

MUSIC PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN ST HELENA CULTURE

by Trevor W. Hearl

During the last few years there has been a remarkable growth in literature and societies devoted to St Helena, reflecting an unprecedented interest by “the outside world” in the island. No longer a mere stage for Napoleonic dramas, its vital role in commerce, empire and science is being explored, while travelogues, histories and chronicles of churches and schools record its home-grown affairs. But behind the enthusiasm for flora, fauna, philately, and so forth, lurks a danger. Though most studies have their cast-list of characters, showing at least that St Helena is not a desert island, too few focus on the “Saints” and their cultural heritage.

A few exceptions can be cited fortunately. Welcome information is available on island recipes, dialect and literature, and a valuable “genetical and medical study of an isolated community” by Dr Ian Shine, modestly entitled *Serendipity in St Helena*, was published in 1970. Recently the citizenship campaign and Dr Charlton’s TV research have promoted islanders to centre-stage, and now from the heart, as it were, comes a growing body of home-spun material on the thriving musical life of the island.

Eric George, a retired Education Officer, lifelong promoter of St Helena music and one of its most versatile musicians, has set himself the hard task of rescuing local songs and melodies by transcribing words and music, recording them on tape and publishing the results for posterity. Making music is one of the community’s most popular cultural activities exploiting an inherent talent that, from a total population of 5,500 souls, provides live music for every occasion, sacred or secular. Mr. George’s publications are produced entirely on the island and thus doubly welcome. It is no easy assignment but with colleagues’ help, a few recordings and a computer, two books of words and music have been published, *St Helena Songs 1941-1994* and *Fibre: an Island Musical*, evoking memories of the flax industry, with a companion cassette bringing the books to life by playing the music of “Fibre” and the lyrics and music of nine songs. A third booklet, *Music on St Helena* sets the musical scene in schools and society since the war.

ST HELENA SONGS

In a Foreword to *St Helena Songs 1941-1994*, Governor Hoole praises Mr. George’s “perseverance, enthusiasm and hard work”, and makes the important point that it gives readers a “richer knowledge and understanding of St Helena. Some of the adult songs have a strong political theme in which past events are portrayed in a colourful and lively manner. Many of the children’s songs indicate a simple and touching love of their island but sometimes concern for the future”.

Over fifty songs are given with their scores, half of them by pupils at school. Most depict a “Happy, Happy Island” where “Things are Going Well”, and ships, flowers, fishing and even the advent of automatic telephones, inspire optimism and pleasure. There are occasional doubts: “Today I think your beauty is eroding/ But still I’m pleased to be a part of you/ Despite the friction that’s among our people [...]”; and more specifically, “Modernisation has ruined its old face / Fumes and pollution; more noise ev’ry day” but the overwhelming impression is of islanders celebrating their “paradise isle”.

AN ISLAND MUSICAL

The musical “Fibre” is no less evocative of island sentiment. Written and presented by secondary school pupils and teacher trainees, it had its premiere in 1984 before Prince Andrew on the 150th anniversary of the colony’s transfer from the East India Company to the Crown. The text is prefaced by a helpful note on the flax industry. Though the first song opens “Oh, what a beautiful morning”, this is no *Oklahoma*, but a tale of long hours, dirty work, aching backs and poor pay. Some songs (“Scotching”, “Strip and Wash”, “The Chopper” and “Baling”) stress its laborious processes and that well-remembered whine of machines echoing across the valleys, with music to match. But as the finale explains, “We really have no choice, we really need the pay/ And slav’ry in the mill is the only way”.

A MUSICAL ISLAND

Music on St Helena provides a valuable introduction to developments over the last half century, bringing up to date Tony Cross’s keen appreciation of “Music in St Helena” in 1960 (Making Music No.42 8-10). In schools, where 40% of pupils are estimated to have musical gifts, progress in practical and theoretical musical education has been outstanding. No fewer than 176 pupils passed Royal School of Music examinations during 1980-84. On-island bands and orchestras, and the sensitive issue of musical taste (or “Styles of Music” as he tactfully puts it) Mr. George has laid firm foundations for future research. He estimates that most prefer “heavy disco sounds”, though “country style” seems more typical of island taste, closely followed by “light music” of the dance-band era. Clearly Radio St Helena has a heavy responsibility here, though church services should not be underestimated as a source of musical experience. Otherwise isolation condemns islanders to a narrow range, unfortunately, and social pressures to conform are inhibiting in a close-knit community. It is difficult to know what life chances in music are denied to individuals, but some outstanding musicians have gone overseas.

Most households have a guitar, however, and there are over 40 pianos and organs on the island. The supply of band instruments, from big bass drum to euphonium, might support five bands and, with woodwinds and strings, a respectable orchestra - the “Gettogethers” raised over £2,000 for theirs. Maintenance is a problem to which the Royal Marines School of Music generously responded in 1992 and 1994 by renovating many school and band instruments free of charge.

AN HISTORIC HERITAGE

St Helena's military and dance bands offer residents and visitors regular experience of live music. The contribution to community life made, for example, by the Gettogethers' Orchestra and the Syncopated Saints dance band, and the role of country trios in enlivening evenings in isolated valleys, are cultural assets to be cherished. The Salvation Army band has a century of service behind it and the St Helena Band a century and a half; such legacies should clearly be chronicled. Many a patriotic St Helena bandsman, at home or overseas, would be delighted to recall "old times" BBC correspondent Mike Thomson's favourite recollection of St Helena in 1994 was of Wilf Thomas returning, after 49 years at the Cape, to play with the St Helena Band of which his father had been bandmaster.

A few years ago I was taken back to the mid-19th century origins of the St Helena Band by a New Zealand correspondent who kindly sent me a copy of "The Briars", the first of a set of St Helena Waltzes composed by Bandmaster Callen of the St Helena Regiment and dedicated to Miss Solomon. In those days, according to Grant's *St Helena Guide* of 1883 (p. 51), the Castle Gardens were "thronged with persons who assembled there to listen to the sweet music discoursed by the fine band of the late St Helena Regiment (styled the "Old Saints") twice a week in fine weather, and that of the St Helena Volunteers on moonlight nights".

More about the Bandmaster and his Waltzes has yet to be discovered, like so much else in the island's rich musical history. But Eric George has set a practical example of what needs to be done; may his efforts on behalf of St Helena's heritage get the support they deserve.

- Eric M. George (ed): *St Helena Songs 1941-1994. Words and Music.* 100 pp. £9.99.
- Eric M. George (comp): *Fibre, an Island Musical. Words and Music.* 40 pp. £5.50.
- Cassette: *Fibre & St Helena Songs.* Transcribed and recorded by E.M. George.
- Eric M. George: *Music on St Helena.* Revised edition 1995 40pp. £2.99.

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