

American Orchestra Music in Mid-Nineteenth-Century New York

George Frederick Bristow (1825–1898), a pillar of the New York musical community for most of the nineteenth century, was a composer, performer, conductor, educator, and a strong advocate for American music. Bristow's father was a musician, and the young man's given names suggest that his parents (who immigrated from England in the 1820s) expected him to follow in his father's footsteps.¹ His musical training (violin, piano, composition, orchestration) took place entirely in New York, where he studied with his father and several prominent members of the Philharmonic Society, now the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.²

Bristow's first public appearance (on keyboard) was at the age of nine, and shortly thereafter he began to play professionally in a theater orchestra. When he was twelve he joined the orchestra of the Olympic Theatre, where the increased technical demands and a more-varied repertory (burlesques, extravaganzas, operas) resulted in a marked improvement in his performance skills and an expansion of his musical horizons. He later wrote that because of the challenges and encouragement at the Olympic, he "began to think it *was* possible . . . to do something in music, to play well, to even compose."³ At seventeen he joined the first violin section of the Philharmonic Society orchestra, then in its second season (1843–44). He would remain a member of that ensemble (with one brief hiatus) until his retirement some thirty-six years later.

Throughout most of his career, Bristow was an accomplished freelance performer in New York. He accompanied singers and choral ensembles on keyboard, played in chamber groups, was a violin or piano soloist with the Philharmonic Society, and performed in other large ensembles. The latter included the orchestra that accompanied the phenomenally popular "Swedish Nightingale" Jenny Lind in her New York concerts (1850–51) and the Jullien Orchestra, which was organized by the French virtuoso conductor Louis Antoine Jullien (1812–1860) and toured the United States in 1853–4. Bristow began to conduct professionally when he was sixteen and continued to do so for most of his life, directing both church choirs and important choral ensembles, such as the Harmonic Society, the Mendelssohn Union, and the Harlem Mendelssohn Union. He was also active as a music educator, teaching privately, writing pedagogical compositions, and serving as a music teacher in the New York public school system for over forty years. To a certain extent Bristow was a typical, but more than usually accomplished, nineteenth-century urban musician, who regularly and ably participated in many of the musical activities that were a normal part of urban cultural life during the period.

In addition to all of his performance and pedagogical activities, Bristow also composed music from the time he was a teenager until shortly before his death at the age of seventy-two. He wrote in all genres, including works for organ and piano, chamber ensemble, and solo voice. His output

¹ Delmer Dalzell Rogers, "Nineteenth-Century Music in New York City as Reflected in the Career of George Frederick Bristow" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1967), 58–66; Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Strong on Music. The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong, 1836–1875*, Volume I. *Resonances, 1836–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 106n, 302n.

² Information about Bristow's early training and career is from an unpublished holograph document, "The Life of a Musician. His Troubles & Trials &c.," written by Bristow, presumably in the 1860s, in the Bristow Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center.

³ "The Life of a Musician," 13–14.

includes large sacred and secular choral compositions, two operas, and orchestral works including dances, marches, overtures, and five symphonies. He composed well into the 1890s, and eight months before his death conducted the première of his symphony *Niagara* (1893), which included a chorus of two hundred, vocal soloists, and the Grand Orchestra of Anton Seidl.⁴ Only a handful of his works are available in modern editions, however. They include his opera *Rip Van Winkle* (1855), oratorio *Daniel* (1866), and (most recently) his *Symphony No. 2* ("*Jullien*") (1853).⁵

Bristow is best remembered by music historians as a proselytizer for American music, primarily because in early 1854 he was drawn into a heated argument between the composer William Henry Fry and the editors of two music journals, Richard Storrs Willis (*Musical World and Times*, New York) and John Sullivan Dwight (*Dwight's Journal of Music*, Boston).⁶ Fry believed that Willis had unfairly dismissed one of his compositions, and asserted that American critics had a responsibility to support native composers. The argument quickly devolved into a critique of the Philharmonic Society, for New York composers had been complaining for years that the ensemble (which was now dominated by immigrant German musicians) refused to perform their compositions. The situation was made more volatile by the presence in New York of the French conductor Jullien, who had arrived in late summer 1853 and had begun commissioning works by American composers (notably Fry and Bristow) almost immediately. The subsequent repeated performances of these works by the exemplary Jullien Orchestra only exacerbated the Philharmonic's situation, and the resulting journalistic "musical battle" about the ensemble's neglect of American composers lasted for four months. It had an important impact on Bristow, for during the contretemps he angrily resigned from the orchestra and announced his intention to establish a rival American Philharmonic Society (which apparently never materialized). He rejoined the orchestra in 1855, but later helped to establish other nationalistic music groups in New York, including the American Music Association (1855–58) and the Metropolitan Music Association (1859). He also regularly programmed American as well as European works for his choral ensembles and focused on Americanist subject matter in some of his later compositions, including the opera *Rip Van Winkle* (1855), *Columbus Overture* (1861), *Arcadian Symphony* (1872), *The Pioneer* (1872), *The Great Republic: Ode to the American Union* (1880), *Jibbenainosay Overture* (1889), and *Niagara Symphony* (1893). This reputation as a self-appointed spokesman for American music has endured, but it also has unfortunately overshadowed his compositional achievements.

⁴ Gregory Martin Fried, "A Study of the Orchestral Music of George Frederick Bristow" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1989), 85.

⁵ *Rip Van Winkle: Grand Romantic Opera in Three Acts*, Steven Ledbetter, ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), *The Oratorio of Daniel*, David Griggs-Janower, ed. (Madison: A-R Editions, 1999), and my edition *Bristow's Symphony No. 2* ("*Jullien*"): *A Critical Edition*, in *Music of the United States of America*, volume 23 (Middleton, Wisc: A-R Editions, 2011). For a summary of current research on Bristow, see my "Encouragement from an Unexpected Source: Louis Antoine Jullien, Mid-Century American Composers, and George Frederick Bristow's *Jullien Symphony*," in *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* vi:1 (2009), 65–87, esp 66, note 3.

⁶ The feud between the two composers and the critics, which played out in the pages of the journals edited by Willis and Dwight (and in other periodicals of the time) during the first four months of 1854, is generally known to American-music scholars. For a thorough discussion (and citations of other scholarship on the contretemps), see my "American Orchestral Music at the Middle of the Nineteenth Century. Louis Antoine Jullien and George Bristow's *Jullien Symphony*," the introductory monograph to *Bristow's Symphony No. 2* ("*Jullien*"), esp lxx–lxxx.

Symphony No. 2 (“Jullien”)

Bristow’s *Symphony No. 2*, “Jullien,” was commissioned by its namesake in 1853. A substantial work in D minor, it is in four movements and is scored for a standard early nineteenth-century orchestra: strings, pairs of winds (flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons), brasses (horns and trumpets), and timpani. The only significant difference is the addition of two horns (for a total of four) and three trombones. All four horns are used in the first and last movements, and all three trombones only in the finale, but there are prominent trombone solos in the first and third movements. The work is clearly “Europeanist” in orientation, for Bristow used as his models several symphonic works by Beethoven and Mendelssohn that had been a regular staple of the Philharmonic Society concerts during its first ten years. Stylistically, the symphony is solidly aligned with the more “conservative” Romantic-period composers rather than with “radical” (i.e., programmatic) symphonists such as Berlioz or Liszt, whose orchestral music was still mostly unknown in America at mid-century. The “Jullien” is also more conservative than the style that Bristow himself would adopt in his later orchestral works.

The tonal relationships in the symphony are typical of the period: the first and final movements are in D minor; the *Allegretto* is in the parallel major, and the *Adagio* in B-flat major (a relationship of a third with the work’s predominant tonality). There are also various other attributes that mark the work as overtly Romantic. For example, the first movement, marked *Allegro appassionato* and in sonata allegro form, opens with a stormy, passionate, and *fortissimo* introduction, which gives way to an ominous and brooding first theme, played by celli and bassoons. The second theme, in the relative major, is wistful, evocative, and appropriately contrasting. The movement is replete with examples of Bristow’s skillful use of thematic development, which he clearly learned by studying the symphonies of Beethoven, the recognized master of the technique. The second movement (*Allegretto*), in contrast with the first, is delightfully upbeat, mischievous, and even “elfin” in the style of some of Mendelssohn’s orchestral pieces. This work, a scherzo with two trios, is the dance movement of the symphony. Bristow used as his model either the polka or the schottische, two related dances with characteristic rhythmic patterns, both of which are European in origin but were nevertheless standards in the midcentury American dance repertory. William Henry Fry called this movement the “best hit” of the symphony, and Richard Storrs Willis described it as “rather like a schottische, but neatly and cleverly worked and of pleasing effect.”⁷

The third movement *Adagio* (in two parallel sections followed by a brief coda) illustrates Bristow’s gift as a melodist, for it is an extended exploration of three different tunes. The first, which is yearning and serious, is introduced by the solo trombone; the more-dramatic second is developed in a dialogue between strings and winds; the third, first heard in the strings and repeated in the winds, is quiet and somewhat wistful. Over the course of the movement Bristow develops these themes, creates spinoff melodies from fragments, and explores their emotional differences with skillful and appealing orchestration. Willis described the *Adagio* as “the best of the movements,” and Jullien performed it frequently in 1854–55 on tour in the United Kingdom, where—according to Jullien’s concertmaster—it “made a great impression on the Orchestra and the public” and on some influential British critics.⁸ The final movement, marked *Allegro agitato*—

⁷ Fry, “Musical. The Philharmonic Society,” *New York Tribune*, March 3, 1856; Willis, “The Philharmonic Society,” *New York Musical World*, March 8, 1856, 110.

⁸ Willis: “The Philharmonic Society,” *New York Musical World*, March 8, 1856, 110; Autographed Letter, Signed (ALS) from Henry Weist Hill (London) to Bristow (New York), March 25, 1855, Bristow

Grandioso—L'istesso tempo, is a rhythmically intense and driving rondo that explores three themes. The movement—and the symphony—concludes with a grand and majestic ceremonial march that highlights the winds and brass instruments and plausibly quotes a tune from an unidentified anthem.

Despite its evocative title, the *Jullien Symphony* is primarily a work of absolute (not programmatic) music, although there are some hints of programmatic “American” effects.⁹ The most obvious example is the composer’s use of a popular midcentury dance as the model for his second movement. Bristow might have chosen the dance style as a subtle signifier for America, but he might also have intended it as an oblique nod to Jullien, who was well known as a composer of dances, including schottisches and polkas. Bristow’s prominent use of trombone as a solo instrument throughout the symphony is also striking. It is possible that the young composer was influenced by Schubert’s *Symphony No. 9* (“The Great”), for the Philharmonic Society had performed it in 1851 and again in 1853. But Bristow’s intentional highlighting of brass instruments might also have been a subtle but deliberate reference to the United States, for audiences of the time most frequently heard trombones in the brass bands that were ubiquitous in midcentury America. As a result, those who heard the symphony might automatically have made a connection to what was considered a regular part of the American soundscape. The final possibly-programmatic musical gesture is the grand march with which the symphony concludes, which could have been intended as an homage to Jullien.

The Jullien Orchestra performed movements of the symphony (not the entire composition) numerous times in New York in 1854, and the conductor also took the work with him later that year when he returned to the United Kingdom, where he performed the *Adagio*. The premiere of the entire symphony had to wait until March 1856, when the Philharmonic Society, under Bristow’s baton, finally performed it—perhaps in exchange for the composer’s return to the ensemble.¹⁰ It is truly unfortunate that the orchestra never played it again.

Overture to Rip Van Winkle

Bristow was working on his first opera, *Rip Van Winkle*, when Louis Jullien arrived in New York. It is unclear whether the opera was already complete or in progress when the French conductor commissioned a new symphony almost immediately upon his arrival. The opera was not produced until 1855, so it is likely that Bristow put that work aside and returned to it in 1854 only after completion of his classically-oriented symphony. If this is the case, then Bristow must have returned to the overtly nationalist opera with a great deal of enthusiasm, especially after his vehement and quite public championship of American composers in the battle with Willis and Dwight. Other evidence supports this speculation, for in December 1854 Louis Jullien wrote to

Manuscript Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁹ Bristow’s symphony is never identified by its subtitle in the published programs of the Jullien Orchestra performances (at least in the United States); rather it is referred to as “New Symphony” (December 29, 1853) or “Symphony in D Minor” (May 24, 1854). As a result, the subtitle and its programmatic implications were not generally known to the public. Apparently the first time the work was called “The Jullien Symphony” on a published programme was at its premiere performance by the Philharmonic Society orchestra on March 1, 1856. See programs in the *New York Times*, and the 1856 program in the New York Philharmonic Archives.

¹⁰ The suggestion that Bristow returned to the ranks of the Philharmonic in exchange for a performance is pure conjecture. But it must have been embarrassing to the Society that one of the most prominent and promising “native” musicians in New York was estranged from the only standing orchestra in the city.

Bristow from London and encouraged him to complete his Symphony No. 3 (which he had started in 1854) and to send it to London “at your earliest convenience” so that his orchestra could perform it.¹¹ The fact that Bristow did not finish this symphony until 1858 suggests that the altercation had whetted his appetite for nationalistic compositions like the opera, as opposed to Europeanist symphonic works.

Rip Van Winkle is a setting of a libretto by Jonathan H. Wainwright (after the well-known 1819 short story by Washington Irving), and was premiered in New York on September 27, 1855 by the extraordinarily popular Pyne and Harrison Opera Company (visiting from England), under Bristow’s direction. According to Vera Lawrence, the sets and costumes for the production were based on the wonderfully evocative illustrations that were published in 1849 in a lavish edition of the story that had been commissioned by the American Art-Union.¹² Americans of the time were opera-happy, and regularly patronized productions of an overwhelmingly Europeanist repertory, performed in Italian, French, and English. Critics enthusiastically hailed Bristow’s work as a nationalist composition and welcomed it as evidence of the beginning of a long-hoped-for American school of opera. The work enjoyed a significant run of nearly two weeks, and was thereafter performed for several additional weeks in alternation with other works in the Pyne and Harrison repertory. It was revised and again mounted in 1878, but did not spur an American school of operatic composition.¹³

The overture to the 1855 version (which Bristow replaced with a much shorter “Introduction” in 1878) is the work performed on this recording. It is scored for strings, pairs of winds (and one piccolo), pairs of trumpets and horns (in E and A), three trombones, and timpani.¹⁴ The overture starts with a slow introduction, which is followed by a faster section; this makes the work similar in structure to many opera overtures of the period. The slow section is in ternary (three-part) form: a pompous, grandiose, and almost fanfare-like opening section (A) yields to a somewhat questing melody played by flutes and oboes and repeated by the strings (B), after which the fanfare-like A section returns. After a transition, this, in turn, segues to the upbeat *Allegro vivace*, which is in standard sonata allegro form, with two contrasting themes and a bonus extra melody that is highlighted several times in the winds. The work is very skillfully orchestrated; Bristow typically highlights the winds, thoroughly subjects his appealing melodies to thematic development, and creates entertaining conversations between different parts of the orchestra. It was normal for opera composers of this period to use melodies from the opera in their overtures. Bristow does this at least once (the questing melody in the opening section is from an aria in Act II), but since the published score for the opera is of the significantly revised 1878 version, it is difficult to identify other possible quotations.

¹¹ ALS from Jullien [via secretary] (London) to Bristow (New York), December 14, 1854, Bristow Manuscript Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts..

¹² Vera Brosky Lawrence, *Strong on Music. The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong*. Volume 2. *Reverberations. 1850–1856* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 624.

¹³ For background information on the opera, see Ledbetter, “Introduction,” *Rip Van Winkle*, viii–xi. For information on the Pyne and Harrison Opera Company and on the performance and reception of opera in the United States during the antebellum period, see my *Opera on the Road. Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993; reissued in paperback, 2001). Opera in German was rarely performed in the United States during the antebellum period.

¹⁴ For this recording of the overture, the Northern Sinfonia used a scholarly edition of the work created by Kira Lynn Horel. See “The Overture to George Frederick Bristow’s *Rip Van Winkle*: A Critical Edition” (DMA dissertation, University of Iowa, 2012).

Winter's Tale Overture

Around the same time that Bristow was preparing to conduct the Philharmonic Society orchestra in the première performance of his *Symphony No. 2*, he was also busy writing the *Winter's Tale Overture* (1856), a very different kind of composition. New York audiences were quite familiar with concert overtures, for during its first fourteen years the Philharmonic Society had regularly performed such works by many European composers, both known (Beethoven, Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Rossini, Spohr, and Weber) and relatively unknown today (William Sterndale Bennett, Neils Gade, Peter Lindpaintner, Ferdinand Ries, and many others). Some of these compositions were programmatic works designed as concert overtures; others were originally written for operas (like Bristow's *Rip Van Winkle*). The *Winter's Tale Overture* is neither, for it was composed as the curtain-raiser for a new production of Shakespeare's play, mounted at Burton's Theatre on Broadway in February 1856. One of Shakespeare's later works, *The Winter's Tale* is in five acts and takes place in both Sicily and a fanciful Bohemia that has both a seacoast and a desert. The name, according to scholars, indicates that the drama is akin to a tale told to children on a winter's evening—it is entertaining, fanciful, and not particularly believable. The play features unrealistic accusations, pronouncements by an oracle, hidden identities, a storm, a man-eating bear, a shepherd's festival, and an improbable transformation of a statue into a living person; the production at Burton's was enlivened by spectacular scenic display.

The *Overture* (marked *Allegro Pomposo*) is scored for strings (including contrabass), pairs of winds (plus piccolo), pairs of brass (horns in E and G, trumpets, and trombones), and percussion (timpani and side drum). Not programmatic in a narrative sense, the work is sectional in format and clearly alludes to different parts of the play. It commences with an upbeat, infectious, and foot-tapping melody that is repeated several times before transitioning to an obvious musical storm, complete with swirling winds in the violins and *sforzando* lightning and thunder (assisted by the brass and timpani). The storm eventually dies down and the music segues to a rustic melody in the oboe (with a bird-like countermelody in the flute) to the accompaniment of a subtle drone. When this subsides, a brass fanfare leads to a militaristic fife-and-drum melody (played by piccolo and side drum) that is developed, gives way to a new tune by solo clarinet (repeated by viola and horn), and then returns. The infectious opening melody reappears briefly, then the overture concludes with an *accelerando* coda that prepares for the raising of the curtain on the play. There is no extant evidence that the overture was actually performed with the play in 1856, but an advertisement for a revival a year later notes that the production would include an "overture, composed for this piece by Mr. Bristow."¹⁵ Whether or not Bristow conducted the overture—and the rest of the music that accompanied the play—in either 1856 or 1857 is unknown. But it is plausible that he did so, since he had plenty of theater-orchestra experience. Furthermore, such an engagement would have been perfectly unexceptional for a musician—like Bristow—who habitually assumed the many and diverse roles expected in the musical world of midcentury New York.

—Katherine K. Preston

Katherine K. Preston is the David N. and Margaret C. Bottoms Professor of Music at the College of William and Mary in Virginia. A former President of the Society for American Music, she has published widely on various aspects of music and musical culture in the United States during the nineteenth century.

¹⁵ "Amusements," *New York Times*, April 6, 1857, 3.

Royal Northern Sinfonia, Orchestra of Sage Gateshead, is the UK's only full-time chamber orchestra and the leading professional orchestra in the North East. Since its inception in 1958, it has built a distinctive reputation as a fresh-thinking and versatile orchestra, performing with a trademark zest and stylistic virtuosity. It is the only UK orchestra to have a purpose-built home for all its rehearsals, concerts, and recordings. Playing a wide repertoire of diverse orchestral music, Royal Northern Sinfonia works regularly with a roster of globally renowned artists, including the likes of Christian Tetzlaff, Miloš Karadaglić, and Pierre Laurent Aimard, as well as resident artists Lars Vogt, Julian Rachlin, and Thomas Zehetmair. They have collaborated with leading popular voices such as Sting, Ben Folds, and John Grant as well as commissioning and premiering new work, most recently from David Lang, John Casken, and Kathryn Tickell.

Royal Northern Sinfonia regularly appears further afield, from Aldeburgh to Hong Kong, as well as at performances in the BBC Proms and neighbouring Edinburgh Festival. Back home at Sage Gateshead, the orchestra works with adults of all ages and young people, providing unbeatable instrumental learning opportunities.

For more information about the orchestra and its home, visit sagegateshead.com

Rebecca Miller has guest conducted the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE), Royal Northern Sinfonia, London Mozart Players, London Philharmonic Orchestra, BBC Concert Orchestra, and BBC Proms. She regularly conducts the Southbank Sinfonia and has conducted in the United States with the Houston Symphony, Louisiana Philharmonic, Huntsville Symphony, Musiqa, Bakersfield Symphony, Santa Cruz Symphony, and Bard Music Festival; in Mexico with Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional and Orquesta Filarmónica del UNAM; and the Teresa Carreño Youth Orchestra in Caracas. Her discography includes her acclaimed CPE Bach disc with the OAE (Gramophone Magazine's "Editor's Choice"), Aaron Jay Kernis's *Goblin Market* (Signum), Lou Harrison's *For Strings* (Mode), and Haydn Symphonies with the Royal Northern Sinfonia (Signum).

Born in California, Ms. Miller holds degrees from Oberlin Conservatory (B.M.) and Northwestern University (M.M.), was the Paul Woodhouse Junior Fellow in Conducting at London's Royal College of Music from 1999–2008, and was Founder/Artistic Director of London's New Professionals Orchestra. She was previously Resident Conductor of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, Conducting Fellow of the Houston Symphony, and is currently Director of Orchestras at Royal Holloway University of London and Music Director of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Dream Land. Included on *The Wind Demon*. Ivan Davis, piano. New World Records 80257.

Symphony in F sharp Minor. Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Neeme Järvi, conductor. Chandos 9169.

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Symphony No. 2 (“Jullien”) is published by A-R Editions, Inc.

Overture to Rip Van Winkle is published by Kira L. Omelchenko.

Winter’s Tale Overture: ms

Orchestra scores and parts for George Frederick Bristow’s *Winter’s Tale Overture* were provided by the Edwin A. Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music at the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Typesetter: Jessica Loranger

Producer & Engineer: Simon Fox-Gál

Recorded January 12–14, 2015 at The Sage, Gateshead, United Kingdom.

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC

Front cover painting: *Busy Wharf Scene, New York City, 19th Century*, courtesy The Library Of Congress.

Design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc.

This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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GEORGE FREDERICK BRISTOW (1825–1898)

ROYAL NORTHERN SINFONIA
REBECCA MILLER, CONDUCTOR

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- Symphony No. 2 (“Jullien”)* (1853) 43:21
1. Allegro appassionato 16:03
 2. Allegretto 5:58
 3. Adagio 11:03
 4. Allegro agitato—Grandioso—L’istesso tempo 10:03
5. *Overture to Rip Van Winkle* (1855) 8:19
6. *Winter’s Tale Overture* (1856) 9:52

TT: 61:48

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