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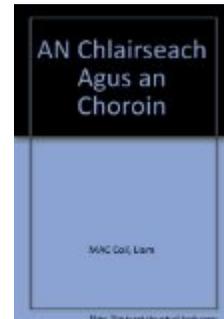
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Liam Mac Cóil. *An Chlairseach Agus an Choróin*. Indreabhán Co. na Gaillimhe: Leabhar Breac, 2010. 414 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-0-89833-245-2.

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While this book ostensibly analyzes the seven symphonies of the Anglo-Irish composer Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924), written between 1876 and 1911 as Ireland lurched towards Home Rule and civil war, it is much more a work of historiography, trenchantly questioning the way in which Irish history continues to be viewed as a subset of British history. One of the greatest writers writing in Ireland today, Liam Mac Cóil remains virtually unknown outside the Irish-speaking world, mostly because he chooses to write about the Gael in Irish, a deliberate gesture to the Daniel Corkerys and Diarmaid Ferriters, who seek the greatest audience and therefore write in English. He furthermore persists in hiding his themes behind dry subjects. Several reviewers consider *Fontenoy*, his brilliant 2006 novel that engages with the subject of Irish involvement in the War of Austrian Succession, to be little more than a work of historical fiction, but it is nothing of the kind—it is a strident and imaginative call for the reclamation of Irish Gaelophone culture, even if that reclamation is a re-imagining. *Fontenoy* is only a hatpeg on which Mac Cóil is hanging a many-colored tricorne of importance far beyond that of the peg itself—an approach that is reprised in this historical sketch of Stanford.

An Chlairseach agus an Choróin has all the appearance of an academic monograph, with appendices, bibliographies, discographies, illustrations, and footnotes, but Mac Cóil, writing defiantly in the first person, is quick to let the reader know that he has scant regard for the form, which causes a (deliberate, in his view) *Entfremdung* in the reader (p. 370). Indeed, one feels that Mac Cóil might even be parodying academic style and apparatus in this book, as when he uses a footnote on p. 246 to correct his observation in the text that there is a pic-

ture of Elizabeth II hanging over the main stairway of the Royal College of Music in London (it is, in fact, the Queen Mother), or when he uses a footnote on p. 324 to suggest that he may be inventing his ancestors. Within that parody, however, we find a strident discussion of Irishness, colonialism, and Gaelness (so foreign a concept to English-speakers, even in Ireland, that there is no English word for it). Mac Coil spends a great deal of time on Stanford's possible identity crisis (Irish or English?), a status precipitated by his background. Difficult to categorize, Stanford grew up a member of the Dublin Protestant Ascendancy, but moved to Cambridge early in life where he had to deal with being framed by the English as a mere teacher of great composers rather than a great composer himself. Contradictorily a Protestant, Unionist, and Irish nationalist, Stanford was all but stateless after Irish independence 1922, and part of this book's intention is to interrogate this precariousness in identity as Home Rule grew to reality in Ireland.

Mac Cóil perhaps best positions Stanford in his note on the similarities between Irish Protestantism and Gaelic Irish culture: both are being drowned by "the american disinterest of the anglophone semi-roman catholics of the country" (note his refusal to capitalize these words) (p. 106). But this raises profound questions about Gaelic culture. What does it mean to be Gaelic, but not necessarily Irish? Is Mac Cóil suggesting (as it seems) that Gaelic culture is somehow defined by what it is not, or by what the colonialists destroyed? This suggests that the tree is somehow defined by the lumberjack. It does sometimes seem that Mac Cóil is defining "Gaelic" (not "Irish") as all things Irish that are not Anglophone. Mac Cóil, perhaps aware of this definition's contrarian basis, fights back when he returns to two things that set

the culture apart: its language and its community, both of which he believes to be under attack. He notes (pp. 132-133), for example, that much recent “scholarly” work has deliberately set about “erasing” Irish from the country’s English-language cultural slate, as Hugh Shields did in a 1998 edition of James Goodman’s pipe tunes by silently “translating” all the Irish titles, thus making it seem that the tunes were all performed by English-speakers.[1]

As to the “Irishness” of Stanford’s work, Mac Cól vacillates. On the one hand, he hears the echoes of the Irish landscape in such works as his famous third (“Irish”) symphony (p. 239), but on the other hand he acknowledges that there is no small amount of Thomas Moore’s romantic Ireland in Stanford’s work too (pp. 112-113). But where does Gaelic culture fit into this discussion of Stanford’s music? If language (and the culture behind it) is so central to Mac Cól’s thesis, it seems odd that Stanford had absolutely no interest in it, and seems likely never to have heard a traditional song sung in Irish (p. 170). Stanford’s view on the role of Gaelic music is clear in his book *The History of Music*, where not a single word is spoken about it.[2] And yet Stanford wrote “The Irish Symphony,” six “Irish Rhapsodies,” and several other Irish-themed works. Why? Certainly it has everything to do with identity, and Mac Cól suggests that an ongoing debate about Irishness at Cambridge University might have prompted Stanford to compose such material (p. 199).

Mac Cól deepens his analysis by considering the role of the listener in determining the characteristics of music. Continuing an argument begun in *Fontenoy*, he suggests that it is in the ear of the sympathetic Gael that Gaelic music is heard, and perhaps less so in the pen of the composer. *Pobal* (local community) is a central theme in the book—there is no singer without an audience, and the Gaelic writer and musician only exist by membership in that community. Readers, listeners, and viewers complete the social association inherent in the meaning of this word. Echoes of this emerge in a fascinating comparison of the English and Gaelic versions of the Psalms, in which Mac Cól suggests that the English versions in Anglican songbooks were triumphalist and colonialist while the Gaelic versions were “softer and simpler” (p. 193). It is not clear if this is meant to place Stanford (who knew no Irish) among the colonial chauvinists, but a Whorfian psycholinguistic discussion like this needs more precision, time, and analysis. Is it the speaker or the language (or the listener?) that makes a psalm sound militaristic? Of course, this argument is closely related to ongoing discussions about militarism in national

anthems.[3]. Mac Cól is on surer ground when he analyzes the various versions of “Jerusalem” that accompanied British colonialization through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (pp. 273-286), but suddenly seems at a loss to place Stanford when he discusses Stanford’s jingoistic naval music compositions “Songs of the Sea” (1904) and “Songs of the Fleet” (1910) (p. 196).

This analysis of “Jerusalem” returns Mac Cól to the theme of colonial propaganda and cultural framing. “Jerusalem,” written by William Blake in 1804 and set to music by Stanford’s contemporary and erstwhile friend Hubert Parry in 1916, developed the status of an alternative national anthem almost immediately after its first performance. Heavily biblical in language, “Jerusalem” represents the country-pubs-and-cricket-whites image of England (“a green and pleasant land”) that was distributed universally until very recently, and which many colonies imbibed without question (p. 273). But there is no place for Ireland in Jerusalem. Neither colony nor province, is it perhaps a suburb (p. 274)? In the end, the only solution for Mac Cól is an Irish Jerusalem (again uncapitalized).

But it is in his discussion of works such as the essays of Hubert Butler that Mac Cól shines, when he combines opinion, argument, and authority to present insights on modern Irish culture, which “sucks American culture in with its mother’s milk” (p. 208) and continues to reject Gaelic music as provincial and unsuitable for national or international status.[4] But Gaelic music, suggests Mac Cól, was never intended for the national or the international stage, and certainly not for the concert hall (p. 209). What we consider to be Gaelic music nowadays is dance music, its repetition a function of its use as dance accompaniment (p. 210). Mac Cól imagines Seán Ó Riada, the highly influential Irish composer of the sixties, being forced to choose between “local” and “national” music when seeking a path, and missing fame for having chosen the local, while Stanford took the king’s shilling and chose the national (p. 211). Local music is just that—it has no aspirations to the international stage. It had to be sidelined while Ireland sought its cultural place among the nations, and that place could not be found using waulking songs, keens, or traditional dance music (p. 223). If this continuing problem is to be solved, Gaelic music needs to be reevaluated (p. 280).

This book, a sometimes meandering first-person journey through Stanford’s seven symphonies, took seven years to write, as Mac Cól cast about for meaning and identity in Stanford’s work. It is not clear that he finds

it, however. In the final pages it seems that he rejects the grand debate. No more national culture; no more intercultural misunderstandings and hostilities—“it’s only us, our friends, our relations, our families, our communit[ies].... In other things there is nothing but supposition and ideological pride” (pp. 314-315). Where this leaves Stanford or Gaelic culture is unclear. Has Mac Cóil concluded that all musical response is in the moment and affected by situation (p. 317)? No amount of annotation can change the fact that, as he puts it, you cannot listen to the same symphony twice. It seems that his tacit point is that the historian reads history as the listener hears music—subjectively and ephemerally. The Gael, unless he chooses otherwise, reads (and writes) as a victim, while the colonialist, reading only sources that match his beliefs (and language), writes as monocultural victor.

One sometimes gets the feeling, however, that Mac Cóil is lamenting the destruction of Gaelic culture without evidence. No mention is made of RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta, which almost fetishizes Gaelic music, nor of TG4, the national Irish-language television station that has done so much to promote the Gaelic music form since 1996. How can Mac Cóil not have mentioned Gael-Linn, the corporation that has done so much to promote Irish indigenous music since the 1950s and which issued Seán Ó Riada’s groundbreaking, traditionally-tinged orchestral soundtrack to the film *Mise Éire* in 1959? That is, while Mac Cóil laments the state of Gaelic music, there seems to be ample evidence for its revival, and not just through the medium of the English language.

More troublingly, Mac Cóil laments repeatedly that there is no institution to develop Gaelic music as classical music was developed by the various national academies around the world, and that only an Irish-language institution can understand Gaelic music. Yet nowhere do I find reference to Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ), an international, government-recognized organization for the promotion of Irish traditional music in all its forms. Since 1998 CCÉ has developed an Irish traditional mu-

sic curriculum and examination system with the approval and support of the Irish government. While CCÉ is not yet a national academy, it is a magnificent first step and should have been acknowledged by Mac Cóil.

This is nevertheless a great book, raising troubling questions about how the historical process counterfeits objectivity and how we foolishly continue to see Ireland only in terms of Britain while absolutely refusing to read primary or secondary sources in any language other than English. As in *Fontenoy*, Mac Cóil is writing an alternative history of the Gael, taking that right away from the victor-colonialist. He is putting the Gael alongside Anglophone culture and removing him as a subset of that culture (this has yet to happen in America, where Irish studies is almost always a subset of British studies). Because he knows that history is fiction, and that it is used as a political tool, he very consciously (and very rightly) proposes that the Gael rewrite history. As he says, most profoundly, his feet firmly planted on the floor of Club Ráth Chairn, his local community center, *gineann muid ár sinsear [agus] ní bhíonn duine gan aird i measc a phobail féin* (we beget our ancestors, and nobody is overlooked in his own community) (p. 324). It is a thought-provoking first step towards a reevaluation of Ireland on its own terms, not those of Anglophone colonialists or outsiders.

Notes

[1]. James Goodman, *Tunes of the Munster Pipers: Irish Traditional Music from the James Goodman Manuscripts*, vol. 1, ed. Hugh Shields (Dublin: Irish Traditional Music Archive, 1998).

[2]. Charles Villiers Stanford, *A History of Music* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

[3]. See, for example, Kevin Myers “We do not have a Settled Identity for Our Anthem,” *Irish Independent*, February 25, 2010.

[4]. Hubert Butler, *Independent Spirit: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1996).

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