



EXPERIMENTAL WORKSHOPS COMPARING THE
MUSICAL PERFORMANCE OF
VERNACULAR BARDIC POETRY IN
MEDIEVAL WALES, IRELAND AND SCOTLAND

Workshop 1: Scotland and Ireland

Saturday 4 April 2009: 9.30 am to 5.30pm

with short recital at 7.30 pm

Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies /
School of Scottish Studies Archives
University of Edinburgh
27 George Square
Edinburgh EH8 9LD



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

- 9.30 Dr Sally Harper and Professor Dafydd Johnston
Welcome and introduction to the project
Brief report on current research and review of questions to be addressed
- 9.50 Dr Virginia Blankenhorn (voice) with Patsy Seddon (harp)
‘Tuar guil, a cholaim, do cheol’! An argument for – and an attempt at – the oral performance of rainn agus amhrán verse
(followed by questions and brief discussion)
- 11.00 *Break for coffee*
- 11.20 Professor William Gillies
The main features of early strict-metre poetry in Scotland and Ireland
- 11.50 Professor Donald Meek
assisted by traditional singers Catriona Garbutt and Margaret Callan
From the Era of Ossian to the Age of the Ipod: The Transmission and Performance of Gaelic Heroic Ballads
(followed by questions and brief discussion)
- 1.00 *Lunch*
with opportunity to watch a video recording of Allan MacDonald (pipes):
Reconstructing a seventeenth-century Gaelic pibroch song (c.40 mins)
- 2.10 Simon Chadwick
The musical possibilities and limitations of the early Gaelic harp, demonstrating Davy Patton’s replica of the ‘Queen Mary’ instrument
- 2.30 Dr Lillis Ó Laoire
Reclaiming Syllabic Poetry: An Experimental Performance
- 3.15 Professor Breandán Ó Madagáin
Irish lament in syllabic and accented verse
- 4.00 *Tea*
- 4.20 Full review and discussion of all sessions
- 5.20 *Break for supper (please make your own arrangements)*
- 7.30 Evening recital featuring all performers, together with William Taylor, harp

ABSTRACTS

Dr Virginia Blankenhorn (voice) with Patsy Seddon (harp)

‘Tuar guil, a cholaim, do cheol’! An argument for – and an attempt at – the oral performance of *rainn agus amhrán* verse

The focus of this session will be ‘Tuar guil, a cholaim, do cheol’ (‘Oh, dove, your song is cause for tears’), an anonymous seventeenth-century poem that may refer to the castle of Shanmuckinish near Ballyvaughan, Co. Clare. The text follows a very similar principle to the *trí rain agus amhrán* compositions (the earliest of which were composed in fifteenth-century Munster), which normally comprise three stanzas in syllabic metre followed by a single stanza in accentual metre. Here, the poem differs only because it has eight stanzas in classical metre, followed by one in an accentual metre. The two forms thus appear to be closely related, and the rationale for oral performance appears to be equally valid for both. In addition, the textual character of ‘Tuar guil’ – referring to all sorts of sounds associated with castle life – can only be enhanced by musical presentation. Though there is no manuscript specificity about the music used to present this poetry, this session will represent an historically informed – if still highly speculative – attempt to perform the poem with harp accompaniment.

The text to be used (and the translation into English by Thomas Kinsella) comes from *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, ed. Seán Ó Tuama (Dublin 1981), 21–23. The air to be used for the stanzas in classical metre has been slightly adapted from one that Professor Breandán Ó Madagáin has shown was likely used by Eugene O’Curry’s father for the recitation of Fenian lays; that for the final stanza is the air to a song in very similar metre called ‘Cathair na Léige’, recorded in Ring, Co. Waterford, from Labhrás Ó Cadhlaigh, Kilgobinet, in 1940.

Professor William Gillies

Music and Gaelic strict-metre poetry

The fact that Gaelic court poetry in the Classical period was at least sometimes performed with a musical accompaniment is an iconic fact, but the details of the relationship between words and music in that performance remain obstinately elusive. This is a good time to re-visit such questions, now that the whole corpus of bardic verse is becoming much more accessible to scholars, and study of the words-music continuum is proceeding apace in other, potentially related areas. There are still reasons for modesty about what we may hope to establish, both on account of certain characteristics of the poetry itself and in view of attitudes expressed by the composers themselves. However, indirect or even negative evidence can be helpful; and it is likely that, away from the strict-metre court eulogy, we can make some progress on the musical component in the performance of *dán*. Testing these and similar thoughts is the welcome challenge of this workshop.

Professor Donald Meek,
with traditional singers Catriona Garbutt and Margaret Callan

‘From the Era of Ossian to the Age of the Ipod: The Transmission and Performance of Gaelic Heroic Ballads’

The Gaelic ‘heroic ballads’ of the Middle Ages are significant for a number of reasons, including their survival into the twentieth- (and even twenty-first) century via ‘tradition-bearers’; their close relationship to bardic verse (they are syllabic, though in loose forms of the standard metres); their preservation of what is sometimes likened to ‘ecclesiastical plainchant’; and their ‘pan-Gaelic’ connections (Ireland, Scotland, Man). How would these ‘ballads’ have been performed? This presentation, undertaken in conjunction with two living exponents of the Gaelic heroic ballad tradition, and illustrated by early recordings preserved in the Archives of the School of Scottish Studies, will enable us to hear what the singing of syllabic verse was actually like. It will also aim to demonstrate the categories of sung ballads that have survived, and, where appropriate, will show the relationship of these to other types of ballad-type verse (e.g. Judgement Day poems) in the eighteenth century, which utilised somewhat similar tunes (where again, we have the ‘live’ evidence in archival recordings). We also have some descriptions of the ‘ritual’ accompanying such singing. While the Gaelic ballads are normally in non-strict forms of syllabic metre overall, the degree of ‘strictness’ varies within the compositions, depending on the theme of the ballad, or indeed the specific part of the narrative in question.

Simon Chadwick

The musical possibilities and limitations of the early Gaelic harp, demonstrating Davy Patton’s replica of the ‘Queen Mary’ instrument

Discussion of the musical performance of vernacular bardic poetry focuses on evidence drawn from within the texts, from manuscript and historical sources, and from living oral traditions. A very different and important source of evidence for historical Gaelic music performance practice, is the corpus of eighteen or so extant Gaelic harps. Dating from between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, these instruments were designed, constructed and used in native musical contexts, both solo and for the accompaniment of bardic poetry. The design and structure of these old harps – utterly different from modern Scottish, Irish and classical harps – has very important implications for our understanding of early Gaelic music. Simon Chadwick’s replica of the medieval ‘Queen Mary’ clarsach, built by Roscommon sculptor and harp maker Davy Patton, is the most accurate replica ever made. This presentation will explain many of the key features of the replica, and demonstrate its musical powers and limitations.

Dr Lillis Ó Laoire

Reclaiming Syllabic Poetry: An Experimental Performance

The distinctive airs used for syllabic verse have not received the same attention as those of the more melodic *amhrán* tradition. Many syllabic airs survive in oral twentieth-century recordings of Ossianic lays from Scotland, and are now generating interest among a younger generation of singers. Although fewer sound recordings survive from Ireland, those extant also provide valuable insight into the style of singing used for these poems. This paper brings insights gained from an examination of some of these sources to a performance of Ossianic poems, with a further tentative attempt at interpreting *Dán Díreach*. Based on the well attested premise that one air may be transferred and used for a number of poems, I will use examples of airs, fitting them to poems for which no air survives. In the case of *Dán Díreach*, I will use Ó Comhraí's air for 'Sciathlúireach Mhuire' as learned from Professor Breandán Ó Madagáin's pioneering 'Caointe agus Seancheolta Eile', attempting to fit the words of Muireadhach Albanach's renowned lament 'M'anam do sgar riomsa a-raoir' to that tune. Given the controversies generated by debates surrounding Historically Informed Performance, I claim no special authority or authenticity for these experimental interpretations, beyond observing that the attempt to draw attention to this neglected area is worthwhile in itself.

Professor Breandán Ó Madagáin

Irish lament in syllabic and accented verse

An exploration of how the lament was sung both at learned and folk levels – elegy (*marbhna*) and keen (*caoineadh*), respectively – to give heightened expression to emotion.

PARTICIPANTS

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Catriona Garbutt (traditional singer)	
Patsy Seddon (harpist)	
Simon Chadwick (harp historian)	simon@simonchadwick.net
William Taylor (harpist) <i>Evening only</i>	bill.clarsach@googlemail.com

Dr John MacInnes
Abigail Burnyeat
Paul Dooley (harpist)
Tiber Falzett (PhD student)
Marion Garbutt
Celia Johnston

Technician: Ian Mackenzie, assisted by Caroline Milligan

Other guests will join us for the evening recital, at which drinks will be served.

The support of the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies / School of Scottish Studies Archives for this workshop is most gratefully acknowledged. The project directors would especially wish to thank Dr Margaret Mackay for her great assistance and vision as local convenor.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Experimental Workshops comparing the Musical Performance of Vernacular Bardic Poetry in Medieval Wales, Ireland and Scotland

Principal Investigator: Dr Sally Harper (School of Music, Bangor University)

Co-Investigator: Professor Dafydd Johnston (University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth)

Much poetry is made to be heard, but all too often we miss something of its richness by confining our reading to silent perusal of the printed page. This is especially true of the early 'bardic' verse created by highly trained craftsmen from medieval Wales, Scotland and Ireland; a true 'performance poetry' conceived for declamation before an assembled audience. It has long been acknowledged that the sophisticated verbal patterning and strict metrical organization of such verse was also enhanced by some form of simultaneous musical accompaniment, where the poet may have declaimed to his own harp or lyre, or a professional declaimer perhaps combined with an independent instrumentalist. Just how the verse was 'sung' and how such accompaniment worked has nevertheless fascinated and puzzled scholars for years, not least because the bards memorized their material rather than writing it down on the page.

This project therefore sets out to explore that lost aural and oral dimension of bardic poetry by drawing together poets, singers, players and scholars in a workshop setting. The fragmentary verbal, musical and pictorial evidence from all three regions will be pieced together, compared, and tested for viability. The main outcome will be a series of experimental, but historically-informed, performances of poems from each region, which will be made available as audio-visual recordings on an interactive website with full public access. Invited participants will include contemporary strict-metre poets, classically-trained 'early music' specialists, traditional musicians used to improvising accompaniments around set patterns, and composers working in the minimalist tradition; the nearest equivalent to the patterned accompaniments of the early musical sources. It is hoped that the project will reawaken new possibilities not only for the 'performance poetry' of medieval Wales, Ireland and Scotland, but also for that of other regions.

For further details, see <http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/vernacularpoetry/index.php>

Workshop 2: Wales

This will be held in Powis Hall, Bangor University, on Saturday 16 May 2009, beginning at 9.30 am, with short evening recital at 7.30 pm



THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL (AHRC)

Each year the AHRC provides funding from the Government to support research and postgraduate study in the arts and humanities, from archaeology and English literature to design and dance. Only applications of the highest quality and excellence are funded and the range of research supported by this investment of public funds not only provides social and cultural benefits but also contributes to the economic success of the UK. For further information on the AHRC, please see www.ahrc.ac.uk



BEYOND TEXT: A STRATEGIC PROGRAMME OF THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL

The AHRC Beyond Text strategic programme was developed in 2007 following a period of consultation with the arts and humanities research communities, which identified visual communication, sensory perception, orality and material culture as key concerns for twenty-first-century scholarship and the wider community. The programme centres on five thematic, interdisciplinary areas: Making and Unmaking; Performance, Improvisation and Embodied Knowledge; Technology, Innovation and Tradition; Mediations; Transmission and Memory. These themes provide a framework to investigate the formation and transformations of performances, sounds, images, and objects in a wide field of social, historical and geographical contexts, tracing their reception, assimilation and adaptation across temporal and cultural boundaries. The programme has a budget of £5.5 million over five years and runs from 2007 to 2012.