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Promoting, Developing, and Preserving: Using Performance Award Graded Examinations to Encourage the Performance of Welsh Traditional Music on the 16-String Small Harp

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The aim of this article as a research paper is to present the initial approach of an action research project undertaken digitally between the International School of Musicians and Derwent Harp School, a collaboration between two neighbouring countries, England and Wales. The ongoing project aims to develop and promote the use of Welsh traditional music through the International School of Musicians graded examination syllabus for the small 16-string Harp in C major. Derwent Harp School, a Welsh Music School, has compiled the music for the syllabus from their extensive knowledge of both small harp and Welsh traditional music. The harps are hand-made from wood in Wales by Derwent Harps. The action research methodology details the first cycle of *research results* and recommendations for further research cycles to be conducted. The research involved two specialised harp teachers, five examination candidates and one examiner. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which were analysed using thematic and narrative analysis. The initial results show a positive outcome in the uptake of Welsh traditional music, with candidates expressing a keenness to learn additional Welsh traditional music and seeking opportunities to explore the range of music available. The *practical significance* of the action research stems from the decline in instrumental tuition in Wales, specifically that of Welsh traditional music. Furthermore, the research makes a beginning *contribution to science* by investigating current practices in teaching instrumental music tuition in Wales, which is currently an under-researched area. Initial *Conclusions suggest* the use of the graded music exam as a means to promote Welsh traditional music is well placed to make an impact on improving uptake by promoting, developing and maintaining this genre for future generations.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Assessment; Welsh Music; Traditional Music; Music Examinations; Harp

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Introduction

The British Isles has a rich musical history filled with a tapestry of centuries-old traditional music and folk song, amongst other performing and creative art forms found throughout the region. Within the mainland of Great Britain, comprised of three countries, England, Scotland, and Wales, each country has its own musical traditions and established art forms of heritage that have assisted in forming the identities of these three distinct nations over many centuries. These traditions also contribute to the development of culture, providing a structural foundation upon which we build our societies. They play an important part in creating the ingrained fabric of our society and help to define who we are as a people, forming our identity and influencing the evolution of our culture over time. In addition, traditional art forms assist in helping us to define and understand our past and how that impacts the present to, in turn, influence the future. It can be said that all social groups within society have their own music, which is often symbolic and reflective of the identity of that group (Nettl, 2000).

Wales is a small country of 20,782 square kilometres on the island of Great Britain, with a population of around 3.19 million. Despite the smallness in size, it is a country with vast cultural influence. Its extensive cultural and natural legacy includes historic structures, locations, and landscapes, in addition to various collections and archives. Wales possesses not only significant historical artefacts but also a strong intangible culture that is concentrated on the Welsh language and anchored in music, mythology, stories, and rituals. Such is its strength in music traditions that it acquired the nickname “Land of Song”. Wales has a strong historic singing tradition which fundamentally forms part of the Welsh identity and tradition.

Recent Research and Publication Analysis. However, over the past 25 years, there have been concerns, specifically in Wales, that cultural heritage in the form of traditional music and folk song has been in decreasing demise due to a lack of infrastructure to support learning within schools (National Assembly for Wales, 2018), with instrumental music tuition in Wales, also in general decline since 2010 (Carr, 2018).

According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), musical traditions need to be preserved for future generations because they are part of our cultural heritage, in which they refer to as a melting pot of culture as intangible cultural heritage. Their 2003 convention describes intangible cultural heritage as “the oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festive events” (UNESCO, 2018, p. 5), which are transmitted and communicated from one generation to the next. Music and other performing art traditions are crucial to the list of intangible cultural heritage. These traditions are recognised as having a significant contribution towards developing a society’s culture and identity.

Defining traditional music can be complex and take on many different layers of meaning depending on the context and the geographical area, including the medium of performance or, indeed, the level of participation. As discussed by Sally Harper in her introduction to Phyllis Kinney’s 2011 seminal work “*Welsh Traditional Music*”, defining traditional music is like trying to “nail jelly” (Kinney, 2011, p. 17). It is a slippery, evasive term taking on many guises. In regards to this paper, Welsh traditional music is understood to encompass music that is recognisable as Welsh national music,

including national song and Welsh folk song, in addition to music that is identified as having Welsh origin or recognised as important within Welsh culture.

UNESCO has placed importance on music as a tradition that represents intangible cultural heritage. Many countries worldwide have utilised UNESCO's convention to ensure they safeguard their music traditions, ensuring greater visibility and a future for survival. Although the concerns over the demise of Welsh traditional music have been well discussed, Wales is noticeably absent from the UNESCO list despite UNESCO's well-established and informed network providing access to additional funding bodies to assist in preserving cultural intangible heritage. Traditional music and other art forms are often reliant upon living populations. Rather than using notation, music tends to be generally passed on as an oral or aural tradition.

When vulnerabilities are felt through ageing demographics, and those able to pass on their musical knowledge are dwindling, there is a genuine risk that traditional music as an intangible cultural heritage can be quickly lost.

Anthropology and ethnographic studies suggest that playing music, singing, or dancing leads to an experience of aesthetic principles which can influence foundational cultural schemas. According to Lewis (2013), foundational cultural schemas can be described as "aesthetic orientations that influence our everyday decisions and behaviour by seducing us to conform to them using our aesthetic sense, enjoyment of harmony, desire to cooperate, curiosity, and pleasure-seeking propensities" (p. 45).

I suggest that musical foundational schemas, specifically developed from folk and traditional music art forms, possess powerful resilience through their ability to adapt, maintain consistency and remain relevant despite the ever-changing world charge of globalisation. Remaining relevant is particularly important as "practices of the past are discarded when they cease to be functionally useful or symbolically meaningful to a community" (Kurin, 2004, pp. 66–67).

However, if Welsh traditional music is in demise, a possible solution then to resolve the problem would be to find a way to bring this music to the young generation ensuring the music has a function to be useful and, it is hoped, become symbolically meaningful to the music student so that they embrace the music, making it their own. According to Kinney (2011), Welsh traditional music is uniquely indigenous. The research question, then, seeks to bring this music to wider public knowledge through graded examinations featuring Welsh traditional music. The International School of Musicians, usually shortened to ISoM, is a music education and examination digital service provider that utilises an online platform for music examinations to take place globally. ISoM's examinations are available for a broad range of musical instruments in many different styles and genres. Music books, lesson plans, and other resources are free, making ISoM innovative in the cultural field of music education. Examinations are delivered in 94 countries, in which the company have built a good customer relationship base working directly with music teachers, schools, and colleges, which ISoM identify as representatives. As a young digital company based in a diverse and bustling area in London, ISoM is well-positioned to be agile in its decision-making through research as the senior management team are all experienced academics well versed in research methodology, methods, and analysis. Implementations and adaptations to interactive music books are delivered at a fast pace through digital transformation.

Compared to other innovations in our history, digital technologies have grown more quickly. In just two decades, they have transformed society and reached almost 50% of the population in developing countries (United Nations, 2020).

The world we live in consists of lightning-speed technology, superhighways, digital media, intelligent robots, supercomputers, driverless cars, cybernetic enhancements, genetic editing, and smartphones that allow us to access and create information instantly (Schwab, 2017). Technological developments such as these make for an easier transition when implementing new strategies. The fourth industrial revolution fundamentally changes how we live, work, and relate to each other. There is an opportunity for ISoM to work with other collaborators to explore ways in which music and performing arts can be developed further for mutual benefit through the implementation of digital technologies. In regards to this research, digital technologies allow a fast-tracked pathway to create and develop suitable means to assist in as a means in promoting Welsh traditional music and to develop this genre to remain relevant for generations to come.

Methodology. As the lead researcher in the cultural field of instrumental music tuition, I employed an action research methodology in order to explore, investigate and develop Welsh traditional music in the form of examination material. Action research can be defined as a systematic study that merges action and reflection intending to improve practice, undertaken by practitioners into their own practices (Cohen et al., 2007; Kemmis, 1993; Lewin, 1946). Action research is the most suitable approach because it is “an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice” (Bradbury-Huang, 2010, p. 93).

It is only by taking action that understanding becomes clearer because action research is a practice rather than research about practice (Bonfield-Brown, 2018).

Between 2014–2018, ISoM’s predecessor, the Every Child a Musician programme (ECaM), undertook an action research project situated in Newham primary schools leading to the creation of a new form of music assessment, a Performance Award Grade exam, known as a PAG exam. The new type of performance-based assessment has been evidenced as providing a well-structured curriculum for children learning to play musical instruments in small groups. These exams are exclusive to ISoM and are becoming increasingly popular as a means of assessment for teachers and students worldwide. The research within the ECaM programme, and now within ISoM, demonstrates that assessment through performance within a PAG examination provides cultural capital and social justice for children in music education, developing and building their learning power and independent learning (Bonfield-Brown, 2018).

It is suggested that a PAG examination featuring Welsh traditional music may offer a way forward to both preserve and develop this genre, which, as discussed and evidenced earlier, is in decline.

Graded music examinations are by no means a new idea, having been introduced in 1877 by Trinity College of Music, London, as a method of assessment that includes aural tests, sight-reading and technical work to demonstrate musical attainment (Wright, 2013). Other components are fixated entirely on Western art music, with the design of the examination over the past 146 years remaining static as “the process appears largely unchanged to the present day” (Southcott, 2017, p. 57), with the focus of repertoire firmly fixed on Western classical art music. Traditional folk music, in its original form, is not usually included.

Graded music examinations are very much at the forefront of instrumental music tuition in the United Kingdom. It is a method of assessment that is particular only to instrumental musical teaching, typically in a 1-2-1 setting, as a system of examinations set over eight levels which are considered to provide an instrumental music education from the young beginner to the advanced performer.

ISoM's PAG exams differ as they are entirely performance-based, with music specifically chosen for its melodic and lyrical nature and to be representative of different genres, not just that of the Western art canon. In addition, music is carefully selected to appeal to children in a way that engages them and sparks their curiosity, suitable for a group context so that children may play music together and learn together. This places ISoM in a unique position to be able to work in partnership with other organisations that are specialists in their musical field, leading to progressive and exciting opportunities to both preserve traditional music and promote new, emerging genres.

Aim of the article

The aim of this article is to present the initial approach of an action research project undertaken digitally between the International School of Musicians and Derwent Harp School, a collaboration between two neighbouring countries, England and Wales.

Main research material

The International School of Musicians tasked Derwent Harp School to compile five pieces of music scored for the small 16-string harp in C major, including one Welsh traditional melody. In addition, they were asked to compose five exercises that are suitable for the young beginner that assists them in being able to develop both the necessary fine motor skills and music reading ability to play the selected Welsh pieces. The music was then placed into a digital book, free to download as part of the syllabus for ISoM's Grade 1 examination for beginners.

We wanted to see if the inclusion of Welsh traditional music would improve both the uptake of harp exams but also if the candidates would choose to play the Welsh piece from a choice of five pieces in total. Derwent Harp School selected a well-known Welsh hymn called "*Calon Lan*" by John Hughes. It is a very popular song and is also sung as an anthem at rugby matches, although, perhaps, less likely to be heard as an instrumental piece. The scoring for the 16-string small harp in C major is presented below/overleaf in Figure 1.

We then placed the entire music book on the ISoM website and informed our global representatives of a new free harp book.

Our first analysis revealed a 62% increase in downloads for the grade 1 book. It is suggested that this is partly due to the publicity we created, but we did not name the music pieces contained inside. Examination bookings also increased by 37%, but this may be due to social media posts created by Derwent Harp School and Derwent Harps, respectively.

HARP - GRADE 1

Adagio Calon Lan John Hughes

The image shows a screenshot of a musical score for the harp piece 'Calon Lan' by John Hughes, arranged for Grade 1. The score is in 3/4 time and is marked 'Adagio'. It consists of four systems of music. The first system begins with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The right hand plays a simple melody, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the fourth system.

Figure 1. *Calon Lan*, arranged by Derwent Harp School.

Source: Author's screenshot

What we were really interested in was whether the children taking their PAG exams would choose to play *Calon Lan*. The other four pieces included, *Away in a Manger* (English Carol), *Brian Boru's March* (Traditional Irish Tune), *Dona Nobis Pacem* (Traditional Canon), and the famous *Lullaby* (Brahms). The PAG examinations were taken over a period of one week with five candidates. All five candidates selected *Calon Lan* as their first choice to play.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted through the final section of the PAG, which is where the examiner enters into a discussion with the candidate to find out why they chose to play *Calon Lan*. Other questions will delve deeper into music theory, but we specifically wanted to understand what drew children to choose the Welsh traditional piece. We were sure to follow ethical guidelines and confirmed with parents that we wished to use the children's answers anonymously for research and gained their written consent.

I employed a narrative analysis to understand the children's perception so that their voices would allow me to recognise the next appropriate course of action within the research. Narrative analysis is suited to this study as we all have different and shared viewpoints to be taken into consideration. The narrative analysis will also allow

for a broader understanding of how we might preserve Welsh traditional music and whether the PAG exams are an appropriate fit for this purpose. Kim (2016) discusses the work of Polkinghorne (1988) detailing narrative analysis as “not merely a transcription of the data, but is a means of showing the significance of the lived experience in the final story” (p. 197).

The children’s responses and examiner questions were written up, and in the first phase, I familiarised myself with the data. The next step involved the removal of any unnecessary words, comments, and examiner questions. The third step was to seek emerging themes from the narratives, which led to the final phase, where I began to create coherent stories that reflected the children’s experiences.

The emerging themes were positive and promising. Children chose the music because they recognised it from rugby matches, not knowing it was a Welsh hymn. They chose the music because they liked the melody and felt they could sing along to it. Some children thought the music was easier than the four other pieces in the book, yet all the music is of equal difficulty. One child stated that their Father knew the song from his childhood, and that gave them the impetus to choose *Calon Lan*. They all enjoyed playing the music and either said it made them feel happy or calm because the music sounded beautiful (some said pretty) on the harp.

Conclusions

The aim of this article presented as a research paper was to explore the possibility of developing and promoting Welsh traditional music implemented into ISoM’s PAG exams via their digital platform. It is too soon to make any bold conclusions, but the initial results, both in terms of the number of people downloading the music and that all five candidates chose to play *Calon Lan* in their PAG exam, are both encouraging and exciting when considering the possibilities of preserving Welsh traditional music. The limitations of this study must be considered in that the research sample size of five children is very small, but their answers were big and bold, and they were confident in their choice of music and why they liked playing it.

There are opportunities here to consider using the PAG exam as a vehicle to preserve other traditional and indigenous music from around the world. It is important to note that the PAG exam is not compulsory, and the music books are freely available to anyone, whether they play the harp or not! The ISoM ethos is rooted in accessibility and inclusivity and, through our mission, breaking down barriers to provide world-class music education and assessment opportunities globally for everyone through digital innovation.

There is a danger of becoming too prescriptive in what children choose to play, and we are working on increasing our resources to ensure we do not become the dominant hegemonic voice in music education.

It is clear that much more work needs to be done with additional cycles of action research where we will continue to explore the possibilities of promoting, developing, and preserving Welsh traditional music through our PAG exams.

The practical significance of the action research stems from the decline in instrumental tuition in Wales, specifically that of Welsh traditional music. Furthermore, the

research makes a beginning *contribution to science* by investigating current practices in teaching instrumental music tuition in Wales, which is currently an under-researched area.

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Просування, розвиток і збереження: диференційовані іспити Performance Award для заохочення виконання традиційної валлійської музики на 16-струнній малій арфі

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Мета статті — представити дослідницький проєкт, який проводиться в електронному форматі між Міжнародною школою музикантів та школою Derwent Harp в рамках співпраці Англії та Уельсу. Цей проєкт має на меті розвиток і просування використання валлійської традиційної музики через програми іспитів Міжнародної школи музикантів для малої 16-струнної арфи до мажор. Валлійська музична школа Derwent Harp скомпільовала музику до освітньої компоненти на основі своїх глибоких знань як арфи, так і традиційної валлійської музики. Методологія детально описує *результати* першого циклу та рекомендації для проведення подальших циклів досліджень. За допомогою тематичного та наративного аналізу узагальнено дані опитування представників цільової групи (двох спеціалізованих викладачів арфи, п'яти кандидатів на іспит та одного екзаменатора), які збирали через проведення напівструктурованих інтерв'ю. Початкові результати демонструють позитивний результат у сприйнятті валлійської традиційної музики: кандидати висловлюють бажання більше вивчати валлійську традиційну музику та шукають можливості дослідити спектр доступної музики. *Практична значущість* дослідження пояснюється зниженням рівня навчання інструментів в Уельсі, зокрема валлійської традиційної музики. Крім того, дослідження робить початковий *внесок у науку*, аналізуючи сучасну практику викладання інструментальної музики в Уельсі, яка нині є недостатньо дослідженим напрямом. *Висновки* свідчать про те, що використання кваліфікаційного іспиту з музики як засобу популяризації валлійської традиційної музики має всі шанси вплинути на покращення сприйняття завдяки просуванню, розвитку та збереженню цього жанру для майбутніх поколінь.

Ключові слова: нематеріальна культурна спадщина; оцінка; валлійська музика; традиційна музика; музичні іспити; арфа

