

# **'The man to succeed Handel': Bach and Victorian Aspiration in 1851<sup>1</sup>**

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'Victorian' as a byword for backwardness gained currency long before the Queen died in 1901. Even as the nation paraded its modern technology at the Great Exhibition in 1851, thoughtful British writers were beginning to express doubt about so much material display. By the 1870s, confidence in the ongoing Betterment of Life seemed shallow indeed. Religious, historical and political orthodoxies had been challenged on all sides; the nation's moral ethos was turned inside out by art for art's sake; social platitudes, already deflated by Thomas Carlyle and Charles Dickens, were soon to be upended by Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw. More direct reaction set in with the younger Edwardians, who positively revelled in rejecting the mores and bad taste of their parents. But it was ultimately the rupture of World War I, so monumental in its effect, so closely associated with bungling late Victorian politicians and largely blamed on them, that led to the most bitter denunciation of everything Victorian. Lytton Strachey's ruthlessly ironic book *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918, gained accolades for its wit and tone; it struck the national mood and set a fashion for debunking that lasted until the 1940s. Only with time and careful research were major literary figures recovered, followed by aspects of political and social history misrepresented or misunderstood by the 'new critics'.

Not surprisingly, nineteenth-century British music and musical life shared a similar fate in being over-criticized or rejected, even dismissed, by a range of reactionary twentieth-century writers, a prejudice that flourishes still. Indeed more than any other element of the period, music has been slow to regain equilibrium, to be sensitively reassessed as part of a broader cultural history, for two main reasons. First, musicologists have conventionally studied notes on pages and the great composers who wrote them: frankly, there weren't many genius composers in Britain between Purcell and Elgar, at least according to dominant European music

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<sup>1</sup> This talk was first given as '*Annus mirabilis*, 1851: Edward Holmes and the Problem of Musical Progress' at the 2nd Biennial International Conference on Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain, University of Durham, July 1999, and revised for Music in Britain: A Social History Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, December 1999.

historiography. Second, music historians trying to explain what they've seen as an embarrassing creative void have tended to give up or get sidetracked, falling in with a narrative of renaissance – the reassuring idea that things got a lot better in Britain, musically, at the end of the nineteenth century and especially when light dawned in the twentieth. According to this model, widely accepted until recently, the decades that preceded the 'English Musical Renaissance' of Parry, Stanford, Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Holst and the rest are by definition a Dark Age, unworthy of attention. With few musical monuments – composers or works – to set against the superiority of Germany or the distinctiveness of France (so the notion goes), any deeper exploration of British nineteenth-century musical life must be doomed to failure.

It's not my aim to rehabilitate the whole of Victorian musical culture, nor to uncover some brilliant new composer or musical piece others have missed. Neither do I mean to question the new excitement about English music in the early twentieth century, which was truly felt and widely discussed at the time even apart from political imperatives. Instead I wish to change lenses completely and shift the focus to another kind of musical work – performance, criticism and reception – which I hope will reveal unsuspected light and strength in the British intellectual engagement with music in that supposed Dark Age, as well as get us closer to the real state of musical practise among singers, players and listeners in the mid-nineteenth century.

J.S. Bach is central to the discussion, which I draw from the pages of a major London literary journal in 1851, *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*. The writer in question, **Edward Holmes**, is a pivot in my argument for how we might profitably read good music criticism. By 'good' I don't mean accurately predictive of modern taste. As with composition, I would contend that Victorian performance and criticism have too often been measured that way, looking backwards superficially from an assumed superior stance. It is still common, for example – though naive – to look down on the nineteenth-century English press as corrupt, ignorant or so fundamentally conservative as to be a backwater of musical opinion; to think of music publishers as mere shopmen looking for sales; to portray Victorian music scholarship as overprecious, antiquarian and amateurish; and to reduce all Victorian performance to a gigantic Handel festival, a mother at the piano, or a politically correct surpliced choir. Like most clichés, these images have an element of truth in them and we recognize the caricatures they deploy. But to get beyond the ridiculous, to analyse the genuine conditions of music activity in nineteenth-century Britain, we need to put ourselves directly in the shoes

of reliable witnesses at different points within it. A lot happened between 1785 and 1914, the 'long nineteenth' century; there were shifting patterns of continuity and change, relative ups and downs, all the way through it. Music was always a part of this bigger picture, and its relation to wider contemporary events is crucial to a more subtle understanding of how the Victorians heard and thought about music.

My subject begins right at the beginning of the mid-Victorian plateau – that period running from the Great Exhibition of 1851 to the Second Reform Bill of 1867 – when not backwardness but progress was the watchword. We have perhaps forgotten, or never knew, that a prevailing assumption throughout much of the nineteenth century, at least to the 1870s, was that whatever is New is *ipso facto* Better and that the greatest obstacle to the future is the persistence of the past. It's a point worth remembering when we look at musical taste, trends in scholarship, or the creation of everyday goods and services. Late-Romantic nostalgia and historicism really had very little to do with intellectual or social life for most of the century: thirst for the new was almost unquenchable. As Asa Briggs describes the mindset of this middle period, 'Clear thinking was preferred to impulse, [...] hard work was considered the foundation of all material advancement; and both clear thinking and hard work were deemed essential to continued national progress'.<sup>2</sup> The stress on thought, work, and progress was accompanied by a real sense of national pride during the 1850s and 60s. Britain was booming. From 1850 a rise in prosperity affected farming as well as industry. There was no outside threat to security, and national institutions compelled admiration. When European nations and the USA were torn by internal strife, British governments found ways to adapt and reform, without violence. Most people believed in a common moral code based on duty and self-restraint, yet were also interested in free discussion and open enquiry. Order and change could both be accommodated.

It sounds ideal. But of course this vision of so much unity, peace and stability is deceptive – another broad generalization – and the balance did not last. What I'm specifically concerned with is one anomaly in the general story of British economic and political strength at mid-century: the relative weakness of British music and musical institutions at the same time. For there's no doubt that against earlier decades, when the Philharmonic Society, the Royal Academy of Music, and an English Opera had begun with great fanfare, events of the 1850s and 60s look boring and sluggish, bourgeois, even philistine by comparison. New musical

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<sup>2</sup> *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851–67* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955, rev. 1970, 1972; pb, 1975), 1.

institutions faltered, hopes for British composers were disappointed, and music was co-opted for non-musical goals, mostly moral or commercial. Though increasing numbers of people were involved in music-making activity in the choir loft or front parlour, their musical range was mostly narrow and the level of cultivation limited. In this sort of environment, artistic progress is hard to find. It may even have been unlikely: the national obsession with industrialization and material wealth perhaps stunted humane culture.

Edward Holmes's approach to this lack of progress in an age otherwise devoted to it is instructive and challenging. In his five essays for *Fraser's* in 1851, the year of London's 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations', he seized on one composer as man of the hour – the little known (and less liked) Sebastian Bach. For Holmes, Bach was the embodiment of thought, hard work and progress; the ideal representative of mechanistic advance but also spiritual renewal (two themes of the Exhibition); and not least, Bach was the harbinger of future possibility in English musical standards, or as Holmes put it, 'the man to succeed Handel'.<sup>3</sup> Along the way we find discussion of Mozart, Samuel Wesley (one of the first evangelists for Bach's music in England), Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Giulia Grisi, Jenny Lind, Daniel Auber, John Hullah and others. But Holmes's overriding emphasis is on Bach – the science, vitality and newness of his music and hence his appeal to cutting-edge Victorians. Of course Bach could never remotely be seen as British (like Handel), he wasn't commercially marketable, he wasn't even singable. So where was this propaganda leading? What was Holmes really getting at? Here I want to look at Holmes's essays in some detail, consider their backdrop – the Great Exhibition itself – and place his criticism in perspective. Then I want to throw the story forward in time, with a brief glance at later developments in English Bach and Handel reception to the end of the century.

Everyone knows about the Crystal Palace, the most modern building in nineteenth-century England. Londoners had seen competitive displays of manufactured goods as early as 1756, and residents of other towns, notably Birmingham, had mounted a few in the early nineteenth century. But it was not until 1847 that the Society of Arts staged the first of several exhibitions with good design as a chief criterion. The two people seen as most directly responsible were Prince Albert, the Society's president, and Henry Cole, a former civil servant of huge energy and organizing ability. In 1849 with the success of their third exhibition and the model of the Paris Quinquennial Exhibition in view, they began planning the 1851 event. It

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<sup>3</sup> 'Our musical spring', *Fraser's Magazine* 43 (May 1851), 590.

was the Prince who decided the scope should be, for the first time ever, international, and Cole who suggested Hyde Park as site. A Royal Commission was founded, and public and business-community soundings taken; this being Britain, the project had to be self-supporting.

Controversy engulfed the original building plan, a clumsy bricks-and-mortar structure that would have permanently 'mutilated' the Park. Fears grew that crowds of vagabonds, foreigners and *hoi poloi* would desecrate the streets, murder the Queen and spread the plague. But in the end the whole operation, though notoriously complex politically and logistically, proved an outstanding success – one of the few great undertakings in the century that could be called an unqualified success. Joseph Paxton's magical, pre-fabricated building, inspired by the iron-and-glass greenhouses he'd designed at Chatsworth, went up in six months to public acclaim. Covering nineteen acres on the park's south side, it was more than three times the length of St Paul's Cathedral. Three large elm trees were left to grow inside under an arched transept built to cover them. Of the nearly 14,000 exhibitors, just over half were from the British Isles and Empire (situated in the western half of the building), and the rest were 'foreign' (in the eastern half). Of these, France and the German states were the most prominent.

The Exhibition was open to the public with a sliding scale of entrance fees from 1st May to 11th October 1851 (excluding Sundays). More than six million visitors attended from around the world; on one day in October alone, more than 93,000 people were in the building at the same time without incident. There were several restaurants and hundreds of police (including foreign police); alcohol, smoking and dogs were not permitted, nor were prices shown on goods in the exhibits. Catalogues in three languages set out classified lists of the items on show under four main headings: raw materials; machinery (including musical instruments, classed with scientific, horological and surgical instruments); manufactures; and fine arts (sculpture and models but no paintings). More than 3000 prize medals were awarded by specialist juries. With a clear profit of over £186,000, the Commissioners, on the Prince's advice, bought 87 acres of land in South Kensington to provide a permanent centre for the encouragement of science and art. The Royal College of Music, another of Henry Cole's projects, was only one of the new institutions ultimately housed on this estate and one among many of the Exhibition's lasting benefits. Others included improvements in

international postal communication, reform of the patent laws, and the birth of excursion travel – 'for the safety and amusement of the masses'.<sup>4</sup>

Much has been made of the overt commercialism of the Exhibition project. A celebration of private enterprise and British ingenuity, it was indeed an elaborate trade fair, inviting other civilized nations to come and admire 'our' prosperity and progress. But after the European political convulsions of 1848, Prince Albert also had sincere hopes that this 'living picture' of the peak of mankind's industrial development would open a new era in world peace and cooperation. His motives were idealistic as well as material, and not ill-founded. Contemporary accounts suggest that the glow of brotherhood around the Exhibition, though short-lived, made an impression on many visitors. Lo and behold, even the working classes behaved themselves. The underlying message seemed to be Free Trade + an Open Society = Prosperity and Peace. Fascinatingly, Jeffrey Auerbach's new study complicates that view,<sup>5</sup> revealing just how much Albert cherished a more pointed purpose, that of puncturing any complacency among British designers by forcing direct comparison with their more advanced continental and North American competitors. According to this angle, showcasing local economic prowess was much less important to the Prince than *stimulating* British achievement through the visible display of the output of other nations. By 1851, British industry had already felt itself to be slipping behind.<sup>6</sup>

Music as an art, of course, an aesthetic endeavour with its own cultural meanings, could hardly be put on a table at Hyde Park. Official opening and closing ceremonies used music as embellishment – the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*, and the March from Mendelssohn's *Athalie*. And various music renditions were given to demonstrate technological improvements in the instruments on display – notably keyboard recitals, including Bach fugues on the big organs, of which there were several. Advances in music-printing technology were also on show. But music itself, unlike design in the plastic arts, was not really up for discussion. Edward Holmes simply chose the Great Exhibition topic, in all its timely and ironic suggestiveness, as a kind of springboard for his *Fraser's* essays throughout the year.

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in C.H. Gibbs-Smith: *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Commemorative Album* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1950; rev repr., 1964), 38.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> See John R. Davis's review of Auerbach in *Reviews in History*, published online by the Institute of Historical Research: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/132>.

A major London monthly stressing politics, religion and social conditions, *Fraser's* was distinguished not only by its literary style and liberal thought, but by a focus on principles rather than individual parties or people. Holmes wrote for it regularly between 1848 and probably 1858, a period when his co-contributors included Charles Kingsley, Walter Savage Landor, G.H. Lewes, Thomas Love Peacock, Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer. We can assume that reasonably intelligent people such as these, and six or seven thousand others at the top of the literate classes, were among his readers; some of them, like Lewes, Carlyle and Eliot, would already have had a well-developed international, even Teutonic, outlook.

Of the magazine's twelve monthly numbers for 1851, many alluding to the Exhibition and its impact, five contain music articles by Holmes, April to December. All these are unsigned as was customary, but four are attributable to him using documentary and internal evidence.<sup>7</sup> The fifth article – actually no. 3 in the sequence – I believe can also be attributed to Holmes on internal grounds. In broad outline the articles are as follows: **1. April:** 'Mozart's pianoforte' (vol. 43, pp. 453–62), a historical discussion of Mozart's piano music, raising doubt about the apparent significance of new keyboard technology; **2. May:** 'Our musical spring' (vol. 43, pp. 586–95), a review of London opera and other performances in the spring, notably one by John Hullah's singing classes of the Credo from Bach's B-minor Mass (this article embeds an important survey of the English Bach movement to date); **3. June:** 'Are the English a musical people?' (vol. 43, pp. 675–81), a philosophical essay pointedly asserting bigotry and false reasoning in some English listeners, spun off Coleridge's 1799 poem 'Lines Compos'd in a Concert-Room'; **4. August:** 'The opera and concert season' (vol. 44, pp. 155–64), a more routine overview of summer performances in London; and **5. December:** 'Progress of the English choir' (vol. 44, pp. 609–18), a penetrating essay on the importance of a new music publication, *Six Motets*, the first English edition ever of Bach's choral music (this promotes a futuristic Bach at the expense of an old-fashioned Handel and, crucially, turns the spotlight on local and provincial choral societies). In the time available, I can't explore all the subtleties of content and tone in this material – the average length of one of these essays is more than 6000 words – but I'd like to highlight some of Holmes's most salient ideas.

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<sup>7</sup> See Walter E. Houghton, ed., *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824–1900*, 5 vols. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, and London: Routledge, 1966–89). *Fraser's* is discussed in vol. 2, with the Holmes attributions at FM-2842, FM-2855, FM-2879 and FM-2916.

The real music exhibits in London in 1851 were the performances in theatres, concert halls and churches as in any other year; no single special music event was mounted for the Exhibition (though Hector Berlioz, one of the jury members for musical instruments, tried to put one on in August). Holmes knew the situation and realized only too well that visitors, many of them foreign, would be scrutinizing whatever they could find in town as typical of British music achievement and taste. Rather than launching in with his opinions on every offering, however – there were more operas than usual, with rapid turnover to satisfy the crowds – he chose to disarm readers with a frank account of the state of musical affairs, readily accepting that the London opera business was cynical, for example. He also affirmed without hesitation the superiority of foreign composition generally. One could speculate on fanciful reasons for this fact, he suggests, but there's no point in disputing it, or even in hoping for a great British composer until our standard of music education improves. No self-pity, no special pleading. In Holmes's view, the lack of a strong British 'creative product' was irrelevant as a gauge of *national* music cultivation anyway. Far better, he goes on, to focus on what we already do better than other nations – consuming music of all kinds, which meant putting on concerts, publishing, performing, hearing and appreciating music.

To that end, he proceeds to consider not just the singers or playing standard at each event he covers – the norm in most periodic English music review columns – but the musical works themselves, composers' influences, and his own ideas about changing perceptions of a given composer over time. This element of temporal perspective was central to Holmes's method: it allowed him to draw on his own growth as a listener, as well as to detect intellectual progress – the 'march of mind' – in increasing public understanding of a given work or composer. Musical progress in this sense was both collective and historical, and depended on measuring the present against the past: we are now here and we used to be there (with respect to Auber, or *Die Zauberflöte*, or the keyboard works of Bach). An appeal to history was natural for Holmes, trained as he was under Vincent Novello, but in 1851 it also resulted from his place in time. Born in the eighteenth century and christened in the nineteenth, he was exactly 51 years old and susceptible to a backward glance occasionally.<sup>8</sup> Personal and musical history indeed coincide in his *Fraser's* account of the English Bach movement. In this case, Holmes demonstrates progress

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<sup>8</sup> Standard sources including the *Dictionary of National Biography* have long given his birth year as 1797. On the evidence of Holmes's application to the Royal Literary Fund in 1848, however, his correct birth date is 10 November 1799 – a correction first made public in *The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1988), and subsequently in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2001).

merely by providing the backdrop of a past – concrete, written details of G.F. Pinto, Wesley, Karl Friedrich Horn and the earliest Bach cult in England, of the first English editions of the organ trio sonatas and the '48', and of the gradual change in attitude towards Bach that had taken place among British music professionals. By 1851, as Holmes knew from his own experience, it was no longer shocking, controversial or 'divisive' to be seriously interested in Bach's music as it had been in the 1820s. Article 2 is not by any means the first English tribute to Bach's music, but it's the first extended one I know of to the English Bach awakening.

But where did the Bach trigger come from in 1851? Answer: from the only two really *new* musical occurrences capturing Holmes's attention that year: the first complete public performance, with orchestra, of the B-minor Mass Credo, in March at St Martin's Hall under John Hullah – 'an event of the utmost importance in the musical history of London'; and, later in the year, the publication of Bach's *Six Motets* – 'a trophy of quiet national progress'.<sup>9</sup> This set had been issued under the auspices of the recently formed English Bach Society (which actually preceded the German Bach Gesellschaft), and included 'Singet dem Herrn', 'Jesu meine Freude' and four other unaccompanied double-choir motets. For Holmes, performance was the way to exhibit present musical achievement, while a score, tangible and visible, was a solid object symbolizing future performances. Insofar as both these events were firsts, Holmes applauds the historical advance they demonstrate. Even more significant was the collective social progress they represented: choral music requires and rewards social cooperation; part-singing carries both spiritual and wider educational benefits for factory workers as well as schoolteachers, indeed amateur singers at all levels. Holmes expresses a typically utilitarian view of the sight-singing movement here and gives Hullah high praise. The particular novelty about Bach's music, of course, was its fiendish difficulty, its unfamiliar, un-English style and what were widely perceived as its unvocal qualities.

Enter here the subtle apologist for Victorian aspiration – moving beyond ourselves, beyond where we already are. Holmes's promotional strategy turns not only on making Bach approachable and worthy of hard work – he discusses the style and structure of the motets, and gives solid advice for how local choirs might tackle each of them – but also on questioning the relative value of Handel, the obvious paradigm against which every choral composer was measured in England. In effect the writer opens a rhetorical space in which readers are led to suspect their own admiration of their settled hero: Handel's motives were frankly mercenary and vain, Bach's were religious; Handel's vocal music depends on external, often

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<sup>9</sup> The two quotes appear in, respectively, article 2, p. 590, and article 5, p. 609.

momentary, associations of language, Bach's has its own internal logic, purely musical; everything about Handel points backwards, Bach is fresh and still awaits discovery. Holmes's challenge is positive, contemporary, and provocative. It raises curiosity about the new sound of Bach, and points a way forward for British music culture post-Handel.

Despite promising signs in Bach performance and publication, however, all was not hopeful in 1851. In a divergent article making no obvious reference to topical events, the writer of the June piece raises the more fundamental problem of aesthetic sensibility in music, stating baldly and with some vehemence that the English as a nation are 'hopelessly unmusical'.<sup>10</sup> Because they are instead a poetical people, he argues, they conflate all sorts of associative ideas – an opera singer's face, for example – with music itself, misunderstanding and misjudging what they hear. The essay is imaginative and colourful, dialogic and critical; its form is superficially unlike Holmes's usual one, and historians working on *Fraser's* have offered no suggestion as to an author. But on close reading I find the themes, examples and tone all highly characteristic of Edward Holmes, who was as much at home with modern Italian opera as with J.S. Bach and capable of using both to broach the same subject – namely, the English tendency to fear or despise what is not English. By exposing Coleridge's false dichotomy between 'natural' English song and 'artificial' Italian opera – and by mimicking equally false distinctions made between the 'northern' Jenny Lind and the 'southern' Giulia Grisi – Holmes sets up another us–them pair, very much like the Handel–Bach comparison in article 2 (and later in no. 5). His underlying point is the same: familiar musical styles and genres are not intrinsically better because they're familiar; all music requires sensitivity to be appreciated, and all has its value. In working to acquire musical taste, as the English must do, breadth is more likely to be helpful than bigotry.

This essay was surely written as a response to something recent that had irritated Holmes – maybe a vacuous, overweening review of Lind somewhere, or more seriously, the rabid anti-Catholic feeling, government supported, that was sweeping the country in the first six months of 1851.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the catalyst, this writer is clearly attacking English narrowness, a theme not at all inconsistent with Holmes's projection of the

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<sup>10</sup> Article 3, p. 676.

<sup>11</sup> Such feeling had originated in a papal decision of 1850 to divide England into Roman Catholic dioceses and restore a regular Catholic hierarchy. Evangelical Protestants were nervous and outraged, prompting the prime minister, Lord John Russell, to propose legislation curbing what anti-Catholic elements deemed 'papal aggression', in February 1851.

'foreign' J.S. Bach. Was it accidental that both topics rubbed shoulders in *Fraser's Magazine* around the same time, in 1851? I don't think so. Like all good journalists, Holmes was story-led; like all the best critics, he found multiple connections between cultural events and contemporary society. He wanted to make people think. The images and ideas he evoked – a new crop of sight-singers being 'forced' as under glass, social and technical difficulties being met through 'industry', the piercing of British musical complacency – led to a verdict on national and musical progress that was both reassuring and in some ways disturbing.

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So who was Edward Holmes, and what do we know about him? In the mid-nineteenth century his writings were recognized in inner circles as the best of their kind in English. He was known mostly for his weekly column in the *Atlas* newspaper and for his book on Mozart published in 1845. The first documentary biography of that composer in English, it secured Holmes's reputation into the twentieth century. If as a journalist he hadn't moved around so much, contributing off and on to seven periodicals over a thirty-year period, and if all his writing had carried his name, that recognition would have been far wider in his time and ours. It raises a 'bibliographical identity' problem for historians. Because we can't readily associate Holmes with one major title of obvious class or political persuasion throughout his career (like we can for many other, less thoughtful, music critics in the period), he's harder to pin down, pigeon-hole, and use as a source; he *seems* less 'powerful'. He also never wrote any memoirs saying how important he was or how many famous people he knew. Very few letters or other documents about his life and career have survived; he left no estate and had no heirs. Yet the quality of his writing is remarkable.

The son of a successful businessman in Hoxton, Holmes was educated at John Clarke's school in Enfield where his classmates included John Keats. He was then apprenticed to a Fleet Street bookseller, but Clarke's son Charles Cowden Clarke encouraged his musical bent and introduced him into the Vincent Novello–Leigh Hunt circle around 1816. Holmes not only studied the organ with Novello, but eventually moved into the family home as Vincent's apprentice in the mid-1820s, assisting with editorial projects, teaching, and taking part in performances, some of them historic. Holmes sang tenor in the first English performance of Beethoven's *Missa solennis*, in 1832 at Thomas Alsager's house, and may have done the same at one of the first airings of the Bach double-choir motets, also at Alsager's (where the motets' influence on Mozart would have been a key attraction). He played and taught Bach's keyboard works from the earliest days, coming directly under Wesley's influence.

Meanwhile at Novello's house before 1820, Holmes had met Percy Shelley (whom he idolized), William Hazlitt and Charles and Mary Lamb, all the time nourishing his literary instincts and widening his music reference points. Over the rest of his career, he worked as a church organist at Poplar and later in Holloway, north London, as well as a journalist and private teacher; his most celebrated organ pupil was the young Elizabeth Stirling, herself an early exponent of Bach's fugues. For years Holmes supported an extended family that included his aging father, sisters, nieces and nephews. His own personal happiness and marriage to Louisa Webbe (granddaughter of Samuel Webbe) seem to have been delayed until those responsibilities were discharged in 1857, only two years before his own death. But financial security was never assured. In the late 1840s when by coincidence Holmes lost two jobs at once (his *Atlas* post and the organ position in Holloway), he applied to the Royal Literary Fund for financial assistance. His referees included John Rolt, a future Attorney General, and Mary Shelley, the poet's widow and herself a major author for whom Holmes had once nourished a great personal affection. It is his extant RLF application that in fact documents Holmes's work for *Fraser's*.<sup>12</sup>

Holmes continued to work in music scholarship and journalism: he edited William Boyce, studied Matthew Locke, wrote a biography of Purcell, analysed the Haydn and Mozart masses. His alertness to musical content made him delight in spotting connections between composers and across periods. Palestrina, Gluck and Beethoven, Bellini and latterly Berlioz fascinated him. His public U-turn on programme music in fact resulted from his first hearing of *Harold en Italie* in London in February 1848, and paved the way for cordial personal relations with Berlioz. Holmes was not the only English critic to rave about Berlioz's music that year, but he was probably the only one to appreciate it so thoroughly. Indeed in a later essay for *Fraser's* in October 1848, he proposed not Bach but Berlioz as a solution to the same conundrum of musical progress: the essay shows Holmes's familiar concern for the aesthetic slump of the times – 'an age where it is not composition but invention which sleeps', and promotes Berlioz as successor to Beethoven.<sup>13</sup> No two composers could be more different than Bach and Berlioz, or their music more difficult to bring off for English audiences around mid-century. Yet both of them grabbed Holmes's classical ear and Romantic sensibility because their technical resourcefulness underlay music that spoke honestly and deeply to the human spirit. That was Holmes's real measure of value, not a composer's style, nationality or even chronological newness.

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<sup>12</sup> Case file no. 1213 (30 Oct 1848), now in the RLF Archive at the British Library.

<sup>13</sup> 'Hector Berlioz', *Fraser's Magazine* 38 (October 1848), 421–27 at 421.

Ultimately the most remarkable thing about Holmes's essays in 1851 – other than the fact that they appeared in the general press at all (no specialized English music journal would have carried such extended material at that date) – is the way they track the year's events, by turns reflecting and subverting the mood of celebration. To make Bach into an honorary High Victorian was not merely a clever sideways move, both to praise and stimulate British achievement, but a metaphor that put music back into the national debate about progress, which Holmes felt should be audible as well as visible with lasting benefits for all of society. How far he succeeded in moving minds and ears towards Bach, or Berlioz, is another matter. His strategy was rhetorical – as Bach's music is for every phrase of the motets – and of course, in both symbolic and practical terms, Bach had a long way to go ever to unseat Handel in Britain. Berlioz's plan for his Great Exhibition concert had indeed envisaged a star programme of Handel, Rossini, Bortniansky, Berlioz and Gluck, using a choir of a thousand and an orchestra of 500. And in the later 1850s, a whole Handel production machine was cranked up with a view to the centenary of Handel's death in 1859. Its eventual outcome would be the Handel Triennial Festivals from 1862, given at an enlarged Crystal Palace in Sydenham by the Sacred Harmonic Society, conducted by Sir Michael Costa. These were the 'monster' performances that did so much to perpetuate a limited idea of Handel's music – a handful of oratorios, anthems and organ concertos – as massively grand and spine-tingling. It is as well to remind ourselves that however we interpret those events, they clearly had quasi-religious, patriotic and recreational value for thousands of devotees. Meanwhile, though fresh work on the context of Handel's Italian operas had been published in London by Victor Schoelcher as early as 1857, the operas themselves were virtually shelved. The English Handel Society, formed in 1843 to execute a complete edition, had already packed up in 1855 for lack of subscriptions after only a dozen volumes.

Against this picture of Handelian stasis, the trajectory of English Bach study impresses – from a small band of devoted disciples working on the keyboard music in the early 1800s to calls by C.E. Horn and then T.A. Walmisley in the 1830s for a complete edition;<sup>14</sup> from isolated or partial choral performances in the mid-1850s, notably of the *St Matthew Passion* under Sterndale Bennett, to full public performances beginning in the 1870s under Joseph Barnby and then John Stainer, and eventually to the Bach Choir performance, in 1876, of the complete B-minor Mass under Otto Goldschmidt; and from Stainer's performance of the 'pedal fugue' in

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<sup>14</sup> See Michael Kassler, ed., *The English Bach Awakening: Knowledge of J.S. Bach and his Music in England, 1750–1830* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2004).

G minor at the Crystal Palace Saturday concerts in 1868, to Charles Hallé's Bach piano recitals in the early 1880s. Holmes might have been specially pleased that the easiest of the *Six Motets*, 'Ich lasse dich nicht', served as a test piece for Crystal Palace choral competitions in the 1870s.

Finally, Edward Dannreuther's intrepid explorations of the keyboard and chamber music at his private Orme Square concerts in the late 1880s and early 90s, together with his lectures and published study of Bach's ornamentation, show a high point of achievement, although they also confirm the appeal Bach retained for specialists. For there is no doubt that despite increasing public familiarity with the big choral works and some of the organ and keyboard music in the later nineteenth century – stimulating ever more common reference to Bach and Handel as equals, with distinctive strengths – much of Bach's music was still seen as an acquired taste, a musician's music, the acme of technical skill but also difficult to listen to. The one alternative approach with intellectual sway from the 1880s, analogous to Holmes's projection of Bach as new in 1851, reflects both the rising influence of historicism and a more thorough-going appreciation of Romantic music in England by this time: that is, the projection of Bach as founder of the whole German national school. For Dannreuther and others, including his colleague George Grove, Bach became not the man to succeed Handel (which had begun to happen in real time), but the natural historical precursor to Beethoven and Brahms, the man whose technique and spirit could extend and complete our understanding of the great German Romantic canon. By the 1880s, it was Schubert who was 'new' – as Grove had shown – and Mendelssohn who was revered as Bach's visionary historical editor and conductor in both Berlin and London.

One could go on with these circles of time and change, reiterating the subject like fugal entries. But I hope I have made the point that nineteenth-century English Bach reception was a bit more than a cult, or even an accumulating catalogue of events. It involved engaging with the past in a totally modern world. Looking back over the 200 years since Edward Holmes's birth, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that he was right to try to move ears and minds towards Bach in 1851, and that he was especially 'good' in his method of doing so, using contemporary events to draw readers in. Most of all, we should be grateful that with Holmes, criticism itself was an art, an act of performance in print. In his case, clear thinking and hard work had more than a little to do with it.