

THE ORDER OF BARDS OVATES & DRUIDS MOUNT  
HAEMUS LECTURE FOR THE YEAR 2013

# The Fourteenth Mount Haemus Lecture

Music and the Celtic Otherworld

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## Overview

From the beautiful, enchanting music of the faery harp to the sacred singing of elves or angels, Celtic literature has many references to a spiritual or supernatural dimension of music. Referred to as 'the Celtic Otherworld' in Celtic and folklore studies, music in these sources is often prominently featured in this spiritual Otherworld dimension. There are numerous references to music throughout these sources, ranging from faery harpers, the songs of mermaids, the singing of elves, musical trees, melodious fountains, and so on.

Many of these references, primarily from the Old and Middle Irish literature of early medieval Ireland and Gaelic Scotland, had been previously collected into a collection for a major academic study entitled *Music and the Celtic Otherworld* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000). This volume explored the spiritual dimension of music from a specifically Celtic perspective, an interdisciplinary specialist musicology study with a focus on music itself as the primary focus, rather than from the perspective of Celtic folklore or religious studies per se. Musical references inclusive of both the earlier pagan, pre-Christian as well as Christian-related contexts about music were collected from the primary Old Irish and Gaelic Scottish manuscript sources for that volume.

In this paper, following a general Introduction to the topic of music in the Celtic Otherworld in the Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic sources, seven separate sections will be presented, organised thematically: 1) Performers; 2) Places and Times; 3) Healing; 4) Birds and Animals; 5) Dreams, Dreaming, and Music; 6) Trance-like Sleep State; and 7) Grieving/Bereavement. Each section will present several key examples of selected Celtic music references that specifically relate to that particular theme, followed by a few examples of relevant scientific research findings from a range of fields that relate to that theme. This is followed by a short Conclusion section at the end of the paper.

## General Introduction: Music and the Celtic Otherworld

The enchanting, alluring music of the Celtic Otherworld is portrayed in the Old and Middle Irish literature of early medieval Ireland and in Gaelic Scottish sources as being heard from a dimension not of this world, that is, as something beyond ordinary reality and one's normal, everyday life experience. In some cases, beautiful, ethereal music is heard, yet no musicians are seen. For example, tales abound of a mortal occasionally hearing haunting, ghostly music at the ruin of a burial cairn or ancient site. In other references in this literature, under certain circumstances a mortal may be 'abducted' by the faeries (*sidhe*), elves or angels, and taken to the Otherworld, and then returned to earth with special musical gifts, a new song, inspiration, or prophetic gifts. There are also many descriptions in this literature of

music having powerful and often highly unusual effects on the listener. These references are widely distributed, being found in early tales, myths, the Saints' Lives, folklore accounts, ballads, poetry, place-lore and proverbs, and early law tracts.

Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic literature in particular offers an especially large number of references about the spiritual dimension of music, many of which specifically relate to the elements and the landscape itself as being inherently musical, and/or as a gateway to musical inspiration or a possible otherworldly encounter. Throughout the literature there are numerous examples of music or sound being present in some way at key intersections in descriptions of a landscape, i.e., 'liminal doorways', places portrayed as being in between this world and the Otherworld, where the veil is particularly thin, i.e., as with a musical net at the entrance of the doorway of a sidhe woman's island house, the doorway threshold of an island paradise with its beautiful music, or initial encounters with a 'singing' stone or 'musical' tree when a mortal first enters an Otherworld place. In these sources we also encounter a relatively broad range of other references to otherworldly music and the elements in general, i.e., fountains, wells, rivers, a loch, or other undersea Otherworld dimension consistently described as having 'musical' or 'harmonic' qualities; the sound of the 'music of the wind' through the trees; the 'music' of a woodland, field, hill, cave, stone, mountain or plain, and so on. Examples portrayed both in an exclusively Otherworld context as well as those presented as part of normal, everyday life experience are often portrayed as highly musical in some way, i.e., as with comments in the references about the 'music' of the sounds from a blacksmith's anvil, the 'music' of a sword in battle, or, the tinkling of a fishing net, for example.

The concept of the Celtic Otherworld realm in these references is complex, often having a number of subdivisions. For example, there are over one hundred names for the Otherworld itself in these Celtic sources, i.e., 'The Land of Eternal Youth', 'The Land of Promise', 'Avalon', 'The Land Beyond the West', or the 'Land-Beneath-the-Waves'. The Otherworld is often described as clearly being not of this world, a beautiful realm beyond mundane, everyday existence. Yet throughout these sources there is a rather consistent recognition of the musical Otherworld as immanent, i.e., as being in and amongst mortals in everyday life, as ever-present and alive, whether one is necessarily consciously aware of it or not. In certain unique and special circumstances, however, a human mortal may enter and experience this Otherworld, interact with those in that realm, and then return to earth, often greatly transformed in the process. The references from these sources inform us that the medium by which one gets there, or returns, is quite often by means of music or sound in some manner.

References about music in the Celtic Otherworld feature various Performers, Instruments, Times, Places, or Effects, as further outlined in Music and the Celtic Otherworld. In these Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic sources about the early Celts and the portrayal of music in their society, the entire concept of a musical performer or a musical instrument is far broader than it is in our current time, i.e., performers are portrayed as faeries, angels, harpers, pipers, and so on, in the Celtic Otherworld realm, yet, a musical 'performer' in these same references when referring to everyday, mundane life, could just as easily be a tree, a stone, or a chariot wheel. Instruments, too, often defy usual categorisation, as musical instruments like a harp, pipe or bell played by a mortal human or faery performer in the Otherworld could also include 'instruments' like a fishing net, a sword, or the tinkling of a silver musical branch. Places where an interplay of music and the Otherworld could take place on occasion for a mortal are endless, portrayed in these references as often intersecting with a particular crossroads, a cave, an ancient cairn, standing stones, a loch, river or a spring, for example. Times when such an event might conceivably occur could be on the eve of an ancient Celtic festival: Imbolc (1 Feb.); Beltaine (1 May); Lughnasadh (1 Aug.); and Samhain (1 Nov.), or, it could also be portrayed as occurring at the liminal moment of dawn,

midnight, twilight or dusk. Often, music is portrayed in these references as 'ever-present', i.e., as an eternal presence in and among us. The effects of music on the listener in the early Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic literature are many and varied, including chants to protect a home, the 'three strains' of joy (*gentraide*), melancholy (*goltraide*) and trance-like sleep state (*suantraide*); to inspire or teach; to summon an animal, or heal the sick, among many others.

Given this broad survey of possibilities in the literature, we see that throughout the full range of these early Celtic sources, it is evident that the early Irish and Gaelic-speaking Celts consistently acknowledged an otherworldly aspect to music, and their portrayals of music and its effects in both Otherworld as well as everyday contexts throughout the sources reflect this. Music, it seems, is never far away - no matter what the context. Music - be it portrayed in the reference in an Otherworld context or in an everyday life situation - is seen as an especially powerful, effective 'gateway' to get to - and from - another dimension.

Now that we have a had general overview of the topic, we will now examine each of the seven thematic areas about music and the Otherworld: 1) Performers; 2) Places and Times; 3) Healing; 4) Birds and Animals; 5) Dreams, Dreaming, and Music; 6) Trance-like Sleep State and 7) Grieving/Bereavement: first, in each section, by listing several of the key Celtic references to illustrate that particular theme, then, followed by several relevant scientific and cross-cultural research findings that relate to that theme.

## **SECTION ONE: PERFORMERS**

The kinds of musicians who are portrayed as performers are many and varied throughout these early sources, tales, and legends, where the music should also be seen as part of the larger context of the story. Often we encounter the performers playing a specific instrument, i.e., a harp, timpan, pipes, etc., in both Otherworld and everyday life references. A few of the excerpts about performers are reproduced for you here. Some of them are of the *sidhe* (faeries), others are not; but nearly all are portrayed in these sources as having great musical talents and gifts and unique powers, for example:

### ***Sidhe-folk elfin musician plays for Cuchulainn: the 'three strains':***

One day, Cuchulainn, hero of ancient Ireland, encountered a wee, elfin musician Senbecc along the banks of the river Boyne. While he was catching salmon, Cuchulainn saw what looked like a tiny man in purple clothing in a small boat of bronze, so he asks him to play for him. Senbecc, the famed faery harper, then played him the 'three strains' of joy, melancholy, and trance-sleep:

*'What little thing is that...? Asked Cuchulainn. 'A small harp, 'said Senbecc, 'and shall I play it to you?' 'I am pleased,' said Cuchulainn. Then he ran his fingers over it in such a way that Cuchulainn kept shedding tears at the melancholy tune. Then he played the merry tune, as Cuchulainn kept laughing continually. He played the sleepy tune, and Cuchulainn was in sleep and continuous slumber from one hour to the other.'* (1)

### ***The 'deadly' sidhe pipers of Sid Breg:***

Not for the fainthearted, these otherworldly performers. Here, from the Old Irish tale *Togail bruidne Da Derga* ('Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel'), we encounter the best - and, according to the ancient Irish, the deadliest - pipers in the world, the *sidhe* pipers of Sid Breg, who 'will slay, but...cannot be slain'. Reported by a spy of those who wanted to raid the

large hostel of the powerful Da Derga, the following excerpt from this tale reveals what he saw in the 'Room of the Pipers' on his initial lookout mission:

*[The Room of the Pipers]: I saw an apartment with nine men in it: all had fair, yellow hair...overhead there were nine pipes, all four-toned and ornamented; and the light from the ornamentation was sufficient for the royal house. Explain that, Fer Rogain. 'Not difficult that', said Fer Rogain. 'They are the nine pipers that came to Conare from Sid Breg because of the famous tales about him; their names are Bind, Robind, Rianbind, Nibe, Dibe, Dechrind, Umal, Cumal, and Cialgrind. They are the best pipers in the world. Nine tens will fall by them at the first onslaught, and a man for each weapon, and a man for each man. They will match the performance of anyone in the hostel; each of them will boast of victories over kings and royal heirs and plundering chieftains, and they will escape afterwards, for combat with them is combat with a shadow. They will slay and not be slain, for they are of the sidhe.'* (2)

### ***Musical stone as the key 'performer' in the Otherworld:***

*'Then they row to the bright stone  
from which a hundred songs arise.  
Through the long ages it sings to the host  
A melody which is not sad,  
The music swells up in choruses of hundreds,  
They do not expect decay nor death.'*

- from the 12th c. Old Irish tale, The Voyage of Bran (3)

### ***A stone pillar portrayed as a 'performer':***

Here, in a tale about Kenneth, the famed Highland Brahan prophetic seer, we encounter a situation from Scottish Highland folklore near Inverness about a stone pillar near Strathpeffer - the 'Stone of the Lyre' - as making a unique, hollow echoing sound when struck:

*.... Another prophecy that has not yet come about concerns a stone pillar again, called Clach na Tiompain, 'The Stone of the Lyre', so-called because of the hollow sound it made in the wind. It is near the famous Strathpeffer wells, and when it is struck, it makes a great, hollow echoing sound. Kenneth the Seer said that the day would come when ships would ride with their cables attached to Clach an Tiompain; that, of course, has not yet come about....'* (4)

### ***Otherworldly music performer - as a fly - comforts her lover***

In the Old Irish tale Tochmarc Etain ('The Wooing of Etain'), the maiden Etain as a fly, is portrayed in this reference as a musical performer to comfort her beloved Midir, as she had been turned into a fly by a jealous sorceress, Fuamnach. In his abject misery in such a situation, Midir experiences great daily comfort in having Etain, even as a fly, buzzing around very near him:

*'Sweeter than pipes and harps and horns  
was the sound of her voice and the hum of her wings...  
as long as he could watch the scarlet fly,  
Midir loved no women, and he did not enjoy  
food or drink or music, unless he could see it  
(Etain, as a scarlet fly) - and listen to its music  
and its buzzing.'*

- from Tochmarc Etain ('The Wooing of Etain' (5)

### ***Golden harp sings of its own accord:***

As a cross-cultural example provided here from the well-known faery tale 'Jack and the Beanstalk', we have the well-known anecdote about the giant asking for his golden harp, which then spontaneously sings harmoniously of its own accord:

*...So the ogre sat down to the breakfast and ate...but every now and then he would mutter: 'Well, I could have sworn -- ' and he'd get up and search the larder and the cupboards and everything, only, luckily, he didn't think of the copper. After breakfast was over, the ogre called out: 'Wife, please bring me my golden harp'. So she brought it and put it on the table before him. Then he said, 'Sing!' and the golden harp sang most beautifully. And it went on singing till the ogre fell asleep, and commenced to snore like thunder... ' (6)*

Later, of course, one may recall in this tale that Jack desperately tried to escape from the giant by aiming for his harp, crawling very quietly on his hands and knees until he came to the huge kitchen table, grabbed the magical golden harp, making a mad dash for the door. But at once, the harp mysteriously called out, 'Master, master!' and the giant woke up just in time to see Jack desperately fleeing with his harp...

Such examples consistently tend to show music as being an integral part of life in some way, be it in the Otherworld or in an everyday situation, not as a mere 'sideline' per se; music is also portrayed as mutually transforming the people or situations around it. The great variety of performers portrayed in the sources is endless, but these are a few key examples.

### **Performers: Scientific research examples**

#### ***Breton megalith of Er Grah at Locmariaquer 'had a voice':***

Here, similar to some of the Celtic examples above, we encounter research that reflects a rock - often certain standing stones - as having a peculiar sound or musical quality, as a 'performer' all its own. Bernard Fagg, a scholar of the rather unusual phenomenon of 'ringing rocks' back in the '50s, conducted groundbreaking research at that time on the giant fallen Breton megalith of Er Grah, commenting that it was a ringing rock, and 'had a voice', so to speak.

Made of granite and weighing 342 tons, this great megalith - now broken into four fragments - had originally stood 20 metres (66 feet) tall when it was erect, making it the tallest known standing stone in Europe, according to researcher Paul Devereux, who commented further about Fagg's research at the Er Grah site:

*When visiting the huge monolith, Fagg was instructed by a local man to place his ear at one end of the longest segment while the man struck the opposite end with a stone. This caused it to issue a ringing sound... (7)*

***Chinese folk performer plays a 9,000 year-old Chinese neolithic flute:***

In more recent times, *Nature* magazine reported major scientific research findings about what it described as 'the oldest playable musical instrument' - a neolithic Chinese bone flute played by a modern-day Chinese folk music performer.

Archaeologists reported that the flute was originally found as part of six complete, playable multi-note flutes that were excavated from the early neolithic site of Jiahu in Henan Province, China. Radiocarbon dating estimated to be between 7000 and 5700 BC:

One of the flutes, with seven holes, was free of cracks, and was therefore selected to be tested acoustically. The tone of the whole tube is G or F. Its tonal scale is the ancestor of either the six-tone Qing Shan scale or the seven-tone Xia Shi scale, both of which were only documented 6,000 years later. A Chinese folk song was playing on the flute by Taoying Xu, and this was recorded. The flute produces a 'breathy' sound, a little reminiscent of pan-pipes. The flute can be heard on a relevant link on the Nature website, at [www.nature.com](http://www.nature.com) (8)

As John Purser's study 'Scotland's Music: A History of the Traditional and Classical Music of Scotland from Early Times to the Present Day' points out:

*Connections between bird-song and music and speech and piping cannot be given a time of commencement. In the European context we can go back far enough to satisfy the sceptics – back to our first visitors some eight thousand years ago... Pipes are as old as man's ability to take a bird bone, which is naturally hollow, and blow through it, perhaps adding a hole in the side to add a note... Just such a pipe was found on the coast of Denmark dating from 5000 BC. (9)*

***Natural crystals as energy 'resonators':***

Dr Patrick Flanagan, expert researcher on the properties of crystals, found in key 1974 research that 'crystals of all kinds, such as quartz and precious gemstones, have a marked effect on water surface tension, a characteristic known to ancient Tibetan physicians who applied it to make crystal-affected water potions for their patients'. (10) This water, when poured over alfalfa, wheat or mung beans, produced more vigorous growth; Flanagan believes that natural rock crystals are akin to 'resonators' of cosmic energy impulses, possibly connecting the universe, electromagnetic forces of the earth, phenomena like sun spot activity, and humans in some yet-to-be-determined manner.

Hopefully, more scientists and experts in some of those fields will report any of their new findings that may also relate to sound in some way, if relevant, in the coming years. But, again, the very concept of nature - in this case, a 'rock' - that is in some way 'alive', vibrant, or a living energy or force, would be no great surprise to those portrayed in our Old Irish or Scottish Gaelic sources.

**SECTION TWO: PLACES AND TIMES**

What are some of the key connections in the Celtic sources between the landscape, the elements, and music and sound? Nature, the elements, and the land itself are often portrayed throughout these references as being musical or harmonic in some way, as 'alive', as a kind of universal 'music of the woodland' that many have referred to throughout the ages. One tends to see a strong underlying awareness of a service to the land and her people, traditions, lore, memories, the joys, and sorrows throughout time that occurred at a certain location as well -

and, on occasion, a number of the references have examples of music being present concurrently at both a particular location and at a specific time, i.e. such as being present at an ancient site or tumuli on Beltane, for instance. An inherent musicality in the land, the lifeblood of the landscape itself, is often a consistent theme in these references. Even today, some people immediately come to a particular place or location and seem to immediately 'know' that a certain place is where they belong, their home, as if they have heard their 'heart Song'; for others, the very same place may not particularly resonate with them at all. At various times in one's life, too, different places - as well as the types of music heard or played there - may be more relevant to one's life than at others, and in some of the early Celtic references we also encounter this point of view. Certain places and times in the Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic sources have long had various connections with mysterious music and the Otherworld in some way; a few examples are given here:

***The Otherworld realm itself as inherently musical:***

One of the most poignant examples of this is from the Old Irish tale, The Voyage of Bran, where the very character of the many dimensions and lands of the Otherworld realm itself is portrayed as continuously joyful - and - inherently musical:

*Colours of every hue gleam  
Throughout the soft familiar fields;  
Ranked around the music, they are  
ever joyful in the plain south of Argatnel...*

*There is no fierce harsh sound there,  
But sweet music striking the ear...*

*Riches, treasure of every colour  
Are in Ciuin, have they not been found?*

*Listening to sweet music  
Drinking choicest wines...  
Listening to music in the night,  
And going to Ildathach,  
The many-coloured land,  
A brilliance with clear splendour  
From which the white cloud glistens.' (11)*

***King Cormac visits tir tairngiri, the Land of Promise:***

Here, King Cormac visits the otherworldly Land of Promise, encountering a shining fountain with five streams flowing out of it. Nine hazels grow over this magical undersea well and five salmon of wisdom are in the fountain and eat the hazelnuts which were deemed sacred by the poets. But note, too, how the text specifically informs us about the 'melodious' quality of the five streams, i.e., above and beyond 'any music that men sing':

*Then he sees...a shining fountain, with five streams flowing out of it, and the hosts in turn drinking its water. Nine hazels of Buan grow over the well. The purple hazels drop their nuts into the fountain, and the five salmon which are in the fountain sever them and send*

*their husks floating down the streams. Now the sound of the falling of those streams was more melodious than any music that men sing... (12)*

Of course, far more could be added about the initiatory and poetic aspects of this particular excerpt, but here, the key role of music in an Otherworld realm remains a focus, i.e., the streams are 'more melodious' than any type of everyday, mundane music. The concept of a musical undersea otherworldly dimension, often portrayed as a fountain or a waterfall, often occurs throughout various Celtic (and other) folklore references.

***Welsh 'green place' where faeries were known to be seen in the late 1940s, as reported by modern-day Welsh folklore scholar Robin Gwyndaf in his essay, 'Fairylure: Memorata and Legends from Welsh Oral Tradition':***

*'Once upon a time there was a boy who lived on a farm, high in the hills of north Wales. Occasionally when he was not needed to help...or, when he just felt like wandering over his 'country estate', he would leave the farm yard, walk along Cae Bach (the little field) until he came to Y Giat Goch (the red gate). Once through this gate he was right in the center of a circular piece of land about ten years in diameter. The grass there was always green - unusually green - and always fine and even, like velvet. There the young lad would sit for hours and ream his time away. Nowhere would he be happier than in that green circle of land near the red gate, because there the fairies would come and take him with them on a long, long journey, over the Foel Goch hill, Llangwm village nearby, and the Berwyn mountains, to a wonderful land of beauty and plenty, sweet music and dance. The author of this essay was that young boy! I mention my childhood recollection not to emphasize the power of imagination, but to point out that the belief in the fairies persisted in Wales into the late forties and early fifties of this century...'* (13)

Here again, even in this more modern-day example, as in the ancient tales, we hear a description of music in the Otherworld as being especially 'sweet' to the ear, contributing to an environment of exhilarating joy and hope.

***'Will you join the dance?'***

Here, again from Welsh tradition, we find mention of 'green patches' of the fairies (Tylwyth Teg) and music and being 'enticed' to join the fairies in their dancing. By far the most common tradition in current Welsh fairylure is that which refers to green circular patches on the land known as \*cylch y Tylwyth Teg\*, i.e, fairy circles or rings. One 20th century folklore informant commented:

*'... these green fairy patches were regarded as sacred. They were not to be tampered with and farmers who ploughed across them were cursed. The fairies of Wales were very fond of music and dance. Many a young lad on moonlit nights claimed to have seen them dancing on hill tops or in the fairy ring and was enticed to join in the circular dance. Once a mortal got into the fairy ring, it was believed to be very difficult to free him. One method was to place a stock of rowan tree across the circle. The rowan was considered a sacred tree... '* (14)

***'The case of the missing piper': Piper's Caves in western Highlands and Islands***

At times, in early Scottish folklore accounts, certain caves are a portal to the Otherworld that involves music in some way. Throughout much of Scottish folklore about pipers we

often encounter the situation in which a piper and his dog enter a particular cave and, although the piper often disappeared for good, his dog would sometimes later return, very exhausted, for example:

*'..... pipers with their dogs disappeared and were never seen again. One was near Borerraig, on Loch Dunvegan (a sea-loch on the Isle of Skye), and although the piper never emerged, it was said that his dog did, coming out exhausted and 'semi-flayed' some time afterwards. Some of the Scottish caves where pipers have disappeared are known as the Caves of Gold, since these caves were also said to be the hiding places of hoards of treasure which no one could ever find. One such was in the mountain Crogary Mor, in North Uist...'* (15)

### ***Times: Celtic literature references***

Often, specific times in the early sources are also referred to as relating to music and the Otherworld in some way in the Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic textual sources. References to times occasionally also come from modern-day oral informants, who periodically informed 20th century folklore researchers about what they described as unusual encounters with otherworldly or mysterious music at a specific time of day, month, year, or at a festival time. Situations vary, as we witness from these few examples:

### ***The songs of Buchet's house: 'party time'***

One of the most colourful Celtic examples about times is from the Old Irish tale Esnada Tige Buchet ('The Songs of Buchet's House'), where the joyful effects of the music at a nobleman's celebration are described, with music having a central role:

*'The song of Buchet's house to the companies: his laughing cry to the companies: 'Welcome to you!' ... The song of the fifty warriors with their purple garments... to make music... the song of the fifty maidens... their song delighting the host. The song of the fifty harps afterwards till morning, soothing the host with music. Hence is the name 'The Songs of Buchet's House'.* (16)

### ***The piskies and their love of music***

The Cornish piskies in particular are often portrayed as especially fond of music and helpful to human mortals on occasion, i.e., corn-threshing or assisting with household tasks, and so on - but in these accounts one understands that they are most definitely not to be trifled with, as if seen or challenged, they can be very mischievous indeed, if not downright dangerous, should a mortal dare cross them.

Here we have two classic examples of folklore informants' accounts about the piskies of Cornwall as reported to Cornish collector Robert Hunt:

*.... 'There is a celebrated piskie haunt at costellas in Cornwall (says a Mrs. Bray) where they have been seen in a ring - the men smoking... and the women spinning... I never heard of this place. Like the rest of the 'good people', piskies are fond of music, and the sound of their 'harp and pipe and symphony' is occasionally heard at nightfall. It is said that a man once passing one of the piskie rings, and hearing them dancing and singing within it, threw a large stone into the midst of the circle, when the music at once ceased and a dreadful shriek arose.*

*The appearance of the pixies of Dartmoor is said to resemble that of a bale or bundle of rags. In this shape, they decoy children to their unreal pleasure...'* (17)

### ***More on piskies' singing and music:***

Again, we have another example of a 19th-century informant's description to a folklorist about the piskies in Cornwall, and his unique rhymes and singing:

*Thomas Couch, in the 19th century, recorded a number of Piskey traditions in the immediate area of Polperro (SX 210510) ...[he] recorded the story of a piskey helping a local farmer by hand-threshing his corn by night. The farmer stole up to the barn to watch him at work and noted that the little fellow's clothing was ragged and old. In gratitude, the farmer left a new set of clothes for him the following night but the sprite's reaction was unexpected. After putting the new clothes on, he sang out: "Piskey fine and piskey gay, Piskey now will fly away" (or, in another version: 'Piskey new coat and piskey new hood; Piskey now will do no more good'.) He never returned, presumably annoyed at having been spied on...'* (18)

### ***Music in the Otherworld as eternally 'ever-present':***

The idea of continuous music heard in a purely supernatural Otherworld realm occurs fairly frequently in the early Irish literature, such as from the following excerpt from the Old Irish tale 'The Wooing of Etain'. Here, Midir, of the sidhe, tries to woo the maiden Etain with the powerful allure of coming to live with him in the most wonderful land where music is always present, a continuous delight:

*'Fair woman, will you go with me to a wonderful land where music is?'* (19)

Beltane, signifying the beginning of summer in the northern hemisphere, is, not surprisingly, often described in the Old and Middle Irish sources as having far more joyful music at that time year; the music often being directly connected with the land itself. Here, from an Old Irish collection of poetry, is a description alluding to music all around at the time of Beltane:

*Woodland music plays; melody provides perfect peace; dust is blown from dwelling-place... swallows dart aloft... music surrounds the hill, soft rich fruit flourishes... the hardy cuckoo sings, the trout leaps...* (20)

### ***Hogmanay: Scottish new year customs***

Regarding the time of the new year, Hogmanay was - and is - a key time in Scotland. In earlier centuries, it also had additional customs and traditions attached to it, as revealed by Celtic folklorist Anne Ross's description of certain Hogmanay customs that were musical in some way, including the reciting of the duan ritual chant, ritual rhymes, the beating of the Hogmanay hide, and much singing and merriment:

*...The young people used to travel in groups around their own townships. In different areas, different rites would be performed at each house, but some form of Duan Challiunn, 'Hogmanay Poem', would always be chanted. There were two types of visitation: in one instance, the duan was recited outside the house and the chant described the ritual of*

*approaching and entering the house. Another duan was sung after the house had been entered, when the caisean Calluig, 'Hogmanay Hide', was beaten. This is also called the Caisean a'Bhuilg, or 'Hide the Bag'. The basic form of the ritual was universal in spite of regional variants in ritual and terminology. These old practices have virtually died out, but the ancient and pagan ritual discernible in them requires no comment... ritual rhyme was, of course, chanted in Gaelic. Its very monotony imparted a certain eerie relentlessness to the ceremony. When it was finished, another carol or chant would be sung at the door of the house; this would praise - in anticipation - the generosity of the occupiers and would request entry and reward. In some areas, the skin was singed by the man of the house, and the fumes it gave off were believed to have powers of purification, imparting health to all the family for the next twelve months...* (21)

In addition to the many songs, joy, and musical activities portrayed in this example, we also note - again - a specific mention of singing at the door, i.e., at a symbolic liminal crossing. Even here, in much more recent centuries than in ancient Ireland or Scotland, music is still referred to as being sung or played at such thresholds in numerous folklore accounts as well, with doorways being rather common.

### ***Places and Times: Various scientific research examples:***

A number of scientific researchers have, and are, continuing to focus their work on particular places in the landscape that relate to the geometric shape of the spiral, ranging from early megalithic sites to more modern locations, one of which concluded that at certain ancient sites:

*'...the vectors of electromagnetic force would have favoured spiral shapes twisting in one direction or the other...'* (22)

Newspaper reports and other articles inform us today that many studies are being undertaken by a number of experts in a variety of fields like earth sciences, electromagnetism, geometry, energy medicine, cymatics, physics, and so on, offering highly complex areas for the relevant scientific experts in those areas to explore further. Undoubtedly, there may be more research being done in the early 21st century in these particular areas that may relate to sound or music in some way, but it is interesting to note that geometric shapes like the spiral - whether clockwise or counterclockwise - do seem to show up with frequency in some carvings at certain early sites, at times often connected with water or moisture at that location in some way. It will be interesting to see what new research these scientists and others may uncover in the years ahead.

### ***Places that report 'ghostly music', mysterious sensations or general uneasiness by visitors:***

Some researchers believe that among other factors, infrasound frequencies in a given environment may be a possible factor regarding certain places that report alleged mysterious or allegedly 'creepy' presences, or strange 'ghostly' or otherworldly music, on occasion.

They have considered that such haunted places may possibly have higher levels of infrasound frequencies in the environment, that, for some individuals, seems to affect them far more than others who visit exactly the same location, as for a variety of reasons, different people seem to have different sensitivities to such phenomena. While not directly musical per se, vibrational or sound frequencies in certain locations are now being studied by scientists far more than in the past.

While many situations of this nature involve a great variety of factors that must also be considered, engineer Vic Tandy in England found that in two places, a workshop and a 14th-

c. cellar, where hauntings had been reported for some time that had been causing highly disturbing feelings of uneasiness, a vague feeling of being watched, 'creepiness', a cold chill, and so on, in some visitors - but not others - that these can largely be explained 'as having resulted from the neurophysiological effects created in susceptible witnesses by a prevailing low-frequency sound in that environment, specifically one of around 19 Hz.

In other words, for those particular individuals, he surmised, perhaps they had a much greater sensitivity to lower frequency sounds in this building. He then conducted more experimentation in order to attempt to find out why - or from where - the cause of this specific location's problem was originating from. We learn more about the overall situation as elaborated further by Paul Devereux in *Stone Age Soundtracks*:

*...The sandstone cellar is in Coventry, England, and was originally beneath a fourteenth-century house owned by the Benedictine Priory that stood opposite, but is now below the Tourist Information Centre and is open to visitors. The staff at the centre became aware that a number of visitors were having disturbing experiences in the cellar. A Canadian journalist became frozen to the spot and was observed to turn 'ashen' - he said that he felt as if a balloon was being pushed between his shoulder blades and had an intense feeling of a presence...A Latvian tourist described feeling a presence and a cold chill...A German-speaking tour guide felt a presence as if she was disturbing something. She also felt a chill. There were many more examples. The effects were markedly similar in a wide range of people who otherwise knew nothing about a 'ghost' nor of other people's reactions. Most people who visited, though, were not affected, so it seems as if only those with a certain sensitivity experienced the 'ghost'. (Indeed, according to an acoustic expert at Penn State University in the United States, it seems that some people are hypersensitive to infrasound. In England, Vic Tandy conducted repeated acoustic surveys and found a continuous dominant background 19 Hz standing wave. The signal was being modulated by a 2-4 Hz signal. The source of the infrasound was not determined [i.e. for the cellar]. (23)*

As it turned out, the source of the infrasound in the workshop area was finally traced to a fan in a laboratory cupboard - one that emitted lower sound frequencies that were apparently sensed or 'heard' by some individuals - but not by others - in that particular place. Perhaps future infrasound research in certain environments, too, along with a number of other factors, can also help shed light on why some people react quite differently than others in such circumstances.

Much other research, too numerous to list here, has also been done in various areas examining sound, vibration or music at certain sacred sites worldwide and the effects on those present. Dowsers, too, have conducted their own research about their work with the landscape, some of which involves chanting or singing, for instance.

Even in these modern-day accounts, too, at certain places or times, music, sound, and/or spiritual activity often directly intersect, as a number of the early Celtic literature references also consistently portray.

### **SECTION THREE: HEALING AND JOY**

In the Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic references, both physical as well as emotional healing effects are often described as a direct result of hearing music. Effective cures from serious battle wounds, severe depression, the pains of childbirth and so on are often portrayed as occurring while, or shortly after, certain music is played, heard, or sung.

For example, in the Old Irish tale *Cath Maige Tuired II* ('The Second Battle of Mag

Tured'), the leech-doctors of the mythical Tuatha de Danann are portrayed as not only healing wounded men in battle, but also, as restoring the dead back to life again through the power of their chanting around the well of Slane:

*Dianchecht and his two sons...Octriuil and Miach, and his daughter Airmed, were singing spells over the well named Slane. Now their mortally wounded men were cast into it as soon as they would be slain. They were alive when they would come out. Their mortally wounded became whole through the might of the chant of the four leeches who were about the well. (24)*

### **Old Irish example featuring music as alleviating depression:**

In the Old Irish tale 'The Adventure of Teigue, son of Cian' (Echtra Taidg maic Cein), Teigue and his men have been out at sea on a particularly exhausting voyage and are very tired, depressed and demoralised. At this time, the tale informs the reader that birds from The Land of Promise (tir tairngiri) are sent to them by Cleena, the otherworldly minstrel of tir tairngiri to sing for them:

*And they saw enter to them...three birds...They eat an apple apiece, and warble melody sweet and harmonize, such that the sick would sleep to it. 'Those birds', Cleena said, 'will go with you; they will give you guidance, will make you symphony and minstrelsy and until again you reach Ireland, neither by land nor by sea shall sadness or grief afflict you.' Then the birds struck up their chorus for them...for...they were so grieved and sad at renouncing that fruitful country out of which they had come, these modulations gladdened and soothed them that they became merry and of good courage all.' (25)*

### **Joyful singing as helping to increase prosperity in the community:**

Noisiu, of the legendary Sons of Uisliu, in the Old Irish tales, was especially renowned in these sources for his joyful singing, the positive effects of which are also seen to enhance prosperity in the entire community:

*It happened one day that Noisiu was standing alone on the Rampart of the stronghold of Emuin, and he was singing. The singing of the sons of Uisliu was very melodious: every cow that heard it gave two thirds more milk, and every man who heard it grew peaceful and sated with music.' (26)*

As cattle were one of early Celtic society's most prized resources, the fact that upon hearing such music a two-thirds increase in milk production could potentially result from it, seems to indicate a positive belief about the overall effects of the joyful music, relaxation effects, and increasing prosperity for the ultimate benefit of the whole community.

## **Healing and Joy: Scientific and medical research**

### **Music and its effects on muscle strength or weakness**

Research conducted regarding the effects of music on the human body has shown that overall muscular activity increases when a subject is listening to music, as does the pulse rate - even when the same piece of music is repeated. But, tellingly, it was when the subjects were asked by the researchers to squeeze an ergometer (an instrument designed to measure the strength of the handgrasp) 'he or she was unable to carry out the assigned task properly while music was being played. Lullabies invariably decreased muscular strength, while marching songs increased it.' (27) At times, joy and happiness and other emotional responses could also be increased or decreased.

### ***Drumming can cause great joy, ecstatic states, and healing: Hazrat Inayat Khan***

Joyful, healing effects of drumming and percussion have long been referred to by shamans through the ages, music therapists or sound healers, and many spiritual teachers - including the gifted early 20th century Sufi teacher and musician Hazrat Inayat Khan, who died in 1927.

In one of his lectures, 'The Manifestation of Sound on the Physical Sphere', he commented that '*The physical effect of sound has also a great influence upon the human body... The whole mechanism, the muscles, the blood circulation, the nerves, are all moved by the power of vibration. As there is a resonance for every sound, so the human body is a living resonator for sound... Sound has an effect on each atom of the body'.... [then, he adds]... drumming can cause ecstasy because the sound of the drum goes directly into their whole system, bringing it to a certain pitch.* (28)

As pitch is frequency, it is not surprisingly that the 'whole body effect' of vibrations on the human body - as with drumming and/or dancing - has accompanying physiological effects, including those of great joy, ecstasy or healing. The human body is a 'living resonator' for sound, activated by certain types of rhythms and music.

### **SECTION FOUR: BIRDS AND ANIMALS**

Long a favourite from Old Irish literature, the following example is from the 'Adventures of Teigue, son of Cian', where birds are clearly featured, warbling their unique birdsong music while feasting on grapes in the Otherworld:

*Birds beautiful and brilliant feasted on these grapes, ...as they fed, they warbled music and minstrelsy that was melodious and superlative, to which patients of every kind and the repeatedly wounded would have fallen asleep...' (29)*

#### ***A silver whistle is used to summon an eagle:***

Here is a fascinating excerpt from the Breton tale of 'Princess Blondine', where the quest to find the lost princess becomes increasingly desperate by the search party, who then consult with a wise old hermit for help: and, note here, too, of how the silver whistle is effectively used to summon an eagle:

*'But God has made me master of the birds [said the old, wise hermit] ... I'll blow on this silver whistle of mine, and you'll see them come from all sides, big and small; maybe one of them will be able to tell us something about Princess Blondine.' The old man blew on his silver whistle, and at once clouds of birds of all sizes and colours came over the frost, uttering all sorts of cries. The air was darkened by them. The hermit called them all by the names, one after the other, and asked them if they had seen Princess Blondine during their travels. Not one of them had ever seen her, nor even heard of her. All the birds had answered the call, except the eagle. 'Where can that eagle be?' said the hermit. And he blew harder of his whistle. Then the eagle arrived, in a bad temper, and said: 'Why have you made me come here, to die of starvation, when I was doing so well where I was?'*

*'Where were you then?'*

*'I was at Princess Blondine's castle, where I lacked nothing, for there's feasting there every day.'*

*'This is wonderful news, and you're free to go back there, but on condition of carrying my nephew*

*on your back',*

*'I'll do that happily, if I can have as much to eat as I want.'*

*'Don't worry about that; you'll have as much as you want, glutton that you are.'* (30)

Then, the eagle flies on, and they further encounter a fountain, a beautiful tree, and other interesting phenomena on their many adventures.

***A Welsh folklorist summarizes faery lore, including the magical, singing birds of Rhiannon:***

*'Legends of mortals enticed into the fairy realm, or abducted by fairies, are numerous. A few legends relate the strange experiences of mortal men being enchanted into Fairyland through listening to the sweet song of a bird. One such bird sang to a lad called Sion ap Siencyn of Pencader, Dyfed. He had been in the woods, or so he thought, merely for ten minutes, but when he awoke the tree upon which the birds sang had withered. When he returned to his home an old man informed him of the words of one Cadi Madog of Brechfa: "She used to say that you were with the fairies and would not return until the last drop of sap in the tree had been dried up." This and other similar legends are reminiscent of the well-known tale of Branwen in the Second Branch of the Mabinogion. Only seven men return to the Island of the Mighty from the tragic war in Ireland. The men are grieving, having buried Branwen. They carry with them the head of their beloved Bendigeidfran, Branwen's brother. At Harlech, three birds appear, the Birds of Rhiannon, and sing them a most wonderful song for seven years...'* (31)

***Wild wolves summoned and placated by Cascorach's faery music***

In one poignant example from an Old Irish source, sidhe-musician Cascorach's exquisite, stringed music is here portrayed as having a unique power to summon and subdue three wild wolves who had been causing some trouble in the community. From the Accalam na Senorach ('Colloquy of the Ancients'):

*He got up early next day and went to the top of the cairn, and was playing and continually thrumming his lute till the clouds of evening came down. And...he saw three wolves coming towards him, and they lay down before him and listened to the music...[he] came, next day, to the same cairn, and posted his followers all around...and the wolves arrived at the cairn, and lay down on their forelegs listening to the music.'* (32)

**Birds and Animals: Scientific research examples:**

***Birdsong perceived to embody spirit voices:***

Here is an interesting cross-cultural example about birds and music, where, for the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, birdsong is perceived to embody the spirit voices, as it is often portrayed in many ancient cultures:

*The Kaluli are another tribal people from Papua New Guinea, and they consider the birdsong emanating from the dense foliage around them to be the voices of the dead, or, more accurately, they believe the living birds embody the spirit voices. Bird classification is based not on what birds look like, but on the kind of songs they have. But birdsong is only one kind of 'acoustic coding of the environment' used by the Kaluli, acc. to Gell. The sounds produced by rivers, streams and waterfalls has also entered their language and poetics. 'The*

*descending movement of Kaluli song is the sung equivalent of a waterfall, and particular streams and falls are perpetually evoked in the texts of Kaluli songs...'* Gell writes. *'Place, sound and social memory are fused together in Kaluli poetics.'* (33)

## **SECTION FIVE: DREAMS, DREAMING AND MUSIC**

One way in which a selected mortal could have musical influence from the Otherworld bestowed upon him or her is through a dream, as illustrated by the following example from an Old Irish source.

A man goes up to Cend Febrat, a particular mountain, and is then shown in a dream-like reverie every faery mound that was on the mountain, and its history. He then wakes up, having 'received' the theme of his own song, after which he returns to the everyday world, a musician now spiritually blessed with his own unique song and a vision:

*As I slept (pleasant the manner) therein I met with the theme of my song: there was shown me truly and in full every faery mound that is at Cend Febrat.* (34)

### ***'Harp of Harmony' to help a hero go to sleep***

From Scotland, we have the following reference from J.G. Campbell's *More Highland Tales*. In the tale entitled 'Bramble Berries in February', a hero's mother's sister puts the Humming Harp of Harmony (Chruit Chananaich Chiuil) at the hero's bedside so that he may listen to it, dream, and sleep better:

*Then she gave him food and drink...she put him to bed,  
And at this head she placed the Humming Harp of Harmony,  
That he might the better slumber...'* (35)

### ***Peaceful, calming effect of the cuckoo's singing***

Appreciation for day-dreaming and music is also apparent in some of the Celtic Christian references as well. For example, we have an Old Irish poem entitled 'Summer Has Gone', making reference to the peaceful, calming effects of the cuckoo's singing in a hermit's life, lulling him into a dream-state:

*.... The cuckoo sings sweet music  
and there is smooth, soft sleep ...'* (36)

## **Dreams, dreaming and music: Scientific and cross-cultural research examples:**

Some shamanic traditions place great emphasis on the importance of dreams and the specific instructions obtained in them from the ancestors via music in some way. In such traditions, an ascent to the Otherworld is often made by special songs and chants in a highly unique way. The Corroboree poets of the Australian Unambal also emphasise receiving their special songs and chants from the Otherworld. The gift - or, on occasion, direct 'retrieval' - of special songs and unique chants, obtainable only in the Otherworld itself, is a hallmark of shamanism.

Dr Holger Kalweit, in his detailed research on the Corroboree poets' specific techniques, concluded that the poet can 'travel to the Beyond where he can collect songs and chants, which he teaches to the members of his tribe.' Here, not only is the 'retrieval' of a particular song or melody important, but, later, upon return, so is the teaching function to the rest of the tribe. He further points out that the acquisition of special songs of power and certain chants can often come only from a dream, reverie or vision in the supernatural Otherworld itself, with the blessings of the spirits there, is continually emphasised in many shamanic traditions worldwide. (37)

### ***Music, dreams, and the vision quest:***

In one case, anthropological fieldwork and research was conducted, in which a young shaman spoke to the anthropologist upon his return from a vision quest, saying how he had obtained three songs in a dream.

Hearing mysterious, otherworldly music is also documented in cases of anthropological research regarding the training of Zulu shamans. When a young shaman receive his or her calling from the Otherworld, sometimes against his own will, the individual is often ill for weeks, having many unusual dreams and visions in the process. The moment of initiation by the spirits of the Otherworld during a dream-state occurs when the individual in question 'receives his song', one that was previously completely unknown to him. This moment of receiving his own song is greatly celebrated by the elders of the tribe. Dr Holger Kolweit further elaborates about this particular aspect of the Zulu training in his research results.

Here, in one excerpt, a young man spoke directly to Kolweit about his new shamanic status and music, upon his return from the Otherworld:

*.... Now there are things which I see when I lie down. When I left home I had composed three songs, without knowing from whence they came; I heard the song, and then just sang it, and sang the whole of it without ever having learnt it. (38)*

### ***'Dream songs':***

The Native American vision quest is well-known in this regard, too; there are many accounts of this. Here, a modern-day dream researcher Dr Patricia Garfield explains in one example from her dream research where the adolescent young man has returned from his vision quest with his 'dream songs' - i.e., songs that were, and can be, only obtained in a dream state, but in this instance were also then used throughout his life:

*'Dream songs...were particularly important in American Indian life. The dream songs received during the all-important adolescent vision quest became the dreamer's personal refrain. They were used throughout his life at stressful times (for example, war parties) and were also used to evoke the power of his own personal spirit. This is readily understandable as a function of the dream songs' strong emotional power for the dreamer.'* (39)

### ***Modern era musician develops his own method of obtaining songs 'from dreams':***

One late 20th century modern-day rock musician, Todd Rundgren, once told a US magazine interviewer about how at times he became very aware that some of his songs came to him fully realized in a dream, i.e, as already finished. Rundgren, over time, then further developed his own personal way of enhancing this process:

*'Many of my songs I dream fully realized. I dream that I am in the control room, listening to something on the speakers, and it is this piece of music that I have not written yet... This has happened so frequently that I can wake myself up and remember substantial parts. I don't know whether my sub-conscious has been working overtime writing these songs without my help and then revealing them to me, or, whether they're transmitted to me by some kind of muse or angel, or whether there is a difference between the two... They're lucid to the extent that I realize that I'm dreaming and wake myself up to write the song down'.* (40)

All of the above examples are often similar to a number of the early Celtic references, where we also encounter many themes involving dreaming, vision states and the key role of music, all intersecting with a human in some way in the Celtic Otherworld.

## **SECTION SIX: TRANCE-LIKE SLEEP STATES**

Celtic literature examples (please see references previously cited under the headings of 'performers', 'birds', 'healing', et al, for the examples that also included mention of music having the ability to put the listener into a trance-like sleep state).

### **Trance-like sleep state: Scientific research examples:**

As we might imagine, trance and meditative sleep-states are of continual interest to many researchers from a number of fields, investigating research topics such as the effects of drumming and rhythms on the listener, the soothing effects of harp music, or, more recently, increasing work being done on the hemispheres of the brain and sound, and so on.

### ***Research about music, sound, and the brain:***

Much research has, and is, being done on the human ear, sound, and music, and the various effects on the body. On the whole, it seems many researchers believe that music and trance-like states are often more connected with the left hemisphere of the human brain, which is connected to the more intuitive right side of the body. To illustrate this concept, in one key example from later 20th century research, Dr Diana Deutsch reported results in *Scientific American* where their team reported detailed research results about sound and the two hemispheres of the human brain, outlining how 'the right ear is somewhat more directly linked to the left side of the brain and vice versa. The left hemisphere is responsible for much of our music perception and for processing words and sound sequences, while the right hemisphere processes the quality of complex non-verbal sounds.' (41)

### ***Melodies, laughing and crying are often processed by the left ear:***

Similarly, in the *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, researchers King and Kimura researched and reported how, while both sides of the brain do process sound, the 'left ear is reportedly better at perceiving vocal nonverbal sounds, such as hummed melodies, laughing, and crying; the right ear is better at perceiving verbal sounds'. (42)

Drumming and percussion: how effects of rhythmic percussion sound(s), in particular, often strongly effect the consciousness and brain of the listener:

British psychologist Brian Bates informs us in this excerpt from his groundbreaking work connecting themes of applied imagination, rhythmic percussion and Anglo-Saxon magic:

*'We have always known about magic and this knowledge has always been inside us, but it is blocked from our consciousness by all sorts of taboos, perceptions and dogma. Once people are aware that they already have this resource of knowledge, the floodgates open and they are able to think and act in all sorts of more empowered ways than before. My research into Anglo-Saxon magic has shown me that in days long ago we knew more about the various ways the mind works than we do now. Recovering this knowledge will help us in all areas of our lives. For example, there is remarkable research into the effects of rhythmic percussion sound (for example, drumming) on the way that our imagination streams and uses information that we have stored subconsciously. All shamanic societies seem to have used some version of rhythmic sound to induce altered states of mind, from which we can think more creatively and have extraordinary insights that do not occur to us in our usual mode of everyday thinking, and this is a process that involves no drugs at all... This sort of applied imagination is a natural resource that is at the heart of magic, and it is just waiting for us to use it in our lives today.'* (43)

Much more research is being done the areas of trance and meditative sleep-states, and it should be interesting to see what the experts in those fields report in their results in the years to come.

## SECTION SEVEN: GRIEVING/BEREAVEMENT

In a number of Celtic references, melancholic otherworldly music is often shown to be as powerful as that of joy or ecstasy. Here we have three classic examples from Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic sources to illustrate a general understanding of the 'sad strain' and its effects on the listener.

One Scottish Gaelic folklore account involving crying heard - but no one seen - from within a cave, with a quality of sweetness to its melancholic music, is from a story from Kintail. It was recorded by Ian Paterson from an informant named Mrs Kate Dix, of Berneray, Harris, now stored in the extensive collection at the School of Scottish Studies Archive at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. The basic structure of this type of musical legend generally involves a faery musician who is portrayed as sitting outside a cave for the precise purpose of discouraging intruders via the playing of his music, while his other companions hold their revels further within the cavern.

### *'Cave of the Sobbing'*

Here, however, we have a rather unique twist to the basic story structure of this legend, involving a strong element of music, grieving, melancholy, and sadness, with Scottish folklorist Professor Alan Bruford reporting the key informant's comments about what became known to the locals as the 'Cave of the Sobbing' (Uamh na h-Ochanaich), where the mysterious crying from within the cave was reported to have 'sounded like sweet music':

The story, heard by Mrs. Dix's father when apprenticed to a tailor on Loch Longside, was that a sobbing sound used to be heard on dark nights from a cave in the hills near there, which was therefore called Uamh na h-Ochanaich ('The Cave of the Sobbing'). At last, a local lad ventured to go there for a wager and discovered that close to [the cave], the sobbing sounded like sweet music: it was made by an old fairy man sitting in the mouth of the cave playing a 'Lochaber Jews' harp' (tromb Abrach) to frighten away intruders while his companions held their revels further in. When this was discovered, the able-bodied young men of the community all gathered to raid the cave for the fairies' money (or silver - airgiod) but were never seen again... (44)

### *An Old Irish example of the 'sad strain': golltraighi*

As reported in *Music and the Celtic Otherworld*, from the Old Irish tale Cath Maige Mucrama we have a classic example from an Old Irish text of the tragic effects of the 'sad strain' - *golltraighi*. In this excerpt, King Ailill of Connacht and his men listen to the gifted wee elfin harper Fer Fi, and then, overcome, beg him to stop:

*...Then he played them the golltraighe, or weeping-strain, reducing them to weep, wail, and bitterly to lament, until it was besought of him that he would desist.'* (45)

Here, the sheer sadness of the faery musician's harp was felt to be so overwhelmingly powerful at the time that the musician was asked to stop playing as soon as possible, attesting to its perceived otherworldly influence and rather dramatic effects upon a human listener.

Many other instances of this type exist in Celtic literature; this is but one example. Old Irish 'Lament of the Fairy Women':

Lament was seen by the early Irish in particular as being very powerful in its

melancholic and spiritual effects, involving special chanting as well as a unique type of wailing song called 'keening', generally sung at funerals by women and certain men, in the procession to the funeral as well as during the ceremony. Here, an excerpt entitled 'The Lament of the Fairy Women' is portrayed as having especially overpowering melancholic effects on the listeners present:

*... they gave forth their cry, so that the people who were in the court were thrown prostrate. Hence it is that the musicians of Ireland have got the tune 'The Wail of the Fairy Women.'* (46)

### ***Scottish death customs and chants: Moray Firth***

Often, early Celtic folklore informants reported instances of certain customs about death, funerals, and music in the specific areas they were investigating. Here, Scottish research in the Moray Firth area regarding melancholy songs, laments, keening songs, mourning, and various funeral practices is further described:

*.... 'Shaw, in recording traditions from Moray in the 18th century, gives us some information about death customs in his day...he mentions the mourning women (bean tuirim) who were employed to chant the coronach or lament, reciting the heroic deeds, the hunting prowess, the largesse and so on of the deceased, in true archaic Celtic fashion. [He] also notes that it was commonplace in Moray in his day for people to make a sunwise (deiseal) procession around the church at marriages, funerals, and the churching of women, that is, their first visit to church after the birth of a child...'* (47)

### ***The 'death song' of swans: cross-cultural example***

Regarding the topics of melancholy, death and music, swans - long featured in much Celtic lore - in particular have long been portrayed as singing a very sad death song before they die in a number of folklore traditions, including the Celtic.

Many myths, legends, and artistic works make reference to this phenomenon involving a mysterious, mournful singing of swans at or near their death, including one of the more well-known quotes from Shakespeare's King John, Act 5, Sc7, w21-2:

*'This pale, faint swan, who chants a doleful hymn to its own death'.*

### ***Funerals, grieving, and music: Pipers at Scottish funerals in earlier times:***

*.... 'In Barra, a corpse was left unburied for 48 hours alone; in Uist it was retained in the house from three to five nights. The seis or seisig-bhais, 'death-wailing', could be heard in the house in which the death had taken place. The tuiream, 'lament', was the mourning in the open air after the doleful funeral procession. Some pipers were renowned for their laments at funerals. Carmichael records that the word gul or gal was a term which was applied to this archaic custom of professional mourning. By 1904, it had become redundant in Scotland, although it was still in vogue in Ireland, where it was called caoineadh, the well-known anglicized word 'keening'...'* (48)

### ***Grieving/Bereavement: Scientific research and cross-cultural examples:***

In a similar vein, one key aspect for many sound healers and music therapists today often involves music and various issues relating to grieving, bereavement, deaths, or funerals. They often advise everyone, including the bereaved after a death or a loss, to consider a far greater awareness of silence on a daily basis to assist with the post-death healing process.

The 'sounds of silence' can indeed be healing, as the human aural spectrum cannot normally hear all the sounds around us, especially when immersed in our busy, modern-day society. As many today practice, simply setting aside time each day for silence or a preferred

method of meditation (without singing or playing music) can also be helpful, including for those during a time of bereavement or loss, for example.

Sound healer Jonathan Goldman is one modern-day practitioner with a great appreciation and acknowledgement of silence, as he further elaborates about the value of meditation and sitting in silence in *Healing Sounds: The Power of Harmonics*:

*'An excellent place to begin the first path is to work with the energy of silence. Honouring this energy allows us to come to a place of stillness. In silence, it is possible to perceive all sounds that can be created... We are truly a celestial orchestra filled with sound; the heart beat, respiration, circulatory system, auditory system, nervous system, and brainwaves all create myriad sounds that we can become aware of through silence. When we sit in this manner, we also become aware of externally created sounds. We notice nature sounds such as birds chirping or the wind blowing... I have found that one of the fastest ways of altering consciousness is to sit silently. As we begin to tune in to the inner and outer sounds we truly change the way our everyday perception works. We are altering the auditory system and our brainwaves as well... Sitting in silence is the beginning of this work and also the end...'* (49)

### ***Drumming or percussion also used in healing after a trauma or death:***

In many traditional cultures, rhythmic patterns are often used in association with rites of passage, including a death or at a funeral. The sound's impact on the human brain from rhythm has long been a focus of study for many researchers, as has rhythmic dancing activity. In particular, it seems a number of researchers increasingly believe that shamanic drumming often tends to involve low frequency sound waves.

One major study along those lines was conducted in the early 1960s by Andrew Neher, who published papers in which he reported the effects of drumming on monitored subjects, noting that the single beat of a drum contains many frequencies, but that these are mainly low frequencies. His initial research laboratory experiments showed that drumming did indeed affect the electrical activity of a subject's brain, particularly in the auditory region. Subjects also reported "unusual perceptions" at times. (50)

### ***Drumming found to entrain the human brain into the low-frequency range:***

British researcher Paul Devereux summarises the further work being done by experts more recently about drumming, the brain, and the lower frequencies:

'Some subsequent studies have supported Heher's view that ritual drumming, especially in shamanic contexts, does tend to 'drive' brain rhythms into the low-frequency theta range. For example, in studying ritual drumming among the Salish Indians of America's Northwest coast region, researchers found that frequencies in that range were indeed produced. (51)

'Music thanatology': a sub-speciality of bereavement, grieving and music studies:

The Chalice of Repose Project in the USA, which uses music to aid the terminally ill and dying, bases its successful medical effort on a set of practices concerning the care of the dying that were effectively used in France at Cluny, founded in 909 AD, based on certain Gregorian chants. It is an example of a growing sub-specialty of musical healing that involves assisting those who are going through a bereavement process, and/or recuperating from a death, grieving a lost child, a partner, or relative, or surviving serious surgery or a major accident.

Founder Therese Schroeder-Sheker has written that in their work 'specific music is played for conscious patients, other music for those who are comatose, those in physical pain, mental agony, etc.' (52) She also comments that the hospital where the project started was

'the only hospital in the world with twenty-seven harps and resident singing-harpists in training'. (53) The project has since expanded into other areas of the country and in some areas of Europe; its aims are similar to some of the examples described in the literature of early Ireland about healing, where harp music, certain chants and singing are often cited as being particularly effective ways to assist those in extreme pain, anguish, or near death. A 'thread of sadness...and wisdom':

Music, joy, and sadness are often intertwined in certain types of music. Many have noted through the centuries that quite a number of the more favourite Celtic tunes, for example, certain Irish and Scottish songs in particular, often have ostensibly joyful uplifting effects upon the listener, but - musically-speaking - these same tunes ironically often have a higher number of minor chords at certain intervals, something one may not initially expect.

Robin Williamson comments about certain uplifting Celtic tunes, i.e., that 'the best of them have a thread of sadness and wisdom woven through the patterning. I've played these tunes in all kinds of places, to all kinds of people, and they never fail to raise good cheer. This music is staggeringly honest.' (54) I wholeheartedly agree. Again, such music, a route to musical Truth, one might say, 'cuts to the core'; it is indeed staggeringly honest. While the minor chords are present, the overall effect of the music is often quite the opposite - joyful and uplifting to the human ear.

## **Conclusion**

We have now journeyed on our 'circuit' through a survey of music and the Celtic Otherworld from the Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic sources, revealing a broad range of examples in both everyday and otherworldly contexts.

In these references, music is consistently portrayed as ever-present, and especially in the Otherworld examples, it is seen as a connecting link, a vital thread, that in the right circumstances, can be a most effective link for a human mortal to go to the Otherworld, and back, often returning highly transformed in the process.

The quotations cited all confirm the powerful effects of music: whether for creating or enhancing healing, inducing or deepening a trance-like sleep state, connecting with the spirits of the landscape, creating joy and happiness, alleviating grief or sadness at key junctures, summoning a bird or an animal, increasing prosperity or productive results, obtaining new songs from a dream, deepening a connection with an ancient site or special place, or assisting the community around one.

While no one can ever say for certain what an early society or people precisely believed or what their exact musical techniques or practices were, nor can anyone tell another 'how' to live their own life or develop their own personal spiritual practice, in these Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic references we consistently see music portrayed as an ever-present, immanent reality in the environment all around us, whether one is necessarily conscious of it or not at any given time, and with music highly featured in these references as a potentially powerful transformative agent for major change. Its effects upon the mortal listeners alone attest to this, and, as expected, the effects in or around a faery musician or other otherworldly spirit, being, or deity, are all the more dramatic and far-reaching in their effects on the listener. An inherent 'musicality' to the landscape itself is also evident throughout much of this material, perhaps a poignant reminder for us to recall today as well.

A final insight about Celtic music is from a comment by Robin Williamson about how, historically, various styles of music and cultures have also tended to be cyclical, and that new

presentations are created by drawing upon new combinations of styles and writing songs: (55)

*There are truths, but no new truths; truths are the trapeze, and in this circus all infinity expands itself.*

The Triads of the Island of Britain also remind us that the three foundations of Awen are:

*To understand truth, To love truth, To maintain truth.*

Music, a universal language that everyone can understand, no matter who they are or where they are from, may also be perceived as a metaphor for a far greater, infinite Truth. From these early Celtic references, it seems that music itself may still have much to teach us today, having a unique wisdom all its own, a perennial Truth, one that resonates down to us today.

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