

ALISTAIR ANDERSON**TEXT OF KEYNOTE SPEECH TO EFN SPRING FORWARD #2, 24 APRIL 2021**

The thoughts I will share today are personal –

I was a dancer long before I picked up an instrument and some of my most life changing musical experiences have been listening to great ballad singers. However I am best known as an instrumentalist and many of the examples that I might use to illustrate points will be drawn from the instrumental traditions. But, undoubtedly, parallel examples can be found from dance and song.

I found the warmth and generosity of everybody I have come across over the years, especially the older “traditional” musicians, singers and dancers, an inspiration.

Today I just want to stimulate thinking and pose questions. While this may be a Keynote speech, just as modulating away from the home key and dissonance are creative forces in music, you should feel free to disagree with anything I say.

I would like, at first at least, to look at the huge complexity and richness of the traditions we love.

I feel this is worth thinking about, not only because EFN will have priorities to consider, but also because we sometimes have to talk with people who don't really understand what makes Folk Music tick and I'm not sure we are always good at explaining what makes it different and how these differences have real value in specific contexts.

The impetus to make music appears to be spread throughout all societies and social classes.

For many people the time available to practice musical skills was limited by the needs of labour. However the impetus to make music remained as strong, and the needs of communities for music remained as real, whatever the working lives of the individuals. For many generations traditional music has been a major means of artistic expression for ordinary people. It has developed to fill their musical needs and aspirations.

And its wonderful stuff.

When I first heard Billy Pigg play the pipes, when I first heard Jeanie Robertson sing, when I first saw Johnson Elwood dance, I was amazed. Today I listen to a wide range of musical genres but still when I listen to recordings of my heroes or go to a concert of today's singers presenting those old songs they still hit me as strongly as ever.

Because this stuff, this music, is good.

The subtle interplay of phrasing, dynamic and decoration that a singer will employ to bring the story to life can, I feel, produce as intense an experience as any Schubert Lieder. The tiny inflections the fiddler brings to an old jig can hold an audience as entranced as a Bach partita

I once took Will Atkinson, Willy Taylor and Joe Hutton (3 older musicians and shepherds from Northumberland) to play a concert with the Lindsay String Quartet. It was a mainly classical audience.

When Will Atkinson played a solo on his £2 Chinese harmonica he was armed with only that small, quiet, diatonic, instrument and a series of simple 4 and 8 bar phrases, but the way he played, judging the start and end of every note to the millisecond – the degree of attack, the precise weight of each note relative to those around it – indeed the changing dynamic within the note - all this set within a dance orientated rhythmic structure which had a flexibility of pulse that allowed each individual phrase to breathe, to be shaped to draw us in to his particular vision of each melody - put a complete spell on the audience and Peter Cropper, the leader of the quartet, leaned across to me and said “that is greatness”

This stuff is good – it can stand alongside any other musical genre in terms of subtle complexity, emotional range and expressive intent.

Personally, I feel that even if this were a museum culture, a completely static body of songs, tunes and dances, it would still be worth performing.

Yes this stuff is that good

But we all know it is so much more than just a museum culture. It is an evolving form. It is changed by each generation.

It has evolved as a highly flexible form - a series of apparently simple building blocks, set in a stylistic framework that allows tremendous scope for individual input at a wide range of technical skill levels. Great performers can take us on flights of fancy equal to any you could find in other musics. While others, of more moderate skill,

may have just a couple of songs that they can really get inside and add something of their own to with the result that they may be able to rivet us with their performance even if we already know the song well.

This music is *designed* to have room for personal **stylistic** input from an early stage. This can be a great asset in teaching situations – a feeling of ownership and real involvement can grow early in the process. Of course it does mean that teachers need to understand an appropriate stylistic vocabulary, current within any particular tradition, and it raises real questions of teaching process.

This interaction between the musical material – the song, tune or dance - and the subtle stylistic vocabulary that is used to bring it to life is central to what makes traditional music work.

There is something I find wonderful about the process. The way ideas move between musicians, singers and dancers - ideas carried within old tunes, hidden in new twists of a song or running through new steps of a dance. The free exchange of ideas, of energies freely given, freely accepted, this transfer of energy and ideas is amazing to be part of. It's like molecules in a gas bouncing off each other exchanging energy at each contact. The difference is that at the point of transfer **extra** energy is produced. The momentum grows with the exchange of ideas so it's not like ordinary molecules bouncing off each other, it's actually more like a controlled nuclear reaction - but for that of course you need a "critical mass" and building a critical mass of participants in our communities across Europe is perhaps what Spring Forward is all about.

Of course it's not a museum culture but, at its best, the work of previous generations underpins the present and provides ideas to fuel developments for the future.

Millions of man and woman hours of work have gone into developing this amazingly rich seam of songs, dances and tunes, and the hugely varied stylistic vocabulary through which they have been realised over the years. Many singers, musicians and dancers today enrich their work through a deep understanding of the tradition gained from long exposure and study. But slavish copying would tend to **deny the creativity of the previous generation** by suggesting that they didn't build on the work of **their** forebears. We tend to put something of ourselves into the mix - sometimes this contribution may be microscopic, sometimes radical and who is to say which will prove the more important contribution in the long run.

I often hear people wondering if this new idea or that latest fashion might be dangerous for the future of a tradition.

I worry myself – I remember when I wrote *Steel Skies* back in 1982. I didn't really regard *Steel Skies* as folk music, although it was *designed to decay* into folk music. But some of the more fulsome reviews were heralding it as "The New Way Forward for Folk." I thought what happens if everyone starts writing like this it could be disastrous. The Great folklorist A. L. Lloyd calmed my fears; he suggested, "A healthy tradition is like a self righting lifeboat. Sometimes it might seem to be about to be swamped by new ideas but it takes what it needs and lets the rest drop away."

The Critical words there are surely – "a healthy tradition"

A Healthy Tradition does need a **critical mass** of participants. Although the "star performers" may start new ideas, the real engine of the tradition is held by the huge network of singers, players and dancers who absorb new ideas and polish them with the patina of use. It is this broad community of dancers, singers and players who hold the value systems that invisibly underpin the form. They, by taking up or dropping new facets of the tradition, help establish what might go forward and be current in 20, 50, 100 years time.

Some of the ideas that seem exciting now may have fallen by the wayside and others - some little quirk of timing, that appeared almost unnoticed, may be established as the essence of a tradition in fifty years.

I may add that many of the professional performers I know feel that they need the contact with these grass roots in order to keep their own music stimulated.

It is perhaps not our duty as individual musicians to define the direction of the tradition. If we have a duty it is perhaps to build a healthy tradition, sea-worthy enough for the next generation.

I feel that there is no dichotomy between the professional performance and the community potential of this music. Indeed, these two strands, the professional and the grass roots, both depend on each other.

We live in a world of mass media and a huge entertainment industry. We cannot ignore it. Success or imagined success is one of the main weapons of popular music marketing. I feel that real, personal, face-to-face contact is our main defence to this. However, even a modicum of perceived success, even an occasional stamp of media approval generated by great performance on a high profile stage, can help erode the inhibitions that stop people getting near to the music and that important face-to-face contact.

The dynamic between active participants, be they high fliers or those of more modest ambition, and the communities they serve is also integral to how folk arts work.

The communities that form the context for much of the performance of folk arts today, may appear to be very different to what we think of as the “original host communities” of this material. Indeed the lives of my great friends and mentors; Will Atkinson, Joe Hutton and Will Taylor were very different to mine. When I picked them up to drive to some event, the conversation as we drove away was a litany of every field we passed – recollecting who worked there, who they were married to, where they went to school, if they danced or grew fine potatoes or wrestled at the annual show. Subconsciously or not, they kept an awareness of the networks they lived in very fresh in their minds and this did seem to give them a certain rootedness that, some would say, could be heard in their music.

Are these old networks just part of a lost way of life?

We do still live in networks. It is true that the points of crossing within the networks are less frequent than in village life of old when each person was connected to others on several planes of a multilayer network. That is not the case today. However, if one goes to a housing estate in Newcastle, one finds that some people will have children at the same school, some will shop at the same supermarket, some may support the same sports teams, some may want to raise funds for a shared cause. A community based traditional music event, such as a ceilidh led by a school ceilidh band with the PTA running the bar and other students making posters or running a PA, can provide just such a point of crossing.

A school orchestra may put on an excellent concert but it will always be a long way second to a professional orchestra. Whereas, in a school ceilidh, where some kids are in the band, there are songs from a school folk group, and their friends and parents are dancing, that event can be equal to the best ceilidh in the land. Because it's success is a result of the overall chemistry of the night, because everybody in the room is involved in building the energy – the dancers respond to the music the musicians respond to what's happening on the floor.

Such additional crossroads in life's networks can help us, in a little way, to establish who we are in a world where we are under constant pressure to abdicate our powers of choice to opinion formers and fashion. More and more we are invited to be passive consumers, further and further removed from the point where anything is made. Self made music, and traditional music in particular, gives us tools that can help establish ourselves and our place in communities.

I remember Stan Reeves of Edinburgh's Adult Learning Project talking passionately about dis-enculturalisation in the housing schemes around the city where "people can't make anything, can't cook food, can't sew, can't use simple hand tools, don't write letters, have never seen a live performance of any kind." Encouraging people in those situations to be involved in artistic activity is very difficult. Stan found that traditional music worked remarkably well because of the potential for personal input at an early stage, because of the feeling of sharing, because of the common ownership of the material and of the underlying value system.

To take our place in 21st century alongside all the other genres of music song and dance we need to build on its strengths – its flexibility – its range of emotional engagement and the huge potential for personal and communal creativity.

As EFN goes forward and seeks funding for exciting new projects:-

How can we ensure that funders or collaborators from other genres or art forms gain some insight into the special qualities of folk arts?

How can we explain how these qualities have arisen, what strengths they bring, also how they can be overlooked, squashed and undermined

How do we explain that artistic excellence and grass roots involvement are absolutely interlinked and that they feed off each other?

That some vital features of excellence may be difficult to define - they may be microscopic in detail but major in effect. The apparently simple may be infinitely subtle.

To take an example from a very different tradition –

The Japanese artist who can conjure something wonderful from a few simple lines with brush and ink is not in competition with the great painter in oils. Both require incredible skills, but the apparent simplicity of the ink sketch requires amazing subtlety and precision to make an equivalent impact as a huge oil canvas. Who can say which is harder to achieve – **does it require more artistry to hold attention with the obviously complex or the *apparently* simple?**

We need to make those new to the form think about that.

EFN will be faced with making decisions. What are the questions they will have to consider? What are the balances they might have to strike?

We need to consider –

How we can facilitate peoples understanding of quality folk art and raise their aspirations to “fly high” whilst also accommodating participation and engagement at all levels for all abilities?

Do we need to highlight things that might be lost – especially at the micro level of stylistic subtlety – how do we lead without being pedantic and restrictive - can we encourage a feeling of “discovery”

How do we engage with the media to help change the profile/perception of folk arts? Are there other, grass roots, ways to lift the profile.

When we work in schools, even if we excite the youngsters at the time, how do we avoid leaving a feeling that “it’s school stuff” – “just for kids”?

When we support young artists how can we best “feed their roots” as well as giving them the chance to “branch out.”

How can we develop young promoters who can create performance environments attractive to young audiences?

Are there opportunities in “Cultural Tourism” and if so how do we avoid some of the serious pitfalls there?

Be prepared to fight your corner – yes collaborate with other forms work across genres and art forms - be supportive of fellow practioners in other forms but don’t be afraid to stand up for folk music - learn how the funding and support systems work so you can advocate effectively

Although EFN will need to develop projects that provide work for professional musicians there can also be a focus of long tem impact – does it inspire new people to get involved? - Are there elements of a project that help skill up others?

Today as we tease out pointers and principles that might help the European Folk Network realise the potential of collaborations across our continent. We have to be realistic but also ambitious. The potential of the Folk Arts in the 21st century is there in its very DNA, in the way it evolved in the hands of ordinary women and men.

The energy is just waiting to be released. Given half a chance, new generations will respond to it.