

A walk round the outside of the Victoria Theatre



The Victoria Hall, as it was called originally in honour of Queen Victoria, opened its doors on the 8th February 1901. The grand opening had been set for the 25th January, but it had to be delayed due to the Queen's death, just three days earlier. The building was the brainchild of local industrialist, town councillor and one time mayor, **George Henry Smith**. Unlike most large towns, Halifax had no custom-built concert hall and Smith was determined to change this.

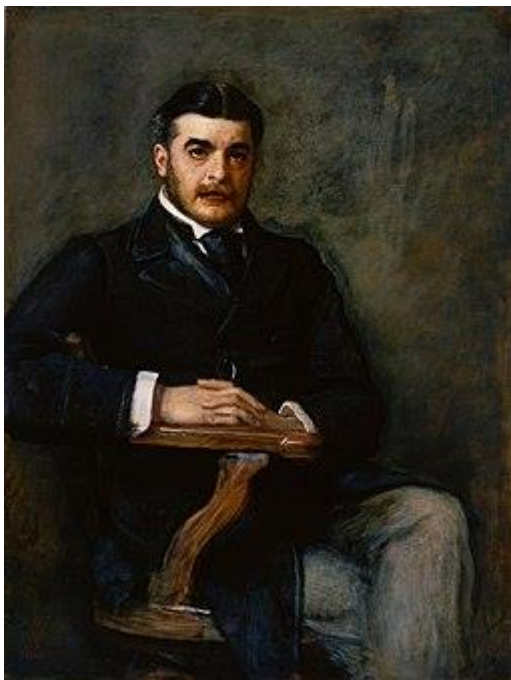
The hall was designed by Halifax-based architect, **William Clement Williams**, in what contemporaries called 'English Renaissance Style'. It is marked by its flamboyant domes and extensive carvings. These carvings were designed by a Gibbet Street stonemason who we know only as R. Harvie. Most of the roof structures are entirely decorative, although the two red turrets form part of the ventilation system. The exterior design was intended to be a celebration of the arts, particularly music.

Williams designed a number of other prominent Halifax buildings including two very close by. Opposite the Victoria's Commercial Street frontage is his York Buildings (1905), long used by the Halifax Building Society, but originally a large and impressive shop for the draper, Alexander Scott. A little further down the street, the current Lloyds Bank was built as the Halifax and Huddersfield Union Bank in 1892.

Our tour begins up the hill from the front entrance. Turn into Powell Street. In front of you at the far end of the road is the eighteenth-century Royds House. The Victoria stands in what was once part of its gardens. Walk to the end of the theatre. The steepness of the cobbled road running down to Commercial Street shows that this wasn't a straightforward site to develop. The grill just along from the end marks the entry to a lift, added in more recent times to allow for easier unloading of equipment to the stage, some twelve feet below. This back wall is very functional but at the end of the block we start meeting the first signs of the decorations that were aimed to impress passers-by on the main streets.



The names of twelve composers adorn the building. The design was very much intended to celebrate British music and eight of the names you will see represented relate to British composers, some now really rather obscure. The first we come to is **Sir Hubert PARRY** (1848-1918), already an influential composer by 1901, who was later to write his famous tune for the hymn 'Jerusalem'. Parry was due to conduct one of his own works at the original opening concert but unfortunately could not perform at the rearranged event. Floating above Sir Hubert are cherubs playing on panpipes and other musical instruments.



As we turn back into Fountain Street, **Sir Arthur SULLIVAN** (1842-1900) is next to be honoured. The comic operas such as *The Pirates of Penzance* and *The Mikado* written with W.S. Gilbert have been performed frequently at the Victoria by numerous talented local amateur operatic companies. More music-related carving can be seen above Sullivan's head, while at ground level, the red fire doors once formed the entrance to the balcony staircase. In those status-conscious days, 'backstairs' were created so that patrons in the cheapest seats could be separated from the wealthier ones.

Sullivan, painted by Sir John Everett Millais, 1888

A little further down comes the foundation stone laid with much fanfare in May 1899. Local dignitaries, led by fifty policemen, marched from the Town Hall, and the Halifax Choral Society with the King Cross Brass Band providing music.



King Cross, once a leading British brass band

After this point, three more composers are celebrated. Although **Sir Henry BISHOP** (1786-1855) is hardly known to modern music-lovers, he was once extraordinarily popular and was the first ever British composer to be knighted. He was best known for his parlour ballad 'Home, Sweet Home', one of the nineteenth century's most performed songs.

'mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble there's no place like home!
A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,
Which seek through the world, is ne'er met with elsewhere:
Home! Home! Sweet, sweet, Home!
There's no place like Home!
There's no place like Home!

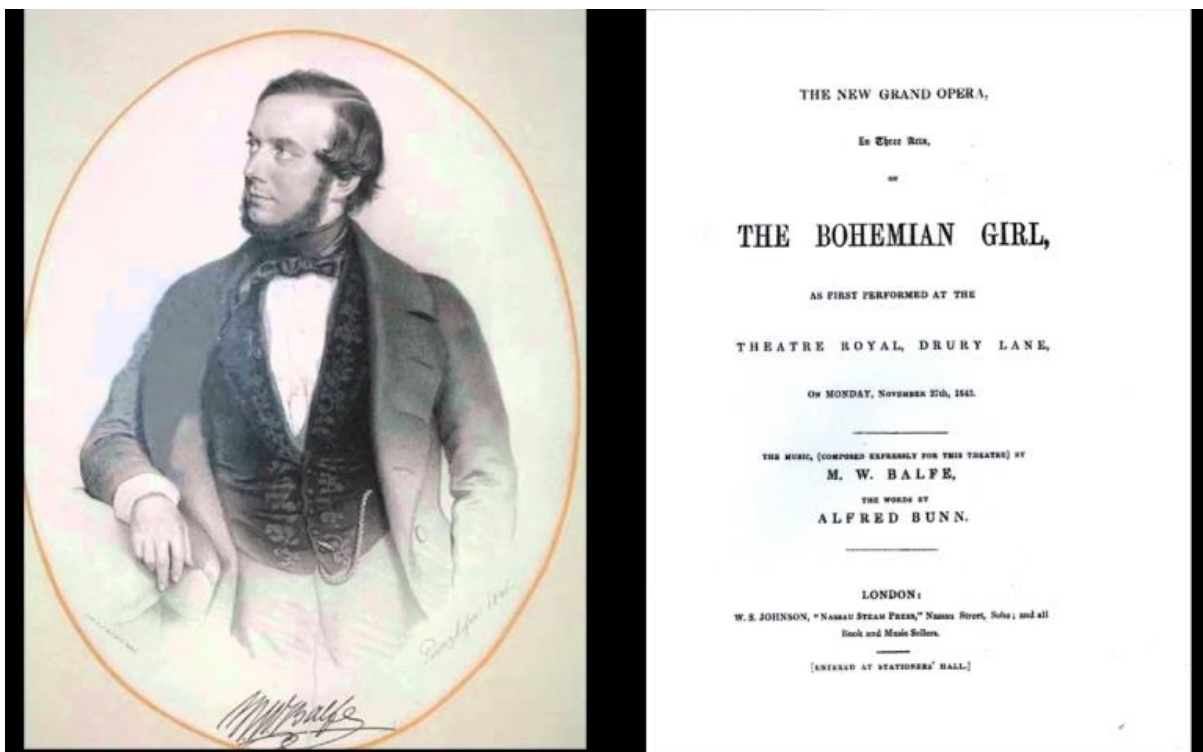
William Vincent WALLACE (1812-1865) was an Irish pianist, violinist and composer, whose opera, *Maritana*, was a Victorian favourite and one of the first operas to be performed at the Victoria.



Thomas ARNE (1710-1778) was a prolific theatrical composer in his day but his name appears mainly because he wrote 'Rule Britannia' which appeared in the play *Alfred* in 1740.

We then reach the ornate frontage and entrance. The doors and the mosaic floor are both striking original features. Above the doors, a 'postage stamp' likeness of a young Queen Victoria, framed by two crowns, looks across the building. To left and right stand the statues of the two muses, the building's most prominent and important decorations. The muses were the goddesses believed by the Ancient Greeks to be the source of knowledge in science, literature and arts. The Victoria's figures do not represent specific muses but were intended to symbolise the great value of learning and culture.

Moving into Commercial Street, three more composers appear. Although the music of **Henry PURCELL** (1659-1695) was not a mainstay of the concert platform by 1900, the fact that he was one of the few composers to have a genuinely international reputation guaranteed his inclusion. **Michael BALFE** (1808-1870) was an Irish composer whose opera, *The Bohemian Girl* (1843) was probably the most popular British opera of the nineteenth century and drew a packed audience to the Victoria in 1902. He also wrote the music for the great Victorian ballad, 'Come into the garden Maude'.



Sheffield-born **Sir William Sterndale BENNETT** (1816-1875) is the only Yorkshireman named on the building. His choral work *The May Queen* (1858), written for the opening of Leeds Town Hall, was regularly performed by local choirs.

There were originally eight shops along the frontage and their rents were a vital source of revenue. Unsurprisingly, one was a music shop. Another was Maison Victoria, a women's clothing shop that promised

a choice Selection of Novelties in French, Vienna, and Berlin Models. Coats, Mantles, Costumes for Promenade and Evening Wear, also furs in the Newest Designs

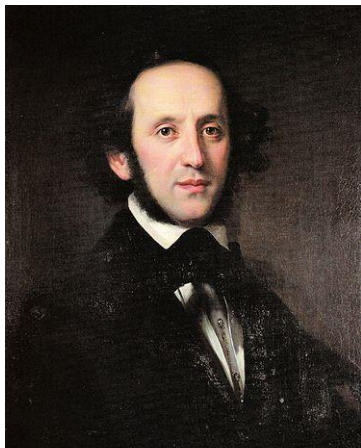
Finally, to four profoundly influential foreign composers. Fittingly, there is some elegant musically-themed carving on this side of the building. The music of **George Frideric HANDEL** (1685-1759) was phenomenally popular in the Victorian age and well beyond, especially his oratorio *Messiah*. The Halifax Choral Society have performed the work here virtually every Christmas since 1901.

The Thursday before Christmas means one pleasure to the exclusion of all others for many Halifax people —a pleasure with which nothing save the call of stern duty can be allowed to interfere. On this evening, the Halifax Choral Society sings "Messiah", a concert that is sure to fill the large Victoria Hall and possibly the only musical event of the year which necessitates a returned-ticket waiting list. Halifax Evening Courier, 18 December 1950

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756-1791) was another whose reputation made him impossible to exclude. His operas 'The Marriage of Figaro' and 'Don Giovanni' both played at the Victoria in its early years.

Just down the road in Prescott Street, local piano merchant, W.H. Benn, named his early twentieth-century showroom Mozart House.

Ludwig Van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) had the honour of being the first composer to have his music performed at the hall. The opening concert began with his 'Funeral March', played in memory of Queen Victoria,



Felix Mendelssohn

followed by the Fifth Symphony. **Felix MENDELSSOHN** (1809-1847) was another much-loved composer in the nineteenth century, with his choral works almost rivalling Handel's in popularity.



Ludwig Van Beethoven

OPENING OF THE
Victoria Concert
Hall, Halifax.

The Directors have arranged for

Two Grand 
full-Dress Concerts,
in celebration of the Opening.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 25th, 1901,

THE

HALLÉ ORCHESTRA,

WITH

Dr. HANS RICHTER, Conductor.

Vocalist :—Madame MARIE BREMA.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 26th, 1901,

THE

HALLÉ ORCHESTRA,

WITH

Dr. HANS RICHTER, Conductor.

Vocalist :—Mr. ANDREW BLACK.

The Full Chorus of the HALIFAX CHORAL
SOCIETY have been invited, and will take
part in both Concerts.

[Prices of Admission on page 4

A 'ghost' programme. Two 'opening' concerts that were never held

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