

BBC Scotland © 2007
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In Ossian's Cave
writer/presenter: John Purser
producer: David McGuinness

Trad. arr Heymann - Airs by Fingal

Ann Heymann
CD The Harper's Land
Temple COMD 2012 Track 14

John Purser voiceover: Nuair a bha Dr. Johnson a' cumail a-mach nach robh litricheas sam bi aig nan Ghàideal agus nach robh ach breugan le Seumas Mac a Pherson, cha robh fios no ciall aige idir idir. Ach tha Mac a Pherson agus nan Gàidheal fo smachd an Dotair seo fhathast.

When Doctor Johnson declared that the Gaels had no literature and that James Macpherson was a deceiver, there was neither knowledge nor sense in him, but MacPherson and the Gaels still suffer from the influence of his comments. Johnson had no Gaelic and so he understood little of what was going on around him when he made his famous tour of the Highlands; but the simple fact was and is, that Gaelic literature enjoys an older and greater continuity than that of English literature. What's more, James MacPherson encountered some of that material, of which hundreds of thousands of lines survive in classical and colloquial Gaelic. MacPherson indeed reworked these substantially in his famous Ossianic publications, Fingal and Temora, but it's still possible to trace the roots, in some cases back to the 9th century.

What about the music we're listening to? Well, it's a tune by Fingal. So said James Bowie when he published it in 1789, and many years before, the famous Blind Harper Ruairidh Morrison, played it to a Highland gentleman from whom Bowie got it. How old is it? We can't tell, but a great deal older than any music known to Dr Johnson, so, when we enter Ossian's cave, don't regard this as mere Romantic indulgence. The echoes in this cave are truly of the voices of the past.

JP: Ann Heymann playing two Airs by Fingal on a wire-strung clarsach or Celtic harp, of the sort that used to be played in Ireland and the West of Scotland. We have, as it were, metaphorically entered Ossian's cave. And who was Ossian? Not hard to answer, but strange to tell. Ossian's mother, Sadb, had been transformed into a deer by the Black Druid. Ossian's father, Fingal, had found him abandoned and brought him up as a warrior and a poet. Fingal, or Finn MacCool was one of the greatest of Celtic heroes, so it was a good upbringing.

As for Ossian's wife – she was a fairy princess from Tir nan Og – the land of eternal youth, and there she and Ossian lived until home-sickness drew him back. But of course as soon as Ossian touched the soil of his homeland he became his true age and ended up ancient and blind, playing his harp remembering the better days before the Christians came. We have a sort of record of the arguments between old blind Ossian and young assertive St Patrick. It dates from the 12th century, but amazingly it lives on in the oral tradition, with Ossian complaining at Patrick's psalms, and Patrick not in the slightest bit interested.

Allan MacDonald 's an oidhche Ossianic laoidh
BBC Recording

Allan MacDonald interview: Well I'd heard quite a bit about this song already and I was kinda fired up by the idea of it. To my great surprise when the late John Lorne Campbell published his collection of songs entitled Songs Remembered in Exile, most of which he collected in the island of Cape Breton in the 1930's, one of the very few of these kind of songs he collected in Cape Breton was from a man called Angus MacIsaac who was originally from Moidart and my own name, although it's MacDonald now, it was MacIsaac and I'm quite sure we were the same people and I suppose it's that simple.

JP: Allan MacDonald, singing and talking about an Ossianic lay that has in essence survived some 800 years.

Of course though James MacPherson certainly heard Ossianic material like that, that's not how he reproduced it. First he had to translate it, secondly, he had to try and make a coherent narrative out of numerous bits and scraps, and then he had to express this ancient and strange material in a way that would capture the minds of his late eighteenth-century readers. His success was phenomenal – so much so that in Europe many of his writings were imitated and translated by the greatest poets, and set to music by the greatest composers.

But how did MacPherson hear his own material? Did he sing it himself? The answer is, he did, and we can actually hear how. In a single copy in the Wighton Collection in Dundee there is a group of MacPherson's songs which he sang in London to the Scottish composer and publisher, James Oswald - and Oswald wrote down what he heard.

James Oswald - Song of Selma: 'It is night, I am alone'
Susan Hamilton, soprano David Greenberg, violin Alison McGillivray, cello
BBC recording

JP: Susan Hamilton with MacPherson's own way of singing his Ossianic songs with James Oswald's 18th-century accompaniment. But the main stories themselves weren't necessarily sung – rather they were recited, sometimes to the accompaniment of music. The Gaelic scholar John MacInnes is going to recite the Ballad of the Smithy, but first, let's hear him tell us a little about its background:

John MacInnes interview: The sword of Fionn MacCumhail, who was the leader of the Feinne, had lost its virtue because one of the Feinne had to be executed. He had let the women of the Feinne burn to death and so on and, he was executed by his own son but, Garraidh, his father – the man who was to be put to death was allowed one last request, and he asked that he be executed with Fionn's own sword, with his, Garraidh's head, on Fionn's thigh. And as the sword never left a remnant of flesh unsevered, he knew perfectly well that it would go through Fionn's thigh as well. So they heaped up sods and hides and various other items, to defend Fionn's thigh, and Garraidh put his head on the thigh and the son executed him, but in fact the sword went through everything and wounded Fionn very badly, but he didn't actually lose his leg. However the sword was never the same again, so it had to be rettempered, and it was rettempered by the smith of the supernatural – by the magic smith, the smith of the other world and the ballad of the smithy, as it's called, which comes from round the fifteenth century, we have a literary version of it in Ireland and that was very popular in Scotland, and it was known – bits of it here and there – a little bit of it was known in Raasay in my own time it was known in North Uist and South Uist, in Barra, and here and there, no doubt, in fragments at any rate in other places.

JP: Now the Ballad itself, accompanied by Bonnie Rideout and Eric Rigler, playing "An Air to which Ossian was Recited", published as long ago as 1784.

Trad - Air to which Ossian was recited
Bonnie Rideout & Eric Rigler
CD Celtic Circles
Maggie's Music MMCD209 Track 7

John MacInnes reading + voice-over:

Laoiadh Caoilte, The Lay of Caoilte:

One day the Feinne were on the plain of rushes, four warriors of the band: I myself – Oscar – and Turlas and Fionn too, son of Cumhail. We saw coming from the hillside a tall black one-legged man with a dark black hood of hide and an apron of the same stuff. Fionn spoke to him as he went by.

“To what land do your people belong, you, dressed in a cloak of skins?”

“Son of Leumhain is my name, if you want to hear my story. Once upon a time I was a goatherd to the King of Norway. My relatives were in Beinn Dòrain where I was reared from childhood by the dark-haired daughter of the son of Askill – she who was good at tending children. But I now put you under a spell, for you are used to the work of a smith. You must follow me to a dark glen at the west of the world. It’s a long way to the door of my smithy.”

Then they set out – four bands into the bleak province, into the dark glen at the west of the world: and Fionn was the last, alone. The smith took but one step over each desolate glen – we could hardly see a strip of his dress on his rump.

“Open, open,” said the smith.

“Thrust it in before you,” said Turlas. “I wouldn’t leave the door of my smithy in a place of danger, and I all alone.”

Then they got bellows for blowing: then they got clothes for smith’s work, and there were four smiths, horrible to look at, all misshapen. Each of them had four hands, a leash and pincers of iron. The one who was tending them all there spoke, and Turlas was quite as able. Turlas was the watcher in the smithy: Turlas accustomed to standing – his face was as red as oak charcoal from the fruit of his labour. One of the smiths spoke in angry tones:-

“Who is that lean fearless fellow who has ruined my steel anvil?”

From then on Turlas was called Caoilte – lean one. Let that name be known far and wide. And there they got the straight glittering swords and the keen sword made by the children of Siamon of the green lawn. ‘Whistle’ and ‘Cry’ and ‘Shout’ were the names of the swords made by the sons of the smithy. Diarmid had twelve. Many a man they put to death. A swift sword in the hand of Fionnn, son of Cumhail - it never left a remnant of flesh unsevered.

JP: John MacInnes, taking us back to Ossianic days as they were remembered over two-hundred years ago. Many have entered Ossian’s cave – some Celtophiles have never emerged and probably never will - but perhaps the boldest musician to enter and emerge with his virtuosic response to MacPherson’s own vision of Ossian is Erik Chisholm. Chisholm’s Night Song of the Bards is for solo piano and was inspired by a passage in MacPherson’s Ossian.

Erik Chisholm - Night Song of the Bards (Six Nocturnes for Piano)

Second Bard: Allegro tempestuoso

Murray McLachlan

CD Erik Chisholm Piano Music

Olympia OCD 639 Track 26

JP voiceover: This was composed 180 years after MacPherson. But what is time? The MacPherson itself was based upon a story as old as the ninth century – a thousand years ago. Five different bards describe the night to the Chief, and it is wild and stormy.

I want to end this week with the Chief's night song – Ossian himself, old and blind, deep in memories and yet looking towards a new dawn. Chisholm's music, MacPherson's words:-

Erik Chisholm - Night Song of the Bards (Six Nocturnes for Piano)

Finale (The Chief): Adagio

Murray McLachlan

CD Erik Chisholm Piano Music

Olympia OCD 639 Track 30

JP: "... rise the pale moon from behind the hills, or inclose her head in clouds; night is alike to me, blue, stormy, or gloomy the sky. Night flies before the beam, when it poured on the hill. The young day returns from his clouds but we return no more.

“Where are our chiefs of old? Where our kings of mighty name? The fields of their battles are silent. Scarce their mossy tombs remain. We shall also be forgot. This lofty house shall fall. Our sons shall not behold the ruins in grass. They shall ask of the aged, ‘Where stood the walls of our fathers?’

“Raise the song, and strike the harp; send round the shells of joy. Suspend a hundred tapers on high. Youths and maids begin the dance. Let some gray bard be near me to tell the deeds of other times: of kings renowned in our land, of chiefs we behold no more. Thus let the night pass until morning shall appear in our halls. Then let the bow be at hand, the dogs, the youths of the chase. We shall ascend the hill with day; and awake the deer.”