
The west gallery tradition in the Isle of Man

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In this paper Fenella Bazin sets out by establishing the historical background relating to the use of metrical psalmody in the worshipping communities on the Isle of Man. She then turns to the broader educational issues affecting the tradition, and examines the growing importance of Methodism on the island and the effect it had on the Manx Church. Her attention is next focused on the Colby music books – some of the most important Manx sources containing sacred vocal music from the Georgian period. In conclusion she deals with matters related to performance practice, including instrumental accompaniment and the role of the west gallery, and explains why the tradition continued into the early 20th century.

Background

The 227 square miles of the Isle of Man stand in the northern part of the Irish Sea at the centre of the British Isles. Scotland, its nearest neighbour, is only sixteen miles away, while the closest point on the English coast is thirty miles to the east. On a clear day the mountains of Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England are visible, emphasising the island's important strategic position. It was never occupied by the Romans, Saxons or Normans but is culturally part of the north-west Gaelic lands of the British Isles, much influenced by the Celtic church and a main protagonist in the Kingdom of the Isles during the Scandinavian rule from AD 800 to 1266. After a turbulent period, when English and Scots fought over the island, the Manx came under the control in 1405 of the Stanley family (later the Earls of Derby), whose links with the north-west of England were a powerful tool in the shaping of Manx history until the family's hold was finally broken in the 19th century. Being a seafaring nation, it was only natural that Manxmen should travel and trade. Those who remained at home were subject to compulsory primary education from the early 1700s, and women were given the vote in 1881. From the mid 1800s until the 1950s, holiday-makers from industrial areas of Scotland and the north of England poured into the island's capital of Douglas, leaving the rural areas virtually untouched. Pockets of Manx Gaelic speakers could still be found in some remote areas at the beginning of the 20th century, along with a rich vein of traditional music, folklore and superstition. The modern economy is now based

on finance and industry, which supports a population of 70,000 and offers well-paid jobs that enable Manxmen and women to stay on the island. The Isle of Man is not part of either the United Kingdom or the European Union. It has had its own parliament for over 1,000 years and the ancient open-air Tynwald ceremony still takes place on Old Midsummer Day, when the laws made during the preceding twelve months are read aloud in Manx and English for all to hear.

This, then, is the context for the story of the west gallery tradition in the Isle of Man. It is important to understand the island's history when charting and interpreting the events which gave Manx vernacular music its character.

Early evidence

Surviving manuscripts indicate a rich repertoire of west gallery music; literary references offer glimpses of activities within that tradition. As the son of the vicar of Braddan, T. E. Brown (1830–1897), the Manx national poet, had an upbringing which gave him every opportunity to observe at close quarters one of the best-documented Manx gallery choirs. This extract from his narrative dialect poem *The Schoolmasters* suggests something of the atmosphere of a mid 19th-century 'quire':

And, when I got higher
In the school, they coaxed me to come in the
quire,
And I did; and even after I left,
I stuck to it – aye, and made a sheft¹
To sing somethin' – tannor² I was wantin' –
Tannor – aye; but allis slantin'
Into the bass, and – loo, loo, loo!³
And settled to something between the two –
Rather doubtful, of a manner.
But Mark was singin' the counter-tannor –
See-saw, most beautiful! Sixes and sevens ...
(Brown, 1920, p. 499)

To explore the origins of gallery music in the Isle of Man, we have to go back to 1763, when Mark Hildesley (Bishop of Sodor and Man from

¹ sheft = shift

² tannor = tenor

³ [tries his voice]

1755 to 1773) wrote: 'I see and hear nothing of the Teaching Psalmist; what with a musical Clerk, and a sol-fa Instructor, sure[ly] Douglas congregations will produce a compleat harmony. Pray give Mr Grave the little piece upon Psalmody of which I think you had one or two from me'. This is one of the earliest direct references to Manx church music that I have so far discovered (Hildesley letters, 13 January 1763).¹ Although scarce, 18th-century documentary evidence shows that the singing of psalms in Manx was introduced so that, in the words of Bishop Hildesley, 'the natives of this Isle ... may be enabled to sing with the Spirit, by singing with the understanding'.² It is not clear whether there had been earlier attempts to sing in English or whether this was the point at which psalm-singing was first introduced to Manx congregations. But it is clear that the intention was that the people should be allowed to sing in their mother tongue, although a concession was made to allow 'one [psalm] only in English at each service if the Minister so chooses'. Unfortunately, Hildesley's successors did not have his enthusiasm for music and it was only with the coming of Methodism in the early 19th century that the Manx church authorities made further official attempts to improve the standard of singing in the island.

In the meantime, the church was left to the people, and church music was left to individual musicians in each parish. Standards, of course, varied tremendously, from the accomplished choirs and bands which were trained by professional choirmasters to the ad-hoc groups that did their enthusiastic best with little guidance, knowledge or experience. There seem to have been two distinct styles of singing prevalent in the Isle of Man during the period under discussion. The 'west gallery' style introduced English-language anthems to the churches which served urban parishes, such as the island's main town of Douglas and the garrison of Castletown, where there has been a large English resident population for at least two centuries. But the story was different in many of the more remote rural parishes, where

change was slower in coming and the population was probably still predominantly Gaelic-speaking. The 'old-style' psalm-singing, which can still be heard in Hebridean islands such as Lewis, seems to have survived in some of these country districts until at least the middle of the 19th century, and was described in some detail by Hall Caine, a Manx writer whose novels outsold those of any of his contemporaries, but who is now almost unknown outside the Isle of Man.

It was some comfort to drown with the wild discord of their voices the fearful noises of the tempest. When they finished the hymn, they began on it again, keeping it up without a break, sweeping the dying note of the last word into the rising pitch of the first one.

(Caine, 1897, p. 164)

This style also seems to have been found in English-speaking areas of Britain but, given the Isle of Man's close cultural and political links with the Western Isles, the style found in the island is probably linked with the Hebridean rather than the English tradition.

Flourishing alongside both these styles was the singing of sacred songs known as carvals, a Manx word approximating to the English word 'carol'. Carvals sometimes ran to forty verses, with each verse having up to eight lines. The subjects were sacred and could be drawn from biblical subjects such as the story of the prodigal son, or deal with topics such as judgement, salvation and Christian duty. Although they were traditionally sung in church on Christmas Eve after the departure of the parson, fewer than a quarter of those which survive use the Christmas story, and all have Marian references, a rare post-Reformation survival in a Protestant culture. The melodies used by the carval-singers, who were almost always men, survived in the oral tradition and were written down in the late 1800s. Most of the tunes seem to be specifically Manx. Their survival seems to me to be the result of cultural mores, particularly the lingering influence of the Celtic Christian church and the consequent reluctance of the Manx to accept the changes of the Reformation, rather than geographical isolation. Indeed, in the period under discussion, the Isle of Man had an industrial economy based on international trading, mining and, from the middle of the 19th century, tourism.

Metrical psalmody established

By the 1800s, however, metrical psalms seem to have been widely used, and were generally given out two lines at a time by the clerk, who was a person of some importance in the parish, rank-

¹ I am grateful to the Rev. R. L. Thomson for drawing this to my attention.

² Metrical versions of the Psalms of David were included in the 1768 edition of the Manx Book of Common Prayer which was dedicated to Bishop Hildesley. These were later added to by the Rev. John Clague, Vicar of Rushen from 1782 to 1816, and published as *Psalmyn Ghavid: a Metrical Version of the Psalms of David*. Many of the 1768 verses were based on those of Tate and Brady.

ing lower only than the minister and the captain of the parish.¹ Among the Presentments to the Manx Church Court in 1798 is a fine description of the clerk's role:

Thos Moore one of the Church wardens begs leave to inform the Court that John Quinney of Ballacrine and several other parishioners complain of John Crebbin the parish Clerk for not reading the Manks Metrical Psalms of David line by line before he sings them – and it is well known that the custom of reading the said psalms line by line has always been practised till of late years in the Church and was thought to tend much to the comfort and edification of the unlearned by enabling them to sing with the spirit by singing with the understanding [a clear reference to Bishop Hildesley's comments]. Whereas the present mode of singing the Psalms by the said John Crebbin in reading out the first two lines only of the Psalm or that part of the Psalm which he intends singing, and then sings two, three, or four stanzas can tend no more (with submission to the Court) to the Comfort and Edification of the illiterate than if he sang them out in high Dutch or any other foreign or barbarous language.

(cited in Thomson, 1993, p. 123)

It is interesting to note that in many rural Methodist chapels today the leader of the service will still read out the whole of the first verse before the singing begins. Clerks could be 'presented' (that is, summoned to appear before the church courts) for 'not coming to meet the burials for to raise the psalms to their houses' (Kermode, 1954, p. 109) and even a vicar was 'presented' 'for restraining and forbidding our said Parish Clerk to sing and raise psalms' (Kermode, 1954, p. 90). These references to psalm-raising suggest that the singing was often unaccompanied. The tradition has survived to this day in the form of hymn-raising competitions which form part of the programme of local chruinnaghts (the Manx equivalent of eisteddfods).

By the time John Wesley visited the island in 1781 he was able to note that 'both men and women have admirable voices', suggesting that he had heard singing in the English rather than the Gaelic tradition. In spite of Wesley's advice that the use of Manx should be discouraged, the first hymn-book in Manx (words only) was published in 1799, underlining the continuing predominance of Gaelic over English.

¹ The captain of the parish was a militia-based appointment that still survives on the island today. There has never been a squirearchy in the Isle of Man.

Effect of Methodism

The general lethargy of the parish clergy was jolted by the arrival of Methodism, which was adopted enthusiastically by the Manx. By 1778, the island was entered as a separate circuit and by 1781, when fewer than 25,000 people lived on the island, the membership of the society was 1,597. By 1862, when the population had doubled, the movement had been adopted with such enthusiasm that there were 91 chapels, with 35,000 sittings, 20 ministers and 200 local preachers (Moore, 1900, pp. 677–8).

Anglicans were forbidden from associating with Methodists and in 1779, the year after Wesley's second visit, the Lezayre schoolmaster was summoned to appear before the Manx church court for socialising with them and had to agree to refrain from doing so in the future (Kermode, 1954, p. 119). Methodism was tailor-made for the large number of independent Manx farmers who were subject to church tithes. The Reverend Rex Kissack summarised the situation in the following way:

The Methodist farmer ... was the natural enemy of the Church. The endemic war he maintained over the Tithes reached its bitterest under Bishop Richmond (1773–84), and then under Bishop Murray (1814–27). Methodism put into his hands the chance to inherit the influence and powers the Vicars had so long enjoyed. The Methodist meeting room might well originate in one of his barns, and when the time came to have a custom-built chapel, who but he should donate the parcel of land? His position as landlord and employer could now be enhanced by entering the spiritual realm as Local Preacher or Class Leader. The 19th century Census returns show many farmers proudly recording their occupation, not only as landowner or farmer of so many acres, but also as local preacher.

(Kissack, 1994, p. 13)

Singing classes

Notices began to appear in the local newspapers around the beginning of the 19th century advertising singing classes. In *Manx Reminiscences*, published posthumously in 1911, Dr John Clague (1842–1908) mentions a Master Harmer, who taught in some of the northern parishes of the island (Clague, 1911, pp. 185–97). He was probably the same person as the Mr Hamer, who in March 1810 announced his intention to open a school at a Douglas Concert Room 'for the instruction of young ladies and gentlemen in the singing of sacred music'. A year later a Mr T. N. Earnsby gave notice that he too intended to open a school in a nearby Club Room (*Manx Advertiser*,

2 March 1811). This tradition seems to have continued well into the century and we find a Mr Hill from Ireland offered 'classes in Psalmody and Theory of Music' for three months in 1837 until he left the island to take up an appointment in the Chapel Royal (*Manx Advertiser*, 5 December 1837). In 1828 the vicar of Malew gave a supper to 60 of his parishioners and choir to try to encourage them to restore 'the most interesting and ancient mode of divine worship, Psalmody, which is usually so neglected in our church ... and in which sacred duty the Dissenters so successfully rival us' (*Manx Sun*, 15 January 1828). There is a detailed description of the methods of one such music master. Dr Clague published the information he had been given by his mentor William Duke, a keen amateur musician and botanist, who had been a member of 'Master Shepherd's' choir early in the century. Shepherd had been an itinerant music-master, who had trained choirs in all parts of the island from about 1809 until the late 1830s and his methods were described in the following terms:

He had a way of his own to teach church choirs. He made all the singers 'sol-fa' the tune for themselves and keep time with the tune, with the open hand on the first beat of the bar, in common time, and the shut fist on the second beat.

In time, three beats in the bar, the hand was put down on the little-finger side of the hand for the first beat, for the second beat the points of the fingers were put down, and for the third beat the wrist of the hand was put down.

His teaching was in this rhyme:

Above your 'mi' twice 'fa, sol, la,'
Below your 'mi' twice 'la, sol, fa.'

Thus 'mi' comes in twice.

'Mi' was the seventh note of the octave, and it did for major or minor scales. He was only sure of one note of the octave, for there were two 'fas', two 'sols', and two 'las', so that he could not know one note from the other.

(Clague, 1911, pp. 189–90)

This description tallies with the method found in shape-note music, but there are no Manx manuscripts which have been annotated for solmisation or copied with shape-notes. Tonic sol-fa is only used in one Manx manuscript, a flute book of the 1830s.

Clague goes on to report that the singers were in two rows which faced each other, and each part was taught separately. Shepherd 'would not give leave to allow one set of the singers to hear the other until they knew their own part'. He copied out the parts into books which he sold for a shilling, ruling out the staves with a five-pointed pen,

and he also charged a fee of ten shillings per quarter.

The Colby music books

Thirteen of Shepherd's books lodged with the Library of the Manx Museum are known as the Colby music books.¹

A fourteenth book in the set is known, rather confusingly, as 'Shepherd's music' (probably so named after the hymn-tune 'Shepherd's Lover') although it is not in Master Shepherd's handwriting and has many other significant differences. Its date of c. 1810 suggests that it might have been from the days of 'Master Harmer'. For the purposes of this discussion I refer to the Colby music books as a single set and the 1810 manuscript as a separate item. Other manuscripts from the Master Shepherd series still exist in private ownership.

Of the fourteen surviving distinct groups of manuscripts dating from the period 1810–60, two record music from the oral tradition, three contain band parts and the remaining nine are mainly devoted to sacred vocal music, with over 800 different hymn-tunes and 45 anthems. The majority of tunes are drawn from the broad British repertoire; only one per cent of the hymn-tunes bear Manx place-names, such as 'Mona's Isle', 'Arbory', 'Crofton' and 'Braddan', and it is difficult to ascribe a date or authorship to any but a handful. Fifteen per cent of the tunes appear in two or more collections; it is significant that the manuscripts dating from 1840–50 are more likely to have tunes in common than the earlier collections, whose distinct character suggests greater musical isolation. Very few of the arrangements are common to two or more collections, indicating a variety of different sources. Some of the arrangements appear to have been made locally. Few of the authors indicated the allocation of vocal lines, but the second line of a four-part arrangement often spanned a narrow range and may have been written for boys whose voices were in the process of changing. In a conversation in 1993 with Mr J. C. Quayle, who was a chorister in St George's, Douglas, around the time of the outbreak of the First World War, he confirmed that boys continued singing while their voices changed, and were only allowed to tackle a limited range of notes. He described the process as 'sliding' rather than 'breaking'.

Anthems are generally not shared between collections and range from simple four-part settings to sophisticated verse-anthems with symphonies

¹ The Colby music books MMMSS J.66.7087-96, 6523, 6525-7 (MMMS: Manx Museum manuscript).

(often referred to as 'sympathies' in the text and orally within my own memory), including the 'Prodigal Son', 'Salem', 'Awake up my Glory', 'The Fall of Babylon' and the Echo chorus, which appears in the publication produced for this conference.¹

Organs and other instruments

Although the introduction of organs was generally detrimental to the singing (as in St George's Church, Douglas, where correspondents proposed several ways of improvement in letters to the newspapers over a period of several years), in one parish at least the opposite held true. The dedication of an organ in Kirk Braddan in 1837 led to the formation of a choir by 'several gentlemen of the neighbourhood' (*Manx Sun*, 5 September 1837) and, judging by a surviving manuscript, a standard of music was reached that was sustained over many years. John Sayle's serpent book,² which probably dates from the beginning of this enterprise, contains three- and four-part hymns and anthems in open score, piano reductions of a selection from Handel's Water Music with instrumental cues, and a large number of serpent parts for a variety of sacred and secular pieces (some locally composed) copied in at least five and maybe up to ten different styles of handwriting. This 90-page manuscript is also the key to a fascinating insight into the lives of a group of mid 19th-century amateur musicians, most of whom were skilled manual workers, drawn almost equally from the Manx and English populations. Although the manuscript belonged to a Manxman, English is used exclusively throughout the book, showing the influence of nearby Douglas. Research in the IGI (International Genealogical Index) and the register of wills and the census returns in the Manx Museum reveals that the musicians listed by Sayle were often related by marriage. The search even led to the identification of the elusive 'Master Shepherd', whose name was William, and whose youthful links with the Brigham area of Cumberland were maintained by him and his descendants over at least three generations.

¹ *Music for Country Choirs: a west-gallery anthology*, edited by Blaise Compton, containing material used in the practical sessions at the conference, was produced for the use of delegates. Copies can be obtained from the publisher: King's Music, Redcroft, Bank End, Wyton, Huntingdon PE17 2AA.

² Sayle, John, serpent book, 1837, Manx Museum manuscript 1234A.

Galleries

Most of the Manx parish churches had west galleries, often reached by an outside staircase, but there is no firm evidence that they were for the sole use of singers and musicians. Indeed, where Victorian churches replaced the ancient Celtic buildings, some of which had fallen into semi-dereliction, galleries were often reserved for intack-holders, that is people who held land in the parish but were not resident. In the 1850s, the choir and organ in St Barnabas's Church, Douglas, were placed in an east gallery, immediately over the Communion Table (Wood, 1924). There is oral evidence that galleries were used in the old churches of Lezayre (Douglas, 1916, pp. 416–18) and Maughold (interview with Miss F. M. C. Kermodé, 1993), and Methodist churches certainly had 'singing seats' (Killip, 1971, Plate 45), which were often removed with the introduction of harmoniums and organs.

Although T. E. Brown's narrative poem *The Schoolmasters* is not set in his father's parish of Braddan, he gives us perhaps the best idea of where musicians sat in a parish church, as well as a fine description of a bass-viol player. 'Clukish' is a dialect form of Clucas, which also happens to be the surname of one of the musicians associated with Braddan's John Sayle.

Clukish, that's the man, and Maggie,
Fuss-rate singers, father, and son,
And daughter, lek the three in one,
Tuned to a dot, most parfec, it was,
And him upon the bass-viol –
Treminjis! noted for the long
And loud and soft and full and sthrong.
And when they were sittin' the whole of the
three
Right in front of the gallery,
I've heard the Pazon say they were lookin'
Him like a big ould angel sthroogin'³
The sthrings, and them lek⁴ God had given
Lek wings to heave him up to heaven.
(Brown, 1920, p. 494)

In another narrative poem, *Tommy Big Eyes*, Brown describes at length the occasion of the introduction of a bass-viol into the chapel at Jurby. In response to Missis Cain's horrified exclamation: 'What! play the fiddle in the chapel!', the local preacher tells Tommy:

'The fiddle may go on the back of the fire,
Or the midden, or any other place;
You'll be cultivatin' the viol-bass,
Of course, the proper instrument,'

³ sthroogin' = stroking

⁴ lek = looking as if

He says, 'and begin immadient.
 We'll get it from Ramsey,' he says, 'you'll see;
 And it'll be the chapel's property,
 And paid in instalments out of the fund –
 It isn' very expensive they run,
 These viol-basses; and you'll have permission
 To use it, but only on condition
 You'll lead the singing. So there you have it;
 And now your talent'll be His who gave it,
 And you'll be sitting in the front pew,
 And God'll be glorified in you'.
 (Brown, 1920, p. 262)

Tommy was also told that he had to sit on: 'a handy seat under the pupil ... in the middle of the aisle' (Brown, 1920, p. 261).

Other eye-witness accounts are to be found in the entertaining reminiscences of James Cowin (1902, p. 48) and there are detailed descriptions in the novels of Hall Caine (1896, 1897) of the difficulties encountered by some musicians playing for social occasions, when the tunes would turn out 'half hymn, half dance-tune'! Cowin describes mid 19th-century Methodist anniversaries in the following terms:

I have seen the regular singers crowded out into side-pews in the gallery, and their places taken with the instrumentalists, including flutes, clarionette, 'cello, small fiddle, basson and trombones running out each side of the preacher's head. [original spellings]

The general state of church choirs and bands did not escape his keen wit:

Unless they were strong in the singing pews they had no chance, for 'Cannan the milk-man' and 'Christian the nailer' caught hold and ran off with hymn and tune, leaving the singers to bring up the rear.

Some clergy opposed *any* music in church (Cowin, 1902, p. 48) and a Methodist preacher was quoted as saying 'It is with the tongue the Lord wants praise and not with the fiddle and such things' and 'The Divil is in the organ' (McFee, 1972, p. 19).

While secular instrumental playing in the Isle of Man was closely linked the Scottish-Scandinavian tradition, instrumental church music seems to stem almost entirely from the English style. Most instrumentalists seemed to be able to turn their hands to sacred and secular music alike, laying firm foundations for the introduction of the village and club bands which were to be so popular by the end of the 19th century.

Continuing tradition

The instrumental tradition lingered on into the 1950s but had its most colourful 20th-century manifestation in Tom Taggart, who played the

hymn tune on his 'fiddle', a 'cello which he called 'Herself', with a drone-like accompaniment, while singing tenor. The congregation improvised additional harmony. Sometimes he would play dance-tunes, but felt uneasy playing them on the 'fiddle', as 'her' main purpose was to provide music for worship (Douglas, 1966, pp. 61–3). Extracts from a long dialect poem by local preacher Mr Cecil McFee, who died only a couple of years ago, vividly conjure up a scene in the tiny chapel of Kerrowkeil, high up in the hills above Castletown. Tom was known for arriving late for the service and Cecil McFee, then a young preacher, began the service without him, playing the first hymn on the harmonium.

Billie Tom Watterson said, 'Thou'll get thunder'.
 The singing got going quite well with a swing,
 But everyone wondered what trouble it'd bring,
 When all of a sudden the door opened 'Whack!'
 An' there stood a man with a sack on his back.
 It was Tom with his fiddle, bewhiskered old
 gent.
 He glared and he scowled, as he stood there all
 bent,
 Doubled up he was tho' with the weight that
 was in it,
 I said to myself, 'And now I am for it'.

Tom stamped up the aisle and tuned 'Herself' during the prayers, but the young preacher diplomatically commented on the fame of Tom's playing and the service continued to the accompaniment of 'cello and harmonium.

The rafters were ringing, aw now thou are
 talkin',
 The people all singin' with heart, soul and
 voice,
 The chapel it nava' had heard such a noise.
 Tom played the bass, and sang perfect tenor,
 His voice tho' so old, was unusually mellow.

Until the 1830s, Anglicans and Methodists not only worshipped in the same buildings but some individuals even held office in both churches. Matthew Summers, the last clerk of Maughold, was 'a local preacher among the Wesleyans, and might often be heard hurling anathemas from a country pulpit at the very church whose bread he subsisted on, and whose services he assisted in daily'. He died in 1875 (cited in Radcliffe, 1979, p. 120).

Methodists and Anglicans also shared the same music for some time after Wesley's visit but in the urban churches, such as the new St George's in Douglas, where the population was much more cosmopolitan and anxious to be seen to be fashionable, organs, often placed in existing west galleries, began to be installed from as early as 1778. There is little evidence of their use before this, except during the 17th century in the Cathedral

in Peel, where the Earls of Derby had worshipped. Organs began to appear in the new purpose-built urban Methodist churches during the middle of the 19th century, with the need to attract congregations from the enormous influx of summer visitors from the industrial north-west England, but some of the smallest rural churches of both denominations were still relying on hymn-raising and church bands until the 1930s.

The Manx love of singing flourished during the 19th-century west gallery tradition in the Isle of Man, and the mingling of the Gaelic and English traditions, along with the strong Methodist presence, produced a type of church music which survived into the early 20th century. Most of the musicians, like John Sayle and Tom Taggart, had no formal musical training, but their natural musicianship and devotion to music-making combined with their church and chapel backgrounds produced a potent force which still exercises a powerful effect on Manx musical life today.

