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‘I realised it was the same song’: Familiarisation, assimilation and making meaning with new folk music

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Abstract

In many settings, folk music continues to be a vibrant resource for contemporary audiences. Existing research in the folk music scene has largely been centred on participation, reflecting historical tensions surrounding the professionalisation of the genre. However, in this paper, we challenge the binary between participatory and presentational forms of music (Turino, 2008), positioning listening as a form of participation and highlighting the work done by audiences for presentational folk music. This paper presents the findings of a longitudinal, qualitative study of listening experience around the release of a new folk album by the first author: Fay Hield’s *Old Adam* (2016). Through a series of focus groups, eight participants gave increasingly personalised accounts of their relationship with the music, from first reactions to finding deep meaning in the songs. We draw on disparate strands of research including developments in music psychology and audience research, as well as theoretical literature on the value of storytelling, to consider how songs go from unknown entities to important emotional resource for listeners. We demonstrate that familiarisation with new music is impacted on by: live and recorded listening contexts, musical preference, existing knowledge of folk music repertory, and genre conventions. We show that while listeners may make their own meaning from music, they need to find resemblance between a song’s meaning and their own lived experience in order to connect with it deeply. While theoretical storytelling literature suggests narrative is important as a means of mentally rehearsing for future experiences, instead we found participants reject that notion, understanding rather that song stories act as a tool for reflection and in making meaning of previous experience. This depth of engagement shows that while these listeners may not be getting their fiddles out or leading a chorus song in a singaround, they are far from a passive audience.

Introduction

There is a nostalgic archetype of traditional singers in England gathering in a rural public house sharing songs of love, death, work and play that stem from time immemorial and speak to and for the masses. Although this myth has been roundly busted (Boyes, 1993), communal music making is still valued with folk clubs and festivals remaining popular, and people sharing songs and identifying as part of a folk tradition.[1] Alongside this practice, new models of performance have emerged, involving the professionalisation of artists, increasingly commercialised products and more presentational performance spaces and formats. Although an established repertoire remains as the bedrock of the English folk canon, exemplified in The Full English Digital Archive,[2] mediated access to these resources and changes in performance contexts means contemporary musicians and audiences can be introduced to material as new rather than as part of an inherited tradition.

This study explores this process through an examination of how listeners engage with a new album of traditional songs. The research was conducted around the preview, release and tour of Hield's album *Old Adam* (2016). The album contains twelve songs based on traditional stories which Hield intended to explore what is it to be human, from peasants to the monarchy, the mundane to the supernatural, personal to societal issues. Eight participants took part in a longitudinal research project over six months investigating their reactions to the album over time.[3] Drawing on the authors' combined backgrounds in ethnomusicology, audience studies, and music psychology, this paper tells the story of the participants' growing familiarity with the album. Contextualising songs against their broader engagement with folk music and finding meaning in the songs for their wider lives, we explored how folk music listeners generate meaning from 'new' folk songs.

Folk music listeners

The authors' backgrounds make for diverse fields in which to seek prior understanding of folk music listeners' experience of new music. In the following section, we consider: previous research on folk music audiences, psychological investigation into musical familiarisation, meaning-making in music, and storytelling. In doing so, we draw on literature from ethnomusicology, music psychology (both social and experimental), as well as more theoretical literature and cultural studies publications.

Folk music audiences and participation

Previous research on folk participation has explored music-making within contexts where the distinction between performer and listener is blurred. Research on the value of amateur music engagement has focussed overwhelmingly on specialist or localised community contexts (Dunn, 1980; Pickering and Green, 1987; Russell, 2004) and specifically the amateur-heavy folk club scene (Pickering and Green, 1987; MacKinnon, 1993; Hield, 2010). While this research has produced rich findings on identity and community, it also emphasises a participation-centric definition of the value of traditional music engagement. To our knowledge, there is only one existing study exploring the experiences of listeners for professional, presentational folk music: McKerrell's (2012) study of six listeners at a concert by the Scottish band, Malinky. While this is a welcome first excursion into the experiences of audiences for professional folk music, McKerrell does not discuss the reasons for this absence

of literature, nor does he set his study against the context of contentious arguments around the legitimacy of professional and presentational performances within the contemporary folk scene.

We use the term 'presentational' as in Turino's (2008) monograph, in which he sets out a taxonomy of recorded and live music. Live music is subsequently broken down into: presentational music, where lines are drawn between the music-making artist and the non-music-making audience; and participatory music, where the emphasis is on the activity and social interactions, rather than on the quality of the music made and there is little to separate 'musicians' and 'audience'. Participatory music is favoured throughout Turino's book as being more 'democratic' than presentational music (2008:92). Turino notes that many participatory musical cultures have subsequently spawned presentational counterparts, so indeed has English folk music developed a branch of professional, presentational performance, in which artists provide music for audiences. Sweers' (2005) investigation into the folk rock scene in the 1990s provides a clear account from a performer perspective, though her discussion of the audience is restricted to demographic profiling, and she leaves us with the question 'what made the music appealing to the audience?' (2005:137). By exploring the experiences of a population who engage with folk music in such a presentational context, our study challenges the idea that participation (playing/singing) is the only legitimate means of engaging with folk music.

Music psychology and musical familiarity

A primary research question was to explore how listeners respond to, and ultimately find meaning in, new music. Music psychology offers a rich source of insight into how music becomes familiar, and how music can function as a meaningful emotional resource. Under experimental conditions, it has been found that enjoyment of music increases with familiarity, until a saturation point when enjoyment begins to decrease (for a summary see King and Prior, 2013:2). This Inverted-U curve is affected by the complexity of the music; simple songs are enjoyable with minimal exposure, but listeners tire of them more easily (see North and Hargreaves, 1995). Greasley and Lamont (2013) find that listeners take steps to mitigate this decline by 'putting the music away' when they become bored of it. Furthermore, listeners can dislike a piece of music on first hearing, but grow to like it over time. First reactions are often focused on the mood and narrative of new music, with listeners' attention shifting over time to consider musical structures and themes (Prior, 2013). Unknown pieces may be stylistically familiar or unfamiliar depending on the listener's previous musical experience (Bharucha, 1994; Huron, 2006; Prior, 2013), suggesting that the process of familiarisation may be affected by existing knowledge and expectation of generic conventions.

Nevertheless, research in this area has notable gaps. Most studies have not offered listeners agency in their choice of music or frequency of listening (a notable exception is Greasley and Lamont, 2013). There is a lack of qualitative, longitudinal research in natural settings into the process of familiarisation with new music. We have found no research into how this familiarisation process might be impacted by the modes of recorded or live music listening. Additionally, while researchers acknowledge that listeners' first reactions to a new piece of music are impacted on by their existing knowledge of the genre, there is no discussion of how this affects the longer familiarisation process. Hield's music, composed within a genre colloquially termed 'traditional' (Hield, 2010), is likely to present a peculiar case for the

familiarisation process; within this genre, a high level of musical material repeat across different songs. Pieces displaying significant storyline similarity are grouped together as versions of particular 'song families'[4], and less substantial elements such as melodic content or floating verses appear across the canon (Roud and Bishop, 2012). Therefore 'new' folk songs may be familiar to the listener in more than just style, as identifiable elements may already be known. As such, any process of familiarisation may be notably different within folk music.

Meaning and music as an emotional resource

There is a gap in the literature between studies into listeners' engagement with unknown music, and research on how listeners use music as an emotional resource (for example, DeNora, 2000). At some point, listeners encounter a piece of music as unknown, and over time assimilate it into their emotional lives, yet we are aware of no research that traces this process in real time. Studies into musical meaning-making are retrospective, requiring participants to reflect on how pieces became meaningful. Lamont and Webb (2010) find that listeners can have long-term and short-term favourites, influenced by recent exposure to music, whether chosen or accidental. Long-term favourites can go on to become 'musical autobiographies to reconstruct their life story' (Lamont and Greasley, 2016; Sloboda, Lamont and Greasley, 2008). Indeed, they can become favourites because they are associated with significant emotional events in the listeners' lives (DeNora, 2000; Lamont and Webb, 2010).

It is worth noting that the meaning listeners derive from songs is not equivalent to the meaning intended by the author and that connections cannot be assumed between either performers and listeners, or for listeners as an homogenous body. The processes listeners go through in contextualising new folk music involves layers of complexity, depending on their existing knowledge base. Atkinson (2002) observes how knowledge of multiple pieces in a tradition creates a network of understanding that can be drawn on to navigate individual performances. While anyone can enjoy a performance for its aesthetics and internal plot, there is an assumption that a deeper understanding of the wider folk song repertoire or the history of a song's performance context brings a deeper level of understanding to a performance. The process of meaning-making is therefore culturally-specific.

Storytelling

Many folk songs have a particularly pronounced narrative element, demonstrating links to actual events or historical, geographical and cultural settings. Scholarly interest in these narratives typically focuses on textual analysis (e.g. literary, Renwick, 1980; or historical, Palmer, 1988), with little research on the impact of this on listeners' experience. Rare exceptions are found in Russell's (2004) work with singers of hunting songs where he identified relationships between lyrics, the singer and audience reception for this close knit social group, and McKerrell's (2012) finding that contemporary Scottish folk audiences retain an aesthetic appreciation of a performance longer than semantic understanding of songs. These studies do not explain how listeners make sense of songs with prominent storylines over time, nor do they consider the influence of live and recorded formats on the listeners' engagement with these narratives.

Literature on storytelling offers a starting point for understanding how song narratives might be meaningful to listeners. Previously, it has been claimed that stories function as an important personal development tool. The characters and situations contained within are thought to provide the listener with a window into experiences beyond their own lives (Braid 1996; Miller et al. 1990; Tirrell, 1990), echoing Fine's (2002) broader research into the psychological and social benefits of role play. However, research in this area is overwhelmingly theoretical, describing the value of storyworlds generally, rather than the impact of particular occasions. Heywood (2004) explored these theories of narrative within real-life contexts, finding that participants were quick to reject overtly 'scholarly' interpretations of the value of storytelling. They denied that narratives were a means of imparting social values, instead describing them as 'uplifting' or 'entertaining' (2004:52–53). While storytelling may have the capacity to instigate emotional and moral development, empirical studies have encountered much more casual and even disinterested reactions requiring further study to explore this tension.

Previous studies show the need for research into audiences for professional, presentational folk music which have until now been overlooked in favour of participatory settings. In addition, there is a lack of understanding of how generic conventions have impact on listeners' familiarisation with new music. For example, the use of choruses and tunes across multiple songs may speed up the process of familiarisation for listeners with existing knowledge of those musical elements (Hield, 2013). In addition, this other knowledge may shape how the listener interprets the meaning of the song. There is an absence of research into the processes that happen when unknown music becomes familiar and subsequently meaningful for listeners. Our project applies developments in audience research and music psychology to explore the nature of listeners' engagement with professional folk music as it occurs in both live and recorded formats, using the case study of Hield's *Old Adam* album to explore how they make sense of newly-produced folk music.

Methods

Our research questions pre-determined many of our methodological decisions. We were keen to understand how familiarisation works within as natural a setting as possible, so the experimental conditions that have often been used in research into music familiarisation were not appropriate. In order to shed light on how listeners make meaning from new music in a natural environment, we needed to employ a longitudinal research design.

As this study explored how listeners make meaning from new music, it was phenomenological in nature, concerned with the subjective experience of the participants (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). As such, we needed a qualitative approach to allow participants to share their idiosyncratic music experiences, with the freedom to draw on prior musical knowledge and to think out loud about what music means to them.

We decided to use a focus group because it would provide opportunities for participants to compare and contrast their own experiences, thereby deepening their own understanding of their listening. In addition, focus groups held immediately after musical events allowed us to explore the immediate reactions of multiple participants to the performances. Using a talk-

based approach allowed Price to ask participants to expand on or clarify their comments; folk music audiences are often highly engaged in scholarship around the art form and have a tendency to regurgitate soundbites from folk music literature. It was hoped that the longitudinal conversational approach would help them to examine their own engagement more critically, whilst allowing us to clarify their viewpoints or expand on their opinions.

Focus groups

The focus groups were around 45 minutes in length, taking place immediately after each of the events listed in Table 1 (two performances and a public engagement event). The conversations were semi-structured, with very loose lines of questioning in order for participants to shape the conversation to what was meaningful to them (example questions are given in the Appendix). Lines of inquiry for the group discussions were devised by both Hield and Price, with the focus groups being carried out by Price alone, as we felt participants would be more honest or critical about their engagement without Hield present.

Table 1: Events attended by participants

Date	Event
15th October 2015	Old Adam album preview show Fay Hield and the Hurricane Party Music in the Round, The Crucible Studio, Sheffield
13th November 2015	Public engagement event: 'Seeing Human in Song' Round-table of scholars and practitioners including Hield AHRC Being Human Festival, Upper Chapel, Sheffield
15th March 2016	Old Adam tour performance Fay Hield and the Hurricane Party University of Sheffield Concert Series, Firth Hall, Sheffield

The methods used within this study were innovative, seeking not only to capture our participants' experience of listening, but through ongoing conversations and attendance at a public engagement event, inviting our participants to develop their own understanding of their listening. We have discussed elsewhere the benefits and limitations of this approach considering both the ethics and the validity of such a method (Hield and Price, 2017). We will not rehearse our reflections here, but suffice to say that we were concerned that we may have been priming participants to provide us with the answers which they believed we were looking for. However, there was an unexpected level of resistance amongst the participants, demonstrating their resilience to priming and a desire to have their voice heard. Over the course of the three focus groups, Price reflected back to the participants our conclusions from previous discussions, and was met with frustration when these findings had been reduced to generalisations or translated into unfamiliar, overtly academic language. The longitudinal approach therefore improved the nuance and accessibility of our interpretations of the participants' discussions. In addition, holding multiple focus groups with the same participants emboldened some to voice more controversial opinions in the final focus group, suggesting a longitudinal approach might mitigate the issue of dominant voices in focus groups, as well as

helping to move beyond generic, under-considered responses to more thoughtful answers from the participants. While these methods had their complications, they have been useful in helping participants to develop their own understanding of the listening experience, significantly enhancing our ability to capture that experience.

Participants

Eight participants took part in this research. This number was limited by the maximum number of people which we felt could take part in a group conversation. While the sample is modest, in this study we decided to prioritise depth of responses over number of participants. The sample is well-representative of folk music audiences: roughly equal gender balance, skewed towards older listeners, three of whom were players or singers themselves (two amateur and one professional), having come to folk music at different points in their lives and through different repertories. Given the time commitment of a longitudinal study, recruitment inevitably skews towards: highly-engaged listeners who are deeply invested in the art form; people who are confident in group settings and willing to talk freely about their experiences, and; often retirees who are under less time pressure. Inevitably, the eight experiences described in this paper will not capture the full spectrum of audience experiences, but does go some way to uncovering the processes underlying how listeners become familiar with new music.

Six of the participants were already engaged in Hield's music and had tickets to the first performance. This does not seem to have radically affected our data as participants were still confident enough to be critical of Hield's music. Given that we were studying their responses to a new album, unknown to all eight participants, their knowledge of Hield's past repertory simply became part of their contextualisation of the music against their existing knowledge.

Analysis

Focus groups were recorded on a portable audio device and transcribed by Price. Each author analysed the transcripts separately, carrying out thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify data relating to familiarisation and meaning-making. Subsequently, subthemes were identified within the data around the following subject matter: (1) participants' experience of hearing the music in live performance, (2) comments about the differences in experience of listening to familiar and unfamiliar music, (3) moments in which participants connected songs from Hield's album to their existing knowledge of folk music, (4) attempts to decipher the meaning or intent of songs, (5) participants' personal meaning-making from the songs they heard, and (6) general reflections on the power of songs and narratives for modern listeners. While each listener's engagement with the new album was idiosyncratic, shaped by their own musical tastes, prior knowledge of folk music, and wider lived experience, this study offers a window into the wider process of familiarisation and meaning-making as it occurs in real time, in natural settings, within a specific music genre.

The following discussion explores participants' comments from these three focus groups. First, we explore how participants become familiar with new music. We demonstrate how bewildering hearing unfamiliar music can be and how little understanding participants take in on first hearing beyond immediate aesthetics and mood. In subsequent listenings, participants began to make connections between these particular songs and the wide folk music repertory.

Participants were often keen to uncover or at least speculate as to the intended meaning or purpose of the songs they were hearing. In the second section, we consider how these new songs may become emotional resources for the participants. This begins with a discussion of participants' thoughts on the morality of folk songs and the purpose of narrative songs and stories more broadly. To finish, we show how participants' own sense of meaning can be at odds with other understandings of the songs' intended message and we foreground the value of individualised meaning-making.

Familiarisation and new music

Hearing new music

The group were first taken to a preview performance of material from the forthcoming album. The first half of the show contained songs from previous albums with three melody instrument accompanists, followed in the second half by the new album tracks accompanied by a six piece band. This was the first time these songs had been played in public, and the first time in Hield's career that she had performed with drum kit and double bass. The repertoire in the first half was familiar to six out of eight of the group. Steve and Anne, however, were not familiar with Hield's output, and therefore the whole set list was new to them. Consequently, Steve and Anne's responses in the post-show discussion reflected on the experience of hearing new music far more than the others participants.

> Steve I think if you hear the songs for the first time, sometimes you don't quite get everything that's going on. Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't. But what I liked was 'The Looking Glass', because I kind of followed the story. Some of the other ones, there's so much going on, I got a bit lost.
>
> Anne That's why it's good to have a mix of songs you're familiar with and stuff that's new to you. I think if you went to a concert and every single song was totally new to you, you'd be a bit like 'arghhh!' Because the concentration required to take all that in would be quite terrific, wouldn't it?

Steve and Anne both describe feelings of sensory overload in hearing a new song for the first time. They were unable to attend to every element on first hearing and, as a result, it was not possible for Steve to comprehend the meaning of some songs. Anne's description of hearing new music is couched in terms of work, effort and concentration. Taken together, these responses depict the act of navigating unfamiliar music as difficult, requiring listeners to have greater focus and concentration than that required for familiar music.

Interestingly, while participants did not always enjoy or understand new songs upon first hearing, they anticipated future enjoyment, with many expressing a desire to listen to the new songs again.

Nicholas ‘[Old] Adam’ [the song] began wonderfully with ‘he doesn’t wear any clothes’. [...] I really wanted to listen to that one, probably more than the rest. But I lost it. That’s going to be a good song!

Max [‘Green Gravel’] was a bit of a surprise. I’m not sure I got it. I might warm to it but I didn’t really follow – having listened to the first half – where it was going. The music, I didn’t quite gel with. But sometimes it takes time.

For Nicholas, the subject matter of ‘Old Adam’ piqued his interest. The longitudinal design of this research enabled us to capture this initial interest in the songs, before participants subsequently became familiar with them. Having heard the first verse and enjoyed the ‘wonderful’ lyrics, Nicholas was keen to listen to an audio recording to discover the story. Both Nicholas and Steve use the term ‘lost’. Perhaps this is a particular quirk of this style of folk music; the songs had a narrative complexity that made it difficult to follow without hearing all the lyrics. A number of participants spoke of wanting to repeatedly listen in order to learn the words and be able to sing along, going so far as to say how grateful they were when artists included lyrics in their album sleeves for this purpose. This implies that for many participants, hearing and learning the words to a song was an important part of their enjoyment.

Max’s desire to listen again was, however, rather different in tone. He described the ‘surprise’ of the first song in the second half. As mentioned earlier, the new album material featured a six-piece band with a drum kit and double bass, a new aesthetic for Hield. Given that Max was already familiar with Hield’s music, the difference in sound in the second half subverted his expectations and may have been a disappointment. Max’s desire to familiarise himself with ‘Green Gravel’ in order to ‘gel’ with it musically, suggests that he intends to listen again without the expectation that it would inhabit a similar sound world to Hield’s previous output.

These comments imply that listeners are aware that enjoyment increases with familiarity. Max showed a willingness to reserve judgement about a song until he was able to listen again. Other participants looked forward to a time when they knew the lyrics well enough to be able to sing along and fully comprehend the twists and turns of the narrative. However, this raises the question of what it is that piques a listener's interest enough to invest time in listening again if they do not particularly like it the first time. For Nicholas, there was something in the lyrics and subject matter that intrigued him. For Max, on the other hand, the impetus to listen again could be connected to navigating a new musical style, or his enjoyment of Hield’s previous musical output that caused him to trust that the new songs would yield satisfaction in time. Though the detail differs, many listeners were driven to deliberately increase their familiarity.

Contextualising new music

After hearing the songs at the preview performance, participants were given copies of the *Green Gravel* EP and, on release, the *Old Adam* album. As participants grew familiar with the tracks through repeated exposure, they came to know songs in different ways. The longitudinal design of this study showed how participants began to identify connections with other songs in the folk music repertory. Participants made sense by identifying familiar elements such as tunes, tropes and choruses that they knew from other songs. Steve and Abigail both described the experience of realising a song had familiar elements.

Steve [Fay] did the one about the prostitute, 'Bad Girl', and I was sitting there thinking 'hang on, this is 'The Streets of Laredo'. [...] There's a massive family of related songs that all share some of the things. Most of them have a very fancy funeral.

Abigail I love when I discover a song that's the same as a different song and I didn't realise… [...] Like recently I discovered a [song called] 'Rackabella' but I know it as 'Bold Sir Rylas' and I realised it was the same song and I'd listened to them both separately many times and just I suddenly realised that it was the same. I just love that.

As seen here, the process of recognising elements from other songs can happen instantaneously or much more slowly, as with Abigail's moment of realisation that 'it was the same song'. Both Steve and Abigail found enjoyment in having recognised common traits between songs. Indeed, this seems to be a distinct joy in listening to folk music. This recognition is dependent on the listener's knowledge of folk music repertory. While all our participants regularly listened to folk music, Steve had a considerably greater knowledge of folk music compared to Abigail. Indeed, there were a number of times in the focus groups in which Steve and Anne, the two musicians in the group, related new songs they heard at Hield's performances to a larger song family. Steve explains that most 'Unfortunate Rake' songs are 'usually' about a cowboy, not only explaining the origins of the song but also that this particular version was unusual to his experience. Steve's comment therefore shows another level of sophistication in not only recognising familiar elements of a song but being able to place it within a song family, and therefore having insight into its narrative, meaning, and historical or cultural origin.

Steve's comment can also be seen as an outward display of knowledge; becoming knowledgeable or an expert on folk music is regarded as somewhat of a badge of honour for folk aficionados (Stock, 2004). A desire to be well-informed about folk music led other participants to research the songs in order to understand their history or meaning. This only came about as participants had the opportunity to repeatedly listen to the songs after the first focus group. In subsequent listenings, they began to hear more of the words and ponder the song's history. Anne tried to trace the origins of the song 'Old Adam' which included a number of references to old-fashioned clothing. Debbie, on the other hand, had previously attended a lecture on variants of 'The Death of Queen Jane'.

Anne But it's interesting because I was just trying to wonder how old ['Old Adam'] was because it was saying about not wearing bows and frills on our lady's dresses and I was thinking 'when's this period then? When's this written?' I looked up when kid gloves became fashionable – the 1730s!

Debbie I went to a really interesting talk about a song which I'd heard one folk singer sing about Queen Jane – Jane Seymour, 'The Death of Queen Jane'. The speaker had done some research into the different versions and why they emphasised certain things and it was hugely political.

For listeners like Anne and Debbie, traditional music appreciation can become a semi-academic hobby. While concerts may be experienced as a standalone event, many listeners commit considerable time, money and effort to understand the music in different ways. This commitment resonates with Stebbins' (2008) notion of 'serious leisure', as these participants have invested emotionally and intellectually in folk music, building bodies of knowledge through a process of edutainment, seeking to be entertained and learn something new in the same breath. In the same vein, participants were interested in the origins of the traditional songs they heard, be that historical, geographical or cultural, and were interested to know about the song's own journey.

> Steve There's sort of two kinds of story, actually. There's the story about the song: where it came from and who sang it and its origins. And there's the story that the song is telling which is often not the same thing.
>
> Pauline [In the artists' introductions, I want to hear] where it's come from or why. […] It makes it richer.
>
> Anne If you're a singer of a song, you have to sing it a lot to get inside it and understand what's going on in the song and I think a good performer is somebody who will do that, who will work it out, what's going on behind the song.
>
> Steve It's one of the other attractions of folk actually, that people have genuinely thought about the songs. [...] They don't just say 'oh, this is a jolly song with a nice chorus'.

Our participants felt that folk music was unusual in having such complex stories recounting rich histories compared to other musical genres (especially pop), and assumed performers invested a lot of thought and research into the material they performed. Indeed, this is one element that some participants really loved about the genre and why they were attracted to performances of this nature. As with many folk artists, Hield provides introductions to most songs, giving information about the material's provenance including the song's composers, source singers, collectors, subsequent singers, or her personal source. The context many songs originate from do not lend themselves to clear histories, and understandings are rather based on differing notions of communal composition or seeking piecemeal historical evidence (Roud, 2017). Participants nevertheless enjoyed learning about where a song has been and what it might have meant to its various singers.

Understanding song meanings

Deeper relationships were formed with individual stories than the album as a whole. For most participants, understanding the narrative of a song was important for their enjoyment and they actively interrogated and speculated as to particular songs' meanings. When a song piqued their interest, most participants wanted to get to know more about the story and its meaning, although without any expectations that they would ever fully 'understand' it. Indeed, participants particularly enjoyed songs where the meaning was ambiguous.

Anne That's the fun of some songs. Well, 'fun' belittles it, but that's the interest of some songs, when you have to work at actually thinking about them and thinking about what they actually mean.

Steve The ones I like are the ones where the story's not entirely clear. Like that 'Hag and the Beck'. I thought 'what is this about, exactly?' And I really like that because you go and listen again and think 'what is this?'

Anne explicitly rejects the term 'fun' for this enjoyment, again implying a more serious, or pseudo-academic engagement. Indeed, many of the participants relished the intellectual stimulation of this music, whether through finding out the lyrics, finding musical or textual connections to other songs and puzzling out meaning. Once again, it was primarily the lyrics that provided participants with a window into the song's meaning.

Furthermore, participants' understanding of a song were mutable and liable to change over time, with the mode of listening having an impact. Through digital playback, listeners are able to repeatedly listen, and to focus on particular sections in isolation. In particular, participants used this device in order to learn the words of a song, at times in order to sing along, but in doing so they also began to gather more of its meaning. Live performance, on the other hand, provided insights through the artist's introduction or in bringing out lyrics that were slightly less clear on the recording. Colleen mentioned that she hadn't quite understood 'Queen Eleanor's Confession' until Hield described most of the story in an introduction. In addition, the change in diction and emphasis in live performance meant that Nicholas heard a lyric in 'Raggle Taggle Gypsy' that he had never noticed before: that the female character was only sixteen years old, considerably altering his understanding of the premise of the story.

When participants speculated as to a song's 'meaning', they appeared to conflate two separate concepts: on the one hand, an understanding the narrative of the song; on the other, speculation as to the author's intent. Questions of 'purpose' and intent were frequently posed in the focus groups. The murky origins of traditional folk songs means finding a specific intention or purpose is unlikely, leaving listeners free to speculate as to context of its composition.

Colleen ['Child Owlet'] was very grim.

Pauline Was it a cautionary tale, at all?

Nicholas There's no morality in it. There's no judgement in it, it's just a story, so it's up to you. [...]

Max You wonder what the purpose of a song like that is.

Pauline Why somebody wrote it, and whether it was true and that's why they wrote it.

Participants were interested in whether songs were rooted in historical truth, merging questions of authorship, intent and context of creation. Therefore learning about the geography, cultural

origin and chronology of a song's contributes to listeners' understanding of songs' meaning. There is an interesting tension between Nicholas' firm assertion that there is 'no morality' in the song, and Max's pondering as to its 'purpose', which has an undertone of their being a message, a lesson, or even a 'moral of the story'. It is worth noting the genre specificity of these comments. Instrumental music would not have the same narrative details and therefore would not prompt the same discussion of morality or author's intent. Indeed, participants' understanding of a song's 'meaning' seemed to be entirely focussed on the lyrics with little consideration of the music.

Upon hearing new music listeners undertake different layers of understanding. Hearing music for the first time can be a somewhat overwhelming experience but providing there is some kind of hook listeners can anticipate future enjoyment and will persevere. Listeners contextualise songs against previous musical knowledge, which has very specific processes within folk music, where songs can share musical and textual themes. They seek to comprehend the words, sometimes learning them in order to sing along, and, depending on the complexity of the song, seek to peel back the layers of meaning. Again, this process looks different within folk music compared to other genres, given its detailed narrative in much of the repertory, and the fact that its origin is often obscured. That many folk songs are historically, culturally or geographically alien to the listener seems to fuel their speculation as to its meaning as well as encourage folk aficionados to research song families. However, it is not only the author's intention that is of importance in folk music reception; meaning is not fixed and listeners make their own kinds of meaning from new music they encounter.

Finding meaning in songs

Understanding and learning from songs

We were keen to explore how listeners engaged with the moralistic content of some folk songs as the twelve songs that form *Old Adam* were intended by Hield to explore what it is to be human. We looked to examine how listeners might use songs to explore their own humanity.

> Steve — Sometimes they're a moral tale where the moral's quite clear, but sometimes the morals can be ambiguous, you know? Songs of betrayal, where it's not quite clear who's in the right. And that's also life as well. Life isn't always clear-cut. Sometimes there isn't a right and a wrong, there's just people trying to figure out what to do.
>
> Anne — Philosophical compass.
>
> Pauline — They kind of tell it in reality and therefore you decide whether you…
>
> Steve — It makes you think, rather than telling you the answer. Yes. In fact, I don't like songs that try and tell me the answer too much.

Participants were in agreement in enjoying the puzzle of songs that invited the listener to form their own judgement rather than any kind of didactic moralistic teaching. What became clear is

that 'morality' was an inappropriate term for the process of empathy and hypothetical decision-making. When we questioned whether songs were 'moral', it received an emphatically negative response. Songs were better understood as presenting a moral dilemma or exploring one's own moral compass. Participants shared how they particularly enjoyed the darkness of many folk songs, as darker stories invited consideration into what it might be like to be in the position of the character and how they might respond in that situation.

> Pauline It's a light-bulb moment, sometimes. It might be something that, actually, this particular scenario or whatever, you haven't come across, but it can be a kind of lightbulb moment because it is new.
>
> Steve It's a bit like reading literature where it puts you in the position of imagining what it might be like to be in that situation. You know, you think 'what would it be like to be in a situation where you're driven to kill somebody' or where your wife has been completely unfaithful. Not that you've been in the situation, but you've just lived enough of life to wonder what that might have been like, and the songs, sort of, makes you think about it and mull it over. It's like reading a novel about something like that.

Pauline's comment and Steve's expansion relate strongly to previous literature on the value of storytelling. The idea of having a 'lightbulb moment', gaining new insight into the thoughts, feelings or actions of a character in a song is in alignment with the concept that storytelling provides a means to develop morality by empathising with people and situations outside of the listeners' lived experience (Braid, 1996; Miller et al., 1990; Tirrell, 1990). It supports the idea that stories can act as emotional preparation by helping people to hypothesise as to how they would act in a given situation.

We wanted to explore whether this offered a framework through which participants could understand their own engagement with folk music, so took them to a public engagement event in which researchers and artists explored the idea of narrative as preparation for life. The public engagement session introduced Fine's (2002) concept of play as a means of emotional development in providing a chance to experience difficult emotions in a safe space. In the post-event focus group, participants embraced this theory. Anne talked about children's stories as 'a rehearsal for life', and Colleen made a similar point in relation to soap operas that 'might just introduce [young people] to [...] these fantastic dramas that people do go through in their lives'. While participants particularly embraced these ideas in relation to children and younger adults, they did not at any point volunteer examples of when this learning had translated into changes in their own behaviour. We interrogated this further in the final focus group.

> *Can you think of examples where you're drawing on songs and stories to deal with real life?*
>
> Anne I kind of think it's the other way round. I identify with songs when they relate to experiences I've already had.

Steve Same, absolutely the same.

Anne So that's when a song means more to me and I get more from it when it mirrors an experience or a feeling that I've had or I've had to deal with.

Steve I suppose the good songs are about universal things. […] A good song about those things just chimes, doesn't it? It's like a poem, isn't it? 'Yeah, that's right, that's how it is'.

Anne Or it chimes with your worldview, if you like.

Participants felt that they were more likely to retrospectively connect songs with prior events, perhaps using them as a resource to process emotion, as opposed to drawing on their listening to aid them in later experiences. Returning to the same topics in each focus group allowed us to clarify the participants' thoughts. After the second focus group, participants embraced the idea of stories equipping them for difficult situations in later life, but in the third focus group, they were more critical of this idea. There are a number of possible explanations for the disparity between participants' general embrace of the theory and their reluctance or inability to articulate examples in practice from their own lives. Participants spoke about children's stories and soap operas speaking to young people and therefore, perhaps do not consider stories to have the same effect on adults. Since the participants were all adults, it may suggest a reluctance to analyse their own listening in this way.

Alternatively, there was perhaps a resistance against theories which explain *away* participants' enjoyment of folk music. Asking participants to conceptualise the processes in this study was, at times, a step too far. Indeed, in research on the impact of fairy tales on children, Bettelheim (1976) suggests for the story to have beneficial externalisation affects, the child must remain unaware of the unconscious pressures they are responding to by making fairy-story solutions his own (Bettelheim, 1976:58; see also Dundes, 1991). Asking participants to surface the work their listening is doing on their emotional character formation runs the risk of negating the impact of that work. The talk-based research methods used in this project may not be equipped to access this subconscious information without adversely affecting participants' experience (Heywood, 2004; Hield and Price, 2017). Though we were unable to access hidden psychological impacts, our participants were very interested to share their personal experiences, demonstrating how their listening connects with their wider lives and experiences in other ways.

Making personal meanings

Beyond associating with elements in the story, prior experience of the material being performed also impacts upon the meanings listeners generate. Hield recollects an audience member telling how a version of 'Linden Lea', from a previous album (2013), was played at her husband's funeral. Subsequently hearing this song as part of a live performance clearly brought back memories for that particular listener that others did not share. This is reminiscent of DeNora's (2000) work on song association, whereby music becomes strongly associated to the time in a person's life that songs are encountered, imbuing that song with additional

meaning to the listener. This song, and others, were also personally relevant to focus group participants. As DeNora found, these associations can bring highly personalised and heightened emotional responses, such as Debbie describes, 'Yeah, my dad used to sing 'Linden Lea'. It always makes me cry! I was crying!!'. Our study demonstrated that these biographical associations are not always welcome.

> Nicholas I'm a lawyer and I'm doing a murder trial at the moment [...] I've only listened to [*Old Adam*] a couple of times, but I don't want the songs to get under my skin while I'm doing this particular case, because it will then resonate with that case so I'm kind of keeping these songs at bay until I get through.

Nicholas was hesitant to risk building unpleasant connections with the new music to stressful aspects of his life at this moment in time. This implies that listeners are aware of how strongly songs can become attached to memories, to the point of avoidance to preserve their future enjoyment. Throughout this paper, we have discussed how it tends to be the lyrical content which listeners use in order to understand meaning. However, Nicholas's meaning-making here is far more concerned with the biographical context of his listening. This implies that while the integral song text is important for participants in decoding the 'meaning' of the song, their own personal context can bring additional meaning-making to their current, and significantly, subsequent listening experiences.

This suggests that song meanings are more complex than an essential, reductionist interpretation of a song's lyrical content, and our research suggests that listeners are aware of this too. While participants were interested in song introductions, listeners resist prescribed meanings. Abigail described a song by Richard Thompson entitled 'Waltzing's for Dreamers' (Thompson, 1988), her understanding of which has undergone a transformation with repeated listenings. At first, she thought it was 'lovely', perhaps meaning the musical sound was 'upbeat' or projecting a broadly positive vibe. However, as she grew more familiar with the lyrics, she came to realise it was 'a bit miserable and depressing'. In this instance, the sentiment of the song became clear through repeated listenings, though Abigail resisted against this new 'depressing' meaning that had been revealed to her, instead choosing to hear it as an upbeat song. Songs hold multiple meanings and listeners can be active agents in determining their preferred meaning from a song; they not only seek to understand it, but actively shape meaning for themselves.

Songs can also become meaningful when participants find resonances between their subject matter and contemporary issues.

> Debbie I was listening to a song that I've listened to a lot before – 'Our Captain Cried' – going off to the Napoleonic War. And when I was listening to it recently, I'd watched the Military Wives choir, I don't know if any of you watched it? That these women were just waiting, nothing else, just waiting. She's saying 'why must you go?' And I just thought it's exactly the same sentiment as those women, desperate when their men go off to war.

Debbie shows how songs can adapt in meaning over time, becoming differently powerful in light of a recent memory. Steve found contemporary meaning when he identified universal human experiences within seemingly historically or geographically distinct settings: 'men going to the Napoleonic War, men going to the Falklands – it's the same thing. It's just the same human situation'. This is particularly relevant for understanding the engagement of folk music listeners. Social contexts change, and listeners find it interesting to view songs on these different levels – to marvel at the stasis in love, death, war and work, but also to consider changes in social norms and values, for example the sixteen-year-old wife in 'Raggle Taggle Gypsy'. The idea of settings being simultaneously unknown and yet relatable was a key factor in participants' enjoyment. Indeed, Steve suggests that finding relatable situations within a seemingly alien context might be part of the enjoyment of folk music or, indeed, Shakespeare plays, in that they appear remote due to the language and context of the story but in reality speak of universal human predicaments. Stories mediate the line between the familiar and alien, connecting to listeners' lived experiences and presenting them with something outside that. The balance of these two factors can affect how much listeners connect with the meaning of the song.

Throughout this paper, we have emphasised the importance of text for participants' understanding of the meaning or intent of a song, reflecting the nature of the focus group discussion. However, the text, stories and meaning of songs were not always of great importance for participants' *enjoyment* of a song. Such enjoyment was never divorced from a songs' musical content, atmosphere or mood, which enabled listeners like Abigail to ignore her evolving understanding of the songs' meaning and instead find her own resonance with the aesthetic of the music. More extreme still was Colleen's description of her engagement as 'visceral', generated through musical structures 'that's something to do with the rhythm, and that sort of feeling of atmosphere'. Colleen derives most of her listening pleasure from the music alone.

> Colleen They all have different things that you hone in on. To me, a lot of the tunes that Fay sings [...] really sort of resonate with me. [...] I mean, she could be singing the telephone directory for all I care! As long as it's put to one of those tunes and she was doing it with the musicians. [...] You could have words that were totally crazy and it doesn't make any sense at all.

Colleen made this statement in the final focus group, in which she also claimed to prefer recorded music to live performances, contrary to the rest of the group. This suggests that she was emboldened by the longitudinal design, feeling more comfortable in expressing what might be considered controversial opinions. For Colleen, it was possible to enjoy songs with no understanding of the words, but if participants deemed lyrics inappropriate, distasteful or in some other way unsettling, they got in the way of their enjoyment and alternative meanings were created to enable satisfactory listening. Therefore, while it is fascinating to explore how listeners make meaning from the complex narratives that abound within the folk music genre, any consideration of the lyrical content must also take into account that this meaning-making is only one of a number of ways in which participants can derive enjoyment from a folk song.

Discussion

It is clear from our focus groups that meaningful relationships are developed with songs in a variety of ways. While there is no one-size-fits-all explanation for meaning-making, we have found processes of familiarisation common to multiple listeners. The level of connection that listeners build with particular songs is firstly dependent on how frequently they have heard the music. The Inverted-U model of familiarity tells us that enjoyment increases with each hearing of a new piece of music; our study shows that listeners are aware of this, and may reserve judgement until they have listened sufficiently, actively listening repeatedly in order to hear elements they have missed. The complex narratives of the songs on *Old Adam* in particular helped bring this to the surface, further demonstrating particularly active engagement by folk music listeners that reflects the participation ideology of the genre more widely.

Secondly, the connection listeners build with songs is dependent on how directly they have considered its meaning in relation to their existing musical knowledge or through further research. When a song piqued the interest of our listeners, they also became invested in finding out more about the song. The fact that the original writer's intention was unavailable did not stop them from speculating. For artists, providing extra musical information such as sleeve notes, introductions from the stage or peer discussions in the focus group all contribute to listeners' perception of what they hear, not only presenting new information but also provide pointers for listeners to generate their own positions and personalised meanings. While there is a certain amount of unpredictability as to which particular songs are meaningful to different listeners, these elements are commonly in play and attention to developing these connection points can help audiences build stronger relationships with music they hear.

We have demonstrated that familiarity involves a process of contextualisation, particularly within the folk music genre, as listeners find commonalities between song families and sound worlds. Any future discussion of familiarity of music must therefore investigate listeners' previous knowledge of repertoires or genres. In addition, in finding this process of contextualisation we have also illuminated the joy experienced when listeners fit new songs into their existing knowledge, like solving a puzzle. This appears to be a particularly strong pleasure of listening to folk music.

A song may also be more or less interesting to a listener depending on their personal experiences, and remembering a song as being a favourite of a loved one, and the subject matter resonating with previous lived experience also deepens a listeners' connection to a song. An interwoven process, placing the intrinsic experience of the act of listening to a particular song within their wider listening and emotional worlds, is at play. It is this active process involving the duality of familiarisation, and recognition within their own lived experience that gives music meaning to listeners.

Finally, this research project questions Turino's (2008) presentation—participation duality. As the focus group data makes evident, listeners are actively involved in constructing meaning as they experience presentational music. As Nicholas said in the final focus group, 'I think I'm as good a listener as those performers. I really think that I do a lot of work when I go to a concert'. Many of the participants couched their experiences in language of active participation, challenging the idea that presentational arts are the passive counterpart to active participatory

engagement. This implicit bias towards participatory arts, which manifests within the folk music scene too, has led to a paucity of research of the experiences of audiences for staged, or recorded, folk music. In demonstrating the active engagement of folk music listeners, we argue for the legitimacy of this form of folk music consumption, and welcome further research into the experiences of the many people who, through recordings and staged performances, use folk music as a resource for meaning-making.

Conclusion

Old Adam is an album which was intended to explore human morality through a range of narratives. We investigated whether theories on the moral and empathetic role of storytelling in shaping our behaviour might be useful to explain listeners' engagement with these songs. This produced at times contradictory and even hostile responses (Hield and Price, 2017). Participants embraced the *idea* that stories might prepare us for life in general, describing 'lightbulb moments' of empathy and of putting themselves in someone else's shoes. However, they did not feel that this had impacted on their own future behaviours. They felt instead that songs were powerful when they retrospectively chimed with their experiences. Rather than proving that folk songs do not serve this function, our study highlights how difficult this kind of data is to necessarily ascertain, explaining why most work in this field is theoretical. More empirical research is needed to test the link between hearing songs about moral dilemmas or the human condition and how that might prime people to act in certain ways. We can see it as researchers, and participants saw it in others, but did not acknowledge it within themselves.

This longitudinal project has shown that folk music listeners are aware of the process of sense-making that occurs when listening to new music. It has also demonstrated the ways in which prior musical knowledge is brought to bear in order to make sense of new music, which can be a somewhat overwhelming experience. Folk music's emphasis on narrative, the relationship to tradition through shared lyrics, tunes and tropes, and its strong participatory ethos affect the experience of listeners within professional, presentational performance contexts. While these listeners may not be getting their fiddles out or leading a chorus song in a singaround, they are far from a passive audience. This is the first study to use developments in music psychology and audience research to explore the 'work' done by listening audiences at professional, presentational music performances. Amateur music making in communal contexts are not the only form of participation that happens within folk music, as this repertory continues to hold relevance and resonance with listening audiences in professional presentational contexts creating a particularly participatory listening community.

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Appendix: Example questions from focus groups

- What did you think of the performance/talk this evening?
- Was there anything you particularly enjoyed? Or anything you disliked?
- What do you think the rest of the audience thought of the performance/talk?
- Were there any songs you already knew / knew well / or were completely new to you? Did that in any way alter how you listen to those songs?
- How does tonight compare to other folk music performances you've been to?
- Were there any songs / anything in the talk that confirmed or challenged your ideas / attitudes / beliefs?
- Where there any songs you had already come across before hearing Fay's version? What do you think of Fay's version? What was your previous experience of this song? What did that song mean to you before? And now?
- Introductions to the songs: What do you want to know? Were there any that really changed how you thought about a song?
- We've talked a lot in previous groups about how traditional songs deal with issues that are still relevant to modern day. Have you spontaneously compared modern day problems to songs they've heard? Or does this just make logical sense? Had they consciously thought about this before doing this research?
- Likewise, we've talked about songs being moral. Are there different ways in which songs explore morality?

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[1] We could spend the rest of the paper defining 'folk' and 'traditional' music, but would prefer to direct readers to existing discussion (See Sharp, 1907; Lloyd, 1967; Harker, 1985; Pickering and Green, 1987; Atkinson, 2002; Winter and Keegan-Phipps, 2013; Roud, 2017) Here, we are talking about materials performed in events that self-label as folk which musicians themselves call 'traditional'.

[2] The Full English Digital Archive can be found at: https://www.vwml.org/search/search-full-english

[3] This study also investigated the artist's experience of developing and performing *Old Adam*, and the listeners' experience of the album as recorded music and live performance. This data will form the basis of another paper.

[4] See English Folk Dance and Song Society's Vaughan Williams Memorial Library https://www.efdss.org/library-and-archive Accessed 30/05/2018