Charles Steggall

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Lecture delivered at the Hymn Society's Conference at Canterbury on September 23rd 1959 by Allen K. Blackall, Mus.D., F.R.A.M., Hon.R.C.M., F.R.C.O., F.B.S.M.

I greatly value the time allotted to me from the precious hours of a Hymn Society Conference in which to speak to you of CHARLES STEGGALL, a musician whose name for quite a long period was well known in England, and held in very high esteem by his fellows, but which today for the most part is rarely mentioned, and is in some danger of becoming no more than a vague memory. And yet, had he lived to see it, this Society would not have had a more enthusiastic member for, in addition to his other manifold activities, he was a hymnologist for the greater part of his life. Born in 1826 and living till 1905, his life-span covered the whole of the Victorian era. That was, you will agree, a time of sweeping changes, and in no sphere were these changes so great or, I might add, so desirable, as those which were brought about in the Services of the Church of England, and in the various activities connected with them, and Steggall was in the middle of it all.

My chief qualification for this task lies in the fact that I was privileged to know Steggall and to be taught by him for three years at his private house and at the Royal Academy of Music. His name had been quite well known to me for a long time for, strangely enough, my first teacher had himself been a pupil of Steggall's at the Academy so, in a queer musical way, I might have been called Steggall's grandson. My early efforts in Harmony would often call forth my teacher's remark, "Steggall always said" or, "That wouldn't have done for Steggall." At this time I was a Choirboy and I was much interested in hymn tunes. I fear that I spent a lot of time in playing them when I ought to have been practising Major and Minor Scales. I searched for Steggall tunes in all the tune books we had at home—'*The Bristol Tune Book*'. '*The Congregational Church Hymnal*', '*The Hymnary*', '*Hymns Ancient and Modern*', and I found quite a lot in them. 'T*he Hymnary*' had most, no less than 13. I was quite excited when in the Preface of '*Hymns Ancient and Modern*' I found where he lived. It said something about if we wanted to know anything on musical matters, we were to write to him at 8 Horbury Crescent, Notting Hill, London, W., or something of that kind.

When in due course I was admitted as a student at the Royal Academy, in 1894, I was fortunate enough to be accepted by Dr. Steggall as an Organ and also a Harmony student, I think he remembered my first teacher. For the first Organ lesson I was told to go to 8 Horbury Crescent. This surprised me, but I went. When I entered, I heard an Organ being played in a room towards the back of the house. I was shown into the room and there was Dr. Steggall, about whom I had heard and thought so much, but who I was now seeing for the first time. He was 68, I was 16, and the first impression I got was of his noticeable shortness of stature. Even then I seemed to be a shade taller

than he was. He was clean shaven, not much hair on his head, but what was there he put to the most effective use. He wore glasses usually near the end of his nose and was attired in very correct morning dress. A student was playing as I entered and I was duly introduced to him W. H. Bell. You may or may not be acquainted with this name but I am sure some of you heard it in Addington Palace on the occasion of the Jubilee of the English Hymnal when Vaughan Williams, in his lecture, gave a list of young composers whom he had invited to help by submitting tunes. He mentioned W. H. Bell, whose tunes 'CATHCART' and 'HAIL, HARBINGER OF MORN' appear in the book. Look them up, you will I think at least find them interesting. Bell would have made a big name if he had stayed in England, but nearly the whole of his work was done in Capetown where he was Professor of Music. It is I think, worthy of note that the first music I heard on Steggall's organ, played by Bell, was the Fifth Symphony of Widor, the French composer, then quite a novelty in England. Steggall, aged 68, was always abreast of his times, and his sympathies so broad, they would include the most modern works.

Later on I learned how there came to be an organ in the house. In 1851 when Steggall, at 25, was appointed Professor of the Organ at the Academy (he was the first, and for a time the only holder of the position), there was no Organ there. But Steggall fortunately had married the daughter of Bishop, the well-known Organ builder, who came to the rescue and built him an Organ. It was not, of course, a large one; only two manuals; and its power was graded to the size of the room. Its best stop was perhaps, curiously enough, not made by Bishop. It was a 16ft Trombone made by Cavaillé-Coll, the famous French Organ builder. It certainly was a fine reed. We were only occasionally allowed to use it, even when we were sure of playing the right notes. A wrong note on the Trombone was unthinkable. The organ was blown by hand by a boy in the lower regions of the house. We never saw him, and we had no sympathy whatever with his sufferings. Steggall saw to it that we did not use too many stops. I remember that one day, when we arrived at the house, we were told that the boy was away (worn out by his labours, no doubt!), and that the cook was blowing for him. For a time the wind came in fitful gasps, and then ceased altogether. The Doctor stamped on the floor, but there was no wind forthcoming. At length he hurried from the room and, after a short time, reappeared. Smiling at us over his glasses, he said: "the potatoes were boiling over." After that the wind was rather severely rationed. Have you ever heard Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor played on an 8 ft. Dulciana? It has what you might call a 'new look'—yet I seem to have heard some of our modern organists play it on a 2 ft. Piccolo!

As a Teacher Steggall was strict and exacting, but always kind and patient. I never heard an angry word come from him, though he was sometimes rather upset. One morning we found him with a letter in his hands which he had just received from the Editor of a new Hymn Book, enclosing the words of a hymn and asking him to write a tune for it. I so well remember the scorn in his voice as he said "Look at this! how do you think it begins? 'I am coming, I am coming'—Sankey and Moody diluted'." Steggall's Class for Harmony, Counterpoint and Composition was held in a large room in the Academy itself, which was then in Tenterden Street, Hanover Square, and not in the present fine building in Marylebone Road. His teaching of Harmony was almost entirely confined to the harmonization of Figured Basses, both on paper and at sight at the piano. This was most valuable training for an Organist. He declined to look at a carelessly or untidily written exercise, and he had an effective way of dealing with a really bad case. He would make a great show of polishing his glasses and, as a last resort, of turning the paper upside down. "No, Mr. So and So, that really will not do!" Very often, when lessons were over, he would talk to us of his past life, and much of what follows was learned in that way.

In 1846, when he was twenty years old, he was present at the first London rehearsal of Mendelssohn's 'Elijah' in Exeter Hall. (It had just had its first performance in Birmingham.) This rehearsal was being conducted by Mr. Surman, then a well-known London Conductor, and while it

was in progress Mendelssohn himself entered the Hall, and naturally caused the greatest excitement. To Steggall's surprise and delight, the great composer sat in a vacant seat next to him. At one point, during the Chorus 'Hear us Baal! hear, mighty god!', Mendelssohn became very restive and, finally, ascended the platform. After a word or two to Surman, the composer took the baton and the chorus was sung at about twice the former pace. Steggall attended the subsequent performance a day or so later and, between the two parts of the Oratorio, and upon a grand piano, so placed that he faced the audience, Mendelssohn played some extempore variations on Handel's 'Harmonious Blacksmith.'

At the age of 21, Steggall had become a student in the Academy under Sterndale Bennett who, from the first, exercised a very strong influence over him. It is perhaps impossible to get a real picture of Steggall without remembering his early training under Bennett. This included lessons in piano, harmony and composition. He told us that in the summer months his lessons with Bennett began at the Academy at 7 a.m. At 8 o'clock he used to walk with him to Portland Place, then one of the most fashionable streets in London, where Bennett was due to give a pianoforte lesson. Steggall always spoke with affection, and almost reverence, of Sterndale Bennett. He would say that it was a great mistake to think of him as an imitator of Mendelssohn. Some of Bennett's finest compositions were written before Mendelssohn's works had become known in England, and no one was a greater admirer of Bennett than Mendelssohn himself. Although Bennett came to hold three very important appointments:—Principal of the Royal Academy of Music; Professor of Music in Cambridge University; and Conductor of the Philharmonic Society; together they brought in only a very limited financial return, and he was obliged to teach. And he was such a good teacher that he frequently found himself with a waiting list of 30. That is the secret of Bennett. He wore himself out with teaching, and had little or no time for composition. That is our very great loss.

Steggall often spoke to us of the almost incredible state of English Church Music in his younger days. "Things have been turned upside down since I was a young man", he would say. In the average London Parish Church there would be an organ of sorts (though the barrel-organ was not altogether extinct), and the organ would almost certainly have no pedals. The singing was confined to the hymns, the remainder of the Service being read in the speaking voice by the Clerk between them. The hymns would be led by a number of children from the Parochial Schools, who were themselves ill-trained, and who were usually seated in a gallery. They sang inferior times, and altogether the congregational singing was poor and half-hearted. Steggall's remedy was to provide good tunes, led by men's choirs instead of children's. In pursuit of this ideal he did what very few young men of 22 have done. In 1848 he published '*Church Psalmody*', a collection of good tunes, based largely upon the Ravenscroft psalter, although he had been persuaded by friends to include HELMSLEY and the EASTER HYMN. They were, on the whole at all events, free from tunes which did not require any repetition or words, which he deplored.

In his Preface to '*Church Psalmody*', he blames the congregation for leaving the singing to a few ill-trained children. "How different", he says, "from the soul-stiring meetings of the early Christians at which. St Jerome tells us, the sound of their oft-repeated "Amen" was like a peal of thunder". He affirms that tunes must be of an ecclesiastical character. He complains that those in use were like glees and songs. Introduce 'pretty' tunes and the people cease to sing in order to listen. He would replace the children's choirs by choirs of men. The Congregation must prepare themselves for their work. And in order to get congregational singing a standard selection of metrical psalms and hymns must not only be authorised but commanded for use in all the churches This is the voice of a young man in deadly earnest. This was his 'Credo' and from this time, he became much in demand as a Lecturer on Church Music, frequently for this purpose attending Diocesan Conferences, Choir Festivals, and other gatherings of the clergy up and down the country, and thus helping to bring about the much-needed reforms.

His work as a Hymnologist having begun thus 20 years later, in 1868, he was approached by another enthusiast, the Rev. Thomas Darling, at one time vicar of Thanington (a part of Canterbury), who had compiled a collection of hymns entitled '*Hymns for the Church of England*', and who was looking for a Musical Editor. Steggall, who in 1861 had witnessed the first appearance of '*Hymns Ancient and Modern*', felt that this latter Collection (*A & M*) contained what he thought to be too many tunes of a pretty nature, the weakness lying in their harmonization. As Editor of '*Hymns for the Church of England-with Proper Tunes*' he found his chief model in the Genevan Psalter. The book included his own CHRISTCHURCH, which made its first appearance here, being set to 'Sweet place, sweet place alone', the original Part 1 of Crossman's poem Jerusalem on high', which at first was the beginning of Part 2. It was hardly possible for the book to have had a wide circulation but, ten years later, in 1878, a second edition appeared which included Steggall's ST. KENELM, MIRFIELD, CHURCH MILITANT and ST. LAWRENCE, all of which found a place in the 1904 *A & M*. In parenthesis, Steggall joined the Committee of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1886. Speaking of this famous book, and its name, credit for which is generally given to Dr. W. H. Monk; by one of those coincidences which crop up from time to time, I have a copy of Horsley's *Psalm Tunes, Ancient and Modern*, published in 1828. Great minds think alike!

The year 1851 was an eventful one for Steggall who was then 25. He took his Doctor's degree at Cambridge University and, in accordance with the usual requirements, he wrote an 'exercise'. This was a setting of one of the Psalms, for Chorus, Solo voices, Organ and full Orchestra, and its performance was given at his expense in the Chapel of Trinity College. The great Professor Walmisley conducted and Steggall himself played the Organ. No Soprano soloist being available in Cambridge, a boy of 11 was sent from St. Paul's Cathedral in London to sing: his name was John Stainer. Soon after this Steggall gave Stainer lessons in Organ, Harmony and Counterpart, and a strong friendship sprang up between the two. Thirty seven years later, in 1888, Steggall wrote an Evening Service, with Orchestral accompaniment, for the Dedication Festival of the Sons of the Clergy and Sir John Stainer conducted it.

Among the changes that Steggall met with in his early days as an Organist none perhaps was so complete as that brought about by the introduction into England of the Organ Pedals, roughly between 1830 and 1840. In this we were centuries behind the German Organs. When Mendelssohn was in London in 1846 there were only two or three Organs upon which Bach's Fugues could be played. The Pedal Organ, as at first it was called, made new and very considerable demands upon the player. It was, as it were, a new instrument. Some well-known Organists declined to have anything to do with it. At the Great Exhibition of 1851 when Sir George Smart, Organist of the Chapel Royal, St. James and, by the way, composer of 'Wiltshire', was invited to play one of the new Pedal Organs, he refused, saying, "never through the changing scenes of life had he been asked to play on a gridiron." Dr. Gauntlett, on the contrary, was known as the 'Pedal Organist'. Steggall not only conquered the new technique but he helped others to do so. He published an 'Instruction Book for the Organ' which had a large sale. It was mainly concerned with the Pedals. In spite of all this the development of the Organ was slow, and it is surprising to hear that as late as 1884 the Organ in Canterbury Cathedral had only one octave of pedals, and a Swell Organ having Tenor C as its lowest note. It is pleasant to record, however, that, two years later, in 1886, Canterbury was the first English Cathedral to install an Organ with electric action.

In his long life Steggall held only three organ appointments. When he was 22, in 1848, he became Organist at Christ Chapel, Maida Vale, one of the best attended Churches in London. The Rev. Daniel Moore, the Vicar, a popular preacher, attracted 2,000 people each Sunday. I believe the Liturgy was chiefly said, not sung, but the Church was famed for its hymn singing. In 1855, when he was 29, he became first Organist of Christ Church, Lancaster Gate, a Church with a very fashionable

congregation. And at 38, in 1884, he was appointed Organist of Lincoln's Inn Chapel, where they held a Cathedral type of Service and the Choir consisted of 6 men and 12 boys.

One day in October 1849 Sterndale Bennett found Steggall at the Academy and asked him to lunch. He wanted to show him something which he had brought from Germany. It was, he said, a big choral work by J. S. Bach. Steggall replied that he knew Bach's Clavier and Organ music but didn't know he had written any choral works. To this Bennett responded, "My dear fellow, he's written cartloads; I want to do some in London." On arrival at his house, Bennett took from a drawer a large volume. It was the German edition of the *St. Matthew Passion*. They set to work, a Bach Society was formed with Steggall as Hon. Secretary and the Committee including Goss, Cooper, Horsley and Hullah. The first rehearsal, or 'trial', as they then called it, took place on March 21st, 1850. The name of Bach was so little known in England that no one seemed to know for certain how to pronounce it—Bake, Back. Bash, Bartch, all were used in turn. The first lady member of the Society was Miss Helen Francis Harrington Johnstone. She was at that time studying under both Bennett and Steggall. She was quite young, but curiosities of dress and rather thick glasses made her rather a conspicuous figure. Steggall was asked if she was Mrs. Bach? She knew some German, and took up a more advanced course of study, and actually made the first English version of the words of the St. Matthew, beginning with the Chorales, which were published separately. At first the Chorus numbered only 35-4 ladies and 31 men. But Thomas Helmore brought some boys from the Chapel Royal, and they made up for the lack of Sopranos. The first performance in England of the '*St. Matthew Passion*' took place under Bennett's direction on April 6th 1854 with a Chorus of 300 voices. The Prince Consort was present. A contemporary report of the performance says. ''Even at the first hearing much of the music was greeted with loud bursts of applause and encores-out of place, perhaps, but at any rate encouraging." Only a week or so ago, turning over the pages of Bennett's edition of the *St. Matthew Passion* and comparing it with one of the most recent editions, that of Elgar and Atkins, I was surprised to find Miss Johnstone's words still in use. Whole phrases and sentences are hers.

At the risk of leaving Steggall just for a moment, I must remind you that as a Hymn Society we owe a special debt to Bennett. Miss Winkworth had published *Lyra Germanica*, two volumes of her translations of the German hymns into English had appeared, and Bennett was invited to undertake a musical edition of these. He started work upon it with the idea of confining the music to the chorales of Bach. But soon he was joined by Otto Goldschmidt, a great authority on the subject, and other German Chorales, the best that could be found, were incorporated and, in 1863, *The Chorale Book for England* appeared—a book worthy of deep study. I will content myself with saying that we owe to it a tune which has become a great favourite in England, and which is usually sung to 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty.'

A list of Steggall's Organ students would be a very long one and many well-known names would be found in it. From a Hymn Society point of view, Barnby would be the most interesting. I think that Steggall himself would have placed George Cunningham in the first place. He had previously been a 'star pupil' of Josiah Booth, whose name will be familiar to our Congregational friends. In after years I found myself at the Midland Institute in Birmingham, and then Cunningham became Organist of the Town Hall, literally next door to me. I did my best to prevent George from going to Birmingham. In other words I competed against him for the post. Happily I was unsuccessful, he insisted on going. After his opening Recital, five of us met in Sir Granville Bantock's room in the Institute, and found to our surprise and pleasure that we all had been in Steggall's class at different times, including Bantock.

When Thomas Attwood Walmisley, Professor of Music in the University of Cambridge died, in 1856, the Vice Chancellor immediately found himself, in his own words, "perfectly over-whelmed with

applications" for the post, and it was announced that the choice should be made by open poll of the Senate. Bennett had allowed his name to be added to the list of Candidates, and his wife spent a month in correspondence with the electors, many of whom lived not in Cambridge but in various parts of the country. By noon on the Election Day Bennett headed the list easily but his friends were anxious lest the London train should bring a large number of supporters for his rivals, Elvey and Hullah. I quote from Bennett's Biography, written by his son—"A rush was made to the 'Bull Hotel' to meet the omnibuses from the railway station. Only one drew up, and the Bennett party were greatly relieved to see, as its sole occupant, the somewhat diminutive Charles Steggall, who had come up in the hope of being among the first to congratulate his master." The choirboy of King's had become the University Professor. It is difficult to believe that during the first twelve or thirteen years Bennett held the Professorship there was no stipend attached to it. He became Sir William in 1871. Bennett's life was not to be a long one. He died February 1st 1875, in his 58th year, and was buried in Westminster Abbey, in the North Choir Aisle, quite close to the graves of Blow, Purcell and Croft. (Near that spot Stanford and Vaughan Williams have since been laid.) Steggall was one of those who shared the duties at the Organ. A sad task for him. Soon after, the Rev. Thomas Darling of Thanington wrote to ''The Guardian" concerning Bennett—"It was his wont to finish his week's labour by giving a free lesson to three girls from the Clergy Orphan School, the house which lay hard by his own dwelling-place in St John's Wood. The lesson thus given, on Saturday January 23rd, proved to be the last act in his vocation and ministry."

Steggall took a leading part in the founding of the Royal College of Organists, and delivered the inaugural Lecture at Freemason's Hall on October 18th 1864, when he was 38. He was one of the three first Examiners, the other two being E. J. Hopkins of the Temple and John Hullah of the Charterhouse. From the first the standard was fairly high as, out of seven Candidates, only two passed. That the standard was well maintained afterwards is shown by the fact that in 1897 I was lucky enough to be one of only 27 who passed out of 156. In 1870 the three Examiners were Steggall, Hullah and A. Sullivan, Esq. At first sight the last name may seem strange to us and we may ask, Who's that? What is he doing here? Good gracious! You don't mean Gilbert and Sullivan? Yes, the very same man. Had he not already been Organist of two well-known London Churches—St. Michael's, Chester Square, and St. Peter's, Cranleigh Gardens? Had he not been Musical Editor of '*Church Hymns*'? Moreover, was he not about to compose a song (and make a lot of money by it), descriptive of one of the Candidates whom he was examining in Transposition that day? How did the words begin?

Seated one day at the organ,
I was weary and ill at ease,
And my fingers wandered idly
Into unrelated keys.

The words are slightly different when the song was published but, in any case, there must have been many a Lost Chord that day!

Some consideration needs to be given to Steggall's compositions. He wrote, or at any rate published very little for the Organ, although in his early days he made a considerable number of arrangements for the organ of other musicians' compositions. He arranged numbers from Mendelssohn's 'Elijah' which, though they are never used today, at that time, when the pedals were 'new-comers', these would constitute Studies for the use of the feet. His arrangement of Sterndale Bennett's 'Barcarolle', from his 4th Pianoforte Concerto, though rarely heard now, was at one time much in use at Organ Recitals. He wrote Anthems and Services, and upwards of 100 Hymn Tunes. Of the Anthems we need only mention the two best known, 'God came from Teman', and 'The Holy One from Mount Paran', Though at one time this was frequently found in Cathedral Service lists, it has not survived—

though I have come across a lot of people who found it a "jolly one to sing". The trouble was that no one understood what the words meant, and it must be admitted that the music did little to explain them. I once asked Steggall the meaning of 'God came from Teman'. He smiled, and looked at me over his glasses, and said 'Well, I did know'. His setting of 'Remember now thy Creator', however, must be placed in a different category. Here words and music are closely allied and the Anthem, to my mind has one really moving moment, and that is in its ending. When the chorus of frustration and despair—"All is vanity, saith the preacher, all is vanity"—has died away, a boy's solo voice is heard singing, for the last time, 'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth', and there is not even a chord to follow. To me at all events, who have had so much to do with boys' voices, this is not only pathetic, but surely an almost unique feature—"Like silver lamps in a distant shrine." When we come to his Hymn Tunes our minds naturally turn to his best-known, and probably his finest, CHRISTCHURCH (the name of his Church in Lancaster Gate). I do not think I can recall any comparatively modern tune that has suffered more modifications in the hands of Editors. Its principal feature, surely, is the long gathering-note at the beginning of each line. In 1872 Barnby shortened them, in *The Hymnary*; in 1874 Sullivan not only shortened them but, in addition, doubled the length of the final cadence and, (*Et tu, Brute*) the 1904 *A. & M.* shortened them. This latter, I cannot but think must have been done in spite of him. I cannot imagine that he would have suggested it but, as an old man, he might not have been able to resist it. In the 1906 *English Hymnal* there is a pause mark at the end of line 6 "when shall I be"—which, to my mind, encourages the taking of breath in the wrong place. It is with pleasure that I see the tune in its original form in the latest *A. & M.*, and in *Congregational Praise*. In the latter book the tune is used for three hymns, in one of them it is effectively transposed up a tone, to suit strong words. In connection with this tune I remember Steggall telling us that on a recent holiday he had attended a Church when his tune CHRISTCHURCH was sung, but where the Organist had persisted in supplying his own harmonies to the unison line in every verse. Steggall said, "I did not return his call."

Steggall's work for *Hymns Ancient and Modern* went on for nearly the rest of his life. We very often saw in his hands a large volume interleaved with manuscript paper, which he told us had to do with a new edition of *A. & M*, That edition made its appearance in 1904, with what result we all know. Any conclusion that I might be tempted to draw from the fact that he died in the next year, 1905, would be pure conjecture. Those are the facts, and there I leave them.

In his inaugural address at the launching of the Royal College of Organists, to which I have already referred, he is officially reported as having said, 'I hope for the time when the name of "Organist" shall be suggestive of all that is Christianly, of all that is scholarly, all that is gentlemanly'. We can truly say of him that he was, himself, a Christian, a scholar, and a gentleman. Among writers on Church Music there is none whose praise I should value more highly than that of the great Bishop Frere. I quote from his invaluable Introduction to the Historical Edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, '… the older writers of the period kept to the traditional, strong and masculine style; it is evident in Goss, in Elvey, in Steggall, in S. S. Wesley to the end. The third of these deserves a special mention here because of his valuable services to this Collection; but apart from that, his tunes may be taken as models of sobriety and melody, and he has an honoured name which will abide.'

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