

# MUSIC IN IRELAND

## 1848–1998

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# RACE, NATION AND EMPIRE

IN THE IRISH MUSIC OF SIR CHARLES VILLIERS  
STANFORD

*Michael Murphy*

Sir Charles Villiers Stanford was born in Dublin in 1852 to a Protestant family. The family were renowned in the Dublin legal world and were diehard conservative unionists. As a young adult Stanford moved to England where he made a significant contribution to Britain's musical renaissance. Through his leading academic positions at Cambridge and the Royal College of Music in London, his large output of musical works, his conducting and his administrative work, he became one of Britain's most powerful musical figures. Central to his career and personal identity was his Irishness. Some of his most popular and famous works were those with specifically Irish subject matter: such as his Irish symphony, his six Irish orchestral rhapsodies, his comic opera *Shamus O'Brien* and his many Irish folk-song arrangements.

Unlike Yeats, Wilde, Joyce and Shaw, Stanford is absent from debates on late nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish culture. This is not a fault of Irish or English cultural historians but is a product of that very history where music was marginal to the discourse of Irish nationalism. By the nature of his profession therefore, Stanford's enormous stature in British music and his professed expertise in Irish folk music were destined to be irrelevant to the discourse of Irish cultural nationalism. However, in crossing the Irish Sea to England, Stanford did not distance himself from his Irish provenance. Rather he defined both himself and much of his music by articulating his Irishness in a very specific way. This lecture examines Stanford's mediation of his Irishness.

My argument is that Stanford's construction of Irishness was based on the English view of the Irish. Thus I believe that Stanford's version of Irish identity was the converse of contemporary Irish society and culture, especially the Gaelic League. In essence, Stanford engaged the discourse of British imperialism in constructing Irishness. In this lecture my main focus will be on his study of folk music from the British Isles. The intellectual author-

ity of these folkloristic studies provided the context for his Irish works. In particular I will examine certain of his personal and professional statements relating to Irish folk music and the notion of Irishness. As a dissonant counterpoint to the English reception of his Irish works I will examine what Shaw had to say about Stanford. In conclusion I will pose the question whether Stanford will ever be regarded as a serious composer of Irish national works.

Let me begin by considering Stanford's assimilation into English musical life. The fact that Stanford was a Protestant was crucial in allowing him access to the key English institutions. He studied at Cambridge where he became the golden boy of English musical life and where he later became Professor of Music. His music for the Anglican services strengthened his religious and professional assimilation. In the spirit of Matthew Arnold's agitation for a National Theatre for England Stanford was foremost in advocating a National Opera for England. Thus Stanford was at the centre of many English institutions, the mission of which was to define Englishness for the rest of the nation.

The extent to which Stanford was assimilated is evident from the article on him in the fourth edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* published in 1940:

Sixteen years have passed since the mortal remains of Charles Villiers Stanford were laid to rest close beside those of Henry Purcell in the north choir aisle of Westminster Abbey. That singular honour was testimony to the sure faith of his countrymen that the name of Stanford would endure in their art.<sup>1</sup>

The question must be asked: which country and whose art? This paradox is ever present in the writings about Stanford. One solution is offered by Sydney Grew in his book *Our Favourite Musicians – from Stanford to Holbrooke*. Grew's first sentence on Stanford states

Stanford is an Irishman, but we call him an *English* musician because he lives in England, writes for the English, and makes exclusive use of the English language.<sup>2</sup>

Grew's statement may seem disingenuous – after all, couldn't the same be said of Shaw and Wilde? Nevertheless, with Stanford the case is different if we consider his marketing strategy. Take, for

example, the title of his 1882 publication of Irish songs which he called *Songs of Old Ireland: A Collection of Fifty Irish Melodies Unknown in England*. The preface elaborates thus:

The Fifty Irish Melodies comprised in this collection may be described as new to English ears. They have been chosen to represent as far as possible the various characteristics of the people, from which they have sprung. Thus, glimpses into the lives of the Irish peasant, fisherman, and mechanic are given.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, Sydney Grew was right. Stanford chose to represent the Irish to the English. The complex relationship between Irishness and Englishness is written into Stanford's Irish discourse. As Declan Kiberd stated in his recent book *Inventing Ireland*, 'If Ireland had never existed the English would have invented it.'<sup>4</sup> That Stanford was Irish gave a unique authority to his musical and verbal utterances on Ireland and Irishness. Such authority would have been impossible for a non-native. Stanford's Irish discourse, as articulated in his music, memoirs and philosophy of education, constitutes a process of re-inventing Ireland for the English. Interestingly, Stanford's own Irishness was subject to an ongoing process of re-invention by his English contemporaries. His Irishness was deemed to be a healthy influence on his music.

One of Stanford's important contemporaries, J. A. Fuller Maitland, states:

Stanford's Irish descent gives his music a strong individuality, which is not only evident in his arrangements of Irish songs and in his work as a collector, but stands revealed in his 'Irish Symphony', in the opera, 'Shamus O'Brien' the orchestral 'Irish Rhapsodies,' the 'Irish Fantasies' for violin, and in many other definitely Irish compositions. The easy flow of melody, and the feeling for the poetical and romantic things in legendary lore are peculiarly Irish traits.<sup>5</sup>

Most English commentators during and after his lifetime made constant reference to the way in which Stanford's Irish works were faithful representations of the 'typical Irishman'. Another prominent commentator of the time, J. F. Porte, stated:

*Shamus O'Brien* is an opera that abounds with the broad and individual humour of the Irish temperament. It is a national work to the core, abounding with sparkling music, full of the native wit and joviality of the typical Irishman.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, it was in representing the 'typical Irishman' that Stanford's Irish works were national in character. But the 'typical Irishman' was an English invention. Let us take a closer look at the physiognomy and character of the 'typical Irishman'.

On the one hand there was the comical Irishman whose humour was a defining and redeeming feature of his race. A number of 'typical Irishmen' populated Stanford's works. One of the most famous was Father O'Flynn who was the subject of the eponymous song in the 1882 collection of *Fifty Irish Melodies*, and who later became the priest in *Shamus O'Brien*.

On the other hand, when John Bull was in a foul temper he had a less lovely view of the Irish as infamously animated in the pages of *Punch* magazine. Any Irish person in England had to forge their identity against such views. Stanford's response was to exploit these stereotypes without a trace of irony. For example, in his recollections of Dublin he tells of a musician, O'Shaughnessy, who adopted a more European sounding name, thus becoming Mr Levey. Stanford tells us:

The chief violinist in Dublin was a great character, with a face which might have been a model for the typical Irishman of the comic papers ... His name quarrelled with his face; it was incongruous to hear the servant announce 'Mr Levey' and see, not dark hair and a pronounced nose, but an unmistakable Paddy enter the room.<sup>7</sup>

Stanford deftly negotiated the treacheries of Victorian racial theory to construct a benign Irish race for consumption by his English peers. Before looking at how he did it, I want to briefly look at the nature of British cultural imperialism.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of British imperialist ideology was Social Darwinism, especially the biological basis for racial superiority. The following quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson's poem *Foreign Children* provides an example of how imperialist ideology percolated all aspects of Victorian Britain, including childhood:

Little Indian, Sioux, or Crow,  
Little frosty Eskimo  
Little Turk or Japanese,  
Oh, don't you wish that you were me?

You have curious things to eat,  
I am fed on proper meat;  
You must dwell beyond the foam  
But I am safe and live at home.<sup>8</sup>

Stanford set this to music in *A Child's Garland of Songs*. This does not make him, *ipso facto*, an imperialist cheerleader. But the assumptions underlying its sentiment surface in a more thoroughgoing manner in Stanford's philosophy of education for school-children. That theories of racial superiority suffused British music theory is evident from the following extract from C. Hubert H. Parry's book *Style in Musical Art*:

It seems as if some physical conformation made it impossible for certain races and types of mind to keep many threads of thought truly balanced and adjusted ... The power of patient co-ordination which qualifies a people for self-government is the same which has made the development of musical art possible. Races which are not capable of such co-ordination must remain incapable of fully understanding highly organised art.<sup>9</sup>

Cognate with the British imperialist discourse was a missionary project predicated on the assumption that the genius of the superior races would eventually improve the primitivism of the lesser ones. That this could be brought about by art is evident from the following statement by Parry:

The whole development of true art is devised to engage more and more of the finer mental qualities. Its object is to appeal to types of mind which have the richest outfit of the finest qualities, and one of its greatest joys is to find that it helps the imperfectly provided mind to attain fuller measure of the finer qualities.<sup>10</sup>

Stanford's debt to the imperialist discourse is transparent in his philosophy of education. This philosophy is recorded in his lecture to the managers of the London Board Schools in 1889. His lecture begins with what he calls an 'unsavoury fact':

My proposition is this: that the first effect of education upon the uneducated masses is the development of socialistic and even of revolutionary ideas amongst them.<sup>11</sup>

By way of remedy Stanford mentions

that Prince Bismarck was alive at once to the necessity and to the danger

of popular and compulsory education ... Foreseeing that the first contact of education with uncultivated minds would inevitably produce socialistic results, he passed laws for the repression of socialism almost simultaneously with his laws for general compulsory education.<sup>12</sup>

Stanford continues with the observation that the tree of education provides both good and evil, and that there are many methods by which the evil can be mitigated. He states

one of the most powerful is, without doubt, to be found in the influence of art ... I apprehend, then, that in music you have at your disposal the most powerful living agency for the refinement of the masses.<sup>13</sup>

Stanford then states:

And what should be the kind of music taught? Without doubt, national music, folk-music – the music which from the earliest times has grown up amongst the people.<sup>14</sup>

Stanford's lecture strikes the tone of Lady Bracknell's revulsion at 'the worst excesses of the French Revolution'. If we compare Stanford's philosophy with Thomas Davis' motto 'Educate that you may be free', a motto that inspired later programmes of national regeneration and, indeed, this lecture series for radio, Stanford's programme is revealed as imperialistic if not imperialist. As such he is the antithesis of James Connolly's socialism on the one hand and on the other that of Shaw, whose advocacy of the Fabian Society promoted wise government of the empire.

Stanford developed his programme for the educational use of folk music with specific emphasis on the issues of race, nation and empire. Thus he states:

You have two distinct schools – Saxon and Celtic; and four distinct styles – English, Welsh, Scotch and Irish.<sup>15</sup>

In Stanford's theory all of these come under the umbrella of 'British productions'. However, at this time English folklorists were advocating an inwardness. In other words, they promoted the study of the English peasant rather than the colonial savage. In this context Ireland could be considered to be too peripheral. To negotiate this situation to his advantage Stanford brilliantly made the point that the devil you know is better than the devil you don't

know. I quote from the aforementioned lecture where he states

If I may once more take the example of my own country, Ireland, it is a sad fact that Christy Minstrel songs are driving the superb Irish folk-music out of sight and out of mind. In the neighbourhood of the towns the 'darkie' invasion has been fearfully successful. It is now only in the harvest-field, and in remote districts where the melodies sacred to burnt cork are still an unknown luxury, that the genuine ring of the Irish style is preserved. Such disaster as this it is for the schools to avert.<sup>16</sup>

Stanford went on to make the point that

Such a work as this supervision of national music for our schools involves, ought surely to be placed in the hands of our responsible leading musical men, and no collection should be issued until their approval of it has been obtained.<sup>17</sup>

Happily for Stanford, the Board of Education published in 1905 his immensely successful *National Song Book* complete with English, Welsh, Scotch and Irish folk tunes.

Stanford's folklorist activities also informed his non-educational publications of Irish songs. Stanford noted that many problems of accuracy had crept into Irish folk song arrangements. Those of Thomas Moore received much of his criticism. For example, he states

In the case of so patriotic and so enthusiastic a national music lover as Thomas Moore, it is scarcely possible to find a page of Irish folk-music which he touched without unjustifiable and, I must say, destructive alteration.<sup>18</sup>

Such an opinion ignores the centrality of patriotism in Moore's works. Moore himself makes this explicit. Moore responded to the accusation

that the tendency of this publication is mischievous, and that I have chosen these airs but as a vehicle of dangerous politics. To those who identify nationality with treason, and who see in every effort for Ireland a system of hostility towards England ... I shall not deign to apologise for the warmth of any political sentiment which may occur in the course of these pages.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, Stanford published a collection of folksongs called *Moore's Irish Melodies Restored* (1895) no doubt as an attempt to disabuse the Irish and English public of Moore's follies. However, his

claim to have restored these melodies is a false one. For one thing, in dismissing the political overtones of Moore's publications Stanford was negating a dimension which was essential to Moore's own intentions and to his success in Ireland as the national bard.

While the English took Stanford at his word his folklorism came under attack from Dublin, most notably in Grattan Flood's popular and patriotic book *A History of Irish Music* (1905). Another notable musical figure in Dublin at the time, James Culwick, dismissed Stanford's folklorism as beautiful but not practical for national purposes.<sup>20</sup>

To my mind there is no better counterfoil to Stanford's Irish discourse than George Bernard Shaw's criticisms of Stanford. Shaw attributes to Stanford a double-personality in the manner of Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. This novel explored Victorian Britain's fear that every English gentleman was host to an uncontrollable animal nature. For Dr Stanford the animal nature was, of course, Irish. Shaw says of Stanford

Far from being a respectable oratorio-manufacturing talent, it is, when it gets loose, eccentric, violent, romantic, patriotic, and held in check only by a mortal fear of being found deficient in what are called 'the manner and tone of good society.' This fear, too, is Irish: it is, possibly, the racial consciousness of having missed that four hundred years of Roman civilisation which gave England a sort of university education when Ireland was in the hedge school.<sup>21</sup>

Shaw's critique of Stanford's very popular *Irish Symphony* provides a caustic commentary on Stanford's discourse of Irishness. Shaw states

The success of Professor Stanford's *Irish Symphony* ... was, from the Philharmonic point of view, somewhat scandalous. The spectacle of a university professor 'going Fantee' is indecorous.

The *Irish Symphony*, composed by an Irishman, is a record of fearful conflict between the aboriginal Celt and the Professor. The scherzo is not a scherzo at all, but a shindy, expending its force in riotous dancing. However hopelessly an English orchestra may fail to catch the wild nuances of the Irish fiddler, it cannot altogether drown the 'hurroosh' with which Stanford the Celt drags Stanford the Professor into the orgy.<sup>22</sup>

Shaw's achievement was to ironise the discourse of imperialism in Stanford's music and philosophy.

Despite Shaw's serrated critiques and the disabusing scholarship in Dublin, Stanford survived as an ambassador for Ireland in the English imagination. A classic instance of the anachronism of the imperialist discourse occurs in a short survey of Stanford's life and career by Orsmund Anderton, who describes *Shamus O'Brien* as 'contributing to the softening of the "the Ancient Hate"':

Altogether it is a fine piece of truly national flavour, which has done not a little to help kindness and mutual understanding between the opposing forces ... Happier relations between John Bull and his 'Other Island' will be a real relief to him: and these he may fairly feel that he has himself contributed, in an indirect way, to bring about ... He has shown the Irish spirit in an attractive light – may his tribe increase!<sup>23</sup>

This review was written in 1922. The failure to mention the fact that Stanford's tribe was locked in a violent civil war just as their nation was giving birth to the state reveals the closed-circuit nature of imperialism.

This is apparent also in Stanford's own response to the convulsions of the First World War. In an essay written in 1916, Stanford gives a history of musical works which were inspired by war. His essay ends in an appeal for greater patriotism in British music:

War has its blessings as well as its curses. One of the greatest of its blessings is the awakening of patriotism ... we must cultivate a trust in British ideals and British effort at least as great as other nations have long shown in their own.<sup>24</sup>

For Stanford British musical patriotism was concerned with finding a home-grown alternative to German music. This idea was promoted in a book written in 1916 by Stanford and his colleague, Cecil Forsyth. The overriding message of this book was that nationalism was the solution to the German problem in British music. The book states:

there are two classes of men ... the nationalists and the denationalists. And the artistic health and productivity of any community increases exactly with its proportion of nationalists ... It is a quarrel of the creative with the receptive ... of the man who loves his country and the man who loves someone else's.<sup>25</sup>

This resort to 'us and them' nationalism posed a potential identity problem for Stanford in light of his Irishness and the Easter Rising.

Moreover, Irishmen of diverse political loyalties fought in the Great War: nationalists fought for the rights of small nations while unionists fought for the empire. By dedicating his Fifth Irish Rhapsody to the officers and men of the Irish Guards and to the memory of their first colonel-in-chief, Lord Roberts, his Irishness was gainfully employed as loyalty to the British war effort. Such an interpretation resonates with his own diehard conservative unionism and imperialist strategy.

Notwithstanding Stanford's immense status in British musical life, much of his popularity as a composer of Irish 'national' works results from the fact that the Irish were a source of entertainment for the English. While he was regarded as a serious composer in England he was also an entertainer. Whether Stanford will ever be regarded as a serious composer by the Irish public will largely depend on the extent to which they can forget him as an entertainer, because the Irish also find his Irish works entertaining.