

PEADAR Ó RIADA, *CEOLTÓIRÍ CHUALANN: THE BAND THAT CHANGED THE COURSE OF IRISH MUSIC* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2024), ISBN 9781781178690, 256pp., €24.99 (hardback)

The life, career, and work of Seán Ó Riada has received a fair deal of attention in scholarly and more general writing over the past fifty or so years. While this has included much discussion of the group he formed, Ceoltóirí Chualann (1960–1969),¹ this new book from Peadar Ó Riada, son of Seán Ó Riada, is the first volume to focus solely on the band and its music.² Peadar will be familiar to many as a broadcaster, traditional musician, choir director, and composer of both traditional and liturgical music—to mention just some of his roles. The author’s stance is clear from the subtitle; many commentators have made similar claims about the group’s impact on traditional music. A number of dissenting voices have reasonably argued that some of the techniques and styles of arrangement originated by Ó Riada have not always been prominent within the tradition.³ But although this might have been somewhat true of the more commercial bands of the 1980s and 1990s, Ó Riada’s model and methods are perceptible in even the plainest of groups. They also remain the bedrock of the Grúpaí Ceoil (Traditional Group) competition at the Fleadh Cheoil, and are currently much in evidence in the recent blossoming of the traditional or folk orchestra as a locus for new composition and complex arrangement. It is tempting to consider the ‘tradorchestra’⁴ as representing a new stage of Ó Riada’s initial vision of ‘an ideal type of céilí band or orchestra’, which he first expressed in his series *Our Musical Heritage*.⁵

¹ The spelling ‘Cualann’ was used for most of the Gael Linn recordings; Chualann was used in most of the Radio Éireann listings, on their archive tapes, and on some of the published records (e.g. the sleeve of *Ceol na nUasal*).

² A recent PhD study also focuses on the band and its legacy, similarly arguing that Ó Riada transformed traditional music through the band’s novel approach. Malachy Bernard Egan, *A New Model: Seán Ó Riada, Ceoltóirí Cualann and Irish Traditional Music* (PhD dissertation, NUI Galway, 2020).

³ See for instance Terry Moylan, ‘Humpty Dumpty and Acoustic Bicycles’, *The Journal of Music*, 1 May 2001, <https://journalofmusic.com/focus/humpty-dumpty-and-acoustic-bicycles>.

⁴ The neologism ‘tradorchestra’ isn’t in common use (thankfully), but appears in a discussion of the ensemble by Jessica Cawley in ‘Enhancing the Accessibility of Irish Traditional Music Through Collaboration: Insights from the Creative Tradition and Music Generation Partnership’, *Ethnomusicology Ireland*, 9 (2024), 11–23.

⁵ Seán Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage* (Mountrath, Portlaoise: Fundúireacht an Riadaigh/The Dolmen Press, 1982), 74.

The first part of this new book tells the story of the band, and benefits from Peadar Ó Riada's first-hand knowledge and friendship with the musicians, as well as his access to the records and archives of Éamon de Buitleár, Michael Tubridy, and his father. It is written in a straightforward style, which will make it accessible to a wide readership. There is a lot more detail here about the gestation of the group than in Ó Canainn's biography, although the broad strokes of it will be familiar to many. More attention is given to Ó Riada's own Irish language play, *Caoineadh an Spailpín*, produced at the Damer Theatre in 1960,⁶ which featured some of the same musicians that appeared in Bryan MacMahon's *Song of the Anvil* in the Abbey Theatre.⁷ The profiles of the musicians of Ceoltóirí Chualann contain some firsthand insights into their relationship with Ó Riada and their role in the group. For instance, we learn that de Buitleár was given the chords for the band arrangements (played on the basses of his button accordion);⁸ Paddy Moloney was often given countermelodies due to his good musical ear; and Martin Fay was also often given harmonies and counterpoint, but in his case it was because he was a professional musician (who was already part of the Abbey orchestra) and an excellent reader.⁹ The profiles of the musicians sometimes over-stray into personal aspects of the musicians' lives, although they certainly show the deep connections there were between the wider circle of the group and their families.

One of the underlying tropes of the book also emerges through these profiles: that the band, its members, and its music were deeply connected to, and representative of, Seán Ó Riada's rediscovery of the 'Náisiún Gaelach' and his adoption of 'An Saol Gaelach'. The identity of Ceoltóirí Chualann as authentic exponents of an autochthonous music in part gave Ó Riada the authority to represent, reframe, and even recreate Ireland's musical traditions. This has to be understood within the context of the period, which is emphasised in the introduction: this was a time when traditional music was often not tolerated, particularly by those ascending the social scale in Ireland. The symbolic choice of the Shelbourne for the group's concert debut in 1961 deliberately

⁶ Confusingly, Peadar Ó Riada only uses the second part of the title for this play in the text: the reproduction of the programme gives the full title as *Spailpín, a Rúin nó Eoghan Rua agus an Ceannai Glic*. Peadar Ó Riada, *Ceoltóirí Chualann: The Band that Changed the Course of Irish Music* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2024), 54.

⁷ Oddly the book doesn't mention the Galway flute-player Vincent Broderick, who was part of the group who played at the Abbey Theatre, but didn't join Ceoltóirí Chualann.

⁸ Peadar Ó Riada, 13.

⁹ Peadar Ó Riada, 16–18.

aimed to confront the upper echelons of society with music and musicians which were considered backward and beneath them; it was also undoubtedly an expression of Ó Riada's desire to restore the status of traditional music and song.

The most informative and strongest sections of the introduction reveal the ideas and ideology underpinning the band's work. It was a revelation to learn that *Reacaireacht an Riadaigh* (1962) was a form of concept album, representing the 'high art of the indigenous Irish Nation' and containing 'examples of the more refined elements of the culture rather than that which would be regarded as the folk element' (33). By contrast, *Ding Dong* (1967) was intended as a collection of the 'music of the ordinary people of rural Ireland of the time' (34). The third album, *Ceol na nUasal* (1967), is more easily understandable as a concept album, which aimed to 're-acquaint the Irish public of the time with the art music of their indigenous culture' (36).

Ceoltóirí Chualann sheds welcome light on the process of making the radio shows: the volume of material arranged and recorded over the decade is extraordinary, and as Peadar Ó Riada notes, 'the constant recording of these programmes was a merciless animal devouring songs, tunes and stories.' (29) There are vivid descriptions of the gathering of materials for broadcast, the rehearsal and arrangement of the tunes, and the recording process. Having said this, there is some haziness concerning the radio shows and the early period of the group. The text notes that Ó Riada 'began his series of *Reacaireacht* radio programmes for Radio Éireann in the closing years of the 1950s and early 1960s' (24), although from newspaper reports it appears that it was first broadcast in March 1960. More information about how the commissioning of the programme *Reacaireacht an Riadaigh* first came about would be helpful, as it predated the band's first concert at the Shelbourne. There are also unexplored questions about how *Reacaireacht* related to other earlier programmes of Ó Riada's which have been rarely discussed, particularly *Ár gCeol Féinig: Clár Ceoil agus Seanchais le Seán Ó Riada*, which was broadcast on Radio Éireann around the same time.¹⁰ Towards the end of the first part of the book the narrative loses its way somewhat, in that it brings in more of Ó Riada's work outside the band, and includes some odd material (a partial list of Claddagh

¹⁰ A script for one of these programmes is located in the UCD Library collection *Cartlann Scríofa RTÉ: Scripteanna Chaint Raidió i nGaeilge*: P259: *Clár Tuairisciul. 'Ár gCeol Féinig'*, 19 Mí Márta 1961, P259/463 (97) <https://www.ucd.ie/archives/t4media/p0259-rte-radio-talk%20-scripts-in-irish-descriptive-catalogue.pdf>. The lack of information on this show and others made by Ó Riada in this period has been highlighted by Patrick Egan recently; Patrick Egan, *Exploring Ethnography and Digital Visualisation: A Study of Musical Practice Through the Contextualisation of Music Related Projects from the Seán Ó Riada Collection* (PhD dissertation, University College Cork, 2019), 236.

Records releases for instance). Despite this, there are also useful discussions of lesser-known pieces like *The Battle of Aughrim* (1969), an LP of Richard Murphy's long poem which featured the band, and the O'Carolan memorial concert held in Cork in 1970.

While I would heartily agree with Peadar Ó Riada's assessment of the band as performing music in a manner never heard before, I am less convinced by his statement that 'I admit that I find it very hard to see anything comparable, in the last fifty-three years, since they played their last notes' (7). For several years now the best traditional groups at the Fleadh Cheoil, or indeed the bands at Gael Linn Siansa competitions, while clearly based on the Ceoltóirí Chualann model, have exhibited a sophistication and artistry that refines and develops Ó Riada's techniques. Many commercial bands too, from Beoga to Fidil and Ensemble Éiriú, to mention just a few, have also built on Ó Riada's ideas. In truth perhaps questions of development and advancement are peripheral to the more fundamental fact that Ó Riada's techniques have become commonplace and second nature to most musicians. They have, in themselves, become part of the language of traditional music: to put it bluntly, they are traditional.

The second part of the book contains an invaluable collection of primary source materials relating to Ceoltóirí Chualann; these include the band's musical arrangements (which are written out as text as opposed to being notated in score form); details of the band's recording sessions, broadcasts and concerts; and a number of intriguing manuscript arrangements of traditional material. The most substantial section contains the written arrangements made by Seán Ó Riada for the group. As the text explains, these were worked out by Ó Riada, with the final versions being documented and written down by Michael Tubridy, who acted as the 'recorder of the arrangements' (18).¹¹ Ó Riada and the band used a system whereby the parts of tunes are labelled ABC etc, with these then being assigned to a soloist, a group of instruments (e.g. 'Flutes'), or the whole band. There are hundreds of different arrangements (the index lists 389 different dance tunes, songs and airs that were used, some which have multiple arrangements), which range from some very simple structures (e.g. version #3 of 'An Buachaill Caol Dubh' only consists of AB: Fiddle; AB: Whole Band) to more complex sets of tunes with chords, countermelodies and other instructions.

¹¹ Later, when Ó Riada moved to Cúil Aodha, Éamon de Buítléar had a special role in the band after Ó Riada moved to Cúil Aodha, as Ó Riada would send 'either written music or tapes to him in Dublin'; Tomás Ó Canainn, *Seán Ó Riada: His Life and Work* (Cork: Collins Press, 2003), 50.

Peadar Ó Riada has included incipits for some of the tunes and songs, as a way of distinguishing which version of a tune was used in an arrangement. This is helpful but also frustrating, as there are many less-well known airs and tunes for which incipits are not included, and which aren't easily accessible through the published recordings. Some tunes are listed as 'Jig' (as part of the 'Steam Packet' version #3) (191), or 'Barn dance' (part of 'Rolling in the Rye Grass') (176). Others are named but not easily traceable, such as 'Deisiú na Líonta' (part of 'Steam Packet' version #1) (191), which according to an RTÉ field recording from 1964 was another name for the famous 'Ríl Mhór Bhaile an Challaigh' (194); or 'The Day of the Thrashing' (part of 'An Súiste Bui'/'The Yellow Flail') (194). I appreciate that recordings for some of these arrangements might not exist, but some are accessible and can be identified (e.g. the 'Barn dance' above is often known as 'The Chaffpool Post' or 'James Gannon's').¹²

It is a pity that no information is given (or perhaps was recorded) about when these arrangements were first performed or recorded—this would have been helpful to researchers and musicians who wanted to hear how these were realised in performance. Similarly, it would have been useful to note that some of the extant recorded and broadcast arrangements are not included in the book (again, it may be that these did not survive in personal or official archives). Take for example the very first arrangement of the collection, 'The Abbey Reel' (64).¹³ The version in the book includes an incipit for a reel ('Reddigan's') that was renamed by the musicians of Ceoltóirí Chualann after the Abbey Theatre.¹⁴ However, the only available recorded version of 'The Abbey Reel' made by the group is part of the music for the 1962 film version of *The Playboy of the Western World*. Confusingly, three tracks on the reissue are titled 'Abbey Reel Pt. 1', 'Abbey Reel Pt. 2', and 'Abbey Reel'. Of these, only the 'Abbey Reel Pt. 2' is based on the tune in the incipit; the others are based on a different reel, 'Sporting Paddy'.¹⁵ The arrangement printed in this book is straightforward, with the instrumentation changing

¹² The Irish title was used for its initial broadcast: 'Ag Súgradh ins an Móinfehear', *Reacaireacht an Riadaigh*, Radio Éireann, broadcast on 29 July 1961.

¹³ Confusingly, another arrangement is labelled 'Reddigan's/Abbey Reel & Golden Keyboard'; whether the tune labelled 'Reddigan's' is also the 'Abbey Reel', or a different tune, is unclear. In any case, neither of these are comparable to the version on the *Playboy of the Western World* discussed below.

¹⁴ Peadar Ó Riada, 15.

¹⁵ The original LP used scene descriptors from the film as titles, and did not include the tune names: e.g. the Abbey Reel Part 1' was listed as 'Scanraíonn Shawn Keogh roimh Christy agus téann ag scaipeadh an scéil'. The tune names were included in the 2011 reissue. Seán Ó Riada agus Ceoltóirí Cualann, *Playboy of the Western World*, Gael-Linn (1962), (LP) CEF 012. Reissued as part of *Seoda an Riadaigh: Seán Ó Riada 1931-1971: The Essential Collection*, Gael-Linn (2011), (CD) orlada6, 2011.

for each round of the tune (the tune is played nine times, making nine rounds). In contrast, on the recording of 'Abbey Reel Pt. 2' the tune is only played once, and two combinations of instruments alternate every two bars (pipes, flute and whistle being answered by box and fiddles). After this the reel tempo slows, and the uilleann pipes (echoed by the band) plays a motif or theme which recurs in the film score. Such a large discrepancy between the extant printed arrangement and the recorded one suggests that the *Playboy* version was not just a reinterpretation, but a separate arrangement. I'm not suggesting that these needed to be transcribed in all cases (although this too might be beneficial), but more contextual or additional details about the arrangements would have made the book much easier to use. Other arrangements for which recordings exist are easier to access, and comparisons can be made between the arrangement, and various recorded versions: for example, the arrangement for the reel, the 'Boy in the Boat' (or 'An Buachaill sa Bhád'), was used for the version on their first LP, *Reacaireacht an Riadaigh* (1961), and the radio broadcast made on 28 January 1962.¹⁶ Unfortunately the list of radio broadcasts made by the band is incomplete; some of the earlier programmes are listed in the catalogues of the Irish Traditional Music Archive (ITMA), and it is unfortunate that these weren't included. There are scant details about some of the later broadcasts: these aren't covered by the ITMA database, and it may be that the information about these has been lost, or remain within the RTÉ archives. While the information gathered in these sections is often new and a boon to researchers, the data requires more rigorous contextualisation, as well as more connectivity between the arrangements, studio recordings, radio broadcasts and the discographical and radio records.

The most revelatory section of the book is the small selection of musical scores, most of which are transcriptions or notations of tunes (comprising only a melody). There isn't a lot of contextual information for these either: it is unclear whether they were for Ceoltóirí Chualann, or tunes that were written for Ó Riada's own use in other contexts. The exceptions are some fully written out arrangements for the band: 'Comhcheadal a hAon', 'Cathaoir an Phíobaire', the 'Laurel Bush', 'Pádraig Aodhaire', and 'Pádraig ar Teicheadh'.¹⁷ Were these examples of arrangements written by Ó Riada after he moved away, and sent to de Buitléar? Perhaps so, as in the catalogue of recordings and broadcasts included in the book, 'The Laurel Bush' was part of programme 21 of *Fleadh Cheoil an Radio* (with dates given of 8-9/2/1969), and 'Cathaoir an Phíobaire' is listed as

¹⁶ Peadar Ó Riada, 82.

¹⁷ I am not sure whether these last two titles are fully correct, as the tunes are not referred to in the index, and the handwriting on the manuscript is small and difficult to decipher.

part of programmes 23-26, which are noted as being unavailable.¹⁸ No written arrangement is included for 'The Laurel Bush', but there is one for 'Cathaoir an Phíobaire' (94-95), which is similar to the one for the 'Piper's Chair' (161). In the absence of available recordings it is difficult to comment too much on these arrangements; however, the first of these, 'Comhcheadal a hAon', has been broadcast on Peadar's own show on Raidió na Gaeltachta.¹⁹ It is described as 'an experiment using the new concept of a traditional Irish Music ensemble—Ceoltóirí Chualann—as a European Classical Chamber Ensemble, with the inherent rules of counterpoint and harmony associated with its classical culture and model' (225).²⁰ A charming and fascinating piece, it is deeply indebted to Baroque music in its style and structure, with obvious echoes of Carolan's more Italianate pieces, Vivaldi's concerti grossi, and Bach's Brandenburg concertos. Although there are elements of pastiche, it might be more accurate to describe it as a simulacrum for which no original exists, an imagined music which might have emerged if Carolan had a successor who had further bridged the classical and Gaelic musical worlds. In another respect it intimates that, no matter how much Ó Riada argued for the harpsichord as a sonic substitute for the wire-strung harp, his use of the instrument stemmed directly from his knowledge of classical music: what Harry White describes as the instrument's 'alternating "continuo-concertino" like deployment' in the Ceoltóirí Chualann arrangements is plainly evident in 'Comhcheadal a hAon'.²¹ The lack of contextualisation of this piece raises many other questions: were the parts learnt aurally by the musicians, or read from the score? Is this a live recording, from a broadcast, or was it due for release? Whatever the circumstances, it is a significant work, and it is fascinating to be able to view the full score, given that the other arrangements are written out in more of an outline form.

Peadar Ó Riada has made a significant contribution to the traditional music community by the gathering, organising, and publishing of these primary sources. *Ceoltóirí Chualann: The Band that Changed the Course of Irish Music* opens up fertile new ground for researchers; it will be of interest to those involved in arranging traditional music; and provides a fresh and accessible history of Ceoltóirí Chualann. Its broad

¹⁸ Peadar Ó Riada, 224.

¹⁹ Peadar Ó Riada, *Cuireadh Chun Ceoil*, 5 August 2022, <https://www.rte.ie/radio/rnag/cuireadh-chun-ceoil/2022/0805/1314232-cuireadh-chun-ceoil-de-haoine-5-lunasa-2022/>. The piece begins at 1:25:23.

²⁰ Perhaps the order of the pages was mixed up in the archive; the four pages of the score should be read in the order 225, 228, 227, 226.

²¹ Harry White, *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland, 1770–1970* (Cork: Cork University Press & Field Day, 1998), 148.

appeal is also a weakness: while the narrative chapters form a lively introduction to the achievements of Ó Riada and the group, which is firm in its stance on the music, this sits somewhat at odds with the more specialised arrangements and archival material of the second part. Similarly, while Peadar Ó Riada's deep connection to the band and its members provides original insights and an emic understanding of the music, many readers will be sharply aware of the ensuing lack of critical distance. Despite this, the book is of particular value for its focus on a single band, and for providing unrivalled access to the inner workings of one of the first and most influential traditional groups in Ireland.

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