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Wales: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice

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The principality of Wales is part of Great Britain, along with England and Scotland. Like Scotland, Wales has had its own legislature since devolution in 1997, with Northern Ireland following suit in 1998. Historically, the borders between Wales, Scotland, and England were fraught with skirmishes; modern disputes have been pursued only politically. This entry explores Wales's cultural heritage, musicians, music education, live music scene, and the importance of the Welsh language in contemporary Welsh music.

Cultural Background

Music has always been part of Wales's rich culture, and many musical traditions continue to the present. The Welsh harp is still an iconic symbol, played in folk circles and competitively in the *Eidsteddfodau* music festivals (*Eisteddfods*). The harp also accompanies a unique Welsh style of declamation called *Cerdd Dant*. Choral singing is also a source of pride. Male voice choirs thrived throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, especially in mining communities, and are still renowned for their distinctively rich timbre. Although fewer nowadays, such choirs continue to perform in their communities as well as in competitions or further afield in combined choir festivals. The most famous is the London Welsh Festival of Male Voices Choirs at the Royal Albert Hall, featuring around 1,000 voices and solo vocalists. With dwindling and largely aging memberships, the future of this medium is a little uncertain. In a religious context, meanwhile, Welsh hymnody is renowned for its good tunes.

Prominent Welsh Musicians

Wales has excelled at producing world-class singers, including Shirley Bassey, Charlotte Church, Wynne Evans, Aled Jones, Paul Potts, and Bonnie Tyler. Mezzo-soprano Katherine Jenkins performs music across various categories from operatic to musical theater. Geraint Evans, Margaret Price, Robert Tear, and Bryn Terfel are but a few of the longer established classical superstars. One of Wales's longest established rock groups, Manic Street Preachers, has been performing together since 1986 (with some changes in personnel over time). The members of Manic Street Preachers declare that their origins in a small south Welsh former mining town were a formative influence on their repertoire.

Music Education

As communities and musical fashions change, choral singing has waned among children and young people; there is nonetheless a determination to keep music alive in schools. At the strategic level, the Welsh Assembly is setting policies in place to ensure that music is nurtured among its youth. In November 2015, the Welsh Government responded to a report by a group tasked with examining existing music services, stating a determination to establish quality music education within the new school curriculum and to work in the short term with Music Partnership Forum Wales. Desired outcomes include establishing mechanisms for service provision, instrumental tuition particularly to disadvantaged children, options for musical instrument supply across the sector, and setting up partnership arrangements with other interested parties.

Talented young musicians have the opportunity to become involved in National Youth Orchestra of Wales, while music can be studied at degree level at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff University, the University of South Wales, and at the Centre for Advanced Welsh Music Studies at Bangor University. Bangor promotes the study of all aspects of Welsh music, publishes a bilingual scholarly journal, *Welsh Music History (Hanes Cerddoriaeth Cymru)*, holds conferences, and collaborates internationally with scholars researching aspects of Celtic music.

Live Music

Millennium funding across Britain enabled a number of new ventures benefiting arts and tourism. In Wales, a new performing arts center was opened in Cardiff Bay in 2002. The Millennium Centre is home to eight professional companies, including the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and Welsh National Opera, ballet, theater, literature, and circus. It has a strong community engagement ethic, placing emphasis on outreach and on programming a wide range of art performances to appeal to the broadest possible audience. The center is also the home of *Tŷ Cerdd* (The music of Wales to the world), which is the Welsh music information center.

There are also many other music ensembles based in Cardiff and elsewhere: Notable among these are the BBC Welsh National Chorus, Music Theatre Wales (in Cardiff) focusing on contemporary opera, the City of Cardiff Melingriffith Brass Band, Mid Wales Opera, and the Wales Chamber Orchestra.

For a comparatively small country, Wales boasts an impressive number of live music festivals and competitions. The Welsh Music Prize is one of the most recent, set up in 2011 by a DJ and a music promoter, to run in tandem with *Sŵn* festival in Cardiff and to encourage new Welsh music. A longer established and better known competition is the biennial BBC Singer of the World Cardiff, while the National Eisteddfod and the Welsh League of Youth Eisteddfod (*Urdd Gobaith Cymru*) accommodate both classical and traditional music. The Llangollen Eisteddfod is also noteworthy, and there is another festival for *Cerdd Dant*. Additionally, the North Wales International Music Festival in St Asaph Cathedral, Denbighshire, attracts residents of that region, particularly since the railway network between north, mid-, and south Wales has been much depleted since the mid-20th century.

Promotion and Commerce

Tŷ Cerdd has already been mentioned as Wales's music information center; there are also many organizations promoting amateur music making and the work of professional practitioners. The UK-wide voluntary music organization, Making Music, has a national branch in Wales and coordinates Music Partnership Forum Wales for the Arts Council of Wales. *Trac Cymru* develops the folk music scene, and there is a national center for folk music, *Tŷ Siamas*, in Dolgellau, Snowdonia. The Welsh Folk Song Society publishes a magazine and is involved with the National Eisteddfod. Jazz has its own enthusiastic following, with Brecon Jazz, Jazz Heritage Wales, and North Wales Jazz named on the Welsh Government's cultural web pages. Community Music Wales aims to bring music to disadvantaged groups, care homes and other community-based ventures, offering workshops and training to people who might not otherwise enjoy practical involvement in music.

In terms of recorded music, the Welsh company Sain was founded in Cardiff in 1969 and had various studio and office locations before moving to its present site near Caernarfon. In keeping with the times, the 1970s saw an outburst of political songs, as pressure grew for a revival of the Welsh language and Welsh government. Sain now has an extensive catalog, with a strong focus on Welsh-language music, rock and folk music, male voice and mixed choirs, solo singers, and harp music. Another company, Music Wales Ltd., describes itself as *Wales's biggest label* and handles recordings by international names such as Charlotte Church, Bonnie Tyler, and Paul Potts.

While Wales certainly has had, and indeed has, its share of talented composers, comparatively few have made their name internationally, although Alun Hoddinott and William Mathias contributed considerably both as composers and as teachers of the next generation. Welsh composers of classical music today are represented by CURIAD (Composers of Welsh Music), which has been promoting new music since 1992, also publishing new editions of music from earlier periods extending back to the Baroque era. Additionally, Discover Welsh Music describes itself as *a digital hub for the music of Wales*, currently profiling five composers—Hoddinott, Mathias, Dilys Elwyn-Edwards, Grace Williams, and Joseph Parry, sharing their manuscripts, recordings of their music, and biographical details.

The Welsh Language

Parents in Wales choose whether their children are educated in English or Welsh; in some parts of Wales, education is bilingual. Welsh is also taught as a subject in its own right. As mentioned above, the Welsh language movement had a resurgence in the 1970s, and February 12, 2016, saw the celebration of Welsh Language Music Day, raising awareness of five decades of Welsh music. The Selar Music Awards were made a week later. For children and young people, Urdd Gobaith Cymru allows them to develop a range of social skills through the Welsh medium, including sporting and residential activities as well as the Eisteddfod. Like the other Celtic languages, Welsh will probably always be a minority language but fiercely defended by its protagonists. As such, songs will continue to be written in the Welsh language but may not have wide exposure outside Wales itself.

See also [Celtic Music](#); [Festivals](#); [Wales: History, Culture, and Geography of Music](#)

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