

THE AMAZING VARIETY OF IRISH SINGING TRADITIONS

outline of the workshop led by David Ingeron, Davidingersonmusic.com

Also available for download here: <https://www.davidingersonmusic.com/workshops>

Main goals:

- increase awareness of the richness and variety within the broader tradition
- increase awareness of the unique characteristics of the older traditions
- increase awareness of the influences of English, European practices on Irish traditions

Caveat:

While I do not claim to be a scholar or expert on this subject, I do have more than 40 years of experience and study in the field.

The following is my own set of distinctions concerning the whole fabric of Irish singing. I will be picking apart and exposing a number of threads of this rich and lengthy tradition to expose the unique character of some of the older traditions. There are no hard and fast lines between these strands; they are broad generalizations with blurred boundaries which I use to illustrate and promote certain specific strands. There are no value judgments associated with any of these distinctions.

Singing among the ancient Celts: Singing has been a significant part of Celtic cultures for thousands of years. The ancient Roman historians Sallust, Livius, and Tacitus all commented on the singing and chanting of the Celtic warriors they or their informants encountered. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Celtic_music

Polybius, 3rd Century BCE Greek historian, wrote that the Celtic Chiefs were accompanied by bards who sang their praises before the assembly of warriors.

Celtic Warriors, by WF & JNG Ritchie

SEVEN SIGNIFICANT VARIETIES (for my purposes in this workshop)

A. Ossianic (Fenian) Lays

1. Ancient chants based on early Celtic myths (the folk source of James Macpherson's *The Poems of Ossian*, 1762)
2. In the Irish language
3. Possibly originally accompanied by harp
4. The last singer died in the early 1950s in Co. Donegal

B. Caoineadh na Marbh (Keening of the Dead)

1. Usually sung, wailed at wakes, funeral processions, gravesides
2. In the Irish language
3. Originally long praise and lament poems
4. Late 19th, early 20th C. improvised but with many stock phrases in Irish
5. Usually sung, wailed by paid or experienced keeners, all women
6. Died out before the mid-twentieth century

- C. Sean-nós Singing (Pronounced *shan-nose*, meaning old style)
 - 1. In the Irish language
 - 2. Solo and unaccompanied (almost always)
 - 3. Arrhythmic, usually slow tempo
 - 4. Frequently modal and with accidentals
 - 5. Almost never have choruses
 - 6. Almost all traditional, rarely newly composed
 - 7. Largely from the Irish-speaking or Gaeltacht areas of Ireland
- D. Irish language rhythmic songs
 - 1. In the Irish language
 - 2. Solo, unaccompanied (in their original settings, but often commercially recorded with accompaniment)
 - 3. Rhythmic, usually medium or fast tempo
 - 4. Usually in major or minor
 - 5. Often have choruses
 - 6. Almost all traditional, rarely newly composed
- E. Anglo-Irish traditional songs
 - 1. In the English language
 - 2. Solo and unaccompanied
 - 3. Sometimes modal, often major or minor
 - 4. Variety of arrhythmic and rhythmic melodies
 - 5. Some with choruses
 - 6. Mostly traditional, occasionally newly composed
- F. Parlor Songs (including *Moore's Melodies*)
 - 1. Composed generally in the 19th Century in English
 - 2. With piano accompaniment
 - 3. Rhythmic with occasional rubato phrases
 - 4. Usually in major or minor keys
- G. Pub songs
 - 1. Mostly in English, once in a while, Irish
 - 2. Accompanied by guitar, bouzouki, fiddle, bodhran, or other instruments
 - 3. Almost always rhythmic, a strong beat being essential to many of them
 - 4. Usually in major or minor keys
 - 5. Many have choruses or are singalongs
 - 6. Mostly traditional, a fair few newly composed.

Other Significant strands:

There are many other significant strands that help make up the Irish singing tradition:

Lilting, *port béil*;

Macaronic songs (in both Irish and English);

Nationalist songs (The West's Awake, Down By the Glenside);

Songs in praise of place (Omagh Town, Sweet Kingwilliamstown);

Broadside ballads, topical songs (Molly Bawn, Stewball and the Monaghan Grey Mare);

Rebel songs (Kelly the Boy from Killan, Down by the Glenside);

Shanties, work, fo'c's'le songs (Paddy Doyle's Boots, Way Haul Away);

Music hall songs (Ten Minutes Too Late; The Irish Jubilee);

Tin Pan Alley, musical theater songs (When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, Glocca Mora);

Orange songs (Old Orange Flute, The Bold Orange Heroes of Comber);

Religious songs (Caoineadh na dTrí Mhuire, Kerry Christmas Carol), Wexford Carols

The usual folk songs: love, lullabies, comic, drinking, laments, etc.;

Songs composed by significant songwriters (PJ McColl, Samuel Lover, Francis Fahy, Johnny Patterson, John Shiel, Percy French, etc.);

Classical singing (The Messiah, performed annually since its Dublin premier, 1742);

Songs from other countries (I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen from Germany);

Country western style songs; rock 'n' roll; punk;

Newly composed songs in all these traditions.

Examples: (If the following links don't work by simply clicking on them, copy and paste them into the URL bar of your browser.)

Ossianic Lays: <https://youtu.be/cRobZL31z-A>

Caioneadh na Marbh: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAvN59CtTIQ>

Sean-nós songs

Treasa Ní Mhiolláin (Connemara): Cúirt Bhaile Nua:

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

Nioclas Toibin (Munster): Róisín Dubh:

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

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

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8yrqHb_7U8&t=46s

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

Irish Language Rhythmic Songs:

Lasairfhíona Ní Chonaola: Bean Pháidín:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGX17CsMFPk>

Liam O'Maonlai: Sadhbh Ní Bhruinneallaigh:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFIHO3r9UBk>

Clannad: Níl sé 'n Lá: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD6c-spsULM>

Altan: Dúlaman: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ-ejT6_tZc

Anglo-Irish songs:

Paddy Tunney: The Mountain Streams Where the Moorcocks Crow:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVDubFS4HyY>

Rita Gallagher: The Buachaill Roe:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwn6vWO3MS4&t=30s>

Dolores Keane: The Shores of Lough Bran:

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

Len Graham: Old Arboe:

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

Parlor Songs:

John McCormack: The Harp that Once through Tara's Halls:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATva_4Nhr7Q

Pub Songs:

Clancy Brothers, Tommy Makem: Jug of Punch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUgh4JuOJrg&list=PLPwGXfzq7qx6jDsSqsrbZM08wbHUyEZpl>

The Dubliners: Black Velvet Band: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBRQM0vErH8&list=PL7EF87434135AE75E&index=2>

Clancy Brothers, Tommy Makem: The Wild Colonial Boy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3QJPxiLOPo>

The Dubliners: The Wild Rover: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_o5XcrEF-I&list=PLPH16x8oUZKB04Ev_6QL2LkCIARRuW-yZ

Punk:

Dropkick Murphys: The Fields of Athenry: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5VTeGWQyMs>