

CHAPTER I

*Music in Welsh History**Trevor Herbert*

All histories of music need contexts, but some more than others. The relevant contexts, at least in western music, have been patronage (whether benevolent or commercial), cultural production and distribution, the audiences for which music has been written and performed, the needs and purposes it has served, and how continuities have been interrupted by musical or extra-musical interventions. It would not be an enormous step to think of Welsh music history in similar terms were it not for the sizeable adjustment needed because Welsh music has not consistently followed the path of the mainstream European tradition. There is no body of secular works in the art music category from before the mid-twentieth century that has gained sustained public interest or deserved serious analytical attention, so no claim can be made for Welsh music to have a composer-led history. It can therefore reasonably be asked why Wales should famously be regarded as a 'musical nation' and a 'land of song'. These could be dismissed as stock phrases of the type routinely tagged to national stereotypes, which gain currency by repetition, but it would be a mistake to pass over them too lightly. They deserve unpicking because they contain historical substance and, to an extent, have configured the way the Welsh have regarded themselves and how others have often described them.

Traditional song of the type found in aural, oral and mainly rural practices has provided the main strand of continuity in Welsh music. From the nineteenth century, a new tradition emerged, as choralism became so widely and popularly practised that it too became one of the country's most quoted features. Welsh music has a coherent history, but taken as a whole it needs special attention, because, like other music cultures that reside fully or partly outside the European mainstream, its values must be understood in terms of its dynamic in the lives of the mass of the people and their communities rather than in those of just a social elite. In this respect, it is helpful to draw on methods used to investigate fields such as popular and non-western music, which show, with a good

degree of consistency, that musical creativity and practice is the product of social processes and not just evolving repertoires.

A further complication is that Welsh music has been both an outsider and an intimate of the mainstream traditions in both art and popular music. The major style periods of European art music seldom map neatly onto the Welsh experience: for example, there is no major manifestation of the baroque or classical periods in Welsh music, and romanticism is revealed only in its broad intellectual and cultural sense rather than in a body of exemplar musical works. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence of alignments to, and borrowings from, dominant external cultural trends. Secular and sacred music from the earliest periods of which we have knowledge were sophisticated and often show connections to wider European practices. The performance of sacred music in Welsh cathedrals and religious settlements before the sixteenth century always matched wider practices of the Latin Church and later of the Reformation; Lutheran congregational homophony can easily be identified as one of the models used by later Welsh hymnists; and oratorio, or derivatives of it, played an important part in nineteenth-century Welsh choralism. From the twentieth century, three categories of musical activity overlapped: one formed or preserved in the *eisteddfod* and chapel traditions, another mirroring global developments on both sides of the Atlantic and given pace by new media, and a third deliberately aimed at strengthening the alignment between Welsh music and the mainstream European art tradition. It was this latter strand that led, in the mid-twentieth century, to the professionalisation of a music culture that had previously been dominated by amateurs. Another conspicuous feature of Welsh music, perhaps offering mitigation for the general absence of ‘great works’, has been its massive emphasis on performance. The engagement of the Welsh with musical performance is discussed elsewhere in this book, but the many great Welsh opera soloists, singers such as Tom Jones and Shirley Bassey and pop groups such as The Manic Street Preachers are each, in different ways, beneficiaries of a tradition of singing and the distinctive structural processes that nurtured it from the early years of the nineteenth century.

There are also species of Welsh music that are unique. They include the oldest forms of which we have knowledge, such as *cerdd dant* (literally ‘string craft’),¹ in which a voice improvises melodic declamations as

¹ ‘Penillion’ has also been used as the name for later versions of this form, but the genre from which it originated is *cerdd dant*. For an illustrated description of *cerdd dant* and *penillion* see Phyllis Kinney, *Welsh Traditional Music* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 241–246.

a counterpoint to a predetermined instrumental (harp or crwth) melody. Knowledge of the origins of *cerdd dant* is opaque, mainly because it relied on oral rather than written transmission. It is described in early writings, but the musical sources date from much later than the time when it flourished. The most important is the Robert ap Huw manuscript, containing harp tablatures with extensive annotations.² The distinction between *cerdd dant* and vernacular song is beyond dispute. Sally Harper makes the point that despite all its 'elusive aspects . . . there is no doubt that this was an elevated music with a courtly function'.³ It was a sophisticated practice, intimately connected to the bardic art *cerdd dafod* (tongue craft); many songs were settings of declamatory praise poems directed at noble patrons.

Wales, Britain and the Centres of Cultural Production

Leaving aside vernacular forms, the musical life of Britain before the eighteenth century was centred on the court, the larger churches and a relatively thin network of aristocratic and gentry residences. From the eighteenth century, this changed. London became a major centre for a greatly expanded musical life and a destination for leading Continental musicians. Musical commerce flourished, and theatres, concerts, music publishing houses, musical retail and the general paraphernalia of associated requisites took root. By the early nineteenth century, major and lasting institutions such as the Royal Philharmonic Society (1813) and the Royal Academy of Music (1822) had been established. For elite society at this time, subscription concerts had become a feature of 'the season', and while there is scope to question whether the interest of audiences was universally focused on music rather than the social interactions it generated, these congregations prompted the development of an infrastructure within which the music profession flourished, repertoires circulated and an increasingly widening music business functioned efficiently. The same can be said of Dublin and Edinburgh, even if on a smaller scale. Both were metropolitan centres: Edinburgh thrived as a capital city, and Dublin, if only briefly, was the second-largest city in the British Empire. Both had a social elite and institutions that mirrored developments in the British capital; for example, both cities had established national academies before

² The Robert ap Huw manuscript (GB-Lbl Add. MS 14905) is given close scrutiny in a special issue of the journal *Welsh Music History/Hanes Cerddoriaeth Cymru* – see Vol. 1/Cyf. 3 (1999).

³ Sally Harper, *Music in Welsh Culture before 1650: A Study of the Principal Sources* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 7.

the end of the eighteenth century.⁴ At the start of the nineteenth century, London, Edinburgh and Dublin, with populations respectively of 1,088,000, 83,000 and c.182,000, were major centres of cultural production,⁵ and it was not just material production that was generated: a shared aesthetic developed which led to the formation of yet more agencies and infrastructures that defined and stabilised musical taste and continuities of practice.⁶

Wales had no comparable centre of cultural production in this period and there was no place that could be meaningfully termed ‘metropolitan’. Between the death in 1282 of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the only formally acknowledged native Prince of Wales, and the institution of a devolved Welsh Assembly in 1999, Wales was effectively assimilated with England. The Acts of Union of 1536 and 1543 consolidated the legal status for this arrangement. The Council of Wales and the Marches met at Ludlow between 1471 and 1689,⁷ primarily to manage the estates and finances of the Prince of Wales. Provision was also made in Wales for the implementation of English laws and taxes.⁸ Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Wales was a rural country with few towns of any size. In 1801, the most populated settlement was Merthyr Tydfil with 7,705 people. The largest towns in the north were Caernarfon in the west (3,626) and Wrexham in the east (2,575).⁹ At this time Cardiff, which was not formally the Welsh capital until 1955, had a population of less than 2,000.

Merthyr Tydfil, on the northern rim of the south Wales valleys, owed its development to its iron industry. It was to remain the largest town in Wales until the 1870s, when it was overtaken by Cardiff, which grew as a seaport to serve the massive industrial expansion in the southern valleys that made Wales the world’s most important centre for the production of steam coal. This phase caused a commensurate demographic shift in which internal migration from the rural areas to the industrial valleys, and immigration from England and Ireland, caused cultural adjustments for the entire

⁴ The Royal Society of Edinburgh was founded in 1783, the Royal Irish Academy in 1785.

⁵ The populations of London (county of) and Edinburgh are taken from the 1801 census; that for Dublin is from James Whitelaw’s *An Essay on the Population of Dublin* (Dublin: Graisberry and Campbell, 1805), p. 15, which is widely cited and based on Whitelaw’s 1798 house-to-house survey.

⁶ For an outline of concert life in London at this time, see Simon McVeigh, *Concert Life in London from Mozart to Haydn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁷ The Council was abolished by Parliament in 1641, revived in 1660 and finally abolished in 1689.

⁸ For an overview of the various legal systems that have operated in Wales, see Thomas Glyn Watkin, *The Legal History of Wales*, 2nd ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012).

⁹ Unless otherwise stated, data in this chapter is from L. J. Williams, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics* (Cardiff: The Welsh Office, 1998). Relevant pages for this passage are pp. 62–64.

country. For the greater part of the nineteenth century, a period which saw formidable advances in most developed countries, there was in Wales neither a place nor formal secular agencies that provided an official administrative or cultural focus. There was no university until 1872, when the first University College of Wales opened in Aberystwyth.¹⁰ Following a popular petition, the National Library of Wales was established in 1907, also in Aberystwyth (see Figure 1.1). The placing of both institutions in the largest settlement geographically central to the country is indicative of the best logic that could have been applied at a time when neither the north nor the south held undisputed sway as the dominant centre of cultural influence. The Established Church, under the control of Canterbury, was the sole official British agency other than those concerned with the law or taxation.



Figure 1.1 The National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, 1941. Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru – National Library of Wales

¹⁰ St David's College, Lampeter, which was to become a constituent college of the University of Wales in 1971, originated in 1822 as a training college for the clergy.

Present throughout Wales, it had a mixed reputation among the laity: while many held it in affection for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it became largely unloved and perceived as ‘English’. In the nineteenth century, realities such as these were primary causes for two unprescribed agencies to fill the void and provide a surrogate structure for the future development of musical life and, to an extent, the cultural coherence of Welsh society more generally: the revived and reconstructed form of the ancient Welsh eisteddfod, and the rapid consolidation of religious nonconformity.

History, Identity and Language

For much of its history, Wales has had a distinct and widely acknowledged cultural identity, but no administrative autonomy. Musical life has often been perceived as an agent in the formation of that identity. Whether this idea is realistic or sentimental can be considered from different but connected perspectives. One is that indigenous music and its associated practices transmit signals of identity by association; another (similar and obviously connected) is the reverse: that music makers consciously or subconsciously act out imitations of ethnic characteristics shaped over time that eventually find resolution through consensus.¹¹ Yet another, but also connected, is that by the twentieth century, cultural identities owed much to ‘the invention of traditions’, a common process in the nineteenth century when so many national identities were forming or selectively revising their tone and shape.¹² Each of these ideas has purchase in the story of Wales, but it would be wrong to underestimate the depth of history from which the Welsh can legitimately summon evidence of their distinctive ethnicity: many sources seem to testify to it. For example, Bernard, the first Norman bishop in Wales, writing to the Pope around 1140 to argue a case for the establishment of a discrete archbishopric for Wales (that by implication would be distinct from that of England), described it as ‘entirely . . . a nation (*natione*), in language, laws, habits, modes of judgement and customs’.¹³ The musical life of the country has

¹¹ See, for example, Simon Frith, ‘Music and Identity’, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1996), an exploration of such ideas in respect of modern popular music.

¹² Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹³ R. R. Davies, ‘The Peoples of Britain’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4 (December 1994), 10. Davies makes the point that Bernard’s prospective candidature for such a post, if it were created, may have caused him to emphasise the distinctiveness of Wales.

played an important part in those ‘customs’ in the sense that the social rituals of music making have contributed to the formation of collective memories that strengthen feelings of ethnicity.¹⁴ Ultimately, three clearly discernible factors can be cited in support of the claim that Welsh music is distinctive. First, it contains genres, practices, agencies and even instruments that are absent, in the same form, from music cultures elsewhere. Second, to an unusual extent, ideas about the Welsh as a ‘musical nation’ have been inspired by, and even constructed from, interpretations of the country’s cultural past, and irrespective of the veracity of those interpretations it remains the case that cultural inheritance has been a recurrent topic in historical narratives about Welsh music. And third, in almost every era, but especially before the twentieth century, the Welsh musical aesthetic has been shaped by the country’s cultural, political, social, demographic and religious developments. To these factors can also be added a more provocative suggestion. In contrast to the experience of many other nations, particularly those of the British Isles, from at least the late eighteenth century the relationship between the mass of the people and music has been relatively uninhibited by gender or social class. The Welsh music tradition is the product of an unusual level of democratic engagement.

The population of Wales in 1600, calculated from an average of baptisms, burials and marriages, was a little over 350,000.¹⁵ In 1801, by which time the first phase of industrialisation had occurred, it had grown to 587,245; by 1901 it was more than 2 million, and by 1970 it had risen to a little over 2,700,000.¹⁶ Before the mid-nineteenth century, the country had a relatively small aristocracy, most of whom were absentee, and a larger gentry and mercantile class. The gentry included those who occupied the estates that covered large parts of the country. Many had country residences that maintained musicians, and from the later eighteenth century, the gentry was also responsible for funding the ‘bands of music’ attached to county militia but also serving the social needs of the gentry class. By this time, and to an unusual extent, many of the gentry families were joined through marriage to English or Scottish dynasties.¹⁷ The massive majority

¹⁴ See, for example, David Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Williams, *Digest*, vol. 1, p. 6. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁷ The unusual factor is the extent to which the men of these families remained unmarried or produced no male heirs. On this point see Philip Jenkins, *The Making of a Ruling Class: The Glamorgan Gentry 1640–1790* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), chapter 2. For a list and map of the estates of Wales in the eighteenth century, see Peter D. G. Thomas, *Politics in Eighteenth-Century Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), pp. x–xi.

of the population was proletarian: working on the land or in other modes of craft or labour. The conspicuous difference between the English and the Welsh among this class was that they spoke a different language. Welsh was the language of most of the population until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the most emphatic phase of industrialisation occurred. It was always both a vernacular language and the language of poets and learning: the richest and most ethnic strands of the Welsh music tradition are bound intimately to the language – most obviously *cerdd dant*, traditional song and nonconformist hymn singing. From the nineteenth century onwards, Wales began to become a more bilingual country because of immigration and educational legislation, but while the proportion of Welsh speakers decreased in Wales as a whole, it continued to be the dominant language in some industrial areas as well as the rural counties.

As is the case with most languages, among its speakers Welsh has always been more than a mode of communication: it has cultural weight. Those raised in the language regard it as a natural part of their being. A decline in its use was apparent in 1891 when the census (the first to measure language preference) recorded just 54 per cent of its population as Welsh speakers, but while the number had decreased further in percentage terms because of a rise in the population of the country, the actual number of Welsh speakers increased until 1911 when the census recorded a total of 977,366 Welsh speakers.¹⁸ The trend was downwards in the twentieth century, and in 1981 Welsh was spoken by just 19 per cent of the population, but subsequent measures, including legislation and the provision of Welsh-medium education, have stimulated a dramatic reversal.¹⁹

Historicism, Romanticism and Eisteddfodau

From at least the fifteenth century onwards, the roads between Wales and the British capital were well-trod by those who sought intellectual, pecuniary or other advancements. One estimate suggests that even by the late sixteenth century more than 5 per cent of London households might have been of Welsh descent.²⁰ In the eighteenth century, the London Welsh

¹⁸ Williams, *Digest*, Vol. 1, p. 78.

¹⁹ In 2017 the Welsh government published its ambitious *Cymraeg 2050* strategy, aiming to create a million Welsh speakers by 2050. Demographic signs suggest it could exceed that target. The Welsh Government Annual Population Survey (September 2020) showed that 28.8 per cent of the population spoke Welsh.

²⁰ W. P. Griffith, 'Tudor Prelude', in *The Welsh in London 1500–2000*, ed. by Emrys Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), pp. 10–11.

started to organise themselves into coherent societies. There was a Welsh school in London from 1717, and in 1751 the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion (broadly, ‘the Earliest Natives’) was founded to promote learning and philanthropy among the London Welsh. Other Welsh societies were established in London over the following two centuries, but the Cymmrodorion Society was the most significant and enduring. The importance of these organisations should not be underestimated, for in their midst, at various times, were some of the most influential Welsh musicians, including Edward Jones (Bardd y Brenin; 1752–1824), the harpist and antiquary, whose *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards* (1784) is one of the most important early published sources for Welsh traditional music; the harpist John Thomas (Pencerdd Gwalia; 1826–1913), a writer, teacher at the Royal Academy of Music and harpist to Queen Victoria; and the pianist and composer Brinley Richards (Cerddor Towy; 1817–85), one of the most prominent motivators of the Cymmrodorion Society and a major wheeler-dealer in musical life between Wales and London. The importance of these organisations was twofold: they created an influential and articulate lobby for Wales and Welsh culture in the British capital, and from the late eighteenth century onwards, they provided a conspicuous focus for interest in the ancient origins of a distinctively Welsh cultural and musical aesthetic. Special attention was directed at the idea that poetic and musical culture had been nurtured in Wales from the twelfth century onwards in the bardic assemblies that became known as eisteddfodau (literally ‘sittings’ in the sense of ‘sessions’).²¹ Many protagonists of a revival of this culture were speculators rather than conscientious scholars, but they were to have a profound influence on the way the Welsh and their music were understood or imagined, both within and outside Wales.

The instigation of a new version of the eisteddfod from the late eighteenth century had a major impact on the course of Welsh music. Original eisteddfodau were competitive events, and while they included instrumentalists even in their earliest manifestation, their primary focus was on poetry. One of the more significant temporary figures of the eighteenth-century London-Welsh fraternity was Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg; 1747–1826), a Glamorganshire stonemason and intellectual polymath. Iolo has been the subject of prolonged and rigorous scholarly attention that has revealed him to be a vastly talented, many-sided individual who played

²¹ Though these events had a much older ancestry, there is no evidence of the word ‘eisteddfod’ being used to describe them prior to the 1520s.

a critical part in shaping the romantic tradition of Wales. In 1792, as part of his druidic-bardic obsession, he assembled the first meeting of a gorsedd (an assembly of bards) at Primrose Hill, London. He introduced the gorsedd into the eisteddfod at Carmarthen in 1819, and from then on it was a permanent and central component of eisteddfod ritual. However, Iolo is most famous for his claim that he had discovered authentic early Welsh literary works, particularly those of the fourteenth-century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym (c.1320–70). Doubts were voiced in the nineteenth century by Sir John Morris-Jones of the University of North Wales, Bangor, but it was not until the Cardiff University academic G. J. Williams concluded a prolonged forensic examination that some of Iolo's 'discoveries' were revealed to be no more than brilliant forgeries.²² By this time, the deceptions had been enthusiastically digested and had thereby made a significant contribution to both a Celtic revival and a lasting reconstitution of the eisteddfod. In this one sense, the eisteddfod that took shape in the Victorian era benefited from invention, but it would be entirely wrong to disregard its genuine origins or its positive effect on Welsh cultural life. It is also important to stress that Iolo lacked neither brilliance, knowledge nor veracity in most of his endeavours. He was not alone in taking an imaginative approach to Welsh history: many espoused its literary and musical richness while knowing much less about it than Iolo.

Such idealisation of the past is a shared feature of romantic movements more generally. In Wales, however, and irrespective of any truths, half-truths or forgeries that contributed directly or indirectly to its re-establishment, the eisteddfod took on enormous significance. Within two or three decades, eisteddfodau were being arranged across the country, and what had originated as primarily poetic events took on a more musical character. Furthermore, the competitive element engendered a level of popular enthusiasm that was unprecedented. Local eisteddfodau stimulated tribal loyalties as towns, villages and even hamlets pinned their hopes on local heroes and heroines. Criticism of the competitive ethos came from some of the distinguished English musicians who saw no inconsistency in accepting remuneration for adjudicating them. The English composer Frederic Hymen Cowen (1852–1935), having adjudicated at the Cardiff Eisteddfod in 1910, concluded that 'the Eisteddfod rather retards the progress of the music in Wales than advances it . . . the purely competitive side seems to loom so largely as

²² For an overview of these and other assessments, see Geraint H. Jenkins, 'On the Trail of a "Rattleskull Genius": Introduction', in *A Rattleskull Genius: The Many Faces of Iolo Morgannwg*, ed. by Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 1–28.