

Rob interviewing Carl Smith on Celtic Folk Music

Rob: Hello, and welcome back to our series, coming to an end now, of our tour of Europe and its different musical traditions. Once again, I am here with composer, conductor and musical expert, Carl Smith. Hello, Carl.

Carl: Hello, Rob.

Rob: Now, that music we've just heard in the background there was some harp music from Wales and you're going to come to that in a second. But what can you tell us in general about Celtic music.

Carl: Well, Celtic music is a very broad group of musical genres that evolved out of the folk music traditions of the Celtic peoples of north-western Europe. So, broadly speaking this means the traditional folk music of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man and of course, Brittany. Folk music tradition of course is particularly strong in Brittany where Celtic festivals large and small take place throughout the year.

Rob: The fest-noz and the fest-deiz.

Carl: Absolutely right. And, also in Wales where the ancient Eisteddfod tradition has been revived and flourishes. Celtic music is also extremely vibrant in other countries especially Canada and the United States due of course to migration. And this music has had enormous influence on the development of American music, particularly bluegrass and country music which in turn has influenced modern rock music. Whilst Celtic music has many forms, many variations due to the different traditions, the different languages of each region, there are also significant similarities in musical styles and traditions throughout these areas. And although the various nations I have mentioned today have modern-day independence, their roots and traditions of the music reach back to a shared ancestry and therefore common musical heritage. And, as with the other forms of music we've explored, Celtic music reflects the lives and occupations of ordinary people. So, for example, a great deal of Celtic music celebrates the sea and seafaring.

Rob: And the distinctive features of Celtic music, tell us about that.

Carl: I think one of the most distinctive features of Celtic music is due to the influence of the harp, and the Celtic harp goes back many, many centuries. And, if you compare Celtic music to most of the other regions that we've talked about in this series, the Celtic music has a much more melodic variation and I believe that that's due to the harp, a stringed instrument which has a much greater range of notes and a greater variety of notes than many of the traditional folk instruments that we've talked about in the other regions. In general, the music of Scotland and Ireland has greater melodic range than that of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany where the use of the pentatonic scale, which is the five-note scale, is more common.

Rob: Don't get too technical, please.



Carl: Another thing that makes Celtic music distinctive is the harmony, the harmonic structure of these melodies is frequently very simple. By harmonic structure I mean the chords, the accompaniment that goes with the melody is very often very predictable and it's based around three or four chords. Which means that people can easily join in so if there is a group of singers or musicians somebody else can come along with their guitar, with whatever instrument it is they can improvise the melody, they can improvise harmonies and they can sing and play along very easily in a spontaneous fashion. Now this creates a great communal atmosphere where the music is enjoyed and celebrated by everyone. The final feature is dance, and dance is an important feature of folk music from all countries but with most types of Celtic music the link to dance is exceptionally strong.

Rob: So, we're going to go on a little tour around the Celtic countries now. We'll begin with Ireland. What can you tell us about the Irish traditional music?

Carl: Well, Irish traditional music includes many kinds of songs, drinking songs, ballads, laments, a song unaccompanied or with accompaniment by a variety of instruments. Traditional dance music includes reels, hornpipes, jigs and set dancing developed in the 18th century.

Rob: Can you tell us what set dancing is?

Carl: Set dancing is where a group of people will perform the same steps as a group, so something like *The Dashing White Sergeant*.

Rob: *The Gay Gordons*.

Carl: *The Gay Gordons*, that's right, like that where people are dancing as a group but they are all doing the same steps in a formation.

Rob: Okay.

Carl: That developed in the 18th century. And then influences from other parts of Europe brought more dances like polkas and mazurkas.

Rob: They made it as far as Ireland?

Carl: They, indeed, yes. And the Irish fiddle has been played in Ireland since the eighth century and the bagpipes also have a long tradition of being associated with Ireland. The revival of Irish traditional music took place around the turn of the 20th century and at that time the button accordion and the concertina were becoming very common. Irish step dance competitions were organised at country houses where local and itinerant musicians were welcomed to take part. Again, this great feeling of community taking part in the music.

Rob: Is there a difference between step dance and set dance?

Carl: No, it's basically the same ...

Rob: Okay.



Carl: ... the same sort of thing. So Irish dancing was encouraged in schools, encouraged by patriotic organisations and remains hugely popular parts of Irish culture today. Think of *Riverdance*, or ...

Rob: A huge show, that was a great success throughout the world.

Carl: There is of course a wealth of music to choose from from Ireland but this recording features the harp, pipes and fiddle and gives a really good example of the melodic capabilities of these instruments that I was talking about earlier.

Rob: Okay.

Music playing

Rob: So, we've been in Ireland. Now take us to Scotland.

Carl: Well, for many people the mere mention of Scottish music usually means just one thing, the bagpipes. However, this is just the tip of the iceberg. The bagpipes in Scotland can be traced back as far as the 15th century but traditional music and instruments existed many centuries before this. For example, on the Isle of Skye there was evidence found of a stringed instrument called a lyre that dated back as far as 2300 BC making it the oldest surviving stringed instrument in all of Europe. Stone carvings from around 700 to 900 AD also depict people playing harp-like instruments so we can see that the harp really is the root of this music. And, as with Ireland, the harp, the fiddle, pipes and accordion are hugely important instruments in traditional Scottish music. The Great Highland bagpipe achieved a position of dominance in the Scottish music in the 1400s and has remained so ever since. The Highland bagpipe is a member of a family of instruments in common use dating back to ancient times across much of Europe, North Africa and The Middle East. And although there are close links between the roots of much of Scotland's music and the Gaelic tradition from Ireland, there are also differences in the Scottish music due to the Old Norse and the Scandinavian influences that we talked about in a previous talk.

Music playing

Rob: Now we've been to Ireland, Scotland. Let's go to Wales.

Carl: Wales has a history of using music as a primary form of communication. Vocal music in harmony is synonymous with Welsh music.

Rob: The great singers.

Carl: Absolutely, the great singers in harmony, the great choral traditions. And the earliest examples of vocal music with well developed harmonies can be traced back as far as the 14th and 15th centuries. Many of the songs are and were ceremonial in nature to commemorate special events. Much of the traditional music in the Welsh language was unfortunately suppressed in the 18th and 19th centuries when the use of English was promoted as part of the union. And, with the rise of the Methodist church. The church

frowned upon traditional music and dance although some folk tunes were sometimes used in the Methodist hymns.

Rob: They adapted, didn't they to their purposes.

Carl: Since at least the 12th century Welsh poets and musicians have participated in contests known as Eisteddfodau and since the 1970s there has been a significant revival of traditional Welsh folk music. The harp, again, is the instrument most closely associated with Wales. The traditional harp is three rows of strings enabling the player to play a full range of notes and again, achieve these melodic variations I have talked about earlier. The Welsh fiddle and the Welsh bagpipes also feature in traditional music.

Rob: Now, the music we started with we are going to hear again. This is a traditional piece.

Carl: A beautiful song for harp and voice.

Music playing and singing

Carl: At last, after what seems a very long journey throughout Europe, we return home to Brittany. Celtic roots very much in evidence in Breton music and traditional Breton folk music includes a variety of vocal and instrumental styles. One of the most common types of song is known as the *kan ha diskan*, or call and response style where a phrase is sung by one person and then a second person joins in with the end or the last line and then carries on alone, and the first singer joins in again with the last line and so on. Then each musical phrase is altered slightly each time. And the songs can be about any subject but the meter and rhythm always follow that of a folk dance.

Music playing and singing

Carl: The *chants de marins*, these are shanties and ballads about shipwrecks, sailing, loss of life at sea. Often these are accompanied by instruments such as the fiddle and accordion. And many of you of course will know of the annual Chants de Marins contest which takes place in Paimpol where the world's most famous shanty men gather every year. Once again, the Celtic harp is the oldest of Breton instruments but it fell out of favour in the 18th century and it has only really seen a revival in recent decades.

Rob: Thanks to Alan Stivell amongst others.

Carl: Indeed. Yes, indeed. The mainstay of traditional Breton instruments are the bombarde which is a double-reeded instrument similar to an oboe, and a biniou which is a small bagpipe which plays an octave above the bombarde. They are often played in duo in the same way as the *kan ha diskan* that I described earlier.

Music playing

Carl: Other instruments commonly found in Breton music are again, the harp, the wooden flute, the Breton clarinet, fiddle, and accordion with of course the later addition of guitars. Frequently Breton music has been used to accompany traditional Breton dance. In the



agricultural society of the 19th century the most common occasion on which dancing took place would be weddings or religious festivals such as pardons. Dancing was also used as a method of compacting the earth floor of a new house or to prepare a threshing floor. As we all know, the Breton dance is typically performed in a circle and the circle is the representation of a community. So, the individual is both a minor and a vital element in the working order of the dancing and singing so symbolic of the community. There of course are many events and festivals throughout Brittany where traditional Breton music can be heard and dance can be experienced and enjoyed.

Rob: I've certainly enjoyed our exploration of European folk music with you, Carl. Thank you so much for all the work you've done bringing these to our attention and taking us on this whistle-stop tour.

Carl: Thank you.

Rob: We've done so much travelling it is time just to relax with a little bit of Breton music to bring us back to home.

Carl: I think so.

Rob: Thank you. Also, to our listeners who are listening. And goodbye. Kenavo.