

Folk Music in the English and Irish Literary Traditions

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Introduction

Folk music is present in the cultural tradition of Britain. It appears in many forms of literature – in poetry, in drama, etc. – and in the cinema. The Irish writer, poet and lyricist Thomas Moore (1779-1852) composed his *Irish Melodies* (1807), a collection of 124 poems intended to be sung in Irish air, wholly romantic but at the same time nationalist. Folk music in poetry has many advantages in the sense that it emphasizes the synthetic and symbolic dimension of literature.

This article is an attempt to unveil the place of folk music in English and Irish poetry. Many writers and poets wanted to popularize the sense of cultural loss; to touch the people, they combined it with traditional ballads. The Anglo-Irish decline that writers and poets such as Thomas Moore, William B. Yeats, Percy Scholes, etc., wanted to recapture will be the main issue of this work. This exploration will be done, first by studying the use of music in poetry, then by examining the close relationship they have. It finally analyzes the place of folk music in the English and Irish literary traditions and shows that it was not only a way of recapturing the sense cultural identity, but also of reimagining a new Ireland and a new way of life.

I – Music and Poetry: the Poetricity of Music and the Musicality of Music

Music and poetry have a very close rapport; it is a union and tension between the sound and the verse. Shakespeare associates the beautiful text with the song of a nightingale and the bad text with the cry of the owl. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1623), Caliban talks about "*This land's full of music*". The notion of "lyricism" is often associated with poetry. A poem that expresses its author's feelings and emotions is known as a "lyrical poem". The association between lyricism and poetry is part of the aesthetics of Romanticism, and it is epitomized by the Romantic English poets

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), who published a collection of lyrical poems entitled *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). In his edition of *The Complete Works of W. B. Yeats* (1996), Richard J. Finneran appends to the collection of poems music specially composed to accompany some of Yeats's lyrical poems.

Associating poetry with "lyricism" is symbolically uniting poetry with music as the term "lyricism" is derived from the name of a mythical musical instrument called the "lyre", which is correlated to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In Western mythology, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is considered to be an illustration of the intricate relationships between emotions, poetry and music. It is about the story of Orpheus, who is known as the most talented music player of the ancient times. It is said that the god Apollo was his father, from whom he took his talent in music, and that the Muse Calliope was his mother. He lived in Thrace, in the northeastern part of Greece. Orpheus was endowed with divinely melodious voice that could charm everyone who heard it. When he was first given the lyre as a boy, he mastered it in no time at all. The myth says that no god or mortal could resist his music, and that even the rocks and trees would move themselves to be near him. After the death of his beloved wife, Orpheus was no longer the same carefree person he used to be. His life without Eurydice seemed endless and he do nothing more than grief for her. This is when he had a great but yet crazy idea: he decided to go to the Underworld and try to fetch his wife. Apollo, his father, would talk to Hades, the god of the Underworld, to accept him and hear his plea.

Armed with his weapons, his lyre and his voice, Orpheus approached Hades and demanded entry into the Underworld. No one challenged him. Standing in front of the rulers of the dead, he said why he was there, in both a voice mellifluous and disquieting voice. He played his lyre and sang out to King Hades and Queen Persephone for Eurydice to be resuscitated.

Hades openly wept, Persephone's heart melted, and even Cerberus, the gigantic three-headed hound guarding the entry to the Underworld, covered his many ears with his paws and howled in despair. The voice of Orpheus was so moving that Hades promised this desperate man that Eurydice would follow him to the Upper World, the world of the living. However, he warned him that for no reason must he look back while his wife was still in the dark, since that would undo everything he hoped for. He should wait for Eurydice to get into the light before looking at her.

With great faith in his heart and joy in his song, Orpheus began his journey out of the Underworld, joyful that he would once again be reunited with his beloved wife. As Orpheus was

reaching the exit of the Underworld, he could hear the footfalls of his wife approaching him. He wanted to turn around and hug her immediately but managed to control his feelings. As he was approaching the exit, his heart was beating faster and faster. The moment he stepped into the world of the living, he turned his head to hug his wife. Unfortunately, he got only a glimpse of her before she was once again drawn back into the Underworld. When Orpheus turned his head, Eurydice was still in the dark, she had not seen the sun and, as Hades had warned Orpheus, his sweet wife was drowned back to the dark world of the dead. Waves of anguish and despair swept over him and, shuddering with grief, he approached the Underworld again, but he was denied entry this time; the gates were remaining shut and God Hermes, sent by Zeus, would not let him in.

Joyce and Kafka also resort to music to back up these myths. Music is presented as announcing life. In a poem, it makes the language purely phonetic. Shakespeare's use of music in his work is a manifest illustration of the link between music and literary genres such as poetry and drama. The idea of *concord* is inherent in English literature from the Renaissance to the 17th century¹.

Even the Cosmos is reflecting this musicality if we refer to Johannes Kepler's (1571-1630) astronomy through his theory of the solar system. For him (1) the planets move in elliptical orbits with the Sun at one focus; (2) the time necessary to traverse any arc of a planetary orbit is proportional to the area of the sector between the central body and that arc (the "area law"); and (3) there is an exact relationship between the squares of the planets' periodic times and the cubes of the radii of their orbits (the "harmonic law"). Kepler himself did not call these discoveries "laws," as would become customary after Isaac Newton derived them from a new and quite different set of general physical principles. He regarded them as celestial harmonies that reflected God's design for the universe².

In *Hamlet* (1603) and *Macbeth* (1623), Shakespeare uses music theory and philosophy in his presentation of the characters' mental states, which adds a second layer to the way a character's actions should be perceived. For example, Shakespeare associates music "*out of tune*" with madness. This is evident in *Hamlet*, in act 4, where Ophelia is seen singing constantly, and what she says makes little sense (207-209). After interacting with her for a few moments, Claudius and Gertrude come to the conclusion that she has been driven mad by grief, following her father's death. Since madness was connected to a wrong tuning with the spheres in the Elizabethan world, it is easy to see why he made this connection between singing and madness³. Ophelia's insistent

singing only emphasizes her insanity, because a nonsensical song cannot be aligned with order, harmony, and beauty evidenced in the spheres.

Erin Minear (2010) discusses the idea that Hamlet's sung songs are "*in some ways more disconcerting*" (10) than Ophelia's. It is quite clear when Ophelia moves from thinking logically to thinking musically, but Hamlet's movement is far subtler; actors and readers alike have a hard time telling the difference between what is meant to be sung and what is meant to be spoken, which obscures the truth that he is only feigning to be mad. For example, in a discussion with Polonius, Hamlet quotes a song. When Polonius assumes that this quotation is relevant to their discussion and that Hamlet is responding through its use, the latter points out that his reasoning is flawed (107-109).

In her analysis of *Pericles* (1609), Catherine Dunn (1969) expands on the discussion of madness in Shakespeare's works, where Shakespeare seems to draw many connections between psychological states and the philosophy of music in the cosmos. In this work, madness is seen as the state of being "*out of tune*," while sanity is seen as the state of being "*in tune*." Within *Pericles*, Shakespeare's allusion to music takes one of two forms: either "*the harmonious or inharmonious tuning of the bodily elements and humours to produce a certain character*" (394), or the ability of music to provide cures to those physical and mental ailments, often by tuning the body to the spheres. Antiochus's remark to Pericles is a patent illustration: "*Yet hope, succeeding from so fair a tree / As your fair self, doth tune us otherwise*" (1.1.115–116). Antiochus is describing the idea that hope will tune his body differently and therefore put him into harmony with the universe, causing him to act differently. This idea flows easily from the musical theory of the time, which those living in Shakespeare's era believed, the Elizabethans believed that one's body or life could be tuned either harmoniously or inharmoniously to the cosmos. Similar allusions to the theory are contained throughout the rest of the play.

In Shakespeare most famous romance *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), it is important to understand music's place within the play. While music is associated with discussions between Romeo and Juliet toward the end of the play, it is most significantly tied to love in act 2, scene 2. In this scene, Romeo and Juliet are speaking to each other, and Romeo exclaims: "*How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night, / Like softest music to attending ears!*" (2.2.176–177). Later, in act 4, several characters hold a witty exchange regarding why the sounds of instruments are called "*silver-sweet*," and the musicians cannot quite give a compelling explanation (207). In the same

way that describing music as “silver-sweet” is inexplicable, describing the speech of lovers is inexplicable. As these two sounds are linked in Romeo’s line—“*Like softest music to attending ears!*” (2.2.177). Shakespeare strongly connects the speech of lovers to music. Love is seen as a departure from one’s normal state of being and is tied to an unexplainable descriptor, just as music is. For these reasons, *Romeo and Juliet* reflects the music of the cosmos in two ways.

First, *Romeo and Juliet* reflects the earlier idea that by connecting phrases throughout the play, Shakespeare mirrors the balance and order that are integral to the worldview brought about by a belief in the spheres. By connecting the two statements of “silver-sweet sound”, he creates a symmetry in his literary structure which reflects that of the cosmos. Secondly, by comparing the speech of lovers to music, Shakespeare seems to show the inverse of his presentation of madness. Aligning madness with music emphasizes the idea that madness involves a character out of line with the spheres, but this idea is overturned with the presentation of love in *Romeo and Juliet*. In this play, love, which evokes comparison to “silver-sweet” instruments, can be seen as bringing one into order with the balance of the universe. For that reason, today we can see the musicalizing of our post-modern world in the stadiums during football matches, in supermarkets etc.

The Tempest (1623) is a perfect example of Shakespeare’s use of character and the supernatural to represent the philosophy of the music of the cosmos. John Cutts (1958) describes the play as taking place on “*an island that resounds continually to music in the air,*” which, he believes, is “*equivalent to music of the spheres*” (347). The music in this play is integral, and Joshua Cohen (2013) describes it as a metaphorical, even “*metaphysical principle*” (70). In his article, Cohen argues that Ariel, one of the spirits in *The Tempest*, is portrayed as the living embodiment of music. This is evident as every time that Ariel makes an appearance, it is underscored with music. For instance, this can be seen in act 1, scene 2, when Ariel appears for the first time, singing, and Ferdinand asks “*Where should this music be? i’ the air or the earth?*” (1.2.465).

In addition, Ariel lives in the air of the island, which is described as being “*alive with music*” (41). In Shakespeare’s time, the word *air* was commonly associated with music because it evoked the idea of fairies and other melodies. This is seen near the beginning of the play, when Ferdinand reflects on the fact that an unseen music has helped to soothe his grief regarding the death of his father. The music he hears in the air is the song of Ariel, which more firmly cements Ariel’s role as the embodiment of music and draws a comparison between his song of the air and the spheres’ song of the cosmos. Cohen states, “*So much is music a part of the air of the island, and Ariel a part*

of both, that we come to realize that music is somehow intrinsic to Ariel's nature" (73). The idea that music symbolizes the strange and supernatural is seen to reflect the idea of the spheres because it shows that such things are a departure from the order assumed by Shakespeare's contemporaries. Shakespeare purposely obscured certain characters from seeing the source of the music and his decision to prevent Ferdinand from seeing Ariel emphasizes this fact.

It is important to note that Shakespeare's uses of the supernatural and unusual or strange in music evokes the Gothic roots in music. In Gothic aesthetics, the "*Supernatural manifestations have the power to fascinate and appal, for they touch the secret springs of our mortal apprehension which connects our earthly with our spiritual being*" (Varma 1966: 212). The music as a supernatural element is used in poetry to recapture the loss or decline:

In a literary context, 'Gothic' is most usually applied to a group of novels written between the 1760s and the 1820s [...]. When thinking of the Gothic novel, a set of characteristics springs readily to mind: an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfects techniques of literary suspense [...] (Punter 1980: 404).

The presence of folk music in the Gothic imagination reveals the link between the natural and the supernatural which is taken by British and Irish writers as a means to reimagine a new Ireland of peace a new awakening face to the cultural alienation. It is done through a recapturing of the past, linked with traditional ballads to touch the people. This is what writers and poets such as Thomas Moore in *Irish Melodies* (1821), Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), William B. Yeats' *Down by the Salley Gardens* (1889), McPherson's *Ossian* (1760), T.S. Eliot's *The Four Quartets* (1941), etc., show in their writings.

II. Recapturing Cultural Loss with Music

Published in 1765, the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* is a collection of ballads and popular songs collected by Bishop Thomas Percy, it evokes the recapturing of a new ideal by bringing back stylish folk tradition. The late 18th century in Ireland coincide with the emergence of the Romantic Movement. In his *Irish Melodies*, the Romantic Irish writer Thomas More depicts an unspoiled dream world of monsters and landscapes. The *rock* and the *bran* (Irish harp) are two Irish nationalist symbols powerful in the Irish nationalist expression). The *rock* symbolizes resistance,

and hardness, whereas the *harp* symbolizes sensuality⁴. Moore wanted to popularize the sense of cultural loss in correlation with ballads to touch people's nationalist sensitiveness.

Irish Melodies is Thomas Moore's collections of 124 poems; set to traditional Irish tunes and published in ten volumes between 1808 and 1834. It is a reflection of Thomas Moore's belief in the close connection between Irish music and national identity. For that reason, Moore considered his work in combining words in English to the "*truly national*" Irish melodies (143). His letter illustrates this fact by saying that the *Irish Melodies*:

appears too plainly in the tone of sorrow and depression which characterizes most of our early songs [...] The poet [...] must feel and understand that rapid fluctuation of spirits, that unaccountable mixture of gloom and levity, which composes the character of my countrymen, and has deeply tinged their music (143)⁵.

Moore's "The Meeting of the Waters" was first published in 1808, and by the end of the century it had become one of the best known of his *Irish Melodies*, along with "The Harp that Once Through Tara's Halls", "The Minstrel Boy", and especially "The Last Rose of Summer". These poems raise mostly the issue of nationalism and sentimentalization. Understanding the context will enable us to grasp the subject matter. Irish history is defined by two key struggles: external struggle, the conflict between Ireland and the invader; and internal struggle, the conflict between the Irish themselves. The contradiction often rests upon such questions as who is "really" Irish, who should rule Ireland, and especially who belongs to the true, authentic Irish tradition. These questions are still very alive today. At the background of these two struggles, a number of heroes and key events have emerged, providing a kind of historical mythology that parallels and often overlaps with traditional Irish mythology.

There is clearly a certain sentimentalism in Thomas Moore's famous *Irish Melodies*. These were enormously popular poems – at least as popular in England as in Ireland – that Moore set to music in the early 1800s. The poems, or songs, are marked by sentimental images of the Irish landscape and culture ("The Harp", "The Minstrel", "The Bard", "The Island of Sorrow", "The Last Rose of Summer"), and seem on the surface to romanticize and embellish the realities of Irish life. Yet, beneath the surface, one can see many impulses of national dignity and pride, even rebellion, as in such songs as "Dear Harp of my Country"! and "The Harp that Once Through Tara's Halls" (which Joyce puts to powerful use in his short story "Two Gallants"). In reading Moore, one must

attend to the ways in which the surface meaning might rub against the hidden one, and the ways in which Moore employs apparently stock devices in unusual manners⁶.

In a footnote to the first printing of the songs, Moore wrote that "The Meeting of the Waters" forms a part of that beautiful scenery which lies between Rathdrum and Arklow, in the county of Wicklow, and these lines were suggested by a visit to that romantic spot, in the summer of the year 1807. The prayer for peace in the last line was probably also in the mind of James Power, Moore's London publisher, when he declared that *Irish Melodies* 'will do more ... towards producing that brotherhood of sentiment which it is so much our interest to cherish, than could ever be effected by the arguments of wise, but uninteresting, politicians'⁷.

As many writers, George G. Byron (1788-1824) is among those who said of Thomas Moore: "he is the poet of all circles and an idol of his own" (278), that is why "The Meeting of the Waters" is played in a very sentimental manner: green valleys, pure crystal streams, friends departed. It reveals the sentimentalization of a powerful feeling of loss. Moore's combination of poetry and music brought his work to a wider audience in Ireland than any previous English-language poet in Ireland had enjoyed. His "Melodies" became "*the secular hymn-book of Irish nationalism*" (Sullivan 1960: 7) in the nineteenth century. As Thomas Kinsella (1986) has noted, Moore was regarded by many as "Ireland's national poet" (xxvi) during his lifetime, and his *Irish Melodies* was: "*possibly the most popular book ever produced in Ireland*" (xxvi). Furthermore, Liam de Paor (1994) suggests that Moore was "*one of the most significant figures of the transition at the point where Anglicization was beginning to be fully effected*" (338)⁸. Moore represents the beginnings of the articulation of Irish identity and culture, on a national scale, in the English language.

William B Yeats is another eminent figure of poetry who harped on the strings of folk music in his poetry to recapture the Anglo-Irish decline. Yeats' Celtic Twilight Movement is a movement characterized by anti-Wordsworthian feelings. Imagined countries where peasants live in an Ireland. He satirizes rationalism, as well as bourgeois philistines. He is anxious about Anglo-Irish decline. The Celtic mythology in decline, this is what he wanted to recapture. It needed, he thought, to be reworked into the present. So he does it with a dose of Celtic mysticism. "Down by the Sally Garden", published in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889) means the willows: in a footnote, Yeats says he reconstructs an old song as remembered by an old woman in the village of Ballisodare. He uses his artistic ability to rework it.

"Down by the Sally Garden", originally "Rambling Boys of Pleasure", is a simple poem that describes a speaker's past and how it failed. The two stanzas of the poem are quite similar in form. Yeats repeats parts of the same lines twice in order to maintain the song-like qualities of the first three lines that he could remember. The speaker's relationship failed in so far as, despite his love's urgings, he did not take life or love easy. Perhaps he rushed into things too quickly or made decisions that she didn't approve of. Either way, it ended in tears. In the first stanza the speaker begins by making use of the line that later came to be used as the title of the poem. He describes how there was a place, in the "sally gardens," where he used to meet his love. The language in this poem is quite simple and musical. This makes a great deal of sense since Yeats took the lines from his memory of a song sung by an old woman he used to pass.

James Joyce's short stories, his only book of short stories, *Dubliners* (1914), provides snapshots of turn-of-the-century Ireland and epiphanies of youth and adulthood. Many of them number among the most admired works of short fiction: "Araby," "Clay," "A Little Cloud," and especially the concluding story, "The Dead." It is set in Christmas time; musical imagery is used to map out the underground part of the psyche. Musical imageries convey masks and psycho-drama: "*bronchitis laughter*", a narrative sub-text which means laughing in musical echo. Death is used as a metaphor. Monks in a monastery, sleeping in their coffins to atone for their sins. The musicality in the poetry reflects a difference or contradiction existing between the West of Ireland and the West of Britain, Ireland's dependence upon Britain, rather than upon itself; "*Sinn Fein*" evokes mental health matters.

In a nutshell folk music in the English literary tradition played an important role in literature particularly in poetry. Through sentimentalization, the poets had established or tried to reconstruct a new Ireland to touch the people.

Conclusion

Traditional folk music has had important overt influences on contemporary poets. It has also had significant covert influences. This includes poets' choices of performance as a means of transmitting their poetry; their incorporation of elements from other poems into their work; the language they use in their poetry, which may not necessarily allude to music but is nonetheless influenced by the context in which traditional music is performed.

The link between music and poetry reveals a correlation even a harmony which gives a better and clearer understanding of the poets by their readers; music in poetry was the springboard to reach their aim. Both English and Irish poetry reveals that music is true, music is life. Folk music in the literary tradition is the hyphen between the past and the present in order to recapture the cultural loss and traditional decline through lyricism. The aim was to create a new idealized and peaceful Ireland for the new generation.

Finally, the issues of tradition and community are persistent concerns, which have also informed the historical relationship between music and literature in Ireland. This music may be a therapy and salvation for the younger generation and establish a new world order.

Notes

¹ In literature, it means agreement or harmony between people or nations; it also means amity, a treaty establishing peaceful relations between nations; agreement or harmony between things, ideas, etc. Poets and composers have collaborated more closely in the past. The musicality of the cosmos also exemplified in Pythagoras medicine; he was using "music as medicine." The flute and the lyre were two of the primary instruments used by Pythagoras and his followers for healing purposes. He is also credited with being the first to understand musical intervals from his work with the monochord, a single-stringed instrument in which the string tension was established by a fixed weight.

² See Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Johannes-Kepler/Keplers-social-world> 09/11/2020. See also *Mysterium Cosmographicum* (The Cosmographic Mystery) (1597), Tübingen.

³ See Percy Scholes, "The Purpose behind Shakespeare's Use of Music," *Proceedings of the Musical Association* 43 (1916–1917): 2, doi:10.1093/jrma/43.1.1.

⁴ Whatever its origins, the harp was adopted as the symbol of the new Kingdom of Ireland, established by Henry VIII, in 1541. Upon the secession of the Irish Free State from the United Kingdom in 1922, the harp was taken as the emblem of the independent Irish state.

⁵ Indeed, the major political figure in Ireland in the early nineteenth century, Daniel O'Connell, found a great deal to praise in Moore's work attributing "*much of the present state of feeling, and the desire for liberty in Ireland to the works of that immortal man [Moore] – he has brought patriotism into the private circles of domestic life*". However, this development itself, particularly as it applied to the embrace by women of Moore's music, was criticised by later commentators such as Charles Gavan Duffy, who described Moore as the "pet of petticoats" [Howard Mumford Jones, *The Harp That Once-: A Chronicle of the Life of Thomas Moore* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1937), p. 292, Charles Gavan Duffy, "Thomas Moore", *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. 1, ed. by Seamus Deane et al (Derry: Field Day Publications; London: Faber and Faber (distributors), 1991), p. 1251].

⁶ See Irish Lecture: http://ireland.wlu.edu/lecture/ch3_6.htm, retrieved on 14/11/2020.

⁷ See John Barrell 'The Meeting of the Waters', <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n15/john-barrell/the-meeting-of-the-waters>, Vol. 39 No. 15 · 27 July 2017.

⁸ Quoted in Michael Ó Suilleabháin, 1994, 'All Our Central Fire': *Music, Mediation, and the Irish Psyche*, *Irish Journal of Psychology* 15.2 and 3: 338.

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INTER-TEXTUAL