

# Mac Mathuna has left a priceless legacy

■ Limerick native's collection and recording of music in the 1950s was a monumental task, but a labour of love



## Then & Now

with Tom Aherne

CIARÁN MAC MATHUNA was one of Ireland's best-loved broadcasters and champions of Irish music.

The fifth anniversary of his passing is this Thursday December 11. He was much more than a broadcaster of Irish traditional music as he was an archivist, collector, recorder, and a good friend to the people whose music he played on the various programmes he presented down through the years.

He was a recognised authority on Irish music and he lectured extensively on the subject. For more than 50 years he made an enormous contribution to the preservation and development of Irish traditional music.

Ciarán joined RTE as a radio producer/presenter in 1955 and his programmes *A Job of Journey Work*, *Ceoilte Tire*, and *Mo Cheol Thu*, all became household favourites.

He linked Irish people across countries and continents through traditional Irish music which he loved and worked so hard to give it its rightful place in Irish people's hearts.

He was an interesting person who was well read and well travelled with a deep interest in Irish culture. He also visited Irish centers in New York, Boston, and Chicago and emigrant communities all over Britain as part of his work.

Ciarán won many awards over the years including two Jacobs Awards in 1969 and 1990 for his radio programmes, also a number of honorary doctorates.

He received the Freedom of Limerick city in 2004 and the Musicians Award at the TG4 Traditional Music Awards in 2007. Ciarán also received an award for his support to Comhaltas at their 50th Anniversary banquet held at the Mansion House in Dublin in 2002.

His was the quiet and relaxed sound that was synonymous with Sunday mornings after the 8am News on RTE Radio 1.

From 1970 to November 2005 he presented *Mo Cheol Thu* ('you are my Music') from 8.10 to 9am and the programme was described as the "Mass Bell".

For 35 years it was as regular as the church bell calling all to attend Mass. Its signature tune "The Lark in

the Clear Air" still brings back warm memories of quiet relaxed Sunday mornings in bygone days.

I can still recall the sound of "The Touch of the Master's Hand" and the concertina playing of Mrs. Crotty from Clare after all those years.

The rest of the week the station reported the news at home and abroad and discussed the state of the economy and other important events.

On Sunday Ciarán's soothing and gentle voice entertained his large number of listeners with a mix of instrumental music, song and poetry. The birth places of the entertainers were all mentioned and became familiar to us as we listened in having our breakfast before setting out for Mass in Carrigkerry.

Ciarán was born in Limerick city in 1925 one of six children, and his father Seamus was principal at Saint Patrick's School.

His mother died when he was just one year old and they lived on Saint John's Avenue near Mulgrave Street. His father was an Irish teacher, who always had a keen interest in Conradh Na Gaeilge.

Ciarán as a result was immersed in all things Irish, and he was educated at CBS Sexton Street. He took part in school musicals and operettas, and he was interested in all kinds of music.

Ciarán graduated with a BA from University College Dublin. He secured a degree in Irish in 1947 and wrote his M.A. thesis on "Themes of Gaelic Folk Songs".

He secured work with the Ordinance Survey and the Irish Placenames Commission, which prepared him for the type of work he was to become involved in later years.

This work brought him in contact with the oldest surviving native Irish speakers throughout the country. This experience was to prove invaluable when he joined Radio Eireann as a script writer, with special responsibility for collecting music and songs for broadcast.

In 1955 Ciarán married Dolly McMahon from Ardrahan, in Galway who was a lovely singer of Irish songs. Their children Pádraig, Cronan, and Deirdre were all interested in music



Ciarán MacMathuna, inset, has conferred a great legacy on the people of Ireland with his work recording the music and songs of the country. Main picture is the square in Upper William Street in his native Limerick city dedicated to his memory

and they played the flute and the Uilleann pipes.

In the early 1950s Radio Eireann decided to start collecting Irish music, a culture which was quickly dying out in many parts of the country.

Ciarán with only a mobile recording unit was given this difficult task which turned out to be a labour of love for him. He also presented and produced a 30-minute programme on Radio Eireann which he called *A Job of Journeywork*.

After a short time it became the most popular programme of the week. The musicians and singers he recorded became household names and as a result Ciarán received invitations to almost all the towns and villages in Ireland.

He travelled the length and breadth of the country with the Outside Broadcast Unit attending music festivals, and fleadh cheols recording the musicians and singers.

It was a time when Irish traditional music was struggling and many people had an inferiority complex about

playing or listening to it. Ciarán once remarked that it was common for musicians to hide their instruments under their coat going to a session for fear of being laughed at.

The interest was taking root and things were changing and more people had the courage to show their interest in Irish music and culture.

With Ciarán in charge the revival could not fail and he continued his collecting. He knew his music and what made a good recording even though he could not play an instrument himself.

His easy going style and love for music put people at ease allowing them to express themselves in their music, and to show real pride in their heritage.

The technology of the time is hardly imaginable now as Ciarán and crew had to carry huge batteries and thousands of feet of cables in his truck.

The cables were put through pub and hall windows and out to be connected to the truck parked in the street to get the recordings done. It served to underline his determination

to collect this material for preservation and posterity. He visited many places around Limerick including Athesa, and Feohanagh.

John Cussen recalls his visit to the Muintir Na Tire Hall in Feohanagh on Wednesday November 5 1958. "At 7.30 the mobile recording unit arrived - a big blue van with all the recording equipment aboard. In a short time the two men had everything set up for the recording and the hall was full as the people waited to see the man who's voice they had been listening to for the previous few years. At 8pm Ciarán arrived to great applause and straight away the recording session began. He was handed the names by Fr Tim Greene who invited him. Some people played individually and others played in groups of two's and three's.

"The one pair that stands out in my memory are John Joe Harnett and Sean Collins from Strand - John Joe on the concert flute and Sean on the tenor banjo. They were outstanding musicians and they played several beautiful tunes. Another great fiddle

player-and not his first time in front of the microphone was Jim Mc Enery from Castlemahon who played two slow airs. Pat Cagney sang a couple of songs and my father played "The Culainn and a few dance tunes.

"Everybody got their turn at the mic before the recording session ended and all adjourned to the nearby pub where the session continued."

Ciarán was widely admired and deeply respected and appreciated by all. The work done by him and a handful of others in rescuing and preserving those precious nuggets of music and song will always be remembered. He always felt that RTE never got the credit it was due for its contribution to the promotion of Irish folk music more particularly at a time when it was neither fashionable nor profitable. The late John B Keane once said: "Ciarán made the shamed people of Ireland unashamed of their musical birthright."

He may be gone but the touch of the master's hand has left us a wonderful legacy to enjoy well into the future.