus 152 (Dated: November 1917)

Dedicated to Sir Walter Parratt. (English organist composer 1841 to 1924).

This sonata contains the most recognizable melodies as the first movement is based on the tune St Mary and the third movement is built on the tune Hanover.

The first movement in D minor provides some very interesting developments as this movement opens with dotted half note accumulating chords in twelve-eight time. Even though there are a number of different texts for the St. Mary tune, based on the “forte” dotted half-note opening section (which repeats in various ways throughout the movement), it is hard to imagine any other text fitting the music except that of which was composed by Cardinal John Henry Newman, the first verse of this Hymn beginning with the Creedal statement “Firmly I believe and truly, God is Three and God is One”. This Stanford keeps quoting selected phrases of the “St. Mary” tune in different voices and maintains interest by alternating loud and soft sections using both themes. There is a short section in the key of D major before returning to D minor and the movement concludes with some wonderfully quiet melodic sections using the St. Mary tune.

The second movement, in B flat major, titled “Benedictus”, emerges from an opening plainsong melody in common time. In the sixth measure, Stanford adds what might be perceived as an instrumental interlude (or comment) on the plainsong melody. This alternating pattern continues until the “piu mosso” designation in D flat major, where the manual parts make a “hesitating” octave jump before the plainsong melody continues and the pedal adds to the hesitancy with off-beat eighth notes. Following this, we hear the “Hosanna” section of the Benedictus, identified by upward chordal octave skips where Stanford asks for reed stops to be added to the ensemble. There then follows a continuous development, utilizing all of the previous themes and the movement ends very quietly with the opening plainsong melody.

The third movement in three-four time and overall in D major is based on the tune “Hanover” and although it is sixteen pages long, presents little in new or innovative ideas. It variously quotes parts of the different phrases of the tune and uses this as material for further development. There are many short imitative lines, loud emphatic chordal statements, as well as equally short melodic lines with varied accompaniment. The movement ends with a setting of the complete chorale and a repeat of the last line, which does add an energetic close to this sonata.

Sonata Celtica No. 4, Opus 153 (Dated: 1918 or 1920)

Dedicated “To my friend Harold Darke” (English organist-composer, 1888–1976)

The first movement, (Allegro molto moderato) in C minor and three-four time, shows the most Germanic influence of all of Stanford’s compositions and it immediately brings to mind the first Sonata by Josef Rheinberger, (which in turn is of course again indebted to the style of Bach). *This reminds us again that no composer lives in isolation, or is ignorant of historical models and as such they are therefore all musically related.* After introducing the principal theme, Stanford presents a chorale-like melody in various voices which alternates with the main subject (or parts thereof). This continues until the addition of modified thematic material in an eighth-note pattern leading to another setting of the chorale melody. Following a key change to C major the chorale is then enhanced by running sixteenths pattern in the tenor. After re-iterating parts of the main theme, Stanford concludes the movement with a number of repeated chords over off-beat pedal notes, reinforcing the C major ending.

It is astonishing how Stanford can move from Germanic counterpoint (as Rheinberger) to an English Choral music style so imperceptibly and so quickly in a few measures.

The second movement (Tema con Variazioni) in A flat major and common time, has a slightly unusual style. It is not an expected traditional set of variations on one melodic theme. These variations are sometimes based on melody and other times on harmony. (This variation style was brought to its ultimate development in the very extensive and difficult “Variations on an original theme Opus 73” by Max Reger, 1873-1916). The written out lower mordent in single notes, which opens the movement, is one of the motives which appears fairly often. At variation II, there is a time signature change to six-four with much use of the imitative lower mordent motive. In variation III, (in common time) we hear a short reminder of the first movement with Stanford inverting part of the opening subject. This section also features the lower mordent motive in diminution in the pedal. The movement then returns to material based on excerpts of the original theme at “Tempo della thema” of variation IV, which closes the movement quietly.

The third movement is subtitled “St. Patrick’s Breastplate”, is a Hymn to the Trinity, to a text ascribed to St. Patrick (372-466) translated by Cecil Frances Alexander and set to an ancient Irish Hymn melody in an arrangement by Charles Stanford. This tune is used for all the verses, except for the second last verse which is set to the tune “Gartan”. The movement begins with a forte unison octave of the first line of the Hymn, soon joined by chordal support ending on a whole-note D major chord. This repeats sequentially a third higher and modifies the opening material, ending in C minor where it introduces the passacaglia unison theme in the Pedal. The accompaniment to the passacaglia subject starts similarly to Max Reger’s “Introduction and Passacaglia” and it accompanies the passacaglia subject three times, each time increasing in volume and number of voices. Following this, the melody moves to the soprano, supported by chords and imitative counterpoint, slowly eliminating some voices to a quiet reduction to three part harmony. Here Stanford introduces the tune “Gartan” for the altered meter of the text of verse six. *(This tune originally used for the “Sancti Venite”, is now known to many only as “Love came down at Christmas”, the sixth verse being mostly sung to the tune “Deirdre”)*

Part of this new theme is then developed until the “poco piu lento” in six-four time, when we hear again a short reminder of the beginning of the original passacaglia theme. This is accompanied by an accumulative two-note upward chordal leap, emphasizing the beginning of the chorale on the manual, which eventually is supported by rhythmic unison pedal in octaves. This section then gradually becomes softer, utilizing a two part passage in sixths leading to another passacaglia section (slightly modified) which gets repeated a number of times with different accompaniment. The following section leads to manuals and pedal imitating and reinforcing each other. Then a pedal

solo leads to the final statement of the “Gartan” tune and parts of the main theme which get stronger in preparation for the final entry of the principal St. Patrick’s Hymn tune.

Sonata No. 5 in, Opus 159 (Dated: May 1918 or 1921) subtitle: Quasi una fantasia

The whole of this Sonata is based on Stanford’s own tune Engelberg (Angel’s Mountain) written in 1904, when he happened to be in Switzerland. (Surprisingly, the last line of the Hymn tune seemingly ends with a Question, not on the tonic G, but on the dominant D).

This Sonata (in contrast to the other four) is not in three distinct movements, but is in cyclical form. All three sections based on the same (or modified) thematic material.

The first section (Allegro moderato) in A major and common time, opens with the first line of the Hymn in unison octaves. It is followed immediately by a number of similar statements using actual note values as well as diminution of the opening three notes of the tune in four parts. This continues with arpeggiated chords in sixteenths (again based on the first three notes) followed by a short chordal section finishing on the dominant. Here Stanford introduces a dotted rhythm accompaniment which adds to and alternates with previous material until we hear the first line of the Hymn as a solo line over triplet accompaniment. It then returns to chordal sections with the Solo first line interspersed and modulated until it is stated Hymn-like in homophonic style. Stanford then uses parts of the previous thematic material, to prepare for the second section (movement).

The second section (Allegretto non troppo mosso) beginning and ending in F# minor is in nine-eighth time and is again based on the opening notes of the Hymn in diminution. A gentle, unison eighth-note passage leads to and serves as the accompaniment for a melody based on the (modified) second line of the Hymn on the Swell manual. These different parts continue to interact with each other until the key change to G-flat major, where Stanford returns to the first line of the Hymn in three-quarter time. The main subject then continues in the alto-tenor part with a new countersubject in soprano. When the main theme returns to the soprano, it is undergirded by an eighth-note passage in the pedal before returning to F# minor and nine-eighth time. Whereas in the opening section, the (modified) melodic fragment was in the tenor, accompanied by triplet eights, the roles are here reversed, the melody being in the soprano with triplet eighths in the tenor. A chromatic rise in the soprano is followed by a re-iteration of part of the second measure of the Hymn-tune and with one last ascending chromatic scale following a descending scale in the pedal, concludes this second section on an A major dominant seventh chord.

The third section (Allegro) in two-four time and in A major, is a fugal treatment of the last two measures of the hymn tune. Although this motive alternates with reminders of other parts of the hymn tune, it returns regularly, either in the tenor or soprano and it is periodically accompanied by sixteenth note passages. A modulatory bridge, which features the fugato motive in the pedal, leads to the first complete statement of the hymn melody in quarter notes in A flat major, supported by staccato pedal eighth notes. After a return to A major, Stanford continues to develop the fugato motive sequentially and imitatively with interludes based on other parts of the tune. This development prepares for the entry of the “Allegro Moderato, ma piu largamente” indication of the Engelberg tune in its entirety. The movement concludes after a number of repetitions of the last three notes of the tune and after a climbing pedal passage, ends gloriously on the complete last line of the Hymn, triple forte in A major.

Some final thoughts:

It appears from the foregoing analysis that these five organ sonatas fall into two distinctly different styles of composition. Sonatas number one and five are similar to

each other in basic form and style. Sonata number one, even though it is in three separate movements, is to a great extent based on the same thematic material. By the time we get to sonata number five, Stanford has obviously decided to dispense with the separate movements and composed a Sonata in one complete single movement, but in three separate but connected sections, all based on the same theme (with modification). Sonatas number two to four, are also similar in form, however, (as distinct from number one and five) they all consist of three separate movements, each with its own theme. One interesting item which is worth mentioning is that the middle movements of sonatas two, three and four are based on Sacred Latin texts, or on models of the Middle Ages.

Some of the relevant background information was gathered from the following:

Organ Sonata scores, Contact: Masters Music Publications Inc. U.S.A.

Choral Music (edited by Arthur Jacobs)

Stanford: pages 228, 229, 266, 268, 270, 282, 393.

Vaughan Williams: Page 268

The Norton/Grove Concise Encyclopedia of Music (New York: Norton & Company 1988)

Page 622: Requiem Mass

Page 722: Stanford

Common Praise (Toronto, Anglican Church of Canada 1998)

Hymn # 436: St. Patrick

Hymn # 598: Engelberg

The Hymn Book (Toronto, Anglican Church of Canada 1971)

Hymn # 74: St. Mary tune

Hymnary.org

Cardinal John Henry Newman (Text for the tune St. Mary)

Stephanie Burgoyne ARCCO, ARCT. Artist Diploma P. D. is one of a great number of North-American "Professional-Amateur" Organist-Choirmasters which, (*although University accredited*) have to accept

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