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Authors	Mac Aodhgáin, Pádraig
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How Seán Ó Riada helped forge a new path in Radio Éireann

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Seán Ó Riada's pioneering broadcasts were bound up with the changing nature of Radio Éireann and a modernising Irish society. (Photo: © RTÉ Photographic Archive)

Analysis: The artist's progress in broadcasting was bound up with Radio Éireann's development and changed how we think and talk about Irish traditional music

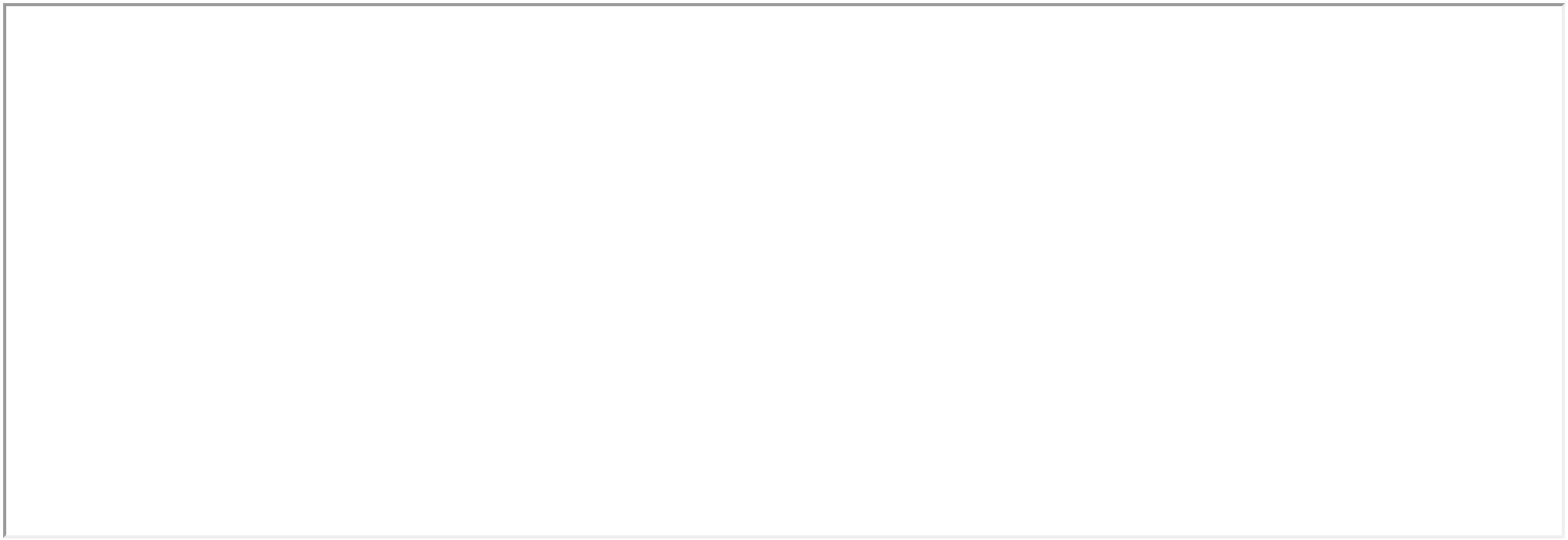
October 3rd marks the anniversary of Seán Ó Riada's passing in 1971. Ó Riada is known for his artistic achievements: his iconic score for George Morrison's *Mise Éire*, and the musical ensemble Ceoltóirí Chualann that was a precursor to The Chieftains. Above all, his now-famous radio show series *Our Musical Heritage* for Radio Éireann changed how we think and talk about Irish traditional music.

But Ó Riada's fame on radio was not achieved in isolation. His pioneering broadcasts were bound up with the changing nature of Radio Éireann and a modernising Irish society.

Plugging in the nation

In 1950s Ireland, radio was a dominant force alongside film and theatre. Before rural electrification, families could power their radio by using what were heavy, wet-cell batteries. The story is often told that someone in the family would have had to cycle or go by foot to garages in local towns to recharge them. Between 1946 and 1970, the expansion of electricity transformed radio listenership and "the wireless" went from being used for just a special occasion into a sound frequently heard in Irish homes.

The nature of radio brought a sense of the "here and now". Broadcast in English and Irish, Radio Éireann connected people immediately to news, entertainment, and contemporary events. Broadcasters (mostly men) were the voice of the radio and of authority on various topics, and they became household names across the country. Broadcasters had some artistic freedoms and exclusive audio archives at their fingertips, but their work was still directed and produced by radio staff.



From RTÉ Archives, musicians celebrate the work of composer Seán Ó Riada at the National Concert Hall

The BBC influence at Radio Éireann

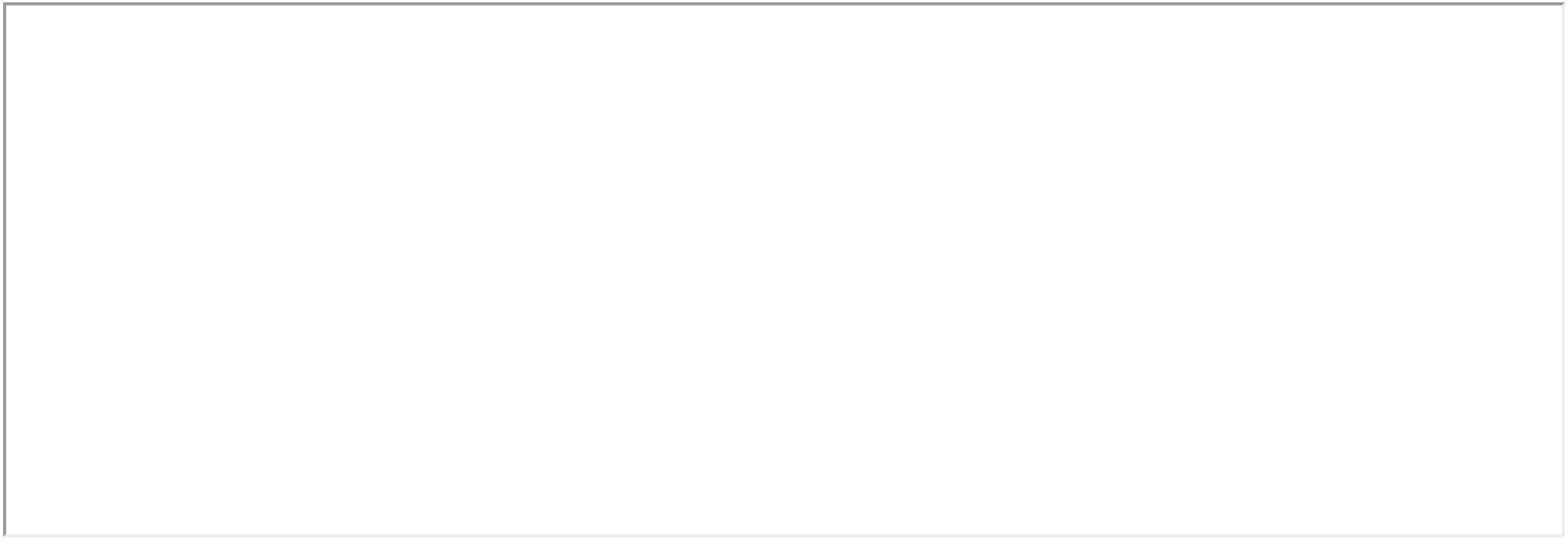
In the 1950s, Radio Éireann was undergoing a drive towards modernisation. Broadcasters could deliver longer shows more easily with the introduction of magnetic tape recording, replacing the need for acetate discs. Maurice Gorham, a former director at the BBC, led further change from 1953. Under his guidance the station adopted the BBC's classic public service mandate: to inform, to educate, and to entertain.

Gorham introduced long-form, educational programming. An appetite for new ventures such as the *Thomas Davis Lectures* heralded the move for broadcasters towards multi-week, extended broadcast series (which Ó Riada contributed to in 1960).

The testing grounds: Early radio experiments

Ó Riada joined Radio Éireann in 1955 as Assistant Director of Music, starting his broadcasting career under his birth name, John Reidy. He soon grew tired of the bureaucratic constraints that came with a desk job and resigned within months. However, this was only a beginning. He rejoined as an independent contractor in a more artistic role later that year, gaining freedom to design and narrate radio shows. Over time, his shows aligned closely with the station's editorial model, especially as he moved towards what he termed "An Saol Gaelach"

(the Gaelic way of life). Between 1955 and 1962, the station accepted over 100 narrations from Ó Riada, while the length of his show series steadily increased.



From RTÉ Archives, the 'Thomas Davis Lectures' series was launched in September 1953 with the aim of introducing the best in Irish scholarship

Critics often focus on Ó Riada's iconic 1962 achievement, *Our Musical Heritage*, but this obscures nearly a decade of experimentation. Earlier series - such as *Autumnal Capitals* (with poet Thomas Kinsella), *Bypaths in Music, New Directions in Music, Their Kind of Music, Ag Déanamh Cheoil, Reacaireacht an Riadaigh*, and *Ár gCeol Féinig* - served essentially as

testing grounds where he could refine his style. Through these programmes, he was constantly broadcasting to the nation, refining a mode of presenting for his later commentary style, and testing how to align his own priorities with developments at the station.

The power of the multi-week series

Mid-century broadcasting structures directly influenced how music programming was analysed, consumed, and appreciated. As historian F. X. Martin reflected in 1967, grouping radio lectures into multi-week programmes offered clear advantages over one-off broadcasts:

> ***"It is easier for the broadcasting authorities to plan and organise 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..."***

As Ó Riada's experience in broadcasting progressed, he forged ahead within this new model, eventually turning towards Irish language and Irish traditional music material, even as the station had a preference for classical music. A perfect example was *Ag Déanamh Cheoil* (*Making Music*), a 10-week series broadcast in August 1959. Ó Riada explained orchestral

instrumentation for a lay audience alongside accessible breakdowns of the structure of well-loved songs such as *"Buachaillí Loch Garman"* (*The Boys of Wexford*),*"An Buachaill Caol Dubh",* and *"Ar Éireann Ní Neosfainn Cé Hí"*. To illustrate his points, he blended new commercial releases from Gael Linn with field recordings of sean nós singers, such as Seán 'Ac Dhonncha and Sorcha Ní Ghuairim. *Ag Déanamh Cheoil* was a balance of light analysis on Irish traditional music with entertainment, becoming the blueprint for *Our Musical Heritage*.

The legacy of Our Musical Heritage

By the time Our Musical Heritage aired in 1962, Ó Riada had mastered long-form narration for the lay audience. Over 16 weeks, he brought listeners on an accessible journey of general listening towards a deeper, informed appreciation of Irish traditional music. This kickstarted discussions on ideas of complex regional styles to a national (and international) audience, demystifying traditional music theory for the public.

Public reaction at the time was mixed, but its long-term impact was monumental. Rebroadcast in 1963 and preserved in a landmark 3-LP box set in 1982, the series remains a cornerstone of traditional music scholarship today.

Ó Riada undoubtedly forged new paths in his own way at Radio Éireann - but without the supportive environment and developments in Radio Éireann during the 1950s, his voice might never have reached the nation in the way that it did.

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