

Identify and describe the features commonly found in Sean-Nós singing. (2010 Q5 B iii) | A1 Sample Answer

Sean-nós is a specific style of unaccompanied singing in the Irish language. It has developed into three main regions; Ulster, Connaught and Munster.

Ulster Sean-nós has been heavily influenced by Scots Gaelic song and contains minimal ornamentation. A singer in this region is Lillis O' Laoire. Connaught sean-nós is less concerned with the rhythm and contains a highly florid line. The performer in this case connects the text to their interpretation of the melody. A performer of this style is Sesame O'Heanaí, who performed "Roisín Dubh." Munster sean-nós contains more ornamentation than Ulster, and pays more attention to the beat. There is much use of vibrato and nasal tone quality. A performer in this case is Iarla O'Lionaird.

Sean-nós singing contains many defining characteristics, such as ornamentation, variation, glottal stops, nasalisation and the method of performance. There are two types of ornamentation - melismatic and intervallic. Melismatic ornamentation uses auxiliary notes to decorate or replace a main note of the melody. It may also be reduced to a single note leading into the main note. Intervallic ornamentation, however, replaces an interval between two notes which may be replaced by a different interval, or a series of stepwise notes to fill the interval. Ornamentation will change due to the song's wording. There are also three types of variation - melismatic, intervallic, and rhythmic.

A technique commonly used in sean nós is the glottal stop. This is the sudden stopping of the flow of air in the throat leading to the abrupt ending of a note. This is used to emphasise the previous or next note. This technique is still common in sean nós and has also made it into Anglo-Irish ballads in some regions, such as Cork.

Another technique used in sean nós is nasalization. This maintains continuity musically by continuing a note at the end of a line, even when there is no text to support it. It is particularly noticeable on a vowel when a singer closes his lips, forming an "m" sound like a drone which is repeated at the end of other lines.

In sean n6s performance, the audience is often expected to participate, through words of encouragement and commentary and audience members may even come up to hold the hand of the performer in support. Cajoling occurs from the audience, and the singer may position facing the corner of the room and away from the audience. The position may have acoustic benefits and also ancient significance.

Nowadays there are events and "sean n6s camps" in place in order to keep the sean n6s tradition alive, such as the Willie Clancy summer school. There have also been radio series' such as O'Riada's "our musical Heritage" (1962) which broadened public interest in sean n6s. It is to this day appreciated in Gaeltacht areas, where its subtleties and regional variations can be appreciated.

These are the features and developments of sean n6s singing over the years.