

Modern Performance Practice and Aesthetics in Traditional Scottish Gaelic Singing

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2008

I certify that this thesis has been composed entirely by me and is my own work.

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December 2008

Abstract

Performance practice and aesthetics is an under-researched area in Scottish Gaelic song. Previous studies have focused on text rather than context, and there is a significant lack of information from the singers themselves, in their own words, as to how they view their own tradition of singing and performance. The objective of this study is to present an overview of modern performance practice and aesthetics in Scottish Gaelic singing, based primarily on what singers believe to be important. The scope is not meant to be exhaustive; rather the purpose is to serve as a preliminary study of Gaelic singing and promote discussion in the topic. Located in the field of ethnomusicology, it will consider not just the musical sounds produced, but the performance as a whole, and consequently the research is divided into the four topics of aesthetics; singing styles and vocal techniques; performance contexts; and repertoire selection and transmission. The data were collected primarily through fieldwork, combining interviews with fifteen Gaelic singers of different ages and experience in Gaelic song with participant-observation at *céilidhs*, formal concerts, and Gaelic singing classes. The information gathered is revealing, indicating that, although singers have a clear sense of what is important to them in their singing, there is no universal set of criteria with which every singer agrees. Certain aspects of singing might inspire very definite opinions in some singers, and ambivalence in others. But one prominent theme to have emerged, that appears to pervade throughout modern Gaelic singing, is the juxtaposition of preservation versus innovation. This manifests itself in many different ways, such as the contrasting contexts of *céilidh* and concert hall; the contradictory opinions of how much

interpretation is acceptable; whether or not singers choose songs based on the traditional criterion of the poetry, or for the melody; whether or not accompaniment or choral singing has a place in traditional Gaelic song; and whether or not their repertoire selection is affected by the taste of modern, often non-Gaelic-speaking, audiences. All of this certainly reflects the state of change in which the world of Gaelic singing finds itself, with more external influences than ever before, and facing the question of whether or not it can survive if it is not relevant for modern singers and audiences.

Acknowledgements

There are many people I would like to thank for helping me during the course of this thesis. Thank you to my supervisors, Dr John Shaw and Dr Neill Martin, for giving me support, guidance, and encouragement throughout; for keeping me on track, offering countless suggestions and believing in the project. I would also like to thank Dr Katherine Campbell, whose additional support (whether it was reading chapter drafts or providing an excellent source of advice) was very much appreciated, and I am grateful for her help.

Thank you to Dr John MacInnes for taking the time to read an early draft and share his vast knowledge of Gaelic song. Thanks also to Dr Peter Cooke, who provided encouragement and recommended some very interesting avenues of research, and to Prof. Akiko Takamatsu, for sending me a copy of her paper on Scots Traveller singing.

I would like to thank the University of Edinburgh Small Project Grants fund and the Scottish International Education Trust for their financial assistance. These grants were instrumental in allowing me to travel to the Hebrides to conduct fieldwork, and present my research at the 2005 Celtic Folk Studies Conference in Cardiff.

This project could not have existed at all without the help of all the wonderful Gaelic singers whose words make up the heart of this thesis. I would like to thank each of them for sharing their thoughts and feelings with me; I learned so much from them and had a wonderful time in the process.

And most importantly, I would like to thank my family: my husband, Chris, for his incredible support and belief in me, and my son, Fionn, who was born halfway through my studies and who has shown me what is really important in life.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The concepts of performance practice and aesthetics in singing are fascinating ones, and have been very seldom previously investigated in the Scottish Gaelic tradition. Considering how much study has been devoted to Gaelic song, it is very surprising that so little examination has been done on how Gaelic singers actually sing; questions such as what makes a ‘good’ Gaelic singer, what makes Gaelic singing unique among other traditional musical cultures, and what features of the singing style are considered to be important, have largely been ignored. Most importantly, there is a significant lack of information from the singers themselves, in their own words, as to how they view their own tradition of singing and performance. This study will attempt to redress the balance of Gaelic song scholarship that has mainly focused on text rather than context.

Definitions and delimitations

The term ‘Performance practice’, derived from the German *Aufführungspraxis*, is one that is most often associated with Western art music, where it is concerned mainly with the ‘authentic’ reproduction of historical compositions through focus on such aspects as notation, ornamentation, instruments, tuning, and the size of ensembles (Kennedy 2004:555). For non-Western or traditional music, the study of performance practice is much less specific, covering, as Benjamin Brinner writes, the ‘conventions that govern music-making and accompanying activities... [which] delimit a range of appropriate choices in

performance, and, increasingly, are understood to be situated, negotiable and often gendered' (Brinner n.d.). He goes on to say that these conventions are usually unwritten, sometimes unarticulated, subject to change, and are exceedingly dependent on context and relations between performer and audience (Brinner n.d.).

The discipline of aesthetics is one that has occupied scholars and philosophers for centuries, extending into all areas of the arts and beyond (see Hospers 1969; Gaut 2002 for a selection of readings on aesthetics). While the study of aesthetics can raise many profound philosophical questions, this study is not rooted in philosophy but in ethnomusicology; consequently the examination of aesthetics in this case concentrates on the taste and values that singers have regarding Gaelic song. This aspect of aesthetics in relation to Scottish Gaelic singing will be discussed in much more detail in Chapter Two.

The word 'traditional' is used throughout this work, and it is necessary to clarify its meaning as it is employed here. In the Scottish Gaelic context, 'traditional' refers to the nature of the rich singing culture that has been transmitted orally through families and communities, encompassing not only songs, but singing styles, aesthetics, and conventions as well, all of which will be discussed over the course of the thesis. However, the main focus of the fieldwork, and of the thesis, is to investigate the current state of Gaelic singing; not as it has been in the past, but how modern Gaelic singers of traditional songs are interpreting the tradition they have inherited and are passing it on. In some cases, this may differ from customary traditional Gaelic singing as discussed in previous scholarship. But by their very nature oral traditions are fluid, not static, and thus not fixed in any particular time period. These modern singers are certainly singing traditional Gaelic songs and

perpetuating Gaelic singing, and so it is appropriate to refer to their singing as traditional, albeit the modern or contemporary form. Consequently, in all discussions of present-day Gaelic singing it will be made explicit that it is the contemporary manifestation of the tradition that is being examined.

It is also necessary to clarify the definition of ‘poetry’ as used in the fieldwork and in the thesis. When singers were asked about their opinions on song poetry in the interviews (such as the relationship between poetry and music in a song and which of the two elements they feel is more important), ‘poetry’ was referring to the song texts. It is of course true that there is much more to the song texts than simply the words; bards employ great artistry in their choice of metre, rhyme structure, use of poetic techniques such as metaphors and similes, and in marrying the poetry with a suitable air. Many Gaelic singers will understand this, and it will inform their opinions when they express their appreciation for the poetry of a song. But Gaelic poetry is a specialised topic of its own, and it was not possible to explore all its deeper dimensions in the present thesis. Consequently, all instances of the word ‘poetry’ should be considered to mean the words of a song,

Objective of study

This study will provide an overview of modern performance practice and aesthetics in traditional Scottish Gaelic singing, based primarily on what singers believe to be important. Using an ethnomusicological approach, it will therefore consider not just the musical sounds produced, but the performance as a whole. All the different elements of singing and performance are very closely interrelated, and so it is difficult to separate them and discuss them independently; singers themselves

do not make any of the divisions or categorisations so favoured in academia¹. But in order to facilitate analysis, the topic has been divided into separate areas of research: aesthetics, techniques and singing styles, performance contexts, and transmission and repertoire selection.

By considering each of these areas, the aim is to achieve a balanced approach to the study of performance practice. However, the scope of the project is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, its purpose is to serve as a preliminary study of Gaelic singing and promote discussion in the topic. Hopefully future studies will benefit from this groundwork, and more in-depth research will follow.

The motivation for this work stemmed from multiple personal interests. As a singer myself, I have always been intrigued by the many different singing styles and beliefs about singing that exist, even among singers in the same tradition. My own background is in Western art music, and consequently I wanted to explore a tradition outside of my personal experience, curious to see how their musical culture would differ from my own. I was particularly drawn to Gaelic singing after moving to Scotland from Canada, and being captivated by the language and music of the Gaels.

Previous approaches

Many of the early accounts of Gaelic singing were written not by researchers, but by travellers in the Highlands and Hebrides who commented on the singing they observed on their journeys.² These writers were almost always complete outsiders to the Gaelic tradition, knowing little, if anything, about the culture or language. And while many fieldworkers and researchers today in ethnomusicology and folklore

¹ Examples are Ross 1957, which classifies the main types of Gaelic song, and Ó Madagáin 1985, which categorizes the functions of Irish song in the nineteenth century.

² See Boswell 1955; Johnson 1792; Necker de Saussure 1822; Pennant 1998.

could also be considered outsiders to the tradition they study, the difference with these early writers was their approach. Infected by pastoralism, ‘the simple and pure existence the city person imagines the countryman or the “savage” to live’ (Abrahams 1971:20), they inserted a great deal of their own opinions and biases into their publications, which were accepted unquestioningly by much of their non-Gaelic audience. Richard Schechner, the performance studies scholar, rightly points out that ‘there is no such thing as neutral or unbiased’ when it comes to a fieldworker’s approach (Schechner 2002:2), but this early travel writing reveals no apparent attempts at reflexivity or assessment by the author of how their own position may have influenced and affected what they observed. Their purpose was not to try to understand the culture from within, but simply to comment on it from the outside. This methodology, which would be considered flawed by today’s standards, resulted in observations that are often tinged with value judgements, and their choice of language suggests they felt they were dealing with a primitive culture, inferior to their own. Thomas Pennant, for example, describing a waulking in Rum in 1772, mentions that as the intensity of the women’s physical action gradually escalates, so does that of their singing, until ‘at length it arrives to such a pitch, that without breach of charity you would imagine a troop of female demoniacs to have been assembled’ (Pennant 1998:284-85). L.A. Necker de Saussure attended a nineteenth-century *céilidh* in Iona where people were singing a waulking song round a table, and wrote that:

This scene greatly amused us, and we were astonished to see, under so foggy an atmosphere, in so dreary a climate, a people animated by that gaiety and cheerfulness, which we were apt to attribute exclusively to those nations who inhabit the delightful countries of the south of Europe (Necker de Saussure 1822:42).

Clearly, the major obstacle with such sources is that all of the descriptions and observations they contain are solely the interpretation of the authors, and the Gaelic people themselves are not given a voice. Pennant does not talk to the women doing the waulking and let them explain the process to him; he simply makes his own judgements and draws his own conclusions. Yet this does not mean that modern scholars should ignore these sources entirely; the ethnomusicologist Thorkild Knudsen asserts that ‘we must not neglect the biased research of several generations as long as their results are intrinsically valuable’ (Knudsen 1968a:3). For example, Pennant’s description of a waulking, though biased, is indeed valuable, as it is a record of the waulking process with the women using their feet as well as their hands, a much less common occurrence than using the hands alone; the passage from Necker de Saussure is useful for its description of the mood and atmosphere of a nineteenth-century *céilidh*, despite its condescending, subjective tone. And other travel accounts are important as they describe performance contexts of Gaelic song and various types of song sung (see Johnson 1792:80-81; Boswell 1955:261, 265).

The question then, with regard to such inherited data, should not be whether or not it is to be used at all, but instead *how* it should be used in modern research. We must recognise that each of these sources represents the opinions and experiences of only one person; they are merely one individual’s perspective, and an outsider to the tradition at that. It must also be taken into consideration that the writers would have been influenced by the colonial attitudes of the time, and by their intended audience of upper-class non-Gaels. It is likely that the audience may have shared these ‘noble savage’ sentiments and delighted in reading stories such as the old woman who was unable to speak English, but who sang ‘quaint lullabies’ about

Bonnie Prince Charlie in Gaelic (Goodrich-Freer 1902:269). The modern researcher must disentangle the valid observations from the biased, prejudicial statements and treat the sources as a historical, yet extremely subjective, perspective on the culture, and not as the definitive or official word on any subject. They need to be used in combination with scholarly literature and, most importantly, with the researcher's own fieldwork within the culture. And when taken in context, such sources can help contribute to the historical knowledge about Gaelic song.

This wave of travel writers who 'discovered' the Hebrides was followed closely in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by people interested in collecting Gaelic songs for posterity before they disappeared forever (MacLeod 1996:128). This was not a phenomenon unique to Gaeldom; other traditional cultures were also subjected to the work of collectors, motivated by 'a romantic longing for an idealised past', whose goal was solely the collection and preservation of texts (Stoeltje, Fox et al. 1999:166). In the case of Gaelic song, many of these collectors, such as Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (Kennedy-Fraser and MacLeod 1909-1921) felt the need to 'improve' the traditional songs they transcribed, adding piano accompaniment and transforming them for a Victorian audience accustomed to Western art music. Shiloah and Cohen, in their classification of developments in Jewish oriental music, define such modified music as 'pseudoethnic':

...the artistic transmutation of ethnic musical forms by producers and performers from outside the ethnic group for an external audience. While the works are presented as ethnic music, their form has undergone such far-reaching changes to Western stylistic patterns that, properly speaking, they no longer belong to the realm of ethnic music (Shiloah and Cohen 1983:242).

As with the use of outsider adjudicators at the Mod,³ this was another instance of external aesthetics being applied to traditional Gaelic song, and Kennedy-Fraser's arrangements were warmly received by the English-speaking audiences; J.L. Campbell and Francis Collinson quote Sir Robert Rait and Dr George Pryde, who wrote in 1934 of Kennedy-Fraser that

[she] made the nation her debtor with her edition of songs of the Hebrides. To deride work of this kind as a tampering with the genuine product of the folk-spirit is inept and ungracious, yet it is still occasionally done. Not only is it clear that the essentials of the originals are generally preserved and that the alterations and additions are improvements; it is even doubtful if in many cases, anything would have survived without the interested labours of these collectors (Campbell and Collinson 1969-81, vol. 1:29).

Gaelic audiences, however, have not been as complimentary about the treatment their songs received at her hands, and in Barra they have said '*mhill i na h-orain againn*', 'she spoilt our songs' (Campbell 1957-58:310).

But while Kennedy-Fraser's treatment of the music may be questionable, the introductions to her volumes are useful from an academic perspective, containing descriptions of Eriskay and observations on Gaelic singing, with many unaltered airs included. Conversely, the writing style of Amy Murray (1905-1906; 1936), who collected songs in Eriskay in the same year as Kennedy-Fraser, is certainly romantic and subjective, but she presents the songs she transcribed in a much more impartial and scientific way.⁴ Murray worked closely with Father Allan MacDonald, the Eriskay priest and a collector himself, which gave her the opportunity of learning about the culture from an insider to the tradition, and this is illustrated in her valuable

³ The Royal National Mod, *Am Mòd Nàiseanta Rìoghail*, is an annual competition based on the Welsh *Eisteddfod* (MacDonald 1966-67), and of which singing, both solo and choral, is a central part. The Mod will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

⁴ See Campbell 1957-58 for a discussion of the work of both collectors.

observations and insights into Gaelic singing, although her writing is flowery and lyrical.

The main emphasis of the early Gaelic song collectors was primarily the song text, less often the music, and rarely the singers themselves, the audiences, or context. Otto Andersson, a Scandinavian musicologist, collected waulking songs in Lewis in 1938 to ‘note their rhythms, forms, and characteristics’ (Andersson 1952:2). In his study he analyses the music in extreme detail, considering aspects such as form construction, number of bars, mode, and rhythm, and also undertaking a stanzaic analysis, although refraining from touching on the actual text. He did not know a word of Gaelic, and had never actually seen a waulking himself, acknowledging that his knowledge of waulking came solely from literary sources (Andersson 1952:10). His musical analysis is very thorough, but he completely neglects the contextual aspect; nowhere does he mention who his informants were, how they learned the songs, or when they sang them. The curatorial attitude prevailed, and the priority was much more about conserving the songs themselves than with how the songs fit into their cultural context.

The shift of emphasis from the text to the context in folklore research took place in the middle of the twentieth century, when the position of the researcher gradually changed from collector to participant-observer. Stoeltje et al (Stoeltje, Fox et al. 1999:166-67) label the 1970s as a ‘transitional decade’, when works by scholars such as Roger Abrahams (Abrahams 1971; 1972), Richard Bauman (Bauman 1972; 1975), and Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein (Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975) began to stress the contextual aspect of folklore studies, and with it ‘a conceptualisation of folklore in which communication and performance are key

terms' (Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975:3). It was no longer acceptable for a traditional song to be examined in isolation, instead researchers realised the importance of studying the context of the song, including how it fitted into the cultural fabric of the community and into the repertoire of the performer, and how the performance event itself affected the song. The emergence of such theories with regard to song has resulted in the fields of folklore studies and ethnomusicology becoming closely related, for the fundamental concept of ethnomusicology is that both the music and the culture from which it comes deserve equal attention. And ethnomusicology has certainly benefited from the advances in scholarship made by folklorists; in his discussion of performance practice in an ethnomusicological context, Gerard Béhague cites the theories of Abrahams and Bauman that advocate studying the interactions and relationships between the performers (Béhague 1984:4). Other ethnomusicologists such as Marcia Herndon and Norma McLeod (1980a; 1980b) have also used anthropological and ethnological approaches in their work on music as performance, where the performance event as a whole is the object of study.

The contextual and performance emphasis in folklore and ethnomusicology has been taken even further by the emerging discipline of performance studies, where behaviour is the focus of attention, and 'any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed' can be considered a performance (Schechner 2002:1, 2). Richard Schechner, one of the pioneers in the field, explains that to examine something 'as' performance, whether it be 'a painting, a novel, a shoe, or anything at all – means to investigate what the object does, how it interacts with other objects or beings, and how it relates to other objects or beings. Performances exist only as

actions, interactions, and relationships' (Schechner 2002:24). Erving Goffman also stresses the relationship aspect of performance, delineating a performance as 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers' (Goffman 2004:61). Thus, such scholarship places a great deal of emphasis on studying the relationship between the performer and audience.

All of these developments in performance scholarship make it clear that the approaches and methods of the early collectors are long gone. But it is also clear that with regard to the study of Gaelic song, and particularly of Gaelic singing practices, there is some catching up to do. Ethnomusicological approaches and methodologies have not been employed to any great extent in the study of Gaelic singing; contextual studies of Gaelic song have neglected the musical side, and music analysts have omitted the cultural and performance contexts of the songs. The exception is the research that has been done with bards, such as that of ethnomusicologist Thorkild Knudsen, whose work with the Skye bard Calum Ruadh focused on singing, composition, and context (Knudsen 1969; 1978). More recently, Thomas A. McKean has also worked with a bard from Skye, Iain MacNeacail, concentrating on compositional processes and contexts (McKean 1997). But the behaviour, aesthetics, practices, and processes of the singers themselves have been under-represented in the literature, and consequently the present study will attempt to fill that void.

Methodology

The methodology of the current work was strongly influenced by the folklore and ethnomusicological principles discussed above. Vocal performance practice must be analysed not as simply a series of sounds, but as part of a wider performance

context, and this concept formed the basis of the research. Consequently fieldwork, combining participant-observation and interviews with singers, was the main source of data. The interviews, conducted primarily in English, were semi-structured and based on questionnaires, but each one evolved in its own way and not all questions were necessarily asked of each singer (see Appendix 2 for a typical questionnaire). They took place over a period of two years, from 2004 to 2006, in Edinburgh, South Uist, Lewis, Inverness, and Skye. During this time I also dedicated a great deal of time to learning the Gaelic language (although I am far from fluent), and being involved as a participant-observer at *céilidhs*, formal concerts, and Gaelic singing classes.

In carrying out the fieldwork, it was of prime importance that I recognise my own position in relation to my informants. As Helen Myers advises, ‘Before entering the field pause to assess the personal and cultural biases you bring to the project. There is no purely objective research in ethnomusicology (or any subject). Cultural assumptions and personal idiosyncracies guide our observations and colour our findings’ (Myers 1992:32). Stoeltje et al write that

With increasing thought and philosophical argument dedicated to identity politics today, we have become aware that all aspects of the researcher’s identity are relevant to the fieldwork enterprise. Such matters as whether one is female or male, a student or professor, married or single, a native or stranger, has children or not, and many more will affect the relationship between the researcher and the researched and, consequently, the results of the study (Stoeltje, Fox et al. 1999:166).

Self-awareness on the part of the researcher of how his or her own personal identity can affect the study is therefore necessary in all fieldwork. In my case, my background as a classically-trained singer with a university education in Western art

music most certainly affects how I perceive Gaelic singing, since according to Bruno Nettl, ‘what one hears is conditioned by one’s own musical experiences and also by one’s expectations concerning the music being heard’ (Nettl 1990:32-33). I am also a Canadian, an obvious outsider to the Gaelic culture, and a learner of the language.

But there are also potential advantages to being an outsider when doing research. For one, it affords the opportunity to have a more objective point of view, without being caught up in personal opinions or biases of the society. There is also the possibility that an outsider is capable of insights that an insider is not; the ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood has said that, because of his or her training and perspective, the outsider ethnomusicologist ‘is capable of insights and evaluations which no [native], even with training abroad... could ever duplicate’ (Hood 1971:374).

However, while I may be an outsider to the Gaelic culture, many years of singing and performing as a soloist and as part of ensembles means that I have first-hand knowledge of the performance experience, and understand the various processes and decisions that singers face. This is insider knowledge that non-singers would not have, and thus my background has proved vital in my fieldwork, enabling me to have in-depth and empathetic conversations with singers about singing.

One way to facilitate studying the music of another culture in-depth is for outsider fieldworkers to aspire to ‘bi-musicality’, or ‘fluency in two or more musics’ (Titon 1995:288), the concept first described by the ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood (Hood 1960), which advocates researchers themselves learning to perform the music of the culture they are studying. This practice is part of the participant-observation technique of fieldwork, where researchers are not simply observing music making

from afar, but joining in. In this way classically-trained researchers accustomed to Western major and minor scales can re-train their ear to the modes and intervals of traditional music, as well as learn traditional methods of transmission, which are very different to those in the Classical music world that emphasise dependency on the printed score (Hood 1960:56). For my study, I felt that making a conscious attempt at learning to sing Gaelic songs in the traditional style would greatly help me to learn what exactly the Gaelic singing style is and how a singer actually achieves it. But learning a completely different singing style and vocal technique is not a small undertaking, and Hood describes the difficulties that exist, from working with the particular sounds of the foreign language to mastering the quality of the singing voice. This in itself is an extremely complicated process, involving vocal tone such as vibrato or no vibrato, ornamentation, and additionally ‘The student must imitate the proper shape of the mouth, the position of the tongue, the attitude of the head, the tension in neck muscles and even to a degree the revealing facial expressions which are an open window to the singer’s unconscious muscular control’ (Hood 1960:58).

In 2003, before beginning my postgraduate work, I attended a residential Gaelic singing class at *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*, the Gaelic college on Skye. This was my first experience of attempting Gaelic singing myself, rather than just listening and watching other singers perform, and it was instrumental in clarifying the questions I wanted to answer in my research. Since then, I have participated at numerous informal *céilidhs*, and all of these experiences, whether structured or unstructured, formal or informal, were very useful in demonstrating what is involved for Gaelic singers. Most importantly, the attempts at bi-musicality made me feel very strongly that singers’ own opinions of what is important in the tradition should be at the

centre of this examination of Gaelic singing and performance, and they should be presented in the singers' own words; as Lauri Honko writes, 'A modern folklore document permits the voice of the people to be heard exactly as uttered' (Honko 1992:5). As a result, the fieldwork involved qualitative research based on naturalism (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:6-10).

In selecting singers to interview, I wanted to find a mixture of ages, backgrounds, and professionalism in Gaelic song. I already knew some of the chosen singers from having interviewed them previously or worked with them in other capacities; some were referred through other singers I knew, and some were singers I initially had only known by reputation and specifically wanted to meet for this project. Bruno Nettl very aptly says, 'Informants often select themselves; they appear in the fieldworker's life fortuitously, and one may have little choice' (Nettl 1983:255). Despite all the planning and research I undertook to find the perfect singers to interview, in the end two important criteria were whether or not they wanted to be interviewed, and whether or not they were available!

In total, fifteen singers were interviewed, ranging in age from early twenties to late seventies, some of whom make their living as Gaelic singers, and some who simply sing in their local communities for their own enjoyment (additional details about the singers appear below). Since this study was based on a small sample size and conducted over a relatively short period of time, it must be acknowledged that the data collected and conclusions drawn may not necessarily apply universally throughout the Gaelic community; there may well be regional variations and gender or age-specific cultural features not discovered. Also, the implications of this 'informed selection' of informants means that those singers used as sources may not

necessarily be the best choices from among the wider group of singers. There is still a great deal of information to learn about Gaelic singing, but the research is, nevertheless, an important first step into Gaelic singing practices.

All of the interviews but one were conducted in person and recorded on mini-disk for preservation and transcription. Copies of these recordings are held in the Sound Archive at the School of Celtic and Scottish Studies (see Appendix 1). One interview was conducted by telephone and notes were taken in lieu of a recording and transcription.

One key methodological decision made for this study is to not identify any of the singers by name. The information they shared with me is very personal and subjective, with the ideas of some contrasting starkly with the opinions of others. While it is hoped that this research will contribute to Gaelic singing scholarship and provide a starting point for discussion, the Gaelic singing community is a small one and I have no desire to pit singers against each other or provoke controversy. Thus any names of Gaelic singers that appear here are from the published literature, or from earlier studies I have done myself where singers' names have already been used with their consent.

Singer demographics

The singers interviewed for this study were from a wide range of backgrounds. Here, factors that may be relevant to the singers' experiences and opinions are summarised to illustrate the diversity within the sample.

Age

The age range of the sample was wide (the youngest singer was in her early 20s; the oldest singer was in her late 70s), but the most common age group was between 40 and 50.

Age (Decade)	Number of Singers
20s	4
30s	2
40s	6
50s	1
60s	0
70s	2

Place of Birth

All of the singers interviewed moved away from their place of birth as adults, many to go to university or to find work. Most have remained elsewhere, however three have since moved back to their native island after many years away.

Place of Birth	Number of Singers
North Uist	1
South Uist	4
Barra	3
Lewis	3
Skye	2
Mainland	2

Gender

In the Gaelic tradition there are many more women than men who sing; or, at least, the women are much more visible. As a result, it was not possible to interview an equal number of men and women: thirteen women and two men were interviewed, and consequently the ratio of female to male singers in the fieldwork is quite indicative of the wider world of Gaelic singing as a whole.

Status

Of the fifteen singers interviewed, four were professional singers, in that they earned their living through singing (performing, teaching, or recording), and eleven were mainly active as community singers. Two of the community singers, while they made it clear that they would never consider themselves to be professional, were extremely well respected as Gaelic singers, had recorded CDs of Gaelic song and had performed widely both in Scotland and abroad. Several of the community singers had engaged in some professional activities, such as teaching Gaelic singing at local *féisean*, or festivals, but overall would not be classified as professional singers.

Language and family

Gaelic was the first language of eleven of the singers interviewed, while the remaining four considered themselves to be learners of the language. All of the learners had Gaelic-speaking relatives, and some Gaelic was spoken in their homes during childhood.

The role of music in family life during childhood varied among the singers. For ten of the singers, music and singing were an important part of their childhoods and some of their immediate family members were Gaelic singers or

instrumentalists. Several of these singers were steeped in the tradition of Gaelic song, with songs being passed down within their family for generations. Of the five singers who did not have musical families, two said that their parents and other relatives were not singers themselves, but that they had always encouraged them to sing. A third, whose immediate family was not musical, grew up in a close-knit Gaelic-speaking community, and she learned many songs from her friends and neighbours. For the remaining two singers, Gaelic singing was not a strong feature of their childhoods, but they came to singing later in their lives.

Thesis outline by chapter

- **Chapter One: Introduction:** This chapter identifies the objective of the study, considers previous approaches to the study of performance practice and aesthetics in Gaelic singing, and outlines the project's methodologies.
- **Chapter Two: Aesthetics:** This chapter considers common approaches to the study of musical aesthetics, and discusses in detail the aesthetic values of 'good singing' (within the Gaelic tradition and cross-culturally), including beliefs about poetry and music and the place of narrative within singing.
- **Chapter Three: Techniques and Singing Styles in Gaelic Song:** The characteristics of Gaelic singing styles are examined, focusing on vocal quality and intonation; ornamentation, variation, and improvisation; and phrasing, tempo, and treatment of rhythm.
- **Chapter Four: Performance Contexts:** This chapter discusses the performance contexts of Gaelic singing, beginning with an overview of the historical and modern contexts, and focusing on the Mod as an example of

institutional singing. The performance setting, performer-audience relationships, and performance etiquette of Gaelic singing are then discussed.

- **Chapter Five: Transmission and Repertoire Selection:** This chapter examines the beliefs held by Gaelic singers concerning how they choose the songs they want to sing, and how they actually learn songs and singing style.
- **Chapter Six: Conclusion:** The conclusion discusses the results of the study, reflecting on the fieldwork with singers and the themes to have emerged in modern Gaelic singing, and makes suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

Aesthetics

The term 'aesthetics' first came into modern usage in the eighteenth century, initially referring to 'a kind of knowledge gained through immediate sense perception', but subsequently to 'the experience of beauty and the unique experiences of emotive insight that works of art can afford' (Korsmeyer 2002:268). Aesthetic discourse can be mystifying to the non-specialist; indeed the ethnomusicologist Alan P. Merriam makes reference to the 'verbal jungle which tends to obscure rather than to clarify the essential ideas contained in the philosophy of the aesthetic' (Merriam 1964:260). The concepts of 'aesthetic' or 'the aesthetic' are ones that appear constantly in the literature (Hospers 1969:2), and yet, 'despite the enormous literature devoted to aesthetics, it is extremely difficult to discover precisely what an aesthetic is' (Merriam 1964:259). In order to determine what is meant by the aesthetic in Western culture, and ascertain whether or not it can be applied to traditional or non-Western music, Merriam has outlined six factors that make up the concept of aesthetics as applied to Western art: psychic distance, and the separation of art from its context; 'manipulation of form for its own sake'; the attribution of emotion-producing qualities to art; 'the attribution of beauty to the art product or process'; 'the purposeful intent to create something aesthetic'; and 'the presence of a philosophy of an aesthetic' (Merriam 1964:261-69). His conclusion, based on the two non-Western cultures he examines, is that an aesthetic cannot exist

if it is not explicitly verbalized in a definite 'language of the aesthetic', as it is in Western society (Merriam 1964:269).

Michael Owen Jones, however, disagrees with Merriam. He argues that 'There is a folk aesthetic in the sense of reactions that are manifested in restricted code form as traditional and conventional modes of expression, such as "them hills ain't hard to look at," "you couldn't keep from chokin' up to hear him sing it," "man, they're pretty the way he makes them," and many other expressions embodied within specific folkloric form' (Jones 1971:103). Thus, according to Jones, the elusive 'language of the aesthetic' is not necessarily an indication of the presence of an aesthetic, and researchers must listen carefully to what their informants are saying in their expressions of appreciation to fully understand their responses. Roger Scruton argues that music is, in itself, aesthetic, and consequently 'any society that makes music is already taking an interest, however primitive, in something that has no purpose but itself' (Scruton 1999:478). He is also of the opinion that, when it comes to aesthetics, 'to explain is to alienate: it is to show something as "outside", observed but not internalized, as in an historical narrative or a scientific textbook. It is to prefer conception to experience' (Scruton 1999:463).

The most crucial point made by Jones regarding research into traditional cultures' opinions concerning the arts, and one that is particularly relevant for the present study, is the following:

The most useful concept for the researcher interested in peoples' responses to art, then, is not that of the aesthetic but of taste, which is not constant and which includes such factors as the nature and purpose of the object created, personal values deriving from one's experiences and goals as well as from the internalization of group values, and one's sensitivity, ability to apperceive, and experience in the evaluation of the objects that are judged.

The concept of taste, then, subsumes the aesthetic attitude ... and is more viable in the study of any art tradition than is the elite concept of the aesthetic, with its six factors delineated by Merriam (Jones 1971:104).

This idea of ‘taste’ over ‘the aesthetic’ corresponds exactly with the approach of the present study. The intent is to discover the opinions that Gaelic singers have about their own tradition: their tastes, values, beliefs about what is important, and what is meaningful for them. Therefore ‘aesthetics’ is applied throughout this work in the sense of ‘taste’, and not in the sense of the elite concept of the aesthetic. Investigations of local theories of aesthetics ‘or whatever can be construed as the nearest equivalent to a localized aesthetic theory’ (Becker 1983:65) is something that ethnomusicologists are now examining in more detail, but which has been largely neglected in previous research on Scottish Gaelic song.

Approaches to the study of musical aesthetics

As discussed in the Introduction, the majority of the early writers and collectors of Gaelic song focused on either the song texts or the music to the exclusion of the performance context. Interviews with singers were uncommon and most studies largely ignored the personal and emotional connections between singer and the act of singing. Any mention of aesthetics would have been the author’s own judgements of what he was observing in singing practices, and not that of the singers.⁵ There are a few exceptions, such as Tolmie 1911, Murray 1905-1906 and 1936, and Broadwood 1927-31, all of whom describe Gaelic singing practices, and will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters. However, while these writers did use first-hand testimony of informants, a classification of singing

⁵ Examples are Kennedy-Fraser 1909, 1917, 1921; McDonald 1784.

aesthetics was not the goal of any of their studies, and again, mention of aesthetics is somewhat incidental.

Recent researchers of Gaelic song have devoted more time to the study of internal musical aesthetics (such as John Shaw, 1992-93 and in MacLellan 2000), but there is still a lot of work to be done. No in-depth, ethnomusicological research on singing aesthetics in the Gaelic tradition exists, as it does for so many other cultures including Scots (Williamson 1985; Smith 1988; Smith 1992), English (Dunn 1980), Greek (Caraveli 1982), Navaho (McAllester 1954), Egyptian (Racy 1982), and Irish (Henigan 1991). Examining these studies is very useful as they highlight the important issues in the study of musical aesthetics, and thus it is possible to gain cross-cultural insights into the Gaelic tradition.

While the concept of aesthetics is one of the most important elements to study when examining the musical traditions of a particular group, trying to define a society's musical values can also be a vague and abstract process. How does a researcher obtain information on beliefs that are so inherent to a given tradition, and so personal? Many ethnomusicologists are obvious outsiders to the culture they choose to study, and therefore do not have the innate, instinctive knowledge of the music of those who were born into the tradition. In order to discover what is important to people about their music, one possible method of research is to ask the people themselves. This may sound like an obvious approach, but nonetheless ethnomusicological opinion has been divided as to how articulate informants can be about their own musical aesthetic system. A number of writers on the subject claim that 'The members of most non-Western cultures, especially the non-literate and folk societies, have difficulty in verbalising about music. Asking them what good or bad

music may be, or what constitutes good or bad singing, and the reasons for the answers, may not produce results' (Nettl 1964:274). Norma McLeod, who had difficulty with her research in Madagascar while attempting to study the naming for the tunings of the zither, agrees: 'The use of informants presents problems in ethnomusicology, since most musicians do not perceive musical form consciously. They cannot and do not express the larger portion of the principles in operation in their own music. As artists, they function as performers, but not as theoreticians' (McLeod 1966:52). Breandán Ó Madagáin, however, makes a necessary argument when he writes of singers in Ireland that

...it would be a great mistake to interpret their inability to articulate their musical appreciation as an indication that they were insensitive to the musical aesthetic. The comparative vagueness of their comments on the music will have been due in large measure to the fact that it is very much easier for language to discuss language than it is for language to speak meaningfully about music, which is not in the speech mode. Their appreciation of the music will have been instinctive rather than analytical, and for the most part their interest will have been in the totality of expression, not dissociating the musical dimension from the other (Ó Madagáin 1985:179-80).

That singers do not always separate music from the whole is a significant point. David McAllester surveyed Navaho Indians on their song aesthetics, and found that 'When a traditional Navaho is asked how he likes a song, he does not consider the question, "How does it sound?" but "What is it for?"' (McAllester 1954:5). His informants did not regard songs to be separate from their function, and therefore found it very difficult to discuss aesthetic preferences such as their favourite instrument (McAllester 1954:71).

Merriam is of the opinion that, while cultures will certainly differ as to the extent of their articulation about music, it is unlikely that they would have absolutely nothing to say about their musical style (Merriam 1964:117). Gerard Béhague goes even further, saying that ethnomusicologists should be ‘rejecting once and for all the idea that musicians are unable to verbalise about their own music-making process’, and should be employing a methodology that combines interviews with informants, participant-observation, and other fieldwork techniques (Béhague 1984:9).

With this in mind, McAllester (1954) seemed to be far ahead of his time when he set out to examine the musical aesthetics of Navaho Indians in Rimrock, New Mexico. His study outlines a clear methodology of research, making use of a questionnaire (which he includes in his publication) as the basis for interviews, in combination with having recorded songs, attended ceremonies and church meetings, and spent time working and camping with Navaho families. In his analysis of the community’s aesthetics, he lets his informants speak for themselves, by using their own words as much as possible. While it is expected today that any folklorist or ethnomusicologist would do just that, it was not common at the time, and McAllester’s work paved the way for future study in the field of musical aesthetics. Similar techniques have been used by a number of researchers since then, who have mostly, as Béhague recommended, moved on from the theory that people are unable to communicate about how and why they make music. Ginette Dunn, in her work on singing traditions in East Suffolk, found that both singers and audiences had clear opinions about performance and the particular qualities of individual singers, but that there was not ‘a readily verbalised set of judgements to be found in any one informant’ (Dunn 1980:205). In her experience, the only way to come up with an

assessment of traditional aesthetics was by ‘sifting the evidence of performance, attitude and dialogue’ (Dunn 1980:205). Through working closely with singers and audiences and observing performances and performers, Dunn was able to analyse the local aesthetics and make some firm conclusions, utilising both ‘folk evaluation’ and ‘analytical evaluation’. The difference between the two concepts, known as ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ in folkloristics (see Dundes 1962) is that ‘the folk evaluation is the explanation of the people themselves for their actions, while the analytical evaluation is applied by the outsider’ (Merriam 1964:31-32). Researchers must distinguish between the two, and never ‘confuse the evaluation of the speaker, the actor or the doer with the evaluation of the analyst’ (Bohannon n.d., quoted in Merriam 1964:32). This is an extremely important point to remember, since no two investigators will ever arrive at exactly the same conclusion, and they must be aware that what they present in their final product is really only their own interpretation of the informant’s culture (Vasenkari and Pekkala 2000:252). As Clifford Geertz argues, in outlining the nature of ethnographic description, ‘anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. ... They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are “something made”, “something fashioned”... not that they are false, unfactual, or merely “as if” thought experiments’ (Geertz 1973:15). The interpretation of the researcher is particularly relevant to the subject of non-Western or traditional musical aesthetics, because of ‘the danger of reading Western meanings and expectations into passages where they are not relevant’, as Leonard B. Meyer points out in his seminal work *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Meyer 1956:197).

Thus, through a combination of informant interviews and participant-observation, it is possible for researchers in ethnomusicology and folklore to reach an understanding of a culture's musical aesthetics. The extent of what each individual informant can say about music will certainly vary, but first-hand testimony should still be the starting point for determining how people within the tradition feel about and speak about their music.

'Good singing' – cross-cultural perspectives

A primary concept of musical aesthetics is what precisely a society considers to be good singing. Do people place importance on aspects such as vocal technique, expressiveness, diction, or type of song? Every culture will have its own unique criteria as to what constitutes good singing, and much can be learned through comparisons of different groups.

In the Scots traveller community, a singer was praised for his or her ability to sing the old songs, to improvise, and to communicate the travellers' history through song (MacColl and Seeger 1977:20). However, Linda Williamson found that there was no such thing as a 'traveller favourite,' or a singer who was considered to be 'good' by everyone (Williamson 1985:20). Duncan Williamson, a well-known traveller singer and storyteller, said that a singer's recognition came for being 'good at such and such songs' (Williamson 1985:21). There was no universal consensus within the tradition on what was considered to be good singing, and in fact 'No distinction is made between good and poor or average singing. Any traveller who attempts to sing, [...] may be termed "a singer"' (Williamson 1985:20, 23). The lack of a consensus among travellers on the criteria of good singing is very interesting, as it indicates their central belief that singing is something open to everyone, not just a

select few who are deemed to be better than the rest. Conventionally songs were an important part of the fabric of the community, and everyone was equally expected to contribute a song or a story in a get-together (Williamson 1985:22).

For singers in East Sussex, Dunn found that the most essential part of singing was that it continued to happen, providing entertainment and camaraderie, and perpetuating the tradition (Dunn 1980:206). Secondly, preferences were expressed for particular singers, songs, or styles, but ultimately any performance was accepted (Dunn 1980:206). When she questioned informants as to who were their favourite local singers, many people did not give a reason for their response, but said only that so-and-so was a 'lovely singer', and this explanation was considered sufficient. But Dunn observed that in the community there was no articulated concern for the musical criteria of 'correct phrasing, descriptive ability, imagery, key control, organic form and originality' (Dunn 1980:206). Singers and audiences valued emotional delivery and accuracy, but they were appreciative of performance of any kind, and this was their primary aesthetic.

Kenneth Goldstein has also asked informants to name the best singers in their communities. Nearly everyone he has interviewed, from many different English-speaking communities in North America and Europe, selected the singers with the biggest repertoires, and they said very little about either the vocal quality of the singers or about the nature of the songs (Goldstein 1991:168). In traditional music, there are many other attributes that are more highly prized, and are indicative of good singing, than a singer's vocal quality. In fact, the terms 'good singing' and 'good singer' can be seen to represent different levels of aesthetic priorities, where for some it is the act of singing itself that takes precedence over the singer. The Congo

Basongye, while possessing a variety of terminology for musical structure, have few terms for voice quality and devote little attention to discussing it (Merriam 1964:119). To them, a singer is good if he can be understood, especially over long distances, can speak the words quickly, and can name names correctly in the song (Merriam 1964:119).

In the Irish *sean-nós* tradition, it is not the singer at all, but the song, that is considered to be most important (Henigan 1991:98; Ó Canainn 1993:75). In performance, a good singer presents ‘a kind of detachment which invites the listener to pay no attention to the performer who is, after all, only the medium by which the message is conveyed, but rather seems to ask him to concentrate his attention on what is being said and on the manner of its saying’ (Ó Canainn 1993:75). Julie Henigan found that for many people in Donegal, conveying the emotion of a song was a highly valued ability in a singer, and letting the song speak for itself was more important than any technical skill (1991:98, 100).

This aesthetic belief of the primacy of the text and emotion of the song has many parallels with the Scottish Gaelic tradition. Gaels in Cape Breton, Canada, were more likely to emphasise the performance and repertoire over the singer, and although they appreciated a good voice, the priority for many was that the words and essence of the song were communicated (MacLellan 2000:23-24). Cape Breton Gaels also admired singers with good memories, and people preferred songs that were easy to sing (MacLellan 2000:23). In my own fieldwork, while many of the singers interviewed shared similar views to each other on what constitutes good singing, there was certainly no defined set of criteria with which every singer agreed. Certain aspects of singing might inspire very definite opinions in some singers, and

ambivalence in others. But one main principle that emerged quite consistently was that good Gaelic singing involves more than simply the vocal quality of the singer. This is not to say that the vocal quality is irrelevant, but it is certainly not the only criterion for most of the singers I interviewed. The singer's actual voice is in fact crucial, because it is the tool that enables him or her to communicate the poetry of the song and the emotion it contains, and these are the two attributes that are considered most important in a good Gaelic singer.

Communicating the text and story

The ability to make every sung word clearly understandable by the audience was recognised by several singers as an essential part of Gaelic singing, and was seen as more critical than the singer's voice:

For me, first and foremost, somebody who can communicate the story of the song, somebody who I can sit down there and listen to and understand every word. ... Obviously, you know, the quality of voice is important ... it's a[n] expression of a musical entity, and there has to be a certain amount of musicality in the voice, but that's not first and foremost for me (SA2006.009).

I think the most important part is being understood, being very clear ... in the text, yes. Intonation. Often you hear people with fantastic singing voices, and you can't understand what the song's about ... and if I can't understand what the song's about, well, it's not much use to me, so I think it has to be very clear (SA2005.076).

Another singer, discussing the importance of the words over the music in Gaelic singing, compared it to a style of English-language singing that also values the story above the music:

...you know Frank Sinatra, he had a fantastic way of putting the story of the song across, didn't he? And the words were

more important to him... than the music. That's the same in Gaelic song, because there's a story in Gaelic song, and you've got to tell the story in song, and some people are good at doing it, and others do it *coma co-dhiù* [indifferently], you know, as if they have no understanding of what it's about; they don't have the knack of putting the story across (SA2005.079).

These singers all share the traditional belief that the words are the essence of the song, and it is the singer's job primarily to sing the song in a way that allows the poetry and story to be understood. While this should ideally be done in a musical way, the musicality and vocal quality of the singer are less important than the communication of the text.

Communicating the emotion of the song

Besides the poetry, the other very important element of a song for many singers is the emotion it contains, and they feel that a good singer is someone who feels the sentiment of the song and can communicate it to the audience. 'Somebody who makes the song come alive,' is how one singer described it (SA2005.075). Another said that 'There's no point in just singing a song, nobody sings a song! You have to feel a song' (SA2005.078). A third singer said that to her, a good singer is one who 'sing[s] with feeling, and feeling about the song, and you can get great singers who are not musically brilliant, and you can get brilliant voices that don't do anything for Gaelic song' (SA2005.034). Again, she emphasised the fact that good Gaelic singing is about much more than the singer's voice. For one singer, her ideal of good singing was personified by a particular singer who she felt always thoroughly believed in the songs she sang, and was not just giving a performance:

it's the way she presents them, it's the way she feels about them, it's just – you know she lives and breathes them, but

not a[n] in your face living and breathing, it's just part of her. And then I can go somewhere else and I can see someone get up on a stage and do a wonderful performance and then that's it, they get off the stage and they've lost something. ... She has a style of singing, and she has a way about herself when she sings, and she believes in everything she does and everything she presents, and I can believe it, just by looking at her and just by listening to her, and I can hear others and they're performing. And that's fine, but with her it goes beyond that. And ... there isn't a word that can say it, but I just know myself what it is that I feel when I listen to her sing (SA2005.081).

Clearly, the sharing and communication of emotion plays a very important role in Gaelic singing. The singers I interviewed indicate that a singer who sings without really understanding and empathising with the song would not be considered a good Gaelic singer, however musical their voice, which is a belief also held by the Scottish traveller community, as the following passage by Sheila Douglas illustrates:

One of the most moving versions I have ever heard of a song called 'Bonnie Udney' was sung by a wheezy-voiced old travelling woman called Ruby Kelbey who could not sing more than three words at a time in one breath, but who had such passionate intensity, such *coniach*, as the travellers would say, that her singing touched the heartstrings. The same song sung by the most beautiful voice in the world, with perfect phrasing, cannot have the same moving effect unless the singer's heart is in the song, and he or she is not using it as a vehicle to show off musical prowess (Douglas 1995:292)

According to Douglas, then, singers must put some of themselves into the song and be completely involved with it in order to treat the songs and the singing tradition with the respect that they deserve.

Aesthetics of poetry and melody

The relationship between poetry and melody in song is a complex one. In many traditional cultures, the text and music of songs are thought to be inseparable from one another (Nettl 1964:281), and this is a belief that was also held in Gaelic Scotland: singers in Glendale, South Uist, would never hum or sing the tune of a song without the words (M. Shaw 1977:76), and the text of a song would rarely be recited without the melody in Cape Breton (MacLellan 2000:25). However, although they may have been inseparable, the two elements of poetry and melody were not considered to be equal. Customarily, Gaelic singers in both Scotland and Ireland equated the value of a song with the poetry, not the music (Freeman 1918-21:xxiv; Ó Madagáin 1985:178; Shields 1993:113; MacLellan 2000:47). Highland singers were often extremely knowledgeable about the poets of the songs they sang, yet knew nothing about the origin of the airs, and generally considered them to be simply ‘vehicles for their verse’ (Tolmie 1911:ix). A.M. Freeman was even of the opinion that Irish singers in Ballyvourney, County Cork, were ‘largely unconscious of music’:

If you tell [a singer] that two of his songs have the same tune, he will answer that that is impossible, since they are different songs. If you then say, that the tunes are very much alike, he will agree, and look upon you as a musical genius for having noticed it. [...] He thinks that you understand the song (that is, the words) so perfectly, that you have got the tune. [...] [h]is one anxiety is that the words he sings may be clearly understood (Freeman 1918-21:xxv).

Scottish Gaelic singers similarly felt that the melody did not have an existence independent of the words. When Amy Murray was being taught a song by two women in Eriskay in the early twentieth century, they could see no difference

between two phrases in the song that had the same words but somewhat different tunes: ‘Aren’t they just the same *words?*’ they said (Murray 1905-1906:319-20). The variation in the music was not enough for them to consider the two phrases to be different. This aesthetic dominance of text over music was reflected in both Scotland and Ireland in the ancient practice of composing new songs to pre-existing airs, where a song was considered ‘new’ with the composition of new words, not necessarily a new tune (Tolmie 1911:ix; Collinson 1966:111; Ó Madagáin 1985:158; McKean 1997:121; MacLellan 2000:46).

In discussions with contemporary singers about the aesthetics of poetry and melody, and which they considered to be more important, the traditional appreciation of the text appears to persevere. Singers still value the quality of the poetry in the songs they sing, and out of all the singers interviewed, only one said that she would sing a song where she only liked the melody and not the poetry (SA2005.077). However, the melody has perhaps risen in prominence, with many singers today placing more emphasis on a song’s tune than singers would have in the past. Several singers mentioned that for them to want to sing a song, they have to like the melody: ‘If I don’t like the melody then I don’t really like singing them, ’cause it has to be something you want to sing’ (SA2005.075). ‘[I]f the tune isn’t attractive, I don’t really want to sing the song, I might want to read the poetry of the lyric, but I wouldn’t necessarily want to sing it’ (SA2005.077). ‘I wouldn’t say I was somebody who would read the song and say, “I definitely want to sing that,” regardless of what the music is’ (SA2006.022). But so intertwined is the relationship between the words and music that many singers genuinely do see them as inseparable, and do not value one over the other. Said one singer: ‘the two have to marry, you know, you

can't have one without the other' (SA 2004.041). Another singer said that if he ever finds himself consciously thinking about either the music or the words specifically, then that song does not really appeal to him:

The best songs are those [that] reach me at a sort of a higher or a lower level, and they move me, and they make an emotional response to them, and the fact that their rendition, and the inextricable link between their poetry and their music, works. When I'm aware of one facet as opposed to another then I know that it's not absolutely, absolutely working, when I'm saying something like, 'Oh, I really like the poetry of that song [but there is not much to the tune], or vice versa, then I know... it's moving to a more analytical or cerebral level, whereas I connect best with songs that reach me on an emotional level (SA2006.009).

A singer's personal aesthetics of text and melody clearly have a great deal of influence on what he or she considers to be a 'good' song. One singer said that for her a good song 'has to have a good tune, it has to have a memorable tune, and the lyrics have to suit the tune ... the lyrics have to be good. ... I like fine lyrics, and lyrics which have been married with a tune in an artistic way so that it all goes together as a whole, as a unit' (SA2005.073). Other singers agreed that a good song must contain decent poetry and a nice melody, but a further requirement for many singers was that a song should also contain genuine, heart-felt emotion. A good song for one singer had to:

...tug at the heartstrings. Yeah, I definitely do like ones that are kind of more about emotions and strength of feeling, and of things that – I suppose feelings that are enduring and ... the situation might be different, but you recognise what the person's trying to express (SA2006.022).

The need for a song to have a strong emotional aspect was so important to another singer that it could even take precedence over the poetry:

Well, for a song to last, to go through generations, it's got to have a good melody. And emotion. Now, there's some songs that I think, that I have in my repertoire, that I think are great songs, which maybe don't have the most wonderful poetry to them. But they do have an emotion to them. Now, that may be because I've made them personal to me, and I think for a song, for a singer, and for somebody who listens to a song, it's all very personal, it's about taste, and what you like, and making it special for you (SA2005.034).

Thus, while the poetry still appears to be the dominant focus, the melody and emotional content also have large roles to play in the aesthetic appreciation of a song. But the text is the focal point of the song, and consequently conveying that text to the listener becomes one of the singer's primary goals.

It is not just in the Celtic world that aesthetic preference holds the words above the music. This was also the case in Madagascar, where 'Judgements about the relative value of songs related not to the music, but to the linguistic text. A song in which proverbs were acute and well-handled were considered to be a superior product' (McLeod 1966:58-59). But not all traditional cultures place so much value on a song's poetry. Native American singers feel that the melody of their songs is far more important than the text, and Nettl found that some disliked 'white' music because they thought it had too many words, and was too much like talking (Lavonis 2004:347-48).

Singing and narrative

One way that the singer can communicate the song's poetry and story to the audience is through oral narrative. Scottish travellers, when singing for audiences who were unfamiliar with the story of a song, would often tell the story before they sang to ensure that the listeners would get the most out of the song (Williamson

1985:74). In the Scottish Gaelic tradition, ‘the links between song and oral narrative are of primary importance’ (MacLellan 2000:14). Gaelic singers frequently tell the audience the name of the composer, the story behind the song, and perhaps an anecdote about the bard before they begin to sing, and such narratives ‘could be regarded as an integral part of the song by the singers’ (MacLellan 2000:14). Song introduction is a necessary part of the performance, as comprehension of a song would depend on knowing the story and characters already (McKean 1997:131). Allan MacArthur, an 86 year-old Gaelic singer from Codroy Valley, Newfoundland, said that his mother would always introduce the songs she sang: ‘Now every song my mother knew, she knew why it was composed, and everything. There was a history behind the songs. Well, that was better than the song in a way because she would tell you first why the song was composed, and then she would sing the song, you know, to compare with the history, you see’ (Bennett 1989:146). Singers in Ireland also begin their songs by telling the story and setting the scene, and it was observed that ‘There was not a song among them but had a story going along with it’ (Ó Madagáin 1985:173).

Scots revival singers Archie and Ray Fisher both viewed oral narrative as essential in their performances. Not only was it a means of introducing a song to an audience, and telling them the story and context of the song, but both singers also felt that it was a way of establishing a connection with their audience (Smith 1988:334-35). Interspersed speaking in between the songs served to bring performer and audience closer together, and create an intimate, less formal atmosphere.

The fact that narrative has such a central position in Gaelic singing further illustrates the cultural aesthetic that it is the words that are the heart of the song, not

the music. It is important to singers that their listeners appreciate the references and allusions within the song and have an idea of the story, and the audiences themselves need to feel that they understand; listening to a pretty tune is not enough for them. For most of the singers I interviewed narrative was seen as essential, taking the form of a brief spoken introduction to the song. Singers might mention the composer, where the song comes from, what the story is about, where and from whom they learned it, what it means to them, or some kind of anecdote about it. And singers have a variety of different reasons for why narrative is important, and why they choose to include it in their performances. One intention is to present the audience with background information that enables them to understand more about the song, thus involving them in the performance:

... it's about making your songs accessible, because if you give them just a teeny line, all it needs is a very short introduction in some cases, and it's enough for the audience to jump on it, and have a picture that they can stick with in their mind which helps the song along for them (SA2005.034).

I like to talk as much as I like to sing, if I'm doing a concert or whatever. And I think that sells yourself and the song to the audience, because they feel they're in the song with you before you tell it. ... and there's something more to the actual song than just getting up there and singing it. So I think that's important too (SA2005.081).

Imparting background information to aid the understanding of the audience is perhaps the most obvious explanation for the purpose of narrative, but it is by no means the only reason that singers decide to include it. It can also be a relaxation tool for the singers themselves: 'It can relax you as well. It can, it puts you at ease, if you ... stand there and just say a few words' (SA2005.075).

I far prefer talking. 'Cause it relaxes me, it makes me feel at ease too. And I'm not nervous, but I just feel that getting up there and singing and going off it's like – we've lost something, because we've got to share ourselves as well as the song and the stories (SA2005.081).

Singers also feel that spoken introductions are basic good manners, and thus a fundamental part of performance etiquette (which will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Four). One singer declared that it is 'only polite if you speak to your audience' (SA2005.078), and another said that it is 'just really good manners... just to say, well this is the song I'm singing, this is where I got it from' (SA2005.075). It is a way of interacting with the audience to make the song less of a performance and more of a two-way relationship: 'and you have to get a bit of interaction, you don't want this total, separate divide between performer and stage and audience' (SA2005.078). 'It's a link with the audience when you're talking to them' (SA2005.075).

For the singer to briefly mention who they learned their song from is a very important part of oral narrative for some singers, as they see it as a sign of respect for the tradition bearer who taught them: 'I try to tell, as much as possible to tell who I learnt it from, 'cause I think that's quite important, to say, to give people recognition' (SA2005.076). Said another singer, 'It's just really respecting the people that you got the songs from' (SA2005.075).

Narrative is not necessarily a universal practice in the world of Gaelic song, however. Several singers said that it is a relatively recent adoption for them personally, fuelled by audience expectations that songs will be introduced (SA2005.074; SA2006.022). One singer who grew up in a small community in Barra said that narrative was never a part of the local *céilidhs* there:

No, no, no, not at all. Because, you knew each other and you knew all of them, I mean you were a big family, there'd be 70 people in the hall, 80 people, maybe a hundred, we knew each and every one of them, we knew each other. We lived each other's lives. There wasn't anything about anybody in that hall you didn't know, and that they didn't know about you (SA2005.081).

Perhaps this could be a reflection of the limitations of the hall repertoire, but the fact that such a close-knit Gaelic-speaking community did not employ narrative at all is an interesting detail, as it suggests that its place is at least partially to accommodate outsiders, to ensure that they understand the local references and idioms and feel included in the event. Thus, spoken introductions for non-Gaelic-speaking audiences become particularly important, as one singer pointed out:

... if you are talking to a, maybe, not a strong Gaelic audience, but people that are obviously there because they're interested, and I think if you explain what the song is about, first of all, I always find that that helps, they're very interested in finding out what's the story behind it, and why was it written, and when, and I always find they're very receptive to that. I think that goes for whatever kind of song you sing. That if you explain to your audience before you sing it, what it's about, if it's a non-Gaelic-speaking audience, then, they still appreciate it (SA 2004.039).

But even within the Gaelic-speaking community narrative can serve to fill in gaps in knowledge. With the deterioration of the Gaelic language, many of the younger people can have difficulty picking up the complex Gaelic and allusions in many of the songs, something that John Shaw has observed about Cape Breton in particular (MacLellan 2000:53). Consequently, an introduction by the singer can greatly assist the comprehension of the audience, and ensure that they get as much out of the song as they can. Details, such as people and places, of lesser-known songs may be lost to audience members even if they do speak Gaelic, as is illustrated

by the young Gaelic singer Julie Fowlis. She performs widely to both Gaelic and non-Gaelic-speaking audiences, and makes use of narrative because ‘A lot of the songs I am interested in are at a very local level. They are from specific townships and they are very people-specific. Even to Gaelic speakers they wouldn't have the same impact if you didn't know the characters that were being talked about’ (Trew 2007).

Changing aesthetics

As the discussions above indicate, Gaelic singing is not a static tradition but a dynamic one, with tastes and preferences changing somewhat over time. This was something that several singers commented on. The foremost observation was that the very nature of Gaelic singing itself is changing. While singing in Gaelic society was historically community-based, with everybody singing during work and leisure activities alike, regardless of ability, some singers today feel that there is an expectation that in order to sing in public one must have a very good voice. Among the singers interviewed, there is clearly an opinion that good singing is about more than just the voice, but they still feel that in the wider world of Gaelic song, the singer's voice is becoming more important. One singer said, of how Gaelic singing is changing:

Well, it's more professional now, isn't it? ... You hear less of the – I don't mean to be disparaging at all, but the old granny. You hear less of that. I'm sure that was more common in years gone by, that people would just sing. And now people don't sing as much, or everyone expects you to be able to sing very well if you sing at all, and I think that's a shame (SA2005.073).

Another singer agreed, saying that singing is more about performance now, as opposed to a sharing of song:

I think nowadays it's only people who sing very well who will go up and sing. I think there's a bit of a... it's not respected in the same sense, that you could sing a song and people would join in to help you. I think now you have to give a performance where people are there to be entertained, not be part of it, quite often. I think that's – I think fewer people go up to sing because they don't feel confident enough to say right, I am good enough, and I will sing. And I think generally now, if you're not very good and confident in your own ability, you won't do it at all, whereas in the past I think, you could – keep tune, and you had lots of songs, OK you'll sing, and people would help you with the chorus. It doesn't happen now (SA2005.076).

This singer highlights how the expectations of the audience have changed, with people wanting to be passively entertained, without participating themselves, more so than in the past. Another singer also remarked upon the changing audience aesthetics:

I think audiences expect different things from Gaelic song now than in the past. And singers expect different responses from audiences than they used to have in the past. And when I say audiences, I just mean the people who'd be listening to a song, I'm not referring to like, you know, a paying audience. Just, you know, if you sang a song in a house, those who were listening to you would have reacted very differently, 40, 50 years ago, than they would now, I think (SA2005.034).

She believes that most modern audiences do not have the patience to sit down and listen to a long, unaccompanied Gaelic song anymore:

I think even, unless you're in a very *Gàidhealach* [Gaelic-speaking] community, where you've got your whole house full of Gaelic speakers or whatever, people don't have – they're not used to listening to song. The bottom line is, that – I think we now, in modern age, where you've got incredible imagery going on in television, and on videos and film, that when it comes down to the stark, sole voice, it's a different

thing to take a handle on, you know, and some people don't have the concentration span to actually sit and listen to a 30-verse song anymore. In fact, I wouldn't expect it of them anyway, whereas 40 years ago they would have done, without any question. Somebody was singing a song there would have been an audience of people who would just sit and listen to that song for the words' sake – for the stories (SA2005.034).

Obviously, singers are aware that the changing contexts of Gaelic singing are having an effect on the aesthetics of the tradition. Modern life, with all its developments and innovations, means that traditional singing has much more competition than it used to, and is no longer at the centre of every community. It also means that the potential audience for Gaelic song is much wider, with non-Gaelic-speakers having the opportunity to hear Gaelic singing on CDs or radio. In effect, the tradition has been somewhat diluted, with the decline of the language being a major factor, as well as the influx of outsiders as audience members who must be catered for specifically. But what is clear from all of my interviews with singers is that while there may be some changes within the tradition, it is still carrying on. The aesthetics that were always at the heart of Gaelic singing are still there, and today's singers are doing their best to ensure that the tradition remains true to its roots.

Chapter summary

Ethnomusicologists have differed in their approaches to traditional musical aesthetics in the past, but it is now generally accepted that asking the informants about their own tradition is one of the most important methodological steps to be taken in such research. Among the singers interviewed in the present study there was no defined set of criteria with which every singer agreed, but they all felt that good

Gaelic singing was about much more than the vocal quality of the singer. While good voices were recognised, singing was first and foremost about communication: singers valued the ability to make the text understandable to the audience, and to communicate the feelings and emotions contained in the song.

Traditionally, the text and music were considered to be inseparable, but the value of a song was equated with the poetry, not the music. Among contemporary singers this aesthetic still exists, although the gap between the two appears to be closing, as singers consider the melody to be more important now than singers would have in the past. Oral narrative is viewed as essential for most singers, taking the form of a brief spoken introduction, and containing such ‘metadata’ as the origin and history of the song or how the singer learned it. This provides background information and can also improve the singer-audience relationship.

The traditional aesthetics of Gaelic singing appear to be upheld by contemporary singers, but they themselves recognise that the nature of Gaelic singing is changing. Modern contexts, audience expectations, and the decline of the Gaelic language have all contributed to a stronger emphasis on vocal quality, and on formal performance rather than community-based sharing of songs.

CHAPTER THREE

Singing Styles and Vocal Techniques

Description of singing styles, whether of an individual or of a culture, is a field of ethnomusicology that may be said to be characterised by a certain vagueness and imprecision. Vocal techniques are discussed less than instrumental techniques in the literature (Merriam 1964:105), and no definitive descriptive vocabulary exists (Nettl 1964:154). Charles Seeger asserts that it is much easier to describe *what* is sung rather than *how* it is sung (1958:3-4), and consequently this is what much of the singing scholarship has focused on. As discussed earlier, Gaelic song is no exception, with most studies concentrating on the text of the songs rather than the method of singing.

In this section I will consider the characteristics of Gaelic singing styles, focusing on vocal quality and intonation; ornamentation, variation, and improvisation; and phrasing, tempo, and treatment of rhythm.

Singing styles

One ethnomusicologist who did devote a great deal of time to the study of singing styles was Alan Lomax (1959, 1978), whose system of cantometrics defined ten different singing styles throughout the world. In cantometrics, he maintained that the way the people in a particular society sang was directly related to other aspects of their culture, and was determined by 'the position of women, the sexual code, the degree of permissiveness about sexual enjoyment, and the affectual relationship between parents and children' (Lomax 1959:936). He classified the Hebrides as part

of the 'Old European' category, where 'singing and dancing are basically choral and cooperative. The voice is produced from a relaxed throat and the facial expression is lively and animated, or at least relaxed' (Lomax 1959:936). John Shaw suggests that the area Lomax calls 'Modern European', including Lowland Scotland and Eastern and Southern England, where one finds 'solo songs in harsh, hard voices ... a stronger interest in text than in tune' (Lomax 1959:937) could also apply to Gaelic singing (MacLellan 2000:372-73). Cantometrics is an extremely valuable and interesting method of cross-cultural comparison, but the system has come under criticism on several points. Some reviewers found fault with the methodology, believing that Lomax's sample size of ten songs per culture was not large enough to properly assess any culture's style (McCormick 2002), and that stylistic differences found within any given culture would 'create serious arguments with the sampling techniques employed in cantometrics' (Herndon 1978:207). McCormick also believed that 'the links between vocal traditions and culture are not as straightforward as Lomax seems to think' (McCormick 2002). However, despite these criticisms, ethnomusicologists and anthropologists alike agree that Lomax's work is a substantial contribution to the field of music research and 'should be carefully read and studied by all those with even a passing interest in the music of the world's peoples and its integration into their cultures and societies' (Merriam 1969:385).

In most scholarly studies of Gaelic song, singing styles and performance practice have been neglected. The major exception is in the area of waulking songs, where a great deal of research has been done by Campbell and Collinson (1969-81) on the songs themselves and the manner of their performance. Apart from this

specific genre, however, Gaelic singing styles have not received very much attention in the modern academic literature. The common theme that emerges in examination of the research is that an analysis of singing styles and vocal technique is not the main objective of any work. No such study exists for Gaelic singing, which is somewhat surprising, and it is in stark contrast to the Irish *sean-nós* tradition, where there is a plethora of sources that discuss the singing styles and techniques in depth (for example, Freeman 1918-21; de Noraídh 1965; Shields 1971; Bodley 1972-73; Shields 1981; Henigan 1991; Ó Canainn 1993; Shields 1993; Vallely 1999).

Considering the fact that the two Gaelic traditions are so closely related, one might expect that equal attention would have been given to each country in terms of song research. In any case, the closeness of the two traditions means that considering the research into Irish singing practices is useful when examining the Scottish Gaelic tradition.

An important theme in the literature on Irish *sean-nós* singing is how personal a singing style is to each and every individual singer (Henigan 1991:101; Ó Canainn 1993:49; Cohane and Goldstein 1996:430). While a cultural aesthetic certainly exists, and singers must work within this framework, 'singing style seems dependent on the personality of the singer, the type of song, and the singing situation' (Cohane and Goldstein 1996:430). This was likewise the case in Cape Breton, where variations between singers and regions were noticed and discussed, usually with approval (MacLellan 2000:28-29). Despite the generalisations made by Lomax, no such thing as a universal singing style will exist in any culture; there will always be differences, small and large, between singers' approaches.

While there will be variations of singing styles within traditions, conversely there are also similarities across different traditions, which are illustrated by cross-cultural examinations of singing styles. One characteristic that seems to pertain equally to the Scots travellers, Irish, and Scottish Gaelic musical traditions is that it will usually take singers a little while to get into the tune when they start singing (Freeman 1918-21:xxii-iii; Campbell 1957-58:312; MacColl and Seeger 1977:22; Williamson 1985:128). Occasionally, elements from the previous song will appear in the next one, and the songs will only achieve stability after two or three verses (MacColl and Seeger 1977:22).

Amy Murray observed that for many Gaelic singers, singing is a natural process, and one that they do without thinking about how they do it. Because of this, they can get flustered if they are asked to start or stop: ‘to halt your singer, to turn him back, to make him in any way self-conscious, is enough to throw him off his way altogether. Having come by it with little thought, so soon as he begins to think, he will leave out something, put in something, take the high turn instead of the low, or the other way round, nor know he does it’ (Murray 1936:116). It seems that Lucy Broadwood found the same thing with singers from whom she collected songs in Arisaig, as she singles out one particular young singer who was actually very good at stopping and repeating parts of songs (Broadwood 1927-31:280). This natural, almost instinctive approach to singing was also the practice in Ireland, where singers in Donegal ‘sang as they breathed, unselfconsciously and spontaneously’ (Henigan 1991:103).

Another manifestation of the spontaneous and instinctive singing styles of both Scottish and Irish Gaels can be seen in the practice of combining speaking and

singing, especially in moments of emotional intensity. Brendán Ó Madagáin recounts an anecdote of an Irish woman whose voice would rise into a recitative-like chant when she told a sad story, but would return to ordinary speech when she moved on to another topic (Ó Madagáin 1985:148). The same thing occurred in Eriskay, where Father Allan MacDonald said that, ‘When they come up to tell me of anyone dying or in trouble they always chant it’ (Murray 1936:101-102). In Hungary, too, laments can often be ‘impassioned, half-weeping, half-singing’ (Rajeczky 1960:58).

Clearly, at times emotions can be so strong that speaking is simply not adequate, and the only way to express oneself is through song.⁶ Singing is on a level of greater intensity than speaking, a fact recognised by Irish performers by frequently dropping into speech at the conclusion of a song, the singer’s way of announcing ‘a return to “real” or “non-ritual” time at the song’s end’ (Shields 1993:121). Occasionally Irish singers will also descend into speech during a song, a custom used by Scots travellers as well. They will sometimes use a mixture of speech and song throughout narrative song performances, one reason being that hearing a spoken word at an important point of the song will capture the audience’s attention (Williamson 1985:73).

Béla Bartók, the Hungarian composer, pianist, and ethnomusicologist, was very interested in the speech-like quality of folk song; in discussing the vocal melodies of his native country he noted that ‘The style of performance is always *parlando, poco rubato*’ (Suchoff 1992:51). In his musical transcriptions he used a great many additional symbols and signs, attempting to describe as closely as

⁶ See Merriam 1964: 219-23 for a discussion of the function of emotional expression through music.

possible the way the songs sounded in performance, and indicating such characteristics as (among many others) indefinite pitch, notes a little shorter or longer than indicated, and pitches slightly higher or lower than indicated (Suchoff 1997:81). Transcription can play an important role in describing singing styles, although it is subject to the opinions and biases of the transcriber, and to be of any use it requires that the reader be familiar with the musical tradition in question, as Charles Seeger points out: ‘...no one can make it sound as the writer of the notation intended unless in addition to a knowledge of the tradition of writing he has also a knowledge of the oral (or, better, aural) tradition associated with it’ (Seeger 1958:186). Being able to actually read the transcription is necessary too, and can be difficult when they are full of additional symbols, as in Bartók’s case, or extreme ornamentation. Ailie Munro, for example, had to contend with this in her transcriptions of Scots singer Lizzie Higgins: ‘The question of ornaments poses a problem for the transcriber: they are so lavishly used by Lizzie that it would make the transcriptions more difficult to read if they were all written as grace-notes’ (Munro 1970:158). In this case Munro provides a ‘basic shape’ of the tune underneath each line of the detailed transcription, which aids the reader in seeing the plain, unornamented melody, and helps to illustrate just what Lizzie does with her version of each song (Munro 1970:158). But however detailed or otherwise a transcription may be, it is no substitute for hearing the song sung by the singer, as Bartók agreed:

‘... it does not suffice for a musician to notate exactly these melodies by ear alone, we must have recourse to the phonograph or gramophone as often as possible, even if we have to deal with apparently simple melodies. That is because the peasant’s singing style is full of peculiarities, often very characteristic and worthy of recording with precision (such as the portamento of the voice, irrational rhythms, and so forth),

which ... we are hardly able to notate down on paper with our conventional symbols' (Suchoff 1992:59).

As far as capturing and analysing singing styles, modern technological advances mean that there are now additional methods, such as using a spectrograph to study vocal timbre (see among others Miller and Franco 1991; Malloch 1994; 2001). The spectrogram, the graph produced by the spectrograph, displays the 'distribution of acoustic energy in a specific frequency range and time' (Miller and Franco 1991:4). Miller and Franco, approaching timbre analysis from an operatic pedagogical perspective, write that the spectrogram is capable of revealing such aspects of the singing voice as vibrato, vocal resonance, and vowel definition (Miller and Franco 1991:5), which all contribute towards defining how a particular voice sounds. The output, however, is not necessarily straightforward; Malloch cautions that 'the data needs to be weighted in order to correspond more closely with models of auditory perception, and the mass of data that is represented... needs to be reduced so that we are left with information specifically to do with timbre' (Malloch 2001:160). But when used appropriately, the spectrograph can add a new dimension to vocal timbre research, and it would be fascinating to see this applied with regards to traditional Gaelic singing.

Vocal quality and intonation

Descriptions of vocal quality and intonation, the way a voice actually sounds while singing, tend to be very subjective and vague. When an attempt is made to describe a singing voice, it is often done in very broad terms, using general words such as 'relaxed' or 'tense', and conveying meaning only to those who are already familiar with different singing styles (Nettl 1964:154). A good example of this is

Amy Murray, an American singer and harpist, who visited the island of Eriskay in 1905 and recorded descriptions of Gaelic singing and singers, working closely with Father Allan MacDonald, the local priest (Murray 1905-1906; 1936; see also McGuire 1999). She treated the songs she recorded with objectivity, but her writing style is often romantic and whimsical, and her observations on vocal quality are somewhat nebulous: Eriskay treble voices are characterised as ‘sweetly wild, fresh, well-nigh sexless’ (Murray 1936:130) as well as possessing a plaintive, passionless quality (Murray 1905-1906:325). This reinforces the truth in Nettl’s statement, as someone already acquainted with Gaelic singing may be able to identify with this description, but anyone else would have a difficult time interpreting how exactly this might sound. A more useful description by Murray is one in which she writes that the tone of Gaelic singing is ‘rather that of speech than of song’ (Murray 1936:102), which has also been said for Irish singing (Shields 1993:122).

Conveying the sound of Gaelic singing through comparison is a technique used by Lucy Broadwood, when she writes that ‘Highlanders are very commonly gifted with fine voices, of a rich resonance similar to that found amongst Italians. In Gaelic the vowels are open and pure, often succeeding and melting into each other as they do in Italian’ (Tolmie 1911:ix).

Broadwood’s emphasis on resonance in Gaelic singing is intriguing, as it appears to be the opposite in the Irish tradition. Seóirse Bodley stresses that because ‘Irish traditional singing involves fast ornamentation the preference is for flexibility of voice – resonance is of minor importance’ (Bodley 1972-73:46). Irish women’s voices are ‘light, flexible and agile’, and similarly there is ‘little emphasis on resonant tone-quality’ for men’s voices (Bodley 1972-73:46, 47). However, both

traditions make use of nasality, to varying degrees. In Inverness County, Cape Breton, Gaelic singers have a ‘marked nasal quality’ that is unlike other parts of the island (MacLellan 2000:28), and nasality is also characteristic of the singing in certain parts of Ireland, where it is used as an expressive effect, to emphasise a certain note or group of notes (Ó Riada 1982:38). Nasal tone is also frequently employed at the end of a line, where the singer closes his lips to create an ‘m’ sound as a sort of drone (Ó Canainn 1993:74). It is a method of maintaining continuity between lines, by continuing the sound even when there is no text, and is perfectly acceptable within the tradition (Ó Canainn 1993:73-74). This appears to be a technique unique to Ireland, as I have found no mention in the literature of this being practised by Scottish Gaelic singers, and it is not something I have observed in my own fieldwork.

According to Alan Lomax, nasality plays ‘an essential part in certain singing styles’ (Lomax 1978:70), and it certainly seems to be a technique used by other traditional cultures as well: MacColl and Seeger observed that English travellers sang in a ‘sharp and slightly nasal’ tone (1977:21), while the North American Native Teton Sioux, who modify their vocal quality depending on what they are singing, make use of nasality in love songs, but not in lullabies or songs of death (Lavonis 2004:346).

Whether or not singers from other traditional cultures manipulate their vocal quality in this way is an interesting topic for exploration. Charles Seeger, discussing the Anglo-American singing style, says that there is no ‘variation of tone-quality within the sung syllable, the phrase-breath or the melody-stanza’ in that particular tradition (Seeger 1958:9). He continues:

Singers vary the timbre of voice only as required by the automatism of voice production in the enunciation of words and the rendition of high and low tones of a melody. Once established, a timbre is maintained with as little variation as possible throughout a song, indeed, throughout the whole repertory of the singer. Only old age seems to alter it (Seeger 1958:9).

Variation of dynamics as a vocal technique is another feature that is not a part of Anglo-American traditional song, and, similarly to vocal timbre, a singer will use one dynamic level throughout their entire song and repertoire (Seeger 1958:9). In the Gaelic tradition, however, it was observed that Scottish Gaels employ *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, and *mesa di voce* effects (Tolmie 1911:ix, x), although this was not something I encountered in my own fieldwork and in listening to archived recordings. In Ireland, dynamics and other vocal techniques such as *vibrato* are seldom used in *sean-nós* singing (Bodley 1972-73:46-47; Ó Riada 1982:23; Ó Canainn 1993:74-75). Ó Canainn associates these devices with the vocal quality of the trained singer, and writes that in Irish traditional song ‘The song is allowed to speak for itself, with a minimum of artificial intrusion or histrionics on the part of the performer’ (Ó Canainn 1993:74-75). I have found no information on the use of *vibrato* in the literature, but there is so little material available that it is impossible to say definitively, on the basis of prior research alone, what exactly Gaelic singers do or do not do with regards to singing styles and technique. Considering the observations by Murray and Broadwood on the unselfconscious, natural quality of Scottish Gaelic singing, I would doubt that deliberate variations in voice quality would be a major part of the tradition, and this theory was supported with my own fieldwork. Of the Gaelic singers I spoke to, none said that they would purposely modify the way their voices sound. Explained one singer: ‘No, I would be hopeless

at doing it. I just sing the way it comes out, that's the way it is, what you hear is what it is, for me. I don't try to put any frills or falderals or anything like that to it, no' (SA2005.079). Another singer also said that she had never attempted to modify her vocal quality:

It's just the way it's always been, I haven't changed it in any way. And I've never tried to. I've never tried to, because I don't think it's something you can do, unless you actually go for singing lessons. And if people do that they want to do it, they want to change their style, but I never did, I just do what I do, always have done, and I can't imagine that it would be any different (SA2005.081).

One aspect of vocal quality that has been remarked upon in several sources is the geographic variations in the *tessitura* (the part of the vocal range that is most used) of voices in Scottish Gaelic singing. Of Eriskay, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser wrote that 'The best singers on the island had remarkably low voices, and I understood that a low voice was particularly admired on the island, while high voices were preferred in Skye!' (Kennedy-Fraser and MacLeod 1909-1921:vol. 1:viii). Amy Murray's experience of Eriskay was that voices differed even within the island itself; in *Bun a' Mhuilinn* (Bunavullin), they sang 'high and shrilly', while those in the '*Baile*' (town) sang their songs at lower pitches (McGuire 1999:85). The variation in voice type seems to be most extreme in female voices. J.L. Campbell and Francis Collinson have written that women singers in the Outer Hebrides, particularly Barra, Eriskay, and South Uist, have extremely low voices, whereas the *tessitura* in Lewis is 'peculiarly high' (Campbell and Collinson 1969-81:vol. 1:225). Further examination of the difference in *tessitura* between the various Scottish Gaelic regions, including how and why it came about, would be a very interesting study, which unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this project.

In discussions of the sound of Gaelic singing, mention must be made of the scales used in Gaelic song, as they obviously have a great deal to do with how the songs sound. Primarily, gapped scales used either the five-note pentatonic scale (with the 4th and 7th omitted from the octave) or the six-note hexatonic scale, with one gap filled in, and either the 4th or the 7th missing. Each type of scale can also have several inversions, whereby the bottom note of each scale is transferred to the top, and so each note of the scale in turn becomes the lowest or ‘keynote’ of the scale (Collinson 1966:4-5). Collinson also notes that each scale position has its own distinctive sound: ‘Tunes constructed upon the first or basic position for instance have much of the characteristics of a major key, owing to the presence of both the major third and sixth reckoning upwards from the keynote’, while ‘Tunes constructed upon other positions of the scale may sound either minor, major or indeterminate according to their individual contours’ (Collinson 1966:5, 6).

Ornamentation, variation, and improvisation

As practised in Western art music, ornamentation is the performer’s embellishment of the musical material written by the composer, and is considered to be ‘extra’ to the originally composed music. It is possible to clearly distinguish between the composer’s music, and the ornaments added to it by the performer in their own interpretation of the song. In traditional music, however, the concept of a definitive composer’s version of a song simply does not exist, and Bruno Nettl writes that in non-Western music ‘it is not usually possible to distinguish between ornaments (trills, turns, etc.) which are essential to the music and others which are superimposed’ (Nettl 1964:153-54). In fact, ornamentation itself is inherent to the music of many traditional cultures, and should not be thought of as an extra or

optional part of a performance in any way (Nettl 1964:154). This is precisely the case in Irish *sean-nós*, where the highly-ornamented melody is ‘the most significant musical aspect of the art’ (Ó Canainn 1993:71), and ‘The freedom that the performer enjoys in the execution of a song or air is an essential part of the Irish tradition’ (Ó Canainn 1993:4). The ornaments used in *sean-nós* have been described in detail in the literature and are mainly comprised of auxiliary notes, passing notes, rhythmic variation, grace-notes, turns, and *glissandi* (Ó Canainn 1993:71-72; Shields 1993:123; Vallely 1999:338).

The supposed difference in ornamentation between Irish and Scottish Gaelic singing is illustrated by Lucy Broadwood, when she alleges that ‘Some singers, chiefly the older people, ornament as over-profusely as do many of the Irish, but as a rule Gaels adorn their airs sparingly and with musical good taste’ (Tolmie 1911:x). According to Patrick McDonald, whose important collection of Gaelic melodies dates from the eighteenth century, the fundamental ornament in Gaelic singing is the *appoggiatura*, or grace-note, which is performed quickly so that it is ‘but obscurely perceived’, and approaches the main note from above or below, from an adjacent note or up to and even more than a third away (McDonald [1784]:4). In Finlay Dun’s printed collection of Gaelic song, the *appoggiatura* is also emphasised, as well as highlighting the simplicity of the singing style, with the advice to singers that ‘The vocal expression should be regulated by the general signification of the words and the spirit of the music. The style should be simple and natural, avoiding every kind of artificial ornament, or pseudo-embellishment. A simple *appoggiatura* may be all that is required as an occasional addition to the melody’ (Dun [1848]:iii) .

Ornamentation plays an important role not only in secular Gaelic song, but also in the tradition of congregational Gaelic psalm singing in the Western Isles. An in-depth examination of psalm singing is beyond the scope of this study, but an overview of the use of ornamentation in this tradition can inform the present discussion. The tradition features a style of group singing of what originated as the Common Tunes of the Lowland psalter, but having evolved through oral transmission the tunes are now so complex and ornamented that they are virtually unrecognisable in comparison (Collinson 1966:262). Led by a precentor who first sings the line not only ‘to let the congregation hear clearly the text it is to sing next, but also to give a hint of the melody line by pinpointing its more important notes’ (*Gaelic Psalms from Lewis* 1994), the psalms are sung by everyone in the congregation in unaccompanied unison, but with the addition of elaborate ornamentation, as each individual singer improvises grace-notes in his or her own particular style, ‘so that the tune is heard slightly out of phase with itself and, as it were, in different colours simultaneously’ (Purser 2007:168). Collinson describes the result as ‘astonishing, for it creates a shimmering kaleidoscopic harmony of its own, against which the unison of the tune stands out in great strength and dignity’ (Collinson 1966:264). From an ethnomusicological perspective, this practice is absolutely fascinating. Thorkild Knudsen, in his investigation of psalm singing in the Hebrides, Denmark, and the Faroe Islands, sums it up very well when he writes that it allows individuals to express themselves in their own way; to worship ‘not [in] a congregational song in which everyone sings in a body, as with one mouth, following the baton of the organist. But individual people, who in the singing

fellowship reserve the freedom to bear witness to their relation to God on a personal basis' (Knudsen 1968b:10).

Psalm singing is clearly a stream of the tradition that strongly emphasises the conscious, deliberate use of ornamentation. In my own fieldwork, the ornament of which most singers were aware was the grace-note, although for many their implementation and execution was not a conscious choice. Rather, the use of grace-notes, and ornamentation in general, was often a very natural, instinctive process. 'Never think about it. It just happens,' said one singer (SA2005.034). Another singer, in discussing how she would decide on ornamentation, said concisely, 'I don't decide at all... I just sing' (SA2005.074). A third singer went even further, saying that not only do her grace-notes 'just happen', but that she can tell the difference between a singer who sings them naturally, 'compared to the person who puts grace-notes in because they think that [they] should – oh, that's awful! I hate it. Because it just seems so false when it's put in there and it shouldn't be there. Whereas if it's in that voice anyway then it's going to be there, and you can't take it out' (SA2005.081). The natural singing of grace-notes is also advocated by the Gaelic singer and writer Anne Lorne Gillies, who has completely omitted any kind of ornamentation from the musical transcriptions in her recent anthology of Gaelic song. She writes in the introduction that ornamentation 'arises naturally out of the meaning of the song, and the heart, gut, linguistic background, taste and vocal equipment of the singer'; she would not want learners to all sing the song the same way as it appeared in print if ornamentation were included (Gillies 2005:xvii)

Another singer I interviewed agreed that the instinctive, organic singing of grace-notes is 'quite a primitive thing, really,' and explained her own approach to

using them: ‘You’re supposed to get yourself into the song. You’re supposed to understand the words, understand the story that the song is telling, get yourself into the song, and you just do it naturally. You just sort of take the song on and allow the grace-notes to come out’ (SA2005.077). When asked if the placement of ornamentation had anything to do with stressing significant words in the text, she said it did not, that ‘it’s more about melody, the ornamentation’s really for the melody’.

This question about whether or not a singer’s use of ornamentation (whether conscious or subconscious) has anything to do with important words in the song text is an interesting one, and has not previously been examined for Scottish Gaelic singing (MacLellan 2000:xxvi). Accentuating the significant words of songs through ornamentation is a technique used in both traditional and art music; singers in the Irish *sean-nós* tradition will often lengthen important notes that reflect important words (Ó Canainn 1993:73), while the ornamentation of the vocal music from the early Baroque period is entirely based on the clear communication of the text (Caccini 1970:preface). However, in an interview with the ethnomusicologist Thorkild Knudsen, the well-respected Gaelic piper Calum Johnston described ornamentation as a way of adding beauty and interest to a melody, not as a way of emphasising text:

Oh, ... the old fellows, well some of them you see, some of them had the art of putting a taste on a tune... well, what I would call putting a *blas* on it, putting a taste on it. You know it’s just like eating something that has no taste, and then you put something on it to put a taste on it... Some would sing an air straight through, the bare notes as you might say, and the others would put little grace-notes in, that made all the difference, that gave a taste to that air, instead of having it bare. They clothed it up in beautiful garments as you might say (Campbell 1973-74:180).

These statements may not be representative of the entire culture, but they do show that for some singers, at least, ornaments are for the melody, not the poetry.

Whether the purpose of ornamentation is for enhancement of the melody or for stressing a word of the text, the singer is faced with a conscious or subconscious decision about how to vary those ornaments. Lucy Broadwood says that Gaelic singers will often vary their grace-notes with every verse (Tolmie 1911:x), and the Cape Breton singer Lauchie MacLellan would vary a song's melodic ornamentation, along with the rhythm and tempo, to such a degree that there might well be 'as many variations of any given verse measure as there are stanzas' (MacLellan 2000:xxvi). Variation in Irish singing is considered so important to the tradition that Seán Ó Riada goes as far as saying 'It is not permissible for a *sean-nós* singer to sing any two verses of a song in the same way. There must be a variation of the actual notes in each verse, as well as a variation of rhythm. What makes one *sean-nós* singer better than another, more than anything else, is his ability to do this better' (Ó Riada 1982:24). Melodic and rhythmic variation may occur from verse to verse, performance to performance, or singer to singer, and is greatly dependent on such factors as the local aesthetics, and the mood of the performer and audience (Bodley 1972-73:50; Ó Canainn 1993:339).

In Scottish Gaelic singing, the area that has received the most scholarly attention to do with variation is the genre of waulking songs. Francis Collinson discusses how variations in the airs of the verses occur frequently, both because singers enjoy changing their melodies, and also because the words and tunes are so closely linked that any variation in the text in subsequent verses will produce a variation in the tune (Campbell and Collinson 1969-81:vol. 1: 223). His mention of

the singers having the 'usual liking of folksingers of varying their melodies' (Campbell and Collinson 1969-81:vol. 1: 223) suggests that they are very conscious of the modifications they make, and that in this case the variations are indeed intentional.

But some scholars have suggested that not all traditional singers are as conscious of the variations they make. Foss (in Abrahams 1970) likens the variations of traditional singers to those of jazz singers, but distinguishes between them by saying that 'the jazz artist is consciously and intentionally seeking variation as a creative means of expression while the traditional performer produces variations in an unintentional or subconscious but nonetheless creative way' (Abrahams 1970:161). Linda Williamson and MacColl and Seeger, discussing variation in the singing of Scots travellers, both strongly disagree however, and say instead that variations are the result of a singer's control of melody in a performance (Williamson 1985:120) and are 'neither accidental nor incidental [... but] represent a singer's attitude towards his or her craft and towards the transmission of an inherited oral culture' (MacColl and Seeger 1977:17).

In my fieldwork, variation and improvisation were not techniques used by all singers, nor were they necessarily considered desirable. One singer was of the opinion that consistency in performance was the sign of an experienced or professional singer, and therefore one of the main objectives to which she should aspire (SA2005.073). She felt uncomfortable with the fact that she did not always know how exactly her songs would come out, and consequently, if her performances varied she felt it was due to her perceived relative inexperience as a performer. Another singer thought that once she had learned a song she would not want to

change it: ‘... it’s like learning any tune, if you learnt a tune for the piano, if you learnt a tune for the bagpipes or anything, it would be the tune, so I wouldn’t just add grace-notes here, there, and everywhere, depending on which night I’m singing it on, if I’ve learnt it, I’ve learnt it’ (SA2005.075). This approach was also taken by another singer, who said that she does not try to vary her songs or improvise at all: ‘No, I try and just sing, try and stick to a game plan, that’s the safest thing to do’ (SA2005.077).

Other singers thought that their singing would probably vary from performance to performance, not necessarily on purpose but perhaps as a result of factors such as fatigue or their frame of mind at that moment. Mood and its effect on pitch was mentioned by a singer as an example of how his singing might vary: ‘[a particular song will be] roughly the same, it’ll be roughly similar, it’ll be same tune same words, but it will have a different feeling, sometimes it’ll be a different pitch I’ve got, sometimes it’ll be slightly higher and that will make it sound quite differently, sometimes I’ll accentuate different aspects of it, depending on my mood’ (SA2006.009). Out of all the singers interviewed, only one said that she consistently and purposely varies her songs from performance to performance and improvises ornaments: ‘...it’s different every single time. I’ve never sung a traditional song the same way twice.’ (SA2005.078).

Studying the devices of ornamentation, variation, and improvisation in Gaelic singing from an ethnomusicological perspective enables scholars and outsiders to the tradition to gain a much deeper understanding of the vocal techniques that singers use. However, most of the singers themselves do not think about these techniques; they are simply an intrinsic part of their singing and they do not analyse them

separately. So in that way, an in-depth analysis may be considered foreign to the tradition. I did find that singers were more readily able to discuss rhythm and beat than melodic ornamentation, which is perhaps due to the fact that rhythm is closely associated with the poetry, the principal component of the song. Or perhaps it is a manifestation of what Nettl believes, that ‘The members of most non-Western cultures, especially the nonliterate and folk societies, have difficulty in verbalising about music’ (Nettl 1964: 274). In any case, outsiders should take into account that ornamentation, variation, and improvisation are fundamental to the Gaelic song tradition, but that the singers themselves do not spend a great deal of time thinking about them.

Phrasing, tempo, and treatment of rhythm

The three stylistic features of phrasing, tempo, and treatment of rhythm in singing are closely intertwined, and they are all significant components of performance practice in traditional Gaelic song. Important sources that address the subject are early printed song collections, whose introductions stress the flexibility of the rhythm, and the prominence of *rubato* in Gaelic singing:

Chiefly occupied with the sentiment and expression of the music, [Gaelic singers] dwell upon the long and pathetic notes, while they hurry over the inferior and connecting notes, in such a manner as to render it exceedingly difficult for a hearer to trace the measure of them. They, themselves, while singing them, seem to have little or no impression of measure (McDonald [1784]:2).

The time should not always be observed throughout the same song with rigid uniformity: For the due expression of the words will occasionally require the time to be retarded or accelerated. In some of the airs of the songs the rhythm is irregular; and more so in defect than in excess. When this irregularity appears, (though it is considered by many persons

as a beauty in this style of music,) and if pauses upon notes occur in the Air, these should be long-sustained. This will not only greatly contribute to diminish the unsatisfactory impression which a fastidious ear may experience on account of the defective rhythm, but will, at the same time, impart a certain wildness of expression to the effect of the whole passage (Dun [1848]:iii).

Both of these collections, intended for audiences of non-Gaelic singers accustomed to Western art music, were trying to convey the qualities that were most characteristic of the tradition, and thus strongly emphasised the free rhythm of Gaelic song. This is a theme that has continued into the modern printed song collections, with one advising singers that a ‘good Gaelic singer will adjust the rhythms to match them to the words more effectively’ (Campbell 1987-93:vol. 1: preface). Amy Murray discovered the close relationship between the rhythm of the songs and the Gaelic language for herself while attempting to notate melodies in Eriskay, realising that one ‘cannot make the Gaelic go with the stick [of a conductor] without doing violence to the quantities of Gaelic speech, and these are fixed. Long must be long, whether it be sung or spoken; short must be short’ (Murray 1936:102).⁷ The flexibility of rhythm in his singing was explained by Calum Johnston when he said, ‘Oh yes, I always have to give as the words require. Sometimes a note may be short or a note may be long, according to the word that’s used there, and very often there are hardly two verses sung in exactly the same way, on account of the words, because the syllables are different’ (Campbell 1973-74:180).

Thus it is the Gaelic language that is the prime determiner of musical phrasing, tempo, and rhythm, corresponding directly to the Gaelic aesthetic that the

⁷ The exception is in waulking songs, where a characteristic rhythmic feature occurs when a stressed syllable of a word falls on a weak beat, resulting in syncopation called a wrenched accent – see Collinson 1966: 69-70; Matheson 1955: 79.

poetry, not the music, is the most important part of a song. Rhythmic freedom and *rubato* as devices to accentuate the text are also utilised in other song traditions that place a similar importance on the words, such as Irish singing, where the rhythmic flexibility usually reflects the rhythms of speech (Shields 1993:121). In the ancient Transylvanian style described by Bartók, two of the main characteristics are ‘the deviations, more or less considerable in measure, from regular time (*tempo rubato*); [and] the *recitativo-parlando*, singing in recitative, whereby the rhythm of the text at times changes the form of the melody in every verse’ (Suchoff 1997:77). Giulio Caccini, writing on 17th century Italian monody, advocated the use of *rubato* (which he called *sprezzatura*), describing it as ‘that gracefulness in singing which, if applied in the right place (as it might be during a sequence of quavers or semiquavers passing through various harmonies), takes away from the singing a certain constricting stiffness and dryness and makes it pleasing, free and airy’ (Fortune 1954:217). This would then ‘relieve the song of a certain restricted narrowness and dryness ... just as in common speech eloquence and variety make pleasant and sweet the matters being spoken of’ (Caccini 1978:preface). Rhythmic freedom to accommodate the words is clearly a key characteristic of vocal music traditions that highly value the communication of the text.

But while some give and take with the rhythm is necessary, another very important feature of Gaelic singing is the consistent pulse throughout a song. This is such a crucial element that many singers feel the need to express it in a physical way, and this has been observed often in the literature. The Gaelic singer Margaret Mackay from Scarp, Harris, ‘was very conscious of rhythm and one of her regular habits was to beat or stroke the rhythm on to her knee with the left hand’ (MacAulay

1976:211). When teaching songs to others she would take great care to impress upon them the importance of the rhythm; in Fred Macaulay's visits with her he found that she would 'hold my left hand in her right and gently tap the rhythm into my palm with the index and second finger of her left hand. If I deviated at all from her rhythm or tempo I was made aware of it by her increase of emphasis in the tap' (MacAulay 1976:219).

Singers in Scotland tapping their feet in time to the music was a sight described by Lucy Broadwood (Tolmie 1911:x), while the French writer Necker de Saussure attended a nineteenth century *céilidh* in Iona where 'men and women seated themselves in a circle and joined hands, or held, in couples, the end of a handkerchief, with which they kept time during the chorus' (Necker de Saussure 1822:42-43). Frances Tolmie also wrote of group singing occasions in Skye that 'The company when singing sat in a circle, each member of which was linked to the next by means of a handkerchief held at the ends between them. The rhythm of the songs was vigorously marked by the waving up and down of the handkerchiefs in unison' (Tolmie 1911:149). The practice of physically keeping time while singing also made its way across the ocean to Canada with emigrant Gaels: Helen Creighton described seeing an elderly couple in Nova Scotia who would sit 'side by side, a handkerchief held between them, swinging it back and forth in their hands in time with the music' (Creighton and MacLeod 1964:xi-xii). In a similar vein, Margaret Bennett observed Gaelic singers in Newfoundland, performing milling (waulking) songs for entertainment, spontaneously seize the tablecloth and pound it on the table to the rhythm of the song, in a motion that simulates the milling process (Bennett 1989:163). In Cape Breton, people at a *céilidh* would strike the table in a back-and-

forth motion similar to milling, and it was also common to hold hands during a song, a practice which is done to this day, even at formal concerts with large audiences (MacLellan 2000:27-28)

The singers I interviewed felt just as strongly about expressing the rhythm of their songs. One particular singer, also a piper, instinctively beats her feet whenever she sings or plays, and said that during the recording of her CD she was forced to restrain herself to prevent the thumping sound being audible in the recording. Not beating time felt very unnatural and it was simply impossible for her to keep still; to compromise she attempted to mark the beat silently with her hand in her pocket, but it was still loud enough to be picked up by the studio microphones (SA2005.079). Another singer has resorted to not wearing shoes when she sings, either in performance or in recording, because she bounces around so much to the beat that she too was finding the sound was coming through the microphones (SA2005.034).

As with the rhythm, the importance of the words in Gaelic song also governs the phrasing, as I learned when I spoke with singers about how they choose where to breathe in their songs: ‘...it’s back to the telling of the story. So once you’ve got the tune, then it’s all broken down into the telling of the story, so the phrasing of the words will help indicate good places to breathe’ said one singer (SA2005.034). And another singer agreed, ‘so that you can put the story of the song across, you try and breathe in a place where you don’t break up the bit of the story you’re telling’ (SA2005.079). But singers do not always plan ahead of time where they will breathe; one singer described how she had never thought about her breaths until she was recording a song ‘where I had to take a breath in a certain area, or I would never get through the line. And it was the first time I’d ever experienced something like it.

And it was only because I was recording it; at a *céilidh* that doesn't matter, you can breathe wherever you want' (SA2005.081). The informality of a relaxed context like a *céilidh* means that singers do not always have to worry about their singing as they go along, they can simply sing. In stark contrast to this is a competition setting where another singer, who sings at the Mod every year, told how breathing can be an opportunity to make an impression with the adjudicators: 'Sometimes the end of a line is always a good place [to breathe], but other times you want to try and show off a wee bit, and try and put two lines in one ... you do want to show what you can do, even if you only do it once in an entire song, you want to show that you do have the lung capacity, or attempted lung capacity' (SA2005.078). The stories of these two singers illustrate how different performance contexts can have quite an effect on the resulting musical sound, which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Traditional Gaelic aesthetics dictate that the words are dominant over the music in a song. Singers' approaches to phrasing, tempo, and treatment of rhythm demonstrate some of the ways in which these aesthetics are put into practice in singing to maintain the tradition and reinforce the ideal.

All of the singing techniques and characteristics described in this chapter are an integral part of what makes Scottish Gaelic singing unique. While it shares certain features with other singing traditions, it retains its own individuality and has its own distinctive sound. My purpose has been to communicate the essence of the tradition by using the singers' own words as much as possible; this lets them speak for themselves and define their own tradition, but because singers can find particular features difficult to discuss, this method does result in an uneven distribution of information gained from fieldwork. I have not dwelt very much on the actual sound

of the Gaelic singing voice, because the singers I interviewed did not really talk about it. As the ethnomusicological literature suggests, this is one of the most difficult things to verbalise, and is definitely a worthy area for a much more in-depth future examination.

An additional area that was outside the scope of this study but which would also be intriguing to pursue further elsewhere is physical singing style. In Lomax's system of cantometrics, the performer's physical singing style, which includes 'bodily stance, gestures, facial expressions, muscular tensions, especially those of the throat' is part of the 'total human situation' that is involved in singing, and is very important in the study of musical style (Lomax 1959:929). His descriptions of physical characteristics are extremely comprehensive, such as his comparison of American White Folk and American Negro Folk singing styles (Lomax 1959:930):

American White Folk

The body is held tensely, as the singer sits or stands stiffly erect. The head is often thrown far back.

The singing expression is mask-like and withdrawn, normally, and agonized on high notes.

American Negro Folk

The body of the singer moves sinuously or in relaxed easy response to the beat. He dances his song.

The singer's expression changes with the mood of the song, line by line; there is a great deal of smiling and even laughing in many performances.

There is very little in the literature on Gaelic song that approaches the same level of detail on the relationship between a singer's physical singing style and their vocal singing style. How the various parts of a song (high or low sections, fast or slow tempos) affect the singer's facial expressions (and vice versa) has not been

considered at all, and in fact there is very little on the physical side of solo singing in general. John Shaw is an exception when he mentions that in Cape Breton, it was not uncommon for a singer at an informal *céilidh* to perform in a reclining position, not looking at the audience, and often with closed eyes (MacLellan 2000:27). Singers in Ireland also sang with their eyes closed, a technique that achieved a feeling of detachment, and emphasised ‘that the only contact between [a singer] and his audience is that of the song itself’ (Ó Canainn 1993:79). Certain singers are very conscious of the physical side of their singing, and have distinct preferences as to how they want things to be in a performance. Ray Fisher, a Scots revival singer, prefers to sit on top of a table as opposed to on a chair so that she can see the faces of her audience and make eye contact with them (Smith 1988:298). On the other hand, her brother Archie does not usually make very much eye contact with his audience, ‘although he conveys the impression of speaking and singing more or less directly’ to them (Smith 1988:297). Freeman describes an Irish singer in Ballyvourney whose favourite singing position was to be turned half way round in his chair, with his arm resting on the back and his hand either covering his eyes, or supporting his head (Freeman 1918-21: xxiii).

Chapter summary

There has been very little previous study on Gaelic singing styles and vocal techniques, and it is an area within the wider field of ethnomusicology that is still quite vague, since there is no definitive descriptive vocabulary.

The early material available stresses the unselfconscious, natural quality of the Gaelic singing voice, also highlighting the simplicity of the singing styles and emphasising the importance of the *appoggiatura*, or grace-note. These

characteristics appear to have carried on to the singers of today, as none of the singers interviewed said they would purposely modify the way their voices sound. They were all aware of grace-notes, but did not use them in a conscious way; for most singers the placement of grace-notes, and of ornamentation in general, was instinctive and not something they thought a lot about or planned out ahead of time.

In Irish *sean-nós* singing, variation in performance is extremely important. Singers must change the notes and rhythm from verse to verse, and to not do so goes against the very nature of the tradition. This has also been observed for Scottish Gaelic singing, but in my fieldwork variation and improvisation were not techniques used by all singers, nor were they necessarily considered desirable, for reasons such as singers wanting to be consistent or appear more experienced. What was important to them were the words, which govern phrasing, tempo, and rhythm, corresponding directly to the Gaelic aesthetic that the poetry, not the music, is the most important element of a song.

CHAPTER FOUR

Performance Contexts

A fundamental principle of ethnomusicology is the belief that music cannot be isolated on its own as simply a series of sounds, but must be considered in its cultural context. In a study of vocal performance practice, this means that researchers must investigate the performance as a whole, taking into account the music itself, the performer(s), the audience, the physical setting, and the performance occasion (Béhague 1984:3; Seeger 1992:104; Titon 1992:3). Béhague (1984:7) describes this by saying that

the study of music performance as an event and a process and of the resulting performance practices or products should concentrate on the actual musical and extra-musical behaviour of participants (performers and audience), the consequent social interaction, the meaning of that interaction for the participants, and the rules or codes of performance defined by the community for a specific context or occasion.

This chapter will discuss the performance contexts of Gaelic singing, beginning with an overview of the historical and modern contexts, and focusing on the Mod as an example of institutional singing. The specific aspects to be considered will then be the ‘non-musical elements in a performance occasion or event [that] influence the musical outcome of a performance’ (Béhague 1984:7), such as the performance setting, performer-audience relationships, and performance etiquette. Because the scope of the fieldwork was to concentrate on the singers’ perspectives I have not interviewed audience members; this would be a useful avenue to pursue in future studies as it might provide different information (see MacKinnon 1994 for a

very interesting survey of audiences of traditional music). Research on cross-cultural singing traditions will form an integral part of this section as such studies help provide insight into the Gaelic tradition, especially since previous academic research on Gaelic singing generally has not used an ethnomusicological approach in the study of singing contexts.

Overview of historical and modern contexts of Gaelic singing

Singing occupied a very central position in historical Gaelic society. When John Shaw asked Gaels in Cape Breton why they sing songs, they were perplexed at the question, as though ‘singing occupies such a fundamental, pervasive role in the Gaelic world that to question the reasons for its existence would be like attempting to produce an explanation for why we breathe air or walk on the ground’ (MacLellan 2000:18). To demonstrate just how important song is to Gaels, McKean cites the Gaelic proverb [*Thig crìoch air an t-saoghal ach*] ‘*mairidh gaol is ceòl*’: ‘the world will end, but love and music will last’ (McKean 1997:130). Gaels sang everywhere, with some of the main occasions for singing being dances or weddings, work, or relaxing by the fireside (M. Shaw 1977:71).

One of the most important contexts for Gaelic singing in a social setting was the *taigh céilidh* (‘visiting house’), a focus of communities in Scotland, Ireland, and Gaelic-speaking parts of Canada up until the Second World War (McKean 1997:98). It was an informal gathering with singing, storytelling, music, jokes, and local history anecdotes. A detailed description of a *céilidh* is given by Carmichael (Carmichael 1928-71:vol. 1:xxiii), and although storytelling (not singing) is the focus of this description, it vividly communicates the atmosphere of the occasion and details the behaviour of the participants, and thus is worthwhile quoting at length:

The house is roomy and clean, if homely, with its bright peat fire in the middle of the floor. There are many present – men and women, boys and girls. All the women are seated, and most of the men. Girls are crouched between the knees of fathers or brothers or friends, while boys are perched wherever – boy-like – they can climb.

The houseman is twisting twigs of heather into ropes to hold down thatch, a neighbour crofter is twining quicken roots into cords to tie cows, while another is plaiting bent grass into baskets to hold meal.

*'Ith aran, sniamh muran,
Us bi thu am bliadhn mar bha thu 'n uraidh.'*
'Eat bread and twist bent,
And thou this year shalt be as thou wert last.'

The housewife is spinning, a daughter is carding, another daughter is teasing, while a third daughter, supposed to be working, is away in the background conversing in low whispers with the son of a neighbouring crofter. Neighbour wives and neighbour daughters are knitting, sewing, or embroidering. The conversation is general: the local news, the weather, the price of cattle, these leading up to higher themes – the clearing of the glens (a sore subject), the war, the parliament, the effects of the sun upon the earth and the moon upon the tides. The speaker is eagerly listened to, and is urged to tell more. But he pleads that he came to hear and not to speak, saying:

*'A chiad sgial air fear an taighe,
Sgial gu la air an aoidh.'*
'The first story from the host,
Story till day from the guest.'

The stranger asks the houseman to tell a story, and after a pause the man complies. The tale is full of incident, action, and pathos. It is told simply yet graphically, and at times dramatically – compelling the undivided attention of the listener. At the pathetic scenes and distressful events the bosoms of the women may be seen to heave and their silent tears to fall. Truth overcomes craft, skill conquers strength, and bravery is rewarded. Occasionally a momentary excitement occurs when heat and sleep overpower a boy and

he tumbles down among the people below, to be trounced out and sent home. When the story is ended it is discussed and commented upon, and the different characters praised or blamed according to their merits and the views of the critics.

If not late, proverbs, riddles, conundrums, and songs follow.

This passage illustrates the informal nature of the evening, with no set performance programme in existence. Performer and audience are not separated from each other, but sit together wherever they can find a place in the fully occupied room. That the stories evoke emotional responses in the listeners is clear, but discussion is saved until after the narration is complete. The character of the *céilidh* in Scotland as described by Carmichael was similar in the emigrant communities, where gatherings, composed of impromptu audiences, usually took place in the kitchen, singers sat ‘among the audience’, and there was no set programme (MacLellan 2000:25, 27).⁸

Singing was not only a leisure activity for Gaels, but was a part of everyday life, with songs sung in the Western Isles and Canada alike for communal activities like the waulking of the tweed, reaping, and rowing, and individually for tasks such as spinning, carding, milking a cow, or soothing a baby (Ross 1961:19; Bennett 1989:150; MacLeod 1996:127; MacLellan 2000:19). Singing was a central part of the culture, as illustrated by a woman from Eriskay saying in the early twentieth century, ‘Whenever I’m not saying my prayers I’m singing. Ever since I was a child I was not without the *torraman* [humming] of a song in my mouth’ (Murray 1936:197). It was a similar situation in Ireland, where Joyce observed that songs were heard everywhere: ‘sung, played, whistled; and they were mixed up with

⁸ See also Bennett 1989 for descriptions of *céilidhs* in Newfoundland.

people's pastimes, occupations, and daily life' (Joyce 1909:vii, quoted in Ó Madagáin 1985: 130). Song as a natural, intrinsic part of everyday life can also be found in other traditional cultures, such as the Nenets people, a minority group living along the Russian coast of the Arctic Ocean, for whom 'singing is more like a mode of life rather than a staged or framed behaviour' (Abramovich-Gobon 1999:37). Similarly, traditional Native American songs are not viewed by the people as 'works of art', but are simply part of normal, day to day living (Lavonis 2004:346). Every society will differ somewhat in its exact use of music, but 'There is probably no other human cultural activity which is so all-pervasive and which reaches into, shapes, and often controls so much of human behaviour' (Merriam 1964:218).

An interesting aspect of Gaelic singing is that songs with specific purposes, such as waulking and rowing songs, were also sung for pleasure outside of the work context. Waulking songs were often sung at *céilidhs* by a group of people holding handkerchiefs, waving them up and down to mark the beat (Tolmie 1911:149). In some traditional cultures, however, songs are not sung outside of their original context; in much of Africa, for example, rowing songs are strictly for rowing, and religious music is sung only during the intended religious rites (Titon 1992:68). Gaels obviously did not feel that their songs were inextricably bound together with their function, and enjoyed singing them to such an extent that they were incorporated into the performance repertoire. At times there were modifications made to waulking songs sung by a solo singer in an entertainment context, however, such as omitting the introductory refrain or only singing the full chorus once or twice; without a chorus to join in it would be very difficult for a single singer to

perform a complete waulking song on their own (Campbell and Collinson 1969-81:vol. 1:218; MacInnes 1971:49).

Gradual changes to traditional Gaelic singing in its community context occurred with the arrival of electricity, the introduction of television, which replaced the *céilidh* house, and the use of machinery on the crofts and in the mills (MacLeod 1996:128). Even several decades ago it was already acknowledged that music did not occupy the same role in Gaelic society as it used to: ‘the real transmission has ceased [...] the singer and story-teller of tradition no longer have a specific function to perform in society. They are no longer called upon to perform, except to the collector with his acquired respect for oral antiquities. The audience of avid young listeners, which alone can perpetuate a tradition, is absent’ (Ross 1961:18). Singing practices have also been hugely effected by the decline of the Gaelic language, as the lines of transmission have been interrupted, and especially in Cape Breton ‘the community’s internal concepts of such fundamental aspects as function, performance, occasion, and composition’ have been altered (MacLellan 2000:52). Singing occasions are now formalised, with separation of performers and audience, and ‘opportunities to perform are controlled by individuals or groups who are not always familiar with the content of the tradition or its social context’ (MacLellan 2000:52). In Ireland too, ‘the contexts for musical practice that are untouched by the hand of either competitions, tourism-oriented showcases, or commercial performance are becoming few in number’ (McCann 2001:97).

Such institutionalisation of the Gaelic song tradition is epitomised by the activities of *An Comunn Gàidhealach*, variously translated as The Gaelic Society (MacDonald 1966-67:21), The Highland Association (Thompson 1979:5), or The

Gaelic Speakers' Association (MacLeod 1996:129). Formed in 1891, its objective was the preservation and development of Gaelic language, history, music, and art. To this end, the following year it established the Mod (now the Royal National Mod, *Am Mòd Nàiseanta Rìoghail*), an annual competition based on the Welsh *Eisteddfod* (MacDonald 1966-67), and of which singing, both solo and choral, is a central part. The Mod is now a significant occasion in the Gaelic cultural calendar for many people, with visitors and competitors not only from Scotland, but also Ireland, Australia, Canada, and the United States. The 2004 Mod in Perth had more than 2,000 competitors taking part, including 82 choirs ('The Royal National Mod 2004' [n.d.]).

The Mod is not the only institution within the world of Gaelic song; other organisations such as BBC *Radio nan Gàidheal* and the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow are also important to the maintenance and promotion of Gaelic singing. However, the scope of this project does not permit an exhaustive analysis of all institutions, so I have focused on the Mod because of its prominence within the culture, and its longstanding influence on it.

The existing literature on the Mod is useful primarily for information on the creation and background of the institution, and for flagging issues that were historically seen as being points of contention, such as the system of adjudication for the Gold Medal. Singing classes are judged by two adjudicators, one to assess the Gaelic and another to comment on the music, 'the latter in many cases being a non-Gael and therefore not necessarily equipped with the essential background of Gaelic music' (Thompson 1979:35). A 1929 *Scotsman* article on the Mod describes the adjudication of a male solo class where the adjudicator 'said he saw that a number of

the singers, though singing Gaelic, did not know all about it, and as a *Sassenach* [Englishman] who did not know so much, he was glad' (*Scotsman* 1929:14). An adjudicator such as this one who is not intimately acquainted with traditional Gaelic singing styles, but imposing his own aesthetic on the competitors, can result in the traditional styles not being appreciated, or even discounted as incorrect, as Francis Collinson observed at the 1949 Mod: 'I noticed that another of the adjudicators took marks off one girl's performance for what he described as approaching the notes of the tune from below, but which I felt was an appropriate and artistic use of grace notes in the traditional manner' (Thompson 1979:35). Collinson felt very strongly that this system of adjudication could have a profound, long-term effect on traditional singing style, writing that

...a native tradition of singing is being suppressed by an imported tradition of adjudication. This is no reflection on the panel of adjudicators, who gave their decision with high musicianship, clarity and fairness, but it does pose the question of whether the object of the Mod is to preserve the traditional style of singing of the Gael, or to sacrifice this for the usual standards of the purely musical festival. Let us take just one aspect of the traditional style, the use of the grace note. This is an artistic device that is common to traditional songs in all languages. Its purpose is firstly, to adorn the melody, but the grace note also has the function of a kind of accompaniment to a melody: it is in fact a form of harmony for a single voice... As it is, the grace notes that are so characteristic of all Highland singing have almost entirely disappeared from the singing at the Mod; or if they do appear, they are marked down – and to me a Gaelic tune without its grace notes is like a diamond that has all the edges and points ground away (Thompson 1979:39).

Frank Thompson has questioned why, if it is impossible to find Gaelic music adjudicators, the Mod could not at least use adjudicators from Ireland who would have a similar musical background to Scottish Gaelic (Thompson 1979:35), but in

fact the organisers of *An t-Oireachtas*, the Irish equivalent of the Mod, have exactly the same problem finding adjudicators from within their own tradition. V.S. Blankenhorn describes how ‘for perfectly good social reasons – i.e. fear of ostracism – it is practically impossible to persuade persons from within the tradition to pass judgement upon their fellows’, and she criticises the fact that the results of the singing competitions are decided ‘on the basis of aesthetic values which are in [many] cases quite foreign to those of the tradition they are dealing with’ (Blankenhorn 1987:10).

The use of classically-trained adjudicators from outside the tradition certainly results in non-traditional elements of Gaelic singing being emphasised. As discussed in Chapter Two, the primary aesthetic in traditional Gaelic singing is that the music is secondary to the poetry, and conveying the words and the emotion of a song is the goal of performance, while the quality of the singing voice is not considered to be as important. But the folklorist Patrick Shuldham-Shaw, visiting the 1949 Mod, did not feel that this traditional aesthetic was receiving enough emphasis, and so felt it necessary to issue a reminder that: ‘A folk-song must be told – narrative or lyrical, it is the words that count. The job of the singer is not to show his audience what a beautiful voice he has, but to show them what a wonderful song it is and let them hear the whole story for themselves. Let the words carry the song along’ (Thompson 1979:39). The weight that the music adjudicators have historically placed on vocal quality and technique can be seen in articles describing the Mod results. One adjudicator in 1929 thought that a particular singer’s voice had a ‘lovely liquid quality, truly the best example he had ever heard’ (*Scotsman* 1929:14). And in a singing class at the 1950 Mod, the adjudicator commented that the singer ‘used her

voice [...] like an accomplished violinist drawing his bow in a lively artistic performance' (*Scotsman* 1950:5). Newspaper articles must be used with care, as they are subjective records and reporters can be selective about what they include. But nowhere in these newspaper adjudication accounts does it say anything about the judges praising a singer's ability to deliver the text so that the audience could understand the words; this of course does not mean that this sort of praise was never given, but it is certainly more likely that the vocal quality was the emphasised element.

Another point of contention of the Mod is the fact that Gold Medal competitors must sing published versions of songs, and are required to adhere strictly to the printed music (Thompson 1979:36). This has two ramifications for the tradition, the first being that only one version of a song can be chosen to be the 'official' printed version, and this does not take into account the local variations that would have existed for a particular song. The second consequence of the printed versions is that singers are not allowed to add variation to their own performances, but must sing only what is printed on the page. This practice goes completely against the tradition of Gaelic singing, where songs exist in more than one form and variation naturally occurs in performance; instead, the selection of one particular version means that a song becomes standardised, and the process of variation in performance is stifled. Insistence on competitors adhering to a printed score is much more characteristic of Western classical music than of traditional, and thus attracts a great deal of criticism from advocates of traditional singing. Father Allan MacDonald of Eriskay felt that when a song appeared in print without the traditional grace notes and ornaments, it was irreparably altered, 'As though you were to fit a

statue into a box by taking off the nose and ears' (Murray 1936:90). Thompson blames the use of printed music in the Mod on the disappearance of the 'flattened note' from Gaelic songs, the flattened note (a quarter-tone that is often stressed) being typical of Scottish Gaelic and Irish music, but which 'appears peculiar and strange to the ears of those accustomed to a more "civilised" treatment of music with notes and half-notes' (Thompson 1979:36-37). Certainly singers themselves can tell the difference between a traditional version of a song and one that has been put into print. Catrinian McLean, a singer from Arisaig who gave songs to Lucy Broadwood in 1906, made a point of avoiding 'hackneyed published songs', while her father Ewan despised what he called 'faked' versions of Gaelic songs (Broadwood 1927-31:281).

With the introduction of the Traditional Medal in 1971, the traditional style of Gaelic singing now has a recognised place at the Mod. In these competitions, singers are not required to submit sheet music to the adjudicators or to follow a printed version of a song, but can sing in their own way. Speaking about the difference between the Gold Medal and Traditional classes, one singer I interviewed said:

There's definitely a difference. The Gold Medal is proper, trained singing, and you should really have good breath control, ideally you would have a singing teacher, which I don't have and that's why I didn't really take it further. Traditional singing, you just stand in front of your audience, you relax, and you just sing, you don't have to do all the facial – you know, cheekbones high, and open your mouth wide and all that, you just don't have to do it, you just sing a nice song that's going to entertain the audience. And if you can put grace-notes in and a bit of ornamentation to make it prettier ... that's where Gaelic singing came from really, the *sean-nòs*, the traditional singing which was passed down from mother to daughter, throughout the generations. See it's a much more natural sound they're looking for (SA2005.077).

Another singer, speaking specifically on the adjudication of the two classes

said that:

I think in many ways, in terms of the judging, the Gold Medal's easier, because you know what's expected of you. You've got your music notation, and you've got to follow it fairly strictly, and you've got to have dynamics, and you've got to make sure you keep in tune, you have to do all those type of things. The traditional, although I always think you should keep in tune, not everyone does it, it's so varied. What is traditional, that's the thing. I think just, sing naturally. I think that's traditional, without being overly – overly, how would you say it, well, certainly not a trained voice. Certainly not a trained voice. Just natural singing, I think, in the traditional (SA2005.076).

There is no doubt that the Mod has raised the profile of Gaelic singing, which could be seen by some as a positive development. Throughout the week of competition there is extensive media coverage, with class winners performing on television and their pictures appearing in various newspapers around the country. However, Edward Henry cites this exposure as one of the ways that sponsored music (to use his term) influences traditional musical style (Henry 1989:92). Everyone can see what singing styles are preferred by the adjudicators when the winners' performances are broadcast to the nation, and this will subsequently influence other singers who also aspire to sing in public and achieve similar recognition.

Audience expectations are another way in which the Mod may have an effect on traditional singing style and performance practice. Institutionalised music carries with it official endorsement (Henry 1989:92) and this, combined with the Mod's intense media coverage, means that the style of singing advocated there is the one that is most accessible to non-Gaels, and which many outsiders to the Gaelic culture most commonly associate with the tradition. The recent interest in 'Celtic' music

means that many people who do not speak Gaelic are also interested in Gaelic singing (MacLeod 1996:134), and the prominence of the Mod may result in this particular singing style being the one that is frequently encountered. The audience will then come to expect this kind of singing, and their expectations will in turn influence Gaelic singers, as the singers will endeavour to please their audiences and sing what they want to hear. This is, of course, with reference to audiences of outsider, non-Gaels; the crucial question is how much the aesthetics of the Mod have influenced native Gaels, and how much they distinguish between these two disparate singing styles.

The general feeling amongst the singers I interviewed was that overall, the Mod has had a positive influence on Gaelic culture. This is not to say that all the singers were completely in favour of all aspects of the Mod, but they believe that it functions in perpetuating Gaelic song, particularly because it provides an impetus for learning songs and offers performance opportunities for those who might not otherwise have them. One singer said that he personally enjoyed competing because ‘you don’t have to wait 20 years to be invited to a *céilidh* to sing, which is not going to happen to everyone, or a large concert, you can choose the songs you want [...] And it’s also quite exciting to go to the Mod, you stand up there on the stage, you’ve got all these people looking, and you’ve got to give it your best shot’ (SA2006.009). Another singer, who does not sing at the Mod herself, believes that it has been a benefit to Gaelic culture because it ‘keeps things going’. She says that

The Mod has been around for over a hundred years and a lot of people like it and go, and compete in it and learn songs that they might not ever have learnt. ... It’s always there, the Mod is there every year, people are always going to it, lots and lots of people, so there are lots of people who are taking part to some extent in Gaelic culture that may not do it

otherwise. And that's a good thing. If it weren't there, I don't know if there'd be anything in its place (SA2005.073).

The focus that the Mod gives to children involved in Gaelic song was praised by another singer I spoke with: 'it gives them a feeling of being involved with the language, because outside the Mod, where do you find this? I think it's good, especially for children, to aim for something' (SA2005.074).

Thus, many singers believe that the Mod has a purpose, and a role to play in the present-day world of Gaelic song. Some singers, though, seemed to share this belief reluctantly; they were in favour of it mainly because they recognised that there was nothing else that offered the same kinds of opportunities, and they appreciated that it was filling a void that would otherwise exist in the Gaelic community. But, for some singers, in its present form the Mod would not be their ideal format for the promotion and maintenance of Gaelic song. As one singer said, 'I would overhaul lots of aspects of it, if I was given the opportunity' (SA2006.009). The major feature of the Mod that drew criticism from singers was the competition side, especially with regards to traditional singing. One singer, while agreeing that the Mod presents valuable singing opportunities, went on to say 'But the competition thing is just totally crazy. Because, how can you compare one traditional singer, or one to another, 'cause everybody brings something different to singing a song' (SA2006.022). Another singer, a well-respected professional who never sang at Mods herself, has lately been asked to adjudicate at Mod competitions. But she strongly disagrees with the competitive element and said that she would personally find adjudication very difficult:

There is absolutely no way on this earth I could do that!
There's no way I could point out that Seumas can get a gold,

and poor little Fearchar can get a thank you and you've done your best; they all deserve medals for getting up there. So in many ways I'm not for it. I'm not against it, because there are people who make this their life, and that's fine, but it wasn't mine, and on a judge front I just couldn't do that either (SA2005.081).

The literature makes it clear that the Mod is having an effect on Gaelic singing style and aesthetics, just as in Ireland, where the festivals and competitions run by *Comhaltas Ceoltóiri Éireann*, the association of Irish musicians, have contributed to a refinement of the music 'in the direction of European cultivated or classical music' (Henry 1989:92). Yet an important difference between the two traditions of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland is that whilst Irish song remains mainly unharmonised and monophonic (Henry 1989:90), Gaelic Scotland has seen the rise of choral singing in four-part harmony, directly because of the Mod. Choral singing in Gaelic has grown to such a degree that an article in the Edinburgh-based *Scotsman* said that 'Lowland cities, towns, and even villages now boast their Gaelic choirs... [and] so common a feature of our national life has the Gaelic choir become, that it is difficult to realise that until near the close of the last [i.e. nineteenth] century the institution was practically unknown' (*Scotsman* 1934:8). Thompson acknowledges that 'From a purely musical viewpoint one can agree with the Mod organisers in their decision to copy this aspect of Welsh culture, if only to offer some "different" type of entertainment at the Mod', but he questions the prominence of harmonised choral singing that was never a part of the tradition in the first place (Thompson 1979:32). The harmonisation of the traditional songs has also been criticised by Shuldham-Shaw, who said that a harmonised song 'ceases to be a real folk-song and enters the sphere of mere harmonisations of the melody, often with soupy chromatic harmonies

more suited to Victorian ballads than the clean melodic line of Gaelic song’ (Thompson 1979:39).

The first Gaelic choir was the St Columba Choir from Glasgow, founded in 1874, and whose success was instrumental in bringing choral singing to the Mod (*Coisir a'Mhòid: The Mòd Collection of Gaelic Part Songs 1896-1947*:vol. 5:preface). Songs sung by the choir were harmonised and arranged with piano accompaniment by the conductor, Archibald Ferguson, who published them in a collection that was, according to the prefatory note, ‘designed to further the cultivation of the native music of the Highlands’ (Ferguson [n.d.]:prefatory note). He bemoaned the fact that until recent times most Gaelic singers had had no vocal training, and hailed the changes that meant that it was ‘not now so difficult to get Gaelic music from artistes possessing cultivated voices’ (Ferguson [n.d.]:prefatory note). Malcolm MacFarlane, an arranger and publisher of Gaelic songs and a Gaelic adjudicator at the Mod, described the singing of the St Columba Choir, which

...consisted in the music being regarded as of first importance and the words of secondary importance. ... the soloists at these concerts also made themselves, more or less, musical instruments, contrary to the practice of the old singers, who mostly sang with animation and feeling, determined to do justice to the words, be the fate of the music what it might (MacFarlane 1924-25:254).

With the pioneering, influential St Columba Choir holding such classical music attitudes towards Gaelic singing, it is hardly surprising that this approach prevailed throughout Gaelic choral singing, and the Mod in general.

Despite the continued popularity of Gaelic choral singing today, not all Gaelic singers approve of it. One singer I spoke with said, ‘I don’t like, for instance, the Mod choir treatment of songs. I actually loathe, I physically loathe it, I can’t bear

listening to it. ... I think of the difference between that and the original song, if I know the song, I just think, no, stop, I don't like you doing that with that song' (SA2005.073). For another singer, it is not as much the sound of the arranged song that bothers her as the fear that it will take precedence over the unharmonised version and people will forget where the song came from:

I think what I'm concerned about now as to the future of the language and the future of traditional song within it, is that people will forget the source, you know, the source will suddenly become a four-part arrangement of a Gaelic song on a piece of paper. And that the singer that takes that material will recognise that as the source, and won't understand that the source was something completely different. And that the Mod doesn't allow for a thorough investigation of the song, or a thorough understanding of where the song came from (SA2005.034).

But several of the singers I interviewed sing regularly with Gaelic choirs (or did at one time), and had various reasons for doing so. A primary motivation was the feeling that part-singing improves general musicianship, as one singer explained: 'I think it helps your voice as well, and it definitely helps your ear, that you're having to sing and listen to whoever's beside you, doing a different part, and it helps you with counting the beats and just your overall musical learning, I suppose, it just improves with singing in a choir' (SA2005.076). The challenge of keeping her own part was also cited by another singer: 'it's a bit more challenging I've got to say, because, if you're on your own, you know where you've got to stick, ... but in a choir it's so much harder to keep your part, so that's why I stand on the end. ... I sing second soprano, which, you know, you don't have the tune all the time. So it's a bit more of a challenge and that's why I thought I'd do it that year' (SA2005.078).

Another very important aspect of choral singing was the social side. This was a driving force behind most of the singers' reasons for singing with a choir, as they can spend time with other people who share their interest in music and Gaelic culture. In fact, this also seems to be a major reason behind why so many singers, whether solo or choral, return to the Mod year after year, as one singer explained: 'Why do we do it, I don't know. And we keep coming back. I think everybody's the same, I think all the singers will tell you the same thing, something makes you come back. I think it's probably just the camaraderie, and you meet people from other choirs, and it's quite a good atmosphere at the Mod' (SA2005.077).

The Mod has a complicated position in the world of Gaelic song. Portraying itself as promoting and perpetuating the Gaelic culture, it provides a focus and a goal for thousands of Gaelic singers who would otherwise not have the same performance opportunities. Yet, it nevertheless emphasises elements that are foreign to the tradition, and may be seen to be replacing the indigenous tradition with a manufactured one. Some singers view this as a threat to Gaelic singing, but quite a few of the singers interviewed seem to consider Mod singing to be a separate, parallel entity to traditional singing, with the two co-existing peacefully and distinctly. The nature of traditional music is such that it does change over time, so separating the precise changes that have been brought about by the Mod and those changes that evolved on their own, reflecting shifting aesthetics, is problematic. It could be argued that traditional music must evolve and develop in order to stay alive, especially when competing with modern forms of entertainment such as the Internet, television, and pop music. However, the danger is that the Mod has not so much reflected contemporary aesthetics as created them, in a large part because outsiders to

the tradition have been instigators in the movement. In a time when minority languages and cultures are increasingly under threat, such institutionalisation threatens to eclipse the indigenous culture altogether, and an organisation set up to preserve the Gaelic musical culture may actually be accelerating its decline.

Performance setting

The changing contexts of traditional singing result in changes in the physical setting of performance, and this undoubtedly has ramifications for performance practice. The setting is a crucial variable in any performance, as it may influence the singer's choice of songs and how they present them, and also the presentation of 'the performing self or persona' (Smith 1988:295). Formal concert situations, where the performer is on a raised stage and separated from the audience, may have theatrical spotlights and amplified sound, which is very different from a small musical gathering in a home, and this will certainly have consequences for both the musical and extra-musical behaviour of the singer.

One way in which the setting directly affects the singer's performance is through repertoire selection. A singer's overall selection of repertoire will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, but at this point it should be mentioned how the particular atmosphere of a given performance has an influence on what singers decide to sing for a specific occasion. Often, they will not know ahead of time what they are planning to perform, but will make the decision once they assess the venue, audience, and other performers. This is not the case only for Gaelic song but for other branches of traditional music too, such as Scots song, in which singers Archie and Ray Fisher, for example, both enjoy the flexibility of being able to modify their programmes as they go. Archie says that he does not do 'a pre-selected programme.

I don't work out the programme I'm going to do before I start. A lot of it has to do with what sort of response you get for various things... I usually do what I like to think is a balanced programme... you just vary your pace (like you would, I suppose, in conversation), on a programme of song... It goes up and it comes down, peak and it goes down...' (Smith 1988:326). His sister Ray finds this freedom very important, and thinks that some concert organisers do not appreciate this element of traditional music, being more accustomed to other genres such as classical music where programmes are worked out in advance and strictly adhered to (Smith 1988:328).

For many Gaelic singers this informal, flexible approach is a customary part of their performances. One singer said that he would have a number of different songs prepared, and then decide at the last minute which ones he would sing: '... normally when I'm going to the concert maybe I have a list of 10 songs that I can choose from, and when I'm there I'll choose' (SA2005.076). Another singer explained: 'when I see the audience I decide. Unless, I'm accompanied, then obviously you have to [plan ahead]. ... it's right, right up to me, until I get my foot on that stage, I don't have to know what I'm going to sing' (SA2005.081).

Performing with an ensemble limits the amount of freedom a singer has, as obviously more planning is necessary when additional performers are involved: 'So you don't have any room for making decisions like, sorry, chaps, I'm going to do this one solo', as one singer explained (SA2005.034). Since she performs regularly with instrumentalists, she feels she does not have a great deal of flexibility to modify her programme on the spot, but does not necessarily decide everything in advance: 'So the only kind of freedom that I would feel I could have, if you're going out and doing a gig, would be that, in the set list, it would say "[vocal] solo" ... if I decided that a

solo song was going to happen in a set I would do it, but I wouldn't determine what it was going to be until that point' (SA2005.034). She went on to say that the audience is a factor in how she decides what her solo song will be, but ultimately her decision is based on how she herself is feeling at the time of the performance. For her, the overall feel of the performance and the setting affect how she feels, and therefore what she chooses to perform.

The shift of singing environment away from the home to places such as pubs or halls can have several consequences for singers. Blankenhorn explains how this phenomenon in Ireland has had an effect on repertoire selection and vocal production, with singers choosing songs to impress an audience, rather than to entertain friends, and female singers now 'produce a fuller, more robust sound which is generally set lower in the vocal register', since they are forced to sing louder to compete with a noisy pub atmosphere (Blankenhorn 1987:8). Such venues are not usually designed for performance; there is not always a formal separation of performer and audience with a specific focal point as in a theatre, and the audience members are there for a social occasion, not expecting to be quiet. The problem of background noise was foremost in the mind of one singer I interviewed. She had been to a *céilidh* recently where a well-known Gaelic singer was performing and had felt awful for her because she could not be heard, due to the layout of the room and the noise coming from the bar. She said that she herself worries about how her voice will carry in a given venue, and whether or not it will have sufficient strength 'to have people stop talking, and to listen' (SA2006.022).

The modern context of Gaelic singing means that there is now a wide variety of performance settings, from intimate gatherings in people's homes, to pubs, to

large concert halls, and the performer-audience dynamic differs in each one. This was described by one singer, who said that in some venues the audience is there purely to be entertained, whereas other venues encourage a greater level of participation by the audience: ‘So I think, well I know I give a lot, on the stage no matter how big a venue that might be, I’ll still give. Now, the venue will determine whether the audience want to participate in that or not. ’Cause sometimes the venue might be austere and not create an ambience where they want any more than just to be entertained’ (SA2005.035).

Different types of performance settings will affect singers in various ways, and each singer will have their preferred type. The *céilidh*, the traditional setting for Gaelic singing, appeals to modern singers for its informal, community-like environment, where singers most often sit amongst the audience and the number of people present is relatively small. There are fewer logistical questions and singers do not need to think about having their voices amplified, which can be a great cause of stress if one is unaccustomed to using microphones: ‘I didn’t go the Mod route, so I find it difficult to stand on a stage, and especially if there’s lots of mics and things, I know very little about it, and you find it difficult to know which mic to stand at when you walk onto a stage’ (SA2005.074). Interaction and communication between singer and audience is facilitated by the informality of the *céilidh* setting and the smaller size, and this is very important to many singers. ‘I suppose with a smaller group, you can interact more; I quite enjoy when you’re singing that you’re able to talk to people and have it quite informal’ said one singer (SA2005.075). Another singer said, ‘I like to sing in small groups of people, as opposed to large stages. And to be singing within a sort of communion or community, where people will join in

with the chorus and where you're really communicating to, I don't know, 10, 15, 20 individuals' (SA2006.009). One characteristic of such a performance context is that singers may not know exactly what might be expected of them over the course of an evening; when they might be called upon to sing, or how many times they may end up singing. Some singers relish this atmosphere: '... you're sometimes told, I'll put you on after such-and-such, but quite often such-and-such doesn't turn up, so they call you up. So to be honest that doesn't bother me at all, especially when it's an informal thing, you just go up and sing. I have no problems with that at all' (SA2005.076). But this unpredictability is precisely what draws other singers to more formal, organised settings. 'I do prefer the formal things,' said another singer, 'cause then you know when you're coming up, you know you can prepare, and you know how many you've got to do, whereas [at] a *céilidh* you could be asked to sing six times in one night, and you just don't know. ... I do like knowing when my moment is, moment of doom, moment of triumph, whatever it may be' (SA2005.078). Whatever the context, singers will prepare for each one differently, according to one singer who performs in a wide range of venues and for very small and very large audiences: 'Cause you kind of build up to every one, it's like – you're psyched up very differently for different styles of performances' (SA2005.034). She also feels that the composition and size of the audience will directly affect how singers sing, saying that, 'I think everybody sings differently, depending on who they're singing for. The atmosphere that is created by three or four folk sitting around is very, very different to the atmosphere of 500 folk.'

Performance wardrobe

The way singers dress while performing is another way in which they may be affected by the performance context; Stephanie Smith writes that dress is a manifestation of a singer's individual personality and performance style, but also of the functions of the performance (Smith 1988:297). Her study on the Fisher family of traditional singers reported that both Archie and Ray sing in clothes they would wear everyday, without making a clear distinction between 'performing' and 'everyday' clothes, while their sister Cilla prefers to keep the two wardrobes distinct and separate (Smith 1988:298, 300, 303). This latter attitude was the prevalent one among the Gaelic singers I spoke with. One professional singer always devotes a great deal of thought about what to wear for particular occasions:

I hate making decisions on what to wear! Like tomorrow night ... I brought something with me that I'd think I'd like to wear, but... going somewhere where you've performed a lot, you obviously don't want to wear the same thing 'cause they'll have seen it a hundred times ... I just like to wear something that I feel really comfortable in. I love the idea of going out there in stars and spangles and a tiara, and I'd love to go out there looking like a diva, but it wouldn't be me. ... if I'm singing with other people I'd like to coordinate ... I always find out ahead of time 'What colour are you wearing?' ... But otherwise it's just whatever I feel comfortable in, whatever looks nice. And the thought of getting up on stage in jeans and a t-shirt, absolutely not. Absolutely not. You have to have some class. (SA2005.081).

She always prefers to dress up when she sings, as opposed to wearing her regular day-to-day clothes, and this applies equally to small, informal *céilidhs* as well as large concerts. By being so particular about her wardrobe it gives her a feeling of control over the situation and makes her feel ready to perform in front of an

audience. Her position as a professional singer may also be a factor, as she sees it as part of her job to look good while singing. Another professional singer also said that she has specific performing clothes, and definitely views it as her responsibility to present a polished appearance to her audience: 'it's part ... of that package of performing. It's like, if people are paying to go and see you, then I think you have to put a bit of effort in. In all sides. And I think – thinking about your appearance is important' (SA2005.035).

Singers at the Mod usually dress up to perform, and kilts are often worn by both men and women. One singer I spoke with who performs at the Mod on a regular basis chose her particular kilt for a very specific reason: 'I have this very bad shake in my left knee ... see when I sing, my left knee will shake the whole time. And there's a reason I got a long kilt made' (SA2005.078). In her case her performance wardrobe helps disguise her nerves and makes her feel more comfortable.

Performer-audience relationships

The relationship between the performer and audience is extremely important in traditional oral performance, and has a substantial effect on the overall result.

This theory has been advocated by several folklorists and ethnomusicologists, beginning with Lord (1960:quoted in Bauman 1975: 302), who wrote that

Whether the performance takes place at home, in the coffee house, in the courtyard, or in the halls of a noble, the essential element of the occasion of singing that influences the form of the poetry is the variability and instability of the audience. [...] Leaving out of consideration for the moment the question of the talent of the singer, one can say that the length of the song depends on the audience.

The work of Başgöz (1975) supports Lord's idea that the audience determines the length of a song. In his study, a Turkish *Aşık*, or minstrel, performed the same folk narrative for two different audiences on two consecutive evenings; one a folk audience at a coffee house, and other an elite, educated audience at a school. The resulting performances were very different, with the second one ending an hour and fifteen minutes earlier than the first, due to the fact that this audience had a very detached attitude and would not interact at all with the performer (Başgöz 1975:144-45). This corresponds also with the opinion of Joyner, who states that 'The response of the immediate audience may affect the performer in a number of specific ways, but the immediate context is less likely to *produce* performance than it is to *inhibit* or reshape performance – to cause a performer to bowdlerise or otherwise select from his folkloristic repertory' (Joyner 1975:262).

In Gaelic singing the composition of the audience has a direct effect on the length of a performance, such as in Cape Breton, where community language ability has declined to such an extent that many traditional songs are considered too long to sing through (Shaw 2003:40-41). In Scotland too, Gaelic singers will often omit verses from long songs if their listeners do not speak the language, a fact that was confirmed by several of the singers I interviewed (SA2005.034; SA2005.081; SA2006.022). One professional singer said that she is often in the position of performing for non-Gaelic-speaking audiences, who not only do not understand the language but also expect that songs will be a certain length:

I mean there are some songs that obviously yes I do know them all in the correct order, all 21 verses of them, but you don't often get the opportunity to [sing the whole thing]. And I'm not convinced ... that our audiences today are necessarily ready for it. I mean some are, yeah. But I find myself, more and more, in the position of offering song,

Gaelic song, to audiences that are pretty much new to it. And it's kind of like more of giving them a taster of it. So yes, I take a song – when I'm performing a song at that level, or whatever you want to call it, I will have sat and thought about it and thought right ok, I want to sing this song, and I then take it to whoever I'm performing it with, and I'll know the song inside out by the time I take it to the musicians. And then we will arrange it, and in that arrangement, if we drop out 11 verses, then that's a decision that we've made for a specific reason which would tend to be that there is a kind of rule of thumb that says each set should only be about four or five minutes long (SA2005.034).

It is not only modern audiences that find many Gaelic songs too long.

Malcolm MacFarlane was lamenting this fact in the nineteen-twenties, criticising the result when a song is drastically shortened to suit the taste of the audience. He looked back nostalgically, writing that 'In earlier days my namesake, when he sang "*Cabar-féidh*," rendered all the verses of that song with precision and ease; and he and his audiences, instead of tiring, warmed up as he proceeded' (MacFarlane 1924-25:258). So it would seem that the audience does have a great deal of influence on the length of performances in Gaelic song.

In much traditional music, the audience plays an active role in the performance. Sessions of Irish *sean-nós* find the audience offering vocal encouragement to the singer throughout the song, with expressions such as '*Dia leat*' ('God with you') and '*Maith thú*' ('good for you') (Henigan 1991:100-101; Ó Canainn 1993:78). The listeners may even comment on the song to the singer; Ó Canainn writes that the singer is not disturbed by this and will often respond musically to the dialogue, although he does not say what form this may take (Ó Canainn 1993:78-79). Verbal support may be given to performers by Scots traveller audiences if they see that the singer is struggling in his or her performance, making a

huge effort to remember a long narrative (Williamson 1985:102). But it is not just praise that a performer may encounter during their song; in the musical tradition of the Yoruba tribe in Nigeria, the audiences are very critical, and performances of *ijala*, hunting songs, are often interrupted by other performers if they think the singer is not singing properly (Finnegan 1977:232).

There may also be interaction between performer and audience in a physical way. This is an important part of Irish *sean-nós*, where a member of the audience will ‘hold the hand of the singer at some high point in the song and will even emphasise either the rhythm of the song or an important sentiment by grasping the hand more firmly and moving it up and down’ (Ó Canainn 1993:79). Freeman observed just that during the first song of the evening at a musical gathering in Ballyvourney (Freeman 1918-21:xxiii):

People are making signs to you to move. The Grandmother – a small, shrewd, active woman of eighty-three, – who has been sitting wedged somewhere behind you, desires to approach the singer. He is just going to sing a verse which she is especially fond of. With great difficulty she makes her way, through a tangle of knees and feet, to his chair. She stands by him, lifts one of his hands and holds it in both her own. He raises his head, and sings the verse looking straight into her face. When the moment comes for his long, high note, she shakes his hand gravely two or three times up and down, and does not let it go till the end of the verse.

The song is over, and is greeted with applause from everyone in the room: ‘Long life to you! Good man! You are in form to-night! What a sweet, musical voice he has! That is a fine song! It is, indeed; it is one of the very old songs.’ All who can get near the singer grab his hands, his shoulders or his knees.

Other traditions also value physical contact between performer and audience. There is often physical contact between Scots travellers and their listeners during a

performance, but in that case it is instigated by the singer as a way to communicate physically with a listener, as opposed to an audience member offering encouragement to the performer. Williamson describes how traveller singers may 'catch hands' with audience members, embrace their knee, or 'singer and listener may encircle one another with their arms in more complete body contact' (Williamson 1985:99-100).

It appears that the performance etiquette with regards to the degree of contact between performer and audience differed between Irish and Scottish Gaelic singing traditions. In Cape Breton, Scottish Gaelic audiences were traditionally more reserved than their Irish counterparts; there was no physical contact, and, with the exception of joining in with the refrains, audiences were expected to be silent throughout a performance (MacLellan 2000:25). There were no open displays of emotion during a song, praise was given after the performance, and criticism was offered well away from the rest of the group (MacLellan 2000:26). But singing the choruses was an important way for the audience to be involved in the performance, becoming performers themselves at this point, and it is still a very central part of the Gaelic tradition. Finnegan writes of audiences joining in with refrains of political protest songs that 'the joint performance of oral poetry expresses and consolidates the cohesiveness of the group of performers' (Finnegan 1977:217), and this could be what it does in the Gaelic community. Interestingly, the importance of the refrain to the total feel of a performance is not felt universally; Scots travellers would often omit the refrain, believing that it could detract from the story in a narrative song and bore the listener (Williamson 1985:274-79).

Singing is a social activity for Gaels, and is ‘an integrating force at all levels of traditional society’ (MacLellan 2000:27). In traditional performance contexts of Gaelic song, the performers were drawn directly from the audience, and everyone participating in an event would have been of the same socio-economic class (MacLellan 2000:25). Group-singing of the choruses has remained crucial to performance practice, and this was confirmed by the singers I interviewed. Some prefer it partly because it can make their job easier; as one singer said, whose repertoire consists mainly of waulking songs: ‘It lightens the load considerably if the audience help you with the chorus’ (SA2005.080). But the main reason is because it seems that many Gaelic singers see singing not as a one-way performance to non-participating listeners, but as a real relationship with their audience, where both performer and audience are sharing equally in the experience of the song. One singer described this by saying that:

I think when a singer sings a song that people know, there is a bond. It’s as if they’re all sharing in the same thing. And that you know everybody will, you know, there’s a lot of songs that, if you know Gaelic songs, you’ll know those particular songs well. You’ll have heard them since you were a tiny child. And they can evoke a lot of feelings and memories in the people listening that maybe the singer knows nothing about, but it can be a very emotional experience. I don’t think – and I think that the singer will... they’ll feel that, they’ll feel that from the audience, that people are, they’re all sharing in the same thing, when a song is sung that people know, and I don’t think it would be the same if they were singing on their own. I think songs are meant to be shared (SA2005.073).

Another singer related the story of a *céilidh* in Barra where he was singing the song ‘*Fàilte do Bharraigh*’ (‘Welcome to Barra’). For such a well-known, local song he invited the audience to join him in singing not just the chorus but the verses

as well, ‘and they all did, and it really was wonderful. It was fantastic to be up there singing and everyone singing along with you, really something special’ (SA2005.076).

The shifting performer-audience dynamic of Gaelic singing results in many singers singing for audiences that do not speak the language, but even in this context singers encourage the audience to learn the choruses and sing along. ‘I love non-Gaelic-speaking audiences ’cause I can teach them choruses, and that’s always great fun’, said one singer (SA2005.081).

Thus, the involvement of the audience can range from simply being observers of the performance, to being performers themselves. Of the various roles held by performer and audience, Fine rightly points out that in cases where the audience is a performer of some kind ‘each participant simultaneously plays both performer and audience roles’ (Fine 1984:75). She also draws attention to the fact that ‘any performer is simultaneously his or her own audience, monitoring and adapting the performance to his or her conception of how the performance should sound and look. And certainly when persons perform in solitude, they assume both performer and audience roles’ (Fine 1984:75).

The practice of solitary singing is an interesting one, and has not been explored in an ethnomusicological way for the Gaelic tradition. It was certainly a part of traditional life, with songs sung regularly to relieve the monotony of individual tasks, but whether singers sang alone for other reasons has not been examined in the literature. For Scots travellers, singing to oneself was done consciously to practice and ‘keep up’ the song, but people also sang alone because they derived pleasure from singing, and an audience was not a prerequisite for this

enjoyment (Williamson 1985:35). Solitary singing in the Nenets tradition was central to their way of life, something that everyone in the community did for their own self-expression: ‘This intimate song performance has an enormous therapeutic effect on the people who must endure the endless light or darkness of the polar nights and days. In such extreme conditions, songs spring from a person spontaneously, without the need for an audience’ (Abramovich-Gobon 1999:33). The Nenets emphasis on solitary singing is even reflected in the performance practice in public settings, with singers in these contexts behaving as if they are still singing to themselves and not to an audience (Abramovich-Gobon 1999:37-38).

Many of the Gaelic singers I interviewed said that they sing quite often on their own, with one singer describing herself as ‘a housework singer’ (SA2005.077). For another, singing is something she does all the time, most of the time even without her own knowledge:

... my daughter stopped me this day and said, ‘Will you ever *stop* Mum!’ And I said, ‘What? What’s the matter?’ And she said, ‘You’re singing *all the time!*’ And I’m not even aware of it. And she said, ‘Would you just stop?’ And I just turned to her and I said, ‘It would be easier for you to say, “Stop breathing, Mum.”’ Because I’m not even aware, I’m not even aware of the fact that I’m doing it, and if I’m not singing outwardly, I’m singing inwardly, there’s always something in there (SA2005.081).

Her solitary singing is not at all about practicing or learning songs, but is simply a part of who she is, and it would be incredibly difficult for her to change this. For a third singer, solitary singing takes a slightly different form. She too said that she sings all the time, ‘but I sing in my head a lot. I don’t sing out. ... I mean, I’ll be doing something, even finding myself at the computer doing something, but actually another part of my brain is singing, you know like there’s words floating around or

tunes floating around in my head, all the time. But nobody else would be aware of that, which is quite funny' (SA2005.034). She attributes this to the fact that in addition to being a professional singer she is a mother and runs her own business, and consequently describes her life as being 'compartmentalised'. She is not always able to sing out loud, but singing in her head is singing nonetheless.

Performance etiquette

Each and every performance context will have its own unique unwritten rules as to how a performance progresses, and what is and is not accepted practice. Patrick Kennedy's accounts of *sean-nós* performances in Ireland serve as interesting examples (Kennedy 1867); although the descriptions are conveyed as part of a novel, he was writing about his own experiences as a schoolteacher in County Wexford where he used to attend many singing and storytelling sessions, and he asserts in the preface to the book that the incidents described really took place (Cohane and Goldstein 1996:426-27).

According to Kennedy, there were particular conventions as to how a singing session would unfold. Singers were each chosen by the singer preceding them, who based their selection on three factors: the vocal quality and repertoire of the singer, their character, and whether or not he or she was 'an attractive member of the opposite sex' (Cohane and Goldstein 1996:430). When asked for a song, singers in Ireland might feign reluctance to perform, but this was simply an expected part of the performance etiquette, and they would usually agree to sing eventually (Ó Canainn 1993:79). No one could sing without being asked by someone else first, they were not permitted to monopolise the session, and they would not be called on again until

all the reasonably good singers had had a chance to sing (Cohane and Goldstein 1996:432, 433).

Some of the practices of etiquette observed at this Irish session also have parallels with performance occasions of Gaelic song. Singers would have to be asked to sing, and at traditional *céilidhs* in Cape Breton it was usually the host who would request the next singer, but this could also be done by audience members (MacLellan 2000:25). And, similar to the session described by Kennedy, in Gaelic song one particular performer was not allowed to dominate the entire evening. At *céilidhs* in Newfoundland, it was considered rude if a singer or musician held the floor for too long, no matter how popular he or she was with the group (Bennett 1989:76).

And there are most certainly unwritten, yet specific, rules to be followed among singers. The concept of song ownership, or the idea that certain songs belong only to certain singers, crosses cultural boundaries and has been emphasised by many sources in the literature. In the community of pub singers in East Suffolk, a singer was only permitted to sing someone else's song 'after acknowledging the true ownership of the song in public, or requesting permission from the owner before a performance at which he will not be present' (Dunn 1980:202). It was very much the same in Norfolk, where one night a stranger in the local pub began to sing a song commonly associated with a particular singer, and the latter was so furious to find someone else singing 'his' song that he would have physically attacked the singer had he not been restrained (Heppa 2005:578). Casey et al. found that singers in a Newfoundland community were very competitive about their repertoire, and would only write a song down or record it for another singer if they get a favour back in

return (Casey, Rosenberg et al. 1972:401), and similarly, songs to Native American singers 'are regarded as personal property and may be given as gifts or traded for other songs or concrete objects' (Lavonis 2004:346). The perception of song possession can even apply to singers who belong to the same family. The mother in a particular Scots family described by Edward K. Miller was very possessive about her songs, firmly believing that they belonged to her, and she would get annoyed when any of her daughters sang one of 'her' songs (Miller 1981:206).

The world of Gaelic song is not immune to the idea of song ownership, but interestingly, this does not seem to be the case in Cape Breton, where 'the concept of ownership did not apply to songs any more than to fiddle tunes or stories', and 'no singer had a formal or enforceable claim on any particular song' (MacLellan 2000:22). In Scotland, however, it is not uncommon for singers to ask permission to sing another singer's songs at *céilidhs* and other performances. One singer described a specific fundraising concert where all of the singers got together to discuss the concert repertoire, to verify that none of them were planning on singing the same thing and to check if they could sing a song usually associated with one of the other singers:

... we put our heads together, what are you going to sing, and what will I sing, in case we repeated the same song, or would you mind if I sang that one, I know that you sing it, but would you mind if I sang it? You know, that kind of thing, and generally people said, 'Oh, carry on, sing whatever you want, I don't mind.' And I don't mind anybody singing whatever my mother left. I don't mind that at all, I think it's a compliment (SA2005.080).

Thus, not only does performance etiquette dictate that singers ask permission to sing another singer's song, but also that they must not repeat a song that has

already been sung at the same event by another singer. One singer I interviewed makes a point of choosing lesser-known songs precisely so that she does not have to worry about someone else singing a song that she was planning to sing:

I mean, there's so many millions of Gaelic songs out there, it's quite fun to sing something that nobody's heard before, because there's always someone who's going to come up to you and go, 'God what are you singing, I don't want to sing the same song as you.' And since I pick slightly odd songs, it's a bit more – it's a bit easier to get round that, because there's always someone who's gonna steal your songs. So if you're asked to sing four songs, have seven, ready, because there'll be somebody to steal your songs, and this is why I pick for the odd ones (SA2005.078).

This singer's use of the word 'steal' here is very revealing, as it emphasises how strongly she feels about the songs she sings, and that they really are her own personal property.

All of these practices of etiquette are understood by singers who perform regularly, and it is expected that the rules will be adhered to. To breach them is really almost a sort of transgression, and goes against the community-based aspect of Gaelic song.

Chapter summary

Traditionally Gaels sang everywhere, with music an integral part of daily life, and *céilidhs* at the centre of communities. Modern performance contexts are very different, with separation of performer and audience, and many events now taking place in a loud pub atmosphere, where singers often have to compete with background noise.

The context can affect singers in a number of ways, such as repertoire selection. Often singers will not know ahead of time what they are planning to

perform, but will make the decision once they assess the venue, audience, and other performers. It may also affect how singers dress, with many Gaelic singers (particularly professionals) having a distinct and separate performing wardrobe, wanting to present a polished appearance to their audiences and feeling that this gives them a sense of control over the situation.

There are a variety of different contexts for modern Gaelic singing, and consequently singers will have their personal favourites. *Céilidhs* can appeal to modern singers for the informal, community-like atmosphere, while other singers prefer the structure of more formal, organized events. But in any performance, no matter what the setting, the performer-audience relationship has a direct effect on the overall result. This is particularly true for the length of songs, as Gaelic singers will often omit verses from long songs if their listeners do not speak the language. Involving the audience directly is important to many singers, and having them join in with the choruses is a way of achieving this; singers view singing not as simply a performance, but as a real relationship between singer and audience, where both are contributing to the experience and sharing equally in it.

Each individual performance context will have its own etiquette of what is and is not acceptable. In modern Gaelic singing, song ownership plays a very important part in this and singers can be rather possessive about their repertoires. Etiquette dictates that singers not only ask permission before they publicly sing a song commonly associated with another singer, but that they must not repeat a song that has already been sung at the same event by another singer. Some singers even make a point of choosing repertoire that is less well known to avoid others singing 'their' songs.

The changing contexts of the tradition mean that Gaelic singing is now less immediate and spontaneous and is instead more formalised, with institutions such as the Mod playing a large role in its perpetuation. The Mod has suffered a lot of criticism since its inception, but many singers today feel that overall it has had a positive influence on Gaelic culture, providing goals for singers to learn songs and opportunities for performance, even if the competition side is not so desirable. It also acts as a social gathering, with many people returning year after year. Singing has always been a social activity in the Gaelic community, and the Mod is one way that this is continuing in the modern context.

Repertoire Selection and Transmission

This chapter will examine the beliefs held by Gaelic singers concerning how they choose the songs they want to sing, as well as how they actually learn songs and singing style.

Repertoire selection

The factors that affect a singer's choice of repertoire are very important to examine, but precisely why and how singers choose the songs they do has not been investigated in depth for the Gaelic tradition. Several studies of the total repertoires of individual Gaelic singers or song-makers have been conducted in the past (see Ross 1961; McKean 1997; MacLellan 2000), and my own previous research has focused on repertoire selection in the specific genre of emigration songs (McPhee 2004), but repertoire selection in Gaelic song is still very much an under-researched area. This has been studied for other cultures, however, and cross-cultural comparisons can thus assist in locating Gaelic singing within the traditional music of the world.

According to Porter and Gower (1995:283), 'A singer's preferences in repertoire are shaped by basic factors: learning, taste, and the learned ability to read different audiences in differing situations'. These factors can be described as internal and external: those that come from within the singers themselves, that are a part of who they are as people and are closely bound together with their personalities

(internal factors), and those that are imposed by others (external). Both are influential in the process of repertoire selection.

Internal factors

Many Gaelic singers I interviewed had more than one reason for singing particular songs:

I'll only sing something if I actually like the song. I wouldn't sing something I didn't particularly like. But I also like ... to choose a song by its melody, if I like the tune, 'cause ... I don't like songs that stay within a few notes, I like things that have got quite a range to sing. I also like a song that's got a story, that tells something ... If I don't like the melody then I don't really like singing them, 'cause it has to be something you want to sing. ... So it's the story behind it, and the tune, that's how I choose songs (SA2005.075).

I have to like the song, first of all. And also, I like a song with a story (SA2005.076).

... some [waulking songs] have very, very nice tunes to them, and I love these, and they're very catchy ... and I like them because of the story, you know, either it's a love affair, or somebody who's died, they're sad, or they're praising. And some of the Gaelic in them is very, very nice, very appropriate and very nice, and I like them for that reason too (SA 2004.040).

However, aesthetic appeal and liking a song are not always enough for a singer to want to sing it; recognition of how suitable a song is to his or her voice is also an important consideration. For one singer, how a song fits her voice and how easy it is for her to sing are two very important factors in her selection of repertoire:

Well I guess, first of all, every singer knows what they can and can't sing. I hear people sing songs that I would love to learn, and then I'll pick up the lyrics ... and I'll start to sing it and I'll think, I can't do it, I just can't sing this song, because you know ... what you're capable of, and you know what suits your voice and what doesn't suit your voice. So, on

many fronts, it isn't even just a case of do I like the song or don't I, it's can I sing it? ... you know what you're capable of, and you know what you like, you know what's easy ... And sadly, the older I get, what's easiest is what I go for (SA2005.081).

Another singer rules out an entire genre of songs from her repertoire because she feels that they do not suit her:

I for instance can't sing *puirt-a-beul* songs right, I just can't. I don't particularly like them, but yet if somebody can sing them well, God it's wonderful, but it's not my kind of thing... I suppose there are some kinds of songs that just do not suit your voice (SA2006.022).

So a singer's perception of what is and is not appropriate for his or her own voice is a very important factor in the type of repertoire the singer chooses. A singer must feel comfortable with a song to be able to sing it, and will certainly not enjoy singing it if it does not feel right, as this singer demonstrates:

Sometimes it doesn't work, sometimes I don't think it suits my voice, and I might learn to sing it, learn the words and the tune, but I never really sing it much 'cause I don't think I do it very well. And other songs if I enjoy singing it and I think it sounds good, then I'm more likely to persevere with it and just work on the way I sing it (SA2005.073).

Another determiner that affects all singers is their individual personality and life history, which affects what songs appeal to them on a personal level and will greatly influence their attraction to particular songs and genres (Pentikäinen 1976: 269; 1978:331; Kumer 1981:49). In my own investigation of why Gaelic singers sing songs of emigration, I found that the singers who have the largest repertoires of the songs and sing them most often usually feel a personal connection with the genre, whether from having experienced emigration first-hand in their own family, or having been to Gaelic emigrant communities in Cape Breton and elsewhere in the

world (McPhee 2004:46). The way the singers feel about emigration songs, and consequently whether or not they choose to make them a part of their repertoire, is directly related to their personalities and personal experiences. Singers' life experiences will also affect their repertoire by determining the kinds of songs to which they are exposed, such as singers who have worked as fishermen whose repertoire then includes many maritime songs (Heppa 2005:574). Songs that singers strongly associate with particular people, such as close family members or friends, can be quite significant to them and hold a special place in their repertoires. The repertoire of the Gaelic singer Rona Lightfoot contains many songs that were sung by the women in her family, songs that she has actively learned from field recordings of her mother, while Mary Smith purposely set out to learn the Gaelic song of emigration composed by her own great-great-grandfather for his brother who emigrated to Canada (McPhee 2004:29, 27) . Songs from the family repertoire, or composed by a family member, are often very important to singers, and show how kinship connections can affect repertoire selection.

But it is also the case that if a song has a particularly strong personal connection, a singer may feel too close to it and consciously avoid singing it. One singer from Lewis said that she associates most of the songs from her native island with her family and childhood, but now that her parents have both died these songs make her so emotional that she finds many of them too difficult to sing (SA2005.073). Another singer emphasised the difference between public and private singing, and said that songs she feels very strongly about she would not perform in public:

... Well, there are certain songs I wouldn't sing, there's a song that my uncle sang for his wife who died who's my

auntie. She died young, and he wrote a beautiful song, and I couldn't sing that song; there are certain songs that I just wouldn't touch, I wouldn't sing them in public, because I'm too attached to them ... so it's probably better to have some kind of distance between me and the song (SA2005.077).

Her mention of public and private repertoires is a very intriguing point, and is something that has been noted for other singers. Ian Russell describes how the singer Arthur Howard had several different repertoires, depending on the context and composition of the audience, including about fifty songs that he only performed at home. This was not because these songs were not meaningful to him, 'but rather that their context was that of the hearthside, and their only audience was that of Arthur himself or, perhaps, a close friend' (Russell 1986:46). These examples help illustrate just how personal and emotional singing can be. Although these two Gaelic singers sing regularly in public, there are some songs that they reserve to sing only on their own, in private, without any audience. Singing songs in public that one feels particularly close to can be like baring one's soul, leaving one feeling very vulnerable and exposed. Clearly the presence of an audience has an influence on a singer's repertoire choices, and this will be discussed further below.

Connection to one's own local area is another expression of how a singer's personality and life history affect their repertoire. Some singers find that songs relevant to their home are very important to them, and actively seek out songs traditionally sung there or composed by a local bard, such as a singer from South Uist who seeks out songs by Uist bards (SA2005.076). Another singer, also from South Uist, describes her repertoire as composed of 'songs that are related to my home' (SA 2004.041).

But while songs with a clear personal connection may be more important to singers than other songs in their repertoires, it is certainly not correct to say that they need to have such a connection with all of the songs that they sing. The sentiments articulated by one singer were echoed by several others as well: ‘Often [a song] moves me personally for some reason. I don’t have to sing songs from Uist because that’s where my father’s from, or I don’t have to sing songs that describe situations that I can relate to ... no’ (SA2006.009). There are certainly varying degrees of personal relevance when it comes to songs, and in fact, some singers believe that a personal connection with a song does not have to pre-exist, but can instead be created. One singer who leads workshops with children tries to get them to empathise with the emotions in the songs:

...that’s how I try to involve kids in song, is by telling them that even though a song’s 600, 700 years old ... the person who wrote it had the same emotions that we’ve got now. You know, emotions haven’t changed, they’re exactly the same. And it’s these emotions that have driven that song through all these generations. So there’s bound to be something that you can connect with, in a song (SA2005.035).

Finding elements from her own life to personalise a song she likes is also a method employed by a singer from South Uist:

...well, today the song I sang ... was ‘In Praise of Mull’, and I’ve only been to Mull once this year ... but then I could say that I was singing that about Uist. ... I don’t think you need to have a personal connection, I think you can get, as my mum was saying to me when I was saying, ‘well, I have to put some expression in this song’, and she said to me, ‘well, when it’s saying here, it’s talking about the flowers on the hills, and why don’t you just think of Uist?’ And then you can get that into your head, and then that goes into your singing. So you can get your own personal connection with a song (SA2005.075).

And, of course, a singer's own motivations for singing in the first place will strongly affect how he or she selects repertoire. Professional singers who make their living giving concerts and selling CDs will certainly choose their songs differently from someone who sings primarily for fun, or as a means of relaxation. One professional singer interviewed tries to maintain a balanced repertoire to present to her audience, so will select songs by their type, based on what she thinks she may need more of:

So when I'm looking – what I would tend to do is thinking that I need to have maybe more of a certain style of song in my repertoire, so I'll be thinking, right, OK, ... maybe I need to look at some heavier songs, or maybe I need to look at some *òran luaidh*, or some more *puirt*, you know. ... and I suppose that's now because I've moved into that field of singing to an audience ... it's very different from standing up at a *cèilidh*, and singing a song in a village hall, where you would be expected to do two or three songs. There's a big leap from that to suddenly having to do your two 45 [minute] sets, which of course is what I do a lot of now. So it's always, it's keeping a good variety of style, fresh (SA2005.034).

Another singer, who has released a CD of Gaelic song but does not consider herself to be a professional singer, chooses her songs strictly because she likes them, and does not feel any obligation to cater to an audience: 'No, I just sing what I feel like singing, because I'm not really a professional singer, so I just pick one that I would like to sing, or if I'm asked. I like singing to myself, I'm not so keen on singing at concerts' (SA 2004.040).

Thus, singers have many different internal influences that affect the songs they choose to sing, from aesthetic appeal to the reasons behind why they sing. But they must then weigh them against the external factors, which are also extremely important in the decision-making process.

External factors

Singing is a relationship between singer and audience, where both parties contribute to the performance, and the result is a shared experience between the two. Thus, the audience plays a crucial role in a singer's selection of repertoire, and this has been explored often in the literature. Casey et al. (1972:397) say that

A singer interacts with his audiences in the way that a politician interacts with parts or all of his constituency. The 'good' singer is aware of the likes and dislikes of the groups and individuals for whom he performs. He manipulates his repertoire in response to perceived or anticipated performances, giving his constituents what he thinks they would like to hear. He is more or less sensitive to their feedback and thus quick to react in situations in which either his or their expectations are not fulfilled.

This is precisely what is done by Mary Jane Lamond, a professional Gaelic singer and recording artist from Cape Breton, who recognises that her repertoire is strongly influenced by the tastes of her audience. While her own personal preference is for sad songs, which she would sing exclusively if she could, she is conscious that she is in the 'entertainment industry' and that audiences want to hear energetic, humorous songs. Because of this she does sing livelier songs like *puirt-a-beul*, although she dislikes them, as to her they have no substance and are just about 'showing off' (McPhee 2004:39).

Singers themselves also show awareness that different types of audiences will have different preferences in repertoire. For the traditional singer Almeda Riddle, for instance, the composition of the audience is the main determiner of what she will perform for them; songs that she would sing for children she finds inappropriate for adults (Abrahams 1970:153-54). Similarly the Finnish singer Oksenja Mäkiselkä would select different repertoire for different kinds of audiences, attempting to 'suit

the situation and the audience in question and thus [trying to] control the mood of the event' (Asplund 1994:349).

For Gaelic singers, the question of whether or not the audience speaks the language is probably the single most important factor, and was mentioned by nearly every singer I interviewed. When singing for a non-Gaelic-speaking audience who may have very little experience with unaccompanied traditional singing, several singers described it as giving the audience a 'taste' of Gaelic singing, choosing songs by their melody rather than the poetry, and usually selecting lighter repertoire with quick tempos. One singer who was asked to sing for a non-Gaelic-speaking audience with only a few minutes' notice described her thought process of deciding what to sing for them:

So I had to sing something, so I thought well, I can't sing something that's too long, because there's nobody going to understand me, I think I need to sing something that's light, that's kind of colourful, that has a nice melody, so that ... if they can't understand they can at least enjoy the music. ... So I chose something that would be light, and not too heavy (SA2005.075).

As she demonstrates, singers think about many different elements when it comes to choosing repertoire for their audience. Of particular concern is the length of the song, since the audience will not be accustomed to listening to long songs they do not understand:

Nowadays ... you're largely singing to people who don't understand what you're singing about anyway, so you always have to think about the length ... I'm not like a well-known Gaelic singer so I don't expect everybody to be reverential when I'm places, I have to use my voice to carry a song, so I sometimes think, well, maybe a couple of verses is all you're going to actually manage to put across, 'cause they're not going to actually listen for too much longer, 'cause people aren't very used to listening. Especially if they don't

understand what it's about. So you have to think about that to some extent. But otherwise, if they were all Gaelic speakers I would give them the 14 verse, heart-rendering [sic] version if you could get away with it (SA2006.022).

Based on the responses of the singers interviewed, many Gaelic singers seem to be very sensitive to the needs of their audiences, and strive to entertain them without alienating them or making them feel excluded from the culture. One singer explained that although he ultimately would like the audience to learn the Gaelic language, he does not want to overwhelm them:

I think you always have to be conscious of where you're singing and who you're singing for, 'cause ... I don't think people would enjoy it if it's not in the right context. Although you always want people to learn Gaelic, and fall in love with Gaelic song to make them learn the language, I suppose, you can't do that by just going in at the deep end I think, you have to go in gently (SA2005.076).

But it is not only non-Gaelic-speaking audiences that affect repertoire selection; audiences that are composed of native Gaels have just as much influence on a singer's choice of songs. Wanting to cater to local tastes is a key objective, so many singers will learn songs from the area where they are singing:

...if I was singing in say, when we're singing in Lismore and Mull, I did learn some Mull songs. In fact, this one that I sang today, I learnt for that, and I learnt some Lismore songs so that the people, although I wasn't from there, the people that were in the audience would know these songs, and they would want – well we want to have something for them as well. So it does affect what you sing, definitely (SA2005.075).

Singing something relevant to the audience is not always as easy as simply singing local songs, however, according to another singer:

Well, now, if I'm singing in Barra, I'm not going to sing Barra songs 'cause they're fed up with them, they've heard

them so often. I'm not going to sing Lewis songs 'cause they don't want those. I could sing some Uist songs, so you have to be kind of multicultural in yourself, you have to keep everybody happy wherever you are, you have to give them a taste of something they would want (SA2005.081).

A further requirement for many singers is to actively involve their audience in the performance and get them to sing along, so they look for repertoire that is conducive to chorus singing:

...if you're singing in a very traditional *céilidh*, and most of the people or everybody has Gaelic, I try and give them something that they know, you don't want to make them too heavy so that they're bored or whatever, you also want them to join in, so it's often a mixture of song where they can listen, and also choose another song where they can join in of course, 'cause they love joining in (SA2005.076).

The obvious advantage of singing for an audience of Gaels is that singers are communicating to people from within the tradition, who will understand the poetry of the songs and appreciate the history and stories behind them. But according to at least one singer, unspoken rules of performance etiquette dictate that not every Gael can sing every song in every context. A native of Glasgow with a father from Uist said he would feel uncomfortable singing a particular song in public that is strongly associated with the Lewis tradition:

... there are some songs that I would hear that are so strongly from a particular tradition. ... like I love the song '*Tri fichead bliadhna 's a tri*', which is from Ness in Lewis, I love it... and it's sung by Mary Smith, and from – William Matheson. People with a strong connection to Ness, and it's sung in a kind of a – quite a decorated plainsong kind of way, with lots of Lewis-style grace-notes, and I will sing it at home, washing the dishes and stuff ... publicly I wouldn't sing it in every setting. I certainly wouldn't sing it in Ness. You know, I wouldn't feel totally comfortable that I would do it justice, that it would be appropriate for me to sing it (SA2006.009).

Singers may also be strongly influenced by other singers in their community when selecting repertoire. This can work in two ways: by singers being exposed to new songs sung by others and learning from them, or by consciously avoiding songs that are associated with another singer. Song ownership pertaining to particular performance contexts was discussed in Chapter Four, but it is necessary to mention it here as well, as it also affects repertoire selection. Singers interviewed for this study confirmed that certain songs may be strongly associated with particular singers, causing other singers to entirely avoid including them in their repertoires. If they do not avoid them completely, they have to be aware of the fact that listeners will associate the song with a specific voice and a specific singing style. One singer described how songs can become linked with a particular singer, and how this affects her own singing:

...Gaelic radio will have a favourite of an album, so that'll be the one that'll get played. And then the person will get associated with that song. And there are definitely songs, I mean I'm thinking of examples where somebody has sung a song and you think, 'Wow, that is *the* version.' And then if you wanted to perform that song, I think if I was to do it, I would just shy away from doing that kind of arrangement, I would – do it with different instrumentation (SA2005.035).

Another singer agreed, speaking of a particular singer she admires: '...and she's a lovely singer, has got beautiful songs, got a very distinct style, which is something you have to be very careful about if you want to sing any of her things, the ones that she's known for singing' (SA2006.022).

Several singers I interviewed specifically endeavour to find songs that are not performed all the time, and make this the focus of how they choose new repertoire: '... as much as possible I try to sing songs that most people don't know, 'cause quite

often you hear songs done to death, over and over and over again, so I like to choose songs that I haven't heard before' (SA2005.076). Another singer felt the same way, saying that she will often choose songs that were sung all the time when she was a child, but are now associated more with the older generation and are much less common (SA 2004.039).

Whether or not singers are protective about their repertoire, they will influence other singers. In an oral tradition, the repertoires of current singers directly affect those of the future, since what is sung today will be what the future singers perform and transmit tomorrow (Kumer 1981:49). With the present technology of sound archives and recordings, modern Gaelic singers do have different tools available to them for learning new songs, but there is no doubt that existing repertoires still strongly affect what singers hear and learn.

It is clear that repertoire selection in Gaelic song is a complex process, with many factors affecting how singers select the songs they sing. These factors are certainly not all weighted equally, however, and what is less obvious is how singers decide which factor is ultimately most important to them, to override the others and determine which course their repertoire will take; whether they are more strongly influenced by the internal or external factors, and to what extent. This is something that is most certainly different for every individual singer, and whilst it is possible for others to learn about the reasons behind singers' repertoire selection, it is only the singers themselves that can really know for sure how and why they choose a song.

Transmission

In the context of the present study, the concern is not just with the transmission of repertoire, but also how singing styles and techniques are transmitted

from generation to generation and singer to singer. As Alan Lomax says, 'Folk singers do not sing naturally, like birds. All singing is learned behaviour' (Lomax 1978:70).

However, the first thing that is immediately apparent when surveying the literature on song transmission in the Scottish Gaelic tradition, is that most researchers have been principally concerned with the transmission of the songs themselves (usually just the texts), and not with the transmission of singing style. Traditionally, Gaelic songs were transmitted orally, with songs passed down through the community to family members or friends. Frances Tolmie (1911:147-48) describes how Mary Ross, a singer from Skye born in 1848, acquired songs from her visits with the neighbours, from her grandfather and his gatherings with friends at the local inn, from her father, and from her step-mother, a weaver. Numerous other sources on singers and tradition bearers also discuss the oral transmission of songs through families (see Ross 1961; Paterson 1975; *Tocher* 1975:42; MacDonald 1977-78), but these studies usually focus on the repertoire and do not discuss any learning or teaching of singing style.

This absence of the subject in most of the literature may be due to the informal nature of style transmission in the Gaelic tradition. John Shaw found that singers in Cape Breton acquired singing style and technique by observation, imitation, and developing on their own, not through any kind of deliberate transmission (MacLellan 2000:37). The teaching of Gaelic songs focused solely on the texts, and the most important thing for a young singer was to learn the words exactly as they were sung to him (MacLellan 2000:37). Such indirect learning of singing style was also described by Amy Murray, who observed the tradition in

Eriskay: ‘Yet how [a typical Gaelic singer] came by any way [of singing] at all would puzzle him to tell you. “I’m sure I never wasted any time learning [songs],” he’ll say’ (Murray 1936:87). The implication here is that that their learning process was incidental, or even accidental, rather than a dedicated activity on the part of themselves or a teacher.

But, whether verbalised or not, singing style was definitely transmitted from singer to singer. Transmission of singing style and technique was informal but certainly occurred, as singers learned how to sing from those around them, and were learning the texts and assimilating singing style at the same time. They would have had to sing within the cultural aesthetic boundaries in order for their performances to be accepted by the community (Merriam 1964:158). Linda Williamson makes a similar observation for the Scots traveller community, when discussing their tradition of narrative song performance. The exact transmission of the words was a requirement of the traveller culture, but the ‘characteristic sound’ of traveller singing would be maintained when a song was passed on (Williamson 1985:44-45).

Informal attitudes towards the transmission of singing style can likewise be seen in other traditional cultures. Julie Henigan found that in Donegal, the focus of transmission was repertoire, rather than singing style; when singers spoke about their influences, they were referring to the songs, not techniques, they had learned from them (Henigan 1991:98). Development of singing styles was much more intuitive than self-conscious, as demonstrated by two singers who answered the question of what style they sang in with the reply, ‘Whatever way it comes out’ (Henigan 1991:98). Among the caste of professional musicians in the Manding people of West Africa, boys studying an instrument were apprenticed with a master for seven to ten

years, but girls were taught singing not as a special discipline, but as part of their general training in womanhood. Singing was thought to come naturally, and one singer said, ‘You can learn singing by sitting near a singer. The voice is not controlled by any teacher. It is natural. Some voices are good, others are not’ (Knight 1984: 75).

One of the major ways that Gaelic singers learned songs traditionally was through repeated exposure at *céilidhs* and other gatherings throughout their lives, and by imitating what they heard around them. Imitation as a learning device is used in traditional cultures around the world, such as in Native American singing (Lavonis 2004:344), and is described by Merriam as a way for children to begin their musical training, and also at times a way for adults to continue their musical learning (Merriam 1964:150). McKean describes the informal learning that occurred through the *céilidh* house as a process of osmosis (McKean 1997:113), and indeed, in Quebec, Margaret Bennett interviewed a singer who stressed that he did not systematically learn a particular song that he sang (he could sing 116 lines and used to know all 259 verses), but simply used to hear it sung by different singers at gatherings when he was young (Bennett 1998:152). Poets in the former Yugoslavia would learn their art in much the same way, by unconsciously absorbing the themes and stylistic conventions of the epic poems by listening to other poets, and later singing them for themselves (Finnegan 1977:193).

Informal group singing such as that found in *céilidhs* is identified by Shaw as the first stage in the learning process for Gaels, which may then be followed by the appearance of mentors who encourage the growth of a young singer (for example, the Cape Breton singer Lauchie MacLellan, who spent a great deal of time with his

blind uncle) to learn songs (MacLellan 2000:37). Lauchie was not specifically taught vocal technique, but his uncle stressed the importance of communicating the ‘essence’ and emotion of a song, as well as the correct words (MacLellan 2000:38). In this way, he transmitted the musical aesthetic values of the culture, with its emphasis on emotion and song texts over the music.

The type of mentor-student relationship that Lauchie experienced with his uncle, nearly that of apprentice and master, has parallels in other cultures. Lord saw that young singers in the former Yugoslavia would select another singer with whom they would work closely, often their father, uncle, or a well-known local singer (Finnegan 1977:194). Martti Stuur, a Lapp singer from Finland, learned the art of *yoik*, traditional Lapp singing, at the age of sixteen from an excellent local singer and farmer (Szomjas-Schiffert 1973:55). Not all Gaelic singers would have had such special directed learning when it came to singing (MacLellan 2000:37), but eager young singers would actively seek to learn new songs. Iain MacNeacail of Skye said that if he heard a song he liked he would decide to learn it, telling himself, ‘I’m going out to get that song off him’ (McKean 1997:111).

So learning of repertoire in the Gaelic tradition was not exclusively an incidental process, and singers would specifically aim to acquire new songs, just as singers did in other cultures. The Norfolk singer Harry Cox once said, ‘I’ve walked as far as fifteen miles for a song’ (Heppa 2005:576), just as Lauchie MacLellan used to also walk miles to learn a new song when he was young (MacLellan 2000:8).

Modern Gaelic singers: The learning of repertoire

In my interviews, I realised that, just as no two singers are exactly alike, so their learning processes vary as well, with each singer approaching the learning of

songs in a slightly different way. Their methods range from very casual, indirect learning to active, focused learning, and all make use of different resources for finding songs they want to learn.

The traditional, informal way of learning was still preferred by at least one singer, who says that for her, singing is not about sitting down and trying to force herself to learn a song. She feels very strongly that singing is an organic, natural process, and that songs she wants to learn will eventually come to her in time:

I feel sometimes that if something becomes a real task, like mastering a song or something, that's not what song's about to me. It's not. It's either part of you or it's not there ... there's a lot of songs that I want to sing in my repertoire and they'll come to me at some point. But I don't give myself any grief by sitting down and making myself master a song. I've done it in the past with things like maybe a radio programme that wants a specific song or a television programme that wants a specific song, but in order ... for me to feel completely comfortable with a song, that's not the way I approach it, I don't sit down and study it. It'll come, in time it'll just sort of seep in (SA2005.034).

Despite being a professional singer and sometimes having to learn songs for particular occasions, she still favours this traditional 'osmosis-style' process over specific, directed learning of songs, as they feel more a part of her than if she sets out to learn them on purpose. Very rarely will she start learning a song completely from scratch, preferring instead to revisit songs that have stayed with her throughout her life: 'supposing it was something that I maybe heard a line of, a line of it stayed with me since I was six or whatever, and I do feel like I'm re-exploring it, that ... part of it's already in there, whether it's just the tune, or whether it's some of the words, or something' (SA2005.034). Her primary source for songs has always been the tradition bearers of her community, as opposed to books or recordings, and she

recognises that she was very fortunate to grow up in a time when singing was still a part of daily life.

The incidental approach to learning is also preferred by another singer, who regularly competes at the Mod and therefore has specific deadlines. But even with the pressure of a time limit and a competition, she does not set out to deliberately learn her songs, and she makes a clear distinction between ‘learning’ songs and ‘picking them up’:

I don't seem to remember ever learning things. I seem to pick things up rather than learn things, I don't make a conscientious effort to learn things. ... It just happens, I don't like, sit down for half an hour every night for six months and try and learn it (SA2005.078).

Other singers make more of a concerted effort to acquire and learn new repertoire. Even without having any particular deadlines or public performances as a motivator, one singer who sings mainly for her own enjoyment regularly tries to learn new songs: ‘I enjoy just singing, with no agenda, and so I will make an attempt to learn songs that I particularly like’ (SA2005.073). Another singer describes his learning process as a ‘hunt’, whereby he will hear a song that he likes and want to sing it himself. After first of all ‘sort of humming it, and singing the wrong words for a long time,’ he will decide that he wants ‘to learn to sing it properly’, and then try to track down a recording to help him learn the words (SA2006.009). He sings at the Mod on a regular basis, and for him the whole process of thinking about, working on, and learning the songs is ‘generally as enjoyable or more enjoyable than the actual getting to the Mod’. His own learning process involves going to a music teacher, a Gaelic speaker from a family of traditional singers who has a great deal of experience with song, and together they work on improving his singing. He very

much enjoys this time where the sole purpose is to think about singing, without anything else intruding or getting in the way.

Several other singers I spoke with also had someone they would see regularly to help them learn songs, whether by assisting them with repertoire selection or giving advice on how to improve their singing. But these meetings, even if they were with a music teacher, were not the same as formal singing lessons, where the long-term objective is to improve vocal technique through learning repertoire. However, there were singers I interviewed who had taken formal voice lessons, and they all thought that the experience had greatly improved their singing. One singer felt that strengthening her voice had improved her confidence, as previously she had been very aware of people's criticisms of her vocal quality, and she now felt more comfortable to just sing what she wanted (SA2006.022). Another thought that lessons had improved his singing 'in that it taught me all about breath control, and really strengthened my voice' (SA2005.076). But the majority of the singers I interviewed had had no formal training and did not read music. Discussing the fact that she learned songs solely by ear, one singer said that for her not being able to read music was a positive thing, because 'when I hear it from the original source, I *hear* it, and it's very, very easy for me to pick up a melody' (SA2005.081). She saw it as ensuring that she would continue to learn songs from people, rather than from books.

Not all singers have the luxury of learning songs exclusively from other singers, however, and amongst the singers I interviewed, recordings played an important part in the transmission process. This use of recordings (both commercial and archive field recordings) in transmission is certainly a reflection of how much

the modern context of Gaelic singing has changed, and how much less immediate it is. Most Gaels are not surrounded by song in their day-to-day lives as they would once have been, and so to learn songs singers must cast a wider net and make use of all the resources available to them.

But that is certainly not to say that all singers are learning songs from recordings alone. Some singers I spoke with would use them in conjunction with learning from people, such as one who said

...if I know somebody has recorded a song, like Flora MacNeil has recorded a song, then I'll go to her, and I'll say, 'Will you teach me?' ... once I started singing, [my mum] started taping things off the radio, from Gaelic programmes. You know, old recordings ... so she always had a tape ready in the machine, so she gave me loads of tapes, and that I waded through now and again, if I'm looking for something new, or something that I haven't heard for a while (SA 2004.039).

As this singer points out, recordings can provide access to a great variety of repertoire that might otherwise not be so easily accessible.

Printed sheet music is another available resource for new songs. It can be a problematic one, however, since many traditional Gaelic singers do not read music, as was the case with most of the singers I interviewed. Collections of Gaelic song printed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not actually intended for Gaels, but for Lowlanders enraptured with the Victorian 'Celtic' ideal (MacLeod 1996:128), and this can be observed in the large number of collections from this time period with poetic English or Scots translations made for singing (see Campbell 1816; MacBean 1890; MacBean 1900; Kennedy-Fraser and MacLeod 1909-1921; Whyte 1946; Dun [1848]; Moffat [1907]). Many later publications, more directly aimed at Gaelic audiences, used sol-fa instead of staff notation (or a combination of

both) and had either literal English translations or no English at all (see *Coisir a'Mhòid: The Mòd Collection of Gaelic Part Songs 1896-1947*; *Eilean Fraoich: Lewis Gaelic Songs and Melodies* 1982; Campbell 1987-93). The real difficulty with printed Gaelic songs is that on their own they cannot adequately convey how the songs are meant to sound, and so singers who make use of books will usually use them in conjunction with learning from other singers or recordings; no one I spoke with used printed music alone.

Motivation is an extremely important aspect in learning a song, and therefore the learning process can be much more difficult when the song is one that the singer may not particularly like. Whether it be a prescribed piece for the Mod, or for professional obligations such as a particular performance or recording, singers do not always have a choice about the song they learn. One singer said, 'If I like the song I just go at it and I learn it. And if I don't, it could take years, or maybe I ... just keep it in some kind of box in my head, to refer to later on' (SA2005.074). Other singers agreed that it is much more difficult to learn songs if one dislikes them: 'you don't get a handle on them' (SA2005.034). And some singers simply try to avoid learning songs that they do not like. Said one: 'I don't think there would be much point' (SA2005.077). And another said very succinctly: 'If I don't like them, I won't sing them, I won't learn them' (SA2005.075).

In addition to the poetry and music of the songs, for many singers the learning process also extends to researching the backgrounds and stories behind the songs, for reasons that vary with every singer. 'What's the point of singing it if you don't?' was one singer's opinion. 'I think without the story, a song isn't a song. Or, why it was created, what gave rise to the song, I think you have to find out, for most

songs' (SA2005.074). Clearly, in this singer's mind, the story behind the song is as important as the song itself. Another singer feels that understanding the background of songs is a necessary part of giving the tradition the respect it deserves: 'When I start to learn them I find out what I am singing about, and who wrote the songs, ... who it was composed by, who I heard singing it, where I collected it from. I think it's just, it's respect for the people who have left this for us to sing, that's just what it is' (SA2005.075). And a third singer feels that making a song her own and interpreting it in her own way is very important, but could only really be done by first appreciating the background of a song and where it had come from:

Because the more you actually go into it, the more you discover, and the more you want to get to know about your songs, and the background, the history behind them, the stories, because they are so relevant to identify where the songs come from, and that you're able to then interpret that song as your own, because that's what I believe traditional music is, you've not to forget where the songs did come from, but for you to move on, you have to make it your own (SA 2004.041).

As discussed in Chapter Two, Gaelic singers traditionally would have known a great deal about the bards of the songs they sang (Tolmie 1911:ix), and it seems that for some singers this tradition still continues today. However, as for repertoire selection, whether or not a particular singer does such research into songs can also depend very much on their motivations for singing in the first place. One singer sings mainly as a hobby, for her own pleasure, and so does not want to be spending time doing research:

No I don't, I don't know about ... the backgrounds. I don't tend to, it's too much of hard work that, it's very much a pastime, it's something I do to relax, so, no. ... if I were to speak to somebody who I thought might know, I would ask

them do they know anything about the song, but apart from that, no (SA2005.073).

However, as a teacher of Gaelic, she will often teach songs to her classes, and on those occasions she usually will introduce the song by talking a little bit about where it came from and what its story is. She acknowledges this by saying that ‘when I’m doing things in class it’s work. I enjoy doing the song, I enjoy doing the classes, but that’s work, that’s different. I have to take a different attitude to that to something I just pick up and sing at home’.

Modern Gaelic singers: The learning of singing style and technique

For most singers, how they undertake the learning of repertoire is much easier to articulate than how they learn their singing style. Most of the singers I interviewed found it quite a difficult topic to discuss, and it was not something that they had previously considered. They were able to comment on it in a general way, but not with any real specificity, which is very interesting in itself as it suggests that the traditional indirect method of style transmission is still a part of modern day Gaelic singing.

One singer, who has learned many songs that were passed down by her mother and grandmother, thought that transmission of singing style was about imitation: ‘Most singers I think, they pick somebody that they like very much and they try to imitate that person. I’m sure I’m trying to imitate my mother. And she probably tried to imitate her mother before that, and before that, and you know, it just came down the generations’ (SA2005.080). Comparing the singing of different family members (such as singing style and technique, timbre, and different versions of the same songs) is outside the scope of this study, but would make for very

fascinating future research., especially in cases where archive recordings exist for several generations of the same family.

A number of other singers disagreed with the opinion that imitation plays a part in transmission, feeling that their singing style was their own, and they had not consciously tried to copy anyone:

I think I've just come up with that on my own really, 'cause I don't think I sing like my dad does, I probably absorbed it from just listening to a lot of hours of a lot of different types of singers, and sort of felt my way into it with regard to the type of voice that I have, the songs that suit my voice, songs that I like to sing. I haven't tried to ape anyone in particular. And tried to strike that balance which is really hard between sort of, a genuine traditional flavour to singing, but also one that's genuine as well, without it being – a parody or whatever (SA2006.009).

I don't know if I have a particular way I sing. I think I just sing it plain. ... if there is a Lewis style of Gaelic singing, I suppose I must be influenced to an extent by that. But I wouldn't say that there's any one singer ... who's influenced me, no. I just sing it the way I think I'm ... technically able to sing it, and the way I think it sounds best. ... I don't knowingly copy anyone (SA2005.073).

The mention by the singer above of her native island of Lewis as potentially having an influence on her singing style is something that several other singers also remarked upon with regard to their own home towns or regions. One singer said quite unequivocally that the strongest influence on her singing was 'The people round about me [in Skye]. Without any doubt' (SA2005.035). As a child, she would pop in and out of different homes in her town, speaking to different singers, old women in particular, and learning from them about songs and singing. She strongly feels that these people helped shape her into the singer that she is now. And another singer, whilst not having any individual singers in mind as influences, said of her

singing style that ‘I think maybe part of that just comes from the part of Lewis I’m from, is just something that’s in the people’ (SA2005.077). So there undoubtedly seems to be some recognition among singers that, first of all, local singing styles were transmitted, however unconsciously and second, that different islands or areas have their own unique styles of singing, which are transmitted through the local singers to the next generations.

Thus, amongst the singers interviewed here, there appears to be varying degrees of consciousness of their own singing styles and how they were acquired, whether through imitation, indirect transmission, or their own intuition. With this in mind, an important topic to consider is how much stylistic freedom singers feel they have with the songs they learn; whether they pass them on exactly as they learned them, or whether they make the songs their own and express them in their own way.

Leonard B. Meyer writes that

...qualitatively the performer’s role is always the same; he is always an active creator, shaping and moulding the abstract scheme furnished him by the composer or by tradition. Quantitatively his role varies. At times his task is limited to communicating the meaning latent in a relatively fixed set of musical relationships; at other times, in other cultures, the performer adds to, alters, and makes major modifications in the materials which serve him as a point of departure (Meyer 1956:200).

With regard to how much freedom singers in the Gaelic tradition have to change songs and sing them differently to how they learned them, there appeared to be differences of opinion among the singers interviewed for this study. One singer said:

Of course I do [change songs]. Because that’s just ... the inroad. And I would also check up other sources. I’ve got classic examples of looking at songs and finding six or seven

recordings, from the same singer. And they're all different. ... There's no such thing [as a correct version], I don't think (SA2005.034).

However, another singer was adamant that one should not make any changes, but preserve songs as they were learned: 'No, no. Some people say that you can, that you can put your own style on it, but I quite like singing it the way – if it's supposed to be sung like that, or if that's the way it was collected, then I quite like singing it that way' (SA2005.075). Bringing his own style to a song and singing it with his own voice, not imitating any earlier singers, is very important to another singer:

I suppose... once I've kind of... heard it sung by whoever the tradition bearer was, and then got comfortable with my own accommodation of how I've heard it you know, although you could hear in my style sort of hints of other singers, I would hope that I would sing it with my own style, in keeping with a 41 year-old person living in the 21st century, not an 80 year-old person living in 1970, and I try not to parody or be anachronistic (SA2006.009).

And a fourth singer felt that she would not change a song on purpose, but she has her own individual voice and so subconscious alterations will inevitably happen:

You try not to change it. ... well, you change it anyway because you're singing, your voice is different, your whole thought process is different so you're going to change it, but you try and remember the words you heard, and work from there. ... But consciously, no (SA2005.074).

These two extremes of song preservation versus interpretation, and everything in between, have emerged as a prominent theme in the fieldwork for this study, with several singers holding beliefs that conflict strongly with the beliefs of other singers. Akiko Takamatsu found something similar when looking at singing styles of Scottish travellers; one singer said that he learned all his songs by imitation, not making any changes or adding his own style, while another said that he would

never imitate anyone else (Takamatsu 1987:2, 3). Such diversity of opinions on the subject of modifying songs is intriguing because it seems a very difficult thing to predict, with no evident patterns. It is certainly not based on a singer's position as amateur or professional, since there were both amateurs and professionals who inclined towards the preservation end of the spectrum, and also those who were more in favour of interpreting a song in their own way. It could potentially be related to singers' own views of themselves, and whether or not they see themselves as a 'singer' or as a 'transmitter'; one singer I interviewed clearly differentiated between the two in his own mind, saying 'I'm not a hundred percent comfortable as myself as a "singer", in inverted commas, I'm more a – hopefully a transmitter of songs, if you see the distinction' (SA2006.009). Perhaps a 'singer' is more likely to make changes to a song than a 'transmitter'; Meyer argues that 'the composer and performer, by their very nature as creators and makers, regard the traditions and styles which they inherit from their predecessors as a challenge – as a more or less fixed, recalcitrant material, whose resistance to change and modification the true artist delights in overcoming and conquering' (Meyer 1956:69). In any case, how a singer treats a song is something that is deeply personal and unique to every singer, rooted in how they see the tradition and their place within it.

Chapter summary

Repertoire selection is affected by both internal and external factors. For the Gaelic singers interviewed, the internal factors consisted of aesthetic appeal; recognition of the suitability of a particular song to a singer's voice; a singer's individual personality and life history; and their own motivations for singing and learning repertoire. Singing is an extremely personal and emotional experience, and

consequently some singers had songs in their repertoires that they would not perform in public, as they considered the songs too personal to share.

External factors affecting repertoire selection are the audience (particularly whether or not they speak the Gaelic language) and other singers' repertoires (by singers being exposed to new songs sung by others, or by consciously avoiding songs that are associated with another singer). These factors were very influential for most of the singers in the fieldwork, demonstrating that, for singers who regularly perform in public, they are most certainly not choosing their songs in isolation; they are sensitive to the needs of their audience and are aware of what other singers in the Gaelic community are singing.

Repertoire transmission in Gaelic singing was traditionally oral, with songs passed down through the community to friends or family members. The transmission of style was informal, and singers acquired singing styles and technique through observation and imitation, rather than through deliberate transmission. For modern singers, there is a much wider range of methods used in repertoire transmission, from the traditional casual and indirect to active, deliberate learning, and different singers make use of different resources for finding songs they want to learn. Recordings now play a greater role in transmission than they previously did, with most singers using them in combination with learning from other singers. For many singers, learning about the backgrounds and stories behind the songs they sang was very important, but it depended greatly on a singer's motivation for learning songs; those who sang purely for themselves, as a hobby, were less likely to spend time doing research than those who sang professionally.

The transmission of singing styles and technique was something that most of the singers interviewed found a difficult topic to discuss, as they had not previously considered it or given it much thought. Imitation of other singers, the influence of local singers and singing styles, and a singer's own intuition were all mentioned as having an effect on singing style, but there were definitely varying degrees of awareness of their own singing styles and how they were acquired. Singers' opinions were very strongly divided on the issue of whether or not they would change songs from how they learned them, varying between the two extremes of song preservation versus interpretation, and this has become a prominent theme in the fieldwork for this study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to present an overview of modern performance practice and aesthetics in traditional Scottish Gaelic singing, based principally on what the singers themselves believe to be important. Focusing on the specific topics of aesthetics, singing styles and vocal techniques, performance contexts, and transmission and repertoire selection, the research was conducted through participant-observation and interviews with singers. Among the fifteen singers who were interviewed, there was a wide range of age and experience in Gaelic song, singers of different generations and backgrounds, and both professional and community singers.

Reflections on fieldwork

The fieldwork was a very rewarding experience, and I enjoyed the dialogues I had with each and every singer, amazed at how each interview began with the same questionnaire, but resulted in vastly different discussions. I learned a great deal about Gaelic singing, of course, but also about interviewing in general. For instance, I very quickly learned to adjust my vocabulary (which has been ingrained from years of classical singing) after one of the first singers I spoke with was confused by my use of the term '*a cappella*', being completely unfamiliar with it. In subsequent interviews I rephrased my question to ask about 'unaccompanied singing' instead, which solved the problem. Some singers also seemed to be slightly intimidated by what they considered to be technical questions; I found that an enquiry such as 'How

do you think singing styles have changed through time?’ would get a better reaction and promote more discussion if reworded as ‘How do you think singers sound different now than they used to?’ While certainly not wanting to condescend to singers, I did find it important to phrase my questions clearly and keep any technical terms to a minimum. At no time in any of the interviews did I use the words ‘performance practice’ or ‘aesthetics’, asking instead about their opinions on things like good songs and singing, learning repertoire, performance contexts, and any influences on their singing.

An interesting question with regard to the fieldwork is whether or not singers have perhaps said things they thought I wanted to hear, things that they think would put themselves or their tradition in a better light. One prominent Gaelic piper and singer said in an informal conversation that he thought singers might provide the ‘right answer’ when asked, for example, why they sing a particular song; they may say it is for the quality of the poetry but only because they think it is the correct thing to say, not because they actually feel that way (personal communication). This is, of course, a possibility with this type of fieldwork, but I would hope that singers would answer truthfully and not because of any perceived expectation on my part or that of their peers. Frankly, the opinion that singers might exaggerate their interest in the words over the melody is interesting in itself, as it indicates how fundamental the poetry was to the traditional aesthetics. In any case, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that singers may give answers that they think will reflect positively on themselves.

Emergent themes

Among the singers interviewed, there was no universal consensus on aesthetics. Although singers have very clear ideas about what is important to them in their singing, there was no unanimous set of criteria with which everyone agreed. However, there were some important themes that emerged from the fieldwork that appear to pervade modern Gaelic singing, the most prominent of which is the juxtaposition of preservation versus innovation. Affecting both aesthetics and performance practice, it manifests itself in many different ways, such as the contrasting contexts of *céilidh* and concert hall; the contradictory opinions of whether or not singers should sing a song differently to how they learned it and how much interpretation is acceptable; whether or not singers choose songs based on the traditional criterion of the poetry, or for the melody; whether or not accompaniment or harmony has a place in traditional Gaelic song; whether singers learn songs from other singers or from recordings; and whether or not their repertoire selection is affected by the taste of modern, often non-Gaelic-speaking, audiences. All of this certainly reflects the state of change in which the world of Gaelic singing finds itself, with more external influences than ever before, and facing the question of whether or not it can survive if it is not relevant for modern singers and audiences. As one singer said to me, ‘...you’ve got to move with the times, you’ve got to make [Gaelic song] presentable to people. And if that’s what it’s going to take on a Gaelic-song front, then we have to be able to sit back and let it go slightly, let the songs, let the music, take baby steps, and then take maybe bigger steps, just to see where it will go. But don’t feel by holding onto it that you’re doing our culture and our history a favour, because we’re not, we’re going to kill it ourselves’ (SA2005.081).

Gaelic singing has undergone many changes, but it appears that the traditional aesthetics and performance practices are still continuing, albeit somewhat modified as the tradition continues to evolve. According to this study, one of the most important aspects to continue is the belief that Gaelic singing is still very much a relationship between performer and audience, where songs are shared, not just sung. Most singers try to encourage this by the use of oral narrative to communicate with their audience, and by selecting repertoire that involves the audience, and enables them to sing along with the choruses. Singers also work hard to sing songs that particular audiences will appreciate, and try to sing local songs, or songs that they know that an individual audience will like. The importance of this performer-audience relationship can also be seen in the persisting aesthetic of clear diction, enabling the audience to clearly hear the poetry of the song and allowing the story to be told.

Suggestions for further research

In gathering first-hand information from the singers themselves on aesthetics and performance practice, this study has addressed an area of neglect in previous research and has identified several areas of further study.

A closer examination of Gaelic singing styles would be extremely worthwhile. This includes physical singing styles, and how it affects the vocal sound produced. Comparing the singing styles between different regions of Scotland (or even more generally between Scotland and Canada) would certainly be useful, and would help to illustrate what are national versus local traits. The difference in *tessitura* between different regions also deserves further attention.

Another interesting project would be to compare the singing of different family members to see how their styles and vocal quality differ or resemble each other. There are several instances in the School of Scottish Studies Sound Archive where multiple generations of the same family have been recorded, and it would be fascinating to investigate these more closely. Using a spectrograph, it would also be possible to analyse their vocal timbres and learn more about such things as their ornamentation and phrasing.

The psalm singing of the Western Isles is an additional aspect of Gaelic singing that deserves more ethnomusicological attention. How do singers decide on their ornamentation in this situation? What does psalm singing mean to them? How much are they affected by the presence of the rest of the congregation? It would be quite interesting to find out the answers to these, and many more, questions about the tradition.

Regarding the transmission of Gaelic singing style, a very important study would be to analyse the institutions involved with teaching and assess how their methods correspond to the traditional context of transmission, where songs were passed down orally through the community, transmission was concerned solely with repertoire and the exact preservation of the text, and singing style was learned through observation and imitation. Are traditional singing styles being transmitted in these modern institutions, or is the emphasis instead on teaching repertoire? For example, in the Highlands and Hebrides a relatively recent initiative to promote Gaelic culture is the advent of Gaelic *féisean*, or festivals, summer schools dedicated to teaching Gaelic song (as well as instrumental music, art, drama, and dancing) mainly to children from age eight to eighteen, in a non-competitive atmosphere (MacLeod

1996:134; McKean 1998:251). Although most *féisean* are taught in English, students also have the opportunity to improve their proficiency in Gaelic through daily language lessons (McKean 1998:251). The actual teaching techniques of the *féisean* for Gaelic song have yet to be explored. Another, even more recent, development in Gaelic song transmission is the new degree programme in traditional music at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD) in Glasgow. Begun in 1996, the programme ‘centres on performance, with tuition by practicing traditional artists: some tradition bearers, some learner-professionals. The aim is to develop well-trained musicians at ease with both the authentic tradition *and* the ins and outs of the professional music business’ (McKean 1998:254). Again, the particular teaching techniques used have not been discussed in the literature, but as the aim of the course is to further the authentic tradition, tuition in singing styles would be expected. If this is the case, how does it take place?

These are just some of the areas that have been highlighted by this study as worthy of further research. Performance practice and aesthetics is a large topic, and as such it has not been possible to cover everything in comprehensive detail. By carrying out this project I have sought to provide a different angle to the existing material on Scottish Gaelic singing, which will hopefully encourage discussion within the field and lay the foundation for more research to follow on this unique tradition.

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Appendix 1

List of Recorded Interviews

SSS Archive No.	Date of Recording	Place
SA 2004.039	6 July 2004	South Uist
SA 2004.040	7 July 2004	South Uist
SA 2004.041	7 July 2004	South Uist
SA2005.033	6 April 2005	Skye
SA2005.034	9 April 2005	Skye
SA2005.035	9 April 2005	Skye
SA2005.073	11 October 2005	Lewis
SA2005.074	19 October 2005	Lewis
SA2005.075	20 October 2005	Lewis
SA2005.077	21 October 2005	Lewis
SA2005.076	20 October 2005	Lewis
SA2005.078	23 November 2005	Edinburgh
SA2005.079	19 November 2005	Inverness
SA2005.080	19 November 2005	Inverness
SA2005.081	11 November 2005	Edinburgh
SA2006.009	8 March 2006	Edinburgh
SA2006.022	31 March 2006	Edinburgh

Sample of Fieldwork Questionnaire

General Background

Name

Address

Place of birth

Previous dwelling places and travel

Approximate age

Occupation

Education

Musical Background

How long have you been singing?

Do you play any instruments?

Are other members of your family musical?

Aesthetics

What do you think songs do for you?

What does a song have to contain to be a 'good' song?

What do you consider to be 'good' singing? How would you describe
what this is?

Where do you think you have learned this?

Are there songs you like just because of the melody? What is it about the melody that you like?

Are there songs you like just because of the poetry?

Which Gaelic singer do you most admire, and why? What's special about them?

When you listen to a singer, what's the first thing you notice about them?

Do you prefer songs to be unaccompanied or accompanied, and why?

What (if any) kinds of accompaniments do you think are suitable for Gaelic song? Do you prefer to sing solo, or do you also enjoy singing with others?

What is the relationship between the poetry and the music in a song?

What do you think is more important, the poetry or the music?

Do you think it is possible for a non-Gaelic speaker, or a Gaelic learner, to sing these songs 'properly'?

The Mod and Harmony Singing

How do you feel about the Mod, and what do you think its place is within the Gaelic tradition?

What (if anything) do you think the Mod has done for Gaelic song?

Do you think the Mod is changing how people sing Gaelic song?

Do you think there is a difference between how people sing at the Mod and how other traditional Gaelic singers sing?

What do you think about Gaelic choral singing, and songs in four-part harmony?

Singing

Why do you sing? What does singing mean to you?

When do you sing? Just for formal occasions, or do you sing for yourself?

How do you decide what songs to sing?

Do you need to have a personal connection with a song in order to sing it, or can you simply like the words or music?

How do you decide what kind of grace notes to use in a song and where to put them?

Do you sing a song the same way every time, or do you change it?

Do you always know ahead of time what songs you are going to sing at a performance?

How do you choose the songs that you sing for a particular occasion?

Do you improvise when you perform, or do you know ahead of time what you are going to do?

Do you vary the air from verse to verse? Why and how? Do others do this? How much can you vary something and still keep the same song?

Do you plan ahead of time where you will breathe? How do you decide where you will breathe?

Do you sing different types of songs in different ways? If so, how?

How much do you change a song (if at all) from how you learned it?

Would you change the text or the music or both?

Do you use dynamics (variations in volume) at all when you sing?

How would you describe your practicing, or preparation for performing?

Have you ever changed your own delivery after hearing someone else's?

Do you sing more than one version of any song?

Would you abandon a family version of a song for one that you thought was better?

Do you think younger singers today sound different than singers did when you were growing up?

Influences

Who or what were your first influences to traditional singing?

Did you sing in church or Sunday school?

Did your family have a reputation as performers? Did people in your family want you to perform?

Were you ever encouraged to sing through school?

What do you think has affected or influenced **the way** you sing?

Did you learn this from a particular person or persons?

Are there any songs that you associate with certain people? Do songs ever evoke memories of people you learned them from?

What makes you pick a particular song to learn?

How do you learn songs?

Do you learn songs easily or with difficulty?

Where do you get the songs you sing- favourite source or person?

Do you learn by ear or from books? Can you learn by ear? Do you read music?

How soon after you learn a song would you perform it in public?

Do you teach songs to others? If I asked you to teach me a song, how would you do it?

Performance Settings and Contexts

How do you feel about performing in public?

What are your preferred performance contexts, venue, type of performance, size of audience?

Do you ever use a microphone?

Do you sing differently depending on who you're singing to?

Do you ever consciously try to either change your singing or keep it the same at different performances?

When you sing for an audience, what do you want them to get out of the song, what do you want them to experience?

Do you think you sing differently for a non-Gaelic audience than for a Gaelic audience?

How would you describe the relationship between singer and audience in Gaelic song?

How much contact do you have with your audiences at performances?

Do you know of any occasions when there is ever any physical contact between performer and audience?

Would you ever make eye contact with audience members?

When you perform, do you sit or stand?

What do you wear?

When you sing a song, do you tell the audience about the background or story of the song? In your experience, would you say that most

singers today do or do not do this? Do you think this is an important part of Gaelic song, or a minor detail?

Do you research the songs you sing?

How many stories do you know that are connected with songs?

Do you envisage things when you sing, as some storytellers do?

What do you think of when you are singing, what kinds of things are going through your head?

How do you think the atmosphere should be? Can the audience talk or sing along?

Do you swap songs often with others?

Do you sing with your family and relatives?