Marilyn Tucker & Paul Wilson - EFDSS Gold Badge Citation

Citation read by Doc Rowe - Badges presented by Peggy Seeger

Cygnet Theatre, Exeter, 22 July 2016

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The group had been working flat out all week. The plans had been evolving for months. But this was the moment. The fire burnt through the right stick at the right time so that, as the band of local musicians played to the crescendo, the vast head of the Grey Mare swung to look at the audience before going up in flames.

Everybody gasped: children and adults, audience and participants, musicians and artists. In that moment, it became clear that Marilyn and Paul were capable of incredible things. Their commitment to continually achieving incredible things is the reason we are all here today, some thirty-two years after that first Sticklepath Fireshow.

When I was asked many months ago whether I would come along tonight to read this citation it was an easy question to answer. Yes!

This is the third of these presentations I have made, and this evening I am honoured to be here to present English Folk Dance and Song Society Gold Badges to two of my longest standing friends.

The first gold badge was awarded in 1922 and since then over 150 awards have been made. Past recipients include Cecil Sharp, Maud Karpeles, Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Kirkpatrick, and Ewan MacColl. They also include myself and Peggy Seeger who are here to celebrate this evening.

The gold badge is the highest award the Society can confer and it is awarded to Marilyn Tucker and Paul Wilson of Wren Music for their outstanding contribution to the art of folk music and song.

Marilyn Tucker was born in South Zeal on Dartmoor in June 1951, the eldest of three daughters born to Wrey and Margaret; community and trade union stalwarts. She later moved to London with her two young children, Paul and Mary. Marilyn returned to Devon and undertook a social science degree at Rolle College, followed by teacher training. She travelled daily to university from South Zeal. She lived with her sister and their combined four children, just a few doors up from Wrey and Margaret. Wrey would always be singing around the house, proclaiming 'anyone can singing in the evening, but it takes a real man to sing in the morning'.

Paul Wilson's life began with his mother being taken to hospital by tractor in a freak snowstorm in late April 1950. Paul and his younger sister were raised by Michael and Elizabeth, keen amateur philosophers, alternative education enthusiasts and committed members of the community. Paul began piano lessons at the age of six. At Paul's first gig at the age of eleven, adult members of the carol singing choir carried his accordion between houses because - although he could play - Paul was too slight to move along with it as well. He went on to attend Dartington College of Arts to study music, but found himself more drawn to the singing in the pubs of south Devon, and collecting songs from rural and traveller singers. Five years in the band Staverton Bridge taught him that he wanted more than a life on the road.

Marilyn and Paul met in June 1978. Where else, but a pub in South Zeal. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Paul received funding from the Arts Council to run folk concerts which usually took place in theatres and the back rooms of pubs. Marilyn went along to listen. During evenings spent reflecting on the political and philosophical context for the art, they concluded that this music was too important to be confined to the back rooms. Marilyn describes what they embarked upon as 'cultural activism', a concept that remains core to their work today.

In English folklore, the wren is the king of the birds. The wren is small, and sings disproportionately loudly for its size. The Cutty Wren - one of the oldest English folk songs, thought to be sung at the peasant's revolt - tells of the possibility of a more equal world. The wren seemed the perfect emblem for this new venture into cultural activism.

Marilyn and Paul decided working together would be their statement to the world about their relationship. In 1983 they embarked upon their first project together, a series of concerts and workshops in schools, under the name The Wren Trust.

Just a few months later this fledgling organisation was making international connections to celebrate the music further afield. A group of Newfoundland musicians came to Devon and found kindred spirits in Marilyn and Paul.

Jim Payne, one of those first musicians from Newfoundland in 1983, says:
"I've witnessed Marilyn and Paul's perseverance and dedication to building Wren, and how committed they've been. To collecting and presenting traditional music in traditional ways, and how determined they've been to be inclusive of as many people as possible and applying the music to furthering political awareness and activism."

From 1983 until now Wren Music has continued to grow as a considerable and well-respected organisation. There are too many projects to describe, too many participants to name, too many colleagues to thank. But to mention just a few.

Paul and Marilyn recorded their album Bread and Roses in 1987 and Wren Trust became a registered charity in the same year. They undertook Songs of the West, a recording project with Martin Graebe based on the collection of Sabine Baring-Gould, in 1989. The story of how they stumbled across several of Baring-Gould's thought-to-be-lost notebooks at Killerton House in 1992 is too long to tell now.

In 1997, with the change in government, more money became available for community arts, and Wren Trust employed a series of admin support workers. Then in 1998 employed Chris Foster to establish the Baring-Gould folk festival. In that year they also embarked on another major recording project, Dead Maid's Land. To mark the millennium they assembled 2000 Voices in Plymouth Pavillions. Communities in Bratton Clovelly, Newton Abbot, Combe Martin, Newtown, Exwick, Whipton and Okehampton have enjoyed large-scale theatrical projects. And St Budeaux in Plymouth, Mincinglake in Exeter and Okehampton have enjoyed outdoor huge lantern processions.

With the arrival of the national lottery and a culture secretary who believed in 'people's art', the early 2000s saw Wren Trust enjoy significant public investment, and series of full time trainees joined the team. More recently European Union funded projects have taken the team and participants abroad to share traditional music, and the relationship is ongoing with Newfoundland and South Africa.

In 2009 Wren Trust officially became Wren Music - a fact some local newspapers seem reluctant to admit! Since 2010, austerity and the dismantling of our public system has shown Wren Music as an organisation that can skip, swerve, diversify and adapt to sustain itself. The continued existence of Wren Music, and the absolute dedication and tenacity of the two people we celebrate tonight, are no coincidence.

Across Devon, Wren Music now runs five weekly community choirs, one specialist men's singing group, three weekly folk orchestras, two specialist orchestras, seven youth groups, a programme of work in secure schools and special schools, an annual folk festival, occasional major community projects and countless one off workshops.

Wren would not be here if Paul and Marilyn hadn't set it up, but it would not still be here now without the work of the fantastic team. At the start of this concert we enjoyed music from the Wren Band. You can almost feel from their performance that this group of people are not only musically brilliant, but also share a commitment to enabling others to achieve their very best.

David Faulkner is an incredible English bagpiper, who has ceaseless energy and natural instinct for using his music to transform the lives of the people he meets.

Nick Wyke is a remarkable all-round musician, who effortlessly sees the bigger picture and will ensure that no one is left behind.

Becki Driscoll has exceptional skill on the fiddle, and will work tirelessly to ensure everyone can participate in any tune she writes or arranges.

Sarah Owen is an outstanding singer, who marries her technical brilliance with her limitless generosity of spirit for everyone she works with.

Jon Dyer is a phenomenal flute player who lives and breathes the folk tradition. His effortless skill in creating music in partnership with others means he works with experience far beyond his years.

Paulo Tucker is the best acoustic sound engineer around. He's a natural problem solver, constantly making molehills out of mountains, with lightness and humour.

This staff team is augmented by a group of freelance music leaders: Dave Rich, Matt Norman, Tiggy Saint, Bella Lilley, and we are joined tonight by Rebecka Lyons and Emily Howard. Volunteers make events and workshops possible, including in particular Wren's admin volunteer Debbie Jessop and archive volunteer Jenny Norman - who are also here tonight. Over the years a great many people have served as Wren Music Trustees, supporting Paul and Marilyn to further their vision - some of whom are here tonight. And of course we must not forget Ale&Cake who organised this event.

During all of this, Marilyn and Paul have found time to look beyond the parameters of their work with Wren. Paul has spent many many hours on trains to London and Gateshead informing national music education policy and shaping the sector we have today. Marilyn is a long standing member and former Chair of the Folk, Roots and Traditional section of the Musicians' Union. She also has a strong commitment to developing her skills in oral history, and in particular turning ordinary people's memories and experiences into excellent and often catchy songs.

When asked what she was most proud of, Marilyn replied that her usual answer is that Wren Music has made an opportunity for young musicians to have a job, and be able to call themselves professional musicians in Devon. But lately, her answer is a little different. During the social turmoil of Brexit and the accompanying political uncertainty, Marilyn feels happy that people say Wren Music gives them hope, purpose and a sense of community. Wren Music was born in the 1980s during the rise of mass-consumerism and a drive for individualistic living, Marilyn and Paul's work swam against that tide, against Margaret Thatcher's ideas for this country. We must leave here tonight in no doubt that they will continue to confront social division by bringing communities together, to share and celebrate our complex identities.

Throughout the life of Wren, Paul and Marilyn have given support to and been supported by their three children - Mary, Paulo and Amy. As well as their three grandchildren - Mary's son Stefan and Paulo's daughters Eva and Lilia - many of whom are here this evening.

For many years Marilyn and Paul lived at number 38 in South Zeal. In the year 2000 they upsized to number 117 in Okehampton, in part so that they could easily put up more visiting artists. Now, number 117 is almost another member of the Wren team - providing warmth, shelter and a home away from home for countless artists, volunteers and friends throughout the years, including most of us on the stage tonight. It is a sign of Paul and Marilyn's generosity of spirit that this place exists, and welcomes us all back again and again.

Marilyn says: "Everybody knows Paul is a great all round musician, he can play a number of instruments and knows lots about song. But his greatest strength is his ability to match people and music: creating arrangements for a variety of voices, making musical scores for plays that fit with the action, and enabling any standard of player to join in. He'll work tirelessly to make sure people can shine."

Paul says: "Marilyn has a connection with the whole idea of folk song repertoire which she didn't have to learn – she can't help but live and breathe it. She's honest, direct, quick, intelligent, has an enviable memory and unerring ability to sort out what's important. Because of this she is able to make amazing, creative connections, which means she has ideas for great new projects and write excellent songs."

This award came as a surprise. It was not asked for, nor was it expected. But Marilyn and Paul have inspired so many thousands of people that it was merely a matter of time until someone said 'they need to be recognised'.

Peggy Seeger, patron of Wren Music and performer this evening, says:
"As far as I know, there's no-one else like them, doing what they're doing in the community, to the extent that they're doing it. They've used music to create community and they've used community to create music."

Their individual achievements are almost impossible to disentangle from each other, and each would not be who they are without the other. This evening, technically, they will receive one gold badge each. In reality, they will have two gold badges that they share equally. For some, this complete meshing of professional achievement, indeed complete meshing of lives, would result in a crisis of identity.. But Paul and Marilyn have given themselves to their vision, and they enjoy a shared identity far greater than the sum of its parts.

Mervyn Bennun, one of Wren Music's first trustees, says:
"Paul and Marilyn are the perfect illustration of the fact that the more of yourself that you give, the bigger you become. Every memory of Paul and Marilyn is linked to their total dedication to fighting for everything worth fighting for peace, freedom, human dignity, an end to racism, an end to war. They never do this as a sort of soppy, soft-centred do-goodism. They do it with music and words that set hearts ablaze."

Presentation by Peggy Seeger

It says here I should say "I will present this award to these two illustrious members of the folk community" but I'd like to add how lucky you [audience] are to have them as members of your community.

When you have a talent as special as these people do, it would be tempting to travel around and receive the glory. But they have done the hard thing, and stayed put to grow the community we see here this evening.

We live in a patriarchy, so I will present to Marilyn first, and then to Paul, one of the best feminists I know.