

James R. COWDERY, *The Mélodie Tradition of Ireland* (Kent, Ohio, The Kent State University Press, 1990. Pp. xviii, 202, mus. exx., photo, bib. refs., \$24.00 + \$3.00 shipping US (hardcover), ISBN 0-87338-407-5; tape \$ 12.00 + \$3.00 shipping US)

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Despite its seemingly specialized subject matter, James R. Cowdery's, *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland*, deserves the close attention of musicologists, ethnomusicologists and folklorists. Whereas the main body of the study is restricted to intensive, highly technical analyses of only a few Irish songs and dance tunes in many versions and variants, these analyses are relevant not only to students of British traditional music but also, as Cowdery astutely points out, to scholars who deal with such other "modal" idioms as those of the European Middle Ages, South Asia and Indonesia. Indeed, within the broad scope of the volume's implications, one could include such repertoires of specifically Canadian interest as the Acadian songs studied along similar lines by Deschênes (1989). Additionally and quite importantly, Cowdery presents musically illustrated verbal testimony of a pre-eminent traditional Irish musician, Seosamh O hÉanaí, known to many English speakers as Joe Heaney, in order to illuminate aspects of indigenous musical categories and conceptualizations. Cowdery further documents this study with several detailed transcriptions of songs and instrumental pieces that are keyed to a cassette recording of the originals which, in turn, is available from the publisher. An outgrowth of his M.A. thesis and Ph.D. dissertation for Wesleyan University as well as of his studies there with Heaney, Cowdery's present offering comprises a re-formulation of ideas he has advanced in earlier treatments.

Cowdery opens his account with a concise overview of the history, styles and genres of Irish traditional music. If read in conjunction with Breathnach (1971), O Canainn (1978) and O Riada (1982) as well as Porter's recent extensive bibliography of British traditional music (1989), Cowdery's survey functions as a handy introduction to the tradition as a whole, the scholarly tradition that has emerged from it, as well as to the book itself. Cowdery's writing here is at all times flowing: he seldom gets waylaid by aspects of Irish musical tradition that are irrelevant to his central concerns. He quickly sketches just enough information in his introductory survey of traditional Irish music for the reader to become engaged in his subsequent examination of *sean-nós* ("old style") songs and dance tunes.

Following Cowdery's brief introduction to these vocal and instrumental forms is one of the highlights of the volume: a chapter centering on extended passages from interviews with Heaney. These passages are intermixed with musical examples of song-excerpts performed by Heaney which vividly illustrate

various points as they arise in the discussion. In particular, we learn that ornaments serve to emphasize salient words or syllables of the text (cf. Williams 1985) and we are introduced to the very general aesthetic notions of “pulse” (which I would loosely equate with “flow” or even “intense flow”), “the nea” (which never seems to be pinned down as a concept by Cowdery), and the indignously disputed ideas of “singing a song” and “saying a song”, both of which might be conveyed by the phrase “*abair amhrán*” (which could be rendered approximately as “putting a song across — even to oneself”).

The remaining chapters focus on connections among stanzas, versions and variants within four groups of traditional Irish tunes. These case studies investigate the topic of so-called “tune families”, which has a long history in British folksong scholarship, as well as Cowdery’s own ideas concerning so-called “tune models” and the “outlining”, “conjoining” and “recombining” of tunes. Cowdery demonstrates in these chapters that specific portions of selected versions and variants of “The Blackbird”, a group of dance tunes that has served for slow airs, set dances, hornpipes and reels, differ whereas others are similar. Worthwhile here would have been an analysis that laid more emphasis on the evident importance of strongly implied chords for the identity of all the tune-variants discussed. Instead, Cowdery provides only a brief account of the chordal piano accompaniment of Michael Coleman’s variant which, Cowdery himself admits, would be recognized generally as anomalous by other tradition-bearers. Indeed, Cowdery’s failure to recognize clearly articulated structures that intervene between the seven degrees of a scale or mode and the single finalis or tonic of a tune — namely, triads and dyads of various sorts as well as patterns of rhythm and metre — prevents him from probing more deeply than he has the “inner life” of Irish melodies.

Cowdery discusses in much detail tunes for “Ballylee”, a *sean-nós* song the melody of which is also used for a slow air, and for “Rakish Paddy”, the melody of which serves for both a measured march and a dance tune. Central here is the notion of “melodic moves”, brief passages that outline or emphasize various degrees of a scale or mode. For certain variants of these melodies as well as for some variants of “The Blackbird” and “The Boyne Water”, Cowdery finds that individual “melodic moves” recur from rendition to rendition. Sometimes the recurrences are virtually identical, both in order and in content; sometimes only some such passages recur; and in further instances, one can only posit similarity of ordering if one allows for the possibility of cyclism in the permutations (cf. in this regard, Blacking 1967, for a similarly cyclic formulation, and note that the book as a whole cycles in its organization to and from accounts of “The Blackbird”). Again, one regrets Cowdery’s general neglect of triadic and dyadic structures, for such structures clearly inform the very contents of the “moves” he posits. Nonetheless, if one carefully follows Cowdery’s analyses here, one can conclude that various performances, tunes

and tune-groups display a much higher degree of unity and coherence than might have been discerned by a less attentive scholar. In all this, Cowdery's analyses, influenced as they seem to be by Powers' seminal account of mode (1980), generally eschew the abstractions and Procrusteanism that has permeated many earlier attempts to "classify" traditional melodies.

Once one has digested the technical details of Cowdery's account, one finds much that might be of value beyond the usual aims of musical analysis itself. Cowdery himself acknowledges that his outlook and findings are rather compatible with, for example, Geertz's notion of "thick description", Blacking's idea that "rules" underlie a culture, and Glassie's concept of "context". And the critical and interpretative discussions that accompany the analyses (which themselves might well serve as models or points of departure for research papers and theses) would be fair grist for many seminars and tutorials in musicology and ethnomusicology.

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