

Introduction to *Sean-nós* Singing

By David Ingerson

This outline, with live links, is available for download from my website,
Davidingersonmusic.com on the Workshops page

GOALS

- to increase awareness of the unique characteristics of *sean-nós* singing
- to practice some of the techniques of *sean-nós* singing in the context of an English language song

Caveat: I do not pretend to be a scholar or an expert on the subject of *sean-nós* singing. I simply love the art form and have been studying and singing *sean-nós* songs for over 40 years. I'd like to share some of what I've learned.

ACADEMIC DESCRIPTIONS

“The most archaic form [of the current song tradition] is *sean nós* (old style) singing in the Irish language. Each regional dialect of Irish has its own unique *sean nós* style. A complex and magnificent art, *sean nós* is an unaccompanied form of singing which demands tremendous skill and artistic understanding. It derives in part from the bardic tradition of professional poetry which declined in the seventeenth century. There is no display of emotion or dramatics in *sean nós*. The singer is expected to vary each verse using improvisation, an implicit musical skill which requires subtle changes in rhythm, ornamentation and timbre. Among the most celebrated *sean nós* masters in recent times were Darach Ó Catháin, Sean ‘ac Dhonncha, and Seosamh O’hEanai.”

Fr. *A Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music* by Gearoid O’hAllmhurain, p. 9

“Being involved in the atmosphere and meaning of the song, [the *sean-nós* singer] moves from stress to stress at his own pace which is really dictated by the feeling he puts into the words and by the amount of ornamentation and the number of stops he chooses to use in his gracing or “humouring” of a tune.”

Fr. *The Irish Song Tradition* by Seán O Boyle, p. 17

“*Sean-nós* singing is one of the finest of the traditional Irish arts. It is often characterized by unaccompanied performance in Irish or in English; free rhythm, relative lack of vibrato or dynamic change, and especially by the use of rapid, melismatic ornamentation.” Sean Williams, Prof. Of Celtic Studies (and student of Joe Heaney), The Evergreen State University

Tom Munnelly, one of the foremost collectors of Irish songs, suggests that *sean-nós* is “an extremely hazy label covering a good deal of current misconceptions.”

HOW TO PRONOUNCE *SEAN-NÓS*

Irish word	Pronunciation	Meaning
<i>Seán</i>	/Shawn/	John
<i>Séan</i>	/shane/	good luck
<i>Sean</i>	/shan/	old
<i>Sean-nós</i>	/shan-nose/	old style

CHARACTERISTICS OF *SEAN-NÓS* SINGING

Sung solo and unaccompanied

Including improvisational elements in the melody, rhythm, and words

Ornamentation

Flexible, varied rhythms

Glottal stops, pauses

Variations between lines, verses, and performances

In the Irish language (Gaelic)

Closed, often drone-like sound, held l, m, n, r

The last word or phrase is sometimes hurried or spoken

Variety of vocal qualities (untrained voices)

With few, if any, dramatic or dynamic extremes

Every one of the above characteristics is “violated” by one well-respected singer or another.

CHARACTERISTICS OF *SEAN-NÓS* SINGING CONTEXT

The songs are transmitted orally, not learned from a book

They grow out of a community and reflect a local or regional style of singing

The air is at the service of the words and meaning

Sean-nós singing is a folk or kitchen art, not a performance art

The song is more important than the singer

Often modal or with accidentals (sounding “primitive”)

Almost never with a chorus

LINKS FOR EXAMPLES PLAYED DURING THE WORKSHOP

Treasa Ní Mhiolláin (Connemara): Cúirt Bhaile Nua:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJwY8MmjC_A

Nioclás Tóibín (Munster): Róisín Dubh:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxBkmW62Us8>

Diarmuid Ó Súilleabháin (Munster): Bruach na Carraige Báine:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8yqrqHb_7U8&t=46s

Máire Ní Choilm (Donegal): Tá Mé i Mo Shuí: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFP2Wdil56M&list=OLAK5uy_nyydN83DIHKpvETb-1YnJJgoK6xACVz5Q)

[v=rFP2Wdil56M&list=OLAK5uy_nyydN83DIHKpvETb-1YnJJgoK6xACVz5Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFP2Wdil56M&list=OLAK5uy_nyydN83DIHKpvETb-1YnJJgoK6xACVz5Q)

Joe Heaney (Connemara): Úna Bhán: <https://youtu.be/DKex3hL5OmY>

Seán 'ac Dhonncha (Connemara): Anach Cuain: <https://youtu.be/8kxSDAEYktU>

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Corn Uí Riada Buaitheoiri (various artists), Clo Iar-Chonnachta, cic@iol.ie A collection of songs sung by the Corn Uí Riada winning singers from 1972 to 2007.

The Road from Connemara (Joe Heaney), Topic Records, www.topicrecords.co.uk
Songs and stories of Joe Heaney as recorded by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger.

Darach O'Cathain: Traditional Irish Unaccompanied Singing, Shanachie Records.

Paddy Tunney; The Man of Songs, Folk-Legacy Records.

Guth ar Fan; A Wandering Voice (Máire Ní Cheileachair), Secret Garden Music

[Cois Abhann na Sead; Traditional Songs from Muskerry \(Eilis ní Shuilleabhain\), Clo Iar-Chonnachta.](#)

Glor Mhaigh Eo (various artists), Clo Iar-Chonnachta

MASTER SEAN-NÓS SINGERS FOUND ON YOUTUBE

CONNEMARA

Joe Heaney

Treasa Ní Mhiolláin

Sarah and Nan Ghríallias

Josie Sheáin Jeaic

Johnny Mháirtín Learaí

Seán 'Ac Dhonncha

Eamon Ó Donnchadha

MUNSTER

Diarmuid Ó Súilleabháin

Nioclás Tóibín

Begley (Beaghlaioch) family

Breannán, Séamus, Josie

Finola Ó Siochrú

Ann Mulqueen

Áine Uí Cheallaigh

ULSTER

Máire Ní Choilm

Lillis Ó Laoire

Pádraigín Ní Ualachain

Tríona Ní Dhomhnaill

Gráinne Holland

Diomnic MacGoillaBhríde

Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh