

Greene, Harry Plunket

by Gordon T. Ledbetter

Greene, Harry Plunket (1865–1936), singer, teacher, and author, was born 24 June 1865 at his parents' home, 49 St Stephen's Green, Dublin, son of Richard Jonas Greene, barrister, and Louisa Lillias (née Plunket), writer of children's stories and fourth daughter of John, 3rd Baron Plunket. He was baptised as 'Harry Plunket Greene' at St Peter's church, 29 August 1865. He was educated at Clifton College, Bristol; a career in law was put aside, partly on account of illness and partly on account of his evident musicality and the development of a promising voice. Beginning as a bass, he changed to baritone and studied singing in Dublin with Arthur Barraclough, in Stuttgart (with Hromoda) and Florence (with Vanuccini), and in London with Alfred Blume, J. B. Welsh, and the Hungarian Francis Korbay, whose arrangements of Hungarian folk songs Plunket Greene sang with marked success.

His first public appearance in London was at Stepney on 21 January 1888 in Handel's 'Messiah', and in 1890 he made a few appearances at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, most notably as the Commendatore in Mozart's 'Don Giovanni'. In 1892 he created the title role in Parry's oratorio 'Job' and continued to be associated with Parry's works. Charles Villiers Stanford (qv) wrote many of his songs for Greene, and it was as a refined interpreter of art songs with exemplary diction, rather than as the possessor of an exceptional voice, that Harry Plunket Greene forged his reputation.

*The Times*, announcing his death (which took place on 19 August 1936 at St George's Hospital, London), went so far as to describe him as 'the most distinguished of the older generation of British musicians, and it is difficult to estimate the effect he had upon the course of musical development in this country in the years before the war. He was the creator of the song-recital as we know it, and it was largely due to him that English song-composers from Parry and Stanford onwards gained an immediate and adequate hearing'. It was a novelty at that time for a recital to consist only of a singer and a pianist, with songs and piano solos making up the programme.

He toured England extensively from December 1893 with the pianist Leonard Borwick (later adding Samuel Liddle as accompanist, while Borwick confined himself to playing solo), revealing a large repertoire. Over a period of ten years of giving recitals in London, he did not repeat a single item. By this time it is reckoned he had sung some 500 songs in public. His singing of Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms was especially admired. The first singer publicly to perform Schumann's 'Dichterliebe' complete and unabridged in London, he visited America and Canada on several occasions, giving recitals and adjudicated at singing festivals in Canada, and made occasional concert tours in continental Europe. He taught and lectured

on singing, holding professorships at the Royal College of Music, London (where he was a fellow), and at the Royal Academy of Music. In 1912 he wrote a well regarded treatise on singing, *Interpretation in song; Pilot, and other stories* appeared in 1916; and *Where the bright waters meet* (1924) is an engaging book devoted to fly fishing. *From Blue Danube to Shannon* appeared in 1934 and is a whimsical and uneven collection of reminiscences, some garnered from previously published magazine articles. *Charles Villiers Stanford*, a biographical portrait of his friend, was published in 1935.

Harry Plunket Greene made a number of recordings for the Gramophone & Typewriter Co. (later HMV) between 1904 and 1906. He recorded again for Columbia in 1934 when in his sixty-ninth year, and his English version of 'Der Leiermann' from 'Die Winterreise', from that time, is regarded by many critics as one of the greatest of Schubert recordings.

He married (1899) Gwendolen Maud, younger daughter of Sir C. H. H. Parry, director of the Royal College of Music; they had two sons and a daughter.

---

*Ir. Independent*, *Ir. Times*, 20 Aug. 1936; S. Wilson, 'Harry Plunket Greene', *Recorded Sound*, xxxii (1968), 327; M. Ritchie, 'Plunket Greene as a teacher', *Recorded Sound*, xxxii (1968), 328 (discog.); Discography, *Record Advertiser*, i, no. 6 (1971), 2; Gerald Moore, *Farewell recital: further memoirs* (1978); W. McCann, bibliog., *Linen Hall Review*, vii, no. 3/4 (1990), 18; *New Grove dictionary of music and musicians*, 7; Jeremy Dibble, article in *ODNB*