

Part II.

The Musical Works Considered

The devotion of so many composers to virtually every work written by Longfellow is evidence—if further evidence is needed—that his poems touched the hearts of people everywhere. Hundreds of musical works in forms large and small attest to the wide range of his popularity.

As a poet of the people, Longfellow was sought out by composers to the people, balladeers and part-song writers whose works, not often surviving their own day, entered deeply into the soul-satisfying arts of the home. The musician will be quick to argue that the majority of composers listed here do not deserve mention in the same breath with the renowned poet. Our reply must be based on the thesis that enduring collaborations by persons equally yoked are not frequent, even though they may appear so at the time. Mr. Longfellow at no time worked in collaboration with a composer, nor did he show particular interest in unsolicited settings of his works. His lines were frequently set, as he well knew, by inferiors, by a few equals—notably in the larger poems—but by no superiors. To the public, the poetry remained of preeminent interest.

This commentary on nearly one thousand musical settings of Longfellow's poetical works urges no claim for their suitability to their texts. The poet himself chose only a few at the insistence of Dempster (diary, January 19, 1846), whom he liked as an individual but wearied of as a mannered and sentimental troubadour. He definitely stated that one or two poems, particularly "Footsteps of Angels," did not lend themselves to musical setting, but this did not deter Dempster or thirteen others from having a go at "Footsteps" (diary, September 4, 1847). This poem involved deep personal emotions deriving from the deaths of his first wife and of his brother-in-law, George W. Pierce. A poet's dread of what a composer may do to his lines was also a point to be considered. Mass-production tended to lace rigorously every poem into a corset or uniform, undulating melody with small allowance for whatever highlights or subtleties the poem held.

Musical literature is weighted with works of sublime tonal value unhappily wedded to texts of lesser worth. To say that Schubert could immortalize the dinner menu is tantamount to admitting that he nearly did so. In making allowances for the declining fortunes of Longfellow's poetry in the twentieth century we may note that the majority of ballad composers, and a few of those writing in larger forms, eagerly hitched their wagons to brighter stars, adapting the rich sentiments of another's verses to pauperized melodies and banal harmonies commonplace even in their own day. Mr. Longfellow's journal proves

his own tastes in music to have been uniformly excellent. When confronted with a setting of his work, as in the case of Stöpels (diary January 16, 1858), he did not commit himself beyond the merest courtesies, even in his journal. It is supposed that he accepted Liszt's dedication, but no letter survives.

Conclusive evidence of an almost total want of genius in setting these poems rests on the fact that, whereas Longfellow's poems are known to children throughout the English-speaking world, not a single musical setting survives in the current repertory. Not even the long day's radio programs find place for Weiss's "The Village Blacksmith," Romer's "Footsteps of Angels," or one of Balfe's *Six Songs*. The only possible exception might be Woodbury's "Stars of the Summer Night," probably the best of forty-nine settings of that poem. Were the times kinder to male choruses, or singing in the home, other settings might—or might not—charm us today.

The pain of popularity inevitably subjected the poet to stresses. The common touch became all too common, the homely sentiment too conventional. Imitation of one's betters was the composer's best compliment. The greed of opportunist publishers or the day-by-day economics of underpaid tunesmiths too often provided the rationale.

To the musical public, and to the composer for that public, Mr. Longfellow was but one of many available poets.³⁸ Of his fellow Americans—frequently Cantabrigians—he was the most popular. Aldrich, Bryant, Cooper, Emerson, Field, Harte, Poe, Hawthorne, Holmes, Irving, Lucy Larcom, Lowell, Riley, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, Whitman, and Whittier were staunch companions, though some were more equal than others in both quantity and quality. Tennyson and Browning had their share of musical settings, as did Byron and Scott of an earlier day.

Short works were preferred wherein an immediacy of sentiment and wide variety of subject gave them favor. The dialectic of the day was in turn sentimental and homely, moral and humanitarian, religious and patriotic. Moreover, Longfellow's regard for nature is shown by poems on running water: brooks, rivers, rain, the sea, tide; on romance-kindling seasons of the day: twilight, daybreak, afternoon, night; on the ages of man: old age, youth, childhood, autumn, spring; on homely symbols: clocks, bridges, ships, trees, bells. All are fabric to the joys and sorrows of human experience. Death plays its part, but with a calm sweetness affording gentlest expression—in the minor mode. Once mobilized to these contemplative subjects, composers went on to such unlikely poems as those celebrating the anniversary of Louis Agassiz, "The Statue Over the Cathedral Door," "Barrabus," "The Nun of Nidaros," "Catawba Wine," "Suspiria," "The Arsenal at Springfield," and others similarly topical, turned into fluent, self-conscious balladry by such as John Blockley and John Liptrott Hatton.

Longfellow's popularity equaled that of Tennyson's. Of the latter's works, "Blow, Bugle, Blow!," "Break, Break, Break," "Come Into the Garden, Maud,"

“Ring Out, Wild Bells,” or the dreadful “Crossing the Bar,” among shorter works, or “Enoch Arden,” “King Arthur,” and “The Lady of Shalott” in the larger, were frequently set to music. Browning’s “In a Gondola,” “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” and “Pippa Passes,” were popular subjects at a later date. Ethelbert Nevin, for instance, was a type of tonal Robert Browning, but no finer settings of “The Year’s at the Spring,” and “Ah! Love, But a Day!” can be imagined than those by Mrs. H.H.A. Beach.

The poet met the composer more than halfway. As Prof. James D. Hart writes:

Like his subject matter, Longfellow’s metrics posed no problems. Whether he employed the common ballad, the well-known sonnet, or with great adroitness handled unusual meters such as the Latin hexameters in *Evangeline* and the trochaic tetrameter in *Hiawatha*, his language flowed easily and the best of his rhythms were memorable. His words were generally arranged in normal prose order, communicating immediately to an unsophisticated mind.³⁹

Seventy-five years of constant drawing from this well spring of inspiration—if inspiration be not too strong a word—comprises a long period, comparable to the record of Goethe, Heine, and Klopstock, among the German romantics. Songs with Longfellow texts appeared in the early 1840s, soon after they were published, and continued through the 1920s, the majority of these latter written for mixed voices of school children. A volume of Mr. Longfellow’s collected poetry in 1846 sold but six thousand copies, a two-volume edition in 1840 sold twenty thousand; a third collected edition in 1856 sold forty thousand. “Except for his drama, *The Spanish Student*, no poetic work by Longfellow sold fewer than two thousand copies, and his first dozen volumes of new and collected poems sold about 155,000 copies between 1839 and 1864,” Professor Hart records.

In paying tribute to the British for the astonishing volume of their production we acknowledge that England was the major source of mass-produced musical works. From the major choral works of Sir Edward Elgar to the profuse, minor bloomings of John Liptrott Hatton, productivity was sufficient unto a day making high quantitative demands. To fancy that Blockley, Hatton, or Stephen Glover bore special affection for the American poet is to overlook the impartial favor which they bestowed on Tennyson, Browning and others.

John Blockley was indiscriminate, agrees Maurice Willson Disher:

When we pick out of his list “Excelsior,” “Evangeline,” almost everything else that others chose, and “The Consecration of Pulaski’s Banner,” we have merely heard the grace notes. We must be prepared for the prodigies of a man who was a genius in industry if not in inspiration. To him the poetry of America was worthy of all respect but only in moments spared from his simple task of providing music for all the verse of Queen Victoria’s reign. If he overlooked some trifle, he was not to blame; his horizons embraced not only the best of this world but hymns reaching to the next.⁴⁰

“Excelsior” was not popular until the song composers made it so, Mr. Disher maintains. Even that popularity was mild until “The Village Blacksmith” provided W. H. Weiss with a ballad in 1841 that struck the anvil with shilling sparks wherever music was sold.

Scott’s previous poem about a shaft at random never achieved as much fame because it wasn’t set to music, or as well set. Balfe’s setting of “The Arrow and the Song” is now favored because Balfe—he of *The Bohemian Girl*—was incapable of writing a forgettable melody. The urgent Blockley often garnished his imprints with advice that one should “be sure to ask for settings by John Blockley,” thus avoiding the error of buying settings by Hatton, Weiss, Balfe, or Miss Lindsay—competitors in the same traffic.

The greatest of these, however, was Balfe.

During this year (1857) the musical world hailed with delight the publication of Six Songs and a Duet, which Balfe had composed to words by the American poet Longfellow. Published by Boosey, they met with a most favorable reception. An enormous number of copies were sold in a remarkably short period. Up to this time the poems of Longfellow were scarcely read or known in England. Balfe’s selection of words attracted attention to the poet who had written them, and awakened a demand for his works. Musicians of all degrees of talent followed the lead given, and poured forth a flood of “Longfellow settings.” The poet himself, grateful for the popularity which his verses had gained in England through Balfe’s genius, wrote a letter expressing the pleasure he had received through his music, and invited Balfe to visit him at his home in America. He promised him a reception in this country which his talents merited. . . . Balfe was asked to accompany Jenny Lind to America in 1850, but was not able to make arrangements for a visit.⁴¹

Mr. Longfellow was well-known in England before 1857, but there is no denying the aid of Balfe and his feather in extending the poet’s fame.

Fair estimate of the second and third-rate composers—the Blockleys, Hattons, Romers, and Lindsays—is less rewarding to the musicologist than it is to the social historian who must stress utility rather than art. Inner forces deriving from nobility of character, heaven-bestowed genius, or ordeal by fortune’s fire, are not perceptible in these lesser figures.⁴² Their personal lives, where they are known, recount day-by-day struggles in theater or with publishing houses. Rather than searching inner recesses of the mind to bring forth works of spiritual strength, they frequented the marketplace to descry a trend or to cry out their wares. They perpetrated no large wrongs; they displayed but the mildest of virtues.

Hatton spent many years writing music for Charles Kean and the Princess Theatre. From 1845 until 1850 he was in the United States, singing with breadth and dignity the part of Elijah before reverential Bostonians, then entertaining New Yorkers with pantomimes and vaudeville. Was he discouraged with the slow rate of advance in England and looking for a place of residence? America could

offer little more. Returning to England, he composed operas and sacred works, all pot-boilers, and found his most lucrative reward in the seemingly endless stream of ballads incarcerating rather than releasing the sentiments of his betters. Hatton must have sensed the power of the poet's reputation while in Boston, but there is no mention in Mr. Longfellow's journal of their having met.

Neither John Blockley nor Stephen Glover appear in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Articles on Cowen and Hatton make briefest mention of their principal area of influence, yet thousands of copies bespeak thousands of dollars spent. These ballads were sung by more voices and played by more hands than can be numbered. They were antidotes to boredom, welders of family ties, wholesome entertainment for friends, and moral impulsions for the race. They comprise a fuller impact on the body social than even the greatest success of a well-regarded opera.

One bold fact gives us pause. Today our popular music is performed for or "at" us. Nineteenth-century popular music was not intended for radio, phonograph, jukebox or any cranked-up or turned-on invention. Nineteenth-century folks had pianos in the parlor and were circumspect with regard to music in the home. Ballads were for six days, hymns for the seventh. However sentimental household music and its versifications appear at this remove, however mawkish the tonal dressing, they hold honest affection in high regard.

Composers offering their tributes to Mr. Longfellow—and to the public at large—do not include the so-called immortals. Wagner, Brahms, Strauss, Wolf, Debussy, Duparc, or Fauré did not pay court, as composers of the previous generation had honored Shakespeare, Scott, and Burns. Other well-known composers did find inspiration in the poet—Sir Edward Elgar, Sir Frederick Cowen, and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. (Joseph Bennett called him "the Rudyard Kipling of our young composers.") Josef Holbrooke, Horatio Parker, Dudley Buck, George Chadwick, Arthur Foote, and Charles Wakefield Cadman are still respected names, a little lower than the angels, whose works are not often heard today. Many of us insist that they are worthy of more than cold remembrance. None, however, were hack-writers in the style of Blockley, Hatton, Weiss, or Romer. George Whiting's use of "The Skeleton in Armor" was "by special permission of Longfellow."

A few ladies chose to set the bard, several of them too coy to divulge more than initials: Miss M. Lindsay (Mrs. J. Worthington Bliss), the Honorable Mrs. Bertee Percy, "G. T." (Grace Thistlthayt), Mrs. A. Swan Brown, Charlotte M. Oliver, "Dolores," and Elizabeth Philp. A few of these names amuse us. Faustina Hasse Hodges ("The Dead"), for instance, is not related to the celebrated prima donna of an earlier day. Miss Hodges was a Brooklyn organist (d. 1895) whose brother, John Sebastian Bach Hodges, was also an organist and eminent divine. (Another brother, George Frederick Handel Hodges, was not musical except in name.) Carl Maria von Weber's name is erroneously attributed to the famous "Last Waltz." Handel is here through "The Harmonious

Blacksmith" unsuitably wedded to "The Village Blacksmith," but Mendelssohn is present by reason of his own writ. Charles Gounod adapted half a dozen Longfellow poems while living in England in the 1870s. Liszt's "Die Glocken des Strassburger Muensters" is more written about than performed and it was not acclaimed when first heard in Boston.⁴³ Letters between the authors and their families, the very New Englandish Mrs. Pierce and the very un-Bostonian Princess Carolyn Sayn-Wittgenstein, surround the work with a personal aura.

America's first generation of twentieth-century composers was often of the same social background as the poet, nourished in traditions of New England literary movements. Philip Greeley Clapp, Eaton Fanning, Gerald Topping, and Arthur Farwell wrote in styles less consciously derived from the European. Francis Boott, a prolific songwriter, was of the Cambridge circle, though long resident in Italy. There is a single song by Charles Ives ("The Children's Hour") and, from a later generation, prize songs written at Harvard and Wellesley by Randall Thompson and Katherine Davis.

Mr. Longfellow's range of subject matter is notable. To fame early won by short works on humble subjects—"The Rainy Day," "The Village Blacksmith," "A Psalm of Life," "The Wreck of the Hesperus," "The Bridge," and "Excelsior"—he added the heroic. In these he did not confine himself to a single period or specific locality. *The Skeleton in Armor*, *Evangeline*, *Hiawatha*, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Tales of a Wayside Inn* bespeak the breadth and extent of his genius; they deal with heroic figures and lofty ideals wherein the moral tone and the mood of exaltation is everpresent.

Patterns of European and American musical life in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth include large choruses, all evidence of strong community involvement. Caught up in the surge of masterful oratorio singing were works of Handel, Haydn, and Mendelssohn; however, other scores were also needed to forge new links in a mighty chain. Spohr, Neukomm, King, and Romberg had served their purposes and retired. Bach had not yet attained his present-day popularity. Composers wrote on commission as artists Sargent, Abbey, Puvis de Chavannes, and St. Gaudens enriched public buildings with their illustrator's art. As thousands came to see new buildings, new murals, fresh portraits, heroic sculpture, so audiences flocked to hear great structures of choral sound. But the demand did not include advances in harmonic idiom or alteration of structure from solid foundations laid by Handel and built upon by Mendelssohn. Composers in these imposing forms write for amateur choruses—professional parts are solo—even when highly skilled. Longfellow's subjects were so admirable to the need that one might suppose he wrote them with that purpose in mind. Such was never the case. The poet's own lifelong interests in several arts ran concurrently, but in unrelated course. For a best-selling poet no associative artist was needed. In these larger works the advanced musician honored the poet to a far greater extent than the average songwriter.

Arthur Sullivan, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Frederick Cowen, Carl Busch, Charles G. Converse (not Frederick S.), and Arthur Foote found several of the longer works to their liking. Acclaimed on first hearings, none is a repertory item today owing in part to the decline of the chorus idea after World War I and the acceptance of a more contemporary musical idiom.

In analyzing a thousand works from the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic viewpoints we may note certain basic characteristics.

- (1) The music does not often employ novel technical devices or advanced idioms.
- (2) Simple ballads for amateur performance in the home or for volunteer chorus convey a direct musical meaning unaided by more subtle approaches possible to a professionally-trained artist.
- (3) In the period 1840–1914, romantic ideals of music, expressed in terms of Victorian custom, governed all popular styles. Emphasis is on melody and harmony, with slight regard for rhythmic variety.
- (4) Composers were of necessity conservative, even when most professional.

It is dismaying, however, to mark selection after selection based on trite melodic devices. Except for the words, one piece is barely distinguishable from another; the same tunes could accommodate “Footsteps of Angels” and “A Psalm of Life.”⁴⁴ The use of simpler keys is practical. Hatton ventures into D flat for “Footsteps,” and indulges in bits of recitative, but such digressions are infrequent. Thirds and sixths predominate in chords; cadences are conventional and amply forewarned. We are not told anything in mournful numbers; the cheerful note falls not below a brief nostalgia signaled by the minor, or a furious rumbling in the accompaniment. Their commonness is proof that the poetry is superior to the music.