

- REVIEW -

## Hugh Blair: Worcester's Forgotten Organist

Kevin Allen

Kevin Allen,<sup>1</sup> 2019

329 pp.

Hugh Blair is not a man to whom posterity has been kind. As Kevin Allen explains in the Preface to this pioneering biography, he is remembered, if at all, as a composer for a single piece of music; as a conductor for his association with a single festival series; as a champion of new music for his friendship with a single composer, and as an organist for a single (non-musical) weakness. It is Allen's aim to challenge such narrow views, presenting Blair to a modern audience as 'the most distinguished musician to occupy the post of Organist of Worcester Cathedral since Thomas Tomkins'.

Written chronologically, the book traces Blair's path from his childhood in Worcester (where he began his official connection with the Cathedral as articulated pupil to the Organist, William Done) through to his death in a Worthing nursing home in his late sixties. The interests and experiences that emerge in the early chapters show clearly that many of the distinctive characteristics of his maturity were already present in his youth. Particular attention is drawn to the influences of C. V. Stanford, under whose baton he played in the Cambridge University Music Society, and George Garrett, with whom he studied organ and from whom he may also have learnt the rudiments of composition. The subsequent chapters chart his rise from Assistant Organist (to his old teacher, Done) at Worcester Cathedral and his entry to the wider musical life of the city, through his first Three Choirs Festival and resuscitation of the Festival Choral Society, to his eventual appointment as Done's successor as Organist and Conductor and the rapid downfall and resignation which followed. The last chapters deal with his subsequent career, which was spent (after at least one unsuccessful attempt to find work elsewhere) as Organist of Holy Trinity, Marylebone and sometime Borough Organist of Battersea.

This detailed account of Blair's life is interwoven with a record of the developing friendship he enjoyed with Edward Elgar, a friendship convincingly presented (on the evidence of letters and manuscripts) as far more mutually beneficial than traditional views of Elgar might suggest. Another strand of the narrative is provided by Blair's own interest in, and contributions to, modern music. This is demonstrated both by the wide range of contemporary works (often by non-British composers) featuring in his concert programmes and by his own, increasingly large, oeuvre. Again, Allen argues convincingly for Blair's recognition – this time as a significant participant in the development of British music and musical sensibilities at the dawn of the English Musical Renaissance.

There is much to admire in Allen's engaging biography – first and foremost, perhaps, the sheer volume and quality of the research on which it is based. Primary sources include Blair's own manuscripts, writings and correspondence; personal diaries kept by friends and choir members; minutes of the various committees with which he was associated; proceedings of the Cathedral chapter, and reviews provided by the critics of the time. Allen is indisputably fortunate in the amount of documentation that survives from Blair's time in Worcester, but he also makes good use of it to provide what is at times a day-to-day (if not moment-by-moment) account of significant seasons in his subject's life. For example, the story of Blair's first Three Choirs Festival as conductor (held in Worcester in 1894) begins with the meeting at which he was appointed, and is told through quotations from committee reports, extracts from the diaries of performers and festival-goers, and reviews from the local and national press. Allen's concluding discussion of the success of the Festival includes extracts from *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, the *Worcester Chronicle*, *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Musical Times*. Here, as in most of the rest of the book, the effect of the contemporary accounts is pleasing; the vivid sense of time and place they provide is one of its most memorable features. Only occasionally is the reader moved to wonder whether some of the longer quotations could have joined Blair's own article for the 1894 Festival in the Appendix.

Given Blair's steady rise to fame in Worcester, it might have been tempting to present him as a musical hero, but Allen is careful to avoid a hagiographical treatment of his subject. The many favourable reviews Blair received are balanced

not only by the juxtaposition of opposing critical reactions, but also by accounts of his disputes with the Cathedral authorities and, in particular, hints of his growing dependence on alcohol. Allen's treatment of this last issue is balanced and sensitive (if occasionally lacking in the detail he leads the reader to expect in the Preface), and his conclusion that its roots lie in the pressures of Blair's working life seems eminently reasonable in the light of the feverish activity documented in the narrative.

The more analytically-minded may be disappointed by the lack of in-depth treatment of Blair's compositions, but the book (wisely) does not attempt to be a 'life and works' study of Blair the composer. Too narrow a focus on this aspect of his work in a first full biography might have detracted from the presentation of his other, at least equally important, contributions to the musical culture of his times. Instead it offers a rounded study of a multi-faceted musical personality set in a satisfyingly broad musical and socio-historical context, and this attention to wider issues will make it valuable not only to musicians but also to more general students of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For the most part the text is accurate and easy to read, marred only by a few typographical errors and a handful of sentences that do not (at least in a first reading) appear to make sense. Readability is further enhanced by the use of footnotes rather than endnotes. The avoidance of abstruse technical vocabulary supports Allen's aim to bring his subject's name before a wider public, and where a contemporary account includes a term which is now out of use, an explanation is usually provided. Given the level of detail in the rest of the text, it is surprising that specifications for the two new organs Blair helped plan (one for Worcester, one for Battersea Town Hall) are not included in either text or Appendix. This will frustrate organists and historians alike, as both organs were built by early exponents of the emerging electrical system. That said, such appendices as there are contain a wealth of useful and interesting material, in particular a list of Blair's compositions and arrangements (with publication details where known), and programme details for all his concerts with the Worcester Festival Choral Society. The sixteen photographs in the centre of the book are well-chosen, and the clerical portraits are

particularly useful in that they convey strong impressions of the personalities on whom Blair's livelihood at Worcester depended.

It is a tribute to Allen's presentation of the Worcester years that the only major disappointment in reading the book as a whole is the lack of equally detailed coverage of Blair's life after leaving the Cathedral city; the eleven years of his adult life spent there account for some seven chapters, while the remaining twenty-plus years are dealt with in the final two chapters. Admittedly, the inclusion of 'Worcester' in the title suggests some degree of geographical limitation, but it may also be the case that Blair's subsequent life generated far less primary source material, not least because his provincial fame did not translate particularly well to the larger world of the capital. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that if further research brings additional source material to light, Blair's contributions to the musical life of Holy Trinity, Marylebone and the borough of Battersea (both just as forgotten as his work in Worcester) will form the subject of another book by the same author. This reviewer, for one, would welcome such a volume.

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Endnote:

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