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The Manx Music Festival: A Socio-Cultural Consideration

Introduction

At the close of the 1993 Manx Music Festival, Sir Charles Kerruish, then President of the Isle of Man parliament, Tynwald, stated: "This festival demonstrates the strength of Manx culture as it is today. Frankly it makes me feel proud to be Manx and happy in the knowledge that our cultural heritage is in such safe keeping."[1] This article is a consideration of the ways in which this music festival can be claimed to demonstrate "the strength of Manx culture as it is today." By examining the festival from two perspectives it will consider the ways in which the festival is negotiated as a symbol of Manx culture. The first of these perspectives focuses on the meanings found within the festival itself, and the second on the place the Manx Music Festival occupies in the broader culture of the Isle of Man as a whole. Ultimately the article will show how a competitive music festival is used as symbol of both culture and identity.

The empirical research for this paper took place over a number of preparatory months and culminated in an intensive six-week period of field study in the Isle of Man that included attending the 108th Manx Music Festival in April 2000. I have chosen to report my findings from this research using the present tense, but this is by

no means an attempt to place the research in some sort of historically ambivalent moment, with disr

including the Manx Gaelic language, music and dance. These phenomena were influenced by contact with the surrounding Celtic nations; for example, the language bears a similarity to the Gaelic of Scotland and Ireland and there are many examples of folk tunes that appear not only in the island, but also in Scotland, Ireland and England. This distinction, however, was not to last and the arrival of the Victorian age, and hundreds of thousands of tourists a year, saw the fast decline of a subsistent way of life that had existed for centuries.[4] Native Manx were forced to adapt to the ways of the Eng.7(e)77.2(.0o)-14(fspea)17(na)e

In December 1892 the bud that was to blossom into the Manx Music Festival made its first appearance. Initially attached to the annual exhibition of the Isle of Man Fine Arts and Industrial Guild, the music "section"—the brainchild of one woman, Miss M. L. Wood—was a day-long round of music competitions. The first day of competitions consisted of adult and junior sight-singing classes (something Miss Wood thought to be of paramount importance in musical education), and adult and junior choral classes, and culminated in an ev

of the island. In the festival was found not only the pursuit of musical excellence, but also a gathering of representatives from the whole of the Isle of Man.

The fledgling status of the festival in the early twentieth century as a Manx phenomenon was confirmed as the century progressed, but it was not only the socio-political circumstances surrounding the native population at the festival's inception that led to this confirmation; other factors have also had their part to play. The geographical location of the festival has enabled it to grow as a symbol of culture. The status of the festival as an island festival has afforded it a large degree of insularity perhaps not present in festivals elsewhere: the majority of people attending the festival are Manx, and always have been Manx for over a hundred years. The festival has never happened anywhere other than the Isle of Man and as such can be claimed to be part of the ethnic identity of those involved, something that is important in the individual definition of what it means to be Manx. This is very important when remembering that at the festival's formation there was very little present in the Isle of Man that could still claim to be Manx. Further to this point is the fact that until 1923 the festival was only open to those people who resided on the Isle of Man, so "foreigners" were prevented from being involved. After this date the classes became open to those from outside the island and although there was some outside interest this was, and remains, usually very small. The festival remains something by the Manx for the Manx, and the value of this, to those involved with the festival, cannot be overestimated. Today, the Manx Music Festival has evolved from small beginnings into a week-long extravaganza of over a hundred classes in music, speech and dance and has, through its long history, formed a unique self-contained society.

This chart is representative of the relative necessity of each of the six social categories shown here in descending order. The socio-cultural meaning present in the festival is formed by the members of the six groups out

self-contained facilities of the Villa Marina complex allow for total immersion in the festival environment and enable participants to spend all day attending the competitions, eating, drinking and socialising without having to step outside the complex grounds. Once in the festival context, as mentioned previously, the members' six social groups cast off their roles from the outer world and assume their festival identities and the meanings, behaviours and idiosyncrasies that these imply. High ranking in the unspoken hierarchy of the festival is gained from a number of directions: long association with the festival, membership of several of the social groups, membership of one of the "Guild" families—and a Cleveland Medal or two, or three, or four, can only enhance an individual's status in the proceedings.

National Identity

Geoffrey Christian, nephew of the late and famous (at least in terms of festival folklore) Miss Emily Christian, former choral conductor and official accompanist, is, along with his wife Elaine, a keen member of the festival community both as an audience member and competitor. He considers the festival to be "Our own Manx festival. I know that there are other groups on the Island…but I see the Guild as being our Manx National Festival and we need to support it."[9] The need to "support" the festival stems from ethnic motivation: it provides a common tradition and the place of the festival as a "national festival" must be maintained. Triple Medallist Andrew Williamson agrees with the placing of ethnic value on the festival: "It has been going since 1892. Everyone born on the Island since then has grown up with it and always known it. The Celtic Nations have always enjoyed their music making."[10] Here the insinuation is that the festival is part of the Manx culture due to its stable presence in the life of those on the Isle of Man. In this case the festival becomes not only part of

Manx culture but is seen as an extension of the "Celtic" connections that the Isle of Man and the Manx people are always keen to promote.

Quadruple Cleveland Medallist, Barbara Gale, is one of the festival's keenest supporters, being a competitor, steward and member of the committee. She states that,

> The "Guild" is one of "the" weeks to Manx people. Our new residents attend it if their children are involved but many Manx people attend because it is the thing you do! They'd never not attend….This is a truly Manx occasion, the Guild is the biggest musical event of the year.[11]

Again, the festival is perceived as being a "Manx" event, even though on the surface

place. This was the appearance of the Manx National Anthem. Written by W. H. Gill, compiler of *Manx National Songs*, the anthem was to be sung in English at the close of every festival session.[12]

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respected figure both with fellow competitors and audience members alike. The reason for her acceptance seems to lie in her own acceptance of the constructs found within the festival:

> I do think the festival is part of the Manx way of life. So many families on the Island are connected to and with the festival. It's a superb week of music making. It forges friendships and everyone helps everyone…I am not Manx and that may change my perception, perhaps I'm not as blinkered as some or so steeped in the tradition that I just keep my head down and keep going.[20]

Karen Elliott realises that the existence of, and the importance placed upon, ideals of family and tradition found within the festival, and whilst these do not personally

festival, as part of both the heritage of the Isle of Man and the family traditions held within it. Those who are unconnected and treat the festival as part of a long circuit may find themselves lacking in the support of the other competitors and the audience. The need for this type of consideration is usually, however, very small: a glance at the 2000 festival programme shows that of the total number of competitors, numbering towards two thousand, only four were from outside the Isle of Man.[22] The insularity that has led to the festival becoming a vehicle for the construction of socio-cultural meaning looks set to continue.

There is one "outside" presence that is impossible to ignore and that is Cleveland, Ohio. The Cleveland Medal, first donated in 1923, has become the top award at the Manx Music Festival, but the question that needs to be asked is whether the festival has any meaning to the people of Cleveland, Ohio. The answer can be found in the thoughts of Mona Haldeman, year 2000 President of the Cleveland Manx Society:

> I don't know why the decision was made to present the medal. All I know is that it was started in 1923, and was meant to show the interest of the Cleveland Manx in the Isle of Man…The first medals were gold, but now they are merely gold plated. A mold was made, and until a few years ago, all medals were made using that mold, even though it had been cracked somewhere along the line. It was finally decided that it could no longer be used, so a new mold, a rubber mold, was made and enough medals were cast to last until 2023. After that time, who knows? While the Cleveland Manx Society is the oldest in North America, we are dwindling fast, and when the present members expire, there may not be enough younger ones to carry on. We are very proud of our contribution and love to have the medallists come and sing for us.[23]

For the Cleveland Manx Society, the opportunity of giving the medal has provided a link for the Cleveland Manx with their "homeland" for over one hundred years. As for those within the festival, the Cleveland Manx are provided with a sense of heritage, contributing to a strengthening of ethnicity and identity. For the Cleveland Manx,

especially in the year 2000 when the majority of native immigrants to Cleveland, Ohio, will have died leaving mainly second, third, fourth and even fifth generation Cleveland Manx, the link to the festival is naturally weakening. For now, however, and indeed for the near future, the fostering of trans-national cultural associations within the festival looks set to remain.

that knowledge of the festival becomes available to the general public. Manx Radio began transmitting daily reports of the festival in 1965, although Martin Faragher reports that "at that stage not many Manx villages could pick them up."[25] Nowadays, transmission is not problematic and Manx Radio reaches every part of the island. In 2000 the festival had twice daily reports on the radio throughout its duration timetabled at 8.15 am and 6.00 pm. In addition there were two further programmes: the broadcast of Finals' Night highlights and a two-hour nostalgia programme on the afternoon of Finals' Night. These programmes are broadcast at such a time as to give maximum exposure. For example, people may idly have Manx Radio on in their cars on the way to and from work when the festival broadcast is likely to be playing. This sort of exposure enables raised awareness of the festival even if the people listening are not personally involved with it, so, for instance, the listening audience will pick up on the importance given towards "Cleveland Night" and attach their own significance to the event and the winners.

The final way in which the profile of the festival is raised in the eye of the general public is by word of mouth, which is particularly the case in respect of new residents who would not otherwise be aware of the festival's existence. Alison Farrina, resident of the Isle of Man for three years and lately Head of Drama at the Manx Academy for the Performing Arts, describes her first encounter with the festival as follows:

> Well I heard about the Guild the first year I was here from word of mouth and didn't quite know what it was and everyone kept saying, "Oh the Guild…he's in the Guild…the Guild…the Guild… the Guild" and erm, I wasn't quite sure what it was, but I knew it was important because of the reverence that everyone seemed to have for it. And finally I realised it had to do with singing and music and some bits of drama and then I started to get more interested in it.[26]

This type of introduction to the festival is not unusual for new residents, particularly the confusion over the use of the colloquial title "Guild." What can be drawn from Alison Farrina's response is the appearance of meaning drawn from the "reverence everyone seemed to have for it." Alison Farrina was aware of a cultural significance, even if she was not actually sure what that significance was.

The best example of the festival containing cultural significance throughout the Isle of Man is seen in the presence of festival terminology in mainstream society. Graham Crowe stated "a big percentage (of the population) have heard of and are aware of the Cleveland Medal." The media, in reporting other musical events in the Isle of Man, often encourages this awareness. The Cleveland medal becomes a culturally implicit term: it is seen and known as a validation of singing ability to the vast majority of Isle of Man residents even if they do not actually know what the Cleveland Medal, or the Manx Music Festival, actually is. Medallist Andrew Williamson comments,

- Thirdly, the festival provides the setting for a self-contained microcosmic society that has been and still is largely of Manx origin.
- Fourthly, elements of the festival have permeated the wider society of the Isle of Man leading to a number of culturally implicit terms and traditions sprung directly from the existence of the festival, the quintessential example being the national anthem.

The Manx Music Festival is not all things to all men; it does have its opponents, from those who see competition in music as being unhealthy for musical development, to those who think it could be doing more to help the more "traditional" Manx arts.

Indeed, there is great debate among many parties as to what the term "Manx" actually signifies. At a most obvious level the festival is Manx because it takes place in the Isle of Man and the majority of participants are from the Isle of Man. There are, however, a number of interested parties in the Isle of Man who vehemently promote what they see to be a Manx culture that is not to be found in the Manx Music Festival. To the promoters of this particular cause, the Manx Music Festival is seen as anything but "Manx;" it may take place in the Isle of Man but that is the only claim to the loaded term "Manx" that it can make. It does nothing to promote the traditional way of life that way changed forever by the arrival of English dominance in the nineteenth century, with the exception of a few token "Manx" language classes; it is, indeed, part of the system that was responsible for the erosion of Manx culture in the first place. The great debate as to what is and is not "Manx" has been ongoing since before the twentieth century, and is closely associated with ideas of tradition and authenticity. The place of the Manx Music Festival in this debate lies in whether it is justified in claiming its place as being a part of Manx culture.

The promotion of an indigenous culture is obviously very important to any nation; it gives a sense of uniqueness and creates solidarity, and the Isle of Man is certainly no different in its need for this. On the other hand the promulgation of ideas of "tradition" and "authenticity" is always precarious. Many supporters and promoters of the "traditional" see the Manx Music Festival as not being sympathetic to what they perceive as being Manx Culture. Although the Manx Music Festival has, as already mentioned, periodically offered a number of Manx language, music and dance classes, this has never been wholly accepted and supported by the "traditional" community. Manx Nationalist and ardent supporter of traditional Manx culture, Phil

revivalists may give it credit for. Fenella Bazin, who has been greatly involved with both the Manx Music Festival and the more "traditional" culture of the Chruinnaght, summarises the issue when she speaks of the Manx Music Festival in the following way:

> I think it's a lot more Manx than a lot of things people say are Manx events. Mainly because it's got a long tradition, not just since 1892, but this sort of music competition was going on long before that, right since the beginning of the 19th century. If you look in the newspapers you'll see reports for music competitions and festivals and such. And the whole basis of the Guild was really singing. I mean it's changed in the past twenty-five years, there have been a lot more instrumentalists, but singing is still at the core of the festival. Singing was the thing that was going on in the Island. People were enthusiastic about singing in the nineteenth century—it was the main thing that was going on. So I think the whole atmosphere is such an unforced atmosphere. I've been involved in the Chruinnaght right since the beginning of the revival. I used to take part in Chruinnaghts when I was young as well, and Chruinnaghts when I was young were Manx because they were what you did. Of course, the 1978 revival was something done very consciously and people were being very consciously "Manx" and consciously "Celtic" so in a sense that was much more artificially Manx than the Guild is. A lot of people wouldn't agree with that, but that's how I see it.[30]

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of what is or is not part of Manx culture—their own individually formed "webs of significance."

It is impossible, however, to ignore the place the Festival now occupies within the culture of the Isle of Man and the part it has played in shaping Manx culture throughout its 109-year history. Those involved with the festival have used their own power, whether consciously or unconsciously, to impart a socio-cultural meaning that is pertinent to the formation of both national and individual identity. It is this which led to the President of Tynwald using the Manx Music Festival as an example of "the strength of Manx culture as it is today," and the Manx Music Festival will continue to occupy an important role in the culture of the Isle of Man.

Notes

[1] Manx Independent, 4 May 1993.
[2] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 22.
[3] In undertaking this study I was fortunate enough to be able to approach it from the position of the native ethnographer, and although this provided me with some distinct advantages, it left me wondering whether my own close involvement with the Isle of Man and from the age of five, the Manx Music Festival had clouded my judgement in any way. And so, although I have not consciously manipulated the research in any way, I am aware that, being human and being personally involved with my chosen field, there is a possibility that this may have happened despite my best efforts to the contrary. I am mindful that what I am presenting is by no means a definitive account.
[4] The figures peaked at 663, 360 in the year 1913 (reference taken from J. Belchem, ed., *A New History of the Isle of Man, Volume 5: The Modern Period 1830-1999* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).
[5] Although immigration was a feature of island life for centuries, and English was widely spoken throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was during the Victorian period that the effects of Anglicisation were most profoundly felt.
[6] It is interesting to note that Miss Wood herself immigrated to the Isle of Man in the year 1857 at the age of sixteen and that her motivation in forming the musical competitions was itself sprung from the philanthropic drive to improve and educate the local population.
[7] 'High Bailiff' is the name given to the Stipendiary Magistrate of the Isle of Man.
[8] Since the initial research for this paper was undertaken, the Villa Marina has now closed for renovation and will not re-open until the year 2004. In 2002 the festival plans to split itself across two sites in central Douglas. Whether this change in venue will have an effect on the festival remains to be seen.
[9] Author's interview with Geoffrey and Elaine Christian, 17 April 2000.
[10] Response to written questionnaire.
[11] Response to written questionnaire.

[12] Gill, along with his brother Fred and Dr John Clague was a keen collector. Although not resident on the Island, he has a keen supporter of Manx culture and edited *Manx National Songs* to become part of Boosey's *Royal Edition* of songbooks. It contained Manx airs with English words and added four-part harmony.
[13] Author's interview with Fenella Bazin, 20 April 2000.
[14] Author's interview with Marilyn Cannell, 17 April 2000.
[15] Interestingly, I recently interviewed an adjudicator about the work I'm undertaking now. He adjudicated at the Manx Music Festival in the 1970's and when I told him of my connection with the festival he said: "Oh, the Manx festival, that's where they have all those singing families, isn't it?"
[16] Interview with Fenella Bazin.
[17] Interview with Marilyn Cannell.
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