

Experiments in musical texture

SIOBHÁN LONG

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Caoimhín Ó Raghallaigh has earned acclaim for his eclectic musical collaborations, but the fiddler and composer says his goal is to let the music do its own talking

BOUNDARIES CAN serve a raft of purposes. For some, they give licence to conform to the limits they pose. For others, they're the fodder that lure individuals to taste of what life can offer on both sides of the divide. Caoimhín Ó Raghallaigh is a fiddler, a composer, a multimedia artist – and if he had the time or inclination, a theoretical physicist, who's most at home when crossing, straddling and often simply ignoring boundaries.

On the face of it, Ó Raghallaigh is a fiddler whose roots can be traced to the world of traditional music. He's worked as an uilleann pipe maker and as a traditional music archivist; he's in his element when sharing a tune with former TG4 Traditional Musician of the Year Paddy Cronin or Breannán Begley, but he's equally comfortable collaborating with saxophonist Seán Óg, US dancer Nic Gareiss and Swedish percussionist Petter Berndalen on his Dublin Fringe Festival showcase, *Four on the Fringes of Folk*. In between, he can be found noodling with Icelandic avant gardists Amiina, delving into the fiddle style of Norwegian Hardanger fiddler Nils Økland or trading tunes with Martin Hayes and Peadar Ó Riada, with whom he released an album of newly composed Ó Riada tunes titled *3/Triúr* earlier this year.

Ó Raghallaigh's music has attracted the attention of many listeners who would not consider themselves fans of traditional music. Uncle Earl's Kristin Andreassen counts herself among that mix of listeners in thrall of Ó Raghallaigh's highly energised work.

"It's like if you untangled an Irish session and hung up the choicest bits each in front of its own glowing Christmas light and viewed through 3D glasses made of paper and cellophane," she says.

His earliest memory of listening intently to Irish music was hearing *The Marino Waltz*, composed by The Dubliners' John Sheahan (and used extensively to soundtrack a Bórd na Móna TV ad in the 80s). Later, he heard Martin Hayes play, and for Ó Raghallaigh, "it was the first window into the magic of music". It's the fizz of collaboration that often sets his music alight, he admits.

"Music is communication," he says. "With Breannán, either he or I throw something at the other, and we're off! We immediately respond, amplifying whatever the other has played. It's so dynamic playing with him. There's no fear. We can go to crazy loud places or incredibly quiet places. It's all an adventure."

He and Begley have just released an unfettered album, *Le Gealaigh/A Moment Of Madness*, recorded over the past few years whenever the mood took them.

"I don't really subscribe to this sterilised studio thing at all," Ó Raghallaigh says. "I don't think it offers us as humans what we need. What I need from music is the rough edges. I need to feel the grain in the wood. I need to see the dirt under the finger nails. And that's the approach Breannán and I took on the record."

One of the most distinguishing features of Ó Raghallaigh's music is its ability to transcend genres, to exist outside the boxes which can often corral a musician.

"One of my favourite records is Tony McMahon's *I gCnoc Na Graí/In Knocknagree*," he says; recounting a conversation he had with MacMahon many years ago. "What's the difference between playing a tune with heart and without? I remember asking Tony about that, and what he told me was that it has to come from living. You have to live the highs and the lows, and then you put them into your music. That was a huge step: my transition from thinking of great musicians just as musicians, to thinking of great musicians as people, and that the music comes from the entire way they look out of the lenses of their eyes at the world. It's not just the way they think about music."

Ultimately, Ó Raghallaigh's goal is to transcend the emotions, to let the music do its own talking.

"A lot of artists see the music coming from something beyond themselves," he says. "For me, that's even more interesting than harnessing emotions. It's when you actually subtract yourself from the equation altogether and you're just trying to let the music flow, without any filters."

Ó Raghallaigh plays the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle, whose distinctive double notes

and deep tones have almost become his trademark. Sound worlds and textures are what he trades in, rather than simple notes and melodies.

“You can take the bow off the strings and the sound continues. I love silence and I love space so that’s a huge attraction for me. It’s as if you send a note out, and then you sit, and wait for the next one. As a solo instrument, that’s a huge plus.”

Ó Raghallaigh’s music is distinctively his, and not a facsimile of what he’s heard before. For him, that’s at the heart of his approach to playing and making music.

“The material has to be yours,” he enthuses. “If the material isn’t yours, then why are you playing it? The notion of music preservation isn’t interesting to me. You have to be at that point where new ideas are brought into existence. That’s the whole idea behind creativity. For any artist, you want to be at the coalface, the cutting edge where ideas are being formed in music. Where the sparks are coming out of the pick at the face of the rock. That’s the only interesting place to be.”

Ó Raghallaigh’s ability to stretch and bend music so that it doesn’t conform to any conventional notion of rhythm coincides with his alternative perspective on time itself.

“Instead of time being a metronome, think of time as a reaction to gravity,” he suggests. “For Breannán, time is what happens when you’re dancing sets. So it’s not a straight line. It’s rotating. Centrifugal time is completely different to linear time. The second is a completely arbitrary division. It’s fine if you want to make a business meeting, but for walking in the mountains or playing music it’s not very relevant.”

www.caoimhinoraghallaigh.com

Breannán Begley and Caoimhín Ó Raghallaigh’s CD, *Le Gealaigh/A Moment Of Madness* is out now on IrishMusic.Net records
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