

SIR FREDERICK OUSELEY

As thousands of students, young and not so young struggle through their music harmony and theory exams I wonder if they give any thought to how this came about. Part of the answer lies in the life of an extraordinary Whitelocke descendant.

Frederick Arthur Gore Ouseley was the only surviving son of Sir Gore Ouseley and Harriot Georgina, youngest daughter of the ill-fated General John Whitelocke (1758-1833) (see Vol.9:1:5). Unlike his sisters and brother who were born in places like Tabriz and Shiraz in Persia or St.Petersburg in Russia Sir Frederick was born in London August 12, 1825. His parents followed the custom of having influential persons as sponsors at their children's baptisms. In 1814, when Ouseley's sister, Alexandrina Perceval was baptised in St.Petersburg, her sponsors were Alexander, Emperor of Russia, the Hon. Robert Gordon, her Imperial Majesty the Empress Mary and the Hon. Mrs. Spencer Perceval! Ouseley was sponsored by H.R.H. Duke of York, the Duke of Wellington, the Marchioness of Salisbury and Miss Ouseley. An auspicious beginning.

His father was an Ambassador and noted orientalist but Ouseley's talents lay in a completely different direction as it was evident at a very young age that he had an extraordinary ear for music. As a young child he was able to play complicated scores by ear and by the age of eight had composed an opera. His skill at improvisation was demonstrated by playing 'God Save the Queen' with his right hand while playing 'Rule Britannia' with his left.

At nineteen Ouseley's life took a drastic turn with the death of his father and inheriting of his estates and titles. A possible career as one of the great composers of the 19th century was not considered fitting and Ouseley was sent off to Oxford to read for a degree prior to ordination in the church. After receiving his M.A. in 1849 he took a degree in music he became a Professor of Music at Oxford. This was despite public comment that a man in his position should not have presented himself for examination as music was not held in very high esteem in Victorian England.

In the following years Ouseley used his talent and wealth to create a college of music at Tenbury in Worcestershire. Ouseley became warden of the College, provided a headmaster to run the choir school, a curate to help in the parish and a professional organist for the church. He also provided a vicarage and day-school for the parish.

The library Ouseley built at Tenbury was one of his greatest achievements. It housed the premier collection in the western world at that time, comprising over 4,000 volumes covering the 15th to 19th centuries. Treasures included Handel's Messiah, the conductor's score used at the first performance at Dublin in 1742; the Batten Organ-book; the Toulouse-Philidor opera collection; the service books from the Chapel Royal of Louis XIV. To finance a portion of this collection Ouseley sold 35 of his father's Oriental manuscripts to the Bodleian Library including the one Edward Fitzgerald later used to become acquainted with the 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam'.

Ouseley was a pianist, organist, guitarist, cellist, singer and prodigious composer of sacred music. His system of proper music examination was the first instituted and the concepts he developed are still used today. Oxford University's system of granting honorary degrees in music began in 1879, during Ouseley's tenure.

Ouseley never married and died suddenly on April 6, 1889 and was buried at St.Michael's, Tenbury near his beloved college. The school operated until 1985 and has recently reopened as an international college. In addition to his many compositions and publications Sir Frederick's legacy of formal music examinations

remains to this day.

Sources: REF553; REF554; UBC136