

Folk for Art's Sake: English Folk Music in the Mainstream Milieu

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The English folk arts are currently undergoing a considerable resurgence; practices of folk music, dance and drama that explicitly identify themselves as *English* are the subjects of increasing public interest throughout England. The past five years have seen a manifold increase in the number of professional musical acts that foreground their Englishness; for the first time since the last 'revival period' of the 1950s and 60s, it is easier for folk music agents to secure bookings for these English acts in England than Scottish and Irish (Celtic) bands. Folk festivals in England are experiencing greatly increased popularity, and the profile of the genre has also grown substantially beyond the boundaries of the conventional 'folk scene' contexts: Seth Lakeman received a Mercury Music Awards nomination in 2006 for his album *Kitty Jay*; Jim Moray supported Will Young's 2003 UK tour, and his album *Sweet England* appeared in the *Independent's* 'Cult Classics' series in 2007; in 2003, the morris side Dogrose Morris appeared on the popular television music show *Later with Jools Holland*, accompanied by the high-profile fiddler, Eliza Carthy;¹ and all-star festival-headliners Bellowhead appeared on the same show in 2006.² 1

However, the expansion in the profile and presence of English folk music has not been confined to the realms of vernacular, popular culture: On 20 July 2008, BBC Radio 3 hosted the BBC Proms Folk Day concerts in the Royal Albert Hall, with a selection of specifically *English* folk music ranging from orchestral works by Vaughan-Williams to performances by contemporary folk artists such as Bella Hardy and Martin Simpson, with Bellowhead providing a rapturous close to the proceedings;³ on 6 April 2006, the closely-choreographed morris dance company Morris Offspring received coverage on BBC 2's *The Culture Show* for their first extended stage-show, *On English Ground*, which premiered as a sell-out performance at London's South Bank, before touring England's major arts venues; in 2008, another key protagonist of the resurgence, Tim Van Eyken, played the role of the 'Songman' in the National Theatre's production of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse*; while the Askew Sisters, a young duo from London, have performed at both the National Portrait Gallery and as part of the National Theatre's foyer concert series during 2007-8. It can be inferred through the expansion of English folk music into the standard programming of these diverse performance contexts that 'popular' and 'art' cultural and musical associations may be central to an emerging taxonomy within the contemporary English folk music repertory. This article will discuss one discreet movement within the current resurgence: 2

that element that I have – for the sake of discussion and for want of less problematic labelling – chosen to refer to as 'art-orientated English folk music'. Through consideration of the output of two overlapping, exemplary acts, I shall briefly illustrate some of the main musical characteristics of this movement, and consider its relationship with English folk music's transition into the arts venue context.

Before examining some of the musical characteristics present within this movement, it would be pertinent to offer a preparatory caveat: a recognition of the ever expanding scope of 'arts venues' (which I shall treat – in accordance with common usage among informants in this field – as synonymous with 'arts centres and theatres') in contemporary England. It is unnecessary for me to rehearse at length the (widely acknowledged) dissolution of conventional generic labelling such as Art, Popular and Folk in the post-modernity of Western society.⁴ Suffice it to say, the programming of arts centres, theatres, opera houses and other spaces originally reserved for the performance of 'high art' music, dance and drama in England (as elsewhere in Britain and the West) is reflecting such a dissolution. A more appropriate term, however – and one now widely used by those working in the English culture industry – is the 'mainstream venue'. The term 'mainstream' is particularly problematic, since academic investigation of 'the mainstream' or 'mainstream culture' as a contemporary construct is, for the most part, indirect – the secondary focus of texts that engage, primarily, with a particular sub- or counter-culture. The appearance of the term in such contexts is, in fact, indicative of its synonymy with a largely unquestioned, dominant culture in line with a Gramscian hegemonic order.⁵ The construct of a 'mainstream' plays a central role in the assertion of a music's sub- or counter-cultural identity, whether it be within the confines of academic writing, or within the grass-roots discourses of the genre with which it is being contrasted.⁶ In the case of mainstream venues, representatives from both sides of the sub-/dominant cultural divide are happy to engage with the terminology: at a Folk Industry Focus Day, run by the folk arts development agency FolkArts England and entitled 'Publicity, Marketing, Media and Promotion', representatives from two such venues (Loughborough Town Hall and De Montfort Hall) took part in a presentation to folk activists under the heading 'Promoting Folk in Mainstream Venues'.⁷ In the event's programme, the session was given a preamble that strengthens an understanding of the generic expectations of the mainstream venue:

If folk has really gone mainstream in recent years, there can be no greater symbol than its increasing regular appearance in venues better known for their orchestras or rock and pop.⁸

Here the concept of 'the mainstream' is in existence in contradistinction with the 'folk scene', but the use of the term with reference to these venues is ubiquitous in English culture. This is ultimately due to the fact that the genre-led marketisation of performed music in this country has resulted in such levels of categorical specificity as to ensure that the majority of such music can be seen to be – and be marketed as – sub- or counter-cultural. The genres that are not required to identify themselves as in contradistinction to the 'mainstream' orientation of these venues are – as the quotation above

would imply – a) orchestral and b) rock and pop. Within a Gramscian understanding of the mainstream as synonymous with dominant culture, the mutual acceptance of the latter category's place within these venues is obvious: 'rock and pop' is the very epitome of contemporary mass-mediated, popular culture. Although acts within this broad category will position themselves – and be positioned by audiences – at particular points along a 'mainstream' continuum, they will rarely foreground a strong counter-cultural assertion. On the other hand, the failure of art music (characterised in the above quote by orchestras) to distinguish itself from 'the mainstream' is more interesting, since it is far from able to declare a position within the dominant culture of English contemporary society.⁹ Rather, this fact demonstrates the reality of the socio-historical associations central to the mainstream venue's actual and assumed function within the society. Whilst discourse around the subject of such venues implies programming that is largely inclusive of all genres, the all-encompassing nature of these venues can, however, be overstated: in the majority of cases the emphasis – in terms of performances, if not ticket sales – remains on Western 'high art' music, dance and drama; many such venues have names that refer very strongly to historical links with 'high art' culture: Opera Houses, Theatres, Concert Halls, etc. The references and histories inherent in these performance contexts serve to perpetuate strong associations with performative texts of high cultural value (amongst the educated middle classes) and, therefore, high socio-cultural status. To be programmed at any such 'mainstream venue', amidst a discourse of generic inclusivity, an act or event has still to be implicitly deemed culturally 'worthy'. It is for these reasons of cultural association that the conceptual label of 'art' with reference to these venues constitutes both a viable and invaluable handle on the current pro-contextualisation process of the English folk arts.¹⁰

In order to understand English folk music's journey from what many participants and scholars have referred to as the 'folk scene' to a position of central occupancy within the scheduling of arts venues, it is worth noting some key features of the milieus out of which it is expanding. The folk scene in England has, since the second revival period of the 1960s and '70s, essentially resided within the performance spaces of the folk club, the session and the folk festival (see the respective writings of MacKinnon, Brocken and Sweers for more on this subject).¹¹ Of these three contexts, the former is most strongly associated with the second revival period of the 1960s, and plays a relatively minor role in the current resurgence. Folk clubs are often held in the back-rooms of pubs on a weekly or monthly basis. A small charge is paid at the door, and proceedings generally consist of floor spots by (usually amateur) regular club members and performances by booked professional acts, commonly comprised of between one and four musicians. Clubs are fundamentally *song* orientated: relatively little instrumental music is played that isn't accompaniment, and repertoires of booked acts are predominantly song. Folk sessions tend to take place in similar physical surroundings, although they are generally freely entered, purely participatory (i.e., no booked acts), and, therefore, less formal. The term 'session' also implies a far greater proportion of instrumental music (generally taken from English ceilidh and morris repertoires), but not to the exclusive extent of Irish or Celtic sessions existent in England and globally. Festivals, on the other hand, often

comprise a weekend- or week-long series of concerts by professionally booked artists, as well as sessions, sing-arounds (essentially 'sessions' exclusively for singers), dance displays (usually by Cotswold and Border morris sides, Rapper dancers, longsword dancers, North West clog sides and exponents of various other styles of clog and step dancing), and participatory social dances (most of which fall under the heading 'ceilidhs').

Folk clubs remain a mainstay of the professional English folk musician's performance circuit throughout the year, although festivals (the majority of which occur during the summer months) represent an essential opportunity for substantial income generation – both through performance fees, and through the sale of CDs and merchandise. It is from these contexts that artists are moving in to the realm of the local and national arts venue. Most artists are simultaneously continuing to perform in the club, festival and arts venue contexts, whilst certain acts appear only on festival and arts venue stages. It is important to acknowledge that the appearance of English folk musicians on stages at arts centres and theatres is not a new occurrence per se. One should remember that the first revival of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century – best characterised by the efforts of Cecil Sharp – was based on the relocation of folk song from country lane to concert hall.¹² It was, of course, the songs – and not the singers – that underwent this relocation. Since the 1960s and 70s, a number of English folk musicians have performed regularly in arts centres and other such contexts. However, these performances have been *relatively* uncommon in comparison to the equivalent performances that make up part of the current resurgence. Where before a small number of key English folk personalities or bands may be expected to appear in large and mid-level theatres, today English folk music has assumed a significant proportion of scheduling at many such venues. Whilst that proportion may not be equal to that of other broad genres of music, dance and drama, it *is* equal to or greater than that of other – non-English – folk and traditional music (significantly, those acts that appear under the generic heading of 'World Music'), and the programming of English folk – to whatever extent – has been *normalised* in the majority of England's arts venues. I will now go on to discuss two acts involved in this normalisation process, and consider ways in which their respective musics and discourses may be seen to reflect (and also influence) this cultural shift.

The approach of this article is ethnomusicological, and the methodology by which the research has been conducted combines ethnographic fieldwork and textual analysis. What follows is also predominantly phenomenological, in as much as it is concerned with the particulars of English folk music's movement into new texts and contexts, rather than with a detailed explanation of the reasons for this movement.¹³ It is fair to acknowledge some key assumptions borne out of the ongoing research, as regards the origins of English folk music's movement into 'arts' and 'mainstream' venues and contexts: 1) that the heightened interest in English national identity and English folk arts referred to above has resulted in the development of audiences beyond the self-identifying 'folk scene'; and 2) that the economics of performance fees and potential CD sales at these relatively sizeable venues, along with the development of new audiences and the subsequent rise in profile, represents

a strong motivation for folk artists' engagement in such a movement.

Art-orientated folk music: Chris Wood and the English Acoustic Collective

The name 'English Acoustic Collective' is generally used to refer to the trio made up of Chris Wood (violin, viola and vocals), John Dipper (violin) and Rob Harbron (English concertina), although the title originates from what their website refers to as 'a fluid group of composers, writers and choreographers whose work is grounded in a love for their common cultural inheritance.'¹⁴ Most significant in the inception of this collective have been the annual summer schools in traditional music composition and performance organised by Wood, and at which both Dipper and Harbron were early attendees. However, when audiences and promoters refer to the EAC, they are almost invariably referring to the Wood/Dipper/Harbron trio. The discursive representations offered here are immediately striking: the use of the term 'collective' within the title of this 'fluid group' implies the collaboration of *artists* rather than craftsmen. The word also speaks of the 'art-ification' of other vernacular musics, particularly through the – now largely unconscious – historical references to its use in the modern jazz and free jazz movements of the 1960s and 70s.¹⁵ In fact, the concept of intellectual discourse is central to the identity of the EAC, and to Wood as an individual musician. Wood's own explanation of the group's intentions sets the tone:

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The EAC is a fluid group of composers, writers and choreographers whose work is grounded in a love for their common cultural inheritance. The work outlined on the site seeks to articulate and amplify the case for authentic and meaningful indigenous forms of cultural expression. It also investigates the creative 'wet edge' between the traditional and the contemporary.¹⁶

These comments are expanded, and complemented by substantial quotes by the acclaimed writer Kazuo Ishiguro and cleric Dr John Sentamu. Where one might expect to see reviews from the most popular and recognised home for folk music in the national media (BBC Radio 2's popular Mike Harding Show), instead the erudite reviews of BBC Radio 3 presenters (Verity Sharp and Fiona Talkington) hold pride of place on the trio's website.¹⁷ Via a web link from the Collective's homepage, the visitor can be taken to the *Journal of Music in Ireland*, the journal in which Wood's thoughts on the subject of Englishness and English folk music have been published.¹⁸ In the group's music, too, are manifest profound textual links with contemporary art music,¹⁹ offering up unspoken associations with wider cultural concepts of 'art'. It is the nature of such links that I should like to investigate here, through the brief analysis of examples taken from their recorded works. Before doing so, however, it is worth making some general points about the musical language in which the EAC operates.

The Collective's music is generally diatonic or modal (the latter portion being commonly Dorian or Mixolydian), characteristics that are in keeping with the raw materials – the English traditional repertory – with which they are dealing.

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However, the following examples will demonstrate how the group engage with a process of arrangement that enforces tonal ambiguity. This is achieved principally via the employment of what could arguably be described as the EAC's key musical characteristic: the relative polyphony of the instrumental texture. Only very rarely does a clear monodic dichotomy of melody/chordal accompaniment – so standard throughout the arrangement of all folk musics across the British Isles – appear in the EAC's performances and recordings. Another central characteristic of the EAC's soundscape is the particularly 'clean', intonationally accurate and sonorous fiddle sound produced by both Wood and Dipper. The pure timbre produced by the two players (and most likely attributable to a careful consistency of bow pressure) minimises the creation of pitchless, percussive sounds and secondary overtones more commonly heard in the playing of most English fiddlers, and is clearly distinctive in comparison with the more rhythmically inflected, 'bow-thirsty' playing of contemporaries such as Eliza Carthy or Jon Boden.²⁰ This clarity of tone from the fiddlers is often highlighted by the notable relative absence of a bowed second, sympathetic, open string for harmonic emphasis or drone effect. In combination with relatively understated, sparsely textured arrangements, these stylistic qualities result in a uniquely restrained – almost chamber-ensemble – quality.

Sound File 1: English Acoustic Collective, 'Train Tune' (extract)²¹

'Train Tune', composed by John Dipper and recorded by the EAC on their album *Ghosts*, encapsulates many of these characteristic features. Most significantly, the opening to this track (see Sound File 1), provides a clear example of the complex of musical ambiguities that lies at the heart of the Collective's output. Firstly, there is a distinct lack of monody inherent in the arrangement: only a subtle difference in volume between the two polyphonic voices (concertina and fiddle) is present to assist the listener in discerning the 'tune' from the accompaniment.²² This uncertainty of the texture is compounded by a metric ambiguity: the tune is in the particularly unusual – and, most notably from the standpoint of English instrumental folk music culture, *undanceable* – time of 5/4, and the grouping of crotchets oscillates between 2+3 and 3+2, resulting in a relatively complex, irregular phrasing. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the melody's tonal centre is never harmonically asserted: as can be seen in the approximate transcription in Fig. 1, the 'A part' of the tune – that is, the first full 16 bars in the violin part (bars 17-32 in Fig. 1) – could be largely interpreted as being centred around an A melodic minor, albeit with consistently flattened sevenths and variable (sharpened or natural) sixths. Any tonality of this melodic line is, however, made ambiguous by the repetitive accompaniment figure played by Harbron on the concertina, which emphasises the flattened sixth (F \flat) from the outset. The appearance of the note as a resounding pedal in the lower octave from bar 25 is so emphatic as to result in a false relation in bar 28. The B part is anchored more securely to a mixolydian mode centred on D, but this is accompanied by a relatively unusual harmonic movement between D major and F major, emphasising the regular flattened seventh, whilst systematically avoiding a more predictable dominant harmonisation (A minor).

The image shows a musical score for 'Train Tune' by John Dipper. It consists of seven systems of music, each with a Violin (Vln.) part on the top staff and a Concertina part on the bottom staff. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 200. Measure numbers 17, 21, 26, 30, 34, 39, and 44 are indicated at the start of their respective systems. The Violin part is a single melodic line, while the Concertina part provides a complex, rhythmic accompaniment with many rests and dynamic markings. The score ends with 'etc.' for both parts in the final system.

Fig. 1: Extract from 'Train Tune' by John Dipper; select transcription by the author.²³

The tune 'St. George's Day', written by Harbron and featuring on the same album, *Ghosts* (Sound File 2; Fig. 2), offers a far clearer assignation of melody (a single concertina line) and accompaniment (a pizzicato ostinato split between a detuned viola and violin),²⁴ although it remains polyphonic and understated to an extent uncharacteristic of English folk music performance

more generally. The tune's form is also clearly recognisable as a standard 32-bar jig (e.g., in 6/8 time, and in AABB structure). Tonally, however, the melody alone can be regarded as somewhat ambiguous: it begins on a G, and phrases end on notes from the C and Am triads, but is essentially in Dm and F – a fact only made apparent by fleeting signifiers such as the recurring mid-phrase Dm arpeggios (e.g., bars 18 and 22 of Figure 2).

Sound File 2: English Acoustic Collective, 'St. George's Day' (extract)²⁵

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'St. George's Day'. It consists of six systems of music, each with two staves. The top staff of each system is for the Concertina, and the bottom staff is for the Viola and Violin. The time signature is 6/8. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The first system starts at measure 17 and includes a 'pizz.' (pizzicato) marking for the string part. The second system starts at measure 22. The third system starts at measure 28. The fourth system starts at measure 33. The fifth system starts at measure 38. The sixth system starts at measure 44 and ends with 'etc.' on both staves. The Concertina part features a melodic line with various ornaments and phrasing, while the string part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with frequent pizzicato notes.

Fig. 2: Extract from 'St. George's Day' by Rob Harbron; select transcription by the author.²⁶

It is, however, the nature, and also the performance of the pizzicato string accompaniment that is key to an understanding of the cultural associations invited by this piece. Primarily due to their relatively low dynamics, and the resultant limitations of the technique in unamplified – traditional, social – contexts, the plucking of strings is a very unusual occurrence in English fiddle

music.²⁷ The technique is more readily identifiable with 'art' music, whether classical or contemporary. Even more significantly, it can be argued that the repetition and angular nature of the pizzicato figure forges more specific associations with the works of relatively populist (or 'accessible') contemporary composers, such as Michael Nyman, Howard Skempton or Arvo Pärt. In total, the piece is fully tonal, but the pseudo-minimalist string accompaniment leads to transitory dissonances and reinforces the sense of harmonic ambiguity already implied by the linear characteristics of the melody. Unspoken relationships to twentieth century art music are equally apparent in the opening to the track 'Albion', taken from Wood's solo album *The Lark Descending*, (Sound File 3). Here, the two-chord repetitive figure is perpetuated to an extent reminiscent of minimalist works by Steve Reich, Philip Glass or John Adams. It could even be suggested that the relatively percussive 'strumming' of the strings in 'Albion' results in an Mbira-like effect similar to that present in many of the better known performances and recordings of the Kronos Quartet. In the case of 'St. George's Day', the subtle alterations to the established pizzicato figure in bars 44 and 46 of the extract in Fig. 2 carry connotations of minimalist phase-changing.

Sound File 3: Chris Wood, 'Albion' (extract).²⁸

Extended forms

The destabilisation of generic boundaries is a feature present not only in the textual foreground of contemporary English folk music. Just as the harmonic structuring and accompaniment of tunes is moving away from the established diatonicisms and monodies, so too are the larger-scale forms of performance developing beyond the expected. A folk performance, as with a folk CD, generally involves a programme made up of discreet 'sets of tunes' and/or songs (usually accompanied), but this most basic of conventions is also undergoing renegotiation, through the development of extended, semi-narrative musical products. One such work is *Christmas Champions*, a collaborative composition by Wood and the storyteller Hugh Lupton. The original piece, around twenty-six minutes in duration and commissioned in 2005 at the request of presenter Verity Sharp for Radio 3's *Late Junction*, explores the specifically English tradition of mumming – the itinerant performance of folk drama that has, in the distant past, been particularly prevalent during the Christmas period (combining as it does legendary and nativity narratives), but is now a relative rarity within the broader realm of the English folk arts.²⁹ In its earliest form, *Christmas Champions* existed as a recording, combining Lupton's narration and Wood's music, and interpolating recordings of the reminiscences of one Herbie Smith, a regular mumming player during the 1930s. However, after receiving critical acclaim in the national media, the form was extended yet further into a touring show performed with Dipper, Harbron and Scottish singer Olivia Ross, which was performed first in December of 2007, and was toured in a reworked form in December of 2008.

A key component of the show is the song 'England in Ribbons', itself an extended work by Chris Wood; the song is introduced at various points within

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the show, but receives a full exposition at the very end, reiterating the central sentiments of Lupton's narrative. As well as featuring in the original recording and in the subsequent show, this song also appears on Wood's solo album *Trespasser* as a track thirteen minutes in duration.³⁰ This version is notably experimental in its use of multi-track recording techniques: Wood not only builds an almost orchestral body of string parts up through the multi-tracking technology at his disposal, but also uses his voice for instrumental effect (for instance, doubling the cello's pedal tonic, D \flat). The result is an extremely full, thick texture – very different from the sparse textural characteristics of the EAC.

This full texture is, however, not replicated on stage for the *Christmas Champions* show: to do so would require the cumbersome and problematic (and, many folk audiences would argue, experientially obtrusive) involvement of backing recordings. Instead, a sparser arrangement is performed by the three members of the EAC and Olivia Ross. The various incarnations of 'England in Ribbons' acts as a stark reminder that the 'arts' context is by no means confined within the physical boundaries of arts venues but is equally resident within the recorded artefact. This connotation of 'the arts' beyond the performative space of the concert stage is made yet clearer by Wood's relationship with Radio 3, the programming for which is typical of the larger arts venues throughout the UK – focussing as it does on classical music, contemporary art music, Jazz, 'world music', and increasingly, British folk music. Meanwhile, the extended forms of both *England in Ribbons* and *Christmas Champions* as a whole are exemplary of contemporary English folk music's increasing engagement with the kinds of extended forms readily associated with the arts centres and theatres in which they are to be performed. This is not to suggest that extended compositions relating to folk music are a new phenomenon, per se: as was mentioned at the beginning of this article, the very *modus operandi* of the first English folk revival was the combination and reworking of collected folk material into large scale chamber or orchestral works. However, these were only ever regarded as alluding to or engaging with folk music, rather than actually *being* folk music.³¹ Previous examples have also been more clearly centred around an 'art' music discourse. The extended forms in which Chris Wood is now involved are also a departure from strictly musical composition and performance: as well as engaging with recorded media, *Christmas Champions* is a directed show involving simple choreography and scripted dramatic interludes; the EAC were also, in 2006, the fore-grounded musical accompaniment to a full-length morris dance show, *On English Ground*, in collaboration with Morris Offspring.

Performance, experimentation and ambiguity

Perhaps the most important point to be made regarding the pizzicato strings in 'St. George's Day' relates to the way in which the track is performed by the EAC in a live concert context. I have reduced the viola and violin to a single stave in the transcription in Fig. 2 not simply because they combine to form a single, fluid line, but also because they are simultaneously performed by a single individual – Chris Wood. Wood sits with the instruments balanced near-vertically, one on each knee: the neck of each is supported, close to the body,

by the thumb and crook of the corresponding hand, whilst the fingers are used to pluck the open strings. This performance technique has an immediate visual impact, through its novelty both in folk music and art music contexts: audiences of either musics are quite unaccustomed to the sight of these stringed instruments being played in this way, and the method has become something that English folk music audiences now associate very strongly with Wood.

The use of this technique in the performance of 'St. George's Day' can be interpreted in a number of ways. Firstly, it is possible to consider the method as a celebration of folk music as a 'homespun' genre. Through this interpretation, Wood's behaviour can be regarded as a 'naïve' exploration of the practical musical potential of the limited number of available instruments.³² This 'do-it-yourself' approach to the use of instruments is particularly effective in the context of the English folk music resurgence, since it represents a visual and embodied manifestation of a home-made aesthetic, supporting a construct of authenticity that is so regularly renegotiated and reasserted with relation to this genre. Perhaps, in response to the more 'artistic' elements of the trio's music, here at least is a valuable affirmation of the folk-musical identity, acting in contradistinction to the accepted, conservative practices of the arts venue-orientated establishment. An alternative reading of this technique, however, would be that it represents a celebration of experimentation: these highly recognisable instruments are used by Wood in particularly unrecognisable ways, through a notably self-conscious exploration of organological potential. This analysis would suggest that Wood's method of performance here can be seen as imbued with a post-modern esotericism similar to that present in John Cage's works for 'prepared piano'. Whilst apparently taking on 'Heath Robinson' characteristics in isolation, when considered in combination with the musical text and the cultural and commercial positioning of the group more generally, it could be argued that this experimentation actually reinforces – rather than repudiates – the EAC's alignment with the musical and conceptual values of twentieth century Western 'high art' culture.

The reality is, of course, a combination of these two readings. Both culturally associative systems are likely to inform the audience's experience of the musical event. The network of seemingly conflicting inter-textual references and connections invoked here serves to demonstrate – and is, in fact, necessarily reflective of – the wider ambiguities of contemporary English folk music's movement into a 'mainstream' environment. The situation is complicated yet further since that 'mainstream' is, itself, engaged in the dissolution of generic boundaries at a structural level whilst simultaneously maintaining those boundaries through generic labelling of the acts. Such breakdowns in the categorisation of consumed culture are inevitable when the mainstream arts centre is predominantly a space for cultural engagement by 'omnivorous', educated, middle class audiences.³³

As well as the implications of the EAC's specific textual characteristics, formal expansions and performative behaviours, it could be argued that more middle-ground associations with 'art' music are at play in the instrumentation of the

trio. The ergonomic characteristics of the English concertina, in particular combination with Harbron's performance style and ability, are such that it lends itself to polyphony in the tenor and (in the case of the baritone and bass concertinas, which Harbron employs occasionally) bass registers. It is no surprise then that, when both Dipper and Wood are playing violins – and even when Wood is playing viola – the resultant soundscape is remarkably similar to that of a string quartet: the ultimate 'art' music ensemble. The group's physical presence on stage also reflects that of a string quartet: they invariably appear on stage in a relatively closed arch, with Wood and Dipper at either side of Harbron, almost facing each other (i.e., almost at ninety degrees to the audience). So the performance is, to some extent visually, as well as aurally, introverted: conceptually 'artistic'.

Art-orientated folk music: Methera

The subtle links between the EAC's strain of contemporary English folk music and art musics obtained ultimate clarity when, in 2007, John Dipper and three other English folk musicians embarked upon a new project: a string quartet by the name of Methera. As might be expected, the group have generated a good deal of discourse relating to their choice of ensemble, much of which is underpinned by a largely unexamined belief that the string quartet is an inherently natural, and effective unit. Their MySpace page explains that '*Methera* unites the depth and integrity of traditional English music with the rich texture of the string quartet. Four fine young musicians with individual traditional styles meet in a unique classical constellation.'³⁴ The sleeve notes to the group's album continue the discourse:

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It was a yearning for traditional music to be heard through the voice of the string quartet that compelled Methera into existence. It quickly became clear that Methera was about a meeting of musical minds.

Four individual musical characters with our different stories to tell; the cohesive structure of the string quartet gives us the freedom to indulge in tradition and rebel against convention.³⁵

The essential, organic purity of the string quartet's 'rich texture' and 'cohesive structure' are not questioned in these statements; they appear, instead, to represent the rehearsal of a timeless, simple truth. Were it not for the – broadly well known and acknowledged – traditional backgrounds of the individuals involved, the reference to a 'unique classical constellation' might even lead one to question with which conventionally labelled genre the group are seeking to identify. Interestingly, however, the musical language of their output is generally less aesthetically challenging to folk audiences than that of the EAC; their debut album, *Methera*, is – proportionately – far more orientated towards a clearly monodic texture (see Sound File 4). Where textures become more polyphonic, the presence of the cello (played by Lucy Deakin) as a dedicated bass instrument often results in the strengthening of harmonic progression, and instances of octave-unison playing are surprisingly frequent. There will, of course, be considerable differences between the aesthetic choices made by the two groups, since they share only one member

(John Dipper), but it may be possible to suggest – albeit tentatively – that it may be advantageous for folk musicians coming together in such a 'classically' loaded ensemble format to produce a more readily accessible, harmonically grounded sound than that of the EAC, if only to reassure audiences of their predominating folk music orientations as individuals. To suggest that such decisions were made consciously would be conjectural, and pre-emptive of future ethnographic interviews with Methera's membership. But it is fair to acknowledge that their evocation of the string quartet ensemble must necessarily place a greater burden upon them to assert that what they do is 'folk' than that borne by the EAC, whose clear folk instrumentation counters any intermusical ambiguities apparent in their performances or textual output.

Sound File 4: Methera, 'Mount Hills Set'(extract).³⁶

As with the EAC, elements of Methera's performative practices are unique and key to an ethnographic understanding of the group's inter-textual negotiations of the folk and art idioms with which they engage. The four performers play without music (as is normal for a folk group – but not for a string quartet), but are not orientated towards the audience: they perform in a tight square arrangement, each musician facing inward, in such a way that one player has their back to the audience for the duration of a piece (or set). Between each discreet rendition, the members of the group stand up and move around the square, thus varying each member's orientation in relation to the audience. This physical arrangement of the musicians will often require a performer to look over their shoulder, temporarily re-orientate their body on their seat or briefly stand in order to announce the next piece, or otherwise address the audience. Such consequential requirements highlight to the audience not only the unusual nature of the arrangement, but also – by implication – the importance bestowed upon it by the performers. Its importance is also acknowledged through its depiction in the majority of the group's promotional photographs. 20

The cultural significance of this performative technique can be read in a number of ways. At a discursive level, the inward-looking formation places emphasis on the creative negotiations apparently taking place between the constituent parts of the group and a greater whole: attention is physically directed towards the liminal creative space between Methera as 'four individual musical characters' and Methera as the 'meeting of musical minds' within a 'cohesive structure'. The group's 'gig book' on their website offers audience members the opportunity to leave (positive) comments, many of which demonstrate inclination towards an engagement with this discourse: 21

'I loved the playful precision of your rhythms, and the column of sound that rose up from the middle of the square.'

'You played together like one instrument.'

'A really special, emotional experience - 4 as 1!'

'Your music is so beautiful and your communication together fabulous - a quartet so without ego you didn't even introduce yourselves!'

'A wonderful evening of spontaneous music-making.'³⁷

Certainly, Methera's act of sitting in a circle, with one member presenting their back to the audience, takes the notion of introverted performance to a logical extension, but this, as with various elements of the EAC's presentation, can be understood as engagement with and reference to both traditional and art culture via oppositional conceptual routes. For instance, whilst the act of turning one's back on the audience may be read as an indication of artistic introspection and creative immersion, it can be argued that doing so in order to look directly at your fellow musicians is an invocation of folk music's perceived origins as a participatory, self-motivated activity, rather than an audience-orientated, performative practice. The most 'grass-roots' exhibition of this behaviour can be seen in the context of a pub session, where players are creating music for their own enjoyment, rather than for the benefit of other patrons (i.e., not producing music for an 'audience', *per se*).³⁸ Through this reading, the audience are offered the privilege of baring witness to a perceivedly timeless, organic creative event, such as it would occur whether or not onlookers were present.³⁹ Through this action, Methera can be said to be actively constructing a form of social authenticity, thus claiming the string quartet for the creation and development of traditional music.

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the display of traditional music-making in such a manner as to physically exclude the audience occurs nowhere else within the professional performance of English folk music. Furthermore, Methera's presentation foregrounds the occurrence of a – to some extent, spontaneous – performative process, rather than the musical text as a product. The very act of presenting the music as process rather than product in this way, and of developing a clear and unique challenge to performative conventions (conventions accepted within both contemporary folk *and* art music genres) is a practice that, of the two genres involved, is most easily associated with twentieth century Western high art. The indeterminacy-based compositions of Riley and Cage provide obvious examples; the foregrounding of practical devices is also found in the methods of postmodern dance implicit in the title of a series of Contact Improvisation dance performances in 1975 New York, *You Come, We'll Show You What We Do*.⁴⁰ It is, of course, worth noting that much of the intended demystification of compositional technique that is inherent in such high-art events is not present in Methera's live performances: in fact, the emotive and often spiritual content of the audience responses chosen to appear on the group's website would suggest an *increased* mystification of the communicative processes at work between the musicians. Nonetheless, the unusual performative practices involved in their live performance are comfortably experimental in a way that can enable their contextualisation on the arts venue stage. In total, the artistic connotation of the string quartet is juxtaposed with a tradition-orientated discursive, spatial and historical context, but this apparently post-modern challenge to genre culminates in the production of a relatively accessible, diatonic soundscape that serves to render the event culturally – and therefore

economically – secure.

A point that I have deliberately neglected to mention thus far in this consideration of Methera is the important fact that the group rarely appear on concert stages of middle scale arts venues (such as those on which the EAC regularly perform). Many of their performances take place in smaller scale venues, such as churches and village halls, with a large number taking the form of 'house concerts'. Such concerts consist of an individual in contact with the group hosting the performance as the larger part of a social event for an invited audience. The house concert takes place in the largest available room of the host's home; audience/guest numbers are therefore limited by the size of the space available – usually to less than twenty. To avoid various issues pertaining to licensing and regulation, the audience are not charged on entry, but after the concert a suggested donation is invited (which is invariably paid or exceeded by each audience member). The house concert as a performance context is deserving of considerable ethnographic investigation;⁴¹ it is of particular interest here since it represents a subtle, spatial manifestation of the generic dissolution characterised by the music of the two groups discussed. On the one hand, the small scale of the space, and the low number of audience members results in an 'intimate' atmosphere, enhancing the perception of authenticity, and offering the opportunity to bear witness to the musical event at the closest possible quarters. As with the group's non-presentational seating arrangements, the scenario offers a comfortable reminiscence of a perceived past in which traditional music existed as a domestic, amateur pursuit. One comment in Methera's gig book expresses this:

'It was just like a Thomas Hardy novel, travelling musicians playing in a thatched cottage.'⁴²

The social element of the occasion is also emphasised: audiences often include groups of close friends, and post-concert socialising affords attendees the opportunity to converse – and join in a glass of wine and food – with the performers. On the other hand, however, the social roles of a concert (audience/performer/host) are very present, and the established conventions of an arts venue stage (attentive silence during and applause after each piece) are respected. Through adherence to such protocols, the event can in fact be read as an evocation of chamber music recitals popular amongst the European bourgeoisie prior to the development of public concert culture during the nineteenth century.⁴³ Certainly, the predominant audience demographic at house concerts supports this reading. Alternatively, such an event could be considered closely reminiscent of the patronage of itinerant court musicians throughout the middle-ages; ultimately, the connotations of the process are historical, whilst those of the domestic space are vernacular. Thus, the house concert can be understood as an inherently 'artistic' context by contemporary values, but one that more closely meets with the ideological requirements of folk music.

The music of Methera and of the EAC are not presented here to illustrate any wider scale demolition of generic boundaries within the conscious experience

of contemporary English culture: constructs such as 'folk', 'classical' and 'pop' remain active and largely delimited; whilst the boundaries between these constructs continue to blur, each has at its centre a culturally identifiable hard core. The examples offered in this article exemplify the assertion of identities (be they national, ideological or individual) through the performative negotiation of homologies and overlapping associative systems on which such taxonomies are constructed. The ambiguities inherent within these negotiations are especially acute within the – somewhat ironically separate – cultural realm of the 'mainstream' performative context: here, emphasis is placed on the simultaneity of conceptual, generic challenge and the cultural – and economic – security of an accessible aesthetic. The diatonic and modal material and comfortably repetitive middle-ground structures of English folk music offer a fertile ground for the reconciliation of these seemingly negating symbols and devices of the esoteric and the vernacular. It is important to acknowledge that the movement that the EAC and Methera represent is only one of a number of directions being followed by contemporary English folk music. Alternative forms exist that engage with popular music texts and contexts ranging from rock to West End theatre, where alternative homologies and commonalities are emphasised as to play host to the assertion of alternative English folk music identities.⁴⁴ Rather, the engagement with art musical aesthetics, conventions and arrangements discussed in this article represents one negotiation of a larger recontextualisation process whereby English folk music is becoming convergent with that sub-hegemonic strain of dominant culture (be that 'high' or 'low' culture)⁴⁵ that resides within the 'mainstream' milieu.

Notes

¹ *Later with Jools Holland* (London: BBC2, 3 May 2003).

² *Later with Jools Holland* (London, BBC2, 6 December 2006).

³ See BBC, 'Folk Day', *Proms*, 2008,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/proms/2008/familyevents/folkday.shtml> (22 July 2008).

⁴ Contemporary English folk music certainly offers a strong critique of the relatively recent attempts by Booth and Kuhn to identify definitive economic and transmissive universals within each of these terms. Gregory D. Booth and Terry Lee Kuhn, 'Economic and Transmission Factors as Essential Elements in the Definition of Folk, Art and Pop Music', *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. 74, No. 3 (1990), 441-438. See also John Blacking, 'Making Artistic Popular Music: The Goal of True Folk', *Popular Music* No. 1 (1981), 9-14; Robert Fink, 'Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music at the Twilight of the Canon', *American Music* Vol. 16, No. 2 (1998), 135-179; and Jim Collins (ed.) *High-Pop: Making Culture Into Popular Entertainment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) for varied, reactive analyses of categorical dissolution. In this article, such terms shall be used as they are by musicians and audiences in the field.

⁵ For an unusually focussed discussion of the terminology see Michael Morgan and Susan Leggett (eds.), *Mainstream(s) and Margins: Cultural Politics in the 90s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

⁶ An obvious example can be found in Karen Bettez Halnon, 'Alienation Incorporated: "F*** the Mainstream Music" in the Mainstream', *Current Sociology* Vol. 53, No. 3 (2005), 441-464.

⁷ FolkArts England, *Agenda*, (Matlock: FolkArts England, 2007).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Recent, self-conscious and discursively mediated attempts by opera singers to reach 'mainstream' audiences serve to emphasise this point (e.g., Luciano Pavarotti's successes after the use of his recording of Puccini's 'Nessun Dorma' for the Italia 1990 World Cup; more

recent stadium performances by Russell Watson; Charlotte Church's early career; and the current popularity of Katherine Jenkins). For a historical discussion of opera's relationship with, removal from and recent returns to popular culture, see John Storey, "Expecting Rain': Opera as Popular Culture?" in Collins, *High-Pop*, 32-53.

¹⁰ I am cautious to avoid using the term *recontextualisation*, since it would be misleading to imply that English folk music had not appeared in these contexts before. The movement I seek to discuss in this article is, rather, a *normalisation* of such appearances within arts venue schedules and the various textual and performative developments that are occurring in tandem with that normalisation.

¹¹ Niall MacKinnon, *The British Folk Scene: Musical Performance and Social Identity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993); Michael Brocken, *The British Folk Revival 1944-2002* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Britta Sweers, *Electric Folk; The Changing Face of English Traditional Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹² See, for instance, John Francmanis, 'National Music to National Redeemer: The Consolidation of a 'Folk-Song' Construct in Edwardian England', *Popular Music* Vol. 21, No. 1 (2002), 1-25: 13.

¹³ Such a survey is beyond the scope of this article, but is in the process of being compiled as part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project based at the University of Sunderland, and entitled *Performing Englishness in New English Folk Music and Dance*. The project ends in September 2009, and the findings are due to be published in 2010. It must be noted, therefore, that many of the thoughts presented here are based on ongoing research, with, for instance, some interviews yet to be conducted. This is particularly true in the case of work on the group Methera, which formed after the commencement of the aforementioned research project. However, this article looks in most part at intertextual references and cultural – rather than conscious – associative systems, the assertion of which is largely achievable through the author's history of ethnographic research in the field. Vital participant observation of the audience experience has been carried out in all of the areas discussed – an experience, it must be remembered, that does not generally include in-depth discussion of cultural and textual issues with performers.

¹⁴ 'The Gold that You Are Searching For is in Your Own Backyard' *English Acoustic Collective*, date unknown, <http://www.englishacousticcollective.org.uk/> (2 April 2008).

¹⁵ The term has often been used to refer to Ornette Coleman's Double Quartet, and most significantly appeared as a verb in the title of that group's pioneering debut album: The Ornette Coleman Double Quartet, *Free Jazz (a Collective Improvisation)*. (LP, Atlantic Records, SD 1364, 1960).

¹⁶ 'The Gold'.

¹⁷ 'English Acoustic Collective' *English Acoustic Collective*, date unknown, <http://www.englishacousticcollective.org.uk/EAC/index.html> (2 April 2008).

¹⁸ Chris Wood, 'Not Icons but Jewels: Music and Loss in England', *Journal of Music in Ireland* (2006), <http://www.thejmi.com/article/413> (2 April 2008).

¹⁹ Here, I am using the term 'textual' in the most general sense, that is, pertaining to the nature of the audible construct. In actuality, the majority of the discussion in this article will be directed towards instrumental music.

²⁰ See Eliza Carthy, *Rough Music* (CD, Topic Records TSCD554, 2005); John Spiers and Jon Boden, *Bellow* (CD, Fellside Recordings FECD175, 2003).

²¹ English Acoustic Collective, 'Train Tune/Tom Cat', *Ghosts* (CD, RUF records, RUFCD09, 2004), Track 3.

²² I use the term 'tune' here as it is used in English folk music culture generally – that is, to denote the basic ethnomusical unit: a single-line melody, usually in AABB – or, less commonly, AABBC – form ('Train Tune' is the former), where each part is typically eight bars in length.

²³ English Acoustic Collective, 'Train Tune/Tom Cat'.

²⁴ The pizzicato figure is built through a combination of the lowest three strings on the viola (tuned down a tone, to B \flat , F and C respectively), and the equivalent strings on the violin.

²⁵ English Acoustic Collective, 'St. George's Day/Cuckoo's Nest', *Ghosts*, Track 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ I use the term 'fiddle' here, as it is commonly used in English folk music culture, to denote a violin or viola (although in the majority of cases it refers to the former). The term is often used specifically to acknowledge the instruments' use in the traditional genre: if one plays the

'violin' one is probably playing 'art music', while if one plays the 'fiddle' one is most likely to play a folk or traditional repertoire. This use of the term as a contradistinctive device is by no means limited to England, but is worth clarifying. For the purposes of this article, it is interesting to note that the instruments are referred to as 'violin' and 'viola'. Whilst the EAC are not unique amongst English folk musicians for using these terms, the choice to do so here amplifies associations with 'art' rather than 'folk' culture.

²⁸ Chris Wood, 'Albion', *The Lark Descending* (CD, RUF records, RUFCD10, 2005), Track 2.

²⁹ *Christmas Champions, English Acoustic Collective, 2007,*

<http://www.englishacousticcollective.org.uk/champs/index.html> (2 April 2008).

³⁰ Chris Wood, 'England in Ribbons', *Trespasser* (CD, RUF records, RUFCD11, 2007), Track 4.

³¹ Likewise, the interaction of folk musicians with art music towards the end of the second period of revival resulted in extended works such as Alistair Anderson's classically tinged *Steel Skies* (1982) but this was specifically Northumbrian, rather than English folk. The close relationship between Northumbrian folk music and art music contexts and performers has been cultivated since, by both Anderson and Kathryn Tickell. See, for instance, Anderson's and Tickell's staff profiles on The Newcastle University website:

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/sacs/staff/profile/a.m.anderson>;

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/sacs/staff/profile/k.d.tickell> (both 22 April 2008).

³² In fact, this 'limited' instrumentation is something of a self-imposed constraint. Although all three individuals are polymath in terms of their instrumental performing abilities, the only regular change in instrumentation within the context of the EAC is Wood's moving between fiddle and guitar.

³³ In their recent, heavily quantitative survey of musical consumption in England, Chan and Goldthorpe identify an omnivore-univore reading where 'omnivorousness is taken to express a new aesthetic – perhaps less inclusive than it may at first appear – that is itself exploited in status competition'. This reading would seem to corroborate succinctly the observations of 'the mainstream' milieu offered here. Chan Tak Wing and John H. Goldthorpe, 'Social Stratification and Cultural Consumption: Music in England', *European Sociological Review* Vol. 23, No. 1 (2007), 1-19: 14.

³⁴ Methera, 'Methera' *Myspace*, 2008, <http://www.myspace.com/methera> (2 April 2008).

³⁵ Methera, sleeve notes: *Methera* (CD, Independent YAN001, 2008).

³⁶ Methera, 'Mount Hills Set', *Methera*, Track 6.

³⁷ Methera, 'Gig Book' *Methera*, 2008, <http://www.methera.co.uk/reviewsgigbook.html> (2 September 2008).

³⁸ For more on the session context in English folk music, see Jonathan P. J. Stock, 'Ordering Performance, Leading People: Structuring an English Folk Music Session', *The World of Music* Vol. 46, No. 1 (2004), 41-70; and Simon G. Keegan-Phipps, *Teaching Folk: The Educational Institutionalization of Folk Music in Contemporary England*, Doctoral Thesis (Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle University, 2008), 263-7.

³⁹ There is much of interest regarding tourist/audience perceptions of a traditional musical event's authenticity and perceived spontaneity in Lesley Stevenson, 'Commodification and Authenticity in The Traditional Music and Tourism Initiative', *European Centre for the Experience Economy*, 2003,

http://experience-economy.2yellows.org/wp-content/UserFiles/File/CommodificationandAuthenticityintheTraditionalMusicandTourismInitiative_03.pdf

(3 October 2003).

⁴⁰ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 66. Banes quotes Steve Paxton, a central figure in the Contact Improvisation movement, as having explained 'We're focused on the phenomenon, rather than on the presentation'. *Ibid.* 67.

⁴¹ A detailed survey of the phenomenon is sadly beyond the scope of this article; anecdotally, it would appear to be something of a recent cultural import from America, where it also has close ties with folk musics.

⁴² Methera, Website gig book.

⁴³ William Weber, *Music and the Middle Class: The Social Structure of Concert Life in London, Paris and Vienna between 1830 and 1848* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 3. It is important to note that house concerts are mentioned by Locke as a specifically *art music* orientated milieu in late nineteenth/early twentieth century America: Ralph Locke, 'Paradoxes

of the Woman Music Patron in America', *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. 78, No. 4 (1994), 798-825: 804. See also Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music* (London: University of California Press, 1989), 43, 147-8.

⁴⁴ For the former, see The Demon Barbers, *+24db* (CD, The Demon Barbers DBS001, 2008); for the latter, see Bellowhead, *Burlesque* (CD, Westpark Music LC|07535, 2006).

⁴⁵ Celebratory allegiance to the latter is also becoming increasingly popular within English folk music, with Jim Moray's album *Low Culture* demonstrating that allegiance – and signposting the dichotomy – most explicitly: Jim Moray, *Low Culture* (CD, NIAG Records NIBL007, 2008).

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