

# Advancing Music in Ireland as Religious and Social Practice: The Experience of Pat Ahern

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*Abstract: Probably best known for his work that led to the development of Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, Monsignor Pat Ahern has helped shape musical culture across a range of genres through the latter half of the 20th century with a notable impact on liturgical music. By focusing on his role in the establishment of a choir in St. John's Church, Tralee, in 1957; his production of pageants on religious themes that incorporated choral music; and his two masses, published in 1984 and 2014, this article places Ahern's music in the context of time and place by examining his legacy in the soundscape and musical culture of Ireland.*

Résumé :

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Pat Ahern (b. 1932) is an influential figure from Co. Kerry in the south west of Ireland who influenced engagement in both religious music and Irish traditional music, song and dance locally and nationally (Kearney 2011, 2015; O'Keeffe 2013a). Growing up on a family farm in Leitrim Middle near the village of Moyvane, Ahern first learned music from his mother, fiddle player Margaret Walsh. Other local influences included his cousin, fiddle player Barney Enright,

and he learned dancing from the legendary master Jeremiah Molyneaux (1882–1965) (Creedon 2007; Foley 2013; Phelan 2015). Ahern was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1957 and returned to Kerry, where he established church choirs, directed religious pageants, contributed to the development of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ),<sup>1</sup> and founded a folk theatre group that became Siamsa Tíre (entertainment of the land), the National Folk Theatre of Ireland. After his ordination, Ahern continued to perform Irish traditional music, which contrasted with the views or attitudes expressed by some within the Irish Catholic Church. Together with his brother Seán, a notable singer and uilleann piper, he was recorded by broadcaster Ciarán MacMathúna at home in the early 1960s for a programme of Irish traditional music on national radio. Although it conflicted with the attitudes of the church hierarchy at the time, Ahern later received considerable support from his bishop, Éamonn Casey, in the development of Siamsa Tíre.

Critically reflecting on Ahern’s musical life provides new insights into musical culture in Ireland and the varied influences on both sacred and secular music activities. These include the folk music revival beginning in the 1950s (Ó hAlmhuráin 2017),<sup>2</sup> the impact of Vatican II on church music practices (O’Keeffe 2013b; 2017), and the popularity of contemporaries including Seán Ó Riada (1931–1971), who also influenced both traditional and church music in Ireland (Ó Canainn 2003; Egan 2020). Ahern is a significant figure in Irish musical life, who lived during, and contributed substantially to, a major period of national creative output.

The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) was announced by Pope John XXIII in 1959 with the aim of achieving spiritual renewal for the church. A series of gatherings took place from 1962 to 1965 that focused on reform, leading to the use of vernacular languages instead of Latin in the liturgy and greater lay participation in church activities. Composers set about creating new mass settings in vernacular languages (Gillen and Johnstone 2001; O’Keeffe 2017). Alongside Ó

Riada, Ahern is among the first composers to explore the use of Irish language liturgical text. Helen Phelan has noted that “Irish-language composition was central to the Irish response to changes in the liturgy, particularly in the early years of reform” (2013: 705). Ó Riada drew on the linguistic heritage of the Irish-speaking districts of Corca Dhuibhne and subsequently Múscraí, where he went to live from 1963 and founded a local church choir (Ó Canainn 1981, 2003). He was also strongly influenced by the monks of Glenstal Abbey steeped in the traditions of Latin chant (O’Keeffe 2017). Seoirse Bodley has noted that the objective of Ó Riada’s first mass was “in part to write a work for a particular community,” (1981: 39) but Benedictine monk Dom Paul McDonnell of Glenstal Abbey remembered that Ó Riada “was a somewhat reluctant convert to liturgical music” (1981: 110). Already immersed in liturgical music, Ahern also composed music to meet the needs of and contribute to the cultural capital of his community.

Ó Riada’s engagement with liturgical music is inextricably linked to the development of the church choir in Cúil Aodha, a rural Irish-speaking village in Co. Cork. In a discussion on music and the liturgy published in 1968, Ó Riada noted how he began using sacred texts with known *sean nós* (old style) melodies when he began with the choir around three years previously (O’Callaghan et al. 1968). Composed in late 1968, Ó Riada’s setting of the Lord’s Prayer for “Ceol an Aifrinn” (Music of the Mass) (1971) incorporated influences from both Gregorian chant and traditional *sean nós* song and exemplifies the integration of tradition into liturgical composition (Harris and Freyer 1981; O’Keeffe, 2017). Director of Sacred Music at the National Seminary of Ireland John O’Keeffe has outlined how Ó Riada took a different approach to his second mass, “Aifrinn 2” (1979),<sup>3</sup> utilizing Gregorian plainchant modes and attempting to create an Irish sound, all the while contributing to a sense of community in Cúil Aodha. O’Keeffe’s (2017) analysis of the masses of both Seán and his son Peadar presents not only a model for a

technical study of the masses but demonstrates the links between composers and their milieu that informs a critical review of Ahern's work.

Acknowledging Ahern's considerable contribution to Irish traditional music and his role in documenting the dance traditions of North Kerry (see also Foley 2013; Kearney 2013; Phelan 2014), this article focuses on the musical activities that connect with his religious vocation and the development of musical communities that have not received attention. It concentrates on the choir of St. John's Church, Tralee; religious pageants Ahern produced and directed; and masses Ahern composed. It is informed by my experience of growing up in Tralee and participating in activities led by Ahern, conversations with others who have been part of this musical world, and regular meetings I had with Ahern. Local newspaper archives provide additional sources for information to support the memories of the community and ethnographic enquiry.

My first recollection of Ahern is from when I was about eight years of age. He auditioned me for a place in the Teach Siamsa training centre at Finuge in North Kerry.<sup>4</sup> I may well have encountered him before but one of my memories of this occasion is of Ahern going to the piano and playing intervals, short ear tests and clapping exercises. This memory echoes memories of others who had similar experiences with Ahern dating back to the 1950s, auditioning for choirs, Siamsa Tíre, and other performing groups. If I had encountered Ahern prior to my audition in the Teach Siamsa, it may well have been in St. John's Church in Tralee where he conducted the choir and directed special liturgical services over a long period of time. I was also briefly a member of a Taizé choir he established for the same church to encourage teenage participation in the liturgy and was a cast member for the monumental Millennium Pageant, *The Dance of Life* (2000), which he produced and directed in Millstreet, Co. Cork, as well as *Críost Liom* (Christ with me [2002]) in Dublin. I have also sung with the choir of Siamsa Tíre at funerals, for which

we would perform *Aifreann Phádraig Naofa* (Mass of St. Patrick), which was published in 1984 but has its origins at least a decade earlier. After a successful audition and a period of training in the Teach Siamsa in Finuge, I eventually became part of the Siamsa Tíre Company with whom I performed for over a decade. I developed a close friendship with Ahern, which further informs and inspires my research.

In this article, I consider Ahern's impact on the formation of a musical community in a county town in rural Ireland in the latter half of the 20th century and his legacy in the present in the context of musical and theatrical culture. Ahern's impact and legacy suggest that he is a person of national importance. This was demonstrated when the National University of Ireland conferred an honorary doctorate to him in June 2017 and the CCÉ awarded him the title of *Ard Ollamh* (High Professor/Supreme Bard) at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Drogheda in 2019.<sup>5</sup>

### **Church, Music, and Society in Ireland**

The Catholic Church held a dominant and largely unquestioned authority in the Republic of Ireland from the 1950s to the 1970s (Inglis 1998; Phelan 2017). A majority of Irish people practised their faith regularly and open dissension among the laity was rare, at least until the 1960s (Ferriter 2005; Inglis 2007, 2014). It is not uncommon in conversations with an older generation of choir and Siamsa Tíre performers for them to note an automatic, reverential, and unquestioning “yes Father” response to Ahern's instructions. The Church also had a significant influence on Irish education (McCarthy 1999; Egan 2020). As a young curate tasked with establishing a church choir in Tralee, Ahern was an authoritative figure who visited local schools run by the Christian Brothers, Presentation Sisters, and Sisters of Mercy. The respect for church

figures likely contributed to his success in recruiting performers and maintaining an air of authority, still very evident when I was a child in the 1990s. This was a time of increased secularization that coincided with the period of economic growth known as the Celtic Tiger. Reflecting on this period, dance scholar Aoife McGrath has noted that “the undermining of the moral authority of the Catholic church in the wake of a series of clerical child abuse and sex controversies. ... scandals relating to abusive and paedophile priests that began to emerge after 1994” (2013: 5). But many priests, nuns, and bishops contributed positively to society and provided leadership at home and abroad (see also Ferriter 2005: 734). Ahern directed Church choirs, religious pageants, and other liturgical activities in the late 1990s and into the 21st century, continuing to involve members of the community that participated throughout the preceding decades and also encouraging the involvement of younger people.

Research on Catholic Church music in Ireland has tended to focus on the 19th and early 20th centuries (Gillen and White 1993; Gillen and Johnstone 2001; Curran, 2007), with attention given to the Cecilian movement (Daly 1995) and the role of continental organists in Irish Church music (Deacy 2005; Collins 2007), with some studies of earlier periods (Zon 1996). Studies on influential figures such as the Fleischmanns are informative and provide context for the development of church music in Ireland (Fleischmann 2000; Cunningham and Fleischmann 2010). Not confined to the Catholic Church, Róisín Blunnie (2018) has provided an overview of Scripture and music in Ireland that leans on previous studies and introduces contemporary composers but, with the exception of John O’Keeffe (2017), there is a dearth of research on developments in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly at a local level. Informed by her own Irish American Catholic background, singer and scholar Helen Phelan (2017) has examined

more contemporary contexts for ritual singing in which a sense of belonging is created through engaging in singing in and beyond the Catholic Church.

Gerard Gillen has lamented the dearth of organists and training opportunities (1968; 2010), and a perceived lack of enthusiasm among Irish Catholics for participating in church music (2000; see also Callaghan et al. 1968; Phelan 2002). This article provides a counter-narrative for Gillen's writings through the use of an ethnomusicological approach informed by the work of Ruth Finnegan (1989) and Kay Kaufman Shelemay (2011) on music communities. My focus is on one individual who could be termed a "sentinel musician" (Shelemay 2022). Such an approach can work together with a musicological enquiry, interrogating musical practices and pathways across a wide range of musical genres and styles and provides an example of one individual who has made a significant impact on local and national levels.

Tralee is not unlike many other large towns in rural Ireland and, in many ways, can mirror other places in Ireland where, as Kieran Daly has put it, "[b]y the close of the 1940s even the smallest rural community supported at least one church choir" (2013: 75). However, the paucity of professional musical guidance resulted in a frugal repertoire, often of low standard, and the church music repertoire generally deteriorated over the years (75). Informed by his studies in Maynooth and Cork, Ahern brought to Tralee a level of musical knowledge that facilitated the development of church music, an interest in theatre that led to community involvement, and a creativity that included the composition of two masses.

## **Education**

Ahern attended St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, from 1950 to 1957. His longstanding faith and his experiences during his studies at Maynooth, allied with his appreciation for Irish culture and later folk culture more generally, are integral to understanding his musical life and legacies that transcend genre and locality. The cultural context that Ahern encountered at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, was shaped by reforms led by Paul Cullen (1803–1878), who became archbishop of Armagh and primate of Ireland in 1850. Cullen oversaw a number of decrees, which included “the first liturgical music reform legislation in Ireland” (Deacy 2005: 14), leading to “some measure of formal instruction in sacred music” (White 1998: 78). Patrick O'Donoghue has observed that Cullen was in favour of “the objective of introducing the restored Gregorian chant to the Irish church” (1990: 127), while Harry White has noted how the Irish Cecilian movement advocated for “Gregorian chant and sixteenth-century polyphony to the virtual exclusion of all else” (1998: 78). Despite the decline of the Cecilian movement in Ireland in the early part of the 20th century (Curran 2013), its legacy and the influence of Heinrich Beyerunge (1862–1923) as first professor of sacred music at the national seminary contribute to the environment experienced by Ahern in Maynooth.

At Maynooth, Ahern received lessons on the piano and organ from Charles O'Callaghan (O'Keeffe 2013: 8). O'Callaghan was appointed Professor of Sacred Music in 1951 and taught organ and basic harmony to Ahern. Ahern sought membership in the choir, which opened up a whole new world of music for him, and he wrote all that he could about music in an essay to gain acceptance. He sang first bass in the choir and studied the old masters using special arrangements by Beyerunge for equal voices, arrangements to which he would return to again during his later career.



Ahern returned to education in 1960 to focus on music. In conversations we have shared, he remembered that his bishop initially suggested he should travel to Rome for further musical studies. Instead, after two years in Tralee, he was offered the opportunity to study in Cork. While still attending to duties in Tralee, Ahern completed a BMus at University College Cork (UCC) from 1960 to 1962 under Professor Aloys Fleischmann (1910–1992). During his degree programme, Ahern studied piano with Fleischmann’s mother, Tilly. While he is modest about the level of skill he achieved on piano, he does credit Tilly with teaching him “how to interpret a piece of music, and phrasing” (Ahern 2000: 37). Having to continue to commit to his duties in Tralee, Ahern missed out on some aspects of musical life at UCC, such as joining the orchestra. Fleischmann allowed Ahern to perform traditional fiddle for his practical examinations, a gesture that reflects Fleischmann’s recognition of bi-musicality and appreciation for traditional music.<sup>6</sup>

Connecting with his experience in Maynooth, Ahern noted Fleischmann’s love of composition and his encouragement to this end, emphasizing his traditional approach and the importance of harmony and counterpoint.

I had been in a choir in Maynooth, where we had sung a lot of the old masters and I had a grasp of how that music should sound. We had to do that period, the sixteenth century, as part of the course, and I loved it. He paid me a great compliment one day. When he was playing my exercise he said: “My goodness, that’s wonderful. If you go on like that you’ll be writing Masses!” (Ahern 2000: 38).

Fleischmann’s words were quite prophetic. Ahern’s final examination in Cork is also noteworthy as he specialized in choral conducting and prepared the choir in Tralee, who performed a recital

in the university's Aula Maxima (Ahern 2000: 38). Ahern's community was a part of his personal journey and both he and the choir benefited from his musical training.

### **St. John's Gregorian Choir**

Following his ordination on June 23, 1957, Ahern was sent as a young curate to the parish of St. John's in Tralee, where Dean Donal A. Reidy desired a new choir. The previous choir had lapsed during a period of renovations on the church building. Ahern's bishop, Denis J. Moynihan (1885–1975), recognized Ahern's musical potential and agreed to support further study in music once they had established the choir in Tralee. Reidy, who had known Bewerunge, not only tasked Ahern with forming a new choir, he named it the St. John's Gregorian Choir, fully aware of the status the name implied.<sup>7</sup> He encouraged singing works composed by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century composer Palestrina, which echoes Deacy's (1995) recognition of the popularity of Palestrina's music at the time. The choir quickly made an impact. An article about church services in the county for Christmas in 1958 noted that the choir "made a highly artistic and prayerful addition to Divine Worship in Tralee," reflected in the singing of the *Proper of Mass I* in plainchant by the 75 boys and men (Christmas 1959). The Mass included works by Palestrina, Haller, and Handel and was preceded by *Adeste Fideles* (Novello) and *Silent Night* (Gruber).

Initially comprised of men and boys, the Gregorian choir established by Ahern in Tralee was the basis for many of the musical developments in the town and further afield over the next half century. Unlike in other parts of the country over the preceding century where Belgian organists played an important role in developing church music (Delany 1952), Ahern was an Irish-born cleric who undertook the role of choirmaster. Influenced by his studies at Maynooth,

Ahern made informed decisions regarding the music for the new choir and was strict in the musical training he provided. Reflecting Delany's (1952) emphasis on engaging with schools and the role of the Catholic Church in the Irish education system, Ahern recruited boys from the local Christian Brothers' School on Edward Street. In a letter to *The Kerryman*, one of the original members recalled that

There was a piano in the corner of the room and Fr. Ahern gave the note and we sang the scales up and down, in and out until we had satisfied our tutor that our pitch and tone were accurate and resonant. Fr. Ahern was a great teacher and from the outset he instilled in us a love for singing and for giving of our best. We learned about breath control, intercostal muscles, our diaphragm, our larynx, and our nasal cavities and how important all these were if we were to produce the best sound and the sweetest music (Fr. Pat 2007).

The appreciation his pupils had of Ahern as a teacher is important and contrasts to the many critiques (Fleischmann 1952; Herron 1985; Heneghan 2001). Ahern facilitated opportunities for young men, and later women, in Tralee to experience a new musicscape.<sup>8</sup> The aforementioned original member recalls: "His first love was Gregorian Chant. There was something sacred, reverent and mysterious about the way he approached this ancient way of praising God in Latin" (Fr. Pat 2007). Others recall his attention to detail in the pronunciation of words. He would play them examples of the Vienna Boys Choir. Michael O'Shea remembered that Ahern would take the choir to the Cork Choral Festival where they could experience other choirs (interview, March 16, 2016). The importance of the choir for exposing young people to the potential for music-making is critical.

The choir in St. John's Church established a musical community that would influence other activities in the town. Musician and composer Aidan O'Carroll remembered joining the choir around the age of ten when his family moved from Castlemaine to Tralee:

That was one of the most amazing experiences for me because until then, I was roughly ten, until then I didn't know any other boys of my age who were actively involved in any kind of formal music making. And it was a rare enough thing for anybody to be involved in formal music-making at that time (interview, June 29, 2016).

All boys in the choir were asked to read a passage of text as part of the audition in addition to singing and undertaking ear tests. Their training included learning to read music, which Ahern considered a necessity, although for some it simply meant the ability to follow the notes up and down and recognize the value of notes. Later, O'Carroll would further develop the tradition of a boys' choir in the school, where I myself attended.

For the majority of young boys and men in Tralee in the 1950s, the singing of Gregorian chant and works in the style of Palestrina reflected an exotic otherworld. Ahern was a mediator, as described by Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin in relation to Turlough Carolan, Tommie Potts, and Seán Ó Riada:

By mediation, I mean that middle voice which opens up a channel of communication between separate energies. In the case of music, I am referring to musicians who, through a mix of artistic talent, temperamental disposition and what some would call historical accident, find themselves in a position where their natural accent speaks to opposite sides. Such figures are frequently involved in a musical fusion which can quickly become a musical confusion if things start to go

wrong. The musical mediator can be viewed as a bridge which allows listeners access to parts of their society and their experience of which they were unaware or perhaps just suspicious. And like any bridge, people walk across it — often with little regard for that which conveys them to another place, another world (1998: 78).

Ahern created an opportunity for people in Tralee to learn music through their involvement in the church choir. Many went on to learn music in other contexts and some developed significant performance profiles and careers in music, while some were integral to Ahern's other significant development at the time, *Siamsóirí na Ríochta* (Entertainers of the Kingdom).<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting on a childhood memory of choir practice, O'Carroll remembered members staying after rehearsal and being augmented by other, non-members of the choir (interview, June 29, 2016). He described witnessing this group sing "strange songs" and dance as a transformative experience. Having grown up in a family environment that regarded classical music, or light music as its preferred idiom, for music making, O'Carroll found this traditional music to be alien. He later became part of the company, learning Irish dance from Patricia Hanafin and starring in a number of productions in Ireland and abroad. Thus, Ahern was mediator for musical experiences in both directions between the classical and the folk. This overlap between the choir and folk theatre company is also evident in his use of SATB choral arrangements or Irish language song in the folk theatre productions.

After a decade of intense activity in Tralee, Ahern was transferred to Dublin in 1968. Sr. Aquino O'Halloran (d. 1983) took over as director of the choir and was succeeded by Nora Kelliher O'Grady. Ahern returned to the position of choir director at the suggestion of the Dean of Kerry, Monsignor Dan Riordan in 1996. Many of the original choir came back together in

2001 to sing as part of a civic reception honouring Ahern on his appointment as Domestic Prelate and the title Monsignor in December 2001 (McConville 2001) and for Jubilee Concerts in 2007. In 2009 the choir undertook a number of engagements in churches throughout the county, which included Caherciveen, Brosna, and Killorglin (McConville 2009). Ahern retired from his role in 2011; he was succeeded by Michael O'Shea who began as a boy soprano with the choir in 1958 (interview, March 16, 2016). The choir continued to perform at Mass in Tralee each week until the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020.

### **Religious Pageants and the Theatre**

As well as being a period of high church attendance (Keogh 2005), the 1950s and 1960s were an era of historical pageantry (Fitzpatrick Dean 2014). While Ahern would go on to have a significant impact on Irish theatre through the establishment of Siamsa Tíre, it is his religious pageants that are most relevant to the focus of this paper. Although there is significant scholarship on Irish drama, there is a need to expand the focus of Irish theatre studies to examine other forms of cultural performance beyond scripted material performed in the theatre space (Pilkington 2004). Noting the popularity of pageants in Ireland through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Fitzpatrick Dean (2014) has highlighted how these paratheatrical events aimed to attract the widest possible audience often did so. She has acknowledged the strength of the country's identity as a Catholic nation and that the "liturgy and ceremonies of the Catholic Church may predispose its faithful to value such spectacles" (Fitzpatrick Dean 2014: 2), pointing to the 1932 Eucharistic Congress and the 1979 visit of Pope John Paul II as the most famous and largest public spectacles since Irish independence. The mid-1950s witnessed a period of intense

national pageantry linked to the *Tóstal* (The Gathering), a series of festivals held in Ireland from 1953 to 1958. It is in this milieu that Ahern developed pageants on religious themes.

In 1958 Ahern produced *Massabielle, The Story of Lourdes* in the CYMS Hall, Tralee, repeating the production in 2008 in the same venue. The nativity production *Bethlehem* was produced in St. John's Hall, Tralee, for five nights from Sunday, December 27, 1959 (Tralee Nativity Pageant 1959). Influenced by the production at Oberammergau, Ahern produced the Passion play *Golgotha* in 1963. One of Ahern's most significant pageant productions was *Dance of Life*, a Millennium Pageant in 2000. In 2002, Ahern received a commission from the Christian Brothers to produce *Críost Liom*, the bicentenary salute to Edmund Rice, founder of the Christian Brothers at the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) in Dublin. Another commission, *Song of the Living Stones*, the Story of Christianity in Kerry, was staged in St. Mary's Cathedral, Killarney, in 2005. He continued to organize liturgical pageants in the local churches in Tralee for Christmas and Easter ceremonies. Many of these events served to create a strong sense of community, highlighting the talents of the groups with which Ahern worked, and demonstrating connectivity with Siamsa Tíre.

Ahern's first pageant coincided with the centenary of the Lourdes apparition. Fr. Michael Murphy was curate and chaplain to the Catholic Young Men's Society (CYMS) and encouraged him to develop a pageant in Tralee. Together with Mr. Pat Curtin, a member of the CYMS committee and an actor, they travelled to Birr where Paddy Fanning devised and directed a production. Taking theatrical inspiration from Fanning's production and through research on the subject, Ahern undertook the challenge of staging a production in Tralee. For this he engaged local amateurs as actors. The St. John's Gregorian Choir was central to the performance.

Music is central to many of the pageants and the choir plays an important role. Writing after *Massabiele* in 1958, a local journalist gave special praise to the singing of St. John's Gregorian Choir, acknowledging their performance as "a credit to conductor Fr. Ahern" (Tralee Pageant 1958: 17). In the following year, comments on the musical aspects of *Bethlehem* included the size the choir, which consisted of one hundred highly trained voices (Tralee Nativity 1959). Both performances included the Hallelujah chorus and exemplified Ahern's development of music in the town. Journalist Séamus McConville stated:

Choral singing was always a pathetically weak point in Tralee shows — in my experience. But now I am able to boast that I have never heard better anywhere. ... The choir comprised of approximately one hundred men, women and boys, has been together for only two years — the ladies were recruited only a year ago — yet they performed like polished artists, trained to near perfection by Father Ahern. Tralee should be proud of them (1960: 9).

It is clear that from a very early stage in their development, the St. John's Gregorian Choir under the direction of Fr. Pat Ahern had a significant impact on the musical culture of Kerry.

After a decade in which he had established the choir and folk theatre group in Tralee, in addition to completing a Bmus at UCC and producing a number of successful historical pageants, Ahern was transferred to Dublin in 1968. Initially studying Radio and Television Production at the Catholic Communications Centre, Booterstown, Dublin, Ahern developed and directed a Radio Production and Training Unit for clergy and religious, producing a weekly religious radio programme for RTÉ radio, entitled *Network*. It was here that he befriended Fr. Dermod McCarthy, who was to be a close friend, influence, and collaborator in subsequent



years. McCarthy was best known as part of the team that produced the *Radharc* series of religious programmes for Irish television from 1965 and later editor of religious programmes in RTÉ from 1991 to 2007 (McGarry 2007). Ahern was also involved with the Abbey and Peacock Theatres at this time and is listed variously in the archives as Author, Choreographer, Director, Dance Director, and Musical Director (Abbey Theatre Archives).

In Dublin, Ahern became more involved with CCÉ at a national level. According to Director General Labhrás Ó Murchú, the CCÉ recognized that Ahern “had shown through his stagecraft that he was bringing a new dimension to presentation which, from everybody’s point of view was very important” (interview, May 16, 2017). He was the producer for the first three Fleadh Nua (New Festival) events staged in Croke Park, St. Stephen’s Green and the National Stadium, all in Dublin. Although Ahern did not travel with the group, he also produced CCÉ’s first concert tour to North America in 1972. He returned to Kerry where his bishop encouraged him to develop Siamsa Tíre.

Following his retirement as artistic director of Siamsa Tíre in 1998, Ahern returned to religious pageantry with *Dance of Life*, a millennium pageant staged at the Green Glens Arena in Millstreet, Co. Cork on November 26 and December 3, 2000. The initial idea for the pageant came from Ahern’s bishop, Bill Murphy and from this, Ahern put together a team. Dean of Kerry, Monsignor Dan O’Riordan from Milstreet parish, accompanied Ahern to view venues and liaised with Noel C. Duggan, owner of the arena (personal communication, July 25, 2017).

The artistic team for the pageant included a number of Ahern’s former collaborators. Fr. Tom Hickey (1924–2021) developed mime and tableau sequences and assisted with make-up as well as providing the “voice of God” in some scenes. Fr. Dermot McCarthy recommended

scriptwriter Joe O'Donnell, who had written a Holy Week series for RTÉ. Aidan O'Carroll, a former member of the St. John's Boys' Choir, who went on to join Siamsa Tíre, study music under Fleischmann, and found the Kerry School of Music, provided a score and conducted the orchestra. Dancers from Siamsa Tíre performed the choreography of Oliver Hurley, artistic director of the company who had been a member of Siamsa Tíre since childhood and developed his stagecraft under the influence of Ahern. Mary Noonan, who had previously worked with Ahern in Siamsa Tíre also contributed choreography, as did Siamsa Tíre performers Anne Herbert, Honor Hurley, and Jonathon Kelliher. Jimmy McDonnell, then technical director at Siamsa Tíre and formerly a performer with the company provided the lighting design, while the stage managers Des Hurley and Seamus McDonnell also came from Siamsa Tíre.

The cast and choir numbered around a thousand individuals drawn from throughout the Diocese of Kerry. As Fitzpatrick Dean has noted: "Pageants typically depend on mustering a larger number of participants to create an epic *mise en scène* in hopes of drawing a proportionately large audience; the epic scale to which pageantry aspires is one of its defining characteristics" (2014: 4). Newspaper reports highlight the involvement of individuals from a variety of amateur drama groups in the area, as well as members of the Siamsa Tíre company. Photographs in the programme highlight the inclusion of choirs from throughout the diocese. Notable photographs include choir members from Bere Island who travelled by boat for rehearsals and an image of the seamstress team, emphasising the efforts of the community behind the scenes. Reflecting Ahern's own interest in heritage, photographs included backdrops of the stone circle in Kenmare and the ancient pilgrim site at "the city of Shrone," reminders of ancient and older Christian heritage.

For the choir, Ahern contacted every choir in the diocese and organized rehearsals over a period of 18 months. Rehearsals took place each month in each of the 10 deaneries, subdivisions of the diocese consisting of a number of parishes. Ahern prepared the repertoire and recorded tapes of all of the parts sung by the choir in Tralee, distributing them to each choir who could make further copies. Noting the circular nature of Ahern's life, writing in *The Irish Times*, Leland noted that, "Now retired, Ahern is more or less back where he started as a young curate, conducting a Gregorian choir at St. John's Church in Tralee" (2000: 16). *The Dance of Life* was a monumental undertaking involving a very significant number of people, reflecting both the artistic and community development that had occurred since the establishment of the choir in St. John's Church, Tralee, in 1957.

The music for the pageant demonstrates Ahern's globally informed musical soundscape. Seeking to begin with simplicity, the pageant opened with a Hindu chant, the sacred Ohm, symbolic of Ahern's consideration of spirituality beyond any particular religion, which is combined with texts taken from the first chapter of John and the second chapter of Genesis. The score included an orchestral fantasy on the carol "Diadem," a Czech carol and the more popular "In the Bleak Midwinter." Noting a desire "to find the inner, decoded simplicity to which people have responded through the ages" (Leland 2000: 16), plainchant was used as an inspiration for a number of orchestral movements. Echoing how he introduced young boys in 1950s Tralee to the singing of the Vienna Boys Choir, through *Dance of Life*, Ahern introduced both cast and audiences to a wide range of musical influences, incorporating contemporary dance, large scale choral singing of works from the ancient to the contemporary, and closing with a piece that incorporated Irish traditional dance.

*Dance of Life* was watched by 14,000 people and later released on VHS, produced by Fr. Dermot McCarthy for Kairos. *Dance of Life* expanded Ahern's influence on musical communities beyond the parish of St. John's in Tralee, including performers from all parishes in the diocese. Opening up their musical experience as he had done with the original Gregorian Choir 43 years previously, Ahern could also now turn to younger artists whom he had influenced, particularly O'Carroll and Hurley, as well as many cast members who had participated in his projects over the decades. *Dance of Life* brought together a wide range of people who could experience liturgical music and paratheatrical pageantry, bringing that experience back to their own communities and developing their own artistic practice.

## **Masses**

While the choir and religious pageants involved the development of communities of practice, Ahern's composition of two mass settings and other music for liturgical celebration reflect his own individual musical creativity and his role in developing the repertoire of his community. In the context of community formation, the mass settings contribute to "unisonality" (Anderson 1983: 145), which can extend the sense of community beyond the church choir. The use of the Irish language reflects a move towards the vernacular in liturgical music and Ahern's enthusiasm for the language.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Ó Riada and the choir in Cúil Aodha, the majority of the choir members in St. John's were not native Irish speakers but sang Irish language song both as part of the Mass and, for many, with Siamsa Tíre. However, whereas Ó Riada completed a unison mass for a choir of Irish traditional singers, Ahern develops several parts in SATB harmony, building upon his development of the choir's competency with vocal harmony and influenced by

European composers. In his introduction to O’Keeffe’s book on the Ó Riada masses, Frank Lawrence has written that “[t]he challenge for the composer of liturgical music is twofold: to speak with his or her own voice, and to speak with the voice of the community, the particular ecclesia, the vox populi” (2017: viii). Ahern seeks to find his compositional voice within the context of the soundscape of the community in which he is located.

Ahern’s musical output, philosophy, and impact evolve in tandem with and in response to changes around him and, like his engagement with the choir and theatre communities, reflect and celebrate the talents of his community. His life spans a period of great change in the church and church music. Contrasting the instructions of Pope Pius XII in his *Musicae Sacrae* (1958) with the Vatican IPs *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Liturgy 1963), Gillen has argued that this “period of five years must have seen more radical change in the structure, liturgy and theological thinking of the Church than previous periods of hundreds of years in Christian history” (2010: 538). Commenting on the impact of Vatican II in Ireland, Gillen highlighted three areas of concern related to the appropriateness of different musical styles for the liturgy; the role of the choir, cantor, and organ; and the potential for other instruments (Gillen, 2010: 536-7). Ahern addresses many of these questions in a way that differed to others and reflected his own musical world. His first mass utilised the fiddle and Irish traditional music, as well as the organ. When English was adopted as the language of the Mass, Ahern quickly composed musical arrangements to fill the lacunae, many of which still exist. However, it is his work in the Irish language that is most notable, and Ahern is among the composers who contributed to the corpus of Irish-language liturgical music. Encouraged by his friend Fr. Dermot McCarthy, Ahern published his first mass, *Aifreann Phádraig Naofa*, with Veritas in 1984,<sup>11</sup> followed by his second, *Aifreann na nDaoine* in 2014.

<<Place Fig. 1 about here>>

Fig. 1 Transcription of melody for “Rian Phádraig,” used as réamh-cheol (overture), transcribed from 1984 recording of *Aifreann Phádraig Naofa* performed at the Pro-Cathedral, Dublin.

Named for St. Patrick, Ahern first developed elements of *Aifreann Phádraig Naofa* in the English language. After an accident on a trip to the United States in 1975 in which he broke both legs, Ahern spent six months recuperating, including a period of time in Moyvane where he revisited the concept but using the Irish language. The mass setting is based on a pentatonic scale,<sup>12</sup> uses an Irish language text, and incorporates elements of Irish traditional music. A recording from 1984 features organ and fiddle, playing a simple pentatonic air (see fig. 1), with both instruments incorporating ornamentation influenced by Irish musical traditions. The contrast between the organ — the instrument of the church played on that occasion by John O’Keeffe — and the fiddle — the instrument of the people played by Ahern — sonically brings together the two realms that Ahern represents. A second example, from the offertory (fig. 2), repeats the original air on organ in a new key and time signature but with Ahern playing an interpretation of the tradition set dance, the “St. Patrick’s Day,” on the fiddle. The recessional piece is a triumphant coming together of organ, SATB choir, and traditional instruments, including bones. With lyrics by another Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Oliver Crilly, *Rian Phádraig* is a rhythmic march begun by male voices over organ.<sup>13</sup> It is a repetitive piece that, over nearly eight minutes, develops different sounds, including a particularly effective descant and a version of the “St. Patrick’s Day” played on traditional instruments. These three arrangements are not in the published sheet music.

<<Place Fig. 2 about here>>

Fig. 2 Transcription of “Ceol don Ofráil” from 1984 recording of *Aifreann Phádraig Naofa* as performed by Pat Ahern and John O’Keeffe.

Amongst the pieces in *Aifreann Phádraig Naofa* is the popular “Íosa Mhillis” (Sweet Jesus), given to Ahern by an older priest, Fr. Pat Sayers, who recounted the story of an old woman who received communion at her home in the Gaeltacht. When the priest would go into the bedroom, she would reach out her two hands in front of her reciting the prayer. In the music, Ahern utilises the minor mode to suggest or reinforce the plaintiveness of the old woman’s words before returning to the major mode. Ahern abandons a time signature for this piece, evoking Irish traditional *sean nós* song. This hymn was performed for Pope John Paul II in Limerick in 1979.

Ahern’s second mass, *Aifreann na nDaoine* (2014), may be translated as “the peoples’ mass.” It follows on from the philosophy that underpinned his work with Siamsa Tíre, a desire to understand the mindset of the Irish people and compose a mass that would develop congregational singing in the Irish language. The second mass was a commission following a call from Maynooth from the Liturgy Committee who were preparing a new publication of *An Leabhar Aifrinn* (The Book of the Mass), a translation of the new liturgy into the Irish language. Ahern’s love for and valuing of the Irish language marked him out as an ideal candidate to engage with such a project.<sup>14</sup> He incorporated influences from *sean nós*, particularly in relation to ornamentation. Although the mass was accepted by the Irish committee, it was rejected by Rome, who deemed it too difficult to sing and not close enough to the original Latin chant. Ahern chose to publish the new mass himself with a recording by a choir in Tralee.

As with Sean Ó Riada, Ahern's mass borrowed from the prior composition. *Aifreann na nDaoine*, opens with the hymn "Críost Liom," Ahern's setting of St. Patrick's Breastplate in the Irish language, again using a pentatonic melody (fig. 3). Continuing the connection to Ireland's patron saint from the previous mass, in contrast with the celebratory sound of *Aifreann Pádraig Naofa*, *Aifreann na nDaoine* engages with chant-like sounds. Throughout the mass, there are many passages of repeated notes where the rhythm attempts to follow the natural rhythms of the spoken language.

<<Place Fig. 3 about here>>

Fig. 3 Section from "Críost Liom." Adapted from Ahern (2014).

*Aifreann na nDaoine* was first performed on May 16, 2013, at an open-air mass in the historic Ardfert Cathedral (Reidy 2013: 10). The Mass was celebrated by former Bishop of Kerry Bill Murphy, who had instigated the idea for *The Dance of Life*, and took place as part of the Gathering Festival, a government initiative. The choir was drawn from members of a reformed *Siamsóirí na Ríochta*, mostly longstanding or former members of *Siamsa Tíre* who rehearsed at Ahern's home outside Tralee. Some were or had also been members of St. John's Gregorian Choir and the membership also included a new generation, drawn from children of older members. Thus, Ahern's activities continued to have an impact on the construction of community, and participants shared a common musical heritage that is expressed through the performance of *Aifreann na nDaoine*.

Ahern's compositions have reached national circulation. *Aifreann Phádraig Naofa* has been broadcast on a number of occasions on radio and television. Four of Ahern's works appear



in the 1999 Veritas publication *In Caelo* (Lawton 1999) and others have been used in the Irish Church Music Association summer schools, including excerpts from both masses in 2017. Excerpts from Ahern's masses were also included for the visit of Pope Francis in 2018. However, it is the affective power and "semantic snowballing" (Turino 1999: 235, 237), especially of the *Aifreann Phádraig Naofa*, for a community of singers who include this music in their repertoire, particularly on occasions such as weddings and funerals that is most significant. These pieces of music have developed emotional salience for the community who have shared common experiences and invested emotionally in this music, reflecting "music's power to create affect and forge social identities" (Turino 1999: 225).

## **Conclusions**

Much research on music in Ireland beyond the realm of Irish traditional music has focused on larger cities, including Dublin, Cork, and Belfast. There is an assumption of a paucity of musical activity outside of Irish traditional music in many parts of the country, reinforced by critiques of music education in Ireland. However, a critical consideration of the work and legacy of Fr. Pat Ahern provides an informative insight into local musical cultures and communities beyond the established canon. This article has sought to recognise the bi-musicality of Ahern, previously celebrated primarily for his contribution to Irish traditional music and the development of folk theatre. Both of these elements remain integral to this study and highlight how the integration of individual and community musical experience can help engage participants in the liturgy and celebration of the church's teachings.

While many parts of the country benefited from the arrival of foreign musicians to their churches, in Ahern, Kerry can point to a local talent who opened up the musical worlds of those with whom he worked, influenced by his own education and interests. Through his initial work with the St. John's Gregorian Choir, he emulated the few cathedral choirs in the country at that time. He established the foundations for further musical development in Tralee that moved from the church pew to the theatre stage. His choir became a pathway for members' musical development. He filled a gap in music education provision, providing an early example of community music education. Many of the members of the choir developed bands that were part of the popular music soundscape of Tralee in subsequent decades, playing in pubs and at weddings, enriching the lives of the whole community. Some went on to study music and establish careers in music, and others became teachers who fostered an appreciation of music in subsequent generations.

Echoing McCarthy's (1999) acknowledgement of the development of musical cultures within communities and as in Finnegan's (1989) study in an English context, the choir fostered a sense of belonging and community, and the musical education gained by members is often overlooked. As Finnegan has noted, "The music education through the churches is often overlooked, but in practice complemented school music teaching, though operating at a more informal and unnoticed level" (1989: 219). Ahern's work becomes more visible through his religious pageants and the founding of Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland. There are many overlaps between his initial development of the choir, production of pageants, and establishment of a folk theatre company. All of these activities added greatly to the cultural life of the region and the evolution of an artistic community and the community established by Ahern through music-making is still evident in Tralee in the present.

In interviews with people who have been a member of the choir and/or Siamsa Tíre, it has often been suggested that Ahern had a number of vocations related to church, music, theatre, and folk culture. All of these are linked in his philosophy, for which his musical activities are a manifestation. Ahern's activities in church music and folk theatre overlap in the formation of musical communities, each advancing the success of the other, both musically and socially. Ahern harnessed the natural musicality of the region in which he worked, whose members were more familiar with Irish traditional and popular music forms, and, through choral training, developed a new locally-nuanced approach to the performance of traditional songs that were the pillars and sonic marker of Siamsa Tíre later on. Ahern's masses perhaps best encompass his various intellectual and creative sides — his love of the Irish language and Irish musical traditions, his appreciation of the power of music to communicate and connect with all people, his ability to develop a sense of community and encourage engagement, and his spirituality. Ahern's diverse musical outputs and lifetime of music-making provides a legacy that continues to shape, influence, and inspire communities today.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1951, *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* (the Association of Musicians of Ireland) is the largest organization engaged in the promotion of Irish traditional music internationally.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Scahill (2019) has provided an informative critique of the Irish traditional and folk music revival with a focus on the recording of LPs from 1955–1970 that provides further cultural context for Ahern's formative musical influences.

<sup>3</sup> Commissioned by Dom Paul McDonnell of Glenstal Abbey, *Aifreann 2* was first performed in 1970.

<sup>4</sup> Literally translated as “house of entertainment,” the *Teach Siamsa* is a thatched cottage modeled on vernacular rural architecture built by *Siamsa Tíre* as a training center in North Kerry and opened in 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann (Festival of Music of Ireland) is the largest annual festival of Irish traditional music in Ireland, organized by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann.

<sup>6</sup> The use of bi-musicality here draws on the work of Mantle Hood (1960) and is used to reflect Ahern's fluency in two musical traditions: Irish traditional and liturgical/Western art music.

<sup>7</sup> In a series of concerts to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of St. John's Gregorian Choir on April 29, October 29 and 30, 2007, broadcast in edited form on Radio Kerry on October 31, 2007, Ahern recounts the role and aspiration of Dean Reidy.

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<sup>8</sup> The parish priest abided by Church protocol not to admit women when the choir first started. Delany (1952) has observed that this was ignored widely and Ahern does not remember formal rejection of women in choirs. However, in the early 1960s, women were admitted and this contributed to the sustainability of the choir.

<sup>9</sup> Translated as “entertainers of the kingdom,” this was the name of the group that preceded the formal founding of Siamsa Tíre in 1974.

<sup>10</sup> The importance of the Irish language for Ahern is exemplified in an unpublished report anticipating the development of a National Folk Theatre that placed an emphasis on the importance of the Irish language and the presence of the language in Co. Kerry (Ahern and O’Sullivan, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Owned by the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, Veritas is Ireland’s leading religious publisher and retailer whose primary function is to serve the needs of the Irish Church.

<sup>12</sup> A note in the 1984 edition reads: “Cloítear go dlúth leis an gcóras cúig nótaí i ngach cóiriúchán don chór agus don orgán. Ba cheart don cheoltóir cloí go dílis leis na cóiriúcháin sin” (The five-note system is closely adhered to in all arrangements for the choir and organ. The musician should faithfully adhere to these arrangements).

<sup>13</sup> An English language translation by Fr. Dermot McCarthy is also included in *In Caelo* (Lawton, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Ahern’s love and knowledge of Irish was nurtured from a young age, in particular by a teacher, Micheál Ó Suileabháin from Glengarriff who taught him in primary school and was married to his aunt.

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