

Ten of the best: A history of Welsh folk music

This week musicians and music industry leaders from across the globe are in Cardiff as WOMEX, the world's leading World Music Expo arrives in Britain.

Gwyneth Glyn has collaborated with some of Wales's leading musicians and performed all over the world



Each evening Cardiff Bay will become the _____ for a world music Showcase Festival featuring a tapas of world music from around the world.

Folk music played a large part in this year's **opening ceremony** featuring **Cerys Matthews** and other leading Welsh musicians taking the _____ on a journey of Welsh music and culture spanning 30,000 years.

We asked ten of the leading exponents of Wales' folk music to share songs that best represent what makes each tradition so unique.

1. The harp tradition in Wales

The earliest _____ manuscript of harp music in Europe - the manuscript of **Robert ap Huw**, comes from Wales.

"The tablature of the Ap Huw manuscripts provide a vital insight into early, traditional music and his music is still celebrated and performed widely" said internationally _____ harpist, **Catrin Finch**.



Catrin Finch is Britain's foremost harp performer and former Royal Harpist to Prince Charles.

"**Caniad Y Gwyn Bibydd**" (The Song of the White Piper) demonstrates his music's amazing ability to sound contemporary, even though it was written nearly five centuries ago."

2. Cerdd Dant

This unique tradition of singing or chanting poetry to harp _____ is a direct descendent of the form used by early bards to intone poetry in _____ of their kings and princes.

Gwenan Gibard, a musician and leading exponent of the tradition chose the track **Bum Yn Caru Cainc Y Datgeiniad** by one of the old style singers, Einion Edwards, from Meirionydd - a stronghold of the tradition for centuries.

3. The Welsh Triple Harp

Considered by many to be Wales's national instrument, the triple harp was _____ to Britain from continental Europe in around 1630. It became popular with harpists in London, many of whom were Welsh and brought it to Wales where it became popular amongst the Gipsy community.

"The 'shimmering' voice of the Triple Harp's three rows of strings is truly as timeless and unique as the Welsh language itself" said **Robin Huw Bowen**, a full-time professional Welsh harpist specializing _____ in the Welsh Triple Harp.

The track **Pwt Ar Y Bys** (Fingering Vamp) shows off the harp's capability and the Welsh tradition to great effect.

4. The Plygain Service

In many parts of Wales Christmas Day meant attending an early **plygain** service between 3-6am at the parish church.

Singer **Arfon Gwilym** was brought up in the tradition and explains more: "The plygain tradition



survives mainly in Montgomeryshire and takes
_____ in churches and chapels over a six-
week period during Christmas and the new year."

The plygain is one of the oldest _____ folk traditions in the British Isles.

"After a short service, the plygain is declared open and anyone in the audience can take
_____, as individuals or as small parties, the most common party being three people,
singing in close harmony. The singing is always unaccompanied and in the past was dominated by
men who sang in a simple folk style that was unique."

5. Welsh folk songs and ballads

Welsh ballads are still _____ performed in their traditional forms but new generations
of musicians are revisiting them and performing the songs in more contemporary styles, ensuring
they remain relevant. In recent years, folk singer **Siân James** has been at the forefront of this
movement:

"A ballad which _____ my imagination from a very young age was the very
beautiful **Yr Eneth gadd ei gwrthod** (The rejected maiden) - a 19th Century ballad from the
Cynwyd area near Bala, which tells the story of a young girl who, finding herself pregnant out of

wedlock, is thrown out of her family home by her father, ostracised by her community and left destitute."

"It ends with the girl _____ herself. She is found with a water-sodden note in her hand, asking to be buried without a headstone, so her existence would be forgotten."

6. Wales' traditional dance reels



Due to the work of enlightened individuals such as **Lady Llanover** in the 18th Century, a good many of Wales' traditional dance reels (folk dance and accompanying dance tune type) have survived. Stephen Rees is one of Wales's _____ folk musicians and musicologists: "This recording of **Pibddawns y Sipsi** performed by Nansi Richards, the original 'Queen of the Welsh Harp' _____ the 'hwyl' or spirit of our traditional dance music."

7. Macaronic blends of Welsh and English

During the Industrial Revolution, migrant workers from across the world flocked to Wales' coalfields, slate quarries and docks. The impact on small, Welsh speaking communities was immense and this period ignited a tradition of mixed language songs known as Macaronic.

Cerys Matthews is a huge fan and chose **Cân Merthyr** as one of her favourites. Initially, Macaronic songs _____ to be an oral tradition but handwritten records do exist in the National Library of Wales archives dated 1909.

Its words are said to _____ sold on the pamphlet of a ballad-singer at Merthyr Tydfil around the mid-19th Century.

8. Celtic folk revival

The 1960s and 1970s saw a surge in Welsh language activism. While the rest of the western world was engaged in the hippy movement and the 'summer of love', Wales was rediscovering its folk music and traditions, fuelled by a surge in the popularity of Celtic music.



"We formed Ar Log in 1976, with the dream of _____ to earn a living solely by playing traditional Welsh music" said Dafydd Roberts, one of the founding members of **Ar Log**.

"By the early eighties Ar Log was travelling Europe and North & South America for around nine months of the year with a wealth of traditional Welsh folk music at our _____, from haunting love songs and harp airs, to melodic dance tunes, and rousing sea shanties."

This medley of traditional folk songs comes from Ar Log's own repertoire: **Twll yn y to / Cymro o Ble / Pedwar Post y Gwely**

9. Protest songs

Dafydd Iwan is a singer-composer and political _____ and campaigned during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s for official status for the Welsh language with Cymdeithas Yr Iaith, **the Welsh Language Movement**.

"Songs have been a natural _____ for expressing strong emotions and political protest for centuries, and here in Wales there is a long tradition of ballads with a strong social and political theme," he said.

Peintio'r Byd Yn Wyrdd (Painting the world green) grew out of the road-signs campaign for the Welsh language.

10. Experimentation and collaboration



More and more young musicians are turning to the folk tradition for inspiration and helping to drive creative experimentation and collaborations.

Welsh poet and singer-songwriter **Gwyneth Glyn** has recently been working on such a project with musicians from India and singer Tauseef Akhrar from Mumbai and incorporates Indian violin, tabla and Welsh harp.

Another recent project _____ **Mamiaith** (Mother Tongue), saw Welsh folk group **9Bach** collaborate with Australian group **Black Arm Band** to explore the poignant theme of lost language. Gwyneth chose the track **Cariad Mam** (Mother's Love) from that album.

Today, musical tradition in Wales is _____ as younger musicians turn to folk music for inspiration but continue to develop it further with rich musical collaborations around the world.