

Manx Notes 197 (2014)

DAVID SPEERS

WRITINGS ON MANX FOLK MUSIC FROM CARN

(1992–94)

David Speers is one who was heavily involved in the Revival of song and dance that began in the mid-1970s in the Island both as musician and as dancer.¹ He was also the author of a number of pieces that appeared in *Carn*, the newsletter of the Celtic League, between 1992–94 that reflected upon this Revival and which are reproduced here.* The author wishes to stress that these pieces reflect his views at the time they were written and that his opinions may have been modified in the intervening years.

STEPHEN MILLER

VIENNA, 2014

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DAVID SPEERS: A CHECKLIST OF WRITINGS ON MANX MUSIC

ARTICLES IN CARN

David Speers. "A View of Manx Traditional Music Today." *Carn* 77 (1992): 20–21.

———. "*Kiaull Manninagh*: A Review." *Carn* 81 (1993): 21b–c.

———. "Manx Traditional Music: The New Conservatism." *Carn* 82 (1993): 20–21a–b.

———. "[Letter to the Editor]." *Carn* 88 (1994): 21a–b.

OTHER PIECES

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———. "The Historical References to Manx Traditional Music, Song and Dance." *Béaloides* 64–65 (1997 [for 1996–97]): 225–77.

———. "Nationalism and Traditional Culture: Celtic Identity and Ideology in the Isle of Man 1890–1940." MA dissertation. University of Liverpool, 1999.

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¹ This Revival is the subject of Chloë Woolley, *The Revival of Manx Traditional Music: From the 1970s to the Present Day*, PhD (Edinburgh, 2004). Also, ———, "Parallels Between Descriptive Revival Models and the Manx Traditional Music Scene: From the 1970s to the Present Day," 1–14 in "*Completed and Restored to Use*": *Revival and Dissemination of Manx Folklore and Tradition during the 20th Century*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004).

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“HISTORIES AND MYSTERIES: THE SECRET LIFE OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN THE ISLE OF MAN” SERIES, NOS 1–10 (2014)

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(1)

A VIEW OF MANX TRADITIONAL MUSIC TODAY *

(1992)

[20a] The playing of Manx traditional music has progressed greatly in the past fifteen years or so during which time a revival movement, based upon pub sessions and associated activities, has ensured that it has become firmly established in a number of areas. In schools for example there are more teachers than at any other time willing and, more importantly, able to pass on their acquired knowledge to Manx pupils.

It would seem on the face of it that the tradition is moving from strength to strength. It would be more accurate however to describe the current position as being that—having achieved much—Manx music is on a plateau in terms of development.

[20b] Leaving aside the fact that any traditional pursuit must in the late twentieth century compete with a mass culture which has assumed global proportions, there are a number of factors which have brought about this situation. The most important of these is the overall limitation placed upon the tradition by the fact that it is based almost exclusively upon the four hundred or so tunes comprising a small number of manuscript and published sources. The largest and most significant of these is the Clague Manuscript which contains more than three hundred tunes and variants.

Of these, a high proportion are *carval*—religious—tunes and ballad tunes. Many more are variants, fragments or incomplete tunes. This adds to the problem faced by those musicians keen to play within the Manx tradition week after week at pub sessions and *ceilidhs*. The *carval* tunes—[20c] whilst being beautiful melodies—do not travel well from the sacred to the secular strands of the Tradition without reinterpretation. If they are not, they are heard for what they are: hymn tunes played on folk instruments. The impression gained by listeners to Manx music is inevitably influenced by an over judicious use of such tunes in the secular context.

[21a] To an extent, ballad tunes may be similarly perceived in the context of present-day sessions and *ceilidhs*. Ballads from all traditions were generally based on either stories and legends, or they carried news of dramatic events which had occurred. Whatever their subject they were usually sung to the most suitable tune or tunes known to their singers. Ballad singing is not as popular with musicians today as when the collections of traditional melodies were being made and, although the traditional ballads are still sung, the ballad tunes have survived largely without their words. As with all good ballad tunes, they are vehicles for the lyrics which become associated with them. However, they tend to be included in Manx sessions regardless of their suitability in purely instrumental terms.

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Of the other categories of tunes available from traditional sources mentioned above, the close variants and fragments self-evidently serve to further limit the scope of the musician wishing to play Manx music in traditional sessions.

In terms of character, both Manx and Welsh music have been described historically as “melancholic.” This has been attributed to the fact that many tunes are based in the Dorian and other modal scales not familiar to the modern listener. There are however many rousing tunes [21b] which use these scales in both traditions—and a few more besides. Further, in the Manx tradition, several writers have observed a vibrancy in the music of the people from former periods. For example, Thomas Quayle in his *General View of Agriculture of the Isle of Man* published in 1812 refers to “jigs and reels” being played at the *Mhellia*—the Harvest—dance by the fiddler who would be changing his tune and “often playing one of the few national lively airs, preserved from early times, resembling strongly in character the Irish.”

It seems more likely therefore that other factors are involved and—looking at some which are common to both countries—the predominance of the Established Church, especially in Man, and later, the zeal of the Non-Conformists, naturally had a strong influence upon the music which was played and sung in local communities.

The net result of this situation is that, firstly, musicians—and others—are put off by the sometimes subdued nature of Manx music. Secondly, if they persevere and become proficient at playing the tunes, within a few years they move on to different musical styles or traditions because they are not content to remain within such a confined area.

How can this situation be improved without borrowing directly from other [21c] traditions? There is no instant or simple solution, but it is essential that the scope of music suitable for playing in sessions is widened. Given the comparatively small base from which to work there appears to be three realistic options available: (1) to reinterpret—and where necessary restructure—those tunes which are not particularly appropriate for session playing; (2) to restore fragmented tunes for session use and (3) to compose new tunes of this kind using features of the traditional material.

Work has begun on the first two options, with a dozen or so tunes from traditional sources being introduced within the past twelve months. As regards the third option, new compositions have been submitted to *Yn Chruinnaght*—the Manx Inter-Celtic Festival—for a number of years without making any significant contribution, numerically speaking, to the repertoire of the sessions which represent the living tradition. A few such tunes are now being played, but, particularly as the early sources are finite, more are needed to ensure that Manx music develops and grows. This, along with some borrowing and adapting, has sustained other traditions with similar pedigrees. However, the way forward should not be by imitation, but rather by reappraisal.

(2)

KIAULL MANNINAGH: A REVIEW *

(1993)

[21b] Few recordings of Manx traditional music have been made up to date, and so it might be argued that any recording venture should be regarded as being worthwhile. However, if this argument were supplied to all such recordings as and when they are made, it would soon become apparent that it is not a sound basis upon which to judge their merit or otherwise. The recently released *Kiaull Manninagh* aptly demonstrates this.²

The material chosen—all instrumental—is wide and varied, including slow airs and livelier dance tunes. The tunes themselves are grouped into twos and threes, and in some cases some thought has gone into the composition of the groups. For example, the *carval* tune “Oikan ayns Bethlehem” appears with “Arrane y Guilley Bane” and “Creg Willey Syl,” all of which are associated with Christmas custom and practice. However, other groups of tunes do not appear to be connected by anything—not even a common time signature, which is usually the case when grouping traditional tunes into sets.

Where tunes have been grouped into twos, the players have made a feature of repeating the first tune played after the second. Possibly this is an attempt to imitate the sonata form, but it is unusual for traditional music to be grouped in this way and will sound peculiar to anyone familiar with traditional music.

Some of the tunes played are as written in the collected sources of Manx music, with the two parts of the music repeated in an AB pattern, whereas others are repeated in an AABB pattern. The usual way of playing these tunes is the latter, which begs the question: why play one tune in one way and another in a different way? The “Three Little Boats” is an example of this. It is written in manuscript form as two lines of music—suggesting an AB pattern—but it is played by traditional musicians in an AABB pattern, and is given on the tape in that form. The “Cum yn shenn oanrey cheh,” however, is played on the tape in an AB pattern—as written. It appears from this that where the players are aware of how the tunes are generally played they followed suit, but where they have not been aware they have played the tunes as written without attempting to apply any of the conventions of traditional music.

The style of playing—particularly the violin—is classical with a little ornamentation. Whilst this is quite effective in the playing of the slow airs, the dance

* Originally published as “Kiaull Manninagh: A Review,” *Carn* 81 (1993), 21b–c. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Celtic League and David Speers.

² *Kiaull Manninagh: Manx Traditional Music for Violin, Harp and Guitar*, Bernard Osborne (violin), Charles Guard (harp), and Pete Lumb (guitar). Cassette released as Manx Camerta MXCM 1 (1992).

tunes sound very lifeless, having had all the edge normally [21c] associated with traditional instrumental music refined out. Indeed, the tape might more honestly and accurately have been subtitled “Manx traditional music arranged for the violin and guitar.” At least then the reference to the violin—rather than the fiddle—may indicate to the buyer that the material is presented in a classical way.

This points to a very fundamental problem with the playing of Manx music today. There are too many classically trained musicians imposing their perspective on a traditional music—and then attempting to translate it into the context in which traditional music should exist—the pub session, the *giense* or *ceilidh* and the audio recordings which correspond to these activities. The situation would not be so bad if—as in other countries—such musicians used the traditional music as a source of inspiration for classical composition and performance in an appropriate manner. As it is, this type of venture tends towards interference rather than cross-fertilisation.

This is not to say that classical musicians should avoid playing traditional music. Martin Faye of the Chieftains—amongst many others—is an example of a classically-trained musician who has studied traditional fiddle playing and who makes a living out of it. Further, a number of Manx musicians have been trained classically but have made attempts to play traditional music in a traditional style. So, the styles of—for example—the traditional fiddler and the classical violinist are separate and distinct. As the late Brendan Breathnach once put it: “... a violinist is not an educated fiddler, any more than a fiddler is an untutored violinist.” The styles, then, should be respected as being separate and distinct.

If these shortcomings are ignored—as no doubt they will be by those who listen to the tape out of general interest rather than a wish to hear Manx traditional music—the resulting music is pleasant to listen to. It is a pity that it adds to a body of recorded Manx music which pays scant regard for its traditional roots.

(3)

MANX TRADITIONAL MUSIC:
THE NEW CONSERVATISM *

(1993)

[20a] Manx traditional music has progressed through a number of stages since it was collected and written down in the nineteenth century. During this time it was taken from the Manx community, where it had played a significant part in the lives of ordinary people, and placed in the hands of a small number of experts who became its established authorities. The result of this is that for a considerable period views of what constituted Manx music were conservative in nature, and the music did not

* Originally published as “Manx Traditional Music: The New Conservatism,” *Carn* 82 (1993), 20–21a–b. See also, “[Letter to the Editor],” *Carn* 88 (1994), 21a–b. [4]

develop in any significant way. Over the past seventeen or more years this situation has altered radically, however there are signs that the radicalism is in danger of becoming like the conservatism it replaced. In order to have a better understanding of this it is necessary to look at the historical background in closer detail.

The music achieved widespread popularity—both in the Island and elsewhere—with the publication of *Manx National Songs* and *Manx National Music* in 1896 and 1898. The former of these in particular has had a great effect on commonly held perceptions of what Manx music is, or should be, long after the music itself had ceased to exist in the environment from which it was taken.

This manifested itself in two important ways. Firstly, the material was presented in a way which would make it more acceptable to the polite society of the time, being the market for these publications. In doing this, the style of performance of the music—mainly vocal with piano accompaniment—was modelled on that popular in Victorian music halls and drawing rooms and the subject matter of the songs was censored.

Secondly, the music became judged according to the conventions of the concert stage rather than by those of traditional music. It may be true to say that this was inevitable given the circumstances in which the main collections were made, the personalities involved and the development of the *Manx Music Festival* (the “Guild”) which had a very particular view of how music should be performed.

Amongst the aims of the publishers was to bring the music to a wider audience and this resulted in its translation out of the traditional setting. This did not find favour with some commentators of the time and there is some evidence to suggest that Dr John Clague, from whom much of the source material was obtained, was not enthusiastic about the way in which the music was arranged and presented. Nevertheless, the publications were made and a bench mark was set. It was against this background that later work in the field of Manx traditional music was undertaken.

It was not until the mid-1970s that the original source material was re-examined by musicians who had any real knowledge of traditional music in its wider setting. At [20b] this point the authority of those who had assumed the role of guardians of Manx music—as they saw it—became challenged for the first time in almost a century. These musicians began the process of interpreting the music as it was collected in a “folk tradition” context rather than in a way which had aspired towards refinement. In doing so, certain assumptions were also questioned. For example, it had long been insisted upon in competitions—and consequently in schools—that ornamentation not be used in playing or singing Manx music. Not only did ornamentation become used by some—not all—musicians, it was self-evidently an enhancement to the music in the “traditional” context.

Another objection raised was the way in which the music was performed in places where ordinary—adult—people met and socialised. In other words, people took the

music out of the school, concert, and competition environment, and into the public house and *geinse* or *ceilidh*. The [20c] traditional music session was born in the Isle of Man despite, or maybe because of, the way in which dogma disguised as knowledge was used to control peoples perception of their music. Colin Jerry, in discussing some of the reactionary attitudes encountered amongst the recognised authorities of the day, observed that, by making any deviation from a prescribed norm unacceptable, “thus is conservatism maintained.”³ At the same time as this process was beginning a different order was being established which both became a focus for reaction against the old conservatism and fertile ground for the new.

In the years which followed several further publications of Manx traditional music were made which have been widely used in the development of a greater understanding of the subject. These have also been successful in bringing the subject matter before a wider audience in much the same way as the earlier publications—the major difference being that they have been more or less faithful transcriptions of the original collections. In using this material to re-evaluate the music, a system of notions and conventions has evolved amongst those who play or teach it which [21a] in many ways has served to strengthen its development as a living tradition. However, some notions on style and form have evolved which are in danger of becoming as stultifying as those encountered during the early revival period of the 1970s.

For example, the way in which notation is interpreted has in some instances been subjective and inappropriate, with players being guided by their ability to read from the stave rather than their knowledge of the form of the music they are playing. All forms of music are governed by conventions which influence the way it sounds, and this is as true of Manx traditional music as any other. Therefore, when looking at the interpretation of musical form, it is reasonable to compare bare notation with that of similar traditions to gain an indication of style and inflection. The musical form prevalent in Manx traditional music—certainly where dance music is concerned—is similar to that found in musical traditions of Scotland and Ireland. Indeed, a number of historical sources refer to Manx dance music as resembling the Irish in character.⁴ Taking this a step further, it is therefore reasonable to use these other traditions for comparison when looking at specific forms—such as the double jig—to gain an indication of how the music should be interpreted in an appropriate way. So, a piece of music written in $\frac{9}{8}$ time and having the form of a double jig is then played as a

³ Colin Jerry, “Fifteen Years in Manks Music,” in *For a Celtic Future: A Tribute to Alan Heusaff*, ed. Cathal Ó Luain (Dublin: The Celtic League, n.d. [1983]), 289–95; see 289.

⁴ For some examples of this description of Manx music see “The Present State of the Isle of Man,” *The Monthly Magazine* (1801) 43; Thomas Quayle, *A General View of the Agriculture of the Isle of Man* (1812) 112.

double jig, and not as any piece of music written in this time without the form of a double jig, or outside the context of these traditions.

These are the same principles of critical analysis as those applied during the earlier years of the Revival—as evidenced by the example given of how the use of ornamentation was “rediscovered.” And yet efforts to introduce stylistic elements into the playing of the music which fall outside the current perspective of some players are met with strong resistance. It may therefore now be regarded as being “wrong” to play a particular piece with more of a rhythmic emphasis than previously because it is seen as being too heavily influenced by the Irish or Scottish styles: even when the reasons for doing so are based on good musical sense and detailed comparative study of the material.

Another example of this contradictory attitude is the way in which the musical form is treated inconsistently. In the notation of various types of traditional music it is not always clear in which cases and how often sections of music are repeated. These sections are sometimes known as A and B tunes, and the way that they are configured gives the musical distinctive pattern. A number of tunes currently played in the pattern AABB are actually written in manuscript sources as simple A and B sections. It is not clear why the decision was taken as to play these tunes in this way but the fact that they are [21b] is entirely within the overall structure of similar types of music in the other traditions mentioned. For instance, in Ireland it is sometimes known as playing a piece “single” or “double.” Some of the tunes doubled in this way which were originally written as single tunes are “Flitter Daunsey,” “Skeelley Vreeshey,” “Betsy Baker,” “Car ny Rankee,” “Gyn Ennym,” “Three Little Boats,” and “Moirrey ny Cainle.”

A number of other tunes are also treated in this way. When tunes have been re-evaluated more recently—as they have been previously—and tunes following the AB pattern played double, the same resistance as described above is again met with. An example of this is the playing of the tune “Eunysagh Vona.” This is played with an AB pattern for the dance of the same name, but some feel it should be played as AABB in the context of a music session. However, the more conservative players show their strong disapproval. This can be frustrating for those wishing to develop the music beyond the level it has so far achieved and towards a more authentic traditional style which can then develop into a truly Manx style.

A further consequence of this tendency to be inconsistent is that it serves to make the whole area exclusive. Musicians who do not make the considerable effort required to find out which tunes are played under one set of rules or other are disadvantaged in exactly the same way as those who in earlier years attempted to re-evaluate a music which had, as mentioned earlier, been taken out of its natural environment. The situation has become similarly formalised and so “thus is conservatism maintained.” Further such examples of this newer form of conservatism

are evident at present, but to discuss them at any further length here would not add to the points already made.

It is hoped that the “new conservatism” does not inhibit the development of Manx traditional music as the “old conservatism” did.

(4)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR *

(1994)

Dear Editor,

[21a] In the Winter issue of *Carn* 1992/93, I wrote an article that concerned itself with the “New Conservatism,” which attempted to sum up Manx traditional music as it existed then.⁵ Its main theme was that the conservative attitudes of the status quo of “Manx music” in the 1970s and 80s were being displayed by some of the very same people who encountered and resisted them.

Having acquired a sort of status quo of their own, they have tried to prevent people such as myself (after twelve years of close involvement) from discussing “Manx music” in its wider traditional context, and interpreting it accordingly. They have never made any cogent attempt at setting out any contrary argument. Instead, they have used phrases such as: “*can’t* play [such-and-such] tune like that...,” “*shouldn’t* try to interfere with the new tradition [*sic*] ...,” or “*mustn’t* draw conclusions about the nature of ‘Manx’ music based in historical references” (ludicrous, but true).

Since the earlier article, such attitudes have manifested themselves in a much more sinister way. Several otherwise well-respected “stalwarts” of Manx culture, have opposed my views in very aggressive and dogmatic terms. These have included a former teacher, and a former Keys candidate who has twice torn down and defaced posters belonging to the session players who meet regularly in Peel *whilst the sessions were in progress*.

All of these people have, when it has suited them, expressed themselves very logically and eloquently. So, what is the [21b] reason for such bile? If my views (which are being published) have no merit, then surely the best course of action for anyone having opposing views would be to expose my flaws by counter argument, or simply ignore my views (and me) as being unworthy of wasting any effort.

The very fact that this opposition has taken extreme and personal forms makes the answer to this very clear. Only fear produces such actions. In this case, fear of the truth and the exposition of inadequacy and mediocrity.

* Originally published as “[Letter to the Editor],” *Carn* 88 (1994), 21a–b.

⁵ “Manx Traditional Music: The New Conservatism,” *Carn* 80 (1993), 20–21a–b. [3]

There is no excuse for violence and intimidation in a situation, which is neither violent, nor intimidating. To paraphrase the close of my previous article: I hope that these attitudes do not inhibit those who want to develop their knowledge of what we (loosely) describe as being “Manx music.”

What I find particularly disturbing is that those mentioned have actively sought positions of power and influence within the broad sphere of “nationalism.” They (and others like them) seem all too well to fit Oscar Wilde’s caustic remark: “patriotism is the virtue of the vicious....”

