

Gwalia

From Llanrwst to Mellieħa

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This is the story of how I came to write my rhapsody, *Gwalia*, for the Imperial Band and the challenges faced by composer and performers alike.

Beginnings

In 1988, I had a number of life-changing experiences: I learnt Welsh, I moved in with Julie, and as musical director of Opera Gogledd Cymru (North Wales Opera) I received a commission to write an opera in Welsh to be performed the following year in Llanrwst, at the National Eisteddfod of Wales. To write an opera is time-consuming and challenging; to attempt to write an opera to be performed in less than twelve months when one has a full-time job borders on the insane.

I had an idea for the plot: a tragedy based on Welsh poetry of the ninth or tenth century telling of the death of one of the Welsh princes and the fall of his castle and demise of most of his family. A really cheerful tale! I found a brilliant poet in John Gruffydd Jones who took my ideas, together with the original texts in Old Welsh, and turned them into a two-act libretto.

There were many constraints put upon me: money was limited so the opera was scored for a chamber orchestra; rehearsal in the actual performance area – the main tent at the Eisteddfod – would be extremely limited; teaching was taking up a lot of my time and because I was now able to converse in Welsh, I actually had to teach Welsh to a class of reluctant English immigrants! However, there were a lot of advantages, too: I was surrounded by talented singers in the company and was able to write specifically for their voices; one of the local male voice choirs agreed to take part as an offstage chorus; and Julie agreed to copy out the music as it was written to speed things up.

Once I began to write, the music flowed, I had very few occurrences of writer's block, and each week, the company had a new scene to rehearse.

The cast of soloists was immense because the main characters, Cynddylan and Heledd had many brothers and sisters, not to mention the servants and the court harpist. Julie was cast as Heledd and I was to conduct the orchestra, which would be on stage behind the action.

Unfortunately, less than a month before the performance in August 1989, the singer playing the baritone Cynddylan dropped out so I had to make a few changes. On the plus side: I managed to get a member of the staff from Welsh National Opera to conduct and I slightly rewrote and learnt the part of the Welsh prince; everything else went according to plan – including some very uncomfortable, realistic 7th century costumes, the harpist agreed to act as well as play his part, and the internationally renowned opera singer Sir Geraint Evans consented to recite a specially written prologue.

The performance was declared a success (although it was a pity that there was only one performance), my eldest daughter, Delyth, was old enough to attend the performance, and the opera company later received an award from the Guild for the Promotion of Welsh Music.

Many years later

In 2011, I was still experiencing a number of life-changing experiences: Delyth decided to get married in Malta, I was now married to Julie, and as a friend of the Imperial Band Club I received a commission to write a piece of music about Wales to be performed at the Feast Concert on September 2nd. Due to the wedding taking place in June of that year, I actually visited Malta on a number of occasions which gave me many opportunities to listen to the band, listen to the Ladies Choir and plan the piece.

Julie and I had already spent many hours thinking which Welsh folk songs, hymns and arias we could transcribe as part of the rhapsody; all that we had



really decided was that it would be in four sections and have a typical Welsh ‘Amen’ at the end. This is where Delyth helped out, bless her. She has always been a fan of my music (perhaps inspired by that two-hour helping when she was aged 8) and even surprised her music teacher by writing her A level essay on a Welsh composer ... about me. So when she asked for an arrangement of her favourite Welsh lullaby for the wedding I was delighted, but not surprised. I then approached a few ladies from the band club to see if they would be willing to sing it at the wedding, under Shirley’s expert guidance of course. What a wonderful job they made of the harmony and the Welsh language! An idea was born...

I now had a slow section for the rhapsody; Julie and I had immediately chosen Meirion Williams’s ‘*Aros mae’r mynyddau mawr*’ (*The great mountains endure*) as a powerful opening; what else could we choose to represent Wales, and how could I link the extracts together? A short list was drawn up: Welsh Male Voice Choir favourites *Gwahoddiad*, *Nidaros* & *Tydi a roddaist*, marches including *Men of Harlech*, hymns including *Llanfair*, and of course our own national anthem *Mae hen wlad fy nhadau*. But what could I use to link these venerable melodies together? It was when I wanted a brief fanfare to link the marches together I started whistling a tune then realised it was one I’d written over twenty years previously. Out came the score and then the penny dropped – I could resurrect and transcribe some of

the music from my opera *Dagrau Pengwern*. When I visited Mro Anthony Borg and found him humming the theme from near the end of Act 1 of my opera, I knew I’d made the right decision.

Problem over? No! I still had to persuade Shirley and her ladies to sing yet more Welsh (telling them that Julie had sung in Maltese was not enough), and I had forgotten my own musical experiences on Malta. The British may have influenced the military band tradition on Malta, but it is Maltese, Neapolitan and Sicilian tunes that influence the marches, hymns and arias on the islands. Just as I am still occasionally bemused by the phrase lengths in Maltese band pieces, the members of the Imperial Band were equally bemused by angular melodies and frequently changing time signatures. But as is always the case when musicians want to play something, they will...and they did!

I will always be grateful to the performers who took part in the première of my rhapsody *Gwalia*, to their commitment, perseverance and musicianship. I will never forget: the looks of achievement on the faces of those who had worked long and hard, the questions and comments from band members as they came to terms with the strange Welsh music, the compliments from those who enjoyed playing it, and the wonderful sound that was produced. Little did I think when I first heard the band seven or eight years ago what it would lead to. My heartfelt thanks to you all.