

**Capel y Boro**  
**Sun 3 Aug 2020 at 11am**

**Capel y Boro events**

## **Welsh Musicians in London**

**John Jones presents a talk with music**



**Britain was once referred to** as The Land Without Music, by a German music critic, no less, Carl Engel, back in 1866, and it thereafter became something of a cultural cliché. It's also been attributed to Mendelssohn, though that would be a bit rich given that he couldn't keep away from the place.



But the truth, as always, is somewhat different. London has always been a great magnet for musicians: take Handel, Mozart, Haydn, Chopin and Wagner to name but a few. In fact, Berlioz once said that 'there is no town in the world where so much music is consumed.' Or, as another German music critic, Johann Matheson, a friend of

Handel's, put it, "The Italians exalt music; the French enliven it; the Germans strive after it, and the English pay for it".

London was, after all, one of the biggest cities in the world, five times the size of Vienna in 1800, which at that time was the largest city in the Holy Roman Empire, and ten times bigger than most of the others. And the combination of the royal court, City churches, commerce and a vigorous tavern culture around the ports made it a significant musical centre from the earliest times.



The attraction must have been considerable given the legendary fog – which wasn't actually fog at all, but highly toxic air pollution due to the vast population and frenetic industrial activity. Combine this with a damp climate and leaden diet, not to mention the relentless din of the street traders, most visitors would have had quite a shock. Rossini was laid up for a week as soon as he arrived, Chopin dubbed the climate Hellish, and Mozart's father wrote a letter expressing his bewilderment at the peculiar national ailment known as the Common Cold. Yet, still they came. And it's equally true of Welsh musicians who came to practise their craft, to get noticed and, no doubt, to make some money.

It's not that surprising given the historic associations between the Welsh and the capital and the strong musical traditions in Wales as mentioned by the cleric

and academic Gerald of Wales, Geraldus Cambrensis, (pictured below) back in 1194. The Welsh, he said,



... "sing not in unison, but in parts ... There, in a group of singers, you will hear as many melodies as there you will see heads, yet they all accord in one consonant and properly constituted composition... acquired, not by art, but by long usage which has made it, as it were, natural ..."

So there we have the earliest documented reference to a Welsh choral tradition.



But now let's just jump forward and begin with one defining moment, the appearance of the South Wales Choral Union at a choral competition at the Crystal Palace on Sydenham Hill in 1872, conducted by Aberdare's very own maestro, "Caradog", which triggered this enduring myth that the Welsh were a musical nation. The Crystal Palace had been built for the Great Exhibition of 1851 in Hyde Park, designed by

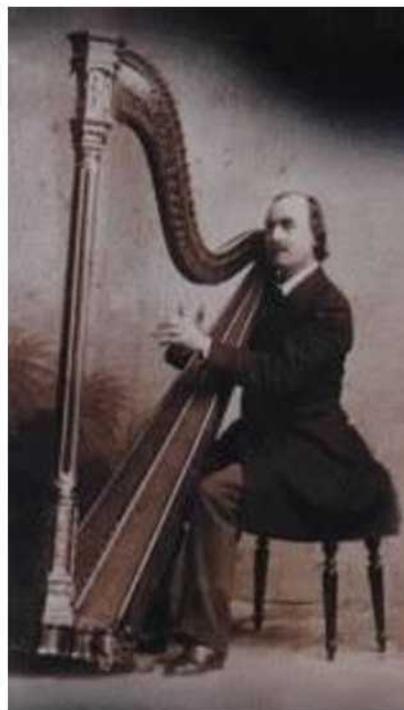
William Paxton with work overseen by John Jones Talhairn, a poet and architect from Denbighshire, and the author of the words to *Bugeilio'r Gwenith Gwyn* and *Mae Robin yn Swil*. He worked closely with John Thomas Pencerdd Gwalia, the harpist from Bridgend and professor at the Royal Academy of Music, on his collections of Welsh folk songs. The pianist and composer and professor at the Royal Academy of Music, Henry Brinley Richards from Carmarthen, was actually one of the adjudicators at this prestigious choral competition. The 350-strong choir was made up of choristers from the coalfields of the Rhymney, Rhondda and Swansea valleys. Their victory in the principal choral competition was eagerly reported in the national newspapers.



The Times observed that:

*"We cannot but wonder at the excellence they have attained, an excellence unattainable except through assiduous and continued study"*.

Praise indeed from a national newspaper of record.



John Thomas (pictured above) was appointed royal harpist to Queen Victoria in 1871 under the name *Pencerdd Gwalia*. He is known nowadays mainly for his elaborate arrangements of Welsh folk songs for harp but, in his day, he enriched the London music scene by establishing the Welsh Choral Union with a series of annual large-scale concerts at St. James's Hall between Piccadilly and Regent's St., designed, incidentally, by Owen Jones, son of Owain Myfyr, the antiquarian from Denbighshire and one of the founders of the Gwyneddigion society in London. The hall accommodated over 2000 people, often with spectacular turns such as an orchestra of 20 harpists performing arrangements of traditional airs. Here is one of John Thomas's folk song arrangements for harp.

**John Thomas *The minstrel's adieu to his native land* - Easy pieces for harp, Volume IV (Catherine Michel & Xavier de Maistre)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHGxisfGsyQ>

Another story worth telling is that of Georgina Weldon, born Georgina Thomas, a somewhat eccentric member of the Treherne family of landed gentry from the Lletymawr estate in Carmarthenshire. She trained as a singer in Brussels, but had to give up any hope of a professional career after marrying an impoverished army captain, William Weldon. They lived in Tavistock House in Bloomsbury, where there was a small theatre attached that had been added by a former resident, none other than Charles Dickens. The house has since been demolished but stood on the site of what is now the BMA headquarters. In 1869, by which time her childless marriage was breaking down, she founded a National Training School of Music at Tavistock House to teach poor children, taking the orphans round the West End in a converted milk float to advertise weekly concerts at the Langham Hotel.



In 1871, she met the celebrated French composer Charles Gounod, (pictured above) who had fled to London to escape the

Franco-Prussian War, and persuaded him to move into Tavistock House as her lodger. Gossip soon began about the nature of their close, if rather dysfunctional, relationship and, three years later, Gounod, who had promised her the title role in his next opera *Polyeucte*, returned to his wife in Paris.

Georgina was so affronted by Gounod's departure that she held on to his manuscript, sued him for libel, lost the case and was later imprisoned – twice in fact, and became known as a Portia of the Law Courts having brought over 100 cases of one kind or another to court.



Her image as a national celebrity subsequently appeared on an advert for *Pears Soap*. She drove judges mad, embraced spiritualism, had a pet monkey called Titileehee, stole her husband's mistress as her own and spent her twilight years in voluntary exile in a French convent. It's hard to know who to feel most sorry for – Gounod or the French nuns. Here's a part of that opera:

### Charles Gounod *Polyeucte* – “Source délicieuse”

Roberto Alagna (tenor); London Philharmonic Orchestra/Richard Armstrong

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqNO5goHUyM>

One musician who was not so notorious was another alumnus of the Academy, Llewela Davies, a pianist from Talgarth near Brecon, who became Dame Nellie Melba's accompanist on her worldwide tours. Llewela also performed at the Three Choirs Festival and her appearances at the National Eisteddfod were always special occasions. She married another Welsh musician, Frederic Griffith, and died in London in 1952.

But the traffic was not altogether one way. Many tunes from England began to pour into Welsh folk song collections. The music hall was a source of many new airs, including *Polly Perkins of Paddington Green* and *The Three Ravens*, with added Welsh words, often by the poet Ceiriog. Another was *The Bells of Aberdyfi* which we made one of our own. The tune actually first appeared in a comic opera, *Liberty Hall*, by Charles Dibdin, at the Drury Lane Theatre, in 1785, performed by a comic Welsh character called Ap Hugh.



The first of two National Eisteddfodau in the capital was held at the Royal Albert Hall in 1887 at which the London Welsh Choral Society was conducted by J Haydn Parry, son of the Dr Joseph Parry, the composer of several hymn tunes and the first Welsh opera *Hywel a Blodwen*. They competed with choirs from all over the country, that is, from Wales and England. In fact, the main choral prize was shared between the celebrated Rhondda Glee Society and a choir from Huddersfield.

It was all far more Anglicised in those days, of course, and it was quite common to sing test pieces in either Welsh or English. Yet, the fact that the Eisteddfod was held in London at all reflected a growing sense of national consciousness among the London Welsh and an expanding and more self confident community; the London Welsh were on the crest of a wave, with many prominent individuals supporting good causes such as the University of Wales, the National Library and the National Museum.



MR. BRYCESON TREHARNE

A composer from Merthyr Tydfil, Bryceson Treharne, came to study at the Royal College of Music at the end of the century before embarking on a

distinguished career in the USA. He was also organist at the Borough during his time in London.

Also Eos Dyffryn, who was the choir master at the Borough, who was described as the greatest tenor in America.



Following its triumphant victory at the Chicago World Fair Eisteddfod in 1893 and at the Paris Exposition in 1900, the Royal Welsh Ladies' Choir conducted by Madame Clara Novello Davies (pictured above), was offered a six-week run at the Palace Theatre of Varieties in Shaftesbury Avenue - directly opposite Charing Cross chapel.

Originally built as a home for English grand opera by Richard D'Oyly Carte, the Palace Theatre soon became a home of more popular entertainment of the music hall kind, which had something of an ambiguous reputation at the time, and Clara Novello Davies's enthusiasm for the engagement was not shared by all members of her choir. In fact, several resigned, deeming it hardly a respectable venue for young, virtuous, chapel-going Welsh women to perform.

Nevertheless, their renditions of *Llwyn Onn*, *Clychau Aberdyfi* and *Rule Britannia* were received enthusiastically. But God only knows what they made of it all at Charing Cross chapel.



One of Pencerdd Gwalia's most celebrated protégés was the coloratura soprano Mary Davies, or Mair Mynorydd (pictured above in a painting dated 1885), born in London of Welsh parents, who enjoyed particular success as an interpreter of Berlioz's works. She was also a founder member of the Welsh Folk Song Society whose members congregated around Lady Ruth Herbert Lewis and her entourage at Charing Cross during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Another of that group was the Trefforest-born composer Morfydd Llwyn Owen (pictured below) who had taken the Royal Academy by storm following her arrival in 1912. There, she won numerous awards and, after graduating, began to give concerts of her own compositions at the Bechstein Hall, later renamed Wigmore Hall, and made her singing debut at the Aeolian Hall in Bond Street in 1917. Here is arguably her most famous song, *Gweddi Pechadur*, sung by Stuart Burrows.

### Morfydd Llwyn Owen

### *Gweddi Pechadur* (Thomas William)

Stuart Burrows (tenor); John Constable (piano)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=venOK6LalY0>



Morfydd Llwyn Owen's life, however, was cut tragically short. In February 1917, she married the psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, a devoted follower of Sigmund Freud, in Marylebone Register Office, but she died following an emergency operation for suspected appendicitis while on holiday in the Mumbles aged just 26 in 1918. It was a significant moment that, on the centenary of her death, the BBC National Orchestra of Wales performed her *Nocturne* at the Proms – a kind of coming home, as it were.

### CENTRAL LONDON RAILWAY 1891



Now it's worth considering here the practical difficulties that faced

audiences living increasingly away from the centre, of attending concert venues in the days of horse buses and winter fogs. The tube station at Oxford Circus opened in 1900 which made access to the West End much easier but during its pre-eminence in the 1870s, the Crystal Palace in Sydenham had its own railway station and arranged special fares for its audiences.



Welsh soloists were also making their mark in the Promenade Concerts at the Queen's Hall in Regent St. too; singers such as Leila Megane (pictured above) from Pwllheli sang in Henry Wood's first season, sharing the stage with Clara Novello Davies's Royal Welsh Ladies' Choir singing *Rule Britannia* on the Last Night in 1895. Leila Megane went on to sing in Paris, Milan, Moscow and New York, and in 1922 made the first complete recording of Elgar's *Sea Pictures* with the composer himself conducting:

---

**Edward Elgar *Sea Pictures* – “Sabbath Morning at Sea”**  
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

Leila Megane (mezzo-soprano);  
The Symphony Orchestra/Sir  
Edward Elgar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaIxxN49EIU>

---

She later went on to marry the composer Osborne Roberts, composer of *Y Nefoedd* and *Pistyll y Llan*, and settled to live in Pentrefoelas.

Another was the Rhondda-born tenor Tudor Davies, who sang Wagner at Covent Garden and created the role of Hugh the Drover in Vaughan Williams's opera of that name in 1924. He starred opposite Dame Nellie Melba in *La bohème* at Covent Garden in 1922 and served as a mentor for Parry Jones of Blaina in the Rhymney valley who likewise took part in some important London premieres including Berg's *Wozzeck*, Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* and Hindemith's *Mathis der Mahler*.

---

**Samuel Coleridge-Taylor**  
***Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* –**  
**“Onaway! Awake, Beloved!”**  
(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

Tudor Davies (tenor); HMV  
Orchestra/George W Byng

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcQW68jK4FU>

---

The aforementioned Clara Novello Davies moved to London from Cardiff in 1913 with her son to a flat above the Strand Theatre in Aldwych, now aptly renamed the Novello Theatre, where she gave singing lessons and entertained famous actors and singers of the day

including Adelina Patti. She also had an adopted daughter who had been one of her piano students, named Marie Novello, from Maesteg who had studied in Vienna and won the Gold Medal at the National Eisteddfod in Cardiff in 1899 and shared a similar honour with none other than the composer-pianist Ferruccio Busoni at the 1907 Cardiff Triennial Music Festival.

Thereafter, she enjoyed a considerable professional career, touring the English provinces and giving recitals at the Bechstein Hall. She specialised in romantic repertoire and performed Liszt's First Piano Concerto at the Promenade concert in 1909, the first of seven appearances. She also undertook an American concert tour, visiting New York and Chicago and made several recordings for the Edison Bell company and, later HMV. But she died in 1928 after completing only a few sides of a recording for them, and was buried in Maesteg cemetery.



Her half-brother, David Ivor Davies (pictured above), was later to become rather famous too, having composed the

jingoistic anthem, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, at the start of the First World War, bringing him a considerable amount of money and early fame. During the 1920s Ivor Novello became a matinee idol of the silent screen, starring in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lodger* and, during the 1930s and 1940s, wrote a string of highly successful musicals including *Glamorous Night*, *The Dancing Years*, and *Perchance to Dream*.

One of the stalwarts of his musicals was Olive Gilbert, a soprano from Carmarthen who had a career with the Carl Rosa Opera Company, once singing Fricka in Wagner's *The Valkyrie* with them in 1929. She also acted as Novello's personal assistant and housekeeper, living in the flat below his, above the Aldwych Theatre. Ivor Novello died there in 1951, a few hours after completing a performance of his *King's Rhapsody* at Drury Lane and was buried in Golders Green. Here is footage from his funeral:

---

**Film, The funeral of Ivor Novello, Golders Green Crematorium, London, 1951**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHHIU8wWSAA&t=1s>

---

Olive Gilbert sang *We'll gather Lilacs* during the cremation.



Ivor with Olive Gilbert in 'Perchance to Dream'



And who, I wonder, has ever heard of Binkie Beaumont (pictured above in a photograph by Angus McBean), who ruled the West End theatre for almost fifty years from the 1930s? He ran H M Tennant, London's foremost theatrical agency.

When the actor Victor Spinetti came up to London in the 1950s, he said if you didn't work for H.M. Tennant, you didn't work for anybody. Binkie Beaumont managed the careers of Peggy Ashcroft, Ralph Richardson, Noel Coward and John Gielgud, who used to say "I never move without Binkie".

Binkie Beaumont was the son of a timber merchant from Cardiff, born Hughes Griffith Morgan. He brought *Oklahoma!*, *West Side Story* and *My Fair Lady* into the West End and was a founder board member of the National Theatre.

Victor Spinetti had a great story to tell about Binkie. On the phone one day with a client one day, he was overheard to say: "I won't say yes, and I won't say no; I'll say Mmmmm". Enquiring what was going on, his assistant replied, 'Oh, he's just double crossing some old dear.'

A number of prominent Welsh musicians who studied in London during the 20<sup>th</sup> century including Idris Lewis, the son of a miner from Swansea who came to study at the Royal College of Music, who became assistant music Director of Daly's Theatre, off Leicester Square, while also organist of Charing Cross Chapel, and conductor of the London Welsh Choral Society and London Welsh Male Voice Choir.

He became musical director at Elstree Studios when silent films were beginning to give way to sound and worked in particular with Richard Tauber on a number of films and notably was the composer of *Bugail Aberdyfi* and *Can yr Arad Goch*. He subsequently moved to Cardiff where he became Director of Music at BBC Wales.



The composer Grace Williams (pictured above) meanwhile came from Barry in 1926 to study with Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music before teaching at Camden School for Girls for some years. Meirion Williams came here from Dyffryn Ardudwy to study at the Academy, and stayed for the rest of his life, making his home near

Wembley where he made a living as an accompanist, organist and composer of much loved and frequently performed songs.

---

### **Meirion Williams**

***Pan ddaw'r nos*** (Elfed Lewis)

Sir Bryn Terfel (bass baritone);  
Annette Bryn Parri (piano)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLkx5OLVbF4>

---

There was also Arwel Hughes, father of conductor Owain Arwel Hughes, who likewise came to study with Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music before succeeding Mansel Thomas as Head of Music at BBC Wales. And let's not forget that Vaughan Williams was himself of solid Carmarthenshire stock.

There was no shortage of choirs in London either. The London Welsh Association Youth Choir was established by Gwilym Evans in 1953, later conducted by Kenneth Thomas and Terry James. Likewise the Gwalia Girl Singers, the London Cambria Choir, the Borough Chapel Choir and London Welsh Male Voice Choir, formed in 1902 under conductor Merlin Morgan, organist of Charing Cross and Musical Director of Daly's Theatre, who took them to Paris in 1912 to compete in the Paris International Tournament of Music in the presence of the composer Camille Saint-Saens. In 1923, Llewelyn Bevan became its conductor, with Horatio Davies, the organist of Mile End Chapel, as his deputy. As Merlin's assistant at Daly's Theatre, Horatio trained many musical

stars of the day including Evelyn Laye and Jessie Matthews.

In addition, he became musical director of the London Cambrian Choir, a group that would later adopt the title of the lapsed London Welsh Choral Society. Llewelyn Bevan also attempted to raise musical standards at Charing Cross by forming a music club, inviting prominent speakers such as Sir Hugh Allen, Director of the Royal College of Music who had once been organist of St. Asaph Cathedral, and the composer Granville Bantock to give lectures.

The annual showcase was the St David's Day concert at the Albert Hall together with an Autumn concert at the Festival Hall which gave a platform to aspiring Welsh artists such as Gwyneth Jones, Maureen Guy, Margaret Price and Delme Bryn Jones.

It's also worth recalling the annual Welsh Festival evensong at St. Paul's Cathedral, held on the Thursday before St. David's Day from 1898 for nearly fifty years, involving some of Wales's most distinguished preachers who were invited on this special occasion.

It was often said that there were more Welsh singers in the Royal Opera House Chorus than in Welsh National Opera's. Certainly, Covent Garden has given a platform to a host of Welsh singers, most prominently Geraint Evans, Stuart Burrows, Elizabeth Vaughan, Gwyneth Jones and Anne Evans who later went on to great acclaim in the world's most prominent opera houses. There were others too of an earlier generation –

Rhydderch Davies, Edgar Evans and Roderick Jones – whose contributions have been somewhat overshadowed – how easily we forget.



Then there was Trevor Anthony (pictured above) and his brother Cyril from Ty Croes near Ammanford. Trevor worked in the mines before coming to study at the Academy. During the Second World War he worked as a Telegraphist for the Royal Navy before resuming his operatic career, at Covent Garden and with D'Oyly Carte. Benjamin Britten created the role of the Voice of God in his opera *Noye's Fludde* for him in 1958, a production which also featured a very young Michael Crawford, by the way.

Trevor Anthony sang at the Proms many times under conductors such as Thomas Beecham and Malcolm Sargent. His brother Cyril Anthony you'll remember was the organist of King's Cross Chapel for many years and regularly played at the St. David's Day festival at the Albert Hall.

Here is Trevor in *Noye's Fludde*:

---

**Benjamin Britten**  
***Noye's Fludde* - "Noye, Noye, Take Thou Thy Company"**

Trevor Anthony (bass) and  
chorus; English Opera Group  
Orchestra, Merlin Channon and  
Norman Del Mar

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0aVy3qqrwfY&index=3&list=PLVwoLav0o3l4JJaWj3t06f\\_EoMWYeCYmGD](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0aVy3qqrwfY&index=3&list=PLVwoLav0o3l4JJaWj3t06f_EoMWYeCYmGD)

---

Other performers were equally influential teachers at the Academy such as Osian Ellis, who worked extensively with Benjamin Britten, played for the Goon Show and at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, and tenor Kenneth Bowen who performed in festivals and opera houses throughout the world, both of whom attracted a string of eager young students, a tradition that continues to this day. Nowadays, there are so many Welsh musicians living, studying and working in London that we'd be here all day listing them. Because London has always been a magnet for musicians from all over the world – not a bad record for the Land without Music!

---

Written and presented by  
**John Jones**

Produced by **Mike Williams**

---