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The Bodhrán

The History of The Bodhrán

By Paraic McNeela (The Bodhrán Maker)

Every year I give a lecture in DCU (Dublin City University) on the topic of The Bodhrán. The fun thing I like to do at the start, to grab the students attention, is to say "The facts you are about to hear are all lies". That of course is not true, but over the years if there is one thing I have learnt when researching the bodhrán is that there is actually no definitive history of the bodhrán. We can only rely on word of mouth (more like chinese whispers) handed down through the generations, like the stories and legends narrated to us by our parents and grandparents. What we know about the bodhrán is only hear say. Basic online research will deliver several and varied opinions on the drum's roots. Many claim it as an ancient druidic drum and indeed the frame drum is the oldest form of drum. In the case of the bodhrán, a trade route could feasibly be traced back over several millennia to Persia where the frame drum is considered to have originated. Most make the connection to its use in winnowing i.e. separating seeds, and this would provide the most likely source as it provided the basic drum for most of the other frame drumming cultures. More recently it may have come from North Africa where it is still used today and played by the hand. Ireland traded with the Mediterranean countries making this a likely explanation. For the dying of wool the rim could have been made of bent willow with the skin stretched and tied over the circular willow then punctured to allow the dye to pass through. For dying, the popular colours then would have been purple, from the flower of the heather, green from vegetables and orange from carrots. Purple and green are known as the

Celtic colours. The bodhrán was also used in battle as a war drum to rise the temper of the fighting men against the enemy. The first we hear mention of the bodhrán in folklore, is from our grand parents and they probably heard it from their grandparents and this was with regards to the wren. We can presume it was used around in the 18th century and maybe many centuries before that. As the wren is said to be a pagan ritual, we don't know how far back it goes. There is no written history that I can find. John B Keane wrote the book " The Bodhran Makers" but that was a novel, not a history. What it does tell us is that the bodhran was well known around the Kerry area and was part of the local tradition, well enough known to write a book about it.

What made it popular was its use as a beat to the music played on the day of the wren, Saint Stephen's day the 26th of December . The wren, when a group of men dressed up in straw hats and straw skirts their faces blackened with soot, entertained their local population by going from house to house playing traditional music and dancing in payment for food, money, or drink and of course the craic. They were called wrenboys, mummers, or strawboys. The wren is said to be a pagan tradition and if the bodhran was used in this tradition it could go back a millennium or more. Legend has it that St Stephen was betrayed by a chattering wren while hiding from his enemies. The wren like St Stephen should be hunted down and stoned to death. Another legend holds that during the Viking raids of the sixth century, Irish soldiers were betrayed by a wren as they were sneaking up on a Viking camp in the dead of night. The wren began eating crumbs left on a bodhran drum head and the rat-a-tat-tat of his beak on the drumhead woke the drummer who sounded the alarm. The Irish were subsequently defeated and the wren blamed. So if the wren was celebrated as early as the first millennia it is possible that the bodhrán was also around at that time.

The wren the wren the king of all birds,
On Stephens Day was caught in the furze,
Although he is little his family is great,
I pray you lady you give us a treat.
My box would speak if it had only a tongue,
And two or three shillings would do it no wrong,
Sing holly sing ivy-sing ivy sing holly,
A drop just to drink would drown melancholy.

And if you draw it of the best,
I hope in heaven your soul will rest,
But if you draw it of the small,
It won't agree with these wrenboys at all.

The bodhrán was first recorded on a 78 record in the 1920s and became popular in the fifties and sixties with the renewal in popularity of traditional Irish music and gave life to the bodhran makers of the sixties such as Sonny Davey from Sligo, Charlie Byrne from Tipperary, Paddy Clancy from Limerick and many more. Bodhrán-making became a cottage industry and in 1978 I joined that fraternity known as The Bodhrán Makers. An bodhrán was promoted by Seán O Riada in his arrangements for Ceoltoiri Cualann, who later became the Chieftains, and was preferred by Sean to the snare drum used in the ceili bands. The

word bodhrán could also mean deafner, possibly so called because the wren boys used it to make a lot of noise. According to John B the wren boys sometimes added flattened pennies to the sides to make a jingle and hence the name tambourine. It was also called the bourine.

However, the bodhrán is regarded by most with derision, or at best suspicion and this is what bodhrán players are up against. There are reasons for this attitude. The bodhrán seems easy to play; to the non-musician who wants to be thought of as a musician, the bodhrán seems an easily-acquired passport into a select company. Or it may be that he perceives the music as an entertainment which everyone may, or should, join in. Whatever the motivation, the results are sometimes dreadful; a piano accordion, for example, accompanied by a battering of four or five aspiring bodhrán players, all producing personal variations on what they think is the beat is hardly likely to be music. On the other hand the bodhrán can give a good lift to a session or to solo playing. The combination of flute and bodhrán is a well tried one and many flute players like a good bodhrán accompaniment. The frame is made from a variety of different timbers the most popular being plywood. The use of crossbars gives that added strength to the frame. The skin most used is goatskin but I have heard of people using a variety of animal skins. Goats are not killed for their skins. The skin is a by product. The skins that are used today come from a variety of countries mainly Ireland, North Africa, India and Pakistan.

To finish off, a researcher friend of mine was researching the word bodhrán and believes that it comes from the Irish word borraigh, which means anger or aggravate. Relate this to winnowing i.e. the separating of the wheat from the chaff. As the wheat bounced against the skin, the wheat is agitated and the chaff separates. So the agricultural tool used to perform this operation could well be called a bodhrán.

So there you have it. I've searched library's and the web, but from what I can gather it is all speculation. This, in my professional opinion, is the most likely history of the Bodhrán.

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