

National identity and local ethnicity:

The case of the Gaelic League's *Oireachtas sean-nós* singing competitions.

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In this paper, I amplify in more detail, points only briefly referred to previously (Ó Laoire, 1998), and analyse the *sean-nós* (traditional song in Gaelic) competitions established by *An tOireachtas* (1897-1924, 1939-). To do this, it will be necessary to revisit the activity surrounding the early period of the festival, in order to contextualise the developments that have arisen from it. Subsequently, I will examine the period from 1939, with a focus on individuals who were influenced by *An tOireachtas* and the principles it promoted regarding Gaelic song and singers. Finally, I will look briefly at the contemporary situation, identifying some trends evident in the developing scene.

I have already outlined (Ó Laoire, 1998) something of the process by which *sean-nós*, or traditional singing in Irish (Gaelic), has come to be seen as a central part of the canon of Irish traditional music. The roots of this process go back at least to the eighteenth century, and probably further (Leersen, 1996, p.175) and became gradually more intensified during the nineteenth century, until by 1893, Douglas Hyde could remark that if Ireland were to lose her (traditional) music, the island would have lost its single most important cultural asset after the Irish language and its literature (Hyde, 1894, p.155). Song was central in this claim for the invaluable contribution of traditional music to an Irish identity, since its form embodied both music and language, and could consequently be seen as a kind of isthmus linking these two fields, of which the linguistic and literary heritage occupied undisputedly the higher position (White, 1998).

Hyde was a folklorist, as well as being a cultural nationalist, deeply influenced by the philosophy of JG Herder, and of a previous Irish nationalist, Thomas Davis and the Young Ireland movement. It was Hyde, with his philosophy of the maintenance and revitalisation of Irish as a *spoken* vernacular, who most powerfully fused the scientific collection of folklore with the language movement. By 1927, after the establishment of the Irish Free State (1921), the Folklore of Ireland Society was set up by Hyde and others. This became the Irish Folklore Institute by 1930 and the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935 (Ó Giolláin, 1996, pps.143-144). Today this huge collection of more than two million pages of material is stored in the Department of Irish Folklore, at the National University of Ireland, Dublin.

The main project initiated by the Gaelic League, the maintenance and revitalising of the Irish language or 'the Revival' as it is most often called, also became a state project with far reaching effects at the same time. Statutorily defined Irish speaking regions were

demarcated in 1926, officially known as *Gaeltachtaí* (Johnson, 1997, p. 181-2). These were ear-marked for special protection by the state to safeguard the continuance of the Irish language as a vernacular. Both these and other projects were crucially underpinned by a need for the fledgling state to construct a differential identity (Bauman, 1971, p. 31), one based on a nationalist rhetoric, which defined Ireland as 'not-England' (Kiberd, 1995), in opposition to its former colonial ruler. This meant that many language enthusiasts believed that their work had been accomplished when autonomy had been achieved, and that the state was now firmly in charge of implementing the goals which they had so zealously pursued. The Gaelic League became, then, in many ways, a spent and marginal force in the new Free State (Devlin, 1972, p. 87).

These developments had a profound effect on traditional music and on song in particular, since song, above all, because of its verbal component, was seen as a 'textual adjunct in the service of romantic nationalism' (White, 1998, p. 70). The *Oireachtas* festival was established four years after the League with its own committee, and with a brief of promoting the cultural heritage. Again, literature took precedence, the stimulation of new writing being a primary aim. There was, however, also an interest in what are now called the performing arts, in storytelling, in recitation, in music, song and dance. Competitions were established to encourage these art forms and music and song proved particularly popular (Ó Súilleabháin, 1984, p. 95-113). An interest in song and music was paralleled with an interest in what was then most often called the "Irish style" (Ó Súilleabháin, 1984, 99). The Gaelic movement (also known as Irish Ireland) was imbued with a desire to promote all things Irish. Thus, the singing style of the people in Irish speaking regions, who, in their rural adherence to a language and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) which had been excluded from colonial discourses of power and influence (Fallon, 1998), was now advanced as the most saliently Irish of all. With other cultural phenomena that were seen as characteristically Irish (Mac Póilín, 1994), this style was invested with the symbolism of not-Englishness (Kiberd, 1995), and therefore of pure Irishness. In a convenient and powerful binary polarity, paralleled in other spheres, mainstream European music came to represent the colonial tradition, and Irish music and song came to represent 'pure, authentic' Irishness. Consequently, anything redolent of the influence of the European style came to represent a pollution or a 'contamination' (cf. Deane 1985, 70, 94) of Irish purity and authenticity, to the extent that even Turlough O' Carolan, a famous 18th century harper and composer was criticised by one of the more extreme members of this movement (White, 1998). My depiction here is necessarily, given the constraints of space, somewhat crude and reductive, glossing over what was obviously a much more complex and contested situation (O' Leary, 1994, Fallon, 1998). Nevertheless, such generalisations do signpost the dominant trends of the time. A passage describing a song competition, held at *Feis Chonnacht* in September 1910 (B. 1910), in County Galway, will serve to illustrate something of the heady atmosphere which pervaded such events in those days:

On the first day of Feis Chonnacht [sic] a few judges and a large number of competitors got isolated by a great rain storm in a large tent which was pitched in

a field beside the lake. While examining some children in Irish prayers we discovered a small band of girls from Belclare. Their *blas* and correctness of speech was sufficient to show that Irish was their home language, and on learning that they were all singers, the desire to hear some old-strain songs prompted us to set up an *impromptu* concert during an interval between two competitions...For a whole hour the Belclare girls held the attention of a big audience. The native speakers from the Loughrea district, among whom the old-strain singing is now largely a memory, were excited with enthusiasm and made many exclamations of approval during the songs.

The hallmarks of the Gaelic League philosophy are readily apparent in this description. Its members saw themselves at the heart of a campaign to draw attention to and to revitalise the traditions of Gaelic singing throughout Ireland, and active teaching and competitive events were the principal methods they employed to do this. It is clear that there was more than an element of the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) about this, although it can be argued that was also a continuity. Honko's (1995, pps. 133-4) definition of tradition as 'an availability of cultural elements' is most useful here, where traditions become part of the cultural order by a process of selection. These cultured elements then help to define group identity, as a 'set of values, symbols and emotions joining people through constant negotiation, in the realization of togetherness and belonging - constituting a space for 'us' in the universe (as well as distinguishing us from them)'. This imagined community (Anderson, 1983) then, was not so much based on mass literacy, since the medium of mass literacy in Ireland was English. The League's successful, if controversial, campaigns for a stronger place for Irish in the educational system, did extend literacy in Irish, and reading ability increased subsequently, but this was never on a 'mass' level (Ó Fiaich, 1972, pps. 63-74). Rather, it based its vision on the past glory of the Irish people and adopted song in Irish as a contemporary symbol (among others) of that imagined former greatness. In Gellner's terms, 'the shared culture is revered *directly* and not through the haze of some token' (1982, p. 169).

It is clear from the description of the Feis given above that there was, by 1910, a clear idea of what constituted 'old-strain' singing. This was an idea which was promoted by the League, through the national festival, *An tOireachtas*, and its competitions, from the very early days after its establishment in 1897. This was the subject of no little contention as the questions of accompaniment, harmonisation and choral arrangements were vehemently debated. Unaccompanied singing in unison was established as the accepted style of choral performance. Patrick Pearse, now best known for his part in the Easter Rising in 1916, took part in the discussion. In an essay on *Traditionalism*, he pointed out that he thought that people were overly concerned with the *traditional style*, which he regarded as a peasant style rather than a national style. He proposed that this style of singing could form the basis of a national style of song and music (Pearse, 1906):

The traditional style is not the *Irish* way of singing or of declaiming but the *Peasant* way; it is not, and never has been, the possession of the nation at large,

but only of a class of the nation . . . And those who would build up a great national art – an art capable of expressing the soul of the whole nation peasant and non-peasant - must do even as we propose to do with regard to the language: they must take what the peasants have to give them and develop it.

However, as I have already said, the nativist, separatist element in the Gaelic League would have regarded such 'development' as pollution and contamination, and so, the elements of accompaniment and harmonisation were stigmatised as impure and inauthentic to the Irish tradition. Style, then, in this case, the solo, unaccompanied, modal, rhythmically free way of singing was appropriated and reified to provide an oblique challenge to the hegemony of colonialism; an attempt to offend the silent majority, and to contradict the myth of consensus. As such, it provided a 'loaded surface' in which messages of resistance could be read (Hebdige, 1979, p. 17-18). Gradually, in a shifting of the power balance, rural singers from Irish speaking areas were legitimised and valorised as the true and authentic exponents of what Pearse called the peasant style, but what others interpreted adamantly as the 'national style', precisely because it was different to the 'art' style identified with the coloniser. Proponents of this style drew attention to the differences in scale, pitch, phrasing, technique, timbre, mental state and of course language (Henebry, 1903, p. 12-13). Others stressed the modal character of Irish airs, drawing attention to their similarity to Gregorian chant and reserving the term *traditional* 'to describe those melodies which appear to be out of joint altogether, but which are in reality the highest form of musical rhythm' (Hardebeck, 1911, p. 91).

The *Oireachtas* festival then, was crucially important in the selection of the style which has become known generally as *sean-nós* (Bodley, 1973, Ó Canainn, 1978, Ó Riada, 1982, Carson, 1986, Henigan, 1991) to represent a cultural agenda formed in opposition to dominant Anglo-European musical traditions, whose aesthetic, as Zumthor (1990, p. 48) has argued, was very much part of the colonising process, creating what he calls an 'interior colonization.' In its construction and promotion of traditional style, *An tOireachtas* recognised that there was a different aesthetic and in codifying of its rules, the festival created an alternative art style as a direct response to, and an implicit critique of, the musical culture of the conservatory. The construction of this polarity supports Stokes' (1994, p. 8) observation that, 'music is one of the less innocent ways that dominant categories are enforced and resisted'.

Séan Ó Riada's (1931-71), (1982, p. 23) description of *sean-nós* song, first broadcast as radio lectures on national radio during the summer and autumn of 1962, illustrates the case well. The features of traditional song style are enumerated explicitly in opposition to the European style, despite his argument for its appreciation on its own terms:

Sean-nós singing cannot be appreciated except on its own terms. The *sean-nós* singer is unaccompanied. *Sean-nós* singing demands great skill and technique and an artistic understanding beyond the demands made on the average European singer. This is because a good deal of each *sean-nós* song is impro-

vised, and the singer must know how to improvise in the proper style.

. . . the singer does not display emotion in the European style; . . . he does not use dynamics, he does not sing loudly and again softly for emotional or dramatic effect.

There seems to me to be an almost oversensitive defensiveness in this and other descriptions of the singing style. I believe this stems from the belief that although it was, at this time, regarded as an art form in its own right, by a small number of ardent followers involved in the Gaelic movement, its value as art is not generally accepted or understood. In fact, Ó Riada's radio broadcasts were planned with a view to reversing such misunderstandings and, for many, they presented traditional music for the first time in a manner which they could relate to, not as the music of 'bog trotters', or 'ignorant gulpins' Hardebeck, 1911, p. 93), but as an art form in its own right with its own rules and principles. It is significant that a project initiated at the turn of the 20th century should have just begun to have a general effect over 60 years later. Ó Riada himself, a committed modernist, was a highly influential figure in effecting such an acceptance in the public consciousness beyond those who actually practiced traditional music (Kinsella, 1982, Ó Canainn & Mac an Bhua 1993, Fallon, 1998, White, 1998, Vallely, 1999).

It is now time to look at the experiences of those practitioners, and particularly from my point of view here, those of traditional singers. What effects have this selection and culturing of their tradition have upon them, their performance practices and their attitudes to traditional song. Since it has been an important forum for traditional song in Gaelic and consequently a powerful arbiter of taste, what effect has *An tOireachtas* had on the song tradition?

It can be said, without exaggeration, that activities such as I have briefly outlined above, have served to shape and expand the discursive framework of the *sean-nós* song tradition. This framework can be viewed as an insider's theoretical base for the interpretation of that tradition to practitioners and listeners within the tradition and to those who are outside it, as Cowdery (1990) and Coleman (1996, 1998) have shown in the case of Joe Heaney, (Vallely, 1999, pps. 277-8). These ideas, based as they were on descriptive analysis of singing, have been seamlessly grafted on to the older interpretative matrix. Heaney himself was an early prize winner at the renewed *Oireachtas* in 1942, going on to win the gold medal in 1955, the supreme accolade for traditional song in Irish, achievements which gave him national recognition as a singer. Heaney's theory stressed the importance of the story of the song, known as *údar* (authority) in Irish, an awareness of which was necessary for the proper emotional interpretation of the song. '*Abair amhrán*', say a song (Williams, 1996) he said, meant that one had to tell the story of the song through the music and to put oneself in the place of the song's protagonist. For him, stylistic embellishments were aids to the storytelling process and were used to heighten the dramatic effect. Singing, according to Heaney, was the act of conjuring the scene in internal visual imagery (Coleman, 1996). Heaney also mentioned the metrical structure of a song, arguing that there was no beat, but a pulse without which the song was dead. It

is tempting, in this case, to see a direct correlation between Hardebeck's (1911, p. 93) definition of 'traditional' as songs using *rubato*, and Heaney's views on the same subject. Heaney, of course, is by far the most famous singer of Irish traditional songs. He sang at the Newport Folk Festival, Rhode Island in 1965 and, after his permanent emigration to the US in 1966, he began to move in musical circles there. He was appointed part-time teacher in Irish folklore in Wesleyan University in 1980. He was subsequently appointed to a teaching position at the Ethnomusicology Department of the University of Washington. He was presented with the US National Heritage Award for Excellence in the Folk Arts by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1982. He died in 1984, and is buried in Maoras churchyard in his native Carna, Co. Galway. The legacy of his powerful, emotive singing is still palpable among traditional singers in Ireland, and the progression of his career is sometimes interpreted by Irish speakers and cultural activists as an expression of profound disappointment with a State which, in theory, was committed to supporting Irish language and culture, but which, in practice, allowed some of its most talented traditional performers to emigrate and, ironically, to receive honours from foreign institutions and governments.

The aspects of *sean-nós* theory which he outlined in interviews are representative of a canonical view of *sean-nós* singing, which as I am arguing, are profoundly shaped by the Gaelic revival, and its stimulation and promotion of traditional song. Many of these same theoretical precepts are posited by Aodh Ó Duibheannaigh (1914-1984) in his interpretation of *sean-nós* tradition (Vallely, 1999, p. 276). A singer and noted authority on the folk tradition of his native community in Donegal, he also, like Heaney, was an *Oireachtas* gold medal winner (1958). Similarly, he laid great stress on '*abair amhrán*' (which he claimed as a specifically northern characteristic) and on rhythmic freedom as central tenets of *sean-nós* expression (Lambert, 1985, p. 112, 344; Henigan, 1991). Again, this seems to me to be an expression of identity constructed in opposition, where the claim is that traditional singers tell the story of the song with true emotion. The tacit implication contained in such statements is, that those trained in the European tradition foreground the musical, at the expense of the verbal expression, in contrast to traditional song, where the words dictate the expressive needs of the performance. It is worth noting here that *telling* a song was a saying also used by English folk singers (Vaughan Williams, 1963, p. 17), which adds further weight to the claim that I have previously advanced (Ó Laoire, 1998) that these cherished theoretical precepts were deeply influenced by the general folk song movement in Britain and Ireland at the turn of the century. The similarities between Heaney's and Ó Duibheannaigh's discursive framework, appropriated from this movement, point to a shared ideology of tradition; a matrix for the creation of a collective conscience (Geertz, 1973, p. 220).

As I have already observed, the state also delimited official Irish-speaking areas in 1926, thereby reifying these regions as designated storehouses of the national identity. Following such state recognition, the culture of these regions became reified in turn. As regards singing, the stylistic divisions are usually given as follows; the Galway style is considered the most ornamented, with those of Kerry, Cork and Waterford in the south being somewhat less so, whereas the northern singing style has, what one writer has called,

a 'stark simplicity' by contrast (Ó Canainn, 1978, p. 71). The people of these regions, with their varied dialects and singing styles encounter each other at *An tOireachtas*. They purportedly represent the 'national' style of singing in all its variety. In competing against each other, singers are subject to contrast and comparison. The difficulties of contrasting widely differing regional styles in a competitive atmosphere are obvious. Theoretically, all styles have parity of esteem, but in practice, the ideology of ornamentation, what I have elsewhere described as the 'cult of the melisma' (Ó Laoire, 1994/5, p. 219) prevails. Hugh Shields summarises, (1993, p. 124):

. . . it is the more richly ornamented melodies of the West, and somewhat less so today, of the South-West, that are commonly supposed characteristically Irish, so attracting to themselves the epithet *sean-nós*.

A crude axiom of *melodic ornamentation = traditionality* can be drawn up where, as I have previously argued, the identification of melodic ornamentation with Irish singing led to its fetishisation by its proponents, again to differentiate the style from English styles. Carson (1946, p. 45/6,49) discusses some of the difficulties of using such a blunt instrument for classification:

To generalise about the Irish song tradition - or even perhaps, to *call* it the 'Irish' song tradition - is difficult. There are obvious stylistic parallels between some Irish vocal techniques and those say of Western Scotland . . . the 'high lonesome' style of the Appalachian mountains is not a million miles away, emotionally and technically, from that of some Donegal singers; . . . Further, many aficionados of the *sean-nós* school of thought would be surprised to find that Joseph Taylor, recorded by Percy Grainger in Lincolnshire in the early years of this century, used vocal techniques which would be familiar to the Connemara singer.

Carson, I think, makes a good argument for an inclusive definition of traditional song, a processually based rather than a product oriented model. And yet, the product, a national song tradition, signified by special formal and essentialising features, acting as a central canonic pillar of Irish music and hence, of Irish identity, has been a central concern. Kevin Whelan (1993, p. 5, 6) has demonstrated the intensely local nature of Irish culture down to the present, the family farm first, and then the townland, providing the primary focus for local identity, in what he terms the 'set of Chinese boxes' extending outwards eventually to include the nation. Indeed, it can be argued that identity is not even an agreed category within the townland (Ó Laoire, 1999). At *Oireachtas* competitions then, it comes as no surprise that differentiation is made along regional, dialectal and stylistic lines, what, for the purposes of this paper I am calling local ethnicity. Galway singers are the most numerous group attending the *Oireachtas*, a fact which is reflected in the results of *Corn Uí Riada*, the most prestigious *sean-nós* competition. In the thirty eight years from 1960-1998, the competition has been won by Galway singers a total of twenty six times.

Two more singers of Dublin origin, singing in the Galway style and repertoire make a total of twenty eight. Also from 1971 until 1989, a period of eighteen years, *Corn Uí Riada* was won each year by Galway singers. This is a testament to the strength and vitality of traditional song in the Galway region during that period. Arguably, however, it also marks the existence of a certain trend of favouring the Galway singing style. In his discussion of similar trends in instrumental music, language and sport in Ireland, Kevin Whelan (1993, p. 31) tellingly comments:

It would appear that the co-option by the state or nationalist movements has an inbuilt dynamic of standardisation which is inimical to the heteroglossia of regional styles and traditions in popular culture.

Moreover, I have heard the traditional singing of my own Northern region being described by a native of Connemara, and a knowledgeable enthusiast of its singing, as closer to *amhránaíocht* ([non-traditional] singing) than true *sean-nós*, thereby indicating support for this trend of Galway ascendancy, and how such a standardising dynamic can be quickly adopted by the dominant community and grafted onto their own self understanding. This claim was made, arguably because the singing style is comparatively lacking in the florid melismatic embellishments characteristic of *sean-nós* as practiced in the Galway region. This is the kind of discussion Maighr ad N  Dhomhnaill refers to when commenting that Northern song was ignored (McNamee, 1991, p. 42), and there is evidence from another Donegal singer whose singing was dismissed adjudicators as not *sean-n s* (Henigan, 1991). On the other hand, Aodh   Duibheannaigh criticised the Galway singing style for being too drawn out (Henigan, 1991). It almost came to the point where *sean-n s* was a term exclusively reserved for the Galway style of singing.

Corn Cuimhneach in Chonaill U  Fhearraigh was presented in 1977 for the first time as a direct attempt to counteract the Galway domination of the song competitions. Named in memory of Conall   Fearraigh, a Donegal singer, it was for *amhr ana ocht gan tionlacan nach sean-n s  * (unaccompanied singing which is not *sean-n s*). This was meant to provide disgruntled Donegal singers with an opening and as a way of circumventing Galway's seemingly unbreakable domination of *sean-n s* competitions. Yet it set a dangerous precedent, in that it seemed as if those who competed and won in this competition were actually forgoing their claim to be considered as *sean-n s* singers, i.e. giving up the traditional authenticity of their song style, admitting its 'contamination' by modern influences, because it lacked stylistic features that it had never possessed in the first place. This situation prevailed until the mid-eighties when the fortunes of traditional song in the other regions took a turn for the better, with a number of singers emerging who directly challenged this hegemony. During the nineties these singers took major *Oireachtas* prizes, earning the approval of singers and listeners alike, and overturning the reigning orthodoxy. As a result of these gains, and although Galway singers will always be strong contenders, there is at present a general acceptance of the place of the other styles. Gear id n Breathnach, a Donegal singer, the 1996 winner of the women's competition and of *Corn U  Riada*, also took *Corn Cuimhneach in Chonaill U  Fhearraigh*, standing the whole

dubious classification system on its head. This demonstrates ably Stokes' (1994, p. 6) observation that 'ethnicities [as I am terming regional identity here] are to be understood in terms of the construction, maintenance and negotiation of boundaries and not in putative social 'essences' which fill gaps within them.' Tradition, then, can be seen as an emergent and enacted space where such boundaries are in a process of continual contestation and renegotiation. Collective consciousness is not then, a monolithic entity, but one coloured by enduring perspectives of local allegiances, themselves heightened by the competitive nature of the festival.

To conclude then, the Gaelic League's *Oireachtas* competitions have deeply influenced *sean-nós* song style over the course of the past century. Seen as a national forum for a national music by some, it is also an arena where disparate local identities of Irish-speaking Ireland encounter one another and jostle for recognition and validation, in events which cast folk song as much in the role of "an instrument of conflict as a mechanism contributing to social solidarity" (Bauman, 1971, p. 38). The powerful dynamic of standardisation at work has not erased these local allegiances, and at present, because of the recent emergence of strong competitors from the 'non-standard' regions, a more egalitarian ethos has been negotiated and, for the moment, seems to prevail.

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