

Prince Albert and the reception of the chorale in England

This Report revisits the path of the Reception of the chorale harmonisations of Johann Sebastian Bach into British musical life, particularly suggesting that royal influence in the period of Albert, Prince Consort, (r.1840 – 1861), was a significant and underappreciated factor in the introduction of chorales generally to hymnology in Great Britain, and influenced the reception in particular of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Reception of the Chorale into hymnody in England coincides in time with the later period of Prince Albert's life and especially, as we shall see, his last days and death. The turning point in achieving widespread adoption and appreciation of chorales lies in the mass-circulation 'Hymns Ancient and Modern', in which chorales were set with music in 1861. The precursor was the publication of chorale texts in the specialist publication *Lyra Germanica* of 1855¹. In 1862 *Lyra Germanica* was reissued as the 'Chorale Book for England,' with adapted texts and musical settings. In the preface Catherine Winkworth sets out a conscious desire to embrace the musical language of Germany:

'where the country is so nearly akin to our own, may we feel that it is at once our privilege and our duty to appropriate all that she can bestow on us, and to hope that her gifts will find a welcome and a home here'.²

To appreciate the eventual cultural impact of this reception we need to begin at the end: by 1906³ the next derivative, the 'English Hymnal' contained 22 settings by Bach, outstripping any other composer.⁴ The Passiontide Chorale, 'O Sacred Head Sore Wounded'⁵ in particular, became a staple of Holy Week observance in the English (and Scottish) churches, a moment when a specifically Lutheran text and melody form the focus of worship. This cultural transfer occurred in the space of under a century, before which period the chorale as a musical form had been almost unknown.

How did the Victorian court influence this development?

The seventh Bach Network UK dialogue meeting gave poignancy to this question. Our venue, Madingley Hall, Cambridge, is closely associated with the last days of Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha⁶, spouse of Queen Victoria. On 25 November 1861 he came there –then his eldest son's student

¹ Translations by Catherine Winkworth; edition with music, 1862; translated by Winkworth; compiled and edited by William Sterndale Bennet and Otto Goldschmidt

² Foreword to *The Chorale Book for England*, Catherine Winkworth, September 1862

³ *English Hymnal*, 1906, edited by Percy Dearmer and R. Vaughan Williams

⁴ Handel, for example has only 4; the nearest competition is Orlando Gibbons at 16

⁵ "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden", words within *Befiehl du deine Wege*; melody by Hassler and words by Paul Gerhardt based on the Latin, *Salve caput cruentatem*.

⁶ b.1819 d.1861

residence- to admonish the selfsame heir to the throne, Prince Albert Edward⁷, for initiating an amorous scandal known as the Nellie Clifden affair. Walking in the grounds and beyond, the pair became lost and returned late, drenched.

The already-wearied father, Prince Albert, subsided fast under typhoid-like symptoms⁸. The failing patient asked on 8th December for music – ‘a fine chorale at a distance’ and a piano having been placed in the adjoining room, Princess Alice⁹ played on its some of Luther’s hymns...¹⁰ Of these we know from Queen Victoria’s own journals that one was *Ein Feste Burg*.

Chorales also associated to happier days. In 1842, only two years after marriage to the young Queen Victoria, Albert was the dedicatee of *Twelve Corales* (sic) published by the ‘Royal and Noble’ directors of the Concerts of Ancient Music.¹¹ Albert was the ‘Royal’ director, and was expected to arrange a concert each year. The lavish publication hints also at the participation of the royal purse. Herein are compositions by *Martin Luther, Schop, Eccard, Graun, Oslander, Homilius and Sebastian Bach*- arranged by the conductor, Sir Henry Bishop. The Bach harmonisation is of *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*¹² (which was heard in concert by Queen Victoria) whereas that of *Ein Feste Burg* is attributed to Luther, the superscription emphatically stating ‘composed at Cobourg (sic) A.D. 1530’. At time of writing this is an identifiable collection of chorales that probably (in view of Albert’s association) was in the Royal household, but others may well at some point have existed.¹³

The preceding art in terms of chorale reception in England consists of small circulation collections aimed at a connoisseur market¹⁴. As noted above, the breakthrough comes around the point of Prince Albert’s death in 1861, with the publication of an eclectic collection of hymns in which chorales features prominently, ‘Hymns Ancient and Modern.’¹⁵ In the following 150 years the work has sold 170 million copies and thus acted as a vehicle for the dissemination in the English-speaking world of chorales in general, and harmonisations by Bach in particular.

⁷ Succeeded as King Edward VII (b.1901 d.1910)

⁸ Now thought to be the late stages of ulcerative colitis (Paulley 1993) or Crohn’s disease, a syndrome not described in medical literature till 1913. (Helen Rappaport, ‘Magnificent Obsession...,’ publ. Windmill 2011, p.256)

⁹ 1843-1878; m. Ludwig IV, Grand Duke of Hesse and by Rhine (b.1837 d.1892)

¹⁰ I am grateful to Miss Pamela Clark, Senior Archivist, Royal archives, for confirming the facts in the quoted account, taken from Lytton Strachey’s ‘Queen Victoria’ (1921)

¹¹ I thank Yo Tomita for this observation and a fair copy

¹² Tr. ‘Sleepers wake, a voice is calling’

¹³ The relevant collections of the British Library and the Royal Archive at Windsor were consulted

¹⁴ See “The English Bach Awakening” (ed. Kassler) covering 1750-1850 in which keyboard settings and fugal writing predominate. Attributions of hymn settings to J S Bach occur in 1819 (Melrose), 1820 (?) (Holmyard), 1822 (?), Borthwick (1855) (Smith). German Chorales are also published by Cox (1841), von Bunsen (1833/1846), culminating in ‘The Chorale Book for England’ (Winkworth, 1855).

¹⁵ Six texts come from Winkworth; 8 settings attributed to J S Bach; 35 further chorales ‘German’ out of 273 entries.

Significance of chorales for Prince Albert and Queen Victoria

Chorales sung by children accompanied Prince Albert as he left Gotha in his coach for his new role as an 'uncrowned King' in 1840. It would be conceivable that they were purely a matter for private devotion, as was the case at his deathbed. However, fresh evidence suggests that both he and Queen Victoria were proselytes for the Chorale, and interested in gaining a wider audience for this musical form. In this question of cultural influence a key influence was Felix Mendelssohn.

On the morning of 14th June 1842 Mendelssohn acted as messenger for Albert's cousin, Frederick William IV, King of Prussia¹⁶. He was then invited the following evening to meet Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.¹⁷ Further *rendezvous* occurred on 9 July 1842, 30 May 1844 and 1st May 1847, with a royal visit to the second performance of *Elijah*¹⁸ on 23 April 1847.

Mendelssohn is known to have played a Prelude and Fugue on the Buckingham Palace organ and an improvisation on *B A C H*. The royal couple were also introduced to Mendelssohn's *Paulus*¹⁹ and attended a performance. It is a work notably referential to the musical styles of Bach, especially in its chorale settings.

Prince Albert also himself played, at the 9 July 1842 Palace meeting, a chorale for Mendelssohn, who was diplomatically complementary in return. We have two harmonisations of (wholly original) chorales composed by Albert which have survived and were published; they found their way into hymnals in the nineteenth century.²⁰ The second is a hymn-like setting of the well-known words, 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!'²¹ which was overshadowed by Mendelssohn's setting of the same. The first:

'In life's gay morn, ere sprightly youth
By vice and folly is enslaved
May thy maker's glorious name
Be on thy infant mind engraved.'

¹⁶ b.1795 d.1861; r. 1840-1861.

¹⁷ 'For all their exalted station, they were quite nervous!' (In Kupferberg, 'The Mendelssohns: three generations of Genius', publ. Scribner 1972)

¹⁸ Op.70

¹⁹ In English, *St Paul*; Op. 36

²⁰ Under the names 'Coburg' and 'Gotha'. I am grateful to Robin Leaver for this information. They are included in 'The Collected Compositions of His Royal Highness The Prince Consort', ed. Cusins, publ. Metzler (date unknown)

²¹ Words by Charles Wesley/George Whitfield, usual tune appropriated from Mendelssohn's *Festgesang* (WoO9) by William Cumming

...was a staple of Court christenings²² but the words, absurd to modern ears, were already an impediment to other uses. Undaunted, Victoria found new texts for the wedding of her heir, Prince Albert Edward, to Princess Alexandra of Denmark²³ in 1863, and for the review of her Scottish troops at Holyroodhouse in 1876.

The harmonisation lacks Bachian features, such as modulation to unexpected keys or dynamic inner parts, and displays a weak inverted cadence at the end of the first line. We are forced to agree with the witty essay on Albert's entire musical output, penned by the young Nicholas Temperley²⁴:

'It must be confessed that not one of these compositions is of the slightest musical interest. If they had not been by a Prince.....they would have been decently forgotten after his death. In fact, they were widely performed..'

Albert's own chorales were not, however, of great impact in the reception of this form, and are not performed in modern times. It is in his interactions with the musical circle who favoured chorales as contributing to a dignified form of worship, which is the basis of his influence.

The funeral of the Duke of Wellington, 1852

It is evident that Albert played a pivotal role in instigating the use of the chorale at the most ostentatious State funeral ever devised in the United Kingdom, that of the victor of the battle of Waterloo, Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington.²⁵

The service in question, on 18 October 1852, occurred in London three months after his death and paradoxically opened an opportunity, in an Anglican setting where hymns were then scarcely permitted (as distinct from the use of the psalter and anthems in "quires and places where they sing"). The Prayer Book service had already been pronounced over the famous soldier's corpse; so an *ad hoc* service, but of premeditated magnificence, had to be concocted for the 14,000 persons of quality packed into St. Paul's Cathedral.

It is clear from the Journals of Queen Victoria that the court, through Albert, dominated the organisational innovations.²⁶ In particular, an enormous (albeit hideous) funeral car was hurriedly constructed, one of the principal designers

²² Christening: as early as 29 June 1850, first performed for the baptism of Prince Arthur. On March 10th 1863: Albert's chorale set to new words by Oliphant; and sung by the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, wife of the chorale enthusiast Otto Goldschmidt, and a friend of Catherine Winkworth q.v.

²³ Later Queen Alexandra (1844-1925); dedicatee of Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*

²⁴ 'The Prince Consort, Champion of Music'; *Musical Times*, Vol 102, No. 1426 (Dec 1861), published on the centenary of Albert's death.

²⁵ b.1769 d.1852

²⁶ 'Dearest Albert had chosen all the music and taken, as he did with the whole, great trouble about it'. Queen Victoria's Journals, Thursday 18th November 1852

being the exiled Saxon architect, Gottfried Semper.²⁷ Victoria, by court convention, did not attend the funeral but inspected the Cathedral and particularly praised the funeral car, which was thought execrable by the literati of the day.²⁸ More important in terms of cultural impact, however, was the music.

'The Garter King of Arms recited the Duke's title and honours, then took the broken staff from the controller of his household and cast it into the vault. As he did so, the choir sang the chorale 'Sleepers awake!' [*Wachet auf, Ruft uns die Stimme*] as harmonised in Mendelssohn's Oratorio, 'St Paul'. A military band had earlier played the same oratorio's chorale, *Dir, Herr, will ich mich ergeben*.'²⁹

Prince Albert and the Bach Society circle

Could there have been other influencers behind this innovation of chorales at a State occasion? My conclusion is that Albert would have been the primary driving force since a number of other possibilities among chorale sympathisers can be discounted.

The Prussian Ambassador ³⁰, and a noted chorale enthusiast Baron Bunsen, was an intimate of the royal family; but his own memoirs, praising the Anglican music at the Wellington funeral, do not mention the Mendelssohn settings.³¹ Saxony at this date had no ambassador in London.³²

William Sterndale Bennett ³³, editor of the 'Chorale Book for England' (1862), was plausibly an influencer of the Prince. But, since Sir John Goss was then organist of St Paul's Cathedral, it remains open as to whether one or other was consulted. The reasons to consider Sterndale Bennett a central figure in reception of Bach's choral music come later.

²⁷ Semper (b. 1803 d.1879) was designer of the eponymous Opera House in 1841, but took part (cf. Richard Wagner) in the 1849 May Uprising in Dresden. He was granted amnesty in 1862.

²⁸ Such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Charles Dickens. The vehicle is now at Stratfield Saye, Hampshire, England.

²⁹ Chorale tr. 'Unto you, O Lord, I yield up my soul'. This quotation is from 'Lyra Germanica: German Sacred Music in Mid-Victorian England' by Michael Ledger-Lomas; in *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, bd. 29 2007 nr. 2. The same article points out that the latter chorale was also played at Prince Albert's temporary interment in St George's Chapel, Windsor, in December 1861.

³⁰ Christian Carl Josias, Baron von Bunsen 1791-1860; scholar and diplomat. Author of *Allgemeines evangelisches Gesang- und Gebetbuch zum Kirchen- und Hausgebrauch* Hamburg, 1846. Collaborator with Winkworth q.v.

³¹ 'A Memory of Baron Bunsen', by F W Bunsen, publ. 1868

³² Count Charles Frederick Vitzthum von Eckstädt (b.1819 d.1895) was not appointed by the King of Saxony till June 1853. He loathed Bunsen, probably for denominational reasons, and expressed this view in undiplomatic terms: "an unfortunate choice" "his artistic dilettantism was a harmless hobby but his engagement as statesman was a misfortune" "wanting in quality" "a fiasco"! (Reminiscences., Vol 2., reprint by General Books LLC (2012), p.50 et seq.

³³ William Sterndale Bennett (b.1816 d.1875); friend of Mendelssohn and Schumann; Professor of Music at Cambridge 1856-1866. Attended first performance of *Paulus*. Founding President of the Bach Society in 1846.

Sterndale Bennett conducted the first English performance of the St Matthew Passion (BWV 244) on 6 April 1854. He met Prince Albert on five musical occasions; and of most interest in a court context is the private performance on Saturday 23rd April 1859 for Queen Victoria herself, in St George's Hall at Windsor Castle. Here is the record in her journal for that day:

'We dined à 4 with...and after dinner...went into St. George's Hall where a small company was assembled and Bach's Passion Music was performed with full orchestra. The words were according to the Gospel of St. Matthew. The music consists of recitatives with accompaniment & very fine Chorales. Though so fine, it was a little fatiguing to listen to, there being so much sameness.'

In assessing this reaction two matters are of note; firstly, Queen Victoria's own tastes were generally far from the Baroque; in one of her Journal entries, she calls Handel 'tiresome'. Temperley says,

'At two concerts given by her at Buckingham Palace in 1839, every single item on the programme was a vocal extract from an Italian opera, with a heavy preponderance of Rossini and Donizetti.'

Secondly, and germane to the influence of the court, Victoria nevertheless adored chorales and chooses, after Albert's death, Johann Sebastian Bach's setting of *Liebster Jesu* to be performed at a christening³⁴, alongside Albert's own composition referred to earlier. This affection derives from both her pious German mother,³⁵ and her close governess, Baroness Lehzen, who was the daughter of a Lutheran pastor.³⁶

Queen Victoria and the chorale

In Queen Victoria's journals, now available via digitisation carried out in connection with the Diamond Jubilee of HM Queen Elizabeth II in 2012³⁷, we can find 52 references to chorales.

'Nothing is more truly devotional and raises mind and hearts so much as the singing of a fine chorale, in which the whole congregation joins' is a typical quote, in this case for Christmas Day, 25th December 1845. At Coburg she is moved by children singing *Ein Feste Burg* outside her window as they go to school; after Albert's death she is 'moved to tears' by hearing Princess Alice

³⁴ Christening 21 May 1867 at Windsor of Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein, a favourite grandson (b.1867 d.1900). Queen Victoria was predeceased by three children, three grandchildren and two sons-in-law. Thus there was scope for funeral arranging, which was reputed to be to her liking

³⁵ Victoire Marie Louise of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, 1786-1861

³⁶ Louise Lehzen, Baroness in Hanover; 1784-1870

³⁷ www.queenvictoriasjournals.org (accessed 21 June 2015)

play them. As late as 1896 she records, in German, the playing of *Jesu, meine Zuversicht* at the funeral of Prince Henry of Battenberg.³⁸

Prior to Albert's death, chorales were frequently employed at court: when Queen Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent, died in March 1851, *Nun freuet euch*, was sung to English words (by Thomas Cotterill). Albert was the principal mourner; 'his eyes filled with tears when Mr Tolley, the soloist in the Chapel choir, came to the words in Martin Luther's hymn, *The trumpet sounds, the graves restore/The dead that they contained before*.'³⁹

The exact choice of music at Court events was habitually reported in the leading newspapers, thus ensuring national curiosity in the utilisation of chorales at christenings, weddings and funerals.⁴⁰ For Albert's own demise, the choice was *Wann mein stündlein vorhanden ist*⁴¹, sung in translation by the choir, as well as the solo setting of *Nun Freuet euch* which had been heard in St George's Chapel only some nine months previously. These had been requested by Victoria who, in accordance with custom, did not attend the obsequies herself. It was as well; the choir and preacher were choked with grief and men openly wept as this widely admired Prince went to his untimely grave. But the chorale was now an established part of court ritual, and lived on under the encouragement of Queen Victoria herself.

Reception of Chorales generally: or of Bach chorales specifically?

Both of these simple chorale settings from Albert's funeral were prominently marketed by the Organist of St George's Chapel, Windsor, Dr George J. Elvey.⁴² Furthermore, a first edition of Prince Albert's own chorales was published in 1866 by the Oxford clergyman, Revd. Peter Maurice D.D., translated 'to English, Welsh, Gaelic, Irish and German'.⁴³ He had asked royal permission to transpose down the first, 'In life's gay morn' for congregational use, prior to the Prince's death. His agenda is Protestant and Evangelical, even though the Anglo-Catholic or High Church party of the Church of England were also enthusiasts for the devotional spirit of the chorale, allowing an escape from the endless appoggiaturas of non-conformist hymnody.

Immediately after Albert's death, however, debate starts to swirl around the question of what constitutes the best settings of German chorales for Church

³⁸ b.1858 d.1896; married to Princess Beatrice, youngest daughter of Queen Victoria.

³⁹ *Times*, 26 March 1861

⁴⁰ E.g. "The choir performed a chorale by Albert specially written for the occasion", *The Spectator*, 29 June 1850, report of the christening of Prince Arthur, later Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, 1850-1942

⁴¹ Text by Ludwig Rudolf Senfft von Pilsach, Provost of Naumburg, 1715; tr. "When my final hour is nigh"

⁴² *Musical Times*, March 1, 1862

⁴³ "Two Chorales....." British Library A659

use in England. Maurice notably prefers the simplicity of the Albert style of simple block harmonisation, to the congregation-challenging Bachian settings. Contrawise was the reaction of the extensive review of the 1863 *Chorale Book for England*:⁴⁴

'The chorales are, on the whole, presented here in a far more antiquarian form than that in which they are generally known...this seems to us a clear mistake.....No one who has fed upon the full rich chords and intellectual progressions of Handel, Purcell, Bach and Mendelssohn can feel any satisfaction in uttering the musical aspirations of religion in the archaic and immature forms of the sixteenth century. Still, no collection of purely German chorales, possessing any claim to be representative, has appeared before the present work'.⁴⁵

This post-Albert debate seems to have been decided in favour of Bachian harmonisations; for Sterndale Bennett himself, though editor of the 'Chorale Book for England', declares in a lecture at Cambridge in January 1871:

'The crude and chromatic harmonies which one now finds in church psalmody are but unsuccessful imitations of J S Bach who when he employed his harmonies wrote them for skilled vocalists, and not for the general congregation'.⁴⁶

Reception and Performance: how should Bach chorales be rendered?

Prince Albert, who was modest about his own compositions,⁴⁷ thus played an active part in raising musical appreciation at Court and introduced Johann Sebastian Bach's music to the Queen as well as a wider public. The standards at Windsor and Buckingham Palace rose and part of the legacy was the adoption in England of the chorale in general; and particularly settings by Bach. He touched and encouraged Bach circles at many points in his role as Prince Consort.

But were the chorales to be congregational, as Queen Victoria liked; or sung solo at funerals, or by choir and organ? Or even *a capella*, as perforce happened at the Frogmore Mausoleum where an annual commemoration of Prince Albert's death was held? The resolution of these issues remains open

⁴⁴ 'The Chorale Book for England'. Review 22 August 1863. 'The Hymns translated by Catherine Winkworth, the Tunes compiled and edited by William Sterndale Bennett and Otto Goldschmidt. Published Longmans'

⁴⁵ Author anonymous, perhaps Sir George Grove (1820-1900) who was a founder member of the Bach Society in 1849 (author's suggestion).

⁴⁶ *Lectures on Musical Life* by William Sterndale Bennett ed. Nicholas Temperley (Boydell 2006). I am grateful to William Sterndale Bennett's descendant, Barry Sterndale Bennett, for this and other observations

⁴⁷ "Persons in our position of life can never be distinguished artists...." Theodore Martin, *Life of the Prince Consort*, (London, 1875, Vol.4 p.15) (five volumes)

today: are Bach's settings musically compromised by inclusion in public hymnals?

Shortly after Victoria's own death in 1901 Ralph Vaughan Williams insisted on one element of a solution for these questions: for the singing of J S Bach's St Matthew Passion setting (verse 4) of the chorale superscribed as *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden...*⁴⁸

'This version should be sung by the CHOIR ALONE. This version..... should only be attempted by **good choirs**.'⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Tr., 'O Sacred Head sore Wounded'. This verse 'In Thy most bitter passion/my heart to share doth cry'

⁴⁹ English Hymnal, 1906 edn., No. 102