

Book Review

Sir Henry Wood Champion of Bach's Music by Hannah French

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This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sir Henry Wood, co-founder with Robert Newman of The Proms. He was a towering and indomitable musical figure in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to whom we owe much, the Proms not only a legacy, but one that has continued to inspire an annual contemporary celebration of his musical priorities that have equal relevance today.

Wood saw himself chiefly as an educator and it is in this spirit that he approached his work, whether as an arranger, conductor or concert planner. However, little is known about his devotion to Bach's music and his deeply held wish to make it better known here. That is... until now. The timely publication of Hannah French's well documented, researched and carefully compiled account removes all doubts as to Wood's commitment. The five parts/chapters that chart Wood's journey with Bach are fairly comprehensive recalling his role in the English Bach revival, his programming, approach to interpretation and his influence. These are complemented by detailed footnotes, tables, bibliography and no less than nine very interesting appendices. So, for readers who enjoy books about British musical history that set in context and address curiosities, this book hits the spot. For me, it is the numerous illustration plates that show Wood's markings, his arrangements and realisations that are the most revealing, for he was known for his meticulous attention to detail.

The late 18th and early 19th century English Bach revival was certainly hesitant, even reluctant. Way back in Sir Henry Wood's time, and even further, it was altogether a different environment. We owe much to him and others for breaking the barriers of prejudice even if they had to go to some lengths in musical terms to achieve success. Continuing the revival, the seeds of which were sown as early as 1770, Samuel Wesley's 1809 première here of Bach's motet "*Jesu, meine Freude*" BWV 227 was originally sung in Latin because German was such a hard language; Sterndale Bennett's English première of the St Matthew Passion, having studied Mendelssohn's German score, was not given until 1854. It was performed in English probably because to have sung the work in German could have jarred with how the country thought of itself in the expansive Victorian Britain of the mid-19th century. Its German-born and Lutheran educated Prince Consort was regarded with some scepticism too. These and copious other examples of Bach performances, especially in the latter half of 19th and early 20th century Britain also reveal the licence that was often taken with Bach's music in order to please listeners and participants – even improve it!

The book reveals that, while British audiences were already familiar with some of Bach's repertoire up to the 1890s and treated it with reverence, its true extent and greatness were yet to be fully known and fully appreciated. Wood's educating zeal led him to perform, for example, single movements of unknown vocal works especially from the cantatas, interestingly choosing rarities that would still take some marketing today. We discover that Wood referred to these rarities as 'novelties' to entice audiences to give the music a chance. Close examination of Proms programmes in WW1 are a fascinating glimpse into how the sensitivities (or as Robert Newman referred to as "the passions of the hour") were addressed without consigning German music to the shelves for the duration amidst considerable anti-German sentiment in the country. Wood's programmes would often include say a recitative and aria from the St. Matthew Passion for example or his edition of a Brandenburg or an arrangement. Movements, as opposed to whole Bach works, were incorporated in wide-ranging programmes that we would probably regard today as an indigestible mix of music. This approach extended beyond the war years, with vastly increased orchestral forces often employed in Bach works, expediently, that in effect moved away from the original in scale and approach by today's standards – fodder for the reaction to this that occupied later generations of Bach specialists and scholars including the present writer's husband.

It is so easy to view Bach's music solely through today's lens and how we perform it now. The gargantuan, re-orchestrated, over-edited presentations of over a century ago, including those by Wood himself, have given way to small-scale accounts that enhance modern Bach scholarship. These have removed all semblance of 19th century performance practice, corrected the notation and word underlay, performing the music in the original language and therefore removing the need to accommodate diphthongs in English translations for example. This 'reaction' to Wood's approach has given audiences the chance to hear the music played in period style and on instruments with which Bach would have been familiar; a new sound world for us, but home territory for the composer.

Bach scholarship and performance has marched on since. Sir Henry Wood has acted as catalyst among his contemporaries, like Whittaker and Kennedy Scott, for a deeper exploration of the composer's music; in many ways that is his true legacy. Wood's was influenced by his own musical enthusiasms and the mood of his day, even the social and political. Giving due credit to those who have gone before often jars with those who come after, simply because it does not suit the self-marketing ethos of the day. Here in this excellent and very readable book, due credit is given generously to Sir Henry Wood and his championing of Bach's music pre-WW1 to 1944 (his death), one among many who equally have played their part in bringing Bach's life-enhancing music into the lives of countless people, yesterday, today... and hopefully tomorrow.

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