

Welsh music on the A4

And the plight of minority languages

Isabel Scott

A B C Ch D ... A B C Ch D ... A B C Ch D. This is how it began, my gathering of thoughts regarding the status of minority languages and the pivotal role of art in their preservation. 'A B Ch C D' is a song of *Y Dydd Olaf* (The Last Day), the debut album by Gwenno released in 2015 on Heavenly. Formerly part of retro-kitsch group The Pipettes, *Y Dydd Olaf* could not be any further from Gwenno's previous endeavours: a concept album sung entirely in Welsh and Cornish, bringing together an intriguing set of themes: 'patriarchal society, government-funded media propaganda, cultural control, technology, isolation and the importance of, and threat to minority languages'.

Holding on

The album derives its title from a science-fiction novel written in 1976 by Welsh nuclear scientist cum novelist, Owain Owain, which tells of a bleak future where robots and technology have completely taken over human thought and society. Gwenno transposes Owain's dystopian vision onto the Welsh linguistic context, commenting that 'in a world where globalisation wants to turn everybody into the same thing, I think that anything that allows you to go to another place or be in another world has got to be celebrated'. The album's ten tracks create a dreamy, shimmering and metallic soundscape whose retro-futuristic atmosphere, reminiscent of the likes of Can and Kraftwerk, led *Time Out* to describe it as the 'sound of the M4 (motorway connecting London with South Wales) meeting the Autobahn'. Inspired by this description I decided to take *Y Dydd Olaf* on a mini road trip to the south of Luxembourg, a journey that yielded some interesting parallels between the Welsh cultural and linguistic context and the status of Luxembourgish, a language constantly pronounced as being on the brink of annihilation.

Y Dydd Olaf opens with 'Chwyldro' (Revolution). I start the car, the sun shining brightly on a spring afternoon as I hit the A4 motorway Richtung Süden: Schifflange, Differdange, Esch. The monotonous Autobahn landscape is punctured by steel giants of the past. As I drive past Luxembourg's industrial heritage in a state of decay, images of the miners' strikes under Thatcher come to my mind, a struggle that left a bitter trail of abandoned communities bereft of all sense or purpose; particularly in South Wales. 'Patriarchaeh' puts a dampener on the seemingly endless benefits of technology, as it becomes another means of spreading misogyny online. 'Stwff' addresses an identity crisis caused by failed attempts to assimilate into an alien culture: 'When I'm far from home I see the truth more clearly/ I can only apologize for feeling the frustration/ Young and ambitious in a minority culture/ I joined the middle but it didn't really impress me'.

Tracks 'Y Dydd Olaf' (The Next Day) and 'Fratolish Hiang Perpeshki' (nonsensical words) directly allude to Gwenno's main source of inspiration, the science-fiction novel by Owain. The story revolves around a dystopian future where robots control all human thought except for the protagonist who resists their colonising attempts by keeping a diary in Welsh, a language they cannot understand. Both tracks are a reminder of the importance of holding onto one's language as a means of resisting the dominant culture. 'Amser' (Time), the final track of the album is a poem written in Cornish (language of Cornwall, south-west England) by Gwenno's father Tim Saunders, a Celtic language once extinct but

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now undergoing a revival. In an interview with *The Quietus* (a music and pop culture website), Gwenno explains the gist of the song:

The verses are: 'the trees don't stop growing, the lake doesn't stop freezing over, how much time do we have left? How long before we reach the top of the mountain?' It's just about being conscious of time running out. It symbolised how I felt when I was reading Owain Owain's book, which represents the emergency of a language and a people potentially disappearing. From my dad's perspective he's probably referring to Cornish and to Cornwall, that there's limited time to save things, save a culture, save a language.

Dragon meets Roude Léif

At first it seemed unlikely that Gwenno's music could be transposed onto Luxembourg's cultural landscape, yet the similarities are striking. Both the south of Luxembourg and Wales (as well as most communities in the north of Britain) have struggled to fill the void left by the hollowing out of the industrial workforce, as steelworks and miners' pits constituted the mechanical heart of these communities. From a linguistic standpoint, the status of Luxembourgish and Welsh throws up more obvious parallels. Both languages are caught up in an existential struggle against (a) dominant language(s); the Welsh dragon is up against English while the Roude Léif faces both German and French. Much is at stake: the loss of a language implies a loss of identity, a whole universe of communicating, making sense of things and creative expression. Language is tied up with identity, and in the Luxembourgish socio-

political context this has become quite a thorny issue, particularly as discourses around the marginal status of Luxembourgish are a well-versed argument of the right, who under the banner of patriotism struck particularly alarmist tones in the debates preceding last year's referendum, holding foreigners to account for failing to learn Luxembourgish and blaming them for its demise, even though more people than ever are willing to learn the language.

Creative potential

Perhaps the artistic avenue could be further explored, as demonstrated by Gwenno's Welsh protest album that successfully argues the case for the preservation of minority languages as well as celebrating their idiosyncrasies and intricacies. Legotrip's song 'HDMG' is a case in point, offering a playful take on the limits of the Luxembourgish language in expressing complex emotions such as love. When asked about her view on the artist's role within the community, Gwenno's response was: 'It's the culture that makes a city. The culture, the music and the art are all of the things that make a city appealing. Otherwise what is it? Just a bunch of buildings'. Serge Tonnar and Legotrip come very close to that sentiment in their scathing track 'Laksembörg-Sitty': 'Laksembörg-Sitty/very pretty/very dout, dout'. Playfully countering the perception of Luxembourgish as being too clunky and inexpressive for artistic purposes, artists such as De Lâb, Legotrip and Serge Tonnar have managed to tease out its creative potential. The antidote to the scaremongering of Luxembourgish being on the brink of extinction could well lie in bold and creative Luxembourgish expression through music, through art. ♦

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Album Cover of *Y Dydd Olaf* by Gwenno

