

Blas o Gymru

A taste of Wales in the Basque Country: October 2017

The Party

There were eight in our party. The first four named are professional musicians, although only Gwilym is full time. The costs of these four musicians were fully supported by Wales Arts International, whose help was invaluable. Three of the other four were self-funded; the artist Luned Rhys Parry was partly funded through a separate grant, also from Wales Arts International,

The Blas o Gymru tour was timed to coincide with the return leg of Luned's residency. This return trip was arranged so that Luned's work, inspired by her stay earlier in the year, could be exhibited in the Basque Country, and shared with those who helped and inspired her.



Members of the party:

- Gwilym Bowen Rhys, traditional musician
- Iestyn Tyne, student, poet and traditional musician
- Osian Morris, dry-stone waller and singer/songwriter
- Nicolas Davalan, teacher and musician
- Alaw Fflur Jones, school student and singer
- Maureen Fairclough, Tour Manager
- Meic Llewellyn, Facilitator
- Luned Rhys Parri, visual artist.

The tour and the development of our practice

Roedd ein taith i Wlad y Basg yn ceisio rhoi blas o ddiwylliant Cymru i'r Basgwyr trwy gyfrwng cerddoriaeth a chelf weledol. Teithion ni ogwmpas y wlad gan ganu mewn canolfanau celfeddydol a chanolfanau cymunedol gan wneud llwyth o gyfeillion a chysylltiadau newydd. Mi roedd yn brofiad gwerthfawr i fi fel canwr, gan mod i'n canu mewn iaith doedd y gynlleidfa ddim yn ei ddeallt, roedd mynegi ystyr ac ysbryd y caneuon yn holl bwysig felly roedd yn ymarfer amhrisiadwy i fi. Mae fy nealltwriaeth a gwerthfawrogiad o ddiwylliant y Basgwyr yn fwy ers y daith, y gobaith ydi fedrai drefnu mynd yna i ganu eto yn y dyfodol.

(The aim of our trip to the Basque Country was to give a taste of Welsh culture to people there, through music and visuals. We travelled around the country, performing in arts centres and community venues, and made many new friends and contacts. It was a valuable experience for me as a singer, performing in a language completely foreign to the audiences and yet having to express the meaning and spirit of each song. This was an invaluable experience for me. My understanding and admiration of Basque culture is much greater as a result of this tour. My hope is to return in the future, and arrange further performances.)

Gwilym Bowen Rhys.

**Yn ystod taith Blas o Gymru,
Mi cefais flas ar ffordd arall o fyw,
Ffordd newydd o flas,
Dantaith o iaith a diwylliant newydd,
Dau lleiafrif yn cwrdd, ac uniaethu,
Blasu treigl alawon ein gilydd,
Creu a plethu a gwerthfawrogi**

*(During the Blas o Gymru tour
I tasted another way of living,
A new way of tasting,
A dance of languages and culture,
Two minorities meeting and becoming one,
Tasting the sounds as tunes came together,
Creating and weaving and admiring.)*

Osian Morris,



Simply to be able to travel and live together as a group was a powerful influence, as we discovered skills and capacities and strengths in each other that will be a communal resource in the future. As shown below, the venues and ambiences we found ourselves operating in were very diverse indeed, as were the audiences we were engaging with. Some of the gigs were amplified - a first experience of this for Alaw, which she greatly enjoyed - while others were acoustic. The skills of holding and engaging an audience, in settings as different as a soporific, well-upholstered cinema, a noisy bar and a community feast were all shared and honed during this tour.

We two (Maureen and Meic) were in some ways ideally placed, as administrators and non-performers, to watch and enjoy the transfers of expertise and enthusiasm taking place, over this period, among the group. Gwilym, although only 25, is already a very experienced performer in a range of genres and situations, and he passed on a great deal of advice and example, especially to Alaw to whom nearly all this experience was new.

"You're singing like a little eisteddfod girl," he told her one day. "Now you have to learn not to recite songs, but sing from the heart. Feel every word."



We also watched Osian, essentially a unique blues-based singer and guitarist, beginning to come in with voice, guitar and mouth-organ in support during more traditional material and Iestyn and Gwilym, in turn, enriching Osian's performances with sympathetic harmonies. Gwilym also accompanied both Iestyn's oral poetry and Alaw's voice, at times, with harp accompaniments - highly effective. During the tour, the musicians found themselves playing with a range of Basque musicians, mainly but not entirely traditional. A number of these were either fully professional, or very highly regarded within their own culture. Tunes and songs were exchanged and Basque and Welsh musicians sang and played each others' material with great enthusiasm. Out of these exchanges arose plans for further interactions which will be explored more fully below. An exciting discovery during the tour was the very powerful impact of oral performance poetry as part of a musical act. Iestyn, as well as a very fine fiddler, is a writer of cynghanedd (traditional strict-metre poetry) and his renditions of both his own poetry and work by Dafydd ap Gwilym greatly enriched the performances. Audience response was very positive, and increased during the tour as Iestyn gained confidence, and his colleagues began to support him with gentle instrumentation. This may have been partly because there is a strong, lively tradition of performance poetry in Euskal Herria, so audiences were already attuned to the form, but to us too it seemed a very powerful addition to the usual repertoire. Also effective in offering a 'Taste of Wales' was the collection of images we projected behind the performers: we got better at arranging this as the tour progressed, and responses to our on-the-spot evaluation materials (more details later) demonstrated their success. We have more to learn, though, both about how best to use such material, and in developing and improving its content.



'Blas o Gymru' was very effective, it seems, in communicating the Welsh love of place and culture in a similar, neighbouring culture. That success is evidenced in the evaluation responses, but more powerfully in the very warm reception we received throughout our stay. There is little doubt that as a concept, it is both effective and transferable, as was shown in the invitations we received during the week to take it next year both to Belfast and Donegal - see more below. Although it should be remembered that this tour took place in circumstances enhanced by several years of previous contact and interchange, and that there is clearly an innate sympathy between Welsh and Basques because of our common experiences and the close convergences between our cultures, all the evidence of this tour reinforces a feeling that the pattern is one to be repeated and developed in the future, and shared with other cultures.

Maureen Fairclough

Meic Llewellyn.

Rwyf wedi bod yn ffodus i ganu yn y prosiect yma, ac mae hi wedi fy helpu i sylweddoli fy mod i'n gallu parhau i ganu llawer mwy hyderus nag o'r blaen. Hefyd i magu'r sgil o gydweithio gyda perfformwyr eraill, sy'n brofiad gwerthfawr iawn.

(I was very fortunate to take part as a singer in this project, as it's helped me realise I can perform with much more confidence than I used to. Also, to develop my skills in performing with other musicians was a very valuable experience).

Alaw Fflur Jones.



Performances and venues

Our eleven-day tour was planned around four formal performances, two in the province of Nafarroa, one each in Gipuzkoa and Biskaia. While we were there, this pattern changed and our performers found themselves in action eight times in eleven days. As each performance, formal or informal, had its own value, we'll try to record them all here.

Date	Location	Type	Venue	Numbers	Demo-graphics	Eval.
Fri 20/10	Aldatz, Nafarroa	Jamming/ sharing tunes	Bar	15 - 20	All ages, both genders	N/A
Sat 21/10	Kantina, Lekunberri, Nafarroa	Formal concert	Café bar	50 +	Young and middle-aged, Some children	Yes
Tue 24/10	Uizi, Nafarroa	Formal supper with music	Village hall/ hostel	60	Middle aged and older. No children	N/A
Wed 25/10	Doka, Donostia, Gipuzkoa	Formal concert	Multi- purpose venue	25	Young adults + young middle aged. Both genders	N/A
Thu 26/10	Berri tz, Biskaia	Formal concert	'House of Culture' - town venue	50+	Older middle- aged and elderly. Both genders	Yes
Fri 27/10	Town Hall, Leitza, Nafarroa	Discussion	Town Hall	20	Middle-aged. Both genders	N/A
Sat 28/10	Sinea, Leitza, Nafarroa	Formal concert	Town cinema	60	All ages, both genders	No
Sat 28/10	Torrea, Leitza, Nafarroa	Jamming/ sharing tunes	Bar	30	All ages, both genders	N/A

It's worth singling out a few elements from this table, to demonstrate the different benefits and opportunities they offered. The first time the instruments came out of their cases was an impromptu jam in a cider-house in the village of Aldatz near Lekunberri, run by an old friend. The vigour and pzazz of the occasion did a great deal to generate interest and attendance for the concert in Lekunberri a day later, and also demonstrated to the performers what sympathetic and understanding audiences they would be working with. The publicity process was also supported by we two (Meic and Maureen) distributing flyers and fly-posting the town. Such publicity was particularly useful as in both Lekunberri and Leitza the concerts had been prepared by an

organisation that, although well-resourced and well-meaning, had little prior experience of promoting performance events. Basques respond particularly well to face-to-face contact, and our group's embrace of Euskara, the Basque language, paid enormous dividends. "They are very strange, these Welsh," a friend overheard. "They all speak our language."

Kantina, venue for the first public concert, is a bar/ café, next door to the gallery and information centre Plazaola, which housed Luned's exhibition. The concert started at 1.30, immediately after the opening of that exhibition. Although attendance at the opening was low, it gradually increased once the music was the space, and the audience was positive and responsive. Demographics of this audience were very mixed, from families and young adults to groups of older men who perhaps always visited Kantina at this time. One man, originally from Wales, had travelled 60km to be at the concert and was really emotional in his response. Flyers and leaflets had been produced and translated in advance, in a collaboration between Plazaola and ourselves, but we found little evidence of distribution, although there had been a newspaper article and mentions on local radio. The flyposting and leaflet distribution the day before was successful as many of the personal contacts made then attended the concert. Friends in the area also used social media contacts to spread information about this and other performances. A collection was made at the end of the concert.



The opportunity to take part in a traditional community 'cultural evening' with food and music, in the small village of Uitzzi near Lekunberri, cemented friendships further, as well as demonstrating the power and popularity of community singing in the Basque language - something we Welsh tend to associate with our own culture more than others. It also gave an opportunity to hear and meet a very fine local concertina player.

The evening in Doka, a state-of-the-art new venue in the sophisticated city of Donostia, was a creative contrast to that. Doka is a warehouse, minimalist, night-club type of venue. The audience was our smallest, and in those terms a little disappointing, perhaps partly because the concert started at 7.00 and was slotted in before a Salsa class.

However, it was largely made up of old friends, particularly of Gwilym's and Meic's. Many of them were either musicians themselves, or otherwise involved in cultural production in the Basque language. Conversations (and dancing) went on well into the morning, and out of that evening emerged a plan to continue the emerging collaborations with a reciprocal tour in January 2018. We recruited that evening an outstanding singer/percussionist, a Bertzolari (traditional performance poet) and an outstanding sound technician - more details in a later section. It's sometimes hard to tell as a visitor, but again, the level of publicity seemed disappointing: there were some posters about the venue, but little evidence of external marketing. No collection was made but the venue made a contribution.

The next performance was at 7pm the next evening in Berritz, a dormitory town between Bilbo and Durango, in 'Kultur Etxea' - the House of Culture, a newish, intimate, purpose-built theatre space. The performance, to a large, rather older and unusually staid - but very appreciative - audience was followed by the hosting of our group by a number of well-wishers from the community there. Out of these interactions grew creative relationships both with a fine young accordionist and another well-known young performance poet, both of whom are eager to continue collaborations in the future. No collection was made here, as concerts at this community venue are always free.

During the two days we spent in Leitza, we presented a glimpse of Welsh culture through words and images to a small, sober and receptive group one evening in the Town Hall. This again demonstrated the sympathy and mutual interest between the two cultures and along with the now-familiar leafleting and flesh-pressing, simulated interest in our performance a day later. It also engendered a discussion involving the Mayor and Town Clerk of this very beautiful small town, aimed at developing sustainable contacts with a similar community in rural Wales. Machynlleth seems currently to be the front-runner as we consider what is possible for the future. The venue for our final concert, in Leitza, was an old cinema, which judging from the musty church-like



smell, had not been used for some time. The audience was again mixed but predominantly young and many came with young children. Meic and Maureen had again been busy distributing posters and leaflets the day before the concert, talking to people - in Euskara - and encouraging support. Again many of those we spoke to attended the concert, as did a number who were approached in the market square immediately beforehand. The concert was well attended and enthusiastically received, demanding an encore. The Mayor and Town Clerk of Leitza had clearly been busy publicising our arrival, and the community in Leitza was by far the best-prepared and best-informed of those we engaged with. A collection was made at the end of this performance, and it was by far the most generous collection we received.

The jamming and tune-sharing that took place in Bar Torrea after our final gig also cemented a number of friendships, brought us into creative interchange with a talented traditional piper who would also like to visit and play in Wales, and laid further foundations down for sustainable interchanges in the future.



Putting the value into evaluation

Evaluation processes are often seen, at best, as worthy but time-consuming activities with little immediate impact on an event or activity. Under Maureen's direction, we used audience evaluation forms twice, each time in a situation that enabled the process to take place naturally and without disruption. In each case, we were delighted by the positive, pro-active response of those questioned, and were able to put a number of suggestions made into immediate action, improving the quality of our performances and their relevance to future audiences. Here is the form we used:

GALESEKO ZAPORIA - Lagundu hobetzen, mesedez!

Gure showa gustuko izan duzu? (1 = ez asko, 5 = asko)	1 2 3 4 5
Galesi buruzko ezer berririk ikasi duzu gaurkoan? (1 = ez asko, 5 = asko)	1 2 3 4 5
Zer da gehien gustatu zaizuna?	
Nola hobetu genezake gure showa?	

Eskerririk asko zure laguntzagatik - oso baliogarria da guretzat!

GALESEKO ZAPORIA - Please can you help us?

How much did you enjoy the show? (1 = not much, 5 = fantastic)	1 2 3 4 5
Did you learn anything new about Wales? (1 = not much, 5 = a lot)	1 2 3 4 5
What did you enjoy most?	
How do you think we can improve the show?	

Thank you for your help - we'll put it to good use!

This simple evaluation tool was devised and prepared before we left. We needed it to be brief, useful and not onerous either to complete or interpret. We used it first during the second half of the first performance. We decided to do it during the performance because our experience was that post activity evaluations tended to be the last thing people want to do when often all they really want to do is leave. These evaluations were enthusiastically received and completed.

The mean score for enjoyment during the first performance was 4.6 out of 5. Areas of particular enjoyment most frequently noted were:

- Violins
- The vocals
- All the music
- Our use of a Basque speaker to introduce elements of the performance
- 'Everything'.

The score for gaining new knowledge about Wales was 3.6, and most importantly the areas respondents felt we needed to improve to make the concert even better were:

- To provide images to inform / support performance.(we had failed to do this prior to the first show)
- To address acoustics as the quieter songs were difficult to hear.
- To add percussion .
- To explain more fully what the songs were about.

We responded immediately to three of the responses, and prior to the second concert introduced amplification, images and a brief explanation of each song in Euskara. Percussion was not a part of the performances. We decided it was not appropriate to evaluate the second public performance, as it was in a nightclub type environment. However, we evaluated the third concert, again part way through. This rather older audience was very keen to give us feedback.

The mean score for enjoyment this time was 4.7. Particularly enjoyed were the violins, the poetry, the harp, and 'music in general'. The score regarding gaining new knowledge about Wales remained the same at 3.6. Their suggestions for improvement were:

- The slide show should include a map showing where Wales is!
- More information could be given on the slides about Welsh traditions and culture.
- Again, fuller explanation of the songs
- Provision of a leaflet with information about the songs
- Introduction of dancing into the show.

In response, prior to the final concert we added 2 new slides to show Wales relative to the UK and Wales relative to Europe as a whole. The explanations of songs were rewritten, and very well interpreted by a fluent Basque/ English speaker.

We made a decision that the final concert would not have an interval, and as it took place in a cinema we decided written evaluations were not appropriate. We have been considering as a group, however, a number of ways in future productions we can introduce more effective ways of giving context to the material in Welsh for non-speakers. We will also consider how to introduce a dance element into the event.

Maureen Fairclough

Meic Llewellyn.

Networking, collaborations and new directions

Y gobaith ydi y bydd possib trefnu i artistiaid o Wlad y Basg ddod yma i Gymru i ni allu cryfhau y cysylltiad rhwng y ddwy wlad ac i bawb cael elwa o hynny.

(Our hope is that it will be possible to arrange for Basque performers to visit Wales soon. This will strengthen the links we've made, to everyone's benefit.)

Gwilym Bowen Rhys.



The processes of performing and networking were very closely intertwined, and in retrospect it's almost impossible to say where one began and another one ended. We were fortunate in that this tour was supported by a history of close contacts and collaborations over a number of years, a process that Luned's residency in spring had contributed to and enriched. It's in the nature of these activities that a number of possibilities emerge; not all of them bear **immediate** fruit, but sometimes relationships that appear to have stalled become active at a later stage. We'll concentrate here on identifying interactions that have been firmly agreed, and seem likely to produce new activity in the near future:

- **Eneko Aritza**, manager of Doka in Donostia, is also one of the finest sound engineers and producers in his country. He has agreed to come to Wales in January 2018 in company with **Mixel Ducau** (singer and alboka player), **Arrate Illaro** (performance poet) and two other musicians, to spend an intensive four-day period rehearsing, performing and recording in company with the 'Blas o Gymru' crew, aiming to produce material for a collaborative CD. **Maureen Fairclough**, who managed this tour, will again be involved throughout that crowded period, and **Meic Llewellyn** will facilitate the process.
- We have been provisionally invited to take 'Blas o Gymru' to the **Belfast International Arts Festival** in 2018, continuing the tour to make three later performances in Donegal, Eire. These will be confirmed in December 2017.

- **Mikel Lasarte**, dancer, choreographer and animateur, proposes to make a short tour of Wales with a seven-person performance troupe in the summer, dancing at Sesiwn Fawr and other festivals.
- Meic and Luned have been asked to contribute to a forthcoming book about the artist **Juan Gorriti's** three retrospective exhibitions celebrating his fifty years of work, the third of these exhibitions, of course, took place at MoMA Machynlleth between November 2016 and January 2017.
- The producer **Igor Otxoa** of Txalap-Art, who is also Director of the annual **Atlantikaldia** international arts festival in Errenteria, will be meeting Meic and colleagues in Ireland this December. One of the aims of their meeting will be to develop a programme of exchanges and mutual support between Atlantikaldia and a similar festival in Wales - perhaps Y Sesiwn Fawr in Dolgellau or Gwyl Arall in Caernarfon. Another aim is to prepare a distribution network in Euskal Herria for the CD mentioned above and future productions. A final aim is to discuss with arts organisations in the Gaeltacht the potential for launching 'Culture Europe' bid to support the building of a touring network for traditional musicians from smaller cultures.
- Alaw, in her GCSE year at Ysgol Bro Hyddgen in Machynllethm wrote a daily blog during the tour. This has now been published, along with her photographs, in the weekly magazine 'Golwg', giving her and the tour a national coverage, as well as contributing to her educational, career and personal development.
- Supported by other members of the travelling party, Maureen and Meic are currently creating a new small organisation, **Pam Lai?**, to co-ordinate the activities identified above, and to hold in trust for the participants the 'Blas o Gymru' concept, enabling them to take control of how the idea is used and developed in the future.

Meic Llewellyn.

Dwi'n gobeithio bydd yna brosiect arall yn cael ei chynnal yn y dyfodol a byswn i wrth fy modd i fod yn rhan ohono. Byswn i'n hoffi mynd yn ôl i Wlad y Basg i ganu gyda fwy o draddodiadau i rannu e.e canu cerdd dant. Hefyd mae'n wych i ddatblygu gyrfa a mwy o repertoire.

(I'm hoping that the future project being discussed will come to pass, and I'd be overjoyed to be part of it. I'd also love to go back to the Basque Country with more traditional material to share, for example cerdd dant. It's also great to feel I'm developing my career and repertoire.)

Alaw Fflur Jones.



Thoughts on the budget

The support offered by Wales Arts International, in covering the costs of the four professional performers, made this tour possible, and we are very grateful. On the whole, we were able to keep our expenditure very close to the original estimates, and I'll only mention here the areas where there were divergences. For more detail, see the budget report sheet attached below. Although air travel costs were very close to our predictions, overland travel (including transfer costs, parking and road tolls) proved more expensive. Our decision to hire a vehicle large enough to cope with instruments and artwork, as well as passengers, increased our outlay but was justified by circumstances. Our spending on accommodation and sustenance was proportionally lower than estimated, thanks to the generosity of our hosts. Cash income for performances was considerably lower than expected, as almost all the venues were community ones who found charging attendance fees difficult (although twice this was made up by taking collections). However, unexpected 'in kind' help such as meals more than made up for this, and allowed us to pay a small fee at the end of the tour to each of the performers.

Maureen Fairclough.

Blas Cymru – Budget: original costings and actual expenditure

Expenditure	Projected	Actual	Dif	Notes
Return travel from UK	766	746	+20	4 return air fares and 4 bags
Transfer costs UK	192	301	-120	Parking @£61 plus £40 towards petrol (home to Manchester) for 3 cars (2 shared from same location)
Transfer and internal travel - outside UK	849	991	-147	A large vehicle was hired due to transportation of instruments between venues. Vehicle hire (fully comp) £822 Fuel £60 Taxi £16 Tolls £33 Parking £60
Accommodation Costs	1540	605	+935	
Accommodation In Kind		935	-935	Accommodation provided by hosts
Daily subsistence	800	880	-80	Subsistence needed for 11th day , flight 21.30
In kind		320	+320	Additional food etc provided by hosts
Marketing and publicity	700	700		
Professional fees		570	-570	
Total	£5487	£6057	-570	

Final Reflections

In looking ahead to the future of 'Blas o Gymru', it would be hard to imagine the package working nearly as well without a strong, immediate visual element such as our montage of images projected behind the stage, although we realise that the images need to be more informative about Wales and its culture and traditions.

As well as Wales Arts International, a debt has to be acknowledged to Lady Luck. The membership and dynamics of the tour party were a crucial element in the success of the tour, and as non-



performing organisers who observed every minute of every gig as well as living within the group, we two were ideally placed to observe the party in action, the relationships and roles emerging, skills sharpening and aspirations growing. Our touring party was as committed to engaging with and understanding Basque people and culture as they are to promoting and celebrating their own. In addition to their performing skills, it was their warmth and interest in other people that set them apart, and made them welcome wherever they went. Gwilym's charisma and unquenchable energy, Osian's gentle charm and quick humour, Iestyn's fierce and yet completely modest immersion in his art, Nicolas' quiet professionalism, and Alaw's sheer joy whenever she found herself able to contribute in her own right, made this party a delight to work with and a very powerful tool for sharing understandings.

Maureen Fairclough

Meic Llewellyn.

Hoffwn ddiolch Maureen a Meic, yn arbennig, am eu gwaith called ac eu hegni, trefnu a rhedeg y daith mor effeithiol a mwyl hwyl.

(I'd like to thank Maureen and Meic especially, for their hard work and energy, organising and running the tour so effectively and with so much hwyl).

Gwilym Bowen Rhys.