

# THE MUSICAL ASPECT OF THE SONGS OF NAN MACKINNON OF VATERSAY

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The singing of Nan Mackinnon has a strangeness about it even to the person with a wide experience of Gaelic folk-singing. One might say facetiously of it that it is "out of this world". For once, however, the phrase would be justified, for it is the singing of a person who lives, and sings for her own amusement, within the confines of her immediate family circle, in the midst of a small island community which itself chooses to enjoy a withdrawn existence, and where visitors are not encouraged to intrude. Her singing, which is the legacy of her mother, has therefore probably preserved in a manner almost completely unspoiled by extraneous influences, the way of singing of that older island community in which her mother lived the greater part of her life—that of the now uninhabited island of Mingulay.

The actual vocal timbre of Nan Mackinnon's voice is of a narrow quality, though without the harshness which the description implies—indeed there is a soft, ruminative, reflective sound about it, as if she were singing to herself rather than to a listener. This shows itself not only in the actual sound of her voice, but in the tempo and rhythm of her songs, the outstanding characteristic of which is its unhurriedness. Like all good folk-singers, she lays as much importance on the proper emphasis and quantitative value of the words of a song as on the melody, singing a long note to a long vowel, even if it means adding what to the musician is an extra beat or more in the bar, or the robbing of the accepted duration of a succeeding note—a *tempo rubato* which is sometimes "more than *molto*", to use familiar musical terms. In a language which abounds in long vowel-sounds as does Gaelic, this characteristic becomes the more marked; and when to it is added a naturally leisurely mode of singing, the rhythm can become very elongated indeed. Yet the rhythm is there, though it is sometimes of an elusiveness that provides a stiff test for the transcriber.

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The tessitura of her voice gives the impression of being high in pitch; but this is found to be an illusion, probably arising out of the narrowness of the sound quality. The compass seldom exceeds D in the treble stave and low G or an occasional F below it; which is not, however, as low as is to be heard from the female voice in the neighbouring island of Barra.

Grace-notes abound in typical Hebridean patterns. These take the simple forms, most often of a single, sometimes of a double, and rarely, of a triple grace-note. The elaborate *melismata* of the singers of the more northerly end of the Long Island are absent.

A curious characteristic which may be noticed in her singing, and which is not unknown in the Hebrides, is that of cutting off abruptly the flow of sound at the end of a phrase by a sort of inverted *Coup de glotte*, that is, by a sudden sharp closing of the throat instead of, as normally, by the gentle cessation of the breath stream. With Nan Mackinnon, this has the effect of throwing the voice upwards in pitch as the sound ceases, generally to the interval of a third or fourth, in a kind of involuntary after-grace-note; a sound which the transcriber must note as a point of interest, but which, being intrusive, and extraneous to the melody, must be omitted from it in transcription for publication.

Strangely arresting, however, as is the actual singing of Nan Mackinnon in these respects, it is in her quite remarkable repertoire of traditional songs that the chief interest lies; for these embrace an almost complete cross-section of the whole Gaelic song-culture, and include examples of every song-type (except, curiously, the Ossianic lays) from great elegaic songs to the lightest of *puirt-a-beul*. Her singing of *puirt-a-beul*, which form a considerable section of her repertoire, is in complete contrast to the *rubato* manner of her other songs, for here she becomes intensely rhythmic. Most, though significantly not all, of her *puirt-a-beul* are found to be constructed on the bagpipe scale—significantly not all because it shows that *puirt-a-beul* are not necessarily just a putting of words to pipe-tunes, and that rhythmic vocal music in dance measure exists in its own right in Gaelic tradition. The several strains which go to make up the movements of her *puirt-a-beul* are often repeated quite a number of times, giving one to speculate on whether they may have borne any relationship to the repetitive routine of the dance for which they were sung.

The labour songs, mostly of the type used for the shrinking of the cloth, provide also their interest and problems. Although Nan Mackinnon knows and sings a considerable number of these, she states that she never took part in the actual communal task of waulking the cloth, but learnt the songs *qua* songs, from her mother. Again one finds in them unexpected rhythmic deviations from the regular beat of labour songs; and this again poses a question—do these point to older forms of the songs, existing perhaps before they were impressed into the service and adapted for the purpose of the waulking (of which there may also possibly be a hint in the early phonograph recordings of Mingulay singers made by Mrs Kennedy Fraser), or do these deviations merely take their source in Nan Mackinnon's own way of singing them? This is a question which must be left to the Gaelic scholar to answer.

Musicologically, the repertoire presents material for a complete study of Gaelic folk-music. In the scale foundation of the melodies, all the musical modes are to be found, including those rare in folk-song, the Phrygian and Lydian; the latter said by Cecil Sharp never to have been found by an English collector, i.e. in English folk-song. (It exists, however, within the scale of the Scottish Highland bagpipe.) The complete cycle of pentatonic modes are to be found; while of hexatonic scales, Nan Mackinnon's songs present so wide and varied a selection that they burst open the preconceived system for the classification of these scales worked out in the School of Scottish Studies, and have made necessary a wider system of classification. Of particular interest are some six or seven songs constructed on conjunct five-note scales, and two rare examples of a four-note scale, one conjunct and one gapped—perhaps again survivals of a more rudimentary stage of Gaelic folk-music.

To the singer of Gaelic folk-songs, Nan Mackinnon's songs are a potential enrichment. From all angles, the recording of her complete repertoire of more than four hundred and fifty songs must be accounted a major contribution to the study of Gaelic song.