

ONE FOOT ON EITHER SIDE OF THE CHASM

Cape Breton Singer Mary Jane Lamond's Gaelic Choice¹

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Abstract

Mary Jane Lamond has recorded five albums of Scottish Gaelic songs known and sung in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada. Yet fewer than 500 native Gaelic speakers are estimated to remain in Cape Breton. Song lyrics are central to traditional Gaelic performance and aesthetics and yet the majority of Lamond's audience is a mainstream, non-Gaelic speaking one. Reviewers of Lamond's albums mention her powerful vocals but can only draw meaning from the sound of her voice, rather than from the words themselves. Lamond's language choice identifies her as a Cape Breton Gael to both local and inter/national audiences, but the ways in which her lyrics are considered meaningful vary. Lamond is a cultural activist who has deep respect for the Cape Breton Gaelic tradition. But is it possible to bridge the chasm between traditional and popular Gaelic music audiences when language is central to the former, but incomprehensible to the latter?

Keywords

Gaelic, Cape Breton, popular music, language, reception

Introduction

I study Cape Breton Gaelic song. But while the label of "Cape Breton Gaelic song" might suggest a homogenous song culture, bounded geographically by the eastern Canadian island of Cape Breton and contained by the word "song" - as though all Gaelic songs were relatively similar - the reality is that Cape Breton Gaelic song is a diverse, transnational phenomenon. The Cape Breton Gaelic diaspora is linked to Scotland, which has a number of internationally successful Gaelic music acts, including Capercaillie and Runrig. Cape Breton has produced its own internationally acclaimed Gaelic musical acts, the most famous of whom are The Rankins (formerly The Rankin Family) and The Barra MacNeils. However, other Cape Breton recording artists have also chosen to include Gaelic songs on their albums, including Lamond, Rita and Mary Rankin (distant cousins of The Rankins), and fiddling sensations Ashley MacIsaac and Natalie MacMaster. What intrigues me, and is therefore the focus of this essay, is the reception of these Gaelic songs in different communities. Why sing in a language understood and spoken by so few? How does one make sense of a song sung in a language one does not understand? What is the difference in reception of Gaelic songs between a Gaelic-speaking and a non-Gaelic speaking audience, or between a local and a global audience?

Lamond, who has recorded five Gaelic albums to date, is a unique recording artist in Cape Breton because she performs and records exclusively in Gaelic. The other Cape Breton recording artists mentioned above do not: although they have included Gaelic songs on at least one of their albums, the percentage of Gaelic content on these albums is small relative to English song or instrumental tracks. For example, The Rankin Family never included more than three Gaelic songs or medleys on any given album, while The Barra MacNeils did not include any Gaelic songs at all until their fifth album, when they began to include one or two. Ashley MacIsaac and Natalie MacMaster have both included an experimental Gaelic song on at least one album each. Only Rita and Mary Rankin, who are the least known of all these artists, have recorded a substantial number of Gaelic songs, six on their first album and four on their second. Despite the Gaelic songs recorded by these various

artists, none except Mary Jane Lamond can claim Gaelic fluency; the rest all learned their Gaelic lyrics phonetically.

National and international audiences will be most familiar with Lamond as a result of her vocal contribution to Ashley MacIsaac's Canadian top 10 hit from 1995, *Sleepy Maggie*². But she has been well-recognised for her own albums as well. All five of her albums have been nominated for or granted a range of awards, including Junos, East Coast Music Awards, and Canadian Folk Music Awards.³ Her albums range in style from traditional to heavily pop oriented, particularly in their song arrangements. However, regardless of their varied arrangements, almost all the songs on Lamond's albums are traditional Gaelic songs known and sung in Cape Breton at one time or another rather than her own compositions.⁴

Lamond's recording career began when a Cape Breton organisation, B&R Heritage Enterprises, whose mandate was to preserve and promote traditional Gaelic culture, invited her to record an album, *Bho Thir nan Craobh: From the Land of the Trees*, which was released in 1994. It is quite traditional in flavour, by which I mean that the majority of tracks are unaccompanied and the few tracks containing instrumental arrangements involve only a minimal number of acoustic instruments typically heard in the traditional Cape Breton music scene. Eight of fourteen tracks feature Lamond's unaccompanied singing. Of the remaining six tracks, only a fiddle, guitar, and piano are heard in various combinations. Lamond's next two albums became increasingly pop oriented. She released *Suas e!* ('Stand Up for It!') in 1997 and *Làn Dùil* ('Full of Hope') in 1999. These make increasing use of typical pop-rock instrumentation (electric guitars, bass, and drum kit), studio effects, and other sounds not typical of live music-making in the Cape Breton Gaelic context. Only three of eleven tracks on *Suas e!* involve unaccompanied voice, and only two of eleven tracks on *Làn Dùil*.

Lamond's fourth album, *Òrain Ghàidhlig* ('Gaelic Songs') (2000) demonstrates a marked return to traditional aesthetics. Of eleven songs, six are unaccompanied. The arrangements of the other five recall those of her first album in that they are limited to a maximum of three acoustic instruments for any given song, and they draw on instruments commonly heard in the Cape Breton Gaelic community (fiddle, bagpipes, guitar, and/or piano). Most recently, Lamond released *Stòras* ['Treasure'] in 2005. Although only one of eleven songs is unaccompanied, the arrangements avoid conventional pop-rock sounds. Instead of a drum kit, other percussion sounds are featured, such as shakers and hand drums. Where guitars are used, they tend to be acoustic rather than electric. Additionally, a string quartet is featured on three tracks. The unusual instrumental arrangements prevent this album from sounding traditional in the same sense of Lamond's first and fourth albums, but neither is it a pop-rock album. Instead, the acoustic instrumentation and creative arrangements give the album something of a 'singer-songwriter' aesthetic.

In this article, I focus on the two pop-rock albums, *Suas e!* and *Làn Dùil*. I am intrigued by Lamond's decision to construct a music career entirely in Gaelic, despite the relatively small numbers of Gaelic speakers in the world, and despite the fact that she herself is not a native Gaelic speaker. I begin with the assumption that these two albums are simultaneously directed at a local Cape Breton Gaelic audience and at a larger mainstream pop audience. I will provide evidence to support this assumption before reviewing the ways in which these two audiences have actually received her music. Ultimately, I am interested in exploring how Lamond constructs her music in order to appeal to these two very different audiences and in investigating how these audiences respond to her strategies.

Cape Breton and Gaelic Culture

Cape Breton is a small island at the north-east end of the maritime province of Nova Scotia, Canada. It has a population of close to 150,000 living on 10,311 square km (3,981 square miles). Europeans first encountered the indigenous Mi'kmaq population in 1497 and by the end of the 1510s, Basque, Spanish, French, British and Irish fishing boats were visiting the Grand Banks each summer and their fishing territories gradually expanded (Wicken, 1994: 164-5). Over the next few hundred years, the English and the French battled for control of Cape Breton as part of the eastern

North American seaboard, an important territory in the ongoing efforts to establish New World colonies. Ultimately, the British gained political control as a result of the 1763 Treaty of Paris. The first Scottish immigrants arrived in Pictou, on the Nova Scotia mainland near Cape Breton, in 1773. Tens of thousands of Scots emigrated to Cape Breton between then and the mid-Nineteenth Century, making the island predominantly trilingual: English, French, and Gaelic. At the turn of the Twentieth Century, the booming mining and steel industries resulted in considerable urbanisation while also attracting thousands of immigrants from overseas and from elsewhere in North America, including Lebanese, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Greeks, and Italians. Consequently, Cape Breton is a multicultural island.

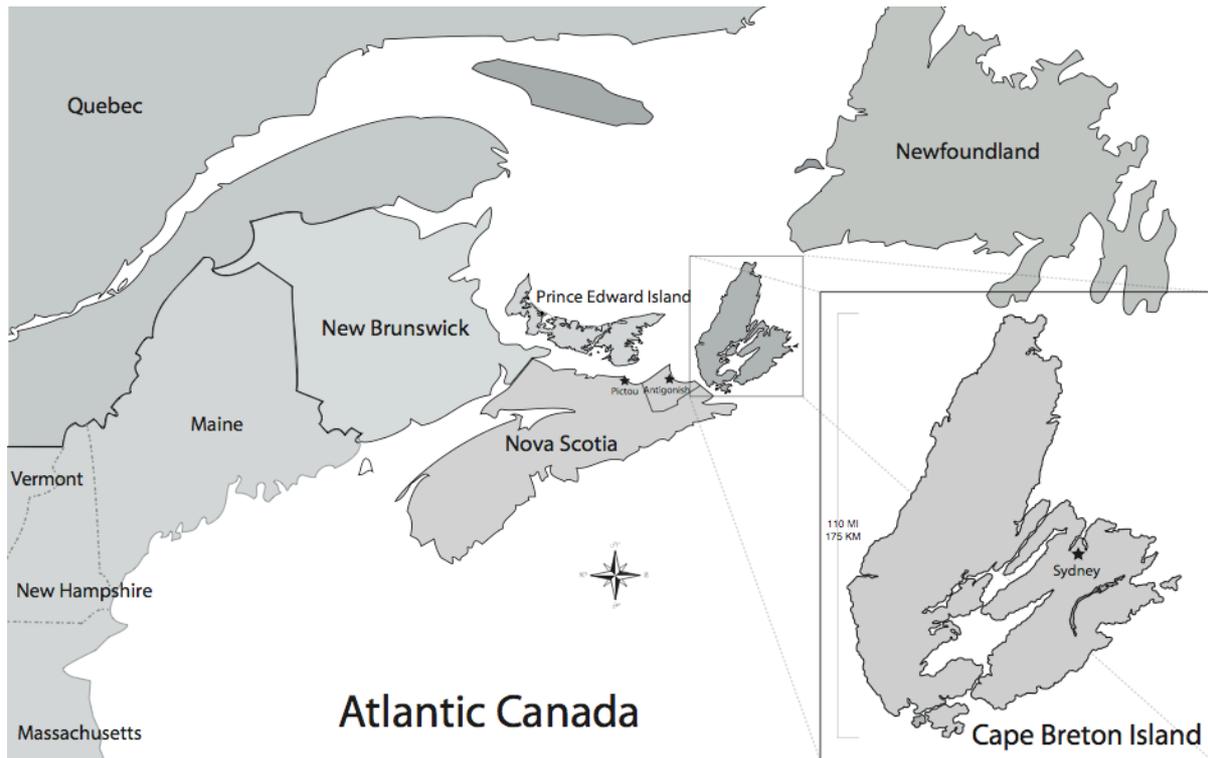


Figure 1 – Map of Cape Breton Island and locale (Barry Gabriel)

Cape Breton is the only remaining *Gàidhealtachd* (Gaelic-speaking community) outside Scotland. Thousands of Gaelic-speakers from Scotland emigrated to the island during the Nineteenth Century Clearances, when Highlanders were cleared from their lands to make room for sheep farming.⁵ In 1931, the Canadian census reported 75,414 Nova Scotians of Scottish descent, 24,303 of whom spoke Gaelic (Donovan, 1990: 22; Kelly, 1980: 19). At the same time, John Lorne Campbell, a Gaelic-speaking folklorist from Scotland, conducted a survey and estimated there were 30,000 Gaelic speakers in Antigonish County⁶ and Cape Breton Island alone (Kelly, 1980:20, quoting Campbell, 1934: 161).⁷ Meanwhile, John Lorne Campbell reports that J.G MacKinnon, editor of the Cape Breton Gaelic newspaper, *MacTalla*, estimated there were actually 35,000-40,000 Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island together (Kelly 1980:20, quoting Campbell, 1934: 161). Some might be surprised at how many Gaelic speakers lived in the Maritimes in the early part of the Twentieth Century, especially since fewer than 500 Gaelic speakers are estimated to remain today (Kennedy, 2001: 74).⁸

The decline of Gaelic has been well documented in both Scotland and Cape Breton (e.g., Kelly, 1980; Dorian, 1981; Wardhaugh, 1987; MacKinnon, 1991). Sociolinguists have identified four

factors that contribute to local attitudes towards any language (Appel and Muysken, 1987; Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor, 1977): the status of the minority group (economic status, internal and external social status, history, and status of the language in a world context); demographic factors (number of speakers, geographic concentration, degree of isolation, rural or urban population, ties with homeland, and extent of exogamy); institutional support (mass media, religious services, government services and policy, and education); and the degree of similarity of the language speakers to the social majority (e.g., is the minority language intelligible to majority-language speakers?). Given Cape Breton's economic struggles and high unemployment, the Gaelic language's long history of repression in Scotland, the low number of Gaelic speakers in both Scotland and Cape Breton, massive urbanisation and out-migration, lack of institutional support, and Gaelic's unintelligibility to English-speakers; it is not surprising that the Gaelic-speaking population is on the decline.⁹

However, over the past couple of decades, there have been concerted revival efforts, of which Lamond has been a conspicuous part. She wrote a regular column for *Am Bràighe*, a local, bilingual culture-focused periodical; promoted Gaelic to children by visiting schools; taught Gaelic song workshops and courses; and acted for a term as co-president of the Gaelic Council of Nova Scotia. And then there are, of course, her five Gaelic song albums.¹⁰ Given that her potential Gaelic audience is quite small, one might reasonably ask why she chooses to sing in Gaelic. Ethnomusicologist Harris M. Berger suggests, "When a singer uses, for example, a high-status foreign language, a despised local dialect, or a formal linguistic register in song, he or she may be exploring, performing, or enacting a social identity rather than merely describing it" (2003: xv-xvi). In this regard, Lamond's language choice serves to assert her identity as a Gael while promoting the Gaelic language to a broader, mainstream audience. Such an approach allows Gaelic to be recognised by as many people as possible in order to raise awareness of its precarious situation, to attract new language learners, and to draw tourists to the area and thereby support the economy.¹¹

Lamond herself is not originally from Cape Breton, although her grandparents were native Gaelic speakers from the Mira area, and she visited them every summer as a child.¹² When she had the opportunity to attend a traditional Gaelic song event in Cape Breton as an adult she was so moved by the Cape Breton Gaels who had come together for the pure joy of singing that she decided to pursue Gaelic culture more seriously herself (Ritchie, 1998; Melhuish, 1998: 142). She completed a Celtic Studies degree (which included instruction in the Gaelic language) at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, a short drive from Cape Breton. She has since become quite proficient in the Gaelic language as well, and subsequently made Cape Breton her permanent home.

As previously described, Lamond's debut album was traditional in nature. Subsequently, Lamond set off on her own independent recording career, and her next two albums exhibited a strong shift towards a pop-rock style. However, despite the clear pop orientation of the music on *Suas e!* and *Làn Dùil*, there are also strong traditional elements. For example, the cover art of both albums suggests traditional contents. On the front of *Suas e!*, a close-up of Lamond's face is set in a rustic wooden frame, which in turn is framed by a wagon wheel. Two metal film reels and four metal cogs surround the wooden frame. Opening the liner notes, one sees the phrase, "*Thig a' chuibhle mun cuairt...*" ('the wheel will come around'), from a poem by John Roy Stewart,¹³ that is echoed in the spoken words on the first track. The phrase amplifies the circle imagery on the front cover, but is not provided in English translation. Opposite these words is an image similar to that on the cover, except instead of Lamond's face, we see a black and white image of two hands clasped. Set in the jewel case behind the CD is a maple leaf, highlighting the Canadian context of the Gaelic songs on the album, again framed by circular and square objects, behind all of which appears to be an old, handwritten letter. The images are reminiscent of rustic antique objects. While they may not prepare the listener for the contemporary sounds on the album, they do signal that the pop-rock arrangements are framed by and/or rooted in tradition. As Fabbri notes:

For ten years or more [the graphics and design of record sleeves] have taken on functions far more complex than simply indicating their contents. It is well known that the record sleeve contributes to determining the meaning not only of the record-object but also of the very music that is found inside. (1982:139)



Figure 2 - *Suas e!* CD front cover

Applying Fabbri's point, the traditional images on the cover of *Suas e!* actually become one means of ensuring that the album's purchasers conceive of the music as traditional before they even hear it. Such visual cues no doubt played a role in the nomination of *Suas e!*, despite its pop-rock arrangements, for a Juno in the category of "Roots/Traditional Album" in 1998 as well as in the nominations of her equally pop-oriented album, *Làn Dùil*, for the same Juno "Roots/Traditional Album" award and for the "Roots/Traditional Solo Artist" in the East Coast Music Awards (ECMA) in 2000.

Whereas *Suas e!* featured general and generic images of tradition and age, *Làn Dùil's* CD booklet features photographs of well-known Cape Breton Gaels and cultural items. The first image one sees upon opening the liner notes is a photograph of the popular 19th Century Gaelic song book, *An t-Òranaiche* ('The Songster'), a collection proudly owned and referred to by many Cape Breton Gaelic singers and would be instantly recognisable to any of them. The last page of the booklet folds out to reveal black and white pictures of four men, all of whom would be easily identified by those from the Cape Breton Gaelic community, together with a picture of a traditional Cape Breton house. The images seem to symbolise a traditional Gaelic way of life in Cape Breton. Malcolm Angus Macleod holds a *cas-chrom*, a foot plough traditionally used in the Highlands. Father John Angus Rankin's priest's collar stands out just above the bottom of the image, Tommy Peggy MacDonald sits on ropes likely used either for fishing or farming, and Cassie McCuish's house is a romantic representative of a late Nineteenth Century Gothic Revival house, which is fairly typical of older island architecture. Joe Neil MacNeil, whose voice is heard reciting "*Mo Ghille Mór Foghain'each*" ('My Big, Strong Lad') on the album, smiles in the last picture in a plaid shirt. Although these images most certainly function as symbols of traditional Gaelic culture for non-Gaels, the liner note images seem

simultaneously directed at a local audience who would instantly recognise the images, despite the mainstream pop orientation of the album.

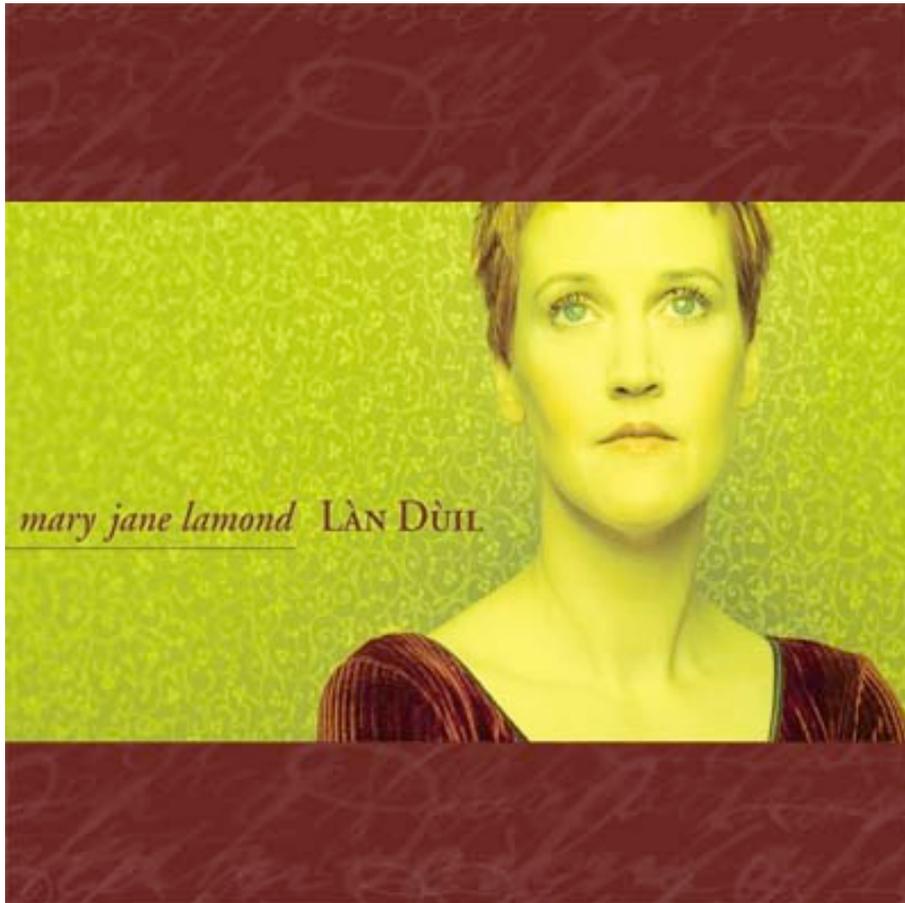


Figure 3 - *Làn Dùil* CD front cover

But perhaps the most potent symbol of “traditional” on these two albums is Lamond’s choice of language: Gaelic. In traditional Gaelic song, language is privileged over all other considerations. Traditionally, songs were expected to be transmitted verbatim (Shaw, 2000: 37). Audiences praised singers for exercising vocal and ornamental variations, but quickly corrected them for any lyrical inaccuracies or alterations (ibid: 29, 38). Accuracy is so significant that song publications are consulted to verify the accuracy, order, and completeness of a song’s lyrics. Songbooks were (and continue to be) valued possessions and people often kept scrapbooks of Gaelic songs clipped from Nova Scotia newspapers such as *The Casket* and *MacTalla*. Margaret Bennett, a folklorist who studies Scottish Gaelic culture in Canada, writes of Gaelic singer and tradition-bearer Allan MacArthur, who kept such a scrapbook, even though he was illiterate in Gaelic (Bennett, 1989: 60). Bennett describes the reverence with which MacArthur handled his copy of *Sàr-Obair nam Bard Gaelach: The Beauties of Gaelic Poetry and Lives of the Highland Bards*, a publication of Gaelic song lyrics. Allan avidly read the book’s English sections about the songs’ bards, and could recognise the songs he knew. He would painstakingly study the words on the pages to determine whether there were any unfamiliar lyrics. If there were, he would ask someone to read and teach the words to him (ibid: 59-61). Many of the Gaelic singers I interviewed proudly owned and consulted copies of Gaelic song collections such as *An t-Òranaiche* and Creighton and MacLeod’s *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* (1964)

According to local aesthetics, Cape Breton Gaelic singers must have a total understanding of all vocabulary in a song and they must ensure that each word is clearly audible and carefully

enunciated. Vowel length is significant to meaning in Gaelic and therefore dictates the rhythm of the music. For example, the words *sàbaid* and *sabaid* look and sound similar but the accent over the “a” in the first instance indicates a long vowel and means “Sabbath” whereas the second, lacking an accent and therefore lacking a long vowel, means “fight”. Obviously, the difference in meaning is significant and one could imagine how important it would be to use the correct vowel length when referring to the “Day of the Sabbath”! A song’s rhythm should change with each verse as the singer accommodates the rhythm of the lyrics. In Gaelic, rhyme occurs between accented vowels, rather than between syllables, as in English. Thus, according to Gaelic aesthetics, ‘acorn’ and ‘anticipation’ would be an example of good rhyme. A singer must not only be careful to extend the correct vowels, but to ensure that accented vowels are emphasised rhythmically in order to clarify the rhyme scheme (see NicLeòid, 2002 for an extended description and analysis of traditional Gaelic song aesthetics).

On Lamond’s pop albums, she is very careful to ensure that the vocal tracks of all her songs are forward in the mix so that the emphasis is on the lyrics. On both *Suas e!* and *Làn Dùil*, Lamond’s voice is clearly audible at all times. She deliberately ensures her voice is not simply another timbre in the overall texture, a point to which I return later. She also delivers the lyrics in a very traditional manner, by which I mean that she does not modify the lyrics by playing with the words (e.g., by extending, shortening, or otherwise modifying them), repeating sections not traditionally repeated, or by changing the order of the lyrics, all modifications to be found on Gaelic pop albums by other artists.¹⁴ And while Lamond does incorporate instrumental interludes between verses, she never interrupts the actual verses themselves. In fact, the lyrics are so important to Lamond that, as she said to one interviewer:

Adding more instrumentation was really about trying to add a soundscape that would create textures and express the emotion I felt for these songs. My philosophy in recording the album was that if you took away all the instrumentation, you’d still have a decent rendition of a traditional song. These songs stand on their own beautifully and you don’t need to change them to make them better. It’s really a question of accompanying the song and letting the song dictate what happens with it. (quoted in Melhuish, 1998: 142-3)

Lamond conceives of the instrumental accompaniment and overall arrangement as a complement to the lyrics. In fact, they are almost “disposable,” since the performance of the song should be able to stand on its own even without the instrumental backup.

At the same time that Lamond was aiming for a traditional rendition of the Gaelic lyrics, she integrated pop conventions as well. First, Lamond adheres to the three minute pop song format by shortening many Gaelic songs, which tend to be lengthy in their traditional forms. She is sometimes conflicted about this practice, but told me in an interview in 2004, “people have such a much shorter attention span that even people who can understand the words can’t stand it if somebody sings 22 verses. They find it too long”. Of course, she is not the only Gaelic singer to shorten songs; many other Gaelic singers in both local and commercial contexts shorten their songs for the same reasons.

Second, she employs typical pop-rock instruments in her arrangements. Whereas, as I have already indicated, more than half the tracks on her two most traditional albums are unaccompanied, all but three on *Suas e!* and two on *Làn Dùil* are. Moreover, the instrumental arrangements on her most traditional albums, *Bho Thìr nan Craobh: From the Land of the Trees* and *Òrain Ghàidhlig*, are restricted to no more than three acoustic instruments. On her pop albums, however, arrangements feature a combination of guitars, bass, keyboards, and drums and make ample use of studio effects. Cello, trumpet, and distinctive percussion instruments add unique timbres and textures. Lamond does make use of a range of ‘Celtic’ instruments in her pop arrangements: in addition to the fiddle and bagpipes, the bodhran (Irish drum), accordion, and bouzouki¹⁵ contribute to selected tracks. Although these instruments may be interpreted as ‘traditional’ by a mainstream audience, and although they are frequently used by traditional Irish and Scottish musicians, they are not typically played in traditional contexts in Cape Breton. These instruments serve to sonically label her music as ‘Celtic’ in the global marketplace, but are not in fact traditional sounds in Cape Breton Gaelic culture.

On *Làn Dùil* she also incorporates tabla on several tracks, and Indian bols (vocables used to represent and transmit tabla rhythms) on one. In the liner notes, the bols are equated with Gaelic mouth music. The incorporation of Indian tabla and bols can be understood to signal that Lamond's music is 'world beat' in its blending of different traditions (reminiscent of the kinds of Celtic music created by Afro Celt Sound System, Mouth Music, and Baka Beyond). It also suggests the ways in which Gaelic culture is part of a global music culture, as both Gaelic and Indian cultures have 'mouth music'. Thus, Gaelic song is not marginal and incomprehensible, but rather shares characteristics with other cultures of the world. Finally, the arrangement may serve to elevate Gaelic song by equating it with the Indian *classical* music tradition.¹⁶ Alternatively, it is entirely possible that rather than seeking to elevate the status of Gaelic song, Lamond may simply have combined two "exotic" musics to better position herself in the world beat music market. She may also have enjoyed the challenge of incorporating such innovative combinations and viewed them as part of her artistic growth as a pop-rock singer.

What I am suggesting is that Lamond attempted to combine traditional elements, such as imagery and lyrics, with pop accompaniments and arrangements in order to appeal simultaneously to both traditional and mainstream audiences. My next question was whether those audiences actually receive Lamond's albums in the ways she intended or expected. When I spoke with Cape Breton Gaels, they tended to avoid passing judgement on Lamond's albums, which is not surprising. The Cape Breton Gaelic community is small, and Lamond is well-liked as a person, singer, and community activist. No one would have wanted to offend her. The single local published review of *Suas e!* I know of makes no reference to the song arrangements or Lamond's vocal performance (Rankin, 1997). However, and to my mind significantly, it does praise Lamond for her *choice of repertoire*, which one might expect in a culture that privileges lyrics: "For anyone interested in the lyrics of songs, above all else, Mary Jane Lamond's new release *Suas E* is a treasure" (ibid). The review centres on summaries of lyrics and descriptions of song texts while providing a few lyric excerpts, highlighted as noteworthy poetry. Similarly, in a local review of *Làn Dùil*, the contemporary arrangements are acknowledged, but the focus is on praise for Lamond's celebration of community by her inclusion of local people on the album (MacEachen, 1999).

However, Margaret Bennett, a folklorist and Gaelic singer and speaker from Scotland, was less reserved about her feelings for *Suas e!* She played the CD for a group of Gaelic speakers on the Isle of Skye in Scotland and wrote a review based on their reactions. Criticisms, not surprisingly given traditional Gaelic song aesthetics, focused on issues of language:

Mary Jane Lamond's Gaelic is quite good – very good, in some of the songs, but listen, you can't make out a word of ["Bòg a' Lochain"]. Mind you, other [songs] are quite clear.' (I would single out tracks 2 and 10 as having the best diction, in particular her convincing introduction to the song, spoken with clear articulation.)
(Bennett, 1998b: 27)

One of the listeners apparently even asked, "Is she singing Gaelic?" with respect to *Bòg a' Lochain*. When I myself spoke to one native Gaelic speaker and singer from Scotland, she noted with respect to Lamond's first album that the producers "might have worked a little harder on Mary Jane's Gaelic before they actually put it on tape, but one learns as one goes." Language is clearly of central concern to all these people. They seem far less concerned with or interested in the arrangements.

So despite Lamond's efforts to privilege the lyrics, she may not have always succeeded according to traditional aesthetics. But what do mainstream reviewers make of her Gaelic songs? I would like to consider the ways in which a mainstream audience might receive and respond to Lamond's albums, using reviews in the popular press as a starting point. Given that reviewers in the popular press presumably do not understand the Gaelic language, have no significant knowledge of Gaelic culture, and assume their readers are much the same, their personal opinions and assessments are rooted in the melodies, groove, instrumental arrangements, and vocal timbres, rather than based on the poetry and its rendition. A few excerpts will illustrate:

If you've heard the Chieftains' Fire in the Kitchen album, then you've heard the first track on Lan Duil, "A Mhairi Bhoidheach (Beautiful Mary)." The arrangement is different here, with a shimmering backdrop of accordion and delicately picked guitar underscoring the powerful vocals. A strong but non-intrusive percussion beat and bass line anchor and balance the song. Fiddler Wendy MacIsaac joins in on "Faill ill o ro," playing a tune called "The Orphan" as a bridge in this portrait of Highland life. (Scanlon, nd: online)

Mary Jane is well aware that the strength of her material lies in the tunes and the words, and these are never swamped by the arrangement: on the other hand, she knows how to weave the powerful dance music of Cape Breton into the songs to create counterpoint and break up the verses. Indeed, the word "powerful" is a very apt description of the songs and music here. "Varied" would be another good description, with tracks ranging from a capella worksongs via toe-tapping mouth music to Celtic pop. As well as the soft rock arrangements, there are world-class fiddles and pipes dovetailed into the singing. There's also quite a bit of tasteful experimentation with archive recordings and techno programming: nothing too shocking, but some very imaginative effects. (Monaghan, 2002: online)

Her radiant, flexible voice creaks like an old woman's or soars like a young girl's as she goes within each song and reports back like a time traveler. If Lamond's singing never, ever disappoints, the instrumental settings are another story. The trap drums and electric bass are often distractingly loud and placed too far forward in the mix, while the synthesizers tend to be distressingly facile and wide of the mark. There are enough excellent tracks to warrant making the purchase, such as the mournful "Cha Tig Mor Mo Bhean Dhachaidh (The Widower's Lament)" and "Mo Ghille Mor Foghain'Each (Charles Street Reel)," with its percolating tabla, electronic mouth music conceits and jaunty fiddling, but getting to them might take a bit of patience. (Roden, 1998: online)

Wisely, the emphasis is placed on Lamond's exceptional voice, because, for the most part, the music is unexceptional: a mix of folk-rock riffs and melodies with some Gaelic instrumental touches thrown in here and there – bagpipe, fiddle and so on. In terms of the overall musical tone of the album, it wouldn't be far off to describe Lamond as a Gaelic Sarah McLachlan [sic]: a purveyor of stirring, smart, soothing music that's a pleasure to kick back and listen to. (Szeman c.1999: online)

Her voice is often praised, but for her sound, rather than for her diction. Reviewers rarely comment on the lyrics themselves, as Rankin emphasised in her local review of *Suas e!*, quoted earlier. Instead, they tend to focus their attention on the arrangements. As Reiss observes in his essay on Irish traditional music:

The exotic is portrayed... by the sound of Gaelic. Songs sung in Gaelic inhere a quality of alienness that is seldom modified by translation. This alien language is then used to construct imaginary time: a sense of ancientness or timelessness, from which the traditional tunes emanate. (2003: 163)

Although the strength of Lamond's materials "lies in the tunes and the words," the words are rarely mentioned, at most acknowledged in brief song summaries or title translations. Given that Lamond's songs are almost all traditional Gaelic songs, rather than newly-composed, the reviewers may be forgiven for associating the language with an idealised past rather than thinking of it as a modern, living language. Thus, even though Lamond frames herself as a contemporary Cape Breton Gaelic singer, she is interpreted as providing a "portrait of Highland [Scottish] life," "report[ing] back like a time traveler," where Gaelic songs are retrieved from the past rather than associated with the present.¹⁷

Lamond's Gaelic lyrics are recognised by both traditional and mainstream audiences, but in very different ways. The traditional audience focuses on Lamond's choice of repertoire and her rendition of them as an index of the degree to which she has learned the language and understood its importance in song performance. For a mainstream audience, Gaelic is an 'exotic' language. Lamond's fluency in Gaelic is associated with authentic origins and a pure, ancient tradition. In other words, it creates what Tim Taylor calls "authenticity of primality":

Another facet of the authenticity issue concerns origins; this is perhaps the oldest assumption made by westerners of musics from outside the west. What is of concern to listeners is that the world music (or alternative rock or what have you) they consume has some discernible connection to the timeless, the ancient, the primal, the pure, the chthonic. (1997: 26)

At the same time, the Gaelic lyrics also give Lamond's music a patina of "authenticity of emotionality" whereby "western listeners [tend] to impose gut-level, romantic ideas and feelings to musics they might not otherwise be able to respond to at all, except with puzzlement" (ibid: 25).

Lamond had herself considered what it meant for non-Gaelic speakers to listen to her music: "I don't want to do this because I think the songs are hopeless and needed all this help, but more in interest in being able to communicate on a different level with people who don't understand the language" (quoted in Haggart, 1997: online). But with a shift from a Gaelic to a mainstream audience, there is a concomitant shift in the location of meaning in her songs from the lyrics and poems, which reach the audience through the *medium* of Lamond's voice, to Lamond's voice itself. Meaning and authenticity are located in the music, rather than in the lyrics and their sense.

Languages, however, have semantic meaning, even if not for all audiences. In a perceptive and articulate passage, the final reviewer I referenced ponders the value of (exotic) languages in world beat music:

This is one of the irresolvable antinomies of world music: as Western audiences are unlikely to understand the lyrical content of the songs (except by reading liner notes), the point of access to music not in English tends to be through the music and the emotional feeling that it conveys. This is why the most popular forms of world music tend to be the least challenging and the most (apparently) exotic. All in all, there's something disturbingly middle of the road about much Gaelic and Celtic music, and Lamond's is no exception. It's beautiful, enchanting, but entirely unthreatening — the sophisticate's version of muzak. It shouldn't be this way, and I'm not about to suggest that we should stop listening to the exciting music being produced around the world. I'm just suspicious about what it all means. (Szeman. c.1999: online)

Even if Lamond intended her use of Gaelic to be a political statement, legitimising it as a language appropriate for an international music market and raising its national and international profile, it can be depoliticised by the tendency for mainstream audiences to associate it with a distant time and place; it is therefore beautiful and enchanting, like a medieval princess or castle, "but entirely unthreatening."

With both *Suas e!* and *Làn Dùil*, Lamond has tried hard to balance the aesthetic requirements of the Cape Breton Gaelic community by privileging the lyrics in her arrangements and in the overall sound mix, with the aesthetic requirements of a mainstream audience by creating innovative and interesting instrumental backdrops, or "soundscapes," as Lamond called them, for her voice (Melhuish, 1998: 142-3). But if Lamond's albums are meant to introduce Gaelic culture to a mainstream audience, has she failed to convey the principal, guiding aesthetic that requires that the lyrics be central? Lamond may well have chosen not to provide full English translations of her Gaelic songs in the liner notes in order to allow the Gaelic language to stand on its own, perhaps even to force the listener to look at the Gaelic lyrics rather than heading straight for the English translations. However, with

nothing to hang onto, the non-Gaelic speaking audience has no choice but to treat the lyrics as another sonic, rather than linguistic, element.

Others have a different perspective. Lang and McLeod argue that there is far too much English used in the packaging of Gaelic song recordings and that there is too much concern for non-Gaelic speaking audiences. They argue that English liner note text “weakens Gaelic music as a domain for Gaelic language use (and therefore for language revitalisation efforts) if English is used as the sole medium of communication... in the packaging and presentation of recorded music, in order to accommodate non-Gaelic speakers” (2005: 1). They argue that “Gaelic music provides, at the very least, an opportunity for more visibility for Gaelic and for a thoroughly bilingual approach – if not a more-Gaelic-than-English approach” (ibid: 9).

In terms of the Cape Breton Gaelic community, I wonder if Lamond sings exclusively in Gaelic to show her commitment to the language and culture, as well as to demonstrate her “insider” understanding of it, in order to achieve greater acceptance within the community. At the same time, she seems to use Gaelic’s exotic flavour – and the putative cultural authenticity it symbolises – to appeal to a mainstream market. Language is central to Lamond’s attraction to both Gaelic and mainstream audiences, but for different reasons. The Gaelic audience locates the power of the language in the meaning of the song texts themselves, judging Lamond on her ability to convey the words’ meanings clearly, accurately, and expressively. The mainstream audience locates the power of the language in its symbolic representation of an exotic Other, judging Lamond on her cultural “authenticity” and her ability to manifest a sense of “Gaelicness” in the *sound* of her voice (rather than the meaning of her words) as well as in the accompanying instrumental arrangements.

A quotation from Lamond herself proves illuminating:

I grew up thinking innovation was what was the best – that’s what was artistic and creative, like David Bowie and Iggy Pop and all this stuff. That’s what was cool when I was a teenager. And then you’re dealing with this material, and I have an incredible amount of respect for it, but really what’s prized is the exact opposite of innovation. So you’re trying to be both, and you always have one foot on one side of this chasm and one on the other, and you’re so likely to fall in. (Ritchie, 1998: online)

Lamond is ‘bicultural’ in that she was raised in one culture and has adopted another. She strives to do honour and justice to the aesthetic requirements of each but she is caught up in the tensions of binaristic discourses opposing modern and traditional, global and local, language and music. She has obligations to each community as her ability to live in one is predicated on her ability to make a living in the other. Lamond’s ambivalence regarding her position within these two cultures is evident not only in the co-existence of traditional Gaelic and contemporary mainstream elements on the two albums discussed, but in the constant stylistic shifts evident over her recording career, beginning with a highly traditional album, moving to two pop albums, and returning again to two more traditional albums. Has Lamond managed to bridge the chasm? Is such a bridging even possible? The questions may remain unanswered, but they form a subtext of Lamond’s reception in both the Cape Breton Gaelic and mainstream music communities.

It is also pertinent to extend the scope of these queries to understand how Lamond’s recordings and career relate to and express aspects of contemporary Cape Breton Gaelic identity. While the ‘protected space’ of the island has allowed Gaelic culture to survive – albeit in diminished form – into the early 21st century, the opening up of the island by train, ferry, and air transport, and especially by the creation of the Canso Causeway in 1955, linking the island’s roads to those of the mainland, has hastened its decline. Modern electronic media have also played a major part in this, strengthening and facilitating greater anglophonic hegemony; and popular music has been a significant element of this. The questions that can be posed regarding Lamond are also ones applicable for Cape Breton Gaelic culture more generally. How much will Gaelic pop’s insertion within a context of an exploited (‘quaint’) cultural niche market help sustain – or otherwise

'museumify' – its Gaelic base? Do the broader realms of world music and global tourism offer hope of cultural continuance or are they its picturesque sunset?

Endnotes:

1. I am grateful to my colleagues, Richard MacKinnon and Chris McDonald, for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I am also indebted to the anonymous reviewers of this article, who made valuable suggestions and steered me towards useful literature.

2. The album on which *Sleepy Maggie* appeared, *Hi™, How Are You Today*, sold more than half a million copies worldwide and was certified triple platinum in Canada. The album also won a Juno Award for Best Traditional and Roots Recording.

3. A Juno Award is the Canadian equivalent of an American Grammy Award. The East Coast Music Awards (ECMA) were established in order to recognise a greater number of east coast musicians than could be, or have been, recognised by the Juno Awards, as well as to increase their visibility. The Canadian Folk Music Awards (CMFAs) were established in 2005 in order to provide greater opportunities for recognizing "the breadth and depth of folk music in Canada" (from the CFMA website: <http://www.canadianfolkmusicawards.ca/about.htm> - accessed January 2007).

4. Lamond features Gaelic songs that originated in Scotland as well as songs made by local Cape Breton bards. Most of the local compositions date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, Lamond also includes one Gaelic song composed by a young, fluent Gaelic learner from Cape Breton, Jeff MacDonald (Goiridh Alastair Dhùghail), on *Làn Dùil*. This is one of very few Gaelic songs made recently in Cape Breton.

5. Scottish Gaelic immigrants settled in many parts of Canada, establishing Gaelic communities. See, for example, Margaret Bennett's work on the Gaels of Newfoundland's Codroy Valley (1989) and the Eastern townships of Quebec (1998a). However, while some Gaelic speakers may still be found in these areas, they are exceptions, whereas Gaelic in Cape Breton, while declining rapidly, is still a living language and culture in that it is taught in some schools, and Gaelic cultural events still regularly occur in communities throughout the island.

6. Antigonish County is on mainland Nova Scotia, adjacent to Cape Breton Island.

7. John Lorne Campbell summarised his unofficial 1932 census findings in *Songs Remembered in Exile* (1990), where he indicates that he enumerated a total of 15,425 Gaelic speakers in Cape Breton and its immediate vicinity. But he also writes, "It would not have been surprising if the actual total were twice that figure, especially as some correspondents only estimated percentages" (16).

8. The number is considerably less according to the Canadian census. Based on a 20% sampling rate, there are 265 people in Cape Breton with Gaelic as a first language (mother tongue), 655 who speak it (to what degree is unspecified), and none who use it in the home (Canada Census 2001: Profile of Language, Mobility and Migration for Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Divisions, and Census Subdivisions).

9. For a more detailed analysis of how these sociolinguistic factors have affected Gaelic in Cape Breton, see Sparling (2006).

10. Readers unfamiliar with Lamond may find it helpful to hear some examples of her music. Lamond's website, <http://www.maryjanelamond.ca>, includes excerpts from most songs and most of her albums.

11. Although tourists may be viewed ambivalently by Cape Bretoners, tourism has the potential to play a significant role in the maintenance of the Gaelic language in several ways. First, Gaelic learners from around the world come to Cape Breton to learn and practice their Gaelic. This Gaelic tourism provides teaching jobs for Gaelic speakers. Second, tourists of all kinds are attracted to the "Folk" found in Cape Breton and past provincial governments have capitalised on this by "tartanizing" the province (see McKay, 1992). Cultural tourism depends on there being identifiable cultures to see. Thus, tourism encourages government subsidies and funding to support Gaelic initiatives, especially Gaelic language instruction, to encourage more Cape Bretoners to learn and speak the language. It is no accident that both culture and tourism are the mandate of a single ministerial portfolio, the Ministry of Culture, Heritage and Tourism, in the Nova Scotia Legislative Assembly. Third, touristic interest in Gaelic increases its legitimacy, given its history of having been regarded as a "backward" language. Fourth, a healthy economy results in local residents having the disposable income and time needed to learn the language.

12. I use the term 'native speaker' to refer to those who have learned Gaelic as their first language. However, this is not to say that all native speakers speak Gaelic equally well or comfortably. Given the

overall decline in the Cape Breton Gaelic population and the loss of many contexts in which Gaelic would have been spoken in the past, native speakers today may best be understood as 'semi-native speakers', to reflect the limitations and partiality of the Gaelic they would have learned and which they use.

13. The liner notes to *Suas e!* attribute the words to John Rory Stuart, as quoted by Jimmy MacKay in *Seallabh gu Taobh*. However, in the book *Sealladh gu Taobh*, Jimmy MacKay attributes to the words to John Roy Stewart (Watson and Robertson, 1987: 31).

14. For example, Gaelic song arrangements on albums by Mouth Music and Talitha MacKenzie (who had some success on the world music charts in the 1990s) clearly privilege musical arrangements over the Gaelic texts.

15. The Greek bouzouki was introduced into Irish music by Johnny Moynihan of Sweeney's Men in the late 1960s and has now been adopted as a standard instrument in contemporary Irish folk music ensembles.

16. This is not to say that aspects of Gaelic song are not deemed "classical" or "art song" within the Gaelic community. See, for example, my discussion of Gaelic song genres in my PhD dissertation (Sparling, 2006). However, there is the potential for a mainstream audience unfamiliar with Gaelic song and poetry to assume that all Gaelic song belongs to a vernacular tradition.

17. See Chapman (1978) for an analysis of how romanticised notions of Gaels and Gaelic culture have been constructed by outsiders. See Macdonald (1997) for an analysis of the ways in which Scottish Gaels are invested in some romanticised notions of Gaelic culture and history while resisting others.

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