



## Traditional song in Ireland: living fossil or dynamic resource

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# Traditional Song in Ireland: Living Fossil or Dynamic Resource?

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When I submitted the abstract of this paper, I did not realize that the late Frank Harrison used almost exactly the same title in an Ó Riada memorial lecture at University College Cork, Ireland some years ago (Harrison, 1988). I can only say by way of excuse that it was not conscious theft on my part, but an example of inadvertant intertextuality. In this paper I propose to give a survey of the traditional song scene in Ireland, its main events and also to attempt an exploration of some of the issues which concern singers and indeed the wider community of musicians in Ireland at the moment.

Folk song has long been a subject of interest to scholars and has meant many things to varying groups since the time of its coinage by Herder in the eighteenth century (Bohman 1988, 32-33). Bruno Nettl (1983, 304) has noted that:

the term "folk song" has strong emotional connotations in Western society as already illustrated by Julian von Pulikowski ... who showed, in a large study of the term, how the concept was batted about by politicians of the left and right, by social reformers, nationalists, educators, antiquarians, musicians theoretical and practical, even in the nineteenth century.

This is no less the case in Ireland than elsewhere and it may be useful in this regard to outline some of the historical background of traditional song, in order that we may better understand how traditional song came to be regarded as a powerful national identity symbol, a role which it still occupies in the prevailing contemporary situation.

Music has been on the cultural and political agenda in Ireland since the time of Giraldus Cambrensis, a Welsh Norman who visited Ireland in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and who found very little to praise among the Irish except their music. Somewhat later at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was a revival of interest in the harp, the national instrument, which culminated in the great festival of harpers in Belfast in 1792. This was the last gathering of traditional harpers in Ireland and it was also unique in that it was the first time their music was systematically recorded. The collector was Edward Bunting, a young organist, who was so impressed by what he heard that he devoted the rest of his life to the collection of Irish music and song, publishing three volumes from his collections in 1796, 1809 and 1840 respectively. Many of the tunes he transcribed at the Belfast festival were songs which the harpers accompanied themselves with on the harp. Many of these are

still current in today's song tradition, in versions which are close to those in Bunting's first book. He himself did not know the Irish language and as a result was unable to write down the lyrics. He subsequently enlisted the help of Patrick Lynch, a Gaelic scholar who wrote down the words, which are still extant, although it has been difficult at times to rejoin the music and the lyrics (Ó Canainn, 1978, 13-14).

It seems to have been Bunting's successor, George Petrie, in his *Ancient Music of Ireland* (1855), who first placed the singer in a central position with regard to the transmission of song. In his preface he stated that singers gave the most accurate renditions of the airs, thereby ensuring that, in the classification of Irish music, song was given a central location:

I must say, that except in the case of tunes of a purely instrumental character...it was only from the chanting of vocalists, who combined words with the airs, that settings could be made which would have any stamp of purity and authenticity. (Petrie, Stanford ed. 1902,1905, x)

Not only was this an important statement from the point of view of the centrality of song in the Irish tradition, it also stated two concepts that were clearly high on the collector's agenda, *purity* and *authenticity* (Trachsel 1996, 34). Here we have the beginnings of a native theory of traditional music and song, as it can be said without exaggeration that these two perspectives still inform attitudes to music in Ireland today, which leaves the dialectic of tradition and innovation a particularly fraught one at times.

Some forty years later the Gaelic League was founded with the aim of generating a cultural renaissance of Gaelic language and culture. Although it was conceived as a movement which was above politics and in which all Irishmen could unite, regardless of creed or political persuasion, it was from the outset an organization dominated by a nationalist perspective, which became more overtly separatist with the passing of time (Mac Donagh, 1983, 113). In his famous lecture, "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland", first presented in 1892 (Hyde, 1894) which spelt out the poor state of Gaelic culture in Ireland and suggested a program for its amelioration, Douglas Hyde noted that traditional songs in Irish were losing ground to popular music hall compositions such as "Get Your Hair Cut" and "Ta-ra-ra-boom-Dee-ay" (Hyde, 1894, 156). His own collection, *The Love Songs of Connacht* (1987, 1968, 1893) was an influential text in the Irish literary revival and may have been important in the formation of a canon of Irish folk song that was being formed along lines where Sharp's (1965, (1907)) concepts of folk song seemed to coincide felicitously with nativist ideas at the time. This model emphasized oral tradition at the expense of printed methods of dissemination and focused on rural performers in remote areas, which it viewed as the only true carriers of a musical culture upon which a national music tradition could be founded (Sykes, 1993). In the Gaelic League philosophy, which was heavily influenced by the international movement of Romantic nationalism, the true spirit of Ireland was the neglected and despised Irish-speaking one, which was to be found only among the dwindling communities where the Irish language survived as an everyday vernacular. Every effort would have to be made to preserve the vitality of these areas and their traditions must be collected and saved from extinction.

An annual literary and cultural festival was established in 1897 modelled after the Welsh *Eisteddfod* and called *An tOireachtas*, a resurrection of the old Irish term for a king's assembly. This continued until 1924, when it ceased, and was begun again in 1939. It continues uninterrupted until this day. As this was the first such assembly of its kind and since many of the Gaelic League members were middle class city dwellers, with little knowledge of, or contact with, the Gaelic regions, difficulties arose almost immediately regarding the nature of traditional song (Ó Súilleabháin, 1984, 95-113). This was due to the fact that urban singers, who, given their training, were probably appalled at being passed over in competition for traditional singers from the Irish speaking regions. It is evident that they did not believe much in the existence of a traditional style and at least one correspondent called for the adoption of a standard for traditional singing (Ó Súilleabháin, 1984, 105). After quite a lot of discussion and public debate in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, the official newspaper of the League and in other fora, the maxim was adopted in 1911 that "*ní éistfeair ach le hamhránaíocht ar an sean-nós*", ie only *sean-nós* singing will be accepted (Ó Súilleabháin, 1984, 111). This may be the first recorded use of the term with regard to traditional song in Gaelic League documentation. Although it seems to have been around for at least a hundred years previously (Ó Muirithe, 1996, 173), this moment marked its adoption by the Irish revival movement as a definite term of description for the traditional, unaccompanied and usually solo singing of the Irish-speaking regions.

These concepts were developed over the years and continue to inform popular conceptions of Irish traditional music and song, both among singers, musicians and other enthusiasts

Today, *An tOireachtas* is run over a ten day period with the main competitive events being held over two weekends. It is interesting to note that the dichotomy which presented itself in the early years, that is, the difference between Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht competitions is still observed in today's *Oireachtas*; the choral and instrumental music competitions being on the first weekend and what are known as *comórtais Ghaeltachta*, ie Gaeltacht competitions, falling on the second. The highlight of all competitions in the *Oireachtas* are those for *sean-nós* singing. These culminate in *Corn Uí Riada*, the Ó Riada memorial cup, which is the last official event of the festival and which is the one which receives most attention from the media. Two points are of interest here. One is the separation of the solo traditional singing events from the musical and choral competitions, and their inclusion under the heading of Gaeltacht competitions. In fact, until the mid-seventies those who were not natives of Irish-speaking areas were not allowed to enter Gaeltacht competitions (Ní Chionnaith, 1993). The other is the fact that *sean-nós* singing seems to be viewed more as a language event than a musical one. In addition the *sean-nós* competitions get most attention from the media, the major events being broadcast live on *Raidió na Gaeilte* (the Irish language radio station). *Sean-nós* then, has achieved a central position in the canonical hierarchy of the *Oireachtas*, which reflects its received position as the foundation of traditional music in Ireland. This position has generally been confirmed by many of the studies carried out on Irish music (Ó Riada, 1982 (1962), de Noraidh, 1965, 1994, Bodley, 1973, Ó Canainn, 1978). These studies differ little in the broad picture they present of highly ornamented solo singing in the Irish language, surviving only in the Irish-speaking areas mainly on the western seaboard, and like the Irish language itself, in danger of extinction. They outline in varying detail the ornamen-

tal features of singing in Irish and stress decoration and variation of the melodic line as the most important musical aspects of traditional song. This stressing by scholars of the decoration of the musical line of traditional song has led to the belief that the more ornamented styles represent the most authentic and traditional singing practiced in Ireland (Shields 1993, 124). Some recent writers have raised important issues regarding views on authenticity in their critique of the anomalies in this received position and of the classical view of traditional music in general (Carson, 1986, 49, Smyth 1995, 2-10).

Consequently, vocal decoration has been promoted by the cultural revival as a symbol of authenticity and has become somewhat fetishized, with many singers now singing in highly ornate styles which were not characteristic of their regions in the recent past (Foley, 1991, 26). Vocal decoration is important in almost all Irish singing styles, but the focus has been on particular kinds, usually the impressive melismatic runs and rolls characteristic of some regions. Other forms of embellishment, such as stopping, phrase, rhythmic and melodic variation tend to be passed over because they are less aurally striking. Indeed, singers from areas where a more restrained style prevails have often received rough treatment from adjudicators because of their singing style. This more restrained style (called simple by some) is regarded by many as less traditional and not true *sean-nós* (Henigan 1991, 97). This attitude is directly linked to the ideology of nationalism and the role of singing as an identity symbol, which differentiated between Irish and foreign singing styles, the more ornate being considered more authentically and purely (those words again) Irish, because they were perceived to sound markedly different from English folk and European art styles, thus emphasizing the cultural separateness of the Irish people, which, in turn, lent important support and legitimation to the ideal of political separation (Whelan 1992, 42). Fr. Richard Henebry (1902, 12-13), an influential member of the Gaelic League, with strong nativist tendencies (O' Leary, 1994, 15), emphatically stressed seven major differences between standard Western European singing and the Irish style, with regard to scale, pitch, phrasing, technique (runs and florid adornments), timbre of voice, state and subtleties of language. This type of scrutiny developed into a codification of the rules of traditional song (Ó Súilleabháin, 1984, 102, Carson, 1996, 91) which eventually became prescriptive and normative and which have a had a tendency towards standardization, the very thing called for by some of the early critics of traditional song.

In a recent article which examines the present qualities and characteristics of *sean-nós* song from a historical point of view, Pádraig Ó Cearbhaill (1995, 44-45) identifies five features which are nowadays seen as salient and uncompromising features of traditional song in the Irish language. These are (a) that the voice quality uses no dynamics, (b) that rhythmic and rubato songs are distinct categories, (c) that the singers do not use vibrato, (d) that it is thought that words precede music in importance and (e) that the melodic phrases must not be broken. He then gives examples from traditional singers and others which contradict these supposedly categorical rules. Arising from those contradictions he suggests that rule makers ought to be very careful when formulating any kind of rule about *sean-nós*.

Such analysis of traditional song is relatively new, and these notions regarding its "proper" characteristics are still widespread and indeed, it may be said, held with deepseated and dogmatic conviction by many. This type of stylistic

standardization is characteristic of cultural revivals and similar processes have been noticed in sports and instrumental music in Ireland (Whelan, 1993, 29-35). This standard style of singing is easily recognized and is promoted by the *Fleadhanna Ceoil*, competitions organized by *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* at regional, national and international level and which promote traditional music in an All-Ireland and a diasporic context, particularly in Britain and continental North America. In this style the voice can be described as light and there is a preference for rubato airs which nevertheless have a steady pulse. Vocal decoration is judiciously applied and the effect overall is very smooth and sweet at its best. The effects of competition can, however, lead to a homogenization of personal styles with singers sounding almost identical. In other words, singers interested in prizes tend to sing in ways which they believe will earn the approval of adjudicators. This compromises the ideal of non-competitive song style in Ireland where the distinct personal stamp of the individual singer is highly prized. At *An tOireachtas*, the Gaelic League festival I have already mentioned, and which is regarded as the primary forum for traditional singing in the Irish language, a trend of favouring the singers of the Connemara region has recently been reversed with singers from other Gaeltacht regions, and, in 1995, a singer from Dublin winning major prizes<sup>1</sup>. Adjudication at such competitions is a matter of some controversy as I have previously stated, with the biases of individuals often taking precedence over aesthetic considerations, sometimes with highly unexpected results. The ideal of closely knit rural communities where singing is transmitted within the family has proved to be a rigidly held precept in such biases<sup>2</sup>. Ó Cearbhaill asks the question, "how many of the Gaeltacht regions today exist where sean-nós singing forms an integral part of community life as described by Ó Madagáin in 'Functions of Irish Folk-Song in the Nineteenth Century' (1985)?" Indeed, there is only a very small number of such communities left, even in the Irish-speaking regions, but nevertheless the idyllic scenario still persists in the minds of many. The west of Ireland in general has been an emigrant culture for the past 150 years, suffering a renewed haemorrhage in the 1980's, after a brief respite in the 1970's. The Gaeltacht regions are no exception to this. The effects of modern media curtail the home-made entertainment of evening visiting with the result that one of the most important fora for singers has been severely attenuated. A number of measures have been taken to combat this. *An Gaelacadamh*, an organization based at *An Spidéal* in Co Galway sponsors classes for children in traditional song as does *Meitheal an Dúchais* in the Donegal region. In the Ring Gaeltacht in Waterford, traditional music and song is part of the curriculum in the local secondary school, which has led to the emergence of a number of talented young singers and musicians in that area. All this goes against the received wisdom that *sean-nós* singing cannot be learned, but must be absorbed from family or neighbours. Ó Cearbhaill has successfully shown that even in the nineteenth century, the supposed heyday of burgeoning oral tradition, that songs were formally taught by singers to members of their families and to others. Drawing on the reminiscences of the great Labhrás Ó Cadhla (1889-1961) from Kilgobnet in the mountainous *Sliabh gCua* region of Waterford, he retraces his song pedigree back to the early nineteenth century. Ó Cearbhaill cites several passages which show that song was actively and strictly taught within the household, belying the popular model of unconscious absorption which still informs the attitudes of many. It is important to note the difference between informal and unconscious here, since many of the

present older generation of singers do not remember being formally taught, but remember when they learnt songs and the encouragement or otherwise of their relatives (Ó Laoire, 1996). Consequently it could be argued that the classes in traditional song which I have mentioned above are but another manifestation of the impulse to pass on the songs, evident from accounts of song transmission in the past, and that they represent an adjustment to contemporary living conditions. The evidence from the last century shows that they are in no way untraditional. Of course, many argue that it's not the same as it was in the old days, but then, nothing ever is! For adults, who are no less affected by these changes than are children, a number of workshops, symposia and festivals are held in various parts of the country during the year<sup>3</sup>. These create a focus for what might be termed a spontaneous song community which gather for these festivals and disperse again after them. One of the most interesting of these festivals is *Sean-Nós Cois Life*, which was set up in 1992 by a group of enthusiasts for traditional Gaelic song in Dublin. This festival is run over a weekend in late March or early April and its format includes workshops with singers from Gaeltacht areas all over the country. Sessions also form an important part of the activities. One of these includes storytelling and is run in conjunction with An Góilín Singers' Club. Another important aspect of the festival is the presentation of a *gradam* or award to a singer who has made an outstanding contribution to the song tradition during his or her lifetime. In this way, the organizers hope to recognize the important work that singers carry out in collecting, transmission and teaching as well as in performance, without regard for the vagaries of competition.

The transmission of songs is also aided by the publishing company *Cló Iar-Chonnachta*, a small but vibrant enterprise, located in the Connemara Gaeltacht and which, since 1985, has been publishing books, CDs and cassettes. Their song tapes and CDs contain some of the most important records of older singers not previously commercially recorded and are an important link for those who wish either to learn songs or increase their appreciation by listening. This is an important resource for young singers to acquire both style and repertoire. This company has indeed also been instrumental in publishing newly composed song also in *sean-nós* style and the new country and western style which is so popular all over rural Ireland. Some of these songs indeed are in traditional metres, but they go very well with tunes which reflect country influence. The main group responsible for promoting this new country style in the Irish language has been *Na hAncairí*, whose singer John Beag Ó Flaithearta is one of the most popular vocalists in Connemara and indeed, in other Irish-speaking areas today.

I have focused up to now mainly on the Irish language tradition, which is symbolically very important as I have shown, although numerically, singers from the English language tradition far outnumber their Irish-speaking counterparts. Actually, this is another dichotomy inherited from the early Gaelic League days and one which still continues to have consequences today. It also ignores the fact that Irish-speakers also speak English and enjoy singing in English as well. As Shields (1993, 141) comments,

In the same way that good singers of English mingle traditional with other songs, singers of Irish may be expected to mingle traditional (and other) songs in English with their songs in Irish. This fact has been obscured by the Gaelic revival movement, both from the understandable

desire to notice and preserve items in Irish and from the less enlightened supposition that the Gaeltachts have no other culture than a Gaelic one.

By identifying the Gaelic culture as the most quintessentially Irish, all other culture was thereby rendered less important and less Irish. Song was no exception in this regard, and broadside ballads, locally composed and music hall material were rejected out of hand and given no place in the received tradition of Irish song. A few years ago, at an event where there were two competitions, one for singing in Irish and the other for singing in English, I heard one of the adjudicators commenting that the English language song tradition "came a very poor second to Gaelic song," thereby insulting half of the competitors present. In its search for purity and authenticity, the Gaelic League ignored the new hybridized culture that had grown up alongside Gaelic culture and, moreover, which was deeply influenced by it. David Lloyd (1994, 62) has argued that the power of this subversive and dialogic response to colonization was misunderstood by many cultural nationalists, who chose only the monologic route of the Irish language and Gaelic culture to support their separatist ideal. I believe it is time to acknowledge that traditional song in Ireland, in both languages are different and equally important branches of the same tradition, which to be properly studied must be taken in conjunction.<sup>4</sup>

In a recent article in *The Irish Times* (May 7<sup>th</sup> 1997), James McCloskey, a professor of linguistics at the University of California, Santa Cruz, had these comments to make regarding the politics of language in Ireland (my translation),

Despite the ferocity and the acrimony of language politics in Ireland, the debates surrounding them are parochial and narrow minded on both sides....Language questions in Ireland are almost invariably discussed in terms of nationalism. When the attempt at preservation is criticized, it is usually accused of narrow-minded romantic nationalism.

It is accepted on both sides that the philosophy of nationalism (whether one approves or disapproves) is the foundation of the revitalization campaign. But if the frame of reference is extended somewhat, it becomes clear immediately that it is neither necessary nor proper for nationalism to be concerned. The value of keeping the Irish language alive is not because it is a symbol of identity. Because of the accidents of history, we have been left to care for one strand of the varied web of speech — a web which belongs to the whole human race and not to us alone.

Because traditional music and song is often linked in the popular mind with the language, these statements regarding the debates which surround them apply equally well. Song and music, I would argue, provide an important role in the formation of identity which cannot be discounted. However, as McCloskey rightly points out, with regard to the Irish language, their worth goes much deeper than that.

The transmission of traditional music and song then, need not, any more than the language, be seen in terms of backward looking oppositional atavism alone, but may be viewed as "an imaginative leap which makes contact between

us and all the other communities around the world, upon whom it has fallen to make the same effort" (McCloskey 1997, (my translation)). There seems to be a recognition in some quarters that there is a need to break down entrenched barriers. At the annual Merriman Summer School, held in Lahinch, County Clare, in 1996, some of Ireland's top performers of traditional music and song shared a platform with their jazz and classical counterparts, in what is believed to have been the first concert of its kind and which was supported by the Arts' Council. I believe that this is the kind of imaginative act that McCloskey is thinking of, although it concerns music and not language. It seems to me that it augurs well for a rethinking of traditional song and music, in terms which allow a more creative approach than the old dichotomy of nationalism and anti-nationalism, which was such an integral part of official attitudes in the 1930's (Brown, 1985, (1981), 147) and which continues, in more subtle dress, to pervade attitudes towards the relevance of traditional music and song today. It may also address another related issue, that of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, which are often seen to be opposing forces, but which Gerald Pocius (1991, 272 – 299) has convincingly argued for Newfoundland, are in many senses academically imposed categories. The truth is always more complex and lies between these poles, which is an idea we must become better acquainted with as we carry the legacy of traditional music and song with us into the twenty first century.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Áine Uí Cheallaigh of An Ring, Waterford, has won Corn Uí Riada on two occasions (1990 & 1992) as, indeed, I have myself, representing Donegal tradition, (1991 & 1994). Another Donegal singer Gearóidín Bhreathnach took the prize in 1996. Mairéad Ní Oistín, originally from Dublin and now living in Connemara, won Corn Uí Riada in 1995. Mairéad sings in the Connemara style and repertoire. It is

interesting to note that the Raidio na Gaeltachta, the Irish-language radio station, with headquarters in Connemara, stated in their news bulletin announcing the results that Mairéad Ní Oistín was *from* Connemara. She herself contacted the station about this and the announcement was corrected to "originally from Dublin and now living in Connemara," on subsequent bulletins. Galway singers have featured strongly in the runners up in this competition in these years. The winner of the 1993 competition was Nóra bean Mhic Dhonnchadha, from Connemara, who took the prize for the third time, one of only three singers ever to do so. Interestingly, both of her songs were newly composed and received their first public performance at *An tOireachtas*.

<sup>2</sup> Some of these festivals include *The Inishowen International Ballad Symposium*, held annually in Co Donegal and organized by Jimmy McBride of Bunrana, The Forkhill Singers' Weekend, held in Forkhill Co Armagh, *Sean-Nós Cois Life*, discussed above, *Fleadh Amhrán agus Rince* (Festival of Song and Dance), organized by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in Ballycastle Co Antrim and the Lahinch Folklore Summer School, Lahinch, Co Clare. Also in Clare are the Ennistymon Singers' Festival and the internationally known Willie Clancy Summer School in Miltown Malbay. All of these are organized by local committees. A number of other summer schools for traditional music have been set up in recent years based on the Willie Clancy model. These are held in Tobercurry, Co Sligo and in Drumshanbo, Co Leitirim. *Pléaraca Chonamara*, an Arts' Festival based in the Connemara Gaeltacht, a region regarded by many as the capital of sean-nós singing in Ireland, features both competitions and informal sessions for Irish language singing. The Joe Heaney Festival, based in the same region includes lectures, competitions for young people and singing sessions. The *Fleadh Cheoil*, already mentioned has competitive events as does *An tOireachtas. Féile na Mí* (The Meath Festival), a cultural event centring round the Rath Cairn Gaeltacht in that county, features *sean-nós* competitions and also lively sessions of singing and traditional dancing. This is, necessarily, but a listing of the most prominent events and is by no means a comprehensive one.

<sup>3</sup> To this end, I have established in conjunction with Professor Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin and the Irish World Music Centre at the University of Limerick, *Ionad na nAmhrán* (The Song Centre), which aims to promote the study and performance of traditional song in Ireland. So far there have been three annual events, kindly sponsored by *Bord na Gaeilge* (The Irish Language Board), where singers have been invited to perform at a concert, give workshops and discuss issues relevant to the song tradition. We have also commissioned a short film on an individual singer and have, with *Teilifís na Gaeilge* (The Irish Language Television Station) and Hummingbird Productions, completed a 40 minute documentary on singing in the Donegal Gaeltacht. We have begun to amass an archive and have planned a series of short residencies for singers to share their art.

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