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Not Icons but Jewels

Music and Loss in England

Chris Wood

Currently experiencing an upsurge in the popularity of its folk music – termed ‘the second folk revival’ – English society is at the same time attempting to address the issue of national identity. Chris Wood – pioneering singer, fiddle-player and composer, who this year was nominated for four BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards, including folk singer of the year – is musically at the very heart of what is taking place in English folk music at present. Here, he provides his personal view of English society today and the untapped potential of its traditional music.

My music has at its centre the most prolific of all composers: Anon..

I have been asked for a personal view of what is happening on the English folk music scene at present, and personal is what it shall be. Some of what I have written is, I feel, specific to England – some of the issues are not. It will contain generalisations to which there are numerous exceptions.

Here is the first. The English folk music scene exists in a ghetto largely of its own making. It does not encourage work which challenges its thinking, and at the other end of the continuum, nor is it in a position to insist on strict adherence to traditional style bearing.

Perhaps my writing and recording work have cloistered me away more than is good for me, for indifferent to my misgivings, the English folk scene is thriving. Festivals are as well attended as ever and, I am told, by a younger average age group each year. BBC 4 Television has just recently broadcast a three-part series entitled *Folk Britania*, which celebrates the ‘second folk revival’. The haemorrhaging of the folk clubs seems to have abated with occasional new promoters chancing their arm. We now have our first Folk Music Degree graduates released into the community and stirring things up for us old lags. I could go on.

So what is my problem? I’m impatient. The English have deep-rooted cultural issues which I feel our folk music could go a long way towards resolving. Putting it as simply as I can manage: a chequered, bellicose, imperialist past has left us lurching from ‘Land of Hope and Glory’ to banning black bin-bags (because somebody associated ‘black’ with rubbish) in the space of only a couple of decades. I am among those who believe that England’s highly developed adherence to political correctness stems from a sense of guilt, that it is a sign of cultural disarray, and that the time is approaching when we must move towards something more meaningful.

Moving forward in a positive way from this state of affairs is no small matter. Firstly, England’s establishment would rather attempt any degree of legislative and cultural gymnastics before acknowledging the real issue. Secondly, the effect of this cultural confusion is that it attracts those who peddle a bureaucratic, commercial panacea. The heightened stratification, streamlining and compartmentalisation of commercial structure has crept into our media, our arts administration and practice, our politics and schools, our social and community organisations and inevitably, the individual’s perception of just about everything. Only managers can manage, only painters can paint, only teachers can teach, only writers can write, only composers can compose. But where does that leave Anon.?

Not icons but jewels

The nub of my argument is that the English establishment and our arts administration in particular have focused long and hard on the ‘Love thy neighbour’ part of the second commandment, creating ever more tortured initiatives in pursuit of political correctness. But the secret of the commandment is contained in ‘as you would love yourself’, and if they are thinking of getting around to that part of the commandment, they haven’t done so yet. If I might make a slight paraphrase of the commandment for the situation as I see it here in England – until we learn to love ourselves, we will not understand what it is to love our neighbour.

When the English government, media and arts administration do respond it is to what they interpret as a ‘lack of nationhood’, and it is often with the deft hand of tokenism. A recent example is the ‘Culture Department’s’ brand new ‘initiative’ called ‘Icons Online’ where we are invited to vote for our favourite English icon, the list to be updated each month. Popular icons so far include: fish & chips, the mini (now owned by BMW), the Routemaster Bus (now ‘phased out’), the red letterbox (now sealed to foil bombers) and so on. My vote for ‘The Peterloo Massacre’ has yet to appear on the list.

But when we ‘English’ look at the legacy left us by Anon., what do we find? Not icons but jewels. Songs, tunes, dances, ceremony, custom, lore, vocabulary, craft, magic and most crucially, an instinctive understanding of the pedagogical power of narrative. Nothing short of ancestral attempts to unriddle the universe. Offerings so perfect in their conception, so apposite, so full of wisdom, so spot-on, so timeless – so ‘*English*’ – that no ‘cultural initiative’ comes close.

An English diaspora

The reasons for England’s cultural uncertainty/reticence/ambiguity are many: empire, two world wars, a class structure which has morphed to survive both of those world wars, long American cultural shadows, perceived cultural confidence of European neighbours and ethnic minority groups. The list goes on and there is an article in each of them, but if we focus on one of the major contributing factors, that of the sustained enclosures acts which began in 1200, with the major phase taking place from 1760 onwards, perhaps we can argue the case for a cultural dispersal on a vast scale – an English diaspora.

Please understand these are the observations of a musician, not a history professor, but to paraphrase my dictionary, the common model for diaspora is the movement of a people away from the place where their culture was most concentrated. Putting the dictionary aside, my perception is that there is more often than not a bogey-man involved, real or otherwise, who will eventually play an important role. Upon arrival in new lands, the refugees congregate to reaffirm and reinvent their identity, and it seems to me that the oppressor plays a major role in this reunification and the cultural outpourings that follow. In many such cases diaspora becomes the catalyst to a great deal of positive cultural activity.

If, however, a people are not taken from their land and their way of life, but their land and their way of life are taken from them, we see the negatives of diaspora with few, if any, of the positives. Writing in the *Journal of Music in Ireland* I need hardly go into the details of enclosure and clearance, except perhaps to point out that these things took place in England too. The subtle but substantial difference is that we here in England are our own bogey-man.

Hugh Brody, writer, anthropologist and filmmaker, writes in *The Other Side Of Eden* on the enforced teaching of English as a replacement, not addition to, the native languages of North America.

It is possible to travel through the vast forests of the Pacific North West, look up at the wild beauty of the coastal mountains, stare into the clear fast waters of all those rivers, and hear a kind of silence. This is not the silence of wild empty wilderness, of remote mountains – these are extremes of geography, nature without culture. There is, rather, a silence that marks the loss of the words that give this place – and many such places – its fullest and richest expression. The loss of people’s own names for their hills, rivers, lakes, bays, peaks, slopes, islands, trails; and of their ways of evoking the origins, significance, humour and poignancy of the landscape.

As a musician I have the opportunity to drive the length and breadth of England, but I carry with me that selfsame ‘wordlessness’ because England’s history, like every other nation’s history, is written by the ‘winners’. For example, Castle Howard is one of England’s flagship stately homes – probably on the ‘Icons

Online' list – but what of Hinderskelf, the village which was levelled to make way for it? There are many such examples – the English enclosures have taken place over seven centuries.

Where clearances were carried out in, for example, Scotland and Ireland, those atrocities have entered the cultural fabric of those countries. They are eloquently mourned in song, story, poetry, painting and dance, and carried in the heart of Anon. from generation to generation. But when your oppressor is writing your history for you, there will be a great many glaring omissions, and I do not believe it is an overstatement to say that 'the English' have not been allowed to mourn the loss of that which defined them.

Rather than focus further on the enclosures I would like to give an example of how subtle the paradox is by looking at the vast body of song on the subject of Napoleon.

'Official' history focuses pretty much on battles and dates, for example, this line from the BBC's website: '... along with the help of Prussian general von Bluecher he [the Duke of Wellington] defeated Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815, bringing Napoleon's reign to an end.' But Anon. is captivated by the emperor's exploits, by the Prussian act of betrayal which leads to the downfall at Waterloo, and by the romanticism of the exile to Saint Helena, and an outpouring of song ensues. It is in between the lines of these songs that you can hear an unspoken hope, a yearning for Napoleon to cross the channel and overthrow the system which oppresses them, but for the English singer to sing in outright praise of Napoleon was not just unpatriotic it was treasonable. The closest to crossing the line I have ever heard is in the song 'Our Captain Calls All-hands'; the young man is leaving for war and the girl asks 'How can you go abroad fighting for strangers?' It is that use of the word 'for' which lays bare the plight of England's Anon.. It always has and it does still.

From Peterloo to Hinderskelf, to the suicide in my local park

The desire to find the words which give my inheritance 'its fullest and richest expression' is what lies at the heart of my music. That is why I have little time for anything shallower. It's not high-handedness but respect for those who's miraculous act of faith has given me my raw material. I don't sing English folk songs because I am proud to be English, I sing them because I love them, and in return I feel the love of my ancestor in them. They are therefore a source of exactly what English society appears to be seeking at the moment. At the 2003 BBC Folk Awards, the British-based Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro said:

The way I see it is like this... There is this kind of treasure chest you have sitting in front of you, and if you were American or perhaps Irish you might have opened it by now, but because you live here it probably hasn't occurred to you to do so yet. Well, I would urge you to open that thing up and delve inside it, because I believe you'll find there a sublime vision of life in the British Isles as it has been lived over the last few centuries; and it's the kind of vision that you can't readily get from the works of say, Dickens or Shakespeare or Elgar or Sir Christopher Wren. If you don't open that treasure box I think you are going to miss a certain dimension, a whole dimension of cultural life in this country so I urge you to do it.

I am aware that this subject extends too far to be dealt with in one article, but I have tried to raise these issues in the spirit which I was invited, the very personal view of a musician working in England today. Out of all this negativity there is a creative freedom which stems from this 'wordlessness', and it is to be found in the atavistic gaps which result from such a tattered tradition. My teaching engagements at the University of Limerick were enough to show me that, so strong is the tradition in Ireland, that musicians are able to split hairs to an extent that we here in England are not. It is England's cultural alopecia which has stirred me to concentrate on composition and writing in particular and to take regular sabbaticals from the restrictions of the 'folk scene'.

Recent sabbaticals have produced work for BBC Radio 3. *Listening to The River* was a demonstration of a relationship England's indigenous music has always had with regional speech and landscape. *Christmas Champions* was a collaboration with writer and storyteller Hugh Lupton and was a piece which delved into the mysteries of England's Mummers' Play. Far from a documentary on the subject it became a dreamlike journey along linear time (days, months, years) and circular time (seasons, ceremony, ancestral evocation). Traditional music has never adhered to the constructed boundaries of a governing class. Nor should our sense of ourselves.

From Peterloo to Hinderskelf, to the suicide in my local park, it is the singer who will teach 'the English'

how to love themselves. It is the singer who will encourage the 'English' to place their official history to one side for a moment and look to their individual stories. It is the singer who still, in the year 2006 asks 'How can you go abroad fighting for strangers?' And when we look more closely at our own individual stories we will find acts of stoicism, creativity, ingenuity, constancy, silliness and all the things that are common to humans the world over. We are no different from anyone else. Our indigenous cultural inheritance is no richer than anyone else's, but how long must we wait before we understand that it is no poorer?