

Gradam Ceoil: rewarding Irish music's wonderful anarchy

The infinite ways in which the music is woven, nurtured, challenged and enjoyed are highlighted by the recipients of this year's TG4 awards

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Anyone tempted to think that the traditional music firmament is a finite space populated by known quantities will have their preconceptions shattered by this year's TG4 Gradam Ceoil award winners. Banjos, boxes, flutes, pipes and fiddles may still be central to the mix, but it is the infinite ways the music is woven, nurtured, challenged and enjoyed that characterise this year's recipients.

This year's young traditional musician of the year is Bryan O'Leary, a young accordion player from Sliabh Luachra. Disentangling the impact of nature and nurture would be impossible in his case: he is a grandson of the late Sliabh Luachra master of the accordion Johnny O'Leary, of whose voluminous repertoire it was remarked that the only way to stop him from playing tunes previously unheard would have been to shoot him.

Johnny O'Leary's inventive playing style has left a deep impression on his grandson. "With a lot of accordion players, you can listen to them and copy what they do, note for note, but when Johnny was playing he did something different every time," says Bryan. I don't think there's anyone who can really sound bang on like him. I know that I can't anyway."

A musician can hardly emerge from Sliabh Luachra without having a taste for dance music, and O'Leary admits to a primal attraction to the polkas and slides of his home place. From childhood, he was a regular visitor at the famed Dan Connell's pub in Knocknagree, Co Cork, a mecca for generations of dancers. He is wary of the demands dancers make on musicians these days, however. There's a constant pull and push between those on the dance floor and the musicians who bring those polkas and slides to life.

"If you're playing at the pace that dancers want today, the whole rhythm goes," says O'Leary. "You can't get in all of the notes. After all, as my grandfather used to say, you have only four fingers. I don't enjoy playing that fast, because it becomes only notes really. And these days, at the pace they're dancing, some dancers could just as easily be dancing to a CD. It's more of a workout for them really. In Dan Connell's, the dancers used to dance to the music, whereas now, you play for the dancers."

Moloney's life in music

[Mick Moloney](#), now semi-retired from New York University, is recognised this year for his outstanding contribution to traditional music. Moloney is a professional musician, anthropologist, musicologist, record producer and arts presenter. With an MA degree in economics and politics and a PhD in folklore and folklife, he is something of a renaissance man. He is currently in Burma, doing voluntary work for Irish Aid.

News of this Gramam Ceoil award caught him completely off guard. “I feel a tremendous sense of honour, and I feel I’m accepting it on behalf of all the people in America who taught me my trade,” he says. “Most of them are dead now, like [Cavan-born fiddler and composer] Ed Reavy in Philadelphia; [Chicago fiddler] Johnny McGreevy; [New York-based flute and concertina brothers] Jack and [Charlie Coen](#); [New York fiddler] Andy McGann; and [Longford fiddler] [Paddy Reynolds](#).”

“They were my teachers, and they never got honoured in their lifetime, so in a way I feel I’m accepting this on their behalf.”

Moloney speaks with insight on the lot of immigrants, past and present, for whom flexibility and adaptability were and are a prerequisite to successfully transitioning to a new world. It’s a trait Irish immigrants shared with Jews who came to the US in the 1890s, Moloney observes, which fuelled a period of enormous creativity and collaboration during the heyday of Tin Pan Alley and right up to the start of the Great Depression.

One of Moloney’s most intriguing recordings is a collection titled *If it Wasn’t for the Irish and the Jews*, which celebrated those intersecting paths of immigrant Irish and Jewish musicians on such songs as *Sailing off to the Yankee Land*.

“If you were a fiddle player, a singer or a dancer, you could become a vaudevillian,” says Moloney. “The stage always had access to marginalised groups, and it offered a real prospect for a recently arriving immigrant. We had already been coming to America for about 190 years by the time the Jews started arriving in the 1890s, and we were on our way out of that *déclassé* entertainment business, because it was on the fringes. One thing, though, the Jews had in common with us was that they had nowhere to go back to, so for a brief period of that transition, there were some wonderful collaborations and great songs.”

Moloney agrees that traditional music is going through a golden period, with collaborators innovating in all manner of ways.

“I think protectionism had its place in the past,” he says. “When I was starting out, I think a lot of the field recordings I did were examples of affirmative action and cultural protection, because I was in dread that this music would die out in America. But those days have long passed.

“I think we can feel secure now that the core of the music has been protected, preserved and enhanced, and that it’ll never become a museum piece. It has to continue to evolve, and the practitioners should be the determinants of how that goes. So as long as you get a lot of good people together, something wonderful is bound to come out of it.”

Modest Bradley

Not a man given to throwaway responses, [Harry Bradley](#) takes the news of his award as traditional musician of the year with his customary reticence. His flute playing is distinguished by his sharply defined, punchy and rhythmic style, informed to some degree by his Belfast roots but also by his interest in the music of the 1920s and 1930s.

Bradley's podcast, *The Errant Elbow*, is his piping diary, and it is a singular interpretation of individual tunes, a boon for piping students and listeners with an appetite for taking a magnifying glass to the intricate embroidery of the music.

Finding a voice

"I was surprised and a bit taken aback because people who won the award before were people I looked up to and admired, who have a certain standing in the Irish music community," he says. "I've never placed myself in that category. It seems to me a strange choice, but I'm very grateful."

Finding a voice in a tradition with such a long, colourful history does not come to everyone, or easily, says Bradley.

"I don't think you can teach it. I think that it takes a certain attitude. What is at the core of Irish traditional music is that it doesn't get cornered. It's wonderfully anarchic, and embracing that takes a certain attitude.

"Finding your own voice may well be, ironically, about copying other people, until your own comes through. Anybody who has their own voice, at some stage or another, closely studied the intricacies of other people's playing. We have that tension between tradition and innovation. I mean, a competent musician is going to be innovative. That's the inherent irony of it."

TG4 GRADAM CEOIL: AND THE AWARD GOES TO . . .

- Traditional musician of the year: **Harry Bradley**
- Ceoltóir Óg TG4 (young traditional musician of the year): **Bryan O'Leary**
- Gradam Comhcheoil TG4 (musical collaboration): **Mick O'Brien, Aoife O'Brien and Emer Mayock**
- Amhránaí TG4 (traditional singer of the year): **Nan Tam Taimín de Búrca**
- Gradam Saoil TG4 (hall of fame): **Chris Droney**
- Rannpháirtíocht de scoth TG4 (outstanding contribution): **Mick Moloney**