

SIR GEORGE DYSON



HIS LIFE AND MUSIC



PAUL SPICER

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Paul Spicer

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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Extracts from *Bach's Birthday*, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, *The Blacksmiths*, *Children's Suite after Walter de la Mare*, *A Fairy Madrigal*, *The Open Window*, *The Pedlar's Song*, *Praise*, *Psalm CVII Symphony and Overture*, *The Seekers*, *Siena*, *Sonata for Cello and Piano*, *St Paul's Voyage to Melita*, *Thanksgiving*, *Three Rhapsodies for String Quartet*, *Three Songs of Praise*, *Three Songs to Julia*, *A Wet Sheet and a Flowing Sea* and *Woodland Suite* by George Dyson are reproduced by permission of the Sir George Dyson Trust representing the Dyson Estate.

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Preface

George Dyson touched almost every sphere of musical life during his long, colourful career. He was one of the most outstanding musical educators of his time, working for many years in some of our greatest schools, helping to educate the nation through his regular radio broadcasts, and served as Director of the Royal College of Music. He was passionate about improving amateur music making throughout the country, founding the National Federation of Music Societies and becoming President of the Rural Schools Music Association. His important work with the Carnegie UK Trust, of which he eventually became Chairman, brought him into contact with politics at the highest level, and the evidence of his wide-ranging skills made him an obvious choice as a regular member of the BBC Brains Trust panel. But it is through his compositions that we, at this distance, can know and love George Dyson, who gave us a canon of works, great and small, to enjoy. It is the task of this book, as much as anything else, to bring this music alive to a new generation who are now becoming aware of the riches and variety of British music of this period.

I ended my biography of Herbert Howells with a quotation by Hugh Ottaway which I have used many times to illustrate what I regard as being one of the most clear-sighted comments about early twentieth-century British music; it applies equally to George Dyson: 'The strength of the music derives from its impeccable style, from the mode and quality of thought within the idiom. That's what tells in any work of art. Idioms come and go and history finds little to choose between them; the enduring factor is the quality of thought, which alone makes the idiom a living and vital thing.'¹ This states so clearly the imperative for integrity in stylistic matters separated from issues of musical language or fashion. Dyson was no original in the accepted sense of the word. He said so himself and there was no false modesty in the statement. But he was utterly true to his principles, entirely professional in his approach, and was actually more original in some elements of his work than he claimed. This is especially true in his use of secular and medieval subjects for a number of his major choral works, and his choice of Old Testament Biblical narratives without a sermonising moral in others. This was highly unusual at this time, especially for works destined for the Three Choirs Festivals.

The critics of the day all recognized the quality of his work, and, for a time, he was regarded as a major compositional voice. Fashion, however, is an irresistible drug and its gravitational pull is as strong as magnetic north. It was inevitable that a composer who steadfastly wrote with such classical models in evidence as Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Brahms, Respighi, Richard Strauss, Sibelius and a principal English model, Hubert Parry, would fall off his perch quicker than others who were more forward looking. It is notable how he resisted the Vaughan Williams revolution in general, leapfrogging that generation to take more note of Walton. He equally resisted Stravinsky, Prokofiev and all the other musical developments taking place throughout the world. In someone else this might be taken as insularity; with Dyson it was both a natural usage and a decision taken through deep and searching knowledge of all this new music which he could illustrate from memory at the piano. These feats of memory, and his prodigious knowledge were the stuff of legend throughout his life.

Dyson was not interested in posterity. He kept no diaries, letters or personal papers. He destroyed almost all his early manuscripts. He was an unsentimental, pragmatic and intelligent thinker. He was a brilliant economist, had an extraordinary head for finance and figures, and was forensic in his administrative capabilities. No wonder

¹ *Musical Opinion*, Nov. 1951, 81.

he was an obvious choice to succeed Sir High Allen as Director of the Royal College of Music in 1938. He had already been described numerous times as a 'genius' by some of the leading men of the day when applying for the post of Director of Music at Wellington College. He was, in short, a one off.

Being unique, however, carries with it the problems by which brilliant people are so often dogged. He was seen as tough, unforgiving, insensitive, and always 'right'. His reputation at the RCM was of creating a 'stainless steel' rather than a 'golden' age. The cartoon of him as treasurer of the Incorporated Society of Musicians at a time when it might have ceased to exist because of its parlous financial state shows him in a surgeon's gown wielding a knife (see plate 29). But he saved it. This is how he was so often seen. However, these outward signs hid, as they so often do, a multi-faceted and complex personality which the coming pages will try to unravel. Dyson has had a bad press from many quarters and I shall attempt to set this record straight, painting a picture of a man who, with all those faults, was a deeply feeling, humorous, caring and loving family man who, in the manner of the day, was not particularly demonstrative in his affections, but knew the importance of those things of lasting value. His correspondence with his son, Freeman, is rare partly for existing at all, but more because it shows how deeply he felt on personal issues, and how he wanted to share some of his most personal experiences with his son to help him in his own moments of emotional turmoil.

I came to Dyson through serendipity. Like all choristers I had sung his evening canticle settings in D and F and loved them. When, therefore, some years ago I was in Blackwell's Music Shop in Oxford and picked off the shelf a recording of his Violin Concerto I did so out of pure interest and with little sense of expectation. Imagine my amazement when I was swept, wholly unexpecting, into a remarkable world of which I had no inkling. I played this piece again and again and it became a 'Desert Island Disc' for me, so much did I love it. This, and the beautiful *Children's Suite after de la Mare* with which the Concerto was paired, made me search for all the Dyson I could find. I loved everything I heard, and realised that here was another composer, like Howells, to whom I was chemically attracted. It made me wonder yet again why certain composers attract us as they do, and why one composer will light the world up for me and may leave the next person indifferent.

An extremely positive recent development is that all music can now be appreciated for its own merits. People are no longer so interested in musical fashions except as historical phenomena. A piece of music can come from any time and any place and be listened to with an open mind. If it wins attention and pleases the listener it has succeeded. It will not simply be ignored because it belongs to one 'school' or another. This is real progress. Thus it is that Dyson can have his chance with a world of music lovers who twenty years ago might have swept away a composer who, if he can bring light and enjoyment to this listener, can certainly do it for many others.

Serendipity raised its head above the parapet again when, in the RCM library one day, I chanced to ask Peter Horton if he knew if anyone was writing a biography of George Dyson. He told me that the Dyson Trust was, at the moment, looking for someone to do just that. Thus it was that I threw my hat in the ring and was eventually chosen for this task. It has been a long process because a busy professional life goes on around it, but it has been immensely rewarding. The music has more than lasted the test of time. It has been a remarkable experience. I record my grateful thanks to the Trustees of the Sir George Dyson Trust for their unwavering support and for the financial contribution given in order to assist the publication of this book.

I want to thank Dyson's two children, Alice and Freeman, for being so supportive throughout. Until she moved to a retirement home in 2009, Alice lived in the house

in Winchester which the Dysons purchased for their retirement. Sadly, she died in 2013 before she could see the publication of this book which, without her help in loaning personal papers, photographs and information, and showing a prodigious memory when pushed for personal information which her father resolutely hid from view or destroyed, would have impoverished this biography irredeemably. Freeman, too, although living in the USA and continuing to have a prodigiously busy life as one of the world's most distinguished scientists, has been wonderfully helpful both on his regular trips to the UK, and by e-mail. He, too, has a remarkable memory and has been willing to share everything he can remember with me. It has been a privilege to know these two remarkable individuals.

Early on in this process I was fortunate to be awarded a major grant by the British Academy to take a sabbatical period to research and begin writing. I am immensely grateful to them for the opportunity this gave me, and to those referees who kindly supported me and believed in my ability to write this book. Others who have helped unstintingly have been Judith Dyson, Dyson's cousin, who added many personal recollections and with whom I spent a number of fascinating days in Halifax uncovering the 'Dyson trail'; Lewis Foreman, Administrator of the Dyson Trust, and an acknowledged expert on English music, has been a mine of information and always helpful in responding to many queries; Peter Horton in the RCM library, already mentioned, was wonderfully supportive in all my RCM researches which form such a major part of this narrative; Steve Fogleman, an American English Music enthusiast, came to stay in order to help me in the early stages and became a good friend; Philip Lancaster, another English Music expert, has always been on the other end of a phone or a quick e-mail exchange to use his encyclopaedic knowledge to help in the cause. Rolf Jordan, artist and writer, has constantly drip-fed information, articles and music he has found and has helped also, most essentially, with photographs. Jonathan Clinch has given valuable advice and been a forensic critic not afraid of telling an unpalatable truth, but thereby helping to strengthen the narrative significantly. Another constant supporter and contributor of valuable Dyson information to my pigeonhole at the Birmingham Conservatoire, is John Smith, Secretary of the Conservatoire Association, who became acquainted with the Dysons by delivering their newspapers as a boy. Dyson Trustees Sandrey Date and James Eggleston have contributed significantly and Peter and Margaret Enright of Halifax have been endlessly generous in providing hugely valuable local information as has Martin Gibbs in relation to the Atkey's house in Wimbledon. I am also very grateful to David and Dina Bartle for their kindness in sharing personal material about Dyson's involvement with the Bedloe family.

Last, and in some senses most of all, I want to thank Ray Siese who has collaborated in this venture by providing all the appendixes. His tireless work collating valuable information including the list of works, discography, texts used and other fascinating material, makes this book a useful point of quick reference as well as detailed biography. I am immensely grateful to him.

There are, inevitably, many other people who have helped along the way and I am grateful to them all. I hope that everyone who is fired by Dyson's music will now press for more performances, broadcasts, talks and recordings and help to bring alive, once again, a musical voice muted for far too long.

Paul Spicer
Lichfield 2013

*For Reinaldo de Santana Ribeiro
and in fond and grateful memory
of Alice Dyson (1920–2013)*



CHAPTER 1

‘A Veritable Muck-Midden’

If only your respected parent-in-law [Albert Sammons] would not have wasted so much time over such stuff as Sir G Dyson’s Concerto! (For God’s sake don’t repeat this to him, or if you do don’t say I said it.) But he has recently been playing it all over the place. ... Why? If it were Walton’s or the Bloch or Bartok I could understand it and applaud it ... but Dyson! – words fail me!!¹

E. J. Moeran wrote these blistering words to his friend Lionel Hill on 16 January 1945. Dyson’s general dismissal as a composer has been a common cry over the last fifty or sixty years. Very little of his music has held its place in the repertory. Of all his output only *The Canterbury Pilgrims* and the two sets of evening canticles in D and F for the Anglican liturgy of Choral Evensong are performed with any regularity. Thus it is important not only to record what was by any standards a remarkable life, but to rehabilitate Dyson’s reputation and stir the embers of public interest in a wide-ranging list of works which are lyrical, passionate and engaging. At the core of his output lie major choral and orchestral compositions, a dramatic symphony, an outstandingly beautiful violin concerto, two balancing concertos for string orchestra, a ravishing, intimate piano concerto and much more besides. Dyson was a complex and often difficult man, but his music and his active involvement with many important causes, both in and out of music, show the true core of his personality and the extent to which he was involved in changing the face of music performance and education in this country. His work touched the lives of millions in one way or another as these pages will reveal.

George’s birth

George Dyson (he wasn’t given a second name) was born in Halifax on 28 May 1883, the son of a foreman blacksmith who worked in one of the vast engineering plants which were such a feature of northern industrial towns. His mother worked in one of the other great Halifax trades, textiles, as a weaver. In 1915, according to the town’s historian, John A. Hargreaves, Halifax had a particularly broad base of industry and was, for a time, called ‘the town of 100 trades’,² which included ‘sixteen varieties of iron trades; ten varieties of the building trades, 899 registered workshops, the largest carpet (Crossleys) and toffee (Mackintosh) manufacturing firms in the world; and the leading producer of drilling and boring machinery’.³ Engineering vied with the textile industry, out of which it grew, to make the town one of the most important industrial communities in England.

The downside of all this heaving mass of industry was, of course, the human cost and the terrible pollution. As Hargreaves put it: ‘The density of the built environment, the inadequate sanitation, and the pervasive industrial pollution prompted the sanitary inspector and artist J. R. Smith to describe Halifax as “a veritable muck-midden”

¹ Lionel Hill, *Lonely Waters: The Diary of a Friendship with E. J. Moeran* (London: Thames, 1985), 41.

² John A. Hargreaves, *Halifax* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 118.

³ *Ibid.*, 121.

and Dickens to describe it “as horrible a place as ever I saw” in 1858.⁴ Hargreaves continues: ‘J. S. Fletcher, writing in 1912, recalled the ‘great canopy of dun-coloured smoke which seemed to hang night and day above the grey old town from Beacon Hill to the edge of Skircoat Moor.’⁵

All this was the young George Dyson’s inheritance. No wonder years later, in 1934, that his musical tribute to his father recalled his trade. This was *The Blacksmiths* for which Dyson used a remarkable anonymous alliterative middle English poem which begins:

Swart, smirched smiths, smattered with smoke,
Drive me to death with the din of their dents.
Such noise on nights heard men never;
Such clashing of cries and clattering of knocks.

Dyson’s father, John William Dyson, worked for Drakes Limited, a large engineering company whose works were in Shay Lane in the Ovenden district of Halifax. Drakes was a proud and internationally respected firm. They worked principally for the gas industry with coal carbonisation and steel structural work as the core of their business to which was added a huge brickworks.

John William’s working environment could so easily have become George’s later on. Peter Enright, a present-day native of Halifax, described the ‘local colours’ from his childhood as

Black (the colour of the buildings) and grey (smog and smoke from factories and coal fires). Of course the sun shone occasionally on Halifax, but here there seems to be a reversal of the normal processes of recall, in which the good things in life are remembered and the bad forgotten. Beacon Hill, it seemed, was barren and polluted beyond redemption, and when the first trees were planted in the early fifties, no-one gave them much hope of survival. But then came the Clean Air Act (1956) which, together with the decline in manufacturing, brought about a remarkable transformation.⁶

At the time of John William’s childhood (he was born in 1859) Halifax, according to T. J. Maslen in Watson’s *History and Antiquities of the Parish of Halifax*, was a ‘mass of little, miserable, narrow, ill-looking streets, jumbled together in chaotic confusion, as if they had all been in a sack, and emptied out together upon the ground’.⁷

As part of the general development of the town necessitated by the huge growth in its manufacturing industry, row upon row of mean back-to-back terraces of small houses were built to accommodate the working families. Tracing Dyson’s housing from his birth at his maternal grandparents’ house, 4 Schofield’s Court, off Crossley Terrace, neither of which exists today, to the time when he went to London as a student aged seventeen is something of a mystery tour. It is remarkable partly for the number of times the family moved in a short space of years. It is also a sobering reminder of the straitened conditions in which they lived.

Living conditions were basic. There was no hot running water. Usually there was a coal burner or, if lucky, a gas ring to heat a copper in the cellar to supply water for the laundry and to put in the bath (just a portable metal tub). Baking would have been

⁴ D. Taylor, ‘Annals of the Parish of Halifax’ (Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society, 1972), in Hargreaves, *Halifax*, 161.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Letter from Peter Enright to the author, 1 Nov. 2005.

⁷ John Watson, ‘History and Antiquities of the Parish of Halifax’ (1775), in Hargreaves, *Halifax*, 115.

done in the fire oven and hot water for normal use was supplied by boiling a kettle on the fire. Houses at this point mostly had gas lighting. The toilet was outside and there was no purpose-made toilet paper, just neatly cut sheets of newspaper hung on a string. A candle was left burning to stop the toilet freezing in winter.⁸ The family lived at very close quarters with each other, a situation requiring discipline, sensitivity and a heightened sense of family responsibility.

And yet John William and his wife Alice were obviously good parents and were determined that their children should seize the opportunities which arose. Music played a very important part in the family's life and they had a piano in their small house which gave the young George the opportunity he needed to start making music at home as well as in the church. Later, when he was a student at the Royal College of Music, he wrote to his Greek teacher, Oscar Browning: 'I think my father is coming up on Saturday for a week. ... As my dad is extremely musical we shall have a good time.'⁹ For a young man being exposed to the best that music could offer in the country at that time this was an endorsement of the sympathy and enthusiasm which the family will have felt for George's burgeoning talent.

Music was important to many inhabitants of Halifax. The history of the choral society, which claims to be the oldest in the world having been founded in 1817, has the following remarkable reminiscence:

In this manufacturing town, the poorer classes are, so to speak, born musicians. They meet constantly at their habitations for practice, and after a hard day's toil, their solace is a glee party or a trial of choral music. So determined are these amateurs that man, woman, and child will trudge five or six miles to attend a rehearsal for a choral evening, or to sing a roundelay with a few of their friends.¹⁰

North Parade Baptist Church

The centre of the family's non-working lives was the North Parade Baptist Church which had a rich musical tradition. *A History of the Halifax and Calder Valley District of Baptist Churches* states that

The North Parade Church owed its origin to the evangelistic labours of the Rev. Dan Taylor. While ministering at Birchcliffe, Hebden Bridge, he travelled widely preaching the Gospel, and won converts in Halifax ... in the year 1773.¹¹ In 1777 this small flock of adherents built a small chapel in Hayley Hill. ... In 1854 it was decided to move the church to 'a more favourable part of the town', North Parade, from whence the Church took its future name.¹²

Once established in an imposing new Greek temple-style building, the ministry of the church developed and changed as the years went on. It was highly successful and attracted a series of excellent ministers, but a rehousing scheme ultimately removed

⁸ Interview between Judith Dyson and the author.

⁹ Letter from Dyson to Oscar Browning, 30 Oct. 1902: from *The Papers of Oscar Browning*, King's College, Cambridge, GBR/0272/OB.

¹⁰ Note for the Halifax Choral Society Centenary Programme: 'For one hundred years', *The H.C.S., 1818-1918*.

¹¹ W. B. Wilson and W. S. Davies, *A History of the Halifax and Calder Valley District Baptist Churches* (Halifax: Halifax & Calder Valley District of the Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1968), 40.

¹² *Ibid.*, 41.

the people of this district – the site now occupied by the Halifax bus station – and brought the work to an end.¹³ The change in population of this district meant a decline in the church's attendance. A new road development scheme, and the fact that the church was eventually condemned as unsafe, meant closure. The final service was held on 29 May 1960 after which the building was demolished.

The Baptist church was strict in its procedures. Dyson's cousin, Judith Dyson (daughter of Dyson's first cousin Telford, 1909–97), remembers her maternal grandmother, Martha Anne Horsfall, telling her that she was 'disciplined' by the church elders when her attendance had been seen to be erratic. Judith pointed out that she worked hard in the mill all week and needed some Sundays to rest. The Deacons' minutes from the church records show just how much control the chapel had over people's lives. They used to send out visitors to the homes of members who had not attended chapel. Alice Dyson (George's mother) was one of these 'visitors', although it was the men (inevitably) who were very much in charge. John William was a church superintendent and carried on the strict family tradition, insisting that the whole family attended church until reaching the age of twenty-one, after which it was, of course, their decision as to whether or not to continue.

The fine musical tradition at the church has already been mentioned. It started humbly with 'the singing ... accompanied by a harmonium, and earlier still by a violincello [*sic*]'¹⁴ The organ was installed in 1864 and placed on a large gallery above the pulpit at the 'east' end of the building ideally placed for leading the congregational singing. The choir sat up in the organ gallery. Judith Dyson's recollections from her time in the choir at the church are colourful:

It was a very balanced group, though as with most choirs, a bit short on tenors. In the Deacons' minutes *c.* 1900 I read that there was discussion about removing some of the decorative framework from around the organ to make more room for the singers to sit. They discussed it for three months and then decided not to bother. The singers were not happy about that decision.

The choir, who would number around twenty-plus, sat either side of the organ. There were balconies at either end of the chapel. When I was a small child I sat at one side with my Dad in the basses, just as John William had done with his father. When I was a bit older I sat with my 'auntie' in the altos until I was old enough to join the sopranos.

To get into the side of the choir where the ladies were though, I had to walk through the dark and scary pump room with its hissing noises and a considerable amount of dust. Whilst I loved joining in the singing, the ordeal of crossing this room was rather too much for a small person. [The organ was blown manually until 1918 when an electric motor was introduced at George Dyson's suggestion. The Deacons' minutes in 1900 refer to the appointment of a 'bellows operator' who took over from his brother.]

Some of the people I remember in the choir were at John William's funeral – one or two characters that were fascinating to a child: Mr Raymond Clay, tenor, was totally bald and had a very white face; Florence Haley, had many chins which vibrated as she sang, as did her voice; a tiny lady, Emily, with round glasses had a very sweet soprano voice. She often sang solos. There was smiley-faced Mr Clough, a solicitor who was very kindly.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41–2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The evening service always had an introit, psalm, anthem and benediction for the choir to perform. The weekly rehearsal was on a Friday evening.¹⁵

The organ which was to be so important a part of young Dyson's musical celebrity was originally built by the firm of Wilkinson & Sons in 1864 as a two manual instrument which was enlarged by Conachers into a three-manual organ with twenty-eight speaking stops in 1886. When it was rebuilt again in 1918, Dyson was the adviser and his careful thoughts on the renovation of the instrument are interesting to read. His letter of principal recommendations ends: 'I shall be most happy to afford the church any help or advice that I can. I have known the organ a long time and have been an interested spectator of its hard work and increasing years, and I should rejoice to see it restored to robust health again.'¹⁶

His recommendations were entirely practical, always with a view to keeping within a tight budget. He wanted to see additional stops, mainly for the practical purpose of supporting hearty congregational singing, but understood the need for financial stringency. His one passionate plea is for a new RCO (Royal College of Organists) pedal board including a top F (one semitone higher than the old one) at an additional cost of £12. One small clue to a personal preference appears in a letter dated 10 January 1919: 'But the "Vox Humana" is a stop that I personally have no liking for, though it is generally very popular, exceedingly so at times.'¹⁷

This little touch of humour – Dyson listening to the organ and, facially inscrutable, quietly notching up the number of times the distastefully plangent sounds of the *vox humana* made an appearance begins our portrait of a man who was 'Yorkshire' to his fingertips (he never lost the flat vowels of his accent) however southern and sophisticated the company he kept later on. There was always something 'meat and two veg' in Dyson's preferences, and he would often choose a cup of cocoa when there was anything to celebrate. But lest this is read as a rather damning character assessment by those more used to reading of composers' alcoholic and sensual excesses, the reader should not be fooled into thinking that Dyson was, as is often stated, just 'a dry old stick' as will be richly demonstrated in this unfolding story.

The Dyson family

Dyson's mother, Alice, was born a Greenwood on 11 May 1854. Her father, George, was a carpet weaver at one of the many textile mills in the town (probably Crossley Carpets nearby). Unable to read or write, he marked the birth certificate with a cross for his signature. The Dysons and the Greenwoods lived very near to each other. When they were married in 1882 John William was living in his family home in Birks Hall Lane (no. 7) down in the valley where the Hebble brook runs and very close to Lee (Worsted) Mills where other members of his family worked. The area is often now referred to as the 'Tip', an accurate but very unflattering name for what is an attractive open area of parkland now much used by dog walkers. Alice lived above the valley in No. 4 Scholefields Court, the house in which George was born. (Other references to this address, including George's birth certificate, spell it 'Schofields'.) The Birks Hall Lane houses were known as 'Hob Houses' and were close to the old Angel Quarry, and it was up a leafy path called 'Angel Walk' that John William will have had to walk to see Alice. His journey to work at Drake's took him in the opposite direction and

¹⁵ E-mail from Judith Dyson to the author, 31 Oct. 2007.

¹⁶ Report from Dyson to the Minister and Deacons of North Parade Baptist Chapel, Halifax, dated March 1918, following examination of the instrument on Sunday 3 March.

¹⁷ Letter from Dyson to George Haley, North Parade Baptist Church, 10 Jan. 1919.

was a substantial walk although later on, with the advent of trams which went all the way down the Ovenden Road, his commuting time from their current house on Lee Mount would have been cut pleasantly short.

By a remarkable coincidence the minister who married John William and Alice on 12 August 1882 was also a Dyson – Rev. Watson Dyson, who was at North Parade from 1878 to 1887. By another coincidence he also produced a distinguished son who was to be knighted, the Astronomer Royal Sir Frank Dyson (1868–1939). It is strange, too, to think that Frank Dyson worked as Director of the Greenwich Observatory from 1910 (he was responsible, amongst many more distinguished things, for introducing the ‘pips’ to mark the exact time) and that George Dyson had been organist of the church at Greenwich ten years earlier during his student days at the RCM. The nice coincidence of Watson Dyson officiating at his parents’ wedding caused George to dryly remark that ‘Frank Dyson’s father married my mother!’¹⁸

Alice was five years older than John William and was a very powerful personality. Telford Dyson, who lived with them, was the son of John William’s *unmarried* and youngest sister Lily who was born in 1873. We can only imagine the scene after *that* revelation. Telford remembers being ‘absolutely terrified of his Aunt Alice’.¹⁹ A lady of decided opinions and great strength of character (and dry humour) she was asked by someone how she had managed to space her three children so well, she replied ‘well he didn’t want it often!’²⁰ Every photograph there is of Alice radiates this strength of character, the kind which pulls eyes towards her as the centre of attention. She once said to George’s daughter, also called Alice, that she could have done so much more if she had been a man. Alice was the one, apparently, who, also musical, pushed young George on and got him to follow his vocation which, from such a background, was unusual given that all the children would be expected to leave school at the earliest legal moment, get employment and contribute to the household expenses.

Alice followed her father into the mills. Life in the mills was tough and children began work in the factories as young as nine and could work up to twelve hours a day. In Halifax a child would be employed as a ‘worsted doffer’ or a ‘worsted spinner’. Alice told her grandson Freeman (George’s son) ‘with great pride’ that ‘she went to work in a mill at age eight.’²¹ ‘She became a skilled weaver and made good wapes. She worked there until she married.’²²

John William, aged twenty-two at the time of the 1881 census, was as we have seen, a blacksmith working at Drakes. His younger brother, Arthur, aged fourteen, was doing his stint as a ‘worsted doffer’ (someone who replaced empty bobbins of wool by full ones) before going on to work at Drakes when he was old enough, where he became an ironwork erector. Their younger sister, Sophia, aged twelve at the time of this census, was already a ‘worsted spinner’. In this job Sophia would have had to spin the combed wool. Sophia went on to be a domestic servant, working for a time for Mary Mallinson, a widowed lady in her seventies, at 15 Balmoral Place, Halifax, an exclusive private road with a terrace of handsome houses.

‘Piecers’ were also required in the wool industry, and on the same page as John William’s first appearance in a census in 1861 aged two, the family next door by the name of Maude had a son aged eight who was a ‘worsted piecer’. The family one door further down the street also had a son in the same employment aged nineteen. He

¹⁸ E-mail from Judith Dyson to the author, 1 Nov. 2007.

¹⁹ Telford Dyson (George’s first cousin), ‘Recollections of our Family and Church’, 1987 (handwritten notes).

²⁰ E mail from Judith Dyson to the author, 1 Nov. 2007.

²¹ E-mail from Freeman Dyson to the author, 6 July 2008.

²² *Ibid.*

must have been very small for his age. John William, aged twelve, in the 1881 census, seems to have avoided this particular misery and was simply listed as an 'errand boy'. Whether this was because he was big for his age, or he was able to earn enough in this rather less arduous (it is assumed) outdoor form of employment we will never know.

Unusually, both Dyson's grandparents on John William's side were described as 'painters and paper-hangers'. These were Jeremiah and Mary Anne (born Roper). They were both born in 1835 and were married in Halifax Parish Church on 14 September 1857. Jeremiah's father was a butcher and Mary Anne's was a wool-washer. It was highly unusual for a woman to be involved in the same employment as her husband in this particular trade. They lived in Lee Bank, down in the valley near Birks Hall Lane and close to the huge Dean Clough carpet-making Mills.

John William's sizeable obituary and photograph in the *Halifax Courier* shows how highly regarded he was in the community. After announcing his death 'at 8 o'clock on Monday evening (22 January 1923) after a long painful illness' (he had breast cancer and 'exhaustion'). The paper went on to report:

Mr Dyson had done long and faithful service in connection with North-parade [sic] Baptist Church, having an unbroken record with this place of worship of 60 years, as scholar, teacher and superintendent. He was a member of the choir for over 50 years and had been choirmaster over 25 years. He was a deacon of the church and superintendent of the school. In November, 1921, he was presented by the friends of the church, choir and Sunday School, with a beautiful timepiece and a barometer in token of his faithful service as choirmaster. ... He first went into the choir pew with his grandfather, one of the founders of the North-parade Church, from Haley Hill Chapel. His age would then have been about 2½, and he had remained almost ever since. During the time he was choirmaster, the choir made great progress, due to his enthusiasm and interest in the work.²³

The list of mourners at John William's funeral emphasises how highly he was regarded. Both J. Wilfred Drake (Chairman of Directors) and C. W. James (Manager) were in attendance, a real tribute to one of their 'blacksmiths' – even if he was a 'Foreman Blacksmith' as his death certificate records. There was also a considerable number of fellow workers in attendance. The funeral service was held at North Parade but he was interred (as was his wife, Alice, much later in 1943) at All Saints Anglican church in the pleasant uphill Skircoat Green district of the town, not far from the house in Heath Park Avenue (No. 18) which George had purchased for them in 1910 to lift them up out of the poor area of the town in which they previously lived. (John William's brother Arthur refused to visit them in their new 'upmarket' house, feeling that they had betrayed their origins.) The grave (lying flat) is set in the shade of a beautiful overhanging tree at a cross point of the paths in the church's cemetery.

Early days in Halifax

George attended Parkinson Lane School, a handsome collection of buildings in French chateau-style with the usual separate boys' and girls' sides which are like the 'wings' of the chateau. Deeply recessed between them is the central building. Parkinson Lane was built as a 'model' junior school which George attended for the short period from 14 October 1889 to 14 March 1890. Whilst there (and the reason he attended this school) the family were living in a small terraced house No. 11, Knight Street, very

²³ *Halifax Courier*, 26 Jan. 1923.

close by, which was in the process of demolition as the research for this chapter was being undertaken. In March 1890 the family moved up to Lee Mount and George and his younger sister Bertha (born in 1887, four years later) were transferred to Lee Mount Junior School. Perfectly situated a stone's throw from where they now lived, this was where George stayed until transferring to the Halifax Board School (which became Halifax Modern and then Clare Hall and is now derelict) in about 1894–5 (no records exist). He was awarded a Rawson Shaw scholarship to attend the school. William Rawson-Shaw (1860–1932), a prominent Halifax citizen, became a successful Liberal member of Parliament following his father to Westminster after his death. He later left the Liberals and became a Conservative. He set up the scholarships in his own name to be distributed by the local Education Committee each year to support children from poor backgrounds.

Given the emphasis on reading which occupied so much of George's time it is extraordinary to think that had been born with an almost non-functioning left eye. Freeman Dyson (George's son) wrote:

I have a clear memory about GD's eyes because I was intrigued by his glasses when I was a small boy. He had a special pair of glasses made with the nose-piece and ear-pieces reversible so that it could be worn with either lens in front of his right eye. One lens was for near vision, the other for far vision. So he could quickly switch from one to the other. His right eye was completely dominant and remained sharp until the end of his life. The left eye was suppressed when he was a baby and remained effectively blind all his life. He said he was never inconvenienced by having only monocular vision. I remember examining his left eye and being surprised that it looked almost normal although it was not functioning.²⁴

The last of John William and Alice's children to be born was Hubert Vincent in 1894. Nine years separated him and George. Hubert was the only one of John William and Alice's children to be given two first names. He went into the wool trade, being employed by Paton & Baldwin who were very socially conscious employers building houses for their employees in the 1880s and establishing a community which included medical and fire services.²⁵ Hubert did extremely well in this giant firm, moving away from Halifax to Darlington and becoming part of the management. Hubert was also musical and played the organ, being listed as one of the official organists at North Parade between 1920–6 following the twenty-one year incumbency of Mr H. Holmes who was organist at the time of the organ's rebuilding for which George was the adviser.

Early musical training

Dyson was introduced quite naturally to the wonders of the organ from the earliest age. With his musical propensity and the importance of chapel life to the family, it was the most natural thing in the world for him to take an interest and to want to learn it at the first opportunity. As far as we can tell his first proper organ teacher was John Layton who, it seems, was teaching George around his tenth birthday. There is no information about who John Layton was, or how George came to have lessons with him. He was not the organist at North Parade.

The *Halifax Courier* obituary of Dyson (also mentioned in John Hargreaves'

²⁴ E-mail from Freeman Dyson to the author, 18 Jan. 2008.

²⁵ Paton and Baldwin: www.coatcrafts.co.uk/About+Coats/History [accessed 28 Sept. 2013].



Fig. 1.1 North Parade Baptist Church, Halifax

Halifax) states that he studied with Arthur Collingwood at Rhodes Street Wesleyan Church. This is hardly likely as they were almost the same age. Collingwood was born in November 1880, making him two and a half years older than Dyson. In fact, at Collingwood's death in April 1952 Dyson wrote to his widow: 'I am very sorry indeed to hear of the death of my very old friend. We were boys together in Halifax and I have always rejoiced in his fine career.'²⁶

My reading of this situation is that for 'with' read 'together with' and that the likely teacher of both boys would have been W. H. Garland who was the distinguished organist of Halifax Parish Church 1884–97. After a brief six-month interregnum by George Milligan, F. de G. English arrived for the first of his two periods as organist, the first of which saw him directing the music at the church between 1897 and 1911 which would have seen Dyson through his entrance to the Royal College of Music. If it is not the case that the young Dyson had lessons with these men, and it is perfectly possible that their fees were not affordable by the Dysons, then the slightly older Collingwood might have proved useful to Dyson as a 'sounding board' for his own ideas and someone to whom he could play and whose musical opinion he trusted. It is, however, notable that in Dyson's article about *The Canterbury Pilgrims* for the *Halifax Courier* preceding a performance in 1952 which ends with a colourful autobiographical paragraph, he mentions just two organists from his childhood: W. H. Garland at the Parish Church and John Mackintosh (of the toffee-making firm) at Queen's Road Methodist Church.

Rhodes Street Methodist Church, where Arthur Collingwood played the organ, was another handsome new and sizeable building opened in 1867, built to accommodate some 800 people in the church and a further 400 children in its schools. When it

²⁶ Letter from Dyson to Mrs Arthur Collingwood, 7 Apr. 1952.



Fig. 1.2 George aged about ten with his organ teacher, John Leyton, c. 1893

was opened it was the third-largest building in the town after the parish church and the Square Congregational church. Like so many of the buildings contemporaneous with it, it has now been demolished. At the time it was a very significant structure close to where the Dysons and all their connected relations and friends were living. Its large spire rising to 104 feet will have dominated the local horizon. The organ was undoubtedly also impressive – more so than the North Parade instrument – with thirty-six speaking stops from 32' pitch upwards. In the way of these things, the young George will have been excited to play a large new instrument in this impressive space.

It is notable that Halifax, at this time, should produce two youngsters with formidable musical talents in the form of Collingwood and Dyson. Collingwood (who joined the RCO in June 1895 and lived at Hopwood Lane) passed his Associateship of the Royal College of Organists (ARCO) that same year at the age of fifteen but didn't take his Fellowship exam (FRCO) until 1904, by which time he had moved to Aberdeen where he was organist of the Free West Church. Dyson joined the RCO on 3 July 1897, aged fourteen. He passed the organ playing for the diploma in July 1897 but not the paperwork until January 1899. He passed the FRCO exactly a year later in January 1900 aged sixteen, thereby easily beating his older rival to that highly prestigious diploma. The Dysons' address at that time was 35 East View, Lee Mount, Halifax (now demolished). He was removed from the RCO's registers in June 1916. This was usually for not keeping up with the annual subscription which is not exactly surprising as he had been invalided out of the trenches that year.

The RCO's examinations were rigorous and searching. The paperwork examination for the Associateship in January 1899 consisted of two three and a half hour papers. The first had questions in strict counterpoint in both three and four parts in open score and appropriate clefs. Question 2 gave the option either to write a countersubject to a given treble line answering the subject, or instead, answer two given subjects. The paper continued with three questions on a variety of subjects covering organ mechanics, registration, musical terms, composers for the organ, and more general musical history topics. The second written paper asked for the realisation of a figured bass in four parts, the harmonisation of a melody in four parts, the figuring of a passage from Bach's Toccata in C, and the explanation of certain chords. Finally, candidates were required to make an addition of three bars to a short given passage in E flat major which continued so as to make 'an agreeable modulation' to F major or G minor or D major. For a young boy of fourteen in his situation, this was searching indeed, and it is of little surprise that he failed this part of the examination at the first attempt.

Hot on the heels of his Associateship paperwork pass in 1899 came the FRCO which he passed first time in both organ playing and paperwork. This demonstrates just how much he had learned in the intervening period. The prepared pieces he played were Bach's Choral Prelude *Komm, heiliger Geist, Herre Gott*, the *Fantasia and Fugue* from Rheinberger's Sonata no. 9, op. 142, and *Air with Variations* from Sonata no. 3 by Alan Gray.



Fig. 1.3 Rhodes Street Wesleyan Church



Fig. 1.4 Dyson's earliest surviving composition, written in 1890, aged seven (RCM MS 4731)

His keyboard tests consisted of the accompaniment of a Psalm (125) either to Anglican chant (given) or a Gregorian chant, in which case the candidate had to supply varied harmonies. Next came four-part score reading with treble, alto, tenor and bass clefs, sight-reading, extemporisation and harmonising a given melody. The paperwork tests were again in two papers of three and a half hours duration. There were three questions relating to strict counterpoint, a fugal exposition and three questions on varied musical subjects. The second paper had an orchestration question, harmonisation of a melody in four parts (open score) and the realisation of a Ground Bass which had to have 'three distinct presentations of it' given and again written in open score. Tough assignments for a coveted diploma.

Earliest compositions

A surviving programme of an organ recital he gave at North Parade on Tuesday 3 April 1900 makes interesting reading. First, it is his 'farewell' recital before leaving for London, and he is billed 'Mr. Geo. Dyson FRCO (Winner of a free Organ Scholarship at the Royal College of Music, London, Feb., 1900)'. Dyson was joined by Mr J. Nichol Bates (violin) and the church choir which sang *Come thou Holy Spirit* by Barnett, and *Abide with Me* by Turner. Violin solos were Raff's *Cavatina* and Goltermann's *Le Rêve*. For the rest, Dyson gave a wide-ranging programme with music by Lefébure-Wély, Guilman, Mendelssohn (Sonata in D minor no. 6), Hollins, Bach (Toccatina and Fugue in C), Hesse, Lemare and finishing with a Processional March by Faulkes. The second half of the programme featured his own Sonata in C minor in four movements:

Allegro con brio; Andante; Variations on St Ann's Tune; and Finale. We shall see in the next chapter how almost none of Dyson's early compositions survive. This is another case of a lost work or a positive cull of his youthful efforts.

The earliest of Dyson's compositions to survive is a short piano piece in A major which Dyson noted in a mature hand was written in 1890 aged seven. What this little piece shows is a good rudimentary knowledge of harmony and a feeling for shape and melody. Within its childish limitations it is strong and purposeful, beginning with a 'drum roll' introductory three bars before taking off with a quickly moving bass line supporting a strong melody. At bar 13 the right hand takes over the semiquaver figure from the left and drives the short piece to the end. As a piece of real juvenilia it is well written and shows a clear influence of the Victorian composers to whom he would have been exposed in church and elsewhere. A teacher would have recognised real promise in this little piece.

We shall see in the next chapter about Dyson's friendship with a family called Bedloe in Greenwich, near London. The only reason we have a number of his very early compositions is that Dyson left a collection of early manuscripts with them. (The piano piece mentioned above was not in this collection.) A much bigger and more impressive work which comes from the Bedloe collection was an anthem called *I will Sing of Thy Mercies* written in February 1895 when Dyson was just eleven years old (his birthday was in May). This is a setting of Psalm 89 and is described as being by 'Master George Dyson'. It is composed in the manner of an extended verse anthem such as Dyson might have known, perhaps by one of the Wesleys. The opening movement in F major is for full choir and organ with the organ directions for registration given just as he would have seen in the music he sang in the church choir. It is all serviceably written and obviously composed at the piano. The word underlay to the music bears little relation to the notes to which they are supposed to be sung. This is clear especially from the last seven bars of this extract (see Fig. 1.5).

The second movement is a tenor solo which has a beautifully lyrical melody outlined in the first seven bars of organ introduction. The third movement is for choir alone and he notes that it can be sung with or without accompaniment. It is also marked *con espressivo*. A brief organ passage is required at one point which might hint at a tendency for the North Parade choir to sink irredeemably in pitch in unaccompanied music and his realisation, even at this tender age, that a short passage of organ accompaniment would help them to keep in tune.

There is a quasi-fugal start to the final movement marked *pomposo* but the words don't fit, although they could easily have been adjusted to work if someone had shown him how it was done. The really arresting point in this movement is his sudden departure from C major into D flat major perfectly well realised, but extraordinarily colourful in the context of the Victorian blandness of the rest of the anthem. This is nothing, however, compared with the harmonic extravagance of final page of endless 'Amens'. There is a real sense of the boy enjoying himself and flexing some muscles which he barely knew existed. His final signing off is as extravagant as his ambitions at this moment in his young life (see Fig. 1.6).

However primitive this writing may be, it points to Dyson's early predilection for composition and his quick learning of its basic principles. Tuition for the RCO examinations will have advanced his technique to the point where he could apply with some confidence for the scholarship to the RCM at which, with growing maturity and exposure to a far broader set of musical influences, he could take wing.

A musical score for a hymn, consisting of two systems of staves. The first system includes a vocal line with lyrics "sing of the mercies of the Lord for ever" and a piano accompaniment. The second system includes a vocal line with lyrics "mouth will make known thy faithfulness to all generations" and a piano accompaniment. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *pp*, *ff*, and *ff*, and performance instructions like "pp time solo." and "Full time 15th".

Fig. 1.5 *I Will Sing of Thy Mercies*, composed in February 1895, aged eleven (RCM MS 7833)

A musical score for the "Amen" section of the hymn. It begins with the tempo marking "Largo" and features five vocal staves, each with the word "men" written below. The piano accompaniment is visible at the bottom. The score concludes with a large, stylized "Amen" written across the staves, followed by a large, decorative flourish.

Fig. 1.6 *I Will Sing of Thy Mercies, Amen* (RCM MS 7833)

CHAPTER 2

The Royal College of Music and the Mendelssohn Scholarship, 1900–1907

Scholarship to the Royal College of Music

Dyson entered the Royal College of Music on 7 May 1900 on an Open Foundation Scholarship to study organ with W. S. Hoyte and composition with Sir Charles Stanford. He was not quite seventeen years old. He was given a preliminary examination in Halifax on 31 January, and a final examination on 23 February. Organ was his first study and the subject for which the scholarship was awarded. Composition was his second study and was shared with lessons in analysis.

How he came to organise the audition from his remote northern outpost is not known. What is certain though is that his mother was the real mover and shaker of the family. She was the dominant partner, as we have seen, and if she decided that George was going to succeed in making the most of his obvious talents there was little that would stop her. In a small town where musicians of George's calibre of any age were few and far between the organist of the parish church would have been an obvious consultant. We have already surmised that he might have taught the boy the organ, and may well have tutored him in harmony and counterpoint for the Royal College of Organists diplomas. If this is the case, then it is also likely that he suggested the Royal College of Music as an ideal place for him to continue his studies, knowing the scholarships they offered. These awards made study in London possible for a boy of George's background, as they offered not only full remission of fees but subsistence as well. Later, Dyson remarked: '... we scholars were mostly as poor as crows. There was no generous government or education authority to maintain us. Our standard of life was often represented by about one pound a week. The pound went further, then, of course, but it was a close shave.'¹ It was additionally helpful that the RCM held its preliminary examination for George's entrance to the College in Halifax so that the family was spared the expense of a journey to London.

Once his scholarship was secured, George had to find somewhere to live, and on this front, at least, things were made easier for him as his aunt Azubah (his mother's sister) and her husband, Shaw Gledhill, lived in Greenwich at 59 Earlswood Street (see Fig. 2.1). For a while they had lived with George's family in Halifax but at some point decided to move to London. Gledhill was a 'stationary engine driver', operating a static engine in the factory which ran belt-driven machinery. George was extremely fortunate in being able to stay so conveniently with relatives. He then set about finding musical work in the area to supplement his meagre income and was lucky to secure the post of assistant organist at St Alfege's parish church in Greenwich.

St Alfege's church and the Bedloes

Greenwich parish church has a long history. The first building was erected around 1150 and in 1585 was the burial place of Thomas Tallis who lived in the village in the last years of his life, in all likelihood in Stockwell Street, almost opposite the east end of the church. In the great storm of 1710 the roof collapsed and it was decided to build a new church. Hawksmoor, the distinguished pupil of Wren, was commissioned to

¹ *RCM Magazine* 46(2) (1950), 45.



Fig. 2.1 59 Earlswood Road, Greenwich (formerly Earlswood Street)

build a large new church in the English Baroque style fashionable at the time. It was consecrated in 1718 and survived all the vicissitudes of the next 230 years until enemy action in the second World War destroyed the interior of the building in 1941. But by then George had other London responsibilities of far greater moment.

St Alfege always employed two musicians: a Director of Music who was the choirmaster, and an assistant organist who played the organ. In 1896 George Bedloe was appointed choirmaster under the auspices of the popular vicar, Brooke Lambert. The church had a thriving musical set-up and besides the normal liturgical music the choir sang the fashionable oratorios of the day by Handel and Mendelssohn accompanied on the organ. The Bedloes, originally from Blandford Forum, lived at the aptly named Blandford House, 5 Ulundi Road, Blackheath, very close to Greenwich.

Bedloe had become headmaster of the new Grade II boys' elementary school in Halstow Road, Greenwich at a handsome salary of £200 a year. There is evidence that despite the essentially working-class population of the school he strongly encouraged the arts. Pupils were taken to the National Gallery, and a group of forty-five of them took part in a performance of Handel's *Judas Maccabaeus* at the Queen's Hall in July 1900. The first visitor to the school in Bedloe's headmastership was Brooke Lambert and a good relationship was obviously established which led to Bedloe's church appointment. G. F. Bartle, Bedloe's grandson, wrote: 'It is difficult today to appreciate the prestige attaching to such a position at the turn of the century. St. Alfege,

Greenwich, was a fashionable Anglican church, whose large congregation included the Astronomer Royal and other gentry.² Bedloe's wife, Kate, was also a teacher and amateur musician who enjoyed all the musical activity which enriched their lives.

Exactly how Dyson's appointment came about is not known. Since St Alfege's was the principal local church, and was very close to where he was living in Earlswood Street, it is likely that he would have attended services there. As a newly appointed Foundation Scholar at the RCM with a FRCO diploma already under his belt aged only seventeen, his reputation will have been quick to spread. His early sense of ambition will also have had his antennae acutely tuned to modes of behaviour, accents of speech, interaction between classes and the usefulness of a church in softening social barriers. The scene will have been very unfamiliar to his upbringing. The climb, as far as he was concerned, professionally and socially, had begun.

In 1902 Bedloe was appointed Headmaster of Ackmar Road boys elementary school at a salary of £300. Halstow Road School had been made into a co-educational school and Bedloe, who disliked teaching girls, decided to apply for another all-boys school, even though it meant a significantly increased commuting time. The benefit of the large increase in salary gave the family the opportunity to furnish the Ulundi Road house in style 'complete with a small conservatory, a billiard room and a comprehensive home library'.³ Dyson by this time had become a regular visitor, and in due course moved in to lodge with the family. Exactly when this occurred is not known, but he was certainly living there by the summer of 1902 when his correspondence with Oscar Browning (see below) shows Ulundi Road as his address.

The Bedloes had two daughters, Dorothy and Marjory, and over time he formed a deep friendship with both of the girls, but it seems that he had a special relationship with the elder daughter, Dorothy. By all accounts she grew very attached to George and when eventually he left to go to Europe on his Mendelssohn Scholarship, the relationship ended abruptly causing considerable distress to Dorothy. He did return to visit the family as there is a photograph of him in his officer's uniform in the family's possession together with another of him taking Dorothy for a ride in the sidecar of his motorbike, but his life had moved on. Dorothy never married and eventually became a nun in St Saviour's Priory at Haggerston in London.

During his time as a RCM student living with the Bedloes Dyson wrote a good deal of music, some of which was given to or left with the family. We referred to one or two early pieces discovered in the collection. The only work of real consequence is the Sonata for Cello and Piano written in 1904 which, when found, was a major discovery since Dyson systematically destroyed all his early manuscripts and this was therefore a rare example of one of his major student works.

The Royal College of Music

But we have moved ahead of ourselves. Dyson has just arrived at the Royal College of Music and is walking the hallowed corridors of the great institution of which Sir Hubert Parry is Director. Little did he realise at that stage what an influence Parry was to be on him – as indeed he was to several generations of Royal Collegians and, ultimately, the nation as a whole.

It is difficult to think of another musician of the time who inspired such loyalty and devotion as Parry. He seemed to cast a spell over people who were thereafter in

² G. F. Bartle, 'George Bedloe: A London Board School Headmaster' (undated and unpublished article).

³ Ibid.

complete thrall to his personality and his powerful eloquence. Herbert Howells said to a later generation of RCM students, 'Alas! By chronological misfortune you can never know what it meant to sit here under the spell of Sir Hubert Parry's pervasive, all-embracing sweep of mind and temperament.'⁴ Parry, being the first Director of the College in its new buildings in Prince Consort Road, was the guiding hand under which the College became a great institution. His breadth of vision, his determination to create a meritocracy 'lest the publicity, the splendid quarters and the favour of the great, might attract the wrong type of student, and debilitate the artistic life of the place'⁵ were his principal hallmarks. 'Parry's personal insistence on merit as the one claim to distinction was the greatest safeguard of all.'⁶

Gerald Finzi, writing to the singer and musicologist Mollie Sands in March 1948, was disparaging about the RCM's centenary tribute to Parry: 'It's hard to believe that the RCM celebrations consist of a performance of the Songs of Farewell & at a request, I believe, the English Suite. That's all. I am told that Dyson's college address never even mentioned Parry, but was devoted to economics!'⁷ This is perfectly true. Dyson's January 1948 beginning-of-term address was a highly unusual lecture on the economics of the country. He felt it was a valuable exposition for the students who were still suffering the effects of rationing and the many post-war privations which affected everyone in those days. Devotee as he was of Parry, Dyson was never a man to look back and often said as much. This had nothing whatever to do with a lack of either respect or affection. His way was different, markedly different from someone of the sensibility of Finzi. While it is true that performances of Parry's works that year were few, it has to be remembered that the overall number of College concerts was also much reduced. To concentrate on one composer, however revered he might be, when live performances were so much at a premium would, in Dyson's mind, be a betrayal of Parry's own guiding principles of breadth of vision.

Colles, in his Jubilee Record of the College in 1933 also notes about Parry:

He, like his predecessor before him, was keenly desirous to stimulate the pupils to take an interest in what lay outside their immediate and daily tasks. His own lectures on the history of music, like his terminal addresses [which it is easy to see, inspired Dyson's own], kept this end steadily in view. He brought down from the fast-closed [reference-only] library at the top of the building scores of rare works, had extracts copied from them and commandeered parties of singers and instrumentalists to perform them as illustrations. His lectures themselves were as fascinatingly full of human interest as they were of erudition. ... Another, though, smaller instance of the spread of culture by the students themselves, was an informal debating society which was started early in 1896.⁸

Holst, Vaughan Williams, Ireland, Hurlstone, Gatty and Martin Shaw were members of the all-male club. Subjects were wide-ranging and included Carlyle's 'Essay on Dante', the 'Socialism of William Morris' and 'The Philosophy of Schopenhauer'. Parry, on hearing of the initiative 'clapping one of the promoters on the back asked in evident hope of an affirmative answer, 'Do any of you young fellows

⁴ *RCM Magazine* 58(3) (1962), 52.

⁵ H. C. Colles, *The Royal College of Music: A Jubilee Record, 1883-1933* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Letter from Gerald Finzi to Mollie Sands, 7 Mar. 1948.

⁸ Colles, *The Royal College of Music*, 32-3.

talk wild?’ However, as Colles points out, ‘the wildest talk was only that of a debate on the motion that “academic training should be abolished”.’⁹

Parry, in a beginning-of-term address in September 1915 at the end of the first year of the War laid out his philosophy for the College when he said, ‘It must emphatically be said that the College is not a place for merely teaching people music. It is much more than that.’¹⁰ He went on to enumerate the particular strengths and unique qualities of the institution as he saw them:

It has always been a place with big aims of doing special services to the nation, and it was organized from the first with a view to their attainment ... we had it in mind to spread the appreciation of secular music, especially orchestral music, and chamber music and opera ... we trained some of the finest young players alive, and superb players on cellos and violas and violins; and they became available for employment in provincial orchestras, as well as in the orchestras which were always increasing in numbers in London. ... Under the enterprising guidance of Sir Charles Stanford we brought out new works of importance, and always maintained the highest standards both in the quality of the works and their performance. ... Thirty years ago there were no opportunities for a young composer to hear anything he had attempted in the line of secular instrumental music. ... We had not only our own composers in mind, but those who did not belong to the College when, with the assistance of Mr Ernest S. Palmer, we devised the Patron’s Fund ... instituted to perform orchestral works and chamber compositions by young British composers, and it was the College itself which insisted upon the proviso that it was not to be confined to College composers, but to be extended to young British composers wherever they could be found.¹¹

In the days before the present concert hall was built (it was opened in 1901) concerts were either presented in the ‘Tin Tabernacle’, the makeshift hall in which many future distinguished artists gave their early performances, and where, on 11 November 1898, Coleridge-Taylor’s *Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast* was premiered, conducted by Stanford, or in the West Theatre of the Royal Albert Hall, the room used for performances when the College was still housed in the building next to the Albert Hall which later became the home of the Royal College of Organists. During the time before the building of the concert hall the College orchestra, conducted by Stanford, was taken to play in Cambridge where he was Professor of Music, and to Oxford where Parry was Professor. Colles states: ‘It was held to be a part of the mission of the R.C.M. to carry orchestral music into the provinces, and the university towns were the natural *point d’appui*.’¹² After the acquisition of the concert hall it was felt that there was no need to continue these provincial visits and the orchestra concentrated its work on home territory.

Dyson, arriving in May 1900, would have watched the final stages of the construction of the hall. Its first apparent problem was one of an over-reverberant acoustic. This was not a problem, of course, for the new organ, a three-manual instrument built by J. W. Walker & Sons, which was given by Parry. This was a major addition to the facilities as far as Dyson, as a young organ scholar, was concerned. As Colles points out ‘Whenever the hall was not required for orchestral or choral rehearsals, the organ was in use.’¹³ The organ had thirty-two speaking stops and was

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰ *RCM Magazine* 12(1) (1915), 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Colles, *The Royal College of Music*, 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

typical of its day in concentrating its specification on lower pitch foundation stops. There was no upper work above two feet on the Great, for instance, and the Swell only had a three rank Dulciana Mixture – a gentle, string-toned stop – to carry the upper work (higher pitches) above two feet. The Choir organ had six gentle colours, including a Clarinet, and the Pedals seven stops ranging from 16' to 8' pitch only. A 32' Sub Bourdon was 'prepared for' but never installed. The organ was boldly voiced to fill a large space, and the hall was indeed a sizeable building: 119 feet in length, 58 feet wide and 43 feet high at the apex of the vaulted roof. The seating capacity was almost 900 (people must have been packed very tightly), and there was space for some 230 performers on the stage. The backstage facilities were also generous with Artists' Rooms on three floors at the platform end. Underneath the hall there was another large space 78 feet long, 58 feet wide and 16 feet high used as an examination room. It was this room which twenty years later was developed into the Parry Opera Theatre.

Students who were organists and composers were expected to form the percussion section of the orchestras in College at that time. There was no specialised teaching of percussion instruments and it was felt that this training was good for non-orchestral musicians to get to know the orchestra from the inside. Dyson is listed as taking part in various orchestral concerts during his student days. The first of these seems to have been 14 February 1902 when he played in the first Patron's Fund Orchestral Concert: a 'Grand Concert by the Orchestra' conducted by Parry (standing in for Stanford who was presumably indisposed). The programme consisted of:

Brahms	Symphony No. 3 in F (op. 90)
Handel	Recitative and Air ('Acis and Galatea') 'Lo! Here my love! sung by Seth Hughes (Scholar)
Saint-Saens	Violin Solo in A minor 'Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso' Haydn Wood (Scholar)
Weber	'Liese, leise' (<i>Der Freischütz</i>) Alice Turner (Student)
Elgar	Variations for Orchestra (On an Original Theme: Op. 36)

Dyson was in a generous percussion section of five players (not including the timpanist) amongst whom was his exact contemporary, William Harris, and a future Registrar of the College, Basil Allchin. A year later, on 4 December 1903, he is listed playing the 'drums' in Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* at the Lyric Theatre under Stanford's direction.

Dyson's first solo performance in a College concert took place in the Concert Hall on 17 October 1901 at 7.45 p.m. when he concluded the concert with a performance of Bach's Passacaglia in C minor on the organ. College concerts being far fewer in number than today, opportunities did not arise as often for students to play in public. Dyson's appearances were few and far between, and records show that he only played solo organ items three times. The second was on 6 June 1902 when he played Bach's Fantasia and Fugue in G minor, and the third was 23 October that year when he played Liszt's *Fantasia on Ad nos, ad salutarem undam*, a major virtuoso work of the repertory.

By all accounts Dyson was an insatiable student with a voracious appetite for his studies. Walford Davies, writing a tribute to Dyson on his appointment as Director, painted this colourful vignette of Dyson the student:

If any present student of the College, chancing to pass the door of Room 51 [Stanford's teaching room], will imagine for a moment that the twentieth century has only just begun, and will peep through the glass panel ... there he will see a Counterpoint class of six at work. If he cares to enter, he will notice among its members, a very keen Yorkshire boy in knickerbockers, leaning on the shoulder of the teacher who is correcting his exercises, and eagerly asking, 'What happens to the *bass* if the progression goes like that?' (The word *bass* being pronounced with a nice, crisp, north-country vowel, rhyming with *lass*.)¹⁴

Walford Davies also wrote of Dyson revelling in music 'not only as a great game, but also as a glorious human language, for ever growing, and yet never growing old'.¹⁵

It is interesting that although the organ was Dyson's principal study, there is no record of him mentioning his organ lessons. By all accounts, however, the young Dyson was a fine improviser and won a College prize worth three guineas for that skill in March 1902. There are elements in his compositional process which point to their origin in improvisation. His insistence, for instance, on constant shifts of a minor third as a development method suggests, as David Owen Norris has pointed out, a *leger de pied*,¹⁶ in which the feet on the organ pedals shift up this interval, carrying the resulting harmonic shift with them and thereby increasing intensity and, no doubt volume as well, towards a climactic moment.

However, we should not think of Dyson's compositional processes as being so serendipitous as to emerge purely from a wandering foot on a pedal board. Dyson was the first student at the RCM to win a second Foundation Scholarship. Whilst having studied composition since arriving at the College in 1900 he was always thought of principally as an organist. It is for this reason that we see him only appearing in College programmes playing the organ. After winning a composition scholarship for an additional year in 1903 (he was also awarded £20 maintenance for the year) he was deemed to have changed his first study allegiance and at that point we begin to see Dyson's compositions featuring in College programmes.

Other than the juvenilia discussed in the previous chapter, the only other piece of his music from this time is a setting of the Kyrie of the Mass dated 16 January 1903 (see Fig. 2.2). He was nineteen years old. It is interesting that this short setting, obviously written for practical reasons for a church service, presumably at Greenwich, does not seem to have moved on stylistically very far in the time he had been in London. It still reeks of Victoriana, which was undoubtedly what was required at this time. The technique, however, is surer and word underlay is now understood.

Dyson's friend William Harris, another to write a tribute at the time of Dyson's appointment as Director of the College, wrote of Dyson's 'natural gifts of memory, improvisation, alertness and quickness of perception; but more than any of these by his insight into, and understanding of, the significance of Stanford's teaching. What seemed pedantry to some was to him clearly related to great fundamental truths. I imagine Stanford's words sank in very deep.'¹⁷

Dyson's lessons with Stanford were rigorous and he wrote a fulsome tribute to his mentor after Stanford's death in 1924.

In the sense in which it is customary to understand the term, I think Stanford's teaching had most of the major defects that teachers are usually counselled to avoid. The careful exposition of principles, the weighing and collating of

¹⁴ *RCM Magazine* 34(1) (1938), 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶ Interview between David Owen Norris and the author.

¹⁷ *RCM Magazine* 34(1) (1938), 18.

Allegretto *Kyrie* *Sir G. Dyson*

and in-clude our hearts, in clude-our hearts to keep - this Law
 Lord have mercy up-on us and in clude-our hearts! to keep - this Law

After the 16th.

Lord have mercy up-on us and write thy Law in our
 hearts; we do seek thee.

10: i: 1903

Fig. 2.2 Kyrie dated 16 January 1903, aged nineteen (RCM MS 7835)

detail, the conscientious or laboured endeavour to understand or appreciate an alien or repellent point of view; these faculties had no sure place within his temperament. He could give first-rate technical advice. 'Keep the double-basses up.' 'Percussion is effective inversely in proportion to the amount of it.' 'You don't make more noise by scrubbing at a fiddle than by bowing it normally.' Remarks of this kind came frequently, and were invariably sound. But in matters more elusive, in questions of personal expression, of poetic or dramatic mood, of all the more modern devices of emphasis or atmosphere, he seemed to some of us to be a bundle of prejudices. His judgements in these things were so impatient, brusque and final. If he disagreed with a student's choice of a poem, he was not likely to find much sense in the setting of it. Sometimes his distaste was strong enough to defeat itself. The pupil might become sullen and the teacher bitter ...

Stanford's real and abiding influence lay in qualities of mind and character of which he was probably never even conscious. His fundamental reactions were fierce and intuitive. There were some things to him so elemental that they rarely required to be expressed, much less argued about. And on this plane he carried most of his pupils with him, without their being in the least alive as to what was actually happening. Vagueness, shallowness, sentimentality, froth,

and a score of other temptations to which every talent, young or old, is subject, were simply outside his orbit. They could not exist in his presence, and men left them outside his door like a coat or a hat. This was the real infection. His direct judgement, his tightness of speech, his fury of integrity, these were what he gave to those who could digest them. It was an influence as indirect as was the breadth and scholarship of Parry. One did not have to know Parry. He had only to sit in the Director's room at the Royal College, and it was impossible for slack or superficial work to feel at home there. How could an institution be aimless that had Parry at its head? How could a composition be meaningless vapour that had Stanford at its heels?¹⁸

Here, perhaps, is Dyson's true tribute to Parry. Herbert Howells shared Dyson's feelings about Stanford and also said that there were some students whom Stanford felt were unteachable:

... on his own confession sometimes, I heard him say that there were certain pupils who defeated him. He was defeated ... among others by Frank Bridge who said he was a magnificent musician, but to him the enigma of Frank Bridge's personality stifled Stanford's efforts to help him. And the other person that he reviewed in the same sort of way but in quite another sense was Ivor Gurney, of whom he said 'that was probably potentially the most gifted man who ever came my way'.¹⁹

Howells recalled one instance where he went one week to sit in on one of Gurney's lessons with Stanford.

Gurney, whose manuscripts were completely chaotic, sat waiting impatiently for Stanford to deliver his assessment. Eventually the moment came when Stanford's gold pencil moved to make an alteration. 'There, my boy! That puts it right.' Gurney looked to see what had been done and said 'Well, Sir Charles, I see you've jiggered the whole show.' Stanford threw him out, but after closing the door remarked to Howells who was left sitting apprehensively by the recently vacated desk 'You know I love him more each time.'²⁰

Not all Stanford's students were remotely as complementary about his teaching methods. Arthur Bliss, a contemporary of Howells at College, wrote, 'I prefer to forget the hours I spent with Stanford: they were not many and from the first moment when he scrawled on my manuscript "He who cannot write anything beautiful falls back on the bizarre", I felt the lack of sympathy between us. He was a good teacher when in the mood ... [but] he had a devitalising effect on me. Also at twenty-two I was too old to conform.'²¹

The Oscar Browning saga

At some point in 1901 or 1902 it seems that Stanford suggested that Dyson should expand his education by studying Greek. It is possible that he thought Dyson might apply for an organ scholarship to Cambridge, where Stanford was Professor of Music, when his College career ended. A knowledge of Greek was essential for successful matriculation. Stanford recommended that Dyson should have private lessons with

¹⁸ George Dyson *et al.*, 'Charles Villiers Stanford', *Music & Letters* 5 (1924), 198.

¹⁹ Herbert Howells in conversation with Sir Arthur Bliss (BBC Radio 3, 18 Sept. 1973).

²⁰ Michael Hurd, *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 35.

²¹ Sir Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), 29.

Oscar Browning at King's College. Stanford knew Browning well and had asked him to become Treasurer of the Cambridge Musical Club (as opposed to the Musical Society) as he was a keen supporter and a noted eccentric Cambridge figure.

Browning, universally known as OB, had been a pupil at Eton, and later taught there for fifteen years before he was sacked in 1875. The Headmaster of Eton at the time, James Hornby, said that 'it was not for committing acts of "immorality in the ordinary sense of the word." In so writing, Hornby left the impression that he was sacking OB for acts which were immoral in some extraordinary sense.'²² Kincaid, one of OB's biographers, continues by saying 'Whether Johnson's [William Johnson Cory, who was also sacked for similar 'offences'] and Browning's enthusiasm for youth led them into improper conduct cannot ever be known. Much is suspected; nothing can be proved.'²³ What is well documented is OB's particular predilection for George Curzon whilst at Eton. Curzon, the son of Lord Scarsdale of Kedleston Hall, the great Palladian mansion by Robert Adam near Derby, became Viceroy of India and Foreign Secretary and travelled widely with OB in his teenage years.

Browning was a powerful man, had many influential friends, was a serious and pioneering educational reformer and was also extraordinarily conceited. Hornby had quite a battle on his hands to remove Browning but was adamant. An example of a letter sent in support of Browning came from Lord Portsmouth, who said:

I can strongly attest that the love of work, the anxiety to improve themselves and the right feeling which is apparent, I am happy to say, in my three sons, is very much the result of your good influence. I think your leaving Eton would be a great loss to the school. In fact, I look upon it that your removal would prove an irreparable loss to Eton. The tone of your house is so manly and straightforward.²⁴

The Governing Body of Eton met in November 1875 to consider his fate, including, according to Anstruther (another biographer), what would have been a verbal account of Browning's love affair with Curzon. The repercussions reverberated around as far as the House of Commons and were aired in *The Times* and other newspapers. No argument in his favour could prevail, however, and after his removal from Eton OB went quite naturally to King's College, Cambridge, where he claimed his right as a Fellow of the college under Henry VIth's statutes, making it a safe haven for him. He had rooms in the Gibbs building next to the chapel and entertained widely.

It was into this intellectually glittering but highly dubious company that young Dyson was drawn. Even though OB was by now in his mid-60s, to Dyson it was glamorous, stimulating, and offered the frisson of something he probably could not begin to fathom but sensed as being exotic, and being in Cambridge, sure to advance his career. The correspondence which has survived (OB preserved all Dyson's letters) shows Dyson unsurprisingly dancing completely to OB's tune. It is a fascinating period to track because Dyson either doesn't know what is going on, or he is choosing to ignore less savoury elements as long as they don't affect him. Then, at the point when he realises what is happening – or perhaps Browning is no longer necessary to his advancement – Dyson backs off, washing his hands of the man as cursorily as he can without actually being rude. But as we shall see, things had anyway changed for Dyson by then.

The saga begins on 23 July 1902 when Dyson accepted an invitation to spend a few

²² James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), 232.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Ian Anstruther, *Oscar Browning* (London: John Murray, 1983), 71.

days in Cambridge. The letter is signed ‘Yours respectfully’. The next letter, following his stay with OB is much more relaxed:

30 Ulundi Road, Blackheath SE
4.viii.1902

Dear Mr Browning,

I send a Greek double exercise as promised. My three services at church yesterday are responsible for it.

Needless to say, I arrived at Greenwich alright on Saturday evening, after spending quite the most delightful week of my existence. With my accustomed stupidity I left on Tennyson’s wash-hand stand a tooth brush and powder-box. Would you mind asking Horace to send them on.

Many thanks for the service list just received. What a pity I could not be there yesterday.

I trust you will have a safe and enjoyable journey ‘sur le continent’, and will derive great benefit from the waters of Marienbad.

With best respects, I remain,

Yours to a bit of Drysdale Mixture²⁵

Signing in Greek: Georgos ho neanias [George the youngster]²⁶

The signing off is particularly telling. He is not only showing off his use of Greek, but is also showing himself to be one of OB’s ‘youngsters’. The ‘Drysdale Mixture’ is a mystery but is probably some kind of special cocktail which OB mixed. This may also have been another ‘first’ for young George.

On 13 August Dyson writes to OB again from Ulundi Road to say:

Dear Mr Browning,

Very many thanks for the ‘Prometheus’. I will try and do something at it as soon as I feel in any way competent. My wish to ‘romp’, as you call it, through the book has led me to do double work this time. I hope it is somewhere near correct.

I trust you have had a safe journey and are already feeling the benefits of the change of climate. With kind regards to Jack, who I trust was not afflicted with ‘mal de mer’.

I remain

Your respectful Grecian garçon

George Dyson

The mixture of playfulness and respect is very revealing here, especially in the signing off, as the master–pupil relationship develops. Dyson’s next letter reflects on Coronation Day, 11 August 1902:

Blackheath
13.viii.1902

Dear Mr Browning,

Your very interesting letter to hand. Many thanks for it and for the corrections.

I went up to Fred’s on Saturday morning last about 9am. We had a good time together, I can assure you. What surprised us both a good deal was that the

²⁵ Drysdale Mixture is pipe tobacco condemned by the early public health campaigner Charles Drysdale FRS as one of the most virulent of vegetable poisons.

²⁶ The Papers of Oscar Browning, King’s College, Cambridge, GBR/0272/OB. All the letters from Dyson to Browning quoted in this chapter are from this source.

crowd was very small in Pall Mall and St James' St. There was a great number of course, but as we were able to go out and have something to eat in the forenoon, you will understand that it was not such a crush as usual. The King looked very well indeed to my eyes, but the procession itself was very meagre. We had tea at the musical club and then we discussed Dickens, Darwin and the general mutability of things until it was time for me to catch the last train.

I see by the papers that Tree has gone to Marienbad; is that correct? Give him my Ulyssian regards.

With best respects,
Ever your lonely amphibian
Georgos [in Greek]

Dyson's reference to the King's appearance was because the Coronation had had to be postponed from the scheduled date of 26 June to 9 August because Edward had to undergo an emergency appendectomy operation. This is a possible reason for the smaller crowds; many of those who had made special arrangements for the June occasion might not have been able to change their commitments for the August date.

On 17 August Dyson writes an informative letter about his work and his attempt to learn German:

Dear Mr Browning,

I hope I am not trespassing on your kindness by sending 3 times as much work as you stipulated. I am anxious to get along, however, and that is my excuse.

I am very glad to hear the doctor gives you such a good report, that this will be therefore be [sic] your last dose of the Marienbad H₂O. I have just finished my 3 services and consequently feel somewhat tired.

Ich lerne Deutsch [in German Gothic script]

That is all I know as yet, and I can't write it a bit

Yours respectfully
George Dyson

PS. Have just received your letter of Saturday, Many thanks. I notice the only correction on one of the sheets is a correction of the Greek given in the book to be translated. I believe there are occasional slips in them.

I am very grateful for the programmes. They are very German. I have got that edition of Schiller, and will get the 'anr' [abbreviation of *anderer* – 'other']. What a fiendish language to write it is. I am at the present time in the middle of an attempt to write out some of the Schiller, but I find German writing rather queer. However, I suppose I shall get over it in time. I should be be [sic] very pleased to read that article on Carissimi etc. I can read a good deal of French with an occasional look at the dictionary, very comfortably.

With best love
George [in Greek]

In the next letter, there are tantalising initials and names, and a heartfelt desire to be at home again:

Blackheath 21.8.1902
Dear Mr Browning,

After 3 weeks of practically unadulterated loneliness, I depart, (DV., WP., God willing and weather permitting, as the prophet Harvey hath it,) [WP might

be Walter Parratt, the rest are unknown] for the salubrious climate of Halifax; There to see my native relatives, friends, and landmarks, and to do as much work as they will permit. You will understand how glad I shall be to leave the metropolis, and it comforts me to know that I shall do so on Monday morning next.

I shall be away for 4 weeks and during that time my address will be

35 Lee Mount Rd,
Halifax

I should be pleased if you would send my exercises and your very interesting letters to that address.

I am booked for a recital there on Sept. 13th in the very fine hall there, yclept [an archaic form of the word 'called' or 'named'] 'Victoria', on a very fine organ in it, belonging to the Corporation of the town. I shall be sure to let you have all the particulars.

With best love

Ever your aorist participle, [aorist – a verb tense in Classical Greek expressing action, but also from Greek ἀοριστός, meaning 'unlimited']

George Dyson

PS. Kindly excuse the note paper

It is amusing to watch Dyson trying to impress OB through his use of words, Classical allusions and news of his advancing career. The Victoria Hall, a concert hall in those days, was a major addition to Halifax's cultural facilities and was built between 1899 and 1901. It was therefore very new when Dyson was asked to give his recital. The organ, built by Hill & Sons, was a fine instrument of four manuals and pedals with forty-eight speaking stops. This vied with the large instrument in the Parish Church for the grandeur and variety of its tonal palette. The organ was opened by the organist of Manchester Cathedral, J. Kendrick Pyne on 26 September 1901. Dyson's invitation to play it shows the local interest in him remaining high, and the fact that he is invited so early shows that Halifax was watching his career with interest, and that he was being rated with the top performers to play on this prestigious new instrument.

The next letter gives some insight into his home life in Halifax, and how much he is enjoying being back with friends and family:

35 Lee Mount Road, Halifax

28.8.1902

Dear Mr Browning,

Although I have not done anywhere near so much work as usual, I feel I must not delay in sending it any longer. You will understand that my preparations for my holiday, my coming here, and my consequent rush of engagements have utterly disorganised my usual methods, and I have found it impossible to do anything seriously as yet. Forgive me.

I hope to commence my usual routine to some extent shortly, and shall thus be able to work on regularly, if I am permitted by my many friends to do so.

I need not say how pleased I am to be at home once more. I found my people all well, and I have spent most of my time as yet, rushing about Hx. on a bicycle, calling on multitudes of people. The weather is rather good for Halifax. It never rains for more than 23 hours a day.

Your letter of Saturday was extremely interesting. I am very pleased to hear

that you think this will be your last dose of the muddy and also (I won't write the word, but it rhymes with muddy) waters of Marienbad.

This is the first moment I have had since I came, but as it is now 2.30am (don't look so reproachfully, for my friends almost pressed me to a jelly to stay even longer). You will excuse this scrawl, to say nothing of the blot.

I hope to write a long letter next time.

Ever your affectionate

George [in Greek]

The same feeling of flow, and of general busyness and happiness is the theme of his next missive just over a week later when he bemoans the fact that he has, once again, not managed to send Greek work for marking. He is also getting ready for his big recital at the Victoria Hall:

35 Lee Mount Rd
Halifax

9.9.1902

Dear Mr Browning,

I trust you will believe me when I say that I am quite ashamed of myself when I have begin [*sic*] to write a letter of apology. I find it impossible to get any appreciable amount of work done at home here, but as this is conformable to all precedent, at least in my experience, I suppose that I really ought to be surprised [*sic*]. Every time I come to Hx I always bring shoals of work, musical and otherwise, and always go away often having been able to do just nothing at all.

I am comforted by the assurance, however, that, as I did work regularly when I had the chance, you will not put down my extreme irregularity now, to laziness, at any rate, not to intentional laziness. I am compelled to say that the little work I have been able to do this last week is not worth troubling you with, and I can do nothing but sincerely apologise.

My great preventative, however, has been something, which you will I'm sure, encourage my paying great attention to, and which is fully set forth on the hand-bill I send. I find posters 10ft. by 6ft. announcing to all whom it may concern, that George Dyson (in letters about 2 ft high and in a far from artistic blue) will do his best to fill the hospitals of the place, on Saturday next. As all the people in Hx are extremely critical, and as everybody in it who has the remotest idea that he is musical, and there [*sic*] name is LEGION, will be there; and as I have, furthermore, put down a very stiff programme, I am doing what I can to make criticism unprofitable. I can assure you that I have had great difficulty in finding a programme that could be at the same time considered classic and popular. I shall see on Saturday, how far I have been able to do so.

We are having splendid weather here, for Halifax, and I am trying to make the best possible use of it. I have had one or two fine cycle rides, by myself though, and this fact made my Cambridge fellow-cyclist very conspicuous in my mind, in so much as absent in body. And it gave me many a twinge of conscience when I thought how I was neglecting my Greek etc.

After my complete week or so of holiday from participles etc. I shall be able to attack it with renewed vigour when I get back to town on Saturday week, and I shall do my best to make up for lost time.

I am reading Ruskin now for the first time. What a wonderful man he was! He is perfectly gorgeous to my mind. May I ask for your opinion of his work?

I have been asked to play at three places of worship on Sunday next. Can you decide for me which I shall go to?

With every apology,
Ever your bound Prometheus,
George

PS. Remember me to Jack

As we have seen in a previous letter, Dyson was given 'Prometheus' by OB to work on, and his signing off here is obviously a reference to the characteristics of the god who had stolen fire from Zeus to give to mortals, thereby kindling creativity in them. Dyson here is obviously seeing OB as Zeus and himself as Prometheus. It is a nice image. The use of the word 'gorgeous' also stands out in this letter as being completely foreign to his normal 'northern' vocabulary (and not apt in this context). Again, there is the sense of him trying to lift his social status by aping words used by people of the class to which he aspires.

Dyson's return to London brought with it a renewed sense of urgency in his studies. He gets straight on to his Greek work for OB and is relieved to find that he still remembers what he had learned the previous term. Of perhaps greater interest is the news that he is to perform Brahms' *Lobgesang* with strings, organ and an augmented choir at the church in Greenwich. This was a special performance for their Harvest Festival. Additionally he reports that Beethoven's *Fidelio* is being worked on at College and 'we get it pretty thick as a rule'.

Dyson will have been playing percussion in the orchestra again and so was involved in many rehearsals. As always, though, it is the signing-off at the end of the letter which is revealing. Here is a nice touch of humour:

I hope this will reach you. If, to perpetuate a 'BULL', it does not, let me know.

Best love to Jack.
Ever your Grecian garçon,
George [in Greek]

On 30 September Dyson was writing again. At this stage of the 'relationship' there is always a good-natured and slightly forward banter which was obviously reciprocated in OB's replies which Dyson did not preserve. This time Dyson was concerned for OB's anonymous friend Jack:

I am sorry to hear that Jack is getting homesick. He ought to do more Classics. They are an excellent thing for all mental diseases except boredom. He is working too hard, I am afraid. Tell him so from me.

I wish I could slip over and give you a call. I have heard one or two good stories that would enliven Jack.

Jack, like Fred and Tree, is more than likely one of OB's acolyte undergraduates who attended on him and surrounded him with his required stimulus of youthful beauty and entertainment. OB collected youth of any sort. H. E. Wortham, in his biography, reported that

O.B. was once walking with an undergraduate through one of the narrow and draughty passages which abound in Cambridge when the sight of a 'piece of childhood' crying on a doorstep stopped his rolling gait and stood 'hove to' like a steamer in a choppy sea. 'What is your name, my boy?' he asked, swaying uneasily, and it was long before he could get any intelligible answer. 'Poor boy, he's hungry', said O.B. at length. 'Let's get him something to eat.' With some

difficulty the boy was hauled off to a cook-shop, where O.B. purchased various comestibles and had them wrapped up in newspaper. By this time he had extracted his entire family history, even down to the names of his brothers and sisters, and was lamenting that there was not more propaganda for the Navy.'

He then went on to espouse the benefits of a career in the navy to the boy. 'You know', he remarked to the undergraduate as they resumed their course ... 'when I walk about Cambridge, I look upon myself as a sort of knight-errant, and I nearly always find some dragon to spear – or some windmill to tilt at' he added with a laugh.²⁷

Of greater moment in Dyson's last letter, perhaps, however, is the news that he is getting on with a new composition: 'I am getting along very well now with my symphonic poem. It will be Dyson's "chef d'œuvre" I think.'

What this work might be is impossible to tell as there is no record of any such work being performed. What is absolutely certain is his insatiable thirst for reading (something which he mentioned many years later in one of his Directorial addresses at College as a personal recollection of his student days). Here he is enthusing about a new book: 'I am reading Hadow's *Studies in Modern Music*. They contain an essay on Musical Criticism which is quite one of the best I have ever read. They are practically new books; have you read them?' And he signs off this time: 'I trust your good weather, health, and versatility will continue to the last thread of my mortal coil, Yours George [in Greek]' – a slightly tortuous conceit, but with sufficient 'cheek' to cause an indulgent smile in Cambridge, without doubt.

The next letter shows that Stanford was indeed linking Dyson with Cambridge:

Blackheath SE

3.10.1902

My dear Mr Browning,

Will you please excuse the fact that my exercises are rather late. I am to have my Trio for Piano, violin and cello performed at a College concert in about a fortnight, and I have been busy revising it and writing parts. Shall you be back in time to be present? I do not know the exact date, but I believe it is the 17th. It promises to go very well. The best three fellows at Coll. will play it. I expect my dad to be in town at the time. I should very much like you to meet. I know father is very anxious to meet you, after your kindness to me.

We had a fine performance of the 'Lobgesang' at church last night. Everything was splendid.

From something which Stanford has said to me, I believe everything is going to work out alright at the R.C.M. for my coming to Cambridge next year, if I have the opportunity. That will be fine. I must not be too sanguine, however.

I trust you are not working too hard, and that your good health is continuing.

With best respects to Jack

Your affectionate organ-grinder

George

Of Cambridge, more a little later. Dyson's Piano Trio in D referred to in that letter was given its first performance on 5 December 1902. This was the first of his works to be heard in a College concert. The premiere was given by Harold Samuel (piano), Haydn Wood (violin) and Arthur Trew (cello), a distinguished line-up, in a mixed programme of music by Beethoven, Brahms, Bach and Fesch. The Trio has long

²⁷ H. E. Wortham, *Oscar Browning* (London: Constable, 1927), 243.

disappeared. All we know about it is that it was in four movements: *Allegro moderato*; *Scherzo–Allegro molto*; *Andante sostenuto*; and *Allegro con fuoco* and that it was obviously music with youthful fire and energy, if the number of *Allegro* movements are anything to go by.

In the meantime, Dyson's correspondence with OB continued apace and apologies were being sent for not keeping up with his Greek exercises due to the amount of musical work he had to get through, including the revision of the parts for his Piano Trio. In fact this letter, written on 13 October 1902 is timed at 1 a.m. (put prominently in the middle of the page and underlined) as if to prove the point. The signing off this time has yet another literary reference: 'Ever your Diogenes, George' (in Greek). The 'Diogenes Club' was Sherlock Holmes' fictional club featured in his story 'The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter' and so another nice literary link-up to his work for OB.

More apologies were being offered in Dyson's letter of 3 November, and another literary reference:

I feel thoroughly ashamed of myself when I think of the number of apologetic letters I have had to write to you during this term. This only keeps 'my feelings' from 'being too much for me' (See Mrs Cluppins [*The Pickwick Papers*]) that I know it is not willingly I am so remiss. I have just had father up for a week, I have 3 recitals during the next fortnight, (one at Leighton) my Trio is to be done on the 13th I think; These things and my ordinary College work have kept me from doing anything more than occasionally looking at my Greek grammar in the train.

I know I must seem very ungrateful, but I simply cannot work regularly during term; for, having two first studies at Coll. I get double the work of most people.

He finishes with another musical enthusiasm: 'You mentioned Max Bruch in your last letter, I think. His best music is, I think, the Fiddle Concertos [*sic*]. (This does not sound like good grammar). There is also a wonderful "Ave Maria" for soprano and orchestra which is quite a masterpiece. I like it the best of his works, as far as I know them.'

On 10 January 1903 Dyson wrote to turn down an invitation he had had from OB for an extended foreign trip:

Allow me to thank you for your letter and for your very handsome invitation. I have delayed writing in reply in the hope I might be able to make such arrangements as would enable me to accept it. I am very sorry to find, however, that I should have to miss the last three weeks of this term at Coll.; and as this period includes one of the most important event [*sic*] of the year, the annual examinations, which, as this may be my last term at Coll. I am very anxious to attend, it will be quite impossible for me to accept your very kind invitation. I am sure I should enjoy the trip tremendously, and am naturally very much disappointed, but I am afraid my participation is impossible. I do not think, moreover, considering the holiday I have just had, that the vicar would countenance my being away from church for so long a period.

The signing-off at the end of these letters is beginning to cool. This one simply has

With reiterated thanks and regrets.
Yours respectfully,
George Dyson

which is far removed from the effusiveness of earlier letters. One senses a 'growing up' going on and some distancing. Signing both his names is in itself quite a reversal.

Then comes the news of his success in the Mendelssohn Scholarship competition and the fact that this will mean any thought of a move to Cambridge is now not possible or, in the circumstances, not what he wants to do.

I am very grateful for your kind congratulations [on the Mendelssohn Scholarship news] and good wishes. Considering the keen competition I am myself rather elated.

As regards my coming to the University, you may not know that this scholarship is only given to me for one year, (owing I believe, to my having a high place on the composition lists at present) and it does, if anything, render my coming to Cambridge rather more uncertain. In fact, I am afraid it will make it impossible, for I shall not be able to afford it, and shall have to set about making a living instead when this expires. I regret it but do not see my way out of it.

With renewed thanks
Yours respectfully
George Dyson

OB wasn't going to give up so easily, however, and he wrote with the news that the organ scholarship at Corpus Christi College was his for the asking if he would commit to it. Dyson's reply is characteristically decided:

30 Ulundi Rd, Blackheath SE
21.V.1903

Dear Mr Browning,

I fully appreciate your so kindly sending me particulars of the Corpus Scholarship, for which, being ignorant of your address in Italy, I was unable to thank you at the time, and also your very interesting letter of the 7th inst ...

I am (also) very sorry to state that, after looking at the matter from every point of view and after conferring with my people at home on the matter, I am compelled to relinquish all hope of becoming a member of Cambridge university, even though I am so fully aware of the influence such a precedence [*sic*] would inevitably have on my career.

When I say that my circumstances utterly prevent me, I trust you will not misunderstand me. I can only thank you for the trouble you have taken on my behalf and the generous way in which you seconded the plans I so hopefully made, and regret that I must now finally abandon them. I shall never cease to be grateful to you for your kind interest in me.

As regards your kind invitation to Cambridge, I at present see no possible likelihood of my being able to accept it owing to my work here, but I am none the less grateful.

Believe me,
Yours respectfully
George Dyson

What a change in mood and expression there is here. But that is nothing compared with his next which was also his last, written on 20 July 1903:

Dear Sir,

I am very sensible of the compliment you paid me by coming to College on Friday and I assure you I was very gratified by it.

I am able to say that the performance was, from the players point of view, admirable; and I only trust the music deserved the care spent in rehearsing the work. Stanford was pleased, and that is a great deal.

I am sorry that owing to the Greenwich trains I had to leave before the conclusion of the programme, and was unable to see you at the time.

Trusting you are well, and with many thanks for the interest you so kindly show,

I remain

Yours respectfully,

George Dyson

It is easy to read too much into these things, but was Dyson deliberately leaving the concert early to avoid having to talk to OB? Look at the salutation 'Dear Sir', and the signing off 'Yours respectfully'. It is notable how these letters cool in their ardour as Dyson grows older and wiser. Realising that Greek was no longer essential for him as he was not to go to Cambridge he now withdrew from OB as politely as he could. He probably realised that he made a bit of a fool of himself, saw through OB slightly too late and began to pull up the drawbridge between them, reverting to a more formal style of address whilst not losing his politeness and gratitude for OB's interest. As a postscript to this period it is worth quoting part of a letter Dyson wrote to his son Freeman on the subject of homosexuality which might help to put the OB saga in context:

And now a word about the sexual problems of life, including the 'homo' variety. I know as much as you have told us about yourself. But my experiences as a boy and youth were far worse than yours. Indeed when I joined the public-school world I knew that whatever might happen inside it, there were still more unclean circles outside. These are just facts, of which neither boarding schools nor day schools, neither the educated nor uneducated have a monopoly.²⁸

Early compositions at the RCM

The performance Dyson refers to in his final letter to OB was his next major chamber work performed at a College concert, the *Concertstück* in C major for piano, flute, clarinet, bassoon and horn. The performers in this premiere of 16 July 1903 were James Friskin (piano), Charles Souper (flute), Arthur Leonard (clarinet), Harold Thornton (bassoon) and George Manners (horn). The work opened the programme which otherwise consisted of music by Brahms, Mozart, Schubert, Liszt, Tchaikovsky and Strauss. The *Concertstück* is now lost but it was regarded sufficiently highly to be chosen to be performed in a Patron's Fund concert on 6 December 1904 at the Aeolian Hall in London. In that programme Dyson anglicised the title to *Concert Piece* in C and there was a full programme note written by the composer Cecil Forsyth. Forsyth was born in 1870 and so was a good deal older than Dyson but was nevertheless studying with Stanford at the same time. Forsyth came from Greenwich and besides being a noted composer (although his works were more or less forgotten after he emigrated to the USA in 1914) he was best known for his books *Music and Nationalism* and

²⁸ Letter from George Dyson to Freeman Dyson, June 1957 (no day given).

Orchestration which, together with *A History of Music* written with Stanford cemented his reputation as a serious commentator on music. Forsyth wrote this about Dyson's *Concert Piece*:

The work opens with a movement marked 'Allegro Risoluto.' A held G in the wood-wind instruments leads with an upward rush to a strongly marked subject announced at the third bar, the horn leading the way. This is continued and enlarged on, a broken rhythm of three semiquavers (first heard in the opening bar) being freely used. When this has been carried to a forte, a short section follows in a continual decrescendo leading to a flowing cantabile subject in A minor, first given to the flute over a continual rippling accompaniment of arpeggios for the piano. At the fifth bar the bassoon takes up the melody and is immediately joined by the clarinet. The music in this section never rises above a mezzo forte, and eventually dies away in a descending passage for the woodwind instruments alone. At the last bar the bassoon is left 'solo' on a low E, and the piano has a soft ascending arpeggio.

Here the double bar is drawn and the key changes immediately from A minor to A major as the horn enters with the pronounced rhythm of the first subject.

The working out section which begins here is so clearly developed from material already heard, that it may safely be left to speak for itself; but before the return of the first subject a new and interesting fragment of tune is heard in the piano, the syncopated rhythm of its first bar giving the hint for a good deal of the succeeding matter.

Little need be said of the rest of the piece, all is so clear. The second subject returns in the key of C minor, and the bassoon here takes precedence of the flute. A brief section marked 'Meno mosso, sotto voce', introduces unexpectedly and happily the short subject which preceded the 'return.' At the eleventh bar the original tempo is resumed, and the work is carried to a brilliant ending.²⁹

The performers on this occasion were Harold Samuel, Gilbert Barton, Charles Draper, Harold Thornton and J. Smith. The frustration of the missing performing material is at least a little mitigated by the programme's full account of the progress of the music. It is also obvious that the structure of the work was so well conceived that it needed little, if any, explanation.

Dyson's next composition to be performed in a College concert after the *Concertstück's* first performance was the Sonata for Violoncello and Piano in A major. It was given its premiere on 11 March 1904 by the cellist Arthur Trew with Dyson himself playing the piano part. This work has already been referred to as being discovered recently amongst the Bedloe papers. The Cello Sonata is one of only two extant student works of Dyson's, and the only one to remain from his time at the RCM. It is particularly fascinating as it shows a remarkable maturity of expression, and an obvious sympathy with the medium. It makes the loss of the other works of this period a point of even greater regret. There are clear resonances of both Brahms' chamber music and Rachmaninov's influential Cello Sonata of 1900. Rachmaninov was only ten years Dyson's senior, having been born in 1873, but his meteoric rise to fame, more as a pianist in the first place than as a composer, brought him an international reputation early in his career. 1900 was the year of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto and his rehabilitation following treatment for the severe depression which

²⁹ Patron's Fund Concert programme, 6 Dec. 1904: *RCM Magazine*.