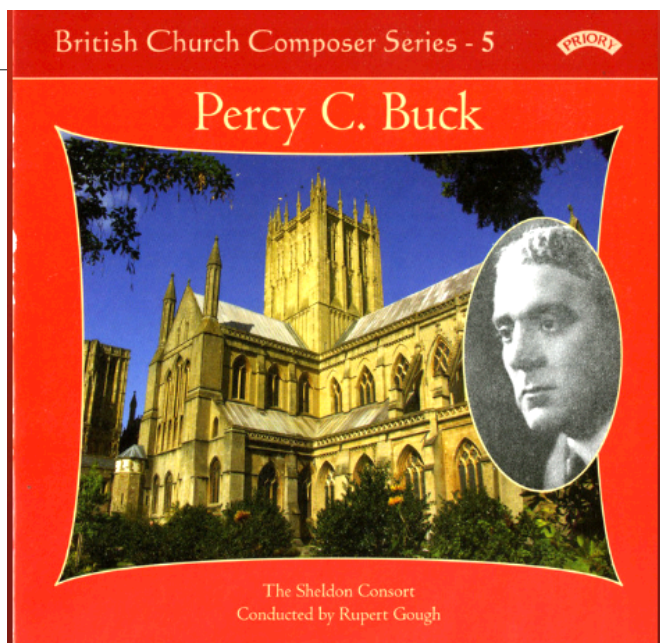


## SIR PERCY CARTER BUCK 1871-1947

John Riley

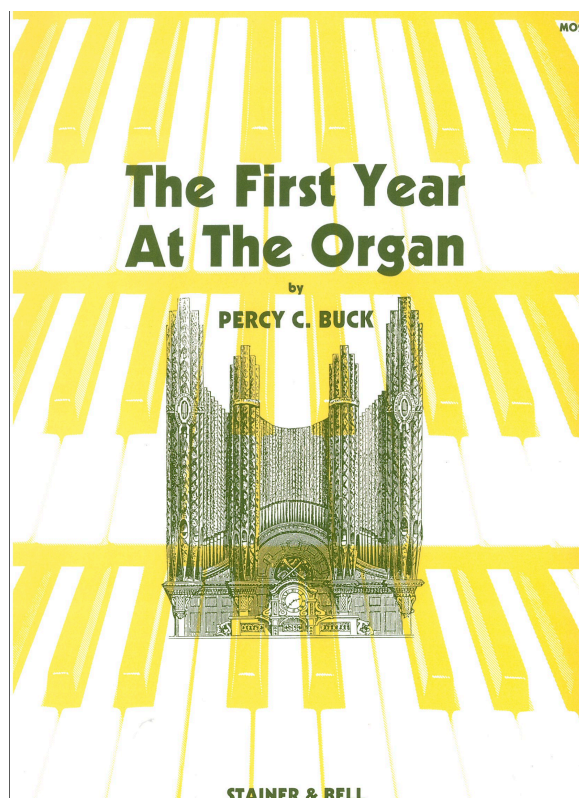


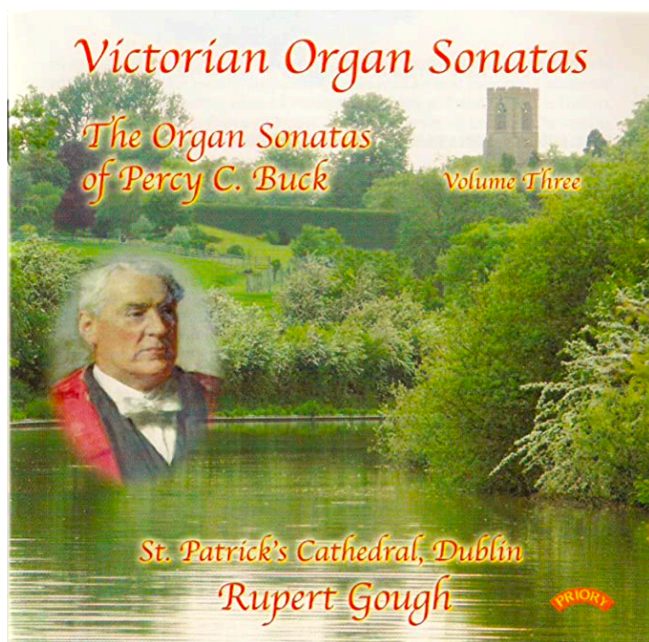
Percy Buck (not to be confused with the American organist Dudley Buck of *Variations on The Star Spangled Banner* fame) was born in London, and studied at Merchant Taylors' School, the Guildhall School of Music and then at Royal College of Music where his teachers included Walter Parratt, C.H Lloyd and Hubert Parry.

Buck held posts as organist at Worcester College, Oxford, Wells Cathedral and

Bristol Cathedral, followed by a much longer tenure of Director of Music of Harrow School from 1901 to 1927. He combined this with posts of Professor of Music at Trinity College Dublin, and subsequently London University, as well as teaching at the Royal College of Music. From Harrow School he went on to be Music Adviser to the London County Council as well as continuing other teaching roles, even after retirement from London University. As educator, he wrote a range of publications including *Acoustics for Musicians* (1918) and *Psychology for Musicians* (1944), second-hand copies of which are readily available even today. His organ tutor, *The First Year at the Organ* (1913) has most remarkably never been out of print in over 100 years.

Percy Buck's compositions include a number of chamber works and several piano pieces and songs. Many of his manuscripts though were destroyed when a WWII bomb fell on the London University library. By far his largest output was in choral music with a range of anthems, psalm chants and hymns. Of his anthems, perhaps the most memorable are *The Lord is Gracious* with its finely developed thematic and textural interplay and colouring between soloist, choir and organ, and *They that Sow in Tears* with its bold chromatic and harmonic shifts that are frequent hallmarks of his style.





Some individual touches apart, his output is predominantly conservative in style and with many of the stylistic characteristics found in the works of such composers as Stanford, Parry, Brewer, Blair and Elgar. His choral works are never less than well-crafted not least in contrapuntal skill, and with some references to the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century English choral tradition. (Buck was also on the editorial committee for the Tudor Church Music series published by Oxford University Press).

His corpus of organ works is relatively small; three substantial organ sonatas, two short preludes on Christmas themes and a Military March, all of which were composed between during the late 1890s/early 1900s. Whilst

none of the sonatas can quite manage the sheer distinction of thematic material, concision of development and overall memorability, of say the Elgar *Sonata in G*, they each possess many individual features and are well-worth being acquainted with.

Very much in contrast in style to such works as the organ sonatas, Percy Buck's most enduring legacy and stylistically forward-looking compositional output is arguably that of his hymn tunes, notably the *Fourteen Hymn Tunes* published by Stainer & Bell in 1913. Although long out of print, a number of these hymns have appeared in various other hymn books, most notably in *The New English Hymnal*. These were very much influenced by his work at Harrow School where unison singing was the rule and they depart significantly from traditional four-part harmony. In the preface to *Fourteen Hymn Tunes*, he wrote: "My first thoughts turned to plainsong, which I have always thought the most beautiful form of unison-singing conceivable. A few experiments, however, convinced me that this was too delicate a porcelain to be handled by such promiscuous (*sic*) body of singers". (However)... "I found that a large body of untrained singers could readily learn to sing in irregular rhythm: that is to say that they relished the departure from the adamant four-bar phrases of the normal hymn tune. And I found, further, that they appreciated and sang well those little groups of notes on single syllables which are characteristic of melismatic plainsong." The flowing lines, irregular phrase lengths and piquancies of harmony found in by far his best-known hymn tune, *Gonfalon Royal* are readily evident in such tunes as *Draw Nigh*, *Dulcis Memoria*, and *Martins* (above). In these he also eschews a climatic ending in favour of an arc-shaped melodic contour redolent of plainsong.

Although Percy Buck may not generally be counted as being among the very first rank of composers that comprised the renaissance of English music composition in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and earlier 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, his achievement across a wide range of music and music education is not to be overlooked. The Priory Records recordings of his choral music (PRCD 835) and most of his organ output (PRCD 850) are well-worth acquiring.

Percy Buck's small output of psalm chants can be heard on various volumes of Priory Records *Complete Psalms of David* (series 1 and 2), and several hymn tunes on volumes of *The Complete English Hymnal*. All these are also available on Spotify; inputting 'Percy Buck' in 'search' should readily locate all of these.