

Cân y Mynyddoedd/ Canciones de las Montañas

Phase one: Santander, Colombia, October – November 2019

A very brief summary for our friends and supporters



You can use a lot of words to describe an experience, or just a few. Sometimes, a lot of words can stand in the way, so in this case we'll try to be as brief and clear as we can. In the autumn of 2019 – the Unesco Year of Indigenous Languages - a very small group of Welsh musicians found themselves in the mountains of Santander province in the north of Colombia. We were responding to an invitation to help celebrate Independence Day in Simacota, one of the most beautiful villages in the world, and a second one to take part in a two-day festival of traditional music in the city of Bucaramanga, provincial capital of Santander. Our tour was partly funded by **Wales Arts International**, to whom we're hugely grateful – without their support and encouragement we could never have done it – and partly by a series of fund-raising concerts we put on ourselves during the few months previously.

Our party was originally made up of Iestyn Tyne, a traditional fiddler and poet; Osian Morris, a singer-sonwriter; Gwilym Bowen Rhys, a singer, guitarist and fiddler; Javier Sanchez Rodriguez – a Colombian from Corris in Gwynedd - who came as our cultural interpreter but soon became much more, and Meic Llewellyn who might



describe himself as manager if everyone didn't laugh when he does so. We were soon joined by Mateo Santero Peña, a performance poet who'd travelled for twelve hours by bus from the Panamanian border to meet us and who spent the week with us; Beatriz Cecilia 'Chechi' León, a poet from nearby San Gil; and Camilo Andrés Hernández Orduz, tiple virtuoso, leader of the traditional music band 'La Pie de la Cuenta' and organiser of 'Gala Night of the Tiple' in Bucaramanga.

We were there nearly a fortnight, and ended up playing more impromptu and short-notice events than there were scheduled ones. We played in schools and art centres, on farms, in indigenous New Year celebrations and around camp fires. We found ourselves working with Colombian performance poets, tiple players, school choirs, drama groups and marching bands. We shared a stage with ventriloquists and puppeteers. It was a crowded and intense time, and the most difficult thing of all is singling out the most 'important' or 'significant' experiences and outcomes. We performed live and were interviewed on TV, were streamed live too on to social media platforms, and were interviewed by the national press – and talked long into the night with students, campesinos and their families. Every minute was important and significant, and none of us will ever be the same again.



It seems that our hosts and audiences felt the same. Catherine Lizirazu of the Municipality of Simacota commented that our greatest gift to her village was "happiness - and new knowledge, a curiosity to know about a culture that for all of us was unknown, and we came to enjoy its different sounds. Cerrig Camu left a mark on the Santandereana population, sharing their culture, experiences, music and art. It surprised us that even though great distances separate us, our cultures have great similarities. They

are beings of noble heart." She felt that audiences throughout the tour were "euphoric, surprised, emotional to see new musical instruments, hear a different language incorporated into the songs, generating joy and turning music into a universal language. To say goodbye at the end of their concert with a song as important to Santandereanos as 'Pueblito Viejo' in the voice of Gwilym Bowen Rhys and with the sounds of the violin, guitar and tiple left a beautiful memory for the public."

David Léon from San Gil added “The public reacted favourably in terms of acceptance, pleasure and enjoyment of quality, the variety of their musical art, the fusion and adaptation of their artistic style with our music. There were people who saw them for the first time, then followed them until the next presentation in the next town.” Deniesa Bourne of Grandes Genios, a ‘University for Children’ in Socorro, was sure that “both children and adults were inspired, motivated to learn more, and very happy. The participants were so involved with the experience that the language was not a barrier, but something to enjoy to the fullest.” There is so much we could all say. What we can safely do, though, is record some practical, simple outcomes of the project so far:



- We have agreed to arrange a series of performances here in Wales in July and August 2020, featuring poets, musicians and dancers, and further developing the relationships we’ve built up so far
- We will also be arranging a visit by the Wayuu language activist and documentary film maker Heidi van Grieken to engage with audiences and language normalisation agencies here
- We will continue discussions with the Autonomous Indigenous University in Cauca (southern Colombia) with a view to developing reciprocal relations and performance opportunities
- We have agreed to help Casa dos Livros Total, San Gil (a very exciting and creative arts and heritage centre) develop relations with similar centre in Wales. I’m preparing to talk about them to Galeri, Caernarfon, Y Tabernacl in Machynlleth and Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru We will be putting the Grandes Genios at the School of Art of Socorro University in touch with Theatr Felinfach in Ceredigion to share ideas and develop trans-Atlantic interactions, and will ourselves continue working with them, to develop our own creative relationship.



Longer-term benefits are so difficult to guess at. Who can predict how Vallenato rhythms or the sound of the tiple will re-surface in the songs of Osian Morris, or in what way the rhythms and cadences of Afro-Caribbean rap will emerge in future poems by Iestyn Tyne? Who could imagine at this moment whether the challenges facing Wayuu language and culture might be alleviated through contact with speakers and amateurs here in Wales? Will the channels we've helped to open have silted up again in a few years, or before long will there be a creative and intellectual thoroughfare running between the mountains of Santander and those of rural Wales? As Chou En-Lai commented on the effects of the French Revolution, "It's still too soon to tell."

What we can be sure of is that we've changed as people and performers as a result of this experience, and we're aware that our friends in Colombia have changed too. Our views of the world have developed, as have our aspirations. Hundreds of people in Santander province are now aware of Wales and Welsh culture when they weren't before, and they've liked what they saw and heard. And we've all brought home a sense of great privilege, having shared in and learnt from the song of the mountains in Santander. We're grateful to Robin Oisín, our host at La Vega, our tranquil sanctuary high in the mountains; and to all the other friends in both countries who, in different ways, helped us along this road.



Meic Llewellyn, November 2019.