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"To Inform, Educate and Entertain": The Early Radio Broadcasts of Seán Ó Riada

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Abstract
Seán Ó Riada (1931–1971) was an influential figure in Irish cultural life during the mid-twentieth century. His regular presence on Irish radio station Radio Éireann (RÉ) was a catalyst in his rise to prominence. In this paper, Ó Riada's first decade of broadcasts on RÉ are considered, both in his role as Assistant Music Director at RÉ, beginning in 1953, and those that he produced and presented after that as an independent contractor for RÉ. This research examines an approach to radio programming at RÉ that emerged gradually from 1955 onwards, culminating in Ó Riada's influential radio series entitled *Our Musical Heritage* in 1962. Ó Riada's activity was influential but also shaped by agendas of the station during the 1950s. Evidence is used from archives and the history of broadcasting to reference key moments and artistic developments in Ó Riada's shows alongside RÉ's progressing agenda.
Keywords: Seán Ó Riada, Radio Éireann, history of Irish radio

Author biography
Pádraig Mac Aodhgáin (Patrick Egan, PhD) is a Research Data Steward, Digital Humanist, ethnomusicologist and concertina player at University College Cork. His PhD research focused on an ethnographic account of the career of Seán Ó Riada and his rise to prominence in mid-twentieth century Ireland alongside the digital visualisation of metadata from archives.

Introduction
This article explores the radio broadcasts of Seán Ó Riada (1931–1971) on Radio Éireann (RÉ) from 1953 to 1962 by analysing the role that both Ó Riada and the radio station had in the development of radio shows. Examination of Ó Riada's early broadcasts provide alternative understandings to the pervading narratives about Ó Riada's role in, and the delivery of, radio show programming. The paper reveals the contextual backdrop to his later influential radio series on Irish traditional music, *Our Musical Heritage*, which continues to be a subject of interest and has impacted on the development of Irish traditional music (Kearney 2012).

In the investigation of historical radio and television broadcasts, erasure is a key concern and research is often done by proxy on non-sound objects where recordings do not exist or cannot be found (Browne 2007; Duffy 2025; Gubbins 2024). To assess Ó Riada's activities with RÉ during the mid-twentieth century, a significant amount of radio scripts are available in lieu of audio recordings, and this paper appraises these sources. It should be noted that scripts were not always identical to the material broadcast; for example, published scripts for the 1962 series *Our Musical Heritage* differ in places from the recorded broadcasts (Ó Laoire 2009, 7). As such, scripts are treated here primarily as evidence of planned structure and narrative approach rather than exact transcripts of the programmes as transmitted. This research draws upon multiple archives, particularly the Seán Ó Riada Collection / Bailiúchán Sheáin Uí Riada (SÓRC) in the Boole Library at University College Cork, the subject of a PhD thesis (Egan 2019), and logbooks at Raidió Teilifís Éireann (hereafter RTÉ) (RÉ Logbooks). This approach fills several gaps in knowledge about the content, style and extent of Ó Riada's radio shows in that period. The analysis of this evidence also elicits new understandings around Ó Riada's agency at RÉ and the station's facilitation of Ó

Riada's work on radio, from his hiring as Assistant Music Director at RÉ in 1953 to a gradual evolution of lecture-style radio shows, culminating in the broadcast of *Our Musical Heritage* in 1962.

The broadcasts of *Our Musical Heritage* have received wide critical attention and are seen as important examples of Ó Riada's broadcasting work (M. Egan 2020; Kearney 2012; Ó hAllmhuráin 2016; Ó Laoire 2009; Ó Riada and Kinsella 1982; Browne 2013; White 1998). For a broadcast series to garner such widespread attention reflects the fact that some of the audio recordings have been made available and a publication about the series is accessible (Browne 2013; Ó Riada and Kinsella 1982). Ó Canainn and Mac an Bhua (1993) make mention of Ó Riada's lesser-known programmes in their analysis of his work at RÉ, but crucially most of the audio recordings of radio shows from between 1953 and 1962 are unavailable or no longer exist. Those that do exist, such as the 1958 broadcast *Composers at Work*, are short in length and do not extend beyond one show (Pine 2005). Despite this lack of evidence, the availability of radio scripts and broadcast schedules gives a strong understanding of not only how Ó Riada's career developed, but also the types of shows that the radio station facilitated and the ways that RÉ's agendas emerged over time.

Change and continuity in the 1950s

RÉ instigated several developments that changed how the station operated in the 1950s, including the introduction of a news service, the founding of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra and the Radio Éireann Players, and investment in a Mobile Recording Unit, along with the advent of tape recording (Duffy 2025, 39). Radio programming was also evolving, even as the decade has often been described as involving a certain "greyness", with high unemployment, emigration, and general stagnation (Ó Canainn and Mac an Bhua 1993, 150; Ó Canainn 2003, 286; Keogh et al. 2004; Keogh 1994, 223). Others have shown that the period was replete with social change. O'Leary, for example, inflects the greyness perspective by noting an appetite for the redefining of cultural identities and agenda setting, claiming that "the overt forms of social change that emerged from the late 1950s were a direct result of public dissatisfaction with Irish society in the period after World War II" (O'Leary 2018, 185).

Hutchinson's view of cultural revivals being in a position to "crystallise" during crises and the modernisation process is helpful here (1987). The perspectives of scholars on cultural life in the 1950s moves beyond ideas of the decade as one of stagnation towards what Ní Fhuartháin describes as "continual modernising upheaval, to which various responses are articulated" (2018, 2). As noted by Duffy, the early 1950s was a "burgeoning cultural landscape", as folk music re-emerged in the popular public domain internationally (2025, 41). Key organisations were formed in Ireland at the time, such as the Arts Council and Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, both established in 1951, and Gael Linn, which was founded in 1953 (P. Egan 2019).

Such studies are useful in the context of how Ó Riada's career developments progressed, in parallel to changes that were happening during that modernising upheaval. The trajectory of his emerging work in broadcasting initially aligned with RÉ's broadcasting agendas but then moved beyond them. During this time, when music programming was discussed at governmental and institutional level, nuances

have been noted by scholars. For example, certain genres were placed front and centre:

> The category of music under discussion in these conversations was more often than not Western art music, as the genre of music most perceived to have the potential to improve the mental and emotional capabilities of its listeners. (Gubbins 2024, 58)

Gorham describes the difficulties that existed at the station for popularising Irish traditional music (1967, 227). For Ó Riada on the other hand, his broadcasts on Western art music began to dwindle in the late 1950s, and his presentation of shows on Irish traditional music started to evolve into lengthier productions.

RÉ and "cultural innovations" in the 1950s

Along with operational developments, RÉ instigated "cultural innovations" in programming content for the wider public as the 1950s progressed (Horgan 2001, 72). Maurice Gorham became Director of Broadcasting on 1 January 1953, following a tenure at the BBC, and remained in post until 1959 (Gorham 1967, 218, 296). During 1953, the popular radio series the *Thomas Davis Lectures* was introduced. Discussing the history of Irish broadcasting in 1967, Gorham writes, "one effect of the Thomas Davis Lectures was to give Radio Éireann a new standing in the eyes of the academic world" (1967, 232). He notes that the broadcasts for that particular show were paid for "at the highest rate that Radio Éireann had ever paid for a talks broadcast", indicating the importance that the station placed on scholarly styled content in radio shows (ibid.). At the time, Gorham states that the normal duty of broadcasting was to "inform, educate and entertain" (1967, 221). The organisation Comhairle Radio Éireann, formed in 1953 as a government led administering body for RÉ, consisted of "five people who would advise and assist the minister and be responsible under him for the control and supervision of the station" (Horgan 2001, 71). Through this control and supervision, RÉ radio broadcasts reflected Comhairle Radio Éireann and the new director's agenda for the coming decade.

Critics have shared insights into how the station's programming evolved throughout that time. In effect, Ó Riada's tenure emerged alongside a new type of radio talk that leaned on academic learning through more serious scholarly narration. As historian F. X. Martin claimed in 1967:

> At the very least it may be said that radio has drawn on and benefited from academic learning. It can be argued that it has also stimulated scholarship, and this has certainly proved to be the case with the Thomas Davis Lectures, which have been transmitted regularly from Radio Éireann since 1953. (1967, 276)

This attitude relayed by Gorham and Martin demonstrates the importance and value that station critics also placed on the shows that were broadcast in a more scholarly manner, whilst adding to programming which would also inform and entertain its listeners. Towards the end of the 1950s, Ó Riada would fuse this agenda with his own interests and explorations.

Starting out at RÉ

Ó Riada graduated from University College Cork with a Bachelor of Music in 1952 and joined RÉ shortly thereafter as Assistant Music Director. The job was advertised in the *Irish Times* newspaper as follows:

> ASSISTANT MUSIC DIRECTOR–Who will be required to assist the Music Director in the direction and supervision of all the music activities of Radio Éireann.
> QUALIFICATIONS REQUIRED: a sufficiently high standard of professional qualifications and executive ability to carry out the duties specified.
> Salary: Man, £709 to £824. Woman, £593 to £709.
>
> (Radio Éireann–Staff Vacancies 1953, 9)

The hiring advertisement by the station sheds light on how certain values were constituted at RÉ from the outset. For example, the wording of the advertisement in context of the history of RÉ recruitment reflects a trend from RÉ in its first three decades–employment at the director level was exclusively male. The unequal recruitment advertising also reflected the widespread disparity of pay scales between genders, a disparity further affected by marital status in public service employment. As noted by Gubbins (2016, 189) and Pine (2005), the Directors of Music at RÉ from 1926 to 1960 were usually well-known conductors of Western art music, either in Ireland or on the European scene. In general, women were not in positions to gain such experience as conductors. It is important to understand developments at RÉ through a gendered perspective where the representation of women in the station affected RÉ's radio programming into the 1970s.

Skill in radio show narration and script writing were also reasons for why Ó Riada (then known as John Reidy) was deemed a suitable candidate for the vacancy. In May 1953, the article "Assistant Musical Director–Co. Limerick Man's Appointment" in the *Irish Examiner* reported that a:

> Young honours graduate from UCC has been appointed Assistant Musical Director in Radio Éireann. His distinctions include winning the Pigott and Egan Cups at Feis Maitiú...A series of scripts, narrating Handel's visit to Ireland, were accepted from him by Radio Éireann prior to his appointment. (Assistant Musical Director 1953)

Whilst the submissions of scripts may have helped Ó Riada in his successful appointment, the next two years of direct employment with the station did not result in the new employee delivering narrated shows. Instead, his role involved other work such as arranging concerts, detailing orchestral performances and "answering letters" (Ó Canainn 2003, 28). Even though narration was a valued skill by the organisation, this further evidence shows that the new appointee was required to tend to the station's administrative tasks and other activities from the outset.

Developing trajectories between Ó Riada and RÉ

By 1955, Ó Riada had resigned from the station and in the next seven years he undertook independent work for RÉ. From 1955, Ó Riada also worked as an employee and on an independent basis with other organisations. He managed a pit orchestra at the Abbey, the national theatre, from 1955 to 1962 and collaborated with Irish language organisation Gael Linn on several music recordings (1958–1971). He managed to successfully maintain a strong presence on RÉ radio broadcasts throughout, even after he moved from Dublin to Cork in 1963. In his role as an independent broadcaster, he was continually supported by RÉ to share his artistic outputs and his perspectives. His musical collaborations were also aired by the

station, and many of his compositions and shows were broadcast repeatedly. Victory explains how Ó Riada and RÉ were intertwined:

> In 1976, we commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the beginnings of Irish broadcasting, and the more we examined its progress the more we realised that its critical development was inextricably bound up with Seán Ó Riada. Its later history would have been different had he not lived, and he too would have been a very different person in life and career had Irish radio and television not crossed his path so closely. (1981, 43)

As part of a constructive interaction between the two, RÉ became an important channel for Ó Riada to develop as a broadcaster and continued accepting Ó Riada's creative outputs in a way that was suitable to the duty of broadcasting mentioned by Gorham–to inform, educate and entertain. This new relationship with the station becomes clear in the amount and types of radio show outputs (see Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3) and in the way that the scripts were delivered. The radio shows changed in structure and broadened in subject area as the years progressed and Ó Riada's voice became ever more present over the airwaves with increasing use of the Irish language.

The first narrated broadcasts by Ó Riada appeared after his official resignation as Assistant Music Director from RÉ on the 13 August 1955 under the title *The Armchair Time-Traveller: Talk about Igor Stravinsky*. The original typed script for this show is held at SÓRC (Reidy). The script includes an account of the background of the composer Stravinsky's life, selected incidents that were of interest to Ó Riada and the achievements of Stravinsky. Nearer to the end of this programme, Ó Riada offered his views on the composer's works in twelve-tone music (serialism).

An ever increasing parallel appeared between Ó Riada's musical output in other mediums and his radio talks over time (see Table 1). In mid-July 1956, he narrated a series entitled *Bypaths in Music*, which focused on the history of Western art music. The series included episodes such as "The Psychopathic Prince: Gesualdo", "The Retired Post Office Official: Satie", "The Musical Philosopher: Rousseau", "The Bach Family (The Scattered Seed)", and "The Amorous Virtuoso: Liszt and Paganini". The series culminated in a discussion on serialism. As presenter, Ó Riada again offered his views and focused on what he thought was the significance of composition in this style, later sharing his opinion on the state of the genre. Between the summer of 1956 and 1957, as his composition work and radio activities developed in parallel, Ó Riada composed his first piece in this style, *Nomos No. 1: Hercules Dux Ferraraie* (*The Blue Note* 1981). From 1955 up to his radio series *Our Musical Heritage* in 1962, Ó Riada proposed a large amount of radio show narrations to RÉ: over one hundred were accepted. In earlier broadcasts from RÉ, the station used his original English name, John Reidy, though he had signed his name as both John Reidy and the Irish language version Seán Ó Riada from as early as 1952 (Ó Canainn 2003, 94). The name John Reidy is used in all broadcast announcements by the station until December 1956.

Table 1–Broadcast RÉ talks by Seán Ó Riada 1955–1958

Broadcast Date	Description in Source	Reference
13 Aug 1955	*The Armchair Time-Traveller:* talk about Igor Stravinsky by John Reidy	RADIO PROGRAMMES (1955) *Irish Times*, 13 Aug

12 Sept 1955 6 Oct 1955 10 Oct 1955	*Children Meet the Orchestra:* Talk, with Music, by John Reidy	RADIO PROGRAMMES (1955) *Irish Times,* 12 Sept, 6 Oct, 10 Oct
23 Apr 1956 7 May 1956	*Making Music*: Talk, with Music, by John Reidy	BROADCASTING (1956) *Irish Times,* 23 Apr, 7 May
16 Jul 1956 23 Jul 1956 30 Jul 1956	*Bypaths in Music 1. The Psychopathic Prince: Gesualdo 2 The Retired Postal Official: Satie 3. The Harm. Society of T.F. Gentlemen, Small Coal Merchant 4. The Musical Philosopher: Rousseau 5. Bach*	SÓRC #554
27 Aug 1956 3 Sept 1956 10 Sept 1956	*You'll Enjoy This Music*: John Reidy talks about some of the music to be broadcast this week	RÉ Logbooks
25 Dec 1956	*The Last Troubadour* Musical arrangements by John Reidy	RÉ Logbooks
28 Dec 1956	*An Boscín Ceoil: Clár don Nollaig* Seán Ó Riada agus Tomás Ó Súilleabháin	RÉ Logbooks
27 Jan 1957	*The Playboy of the Western World* with Original Music by John Reidy	RÉ Logbooks
Feb 1957	*Music and Musicians*: A Book review by John Reidy	SÓRC item #554
3 May 1957 10 May 1957 (cancelled) 17 May 1957 24 May 1957 7 Jul 1957 14 Jul 1957 21 Jul 1957 28 Jul 1957	*An Boscín Ceoil: Ceol agus Amhráin* le Seán Ó Riada agus Tomás Ó Súilleabháin	RÉ Logbooks
22 Jul 1957	*The Sublime and the Profane*– Music Reviews by John Reidy	SÓRC item #554
7 Sept 1957 14 Sept 1957 21 Sept 1957 28 Sept 1957	*Meascán Ceoil Do Pháistí* – le Seán Ó Riada agus Tomás Ó Súilleabháin	RÉ Logbooks

05 Oct 1957 12 Oct 1957 19 Oct 1957 26 Oct 1957 2 Nov 1957		
11 Nov 1957	John Reidy reviews "Famous Mozart Operas" by Spike Hughes; "Gilbert, His Life and Strife" by Hesketh Pearson, and "Just Jazz" edited by Sinclair Traill and the Hon. Gerald Lascelles	RÉ Logbooks
23 Nov 1957	*Meascán Ceoil Do Pháistí* le Seán Ó Riada	RÉ Logbooks
28 Nov 1957	*Twelve Note Music: The First of Two Illustrations* by John Reidy	RÉ Logbooks
28 Nov 1957	*Twelve Note Music: The Second of Two Illustrations* by John Reidy	RÉ Logbooks

Ó Riada's radio shows between 1955 and 1958 can be described as shows mostly designed with entertainment to the fore, introducing music, reviewing music books, and briefly touching upon the subjects of the history of Western art music. As seen in Table 2, from 1958 onwards a shift appears in Ó Riada's style of output with the introduction of shows that were more in-depth and had a stronger critical voice. The emergence of the Thomas Davis lecture series on RÉ had led to reflections by commentators in the late 1960s and provide evidence as to how priorities were developing. For example, when describing the advent of format in RÉ, Martin outlines the reasoning behind the choice:

> There are obvious reasons for the grouping of lectures in series. It is easier for the broadcasting authorities to plan and organize on this basis. There is more assurance of an interested audience when a common theme unites a succession of lectures over a number of weeks or even months. A scholar has opportunity to treat a subject in depth when he is allowed to concentrate on one aspect of a theme. The scales were weighed further in favour of the series when it became a frequent practice to publish these in book form, whereas the individual lecture had to make its own way into some magazine or journal. (1967, 268)

Ó Riada continued to deliver shows that were focused on entertainment, but with increasing scholarly narration and number of shows in each series increasing (see Table 2). In January 1958, Ó Riada collaborated on a five-part series, entitled *Autumnal Capitals* which RÉ termed "a series of entertainments" presented by Ó Riada and poet Thomas Kinsella based on Byzantine culture. Broadcasts like this demonstrate how in this era the station was providing a platform for presenters to deliver programming that could be educational, informative, and entertaining but would be delivered over a longer period of time.

Table 2–Broadcast RÉ talks by Seán Ó Riada 1958

Broadcast Date	Description in Source	Reference
3 Jan 1958 10 Jan 1958 17 Jan 1958 24 Jan 1958 31 Jan 1958	*AUTUMNAL CAPITALS*: A series of entertainments presented by John Reidy and Thomas Kinsella (Alexandria, Rome, Athens, Jerusalem, Byzantium)	RÉ Logbooks
5 Feb 1958 12 Feb 1958	*New Directions in Music*: The First of two talks by John Reidy "The Aesthetic Aspect" *New Directions in Music*: The Second of two talks by John Reidy "The Technical Aspect"	RÉ Logbooks
25 Feb 1958 4 Mar 1958 11 Mar 1958 18 Mar 1958 25 Mar 1958 8 Apr 1958	*Making Music:* A talk with music by John Reidy (Making the Bricks–How a Tune is Made, Round and Round, Building it Up, The Symphony, The Concerto, Looking Back)	RÉ Logbooks
21 Jul 1958	*Biography and the Blues*: John Reidy reviews "The Music Makers" edited by A.L. Bacharach, "Vivaldi, Genius of the Baroque" by Marc Pincherle, "Jazz in Britain" by David Boulton and "The Jazz Makers" edited by Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff	RÉ Logbooks
3 Jul 1958 10 Jul 1958 17 Jul 1958 24 Jul 1958 31 Jul 1958 7 Aug 1958	*Makers Of Music*: 1–6 (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Handel, Bach)–John Reidy tells the story and plays some of the music	RÉ Logbooks
12 Aug 1958	*Heritage in Sound*: *A Critical Survey of Traditional Music*. The Why and the Wherefore: –a discussion between Mary MacGoris, Hamish Henderson and John Reidy–the second in a series of six programmes presented by Ciarán Mac Mathúna	RÉ Logbooks
1958	*Composers at Work*	Pine 2005, 237

During this era, Ó Riada was also presenting more radio shows on serialism, with the episode “New Directions in Music” and the show *Composers at Work* (as evidenced in Table 2). In November 1957 he introduced two shows on the topic. On 5 February 1958, he introduced another short two-part radio series entitled *New Directions in Music*. It is likely that for the latter he had been referencing *The Score and I.M.A.* magazine, a periodical on contemporary Western art music written by British composers that had been appearing four times a year and published in London. There are similar references between Ó Riada’s radio script and the December 1956 edition of the magazine and it demonstrates the connection that Ó Riada had to the world of contemporary music at the time. A copy of *The Score* exists in SÓRC and contains notes written by Ó Riada (Burt 1956).

The title of one article in *The Score* by Francis Burt, “The Antithesis”, contained the tagline “The Technical Aspect”. In a similar manner, Ó Riada’s first show is also entitled *The Technical Aspect*. There are also closely related descriptions of ideas between Ó Riada’s transcript and the magazine, in particular the section dealing with post-Webern composers. Anton Webern (1883–1945) was an avant-garde composer of twelve-tone techniques but also a conductor and musicologist. Burt explains that the post-Webern composers had “carried his innovations to an extreme conclusion” with musical elements such as rhythm, dynamics and timbre being restricted to “rigidly permutational procedures” (Burt 1956, 14). Ó Riada similarly covers this point by stating that the group “apply these rigid…procedures, not alone to series, but to dynamics, rhythm, and tone-colour as well”. In a similar vein, Burt laments the lack of imagination of post-Webern composers, whilst Ó Riada states that:

> I fail, therefore, to see more than a very limited value in their work, but it is possible that eventually the experiments which they are now making may consolidate the new techniques and may then give place to an accessible form of composition.

In the radio series *New Directions in Music* in 1958, Ó Riada outlines his opinion on the reasons for the demise of this genre of music. He reverts his discussion to the function and definition of music, and the importance of melody for the advancement of composition in the twelve note technique:

> Melody is therefore the most important element in music. But if melody is so strained as to be almost non-existent, if it can no longer be perceived as melody, it loses all value. There is a physiological limit to the ordinary listener's ability to connect separate sounds, and in Webern's later work, it seems as though that limit may have been transcended. (1958)

These broadcasts illustrate a more direct, critical analysis from the presenter on contemporary musical practice. Ó Riada’s narration reads here as less focused on entertainment, and more about scholarly critique and informing the listener. Even though there is a scholarly approach, the presenter avoids deep analysis, thus suiting enthusiasts and non-experts. As articulated by Malachy Egan about *Our Musical Heritage*, Ó Riada’s mode of delivery would see him become a broadcaster who gave his own personal views and opinions that were not necessarily widely held at the time (2020, 38).The series *New Directions in Music* was followed almost immediately in 1958 with a lengthy series of programmes entitled *Making Music* and another, entitled *Makers of Music*, which were both on air over a total of six weeks.

At this point in Ó Riada’s career, interesting paths began to appear. On one hand,

Ó Riada was beginning to interrogate composition in Western art music more seriously, and on the other hand the first broadcasts of his ideas on traditional Irish music began to emerge. On 12 August 1958, the RÉ Irish traditional music broadcaster, Ciarán Mac Mathúna featured Ó Riada (as John Reidy) in one of a six-part series of programmes dealing with a broad commentary on Irish traditional music entitled *Heritage in Sound: A Critical Survey of Traditional Irish Music* (Mac Aodhgáin 2026). Mac Mathúna hosted influential figures on the folk revival scene who coincidentally had been visiting Ireland at the time including Hamish Henderson and Mary MacGoris (a noted music critic and journalist who worked at RÉ in the 1940s). This is an interesting departure, as it is the first evidence where Ó Riada formally collaborates with others, sharing his opinions on Irish traditional music at the station whilst contributing to a critical survey on the landscape of Irish traditional music.

There is a noticeable reduction in activity between August and December 1958, during which Ó Riada was absent from RÉ broadcasts after a considerable run of radio show output. It is possible that family life influenced this shift, as the family's third child Eoghan Ó Riada was born in October 1958. Other projects were also in development at this time, including Ó Riada's commission to compose music for the feature film, *Mise Éire* (1959), his participation in a commercial recording with Gael Linn named *Ceolta Éireann* which was released in December of that year, and the composition of incidental music for the opening of the RÉ studio in Cork (Mac Aodhgáin 2026). It is also notable that the Ó Riada household changed to Gaelic speaking just before September of that year (P. Ó Riada 2024).

Towards the end of 1958, Ó Riada was invited with other composers to contribute a short statement entitled "Composer's Viewpoint" as part of a *Composers at Work* radio programme, where he shares his views on his compositional interests in Western art music and the problems facing Irish composers at the time (Pine 2005). During his narration, Ó Riada reiterated his viewpoints towards contemporary composition, "It is to…basic principles, basic elements of the art of music, that composers must now return to a rediscovery of the purity of line, and the rhythmic tension between one note and the next" (ibid. 2005, 237).

In 1959, Ó Riada presented a set of more extensive radio show programmes and continued as in other programmes to share his opinion on music throughout these broadcasts with the wider public, as evidenced in Table 3 below. For example, in one programme he introduces an eleven-part series, *Their Kind of Music*, each half-hour show surveying musical cultures from various regions of the world. At that time, this extensive series was Ó Riada's longest running radio programme for RÉ. Interestingly, following the last in this series on 19 May 1959, Ó Riada conducted the recording of his score "Mise Éire" one month later on 9 June (Ó Canainn 2003, 37).

RÉ increasingly served as a platform for Ó Riada to develop his ideas in Irish traditional music and he also pivoted towards Irish language-based radio shows (see the descriptions of radio shows in Table 3). During the summer of 1959, Ó Riada holidayed at Brú na Gráige in Kerry, which critics report had a major impact on Ó Riada's musical life (Kinsella 1979, 67). This development is also contextualised in an interview by Ó Riada's wife, Ruth Uí Riada, with Andrias Ó Muimneacháin in 1972 (*Mo Scéal Féin* 1972). Uí Riada mentions how Ó Riada was influenced by the text on Gaelic culture, *The Hidden Ireland* by Daniel Corkery, during his tenure at the Abbey

Theatre. She reflects on how the sentiment of that book demonstrated that a remnant of Gaelic culture was left in Gaeltacht areas and describes in detail how their family moved towards what they termed *an saol gaelach* (the Gaelic way of life) at that time. Incidentally, due to the birth of their third child, Eoghan, the family decided for logistical reasons in 1959 to change their usual holiday in Paris and to holiday instead at Brú na Gráige, in the Gaeltacht of West Kerry. Uí Riada also noted that at the time Ó Riada incorporated his ideas about Irish traditional music into his new radio show series that was in progress.

Table 3–Broadcast RÉ talks by Seán Ó Riada 1959–62 (prior to *Our Musical Heritage*)

Broadcast Date	Description in Source	Reference
10 Feb 1959	*The Why and the Wherefore of Traditional Music*: –a discussion between Mary MacGoris, Hamish Henderson and John Reidy–the second in a series of six programmes presented by Ciarán Mac Mathúna (repeat of a programme first broadcast in the series "heritage in sound")	RÉ Logbooks
24 Feb 1959 3 Mar 1959 10 Mar 1959 31 Mar 1959 7 Apr 1959 14 Apr 1959 21 Apr 1959 28 Apr 1959 5 May 1959 12 May 1959 19 May 1959	*"THEIR KIND OF MUSIC":* A series by John Reidy (The Spanish, The Italians, The English, The Germans, The Russians, The French, The Americans, The Greeks, The Scandinavians, The Bohemians, The Austrians, The Irish)	RÉ Logbooks
23 Aug 1959 30 Aug 1959 6 Sept 1959 13 Sept 1959 20 Sept 1959 27 Sept 1959 11 Oct 1959 18 Oct 1959 25 Oct 1959 1 Nov 1959	*Ag Déanamh Ceoil*–Clár le Seán Ó Riada fé chineálacha ceoil agus a ndeilbh. (Amhráin agus Abairt, Uirlisí Ceoil, A Thuille Amhráin, Rondo na Rualle Buaille, Tuille Ceol Gaelach, Téama Breachminthe, Tuille Ceoil Aragail, An Sonaid, An Suimfin, An Coinsearto)	RÉ Logbooks
1960	Thomas Davis lecture	SÓRC item #127
19 Mar 1960 3 Apr 1960 30 Apr 1960	*Ár gCeol Féinig* Clár ceoil agus seanchais le Seán Ó Riada	RADIO AND TV PROGRAMMES (1960) *Irish Times*, 2 Apr, 30 Apr

17 Nov 1960 24 Nov 1960	*Fine Music*: Seán Ó Riada talks about themes and tunes	RADIO AND TV PROGRAMMES (1960) *Irish Times*, 17 Nov, 24 Nov
24 Dec 1960	*A Country Christmas* Seán Ó Riada recalls Christmas in West Cork	RADIO AND TV PROGRAMMES (1960) *Irish Times*, Dec 24
18 Mar 1961 31 Mar 1961 16 Apr 1961 29 Apr 1961 6 May 1961 27 May 1961	*Ár gCeol Féinig* Clár ceoil agus seanchais le Seán Ó Riada	RADIO AND TV PROGRAMMES II (1961) *Irish Times,* 18 Mar, 31 Mar, 15 Apr, 29 Apr, 6 May, 27 May
16 Apr 1961 6 Aug 1961 18 Sept 1961 4 Oct 1961 23 Dec 1961	*Reacaireacht an Riadaigh*. Á sholáthair ag Darach Ó Catháin, amhranaí agus Ceoltóirí Cualann, faoi stiúr Sheáin Uí Riada (An tarna craoladh)	RADIO AND TV PROGRAMMES II (1961) *Irish Times*, 15 Apr, 5 Aug, 18 Sept, 4 Oct, 23 Dec
14 Sept 1961	*Cúrsaí Ceoil*: Seán Ó Riada ag tairscint ceoil ísil is uasail	RADIO AND TV PROGRAMMES (1961) *Irish Times,* 14 Sep
17 Oct 1961 24 Oct 1961	*Music I Like* chosen by Seán Ó Riada	RADIO AND TV PROGRAMMES (1961) *Irish Times*, 17 Oct, 24 Oct
27 Nov 1961	*New Science Fiction*: Books reviewed by John Reidy	RADIO AND TV PROGRAMMES (1961) *Irish Times*, 27 Nov
Apr–Sept 1962	*Our Musical Heritage*	SÓRC #554

In the same interview, Uí Riada suggests that Ó Riada used recordings from *An Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann* (National Folklore Commission) for a radio show series that was broadcast in 1959, in the year that the family holidayed at Brú na Gráige in Kerry (*Mo Scéal Féin* 1972). From my records, this show was most likely to be *Ag Déanamh Ceoil* (Making Music).

The availability of commercial audio recordings of sean-nós (old style) Irish singing demonstrates the importance of recorded sound in that era. Ó Riada presented *Ag Déanamh Ceoil* in August 1959, in which he provided a light analysis of several songs from the Irish language. Amongst these songs were “Ar Éireann Ní Neosfainn Cé Hí”, “Buachaillí Loch Garman” (commonly known as The Boys of Wexford), “[Is] Buachaill Ó'n Éirne Mé”, “Seoladh na nGamhan”, and “An Buachaill Caol Dubh” (Ó Riada, 1959). Crucially, the format of this series is a departure from previous Ó Riada shows

as it was produced entirely through the Irish language. Some of the audio examples used in these broadcasts were also sourced from his collaboration on the Gael Linn album *Ceolta Éireann* (for example the use of the song "Cnocainín Aerach Chill Mhuire"). In other broadcasts, material may have been sourced from a series of recordings that Ó Riada had compiled from record companies such as Folkways and Gael Linn. In the first broadcast, Ó Riada uses some recordings from a "Gael Linn LP" (Ó Riada 1959, 2). Later he uses recordings that were made of Sorcha Ní Ghuairim, a singer who had previously recorded for Folkways Records in 1945 and released an LP in 1957 (*Sorcha Ni Ghuairim Sings Traditional Irish Songs* 1957).

In *Ag Déanamh Ceoil*, Ó Riada also describes musical instruments, alongside their use in an orchestra. The content in these shows reflected the explorations that Ó Riada had been working with in the score composition for the feature-length film in 1959, *Mise Éire,* using Western art music and Irish traditional music. Just as sean-nós songs and Western art music were incorporated into the *Mise Éire* film soundtrack later that year, he discussed the two genres side by side in *Ag Déanamh Ceoil*. In his second episode for this show, he introduces a recording of sean-nós singer Seán 'Ac Dhonncha by claiming that education in sean-nós singing existed in Ireland alongside education in Western art music, and he stated the need for training in this style to perform sean-nós (Ó Riada 1959, 6). It is noteworthy how the content of these shows reflects a deepening analysis of subject material in sean-nós song, coupled with Ó Riada continuing to use the station to communicate his own artistic development. The development also mirrors the station's presentation of the show series which foregrounded scholarly narration and an educational approach in the presentation of radio show programming. Ó Riada's commentary is scholarly in format and informative, but light on analysis.

From this series and beyond, a more in-depth analytical approach can be discerned in Ó Riada's radio shows, in keeping with RÉ's approach to supporting lecture series. On 7 February 1960, with his delivery of a Thomas Davis lecture, Ó Riada provided his viewpoints on a show entitled *Irish Traditional Art Music*. Over the next two years, further radio series explored the Irish language and Irish traditional musical culture in depth. For example, in April 1961 the series *Ár gCeol Féinig: Clár ceoil agus seanchais le Seán Ó Riada* (Our Own Music: Music Programme and Lore with Seán Ó Riada) was aired (see Table 3). This four-part series was followed by the series *Reacaireacht an Riadaigh* (Ó Riada's Recital), which was the initial bringing together of his music group Ceoltóirí Chualann and their first LP for Gael Linn in 1961, *Reacaireacht an Riadaigh* (P. Ó Riada 2024, 26). Ceoltóirí Chualann became an important music ensemble in Ireland over the course of the 1960s. As founder, Ó Riada used both the musical group and RÉ to deepen his exploration of material based on Gaelic culture, or "An Saol Gaelach", and rediscovering the "Náisiún Gaelach" (Gaelic Nation) to a greater degree since the late 1950s (P. Ó Riada 2024, 24).

The series *Our Musical Heritage* was delivered a year later in 1962. Originally broadcast on RÉ in July, the programme series was to be the last in Ó Riada's lecture series and had its final episode on 13 October. In total, fifteen shows were broadcast with narration in the English language and Ó Riada detailing aspects of Irish traditional music in greater detail than previous radio shows. By 1963, Ó Riada had moved from

Dublin to Cúil Aodha in West Cork with his wife and growing family, and in this year the *Our Musical Heritage* series was re-broadcast. From 1963 to 1971, Ó Riada co-produced a very successful weekly music, song, and storytelling performance radio show entitled *Fleadh Cheoil an Radio* from his home in Cúil Aodha in West Cork and eventually switched his radio lecture series format to presenting on the national television broadcaster, RTÉ.

Following Ó Riada's death in 1971, a commemorative trust was set up called Fundúireacht an Riadaigh, which operated between 1972 and 1974 (Ó Riada and Kinsella 1982, 11). The foundation noted the audio recordings from *Our Musical Heritage* as an important aspect of Ó Riada's legacy (ibid.). The trust provided financing in 1981 to produce a box set of three vinyl records and an 83-page booklet which presented most of the content of the series, with analysis and contextual information included (ibid).

Inform, educate, and entertain

Ó Riada's radio series output with RÉ during the 1950s was sizeable during a time when the broadcaster and the station both instigated changes in their presentation of radio programming. There was a consistency in how developments occurred between activities by Ó Riada as presenter, and evolving agendas that were set by the station.

Ó Riada's developments within RÉ's goals of "inform, educate, and entertain" is indicative of the ways through which his radio shows were facilitated and delivered. The station had an appetite for the lecture series as shown in the ways that it praised the format and gave higher payments for them. Jennifer Doctor explains a similar approach to listeners by the BBC, where the musical tastes of the British public were shaped by very similar goals, with an uncannily similar description to Gorham's reversed as "to entertain, to educate and inform", a broadcasting landscape with which Gorham was familiar (Doctor 1999, 334). RÉ was under constant comparison to the BBC in broadcasting (Gubbins 2024, 74). The aim at the BBC was to "bring art music spectrum…into the homes of the British public on a daily basis" (Doctor 1999, 334). Certainly, the delivery of Ó Riada's earlier radio show series on contemporary Western art music reflect this emphasis on bringing the art music spectrum to his listeners and about composers in the Western art music genre. Ó Riada followed this style of presenting when sharing his views on the genre's development.

In Ó Riada's broadcasts, the model of the lecture series about Western art music influences his style of delivery of radio shows on Irish traditional music. For example, as a precursor to the 1962 series *Our Musical Heritage*, the ten-part Irish language series entitled *Ag Déanamh Ceoil* saw Ó Riada incorporate a lengthy series of radio shows in which he educates and informs listeners with his views on the state of Irish traditional music and sean-nós singing. The collated evidence here demonstrates a clear shift in Ó Riada's radio programming after 1958, reflected in evidence of personal developments outside of broadcasting. From the airing of *Ag Déanamh Ceoil* onwards, the name John Reidy appears only once on RÉ radio show schedules, and Seán Ó Riada became almost exclusively the name by which he was represented. This emergence was part of RÉ and Ó Riada's objectives of supporting the Irish language, and their overall facilitation of more extensive scholarly radio series in Irish at the station. Duffy notes a similar pattern in the radio show scheduling for Mary

O'Hara as Máire Ní hEághra, where radio shows were delivered in Irish (2025, 41). Ó Riada's motivations towards *an saol gaelach* and RÉ's support of his change in direction would enable a more serious conversation about Irish traditional music.

In his description of shifts in the musical landscape of mid-twentieth-century Ireland, Ó hAllmhuráin highlights Ó Riada's *Our Musical Heritage*, identifying radio as a "key forum" for his "new approach to traditional music" (Ó hAllmhuráin 2016, 193). While Ó Riada undoubtedly used RÉ as a key forum to present his ideas, his approach to Irish traditional music on radio can also be understood in relation to the station's broader facilitation of narrated talks and its evolving institutional agenda. In this sense, the presenting style of shows like *Our Musical Heritage* worked for both presenter and the station. A distinct type of programme delivery had emerged from a mode of address that Ó Riada had already evolved for talks on other genres such as Western art music and were shaped by the wider socio-historical development of Irish radio broadcasting.

Ó hAllmhuráin further observes that Ó Riada had "stepped out of the academic sanctuary to present informed analyses of traditional music", whilst Ó Laoire points out that Ó Riada did not set out to provide a considered assessment of Irish traditional music in the conventional sense (Ó hAllmhuráin 2016, 193; Ó Laoire 2009, 2). Episodes such as *Our Musical Heritage* can also be situated within RÉ's remit "to inform, educate, and entertain", as part of its attempts to bring more scholarly and informative perspectives to its general audience, whilst maintaining a balance with entertainment. This context helps to explain why readings of Ó Riada's delivery of *Our Musical Heritage* have been seen as somewhat radical. Ultimately, the alignment between RÉ's broadcasting priorities and Ó Riada's individual agency demonstrate that mid-century radio programming fostered a distinctive approach to contextualising music alongside its broadcasters when delivering to general listening audiences.

There are other aspects to note on Ó Riada's role at RÉ, such as the unequal representation for women through the prism of the hiring process and the hidden barriers that allowed male composers, conductors, and presenters to appear front and centre in broadcasting. Scholars such as Gubbins have highlighted this in analysis of RÉ's representation of women musicians on the station during the 1970s and evidenced their lack of visibility as performers (2024, 151). It also speaks to this lack of visibility that in the first forty years of broadcasting from RÉ, women were not hired for the role of Assistant Director of Music at the station.

Further research could also explore the use of the Irish language by Ó Riada and other broadcasters within RÉ in the 1950s. Ó Riada transitioned his radio show content from being written in the English language to predominantly Irish language between 1959 and 1962 but had reverted to using the English language to deliver *Our Musical Heritage*. A focus on the topic would shed light on these developments in a time when overall output of Irish language programming was gradually being reduced but had been prevalent in the 1950s (Duffy 2025, 45). This development makes Ó Riada's voice at the station even more important when considering the context of the Irish language.

Conclusion

The delivery of radio broadcasts that would "inform, educate, and entertain" were

indicative of the agenda that was set in RÉ throughout the 1950s and its attitude towards its listeners. Ó Riada's radio broadcasts were part of this agenda setting and his delivery of radio shows evolved in tandem with station agendas during that era. Ó Riada's early radio shows evolved from shorter radio series into what became lengthy radio series with scholarly style narration. He brought this type of narration into the discussion of Western art music and eventually would use a similar style of delivery in his broadcasts on Irish traditional music. This gradual shift coincided with his increasing use of radio shows that were delivered in the Irish language. This development is visible several years prior to his influential radio series *Our Musical Heritage* in 1962. These developments in RÉ and the broadcaster demonstrate the subtle shifts and, subsequently, the redefining of radio programming in Ireland as RÉ attempted to bridge scholarship, entertainment, and informing the Irish radio audience.

This research illustrates Ó Riada's emergence as a presenter was not only shaped by his own artistic convictions but was also influenced by the organisational environment of the station through its recruitment, leadership, agenda, and attitude to music programming. The research demonstrates power structures which were inherent in the organisation at the time. It demonstrates the developing priorities amongst staff at RÉ and how broadcasting evolved in the 1950s as Ó Riada became a key voice in the changing landscape of musical life in Ireland.

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