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# “You Just Sit Down and Do It”

## Gorwel Owen on the music of Llio Rhydderch

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In *World Music: A Very Short Introduction*, Philip Bohlman discusses many of the issues that result from our access, through modern technology, to an ever-increasing amount of music, including the homogenisation that this access can potentially contribute towards. He focuses on the role of music itself as a mediator during moments of what he terms “encounters”. These do not describe events where neutral, detached listeners experience the music of exotic “others”, but form the basis of powerful relationships:

*First encounters with world music are often personal, even intimate experiences, frequently engendering a sudden awareness of local knowledge. That awareness seldom leaves us untouched, rather it transforms us, often deeply... However and wherever first encounters take place, they profoundly change what we perceive music to be.*

It seems strange to consider this idea in the context of a performance I attended recently at Llangadwaladr Church on Ynys Môn, a few miles from my home, by the triple harpist Llio Rhydderch, a musician who has spent a large part of her life on Ynys Môn, and who performs material which draws heavily on a very localised tradition. However, Bohlman’s words reflect my experience of the concert. I was and remain transformed, and I find myself regularly “re-visiting” the performance to try to make sense of this. What follows is an account of Rhydderch’s music, but an account which is unavoidably reflexive for it is impossible to detach musical meaning from one’s own history.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, ethnomusicological categories of “insider” and “outsider” are becoming confused, giving rise to a number of questions: Which musical culture am I an insider to, having listened mainly to Anglo-American popular music and Western art music? Am I an insider or an outsider in relation to

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traditional music from my particular locality? How can one, as a listener or performer, accommodate the local as well as the global? Perhaps Bohlman's idea of the encounter can help provide some answers.

It would be fair to describe Rhydderch's work very broadly as folk music. In this context, "the tension between the mythology of the roots and the necessity to innovate," which Sam Richards discusses in his book *Sonic Harvest*, is often significant. One of Rhydderch's musical strengths is the ability to dissolve this tension; an innate sense of freedom is very apparent in her performances. In fact, when I visited her recently to talk about her work, much of the experience of the Llangadwaladr performance was strangely reactivated in that, within a few minutes, I found myself abandoning my prepared list of questions as I followed her improvisations into areas far more interesting than I could have planned.

Music was an important part of the home during Llio Rhydderch's childhood. She accompanied her father who sang *penillion*, learnt sol-fa from her mother, and was taught to play the harp by Nansi Richards, a family relation and a significant link in an unbroken tradition of Welsh harp playing. Improvisation was important too. She recalls: "Un o'r thrills mwyaf i fi, pan yn blentyn, o'dd chwara' alaw a chanu penillion i fy nghyfeiliant i fy hun... cadw un alaw i fynd a chreu rhywbeth arall, canu cyfalaw" (One of the biggest thrills for me as a child, was to play a melody and sing *penillion* to my own accompaniment... keeping one melody going and creating something else, singing a counter melody). She was also aware very early on of complications within the harp world — a tension between classical training and a traditional path. The lat-



Llio Rhydderch.  
(Photo: Martin  
Roberts.)

ter was, and still is, often considered inferior. She won a scholarship to study music at University of Wales, Aberystwyth but moved to the Welsh Department at the end of the second year: "Doeddwn i ddim yn hollol gyfforddus hefo'r cwrs cerdd gan deimlo fod fy ngreddf gerddorol greadigol yn cael ei rwystro, sef yr hyn oedd yn deillio o fy nghefnidir a beth oedd yn ddyfnach y tu mewn i mi" (I was not totally happy with the music course and felt that my creative musical instinct was being stifled – that which emanated from my background and was deep within me). By choosing to concentrate on the triple harp specifically, she embarked on an independent path.

A conventional myth is that instruments are developed to allow new possibilities, thereby facilitating musical progress. Staying with an older instrument, it is assumed, is limiting. The problem with this myth is that advances in instruments don't occur in a vacuum – rather they are responses to the requirements of particular musical cultures. The evolution of the pedal harp, for example, parallels developments within the Western art music tradition. An alternative myth would be to consider the triple harp as a key to a different set of possibilities. Rhydderch's description of her creative relationship with the harp is telling. As opposed to the conventional notion that an instrument is a means to realise a previously composed work (the term "instrument" is significant here) she sees her relationship with the harp as a reciprocal one, with the harp, at times, guiding her, both in a tactile sense and in the way that she follows the concrete nature of the sound itself.

After college, family and work commitments intervened and Llio Rhydderch didn't return to the harp in a concentrated way until the early 1990s. A chance meeting at a pub session with Ceri Rhys Matthews – who has been instrumental in effectively recontextualising Welsh traditional music via the Fflach:Tradd label – led to the recording of her first CD, *Telyn*, in 1997. Described on the front cover as "traditional Welsh harp music", the liner notes emphasise her position as part of a tradition, and while some of the arrangements are by no means straightforward, Rhydderch herself saw the project, partly at least, as archival in nature.

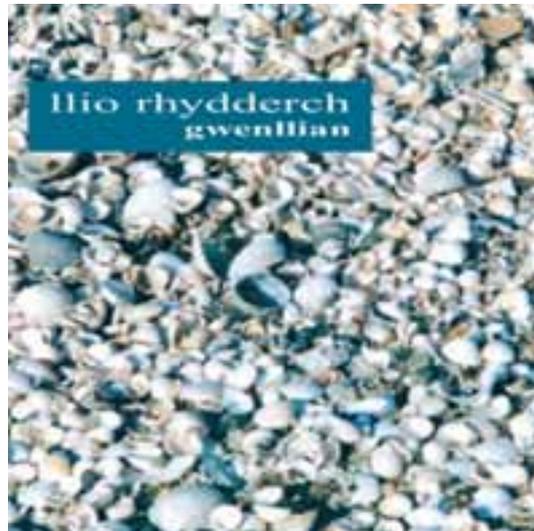
On her second CD, *Melangell* (2000), her own creative voice began to emerge more clearly, and this element intensified in two further solo CDs. The sense of progression through these releases is outstanding, but, of course, this isn't really the result of just eight years' experimentation. Andrew Cronshaw alludes to this in his review of *Enlli* (2002) in *fRoots* magazine:

*While the previous releases consisted of her rich variations on traditional melodies, this time the melodic shapes that have been storing up in her head and hands over a lifetime, break free in their own right.*

Discussing her compositional process, Rhydderch refers to mythological and spiritual imagery, as well as to a sense of place that she deals with both mimetically and on more subtle levels. Her fourth CD, *Gwenllian* (2005), for example, was inspired by historical events that happened in the area where she was born and raised. The compositional process can be slow: “Ma’n debyg bod *Gwenllian* ‘di bod yn disgwyl dod allan ohono fi ers blynyddoedd, ond falla mod i fy hun ddim yn ddigon aeddfed tan rwan i fedru ymdrin â’r thema fel y dylsa hi fod” (It’s likely that *Gwenllian* has been waiting to come out of me for many years, but perhaps I, myself, wasn’t mature enough until now to deal appropriately with the theme).

CD releases led to touring, which widened her audience and, importantly, emphasised her commonality with a number of contemporaries. During the Folkworks “Handpicked” tour of 2003, for example, she shared the stage with, among others, Martin Simpson (England) and Seckou Keita (Senegal) who, like Rhydderch, use their distinctive traditions as a starting point. Reviewing *Gwenllian* in *fRoots* Simon Jones observed that: “[she] knows how to handle the burden of roots and history in such a way that she can use it as a springboard for fresh creativity.” Ceri Rhys Matthews recognised this characteristic during the recording of *Melan-gell*; it linked her, in his opinion to musicians such as John Lee Hooker and Reubén Gonzáles, who, “though essentially of their indigenous traditions, transcend particular cultures”.

Matthews has played a significant role in guiding Rhydderch on her creative path. She told me how, whenever she felt uncertain about breaking new ground, she would play her ideas over the phone to him, eliciting an encouraging “Carry on! Carry On!” This led to an increase in confidence, and a readiness to deal with two freely improvised pieces on her most recent CD. When I asked her about performing them, she told me, “You just sit down and do it!” To some extent these pieces parallel the approaches of contemporary improvisers who follow sounds, reacting to them as they occur. Traditional melodies seem so much a part of Rhydderch’s subconscious, however, that their shadows are still present in a positive sense. The improvised tracks, particularly, allow the listener to share to some extent in the creative experience with the performer. As Julian May observes in *Songlines*, “Like you, she is hearing it for



the first time". This is something which is even more concentrated in live performance.

As well as sharing the stage with global performers such as Baa-ba Maal, Llio Rhydderch has featured on recordings with Dónal Lunny, Abdullah Chhadeh and Natacha Atlas, and recently contributed to Andrew Cronshaw's album *Ochre*. The latter is based on a collection of English folk tunes, some sung in Arabic, and includes musicians from Syria and Greece alongside Cronshaw and Rhydderch. Cronshaw has managed to pull these seemingly disparate elements together. When I introduced the f-word, fusion, that is, in an e-mail exchange about the album, he was quick to put me straight: "I don't really see it as fusion, more intensification, drawing attention to the differences." Cronshaw's careful selection of musicians has a lot to do with the way this work comes together as a whole. Rhydderch's role isn't merely that of a session player, but as someone who brought her own voice to the project. In fact, Cronshaw was sufficiently impressed to include one of her unaccompanied performances on the release.

Llio Rhydderch described to me how, apart from a "ffeil anferth o alawon" (enormous file of tunes) which Cronshaw supplied her with prior to the recording sessions, there were few instructions. Essentially, the musicians sat down and played together, bouncing off fragments of tunes and elements of sound, including those of a fujara (Slovakian flute), double bass and prepared piano. She clearly enjoyed the process: "Oeddech chi jyst yn dilyn beth oedd yn digwydd mewn ffordd... o'dd 'na gymaint o ryddid tu mewn i'r alawon" (You just followed what was happening in a way... there was so much freedom within the tunes). Elaborating on the idea behind the album, Cronshaw said that "what often attracts me to music is the picture it makes for me. I don't mean some kind of concept, though it can be — just music that draws me into a place." This echoes some of Llio Rhydderch's earlier comments, though *Ochre's* "place" fluctuates between the real and the imaginary. The liner notes describe how "[a] good story lasts, travels and jumps language barriers", and this is true of tunes too — "Broomfield Hill", to my ears, is closely related to "Lisa Lân", which Rhydderch had previously explored on *Melangell*.

To return to Bohlman, and to the questions with which I began, his view is that: "In world music, tradition returns again and again, not to be used up or relegated to the past, but to be restored with new meanings in the present." As an artist, of course, Rhydderch communicates these "new meanings" not via a linear process, but through something approaching osmosis. A common thread from my "encounters" with Llio Rhydderch's music is the way in which many paradoxes are comfortably housed. She is both deeply traditional and freely experimental, rooted locally and internationally relevant, and so on; and perhaps these issues are not merely musical.

Sam Richards relates Seán Ó Riada's struggle to unite both sides of his musical life — as folk musician and contemporary composer — to an aspect of the human condition:

*The psyche naively asks: "Which?", not realizing that you can have both or even that both are necessary.*

**References:** P. Bohlman, *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2002); A. Cronshaw, *fRoots* 236 (Dec., 2002); S. Jones, *fRoots* 273 (Mar., 2006); J. May, *Songlines: The World Music Magazine*, 34 (Jan./Feb. 2006); S. Richards, *Sonic Harvest: Towards a Musical Democracy* (Amber Lane Press, 1992).

**Discography:** Llio Rhydderch, *Telyn* (Fflach:Tradd, 1997); *Melan-gell* (Fflach:Tradd, 2000); *Enlli* (Fflach:Tradd, 2002); *Gwenllian* (Fflach:Tradd, 2005); Andrew Cronshaw, *Ochre* (Cloud Valley, 2004).

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