



**PLAY CELLO MUSIC PRESENTS  
TRANSCENDENCE**

**by Ilse De Ziah**

Irish Sacred Music for Solo Cello

Ilse de Ziah: Cello, Composition, Arrangements

Dan Barrett: Trombone (track 6 & 8)

Recorded, mixed and mastered at

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Dan Barrett for being part of the experiment with his magnificent playing;

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When I first heard the recording from 1951 of singer Kitty Gallagher, I felt the deep connection of music with mourning. She sang *Caoineadh do Leanbh Marbh* (Keen for a Dead Child) in a hotel room in Letterkenny on a bitter hard afternoon during a blizzard. I knew I had to find a way to express the 'caoine' or *keen* on the cello. I researched into this style of music and discovered a story of the banning and subsequent loss of the tradition, and the heartbreak of letting loved ones go without this powerful expression of grief. The keens are improvisations based on musical themes, and to bring this to the cello, I needed to take my time to live with the music, grieve with it, play it at funerals, play on a bleak hill, visit the old overgrown cemeteries, visit abandoned houses, listen to the stories of an older generation and form a rich sacred cello vernacular.

Through research and performances for funerals and weddings I also collected hymns and devotional songs, and the vision poem or *Aisling*. I compiled a collection of deeply emotional music that has never been arranged for the cello, and with the help of a Cork County Council grant, I have spent the past 6 months of lockdown and loss, composing and recording these intense pieces. The recordings are inspired by the need for a time of grieving after so much has been lost, and for a need of authentic, sensitive and powerful music to uplift our spirits and help carry us with vigour and hope into the future. The cello is the perfect conduit for such music.

All the best, and I hope you find solace and transcendence in this music.

Ilse de Ziah  
Co. Cork, 2020

## TRACK NOTES

### 1. Seven Rejoices

Based on music for a traditional religious poem *Seacht Suáilcí na Maighdine Muire* (*The Seven Rejoices of Mary*), which can be traced back to Latin and Byzantine Greek numeric hymns. In an early translation from 1853 we see the list of joys for Mary:

*The first good joy that Mary had, it was the joy of one,  
To see her own son Jesus to suck at her breast-bone;  
It brings tidings of comfort and joy!*

*The next good joy that Mary had, it was the joy of two,  
To see her own son Jesus to make the lame to go.*

It continues in this vein, three the blind see, all the way to seven to see Jesus wear the crown of heaven.

The melody reminds me of a heavy metal riff, so I used this in the arrangement by taking on guitaristic ideas such as the blues scale and fast arpeggiated passages. I call the feel Metal Fantasy!

## 2. Fair Churchyard of Creggan (*Úir Chill a' Chreagáin*)

The Aisling or vision poem sung to this melody was written by Art Mac Cumhaigh (1738?-1773). In the poem the poet falls asleep in Creggan cemetery where a fairy woman comes to him at daybreak with a kiss. She urges him to leave his sorrow and travel west with her to a sweet land of honey where the foreigners are not yet in control and he will be enchanted by sweet music. He would love to go, he says, but he cannot desert his wife and friends. The maiden tells him his friends mock his poetry and leave him impoverished. The poet asks her where she is from, and she answers;

*Of fairy race I'm sprung;  
It is I who stir music where  
There are true poets - in Tara by deep  
Night, by morning on the plains of Tyrone.*

By the end he is softening when he says;

*If it is foretold,  
Princess, you are to be my love.  
I would have to hold  
You to an oath before we move  
West on the road. Swear  
That when I die, no matter where,  
By the Shannon, the Isle of Man, in Egypt old,  
I will be laid under in Creggan, its sweet soil above.*

The song was often sung by mothers as they spun, as a way to vocalise their hopes and sorrows in times of oppression. The passages using harmonics gives expression to the otherworldly aspect of this *Aisling*.

## 3. Caoine for a Dead Child (*Caoineadh do Leanbh Marbh*)

In 1951 ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax recorded Kitty Gallagher singing this in a hotel room in Letterkenny on a bitter hard afternoon during a blizzard. The keening practice in Ireland is called *Caoineadh*, which means literally 'to cry, to weep'. The earliest record is from the 8th century. Keening is a ritualised lamentation for the dead which took place at home around the coffin or in a communal setting. Led by a *bean chaointe* (keening woman), who was often paid for the service, it could go on for days and would build in intensity. Improvised verses were sung based on a formulaic opening line, followed by short rhymed lines. The keen would include a litany of who the person was, with both positive and negative themes expressed. Groups of women would join and support the *bean chaointe*, singing choruses, rocking, kneeling and clapping. They would cry their hearts out in a huge cathartic release of grieving. The tone could be hard and intense, with tremendous power. When you heard them keening it was said the hair would rise on the back of your neck.

There are no recordings of keening during a ceremony, and the nature of the music meant it was not documented. The few recordings that exist are only examples of what would be sung. Keening was banned by the Catholic church from 1670 for being a pagan remnant. The church dictated that women could not be a conduit between earth and the afterlife,

as this was the priest's job. There are stories of priests whipping women away from the graves as they wailed.

#### 4. Durrow

This melody is used for many songs, including the much loved hymn *O God, Thou Art the Father*, whose text was written by St. Columba (521-597). Durrow also the melody for at least four other sacred songs, and for the sea shanty Captain Thompson collected by P.W. Joyce pre 1909, and is the name of a town near Kilkenny.

#### 5. Queen of the May (*Bring Flowers of the Rarest*)

Traditional May song popular in Ireland, written by Mary E. Walsh, and published as the *Crowning Hymn* in the book *Wreath of Mary*, 1871. It is sung during a 'May Crowning' service in the Catholic Church, and is one of several May devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Verse 1 and the chorus express the joy of Spring and the love for Mary;

*Bring flowers of the rarest,  
Bring blossoms the fairest,  
From garden and woodland and hillside and dale;  
Our full hearts are swelling,  
Our glad voices telling,  
The praise of the loveliest flower of the vale!*

*O Mary we crown thee with blossoms today!  
Queen of the Angels and Queen of the May.  
O Mary we crown thee with blossoms today,  
Queen of the Angels and Queen of the May.*

#### 6. Dear Father

Featuring Dan Barrett on Trombone

I recorded this with Dan when he was visiting Ireland whilst on his latest European tour. His powerful trombone sound was the perfect expression for the love of a father, be it one's own or one's sacred father. I based the arrangement on a tune from the publication *Hymns Old and New; A Athair Dhílis an AonMhic (Dear Father of the Only Son)*. The text asks for guidance through life.

#### 7. Be Thou My Vision

The version of text sung today is a 1905 translation by Mary E. Byrne of a 6th century hymn *Rop tú mo Baile* by Dallán Forgaill. The text references early Christian Ireland, and it was a "Lorica", which is a prayer for protection. The melody, titled *Slane* in publications since the early 1900s, shows up with many other song texts. Slane is the name of a hill in County Meath, Ireland. In pre-Christian Ireland, an annual fire was lit by the High King Lóegaire to signal the coming of Spring and the pagan Spring Festival. One Easter, in the 5th century, St Patrick, in defiance, lit the fire before the King, to symbolise the Christian Easter. This act traditionally marks the beginning of Ireland's conversion to Christianity.

**8. Lament of the Three Marys (*Caoineadh na dTrí Muire*)**

Featuring Dan Barrett on Trombone

This is also known as *Caoineadh na Páise (The Passion Lament)*, and there have been many versions of it throughout Ireland. It comes from a tradition of songs for the Easter period describing the passion of Christ. This lament brings the emotional intensity of the joys and sorrows of Mary as a mother, through conversations with herself, Peter, Jesus, and the Roman soldiers. The motifs of the text, originally in Latin, have connections to Europe and to the Middle Ages. My arrangement has three iterations of the melody, each in a different key. Through this device the music tells of three Marys who are lamenting the same man, each expressing their different views and stories of their love for him. I had a short section recorded with Dan and added it to the start of the piece as a powerful statement of the man who the women lament.

**9. Bí a Íosa im' Chroíse (*Be, O Jesus, in my Heart*)**

An anonymous devotional poem set to a traditional melody. First published by Seán Ó Riada in 1968 for *Ceol an Aifrinn*, his book of music for the Mass in Irish.

**10. The Spalpeen's Lament (*Caoineadh an Spailpín*)**

This air from West Kerry is referring to a *spailpín*, a wandering farm labourer. According to the Devon Commission of 1843 these itinerant labourers were "the most wretched of the many wretched classes in Ireland", often only earning a daily meal. Theirs could be a violent life with extreme malnourishment, and many died young. There must have been many a *Caoineadh an Spailpín* sung for those who died.

**11. That Night in Bethlehem (*Don Oíche Úd i mBeithil*)**

A haunting Christmas Carol about the events of the first Christmas Eve. The tune is traditional and text is by Aodh Mac Aingil Mac Cathmhaoil (1571-1626)

I love this version of lyrics by Irish language translator M.S. O'Brien

*It's of that night in Bethl'em  
Which under the Sun's e'er heard;  
It's of that night in Beth'lem  
God published the uncut Word.  
The skies' face glows excited;  
The earth in white is dressed.  
Love sleeps within a fish creel  
And drinks from a maiden's breast.  
Out on the open hillside,  
No cover for shepherds' fears  
When bright the heavens open  
And God's messenger appears.  
"And now a hundred glories  
To the Father in highest heav'n!  
On earth to men of goodwill  
Now let there be peace giv'n."*

