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Published in:
Ethnomusicology Forum

DOI:
10.1080/17411912.2026.2628779

Publication date:
2026

Document Version
Author accepted manuscript

Link to publication in ResearchOnline

Citation for published version (Harvard):
McKerrell, S 2026, 'Review: Folk arts podcast', *Ethnomusicology Forum*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 110-113. https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2026.2628779

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Download date: 06. Nov. 2026

Review: Folk Arts Podcast

The Access Folk Podcast and our special series on Folk Arts, Cultural Policy and UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, presented by Esbjörn Wettermark, produced by Kitty Turner, The University of Sheffield, 2025, https://accessfolk.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/activities/podcast.

This podcast brings together a timely snapshot of the folk arts policy makers and front-line organisations working across the British Isles and in the North of Ireland, just as the United Kingdom has surprisingly ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The podcast is from *Access Folk*, containing a series of three hour-long episodes that survey the current context for folk arts and traditional music and dance organisations, including fascinating interviews with leading members of those organisations, and their thoughts and ambitions in relation to cultural policy and the future of ICH in Britain and Ireland. *Access Folk* is a UKRI-funded Future Leaders Fellowship led by Professor Fay Hield at the University of Sheffield. Described as a 'sudden change' in 2024, the UK did a 'U-turn' towards the Convention on ICH marking what was for many of us a surprise announcement following years of government resistance. Both the interviewees and the podcasts as a whole reveal a hope that the Convention might offer an opportunity to raise the profile of their own traditional practices and organisations. Most are sceptical that money will follow ratification to fund folk arts in the British Isles, but there is clearly an appetite to use the ratification as a moment to improve the standing of traditional music, dance and crafts, through state-sponsored legitimation of individual traditions in the UNESCO lists.

The three episodes are divided by territory: In episode one, Esbjörn Wettermark talks to Dr Breesha Maddrell the Director of Culture Vanin in the Isle of Man and Ciarán Ó Maoláin from the Armagh Pipers Club. In episode two, we hear from Danny KilBride from Trac Cymru (Wales) and Katy Spicer from the English Folk Dance and Song Society, where we learn more about the Arts Councils in the nations and regions of the UK and the emerging shape of the implementation of the 2003 Convention. In Scotland, Wettermark meets with Steve Byrne of Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland (TRACS) and narrates dimensions of the conference where the different organisations across the British Isles came together. We learn much about the governance and structure of these organisations, and the podcast is particularly useful in outlining the institutional relationship between government and these arts organisations.

The podcast series is valuable in several ways: Wettermark and the team set out what the 2003 Convention on ICH does via its three lists to safeguard living heritage; it also reveals the complexity and some of the nuances of cultural policy for traditional arts across the different parts of the British Isles and on the island of Ireland. This is important because the UK will be one of the most constitutionally and politically complex territories that has ratified the UNESCO Convention, and the podcast unveils this territorial and political complexity across the three episodes. Understanding the complexity of a 'four nations' (Kearney 2006) approach to traditional arts and culture is critical because of the (substantive) differences in devolved approaches to arts across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and the additional consequences for legally or culturally distinct places such as the Isle of Man and Cornwall. For this alone, the podcast is hugely valuable for anyone working at the interface of traditional/folk arts and cultural policy across the islands of Britain and Ireland. Centrally, the series points towards the potential for the implementation of the ICH Convention to provide a public vehicle for the legitimation of traditional music, dance, crafts and storytelling in the public life of the British Isles and Ireland.

The plurality of approaches across the interviews is fascinating. Manx culture situates ICH within the biosphere discourse, integrating Manx culture within much wider sweeps of environmental, social and cultural flows. The exact position of ICH is emergent on the Isle of Man and may well be incorporated through the Crown Dependencies legislation. Culture Vannin, the key Manx cultural agency for the island

and its culture, has a very active presence on the Isle of Man and internationally, and they are hopeful that the policies surrounding ICH might provide a further platform for their ongoing, and relatively energetic promotion of Manx language, music and culture. Unusually, Culture Vannin is closely embedded with the politics of Man and has a direct relationship to government, which is distinct from almost all the other organisational governance structures.

In Northern Ireland, Wettermark meets with the Armagh Piper Club secretary Ciarán Ó Maoláin to discuss the aims and strategies that underpin their teaching of Uilleann pipes and the annual William Kennedy piping festival in November. In an interesting aside, Ó Maoláin suggests that amidst the heavy reporting burdens for all folk arts organisations in receipt of public money, they decline to return the equalities information on religious background, sexual orientation, ethnic origins, etc. of their audiences because they don't believe that this data actually contributes to the efficacy of Arts Council funding. They do however look at deprivation and socio-economic data across their participants. The podcast therefore usefully points towards disjunctures between policy makers who award annual funding and the end users, who have somewhat different priorities regarding what educational and arts organisations can (and should) do within their communities. The interview also touches upon the ever shifting union between Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland, and the podcast reveals that there is an appetite (at least in Armagh) for much greater collaboration across the island of Ireland as demonstrated by the 2017 inscription of the Uilleann pipes as ICH under the UNESCO Convention, perhaps a model for Scottish piping or English free reed or song traditions.

Wettermark is on firm ground with Katy Spicer from the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) who describes the very substantive programme of folk arts from EFDSS in England, who are a national portfolio (regularly funded) organisation funded by Arts Council England. Firm, because EFDSS has a longer-term financial security than many others, that shows in their discussion and the priorities of the organisation in diversifying audiences for English folk music and dance and their educational objectives. Inclusivity and race feature in Spicer's nuanced discussion of Morris dance in England and the challenges of crafting an inclusive discourse around practices that have undergone rapid changes in context and transmission in recent decades. But the conversation raises important and consequential questions for ICH in the UK, such as how the implementation of the Convention will navigate ethnic and racial diversity which has been a recurrent theme in English folk arts over the past twenty years. A focus on the practice and its historicity of place, rather than the race or ethnicity of the performers is the obvious way ahead, but the question of indigeneity is usefully foregrounded in the podcast (if not cleanly delineated).

In the final episode, Wettermark interviews Steve Byrne from Traditional Arts and Culture (TRACS) in Edinburgh, Scotland. The interview is revealing in that there is complexity in the Scottish public square around how language and traditional arts are supported and understood, but the episode also reveals how the traditional arts can provide a sense of cultural capital for politicians that can make them more visible in the state-sponsored sphere and in the grey literature. However, in Scotland there have been recent changes to the status of the languages of Gaelic and Scots that have elevated their importance in national life, and that will interact with any implementation of the ICH Convention. Byrne makes an important point when it comes to the agency of conventions and policy when he says, 'we see that the art forms we work with are actually bulwarks of traditional culture and modes of expression, and the ways that people can actually feel confident in using the language is often through the traditional arts' (Steve Byrne, episode 3). There is potential therefore in the coming years for traditional song, music, dance, crafts and drama to benefit directly from resourcing that flows from implementation of the ICH Convention within the UK, despite the scepticism across the interviewees in the podcasts that it may lead to direct resourcing of traditional cultural practices.

Wettermark's gentle questioning encourages the interviewees to discuss their frustrations with the ongoing tensions between political and artistic communities; they all call for greater funding for the arts across the UK, often citing international examples (particularly Ireland) which do genuinely expose how poorly arts are funded in the UK. The podcast reveals that almost all of the key stakeholders in these folk arts organisations feel that folk and traditional music and dance are poorly understood by their own umbrella arts councils. The Welsh conversation with Danny KilBride from Trac Cymru reveals frustrations with what might be termed the long-term bureaucratic creep of cultural policy for arts, both because it requires increasingly burdensome requirements for arts organisations to measure and report on multiple dimensions of their activities, as well as a fatigue from the inconsequential outcomes of all that burdensome reporting to national funders. Wettermark voices this neatly when he says, 'The increasing administrative burden paired with less funding and little clarity as to how the data they supply would support arts development in their regions, is a recurring source of frustration' (Esbjörn Wettermark, episode 2). Perhaps, however, the implementation of the ICH Convention might encourage the UK government to provide significant funding across the nations of the UK for traditional arts archives, as powerfully advocated by Byrne in episode three.

There has always been a constructive ambiguity about the terms 'traditional' and 'folk' in the British Isles (going back several hundred years). Interestingly, English performers have always migrated towards the term 'folk' and Scottish towards the term 'traditional' for complex socio-political reasons over many decades. Helpfully for listeners, Wettermark provides a definition early on in the first episode of what he means by 'folk arts', describing it as 'art forms and styles of cultural expressions that are based in oral transmission, have a sense of connection to place, and are perceived by practitioners as being a people's culture – something connected to everyday life rather than being part of an institutionalised art form' (Wettermark, episode 1). This is close to my own definition of traditional arts, as practices that have grown out of place-based oral/historical traditions, or are newly created, but shaped by characteristics derived from place-based historical practices, or those defined as traditional by practitioners themselves.[1] Similarly, UNESCO's definition of ICH also rests upon the oral and historical development of 'practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills' that are recognised as key to group identities and their history (UNESCO 2003). The central defining thrust therefore of ICH aligns with that which has developed in a particular place or territory over generations of oral transmission or practice, and critically which is recognised as such by performers or communities of practice. Specifically, the topics in these podcasts focus on 'folk song, traditional music, dance, crafts and storytelling' with historic connections to place, which is helpful because place and time are key to the definition of traditional/folk arts .

The series does a very good job of laying out the complexity of the current context and will stand as a useful record at this moment in time of where folk arts organisations stand in relation to safeguarding and promoting their regional and national intangible cultural heritage. What comes next of course will hopefully be a subject for future work from colleagues at Sheffield and elsewhere, to answer the key question of what the positive and negative impact might be from the UK's signing of the 2003 Convention on ICH.

Note

[1] 'Traditional arts' in the Scottish context has come to mean the 'native Scottish traditions' of music, dance and storytelling (Francis 2010). For further information see (McKerrell 2014; McKerrell and Hornabrook 2023).

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