Celtic Neighbours Partnership

Tair/ Triúir: final report

Tair/ Triúir was a collaboration between three female traditional musicians working within the native-language cultures of Britain and Ireland. The project ran for two years between 2010 and 2012, and included performance tours in North and South Wales, across the Republic of Ireland, and in Glasgow and London. The project was instigated and supported throughout by Celtic Neighbours, the development network supporting cross-border cultural collaborations across the Celtic world and beyond.

This report has been largely written by the project's co-ordinator, who was also at various times tour organiser, fund raiser, network hub, bus driver, drinks waiter and all-purpose roadie, so cannot make any pretence at objectivity; it is very much a participant's eye view. Balance will, we hope, be at least partly achieved as the three musicians and others closely concerned contribute their own perceptions and reflections at various times during this narrative.

Tair as they performed in their final tour: Seosaimhín Ní Bheaglaoich, Siân James and Mary McMaster

Origins:

Celtic Neighbours works across and between a range of art forms, both traditional and cutting edge. By 2010 we had been involved in a number of projects which involved traditional musicians, and were anxious to explore to what extent musicians working in the Irish language and its musical traditions, Gaelic Scotland, and Welsh-speaking Wales would find common ground, resonating themes, and interesting divergencies between the cultures they had grown up in. As we were at that time involved in promoting a touring visual arts exhibition across all three nations, we seized the opportunity to ask three musicians to work together in supporting it through performances, as the first stage in an open-ended collaboration.

Two of our partner organisations – **Ealaín na Gaeltachta** in Ireland and **Fèisean nan Gàidheal** in Scotland - came forward with suggestions for musicians from their own jurisdictions they felt would enjoy such a challenge, while the Celtic Neighbours Co-ordinator, based in Wales, suggested a Welsh participant. Illness prevented one of our choices from taking part, but the three musicians who originally made up Tair/ Triuir were Siân James from Powys in Mid-Wales, Seosaimhín Ní Bheaglaoich from County Kerry in the west of Ireland, and Catherine Tinney from Skye in the Scottish Hebrides. Coincidentally, the group thus came to encapsulate the approaches and experiences of three generations of women: Seosaimhin is a grandmother, Sian is bringing up teenage sons, and Catherine is still a single student. Iona MacDonald, of Fèisean nan Gàidheal, played a creative and very determined part throughout the project, dealing with events and logistical challenges in Scotland, facilitating contacts with Celtic Connections, and mentoring the Scottish musicians.

During the group's final tour in Ireland, Catherine was prevented from playing due to university commitments, so her place was taken by Mary McMaster from Glasgow. All four sing, while Catherine is also a fiddler and Siân and Mary are harpists. After a mid-project period of collaborative evaluation, it was agreed that we should increase the pool of available female musician to six; accordingly, Noeleen Ní Cholla, the young Sean-nos singer from Donegal and Gwenan Gibbard, the harpist and singer from Pen Llŷn were invited to join the pool, although as yet each has only made guest appearances with them.

The Performances:

November 2010: North Wales	Y Tabernacl, Machynlleth, Powys
	Caergybi/ Holyhead, Ynys Môn
	Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, Llanbedrog, Gwynedd
February 2011: Glasgow	Celtic Connections, Glasgow
	TV Alba, Glasgow
November 2012: South Wales and London	Y Brigands, Mallwyd, Gwynedd
	Neuadd yr Eglwys, Llandudoch, Ceredigion
	London Welsh Centre, London
May 2013: Ireland (The Music Network)	Dublin Castle, Dublin
	The Square, Listowel, Co. Kerry
	Mitchell Street, Tipperary
	Newbridge, Co. Kildare
	Baile Mhuirne, Co. Cork
	Inis Oirr, Aran Islands, Co. Galway
	Dun Luiche, Co. Donegal

Aspirations:

This project was unusual in that rather than developing the work of an established collaboration, we tried to enable an interaction to grow up between musicians who had not previously met, but whose backgrounds and track records suggested that they might have much to give each other as well as creating excellent music. The early aspirations of each were therefore inevitably different, and we will take a few minutes here to examine what we all remember of our hopes for the project when it was just beginning.

Siân

I was very happy and proud to be asked to be part of the Truir/Tair project and the whole experience has been both enlightening and thrilling on many levels. I was looking forward to sharing songs and experiences with my fellow musicians and collaborating with them on a few tunes as well - something we did manage to do with some truly inspiring moments despite the fact that rehearsal time was short!

Seosaimhín

As a traditional sean-nós singer from a Gaeltacht area I have always been fascinated by the music and culture of my Celtic neighbours. I knew a little bit about Scots Gaelic songs, bárdachd and language from university, and have done some further language courses thanks to Colmcille, in Sabhal Mór Ostaig in Isle of Skye. I knew very little about Welsh traditional music and song and I was therefore delighted to be asked to take part in this programme and looked forward to learning as much as I could in the relatively short time we had together.

Catherine:

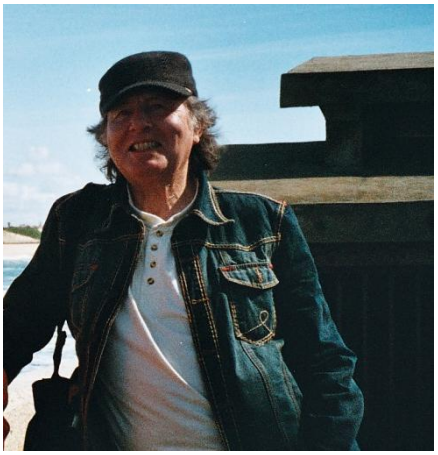
(from an interview with Iona MacDonald)

It was a shock being thrown straight in to the performances with Triùir at 24 hours notice - including travel time down to Wales. As a student of Gaelic, I was able to justify my absence from university by highlighting the opportunity to experience conversation and song-sharing with native speakers of other Celtic languages. Also, being a student, I thought it would be great fun. I wasn't disappointed on either count.

Iona

My hopes were…
That the singers/musicians would share knowledge, songs, styles and language
That there would be a greater understanding of the different Celtic cultures represented
That the project would produce a tangible product, like a DVD or CD
That the project would lead to longer-term collaborations

Meic



Looking back, I think I had four primary aspirations:

- *That the trio would play good music to appreciative audiences*
- *That they would enjoy the experience, and come together in one way or another as a group*
- *That they would explore the common ground, and also the divergencies, between their traditions*
- *That they would develop a momentum that would take them on into further collaborations.*

Funding and finance

This was unusual for a project of its size and ambition in that it demanded very little external fund-raising. Performers' fees in Wales were largely supported by the 'Night Out' scheme of the Arts Council of Wales, which helps to cover the costs of bringing top-class acts to small communities – and which is enormously successful not only in that, but also enabling innovation and experiment to take place in repertoire and performance. A small grant from Culture Ireland and a Highland Arts Programme Music Bursary in Scotland helped cover some of the travel costs of Seosaimhín and Catherine respectively, while fees and costs for the performance at Celtic Connections, Glasgow, in 2011 and the tour of Ireland in 2012 were fully covered by the event organisers.

Celtic Neighbours contributed primarily through the Co-ordinator's paid time in stimulating and facilitating contacts, arranging events, developing publicity and advertising, and organising logistics. It's a great pleasure to be able to show that significant events, with considerable potential and influence, can be mounted without necessarily calling on public or charitable support. The second tour of Wales and London, for which less support was available, did demand some financial investment from our own resources, but overall the project came close to financing itself.

Performance and project development

Writing now as an observer, I was very excited by their first series of performances, across North Wales in November 2010. As soon as they met, they immediately wanted to play together, and would rehearse for hours before each concert. They attracted appreciative audiences, although not always enormous ones, and feedback from those audiences was generally very positive. *"It's very strange indeed that no-one has brought together this kind of performance before now,"* commented Raymond Jones, Manager of Y Tabernacl in Machynlleth. Catherine, the least experienced, soon revealed a gift for mobilising enormous audience rapport with her warmth and humour, Seosaimhin – a very committed Celticist, already a speaker of Scots Gaelic and beginning to learn Welsh – was the key instigator of tune-sharing and research, while Siân, on her home ground, acted as the focal point and interpreter of each performance. A very helpful criticism was made after their final performance of this series, at Plas Glyn-y-Weddw by Eddie Kerr, a visitor from Derry: *"Where's the story, though? There's a great story behind this collaboration, and running through it – but someone needs to make it clearer on stage."*

Rehearsal in Y Brigands, Mallwyd: February 2012

The performance as part of the Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow and associated TV slot were followed, in the summer of 2011, by a mid-project session of evaluation of progress so far, as perceived by those involved. This was conducted through one-to-one, open-ended conversations between Iona and Meic, representing Celtic Neighbours, and each of the three musicians. Iona worked with Catherine, and Meic with Seosaimhin and Siân. There was almost complete unanimity in the views expressed, which can be summarised thus:

- All wanted the collaboration to continue for a further period
- All felt the collaboration should seek to be "more professional"
- All felt that communication between them between tours should be improved
- All felt that differences in proficiency and approach were a significant issue to resolve
- All agreed that the pool of female musicians available should be increased to six.

At the same time, the Celtic Neighbours committee, meeting separately, suggested that a finite timescale should now be written into this project. While recording their enormous thanks to the

performers for their outstanding series of performances, they stressed that their keenest interest is in supporting developing interactions, and felt this collaboration to now have the potential to develop independently . As a result of both processes, the following changes were introduced:

- We agreed to continue Celtic Neighbour's mentoring of the project until Summer 2012
- We agreed to write in rehearsal days into the programme of all future events
- We asked each of the musicians to create some time for communications and research
- We set up a designated digital space for the musicians to use
- Mary McMaster from Scotland, Gwenan Gibbard from Wales and Noeleen ni Cholla from Ireland were invited, and agreed, to join the grup.

During the project's final year, both tours were successful and enjoyed by performers and audiences alike. After the first of the two came to an end with a concert in the London Welsh Centre, Siân commented *"Bu'r daith yn hyfryd iawn a diolch o galon i ti am wneud yr holl yrru - roeddwn i'n hynod o falch fod popeth wedi mynd mor ddi-drafferth." (The tour was absolutely lovely and heartfelt thanks for all that driving – I was delighted that everything went so smoothly").* Towards the end of the second tour – that of Ireland – Seosaimhin wrote *"We're all having excellent fun, and enjoying each day better than the one before."* Micheál O Fearraigh, who helped organise their performance in Donegal, commented *"The Triúr gig was excellent last night – the three women worked really well together and from talking to them they have really enjoyed the Music Network tour, complete with sunshine and excellent scenery . They each did a lullaby in the 3 different languages and it was worth going to hear that alone. We had about 60 in the audience and again their response was excellent. I think it was really well worth doing and Mary Mc Master was an excellent addition".*

At the same time, and despite Seosaimhin's determined efforts to kick-start communications, there was no great development over the second year in communications or joint research. A significant lesson for the organisers has been that the kind of personal and professional dynamics that lead to new, exciting creative territories cannot often be created from scratch. Interestingly, during the period of this initiative, Gwenan Gibbard and Mary MacMaster, two harpists who have both become involved in this project, have been independently developing new work together and with pipers from Northumbria and Ireland. With the understanding of each other and the shared experiences the now expanded group has built up over these past two years, it remains likely that exciting and unexpected developments may yet emerge.

Final Reflections

Siân: *The experience has been just wonderful from the beginning and I am proud to have been involved with such an exciting project. The highlight for me was getting to know my fellow musicians both musically and personally, learning new songs, developing insight into each other's culture and languages, and sharing those stories with our audiences all the way from Caergybi to Donegal, and from London to Glasgow! It has been an honour to work with these talented ladies and I'd like to take the opportunity here to thank Meic Llewellyn and Celtic Neighbours, along with Music Network and the Arts Councils of Wales and Ireland for their continued support and vision. Diolch o galon am y fath gyfle euraidd!*

Seosaimhin: *From the beginning I loved the idea of us getting to know each other's songs and cultural history, and I must say at this juncture that it was a most amazing and extraordinary and enriching experience. I feel I know a little bit more about the vibrant tradition of Scots Gaelic singing and music, and through Sian James's wonderful rendition of Welsh songs, and tunes, I am excited about exploring further the rich store of songs in that noble language. The audiences on our Network tour really loved and applauded loudly when Sian sang about birds and goats and tongue twisters. Mary and i joined in the chorus, having had 'speed Welsh' lessons during our rehearsals! I have acquired a Welsh language course and a dictionary, and am looking forward to having a Welsh song or two in the near future as part of my own repertoire. I would recommend that an instrumentalist from Ireland be included in any deve;opment of this experiment. A harpist would be the obvious choice.*

Catherine: *(from an interview with Iona MacDonald) I would have liked to work further on developing and merging puirt a beul (mouth music) and Welsh tongue-twister songs. If it's possible in the future, I'd also like more time for working together (days, not hours) to explore different ideas and each other's traditions. Given the opportunity again, I'd like to research some older songs for performance.*

Mary: *I enjoyed immensely the opportunity to meet and collaborate with Ireland's Seosaimhin Ni Bheaglaigh and Wales' Sian James. I had heard of both of them but had not seen either of them perform before. They are both consummate artists and it was a pleasure and an honour to sit with them and listen to their performances every night. I learned so much from working with them, about our languages, our music and our history . I especially enjoyed learning some of the Irish and Welsh choruses and hope that's just the beginning.*

One thing I would have changed would have been to schedule time into the project to meet up with the other two somewhere where we could have rehearsed and researched in a non-performance situation. I realise that the Celtic Neighbours site was set up for that purpose but to be honest, I find it hard to rehearse by email even with familiar colleagues. Perhaps that's a sign of my age!
That small negative aside, I am very glad that I was invited to be part of the Triuir project and would like to thank all those who made it possible

Iona: *At the end of the project (or at least the funded element of it) I feel satisfied that the collaboration has produced some memorable nights of music. The first of my initial hopes for the project has been fulfilled, the second only partly, and the other two hardly at all. If I was to be involved in seeking funding for such a venture again, I would budget for a week-long residential session where the musicians could get to know one another personally, have time for cultural exchange (whether formally or informally) and to allow a generous rehearsal time and facilitated cultural and language explorations.*

Meic: *The performances were invariably superb, and I hope to witness in the future the growth of a more exuberant, experimental and assertive pan-Celtic understanding than we've yet enabled to emerge . It's becoming clear – thanks to this group of fine and sensitive musicians – that both the convergencies and divergencies between our musics are exciting and brimming with potential. A danger for organisers is always the temptation to play God, and expect everything to happen on cue, if not before. It's not always like that. With patience and commitment, and by maintaining our sense of fun and our ambition, I'm confident that in time this collaboration will stimulate more unexpected and rewarding developments. I'm enormously grateful to all who've shared the experiment with us for their hard work, patience – and excellent company.*

McMaster

Gwenan Gibbard

Mary

Noeleen ní Cholla

Futures

Celtic Neighbours stands ready to support the musicians in the future, in any way they would like to go forward collectively, that also advances increased understanding amongst the Celtic cultures, and small communities further afield. One proposal being explored is a residential gathering to share music and develop arrangements and interpretations. Another is further collective research into the music itself, particularly concentrating perhaps on traditional music by and concerning women. Recording together, and further performances that break new ground and possibly include musicians from other cultures and backgrounds are also possible. We look forward to hearing from the members of Tair/ Triúir what new destinations they are drawn to, and in what way Celtic Neighbours can help them get there. In the meantime, we would like to thank them once again for all the energy, expertise and creative flair they have thrown into this collaboration.