Seist Chorus Sections in Scottish Gaelic Song: An Overview of Their Evolving Uses and Functions

by

Anna Wright

BMus, Edinburgh Napier University, 2015
MMus, University of British Columbia, 2018

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

(Ethnomusicology)

The University of British Columbia
(Vancouver)

April 2020

© Anna Wright, 2020
The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

Seist Chorus Sections in Scottish Gaelic Song: An Overview of Their Evolving Uses and Functions

submitted by Anna Wright in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Ethnomusicology

Examining Committee:

Nathan Hesselink
Supervisor, Chair, Ethnomusicology Department, School of Music, UBC

Michael Tenzer
Supervisory Committee Member, Professor, Ethnomusicology Department, School of Music, UBC
Abstract

This thesis examines the use of *seist* chorus sections in the Scottish Gaelic song tradition. These sections consist of nonsense syllables, or vocables. Although lacking semantic meaning, such vocables often provoke the joining in of the audience or listening group. The use of these vocable sections can be seen to have evolved in both their physical (sonic) characteristics and their social use and function over time while still maintaining a marked presence in Scottish Gaelic music across many genres and generations. I briefly examine theories surrounding seist vocables’ inception, interview three practitioners of Gaelic song about seist choruses’ inception and evolving function, examine four songs dating from a period spanning 1601-2016, and relate my findings to Scotland’s constantly evolving social and political climate.
Lay Summary

Music is an important process through which identity is created and sustained. Scottish identity is undergoing a period of intense evolution and scrutiny, as evidenced by recent political events such as the 2014 Independence Referendum and Brexit. This thesis considers one element of Scottish Gaelic music – the nonsense-syllable chorus – to document and theorise on its characteristics and evolving functions across numerous genres and a broad historical range, investigating the extent to which these choruses might reflect and influence identity formation in modern-day Scotland.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, and independent work of Anna Wright, in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree “Master of Arts, emphasis Ethnomusicology.”
Permission to use material from interviews was generously given by Frances Dunlop, Calum
MacDonald, and Ewen Henderson. These interviews were approved by the UBC Research Ethics
Board, certificate of approval titled “Gaelic Song and Scottish Society,” H19-01552, dated June
2019.
Table of Contents

Abstract…………………………………………………………………………………………...iii
Lay Summary……………………………………………………………………………………iv
Preface……………………………………………………………………………………………v
Table of Contents………………………………………………………………………………vi
List of Figures……………………………………………………………………………………viii
Acknowledgements……………………………………………………………………………ix

1 Introduction……………………………………………………………………………1
   Gaelic Songs and Seist Vocables………………………………………………………..1
   The Gaelic Singing Community and Theories of Community Formation………5
   The Structure of This Thesis…………………………………………………………..14

2 Songs from the “Old World”…………………………………………………………….15
   “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais”…………………………………………………………….15
   “Òran na Cloiche”……………………………………………………………………….22

3 Songs from the “Modern World”………………………………………………………28
   “Tìr an Airm”………………………………………………………………………….28
   “An Dà Là”…………………………………………………………………………….33

4 Social Functions and Conclusions………………………………………………………41
   The Social Function of Seist……………………………………………………………41
   “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais”……………………………………………………………41
   “Òran na Cloiche”………………………………………………………………………43
   “Tìr an Airm”…………………………………………………………………………44
   “An Dà Là”…………………………………………………………………………….47
List of Figures

Figure 2.1. “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais,” version and translation taken from Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluaidh (2020)………………………………………………………………………………..16

Figure 2.2. Seist vocables interspersed within “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais”………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………16

Figure 2.3. Frances Tolmie, original notebook (National Library of Scotland no. 14908)………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………18

Figure 2.4. Transcription (melody only), first verse of “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” from Kathleen MacInnes, Òg-Mhadainn Shamhraidh (Summer Dawn, 2006)………………………………………19

Figure 2.5. Six verses of Òran na Cloiche (verses 1-6 here correspond to verses 1, 2, 8, 11, 12, and 13 in original)……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………24

Figure 2.6. Transcription (melody only), first verse of “Òran na Cloiche” by Kathleen MacInnes…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………26

Figure 3.1. Text of “Tìr an Airm” by Runrig, from the album Recovery (1981). Translation: musixmatch……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………29

Figure 3.2: Transcription (melody only) of “Tìr an Airm” by Runrig, from the album Recovery (1981)……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………30

Figure 3.3. Lyrics (Ewen Henderson) to “An Dà Là” (Mànran, 2020)………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………35

Figure 3.4. Transcription (melody only), first verse of “An Dà Là,” by Mànran (An Dà Là, 2017)……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………36

Figure 4.1. Text of “Tìr an Airm” by Runrig, verses 4 and 5, from Recovery (1981)……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………46
Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the help and support given to me throughout my time at the University of British Columbia, both in the writing of this thesis specifically and my studies more generally. My thanks, first and foremost, go to the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people, for their continuing patience and gracious hospitality as UBC continues to operate on their ancestral, unceded, homeland.

I owe significant thanks to Dr. Nathan Hesselink, my advisor, without whom this thesis could not have reached completion. His advice throughout this process has been invaluable, and his patience and support unwavering. I owe yet more thanks to him particularly for introducing to me the incredible field of ethnomusicology, which has changed the course of my studies and my life. My secondary advisor too, Dr. Michael Tenzer, has been both a source of constant support and a steadfast inquisitor throughout my time at UBC; his advice and questioning have made me not only a more thorough academic, but a better person. To both of these great men: thank you.

Numerous staff and faculty at the UBC School of Music have gone above and beyond the call of duty during my time at UBC. These are far too many to mention everyone, but a particularly important “thank you” is in order to faculty members Dr. Julia Nolan and Dr. Ève Poudrier, and staff members Isabel da Silva and Shelley Hall. Each of these incredible women have been a huge source of inspiration and encouragement to me throughout my four years at UBC. Thank you.
My time at UBC absolutely could not have continued fruitfully were it not for the enduring support of my Green College community. I am so fortunate to have been granted access to this unbelievably enriching environment, which completely altered my reality as I found my feet in the academic world. For the camaraderie, support, and encouragement I found there through both the other residents of the college and its principal and fearless leader, Mark Vessey, I am so, so grateful.

My studies would not have been made possible were it not for the support of The Cross Trust and The West Lothian Education Trust, both organisations to which I owe my ability to continue in higher education. Your generous support and commitment to education in Scotland is a source of constant inspiration to me.

I am extremely grateful that Frances Dunlop of Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluaidh, Calum MacDonald of Runrig, and Ewen Henderson of Mànnran gave generously of their time and expertise as I prepared to write this document. Their patience and generosity in answering my questions helped me form a better understanding of each specific song and of seist vocable sections more broadly.

Finally, a huge thank you to my family: my parents, siblings, grandparents, and partner, for their unending patience and support, and for keeping me grounded throughout this process.
Chapter 1. Introduction

I first became interested in Gaelic songs shortly after I began to study the Scottish Gaelic language. This was a decision I made soon after moving from my hometown just outside of Edinburgh, Scotland, to Vancouver, British Columbia, and was most likely fuelled just as much by homesickness as it was by curiosity. During this time, I listened to a number of Gaelic songs to practise my vocabulary, and soon noticed that I was drawn to certain compositions (such as “Puirt à Beul”), which consisted primarily of satirical lyrics, childlike rhymes, and nonsense syllables.\(^1\) The simple lyrical content of these songs no doubt contributed to their accessibility for me as a Gaelic learner. As my listening repertory grew to include more lyrically complex works, I noticed that some still contained a seist chorus consisting of these simpler nonsense vocables, somewhat akin to scat-singing (or perhaps similar to \textit{fa la las} or \textit{do-be-do-wahs} in song genres such as madrigals or jazz). It is during this time that I began to ponder the nature and function of these seist chorus sections, and it is these sections that have become the focus of this thesis.

Gaelic Songs and Seist Vocables

My use of the term “Gaelic song” refers to any song sung in the language of Scottish Gaelic; as such it refers to a huge array of genres and sub-genres. Most Gaelic songs fit within broad categories: work songs; domestic songs; and larger, heroic, bardic tales. Many were not written down until relatively late in the songs’ history—indeed some not until within the last century, with scholars such as Frances Tolmie and Ethel Bassin dedicating their lives to the songs’ collection and preservation. Most songs explored in this thesis are work songs or

\(^1\) For further detail on “Puirt à Beul” including its attraction for Gaelic learners, see Sparling (2000).
\(^2\) “Superficially simple” musics like “Puirt à Beul” often contain some combination of these qualities (Macdonald 2012: 9, 17).
composed in the style of work songs, since these generally are group participatory songs containing seist vocable sections.

The Gaelic term “seist” translating as “refrain” or “chorus” does not necessarily indicate those sections which are my focus: those sections comprising nonsense vocables. I refer to them as either “seist,” “seist chorus,” or “seist vocables,” despite the lack of a term referring specifically to those choruses containing nonsense-syllables in Gaelic, so natural and unassuming an occurrence are they (Ewen Henderson, 24th February 2020, personal communication). The history and function of these sections is largely unknown, a puzzle compounded by the fact that their inception most likely far precedes their formal documentation.

Nevertheless, it is worth briefly discussing here one story of their origin and function. Campbell and Collinson, both Scottish traditional music historians, published a three-volume set of Hebridean Folksongs in 1969, 1977, and 1981. The first of these contains perhaps the earliest published theory on the seist vocable tradition. While I believe the function of seist has changed somewhat since this publication, I present in detail their theory below.

*Hebridean Folk Songs, Volume 1* (Campbell and Collinson, 1969) contains in-depth explanations of the songs, their history, and their structure. All three volumes feature seist sections prominently, referring to them as “meaningless refrain-syllables.” Dealing primarily with *waulking* songs in Volume 1, the authors thought it necessary to describe this phenomenon with particular detail, and less thoroughly in the volumes to follow. Campbell and Collinson recognize the importance of seist vocables, and suggest that their primary function was as a memory aid. They liken the seist sections to *canntaireachd*, “a system whereby players of *piobaireachd* [serious, soloistic bagpipe music] memorize the bagpipe scale and even

---

3 Women’s work songs, sung while rhythmically thumping material soaked in ammonia to shrink the weave of the tweed. For more information on their contemporary use, see Speer (1985).
complicated rhythmic figures and grace notes by means of meaningless vocables based on meaningless monosyllables representing the nine notes of the bagpipe scale” (1969: 228). They suggest that seist vocables are not as meaningless as they might seem, and in fact are nuanced and taken seriously by Gaelic song practitioners:

The importance of the refrain to the traditional singer may be shown by the fact that while a person who has learnt Gaelic may not find it difficult to learn some of these songs and their melodies, he or she will often find it difficult to memorize the meaningless refrains, and may be tempted to think that their exact reproduction is not a matter of great importance: whereas with the traditional singer precisely the opposite is the case; the singer cannot remember the song properly unless she or he can recall the refrain exactly, and deviations from its “correct” form are immediately noticed and corrected. (1969: 228)

Campbell and Collinson’s memory theory is somewhat backed up by their finding that no two refrains are the same — each song has its own unique seist section. This would prevent confusion, were the function of seist vocables originally to aid in memory recall. Campbell and Collinson continue:

One of the most remarkable, and indeed crucial features of the refrain syllables in general is that, while short on conventional groups of up to three or even four syllables may occur in different songs, actual duplication of a whole musical phrase of these syllables is so rare as to be practically non-existent. It would seem that in the initial composition of these refrains, whoever may have made them, duplication between one song and another was rejected on principle, either by the persons who made the tunes, or by consensus of agreement amongst the singers themselves – amongst whom someone would be sure to notice and object to the fact that a particular sequence of vocables making up a phrase had already been used for another song. This shows the musical significance of these meaningless syllables must be considered within the context of the particular song in which they occur, and that the meaningless refrain as a whole is a mnemonic device for recalling the song as a whole to the traditional singers’ memories. (1969: 233)

Campbell and Collinson’s memory theory is not far-fetched, especially since Gaelic poetry was not in print until the 18th Century; even at that point, many Gaelic song practitioners were not literate:

---

4 For more information on the oral tradition of Gaelic songs/poetry, see MacInnes, J. (2006: 230-47).
This explains why, when Scottish Gaelic poetry began to appear in print in the eighteenth century, and the authors or collectors wished to indicate to readers to what airs the poems were sung, they needed to do no more than to give the (usually meaningless) words of the chorus as the “tune”. Gaelic readers then were sufficiently acquainted with the corpus of Gaelic song to be able to recognise what air was meant immediately from this as a rule; whereas many modern readers would require that the tune be written in staff notation or sol-fa. … This is all the notational value such refrains could be said to possess; their real value was mnemonic, as the great majority of traditional singers, especially waulking women, could not read Gaelic in any case. (1969: 237)

As plausible as this theory seems, Campbell and Collinson recognise that irrefutable evidence is not possible, and that

One can only speculate on what their history may be. If, as seems very likely, many of the tunes of these songs are much older than the words which are now sung to them, the meaningless syllables associated with their refrains may possess a very remarkable antiquity. (1969: 237)

Campbell and Collinson are concerned with pre-20th century traditional Gaelic songs and show that seist vocables play a significant role in them. I submit, moreover, that with the invention of recording technology, increased literacy rates and accrued documentation, vastly decreased Gaelic fluency levels, and a changed political climate, the function(s) of seist have changed since both their inception and Campbell and Collinson’s writing. I will argue that except in very few cases, the need for a mnemonic memory-aid such that seist vocables might have originally fulfilled has been overcome through a combination of modern technology and improved literacy levels. The continued use of seist in modern music demonstrates that they perform another function in addition to memory that justifies their continued presence. This thesis will explore this hypothesis through four individual song examples, spanning from the early 17th century to the present day.
The Gaelic Singing Community and Theories of Community Formation

When looking at Gaelic singers and their interaction with both Gaelic and non-Gaelic speakers, it is necessary to first identify the community (or communities) to which these songs belong. The Gaelic singing and speaking community is situated across multiple intersections of time and place, participating in both the recreation of traditional musics and the creation of new music. This group is composed of individuals living in Scotland and in diasporic Scottish communities, as well as native speakers whose families spoke Gaelic and those who learned later in life. How best to view this community in all of its complexity? Shelemay (2011) suggests that rethinking the term community itself could enrich the study of musical transmission and performance to include processes that generate, shape, and sustain new collectivities (2011: 349-50). She further specifies:

A musical community is, whatever its location in time or space, a collectivity constructed through and sustained by musical processes and/or performances. A musical community can be socially and/or symbolically constituted; music making may give rise to real-time social relationships or may exist most fully in the realm of a virtual setting or in the imagination.

A musical community does not require the presence of conventional structural elements nor must it be anchored in a single place, although both structural and local elements may assume importance at points in the process of community formation as well as in its ongoing existence. Rather, a musical community is a social entity, an outcome of a combination of social and musical processes, rendering those who participate in making or listening to music aware of a connection among themselves. (2011: 364-5)

Music’s role in community formation and sustenance is an important one. Shelemay suggests three processes through which musical communities arise: descent, dissent, and affinity. I will deal with each in turn below, discussing the theories themselves as well as how they relate specifically to the Gaelic singing community.
Descent Communities

Descent communities are “united through what are understood from within to be shared identities, whether they are grounded in historical fact, are newly invented, or emerge from some combination of historical circumstance and creative transformation” (2011: 367). They are often generated by aspects of individual identity such as ethnicity, kinship, religion, and nationality (2011: 367). This particular breed of musical community could accurately, though not entirely, describe the Scottish Gaelic singing community. Since Scottish Gaelic is the language of the Gaelic-speaking people of Scotland, Scottish Gaelic songs are inextricably tied to elements of kinship, ethnicity, and nationality. This community — though also comprised of many smaller communities — is united in shared identity, and has transformed to include diasporic branches such as those found in Nova Scotia, Canada. These communities are largely composed of descendants of Scottish Gaels, and so the language (and music) are passed down through generations, strengthening the heritage even though the geographic location has changed. Now that technology makes travel and instant communication very easy, these geographically-separated groups share key identity-defining characteristics, such as language and music.

Shelemay avers that the communities rely heavily on music to sustain their identities, the music both sustaining the collective and distancing it from outside influence (2011: 368). I would argue that in the case of the larger Gaelic singing community, language also contributes to sustaining the collective identity, since the Scottish Gaelic language is spoken by a relatively small percentage of the populations of Nova Scotia or Scotland.

Within collectivities shaped by processes of descent, music moves beyond a role as symbol literally to perform the identity in question and serves early on in the process of community formation to establish, maintain, and reinforce that collective identity. I suspect that most music historians and ethnomusicologists would be willing to argue that descent communities would have been unable to sustain themselves over time were it not for these musical practices. The processes through which these communities arise and
sustain themselves very often occur through the catalyzing impact of musical performance. Music helps generate and sustain the collective, while at the same time, it contributes to establishing social boundaries both within the group and with those outside of it. (2011: 368)

These descent communities could, therefore, be just as much sustained by music as they are by language, and no doubt some combination of both. Seist choruses contribute towards this function in a unique way, having no language prerequisites, and therefore assisting comparatively little in boundary-establishment. They therefore play a contradictory role in perpetuating this descent: instead of both sustaining the collective and distanciing it from outside influence, as above (2011: 368), the increased accessibility of seist vocables also to some extent must also open it up to outsiders — and thus outside influence — somewhat blurring clear community boundaries. In an increasingly bilingual country, seist choruses play an important and complex role in the continuation of this musical descent community and Scottish musical communities as a whole.

Dissent Communities

Shelemay describes the second category of community as one of dissent. These dissent communities are formed in opposition to a larger, more dominant group, emerging “through acts of resistance against an existing collectivity” (2011: 370):

Individuals involved in processes of dissent quite regularly draw on musical performance as a mechanism to enlist others in their cause. Indeed, many dissent communities emerge through music making in part because music can give voice to dissent while partially masking its critical edge and reducing risks of retribution from more powerful forces. (2011: 370)

Music’s ability to both criticize and incite others to join in criticism or protest marks music among the most powerful social instigators, oftentimes prompting its censorship (Becker 1982: 5). The creative process and instances of musical rebellion and incitement are both prevalent and
well-documented; the relationship between Scottish music and incitement is trickier still, and is rife with both historic and current power dynamics:

Music is not only a metaphor for social processes, but a powerful stimulant affecting these processes. The relationship between art and politics is not unidirectional but a complex give-and-take, where each influences and is influenced. Music in Scotland today, that of the bagpipe and otherwise, increasingly reflects the political, and music as a vessel in expressing the views of the general public, nationalistic or otherwise, is neither a new nor dwindling practice in Scotland or elsewhere. Protest music and nationalistic music especially breed with exponential speed and potency, and these surely have been aggravated by the recent disregard and contempt shown to Scotland and Scottish people during both the 2014 Independence Referendum and the 2016-present Brexit debacle. (Wright 2020: 28)

Scottish Gaelic was spoken by 25-30% of the Scottish population in the 1690s, yet the first census of Scotland in 1881 reported 6% of the population were Gaelic speakers (Withers 1984: 53). The language was evidently decimated in the 17th-19th centuries, largely through acts aiming to control Gaelic Scotland from the south. These acts include a 1616 act of the Privy Council of Scotland ruling that no heir of a Gaelic chief could inherit their father’s estate without proof of English literacy (Register of the Privy Council, x, 773-6), and the nine Statutes of Iona, passed in 1609. Of these nine statutes, number six and eight are most relevant. Number six reinforces the above: that Highland Chiefs should educate their eldest son in the Lowlands so that they could speak, read, and write English. Goodare writes that “the intention of this — to convert the clan elite into Lowlanders and to wean them away from Gaelic culture — is evident” (1998: 52). Number eight was the “logical counterpart to clause 6: as well as promoting Lowland culture, Gaelic culture was to be repressed,” and involved the banning of the Gaelic bardic tradition [tradition of wandering poets] (1998: 53).

5 For a comprehensive overview of these processes in Scotland, see McKerrell (2016).
John MacInnes writes about this in his essay collection *Dùthchas nan Ghàidheal* (Gaelic Heritage/Heritage of the Gaels), recognising that those referred to as the “Scots” are actually Gaels, and in reference to Scotland there is never any official mention of Gaelic:

Gaelic was deprived of position and status and finally so reduced that is it now the everyday means of communication only in the adult communities of some of the islands of the Hebrides and by the aged in a few mainland areas of the North-West Highlands. Viewed from the standpoint of the present day, the entire process can be stated in direct terms as the destruction of not one but two Scottish languages, each of which had evolved its own definitive characteristics on Scottish soil, by the encroachment of English and its overwhelming ethnocidal power. (MacInnes, J. 2006: 92)

MacInnes views this decimation of the Gaelic language as linked to the beginning of the erasure of not only language but all elements of Gaelic culture (music, religion, dress):

Naturally such fundamental changes were not confined to purely linguistic spheres. As early as 1559, in a letter addressed to certain Scots insurgents by the English Privy Council, the hope is expressed that “this famous isle may be conjoined in heart as in continent, with uniformity of language, manners and conditions. And the king who was James VI of Scotland and James I of England, addressing parliament in 1604 (the year after the union of crowns) states the same sentiment in virtually identical terms, except that he clearly regards this as already having taken place. By 1604 God had “united these two kingdoms […] in Language, Religion, and similitude of manners.” Yet in 1604 Gaelic was still spoken widely in Scotland. Linguistically the Gaels were non-persons. (2006: 92-3)

These events are of particular interest when considering Gaelic today: a language that almost reached extinction is now being revived in Scotland. Encouragement for this language growth comes in such forms as funding from the Scottish government to set up Gaelic medium schools, the University of the Highlands and Islands offering affordable and flexible Gaelic courses, and BBC Alba providing television and radio in Gaelic. The results of these efforts are beginning to become evident: the 2011 census in Scotland reported that 87,100 people aged 3 and over in Scotland (1.7 per cent of the population) had some Gaelic language skills. Interestingly, the number of Gaelic speakers declined in all age populations except those under 18 years of age:
Between 2001 and 2011 there were decreases in the proportion of people who could speak Gaelic in all age groups for people aged 18 and over. For example, for people aged 65 and over the proportion fell from 1.8 per cent in 2001 to 1.5 per cent in 2011. In contrast, the proportion of people who can speak Gaelic increased slightly in younger age groups: from 0.53 per cent to 0.70 per cent for 3-4 year olds; from 0.91 per cent to 1.13 per cent for 5-11 year olds; and from 1.04 per cent to 1.10 per cent for 12-17 year olds. (National Records Scotland 2015)

In sum, there has been a decline of fluent Gaelic speakers, yet an increase in those learning or with partial (non-fluent) Gaelic ability. While the results of the next census are yet to be seen, this is surely a product of efforts to revive Gaelic, especially in younger generations.

This is also reflected in the music of the Gaelic-speaking community. While Gaelic songs were undoubtedly common before these changes, the growing sense of community and identity they enjoy today might partly be due to elements congruent with Shelemay’s communities of dissent. Younger generations are increasingly interested in learning Gaelic, and so many Gaelic musics have seen a revival parallel to the linguistic revival. In many ways, this linguistic and musical revival is demonstrative of general dissent towards the UK politics, policies, and laws consistently seen as detrimental to Scottish life.

A further complicating issue is the commodification of traditional music during the folk revival of the 1950s, as reflected upon by Simon McKerrell:

[T]his process, begun in the 1950s, has led to a complete shift in the way we understand traditional music, transforming the majority of traditional music into a form of commercial music, effectively adopting the markers of popular music, leaving only small pockets of participation in traditional music as a form of cash-free social music making, and thus changing its sound and ideology forever. (2016: 79)

This simplification and idolisation of Celtic traditional music is certainly common, and motivations range from harmless historical romanticism to Celtic purism. While I can see the frustration felt by many traditional musicians at the commodification and capitalist participation of traditional music in general, Scottish Gaelic music particularly sits in a unique place socially
exempt from these norms of capitalism-induced censorship. Commercialisation extends the music’s reach, both demographically and geographically. Sung in a language only approximately 1% of the Scottish population speak, the message it conveys is perhaps cryptic and obscure enough to escape political attention and thus censorship. Regardless that much Scottish music may be both revival-driven (commodified) and/or dissent-driven (containing important social indicators), seist choruses play an important part in improving the accessibility of Gaelic vocal musics given that most Gaelic speakers in Scotland today are not fluent. This is especially important to note as, in order for the dissent-driven message to be widely received, optimal coherency and accessibility is especially desirable.

Shelemay further writes that dissent communities are “almost always at least partial offspring of the forces they challenge, hence the close and interactive relationship between descent and dissent, and the possibility that they can, for long periods of time, overlap” (2011: 372). Since everyone today who speaks Scottish Gaelic also speaks English, and therefore belongs to an English-speaking community as well as a Gaelic-speaking one, Shelemay’s insight here is a factor to consider. For these reasons — primarily language accessibility, consequently larger and more varied audience demographic, more successful message-portrayal, and resulting potential for incitement — I believe dissent-driven functions are largely responsible for modern Gaelic music’s continuing inclusion of seist choruses.

Affinity Communities

Shelemay’s communities of affinity “emerge first and foremost from individual preferences, quickly followed by a desire for social proximity or association with others equally enamoured” (2011: 373). She writes that music often sparks communities of affinity, and that
while musical tastes and preferences may be influenced by other factors more hereditary or learned, affinity communities gain strength through the close proximity of people with similar tastes and sense of belonging (and prestige) that the community association offers (2011: 373). Shelemay also cites cultural capital as a factor in affinity-related community building: “the acquisition of cultural capital inevitably plays a role in the emergence and maintenance of communities of affinity, with financial gain frequently providing motivation for shaping a musical style or event that will engender the devoted affiliation of many” (2011: 373).

The relationship between affinity communities, cultural capital, and musically-incited devotion is illustrated by the deep-rooted connection between Scottish nationalism and Scottish music:\(^6\)

A variety of motivations can be accommodated under affinity, linked on various levels to an array of personal predilections and affective responses. Musical affinity can be driven by sheer sonic attraction, whether based in a desire for the familiar or search for the new; it can catalyse a preoccupation with what is perceived as exotic. The role of a charismatic musician or performer is often a particularly powerful element added to the musical draw in the case of affinity communities. Whatever the basis of the attraction, an affinity community assumes its shape based in the first instance on individual volition, in contrast to motivations deriving from ascribed or inherited factors (descent) or driven by specific ideological commitments or connections (dissent). (2011: 374)

This type of community-forming process is evident among Gaelic speaking (and singing) communities today. Most individuals in the community of Gaelic singers today are descended from Gaelic speakers, but after the serious decline of the language in the 18th and 19th centuries, some have learned Gaelic having not grown up with it. These “learners,” a group in which I count myself, are attracted to the music and/or language itself, and feel enough of an affinity towards it to dedicate time and energy to learning a language not essential to communication (all Gaelic speakers also speak English; there are no monolingual Gaelic speakers).

\(^6\) For further information see McKerrell (2016) and Wright (2020).
While these learners, myself included, might be descended from Gaelic speakers (and singers), the affinitive aspect of this community also plays an important role in community recruitment. In the case of the Scottish Gaelic language and singing communities, dissent and affinity are perhaps more strongly linked than is usual. The increase in Gaelic learners correlates to the Scottish folk music revival; individuals not content with UK, Westminster-centric, politics (especially post-Brexit) might be more inclined to cling to Gaelic as a marked differentiator between Scotland and the rest of the UK. In a similar way to the bagpipes, the Gaelic language might be seen as a symbol of the difference between Scotland and the rest of the UK as much Gaetic music details discontent at the state of politics in both a Scottish and worldwide setting (see songs “Tìr an Airm,” “Òran na Cloiche,” and “An Dà Là,” examined in the following chapters).

The Gaelic singing community is thus located at an intersection of place and time — existing in communities within and outside of Scotland, performing traditional music and modern versions — involving all three of the above processes of community formation and sustenance. With the majority of community members having descended from Gaelic speakers/singers, the community is surely one born of descent to a certain extent. Considering the events discussed above in terms of their detrimental consequences for the Gaelic language, including its near disappearance, dissent also must also play a role in not just the language’s and music’s perpetuation but their revival. Finally, and especially in today’s global society, the Gaelic singing community is now one situated in multiple places (from the Islands of Scotland and Glasgow to Nova Scotia and Cape Breton) and often across generational gaps in heritage, so the community must also be recognised to recruit and perpetuate through affinitive processes. In my treatment of Gaelic song, I view the community in light of all three processes, and consider
the social, political, and national location of the Gaelic singing tradition as it relates to both its individual participants and community as a whole.

**The Structure of This Thesis**

In choosing songs to write about, I required that they have a seist chorus comprising nonsense vocables, since this component is the organizing feature of my analysis. To demonstrate the abundance of these choruses across time periods I include two older melodies composed before the 21st century, and two modern ones composed in the last 40 years. The songs demonstrate the use of seist across a variety of genres of Gaelic song including waulking songs and modern pop/rock music.

Having briefly summarised some theories relating to the history and inception of seist vocables, as well as ideas about community formation, in Chapter Two I discuss and analyse the two older songs “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” (unknown, c.1601) and “Òran na Cloiche” (Bàrd na Phaislig, 1950). Chapter two aims to demonstrate the original structure and use of seist choruses (to the extent that is possible given the lack of early documentation) through examining two examples of seist choruses dating from the 17th century or composed in a style reminiscent of this time period. Chapter Three, in contrast, shifts to more contemporary contexts with “Tìr an Airm” (Runrig, 1981) and “An Dà Là” (Mànran, 2016). The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the evolution of seist choruses as compared to those more historic or historically-informed examples included in the previous chapter. Finally, in Chapter Four, I discuss the development of the seist tradition based on the previous chapters and the importance it carries in current societal and community contexts.
Chapter 2. Songs from the “Old World”

This chapter is concerned with seist as they were likely heard and used historically, and includes a discussion and analysis of two older seist examples. The musical characteristics of each are examined before the social circumstances surrounding their composition are discussed and compared.

“A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais”

“A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” (Son of John, Son of James) dates from 1601, and although perhaps did not originally, now belongs to a genre of Gaelic song known as waulking songs (MacInnes, J. 2006: 260). These songs are working songs, sung as (primarily) women waulk the cloth — a long and arduous process of shrinking the tweed with ammonia while kneading and thumping the material around a table (Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluaidh 2020). “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” is set after the Blàr Càirinis (the Battle of Carinish) in Uibhist a Tuath (North Uist). Mac Iain (the subject of the song) was wounded with an arrow, and this song was sung by his foster mother as she treated his injury and soothed his screaming, some accounts detailing that girls surrounded him to distract him from the pain (MacInnes, J. 2006: 260).7 The text is found in Figure 2.1.

Although the text is straightforward, in performance these lines of text are interspersed with a seist chorus of vocables.8 The lines would be sung by a single, solo voice, and the rest of the group would join in to sing the seist vocables together, as shown in Figure 2.2.

7 “The wounds of Donald MacIain were apparently not serious but one of them was very painful. It is said that he was carried into a house with the arrow still embedded, and that a number of spinning women sang a waulking song around the table on which the warrior was laid during the extraction of the arrow head” (Runrig, Recovery, 1981).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais tha do sgeul air m'aire</th>
<th>Son of John, son of James, your story is on my mind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latha Blar a' Chèithe bha feum air mo leanabh</td>
<td>On the day of the Battle of the Landing place there was need for my baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bha smal air na speuran ’s na reultan ’gam falach.</td>
<td>The skies were obscured and the stars were hidden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latha Blàr na Féithe bha do léine salach;</td>
<td>On the day of the Battle of the Ditch your shirt was soiled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bha ‘n saighead 'na spreòd 'n corp seòlta na glaine;</td>
<td>The arrow was projecting from your clean-cut body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bha fuil do chuim chùbhraidh a'drùdhadh ro 'n anart;</td>
<td>The blood of your fragrant breast was dripping through the linen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bha fuil do chuirp uasail air uachdar an fhearainn</td>
<td>The blood of your noble body was on the ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S bha mise 'ga sùghadh gus na thùch air m'anail.</td>
<td>And I was sucking your blood until it stopped my breath.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.1. “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais,” version and translation taken from Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluaidh (2020)**

A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais tha do sgeul air m'aire

**Air farail ail eò, air farail ail eò**

Latha Blar a' Chèithe bha feum air mo leanabh

**Hi hò, hi ri a bhò hi èileadh, hi hò hi ri a bhò ro a hu a hi ho**

Bha smal air na speuran ’s na reultan ’gam falach

**Air farail ail eò, air farail ail eò**

Latha Blàr na Féithe bha do léine salach;

**Hi hò, hi ri a bhò hi èileadh, hi hò hi ri a bhò ro a hu a hi ho**

Etc.

**Figure 2.2. Seist-vocables interspersed within “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” (seist vocables italicized in bold; spelling phonetic and not standardized)**

9 Reports of Gaels drinking blood are fairly common; see MacInnes, J. (2006: 3), Renwick (1934: 62), and Partridge (1980: 25-37).
I chose this song to illustrate the age of the seist chorus tradition (the inception of which is too long ago to pinpoint due to the nature of its oral transmission). Although most likely dating back to before the early 17th century, this music in its close-to-original form is still popular today. Versions of “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” are sung live by groups such as Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluaidh and have been recorded by prominent Gaelic singers such as Kathleen MacInnes, Flora MacNeil, and Karen Matheson.10 Below I compare two versions, with slightly differing melodies and texts (markedly different versions of the same song were a common feature of aurally transmitted traditional music before they began to be written down and exist in more concretely documented manner; Campbell and Collinson 1969: 237).

This first version is an old transcription I found in the Frances Tolmie collection in the National Library of Scotland (refer to Figure 2.3). Frances Tolmie (1840-1926) was a Gaelic singer and folklorist from the Isle of Skye. She travelled extensively, collecting huge numbers of Gaelic folk songs and filling scores of notebooks (now housed at the National Library of Scotland), and publishing “One Hundred and Five songs of occupation from the Western Isles of Scotland” (1911, reprinted 1997).11 The influence of her work on the Gaelic song repertory can still be seen today.

---

10 Kathleen MacInnes, Óg-Mhadainn Shamhraidh (Summer Dawn, 2006); Flora MacNeil, Orain Floraidh (2000); Karen Matheson, The Dreaming Sea (1996).
11 Her collection further inspiring others, such as Rose Ethel Bassin; see Bassin (1951).
I took some time last summer (2019) to look through her collection, during which time I found the above notebook entry. Her notebooks varied, some containing entire songs meticulously notated, others containing just lyrics or fragments of songs. Of the numerous songs in her collection, most were categorised as “Òran Tàlaidh” (lullabies), “Puirt à Beul” (tunes from the mouth), or “Òran Luadhaidh” (work songs) such as waulking songs. The reason Tolmie documented these song genres more frequently is unclear: these songs might just be more common, perhaps the communities she was involved with sung these songs most frequently, or perhaps she did not feel the need to record other (more formal, e.g., bardic) songs due to their previous documentation, focusing instead on less-documented genres.

For more information see Sparling (2000).
The second example is my own transcription of the melody Kathleen MacInnes uses in her version on Òg-Mhadainn Shamhradh (Summer Dawn, 2006; refer to Figure 2.4). MacInnes, a well-known Gaelic singer, has recorded and performed a large variety of songs, available through YouTube and two solo albums, Òg-Mhadainn Shamhradh (Summer Dawn, 2006) and Cille-Bhrìde (Kilbride, 2012). Òg-Mhadainn Shamhradh contains a number of songs with seist choruses, among them “Òran na Cloiche” (see page 22 of this thesis), “Dh’erich mi Moch Madainn Cheitein” (I Arose One May Morning), and “Bha Mise Raoir air an Airigh” (Last Night on the Shieling) — all of these similarly demonstrate a more traditional, historically informed representation of seist choruses.

Figure 2.4. Transcription (melody only), first verse of “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” from Kathleen MacInnes, Òg-Mhadainn Shamhradh (Summer Dawn, 2006; seist chorus vocables in blue)
When comparing the two different versions, it immediately struck me that although the melodies (and some of the text) might differ, the seist chorus has retained its position, length (comprising the majority of the song), and complexity. While the solo sections with text are more melodically simple in both versions (almost direct repetitions of phrases, largely stepwise motion, with the focus here being on the lyrical content), the seist sections have larger melodic leaps and more varied and longer melodic phrases. Both seist sections differ in syllables and melody, which — if Campbell and Collinson are right — suggests that these might be different songs entirely. It is unclear to what extent this seist-exclusivity is enforced today; if one version was recorded first, it is likely to be this version that survives, with other variants falling out of use.

What of seist’s function? In pursuing this question, I began by interviewing Frances Dunlop, leader of the Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluaidh (waulking song group) based in Greenock, Inverclyde, Scotland. Frances was tremendously helpful in discussing waulking songs with me, her group being one of the very few practising and live-performing groups left in Scotland. Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluaidh is an ensemble consisting of 8-12 women (and, according to Frances, sometimes the odd man) who practise these songs and tour them both within and beyond Scotland, educating others on Waulking songs and their history. They often perform with cloth — and sometimes real tweed — passing it around the table in a loop and thumping it on the table, recreating the songs’ “authentic” surroundings (Frances Dunlop, personal communication, January 3rd, 2020). This performing of waulking songs in their original setting is very rare, and as far as I am aware they are the only group in Scotland regularly doing so. Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluaidh is not only keeping the songs alive in this way: their website is an invaluable
resource for anyone wishing to know more about waulking songs, and includes videos and descriptions of the songs as well as a comprehensive repertoire and lyrics index.

Frances very generously gave of her time in both a sit-down meeting in Glasgow in January 2020 and multiple clarifying email correspondences since. It was Frances who suggested I look at both the seist’s function in memory recall as well as its function as an instigator for joining in and consequent community bonding:

I think it’s just a case of making it easier for people to join in. In waulking songs the chorus tends to be more intricate musically than the verse, so it’s not always as easy as one might expect for learners to pick it up! The older songs will have a chorus entirely made up of vocables, newer songs may have words mixed in, or be composed entirely of words. (personal communication, February 23rd, 2020)

A popular theory on the original function of seist choruses – although undoubtedly speculative – among practitioners today seems to be both encouraging the joining in of singing by the larger group, and to aid in memory recall (since these songs were in aural circulation long before they were written down).

While these features of seist choruses may have contributed to their initial popularity, the original function of seist is subject to a fair amount of subjective speculation. It is entirely possible that they came about as a result of either (or a combination) of the above theories; it seems generally agreed upon that they could have arisen to fulfil many functions such as to instigate joining in by the larger group, to aid in memory in the days before the songs were written down, or even to elongate the songs so as to be able to dance or work for longer. In writing about these sections, I do not hope to solve the mystery of their inception (since finding proof of this is now likely impossible); my focus is, rather, in investigating why these sections have a sustained presence in Gaelic music today – the functions they have evolved to fulfill. “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” illustrates perfectly the early use of seist, and waulking songs give the
reader a good sense of the circumstances surrounding their original use as likely both a memory aid and a communal, join-in section fostering a sense of community bonding and catharsis.

“Óran Na Cloiche”

Óran na Cloiche is perhaps one of the most frequently recorded Gaelic songs (recorded by two of the three artists examined here: Kathleen MacInnes and Mànran) and comes from the ancient Bardic tradition. It conforms to a traditional style, although it was written far more recently, in 1950, by Dòmhnall Mac an t-Saoir (Donald MacIntyre), the Bàrd Phàislig (Bard of Paisley; 1899-1964). For this reason, I chose to categorise it as a “Song from the Old World.” Originally from South Uist, MacIntyre won the Bardic Crown at the Royal National Mòd (a very prestigious musical and cultural festival held annually in Scotland) in 1938 (Tobar an Dualchais 2020) with his poem “Aeòlus!” being hailed as the “Gaelic poem of the century” (MacIntyre and Innes 2008). Known particularly for his long, poetic songs and ballads, “Óran na Cloiche” at 20 verses long is not among his longest works, though it is arguably among his most well-known. Revivals of MacIntyre’s work have become more frequent in recent years, including publications of “Aeòlus!” (published some 70 years after its Mòd performance) and a performance of his songs at the Gaelic Book Festival “Leabhar’s Craic” in Glasgow in 2013 (MacMillan 2013).

In “Óran na Cloiche” MacIntyre references the story of the Stone of Destiny, which was stolen from Scotland and housed in Westminster Abbey. MacIntyre recounts the tale of a group of students from Glasgow stealing the stone back from Westminster Abbey in the dead of night and smuggling it back to Scotland. This politically-charged content is fairly typical of MacIntyre, whose songs often referenced current or past political events in a way that made his views clear:

[He was] far from being parochial in his outlook, because he took a keen interest in the wider issues of the world at large. Nevertheless, he was essentially a Scottish
Nationalist at heart, although not directly associated with the Scottish Nationalist Party. When the Stone of Destiny was removed from Westminster Abbey he rejoiced greatly and in his “Óran na Cloiche” it was evident where his sentiments and aspirations lay. When the Stone was returned he felt very bitter about it, and in his song “Nuair chaidh a’ Chlach a thilleadh” he makes it quite clear that if he had got his way this would never have happened. (MacMillan 1968: xxvi)

Both Kathleen MacInnes and the Scottish rock band Mànran have recently recorded versions of this song, each using the same abridged version of the text (including 6 of the 20 verses), as shown in Figure 2.5. Each verse is separated by the following seist chorus:

'S i u ro bha ho ro hilli um bo ha
Hilli um bo ruaig thu i hilli um bo ha
'S i u ro bha ho ro hilli um bo ha

While the recordings’ styles are very different — MacInnes uses a more traditional instrumentation of whistles, fiddles, bodhran, and acoustic guitar, while Mànran uses a more rock-influenced set up of drum kit, bagpipes, and electric guitar — the structure of the verse and seist is the same, as shown in Figure 2.6 (MacInnes’ version).

The transcription of MacInnes’ version highlights the differences between this more modern version of seist and “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais.” The seist here is still a little less rhythmically and melodically uniform as compared to the sections of text, but the text for this song is more fast-moving than in “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais.” Often multiple syllables are squashed into the space of one pitch, making it very difficult for a group to sing along to (and ideally suited to a soloist). The seist contains — as is to be expected — elements that make it more accessible to the lay singer, such as easier to pronounce syllables and space for breathing. The placement of the seist here is also very different from that of “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais.” Instead of one line of text alternating with one line of seist, “Óran na Cloiche” is structured as one larger section of text followed by one larger section of seist. This is very similar to a modern
The Stone that my grandmother
And grandfather use to talk about
Has returned as it left

My brave Stone!
And I don’t care whether it’s in Kerrera
Callendar or Calvay
As long as it’s in
Steep, rugged Scotland

To be put in a place of refuge
Which will conceal it safely
So that they can't, they won't manage to
Remove a single fragment of it

The Stone that was lost to us
Prised from their grasp
And certainly, if it has returned
That's a very good thing

Let us swear by our hand
Each and every one of us
That we will allow nothing to endanger The
man who unloosed it
And dared to rescue it
From an unpleasant place
If they lay hands on him
We'll need to be strong
And strike a blow for him
Using steel

The Minister was so sorrowful
When he woke that morning
His eyes bleary
As he turned out
Walking the floor
Sighing and praying
And looking at the nook
Where he’d found the stone missing

There was much pacing
And running ‘round the floor
And all he could say was
“Where did the stone go?”
And “By the Holy Mother
What will I do tomorrow
I know the Queen
Will be beside herself”

Said he, looking deathly pale
“I’d never have believed
It could have been raised from the floor
By someone no bigger than a wasp
Something is to happen to me
And heaven help me
The man who unloosed it
Must be as strong as a horse”

**Figure 2.5.** Six verses of Òran na Cloiche (verses 1-6 here correspond to verses 1, 2, 8, 11, 12, and 13 in original; (MacMillan 1968: 147-152). Translation: Mànran, 2020

pop verse-chorus structure, indicative of the seist’s flexibility and suggesting that the seist has recently adapted to fulfil a more chorus-like function and comply with modern structural norms.

While the two versions of “Òran na Cloiche” differ greatly in genre and instrumentation, and so might appeal to different tastes, the song remains popular across various genres. I believe the seist chorus is included here because it provides Gaelic learners with an accessible element to enjoy singing along or listening to without tripping up on intricate lyrics. In this way, I think these seist choruses have developed from light-hearted, middle sections perhaps formed to aid in memory or simply to encourage people to join in, to sections purposefully inserted to include everyone. This inclusion of a section everyone — even Gaelic learners or non-speakers — can easily learn and join in on is particularly interesting given both the time period of the song’s composition and its lyrical content. With the obvious political undertones — from the subject of the song itself (the stone), to verse four which pokes fun at the minister who found the stone missing, laughing at the thought of him pacing and fretting, clearly celebrating the students’ valiant attempt to return the stone to its home — the resulting message is impossible to see as non-political.
This song was also written in the 1950s, right at the beginning of the folk revival and at a time when Scottish nationalism and questions surrounding independence were flourishing. The song is very clearly one communicating distaste at English rule: MacIntyre was upset that important Scottish historical artefacts had been stolen and were still being held centuries later, and used the medium of music to advertise this and express his distaste (the students’ success
and subsequent media coverage\(^\text{13}\) in the decades to come prompted the return of the stone to Scotland in 1996).

The song’s continued popularity also speaks to the abiding potency of its message. Even though it is sung in Gaelic, the seist chorus makes the song and its message accessible to non-Gaelic speakers or Gaelic learners not yet fluent. I believe it might be for this reason that modern songs of a political nature have retained this feature of more ancient traditional songs.

\(^{13}\) The earliest of which include this song, but the incident has since become symbolic of the difficult relationship between Scotland and Westminster, and has been referenced multiple times in various media including the series “Hamish Macbeth” (1995, Daniel Boyle and Nicholas Renton); the film Stone of Destiny (2008, written and directed by Charles Martin Smith); the TV series “Highlander” (1992-7, Davis-Panzer Productions); the novel Romanno Bridge (2008; Andrew Greig); and in jest in the novel The Fifth Elephant (1999, Discworld series, Sir Terry Pratchett; when the Dwarf King’s coronation involves the traditional bread, the “Scone of Stone”), among others.
Chapter 3. Songs from the “Modern World”

This chapter is concerned with modern versions of seist, and is intended to demonstrate how these sections have developed over time. This chapter focuses on these modern seist choruses, particularly in rock and popular music genres in Scotland. As before, the musical characteristics of each are examined before the social circumstances surrounding their composition are discussed and compared.

“Tìr an Airm”

Runrig, a Scottish rock band formed on the Isle of Skye in 1973, is an example of a modern band implementing these traditional techniques. Runrig are very popular in Scotland and have over their 50-year career become Scottish musical icons, having released fourteen studio albums (not including their multiple live albums and compilation albums) from 1978 to 2016. Their live cover of “Loch Lomond” (a traditional Scottish song) has over 4 million plays on Spotify. Many of their songs are sung in Gaelic, the band having been a pioneer in both Scottish Gaelic rock music and taking a bilingual approach to Scottish popular music since the 1970s. Their first studio album, *Play Gaelic* (1978), is sung entirely in Scottish Gaelic; however, most of their albums employ a mixture of English and Gaelic and contain both arrangements of traditional songs and new compositions.
An deid thu leam a ribhinn òg
Come along with me, my young girl
Gu tìr mo gràidh sitheil sona
To the peaceful, happy land
'S chi thu saighdearan a' ruith
And you will see soldiers running around
Am measg nan lusan bèagh 'sa mhonadh
Amongst the beautiful wild flowers

A' Coimhead a mach air maduinn chiuin
Looking out on a peaceful morning
Air baile mòr cruinn is cionn na beinne
On the great town at the head of the mountain
'S bhon is ciuin na tonnan gorm
And though the waves are calm
Tha ceòl ru aig ceòl na mara
There's a new music in the music of the sea

'S an deid thu leam gu tìr mo ghràidh
And will you go with me to the land I love
Seall na h-eoin Dhorchas Dhona
To see the dark evil birds
Treasbadh speuran as ar cionn
Ploughing the skies above us
Deanamh air Steornabhagh le cabhaig
Making for Stornoway at high speed

Nis leugh t-eachdraich, fosgail suil
Now read your history, open your eyes
Anns gach linn mu dhoigh an
To every generation and to the ways of the military
Airnm Stampadh air na croitean seagail
Stamping on the rye in the crofts
'S beathanann òg aig gillean Uibhist
And the young lives of the Uist boys

Cha deid mise gu an rìgh
But I cannot go "for the King"
Cha deid mise an corr a shabaid
I cannot fight anymore
O lunnain mhealt, a Bhreatuinn fhoilleil
The deceit of London, the treachery of Britain
Cha seas mi ach 'son sith nan eilean
I'll only support peace in the islands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 3.1. Text of Tìr an Airm by Runrig, from the album Recovery (1981). Translation: musixmatch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Tìr an Airm” (World of War/Weapons) is a song written by Runrig for their third album, Recovery (1981). Its text, reproduced in Figure 3.1, is highly political in nature, describing the ruinous effect that military presence from the south has had upon the Scottish Islands, referencing the peaceful land that the islands once were as compared to now. Each verse is interspersed with a seist consisting of both vocables and one line of text (see also Figure 3.2):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ho ro horainn o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fàilte gu tìr an Airm (welcome to the land of war/weapons)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ho ro horainn o</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

14 For more songs from this time, see Tolmie (1997 [1911]).
“Tir an Airm” takes the modernised verse-chorus structure of the text and seist sections as seen in “Òran na Cloiche” and develops it yet further, adding a line of text in the middle of the seist vocables.

Here, seist is treated more like a modern “chorus” as found in pop/rock music. The melody of the seist is not any more complicated or melodically interesting than the verse —
octave leaps and syncopation are common in both sections, although the text is a little slower paced in the seist vocables. The change to “chorus-feel” here is largely due to the instrumentation: at the seist the music gets louder, the drum rhythm includes pounding quarter notes (imitative of war drums), and multiple background voices join in singing in unison. As such this chorus-seist hybrid retains important seist qualities such as multiple voices and vocables, but also includes modern chorus qualities such as non-vocal text and marked changes in instrumentation.

In “Tir an Airm” the warlike feel achieved by the instrumentation and lyrical content makes the seist vocables stand out all the more. Incitement is often a desired effect of war songs or marching songs, so seist sections being included here is both almost expected (given the nature of the lyrics’ accessibility and stimulation of singing-along being desirable) and a surprise (given the rock genre and modern song structure).

Calum MacDonald, founding member of Runrig, was kind enough to answer some questions about Runrig’s inclusion of seist choruses in this way. MacDonald likened it to other song traditions, realising that this vocable-based singing is not unique to Gaelic song traditions:

[Seist] is a strong feature throughout a whole range of Gaelic song output. It is indeed widely used within waulking songs, but also within various work songs. It is also used in everything from love songs to humorous songs. I suppose it is common to many music traditions where this type of vocalisation provides the simplicity and repetition that will help the rhythm of the song and hence the context in which the song is used, and that can be anything from working to dancing. Even in modern pop tradition from the ’50s onwards, many of those vocal forms are used, for the exact same reasons as their use within folk tradition: “shu - bi - doo - ah,” “la, la, la,” etc. (personal communication, February 24th, 2020)

MacDonald added that he is not surprised that seist sections continue to be included in more modern styles of Gaelic singing, since he believes they make the message of the song stronger,
providing an opportunity for “repetition, communal response, and assisting lever to groove and rhythm” (personal communication, February 24th, 2020).

The seist chorus encourages catharsis and community bonding, which makes the experience of listening to the music a great deal more inclusionary. In response to asking about this ability to foster community bonding/communal catharsis-like reactions, MacDonald agreed that the seist contributes to achieving this:

It certainly makes communal singing easier to achieve and therefore the bonding you refer to. Also, with the songs that have political undertones, or what I would call “message songs,” the message can be stronger and more pronounced when isolated within and around the scat style vocalisation. (personal communication, February 24th, 2020)

The bonding effects of communal seist singing, therefore, are most likely experienced in Gaelic speakers. My concern, however, is if these effects transfer over to non-Gaelic speakers (or learners with not much experience), whether the result of this might impact on the music’s popularity, and the implications for such politically charged messages within the music. When asked about this, MacDonald responded:

I think this [seist syllables making music more accessible] is true whether you are a Gaelic learner or not. It makes a song more accessible from the outset, irrespective of whether it is in any particular language context, but of course, in any language that is alien to the listener, the simpler the words and the vocalisation, the easier it is to connect with the song. This is something that is universal to all songs. (personal communication, February 24th, 2020)

The seist is of particular interest when looking at Gaelic songs in a Scottish context as a whole, an environment that is not majority Gaelic-speaking while simultaneously undergoing a Gaelic revival. This Gaelic revival is creating more and more interest in Gaelic music, as is evidenced in the popularity of modern Gaelic bands such as Mànran (see following section).

Runrig’s inclusion of seist sections makes their music simultaneously both modern and traditional in its style:
This type of use is not something we contrived in any deliberate way. It just happened naturally, especially in the songs we were writing in the ’70s and ’80s where we were bridging two cultures, taking the influence of an old music tradition and trying to integrate that into a modern song form. (MacDonald, personal communication, February 24th, 2020)

Runrig was on the front lines in this revival, and although their inclusion of seist sections was not a conscious decision, this fusing of styles has influenced many Gaelic bands since, and has undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of Gaelic pop and rock music today.

“An Dà Là”

“An Dà Là” (The Two Days) is the fourth and final song I will look at to demonstrate the use of seist vocable choruses and their development in modern Scottish Gaelic music. A personal favourite, I chose “An Dà Là” because of its contrasting use of seist, comparatively less-political lyrics, and recent release date.

Described as a “supergroup” on their website, Mànran have been a marked presence on the Scottish music scene for 10 years:

Internationally recognised as one of the most iconic and respected Scottish bands on the road today, the seven-piece show no signs of slowing down as they continue to push boundaries and explore new musical and geographical territory each year, bringing their uplifting and unique live performances to stages across the world. (Mànran 2020)

Mànran have released three studio albums to date: Mànran (2011), The Test (2013), and An Dà Là (2017; the title track was previously released in 2016 as a single). Their albums, much like Runrig’s, contain a mixture of traditional song arrangements (Mànran included “Òran na Cloiche” in their self-titled debut album) and new compositions, and are sung in both Scottish Gaelic and English.

The title track “An Dà Là” was written by one of their founding members, Ewen Henderson. This song, while also being the most recent to be examined in this thesis, also
demonstrates the greatest degree of accessibility, situating it very uniquely within the cross-cultural, cross-generational, and bi-lingual contexts that make up modern Scottish society.

Unusually, “An Dà Là” alternates between Scottish Gaelic and English, which makes it appeal to speakers of both languages. The lyrical content is political, yet not in the same way as Runrig’s “Tìr an Airm” or Duncan MacIntyre’s “Òran na Cloiche,” i.e., by expressing views sympathetic with Scottish nationalism/Scottish independence. “An Dà Là” instead expresses general distaste for the state of the world and what it has come to. There are no specific references to Scotland (which is unusual in Gaelic music), and the only person (cryptically) referenced in the lyrics is Donald Trump: the name “Dhomhnaill Iain” in Gaelic translates to “Donald John” in English which, paired with “thar a’ chuain” (over the ocean; verse 6), refers to Donald John Trump, the 45th president of the United States. Figure 3.3 provides the text with Gaelic translation where needed; each line of the text is separated by a seist line (italicised), as follows:

Seo mar chunna sùilean òga
Ro-hò, thugaibh, thugaibh i-ri
A dh’fhairich saoghal bha trom, fo-bhròn
Ro-hò hi-o, hi-o

The seist is interspersed between the text lines in a manner similar to traditional music, seen before in “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais,” with one line of text alternating with one line of seist instead of a more modern verse-chorus structure as seen in “Òran na Cloiche” and “Tìr an Airm” (refer to Figure 3.4).
This is as it was seen by young eyes
That learned of a world burdened by sadness

As I ascended the slopes of the land of heroes
And descended forests of foreign towns

Injustice hidden from view
The time has come to reveal it

It’s a poor wealth that comes without company
The tongue is warm; the heart is cold

Donald Iain over the ocean,
Won’t you listen to the everlasting truth?

How evil your hateful, vain words
That would sully the goodness of mankind

The emancipation will come against the flow
And loving hands will be on the tiller

Be bold, be strong

Figure 3.3. Lyrics (Ewen Henderson) to “An Dà Là” (Mànran, 2020)
This song differs greatly from “Tir an Airm,” not only in structure but in content. Instead of expressing frustration specific to the Scottish islands and their military occupation, “An Dà Là” expresses more a general sadness at the state of the world in a very accessible and humanistic way. The text does not mention specific places or state political/nationalistic viewpoints. The only specific reference made is to Donald Trump, someone who is very much in the public eye and so not an obscure reference by any means, making the song yet more accessible. This sad helplessness at the state of the world and yet hopefulness that change will come “and loving hands will be on the tiller” is a sentiment that a great many people share, and a hope that is applicable to a variety of situations.

I was very fortunate to be able to speak to Ewen Henderson of Mànran, who generously gave of his time in answering my questions about seist in general and “An Dà Là” specifically. Henderson’s comments echoed those of Calum MacDonald and Frances Dunlop. All three pointed out that sections of songs containing vocables were very common in numerous other song traditions, and that there is no real word for the seist vocables section in Gaelic culture. Henderson added that it is so embedded is the tradition that it likely transcended the need for assigning it a name.
When asked about the use and function these vocable seist sections fulfill, Henderson replied:

Quite often a whole chorus will consist of only vocable sounds (though these, too, can sometimes be actual words — “eile” for example, meaning “other” or “another”), but they are also used as spacers between actual lyrics in some songs, too. I suppose this can help punctuate a narrative, give extra emphasis to the actual lyrics and/or, on a practical note, buy the singer some time to remember what’s coming next. That use of vocables (or meaningless lyrics) as a “spacer” is pretty [much found] across a number of folk traditions and no wonder: these songs can be incredibly long in their full form. As a social function, common vocable sounds in a refrain make it easy for anyone to join in, whether they know the song well or not. To my knowledge, there isn’t any one form of Gaelic song that doesn’t feature some level of vocable usage. (personal communication, February 27th, 2020)

Henderson’s suggestion that the seist vocables have a function as a spacer somewhat supports what Frances Dunlop and Collins et al. suggested earlier, that seist aids memory. While the original function of seist vocables is subject to speculation, I do think that their speculated use as memory aid is a likely one — many singers nowadays can recognise a song by its seist alone. I am not, however, convinced that this theory is as relevant today as it might have been earlier in Gaelic song history, nor that it is the singular reason for seist’s sustained presence in modern Gaelic music.

Henderson agrees that these vocables make the music more accessible, although he disagrees that it is because they are inherently simpler than Gaelic words (although some are simpler than others). He instead suggests that there are just no repercussions for pronouncing them wrong — the singers joining in are not in as vulnerable a position as they would be, were they trying to join in with the real Gaelic words wherein they might accidentally mispronounce a word and say something they do not mean:

In Gaelic, vocables can be simpler sounds to make than lyrics but, equally, they can also be pretty complex in their subtleties and nuances and, occasionally, downright complex. In their simpler form, they’re a great way of engaging learners and non-speakers with Gaelic song and if they don’t quite nail the sounds, at least they’re not obscuring actual
words and unwittingly contorting their meaning. I think this probably plays a role in their continuing usage and the continuing popularity of songs featuring simple vocables. (personal communication, February 27th, 2020)

When asked about the wide range of vocables, Henderson — much like Frances Dunlop and Calum MacDonald — immediately recognised that Gaelic traditions were not alone in this feature. Henderson further elaborated on the extent to which vocables are used in Gaelic tradition and in modern popular music:

As far as my knowledge stretches, vocable choruses/refrains have been used in various song forms for various reasons. Off the top of my head, I can think of songs of mourning that make extensive use of vocables — one can imagine the cathartic power either individually or as a group making these sounds out loud. The ancient mourning tradition of *caoineadh* (keening) was largely based on vocable sounds. Equally, I can think of a good few political songs (Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair’s “Óran don Phrionnsa,” for example) where vocables have clearly been used to make the song and the propaganda therein more accessible and more readily retained by the listener. Just as valid are the good-time *cèitidh* songs where vocables play a big role in encouraging the bonding resultant of convivial group singing.

Whatever the occasion, there’s a vocable for that and people are still using them all the time across different cultures and genres. ( Plenty of pop examples: the Beatles “Hey Jude,” the Proclaimers “500 Miles,” or Simon & Garfunkel “The Boxer.”) As I touched on above, I feel they’re a good way to spread the implicit feeling of a song without distorting the explicit (lyrics, etc.). (personal communication, February 27th, 2020)

His list of both Gaelic song genres and modern popular songs demonstrates just how wide-ranging and timeless this tradition is, transcending genre, time period, and language differences. This is an especially important feature to note, since the growing Gaelic-learning population exists in exactly this way, crossing multiple societal boundaries and situated across a huge variety of categories, as discussed earlier:

In terms of modern songwriting, the above practical and social reasons for including vocables are just as valid today as they were 600 years ago. People still love to sing together and, in an age where Gaelic has been pushed back to the extreme western fringes of Europe, the (sometimes) simpler sounds of a vocable chorus can make the music more accessible to audiences who perhaps don’t speak any Gaelic. In terms of solo performance, the use of vocables in a concert setting is, to my mind, a little out of place and one would always hope for some kind of audience participation during a song that
features vocables. That said, vocables can offer the opportunity to express a little more emotion without the risk of obscuring key lyrics or disrupting the flow of the bàrdachd (poetry). Also, for many artists writing in Gaelic today, including vocables can imbue a song with some sort of tangible connection to the past and a degree of cultural continuity. (personal communication, February 27th, 2020)

The above comments succinctly hint at one of my main questions surrounding seist vocable sections in modern Gaelic music: the evolving role of seist as they continue to exist in a society in which Gaelic is not mainstream yet experiencing a revival. It is apparent that seist vocables do have power in making songs in Gaelic more accessible to those with little or no Gaelic, an important feature given the majority of Gaelic learners in Scotland today. This feature of Gaelic song is now more important than ever, and has a potency in not only its ability to incite others through group singing and collective engagement but in its accessibility in a society where the historic national language is spoken by the minority.

When asked specifically about his inclusion of seist vocable lines in “An Dà Là,” Henderson notes:

I included vocable sounds in “An Dà Là,” as I was trying to recreate the feel of work song — perhaps a waulking song or rowing song — and evoke the history of protest often present in work songs across different cultures. Musically, the song arrangement features a number of cyclical motifs that echo the repetition of the vocable refrains, combining to build tension and energy through the song. The song is a call for more understanding and compassion from those in power worldwide but specifically calls on Donald Trump to reject the evil ways of his life and turn his power to love and good. As his mother was a Gaelic speaker from the Isle of Lewis, I thought the song might carry more weight were it written in the style of a traditional Hebridean song. (personal communication, February 27th, 2020)

“An Dà Là” is unique in its content and structure, and Henderson combines seamlessly the modern lyrics with the structure of a more traditional song. The conscious decision to juxtapose the modern lyrics not situated within a specific time or place and written in both of Scotland’s languages, Gaelic and English, along with the older and more traditional structure of alternating text with seist lines — as opposed to a more modern verse-chorus
structure — gives this song the illusion of occupying both modern and traditional worlds, making the message embedded in the song both more relatable and potent.

We have now seen how seist vocables have evolved since they began to be documented through a series of song examples ranging from historically informed traditional recreations to 21st-century popular music. They have been discussed both within the context of their physical (sonic, textural) characteristics, and through the experience of three practising musicians. In the next chapter, I will discuss the importance of seist choruses and the implications of their continued presence in Gaelic music.
Chapter 4. Social Functions and Conclusions

The Social Function of Seist

As can be seen in the previous chapters, seist vocables and the seist chorus tradition have evolved since their first documentation, with each stage in their evolution still practised today. This has been briefly chronicled above using Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluaidh’s recreation of the historic tradition of Waulking songs in “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais”, political/protest songs written by Donald MacIntye, a representative of the ancient Bardic tradition, in “Òran na Cloiche”, and modern rock and pop music as seen in “Tìr an Airm” and “An Dà Là” to demonstrate the changes in seist vocables’ characteristics and their varying uses and functions over time.

In this concluding chapter I will focus primarily on the evolution of the social function of these vocables. Each of the four songs observed represents a different community that aligns more strongly with certain aspects of Shelemay’s theory of community inception and continuation, performs a different social function, and exemplifies a different stage in Scottish political and social history. I will look at each song individually below, before summarising with some responses gathered from interviews cited previously.

“A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais”

“A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” was set after the Blàr Càirinis (the Battle of Carinish) in Uibhist a Tuath (North Uist). This was a clan battle between clan MacLeod and MacDonald; stemming from an insult regarding a marriage refusal, this feud continued for some time (Anonymous 1780: 68). Dating from 1601, the song is set in a transitional time in Scottish
history, the MacLeod-MacDonald dispute being one of the last clan feuds (these were becoming fewer and further between as the smaller territories, clans, and chiefs came under one rule).\textsuperscript{15} This song is still very popular today, with traditional versions of the song sung by prominent Gaelic singers such as Kathleen MacInnes, Flora MacNeil, and Karen Matheson,\textsuperscript{16} and modern rock versions such as “‘Iain ‘ic Sheumais” by Runrig (Recovery, 1981). Its sustained popularity is perhaps evidence of nostalgia for Gaelic Scotland; as such, these older songs I believe play into Shelemay’s theory of community formation and continuation in a particularly complex way. A historic tale relating to family feud, “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” can very easily be seen to appeal to those communities of descent. This explains the song’s popularity to some extent, as families and individuals often are interested in their own history, lineage, or ancestry. Shelemay describes descent communities as “united through what are understood from within to be shared identities, whether they are grounded in historical fact, are newly invented, or emerge from some combination of historical circumstance and creative transformation” (2011: 367), and are often generated by aspects of individual identity such as ethnicity, kinship, religion, and nationality.

While of the four songs chosen “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” aligns most with descent processes, I am sceptical that the role this song might play in community formation has remained unchanged since 1601. I do not believe that this song’s longevity can be solely attributed to communities of descent (which in today’s society in any case are not as clear cut as descending from/belonging to a single clan) and their interest in their family heritage. Communities of dissent and affinity must also play a role in perpetuating this music, especially since revival and/or continuation of this music is so tied to the revival of the Scottish Gaelic Language (and

\textsuperscript{15} For further information on Clan MacDonald, see MacKenzie (1881) and Anonymous (1780).
\textsuperscript{16} Kathleen MacInnes, Òg-Mhadainn Shamhraidh (2006); Flora MacNeil, Orain Floraidh (2000); and Karen Matheson, The Dreaming Sea (1996).
that this, in turn, is related to a move against English-language-centric UK procedures and legislation). The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act (2005)\(^{17}\) is evidence of this, securing Gaelic as an official language of Scotland, “commanding equal respect” as the English language. This in turn has led to a greater Gaelic-medium education program,\(^{18}\) the long-term effects of which will be seen in the coming decade (as indicated by the increased use of and interest in Gaelic music). As has been touched on before, more individuals in Scotland now are Gaelic learners than fluent native speakers, and music might represent to this population more of a romanticised culture than one to which they belong. If this were the case, historic songs such as “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais” represent Scotland in a time before rule from the south was firmly established, and thus must also be related to communities driven by dissent and affinity.

The seist chorus in the above context thus plays a highly important and complex role today as Scotland is facing somewhat of a transitional time, both in implementing changes to language education (increasing Gaelic fluency in a primarily English-speaking society) and issues such as independence are very much on the people’s mind.

“Òran na Cloiche”

“Òran na Cloiche,” set some 350 years after “A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais,” has evolved in its content from family stories, clan feuds, and battles between clans to more nationalistic content (Scotland at this point had more of a cohesive national identity, not consisting of separate clans). “Òran na Cloiche” not only references the Stone of Scone (Stone of Destiny) and its repossession by a group of students from Westminster Abbey (where the stolen artefact had been housed), but pokes fun at the whole situation, particularly the minister’s reaction at finding

\(^{17}\) Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, Commencement Order 2006.
\(^{18}\) For more information on Gaelic-medium education and its effect on students, see O’Hanlon et al. (2010).
the (very heavy) stone to be missing. Dòmhnall Mac an t-Saoir (Donald MacIntyre), the bard behind this song, describes the minister’s turmoil gleefully in a manner which makes his political and nationalist opinions very clear. This content marks “Òran na Cloiche” as an example of a song more aligned with dissent than descent or affinity, although Gaelic in the 1950s was still a language few could speak, and therefore does rely on descent-driven processes such as language ability (this being before the 2005 Gaelic Language Act and other efforts by the Scottish Government to increase Gaelic fluency) to some extent. As Shelemay further noted:

 Individuals involved in processes of dissent quite regularly draw on musical performance as a mechanism to enlist others in their cause. Indeed, many dissent communities emerge through music making in part because music can give voice to dissent while partially masking its critical edge and reducing risks of retribution from more powerful forces. (2011: 370)

Shelemay’s comments speak to contributing factors to the popularity and success of “Òran na Cloiche,” as well as its flexibility and appeal to different audiences. With the aim of music of dissent ultimately tied to spreading a message and recruiting others in the cause, the use of seist here is of special interest given the highly nationalist and political message of the song. The majority of Scottish citizens in 1950 (as is still the case today) were not able to speak Gaelic; the use of seist in songs of dissent, therefore, contributes to the songs’ — and therefore political messages’ — accessibility, reaching more people, spreading the message farther, and enlisting more people in the cause than it might otherwise were it not to include such accessible elements.

“Tìr an Airm”

“Tìr an Airm” is similar to “Òran na Cloiche” in that the motivation behind the song is largely dissent driven. The islands of Scotland were frequently occupied (as was the majority of
the mainland). It is not clear exactly which of these stages of occupation the song is based upon, since occupation of the islands and forced recruitment of Scottish men for the British army were regular and sparsely documented occurrences. The extent to which Scotland was occupied after Culloden (the last big battle of Scottish resistance) has been documented for the first time by the Stennis Historical Society, led by David Kennedy. Whether these occupations are those to which Runrig is referring is unclear, but the effect of these has clearly been detrimental to the people who lived not just on the islands but in mainland Scotland. This is especially made clear through the lyrics to verse four and five, which warn the listener to be wary of the military and learn their ways to better prepare themselves, before expressing exhaustion and frustration at the situation, and a desire for peace to return to their homeland (refer to Figure 4.1).

On the back of the original record cover above the lyrics, Runrig writes “And still we allow the shadow of war to hang over our islands. This song traces the military build up in the Western Isles over the past twenty years” (Runrig 1981). The military influence can be heard throughout the song, with elements such as powerful, march-like, drum rhythms – an element which makes the song’s message of protest against military occupation of the islands even more clear. The message of dissent is also clear, and although it has less overtly nationalistic content than “Óran na Cloiche,” the use of seist fulfils a similar function in both: providing a sing-along, accessible section to further the dissent message through increasing the accessibility of the text in a society where Gaelic is not the language of the majority.

19 The original map could not be procured; see The Newsroom (2018) and also “Military Maps of Scotland” (National Library of Scotland, accessed February 2020).
Figure 4.1. text of “Tìr an Airm by Runrig,” verses 4 and 5, from Recovery (1981)

Aside from the function of seist as an accessibility booster and prompt for joining in,

Calum MacDonald of Runrig brought up the point that the use of seist is natural to Gaelic speaking musicians:

This type of use is not something we contrived in any deliberate way. It just happened naturally, especially in the songs we were writing in the ’70s and ’80s where we were bridging two cultures, taking the influence of an old music tradition and trying to integrate that into a modern song form. (personal communication, February 24th, 2020)

This natural, community-bridging function of the seist choruses is noteworthy, and this function of seist must to some extent aid in communicating dissent-driven messages:

With the songs that have political undertones, or what I would call “message songs,” the message can be stronger and more pronounced when isolated within and around the scat style vocalization. (personal communication, February 24th, 2020)

This natural feel of seist in Gaelic music (as other vocables in other musical traditions, as pointed out by my interviewees), as well as its accessibility and the possibility that it might make verse text more emphatic, explains its continued use and function in music of dissent, even if the decision to include seist is not necessarily always a conscious one.

The 1981 album Recovery in fact contains more than one song of dissent, with the title track “Recovery” also mentioning dissent-driven topic material. “Recovery” details the hardship

Nis leugh t-eachdraich, fosgail suil
Anns gach linn mu doigh an Airnm
Stampadh air na croitean seagail
'S beathannan òg aig gilean Uibhist
Cha deid mise gu an rìgh
Cha deid mise an corr a shabaid
O lunnain mheallt, a Bhreatuinn fhoilleil
Cha seas mi ach ’son sìth nan eilean

Now read your history, open your eyes
To every generation and to the ways of the military
Stamping on the rye in the crofts
And the young lives of the Uist boys
But I cannot go "for the King"
I cannot fight anymore
The deceit of London, the treachery of Britain
I'll only support peace in the islands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Irish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nis leugh t-eachdraich, fosgail suil</td>
<td>Now read your history, open your eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anns gach linn mu doigh an Airnm</td>
<td>To every generation and to the ways of the military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stampadh air na croitean seagail</td>
<td>Stamping on the rye in the crofts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S beathannan òg aig gilean Uibhist</td>
<td>And the young lives of the Uist boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cha deid mise gu an rìgh</td>
<td>But I cannot go &quot;for the King&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cha deid mise an corr a shabaid</td>
<td>I cannot fight anymore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O lunnain mheallt, a Bhreatuinn fhoilleil</td>
<td>The deceit of London, the treachery of Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cha seas mi ach ’son sìth nan eilean</td>
<td>I'll only support peace in the islands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

46
experienced by the people of Scotland during and after the Highland Clearings (a period of time when many lost their homes and livelihoods), although “Recovery” is sung in English and so does not contain a seist chorus section. On the record sleeve, above the lyrics for “Recovery,” Runrig includes a quote from John MacPherson dated 1884: “It would be as easy to stop the Atlantic Ocean as to stop the present agitation until justice has been done to the people” (Runrig 1981).

“An Dà Là”

“An Dà Là”, the most recently written song in this thesis, contains largely political and dissent-driven lyrical content — although, as pointed out previously, descent and affinity cannot be excluded entirely. While “An Dà Là” is not obviously nationalistic in content — as in “Òran na Cloiche” — nor describing frustration over a particular event (such as military occupation, as in “Tìr an Airm”), “An Dà Là” expresses a more general disappointment with the state of humanity at present. This message I find to be refreshing, but given that its applications are not Scotland-specific, it differs slightly in its treatment of seist as compared to other dissent-driven songs seen previously.

The mood of “An Dà Là” is much gentler than “Tìr an Airm,” conveying more of a compassionate, quiet discontent. This gentler expression of dissent was explained by Ewen Henderson as follows:

The song is a call for more understanding and compassion from those in power worldwide but specifically calls on Donald Trump to reject the evil ways of his life and turn his power to love and good. As his mother was a Gaelic speaker from the Isle of Lewis, I thought the song might carry more weight were it written in the style of a traditional Hebridean song. (personal communication, February 27th, 2020)
It is appropriate that this call for more understanding and compassion is reflected musically, and has been (and still is) an important and universal message. Though a dissent song, this is the first song looked at during the course of this thesis which does not mainly involve Scottish-centric or nationalistic connotations, and is instead a call globally for peace and compassion. This universality is reflected in the use of both Gaelic and English in the song’s lyrics, catering to the current Scottish population in its inclusion of both English and Scottish Gaelic text, and those in other English-speaking countries (specifically referring to the United States of America and Donald Trump, whose actions have negatively affected many individuals and communities worldwide).

“An Dà Là” uses seist in a similarly new, more gentle way, although the seist still functions as a section for joining in and to make the message more potent (and was deliberately written in this style in the hope that the message would carry more weight, as noted by Henderson above). The reflective lyrics and rocking guitar accompaniment add to the gentler atmosphere of this seist section, in stark contrast to the violent marching drumbeats of “Tir an Airm.”

Conclusions

The function of seist choruses can thus be seen to have evolved from fulfilling an initial role in memory-aid to a more complex role primarily affirming group cohesion and furthering cross-language accessibility. In this way their use can be seen to fulfil a more pronounced social function over time. Their unique ability to include people of Scotland regardless of their native language — and those outside of Scotland, as in “An Dà Là” — makes this social function all the
more important as the music continues to evolve in an increasingly global and cross-cultural, bi-
lingual, society.

While Gaelic songs do to some extent belong to communities of descent (and some
learners, therefore also communities of affinity), seist choruses appear particularly frequently in
songs that express dissent to some degree. The reasons for this are multiple, and begin with
Shelemay’s theory of connection-building: “an outcome of a combination of social and musical
processes, rendering those who participate in making or listening to music aware of a connection
among themselves” (2011: 364-5). In this way, seist choruses contribute to the potency of the
messages of these songs, as well as helping form connections between participants.

At the time of this writing, Scotland stands at a crossroads. With Brexit officially passed,
and with the UK now having left the European Union, the case for Scottish Independence is
strong. The rise in Scottish national confidence can be seen to have risen steadily over the past
century, with recent polls often showing more than 50% in favour of independence post-Brexit
(Severin 2020). The rise in Gaelic education, as detailed previously, also correlates to this
emerging stronger national identity, which is affected by and reflected in the music studied here.

While the inclusion of seist choruses in modern music is not always a conscious
nationalistic decision on the part of the musicians or composers, these choruses do occupy a
unique position in Scottish music perfectly suited to the population as a whole. Seist choruses
uniquely are in a position to appeal to this diverse population consisting of fluent Gaelic
speakers, Gaelic learners, and non-Gaelic speakers, and provide a bridge between these
communities of differing languages, traditions, and generations. Fluent Gaelic speakers no doubt
appreciate this continuation of tradition — an ancient and traditional element of the music in use
today, bridging the traditional and modern cultures and approaches to music, and satisfying those
communities more aligned with descent-driven motivations. Gaelic learners and non-Gaelic speakers can use seist as an “in,” something in the music to grasp on to if the words are too fast or too difficult to understand or join in with. This cross-temporal connection makes the music (new and old) more accessible, and especially caters to those in the growing percentage of the population making an effort to learn Gaelic (regardless of whether their motivations might be descent-, dissent- or affinity-driven). In this way, seist is uniquely situated to make Gaelic music accessible to the whole population. I believe that while the motivations behind seist use are very much subconscious and historic, they have nevertheless evolved to fulfil this unique role in Scottish musical communities.

Music is often said to act as a social barometer. If this is true, then the culture- and generation-bridging ability of seist choruses is something worth further study, and might prove to be of particular interest in years to come as Scotland’s national identity and the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK further develops.
Bibliography

Anonymous. 1780. “The history of the feuds and conflicts among the clans in the northern parts of Scotland and in the western isles; from the year M.XXXI. unto M.DC.XIX. To which is added, a collection of curious songs in the Gallic language, published from an original Manuscript.” (M,DCC,LXXX. [1780]). Glasgow: J. & J. Robertson, for John Gillies, Perth.


https://manran.co.uk/bio


https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5530fd09e4b007f8cbb170b4/t/5881ff96bf629aeb03f27176/1484914584496/An+Dà+Là+%28faclan%29.pdf


https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5530fd09e4b007f8cbb170b4/t/58caec87ff7c502bbc7cceb5/1489693840719/Òran+na+Cloiche.pdf


https://www.elyrics.net/read/r/runrig-lyrics/tir-an-airm-lyrics.html


c%20sheumais.pdf


____. “Waulking.” Accessed February 1st, 2020. Available at:

http://www.waulk.org/index.asp?pageid=176756


https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/map-shows-400-british-army-camps-scotland-after-culloden-270187


