**When Expectation transforms Experience: Celtification in Cornwall**

***SLIDE 1***

The term “music revival” suggests that music of the past is being reactivated, and that long forgotten sounds are re-awakened in the present. The question that has been asked by many ethnomusicologists dealing with music revivals is: is this really possible? How do we know what the past sounded like? Of course, we might look at what instruments were being played in the past, we might find music notations, descriptions, pictures, photographs. But what about the sound, the musical style, tempi and dynamics?

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The current consensus on music revivals has been nicely summarized by Owe Ronström in 2014:

*“Revival is only partly about ‘what once was’. More importantly, it is about ‘what is’ and ‘what is to come’… In essence revival is a process of traditionalisation that goes on in the present, to create symbolic ties to the past, for reasons of the future.”*

Music revivals are not simply about evoking past sounds. Instead, they are highly political, often linked to nationalist concepts and to social movements which aim at strengthening present issues of ethnicity through music. Music as an efficient device for evoking emotions is used as a means of bonding communities within, and at the same time, as marking distinctiveness from all that is outside.

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This mechanism can be certainly observed in Cornwall, the most South-Western county of England, which is seen by its inhabitants as a separate cultural entity; many call it a “Celtic nation”, mainly because the Celtic nations all define themselves as places, where the so-called Celtic languages are still being spoken or died out not too long ago. (In Cornwall, the Celto-Cornish language was certainly not spoken anymore after 1800 but is currently being revived by scholars and Celtic enthusiasts.) In 2014, the Cornish were officially recognised as a “Celtic national minority” by the UK Government under the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

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The Cornish music revivalist organisation Cumpas sees Cornwall’s uniqueness also reflected in Cornish music, and they proudly claim on their former website:

“*We use Cornish traditional music to celebrate our distinctiveness and diversity”.*

In this paper I shall explore how Cornish music has been consciously turned into a genre during the 1980s and 90s, which distinguishes it from other English folk music styles and is nowadays presented as one of the “Celtic music styles” instead.

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Current beliefs on Cornish music - we might speak of “expectation” here to suit the conference’s topic - all more or less resemble this narrative, as written on a Cornish music homepage:

*“Cornwall has historical folk music tradition [sic] that dates back to early Celtic times and has survived to present day”.*

Early Celtic times can mean anything from the Stone Ages to Medieval times. This entry refers to the Iron Age and to the Middle Ages, when the Cornish Mystery Plays were written in Middle Cornish.

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A former entry on Wikipedia stated:

*“Cornwall is a culturally Celtic nation, though Celtic-derived musical traditions had been moribund for some time before being revived during a late-20th-century roots- revival.”*

Interestingly, this entry was changed only 8 days after I had given a presentation on Celticity in Cornish music at Tremough Campus in Penryn Cornwall, last February. It now reads:

*“Cornwall is a Celtic nation and an English county. Strengthened by a series of 20th century revivals, traditional Cornish music has a popular following”.*

No references are given.

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When the Cornish Music Revival started in the 1980s, it was consciously designed to be a ‘Celtic’ rather than an ‘English’ Revival. English culture and London in particular were felt as a threat to Cornwall, a place, which had lost the economic significance it once had during industrialisation and which had become primarily a holiday destination over the last century.

Instead of belonging to the ‘English rural backwaters’, the Celtic model seemed much more attractive for the revivalists: Celticness is surrounded by romantic notions of mystery, rootedness and exoticism. Additionally, ‘Celtic music’ was probably THE most dominant music genre of the slowly increasing ‘world music’ in the 1980s and 90s, and by joining the Celtic music world, Cornwall had the chance to be at the fore-front of a postmodern phenomenon.

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The deliberate choice to represent Cornish music as ‘Celtic music’ is best depicted in this quote by Neil Davey, front man to the now dissolved band *Dalla.*

*“At that time we wanted to be aware of our Cornish national identity, and there was our desire to assert that we’ve got a language that’s different, and we wanted our music to be different. So anything that sounded different about our music was good for us. […]*

*Back then, we were quite racist in a way, anti-English. […] We heard English stuff and generalised, “oh, it’s all like that, it’s all simple, and Celtic stuff’s much more sophisticated”. So we would’ve made it more black and white than it was anyway, ‘cause we wanted it to, we wanted to hear a difference”.*

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The problem the revivalists encountered was that historic music traditions in Cornwall - we might speak of the “experience” here in accordance to the conference’s topic - did not differ hugely from traditions across the County border to Devon or even Summerset. There were folk songs, shanties, hymns, wassails, brass band traditions and church bands. The antiquarians Fortescue Hitchins and Samuel Drew claim in 1824:

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*“Among the customs and manners that universally prevail in Cornwall, there are very few that can be said to be peculiar to this county”.*

And the folk song collector Cecil Sharp, who primarily collected material in Somerset, states in 1907:

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*“[There] is some warrant for the belief that the distribution of folk-songs throughout the kingdom is, to a large extent, independent of locality. This is the general conclusion at which I myself have arrived after examining, and comparing of my own, the material gathered by others, including the very large collection made by Rev. S. Baring-Gould in Devon and Cornwall”.*

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The probably most prominent music genre in 19th century Cornwall were the Cornish carols, about which William Sandys states in 1833:

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*“They are still kept up, the singers going about from house to house wherever they can obtain encouragement”.*

However, for Sandys, Cornish carols are not in any way tide to a Celtic past and he states:

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*“I was unable to discover any carol in the old Cornish dialect, nor did I expect to do so, it having been so long obsolete as a spoken language, and leaving such few records either printed or in manuscript.”*

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This was not an attractive basis for the revivalists of the 1980s and 90s, who were so eager at discovering music that should represent Cornwall’s distinctiveness to England and its close ties to Ireland, Scotland, the Isle of Man, Wales and Brittany.

So a huge effort was made to re-interpret all musical phenomena in Cornwall as having Celtic roots. I call this process Celtification.

- This was done by ***trying*** to connect the music and dancing to the Celto-Cornish language, so that a serious of rather questionable linguistic links were drawn and English song texts were translated to revived forms of the Cornish language.

- ***English folk songs*** collected in the early 20th century were changed into mainly modal instrumental tunes, which evoke a Celtic sound, and ***were played on instruments*** usually associated with Irish or Breton music, such as the bagpipe, the harp, the tin whistle, the bombard, fiddle and accordion.

- ***Additionally*** musical pieces of the other Celtic places were adapted and turned into Cornish tunes.

- ***And finally***, Cornish music was audio-visually branded as Celtic for marketing purposes.

Let me give you a few examples:

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*When ha Blejennow* is a typical example for a melodic change. 3 versions of this song, known as *Flowers and Weeds*, were collected in Cornwall by Sabine Baring-Gould in 1888 as English folk songs. The author of the Cornish song book *Hengan*, Merv Davey, claims he used the version Baring-Gould collected from Joseph Dyer of St Mawgan in Pydar, which is the third source you can see on the slide. It is obvious that the version in *Hengan* differs considerably from this source and does not show much resemblance to the other versions either. The song is therefore clearly not a re-construction as Davey claims but a construction. The author creates here Cornish distinctiveness from its English original by changing the tune.

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Another typical example of Celtification, is the transformation of a song commonly known as *The American Stranger,* which was collected all over great Britain during the First British Folk Revival and of which Sabine Baring-Gould also collected a version in Menheniot, Cornwall from a Mary Treize. Daveyacknowledges that the song was geographically widespread but claims that “both the tune and words differ in Cornwall”, which, again, emphasises Cornwall’s musical distinctiveness.

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Daveychanges the major mode to the more Celtic sounding mixolydian church mode. He translates the English text into Cornish and additionally alters the melody slightly, as can be seen here. The words of *Estren* are now not usually performed and the tune has become instrumental. Thus during the early phase of the Cornish Music Revival, the English song *The American Stranger* was transformed into the Cornish tune *Estren*.

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The tune *Quay Fair* is claimed by the Cornish revivalists to be a traditional Cornish tune. In fact, the tune has been played as the official tune of the mid-summer festival *Golowan* in Penzance, which started in 1991. In that sense the tune might be said to have become a traditional Cornish tune. However, it is based on a well-known Scottish Reel, commonly known as *Campbell’s Farewell to Red Gap* or *Campbell’s Farewell to Redcastle*, which is in a modal key. This connection is never mentioned by the revivalists. Instead, a

processional dance, a so-called *furry* - was created to it, which reinforces the assumingly Celto-Cornish appearance.

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As can be seen from these examples, the process that I term ‘Celtification’ appears mainly on two levels: an intra-musical one - dealing with sounds, melodies, tonalities and the choice of instruments - and an extra-musical one - dealing with album covers, logos, costumes and titles or group names.

Based on these parameters, the Cornish music and dance corpus grew considerably during the 1990s. As is very typical for music revivals, the early revivalists were seen as the authorities not only for the material but also for the interpretation of it and the style. They criticised for example if the tunes were played by instruments like the clarinet or saxophone, which were not seen as Celtic enough.

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Around the millennium a group of musicians in their late 30ties started to question the revivalists’ ownership of the Cornish material. They felt that the established music and dance policies were too strict and they criticised that the established stylistic parameters didn’t leave them enough room for improvisation and experiments. So in the year 2000, these young people started a new music and dance movement, which was strongly influenced by the Breton Fest Noz. This movement is now known as *Nos Lowen*, which means ‘Happy Night’.

The main concern of the initiators of *Nos Lowen* was that Cornish music and dancing should be fun, easy enough for everyone to take part and therefore inclusive, while at the same time a starting point for developing creativity and improvisation. These ingredients, they thought, might attract young people to the scene and might therefore help Cornish music and dancing to flourish.

*Nos Lowen* was not political per se, it can be seen as a mixture between a rather left-wing, alternative group of people who are nevertheless proud of their Celto-Cornish background.

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The Celticised Cornish music corpus was generally not questioned by the innovatorsbut the way of playing this music differed considerably.

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Key elements of the *Nos Lowen* style are tunes in 5/4th, repetitive rhythm patterns, double stopping on the fiddle, droning, improvising around the melodies, the use of dischords plus the inclusion of new instruments such as the clarinet, the bass clarinet, the darabuka, the cajon and the Galician gaita. Reflecting on the *Nos Lowen-*style, Neil Davey - Merv Davey’s brother - claims:

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“There was so little in terms of style. But what excites me now is how we develop the style now. If I suddenly do something on the fiddle, how long is it before I can say, well, this is the Cornish way of doing it.”

All these features can be heard in Dalla’s version of the tune *Estren*. It starts of with a newly composed intro, then we get the double-stopping on the fiddle before the melody in the mixolydianversion begins. Harmonic singing and improvisation with dischords are added each time the melody repeats itself*.*

***PLAY TUNE***

The presentation of Celto-Cornish music by the Nos Lowen movement is interesting, since its advocates seem to prefer a different vision for Cornwall’s present and future than the former revivalists. They want to portray Cornwall as all-inclusive, hybrid, modern and cool place to be, for newcomers and for Cornish youngsters.

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However, neither the early nor the *Nos Lowen* revival movements are really interested in the local folk music traditions, which effectively do exist in Cornwall: the local pub singers, the brass band formations, the sea shanties-festivals. Their expectation that Cornwall, because of its Celtic past, should therefore have a Celtic music tradition has indeed shaped and transformed the way people now experience Cornish music. It is still an open question whether this neo-Cornish music will increasingly become a common Cornish experience or whether it will just linger for some time as a subculture and eventually disappear.