

Songs in Morris Dance Performance

This paper was presented to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library Conference, organised by EFDSS, at Cecil Sharp House, on Sunday November 12th 2023 by members of the JMO EDI Panel: Liz Scholey (she/her, project lead), Fee Lock (she/her), Jen Cox (she/her), Matthew Turvey (he/him), and Roary Neat (they/them).

The Joint Morris Organisation, JMO, was established 20 years ago in response to the successful campaign to exempt Morris from the then new Licencing Act. It is an association of the three Morris organisations: the Morris Ring, the Morris Federation, and Open Morris. Most of the Morris teams in the UK and some overseas are in membership of one of the three organisations. Over the last 20 years the JMO, through the organisations, has organised annual days of dance, negotiated very competitive insurance cover for its members and become involved in promoting Morris dancing and allied traditions. Following joint work on eliminating the use of full face black makeup, a statement was adopted by the organisations which included:

“Morris is a unique cultural tradition of which we should be rightfully proud. We want people from all races and backgrounds to share in this pride and not be made to feel unwelcome or uncomfortable by any element of a performance”

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, EDI, Panel was then established to address issues related to discrimination, diversity, and inclusion within the Morris community.

Prompted by concerns over the appropriateness of certain songs, particularly one associated with the Lads O' Bunchum Adderbury dance the first project for the EDI was to explore the use of songs in Morris dance performances.

To gather data on current practices and attitudes, a questionnaire was designed and distributed to JMO members. The questionnaire aimed to raise awareness of potential issues as well as evaluating team practices. There was also an open Zoom meeting to further discuss the topic.

Out of 122 team responses (16% of JMO teams)

80 responding teams dance Cotswold only.

11 dance Cotswold with another morris style including Border, Rapper, Stave, North West and Molly

15 teams dance Border only

16 teams dance other styles including Historical dance, Molly, North West, Sword, Rapper, Step Clog, Plough Morris, and Swing/Crossover

91 teams dancing at least some Cotswold represents 75% of responding teams.

The last Morris Census in 2020 quoted 45% of teams dancing at least some Cotswold so our responses appear to be heavily weighted towards teams who dance at least some Cotswold.

Of those dancing at least some Cotswold, only 4 of the teams report as not singing, less than 5%. By contrast 6 out of 15 border teams, 40%, do not sing. All the teams dancing other styles, except for historical dance, report that they sing.

It is fair to say that the questionnaire primarily attracted responses from those teams who sing as part of performance and that these teams mainly dance at least some Cotswold.

Responses to open-ended questions provided rich insights into teams' perspectives on song use. Key themes included the ability and confidence of singers, the relevance of songs to dance traditions, and considerations of inclusivity and offensiveness.

Themes and Quotes:

1. **Ability and Confidence of Singers:**

- "The ability of those singing to do so at the right pitch."
- "It can be difficult to project, and not everyone likes singing/knows all the words."

2. **Relevance to Dance and Tradition:**

- "Songs are an integral part of our tradition."
- "We use the songs as music to provide the structure for dancers."

3. **Relevance to Locality and Team:**

- "We change the songs to make them more relevant to us."
- "Occasionally, we may change a line to fit with the side's brand."

4. **Demography of the Audience and Inclusivity:**

- "We wouldn't sing anything racist and misogynistic."
- "Reduce sexism; make songs more gender-neutral."

5. **Adapting Songs and Evolving Practices:**

- "Teams have debated among themselves the use of songs."
- "The overall impression is of songs evolving through careful thought."

Conclusions:

The study revealed diverse opinions among Morris teams, from those advocating for Unamended traditional songs to those adapting lyrics for inclusivity and relevance. Importantly, teams are actively engaging in discussions about the appropriateness of songs and are open to evolving practices.

Next Steps:

The EDI Panel presented the following findings to the JMO,

- Songs are an important part of Morris performance, and they are evolving
- This process of evolution should be encouraged and promoted, where appropriate.
- We have examples of good practice which we can offer.
- We need to emphasise that we are not proscribing any songs, just offering guidance and raising awareness of potential issues.
- How we present ourselves as performers, entertainers, dancers in the streets, is important in terms of recruitment and retaining new members, particularly those with different life experiences.

A last comment worthy of mention:

"It is all about the joy"

JMO EDI Panel

Nov 2023