Chapter 6
The Sean-nós in the New Ireland: Irish Singing Traditions

CD track 22, “Caoineadh na dTrí Muire” (The Lament of the Three Marys)

Supplementary material

What does the title mean?
The lament refers to Mary, the mother of Jesus, lamenting the crucifixion of her Son. The three Marys in the title are those named in St. John’s Gospel – the mother of Jesus, Mary of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.

To what genre of song does this belong?
It belongs to the genre of religious song in the Irish language.

What is unique about religious songs in Irish?
Unlike other traditions, most religious songs in Irish are sorrowful and focus on the crucifixion. They are classified under various headings: the passion laments (Caoineadh na Páise), poetry of the passion (Dán na Páise), the lament of the three Marys (Caoineadh na dTrí Muire), and they describe the Virgin Mary lamenting her son at his crucifixion. Distinguished scholar of religious song in Irish, Angela De Burca (1999), writes about the songs:

They depict the grieving Mary not as the stoical, silent woman of the Latin Stabat Mater Dolorosa, but as a furiously angry and eloquent Irish bean chaointe, or keening-woman, her hair streaming behind her as she runs barefoot through the desert to reach her son… Although invariably sung in a spirit of great devotion, the songs of Mary’s lament also contain a note of defiance, for their last lines often promise a blessing to anyone who will lament Christ’s death on the cross.

What is the form of the song?
The lines are printed as couplets for convenience of reading, but the entire lament is sung without a break, each line being followed by the burden “Óchón, is óchón ó” (Alas, alas, and alas!). The voices of Mary and Jesus are heard in conversation at times. Some of the text describes objectively what happened (And blunt nails were driven through his feet and hands), while other lines are emotionally intense (Don’t you recognize your own son, Mother?)

How is language used in a way that intensifies the emotional content?
- personal pronouns;
- words that are endearing such as máthrin (loving or little mother) instead of máthair (mother) or a mhicín mhúirneach (darling little son), or muise (a vocable that has endearing qualities)
- repetition of words (cuireadh)
- the direct way in which the cold passion is described, in contrast to the warmth of the first verses, and the consolation of the final verse.

What is the singer’s background in relation to this genre of song?
Joe Heaney (Seosamh Ó hÉanaí), (1919-1984) was born in Carna in the Connemara Gaeltacht. He grew up around Irish song and storytelling. He worked in England and the United States and became known for his renditions of songs in the Irish language. Angela De Burca says that his recordings of religious songs in the 1970s became the standard for performances of those songs after that time.

Where can I find out more about the songs?

What recordings include these religious songs?

Listening Highlights:

1. Read over the translation of the text so that you have a general understanding of the song’s content (See Worksheet 6.1 for words of song.)
2. Listen for how the response at the end of each line (Óchón, is óchón ó) contributes to the song.
3. Comment on the singer’s vocal style. What words describe it? What vocal techniques does Heaney use to carry the text?

(2) C/U
Page 100
Sean-nós singing: The Aisling

CD track 23, “Úirchill a’ Chreagáin” (Creggan Graveyard), sung by Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin

1. Read about the aisling on pp. 100-101.
2. Go back to p. 40 and find the county of Armagh, where the poet, Art McCooey, lived in the 18th century. Find also Donegal and Connacht in County Galway where the singer learned Irish songs since her youth.

4a. Singer Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin approaches song performance as the expression of feeling and emotion. She says of Irish people who feel cut off because they do not understand the language: “if they’d only relax and sit back and feel, they would understand” (p. 107).

4b. As you listen to the song, try to follow the singer’s expression of feeling by the way she carries the words on a melodic pathway in the time honoured tradition of sean-nós. After you listen, discuss your responses as a class. Identify other song traditions in which there is a similar emphasis on the expression of feeling and the dominance of song text.

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(3) C/U
Pages 100-104
CD track 23, “Úirchill a’ Chreagáin” (Creggan Graveyard) sung by Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin

Follow the Contour of the Melody

1. In groups of 4, listen to the song and focus on the contour of the melody.
2. Follow the Irish text on worksheet 6.2 and under each line of text, graph the melody using dots or lines, or a system of your choice.
3. Compare your graph with that of your group members.
4. Read the translation and comment on the relationship between the shape of the melody and the meaning of the text.

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(4) C/U
Pages 104-105
CD track 23, “Úirchill a’ Chreagáin” (Creggan Graveyard) sung by Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin

Tracing the Lineage of a Song

Tracing how a song is transmitted from one generation to the next is like being an archaeologist of song. Such work involves study of melodies, testimony from singers, study of collections and recordings, and like Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin, reuniting airs and lyrics of long-forgotten songs. Here is the story of how the song you listened to came down through the generations from the time of Art McCooey.

a. Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin tells us she learned the melody from a recording of the piper Séamus Ennis who played it instrumentally as a slow air. She is also likely to have absorbed the song during her summers in the Donegal gaelacht, and heard it sung by sean-nós singers Joe Heaney and Máire Nic Dhonncha with whom she spent time in the
Connemara Gaeltacht. She also researched the song literature of South Armagh and published them in *Songs from a Hidden Ulster* (2003).

b. Séamus Ennis learned the air from a cylinder recording of the song deposited in the Folklore Commission library in Dublin.

c. Father Luke Donellan recorded *Mary Harvessy* on an Ediphone cylinder around 1918 and the recording was later passed on to the Folklore Commission, sometime after the mid 1930s.

d. *Mary Harvessy* learned the song from her grandmother.

e. *Mary Harvessy’s grandmother* was removed from the poet Art McCooey by only one generation.

Father Luke Donellan was a key player in keeping this song alive. Collectors play a vital role in the preservation and dissemination of music. While many individuals collected Irish songs in the early decades of the 20th century, Fr. Donellan went one step further and recorded the song. Discuss the function of collectors in the transmission of music.

1. to preserve the music
2. to make it available for researchers and performers
3. to document who sang it and from whom it was transcribed
4. to provide examples of how a song was sung at a particular place and point in time
5. to show how a piece of music can change over time and across places
6. to track songs that left the home country and were taken abroad.

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(5) C/U

Pages 109-110

The Journey of a Song

“Love Won’t you Marry me?”

1. In the last activity you traced the journey of the song, “Úirchill a’ Chreagáin”, from the time it was composed down to the present day. We can do the same for this song, and the journey takes us across the Atlantic from Ireland to the United States, and back again.

a. John Ward’s father learned the song growing up in Donegal.
b. He emigrated to America and passed the song on to his son John Ward.
c. Len Graham learned it from John Ward when he met him in America in 1990.
d. Len Graham recorded the song and we learn it from him on this track.

2. The recording *Bringing it All Back Home* (1991) attempts to chart some of the journeys of Irish music, “to go to some of the places reached, and to tell the story of how it [the music] inevitably would its way back home again.” Go to the recording, select one song, read the liner notes for the song, and listen to it. Tell the story of its journey in prose or picture.
3. Choose a song that you know. Where did you learn it? Trace the song back as far as you can.

(6) C/U
Pages 108-110
CD track 24, “Love Won’t You Marry Me,” sung by Len Graham

1. Learn the song by ear. Start by joining in with the Chorus. Use Worksheet 6.3.
2. As a class, decide on an instrumental accompaniment for the song. Review Andy Irvine’s performance of “Edward Connors” on track 8 for ideas. Draw on class members’ playing skills to provide accompaniment (e.g., guitar, banjo, mandolin, piano, tin whistle, bodhrán).

(7) C/U
Page 110-114
CD tracks 25 and 26, “The Banks of the Bann,” sung by Len Graham

Use this grid in Worksheet 6.4 to compare the two versions of this song.

(8) C/U
Page 112
The Art in/of Packaging Music

The purpose of this exercise is to examine cover artwork on CDs and explore how producers present music visually to the consumer.

1. Look at the CD covers on pages 102 and 112. Both draw on paintings by Irish artists. If you came upon these covers and did not know the music on the CDs, what might you conclude about the contents? Comment on the effectiveness of the cover art.
2. Go to the websites for producers who sell recordings of Irish traditional music (see list in Activity 12, Chapter 1), or visit a record store. Scan the CD cover artwork for several recordings of Irish traditional music that were produced since 1994. Identify themes that surface as you observe the cover art.
3. In class groups, have each member shares 5 CDs and explains the cover art work. After the sharing, the group draws conclusions about (1) what makes a CD cover visually appealing, (2) how cover art is used to promote the music, and (3) how cover art is related to the music/culture it seeks to promote.

(9) C/U
Becoming a Musician

In this book, the authors describe the role of music in the childhood and youth of several musicians – Junior Crehan, Mary MacNamara, Kevin Crawford, Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin, and Len Graham.
1. Create a composite of the factors that influenced their early musical life.
2. Choose a contemporary popular musician. Examine sources that tell you about his/her early immersion in music. What is similar about his/her story and those told in this book?

Worksheet 6.1

“Caoineadh na dTrí Muire” (The Lament of the Three Marys)

‘Sé a Pheadair, a aspaill, a bhfhaca tú mo ghrá bán? Chonaic mé ar ball é dá ruaigeadh ag an namhaid
Oh Peter, apostle, did you see my loved one?
I saw him while ago, being attacked by the enemy

Óchón, is óchón ó.
Óchón, is óchón ó…
Alas, alas, and alas!
Alas, alas, and alas!

Muise cé hí sin siar a bhfuil a gruaig le fána?
Muise cé a bheadh ann mara mbeadh mo mháithrín?
Who is that back there whose hair streams down?
Who would it be if it was not my dear mother?

Who is that fine man on the Tree of Passion?
Don't you recognize your own son, Mother?

An é nach n-aithníonn tú do mhac, a Mháithrín?
Who is that little son I carried for three trimesters?
Is that the little son who was born in the stable?

Or is that the little son who was reared at Mary's breast?
O little darling son, your mouth and your nose are cut

Nó an é sin an maicín a h-oileadh in ucht Mháire?
A mhicín mhúirneach, tá do bhéal is do shróinín gearrtha
Is crocadh suas í ar ghuallí arda
Is buaileadh anuas í faoi leacrachaí na sráide
She was lifted up on high shoulders
and threw her down on the stones of the street

Muise buailigí mé fhéin ach ná bainidh le mo mháithrín
Maróðh muid thú fhéin agus buailfidh muid do mháithrín
You may beat me but do not touch my dear mother
We will kill you and we will beat your mother

Is cuireadh go Cnoc Calvary é ag méadú ar a pháise
Bhí sé ag iompair an croithe agus Simon lena shála
*And he was sent to Calvary Hill to add to his passion*
*He was carrying the cross and Simon following him*

Is cuireadh táirní maola trí throith a chosa is a lámha
*And blunt nails were driven through his feet and hands*
*And a spear was driven through his beautiful chest*

Muise éist, a mháithrín, is ná bí cráite
*Tá mná mo chainte le breith fós, a mháithrín*
*Listen, dear Mother, and do not be tormented*
*The women who will keen for me have yet to be born.*
“Úirchill a’ Chreagáin” (Creggan Graveyard)
sung by Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin

Poet
Ag Úirchill a’ Chreagáin sea chodail mé aréir faoi bhrón

‘S le héirí na maidne tháinig aínir fá mo dhéin le póig

Bhi gríosghrua gharta aici agus loinnir ina céibh mar ór

‘S gurbh é iocshláinte an domhain bheith ag amharc ar an ríoghain óir.

Fairy woman
Ó a fhialfhir charthannaigh, ná caitear thusa néalta brón,

Ach éirigh go tapaidh agus aistrigh liom siar so ród

Go tír dheas na meala nach bhfuair Gaillibh intí réim go fóill

‘S gheobhhaír aoibhneas a’ mo hallaí do do mhealladh sa leis siasaí ceoil.

Poet
‘S é mo ghéar-ghoin tinnis gur theastaigh uainn Gaeil thír Eoghain

Agus oidhrí an Fheadha gan seaghais faoi lig dár gcomhair

Géaga glandaite Néill Fhrasaigh nach nátrígfeadh an ceol

‘S ‘chuirfeadh éideadh fán ar na hollaimh bheadh ag géilleadh dóibh.

Fairy woman
A théagair’s a chuisle, más cinniúin duit mé mar stór

Tabhair léagsa is gealladh sula rachaidh muid ar aghaidh sa ród

Má éagaim fán tSionainn i gCríoch Mhanainn nó fá Éigipt Mhóri

Gurb’ I gCill chumhra an Chreagáin a leagfar mé i gcré faoi fhód.
I'm tired now of single life
My mind's made up to take a wife
To help me through this world of strife
And to keep me out a’ danger

Chorus
Love won’t you marry me, oh marry me, marry me
Love won’t you marry me and keep me out a’ danger
Love won’t you marry me, oh marry me, marry me
Love won’t you marry me and keep me out a’ danger

I have a cottage by the sea
Adorned with flowers for her and me
And any girl would happy be
And I would treat her fairly

Chorus

And now that we the knot have tied
And she for years has been my bride
Wi’ lots a’ children by our side
We’re shielded from all danger

Chorus

Lilted section (dance tune):
Ridle um diddleye dee iydle diddlye deedle
Um diddley die, rattle diddle dee diedoh
Rum diddledee dum diddlye dee iydle diddlye deedle
Um diddley die, rattle diddle dee daydoh…
Worksheet 6.4

“The Banks of the Bann”
Sung by Len Graham

Compare Versions

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