Sean-nós song in the Oireachtas na Gaeilge Festival: The Aesthetics of sean-nós song through the Gaze of the Oireachtas na Gaeilge Adjudicators.

Eamonn Costello

Abstract
The term sean-nós (old-style, way, method) has been used to describe vernacular Irish language song since the turn of the last century, when the Gaelic Revival of that time cast many aspects of vernacular Gaelic culture into national focus. From that time various individuals and groups have been debating what exactly sean-nós means. To add to this debate I have examined adjudicator feedback sheets from a number of sean-nós singing competitions dating from 1940-2011. All the competitions in question took place at the Oireachtas na Gaeilge (“assembly of Irish”) festival, Ireland’s oldest arts festival, established at the height of the Gaelic revival; collectively these sheets can be read as an ethnographic survey that reveals what is considered aesthetically and ethically important from the perspective of the adjudicators. I argue that, the various Oireachtas sean-nós singing competitions should be viewed as a nexus where individuals from various backgrounds come together to create a unique musical culture with its own performance ethic and aesthetic. It is important to point out that I am not suggesting that sean-nós within the Oireachtas be viewed as “authentic” vernacular Irish-language song. Instead, I argue that those who perform and adjudicate at the festival have collectively contributed to the authoring of a genre of song that is widely framed as traditional Irish language song. In my opinion, it is useful instead to frame the “Oireachtas Irish-language song style” as a sub-genre of what is widely referred to as Irish traditional song; one that shares many characteristics with other forms of the tradition but is nonetheless distinct both aesthetically and ethically.

Keywords: Sean-nós song, Oireachtas na Gaeilge, Competition, Adjudication.

Introduction
Established in 1897, the annual week-long Oireachtas na Gaeilge (Oireachtas for short) is Ireland’s oldest arts festival. For many years it has been Ireland’s paramount platform for the promotion and performance of vernacular Irish language song- commonly referred to as sean-nós -which is performed at the festival primarily through the medium of singing competitions. Drawing on the work of Small (1998), I propose that all those who participate in any way and in any aspect of a musical performance are part of that musical performance; therefore, what is considered appropriate musically and aesthetically within any musical community is authored, to different degrees, by all the members of a given musical community. Yet, all too often ethnomusicologists locate their research entirely around musicians, and the role of other “participants” – for example the listener- is often overlooked. I approach sean-nós through the medium of the adjudicators –many of whom are incidentally also singers- not because I believe more conventional “musician-centered” research is flawed, but rather because I believe that our understanding of any musical community is enhanced when it is approached from multiple perspectives. It is hoped that the perspective offered here will contribute to the growing literature on sean-nós song. Due to the fact that the primary performance context for sean-nós song at the Oireachtas is formal competition it makes sense to examine adjudication at the festival, and this article is based on my reading and interpretation of adjudicator report/feedback sheets for a number of Oireachtas Sean-nós singing competitions dating from 1940-2011. I regard these sheets as an ethnographic survey of the views of key figures from within this musical community. These sheets are the personal feedback each individual adjudicator at the festival has given to each individual competitor during this period, and as such they arguably represent the collective, and perhaps even the inter-subjective, musical aesthetic of the Oireachtas membership. I also draw on a number of in-depth interviews I had with the current director of...
the *Oireachtas*, Liam Ó Maolaodha. In his capacity as director Ó Maolaodha selects adjudicators for the various competitions. I also draw on other *Oireachtas* archival material, such as festival programs and secretary notes. All of the *Oireachtas* archival material I have researched is housed between two archives: The National Library of Ireland, and the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* Offices, Casla, Conamara.

**Locating Sean-nós Song**

Drawing on the work of O’Flynn (2009: 4), I argue that, generally speaking, *sean-nós* scholarship can be divided into two schools of thought: essentialist and non-essentialist. The essentialist school tends to define *sean-nós* as a form of traditional unaccompanied solo singing in Irish, and I would argue that this is still the most widely held definition of the idiom (Ó Canainn 1993: 49; Ó Riada 1982: 23; Maclomaire 2011: 268). More recent scholars tend to take a more inclusive (non-essentialist) view. Some have even suggested that certain traditional English-language and macaronic songs might also be defined as *sean-nós* (Williams 2004, p.122; McCann and Ó Laoire pp.251-257). Seán Ó Riada classified *sean-nós* into four main regional styles: Conamara, Na Déise (East-Munster), and West-Munster. No reference is made by Ó Riada to a Donegal or Mayo style of *sean-nós* whatsoever, suggesting that he did not regard traditional singing in these areas to be *sean-nós*.

Essentialist scholars define regional distinctiveness based primarily on the use of ornamentation. Ó Canainn suggests that there are two main types of ornamentation employed in *sean-nós* singing, melismatic and intervallic (1993:71). However, he also notes that nasalisation, rhythmical variation, and glottal stops, grace notes and micro-tonal changes in pitch are all traits of this genre (ibid:73-75).

Generally speaking, the Donegal style is considered to be the most sparsely ornamented while the Conamara style is considered the most densely melismatically ornamented (ibid:71). Ó Canainn states that the various Munster styles are somewhat less ornamented than the Conamara style (ibid:71). However, Ó Riada states that Conamara singers rely exclusively on melismatic ornamentation, “while Munster singers make use of intervallic and melismatic variations” (ibid:30); perhaps suggesting that the Munster style is, in his opinion, the more ornamented of the two styles. I would offer that, both essentialist and non-essentialists tend to overlook the main “stylistic” difference between the various regional styles, which is dialect. There are three main regional/Gaeltacht dialects, and I would argue that dialect is the primary marker of regionality within this tradition. In other words, a singer is classified as belonging to one or other of the so-called regional styles based on which dialect of Irish they sing with.

However, quite often, apart for dialectical differences, singers from differing regions can be quite similar stylistically. For example, Máire Nic Dhonnchadha, a Conamara singer, has as much if not more in common stylistically with Áine Bean Ní Ghallchobhair, a *sean-nós* singer from Donegal, than she has with her fellow Conamara singers Sorcha Bean Uí Chon fhaoa or Nan Tom Teaimín de Búrca (see Cló Iar Chonnachta 2008, 2004). Both Áine and Maire sing with a fairly open head voice and both employ a fairly pronounced amount of vibrato, although the vibrato used by Máire seems to have a wider oscillation pattern than that used by Áine. Maire’s singing also tends to consist of more melismatic ornamentation, although Áine does use some melismatic ornamentation along with grace notes, and micro-tonal sliding. Nan and Sorcha, on the other hand sing with a blend of head, chest, and back of the throat voice, they also tend to pitch songs at the top of their respective range, and both use a minimal amount of vibrato. This paper is concerned with the *Oireachtas* adjudication, as such, a more detailed discussion on regional style falls outside the remit of this paper, except when it is referred to in the adjudicator reports. That being said, it is my view that *sean-nós* scholarship has tended to be overly generalistic in relation to issues of regional variance.
Sean-nós at the Oireachtas

Although the term _sean-nós_ has been used by the _Oireachtas_ membership from as early as 1903 (Ó Súilleabháin 1984:111), it is virtually impossible to determine exactly what the early membership imagined _sean-nós_ to be. It is clear that the term was first used adjectively to refer generally to anything that was considered traditional/vernacular. From the very beginning song featured in the _Oireachtas_’ program; however, the style of singing that featured at the festival was Western art style choral and solo singing, of traditional and newly composed material through the medium of Irish (see Costello 2015). Over the years various individuals within the festival’s membership would periodically argue for the inclusion of vernacular singers into the festival’s program of events, and the term _sean-nós_ was sometimes used by these commentators to refer to these singers. In other words, _sean-nós_ was used within the _Oireachtas_ much in the same way that the term traditional is used today to refer to Irish traditional music. The phrases “_bheidhleidóireacht ar an Sean-nós_” (“old-style fiddling”) or “_bheidhlin ar an sean-nós_” (“old-style fiddle”) were also used to refer to Irish traditional fiddle competitions at the festival, which further suggests that within the context of the early/middle _Oireachtas_ _sean-nós_ generally meant traditional or vernacular (see _Oireachtas na Gaeilge_ Program 1958:49; OnaG secretary reports 1960-1969).

From 1939 onwards the _Oireachtas_ began holding vernacular singing or _sean-nós_ singing competitions as part of the festival program. However, Western art song remained the dominate style of the festival until the early 1970s, when the festival was effectively appropriated at that time by members of the Conamara _Gaeltacht_. This appropriation came about due to the actions of the _Gaeltacht_ Civil rights movement 3, which emerged from the Conamara _Gaeltacht_ during the late 1960s (see Costello 2015). I would offer that, from 1897 until 1973 the _Oireachtas_’ relationship with expressive vernacular Irish culture was one of cultural expropriation. From 1974 onwards, Conamara singers, or those singing in a Conamara style, came to dominate the senior _sean-nós_ singing competition (SSNC) within the _Oireachtas_. This has led some to conclude that the _Oireachtas_ has had a homogenizing effect on traditional Irish-language singing, because a bias exists within its membership that favors the Conamara style (see Ó Laoire 2000). Here I question this assumption, and I argue that the _Oireachtas_ in fact reinforces and promotes regional distinctiveness as opposed to national homogeny through its singing competitions. I also argue that the dominance of the Conamara style is mainly due to the agency of singers from Conamara and not because of the existence of an ideological bias within the organisation as Ó Laoire suggests.

Ó Laoire’s thesis is that, after Irish independence the _Oireachtas_ came to be increasingly dominated by a Romantic nationalist nativist ideology which frames “authentic” Irishness as being the binary opposite of Englishness. According to Ó Laoire, nativists imagine _sean-nós_ to be the binary opposite of Western art song—which for nativists is an index of Englishness. The theory is that the _sean-nós_ singer uses melismatic ornamentation to tell the story of a song, while those trained in the Western art tradition are more concerned with following the melodic contours of the musical line. Ó Laoire offers that the identification of melodic ornamentation with traditionality meant that the Conamara style, which is widely regarded as being the most ornamented style of _sean-nós_ singing, was reified above all other regional styles at the _Oireachtas_ after 1939 (2000:166). To illustrate this point Ó Laoire draws attention to the fact that from 1960-1998 the first prize at the senior _Oireachtas sean-nós_ competition was won a total of 28 times by singers singing in a Conamara style, and that from 1971-1989 the competition was won every year by Conamara singers (Ó Laoire 2000:166-167).

However, closer inspection of competition results reveals that up until the mid-1960s Conamara singers were in fact the least successful of all the _Gaeltacht_ singers. From 1950-63 the first prize at the senior _sean-nós_ competition was won by Conamara singers a total of three times, whereas it was won five times by singers from the various Munster _Gaeltacht_ regions, and four times by singers from Donegal, during the same period. Between 1964 and 1969 first place at the _Oireachtas_ was won by singers from Conamara every year, except in 1968 when the first prize was withheld, and instead second prize was awarded to two
singers, one from Cork the other from Conamara. However, it is really after 1971 that the Conamara style came to dominate the festival.

Between 1980 and 2012, the senior overall Oireachtas sean-nós competition, Corn Uí Riada, has been won by singers from Conamara, or those singing in the Conamara style, a total of twenty-six times. In that same period the competition has been won a total of five times by singers from Donegal and twice by singers from the Waterford Gaeltacht. Although no singer from Cork or Kerry won during this period, second place was won eight times by singers from Cork and three times by singers from Waterford. The festival programs reveal that more singers from Conamara competed at the festival during this period than all the other regions combined. Out of a total of 524 competitors, 340 were from Conamara/Meath, 66 from Donegal, 47 from Cork, 16 Kerry, 28 Waterford and the remainder from elsewhere. The festival programs for this period also reveal that the majority of singers competing in the open over 35 years of age men and women’s sean-nós competition also came from Conamara. These competitions are, since the 1960s, open to anyone over the age of 35. The first and second place winners of both the men’s and women’s senior competitions qualify to compete in the senior men and women’s sean-nós singing competition. The first and second place winners of this competition in turn qualify to compete in the Corn Uí Riada. Out of a total of 1,337 competitors 448 came from Conamara/Meath Gaeltacht, 206 from Donegal, 204 from Cork, 167 from Kerry, 90 from Waterford, and the remaining 222 from elsewhere (see Costello 2015:126-127).

The Gaeltacht civil rights movement essentially appropriated the Oireachtas during the 1970s, because the Gaeltacht civil rights movement was primarily Conamara based, this seems to have inspired the Conamara community to lay claim to the Oireachtas festival. Consequently, more singers from this area typically compete at the festival and I argue that this is the main factor behind the dominance of the so called Conamara style of sean-nós within the festival. That being said the fact remains that one regional style has dominated the festival’s singing competitions since the 1970s and one might assume therefore that this would have a homogenising influence on sean-nós singing within festival. Ó Laoire has argued this very point, he suggests that competition by its very nature causes the “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” (1998, p.165). Again, while this seems a fairly obvious conclusion, my reading and analysis of the adjudicator reports suggests that, notwithstanding the success of Conamara singers, the Oireachtas competition in fact reinforces separateness and regional distinctiveness as opposed to a homogenous national sean-nós style.

Sean-nós through the Gaze of the Adjudicator

The following discussion is based primarily on adjudicator feedback/report sheets from 1940-2011. Although this is a period of 71 years, a number of years are missing from the archives and the exact figure for the period of research is 55 years. Currently, and for much of its history, the Oireachtas employs three adjudicators for all senior sean-nós competitions; however, as Table 1 illustrates, this was not always the case. For example, up to six individuals adjudicated for a period in the 1980s, three in house, and three in various Radio na Gaeltachta (“Gaeltacht Radio Station”) studios, throughout the Gaeltacht. These regional adjudicators would phone in their respective results live over the airways to the festival. Also, between 1959 and 1967 the senior competition only had one adjudicator per year (see Table 1). 54 individuals adjudicated at the festival during this 55-year period. The mean average amount of times an individual adjudicates is 2.6, and the mode—the most common amount of times—is one. The record of most years adjudicated is ten, held by Seán Óg Ó Tuama, an academic and music scholar from Cork).
Examples of Gaeltacht Adjudicators

- **Seán-nós** singers and academic Sorcha Ni Ghuaírúm (1911-1976) from Conamara (adjudicated during the 1940s) (Ainm.ie 2015).
- Seán Ó Cuirrín (1894-1980) a writer, actor and teacher from the Waterford Gaeltacht (adjudicated during the 1940s) (Ibid).
- Áine Ni Laoi (1920-1994) —also known as Áine Ni Ghallchobhair— a **sean-nós** singer from Donegal (adjudicated during the 1960-1980s) (Ibid).
- Adhbh Ó Domnaill (1913-1977) a school teacher and folklore collector from Donegal (adjudicated during the 1970s) (Ainm.ie 2015).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>S.S.N.C Adjudicators 1</th>
<th>S.S.N.C Adjudicator 2</th>
<th>S.S.N.C Adjudicator 3</th>
<th>Real Adjudicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Eilis Ní Shíulainn</td>
<td>Séasaimhín Ní Bhreagáisach</td>
<td>Nan Tom Tairéin de Buca</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Litos Ó Leavine</td>
<td>Ellis Ní Shíulainn</td>
<td>Seán Ó Cuirrín</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Searrís Ní Bhreagáisach</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Searrís Ní Bhreagáisach</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Nan Tom Tairéin de Buca</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Searrís Ní Bhreagáisach</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Áine Ní Chinnéide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Nan Tom Taisin de Buca</td>
<td>Áine Ní Chinnéide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td>Tomás Ó Caoindeir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since at least 1940, **sean-nós** adjudicators have generally been drawn from the various Gaeltacht districts, the academic world of music and Irish language scholarship, and the Irish traditional music world more generally. The following list contains the details of some of the adjudicators from the period under investigation here:
Síle Ní Fhlatharta *sean-nós* singer from Connemara (adjudicated during the 1980s) (Cló Iar Chonnachta 2009).

Tomas Ó Neachtain *sean-nós* singer from Connemara (adjudicated during the 1980s) (Vicipéid 2013).

Lillis Ó Laoire, academic, writer and *sean-nós* singer from Donegal (adjudicated during 1990s-2000s).

**Examples of Non-Gaeltacht Adjudicators**

- Gráinne Ni hEigeartaigh (1925-2013) — also known as Gráinne Yeats — was a Dublin born harpist and singer and historian (adjudicated during the 1950s) (The Irish Times 2013).

- Róisín Ó Thuama (1919-2005) — also known as Róisín Ni Shéaghdha — was a singer and harpist from Dublin (adjudicated during 1980s) (Ainm.ie 2015).


- Seán Ó Caiside (1907-2003) a teaching inspector, choral arranger and song collector from Longford (adjudicated throughout the 1960s) (Rootsweb 2003).

- Tomás Ó Canainn traditional musician, singer and academic from Derry (adjudicated throughout the 1980s-2000s).

- Breandán Ó Madagáin, academic, Celticist, and singer from Limerick (adjudicated during 1980s-2000s).

The ideological bias theory proposed by Ó Laoire is that the *Oireachtas* has reified the Connemara style above all other regional and individual styles of singing. One would assume therefore that the best place to look for evidence of this bias would be the adjudicating process. The above list illustrates that adjudicators are drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds, and from all the Gaeltacht regions. While it is safe to assume that certain individual adjudicators might very well favor one regional style over another, it is difficult to believe that some form of institutional bias exists within such a diverse cohort. Instead, I would offer that what is considered aesthetically and ethically important in this community has been arrived at through a process of debate, discussion, and compromise between those who participate in this festival’s competitions. This does not mean that ideological views, such as Romantic nationalism, haven’t played a role in this process. But it is likely that such ideas are interpreted in different ways by the various actors who participate in the adjudicating process. My objective here is to focus on the reports as a whole, and not on the biases of particular individuals.

Drawing on a grounded theory methodology I analysed the reports to see whether there was evidence there that pointed to the existence of shared views concerning what is considered the key characteristics of *sean-nós* song. My analysis of the adjudicator reports and the *Oireachtas* more generally, suggests that, “good performance” in this musical culture exists along an aesthetic spectrum. In other words, while there are certain characteristic that are considered important and no single precise list, composite of features or definition for an ideal *sean-nós* performance can be ascertained from the reports; instead the reports indicate that, within the aesthetic spectrum of good *sean-nós* performance, there are certain key pillars underpinning a good *sean-nós* performance, namely: complexity, Gaeltacht Irish, repertoire, place, the past, ornamentation, timbre and voice production process.
Characteristics of sean-nós as defined by Oireachtas Adjudicators

The Oireachtas programs indicate that English-language and macaronic song do not feature whatsoever at the festival, as such we can conclude that, within this festival, sean-nós refers to Irish-language song (OnaG 2010; OnaG 2011; OnaG 2012). Sean-nós singing competitions at the festival always feature unaccompanied solo singing. According to the rules contained in the Oireachtas programs, competitors in the sean-nós competitions are required to sing amhráin dúchasach (dúchasach can be translated as traditional or native - amhráin translates as songs) (ibid). Therefore, we can add that at the Oireachtas sean-nós means solo unaccompanied singing of traditional Irish-language song.

Apart for the title and year and the title of the competition, the sheets adjudicators are given are more or less blank. Many adjudicators, particularly during the period 1940-1960 sectioned off the sheets under their own headings. The following sheet from 1946 is typical of this period. In it the adjudicator has written three headings in the left main column that points to how they divided their marks. At the top the adjudicator has written “Caighdeán Cainte” (“level or quality of speech”), followed by “Guth agus Mothú agus Ceol” (“voice and emotion and music”), and lastly, “Rogha Amhrán” (“choice of song”).

The fact that this adjudicator writes Caighdeán Cainte at the top of each of his/her report sheets suggests that s/he regarded Irish as being central to sean-nós singing. Also, at the bottom of the sheet this adjudicator has written: “Gaeilge

Figure 1 – 1946 SSNC, Competition 2 Adjudicator Report Sheet

Guth soiléir: Géar ach taraingteach? Dul na Gaeilge ar a cuid ceoil, agus sean-nós go maith aici” (“Clear voice: Sharp/harsh but attractive/compelling voice? Her music has the Irish-language feel/shape/flow to it”) (OnaG 1946, Comp. 2). Throughout the period of investigation the centrality of the Irish language to sean-nós is referred to by most adjudicators. In 1973 one adjudicator, Seamus de Brún, made reference to the importance of correct and clear Irish in a number of reports: “Gaeilge
sóiléir ("clear Irish"); “Gaeilge sar-mhaith, sóiléir iniomlán aige” ("excellent Irish, completely clear") (de Brún 1985, Comp 43). De Brún was again adjudicating in 1988 and in 1990, and here again he makes reference to the importance of: “urlabhraíocht, go maith sóiléir” ("very good articulation of speech") (de Brún 1988, comp 49), and in 1990 “Gaeilge snáite [sic] anseo” ("Irish threaded/polished through the performance here") (de Brún 1990, Comp 91).

One of the adjudicators at the 1995 competition — who did not sign the reports— wrote in reference to one performer that: “Tá dúchas ceoil na Gaeilge agus [an] tsean-nóis go smior san bhfear seo. Molaim e” ("The tradition of the music of the Irish language and sean-nós runs through the marrow of this man. I praise him") (OnaG 1995, comp. 71). Also included in the 1995 adjudicator reports are statements such as “Gaeilge bhreá san amhrán” ("Fine/rich/lovely Irish in this song"), “Gaeilge deas shoiléir” ("nice clear/accurate Irish"), “Gaeilge binn blasta” ("Sweet tasty — sung with the right accent — Irish") (OnaG 1995, comp. 71). In the 2009 reports, reference is made on numerous sheets to the importance of clarity of speech, for example: “Focail ri-shoiléir, agus an scéal is na mothúcháin a bhaineann leis an amhrán a dtabhait amach” ("words very clear, and the story and emotion of the song brought out well"); “Tá a cuid focail sóiléir, agus is féidir scéal an amhráin a fháil uaithe gan stró” ("words clear, and she conveys the story of the song well") (Ní Shuílleabháin 2009, comp.36). The 2011 reports also refer to the importance of Irish in sean-nós singing, for example: “Gaeilge bhreá” (fine/lovely Irish”), “Gaeilge mhaith” ("good Irish") (Ó Laoire 2011, comp.40).

A number of adjudicator reports allude to the fact that the Irish necessary for sean-nós performance is that of the Gaeltacht (both in dialect and accent). In 1975 Seán Ó Tuama was adjudicating and he wrote in one report: “Sean-nóis i bhfad nós fear anseo – gluaiseacht na seiseanna go deas ceolta. Dúchas na cainte an seachas dúchas na leabhair. Caint go breá sóiléir aici” ("Much better sean-nós here — the movement in the verses was sung nicely. It has the quality of the spoken word as opposed to something learnt from a book. She pronounced the words very clearly") (Ó Tuama 1975, Comp 58). In another report from 1967, another adjudicator remarked that: “still ceart tradisiúnta, ní théadlach a nós sheacht as a bith ach as an ngAethlacht” ("proper traditional style, his style couldn’t come from anywhere other than the Gaeltacht") (OnaG 1967, Comp.53). Many of the reports also contain the adjective Gaelach. Gaelach can be translated as Irish or Gaelic — where something is described as being Irish or Gaelic — for example, bean ghaelach is a Gaelic woman. However, I offer that within the adjudicator reports Gaelach is generally used to refer to the Gaeltacht — in the sense that something comes from or is found in the Gaeltacht.

The Oireachtas is primarily concerned with promoting the Irish-language as a spoken and written vernacular (Ó Maolaoirdha 2014), therefore, one shouldn’t be that surprised to find that grammar and clarity of speech are central concerns of the Oireachtas sean-nós cohort. However, the adjudicator reports reveal that it is not enough to speak clearly and to follow the grammatical rules of the language; instead, a good sean-nós performance is one where the singer sings in one or other of the Gaeltacht dialects. It should be noted that an official standard of Irish known as An Caighdeán Oifigiúil , exists; in reality the official standard functions as an official written language, and no one really uses it as a vernacular. However, although most Irish speakers from outside the Gaeltacht learn one or other of the three main Gaeltacht dialects, many also speak in what might be regarded as a middle-dialect which blends elements of some or all of the various regional dialects with the Caighdeán Oifigiúil. In my experience many Irish speakers from outside traditional Gaeltacht areas also speak in the same accent as they do in English. The reports suggest that, irrespective of where a singer comes from, s/he is expected to perform as if s/he come from one or other of the Gaeltacht districts. This means that when a singer sings in a particular dialect s/he is expected to only sing songs from the regional repertoire indexed by that dialect. This is one of the main ways the Oireachtas reinforces the idea of regional distinctiveness. It also suggests that sean-nóis is viewed as an aural metaphor of the Gaeltacht. Since the Gaeltacht is widely seen as a spatial metaphor of authentic Irishness, sean-nóis can therefore be viewed as an aural metaphor of authentic Irishness.
Sean-nós Repertoire

The reports suggest that while it is perfectly acceptable to sing certain modern songs, as long as they are composed by members of the Gaeltacht community (see Costello 2015), these songs are generally not referred to as Amhráin Mhóra ("big songs"), the nomenclature used to refer to the most prized songs in the sean-nós repertoire. The songs that are most valued by the adjudicators are those considered to be ancient in origin. Terms such as Gaelach ("Gaelic") duchasach ("native/traditional") and sean-nósach ("old styled") are used by adjudicators to refer to this kind of material, suggesting that the more ancient the song the more "authentic" it is considered to be. It is generally frowned upon for a singer to sing a song associated with any region other than his/her own, as the following extract from the 1965 reports illustrates: “Jimmy Mo Mhile Stór — Ní maith an rogha, an bhfuair tú an tamhrán seo san nGaeltacht” ("Jimmy Mo Mhile Stór— Not a good choice, did you get this song in the Gaeltacht?") (Ó Casaide 1965, Comp.55). The importance of choosing material from one's own district is stated even more overtly in the following extract, from the 1967 festival: “Nóis maith aici arís, ach ní thagann an t-amhrán s[é]fo óna dúiche” (“She has a nice style again with this song, but this song does not come from her district”) (OnaG 1967, Comp.53).

Some adjudicators—particularly during the early decades of the Oireachtas—seem to suggest that songs learnt from books or from recordings are less “authentic” than songs learnt aurally. For example: “An chéad amhrán? As leabhar nó de phláta” ("The first song? From a book or plate") (Ní Ghuaírín 1945, Comp. 40). Indeed, many of the reports are critical of singers who sing amhráin scoile ("school songs"). The following quotations relate to one particular performance from the 1973 SSNC. The singer in question was criticized by all three adjudicators for singing a school song: "amhrán maith —eadromacht [sic] ann, ach é cosúil le amhrán scoile. Níorbh rogha maith a bhí ann" ("good song — lightness in it, but it is like a school song. Not a good choice") (de Brún 1973, Comp.64). The song in question is Fáinne Geal an Lae ("the Dawning of the Day"). The melodic range of this song is an octave, and it is usually performed as a march in 2/4 time. It is likely that the adjudicators felt this type of material was not sean-nós for two reasons, first, they believed it was too simple and second they felt it was not of the Gaeltacht. It is likely that those who competed regularly at the festival learned that certain types of song were considered inappropriate for the competition, and this is arguably further evidence that the Oireachtas sean-nós is a unique sub-genre of Irish traditional song.

Complexity in Song Choice

The importance of choosing a song with a wide melodic range is mentioned throughout the reports: "léirigh sé réim a ghutha in san amhrán seo" ("he demonstrated the range of his voice with this song") (OnaG 1963, Comp. 48). From 1965: “deas, ach b’fearr amhrán níos deacair a thógadh” ("nice, but a more challenging song should have been picked") (Ó Casaide 1965, Comp. 55). Competitors at the Oireachtas who sing songs that have a wide melodic range are praised by the adjudicators, for example: "Saibhreas na nótaí sa scála ceoil ón aoide go bun an dréimire" ("the wealth of notes of the scale from the top to the bottom of the ladder/scale"); “Réim an-leathan san amhrán seo ... amhrán deacair le casadh, ach níor dheacair leí e" ("very wide melodic range in this song") a difficult song to sing, but she had no difficulty with it") (Uí Thuama 1981, Comp. 26). This quote reveals that while songs with a wide melodic range are preferred it is also important that the singer be able to perform this type of material comfortably/naturally. The above illustrates that authenticity is seen in complexity and that melodic range is one of the ways a singer can demonstrate complexity.
The Natural Singer

The term nádúrtha or nádúrach (“natural”) is used throughout the reports in relation to the quality of the voice, for example: “Sean -nós deamanta, lán nádúrithe, timbre etc .” (“Excellent sean -nós, fully natural, timbre etc.”) (Ó Madagáin 2008, Comp.32). The term is also used to refer to the style of singing “Amhrán nar cloisiú anseo cheana, fíor sean-nóis nádúrach, gan stró ar bith air” (“A song that has not been heard here before now, true natural sean-nós, effortless”) (Nic Dhonnchadha 1973, Comp.64); and it is used in relation to ornamentation: “Glór an-mháith sean-nóis, a croí go maith ann, analú an-mháith, togha ornáidiochta, go lán-nádúrtha” (“lovely sean-nóis voice, sung with heart, excellent breathing, and fine natural ornamentation”) (Ó Madagáin 2004, Comp.28). The idea of the natural musician is not unique to sean-nós singing; indeed, it is a trope of many musical cultures, including western concepts of music which frames musicality—the sense of musical ability—on notions of genius, God -given talent, and gifted ability (see Cottrell 2004:123-144). However, it is likely that natural is used in the reports in two ways; first it is used to refer to an “un-trained’ singer”, where trained is a synonym for a Western art style singing, an indication that “authentic” sean-nós is unique and different from Western-art singing. Second, it suggests that the “authentic” sean-nós singer performs in an uncontrived and un-derivative manner, where authenticity means being authentic to one’s self. This seems to contradict the idea that the sean-nós singer needs to sound like they are “of the Gaeltacht”; however, the reports seem to indicate that, although it is important to perform material associated with a Gaeltacht in the accent, dialect and style of that Gaeltacht, this should be done in one’s own unique individual voice.

Sean-nós Technique and Ornamentation

Much of the sean-nós literature argues that within this singing tradition “the words precede music in importance” in this singing tradition (Ó Cearbhaill cited in Williams and Ó Laoire 2011: 33). My analysis of the reports however reveals that at the Oireachtas, the musical (tone, pitch, and ornamentation) is considered to be of equal importance to the lyrical component of a song. Many of the reports are critical of singers who sing out of key: “Guth binn taitneamheach ar an sean-nós, ach beagán as fonn” (“Nice enjoyable musical sean-nós voice, but slightly out of tune”) (Ó Cuirrín 1940, Comp. 29). Others stress the importance of pitching the song in a key suitable for the singer’s voice.

Ornamentation is mentioned in a majority of the reports; however most of the adjudicators do not describe what they mean by ornamentation. Instead the reports contain terms such as, ornáidiochta mhaith (“good ornamentation”) ornáidiocht féilúnach (“appropriate ornamentation”), or ornáidiocht duchaíseach/seanósach/ tradisiúnta (“native/traditional sean-nós like ornamentation”). However, from listening to recordings of former Oireachtas winners, I would say that it is likely that when “ornáidiocht” is used, it refers to “rolls/turns” — a melismatic device similar to the turn and mordent in western art music —and to grace notes— which are sometimes referred to in the reports as nôtáí breise (extra notes), and possibly glottal stops (see Cló lar Chonnachta 2008 for examples of past Oireachtas winners).

Ó Laoire (2000: 166) argues that within the festival “authenticity” is seen in melismatic ornamentation, and that this contributed to the success of Conamara singers at the Oireachtas —because the Conamara style tends to feature more melismatic ornamentation than any of the other regional styles. The reports as a whole do suggest that ornamentation (possibly melismatic ornamentation) is important to adjudicators. However, there is also some evidence in the reports that suggests that there is a limit to how much melismatic ornamentation is considered appropriate. As the following quote from 1973, describing a singer from Conamara illustrates: “Guth breá briomhar, réimeach. Iomarca saothair san amhránaíocht—fadáilch ar chuid de na foclaí— leagann ró-thorsach— Ní hé is glorai is mó mothú” (“Fine lively voice with plenty of range. Too much effort in the singing —too long on
some of the words—performance was overly forceful—loudness does not equate to emotion”) (de Brún 1973, Comp.64). I would offer that “fadálach ar chuid de na focal” (“too long/boring on some of the words”) suggests that the singer in question was dragging out the words of the song because he was employing, in the opinion of the adjudicator, too much melismatic ornamentation. Again this illustrates that “authenticity” in this musical culture is seen in more than one element or area of singing.

**Unsuitable Vocal Technique: Vibrato and Dynamics**

Much of the earlier literature pertaining to sean-nós singing proposes that vibrato and dynamics are musical devices considered to be unsuitable in sean-nós singing. However, more recently a number of academics have pointed out that in practice numerous sean-nós singers “incorporate varieties of vibrato and dynamic change into their singing” (Williams and Ó Laoire 2011: 33). Williams and Ó Laoire suggest that the vibrato that some sean-nós commentators and singers refer to with derision is more than likely the “Italianate opera-influenced vibrato associated with nineteenth-century parlour music, the bel canto tradition, and Irish tenors” (ibid, p.34); they add that the oscillation of this type of vibrato can be quite wide, and that intervals of a major third or even a perfect fourth are not uncommon in this style (ibid). The type of vibrato used by sean-nós singers, on the other hand, is typically much narrower, around a quarter tone at most (ibid). Therefore, one could argue that there is a specific form of sean-nós vibrato, one which has a very narrow range of oscillation.

When the term vibrato, and occasionally creathán (“shaking/tremolo”), are used by adjudicators it is likely that they are referring to the pronounced vibrato one would associate with the operatic tradition, as the following extract from the 1983 reports illustrates: “Guth binn milis. B’fhéidir an iomarca a vibrato, ach deas ceolmhar, agus abalta an guth a láimhsáil go maith” (“sweet musical/soft voice. Perhaps too much vibrato, but very musical, and well able to manage the voice”) (OnaG 1983, Comp.39). On the whole, most of the adjudicators who make reference to the use of vibrato in sean-nós singing tend to add terms such as, too much or strong vibrato; therefore, it is reasonable to assume that for the most part adjudicators only object to the use of the pronounced vibrato one might associate with operatic singing, and that a subtle vibrato is considered quite acceptable in sean-nós by most adjudicators.

**Narrative, Phrasing and Emotion in Sean-nós Singing**

Many adjudicators use terms like brí (“understanding”) and mothú (“emotion/feeling”) and the importance of using the appropriate emotion in order to convey the story of the song, for example: “Ní na focal go ró -sholéir agat, agus mar sin nior chuala muid an scéal. Ná bris na bhfocla” (“Nice movement. Words not all that clear, and therefore we were not able to hear the story. Do not break the words”) (Ni hÉigeartaigh 1958, Comp.45). The phrase “ná bris an line/na habairtí” (“do not break the line/sentences”) is one that pops up again and again in the reports. For example, in 1976 one adjudicator wrote: “Briseann an n-abairtí go minic” (“breaks the line a lot”) (Nic Dhonnchadha 1976, Comp.58). Another adjudicator, this time at the 1986 festival wrote: “Na línte briste beagán níos mó aici ná bhi sa chéad amhrán” (“she broke the line here more so than in the first song”) (Ó Neachtain 1986, Comp.44). Many of the reports also mention breath and breathing issues and this also seems to refer to breaking the musical and poetic line: “analú lochtach, briste” (“breathing flawed, broken”) (Ó Madagáin 2004, Comp.28).

The reports indicate that the adjudicators imagine that breaking the line or the phrase is one of the worst mistakes the sean-nós singer can make. The reason given by adjudicators for this is that breaking a line mid-sentence causes the poetic/lyrical meaning of the sentence to be lost. Interestingly, Williams and Ó Laoire note that outside of formal competitions “many singers simply break phrases as they run out of breath, though some attention is paid to continuity of phrasing” (2011: 33). I believe that the “breaking the line"
rule is an aesthetic characteristic of the Oireachtas competition, and it is one of the reasons I believe that Oireachtas sean-nós should be viewed as a sub-genre of Irish-traditional song.

Sean Óg Ó Tuama, one of the most prolific adjudicators in the modern history of the Oireachtas was very critical of singers who broke the line. He is a unique figure within the Oireachtas due to the fact that he is one of only a handful of adjudicators who adjudicated the SSNC on their own; Ó Tuama was the sole adjudicator for the period 1960-1963. Although the idea of breaking the line is alluded to in the reports prior to Ó Tuama’s period of adjudication, Ó Tuama propagated the idea that breaking the melodic line should not occur in a sean-nós performance. He makes some mention of phrasing the line, either maintaining or breaking it, in most of his report sheets, and from Ó Tuama’s time on, most adjudicators make some reference to the ‘breaking the line rule’. It seems likely that those who competed under Ó Tuama, and who later went on to become adjudicators themselves learned this “rule” from their experience as competitors.

The term tradition implies a transmission process, “a chain joining the past to the present, as well as that which is transmitted (traditum); in other words, it refers to a specific inheritance of a collective phenomenon. If one considers this double meaning, one can say that tradition is culture” (Aubert 2007:16). I view the Oireachtas singing competition as a musical culture because it is a sense a social process where ideas concerning what is considered good sean-nós are presented and performed. According to Nketia:

A musical culture can be described simply as the aggregate of cultural traditions associated with music which become evident at the juncture of the social and the musical, traditions that are learned in the social process or in special learning situations, traditions that are cultivated, practiced and recreated by the members of a society in the different roles they assume as music makers, instrument makers and audiences in different contexts of situation. A musical culture thus embraces more than “the tonality of musical “events” within a society or social unit.

(Kwabena Nketia 1981:31-32)

Through their engagement with the Oireachtas competition singers learn the rules of the Oireachtas, they become enculturated into this musical culture, and although the Oireachtas sean-nós tradition shares much with the wider Irish-song tradition, it is nevertheless a unique musical genre, a sub-genre of the Irish song tradition, with its own idiosyncratic rules concerning what is sean-nós. Others have drawn attention to the affect the Oireachtas has had on vernacular Irish-language song generally (for example see Nic Dhonncha 2012, 2004; Ó Laoire 2000, 1998). While I accept that such an influence exists, it is not the focus of this paper. Here I am primarily concerned with the Oireachtas itself, and not its wider influence.

**Sean-nós Timbre and Register**

Throughout the reports numerous adjudicators use terms such as binn and binneas to describe the desirable voice for sean-nós singing. For example: “Béal ró-dhúnta, guth binn, ach an béal ré-dhúnta” (“mouth too closed, musical voice but the mouth was too closed”) (Ó Cuirrin 1940, Comp. 29). Also in 1982 one adjudicator wrote: “Guth an-bhinn, ach gan an stil tradisiúnta ar fad” (“very sweet voice, but style not that traditional”) (OnaG 1982, Comp.37). Binn can be translated as sweet or musical, and it is likely that binn and binneas (“sweetness”) are used in the reports to describe voices considered to be aesthetically pleasing. Ceolmhaireacht is the Irish for musicality, and it is rarely used in the reports; instead the term ceolmhar (“musical or musically”) and glór ceolmhar (“musical voice”) are used frequently. For example: “Guth glan gléineach binn ceolmhar” (“clean bright musical voice”) (OnaG 2008, Comp.32).

Because it can mean sweet, it is tempting to assume that binn is used by adjudicators to refer to a soft, open, perhaps breathy singing voice. Also, the term garbh (rough or harsh) is used throughout the reports to refer to aesthetically unpleasing voices. For example: “Focal go maith agat ach biónn do glór garbh agat” (“the words were good, but your voice is rough/harsh”) (Ni hÉigeartaigh 1958, Comp.45). However, closer inspection of the reports,
combined with listening to recordings of some of the singers described both as having binn and garbh voices respectively, reveals that the term binn does not refer to a specific type of vocal timbre or register (see Cló Iar Chonnachta 2008). Instead, I would argue that binn is used by adjudicators to describe voices that are aesthetically pleasing and that what this is differs from adjudicator to adjudicator.

Nasalisation

The reports suggest that there is no archetypical voice for singing sean-nós, yet there are certain voice production practices which are considered more desirable than others. Throughout the reports adjudicators criticize the use of nasalisation by competitors. For example: “Ni cheart feidhm do bhaint as an tsrón I gceol tire ar bith” (“the nose [nasalisation] is not part of any traditional music. Rough in every way”) (Ó Caoindealbain 1940, Comp. 29). Another example, this time from the 1962 festival: “An t-sronacht aris. Laige ag teacht ag deire[sic] gach abairt” (“nasalisation here again. The end of every sentence is weak”) (ÓnaG 1962, Comp.42), and again, this time from the 1982 Oireachtas: “Amhráin maith é leis, srónáil agus é ag canadh” (“a good singer as well, but nasalisation while singing”) (Ó Ciobhain 1982, Comp.37).

The fact that so many adjudicators appear to be critical of the use of nasalisation is quite extraordinary. For one thing many of the most successful Oireachtas sean-nós singers of the past have sung with varying degrees of nasalisation; singers such as Seán de hÓra and Joe Heaney for example. Seán Ó Riada went as far as to state that nasalization was “probably the most subtle of the sean-nós singer’s range of effects ..., [used] to draw special attention to a note or group of notes” (1983, p.38). Joe Heaney used the onomatopoeic term neá (“neah”) to describe the nasal tone employed by sean-nós singers, which he felt was at the heart of sean-nós singing (2004: 134). In an interview with James Cowdery Heaney stated that:

> The drone, you know, is similar to the human voice, because— ‘nature’s accompaniment’ they call it, you know. This is the way they handed it down, you see, this is the way they used to do it— through the nose mostly, you know, and humming— the slaves working in the fields and all that.(Cowdery 1990: 36-37)

Again, by listening to sean-nós singers, particularly those who have been successful at the Oireachtas, and comparing their voices with the comments contained in the reports, it becomes clear that like vibrato, nasalisation often features in varying degrees at the festival. Suggesting that, like vibrato, the use of nasalisation is perfectly acceptable as long as it is not overly pronounced. The fact that some of the most celebrated sean-nós singers make use of nasalisation also suggests that a degree of nasalisation, and therefore a head voice, is perhaps even desirable in sean-nós singing.

Timbre

Many of the reports criticize singers for singing with too much force or with too harsh a voice, for example, “guth álainn milte ag brú ón scornach” (“beautiful voice ruined by being forced from the throat”) (OnaG 1946, Comp.41). The above adjudicator informs us that while the singer here had a beautiful voice; they are forcing it, or putting too much pressure on the voice, because they are singing too much from the throat. One might assume therefore that this means that the reports are suggesting that a stressed or perhaps projected voice production process is aesthetically displeasing in sean-nós singing. However, like nasalisation and vibrato, many of the most successful Oireachtas sean-nós singers sing at the top of their range, blending head and chest voices; many also sing with a somewhat restricted embouchure and constricted pharynx, which adds a certain tension to the voice (see Cló Iar Chonnachta 2008; Gaeil Linn 2004). This suggests that an element of tension and throatiness is perhaps desirable, again as long as it is not overly pronounced. I would argue that, the main position of the adjudicators is that a singer should sing in their natural voice. Some individuals are more comfortable (natural) using a cheat voice, others a head or
throat voice, and the reports seem to suggest that each singer should sing in his/her own natural uncontrived voice. I would offer that, taken as a whole, the reports illustrate that there is no single definitive or archetypical _Oireachtas sean-nós_ voice. Instead, what is considered musical tonally exists along an aesthetic spectrum. At the risk of being overly simplistic, one might imagine a Classical style singer on one extreme of this spectrum and a very harsh constricted throaty nasal voice on the other, the appropriate _sean-nós_ voices seem to be those that exist somewhere in between these two extremes.

**Conclusion**

As Stokes (1994: 4) argues, in order for music to function so that a social event can happen, the performance has to be considered to be good by the members of musical communities. My objective here is not to try and deconstruct _sean-nós_ into its constituent parts, but to illustrate what members of this musical community believe to be musically and aesthetically important. My analysis of the adjudicator reports and the _Oireachtas_ more generally, suggests that, good performance in this musical culture exists along an aesthetic spectrum. In other words, while there are certain characteristic that are considered essential in _sean-nós_ singing, no single precise list, composite of features or definition for an ideal _sean-nós_ performance can be ascertained from the reports. As in any musical culture, what is good performance is subjective and is always being contested and argued over, and therefore it is to a certain degree in a state of flux. This does not mean that _sean-nós_ performance has no definable characteristics, quite the reverse; instead the reports indicate that, within the aesthetic spectrum of good _sean-nós_ performance, there are certain key pillars underpinning a good _sean-nós_ performance.

The wide use of the term _nádúrtha_ ("natural") in the reports suggests that the natural voice is the ideal in _sean-nós_ singing. It is likely that the use of pronounced vibrato in a _sean-nós_ performance marks the singer as being trained, and therefore not a "natural" singer. Like vibrato and dynamics, nasalisation appears to be acceptable, and perhaps even desirable in _sean-nós_ singing, again as long as it is not overly pronounced. Although some adjudicators, particularly in the earlier period of the reports (1940-1950s), seem to favor a head voice, the chest voice and a blending of head and chest voices seems to be perfectly acceptable and perhaps desirable at the _Oireachtas_. Many _sean-nós_ singers perform with a stressed timbre, and while this might be deemed a characteristic of _sean-nós_ singing the reports show that there seems to be a threshold beyond which a singer should not go — again individual adjudicators differ on what is considered too much tension. It seems likely that if the voice sounds overly stretched and tense it does not sound "natural". The ideal of the natural singer also influences how variation and ornamentation are viewed in this community. While individual adjudicators might differ on how much ornamentation should ideally feature in a _sean-nós_ song, most seem to expect that whatever ornamentation occurs should occur in a natural and uncontrived manner. Traditionality in this musical culture is seen in complexity, and ornamentation is one way a singer can add complexity to a song; however, while adjudicators do place value on ornamentation, particularly melismatic ornamentation, complexity is also seen in melodic range, command of phrasing and control of the voice.

All of the adjudicators seem to agree that “breaking the musical/poetic line” is one of the worst mistakes a _sean-nós_ singer can make. The reports indicate that a singer is expected to embody the spirit and sentiment of the song’s narrative, and some adjudicators suggest that if a singer breaks the poetic line, the “meaning” or _brí_ of the song is lost; therefore, the singer is not embodying the story of the song, as s/he should. Singers who “over-act” are also criticised because they are seen as acting as opposed to “living” the song. It might also be possible that the “natural singer” is expected to be able to sing long and wide melodic phrases with ease. The ability to sing long unbroken phrases is also another way of adding complexity to the performance. Outside of formal competition many singers, irrespective of where they are from, do not seem to be overly concerned with breaking the line. This leads
me to conclude that, the “breaking the line” rule is one of the primary indicators that the Oireachtas is a unique musical genre, a sub-genre of Irish traditional song—one with its own rules and idiosyncrasies.

All of the reports make reference, in one way or another, to the centrality of the Gaeltacht in sean-nós singing. According to the reports, in order to sing sean-nós, one has to sing in one or other of the Gaeltacht dialects. Singers are expected to perform from the repertoire of the Gaeltacht associated with their dialect, and although it is not commented on very much, I would suggest that the reports expect singers to perform in the style associated with their dialect of Irish. Generally speaking, the older and rarer a song and style of singing is the more “authentic” it is perceived to be. Formal competition is sometimes seen has having a homogenising effect on traditional singing, here however, I argue that the Oireachtas does the opposite, it reinforces the local, to such an extent that it contributes to the framing of the various Gaeltacht districts as separate ethnicities with their own separate styles and repertoires.

While the Oireachtas has unquestionably created a space and a platform for what is essentially a marginalised and intangible part of Irish heritage, the tacit “rules” that emerge through the competition culture of the festival have arguably had a restraining effect on the sean-nós singing community. However, it is too convenient to regard the Oireachtas as some form of external agent that enforces control over the sean-nós singing community. As I have stated above, sean-nós singers from the Gaeltacht have been adjudicating at the Oireachtas since at least the 1940s, and this trend has only increased as the decades have progressed. Traditional singers from all walks of life adjudicate next to music academics at the festival. Therefore, one can argue that the Gaeltacht sean-nós community has, through its participation at the Oireachtas as adjudicators, contributed to creating the “rules” of Oireachtas sean-nós singing. However, I prefer to view the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort as a musical culture, and not an external “cultural interventionist movement” (Whisnat 2009). It is all too easy and convenient to view the Oireachtas as some sort of faceless hierarchical organisation that imposes its views and aesthetics on the traditional community. The reality of the situation is far more complex. Traditional singers have been complicit in the authoring of the Oireachtas sean-nós tradition for quite some time, through their active participation in the Oireachtas both as singers and adjudicators. Therefore, if we accept that the Oireachtas has changed traditional song in Ireland, we need to accept that traditional singers have also been agents of this change, and not as helpless “folk” without power or agency.

References

Coleman, Steve -


Nic Dhomhnaigh, Róisín –


Ó Laoire, Lillis –


Archives Cited
Oireachtas na Gaeilge Archives, Casla Conamara.
National Liberty of Ireland, Oireactas na Gaeilge Papers, Manuscript Department, Dublin.

Interviews Cited

Discography
Tóibín, N. 1999 Rinn na nGael, Cló Iar Chonnachta, Ireland.

1 Ethically in the sense of appropriate behaviour - what type of songs, style, performance practice is accepted and what is not.
2 Adjudicator report sheets are in Irish, as such when quoting from them I give the Irish quote with my own translation. Some of the Irish contained in the reports is non-standardised, and for the most part I have refrained from standardising/correcting them here.
3 Cearta Shíbhialta na Gaeltachta (The Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement), was a socio-political movement established in the late 1960s by a group of mostly young radicals from the Conamara Gaeltacht district (Quinn 2000). Lack of employment in the area and the draining of the district’s youth due to emigration were the two main concerns of the CSNG (Mac Giolla Chríost 2012:404). The Civil Rights members also felt that the Oireachtas na Gaeilge, which since 1939 was held annually in Dublin, was elitist and disconnected from the realities of Gaeltacht life. As such, the Civil Rights movement organised three “alternative” Oireachtaí festivals –known as Oireachtas na nGael (the Assembly of the Gaels)- in various Gaeltacht locations between 1970 and 1972 (Costello 2015: 129-133). Because of the actions of the Civil rights movement the official Oireachtas moved its annual festival to Cois Fhharraige Conamara in 1974 the first time it was held outside the capital since 1939.
4 Unlike other Gaeltacht districts, the Meath Gaeltacht was created by the Irish government in 1935, as a part of its Irish language strategy at that time. Families from Gaeltacht districts in Mayo, Galway and Kerry, were given farms in Meath in an attempt to spread Irish as the common vernacular throughout the wider populace. The Meath Gaeltacht consists of two adjacent villages, Rath Cairn and Baile Ghib (Údarás na Gaeltachta 2015). Families and individuals from Mayo, Conamara and Kerry were all settled in Baile Ghib, and, for whatever reason, those who were settled in Rath Chairn all came from Conamara. Both Conamara and Meath Gaeltacht communities now speak the same regional dialect of Irish, and they share the same general repertoire and performance style of sean-nós as well.