

Gender and Culture: Revoicing Traditional Song in Context

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Abstract

Music and song remain powerful indicators of socially gendered ideologies in Ireland, revealing both dominant and transgressive trends. The paper briefly outlines the dominant trends of music and song in society before proceeding to unearth and explore dissenting voices, giving a number of notable examples. The concept of intersectionality emerges as a productive approach to understanding the hegemony of heteronormative identities expressed through music and song performance. It also helps to identify challenges and divergent trends. A broad diachronic framework shows how tradition has never been monolithic across time.

Keywords: Social continuity, change, LGBTQ voices, keening, Gaelic song, performance, tradition, intersectionality.

The first *Crossroads* conference on Irish Traditional Music in 1996 (Irish, Crosbhealach an Cheoil) heralded a new era of scholarship on traditional Irish music. The conference acknowledged various approaches to research, celebrating both established historical methodologies and acknowledging more recent styles together. The event impressed attendees because of the great enthusiasm that pervaded the gathering and the mix of younger and more mature scholars in attendance. The subsequent publication gives some sense of this atmosphere and is a worthwhile portrayal of the range of scholarship in traditional music at that time (Vallely et al. 1999). Some thirty papers appear in print, given by a range of scholars both from Ireland and elsewhere. Revisiting the volume gives us a sense of the current issues in traditional music at the time. Ríonach uí Ógáin's paper, the only one published in Irish, indicated a welcome for publication in that language. The volume's back cover statement reminds us that the conference came in the wake of *Riverdance* (1994), now a continuously touring show in a global context. A single contribution by Rina Schiller on gender in Irish music also stands out (Schiller 1996: 200-05). Notable too, is the patronage of the first woman President of Ireland, Mary Robinson. Although previously, some scholars were active in the International Council for Traditional Music, the society had only a limited presence in Ireland at that time. In the intervening period, the promise that could be sensed at *Crossroads* has come to fruition. This includes the development of a strong Irish membership of ICTM and the holding of the International World Conference at the University of Limerick in 2017.

These developments bode well for a cultural discourse in which the discussion of music, song and their place in culture and society can be as important a barometer of the cultural commentary as any other element. Many critics have regarded literature and literary criticism as the main vehicle for such discourse, especially in Ireland (White 1998, 5) but as Leith Davis argues, music has as much right to play a major role in the discussion as any other cultural form (Davis 2006, 5). Reflecting on that moment and considering the ways in which Ireland and traditional music has changed in the period

since the first *Crossroads* event also shows how much research there is yet to be done, and how much there is to say about the place of traditional music and song in the contemporary situation.

The 2018 ICTM Ireland annual conference call for papers was an intriguing and challenging one. The abstract addressed current concerns, framing them in a matrix of enduring questions around the practice and reception of traditional music and song in Ireland, including the “culture bearers, voice and affect, iconic voices, music and memory, and music and belonging, all in the context of LGBTQ+ voices.” This was particularly appropriate in the wake of the transformative marriage equality referendum of 2015, and following it, the referendum that repealed the 8th amendment in the Irish constitution that granted mothers and the fetuses they carried an equal right to life. Moreover, in the 2019 context of a government led by a gay man with a biracial Indian-Irish heritage and with an avowed interest in the Irish language, it seems an especially appropriate time to discuss such themes and the concerns that arise from them. My attempt here will be to *queer* the pitch, as it were, and follow what I believe to be a way of opening traditional music and song to new and changing identities. In so doing, I want to begin to address the lack of engagement with issues of gender in Irish music (O’Flynn 2009: 152).

In 1996, at the *Crossroads* conference, a definite tension between supposed “conservative” voices and those styled as “innovators” was apparent. That debate continues, although it seems to me that some of the strain has abated, given the enormous development of traditional music within the academy as well as of new performance groups, in addition to the increasing professionalization of Irish music. There seems to be more of a consensus that there is room for all kinds within the broad confines of traditional music. However, it is as well for us to recall that traditional music is often seen as inherently conservative, given its association with the Irish cultural revival, one produced “by a particular kind of masculinist nationalism,” founded on the suppression of counterdiscourses, including feminism, radical socialism, lesbianism and the homoerotic (Walshe 1997: 3). However, it is worth recalling attitudes to the Oscar Wilde scandal (McCormack 1998, Earls, 2012) and speculation over Pádraig Pearse’s sexual identity in this context (Edwards 1977). While neither specifically relate to music, both are relevant to the cultural milieu of the revival and its subsequent trajectories.

It is a given that some strands of that movement, and those that came to dominate the discourse after independence were both regressive and repressive, wishing to contain traditional music within a rural-oriented, agrarian model that emphasized traditional heteronormative binary sexual identities. Such conservatism is generally associated with the Irish language and culture and those who reject or disparage traditional music and song seem perhaps especially convinced of those inexorable, inextricable alignments equating rural, conservative worldviews and gender identities with religion, sport, music and language. This raises the concept of intersectionality, an “interpretive orientation” developed by black feminist scholars that attempts to understand the interlacing of identities and their enmeshment in power systems in ways that mutually reinforce one another (May 2015: 3-4). Defined as “how lived identities, structural systems, sites of marginalization, forms of power, and modes of resistance ‘intersect’ in dynamic, shifting ways” (May 2015: 21-23) intersectionality espouses a commitment to open forms of social justice. Put simply, dominant ideologies coalesce or combine in forming systems that elicit resistance from those who fail to conform. Intersectionality aims to understand such ideologies and strategies of resistance historically and socially in order to unsettle asymmetrical power relations and create dialogue, striving to reduce oppression and enhance equality by forging “collective models of social transformation” (May 2015: 4). Although the model has also been subject to critique, it provides a useful way of thinking about identities closely caught up in power systems that control them. Traditional music, for those who challenge binary gender categorization, is both “liberatory and confining” (Slominski, 2018), a claim that

reveals exactly the enmeshment claimed by intersectionality. By drawing on this approach here, the intention is to give insight into the existence of dissident identities over time, revealing music's inherent potential to achieve transformations.

Éamon De Valera (1882-1975), a unique survivor of the Leaders of the 1916 Rising, became one of the most prominent public figures in post-Independence Ireland. He founded the Fianna Fáil party in 1926 and became head of Government in 1932. He remained a leading and influential political figure for over 50 years, shaping public opinion and policy during his heyday. He was the main author of the 1937 Constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, a central document in Irish politics and law. His best-known speech, given on St. Patrick's Day in 1943, to mark the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Gaelic League (Dowling 1997), has become a byword because of its deployment of the tropes of cultural nationalism, calculated to promote himself by seeming to espouse a utopian vision of traditional Irish life (de Valera 1943). A paean to frugal ways of living and the moderate comforts derived from them, the speech naturally referred to the importance of the Irish Language, but did not specifically mention music. However, in this key passage, the telling phrase "dancing at the crossroads" was mistakenly added afterwards to a description of "the laughter of happy maidens" providing a missing musical soundtrack that, though not originally present, seemed necessary.¹ This embellishment reinforces the association between rural living and the traditional crossroads dance in the Irish popular mind. This, however, was also an Ireland where Micheál Mac Liammóir could live openly with his partner Hilton Edwards, indicating the protection that the cultural scene could also provide for those dissenting from heteronormative identities.

This speech is so often cited because it seems to many representative of a dominant strand of public discourse during the formative years of the state, one always more rhetorical ("The Ireland we *dreamed* of..." [my emphasis]) than founded in reality (Ó Cruaí 1986: 50). Ó Giolláin has pointed out that both a modernizing discourse and a traditionalist one were in conflict at that very period (2000:144). The discourse of modernization and progress prevailed to a large extent in the sociological domain, in the areas of health and housing for example, under the influence of the Labour movement, whereas the traditional view given in De Valera's speech looked towards an idyllic, prelapsarian, golden past and dominated much of the cultural politics of the time. The latter was mainly espoused by artists, writers and those influenced by the Gaelic League and the Literary Revival.

That the socio-cultural landscape in Ireland has a strongly patriarchal orientation can be in no doubt. For music, Fintan Vallely notes a disparity in performance and conceptual spheres in traditional music. While the former has always included females, under the influence of western art music, the latter emerges steadfastly as "a male genre", although evidencing a marked increase in female participation (Vallely 2011, 302). Despite increasing numbers of women performers, the 'conceptual' dominance of men remains clear in the traditional music world. As is well known, the idea of Ireland is closely aligned to traditional music, so that a harp acts as the symbol of the nation, a motif that appears as an emblem of the state on all official documents and coinage. Though Ireland is symbolized as a woman, nevertheless, male voices dominate discourse and this has also been true in traditional music. It is not that there are no female players or that they do not have a voice, but rather that the trope of nationalism, and especially cultural nationalism, has reinforced normative gender models through which participants in musical tradition can be categorized and labelled. De Valera's ideas, though often ridiculed for their old-fashioned Victorian tone, are one representation of what such persistent categories might entail. They draw on well-defined images to evoke idealized types of male and female roles. They reflect majority views of that time, ideas that continued to hold sway for many years. The recent marked rise of GAAⁱⁱ women's sport and the growing media attention it receives, shows how this has changed over time. However, the fact that the coming out of a prominent

GAA player, such as Dónal Óg Cusack, in 2009, created a media stir and some controversy, shows that boundaries have not shifted completely and that quite a few people remain attached to their maintenance. Cusack's ability to capitalize on his identity by publishing a best-selling autobiography (2009), is another interesting development, also indicating palpable change and engagement with new modes of identity formation and branding aided and supported by neo-liberal capitalism. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think of such gradual, incremental adjustments as a tectonic shift. The picture is more complex and variegated and requires patient and careful study to understand it. Although both recent referendums (Marriage Equality 2015, Repeal the 8th Amendment 2018) passed comfortably (62.04% and 66.07% respectively), a significant no vote indicates a core group who are at best uncomfortable with the changes in Irish legislation.

The continued popularity of the Rose of Tralee Festivalⁱⁱⁱ (an annual women's pageant named after the eponymous ballad), for example, shows the continued desire for idealized representations of gender, as attractive young women are interviewed and dressed up to acclaim, accompanied by athletic young men, often also drawn from the ranks of GAA sportsmen. There has been a more recent subversion of these ideal roles; Maria Walsh, who won the pageant in 2014, used the moment to come out as a lesbian. This certainly gave the immortal words of the song a distinctively queer resonance:

She was lovely and fair as the rose of the summer,
Yet 'twas not her beauty alone that won me;
Oh no, 'twas the truth in her eyes ever dawning,
That made me love Mary, the Rose of Tralee.

It would be interesting to know whether Ms. Walsh would have won the competition or, indeed, been chosen to represent Philadelphia, had her sexual identification been widely known beforehand. In any case, her statement had the effect of authorising a queer desire in an event constructed around traditional norms of attractiveness in women. It is now within the bounds of possibility that one Rose could desire another in a manner similar to the male-oriented gaze of the auditorium or screen audience. Such examples provide concrete realizations of the changes occurring around LGBTQ+ issues in Ireland, revealing both the increasing acceptance of and the continuing resistance to such identities. That she won a seat in the 2019 European elections standing for the Fine Gael party, provides further complexity with regard to perceptions of sexual orientation and identities, that undoubtedly deserved to be explored, but that lie beyond the scope of my enquiry here. It is against this backdrop that I will discuss traditional vocal music especially. This development aside, the pageant continues and remains popular happily reinforcing its message that still carries echoes of de Valera's famous speech.

In relation to The Rose of Tralee pageant, I may also mention the GAA and *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* – a major national and international association for traditional music and musicians. Comhaltas organizes international competitive events known as *Fleadhanna Cheoil* (Feasts of Music), which culminate annually in the All-Ireland Fleadh, a major competitive event with a myriad of other formal and informal activities, held in shifting venues during the month of August. The 2018 Fleadh was held in Drogheda, Co. Louth, for example; the 2017 event in Ennis, Co. Clare. The holding of major GAA finals, the Rose of Tralee pageant as well as many other similar and smaller events, the Fleadh Cheoil during the month of August, indicates that these are developments arising out of old *Lúnasa* rituals – the first fruits harvest festival that was celebrated on the last Sunday of July (MacNeill 1982). Deeply connected with courtship and marriage, the saturated intersectionality of dominant ideology stands revealed when such modern events coincide with primordial quarter day celebrations. These connections deserve more detailed treatment that lies outside the scope of my

present focus. However, Maria Walsh's public coming out in the context of this affects the reception and consumption of all such similar events.

Against this background, it is appropriate to compare examples from traditional song widely separated in time, and to some extent in space. This exercise attempts to recover both earlier and contemporary alternative voices and to show how traditional music can adapt and change to reflect and influence its social and cultural environment. I draw these from the traditional context of keening, perhaps the most archetypal and gendered vocal genre, extending also to song, using both text and context to illustrate my points. Though other issues are important, I will confine myself to the topic of gender. In this discussion, I follow Bourdieu's assertion that discourse is not a peripheral part of the work critiqued, but a stage in its production (Bourdieu 1993: 35/6). The time seems right to add another dimension to the works I will discuss, augmenting them and awakening a debate around them.

Keening – Dynamics and Adaptations

In the past, keening came to represent an undomesticated, barbarous Ireland, especially by pre-Famine travel writers, for whom it remained one of their top ten items to see on their tours (Lloyd 2011: 53). In an early description of keening, the genre is said to have been performed by both men and women, and a description of one performance indicates that men were adept at such displays. Referring to the caoineadh W.K. Sullivan observes:

The *Mná Caoínte*, or professional mourning women, who used to attend the wakes and funerals in the Irish-speaking districts of Ireland up to the period of the famine of 1848, and perhaps still do in some of the remoter districts of the west and south, preserve, I have no doubt, a true tradition of the ancient *Cepóg* or *Guba* [forms of lament]. The usual number was at least four; one stood near the head of the bed or table on which the corpse was laid, one at the feet, who was charged with the care of the candles, aone or more at each side; the family and immediate friends of the deceased sat around near the table.... Sometimes one or more or even all the principal singers, were men. I once heard in West Muskerry, in the county of Cork, a dirge of this kind, excellent in point of both music and words, improvised over the body of a man who had been killed by a fall from a horse, by a young man, the brother of the deceased. He first recounted his genealogy, eulogised the spotless honour of his family, described in the tones of a sweet lullaby his childhood and boyhood, then changing the air suddenly, he spoke of his wrestling and hurling, his skill at ploughing, his horsemanship, his prowess at a fight in a fair, his wooing and marriage, and ended by suddenly bursting into a loud piercing, but exquisitely beautiful wail, which was again and again taken up by the bystanders. (1873: 324/5).^{iv}

This oft-quoted passage is of interest for its portrayal of music and gender. Importantly, it is clear that men could lead the keening as well as women. The young man, however, is the *brother* of the deceased, and the *mná caoínte*, the keening women, are conversely described as professionals. Ostensibly in Ireland, then, keening, although also practiced by men, belongs, as a *profession*, mainly to women. The genre has been the focus of much discussion, by Patricia Lysaght for example (1995) with Angela Bourke adopting a feminist framework in her insightful work on the topic (2000, 2002). The interpretation of the keening tradition has itself been a battleground for gendered views of vocal traditions. Conversely to Bourke's portrayal of keening women as eloquent, articulate performers, as grief therapists who expertly channeled the sorrow and loss experienced by relatives and community to provide relief and comfort, Breandán Ó Buachalla viewed *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, or the "Lament for Art O'Leary", as the expression of a single literate, educated voice, expressed through the mode of writing (1998). Written for an Irish officer in the Austrian army, this lament is the longest poem and best-known keening text, and is attributed to his wife, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill (dark-haired Eileen O'Connell). The construction of Eileen O'Leary, or Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, as either oral performer or desk oriented writer itself clearly

throws polarized views of gender roles within tradition into relief. Orality and performance are perceived as less important, more feminine, more transsubjective, while the solitary literary voice, transmitted through writing, implies a definite resonance with a male identity and the individual subject.

Méadhbh Nic An Airchinnigh has unravelled various arguments in a 2012 Ph.D. thesis that was the first to include a serious consideration of the music of lament in Ireland. Her work challenges Ó Buachalla, who dismissed consideration of musical performance and the recorded examples that are found in archives as conjecture, stating firmly that, far from representing the culmination of generations of lamenters' voices, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* represented the voice of a poet. He acknowledged a link between oral tradition and Eibhlín Dubh's poem, but claimed that the literary development it had experienced had transformed it beyond anything any oral text could possibly match in individual excellence. Nic an Airchinnigh managed to show, by including a musical dimension and by identifying the similarities between the various tunes that have come down to us that there was, very definitely, a preferred musical configuration for keening. Her research shows that in both metrical and performative approach, a milking or herding song collected from Elizabeth Cronin (Ó Cróinín 2000: 186-187) closely resembled the characteristics identified by Ó Madagáin (1981 311-332) as those most salient in keening melodies. This included a loose structure with a repetitive element and irregular numbers of lines. Nic An Airchinnigh pointed out, for example, that the air of the great Connacht love song "*Cuaichín Ghleann Néifín*" contained exactly the characteristics she had identified as salient in keening airs. This provides a direction for future musicological analysis of song tunes, in order to compare their structure to those that contain elements linked to keen airs, to help us better apprehend the connections between them.

The authoritative text of the "Lament for Art O'Leary" was recovered in two versions from a woman name Nóra Ní Shindile, from Inse Mhór near Millstreet in County Cork in the 19th century (Ó Tuama 1960, Bourke 2002). The fact that the keen only began to be thought worthy of written record around that time shows the influence of written manuscript tradition and more formal genres of poetry, usually composed by men. As new material became difficult to acquire, attention turned to keening, assisted no doubt by Croker's publications on the topic (1844). As Sullivan's account shows, although men also performed the keen, women certainly predominated to the extent that we can say that it was chiefly a woman's role, especially in a professional capacity.

As a part of the revoicing of the song tradition and indeed of its language, Irish, I turn to a passage from nineteenth-century Kilkenny/Waterford. This describes not just a male keener, but a male *professional* keener, an individual who earned his living, apparently meagre and precarious, from lamenting over corpses in the environs of where he lived. For this account, we are indebted to John George Augustus Prim (1821-75), an antiquarian, and another scholar, John Dunne or Seán Ó Doinn, whom Prim employed to collect song in South Kilkenny and the neighbouring areas of Tipperary and Waterford (Ó hÓgáin 1980 13-15). Nioclás Breathnach, or in anglicized form, Nicholas Walsh, appears to have been active in the second half of the eighteenth century. Also known as Nioclás an Chaointeacháin or Nick the Keener, we have only one short poem from him, with a possible second attributed to him by the collector. However, I am drawn to the description of him as the only *professional* male keener known to Dunne. Nicholas Walsh was, therefore, an exceptional individual. In Dunne's account, worth citing at length, we can understand that his personal attributes were also exceptional:

This Nicholas was an extraordinary man for his powers of keening. He was a living chronicle of all the family pedigrees in the adjoining districts of the 'three counties' [Kilkenny, Tipperary, Waterford], throughout which districts he was universally recognized as a professional keener. It was usual to dispatch a messenger for him 'with horse bridle and saddle' for his conveyance and an 'old guinea' as his fee. On his arriving

at the wakehouse there was a great stir and excitement among the people. He respectfully uncovered on entering said a prayer of the Latin psalm for the dead, and then took his seat among the females who surrounded the corpse and who in the dresses of the period had an imposing appearance and the profusion of lights. Strangers standing without invariably mistook Nicholas's voice for a woman of great orael [sic] powers, so mellifluous and pathetic was it in all the modulations of the song of sorrow – especially in leading the loud wail, in which all the females at either side took part at the concluding words of each stanza. On one occasion at Poulacapple two men were despatched on horseback, one towards the Walsh Mountains for Nick The Keener, the other to Kilcash for a famous female-keener. Both keened the deceased (Mr. John Laurence) at great length in alternate verses, bringing down the tears in hot streams from the hundreds within and without... I doubt whether Nick the Keener had any fixed place of residence. On one occasion here it was at Dún Feart he was found, on another at Gleannta near Bennettsbridge and at another time somewhere in the vicinity of the Walsh Mountains, but of which I am informed he was a native. (Ó hÓgáin 1980:20).

This passage is noteworthy for many reasons. First, it confirms that the keen was a performed genre, agreeing closely with the description given by Sullivan earlier with regard to its solo and communal call and response nature. It also gives the reason for lament performance: to 'bring down tears in hot streams' from the abundant numbers of assembled mourners, directly because of the recitation of the genealogies and deeds of the deceased, again resembling Sullivan's description from West Muskerry. We can see that the professionals fulfilled exactly the role that Angela Bourke argues they played, acting as "grief therapists" (2002: 1366), managing expectations and channeling the sorrow of those who were gathered, so that it was expressed in appropriate ways. Apparent also is the competitive edge that would inform the presence of two consummate professionals from different areas and their concern to acquit themselves well in the presence of such a large gathering, thereby safeguarding their reputations and ensuring opportunities for future employment.

From the perspective of voice and gender, Nick the Keener's occupation as a man in a largely female profession is of intense interest. The facts that he took his place among the females, and that the sound of his voice was mistaken for that of a woman by those who did not know him, suggest strongly that he took on the outward aspects of a female identity when engaged in the practice of that profession. Without exaggeration, it could be argued that this individual had adopted aspects of a transgendered identity. Perhaps this was the result of a medical condition such as puberphonia, a term that indicates an individual's voice failing to change in the normal way due to pituitary malfunction (<http://entcolumbia.org/health-library-0/puberphonia>). The cause of the phenomenon is, however, not really at issue. What is significant is that the feminine character of Nick the Keener's voice may well have been the factor that influenced his adoption of a female identity. He was accepted among the women keeners as one of their own, and his extraordinary voice, his musical and performative ability accounted for that acceptance. The term transgender is, of course, a modern construct adopted to indicate individuals who do not identify with their biological sex or assigned birth gender. My point here is not, therefore, to argue whether we can really identify a figure from the past as transgender. Rather, I wish to suggest that, given the discursive history of the cultural revival, "Tradition" with a capital T, briefly referred to above, is often presented to us as something fixed and unvarying, accepting only binary gender roles, a concept that interlaces and enmeshes, activities and identities, according to ideas of intersectionality. By looking at Nicholas Walsh's identity as described by a near contemporary, we see that this is not necessarily the case. Because of its dominance, this apparent fixity can be challenging, and difficult to interrogate. It can serve to hinder our engagement with tradition as a fluid inheritance that responded to real life conditions. Far from being a dead weight or a prescriptive unchanging monolith, however, when we look at this example we can see that a phenomenon such as a man who performed like a woman, and who was, in fact, accepted as an honorary woman in

a professional capacity, could be accommodated, and even celebrated, during his lifetime in the late eighteenth century.

We do not know many of the details of Nicholas Walsh's life, except the few meagre facts we have in Dunne's account. Nevertheless, we may be sure that his difference marked him as an outsider, someone with prestige certainly, sought after especially for his ability to kee over the corpse, but who had no home and belonged to no fixed abode. In addition to a lament for a priest named Risteard Ó Sé, a couple of short verses attributed to him were said to have been made when he spent the night in a draughty space between two doors, neither fully in one room nor another:

*Dá mbeinn i gCeannanas dom, nó scaitheamh taobh thíos de,
Nó i nGarraí na mBan i bhfochair mo mhuintir',
Chuirfidís a chodladh in olainn is i líon mé
Nó in leaba clúmh na n-éan más é is daoire –
Ní chuirfidís idir dhá dhoras mé ag stopadh na gaoithe!*

*Fad a bheidh grian ar spéir nó féar ar thalamh
Beidh trácht choíche ar Lionard Ó Nadaigh –
I nGarraí na mBan os cionn na Gaise
Mar do bhíonn fuaim abhann agus cling mharbh,
Agus ceiliúr na n-éan gach aon mhaidin.*

(“If I were in Ceanannas, or a bit further north,
Or in Garraí na mBan in the company of my family
They would send to me to sleep in wool and in linen
Or in a feather bed, since that is the most expensive
They wouldn't put me between two doors to block the wind.

As long as the sun shines or the grass grows
The name of Lionard Ó Nadaigh will never be forgotten
In Garraí na mBan above the Gais
Where there river sounds and tinkles faintly
And the birds sing each and every morning.”)
(Ó hÓgáin 1980: 64, 118).

Dunne speculated that this space had been deliberately given to the lamenter in the hopes of eliciting just such a witty and acerbic response in verse. The story emphasizes Nicholas's liminal status, neither fully in nor fully out of society. It also underlines the musical and performative skills that enabled him to compensate for this estrangement, by becoming partially, in some senses, the greatest keening woman of all (Ó hÓgáin 1980). This is, therefore, no rose-coloured portrayal of Nicholas Walsh's life. Not everyone accepted his difference, and his impoverished state left him vulnerable to ridicule and practical jokes. Despite his fee of an “old guinea”, mentioned above, he was apparently a nomad. His skill in Latin, prayer, genealogy, song, however, and above all his combination of those abilities at a high and deeply appreciated level of lament performance, meant that Nicholas had a position in society and that he was sought after for those skills. He conforms almost exactly to Alan Merriam's observation that musicians seem, across a number of societies, to enjoy simultaneously both high importance and low status (1964: 137).

Traditional song and music today have come through the cultural nationalism of the late nineteenth-century. As such, they have been subject to an agenda where “culture cannot be seen as disinterested and autonomous, but is openly subordinated to the political projects of the nationalist movement” (Lloyd 2011: 92). Postcolonial anxiety about gender, and especially a resistance to the trope of the feminized colonial male subject, contributed to a movement in which “the project of remasculinization” (Lloyd 2011: 100) became central, one extremely doctrinaire regarding heteronormative gender identity. Stiofán Ó Cadhla has also argued that the picture we often get of folklore and folk tradition is a colonial category conditioned by the myriad range of –

isms imposed on it by academic discourse, to the extent that only certain aspects of it are highlighted and that these are often seen through a conservative cultural nationalistic lens (2007, 2011: 12).

By highlighting Nicholas Walsh's case, I intend to bring the topic into focus and to point out that such identities existed and could be accommodated, providing us with precedents for our own engagement as traditional singers and musicians with similar identities in our current lives.

Queering Song: Some Notable Examples

Staying with the theme of keening, I want to turn now to a contemporary example of what I regard as the persistence, or repurposing, of keening in a modern vein. This concerns the celebrated writer Nuala O'Faolain (1940-2008), academic, filmmaker, journalist, biographer, memoir and novel writer. A significant presence in Irish public life, her two memoirs *Are You Somebody? The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman* (1996) and *Almost There* (2003) became internationally acclaimed bestsellers. While not a woman who is regarded as a traditional singer or musician in the ordinary sense, nevertheless, O'Faolain did engage with singing in her own way. In the sense that she was an Irishwoman who was culturally competent in the culture of the Island, and who more than once declared her interest in traditional Irish language song especially, I regard her as a representative of tradition in the Gadamerian sense that everyone belongs to tradition and that the old always reappears in the new in unexpected ways (1989:295). Like professional keening women of the eighteenth century, Nuala O'Faolain, also, in some senses, occupied the role of a professional grief therapist in a completely modern vein. Through the influence of her friend, Seán Mac Réamoinn, she followed the Merriman School gatherings, which strongly featured traditional song and wrote eloquently about how the singing affected her.^v

Her identity challenges neat binary divisions between a traditional organic past and a modern dislocated present. Despite her modernity, or perhaps because of it, her interventions in the open expression of private and personal grief are important. Moreover, her engagement with song, as a means to animate and ease the venting of grief, resonates interestingly with the passages quoted above describing the young man's lament for his brother and Nicholas Walsh's professional skill as a keener. In other ways, O'Faolain resembles Walsh in that she was an openly bisexual woman, whose life and experience did not fit comfortably with societally imposed binary, heteronormative categories. Like Walsh, too, she was a liminal figure who chose the margins rather than conformity.

As a powerful and emotive writer, however, she managed to touch a collective nerve that made her a household name. I am not concerned with her celebrity here, but again, with another's description of a performance she gave, in which, very much like an eighteenth-century professional mourner, I argue, she channeled the grief of people who had come to see and hear her specifically for that purpose. Her performance is well observed in Hugo Hamilton's novel, *Every Single Minute* (2015), a fictionalized account of an actual trip the author took with O'Faolain after her terminal cancer diagnosis in early 2008. The narrator, Liam, accompanies Úna to Berlin for the specific purpose of seeing a production of Verdi's opera *Don Carlo*. The novel describes Liam's friendship with Úna and how, in her public speaking engagements, she worked through the grief and unhappiness of her childhood. In describing one of her appearances in Aspen, Colorado, Liam notes how those present were gripped by her compelling narrative:

You could hear the audience listening. You could feel them getting angry on her behalf, crying with her. You could sense them leaning forward and agreeing with her, that a person, has to have love inside them to receive it, otherwise love would have no reason to come looking for you. You could feel every mother in the place wondering if they had

something to answer for, for some moment that they had withheld love from a child. Everything they had done or not done, without knowing what they had done. Fathers too like myself. That fear of looking back and wondering what could have been done differently, even when it's already too late. She thanked the audience for listening to her life and bowed her head. And then, the big surprise came at the end, she sang a song. As she said herself afterwards, she murdered the song. It was all breathy and full of laughing, full of inhaling and coughing and lifting her voice up, as if she had to stand on a chair to get the notes down. It was a song about emigration. Everybody loved it. She forgot the words halfway through. All you could hear was her breathing up and down, like she was keeping the beat going. Then she remembered the words again and carried on all the way to the end, until her lungs were completely empty. (Hamilton 2015: 34/5).

I want to connect the above passage with the earlier passage about Walsh as a performer. In both, the actors are liminal, marginal characters who, nevertheless, possess great performative abilities to channel people's anxieties and fears, their guilt and their grief in ways that can achieve a fully satisfying catharsis. Walsh seems to provide comfort, whereas Úna, alias Nuala O'Faolain, elicits more contradictory reactions. These responses are, however, consistent with the range of emotions explored in keening (Bourke 2002). Of course, O'Faolain was not poor, nor did she live a hand-to-mouth existence, like Walsh. The modern benefits of advanced education provided this highly gifted individual with a fairly remunerated means of self-support. For all that, however, as her writing clearly shows, she remained an outsider, living away from Ireland for many years. Her performances began through her autobiographical writing, detailing the ways in which she felt excluded and the steps she took to re-engage with Irish culture (1996, 2003). Obsessively circling around family relationships especially, she grieved especially for a younger brother whom she believed had been lost through sufficient lack of parental care. This accounted for her fascination with *Don Carlo*, a story she thought of as similar to the narrative of her own family.

It is important also to note, however, that O'Faolain's modern "keening" is a radically different act to Walsh's in significant ways, not least because of the wide temporal interval that separates both. In the intervening period, as Sullivan points out in the excerpt above, the Great Famine of 1845-50 led directly to the demise of much of traditional culture as mortality, emigration and other factors took their toll, changes documented and regretted by William Wilde for example (1979 [1852]: 10-20). It also cemented a language shift from Irish to English that had been gathering pace even before the catastrophe. Keening was actively suppressed and eventually went underground, part of a colonial project that "required", according to David Lloyd, "the reorganization of Irish space and the disciplining of their mouths" (2011: 59). If I am correct in viewing the description of Úna's performance above as testimony of the revoicing of Irish lament, the account reveals the *bean chaointe* or keening woman as an uncanny revenant, educated and English-speaking, reminding listeners of something that has been suppressed and almost forgotten but that manifests itself as immediately familiar when it reappears (Freud 1953: 219-252).

Nuala O'Faolain, after the publication of her first volume of autobiography, enjoyed a new status which might be characterised as Ireland's celebrity grief therapist. She received volumes of fan mail with tales of harrowing grief that had been borne until then in the cold silence of isolation that modernity seemed to impose. When in 2008, at 68, she was diagnosed with cancer, she appeared live on *The Marion Finucane Show* to tell her story yet again. She spoke emotionally about her life and her late success as a writer, the tears welling up on occasion. Although she did not sing on that occasion she referred to a song, revealing again her reliance on vocal music to capture strong and sometimes unspeakable emotion. She referenced the Irish language song, "Thíos i lár an Ghleanna" (Down in the Middle of the Glen), quoting, actually slightly misquoting, the words of the last line of the refrain, lines that frequently doubled as a title for the song as well, "A Rí na Glóire Gile, tabhair ar ais an oíche aréir". In saying that the

song's lyrics summed up where she stood in relation to her mortality, O'Faolain revoiced this song, adding a new dimension to it for the listeners and for those who subsequently read the published transcript in *The Irish Independent* (O'Faolain 2008). Like her performance in Aspen, Colorado, where her singing helped to release all the tension gathered by her searching and emotional narrative, quoting these lyrics helped to sum up a situation succinctly that, in some ways, defied words alone. The musical and poetic dimension of the song lyrics helped to augment her speech, to add artistic power to a searing, harrowing narrative, that held out no real hope and that still, nevertheless, paradoxically clung to it.

Although this love song, made in the mid-twenties by the well-known Irish language writer, Séamus Ó Grianna (1889-1968) belongs to post-independence Ireland (Ó Laoire 2016), the tropes cleverly deployed in it can be traced back eventually to Moorish Spain, through traditions of courtly and country love poetry widespread in Europe. A male speaker celebrates a single tryst with a miraculous, almost otherworldly, woman of incredible beauty, longing for a second meeting but knowing that it will not happen. It combines traits of several love song types as detailed by Seán Ó Tuama. The fact that a woman, Nuala O'Faolain, appropriates the song for her plea of hope against hope is also significant. Because she loved women as well as men, and because the longest and most public relationship she had was with a woman, the song could, credibly, be read as a plea from a female speaker to another female, in effect an expression of lesbian love. There is even a sense in which the beloved female in the song could be a divine manifestation. The ambiguous vagueness of such songs aids and abets such meanings. Conservative critics, eager to emphasize heteronormative aspects of the song corpus, rarely countenance such alternate interpretations. However, her appropriation of it, as a woman who had relationships with women, validates such a reading. The transgressive nature of O'Faolain's written work and its implications for meaning in context must be acknowledged.

This brings me to another song, this time, a love song for a young slender, dark haired man. Called in Irish "An Buachaill Caol Dubh" or "The Dark Slender Boy", there is some debate about its meaning. In the most accepted reading, the individual named in the song is not a human being at all, but the spirit of drink which possesses the poet to such an extent that he is useless for any other purpose. However, another more transgressive reading also exists, as the late Brian Earls has noted:

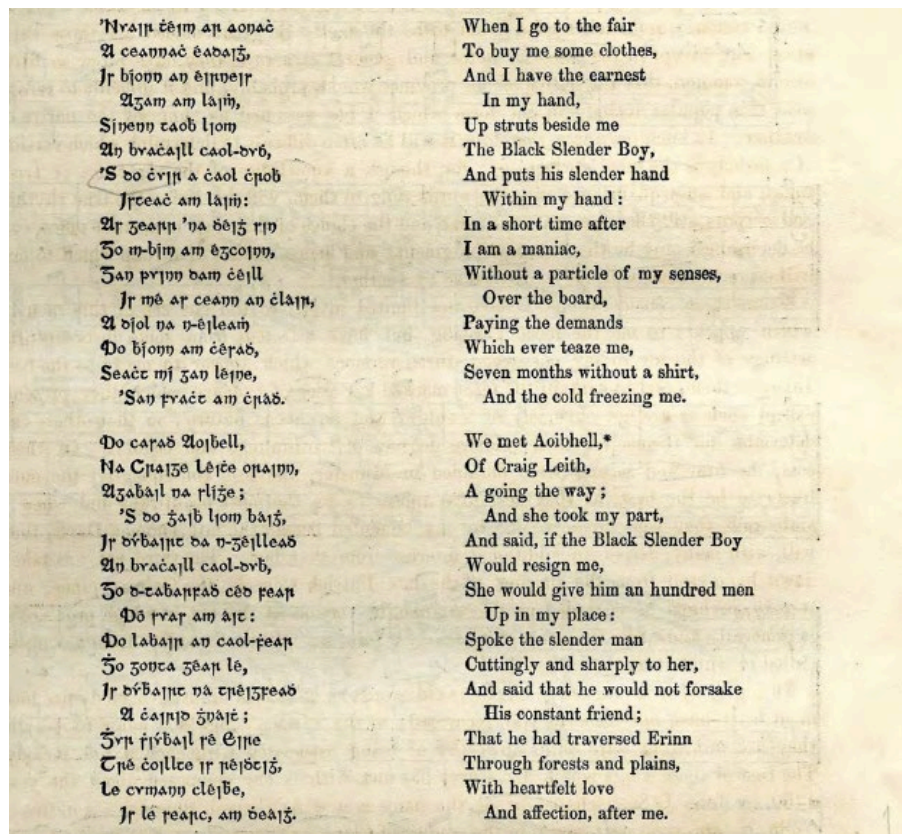
The present writer recalls, sometime in the 1960s, attending a concert by Seán Ó Riada and Ceoltóirí Chualann in the Great Hall of UCD. At one point Ó Riada introduced a piece called if I remember correctly, An Buachaill Caol Dubh (the slim, dark youth), explaining to nervous laughter that, appearances to the contrary, this was not a gay song and that the young man addressed so tenderly was a metaphor for the beer in the drinker's glass. This, of course, was an accurate gloss; An Buachaill Caol Dubh is a drinking and not a love song. Metaphor, however, reveals what is conceivable, in this case that the pleasurable object which is to be consumed can be conceived of as the body of an attractive youth. The setting itself had an erotic dimension, as the male voices we hear in Irish love songs are frequently intent on persuading the girl to accompany them either to the green wood or the ale house. The transformation of beer into a young man's body thus took place in a setting appropriate to such imaginings. (Earls 2009).

Earls sums up the point well. It is sufficient to know that there is a reading of the song that accepts an interpretation expressing homoerotic desire, even if this is a disputed claim. Such a possibility creates an opportunity to explore the song and to acknowledge that there is in the "tradition," however rare and exceptional, a potential recognition of same sex desire. As further evidence, Earls also quotes from a version found in Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin's collection where a visitor is allowed to sleep with "mac fhear an tí" – the son of the man of the house (2003: 17). It may be relevant to point out that, in the thinking of many nationalists, drinking was also a problem of intemperance leading to (Lloyd 2011: 101) "the improper confusion of spaces and practices" (Lloyd 2011: 108). To counter this, these activists refigured drinking from a

form of feminized dependency to a masculinized resistance to hegemonic modes of behaviour, a way to defy colonial stereotypes by revaluing them as marks of difference. In “An Buachaill Caol Dubh” then, the supposedly effeminate weakling in thrall to drink can possibly be repurposed as a masculine figure through the refiguring of drinking to stand for a robust heteronormative, male activity.

Clearly, however, if this was so, the anxiety remained strong enough to warrant a continuing denial.^{vi}

Figure 1: An Buachaill Caol Dubh/The Dark Slender Boy (Petrie 1855: 21).



The opaque variability of many Irish love songs means that they are susceptible to endless contextualized reinterpretation. As a further addendum to the discussion of “An Buachaill Caol Dubh”, another song, “Dónall Óg” [Young Donal], provides additional evidence of being queered. In Micheál Ó Conghaile’s *Sna Fir* (Amongst Men), a gay *bildungsroman*, written in Irish, this archetypal text and its music, representing a jilted female in a prescriptive heteronormative reading, are pressed into service by the main character as a way to grieve for the permanent departure of his own male lover (Ó Siadhail 2010: 150).

The comparisons I have made above are exceptional, a feature that may be used against them. This is an entirely valid objection. It can be justifiably said that I am making too much of these small slivers and that they really do not amount to anything much. However, on the other hand, these scraps of evidence shine a light, however dimly, on other potential narratives, not just of the past but of the future. Referring to Ciarán Carson’s *Last Night’s Fun* (1996), Steve Coleman has claimed that the “model of history that Carson discovers in Irish traditional music is deeply contextual, endlessly flawed, and constantly being patched together from newly discovered fragments” (2012: 170). It is just this model that can open up discussion at the entangled, intersectional nexus of nation, politics, culture, gender and identity. Certainly, because of recent and

ongoing societal change, it is likely such stories will become more acceptable as time goes on. It is useful to remember exceptions in the past that show that these new stories do not constitute a break or the very beginning, and that historical precedents exist that can help validate them. The Ireland we have dreamed of need not only be one that presents rigid binarising models of living, and a look at our musical and song history can help us to accept that reality and even to celebrate it.

Endnotes

ⁱ The phrase 'comely maidens dancing at the crossroads' is widely attributed to De Valera in this oft-quoted speech, although he never actually said these words on that occasion. The phrase symbolises a rather ironic and mocking attitude to the Gaelic Revival's concerns with rural life and puritan morality.

ⁱⁱ The GAA or Gaelic Athletic Association, was founded in 1884 to develop and promote Gaelic games. It has been from the outset a prominent national organization, with multiple branches at local level. Its emphasis has primarily been on male sports run at county, provincial and national levels. Recently, there has been a marked surge in women's sports, drawing large spectator numbers and garnering more media attention than previously.

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^v Cumann Merriman (The Merriman Society), named for the eighteenth century author of the long poem 'Cúirt an Mheán Oíche'/'The Midnight Court,' Brian Merriman. The founders of the society wished to commemorate the Irish language in its culture in the non-puritan spirit that pervades this poem. For further information see: <http://www.merriman.ie/en/an-cumann/>.

^{vi} The homoerotic interpretation depends largely on the two verses printed with the music in Petrie and is probably an unintended consequence of not publishing the rest of the song. When (see Figure 1). I have examined a number of other texts with additional stanzas. these are added, it becomes more challenging to sustain a clearly homoerotic reading. A discussion of those texts would provide material for another article and lies outside the scope of this paper.

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