

'A rare Manx Concert'

Maurice Powell

Orchestral concerts featuring music inspired by the Isle of Man, its landscape and history, and using musical material adapted from traditional Manx melodies, either written by Manx-born composers, or composers and musicians who were resident here, once immensely popular, are rare today. The Isle of Man Symphony Orchestra, of which I am the musical director, does include the popular Manx-inspired works of light classical music in its programmes whenever possible,¹ such as Haydn Wood's *Manx Rhapsody* and *Mylecharane*, recently re-discovered orchestral works such as JE Quayle's *On Maughold Head*² and new works by living Manx composers, such as Charles Guard's *Song of the Southern Hills*.

'Celtic Concerts', 'Manx Concerts' or concerts of 'Manx National Music', were popular from the late-1890s until the Second World War, and as I am presently engaged on a thorough investigation into the circumstances surrounding the First Grand Concert of Manx National Music³ – which took place on Thursday January 7th, 1897, at the Grand Theatre, Douglas⁴ - a brief description of the event might be of interest.

The impetus to organise this concert of Manx National Music came from the publication of the Manx National Songbook⁵ in late 1896, and although many of the songs contained in the Manx National Songbook had been collected and arranged by W H Gill, it is certain that the overall musical director of the concert, Harry Wood,⁶ was responsible for the orchestrations. The concert was announced in December with an appetising advertisement in the *Manx Sun* which promised: 'Manx Songs! Manx Dances! and Manx Scenes in National costume', and a lengthy preview in the *Isle of Man Times*⁷ ensured that the event would attract the maximum interest. Predictably, tickets were oversold, there was 'a great crush to be present', and the theatre was full to overflowing thirty minutes before the start of the concert. Many disgruntled ticket-holders had to be turned away.

The Lt. Governor, the Lord Henniker, was indisposed, but his two daughters, the Hon. Ethel Henniker and the Hon. Cicely Henniker were present, together with Deemster Gill, his brother W H Gill and Dr Clague. *The Isle of Man Times* caught the mood and expectations of the audience perfectly:

'For the first time we were to have an entertainment the programme of which was made up of Manx airs, choruses, quaint old Manx customs, all given by local people, in appropriate costumes and scenery'.

And what an occasion it was, although it would require more space than is appropriate here to offer more than a snapshot of the spectacle that greeted the audience. Harry Wood's Grand Orchestra of twenty-one musicians, led by JE Quayle, accompanied the soloists and the Manx National Choir throughout. Many of the songs were performed with background scenery, and in costume, such as the opening tableau, *Ramsey Town*, the verses of which

were sung by men's voices and the refrain by the full choir. The stage-setting represented Ramsey Bay, peopled by groups of fishermen, old men and women, children, 'hobblers', smugglers, farmers, Manx girls in the fields, an inn - the King Orry Arms - a jolly landlord, and a comical old farmer in a straw hat. 'Too many oilskins', wrote one reviewer, 'but the effect was splendid'.

The Wreck of the Herring Fleet, with Harry Wood's fine orchestration representing the storm, clearly 'suited Mr Brockbanks' declamatory style'. The *Sheep under the Snow*, sung by Miss Phoebe Jull, was deemed 'right enough'⁸, and *Illiam Dhone* performed by a chorus of girls in 'sun bonnets and aprons' was judged 'a gran' affair'. *Hunt the Wren*, acted out by the chorus, and a semi-chorus of six boys each carrying the traditional bush and net, was received with great amusement. The undoubted highlight of the first part of the concert was *The Manx Wedding*, sung by the baritone Mr Alister Proctor, the popular character-singer of many of Harry Wood's concerts - 'he was Manx propar' - which brought the house down and received many demands for encores.

The second part of the concert opened with two Manx songs, *Mylecharane* and *Skeeyl-y-Vridey*, arranged for orchestra, presumably by Harry Wood, followed by a presentation of the curious old Christmas entertainment, *The White Boys*, during which characters representing St. George, The King of Egypt, the Turkish Champion, a Page, a Doctor and the White boys 'go through their fearful and wonderful play'. *Hop-tu-naa* was sung by three 'good lusty Manx voices'; *The Lament of the Duchess of Gloucester*, sung by Mrs WJ Corlett, was encored, and Miss AA Turner was 'quite affecting' in *Oh Hush Thee, My Babe*. The grand finale opened on a beach once again, with a crowd of fisher-folk, farmers and villagers; Alister Proctor and the chorus gave *The Herring is The King of the Sea*, to great acclaim, which led to the final item, the closing hymn, *The Harvest of the Sea*, and the *Manx National Anthem*.

Special praise was reserved for Harry Wood⁹ - who trained the choir and supervised the rehearsals - the orchestra, the stage manager, Fred D Johnson, and his resourceful assistant, JL Killip. The net proceeds of the concert were donated to the hospital.

The publication of the Manx National Songbook - the inspiration for the concert - had met with enthusiasm and negativity in equal proportions, with some commentators much preferring the alleged 'authenticity' of the sister publication, AW Moore's *Manx Ballads and Music*. The Manx Concert, too, had its detractors, some of whom found the performances of some of the vocal soloists 'too Englishified,' and complained that not enough the music was truly Manx in origin. Nevertheless, the audiences were generally delighted by the spectacle, and in consideration for all those disappointed ticket-holders who were turned away, Deemster Gill announced during the interval that the concert would be repeated on January 14th. 'An unparalleled success', reported the *Manx Sun*¹⁰, though the reviewer seemed 'surprised to learn that our little Manx nation possesses such soul stirring melodies and choruses'. Much of the programme, virtually unchanged, was re-cycled again for Harry

Wood's 7th Annual Students' Concert on February 25th, and the entire programme as originally conceived appeared as Harry Wood's St Stephen's Day Grand Concert of Manx National Music on December 27th. The era of large-scale orchestral and vocal concerts of Manx National Music had begun.

Maurice Powell, Andreas, June, 2014.

Notes

¹ Haydn Wood Anniversary Concert, Villa Marina, Nov 2009; the Villa Marina Centenary Concert, July 2013 and the Island of Culture Symphony Concert, Villa Marina, May 2014.

² See *JE Quayle*, Maurice Powell, in a *Supplement to New Manx Worthies*, Culture Vannin, 2014.

³ In March 1892, a letter appeared in the *Mona's Herald* following a popular concert of Scottish music organised in part by Harry Wood. The writer anticipated the format of the 1897 concert by proposing a similar concert of Manx music, suggesting that the programme should be devoted to music from original sources selected by AW Moore, and performed in Manx national costume. The organisers of the 1897 First Grand Concert may have been further pipped-at-the-post, for according to an advertisement in the *Ramsey Courier* dated November 24th, 1896, a concert of Manx National Songs was to take place at the Wesleyan Schoolroom, Albert Street, Ramsey, on December 3rd.

⁴ The Grand Theatre, Victoria Road, was opposite the Villiers Hotel; it later became the Regal Cinema, then The Celtic Bank. Now demolished.

⁵ Boosey & Co., Royal Edition, compiled by Deemster JF Gill, WH Gill and Dr John Clague.

⁶ See *Harry Wood*, 'Manxland's King of Music', Marjorie Cullerne, in *New Manx Worthies*, The Manx Heritage foundation, 2006.

⁷ January 2nd.

⁸ Many comments about the concert – including the title of this article – can be found in a satirico-humorous letter in Anglo-Manx dialect to the editor of *Mona's Herald*, dated January 13th, signed 'Tommy the Wren', Ballidin, 1897', and beginning 'Dear Misther Editor'. Although the identity of the author of this important letter may never be positively identified, Dr Fenella Bazin plausibly suggested to me that it could have been submitted by the Manx national poet, TE Brown, based on the great similarity between the literary style of the letter and the Anglo-Manx stories and poems of the poet. I would further suggest that *Mona's Herald* would only have printed such a lengthy review if it had been submitted by an important and influential person. TE Brown may have been inspired to invent the pseudonym 'Tommy the Wren', by recollections of Thomas Shimmin, 'Our Old Manx Poet', Baptist preacher and rag-gatherer, who was known as 'Tom the Dipper'.

⁹ Harry Wood was presented with a proof copy of the Manx National Songbook in recognition of his help in organising concert of Manx National Music.

¹⁰ January 19th. Review of the repeat concert on January 14th.