

## Cyfarthfa Reborn

By Trevor Herbert



Eleven years ago a collection of original hand-written brass band music was discovered in an attic in Merthyr Tydfil. This was the library of the virtuoso Cyfarthfa Band, founded in 1838 by iron magnate Robert Thompson Crawshay, and famous for winning the second day of the first ever Crystal Palace Championships in 1860. I worked on a reconstruction of the music with the trumpeter John Wallace (*The Origin of the Species: Virtuoso Victorian Brass Music from Cyfarthfa Castle, Wales*, WC2013, first recorded by Nimbus Records, and now on the Wallace Collection label).

Though long defunct, the Cyfarthfa Band's instrumentation, which included keyed bugles, ophicleides and saxhorns, has been heard in *Triumphal March* by Madam Charlotte Sainton Dalby, Joseph Parry's *Tydfil Overture*, Mehul's *Overture L'Irato*, Paganini's *Carnival of Venice* and favourites from the repertory of the time such as *Cyfarthfa Quadrilles*, *Whirlpool Polka*, and of course *The Lost Chord* by Sir Arthur Sullivan.

"...Another set of harmonious blacksmiths awaken the echoes of the remotest Welsh mountains. The correspondent of a leading London newspaper, while visiting Merthyr, was exceedingly puzzled by hearing boys in the Cyfarthfa ironworks whistling airs rarely heard in the fashionable ballroom, opera or drawing room. He afterwards discovered that the owner of the works, Mr Robert Crawshay, had established among his workers a brass band ... I had the pleasure of hearing them play and was astonished by their proficiency."

This is part of an article published on 11 May 1860 in *Household Words*, a magazine owned and edited by Charles Dickens. It was written by his father-in-law and was intended to demonstrate the musical potential of the working people. The article, 'Music in Humble Life', accurately describes the standard of the band, but it does not truly reflect the reason it came into existence and sustained its excellence for almost half a century. The Cyfarthfa Band was different from any brass band that has ever been in almost all respects: its instruments, repertory, function, tastes and standards were unique.

Robert Thompson Crawshay's father W. T. Crawshay was owner of the huge Cyfarthfa Works at Merthyr Tydfil. By the early decades of the nineteenth century Merthyr was the major international centre for the manufacture of iron. Some estimates suggest that one in every five tons of iron smelted in the world came from the town. Consequently, the growth of the town was unprecedented and the wealth of the iron and coal barons, particularly the Crawshays, was impressive.



W. T. Crawshay built a castle on a proud hill above the town and the iron works. It was ostentatiously elegant and was intended to complement the owner's image of grandeur and taste. It was to be an oasis of cultural refinement in a town where the cost of industrial success was massive social squalor. The band was an element of this costly process of constructing an environment fit for the wealth and status of the Crawshays. It provided music, indoors and out, for every occasion and mood. Whether it were a dance, a flower show or a concert of the latest Italian operatic overtures, the band was to provide it. The 1838 band was quickly wound up and reconstituted. The players, who were mainly local, did not live up to the Crawshays' expectations. The new band was as good as could be obtained. The members were London theatre players, travelling circus musicians and noted orchestral instrumentalists. They were enticed to Merthyr by the promise of jobs and housing. The first conductor was a Mr Gratian of Wombwell's Menagerie Circus, one of the best touring companies of the day. In the 1840s he was succeeded by Ralph Livesy, and he and his son George, between them, had control of the band for the rest of the century. One or two of the players were also arrangers for the band, and they transcribed existing music for the instrumentalists at their disposal. But Crawshay also engaged George D'Artney, a brilliant French musician, to make arrangements. D'Artney was a bizarre character. A polyglot with a phenomenal musical memory who could easily have been mistaken for a tramp - and, so it appears, frequently was. He seems to have been permanently drunk and given to fits of sentimentality and high emotion, but his musicianship was acknowledged with reverence by all those who knew him. The Cyfarthfa Band was usually liveried in blue uniforms, braided in gold with the motif (a mastiff) and the motto ('Perseverance') of the Crawshay family emblazoned on their caps. They did not conform to the stereotypical image of a 'brass band'. They were always a private band. They seldom entered brass band contests and, even though they bought and played printed music, their repertory was primarily made up of bespoke arrangements. Ironically, in 1858 Robert Crawshay contracted meningitis and was left permanently deaf. This did not alter the interest he took in the band. He engaged Sam Hughes, one of the two truly great ophicleidists of all time. He also kept the strictest and most jealous control of the band. After his death in 1879 the band continued, but by the end of the century it was much less celebrated. Shortly before the First World War the local authority took it over, but soon lost interest. It limped on to the interwar years, but though it carried the name of the Cyfarthfa Band it did not, indeed could not, resemble the Victorian band.



The Cyfarthfa Band was, without question, the first virtuoso brass band, and may have been the first large, virtuoso Welsh art music ensemble of any kind. The players were, individually and collectively, brilliant. The music survives in 105 hand-written part books. Each book yields evidence of a musical institution that for more than half a century had a clear identity based on brilliant skills and a diverse repertory. The library of the Cyfarthfa Band is an archive of immense importance. Not only does it contain a wide range of music, but also the repertory casts light on musical taste and the nature of musical life in the nineteenth century. Some of the pieces were written locally and specially for the band. The majority of pieces, however, were arranged for the band by the bandmasters or by D'Artney, whom R. T. Crawshay ensconced in a cottage on his estate.

The arranged music gives an accurate insight into the quality of the players at Cyfarthfa. It is because they are hand-written and specifically for the players in the band that they indicate how well the players could play. D'Artney and the bandmasters would not have written music for their musicians that was beyond their ability, but rather, they would have wished to exhibit all the strengths of the band. The library contains many popular dances of the time and a range of light novelty items. But the largest part of the repertory is devoted to serious music: arrangements of classical pieces including complete transcriptions of symphonies by Beethoven and Haydn, and many selections from Italian operas. The routes by which new compositions by Verdi and other major contemporary figures reached Merthyr is one of the most fascinating questions. In many cases, it seems, important new works were being listened to in South Wales very soon after the first performance in Europe.



The instruments used in the band were unusual in two respects. First, keyed bugles and ophicleides were the basis of the band, not the newly designed valve instruments that became popular throughout Britain in the 1840s. Second, even though valve instruments were incorporated into the band, Crawshay bought several Viennese instruments with rotary valve systems and not just the more popular piston valve systems designed by Adolphe Sax. The instrumentation of the band changed considerably over the second half of the century, and in our modern recreations of the Cyfarthfa Band we describe it as "a sort of snapshot of the band in the 1850s". The trombonists, Jim Casey, Ron Bryans and myself, use authentic, unlacquered brass instruments in high pitch. Jim and Ron both play Courtois trombones and play a Higham. Courtois is a well-known firm, but readers may not be aware that the Manchester-based firm, Higham, was one of the major producers of brass instruments in the last century, when all three were made. They were loaned for the concerts and recordings by John Webb who has one of, if not the, largest collections of brass instruments in the UK.

The instruments are in good condition but need some effort to play. By this I mean that most modern instruments are, more or less, the same. They play slightly differently but the entire chromatic spectrum is there with a more or less common response throughout. These instruments are highly idiosyncratic. We each felt the need to play them a lot in order to make them sound good. They certainly sounded

different and people seemed to like the sound - small, edgy, direct and with a lower dynamic range. Pitch was a problem. Not for the trombones particularly, but for the band. John Wallace and I experimented with A=438. This didn't work. The instruments didn't respond well and people found it difficult to think in pitch. We had to make a compromise because of the mixture of keyed and more flexible instruments. We went for A=442 on the basis of a medium point between keyed bugle and later valve pitch. Within a few hours this worked perfectly.

Everyone involved in the project is very grateful to Nimbus Records who placed great faith in it, creating the opportunities for modern brass players to get closer to the virtuoso players of 150 years ago, and with the CD recording enabling listeners to appreciate and enjoy the riches of an unique and miraculously preserved repertory.

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