

## Traditional style: the student singer and the folk industry

Sandra Kerr

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Ón gCos go Cluas

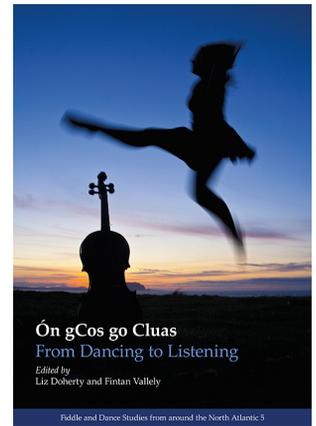
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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### About the author:

**Sandra Kerr** began her long and distinguished career in folk music with Ewan MacColl's Critics Group. Well known as the writer of the music for *Bagpuss* (voted 'best-loved BBC TV children's programme' in 1999), she directs folk choirs (including the award-winning Northumbrian ensemble *Werca's Folk*), and is greatly respected as a tutor of folk arts. The solo album of self-penned songs, *Yellow, Red and Gold* by this multi-instrumentalist is highly regarded; she plays guitar, dulcimer, autoharp and English concertina. She has taught at concertina gatherings including the *Swaledale Squeeze* and *Concertinas at Whitney*, and at the *National Folk Festival Easter School* in Canberra. She performs at all the major folk festivals, solo and with the feminist group *Sisters Unlimited*. Her publications include *My Song Is My Own* (Pluto Press) and *The Song Sampler* (Folkworks). She lectures on the degree programme in Folk and Traditional Music at Newcastle University.

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## Traditional style: the student singer and the folk industry

SANDRA KERR

For Brendan Breathnach, traditional Irish music was ‘essentially the art of solo performance – a gift – to which the musician or singer devotes an apprenticeship of learning’.<sup>1</sup> The term ‘apprenticeship’ is apt. It implies working closely with those who are older and more experienced, understanding the tools of the trade and making and using them in accordance with your craft. Tony Mac Mahon, in his presentation to the Crossroads Conference in Dublin in 1996, making reference to Breathnach’s definition, added, ‘it involves the search for the local footprints of those who have gone before, and it involves a care of not trampling on them when found’.<sup>2</sup> That search for ‘local footprints’ takes us on a path of exploration of the elements that gave the work of great singers of the past – such as Joe Heaney, Elizabeth Cronin, Jeannie Robertson, Belle Stewart, Harry Cox, or Sam Lerner – the stamp of ‘authenticity’ and ‘integrity’, elements which are, of course, sometimes hard to define. Why, for instance would we apply the term ‘traditional’ to the singing of two such startlingly different performances as, say, Bess Cronin of County Cork singing ‘Seoithín Seó’ (see Figure 1), and Sam Lerner with his ‘Butter and Cheese and All’?

Yet, traditional they both undoubtedly are, the authenticity rooted perhaps in the functionality of the pieces: ‘Seoithín Seó’ is a lullaby, clearly, from the soothing text and melismatic quality of the melody, and the intimacy of the singing, and Sam’s song is a piece designed to promote great belly laughs at the discomfiture of the young lover, hidden up a chimney, with the fire lighted below melting his ‘butter and cheese, and all’. Functional, yes, but also skilfully sung – with Cronin’s delicate handling of the tune, her use of glottal stops and mordents, and Lerner’s warm, inclusive way with a song, which someone once described to me as ‘sung through his smile’; his clear identification with the narrative brings to mind the words spoken to Cecil Sharp by Carrie Grover from Maine from whom he took down the ballad ‘Henry Martin’ (also in Sam’s repertoire). She said: ‘when I sing these songs, it seems like I’m the feller it’s all happening to’. That sense of identification with the characters and the trials they encounter in folk songs is perhaps another defining element of traditional singing: ‘Live, live the song’, said Joe Heaney of Connemara, master of the sean-

nós, ‘like drawing a picture’.<sup>3</sup> For a young singer, this can be a more challenging aspect of the craft, since to ‘live a song’ you need to have lived yourself.



**Figure 1** Jean Ritchie talking with Elizabeth Cronin (1879–1956).  
*Ritchie Pickow Archive, p105002, NUI Galway Archives.*

Students who enrol on the BA in Folk and Traditional Music at Newcastle University, do their best, as all students do, to pack as much living into their four years there as they can. On this course, voice is second only to the fiddle as a popular first instrument, and initially the greater part of our student singers’ studies is concerned with technique and vocal skills. Listening to ‘those who have gone before’, analysing, imitating and internalising gives them a solid foundation and appreciation of the expertise involved in the craft they’re apprenticed to; they do not listen to lyric song alone, however, but also to vocalisation, among the exemplars of which is lilter Paddy Breen of Kilmihil, County Clare which gives them a deeper understanding of breath control, rhythmic sense and intonation. Joe Heaney, who came to the teaching of his art at university level later in life, had immensely practical, careful advice, beginning with:

First of all you’ve got to learn the song and develop your own style [...] you’ve got to walk before you run. The main thing is to learn the song and what the song is all about.<sup>4</sup>

But *which* songs? An examination of the repertoire of say, Jeannie Robertson of Aberdeenshire (see Figure 2), will show what breadth and range of material she could call upon; she is said to have known more than 140 songs<sup>5</sup> of a variety of types: lyrical 36%; narrative (ballads) 28%; children’s songs 20%; music-hall/American/drawing room 10%; bawdy song 6%. An object lesson in what the song is all about is given when we consider the centrality of the ballad, ‘Son Davit’, to Jeannie’s repertoire, and its symbolic transformation, resulting from

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the loss of her only son, Jamie ('Jeemsie') who died at the age of eight from meningitis; the song came to embody Jeannie's whole life, taking on the status of a lament for the child from whose death she never recovered.

Her final performances of 'Son Davit' after 1960 reveal a lyric outpouring. Plot no longer had narrative significance, and style was a vehicle for pure emotion. Distilling the life experience of a masterfully 'musical' singer, her delivery had an unforgettable effect on her listeners.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 2** Jeannie Robertson (1908–1975). *Photo by Ian Whitaker, Archives of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh.*

It would be absurd – if not harsh in the extreme – to wish tragedy in the lives of young singers in order that they may better understand and perform the 'big ballads' as Jeannie came to call them. There are other methods: for instance the theories of Stanislavsky (the application of 'the idea of "if" to a role', the concept of 'emotion memory') resonate remarkably with the feelings of empathy expressed by traditional singers referred to earlier in this paper.<sup>7</sup> These techniques, borrowed from the training of actors, are not unknown to our students, who are introduced to them in an attempt to help them get to the heart of that 'pure emotion'. It's an aspect of traditional singing embodied in what another Scots singer from a respected and revered traveller family, Belle Stewart, referred to as 'the coinyach'.<sup>8</sup> It's a term that's hard to define, believed to have come from a Gaelic word meaning 'elegance

of melody'. But for the Stewarts of Blairgowrie it meant authenticity, sincerity, conviction: qualities which Belle had, as also did her daughter Sheila in abundance (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3** Sheila Stewart (1935–2014). *Topic Records*.

But what is the price of this abundance? Singers on the Newcastle course listen avidly to recordings of the old singers, getting quickly, as one student put it ‘to the soul of the music. They grow in confidence, understanding – as another student singer says – ‘that it’s okay to sing in my own voice’. They lilt and diddle for articulation and vocal attack, and to understand the functional nature of the repertoire. They tackle Northumbrian songs with their octave leaps and tripling arpeggios to develop a sense of pitch and extend their vocal range. They learn lyrical Irish laments to understand space, pace and phrasing, and the use of ornamentation. They begin to build a repertoire which reflects the diversity of the folk canon as well as their *personal* relationship with the songs and their own cultural identity. How relevant is all this *industry* to the Folk Industry? An April 2012 web article gave some surprising information:

Folk is thriving. Radio Joint Audience Research figures show that Mike Harding’s weekly folk show attracts an audience of 890,000. Performances from the likes of Don McLean and The Dubliners resulted in 710,000 people watching the show on the Red Button (digital TV) and online via the Radio 2 website.<sup>9</sup>

Sales of folk recordings were said to have increased by 20% during 2011, and sold the highest amount in a century, accounting for 1.6% of all album sales in that year. The sales of individual albums are quite remarkable:

Acts such as Mumford & Sons (Island), Johnny Flynn (Transgressive) and Laura Marling (EMI) whose last album *A Creature I Don’t Know* sold 75,000 copies in 2011 according to Official Chart Company figures, are leading a revival which draws on and feeds back to the more ‘traditional’ acts.<sup>10</sup>

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Are we – inadvertently perhaps – preparing our young singers as ‘traditional acts’ to be taken up and packaged ready for commodification by the Folk Industry? What our student singers choose to do with the gifts they receive in learning ‘the art of solo performance’ is, of course, almost entirely their own affair, and certainly our pedagogy is concerned not at all with fashion and what the folk flavour of the month may be. Our students, anyway, know far more about the ‘folk scene’ than their tutors, some of whom (like me) still think we are part of a ‘folk movement’. Certainly the technical skills they learn would enhance and enrich any professional performance; confidence in and understanding of the material will add gravitas; identification with subject matter and character can deepen passion and sharpen communication, whilst authenticity ensures integrity. All this can proceed from engagement with the lives, the songs and the singing of the likes of those whose voices are cited here, and whom our students hear in the course of their studies. Ewan MacColl, my own tutor and guide when I was a young singer, would agree. Discussing the songs and style of those who are amongst the most authentic and expert of our traditional singers, in his work ‘Travellers’ Songs of England and Scotland’ he advises, succinctly: ‘In his [sic] delivery, the singer is saying: “This is me. This is us. This is our history and our heritage. So listen.”’<sup>11</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tony Mac Mahon, ‘The Beat of a Big Heart’, *Journal of Music*, 1 August 2009, <http://journalofmusic.com/focus/beat-big-heart> [accessed June 2015].

<sup>2</sup> Tony Mac Mahon, ‘Music of the Powerful and Majestic Past’, in *Crosbhealach an Cheoil – The Crossroads Conference 1996*, ed. by Fintan Vallely, Hammy Hamilton, Eithne Vallely, Liz Doherty (Dublin: Whinstone, 1999). See <https://tonymacmahon.wordpress.com/the-language-of-passion-a-paper-by-tony-mac-mahon/> [accessed June 2015].

<sup>3</sup> Steve Coleman, ‘Joe Heaney and Style in *Sean-nós* Singing’, in *Blas: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music*, ed. by Thérèse Smith and Micheál Ó Súilleabháin (Limerick: Irish World Music Centre, University of Limerick, 1997), pp. 31–52 (p. 35).

<sup>4</sup> Coleman, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> James Porter and Herschel Gower, *Jeannie Robertson: Emergent Singer, Transformative Voice*; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press; East Linton: Tuckwell, 1995), pp. 282–286.

<sup>6</sup> Porter and Gower, p. 275.

<sup>7</sup> There are several concise guides to Stanislavski’s methods. See for example, <https://www.bbc.com/education/guides/zxn4mp3/revision/6> [accessed June 2018].

<sup>8</sup> A closely related term, ‘the maysie’ was used by Stanley Robertson, the nephew of Jeannie Robertson. See Mairi McFadyen, ‘*Presencing* Imagined Worlds – Understanding the Maysie: A Contemporary Ethnomusicological Enquiry into the Embodied Ballad Singing Experience’ (University of Edinburgh: unpublished PhD dissertation, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Hazel Davis, *Billboard.biz*; [accessed April 2012 – this web page has been taken down].

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, *Travellers’ Songs from England and Scotland* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 22; reprinted edn (Routledge, 2016).