

Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 54 — Stanley, John

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STANLEY, JOHN (1714–1786), musician, was born in London on 17 Jan. 1713–14. When two years old he was completely blinded by falling on a marble hearth while holding a china basin in his hand. Soon afterwards his musical tastes attracted notice. At the age of seven he was placed under John Reading (1677–1764) [see under **READING, JOHN**, (*d.* 1692)], and some time later under Maurice Greene. In November 1723 the boy of eleven was entrusted with the post of organist of All Hallows, Bread Street. This post he left in 1726 for St. Andrew's, Holborn, where Daniel Purcell and John Isham had recently officiated, and where counsel's opinion was taken at the time regarding the right of electing an organist (*Hist. MSS. Comm.* 7th Rep. p. 689 b); in 1734 he was also elected organist to the Society of the Inner Temple. He held both posts till his death, and at the Temple it was not uncommon to see forty or fifty other organists, with Handel himself, assembled to hear the last voluntary. Stanley had graduated Mus. Bac. Oxon. on 19 July 1729, at the age of sixteen; this is the youngest recorded age for an Oxford musical graduate, and has been surpassed at Cambridge only by Thomas Ravenscroft. Stanley married the daughter of Captain Arlond, in the East India Company's service, but had no issue.

Despite the loss of his sight, Stanley was a good player at skittles, shovel-board, and billiards, and also of whist, using perforated cards. He invented an apparatus for teaching

music to the blind, and his own ear and memory were trained to an extent quite incredible except to those familiar with the powers of blind musicians. He could remember and perform any piece after hearing it once; even when he had to accompany a new oratorio, his sister-in-law, Miss Arlond, played it through to him once only. Musicians at this period were unaccustomed to the extreme keys; but Stanley, having once to accompany a Te Deum of Handel's in D (probably the Dettingen), and finding the organ a semitone above concert pitch, immediately transposed the entire composition without hesitation, a feat which seems to have specially impressed his contemporaries. He was usually engaged (BURNLEY) to perform whenever a charity sermon was preached or a new organ was opened. He frequently played organ concertos at Vauxhall, and was also in much request as a teacher, among his earliest pupils being John Alcock, only two years his junior. He led the subscription concerts at the Swan tavern in Cornhill and the Castle in Paternoster Row, using a Stainer violin for orchestral playing, and a Cremona for solos; both were lost when the Swan was burnt. In 1752, when Handel became blind and could not accompany his oratorio performances, Stanley was recommended to him as a substitute; but Handel preferred John Christopher Smith [q. v.], objecting, he said, to the blind leading the blind. An oratorio by Stanley, entitled 'Jephthah,' was performed in 1757.

After Handel's death in 1760 Smith and Stanley entered into partnership, and continued the Lenten oratorio

performances at Covent Garden. For their first season (1760) Stanley composed 'Zimri;' this was published in full score, but without the choruses. He played a concerto in the interval of every oratorio performance, and accompanied throughout. In the same year he set an ode, performed at Drury Lane, intended as an elegy on George II and a homage to George III. On the occasion of the royal wedding, in 1762, he composed a dramatic pastoral, 'Arcadia.' From 1769 to 1777 he gave annual performances in aid of the Foundling Hospital. In 1774 Smith retired. Stanley then associated the elder Linley with himself in the speculation, and produced another oratorio, 'The Fall of Egypt' (the manuscripts of this and of 'Jephthah' are at the Royal College of Music; see Catalogue of Sacred Harmonic Society's Library, Nos. 1833–4). In February 1779, on the death of Dr. Boyce, Stanley was appointed master of the king's band; and after Weideman's sudden death, in 1782, he led it himself. His last composition was probably the ode written by Warton for the king's birthday, 4 June 1786. It was duly performed, but Stanley had died at his house in Hatton Garden on 19 May. He was buried on the evening of the 27th in the new ground attached to St. Andrew's, Holborn. On the following Sunday an appropriate selection was performed 'on that organ on which Mr. Stanley had with much eminence displayed his musical abilities near sixty years.'

Stanley published a set of six cantatas in 1742, to words mostly by Sir John Hawkins (1719–1789) [q. v.]; they were

so well received that a second set followed in the same year. He also published, besides 'Zimri,' three sets of organ voluntaries, and concertos for organ or strings, with the direction that the same accompaniments would serve for either. They are among the best English instrumental compositions of the eighteenth century. His works are occasionally represented in the programmes of organ recitals, and three of the voluntaries, arranged for the modern instrument with pedal keyboard, were reprinted in A. H. Brown's 'Organ Arrangements,' 1886. Six of Stanley's preludes and fugues are included in Pittman's 'Progressive Studies for Pianoforte, Organ, or Harmonium,' 1882. One hymn tune is used in the Temple church.

Stanley's portrait by Gainsborough, a half-length, was finely engraved by Mary Ann Rigg (Scott), and published in 1781. Another portrait, representing him at the organ, was engraved by Mac Ardell, and appeared in the 'European Magazine.'

[European Mag. 1784, ii. 171; Gent. Mag. 1760 p. 218, 1779 pp. 103, 317, 1780 p. 37, 1786 pp. 442, 512; Georgian Era, iv. 313; C. F. Pohl's Mozart in London, p. 179; Morning Post, June 22, 1786; Courtney's English Whist, p. 313; Marpurg's *Traité de la Fugue et du Contrepoint*, Berlin, 1756, § 2, p. xxv; Burney's *General Hist. of Music*, iii. 621, iv. 587, 654, 663; Grove's *Dict. of Music and Musicians*, iii. 690; C. F. Abdy Williams's *Degrees in Music*, p. 85; Ouseley's *Contributions to Naumann's Illustrierte Geschichte der Musik*, English edit. p. 920; *Musical News*, 16 Oct. 1897.]

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