

Living Traditions

The traditional arts of Wales have often played second fiddle to contemporary arts practise. trac - a brand new organisation - aims to restore the balance. Penny Simpson finds out more from Stephen Rees, trac's chairman.

The popular image of Welsh music centres around two stereotypes: the male voice choir, or a chart-topping band such as the Manic Street Preachers. The Brit Awards and the National Eisteddfod's prize ceremonies honour practitioners in each of these brackets, but what about the "harpers" and pibgorn players of Wales? The who?

"This is the kind of response we are up against," explains Stephen Rees.

"The public profile given to our traditional art forms is limited at best, if not non-existent. This is in stark contrast to the situation you might find in Ireland, say, or Sweden, where traditional fiddle playing is accorded the same respect on a university music syllabus as the learning of classical violin.

"trac aims to redress this situation through a variety of means: we want to look at encouraging participation, as well as the understanding and practise of folk arts. We shall be setting up a database for those working in the field, or wishing to put be into contact with practitioners, as well as developing pilot projects in the community. We hope these will take place in a variety of locations and not just in public houses or concert venues. We aim to utilise local village halls, community centres and school halls when we set up our residency programmes."

In the last 20 years, there has been a marked revival in the traditional art forms, particularly the instrumental traditions, something which trac is keen to build on.

"Since the 1950's, a few dedicated practitioners have managed to continue the traditions against great odds, passing on the songs, tunes and dances they learnt in their communities. What we feel is needed now is an agency which can both provide information on what is going on, as well as one that can make new things happen."

The traditional arts in Wales encompass a wide range of sources and influences. For example, a reed instrument played by shepherds in Europe found its counterpart in 18th century Wales in the form of the pibgorn. (One of trac's board of management is Cerys Rhys Matthews, a celebrated pibgorn player). A recent national tour of "harpers" saw Anglesey-based Llio Rhydderch perform on the Welsh triple harp. The traditional stories of Wales are told in both Welsh and in English, whilst long-standing ethnic communities from countries like Somalia and Yemen provide another vibrant strand in the web of influences being promoted by trac (Traddodiadau Cerdd Cymru).

"Broadly speaking, we are looking at new ways of appreciating all these art forms," explains Stephen.

"In traditional music, for example, there is often a very different dynamic allowed between performer and audience than that found in a classical concert. We want to alert our audiences to the validity of that dynamic - wherever it is being played."

trac are being supported in their promotional activities by organisations such as Wales Arts International and the British Council overseas. A newsletter has recently been launched offering information about events and contacts in the field, whilst last year a CD was distributed featuring the work of many celebrated soloists and groups, including fernhill, Rag Foundation and Robin Huw Bowen.