

INTRODUCTION

There is a certain art form in Wales that doesn't exist in any other culture. It is a special kind of literary form that is classed as poetry, but it is also one that lies very close to music. It is known in Welsh as *cyghanedd* or *cerdd dafod* or *canu caeth*. The last of these terms – *canu caeth* – literally translated means the 'captive' or 'confined' song, and it is so called because of the set of complex rules that underpins it. This is the art form that is the very essence of the poetic tradition of Wales. And before one can express oneself in *cyghanedd*, one has to learn the theory and obey its code.

Dewi Emrys, poet and author of a seminal textbook on *cyghanedd* once wrote:

Cyghanedd is a Science. By this it is meant that *cyghanedd* is not something which happens by accident or whim. It is completely constant and true to itself like the maxims of Euclid.

A rhymester can manage to compose a verse or doggerel from his own head by natural talent or in imitation of a verse he might know. But no one has ever succeeded in writing *cyghanedd* in this free manner. The art must be learnt exactly in the same way as every craft that demands detailed apprenticeship.¹

But *cyghanedd* is much more than a science and much, much more than a set of complex rules. As the last sentence of the quotation above reveals, it is both art and craft. And though it can be argued that, once upon a time, these two words meant the same, today 'art' is usually understood as having the added

¹ Translated from *Odl a Chyghanedd*, Dewi Emrys, London (1938), p. 111.

ingredient of being something brought about by some kind of 'muse' or 'creative spirit'. By bringing 'art' and 'craft' together in one breath, Dewi Emrys reveals the very deep appreciation that exists in Wales of the craft of poetry and an awareness that while there can be craft without art, there can never be art without craft. One can master the craft of *cynganedd* and thus become a *prydydd* without however becoming a *bardd*. Both titles are translated by the English word 'poet', but in Welsh the term *bardd* distinguishes the artist from the craftsman.²

Of course there is more to poetry than the technical considerations of such things as rhyme, assonance and rhythm, but there is no poetry without them – though not, necessarily, all of them at once, of course. Similarly, there is more to prose than grammar and there is more to music than rhythm and pitch. These are the rudiments of the crafts that underpin the art forms.

The craft behind works composed in *cynganedd* or *canu caeth* is spelt out in the rules of *cerdd dafod*. The code that embraces these rules is a tool in the poet's hand, but it is such a nimble tool and so essential that, in a master's hand, at times it can almost seem as if the tool itself is creating the art.

As well as being highly crafted, *cynganedd* is highly popular in Wales. Enjoyed by young and old alike, it has a following like no other literary form in the country. Poets who practise the art can perform their work to packed halls. Indeed, poetry in general is in no way elitist in Wales and it is encouraged from a very young age. We have a children's poet laureate (with pin-up posters to match) and the annual poetry competitions at our cultural festivals – the *eisteddfodau* – are widely covered in the media. *Cynganedd* is studied to a certain extent through the conventional educational streams – schools and universities – but its main breeding ground is in more informal night-classes, where people come together in village halls, chapel vestries and pubs to learn its mysteries.

² It must be noted however, that the usage of these terms has changed over time. Once they meant precisely the opposite and *prydydd* was by far the superior title.

People who have themselves not acquired the craft of *cynganedd* often question its restrictive nature. They see the rules as a barrier to creativity. They forget that art relies on the mastery of craft. One cannot hope to create meaningful music out of a Chopin piano concerto without having mastered scales and arpeggios. One cannot hope to produce the Mona Lisa without mastery of line and form. While learning the craft behind any art form can be hard work, once mastered it is a discipline that liberates the creative spirit. It does not hold this spirit back. On the contrary, it gives it wings.

Take language. If we had to stop and consider the complexities of the simplest passage of conversation – from the tense and mode of the verb to its conjugation; from the effect of preposition on pronouns to the choice of vocabulary – then I believe we might be too afraid to speak at all. Yet, we have all managed to grasp these complexities and so, potentially, are in a position to express virtually the whole range of our experiences, at least to the extent that the marriage between language and thought allows us. The same is true of *cynganedd*. Once its ‘grammar’ has been learnt, it is as fluid as language and as agile as song. It enables the creative mind to say precisely what it has to say in a beautiful poetic form.

Over the next few chapters, I shall try to outline the development of this ancient, yet thoroughly modern tradition, before moving on to explain the most basic principles of how it works. The examples in the exercises can be read and heard in the free download which accompanies this book.³ So too can the poems presented throughout the book.

But before we start, one thing needs to be stressed. This is not a book for the timid or for the half-hearted. There is no quick fix to learn *cynganedd*. In an age of instant-gardens, two-hour transformations of houses and humans, and even ‘Welsh in a Week’, this is one area where time must play its part. There are no short cuts. In the days of the professional court poet in Wales, it was deemed that it would take any would-be poet

³ Available at <https://www.ylolf.com/singing-in-chains-audio>

approximately nine years to learn the craft. And to this day, those who manage to master *cynghanedd* in a shorter space of time are rare. It has certainly been my experience that the more you know about it, the more you realise you don't know. And I'm still learning. To those who persist, I hope they will find it enlightening and fun.