THE VIRTUOSI OF MERTHYR

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An article in the May 11, 1850, edition of *Household Words* carried the title 'Music in Humble Life'. The magazine was edited by Charles Dickens, and the article was one of several aimed at highlighting the 'improving' quality of art music to the working classes. The touchstone of the article, which was written by two eminent journalists, W. H. Wills and Dickens's father-in-law, George Hogarth, was the observations of 'a correspondent of a leading London newspaper' who

> 'when visiting Merthyr was exceedingly puzzled by hearing boys in the Cyfarthfa works whistling airs rarely heard except in the fashionable ballrooms, opera houses or drawing rooms. He afterwards discovered that the proprietor of the works, Mr Robert Crawshay, had established among his workers a brass band ...'[1]

The correspondent had also heard the Band play *Don Giovanni* and *Lucia di Lammermoor* and had been 'astonished by their proficiency'. He had 'seldom heard a regimental band more perfect than this handful of workmen'.

The quality of the Band was, indeed, exceptional. In 1860, at the inaugural Crystal Palace contest—one of the first of the great British national entrepeneurially organized contests—they were beaten into third place on the first day, but won the second day outright[2]. One of their players, John Walker, won the prize for the best bass soloist.[3] For thirty years in the late 19th century, the Cyfarthfa Band was one of a small group of brass bands dominating competitive events in Britain. They are the only Welsh band to have occupied this high ground before the remarkable success of the Cory Band in the 1970s and 80s.[4]

Brass bands developed in the 19th century because of the conflation of a number of related factors. Urbanization provided environments which were hospitable to the creation and sustenance of coherent, highly efficient instrumental ensembles. More important, though, were technological factors. All of the instruments (with the exception of the trombone and drums) that are used in brass bands were invented between about 1830 and 1850. The breakthrough that revolutionised the manufacture and, subsequently, the repertory of brass instruments was the application of the principle of piston valves. The effect of this application was that instruments of various sizes, from the smallest cornets (called cornopeans in the 19th century) to the largest bass instruments, could play *every* note in their melodic spectrum. Older instruments, the simple bugle for instance, could play only a very limited number of notes—that is why most bugle calls, whether *Reveille*, *The Last Post* or 'Come to the cook-house door', sound so profoundly similar. Furthermore, the valves on the new instruments were played using only the three most dextrous fingers of the right hand.[5] These instruments, which were made by mass-manufacturing methods, were heavily promoted in the national press.

The reasons why brass bands, as opposed to lots of people playing brass instruments, became a feature of musical life in nineteenth century Britain are complex. The phenomenon cannot be neatly explained by a single pattern of

circumstances or events. The principal feature is the commercial pressure exercised by manufacturers on the moneyed public to buy sets of instruments, but beyond that there are a variety of reasons why individual bands emerged. The famous Black Dyke Band, for instance, was formed in 1855 from the embers of an all-but-defunct village band by the cotton manufacturer John Foster. He bought everything for the Band: instruments, uniforms, a room to practice in, the wages of a professional conductor, on condition that they were henceforth to be known as the John Foster Black Dyke Mills Band. He then handed them self-governance, but never lost the kudos that the band earned. Some bands were formed following representations from workers to factory, mill or mine owners. Others were formed by representation of townspeople to the civic authorities,[6] and more still were sustained and often formed under the guise of being a crack militia force.[7]

The Cyfarthfa Band is interesting in that it originated from a yet different impetus. Also, it preceded the main thrust of the development of brass bands and in many other respects was atypical of them.

The *Merthyr Chronicle* announced on April 8, 1850

> 'Wisely endeavouring to improve the intellectual character of his workmen by means of refined amusement Mr Robert Crawshay has established amongst them a brass band ...'

It is difficult to understand why this article was published in 1850. Crawshay had started buying instruments ten years earlier; the Band was certainly fully operational by 1844.[8] It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the announcement in the *Merthyr Chronicle* was published a matter of weeks previous to the article in *Household Words*. Probably 'the correspondent of the leading London newspaper' referred to in *Household Words* was in fact the editor of the *Merthyr Chronicle*. Later in the same year the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*[9] was reporting the activities of a band founded by Charlotte Guest. Whatever the reason for such enthusiasm for reporting the musical philanthropy of south Wales's industrial masters it cannot obscure, particularly in the case of R. T. Crawshay, the fact that philanthropy was not the sole motivating force.

The Cyfarthfa Band, unlike others of the time, was very much a private band. The relationship between R. T. Crawshay and his Band had less in common with John Foster and the Black Dyke Mills Band than it did with the Duke of Esterhazy and Josef Haydn's orchestra. Performances at Cyfarthfa Castle were reported in *The Musical Times*, a magazine, at that time, for middle-class lovers of art music:

> On 8 July, a selection of music was performed by the Cyfarthfa Brass Band, in the presence of a numerous and respectable audience. The concert was ably conducted by Mr. Livzy [*sic*]. Jullien's 'British Army Quadrille', Rossini's overture to *La Gazza Lada*, and the Grand Coronation March from Meyerbeer's opera *La Prophete* were the best of the performance.[10]

Though R. T. Crawshay took advantage of the presence of a clutch of local, talented players when he founded the band, players of exceptional quality were drafted in from much further afield. This created consternation among other Welsh bands. At the end of the century, when the new brass band magazines were full of retrospective articles on banding, it was still a bone of contention:

> For many years there was really but one brass band in South Wales capable of giving a good account of itself, and even that,—Cyfarthfa—could in no sense be termed a Welsh band. We

> do not say a word in disparagement of that band but simply point out that the only good band in Wales could not—consisting as it did of imported Englishmen—be cited to the credit of Wales.[11]

The early instrumentation of the Band also shows it to be different from the trends that were current. For example, in 1840 Crawshay bought four keyed bugles,[12] instruments that were already being replaced by the newer, more versatile and efficient (valved) cornopeans. Further, the surviving instruments of the Band show a strong and unusual emphasis towards foreign, particularly Viennese, instruments. Other bands were buying the highly-promoted British-made products.[13]

Crawshay dealt with the old-established, and distinguished, London firm of Charles Pace and Son who were manufacturers and importers of quality instruments. The Pace company was somewhat out of step with the music industry, an industry which was being fashioned by new technology and mass manufacturing processes. It was one of the last of the old-fashioned instrument makers, and Crawshay's dealings with them preceded the most rapid development of brass banding by more than a decade.

For nearly forty years the Band played for, or on behalf of R. T. Crawshay, and he guarded it jealously:

> September 25 1860
> David Jones, Britten Ferry [sic]
> I was very much surprised to hear that my Band was going to play at your concert and that such was announced in the large Bills posted about the town; I cannot imagine why such an announcement should have been made without first of all obtaining my permission. I have received your letter on the subject but I do not acknowledge the excuse sufficient for such a liberty and I should certainly object to the Band playing at Neath if it was not for your sake you having always paid the greatest attention to my message or enquiry sent by me to you. I accord you personally permission for the Band to attend the concert this night and trust to you sending them back this night as promised in your letter if they should be kept over tonight I must charge £20 to pay expenses.
> Robert Crawshay[14]

During the 1850s and 60s the Band was at its zenith. The conductor from the mid-1840s was Ralph Livesey. He was born in Rochdale and became a brilliant keyed bugle player. Crawshay engaged him from Blights Band, the resident professional band at Vauxhall Gardens, London.[15]

Though most contemporary and near-contemporary sources describe the Band as one made up of workers in the ironworks, it would be wrong to gain the impression that the Cyfarthfa Band, in its early days at least, was a good example of working men bettering themselves through great musical achievements.

Most, if not all, of the players worked in the Cyfarthfa works, but the majority were given jobs, probably good ones, *because* of their playing ability. Some took such work as a more comfortable and lucrative alternative to being a professional musician. The trombonist, G.C.Bawden, was a competent cellist and violinist who also conducted the Cyfarthfa string band. William England and his son John were two of a musical dynasty who emigrated from Bradford where they were already well-established musicians. John was a celebrated orchestral cornet player. Another Yorkshireman, John Walker, was recruited from a showband, probably Wombells, which visited Merthyr in 1846.[16]

Detail from a much larger photograph taken at the wedding of Henrietta Louise Crawshay in 1871.

Walker was an ophicleide player. The ophicleide was a bass/baritone instrument which was played with a cup mouthpiece similar to that of the trombone. But, otherwise, it was very different; it had keys like those of a saxophone. It became a musical dodo. It was invented in the 19th century, was employed widely by European composers, then dropped in favour of the valved tuba. It was the last instrument of western art music to become extinct.[17] Merthyr Tydfil was the unlikely centre of later British virtuoso ophicleide playing. John Walker was a fine player and a Mr Coleman, who also played ophicleide with the Band left to make his fortune in America as a player. But the jewel in the crown of the Band was Sam Hughes.

Sam Hughes may well have been, literally, the greatest ophicleide player of all time. He started playing not long after the instrument was invented. By the end of his life he had been the first, and last, professor of the ophicleide at the Guildhall School of Music and the Royal Military School of Music,[18] had given recitals in New York and drawn critical acclaim from George Bernard Shaw.[19]

Hughes was born in Staffordshire in 1823. It appears that he joined the Band in 1858. A letter from Crawshay to the organizer of the Bath and West Show, dated April 12, 1858, states:

> Expect I shall by that time have procured the aid of the *famous* 'Ophicleide' player 'Hughes' so that he will be a great addition on that occasion.[20]

Though Hughes is usually associated with the Band, it is doubtful whether he remained with it for very long. To start with, it is unthinkable that John Walker should have won the prize for best (ophicleide) soloist of the day at Crystal Palace in 1860 if Hughes was playing. More important, press reports of that contest describe Cyfarthfa Band as the band 'from the ranks of which came the celebrated ophicleide player, Mr Hughes, introduced to the public by the late Mr Jullien'.[21] Louis ... Jullien (he had 37 other Christian names) was a musical impresario and publisher, but, most prominently, a showman and conductor. He died on 14 March 1860 and so, presumably, Hughes had been heard and engaged by him at some time late 1859/early 1860.[22] The problems with the chronology of Hughes's time at Merthyr are further compounded by the fact that the Cyfarthfa Band instrument that bears his name dates from the late 1860s.[23] The likely truth is that he was engaged by Crawshay and left after a short time, but continued to be engaged occasionally as a visiting player.

The financing of visits by Hughes, and indeed the general financing of the Band, is obscure. The surviving private account books of Robert Crawshay show some expenditure on the Band.[24] The conductor, George Livesey, was paid £1 per month in arrears with various smaller amounts for expenses.[25] Occasionally, there are substantial payments for instruments, for example £9.12.0 in August 1865[26] to the firm of F Besson for a bombardon and many more smaller items (drum heads, etc.) and repairs. The travel expenses of the Band were also paid from these accounts, but it is clear from other documents that, in most cases, Crawshay had these expenses reimbursed. He sometimes went with the Band on distant engagements. In the summer of each year the Band travelled to Aberystwyth to play at the flower show. Crawshay's personal allowance, compared to the expenses of the Band, puts his

spending on the musicians into perspective:

Sept 7 [1871]	To Band Fare Aberystwyth 21 at 8/6 ea.	8.18.6
Sept 9 [1871]	To Self (Aberystwyth)	100.0.0[27]

It is difficult to trace the source of the main funding for the Band. No clear picture emerges from the available evidence, but two points stand out as being important. First, the majority of the surviving instruments carry engravings other than the manufacturers' names; the practice of engraving the name of a band on the bell (the terminal flare) of instruments was common until well into the twentieth century. The Cyfarthfa instruments carry the inscription 'Cyfarthfa Band/W T CRAWSHAY'. There is no evidence that W. T. Crawshay (R. T. Crawshay's father) ever had anything to do with the Band. In fact, from the 1840s until his death, he was almost permanently ensconced at Caversham Park near Reading, or at his London home. It seems, therefore, that many instruments purchased by Crawshay were paid for from the funds of the iron works, though the accounts show no evidence of it. Second, in some later private account books there are frequent payments *to* R. T. Crawshay from bandsmen. Two of the England family, another player, James Ford, and the arranger/copyist George D'Artney, were paying five shillings a month, apparently repayments for instruments. For example, a summary account dated October 26, 1867, shows the four men paying five shillings each 'by cash for instruments as follows'

William England	£ 4/12/0	
Joseph England	£ 7/19/0	
James Ford	£ 5/15/6	
George D'Artney	£14/15/0	£33/1/6[28]

Whatever the Band was to the bandsmen themselves or, eventually, to the working classes of Merthyr and beyond, it was to R. T. Crawshay part of the sustenance of a cultured middle class environment that had begun in the 1820s with the building, by his father, of Cyfarthfa Castle itself. Further and more potent evidence of this is found in the repertory that the Band played. Six sets of band books survive, containing a total repertory of 353 pieces.[29] The annotated books, and printed programmes, give an excellent profile of middle class musical taste.[30] The repertory can be roughly divided into two broad categories. Popular music: quadrilles, minstrel songs, schottisches, polkas, and so on; and transcriptions of 'classical' music. The first category is common to most, if not all, bands of the period. So is the second, but at Cyfarthfa it had a different dimension. George D'Artney, a French musician, had been brought in by Crawshay specifically to make musical arrangements. D'Artney was, by all accounts, a debtor and a hopeless drunk, but he was also extremely talented.

The common practice was for bands to play arrangements of the most famous art music pieces, particularly overtures and pot-pourris of themes from the operatic repertoire. The most popular was Italian opera; Verdi, Donizetti and Rossini in particular. Also popular were the works of the German, Giacomo Meyerbeer, and overtures of current French operettas by Offenbach, Suppé, Hérold, and so on. Cyfarthfa Band had all of these and, at breathtaking speed after their first

performances, many Italian operatic overtures may well have been heard in Merthyr Tydfil before they were heard in most Italian provinces. But more than this, and this is unique in surviving sources of the period, the Cyfarthfa bandbooks also contain transcriptions of *complete* Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn symphonies. Manuscript music sources for band repertory as early as this are scarce, but complete transcriptions must be regarded as unusual for two reasons. Firstly, the popular practice was to string together the best tunes of any given piece so as to awaken and sustain the interest of the listener for a short period of time before going on to the next tune (an operatic overture does this almost by definition). This type of medley still figures prominently in the brass band repertoire. Secondly, there are pragmatic reasons why transcriptions of entire symphonies are not idiomatic to brass bands. The vibrating membrane of a brass instrument, the player's lips, simply collapse from fatigue after a comparatively short time unless they are rested. Playing symphonies on such instruments is possible, but not terribly practical.

The music was arranged for the band from piano reductions, full orchestral scores and from Band journals. Band journals were publications for bands in which the pieces, either original works or transcriptions, were ordered in such a way that they could be used or, more often, re-arranged, for any combination of instruments.[31] It was not until the end of the century that standard instrumentation for competitions meant that a common genre was set. This caused a publishing industry for brass band music to develop.

The music of Haydn, Mozart, Donizetti and Verdi was being played as well in Merthyr in the 1860s as it was, in the majority of cases, in London. The lighter music provided a staple diet for the grand balls that were held by Crawshay. Private and public concert programmes were built around the classical repertoire. Many public concerts and most contests were held in the open air. It was through open-air concerts and contests that instrumental art music was disseminated to masses of working class people. This aspect of brass banding is probably its most important social historical feature. The quality of brass playing was extraordinarily high. It was precisely because of the absence of a ready made printed repertory that brass band conductors made arrangements of classical music. For a brief period during the 19th century, good performances of art music were a common commodity between classes. When the music itself no longer provided a delineating feature it was re-rarified. The introduction of provincial subscription concerts later in the century ensured, by their cost, a new exclusivity and a safe hierarchical environment for the music of the middle classes.

Cyfarthfa Band sustained its level of excellence for half a century. Its status as Crawshay's private band gradually became obscure. Eventually, it, like most of the other bands, was supported by a loosely-defined benevolent patronage. It was taken over by Merthyr Borough Council in 1908 and shortly after slid into oblivion.[32]

Patronage of bands in the mid-nineteenth century was perceived by middle class observers as providing rational recreation for working people. Good taste in the form of great music was implanted in the working class digestive system by kindly arbiters who were themselves 'expert' moderators of such matters. Such pastimes were seen as vastly preferable to the temptations of, for example, the beer houses.

On the latter point, there is an irony. The only tangible evidence of Crawshay making regular payments to the Band is found in the records of sums paid by him to the Lamb and Flag, Brecon Road, Merthyr, to finance the Band's drinking. The sums were not insignificant. In 1874 it was twenty five pounds and twelve shillings, much more than the total of all other expenditure, including the conductor's retainer[33]. This represents a generous allowance; it also represents a great deal of drinking.[34]

Crawshay's role as an arbiter of musical taste contains an even deeper irony, at least for the 1860s and 1870s when he was exercising direct and stringent control of the Band, because, for the whole of this period, he was deaf. In December 1859, at the age of forty two, he suffered a paralytic stroke; though he recovered, it left him permanently and absolutely deaf. In 1866, W. T. Crawshay, showing little fatherly compassion, was blaming his son's business incompetence on the disability:

> You have made the damndest mess of them [the Cyfarthfa works] that ever a man made of a good concern ... your deafness unfits you for anything but fishing.[35]

To which Robert replied:

> My deafness is a most lamentable thing but I do not find it interferes with the actual management of the works. I am not able to talk to the workman and hear his reply but the agents I have to ask in writing and I think they are most careful in their replies.[36]

In the years following 1859, R. T. Crawshay continued to keep a careful control of the Band. Indeed, it is difficult to perceive any change in his attitude to the Band, even though he was no longer able to hear them.

> March 23 1861
> Ed[ward] Lawrence
> The time arranged for your concert is rather a long time distant and I cannot tell whether my Band will be required for some purpose of my own or not so scarcely like promising it; but if *you* will run the risk I have no objections to allowing you the Band on 16th provided I do not require it myself for another purpose.
> This being your first concert has induced me to allow the attendance of the Band but in future I shall leave the settlement to my Band Master who will require payment.
> Robert Crawshay[37]

George Livesey, the five-shilling-a-week conductor, was the real arbiter of musical taste from 1859 on. Irrespective of his motives for forming the Band in the first place, there is every evidence that the Band was well treated by Crawshay. His near-manic preoccupation with retaining control of it may well have been caused by the sadness of his own position. That position, despite its sadness, does, at least, call into question the exact nature of his relationship with the Band.

Articles like the one in *Household Words* in March 1850, and several more which appeared in the 1850s, 60s and 70s , placed an emphasis on high art music as a panacea for the low tastes and low morals of working people. [38] However, historians of the popular culture of the second half of the nineteenth century should note that, in Wales at least, the greatest instrumental ensemble was paid in beer by a man who was as deaf as a post.

NOTES

1. *Household Words*, Vol.1, pp.160-164.
2. Though brass band contests started much earlier, it was not until the 1850s that they became major events attracting mass audiences. The first national contest was held at the Belle Vue Gardens, Manchester, in 1853.
3. The prize was a Boosey euphonion (euphonium) in B♭, presented by Boosey & Co. (*The Times*, 12 July 1860, p.9.)
4. The Cory Band from Pentre in the Rhondda, founded in 1884 as the Ton Temperance Band, won the British National Contest four times between 1974 and 1984.
5. Instruments like the bugle, the natural (valveless) horn and trumpet have the capacity to produce the sound of a single harmonic series, because these instruments, unlike the trombone, play a fixed length of tubing. Techniques such as hand stopping and crooking on horns and the employment of the super high *clarino* register on the trumpet (J. S. Bach's trumpet parts require this technique) were rather cumbersome or very difficult or both. Keyed instruments were an interim invention in the first half of the nineteenth century. The piston valve, when depressed, directs the flow of air into a new length of tubing, providing a new harmonic series. Seven harmonic series are possible from three valves, thus giving an entire melodic range.
6. For example, the Saxhorn Band of Kings Lynn was founded in this way.
7. The War Office paid allowances for militia and volunteer troops. A good illustration of a band using the War Office allowance merely to sustain its musical activities is given in Henry Livings, *That the Medals and the Baton be put on view*, Newton Abbot, 1975, pp.14-15.
8. Margaret Stewart Taylor, *The Crawshays of Cyfarthfa Castle*, p.82, suggests 1844 as the date for the foundation of the Band. The source of this information is D. Morgans' *Music and Musicians of Merthyr and District* (Merthyr, 1922). This book is extremely useful but often inaccurate. For example, Morgans says that the Band was 80 strong: at no time did it have more than about 25 members.
9. *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 9 November 1850.
10. *The Musical Times*, 1 August 1852, p.46.
11. *The Brass Band Annual*, 1895. The author of this article was an official of the Llanelli Band.
12. National Library of Wales. Cyfarthfa Papers (NLW:Cyf) Box XIV.
13. For a list and description of the Band instruments see Trevor Herbert and Arnold Myers, 'The Instruments of the Cyfarthfa Band', in *The Journal of the Galpin Society*, Vol.XLI.
14. NLW:Cyf. Vol.5, no.701.
15. *The Orchestral Times and Bandsman*, December 1891, p.308. Ralph Livesey was eventually succeeded as conductor by his son, George.
16. Morgans, op.cit., p.131/132. The details here are correct. Wombells Royal Managerie visited Merthyr in 1846. (*Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 1 August 1846).
17. The ophicleide was patented by the French maker, Halary. Strictly speaking, it is the bass member of the keyed bugle family. It was quickly superceded by the valved tuba—or bombardon as it was then known. In the 1860s and 1870s the ophicleide was the subject of, probably undeserved, abuse. It was widely referred to as 'the chromatic bullock'. For an illustration and good description of the instrument see *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol.13, p.652.
18. A photograph of Hughes is given in P. L. Binns, *A Hundred Years of Military Music*, Gillingham, Dorset, 1959, facing p.60. The photograph which shows the 12 founding professors of the Royal Military School of Music, Kneller Hall, is the only known picture of him.
19. George Bernard Shaw, *London Music 1888-89*, London, 1937, p.58.
20. NLW:Cyf. Vol.5, no.268.
21. *The Times*, Wednesday, 11 July 1860. A similar reference occurs in *The Musical World*, 14 July 1860.
22. Stephen J. Weston, *Samuel Hughes: Ophicleidist*, Edinburgh, 1986, p.2, states that Hughes was in Merthyr from 1852. I doubt if this is correct.
23. Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, Acc.No.CCM/B1.
24. The Cyfarthfa Papers at the National Library of Wales do not contain private account books for R. T. Crawshay for the 1840s.
25. NLW:Cyf. Vol.16, *passim*.
26. NLW:Cyf. Vol.16, p.36.
27. NLW:Cyf. Vol.16, p.180. A similar entry for 1870 is at p.154.
28. NLW:Cyf. Vol.16, p.85.
29. The author has completed an analytical catalogue of the band books; this will be published by the Cyfarthfa Castle Museum. The earliest set of books date from the 1840s/1850s. Most date from before 1879.
30. There are printed programmes in a variety of locations. Also, programmes are annotated inside the covers of some band books.
31. The Cyfarthfa Band won 'a perfect set of Boosey's 'Brass Band Journal", sixteen volumes bound in 1860, (*Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday, 11 July 1860), but they do not survive in the Band repertory.

32. The Band was formally transferred to the ownership of Merthyr Borough Council on 17 August 1908. (*Merthyr Borough Council Minutes*, Minute 2884.)
33. NLW:Cyf. Box 14. A loose-leaf abstract of expenditure for 1874 shows:
    Livesey £13
    Ale for Band £25.12
    Drum Heads £7.17.9.
34. NLW:Cyf. Vol.16, *passim*. Entries are for 'The Lamb and Flag for beer for the band' or 'to Hartley for the band'. Trade directories for the period show John Hartley to be the landlord of the Lamb and Flag.
35. Letter from W. T. Crawshay to R. T. Crawshay dated 9 May 1866. NLW:Cyf. Box 7.
36. Letter from R. T. Crawshay to W. T. Crawshay dated 10 May 1866, *ibid.*
37. NLW:Cyf. Vol.5, no.766.
38. *op.cit.*