



“The Group from the West”: Song, endangered language and sonic activism on Guernsey

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Abstract This article studies the interconnection between song, endangered language and sonic activism on the island of Guernsey in the Channel Islands. The discussion focuses on the role of song as a vehicle for helping to nurture a context of language promotion, and how new traditional music culture has been created as a result of linguistic activism. One choir on Guernsey, La Guaine du Vouest (The Group from the West), has emerged as the predominant musical group that represents Guernsey's Norman linguistic heritage through song. The purpose of this article is to present an ethnographic case study of this small island community choir as a way of showing musical culture in action as a result of linguistic decline. Special attention is given to describing the ways the group helps promote and sustain language through song in the 21st century, and particularly in connection with more recent cultural flows such as popular and well-known songs. It is argued that La Guaine du Vouest helps in the survival of an endangered language on a small island through its performance activism by adapting and expanding its repertoire, and that the group's contemporary practices are part of an ongoing process of celebrating and (re-)inventing tradition where heritage and contemporary performance practices meet to re-shape and expand the repertoire of songs in Guernésiais.

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Introduction

This article is an ethnographic case study of the interconnection between song, endangered language and sonic activism

on the island of Guernsey in the Channel Islands.¹ The practice of using familiar tunes and translations of their texts is common among many language revitalisation movements. While acknowledging that such tactics have been criticized as potentially undermining the worth of indigenous culture (e.g., Jaffe, 1999), this article focuses on the role of song as a vehicle for helping to nurture a context of language promotion, and

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¹ The focus of this article is on the island of Guernsey and not the Bailiwick of Guernsey, which includes the islands of Guernsey, Alderney, Sark, Herm, Jethou, Brecqhou and Lihou (Sark and Alderney have their own separate political systems). On these islands and their administrative structures see the Guernsey government website at <http://www.gov.gg>.

how new traditional music culture has been created as a result of linguistic activism.

After a period of rapid decline from the mid to late nineteenth century as a result of an increased use of English due to mass immigration from the United Kingdom, Guernsey's indigenous language, Guernésiais (sometimes written Dgèrnésiais; also known as Guernsey French, Guernsey Norman French and patois),² which includes several local varieties, is nowadays a minority and endangered language on its island home. Its cultural sphere has moved from the centre to the periphery in terms of the number of speakers (cf. *Foras, 1995, p. 62*), although the language is still used by some islanders and maintains importance more broadly as an emblem of island heritage, particularly amongst Guernésiais speakers and enthusiasts. However, over the past decade or so, there has been a renewed interest in Guernésiais by speakers of the language, activists and enthusiasts, partly as a result of the language's reduced numbers of native speakers in a political environment that sees this relatively small island increasingly asserting its status and local identity within the Channel Islands, British Isles and European Union (*Fig. 1*).

One choir on Guernsey, La Guaine du Vouest (The Group from the West), has emerged as the predominant musical group that represents Guernsey's Norman linguistic heritage through song, and it is especially active in promoting Guernésiais through wider public performance, both on the island and other Norman sites (i.e., Jersey and Normandy). The group's activities help celebrate Guernsey's Norman heritage by promoting the island's indigenous language with the aim of nurturing its survival, sustainability and growth, and at the same time create new musical expressions and cultural identity as a consequence of this effort. That is, Guernésiais may be a minority and endangered language, but it maintains a status that is emblematic of its historical home, and its decline over the past few decades has actually helped produce musical culture where language is at the nucleus of creative activity.

Several interconnected questions underpin this research. What are the connections between endangered language and song on the island of Guernsey? Why is song featured so prominently in contexts that seek to sustain and promote Guernésiais? How is a community choir contributing to creating culture as a result of a diminishing number of native speakers of Guernésiais? In answering these questions, this article presents a case study of a small island community choir on Guernsey that shows the production of musical culture as a result of a changing linguistic context. The soundscape produced by the choir is both linguistic and musical, an interconnection that creates culture in a context of real or perceived cultural decline. Special attention is given to the ways the group helps promote and sustain language through song in the 21st century, and particularly in connection with more recent cultural flows such as popular and well-known songs. It is argued that La Guaine du Vouest helps in the survival of an endangered language on a small island through its performance activism by adapting and expanding its repertoire, and that the group's contemporary practices are part of an ongoing process of celebrating and (re-)inventing tradition where heritage and contemporary per-

formance practices meet to re-shape the repertoire of songs in Guernésiais.

Guernsey is one of the Channel Islands. It has a political status as a self-governing Crown Dependency: it is British, but not part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, nor part of the European Union.³ Within the British Isles, along with the other Crown Dependencies (i.e., the Bailiwick of Jersey [the largest of the Channel Islands] and the Isle of Man), the Bailiwick of Guernsey enjoys a close connection with the Crown and British Government, but maintains amongst other things its own government, laws and taxes. Moreover, for over 800 years, since Guernsey chose to continue to align itself from 1204 with the descendants of the Norman rulers, that is the King of England, the island has maintained an island, archipelagic, British and European identity, which has included its own language with local variants.

Within the Bailiwick of Guernsey, the island of Guernsey has a land area of about 62 square kilometres (*States of Guernsey, Policy Council, 2011, p. 3*). As a result of Guernsey being geographically very close to France (about 48 km) and relatively distant from England (about 113 km) (*States of Guernsey, Policy Council, 2011, p. 3*), along with the other Channel Islands it was heavily fortified over the centuries by the British as a result of various wars and conflicts with France. Even during these years, Guernsey maintained its own language, although over the centuries of increased English influence, the island gradually became more anglicized, and by the twentieth century much of the island's social and linguistic identity had changed as a result of this influence. Although having a traditional history where agriculture formed a main part of the island's economy (enjoying a milder climate than the UK), Guernsey moved to mass tourism in the latter half of the twentieth century after a period of German occupation for 5 years during the Second World War. From the 1960s, however, the island gradually developed an offshore financial sector, and, as a result of its own tax laws, the financial industry has now become Guernsey's main industry, being a major player in the world's financial sector. Each of these developments impacted greatly on the island's language as more English-speaking immigrants settled on the island.

There are a number of languages spoken in the British Isles (e.g., *Britain, 2007; Extra and Gorter, 2001; Trudgill, 1984*). Whilst English with its regional dialects dominates the everyday language of much of the population, many regions, islands and geographic peripheries maintain their own languages, including varieties of Gaelic in Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man, Welsh and Cornish. Further south, the Channel Islands have maintained their own languages: Jèrriais (on Jersey), Guernésiais (on Guernsey) and Sercquiais (on Sark) (see *Jones, 2007; Sallabank, 2011*).⁴ As with some other regional languages of the world, the languages of the Channel Islands, which are related historically to varieties of Norman, but with influences from other nearby languages, are linked very much to the islands' traditional past. Today, however,

³ Guernsey, along with the other Channel Islands, has a special relationship with the EU under Protocol 3 of the Treaty of Accession.

⁴ Alderney's local variety of Norman, Auregnais, has been extinct since around the middle of 20th century, although some islanders are attempting to revive the language based on their own memories of relatives speaking the language and their knowledge of extant literature in Auregnais.

² While de *Garis' Dictionnaire Anglais-Guernésiais* (1967) is the main dictionary for Guernésiais, there is still not an official writing system for the language (see *Sallabank, 2010a, 2011, p. 33*).

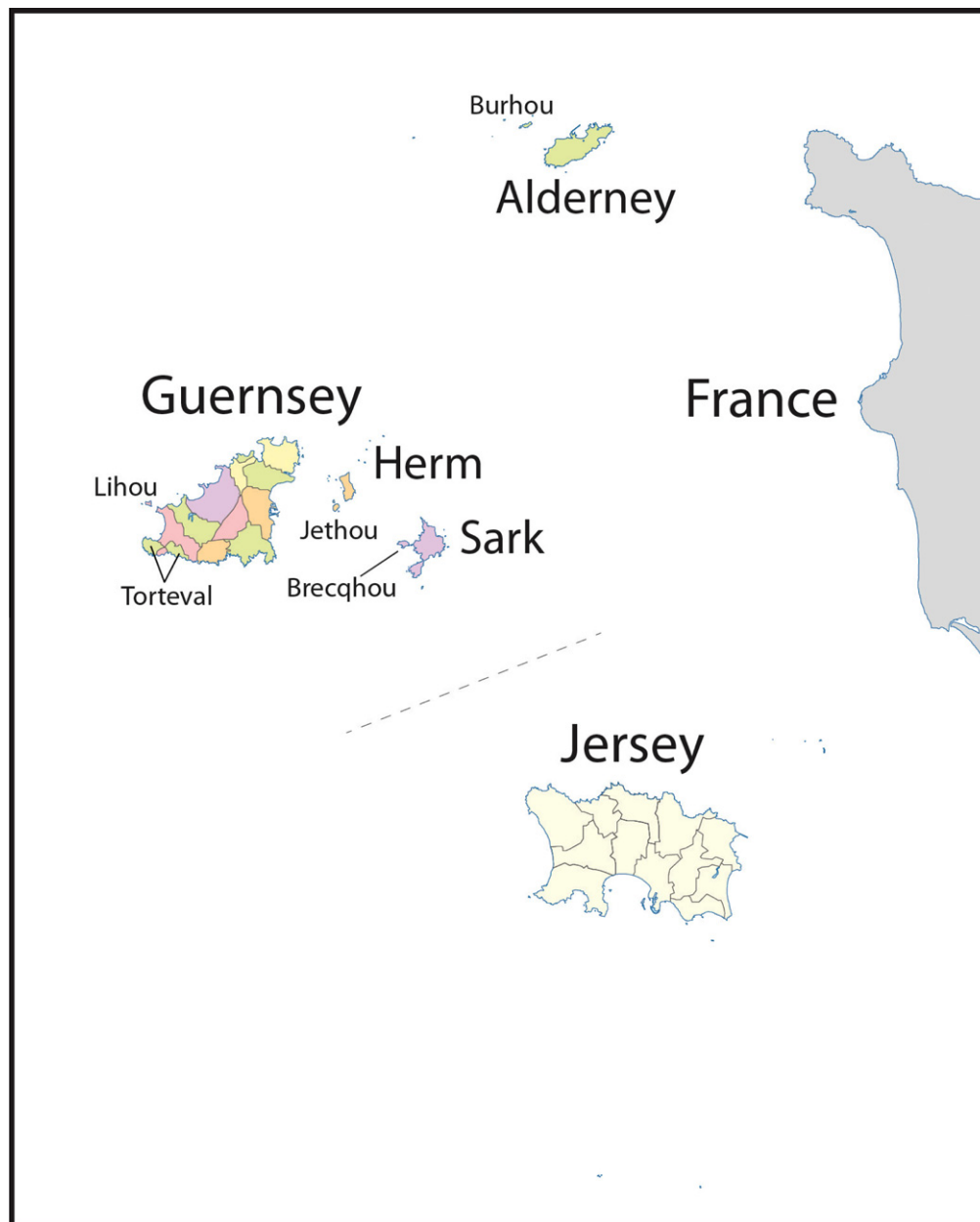


Fig. 1 Map of the Channel Islands in proximity to France. After Wikimedia Commons, https://www.commonswiki.org/wiki/File:Channel_Islands_location_map_%28%2Bparishes%29.svg (accessed 9.11.12.).

Guernésiais is often maintained and performed in social spheres that do much to signify its island heritage and identity, even though the majority of the island’s population do not speak the language.

As a small island with a population of around 62,431 (Policy and Research Unit, 2011, p. 1), Guernsey occupies a distinctive position in terms of its historical, geographical and cultural influences. As a consequence of much linguistic and other cultural influences from the continental mainland and from the British mainland, several languages have been spoken on Guernsey over the centuries, each being localized to some degree. French has been used crucially, especially in legal contexts; Guernésiais was once the lingua franca of Guernsey; and English became the dominant language (also with some of its own unique characteristics; see Jones, 2010). More

recently, other migrations have brought, for example, Portuguese, Polish and Latvian speakers to the island (Ogier, 2009).

One symbolic legacy of Guernsey’s linguistic heritage is Guernésiais. However, such has been the decline of the language that nowadays it is not widely spoken in public except in performance contexts that do much to support its survival.⁵ The language is severely endangered, and could be categorized

⁵ Guernésiais is promoted by various people and organizations, including La Guaine du Vouest (choir and drama group dating from 1936), La Société Guernesiaise (heritage organization dating from 1882), Le Coumité d’la Culture Guernesiaise (cultural organization dating from 2000), L’Assemblaie d’Guernésiais (language promotion organization dating from 1956) and Les Ravigotteurs (language promotion organization dating from around 1995, although not currently active).

as critically endangered (cf. Austin and Sallabank, 2011a, pp. 1, 3; Austin and Sallabank, 2011b; Sallabank, 2002, 2005, 2011; UNESCO, 2012; cf. Jaffe, 2007). The Guernsey census of 2001, which offers the most recent data on the language, noted that 14 percent of islanders claimed some knowledge of Guernésiais (States of Guernsey, 2002, p. 61), and just 2% (1327 people) were fluent speakers (two thirds of whom were aged 65 and above) (States of Guernsey, 2002, pp. 47, 61). Since that time, however, the number has reduced, and one estimate has suggested that there are probably just a few hundred fluent speakers today, and most would be aged 80 or above (Sallabank, 2011, pp. 24–25).

As Guernsey is a member of the British–Irish Council, Guernésiais is treated in this political context within the rubric of a regional language, which has been the subject of much discussion by this forum. Over the past decade or so, Guernésiais has received increased interest from language activists and politicians alike, particularly as Guernsey increasingly strengthens its political status within the British Isles and Europe. In this context, the States of Guernsey (i.e., Guernsey’s government) has recently established a politically-driven language policy as part of a larger cultural strategy for the island (Culture and Leisure Department, 2011a, 2011b; States of Guernsey, 2012 cf; Sallabank, 2005, pp. 51–52).⁶ With this document, the importance of the language to its surviving speakers is particularly evident, as it is to many others on the island. That is, “language is one of the ways in which people construct their identities” (Austin and Sallabank, 2011a, p. 9), and much of Guernsey’s cultural heritage is built on its social and cultural links with Normandy. The importance of the language for some fields of music research is that most, if not all, of the world’s languages have music traditions, so when a language is critically endangered then so is its music (cf. Barwick et al., 2007). Indeed, as noted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):

Every language reflects a unique world-view with its own value systems, philosophy and particular cultural features. As vectors of traditions and ageless know-how, languages lend coherence, well-being and support to cultural identity. They are an essential part of the intangible heritage. Languages may be seen as so many dynamic processes. They respond constantly to a changing environment, ceaselessly taking on new meanings. However, as they are rooted in the life of a community, their survival may well depend on the value that the community attaches to their vitality and transmission.

⁶ The British–Irish Council was formed in 1999 and comprises membership from the governments of Britain and Ireland, the devolved institutions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the governments of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. On the topic of indigenous, minority and lesser-used languages that fall within the British–Irish Council remit, see British–Irish Council (2012). Guernésiais, along with the other Norman varieties in the Channel Islands, is not recognized within the Council of Europe’s European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, unlike several other languages in the British Isles: “The regional or minority languages covered under the Charter in the UK are Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Irish, Scots, Ulster Scots and Cornish. Manx Gaelic in the Isle of Man [which, like the Channel Islands, is not in the EU] is also covered under the Charter [(see Woehrling, 2005, p. 267)]. Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Irish have been granted protection under Part III of the Charter” (Council of Europe, 2010, p. 4).

The disappearance of a language is accompanied by the departure of a whole body of knowledge and ideas that in many cases have thrived for centuries, not to say thousands of years.

A language policy which favours the practice and transmission even of little-spoken languages helps to preserve the world’s linguistic wealth and contributes to safeguarding cultural diversity. It should go hand in hand with multilingual education from an early age so that each and everyone may be a link in the chain of transmission of these cultural traditions besides being able to communicate with the rest of the world. (UNESCO, 2002, n.p.)

As a result of many cultural influences, a plethora of musical activities often take place with many of the local community not always being aware of such musical activity (cf. Finnegan, 1989). In this context, the history of the use of Guernésiais in song is not supported by a great amount of documentary evidence or oral tradition, although there are several historical sources that help in gaining a broader picture of musical activity using the language (e.g., Carey, 1908; de Garis, 1975; Macculloch, 1903; cf. Woodbury, 2011). Moreover, the lack of traditional songs in Guernésiais is commonly explained in terms of the:

Puritanical legislation which accompanied the establishment of Calvinism in the [Channel] Islands at the time of the Reformation. In 1566, 1567, 1581, 1582, and 1611 ‘ordinances’ were passed [in Guernsey] forbidding profane songs, dances, and all ‘jeux illicyte’ under penalty of the culprits having to do penance in Church in sight of the whole congregation, with bare heads, legs, and feet, clad in a winding sheet and holding a lighted torch (Carey, 1908, p. 4).

There have been many centuries since that time for songs to be written, but there is still a perception that such historical legislation is responsible for the lack of original songs in Guernésiais today. It is in this context that a contemporary study of music-linguistic (sonic) activism helps show perceptions of past and current practices. That is, even at the beginning of the 20th century there was a distinct perception that traditional songs on Guernsey were in need of preservation, along with the island’s unique language. For example, one local specialist of Guernésiais, Edith Carey (1864–1935), added a chapter on song to Edgar MacCulloch’s (1808–1896) manuscript on Guernsey folklore:

I have added this chapter to Sir Edgar MacCulloch’s book, as I thought it a good opportunity of preserving a few of the old ballads and songs which, for generations, amused and interested our forefathers, and which now, alas, are all too surely going or gone from among us, swept away by the irrepressible tide of vulgarity and so-called “Progress”, by which everything of ours that was beautiful, picturesque, or individual, has been destroyed. As descendants of the Celtic trouvères, menestriers, and jongleurs, as well as of the Norse Skalds, the bards from whose early songs and chants, the literature of Europe has sprung, we, Normans, should specially treasure the old poems which have been handed down for so many successive generations, and which, in the rapid extinction of the old language in which Wace, Taillefer, Walter Map, and Chrestien de Troyes

sang, are doomed to oblivion (Carey, in Macculloch, 1903, p. 549).

In this paper, several theoretical orientations have underpinned the research. In the broadest sense, this is a music ethnography of a choir and its activities that relates to a micromusic or subcultural sound (Slobin, 1993) and the musicking (Small, 1998) of a sometimes hidden community of musicians (Finnegan, 1989; Veblen, 2008). While the subject of language has long been of interest to ethnomusicologists, whether in providing linguistic models for the analytical study of sound as a language (e.g., Feld, 1974; Merriam, 1964, p. 208; Nattiez, 1975), or looking at meaning in and functions of song texts (e.g., Merriam, 1964, pp. 206–208), and the function of music in language acquisition has been a topic of some music research by scholars such as Levman (1992), a study that interconnects a minority and endangered language and the creation of music culture offers a new perspective to ethnomusicological scholarship (cf. Androutsopoulos, 2007; Auzanneau, 2002; Barwick et al., 2007; Bentahila and Davies, 1995; Grant, 2010, 2011, 2012a,b; Johnson, 2008; Low et al., 2009; Maret, 2010; Mitchell, 2001, p. 30; Pietikäinen, 2008). It is with such a cultural interface that the researcher can see the power that song can have in mobilizing people, and how people can create song as a result of language activism.

Data for this research has been collected in several ways. Firstly, the choir under study has been observed ethnographically during rehearsal when there was also time to talk to most members individually, in small groups and as a focus group. Secondly, individual interviews with some members of the choir have been undertaken, along with personal communication to follow up on field research questions. Thirdly, an historical approach to literature and data, and a critical review of it, has been used in order to provide not only background on the choir but also to contextualize its activities from a perspective of culture critique.

Following this introduction, the article has two main sections. The first provides an overview of La Guaine du Vouest and its purpose as a musical activity that is both of the community and for the community. The next part offers a study of the group in terms of its performance activities using Guernésiais, and includes three case studies of different song types that help show how the choir maintains and creates song in connection with its sonic activism.

La Guaine du Vouest: community music and purpose

La Guaine du Vouest is a community group that was formed in 1936 with the aim of specializing in the performance of Guernésiais through media such as acting, speech or song. As noted in a short article written by members of the group, “the aim of La Guaine du Vouest is to promote Guernsey’s heritage and to encourage people to speak Guernsey French” (Brooks et al., 2009, p. 6). Indeed, while a few local choirs have occasionally performed some songs in Guernésiais, as one member of La Guaine du Vouest commented during research with the group in 2010, there has never really been a choir solely dedicated to Guernésiais before La Guaine du Vouest. This comment is from a contemporary perspective, with La Guaine du Vouest currently standing out in Guernsey as the only choir that sings regularly and exclusively in Guernésiais. Historically, there have been other groups singing in Guernésiais,

including various performances organized by members of L’Assemblaie d’Guernésiais, who have included translations of well-known songs, and The St. Martin’s Patois Company, which formed in 1907 (Lemprière, 1976, p. 175).

La Guaine du Vouest was founded by Gerald and Miriam Robilliard and Dudley and Freda Langlois, along with others from the west of the island of Guernsey (Brooks et al., 2009, p. 5). At first, the group focussed on speech and drama, and later, around the late 1960s and early 1970s,⁷ a dancing group and choir were established (the dancing group has since been disestablished) (Brooks et al., 2009, p. 5). The group now primarily functions as an amateur women’s choir that is especially active in contexts that either promote Guernésiais, or are intended to celebrate traditional island culture and heritage, although a small group of men, and some of the women, perform short plays, monologues or duologues as part of the group’s wider activities, especially in a competition context known as the Eisteddfod, which was first held on Guernsey in 1922, and with a Guernésiais section dating from that year (see Guernsey Eisteddfod Society, 2012). Indeed, the Eisteddfod offers a range of categories for members of the public to showcase the performative and creative talents within a competition context. As one researcher on Guernésiais has commented:

The main fora (and stimuli) for creative writing in Guernésiais are cultural events such as the annual Eisteddfod and La Fête d’la Vieille Langue Normande [La Fête Nouormande], which are also an opportunity for pride in the language. The Eisteddfod also acts as a major forum for speaking Guernésiais among the audience (Sallabank, 2002, p. 227).

In terms of the choir’s production of recordings over the past 30 years or so, it has produced an LP record (*La Guaine du Vouest*, 1979; Fig. 2) and a CD/cassette (*La Guaine du Vouest*, 2000), and is currently working on a DVD that will include a range of media to help in the promotion of Guernésiais.⁸ The group is especially active in the performance of Guernésiais locally (e.g., at fêtes, special occasions, competitions [i.e., the Eisteddfod]) and in other locations (e.g., Jersey and France) during festivals such as La Fête Nouormande (see further Johnson, 2008), and several of the group’s members also teach Guernésiais in Guernsey primary schools on a voluntary basis (Brooks et al., 2009, p. 5). In connection with the choir’s image of performing publicly in heritage settings, one visual feature of the group is its use of Guernsey traditional costumes, “which adds visual impact to the choir” (Brooks et al., 2009, p. 6; Fig. 3). This “visual impact” locates the choir in an historical context with tradition and heritage at the core of visual signification.

La Guaine du Vouest does not have an official organizational structure per se, but functions very much under the leadership of one family, which includes the daughter of one of the founders of the group. One of the choir’s members is the conductor and musical director (and a singer), and for rehearsals she leads from a keyboard. However, for most public

⁷ The members were not too sure of exact dates, but the choir probably started in or soon after 1969.

⁸ At the time of writing this article, their DVD remains unfinished. The aim of the DVD is to provide a visual and audible resource that will not only help showcase the group’s creative outputs, but also help others in learning and promoting Guernésiais (cf. Conathan, 2011).



Fig. 2 Album cover (La Guaine du Vouest, 1979).



Fig. 3 La Guaine du Vouest performing at Lé Viaër Marchi (2008). Courtesy of the Guernsey Portuguese Association. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jlhxm199IU> (accessed 9.11.12.).

performances the piano accompaniment role belongs to a male performer, Peter Le Messurier. There are currently nineteen members in the choir. There are several members in their 80s, some in their 70s, and more in their 60s (there are also several younger singers in the group). This was a point of considerable concern for many members of the choir in terms of its sustainability past the next 5 years or so. Most of the group's members are native Guernésiais speakers; that is, they were raised before going to primary school (aged five) speaking the language in their home context. Only when they entered the state school system were they required to speak English, and in this context the speaking of Guernésiais was not encouraged and it was even frowned upon. While some of the choir's members had left the island for a while during younger years, mainly to work or enter higher education in the UK, on returning to Guernsey they were able to continue their Guernésiais culture within such groups as La Guaine du Vouest and other organizations dedicated to maintaining the

indigenous language and culture of the island. However, unlike some islanders who were evacuated from Guernsey during the German occupation of World War II from 1940 to 1945, many of the older members of La Guaine du Vouest either stayed on Guernsey during this time or were born after the war.

The members of the choir have different abilities in speaking Guernésiais, although each person, except for one, was born into a Guernésiais-speaking family. Furthermore, the choir also requires some of the singers to conform to one linguistic variety of Guernésiais in that there are slightly different varieties in different parts of the relatively small island. For example, Guernésiais speakers acknowledge that the dialect of the high parishes (*haut pas*) on the higher ground to the south and west of the island differs slightly to the dialect of the lower parishes (*bas pas*) to the north (Lewis, 1895; cf. Spolsky, 2011).⁹ As one linguist notes in connection with different Guernésiais dialects: “They are further subdivided into parish variations; it is still possible to tell a person’s origin within a mile or two” (Sallabank, 2002, p. 237). Most of the choir live close to one another, to the west of the island in or close to Torteval Parish, so the speech of the high parishes is the one used, hence the name of the choir, “The Group from the West”. However, the present dialect is one that has evolved over time so that today, as observed by members of the choir, the pronunciation may be slightly different to how some of the members were used to hearing the language in their younger years. Should negotiation be required when deciding the “correct” word or pronunciation of a song’s lyrics, its members currently turn to their oldest member to decide which version of the language to use. As noted by members of the choir, they view her knowledge of Guernésiais as representing the real old ways of the island, especially their (western) part of the island.

The choir provides its members with a context to sing in Guernésiais, as well as in a sphere of public performance where they can perform not only Guernésiais but also a part of their “ethnocultural identity” on the island of Guernsey (cf. Jones, 2008, p. 250). Such a music genre is an unusual one on Guernsey, but it is one that is highly charged with cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973). The singers find in La Guaine du Vouest a context where they can celebrate their past and current identity as Guernésiais speakers, especially in a context where the language is endangered, and members may use the language verbally during rehearsals as a way of celebrating that identity whilst communicating with likeminded friends. In this linguistic, musical and social context, La Guaine du Vouest is a community-based group with an established place amongst the Guernésiais-speaking population, at least in the west of the island.¹⁰ Members gain personal enjoyment by singing in Guernésiais, as well as contributing to a group that seeks to promote the language. The choir creates a micromusic (Slobin, 1993) to which Guernésiais speakers might be attracted, enthusiasts might know about, and others might come across during public performances (cf. Grinevald and Bert, 2011). The musical pathways (Finnegan, 1989) connect La Guaine du Vouest to a large number of people on Guernsey, but the group is necessarily focused on the language of a particularly small number

of Guernsey residents. In its island context, La Guaine du Vouest is one of many musical groups in the Guernsey soundscape, with many styles existing almost in “parallel musical ‘worlds’” (Veblen, 2008, p. 16; cf. Finnegan, 1989). Its members comprise fluent speakers of Guernésiais, as well as several relatively new learners of the language who are thus able to appropriate a linguistic component of Guernsey identity (cf. Jones, 2008, p. 257). What they all share is a commitment to the performance of song using the language, and, like many community groups, whether performance or otherwise, La Guaine du Vouest is the result of a bottom-up commitment by its members – from the community, and for the community.

The interaction of the choir’s members within a context that celebrates and performs Guernésiais and song creates a group that contributes to heritage (old and new) on Guernsey. Guernésiais is a part of the island’s history, so La Guaine du Vouest occupies a unique sonic space amongst other island choirs, but it is at the same time creating new culture for the island and active in performing one version of the language as remembered and crafted by the group’s members in the modern age.

The group is distinctly from the community. In terms of the group’s membership, each person must first and foremost have a commitment to speaking Guernésiais, although the abilities of each member do differ. However, several members of the group have much authority on the language and speak proudly about growing up on Guernsey and speaking Guernésiais in the home and before going to primary school where the language was not allowed to be spoken. While many of the members have past experiences of loss in connection with Guernésiais, they speak fondly of their local language today, and the choir helps build on their identity as Guernésiais speakers, and as Guernsey island residents. It is in connection with such a cultural identity that the group has a clear function. For its members, a distinct community music group has been formed with native speakers of Guernésiais, and with novice and enthusiastic speakers of the language (cf. Kloss and Verdoodt, 1969; Sallabank, 2002, p. 227; Watson, 1989, p. 49). The bond around the language is at the core of the group’s existence, although some ability in singing is obviously important as this is the main activity of the choir.

A further level of community exists between the choir and the wider sphere of Guernésiais speakers on the island. While the area of performance is discussed in the next part of this article, it is important to note here that the choir’s activities would be of primary significance for just a small percentage of the population of the island. In other words, La Guaine du Vouest has community links with other Guernésiais speakers in the contexts of its potential membership pool, and, perhaps above all, the people who would normally go and listen to the choir perform. While there are undoubtedly non-Guernésiais speakers at many of these performances, the group’s singing activities are often in settings where Guernésiais is at the centre of the meaning of the event.

Members of the choir note that they perform “purely with the idea of preserving the language, not just in music”. In terms of sustaining the island’s language, La Guaine du Vouest sees working together as an important part of their work:

“If we’re going to keep this language alive we need to work together, but it’s hard, it’s one of the island things, everyone’s got their own little patch”.

⁹ The island of Guernsey divides into 10 administrative parishes.

¹⁰ The Guernésiais-speaking community includes, according to the latest census figures, people born in diverse places, including places outside Guernsey such as other Channel Islands, Ireland, Portugal and elsewhere in Europe and beyond (States of Guernsey, 2002, p. 10).

“As we get low in numbers we have to work even harder together”.

“Hence the [planned] DVD, at least there will be something there, people will hear and see it” (Personal communication, 2010).

With comments such as these, it is clear that the choir has an underpinning objective of language activism through song. The choir struggles to keep its heritage project alive. It observes that preservation is at the core of the choir’s work and the group is currently producing a DVD of songs and the spoken language, and it must work hard to achieve its goal.

La Guaine du Vouest claims authority in terms of the language it strives to promote. As one of the group’s members commented:

“The knowledge is our group”.

“[There are] not any known singing activities [in Guernésiais] outside La Guaine du Vouest”.

“This group is the most active, in singing and acting”.

“There are others doing language work, but La Guaine du Vouest is the most active in performance” (Personal communication, 2010).

With comments such as these, the group sees itself as leading the island in terms of singing in Guernésiais and in the linguistic knowledge of its members. It creates its own musical and linguistic community; a type of social network that helps in the maintenance and revival of Guernésiais (cf. Sallabank, 2010b). The members of the choir and broader performance group collectively hold much authority in terms of their joint linguistic and cultural knowledge, and it is in this context that the choir is able to perform widely around the island and sometimes beyond.

Members of the group express a commitment to the choir. In terms of the meaning of their involvement, the following comments by members of the group help show their underpinning dedication in helping sustain and promote Guernésiais as a living language, which is clearly expressed through the medium of vocal (linguistic and music) performance:

“I think it means a lot”.

“We are very proud of our heritage”.

“We are proud to be able to speak it but we’re even prouder to be able to sing it”.

“There are so few people”.

“We’ve had people join our choir who after a while have said [I] can’t master this I can’t do it. . . If they’re not fluent with Guernésiais [to] master the notes it just becomes too hard”.

“It makes me proud”.

“Makes be proud to be Guernsey”.

“I suppose I’m a Guernsey donkey [Guernsey person], I want to be different”.

“It will become a struggle as we get older”.

“[We] must get younger people in within the next five years” (Personal communication, 2010).

For the choir, therefore, Guernésiais and singing are interconnected and cannot be separated: speaking Guernésiais allows them to perform meaningfully; and performing allows the choir’s members to express their identity through Guernésiais. Indeed, the interconnection between song and Guernésiais was clearly articulated when one singer mentioned that some people who were not so proficient in Guernésiais joined the choir for a short time but had since left as a result of not being native speakers of the language.

The recognition that the choir needs younger people to help it sustain its performance activities, along with acknowledgement that it is extremely difficult for singers to be active in the group if they do not already have a strong background in Guernésiais, not only reflects the current state of the language on the island in terms of a lack of new or younger speakers of the language, but also shows a distance between what the group would like to achieve and what they are actually doing in terms of realizing this goal. A comparison can be made with some of the observations of Joshua Fishman in other locations in connection with language revitalization:

Sometimes they may say they wish there was a younger generation that knew the language, but they do not really do anything about it. At an unconscious level, some of them may even enjoy being the last real native speakers. I have had people in old age homes come up to me and saying with pride, “Don’t listen to him; listen to me. I am the real last native speaker”. Such people might be quite upset to find out that there is a young speaker or there is still a club of young speakers. . . [O]lder speakers sometimes do not even seek new ways of re-establishing the inter-generational connection in light of the fact that they can only do the things they have been doing. They can only do the things that they have been doing all along. That is the only thing they know how to do. They have their cohorts; they have their hobby group or their club; and those things are age-graded. The things they talk about, the things they sing about, are old age-graded and no young person is going to get any pleasure out of these kinds of conversation (Fishman, 2007, p. 169).

In connection with the activities of La Guaine du Vouest, several questions might be asked. Why is there a need for younger members? What is the group doing to ensure its own survival? Who is the target audience for its performance activities? While the context for such questions has been outlined above, and the next parts of this article explores the group’s *raison d’être* in more detail, several points should be noted in connection with the apparent contradiction between what the group would like to achieve and how it goes about doing it.

La Guaine du Vouest has a mission to promote Guernésiais. It does this by performing an emblematic aspect of the island’s heritage through song, and its performing activities include dressing up in traditional Guernsey costumes and performing in contexts that are imbued with island heritage, as well as the Eisteddfod competition. Because of the small number of speakers of Guernésiais, along with the fact that most native speakers are of an older generation, the choir’s membership has naturally attracted older singers. For the choir, their way of attempting to help the sustainability of Guernésiais is to perform widely, and in doing this the group is actively involved in translating well-known songs into their own

language. As shown below, their song repertoire is oriented more towards easy listening and well-known songs, and certainly does not connect with mainstream popular music. However, while there are some younger members in the group, its activities at heritage sites tend to attract an audience of older speakers of Guernésiais, thus linking the group to activities such as those described by Fishman above.

While Guernésiais has not yet been linked with any serious attempt to popularize the language in one way or another in terms of placing it within a contemporary popular music context, some of the activities of La Guaine du Vouest as outlined below help show a transformation of tradition, a (re-)invention of tradition rather than a restoration of a linguistic or musical heritage (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), and a recontextualization of performance activities where the “framed” context of heritage performance is foregrounded as a way of showcasing the group’s activities. More broadly, but within the Norman-speaking geographical context, there are several music groups in other locations that have moved more towards popular music performance, including the folk-based group called Magène in Normandy, and the recently-formed electric folk-based group called Badlabecques on Jersey (established in 2012 and sponsored and supported by various local organizations involved in the promotion of Jèrriais).¹¹ Indeed, while transforming a perceived traditional past, some of the activities of La Guaine du Vouest, such as associating Guernésiais with a nostalgic past, might not always help in making the language attractive to a new generation of potential speakers and singers.

Performing Guernésiais

La Guaine du Vouest is the only choir on Guernsey that currently sings exclusively in Guernésiais and is, therefore, often in demand to perform in contexts that celebrate the island’s linguistic heritage, which regularly include venues that emphasize Guernsey’s Norman past or other spheres of heritage celebration where a choir singing in Guernésiais helps add a degree of heritage celebration (e.g., fêtes, markets, Eisteddfod and cultural displays).

La Guaine du Vouest has over 90 songs in Guernésiais and French in its repertoire. However, it no longer sings each of these pieces as it has chosen to exclude songs it had previously learned that have exclusively French lyrics (about one third of its repertoire). Instead, the choir nowadays focuses on songs in Guernésiais. Within this repertoire, the choir transmits a small number of songs that are considered traditional on Guernsey in terms of their historic presence on the island (cf. Heaume and Longmire, 1993), and it includes a large number of songs that are adapted or borrowed through a process of translation, many texts of which have been made by members of the group for the group. With this process, the context of song performance is very much one of evoking a particular sense of the past through words and performing the present through song, which is partly a result of having no new Guernésiais songs composed for a long time and possibly a consequence of the endangered state of the language. One influencing factor for

the choir deciding to focus exclusively on Guernésiais songs, as expressed by one member of the group, is that the public wanted to hear such songs as a lot of people did not know them.¹²

Three songs in La Guaine du Vouest’s repertoire are now discussed as case studies as a way of understanding the breadth of the number of pieces they perform, and also the types of music that form part of this diverse repertoire. As noted, the choir’s repertoire of songs in Guernésiais falls into two main categories of song types: (1) traditional and (2) adapted/borrowed. I have used the term “traditional” to refer to songs that have enjoyed a long history on the island, and are often performed with their origins unknown (usually considered to have come from Guernsey or another Norman location). Such songs sometimes have other Channel Island or French connections in that versions or them are also known in these places too. While it could be argued that some of these songs also fall into the “adapted/borrowed” category, that is, if their origins come from outside Guernsey, the songs are clearly understood by members of the choir to be ones that have enjoyed a long tradition on Guernsey and indeed are considered to be a part of their Guernésiais linguistic heritage. The category labelled “adapted/borrowed” is used here to refer to more recent or well-known songs that have a clear origin outside Guernsey. Such songs are often folk tunes or more popular songs, and Guernésiais activists have in recent decades translated many texts into their own language, and are thus helping to create a new tradition in their island context. As well as these two main song types being represented by two case studies, I have added a third case study to show an example of borrowing a song from home. In other words, translating into Guernésiais the lyrics of a well-known song that was originally composed on Guernsey, but usually first known by islanders in its English version.

“Jean, Gros Jean”

“Jean, Gros Jean” (“John, Fat John”) is considered by La Guaine du Vouest to be a traditional Guernésiais song (Fig. 4). A version of the song is also known in Jersey, where it too enjoys status as a traditional song sung in Jèrriais, and a version of it is also known in Normandy. The Guernsey and Jersey versions of the song share much in common in terms of song-text, structure and meaning. The longer history of “Jean, Gros Jean” is unknown, although one early reference to it was at the beginning of the twentieth century in connection with wedding festivities and Guernsey folklore. As the editor of a mid nineteenth-century manuscript notes: “A few songs were sung, ‘Jean, gros Jean,’ being a ‘sine quâ non’ in the country parishes, and then the mulled wine was handed round in cups, especially at midnight, as the clock struck” (Carey, in Macculloch, 1903, p. 101; cf. Carey, 1908, p. 16). Even at this time, the song is noted in connection with its use in the “country parishes”, that is outside the island’s main town of St Peter Port.

Such is the importance of this song in the contemporary musical traditions of Norman-speaking cultures that at a recent fête, La Fête Nouormande (Norman Fête), one that brings language activists from Guernsey, Jersey and Normandy together each year for several days of song, dance

¹¹ Guernésiais and Jèrriais have been promoted at the Sark Folk Festival, which has been held annually since 2010, especially in terms of the presence of language activists rather than musicians singing in the languages.

¹² Each member of the choir has a copy of each of its songs on song-sheets, some of which include music notation.

“Jean, Gros Jean”	“John, Fat John”
Jean gros Jean maryi sa fille	John fat John married his child [daughter]
Grosse et grasse et bian habille	Big and plump and well endowed
A aen Marchand dé Sabots	To a sabot salesman bold
Radinguette et radingot.	Radinguette and radingot [Tra, la la]
A aen Marchand dé Sabots	To a sabot salesman bold
Radinguette et radingot	Radinguette and radingot [Tra, la la]

Fig. 4 First verse of “Jean, Gros Jean” in Guernésiais with English translation (La Guaine du Vouest, 2000, p. 18; transcribed by Doris O. Heaume).

and recitation, that in most years the song is sung in several versions with the texts written out in the anthology that is produced for the Fête (Johnson, 2008). Furthermore, the song’s significance on Guernsey is also emphasized by being performed by the dance group of L’Assemblaïe d’Guernésiais, Les Danseurs de l’Assemblaïe d’Guernésiais, which adds a particularly unique aspect of performance to the song as this practice is not known with the other versions of the song (Heaume and Longmire, 1993, pp. 28–29). The importance of this song for islanders is also found with a version for a harp consort and voice (Lawrence-King, 2004).

When “Jean, Gros Jean” is performed in such contexts as La Fête Nouormande, the various versions of the song presented help showcase some of the varieties of Norman. In such a context, the Guernésiais version serves to represent Guernsey and Guernésiais, and the singers perform local identity through song and lyrics. It should be noted, however, that even in Guernésiais there are slightly different spellings of words for this piece (and others) depending on the dialect or orthography used (the choir even has several different versions, but the meaning of the texts are the same). The Fête context is, of course, concerned with celebrating, showcasing and promoting the Norman languages of the region. In connection with the song text itself, however, there are no specific and unique references to island life.

“Jean, Gros Jean” is an example of a song that is given the status of being considered traditional. It has an established place in the island’s linguistic and musical heritage. For singers who use Guernésiais, the song has its roots in Guernsey, even though it may have origins from outside the island. Nevertheless, and most importantly in this discussion, the song is nowadays considered to represent the island’s past, and it is an emblematic aspect of Guernsey’s heritage that is performed to showcase linguistic, musical, cultural and island identity.

“La Bianv’nue au Vier Marchi”

La Guaine du Vouest includes a number of songs in its repertoire that have been translated from folk songs, popular songs or other pieces (some are well-known, others not so well-known). The translations of such songs into Guernésiais offer two purposes for the choir. The first is to sing songs that have melodies that might be well known. This brings the repertoire of pieces into the modern day, or at least to the ears of someone who might recognize the tune, and offers the singers and audience alike a referential point with a piece of music that they might already know. These are, to borrow from terminology used in contemporary popular music studies, “covers” of earlier songs and they offer a degree of familiarity that the singers and audience alike would usually recognize, something that may make the music more accessible and attractive. For a

group that aims to promote Guernésiais, this practice is a useful strategy for widening its repertoire and for performing to a more appreciative wider public. The second purpose of the process of translation is to offer lyrics to all involved that bring a sense of knowledge to the song. That is, the performers and audience alike may already know the tune and the original lyrics, so the process of translation helps in terms of enjoyment when participating in a practice to which one is already familiar. This is particularly evident in the example now given, although in this case totally new lyrics have been given to the song.

“La Bianv’nue au Vier Marchi” (“Welcome to the Old Market”) is often sung by La Guaine du Vouest (Fig. 5). The song is the first track of the choir’s CD of 2000, and was the first they sang to me during a visit to one of their rehearsals (they were rehearsing it for an upcoming event for which they usually sing this song). What is interesting about “La Bianv’nue au Vier Marchi” is that the melody is from “Der fröhliche Wanderer” (“The Happy Wanderer”; also known as “Mein Vater war ein Wandersmann”: “My Father was a Travelling Man”), which was composed by Friedrich-Wilhelm Möller of Germany just after World War II. However, while the tunes are the same, the lyrics of “La Bianv’nue au Vier Marchi” consist of new Guernésiais words by an unknown lyricist. More specifically, the lyrics in this case offer a detailed contextualization of the location of performance. That is, on the first Monday of every July, the old market (Lé Viaër Marchi)¹³ is held at Saumarez Park, which is organized by the National Trust of Guernsey and has been running since the 1960s.

The song is essentially a reference to this market, an introduction to the choir and a request for support in what they are aiming to achieve. This type of self-referential theme offers Guernésiais speakers a level of cultural understanding that is entertaining in its rendition: many in the audience would recognize the tune as “The Happy Wanderer,” and those with knowledge of Guernésiais would be able to relate more closely with the song’s lyrics and the context of the choir at the event.

In connection with other examples of music and endangered language connections, the importance of the media and popular culture has been stated by Moriarty (2011). There are many examples the world over where music and linguistic traditions are under severe threat and where excursions into popular music are intended to help the sustainability or status of a language (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2007; Auzanneau, 2002;

¹³ Lé Viaër Marchi is a market that sells and displays local produce and handicrafts, and is filled with entertainment including various types of music performance. As already noted, the language often uses slightly different spellings, as evident in the title of the song and one name used for the old market.

“La Bianv’nue au Vier Marchi”	“Welcome to the Old Market”
A la rencaontre au vier marchi	At the start of the Old Market
Nous y v’la donc derchié	Here we are all again
J’ésperans qu’vous s’nallai oimair	And we hope that you will enjoy
Nos solnattes et nos chaents	Our singing and our songs

Fig. 5 First verse of “La Bianv’nue au Vier Marchi” in Guernésiais with English translation (La Guaine du Vouest, 2000, p. 1).

“Sarnia Chérie”	“Guernsey Dear”
Sarnia, chière patrie, bijou d’la maïr,	Sarnia; dear Homeland, Gem of the sea.
Ile plloinne dé biautai, dans d’iaoue si cliaire	Island of beauty, my heart longs for thee.
Ta vouaix m’appeule terjous, mon tcheur plloin d’envie,	Thy voice calls me ever, in waking, or sleep,
Et mon âme té crie en poine, mes iars voudraient t’veis.	Till my soul cries with anguish, my eyes ache to weep.
Quaend j’saonge, j’té vaie derchier, mesme comme t’étais d’vânt,	In fancy I see thee, again as of yore,
Tes côtis si vaerts et ton sabllaon si bllànc,	Thy verdure clad hills and thy wave beaten shore.
Tes bànques et tes rotchets. Ah! Dé toutes la pus belle.	Thy rock sheltered bays, ah; of all thou art best,
Mon réfuge et mon r’pos, chière île qu’est si belle.	I’m returning to greet thee, dear island of rest.

Fig. 6 Opening of “Sarnia Cherie” with English translation (La Fête Nouormande, 2011, pp. 2–3; This is Guernsey, 2012). Guernésiais version by Hazel Tomlinson (member of La Guaine du Vouest).

Bentahila and Davies, 1995; Grant, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Johnson, 2008; Low et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2001, p. 30; Pietikäinen, 2008). With this type of song, therefore, such a practice of translation and adaptation offers a new role for Guernésiais as an endangered language, although the group does not project Guernésiais directly into a popular culture domain by “increasing the socio-economic status of the language” (Moriarty, 2011, p. 447). Moreover, “endangered language media and pop-culture can help to raise the status of the relevant language” (Moriarty, 2011, p. 447), which, in the case of Guernésiais and “La Bianv’nue au Vier Marchi,” provides the listener with what is usually an immediately recognizable tune to which they can relate. Overall, this type of practice, which is particularly predominant for La Guaine du Vouest, has the objective of helping to revitalize an endangered language by adding popular iconicity to a current and growing repertoire of traditional and new traditional pieces for the island.

“Sarnia Cherie”

A more recently composed song that is extremely well known on Guernsey is “Sarnia Cherie” (“Guernsey Dear”) (Fig. 6). The history of this song dates from the early 20th century when it was composed in English. However, such is the song’s importance to some islanders that a Guernésiais version was made. The song, while obviously overlapping with the category of song-types that are borrowed from other cultures or sub-cultures as discussed above, has a recognized Guernsey origin, and is one that has a special place on the island.

In 1911, whilst beginning a three-year residency on Guernsey, George A. Deighton (Albert George Webb, 1869–1934) wrote the original English lyrics for “Sarnia Cherie,”¹⁴ and Domenico Santangelo (1882–1970) wrote the music (George Deighton, 2012). The song was first performed the same year

in the St Julian’s Theatre in St Peter Port. As noted on one of Guernsey’s main media websites: “Its popularity increased as a result of the Second World War when the nostalgic tune stirred patriotic feeling and was adopted by ex-patriots as their anthem” (This is Guernsey, 2012). The song is now used as the island’s unofficial anthem, particularly at times when the National Anthem (“God Save the Queen”) might be used by other islands or nations (e.g., at sporting events, including medal ceremonies, at the Island Games and Commonwealth Games). Such is the popularity of the song today that there is a CD with various versions of the song recorded on it, including a 9 May 1945 rendition that was sung spontaneously by a highly charged public on the island’s Liberation Day after five years of German occupation (*Sarnia Cherie [Guernsey Dear]*, n.d.).

As the “national” song of the island, “Sarnia Cherie” represents Guernsey. Moreover, inherent in the lyrics are references to the island itself. For example, each of the following words and phrases index Guernsey, often referring to island-scapes that contribute to Guernsey’s unique physical and environmental features. For example, “Sarnia”; “gem of the sea”; “island of beauty”; and “rock sheltered bays”. With such lyrics, a special connection to the island exists to which islanders can easily relate, which further helps give the song a sense of patriotism.

Conclusion

As an ethnographic case study of one aspect of a small island musical culture, this article has shown the value of looking more closely at the interconnection between song, endangered language and sonic activism in a community music setting on the island of Guernsey. What the discussion has achieved beyond showcasing the activities of one amateur women’s choir (a micromusic and sometimes hidden group of musicians) is

¹⁴ The word “Sarnia” is the Latin name for Guernsey.

a comprehension of some of the ways one of the world's endangered island languages and song traditions are inextricably linked and often active in producing musical culture as a result of a perceived decline of linguistic heritage. In this context, language is at the nucleus of creative activity. The performance of Guernésiais through song helps highlight the current state of the language; it attempts to mobilize audiences to pay more attention to a symbolic aspect of the island's heritage; and it helps generate new linguistic and sonic culture that would probably not have existed had Guernésiais not entered a period of linguistic decline.

Guernsey is an island dependency of the British Crown. Its island identity is reinforced not only by its relatively small size and archipelagic context as one of the Channel Islands and British Isles, but also by having its own indigenous language that relates to other Norman varieties in the Channel Islands and on mainland France. As well as also having several varieties of this minority and endangered language on the island itself, over the past century, speakers of Guernésiais have moved from the centre to the periphery in terms of the predominant language spoken on the island. However, in the present day, Guernésiais is still maintained and celebrated as an emblem of island identity, particular amongst speakers of Guernésiais and enthusiasts, and is actually able to produce musical culture through song as a result of a diminishing number of native speakers.

La Guaine du Vouest promotes a context to celebrate and make the wider public more aware of Guernésiais. The choir performs predominantly in contexts that often have the intention of showcasing the language rather than the music itself (cf. Jones, 2008). The songs are usually performed in contexts such as the meetings of organizations that do much to preserve and promote Guernésiais, at fêtes that celebrate traditional aspects of Guernsey's heritage, or in competition where Guernésiais is performed to judges and audience alike and the focus is one of competition and language rather than on musical ability per se.

The focus of this article has been on a choir that is simultaneously performing tradition and (re-)inventing it. That is, in the Guernsey setting, the everyday performance of song using Guernésiais is rarely found in the contemporary soundscape. For many centuries, Guernésiais was an everyday language on the island, although by the twentieth century it had entered a period of rapid decline. What resulted was a context where the language was primarily spoken, or put on performance, amongst activists and enthusiasts alike, each sharing the desire not to witness the absolute extinction of the island's language. La Guaine du Vouest's sonic activism through language and song does much to help show aspects of performance where music and language are interconnected through the choir's objective of promoting Guernésiais. The group functions in several ways: as a choir that creates a community of enthusiasts; and as a group that performs Guernésiais with the aim of continuing a linguistic tradition and making the wider public more aware of the value of the language on the island.

The connections between endangered language and song on Guernsey are focussed on Guernésiais as the island's indigenous language. In the island's contemporary musical context, one choir is particularly active in not only performing and promoting songs in Guernésiais, but also creating new "traditional" music culture. Songs in Guernésiais have a presence in many settings as vehicles for celebrating, sustaining and pro-

moting this endangered language as an emblem of island heritage, not only for those that speak the language, but also for the island more broadly in terms of its historical links with Norman culture and the other Channel Islands. Through ethnographic research with La Guaine du Vouest, this article has shown that while there are diminishing numbers of native speakers of Guernésiais to the extent that the language is now critically endangered, the medium of song has actually helped generate a small yet significant creative sphere of new musical culture through linguistic translation and music performance.

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