A Lament for Sam Hughes

The last great ophicleidist

By Trevor Herbert

On 1st April 1898, Sam Hughes died in a small terraced house at Three Mile Cross on the outskirts of Reading. His widow, in grief and poverty, petitioned the Royal Society of Musicians for a small grant to pay for his funeral. The Society, which had treated him kindly in the closing years of his life, responded benevolently once more, for it was known that his passing marked the end of a significant, if brief, era. Sam Hughes was the last great ophicleide player. He was perhaps the only really great British ophicleide player. Many great romantic composers including Mendelssohn, Wagner and Berlioz wrote for the instrument, which was invented by a man called Halary in Paris in 1821 - three years before Sam Hughes was born. For the next half century it was widely used but few played it well. George Bernard Shaw regularly referred to it as the "chromatic bullock" but even he, whose caustic indignation was often vented on London's brass players, had been moved by a rendering of *O Ruddier than the Cherry* by Mr Hughes.

The fate of the ophicleide and the story of Sam Hughes provide a neat illustration of the pace and character of musical change in Britain in the Victorian period. One product of this change was the brass band "movement" - a movement which, if the untested claims of most authors on the subject are to be believed, had its origins in Wales. Despite Shaw's claims that the ophicleide had been "born obsolete", it died because it was consumed by the irresistible forces of technological invention and commercial exploitation. In particular, it was overtaken by the euphonium.

The euphonium was invented in the 1830s. It became popular some time later, but from the start it was easier to play and simpler and cheaper to manufacture. The makers ensured that the euphonium usurped the ophicleide's position as the bass-baritone instrument in brass bands by contriving one of the neatest tricks of the 19th century. At brass band contests it was common to single out the best individual player of the day (irrespective of what instrument he performed on) and award him an elaborate prize - a sort of "man of the match" award. From the mid-century the winners of these awards were, with uncanny frequency, ophicleide players. Their prize was always a brand new euphonium. By about 1870 just about every good ophicleide player had "won" a euphonium.

The exception was Sam Hughes, who by that time had left the world of brass bands and was swanning around London with his ophicleide. He became professor of ophicleide at the Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall and at the Guildhall School of Music. He was destined for stardom with Jullien's orchestra and to beguile George Bernard Shaw with *O Ruddier than the Cherry* at Covent Garden. In the mid-1850s Hughes was playing for the Cyfarthfa Brass Band in Merthyr Tydfil. Robert Thompson Crawshay, who had set up the band in 1838, had procured his services and arranged for him to have a job as a railway agent in Merthyr. He had apparently left by 1860, the year that the Cyfarthfa band came

first at the great national contest at Crystal Palace. Their solo ophicleide player on that day was a man called Walker - he won a euphonium. The best brass band players in Wales were better than most of the professional brass players. The technical and artistic demands of the band repertoire were vastly greater than those of the orchestral repertoire. The likes of Sam Hughes demonstrated a touch that, by all accounts, drew gasps of admiration. The reasons why the players became so good and the consequences of that competence are worth thinking about.

Brass instruments were cheap and relatively easy to play. These two vital factors were pressed home by publishers, instrument manufacturers and everyone else who was astute enough to notice that an entire new market for music was opening. Musical literacy is easier to obtain than word literacy; to an extent, and unlike words, music looks like it sounds. It is possible, even probable, that many of the best 19th century brass band players (people who could play an Italian opera overture at sight) were otherwise illiterate.

Men like Sam Hughes were exemplars for those who followed. Their playing was heard by thousands at open-air contests and concerts. The brilliance of their playing was immediately evident and left little to doubt. Everyone could measure it. Musical skill is notorious for its lack of ambiguity; it is impossible to bluff your way through an ophicleide solo. The other issue of importance concerns the repertoire. While hymns and arrangements of Welsh folk songs are found in the surviving collections of music, the main body of the repertoire is classical or "art" music. Italian opera dominated the repertoire but Mozart, Haydn, Handel, Beethoven and Bach were also popular. (The adoption of Haydn and Handel as Christian names for boys came from this period). More modern music was also played. The Cyfarthfa repertoire included works by Wagner and a precociously talented local boy called Joseph Parry. Bands were the means by which instrumental art music became widely disseminated. The mass of the people had unequivocal access to this form of "high art". They didn't have to be able to read, and because most performances were in the open air, they didn't even need the price of admission to hear the very best "modern music".

The hand-written music from which players such as Sam Hughes played still survives. It provides unquestionable testimony as to how well the instruments were being played. Those who heard this playing did not just hear technical competence. They also heard musical virtuosity. Amidst the smoke and grime of Merthyr in the mid-19th century there sounded, on occasions, the lyricism of men like Sam Hughes. It was not just declamatory fanfares and scintillating chromatic runs that they played but gently turned phrases breathed softly above blocks of deep, sonorous harmony. Most brass band players lived and died where they were born. Sam Hughes died in poverty and a long way from home. The ophicleide died with him. There is a bitter irony in this story. Had he stayed in Merthyr he would have become Welsh. He would have died in comfort and security among people who admired him as one of their champions. Had he accepted the inevitable progress of technology and learned to play the euphonium he might even have died a rich man in London. He did neither.

Today Sam Hughes's ophicleide rests in a glass case in Cyfarthfa Castle Museum. It is known throughout the world as one of the best surviving examples of its type. In the quest for authenticity, musicians are now learning to play the ophicleide again and clapped-out specimens are being lovingly restored. Hughes' instrument plays as beautifully today as if the master had put it down just an hour ago.

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