

LIVSEY, GEORGE FREDERICK (1834-1923), bandmaster

Name: George Frederick Livsey
Date of birth: 1834
Date of death: 1923
Spouse: Elizabeth Livsey (née Abbott)
Child: Sarah Livsey
Child: Mary Elizabeth Rees (née Livsey)
Child: Ralph Livsey
Child: George Frederick Livsey
Child: James Livsey
Parent: Margaret Livsey
Parent: Ralph Livsey
Gender: Male
Occupation: bandmaster
Area of activity: Music
Author: Trevor Herbert

George Livsey was born in Alnwick, Northumberland in 1834, the son of Ralph Livsey (1804-1863), an itinerant circus musician, and his wife Margaret (1808-1887).

Ralph Livsey was a brilliant keyed bugle player, a skill he probably learned in a militia band because this relatively new instrument was developed for the improvement of military music. He became a soloist with Wombwell's Travelling Circus and Menagerie, which was famous for its band as well as its exhibition of exotic creatures. The 1841 census shows the entire family to be living in lodgings in Birmingham with other touring musicians. Merthyr Tydfil was a regular venue in Wombwell's itinerary.

In 1848 Ralph Livsey was enticed to leave Wombwell's to lead the private brass band formed by the ironmaster [Robert Thompson Crawshay](#) at Cyfarthfa Castle, Merthyr Tydfil. George, who was then thirteen years old, was also taken into the band as a keyed bugle player (later playing the cornet). The Cyfarthfa Band was quite different from the many that emerged in the amateur brass band movement that proliferated in Victorian Britain from the 1850s. As well as preceding the general trend, it had a more sophisticated engagement with the canon of European art music and was equipped with expensive Viennese instruments, imported expressly through [Crawshay's](#) London supplier, rather than the much cheaper British versions produced in and for the British market. It was a private and exclusive band, formed and maintained under [Crawshay's](#) patronage as a component of his project to position his ostentatious home as a cultural oasis amidst the south Wales industrial landscape.

One of the very few brass band contests the band entered was the great Crystal Palace national contest of 1860, which it won playing a clever arrangement of the overture to Verdi's opera *Nabucco*. This made the band famous and (though it was hardly deserved) elevated [Crawshay's](#) reputation as a man of both culture and benevolence.

In June 1863 Ralph Livsey died. By now he was a local celebrity and this is evidenced by the relatively elaborate character of his grave at St Tydfil's Old Parish Church. He was immediately succeeded as bandmaster by his son George, who remained custodian of the band for almost sixty years. He conducted it, trained its players, selected and arranged its repertoire and followed his father's example of attracting some of the greatest brass instrumentalists of the day, such as the ophicleide player Sam Hughes, the greatest ever British virtuoso of the instrument.

Livsey was assisted in the preparation of scores by the peculiar George D'Artney, a German-educated French musician with an expert knowledge of European repertoire. D'Artney was retained by [Crawshay](#) in modest premises on his estate, but he was a difficult man who seems to have been permanently the worse for drink. Without George Livsey's remarkable skill the Cyfarthfa Band would not have attained the important place it deserves in music history. The repertoire he created survives, and because it is handwritten and bespoke it testifies to how and not just to what the band played. It was eclectic and included transcriptions of complete symphonies by Europe's greatest composers; the execution of this repertoire required players of remarkable virtuosity and the guidance of a sophisticated musical director.

Like others in the band, Livsey was given work in the ironworks rather than paid as a musician. According to the 1871 census he was living 'within the Cyfarthfa ironworks' and was described as a 'fitter', but later census returns describe him as a 'bandmaster'. His wife Elizabeth (born 1834) died in 1873. The couple had five children, James (born 1858), George (born 1860), Mary (born 1864), Sarah (born 1865) and Ralph (born 1866). The latter became a horn player with the Coldstream Guards and later at the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden.

The Cyfarthfa band as a truly great ensemble did not outlive [Crawshay](#)'s control of the Cyfarthfa ironworks, and early in the twentieth century it was taken over by the local authority; but in its heyday it was probably the best band of its type in the world. In modern times it is famous because the sources relating to it are so complete and illuminating. It was the first truly virtuoso instrumental group in Wales to engage with the main canon of western art music. While its style and format owes something to the legacy of Ralph Livsey, it was George whose musical vision, innate sense of style and uncompromising standards fashioned the band's greatness.

In the later years of his life he lived at 3 Dynevor St, Merthyr Tydfil, cared for by his daughter Mary, who was widowed at a relatively young age. He was a popular man; as the appreciation of him in the *Merthyr Express* (August 11, 1923) put it, 'One always felt refreshed by the charm and geniality of Mr Livsey's disposition'. A large portrait of him by George Frederick Harris was commissioned and paid for by public subscription in 1905. It hangs near the display of the band instruments kept at the Cyfarthfa Castle Museum.

The same appreciation in the *Merthyr Express* describes how, in the period of his final illness, the band frequently played in the street below his window. He died at home on 2 August 1923. Tributes to him in local newspapers were fulsome and often poetic, and his funeral was one of the largest the town had seen. His body was interred at Cefn Cemetery on the outskirts of Merthyr Tydfil.

Author

Trevor Herbert

Sources

Official biographical records and census returns

The Merthyr Express, August 11, 1923

Various primary sources at the National Library of Wales and Cyfarthfa Castle Museum

Trevor Herbert (ed.), *The British Brass Band: A musical and social history* (Oxford 2000)

Additional Links

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