

PONTIO

Building bridges with music for stones and poetry for cement

January – March 2019

Between January and March 2019 two groups of traditional musicians arrived in Wales and completed busy, varied, short tours here. Their visits were the culmination of a process of exchange that had been taking place for two years previously. The six-piece all-female band 'Andreina Jolin' from Iruña in the Basque Country toured in January, playing alongside – and jamming with – a number of native musicians across north and mid-Wales. Andreina Jolin sing and play 'modern traditional' music from the Basque Country and also from cultures in Latin America that they feel share the same dynamics of repression, protest, regeneration and assertion.



Two months later, the Sean Nos duo Doimnic Mac Giolle Bhríde from Donegal, supported by Aindrias de Staic from Mayo, came to headline in Gŵyl y Pethau Bychain, a celebration of traditional music on and around Saint David's Day in Machynlleth, and managed to squeeze in five performances in as many days at venues across the area. Sean Nos is the oldest surviving form of Irish music, still strong down the West coast of Ireland from Donegal to Clare; Aindrias in contrasr performs a heady mix of traditional fiddle tunes, stories and poetry in both Irish and English, and uninhibited comedy.



Both tours were strikingly successful – Andreina Jolin were invited back to perform later this year in one of Wales' most prestigious festivals 'Y Sesiwn Fawr, and Aindrias too will be returning for a series of events and a solo tour in 2020. Both sets of performers were supported voluntarily by a cohort of native Welsh musicians and poets. In many ways, though, from the perspective of those who arranged and organised these events, it is the development process, the outcomes and even the costings that are truly remarkable.

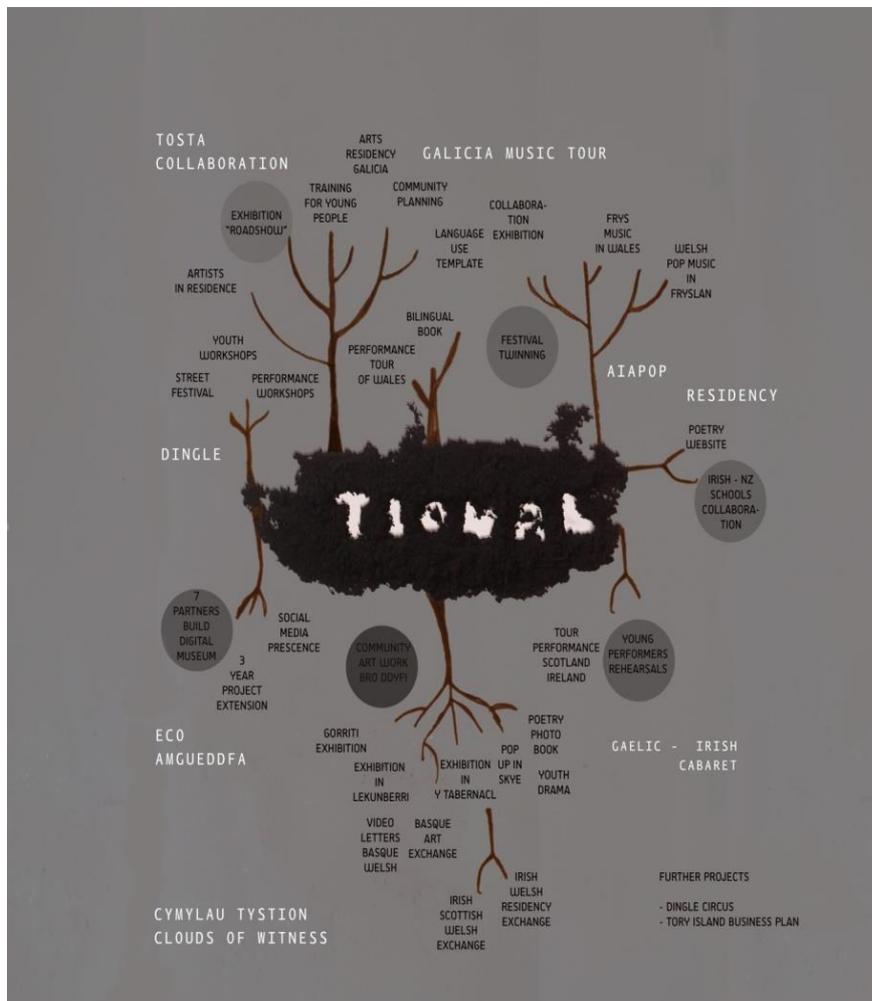
The development process

In many senses, the process goes back for twenty years. Well before Celtic Neighbours began eleven years ago, musicians were travelling back and forwards between Euskal Herria and Wales, and a particular relationship was already developing between communities in the mountains of Nafarroa and the Dyfi valley. People in those communities – especially those involved in performance and the arts – began to feel aware of each other’s cultures and aspirations. More immediately, a double exhibition of the artwork of Juan Gorriti from Lekunberri and of Nafarroa’s rural culture was held in Machynlleth in January 2018, followed by a residency in Lekunberri by the north Wales artist Luned Rhys Parri. This was followed later that year by a tour of Euskal Herria by a small collective of musicians and poets, leading in turn to a return visit by Basque musicians in January 2018 and the formation of ‘Zubika Banda’ a convergence of Basque and Welsh music and musicians.

The relationship with the Irish Gaeltacht goes back almost as far. Doimnic MacGiolla Bhríde is a writer, composer and choirmaster as well as a practicing traditional musician, and in 2006 he brought a Gaelic-language choir from west Donegal to tour in Wales and perform with Welsh choirs. From that seed a number of other collaborations grew up, spanning theatre, dance and the visual

arts as well as music. Both the harpist Siân James and the balladeer Meinir Gwilym, for example, spent time working in the Gaeltacht. It was particularly pleasing, therefore, that Doimnic himself was able to return to play a leading part in ‘Pontio’ this year.

The visual reproduced here, designed by Naomi Heath to demonstrate the fertility and energy of collaborations growing out of our 2015 ‘Tional’ gathering, demonstrates clearly how with a sustained level of commitment, one relationship gives birth to another, and leads to a growing confidence



amongst participants in what can be achieved. All the initiatives described above were facilitated by Celtic Neighbours and supported by Wales Arts International and the Arts Council of Wales.

The Outcomes

In the light of this, it will be seen that any outcomes of 'Pontio' described in a report written so close to the culmination of the project (end of March 2019) will be able only to chart the immediate, first-generation outcomes. Nevertheless, the list is already an impressive one:

- Working with young people in Donegal, Doimnic has recently published a book and CD of traditional songs from the area. During his visit, he was able to work with the Welsh poet and musician Twm Morys, and they hope now to collaborate on a Welsh-language sister volume. Celtic Neighbours intend to facilitate a develop meeting to drive this process ahead, and are already in discussion with Golden Tree Productions in Cornwall to explore the possibility of a Cornish-language dimension.
- Aindrias de Staic has been invited back to undertake a series of solo performances in Ceredigion and Powys later this year, and to take part in Gŵyl y Pethau Bychain 2020. He may also be able to join a small group of Welsh musicians for a performance tour in Colombia in Autumn 2019.
- Idoia Arizaleta Ros from Adreina Jolin has agreed to take part with the Welsh poet and fiddler Iestyn Tyne, the Bertzo (performance poet) Arrate Illaro, Aindrias and the Irish poet Roisin Sheehy in a touring performance of poetry and music, which will take the three poets and three musicians through Wales, the West of Ireland and the Basque Country in 2020. Adreina Jolin will also headline the festival Y Sesiwn Fawr in Wales in 2020.
- All these performers have expressed a desire, should the occasion arise, to play a part in the Galway European Capital of Culture celebrations in 2020, which Celtic Neighbours will be supporting.



Costings

The value of an initiative cannot always be judged from the amount it cost to create. Conventional costings are not always able to reflect the energy and goodwill that have been invested. In the case of 'Pontio' we were able to draw on reservoirs of mutual confidence and goodwill built up over years of interaction. All the performers taking part gave their time and energy for free; not just the visitors named above, but the cohort of very talented Welsh musicians who supported them throughout. These included the singer-songwriter Osian Morris, the harpist Cerys Hafana, the piper and bass player Nicolas Davalan, the poet Iestyn Tyne and the a capella singer Alaw Fflur Jones.



Some accommodation was donated free by Gŵyl y Pethau Bychain, and a number of meals donated by event hosts. Generous support for several of the performances by the Arts Council of Wales' "Noson Allan/ Night Out" scheme which subsidises community events throughout Wales enabled us to cover the travel costs of the visitors, while Celtic Neighbours and a crew of willing volunteers donated their time and expertise for free. The total cash costs to Celtic Neighbours of the Pontio project was a little over £400. We believe that projects like this, which are fuelled by friendship and shared aspirations, are the lifeblood of community culture, and that 'invisible investments' such as these are invaluable in every sense of the word. So, of course, is the support and encouragement provided by the Arts Council of Wales, Wales Arts International and Noson Allan/ Night Out.

