

**Argraffiadau Cymraeg: Exploring Welsh Identity in the Music of Three ‘Cardiff Group’
Composers**

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My paper this afternoon explores the contested and problematic notion of ‘Welshness’ and the different ways in which this particular quality has influenced twentieth-century Welsh composers of art music. This is quite an extensive topic, so I have chosen to focus my discussion on three female Welsh composers, all of whom studied at Cardiff University’s School of Music.

POWERPOINT [INTRODUCE COMPOSERS: Owen, Williams, Tann]

Together with others, these individuals can be usefully and productively considered together as a collective – a ‘Cardiff Group’ of composers whose influence and legacy continues to resonate powerfully within the contemporary Welsh art music scene.

POWERPOINT

The School of Music was one of the first academic departments established when the University was granted its Royal Charter in 1883; we are therefore naturally fiercely proud of our history and heritage.

POWERPOINT [PROVIDE CONTEXT FOR CARDIFF AS A CITY AND CULTURAL CENTRE]

So, let’s turn our attention to the issue at hand: Welsh identity – how do we define it?

POWERPOINT – Welsh national identity [GO THROUGH SLIDE]

Images and symbols that bind or unify.

GO THROUGH NEXT THREE POWERPOINT SLIDES

But are these images stereotypes; cultural tropes; clichés? And do they all apply to the whole of Wales?

POWERPOINT – Welsh regional identity

One of the most the influential studies in the last 40 years has been Balsom's 'three-Wales model'.

[GO THROUGH SLIDE]

Unsurprisingly, this model has been critiqued since its publication. [EXPAND]

One of the most obvious ways to attach music with place and identity is, of course, through the use of native folk song, and there are plenty of examples, such as Grace Williams's *Fantasia on Welsh Nursey Rhymes*. Composed in 1940, this piece quickly became a very popular concert hall piece. Its sense of Welshness no doubt comes from the fact that it sets 8 genuine Welsh folk melodies in a highly attractive orchestral arrangement.

But how else can composers identify with 'being Welsh' and articulate this through their music?

POWERPOINT

There are three key preoccupations evident in the music of the three composers under discussion here today: an awareness and pride in Wales's history, mythology and ancient traditions; a love for the Welsh landscape; a deep affection for the native homeland, including a sense of place, belonging and rootedness.

All of these play their part in articulating unique and distinctive soundworlds.

A 2002 choral work by Hilary Tann – *Wales, Our Land* – will help us here to explore these characteristics in greater depth. Tann explains that the work was composed in response to a commission from the Welsh Heritage Program at Green Mountain College, Vermont, and sets a poem by an unknown Welsh-American slate quarryman.

POWERPOINT

As Tann explains, the text 'speaks of the poet's love of his country of origin, perhaps, even, his longing to return. It is this sense of longing for the homeland (in Welsh, hiraeth) which infuses the composition.'

Being born in Llwynypia in the Rhondda Valley in 1947, but living in upstate New York since 1980, these meanings clearly carried a powerful, poignant resonance for Tann and manifested themselves in some of her music principally through the intense impact of, and

memories associated with, the landscapes and places in and around the area in which she was born.

POWERPOINT

As I have explained elsewhere, 'For the Welsh, hiraeth is a very special word, and one that holds a particular significance and cultural meaning; however, it is a word that is notoriously difficult to translate adequately into English. Tann highlights two basic definitions: a love of, and sense of longing for, the Welsh homeland. But hiraeth embraces much more than this, and involves a complex combination of the notions of homesickness, nostalgia and melancholy, and a profound sense of loss or grief for a person or a landscape, or of a time or place that can never be recovered. The Welsh writer Roland Mathias has described the latter emotion as Gwlad-yr-Haf (the land of the summer), "the happy past from which we have come and to which we can never return".' [Nicholas Jones, 'Composing Cymru: Welsh Art Music Since 1940', in *A History of Welsh Music*, ed. Herbert, Clarke and Barlow (Cambridge University Press, 2022)]

POWERPOINT

Composed four decades earlier for Welsh harpist Ann Griffiths, *Hiraeth* by Grace Williams manages to stir similar emotions in the listener, but in this instance the composer is arguably more concerned with foregrounding melancholy and loss.

[DISCUSS MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS]

The harp, of course, has a very specific relationship to Welsh cultural history and is emblematic of Welsh folk music in particular, and the composer clearly taps into this association. [EXPAND]

PLAY AUDIO CLIP

There is something profoundly national about this music; its 'Welshness' is deeply inscribed. This characteristic, however, is not unique to Grace Williams. Indeed, I would argue that the art music written by any Welsh composer during the period under discussion cannot reasonably be considered without reference to these composers' relationship to their own cultural identity and environment.

But let us rewind a little, and go back to the start of the twentieth century and focus on Wales's first major female composer.

POWERPOINT

Morfydd Owen was without doubt one of the most gifted and significant Welsh composers of her generation. Her untimely death in 1918, at the age of just 26, was a crushing blow for the development of Welsh music at that time. She was born a few miles outside of Cardiff, in Treforest, and attended Cardiff University to study for her undergraduate degree from 1909 to 1912. Owen was a pianist and singer. The work I want to focus on today is *Four Welsh Impressions*, composed in 1914–15.

POWERPOINT

[DISCUSS THE WORK AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACE AND SPECIFIC LOCATIONS]

PLAY AUDIO CLIP FROM *NANT-Y-FFRITH*

As this talk has demonstrated, all of the featured composers share a common characteristic: namely, an enduring fascination with their native homeland.

Clearly, though, the extent to which a composer's Welsh identity impacts on their own music and aesthetic is different in each case. Indeed, what about other forms of 'Welshness'? For instance, in what ways does the blighted post-industrial landscape of the south Wales coalfields affect composers? Or, how do political issues play their part?

In all truth, Welshness finds many ways to articulate itself, and a musical expression of nationhood often tends to be intrinsic and not always external. It seems likely, therefore, that the connection between Welsh identity and art music will remain a complex issue for the foreseeable future.

POWERPOINT

And, in conclusion, perhaps we should heed the warning of Grace Williams's rather quirky yet profoundly wise observation: 'When I am asked for my views on national influences in Welsh music I am reminded of the story of the centipede who, when asked which foot he put down first, got so confused he couldn't walk at all.'