Echoes of the Banshee: The changing voice of Irish women

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INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this research was prompted by a comment in the preface of an Irish song book concerning the lack of ‘women’s music’ in the canon of traditional Irish folk music. This in turn initiated an exploration of the woman’s role in Irish music and the subsequent discovery that the female voice had been essential in the funerary rites of the pre-Christian keening ritual, but over time that voice had been stilled. This paper will attempt to trace a genealogy of the tradition of keening in Ireland and its significance as a feminine ritual. It will also examine the ramifications of the suppression of the practice and its re-emergence as a ‘de-ritualised’ art form. The key questions to be addressed include: What is keening and how was it expressed? What was its social and religious relevance within its original context? What were the political, social and religious circumstances surrounding its suppression? What are the musical and cultural contexts in which keening is now expressed?

DEFINING KEENING OR CAOINEADH

In order to answer the first question, what is keening and how was it expressed, it is necessary to create a definition for keening which has musical and cultural references. Vocal music of lament is probably the oldest kind of Irish music to have survived. There are various types of poetic lament for the dead. However keening or caoineadh is performed only in the presence of the corpse and is defined literally as crying for the dead. “Sure 'tis no use keening unless the corpse is stretched out before one” (Croker, 1844:101).

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, 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. (1988: 386)

He further defines the icons of crying as the “cry break, the voiced inhalation, the creaky voice and the falsetto vowel” (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 (http://www.research.umbc.edu/eol/5/greene/index.html, accessed 7 June 2004).

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. This clinical study was carried out in conjunction with field research. The resulting transcribed sound waves serve to show that the elements of keening are, to a greater or lesser extent, affected by performers. Harvey also asserts that vocal gestures of keening are symptomatic 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 (1993: 21).
While these commonalities can be applied to describe Irish keening, it is important to note that, in Ireland, the art of improvised lamentation by women became highly developed. Patricia Lysaght states, “As a poetic and song genre, it is part of the Irish language tradition” (1997: 108). Similarly Angela Bourke notes that the Irish word caoineadh signifies “a highly articulate tradition of women’s oral poetry” (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 Úi Laoghaire (Lament for Art O’Leary).

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; and the 3 part structure of a keen which comprised of the salutation, the verse or dirge and finally the gol or cry which was echoed by the mourners (O Madaghain, 1978: 312-313).

There is very little recorded evidence of keening in Ireland which is significant since the practice persisted into the 20th Century – a time when the tape recorder was certainly in use. However, given that the caoineadh was not a matter for entertainment but an integral part of the wake ritual, this 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 willingly. 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 participate. However, there are several fragments which have been recorded at funerals and by old women such as Mrs Derraine on the Aran Isles, which give an echo of the tradition by individuals long after it had ceased to be in general community use (O Madaghain, 2006).

CELTIC MYTHOLOGY

In order to address the second question concerning the relevance of keening within its original context, it is necessary to examine 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. In the The Book of Invasions or Leabhar Gabhála, written in the 11th Century it is stated:

Brig 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. (http://members.aol.com/lochlan2/lebor.htm accessed 15 March 2003)

This goddess figure was such an integral part of Celtic spirituality that she was given the status of Christian saint by the Church, thereby appropriating many elements of her legend, with the result that her cult is found widely over Europe. This veneration of the goddess-saint has remained in the Irish psyche and her association with keening is said to have inspired the song of another supernatural being, the Beansidhe or Woman of the Sidhe (the mythical Underworld). This creature from Celtic lore is associated with mortality, and her keening is said to be heard at night, prior to a death.

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 (O Súilleabáin, 1967). However, the pivotal role that the keener fulfilled was to lead the community in the public expression of sorrow and grief and to carry the group along with her. The keen was essentially an interactive performance that demanded a response (O Madaghain, 2006).

Evidence from lament texts present the ideal keener or bean chaointe as a woman who is barefoot and disheveled. Her hair is loose, her clothes may be torn and she travels across country not on 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 1998: 287). She is imbued with a kind of holy madness and often drinks the blood of the deceased to align herself with him rather than the continuing life of the community. 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 (1980: 36).

THE SUPPRESSION OF KEENING

The political, social and religious circumstances surrounding the suppression of keening stem from the post-Reformation period of the Catholic Church. The early Catholic 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 Church was the lack of reference to an afterlife in the keening ritual. There were stringent sanctions imposed on parishes which ignored these regulations. Excommunication was also threatened for recalcitrant women, as shown in the decree made in the Diocese of Leighlin in 1748 (O Súilleabháin, 1967). Keening further became a target in the nineteenth century, when the post-Tridentine Catholic Church made a concerted effort to reshape the religious and moral life of the Catholic population. The Catholic clergy, conscious of their growing status within Irish society, were “becoming more Protestant in their conversation and manners” and were thus “anxious to distance themselves from the less sophisticated elements of their religious heritage” (Connolly 1987: 52-53).

Regulations concerning the removal of a corpse to a Church on the second day of the wake 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 Protestant values. These two factors saw the ritual almost die out, while other characteristics were absorbed and appropriated. The wake lament and wake games were not only pagan remnants of the past but they challenged the notion of heaven and hell, and more importantly, they were 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 keen the dead, as late as the beginning of the twentieth century (O Súilleabháin, 1967). It is this suppression by the Church and resulting ‘de-ritualising’ which has subsequently led to an emergence of new forms of caoineadh 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 presents the concept 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. These various forms include: traditional folk song which encompasses laments from the Diaspora, songs of lost love, rebellion, comic keening; Marian Laments in the séan-nos or traditional unaccompanied style; popular music featuring Sinead O’Connor and Dolores O’Riordan and theatrical recreations of laments in plays by authors such as John Millington Synge

The influence of keening 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. Songs such as A Stór Mo Chroí are typical of the ‘American Wake’ song where a loved one leaves Ireland, never to return and is keened as though dead. Recently, the tragedy of the Irish Diaspora has been translated 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 is set at a crossroads, once a popular place for open air dancing in Ireland, but also indicative of the choices faced by the emigrant and the metaphorical death by forced migration the departing one experienced.

Another well known song from the Diaspora, Paddy’s Lament, has been recorded recently by Sinead O’Connor on her album Séan-nos Nua in a popular rather than traditional style. As one of the functions of popular music is to entertain, this further serves to remove any ritual significance from the
lament. O’Connor’s interpretation echoes the original *caoineadh* style. Her voice in the first verse has minimal accompaniment which enhances the poignant quality of the words and the falling contour at the end of each verse. She also demonstrates several of the vocal qualities associated with keening. She 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, which 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 chant. Of course, O’Connor is aided by studio techniques, but the effect is grounded in the ancient tradition. Another song, *I am stretched on your grave*, shows distinct elements of a keen with a falling inflection at the end of each line, a recitative-like quality, a limited pitch range and lyrics which address the dead lover in an intimate fashion. The voiced inhalation or gasp of breath, the harsh nasal tone and the creaky voice are all apparent, and are, if fact, integral to Sinead 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 Sinead 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 *sèan-nos* or unaccompanied singing. O’Riordan’s unique sound has the hallmark cry break and nasal tone which is aptly demonstrated in the track *Zombie* about the conflict in Northern Ireland.

**CONCLUSION – ECHOES**

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 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. Though the practice has now died out, the echoes of this powerful vocal expression continue to resonate in the voices of Irish women and their music.

**REFERENCES**


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