

- REVIEW -

The Royal College of Music and Its Contexts: An Artistic and Social History

David C. H. Wright
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361 pp.

Founded in 1883, London's Royal College of Music (RCM), it could be argued, constitutes the single most significant musical institution in Britain in terms of the influence it has exerted on British music and culture. The list of composers and performers it nurtured during its first 50 years alone is a veritable Who's Who in English music, and includes, among others, Herbert Brewer, Frank Bridge, Benjamin Britten, Percy Buck, George Butterworth, Clara Butt, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Ivor Gurney, Gustav Holst, Herbert Howells, John Ireland, E. J. Moeran, Herbert Sumsion, Michael Tippett, and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Its history is a rich tapestry woven together from disparate strands; as a result, a forensic and focused approach is required in order to get at the facts, simply because of the number of people and organisations with which it was engaged. Laced with scandals, and household names from every walk of life from the nineteenth century onwards, the story of the RCM is laden with interest for the inquisitive student of British music history. It chronicles the rebirth of British art music at the end of the nineteenth century, and its establishment on the world stage at the start of the twentieth century, through to the pluralistic approach adopted in the new millennium. Inevitably, this presents the historian with a daunting task, particularly in today's world of short print runs and concise word limits, where it is rarely possible to set out an institutional history on an adequate canvas.

David Wright's monograph is the fourth history to be written by in-house authors who were directly connected to the RCM, either as staff or students, from 1933 onwards. It is the first substantial history to be published. After a career in

conservatoire administration, Wright taught at the RCM between 1997 and 2010, finally becoming Reader in the Social History of Music. Since retirement, he has continued to be involved at the RCM as an honorary research fellow. He has published widely on the social and cultural history of music in London, and his research covers a period from the 1870s through to 2020. Wright's history is an overview of the College's work during the long nineteenth century and is part of the Cambridge University Press series titled as 'Music Since 1900', of which Arnold Whittall is General Editor. Set out in three sections, the first covers the directorate of Sir George Grove and the RCM's foundation through to the end of the First World War and the death of Sir Hubert Parry. The second covers the work of directors Sir Hugh Allen, Sir George Dyson, and Sir Ernest Bullock; while the final period is divided into two parts, dealing with the last sixty years from 1960, and the respective reigns of Sir Keith Falkner, Sir David Willcocks, Michael Gough Matthews, Dame Janet Ritterman, and the incumbent, Colin Lawson.

It is telling that Wright felt the need to draw up a formal letter of agreement with his former employer 'to safeguard [his] scholarly independence' (p. xiv) in recording the final period of the College's history. It calls into question whether the study of events from the immediate past constitutes history *per se*; consequently, a more balanced analysis has been sacrificed for the sake of completeness, when an earlier cut-off might have permitted Wright to present a more distilled and detailed account.

In taking what he describes as a 'biographical approach' to the study of an institutional subject—in other words, engaging with the RCM history thematically rather than chronologically—I fear Wright may have gone too far. The presentation of information is often haphazard with important dates omitted; as a result, it would be heavy weather for the uninitiated reader to gain a clear understanding of the history. For example, it is only on p. 145 that he clearly articulates the original purpose in founding the RCM. In addition, there is little new material in the first section: the scandal concerning Henry Holmes, the appointment of professors, the Samson Fox scandal, the building (including problems with soundproofing), Grove's leadership, the curriculum, Stanford's teaching style and character, and so on, have

already been recorded in greater detail by other authors in earlier publications and theses too numerous to mention here.

In representing ‘the legion of relatively unsung [...] former students, who very quietly [...] improved the quality of British musical life’ (pp. 17; 149f), and ‘outliers’ (p. 151)—that is, students whose level of attainment was not predicted at the outset of their studies—he has added significantly to the history. He has also brought together a number of worthy anecdotes from the autobiographies and biographies of former students, which give the reader an insider’s view into student life at the RCM.

There are, however, some notable omissions and misconceptions. Wright claims that the RCM’s new building was ‘set for completion in May, 1892’ (p. 117); however, there were a number of delays, and it was not finally opened until 2 May 1894.¹ A summary of the important role of the RCM in the foundation of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) in 1889 is entirely absent from Wright’s account, which is unfortunate, as an opportunity has been missed to correct the information contained in his earlier book, *The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music: A Social and Cultural History* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013), concerning the ABRSM’s foundation. The role of RCM composers in providing music for the Coronations of four British monarchs would have made a compelling and attractive addition to this history but this, too, has been omitted, and it seems that, too often, Wright gets bogged down in the administrative and financial history which takes precedence for him over the music. It might also have been good to have seen how the post-war proliferation of residential music degrees (BA, MA, PhD &c.) at Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, and London, from 1946 affected the fortunes of the RCM in being able to attract and retain students of the highest calibre. Finally, there is very little close comparison between the RCM and other conservatoires in London, Europe or elsewhere in terms of student success, the curriculum, repertoire, and facilities that each offered; indeed, he omits to provide any clear justification for the RCM in principle.

Social historians Frank Howes, Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes, among others, have viewed the RCM as the engine of the English Musical Renaissance (p.

12). Ever the revisionist, Wright claims, however, that ‘more meaningful historical perspectives into the condition of British music in this period [have] been impeded by the way that the English Musical Renaissance idea continues to be referenced as a default historical setting’ (p. 13). His complaint, that its ‘composer-centric perspective [...] implies a dearth of musical life’ (p. 12), misses the point. Put simply, quantity was no substitute for quality. Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, professor of composition at the RCM from 1883 to 1924, described the English musical landscape in the period leading up to the RCM’s foundation as ‘a half-century of barren mediocrity’ (p. 35), and Wright presents no compelling evidence to the contrary. As the history makes clear, there is no escaping the fact that institutional music education of the quality found on the Continent, notably in France and Germany, was simply not available in England for most of the nineteenth century. From 1843, the steady stream of English musicians, including Sullivan, Stanford, and Franklin Taylor, who availed themselves of a Leipzig education, either at Mendelssohn’s *Hochschule für Musik* or privately, supports this perspective, and undermines Wright’s assertion that the dearth of indigenous art music in the mid-nineteenth century was caused primarily because it was financially inexpedient for British composers to write symphonies, as if this were their primary motivation.² Given the views expressed by Stanford, it is not surprising that an English concert-going public would need some convincing before they might be willing to attend concerts of art music composed by home-grown talent. This is precisely the situation the founders of the National Training School for Music (NTSM), and its successor, the RCM, were determined to alleviate; indeed, it had been the original intention that the NTSM and RCM would set the standard of musical taste,³ an aspect of the RCM’s remit that would cause it to come under fire at the turn of the twentieth century as administrator of the Patron’s Fund ‘to encourage native composers and artists’ (p. 93ff). It would have been useful to have had this aspect of the RCM’s remit fleshed out a little more.

The foundation of a government-funded national academy of music in England, similar to the Paris Conservatoire, had been a personal initiative promoted by the Prince of Wales from 1861,⁴ not in 1878 as Wright’s account suggests (p. 6). It was

the Prince of Wales, who had succeeded his father as patron of the Society of Arts from 1861, and who charged Sir Henry Cole, as Chairman of the Society's Council, to found a national academy of music, initially with the idea of reforming the Royal Academy of Music (RAM) on the South Kensington Estate, following the financial success of the Society's Great Exhibition in 1851.⁵ Cole was *l'homme du jour*: the 1851 Exhibition had been his brainchild; he had also invented the Christmas card and pioneered the Penny Post. The plan to move the RAM to Kensington failed for two reasons. Cole petitioned the Treasury for financial assistance before the scheme had been properly thought through. While the Treasury agreed to grant the RAM £500 a year, it only served to incense members of the music profession who viewed the RAM as moribund, 130 of whom wrote in protest to the Department of Science and Art to demand the establishment of a new national conservatoire and English opera school.⁶ The RAM was invited to move to premises on the Kensington Estate, provided it implemented Cole's radical proposals to transform it into an effective institution. This required funds it simply didn't possess, and it was this, rather than any recalcitrance on the part of its principal, Sir William Sterndale Bennett,⁷ that gave the RAM little choice but to 'maintain itself on its own terms' (p. 4).

Wright lays the blame for the NTSM's failure squarely at the feet of its first principal, Sir Arthur Sullivan, whom he says was over-committed as a composer and provided 'inadequate leadership', but the situation was far more complex than his account suggests (p. 5). Cole's notoriously autocratic management style undermined his relationships with Sullivan and other members of the committee of management, while an irascible temperament failed to attract the required funding to support an institution maintained entirely by public subscription; as a result, he was forced to petition the 1851 Commissioners for funds in 1878 to prevent the NTSM's closure.⁸ In addition, each member of the committee of management, including its chairman, the Duke of Edinburgh, was asked to make a personal donation in order to secure the NTSM's survival. Fearing financial embarrassment for the royal family, the Prince of Wales stepped in. This is not included in Wright's account.

The original RCM prospectus, drawn up by Lord Charles Brudenell-Bruce (1834-1897) on behalf of the Prince of Wales was, by any reckoning, far-reaching. The RCM was intended to absorb both the RAM and the NTSM, but far from merely emulating the Paris Conservatoire, it was intended to go much further, and, not least, to fill the 'obvious *lacunæ* in the curricula of foreign conservatories' (p. 34). The prospectus placed the RCM at the head of the music profession in England with powers to regulate university degrees, rather as the General Medical Council had been founded (in 1858) to regulate the medical profession.⁹ Its royal charter gave it the right to award degrees (BMus, MMus—the first of its kind—and DMus) and was the only institution other than the universities at that time permitted to do so. (The RCM MMus was first awarded in 1948, but the BMus and DMus were finally awarded in the 1990s.) While some of these ideas did not make it off the drawing board, they give a clear idea of what the founders had in mind in terms of the status they intended to bestow upon the new College. The idea, then, that the appointment of Sir George Grove as the RCM's first director 'fuelled suspicion that the College was a plaything of its aristocratic backers [or] a finishing school for drawing-room amateurs' isn't supported by the facts (p. 34). While Grove was not a professional musician, he was an administrator and fund-raiser *par excellence*, which Wright later acknowledges, having managed the Crystal Palace orchestral concerts from 1852. His work as a musicologist, writing articles for his eponymous *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, was far ahead of its time.¹⁰

The establishment of an opera school had been the bedrock of Grove's RCM manifesto in 1881; the first of its kind in the UK, it established the RCM's supremacy. While Wright includes several amusing anecdotes, mostly illustrating a number of slip-ups in various early RCM opera performances, he omits to mention that between 1885 and 1895, some 18 operas were performed under Stanford's direction, each favourably reviewed in *The Musical Times*, including British premieres of Cornelius' *The Barber of Baghdad* (in 1891), Schumann's *Genoveva* (1893), and Delibes' *Le Roi l'a dit* (1894).¹¹ Significantly, following Carl Rosa's death in 1889, and with the exception of an enforced break caused by the First World War, it was the RCM's opera class that ensured the survival of opera in

England until the foundation of the Sadler's Wells Opera Company in 1931.¹² It would have been good if a more focused and detailed study of this important and appealing area of the RCM's work had been included. Given the success of the opera school, perhaps the most extraordinary omission here is any mention of the approach to the teaching of singing.

For me, Wright's account represents a missed opportunity to relate an engaging and informative history of one of Britain's most important musical institutions. In the right hands, such a history could have appealed to a wide variety of readers from the lover of Parry's *Jerusalem* and the Classic FM chart, through to the seasoned academic. Given the approach that Wright has chosen to adopt, where an almost obsessive occupation with the accounts and dry administrative machinations all too sparingly elicits a really valuable piece of information, it makes me wonder what audience he and Cambridge University Press had in mind. The eye-watering price of £90, which may account for the absence of a richer selection of illustrations, will, I fear, make it less appealing still to a wide market.

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Endnotes:

¹ "State Opening of the Royal College of Music", *Times* (UK), 3 May 1894.

² G. W. E. Brightwell, "'One Equal Music': The Royal College of Music, its inception and the Legacy of Sir George Grove 1883-1895" (PhD diss., University of Durham, 2007), 1:13.

³ NTSM Committee of Management Minutes, 001/1, 157, RCM Archive.

⁴ Society of Arts, Council Minutes, 22 May 1861.

⁵ Henry Cole, "The Proposed National Institutions at Kensington" *Journal of the Society of Arts* 1, no. 50 (4 November 1853): 611, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41323505>.

⁶ Extract from Appendix A to Fifteenth Report of the Science and Arts Department (1868), 1872/11318, Royal Archives: Queen Victoria's Private Papers.

⁷ William Sterndale Bennett Private Papers, 13 August 1866, RAM Archive.

⁸ Sir William Anderson, letter to Earl Spencer, 7 July 1877 (1851 Commission Archive, Imperial College, London).

⁹ Brightwell, 1:89.

¹⁰ Michael Musgrave, "The Making of a Scholar: Grove's Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Schubert", in *George Grove, Music and Victorian Culture*, ed. Michael Musgrave (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 86f.

¹¹ Brightwell, 2:304.

¹² Brightwell, 1:151.