Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education

Series 3 Episode 2: Celtic Language in Music (Part 1)

[Intro music]

Yusef Sacoor: Difdar, Fat Lagennis, and welcome to Make Your Mark Notes on Music Education. This week we are doing it on Celtic languages and how they are used in music education all across these islands. So without further ado, I'd like to get our guests to introduce themselves, starting with Manon.

Manon Llwyd: Well, diolch dda pawb. Hello and thank you for inviting us to be here. I'm really pleased to be here. So, Manon Llwyd ydw, I'm Manon Llwyd. And Welsh is my first language. I grew up in a Welsh speaking area and living life through the medium of Welsh, living music, creating and doing everything through the medium of Welsh, as natural as possible. So English is my second language.

Of course, we live in a bilingual society. But speaking Welsh at home and with the family. I am a musician; I'm a composer, I'm a harpist, and I've got a huge sort of Celtic folk background naturally, but trained classically. And I love music fusions of all kinds.

But in terms of education, I work for a company called Charanga Cymru, well, Charanga, and I'm the Charanga Cymru branch. So I'm the CPD and Training Manager, developing Welsh-language and English-language resources, so bilingual resources. And it's really exciting to be able to do that throughout Wales. I also work with dementia, and we have Forget Me Not Chorus down in Cornwall as well. So we actually work close with Cornwall. So that's who I am, and I'm privileged to be here.

Yusef Sacoor: Diolch Manon, and now could I get Ailey to introduce themselves?

Eilidh Mackenzie: Halò a h-uile duine is mise Eilidh NicCoinnich. Hello, and it's absolutely lovely to be here too. My name is Eilidh NicCoinnich and I work for a Gaelic organisation called Fèisean nan Gàidheal which just means Festival of the Gaeles. We've been on the go now for, think it started in about 1991 and was the direct result of the very first Fèisean which happened in Barra in 1981.

So the Fèisean movement has been something that's been weaving its way through Scottish communities now for quite some time. And you can't really go very far in Scotland without stumbling across a Fèisean. So they're primarily about delivering Scottish Gaelic arts, and specifically music, to children and young people. But we do also support adults with learning. And then I work in the formal education service within Fèisean nan Gàidheal, which we call Fèisgoil and that covers everything to do with language, do with music, to do with drama and to do with other crafting projects. So it's lovely to be here. I was raised on the island of Lewis, but I now live near Inverness, where one of our offices is based, and it's really interesting to hear about our Celtic cousins today, so thanks for the invite.

Yusef Sacoor: Taing. Eilidh, if I'm pronouncing that right, and finally, Steve, would you like to introduce yourself?

Steve Hawker: Yes, I'm Steve Hawker. I'm the Inclusion Lead for Cornwall Music Service Trust. And as well as doing inclusion work, which includes language, culture and identity, I do some teaching and performing in a folk band as well.

Ella Roberts: Diolch yn fawr, thanks everyone for your introductions. So, I wondered to kick us off, could you tell us a little bit more about the kinds of projects you're involved in bringing your language into your work? Whether these are group projects, community projects, it'd be lovely to hear what you've been sort of working on.

Manon Llwyd: I work a lot in education, so we do lots of things with the Arts Council of Wales, as much as Charanga, to go into schools to promote the Welsh language and anything bilingual songs and such likes and to bring them into the expressive arts. On a personal level, as I was mentioning, I lead a Forget Me Not chorus, which is dementia work. And I lead a choir of people in North Wales. We've got lots of choirs all over the country. And I'm also the Welsh language lead for the charity, which means developing music. And it's interesting, what I like is working with both ends with education and then the latter end of where music is valuable also. So I get to see, I think, the whole picture. And the language aspect is so important, especially. So it's important to start it off in school and to get that going because by the time you're in your twilight years and you're unwell with dementia, then it's incredibly powerful to see how important the language is, if that's, know, whatever your first language is, because your other languages will diminish. So language is really, really important. So I work on those kinds of projects as well as composing for various, know, whoever phones up and asks for something; this is what I do. So I'm there to help aid music in any way for people.

Ella Roberts: Diolch, yeah, such a broad range of work you're doing with Charanga and outside of that as well. That's brilliant. I'll come to Steve now

Steve Hawker: Yes, there's lots of projects that the music service in Cornwall gets involved in. there's individuals who have learnt Cornish and will use arrangements of jingle bells translated into Cornish or whatever it is with their instrumental lessons. There's larger scale projects as well. So Gareth Churcher, our head of service, is also a composer. So, for example, when there was a mine that was being regenerated, King Edward Mine, he got involved in composing music with brass bands and other kinds of musical local traditions. So there's other things that are going on as well, like the Music Hub and other organisations like Lowenda, who do a folk ensemble. So there's various ways in which the Cornish language gets used in music. And there's quite a few schools who when you go in and visit, they've got signs up in Cornish.

So there's Go Cornish. They do school awards. So those schools which say Ditda or Mitinda instead of good morning or good day. And it becomes more normalised, which is very useful for a language which there's only about 500 fluent Cornish speakers, and maybe up to 5,000 who, like Youssef and I, might speak a little bit.

Ella Roberts: Thank you. So Eilidh, if you want to carry on from that.

Eilidh MacKenzie: So at Fèisean nan Gàidheal the working language of the organisation is Gaelic which is fantastic for people of all levels of trying to learn the language whether you're a fluent speaker coming into work or whether you're actually just at the beginning of the journey you're always welcomed within the organisation. So we have a wide range of abilities, but the actual day-to-day working of our offices is through the medium of Gaelic, so there is an expectation that people get up to speed. And the projects that we deliver, well we have, as I said I think earlier in my introduction, we have around about 46 or 47 a community-based, volunteer-led Fèisean which happen throughout the country and all of those children and young people are given the opportunity to learn Gaelic song or tunes on whatever instruments that have a connection to Highland culture or Gaelic culture. So we have that as our absolute core work that we deliver. But in addition to that, as I mentioned, I work in the Fèisgoil Service, which is our formal education service, and we deliver to schools mainly, and while we do that, we have many different projects.

We deliver to Gaelic medium schools and for any of the listeners who don't know about the situation in Scotland, you can elect to put your child through the medium of Gaelic in an education. There are about 67 primary schools now where you can do that. So of course it depends on the place you live in. You can request it as well though, so councils are obliged to now listen to parents. We had a change in law last year with the Scots and Gaelic, where they became official languages for the first time and when you consider that Scotland has been around for about, sorry, Gaelic has been around for about 1700 years, it seems incredible to think it's only now deemed an official language, but it is, and we're very, very glad to be in this position finally.

With those schools, we deliver through the medium of Gaelic, which is wonderful for our young traditional musicians in particular who are working as freelancers, who are Gaelic speakers and who are looking to take on this kind of work. So that's fantastic. We also have, however, an initiative in Scotland called Languages, the One Plus Two approach, which is a Scottish government initiative to make sure that every child in Scotland is presented with at least two languages in addition to the language through which they're being taught. Schools again can elect to take Gaelic in as one of those languages, and we support that initiative by again employing mainly student-aged Gaelic speakers who are also musicians.

So those are our main projects, but we do have some other one-off projects. For example, we run something called Ceòlas, which means five days, and it's a residential event for Gaelic-speaking children to live in what mainland communities might term a remote community on the Isle of Lewis. And they live a traditional Gaelic lifestyle for the week they're there, so they are taken to a croft. They are also taken out on a boat to smaller islands. They are introduced to the crofting way of life. They get to cut the peats. They get to feed chickens and do some lambing even.

So there's all sorts of ways of engaging the children with the language and in the evenings they tend to sit down and play music together. So we have that specific project for our teenagers called Fúarín, which means the stream or the well, and it opens up young people to research, so they get this opportunity to work with a respected Gaelic singer. They research specific songs, and then they have the opportunity to record them and perform them in front of a live audience. So anyway there's loads of projects, and I'll stop there.

Yusef Sacoor: Yeah, there's a huge breadth of stuff going on there. We'll come back to that point you made about recognition for the language later on. I know how important that is and I know that in Cornwall we've just had a change, an upgrade in recognition, which is which will make a big difference to the way this is educated. But for now, I wanted to touch on inspiration. So, your personal journey with the language. I know we've got people here who for whom it is their first language to speak a Celtic language.

But what inspired you to do this work? What makes you do this work? And sort of what do you think is so important about getting people from the Celtic nations or who live in the Celtic nations to speak their own language?

Manon Llwyd: I'm happy to jump in. Just linking on from all those fantastic things happening in Scotland, fantastic really. And thinking about the recognition of language that you mentioned there. And I know we're moving on from that conversation, but actually thinking of where we're at in Wales, which actually, I think sort of blends in with the inspiration thing, because we've got 403 Welsh medium schools and sort of 91,000 children are being educated through the medium of Welsh. I'm really proud of that.

We've got more speakers now than we sort of had shown in the 2021 census, which didn't look so good, but now we've got 800 and something thousand Welsh speakers. And our language is recognised as the official language of Wales on a par with English, and everything we do we have to consider in terms of education; we really have to consider the Welsh language.

So I came to work for Charanga? Why did I come to work for Charanga? Because I thought it was fantastic that this platform which is a digital platform for music education in Wales to go hand in hand with the new music curriculum in Wales. Just seeing that and thinking that the government is sponsoring the licenses for all the schools in Wales, and actually what that has done by just giving that license and making sure that Charanga Cymru is bilingual. Because Charanga, respectfully, noticed that, okay, there's a language in Wales, which means there's heritage, there's culture, there's all sorts of other things. It's not just the language. It's not just that we translate things from English to Welsh. The inspiration comes from the identity, the belonging, the confidence we have in the language, the connection that music brings. And I think the inspiration has to come from those four things really. The sense of belonging that comes with the language is immense, really. And this is something, you know, even if you go to an English-medium school in Wales now, because of the platform and the fact that we've got hordes of resources that we've created especially for the schools in Wales. That it means that Welsh learners, because we have a really strong Welsh learners programme, it means that they can be inspired to sing in Welsh because everything is bilingual on the platform with a click of a button. You can just find everything in any language you want.

And when I talk to, let's say, people from South Wales, from Pembrokeshire, where they wouldn't, where you would feel that, in some pockets, Welsh language is the second language and they're not so confident, but they were saying to me, because of the creation, the musical creation, they now feel more confident to actually venture to speak the Welsh language. So this is where music is really important. And doing it through music, other than just, you know, straight language, actually helps because the focus moves to having the joy of making music together. So you're actually enjoying either dancing or music or what the storytelling that comes in through music. And that makes a huge difference, I think, because the expressive arts is also a part of it, which means you can explore what you're doing. I think that's so that, yes, again, identity, it's making it kind of exciting to hear the language in creative ways and to realise that it's a live thing. It's not something from the past, although it's really ancient and the oldest speaking language in Europe. And it's something to celebrate. We don't live in the past, it's current and as we know music evolves from generation to generation the language. If they can take that with them, then the Welsh music and all the Celtic music is going to evolve as well. So I think that's really quite exciting, and that's what drew me in, wanting to pass that on. It's like sending the lift back down so that somebody can go up in it

again, and I just love being a part of Charanga so I can share that and get to talk to all the children, and the teachers obviously because they're the gatekeepers. So sorry, that's my bit; I'll stop rambling.

Yusef Sacoor: Not at all. Eilidh, I was wondering if that sort of resonates with you in particularly that sort of thing of using music and music education as a as a as a way of propagating and improving knowledge of the language.

Eilidh MacKenzie: It absolutely does, and I have to say, Manon, you are inspiring; that was amazing. And fantastic to hear of the Welsh increase even since the census; that's really impressive. You're obviously doing something very right in Wales.

Yes, absolutely, think of music as a vehicle for getting language across to children, but not just to children; it's also to their teachers, because we find sometimes, with the greatest respect to teachers, we know how busy they are and how overworked they are, but sometimes if you don't have a teacher on side it can be a really uphill struggle to try and get Gaelic song in there, and you know sometimes I feel I'm banging that drum over and over again and if it doesn't come naturally to the teacher involved you've really got to look at why and we've got to find convincing reasons for them to take it on board. But when they do, it's fantastic, and I think what Manon was saying there about identity, for me, that is one of the most important parts of the whole kind of Gaelic song and Gaelic music journey, and I'm sure the same in other Celtic languages. That idea of giving children in particular a real sense of belonging to some community. They don't have to have been born there. They don't have to have parents or grandparents born there. They are part of that community, and that community is celebrating what has gone before and what will hopefully come right through their lives into the future by taking in Gaelic song and Gaelic music and actually running with it.

Yusef Sacoor: Amazing. That thing that you've both talked about, about identity and sense of place. I suppose coming to you, Steve, how does that present itself in a Cornish context? Because I mean, arguably Cornish was a dead language. I know there's debate on that. In a Cornish perspective, how does picking up Cornish again matter? Why do you do it? What inspired you to do it, and how does doing it through music impact you on a personal level?

Steve Hawker: Yes, well, I guess my inspiration for starting to learn Cornish was at a musicians' union meeting because we have a Wales and a South West region, and I had people speaking Welsh. They were calling home, asking what's for dinner, whatever it was. It just made me think, we do have that in Cornwall. And so that's what got me inspired. But from seeing how kids in school respond, sometimes it's things like place names, that if you understand what they mean or there's other kinds of forms of culture and identity that are left. So all the street names now have to have their Cornish version as well as the English. It's starting to expand a little bit from that first step. We're a long

way behind in, like you say, actually not necessarily a dead language, but it hasn't been widely used; there have been pockets. So I think it's really important that identity thing and also, like you were saying, Eilidh, about banging the drum. It is needed, and kids respond really well to having Cornish in the schools that I've encountered it, which is a fair few of them.

Ella Roberts: Yeah, I was also going to just follow on from what Eilidh was saying and what you were saying there, Steve, about that kind of sense of belonging, with the language. And for me as now learning Welsh, I've lived in Wales for quite a few years now, but I feel like I'm a few of my friends and things are first language Welsh speakers. And I feel like there's always a real welcoming, like you're part of this community now. So, like, encouragement, you know, just to learn a bit of the language. And that's definitely something that I think it's great to hear, how the music projects have facilitated that, because I found, actually, through being a musician myself, and working with other musicians, that's how I've kind of come to learn a bit of the language. So it's nice to hear that reflected in your work as well.

Steve Hawker: If I could just add, in terms of the music, as well as that culture and identity, sometimes it isn't just the language. Like there's several multi-school projects that we've done. For example, there was one in the Minak Theatre with nine primaries, two secondary schools and 500 staff and students. So it's a large multi-school project on a cultural theme. So even where things are not necessarily explicitly using Cornish language. It's really important to keep that cultural identity.

Yusef Sacoor: And I know from here in Cornwall, my home, at every possible sort of social event, it's that sense of place seems to be growing. I've lived here on and off for a decade now, and you do get the impression that more people have that and more people know what it is to be in Cornwall or to be Cornish, even if they're not born here. The question I was gonna ask, I suppose, is also from a practical perspective, both for learning the language. And for learning music, why you think it might be of benefit f for young people to pick up Celtic languages in a musical context

Manon Llwyd: I think using any language to learn music works. But it's nice to take any kind of history and background with you because you're learning a broader thing, and music is giving you a stage to learn a broader thing because music is just not an isolated thing. It's beautiful. Notes and rhythms and such like are beautiful. But even if we're learning instrumental music and not actually using language, I think it's nice to bring, again, we're back to identity, to bring that identity and context of where we are and who we are into that. Which, in school, with children that are hopefully unaffected by diversive thinking, that can actually unite and that people have all got the same goal and set sense of purpose because we're listening to, you know, music is always a connection and creating stories. So in the background there, there is always the language because different languages offer different nuances, also because of different

words, and that's another beautiful thing about learning a different language, whether it's a Celtic one or not.

But there is something pretty nice and earthy about speaking an old language; you feel like you've been here forever, and you relate to your land and your heritage so deeply. So you're passing that on with your own personal passion when you speak it. But these, we've got a, I mean, we may find a sort of, I don't know, a similar sound in language now, but we've got a few words I know in Welsh, like *hiraeth*, which is a sense of longing. And it's very earthy and from the land and also, and you can't translate it, but I feel it. So how do you translate a feeling? Now, music can help you there. And also we have the word, *cynefin*, which is the closest thing I can imagine to belonging, but it actually means more. *Cynefin* is more about your home and more. It's really, you feel rooted in that word. The word has come before you. So again, music, and when you're using these words, you can use moods and music. There's a lot you can discuss. Music is a fantastic way of helping to understand words, and likewise, words can help understand music. So I think it's really deep and it's really exciting.

Yusef Sacoor: Absolutely. And I think that question of heritage leads us nicely on to our next question, which is: with all of that history and that weight, how have these languages the languages themselves evolved, but also the way they intersect with music? Obviously there's a huge oral folk tradition in all the Celtic nations. But also there's loads of new music coming out in various languages. I was wondering how that feeds into your current work, both the changes in the language and in the traditions and the evolutions of these things, and also genres that aren't necessarily traditional to the places you're in. And again, that goes to the floor. Maybe Eilidh, can we start with you, please?

Eilidh MacKenzie: Sure. I think that's an interesting question, isn't it, to think about where it's come from and where it's going. I remember giving a talk, probably I was in my early 20s, so a few decades ago, and an old woman was in the audience, and I had been talking about some research I'd been doing on connections between Gaelic text and Gaelic melody. So it was quite a niche subject. But anyway, this old lady had come to the talk, and she said to me, ‘The problem today is that we no longer milk the cows’. And that was all she said. And then she walked away. And I realised, of course, what she meant was we no longer had a reason to perform so many of these songs that we have in our tradition because they were generally linked to a task, and I'm sure it's the same in Cornish and in Welsh.

I mean, Scottish Gaelic is actually famed for the Oran Lloeig. There are thousands of those songs, and those are the songs used when women sit round a long board table and pound the tweed to get it to the right size. And while they did that, because it was a task that would take hours and hours and hours, they would invariably sing songs. And of course, while they were singing those songs, they were passing on gossip or passing

on history to the younger women round the table with anecdotal references to things that had happened before. And those songs are beautiful. We treasure them. We have so many of them still, which is wonderful because the last example of this being used for its original purpose was in the 1960s, in, I think, Uist. So we no longer do them for the purpose they were intended, so it's trying to then repurpose these songs for a modern audience. And how do you make that appealing?

And actually, I think the Oran Lloeig kind of catalogue is a really good indication of that because they are hugely popular today, but singers seem to enjoy including them in their repertoire, and also tutors really, really enjoy teaching them, and I think it's probably because they have that magic vocable chorus and, of course, know, vocables, as we all know, are just basically sounds that don't hold direct meaning if you were to translate it into English, but they do have a sort of emotional meaning. And they're very repetitive, so when you've got something like that as a hook for a tutor, that's an amazing gift, really, and it's that. We also have that magic chain of three where you have a repeated line three times, and it makes it so easy for young people in particular to catch that song rather than formally learn it. So we have loads of those in Gaelic work songs. And I think there's a place for all kinds of music as long as it's done with respect. I think everything that's happening is just exciting and we should be supporting people and embracing whatever they want to call.

Steve Hawker: Yeah, just to follow on from that, I agree, Eilidh, that there's sometimes in Cornwall, there are songs which are now in English, but they are traditional songs and would have been sung in Cornish. So in the folk trio I play, for example, there's a Taylor's song. So they'd be singing while they worked.

Yes, those traditions, those oral traditions, is just as important in a way in Cornwall's current place as the language is to keep that going, and then as people get more familiar with the language and more people learn it, then those connections that you're saying, Manon, about the meaning of words can also come back.

But just to return to your previous point, Yusef, about why music works in education. I think kids in particular learn by song much more than by being talked at. And so I remember songs from childhood; everyone does, and it's the same in dementia work as you do, Manon, that sometimes people may lose many aspects of their cognitive function, but they can still sing this song. So access is a different part of our memory and cognitive function. So I think it's really useful to have that in schools because then the next generation they have a foundation.

We're a bit behind Wales, but there's lots of people who are actively doing this kind of work, using music in education.

Manon Llwyd: I can just add on to that. think that's really important to what you've just said. Yes, the oral tradition, for a long time, perhaps we lost it because we thought we needed to go back to the dots and, but I think there's a massive revival here of that sort of thinking in Wales, a massive revival and a lot of money being put into folk music again, thinking like that. And exactly what you just said there, Steve, with the dementia thing. It is the last part of your memory to go. What you've learnt as a child within the oral tradition, within the singing. So you could say, couldn't you, with all, you know, it's like really precious, you know, so careful what you share because you don't know where it goes because, okay, we're here for a short time, but there's a lot that happens within that short time for us. And the journey is important. So what you've just said, I think, is really, I don't think it matters where we're at in the journey, whether we're before or behind, but because we can be here today sharing. And yeah, it's interesting. That was really interesting.

Ella Roberts: Thank you so much, everyone, for your thoughts on that. It's really interesting to talk about tradition and how things have evolved, and almost the responsibility we have as well with the languages to keep them going with young people because they're so precious and if you can, someone with dementia can still recall those songs, it kind of really shows the power of it. And I know singing is a big part of that.

Now, I'm just going to ask a quick-fire question. I'd really love to know: do you personally have a standout song or maybe album in your language that you've used in education or it's just something that you really enjoy listening to? We'd love to share that with our listeners. Come to Eilidh first.

Eilidh MacKenzie: I'll try and keep it quick. There's an album out, came out last year, called Arun. It's by a band called Sheehan. And I think that's a fantastic example of where Scottish Gaelic music is currently placed. It's high quality, wonderful, beautiful arrangements, ancient songs sitting alongside newly composed words and melodies. And I would just tell you how to go and check it out. It's wonderful.

Ella Roberts: Amazing. Thanks. Manon, I'll come to you

Manon Llwyd: Well, I find this one a really tricky question because no one album or song stands out. Because there are so many wonderful things, not because there's nothing there. Within the tradition, as I'm saying, there's a revival now. But also, I think if I have to choose a song, there is a song called Gwisgoedd Nef, which is actually a translation of an English poem by Yeats called 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'. And the composer of this song, it's been composed by many composers, but this particular Welsh composer called Dilis Elwyn Edwards, who's also passed away, actually her melody is, although it's kind of deemed classical song, but her melody is deemed from a very folky feeling.

So what's interesting about it is that you take where you come from, and the next generation will take it to where they want to take it. And I think there's just, and it's a beautiful song and I love it as a piece of music and it's very short, and it's very poignant, and it's translated into the Welsh language by a person called Merêd, who was a really famous, very, very famous and the first to record folk music in Welsh and he worked really hard as a collector. So it's really interesting how poignant that is, and how the sort of Celtic feel has moved on into it without making it Celtic. It's just happened naturally,

Ella Roberts: Amazing. Diolch. Could we come to Steve now? I wonder if you have any suggestions for Kernewek?

Steve Hawker: Well, ironically, Gwenno is the most famous Cornish-speaking musician, but she lives in Wales. There's another great artist, Elizabeth Freeborn, who's done a Cornish language album called Emerald. But in the band that I play, in the Richard Trethewey Trio, there's one really beautiful song called Sleeping Under Wing, which has a Cornish verse and an English verse, the same translated. And that can be a useful way to kind of help in the learning process for kids as well in education.

Ella Roberts: Thank you so much.

Yusef Sacoor: Fabulous guys, thank you so much. It's amazing. There's such a breadth of new music coming out. I know before this, Ella and I were talking about Carl in Ellison the Rio 18, who did the Welsh-language Samber album recently, which was really good, and Gwenno has obviously come up as a great champion for the Cornish language. So yeah, loads and loads of exciting stuff.