ORATORIO

RTHK Radio 4 10:00 – 11:00 Programme 6 Sunday 10 june 2007

MUSIC: Sullivan -- The Prodigal Son CD 63618 ##1-3 12:11

[KANE: v.o. at c. 0:36

Welcome to "ORATORIO"; and this week a return to the more traditional style of oratorio, inspired by Handel, that reached the height of its popularity in Victorian Britain in the late 1800s. Arthur Sullivan is far better known as the musical half of the Gilbert & Sullivan phenomenon that produced a whole string of highly successful light operas between 1871 and 1896. But Sullivan had loftier ambitions, which were never really fulfilled: his only grand-opera, 'Ivanhoe', failed though it did have a run of 160 London performances, and was produced also in Boston and Berlin. He first made his name at the age of 20 with incidental music for Shakespeare's "The Tempest". He was still in his 20s when he wrote his first oratorio, for the Worcester festival of 1869, "The Prodigal Son". It was a great success, and continued to be performed regularly until the First World War, when changing tastes and sensibilities led to its falling out of favour. Two more oratorios followed: "The Light of the World" and "The Martyr of Antioch" which Sullivan later revised as an opera. Indeed, it was Sullivan's introduction of an operatic, dramatic element of human emotion and local colour into oratorio that moved the genre onwards from Handel and Mendelssohn. "The Prodigal Son" is our oratorio for this week and you're listening to.its Introduction. Unusually for him, it was Sullivan himself who chose the words, basically the story in St Luke's gospel ch.15, but omitting the episode of the elder son, which Sullivan found irrelevant to his focus on the young man and his father, the tenor and baritone who have the best solo parts. He then "filled out" the story (as he said) with other biblical quotes. Once more, for reasons of time, we have to omit a few numbers in 'The Prodigal Son', mostly from those *other* biblical quotes. [12;11]

ORATORIO: 06

KANE:

After a recitative and aria on words from the Book of Proverbs, the story continues, and Sullivan "fills out" the Prodigal's 'riotous living' with a few verses from the prophet Isaiah set in a masterful chorus that brings a feel of more modern drama to the rather *static* conventions of oratorio of the day: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die". That's followed by *further* intimations of debauchery, through *more* verses of Isaiah, given to mezzo-soprano and chorus: "woe unto them that rise up early in the morning that they may follow strong drink". Then, an admonition from the first letter of St John, "Love not the world, nor the things that are in the world."

MUSIC: s a m e ## 5 – 8 8:39

KANE:

The story continues, with the prodigal falling on bad times, coming to his senses and deciding to return to his father: his bleak solo aria "How many hired servants.." is one of the most moving numbers of the oratorio we're listening to, Arthur Sullivan's "The Prodigal Son".

MUSIC: s a m e ## 9, 11 -- 12 8:08

KANE:

Then comes the joyful reconciliation scene between father and son, expressed in a fine tenor-baritone duet and baritone aria: this was, for Sullivan, climax of his oratorio and the source of its humanness. The section closes with the work's longest chorus, on verses of Ps 107: "O that men would praise the Lord for His goodness".

MUSIC: s a m e ## 13 -- 15 13:58

KANE:

Sullivan didn't set the *remaining* part of the prodigal son story, but instead brought his oratorio to an end on what he'd called biblical "fillins" from psalms, some verses of Isaiah and from the Letter to the Hebrews, in recitative and aria. Just before the end, there an unaccompanied quartet for the soloists, which we're omitting today.

MUSIC: s a m e ## 16, 18 6:57

KANE: That was "The Prodigal Son", an oratorio by Sir Arthur Sullivan, first heard in 1869 in Worcester Cathedral, England. The soloists in that recording were Claire Rutter (soprano), Catherine Denley (mezzo-

ORATORIO: 06 2

soprano), Mark Wilde (tenor) and Garry Magee (baritone). The New London Orchestra and the London Chorus were conducted by Ronald Corp. I'm Ciaran Kane: join me again next week for another 'Oratorio'.

Music: 49:53 Words: 340

ORATORIO: 06