



## Scoring Irish History: The Ó Riada Effect

Steven Sehman, Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Western Washington University, US, [sehman@wwu.edu](mailto:sehman@wwu.edu)

Niall Ó. Murchú, Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Western Washington University, US, [omurchn@wwu.edu](mailto:omurchn@wwu.edu)

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How do history film scores portray national pasts or evoke nationalist sentiment among audiences? Is there a pattern of musical affect across Irish history movies? This video investigates how Seán Ó Riada's score for the historical documentary *Mise Éire* (1959) set a pattern for subsequent feature films, including *Some Mother's Son* (1996) and *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006).

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### Publisher Notes

This video essay was reviewed and approved for publication by two peer reviewers. Due to unforeseen circumstances, we are only able to publish one of the reviews. We are very grateful for both reviewers' work, expertise, and recommendations of some revisions that undoubtedly helped to strengthen this work.

### Creators' Statement

Film music scholars debate how best to represent place and time audiovisually, particularly in national history movies, with the sounding of peripheral and postcolonial histories especially fraught by stereotyping (Burnand and Sarnaker 1999; Brownrigg 2007; Donnelly 2005). Composer and scholar, Michel Chion, holds that a cinematically plausible score will combine audiences' conventional expectations with some local elements in a plausible "rendering" (2019). A challenge for scoring films about Irish history is navigating colonial and Celticist stereotypes of an emotional people in thrall to melancholy and Bacchanalian music that have been widely internalized by global and even Irish audiences (Smyth 2009; Donnelly 2005).

In the 1990s, traditional Irish instrumentation and melodies proliferated across Irish films, British and Hollywood productions in Irish simulacra, and even in movies with little or no relationship to Ireland (Nugent 2018; O'Flynn 2022). Our audiovisual essay compares the varied uses of Irish melodies and instruments across three landmark Irish history films—the celebratory documentary *Mise Éire* (dir. George Morrison, 1959), and the fiction features *Some Mother's Son* (dir. Terry George, 1996), and *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (dir. Ken Loach, 2006)—to help to address the theoretical and practical questions of how filmmakers sound the past and how they might do so better.

Comparing the affective power of the scores of *Some Mother's Son* and *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, we realized their central organizing conceit—using traditional melodies for Irish actions and classical or contemporary music for British state actions—derives from Seán Ó Riada's 1959 score for *Mise Éire* (Sehman and Ó Murchú 2024). The film scores also varied in their quantities of traditional instruments and melodies. Seán Ó Riada's score for *Mise Éire*, which used a predominant Gaelic melody for Irish nationalist actions and emotion, was played by a full orchestra. Bill Whelan's score for *Some Mother's Son* combined traditional musicians from the Irish Film Orchestra and traditional virtuosos from the *Riverdance* Orchestra, who played a plethora of Irish-style airs and melodies. Lastly, George Fenton's score for *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* was shaped around a primary Gaelic melody played by a small classical film orchestra with just one or two typically Irish instruments.

Musicologist David Cooper analyzed six different kinds of music in Ó Riada's score, but predominantly 1) cues derived from *sean-nós* singing accompanying Irish actions, and 2) cues deriving from Ó Riada's own modernist composition-style for Unionist and British state violence (Cooper 2006). In our audiovisual essay, we present twelve of Ó Riada's audiovisual cues onscreen in two grids—six for the melody 'Róisín Dubh' charting Irish struggles and six modernist cues for Ulster Unionist and British state actions. They serve as a template for comparing the musics of later Irish history movies. Aesthetically, we were influenced by Jenny Oyallon-Koloski's (2017) parametric musical grids save that we built our grid serially to allow each cue to play for itself. Steven added musical notation for each cue to underscore their sonic similarities (and variations), Ó Riada's melodically angular, atonal, and rhythmically aggressive modernist "British" cues should be visible from the notation.

Adapting Cooper's comparative musicology, we were able to hear-see (and "re-play") that George Fenton consistently drew on a single melody—"Óró 'Sé do Bheatha Abhaile"—and a wooden flute atop a small orchestra to accompany Irish rebel deeds in *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. By contrast, Bill Whelan used a sonic smorgasbord of Irish music to cue Irish actions in *Some Mother's Son*. The affect of each score is markedly different. Whelan's score plays to stereotypes of Irishness—playful warriors, homesickness, tragic suffering—for American target audiences. By contrast, Fenton's understated fusion of traditional music with West Cork hillsides and the collective action of the Flying Column invites audiences to identify imaginatively and empathically with the rebel group. We include notation again for the cues from *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* to show how transformations of the melody from 'Óró 'Sé do Bheatha Abhaile' cue and accompany Irish actions.

We hope this video essay furthers conversations among film and film music scholars around the use of localized music, which is participating in the complex balance of fulfilling the codes and syntax of film scoring, while also functioning as geographic identification and as an expressive art form.

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## Biographies

Steven Sehman is Senior Instructor of Audio Technology, Music, and Society in the Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies at Western Washington University. His research and teaching areas include sound studies, music production, sound synthesis, and sound in film. Recent scholarship includes works on nationalism in Irish film music, sonic repetition and temporality in Mark Jenkin's film *Enys Men*, and materiality in horror film soundtracks. Sehman is an artist-scholar who is also active as a composer of experimental electro acoustic music, where his work utilizes diverse

tools and processes, including analog synthesis, acoustic instruments, generative and chance processes, found sound, field recording, and video.

Niall Ó Murchú is professor of global studies and political economy at Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Western Washington University (WWU). He has published across disciplines in political science, sociology, applied philosophy, Palestine studies, and film music. Earlier video essays, “[A Place in the Nation](#),” “[Muscular Nationalism, the Female Body, and Sports in India](#)” (co-created with Sikata Banerjee and Rachel Malia Newkirk) and “[Colors of Palestine](#)” (co-created with Kevin Snyder and Mark Miller) were published in *[In]Transition* (5.2, 7.3, and 10.1). He is currently working on conceptual integration in Palestinian film.

### **Review by Díóg O’Connell, Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art Design and Technology**

This video essay provides an interesting interpretation of these films for a film expert, but from a music perspective. The argument is well placed in the discourse of Irish Cinema, presenting Seán O’Riada’s score and how it is adapted, appropriated, and influences the narrative musical score in these films, rather than setting a pattern, as the authors state. These films have achieved a high degree of attention and analysis in Irish Cinema Studies, particularly regarding the role of music in narrative and aesthetic. This video essay presents a new perspective by coming from the discipline of musicology. Although the video essay expects a certain amount of expertise in musicology, it offers an immersive experience for the scholar seeking to better understand the role of musical score in film, and for this it is refreshing and original. However, for the film scholar, rather than the music expert, the video essay does not stand alone as a critical text. The written statement is necessary to reveal the arguments and perspective of the authors. The narrative of the video essay flows easily with the use of the grid pattern, archival footage, musical score, written text, and optional subtitles. Other devices of voice-over and intertitles might interrupt the flow of the narrative, but would also enhance the documentary support for the central case being made.

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