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# Go n-éirí an bother leat: A Pathway Through Irish Choral Music

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# Go n-Éirí an Bóthar Leat: A Pathway through the Landscape of Irish Choral Music

By Anne F. Barry, PhD, Lake Forrest College, Illinois

Since moving from Ireland to the United States, I have found that conversations with new music education acquaintances and friends invariably turn to Irish choral music. The questions I am frequently asked are:

1. Where can choral music from Ireland be sourced and purchased?
2. Who are the key composers and arrangers?
3. How is the language pronounced?

The purpose of this article is to share information about how to source and select choral music from Ireland, with a focus on repertoire for high school ensembles. The canon of Ireland's choral music is inspired by a range of sources: the songs and airs from a rich indigenous tradition; music by composers and arrangers who looked to Europe to adopt a more experimental form of writing in the mid-twentieth century; and both secular and sacred music influenced by the Anglican Cathedral tradition.

In my experience, American music educators' primary interest is in the repertoire that is based upon or influenced by the songs and airs of Ireland's folk tradition. With this in mind, I have selected a few starter pieces that I have used with my own choirs or used in workshops with others and can recommend as good starting points for high school use. In addition, a list is provided of other possible pieces to explore, and those sources will, of course, lead you to many more. These, together with an introductory language guide, will help you to take your first steps on the path to integrating Irish choral music into your classes.



Anne F. Barry, PhD

The early decades of the twentieth century saw independence reestablished in Ireland and a subsequent increase in the prevalence of Irish language singing in schools at that time (McCarthy, 1999). In support of this, the State publications division, An Gúm (an gum), published 350 choral settings between the 1930s and the 1970s.

• Amongst the key composers and arrangers was **Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair** (1900-1982). His selection of settings for high school ensembles includes an SSAA arrangement of "Róisín Dubh" (rojín dúb - "little, dark-haired rose") (Ó Gallchobhair, nd). This piece explores qualities of the Irish solo song tradition known as sean nós (jan nos). Sean nós is sung in Irish, unaccompanied, highly ornamented, and free in meter and rhythm to allow for personal expression. In this setting, the melody passes through all parts, as if each is a soloist. The meter is altered occasionally to accommodate the text and allow for expression. In addition, rhythmic variety and rhythmic independence are apparent throughout, and decorative elements are built into each line of this elegant setting.

• **Ben Hanlon** (b. 1952) has taught at an all-boys middle and high school since 1979 and is the director of the schools' preparatory and advanced men's choirs. Hanlon's style reflects a mix of traditional elements, sometimes fused with contemporary ingredients such as exciting harmonic colors, irregular meters, and varied and complex rhythms. His "Mo Ghile Mear" (mò ghlæ mear - "My Shining Star") for four-part men's choir could be classed as a goltraí (gólθri), a lament, or a geantraí (gæθnθri), a love song (Hanlon, 2014). The lyrics are voiced by a warrior who speaks of those left behind in times of war. It opens with bugle-like calls in the tenor 1 and bass 1 parts while the bass 2 line sustains a traditional drone. The haunting air is shared across all voice parts; at times accompanied by sustained lines in the other voices and at other times camouflaged in a contrapuntal texture. March-like rhythm patterns create transitions between verses and form a backdrop in the climactic final verse. Hanlon also has many fine arrangements of Irish airs in

English, and his setting of “Danny Boy” for men is amongst the most sensitive arrangements I have heard of this much-loved piece (Hanlon, 2003).

- **Seóirse Bodley’s** arrangement of “I Will Walk with My Love” is ideal for a high school mixed ensemble (Bodley, 1982). This piece offers opportunities for female solos and/or semi-choruses. These parts are a little challenging, but if you have more women than men in your group, this would be a great choice. The underlying SATB texture would suit a choir of moderate ability. The ranges are friendly, it is softly hummed, and there is a lot of repetition. Many settings follow this style in which the original melody is maintained as a solo (as it would have been in traditional performance) and the choral parts add a subtle accompaniment.
- **Choirs Can** is an exciting choral project whose first phase was launched in 2012. Choirs Can (can [kan] being the Irish word meaning “sing”) offers access to eight four-part, Irish-language, a cappella settings for mixed high school choirs, for free! The settings are by three Irish arrangers—Deirdre Moynihan, Andrew Synnott, and Mark Armstrong. The website provides the full scores, individual tracks for each line, a recorded pronunciation guide, and a performance recording by an Irish choir. The scores can be downloaded and copied as required. The arrangements are based on songs from the popular traditional canon and reflect many aspects of island life. The use of Irish language is quite limited, making these pieces very accessible.

**Irish Language Pronunciation**

This basic Irish pronunciation guide will help you get started with Irish-language settings. There are many exceptions to the rules in Irish—just as there are in American English—and the presence of many dialects across the island adds to this complexity, but hopefully the guide will assist your initial score preparation and encourage you to research the language further.

Vowels in Irish are used with and without fadas (acute diacritical marks). Using IPA as a guideline for pronunciation, the distinction is as follows:

<b>Vowels Without Fadas</b>	A = a	e = ε	i = ɪ	o = ɔ	u = ʊ
<b>Vowels With Fadas</b>	Á = ɔ	é = e	í = i	ó = o	ú = u

Not all English consonants are used in Irish. Consonants in parentheses are not used, and those underlined can vary greatly in their pronunciation:

b, c, d, f, g, h (j, k), l, m, n, p, (q) r, s, t (v, w, x, y, z)

Some commonly used consonants and consonant combinations are as follows:

- s: can be ʃ (sh) or s (ss) at the beginning of a word, usually s after a vowel
- bh: v
- dh: g or j
- t: θ (soft th)
- d: d' (soft d)
- ch: x
- th: h

Some sample words in Irish are:

sean (old) - ʃan	bhí mé (I was) – vi me
fáilte (welcome) - falθə	Seán (common Irish name) - ʃan
tá tú (you are) - θa θu	cór (choir) – kor

**Key Composers and Arrangers**

The following list highlights the key composers and arrangers of Irish music suitable for high school ensembles, a sample piece that serves as a good indicator of style, and the website or contact details for sourcing the music:

# CHORAL

Composers/Arrangers	Sources	Sample Setting and Voicing
Armstrong, Mark	<a href="http://www.seoltamusic.com">www.seoltamusic.com</a>	My Lagan Love – SATB
Barry, Anne	<a href="http://www.earthsongschoralmusic.com">www.earthsongschoralmusic.com</a>	She Moved through the Fair – SATB
Bodley, Seóirse	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Dilín Ó Deamhas – SSA
Buckley, John	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Suantraí – SS
Clarke, Rhona	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Géibheann – SSA
Deale, Edgar	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Down by the Sally Gardens – SATB
Earley, Desmond	<a href="http://www.halleonard.com">www.halleonard.com</a> <a href="http://www.seoltamusic.com">www.seoltamusic.com</a>	‘Sí Do Mhamó Í – SATB
Farrell, Eibhlís	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Déirín Dé – SSA
Feeley, Ephrem	<a href="http://www.cherrybrookmusic.com">www.cherrybrookmusic.com</a>	The Lake Isle of Innisfree – SA
Fleischmann, Aloys	<a href="http://www.aaic.com">www.aaic.com</a> <a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Cill Chais – SSA
Furlong, Sue	<a href="http://www.suefurlongmusic.ie">www.suefurlongmusic.ie</a> <a href="http://www.halleonard.com">www.halleonard.com</a>	Mo Ghile Mear – SSA
Hanlon, Ben	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Ár nAthair – TTBB
Hayden, Mary	<a href="http://www.aaic.ie">www.aaic.ie</a>	Deus Meus – SSAA
Holohan, Michael	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	No Sanctuary – SSA
Ingoldsby, Marian	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Fuinneamh – SSAA
Kelly, Mary	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Turas Go Tír Na nÓg – SSA
Larchet, John	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	The Legend Of Lough Rea – SATB
McAuliffe, Mary	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Irish Blessings – SATB
McGlynn, Michael	<a href="http://www.anuna.ie">www.anuna.ie</a>	Hinbarra – TTBB
Mooney, David	<a href="http://www.morningstarmusic.com">www.morningstarmusic.com</a>	Avenging and Bright – TTBB
Moynihan, Deirdre	<a href="http://www.choirscan.com">www.choirscan.com</a>	An Mhaighdean Mhara – SATB
Nelson, Havelock	<a href="http://www.aaic.ie">www.aaic.ie</a>	The Girl with the Buckle – SSA
Ó Gallchobhair, Éamonn	<a href="http://www.forasnagaeilge.ie">www.forasnagaeilge.ie</a>	Róisín Dubh – SSAA
Scanlon, Greg	<a href="mailto:gdsanlon@yahoo.co.uk">gdsanlon@yahoo.co.uk</a>	Oíche – SSATB
Sexton, Bernard	<a href="http://www.gia.com">www.gia.com</a>	Críost Liom – 3-Part Round
Stanford, Charles Villiers	<a href="http://www.booseyhawkes.com">www.booseyhawkes.com</a>	My Love’s an Arbutus – TTBB
Sweeney, Eric	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Niamh Of The Golden Hair – SSA
Synnott, Andrew	<a href="http://www.choirscan.com">www.choirscan.com</a>	Buachaill Ón Éirne – SATB
Townsend, Declan	<a href="http://www.cmc.ie">www.cmc.ie</a>	Suantraí – SATB
Victory, Gerard	<a href="http://www.aaic.ie">www.aaic.ie</a>	Sliabh Geal gCua – SATB

These sources will direct you to a wealth of additional pieces for high school ensembles by these and other composers and arrangers. My hope is that these initial steps along the pathway to Irish choral music will lead you and your choirs to an enjoyable journey into Irish tradition and culture.

*Go n-éirí an bóthar leat; may the road rise to meet you.* •

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