

Programme Notes by Ellen Cranitch

January 2019



Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh, voice, flute

Siobhan Miller, voice

Damien Mullane, accordion

Anna Massie, guitar

Democracy – in our currently chaotic and wholly unpredictable world, where it has been corrupted, undermined, bypassed and ignored – thank thank goodness for Music Network and its unshakeable belief in the power of equal voices. Once again MN has nominated for the primaries, confirmed the candidates, and declared all four running mates entirely suitable for office.

They will take to the roads mid-January, and the conversations opened up at their initial meeting in October will be continued, this time in front of a live audience. Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh, Siobhan Miller, Anna Massie and Damien Mullane are all highly accomplished musicians, with a hugely impressive body of work testifying to their authority and understanding of tradition, but also to their forward looking approaches to their music, placing it front and centre as a living, breathing, constantly evolving thing, reflecting the past but shining a light into the future. What better time to explore this than in the month of January - the god Janus – looking both backwards and forwards.

For Damien Mullane, the purely traditional world was not enough. Having been brought up in London, and from a non-musical family, his initial embracing of the session and the set deemed him “a weird kid, who'd rather play the accordion than football”, and eventually led him to Dingle, where he immersed himself in the cultural life of the town. This of course, meant tunes day and night, but also introduced him to many singers and songs, and this was to be an epiphany of sorts. “Playing with singers made me into a musician, as opposed to just a tunes player; I learned how to play my instrument once I started playing songs. It's a creative process for me... 'cause there's nothing there, I have to create my place within that music, as opposed to just playing the same thing in tunes. I regard myself as a musician whose instrument is the accordion. And much of my work now is outside traditional music, for example with Gavin James... my whole musical world opened up when I started playing with singers.”

And living in Dingle naturally he crossed paths with Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh. One of Ireland's finest singers and flute players, she lives 'out on the edge' ... in the wilds of West Kerry, where her love for the music and the language are interconnected. She is also a musician who does not set bookends on her own musical experience. For such a relatively small town in a corner of Ireland, the cultural life in Dingle is extraordinarily rich, and this is what draws people to it, as well as keeping a local community from turning inwards. “We have such a rich '*pobal ceol*', we inform and nourish each other. A lot of the people here are coming or going, we're in the middle of Other Voices at the moment [early December], and you can't not be influenced by all that... whether you choose to or not.”

Though she is primarily thought of as being a 'traditional' musician, she regards herself as being a product of her time, a modern woman practicing a vital and highly communicative art. Humans evolve, they grow in experience and knowledge, and the very act of living is simultaneously creating the tradition of the future. “We are very lucky here, there are no lines between this is tradition / this

is not – this is allowed / this is not.” And when it comes to the Irish language, this shedding of straightjackets is crucial to its survival and growth. The baggage that might have been slung over the unwilling shoulders of countless Irish language students in years gone by seems to thankfully, have been lost in transit. Muireann acknowledges the vital role that social media has played in this – “That’s where its healthiest! It’s all over Twitter, the new generation have taken it on, and I love that!” And it is done with humour and lightness of touch, not the *bata* of stern heritage.

Muireann's vast experience has seen her spend a lot of time in Scotland, performing, making TV and radio shows, and discovering many shared frames of reference. The music we will hear on this tour celebrates a common musical ground between our two countries and follows ‘the journey of a song’, how songs and tunes migrate, return, stay home for a bit, then migrate again, - a little bit changed and matured.

This journey is something that for Siobhan Miller is a fascinating reflection of the journey of people, and many of her songs come from the traveling people of Scotland. Having grown up with a musician father, she was taken to many festivals and performances with him from an early age, and, though she may not have realized it at the time, it was laying down the basis for a lifetime love of song and singers. From just outside Edinburgh, her repertoire includes much material from the travellers of Blairgowrie, and she identifies subtle connections and differences with counterparts in Ireland. “Sometimes its hard to know where a song comes from originally, but we can hear common themes in songs from here, from Ireland, from the US. I see small but significant differences in melodies, ornaments... the singing tradition is so strong in Ireland, I've picked up lots of great songs from my time in University of Limerick, and at the Willie Clancy and Frank Harte festivals which I still perform a lot”. Though she mostly performs with her own band, and her own material, she relishes the challenges that this tour will present. “I've brought some songs that I do already, but which it will be great to make new arrangements of with this lineup.”

These arrangements will be underpinned by the extraordinary virtuoso guitar playing of Anna Massie, and it seems she may be tempted to sing a song or two on this tour also! Her rock solid rhythmic sensibilities, taste and elegance in her choices of chords and voicings in her tune accompaniments, make her the go-to guitarist in Scotland, and has seen her play with some of the finest pioneering artists making adventurous work. Together with Damien Mullane, they have arrived at a very happy place, harmonically speaking. “When we were rehearsing the songs, Anna would throw in nice little chords, and I liked that, I could work around it, and I found it very easy. When you're playing with guitarists, or keyboard players, you can hear their influences, what kind of music they're into, by the chords they choose. Though it's not so much the chords, it's where they put them. Anna is brilliant at instinctively knowing what's good, and knows when not to get too busy... you know, you can keep filling it, but someone has to listen to it!”

And so these four equal voices have gathered at the start of a New Year, it can be a dark time, but as Muireann says, the summer can be so busy for musicians, and now is a time for reflection and collaboration and the shining of a light into the darkness. The set list has been arrived at through a process of agreement, consensus and partnership – true democracy at its best. All those in favour, say “Aye”.