

Music

Robert Sidney

There was ... the nearest approach to a frown I ever saw on his face one Sunday morning when, the study windows being open, there suddenly came a hideous cacophony from an adjacent house – the noise of a strepitant piano ill-treated by some invisible player of a hymn-tune. Oddly enough, we had been talking of music, and Browning had been chatting with unusual freeness about his early studies, under Cipriani Potter and 'old John Relfe', as he affectionately called that well-known teacher of early Victorian students.¹ 'I was passionately fond of music as a child,' he said, 'and if you had told me in those days that I should be anything but a great composer I should have been horribly annoyed. Oh yes, I went in for the piano, and singing, and the 'cello too. And I went all through the mill of harmony and counterpoint, and the rest. Did I try my hand at composition? Yes, but not very much. No, nothing was ever kept, as far as I remember – and hope. Oh, except one trivial thing – the little barcarole that I wrote for the two children to sing in the last act of "Strafford". It goes like this' – and he broke off to hum it for me.²

'Some Browning Memories', *The Saturday Review* (11 May 1912), p. 585

Notes

Sidney, a poet, knew Browning in his last years. Browning's musical knowledge is often referred to; according to Sir James Paget 'He had a powerful knowledge of old Italian music; and so great veneration for Bach, that he once recommended Bach's *Crucifixus – et sepultus – et resurrexit*, as a cure for want of belief' (*Memoirs and Letters of Sir James Paget*, ed. Stephen Paget (London, 1901), p. 404).

- 1 (Philip) Cipriani Potter (1792–1871), composer, pianist and conductor who taught at the Academy of Music from 1822, and an enthusiast for Beethoven, whom he met in Vienna in 1818. John Relfe (1763–1837?), composer and writer on musical theory, the 'Great John Relfe/Master of mine, learned, redoubtable' of Browning's parleying 'With Charles Avison', ll. 81–2 (*Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day*, 1887). Since he is last recorded in the year of Victoria's accession he was probably not available for 'early Victorian students'.
- 2 For the music (which sets Italian words by Francesco Redi) see Oxford, ii.137.