

Mr Craine's Oratorio

Maurice Powell

This is the story of a musical curiosity: the first Manx Oratorio, *The Story of the Cross*, composed by the veteran advocate, journalist and church musician, John Craine of Ramsey, during 1894, and completed on Christmas Day that year.¹

Craine was born in 1851, the only child of John Craine, a saddler, music teacher and property-owner, and his wife Margaret.² He was educated at Ludlow Grammar School, and upon his return to Ramsey, was articled to RF Kelly, a well-known advocate in the town. In 1875, he was called to the Manx Bar, and at his death in 1937, was the oldest living member of that august association.³ In 1881, Craine married Jane Brooke Teare,⁴ the eldest daughter of Thomas Teare, draper of Parliament Street, Ramsey; they had one son, John Teare Craine, in 1883, who became a music and art dealer in Ramsey, and who subsequently lived in Manchester. Tragically, Jane Craine died less than a week after the birth of their son, aged just twenty-one years.

Craine also possessed a flair for journalism, and in 1894, founded the Ramsey Courier and Northern Advertiser in conjunction with an English press agency, with offices at 19 Parliament Street, Ramsey. He was also known as an architect and illustrative artist, whose 'paintings and cartoons of a topical nature' were held in high regard.⁵ He was the organist at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Waterloo Road, Ramsey, for 50 years, a piano teacher and the agent on the Island for the piano dealer, Ryalls and Jones of Birkenhead.

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Craine was the composer of a small number of anthems, songs and part-songs such as the hymn *We have heard, O God, the Story*, the stirring Patriotic Song *The Boys Who Will Ne'er Return*, (1900) dedicated to 'The memory of our brave soldiers and sailors slain in the Transvaal war', and *Crossing the Bar*, to a poem by Tennyson, dedicated to the Masonic Fraternity of the Province of Man.⁶ His last known composition dates from 1936, and is a religious song entitled, *Shine Thou Upon Us Lord*. Throughout his life he was highly-regarded as an organ recitalist, and was judged to be 'a splendid performer on the "King of Instruments"' and 'an instrumentalist of the first quality'. Sometime during the 1920s or 30s, Craine went to America to 'pursue his musical interests', but returned after only a few years. Nothing more is known about this episode in his life. Although he continued to write music for his church, he never again attempted a composition on the scale of *The Story of the Cross*.

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Craine seems to have been possessed of a serious-minded and sober nature, although there is no evidence to suggest that, like Arnold Bennett's typical Methodist in the late nineteenth century, he was a 'repressed conformist', beset by 'a peculiar joylessness'. He professed a life-

long interest in Judaism, and was an adherent of the doctrines of British Israelism; he believed in the 'Israelitish Origin of the British Race', and further subscribed to the idea that the Celts were one of the lost tribes of Israel. For many years he was associated with the Manx Northern Auxiliary of the British Foreign Bible Society.

A noteworthy figure in the life of Ramsey of over half a century, his last months were plagued by failing eyesight, and he died at his home, Willow Cottage, Maughold Street, Ramsey, on July 8th, 1937. The funeral service was held appropriately at Waterloo Road Methodist Church, followed by internment at Lezayre.

His musical idol was Mozart, and his obituary confirmed that 'music was the absorbing interest of his life'. Craine himself spoke these words during a vote of thanks following an organ recital in Peel in 1896:

With me, it is always a pleasure to do anything to advance the cause of music in any way.⁷

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The First Manx Oratorio

Craine was highly-regarded as a choir conductor from the late 1870s, and may have met his future wife at an Annual Wesleyan Chapel Sunday School Tea Meeting⁸ in January 1878, where he conducted the choir and sang, and a Miss Teare helped serve the teas. In February, 1892, he conducted a mixed-voice choir of 40 and a small orchestra at the opening of the 'new' Primitive Methodist Chapel in Ramsey.⁹ We first hear of John Craine's oratorio in the following preliminary announcement in the Isle of Man Examiner:¹⁰

The Pavilion, Douglas,

Thursday, November 28th 1895

First performance in Douglas of the Manx Oratorio

THE STORY of the CROSS (by Mr J Craine).

Under the distinguished patronage of His Excellency the Lieut-Governor and Lady Ridgeway.

Principals - Mr D Humphreys, bass, of Her Majesties Chapel Royal, Windsor;

Mrs Kinley, soprano; Mrs Kewin, alto; Mr Corlett, the popular Manx tenor etc.

Late train for Peel and Ramsey 11 pm.

The premier of *The Story of the Cross*, or perhaps excerpts from the complete oratorio, had actually taken place the previous evening – November 27th - at the Palace, Ramsey, also in the presence of the Lieut- Governor and Lady Ridgeway, at the conclusion of a day of celebrations and 'a public address from the inhabitants of the Northern town', just prior to

their departure from the Island.¹¹ I have discovered no review of this concert, but have established that Craine's new work was performed from references in subsequent reports of the Douglas premier.

After commenting on the stormy weather which resulted in a half-full hall, the reviewer of the Douglas premier ¹² declared that:

Mr Craine is to be congratulated in having placed so high-class a production before the Manx public by means of Manx –mostly Ramsey – talent.

The musical forces consisted of four solo voices, a choir of 60 and an orchestra of 15 or 16 players, led by Harry Wood,¹³ conducted by John Craine himself. Several scenes were performed with 'realistic effect', and clearly made a great impression. Less encouragingly, the reviewer reported that the audience in the rear half of the Pavilion could not hear any of the words, and that overall 'it was all a sameness', with much of the oratorio consisting of recitative¹⁴, with too few arias. The male soloists – the leading Ramsey tenor Tom Corlett in the lyrical role of Jesus, and the bass, David Humphreys, in the roles of Narrator, Peter, Judas and Caiaphas - were complimented on their 'arduous tasks which they performed with credit'. The soprano and alto soloists were considered to be 'worthy of congratulation upon their efforts'. The final hymn with chorus and orchestra – based on the 'Manx National Air', *Mylecharane*,¹⁵ to the words 'There is a fountain filled with blood' – was best appreciated by the audience.

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The introduction to the vocal score of *The Story of the Cross* is very revealing:

Musical students and critics are requested to bear in mind the fact that the following composition is the work of a self-taught amateur, and as such must not be regarded as an exposition of theoretical skill and collegiate learning, but rather as the outcome of nature's great Master – experience.

Craine's modesty is understandable. His oratorio does not stand comparison with the sacred choral works of other Victorian composers such as Stainer, Sterndale Bennet, SS Wesley or Sullivan, nor the earlier generation of Methodist composers such as James Leach, let alone composers such as Handel, Haydn, Spohr and Mendelssohn, whose oratorios and cantatas were well-known on the Island. In fact, *The Story of the Cross* is not an oratorio at all, but a setting of the Passion according to St Matthew, and therefore, in form, has more in common with the *St John* and *St Matthew Passions* of JS Bach, than with Handel's *Messiah*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* or Stainer's *Crucifixion*.

The Story of the Cross is cast 10 parts: Introduction; The Passover; Olivet; Gethsemane; Christ before Caiaphas; Peter denies Christ; Judas and the Priests; Christ before Pilate; Christ in the Governor's Palace and the Crucifixion. Craine acknowledges the use of popular hymns for the congregation to sing in the manner of the chorales which are characteristic of German Passion settings by Bach, Telemann, Homilius and others. He also refers in the Preface to the vocal

score to a Hebrew Melody which appears in the opening 'symphony', which he identifies as 'the tune 'Leoni', ascribed to Nathan, 'a Jewish writer of great ability, on musical subjects'. In a further note at the foot of the 'symphony', the ancient melody is referred to 'The Prayer for the Dying'.¹⁶ The Preface concludes with the words:

It is fitting that the theme of all themes (the Passion of Christ) forms the subject of the first Manx Oratorio.

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As is customary in settings of the Passion, the story is told by a Narrator, an important role normally given to a tenor voice, but unusually in this setting, allotted to either a baritone or contralto. The words of Jesus are sung by a tenor; the role of Judas is given to the baritone, and Peter to the bass voice as is the tiny role of Caiaphas; the soprano assumes the small roles of Narrator in Part 6, singing the words of the Maid, and Pilate's wife in Part 8; the words of Pontius Pilate are sung by either the baritone or contralto Narrator; the contralto voice is specified for the role of Narrator in Part 9.

The weight of recitative referred to in the review of the Douglas premier – much of it lacking inner drama and effective word-painting, and only occasionally developing into arioso,¹⁷ - mitigates against a modern revival of the work. Arias are brief, although some of them – such as Jesus' *Drink ye all of it, for this is my blood*' in Part 2 - have a mild, attractive Mendelssohnian feel to them; most are under-characterised and lack variety. We do not share the guilt and shame of Peter, not the agony of Judas through the music written for them. Craine's harmonic palette is bland and unadventurous; where he attempts to inject drama into his music by harmonic colouration, he too often falls back on chains of diminished 7th chords, which weaken the music and imbue it with a saccharine sweetness at odds with the text.¹⁸ He was undoubtedly aware of his compositional limitations, and steered clear of attempting to delve deeply into the hearts and minds of such complex characters as Jesus, Peter or Judas through his music, as did Bach.

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Another, more serious issue, and the most obviously amateurish aspect of the work, is the lack of attention to musical prosody - the manner of setting the words to music – and the frequently resulting misalignment of strong and weak word stresses with strong and weak musical beats. The result is that much of the work – recitative, choruses and arias – sounds ungainly and has an unnatural flow. Before any attempt to revive the work could be considered, it would be essential to undertake a total revision of the work in order to render the sung text intelligible.

Craine is most successful in writing for the choir, for the most part in a style which is reminiscent of the Victorian anthem. He demonstrates his experience as a choral conductor in the quality of the part-writing, which is often inventive, but there are no full-length

choruses of the Handelian type, nor great choral fugues. His choral forces are frequently divided into separate male and female voices in order to assume different roles as Priests, the People or Jesus' accusers. What are known in German Passion settings as 'turba' or crowd choruses – *Let Him be crucified or Save Thyself! If Thou be the Son of God* - are among the most effective and dramatic in the work.

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The accompaniment is clearly designed for the organ, although Craine suggests, that, with minor adjustments, it could be satisfactorily performed on the piano. Throughout the vocal score there are instructions for the organist as to which registrations and stops they should utilise ie 'strings', 'haut' (oboe), 'Hohlflöte', 'reeds', 'Sw. V. Dia', 'celeste with tremulant' and 8ft 'cello'. A combination of organ, harmonium and piano would also be entirely feasible. Exactly what role the orchestra played in the Douglas premier is not certain as no orchestral material for the work has survived. It is possible that the orchestra only played the short introductory 'symphonies' and accompanied the hymns, of which there are four including an opening hymn *Plunged in a gulf of dark despair*. However, Craine would certainly have relished the use of the two cornets in the orchestra to play in the opening fanfare to Part 8, *Christ before Pilate*, and there are many passages where a solo flute would have added a touch of colour to the wash of organ sound. The orchestra may have accompanied some of the choruses, but it seems unlikely that there would have been orchestral accompaniment to the many recitatives. If the orchestra played a more developed role than this, then it is likely that Harry Wood arranged and supplied the orchestral material.

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The Story of the Cross is not a work envisaged for a great festival, but it could be revived today, with encouragement from an enthusiastic local choir with an appetite for something unusual and uniquely Manx, experienced local soloists and a choral conductor in sympathy with Victorian sacred music. As John Craine might have put it himself:

The Story of the Cross is the sincere offering of an amateur musician, written for amateurs to perform and designed to be heard in their local church.

Will anybody take up the challenge of reviving this first Manx Oratorio?

Maurice Powell, Andreas, September. 2014.

Notes

1. Noted in the preface to the rare printed vocal score, kindly loaned to me by Dr Fenella Bazin.
2. John Craine was christened on 25th January, 1851. Father: John Craine (c. 1815 – 1894); Mother: Margaret Craine (1809-1898).
3. Obituary, Ramsey Courier, 9th July, 1937.

4. Jane Brooke Teare, baptised 1st June, 1862, died 9th March, 1883.
5. Some of his paintings are in the collection of the Manx Museum, such as *Ramsey Bay One Thousand Years Ago (1911)*, which may depict the landing of Norsemen on Manx shores.
6. He was a member of the St Maughold Lodge.
7. He assisted Deemster JF Gill in his search for authentic Manx songs prior to the publication of the Manx National Songbook in 1896. See Stephen Miller, *A Shoemaker of name of Kneale, John Craine's Search for Singers 1895*, Manx Notes 22, 2004.
8. Annual Church Tea Meetings and Festivals have always been an important part of Manx social life. Temperance and Rechabite Festivals were often proceeded by a children's procession with a local band, and were followed by an evening concert. See *A Very Gifted Manx Lady, the Life of Kathleen Rydings*, Maurice Powell, Wibble Publications. 2014.
9. Site of the present-day Millichaps furniture store.
10. IoME 16th November, 1895.
11. Sir Joseph West Ridgeway was deemed to have been a man of exceptional ability as an administrator; 'his charming wife . . . was a great success socially and in all other directions'. From 1896 until 1903, he was Governor of Ceylon. See Winterbottom, Derek, *Governors of the Isle of Man Since 1765*, Manx Heritage Foundation, 2000.
12. IoME 30th November, 1895.
13. 'Manxland's King of Music', at this time the musical director at the Derby Castle. His brother, Haydn, also played in the violin section. The orchestra consisted of 9 stringed instruments, 1 flute, 2 cornets, organ, harmonium and piano.
14. Recitative is a form of speech-like singing designed to carry the often intricate plot developments in Opera, Oratorio, Passion and Cantata, at a pace as close as possible to speech.
15. John Craine gives his source as 'from The Mona Melodist' in the score.
16. Craine is presumably referring to the Kaddish (Qaddish), also known as the Mourners' Kaddish, although the text does not refer to death. The title *Jewish Prayer for the Dead* more properly refers to the prayer *El male rachamim*. Nathan the Prophet wrote histories of both King David and King Solomon, and was involved in music for the Temple in Jerusalem according to Chronicles 1 & 2. Craine's source for his 'ancient tune' could have been a Hebrew melody composed and sung by the great 18th century synagogue singer Leoni, or a later tune known as *Harvington*, written by AE Kettle for the Methodist Hymn and Tune Book (1894).
17. Arioso (lit. Airy) is a mixture of recitative and aria, and could be said to be a short, often lyrical, aria-like interpolation into a normally orchestrally accompanied recitative. The Finale to Act I of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* has a number of especially fine examples.
18. Craine may have been inspired by the choral writing of Louis Spohr (1784-1859), the composer of three impressive oratorios, especially popular in England in the years between Haydn's *Creation* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah: The Last Judgement, Calvary* and *The Fall of Babylon*. Spohr's use of chromatic harmony greatly influenced many nineteenth century composers, but the sacred works of Sullivan and Strainer for example, certainly suffered from following his example too slavishly.