

'Hear the little German band . . .' ¹

by

Maurice Powell

Vaterland hear it . . . I make zee Manxman and ze forinjeer to fly ²

At this distance in time it may seem that the nuisance caused principally by German bands on the promenades and in the streets of Douglas during the 1880s is hardly a matter serious enough to devote many paragraphs to, but in fact, German bands, together with minstrel groups, hurdy-gurdy players and organ-grinders were a persistent source of annoyance to residents and visitors alike for many years. Referred to disparagingly in local newspapers as 'travelling musicians' and their 'brother professors with the dark faces', their presence on the Island was frequently questioned particularly as visiting English bands were always made welcome and were much appreciated.

The German bands in question were not the small, colourful Tyrolean *oompah*-type bands encountered in picturesque Bavarian villages, but rather, scruffily attired groups of itinerant musicians, only some of whom were actually German. Like dreadful harbingers of the summer season to come, they descended upon the town well before Whit-week, and from early morning until late at night, punctuated the holiday atmosphere of Douglas with incessant noise, and touting, which amounted to aggressive begging. The musicians were generally second or third rate in quality, often from minor theatre bands, and their performances consisting of poorly-played, raucous and out-of-tune renderings of popular marches and waltzes or even the *Hallelujah* chorus! King Gama in Sullivan's *Princess Ida* ³ apparently had 'nothing whatever to grumble at' because:

When German bands
From music stands
Played Wagner imperfectly –
I bade them go –
They didn't say no.
But off they went directly!

The pestered and deafened visitors and residents in Douglas, however, had a great deal to grumble at.

Mit mine clarinet I beat Apollo's lute . . . Zounds! ⁴

German bands customarily numbered between eight and a dozen players. The clarinet - 'usually played by a man afflicted with asthma' - seems to have been the main melody instrument, but the reedy and squeaky noise that was characteristic of the manner in which it was normally played, was a particular source of annoyance. The few surviving photographs of German bands show that cornets and other brass instruments were regularly employed together with the ever-present thump, thump, thump of a bass drum. An evening stroll on the promenade in August 1886 was completely spoiled for A. Sheffielder⁵, whom, after running the normal gauntlet of touts, was forced to endure a discordant competition between no less than seven bands.

It was not just the German Bands that destroyed the peace of the promenades, as 'Spex' in the *Times* observed in 1885:

We are stormed by the rabble from Germany with reeds and brass, the canaille of France with catgut and accordions, and the lazaroni of Italy with poisoned ice creams and hokey pokey. Is there no relief, no calm secluded spot about town to

escape from the maddening din? 'From early morn to dewy eve', and far into the night, goes the vile brassy competition of rival bands . . .

Handle-turning Italian piano-organists - street organ-grinders and hurdy-gurdy players – 'the greasy grinders', were second only to German bands in nuisance-value, and were memorably numbered among Ko-Ko's victims in *The Mikado*:

. . . the piano-organist, I've got him on the list.

By 1886, it was clear that something had to be done to curb the worst excesses of itinerant musicians, 'minor extortionists' or 'Hessian mercenaries', as one aggrieved visitor called them. *Mona's Herald* ⁶ was not the first local newspaper to demand that now the authorities had flexed their muscles over the suppression of touting:

other forms of public annoyance shall not long escape their vigilance (*sic*). It would seem as if visitors to Douglas must endure some things, as a sort of penance or penalty for the extra pleasure the town is fitted to give them, and so to our ears and our good nature must be abused all day by horrid German bands . . . exhausted by tormenting organ grinders, and our sleep driven away during the night by idiotic revellers. We want a deliverance from our shouting, roaring, grinding, as well as from our touting tormentors. ⁷

Each season several letters on the subject of music in the town were received from groups asking for permission to perform on the promenades, and were passed to the Music Committee. It appears that the commissioners had no powers to grant permission for bands to perform in the town, and little or no power to move them on unless a particular householder complained of the noise, or if they caused an obstruction. A letter from W.H. Paul, Chief Constable, read out at a meeting of the Douglas Town Commissioners in July 1886, summed up the difficulty succinctly:

The Suppression of German Bands

Dear Sir,

In reply to your letter of 2nd inst. The police have been instructed to use every effort to prevent obstruction, but have no power to interfere when such does occur. ⁸

It was noted that the German bands never sought permission to perform, and simply risked being asked to stop. The Chairman ruled that 'it is for the Board to consider whether they should not be more stringent in this particular matter', and then the matter was dropped. Later that year, another visitor, having heard a rumour that 'the powers that be' had given permission for a first-class band to play on the promenade, was dismayed to find out that the 'cosmopolitan musicians', or 'music pests', were out in even greater force than ever. 'I consider this nuisance the biggest disgrace the Isle of Man ever had'.

Two years later, the situation had not improved and the 'bands of Teutonic vagrants' were still churning out *Der Wacht am Rhein*, *Hi! Kelly* and *The Death of Nelson* on the promenades, and arousing 'a hatred of the Fatherland and all its sons'. One wag even suggested that permission should be granted for only one German band and one Italian organ-grinder – with or without monkey - to perform on the Island, provided that they pitched their tents on the summit of Snaefell! The seasons of 1888-89 seemed to have marked a turning point, and *Mona's Herald* ⁹ was quick to remind the authorities that as the touters had been severely dealt with, mainly by having a greater police presence in the town, it was high time the 'fraternity of musician mendicants' were seen off.

Silence and solemnity restored

By 1890, Douglas had apparently been 'cleared of German bands, hurdy-gurdies, barrel-organs and other questionable acquisitions', and in their place superior local bands - principally F. C. Poulter's Volunteer Band

and Mr Thornley's Douglas Town Band – and selected visiting bands, would be permitted to perform in the town, in uniform, and would also be permitted to collect money, but only 'in small boxes'. Something, it appears had stirred within the Commissioner's chambers to usher in some sort of much-demanded legislation, yet the wisdom of introducing a Music Rate of one penny in the pound to further initiate a series of sensible new regulations was seriously questioned. 'Why did the Commissioners drive music from the streets if they still desire to have it?'¹⁰ It was acknowledged that the street musicians did cause real annoyance – it seems that the sight of a 'disorderly train of women and children following a band, many of them without hats or bonnets' disturbed the writer most of all – but 'our home musicians are more liable to drunkenness than the Italians and Germans that have been sent away'.

By May, 1893, one commentator on Douglas town matters could fairly report in the *Times*¹¹ that a very different atmosphere could be felt along the promenades that season:

The crowds of visitors are there as before, but the old amusements which used to give life and fun to the crowded scene have all gone . . . sternly and persistently banished by the Commissioners. I like a little street amusement, and I believe that the bulk of our visitors like it too . . . a rollicking Nigger Troupe, or even a German band . . . once plentiful in Douglas – to plentiful, I used to think . . . have all gone, and the place is given over to silence and solemnity.

The implication here is that the Commissioners may have ultimately over-reacted, and that to abolish every kind of out-door amusement was a mistake 'which must inflict serious injury on Douglas as a pleasure resort'.

Some high quality German bands eventually won recognition and acceptance in Douglas, and in 1913, Herr Wurm's Imperial Viennese Orchestra - a band in all but name - was engaged at the new Villa Marina. By the end of the following year the band had unsurprisingly been dismissed, although only three of the musicians were either Austrian or German.¹²

Notes

1. From the chorus of *Down at the Old Bull and Bush*.

2. *Isle of Man Times*, 22nd Aug, 1885.

3. *Arthur Sullivan, A Victorian Musician*, Arthur Jacobs, Oxford University press, 1984.

4. *IoMT* *ibid*.

5. *Mona's Herald*, 18th August, 1886.

6. *Mona's Herald*, 11th August, 1886.

7. Charles Dickens once complained to a friend that he could write for no more than half an hour before being disturbed by the most excruciating sounds imaginable, and as late as 1929 George Orwell wrote of London organ-grinders: 'To ask outright for money is a crime, yet it is perfectly legal to annoy one's fellow citizens by pretending to entertain them. Their dreadful music . . . is only intended to keep them on the right side of the law.'

8. The mathematician, philosopher, inventor and mechanical engineer Charles Babbage (1791-1871) would have sympathised with the frustration felt by authorities powerless to deal with street musicians whom he wrote about in *Observations of Street Nuisances* in 1864: 'It is difficult to estimate the misery inflicted upon thousands of persons . . . by organ-grinders and other similar nuisances'.

9. *Mona's Herald*, 3rd July, 1889.

10. *Mona's Herald*, 5th August, 1891.

11. Paul Pry in the *IoMT* 30th May, 1893.

12. A photograph of the band taken at Bridlington Spa c. 1915, shows an ensemble of fifteen players, a mixture of strings, woodwind, brass and percussion, all in Austro-Hungarian-style uniforms. Herr Simon Wurm himself sports Kaiser Bill moustaches.