

PREAB MEADAR – THE BLOOD OF DRIED BONES

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This paper presents discussion of an investigation undertaken into the lyrical structures of a dead Gaelic tradition, connected intrinsically with language and its place in its society; it shows the use of this tradition's poetic meters as templates for the creation of new music typologies and instances.

As Aodh De Blacam (1890–1951) comments, Irish Gaelic society prior to the final English conquest of Ireland (a campaign that took 500 years to complete between the Norman invasion in 1169 and the plantation of Ulster in 1652) was unrecognisable to the Ireland of today¹. Of greater relevance it was irreconcilably different to the feudal kingdoms of its European neighbours. Being a tribal society, it was broken into many petty kingdoms (De Blacam 1920: 100–101).

The *file* (the Gaelic poet, plural *fili*) had a significant and crucial role in the Gaelic order, acting as the eulogizer of his patron, and receiving substantial reward and position in return (De Blacam 1920: 92).²

1. Robin Flower in *The Irish Tradition* (Flower: 1947:164–173) gives a revealing account of the decline of the status of the Gaelic poet (*file*) in Ireland in the 17th century. With the Gaelic political order finally overthrown the poet could no longer find political patronage and was inexorably pursued by the newly planted* English settlers and officials. He gives an account of a soldier of Oliver Cromwell's model army seizing a poet, a MacBrodin of Clare, casting him over a cliff and shouted after him "sing your ran now little man". De Blacam (1920: 99) contextualises this enmity of the English conqueror to the Irish Bardic poet, who he explains acted as a propagandist, or a sort of "poetic journalist," for the Gaelic political cause.
- * "Planter" is a term used to describe the new English settlers who were settled on seized and cleared Gaelic lands during the English conquest of Ireland. The plantations occurred piecemeal over the Tudor and Stewart period with varying levels of success.
2. Contextualising the work and role of the *file*, Osborn Bergin writes: "*Bardic Poetry of any period is easily distinguished by its form. A great deal of it is not really what a modern critic would call poetry in the higher sense. But though it may lack inspiration, it is never wanting in artistic finish. For we must remember that the Irish file or bard was not necessarily an inspired poet. That he could not help. He was,*

The performance of the work of the *filí* was described in an account of the 5th Earl and Marquis de Clanrickarde, Ulick De Burgh (1604–1657) in his memoirs (published in 1722). He says (as quoted by Irish scholar and linguist Bergin):

“The Action and Pronunciation of the Poem in the Presence [...] of the Principal person it related to, was performed with a great deal of Ceremony, in a Consort of Vocal and instrumental Musick. The poet himself said nothing, but directed and took care, that everybody else did his part right. The bards having first had the Composition from him, got it well by heart, and now pronounced in orderly, keeping even pace with a Harp, touch’d upon that Occasion; no other musical instrument being allowed of for the said purpose than this alone.” (Bergin 1970: 8)

There is no record of what this harp music sounded like, but the fact that the poetry had such rhythmic qualities and was composed to be retained in memory rather than on paper, and was recited with measured rhythm, leave intriguing possibilities to the creative imagination³.

Brian Manners (2017) in a recently published book on Irish harp music gives more insight:

“Court performances were public events and not like we would imagine at all. The poet got his message across by using an intense musical speech.” (Manners 2017: 30)

“[...] this theatrical Irish poetry loses something significant if it is translated. Secondly, it still loses something if it is just read

in fact, a professor of literature and a man of letters, highly trained in the use of a polished literary medium, belonging to a hereditary caste in an aristocratic society, holding an official position therein by virtue of his training, his learning, his knowledge of the history and traditions of his country and his clan. He discharged, as O’Donovan pointed out many years ago, the functions of the modern journalist. He was not a song writer. He was often a public official, a chronicler, a political essayist, a keen and satirical observer of his fellow-countrymen.” (Bergin 1970: 3–4)

3. De Blacam (1920: 88) also describes the bardic colleges where the apprentice “*filí*” practiced composing in the dark relying on the memory of rules and language alone to construct their poems in the appropriate meters, maintaining strict rules of syllabic measure, rime, and alliterative structure.

silently, even in the original Irish. Thirdly, if it is just chanted or recited, it is still losing something. Only if it is chanted/sung with its specific musical accompaniment on Gaelic harp—only then are we witnessing the real event. So that begs the question—what did it all sound like? Because we have been left no music, only the lyrics, of these dramatic performances, we can never answer that question fully. But nobody has attempted even a vague answer to that question—until very recently.” (Manners 2017: 30)

“In 2014 an Irish music group made, in my opinion, the first audio recordings of what a Gaelic master-poet’s work might possibly have sounded like. This is rap music like you’ve never heard before.” (Manners 2017: 31)

“Although violin is used rather than a Gaelic harp, and the musicians must take a lot of artistic liberty, it at least gives us a sense of what might have been. They have offered a template to others as to how the most ancient of all Gaelic art forms might be re-imagined and reborn.” (Manners 2017: 31)

The group Manners described above is the duo of Lorcán Mac Mathúna and Daire Bracken under the moniker of Preab Meadar. What follows hereunder is a description of some of the devices employed by this group, a definition of one of their created tune typologies, and an instance of the same.

Preab Meadar: Terminology

Meadar (metre):

The metrical structure of medieval Irish syllabic poetry, and by corollary the lyrics of Preab Meadar, is annotated as $X^m + Y^n$. The first number ‘X’ indicating the amount of syllables in the first line; the second ‘Y’ indicates the syllables in the second line and so forth. The numerators ‘m’ and ‘n’ denote the amount of syllables in the last word of each respective line.⁴

4. This method of annotation is the one used by Eleanor Knott and explained by her in her book on Irish syllabic poetry (Knott 1957: 13).

The above annotation is a shorthand way of describing the meters of the syllabic verse medieval Irish poetry known as *Dán Díreach*⁵—“straight poem” (*dán* = poem, *díreach* = straight). The *Dán Díreach* is an approach to poetic composition where the meter consists of unstressed syllables, where each line finishes with a word of a set syllabic measure, and further rules of alliteration, rhyme, rime, assonance, consonance and elision apply (De Blacam 1920: 94–95).⁶

The structured methodology of this writing allows for its utilisation in musical composition rules due to its regular and rhythmic nature, and its repetitive literary ornamentation. The *Séadnadh Mór* is a type of *Dán Díreach*, with a specific meter described below.

In this paper we will be discussing only the *Séadnadh Mór* meter in depth. The *Séadnadh Mór* takes the form $8^2 + 7^3$ indicating that the first line contains 8 syllables and finishes with a disyllabic word, whilst the second line contains 7 syllables and finishes with a trisyllable. This syllabic measure is repeated over line 3 and 4 of the stanza so that each verse contains two of these 15 syllable cycles.

From this poetic meter a musical time signature and meter was derived—also called *Séadnadh Mór*. This time signature was created by the authors, working from first principle, by examining the rules of meter of the poem, and deriving music compositional rules reflective of the syllabic and alliterative structure of the poem.

The Appendix includes some other instances of musical meters derived from the *Dán Díreach* that we have studied and made compositions for.

5. *Dán Díreach* is a term which refers to its unwavering rigidity in keeping to strictly defined meters. The *Dán Díreach* can be further subdivided into distinct meters, each with their own rules and strict patters of syllabic measure, rime, consonance, alliteration etc.
6. De Blacam (1920: 95–97) describes some types of *Dán Díreach*, each with its own pattern of syllables and alliteration. Knott (1957: 12–20) also describes a selection of the most common *Dán Díreach* meters.

Preab

In modern Irish the word ‘*preab*’ means to leap or bounce. In this instance it is used to signify the dancing of the meter. The music meters in question were derived by the authors stemming from an analysis of the meters of a selection of categories of *Dán Díreach*. Classification and taxonomical definition of these poetic meters has been extensively done by various scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the publications of James P. Carney (1967), Eleanor Knott (1957), and Osborn Bergin (1970), were consulted for both an understanding of the poetic meters and for instances of poems.

In her analysis of the characteristics of Gaelic poetry of the medieval period 1200–1600 AD, Knott (1957: 12–20) describes the characteristics of this poetic style, and sets out definitions for some of the types of meters used by the Gaelic poets, including the strictest and most rigid branch, the *Dán Díreach*. We use the same nomenclature described by Knott, in the definitions of poetic meters used in this paper, both in the main example—the *Séadnadh Mór*—and in the examples used in the appendix.

The melodies herein are composed using an interpretation of rules set out in each poem typology. The lyrics (or words of each poem), the melodies in each tune, and the arrangement within each typology are interchangeable and can be performed in sets, just as tune sets exist in the current repertoire of Irish dance music.

Tune typology—*Séadnadh Mór* $8^2 + 7^3$

The metre, rhyme and alliteration of the *Séadnadh Mór*, provided a tune typology as follows:

The first bar was established from the first octosyllabic line that finishes with a dissyllabic word providing a bar of common time but grouped as 4, 2 (or 6) and 2; the second bar is derived from the second heptasyllabic line with a trisyllabic ending providing the second bar of 7/8 timing, grouped as 2, 2 and 3.

Emphasis is introduced on the rhyming words, highlighting the words with the music and completing the rhythmical structure.

The final trisyllabic words of the second and fourth line rhyme and are thus emphasised. The final word of the third line rhymes with the penultimate word of the fourth line, providing an interesting internal emphasis. In sense of syllables this equates to the final two syllables of line 3 (syllable 7 and 8) rhyming with syllables 3 and 4 of line 4.

Musically this has an interesting relevance. The resulting *Séadnadh Mór* tune typology may be counted 1, 2, 3, 4; 5, 6, [7, 8 emphasised]; 1, 2, [3, 4 emphasised]; [5, 6, 7 emphasised]. The first thing a musician will notice is that this rhythm is a complex time signature with 15 beats per bar notated as 15/8. Alliteration in each line further enhances the rhythmic flow, and suggests melodic and rhythmic compositional frameworks.

In the answer and call relationship, shown (see below), the answerer joins for the emphasised syllables (notes) described above.

***Séadnadh Mór* Example**

The Lion and the Fox; a *Séadnadh Mór* poem by Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn (cc. circ. 1588). The tri-syllabic rhyming words ending lines 2 and 4 are highlighted in bold whilst the rhyming disyllabic words of lines 3 and 4 are highlighted in blue italics. Music and arrangement Lorcán Mac Mathúna and Daire Bracken⁷, 2010.

AN feasach dhó dála an leómhain,
lá dár fhóbhair **aindligheadh**
níor geineadh neach ré mbí a *bhuide*,
rí na *nuile ainmhidheadh*.

Goiris na cheann ceathra an talmhan,
tiad chuige don **chéidiarraidh**;
dob iomdha fan gcuireadh *gcuanach*
buidean *uallach éigialladh*.

Ní tháinig fa thus an chuiridh
ceann an chuineóil **shionnchamhail**,
anais amuigh uaidh fan **aimsín**
go bhfuair **aimsir** iomchubhaidh.

Tiad na sionnaigh san séad chéadna
chuige arís ar **éinshlighidh**
righe riú níor choir ‘na **ceardaibh**
‘na mbróin **chealgaigh** chéimrighin.

Guth (AN) feas-ach dhó dáta an leómb-ain, lá dar fhóbh-air aind-igh-cadh?
Veidhlín
Slua aind-igh-cadh?

Guth niorgein' neach ré mbi a bhui-dhe, é na n-uile ain-mhi-dheadh.
Veidhlín
Slua ain-mhi-dheadh

7. The three staff lines labelled: *guth*, *veidhlín*, and *slua*, translate as: voice, violin, and chorus, respectively.

Conclusion

In our research and subsequent composition, we established that the meters and rules of strict meter syllabic poetry could be successfully used as a basis for the composition of new music, and for the creation and categorisation of new tune typologies.

Work conducted by scholars such as E. Knott, D. Greene, O. Bergin, and J. P. Carney were consulted for the identification of suitable poems, and for the metric structures and rules of strict meter Gaelic syllabic poem typologies which comprise the *Dán Díreach*.

We established that the forms and terminology of Gaelic poetry of the Middle Irish period (13th–17th centuries) suited the analysis of preceding and subsequent works of Gaelic poetry. Indeed these rules originally arose from earlier Irish lyrics (De Blacam 1920: 87) whilst the chaining alliteration which we witnessed in the case study examined became a common feature of later Gaelic stressed meter poetry.

Furthermore we established that the rules of this poetry could be used to guide music composition; and we used the poetic terms and definitions of the poetry to describe and classify the corresponding music.

The present state of Irish as a minority language leaves speakers with a fraught relationship with their heritage. The past, it is said is a different country, whether that is 400 years ago or 40 the distance can be just as overwhelming if the language of that time is alien to your comprehension.

Our work with the *Dán Díreach* has resulted in a tangible and intuitive body of work where the creativity of the master poet of medieval Ireland can literally be felt through the rhythms of these new tune types.

The tune types we have defined are unprecedented and with them they bring new performance challenges and opportunities; amongst them the concept that voice and instrumentalist are operating to complex partnership rules which are new to Irish Traditional music in its current form.

In this paper we have not discussed the dances that might go with these new rhythm signatures. ‘Dance’ strangely enough is an unknown word in Old-Irish literature. Where bodily movement to music is described at feasts and other celebratory occasions in Old-Irish literature, terms such as *Preabarnail*, *léimneacht*, or *opaireacht* were often used. Irish music collector Breandán Breathnach (1971: 37) states that the modern Irish words for dance (*rince* and *damhsa*) were loan words of French and English origin. *Preabarnail* by its modern equivalent translates roughly as buck-leaping. It is likely that this is not what was understood by the term in medieval Ireland.

One of the questions this poses is what dance rhythms existed in pre-conquest medieval Ireland, and what native rhythms existed during this extended period of conquest? How did people dance at feasting and other social occasions? What was the music like? Our research explored rhythm of the period in its only extant form, and came up with surprising and utterly unique creations.

We have devised some simple dance movements for some of the tune typologies we created, but have not tested them. This would be an interesting area to explore and test as a follow-on from the composition project. At the time of writing the authors are developing a performance with Irish *Sean-Nós* dancers to explore the rhythms of Preab Meadar through traditional Irish percussive dance.

* The research funding for this project was provided by the Arts Council of Ireland under their Deis scheme (2010). The application ID was A024472.

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Summary

Preab Meadar is a created synthesis of words, music, and dance, carried out by Lorcán Mac Mathúna and Daire Bracken, through their investigation of the Gaelic medieval syllabic poetry known as the '*Dán Díreach*'. The aim of this study was to establish an original collection of Irish dance rhythms, from clues in the written language of the Gaelic literary tradition prior to the final English conquest of Ireland, and the end of the Irish bardic literary tradition (mid 17th century). Compositions and dances stemming from the language are an intrinsic and new creative link to a cultural legacy of a time and place. The period between the 13th and 17th centuries in Ireland saw the pinnacle of structured language in the *Dán Díreach*; a strict meter, syllabic poetic form, of diverse typologies. In our studies of this arcane art we have found new ways of engaging with language and our historic traditions; and connecting the past and present through unprecedented musical rhythms.

Key words: Gaelic poetry; music; dance; meter; *Dán Díreach*; Preab Meadar; bouncing meter; *file* (pl. *fili*); *Séadnadh Mór*; strict meter; syllabic poetry; complex time.

APPENDIX

A selection of other *Dán Díreach* poetic meters studied:

Deachnadh bheag 5¹ + 5¹

One of the simpler metres consisting of 4 equal pentasyllabic lines providing a 5/8 rhythm for this new tune type; a rhythm, not currently common to Irish dance music.

The final syllable of the second and fourth lines rhyme and the first and third line normally consonate or alliterate with the rhyming words. This gives us a grouping of 4 and 1 in the 5-note bar, but we found dissyllabic words were common at the beginnings of the lines providing us with a 2, 2 and 1 grouping. We have written the pieces with a 2, 3 note arrangement for clarity.

Alliteration is very prevalent and provides the secondary emphasis and flow for the answering instrument. There is often 3 alliterating words per line and it frequently follows through to the next line.

Example

SUMMER

Táinic sam slán sóer
dia mbí clóen caill chíar;
lingid ag seng snéid
dia mbí réid rón rían.

Canaid cuí ceól mbláith
dia mbí súan sáim réid;
lengait eóin ciúin crúaich
ocus daim lúath léith.

(Anonymous, 10th or 11th century)

Rannaighneacht ghairid 3¹ + 7¹

(*rannaighneacht cetharchubaid garit dialtach*) a version of the *Rannaighneacht mhór* 7¹ + 7¹ where the first line is only three syllables in length and the other three lines follow the normal rules. Should the lines end in dissyllables it's called *rannaighneacht cetharchubaid garid récomarcadh*.

Example

Ro boí tan
Ba linn orddan loch dá dám
Nípu é in loch ba orddan
Acht flaith Aeda maicc Colggan
(Anonymous 6th century)

Deibhidhe $7^x + 7^{x+1}$

Deibhidhe is the commonest syllabic metres used. The final of the first line rhymes with the second and the third rhymes with the fourth between words of unequal syllabic length --- x rime with 1+x (rinn and ardrinn). This provides an interesting alternating bar emphasis and grouping in a 7/8 rhythm. There is also alliteration in between 2 words in each line; final syllable of the fourth line alliterates with the preceding stressed word. There are at least two internal rimes between the third and fourth line.

Example

THE TEMPEST
Anbthine mór ar muig lir
Dána tar a hardimlib
At-racht gáeth, ran goin gaim garg
Co tét tar muir mórgelgarb
Dos árraid ga gargemrid

Gním in muige, mag Lir Lór
Ro lá sním ar ar sír shlóg
Écht móo cách (ní lugu)
cid as inganttu didiu
in scél direcra dimor
(Ruman, 7th century)