

Chapter 1

‘On the Breeze a Sound is Stealing’: 1840–1870



There are male voice choirs in Wales today that call themselves ‘glee singers’ or ‘gleemen’, but they owe little apart from their conviviality to the original gentlemen’s glee parties of 18th-century England. The glee was an unaccompanied part song (i.e. a song that combined various vocal parts) for, generally, male voices, and it was an offspring of the round and the catch, where the voices appear to chase each other (from the Italian *caccia*, the chase) but never catching up. The posh London Catch Club, founded in London in 1761 for sociability and singing, was a pretext for drinking and dining, essentially song-and-supper occasions where inebriation and jocularly of a peculiarly male and lavatorial kind predominated. The glee was altogether more moral and modest than the increasingly obscene catch, and as it might include female voices, the more salacious material was rejected.

The tendency of the English glee to divide the text into small sections with different emotional colouring, detailed dynamics, chromatic harmonies and some basic counterpoint was inherited by the larger scale male voice choruses of Welsh composers from Joseph Parry onwards, but there the similarity ends. The glee did sometimes go beyond romantic love, the hunt and the fairies to more topical even mundane subjects like ‘My pocket’s low and taxes high’ (Samuel Webbe, c.1800), but after dabbling with the seasons (‘Yr Haf’/‘Summer’, by Gwilym Gwent c. 1863) and nature (‘Y Gwlithyn’/‘The Dewdrop’, Alaw Ddu, c. 1864), which were ideal for the smaller vocal groupings that were by then springing up across Wales, Welsh composers would soon be drawn to write meatier choruses

that larger ensembles relished and were already picking up from the French repertoire like Adolphe Adam's 'Comrades in Arms' which dates from the 1830s and which smaller glee groups were already singing.

The vocal grouping was different too. The most popular deployment of voices to sing English glees was male alto, tenor, tenor, bass (ATTB) or TTB, with the male alto singing falsetto, or counter-tenor; composers also wrote for sopranos and female altos as well as men (SATB and SSATB) with one voice to a part. The glee more often than not was for unaccompanied solo voices. It happened differently in chapel-going, hymn-singing Wales, which never wholly embraced the glee in its pure form, any more than it took to its heart what Mendelssohn called 'the bearded alto' which was chiefly associated with cathedral and courtly milieus in England. The glee was cheery, light and decorous. The Welsh were not.

Essentially, what prevented the English-style glee tradition from planting deep roots in Wales, apart from the inherent melancholy of its inhabitants, was the strength of religious Nonconformity and the encouragement it gave to harmonised congregational singing. The popularity of four-part hymnody in the chapels of Wales produced a fondness for SATB anthems and choruses which dispensed with the bearded alto. Glees and catches were unaccompanied rounds for three to five solo voices, less commonly six to eight. But in Wales, with its enormous parallel growth of population and Nonconformity, John Curwen's tonic solfa system, which reached Wales in the 1860s, nurtured collective harmonised singing. And whereas in England glees tended to be the preserve of the comfortable class, the Welsh male voice choir has its roots in the working class and working-class conditions.

The first known example of a Welsh glee is a 'Canig Ddirwest', a temperance glee of 1845. The Merthyr and Dowlais Temperance Choir sang glees in 1862 at a local abstinence festival and, we can safely say, brought to them the muscularity which would always characterise the singing there and was far removed from the more refined English style. Similarly, while the pre-eminent Welsh exponent of the English type of glee was Tredegar-born Gwilym Gwent (William Aubrey Williams, 1834–91), one of his first compositions was the robust 'Chwi Feibion Dirwest' ('Ye sons of temperance') for the Aberdare Temperance Eisteddfod in 1860. If Samuel Webbe brought the glee to perfection in England, Gwilym Gwent

was his equivalent in Wales, to the extent that the Rhondda publisher Isaac Jones of Treherbert thought it worth commissioning work from him even after Gwilym had migrated to Pennsylvania in 1872.

Temperance retained its influence longer than the glee, whose compositional popularity was short-lived but intense, in Wales peaking in the 1860s and 1870s. The English glee, compositionally, had dried up in the 1830s; it reached Wales later. It seems to have appealed little to mid-century composers like John Ambrose Lloyd and Tanymarian (Edward Stephen) whose output was mainly hymns, anthems and oratorios, but the next generation responded enthusiastically albeit briefly. Joseph Parry entered three glees for the 1863 National Eisteddfod in Swansea, beating Gwilym Gwent's 'Yr Haf' in the process. The glee exercised the compositional skills of others like Alaw Ddu (W. T. Rees), John Thomas, D.W. Lewis and D. Emlyn Evans. Rees's 'Y Gwlithyn', particularly, was a popular test piece up to 1914 and 'glee' ('canig') was the name given to compositions for smaller choirs of 20 to 30 voices well into the 20th century. The glee, 'a much neglected style of composition in Wales,' Dr T. Hopkin Evans told the National Eisteddfod audience at Cardiff in 1938, 'is not a laboured trick effect for competitive singing; it should be a graceful story told in melodious harmony with all the delicacy and strength suggested by words and music'.

By the 1870s we detect a shift: the Welsh preference was increasingly for full-blooded European choruses influenced more by the flourishing *orphéoniste* movement of male choirs in France than by jolly English glee clubs. These were better suited to the well-drilled choir that reflected the equally well-disciplined workforce found in the rapidly industrialising Wales of the 19th century with its premium on teamwork and co-operation. But the distinction wasn't clear cut. The ambivalence of the Welsh situation is illustrated by the difficulty we have in seeking to distinguish between the glees and part-songs of Joseph Parry. Most of the part-songs he composed in the 1860s are glees: his 'Sleighbing Glee' of 1873 was written for SATB with accompaniment, but while his 'Sailors Chorus' or 'Cytgan y Morwyr' (its refrain 'Codwn hwyl' dubbed 'Cod in Oil' by more irreverent choristers) and sung by Welsh – and Cornish – choristers a century later also dates from that time, it can hardly be described as a glee for it is one of his more robust men's choruses, its virility anticipating his later 'Pilgrims Chorus'



(National Library Wales)

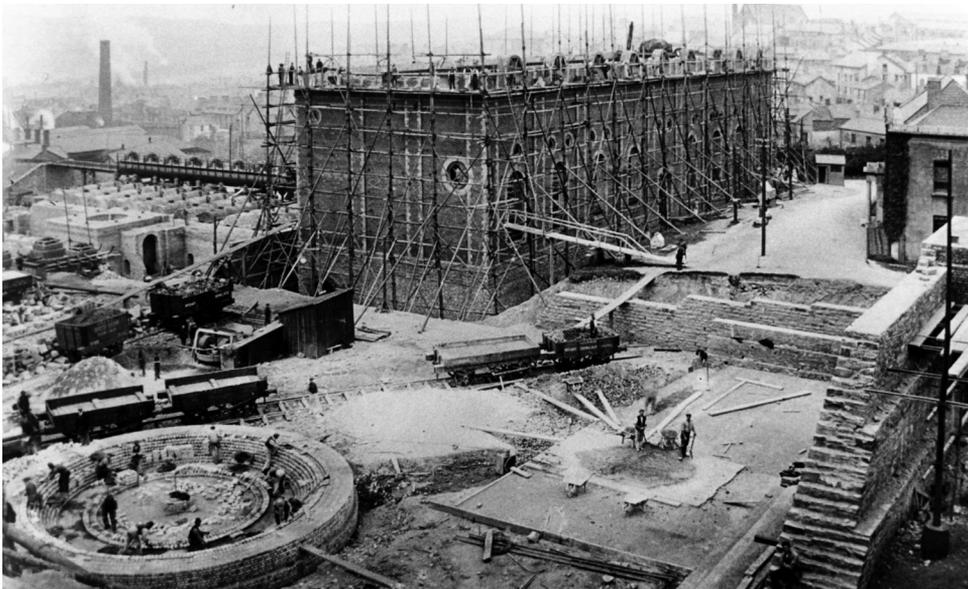
(‘Cytgan y Pererinion’, c.1886) and ‘Iesu o Nazareth’ (1898). The ‘Sailors Chorus’ was signposting the direction the Welsh male voice choir was ready to take, and in Haverfordwest, for instance, they knew the difference: a glee society was already in existence when the Haverfordwest male voice choir was formed independently of it in 1896.

Clearly, therefore, glee societies were common in Wales by the 1860s. The Merthyr Glee party entertained the Cymreigyddion of Abergavenny in 1839, and we hear of an Abersychan glee party in 1847. The Twyn Carno Musical Society of Rhymney (Cymdeithas Gerddorol Twyn Carno) had been in existence for at least fifteen years when the monthly journal *Y Cerddor Cymreig* (‘The Welsh Musician’), in the first year of its appearance, reported on its concert of four-part glees in 1861 and it was in no way the first example of such activity. In January 1849 the ‘celebrated glee singers from Rhymney’ gave a concert in Tredegar Town Hall under the patronage of the ironmaster Samuel Homfray. Glee groups competed at Lady Llanover’s Abergavenny eisteddfodau in the 1830s and 1840s. There was glee singing at the Aberafan eisteddfod in 1853, and the following year the local Band and Glee Club sang at Dowlais station for the families of soldiers ‘engaged at the seat of war’ in the Crimea.

We notice the link with the seats of industry too, and it is in the iron, coal and copper towns almost without exception (the announcement in 1849 that a glee society was to be formed in Chepstow being one of them) that this small-scale form of choral singing is to be found. In July 1856, at about the time the Pontypool Glee and Madrigal Society came into existence, the Brynmawr Glee Club was entertaining the clientele at the Rock and Fountain Inn in Clydach (Gwent). Throughout the 1860s the Monmouthshire press reports the activities of glee parties in Blackwood, Rhymney, Gilwern, Beaufort, Tredegar, Ebbw Vale and Craigfargoed; by the end of the decade the infection has spread beyond the industrial south to Llanddewi-brefi (Cardiganshire) and to Rhydymain, Corris and Dolgellau (Merionethshire). Further north again, there were glee parties active, in a mostly genteel environment, in Ruthin, Denbigh and Pwllheli. North met South when the the Mountain Ash and Merthyr Glee Parties combined singing with a seaside visit to Tywyn and Pwllheli in 1866, while the Blaenau Ffestiniog Glee Party is in 1867 performing a varied programme in both languages by Henry Bishop, Rossini, Joseph Parry

and Alaw Ddu, in support of a concert tour to raise money by Miss Megan Watts Hughes of Dowlais to further her musical education, an early hint of singing's role in fostering a nationwide musical identity. This was an indication, too, of the choral vibrance of this quarrying district that would assert itself even more strongly in years to come. Gentility was not a characteristic of the working class-singers of Blaenau any more than of industrial Mountain Ash and Merthyr.

The process of industrialisation in Wales is mostly associated with the development of iron smelting along the northern rim of the southern coalfield and the export of steam coal from the south-eastern valleys. But there were significant industrial developments, too, at the south-western extremity of the coalfield, in particular copper smelting and tinsplate manufacture in the Swansea/Neath region. For most of the first half of the 19th century, John Hugh Thomas tells us (in Griffiths, ed., 1990), 'Swansea relied for its music almost entirely on a succession of visiting musicians, some passing through like migratory birds, others settling in the town for most of their working lives'. From the 1850s its musical life began to be built on more solid foundations as chapels organised their own singing classes and choirs, and a town choral society was formed. By then the



The early Welsh glee parties were found in the seats of industry, like Dowlais, whose blast furnace site is seen here under construction in 1865. (Western Mail)

metallurgical industries of west Glamorgan were generating considerable vocal activity. Mid-century saw dramatic expansion in tinsplate: where in 1840 there were around 30 tinsplate works, extending in an arc from Llanelli through Swansea and its hinterland to Neath and Port Talbot, by 1890 there were over a hundred. The lower Swansea Valley in particular was one of the most important industrial centres in the kingdom and Swansea itself, 'Copperopolis', the centre of the global copper trade.

The population of the Swansea district increased from 6,631 in 1801 to 19,115 in 1851; it was 65,000 in 1881 and had more than doubled to 134,000 by 1901. By 1860 15 of the 18 copper works in the UK were in the Swansea area, and the peak of activity they reached in the decade before 1914 was reflected in the vigour of the region's musical life, just as it was in the pre-war success of Swansea's 'All Whites' champion rugby XV. While tinsplate works tended to cluster around the ports or along the river valleys, inland too the Ystalyfera Iron Company had diversified into tinsplate with numerous furnaces, mills and forges. Morryston's Forest, Dyffryn and Worcester works sprang up in the midst of the Lower Swansea Valley collieries. Tinsplate was manufactured in Cwmafan from the 1820s and Briton Ferry from 1850, with further expansion in the 1880s. The Gilbertsons were the princes of Pontardawe's tinsplate mills and steel furnaces while smelting was carried on in Landore and Llansamlet. In this sulphurous, foul-smelling setting the choir, like the chapel, offered an escape from industrial squalor.

Not coincidentally, here, in mid-century, glee parties take off. The Landore Tinsplate Glee Party, Oystermouth Glee class, Mumbles Glee class drawn from the Wesleyan chapel choir, Swansea Orpheus Glee Society, Llansamlet and Neath Abbey glee parties were all spawned in that hyperactive decade by Copperopolis' rich industrial heritage. They offered a platform to famed soloists like Eos Morlais (Robert Rees) and Llinos y De (the Southern Linnet, Lizzie Williams), and when the Morryston and Landore Glee Party gave a concert in 1873 they were accompanied by the ardent tonic-solfa propagandist W. T. Samuel, with 'Mr. G. R. Jones in attendance', none other than the burly Caradog, hero of the South Wales Choral Union's victories in 1872–3 at the Crystal Palace.

The Margam Copper Works Glee class met in a chapel schoolroom in the 1860s, with an emphasis on the educational, the learning of the

parts and musical notation, and the Cwmafan Works Glee Club, in existence from at least the early 1860s, was still active in the next century. The Swansea Glee and Madrigal Society sang in Swansea Town Hall in 1862, the year we also start to hear of Morryston Glee Party, a precursor of the great male and mixed choirs that would in time make that densely populated township a byword for choral excellence. It is clear that at this stage too women sang with the men. In this regard Welsh towns were perhaps influenced by the occasional incursions by English societies, like the visits to Newport in 1848 and 1849 of the Clifton Orpheus Glee singers, and of the Lady and Gentlemen Amateurs of Bristol and the London Glee and Madrigal Union to the Assembly Rooms in 1857 and 1866. It was a development to be welcomed for, writing in 1869, a self-styled 'Professor of Music' as was the Welsh way, wished that male glee societies 'be leavened by female voices. Concerts would be much better attended and the performances give greater satisfaction [for] without female voices the singing sounds both dull and disagreeable' (*Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 8 December 1869).

As regards dullness the professor was seriously wrong, as the emergence of the fully-fledged Welsh male choir was about to show. He was wrong on the gender exclusivity of the glees as well. The Libanus (Morryston) Glee Party included Mrs. W. A. Davies and Miss S. Abraham, and while Swansea's Crystal Glee Society consisted of seven men and three women, some of their names tell us something of their character and social origin: Messrs Routley, Prater, Cowman, Buse and Marton, and Misses Huxtable and Prucelle. The Temple Glee Society, also of Swansea, included Miss Puxley, Mrs Parker and Miss Southwell. We cannot be sure they sang Gwilym Gwent as well as Samuel Webbe, but around the copper works and in the thoroughly Welsh-speaking valleys of the Tawe, Nedd and Afan rivers, his compositions would certainly have had an airing.

A further influence were the Christy Minstrels, after Edwin P. Christy (1815–62) and also known as 'nigger minstrels', the generic name for black-faced groups of singers popular in the USA in the 1840s and 1850s, whose tuneful songs featuring allegedly African-American harmonies soon caught on in the UK. We hear of concerts by Christy Minstrels in Cardiff and Newport in 1860, while another at Taibach in 1861 included selections from a repertoire that was condemned outright by the religious

and musical reformer Ieuan Gwyllt (Revd John Roberts) as nothing less than 'sensation music ... feeding the most debased instincts' (*Y Cerddor Cymreig*, March, 1867).

A more significant portent of things to come was that while, at a Temperance Festival at Tabernacle, Merthyr, in 1862, local choirs sang glees and part-songs, they also performed larger choruses like the 'Credo' from Mozart's (attributed) Twelfth Mass. By 1869 the appeal of substantial works solely for male choirs as opposed to small glee parties had reached north Wales too, for that year the men of Engedi, Caernarfon, who constituted the male section of the mixed Eryri (Snowdonia) Musical Union, were getting their teeth into 'Martyrs of the Arena' and 'Comrades in Arms'. Much more would be heard of these particular choruses in the years ahead but for the present, the Welsh male choral tradition was slow in finding its feet. For all the heroics of the *Côr Mawr* there were no Welsh entrants in the competition for male choirs at the Crystal Palace in 1872 or 1873; they left the field to choirs from Bristol, London and Liverpool. It couldn't have helped that the test pieces by Mendelssohn and Schubert were then wholly unknown in Wales. Though Schubert's 'Gondolier's Serenade' would eventually become familiar from the 1950s, it did not feature as a National test piece until 1984. When it did, it was for 'glee' choirs under 40 voices, while the test for the 'second' competition of 40–70 voices that year was a TTBB arrangement of 'Sound an Alarm' from Handel's 'Judas Maccabeus', and for the 'chief' Joseph Parry's 'Pererinion'. That was an indication in a nutshell of what glees could and could not do.

It was an indication, too, that the Welsh experience was part of a wider pattern. Male choirs emerge in Europe from the early 19th century. Initially they were associated with democratic and nationalist sentiment, as in Austria. In countries like Serbia and Bulgaria the movement had an explicit political agenda, an element in a nationalist project. When from mid-century male choirs became a feature of public life from Spain to Scandinavia, too, the emergence of choirs was simultaneous with a growth of a less assertive national consciousness which triggered a musical awakening, especially on the edge of Europe. In these countries, as well as in established states, choirs and festivals became important vehicles for the expression of national and regional identity (Lajosi etc., 2015). Wales was no exception.