

Manx Notes 190 (2014)

“NOT MANX MUSIC BUT MR GILL’S MUSIC”

THE MUSICAL TIMES CRITIQUE OF W.H. GILL (1895) *

In 1915, W.H. Gill in the course of a letter to William Cubbon wrote:

Such is the “irony of Fate.” Of my music compos[iti]ons it is the best of them that are least known—i.e. “not Manx music but Mr Gill’s music” as some one sapiently remarked *sotto voce* at one of my lectures. So, you see, I am a furrener [*ie*, ‘foreigner’] in the eyes of some people.¹

It is difficult to place this incident but may well refer to a talk he gave much earlier in May 1895, to the Royal Musical Association in London.² The review in the *Musical Times* was not just short but also curt as well—his paper “proved to be more of a popular than a scientific nature.” However, the main point of critique was one that was to be ever present:

Mr Gill has been collecting from the lips of old Manx song-men the ancient folk-tunes, with the view of their preservation in printed form; but it is to be hoped that he will take the words of Mr Banister, who presided, to heart, and refrain from fitting them with modern harmonies and altering their form by adding bars where the rhythm to him seems incomplete, as he admitted having done in one instance. Such a procedure would make the collection utterly valueless.³

Gill was sufficiently annoyed to reply with a letter to the *Musical Times* where his response to such criticism was to be equally ever present. His letter opens “[...] you protest against my proposal to ‘restore’ one of the tunes published in 1820 in ‘Mona Melodies’—a book, be it known, which is full of obvious mistakes. Will you allow me to state exactly the nature and extent of my vandalism?”⁴ Gill places quote marks around the word restore: he sees himself instead correcting what to him are musical mistakes. Warming to his theme he continues, “[t]he melody in question is a dance tune and, as there given, runs (or rather limps) as follows [...]”. After presenting the tune in its form given in *Mona Melodies* Gill then wrote:

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “‘Not Manx Music but Mr Gill’s Music’: The Musical Times Critique of W.H. Gill (1895),” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* July (2014), [9]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ Letter from W.H. Gill to William Cubbon, 16 November 1915, MNHL, MS 09913, William Cubbon Papers, box labelled “WC: Correspondence.”

² W.H. Gill, “Manx Music,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* xxi (1895). Reproduced as W.H. Gill, “Manx Music,” *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).

³ “Musical Association,” *The Musical Times* 1 June 1895: 385a.

⁴ W.H. Gill, “Manx Music. To the Editor of ‘The Musical Times’,” *The Musical Times* 1 August 1895. A facsimile of the letter accompanies this piece.

Now I think that all unprejudiced musicians will agree with me that the second section of the tune is minus two bars, and that the proposed “restoration” of it in my forthcoming Collection of Manx National Airs is a legitimate one.⁵

He ended with what he likely saw as a flourish: “Here it is.” What he was certainly not prepared for was the response of the editor of the *Musical Times* who added a comment to the letter: “We shall be glad if a few ‘unprejudiced musicians’ will favour us with opinions on the value of Mr Gill’s ‘restoration.’ We naturally reserve our own comments.—ED., *M. T.*” No such views were to be proffered to the *Musical Times*. A review earlier that year of Baring Gould’s *A Garland of Country Song* had been less hesitant on this topic:

With regard to the accompaniments to the songs praise must be qualified. Some are admirably simple and appropriate—others tricked out with common-place arpeggios or overloaded with “fill-up” passages of the cheapest kind. That the last-named are in a minority is something to be thankful for, but in such a volume they should have no place at all.⁶

There was to be no review of *Manx National Songs*.

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VIENNA, 2014

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REFERENCES

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⁵ Gill, “Manx Music. To the Editor of ‘The Musical Times’.”

⁶ “*A Garland of Country Song*. English Folk-songs with their Traditional Melodies. Edited and arranged by S. Baring Gould and H. Fleetwood Sheppard. [Methuen and Co.]” *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 1 April 1895.