Classification of Gaelic Song

Gaelic song is perhaps the single most definitive area of Gaelic culture, permeating through its many layers in a way that no other art form does. Gaelic culture and song are synonymous with each other. For instance, the Royal National Mod has become the language’s main festival, even though it is almost exclusively a singing competition.

In a folklore sense, these songs are more interesting because of their enormous effect upon the culture of Gaelic rather than because of their imagery, structure and syntax. It has been said that “the human experience of the Gaels can be traced [by their songs]... their songs mirror their folk history” (Bloomfield & Dunn, 1989, p67). These songs were transmitted across the country by those that travelled, such as merchants or government officials, as they would recant songs they had heard in other parts of the country whilst they spent time with the communities that they visited. These songs were almost exclusively passed on via oral transmission between different groups and generations. This is partly due to a lack of literacy in the Gaelic communities in centuries gone by, but also due to a belief held by Scots people since Paganism that songs were better remembered in this manner, rather than being written down.

There are many different forms of Gaelic song, but the task of classifying them is a particularly difficult one. Songs draw their inspiration from a wide range of topics, such as love, war, politics, nature etc. They can be composed and/or written in either vernacular language, which is spoken naturally by the masses, or high register Gaelic. Their structure and written style can also vary wildly from song to song. They may be sung at social occasions or privately, such as at work. These characteristics help us to distinguish songs in a folklore sense but there is such a degree of overlap between these genres that, academically speaking, the most useful course of action is to define categories of song in broad terms. From there, we can discuss different areas of song.

Gaelic songs generally fall into one of four distinct categories: bardic song, lyrical song, social song and work song. Each of these categories shares various similarities with each other, as will be discussed in the rest of this essay. Each perform a specific function within Gaelic society, and have done so for centuries.

Bardic song is a category of Gaelic song that is heavily influenced by the tribalistic nature of medieval Scottish life. Clans would each have a classically trained bard, often receiving a full education up to university level on the European continent, whose job was to compose poetry and song for the clan chief. These would often be panegyric in nature, praising the chief’s physical and leadership qualities (such as his hospitality) and detailing the clan’s achievements to paint a positive light of the clan on the whole. Other functions would be writing eulogies for dead clan members and recanting famous battles. These accounts have provided important historical
information about battles in the clan era, as these bards became de facto historians through their work. This form of song was very important to the culture of these clans, bringing a sense of identity to the people within the clan and providing a conduit for social bonding. Some songs, such as Clan Cameron's “Caismeachd Clann Camshron” (“March of the Camerons”) act as a national anthem does in the modern day. (Clan Cameron Archives)

This form of song changed over the course of the 18th century, as the bardic profession died out along with the clans it served due to the effects of the Jacobite loss at Culloden and the subsequent Highland Clearances in the late 18th and 19th centuries. It became more praising of local landscapes and their inherent beauty; the land of the people rather than the people themselves. Duncan Ban MacIntyre (Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir) is known as one of the more prominent writers of the more modern, natural praise songs, writing shortly after Culloden – an example being “Moladh Beinn Dòrainn” (Praise of Ben Doran), a song commonly performed even today. (Houston, 2002)

Another category of Gaelic song is lyrical songs, which are common amongst songs from all languages. These deal with human experiences such as love, loss, nature, war and humour. These tend to be far more personal in nature, detailing important events in the life of the person who composed the song. With this in mind, these are far more emotional songs, which produce a far stronger response in those singing and listening to them. These songs tend to have a formal structure, being composed or written in verses with rhyme and meter. There is a wide range of lyrical songs in the Gaelic language, dating back centuries, and often being displayed alongside poetry. All traditional Gaelic poetry was written with the intention of it being sung. A classic example of this sort of song is “Teann a Nall”, written in the late 19th century by Lewisman Gillespie MacDonald, a love song in which the singer longs to be with their sweetheart in Uist (BBC Alba).

With a growing number of Gaelic speakers being formally educated and studying poetry and song of other languages, particularly English, in the last two centuries – this genre of song has expanded significantly within Gaelic. This change has also brought the advent of a type of poetry known as nuadh-bhàrdachd, which translates to ‘new poetry’, as more writers write in free verse and break traditional ‘rules’ of Gaelic poetry. This has, in turn, transferred into modern Gaelic song. Good examples of modern poetry in this regard include the works of Anna Frater, who looks extensively at the language itself in her poems, such as “Ar Cànan 's Ar Clò”. Other examples of modern lyrical songs include those by crossover bands such as Runrig and Capercaillie, who have written and sung their own Gaelic songs along with English songs.

With the nature of song and its’ inherent rhythm, many Gaelic songs have endured through centuries because of their use by both men and women while working.
People sang to help themselves through difficult, manual labour that was extremely common in the Gaelic world.

Waulking songs are particularly well known, as women sang to pass the time whilst waulking tweed as a communal event, which was one of the few occasions where women could spend a significant amount of time together. As such, these songs are almost exclusively sung by women and deal with feminine experiences such as courting and motherhood. These songs could often be risqué in their nature, to make the event more entertaining. A popular waulking song is “He Mo Leannan”, about a woman’s relationship with the new man to the village, with the chorus being sung by everyone but individual verses being taken by different individual singers. (Tobar an Dualchais) Waulking songs are familiar at cultural exhibitions even now, as they often couple the songs with a depiction of traditional waulking of the tweed, which is an interesting spectacle for those with little knowledge of the Gaelic culture.

Even tasks such as milking had its’ own brand of song, as farmers sang lullabies to cows with the belief that it helped them produce more milk. The effectiveness of such songs can still be preached today among some farmers. Rowing too had certain specific songs, designed to help oarsmen keep in rhythm to make the job easier in a physical sense. These forms of song are still used today, helping people through the tedium of work, although not always exactly in the jobs traditionally associated with such songs. A commonly known song, very seldom used in its’ original context, is “Tha mi sgith” also known as “Buain na Rainich” which is a song about a man cutting bracken and dreaming of meeting a girl whilst doing so. (Am Baile)

Another category of Gaelic song that can be defined, loosely connected to work songs, is that of the social song. The Gaels are an extremely social people, and gatherings of the entire community were common. These gatherings would be known as ceilidhs, which loosely translate as meetings. Every village had its own taigh-ceilidh (ceilidh house) purpose built for such occasions. In traditional Gaelic culture, ceilidhs were not confined to just formal dancing, as the custom is typically portrayed today. At these events, people would be widely encouraged to entertain each other with stories and song, and a specific brand of song was designed with entertainment in mind for these ceilidhs: the social song. They could be sung by one person individually, or with everyone joining in at the chorus, or sung by everyone in the building. These events were a centrepiece of Gaelic culture, and a brilliant way of keeping community spirit alive – particularly during tough winters.

Specific types of social song include the puirt-a-beul, which translates to ‘mouth music’, which was typically a song with a quick tempo and light-hearted lyrics, often vocables (words with no meaning), which was good for encouraging people to dance, or at least tap their feet. Often several puirt would be strung together in a medley when being performed. (Capercaillie) These songs were especially useful in their function when other instruments were not at hand. Perhaps the most famous
song in this category is “Brochan Lom”, a simple song about porridge, which is a very common nursery rhyme (BBC Alba) taught to children and learners of Gaelic even today.

Perhaps not a category of song itself, but heavily connected to it is the art of cainntaireachd, which translates to chanting, which is a vocal representation of piping notation. This forms “the basis of the indigenous notational system... [which is] an important achievement and gives valuable insight into the musical organisation of Ceòl Mòr” (Donaldson). This form of song is very specific, and rarely performed on its’ own, but is exceptionally useful for those learning the bagpipes.

Another part of Gaelic culture, heavily connected with song, is that of dance. A large part of Gaelic song can be categorised as being specifically for the purpose of dancing, generally social songs but also bringing in bardic and lyrical elements. These can be further categorised as Strathspeys, reels and jigs – with varying tempos rhythms between them.

Gaelic song has been remarkably resilient over the centuries, and remains as popular within and out with the language as it was pre-Culloden, when Gaelic culture overall seemed to begin a marked decline. It’s use in popular culture has extended beyond just Gaelic realms, into areas such as motion pictures with the 2012 Disney film “Brave” featuring several songs in the language as part of its’ marketing campaigns and soundtrack. I believe Gaelic song does so in part because of its wide variety shown by its many different and interconnected genres, and the fact that they crossover as much as they do show various subjects in contrasting lights, which provide new and interesting perspectives. The difficulty in the classification of Gaelic song is one of the language’s strengths.

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