

Review: *The Masses of Seán and Peadar Ó Riada: Explorations in Vernacular Chant*

John O’Keeffe

Cork, Cork University Press, 2017

ISBN: 9781782052357

The publication of *The Masses of Seán and Peadar Ó Riada: Explorations in Vernacular Chant* represents a landmark achievement, not only with respect to its contribution to liturgical musicology but also in its engagement with and analysis of the Irish song tradition. This book offers a unique insight into the “living oral culture of native traditional song” (1), specifically the song culture of the Cúil Aodha area of the Muscraí Gaeltacht. The ways in which aspects of Irish traditional song and vernacular chant intertwine in the Roman rite mass settings of Seán Ó Riada and that of his son Peadar are explored through this study’s focus on the relationship between music and text, drawing on the areas of Gregorian chant, liturgical musicology, ethnomusicology and Irish traditional song culture in the process. Mass settings of the Ó Riada’s (father and son) have not been subject to a large-scale study previously, and such a detailed analysis of their contents as provided in this book also represents the charting of new territory within Irish musical scholarship.

The opening chapters provide a historical and cultural backdrop to the study as well as an overview of some main theoretical concepts which will be applied to the analysis of both composers’ mass settings in subsequent chapters. Chapter 1, “Tradition and Context”, guides the reader through Seán Ó Riada’s first interactions with the Vatican II instruction *Musicae sacrae* at Glenstal Abbey in 1968, which sought to integrate vernacular languages and native music traditions into the Roman liturgy, particularly through the practice of Gregorian chant. The remainder of the chapter also introduces the cultural context of traditional song specifically from within the Cúil Aodha Gaeltacht, as well as recent definitions of chant and orality, thus paving the way for the subsequent chapter, “Words and Music”, in which such topics are discussed in more detail. This next section provides the overall theoretical grounding for the book in its discussion of the relationship between words and music with respect to liturgical composition (in particular modes, models and motifs), Irish traditional and medieval song, and orality.

Two key theoretical standpoints emerge from this interdisciplinary approach to the relationship between words and music. Firstly, this study takes a broader view of traditional song and challenges limited understandings which lend too much weight to “the fixed nature of pre-existing melodic models” (29). It demonstrates, by way of numerous historical examples, traditional melody’s “inherent and inherited flexibility and its ability to accommodate itself to various textual requirements” (29) as well as its aptitude, like other orally based folk song and chant traditions, to generate equally flexible formulae/motifs which enable wide ranging variation and creativity within its performance and composition. Secondly, the author asserts that the relationship between words (text) and music is determined by relationships of number, that is to say that the “numerical givenness (e.g. syllabic, accentual, linear etc.) of prescribed liturgical and devotional texts” (40) has the capacity to bring words and melody in parallel with each other. While such a concept is difficult to put into words, the author successfully illustrates and grounds this relationship through historical and more recent descriptions provided by musicians and scholars of Irish traditional song, as well as referring extensively to the work of medieval music and literature specialist John Stevens. This idea in particular enables the exploration of the interconnectedness of monophonic traditions of chant and Irish traditional song in vernacular mass settings, without having to address extra-musical issues of meaning (particularly those of a cultural and political nature) associated with the Irish language in a national context. Also notable is the vast range of literature and sources on Irish traditional song engaged with

throughout this chapter and during the course of the book. Such engagement highlights the importance of this study in advancing scholarship on Irish traditional song with respect to formal musical analysis, given that most primary texts on such matters are now at least thirty years old.

Two additional chapters on the content of Seán Ó Riada's mass settings, *Ceol an Aifrinn* (1968) and *Aifreann 2* (1969). Both works are meticulously analysed, and seamlessly blend a knowledge of both Gregorian and vernacular chant with Irish traditional song, demonstrating clearly the theoretical concepts outlined within the previous chapters. However, it is Peadar Ó Riada's *Aifreann Eoin na Croise* (1990) which provides the main focus of the study, with two full chapters devoted to its musical analysis. Similarities in the musical and compositional developments and models employed in all three mass settings are considered from the outset of this section. A case for the progressive nature of *Aifreann Eoin na Croise* is also put forward, and the ways in which Peadar Ó Riada has developed the musical language created by his father within the first two mass settings is demonstrated with a clear use of musical examples. In particular, much of the focus of these chapters surrounds the innovative use of motifs and motivic development within the work, which forges stronger links between the "native cultural tradition of song" (256) and vernacular chant. Throughout the course of Chapter 6, the author discusses how the "characteristic melodic aesthetic of Irish traditional song which governs Ó Riada's compositional approach" (190) and orally based compositional devices commonly used in chant such as centonisation, thrift and textual accent/syntax are interwoven within various sections of the mass, once again highlighting the central importance of the relationship between words and music. The level of detail in relation to the musical analysis of *Aifreann Eoin na Croise* is striking, aided by the author's own updated version of the score based predominantly on a recording of the first performance, in addition to his renderings of the sung solo illustrations of the various mass movements on the accompanying CD.

The final chapter focuses on how the compositional developments uncovered in the Ó Riada masses, and in particular in *Aifreann Eoin na Croise*, might be mapped onto contemporary vernacular chant within an Irish context, discussing the monophonic settings of other contemporary composers such as Ronan McDonagh, Fintan O'Carroll and Seirse Bodley in the process. The second part of this section provides an example of the live process of liturgical oral composition, describing a public seminar given by Peadar Ó Riada in Cúil Aodha in 2006 in which he composed music for a liturgical text in English provided from the floor. This live process, according to the author, expressed Peadar Ó Riada's "singular confidence in the ability of the native tradition (through his intimate contact with it) to provide what would be required for a worthy and coherent composition" (254). This sentiment is echoed in the analysis and discussion of the three Ó Riada mass settings throughout the book.

The ethnomusicological content of this study and its adept use of interview content (particularly in the final chapter) as well as relevant personal anecdotes is subtly woven into the fabric of its main argument throughout. Such examples facilitate reader engagement and ensure that this theoretically rich and analytically dense study flows effortlessly across its various sections. The real strength of this publication however, lies in its holistic treatment of orally derived monophonic song traditions from both European and Irish cultural contexts through the exploration of the fundamental relationship between music and words. The author's ability to locate the intersections of such a wide range of historical musical developments within the three Ó Riada mass settings is impressive. *The Masses of Seán and Peadar Ó Riada: Explorations in Vernacular Chant* is also remarkable in its progressive reconceptualisation of vernacular chant based on a unique combination of expert knowledge and experience of the author in both the fields of liturgical music and Irish traditional song culture. It is a pioneering and creative work which offers a significant scholarly contribution to the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology in Ireland.

Stephanie Ford
Maynooth University

References

Stevens, John (1986) *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama, 1050-1350*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.