

Manx Notes 67 (2006)

MANX NATIONAL SONGS WITH ENGLISH WORDS (1896)

“ARRANGER’S PREFACE”

[xii] I gladly avail myself of the present opportunity to add a few remarks to those contained in the foregoing Essay. Such remarks are intended to apply to the entire collection, of which the present Volume represents only a part.

In “arranging” these melodies full advantage has been taken of the latitude implied by the word. Where several versions of the same tune offered themselves for selection, I have chosen the one that appeared to me the most original—i.e., the most Manx—as well as the most interesting from an artistic point of view. In two instances, viz., “Mylecharane” (p. 34) and “Colbagh Breck” (pp. 47 and 98), of which two different versions, one minor the other major, were available, I have in each case combined the two tunes into one. In cases where the tune as found was obviously only a fragment I have supplied new material, preserving as far as possible the character and spirit of the original. Instances of this kind of restoration are the following:—p. 9, 8 bars added as 2nd subject; p. 28, 6 bars of symphony set to words; p. 45, 8 bars (minor theme) added; p. 68, 4 bars added as 2nd subject; p. 72, 2 bars added to restore balance, p. 94, 4 bars added to form chorus; p. 97, 4 bars added as coda.

To the factors of evolution in a nation’s music which are enumerated in the foregoing essay may be added this further one, namely, the influence due to the peculiar genius and limitations of its national instruments. This kind of influence is clearly traceable in Irish music which, having grown up side by side with the national harp, has in the course of time been moulded and modified more or less by association with that instrument. Unlike Ireland, the Isle of Man cannot boast of a distinctively national instrument. Beyond a rude figure of a harp on one of the ancient runic crosses which abound in our churchyards, and the existence near Douglas of a place called Glen Crutchery, the Harpers’ Glen, no trace of the harp can be found. Here, as elsewhere, the violin has always been, and is still, a favourite instrument, but its use in the past has been chiefly associated with dance music. Except in a limited sense, the violin, like the human voice, has no fixed scale-intervals, and can therefore follow the voice with the same freedom that the voice can follow the instrument. Moreover the older Manx fiddles were fitted with only three strings, the two lower ones supplying a continuous “pedal” harmony like the drone of a bagpipe, while the highest string, was reserved for the melody. Hence it is reasonable to infer that Manx music, unlike that of most other nations, has been singularly free and untrammelled in its growth. Born of the human voice it is essentially worth vocal and it is notable that in the case of some of our native carols, of which we possess a large number, the airs lend themselves with difficulty to harmony of any kind. This view is favoured by my own recent experience in hearing

the singing of these melodies in situ, i.e., by the native untutored singers in their solitary homes far removed from the more civilized centres. The intonation of these natural songsters is singularly free and elastic. For instance, according to their rendering of it, the 7th of the scale is distinctly a varying, quantity more or less flat, like the well-known that of the Cuckoo's song. It is obvious that this freedom of intonation adds considerably to the chances of variation and corruption in oral transmission as well as to the difficulty of noting down tunes.

The same elasticity applies equally to tune and accent. In their singing as well as in their recitation of poetry, of which latter they are particularly fond, I found at times in these native minstrels almost a total absence of a definite metrical accent, and in its stead an even smoothly flowing rhythm relieved here and there often in the least expected places by a pause of indefinite length. To use a modern expression the phrasing was singularly free. In fact, to such an extent was the rhythmic structure concealed that much of their music might be appropriately represented, like plain-song, without any bars. All through the singing of a song the words rule, the music merely follows. Or, rather, music and words form one indivisible whole, so that if you ask your bard to sing or hum the tune apart from the words he can hardly do it, and if he once loses the words of his song the music is gone beyond recall. Nor is this vagueness due to a lack of rhythmic sense on the part [xiii] of the performer, for when a dance tune has to be sung it is rendered with due precision and clearness of accent.

In point of structural form Manx music resembles the Irish rather than the Scottish type. Except in one or two instances, for example, "Kiark Catriney marroo" (p. 88) and "Car y Phoosee" (p. 104), what is commonly called the "Scotch Snap" is scarcely traceable. As to the Pentatonic Scale it cannot be said to exist. Among tunes of four lines one favourite type of frequent occurrence in Irish in music is particularly noticeable in which the third line is a repetition of the second and the fourth of the first. In the present selection, examples of this type of melody will be found at pages 4, 40, 41, 50, 84, 130 and 144.

The prevalence of the Dorian mode, especially in the carol tunes, is a singularly conspicuous feature of Manx in music. This mode might at first be mistaken for an ill-sung "modern minor" scale with a variable leading note, but its major 6th is so pronounced a feature when sung by these native minstrels as to place the matter beyond all doubt. It would be premature to attempt to account for this preference of our countrymen. But the fact that such preference exists is worth recording, and it may be safely conjectured that the survival of this interesting relic of antiquity has been mainly due to the complete isolation of the people who have been the custodians of the music in which it is embodied.

To those who have learned to play the piano and other instruments all the old tunes, except two or three, are entirely unknown. It is on the peasant classes that we have had to depend for all our material—rough sons of the soil, unaided (and, may it

be said, unspoiled?) by musical knowledge, notation or instruments—sailors, weavers, shoemakers, tillers of the land, and toilers of the sea. And even among such it is only from a very limited few of the last survivors in the solitary wilds of the Island that we have been able to glean these last remnants of the old-world music of our forefathers.

W.H.G.

Sidcup, Kent.

July, 1896

Source: W.H. Gill, “Arranger’s Preface.” *Manx National Songs with English Words: Selected from the MS. Collection of the Deemster Gill, Dr. J. Clague, and W.H. Gill, and Arranged by W.H. Gill* (London: Boosey, 1896) xii–xiii.

*

STEPHEN MILLER

VIENNA, 2006

