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Madwoman, Banshee, Shaman: Gender, Changing Performance Contexts and the Irish Wake Ritual

Author

McCoy, Narelle

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Madwoman, Banshee, Shaman: Gender, changing performance contexts and the Irish wake ritual

ABSTRACT TEXT:

This paper will examine the central role of women in Irish keening (*caoineadh*) or ritual lamentation, its “submersion” through the eventual suppression of the rite and its subsequent “de-ritualisation”

The *bean chaointe* (keening woman) inhabited a liminal state between the living and the world of the dead for the duration of the mourning period, entering a kind of “divine madness” which allowed the keener to express the collective outpouring of grief through her voice and body, leading the community in a public expression of sorrow and lament. Because the keener could traverse the parallel worlds and use the power of the voice to guide the soul, the Roman Catholic Church decided to abolish wakes with their attendant laments thereby relegating the community to the position of silent watchers. This presentation will examine the role of the embodied voice, as well as the musical and lyrical content of some existing lament fragments to trace the demise of a pagan ritual which has persisted well into the twentieth century. Key points to be addressed will include an examination of the musical and paramusical characteristics of keening; its social and religious relevance within its original context centring on the function of the *mná caointe* or keening women at funerary rites; the social, political and religious circumstances surrounding its suppression; the musical and cultural contexts in which keening is now expressed.

Vocal music of lament is probably the oldest kind of music to have survived in Ireland. The practice of keening (*caoineadh*) or crying for the dead is a tradition which is associated almost exclusively with women and forms a central part of the Irish wake ritual. The significance of the feminine voice in funerary rites is not peculiar to Ireland but can be found in many cultures throughout the world. However, in Ireland, the stilling of the female voice in the wake ritual has led to a “de-ritualising” of the practice which subsequently has seen its re-emergence in new musical contexts. In order to examine this phenomenon, there are several key points which must be addressed. The first of these concerns the actual definition for keening and the way in which it was expressed.

Defining Keening or *Caoineadh*

There are various types of poetic lament for the dead which include the *caoineadh* or keen performed in the presence of the corpse; the learned bardic elegy or *marbhna* written in syllabic metre and composed by court poets up to the seventeenth century; the learned or semi-learned *marbhna* written from the seventeenth century onwards in an attempt to keep the bardic tradition alive; and finally the death-song which usually recalls some dramatic tragedy but is not an integral part of the rites. All of these laments were performed to music and, as well, there were instrumental laments composed for harp and uilleann pipes (Ó Madagáin 1981, 311). However, only the *caoineadh* necessitates the actual presence of the deceased as it is defined as literally crying for the dead. The Irish antiquarian Thomas Crofton Croker (1884) in his book, “The Keen in the South of Ireland”, records his conversation with a famous keener, Mrs. O’Leary, who, when asked to demonstrate her art, stated “Sure 'tis no use keening unless the corpse is stretched out before one” (101). This reluctance to re-enact the rite may explain that, while there exists music for the death-songs and instrumental laments, there is very little recorded evidence of keening which is notable since the practice persisted into the twentieth century to a time when the tape recorder was certainly in use. However, given that the *caoineadh* was not a matter for entertainment but a fundamental part of the wake ritual, this unwillingness is not surprising. Dr Seán Ó Súilleabháin, formerly Archivist of the Irish Folklore Commission, collected an enormous amount of folklore material from the people in the Gaeltacht or Irish speaking areas, but was never able to convince anyone to

demonstrate the keen (Ó Madagáin 1981, 311). A great deal of anecdotal evidence attests to the superstition surrounding the singing of a keen “out of season” as it is believed to call up death which certainly explains the reluctance of keeners to consent to participate in such a display. However, there are several fragments which have been recorded at funerals and by old women on the Aran Isles which give an echo of the tradition by individuals long after it had ceased to be in general community usage.

While not a great deal of detailed information is available on the musical analysis of Irish keening, there have been several studies of lament in South America, Borneo and Africa, as well as European countries such as Russia and Greece. These studies reveal several cross-cultural commonalities which assist in the creation of a framework for musical analysis. Greg Urban (1988) in his researches into Amerindian Brazilian ritual wailing, defines three code commonalities of diverse wailing manifestations:

(1) the existence of a musical line marked by a characteristic intonational contour and rhythmical structure; (2) the use of various icons of crying; and (3) the absence of an actual addressee which renders wailing an overtly monologic or expressive device, despite the importance that may accrue to its status as public, with the desired presence of someone to 'overhear' it. (386)

He further defines the “icons of crying” as the cry break, the voiced inhalation the creaky voice and the falsetto vowel (Urban 1988, 389-390). These phenomena have primarily two things in common—they fall into the category of vocal quality or timbre as opposed to pitch, rhythm and dynamics, and they are found within human crying. Paul Greene, who studied “professional weeping” among the Tamils of India, also makes reference to the icons of crying and has devised a performance analysis which centres on respiratory features, vocalization features and pitch inflection features (Greene 2000). In 1993 Todd Durham Harvey employed “transcribed methodology” using speech analysis computers to minutely analyse the vocal production of the icons of crying, thereby identifying timbres difficult to capture with traditional transcription. Harvey asserts that vocal gestures of keening are indicative of an overall vocal quality or timbre which is cross-culturally symptomatic of keening, with the dominant vocal quality of the genre a nasal tone (Harvey 1993, 21). Significantly, Elizabeth Tolbert (1994) in her research into Finnish-Karelian laments, states that “the icons of crying alone are not the essential

formal criteria that distinguish the female lament from other genres; rather, it is the presence of texted and melodic stylized crying that characterizes the lament as intrinsically feminine” (180). She further states that “women lamenters ‘cry with words’ as opposed to men who merely ‘cry with their eyes,’ or ordinary crying” (180).

While the aforementioned commonalities of lament can be applied to describe Irish keening, the art of improvised lamentation by women in Ireland became highly developed. Patricia Lysaght states, “As a poetic and song genre, it is part of the Irish language tradition” (Lysaght 1997, 108). Similarly Angela Bourke notes that the Irish word *caoineadh* signifies “a highly articulate tradition of women’s oral poetry” (Bourke 1998, 287). Any framework for analysis needs to take into account the importance of this poetic utterance as demonstrated by formal laments such as *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* or “Lament for Art O’Leary”, (Ó Tuama 1995, 88-90) which is the most outstanding existing example of the genre.

From available material it would appear that Irish keeners worked within a strict tradition and all drew on the same body of motifs, themes and vocalisations. Some of the general musical characteristics of early Irish keening are: the use of recitative style with a falling inflection at the end of each line; the employment of *rosc* metre which had short lines of two or three stresses linked by end-rhyme and arranged in stanzas of uneven length which gave the *caoineadh* a raced and breathless style (Partridge 1981, 27); and the three part structure of a keen which comprised of the salutation, the verse or dirge and finally the *gol* or cry which was taken up by the mourners. Seán Ó Tuama (1995) in his article “The Lament for Art O’Leary” describes the keen as “typically a series of incantatory extempore verses lamenting the dead person, chanted to a recitative like air, and punctuated at regular intervals by wailing cries” (81); while a more detailed description is offered by Seán O Súilleabháin (1967) in “Irish Wake Amusements”:

One stood near the head of the bed or table on which the corpse was laid, one at the feet, who was charged with the care of the candles, and one or more at each side; the family and immediate friends of the deceased sat around near the table. The mourner at the head opened the dirge with the first note or part of the cry; she was followed by the one at the foot with a note or part of equal length, then the long or double part was sung by the two side mourners, after which the

members of the family and friends of the deceased joined in the common chorus at the end of each stanza of the funeral ode or dirge, following as closely as they could the air or tune adopted by the professional mourners. (136)

The salutation acted as a prelude which could be sung or spoken and consisted mainly of the name of the deceased being repeated with embellishments. The verse or dirge which followed was reminiscent of Latin plainchant rather than Irish traditional songs. “There is no musical metre, complete freedom being given to the language with several syllables, sometimes whole phrases being sung on the same note” (Ó Madagáin 1978, 314). The speed marking at which the verse was sung was around a crotchet = 100 which is quite unusual for a dirge. The *gol* usually occurred at the end of each verse and it was taken up by the mourners and consisted mostly of words such as “*och ochone*” or “*alas alas*”. Of the small number of recorded keens available, the two examples on “Songs of Aran” (Ethnic Folkways FM 4002) are “essentially of the *gol* type, although it would seem that they are confused linguistically and blurred in musical outline, perhaps because of the decline of the tradition” (Ó Madagáin 1978, 318).

Mythology and the *bean chaointe*

The second key point to be addressed concerns the relevance of keening within its original context which necessitates an examination of the connection of the lamenter to the Otherworld of Celtic mythology, and to comprehend the importance of keening within that world. The cultural significance of keening as a woman’s ritual can be established by tracing its genealogy in Celtic lore and its intrinsic link to Celtic spirituality. The first sounds of the keen in Ireland are attributed to Brigit, the Triple Goddess of Irish mythology. On the Irish Text Society website, the *Leabhar Gabhála*, or “Book of Invasions”, written in the eleventh century, states that:

Bríg came and keened for her son. At first she shrieked, in the end she wept. Then for the first time weeping and lamentation were heard in Ireland.

Brigit was a “mother-goddess *par excellence*, a seasonal deity, and she presided over the important purification feast of Imbolc” (Green 1995, 436). The goddess was such an integral part of Celtic spirituality that she was given the status of Christian saint by the Roman Catholic Church, thereby appropriating many elements of her cult legend. Her

festival has been Christianised as Candlemas and, in spite of her pagan background, she was one of the most popular of the Celtic saints. In the Scottish tradition it is believed that she was the mid-wife of the Virgin Mary, and in the Outer Hebrides, Christ was known as *Dalta Brìde*, the foster-son of Brigid. (Green 1995, 436). In Ireland, the goddess Brigit had a large shrine at Kildare with a perpetual flame tended by nineteen virgin priestesses known as the Daughters of the Flame. When Christianity appropriated her cult there was a smooth transition as priestesses became nuns and the flame continued to burn for a thousand years before it was declared a pagan symbol and extinguished in the twelfth century. Despite this, the common people continued to flock to Brigid's wells to pray to the saint for healing or favours. These holy wells have also been "viewed as portals between the world of form and spirit, representative of rebirth and of the shamanic journey into the Otherworld and back again" (McCoy 1998, 90). This ongoing veneration of the goddess-saint may explain why she has remained in the Irish psyche for so long. Her association with keening is said to have inspired the song of another supernatural being, the *Beansidhe*, (Banshee) or Woman of the *Sidhe* (the magical Underworld of Celtic lore). This mythical creature, portrayed as having long flowing hair, is associated with mortality, and her keening is purported to be heard through the countryside prior to a death. The origins of the *Beansidhe* are not clear, but there is a belief that she represents a mother-form from the fabled Irish land of *Tir-na-mBan* where it was believed that upon physical death, a soul was reabsorbed into the womb of the Great Mother, or into some other female form, to await rebirth (McCoy 1998, 191).

Breandán Ó Madagáin in his radio program entitled "Hags, Queens and Wisewomen," discusses this traditional world view of Irish rural communities in relation to the figure of the supernatural female who is an overarching presence both in life and in fiction.

This supernatural female figure was invoked in times of crisis and transition such as birth and death. Flesh and blood women would step up and take on, not the role of the supernatural female, but a role of service to the community which was motivated and inspired, reinforced and given meaning to by story and ritual. One of these women was the bean chainte or keening woman. (2006)

The keening woman was an essential presence at funerary rites to ensure that the deceased departed to the Otherworld, and that the journey was as smooth as possible. If

the keen broke out too early, the “devil’s dogs” were alerted and the soul could lose its way. However, the pivotal role she fulfilled was to lead the community in the public expression of sorrow and grief and to carry the group along with her in a type of catharsis.

Elizabeth Tolbert (1994) in her studies into Finnish-Karelian lament notes that “the quality of the lamenter’s crying voice points to the somatization of grief, a process that is only possible through the experiences of the individual body. Thus the quality of the voice itself is crucial to the negotiation between the personal and the collective” (192). It could be viewed in some societies that crying denotes weakness and loss of control; however, Tolbert asserts that “lament performance allows for the creation of women’s ‘affective enclaves’, gender defined spaces of protest, solidarity and affirmation that maintains separateness yet also allows for influence and access to social power...”(192). The very nature of *caoineadh* allows the female keener to express the collective outpouring of grief through her voice and body and the *bean chaointe* (wailing woman) inhabited a liminal state between the living and the world of the dead for the mourning period. Angela Bourke in her article, *The Irish traditional lament and the grieving process*, cites evidence from lament texts that attest to this state and the ideal keener is described as a woman who is barefoot and dishevelled, her hair loose, her clothes torn and she travels across the countryside, not on the roads which have been imposed on the landscape by the community. In fact, in her poetry she reclaims nature as a witness to the chaos imposed by death, saying for example that “the birds have fallen silent” (Bourke 1988, 289). The *bean chaointe* is imbued with a kind of holy madness and often drinks the blood of the deceased. This association with blood is a common theme and there are several examples, most notably in “The Lament for Art O’Leary” where his wife drank his blood from her palms. In the eighth stanza she proclaims:

*Your blood ran in streams
I did not wait to clean it up,
But drank it up with my palms*

(Colum 2001)

This reference to the ritual of blood drinking occurs in other stories in Irish literature, for example in Deidre’s Lament for the Sons of Uisneach and Emer’s Lament for Cú

Chulainn. Angela Partridge, in *Wild Men and Wailing Women* suggests that keeners in this state of divine madness are indicative of people in transition, or outside the normal structure of society, a state necessary for the *bean chaointe* to escort the souls of the dead to the other world. The keener, in her state as “marginalised from the community, aligns herself with the corpse addressing the dead person as a member of the community of those living, but one who is about to defect” (Bourke 1988, 290). Similarly in Finnish-Karelian lament, the lamenter acts as a go-between bridging the worlds of the living and the dead. “The display of the icons of crying in the lamenter’s voice is itself the means to travel to the other world; the crying manner of performance along with other ritual actions...enables the lamenter to ‘go to *Tuonela*’”, the land of the dead (Tolbert 1994, 182). Bourke (1988) describes the function of the lamenter as “a sort of grief therapist” who led the assemblage in the act of expressing their own grief. She tried to shock the community by the juxtaposition of the mundane and the terrible with “a series of images from normal life...followed by a brutally realistic description of the weight of the cold earth of the grave” (289). Part of the tradition also included the upbraiding of the dead, calling on them to arise and plough their fields or accusing them of ill treatment of their loved ones. This also had a cathartic affect on the immediate family giving them a chance to air frustrations with the deceased and allowing them to move on with their lives. As well as acting as a mediator between the living and the dead the keener also served another purpose in that the wake ritual “delimited the boundaries in time and space for intense grieving for the dead” (Lysaght 1997, 77). This meant that the community could resume its normal pattern of life once the funerary rites were concluded having expressed its grief through the intercession of the *bean chaointe*.

The Suppression of Keening

The next key point to be addressed concerns the stilling of the female voice in the wake ritual. The political, social and religious circumstances surrounding the suppression of keening can be traced to the post-Reformation period of the Roman Catholic Church. There are reports as early as the sixteenth century that visitors to Ireland found the practice of keening distasteful and savage. The practice of keening is described by a traveller in Kildare in 1683: “as soon as the bearers have taken up the body, they begin

their shrill cries and hideous hootings... and so they proceed towards the church; this now may be heard two miles or more” (O Súilleabháin 1967, 135). The early church decided to ban keening, as the extravagant outpourings of grief were deemed inappropriate and un-Christian. However, one of the main concerns of the Roman Catholic Church was the lack of reference to an afterlife in the keening ritual. There were stringent sanctions imposed on parishes which ignored these regulations. O Súilleabháin (1976) observes that the Synod of Dublin in June 1670 ordered each priest in the country to “make every effort in his power to bring to an end the wailings and screams of female keeners who accompanied the dead to the graveyard” (138-40). He also notes that excommunication was threatened for recalcitrant women, as shown in the decree made in the Diocese of Leighlin in 1748 whereby it was forbidden to allow:

the heathenish customs of loud cries and howlings at wakes and burials are practiced amongst us, (which are) contrary to the express commandment of St. Paul... forbidding such cries and immoderate grief for the dead, as if they were not to rise again... all Parish Priests and religious laymen of this Diocese are hereby strictly charged and commanded... to use all possible means to banish from Christian burials such anti-Christian practice ...on as many men and women as will loudly cry or howl at burials. But as to such men and women as we decree and declare that for the first crime of this kind they shall not be absolved by any but by the Ordinary or his representatives, and in case of a relapse (sic), the aforesaid criers or rhymes are to be excluded from Mass and the Sacraments, and in case of perseverance in this detestable practice, they are to be excommunicated and denounced (138-140).

Keening further became a target in the nineteenth century, when the post-Tridentine Roman Catholic Church made a concerted effort to reshape the religious and moral life of the Catholic population. The attempt to regulate the mourning rites reveals some important insights into the wake ritual. Ireland had been Christian for over a thousand years but “the lack of references to the Christian afterlife...portrayed as an outrage, is marked by the glorification of the earthly life...and is accompanied by displays of grief considered immoderate and inconsistent with the Christian belief in salvation”(Lysaght 1997, 68). The Catholic Rosary for the dead sat comfortably beside the pagan *caoineadh* in the minds of the rural Irish, creating a difficult task for the reforming church. The Roman Catholic clergy set an agenda of modernisation for its parishioners in an attempt to rid them of what they perceived to be pagan superstitions. The clergy was “becoming

more Protestant in their conversation and manners” and wanted nothing better than to turn its back on the past practices of the old “Celtic” Christianity (Connolly 1987, 52).

The wake ritual was further targeted when regulations were introduced concerning the removal of a corpse to a church on the second night of the wake. This abbreviated the keening ritual and it began to lose momentum. Another influence on the demise of keening was “the rise of a conservative middle class Catholic laity modelling itself on a Protestant elite with strong Victorian values, for whom funerary rituals involving lively wakes and lamentation for the dead were an embarrassment” (Lysaght 1997, 69). The decline of the Irish language and the effects of the Great Famine, or *An Gorta Mor*, combined with previously mentioned factors, saw the ritual almost die out, while other characteristics were absorbed and appropriated. The wake lament was not only a pagan remnant of the past but it was a woman’s ritual. It was not appropriate to have women as the conduit between earth and the afterlife, this being the sole province of the priest. Women keeners were whipped in public by priests at graveyards as they tried to keener the dead, as late as the beginning of the twentieth century (O Súilleabháin 1976, 143). It is this suppression by the Roman Catholic Church combined with previously discussed mitigating factors which have led to a gradual “de-ritualising” of the rite which has subsequently led to an emergence of new forms that bear the remnants of a tradition which appears to be embedded in the Irish psyche.

Musical and cultural contexts of contemporary keening

The focus of this research posits that keening is now expressed in a variety of contexts, some apparent and others more subtle. It has moved from a ritual form to an “art” form, where subjects normally considered taboo can be examined without censure. Aspects of keening can be heard in various forms that include: traditional folk song which encompasses laments from the diaspora, songs of lost love, rebellion, comic keening; Marian laments; theatrical recreations of laments in plays by authors such as John Millington Synge and popular music. The Marian laments are of particular interest as they hark back to the belief that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was a keening woman. Angela Partridge (1981) traces the similarities between the Virgin and the *bean chaointe*

noting that Mary often was portrayed as barefoot, walking in the wilderness with loosened hair, that she drank blood and screamed at the soldiers who were crucifying Christ (29-32). The following is an excerpt of a Marian lament recorded on *Celtic Voices-Women of Song*:

*Is airiú! Who hangs from
Yonder passion tree?
Your son dear mother, Do you not know me?
Judas, James and John
Have you seen my only son?
Ochon! My eyes are blind!
Ochon! My heart is wrung!*

In this Passion Song, Mary keens for her son with the cry “ochon” or “alas”, the same lamentation found in the *gol* which was discussed earlier. She describes the grief visited on her at the loss of her son and her anguish as she searches for him. This identification of the Virgin with the art of caoineadh was “one of the ways women in Ireland asserted their right to take charge of the death ritual in the face of strong opposition from the Catholic clergy” (Bourke 1988, 290). In recent times the Marian laments have been recorded in the popular idiom by several artists. The version cited previously from *Celtic Voices-Women of Song*, has been blended with a Latin carol and “reworked” by the American singer Connie Dover thereby removing any ritual meaning and imbuing it with an ambient, somewhat romanticised quality. In a further deritualising of the lament form, the Marian laments are often performed by men. One famous exponent was Joe Heaney, a Connemara native who was a master of *séan-nos* style (unaccompanied traditional singing in Irish). Angela Partridge comments on Heaney’s interpretation stating that:

...laments were religious songs such as Caoineadh na dTrí Muire, (“The Lament of the Three Marys”) which he recorded and made famous, but which were considered...as being women’s songs. In fact their sacred songs were felt to function both as prayers and as direct substitutes for the caoineadh... which was suppressed by the Church

(1983, par.1)

The influence of keening also can be heard in traditional folk songs which provide a link from the past and offer evidence of the community’s desire, whether conscious or unconscious, to retain vestiges of the lament form. In “*Bás In Eirinn: Cultural Constructions of Death in Ireland*”, Lawrence J. Taylor suggests that a “‘cult of death’

has emerged in the political realm, where powerful symbolic performance and emotional display is...a feature of dying, wakes and funerals” (175). He also suggests that the “cult of political martyrdom” has played a “vital, symbolic role in the ‘troubles’ in the North of Ireland” (175). The powerful emotions evoked by songs of the rebellion are further heightened by examples which have characteristics of lament style. An early instance is cited by Ó Madagáin (1981) in the example of *Gol na mban ’san ar* (“The cry of the women at the massacre”) which was reported to have been sung by women searching for dead loved ones after one of Cromwell’s attacks (317). In more recent time folk songs from composers such as Tommy Makem describing the “troubles” feature similar themes. “Four Green Fields” portrays an old woman lamenting the death of her three sons. However, the old woman is Ireland and her “sons” are actually the provinces of Munster, Leinster and Connacht, while the fourth green field, the northern province of Ulster, remains “in strangers’ hands”. Another such song, “The Bold Fenian Men”, was written by Peadar Kennedy and concerns the massacre of the Fenians.

*Twas down by the glenside, I met an old woman
She was picking young nettles and she scarce saw me coming
I listened a while to the song she was humming
Glory O, Glory O, to the bold Fenian men*

The old woman of the song is, once again, Ireland personified, and she commemorates the death of the young men, conjuring up the sight of their valour for the passer by in much the same way that traditional keeners elevated the deceased with vibrant praise. The final line of each verse “Glory O, Glory O, to the bold Fenian men” is reminiscent of the *gol* mentioned previously; however, instead of crying “alas, alack” the composer has used the death of the young men as a call to arms. It is notable that these ballads originally were written and performed by men and, although the style is not constructed musically in the same form as a *caoineadh* the textual references are obvious.

In the communal tradition of the wake ritual “the matter of culture and the matter of history mingle in ways which articulated in traditional symbolic language both a commentary on, and a resistance to, social forces threatening the continuance of old ways and old mentalities” (Ó Crualaoich 1998, 193). During the diaspora, the wake took on a new meaning for those emigrants who were forced to leave their country and an

extension of the ritual became known as the American wake where the loved one leaving Ireland, never to return, is keened as though dead. “Unlike traditional wakes, the American wake observed a metaphorical death, the death of the ‘exile’... (who) would never return to Ireland, not even to be buried” (Bynan 2002, 218-219). Recently, the tragedy of the Irish diaspora has been commoditised into modern entertainment in the form of “Riverdance”, which concentrates on the emigration of a couple to America. The second half of the show is entitled “American Wake”, and focuses on the forced immigration of the Irish in the 1850s during the Great Famine. The joyous and exuberant dancing portrayed in “American Wake” has little or no bearing on the overwhelming grief and despair felt by the emigrant and the family left behind. The ritual loses its meaning and is “commercially cleansed ready for easy...consumption”(Bynan 2002, 234). The phenomenal success of “Riverdance” is indicative of the enormous numbers of people around the globe who claim Irish heritage or feel an affinity with the culture, and who are eager consumers of this easily digested, repackaged nostalgia.

When examining Irish popular music, it is possible to identify a number of artists who use vocal techniques reminiscent of keening. One such performer is Sinéad O’Connor who manipulates her voice to produce a stark, hard quality, using emphasis on consonants and the glottal stop for dramatic effect. Her voice has been described as a “banshee wail” by many popular rock music journalists, and this refers to her ability to crescendo from pianissimo to fortissimo in a very short space of time. This has an aspect of keening, with the voice wailing in an ululating cry reminiscent of the *gol*. Of course, O’Connor is aided by studio techniques, but the effect is grounded in tradition. These vocal qualities become more obvious in her interpretation of the song, “I am stretched on your grave” which reveals distinct elements of the keen. The voiced inhalation or gasp of breath, the harsh nasal tone and the creaky voice are all apparent, and all, in fact, are integral to Sinéad O’Connor’s vocal quality. Bare-footed and shaven-headed O’Connor echoes the keeners of pre-Christian times, often distanced from community by appearance and gesture. Another artist whose voice has characteristics similar to those found in keening is Delores O’Riordan. At times she has been criticised for copying Sinéad O’Connor’s hard-edged vocal style but both women share a similar vocal quality

and are able to produce a “natural fierceness” in their voices which has its roots in *séan-nos* or unaccompanied singing. O’Riordan’s unique sound has the hallmark cry break and nasal tone which is aptly demonstrated in tracks such as “Zombie” about the conflict in Northern Ireland. Her vocal quality serves as the perfect tool to convey her anger and sorrow at the senseless loss of lives, just as the keeners of old raged against the inevitability of death.

Resonance

The female voice in the pre-Christian keening ritual was essential for the safe passage of the soul in its journey to the afterlife. Even after the advent of Christianity, women in Ireland continued to fulfill this function, despite strong opposition by the Roman Catholic clergy. The ritual lament was “valued and felt to be an essential part- perhaps a container- of human culture” (Bourke, 1988: 290). Keening women were the means through which the community could traverse the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead, and their skill allowed life to resume its normal rhythm after the mourning period. The stilling of the female voice in this rite has led to the re-emergence of elements of the practice, though in a de-ritualised form where the gendering of the tradition is altered and popular styles have appropriated characteristics of *caoineadh*. Though the practice has now died out, the echoes of this powerful vocal medium still linger in the cultural memory albeit radically altered in expression and meaning.

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