

## SIR JOHN GOSS

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Sir John Goss may not be the greatest English composer but he is an important figure in the history of music. He was a fine organist and an admired teacher.

He was born on 27 December 1800 in Fareham, a market town between Portsmouth and Southampton, where his father, Joseph, was the organist at the local Parish Church. Some of his antecedents were accomplished singers.

John went to school in Ringwood, close to the New Forest, when he was eight years old. At the age of eleven years, he went to London under the supervision of his uncle, John Jeremiah Goss, who was an alto singer who sang in the choirs of the Chapel Royal, St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. Young John became a singer in the Children of the Chapel Royal, the master of which was



John Stafford Smith, who composed the song *To Anacreon in Heaven* which was later used as the American National Anthem. He was a disciplinarian and took away Goss's score of a Handel Organ Concerto reprimanding him by telling him he was learning to sing.

In 1816, Goss's voice broke and he left the choir and lived with his uncle. John's father was then teaching James Turler who was to become the organist at Westminster Abbey. John became a pupil of Thomas Attwood, organist at St Paul's, who was a kind man and admired by Mendelssohn. Attwood also taught theory and composition as well as orchestration.

To secure an income, Goss joined an opera company under the direction of Henry Bishop taking part in the first British performance of *Don Giovanni* at the King's Theatre in April 1817.

Goss composed *Negro Song* in 1819 for three voices and small orchestra, and a romantic song *Wert thou like me*, to words by Sir Walter Scott, which song he dedicated to his fiancée Lucy Emma Nerd (1800-1895) who he married in 1821.

He took an appointment at Stockwell Chapel, later known as St Andrew's Church, in 1821. Four years later, he was organist at St Luke's, Chelsea at an annual salary of £100 which equates with about £80,000 in today's money,

He composed two overtures in E flat and F minor respectively and incidental music to *The Serjeant's Wife* but he was best known for his songs and glees. From 1827 to 1874, he was professor of harmony at RAM where his pupils included Sullivan, Cowen and Frederick Bridge. Goss entered an anthem *Have mercy upon me, O God* for the Gresham Prize in 1833 which won him the prize. His literary work *An Introduction to Harmony and Thorough Bass* was also published.

The death of Thomas Attwood meant that Goss wanted the post of organist at St Paul's but the salary was only £34 per annum but had other means of income and so Goss considered this favourably. The cathedral did not put any importance on music or its progress and the clergy were not competent ignoring their duties as was the case in many parishes throughout Great Britain. As John Stainer said, Goss was a genuine Christian, a pious man and very gentle which was not helpful in training the choir who were often lazy and argumentative. His anthem *Blessed is the man* was criticised and undermined his confidence but he composed an anthem for the Duke of Wellington's funeral in 1842.

In 1851, Goss set up ways to raise funds for St Paul's organ and put on a performance of Messiah.

His health began to decline in the 1870s and, in 1872, he considered retirement. In February there was a service of thanksgiving for the recovery of the Prince of Wales after his serious illness. Goss composed an anthem The Lord is my strength and a Te Deum. The following year, Stainer took Goss's place.

Goss was knighted upon his retirement.

Goss died in his home in Brixton on 10 May 1880 at the age of 79. His funeral was at St Paul's and he was buried in Kensal Green cemetery. His anthem If we believe was performed at his funeral.

He is best remembered for his hymns; Praise my soul, the King of Heaven and See amid the winter's snow. He also wrote chants including one on Psalm 23 and eight literary works. Most of his works are ecclesiastical works and it is sad that many people object to religious and church music often with irrational vehemence and miss out on some of the finest music ever written.

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