Name: Méabh Ní Chonaill

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An Art form worth retaining

The clang of metal on the blacksmith’s anvil and the tic-tac of the cobbler’s hammer were once the familiar sounds of manual labour in Ireland.

Now that the click-clack of computer keyboards has largely replaced their rhythmic beats as the anthem of the modern workplace, an art form steeped in tradition has also changed with the times.

The work songs that for centuries accompanied weaving, spinning, fulling cloth and other monotonous toil not only made the tedious tasks more bearable but mirrored the rhythms of the work itself, speeding the labourers towards greater productivity.

Like the sea shanties of oarsmen or the spirituals of American chain gangs, the Irish language work song, the amhrán saothar, has survived where the labour it once accompanied has largely died out.

In the case of the amhrán saothar its longevity, and current revival, can be largely attributed to its transition into a stage performance art.

Often barbed with sardonic wit, the amhrán saothar is a meeting of linguistic mastery with acting and singing skills in a two-person battle for the upper hand in an argument - be it over global warming or the relative merits of town and country living.

To witness their popularity with a new generation, look no further than the annual Oireachtas na Samhna festival. Thronged with young people proud of their Irish language and culture, the festival hosts contests where competitors are pitted against each other to perform the most entertaining amhrán saothar in front of appreciative audiences.

One such performer is Danielle Ní Chéilleachair, a trainee teacher from Cill na Martra, Co Cork, who has been taking part in these competitions since she was a national school pupil herself.

“There is craic and messing in there but there is also a bit of singing, a bit of drama,” she says of the verse form, which last year saw her synchronised window-cleaning skills put to the test in an amhrán saothar performed with fellow student Bobby Wolfe.

The two performers usually have “contrasting views and will express them in a comical fashion,” she adds. “We’re kind of mocking each other, which is all the craic with the amhrán saothar.”

The songs she sings are often composed by her neighbour in the Múscraí Gaeltacht, Seán Ó Muimhneacháin, author of a collection of amhrán saothar verses and other Irish language forms, such as the spoken agallamh beirte and sung lúibíní, entitled ‘An tAgallamh Muimhneach’.

Seán says of the origins of the amhrán saothar form: “It was found useful to set the rhythm because most of the work the people would do together, there would be a certain rhythm to the work and if you had a song that would accompany it, it would serve to keep them working together, to keep a rhythm, and as well as that, make it more interesting.

“These songs date back to the days of manual labour being the norm and people would have used them to brighten up jobs like butter-making, working in the forge, sewing, knitting and many more occupations.

“You would have had the same tradition in Scotland - they had ‘waulking’ songs [softening cloth]. Sea shanties also come from the same kind of historical background.”

Humour is brought into performances by a difference of opinion, says Seán. These disagreements often lead to hilarious situations contributing to a “dramatic presentation”, complete with “rows and ructions”, he says.

Entertainment is not their only benefit, notes Seán, a retired national school teacher.

The verses can “help people who have Irish or are learning Irish to use it in an artistic way and people actually enrich their language by those kind of presentations,” he notes.

Danielle has already found them a useful teaching aid. Children take to the verse form and enjoy learning them with their friends, says Danielle, a final year student at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

She has used amhrán saothar verses as a fun exercise with her young pupils, to enrich their Irish language skills without them being aware of it.

“They’re very useful for learning new vocabulary and sentence structure,” she says.

The themes are relevant to today’s young people too, she adds, with “mobile phones, dating apps, social media and even immigration coming into them”.

With his newly-composed songs of physical toil taking topical themes such as Olympic rowers the O’Donovan brothers “pulling like a dog”, Seán Ó Muimhneacháin believes the future of this song tradition lies with young Irish-speakers.

“I’m hoping that as a result of my example through the years, there are many young people out there who have ability and that they will continue to write them, to perform them, and to enjoy them,” he says. “It’s a link with our past and part of our tradition and it’s worth retaining and encouraging.”