

AN ENDEAVOUR IN THE SOUTH

The Castletown Orchestral Society

Maurice Powell 2017

When researching material for a book about amateur orchestras on the Isle of Man¹ I came across a concert review for the Castletown Orchestral Society, which gave no details concerning the Society's origins, repertoire, development or later history. As further details of this noble enterprise came to light, a cautionary and all-too-familiar tale in the story of music making on the Island emerged, as the aspirations of the Island's finest musicians proved to be no match for the shadowy rivalry and jealousy, and a deep-seated unwillingness on the part of local audiences to engage with any kind of music they considered to be 'high brow' or 'classical' in nature, that existed at that time.

The Society was founded by John Edward Quayle² during the winter of 1900 at a time when the highly-regarded violinist and up-and-coming composer was resident in Castletown. The inaugural concert took place at the Town Hall on 28th February 1901, when the orchestra of twenty-three players comprising strings, one of each of flute, oboe and 'clarionet', two cornets, trombone, percussion and piano accompanist performed Mozart's overture to *Così fan tutte*, a *Concert Waltz*, the *War March of the Priest's* from Mendelssohn's *Athalia* and a *Suite of Manx Dances*, either a 'lost' work of J.E. Quayle himself, or a selection from Harry Wood's popular Manx Airs, *The Cushag*. The rest of the programme consisted of popular songs and arias, harp solos and shorter orchestral pieces. The *Isle of Man Times* reported that:

. . . the attendance was large, and we hope 'that this, the first of the Society's entertainments, would be the precursor of many yet in store.

The following year, the annual concert took place in March, and the *Isle of Man Times* correspondent, F.C. Poulter, observed:

. . . that from beginning to end, the concert was most enjoyable . . . This Society (which is only young) may be very proud of its work . . .

Frederick Charles Poulter,³ a well-known local pianist, organist, band director and the musical director at the Gaiety Theatre at this period, stated that the Haydn symphony performed at the concert represented the first opportunity that music-lovers on the Island had ever had of hearing a complete classical symphony. He furthermore hoped:

. . . that having broken the ice, the Society would give us more of this class of music.

The programme opened with Rossini's overture *Tancredi*, followed by a concert waltz and concluded with a march, *Kronnungs*⁴. The leader for this second annual concert was Grace Pleignier, (one of three talented daughters of Victor 'Plan' Pleignier, the charismatic French and Literature master at King William's College) who also performed a violin piece by Bach. Three guest vocal soloists – a Mrs Tate, who possessed a rich mezzo-soprano voice of considerable power and flexibility, a John Kewley, tenor, and a May Proctor, soprano – were all well-received, especially Mrs Tate, who sang arias by Wagner and Rossini from *Tannhauser* and *The Barber of Seville*. The 'high class programme' was praised again at the end of the review, and it was hoped that the Society would continue to include 'such pieces' in future programmes.

Miss M. L. Wood, 'The Mother of Manx Music,' commented regularly on musical matters relevant to the Island and elsewhere and wrote in her *Musical Notes*:⁵

I hear Mr Quayle's orchestral concert at Castletown was a great success but that the encores were tiresome.

Miss Wood was clearly on a mission to curb Manx audiences' enthusiasm for encores, and pointed to the 'encore fever' that appeared to grip London and Paris resulting in many concerts being of inordinate length. Miss Wood concluded by suggesting that the 'Encores Prohibited' rule introduced by Erard of Paris:

. . . could be adopted at many of our Manx concerts where the practice of encoring everything – good, bad and indifferent – so largely prevails.

'A Savage and Satirical Onslaught'.

In 1903, the third annual concert of the Castletown Orchestral Society took place in the Town Hall on 26th February in the presence of their Patron, the deputy-Governor Sir James Gell, CVO, and their president, Dr Clague. Following the pattern initiated the previous year, the programme was an ambitious one, and included the overture to Lortzing's *Undine*, a concert waltz by Ziehrer, a *Fantasia on Negro Melodies* by Thomas Bidgood⁶ and two movements from a Mozart symphony. A guest soprano from Manchester and three Manx vocalists contributed well-known songs and arias, all of which - *pace* Miss M.L. Wood - were encored. The orchestra numbered twenty-five players, and the leader and violin soloist on this occasion was none other than Harry Wood, the musical director of the Palace & Derby Castle Company, a friend and colleague of J.E. Quayle. The *Isle of Man Times* reported that the concert was well-attended; the *Manx Sun* reported that 'the hall was not full'.

This concert, however, came in for the most scathing and poisonous review I have come across among the hundreds of reviews of concerts on the Island that I have examined. It appeared in the *Isle of Man Times* on 14th March 1903, under the heading:

The DOUGLAS, BALLASALLA, COLBY, PORT ST. MARY, AND CASTLETOWN ORCHESTRAL SOCIETY.

THE THIRD ANNUAL CONCERT

(Only Full Report – Communicated)

The review – submitted anonymously – began by criticising the very name of the Society:

Attention should be called to the fact that this Society is misleading people by styling itself 'the Castletown Orchestral Society'; in this way: all the credit, if there is any, which is very questionable, goes to Castletown, and that shows a very selfish spirit.

Even allowing for the fact that a competitive and mostly friendly rivalry has always existed between communities on the Island and their various societies, musical, sporting or whatever, the above comment is mean-spirited and spiteful in the extreme, and furthermore quickly developed into a personal attack on J.E. Quayle and his endeavours to form an orchestral society in the south of the Island. The diatribe poured scorn on every aspect of the concert by suggesting that it was:

. . . less attractive to the general public than was expected, and from a musical standpoint was a disappointment.

Whoever the writer of the 'communication' was, he – it is a fair assumption that the writer was male, as I have found very few reviews of Island concerts by female correspondents – clearly found that the introduction of standard 'classical' works into the programme was not to his taste and even judged that the programme notes were too erudite. The implication was that J.E. Quayle and his players were getting 'a bit above themselves'. The onslaught continued:

Neither was it a success financially, as only between £12 and £13 was taken at the door, which amount we are given to understand, will be nearly eaten up by the expenses incurred by the Society. Under these circumstances, we hope that these annual performances are undertaken solely from artistic motives, and not for the purpose of 'making a trifle'.

It was suggested that at 1s, the ticket price was too high, that the absence of sixpenny seats 'kept many very many people away', and that most 'high class' concerts on the island had seats at sixpence and even threepence:

. . . and yet for admission to this 250th rate concert, nothing less than the proverbial 'bob' was demanded.

The Hall where the concert took place was described as 'dreary, desolate and dirty', and there was speculation that the Town Hall Company had not had the interior decorated since the hall was built. The stage, it was suggested, would have benefitted from some curtains, bunting 'or even a few plants', in order to make the room look more 'cosy and comfortable'.

'Great things were expected of the orchestra'.

The writer was now well into his stride, and after a brief digression during which he hoped that 'instrumental help' would be encouraged in the churches and chapels 'where it would induce the congregation to sing more heartily', he began to challenge the choice of music in the programme. He expressed the opinion that the 'selections of a classical nature' – two movements of a symphony by Mozart, an overture by Lortzing and a march by Mendelssohn – left 'something to be desired,' and that the quality of playing showed no improvement over the previous year; rather, 'they seem instead to have deteriorated'. The performances were 'neither inspiring nor uplifting' and the 'splendour of the brass and the beating of the drum were too prominent'. The orchestral balance was poor, there was 'no noticeable talent brought forward' and the playing was careless. The musicians were urged:

. . . to go through a few courses of study, both practical and theoretical, under a well qualified master.

The critic was by now possessed of a truly missionary zeal, and began a lengthy discourse on conductors and conducting, with examples drawn from the careers of Sir John Stainer,⁷ the nineteenth century composer and conductor, Louis Spohr, one of the earliest conductors to regularly use a baton, Beethoven and concluding with a wearisome and pointless anecdote concerning a town band in Kansas, USA, whose raucous performance apparently brought a Santa Claus crashing some 300ft from a church roof to the floor, and 'mortally injured him!' Only the guest leader Harry Wood met with approval:

Mr Harry Wood proved to be an efficient leader, and did his very best to keep the band together, and, had it not been for his efforts, the orchestra would, we fear, have completely broken down more than once.

Inevitably, the writer eventually turned his attention to J.E. Quayle's prowess as a conductor:

In the execution of the music, the conductor failed to make sense of order, precision, and unanimity felt. Mr Quayle should also bring into his work more infectious enthusiasm. Now, all amateurs cannot be 'conducted'. It is as much as they can do to play the notes, and they are generally either too dense or too conceited to receive any impressions; so, really, it is simply a waste of time, artistically, to have anything to do with them.

The overture to *Undine* apparently suffered from a 'general unevenness' and lack of attention to detail. The Mozart symphony lacked 'crispness and readiness of attack' with 'more noise than music'. J.E. Quayle was likened to the famous conductor Costa, 'a man without reverence', according to the reviewer, who sacrificed the works he directed 'upon on the altar of noise.'⁸ The writer continued in this vein for several hundred embittered words, and I cannot help wondering why the newspaper published such a lengthy and withering attack without at least toning down or removing some of the more personal comments?

Even J.E. Quayle's appearance came in for admonishment:

No number of . . . graduated waistcoat buttons, long frock coats, white starched collars, or other quackeries, will supply the place of sound practical knowledge acquired in long years of art apprenticeship.

Finally, and having attempted to destroy the reputations of J.E. Quayle and his musicians, he turned his attention to the 'vocal elements' in the concert which he judged to be 'below zero' in quality. Agnes Clague was described as 'a warbler' rather than a singer; Mr Cretney's voice was 'dry and heavy; Mr Powers' choice of pieces were 'too classical' for him, 'and did not afford evidence of careful preparation'. Only Miss Barlow of Ramsey, who possessed 'a rich contralto voice', apparently gave the writer any pleasure, although 'her voice was not clear, and her intonation deficient'.

Nor were there to be any final words of encouragement as the parting shot was another admonishment:

The Society is blessed in having for its secretary a hard-working and energetic young man like Mr Kewley; but he was a little too energetic when he ordered the removal of the piano from the Girl's friendly Society's room to the Town Hall for a rehearsal, without first obtaining permission from Miss Ferrier, the secretary of the Girl's Friendly Society.

What are we to make of this virulent and anonymous attack upon the Castletown Orchestral Society and its conductor? The author may never be known to us at this distance in time, but he was surely known to J.E. Quayle. It seems unlikely that he was an orchestral player, as his stated view of amateur instrumental musicians was utterly contemptuous. A frustrated conductor who resented Quayle's initiative in forming an orchestra perhaps, a local band conductor or even a church organist who thought little of orchestral music?

Fortunately there were two responses challenging the writer of the review which went some way towards redressing the balance of opinion, and hopefully helped to restore J.E. Quayle's faith in his brave enterprise. The first came in a letter to the editor of the *Manx Sun* which appeared in the 14th March edition, and signed 'Musicus':

I very much regret the savage and satirical onslaught in the 'Daily Times' of Wednesday, on the recent concert given at Castletown by Mr Quayle's Orchestral Society. The ill-nature and personal feeling of the whole tirade is so palpable that I hope the members of the Society will not be misled by it, but remain firm to their conductor.

The letter went on to point out that J.E. Quayle was:

. . . a clever, painstaking musician, and, as such, is worthy of every support. It was the opinion of one of the best musicians on the Island, who was present, that the concert was very good, especially the orchestral portion of it.

'Musicus' concluded by confirming that he had:

. . . good reason to know that the attack was prompted by revengeful feelings . . . the best plan is to press on in a good way, and take no heed of the malice displayed in the effusion.

A further friendly response appeared in the *Isle of Man Examiner* on the same day, addressed to the editor and signed 'cello':

This concert was without doubt the finest held in the South of the Island . . . the playing of the orchestra was a musical treat.

The writer hoped that the Society would take part in local charity events, and perhaps give concerts in other parts of the Island.

'Press on in a good way'.

The Society did indeed contribute to local charity events, such as the concert which took place on 4th February 1904, in the Town Hall, in the presence of the Lt. Governor, Lord Raglan and Lady Raglan, and other dignitaries. The concert receipts amounted to £16 3s 9d, and the net proceeds amounting to £10 5s 1d were donated to the Castletown Nurses' Home. No further details of this event have come to light.

The fourth annual concert of the Society took place on 28th April in the Town Hall, and may have been repeated on Thursday, 5th May, when the Society presented a Grand Evening Concert in the Town Hall, with four guest vocal soloists, a solo 'cellist and accompanist, led by Miss Pleignier. The main orchestral work was a movement, or movements, from a Haydn symphony, but the programme also included a Beethoven string quartet in G major,⁹ probably just one movement, during which J.E. Quayle played the second violin part. The brief report of the concert makes no mention of this rare and innovative departure from the kind of musical fare that Castletown audiences would have expected. However, there was evidently 'a good attendance, and the entertainment was a success in every way'.

A further Grand Evening Concert at the Town Hall took place on 8th December with the participation of several well-known vocal soloists, a large chorus and an orchestra of 50 players, led one again by Miss Pleignier, in a programme of music by Wagner, Verdi (the *Anvil Chorus* from *Il Trovatore*), Cowen (excerpts from the cantata *The Rose Maiden*), Mendelssohn (the march from *Athalie*) and Sullivan (extracts from *The Mikado*). The proceeds were given to the Town Soup Kitchen Fund. What proved to be the busiest year for the Society since its inception ended in late December when some members of the orchestra took part in a Street Lighting Concert directed by Mr W.C. Cubbon.

The fifth annual concert Grand Concert took place on 25th April in the Town Hall. The vocal soloists included May Proctor, a popular Manx contralto, who appeared with the kind permission of the Royal College of Music, Mr E.W. Power and the Castletown Male Voice Quartette, first prize winners at the 1905 Manx Music Festival. The solo 'cellist was Mr F.G. Gothard, the piano soloist Mrs H. Rushworth and the 'Full Orchestra' was led by Miss Pleignier. For the second time J.E. Quayle included part of a string quartet, this time by Haydn, into the very varied programme, whilst the orchestra played Bidgood's selection of '*Coon Songs*' – presumably the *Fantasia on Negro Melodies* performed at an earlier annual concert – Schubert's *Rosamunde* overture, Chopin's *Funeral March*, Rubenstein's *Melody in F* and Berlioz' *Hungarian March*. The singers all gave pleasure and the pieces by the Male Voice Quartette 'were especially greatly appreciated'.

The *Isle of Man Times* on 29th April reported that the audience, 'though select' was not very numerous, that the 'splendid evening's entertainment' deserved a larger crowd, and that many items were encored. The reviewer continued:

High class concerts are not appreciated by the majority of Castletonians, whose tastes do not rise higher than the music of a brass band, or a 'nigger' troupe, or comic singing.

'The orchestra excelled in the rendering of their pieces'.

The *Isle of Man Examiner* was fulsome in its praise for the joint concert of the Castletown Orchestral Society and Choral Society held in the Town Hall in March 1905:

. . . the most successful held for many years. The programme was well rendered . . . the choral work and the ladies pieces being executed in excellent style . . . many (artists) were recalled . . . there were many encores.

The choir was conducted by Mr J.C. Qualtrough and the orchestra by J.E. Quayle, and led as usual by Miss Pleignier. The hall was full, and the proceeds were donated to the *Rose Ann* Disaster Fund (or possibly the *Wild Rose* which foundered at Liverpool in December, 1904, with the loss of two Manxmen).

The Society took part in just one concert in 1906, at the annual tea festival of the Castletown Dorcas Society,¹⁰ held in the Town Hall on Shrove Tuesday, presided over by the Rev. E.H.L. Locke. The programme was mainly given over to popular songs and arias, but the orchestra gave a good account of itself in Beethoven's overture *Prometheus*, the valse de concert *A Children's Carnival*¹¹ and a *Marche Militaire* from Hugo Felix's operetta *Husarenblut*.

We next hear of the Castletown Orchestral Society in 1908 when they provided the music for a 'theatrical entertainment' in the form of two one-act plays given by a 'number of amateurs' in aid of St Mary's Church Room, Castletown; 'the affair was only moderately attended'. The last recorded appearance of the orchestra, or more likely, a few members only, was at a tea and concert under the auspices of the Level Branch of the Independent Labour Party held in the Rechabite Hall, Port St Mary, in March, 1909. A specially selected choir 'sang Socialistic music and an orchestra from Castletown greatly added to the success of the concert'. With this brief reference, the Castletown Orchestral Society quietly disappears from the story of the Island's amateur orchestras.

J.E. Quayle was a modest, quietly determined man, with high musical ideals and aspirations. It seems unlikely that he would have simply lost faith with his orchestra however much adverse criticism he had to endure for attempting to bring a 'higher class' of concert programme to the south of the Island. Nor would competition from other local musical organisations have deterred him. It is much more likely that the considerable demands made on him by his position in the Rolls Office, his growing young family, together with his studies by correspondence course for the degree of Bachelor of Music from Durham University, his endeavours to initiate a series of music theory classes at Douglas Grammar School, his appointment as conductor of the choir at Rosemount Church, Douglas, and various recitals at Rosemount Church, and in Peel, which he either organised or took part in during this period, put too much pressure on even this dedicated and resourceful musician.

notes

1. Maurice Powell, *ENCORE! The Story of the Isle of Man Symphony Orchestra*, 2013.
2. **John Edward Quayle** (1869-1957). Known affectionately as 'Quayle Mus Bac' because he studied for the degree of Bachelor of Music by correspondence, was a highly accomplished amateur musician, composer and a stalwart of the Island's musical life. See Maurice Powell, *John Edward Quayle*, in A Supplement to New Manx Worthies, Culture Vannin.
3. Maurice Powell, *Charles Frederick Poulter*, in A Supplement to New Manx Worthies, Culture Vannin.
4. Probably the *Kronungs Marsch* by Friedrich Kuhlau.
5. *Musical Notes*, the *Manx Sun*, 7th March, 1902.
6. **Thomas Nelson Bidgood** (1858-1925). The English conductor, composer and arranger who wrote the popular Boer War march *Sons of the Brave* and later the marches *A Call to Arms* and *Vimy Ridge*.
7. **Sir John Stainer** (1840-1901). The highly-esteemed English composer, organist of St Paul's Cathedral, choir trainer and Professor of Music at Oxford University. His 1887 Passiontide cantata *The Crucifixion* is his best-remembered work.
8. **Sir Michael Costa** (1808-1884). Italian born conductor and composer of ballets, operas and oratorios who became a naturalised Englishman. He was Musical Director of the Philharmonic Society, the Sacred Harmonic Society, the Birmingham Triennial Festival and the Bradford and Leeds Handel Festivals. The obscure reference to Costa in the review may be a 'side-swipe' at the conductor for adding percussion parts to his festival performances of Handel's *Messiah*.
9. Opus 18 no 2. J.E. Quayle always encouraged orchestral players to play chamber music, and continued to do so after he became conductor of the Douglas Amateur Orchestral Society.
10. **The Douglas Dorcas Society**, a church-based charitable institution founded on December 1st, 1834 'to administer relief to the poor and necessitous' by providing clothing. The name 'Dorcas' or 'Tabitha' can be found in the Acts of the Apostles.
11. Possibly an arrangement for orchestra of a piece from *A Children's Carnival* by the American composer and pianist Amy Beach (1867-1944).