

Irish Song Tradition | Sample answer

Over the years, Irish song tradition has developed influenced by political and natural events, in both the English and Irish language.

A major song tradition in Ireland is sean-nós singing. Sean nós is a specific style of unaccompanied singing in the Irish language. Sean nós differs in various regions including Ulster, Connaught and Munster. Donegal sean nós was influenced by scots Gaelic song, and the melody contains minimal ornamentation. Lilis O' Laoire is a singer who sings using this style. Connaught sean nós contains a highly florid line, and is less concerned with the integrity of the beat. The performer in this case connects the text to their interpretation of the melody. An example of a performer of this style is Seosamh O' Heanaí. The Munster style of Sean nós uses more ornamentation and pays attentions to the pulse of the beat. Vibrato and nasal tone quality are also used. An example of a singer in this style is Iarla O'Lionaird.

Sean nós singing contains many defining characteristics. Ornamentation is used both melismatically and intervallicly. Melismatic ornamentation involves a group of auxiliary notes decorating or replacing a main melody note, whereas intervallic ornamentation is when an interval between two notes may be replaced by a different interval or a series of stepwise notes to fill the interval. Ornamentation will change according to the wording of the song. It is also common in sean nós singing that words would be lengthened according to importance, use of glottal stops and maintaining continuity. Nasalization is used to continue a note even when there are no words.

Singers use microtonal changes, free rhythm and often emphasize the consonant.

When Ireland was under British Rule after the Act of Union (1801), the English language became more prominent and so a tradition of songs about Ireland, sung in English began to emerge. Even though the language is different common features can be seen in both. An example of this style of song is "Carrickfergus". A common anglo Irish song type is the ballad. This is a narrative song. Ballads deal with a wide range of topics, including love, war and emigration. These ballads were sung at first unaccompanied but later began to incorporate harmony, accompanied by guitar and group singing. An example of a ballad singer is Christy Moore and also The Wolfe Tones.

Many other types of Irish songs exist, such as macaronic songs, in which phrases can alter between English and Irish. Many date from the 19th Century, when the Irish language was in decline, due to a bilingual population. An example of this is “Suil A Ruin.” Another major style of Irish song is the lament, which were often written about loved ones who had died, emigrated or been evicted. An example of a lament is “An Mhaighdean Mhara.”

A prominent style of song in the 1840s was the folk songs of the great famine. These songs focus on the reality of morality, destitution and emigration. An example of a songwriter at this time is Peatsaí O’ Callanain, who recalls the widespread dependence on the potato in “Na Fataí Bana”, which tells about the victims in the hospitals and local poor houses. Around this time, many also sung about the lack of gaiety and courtship, music and matchmaking that characterized communities before the famine struck.

It is for these reasons that the Irish song tradition has developed and changed over the years.