

In the last issue I discussed the present position of traditional singing, the techniques involved, and some of the songs and singers of Munster and Connacht. Before going on to discuss other songs and singers I would like to get back for a while to those problems of approach and definition which seem to plague all discussion on traditional music in this country.

DEFINITION : My dictionary defines folk music as 'any music which has entered into the heritage of the people, but can be assigned to no composer, school, or, as a rule, even, period'. Though not a perfect definition for our purpose, - I have strong reservations about the 'period' suggestion - it can be used as a basis around which a general definition, incorporating the most likely theories and ideas in circulation amongst Irish traditional musicians may be arrived at. Whilst folk music, - or in our case, 'traditional music' may also be defined as a type of music which has been submitted, for some generations, to oral transmission, there are, inevitably, 'grey areas' or borderline areas which give rise to much discussion and disagreement. Perhaps the biggest area of dispute lies between the 'production' theory and the 'adaptation' idea. The production theory is that only songs that have been produced by the people - the 'folk', - can be accepted as genuine folk songs. The adaptation theory allows that songs which were not originally 'of the folk' may be taken over, altered, and adapted within the folk idiom. For example; Brian na Banban's song 'Cathal Brugha' would scarcely be described as traditional according to the production theory; but Sean 'ac Dhonncha took a fancy to it, and brought all the artistry and flavour of his Conamara style to bear on it; other singers followed where Sean led, so that to-day 'Cathal Brugha' is generally accepted as belonging in the traditional repertoire. According to the adaptation theory therefore it qualifies as a traditional song. Similarly I have heard John O Connell of Baile Mhuirne sing a version of the 'Bright Silvery Light of the Moon', which was as fine a piece of traditional singing as one could wish to hear.

But much more than this is required to establish the character and quality of the main body of our folk song. Three important elements come to mind - a) a living tradition (b) variation (basic) and (c) selection/rejection. The living tradition means that traditional singing should be a vital flourishing natural entity rather than a glass-house growth or museum piece. There must be a singing community, and if the old traditional communities are on the way out then alternative



communities may possibly be gound - communities of mind, sympathy, taste and artistry. ~~At~~ Similarly, basic variation is essential, variation which springs from the individual creative impulse, which ensures that the individual approach and interpretation is maintained, and that we have many singers each singing his own version of songs rather than one brilliant singer whose versions of certain songs will be taken as the approved version to be copied and imitated by all other singers. Thirdly, the principle of selection and rejection ensures that, over a long period the body of 'folk' - which includes both performers and listeners - is constantly assessing and examining, that songs are constantly being weighed and discussed, and that in the long run, in theory at least, the best songs should be propagated and the poorer-quality songs rejected. This could mean that a song of doubtful quality which happened to be favoured and popularised by a good singer, would, in time be rejected by the body of singers. One can see this process of selection at work in the field of instrumental music, where clever but unmusical newly composed tunes are trotted out - generally by the less experienced musicians - but are rejected out of hand by the main body of fiddlers, pipers etc., This element of selection is very important and it is essential that a flourishing body of singers, aware of standards and alert to all discrepancies of taste, should be there to exercise it.

Those who read the part of my article in the last issue may recall that I listed various points to which the young traditional singer should give his attention. At this stage I feel I should hasten to reassure the young traditional singer, lest he concludes that when he sings his mind should be thinking on all these technicalities all at once. This is not the case. The ideal thing would be that a young singer would grow up with traditional singing at the two sides of the cradle, that he would hear traditional singing day-in day-out from parents, neighbours, etc. This may have been the case a few generations ago, but it is no longer likely in the Ireland of today. So the young singer must "chase" traditional songs and traditional singers, recording and studying as many songs as he can. He may decide to confine himself to the songs of his native area, and if he belongs to a district which has a strong living tradition this may be the ideal thing, for he will be inheriting songs from singers whose background, accent and tone, should be closely similar to his own. On the other hand he may feel attracted by songs and singers from many parts of the country and if this is the case he could profitably study the different techniques and styles of these singers. He will find that some singers favour a strong robust forceful style, whilst others caress a melody lovingly, and adorn it with subtle and intricate embellishment. The points I have



noted earlier are those I have noticed as the important things in the singing of the people whom I consider to be our best traditional singers. For instance, Paddy Tunney's singing of 'Moorlough Mary' is an excellent example of the effective use of most of these techniques. Few if any, singers that I have heard excell in all these techniques; the man or woman who has a natural flair for variation and embellishment may be inclined to sing rather too slowly, and so on. And, as I pointed out in my article on the sean nos, more is required than masterful technique. There must be involvement, and feeling. My advice to ~~xxx~~ the young singer is, - firstly, listen to as many good singers as possible, and then choose, and get on tape, several good songs that appeal to you. Play back these recordings for yourself several times and join in singing the songs yourself as you get to know them. Do not think that you must copy any singer in every detail, but listen critically to each one, and ask yourself how you would like to sing that song. When you have committed a few songs to memory, practice singing these and get somebody to record your performance. Examine these recordings under the headings I have listed. - Did you stay in tune on those high notes, etc., etc.,? Above all did you enjoy and feel involved in your singing and do you communicate that enjoyment and involvement to others when you sing for them? Listen again to other singers and become involved in their singing too. Then, when you have studied and mastered - even partly - the technicalities, the next important step is to forget about them, - consciously at least, - during your singing, and enter with full-blooded enthusiasm into the spirit and enjoyment of traditional singing. When you see, a good traditional fiddler in session, his bow flying, his fingers darting, the music rushing at you in a <sup>RR</sup>torrent of melody, embellishments and variations tumbling along <sup>RR</sup>measly in the flood, toe tapping and nostrils quivering with the excitement of heady music, you never think of ~~a~~ the serious dedicated young man who sat for many an hour disciplining that bow-hand or labouring over those difficult rolls. Similarly, when you are in full voice with "the Green Fields of America" all those worries about phrasing, ornamentation, and tuning should be left, to coin a phrase "a hundred music-years behind". All the really good traditional singers I have heard have been, basically, natural singers. They are singers who like to sing, and who picked up their songs by ear from other singers. Oftentimes they reproduce a song nearly as they have heard it, quite happy with the way it has been shaped and polished by the singers through whose hands and heads it has passed already. Even so it would not be exactly the same; there would inevitably be the extra



note here, the word changed there, the omission or change of a note further on. Or, on the other hand, the song might be changed considerably, and not necessarily for the better. The air to which it had been sung might be discarded and a different version of it substituted; or maybe, a phrase from another version.

Most of these singers rarely change their approach or technique to any extent, even after frequent contact and discussion with other singers. The odd one might fasten on a catchy phrase or maybe adopt or adapt an idea or suggestion from a compeer, and introduce it into his own performances. It is only since traditional singing became the hobby of the comparatively few, rather than the natural inclination of garsú<sup>n</sup> and grandfather alike, that singers have had to think of the technical side of it. In the old days one just sang traditionally just like grandfather and mother and Johnny next-door. Now you are lucky to hear a traditional song every now and again at a session or at a Fleadh and if you have "the call" and really want to sing in the true style, you have to approach it very seriously and studiously after the manner I have outlined here.

#### TOM PHAIDIN TOM

Tom Phaidin Tom - But to get back to the songs and singers of Munster and Connacht; it may have been noted that in the last issue, when writing generally of Gaeltacht singers who sing in both Irish and English, I omitted any mention of the renowned Tomás Ó Coisdealbha (Tom Phaidin Tom). The reason is simple, that Tomás is such an exceptional and unique singer that his singing has to get special attention in any discussion such as this. Tomás is, to my mind, the one sean nos singer who sounds as good or nearly as good singing in English as he does when singing amhráin <sup>AN</sup> ar sean nos. He is, thus, an exception to the general rule which we noted in the last issue. How he does it I have not yet figured out, but in songs like 'Napoleon' and 'The Banks of the Nile' he seems to capture every elusive trait of the sean nos. Again he is unique in that he regularly sings very short phrases and <sup>YRT</sup> still gives a most exciting performance. I think the secret here is, as I remarked in a note on his singing in the November/December issue, that his phrasing is done to establish a definite shape in the melody and, that these short phrases are linked together, without any loss of pace or attack into longer 'main' phrases. In fact his breath control is astounding in a man of four score years, and he rarely pauses for breath



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except at the end of a 'main' phrase. His use of variation is truly delightful too. (See Troiir Vol 5 No. 6 for further data about this great singer).x

When discussing the songs of Munster and Connacht in the last issue I made reference only to those songs which were closely related in style and composition to the songs of the Gaeltacht. There are, of course, other types of traditional songs sung in these areas. We come now to another body of songs, songs which are to be found in East Munster, East Connacht and, indeed, in other parts too. They are songs written to Irish airs, - usually fairly simple, four-line tunes with an attractive turn in the melody. Mostly the song-writers are found to have discarded the ideas of internal vowel-rhyming which are found in and near the Gaeltacht areas, and, in fact, the language of these songs is generally less colourful than, say, the language of the English songs of *Múscraí*. The style of singing these songs <sup>ALSC</sup> seems less complete and more simple than those with a sean nos influence. Another common feature of these songs is the recurrence of phrases such as "as you may understand", "as you may plainly see", "the truth to you I'll tell", etc., etc.,. These songs may generally be divided into two categories; (1) narrative ballads which tell a definite story and (2) lyrical songs which describe the beauty of a place or the charms of a loved one. (In fact some of the lyrical love songs also manage to introduce the beauties of the countryside to give suitable background to the charms of the admired one. Mary, in the words of the song-writer may "blush like the rose", or be "fairer than the swan" as she wanders "midst the beauties of nature that grace every woodland and lawn", she may also be fairer than Diana or Helen and brighter than the Evening Star.)

Some of the narrative ballads, having started with the customary "Come all ye -" tell their story with directness and an economy of words; more of them go in for a longer introduction and a more devious way of unfolding their tale. In some instances the recounting of a supposed dream or a conversation between the writer and a third person, or even a conversation overheard, may be the means by which the story is introduced and told. The Ballad of Hynes and Bold Dermody (Galway), John Swiss of Castleisland (Kerry), Morrissey and the Russian Sailor, (Morrissey came from Templemore, but the song is known all over Ireland) Sean Tracey and Dan Breen (Tipperary) etc., etc., are examples of this narrative type of ballad. Thinking of the other lyrical--type songs one thinks immediately of such popular songs as "The Cliffs of Dooneen", the "Mulcair River", "Carden's Wild Domain", "The Rose of



Newtown Sandes", "My Gentle Cailín Rua", etc., etc., There are, of course, many songs which do not fit into either of these categories, i.e. songs of emigration, laments, etc. etc., In fact many songs would be very difficult to classify at all, i.e. "Glenlee" could be taken as a song of emigration, a humorous song, a song in praise of a place, a narrative ballad of a man's adventures, - and it is all these and more. Many singers just classify their songs as "well-put-together" - i.e. well written or otherwise. For example the writer who penned this verse:

"He entered the house immediately and sat himself by the fire  
The skillet in the corner was the object of his desire  
His nostrils were wide open, and he afterwards did tell  
That in all his travels through Ireland he never got such a smell".

- certainly knew how to describe the qualities and effect of 'MacTigue's <sup>soup</sup> ~~Songs~~'.

On the other hand the writer who said:

"My true love he dwells on the mountain  
Like a war-eagle fearless and free".

was not a folk singer, for folk-singers just do not use that kind of language.

Again, you know that the man/woman who wrote this verse had something to say:

"If my husband was drinking, and what's that to you  
I'd rather he drank it, than gave it to you  
You skinny old miser, you're not worth a chew  
And your marshy old land is no bargain".

*On the other hand*

~~or again~~, you may get a verse like this:

"Come all you lads and lassies and listen to my song  
It is not my intention now for to detain you long,  
The story that I have to tell, as you may plainly see  
My feeble pen can scarcely write, with sorrow and misery.

I find this kind of verse infuriating because the writer is so taken up with the accepted cliches of the folk idiom that he has used up a whole verse without telling you anything ~~xxx~~ whatsoever. After hearing these four lines all you have is the vague idea that the song is going to be a rather dismal and dreary affair, plus the certainty that there are many more cliché-ridden and uninspired verses to follow.

To be continued.