

Unknown 18th-century hymns discovered in Wales

by [Kristen Thomason](#)

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The audience for the Welsh hymn-singing BBC radio series *Caniadaeth y Cysegr* at Soar Presbyterian Chapel in October 1953. (Geoff Charles/Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/National Library of Wales)

If you ever find yourself at a rugby game in Wales, don't be surprised when the crowds begin to belt out *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*, known as *Bread of Heaven* to the Welsh. Called the "Land of Song," hymns in Wales are not just for church services. They have played a prominent role in the life of the nation by preserving and transmitting its language and culture. Even as churches continue to close, formal and impromptu hymn sings remain.

Which is why the recent discovery of some unique 18th-century hymns is so significant.

Many of these newly discovered hymns are about addiction, mental illness, and “the dark side of the psyche,” said singer-composer Lleuwen Steffan, who discovered the trove of hymns. “You have one that talks of drunkenness and alcoholism that is transformed into drinking the wine from God’s cellar.”

Steffan, who is Welsh, discovered the hymns among the oral history recordings made by [Robin Gwndaf](#) for the archives of St. Fagan’s National History Museum in Wales.

“I knew they were not in the current hymn book,” she told *The Guardian*. “I checked the older editions and spoke to experts on Welsh hymns and indeed they were not in any of the older hymn books either.”

Welsh hymns derive from the nonconformist tradition, predominantly Calvinist Methodists (now the Presbyterian Church of Wales), which experienced a revival in the 1730s. Before the publication of the first Welsh [hymn book](#), *Diferion y Cyssegr*, in 1802, hymns were transmitted orally at house church gatherings called *seiadau* or “experience meetings.” There the small group of Christians would share their “spiritual experiences” followed by prayer and conversation. Then a single member would spontaneously begin to sing a hymn.

These hymns reflect the solo nature of the performance and intimacy of these *seiadau* gatherings. They are a [dialogue](#) with God, asking such questions as, “Tell me, was I that sinner?”

It is unclear why these early hymns were left out of the official Welsh hymn books. Steffan believes the committees that determined which hymns were included didn’t approve of their “dark” content. A more likely explanation may be that, as the house churches grew and worship became more corporate and mainstream, these candid hymns featuring such a personal and specific focus no longer suited the new setting.

With a new century came changes in taste as well. In the 19th century, Welsh churches began appointing professional music leaders to improve congregational singing. In 1826, the leader at a Baptist church in Penycae conducted weeknight practices to teach the congregation how to sing in parts. Older members at the neighboring Calvinist Methodist church, who had always sung in unison, disapproved, believing “such activity encouraged the young to become too frivolous and materialistic.”

Ironically, according to the late hymnologist [Alan Luff](#), four-part harmony eventually became “an indicator of innate Welshness.”

In the village of Rhiwlas in Eryri, where Steffan grew up, there was no shop or pub. [Sunday school](#) with its hymn singing was a “major social gathering.” Drawn by the music, she continued to attend Sunday school as a teenager even though her parents were not avid churchgoers.

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“Welsh hymns resonate with me in ways that other music does not,” Steffan said. “They have changed my life in music.”

After her discovery at St. Fagan’s, Steffan knew she needed to find a way to present these hymns to the public. “They wouldn’t leave me alone. I had the responsibility to share them. I felt I had a real connection with them. They really are a treasure.”

The product of Steffan’s research and musical talent is a concert tour she’s calling [Tafod Arian](#), which means “Silver Tongue.”

“I have recordings of various people speaking about seeing silver tongues falling from the skies during the time of the 1904 revival,” Steffan explained. “It was a common vision during the 1859 revival too.”

In Tafod Arian, Steffan weaves together electronica, archival recordings of hymns and spoken words, and new recordings of the descendants of those original singers into an accompaniment for her own singing and playing.

In addition to recorded testimony about the 1904 revival, Steffan also includes a recording of a sermon in the half-sung, half-spoken style known as Hwyl Gymreig.

Hwyl can mean “passion” or “fervor,” but it also brings to mind the [sails of a ship](#) filling with wind, which is fitting for a preacher thought to be filled with the mighty wind of the Holy Spirit.

Two forms of hymns not commonly experienced outside of Wales, the plygain and the Canu Pwnc, are also featured in the concert. Both styles date back to the pre-Reformation church but nonconformist churches of the 18th century adapted and preserved them for Protestant churches.

[Plygian](#) began as an early morning mass but found new life as a service of Christmas carols held Christmas morning between 3 and 6 a.m. On Pentecost, or [Whitsun](#) as it is known in the United Kingdom, four Baptist churches in North Pembrokeshire gather together to sing [Canu Pwnc](#), a type of Gregorian chant. In this ancient form of hymn singing, the congregation chants a chapter of scripture and then is quizzed by the minister as to its meaning.

For the modern adaptation, members' answers are prepared in advance, but the musical exchange was originally part of the catechism of candidates in the pre-Reformation church.

"Before putting these hymns on stage, I wanted to take them back to the chapels where they were born," she said.

The Baptists of North East Wales, the Presbyterian Church of Wales, and the Union of Welsh Independents are funding the first leg of Steffan's tour, which will take place in 50 Welsh churches. After the church leg, Steffan will present Tafod Arian on a grander scale in concert venues across the UK with [backing](#) from the National Eisteddfod of Wales.

Those who aren't fluent in Welsh can still enjoy the show, Steffan said.

"It will be my pleasure to provide explanations and translations to audience members who do not understand Welsh. This work belongs to all of us, and I'm here to share." Baptist News Global