



EUROPEAN FOLK NETWORK - EFN

INAUGURAL CONFERENCE 28 & 29 NOVEMBER 2019

Hosted at Scotland House, Brussels

With the generous support of EFN's members, British Council Wales, Poppunt and Scotland Europa

Welcome and Introduction

Secretary **Nod Knowles** welcomed 64 participants from 19 nations - Belgium, Catalonia, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Wales. *A full list of participants is appended to this report.*

Nod gave a brief reminder of the history of the network's development. Since the formal legal registration of EFN in early 2019 76 people and organisations from 22 nations have joined as members.

As this was the first ever members' conference, these two days would be the opportunity to shape future plans for the network. EFN's Board of Directors were responsible for setting and overseeing active plans and would be elected annually after this first inaugural period. Nod introduced the members of the network's first Board, who each spoke briefly about their interest in and hopes for EFN.

Speakers

Nod then introduced the first keynote speaker, **Jim Tough** of the Europe-wide participative arts network, Amateo. Jim Tough described the working model of Amateo, a distributed model, with no central office. Amateo recognises that, while the sum of its members constitute a kind of common cultural capital, there is 'no equivalent of a cultural euro', and, echoing a consistent theme of the conference, that diversity at local and community level is of vital importance.

Jim Tough was followed by independent researcher **Anais Verhulst**, who noted that communities, groups and individuals are the key to defining what should be safeguarded in terms of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), the UNESCO designation for what we would recognise as tradition and folklore. These are terms that UNESCO consciously avoided, however, perhaps due to their troublesome history of definition. She observed that another issue of definition, and one that affected the territorial basis of the UNESCO lists of ICH, was the reality that many traditional practices are not bound by borders. In any case 'heritage should not be about lists'.

On the second day of the conference, **Ros Rigby** gave a presentation on the value and potential of networks, concentrating on the example of Europe Jazz Network (EJN), of which she had been a Board member and former President. EJN had a long history from the late 1980s onward and had grown substantially in the 2000s, now incorporating over 150 members from 35 countries.

EJN's activities had grown in reach and impact and included a wide range of projects generated amongst members and groups of members. Plans and delivery of these activities had attracted and been underpinned by significant grants from the European Commission.



Open Space and Conference Discussions

As well as reflecting on the keynote speeches, the main work of the conference concentrated on discussions subjects set by an **Open Space** approach, which was introduced by EFN Board Chair **David Francis**. Open Space is a process by which those attending the conference set the agenda according to what is important to them. The process brought up discussion groups on young people, cultural diversity, individual traditions across Europe, regionalisation, festivals and venues networking, tradition as a way of life, money, organisational structure, gender, definition of terms, artistic collaboration, and broadcast media.

A brief summary of the main points from all of the Open Space sessions is appended to this report. Out of all of these discussions, however, five major themes and proposals for associated projects emerged:

Mapping; Profile; Environment; Inclusion and Diversity; the Role of the Network

Mapping

One proposal was for a **Map** and a **Calendar** – a map to show who is doing what and where, and a calendar to show when. It will help us explain ourselves to funders, supporters and audiences, showing the scale of the sector, and will be our contribution to a better, more connected Europe. What will emerge from a mapping process is a sense of patterns. We also need to map not just individual activities but other networks - and create links. There also needs to be different maps, perhaps overlaid one on the other, for example a map of commercial activity, and a map of traditions, minority languages and so on. The website, with a ‘wiki’ approach, is clearly a platform for making this information available.

Profile

One way of raising the profile of folk music and arts might be to bring together artists, particularly those who already have a good profile, from different countries, different traditions and different genres to **tour** across Europe. Potential outcomes from such a project would be bigger audiences for folk music as audiences from other genres would be attracted. Artists would develop an understanding of other traditions and create new work drawing on multiple traditions. Previous examples of this kind of work include the Fiddles on Fire project, which included workshops, particularly for young people (the artists, audiences and advocates of the future), which enhance the impact of performance. Youth music organisations, which concentrate on their own traditions, could expand their offer to include other European forms. The point was made that musicians don’t want artificial borders created, and a situation created where only music from specific traditions is performed in a particular area. Likewise audiences don’t create barriers and borders – they listen to a range of music styles. The cross-border collaboration could also be applied to staff of member organisations, with an exchange programme to see how others work.

Branding of folk music has already met with some success (‘Celtic’, ‘Nordic’) in finding audiences outside of their home territories. Some felt that ‘Folk’ is a problematic term, its use undermining the status of the work. Status, however, begins with our own attitude. In Madeira, for example, they have been re-learning how to express pride in their own traditions, and have consequently



seen changes in the attitudes of public, politicians and media, all of which has spilled over into a change in how mainland Portugal sees the island culture.

The **pressure** needs to come from above and below. Broadcasters, for example, need to be constantly reminded that there is an audience for folk music. Although commercial broadcasters are perhaps out of reach, there is still a duty on public broadcasters, even though they often ignore it.

We might like to reflect on **how folk music is presented**, often in ways that have not changed for decades. More could be done to place the music in a context - and explain it for those who are less familiar with it, making the experience more satisfying. We have only begun to explore the possibilities of digital media, for example, subscription services. Could you have, say, 10,000 people paying €10 per month for folk content? We need to remember that access and profile raising are linked. If more **young people** are involved, for example, the fact of their involvement raises the profile.

Raising the public profile of the music and associated arts is key in framing the activities and structure of the network, which needs to acquire the presence that will enable it to talk to governments and other public bodies.

Environment

The discussion mostly focused on reducing the environmental impact of touring, with a number of ideas for addressing the issue, including information about the **carbon footprint** of the music industry; **runs of gigs and workshops** in or near to one place, possibly involving more than one act; a **tour by train** from North to South Europe, facilitated by EFN partners.

We should not forget, however, that the local, community aspect of folk practice is as important as professional, on-stage performance.

Inclusion and Diversity

Diversity is a given and is a strength. The EFN has to take into account immigration and higher mobility - and may have to consider the name to make it more inclusive. It has to be expansive enough to include local traditions, traditions that extend across borders, and the musical traditions of new Europeans, balancing global and local, seeking out **commonalities**. There is a paradox – one of our commonalities is the **distinctive** ways our folk traditions express our common experiences: life events, the seasons, love and work.

Gender is an important element of diversity, including transgender and other gender issues. The situation with regard to gender equality is different across Europe, although nowhere, with the possible exception of the Nordic countries, is there anything approaching equal representation on festival bills, of industry leaders and band membership. There is a role for the network in encouraging this, supporting initiatives like the Keychange programme. Girls are very well represented in educational programmes in Ireland and Scotland, but not in the professional and adult session scene, with no clear idea of why this is happening. One factor might be image. Young women in particular can present a powerful image on stage which brings unwanted attention off it.



In many cultures tradition itself is gendered, as is choice of instruments, although that is beginning to change. In Denmark they have addressed this through all female music camps for girls, where they have the opportunity to play any instrument. The goal is bring about a situation where gender is not an issue, but in the meantime quotas may be a bridge to that goal. We have to ask whether we are **activists and advocates** or **enablers** of a space in which change can happen. Can we be both?

The Role of the Network

We need to be **linked regionally, nationally and continentally**, taking into account that some cultures cross political borders. The priority at the moment is **growing the membership**, seeking out those who are not currently represented, finding commonalities, making people aware of what is happening in different communities across Europe. There is also a need not to duplicate the kinds of business to business organisations, such as WOMEX, which already do a good job in their field. We must make sure that the EFN is distinctive. The role of the network should be to emphasise the value of the cultures we represent. Having said that, although there is much in common, what is common is not necessarily universal. Germany is not Scotland, but we are all part of Europe. A strategic awareness of the social and political make-up of where we all live is necessary.

In terms of how the network might organise itself, there are already **strong examples** in the FAMDT in France, and the Europe Jazz Network, as outlined by **Ros Rigby** in her keynote presentation. It is the job of the EFN to add value to existing activities, and perhaps to encourage the creation of networks (like FAMDT) within individual countries, particularly countries which demonstrate both indigenous and non-indigenous diversity.

There is a role for the network in facilitating **cross-border touring**, networking venues, perhaps in regional clusters, Eastern, Western, Mediterranean etc. The advantages of this approach are in cost savings (fewer nights off), upscaling, green practices (fewer one-off gigs), more diversity for audiences to enjoy. The **regional perspective**, a more granular vision, is for some the key to making the network work successfully. This perspective does raise questions, however. What is the scale of a region, for example? There has to be a common point of reference.

Conclusion

There are a number of **questions** which were raised and which remain to be resolved: how often EFN should meet, how topics for meetings are decided, how open should the membership be, what other networks might EFN be linked to.

Despite the open questions, there was general agreement that the EFN could have a leadership role, even if the heavy lifting will mostly be done locally. It can offer strategic thinking, the sharing of good practice, and set the agenda for change. The EFN can be influential, adding value to the work that the constituent organisations already do.

There is much to be done - and determining the phases of action will be the Board's first task after the conference.

**Report drafted and issued by David Francis, EFN Chair
December 2019/January 2020**