

**Experimental workshops comparing the Musical Performance  
of Vernacular Poetry in Medieval Wales, Ireland and Scotland  
September 2008–December 2009**

PI: Dr Sally Harper, School of Music, Bangor University

CI: Professor Dafydd Johnston, Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic  
Studies, Aberystwyth

## **1 Description of Workshop Activities and Themes**

These two workshops formed part of a practice-led project focusing on the performance of medieval vernacular bardic poetry in Wales, Ireland and Scotland. Although our modern appreciation of such poetry is now largely dependent on silent reading direct from the page, there is plentiful evidence from all three regions that this was originally a 'sung' poetry whose impact was greatly heightened by public delivery. The main objective of the workshops was therefore to explore that lost aural dimension through a series of experimental performances attempting restoration of a valid 'song' – whether unpitched heightened speech, pitched declamation, quasi-ecclesiastical chant, or full-blown melody with or without some form of accompaniment. Contributing performers explored very different modes of delivery, one group matching Gaelic heroic ballad texts to traditional melodies associated with the Ossianic lays; another declaiming Welsh strict-metre *cywyddau* to the rhythmic beating of a staff. More than 35 speculative performances were offered during the course of the workshops, each one prepared and evaluated within a historically-informed context, and drawing on the varied expertise of performers, literary scholars and musicologists from all three regions.

Although the modest funding available enabled organization of only two workshops (three would have been ideal), this project greatly exceeded expectations. Each region received equal emphasis and repertoires were discussed in tandem where appropriate. Workshop 1 (Edinburgh) focused on the closely integrated Classical Gaelic verse of Scotland and Ireland, and Workshop 2 (Bangor) on the strict-metre *canu caeth* of medieval Wales, with continuing reference to Ireland. The second workshop also included a 'contemporary' session addressing the problems of strict-metre setting from a more creative standpoint: a young Welsh-speaking poet and composer collaborated with a traditional harpist to explore viable modes of text setting, resulting in an entirely new work. Both workshops followed a broadly identical structure. Each performance was framed by contextual and methodological discussion and followed by a shared evaluation session addressing the effectiveness and 'authenticity' of the chosen mode of delivery. A more general discussion summarizing generic issues and themes concluded the workshop itself and a related evening recital followed.

All participating performers and speakers (including collaborative pairs or teams) received the project brief several months ahead to enable them to select and prepare materials. Other invited participants also considered the central research issues and themes prior to attending and a list of questions was circulated at the beginning of each workshop to facilitate focused discussion (Appendix 1, attached). The limited time available inevitably led to some 'unfinished business', but a follow-up event is provisionally scheduled for 2011.

The partnership between practitioners and scholars was absolutely central to the success of this project as a whole. The readiness of all of the performers (especially the traditional singers and instrumentalists) to engage with those more used to analysing bardic poetry as literary text or as historical evidence has already enabled us to look at the strict-metre repertory afresh. Public interest in both events was also heartening. Observers included those with interests in traditional and folk repertoires, amateur harpists, students and those with more general interests in bardic poetry. The legacy of the project will be significant, thanks not only to the series of 35 audio-visual clips entitled 'Voicing the Verse' / *Y Gerdd ar Gân*, now downloadable via the project website, but also a series of follow-up articles for *Studia Celtica* and new translations of many of the poems performed.

## 2 People and Organizations involved

In accordance with budgetary constrictions each workshop was attended by around 25 active participants and a handful of observers (including students and members of the public). Practitioners and scholars were about equally matched on both occasions. More people joined us for the recitals, with around 80 present during the evening at Bangor.

**Workshop 1** (4 April 2009), convened by Dr Margaret Mackay in consultation with the PI, was held at the School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University. The focus throughout was the organically-related Classical Gaelic verse of Scotland and Ireland. More than twenty experimental renditions of various poems were witnessed here, falling into four main genres (Gaelic heroic ballads, the *rainn agus amhrán* verse of Ireland, Fenian lays, and formal Irish lament). The workshop was scheduled slightly earlier than originally planned to coincide with the Edinburgh Harp Festival (3–9 April), accommodating performers and/or observers who would otherwise not have been able to attend (notably harpists William Taylor, Simon Chadwick and Paul Dooley). The core team from Edinburgh's School of Celtic Studies (Dr Mackay, Professor William Gillies, and Professor Donald Meek) were joined by PI and CI representing Wales, and three key representatives from Ireland, who each addressed different aspects of Irish verse in the strict metres: Professor Breandán Ó Madagáin (Galway), Dr Lillis O'Laoire (Galway) and Dr Virginia Blankenhorn (Dublin). One doctoral student and two early career researchers, all based at Edinburgh, also attended. Although limitations of space within the School of Scottish Studies precluded invitation of a large audience, the room was ideal for our purposes and the discussion highly

focused. Nineteen audio-visual clips (numbers 17/35–35/35) resulted from this session.

The five 'academic' presenters comprised Prof. Gillies, Prof. Meek, Prof. Ó Madagáin, Dr O'Laoire and Dr Blankenhorn, with the three last also performing their own experimental renditions. The performers 'proper' comprised two traditional singers working with Prof. Meek – Margaret Callan (born in North Uist) and Catriona Garbutt (a native of Benbecula, who rarely visits the mainland) – and the professional harpist Patsy Seddon (currently traditional artist in residence, Edinburgh), working with Dr Blankenhorn. (Distance meant that this last collaboration initially built on exchange of mp3 files). Two other non-academics based in Scotland also made significant individual contributions: harp-historian Simon Chadwick demonstrated the main features of the early Gaelic harp and discussed its potential as an accompanying instrument, and the internationally renowned harpist William Taylor performed an extended piece from the medieval repertory of Welsh *cerdd dant* that survives in the Robert ap Huw manuscript at the evening recital, cementing the relationship between the regions. The piper Allan MacDonald, although unable to attend the workshop in person, also pre-recorded a video on restoring an early Gaelic pibroch song, which was made available for viewing during breaks in the day at both workshops.

*Outline and related audio-visual clips:*

- Sally Harper and Dafydd Johnston  
Introduction to the project: Brief report on current research and review of questions to be addressed
- Virginia Blankenhorn (voice) and Patsy Seddon (harp)  
*Tuar guil, a cholaim, do cheol!* An argument for, and an attempt at, the oral performance of *rainn agus amhrán* verse **Clip 17/35**
- Prof William Gillies  
The musical features of early strict-metre poetry in Scotland and Ireland
- Donald Meek, with traditional singers Margaret Callan and Catriona Garbutt  
From the Era of Ossian to the Age of the iPod: The Transmission and Performance of Gaelic Heroic Ballads **Clips 28/35–32/35**
- Simon Chadwick  
The musical possibilities and limitations of an early Gaelic harp, demonstrating Davy Patton's replica of the 'Queen Mary' instrument **Clips 33/35–34/35**
- Lillis Ó Laoire  
Reclaiming Syllabic Poetry: An Experimental Performance **Clips 18/35–23/35**
- Breandán Ó Madagáin  
Irish lament in syllabic and accented verse **Clips 24/35–27/35**
- Full review and discussion of all sessions followed by evening recital

**Workshop 2** (16 May 2009), convened by Dr Sally Harper (PI), was held in Powis Hall, Bangor University. This was a bilingual event to accommodate Welsh-language participants (with simultaneous translation available throughout). An excellent balance was again achieved between academics (Harper, Johnston), scholar-practitioners (Blankenhorn, Salisbury, ap Siôn, Greenhill) and performers (Dooley and other members of Project Datgeiniaeth). Two ‘new’ collaborating groups (not named in the original project proposal) were able to develop distinct themes in a highly significant way: the Welsh-language poet and young career researcher Eurig Salisbury collaborated with Minimalist composer/musicologist Pwyll ap Siôn and professional harpist Gwenan Gibbard on a series of creative settings, and the group ‘Datgeiniaeth’ made its debut appearance under the direction of independent scholar Peter Greenhill, generating a great deal of interest and enthusiasm, not least from the evening audience. The event also attracted a number of eminent scholars who work on various aspects of Welsh strict-metre poetry (among them Professor Gruffydd Aled Williams, Professor Peredur Lynch, Daniel Huws and Tony Conran). Eighteen audio-visual clips (numbers 1/35–18/35) resulted from this session.

Limitations of funding and competing commitments enabled less continuity of personnel between the two workshops than originally envisaged. However, Workshop 1 inspired formation of a third new collaboration comprising participant Dr Virginia Blankenhorn and observer Paul Dooley, who used the six-week period prior to the Bangor workshop to prepare two further experimental performance of Irish *dán díreach*. This enabled us to highlight themes common to both Ireland and Wales.

*Outline and related audio-visual clips*

- Sally Harper  
Brief Report on outcomes of workshop 1 (Scotland and Ireland), and its implications for Welsh strict-metre poetry
- Virginia Blankenhorn (voice) and Paul Dooley (harp)  
Revisiting the performance of *dán díreach* **Clips 13/35–16/35**
- Dafydd Johnston  
The *cywydd* metre and *cynganedd*
- Pwyll ap Siôn (composer) and Eurig Salisbury (poet), with Gwenan Gibbard (voice/harp)  
Cyplysu Cerddoriaeth â Barddoniaeth [Matching Music with Poetry] **Clips 9/35–12/35**
- Sally Harper  
The partnership of string and tongue in medieval Wales
- Peter Greenhill (instructor), Gareth Siôn, and Gwilym Morus (all members of Prosiect Datgeiniaeth)  
The Performing of Medieval Bardic Poetry in Practice’ **Clips 1/35–8/35**
- Full review and discussion of all sessions followed by evening recital

### 3 Evaluation of the thematic area through the workshops

Both workshops set out to address the three main research questions outlined in the original proposal: (1) What evidence survives to inform our general understanding of the lost performance practice of each region, and how should it influence any attempted reconstruction? (2) What forms of declamation and accompaniment might be considered viable? (3) How can an informed exchange between (a) scholars and (b) performers further the discussion?

#### 3.1: WORKSHOP 1 (SCOTLAND AND IRELAND)

The research context for Workshop 1 in its entirety was set by **Professor William Gillies** in an impeccably clear summary of the main features of Classical Gaelic *dán díreach* ('strict-metre') poetry common to both Ireland and Scotland from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. (An extended version of his paper entitled 'Music and Gaelic strict-metre poetry', with appendix on Classical Gaelic Metrics, will appear in the next edition of *Studia Celtica*). Prof. Gillies's brief survey of the main historical evidence relating to bardic performance in these two regions – not only the well-known 'iconic' physical descriptions from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries but also some far less familiar poetic and archival references – was followed by a resume of the main features of *dán díreach*, characterized by a required pattern of ornamentation with line length determined purely by fixed syllable count. This syllabic regularity allied with irregular rhythm (lines have a variable number of stresses) defines the central challenge for the performer. While all were in broad agreement that such metrical complexity demanded a hearing in its own right, Prof. Gillies reminded us that the patterning only works successfully when a studiously archaic pronunciation is used (a feature subsequently addressed with care by Virginia Blankenhorn in her renditions of 'Tomhais cia mise' and 'A chláirseach Chnuic Uí Choscaire' for the second workshop, both prepared under the guidance of Prof. Gillies).

**Dr Blankenhorn**, noting that the Irish have always had a great gift for melody, took performance of *rainn agus amhrán* verse for her own case study. This is a composition particular to the Irish tradition where verses in syllabic metre precede a closing stanza in contrasting accentual metre (the *amhrán* verse), which sums up the case and calls for action. In the performance that followed, Patsy Seddon (harp) accompanied Dr Blankenhorn's sung rendition of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century poem in the *rainn agus amhrán* pattern, 'Tuam guil, a cholaim, do cheol' where the first stanzas quickly establish themselves as 'three-rhyme *ranniocht*', and each line of the concluding *amhrán* in accentual metre comprises five stressed syllables, followed by a stressed monosyllable. Two traditional tunes – both apparently of early date – were chosen to reflect the specific qualities of the verse. The opening stanzas were matched to an air associated both with the Fenian lays and a Marian hymn, 'Sciathlúreach Mhuire', while a second air, 'Cathair na Léige' (collected from a Waterford singer, Labhras O'Cadhlagh) was chosen to match the 5.1 pattern of the *amhrán*. Full discussion of this reconstruction and the associated methodology will

appear in Dr Blankenhorn's forthcoming article for the next edition of *Studia Celtica*, 'Observations on the performance of Irish syllabic verse'.

**Professor Donald Meek** focused on another sub-category of the medieval strict-metre repertory, the pan-Gaelic 'heroic ballad' (which has connections with Ireland, Scotland, and Man). Although such ballads are again written in loose forms of the standard metres, their syllabic structure still demonstrates a close relationship to bardic verse, and some of them have survived into the modern era, allied with traditional melodies. (Their preservation is in part due to archival recordings of ballad singers made during the earlier twentieth century and in part to living 'tradition bearers', especially singers from the Scottish Highlands and Islands). Recordings (all made in the early 1950s for the Archive of Traditional Scottish Studies) of four traditional heroic ballads were heard during this session – *Duan na Ceardaich* sung by Kate Mac Donald, *Laoidh Fhraoich* sung by Dugald MacCormick, and *Laoidh Dhiarmaid* and *Am Brón Binn*, both sung by Ceit MacCormick. This last text, a ballad with an Arthurian theme that relates the quest for a beautiful maiden, a series of heroic tasks and the death of the guardian-ogre, took on particular significance. Prof. Meek showed that text and melody are exceptionally widely travelled, with several versions surviving in different localities from different periods. This session made particular impact thanks to the opportunity to experience that 'living' tradition first-hand – *Am Brón Binn* was sung in its entirety in two different versions by **Catriona Garbutt** (pupil of Ceit MacCormick and native of Benbecula), and a third version was sung by one of Catriona's own younger pupils, **Margaret Callan** (from North Uist). *Am Brón Binn* in yet another variant form was used by Lillis O'Laoire (who had himself learned it from Catriona Garbutt) in partnership with a different text during one of the afternoon sessions.

**Dr Lillis O'Laoire** explored similar themes of text-matching, though with specific reference to Ireland rather than Scotland. He worked from the premise that one air might be transferred and used for any number of poems where no melody survives. Most of his experimental renditions again focused on the later Fenian lays and Ossianic ballads (which employ a looser form of *dán*). The text 'Lon Diore An Chairn' (the well known 'Blackbird of Derrycairn') was matched with a free adaptation of *Am Brón Binn* combined with the tune *Duan na Mulligheartaich*. Four other ballads were also heard: 'Laoi na Seilge', set to a melody adapted from *Laoi na Mná Móire* by Seamus O hIghne; 'Guth Gadhair um Chnoc na Rí', to a melody adapted from *Laoidh Fhraoich*; 'Codail beagán beagán beag' to a melody adapted from *Latha Dhan Fhinn i mBeinn Iongnaidh*; and 'Anocht Sgaolild' to a melody adapted from *Latha Dhan Fhinn*. Dr O'Laoire also attempted one earlier text in *dán díreach* – Muireadhach Albanach's renowned lament 'M'anam do sgar riomsa a-raoir', matched here with Ó Comhraí's air for the text 'Sciathlúireach Mhuire' as learned from Professor Breandán Ó Madagáin – the same melody used by Dr Blankenhorn in her own presentation.

**Professor Brendan Ó Madagáin's** own session focused on another sub-genre of syllabic verse – that of Irish lament. It drew on materials recorded in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – a point at which some

graduates of the bardic schools must still have been alive. The nostalgic, learned quality of the elegy (*marbhna*), where the poet might turn to any of the syllabic metres, certainly implies an older style, and in this case the associated music (in the few cases where it survives from oral tradition) sometimes invokes the decorated reciting-note style of liturgical intonation rather than free melodic elaboration. Prof Ó Madagáin demonstrated this with a verse from the lament for Dhonnchadh Mac Carthaigh (1739), sung to its associated tune recorded from a farmer who had learned it 'from older people' in Co. Limerick in 1851, and a lament addressed to Una Bhan (17<sup>th</sup> century), where the associated melody that has survived in living tradition in Connemara also has 'reciting-note' characteristics with descending cadence.

### 3.2 WORKSHOP 2 (WALES WITH IRELAND)

Although Workshop 2 was convened primarily to explore themes specifically relating to Wales, we began with one further attempt to deal with the absence of predictable rhythm in the performance of Irish *dán díreach* – the same challenge faced by anyone attempting to perform strict-metre poetry (*canu caeth*) in Welsh. **Virginia Blankenhorn** and **Paul Dooley** focused on two Classical Gaelic poems in the widely used *deibhidhe* metre, where each stanza comprises four 7-syllable lines arranged in two metrically independent couplets (ab and cd) bound together by a special end-rhyme (stressed syllables rhyming with unstressed syllables). 'A Palmer's Greeting' ('Tomhais cia mise') by the 13<sup>th</sup>-century poet Muireadhach Albanach was declaimed to Paul Dooley's own harp 'measure', created around a simple choral pattern – both performers in this instance proceeding at their own natural pace without 'waiting' for the other at phrase or line endings. This worked surprisingly well. The second poem, 'To a Harp' ('A chláirseach Chnuic Uí Choscaire') by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh (d.1387) was then performed in three different ways (all using Classical pronunciation) – the first a straight unpitched declamation without accompaniment; the second a similar declamation, but with the reciter indicating to the harper-accompanist where the main chords should be placed to match the accents of the verse; the third a melodic rendition, where the text was matched to the same air, 'Sciathlúireach Mhuire' ('Breastplate of Mary'), used twice in the first workshop. Again the harp provided chordal punctuation to match the accents of the verse, as indicated by the singer; again this flexible approach was convincing.

The Welsh session proper opened with a contextual introduction by **Professor Dafydd Johnston** on the strict-metre *cywydd* – essential to an appreciation of the examples heard in the performances that followed. The *cywydd* [*deuair hirion*] was a lively new poetic form that flowered in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and became the staple genre of Welsh strict-metre poets up to the demise of the bardic order in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Constructed from rhymed pairs of 7-syllable lines with an end rhyme falling on stressed and unstressed syllables, it features the ornamental device of *cynganedd*, a sophisticated verbal 'harmony' based on patterns of internal repetition, assonance and alliteration. Prof. Johnston took a ten-line passage from

*Marwnad yr Abad Rhys* (1440/1) by Guto'r Glyn (fl. c.1435–c.1493) to introduce the features of the *cywydd* metre and the four main types of *cynganedd* (*luscg*, *draws*, *groes* and *sain*) associated with it, demonstrating the irregularity and unpredictability of the rhythms. Particular attention was paid to the variable number of beats in each line, as required firstly by the stress-patterns of the *cynganedd*, and secondly by the sense and natural speech-rhythms. Once again, this crystallized neatly the obstacles to be overcome in producing an effective performance.

Although **Dr Pwyll ap Siôn** (composer), **Eurig Salisbury** (poet) and **Gwenan Gibbard** (voice/ harp) were not part of the original project proposal, they were invited to join the investigation to engage with strict-metre setting from a contemporary creative standpoint. This proved invaluable. Rather than pursuing notions of 'authentic' medieval performance, the team set out to recreate the music-poetic conditions under which the match between music and text might have taken place, addressing much broader questions such as Does text or music come first? What influences what? Does 'what we hear' govern 'what we write', or vice versa? Their aim was to explore empirically some of the different ways in which strict-metre verse might be matched with music, evaluating various different methodologies.

Ap Siôn therefore set out to compose music that reflected the formulaic properties of the poetry (especially the different types of *cynganedd*) by drawing on analysis of audio recordings of Salisbury reciting two of his own existing poems – with particular attention to metrical stress, rhythmic patterning and accentual emphases. 'Miri'r Gân ym Mrogynin', a pastiche *cywydd* in relatively 'traditional' style, was then selected as a working model. Here ap Siôn created a series of harmonic/melodic formulae, each providing a musical analogue to the four main categories of *cynganedd* in the poem itself. Initially these formulae were applied rigidly, first to 'Miri'r Gân', and then to a medieval *cywydd* proper – Dafydd ap Gwilym's 'Edifeirwch'. However, this approach was found to have limitations, not least because the ordering of the *cynganedd* types within each poem follows no predictable pattern. The conclusion was that *cynganedd* is not so much driven by rules regulating internal rhyming schemes, but rather evolves by means of such instinctive musical and aural 'rules' as metrical stress and emphasis. A second stage then followed: analysis of the rhythmic and metrical properties of the same recording of 'Miri'r Gân' (focusing on the natural accents of the poet's own reading), leading to a distinct musical setting almost entirely governed by the 'performance' itself. Rather than using harmonic formulae to match the *cynganedd*, this setting was rhapsodic in nature with rhythm and metre following their own instinctual paths. Composer and poet subsequently analysed each composition together before embarking on the final stage of the collaboration, Salisbury responding with a new strict-metre poem, 'Ffrio', in more contemporary style. This aimed to combine the best of both worlds – a limited emphasis on musical formula coupled with greater metrical and rhythmic freedom. The result was deemed to be a highly successful match between words and music that respected the



idiosyncrasies of strict-metre verse, a technique with much potential for future development (not least in relation to contemporary *canu caeth*).

A brief contextual presentation by **Dr Sally Harper** addressed the evidence for poetic accompaniment in medieval Wales. Flexibility emerged as a key feature: itinerant poets evidently accompanied themselves on the harp (at least up to the 14<sup>th</sup> century), although engagement of paid professional declaimers (some self-accompanying, others working alongside independent instrumentalists) seems to have become increasingly common during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Passages concerning professional declaimers in the early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Statute of Gruffudd ap Cynan were analysed, some specifically requiring the declaimer to use a small group of melodies called *prifgeinciau* when declaiming *cywyddau* (recalling a view expressed at the first workshop that declaimers of Classical Gaelic poetry likely depended on a very small group of familiar tunes). Key evidence also emerged from one late redaction of the Statute (1592), which refers to a 'Stick-end Declaimer' (*Datgeiniad Pen Pastwn*), a lesser category of reciter without instrumental skills who would mark his recitation by singing a *cywydd* or *awdl* while beating his staff on the floor.

The group presenting the final workshop session under the direction of their trainer **Peter Greenhill**, employed this very method of stick-declamation, whence their name, **Datgeiniaeth**, derives. Working from the principle that the complex metrics of Welsh poetry serve primarily to entertain the ear and must therefore take flight as highly accessible aural sound-devices, Peter Greenhill's opening presentation considered whether the level of accessibility is indeed sufficient to account for the development and adoption of so many subtly distinct metrics in Welsh bardic poetry. He spent some time discussing the way in which every metre can be distinguished by ear from its closest relatives, and gave an account of how Datgeiniaeth's own performance style has evolved. Essentially this builds on Peter Greenhill's own deduction that most of the medieval Welsh harp repertory surviving in the Robert ap Huw manuscript (c.1613) is united by a single rhythmic and fully mensural scheme, a principle that can also be transferred to poetic performance. In transcription, one digit of the underlying musical 'measure' of many of the Robert ap Huw pieces generally occupies a standard bar of four equal beats, producing a stable rhythmic pattern that can also be used to underpin poetic recitation. Datgeiniaeth works from the premise that syllabic verse in general was delivered in a natural speech rhythm, with no expectation that the syllables should be timed evenly. This entails a simple dovetailing of the basic metrical unit of the verse – defined as the line – and the basic metrical unit of the accompaniment – a 'bar' of four beats. It is argued that this form of matching can accommodate virtually all of the metres irrespective of their syllable count, enabling text and accompaniment to be delivered at a complementary pace. Use of the staff to mark the underlying beats enhances delivery and draws out the sophistication of the metre, which now becomes more audible.

Several performances adopting this approach were witnessed, including the didactic English-language *cywydd* 'My first love was a plover', written

and performed by the poet, writer and broadcaster **Twm Morys**. Other *cywyddau* in very different styles were also heard – the traditional singer **Gwilym Morus** gave a semi-dramatic rendition of Dafydd ap Gwilym's well known 'Trafferth mewn Tafarn' ('Trouble at an Inn'); **Gareth Siôn** performed in darker style Guto'r Glyn's elegy to Llywelyn ab y Moel (1440), and he and Gwilym Morus combined for a duet performance of the extraordinary 'Task *cywydd* to be sung forwards and backwards' of Owain Gwynedd (1567), where each couplet is repeated in reverse. The two halves of Ieuan ap Rhydderch's 'Vaunting Cywydd' were performed in two different ways, the first with the staff; the second replacing it with very simple chordal accompaniment on the lyre – though still following the same rhythmic principle of four 'beats' per line.

#### **4 Key advances in understanding emerging from the discussions**

The immediate inspiration for both of these workshops grew from preliminary work on the performance of Welsh strict-metre poetry undertaken by PI and CI for the AHRC-funded on-line edition of Dafydd ap Gwilym's poetry, *dafyddapgwilym.net*. This drew in part on varied practical experiments undertaken by several other scholars and performers over a fifteen-year period, most of which had turned for inspiration to the music of the Robert ap Huw manuscript (effectively the only source of late medieval Welsh 'bardic' repertory known to survive). In many cases complete pieces from the manuscript were pressed into service as accompaniment, though with varying degrees of success. One of the main problems of this method identified by both performers and audience was the over-complex musical texture: use of elaborate accompaniment (whatever its 'authenticity') tends to compete with the music of the poetry itself and obscure its complex metrical elaboration. Workshop 2 therefore set out to address this problem in different ways, and the results represent a significant advance in understanding. One collaborative group (ap Siôn, Salisbury, Gibbard) returned to first principles by dissecting the creative process of matching words and music from a contemporary standpoint, using newly-composed music and text and achieving a flexible, quasi-formulaic style that allows the *cynganedd* to blossom. The second group, Datgeiniaeth, adopted a more historical approach, adopting the rhythmic principles of the Robert ap Huw music repertory, but in a far simpler way. In this case the accompaniment was reduced to an underlying rhythmic beat which again complemented and enhanced the subtle metrical qualities of the verse. Many positive comments were received about the resulting audibility of the *cynganedd*: there was consensus that the approach felt both alive and 'historically credible' (whereas some attempts in the past have run the risk of relegating bardic poetry and music to a 'Celtic Twilight' zone).

Less work had been undertaken on the performance of the Classical Gaelic poetry of Ireland and Scotland (*dán díreach*) and the first workshop consequently had less to build on. Despite the broad affinity of this verse with Welsh *canu caeth*, it was also acknowledged that *dán díreach* has some fundamental differences and the same principles cannot necessarily be transferred from one genre to the other. Whereas *dán díreach* tends to emphasize quatrains and vowel rhyme patterns, *canu caeth* opts for more

variable sequences of lines and couplets and emphasizes consonantal rhyme. Equally, while accentual versification comes naturally to the Irish, Welsh is a syllable-timed language: vowels in unstressed syllables are clear, and stressed syllables need not be regularized in order for the lines to be perceived as 'verse'. Further, traces of the original 'sung' dimension of Classical Gaelic poetry are even fainter than for its Welsh equivalent, partly because neither Ireland nor Scotland has a medieval equivalent to Robert ap Huw's harp tablature to draw on. Restoration of an accompaniment to *dán díreach* in its pure, early form is therefore an enormous challenge, not least because it cannot be achieved without restoration of authentic Classical pronunciation. This challenge was nevertheless tackled with considerable imagination and insight in three different ways (each adopting a quasi-improvisatory approach) by Virginia Blankenhorn and Paul Dooley (Workshop 2). Great advances were also made with a series of related repertoires in Workshop 1. Here most contributors chose to focus on later 'sub-bardic' manifestations of syllabic vernacular poetry current in Scotland and Ireland (and sometimes Man) from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Such poetry still demonstrates a close relationship to Classical Gaelic verse (it remains syllabic rather than accentual), but it uses a much looser form of *dán díreach*. It nevertheless has one great advantage – those wishing to perform the verse can turn with justification to some of the traditional melodies associated with the Ossianic ballads and Fenian lays to restore that elusive 'sung' element. The varied results – many of them employing very attractive melodies – may be witnessed in clips 17/35– 32/35.

At a wider level, the outcomes and thematic advances of both workshops are seen most effectively in the complete audio-visual series 'Voicing the Verse' / 'Y Gerdd ar Gân'. They have also been developed for the forthcoming articles for *Studia Celtica*. Other important themes, both general and specific, are summarized below.

#### 4.1 GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

4.1.1 The workshops were a convincing testimony to the power of performed poetry. For most of us, the experimental recreations witnessed – whatever their level of authenticity – ultimately intensified the meaning of the text. Those involved directly in creating the performances agreed that they had been enormously satisfying to prepare.

4.1.2 Several participants (especially at the workshop on Classical Gaelic poetry) were convinced that meaning must remain paramount throughout, taking precedence over strict metrical patterning. More than one person commented that the main emphasis is still on the words in the living Irish tradition.

4.1.3 Most of the performers were agreed that the key challenge of strict-metre poetry turns on that idiosyncratic alliance of syllabic regularity with irregular, unpredictable rhythms and variable number of 'beats' per line. This is equally true of Classical Gaelic and Welsh repertoires. Working at the rhythm was generally the element that demanded most rehearsal time.

4.1.4 The notion of a metrical 'straitjacket' was unhelpful. Many felt that there must have been more flexibility and fluidity in the performance of strict-metre poetry than scholars have tended to think. The flexibility of timing required of the performer(s) implied that professional bardic declaimers probably took any variation in their stride; the listener enjoying the change from the established rhythm.

4.1.5 A rigid, formulaic approach to setting Welsh *cynganedd* to music reveals similar limitations. Although *cynganedd* follows certain rules, instinctive musical and aural features, such as metrical stress and emphasis, need to take precedence.

4.1.6 Strict-metre poetry in general was quite likely performed in a conservative style. It certainly needed to be sufficiently intelligible for a patron to hear it – neither too fast, nor too slow. The performance served to glorify the song and its characteristics, not the performer himself.

4.1.7 No-one was convinced that medieval performers necessarily understood the metres they performed – they just did it. (The advantage of audio recordings for modern performers attempting to master comparable repertoires was emphasized.)

4.1.8 It was agreed that the listener does not experience text and music (or declamation) as two separate entities – rather both must be approached and evaluated together as a single 'sonic event' that appeals to more than one of the senses simultaneously.

#### 4.2 ASSOCIATED MELODY AND RHYTHM

4.2.1 As a general principle, the text – whether declaimed or sung – must be clearly articulated. If sung, use of melisma should be avoided, since it upsets the rhythm and renders the text less intelligible.

4.2.2 The associated air should be of limited melodic compass and simple construction, reflecting in its contour and placement of cadences the structure of the verse.

4.2.3 The rhythm of the performance should reflect the rhythmic subtlety of the verse. If the text is sung, the words should be allowed to dictate the rhythmic distribution of notes in the melody.

4.2.4 Several of the heroic ballad melodies (as also some of the tunes associated with the Irish elegies) recall plainchant, featuring reciting notes and decorative falling cadences. It is nevertheless difficult to match ballad texts to plainchant *per se*.

#### 4.3. THE RECITER'S REPERTORY

4.3.1 Many were attracted by Prof. Gillies's suggestion (Workshop 1) that effective delivery of Classical Gaelic *dán díreach* was likely to have been

dependent on a very simple melodic line and that the repertory of melodies used by the trained medieval reciter may have been limited to a handful, used over and over (just as most of the poetry itself emphasizes just three of the large group of metrical patterns available – *rannaigheacht*, *séadna* and *deibhidhe*).

4.3.2 This notion would also resonate with the instructions for performing Welsh *cywyddau* in the early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Statute of Gruffudd ap Cynan, where the reciter was instructed to sing the texts to the limited group of 14 or 15 [lost] melodies known as *prifgeinciau* ('main tunes').

4.3.3 Some of the surviving melodies associated with the later Fenian lays and Ossianic ballads prove effective partners for earlier verse forms (see also 4.5.2). Tunes associated with the Gaelic heroic ballads are especially varied, some fitting the pace, rhythm and tempo of strict-metre texts very well. (This was effectively demonstrated in a number of the experimental performances, especially those led by Prof Meek, Dr O'Laoire and Dr Blankenhorn.)

4.3.4 Transferability of musical material must have been common (e.g. a secular ballad and a hymn may share a tune). Transference of the same air to any number of poems seems perfectly plausible, providing that the metrical match is viable.

4.3.5 The role of living 'tradition-bearers' in preserving and disseminating traditional melodies with much earlier roots was recognized by many workshop participants for the first time.

#### 4.4 ACCOMPANIMENT

4.4.1 It is assumed that accompanists had a secure knowledge of the language that they were accompanying and communicated closely with the reciter or singer during the performance. (Effective results were achieved with the reciter/singer 'directing' the accompanist where necessary.)

4.4.2 Instrumental accompaniment needs to follow the text's rhythmic patterning precisely, or stay out of the way, in order to avoid creating a second rhythmic focus for the listener's attention.

4.4.3 Where the text is sung, the accompanying instrumental melody should be at one with the sung melody; it should 'keep pace with' the sung notes, not compete with them.

4.4.4 Where the text is declaimed, the accompanist may play a melody that accords rhythmically with the verse (though close communication between the performers is still vital).

4.4.5 The accompanist may have provided percussive flourishes as 'punctuation' at the beginnings and ends of lines and may have played phrases at appropriate points between stanzas or other textual units.

4.4.6 The accompanist should avoid loud percussive effects that coincide with individual words of text, as these may obscure intelligibility.

4.4.7 Many were attracted by the rhythmic use of the staff as an accompaniment to Welsh strict-metre poetry, and felt that it enhanced the *cynghanedd*.

#### 4.5 ASSOCIATIONS AND DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN REPERTORIES

4.5.1 Despite the common cultivation of strictly syllabic forms, the phenomenon of end-rhymes between accented and unaccented syllables, and the general emphasis on elaborate sound patterning, some fundamental differences between Classical Gaelic *dán díreach* and Welsh *canu caeth* were noted, particular relating to structure and consonantal rhyme.

4.5.2 Later material may often be used to shed light on an earlier repertory. The 'sub-bardic' vernacular Gaelic verse of the 17<sup>th</sup> century may therefore inform 'authentic' bardic verse in Classical Gaelic, especially if an associated melody survives (see 4.3.3).

4.5.3 Interplay between medieval Irish and Norman-French traditions was recognized as a possibility, noting that the concluding *amhrán* of *rainn agus amhrán* verse bears some similarity to the concluding *envoi* in troubadour song. This area might yield further exploration.

### 5 Future topics for investigation identified

5.1 Collation and analysis of scattered references to performance practice (including tunings) in poetic and archival sources from all three regions

5.2 Fuller exploration of musical terminology in general (including instruments, singing, metrics and metrical forms), drawing on recently available electronic resources.

5.3 Fuller consideration of the musical and poetic traditions of Ireland and Wales with reference to the wider European tradition.

5.4 Development of cross-cultural study, especially within the areas of Celtic Studies and musicology, examining all aspects of the evidence – continuing the legacy of these workshops.

5.5 Reappraisal of Terrence McCaughey's theory that 'silent stress' was used at the ends of certain lines in *dán díreach*, thereby smoothing out irregularity. This to be done by analysing specimens from all of the main metres.

5.6 Composers and performers to consider collectively the structural aspects of *dán díreach*. How do we deal with conceptual and verbal linking

within and between verses (e.g. the stanza pattern ab bc cd)? How do we deal with scope for musical flourish and display between verses? How might the progression from the first 'plain' couplet to its embellished form in subsequent couplets be mirrored in musical practice?

5.7 Further study of Welsh-Irish relations, exploring possible parallels between the metres *cywydd llosgyrnog* (Welsh) and *ochtfhoclach* (Irish) as also *rhupunt* and *ollbairdne*.

5.8 Reappraisal of early Irish metrics at a wider level, drawing on philological, linguistic and musical aspects.

5.9 Further study of the Irish roots of the 24 Welsh musical measures by deeper exploration of linguistic forms and their possible date, as also whether oral or written transmission was most likely.

5.10 Fuller exploration of the likely 'reorganization' of Classical Gaelic verse, with reference to specification of metrics, regulation of duties of poets etc (as in Wales)

5.11 Consideration of similar underlying or over-arching aesthetic principles at work in Gaelic and Welsh traditions.

## **6 Future collaborations or research projects emerging**

For some of the performers, the prepared performances heard in the workshops were the ultimate project goal. However, there is ongoing reflection on future projects based on the topics identified above. In due course Harper (PI) plans fuller exploration of associated musical terminology in all three regions (including instruments, singing, tunings, and metrical forms), and ap Siôn and Salisbury are discussing an article based on the fruits of their creative collaboration.

The Welsh performing duo Bragod (named in the initial project proposal but unable to attend the workshops) have also been developing Welsh strict-metre textual settings, and offered a workshop at the last conference of the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies at St Fagans National History Museum in October 2009. Their methodology is based on the binary principle of the Robert ap Huw music, where a 'measure' comprised from alternation of two basic chord types underpins much of the repertory. This simple harmonic structure is used to provide the missing vocal line when setting various poetic forms (ranging from verse in the Book of Taliesin to contemporary poetry – including that in the English language). This methodology has inspired considerable interest among several of those attending the second workshop and may lead to further collaboration.

## **7 Plans for further development or action**

7.1 There are provisional plans for a follow-up workshop in 2011, drawing in some of the key contributors from both workshop sessions together

with 'new' performers (Bragod included). It will be especially important to air new project outcomes with others who have already been experimenting seriously with setting *canu caeth* over the years, but who were unable to attend the two workshops.

7.2 Datgeiniaeth (Workshop 2) are currently extending their repertory beyond the *cywydd* metres and are refining their existing performances. These will feed into release of a CD recording as soon as funds allow. They are making two further platform performances in the near future, one in Y Drwm, Aberystwyth.

7.3 General enthusiasm generated at Workshop 2 led to the suggestion that performed strict-metre poetry (sung or declaimed; with or without accompaniment) might become a new competitive category at the National Eisteddfod. This will be explored with Eisteddfod officials.

7.4 A third article for *Studia Celtica* authored by Peter Greenhill and entitled 'Bardic rhythm: the implications from *cerdd dant* studies' is in progress.

7.5 Lillis O'Laoire is provisionally planning an article on the setting of strict-metre Irish poetry to syllabic airs.



## Appendix 1: Questions circulated at the beginning of each workshop

### *Questions for listeners (and performers)*

1. Is the performance viable and/or intelligible?
2. Does the performance appear to be rooted within an appropriate culture (e.g. a learned or 'bardic' culture)?
3. Does the performance accord with whatever historical 'evidence' we may have? Or has it strayed too far beyond such boundaries as we may be able to set?
  - Is it valid to use later indigenous repertoires to enlighten earlier practice?
  - In any later idioms, can we reliably discern traces of the original?
  - How far is the composition of new words with new music – which sets out to work within historically-informed principles – valid as a tool for historical research?
4. How far do music and words coalesce into one *cerdd*?
  - In expressing the words, which takes priority – words as textual meaning or words as 'musical sound' (with or without melody)?
5. What are the respective strengths of singing / intoning / incanting / speaking the text?
6. How does any accompanying instrument enhance, obscure, or coalesce with the words?

### *Questions specifically for performers*

1. How much preparation was required?
2. Which works better: self-accompanied performance or performance as a duo?
3. Is a written text or score helpful (or essential) as an aide-memoire (as opposed to memorizing the material)?
4. Is formal musical training desirable or necessary for a performance of this nature?

### *Questions for those attending both workshops*

1. Are there common principles of enquiry or criteria and methods of observation and analysis of the relationship between, and articulation of, words and music *in performance* across all three regions (Ireland, Scotland, Wales)?
2. How have the 'scholars' benefited from working with professional performers (and vice versa)?