COMHALTAS

Bodhrán: its origin, meaning and history

PART I:ETYMOLOGY

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This is the first of three parts.The second part and the third part with references will appear in subsequent issues of Treoir.

INTRODUCTION

The bodhrán is a single headed frame drum of a general type that is widespread within the traditional music of western Asia and south India, parts of eastern Europe, north Africa, Iberia, Ireland and Brazil, and occurs sporadically in other cultures, for example, aboriginal Americans the Inuit and in Tibet and Mongolia (cf. Sachs, 1942; Blades, 1970; McCrickard, 1987). In mainstream western culture it is chiefly represented by the tambourine. The bodhrán is a very basic type of drum; does not normally have jingles or snares attached. It is perhaps best defined among its type by the playing style, being played predominantly with a single stick or beater and traditionally used as an accompanying instrument following the rhythm of the music as closely as possible.

The evolution of commercial Irish traditional music groups outside the ambit of the céilí band genre, and their propagation through the dramatic development of mass communications that followed the Second World War,

brought an awareness of the instrument to a wide audience, not only in Ireland, but internationally. Current international recognition of the word bodhrán is reflected in the fact that a search on the Google internet search engine (21-04- 07) for the word 'bodhrán' produced 958,000 results, and a search for "bodhran" (without the long accent on the a) produced 862,000. By comparison the word tambourine produced just over 3,410,000 results.

During the past twenty five years or so the bodhrán has been the subject of ongoing speculation in terms of the etymology of the word, the origin and history of the instrument and its place in Irish music, both historically and at present (e.g. MacMahon, 1978; Such, 1985; McGann, 1996; Cunningham, 1999). Earlier work (Ó Danacháir, 1955; Ó Súilleabháin, 1974a, b) laid a solid foundation for research. Unfortunately, with only a few notable exceptions (e.g. McCrickard, 1987; Schiller, 2001), this has not been followed by serious or substantial published study. And, although there is a wealth of solid information surrounding the topic, there has been very little effort to collate this and most of it has remained obscure.

This paper (in three parts) attempts to look openly and critically at the history of the bodhrán and its place in Irish music and to probe some of the received wisdom surrounding it. Such a work can never claim to be definitive nor can it attempt to answer all the questions surrounding the instrument. It strives to be accurate and to present only evidence that is fairly readily available in published literature, in accessible archives, on recorded sound media and based on specific personal observation. If it helps to answer some of the questions relating to the subject, increase awareness of its complexity, highlight what might be fruitful areas of future enquiry, and, perhaps more important, helps to dispense with some of the now widespread trite misinformation and misleading comment on it, it will have served a purpose. Hopefully, it will also stimulate researchers specifically qualified or gifted in history, linguistics and musicology to carry out further serious and painstaking research into some of the matters touched upon.

ETYMOLOGY

That the word bodhrán derives ultimately from the Gaelic word bodhar seems clear (Dineen, 1904, 1927; Royal Irish Academy, 1913-76; Ó Dónaill, 1977). Although taken as a given here, the derivation will be further discussed below. The word bodhar as an adjective, generally meaning deaf in both Modern Irish and modern Scots Gaelic (Highland Society of Scotland, 1828), has a much wider meaning than simply deaf in Irish Gaelic. It also carries the meanings bothered, confused, annoyed, troubled, numb, deadness of sound, and unclearness or stagnancy of water; and it carries these meanings into the associated/derived nouns and verbs, with some additional refinements to the meaning, e.g. bodharaighe (bodharaí) hollowness of sound, hollowness of voice; the sound of a drum; the sound of a stone being broken when it has reached breaking point (Dineen, 1927; Royal Irish Academy, 1913-76; Ó Dónaill, 1977).

BODHAR

The word bodhar meaning deaf is one of great antiquity and is probably deeply rooted in proto-Indo-European. It occurs in a form very little different in all the Celtic languages:

Language	Word
Irish Gaelic	Bodhar
Scots Gaelic	Bodhar
Manx	beuyr(the silentd of Irish and Scots Gaelic is not written in Manx orthography)
Welsh	byddar
Breton	bouzar
Cornish	bothar, bodhar

In Hindi, Old Indian and Sanskrit we see it as follows:

Language	Word
Hindi	badhira
Old Indian	badhira
Sanskrit	badhirá,

and the proto-Celtic *bodaro- and Proto-Indo-European *bhodHro- have been inferred (Koch and Hughes, 2003; Matasovic, 2005).

In Ireland the meaning had broadened in Old/Middle Irish times, if not before, to having at least some of the additional connotations which it carries in Modern Irish: a rough, indistinct or unpleasing sound (with reference to a harp), 'ni hinnte ata an guth bodhar',a dull sound (as in 'bodharghuth lag laoi' the weak dull/hollow sound of a calf), the quality (?thick) of a mist, muddiness of water, and others (Royal Irish Academy, 1913-76). The dominant additional meaning concerns deep or loud sound. By early modern times it had acquired the connotations confused, bothered, annoyed and troubled (cf. Dineen, 1927). The English word bother is almost certainly derived from this meaning of bodhar and must have been assimilated into Anglo Irish before the dh in bodhar had lost its sound in the mid-late Medieval period, probably before about 1300 (Bliss, 1979).

BODHRÁN

The word bodhrán carries two distinct, but related meanings in Modern Irish. Dineen (1927) provides the following definition:

bo□□Án(bo□A□Án), -Áin, pl. id., m.,a deaf person; a person of indifferent hearing; an indistinct speaker; al. a shallow skin-bottomed vessel, a dildurn, a drum; b. □ó□, a big drum.

Ó Dónaill (1977) separates the two chief meanings:

Bodhrán1, m, (gs. & npl. –áin, gpl. ~) 1. Deaf person. 2. Slow witted person, dullard.

Bodhrán2, m, (gs. & npl. –áin, gpl. ~) 1. Winnowing drum. 2. (Kind of) tambourine.

Stepping back a little to Early Modern Irish we find in A Dictionary of the Irish Language(Royal Irish Academy, 1913-76):

bodrán[o, m.] (bodar) tabor, drum: mar timpan, no mar tabur (bodran v.l.) Rosa Ang. 268.15. Cf. bodarán.

But there is a separate spelling for other meanings:

bodarán(bodar): bodaran gl. surdaster, Études Celt. xi 122. Cf. bodrán.

These explanations will be discussed later, but for the moment it is clear that, in Ireland, the word bodhar carries and has carried, meanings indicating sound of a particular quality and that bodhrán is a well established word meaning a drum with the general preference indicating a single headed frame drum (tabor, dildurn). In Scots Gaelic two words, bodhar and fuaim (sound) are joined to give bodharfhuaim with the meaning a dull heavy, hollow sound (Highland Society of Scotland, 1828). Given that neither bodharfhuaim nor its adjectival form, bodharfhuaimneach, carries the meaning deafening it seems that the word bodhar may also have carried some of the elements relating to sound when the language entered Scotland.

It seems that, in its earliest known recorded usage, when the word bodhrán was written into an Early Modern Irish translation of Rosa Anglica (Wolf, [1923] 1929), the root bodhar had carried these additional meanings for some considerable time. For this reason, and for other, perhaps more obvious ones, we must not assume that the word bodhrán has a direct connection with the connotation deaf of the word bodhar.

HISTORICAL REFERENCES

Rosa Anglica

The first known, unambiguous written reference to the word bodhrán, meaning a drum, occurs in a manuscript that was written no earlier than the 15th and no later than the 16th century, or very early in the 17th century (Fig. 1). It occurs in a manuscript copy in Trinity College, Dublin, catalogued as TCD MS 1435, (not 1433, as indicated by Wulff, [1923] 1929) of an Irish translation of Rosa Anglicawhich was written in Latin by John of Gaddesden or Johannes de Gaddesden (1280?-1361). The word bodhrán is used where in other, probably earlier (Wulff, [1923] 1929) copies of the translation the term tabur is used. As this is the oldest known use of the word bodhrán with clear reference to a drum a detailed examination of the circumstance is appropriate.

Rosa Anglica, written in England in Latin probably in 1314, appeared in Ireland within a century. It is not known when it was first translated to Irish. Nicholas Ó hIceada is reputed to have translated it from a Latin copy made in 1400 (Meehan, 1872), but the precise date of his translation is not known. It may have been translated into Irish more than once, but this appears unlikely, given that it would always be much easier to make a copy of an existing translation than to make a new one. As there are many manuscript copies of this translation, or fragments of copies, surviving it is reasonable to suppose that it was in wide circulation in Ireland in early modern times. With reference to the principal manuscript copy she used for her edition and translation to English (RIA MS 23 P 20), Winifred Wulff ([1923] 1929) points out the following: 'On the fly leaf is a loose slip on which is written in a bold recent hand Medical MS written ca. 1460', and she suggests that this would be a reasonable date for the original translation.

In a section on tympanitis under the heading Idropis (dropsy) the following passage occurs in two of the extant copies of Rosa Anglica(RIA MS 23 P 20; TCD MS 1432), where it is said that one of the symptoms of the onset of tympanitis is indicated if the belly resounds 're bualad mar ti(u)mpan no mar tabur…' (on being struck, like a timpan or like a tabor…). In a third copy (TCD MS 1435) this, taking account of the contractions used, is rendered 're bhualadh mar thimpan no mar bhodhrán…' (on being struck, like a timpan or like a bodhrán…). In the MS it appears in Gaelic script with fairly standard contractions, thus bodhrán is written bo□□Á where Ásignifies an or án (Fig. 1). In the context we can't be sure what exactly was meant by timpan or bodhrán. It is likely that timpan in this case means a drum (tympanum) and that tabur and bodhran are synonyms meaning tabor – a single-headed drum like a tambourine without jingles.

Aside from the omission of a line in MS 1432 (clearly due to scribal carelessness), the passage is otherwise almost identical in the three MSs, with the same words in the same order, the only differences being that MS 1435 indicates lenition more readily than 1432 and the use of contractions varies. It would seem that they are ultimately, but possibly at some remove, copies of the same document. Wulff's comment that MS 1435 is written in 'a considerably later hand', seems to place its transcription later than both RIA MS 23 P 20; TCD MS 1432.

It is likely from the construction of the sentence in question (in which the repeated use of the word mar(like) shows that the naming of two types of drum is not a rhetorical device in which synonyms are used for emphasis) that two types of drum are in question. It is difficult, however to be certain what distinction is being made. In the Late Medieval – Early Modern period both timpan and tabor might refer to either a drum in general, to a single-headed frame drum or more particularly to a small drum, double or single headed played with a stick in one hand to the accompaniment of a pipe played in the other. Its modern dictionary definition 'a small drum like a tambourine without jingles, usually played with one stick, along with a pipe… (O. Fr. tabour;an Oriental word.)' (Schwarz, 1991) reflects this. However, it is not always clear what sort of drum is connoted, particularly in Late Medieval – Early Modern times by the word tabor, tabur or tapur (see tapurin Royal Irish Academy, 1913-76), and most historical works indicate a preference for a double headed drum (cf. Galpin, 1932; Blades, 1971).

Given that the word bodhrán is distinctly substituted for the word tabur of other, probably earlier (Wulff ([1923] 1929, p. xxxiii) versions (Fig. 2) it would seem likely that the writer felt that the word tabur would not be properly understood (or possibly was not sure himself what it was) and substituted the word bodhrán, which he knew to make the appropriate sound and also knew his readership would understand. Whether or no a specific type of drum is intended by the use of the word bodhrán, it is clear that at the time TCD MS 1435 was written the word bodhrán was

being used with reference to a drum and would probably be better understood, at least by some people or in some areas, than tabur. It is perhaps significant that the Irish word drum(a) was borrowed from English in early modern times and is the standard Modern Irish word for a double headed drum, whereas, the word bodhrán today refers exclusively to a single headed frame drum. The inference that Geraldus Cambrensis referred to the instrument as one of the two musical instruments he recognised as common in Ireland in his Topographia Hiberniae(cf. McCrickard, 1987) is based on slim evidence, but it is nevertheless susceptible of being drawn. This point will not however be laboured here save to say that, as Laura Felton (2002) has already pointed out, one translation (O'Meara 1982, 104) names the two instruments as the harp and the timpanum, while the other (Rimmer 1969, 29) refers to the cithara and the tympanum. Both authors, however, regard this as a reference to a stringed instrument and, in the context, that seems to be the likely interpretation. It should be noted however that Joyce (1903) suggested that the timpan (tiompán) was a combination of stringed instrument and (probably single-headed frame) drum – an instrument somewhat like a banjo. He also suggested that it may have been the practice to occasionally strike the drum of this instrument while playing. It should not be entirely discounted that the first instrument referred to in the manuscripts is such a stringed timpan, though it is unlikely, given that we are dealing with a translation of an English document written in Latin.

DATING THE MANUSCRIPT

While the manuscript (TCD MS 1435) cannot be precisely dated it can be reasonably well bracketed. If the first translation was done by Ó hIceada close to 1400 and RIA MS 23 P 20 dates to about 1460, and MS 1435, according to Wulff, ([1923] 1929), shows indications of being considerably more recent, it might reasonably be concluded that it is not significantly earlier than 16thcentury. On the other hand, as the manuscript (along with TCD MS 1432) bears, imposed on the first leaf, the signature of George Carew, (Fig. 3) and is recorded as having being presented by him to Trinity College (Abbott and Gwynn, 1921), it cannot be younger than the date of his death, 1629. Carew spent a considerable portion of his career in Ireland. He held military and administrative positions between 1574 and about 1590. He was in the West Indies in 1578, but was back in Ireland in 1579. He seems to have spent much of the 1590s (probably 1592 – 1600) outside Ireland, but returned with Mountjoy in 1600, when he was appointed President of Munster. He served in this capacity until his retirement to England in 1603. He returned to Ireland for three months in 1611 (see Matthew and Harrison, 2004; Moody et al. 1991 for details relating to Carew). It would seem likely that he acquired the manuscripts during one of the longer stints in Ireland, in the 1570s or 80s or 1600-03. His duties drawing up a report on the Ulster plantation in 1611 would have left little time for antiquarian pursuits, for which he had a reputation. Thus the most recent reasonable date at which he might have collected the manuscript is 1611, but 1603 or earlier is more likely. It would seem reasonable therefore to conclude that TCD MS 1435 must be bracketed between late 15thand very early 17thcentury and is essentially a 16thcentury manuscript.

Thus we can say, with a very high degree of certainty that the word bodhrán was used with reference to some sort of drum in 16thcentury Ireland and that it was then an appropriate substitute word for tabur.

JACOB POOL

Following its occurrence in TCD MS 1435, the next reference to the word bodhrán that comes to light is that published in Jacob Pool's list of words from the Baronies of Forth and Bargy in county Wexford. Pool, who collected a substantial list of non-standard English words common to the dialect of south Wexford, during the latter part of the eighteenth and the first quarter of the nineteenth century, died in 1827 without publishing his glossary. It was not to appear in print for another forty years (Pool, 1867). The definition Pool recorded was presented as follows.

Booraan. A drum, tambourine. Irish bo□□Ána drum, also a sieve used in winnowing corn.

One should note that boghar was a common variant spelling of bodhar into the nineteenth century (cf. Royal Irish Academy, 1913-76; O'Reilly, 1821). So boghrán would have been an acceptable variant of bodhrán. The significance of Pool's record is that the word booraanin south Wexford seems to have been used specifically for a drum or

tambourine. Pool recognises, in providing its Gaelic etymology, that elsewhere, or in Irish, or at another time it had as well as its primary meaning, a drum, a secondary meaning in relation to an implement for winnowing corn.

Thus we can be confident that the word Bodhrán, meaning a drum or tambourine had penetrated the linguistically conservative medieval English dialect of south Wexford by the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. In this context the claim of Nicholas Driver (McCrickard, 1987) that the bodhrán has always been played in traditional music in Wexford has some significance.

DINEEN AND MC CIONNAITH

Were it not for the fact that Pool thought it worthwhile to make some record of the peculiar dialect of south Wexford the word bodhrán (as booraan) is unlikely to have appeared in print before 1904, when Patrick Dineen included it in the first edition of his dictionary. The definition here is slightly different from that in the second edition of 1927 (see above) and subsequent editions. He specifically spells the word bodharán by entering it as a separate word – not the usual practice in his dictionaries; and in this definition he introduces the word dildurn, but does not otherwise specifically indicate that a bodhrán is a drum or tambourine. The definitions are as follows

bo□□Án(bo□□□Án), -Áin, pl. id., m.,a deaf person; a person of indifferent hearing; one who speaks with an indistinct voice; cf. bo□□Án □An éis□eAch□(Don. song). Seebo□□□Án.

bo□□□Án, -Áin, pl. id., m.,a sieve-like shallow wooden vessel with sheepskin bottom; a dildurn.

The word dildurn does not appear in Standard English dictionaries and it seems no longer to have common currency in Ireland. Mc Cionnaith's (1935) English-Irish dictionary simply gives bodhrán under the head word DILDURN, indicating that this (bodhrán) is the word commonly used in Connaught and Ulster, and by implication that it is not common to the Munster dialect. This circular reference between Dineen and Mc Cionnaith does not add to our understanding of the word bodhrán, however, Mc Cionnaith's definition of the word drum does throw some light on the question and is therefore worth quoting.

DRUM (vb. & n.), -MER, - MING, □□um□; □. mór; kettle d. □. be□□; d., dildrum bo□□Án [□]; □iompÁn[m]; noise, beating, of the d. □□um□□ó□e□ċ□[mc] □□um□□e□ċ□ [M]; -med out □o □u□i□e□□« le ceol □□um□í a□ □n □i□m □m□ċé [mc];

Dildrum here is almost certainly a misprint for dildurn, particularly as the bracketed □ following indicates that the source is Dineen's dictionary. Given the headword here is drum, it is reasonable to infer that a dildurn is indeed a type of drum and that this is what is meant in Dineen's (1904) definition. It is also reasonable to conclude that he meant a single headed drum or a bodhrán as we know it. It is of some significance that, under the heading dildurn, Mc Cionnaith does not accord the word bodhrán common currency in Munster, but that under drum he indicates that both a drum and a dildrum (dildurn) are referred to as a tiompán there. Under the heading tambourine, Mc Cionnaith gives only méisín ceoiland references Dineen's dictionary. A méisín is a diminutive of the word mias which means a dish or bowl. McCrickard's (1987) reference to méirínin this context is clearly a misreading of the letter s (□in the Gaelic font) for the letter r (□).

ILLUSTRATIONS

Maclise

Illustrations of the bodhrán predating the twentieth century are rare. However, a large oil painting on canvas (1130 x 1621mm) by Daniel Maclise depicting a large Halloween house party and entitled Snapp-Apple Nightis a remarkably detailed work in which a bodhrán features clearly. The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy London in 1833 and records a house party at the house of Father Mathew Horgan in County Cork, probably held on Halloween of the previous year (see Kinmonth, 2006). This is the earliest depiction of a bodhrán of which I am aware. It is a remarkable document in many respects, not least because of its depiction of the bodhrán. The strongest action in the

picture is provided by a couple dancing energetically close to the middle of the floor. Music is being provided by a small group playing pipes, fiddle, flute and bodhrán (Fig. 4). The group looks totally natural and authentic, and save for their dated clothing, is not any different to any traditional group we might encounter in a modern pub. The bodhrán, apparently about 40cm in diameter, is remarkable for a number of reasons. It has no cross piece on the frame. There are jingles inserted into slots in the frame (four or five in all).

The player is using the traditional style of playing with the back of the right hand (or possibly a double ended stick). It is significant that the inside edge of his left fist is pressed against the inside of the lower edge of the skin. This is still a common way to control and vary the tone of the instrument (by moving the fist up along the skin), and it seems unlikely that this style of holding the instrument would have any other purpose.

A second 19th Century painting depicting a bodhrán or a tambourine appears better known among musicians. It is a watercolour (400 x 500mm) entitled A Shebeen near Listowel.Kinmonth (2006) lists the artist as unknown, while Nolan (2003) attributes it to Bridget Maria Fitzgerald and dates it c. 1842. The instrument is about 40cm in diameter, has a very narrow rim into which jingles (probably about six) have been inserted. The drummer is accompanying a flautist. The style of playing (with a finger tip) is unusual for a bodhrán and it is not clear that they are playing Irish music. Cunningham (1999) has commented on their non-Irish appearance and it is probably better not to class it definitively as an illustration of a bodhrán being played.

It was not until the folklorist Caoimhín Ó Danacháir's now well known photographs taken in the 1940s were published (see Ó Danacháir, 1955; Ó Súilleabháin, 1984; Schiller, 2001) that images of bodhrán playing again came to public notice.

(to be continued)

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