

# The Song of the Earth:

## Music and Healing in the Celtic Tradition

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*To him that farthest went away, the sweetest music  
he ever heard was 'Come Home'.<sup>1</sup>  
-Old Gaelic Proverb*

Music is a doorway into the realm of the soul. Hidden in the secret discourse of its tonality is all that has shaped a piece of music. Through the act of listening we participate directly in the soul of the song, vicariously experiencing the depths from which it has arose through the player. This experience is not indirect, nor does it take place in the imagination only. One has only to listen to a truly powerful composition to understand the suggestive resonance that music has. It was not long after our early human ancestors developed the capacity for language that music began to develop as well. There is something about music that connects us more deeply to each other and the world than language could ever articulate.

The presence of the spiritual in music is something recognized by all ancient cultures. Celtic mythological sources are full of references to music in relation to the spiritual and the Otherworld. Music serves as an archetype in the sense that it is a recurring mythopoetic theme or "image" pointing to a collective experience of the human soul. In Celtic mythology this theme is music as a doorway or threshold to the Otherworld, and the transformation towards wholeness that comes with such an encounter.

A prime example of this theme is the story of *Imram Brain maic Febail*, or the Voyage of Bran mac Febal. The story begins with Bran about his stronghold, hearing the sound of music behind him. Whenever Bran would look back he would see no one, but still the music would be there. Finally, such was the sweetness of the music that it lulled him to sleep. When Bran awoke there was a silver branch with white blossoms laying near him. He took the branch back to his royal house, where there is a mysterious woman waiting. She goes on to describe the music filled Otherworld over the sea, imploring Bran to travel to the Land of Women. She takes the silver branch with her when she leaves, and the next day Bran sets out with a company in a small boat to travel through the Otherworld in search of the Land of Women.

It is necessary here to say a few words about the Otherworld. Its description in mythology can be deceiving. It is often described as being across the waves, at the bottom of a lake, deep in caves, or under hills. To take this literally however would be a gross misconception. Although these descriptions accurately portray its imminence

(the Otherworld is *part* of this world, not a wholly incorporeal transcendent reality), a literal reading would suggest that the Otherworld is very distant.

John O'Donohue, an Irish poet-philosopher from Conamara is keen to remind us that "the body is in the soul"<sup>2</sup>. The Otherworld is like the soul of nature. It is not trapped within it, but rather penetrates its depths, and wraps itself around the world. As we move through the world, we move through this nature-soul, and a dynamic openness of spirit, a soft gaze, and a gentle step allows us to move with the rhythm of its fluency. The Otherworld is the interiority of place, just as the human soul is the interiority of an individual. This is not to say it is "inside", but rather that it is hidden and invisible, and its depths cannot be penetrated by ordinary means.

The Otherworld embraces and reconciles duality. In another *Imramma*, The Voyage of Maelduin, one of the islands visited displays this well. On this island there are two flocks of sheep, one white and one black. Every so often the shepard takes one of the white sheep, and places it in the black flock. The sheep turns black. He does the same thing with a black sheep, and it turns white. On this island, the duality of black and white is reconciled, and it is demonstrated how things are far more shifting and fluid than that. This then is the nature of the Otherworld; it reconciles duality<sup>3</sup>.

Due to this nature of the Otherworld it would be impossible to say that it is very distant, because in the same breath we must also acknowledge the closeness of the Otherworld. To dwell solely in either of the two extremes would be to deny its own nature. Certain psychologies might tend to identify the Otherworld with our psyche; the inner realm of the human mind and soul, and that the going-ons there are reflective of our own processes. Other people might lean towards the more spiritual or mystical understanding of the Otherworld as an actual place, a spirit-world, inhabited by very real beings. However, I think that neither of these views are incorrect. Both are attempts to pigeon-hole the Otherworld into one or another extreme; real or imaginary. We have seen from the island of the black and white sheep, however, that the distance between these seeming opposites is only as far as the other flock. What is actually important is that no matter how we understand the Otherworld, in all the stories in which it plays a part, those who experience it are transformed.

Music is forever leading people into the Otherworld in Celtic stories. Just like in the Voyage of Bran, we can see this theme play out from the ancient myths down to the folklore of the modern day. Music often plays the part of signifying that the faery people, inhabitants of the Otherworld, are close; the Faery music comes when the two worlds touch.

Even as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as noted by folklorist W.Y. Evans-Wentz, there were musicians who were said to have gone to the faery people to become musicians. One such musician who's reputation is entwined with the faery people and the Otherworld is the famous harper, Turlough O'Carolan. O'Carolan was struck blind by smallpox when he was eighteen years old, and was soon taken in by the Mac Dermot Roe family, where he learned his harping skills. However, before Turlough ever even lost his sight, he was said to spend time at a local, *rath* or faery fort. After Turlough lost

his sight he would ask friends or family members to lead him up there, where he would lay stretched out in a trance-like state. He later communicated a vision of having gone to the faery folk and learned one of his famous songs.<sup>4</sup>

An even more recent example comes from the Blasket Islands, off the west coast of the Dingle Peninsula, or *Corca Dhuibhne* as it is called in Irish. The Blasket Islands were a small island community, inhabited up until the 1950's when they were officially evacuated. There is a song from the Blaskets called *Port na bPúcaí*, the Tune of the Fairies. According to the folklore of the islands, this song was first heard by the people living on *Inis Mhic Uibhleáin*. Although it has been suggested that the origins of the tune is the sound which the singing of humpback whales makes when it reverberates through the canvas used in the island-dwellers boats. This of course doesn't take into account the fact that words were heard with the song, "*Is bean ón slua sí mé a tháinig thar toinn...*" ("I am a fairy woman who has come across the sea...").<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it was the faeries, perhaps it was the song of whales – or perhaps it was both.

Celtic mythology reveals music to be a great healing power, an aspect of the transformative nature of contact with the Otherworld. Caitlín Matthews, a well-known scholar and practitioner of the shamanic undercurrents of the Celtic spiritual traditions, refers to this process as soul-restoration. She writes, "Music plays the central role in Celtic soul-restoration, forming the most subtle net to help the soul parts reassemble. There are numerous examples of the silver branch's ability to bring the sleep of vision or forgetfulness."<sup>6</sup>

Dagda's harp, and the three strains of music is a prime example of this. There are variations of this story, as is typical of oral traditions. One version of the story recount that the Dagda has a harpist who's name is Uaithne, the husband of Boann. In this version of the story, Boann gives birth to three children which are named *Goltraí* (sad song), *Gentraí* (happy song), and *Suantraí* (lullaby). Each grow up to be famous harpers who excel in the respective music of their name.

These three strains of music were learned and played by all harpers, and used to confer those states onto the listeners. The strain of joy was not just a song of happiness; it was capable of conferring that happiness onto the listener. Likewise for the strains of sorrow and sleep. This demonstrates an interesting approach and philosophy of healing. In Western psychological traditions, healing is often thought to occur by means of bringing a person from sorrow to joy. However, as we have seen, the Celtic approach brings a third factor into play: sleep.

Sleep plays an important role in the process of healing. A major example of this comes from the Ulster cycle of tales surrounding the hero Cuchulainn. When Cuchulainn goes from Samhain (November 1<sup>st</sup>) to Imbolc (February 1<sup>st</sup>) without sleep, defending Ulster from attacks, he is approached by his divine father, Lugh. Lugh sends him to sleep for three days, while he fights on in Cuchulainn's stead. When he awakens he is fully recovered, and ready for battle again.

Tom Cowan, speaks of this power of sleep in his book *Yearning for the Wind: Celtic Reflections on Nature and the Soul*: "Perhaps the music of sleep is required to

produce the tranquil state *beyond* joy and sorrow, a preview of the ultimate consciousness in which all dualities are reconciled, a brief glimpse of the dreamland where the tension between opposites is transcended."<sup>7</sup> Here we are again encountered with the idea of the reconciliation of opposites and its role in healing.

This fits in with Caitlín Mathews description of the process of "soul-restoration" as being the re-integration of exiled elements of the soul. This description fits in with a variety of other approaches to healing. One of these is the shamanic practice of soul retrieval. Soul retrieval is a reaction to soul loss, which is caused by a traumatic occurrence, which forces a portion of the soul to leave the person, in order to protect itself and preserve the integrity of the overall soul. We can see a more materialistic view of this in modern Western psychology's understanding of dissociation and post-traumatic stress disorder. In either case, a fragment of the psyche (the original meaning of which is "soul") breaks off to preserve the integrity of the whole.

Might this idea of the sleep-induced reconciliation of opposites also hold true for the bringing together of lost fragments of the soul? We are, of course, not just talking here of normal sleep, but of the "sleep" associated with trance states, and other altered states of consciousness that put us in touch with our own depths. The same kind of sleep that Turlough O'Carolan no doubt found himself in when laying in the faery fort, learning his songs from the *Sí*. This adds another aspect to the archetype of music as we find it in Celtic mythology: the striving towards wholeness. The search for wholeness fundamentally underlies the purpose of healing.

A second version of the story of the Dagda's harp adds yet another dimension to this archetype of wholeness and healing. In this version of the story it is the Dagda's harp itself which is named Uaithne. It is significant to note that the word Uaithne (modern *uaine*) literally means "verdant" or "vivid green". The harp is responsible for keeping the seasons in order, and importantly when it is stolen by the Fomorians, spirits of the chaotic and destructive powers of nature, they are unable to play it. This idea of music as an ordering principle not only to our lives, but of the land as well, is central to the ancient wisdom which states that the human community is essentially a part of the land.

In Irish the word *tuatha* has a double meaning, which is reflective of this understanding. It means both the people or tribe and the land. This is different than the more common Irish word, *talamh* which also means land. The original connotation of *tuatha* perhaps is *land as place*, a more ensouled presence than *talamh* might suggest. In this sort of understanding the earth and the people are one. It makes sense then that music would be the force behind keeping both the human soul and the soul of the land in order.

Where does this power in music come from though? Perhaps it has its roots in the fact that music is so primal in its expression of the relationship between the humans and the land. Music is a marriage between these two, and we can see this in the melodies and tunes of traditional Irish music. John O'Donohue writes, "Ireland has a great store of traditional music and there is a great diversity of style and nuance. Each region has a distinctive tradition. One can hear the contours of the landscape shape the

tonality and spirit of the music. The memory of the people is echoed in the music."<sup>8</sup> Here again we have the reconciliation of perceived opposites in music. The restorative power of music comes from this nature to transcend the split between humans and the land and to unite them in sound.

The relationship between humans and the earth is both the most primal of all relationships as well as the most neglected of modern ones. It is not without reason that earth-honoring cultures consider the land to be a goddess; we were literally born out of the earth. One of the most defining characteristics of our time is the repression of this relationship, something relatively recent in light of the length of human existence. Soul and nature, the inner and outer landscapes, are one; they are the wildness of the world and the wildness of the self. To alienate ourselves from one is to alienate ourselves from both. In cutting ourselves off from nature we have cut ourselves off from the inner landscape of our soul, and so have lost touch with any viable and life-affirming definition and experience of sanity. This explains much of our modern world and our own culture-wide self-destructive behavior.

Ralph Metzner, a leading theorist in the field of ecopsychology refers to this modern relationship between humans and nature as being dissociative. Once again we are confronted with the theme of dissociation that we came across in discussion of soul-restoration and the shamanic practice of soul retrievals in the individual context.

If music has the power to heal us individually, to reconcile those lost elements of the soul, then it is not such a stretch to consider that music might form the basis of a practice to heal the dissociation between humans and nature as well. After all, as we have seen, the Otherworldly nature of music transcends and includes both dimensions, and so serves as a threshold or liminal space between both; the place where healing can be mediated from.

We have seen that music acts as a gate or doorway into the Otherworld. It was music which lulled Bran mac Febal to sleep, only to awaken to find a silver branch which he would follow into the Otherworld. Bran took the step that we are all asked to take. He was asked to seek out the Otherworld, and to find the Land of Women.

The Land of Women, and the mysterious woman who set him on his quest, may serve here as an image of Bran's *anima*. Anima is the Latin word for soul, which was later used by C.G. Jung to describe the feminine archetype of otherness in the masculine consciousness (the *animus* being the masculine archetype of otherness in the feminine consciousness). The anima or animus often serves as a soul-guide into the depths of the psyche. Jung described the process of integrating this archetype into the psyche, which ultimately is a process striving towards wholeness and the refinement of the ego consciousness into synchronous rhythm with the deeper self or soul. It was the sound of the music of the Otherworld, which literally woke him up to this woman - his anima.

This sort of perspective on the place of the healing power of music, nature, soul, and the Otherworld in psychology would take a massive shift in perception. Our materialistic and industrial based models of reality would not be able to accommodate such thinking, let alone practices. To live life from this sort of truth would require us to acknowledge the needed reciprocity between this world and the Otherworld, inner and

outer, humans and nature. However, this sort of recognition of the interconnectedness of all things is exactly what is needed to heal the perceptive split between these realities. To do this we need to cultivate the ears of sacred listening that can hear the profound music of the Otherworld and bring our fragmented soul back into the wholeness of the soul of life.

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