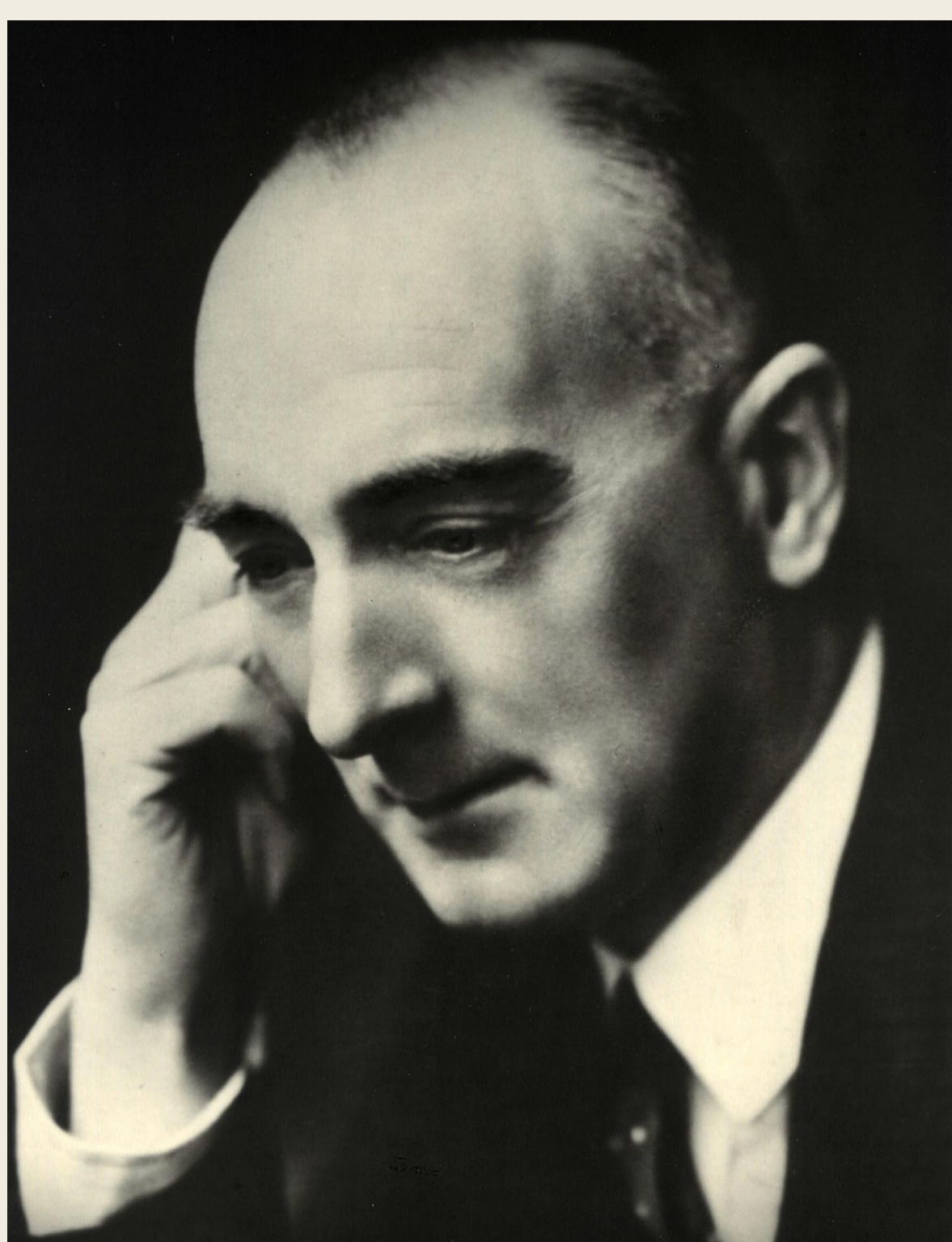


# Robert Sterndale Bennett

TD, MA, ARCM, ARCO

## Director of Music 1908-1945



Robert Sterndale Bennett had quite an act to follow, as his predecessor, Paul David, had created a fine reputation for music at Uppingham and was held in high esteem by the School and beyond. However, Robert's pedigree was well known by the Headmaster as it was Robert's grandfather William who influenced Thring's decision to appoint Paul David as Uppingham's first official Director of Music.

Robert was educated at Derby School where his father was Headmaster. The family was very musical and Robert's skills developed along similar lines to those of his father, in music and mathematics, at the Royal College of Music and St John's College, Cambridge respectively. His first appointment was at St Andrew's, Eastbourne, followed by Fettes College, Edinburgh. In 1908 he was appointed to Uppingham as Director of Music, Organist and Choirmaster.

His musical talent as a pianist and organist was quickly recognised and in the first months of his appointment, he persuaded the Headmaster that the School needed a dedicated Music School. Although Paul David enjoyed a concert hall for his final three years at Uppingham, teaching and practice rooms had been scattered in various buildings. The first Music School was built in 1910 in a corner of the Headmaster's garden. The facility had an immediate effect in that it doubled the number of pupils playing music, meaning that many more pupils could perform in the wind and string sections of the orchestra (which until this time was dominated by staff and professionals). Robert's next focus was to replace the chapel organ and, with support from the Headmaster and an appeal directed at the old boys, a fine Harrison and Harrison instrument was installed. On 7th May 1914 Henry Ley, OU and organist of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford opened the new organ with a recital including Bach, Schumann, Franck and Parry. The new organ transformed chapel services.

Under a new Headmaster in 1916, Robert introduced a timetabling innovation which integrated music lessons into the normal teaching timetable, devising a system which ensured a pupil would only miss one lesson in any subject. When Reggie Owen, the Headmaster, left Uppingham in 1934, he wrote a complete set of imperious notes for his successor, John Wolfenden: below the heading 'Music', he simply wrote 'Sterndale Bennett is chief and does his work well.'

Music flourished in the School under Sterndale Bennett, and his first year featured a Mendelssohn Centenary Concert involving the choir and orchestra. E J Moeran, the composer, was in Lorne House between 1908 and 1912 and by the time he left school he had played in a dozen symphonies, eight overtures, and accompanied many large choral works. In his last year, Moeran formed a school string quartet and wrote a cello and piano sonata. Moeran wrote, at a later date: "It is thus seen that every boy who has ears to hear, when he leaves Uppingham does so with a very fair grounding in the great classics." This testified to Sterndale Bennett's desire not only to enable the musically gifted to succeed, but also for every pupil to be musically informed.

Many eminent singers and instrumentalists were drawn to perform at Uppingham at this time, including Jan van der Gucht, Joan Fullerton and Joachim's grand-nieces Adila Fachiri and Jelly d'Arányi. Sterndale Bennett conducted 150 concerts over his 37 years at Uppingham, including five of Beethoven's symphonies and others by Haydn, Mendelssohn, Mozart and Schubert, numerous overtures and many pieces of chamber music. He was a founding member of the Uppingham Operatic Society, with Gilbert and Sullivan being a favourite, and he performed in many main parts between 1922 and 1938. He composed numerous tuneful pieces influenced by his brother Tom, a well-known music-hall performer, and in most school concerts at least one School Song was included.

In 1923, Sterndale Bennett was President of the Music Masters' Association, securing Music as a School Certificate subject. He was in great demand as an examiner for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music and enjoyed foreign tours, to Canada in 1925 and 1933, and to Malta and Gibraltar in 1936. In 1931, Sir William Ellis made the generous gift of the organ (built by Keates) in the Memorial Hall, and paid tribute to Sterndale Bennett for his untiring work in the development of this project. Dr Henry Ley, now Precentor at Eton College, was once again called upon to give the opening recital. Of all the musical events from visiting performers, perhaps the greatest was that of the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Dr Malcolm Sargent. The programme included Bach and Elgar, but it was the vigour and gaiety of Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances* which particularly delighted the 800-strong audience; the concert provided a joyous diversion in the burdensome days of war.

Sterndale Bennett was awarded the Territorial Decoration in recognition of his military activity before and during the First World War. He commanded the OTC contingent from 1914 to 1919, during which time he was promoted to Major and was mentioned in despatches – and designed and installed a miniature shooting range at Uppingham. He also made a significant contribution in the Second World War, becoming Chief Warden and Sub Controller of the local air raid precautions, and a Platoon Commander for Uppingham and District in the Home Guard. These posts eventually became too onerous alongside his school commitments, and so he resigned, although continuing temporarily as a private in the Home Guard. In 1942 the Uppingham Battalion required an Intelligence Officer and Chief Guide and Robert stepped into that role. He produced maps showing the names of every field in Rutland (many of which are in the Archives) as well as panoramic sketches of the landscape and photographs of numerous bridges and roads in the county, all for military use if we were invaded. He was well suited to the high level of orderliness and fine detail required in this project. Only a man of his capability could juggle the role of Director of Music at Uppingham with training men in the art of war and defence in the Home Guard.

From his record at the School and his radio musical broadcasts to a wider audience, it became well known that Uppingham had a Director of Music of distinction. He had an infinite capacity for detail, a great sense of humour and a high degree of patience. Sterndale Bennett retired in 1945, returning in 1953 to conduct his grandfather's Overture, *The Naiades*, as part of the Thring Centenary celebrations. He died on 27 August 1963.

# UPPINGHAM