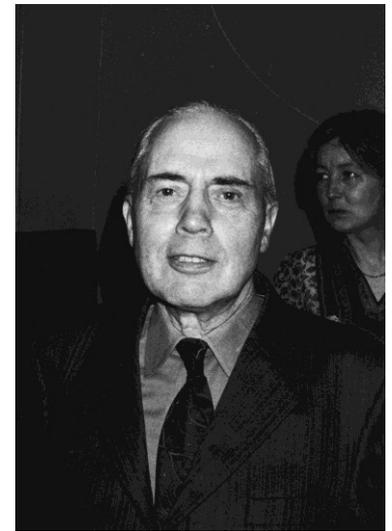


The Rev. William Matheson and the Performance of Scottish Gaelic ‘Strophic’ Verse

V. S. BLANKENHORN

ABSTRACT. The late Rev. William Matheson's lifelong fascination with the performance of Gaelic songs in so-called 'strophic' metres ultimately resulted in his recording seventeen such songs for the album *Gaelic Bards and Minstrels*, No. 16 in the Scottish Tradition series of recordings from the School of Scottish Studies Archive. Strophic metre, used largely for clan eulogy, elegy, and other praise-poetry in the period after the decline of the syllabic metres, is remarkable in that the final line of each stanza contrasts metrically and ornamentally with all of the preceding lines in that stanza. This article examines Matheson's sources, methodology, and performance; evaluates his rationale; and assesses the likely authenticity of his performances of six songs in which the number of lines varies from one stanza to the next.

Among the many topics that engaged the late Rev. William Matheson, there can be few – with the possible exception of genealogy and clan history – that interested him more deeply than the sung performance of Gaelic poetry, in particular, of poetry that had largely ceased to be sung in living tradition. Among the types of verse that interested him particularly was that which was composed in what W. J. Watson termed ‘strophic’ metre (W. J. Watson: xlv-liv). The scholarly community first became aware of his fascination with this topic during the International Congress of Celtic Studies in 1967, at which Matheson talked about strophic verse, and demonstrated how he believed songs of this type would have been performed. Some years later, in the early 1980’s, he sat down with Morag MacLeod of the School of Scottish Studies and recorded seventeen of these songs, which were included in a commercial recording issued in 1993 as part of the School’s Scottish Tradition series (Matheson 1993/2000). This paper will examine how William Matheson came to his understanding of how poems in strophic metre should be performed, and will attempt to assess not only his implementation of that understanding in his own practice, but also its possible implications with regard to other types of sung performance among the Gaels.



The Rev. William Matheson (1910-1995)

Born in Sollas, North Uist, to Lewis parents, William Matheson was steeped in Gaelic tradition from his earliest days. He and his younger brother Angus (who would eventually become the first occupant of the Chair of Celtic at Glasgow University) were encouraged to indulge their natural interest in the stories and songs, both religious and secular, that enlivened their community. After graduating with an honours degree in history at the University of Edinburgh in 1933, William eventually undertook postgraduate study in Celtic Studies, where he was taken under the wing of Prof. W. J. Watson, who was nearing the end of his career as head of the Edinburgh Celtic Department. It was at Watson’s suggestion that William began to prepare an edition of the poems of John MacCodrum, an eighteenth-century Uist bard, for publication in the newly-founded Scottish Gaelic Texts Society series.

As part of his work on the MacCodrum poems, William made long visits to North and South Uist in the summers of 1935 and 1936. The late Donald Archie MacDonald of the

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School of Scottish Studies described this undertaking in a profile of William Matheson in 1980 (*Tocher* 5/35: 283-91):

It was his own idea to make these expeditions and to include tunes, and anecdotes about the bard, in the book, as he was becoming increasingly alive to the value of oral tradition. This awareness was a gradually developing one. Mòd type singing was very much in vogue among the Gaels in towns and cities at the time. There seemed to be a general feeling that oral tradition was more or less dead and that Gaelic song was now to be found only in books. He himself had sung with the Inverness Gaelic Choir and was also associated for some time with the Edinburgh Gaelic Choir, but he became disillusioned with musical notation as an adequate means of transmitting the complexities of Gaelic singing. ...[A]ll in all, there was a growing awareness that there was much more to Gaelic singing than what could usually be heard at Mòds and concerts, and indeed that Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s treatment of the materials she had collected did not do them justice.

On his long visit to North Uist at the end of his first year at University in 1930, William himself had come to realise that there was much more music and oral tradition in the surrounding community than he had noticed in his boyhood years.... It was, however, the MacCodrum expeditions of 1935 and 1936 that brought this development to full maturity. As he himself described it: ‘There was a gradual awareness that what I was hearing from these people in the islands was...not only truer – not just authentic – but *better as music* than what I had been reading in the books ... I began to be discontented with how badly and inadequately the music was written in the books.’

He had no difficulty in getting informants to sing to him. His usual technique was to concentrate on learning the tunes by heart. He would then as soon as possible write down the words and an outline of the tune in tonic sol-fa, as a safety device to back up his own memory and to ensure that some written record, even if an imperfect one, survived. ... He also had a thorough knowledge of printed and manuscript sources such as the Eigg Collection and the MacLagan MSS, and could direct his researches and questions accordingly.

On these expeditions what he learned was not confined to the songs of John MacCodrum, but encompassed the whole spectrum of Gaelic singing and, indeed, oral tradition in general, including aspects of local and family history in North Uist. These years gave his interests a stimulus and a direction that remained with him from then on...

Following publication of his work on MacCodrum, William Matheson studied for the ministry of the Church of Scotland, to which he was ordained in 1941, and spent about ten years in active ministry before returning to academic life as a lecturer in Celtic at Edinburgh University in 1952 – a year after the School of Scottish Studies was established. Over the subsequent three decades, William Matheson recorded some 500 items for the School’s archives, including narratives, reminiscences, anecdotes, and Gaelic songs of all kinds. D. A. MacDonald summarized his achievements thus (op.cit):

There can be no-one alive who has united within himself quite such a range of knowledge of tradition and song on the one hand and academic learning on the

other as William Matheson. Drawing on all manner of sources, oral, manuscript and printed, he has achieved an astonishing synthesis.

Songs in strophic metre

Strophic verse is a type of accentual versification that came into its own following the disintegration of the hereditary Gaelic social system in the seventeenth century.¹ One casualty of this cataclysm was *dàn dìreach*, the strict-metre syllabic poetry composed in Classical Gaelic, which had been cultivated for centuries by court poets in both Scotland and Ireland for the expression of formal panegyric. With the Gaelic courts abandoned and much of the clan chief’s power dissipated, the system of patronage that had supported the formal training of court poets and the composition of strict-metre poetry collapsed.

Although the clan chiefs had lost much of their power and authority, clan loyalties remained strong, and clan panegyric was still composed. Now, however, the bards drew upon the deep reservoir of vernacular poetic forms long practised among ordinary people. Whether the particular metres we now call ‘strophic’ were invented at this time or whether they simply emerged from that reservoir and were adapted for this purpose, it is clear that the strophic metrical forms came into particular favour for the composition of poetry in praise of the clan chief and his household. Noted practitioners include Iain Lom MacDonald (c. 1624 – 1707), Mary MacLeod (c. 1615 – 1707), Eachann Bacach Mac Gille-Eathain (fl. 1650), Murdo MacKenzie of Achilty (died c. 1689), Niall Mac Mhuirich (c. 1637 – 1726), Murchadh Mac Mhathain (c. 1670 – c. 1757), John MacCodrum (c. 1693 – 1779), Margaret Maclean (c. 1660 – c. 1730), and John MacLean ‘*Bard Thighearna Cholla*’ (1787–1848), among others.

‘Strophic’ verse – ‘strophic’ simply means ‘stanzaic’ – is fundamentally different from *dàn* in that it is based on a regularly-recurring rhythmic pattern, *i.e.* it is accentual rather than syllabic verse. Accentual verse represents, indeed, a natural development in Scottish Gaelic, reflecting the stress-timed character of Gaelic speech; and a wide variety of accentual verse forms were doubtless practised for centuries among ordinary Gaels in Scotland – as in Ireland – prior to their earliest appearances in manuscript and printed sources.²

Even so, the type of accentual verse with which we are concerned here appears to be unique to Scottish Gaelic tradition; it is not a recognized form in Irish verse-practice. What makes it unique is its stanzaic structure: rather than a couplet or a quatrain – stanzaic forms that characterize most Irish and a considerable proportion of Scottish Gaelic accentual verse – the ‘strophe’ in this case consists of a paragraph containing between three and nine lines, in which the final line contrasts with those preceding. And while the number of lines per stanza is generally regularised, there is a significant number of poems in strophic metre in which the length of the paragraph/strophe can vary by as many as three lines from one strophe to the next. Such metrical variability challenges musical performance, as the singer must adjust his or her air *ad hoc* to fit the changing shape of the verse. Our task here will be to examine the nature of such adjustments, as revealed by William Matheson’s performances of six such songs.

Reviving a lost art

When Matheson began work, there were very few people singing songs in strophic metre, and even fewer who knew songs by the poets he was interested in. For this reason, he realized that he needed not only to consult oral tradition-bearers but also to investigate manuscript and printed sources if he were to identify and recreate the music associated with specific texts. His familiarity with such sources, and his ability to credibly interpret the staff notation he saw on the page – notation which he knew represented at best a vague approximation of what the original had sounded like – enabled him to reconstruct a style and

method of singing these songs that satisfied him. Thus his work in this area truly represents – to borrow Donald Archie MacDonald’s term – an ‘astonishing synthesis’ of written and oral sources, the whole informed by his deep understanding of oral tradition and, in particular, the needs of its audience for an aurally-integrated and easily comprehensible style of performance that would support the sense of the text.

The liner notes published with William Matheson’s recording *Gaelic Bards and Minstrels* contain rather imprecise attribution of his sources. For example, the first item on the recording, ‘*Thriall ur bunadh gu Pharao*’, is described as follows:

‘*A’ Chnò Shamhna’ do Shir Lachlainn MacGilleathainn, Triath Dhubhaird* – The Hallowe’ en Nut to Sir Lachlan Maclean of Duart. Text from *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, by W. J. Watson... but see also *Bàrdachd Chloinn Ghilleathainn* by Colm O’ Baoill (Edinburgh 1979); tune from the Torloisg ms.

Our first task, then, in coming to an understanding of Matheson’s working method, was to identify his sources for the six songs under consideration. While some of these, like *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, are easy to lay hands on, others – for example, the ‘Torloisg ms’ – are less so. Eventually, however, it became possible to assemble the following list, which readers who own William Matheson’s recording may find a useful supplement to the liner notes:

1. ‘*Thriall bhur bunadh gu Pharao*’ (‘*A’ Chnò Shamhna’ do Shir Lachlainn Mac Gilleathainn, Triath Dhubhaird*)
 Author: Hector MacLean (*Eachann Bacach Mac Ghille-Eathain*)
 Text: *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* (W. J. Watson: 205-9).
Bàrdachd Chloinn Ghilleathainn (Ó Baoill: 14).
 Air: The second of two airs headed ‘*Clann Ghilleane*’ (NLS 14149A: 42).³
2. ‘*Deoch-slàinte an Iarla thuathaich sin*’ (‘*Òran don Iarla Thuathach*’)
 Author: Murdoch Matheson (*An t-Aosdàna MacMhathain*)
 Text: *Sàr-Obair nam Bàrd Gaelach* (J. Mackenzie: 83-5).
 Air: ‘*Fàilte Mhic Shimidh*’ (Fraser: 27).
3. ‘*Mo bheud ‘s mo chràdh*’ (‘*Marbhrann Iain Ghairbh Mhic Gille Chaluim*’)
 Author: Mary MacLeod (*Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh*)
 Text: *Gaelic Songs of Mary MacLeod* (J. C. Watson: 26-31).
 Air: ‘*Marbhrann Iain Ghairbh Mhic Gille Chaluim*’ (Fraser: 13).
4. ‘*An naidheachd so an-dè*’ (‘*An Crònán*’)
 Author: Mary MacLeod (*Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh*)
 Text: *Gaelic Songs of Mary MacLeod* (J. C. Watson: 60-70).
 Air: *A Treatise on the Language, Poetry and Music of the Highland Clans* (Campbell: Appendix, 2).
 105 songs collected in Skye (Tolmie: 263).
5. ‘*A bhean, leasaich an stòp dhuinn*’ (‘*Òran do Shir Dòmhnall Shlèite*’)
 Author: Iain Lom MacDonald
 Text: *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* (W. J. Watson: 189-92).
Orain Iain Luim (A. MacKenzie: 146-51).
 Air: Duncan MacDonald (*Donnchadh mac Dhòmhnail ‘ic Dhonnchaidh*), Peninerine, South Uist.⁴
6. ‘*Cha sùrd cadail*’ (‘*Marbhrann do Shir Tormod MacLeòid*’)
 Author: Mary MacLeod (*Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh*)
 Text: *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* (W. J. Watson: 157-8).

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Air: ‘Cròn nan Màiri Ni’an Alastair Ruaidh’ (Fraser: 19).

We shall here examine these six songs in some detail, beginning with the sources Matheson consulted, proceeding to a transcription of what he actually sang, and ending with a discussion of his musical choices and his rationale for choosing as he did.

‘Thriall ur bunadh gu Pharaò’

This song, also known as ‘A’ Chnò Shamhna’ (‘The Hallowe’en Nut’) was composed by Eachann Bacach for Sir Lachlann MacLean of Duart. Matheson took his text from *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* (W. J. Watson: 205-9):

*Thriall ur bunadh gu Pharaò;
cò ‘s urrainn d’a sheanachas?
Mac Mhuirich, Mac Fhearghais
Craobh a thuinich rè aimsir,
fhreumhaich bun ann an Alba;
chuidich fear dhiu Cath Gairbheach.
Fhuair sinn ulaidh fear d’ainme theachd
beò.*

Fhuair sinn ulaidh fear d’ainme theachd
beò.

*Cha chraobh chur is cha phlannta
cha chnò ‘n uiridh o’n dh’fhàs thu;
cha bhlàth chuirte ma Bhealltainn,
ach fàs duillich is meanglain,
am meur-mullaich seo dh’fhàg sinn.
Cuir, a Chrìosd’, tuilleadh ‘n àite na
dh’fholbh.*

Cuir, a Chrìosd’, tuilleadh ‘n àite na
dh’fholbh.

*Is mòr pudhar an ràith-sa.
‘s trom an dubhadh-sa dh’fhàs oirnn;
gura cumhang leinn d’fhàrdach,
‘n ciste-laighe nan clàran:
‘s fhada ‘s cuimhne leinn càradh nam
bòrd.*

‘s fhada ‘s cuimhne leinn càradh nam
bòrd.

*Chaidh do chist’ an taigh-gheamhraidh,
cha do bhrìst thu ‘chnò-shamhna –
misneachd fir Innse Gall thu:
‘s mòr as misde do ranntaidh
nach do chlisg thu roimh armailt –
fhir bu mhiosaile ‘n campa Mhontròis.
fhir bu mhiosaile ‘n campa Mhontròis.*

*Nàile, chunna mi aimsir
‘s tu ri siubhal na sealga,
cha bu chuing ort an garbhach:
pìc den iubhar cha d’fhàs i
chuireadh umhaill no spàirn ort:
cha bhiodh fuidheall a tàirrne
nam biodh luthadh ‘na crannghail
chuireadh siubhal fo eàrrit’ an eòin.
chuireadh siubhal fo eàrrit’ an eòin.*

*Gum bu mhath do dhìol freasdail
an taigh mòr am beul feasgair,
uisge-beatha nam feadan
ann am pìosaibh ‘ga leigeil,
sin is clàrsach ‘ga spreigeadh ri ceòl
sin is clàrsach ‘ga spreigeadh ri ceòl.*

*Bhuineadh dhinne ‘na ùrros
fear ar taighe ‘s ar crùnair,
ghabh an rathad air thùs bhuainn;
liuthad latha r’a chunntais
bha aig maithibh do dhùthcha,
meud an aighir ‘s am mùirne!
Bha mi tathaich do chùirte
seal mam b’aithne dhomh ‘n t-ùrlar a
dh’fholbh
seal mam b’aithne dhomh ‘n t-ùrlar a
dh’fholbh.*

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For an appropriate air, William Matheson turned to the Torloisk manuscript, a collection of Gaelic song-tunes compiled in Mull in the early years of the nineteenth century. In the manuscript of a talk delivered in Mull, preserved among Matheson’s papers, he describes this document and its origins (NLS 9711: Box 13/19):

One of the most valuable collections of Gaelic music ever made has been discovered within recent years...at Torloisk. It was made during the first three decades of [the] last century, and we owe it to a very talented family, the daughters of Major-General Clephane of Carslogie in Fife. Their mother was Marianne, heiress of Lachlan Maclean, 7th of Torloisk; and their guardian, appointed on their father’s death in 1803, was Sir Walter Scott. Subsequent to that date, their domicile appears to have been mostly in Mull. In addition to their other accomplishments, these girls were brought up to be fluent Gaelic speakers. In their work on Gaelic music, the moving spirit was Margaret, who later became the Countess of Compton. A considerable part of the collection, words and music, appears to be in her hand. The music transcription is of a high standard, well in advance of other collections of the period. Even more surprising is the knowledge shown of Gaelic orthography – not a very common accomplishment at the time, especially among women. The number of Gaelic songs, many of them by Maclean bards, must be well into three figures, and includes a sequence of 42 songs taken down from one singer in December 1812 and January 1813, Miss Margaret Maclean of Gaisgarwell (?). The National Library of Scotland and the School of Scottish Studies of Edinburgh University now possess Xerox copies of what may be called the Torloisk collection of Gaelic songs.

The air that Matheson identified as befitting this particular poem is the second of two tunes appearing on page 42 of the manuscript under the heading ‘Clann Ghilleane’:

The image shows three staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff begins with a treble clef and contains a sequence of notes with a '3' above the first three notes, an '8.' above the eighth note, and another '3' above the last three notes. The second staff continues the melody with a '3' above the first three notes and another '3' above the next three notes. The third staff concludes the piece with a '3' above the first three notes, another '3' above the next three notes, and a final '3' above the last three notes. Below the third staff, the text 'dal segno.' is written in italics.

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Here is how William Matheson copied this air from the manuscript into his notebook:⁵

It should be noted that, in making his transcription of the air, William Matheson is not simply copying the air as noted, but is already beginning to put his own stamp on the melody.

Clann Ghilleathain (2)

(Thriall ur bunadh gu Pharao)

(Maclean Bards I.37)

| m^m : m m m : d¹ : d¹ * | r¹ d¹ : t¹ l : s m * : |

⏟ m s : m r m : s l * : t¹ l s | s m m : mr m * : d¹ r¹ : t¹ l t | l . s * :

t l : s^s m : r t¹ * | r r : m r m : s l * : t l |

⏟ s m m : mr m : d¹ d¹ * ||^{D.S.}

: d : d ||

7 Omit this phrase for 7-line stanza.

6 Omit this phrase and phrase 7 for 6-line stanza.

5 Omit this phrase and phrases 6 and 7 for 5-line stanza.

Most of his changes relate to rhythm, suggesting his overriding concern that the rhythm of the music conform as naturally as possible to that of the text. It is also clear from his transcription that he is not particularly concerned with the placement of bar-lines, given that some of his bars appear to contain only three beats.⁶ For ease of comparison, here is how Matheson’s sol-fa translates back into staff notation:



A particularly interesting feature of Matheson’s sol-fa transcription is his indication of a repeated line at the end. He may have assumed such a repeat on the authority of the ‘*dal segno*’ noted in Torloisg (although the manuscript’s placement of the ‘*segno*’ at the beginning of the second bar is incomprehensible in terms of a sung performance); or he may have decided that this song was one in which the repetition of the final line was called for, and he needed music for that purpose; or he may have made the decision on musical grounds alone, feeling that the tune should end on the lower tonic note. It seems likely that a combination of the latter two considerations decided the matter for him, but it’s unfortunate that we cannot ask him.⁷

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Flexibility in Performance

With regard to the variable length of the stanzas or ‘strophes’ in this song, Matheson’s sol-fa transcription gives us a crucially important clue to his working method. The second line of this transcript indicates which phrases he considers should be omitted in the case of stanzas containing fewer than eight lines (or nine, if you count the repeated line at the end). By choosing lines from the middle of the air for this purpose, Matheson is ensuring that each strophe begins and ends with the same music – something that he believed was absolutely necessary. In connection with the recording of these songs in 1982-3, Morag MacLeod recalls:⁸

I did ask Willie how he got to organise the melodies of bits that he didn’t have from oral tradition or in writing. He said the phrases had to ‘chime’. I understood that it was a bit like harmony between two parts, only between different phrases within the same verse. The problem was to finish with the same melody, whatever the length of the verse was, and the other phrases had to lead to that in a way that pleased the ear, and the melodic conventions of the tradition.

In searching for airs appropriate to the texts he was interested in, Matheson clearly had in mind the number of lines per strophe, and he generally sought out airs containing as many phrases as would be needed to perform the longest strophe in the poem, thereby obviating the need for him to compose music out of his own head to complete a stanza. In this case, there appears to be both musical and historical justification for his assumption that the Torloisg air was intended to accompany the text that begins ‘*Thriall ur bunadh gu Pharao*’: not only are the musical phrases the correct length, and not only is there the right number of such phrases, but the manuscript’s provenance and the association of this particular air with ‘Clann Ghilleane’ all support that conclusion.

In performing this song, Matheson has followed the procedure laid out above to its logical conclusion. Here is how Matheson adapted the air from the Torloisg manuscript to his purposes:

Tairloisg ms. p42



Eight-line stanzas

Seven-line stanza

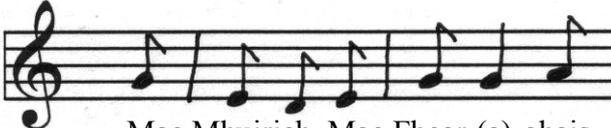
Six-line stanzas

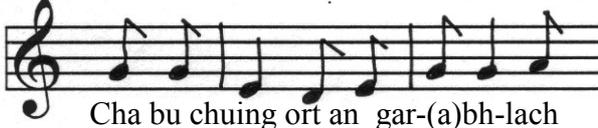
Five-line stanzas

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Notation of these motifs is meant only to convey the melodic contour of the line, the sequence of pitches relative to one another. The bar line is placed following the pitch or pitches assigned to the final metrical foot in the line, which in this poem consists of a disyllable in the initial lines, and a monosyllable in the final line. In addition, we should note that these contours represent the most common melodic patterns used in Matheson’s performance, and that individual stanzas may contain small melodic variations – one or two notes at most – that nonetheless support the overall contour of the melody at that point.

Because the rhythmic quantities of notes vis-à-vis one another are determined by a combination of word-stress and metrical accent, the rhythmical realization of a given motif is likely to differ substantially from stanza to stanza, depending upon the number of syllables (including epenthetic syllables) for which music is needed, the presence of anacrusis or ‘up-beat’ before the first stressed syllable in the line, and the placement of stressed syllables in the line. Here, for example, is a rough approximation of how Matheson performs the third motif from the left, above, in each of the stanzas in which it occurs:

Stanza 1 : 
Mac Mhuirich, Mac Fhear-(a)-ghais

Stanza 5 : 
Cha bu chuing ort an gar-(a)bh-lach

Stanza 7 : 
ghabh an rathad air thùs bhuainn

In the end, Matheson’s performance of ‘*Thriall ur bunadh go Pharao*’ is a mixture of simplicity and subtlety – the subtle, rhythmical interplay of words and metre set to a flexible sequence of chant-like musical motifs characterised by a narrow melodic compass, largely step-wise motion, and a good deal of repetition. Regardless of length, each strophe begins and ends with the same musical material, giving an impression of uniformity despite the fact that shorter strophes will lack one or more of the musical motifs. These songs require great discipline from the singer, who must omit the correct motifs for shorter strophes so as not to end up in the wrong place, and maintain the motifs in the correct order throughout.

This flexible style of performance also characterises Matheson’s renditions of the other five songs of this type, as we shall see in what follows.

‘*A bhean, leasaich an stòp dhuinn*’

William Matheson’s notes reveal that his source for the air to Iain Lom’s text was the singing of Duncan MacDonald (*Donnchadh mac Dhòmhaill ‘ic Dhonnchaidh*) of Peninerine, South Uist, a gifted storyteller and *seanchaidh* who recorded a great deal of important material now held in the School of Scottish Studies. Matheson apparently learned the song from him by heart and subsequently recorded it in sol-fa notation; no audio recording of Duncan MacDonald singing this song has yet been found. Here is the air as Matheson took it down in

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his notebook:⁹

{ : l . l d ¹ : l : l l : - . s	}
{ [⊗] : l . t l : s : l l : - . l	D. S. [⊗] for extra lines
{ : r . r s : m : s l : - . l	}
{ : t . l l : s : r m : - . s	}
{ : t . l l : s : r m : - . f : m r : - : - - : -	}
{ : f . f s : s : m ¹ l : - . t : l s : - : - - : -	

Matheson notes six phrases of music, the last of which is used to repeat the longer line of text at the beginning of the following stanza. Because the text contains stanzas of five and six lines, he indicates that longer stanzas are to be accommodated by the repetition of phrase two – as he puts it, ‘D. S. [*dal segno*] [⊗] for extra lines’.

Curiously, however, Matheson’s performance of ‘*A bhean, leasaich an stòp dhuinn*’ differs slightly from the air as he noted it down from Duncan MacDonald. The following comparison of Matheson’s sol-fa with his performance of the song on *Gaelic Bards and Minstrels* reveals that he chose to repeat the second phrase, not just in those stanzas containing ‘extra lines’ (*i.e.* the six-line stanzas), but in all stanzas, and to accommodate the shorter, five-line stanzas by removing the fourth phrase. This choice probably reflects his own musical preference rather than any structural concern.¹⁰ The two stanzas quoted are as Matheson gives them in the liner notes of his recording:¹¹

Sol-fa	
Six-line stanzas	
Five-line stanzas	

A bhean, leasaich an stòp dhuinn
‘s lion an cupa le sòlas
masa branndaidh no beòir i
tha mi toileach a h-òl:
‘n deoch-s’ air caibtean Chlann Dòmhnall
‘s air Alasdair òg thig o’n Chaol.

Am fear nach dùraig a h-òl
gun tuit an t-sùil air a’ bhòrd as;

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*tha mo dhùrachd do’n òigfhear,
crann cubhraidh Chlann Dòmhnail:
Rìgh na dùl bhith gan chòmhnach, fhir chaoimh.*

‘*Cha sùrd cadail*’

A nineteenth-century manuscript compiled by Angus Fraser, son of Captain Simon Fraser, provided Matheson with an air for this song by *Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh* (Fraser: 19):



This air, however, only contains seven phrases of music, if we assume that the final phrase is to be used for the repeat of the final line of each stanza. This leaves a problem in the case of the ninth stanza of the text, which contains stanzas varying in length from five to eight lines. An example of each stanza-length is given below (W. J. Watson: 157-8):

Stanza 2 (six lines):

*Is trom an cudthrom so dhrùidh
Dh'fhàg mo chùislean gun lùth,
Is tric snighe mo shùl
A' tuiteam gu dlùth,
Chaill mi iuchair mo chùil:
An cuideachd luchd-ciùil cha tèid mi.
An cuideachd luchd-ciùil cha tèid mi.*

Stanza 8 (five lines):

*Nighean Sheumais nan crùn,
bean-chèile ghlan ùr,
thug i ceudghràdh da rùn
bu mhòr a h-adhbhar ri sunnd
nuair a shealladh i 'n gnùis a cèile
nuair a shealladh i 'n gnùis a cèile*

Stanza 4 (seven lines):

*Co neach dh'an eòl
Fear t-fhasain beò
Am blasdachd beòil
Is am maise neòil,
An gaisge gleòis
An ceart 's an còir,
Gun airceas no sgleò fèile?
Gun airceas no sgleò fèile?*

Stanza 9 (eight lines):

*'S i 'n fhras nach ciùin
thàinig às ùr,
a shrac ar siùil
's a bhrìst ar stiùir
's ar cairt mhath iùil
's ar taice cùil
's ar caidreabh ciùil
bhiodh againn 'nad thùr èibhinn.
bhiodh againn 'nad thùr èibhinn.*

To solve the problem of stanza nine, Matheson chooses the simple and conservative expedient of repeating an earlier motif – the one found in the fourth phrase of the air – to extend the melody. The following example shows how Matheson has adapted Fraser's air to the four stanzas quoted above. Again, he has ensured that the beginning and end of each stanza retains the same melodic contour, while the internal phrases drop in and out as needed:

THE PERFORMANCE OF SCOTTISH GAELIC ‘STROPHIC’ VERSE

Fraser

WM
Stanza 2

Stanza 4

Stanza 8

Stanza 9

‘An naidheachd so an-dè’

For another song by *Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh*, Matheson found the following air in Donald Campbell’s collection, *A Treatise on the Language, Literature and Music of the Highland Clans* (Campbell: Appendix 2):

In connection with his 1982 recording of this song for the School of Scottish Studies, Matheson mentioned to Morag MacLeod the difficulty he had encountered in adapting Campbell’s air, which he said had been supplied to Campbell by the nineteenth-century collector Frances Tolmie.¹² Fortunately, it also appears in Tolmie’s own collection of songs from Skye, as transcribed from Margaret Gillies, Bracadale, Skye, in 1862 (Tolmie: 99). We say ‘fortunately’ because the fifth bar of Tolmie’s air, given below, is missing from Campbell’s printed version of the air:

THE PERFORMANCE OF SCOTTISH GAELIC ‘STROPHIC’ VERSE

Unlike other early collectors, Tolmie was in the habit of recording the texts as well as the airs she encountered. In this case, the text differs subtly from the one chosen by J. C. Watson in his collection of Màiri’s verse and sung by Matheson on *Gaelic Bards and Minstrels*. This difference is fortuitous, as Margaret Gillies’ text represents a conflation of the first two verses as Watson gives them, with the result that the first of Gillies’ stanzas contains seven lines, where Watson’s has only five. As a result, Tolmie’s transcription of Gillies’ singing provides sufficient music for the longest stanzas in this poem, *i.e.* stanzas of five, six, and seven lines:

Gillies text (stanza 1)

*An naigheachd ‘so ‘n dé
‘S aighearach ì!
Moladh do ‘n léigh
‘thug maileart do m’chèill,
Cha ghearain mi féin,
Na chailleadh ‘s na dh’èug,
‘S mo leanabh ‘na dhéidh comhshlàn.
‘S mo leanabh ‘na dhéidh comhshlàn.*

Watson text (stanzas 1 and 2)

*An naidheachd so an-dé,
Aighearach è
Moladh don léigh
Thug malairt dam chèill
Nis teannaich mi fhèin ri crònan.

Beannachd dhan bheul
A dh’aithris an sgeul,
Dh’fhàg fallain mo chrè;
Cha ghearain mi fhèin
Na chailleadh ‘s na dh’èug
‘S mo leanabh nan dèidh còmhshlan.*

However, despite the fact that Tolmie’s transcription provides a complete air for this song, William Matheson remarked to Morag MacLeod that the performance had given him difficulty, because the version of the air he was looking at – presumably the one in Campbell’s volume – lacked sufficient music for all the verses:

Nise, chan eil anns a’...Tolmie Collection ach...eisimpleir dhe dh’aon rann. Is mar sin, rinn mi fhèin suas mar a bheadh còir dhuinn na rainn eile a sheinn. Nuair a thuigeas tu dualchas, tuigidh tu dè a tha agad ri chur ann airson an ceòl a dhèanamh suas, a’ bheil a fhios agat.... Sè tha mi a’ ciallachadh, tha feadhainn dhe na rainn anns nach eil ann ach còig sreathan, feadhainn anns a bheil sia, agus feadhainn anns a bheil seachd. Agus chan eil cuimhn’ agam a-nis co-dhiùbh tha Frances Tolmie a’ toirt a’chiùil mar a tha ‘s na còig sreathan nà na sia sreathan, ach – chan eil na seachd, co-dhiùbh – ach co-dhiùbh, ge air bith dè a th’ aice chan eil aice ann ach aon rann.... ‘S mar sin bh’agamsa ri, bha e agamsa ri sreath a bharrachd a chur dhan cheòl dhan chuid dhe na rainn ‘s dòcha, na bha aice-se. Tha mi smaointeach gur h-e na còig sreathan a bh’ aice.... Agus a’ reprise, a bheil a fhios agad.¹³ Agus an uair sin, mar sin, bh’ agamsa ri sreath a bharrachd dhe cheòl a chur ann an cuid dhe na rainn agus dà shreath a bharrachd dhan cheòl a chur ann an rainn eile. (SA2001.079.03-11)

Now, the Tolmie Collection only gives one stanza as an example. For this reason, I myself made up how the other stanzas should be sung. When you understand tradition, you understand what needs to be added to make up the music, you know.... What I mean is, there are some stanzas that only have five lines, some have six, and some have seven. I don’t recall now whether Tolmie

THE PERFORMANCE OF SCOTTISH GAELIC ‘STROPHIC’ VERSE

gives music for a verse of five lines or of six, but it wasn't for a seven-line verse anyway. In any case, she only gives one stanza....So I had to add a line to the music for some of the stanzas, beyond what she gave. I think it was a five-line stanza that she had....And the *reprise*,¹³ you know. And then accordingly, I had to add an additional line of music in some of the stanzas, and two additional lines in others.

Curiously, although Matheson on this occasion mentions Tolmie's air, he clearly cannot have looked carefully enough at Tolmie's transcription as it appears in JFSS which, because of Margaret Gillies' conflation of the first two stanzas, actually *does* include enough music for the longest stanzas of the poem. Matheson's solution to this (non-existent) problem, however, resembles his approach to stanza nine of '*Cha sùrd cadail*': where six or seven phrases are called for, he simply doubles-up phrase three. Arguably the result is just as successful musically as if he had used Tolmie's phrase five:

Tolmie



WM
5-line
stanza



6-line
stanza



7-line
stanza



‘Mo bheud ‘s mo chràdh’

An air for this song by *Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh* appears in the Angus Fraser manuscript, headed *Marbhrann Iain Ghairbh ‘Ic Gille-Chaluim, ‘A requiem for MacLeod of Raasay’* (Fraser: 13). But before we turn to the air, and for reasons that will become clear, it is worth quoting in full the stanzas that Matheson chose for his performance (J. C. Watson: 36-41):

*Mo bheud ‘s mo chràdh
mar dh’èirich dhà
‘n fhear ghleusta ghràidh
bha treun ‘s an spàirn
‘s nach fhaicear gu bràth an Ratharsair.
‘s nach fhaicear gu bràth an Ratharsair.*

*Bu tu ‘m fear curanta mòr
bu mhath spionnadh is treòir
o d’mhullach gu d’ bhròig
o d’uilinn gu d’ dhòrn:
Mhic Mhuire mo leòn,
thu bhith ‘n innis nan ròn ‘s nach faighear
thu.
thu bhith ‘n innis nan ròn ‘s nach faighear
thu.*

*Bu tu sealgair a’ gheòidh,
làmh gun dearmad gun leòn,
air ‘m bu shuarrach an t-òr
thoirt a bhuannachd a’ cheòil,
is gun d’fhuair thu nas leòr ‘s na
chaitheadh tu.
is gun d’fhuair thu nas leòr ‘s na
chaitheadh tu.*

*Bu tu sealgair an fhèidh
leis an deargte na bèin;
bhiodh coin earbsach air èill
aig an Albannach threun;
càit’ a faca mi fhèin
aon duine fo ‘n ghrèin
a dhèanadh riut euchd flathasach?
a dhèanadh riut euchd flathasach?*

*Spealp nach dìobradh
‘n cath no ‘n strì thu,
casan dìreach
fada finealt:
mo chreach dhiobhail,
chaidh thu dhìth oirnn
le neart sìne,
làmh nach dìobradh cathadh oirr’.
làmh nach dìobradh cathadh oirr’.*

*Och m’eudail bhuam
gun sgeul ‘s a’ chuan
bu ghlè mhath snuadh
ri grèin ‘s ri fuachd,
‘s e chlaoidh do shluagh
nach d’fheud thu ‘n uair a ghabhail oirr’.
nach d’fheud thu ‘n uair a ghabhail oirr’.*

*Mo bheud ‘s mo bhròn
mar dh’èirich dhò
muir beucach mòr
a leum mad bhòrd,
thu fhèin ‘s do sheòid
nuair reub ur seòil,
nach d’fheud sibh treòir a chathadh oirr’.
nach d’fheud sibh treòir a chathadh oirr’.*

Here we have seven stanzas, varying in length between five and eight lines (not counting the repeated final line). While all of the stanzas end in a trisyllable, the fifth stanza – the one beginning *spealp nach dìobradh* above – is not only the longest, but it is also subtly different from the others in that the seven non-final lines end in a monosyllable, and most of

the lines begin with a stressed syllable. These features pose a significant challenge, as we shall see.

Fraser gives the tune four times, subjecting it to both rhythmical and melodic variation. It is not clear whether these variations represent something Fraser had heard from singers, or whether he composed them himself in order to extend the music for an instrumental performer. Remarkably, however, Matheson's performance takes advantage of all of them. Here is Fraser's setting:

Part 1

Part 2

Part 3

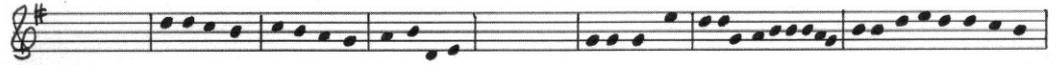
Part 4

In adapting this music to his purposes, Matheson has replaced Fraser's rhythmical inventions with the rhythms dictated by the text, and simply matched the melodic contours – the basic series of tones – with the words, increasing or reducing the number of notes as needed to fit the number of syllables in the text. The following transcripts show how Matheson has adapted Fraser's different versions of the tune to all but one of the stanzas of the poem. Note that, stripped of their rhythmical variation, the first two parts of Fraser's tune contain the same melodic material; for this reason they are conflated in what follows:

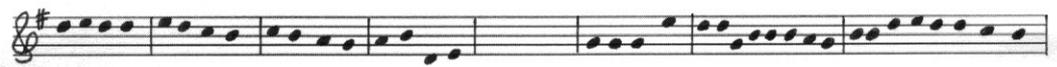
Fraser
Parts 1/2



Matheson
Stanza 1



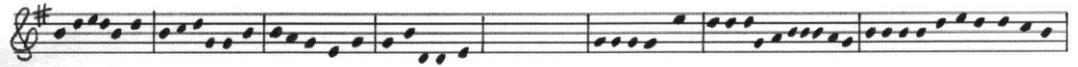
Stanza 6



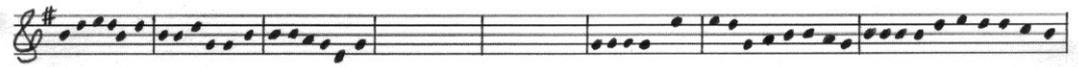
Fraser
Part 3



Matheson
Stanza 2



Stanza 3



Stanza 4



Fraser
Part 4



Matheson
Stanza 7



The fifth stanza presented Matheson with a peculiar problem. In the first place, this stanza contains eight lines (not counting the repeated line at the end), making it longer than any of the others. More important, however, is the conformation of the initial quadrisyllabic lines: most of them begin with a stressed syllable (meaning that there is no room for an ‘up-beat’ or anacrusis in the musical setting); and they end in a disyllable rather than a monosyllable.

None of Fraser’s settings is long enough to accommodate an eight-line stanza; and while the first, sixth and seventh stanzas of the poem also contain quadrisyllabic lines, Matheson clearly felt that the music appropriate for those stanzas would not work for the fifth stanza. Indeed, the musical phrases used for the initial lines of those stanzas sound awkward

when applied to stanza five, because the metrical requirements of the verse upset the rhythmical pattern that one has, by that time, come to associate with those melodic motifs. In any case, the problem of the additional line had also to be dealt with.

Matheson's solution was to improvise some music of his own for the initial lines of stanza five, while ensuring a smooth transition to the final two phrases, which had to remain the same as in all the other stanzas:



*Spealp nach dìobradh
 'n cath no 'n strì thu,
 casan dìreach
 fada finealt:
 mo chreach dhiobhail,
 chaidh thu dhìth oirnn
 le neart sine,
 làmh nach dìobradh cathadh oirr'.
 làmh nach dìobradh cathadh oirr'*

Morag MacLeod has recalled that, during their work together, William Matheson referred to the fact that Angus Fraser's air suggests 'different ways of singing. In Mary MacLeod's *Lament for Iain Garbh* there are variations in the number of lines, but also in the number of syllables in each verse. The music has to accommodate that. He says, "It took me a while to work that out."¹⁴ Possibly it was this problematic stanza that Matheson had in mind, and it is a pity that he did not discuss it while the tape was running, nor did he address it anywhere in print or in his notebooks so far as I am aware. In any case, however, his solution certainly passes muster, judging solely by musical and metrical criteria; and as the problem must have been commonly faced by anyone in the habit of reciting poetry of this kind, Matheson's solution suggests one way in which it might have been addressed.

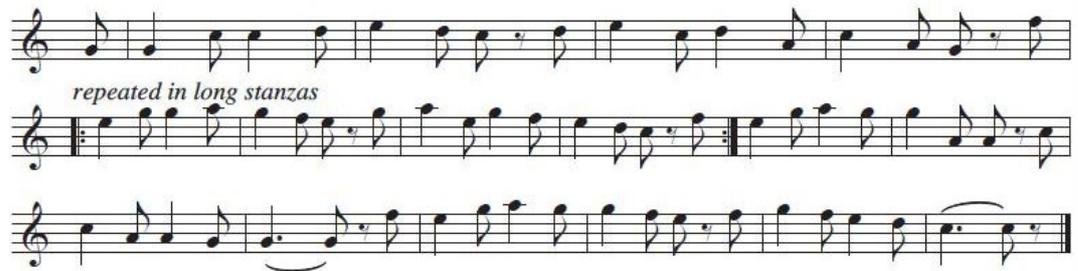
'Deoch-slàinte an Iarla thuathaich sin'

Matheson took the text for this poem, by Murdoch Matheson (*An t-Aosdàna MacMhathain*), from *Sàr-Obair nam Bàrd* (Mackenzie: 83-5); and chose an air from Angus Fraser's collection entitled *Fàilte Mhic Shimidh*, 'A bard's salute to Lord Lovat' (Fraser: 27).¹⁵ As he had done with his arrangement of the lament for MacLeod of Raasay, Fraser set *Fàilte Mhic Shimidh* in multiple parts:

Part 1



Part 2



Stanzas vary in length between five and six lines, with (if the evidence of the musical setting is to be believed) the final long line repeated twice. Unusually, however, the initial lines of each stanza each contain three stresses rather than two, and they end in a trisyllable, rather than the usual monosyllable or disyllable. More unusually still, the final long line contains twice as many stressed syllables as the initial lines, rather than only one additional stress. Here is the text as Matheson sings it:

*Deoch-slàinte 'n Iarla thuathaich sin
a thriall an dè thar chuantan bhuainn
le sgioba làidir luasganach
nach pilleadh càs no fuathas iad;
muir gàireach ris gach guallainn dhi.
Air clàr do luinge luaithe ghabh mi cead
dhiot 's fhuair mi 'n t-òr.
Air clàr do luinge luaithe ghabh mi cead
dhiot 's fhuair mi 'n t-òr.*

*Gun gleidheadh Dia o bhaoghal thu,
o charraid cuain 's o chaolasan,
o charraig fhuair gun chaomhalachd,
seachd beannachd tuath is daonnachd
dhut;
buidh làrach ri do shaoghal ort fhir-
ghaoil ga d' fhaicinn beò.
buidh làrach ri do shaoghal ort fhir-ghaoil
ga d' fhaicinn beò.*

*D'fhear-eòlais làidir fradharcach
deas-chainnteach gàireach gleadharach
min-chinnteach calma foighidneach
crann geadha 'na làimh adhartaich –
Mac-samhail Rasg Mhic-Fhradhairc, siud
mar thaghainn dhut na seòid.
Mac-samhail Rasg Mhic-Fhradhairc, siud
mar thaghainn dhut na seòid.*

*Ma chaidh thu null thar chuantan bhuainn,
air darach naomh a ghluaiseas tu,
fior bhuille saoir le 'n d' fhuairgheadh i;
bidh barant de dhaoin uaisl' oirre,
bidh beannachd bhoich is tuath agad,
chan eagal baoghal fuadaich dhut, bidh
Dia man cuairt dha d' sheòl.
chan eagal baoghal fuadaich dhut, bidh Dia
man cuairt dha d' sheòl.*

*Gur gaoth a deas a dh'èighinn dhut
gun chruas gun tais bhith sèideadh rith'
fear beairte beachdail geurchuiseach
gu sanntach bras neo-èisleanach
a dh'fhuasg'leadh pailteas eudaich dhi ga
bhrèideadh air gach bòrd.
a dh'fhuasg'leadh pailteas eudaich dhi ga
bhrèideadh air gach bòrd.*

*Gun innsinn gnìomh do stiùireadair –
fear cuimhneach ciallach, cùramach,
a dh'aithnicheadh fiamh a' chùlanaich,
's a chuireadh srian ri cùrsaireachd;
mam bristeadh trian a' chùirnein oirr', a
mhùchadh e fo sròin.
mam bristeadh trian a' chùirnein oirr', a
mhùchadh e fo sròin.*

*Ma chaidh thu null thar fairrge bhuainn
thu fhèin 's do choirneal Calmanach,
fhuair cliù an cùirt nan Albannach,
gur h-iomadh tùrn a dhearbhadh leis;
b'e siud an leòmhan ainmeil bu mhòr
seachas air gach bòrd.
b'e siud an leòmhan ainmeil bu mhòr
seachas air gach bòrd*

*Gur tagha cala dh'innsinn dhut
an dèidh na mara Siofordaich,
thu dhol gu fallain firinneach
do Steòrnabhagh thar linnlichean:
bidh ròiseil gheala thinteannan
aig fir 's aig mnà, 's toil-inntinn orr' ri linn
thu thighinn gu'n còrs'.
aig fir 's aig mnà, 's toil-inntinn orr' ri linn
thu thighinn gu'n còrs'.*

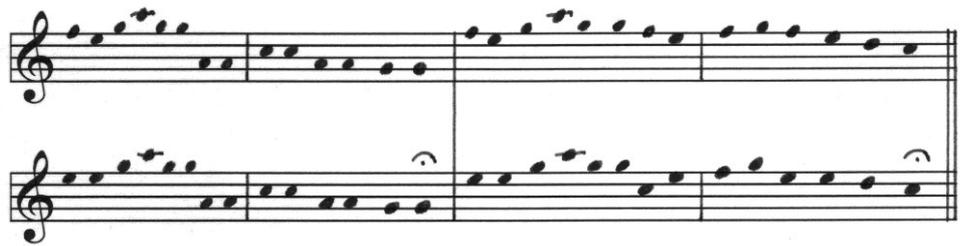
On the basis of this text, one might foresee a general redefinition of 'strophic' metre; but this is not our business here. The interesting thing about this example for our purposes is the fact that Angus Fraser appears to support Matheson's core principle in reconstructing these songs, namely, that the air needs to be flexible in order to accommodate stanzas of varying length; and by directing the performer to repeat bars five through eight 'in long stanzas,' Fraser is confirming that this flexibility needs to come in the middle of the tune, rather than at the beginning or end.

Even so, however, Fraser's setting fails to account for the fact that the text does not fit handily into a standard sixteen-bar musical form. This probably didn't matter for his purposes, as I suspect that he had instrumental performance in mind, and the audience for his collection of tunes would have expected sixteen-bar musical settings. But for Matheson, seeking to re-fit the air to the text, the repeated section would have provided too much extra music for the longer stanzas, as it contains enough for two additional lines of verse, where only one is needed. In other words, Fraser's setting, including the repeated section, supplies music sufficient for a stanza of eight lines (including the repeated last line), rather than only seven.

As he did in the case of '*Mo bheud 's mo chràdh*', Matheson chose to make full use of Fraser's setting of *Fàilte Mhic Shimidh*, adapting Part 1 of Fraser's music to the seven-line stanzas, and using Part 2 for the shorter, six-line stanzas. In any case, the final two musical phrases (*i.e.* the final four bars) are the same for each of the two sections as Fraser gives them. Here is how Matheson adapted Fraser's material to his purposes.

Fraser Pt. 1

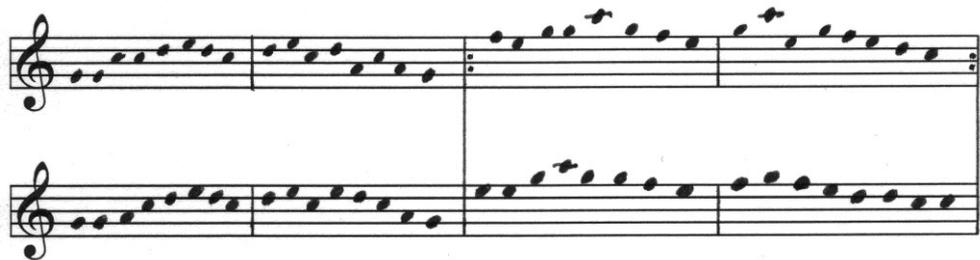
Matheson
Stanzas 1, 2, 6, 8



With regard to the repeated section of Part 1 of Fraser's air, where the text required only three phrases rather than four, Matheson has used only one bar of Fraser's material – the first, which appears second in Matheson's sequence – and has added two bars of his own to make up the music required.

For the shorter stanzas, Matheson has expeditiously used Part 2 of Fraser's material as it stands, with very few minor alterations. As directed, he ignores the repeat:

Fraser
Part 2



Matheson
Stanzas 3, 4,
5, 7

The final two phrases are as given for Part 1.

However awkward it may be to adapt Fraser's air to the longer stanzas, his confirmation of Matheson's core assumption in reconstructing these songs is of inestimable value. The performance of songs in strophic metre has been uncommon for some time, as Matheson's recourse to manuscripts and printed sources attests; very few such songs are to be found in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies, and those that do are, as far as I am aware, songs in which the number of lines per stanza has been regularized.

Conclusions and conjectures

As William Matheson was quick to acknowledge, his performance of songs in strophic metre – whether the stanzas were of fixed length or otherwise – was unlikely to resemble that of someone who had learned the songs from living tradition. In the first place, he believed that the airs were likely to have been composed by the poets themselves, and that they would change to accommodate rhythmical changes in the text. Talking of *Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh*, he says:

'S e a tha ann ach declamation ... an uair a bha i a' dèanamh na facal tha mi a' smaoinichadh gu robh fuaim nam facal a' tighinn thuice aig an aon am leis

na facail fhèin ann an dòigh air choireigin, a bheil fhios agad. Agus seall mar a tha e 'g atharrachadh bho rann gu rann cuideachd, a bheil fhios agad. A bheil fhios agad, an rud a tha 'g atharrachadh bho rann gu rann, mar sin, tha sin 'na dhearbhadh gu bheil e air a dhèanamh ann an làrach nam bonn, gu bheil e mar a chanas 'sa Bheurla spontaneous. Chan e stereotype a tha ann. Tha e a' tighinn thugad mar a nì thu e.... (SA2001.079.03-11)

What it is is a declamation ... when she was composing the words I think the sound of the words was coming to her at the same time as the words themselves somehow, you know. And see how it changes from stanza to stanza, too, you know. You know, the thing which changes from stanza to stanza like that, that proves that it's been made on the spot, that it is, as the English has it, spontaneous. It's not a stereotype. It's coming to you as you create it....

What Matheson is saying is, of course, impossible to prove – and in any event, what might have been true for one poet might not have been true for another. It seems equally possible that certain reciting-tones and melodic motifs circulated within communities, and could have been appropriated as needed by poets and singers. Matheson's own performances provide plenty of evidence that, by repeating a note or subtly altering a melodic contour, a given motif can easily be adapted for lines containing additional syllables; and the same would be true in reverse. Some singers may have been more skilled than others at this sort of manipulation – just as, given the difficulties we have been examining here, some singers were probably better than others at performing songs in which stanza-length was not fixed.

Matheson also acknowledges that there might be a considerable difference between one performance and another of the same song. Again, he is referring to *Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh*:

Tha mi a' smaoinachadh gum biodh eadardhealachadh math eadar 's dòcha mar a ghabh i e dà uair, a' bheil a fhios agad. Dà uair. ... Tha mi a' smaoinachadh, na seann daoine, an uair a bhiodh iad a' gabhail a leitheid gum biodh eadardhealachadh mòr 's dòcha eadar mar a [unintelligible] ghabh iad e, dà uair. (SA2001.079.03-11)

I think there would be a considerable difference between how she performed it on two occasions, you know. On two occasions. ... I think, the old people, when they sang something like that there would be a big difference between how they sang on two occasions.

Matheson appears to be saying that performing these songs allowed a good deal of room for improvisation on the part of the singer. Insofar as his own performances are the result of long study and thought over many years, it is clear that they are not typical of the spontaneous and improvisatory performance that he says would have been common. In particular, his use of the variations supplied by Angus Fraser for '*Mo bheud 's mo chràdh*' and '*Deoch-slàinte an Iarla thuathaich sin*' – variations probably composed by Fraser himself with the instrumental performer in mind – may not reflect traditional performance practice. At the same time, Matheson's use of these variations certainly does reflect his understanding that rhythmical differences between stanzas would have required sensitive adaptation of the melody to fit – whether instinctive and improvisatory, or carefully planned in advance.

Matheson's unflagging interest in this material, his dogged detective work, and his creativity in solving the problems posed by stanzas of irregular length, have given us not only a sense of how these particular songs might have been performed, but a possible insight into how we might unlock the mysteries of other types of sung performance of which only the faintest echoes remain.

While working on this material, I happened to recall a recording made in the 1950s in County Galway in Ireland. At that time the American collector Sidney Robertson Cowell made two recordings of *caointeoireacht*, the keening of the dead, from elderly women in the Aran Islands.¹⁶ While the age and infirmity of one singer made her recording very difficult to make out, the second woman, who chose to remain anonymous, recorded the following. The text is admittedly very basic and formulaic, but its metrical shape is unambiguous: a short stanza of unfixed length, composed of a series of short two-stress lines ending in a monosyllable, concluding with a contrasting two-stress line ending in a disyllable.¹⁷ It is also eerily reminiscent of the metrical shape of strophic verse, suggesting that the latter metre may not have been invented out of thin air by Iain Lom and his contemporaries as some have argued, but may actually have metrical ancestry of some antiquity:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. <i>Och ochón ó</i>
<i>'gus ochón ar maidin</i> | 6. <i>A bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>a bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>'gus a bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>is a bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>a bhó ar maidin.</i> |
| 2. <i>Och och ochón ó,</i>
<i>och ochón ó,</i>
<i>'gus och ochón ó</i>
<i>go deo ar maidin.</i> | 7. <i>Och ochón ó,</i>
<i>is ochón ó</i>
<i>is ochón ó</i>
<i>[unclear] dóite dearga.</i> |
| 3. <i>A bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>a bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>'gus a bhó</i>
<i>'gus a bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>'gus a bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>a bhó ar maidin.</i> | 8. <i>Dia linn go deo,</i>
<i>'gus Dia linn faoi dhó</i>
<i>'gus Dia linn go deo,</i>
<i>is Dia linn ar maidin.</i> |
| 4. <i>(ar) Dia linn go deo,</i>
<i>'gus Dia linn go deo,</i>
<i>'s Dia linn faoi dhó</i>
<i>'gus Dia linn, Dia linn,</i>
<i>'gus Dia linn, Dia linn,</i>
<i>agus Dia dhár réiteach.</i> | 9. <i>A bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>'gus a bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>is a bhó a bhó</i>
<i>'gus a bhó ar maidin.</i> |
| 5. <i>Och ochón ó,</i>
<i>och ochón ó,</i>
<i>go brách agus go deo,</i>
<i>is ochón ó,</i>
<i>is ochón ó,</i>
<i>'s go deo ar maidin.</i> | 10. <i>Ochón ó,</i>
<i>och ochón ó,</i>
<i>go deo agus a bhó</i>
<i>is a bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>is a bhó a bhó,</i>
<i>is a bhó ar maidin.</i> |
| | 11. <i>Och ochón ó,</i>
<i>is och ochón ó,</i>
<i>go brách agus go deo</i> |

*is Dia linn faoi dhó,
is Dia linn go deo,*

is Dia linn ar maidin.

The air, while it relies to a considerable extent on rhapsodic melisma for its expressive qualities – a phenomenon that makes it look very complicated on the page – is actually a simple tune composed of a series of falling motifs within the interval of a minor sixth. In the following transcription, which I made in the 1970s, each staff corresponds to a stanza of text:

The air employs seven motifs in all, labelled [a] through [g] across the top staff. Each stanza uses between three and five of these motifs, always keeping them in the correct order,

The image shows a musical transcription of a Scottish air. The top staff contains seven motifs labeled 'a' through 'g'. Motif 'a' is a single note. Motif 'b' is a two-note descending pair. Motif 'c' is a three-note descending sequence. Motif 'd' is a four-note descending sequence. Motif 'e' is a five-note descending sequence. Motif 'f' is a six-note descending sequence. Motif 'g' is a seven-note descending sequence. Below the top staff are ten stanzas of text, each corresponding to a staff of music. Each stanza uses a different combination of the motifs 'a' through 'g', always in the same order. The motifs are marked with small letters above the notes in the stanzas.

and ending with the sequence [f]-[g]. Most important – and most reminiscent of what happens in the performance of the Scottish examples that we have been discussing here – is the fact that most of the melodic variation from one stanza to the next occurs in the middle of the stanza, *i.e.* in the place where it will cause least disturbance to the aural apprehension of the stanzaic unit. Here is the text once again, this time with the corresponding musical motifs marked to show clearly how the process of turning them into a sung performance works:

B *Och ochón ó*
F *'gus ochón*
G *ar maidin*

A *Och och ochón ó,*
B *och ochón ó,*
F *'gus och ochón ó*
G *go deo ar maidin.*

A *A bhó a bhó,*
B *a bhó a bhó,*
C *'gus a bhó*
F *'gus a bhó a bhó,*
F *'gus a bhó a bhó,*
G *a bhó ar maidin.*

A *(ar) Dia linn go deo,*
B *'gus Dia linn go deo,*
C *'s Dia linn faoi dhó*
F *'gus Dia linn, Dia linn,*
F *'gus Dia linn, Dia linn,*
G *agus Dia dhár réiteach.*

A *Och ochón ó,*
B *och ochón ó,*
C *go brách agus go deo,*
F *is ochón ó,*
F *is ochón ó,*
G *'s go deo ar maidin.*

A *A bhó a bhó,*
D *a bhó a bhó,*
F *'gus a bhó a bhó,*
F *is a bhó a bhó,*
G *a bhó ar maidin.*

A *Och ochón ó,*
D *is ochón ó*
F *is ochón ó*
G *[unclear] dóite dearga.*

B *Dia linn go deo,*
E *'gus Dia linn faoi dhó*
F *'gus Dia linn go deo,*
G *is Dia linn ar maidin.*

A *A bhó a bhó,*
D *'gus a bhó a bhó,*
F *is a bhó a bhó*
G *'gus a bhó ar maidin.*

A *Ochón ó,*
B *och ochón ó,*
C *go deo agus a bhó*
F *is a bhó a bhó,*
F *is a bhó a bhó,*
F *is a bhó*
G *ar maidin.*

A *Och ochón ó,*
B *is och ochón ó,*
C *go brách agus go deo*
F *is Dia linn faoi dhó,*
F *is Dia linn go deo,*
G *is Dia linn ar maidin.*

Unfortunately, so few recordings of *caointeoireacht* are available for public discussion (although I believe there may be some in private hands) that it is impossible to say how commonly this sort of flexible structure might once have been attested in Ireland.¹⁸ It is nonetheless suggestive that the principle which governs treatment of stanzas of unequal length is as clearly demonstrated in this example as it is in the case of the strophic metres. At the very least, this example provides, from living tradition, a useful corollary to Matheson's studied performances, and gives resonance to his conclusions about how poems in strophic metre would have been heard some three hundred years ago.

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NOTES

¹ The term ‘strophic’ is problematic. William Gillies has suggested to me that if, as seems likely, Watson himself coined the term, he was probably thinking of ‘the lyric metres of Greek tragedy (choral etc.), rather than just another word for “stanza”’. Its application to ‘strophes’ of variable as well as of fixed length renders it somewhat meaningless, as ‘stanzas’ are, *ipso facto*, of fixed length. Lacking a better term, however, we shall use the term ‘strophic’ here.

² For a survey of accentual verse-forms in Scottish Gaelic, including a description of the ‘strophic’ metres, see Blankenhorn, ‘Verse structure and performance in Scottish Gaelic vernacular poetry’ in *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 6, forthcoming.

³ A copy of some parts of this MS (including Part A) is also available for consultation in the Archive of the School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University.

⁴ No audio recording of Duncan MacDonald singing this song has been located yet. For Matheson’s notation of the air in tonic solfa see NLS 9711, Box 11/1, 296.

⁵ NLS 9711, Box 12/4, 54a (counting from back of volume).

⁶ Quite early in his career, Matheson elucidated a number of the problems associated with the musical notation of Gaelic songs (Matheson 1955: 67-82). Although he preferred tonic sol-fa to staff notation for transcribing unaccompanied singing, his transcriptions reveal that he found sol-fa a less-than-ideal means of indicating the rhythmic variability of Gaelic song. His transcriptions reveal a variety of techniques, and tend toward suggesting that the rhythm of the line should govern the rhythmic character of the music. In one of the transcriptions relevant to this paper he simply writes the pitch values above individual syllables, without bothering to include any rhythmic values or bar-lines at all; see his sol-fa notation of ‘*Oran do’n Iarla Thuathach*’, adapted from an air entitled ‘*Fàilte Mhic Shimidh*’ in the Angus Fraser manuscript (Fraser: 27), in NLS Acc. 9711, Box 12/4, p. 17a.

⁷ We should also note that, in his performance of this song, Matheson has raised the final note of the fifth bar from the leading-tone ‘B’ to the tonic ‘C’. It is arguable that the original ‘B’ in Torloisg may have been an error, as the tonic makes a great deal better sense in musical terms.

⁸ In an e-mail to the present writer, February 2011.

⁹ NLS Acc. 9711, Box 11/1, p. 296. Matheson gives the text reference ‘S.O.’ – presumably *Sàr Obair nam Bard Gaelach*. While this notebook does not give a source for the air, Matheson’s notes for *Gaelic Bards and Minstrels* credit Duncan MacDonald.

¹⁰ In addition to his recordings for Morag MacLeod in the early 1980s, William Matheson was also recorded singing this song for James Ross in 1954 (SA1954/55/A15). This earlier recording – made when his work with Duncan MacDonald was comparatively recent – also reveals his choice to repeat the second phrase throughout, and omit the fourth phrase in the shorter stanzas. See *Tocher* vol. 4, no. 25, pp. 20 ff. Prof. Gillies suggests that Matheson’s musical choices may have been influenced by the performance of other texts using the same

air, as for example Allan MacDougall's poem to MacDonald of Glengarry which is designated to be sung '*Air fonn agus tomhas "A bhean, leasaich a stop dhuinn"*' (1829:13). We cannot know for certain whether or not William Matheson encountered such a performance in living tradition, but the association of this air with multiple texts suggests the possibility.

¹¹ Although his notebook suggests he was following the text from *Sàr-Obair* when he was working with Duncan MacDonald, the notes to *Gaelic Bards and Minstrels* cite *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* and Mackenzie's *Orain Iain Luim* as his sources for the text.

¹² For Matheson's remarks, see SA 2001.079.03-11. For Tolmie's transcription, see *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, no. 16 (London, 1911): 263.

¹³ By 'reprise' Matheson appears to be referring to the final phrase of music, to which the last line of each verse is sung as a prelude to the following verse.

¹⁴ Morag MacLeod, in correspondence by e-mail, 24/2/2011.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, Matheson does not tell us why he chose this particular air, apart from the implicit fact that it fitted the metre of the verse and accommodated the variable stanza-length of the poem. Dr John MacInnes tells me that he thinks he recalls William Matheson saying on one occasion that he had heard this song sung in tradition; if so, however, the notes to his recording do not mention such an experience.

¹⁶ *Songs of Aran*, Smithsonian Folkways FW 04002 (1957).

¹⁷ So far as I am aware, this is the first time that such a structure has been described for an example of *caointeoireacht*. Extensive study of the genre has, however, been undertaken over many years by Prof. Breandán Ó Madagáin and others, much of it focused on the performance of *Caoineadh Áirt Uí Laoghaire* and the distinction between what Ó Madagáin calls the *gol* – the verse of the *caoineadh*, in which the qualities of the deceased person are enumerated – and the *olagón*, the cry of grief taken up by the mourners in chorus, between verses (Ó Madagáin: 32-41). While I am in fundamental agreement with Prof. Ó Madagáin, I believe that, in addition to the ritualistic use of *caointeoireacht* that he describes, there was also a more private sort of *caointeoireacht* in which a person might seek the solace of song as an ease to grief. In these examples one finds syllables of lamentation such as *ochón* and *ariú* mingling with more specific text relating to the deceased person, without any formal boundary between the two. The present example is, I believe, an example of this sort of *caointeoireacht*, and there are others; see for example Kitty Gallagher's 'Keen for a dead child' on Alan Lomax's seminal early recording for the Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music (Columbia AKL 4941; Rounder 1742), or the fragment recorded by Seosamh Ó hÉanaí at the request of his friend Liam Clancy (search 'caoineadh' at www.joeheaney.org).

¹⁸ Ritual keening of the dead has not been heard in Scotland for many generations, and no records of the musical component of this practice – assuming there to have been such a thing – have survived.

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