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Music and Society-4:

The Survival of Irish Traditional Music

IN AN EARLIER ARTICLE in this series,¹ Jim Sharpe contested the customary view that the coming of the industrial society dealt a death-blow to the folk music of England. He summarised his conclusions thus:

Firstly, . . . the industrialisation of this country did not produce a musical desert in which rustic ballad singers were replaced by a commercial entertainment industry and passive consumers. Secondly, . . . 'folk' or 'traditional' art, except perhaps when it is moribund, is never static: I suspect that the history of English traditional music is one of steady change, with new material, styles and instruments being absorbed at one end and old ones being discarded at the other.

In discussing recent developments in the traditional music of Ireland I shall be adding my support to Sharpe's point that it is in the nature of a healthy folk tradition for it to undergo change. It is my contention that the Irish folk music revival has resulted in something more than the resurrection of a music of purely antiquarian or curiosity value, but has led to the creation of a new and culturally valid genre.

My remarks will be centred upon the pioneering work of Seán Ó Riada (1931-1971) who with his band, the Ceoltóirí Chualainn, spearheaded the Irish traditional music revival. The large number of traditional artists and bands that have emerged in the past 20 years, becoming well known in both Ireland and Britain, owe him a considerable debt for his work in rescuing Irish traditional music from the grasp of a few Celtomaniacs and moulding it into a widely-heard and vital genre. My more general observations will be applicable not only to Ó Riada and the Ceoltóirí but to such bands as The Chieftains, Clannad, Planxty, The Boys of the Lough, and the Breton Alan Stivell.

Ó Riada's obscurity outside Ireland is countered in his native land by a wealth of myth and exaggeration which has rapidly shrouded his life and work. He was trained as a classical² composer (his large output includes orchestral, choral and vocal music, a three-act opera and a considerable quantity of incidental music to films and plays); in addition he was an able jazz pianist and also displayed a wide variety of non-musical talents.

In 1955, while honeymooning on the Dingle peninsula, Ó Riada met Seán d'Horá, a fisherman and *amhránaíocht ar an seán nós* singer (*seán nós* being the ancient Irish traditional singing style, characterised by its free rhythm and dense ornamentation). He quickly realised that he was more at home with what he termed the 'cyclical' (i.e. varied strophic) forms of Irish traditional music than with the classical forms of sonata and fugue which he had been taught at University College Cork, and claimed that 'the cyclic aesthetic of Irish art brings us close to modern music with its anti-classical basis'.³ He learnt to speak

Irish Gaelic, began styling himself Seán Ó Riada (he had been born John Reidy), read Irish literature avidly and absorbed as much as he could of the methodology and meaning of Irish traditional music.

The influence of traditional material and formal procedures permeated his classical music. For example, in his score for George Morrison's film *Mise Éire* (1956) he wrote variations on the popular air *Róisín Dubh* using the full colouristic resources of a symphony orchestra; conversely in his orchestral *Hercules dux Ferrariae* (1957) his serial material is submitted to folk-like variation procedures. He frequently used ornamentation of a traditional character in his classical work, often compressing linear ornaments into compound figurations: an example of this is to be found in his *Night Songs I*, where the common traditional device of striking the note immediately above the melody note to add emphasis before dropping to the main note is condensed to produce a series of clashing seconds.

By 1956 his home in Galloping Green, Dublin, had become a meeting place for sessions of traditional music: it was here that the Ceoltóirí Chualainn were assembled. They made their first public appearance as on-stage musicians in a production that year of Bryan Mac Mahon's *The Song of the Anvil* at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, where Ó Riada was musical director.

The most immediately noteworthy thing about the formation of the Ceoltoiri is that they were brought together as an ensemble: flute, tin whistle, Uilleann pipes, concertina, *bodhrán*, bones, harpsichord and fiddle. Hitherto, with a notable exception, traditional music had been an exclusively solo art.

The music in the living tradition is a solo art. For its effect it depends totally on its treatment of the melodic line, or ornamental and rhythmical diversity and on melodic variation.⁴

The exception, the only previous step in the direction of uniting Irish traditional music with ensemble performance, had been made by Séamus Clandillon when he formed the first ceilidh band in 1926. The ceilidh bands adapted Irish tunes to a popular music style of presentation. Originally these bands employed unison playing only, rendering the tunes in a highly simplified form, omitting the characteristic ornamentation, but by Ó Riada's time they had become integrated into the popular tradition, with harmonisations of the tunes and the introduction to the ensembles of piano, guitars, banjo, accordions, jazz kit, etc. Ceilidh bands play principally for dances and marches; in this they differ from the Ceoltóirí and their successors, who have performed on the concert platform and in the recording studio. Although some traditional musicians have little but disdain for ceilidh bands, all the members of the Ceoltóirí, most of whom were trained in such bands, rise to their defence. Michael Tubridy, flutist of the Ceoltóirí writes:

In my opinion there have been some excellent ceilidh bands in this country. The Ceoltóirí Chualainn merely produced a

⁴Brendán Breathnach, *Ireland Today*, Bulletin of the Department of Foreign Affairs [Eire] No. 908 (May 15, 1977).

¹Jim Sharpe, 'The Impact of Industrial Society on English Folk Song — some observations', *Contact* 15 (Winter 1976-77), pp. 23-27. For the remaining articles in the series see *Contact* 14 (Autumn 1976), pp. 3-10 and *Contact* 18 (Winter 1977-78), pp. 10-15.

²Throughout this article the term 'classical' should be taken to mean 'composed art music'.

³Sleeve notes to *The Vertical Man* (CSM 1).

different sound and was presented in a different way. Ó Riada's primary aims behind the formation of the Ceoltóirí were (a) to provide an opportunity for the individual musician to express himself while performing within the overall structure of a group, (b) the introduction of instruments which had hitherto been lightly regarded by many people, such as the tin whistle, bodhrán and bones.⁵

Some investigation is obviously necessary if one is to determine the critical frame of reference to be adopted when listening to traditional music of the sort conceived of and performed by Ó Riada. The music calls upon the structures and forms of Irish folk music and makes use of traditional instruments, yet it is patently something other than folk music as it has been understood. Ó Riada was first and foremost a classical composer, and brought with him classical attitudes to performance. In addition, the mode of presentation is largely styled upon that of popular music.

Just what is folk music? It is tempting to follow Louis Armstrong's definition: 'All music's folk music: leastways I never heard of no horse making it.' However, in 1954 the International Folk Council drafted the following, somewhat narrower, definition.

Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: (i) continuity which links the present with the past; (ii) variation which springs from the creative individual or the group; and (iii) selection by the community, which determines the form or forms in which the music survives.

The terms can be applied to music that has been evolved from rudimentary beginnings by a community uninfluenced by popular and art music, and it can likewise be applied to music which has originated with an individual composer and has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community.⁶

Some criticisms of such a definition must be put forward. It is derived from a formula outlined 60 years ago by Cecil Sharp⁷ and suffers from his somewhat insular conception of the nature of folk music. It was, in his terms, 'song created by the common people'. By 'common people' he explained that he meant 'the non-educated ... the unlettered whose faculties have undergone no formal training whatsoever, and who have never been brought into close enough contact with educated persons to be influenced by them'.⁸ Such a view is more than a little idealised: it ignores the importance of the 'broadsides' ballad-selling of the 15th-18th centuries, the cosmopolitan nature of many medieval troubadours, the proficient musical literacy of many Scottish and Irish fiddlers and the *crántaireáhd* notation of many Gaelic tunes. Indeed it is usually the literate members of rural communities who are the singers and instrumentalists. The American folk lorst Phillips Barry maintains that: 'No greater mistake was ever made than to suppose that ballads survive best among the most illiterate and ignorant.'⁹

These reservations noted, the Folk Council's definition is a useful beginning. How might we formulate in similar terms the essential ingredients of classical music? The following three factors must surely be fundamental.

(1) The basic requirement is literacy: transmission is not oral but by means of notation. This determines many aspects of the music itself: notation may act both as a limitation upon the classical composer's imagination and

as a tool to assist his intellect. For example, the complexities of twelve-note composition could scarcely exist without the medium of manuscript paper. Dave Laing makes the following comment about the relationship between music and its notation.

Those decisions, about scales, chords, keys, quavers, crotchets, and semibreves, have formed a whole musical tradition in literate Europe and white America, to the extent that anyone defining himself as a composer in that tradition *thinks* music in terms of these categories, and literally writes music ...¹⁰

The level of complexity available to the composer of traditional music (accepting Van Gennep's contention that even traditional tunes begin as the inspiration of a single composer) is limited by his memory, technical proficiency with his instrument or voice (since he must perform his own music), and the determinants of the culture within which he works, e.g. *ceol mor*, *ceol beag*, dance, song, lament.

(2) Classical music is a centralised, urban phenomenon entailing patronage and a high degree of professionalism. These circumstances lead in turn to a strict division between performer and audience, with a subsequent invocation of the economics of supply and demand. Traditional music, conversely, is a rural phenomenon with no strict patronage system and a mode of composition and performance far removed from the capitalist world of classical (and popular) music. In the particular case of Ireland, economic determinants loom large. Beckett¹¹ has noted the existence in Ireland of a dual economy: six counties of Ulster and the eastern seaboard from Belfast to Cork are dependant upon a maritime economy closely linked with England, while the economy of the entire centre and west coast is feudal. This is reflected in the wealth of folk material from central and, in particular, the western counties such as Clare, Meath, Mayo and Leitrim. Conversely the eastern seaboard is relatively poor in folk material and supports a programme of classical music. (The industrial work songs of the Ulster mills are a hybrid genre falling between folk and popular music and are beyond the scope of this article.)

(3) Largely as a function of its being written down, a piece of classical music has, within certain limits, a firmly fixed identity. Traditional music is much more fluid, and relies heavily upon an elaborate system of formulae (what A. L. Lloyd refers to as the *maqam* style of composition), which may be highly formalised as in Scottish *piobaireáhd*, or less strict in the case of Irish melodies. Consequently the folk performer rarely has a rigid melody line in mind, even during a performance. Bertrand Bronson suggests that

what they have in their minds is not a note-for-note accuracy of a written tune; but rather an ideal melody, or melodic idea, which is responsive to the momentary dictates of feeling or verbal necessity.¹²

Re-creation is an integral part of the traditional performer's task and therefore composers of individual tunes are soon forgotten; this is not the case with classical composers, whose music remains intact despite the number or quality of performances.

It is clear that Ó Riada's music, together with a substantial portion of contemporary folk music, fulfils the Folk Music Council's primary requirements of oral transmission, historical continuity, individual variation, and selection by the community. But a second look

⁵ Personal communication.

⁶ *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, Vol. 7 (1955), p. 23.

⁷ Cecil Sharp, *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions* (London: Mercury Books, 1965).

⁸ A. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 21.

¹⁰ Dave Laing, *The Sound of Our Time* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1969), p. 35.

¹¹ J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 243-244, 349.

¹² A. L. Lloyd, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

compels the conclusion that it fits equally comfortably into the category of classical music.

The characteristic heterophony of Irish traditional music is undermined by modern concepts of harmonic tension, concord and discord. Irish traditional music, dating principally from the 17th and 18th centuries, is monodic, conceived in terms of a single line: this may be tested by attempting to harmonise a tune without damaging something vital within it. The concertina, the first naturally harmonic folk instrument, did not become common in Ireland until after 1880. Ó Riada did not share the same unhampered, non-literate sense of harmony, rhythm and form as did many true traditionalists. Performances under his direction were determined in many ways by his classical training and literate thinking. He imposed a diatonic (major/minor) harpsichord continuo upon every tune in performance, justifying this practice by insisting that everyone, even traditional musicians, by now automatically associated melody with harmony and that he was merely adding the harmonies that would otherwise have been added subconsciously. He frequently ignored the use of gapped scales, twin tonics, non-tonal endings and the implications of tonic and flat leading-note drones — all factors idiomatic of traditional music.

Despite this unintended distortion, his treatment of tunes was by no means unsympathetic. He employed genuine traditional instruments and accomplished traditional performers, and undertook extensive study of his material. Nevertheless, a review of Ó Riada's treatment of traditional material betrays it to be more classical in conception than folk-like: (1) Even when dealing with traditional musicians he could not abandon the habits of musical literacy. With the Ceoltóirí he would record the individual parts on tape for each member of the group to learn. The tapes thus acted merely as an alternative to written notation. (2) He expanded the harmonic and textural vocabulary of traditional music and introduced parameters of variation that would not have been feasible in the strict folk tradition. (3) With the exception of his *bodhrán*¹³ playing, he never played a traditional instrument on any of his recordings, confining himself to the harpsichord, decidedly *not* a traditional instrument. (4) He removed traditional music from its cultural context and placed it on the concert platform; his arrangements were never intended for actual dancing, lamenting, or singing. (5) He introduced his music into industrial society, employing modern urban modes of patronage: radio, television and recording.

Naturally, Ó Riada and his successors have been the object of a fair amount of criticism. Their fiercest critics have not, however, been those who object to the classical elements in his work, but those who resent the presentation of traditional music as if it were popular music. Many folklorists would insist that the removal of a folk song from its natural context deals a death-blow to the spirit of that song, and in many respects they are right. Folk music is more than the entertainment music of a simple peasantry; it fulfils a vital cultural function. Alan Lomax has summed it up in the following way:

Each performance is a symbolic re-enactment of crucial behaviour patterns upon which the continuity of a culture hangs, and is thus endowed with the emotional authority of the necessary and the familiar.

Behavioral norms crucial to a culture are then set forth and reinforced in such terms that the whole community can accept them and join in their restatement. Singing and dancing share a major part of the symbolic activity in these gatherings, and come to represent those roles, those modes of communication and of interaction which the whole community agrees are proper and important to its continuity. Song and dance style then represent and summarize attitudes

¹³The *bodhrán* is a shallow single-headed drum, consisting of goatskin stretched over a circular frame. It is played with a double-headed stick or bone.

and ways of handling situations upon which there is the highest level of community consensus.¹⁴

Removed from its context, folk music can easily become merely a succession of tuneful ditties; if its symbolic function is ignored it may become socially redundant. Such issues are musically important since, as has been pointed out, folk and popular cultures determine very different types and styles of composition. The histories of the performance determinants of popular and folk cultures are, like their structures, distinct though parallel.

The very act of recording traditional tunes has important consequences. Ó Riada recorded them not for posterity or for study, as most folklorists do; rather, he did so for commercial purposes. By devising complex non-traditional arrangements of melodies and by utilising the full resources of the modern recording studio, such as mixing, splicing, dubbing, fade-in and fade-out, echo, etc., he produced a degree of expertise derived from, and demanded by, popular music culture. This expertise has come to be accepted as a static criterion of judgement for subsequent performances by the Ceoltóirí and indeed for other bands. In classical music a performance is judged largely by its approximation to the composer's intention as expressed in the score; no such criterion is available to folk music. By entering the world of recording, Ó Riada allowed his music to become entangled in the cult of the ideal performance: as with contemporary rock music, subsequent live performances were judged according to their fidelity to the recorded version. Working to such a rigid critical yardstick stifles the freedom of variation that is demanded by any folk tune.

Another adverse facet of the recording process is its normative effect. Folk music, despite exchanges of material between adjacent regions or areas, is essentially parochial in nature. Ó Riada ignored the provenance of his material and performed all tunes in a similar manner: Kerry reels, Clare reels and polkas may all be played as a single melody. It is also noteworthy that Ó Riada's brand of traditional music has become located upon a small number of urban centres along the east coast (Cork, Dublin, Wexford, Belfast, etc.) while western rural areas that provide most of the material have remained largely unaffected.

But Ó Riada did succeed in achieving some kind of balance between the opposing cultural determinants of folk and popular musics. To begin with he chose to work with the very best folk musicians available and never dictated to them *how* any tune should be played with regard to ornamentation, phrasing, or style: the Ceoltóirí insist that they were allowed complete personal freedom in these parameters. Ó Riada did, though, arrange (countermelodies, harmonies), orchestrate (instrumental combinations, voice leading, solos taken, tempi) and direct each performance. He thus reached some sort of satisfactory combination of traditional performance with popular presentation.

Having achieved this compromise Ó Riada began to present it to an urban audience, utilising all the tools of the urban mass media.

The music is now a marketable commodity. It has a public willing to pay to have its tastes indulged. It is even regarded as a tourist attraction.¹⁵

Ó Riada also carried out an extensive public relations exercise to make the urban population of Ireland aware of their historical position, convincing them as he had convinced himself that such music lay in their blood, was part of their heritage and was thus somehow more natural to them than other musics. His 'Our Musical Heritage' series on Radio Éireann advanced this theory, often 'at the

¹⁴Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture* (Washington: Plimpton Press, 1968), pp. 8, 15.

¹⁵Brendán Breathnach, *op. cit.*

expense of historical and theoretical accuracy'.¹⁶ In this way he reduced the level of 'cultural noise' that would otherwise have prevented a sympathetic reception for his music.

In response to the diehard traditionalists who accused him of commercialism and pseudo-traditionalism, he argued that traditional music must progress or die. Dr Charles Seeger puts the case eloquently:

Rather than say 'the folk is dead' and attempt to keep folk song alive as something quaint, antique and precious, let us say 'The folk is changing — and its song with it' and then help what it is changing into — which may be the whole people welded into one by the new media of communication — not to be ashamed of its ancestors, but to select the makings of a new, more universal idiom for the more stabilized society that we may hope is coming into being, from the best materials available, whether old or new. Better than to lament the loss of ancient gold will be to try to understand its permutation into another metal which, though it may be baser, may still surprise us in the end by being nobler.¹⁷

¹⁶ Interview with Prof. Aloys Fleischmann, University College Cork.

¹⁷ Charles Seeger, 'Folk Music in the Schools of a Highly Industrialised Society', *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, Vol. 5 (1953), p. 44.

By ignoring the more precious qualities of folk music (those beloved of the folk song collector) and by thrusting it into the commercial urban world as a strong, self-sufficient and original genre, he may have breathed new life into it and saved it from a deadening obsession with ethnic purity. Possibly the hybrid tradition of urban music will reject this folk music revival: such is its prerogative. A primary requirement for the survival of folk music in any context is its selection by the community: if the community chooses to take nothing from the traditional repertoire then no amount of artificial respiration will prevent its perishing.

Discography

Ó Riada's classical work is represented by *The Vertical Man* (Claddagh, CSM 1), which comprises *Hercules dux Ferrariae* and various songs for contralto with piano. His work with the Ceoltóirí appears on *Ó Riada sa Gaiety* (Gael-Linn, CEF 027) and *Ceol na nUasal* (Gael-Linn, CEF 015).