

## Sir George Thomas Thalben-Ball

George Thalben-Ball was born in Australia in 1896 but spent most of his life in England after his parents brought him there at the age of 4. He was a musical prodigy, entering the Royal College of Music in London at the unusually young age of 14, where he studied piano and organ. He was the first English pianist to play Rachmaninoff's difficult Piano Concerto No. 3, something he did in 1915 at the age of 19.

### Hymn 280 (1st & 3rd verses)

Thalben-Ball made his reputation as an organist. He succeeded Sir Henry Wallford Davies as organist of London's Temple Church in 1923, when he was just 27. It was a post that he held for 60 years. Large British cities had a City Organist, and from 1948 to 1983 he was the City Organist for London (where he played the massive organ at the Royal Albert Hall). He was also the City Organist for Birmingham for 30 years, and over that time he gave over 1,000 weekly recitals. He also made foreign concert tours, including tours in the United States.

### Hymn 198 (1st & 3rd verses)

He was, of course, a composer, and it is interesting to note that when the Christian Science Hymnal was compiled in 1932 and included 7 of his compositions or arrangements, he was just 36. The Hymnal Notes (written by Maria Louise Baum) have some intriguing comments about Thalben-Ball's music set to Mrs. Eddy's words. For Hymn 26, it says, "This melody is one of three tunes composed by G. Thalben-Ball for the hymns of Mrs. Eddy." It suggests that Thalben-Ball composed it with Mrs. Eddy's words in mind, but I could find no confirmation of this fact.

### Hymn 26 (1st two verses)

Thalben-Ball was a virtuoso pianist, organist and even choirmaster. One commentator observed that "he could sight-read, transpose and improvise in any style and at any length to the highest standard without perceptible effort." (Play recording of his "Variations on a Theme by Paganini": Go to <http://www.dailymotion.com> and search for "Thalben-Ball.")

Here is another of his settings of one of Mrs. Eddy's poems. Again the Hymnal Notes suggest that Thalben-Ball had Mrs. Eddy's words in mind when he composed the music. The comment reads, "Here is a thoughtful interpretation of Mrs. Eddy's Communion Hymn by G. Thalben-Ball."

### Hymn 300 (1st verse)

The most famous of his compositions is his *Elegy for Organ*, and it has an interesting history. During World War II, the BBC broadcasted a daily religious service. When one of these ended several minutes earlier than expected, Thalben-Ball, who had been playing for the service, improvised to fill in the time. So many listeners called to find the origin of the music, that he decided to write down his improvisation as well as he could remember it. It became his most famous composition and was played at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales. (Listen to him playing it: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RyGq\\_kb-I8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RyGq_kb-I8).)

About the third of Thalben-Ball's musical settings of Mrs. Eddy's words, the Hymnal Notes read: "This is one of the two melodies specially set to these favorite words of Mrs. Eddy, for this revision of the Christian Science Hymnal." The "specially" suggests again that Thalben-Ball had

Mrs. Eddy's words in mind when writing the music. Here is something else interesting to note. For each of Thalben-Ball's hymns there is a notation that the music is "by permission of G. Thalben-Ball." The only place that note is missing is for the 3 settings of Mrs. Eddy's poems.

### **Hymn 308 (1st verse)**

Thalben-Ball was, of course, a recording artist, and many of his recordings from the 1950s and 1960s are still available. He was the first and probably the only man to sell a million copies of a record of church organ music. (This 1927 recording called "Hear My Prayer" and featuring the voice of boy soprano Earl Lough is available from Amazon in a remastered version.) Amazon has hundreds of books of his sheet music and scores of recordings of his music by other artists. Some of his own recordings can be found in compilations.

### **Hymn 22 (verses 1 & 2)**

His frequent concerts and regular appearances on the radio made him a celebrity in England, so he was a natural choice for a guest appearance in 1959 on the BBC show "Desert Island Discs" in which famous people were asked what recordings they would want with them on a desert island – assuming they had a gramophone with them. (Play a few minutes of the program: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009y7j7>).

A 144-page biography of Thalben-Ball was published in 1979, and it's also available on Amazon. He was knighted in 1982 and passed on in 1987. Let's close with one of the best-loved of his hymn melodies.

### **Hymn 205 (all verses)**