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For an archived snapshot of the story as it appeared between 2020 and 2023 on

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Dublin Core

Title

A Rivalry of Musical Traditions

Subject

Wexford

Pembrokeshire

Personal Reflections

Traditional Music

Irish Sea Crossings

Creator

Siobhán Doyle

Publisher

Ports, Past and Present Project

Date

2023

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Relation

<https://perma.cc/HRX2-ZUYQ>

Format

Curatescape story

Language

English

Coverage

51.88195003388075, -5.267707159522035

Curatescape Story Item Type Metadata

Lede

'What do you get when you put together the Welsh reputation for musicality and the Irish tradition of a céilí band? The natural desire to compete.'

Story

What do you get when you put together the Welsh reputation for musicality and the Irish tradition of a céilí band? The natural desire to compete. At least that's what it stirred for me, a young musician performing in Wales as part of an annual cultural exchange trip. Every autumn, a twenty strong group of us packed our fiddles, flutes, accordians, tin whistles and bodhráns to forge links and form new friendships with schools and communities in Pembrokeshire. It also provoked a healthy musical rivalry between the two nations.

Growing up in a village that had a direct rail link to Rosslare, I was always aware of the presence of the Port. The tourists on the 'boat train' and the heavy traffic as we reached the Rosslare roundabout which led to the inevitable 'the boat must be just in so' observation. The closeness of the sea also amplifies the familiarity with the Welsh border. But that familiarity is so often bleak. Sea tragedies are an unwelcome occurrence in coastal Wexford and the fear that a lost body might wash up in Wales is an unending mixture of fear and hope. The Irish Sea is a most hostile companion.

Music is an opportunity to present communal accord and a unified identity across that sea. For us performing as Danescastle Music Group in Wales, there were no soloists. We played as a group, which offered us a chance to showcase Ireland as a distinct collective culture. The highlight of every trip was our performance in St David's Cathedral, an ancient cathedral settlement reaching back to the 6th century and located at the most Westerly point in Wales. We even did a rehearsal in the afternoon before our evening performance. That's how we knew it was a big deal to be playing there. We never usually did a sound check but the immensity of this venue, both in physical and historical scale, stipulated one.

We performed as part of a program which showcased Irish traditional music and the modern phenomenon of Welsh male voice choirs and solo sopranos. The finale of the concert at St David's always concluded with the singing of the national anthems of Ireland and Wales - Amhrán na BhFiann and Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau. Now, I know that the performance of the anthems wasn't a competition but if it was, Wales were definitely cheating. Firstly, by forcing a group of outnumbered musicians to sing rather than play and secondly, by doing so with the advantage of a home venue. Listening to the Welsh anthem being sung in the national characteristic of a choir in such a magnificent setting filled me with anger and jealousy that we let our anthem pale in comparison to that most glorious swell of song that filled the Cathedral.

This exchange of national identities through performance took place in a historic Welsh setting that lends itself so well to the phenomenon of a choir. I propose that the 20th anniversary rematch should take place in a cosy corner of Colfer's pub in rural Wexford. Let's see how Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau fairs out in that setting. No sound checks allowed.

Factoid

Related Resources

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