

The Power to Move: Sean O’Riada



O’Riada with very large Bodhran

When Sean O’Riada died on the 3rd of October 1971 from cirrhosis of the liver, a nation mourned in a way that only Ireland can, and for the first time, not for a political figure but for a composer and musician who had given the people a pride in their traditions and a faith to believe that they were a nation once again. People from every walk of life tried to attend the funeral which showed the power of this one man to give them pride in being Irish and a faith in the future of their culture.

He portrayed a unique vision of Ireland and things Irish and gave a pride back to a struggling ultra conservative nation in the country’s oldest and finest traditions. This not only struck a chord in Ireland but in much further parts of the world too.

<https://youtu.be/eBT3BWtks7A>

He had been born John Reidy in Cork City in 1931 and gaelicised his name when in his early twenties he learnt Irish. He became more conscious of the Irish traditions around him and its sudden and near imminent fatal demise.

He became music director at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin writing music for plays and productions. This practical creative process limited his serious art compositions but then it also helped him create some of the most iconic film music to come from Ireland. When some of his more serious art works showed the Irish tinges of folk music, and direct quotes and arrangements, he was asked to write the soundtrack to the documentary film by George Morrison, *Mise Eire* (I am Ireland). This film was a watershed in Irish history finally giving a nation back its true identity through a retelling visually of Irish history from the early 1900's through the revolution, civil war and into the stagnation beyond to the very early 1960's. It shook up a complacent nation buried deep in stagnation brought about by the intransigences of its leader, Eamon de Valera. The great revolutionary leader had become brittle and unmoving on policy which drove many Irish abroad to America and especially England to find work. In the score to *Mise Eire* O'Riada had created a uniquely Irish music full of quotes from traditional and revolutionary patriotic songs to contrast and portray the documentary film footage that Morrison had gathered together from all over the world.

<https://youtu.be/CbkUTDKZC3s>

This was no mere guess and lucky strike on O'Riada's part. He had learnt Irish Gaelic and had moved his family out into County West Cork which is known as a native Irish speaking area called the Gaeltacht, soaked in traditions and traditional music. He had founded a group called Ceoltoin Cualam (*pro: Celtchuri Tchuélam*) back in the very early 1960's. This was no ordinary group in that it drew together traditional musicians from all over Ireland into a cohesive professional performance ensemble who performed traditional music on a concert platform. There was no traditional harpist at the time so O'Riada played this on a Harpsichord. This may not sound so revolutionary today but at the time in Ireland it had never been done and the impact was immense. This particular line up continued without O'Riada but with the inclusion of a Harpist called Derek Bell and went on to dominate traditional music not only in Ireland but all over the world and became known by the name of 'The Chieftans'.

<https://youtu.be/7PosMpPZXzk>

Suddenly the people were hearing their own tradition served up as serious concert music and something to take pride in and enjoy. The players dressed formally and sat in a semi-circle and arranged the music themselves alongside O’Riada. They were suddenly the talk of Dublin and of Ireland. Virtually singlehandedly O’Riada had stemmed the tide of degeneration of the traditional music and had made everyone aware of its beauty and complexity. Something they could be proud of, and in.

It was due to this and his skill as a composer that he was commissioned to create the great score of *Mise Eire*. It was a masterpiece and some may argue that film music can never be a masterpiece but this is one of the finest scores written in this idiom and stands today as such.

In 1964 he was appointed as lecturer in traditional music at Cork University and became a respected and much loved teacher there. His music now took on a strong traditional hue as can be heard in scores such as “*The banks of Sulan*” and “*Seoladh na nGamhan*” (The Herding of the Calves). Even in these scores O’Riada was never content to just arrange traditional music and then let it be, he always delved deeper into the possibilities of the sound world and created experimental works, something that no-one has actually taken up and continued or developed since. His style was unique and yet conservative at the same time.

<https://youtu.be/ZJ8c4GCMcZQ>

One of O’Riada’s last works was a Requiem Mass from 1970 written while seriously ill from cirrhosis due to alcoholism, and scored for soloists, chorus and organ. It was commissioned by Radio Television Eire (RTE) the Irish national broadcaster. It was first heard at the time of the death of de Valera, and should also stand as O’Riada’s own epitaph. It makes use of the melodic Irish vocal style called ‘Sean Nos’ and is very typically O’Riada at his best. Some of the work he took from his own “Folk Mass” of a few years prior which uses traditional styles and is sung in Gaelic. The work’s associations with de Valera elevated O’Riada to equal parity as the head of the country.

<https://youtu.be/SFqBo986nRQ>

Charles Haughey, the then prime minister of Ireland when O’Riada died

attended the funeral. Something that was unheard of then or since.

His film score to *Mise Eire* brought him an acclaim that no other Irish composer has received. It could actually be said that through his music he was Ireland - for a time. He was honoured by thousands in his death but as memories are short he is now viewed in various ways, as an enfant terrible who shook up a happily conservative land, a sacred cow not to be touched or criticised, or as an anachronism of a past best forgotten. I personally take a position of all three. Just like the man you cannot really get a grip on him or his music. It leaves you frustrated, soothed and sometimes annoyed but never unmoved in anyway.

<https://youtu.be/p97TCMuGkjM>