

Manx Notes 204 (2015)

ANNE GEDDES GILCHRIST

MASTER SHEPHERD AND HIS FA SOL LA *

(1922)

[173] Few choir singers of today have ever heard of Shepherd, the musician and psalm singer, who more than a century ago taught church choirs in the Isle of Man, or of his method of teaching.

With the exception of Mr Harmer, of whom little is known, Shepherd, who came from Cumberland, was the first of whom there is record who taught music in parts in the Isle of Man. He taught in the parishes of Maughold, Kirk Christ Lezayre, Kirk Patrick, and others, coming first to Kirk Christ Rushen in 1809. After an absence he returned in 1816, and taught parish choirs in Kirk Christ Rushen and Kirk Arbory.

According to the late Dr Clague's description, in his *Manx Reminiscences*, of Master Shepherd's method, he not only made his singers "sol-fa" the tune (after a system to be explained later), but made each of them beat the time. This they did with the open hand on the first accent and the shut fist on the second, in common time; and in triple time by putting down the hand on the little finger side for the first beat, putting down the points of the fingers for the second, and the wrist for the third. (The description given by Dr Clague is not quite clear.) Shepherd placed the singers in two rows facing each other, but taught each part separately, and would not allow one set to hear the others, until they knew their own part, when they all came together. "They did not know what they were going to sing," says the account, "until they were all together."

In Rushen, the deemster and other gentlemen of that parish attended the singing-school. The gentlemen doffed their hats and the ladies their bonnets for the practice. If one thinks of the beaver hats and coal-scuttle bonnets of the period, one can well imagine that this preparation was almost a necessity in a choral class. Shepherd wrote all out the music himself, using a five-pointed pen for the staff-lines. The air was assigned to the tenors (the ancient rule), the trebles and altos singing added parts above; at any rate, this old arrangement is known to have been still followed by Shepherd's pupil, William duke. Shepherd's fee for the quarter was ten shillings and a shilling for the music book, of which each singer had one; but to eke out a living, during the [173b] day he acted as steward to Deemster Gawne, of Ballacurrey.

Unfortunately, Master Shepherd loved good ale as well as—or better than—good music, and after starting the singers, at a practice, with his pitch-pipe, he had a regrettable habit, it is said, of leaving them busy with one of his tune while he paid a visit to the tavern at the cross-roads. It is not surprising that he came down in the

* A.G. Gilchrist, "Master Shepherd and his Fa Sol La," *The Choir* xiii.153 (1922), 173–74.

world, and we hear of him later, when destitute of other shelter, being allowed to sleep in one of the pews of St Mary's Chapel, Castletown, by Caley, the organist, with whom he was acquainted. He died in poverty in the same town, and is said to have been buried in Malew Churchyard.

A recent search of the Malew Burial Register, from 1810 to 1858 inclusive (kindly undertaken by A.E. Caine, of Ballasalla), has, however, revealed no record of Shepherd's pauper burial, and we remain in ignorance of his Christian name and even of the date of his death.

Shepherd taught his classes in the curious *fa sol la* vocal system of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which all the notes of the scale, except one, called *Mi*, were named *fa*, *sol*, or *la*, *Do* and *Re* being left out altogether. The origin of this system there is no space to discuss, but it seems to have been well established in the time of Christopher Sympson, Royalist soldier, musician, and theorist, who in his *Compendium* (1667) announces that *Ut* (*Do*) and *Re* are "superfluous and therefore laid aside by most Modern Teachers."

Forgetting for the moment any present day meaning attaching itself to "sol-fa"—whether tonic or Solfeggio—imagine a diatonic scale whose central and most significant note is not the tonic, but the leading note (or *Te*), and dub that note *Mi*. In the key of C this would, of course, be B. Now count upwards from *Mi* (B) six notes as two sets of three, each set embracing the interval of a major third; and then count downwards from *Mi* six notes as two sets of three, these likewise each embracing a major third. At each end you will come down again to the note called *Mi*. Name each set of notes upwards *fa-sol-la*, and each set downwards *la-sol-fa*—and there you are!

The C major scale, beginning on B below middle C, would thus be named:

[174a] *Mi*, *fa-sol-la*, *fa-sol-la*, *Mi*, *fa-sol-la*, *fa-sol-la*, *Mi*, etc., *Mi* being a sort of *dies non* like Sunday, with a special type of lettering. It is as if, taking dominoes, you laid down a double blank for *Mi* (really *Si* or *Te*), setting on each side of it a double-three, and then naming each row of pips "fa-sol-la." The one clear thing was that was apprehended by the genius who first dispensed with *Ut* and *Re* was that one scalar major third resembled another, no matter on what part of the scale it happened to come.

As a specimen of this curious notation, here is the tune "French" (or "Dundee") taken from an Ulster ploughman choir-singer's ms. psalm-book—"John Knox, his book, 1810"—showing that Shepherd's method was used in Ireland at the same period. There are no bars, except double-bars at the end of each line of words, and no clef, but a flat is placed in the fourth space of the five-line staff:

FRENCH (in F).

Fa, la fa sol fa, sol la fa || La, sol fa fa *mi*, fa || Sol, fa *mi* la sol, sol fa* sol || La, sol fa fa *mi*, fa ||

Fortunately, this procession of *fa sol la*'s meandered along the staff in the exact positions occupied in a modern tune-book by the notes—which must have been a great help. To assist the poor souls who learnt—or, it would probably be more accurate to say, were taught—their notes in this fashion, an attempt was made by instructors to memorise the system by rhymes, thus:

“Above your *Mi*, twice fa, sol, la;
Below your *Mi*, twice la, sol, fa.”

Then followed directions for “placing your *Mi*” in different keys, such as:

“If that no flat be set in B,
Then in yt place standeth yt *Mi*.”

I do not know to what degree of intelligence English, Irish, or Scottish choirs may have attained over the business, but Dr Clague remarks of Master Shepherd's teaching that he never heard of anybody who could sing from his *sol-fa* after he was dead but his pupil, William Duke, and even he did not understand it very well. People said of Duke that he used to lie on his back while herding sheep in the mountain, trying to master its principles—or, to translate the Manx idiom literally, to “gain to learn it.”

[174b] Poor Illiam! Possibly the dominoes might have helped him. But the heaven to which he looked up for illumination only knows what happened when he got among the minor tunes!

Afterwards, he himself taught a choir... One surmises that many of these bygone choristers sang by ear without knowing it—like not a few modern choir-singers with the printed music before them. In an old play of Skelton's a character says:

“Learn me to sing do re mi fa sol,
And when I fail, bob me on the noll!”

It is to be hoped that Shepherd's pupils were not bobbed on the noll three centuries later. After such a system, Tonic Sol-fa was a tonic indeed, and the banished *Do*—having involuntarily proved its movability—has long been restored to its sovereignty.



* No sharp is indicated for the modulation to the dominant in the third section of the tune; but in other tunes in the same book the sharp sign is set somewhere in the vicinity of the sharpened degree.—AGG.