

Sean-nós Singing, Lesson 1; Learn a Simple *Sean-nós* Song

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This outline is available for download at <davidingersonmusic.com/workshops>

Most important stylistic characteristics of *sean-nós* singing:

- solo, 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

Sean-nós songs are always transmitted orally. There is no practical way to notate the complex and changing ornaments and rhythms. So, first of all, listen to these various interpretations of the song, *Aird Tí Chuain*. (The words and translation are below.)

Best Examples of *Ard Tí Chuain* (also spelled *Ard Uí Chuain*, *Aird Uí Chuain*, *Aird Uí Chumhaing*, *Aird a' Chumhaing*, *Airde Cuan*, *Ardaigh Cuain*)

Eamonn Ó Faogáin <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSnhzI3DWVQ>
Beautifully sung. This rendition sticks most closely to the classic *sean-nós* style.

Lillis Ó Laoire https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_58aX-70lfo (start at 1:35)
Beautiful rendition, mostly true to the *sean-nós*. (Harmonies are not traditional.)
Lillis is currently one of the main authorities on *sean-nós* singing. Julie Fowles and Muireann Nic Abhlaoigh are among the most highly respected Scottish and Irish traditional singers, respectively.

Áine Ní Bhrollaigh <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BWsUp9LYPY>
Beautifully sung, nice tempo variations, some ornaments and variations not strictly traditional but well done. Harp accompaniment. Switches the 2nd and 3rd verses.

Mary O'Hara <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFTqNh-Dex0>
Beautifully sung with many tasteful variations, one dramatic staccato note, and one dramatically held note. Mary is one of the prime movers in bringing old Irish songs to the modern public awareness. This recording is probably from the 60s.

Madelyn Monaghan <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/IwmBJLgtVQU>
Lovely interpretation of first verse and chorus, clearly pronounced with the words shown as well. This would be a good choice for learning the first verse.

Ard Tí Chuain

By Seán Mac Ambróis (John McCambridge)

Verse 1

Dá mbeinn fhéin in Ard Tí Chuain

dah main hain in ard-ee-chhoo-ən

If I were in Ard Tí Chuain

chh = guttural sound

ə = schwa sound, /uh/, sometimes
almost unspoken

() = elided, unspoken “sounds” or tongue positions

In acie an tsléibhe úd atá i bhfad uaim

in äk(ĩ) ən tlay-vah ood (ə)tah (ĩ)vahd oo-əm

Beside that distant mountain (which is far from me, i.e. desired by me)

B'annamh liom gan dul ar cuairt

ban-oo l(y)um gahn dull air coo-art

Seldom would I not go to visit

Go gleann na gcuach Dé Domhnaigh.

go glen nah goo-uchh day dohn-ee

The cuckoo's glen on Sunday.

Curfá (Chorus)

Agus och, och Éire uilig is ó

ägus ochh, ochh air-ə 'lig is oh

And och, och Ireland, cry out Oh

Éire lionn dubh is ó

air-ə lun doo is oh

Ireland, melancholy and Oh

Sé mo chroí atá trom agus brónach.

shay mə chhree (a)tah trəm ah-gus broh-nachh

My heart is heavy and sad.

Verse 2

Is iomaí Nollaig 'bhí mé féin

iss əmee null-ig (ə)vee may hain

Many's the December I spent

I mbun Abhainn Doinne is mé gan chéill

ĩ muhn on dinnə smay gahn chhale

In Cushendun without understanding (innocently)

Ag iomáin ar an trá bhán

egg ih-mahn air ahn trah wan

Playing hurley on the white strand

Is mo chamán bán i mo dhorn liom

iss mə chhəmahh b(w)ahn ih mə ghhorn l(y)om

With my caman (hurley stick) in my fist

Verse 3

Nach tuirseach mise anseo liom féin
nachh ter-shuchh mih-shə an-shə l(y)om hain
I am so forlorn here alone

Nach n-airím guth coiligh, lon dubh, nó traon'
Nachh nār-eem guh cull-ee, luhn doo, no train
I don't notice the call of the rooster, blackbird, or corncrake

Gealbhán, smaolach, naoscach féin
G(ee)al-wan, smal-uchh, nee-səchh hain
Even the swan, the thrush, or the snipe

Is chan aithním féin an Domhnach.
iss chhahn ā-neem hain a(n) dōh-nuh(chh)
And don't even recognize Sunday.

Here are some other interpretations of the song that are worth listening to.

Mary Dillon <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-CdDE0UgfU>
Very sensitive interpretation but with harmony in the chorus.

Micheál Ó Domhnaill <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2CDEMEyNTQ>
Beautifully sung but mostly unintelligible.

Fergus Cahillane <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8m8YThL04hc>
Very interesting slightly modernistic interpretation but I'd say true to the spirit of sean-nós. You just have to ignore the background harmonies.

Eabha McMahon of Celtic Women <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BTy-Eiqgjk>
A little over-engineered but authentically sung. (Stop at 2:15)

Albery Fry <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZLwaWLV8s4>
An interesting compromise between regular rhythm and slightly more fluid interpretation. Probably recorded in the 60s.

Lorcan MacMathuna <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9n0zz3i5Ks>
Interesting variations but he introduces a steady, regular beat

Ciara McCrickard <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Yp7dpRHYzE>
Beautifully sung but all with a regular beat