Charles Godfrey Jnr. - the insult that lasted nine years

Gavin Holman, 4 April 2021

Charles Godfrey Jnr. (1839-1919) was the son of Charles Godfrey Snr. (1790-1863), the well-known bandmaster of the Coldstream Guards Band from 1825 to his death in 1863. He had equally notable brothers in Daniel Godfrey (1831-1903) - bandmaster of the Grenadier Guards from 1856 for forty years, also a noted composer of marches and waltzes; and Adolphus Godfrey (1837-1882), known as "Fred", who took over from his father as bandmaster of the Coldstream Guards in 1863, until 1880, also an accomplished arranger of music for military bands.

Charles Godfrey Jnr., as a schoolboy, played with his father’s orchestra at the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens, went on to study at the Royal Academy of Music, and he played the clarinet in Jullien’s orchestra. In 1860 he became bandmaster of the Scots Fusiliers, going on to be the bandmaster of the Royal Horse Guards from 1868 to 1904. He was a prolific arranger for military and brass bands, and he adjudicated many brass band contests in his career.

His arrangements of selections of classical and operatic music for brass band were particularly popular with audiences and bands alike. These were often selected as test pieces for many brass band competitions and, in particular, the British Open Brass Band Championships, held each year in September, where one of his arrangements was the test piece each year from 1872 to 1923 (with the exception of 1922).

At the British Open contest on Monday 3 September 1888, Charles Godfrey Jnr. was one of the three adjudicators judging the 16 bands who competed, out of the 21 that had entered; the others being J. Kendrick Pyne and George Miller. The test piece that day was Godfrey’s arrangement of Richard Wagner’s Der Fliegende Holländer.

The contest proceeded as usual, with the bands drawing an order to play, unknown to the judges, who were hidden from sight behind screens, thus ensuring a fair adjudication on musical merit with no bias (conscious or unconscious) from the three “men in the box”.

Leeds Forge Band took the stage first, conducted by Edwin Swift, and the others followed apace, concluding with Todmorden Old Band, conducted by Edwin Swift again. It was not unusual for professional conductors to lead several bands at a contest,
particularly for the higher-ranked bands and competitions – Edwin Swift led three of the bands that day; John Gladney, three; and Alexander Owen, five.

It was only when the results were announced that matters took an unsavoury turn. Wyke Temperance Band took first place, winning £30, a trombone, and a cornet. Black Dyke Mills Band were second, winning £25 and a cornet. Todmorden Old Band were third, winning £20 and a baritone. Wyke Old Band were fourth, winning £12. Oldham Rifles Band were fifth, winning £8. The last prize-winning band, Rochdale Amateur Band, were sixth, winning £5.

Seeing the first four prizes being taken by Yorkshire bands, some of the audience showed their dissatisfaction of this result “presumably friends of those who were not successful” – and the judges were “subjected to some hustling” as they left the room. Charles Godfrey is reported to have remarked that “… he had officiated at these contests for 17 years, and this was the first time he had been subjected to such treatment”.

An account from the Manchester Guardian in the following days:

“As soon as the contest had concluded the greatest excitement prevailed in the hall. The decision of the judges, however, was not long delayed. Mr. Godfrey announced their decision. ... It was evident that the judges' decision did not meet with general approval when announced to the audience which crowded the great hall. And while we have the greatest respect for the abilities of the gentlemen who acted as judges on this occasion, and are fully sensible of the difficult and onerous character of their duties, we do not wonder that their awards were received with some surprise. That the Besses-o'-th'—Barn Band was not awarded the first prize was a surprise to many - ourselves included; but that it should not even have been placed amongst the first six was inexplicable.”

Sadly, only the judges’ remarks for the prize-winning bands were published in the Brass Band News, of October 1888, so any comparison with the remarks of the aggrieved bands’ performances is not possible. A letter from “Crochet”, in that same issue of Brass Band News, states:

“I have been an attendee at the Belle Vue Brass Band Contests for the last 30 years, and as a musician (professional) for many years, I have taken great interest in the above contests, but, to my mind, I never was more surprised at any decision of judges than that given on this occasion. I sat and listened, along with a brother professional, for over five hours, each with conductor’s copies, and we decided that by far the best performance was that rendered by the Besses-o'-th'—Barn Band. And what could induce the judges to ignore the performance of this band to me and many others is enveloped in mystery.”

Another correspondent, “The Professor”, from Skipton, makes a number of points in his letter:

“Will you allow me a little space to enter a protest against the disgusting exhibition of brutality and ignorance by the disappointed bands or their hot-headed followers at Belle Vue? Are we to revert to the primitive style of judging contests? Are the
awards to be placed in the hands of the audience? It seems that this is what is desired by the fools alluded to above. I have heard a little whisper, and I hope it is true, that if Messrs. Jennison can find out which particular band or bands were the chief offenders, they never allow them to compete at Belle Vue again. Bravo! say I. One or two of the disappointed bands are cheering themselves with what one or two judges have told them, viz., “Can't understand it; you ought to have been first or second,” &c. I would remind these gentlemen (judges) of Pope's line - Fools rush in where angels fear to tread — for I know that neither of them can measure against any one of the Belle Vue adjudicators as musicians. And, moreover, I have heard each of these meddling gents "cursed most heartily" as unjust judges by the very men they were flattering. I am as certain as I write this that if the most perfect musician of all time, Mozart, was to rise from his grave to adjudicate this contest he would not satisfy all. Ridiculous exaggeration is what is practiced all round. The music written is not good enough, it must be improved until the composer himself would hardly know it. I never heard a band at Belle Vue playing a ff movement, but my taste and good sense revolts against it. They say it is not overblowing. If it is not overblowing, then I am sure that it is impossible to overblow, for each man blows as hard as he possibly can. It is painful to see the blowers gasping like half-strangled men. And the men who never heard the music in its original place, and know nothing of the intentions of the composer, set themselves up as judges of judges. However, I have protested and will not say much more. I hope Mr. Godfrey will not, in his disgust, resolve to hold himself aloof from Belle Vue, but I do hope that he will stipulate that, if anyone can bring home to any band or bands the charge of creating the uproar that they shall never more be allowed to compete. P.S. We are told how the people of Athens got tired of hearing one of their rulers termed "The Just," and so murdered him. Is Mr. Godfrey too just for the self-sufficient people I have been speaking of?

Other newspaper reports stated:

“A slight disturbance took place at the close.”

“The judges were hissed and hooted, and as they left the large hall in which the contest took place, attempts were made to subject them to rough usage. Mr Godfrey found it necessary to secure the protection of a police constable. The judges were naturally incensed at such conduct, which, if repeated, may tend to prevent their attendance at future contests.”

A contemporary assessment of Godfrey’s selection arrangement of the Flying Dutchman indicates the pitfalls that some bands may well have encountered:

“Copies of the arrangement were supplied to the competing bands some weeks ago. In preparing this selection Mr. Godfrey had an eye to testing the artistic skill of the performers rather than their executive ability, but an inspection of the score shows that no slight demand was made upon the bandsmen in this latter respect, especially in the case of the bass instruments, not a few of the passages for which required both delicate and rapid treatment. It is not surprising, therefore, that where weakness was observable in any of the bands it was usually in the trombones and kindred instruments, and this was chiefly to be noted in the few phrases of solo music given to them here and there in the score. The cornets generally came out well, and exhibited nice tone and delicacy of treatment. Taken as a whole, however, the
playing can scarcely be said to be up to the level of the performances at previous competitions, and this probably is to be attributed to the fact that the players were not familiar with Wagner's music, and that it requires a rather different treatment to that of the composers with whose works they are better acquainted. The bands one and all played with precision and made the distinctions between light and shade, but in many cases the distinction was too clear and too sudden, and there was an absence of that artistic playing which Mr. Godfrey had desired to elicit. ... In nearly every case the bandsmen, on mounting the orchestra, dropped their hats and jackets - a practice which, however bad it might look to the spectators, was perhaps permissible considering the heat of the room. The applause was generous, but frequently ill-timed, and many of the audience must have lost some of the finest passages in consequence of the noise made by hundreds of persons entering and leaving. This, however, was unavoidable.”

Following this, which clearly upset Godfrey, he announced that he would no longer adjudicate at brass band contests in Lancashire and Yorkshire. This was a promise that he kept for the next nine years – indeed he did not judge any other brass band contests – until he was persuaded to return to the judge’s box for the 1897 British Open Contest, at which his arrangement of Rossini’s Moses in Egypt was the test piece.

He had, however, continued his arrangements for brass bands, despite his rough treatment in Manchester in 1888, and these continued to be selected for the British Open contests even though he was no longer willing to act as a judge.

His relationships with brass band contests obviously now healed, he continued to act as an adjudicator at the British Open and the National Championships through to 1914.

An interesting article appeared in The Hospital – a medical journal – of 13 April 1889, following pieces on the diseases caused by too tight lacing of women’s bodices, and the benefits, or otherwise, of skimmed milk:

"Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast. So sang the poet, and so all men have believed. But however truly the poet may have spoken in regard to "savage" breasts, it appears quite certain that in "civilised" bosoms the effect of music may be the very opposite of "soothing." The North of England, and particularly the manufacturing districts of West Yorkshire and Lancashire, delight in "contests" of all sorts. "Dog-running" is popular there, and "pigeon flying," and "cockfighting," and, it is to be feared, "pugilism." But the love of fighting shows itself in milder forms, and "contests" of rival brass bands are among the chief pastimes of the summer
Music, therefore, in these cases is put to quite a different use from that of "soothing"; it is, in fact, merely an additional method of defying and conquering your enemy. Unhappily, every brass band cannot carry off the "blue riband" of victory. Only one can take first prize; many must always go home without any prize at all. That the North countryman refuses to understand. Like our splendid Peninsular veterans, he never knows when he is beaten. This dogged determination of his to be on the winning side is likely to cost him dear in the immediate future. Mr. Charles Godfrey, so long and so well known as an adjudicator in band contests, declines, it is stated, to act as a "judge" any more, either in Lancashire or Yorkshire, owing to some rough usage he received at Bellevue last year at the hands of disappointed competitors. North country people will not be surprised to hear of the rough usage, however deeply they may regret it. They know the temper of their fellow countrymen all too well. Not very long ago, in another part of the country, it is said to have been quite a common thing for those bands to whom no prize had been awarded to lay prompt hands on the adjudicators and "duck" them in the nearest pond. Of course all this has its amusing side. But membership in a brass band is often of great educational and health value to thousands of men who are cooped up in factories and coalpits five or six days a week, and it is eminently desirable that all possible stimulus shall be given to the men to practise and excel in their work. No stimulus is stronger than that of competition, and no competition is worth anything except that which is adjudicated upon by competent judges. To adopt a course of conduct which drives the best judges from the judgment seat is a death-blow to all excellence. In the interests of a healthy and educational recreation of great value, it may be hoped that Mr. Charles Godfrey will reconsider his decision, and that Lancashire and Yorkshire men will learn to accept defeat with a better grace.”

Charles Godfrey’s experiences with the unhappy losers at the contest were not the only instances where judges had to make swift exits from the contest ground, and while the emotions and rivalries in band contests remain strong to this day, it is now rare to have any overt or outward displays of displeasure at results – though the cries of “we was robbed” have often echoed in the pubs and band rooms across the land!

The “souvenir” below was reprinted from the Brass Band News of 1st September 1888, and it was distributed to attendees at the Belle Vue contest on the day of the British Open that year.
THE 36th ANNUAL BELLE VUE CHAMPION BRASS BAND CONTEST, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1883.

TEST PIECE

THE "FLYING DUTCHMAN".

CHARLES GODFREY, JOHN GLADNEY.

STORY OF THE OPERA.

Andrewes Wagner in the "Flying Dutchman" is a very fine piece in the role and touches upon certain points. The story of Wagner in the "Flying Dutchman" is a very fine piece, but the music is somewhat less satisfactory. The story of Wagner in the "Flying Dutchman" is perhaps the best, but the music is somewhat less satisfactory.

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THE "FLYING DUTCHMAN." (A.)

CHARLES GODFREY.

STORY OF THE OPERA.

Wagner's song (The Dutchman). The description of opera above where Wagner's song "The Flying Dutchman" begins is a very fine piece. The story of Wagner in the "Flying Dutchman" is perhaps the best, but the music is somewhat less satisfactory.

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THE "FLYING DUTCHMAN." (B.)

A. GLADNEY.

STORY OF THE OPERA.

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THE "FLYING DUTCHMAN." (C.)

EDWIN ASWIFT.

STORY OF THE OPERA.

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