

CHARLES PROCTOR

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The continual over-saturation of a few British composers, particularly Elgar and Britten does a grave injustice to other British composers who are largely ignored.

Such a composer is Charles Proctor and many will ask, Who?

I encountered him when he was a music advisor to the publishing firm of Alfred Lengnick.

He was born in East Finchley, London on 5 April 1906 to parents who came from Lincolnshire. Grandfather Proctor was very keen on music and may have had weekly annual musical evenings and they had a band or music group.

When Charles lived in London, there was often poverty and gloominess, but when his father retired, the family returned to Lincolnshire, to a village called Fleet. However, in his childhood days in London, Charles became a choirboy at St James', Muswell Hill where the organist was a tough character named G D Cunningham, who was also the resident organist at Alexandra Palace.

The boy hated school with the two Miss Goods, one of whom was not, but he had piano lessons with a Miss Penny who lived a few doors away, but his parents eventually did not approve of her and so Charles went to the Muswell Hill Conservatory, a private school run by Edith Hands. The director of studies was one Egerton Lowe and a piano teacher called Helen Ellison taught Charles.

As a boy, Charles used to 'conduct' choirs and orchestras even when he was cycling.

The next development was that Charles' aunt spoke to the music master of Highgate School, F Cunningham Woods. The boy joined this school and its school choir and sometimes was allowed to play the chapel organ. At other concerts, which he attended, he heard the pianists Mark Hambourg and the eccentric Pachmann play. Charles wanted to acquire a scholarship to study at the Royal Academy of Music and, to this end, prepared for this with Rheinberger's Organ Sonata in D minor but was advised to perform Bach' St Anne Fugue which he did. He did not receive the scholarship.

But he did enter RAM, the principal then being Sir Alexander MacKenzie (1857-1935), a rather frightening figure who was a verbal bully and composed about six operas, choral works, a Violin Concerto and the Scottish Concerto for piano and orchestra.

Charles studied harmony with Frederick Corder (1852-1932) who was also difficult. Like Britten, he relished talking about the 'faults' in the works of famous composers and Beethoven in particular, and Britten's condemnation of much of Beethoven's music is ill-judged and prejudicial.

The violin was studied by Proctor under James Lockyer and aural training was with Ernest Read. After Corder retired, Julius Harrison took over his duties and inspired Charles who made several friends including Harry Burley for whom he composed his Viola Sonata and tried to get Lionel Tertis to take an interest in it.

A few months study with Emil von Sauer in Dresden was recommended. Sauer had been a pupil of both Liszt and Rubinstein.

Sauer was 64 and when Proctor went to him he was just 20. Sauer was somewhat vain and very old-fashioned and suffered from anti-German attitudes. He edited the piano works of such composers as Brahms and Schumann and arranged a performance of Proctor's Viola Sonata. Some said that the

sonata stunk and Proctor recalled the famous remark concerning Elgar's Dream of Gerontius which stunk of incense.

Lessons with Sauer were helpful but hard work. The two men often went to the opera and had to stand for hours listening to Wagner.

Back in London, Proctor befriended the composer William Busch, born of German parents, who was a brilliant pianist. Proctor gave piano recitals and his original repertoire consisted of the Appassionata, Brahms' Paganini Variations, Chopin's Polonaise in F sharp minor and Liszt's Mazeppa.

He took up the post of organist and choirmaster at a local parish church for £40 a year plus £1 for a wedding or funeral. He gathered friends together to perform Mendelssohn's Hymn of Praise which was his first experience of conducting.

Proctor seems to have been blessed with aunts. One was a member of the Alexandra Choral and Orchestral Society, originally conducted by Allen Gill who was much loved. This Society was a rival to the Royal Choral Society at the Albert Hall. Proctor, who was becoming very well known, became the deputy and, in the early 1930s, conducted the Dream of Gerontius, Gounod's Redemption, Mendelssohn's Hymn of Praise and Elijah, Bach's B minor Mass, Holst's Choral Symphony and Beethoven's Missa Solemnis.

Then he broke away from this repertoire to stage Boughton's Bethlehem.

There was also the Fairbairn Choir, presided over by T C Fairbairn, who presented several consecutive performances of Hiawatha in June 1935.

Proctor was receiving other assignments. He conducted the North London Orchestral Society in such works as Schumann's Symphony no 1, Beethoven's splendid Piano Concerto no 3 with Busch, Saint Saens Cello Concerto no 1 with Marie Dare and other works.

His hero was the conductor Albert Coates (1882-1953) who was the director of the Royal Philharmonic with whom Proctor was later to work. And there was a time when Proctor deputised for Malcolm Sargent for fourteen concerts at the Albert Hall. Sargent was a showman, or rather a show off, as was Barbirolli and as is Simon Rattle. It is the music that must come first, not the personality or unauthorised alterations of the conductor.

Proctor was neither a martinet nor a show off. All my contacts have referred to him as a kind, patient, understanding and highly competent musician. There is no doubt that he was both an excellent pianist and organist and probably our finest choral conductor and yet he is both forgotten and ignored, and lesser musicians are praised to the heights.

I have received many letters of praise for a performance he gave of the Bach B minor Mass with the LSO. He was awarded an OBE for his services to music.

Healey Willan (1880-1968) was a very fine organist who wrote seven operas, two symphonies, two violin sonatas, an excellent piano concerto in C minor and much choral and organ music. He emigrated to Canada, but Proctor put on a performance of his excellent Song of Praise. Proctor also performed some of his own works such as his Song of England in November 1934 and his Choral Symphony, to texts by Walt Whitman, in April 1939.

In April 1940, Sir Henry Wood asked Proctor to provide and train a Choir for forthcoming Promenade Concerts. Such works included Brahms' superlative Alto Rhapsody, Beethoven's Symphony no 9, Stanford's Songs of the Fleet and John Alden Carpenter's Song of Faith.

Proctor remained an organist in East Finchley then at Wood Green and, in February 1937, he was at St Saviour's, Warwick Avenue and, in 1943 to 1973, he was at St Jude on the Hill in Hampstead, where he met his future wife, Rosemary Rennie, who was the Vicar's daughter. They married on 21 July 1945. She was a sculptor.

During the war, Proctor worked for the War Office usually at nights as a sort of guard and having to carry a gun. In some inactive moments, he worked on his Organ Sonata no 1.

He also had formed the Alexandra Choir which must not be confused with the Alexandra Choral Society. In 1949, he was appointed a professor at Trinity College of Music already having six diplomas, LRAM, ARCM, ARAM, ARCO, FRCO, FRAM covering the years 1930 to 1945. FTCL and FRSA were added in 1958 and 1963. He retired from the Alexandra Choir in December 1978.

He was interested in art and was a fine painter. He spent his final years in Rye and that area of East Sussex playing the organ as required and being a visiting performer elsewhere.

There is so much more that could be written, but I trust that this is sufficient to generate interest in this forgotten but very fine musician. His own music is traditional but not particularly original.

His wife, Rosemary, died on 29 August 1995 and, having heart trouble, Charles died on 26 November 1996. They are buried together in Winchelsea churchyard.

He had a strong High Anglican faith and was a real gentleman. One of the highlights of his life was the visit to Canterbury Cathedral in May 1982 to see Pope Paul II.

He composed much choral music, three works for chorus and orchestra namely A Song of England, Trumpet of God, a motet, and the Choral Symphony, a violin sonata of 1945, a cello sonata, two sonatinas for piano, three organ sonatas, much organ music, a piano concerto in F minor, songs, arrangements and transcriptions.

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