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Alfred Herbert Brewer (1865-1928)

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Ivor Gurney and Sir Herbert Brewer
A misunderstood relationship?

Simon Carpenter

Between 1906 and 1911, Ivor Gurney was an articled pupil of Sir Herbert Brewer, the Organist of Gloucester Cathedral, having just completed a successful career as one of Brewer's cathedral choristers. During his time as a chorister he had regularly been given solos, including most notably as a last minute stand in soloist in a major concert during the 1904 Three Choirs Festival, and he had also been appointed the choir's 'first chorister' in 1905. He was therefore already a gifted musician and it was no surprise that Brewer agreed to take him on as a pupil. At this time in 1906, Brewer — himself a former Gloucester chorister and articled pupil of one of his Gloucester predecessors, C. H. Lloyd — had been the cathedral organist for nearly ten years, and would stay in post until his death in 1928. My recent research for a University of Gloucestershire MA examined his place in British music history, his educational philosophy, and the effect he had on the careers of his teenage articled pupils (of which he generally had a few at any one time). It was initially prompted by a sense that he had been given a 'raw deal' by the biographers of his more well-known articled pupils, including Gurney, who tend to disparage or play down his role. His other notable pupils included Herbert Howells and Ivor Novello.

Writing of Gurney, Michael Hurd (1978) was particularly hard on Brewer and treats the musical life of Gloucester Cathedral rather disparagingly. Hurd reports that Brewer 'does not appear to have been enthusiastic, (as a teacher of Gurney) but duly instructed his wayward pupil in the mysteries of harmony and counterpoint, piano and organ.' One of my main sources was Brewer's own extensive published memoirs, but, useful as they are, they do not include anything on Gurney or his relationship with him.

Alfred Herbert Brewer

Recognised as a leading church musician in his day, Herbert Brewer was knighted in 1926, an honour which came about partly through his close friendship with Elgar. This friendship is explained by the privileged and strategic position he occupied in the music profession by being based at Gloucester Cathedral, bringing with it the codirectorship of the Three Choirs Festival. Brewer directed eight of these festivals over the course of over thirty years (there was a break during the First World War) which involved him every third year scheduling a week's concerts bringing together leading orchestras and soloists, commissioning new works from composers and introducing audiences to these new works and composers. It was Brewer who introduced the world to the now iconic Vaughan Williams *Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis* in 1910, conducted by the composer. It was also Brewer who arranged the first performances of works by other major composers including Parry, Holst, Bliss, Howells, Saint-Saëns and Sibelius, performances often conducted by the composers themselves. Importantly, he was also the director when the BBC first broadcast concerts from the Festival in 1925, introducing it to a whole new audience; and he was alternately conducting and playing the organ when the festival was commercially recorded for the first time in 1927. In 1927 the BBC dedicated an hour to broadcasting performances of him conducting his own works at the studio in Birmingham. Before arriving back at Gloucester — following his earlier choristership at the cathedral — Brewer had been successively Organist of St Michael's Church, Coventry (now Coventry Cathedral) and Organist and Music Master of Tonbridge School, following organ scholarships at the RCM and Exeter College, Oxford.

Brewer's approach to teaching

After his death, Brewer's widow described her late husband's approach to teaching as an 'iron nature combined with intense sensitiveness.' She believed that these 'were the secret of [his] power to lead and to draw the best out of those who came under his control.' Behind these was a well-developed pedagogical approach, drawn from his natural character, his upbringing, the spirit of the age, and his experiences across his career. His overarching attitude to his career was, according to both his widow and eldest son (he had three children), that 'he *Ivor Gurney and Sir Herbert Brewer* always said, his work was his hobby.' It was therefore something that he was passionate about and enjoyed. In this context, Brewer's teaching philosophy can be gleaned from his memoirs. His words reveal his assumptions and attitudes in several key areas, including the intellectual and

societal benefits of the teaching and learning of music, the role of the teacher, and the status and expectations of the pupil. Taking each in turn:

The intellectual and societal benefits of the teaching and learning of music

Brewer's memoirs reveal that he approached the teaching of music with a firm belief that knowledge and appreciation of it was inherently a 'good thing', both in terms of its intellectual benefits and as a civilising influence. He shows this by the language he uses when writing about it. For example, when describing his own background as a cathedral chorister he notes that 'my experience has been that boys who have a knowledge of music and a keen ear generally have a great advantage in learning over boys who have no sense of sound or pitch.' But at every level and in every way he believes that extending the knowledge of music was a noble thing to do, and that the people who took part in such activities should be applauded and rewarded.

At Oxford University he notes with approval that the University Musical Society, of which he was President for a while, 'did much for the advancement of chamber music in the university.' When he was Organist and Music Master of Tonbridge School he was appreciative of the fact that the headmaster 'was one of the few headmasters of the time who understood the value of music as part of a boy's education.' In other words, he saw the world as Brewer saw it. Furthermore, presumably on Brewer's prompting, the headmaster 'made a point of impressing on the boys' minds the privilege of singing in the choir. He also granted special favours to members of the choir, not only by entertaining them in a lavish manner — as he knew how — but by giving them extra half holidays through the term.' Later in his time at Tonbridge, Brewer supervised the introduction of a new pipe organ in the school hall. This enabled him 'to give recitals to the boys […] mak[ing] them acquainted with a quantity of modern music as well as the old classics by transcribing them for organ.'

The role of the teacher

As well as a clear idea of the benefits of a musical education, Brewer also had equally clear ideas about his role as a music teacher. This is evident through his memoirs, beginning with how he enthuses about the relationships he had with the people who had taught him — his exemplars in that role. As a child, his first music teacher was a John Hooper, who, as well as a being a keyboard player, was also apparently 'a violinist of some ability' in the opinion not just of Brewer but also Elgar. However, he went beyond being a good example of a professional musician. John Hooper was the organist of the Roman Catholic church in Gloucester, and Brewer 'often accompanied him and sat beside him on the organ stool and watched him play.' It was therefore almost the relationship of master and disciple. Brewer similarly describes with approval his relationship with Charles Harford Lloyd, organist of Gloucester Cathedral between 1876 and 1881, with whom Brewer served as chorister and began his organ studies. Brewer believed that setting a good example was also an important role for the teacher. When describing his approach to his teaching responsibilities he notes that:

> I have always made a point of not missing a practice or a rehearsal of any kind when it has been at all possible for me to attend. I feel sure this has helped to bring about that *esprit de corps* which exists among the members of my choirs and societies. Slackness and lack of enthusiasm on the part of a choirmaster soon affect those who are placed under his control.

Later, describing his experiences as a pupil of the King's School and trying to capture its pedagogic setting, Brewer describes how 'nearly all the forms [teaching groups] were held in one room, and the pandemonium caused by the masters [teachers] competing with each other in their attempts to drive the rudiments of Latin, Greek and arithmetic into the heads of all the boys, all at the same time, was indescribable.' A teacher, then, in Brewer's mind, was someone who also had to be prepared, if necessary, to force education by all possible means into not always responsive pupils in unfavourable circumstances.

The ability to give 'sympathy' is a quality that Brewer notes with approval existed in his mind in the characters of two people he looked up to in his early career. Hubert Parry, he said, was 'ever *Ivor Gurney and Sir Herbert Brewer* ready with sympathy and encouragement for those who intended adopting music as a profession', while Sir Frederick Ouseley is described as 'sympathetic and kind hearted.' In order to understand the sentiment behind these comments, there is a need to understand what sympathetic meant at that time. Simpson and Sacken believe that the word sympathy was used before the word empathy emerged in the early twentieth century, and before then it included two dimensions: 'an immediate sensitivity to a person's feelings and an

intelligent inquiry into a person's thinking.'[1] The references above were using the latter meaning, and therefore meant in modern terms that Parry and Ouseley both showed an interest in him and respected him as a thinking human being. In turn, Brewer aspired to possess that quality.

Brewer became a full time teacher in 1892 when he joined the staff of Tonbridge School, a boys' public school. He was to stay for several years, demonstrating that he recognised his vocation as a teacher and his commitment to it. He introduces this period in his life by saying that, 'The attempt to obtain good results from boys who naturally preferred cricket and football to irksome but necessary piano practice was a somewhat disheartening task.' This sentence is as rich as any in Brewer's memoirs, revealing so many of the hidden cultural values of the time and place. Firstly, his assumption that the boys would 'naturally' prefer playing sport to artistic activities such as piano practice. One of Brewer's pupils at this time was the novelist, E.M. Forster, who most definitely would not have come under that category. But for Brewer to describe piano practice as 'irksome but necessary' shows that he felt the boys had a low opinion of the subject he was endeavouring to teach.

Brewer however, was helped by his unshakable belief in the value of music education. He was therefore prepared and ready to stand his ground over its benefits to the boys and obtain 'good results' out of them, no matter what the cost. In this he was helped by having the support of the headmaster in his efforts. The role of the pupil in Brewer's mind there was also a firm and clear divide between the teacher and the taught. He gives several clues in his memoirs about the role he expected the pupil to play in this relationship. Firstly he expected pupils to be proactive. As a child musician, he had ambitions to be a chorister, and he took the steps necessary to ensure that he became one. He also valued competitiveness amongst young musicians, jostling for places against their peers, inchoirs and for exams and scholarships, as he did with the cathedral choir and his various exams. Whilst in Tonbridge Brewer introduced house music competitions, in which different sections of the school competed against each other in musical performances. However, alongside the encouraging and rewarding of initiative, he also believed that a pupil should take the advice of those who know better (his masters and parents) and be prepared to be entered for positions or exams.

Brewer describes from his own life: 'About the time I left the choir it was decided that I should enter for the local examination of the Royal Academy of Music.' Even though he then goes on to describe how pointless the actual exam was, there is not a hint of criticism of those who decided it would be good for him to take it. Brewer also expected his pupils to have strong powers of concentration. He mentions this as a useful quality when discussing the chaotic scenes in the King's School when he was a pupil there, 'it had one advantage — it forced on boys the habit of concentration.' And finally, he describes how, as he looked back on his career what qualities he expected in his choir boys. He notes that:

> some hundreds of boys have passed through my hands, and from the first I have made it a rule that every boy should learn an instrument of some kind […]. All the boys read music fluently, and in consequence I have often been able to perform a new setting of the canticles or anthem with a minimum amount of rehearsal […]. Then again, I find it a beneficial plan to question the boys as to the singing of the previous day's service, making them critical of their own performance.

Therefore he wanted them to take themselves seriously as young professional musicians, to take responsibility for their own performances and their place in the ensemble. If he had such high expectations of his boy choristers, it is clear that he would have had even higher expectations of his articled pupils.

Gurney's life as an articled pupil

By the time Brewer was taking on articled pupils at Gloucester Cathedral this method of training had been evolving for several centuries, growing out of the apprenticeships available for membership of the medieval craft guilds. At its heart, and in its purest form, apprenticeship was a contractual relationship between master and apprentice involving reciprocal obligations on the part of both parties. During the time of an apprenticeship, the master 'exercised the same rights and was liable to the same obligations as a father.'[2] An indenture was signed and a premium was exchanged. Over the course of the nineteenth century the system became progressively more flexible as regards the length of time a pupil might spend with a master and also the legal arrangements behind the relationships.

In some cases no legal document existed and the arrangement was done by 'gentlemen's agreement'. Typically organists would advertise vacancies they had for pupils in the trade journals of the time, such as this example from *The Musical Times* of November 1 1869:

> THE ORGANIST of Queen's College, Oxford, has VACANCIES for Two ARTICLED PUPILS.
> Very superior advantages can be offered. During the course of the century it was the default method of training for the aspiring church musician, 'a highly practical solution to the daily needs of the cathedral's music-making, whilst also providing a thorough musical education for those selected', as Howells's biographer, Paul Spicer, described it.[3]

With Brewer as trainer, another of his articled pupils reported later that, 'We attended all services, in the organ loft, chorister rehearsals in the Song School, and had one piano and one organ lesson a week and showed our paperwork for correction more or less when we had some ready.'[4] He also said that the pupils automatically studied for ARCO and FRCO and then BMus (external) 'if good enough.' All Brewer's articled pupils also had the advantage of the presence of the Three Choirs Festival on their doorstep every third year. These festivals were a matchless training ground and experience
for the pupils.

Gurney's relationship with Brewer

When Gurney switched from being a chorister to being an articled pupil in 1906, Brewer already knew him well. He had believed in him, encouraged and trained him from boyhood, and he saw the potential in him to be a professional musician. However, Gurney's recollection of the experience of being taught by Brewer as an articled pupil is slightly underwhelming:

> I would go to his house at the time fixed for my lesson and then Brewer would send me into the city to buy birdseed for his bird, or some other errand, and then when I got back he would say there really wasn't time for a lesson as he must go to the cathedral, and I would only get half a lesson or else he told me to come on some other day for one.[5]

Winifred Gurney, Ivor's sister, recalled:

> Dr Brewer gave him little or no encouragement, according to what I heard my father say. He did not appear to praise or do anything to help him, but told my father that he would be proud if the music Ivor had written was his. I believe also that he took no part in Ivor's success at gaining the scholarship (to the Royal College of Music) whatsoever, either by encouraging him to go for it or help(ing) him in his composition. This I think would definitely spur Ivor on to his goal without help and make him difficult with Dr Brewer.[6]

Marion Scott, who Gurney first met when he started at the RoyalCollege of Music (RCM), reported that she felt that under Brewer's casual and indifferent tutelage Gurney had merely become 'a practical if unpredictable musician.'[7] Ivor's Gloucester friend Margaret Hunt was more severe in her appraisal, calling Brewer 'neurotic and utterly selfish and interested in his own concerns.'[8] According to Hunt, 'he never did anything to help either of his clever pupils (Howells and Gurney) and did not wish them to go to London.'[9] Harsh assessments indeed. But what is the truth behind them? Of the key witnesses, Margaret Hunt and Marion Scott, it is worth trying to understand their perspectives.
Margaret Hunt was one of two sisters — the other was Emily— who lived nearby to Gurney's family, in Wellington Street, Gloucester.

Both were professional musicians, and they saw themselves, alongside his godfather and mentor Rev. Alfred Cheeseman, as providers of the stability and encouragement that he was not receiving from his rather overcrowded family home. His mother, Florence, was reportedly 'rather an unstable person with a tendency to dominate and push her husband and children. She often seemed complaining and cold.'[10] Of the Hunt sisters, Margaret played the violin and Emily the piano and Gurney's visits to them were frequent. Some of his early attempts at composing were dedicated to them, written for them to play. Margaret was the younger sister, though still fifteen years older than the teenage Gurney. The Hunts were a valuable source of musical encouragement to Gurney and he had an 'idealised love' for Margaret. Years later in a poem he expressed how she had encouraged him:

She had such love and after my music sent Me out to woodlands, and to wander by meadow or bent Lanes of Severn — I got into my music — I would wander my soul full of air, and return to her quick …[11] There was therefore a strong bond between them, strong enough to bias her against his teacher. The other key witness, Marion Scott, first met Ivor Gurney soon after he arrived at the RCM and she was to become a lasting friend and champion of him and his work. She was at this time the College Registrar and later recalled their first meeting:

> … I saw coming towards me along a corridor […] a figure which even in that place of marked individualities, appeared uncommon. For one thing the boy was wearing a thick, dark blue Severn pilot's coat […] But what struck me more was the look of latent force in him, the fine head with its profusion of light brown hair (not too well brushed!) and the eyes, which, behind their spectacles, were of mixed colouring […] 'This' I said to myself, 'must be the new composition scholar from Gloucester whom they call Schubert.[12]

Theirs also was a complex relationship that has been thoroughly analysed by Pamela Blevins. She summarises it as 'Marion Scott's abiding affection for Gurney deepened over time, but we know nothing of a physical relationship between them.'[13] With the accusation of the lack of commitment that Gurney complained about we only have his word that he was at the house at the fixed time. Other evidence points to Gurney himself having an erratic and disorganised lifestyle. This could have led Brewer to not know whether to expect him or not. It is likely that their opposite behaviours led to clashes between them. Brewer's busyness and liking and need for efficiency would not worked well with Gurney's high handed and casual approach to life. An example of this is reported by Howells that once when playing for morning service in the Cathedral and the great east window was aflame with light, Gurney saw it as a 'pillar of fire' in his imagination and cried, 'God I must go to Framilode!'[14] He walked out and stayed away for three days. It can be easily imagined how that sort of behaviour would have been received by Brewer.

It is worth pointing out that Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, who taught Gurney composition at the RCM, is also on record as having thought him a difficult pupil. Marion Scott related Stanford's opinion that, 'Potentially [Gurney] is the most gifted man that ever came into my care. But he is the least teachable.' [Stanford] was aware that 'there were greater musicians about than himself […] he told me (Marion Scott) that one of them … was perhaps the most promising composer alive.'[15] This is quite a claim from one of the leading British composers of his age, and someone who at that time was also teaching Vaughan Williams.

Herbert Howells later recalled an occasion when Gurney had written a song of which he was particularly proud and took it along to a lesson with Stanford. Howells sat on Stanford's right and Gurney on his left. Stanford gazed at the manuscript for a seemingly endless quarter of an hour, then took his gold propelling pencil from his waistcoat pocket and altered something. 'There m'bhoy' he said. 'There that will be half a crown.' Gurney, infuriated, looked him straight in the eye and said 'I see you've jiggered the whole thing!' Taking hold of Gurney by the scruff of the neck, Stanford shoved him out of the door, then leaned against the door, broke into a smile and said, 'I love the boy more each time.'[16] Gurney's capacity for friendship had worked again, but came up against his resistance to academic discipline and rigour.

It is interesting to note that Herbert Brewer's alleged response to Gurney's first request to try to gain a place at the RCM was not positive, reportedly asking 'Why does he bother? He can get all he wants here.'[17] That is the only record we have of such an opinion, quoted by a Gloucester friend of Gurney's and one of his self-appointed mentors, Emily Hunt and has to be taken with caution. Also, as it is written, it is impossible to know the tone in which it was expressed. It could have been sympathetic.

The experiences of other articled pupils

Finally, against these reported experiences of one of Brewer's most naturally gifted pupils has to be set the recorded opinions of others. Ambrose Porter, an articled pupil in the early years of the twentieth century, is reported to have said at Brewer's funeral that:

> As a master he had a most inspiring effect on his pupils and his method of training brought out especially the essential qualities of courage and self-reliance; moreover he always chose the better path of example rather than precept. His almost unbelievable efficiency, which no one could really appreciate who did not know him intimately, the careful and often anxious solicitude for the health and well-being of the articled pupils entrusted to his charge. I well remember a kind but firm

> rebuke when he discovered that a certain piece of orchestration had been done after midnight. And so one could continue. [...] the sympathetic understanding with which he entered into the difficulties of his pupils, and his whole hearted joy at their success. Truly his mission in life was to give happiness to others.[18]

Allowing for the fact that there is rarely a negative eulogy given at a funeral, some of the words used to describe Brewer by Porter are instructive. His training method brought out 'courage and self-reliance' n his pupils. Gurney could be said to have wanted more support from Brewer, but actually showed those qualities by moving on from him when he felt the time was right. Clearly Brewer was not a teacher who thought it right to spoon feed or mollycoddle his pupils as Gurney's friends and relations maybe thought he should. Gurney also probably did not appreciate Brewer's 'kind but firm' rebukes as someone more secure would have done. Brewer treated his boy choristers as young professional musicians so would have expected the same sort of behaviour, attitude and strength of character from his articled pupils.

More recently, one of Porter's own pupils has recalled that 'I know that Ambrose Porter valued his time with Brewer, but I cannot recall his talking to me on the subject. He was more proud of the fact that, as Brewer's Assistant, he taught Herbert Howells the organ!'[19] Another pupil of Brewer found it to be a positive experience. Arthur Pritchard recalled that 'it was a very full life and I cannot speak too highly of the tuition and general musical experience gained from a distinguished musician under these conditions.'[20]

Notes:

1 D.J. Simpson and D.M. Sacken, 'The Sympathetic-and-Empathetic Teacher: A Deweyan Analysis' *Journal of Philosophy & History of Education*, vol. 64, no. 1 (2014), 2.

2 Joan Lane, *Apprenticeship in England, 1600-1914* (London: UCL Press, 1996), 2.

3 Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1998), 19.

4 Frederick Lang, *The Anglican organist in Victorian and Edwardian England (c.1800–c.1910)* (PhD Thesis: University of Hull, 2004), 393.

5 Quoted in Pamela Blevins, *Ivor Gurney and Marion Scott: Song of Pain and Beauty* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), 61.

6 Anthony Boden, *Stars in a dark night. The letters of Ivor Gurney to the Chapman family* [revised edition] (Stroud: Sutton, 2004), 26.

7 Blevins, 20.

8 Blevins, 20.

9 Blevins, 20.

10 Blevins, 20.

11 From 'The First Violets', quoted in Eleanor Rawling, Ivor Gurney's Gloucestershire: Exploring poetry and Place (Stroud: The History Press, 2011), 22.

12 *Music and Letters*, XIX.1 (1938), 3.

13 Blevins, p.74.

14 Michael Hurd, *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 21, and Spicer, 20.

15 *Music and Letters*, XIX.1 (1938), 7.

16 Quoted in Boden, 45-47.

17 Emily Hunt memory quoted in Hurd, 28.

18 *Gloucester Journal*, 10 March 1928, 18.

19 Email to author from Richard Lloyd, 18 March 2018.

20 Lang, 398.

Herbert Brewer's memoir, *Memories of Choirs and Cloisters: Fifty Years of Music*, was first published posthumously, in 1931. A new edition, edited by John Morehen, was published by Stainer & Bell in 2015 and is readily available.