

‘O the days of the Kerry dancing!’

– Irish Song Composers in Victorian England

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“Of all the different kinds of concerts now recognized in England the least artistic, though in many respects the most popular, is the ballad concert.”

The anonymous writer in this 1873 article in the *Pall Mall Gazette*¹ not only sums up an aesthetic phenomenon of his age, but at the same time presents us with his value judgement. The ballad concert, he says, is the “least artistic” kind of concert, but also the “most popular”, implying that what is popular is, or at least tends to be, less artistic. It is a theme that, from Victorian times, is a dividing line in the perception of music up to the present day. I will use it as an undercurrent in my paper on Irish song composers in Victorian England, and if I say ‘song’ (and not ‘ballad’) I am aware that I am making a value judgement as well – perhaps not so much because I am convinced of the artistic merits of this music, but initially as an alternative view for you to think about.

For Victorian times, what distinguishes a song from a ballad is not as obvious as it may seem. For while there were indeed a number of composers who exclusively wrote easy songs and piano music for ballad recitals and the drawing room, quite a few names are actually much better known as composers of larger-scale operas, cantatas or orchestral music. A view at the Irish composers working in this medium will underline this idea. Most of them had emigrated to England or at least had their music published there. For here we have the opera composers Michael Balfe and Vincent Wallace, the pianist George Alexander Osborne, the folk-song collector William Forde, the all-round entertainer Samuel Lover, and later in the century the prolific Charles Villiers Stanford. With Stanford, Hope Temple and Alicia Needham we enter the Edwardian period, of course.

All of these composers published a substantial amount of songs and/or ballads, and there are many cases where it is extremely difficult to draw the line between the two. That same article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* has a comment on opera that may well be applied to Balfe and Wallace:

“In an English opera, ballads (especially if they delay the action, and have nothing whatever to do with the plot) are the only musical pieces absolutely certain to obtain applause; [...]”²

¹ ‘Ballad Concerts’, in: *Pall Mall Gazette*, 19 Feb. 1873, p. 10.

² *ibid*

In Stanford's case one might argue that he wrote art songs, ballads, and folk-song arrangements at the same time. But while some of them can safely be put into one of these categories, others are not. Often it is up to the performing singer to give a simple song a higher artistic quality. This is very well illustrated by a singer like John McCormack whom you will hear in a few minutes.

I think one can safely say that in the Victorian era a ballad was a hybrid art form that had elements of art song and popular music at the same time. Although clearly published with a commercial perspective in mind from which publisher, composer and performer benefited, there is a clear difference to popular music as it slowly began to take shape not too much later during the 1920s and '30s. And this is that they were performed by classically trained singers with classical soprano, contralto, tenor or baritone voices, and accompanied by a classical grand piano. Some of the best opera and oratorio singers of the time performed these songs, some turning to ballads exclusively (probably after they had noticed how well they filled their purses), including Helen Lemmens Sherrington (1834-1906), one of the leading English operatic sopranos of the 1860s, the contralto Antoinette Sterling (1850-1904) ten years later, or the once-famous baritone Charles Santley (1834-1922).

The easy-going attitude of Victorian concert-goers, as regards the distinction between the artistic and the popular, is very well described by Ronald Pearsall in his 1973 study of *Victorian Popular Music*:

“The most prominent feature of the nineteenth-century musical scene was that music was not departmentalised, and a man could go in one evening from a ballad concert, sniffing over ‘Home, Sweet Home’, to a promenade concert, revelling in a Beethoven symphony, on to a music hall, joining in the chorus of a ribald ditty, and back to a musical evening at home, where Mendelssohn’s *Songs without Words* [...] rubbed shoulders with ‘Champaign Charlie’.”³

For the early decades of Queen Victoria's reign the term ‘music hall’ was not yet invented. Pearsall argues that the first venue using such a term opened in 1848 but that it wasn't really established before the Oxford Music Hall opened in 1861 on a corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street in London.⁴ And the term ‘ballad concert’ was not established before John Boosey made a profitable business out of it with a monthly concert series beginning in 1867, usually at St James's Hall, which ran for several decades – an ideal forum for promoting the products of his own publishing company, Boosey & Co.



For reasons of time and space I would like to confine my paper to two Irish-born song composers who have somewhat been forgotten by public perception and musicological attention. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that – howsoever you think about songs and ballads – this is an area where Irish composers left their trace in the history of music on the British Isles, just as they did in English opera and in Anglican church music.

³ Ronald Pearsall: *Victorian Popular Music* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973), p. 12.

⁴ Pearsall (1973), p. 30.

Their preferred genre often tempts us to brush over them somewhat too quickly. Their names are Wellington Guernsey (1817-1885) and James Lynam Molloy (1837-1909).

As you see from their life dates, their careers differ by twenty years, and these were decisive years. This difference meant that Molloy could benefit from the quickly growing market for ballads during the 1870s, while Guernsey's popularity had its peak in the late 1840s and early 1850s.

I also chose them for their similarities. Both were born in rural Ireland (Guernsey in county Westmeath and Molloy in county Offaly), benefited from education on the Continent, and came to live in London where Guernsey pursued a military career and Molloy worked for the attorney general. Both also acted as war correspondent to London newspapers, although again at different times and on different wars.

The career of Wellington Guernsey is nicely summed up by a correspondent for the *The Belfast News-Letter* of 1858:

“Mr Wellington Guernsey [...] was, I believe, born in Ireland, his father having been master of a military band, and was formerly in the employment of Messrs. Robinson and Bussell, music-sellers, Westmoreland Street. He had previously been employed in the shop of Mr. Boden, music-seller, Cork. Guernsey was dismissed from Messrs. Robinson and Bussell's under suspicious circumstances, and he then set up a music establishment for himself. His house in Nassau Street was unfortunately burned, and being insured, the company at first refused to pay the full amount of insurance, but a compromise for one-half the sum was accepted by Mr. Guernsey. The *gentleman* then proceeded to London, where he married an actress, and figured very speedily at the police-office, for maltreating his wife. He subsequently obtained, during the Crimean war, a majority in the Turkish Contingent, from which he was removed by General Vivian for gross misconduct. He has since been hanging about the theatres in London, gaining a livelihood composing waltzes, &c., which were very popular, and which were constantly performed by her Majesty's private band.”⁵

To this account let me add a few supporting facts. He was born as William Greville Hudson Guernsey in Mullingar in 1817, studied briefly as a boy with the well-known Italian opera composer Saverio Mercadante at Lisbon during 1827-8, returning to Ireland probably during the early 1830s to work, as you just heard, in Cork and Dublin. From 1843 he lived mainly in England, but for a few years he appears to have returned to Ireland to organise concerts at the Rotunda. In 1847 he became musical director of the Olympic Theatre in London, but by the early 1850s he must have embarked on his military career which took him to Turkey in 1855, the Crimea in 1856 and to Paraguay and Brazil in 1857. In 1858 he was incriminated for stealing documents from the Colonial Office, which ended his military career, and since then has “been hanging about the theatres in London” “composing waltzes”.

His work-list is indeed divided into a time before and after the military period. His greatest successes were songs, piano quadrilles and marches written between 1845 and 1851. The best-known pieces were the songs *She Gathers a Shamrock* (1845), *I'll Hang my Harp on a Willow Tree* (1846) and *Dinah Blake* (1847). He also contributed the words to George Barker's song *Mary Blane* (1846). Why he left this successful career path to join the army is a mystery to me but it is perhaps explained in the words of his best known song which begins:

⁵ *The Belfast News-Letter*, 1 December 1858.

“I’ll hang my harp on a willow tree,
I’ll off to the wars again,
My peaceful home has no charms for me,
The Battlefield no pain, [...]”

and ends:

“And if I survive I’ll mount my steed,
And I’ll off to the wars again.”

The music to this song is an easy piece in G major and in 6/8 time which oscillates between waltz-like passages and a swinging tune in the right hand with frequent repetitions to dotted bass octaves in the left. The song is indeed so tuneful and catchy that it instantly sticks in the mind.

After his dismissal from the army he returned to music, and quickly drew on his earlier successes. An 1860 article in the English newspaper *The Era* headed “Value of Musical Copyrights” notes:

“A few months back Wellington Guernsey’s celebrated song of “I’ll Hang my Harp on a Willow Tree,” was re-assigned to the publishers for £100; so that, who will say that old songs are not worth money, when, after so many years being published, they fetch the above fabulous prices.”⁶

Similarly, another song for which he wrote the words only (and Joseph Ascher the music) called *Alice, where art thou?* (1861) became extremely successful which is recounted in an 1885 obituary of Guernsey in *The Glasgow Herald*:

“Mr. Guernsey’s most successful song “Alice, where art thou?” had a curious career, the composer offered it without success to nearly all the leading publishers for a £5 note. At last Messrs Duncan, Davidson & Co. published it on sharing terms, when the sale reached nearly 300,000 copies, and it even now affords an income.”⁷

Alice, where art thou? even made it into the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, so popular was it.

The music Guernsey composed after 1860 did not become as successful as his poetry, it seems. He stopped composing piano galops and waltzes by 1862, and some of his Ireland-inspired songs like *The Boatman of Kinsale* (1865) and *The Green Moss* (1869) didn’t fetch the same public attention as his pre-1850 music. But why poker with new songs when the old ones still sell?

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Thus, Guernsey somehow was too late when the ballad craze really began. He was out of fashion when music began to be recorded after 1900 while this was still the time of my second composer for today, James Lynam Molloy. Guernsey has never been recorded and therefore not re-issued on CD either and also has not yet been rediscovered by the proponents

⁶ *The Era*, 8 July 1860.

⁷ *The Glasgow Herald*, 16 Nov. 1885.

of Victorian song in England nowadays. Molloy's music, on the other hand, has already been recorded in his own lifetime and was still being recorded in the 1930s by celebrities like John McCormack. Through their lasting popularity they even made their way into world literature, like *Love's Old Sweet Song* of 1884, which became a 'signature tune' in Joyce's *Ulysses*, where it is mainly identified with Molly Bloom who is to sing it on her upcoming concert tour. And this is what it may have sounded like:

Music example 1: J.L. Molloy: *Love's Old Sweet Song* (1884)
(Dáire Halpin, S; Pádhraic Ó Cuinneagháin, pf: RTÉ lyric fm CD 101)
-> *fade out after c. 2'05*

Molloy was born in 1837 near Rahan in county Offaly. He was sent to boarding school in Hertfordshire and then returned to Dublin to study at the Catholic University where he obtained an M.A. in 1858. Further studies brought him to London, Paris, and Bonn, before he settled in London from about 1863 with a lawyer's degree. But he never practised law, instead he worked as a private secretary to the then attorney general. He was a war correspondent for the London *Standard* on the Franco-Prussian war of 1871-2 and travelled widely, particularly in France. From 1880 he lived in Henley-on-Thames near London.

His first songs date from 1865, but his career really took off with the regular ballad concerts from the late 1860s and particularly during the 1870s. To quote again from Ronald Pearsall's study of *Victorian Popular Music*, "in 1878, there were 347 licensed music halls in London alone" and on average "one music hall song sold 80,000 copies".⁸ This was Molloy's market place, and the newspapers and musical periodicals of these years are filled with literally hundreds of announcements and reviews of recitals which include Molloy's music. His most often quoted successes in his own lifetime were songs like *Clochette* (1867), *Thady O'Flynn* (1869), *Eily's Reason* (1871), *Dresden China* (1875), *Darby and Joan* (1878), *Love's Old Sweet Song* (1884), and *The French Partridge* (1904).

From early on, his music included songs relating to Ireland, and although many of them made no use of Irish traditional melodic or rhythmic elements, they gained such a popularity in the early 20th century that some gained a folksong status. This came through the agency of singers like John McCormack, Joseph White, Cavan O'Connor, and many others who recorded these songs more than once and performed them internationally. The effect of this was that – with the exception of *Love's Old Sweet Song* – it is for these Irish songs that Molloy is best remembered by today. These include, besides those already mentioned, his still-famous *Kerry Dance* (1879) and *Bantry Bay* (1889) to which he wrote both words and music. The following recording of *Bantry Bay* was made more than 50 years after its first publication, in 1941, by John McCormack and Gerald Moore:

Music example 2: J.L. Molloy: *Bantry Bay* (1889)
(John McCormack, T; Gerald Moore, pf: Conifer CHDH 207)
-> *fade out just before c. 1'00*

⁸ Pearsall (1973), p. 14.

Returning to my underlying subject of ‘the artistic versus the popular’, many contemporary writers considered Molloy’s songs to be above average. An 1867 concert review remarks:

“Mr Molloy’s songs are (to use a common expression) “for the drawing-room,” but there is more in them than in the generality of effusions written now-a-days for young lady amateurs, who cannot perceive the charm of a higher order of composition.”⁹

The 1874 song *Don’t be Sorrowful, Darling* is described as

“One of Molloy’s simple little ballads, with a great deal in it. Music and Words are equally earnest and impressive.”¹⁰

Apparently Molloy did frequently manage to respond to demands for the popular with a product that could also satisfy a certain artistic standard.

In an obituary on Molloy, the well-known lyric poet Fred Weatherley claimed that Molloy ...

“[...] will be remembered, or certainly his songs will, long after the “superior” and so-called “art-songs” of to-day are forgotten.”¹¹

Weatherly also recalled the process by which Molloy’s songs originated, with which I would like to close:

“A row on the river, a long country walk, a game of tennis with his verse writer, the one suggesting to the other subjects for musical treatment – that is how his songs usually were conceived. And then in the evening at his piano, with his wife and verse-writer, to listen and comment, and would play melody after melody. “What does it say to you?” “What does it mean?” he would ask. To me it might mean one thing, to him another. And then as he played we decided what it did mean, and later the words were written and fitted to the music. The trouble this meant was colossal, but the result was that words and music came out as though from one brain. In this respect he was unlike all my other composer friends.”

Reading of this idyllic process from a time long since gone, it reminds me of Molloy’s verse in his *Kerry Dance*:

“O for one of those hours of gladness,
Gone, alas, like our youth, too soon.”

Music example 3: J.L. Molloy: *The Kerry Dance* (1879)
(John McCormack, T; orch: Conifer CHDH 207)
-> *fade out just at c. 1’00 as time permits*

⁹ Review headed ‘Mr. W. Bollen Harrison’s Concert’, in: *The Era*, 22 Dec. 1867, p. 7.

¹⁰ ‘New Music’, in: *The Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 4 Sep. 1874, p. 3.

¹¹ This and the following quote are from Fred E. Weatherly: ‘Recollections of J. L. Molloy’, in: *The Musical Herald*, 1 March 1909, p. 74.