

THE GREAT TRIUMVIRATE – No.3: ALEX OWEN

Three musicians dominated the brass band scene in the final quarter of the 19th century, and two of them well into the 20th century. They were Edwin Swift, John Gladney and Alex Owen. In the final part of this three - part series, **Tim Mutum** explores the life of **Alex Owen**, one of the most extraordinary characters in the history of brass bands.



Of the three men explored in this series, Alex Owen (1851 - 1920) is perhaps the one whose name still resonates most today. His musical exploits as an arranger of classical music for brass band are regarded by some to have been ahead of his time, and of such interest that some have been both performed in recent times and recorded, on LP and CD. And, although he had other successes, his two main contest winning bands still exist - Black Dyke Mills and Besses o' th' Barn, with whom he will be forever associated as a result of the major tours he undertook with the Lancashire band.

Owen's early upbringing is virtually unknown. Born on 29 April 1851, at the age of seven, along with his sister, he was admitted to Swinton Industrial School - a cross between an orphanage and the workhouse - joining 888 other children. It was here that he spent his formative years leaving, according to his release papers, to become an apprentice to a collier in December 1864. However, the history of the Stalybridge Old Band states that Owen was apprenticed to a cavalry bandmaster. What is not in doubt is that he quickly gained a certain degree of fame as a cornet player and in 1868, aged 16, he joined Stalybridge Old Band, and conducted them from 1869 until 1872. He then founded a rival ensemble - Stalybridge Borough Band. In *Brass Roots* (Ashgate, 1998) Roy Newsome writes, 'By now (1871) he had acquired a reputation as the greatest all-round cornet player of his day. His tone, compass, free production and expression were said to be charming and his stamina described as outstanding. He



Besses o' th' Barn Band in 1903

was obviously destined for higher honours than he could achieve in Stalybridge and, in 1875, came under the influence of John Gladney (12 years his senior) joining Meltham Mills.'

Owen played cornet with Meltham Mills for five years, including the Belle Vue hat-trick of wins (1876 - 1878) and was also conducting other bands. Between 1877 and 1884 Owen led Boarshurst Band, winning a number of local contests with them. It was probably no surprise when, in 1880, he was appointed Professional Conductor of Black Dyke Mills, winning Belle Vue that year and in 1881, and thereby finishing off the hat-trick started by his predecessor, John Fawcett in 1879. The practice after a hat-trick was to be barred for two years, but Owen won with Clayton-le-Moors Band in 1882, thus completing his own personal hat-trick.

On 24 February 1884, aged just 33 years, Owen was appointed Professional Conductor of Besses o' th' Barn Band and conducted them until his death. Shortly after his appointment at Besses, he was thrown from a trap on his way home from rehearsing Lobb Mills Band in Todmorden and severely injured. Although unable to speak or use his right arm, he supervised a final rehearsal of Besses on a test piece prepared for a contest at Southport, conveying his instructions to the bandmaster by gestures.

He continued to conduct both Besses and Black Dyke until July 1888, when he severed ties with the latter. There are two stories about this. One is that he was allowed to conduct both bands in a contest, but could not play cornet with both. As playing cornet and conducting

was the custom, he was forced to make a choice and chose Besses, which gives some indication of their standing as Black Dyke had already won Belle Vue six times by then. There again, as he himself put it, "Maybe I am a professional conductor, but I am an amateur cornet player!"

Roy Newsome in *150 Golden Years - The History of Black Dyke Band* (World of Brass Publications, 2005) paints a slightly different story: 'Owen's departure from Black Dyke (sic) in July 1888 seems to have been quite sudden. He took the band to five contests during June and July, winning two of them. The rift appears to have begun at a contest in Boston (Lincs). Owen was conducting both bands and would normally have played solo cornet with both. However, on this occasion there was a rule that though he could conduct both bands, he could play with only one. This led to Owen playing solo cornet with neither, a fall-out between the two bands and his resignation from Black Dyke.' To further confuse the situation the *Brass Band News* of 1 August 1888 commented, 'What is the reason for this severance of a long and brilliantly successful companionship we do not know nor care to enquire. We simply mention the fact as an item of news.'

Owen was pivotal to the success of Besses and as well as a great conductor was, like several of his contemporaries, well known for his arrangements. They were mainly undertaken in the 1880s and 1890s and, like Gladney and Swift, they helped secure contest victories for him and his bands. In *Brass Roots*, Roy Newsome lists 13 operatic selections arranged by Owen for contest purposes. He also arranged concert music, wrote or arranged six solos and composed four

marches. Newsome went on to write, 'during the 1890s, Owen became so incensed at the number of inaccurate versions of his selections being played that he had sets of the more popular ones printed and made publicly available. In *Brass Band News* of January 1898, he announced the publication of a limited edition of six of his selections, on offer at two guineas for a set of 24 parts.'

Besses played one of his early arrangements, made in 1882, *Rossini's Works*, at 29 contests, winning 21 of them. During 1887 the rules at a contest at Norland, near Halifax were framed in such a way they could not play it, because they had won so many prizes performing it. Undeterred, they played Owen's arrangement of *Beethoven's Works* and still finished joint first! After Owen's death many of his scores were hidden away by Besses, and their use for a long time was restricted to just them. However, when Elgar Howarth was conducting in Sydney, Australia he met a band enthusiast by the name of Cliff Goodchild. He offered Howarth the chance to look at some manuscript scores, the property of his late grandfather, which were gathering dust in his attic. The parcel contained scores and parts left by Owen during the Besses world tour of 1906 (covered later in this article) as a gesture of thanks for the Goodchild's hospitality.

Writing about his arrangements, Elgar Howarth said this about Owen's *Grand Selection from 'Die Walkure'*: "...Owen eclipses all other arrangers; he takes on the Wagner style, transcending one's normal expectations of band sound and expressive capabilities, and comes

almost to grips with Wagnerian proportion since the piece - more like a fantasy than a selection - plays non-stop for 32 minutes. Here the art of arranging is taken to a new level, the result a supreme justification of his evident visionary belief, beyond the mere desire to entertain, of the artistic possibilities of the brass band."

It is quite remarkable how Owen, and others, were able to access orchestral music and make these intricate arrangements which exemplified the type of test piece being played by the finest bands well into the 20th century. In 1995 Bram Gay offered some insight into this. 'Did Owen know these works?' he wrote. 'We cannot say. He may indeed have heard Beecham's British National Opera Company on one of its northern tours. But what of the scores? Where could he have found them? Careful reading of the manuscripts tends to suggest that his sources were piano scores; here and there passages - mere left-hand notes in a piano score - which we know as solo bass clarinet or bassoon, for instance, appear on four tubas. But this idea perishes, almost, before the sheer grasp of the scores themselves. Surely, they could not have been achieved by anyone who had not Wagner's sounds in his ears and Wagner's full scores before his eyes? We will never know.'

Owen enjoyed further Belle Vue successes with Besses in 1892 and 1894. With all his commitments it was no surprise that Owen experienced health problems, but as the *Brass Band News* of 1 December 1897 reported, 'The malady from which Mr Owen is



Besses o' th' Barn Band in Tuileries Gardens, France in 1905, under conductor Alex Owen



Besses o' th' Barn Band at Paddington Station in 1905

suffering is insomnia, in so acute a form that his physician has ordered a long sea voyage and a prolonged rest with change of scene and surroundings.' Owen accepted this advice and sailed to Australia, but not before winning with Mossley at Belle Vue! The cruise worked, Owen regained full health returning to England near the end of March 1898, whereupon *Brass Band News* advertised: 'Come and give Mr A Owen a welcome - come to hear the marvellous Valkyrie selection.' Possibly undertaken during the cruise this was apparently Owen's latest arrangement and was to be played at a concert given by Besses in May 1898.

Owen went on to win the first Crystal Palace National contest in 1900, organised by John Henry Iles, conducting *Denton Original*. The beginning of the 20th century saw Besses o' th' Barn Band under Owen at the height of their success, starting with their only win at the National Championship at the Crystal Palace in 1903. In fact, this turned out to be Owen's final major contest success.

Having won this, Besses embarked on a complete change of direction. The owner of both the National and Belle Vue contests, John Henry Iles, whose life was explored in January's *British Bandsman*, became a focal point for the band. He wanted to broaden the appeal of brass bands beyond the contest platform, and he promoted the band on an extensive tour of England, Scotland and Wales in 1904, undertaking nearly 100 engagements and culminating in a week of concerts in London. That was nothing, however, compared to what was to follow. In May 1905 they went again on tour and then, in June, performed at Windsor Castle before the Royal family. This was followed by an 11-day tour of France to raise funds for various

French charities. Iles's main reason for this was to strengthen the Entente Cordiale by creating a link between the working people of the two countries. This had the support of Arthur Balfour, the Prime Minister. After the first concert in Paris, Alexander Owen was decorated Officier de 'Instruction Publique by the Under-Secretary of Fine Arts. The Besses players, on the invitation of President Loubet, took part, with various French bands, in a function held in the Tuileries Gardens. They performed a lengthy programme, which was received with great enthusiasm. The band also visited Marseilles, Lyons and Dieppe before returning to England. But it didn't end there as Besses then embarked on another mammoth UK tour, ending the year having given 193 performances.

Even more ambitious was a world tour. It came about through a major exhibition planned for Christchurch, New Zealand. A service band was intended to provide the music, but the military authorities would not permit a regimental band to play and Iles was approached. Thus, in July 1906 Besses, led by Owen, sailed for New York and after playing in several American cities went to Canada and then to Honolulu, the Fiji Islands, reaching New Zealand in December. They arrived in Sydney, Australia in May 1907 - playing to 25,000 at the famous cricket ground - and eventually returned to England in the December.

The tour was at one stage at risk of falling through. Owen had asked for an advance fee of £300 from John Henry Iles, as tour organiser. Iles agreed to pay only £150, and at this point the tour only proceeded after a legal agreement was drawn up. It must have been tight time-wise as the agreement is dated 17 July 1906. As a result, under the terms of the agreement, Iles advanced the further £150 to Owen in

return for the documents of title to the Besses band room - the band had been a limited company, called 'The Besses o'th Barn Old Band Union Ltd' (sic) since 1887. Iles held these documents until the end of the tour. Owen's fee in today's money was almost £35,000. In 1909, Besses set out again on another world tour, this time taking in South Africa as well.

Owen wrote his own form of tribute to these amazing tours in the shape of two marches. One was called *World Tour*, the title speaking for itself. The other, written on the second tour in New Zealand, was named after a famous porpoise, known to seafarers as Polorous Jack. One of the diaries kept by the players records the ship as the SS Pateena when the idea came about. Owen's score includes a triangle part, said to be an imitation of the dinner gong which rang to summon the players to their meal just as he finished writing it.

The last decade of Owen's life seems to have been relatively quiet. Besses went on tour once again in 1912, this time to Canada, but without Owen. They returned to Belle Vue in 1918 - their first contest in England since 1903 - with Owen who had only conducted at Belle Vue in 1914 and 1917 in the war years. They came third. On 29 July 1920, aged 69, a few weeks before the Belle Vue contest, Alex Owen died of a stroke at his son's house, where he had stopped off on returning from adjudicating at the Newtown Contest. He was laid to rest in Stretford Cemetery just outside Manchester. By far the wealthiest of The Great

Triumvirate, Owen left £18,319 in his will - over £770,000 today.

Owen's successor was William Wood, who had worked his way up on cornet and ended up at Black Dyke Mills. Just before the First World War he had played for Owen's professional band in Southport. As the band readied themselves on stage at Belle Vue, Wood pointed to his baton and quietly said to the players, "I'm not conducting you today - Mr Owen is. This is his stick guiding us all. He is going to be conducting you today!". Later he related "it was really very, very strange. I'm sure he was there you know, looking down on us all. Anyway, there it was. We played and we won. And no-one had given us - given me - a chance."

On 6 September 1920 a meeting was held of his friends and colleagues at Belle Vue, Manchester. The Alexander Owen Memorial Fund was established to provide scholarships for young players of exceptional promise under the age of 18. Winners included Elgar Clayton (1929), Arthur Butterworth (1939), Gracie Cole (1942), Bram Gay (1945) and Elgar Howarth (1951). The Fund no longer exists and as a charity was removed from the Charity Commission register in February 2000.

In a little over 12 months it will be the centenary of the death of Alex Owen. Perhaps this will provide the opportunity for some performances of his arrangements and to remember one of the most important figures in the history of the brass band.

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