

# *The Origin Of The Species "Gymanfa Ganu" And Its Variants*

gan/by Alun Hughes

Many people with Welsh roots have attended a *Gymanfa Ganu* (a Welsh hymn singing festival). In this article, Alun Hughes, one of Cymdeithas Madog's longest serving teachers and frequent contributor on grammatical matters, has a look at *gymanfas*, *cymanfaoedd* and all sorts of other strange animals.

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"You say tomayto, and I say tomahto, you say potayto and I say potahto." You know the problem. We Welsh have our own version, which goes, "You say *gymanfa* and I say *cymanfa*, you say *gymanfas* and I say *cymanfaoedd*." It doesn't scan too well, and it's more than just a matter of pronunciation, but it's the same sort of thing.

So which is it, *gymanfa* or *cymanfa*? Well the basic word, meaning assembly, congregation, meeting, convocation, etc., is *cymanfa* -- you find it under c, not g, in the dictionary. Often, of course, it's seen with *ganu* following, i.e., *cymanfa ganu*, meaning a singing meeting or songfest. And *ganu* is really *canu*, which is also found under c in the dictionary. Okay so far? Good, for the form we see most often of all of course is *gymanfa ganu*, which you won't find anywhere in the dictionary. You never see *cymanfa canu* (well you do, but only when people don't know better), though you do see *cymanfaoedd* (the plural) *canu*. You also sometimes see *Cymanfaoedd ganu* and even *gymanfaoedd ganu*, even though you really shouldn't see either. Still with me? You **are**? I'm impressed, because I'm lost. Perhaps we should call the whole thing off.

No let's not, let's go back to square one, and approach this conundrum (see under c, not g, in the dictionary) the only sensible way -- grammatically (see under g -- oh never mind...).

The basic word is *cymanfa*. Nouns in Welsh are either masculine or feminine, and *cymanfa* is feminine, and that is the root of the problem. If it were masculine there would be no complications -- this may sound sexist, but that's how it is (don't blame me, I didn't invent the language). And the complications are all related to those darn mutations, the changes that the initial letters of Welsh words undergo when... well, many learners seem to think it's when they feel like it. Rules **do** exist, however, and at the risk of sounding sexist again I have to say that the rules decree that the feminine gender is predisposed to much greater changeability than the masculine (I repeat, I didn't invent the language -- if I had, I would have shared out the mutations 50-50, as any progressive, right-thinking person would have done).

Anyway, the word *cymanfa* by itself means **an** assembly (there is no indefinite article in Welsh, so the "an" is understood). To say **the** assembly we have to use the definite article *y*. Since *cymanfa* is feminine, it undergoes soft mutation: the c becomes g, giving *y gymanfa*.

The same sort of thing happens when we add *canu*. Adjectives describing feminine nouns also undergo soft mutation, and so we have *cymanfa ganu* (**a** songfest) and *y gymanfa ganu* (**the** songfest). The songs of course are always hymns (for songfest read hymnfest), but being Welsh that's taken for granted.

What could be simpler? Well actually the plural is simpler, because though the plural form *cymanfaoedd* is longer and harder to pronounce, the mutations are absent. So when we add *y* and *canu*, that's all we do, add *y* and *canu*, giving *y cymanfaoedd*, *cymanfaoedd canu* and *y cymanfaoedd canu*.

When speaking Welsh, these words are always used according to the rules, i.e., *cymanfa* to mean an assembly, *y gymanfa* to mean the assembly, and so on. It's only when they are transferred to English that inconsistencies arise, but ironically enough these inconsistencies are perfectly logical.

Of the various possible forms (*cymanfa*, *y gymanfa*, *cymanfaoedd*, *y cymanfaoedd* -- with or without the adjective *canu*), the commonest by far are *y gymanfa* and *y gymanfa ganu*. This is because we usually refer to just one of these events at a time (hence the singular), and we usually have a specific one in mind (hence the definite article).

English has no proper equivalent for *y gymanfa* (at least not in the sense of hymnfest, which is what we usually mean by the word). When we want to say this in English therefore, what could be more natural than to keep the Welsh and simply substitute *the* for *y*, giving *the gymanfa* and *the gymanfa ganu*. Since we use the *g*-word so often, *gymanfa* then becomes the English norm, and it makes perfect sense to go one step further and say *a gymanfa ganu*. It also makes sense, though it sounds really jarring to Welsh ears, to make the plurals *gymanfas* and *gymanfa ganus*. In effect, *gymanfa* becomes an English word, just like thousands of other loan words before it, and it must therefore obey the rules of English grammar.

Where does all this leave us? Well for one thing perhaps, better able to sleep nights, now that a major mystery has been explained (??). As to which forms should be used when, that's not so easy. In Welsh it's straightforward, but in English we have a choice. We can try to be purists and use the proper Welsh forms (awkward though this sometimes is), we can take the easy way out and fall back exclusively on the *g*-words, or we can mix 'n' match. There's no simple answer, but my advice is this: whatever you do be consistent, and never **ever** use any of the following -- *gymanfa canu*, *cymanfa canu*, *cymanfaoedd ganu*, and *gymanfaoedd ganu* -- because they don't exist in any language.

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