



## **Music and the Cornish way of life**

*Barbara Gardner-Bray. November 2010*

Simply put, Cornish music is folk music which uses simple instrumentation. It was and is a statement of the times, not unlike the Celtic music of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Over the years, music has played an important part in most occasions in Cornwall, be they holidays such as Christmas, festivals and celebrations such as May Day, county fairs or everyday life occurrences, such as marriages, burials, harvest time and so on.

### **HOLIDAYS**

#### **Christmas**

In the 19th century, carol or “curl” singing formed a prominent part of the festive season. Choirs would memorize carols as they generally couldn’t read music. They would travel from village to village, singing carols such as the “Seven Joys of Mary”, the “Holy Well”, and the “Holly and the Ivy”. A typical Christmas song of the 19th century went like this:

“Welcome Christmas which brings us all good cheer  
Pies and puddings, roast pork and strong beer”

*Then the chorus reads*

“Come let me taste your Christmas beer  
That is so very strong  
And I do wish that Christmas time  
With all its mirth and song  
Was twenty times so long”

As with other Cornish music, carols were introduced wherever the Cornish lived in the new world and old.

## **Richard Jose**

One Cornish singer of note was **Richard Jose**. Richard was born on June 5, 1862 in Lanner, Cornwall. He always said that he was born in 1869 so he would appear to be younger. He sounded younger than his years as he was a counter tenor (between a tenor and a soprano) which was very rare. He even made Caruso jealous as he could reach high notes that Caruso could not. Richard, the eldest of four children, was shipped to America in 1878, after his father's death, to meet up with his Uncle Alfred, in Virginia City, Nevada. Unfortunately, Uncle Alfred was not there when he arrived. He had disappeared. Richard was forced to fend for himself by delivering bread to the miners in payment for lodging in boarding houses. In the evenings, he would visit the saloons, singing such sentimental tunes as "Where is My Wandering Boy Tonight", which touched the hearts of the miners who were far from home. When they found out he was a fellow Cornishman, they made a point of looking out for him. He also went to Carson City too, but soon the Women's Temperance League intervened to save a young innocent from sin, and sent him back to Reno where, by chance, he met a relative, Bill Clarke, who was a blacksmith. Richard worked as a blacksmith for several years, until 1884, when he joined a minstrel group. They played San Francisco, and Sacramento, where he was spotted and invited to perform on Broadway. His career took off and he toured such places as South America and South Africa. It is said that, in 1902, Cecil Rhodes had operations suspended in South Africa so that the Cornish miners would have time to hear one of their own countryman sing.

He even returned to Cornwall to perform and visit Lanner again. They say he was an overnight success with his first ever hit song, "**Silver Threads Among the Gold**", recorded October 27, 1903 for the Victor Talking Company. It took him 25 years to become an "overnight success".



Eventually, he billed himself as Juan Ricardo Jose (pronounced HOSAY), instead of Richard Jose, as the Americans could identify more easily with a singer who came from south of the border than all the way from Cornwall. Richard died on October 20, 1941 in San Francisco. He was 79 years old.

## **FAIRS**

Cornwall, like the rest of the UK, is a county of fairs. Music plays an important role in fairs, now as it did many years ago. Most people in the past attended and returned the same day. Some, however, spent one or two days and sometimes a week in the vicinity of the fair. Billy Treglase, a regular haunter of fairs in the 19th century, composed the following song for the benefit of the wives of the stragglers.

“All the women of Summercourt fair  
I’ll give ee advice then you can beware  
If your man do drink too much beer or gin  
You must scat ‘un down with a rolling pin  
So women I hope you’ll follow this plan  
If you should be plagued with a drunken man”

Why do I get the impression that food, drink and song are an integral part of life in Cornwall?

## **HARVEST TIME**

Harvest time was another reason to celebrate and to sing.

Crying the Neck is a tradition that is still being followed to this day. After the harvest, there would be a supper for the family and the field workers. The entertainment came after the meal with songs like “Harvest Home”, “Green Brooms”, “The Flag of England”, and “Here’s a Health to the Barley Mow”.



## **MAY DAY**

Folk customs were plenty. Some fell by the wayside over the years and some continue to this day. Many include music, most notably May Day, which, in the past, ranked second in importance to Christmas and possibly midsummer. This

celebration is most notably practised in Helston on May 8<sup>th</sup> each year and Padstow on May 1<sup>st</sup>.

### **Helston**

The people of Helston, dressed in their finest, perform the Flora or Furry dance throughout the day to the music of the Helston Town Band, dancing in couples of all ages along the streets and in and out of the houses. The original song, “The Floral Dance”, complete with lyrics, was written by Katie Moss in 1911 after a visit to Helston, and was first recorded a year later by Peter Dawson, a famous Australian tenor.



May Day, by definition, is a celebration of revival and fruitfulness after a long winter. Of course, you may wonder why May, in particular, was of such importance to the Cornish. It was formerly regarded as a season when witches have special powers. There was little doubt that the intention of May music was to scare away evil spirits. May Day in the 19th century was celebrated by young people assembling at a pub at midnight, spilling into the streets dancing to fiddles, drums and other instruments. They would stay up all night to visit farms, drinking a beverage called “junket” which was served with sugar and cream, as well as heavy cake, and other typical Cornish fare. They would dance off the effects of the food with 4, 6 or 8-handed reels, interspersed with slower dances called “Triumph” and “Cushion” dances. After dancing and feasting all night, they would gather the may or (sycamore). At the turn of the 20th century, May Day in St. Ives was celebrated by children blowing home-made whistles called “feepers” & “pee weeps” and May horns (made of tin). At Hayle, parties of children would roam the town singing:

“Oh crown the Queen of May  
Oh crown the Queen of May  
Around the ring we’ll dance and sing  
And crown the Queen of May”

## Padstow

May Day in Padstow is still celebrated with gusto by its inhabitants. It dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. The celebration begins at midnight on April 30<sup>th</sup> from the Golden Lion Pub. The black 'obby 'orse rolls about in the street to a drum beat and accordion with the teaser who is dressed in white leading the way.



In the past, they would leave the inn and parade the streets, stopping at homes where lights were burning as if the singers were expected and they would chant the opening words of the “Morning Song”.

“Unite and Unite, and let us all unite  
For summer is a-come unto day  
And whither we are going we all will unite  
In the merry morning of May”

There are 17 known recorded verses but most have been forgotten, and one or two are still commonly repeated. The concluding verses are:

“Rise up Mr. Hocking, I know you well afine  
For summer is a-come unto day  
You’ve a shilling in your purse, and I wish it was in mine  
In the merry morning of May”

“Now fare you well and we bid you all good cheer  
For the summer is a-come unto day  
We’ll call no more unto your house before another year  
In the merry morning of May”

Like the kindred Furry or Flora Dance of Helston, the Padstow ceremony bears characteristics of a pagan festival.

## **FUNERALS**

Music also played an important part in more somber occasions for the Cornish, such as funerals. The Wesleyans loved occasions for feasting and processions. This included burials. More affluent landowners who were Wesleyan churchgoers would be buried in coffins of copper (obtained from their own mines). A proper funeral meant a procession and feast. The poor could not hope to emulate their landowners, but they did their best. Funerals were common due to the nature of the mining profession and a common scene would include a coffin preceded by a long double row of singers, headed by an elder of the chapel. A hymn would be read in solemn tones 2 lines at a time. A favourite was the following:

“Oh lovely appearance of death  
What sight upon earth is so fair  
Not all the gay pagans that breathe  
Can with dead body compare”

Burying tunes were sung in minor key. Funerals were popular in Cornwall and mourners went to either the home or an inn afterward for food and drink. The people of Zennor parish were poor and didn't have enough to eat at home. Their attendance at funerals was especially noted. They claimed their reputation as singers was sufficient to warrant their attendance at funerals. If someone was asked to lead a hymn and was ignorant of appropriate hymns for the occasion you might hear the following verse:

“Poor brother is dead and gone  
And no better is left behind him  
We'll carry him off and bury him up  
Where the Devil shall never find him”

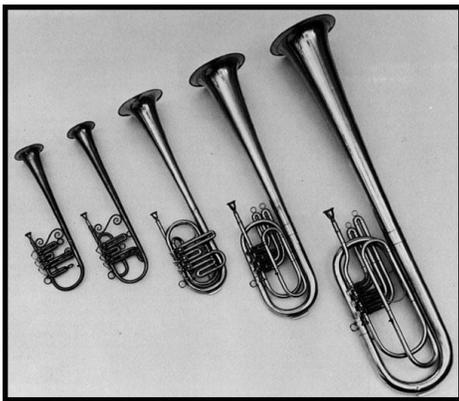
## **BRETON CONNECTION**

Cornish music is often noted for its similarity to that of Brittany. Some older songs and carols share the same root as Breton tunes. From Cornwall, Brittany was more easily accessible than London. Breton and Cornish languages were mutually intelligible. There was much cultural and marital exchange between the two countries, and this influenced both music and dance.

## INSTRUMENTS

A very important part of Cornish music is the instrumentation. There has been a recent upsurge in interest in Cornish pipes. After being extinct for over 300 years they are now being made and played in increasing numbers. Numerous depictions throughout Cornwall dating from the Renaissance period show people playing a distinctive double-pipe, that is, a bagpipe with two melody pipes (chanters). The Cornish pipes are capable of playing two melody lines, either a melody accompanied by moving drone notes, or two independent parts playing in harmony. Documentary evidence confirms that PIPING was a central element in music-making in Medieval Cornwall. This practice involved both double and single chanter bagpipes. Double chanter bagpipes were not unique to Cornwall but may have survived there longer than in Dorset or Yorkshire, perhaps due to Cornwall's isolation or to local favour. The late 20<sup>th</sup> Century has seen renewed interest in the history and practice of bagpiping in Cornwall, leading to reconstructions of pipes and widespread research of technique and repertoire.

Favourite instruments used in Cornish music were the flute, clarinet and an occasional "haut-boy". Bassoons and serpents were also popular. Stringed instruments were rare and came later. The serpent was eventually replaced by the ophicleide, sax-horn and euphonium. These instruments were precursors to modern day instruments found in county silver and brass bands which abound in Cornwall.



Now you may wonder what these instruments were. The following descriptions may be of some help.

- The **SERPENT** is of late 16th century origin. It is a conical wooden tube 8 ft. in length which has been folded in serpentine form to make it manageable. It was sounded by a cup-shaped mouthpiece inserted in a longish brass crook. There were 6 large fingerholes. It is called the bass of

the cornette family. It originated in France and in the mid-18th century experienced wide use in Europe in military bands. However, it was known and used in England in the 17th century.

- The **BASSOON** is a double reed instrument similar to an oboe and dates from 16<sup>th</sup> Century
- The **SAXHORN** is a brass wind instrument or valved horn similar to a bugle which was invented by Adolphe SAX of Belgium.
- The **EUPHONIUM** is a 4-valved horn of the tuba family.
- The **OPHICLEIDE** is a bass bugle.
- The “**HAUT-BOY**” (or in French haut-bois) was an old English name for an oboe.

## VOCAL MUSIC

Of course, musical instrumentation was not the only music heard in Cornwall. Vocal music remains an integral part of Cornish music. Folk songs include Sweet Nightingale, Little Eyes, and Lamorna. Few traditional Cornish lyrics survived the decline of the language. In some cases, lyrics of common English songs became attached to older Cornish tunes. Some folk tunes have Cornish lyrics written since the language revival of the 1920s. Sport has also been an outlet for many Cornish folk songs, and *Trelawny*, the unofficial Cornish national anthem, is often sung by Cornish Rugby fans, along with other favourites such as Camborne Hill and The White Rose.

The Cornish anthem that has been used by Gorseth Kernow for the last 80 plus years is “Bro Goth Agan Tasow” (“The Land of My Fathers”, or, literally, “Old Country of our Fathers”). Another popular Cornish anthem is “Hail to the Homeland”. My Grandad, Arthur Henry Gardner, was very musical and in the early 1900’s in Cornwall, he played organ at Truro cathedral, sang in the choir and was a member of the Cornubia Quartet. In September, 1910, when he was emigrating from Cornwall to Toronto, he requested letters of reference from Truro Cathedral, and the Canon Residentiary of Truro Cathedral and Honorary Conductor of the Truro and Falmouth Philharmonic Societies, Edward C. Corfe, wrote “Mr. Gardner possesses a voice of excellent range, quality and power, which he uses with a musician’s instinct and feeling. He is an admirable soloist and has developed considerably in the last two years in dramatic expression and style, always singing with such reverence as befits sacred music in a sacred building”. The tradition carried over to Canada, after emigrating to Toronto 1910, where, in 1911, he joined the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, and as far as I know, was the choir’s longest standing member, for 40 years. He organized and conducted the

Todmorden Choral Society in 1916 and was organist at St. David's Anglican church from 1916-24, then St. Luke's from 1931-1953. He also appeared in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas in the 1920's.

## **CORNISH MUSIC TODAY**

I could not close without mentioning the all-male voice choirs and county silver and brass bands of Cornwall. Male choirs and county bands have been a part of Cornish music for many years. The combined Wadebridge and St. Columba male choirs of northern Cornwall performed admirably at the 2003 Bowmanville CAHS gathering, which the TCA hosted. The all-male choirs, also typical of Wales, evolved from the mines. By 1923, Camborne was impoverished and couldn't even afford to light its streets. Miners took to the streets singing. They formed choirs and tramped the countryside singing for food. Today, there are 30 known male voice choirs in Cornwall. They are known internationally. As well, Cornish bands currently number about 40 with at least 2 having a history of over 150 years, these being the Newquay Band (1856) and Camborne town band (1841). There is a long proud tradition. Several have achieved success in national competitions.



There are currently three championship bands. The Camborne town band is regularly in the top 10 at the national level. The other two are St. Dennis and Bodmin. The tradition is a strong one due to the mining community and rural farming communities. Singing came first, then the bands followed. Again, this tradition has gone around the world. Modern Cornish musicians have included the "Voice of Cornwall", the late Brenda Wootton – a folksinger, who sang in

Cornish and English, and who died in 1994, the Cornish-Breton family band Anao Atao, the late 1960s band The Onyx and the 1980s band Bucca. Recently bands Sacred Turf, Skwardya and Krena, have begun performing electric folk in the Cornish language.

The Cornwall Folk Festival has been held annually for the past 35 years and this year was staged at Wadebridge. Other festivals are the pan-Celtic Lowender Peran and midsummer festival Golowan. Cornwall won the Pan Celtic Song Contest three years in a row between 2003 and 2005. Cornish music today is carried on in churches, at fairs, annual festivals, in the public houses, and even at Cornish Associations scattered around the world.

Today, I'd like to carry on that tradition by listening to some words spoken and music, played and beautifully sung by our own Heather Dale, followed by a rousing rendition of Trelawny. Hopefully, our Cornish ancestors will be listening.