



## A Tribute to the Westland Row Concert Band of the Seventies

### A prescient review by a charming and irksome critic

Charles Acton was the music critic of The Irish Times for 31 years until his retirement in 1987. He was revered and feared in equal measure. The reasons for this were captured rather well in a piece written by Arminta Wallace in that paper in June 2010.

The title of the article captures the man's character, describing him as, "our charming and irksome critic". In it she points out that "A decade after his death, Charles Acton is remembered in certain musical circles for delivering ferocious reviews of the wrecking ball variety." He raised hackles to the extent that some musicians would refuse to play if he was present at their recitals.

And yet, he must have known his stuff. He was one of only two critics from outside the UK who gained admission to The Critics Circle; the other being Clive Barnes of The New York Times.

A piece Acton wrote in The Irish Times in April 1976 captures the man's style very well. His wrecking ball is directed at The Westland Row Accordion Band which operated in the 1950's and 60's. As a former member of that band I will, I hope, be forgiven for flinching a little at his comments - not so much for myself but for talented members like Chris Keneavy and Ian McGarry. Chris has had a highly successful fifty year career as a jazz pianist and can count among his accomplishments a stint as accompanist to the great Perry Como. He is also the father of Cormac, one of our most talented jazz musicians of the present day - look him up on You Tube. Ian McGarry went on to be the drummer with two of Ireland's best bands of the sixties - Bluesville with Ian Whitcomb and Peter Adler and The Action with Adler and Colm CT Wilkinson. Subsequently he had a very successful career in RTÉ as a producer of musical programmes including the 1979 Eurovision Song Contest.

Acton's eye for talent and the delicate requirements for nurturing it, are also evident in the piece when he details the emergence of The School Concert Band which he tipped for stardom. It is such a prescient piece that it deserves to be read in full.

## Westland Row CBS Concert

### Band recital      by Charles Acton

In the nineteen fifties I used to be saddened that an extremely slick accordean band from the Christian Brothers' School was playing what I thought were musically deplorable arrangements, and that the Brother in charge of it regarded it purely as a social activity, the music not mattering, and was persuading the parents to spend up to £120 each on instruments—a formidable sum in Pearse Street in those days.

Accordingly it was a great pleasure to attend at Coláiste Mhuire last night for the first public concert of the Westland Row CBS Concert Band and find a packed hall and an extremely stimulating performance.

This is a brass and reed band of about 30 which Brother Manning started from scratch some six years ago. In this short time he now has six of the members sitting their Grade VI exams and no less than eight (two trombones, four trumpets, 2 flute and a clarinet in the Irish Youth Orchestra. As well as that there are two other bands following.

Four people gave individual tuition in the school to the members of the bands. One of these is Bobby Houlihan of the Army School of Music who is their trainer and conductor.

The music of last night's concert ranged from medleys and Sousa's marches via film music to such as a suite of Offenbach numbers and Boieldieu's "Caliph of Baghdad" overture. It was all played completely in the spirit of the music with great verve and real skill.

The overture is a very testing item and occasionally showed itself to be a real challenge, but the band won, especially with some very accomplished playing from the clarinets. Again, at the start of the Offenbach the brisk, staccato playing, excellently together in real ensemble, was not only delightful but very accomplished.

For the future, they may look for more dynamic light and shade, but I understand that they have to rehearse in too small and low-ceilinged a room where the sound is oppressive. It was remarkable that they seemed in no way disconcerted by the relatively spacious acoustic of last night's hall. They are so good and so well worthwhile that someone should offer them better rehearsal accommodation.

John Roche (accompanied by Lila Dunne) was the soloist in such items as "One Enchanted Evening" but it was quite wrong to make him put his fine voice through the public address system. For the matter of that, it was quite unnecessary (and sad) that the compere used it too.

If this was only the band's first public concert, it is clear that a great deal more will be heard of them and they, their parents and the school can be very proud of last night's achievement.

Acton's predictions for the band were fully borne out. For a period in the mid to late 70's they dominated the Irish Concert band scene winning prizes including the National Band Championships (and admirers) everywhere they went.

## In the beginning

Brother Jack Manning – mentioned in Acton's review - was the visionary who got it all started. He arrived in Westland Row, from teaching in Kerry, with a history of involvement in music education and a network of former student connections ready to be given full rein.

Early in 1970 he recruited a large group of seven and eight year olds to learn to play the flageolet. A year later they switched to the recorder and in late 1971 twenty one of this group began learning full woodwind and brass instruments. By the mid 1970's nearly eighty boys were learning serious instruments, each receiving a weekly individual lesson by a team of tutors gathered together by the indefatigable Manning, and being prepared for their Associated Board examinations in Theory and Playing.

A concert programme around this time proudly boasts;-

*"Next year some of the boys should have completed their final grade (Grade viii) examination. In 1975 we achieved some notable successes in the Feis Ceoil: 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> places in the Junior Woodwind, 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the Junior Brass."* This followed from a breakthrough in 1974 when one of the Band's trumpet players won the Junior Feis Ceoil and he and one of the Band's trombone players became members of the Irish Youth Orchestra.

It is hard to believe now but this was only the beginning. Eventually no less than fourteen of the Irish Youth Orchestra were recruited from the Westland Row Concert Band. The story of how this came about is worthy of a Hollywood movie - well perhaps an RTÉ documentary.

## The instruments

In December last we assembled a group of seven former members of the band to reminisce about these magical times. If you want to get a flavour of how fresh and warm the memories are after an interval of forty years or so, you might like to download the edited version of that chat accompanying this document.

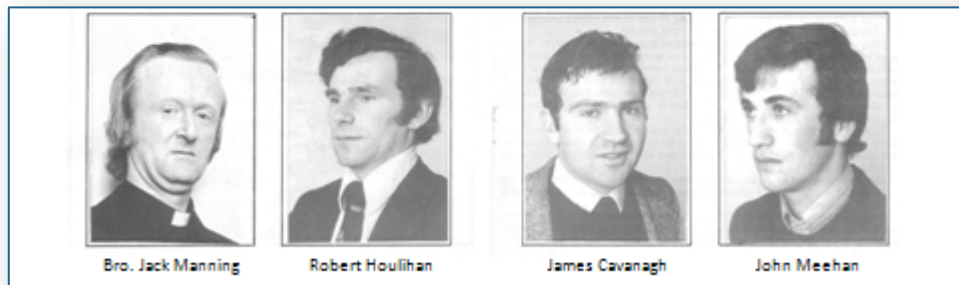
In the video you will see clear evidence of how these men remember with enthusiasm how it all happened. Even something as simple as acquiring instruments is a source of wonder. As best we can work it out the instruments came through Jack Manning's network of former pupils playing in esteemed musical institutions such as The Band of An Garda Síochána, and The Number 1 Army Band.

All were "tapped" for old instruments that could be passed on to a new generation of budding musicians. Inevitably the instruments had seen better days. One instrument had been made in 1914. Others were probably of similar vintage but they were, in many cases, beautiful if somewhat bedraggled instruments. One member describes the saxophone he acquired then (and still owns) as the Stradivarius of saxophones.

The father of one of the fledgling musicians - Tommy Kealy (A former Row Person of the Year)- had a metal works in Denzille Lane, close to the school. The members of our discussion group remember with great affection going to Tommy with "an ugly duckling" trumpet or trombone and picking it up a few days later as a beautiful glittering "swan". One band member recalled being given a pair of white gloves by Tommy when he returned the polished instrument to him and being told to wear them always when playing the instrument so as not to tarnish it. The student took the hint. He went on to win many competition prizes, was accepted by the National Youth Orchestra, graduated

to the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra and now teaches young musicians in The Royal Irish Academy of Music and Rathfarnham Concert Band Society.

## The tutors



The Charles Acton review which opened this essay mentions the band's conductor at that time - Robert Houlihan, then attached to The Army School of Music. The name may ring a bell for music fans. He went on to win prizes and scholarships through the 70's and 80's before becoming an internationally acclaimed conductor at The Opera Theatre in Metz, Principal Conductor of the Tirgu Mures Philharmonic of Romania and Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of the Savaria Symphony Orchestra in Hungary.

Another of the early tutors, James Cavanagh went on to play trumpet with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland. He was Head of Wind Brass and Percussion at the Royal Academy of Music for nine years. He is now Professor of Trumpet and conducts the RIAM Symphony and Intermediate Orchestras.

John Meehan, who taught clarinet and saxophone was The Solo Clarinet player in the Army No1 Band who went on to become Clarinet Lecturer in the DIT Conservatory of Music and also Music Director of the Rathfarnham Concert Band Society.

These pioneers were followed by others. One of our group discussion participants recalls - *"they were not just good teachers, they were the very best on their particular instruments."*

With that kind of input, and the commitment of students to practice and rehearsal, it was almost inevitable that success would follow; and it did.

The Band was run by a group of dedicated parents in a committee which Jack Manning had the foresight to set up. Their efforts in raising funds and running the Band were a huge and integral part of its success.

## Notable successes

One of the delights of the focus group is to listen in to former band members describe memories that have not faded after forty years.

Vincent Kennedy (Row Person of The Year 2013) remembers that early competition in the RDS.



*“ You could actually hear people laughing as we went on stage- we were so small and we had no uniform- just the red and black tie and a white shirt. There was an audible gasp when we started to play and we won first prize.”*

Frank Mullen - *“Yes but I can remember some of us were a little cocky and two trumpeters who won’t be named coming in chanting- “We are the champions”*

Sean Fleming remembers - *“The day we won, coming back to the school with the cup and having to parade it around every class room. I think we got a half day.”*

Tom Clarke’s standout memory is of an international contest. - *“The one that stands out for me is when we were up against The American Band and they must have had a hundred instruments and we beat them.”*

Vincent Kennedy again-*“I remember talking to a guy up at St. Patrick’s. He had been a school inspector and he was telling me The Department was so intrigued by what was happening in this centre city school that inspectors were sent down to check out what was going on”.*

All remember the final band performance in Trinity College. Links to the video of the focus group and sound recordings of the Band's last public performance can be found in the drop down menu "Video and Audio".

### ***Long term benefits***

Band members gained more than just cherished memories. Many made full time careers in music, playing in Orchestras and teaching in Music Academies. Others play in jazz and pop groups on a regular basis.

All are agreed that they got a huge boost in self-confidence from the experience of performing in front of an audience.

Robert Chester - *“The first time you get up to perform in public you’re a bag of nerves. Second time - still a bit nervous. After that it’s no problem”.*

Fintan Sutton experienced the benefits himself and saw them manifest in his son - a medic and a musician. *“When they are doing their practical medical exams they are put through their paces by surgeons who deliberately put them under pressure. My son couldn’t believe it he saw friends of his, who knew the answers, crumbling under the pressure of having to stand up and perform”.*

A less expected benefit was the pleasure taken by parents in the venture. In part this was the sense of pride in the achievements of their children. In some cases it extended to the buzz parents themselves got from their being drawn in as participants in band activities.

*“ For some of them it was their lives”.*

*“My dad was a bus driver and suddenly he was The Band’s Transport Manager.”*

Perhaps the most lasting legacy however is that of being agents of change. Band members learned a precious skill, and a sense of self-esteem. The tutors, who were all very young men, had a unique opportunity to hone their craft as music teachers and conductors. The ripple effect had started and the benefits continue to this day.

Many of the boys went on to create music establishments based on the format of The Westland Row Concert Band. These include The Rathfarnham Concert Band Society and Knocklyon Concert Band. One co-founded the Crash Ensemble and others now teach in the RIAM and DIT Conservatory of Music along with playing with The RTE Concert Orchestra and National Symphony Orchestra. One conducts The Army Band of The Western Command. Another manages The RTE Concert Orchestra. Others set up Route 66 Big Band while the music of another is performed all around the world.

As one group participant put it - *"It reminded me of that scene from Schindler's List where he (Schindler) says - but I only saved a few people - and then the scene cuts to all their descendants coming over the hill and I thought - oh now I get it"*

It seems only fair to leave the last word to Bro. Jack Manning. By all accounts he was a typical Christian Brother- a strict disciplinarian who put it up to his young charges to deliver on their potential. He was particularly keen on the importance of regular practice. A young Fintan Sutton found it difficult to accept the need for daily practice. "Every Day" he asked? "Yes, every day". "What if you're sick?" "Sure that means you have even more time to practice."

We all might have benefitted from such uncompromising hard love.

### ***Further Engagement***

We enclose with this essay a selection of press cuttings and photos which we hope may bring back happy memories for some past pupils. If you recognise any faces (perhaps even your own) or if you would like to add any comments or memories please contact: [westlandrow150@gmail.com](mailto:westlandrow150@gmail.com)

Through the wonders of modern science you may wish to listen in to some recording of the band performing at its peak by clicking on to the appropriate link.

Finally you may view some extracts from our December 2014 Focus Group by logging on to that link.

Des Byrne would like to thank the following Band members for sharing their memories with him.-

- Frank Mullen - Saxophone
- Joe Bergin - Saxophone
- Vincent Kennedy - Trumpet
- Sean Fleming - Trombone
- Tom Clarke - Saxophone
- Fintan Sutton - Clarinet
- Robert Chester - Trumpet



### **The Band of 1974**

**Top Row from left: P. Maloney, G Howard, M Donnelly, S Fleming, J. Egan, T. Donovan, E. McGrath. V. Kennedy.**

**Bottom Row, Left to Right: D Moran, G. Crone, O. Meehan, M. Cassidy, J. Kirwan, G. Cavanagh, J. Ryan, D. Forde, F . Sutton.**





#### Planning Applications

**KILDARE CO. COUNCIL**—Full planning permission sought from Kildare Co. Council for extension to my existing dwelling at Kerdrifstown, Sallins.—Tony Boland.

**CO. DUBLIN**—Permission is sought by Mr. M. J. O'Reilly for new dwelling on site adjoining 17 Woodlands Park, Blackrock.

**CO. MEATH** — Permission sought to erect bungalow and extend cottage at Cookstown, Ashbourne.—signed, Catherine Grendon.

**CO. WICKLOW**—Permission is being sought for kitchen extension, at the rear of 27 Sugarloaf Crescent, Bray.—M. Doris.

## A band with a lot of qualifications

Fourteen of the Westland Row CBS Concert Band (above) have qualified for the National Youth Orchestra, and four went into the last round for the

Euro-orchestra. The band are also All-Ireland Intermediate Champions in brass and reed bands, and on Friday the public can enjoy their many talents at a recital in the Edmund

Burke Hall, T.C.D. Robert Houlihan and Fergus O'Carroll are the conductors, and a special feature of the recital will be the "1812" Overture by Tchaikovsky.







## *It's the top brass in Westland Row*



The Westland Row C.B.S. Concert Band who won the All-Ireland Open Military Band Championship at Intermediate level, and also the McCullough Piggott Cup and Trophy for overall best band in the brass and military section, at the Irish Association of Brass and Military Bands Championships at Dun Laoghaire Town Hall, last weekend. Also in the picture is members of the band with Bro. Jack Manning, the band manager.