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Wales: History, Culture, and Geography of Music

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Wales is a principality forming part of Great Britain, together with England and Scotland. Since devolution in 1997, Wales and Scotland have had their own legislatures—the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament—with some, but not all, government responsibilities being held locally. Devolution came a year later in Northern Ireland. The heir apparent of the British monarch holds the titular role of the Prince of Wales, attending ceremonial events and taking a general interest in the region.

As a country, Wales's territory is bordered with England on its east side and St George's Channel and the Celtic Sea on the southwest; its western coastline is on the Irish Sea and beyond that is the Atlantic Ocean. This geography provides the explanation for the country's strong identity as one of the Celtic nations, along with Scotland, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Cornwall, Brittany, and Galicia in Spain. These countries are linked by the International Celtic Congress, which was founded in 1917 to celebrate and promote their common cultural, linguistic, and musical connections. The very fact that the congress has continued to thrive for a full century is ample confirmation that the participants' sense of cultural identity is a feeling of belonging simultaneously to their own nation and to a broader, more distant Celtic heritage. This entry examines Wales's musical history with an emphasis on Welsh musical instruments, choral music, and language.

Early History

While historians in the past have suggested that Celtic tribes arrived in Great Britain through waves of pre-historic invasions, it seems more likely that these races are linguistically and culturally linked due to trade and migration from one to another via the Atlantic seaways. Their languages all generally described as Celtic, conventionally subdivided into P- and Q-Celtic. Welsh, Cornish, and Breton are P-Celtic languages, whereas Irish, Scottish, and Manx are differentiated as Q-Celtic, having split away from the Proto-Celtic language early on.

By the early Middle Ages, Wales was a patchwork of four major kingdoms and a number of other smaller territories. In the late 8th century, King Offa of Mercia attempted to demarcate England from Wales with earthworks subsequently known as Offa's Dyke. The borders region is described as the Welsh Marches; as with many borders, the precise demarcation of the boundary has historically been contentious, and the cultural affiliations of those in liminal regions like Gwent are fiercely debated.

In the 11th century, one king gained sufficient power to be described as monarch of the whole of the country—Gruffudd ap Llewellyn (ca. 1013–1063), now regarded as the last king of Wales. A patron of the arts as well as a politician and military leader, he was assassinated just 3 years before the William the Conqueror's invasion in 1066, when both England and Wales were to be subjugated under Norman rule. While no trace remains of the panegyric songs written by his court poet, Berddig—possibly because subsequent rulers would not wish to recall the political circumstances of Gruffudd's final years—there is documentary evidence of the bard's high status as an administrator within the court. Additional junior poets, known as *bardd teulu*, accompanied the court on its travels.

Glimpses of early Welsh cultural history can be found extending as far back as the 6th century C.E. in the writings of a Welsh monk, Gildas, who differentiated between ecclesiastical singing and what appears to have been a more declamatory bardic style and in references to the musical instruments of different countries by another contemporary writer, the Italian-born French bishop, Venantius Fortunatus. Later, Welsh music is mentioned in the *Llyfr Du o'r Waun* (*the Black Book of Chirk* or *Chirk Codex*), a 13th-century manuscript describing the 10th-century Welsh laws. The writings of the widely traveled Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales, ca. 1146–1223) are also of interest, and his *Itinerarium Cambriae* and *Descriptio Cambriae* (*The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales*) narrate his travels and the customs he observed.

An ancient legend relates that after the English King Edward I had annexed Wales and incorporated it into England under the Statute of Rhuddlan in 1284, he reputedly ordered the killing of every Welsh bard, to si-

lence their oral transmission of Welsh history. The harp-playing bard in a noble household was effectively a historian, tradition-bearer, diplomat, and publicist for his employer, and hence the highest and most honored of musicians. The legend may be completely unfounded but does underline the important role played by medieval courtly bards. It should be noted that later medieval legislation attempted to control varying types of itinerant musicians, in other words, those not attached to courtly households.

Musical Instruments

Venantius alluded to the *crotta* of the Britons—the word is similar to the Welsh *crwth*, a six-stringed, rectangular bowed instrument alluded to by the 12th-century Giraldus Cambrensis. Giraldus also noted that Welsh musicians played the harp and pipes, and it is the harp that has become known as the Welsh national instrument. The *Llyfr Du o'r Waun* manuscript mentions the harp several times. Other early medieval writing differentiates between the sound made by Irish and Welsh harpers, with the Welsh harps making a buzzing sound emanating from their gut strings compared to the wire strings of contemporary Irish harpers. However, wire strung harps were not unknown in Wales, and it is perhaps unwise to generalize from this comparatively slight evidence.

The Robert Ap Huw manuscript, now in the British Library, is a significant harp manuscript dating from 1623. Its author was a harper from Bodwigen in Anglesey, an island just off the south Welsh coast. Using special notational tablature, with the music for each hand distributed on either side of a horizontal line, Robert Ap Huw (1580–1665) outlines theory and technique as well as documenting tunes going back several centuries. Although thought impenetrable for many years, modern experts have been able to transcribe this material and incorporate the fingering techniques into their own practice.

By the 19th century, a larger instrument known as the triple harp, with its strings arranged in three rows, and capable of being played to a high degree of technical artistry, had become the favored instrument among Welsh harpers, particularly in *eisteddfods* (festivals of poetry and literature).

Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Minstrelsy

The United Kingdom of Great Britain was born under the Acts of Union between Scotland and England in 1707. During this century, there was a revival of interest in bards, their poetry and performances, by the Celtic countries of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. Much was made of their bardic heritage, with poems, stories, songs, and art featuring the bard as central figure, reciting long epic narratives of olden times and extolling their nations' earlier independence. A poem by the English Thomas Gray, *The Bard: A Pindaric Ode* (1757) recalled the legend of the last bard of Wales, who, faced by the approach of Edward I's soldiers, railed at the sad fate of his fellow musicians before throwing himself off a cliff. Such was the enthusiasm for the visual images conjured up by this poem that many artistic impressions followed, not least the wild-haired, distraught harpist depicted in the frontispiece of one of the earliest collections of Welsh songs, by Edward Jones, the "Bardd y Brenin"—*Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards*, in 1784 (revised 1794). His subsequent volume, *The Bardic Museum* (1802) again depicted a bard, albeit a gentlemanly Regency one.

Eighteenth- and 19th-Century Songs and Instrumental Collections

The late 18th and 19th centuries are characterized by significant activity first collecting and then publishing

national songs and instrumental tunes. Some of these collectors moved to London or at least had their books published in London to increase their sales. Simultaneously, expatriates with social position or ambition began to form societies to promote the national culture of the land they had left, retaining a strong sense of Welsh identity and heritage. Notable among these are two London organizations, the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion (*Anrhydeddus Gymdeithas y Cymmrodorion*), founded in 1751, and the Society of the Men of Gwynedd (*Cymdeithas y Gwyneddigion*), founded in 1770. The latter was involved in the revival of the eisteddfod festivals, promoting events annually between 1789 and 1795.

Besides Edward Jones, other notable compilers were John Parry “Ruabon” (1710–1782), who published *Antient British Music* (1842), *A Collection of Welsh, English & Scotch Airs* (1860), and *British Harmony, Being a Collection of Antient Welsh Airs* (1781) and the prolific John Parry, “Bardd Alaw,” or Doctor of Harmony (1776–1851), whose 1809 collection, *A Selection of Welsh Melodies*, was prefaced with “Observations on the Present State of Music and Poetry in Wales,” noting that, “There is scarce a parish in the principality but it contains a harper of some kind or other.” A significant later collector was the prizewinning Maria Jane Williams of Aberpergwm (1795–1873), the unmarried daughter of a wealthy family who in 1844 published *Ancient National Airs of Gwent and Morganwg; Being a Collection of Original Welsh Melodies*, hitherto unpublished, which obtained the prize at the eisteddfod held in celebration of the fifth Anniversary of the Abergavenny Cymreigyddion, October, 1838, to which are added the words usually sung thereto and collected and arranged for the harp or piano forte.

National song collections of the Victorian and Edwardian eras generally reflect the prevailing styles of contemporary art songs, but paratextual material sometimes provides informative musical and cultural commentary on the context in which they were assembled.

Gorsedd—lolo Morganwg

The autodidact Edward Williams (1746–1826), a stonemason whose bardic name was lolo Morganwg, pursued a fanatical antiquarian interest in the Welsh bardic legacy not only collecting verses and songs but also devising the pseudo-druidic Gorsedd ceremony which acknowledged prizewinning bards. It subsequently emerged that this was a ceremony of his own making rather than the revival of an old custom; and as such, it was just one of many contemporary literary fakes, like the Scottish James Macpherson’s Ossian tales. In terms of sheer bravado, Morganwg’s ceremony was equally audacious. The Gorsedd ceremony became incorporated into early eisteddfods, and there are still druidic overtones to the ceremonies enacted today in recognition of winning competitors.

Eisteddfodau and Male Voice Choirs

The first documented competitive eisteddfods (Welsh sing) were in the 16th and 17th centuries. These originated as occasions where bards would perform among their peers to establish status. As early as 1567, the Caerwys Eisteddfod is observed debating vagrants’ attempts to pass themselves off as bards. Although eisteddfods seem to have waned during the 18th century, the London revival at the end of the century triggered a succession of regional Welsh events, culminating in the modern eisteddfod’s inaugural ceremony at Aberdare in 1861.

During the 19th century, choral singing grew in popularity across the British Isles, particularly in growing industrial towns, where it was seen as a suitably moral and healthy diversion for the working classes. The Tonic Sol-fa movement made choral singing accessible to many who never had the opportunity to learn how to read conventional music notation. It was against this backdrop, and partly also in response to the temperance movement, that many Welsh male voice choirs were founded, contributing to a sense of belonging and local

pride in many mining communities. Although there are fewer and smaller choirs today, they still compete at the annual eisteddfod.

Welsh Language

The Welsh language was declining in usage, and prevalent only in certain regions, until strong remedial action was taken in the late 20th century. While English is the majority language, just under 20% of the population speak Welsh to some extent, a situation largely attributable to legislative action over the past four decades, ensuring that the language is taught throughout a child's entire school education. The Welsh Language Act 1993, Government of Wales Act 1998, and The National Assembly for Wales (official languages) Act 2012 have ensured that the language receives recognition and is treated equally with English, and official documentation is bilingual.

Urdd, The Welsh League of Youth, exists to promote Welsh-medium youth activities of all kinds, including sport as well as their own youth eisteddfod. Like the National Eisteddfod, Urdd primarily uses the Welsh medium, although both organizations' websites are bilingual. Besides traditional songs and modern *folk* idiom songs written in Welsh for solo or choral performers, the uniquely Welsh medium of *Cerdd Dant* (a very distinctive form of poetic recitation to harp accompaniment) provides a lasting link with the bardic recitations of the long distant past.

Welsh Music Today

Globally, many chapters and conference sessions have been devoted to discussions about what constitutes traditional and national music. If *traditional* music is defined as that which is transmitted orally, then much of yesterday's traditional music is no longer actively performed; conversely, much of today's folk music is in an accepted modern folk idiom rather than utilizing historic traditional material. Similarly, *national* music encompasses music of all idioms, from classical to traditional, and it is incumbent upon arts councils to ensure not only that the best of all genres is supported and encouraged but that musical education facilitates the nurture of talent in whatever mode it manifests itself.

Today, the eminent center for Welsh music scholarship is the Centre for Advanced Welsh Music Studies at Bangor University. It promotes the study of all aspects of Welsh music, publishes a bilingual scholarly journal, *Welsh Music History* (*Hanes Cerddoriaeth Cymru*), and holds conferences and other events, also collaborating internationally with other researchers into Celtic music.

Many other organizations promote the study and/or performance of Welsh music in all its manifestations, whether traditional or art (classical) music. These include the Guild for Promotion of Welsh Music and the Welsh Arts Council, not to mention *Tŷ Cerdd* (Music Centre Wales) at the still comparatively new Wales Millennium Centre. Wales is well represented on the classical stage with the Welsh National Opera, the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, and the National Youth Orchestra of Wales for talented young musicians, not to mention the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama.

In the traditional music sphere, the Welsh Folk-Song Society was established in 1908, while the Welsh Folk Dance Society was founded in 1949. *Cerdd Dant* performance has been promoted by *Cymdeithas Cerdd Dant Cymru* (The *Cerdd Dant* Society of Wales), established in 1935. Welsh music is also featured at the Museum of Welsh Life (formerly the Welsh Folk Museum) at St Fagans, Cardiff.

An interesting recording of contemporary Welsh traditional music was published in 2009 under the Smithsonian Folkways label. Available both as a CD as electronically via Alexander Street Press, *Blodeugerdd: Song*

of the Flowers is commended as an introduction to the music, and for its extensive, well-researched sleeve notes.

See also [Celtic Music](#); [Festivals](#); [Folk Music](#); [France: History, Culture, and Geography of Music](#); [Ireland: History, Culture, and Geography of Music](#); [Ireland: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice](#); [Scotland: History, Culture, and Geography of Music](#); [Scotland: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice](#)

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Further Readings

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