



# Reviews re Cipriani Potter and Sterndale Bennett

*The Independent*,  
Monday 22 January 1990

*The Musical Times*, November 1990,  
vol cxxxi, no.1773 p.603

## Rediscovering forgotten music

*From Mr Hilary Davan Wetton*

Sir: Bayan Northcott's splendidly detailed account of the Cipriani Potter "revival" ("Back to Potter's bars", 13 January) contained one small but important error.

It is indeed true that I conducted a series of broadcasts for Radio 3, with the Ulster Orchestra, of music both by Sterndale Bennett and Cipriani Potter. However, these programmes were not devised by me but by David Byers, the Senior Music Producer in Belfast. My great enthusiasm for both these neglected composers is owed entirely to Mr Byers; without his encouragement I would probably never even have read the scores.

I would like to acknowledge publicly the debt which we owe to both David Byers and the BBC for helping to uncover so much first-rate music that has lain dormant. There are many more pieces which amply deserve attention from the same period.

Yours faithfully,  
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16 January

## English byeways

If Sterndale Bennett is a dimly perceived figure today, how much more so is Cipriani Potter (1792-1871), Bennett's teacher and his predecessor as principal of the RAM! But the complimentary remarks passed by Beethoven and Wagner (the latter when he conducted one of Potter's symphonies in London in 1851) have borne fruit at last. David Byers, the BBC's director of music in Northern Ireland, programmed a symphony in G minor by Potter, apparently the same one that Wagner encountered, and engaged Hilary Davan Wetton to conduct it. Mr Wetton in turn presented the work, with his own Milton Keynes Chamber Orchestra, at a London concert last January and now has coupled it on record (**Unicorn DKP 9091**) with another Potter symphony, in E flat. Conjecturally tagged as no. 10 and no. 8 respectively, these symphonies show a surprising prevalence of 'Schubertian' traits - in harmony, in rhythmic drive, and general handling of the orchestra. Composing in London in the 1830s, Potter could not have known Schubert's orchestral works directly. But during his earlier Viennese training, did he and Schubert undergo some unidentified common influence?

The more celebrated no. 10 establishes itself as the better work of the two, with a first movement not only much shorter but clearer in tonal direction. The symphony's successful adherence to minor tonality is remarkable: a first movement in G minor, a second in D minor (with A minor in the middle!), a scherzo finding relief in B flat, and a finale which allows a jolly march a seemingly conclusive reappearance in G major but then turns back to G minor after all. To programme this symphony in a leading London orchestral series today would call for no apologies. Mr Wetton and his Milton Keynes musicians (with Martin Loveday and Diana Cummings admirable in cello and violin solos) blaze the trail with considerable spirit.

Another disc from the same orchestra, with Malcolm Binns as pianist (**Unicorn UKCD 2032**), turns attention to three works written by Bennett. Like Potter's pair, they date from the

1830s, but represent a younger composer's outlook. Bennett's friend Schumann was the dedicatee of the Fantasy for solo piano, the sole work of mastery among the chosen three. Couched in the harmonic idiom of Mendelssohn's *Songs without words* but soaring out of the domestic orbit to demand a virtuoso's performing skill, it is splendidly delivered here, though with the piano rather overprominently placed in recording. It is more likely to recommend itself to performers than the Piano Concerto no. 4, unhelped by its very long (80-bar) orchestral introduction and its refusal to let the soloist continue to the last bar of any of the three movements. During the course of the concerto Schumann and also Chopin flit by, but inspiration is patchy and the return of the main theme of the finale is presented almost as a non-event. The able soloist errs in playing a D minor chord for an F major one, if the Victorian two-piano edition (p.26, bar 10) is correct.

The remaining work on the Bennett disc bears the title simply of Symphony in G minor. It is the earlier (no. 4, 1835) of the two symphonies in that key printed in Nicholas Temperley's edition (1982). Classical formalities with occasional gusts of Romantic atmosphere do not convince. All the same, the last of the four movements is remarkable in its character, that of a 3/4 scherzo marked *Presto con fuoco* (and finally *con molto fuoco*). The derivation, even in key, from the scherzo of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems obvious until one recalls that Bennett's work preceded Mendelssohn's. A pity about the ineffective final bar, a strings-only unison. Mr Wetton directs vigorously, but his string-players do not properly articulate the motivic trills in the symphony's opening theme.

ARTHUR JACOBS