

Programme Notes By Ellen Cranitch

Maighread Ní Dhomhnaill, voice

Máirtín O'Connor, accordion

Séamie O'Dowd, guitar, fiddle, voice

Maighread is having a rest after a two day lock-in. She's been in Croke Park, singing for the Pope, and whatever way your leanings might be, the experience was unforgettable - large, appreciative and captive audiences, impressive production, sound and design, and a chance to catch up and perform again with old friends. Electric Picnic for the faithful.

The upcoming Music Network tour, no doubt will be equally memorable, if on a somewhat smaller scale.

Continuing the adventurous programming strand which Music Network pioneered some years back, that of teaming up musicians who, whilst well established in their own careers, are playing together for the first time (Network without the net, if you like), this autumn tour sees three highly accomplished and experienced artists, Maighread Ní Dhomhnaill, Máirtín O'Connor and Séamie O'Dowd pooling their considerable wealth of talent and material to devise a performance celebrating their heritage, influences and passions. All three have been key figures in creating the sounds, influences, and new directions that have shaped traditional music over the past 30 years, and their collective authority, individuality and authenticity, when funnelled into collaboration, will surely be something to look back and remember.

Máirtín cites friendship as an important basis for any collaboration. "This basic friendship that goes back many years...I toured Nigeria, Japan, Europe, with Maighread and Triona and their late brother Micheál, the connection is there, even though we haven't played together for many years. And it's always joyful playing with Séamie, there's a bounce-off that happens at times, and he has a telepathic capability, he can find and anticipate what you're at musically... it's a real conversation".

The conversation is one which we the listener will be privileged to eavesdrop on. It's the mark of good musicianship, the ability to listen, to ponder, and to respond, all in the split second timeframe that playing music live allows. The ability for each to anticipate and discover at the same time what their fellow musicians are trying to communicate, without the need for verbalization... "That," says Máirtín, "is when the real magic happens."

There is also the element of trust in a live music situation. This tour sees the trio play ten concerts.

It is in the nature of traditional musicians (and of course, improvisors, jazz players, folk musicians...only classical music requires an adherence to the roadmap) to stray beyond the constraints of identikit performance, and over the course of a tour, a unique and specific confidence establishes itself between players. No doubt what we will hear on the last night in Portlaoise, will differ from that of the first night in Wexford, and so the music retains an immediacy, a directness and an engagement with the listener that no recordings or YouTube clips can ever hope to replicate.

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So what will we hear? The repertoire available to these three is vast, an accumulation over many years of listening, learning, playing in all kinds of situations, from tiny domestic sessions, to massive stadium performances. Was there a challenge arriving at a set list? Maighread, (who nowadays mostly performs with her sister Triona on keyboard) observes, “Well, for me it is an opportunity to re-visit some of the material that I couldn't re-create on stage in recent years. I am pulling out some songs that we used to do with my brother Micheál, which are guitar-based, I'm delighted that Séamie is on board, we can explore the rhythmic approach to arrangements, - things like ‘Faoitín túr a ló’, and ‘The Lily Of The West’ – we've worked a slightly faster approach... though it's definitely not country music!” Her own heritage, that of the

Donegal Gaeltacht and its immense wealth of music and song, have shaped and directed Maighread's work as an artist, interpreter of songs, and communicator. The singing of her aunt, Neilí, and the legendary Joe Holmes, Len Graham, Geordie Hanna – and her respect for, and love of Donegal song forms the basis of her art. And her life.

That is not to say that the O'Dhomhnaill youngsters were narrow in their musical taste. “Mam was a great singer, and she loved light opera and the musicals. Bing Crosby, Deanna Durbin, Calamity Jane, Oklahoma... we'd sing those show tunes too when we had parties.” And like so many of her generation and right up to the current crop of young female vocalists, the magnificent presence of the great female voices. Joni, Emmylou, Dolly... “When I was working as a nurse, at night, I listened to them a lot.”

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Máirtín O'Connor

Máirtín similarly, had multiple influences in his early years. Though a trad player, he played in bands which explored and assimilated much colour and shade from Eastern European music, and his own highly virtuosic and spirited playing owes much to the ornaments, hairpin bends, and whirly wit of high-octane dance music from other cultures. But, somewhat surprisingly, he identifies piping as another key influence – particularly the piping of the legendary Patsy Tuohy. “I suppose you could say I'm a piper trapped in an accordion player's body. I was blown away when I heard Patsy, and there are definitely piping effects in my playing, though it is more a sub-conscious absorption than something studied and learned.” Máirtín's skill as a composer is also well known, he can turn a soulful air as handily as a rollicking polka. “I suppose it can be a bit like breathing at times... sometimes the tunes come very easily. I started by composing some tunes in the traditional idiom when I was a teenager, and then I was specifically asked to write something. That's a different thing altogether, a commission, and it becomes an act of faith that it all works out OK. Generally it does!”

And for Sligo-born Séamie O'Dowd, working it out is second nature. His quiet authority as a musician is remarkable – his guitar playing, both as an accompanist to songs and tunes, and also taking the lead, whether on fiddle or guitar, is breath-taking. His understanding of rhythm and blues, rock sensibilities, and harmonic good taste, make him the go-to producer for so many musicians seeking to find that rare combination of innovation with respect for tradition, adventure without frightening the horses.

Though a long way from the Horlicks and slippers, it has to be acknowledged that these three fine musicians are at a point in their lives and careers, where age and wisdom has brought with it certain freedoms and a fearlessness that might not have pertained in youth. In a very concrete sense, for singers, the lowering of the range of the voice can add a richness, colour and deeper understanding to the delivery of a song. For Maighread, there is now the opportunity to perform songs that she would not have done earlier. “You're getting older; you're giving yourself the authority and the right to move into something else. And people enjoy that. For years we were known for what we did, but we are different now, and it's great that people still want to hear us. This is what I am now, this is who I am.” A good tune will always be a good tune.

In an elegant twist of fate, Séamie and Maighread last met at the funeral of the great songster, and honorary Sligoman, Thom Moore. In his memory, Séamie's suggested that this tour include one of Thom's best known and loved songs, 'The Train From Sligo'. Maighread's response: “How could we not? I was there in Mulligan Records when Thom was writing that song.” So a gentle benediction on this tour from friends departed, remembered, and a new road rising.

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