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Sing When You're Winning: The National Anthem Debate

Tony Mulqueen, a councillor with Clare County Council, has asked RTÉ to broadcast 'the national anthem each night before midnight in the spirit of Irish pride and nationhood.'

Replying for the corporation, Peter Feeney has said that to do so would be 'cumbersome' and 'counter-productive' in respect of Councillor Mulqueen's aims.

National anthems are the product of emerging nations in search of cultural validation. Along with the flag, the currency, and a range of other invented 'traditions', the national anthem is one of the means whereby an imaginary unit ('Great Britain', for example) is compelled into existence.

Given the fragmented, often illusory nature of modern nationhood, it's no wonder that such pieces of music are frequently contentious.

National anthems are intended to be what the theorists call 'metonymic', in so far as they stand in for the country with which they are associated.

Some national anthems are amongst the most famous and most metonymic pieces of music in existence: who can hear 'La Marseillaise' or 'God Save the Queen (or King)' or 'The Star-Spangled Banner' without conjuring the nations with which these songs are associated?

On the other hand, you may be less familiar with 'Jana Gana Mana' (India), 'Ee Mungu Nguvu Yetu' (Kenya) or 'El Gran Carlemany' (Andorra).

And then there's 'Amhrán na bhFiann' - 'A Soldier's Song' (or is it 'The Soldier's Song' or 'The Soldiers' Song'?). Someone looking for a crash course in modern Irish history could do worse than trace the troubled status of that piece of music from the time of its composition in 1907 down to the present day.

As Kevin Myers wrote in 2010: 'A debate about the utility and the suitability of Amhrán na bhFiann is as seasonal as spring: it's what we do, whenever the rugby season isn't going so well'.

The exchange between Councillor Mulqueen and Mr Feeney may be regarded as the latest exchange in that debate. Such an exchange can, moreover, be troped in all sorts of ways: country versus city, tradition versus modernity, duty versus pragmatism. One suspects, given the ongoing assault upon traditional notions of nationhood, that Mr Mulqueen is likely to remain disappointed.

Anyone who doubts the continuing power of the national anthem as a sign of Irish identity should recall that magical evening back in August when Katie Taylor stood in front of ExCel Arena in London to receive her gold medal.

And yet, if you look at the footage of the ceremony you'll notice that the Golden Girl is not exactly bursting forth in song. It's not quite as embarrassing as that famous scene when John Redwood, the newly-appointed Secretary of State for Wales, tried to blag his way through the Welsh national anthem ('Hen Wlad fy Nhadau') – exposing, in a way that commentary or newsprint never could, the poverty of Tory claims to hegemony (find it on Youtube: it's hilarious).

Nevertheless, many of us will be familiar with Taylor's predicament on the night. My own engagement with 'Amhran na bhFiann' has always been anxious, both in terms of the sentiments expressed by the words, as well as the language in which they're expressed. By the age of fourteen I knew every lyric to every Beatles song, but from whatever combination of laziness, impatience and alienation, I could never get past 'Sinne Fianna Fáil'.

From a musical perspective, there seems to be an implicit tension between national anthem lyrics (which tend on the whole to extol the virtues of the imagined nation) and the music itself, which frequently bears an uncertain relation to the musical traditions of the nation it is supposed to represent.

Jimi Hendrix alerted the world to the power of 'mishearing' the national anthem when he performed that blistering version of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock in 1969. Would a Jazz version of that same piece make people (including Americans) feel differently about the USA? How about a Flamenco version of 'La Marcha Real', or a reggae version of 'Jamaica, Land We Love'?

And what would an 'Irish' national anthem sound like? What are the distinguishing characteristics of 'Irish' music in the international soundscape?

Perhaps, following the stereotypical logic of a movie like Titanic, we should have two national anthems: one, slow and yearning (low whistles, atmospheric 'Celtic' harmonies) to be played on occasions of gallant defeat; and another, wild and raucous – the full diddley-eye treatment - to be performed when we actually manage to win something.

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