

WHAT EXACTLY IS FOLK SONG?

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On 22 January 1908, a botany lecturer from the University College of North Wales in Bangor gave an address to the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion at No. 20 Hanover Square, at that time, home to the Royal Society of Medicine. The lecture was entitled ‘Welsh National Melodies and Folk-Song’ and the speaker made an impassioned case to preserve and protect Wales’s folk song heritage. His name was J. Lloyd Williams, a native of Llanrwst. And this is what he said: ‘[...] melodies [...] recognized by the hearts of the people as expressing the national aspirations [...] it is these songs [...] alone that can be relied upon to foster a love of language and of country [...].’

As well as being a professor of botany at Bangor, J. Lloyd Williams was also the Director of Music at the university. A founding member of the Welsh Folksong Society, he collected folk songs, edited the periodical *Y Cerddor*, and directed a student choir that specialized in performing these songs. In this, of course, he was part of a much wider European movement.

It is hard to define exactly what we mean by ‘folk song’. It is best, therefore, to keep an open mind when it comes to precise definition, since the term means so many different things, to different people, in different contexts. One of the best definitions, perhaps, is by an American folk singer and educator, Dave Fry:

I’m a folk singer. I sing for folks! When I’m done, everybody’s happy. Something special happens when you sing along; you start to feel like a community [...] there’s a chemical released which promotes trust. And trust is the beginning of community, right? Wow, that’s powerful stuff. That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?

But when we talk of something being typically German, English, Irish, or whatever, we are expressing some kind of tribal loyalty, also no doubt a kind of tribal rivalry too. There is nothing new about this, of course. In fact, in the past, identity was far more likely to be rooted in locality rather than in nationality, which has always been a rather fluid concept and something that can, as the historian Eric Hobsbawm pointed out, be invented and often distorted. After all, we possess multiple identities and belong to many different groups and communities. The question is, therefore, where does a border begin and where does it end? And what does this tell us about folk song, which is so inextricably linked to cultural identity?

The West German musicologist, Carl Dalhaus, had some very interesting things to say about this in his survey of nineteenth-century music. He argued that music cannot be somehow ‘naturally nationalistic’. It only becomes ‘national’ when the public regards it as such. It is national music because we say it is, we feel it somehow, or simply want it to be.

Before the nineteenth century, music was more likely to be described in terms

of the functions it performed – dance music, church music, ceremonial music, and the like, much as folk songs were – ploughing songs, weaving songs, lullabies, carols, and so on, that is to say, music for use. In pre-industrial society, men and women sang to set the rhythm of their working day, to relieve the repetition of their tasks, and to make them happy and content. Itinerant balladeers literally sang for their supper, with musical instruments brought out for special occasions such as weddings or dances, and songs handed down from generation to generation. But, from around 1800 or so, something changed radically in central Europe. Music suddenly came to occupy a very important symbolic position, particularly in German-speaking lands, where it became an integral part of the nation-building project. The catalyst for the growing mood for independence in central Europe can be attributed, I believe, largely to the Austrian Empire, as it was then called – a vast multi-national, multi-cultural state of over fifty million inhabitants which accommodated over a dozen indigenous languages, of which German was, by far, the most dominant. Following the Napoleonic Wars at the turn of the nineteenth century, the empire's position and God-given social order was much weakened, and the 'genie was out of the bottle' as certain ethnic groups, such as the Czechs and Hungarians, sought increasing autonomy and, importantly, freedom from the German language with which there had always been something of a love-hate relationship. And, after further political revolutions in the 1840s, people began to talk more about the notion of 'art for art's sake', a belief that music carried some kind of transcendent meaning, beyond borders – another form of invented tradition, you might say. Now although the common labels 'high art' and 'low art', 'serious' and 'light', were not yet in circulation, this schism between what we call 'folk music' and what we call 'art music' was already set, although there was a curious and inevitable amount of interdependence, as we shall see. We will also discover how polarization of this kind became an increasingly common narrative in the history of European music. So how did this happen?

Come with me now to Weimar, a small town in the green heart of modern day Germany, once the capital of the small Duchy of Saxe-Weimar which, during the eighteenth century, attracted some of the greatest minds of the age, including the celebrated poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the playwright Friedrich Schiller, and the poet-philosopher Christopher Martin Wieland. Goethe, in turn, invited the philosopher and cleric Johann Gottfried von Herder, who was appointed superintendent of the Duchy's schools and churches. And between them they created what became known as 'Weimar Classicism', a hugely influential cultural and literary movement. And it was here in Weimar that Herder developed his concept of nationalism. In fact, his significance in the development of modern European thought is hard to underestimate. Pastor, poet, philosopher, translator, polymath – Herder profoundly influenced the ideas of Goethe, Nietzsche (another, later, Weimar resident), Hegel, and a host of other important thinkers. Herder's specific argument of cultural nationalism was that every ethnic group should be politically distinct, and his ideas on the subject were expressed in his theory of the *Volksgeist* ('the spirit of the people'), a theory that every race has its own unique culture. So, by extension, every people has its own, unique, folk music, stemming innately from the people's character, their locality, landscape and, most importantly, their language.

Wales was also in the process of rediscovering its past during the eighteenth century, as a result of a perceived loss of the old way of life through rapid industrialization, the not unrelated religious revivals, and increasing Anglicization, enforced since the Laws in Wales Acts by that great Welshman, Henry VIII, in 1535 and 1542. All of which had a profound impact on the country's social fabric. And, like Herder, the Welsh also believed that their old culture and language remained among the common people – ‘the Folk’, or, as we say, ‘Y Werin bobol, y Werin Datws, Y Werin.’

Most of the Welsh folk-song publishing during this time happened in London, of course, then one of the largest cities in the world. There was ‘Blind’ John Parry, domestic harper to Sir Watkin Williams Wynn of No. 20 St. James’s Square, whose *Ancient British Music* appeared as early as 1742.

In 1770 Herder wrote to a friend: ‘Should I ever reach the coast of Britain, I shall only hurry through, see some theatre and Garrick [London theatre impresario], say hello to Hume [Scottish philosopher who had been responsible for bringing Rousseau to England] and then it will be up to Wales [...].’ Just imagine! Herder KNEW about Wales. And he was not alone. Indeed, the Swiss philosopher, composer, and folk song lover too, incidentally, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, having been offered lodgings while he was visiting Britain in 1766 in a sixteenth-century grange house called ‘Monaughty’ near Bleddfa in Radnorshire, which had once belonged to nearby Abbey Cwm Hir, had fervently hoped that Wales would become his final resting place. Can you imagine, Rousseau, whose ideas inspired the French Revolution, living in Wales.

In 1779 Herder, who regarded Rousseau as his ‘guide’, published a collection of folk songs entitled *Voices of the People in Their Songs* in which he first coined the word ‘*Volklieder*’ [‘Folksong’] – though, oddly enough, it contained Italian, Spanish, German, and Danish songs, not the specifically German material that we might have presumed. As a man of the Enlightenment, Rousseau believed folk songs had both a universal quality and also a local dimension because they gave voice to distinctive cultures.

Before Goethe came to Weimar, he had also searched for folk songs around Strasbourg, where he was then studying law and where, in fact, he had first met Herder. Indeed, Goethe’s main biographer, Nicholas Boyle, describes Goethe as ‘one of the very first field-workers in German folklore’; someone for whom song provided the ultimate synthesis of words and music, which was a very strong theme in nineteenth-century culture.

But, as significant as Herder’s influence was in this respect, folk song collecting had already begun in Russia as early as 1735 among the aristocratic classes, naturally. But the American musicologist, Matthew Gelbart, maintains that this collecting impetus goes back even further. In fact, the first printed collection appeared in Aberdeen as early as 1662. Following the Act of Union, the Scots promoted an image of their own culture specifically to distinguish it from English influences and to preserve it against a potential threat to the old way of life. And it was from here that the idea of ‘the Folk’ spread abroad, especially to Germany, whose historic links with Scotland go back as far as the sixteenth century. And it was in Germany that Herder made the concept his own.

Meanwhile, collections of Welsh folk songs continued to flow from London-based publishing houses. There was Edward Jones, ‘Bardd y Brenin’, and his *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards*, printed in 1784, to say nothing of Edward Williams, the ‘Celtic Rousseau’ as he was called, better known as Iolo Morganwg, and his extensive folk-song collections dating from the 1790s. Edward Jones came from a cultured, well-to-do, farming family in Llandderfel near Bala, and came to London around 1775 – the year in which Goethe arrived in Weimar – under the patronage of members of the Welsh nobility. After his appointment as harpist to King George III, Bardd y Brenin lived in the Office of Robes at St. James’s Palace, visiting Wales during the summer months when not travelling around the various royal residences. He was present at Iolo Morganwg’s inaugural Gorsedd ceremony on Primrose Hill in 1792, despite Iolo apparently absolutely detesting him, nicknaming him ‘Ned Taro Tant’ (or ‘Strumming Ned’), probably out of jealousy at his royal connections. There were others too such as Ifor Ceri, a Montgomeryshire vicar whose *Melus-Seiniau* began appearing from 1815 onwards. Thereafter, there was an outpouring of publications, an indication of the demand for English-language collections of Welsh airs, as the result of eisteddfod competitions, such as the Powys Eisteddfod in Welshpool in 1824 under the auspices of the Cymmrodorion, of which Ifor Ceri was patron. At that eisteddfod, a prize was offered for ‘The best Collection of Old Welsh Tunes never before published’, the first time such a competition had been held.

So, it is fair to say that there was a keen appetite for Welsh folk songs in some quarters. But there were changes afoot. The religious revivalists despised the old customs of the Welsh – their merriment, to say nothing of their drinking habits, and, naturally, their secular songs. Some even thought these songs were immoral, being after all, the soundtrack of the tavern. Many of them were undoubtedly bawdy, it is true. But the revivalists also feared Wales was losing its Christian soul to industrialization, and there were numerous anecdotal stories of harpists abandoning their instruments under their beds or, worse, burning them. J. Lloyd Williams himself told the story of when he was five years old, his father, who had been a regular *pennillion* singer at the Union pub in Llanrwst, turned towards non-conformity and strict abstinence: ‘[...] a daeth terfyn sydyn ar yr hen ganu doniol’ (‘so came to an end the old jolly singing’). Rural popular culture also attracted growing hostility from the state. Officials tried to curb fairs and processions with their associated drunkenness because they considered them a threat to public order, health, and safety. In fact, the more I think of it, drinking plays a central role in this story, both its consumption and suppression.

However, the poet and antiquarian, Lewis Morris of Anglesey, one of the Morisiaid Môn and a founder member of the Cymmrodorion, believed that the culture of Wales faced extinction if the people of Wales continued to ‘get drunk on religion’; while William Jones of Dol Hywel, Llangadfan, another folk song and dance collector, known as the ‘Welsh Voltaire’ on account of his radical political ideas, thought the Methodists were spreading ‘a universal gloom’ across Wales, and had long advocated emigration to America. Others thought it a form of religious terrorism. In short, folk songs were in danger of being replaced by hymns. There is a telling anecdote about the funeral of a faithful patron of a tavern in

Carmarthenshire. At the graveside, the minister announced the hymn ‘Mae ‘ngyfeillion adre’n myned’ [‘my friends are returning home’], asking the nearest stranger to pitch the tune. The man immediately struck up the tune ‘Nos Galan’. Well, you can guess what happened next: ‘Ffa la la la!’ It was the only tune they knew! And it is interesting in this respect, too, that the *plygain* carol tradition provides a line of continuous cultural activity which never really went away when so many other traditions were fast disappearing.

It seems to me, then, that the nineteenth-century religious revivalists pretty much appropriated ‘Y Werin Bobol’, whoever they were, as their own, representing, so they thought at least, sobriety, morality, and the upstanding, hard-working, Welsh-speaking people. But there were others – poets, harpists, and balladeers, notably Abram Wood and his descendants – who were clearly not of this kind – happier in the taverns than in the chapels – who did more than anyone else to keep the old traditions alive.

There were threats in other directions too, one being the Grand Concert of Miscellaneous Music which employed musicians from London who brought the most fashionable European music of the day with them, to say nothing of the choral societies and their strong associations with the chapels and their penchant for ‘respectable’ composers such as Handel and Mendelssohn and their biblically themed oratorios. The other threat was the pedal harp, patented in France around 1810, which posed a very real threat to the traditional Welsh triple harp – actually a seventeenth-century Italian import – resulting in all out ‘Harp Wars’, as I call them, fanned by none other than Lady Llanofor, a fierce defendant of the triple harp and patron of Maria Jane Williams. Interestingly, Augusta Hall, Lady Llanofor, was greatly influenced by a German diplomat, Baron Christian von Bunsen, who was based in London but spent much time in Llanofor Hall as he was married to her older sister; there was also the Rev. John Price, ‘Carnhuanawc’, from Builth Wells, not too far away. And both he and von Bunsen were strongly influenced by Herder’s ideas.

Here, then, was an association of the scholarly, the rich, the aristocratic and influential, aware of contemporary European cultural thought. So, the threat in Wales, it seems to me, was not so much foreign domination by an emerging or neighbouring state, as in other parts of Europe, but threats on its own doorstep.

Nevertheless, during this time, volumes of folk songs continued to appear. Important in this regard was Maria Jane Williams of Aberpergwm’s *Ancient Airs of Gwent and Morganwg*, published in 1844, significantly, with Welsh words. But, arguably, the most important collector in the second half of the nineteenth century was John Owen of Chester, better known as Owain Alaw. Between 1860 and 1864 he published *Gems of Welsh Melody* which includes the first printed collection of ‘specimens of Pennillion singing after the manner of North Wales’. And one of the most influential was *Alawon fy Ngwlad* by a gentleman farmer from Montgomeryshire, Nicholas Bennett of Glanyrafon, Trefeglwys, in 1896. And let us not forget the contribution of the London Welsh. Namely, Lady Ruth Herbert Lewis, the wife of the Liberal MP, J. Herbert Lewis, whose secretary was none other than the folk-song singer Dora Herbert Jones. Ruth Herbert Lewis was a noted folk-song collector, founder member of the Welsh Folksong Society, friend of J. Lloyd

Williams and a prominent member of Lloyd George's circle. In fact, there is a wonderful anecdote by her daughter, folk-song collector Kitty Idwal Jones, about Lloyd George dancing to one of her mother's catchier folk songs at a dinner hosted by her father in the Houses of Parliament, all of which did not go down too well, by all accounts, with the Head of the Civil Service when he happened to put his head round the door.

Folk-song collecting penetrated virtually all corners of Europe during the nineteenth century, their perceived purity, simplicity, and seemingly timeless quality giving them a kind of much-sought-after authenticity. And it was this perceived authenticity that made folk song a suitable foundation for so-called 'national music', which appealed so much to composers such as Smetana, Dvorak, Grieg, Bartok, Janacek and many others, creating new music out of old material, with all its associations – cultural, linguistic, and political.

Meanwhile, what we call 'classical music' became something of a secular religion in central Europe during this time. One of the major concerns that preoccupied musicians and philosophers, particularly in the German-speaking world, was the concept of 'universality' in music, a kind of musical Esperanto as it were, something with purely musical meaning which transcended national borders, striving towards the 'infinite'. So, music became, somehow or other, both a means of national, cultural definition, as well as a universal medium – an awkward path to straddle. Now it has to be said that it was the Germans themselves who identified *their* music as being the universal template for others to follow. The Viennese-born Harvard academic, Stanley Hoffmann, put it very pithily: 'there are universal values, and they happen to be mine.' Yet again, the so-called 'universal' music and folk-inflected music were by no means mutually exclusive, because, ultimately, of course, they could not be. But you can see *why* so-called programme music – music that told a story, rooted in a time and place – became so important to the nationalist composers. Parallel to this national discourse was the *Männerchor*, the male choir movement, which grew to gigantic proportions throughout nineteenth-century Germany with specially composed repertoire, often of a patriotic and folk-inspired nature. And I am sure the connection here with the Welsh choral tradition is not lost on you.

The relationship between the so-called 'high culture' and the 'other' was a tricky act with which composers regularly grappled. Central to this European debate was none other than Franz Liszt, who settled in Weimar in 1848, pitting himself in direct opposition to composers such as Mendelssohn in nearby Leipzig in a fierce and ugly brouhaha that became known as 'The War of the Romantics' - an ideological battle between what was regarded as being absolute music, music without any external associations, and programme music, full of extra-musical associations, a battle that lasted until the end of the nineteenth century.

English music, meanwhile, did not arouse much enthusiasm in Germany. England had been described by a certain German music critic, Carl Engel, who had settled in London, as 'Das Land ohne Musik' ('The Land Without Music') back in 1866. This soon became something of a cultural cliché, of course, echoed again by German writer and psychologist Oscar Schmitz in 1914, this time with distinct nationalist overtones. As the German diplomat and music theorist, Johann Matheson,

a friend and contemporary of Handel's, put it, 'The Italians exalt music; the French enliven it; the Germans strive after it, and the English pay for it.' The truth, as always, was somewhat different, although it is true to say that the influx of foreign composers and performers since Handel had created a certain sense of a national inferiority complex. And it is this perceived vacuum which may account for the emergence of folk song as the indigenous source on which English music could be based, as there was, perhaps, so little else to fall back on.

The first English composer the Germans took seriously was Elgar, whose reputation only began to grow during the 1890s. But, when an English musical renaissance did finally emerge in the early twentieth century, little would they have foreseen that it would actually be influenced by folk song. One curious trigger for this may have been the disproportionate number of composers who originated from what became known as 'Sevenside' – Parry from Gloucester, Elgar from Worcester, Holst from Cheltenham, Vaughan Williams from Down Ampney in Gloucestershire. This was the area, after all, of the Three Choirs Festival, the oldest extant English music festival. But the biggest trigger of all, it appears, was the publication of A. E. Housman's collection of pastoral poetry, *A Shropshire Lad*, in 1896. These poems have been set by composers over a thousand times during the twentieth century, and are an evocation of an English rural idyll which incorporated the Anglo-Celtic dimension of the Marcher lands which lie between England and Wales, rather than the more Anglo-Saxon ambience of the Thames, the home counties, and the metropolis – though Housman himself, it must be said, had been raised in the suburbs of Birmingham and spent most of his adult life in Cambridge. So it seems, therefore, that a late-emerging English cultural nationalism came about through an interest in its 'Celtic fringes', that is to say, its 'otherness'.

One of the main protagonists of the so-called 'English Revival' was Cecil Sharp, who was also responsible for introducing composers such as Parry, Stanford, and even Elgar to these native tunes. His epiphany occurred on a visit to Headington Quarry on the outskirts of Oxford where he happened on a Morris-dancing troupe, complete with bells and bonnets, and was immediately smitten. Later, the Welsh writer and critic, Raymond Williams, would say that Cecil Sharp's definition of folk song was 'abstract and limiting [...] based on the full rural myth of the "remnants" of the "peasantry" which excluded the songs of the industrial and urban working people'. Well, he would say that, would he not? But, as ever, he had a point.

In 1898, a meeting took place at No. 12 Hanover Square, then home of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, which led to the founding of the Folk Song Society, with the aim of collecting and promoting all the folk songs of Britain. Its inaugural address was given by none other than Sir Charles Hubert Parry, baronet of the realm, Director of the Royal College of Music, and Professor of Music at Oxford University. It is hard to imagine anything more 'Establishment' than that. In his address, he railed against the vulgarity of the music hall, the gin palaces and the squalour of urban industrialization, contrasting them with the purity of 'old folk-music'. Present at that meeting was Alfred Perceval Graves, an Irish poet and folklorist who happened to have a summer home in Harlech. He was, of course, the father of the poet Robert Graves. A. P. Graves became a committee member of this nascent society and was also active in founding the Irish Folk Song Society in 1904.

So, naturally, he was asked to set up a Welsh branch of the Folk Song Society; but the pioneers in the field were having none of it, so they set up their own, the Welsh Folk Song Society at the National Eisteddfod in Caernarfon in 1906.

Over the border, meanwhile, the yearning for an English past became increasingly stronger at the turn of the twentieth century, at a time of increasing jitteriness throughout Europe, when Great Britain may have realized that its place in the world was changing, its day in the sun was ending. The foundation of the German Empire in 1871 was a particular shock, which fundamentally changed the balance of power, causing anxiety among the British about being overtaken in terms of economic growth – a view, incidentally, espoused by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George. Suddenly, rural preservation societies emerged, garden suburbs and rural community schools built. In Germany, meanwhile, the *Völkisch* movement was similarly gathering pace with its emphasis on folklore and back-to-the-land, anti-urban populism.

An onslaught against the German domination of English musical life appeared in 1911, launched by the critic and composer Cecil Forsyth who argued for a ruthlessly English national opera, rejecting all foreign influences – by which he, of course, meant, mainly, Wagner. Britain's failure in regard to music, he believed, could be attributed to its national obsession with the sea, since, he claimed, land-locked countries never wasted their time empire-building, concentrating instead on creating great musical cultures. And, with anti-German resentment at its height in the aftermath of the First World War, no new works by German or Austrian composers appeared at the Proms for over ten years.

Eccentric though Forsyth's ideas were, they had a particular appeal to one of the rising stars of English musical life, Cambridge history undergraduate, Ralph Vaughan Williams, who, as late as 1934 – the year that Elgar, Holst, and Delius all died – in an essay entitled 'National Music', argued that native composers share some kind of secret to impart, to which only they have the key. Interesting in this respect are the observations of J. Glyn Davies, Professor of Celtic at Liverpool University and avid collector of sea shanties, in the preface to his collection, *Cerddi Huw Puw*, in 1923:

If there is any constant factor in the growth of our literature [...] it is the impact of foreign culture [...] that has been the most fruitful. In the process of cross-fertilization [...] the Welsh hybrid is stamped by the Welsh language [...] but] in music, the hybrid carries no such mark [...].

And he goes on to reference a number of supposedly Welsh tunes of English provenance. Brave man, as this was not the orthodoxy of the day.

The first explicit call for a 'national music' but, crucially, free of folk influences, was made in 1905 by Sir Edward Elgar in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Music at Birmingham University, though even he was uncertain how exactly this would happen. But even Elgar, the folk-song hater, was not immune to subliminal use of folk song; notice his 'Introduction and Allegro for Strings', which includes the 'Welsh Tune', as he himself called it, supposedly inspired by hearing distant folk

singing while on holiday in Llangrannog in 1901. Elgar believed it to capture a Welsh musical idiom that he had planned to use in a projected Welsh Overture that sadly never materialized. A new generation of composers, however, was already proclaiming an ‘authentic’ English style founded on folk material. Gustav Holst got off the mark first with his *Cotswold Symphony*, followed by Vaughan Williams’s *Norfolk Rhapsodies* in a style which came to be known as the ‘pastoral school’. Think also of the Yorkshire-inspired orchestral suite, *My Native Heath* by Arthur Wood (1924), which includes a movement based on a traditional Maypole dance, ‘Barwick Green’ – it is the theme tune to *The Archers* and it does not get much more ‘Merrie England’ than that, does it?

Thereafter, the search for folk culture sometimes took some alarming paths. Rolf Gardiner of Fontmell Magna in Dorset, the father of conductor Sir John Eliot Gardiner, began appearing at folk events with his Morris-dancing troupe, claiming it to be a form of earth magic and sign of masculine virility. Incidentally, he later became a member of far-right rural revivalist organizations allied to the British Union of Fascists.

Not all musicians in England shared Vaughan Williams’s views, however. Frank Bridge, for example, a committed pacifist and Benjamin Britten’s teacher at the Royal College of Music, was skeptical to say the least. Some even thought that the ‘pastoral school’ composers borrowed old tunes to save themselves the bother of inventing new ones! The composer, Elizabeth Lutyens, daughter of architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, coined the alternative term ‘Cowpat School’, with its ‘folky-wolky modal melodies on the cor anglais’, in a widely reported lecture of the early 1950s. There was indeed a widespread feeling that the Revival movement had had its day. With the emergence of radio broadcasting and the movies, people became aware of other, more fashionable forms of popular music, leaving folk song to appear somewhat old-hat. With the Second World War on the horizon, Constant Lambert, a member of the Bloomsbury Set, fired a shot in his essay, ‘Music Ho!’, at the ‘admirably-meant endeavours of William Morris and his followers [...] with its heartiness [...] noisily wading his way through the petrol pumps of metroland, singing obsolete sea shanties.’ ‘The whole trouble with a folk song,’ he added, ‘is that once you’ve played it through, there is nothing much you can do except play it again [...] louder.’

The period after the Second World War was referred to, specifically in Germany, as ‘Zero Hour’, a total break from the trauma of its past, and the scene was set for the unexpected resurgence of the ultra-modern music of 1920s Vienna which had been banned by the Nazis – free of any recognizable harmony or melody or any kind of geographical association, which became the dominant style of the following decades, largely funded by the American European Recovery Programme, known as the Marshall Plan. After all, what did national identity mean any longer? Over the border in the German Democratic Republic, meanwhile, a folk-music curriculum was being established, at the Liszt Conservatory in Weimar no less, with the purpose of bringing folk music to the common people in accordance with Soviet directives, by the same cultural apparatchiks who had also banned avant-garde music for very different reasons. That was the state of the cultural Cold War.

There were others, however, who ploughed a different furrow, arguing that ‘all

music is folk music' – that is, music for folks. They were the pioneers of ethnomusicology, a term invented in 1950 to describe a new discipline that explored, at first, principally non-Western, oral traditions. But, taking an equally politicized stance, they refused to recognize the privileged position of urban, western art music; music, that is, by white, male Europeans, at the top of some kind of hierarchy as defined by other white, male Europeans. Or, to paraphrase Stanley Hoffmann, 'there's great music, and it happens to be ours'.

One composer who removed himself from this highly polarized discourse was Benjamin Britten, who shot to fame with the premiere of his opera *Peter Grimes* in June 1945, some two months before the end of the war. He was an eclectic composer who drew on a full range of contemporary European styles in the name of public service and social responsibility. Above all, he maintained, he just wanted to be useful. For some, though, he was just too modern; for others, he was not modern enough. He described himself as something of an anachronism in this respect. Well, at least they could all agree on something.

So, where does that leave us? With Britten's folk-song arrangements, written for Peter Pears to sing at recitals, the most famous of which, 'The Foggy, Foggy Dew', was cruelly parodied by Flanders and Swann as 'The Doggy Doggy Few'. Published between 1943 and Britten's death in 1976, the final set, incidentally, was written for the harpist and composer, Osian Ellis. This was not the music of the farmyard, that is for sure. Britten argued that the beauty and value of the songs derived precisely from their hybrid quality, not their alleged ethnic purity. 'What we call folk music,' he said, 'is no product of a primitive society [...] the whole conception of folksong as a germ from which organized music grew may prove to be a false one.' And, in a list of contemporary composers with whom he felt most kinship, Vaughan Williams, Professor of Composition at the Royal College of Music when Britten was a student there, was conspicuously absent. 'Vaughan Williams repulses me,' Britten said in his diaries. However, Britten's last orchestral work, *A Time There Was*, is a suite of English folk songs written partly while on holiday in Germany, 'reverently dedicated to the memory of Percy Grainger', that prolific collector of folk songs, and premiered in Aldeburgh in 1975. Ah, such irony.

And so, we return to J. Lloyd Williams, who concluded his Cymmrodorion lecture, a hundred and ten years ago, with a manifesto on behalf of the Welsh Folk Song Society, and a pledge to research and preserve 'genuine' Welsh folk songs:

Were this to be done, we have no doubt that Welsh national music would become a potent factor in fostering our nationality; it is not impossible that, in time, a distinctive school of Welsh music would spring into existence, which would thoroughly justify for Wales the old title of 'Gwlad y Gan'.

But it was not to be, of course. What I suspect he was hoping for here was for a Welsh revival, along the lines that Vaughan Williams and Holst were beginning to achieve in England, orchestral music infused with the sound and spirit of Welsh folk song. But there was not yet a professional symphony orchestra, nor a professional opera company – the BBC Welsh Orchestra was not established until

1935 and the Welsh National Opera not until 1946. By then, the game was over.

So, what of the future? Folk song has not gone away, but its place in the world has changed, just as the world in which we live has changed. The impact of globalization, generally considered to be a bad thing, far from destroying cultural identity, could be the most significant force in protecting it. An attachment to locality is a powerful phenomenon after all; the need to belong to a community or social group does not simply disappear. The fact remains that national boundaries have always been rather fluid. And music, being easily transportable, is equally as fluid, refusing to be confined doggedly within specific, sometimes artificial, boundaries. And tribal instincts run deep – the history of the twentieth century alone bears that out – which may go some way to explaining the enduring, flexible, and resilient adaptability of our folk traditions.

Probably the best confirmation of the relevance of some of the themes I have outlined is the power they continue to exert today. On 1 March 2016, on the day BBC Radio 3 broadcast only the second-ever public performance of Grace Williams's *Missa Cambrensis* live from St. David's Hall in Cardiff – a significant moment in celebrating what we regard as our own music – Wales's newly appointed Poet Laureate, Ifor ap Glyn, stated in his inaugural address, 'Welsh-language literature tells a local, but universal story.' Now, I wonder where he got that idea from?