

Practical ap Huw

Teleri the Well-Prepared

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https://moeticae.typepad.com/mi_contra_fa/class-notes.html

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Purpose of Class

You should leave this class with an idea of what the ap Huw manuscript is, what its principal components are and what they do, and different ways in which you might use it to inform your historical harp playing.

The ap Huw Manuscript

Robert ap Huw copied out this manuscript, likely in 1613 (based on that date being included in the text, in an ornament). Robert ap Huw was a Welsh harper, and it is thought that he copied another source to produce the manuscript. Lewis Morris, an 18th cen antiquarian who owned the manuscript, marked a section as being copied from sixteenth-century Welsh harper William Penllyn's book. Some of the songs may be older yet, as they reference known fifteenth and sixteenth century Welsh bards, but it is difficult to assign dates with any certainty. It is one of very few sources that can inform us about early Welsh music, and the only one to survive with any musical notation. The notation is not our standard musical notation, nor is it medieval neumes; it is a tablature or notation system that, while borrowing from other tablatures in use at the time, is tuned to uniquely suit the needs of the early harper.

Interpreting the manuscript is not exactly straightforward, and many people operating in good faith have come to different conclusions. It doesn't help that ap Huw seems to have made mistakes in several places.

Its Principal Components

Pages 1 - 7: Introduction by Lewis Morris, 18th cen. antiquarian who gave the book to the British Museum.

Pages 8 - 22: Music

Page 23-34: Music written out in tablature notation, "from the book of William Penllyn"

Page 35: The explanation of the tablature; names of the musical 'gestures'

If you want to decode the music of the manuscript, you will need to keep this reference handy.

Page 36 - 101: More music

Page 102 - 105: Index of songs

Page 106: Name index

Page 107: Index of the 24 measures of music

This provides a framework for writing or improvising new music.

Page 108: The 7 scales or “warranted tunings”

This is the most complicated and confusing (for me, anyway) part of all the discussions around ap Huw. How are the harp strings tuned? What do these 7 tunings imply? How do they affect our understanding of the musical principles at work?

Pages 109 - 123: Lewis Morris’ writings

Example of ap Huw tablature

http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/ap_huw/facsimile/ap_huw_023small.html

Decoding ap Huw’s handwriting:

Page 7 of: <https://wirebranch.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/sources2017.pdf>

Practical Uses

Harp Fingering

The musical “gestures” on page 35 provide clean and effective methods for playing basic note combinations. Not only that, but they include information on how to damp unwanted ringing strings, which is critical for many historical harps (wire or bray).

List of tablature notations:

http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/ap_huw/facsimile/ap_huw_035small.html

William (Bill) Taylor published the most convincing interpretation of this notation in 1999. (The paper is listed in the References section.) The notation consists of four note shapes. The note body is triangular, and can point left or right. There is a staff that goes up or down. The note body can be filled or empty.

Pointing left, staff up: Index finger (2)

Pointing right, staff up: Thumb (1)

Pointing left, staff down: Middle finger (3)

Pointing right, staff down: Ring finger (4)

Filled: Play this note, then damp it

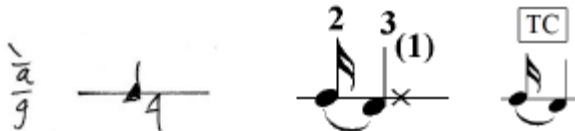
Empty: Play this note and let it ring

The exact fingering of each figure is not specified (e.g., which finger should do the damping) and no metrical information is given (how long each note should ring). Using the names of the

gestures (“thumb choke” and “finger shake,” for instance, give clues about which fingers do what), and trial and error, Taylor came up with fingerings for each of the gestures. They are available in an online PDF (see Resources) and Karen Marshalsay’s “Key Techniques for Harp” teaches them all, with practice exercises (also see Resources).

Let’s look at three simple examples from Bill Taylor’s “Sources for Fingernail Harp Technique” (2017):

taked y fawd, “Choke the thumb”



y plethiad byr, short plait



plethiad y wanhynen, bee’s plait



You can play these slowly and create a melody. Or, you can play the leading tones very quickly, to create grace note ornaments.

You can use these to determine fingering for existing pieces, or to add ornaments to pieces you already know. We can also combine them with the “24 measures,” below, and start composing in a Welsh-ish style

Composition and Improvisation

Without a thorough understanding of the tunings and musical structures underlying this music, attempts to use the “24 measures” described on page 107 will be imperfect. However, even with a simple understanding of these matters (alas, all I can offer you today), we can create interesting and medieval-sounding music.

The 24 measures represent 24 “chord progressions” for songs. Today, we may be familiar with a pop chord progression: I - V - vi - IV. You can see how this underlies songs here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pidokakU4I> You might also be familiar with the canon chord progression, I – V – vi – iii – IV – I – IV – V, since this “Pachelbel Rant” went viral a few years ago: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdxkVQy7QLM>

The songs are different - different melodies, different styles - but the bass accompaniment pattern is the same for all of them. How the pattern is played can be changed up: who plays an arpeggio C-E-G-c in one song, but C-G-E-c in another? The binary notation is the same idea.

The 24 measures are written in a binary notation, all 1's and 0's. The 1's refer to a measure containing stressed sounds from the collection of notes called *cyweirdant* in Welsh, and which we can think of as “home.” The 0's refer to measures with the *tyniad* notes, which are “away.” Not every note in a *cyweirdant* measure has to be taken from the *cyweirdant* notes - ornaments and passing tones can be any note. But stressed sounds should be *cyweirdant*. Similarly, in *tyniad* measures, the stressed sounds should be *tyniad* notes, but any notes can be used for ornaments and passing tones.

List of 24 measures:

http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/ap_huw/facsimile/ap_huw_107small.html

Which notes were which? It appears to depend on the song. The *cyweirdant* and *tyniad* are always two systems of notes, separated by a whole step, which share one note in common. So one song might have:

Cyweirdant: A-C-E-G

Tyniad: G-B(flat)-D-F

Another might be:

Cyweirdant: D-F-A-C

Tyniad: C-E-G-B(flat)

(See more about the B-flat in the next section.)

Additionally, the songs in the ap Huw often use techniques of repetition at home, and then away. A melodic gesture might be performed first at home, and then at away.

We can take the melodic gestures together with the 24 measures to compose or even improvise music. It may not sound very “musical” to our modern ears, but it will sound a lot like the professional recreations of the ap Huw music.

Try It

Here is the binary notation for *wnsach*: 1111 0001

Use these notes, ignoring the B-flat if needed:

Cyweirdant: D-F-A-C (OR scale degree 2-4-6-1)

Tyniad: C-E-G-B(flat) (OR scale degree 1-3-5-7(flat))

1111: Play 4 thumb chokes on E-**D**. (E is a shared note, but the note that rings, D, is solidly cyweirdant)

0001: Play 3 thumb chokes on D-**C**, then one on E-**D**

Make it more fancy, still using all thumb chokes:

1111: G-**F**, E-**D**, G-**F**, E-**D**

0001: F-**E**, D-**C**, F-**E**, E-**D**

Swap out some of the thumb chokes with bee plaits or small plaits! See what happens.

Cerdd Dant

The music in the ap Huw manuscript is *cerdd dant* (“string music”). There are several different kinds of songs, mostly characterized by repetition and variation of themes. Simple themes grow ever more complex, over many (often 10+) verses.

I haven’t studied enough to give you guidelines on how to really compose in true *cerdd dant* style. But starting with the measures, and playing even a simple measure like *wnsach* over and over, changing it slightly (either actual notes selected from the *cyweirdant* and *tyniad*, or the gestures used to play the notes) is definitely a step in the right direction.

Cyweiriau

Page 108 of the manuscript gives the *cyweiriau*, sometimes translated as “tunings.” Are they scordatura? Are they something else? There are seven of them - are they modes? Authors writing about them don’t seem to be in agreement.

Sally Harper, in her fantastic overview of “Music in Welsh Culture before 1650,” cites Peter Greenhill as reconciling everything if you just tune in a B-flat. I have tried to read Mr. Greenhill’s thesis and not made much headway. I am inclined to go with Harper’s recommendation as a good starting place.

If you don’t want to retune your harp with B-flats, you could play with B-naturals. It’s a step away from what (at least some of the) scholarship recommends, but the difference will be undetectable to most of the population.

You can also “change keys.” If we accept that the ap Huw Bs should all be B-flat, in our modern system of music theory, we’d say that’s somehow related to the key of F Major or D minor. In the example below, the opening sections will be played on a C for the 1s and a B-flat for the 0s. In F Major, C is scale degree 5 (F1, G2, a3, b-flat4, c5). If your harp is in C Major (no sharps, no flats) you could play this with G for the 1s and F for the 0s and it would have a similar sound.

Play the Music

This is taken from the first piece in the William Pennllyn section (page 23) (found on Master Gregory Blount’s ap Huw page). You can see the binary measure description at the top, and then the musical notation. Let’s look at the first section.

There are two rows of notation, the melody (top) and the accompaniment (bottom). We can see four accompaniment columns, which correspond to the four ones of the binary notation (1111). They’re all identical, a G-C-e chord (or arpeggio or some other figure not described). (Taylor 2017 gives a handy guide for decoding the handwriting.) It seems likely that the melody figures should be grouped into four as well: my guess would be that you have a repeating motif of C-(a gesture) three times, followed by the gesture alone.

Which gesture is it? I go to Master Gregory Blount’s online facsimile and check page 35, where the melodic gestures are. The very last one is a stack of three notes with a / mark over them. The example given is a rising figure, G-a-c: whole step, minor third. This one here is D-E-g, also a whole step and a minor third. I go to Taylor 2017 and he’s got it named as *plethiad mawr*, “great plait,” and gives the following fingering:

C. *plethiad mawr* [17]
great plait

The single melody note C seems carefully aligned with the accompaniment. I would try different reconstructions - perhaps a chord, perhaps an arpeggio - but I would definitely start either at the same time as I play that C. Then the great plait follows, for the first three figures. For the fourth figure, the accompaniment plays alone, and then the melody figure follows.

The next section, 0000, is the exact same pattern, repeated at B-flat (we believe), a whole step down.

Continue through the piece, transcribing, experimenting with durations and phrasing, and eventually you will have a complete piece.

Some of the pieces have symbols that represent different kind of repeats. I can't say much more about that, except that they are there and we'll need to figure out more about them to make the most accurate reconstructions.

Resources

★ http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/ap_huw/

Master Gregory Blount's ap Huw page. Contains links to other online resources and a facsimile of the MS. If you want to work with the MS directly, this is the place to go.

★ https://books.google.com/books/about/Music_in_Welsh_Culture_Before_1650.html?id=AFDlaZ4474kC

Google Books entry for Sally Harper's Music in Welsh Culture Before 1650 (2007). You can get this as an ebook for around \$50, and it is immensely useful if you want a solid, coherent interpretation of the earlier sources and analysis. Highly recommended.

★ <https://wirebranch.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/sources2017.pdf>

Bill Taylor's manual, based on the 1999 article below. If you can't get or don't want Marshalsay's book, get this. It's the same "gestures" without the exercises and practice pieces.

<https://journals.library.wales/view/1175725/1176280/89#?xywh=-2999%2C-219%2C8629%2C4378>

Bill Taylor's 1999 article on the ap Huw tablature. This is foundational for most modern interpretations of ap Huw. Critical figures are redacted from the free online version. You can request a copy of the journal (Taylor, William. "Robert ap Huw's Harp Technique. In *Hanes Cerddoriaeth Cymru*, vol 3, pp. 82-90) from the library or get Karen Marshalsay's book, below.

★ <http://www.marsharpmusic.com/keytech.asp>

Website to buy Karen Marshalsay's Key Techniques for Harp. It's £20 (about \$25) and it goes through every ap Huw "gesture" and provides exercises to practice them.

<https://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~rja14/musicfiles/manuscripts/aphuw/>

Peter Greenhill's 1990s thesis. The community of musicians interested in the ap Huw manuscript all think very highly of Mr. Greenhill's work. I confess that I find his book very dense and difficult to understand.

<https://www.bangor.ac.uk/music-and-media/CAWMS/robertaphuw.php.en>

Paul Whittaker 1974 thesis. While this is an older analysis, it is very readable.

http://pauldooley.com/aphuw_pages/

Paul Dooley's pages. Mr. Dooley is a traditional musician who, having read Greenhill and Whittaker, applied their insights to re-creating the music. His notes on his process are helpful.

<http://www.bragod.com/bragod2.html>

One of Bragod's pages; links to others are at the bottom. Bragod is a Welsh musical duo who do a lot with traditional music and ap Huw interpretations. Some of the material on their website doesn't line up with other interpretations, but some of it contains very clear explanations. For instance, here: <http://www.bragod.com/bragod4-2.html> has a very good transcription of the 24 measures, but the interpretation of *cyweirdant* is very different.

Recordings

Taylor, William. Two Worlds of the Welsh Harp (CD). Dorian Recordings, 1999 (Catalog # 90260).

Dooley, Paul. Music from the Robert ap Huw Manuscript. Volume 1. (CD) 2004.

Bragod. Kaingk. (2 CD set). 2004.

Bragod. Welsh Music and Poetry from the 14th to the 18th Century. (CD) 2001, 2013.

YouTube Search Results for "ap Huw": https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=ap+huw