The Purity of Irish Music - Some 19th Century Attitudes

The rebellion of 1798 in County Wexford, is interesting as a case of what we might call a pre-modern rebellion, since it shares elements of the primitive rebellion and also of modern nationalism. One can follow the development of attitudes to the rebellion during the following century: in other words how it gradually became a key element in the historical myths of the two factions in Irish politics, myths which permeated Irish life and politics to a remarkable extent. The Loyalist version of the rebellion demonstrated the bestial savagery of the Irish peasant, his superstitiousness, his susceptibility to agitators, and his entire unsuitability for self-government. The Nationalist version emphasised the brutal tyranny of alien rule, the simple bravery of the rebels, and the national aspirations of their cause, other aspects of the cause being pruned. Loyalists emphasised religious conflict; Nationalists minimised it.

Now since it is the case that, in the absence of most modern communications media, song is one of the most effective methods of disseminating opinions and asserting values, and since it is also the case that a large proportion of our most interesting information on the rebellion is in the form of songs (whether contemporary or later), then these political songs are clearly of great interest. Perhaps even more interesting are attitudes to the songs, and indeed to traditional music in general.

The aspect which I particularly wish to elucidate here is that of the models and preconceptions of some of the most eminent figures concerned with Irish traditional music in the nineteenth century. Some of these people were collectors; some were concerned to directly exploit Irish music for particular ends other than mere scholarship. All of them were upper middle-class nationalists, and most of them were Protestants. These circumstances coloured their findings and opinions to a large and interesting extent.

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Nineteenth-century Ireland possessed, in effect, two parallel traditions of vernacular literature, apart from the complicating factor of its two languages. These traditions should not be seen as mutually exclusive - they cross-fertilised one another extensively - but the distinction is a useful convention, and helps to explain the attitudes of the figures mentioned below. One tradition was largely rural-based; some of its songs were in Irish, but English was gradually encroaching. The performers of this tradition were mainly peasants, and their songs and music were transmitted by oral means. Repertoires were relatively constant, and songs were not acquired at any great rate, so that the subjects of the songs remained the same over sizeable periods of time.

The other tradition was largely urban-based, in Dublin and Cork, although it influenced the whole country. It was, as far as is known, restricted to English, and the nucleus of its performers were the urban working class. Most vital of all, the songs were largely transmitted by means of printed broadsheets, composed by hacks (for want of a better term) and sold on the streets extremely cheaply. Thousands of these ballads are known; they were a highly volatile and disposable product. After any noteworthy event, the writers and publishers would issue a new ballad with all possible speed, before the story was stale. Favourite subjects were murders, with the criminal's last words on the gallows; battles, "signs of the times", and if news was thin on the ground, reworkings of old material, often some scene from Irish history.

It must again be emphasised that these traditions had no hard and fast division - peasants often sang the broadsides - but the distinction existed, and became the basis of a whole school of thought about traditional music, expressed as dichotomies between urban and rural, ancient and modern, literate and illiterate transmission, and, since the idea of broadsheets had spread from England, native culture and foreign imports, particularly this last as Irish music became a vehicle for nationalism.

I want here to consider attitudes toward Irish music and songs current among their students in the nineteenth century. These attitudes can be correlated with other ideas of the time, and with the position of the folklorists in Irish society. Most students combined academic interest with nationalist aspirations in varying proportions.

The Music Collectors - Bunting and Petrie

Around the mid-18th century Irish music was passing a watershed. The great bards[1] such as Carolan, who played the harp and travelled the country living from their musical skills as they had done for centuries, were on the decline. (Carolan died in 1738). On the other hand, new influences were arriving, both purely musical - Carolan himself was much influenced by Italian classical music - and also in songs. The increase of English over Irish in much of Ireland, and the gradual influx of literacy into the remotest districts was profoundly altering the nature of the songs people enjoyed. I shall return to the point of literacy later.

Thus the old harp tunes were giving way to new dance music such as the reel and hornpipe, played on the fiddle and the flute, whose volume, portability, and lack of complexity made them highly suitable for dance music, and the old Irish songs transmitted orally were being replaced by over wide areas by Anglo-Irish songs, often disseminated by the printed broadsheet.

It is significant that one of the first episodes in the scholarly discovery of traditional music was organised by Protestant gentlemen in Belfast, those who were radical in the English nineteenth-century sense as well as nationalist: for nationalism in Ireland developed first among the Protestant bourgeoisie and skilled artisans of Ulster. It is also significant that it amounted to a salvage job on the harpers of Ireland. In 1792 these gentlemen organised the Belfast Festival of Harpers, with an explicitly nationalist purpose, and employed a young man named Edward Bunting to note down as many tunes as possible from the mainly very old men who came to play.[2] They specifically instructed Bunting to take down the tunes precisely as they were played, without addition or alteration, but there we meet with the first example of the improving spirit which infused nineteenth-century collecting.

Bunting indubitably admired traditional music - he expended much time and effort on collecting it - and we are much indebted to him for rescuing a vanishing tradition. Yet, both in the case of the Festival tunes and the ones he collected later, not only did he publish his tunes with a piano accompaniment, thus imposing a harmonic system on them which did not necessarily suit them, he also, despite his instructions, altered the melodies to make them fit the normal scales of art music, rather than the modes which characterise Irish music - a Procrustean bed of harmony. We know this because his information on the tuning system of the harpers he studied shows that they could simply not have played some of the tunes he attributed to them; their accidentals are too numerous. Moreover, Bunting transcribed into outlandish keys such

as F minor tunes which the harper played on a C and G instrument.

This conviction that the music had to be improved by its collector, rather than merely transmitted, took most of the century to expire. It means, in effect, that the music is translated from one system of notes to another, and its whole syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships are altered. In imposing any system of harmony on Irish music, one almost inevitably imposes one's preconceptions, since most Irish music moves in powerful single lines, as in dance music, or in drifting tortuous lines, as in slow airs, where a sudden unexpected note may surprise the listener's harmonic sense.

Bunting also published some of his airs as songs, with texts composed specially by various people, although he was not particularly eager to note down texts when he was actually collecting - he preferred to concentrate on the melodies. These publications are a clear attempt to blend modern sentiments and styles on to just so much of a past, traditional style as to ensure that the new elements benefitted from the authority and charisma of a distinctively Irish past. The result was to become known as National Music.

What is particularly significant is a sidelight on Bunting's reasons for altering the tunes: although he never actually admitted altering them, it seems certain that this is why he did it. He believed that the more ancient the tune, the easier it was for him to harmonise on the piano, and that therefore ease of harmonisation was indicative of ancient origin, and as he put it, "purity"[3]. Then all the curiosities of modes, all those melodies most distinctive to Irish music, were modern presumably, degenerate accretions obscuring and perverting the purity of the ancient music, and one was justified in attempting to strip it away. Thus:

> "... the most ancient tunes were the most perfect, admitting of the addition of a Bass with more facility than such as were less ancient."
>
> (Bunting, p. ii)

Since Bunting has already said that the tunes are of indeterminate age, although ancient, it is clear that this addition of basses is his only criterion for determining their relative ages; the argument is thus circular

His reason for asserting this is his belief that the ancient composers knew all about harmony, and intended it to be used in their tunes. In this statement we can perceive a Dark Ages Theory as well as a piece of ethnocentricity: since the harmonic systems of modern artifice are to be preferred to those in use among the common people, and since the common people are supposed to have debased the music they play, then the ancients must have understood modern harmony, and their descendants have forgotten it.[4]

Bunting constantly refers to "pure" or "unalloyed" tunes, which he is attempting to separate from the dross about them. Thus he has omitted one tune by Carolan from his first book of tunes, a tune called "Bridget Cruise", on the grounds that "... (it) was either originally imperfect, or the copy procured of it so corrupt. that a Bass could not be adopted to it."[5] Note the idea that it might have been imperfect the way Carolan wrote it, that a composer could get things wrong.

Another assertion on the nature of music was that musicians never changed the tunes they played (presumably the debasement occurred in transmission), and that harpers everywhere played the same tune in

exactly the same way[6]. Only Bunting's preconceptions can have caused him to do this, since he collected in several districts of Ireland, and the people who played for him almost certainly had widely different styles and treatments. A contributory factor may have been his habit, attested by several writers, of merely jotting down a tune in very cursory fashion when actually collecting it, and making a fair copy later, partially from memory.

The next great collector of words and melodies was George Petrie, an officer of the Irish Ordnance Survey, whose first collection appeared in 1851, and whose work, due to lack of money, continued to be published in bits and pieces over the next forty years or so. He had been a close friend and admirer of Bunting, whose collections he contributed to, although he was by no means blind to the latter's shortcomings, and in particular his (Petrie thought) eccentric habits of reconstructing tunes from jottings and memory, and of only bothering to collect one version of each tune, on the grounds that they were all the same. Petrie deplored this lack of systematic collecting technique, and himself collected large quantities of variants for comparative study. His stated motives for doing this however, are revealing for the light they shed on the ideas and models on which Petrie's collection was based.

Petrie's reason for collecting variants is, he writes, to establish "better versions" of a tune; more, it is for "testing (the) accuracy" of versions he already has.[7] Clearly, in Petrie's mind there are not a number of versions, all of equal validity and interest, to be catalogued; there is an ideal, correct version, of which all others are bastardisations or pale imitations, of no interest except insofar as they reflect or conform to the ideal version, or help in its construction or reconstruction. The ideal, the Ur-Text is of course the collector's construct.

Petrie also criticised Bunting's habit of collecting tunes mainly from harpers (Bunting, presumably, believed that tunes played on the harp would reflect the antiquity of the instrument, and did not collect any other sort of tunes). Petrie explicitly states that instrumentalists are not to be trusted as bearers of tunes, and that the only reliable way for the student to collect correct tunes is from singers, whose words, by the necessity of preserving the sense, keep them to the tune and discourage variation and improvisation.[8] Singers are thus the guardians of "purity" and "authenticity".[9] Instrumental players, on the other hand, cause their tunes to "assume a new and unfixed character, varying with the caprices of each unskilled performer, who, unshackled by any of the restraints imposed on the singer... (by the words)... thinks only of exhibiting, and gaining applause for, his own powers of invention and execution, by the absurd indulgence of barbarous licences and conventionalities, destructive not only of their simpler and finer song qualities, but often rendering even their essential feature undeterminable with any degree of certainty."[10]

There are many key words in this passage from Petrie's introduction to his collection: the blanket condemnation of "unskilled", and the gibes at the variations in performance of the music: the "absurd indulgences" of decorations are inseparable from most Irish music, and to divide a performance into "tune" and "decoration" is a futile exercise, an imposition of unsuitable categories.

The key concept, however, is that embodied in the words "simpler and finer". Clearly Petrie means the two words to mean much the same thing, and the implications are evidently that a older, and more worthy tradition is, due to its own restraint, modesty and quiet tastefulness

being overwhelmed by a flood of "barbarous", cheap, flashy rubbish tacked on to its "essential features" in such a way as to leave those features accessible only to the student prepared to ruthlessly strip away the undergrowth. The artists, in short, are destroying the traditions of their art, as defined by the artistically-minded collectors. The brash materialism and showiness of the nineteenth century has swamped a noble past: the savages actually prefer khaki shorts and Coca-Cola, much as the anthropologists might wish that they would not ape modernity.

This, of course, is bound up with the evolutionist doctrine of survivals, fragments of an older culture which the student may extract in rudimentary form from present-day phenomena. (It is of course much earlier than the period normally thought of as classic evolutionist country). However, whereas most of the "survivals" which evolutionist theory postulates are more or less "savage" or "superstitious", the sort of rubbish with which no reasonable man would encumber himself, the "survivals" which observers found in Irish music are roses among thorns: they are gems which it is of interest and artistic value to preserve from the encroachments of modern trash. The reconstructed savages are being extolled, not vilified, and, although the collectors do not state this as an aim, it is nonetheless clear that their material was intended as part of a cultural heritage. Moreover, a putative heritage is being hammered together by a middle-class intelligentsia in preference to the heritage perceived by the people who actually are the bearers of it, who are being exhorted to share the same sort of aspirations as the intellectuals.

It is not for nothing that the language of abuse which Irish nineteenth-century intellectuals and nationalists poured on to the contemporary music and song of the Irish common people coincides with the language of racial debasement and defilement. Irish nationalism was attempting, as it saw itself, to cast off the trammels of the present, largely imported from England, and to reassert a distinctively Irish culture, which would necessarily hark back to an idealised past far enough back in time to escape the effects of the English conquest. The process of asserting and assembling this culture would clearly involve a search for survivals from a simpler, idyllic, older Ireland - a search which would culminate, by the end of the century, in the foundation of the Gaelic League, the revival of the Irish language, and the development of the Gaelic Athletic Association, who all, successfully, revived or rather reconstructed an Irish tradition for political purposes. The movement involved Irish national identity in a struggle for "purity", freedom from foreign influence, and freedom from the apparent inevitability of modernisation, a struggle which continues now, and which is the strength and the weakness of all such movements in Ireland.

So the great nineteenth century collectors pursued their search for "the stamp of unsullied purity" in music, the echo of the genuine, noble, old Ireland. Their aims were largely antiquarian and artistic, although I hope I have shown that they were not entirely so. They were concerned to preserve for posterity something which they felt was worthwhile, and which seemed to be in decay. They hoped to play a part in an Irish reawakening, but they aimed basically to be transmitters of Irish music, and since this view coincides with that of modern collectors and students, they are honoured despite their faults.

The Assimilators - Moore and Young Ireland

What, then of those whose active intention was to use old Irish music, or at least their conception of it, as part of a new music; to

graft on new words, piano arrangements and the like quite deliberately, in an avowedly nationalist attempt to revitalise Irish music and promulgate nationalism by a process of cross-breeding?

After all, the political effects and influence of songs were clear; as Allingham put it:

> "Does that fine gendarmerie of ours, the constabulary, never intermeddle with crime in its rarefied or gaseous form of songs"[12]

The earliest, and perhaps the most notable, of those who utilised songs in this way was Thomas Moore, and his lead was largely followed by the Young Ireland movement of the 1840's and 50's. These people were roused to action largely by political motives, coupled with the view that the current songs of the Irish were poor stuff: these songs were, they felt, failing in the duties of a nation's music, failing to reflect the national character adequately, and failing above all to provide a spur to action, towards asserting Irish identity. They were sufficiently pragmatic to write their songs in English, to a wider audience, but their chief stumbling-block was always their ambiguous attitude to the class of society they were supposed to be aiming at. Moore, at least, had very few qualms: he wrote explicitly for his own upper middle class, for pianos in drawing rooms, and his was a heritage which the Young Irelanders despite their pretensions to mass appeal, were never able to shake off completely.

The attitude of those who applauded the possibilities, and to a lesser extent, the sentiments of popular song (such as Barry deploring the "clannish"nature of old Irish song,[13] but hesitated at the form, was paralleled by those serious musicians who enjoyed Irish music, but regarded it as something wild, to be tamed by Art, and could afford to patronise their sources, reworking them in a consciously literate manner. Thus Moore on his difficulties:

> "Another difficulty (which is, however, purely mechanical) arises from the irregular structure of many of (these) airs, and the lawless kind of metre which it will in consequence be necessary to adapt to them... That beautiful Air, "The Twisting of the Rope"... is one of those wild, sentimental rakes, which it will not be very easy to tie down in sober wedlock with Poetry."[14]

This precise combination, patronising, reverent and patriotic all at once, is caught perfectly by Power:[15]

> "W. Power trusts he will not be thought presumptuous in saying, that he feels proud, as an Irishman, in even the very subordinate share which he can claim, in promoting a Work so creditable to the talents of the country - a Work, which, from the spirit of nationality it breathes, will do more, he is convinced, towards liberalising the feeling of society, and producing that brotherhood of sentiment which it is so much our interest to cherish, than could ever be effected by the arguments of wise, but uninteresting, politicians... And the chief corruptions, of which we have to complain arise from the unskilful performance of our own itinerant musicians, from whom, too frequently the airs are noted down, encumbered by their tasteless decorations and responsible for all their ignorant anomalies. Though it be sometimes impossible to trace the original strain, yet, in most of them, 'aura per ramas aura refulget', the pure gold of the melody shines through the ungraceful foliage which surrounds it, and the most delicate and difficult duty of a compiler is to endeavour, as much as possible, by retrenching these inelegant superfluities, and collating the various

methods of playing or singing each air, to restore the regularity of its form, and the chaste simplicity of its character."

Note the mixture: improvement of the minds and sentiments of the middle classes, and criticism of the very people who the songs were collected from as debasers. This is the idea of folk purity prior to foreign influence at work, of a chaste simple peasantry, innocent in its contentment, in Holland's words; "the purest native Irish... (lived) self-contained and self-contented, a peaceful pious unrepining race, using and enjoying the land without let or hindrance."

Moore's songs, although quite successful with the upper layers of society, failed to penetrate any lower. The Young Ireland movement, and its organ The Nation, were set up in the 1840's in conscious imitation of the Young Italy movement. They consisted or more or less youthful and earnest Dublin intellectuals, with ideals of a free and nationally minded Ireland, and were anxious to communicate not only with their own class, but also with the working classes, and especially the peasants. Dublin and Cork and their street ballads needed re-attuning to the country roots: so "the mass of the street songs make no pretence to being true to Ireland; but only to the purlieus of Cork and Dublin."[16] Duffy, in his collection, also refers to "the vulgar error of treating street ballads as the national minstrelsy of Ireland",[17] and gives them credit only for being marginally preferable to the utterly debauched ballads sung by the English common people.[18]

The tone of Victorian moral improvement is never far from Young Ireland's efforts to produce a literature "chastened by modern art, but... indigenous, and... marked with a distinct native character"[19] nor in their suggestions that the study of elocution should accompany ballad study.[20]

Despite the considerable influence Young Ireland had on the intellectual life of Ireland, they never acquired the wider influence dreamed of by such as Barry when he wrote "If men able to write, will fling themselves gallantly and faithfully on the work we have here plotted for them, we shall soon have Fair and Theatre, Concert and Drawing-room, Road and Shop, echoing with Songs bringing home Love, Courage and Patriotism to every heart."[21] The great mass of Irish people obstinately refused to draw their morals in the form sketched out for their consumption, and clung to their ballads. A very few of the large body of National Songs entered into popular tradition, and are still sung today; the majority foundered without trace. As Duffy himself said of the efforts of earlier writers, they were "too pedantic to be familiar... too cold to be impressive."[22]

Attempts were made to rationalise this failure, but the true reason was that nationalist writers found it hard to sacrifice their ideals of purity and courage in favour of (they felt) a rather shabby compromise which might ensure popular success: nationalism does not deal in compromises. They were unable and unwilling to "write down" to popular taste and thus only occasionally did they produce a really successful song.

These attempts to study a popular literature and to alter and exploit it at the same time are of considerable interest, both as anthropological attitudes of their time and as an attempt by one political group to draw on the cultural heritage of another in order to construct for itself an authority of antiquity, a national heritage which is in part manufactured. The middle class students applied their

own artistic criteria to an alien phenomenon without any sociological sensitivity. It is clear that the noble wreck of a great artistic tradition which they purported to be rescuing was a construct, whose roots lay partly in their romantic concept of an ideal, pre-industrial Irish world, whose simplicity and health had been perverted through foreign influence, and partly in their impatience with the common people who seemed content to ignore what the intellectuals saw as the reality of history, and historical inevitability. The images of purity and degradation which pervaded their writings were an attempt to express this symbolically, and have clear links with the racial purity theories of the time, and may be seen as an aspect of Celticism, erected in response to English racialist images of a near -simian Paddy.[23] The struggles of this school of thought to assert the past, to try and tease out its survivals and strip off the imported impurities, is summed up by Hyde, writing in the 1890's.

"To the members of the Gaelic League, the only body in Ireland which appears to realise that Ireland has a past, has a literature, and the only body in Ireland which seeks to render the present a rational continuation of the past, I dedicate this attempt at a review of that literature which despite its present neglected position, they feel and know to be a true possession of national importance."[24]

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That this question of purity, of a purging of the roots, is by no means a dead issue can readily be shown. Last year (i.e. 1975) the organisers of the Fleadhanna Ceol, the great contests where the champion Irish musicians are selected, announced that competitors would no longer be permitted to perform pieces by Carolan in the contests. Their reason for this decision was that they considered Carolan's experiments and flirtations with classical Italian music to have compromised the Irishness of his compositions, which were thus unsuitable for a purely Irish cultural event, however excellent they might be musically, since Irish music should be independent of foreign imports. (This ignores the fact that a very sizeable proportion of Irish traditional music, has ultimately, foreign origins.) Carolan's pieces do indeed bear extensive traces of his cosmopolitan interests; the foreign influence, however, never swamps the Irish, and his works are a fascinating piece of dynamic integration for two styles. But he certainly slid a toe over the boundary of demarcation between native and foreign music; as Professor Douglas might say, a dangerous game, and he has been duly sent off the field.

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Notes

1. "Bard" is used not in the Welsh sense, but in the sense of a travelling musician depending on patronage wherever he went.

2. There had been harp festivals before 1792, mainly in the South, but they had not been on such a scale as the Belfast one, nor does a collector seem to have been present.

3. Bunting, p. i.

4. Ibid. p. ii.

5. Ibid. p. iii.

6. Ibid. p. ii.

7. Petrie, p. ix.

8. This is not true anyway. Singers improvise and decorate just as much as instrumentalists.

9. Petrie, p. x.

10. Ibid. pp. x-xi.

11. Ibid. p. xi.

12. Allingham p. 362.

13. Barry, pp. 34-5.

14. Moore, pp. 195-6.

15. W. Power's Advertisement to the Third Number of Moore's Melodies, pp. 197-8.

16. Duffy, p. xv.

17. Ibid. p. xiv.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid. p. xi.

20. Ibid. p. xiiv.

21. Barry, p. 43.

22. Duffy, p. xviii.

23. See Curtis, 1971.

24. Hyde, Dedication.

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