

Leslie Stuart and the Isle of Man

by Maurice Powell

This is the third article in an occasional series about eminent composers of light music who visited the Isle of Man during the golden age of the tourist industry (the mid-1880s until the mid-1960s), a period during which also witnessed the rise in popularity of the genre known as British Light Music, from the age of Gilbert and Sullivan, the final years of Haydn Wood and Eric Coates, and the emergence of the younger generation of Ernest Tomlinson and Robert Farnon.*

* See also *Valse Septembre*, *Felix Godin at the Villa Marina*, and *Frederick Curzon at the Villa Marina*, manxmusic.com.

‘As genuine as his music . . . a delightful raconteur and a charming companion’

The first reference in the Isle of Man newspapers to the master of Victorian and Edwardian musical comedy *de jure* Leslie Stuart,* or rather Mr T. A. Barrett, was in the *Isle of Man Times* of 23rd May 1885, when he was described as the ‘highly creditable’ solo pianist and accompanist in three popular vocal concerts at the Grand Music Hall, Victoria Street, Douglas, on Whit-Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

* Thomas (Tom) Augustine Barrett (1863-1928), better known as Leslie Stuart, is remembered primarily for the ‘hit’ musical comedy *Florodora* of 1899, songs and ballads such as *Soldiers of the Queen* and *Little Dolly Daydream*, and several [as they were then known] ‘nigger’ songs written for the ‘black face’ singer and entertainer Eugene Stratton, such as *The Lily of Laguna*, *My Little Octoroon* and *The Coon Drum Major*. The *nom de plume* Leslie Stuart apparently derived from two names he observed on stage door cards: Fanny Leslie and Cora Stuart. Born in Southport and growing up in Liverpool, he began his career as the organist at Salford Cathedral and the Church of the Holy Name in Manchester, began to compose sacred and secular music in the late 1870s and organised and conducted Mr T. A. Barrett’s series of popular concerts of orchestral and theatre music at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, during the 1880s and ‘90s.

Later that season the *Manx Sun*, 15th August 1885, briefly mentioned a concert at the Derby Castle where Mr T. A. Barrett played ‘several pianoforte solos’ and his brother, Mr Lester ‘Homely Jokes for Homely Folks’ Barrett,* delighted the crowds with his humorous songs and ‘patter’ on his first appearance in Douglas.

* Lester Barrett was a popular summer season entertainer in Douglas, Isle of Man, for many seasons up to World War I. According to Harry Wood - the elder brother of composer Haydn Wood, and later the musical director of the Palace & Derby Castle Company - in his unpublished record of popular music and entertainment on the Isle of Man (1888-1938), *Cavalcade of Music*, Lester Barrett’s most popular song in 1888 at the Falcon Cliff Pavilion was *Delaney’s Chicken*. See Maurice Powell, *Manxland’s King of Music, The Life and Times of Harry Wood*, Lily Publications, 2018.

The *Manx Sun* of 23rd August 1890 reported that the great attraction that month at the Falcon Cliff Pavilion, Douglas,* was Mrs Alice Shaw, the lady whistler (*siffleur*), the ‘rage’ of London, ‘whose marvellous ability in a department of music hitherto closed to women’, had won her considerable renown ‘among all classes in England’. Mr T. A. Barrett had been instrumental in securing her engagement and was her accompanist whose ‘perfect execution and thorough sympathy with the artiste has added greatly to the pleasure of all’ in such pieces ‘of operatic or more severe extraction’ as *Il Bacio*, *The Whistling Polka* and

the waltz *Sylvia*. Each evening Lester Barrett 'scored a big success' with his character studies including 'Professor O'Toole' and 'It is very wrong of Loo'.

* The Falcon Cliff Pavilion once dominated the skyline above Douglas Bay and was one of the earliest major entertainment venues on the Isle of Man. Acquired by the Palace & Derby Castle Company, it was demolished by the winter of 1899 to lessen the competition among the large indoor resorts.

Harry Wood recalled in *Cavalcade of Music* that his 1893 Lancers included Leslie Stuart's *The Soldiers of the Queen* with the composer's permission, and that earlier that season in Douglas he had been introduced to Leslie Stuart by David Day, of Francis, Day & Hunter, at a supper arranged by the manager of the Derby Castle. Stuart had four new songs with him: *Soldiers of the Queen*, *Sweetheart May*, *The Willow Pattern Plate* and *Little Dolly Daydream*, and Wood predicted correctly that they would all become 'hits'.*

* See *Manxland's King of Music* p. 128, and p. 186.

In the *Manxman* in September 1895 two of Leslie Stuart's songs - *Louisiana Lou*, written for Ivan Caryll's 'hit' musical *The Shop Girl*, and *Soldiers of the Queen* sung by Mr Haydn Coffin in the Sidney Jones' musical comedy *An Artiste's Model* - are mentioned in a review of shows at the Grand Theatre and Opera House, Douglas, that season. Tom Barrett's name appears the following year later in the *Ramsey Courier* during a report of the fourth Manx Music Festival (the Guild) when his song *The Bandolero** was sung by one of the competitors. 'Mr Tom Barrett, late of Manchester, and now of London . . . adopts the pen-name Leslie Stuart . . . *The Bandolero* has been extremely profitable to him'.

* Written for the renowned Irish operatic bass Allan James Foley, known as 'Signor' Foli. The song was performed at a BBC promenade Concert in 1895 and published in 1899.

The *Manxman*, 11th September 1897, published an interview entitled a 'Chat with Leslie Stuart', who is referred to 'as perhaps the best song writer of the day'. Stuart revealed that *Louisiana Lou* had sold over 100,000 copies and brought him a £1,000 in royalties. *Soldiers of the Queen* also enjoyed 'a phenomenal success' and created 'quite a rage, even surpassing that of *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay*', sung by Lottie Collins at the Derby Castle earlier in the season, *Sweetheart May* sung by Vesta Tilley and Dan Leno's comic song and monologue *I'm Off to Buy the Milk for the Twins*. In fact, *Soldiers of the Queen* quickly became a popular military band march, and had been played during Queen Victoria's recent jubilee celebrations; furthermore it had been the first tune Her Majesty heard as she emerged from the gates of Buckingham Palace.

'So bright! So charming! and full of glit-glit-glitter'

*Florodora** was first seen in Douglas at the Grand Theatre, then under the management of Mr Alfred Hemmings, commencing 30th July 1900 for a run of six nights, with Tom B. Davis's Company direct from London's Lyric Theatre. All agreed, it was ' . . . the most charming and amusingly diverting of all musical comedies . . . so witty and sparkingly and tuneful as to bring back memories of Offenbach . . .' All-in-all, it was judged to be 'the grand triumph of the triumphant Grand'; a new quintet - 'so tuneful . . . so sparkling' - was introduced into the production and stole the show; the reviewer for the *Mona's Herald* thought it 'the most

diverting number ever produced in this town . . . the audience had it repeated till it was too sore to laugh any more’.*

* *Florodora*, book by Owen Hall aka Jimmy Davis, and lyrics by Ernest Boyd-Jones and Paul Rubens, opened at London’s Lyric Theatre on 11th November 1899 and initially ran for 455 performances. The show moved to New York in 1900 and became one of the first successful Broadway musicals.

* The new ‘quintet’ may in fact have been the Clerks Sextet in Act I.

Leslie Stuart’s new musical comedy for London’s the Lyric Theatre in June 1901, *The Silver Slipper*, ‘A Modern Extravaganza’, was produced at the Grand Theatre, Douglas, in August that year.* ‘One of the principal characteristics is its daintiness’, and at the head of a cast of seventy performers in the role of Stella, the Venusian maid who, curious to observe the activities of men on Earth, drops her slipper over a cloud and is banished from Venus until she had retrieved it, was dainty Lydia Flopp,* a dancer and singer in burlesque and pantomime, with a doe-eyed, butter-wouldn’t-melt look. In the role of Wrenne, Jeannie Macdonald, ‘. . . a petite little actress, like a piece of Dresden china . . .’ The Dickensian character Samuel Twanks, ‘a sporting tipster’ accompanied by an imaginary dog, was played by Mr J. Robert Hale; Miss Irene Verona as Belle Jimper was ‘eminently mirth-provoking’ in the songs *Class* and *I’m on my Good Behaviour*. The elaborate scenery was much admired, especially the Court of Justice in Venus scene when the stage was ‘flooded with beautiful blue light’. The whole production was lavish: the music – with an augmented orchestra for the week - the principal actress, and the costumes - which were insured for £3,000 – were ‘all dainty’.

* The book was by Owen Hall, the lyrics by W. H. Risque and Leslie Stuart, and the music by Leslie Stuart.

* Lydia Flopp, aka Lydia Rudge (1877-1963), was one of the five Rudge Sisters, actresses and dancers from a family of Birmingham brass founders and chandelier makers. Letitia (Letty Lind) was a skirt dancer; Sarah (Millie Hilton) a male impersonator; Elizabeth (Adelaide Astor) a West End actress who married George Grossmith Jr; Fanny (Fanny Dango) enjoyed a career in London’s theatreland before moving to Australia.

The Silver Slipper was followed by a successful re-run of *Florodora* during August Bank Holiday Week which played to full houses. One local newspaper reported that ‘the most popular tunes from the show can be heard played on all the pianos in Douglas or warbled out of some drawing room window as you go to and from the theatre’. Miss Ada Reeve* as the titled but penniless Lady Holyrood, was the star attraction, and her first appearance on stage signalled a tremendous reception. Her rendering of *I’ve an inkling* received countless demands for encores. Miss Amy Augarde took the role of the bewitching Dolores and Miss Adrienne Augarde played Angela Gilfain. Mr Edward Lewis scored a great success as the ‘venal old humbug’ Tweedlepunch, a detective disguised as a phrenologist, and ‘my goodness (he was) one of the funniest fellows you ever did see’. There were encores for Mr L. Russell for his singing of *The Shade of the Palms*, and for the Act II double sextet of English girls (‘chorines’ or ‘Florodora Girls’) and the Clerks, *Tell me, Pretty Maiden*, arguably the most popular show tune of the age.

* Her fee was reported to be £185 for the week’s engagement.

‘Its success is a great as ever’

Florodora returned to Douglas in August 1902 for a week's run; the *Isle of Man Times* reviewer referred to its 'inexhaustible popularity'; a 'lady correspondent' in the same newspaper drew attention to the 'chic and fresh 'Florodora Frocks', the Chinese silk scarves and 'the very up-to-date turquoise confections' worn by the maids in the double sextet scene. On August 26th *The Sliver Slipper* returned to the Grand Theatre for six nights with Fanny Dando (one of the Rudge Sisters) in the role of Wrenne. It was by all accounts '... an evening's amusement full of hearty fun' that attracted large audiences. *Hunt the Slipper* in Act I and *Four and Twenty Little Men* in Act II especially pleased; *God Save the King* was heartily sung in honour of the visit to the Island of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra.

The Sunday Sacred Concert at the Grand Theatre on May 31st 1903 featured a selection from *Florodora* performed by the F. S. Gilbert Opera Company and an orchestra of twenty, and the following month a piano selection from *Florodora* was given at a concert at the Ramsey Pavilion in the north of the Island. *Florodora* returned to the Grand Theatre for six nights on August 31st and played to full houses nightly. Once again, the magnificent costumes and scenery - particularly in the Ball scene in Act II - were especially praised. The *Isle of Man Times* urged all 'lovers of bright melodies, crisp dialogue, and pungent wit and humour . . .' to see this 'bright and pretty musical comedy'. *Florodora* was produced in Douglas again in August 1904, with 'gorgeous staging . . . magnificent dresses', an augmented orchestra and full chorus, and again in 1906 at the Grand Theatre with Mr J. Bannister Howard's Company, together with 'new dresses', and even more elaborate scenery.

Having enjoyed a brilliant success in 1906 at the Vaudeville Theatre, London, the 'smart and witty . . . modern musical comedy' *The Belle of Mayfair* was presented at the Grand Theatre in August 1907. Billed as '... a modern musical comedy . . . smart and witty . . . (music) refined . . . full of vivacity and sparkling melody', it provided a 'capital evening's entertainment' during a week when the great Vesta Tilley was appearing in Douglas at the Derby Castle. In July 1908 Mr Charles Constant's No. 1 Company presented *Florodora* at the Grand Theatre which brought back '... happy recollections of the piece' with the most popular numbers: *Tell me, Pretty Maiden, I want to be a Military Man, Sheltering Palm* and *Queen of the Philippine Islands* proving to be as engaging as ever.

'... the most extravagant piece of fun set to music that was ever staged'*

For one week from 16th August 1909 George Dance's Company presented Stuart's new musical comedy *Havana* at the Grand Theatre. The local newspapers were enthusiastic describing it as '... a downright farce . . . with broad humour . . . (and) a rambling plot frequently delayed by "funny business" and side-splitting drollery'. With a large orchestra and chorus - 'a real bevy of ladies' - it attracted the largest theatre crowds that season.

* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 21.08.1909

Leslie Stuart's last stage success, *Peggy*, was produced at the Gaiety Theatre, Douglas, by Mr George Dance's Company in late August and early September 1911 but 'failed to add to his reputation'. Furthermore, the arrival of the production was delayed by a rail strike in

England. The reviewer in the *Isle of Man Times* summed up his report of the show with the following lukewarm appraisal: 'Altogether, *Peggy* will commend itself to the present taste for light and changeable fare in the summer theatre'. Success now increasingly illuded Leslie Stuart; his star was no longer in the ascendant; changes in musical taste rendered his music old fashioned, and in his personal life gambling debts led him into financial difficulties and eventually bankruptcy in 1913. *Bubbles* (1914) sank into oblivion in the provinces and failed to achieve a London run and although Stuart continued to make personal appearances at variety theatres with his most popular songs, his final years were scarred by drink, marital problems and futile attempts to see his last musical show, *Nina*, into production.

Florodora was kept alive on the Isle of Man and was staged by Douglas Choral Union on Boxing Night, December 28th 1916, and on January 1st and 2nd 1917 at the Gaiety Theatre. Directed by Noah Moore, the highly respected Manx choir trainer and conductor, and presented as the Society's 'coming of age production', *Florodora* had lost none of its power to enchant even in a trimmed down, occasionally flawed, amateur wartime production. The critic in the *Mona's Herald* referred to the music's 'dash and swing' and its appeal to all tastes, and suggested that Bismarck himself, '... that man of blood and iron', would have approved because its melodies 'can be whistled'. *Florodora* continued to provide Stuart with an income throughout the 1920s, although it was never the gift that kept on giving that was Lehar's *The Merry Widow*.

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