

Manx Notes 178 (2014)

“VIGOROUS HORN BLOWING”

THE FIRST SOUND RECORDING
OF MANX FOLK SONG (1898) *

In February 1899, “Mr Gilmore” (as he was always referred to in the Island’s newspapers), presented a talk to the Finch Hill Church Mutual Improvement Society, “kindly giving a capital explanation of the principles and the uses of electricity.”¹ Gilmore was the Island representative of the National Telephone Company and he was definitely a gadget man, illustrating “his subject by many experiments, for which purpose he had brought with him several delicate little machines and apparata.” He had also turned up with a phonograph “which rendered popular music and a speech of President Lincoln’s.” This was not the only item that was played at the meeting:

One of the pieces given created no small amount of amusement. It was the “Hunt the wren” song accompanied by vigorous horn blowing. This item, Mr Gilmore explained, was captured by him at his front door on St Stephen’s Day, and it was a remarkably good capture too.²

So there is a date then, 26 December 1898, for the first known sound recording of Manx folk song.

Whilst Gilmore was the first to actually sound record Manx folk song, he was not the first one to think about so doing. That lies with W.H. Gill, whose experience of notating in the field caused him to reflect in a letter from 1897 on “the enormous difficulty (if not impossibility) of getting an absolutely true first record.”³ The solution: “Next time I come over I will ‘fetch a compass.’ In other words I will bring a Phonograph.”⁴ There is no evidence that Gill did so—but if he had done so, then he would have been placed with Bela Vikár as an innovator in field collecting techniques in Europe.⁵

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “‘Vigorous Horn Blowing’: The First Sound Recording of Manx Folk Song (1898),” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* October (2013), [5]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ Anon, “Douglas. A Talk about Electricity,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 25 February 1899.

² Anon, “Douglas. A Talk about Electricity.”

³ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 27 July 1897, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2. This issue of what specifically to notate is discussed (using the figure of Béla Bartók) in Judit Frigyesi, *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 237–38.

⁴ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 27 July 1897, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

⁵ Maria Domokos, “Vikar, Bela,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 2nd ed., vol. 26 (London: Grove’s Dictionaries, 2001). For an overview of

Gilmore's was a spontaneous action and there must have been many other similar recordings made by individuals intrigued by the possibility to record and playback the sound of the human voice. The Austrian ethnologist, Rudolf Trebitsch, travelled widely in Ireland, Wales, Brittany, the Isle of Man, and Scotland in the summers of 1907–09, collecting on behalf of the Phonogrammarchiv in Vienna. He became aware that he was not the first at all to make sound recordings but found that most were often lost.⁶ This is not lost in the sense of physical destruction or being mislaid, but the cylinders played back once too often and they being soft wax (so they can be recorded on in the first place) then literally worn out.

Gilmore's recording is now lost (as well as other similar ones he may have made) but he figures as yet another name to be added to the growing list of known folk song collectors in the Island and given his enthusiasm for “delicate little machines and apparata” an innovator, though likely not known to him, in the recording by phonograph of folk song, albeit not in the field but literally on his own door step.

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2014

*

REFERENCES

- Anon. “Douglas. A Talk about Electricity.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 25 February 1899: 6*.
- Brady, Erika. *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography*. University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 1999.
- Domokos, Maria. “Vikar, Bela.” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Ed. Stanley Sadie. 2nd ed. Vol. 26. 29 vols. London: Grove's Dictionaries, 2001. 609b.
- Frigyesi, Judit. *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Remmer, Ulla. “Rudolf Trebitsch and the Celtic Languages.” *The Collections of Rudolf Trebitsch: Celtic Recordings—Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Isle of Man, and Scotland (1907–09)*. Eds. Gerda Lechleitner and Ulla Remmer. Vol. 5/2. Sound Documents from the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences:

early collecting with the phonograph, Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 1999).

⁶ Ulla Remmer, “Rudolf Trebitsch and the Celtic Languages,” *The Collections of Rudolf Trebitsch: Celtic Recordings—Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Isle of Man, and Scotland (1907–09)*, eds. Gerda Lechleitner and Ulla Remmer, vol. 5/2, Sound Documents from the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences: The Complete Historical Collections 1899–1950 (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2003) 18b.

THE FIRST SOUND RECORDING OF MANX FOLK SONG (1898)

The Complete Historical Collections 1899–1950. Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2003. 16b–23a.

