

World music: *nul* points

The Eurovision Song Contest might seem the perfect opportunity to hear the traditional music of participating countries, but 'ethnic' efforts have rarely had much success. **Piers Ford** recalls the entrants who have played against the odds

Since the Eurovision Song Contest first graced our TV screens, in 1956, it has been derided for its failure to reflect contemporary trends in pop music. For world music fans, too, there has been disappointment – in the repeated failure of participating countries to submit songs which in some way feature their indigenous musical traditions. These days the spectacle of a brace of hapless performers pulling out all the stops with material which is rarely worthy of their musical talents, along with the ritualistic and highly idiosyncratic voting system, has given the contest credit only for its unique status in kitsch TV viewing. Occasionally performers have been coerced



Remedios Amaya (above) is one of Spain's top *flamenco* singers, but she received 'nul points' for her 1983 Eurovision performance. Photo EMU Spain

into a travesty of their national dress for a few minutes in the spotlight, and among the extravagant ballads and novelty numbers which have dominated the competition there have been accordions, pan-pipes and banjos aplenty. But with the exception of French *chanson* – adopted in any case by several continental countries and generally delivered in the same intense fashion by a female solo singer – national music styles have generally been ignored.

There have, however, been a few entries which have cut through the mass of Euro-pop, earnest Slavic rock, nursery ditties and all-purpose dance tracks to delight the world music enthusiast, if not the multitudes who these days register their votes by telephone. How bold Finland was in 1998 when it presented a multi-textured Runic threnody which actually managed to conjure a sense of ancient holistic Norse philosophies and long tales told around the fire on endless dark nights. And even with its bland lyrics about journeying hand in hand to the promised land, Germany's 1999 entry, 'Reise nach Jerusalem', had a distinctly Turkish flavour, combining soaring Western strings with an irresistible Eastern rhythm and vocals redolent of the bazaar. The gradual inclusion of peripheral European countries such as Israel, Turkey and – on one occasion – Morocco, has also helped to change the picture. In 1983, for example, the Israeli singer Ofra Haza sang a catchy dance anthem called 'Hi' which was light years away from the Armenian folk and ethnic jazz she would become known for but still earned her an impressive second place. Recognising, perhaps, that any

chance of Eurovision success rests on a song with broad appeal and a mundane leitmotif, a number of countries have tended to enter hybrid songs that combine their own interpretation of current tastes in pop music with more traditional elements – a dash of saz lute, perhaps, or a bout of throaty wailing thrown in for good measure. Occasionally this approach has caught the imagination of the juries. Germany's 'Reise nach Jerusalem', with its Turkish influence, came third, while two years earlier, in 1997, Turkey itself reached an unprecedented third place with 'Dinle', a memorable chugging dance tune with a soaring vocal from Sebnem Paker and a backing group playing authentic folk instruments. Yet Greece received no such recognition with a song which was by far its most interesting entry, way back in 1976. 'Panaghia Mou, Panaghia Mou' was a protest song that lamented the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and pitched the pure, impassioned soprano voice of Maria Koch against a large *bouzouki* ensemble and minimal drum beat. Given the ignominious *nul* points fate that has often been meted out on such 'ethnic' contributions, Koch probably regarded her 20 points and thirteenth position as an acceptable return for her efforts. After all, that was the year when Brotherhood of Man won with *Save Your Kisses For Me*, a song that took the contest to unplumbed depths of insipidness.

But it continues to be a difficult battle. Take Portugal, for instance. She joined the fray for the first time in 1964, and more often than not her entries have reflected the country's proud *fado* heritage. But the dignified style of singers such as Simone de Oliveira or Carlos do Carmo has rarely managed to win the juries' favour and is almost invariably dismissed as 'very ethnic' by broadcast commentators, as if that were enough to place it beyond the comprehension or pleasure of the average listener. Too bad for the average listener, then, though not for anyone who enjoys the way in which Portugal and a handful of other countries persist in offering songs which, however tenuously, contain traces of their traditional music.

Spain, too, has struggled to find a foothold in Eurovision. It won in 1968 and tied for first place the following year, but has since foundered on a sea of rosy ballads and excruciating sing-along fare. Only once, in 1983, was it brave enough to send in a fully-fledged flamenco singer to do battle. 'Quién maneja mi barca' was a dark, brooding lament performed by the unheralded Remedios Amaya, who has since become one of Spain's leading flamenco artists on the international stage. But her place in Eurovision history rests with the handful of singers who have suffered the humiliation of failing to score any points at all. With a fair wind and a strong flamenco band, rather than an orchestra that clearly didn't know how to handle the complex, driving rhythms, she might have done better. In 1980 Norway selected a Sami, Mattis Haetta, to sing a song about a famous Lap protest that took place in front of the Norwegian parliament. 'Samiid aednan' was based around a *jolk*

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Yet, as many countries have still musical traditions from beyond the signs for world music aficionados, more promising. Despite the fact of a decidedly superior view of the contest in the vanguard of this welcome, if many of its finest singers have taken competition, representing both the other French-speaking nations. Jac husband of Edith Piaf) sang for Luxembourg and Monaco, while the Hardy, Isabelle Aubret, Jean-Claude Serge Lama and Frida Boccara can lengthy roll of contenders over the though, offered standard *chanson* songs or variations on that curious phenomenon, *yé-yé* pop. France is the quaint yet typically polished *l'enfant* from Marie Myriam. By 21 further afield for inspiration and by drawing upon a variety of traditions largely from African sources. First, a rhythmic *tom-tom*-based chant, 'Blues', penned by that *enfant* from Serge Gainsbourg. His association startling as it might seem – back to France Gall's winning song for Luxembourg, the Lolita-ish *Poupée de cire, poupée de son*. Sophisticated and dramatic, 'White and Black Blues' earned second place. It was followed in 1991 by 'C'est le dernier qui a parié', a hypnotic Senegalese hymn to tolerance, performed by the Tunisian actress Amina, that was pipped at the post by a quintessential Swedish Eurovision number, 'Faangad Av En Stormvind', sung by Carola. Then, in 1992, Martinique-born Kali took the stage with a gentle reggae melody in patois, 'Monté la rivière', but that was another year for big ballads and his understated approach was drowned out by louder voices.

If there has ever been a world music Eurovision, it took place in 1995 as of both an interval act – Riverdance into one of the world's most successful entertainments, and Norway's victory scarcely a song at all. 'Nocturne' was Age blend delivered by a consort of Secret Garden which included the Sherry, piper Davy Spillane, a whist Although Secret Garden now features Age charts on both sides of the Atlantic risk with its 1995 choice. The instrument 'Nocturne' was book-ended by a his

(Sami song) that had featured heavily in the protest, but again the voters' sympathies were hard to enlist and it came a modest sixteenth.

Yet, as many countries have started to experiment with musical traditions from beyond their own borders, the signs for world music aficionados are beginning to look more promising. Despite the fact that it has often taken a decidedly superior view of the contest, France has been in the vanguard of this welcome, if spasmodic, trend. Many of its finest singers have taken part in the competition, representing both their motherland and other French-speaking nations. Jacques Pills (erstwhile husband of Edith Piaf) sang for Monaco back in 1959, for example. Michèle Torr has given her best for Luxembourg and Monaco, while the names of Françoise Hardy, Isabelle Aubret, Jean-Claude Pascal, Betty Mars, Serge Lama and Frida Boccara can also be found in the lengthy roll of contenders over the years. Most of them, though, offered standard chansons, occasional novelty songs or variations on that curious 1960s French phenomenon, *yé-yé* pop. France last won in 1977, with the quaint yet typically polished *chanson* 'L'oiseau et l'enfant' from Marie Myriam. By 1990 it was looking further afield for inspiration and quickly achieved success by drawing upon a variety of traditional influences poached largely from African sources. First came Joëlle Ursull and a rhythmic *tom-tom*-based chant, 'White and Black Blues', penned by that *enfant terrible* of the *chanson*, Serge Gainsbourg. His association with Eurovision isn't as startling as it might seem – back in 1965 he had written

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If there has ever been a world music revolution in Eurovision, it took place in 1995 and was largely a result of both an interval act – Riverdance – that has evolved into one of the world's most successful musical entertainments, and Norway's victory with a song that was scarcely a song at all. 'Nocturne' was a kind of Celtic/New Age blend delivered by a consortium of talent called Secret Garden which included the Irish violinist Fionnula Sherry, piper Davy Spillane, a whistle and a keyed fiddle. Although Secret Garden now feature regularly in the New Age charts on both sides of the Atlantic, Norway took a risk with its 1995 choice. The instrumental core of 'Nocturne' was book-ended by a haunting but extremely

brief vocal line. None the less it centered to victory and heralded a couple of years in which countries scrambled to come up with variations on the Celtic theme. Back in 1984, Franco Battiato and Alice, two of Italy's finest exponents of electronic pop, delivered the atmospheric *I treni di Tazeur*, complete with an unusual backing group of three statuesque soprano opera singers, but nobody has since bothered with experimentation of this nature.

France again took up the ethnic challenge in 1996 with guitarist Dan Ar Bras, who gathered together an international group under the umbrella title of L'Heritage des Celtes, including Capercaille vocalist Karen Matheson, and submitted an ethereal Breton chant entitled 'Diwanis Bugale'. But it was Ireland, then at the height of its Eurovision purple-patch of four victories in five years, that saw off the opposition with 'The Voice', a misty, Enya-like folk story from Eimar Quinn, a singer with Anuna, the group that provided the backing vocals for Riverdance. In 1997 Malta and Sweden both attempted to cash in on the Celtic sound, again featuring ethereal-sounding voices with halting rhythms and lyrics about flying and the wilderness, but the magic had waned and Eurovision was reverting to type; Katrina and the Waves brought the trophy back to the United Kingdom with a feel-good anthem, 'Love Shine a Light', that had nothing original to commend it.

Last year the European Broadcasting Union relaxed the rules and allowed participants to sing in the language of their choice. Inevitably, most countries seized the chance to perform in English in the belief that their chances



Celtic entries became *de rigueur* after Riverdance's interval appearance in 1995. Franco's Dan Ar Bras submitted a Breton chant with L'Heritage des Celtes (above) in 1996 but Ireland took the prize with their own ethereal folk story. Photo: BBC

would be improved by appealing to the lowest common denominator, thereby removing one of the most interesting facets of the competition. So, as the contest limbers up for the 45th time, viewers and listeners hoping for a truly multi-national event will be even more appreciative of any efforts to buck the trend and stick to traditional guns. The omens might not be too good but, as we've discovered, there are precedents. And there's no doubt that if one of them actually broke through and won, the face of Eurovision would be changed forever.

This year's Eurovision Song Contest will be broadcast live on BBC1 on May 13th