

Bach's Unsung Champion: Sir Henry J. Wood

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'What time I had for myself I gave to the study of Bach—*dear John Sebastian Bach*'.¹

Bach at the Proms

Described as 'one of the most remarkable musicians Britain has produced',² Sir Henry J. Wood has been credited with creating a 'new epoch in English musical life' at the turn of the twentieth century.³ As the 'maker of the Proms',⁴ he is chiefly associated with the annual concert series that, from 1895, changed the social and cultural parameters of concert-going in Britain.⁵ Such achievements have been well-documented, but Wood's contribution to the English Bach awakening, particularly through the Proms, has warranted a full assessment.⁶

More specifically, his introduction and popularisation of the Brandenburg Concertos and Orchestral Suites have received little attention in recent scholarship, with research into the English Bach awakening focusing primarily on

Full references to standard Bach literature, and abbreviations used in *Understanding Bach*, 12 (2017) can be found at bachnetwork.co.uk/ub12/ub12-abbr.pdf.

- ¹ Sir Henry Wood in Jessie Wood, *The Last Years of Henry J. Wood* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1954), 17.
- ² Arthur Jacobs, 'Wood, Sir Henry J.', *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press) www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/30538 (accessed on 16 December 2013).
- ³ Rosa Newmarch, *Henry J. Wood* (London: London Lane, 1904), 72.
- ⁴ Arthur Jacobs, *Henry J. Wood: Maker of the Proms* (London: Methuen, 1994). The phrase 'the Proms' is used throughout my research to denote the main Promenade Concert season.
- ⁵ See Paul Kildea, 'The Proms: An industrious Revolution'; Leanne Langley, 'Building an Orchestra, Creating an Audience: Robert Newman and the Queen's Hall Promenade Concerts, 1895–1926'; and Jenny Doctor 'A New Dimension: The BBC Takes on the Proms', in Jenny Doctor, Nicholas Kenyon and David Wright (eds.), *The Proms: A New History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 10–31, 32–73 and 74–129. For further reading, also see W. W. Thompson, 'The Story of the Proms', in Ralph Hill and C. B. Rees (eds.), *Sir Henry Wood: Fifty Years of the Proms* (London: BBC, 1944), 3–13; and David Cox, *The Henry Wood Proms* (London: BBC, 1980), 9–139.
- ⁶ My PhD dissertation was titled 'The Role of Sir Henry J. Wood in the English Bach Awakening: Orchestral Bach at the Proms 1895–1944' (University of Leeds, 2014); however, *J. S. Bach's Unsung Champion: Sir Henry J. Wood* (forthcoming), will expand my research to include Wood's interpretation of large-scale vocal works and his arrangements of cantata arias for concert use.

Bach's keyboard, solo and choral works.⁷ However, Wood's introduction of the Bach orchestral repertoire to English audiences was highlighted and commended during his lifetime; as Sir Jack Westrup suggested in 1943:

The widespread enthusiasm for Bach's music in present-day England is due in the first instance to nineteenth-century musicians—to Samuel Wesley (1766–1837), who was active in making known the keyboard works, to Otto Goldschmidt (1829–1907), who founded the Bach Choir ... and to Sir Joseph Barnby (1838–96), who instituted annual performances of the 'St John Passion' at St Anne's Church, Soho. The study of Bach's choral works ... [has been undertaken by] Sir Hugh Allen (b. 1869) at Oxford and in London, and W. Gillies Whittaker (b. 1876) at Newcastle and Glasgow; while Sir Henry Wood at the 'Proms' has familiarised hundreds of music-lovers with the concertos and suites.⁸

It is significant that Westrup specifically cited the Prom performances of the Brandenburg Concertos and Orchestral Suites as the lasting contribution made by Wood to the promotion of Bach, over his work in any other concert series.⁹ Through them, consistency and change in programming 'orchestral Bach' may be measured against the social, political and practical constraints placed upon the festival. Ultimately, the Proms were designed to make the greatest public impact, and Westrup's identification of their importance is therefore indicative of Wood's success in bringing the Bach orchestral repertoire to the attention of the widest possible audience—and creating a 'vast concourse of Bach lovers'.¹⁰

Wood was aware of the fact that his name was synonymous with the Proms when he wrote:

- ⁷ Michael Kassler (ed.), *The English Bach Awakening. Knowledge of J. S. Bach and his Music in England, 1750–1830* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004). The 'Index of Bach's Compositions' (p. 449) notes that 'No reference to any of Bach's compositions in the following classes is known to have been made in England before 1831: ... Concertos (BWV 1041–1065); Overtures and Symphonies (BWV 1066–1071).' Bach's orchestral repertoire is generally absent from literature such as Harry Haskell, *The Early Music Revival: A History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), or Nicholas Kenyon (ed.), *Authenticity and Early Music: A Symposium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Wood's contribution is not recognised in Nicholas Temperley and Peter Wollny, 'Bach Revival', *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press) www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/01708 (accessed 28 January 2014), or in publications which address the Bach revival, such as Don O. Franklin (ed.), *Bach Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Daniel Melamed (ed.), *Bach Studies 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), or George B. Stauffer, 'Changing issues of performance practice', in John Butt (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 203–17.
- ⁸ Jack A. Westrup, *British Music* (Edinburgh: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 22. See also Cyril Edwin M. Joad, 'Queen's Hall was my Club', in *Sir Henry Wood: Fifty Years of the Proms*, 51–6.
- ⁹ Westrup selects Wood's orchestral performances of Bach at the Proms above his exhaustive work on choral works at major festivals—for which he made new editions and published notes on interpretation. The Proms—as opposed to the regular Saturday Symphony Concerts and Sunday Orchestral Concerts, or specific festivals—are therefore the parameter for my research; they are a complete and quantifiable source of information. On the importance and meaningfulness of setting such parameters, see Martin Zenck, 'Bach Reception: some concepts and parameters', in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, 219–20.
- ¹⁰ Henry J. Wood, *About Conducting* (London: Sylvan Press, 1945), 29.

I am regarded as the 'Conductor of the Promenade Concerts' and that only. I often wonder what they think I do with myself for the other ten months of the year! Perhaps this book [*My Life of Music*] will do something towards telling them.¹¹

Thus, whilst acknowledging that Wood's career encompassed considerably more musical events than just the Prom seasons, they remain a barometer for measuring influence.

Wood's specific approach to programming 'orchestral Bach' is identifiable in the detail of surviving Proms programmes.¹² Four chronological divisions (1895–1914; 1915–26; 1927–39; 1940–44) reflect periods in which trends in programming the sub-types of 'orchestral Bach' can be observed. They are principally defined by changes of management and the challenges of war-time conditions. Furthermore, the statistics reveal themes in programming strategies—including the day on which Bach's music was heard and particular approaches to programme design. Finally, identification and contextualisation of specific soloists employed in the performance of Bach allows the observation of continuity and change in orchestral sound, and the extent to which individuals were either synonymous with the repertoire or used to introduce it.

'Orchestral Bach'

The repertoire examined as 'orchestral Bach' in my research not only includes the Brandenburg Concertos and Orchestral Suites, but also Wood's orchestral arrangements. The former were identified as Bach's 'only purely orchestral pieces' by W. Gillies Whittaker in 1927,¹³ and are thus differentiated from the solo (and multiple-solo) concertos which Wood also promoted. Wood's significant contributions to 'orchestral Bach' include:

1. The programming of all the Brandenburg Concertos (BWV 1046–1051) and Orchestral Suites (BWV 1066–1069) at the Proms between 1895 and 1944;
2. Two recordings of Brandenburg Concertos amongst a modest catalogue of recorded performances: the first complete commercial recording (1930) of No. 6 (BWV 1051), and the 1932 recording of No. 3 (BWV 1048);
3. An edition of Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 for Boosey & Hawkes in 1944, part of a larger editorial project in the last years of Wood's life;

¹¹ Henry J. Wood, *My Life of Music* (London: Gollancz, 1938), 215.

¹² London, British Library, Collection of programmes: Henry Wood (1898–1944) X.435/115 and Music Collections h.5470.a; London, The Royal Academy of Music: Henry Wood Promenade Concerts (1895–1973): A collection of 51 volumes and 4 magazine files; Caversham, The BBC Written Archive, BBC Promenade Concerts (1927–) PUBS 9: a complete set of programme books for the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts under the auspices of the British Broadcasting Corporation since 1927 (33rd season). Paper copies of programmes were consulted in conjunction with the online BBC Proms Archive.

¹³ William Gillies Whittaker, 'Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685–1750', in Hubert J. Foss (ed.), *The Heritage of Music*, I (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 43.

4. Performances of orchestral arrangements of Bach that promoted Wood's distinctive 'Bach sound'. These include Wood's own versions of the Toccata in F (BWV 540), Toccata and Fugue in D minor (BWV 565), and his compilations of two Orchestral Suites No. 5 and No. 6, comprising dance movements drawn from various Bach organ and violin works.¹⁴

The Sir Henry Wood Archive is held at the Royal Academy of Music. It was donated by Wood in 1938 and it comprises a particularly substantial collection of scores and orchestral parts, the vast majority of which are marked up by the conductor. When my doctoral research began, those pertaining to Bach had neither been studied nor fully catalogued, and they uncover a wealth of information regarding Wood's tastes and performing practices.¹⁵ An examination of the Orchestral Suites and Brandenburg Concertos offers a focus on three distinct source types: Wood's personal, marked-up copies of published editions; his recordings; and his editorial work (in both manuscript and print). Three specific case studies highlight the chronological approach to his interpretation of the repertoire. First, the published editions Wood used, edited by Felix Weingartner, Felix Mendelssohn, Ferdinand David, Hans von Bülow and Felix Mottl, reveal the impact of received traditions on his own performances, specifically Orchestral Suite No. 2 (BWV 1067) and Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 (BWV 1047). Second, Wood's recordings of Brandenburg Concertos Nos. 3 (1932) and 6 (1930) show the extent to which his recorded interpretations differed from his contemporaries: Eugene Goossens, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Alois Melichar, Alfred Cortot, Adolf Busch and Paul Schmitz. Third, evidence of a project to edit a set of the Brandenburg Concertos in the published, and highly prescriptive, Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 (Boosey, 1944) and in manuscript copies of Nos. 1, 5 and 6, reveals Wood's continuing desire to educate musicians at the end of his life.

Orchestral Arrangements

An understanding of Wood's approach to performing Bach cannot be reached without consideration of his orchestral arrangements, as they display the influences on the orchestral sounds that Wood sought. However, Jacobs noted that 'a distinction should nevertheless be made between Wood the moderniser, adding to the baroque orchestra what was not already in it, and Wood the transcriber for orchestra of works originally written for a keyboard instrument'.¹⁶ It is therefore important to distinguish between Wood the interpreter of cantata

¹⁴ Wood's Orchestral Suite No. 5 in G is his own compilation of movements selected from the organ works, BWV 592/1, 528/2 and 530/1. It differs from Orchestral Suite in G minor that was originally thought to be composed Bach, and catalogued by Schmieder as BWV 1070, but excluded by Bessler from the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* and now listed among works of dubious authenticity (*Werke zweifelhafter Echtheit*). See *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* VII/1, *Kritischer Bericht*, 11. Wood's Orchestral Suite No. 6 was also his own compilation of dance movements selected from BWV 848/1, 992/3, 827/6, 811/5+6, 867/1 and 1006/1, created in 1916.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Kathryn Adamson, Head Librarian at the Royal Academy of Music for her patience and assistance in this.

¹⁶ Jacobs, *Henry J. Wood*, 231.

arias prepared for Prom performances and Wood the arranger of 'orchestral Bach' works, especially with regard to contemporary opinion of his performances. Wood's specific Bachian sound-world may be observed through analysis of his purely orchestral arrangements—both in isolation and by comparison with other arrangers. A chronological development of his style and contribution to the genre may be seen through three examples. First, Wood's relatively conservative 1913 version of the Toccata in F (BWV 540), which highlights his own educational process as he expanded the arrangement made by Heinrich Esser. Second, his self-styled Orchestral Suite No. 6 (1916), which not only completes a set of Orchestral Suites to partner the six Brandenburg Concertos but also presents innovations in orchestration previously unseen in the established field of orchestrally-arranged Bach suites. Finally, a comparison of Wood's 1929 arrangement of the Toccata and Fugue in D minor (BWV 565) with Leopold Stokowski's arrangement of the same piece (1927), which serves to highlight the conceptual differences between rival arrangers.

The St Matthew Passion and other large-scale vocal works

Although my research initially focused on Wood's contribution to the popularisation of Bach through orchestral works, consideration of his approach to large-scale vocal works, particularly the St Matthew Passion, is crucial to his profile as a Bach interpreter. It is no coincidence that Wood's concerns about only being considered the conductor of the Proms, cited above, constitute the opening words of his chapter on Bach's St Matthew Passion. Within his memoirs it is the only chapter devoted to music outside the season, and a focus on a single work, stressing his specific emphasis on Bach; moreover, Lady Jessie Wood noted that 'to him [it was] almost the *raison d'être* of the book.'¹⁷ Through it Wood investigates the inspiration for his interpretations of the work. Whether given as just single arias at the Proms, or in full at major festivals in cities such as Sheffield or Birmingham, these were performances that were both epic in proportion and scrupulous in detail.

The Royal Academy of Music archive contains a number of copies of the full score of the St Matthew Passion, each signed by Wood, but none of them constitutes his fully marked up conducting score. However, such detail can be gleaned from the vocal scores, hundreds of which are marked up in Wood's hand. Conflating the instructions from individual voice parts gives a clear set of dynamic, textural and rhetorical instructions for Wood's desired effects in performance, many of which are unexpected considering the forces and resources available to him. Wood wrote at length about the challenges of performing Bach with large numbers of musicians, whether more philosophically in his memoirs or very specifically in booklets prepared on the major works for singers. However, he was ultimately a practical conductor, and the adaptations he made 'for festival use' are indicative of his conscious decisions made in order to let the music speak in bringing it to the widest possible audience.

¹⁷ Jessie Wood, *The Last Years of Henry J. Wood*, 17.

Wood in the English Bach Awakening

Wood's role in promoting Bach was crucial to both the English Bach awakening and the evolving concert scene. His impact may be seen clearly against the information contained in the 1896 writings of Frederick George Edwards on Bach reception—a useful indicator of public perception at the outset of the Proms.¹⁸ His incorporation of 'orchestral Bach' into concert hall programmes on a more general scale (whether in original versions, orchestral arrangements or excerpts from large-scale works) strengthened the notion of the 'Three Bs' in Britain, and his symphonic treatment of the repertoire positions Bach as the foundation of modern orchestral concert programming in the first decades of the twentieth century. Although Wood was credited by his contemporaries for the part he played in 'the cause of bringing the music of the eighteenth-century composers into line with modern tradition', and for the 'power of expressing the innate vigour of the older music to ears which probably began their musical experiences with Wagner and Tchaikovsky',¹⁹ reviewers were often highly critical of his approach. Whilst some objected to his tempos, lack of harpsichord continuo, or ornamentation, the most frequent criticisms related to the perceived liberties he took with the scores.²⁰ In 1936 when A. H. Fox-Strangways suggested that 'serious promenaders may well be worried with the problem of salvaging what is genuine Bach from these gargantuan fortnightly wrecks',²¹ he summed up the feelings of numerous critics who were concerned that Wood was 'only half aware of the difference between Bach's orchestra and Wagner's'.²² Many thought that Wood had gone too far, adding instruments 'ruthlessly' and 'destroying all sense of lines'.²³ Despite Wood's Bach interpretations being characterised as 'a temporary elephantiasis',²⁴ closer examination of primary sources such as programmes, marked scores, manuscripts and recordings enables reassessment of his specific performing instructions and practices employed in interpretation. My research examines representatives of various source types within Wood's Bach repertoire in order to challenge several contemporary opinions, and also addresses the seeming dichotomy between what he thought (and wrote) and what he went on to perform. Another overlooked avenue is Wood's public lecture 'John Sebastian Bach: The times he lived in and his life's work', which he gave in Nottingham on 17 July 1901. Although incomplete scripts survive, Bach literature from his personal library can be identified which shows both his

¹⁸ Frederick G. Edwards, 'Bach's Music in England', *The Musical Times*, 37/643 (September 1896), 585–7; *The Musical Times*, 37/644 (October 1896), 652–7; *The Musical Times*, 37/645 (November 1896), 722–6; *The Musical Times*, 37/646 (December 1896), 797–800.

¹⁹ Anon., 'Bach at the Promenades: Some points at issue', *The Times* (13 August 1932), 6.

²⁰ See, for example, *ibid.*, or Anon., 'Promenade Concerts: Bach-Wood', *The Times* (22 August 1940), 6.

²¹ Sydney Grew and A. H. Fox-Strangways, 'Notes and Comments', *British Musician and Musical News*, 13 (October 1936), 217–18.

²² Frank Howes, 'London Concerts', *The Musical Times*, 70 (September 1929), 843.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Anon., 'Promenade Concert', *The Times* (14 August 1930), 8.

knowledge and enthusiasm for the composer and offer clues as to the missing content.

Wood's contribution to the English Bach awakening can be re-evaluated in light of the detail afforded by the examination of his scores, recordings and editions. By considering public and scholarly perception of Bach at the end of Wood's life, I suggest reasons for the historical lack of recognition for Wood's propaganda on behalf of the composer. In short, once Bach was firmly established in the repertory, Wood's contribution was forgotten because it had served a particular educative purpose. His interpretations did not leave a lasting impression—the impact had been in *what* he had done rather than *how* he had done it.

The discovery of Bach is, after all, an affair of a mere generation, and the present enthusiasm is the natural fruition of the seeds sown by Mendelssohn in Germany and the Wesleys and Benjamin Jacob in England ... its spread to the general public is due largely to the steady output of excellent editions of works that were hitherto practically unknown save by name ... and to the work of conductors—above all, Sir Henry Wood—in familiarising the public with the concerted works.²⁵

²⁵ Feste, 'Ad Libitum', *The Musical Times*, 67/999 (May 1926), 415.