

## A Message from Séamus Connolly



**Séamus Connolly. Photo by Bachrach Studios.**

It is a warm April day, 2016. A bright sun against a stark blue sky welcomes me back to Rome, Italy. As I take my first steps on the Ancient Appian Way (Via Appia Antica), memories begin flooding back. It was on this same ancient road, marked with grooves from the Roman chariots, that an idea to publish a music collection of old and newly-composed tunes was first spoken of. It was fifteen years ago, in the spring of 2001, when my wife Chrysandra 'Sandy' Walter and I took a holiday to Italy. We came to visit longtime friends, Enrica and Stuart, and their lovely young children Julia and William. A holiday never to be forgotten!

One of our first escapades from the Eternal City in 2001 found us heading north through the beautiful Italian countryside towards the city of Cremona, believed by many to be the birthplace of master luthier, Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737). In the Museo del Violina, Sandy and I had the euphoric experience of seeing and hearing the master's historical violins played in an exquisite and professional performance. We discussed the importance of preservation and were overjoyed and delighted to

see how pristine the master's instruments looked and resonated centuries after they were built.

On another day, fate would have it that we came across the home of another Italian master, Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). We discussed at length how Verdi's music and the music of past masters and composers lives on through transcriptions, performances and recordings by world-renowned artists. We were reminded of the legendary Irish tenor Count John McCormack (1884-1945) and his celebrated performances of maestro Verdi's superb arias.

Our conversation then turned to Irish music. We discussed the monumental work carried out by Dr. Ciarán Mac Mathúna, the beloved Irish broadcaster and music collector. Ciarán travelled the length and breadth of Ireland for many years, recording Irish music, stories, songs and poetry. His recording sojourns also took him to England and North America. He presented these recordings to the Irish nation through several educational radio programmes: 'Ceolta Tire', 'A Job of Journeywork', 'American Journeywork', and the wonderful Sunday morning series 'Mo Cheol Thú'. Thanks to Ciarán's labour of love, the Irish nation and many listeners throughout Great Britain heard, often for the first time, music and song from all parts of Ireland. In my own county of Clare, listeners such as myself were delighted to be introduced to music and song in the great northern traditions, from singers and musicians who lived in such far afield places as Donegal, Derry, and Antrim. Ciarán often visited Clare, Sligo, Galway, and Kerry as well, documenting and recording yet more of Ireland's wonderful music and song. At all times, Ciarán was mindful of the importance of capturing and recording ordinary people who had their very own distinctive styles and dialects.

One such person I remember hearing on Ciarán's programmes was Julia Clifford, the master fiddle player from the Sliabh Luachra area of County Kerry. When I was just sixteen years old, Mrs. Clifford offered to play tunes for me to record, learn, and add to my repertoire. This generous lady, along with her son Billy on flute, played some lovely music for me. Many of the tunes were unfamiliar to me, and upon asking Julia the name of a tune that she and Billy had played, she would ask in surprise, 'You don't have it - do you?' What a lovely memory of a wonderful evening of music, chat, and inspiration to continue learning and playing my beloved fiddle.

Upon hearing this story, and thinking back to our conversation in Rome about a music book, Sandy suggested that Julia's question, 'You Don't Have It - Do You?' would make an interesting and engaging title for a music book. As an official in the United States National Park Service, Sandy had long been an advocate for education, preservation, and restoration. Forever thinking of new projects, she envisioned a book that would include transcriptions, recordings, songs, and oral history. She knew that I had been inspired by Ciarán Mac Mathúna's work, and that I and many people of my generation had collected and recorded music on big Grundig reel-to-reel machines. It was from these source recordings, along with others from

Ciarán's programmes, that I learned many of my favourite tunes. Sandy and I agreed that these tunes and songs should be enjoyed, learned and performed by others, especially up-and-coming young musicians, giving them a greater awareness of the tradition while preserving the music and its history for posterity. It was at this time that our commitment to creating a collection was born.

On returning home to America, I began the task of selecting 100 tunes from my private archive of source recordings for inclusion in a music collection. These tunes had special meaning for me and still do. Although some of them had fallen out of favor, I knew that my contemporaries in music would be quite familiar with the selections. And so, my grand plan was to have these tunes become popular once again. I was absolutely confident that if my music friends were to play and perform these gems, the tunes would quickly return to circulation, to be enjoyed by musicians, young and not so young alike.

Sandy, the master organiser in my life, was also at work on her computer. She began creating files of colour-coded documents, noting the original source recordings, the type of tune (reel, jig, etc.), and other information pertinent to each selection. Due to copyright issues, we realised we would be unable to publish these private source recordings in the collection. I imagined myself personally performing each tune for the project, while only utilising the source recordings to create transcriptions that would become part of a proposed book.

Over time, the vision for the project developed to include additional tunes and songs, making it potentially a much larger collection. It would be a daunting task for me to try and learn all the tunes and record them for this compendium. At this juncture something wonderful and noble happened that altered the course and direction for the collection, reshaping the idea into a more educational and interesting music assignment. Friends and contemporary masters of the tradition, learning of the project, generously offered their time and talents to learn and record selections for the collection. These masters were delighted and honoured to pass along the music and song in the same spirit of collegiality in which they and I had learned this oral and aural tradition. In doing so, they knew that the music would be heard, learned, played and passed along to future generations.

Deeply grateful for my colleagues' generous offers, my next assignment was to transfer to CDs some original source recordings that I had made so long ago, and mail the CDs to these masters of the tradition. These friends had kindly offered to go to their own hometown studios to record the tunes that I had chosen for them. This approach was most helpful, as it allowed me time to concentrate on other aspects of the project. Going beyond the call of duty, a number of these artists offered their own compositions for inclusion as well.

In the meantime, Sandy and I brought my recording equipment to Ireland, where we met with some of the musicians and singers who had offered to record for us. In

doing so we collected some beautiful performances for inclusion in the project. Once back in America, we travelled to a number of different places and again collected other outstanding musical gems. Eagerly awaiting the new recordings to arrive by post from my collaborators, I set about sequencing the tracks that I already had, putting them in an order in which they would appear in a ten-CD set together with a planned music book.

At this time my friend John McGann, a producer, transcriber, and faculty member at Berklee College of Music, as well as a master performer on stringed instruments, began transcribing the recordings. John truly was a natural musician and he loved every minute of his work in music. Sadly, John left us all too soon, and he is missed by many. Then life took yet another turn for the worse when my darling wife, Sandy, was stricken with cancer. The news was devastating for both of us, but we did our best dealing with it day by day while she battled the illness for a number of years. Then my life crumbled all around me when Sandy, my best friend and confidante, succumbed to her illness. I so missed her and still do. After she passed away, I knew that I was loved by friends and family, but I still found grieving and trying to cope very difficult.

And then, another tragedy. My son Darragh, loved by everyone who knew him, died suddenly. He and Sandy are a huge loss to our family. They both leave a void in our hearts. I thank God that I still have two children in my life, my son Ronan and my daughter Keelin. I am grateful for their love and understanding. After the loss of Sandy and Darragh, I lost the will, motivation, and inspiration to persevere with this enormous task of compiling a collection of music to share with the world. After much deliberation I decided to put the project to rest.

After a long hiatus, my dear friend Dr. Cindy Polo offered much encouragement to resume working on the collection. As a first step, she offered to refresh Sandy's document and to bring the information up to date. Deep down inside me, I knew that I really needed to complete what Sandy and I had begun. After a little more persuasion by Cindy, I began to believe in myself again and in my music. The wheel always turns, and I was now ready to move forward.

Sandy's sister Diane and husband Chuck visited me for a few weeks to help with personal tasks, one of which was to locate Sandy's files for the collection. Not finding a music-related file on the computer, they were puzzled. They knew that she had worked long and hard on this project, but were at a loss as to where the files were stored. I was distressed by the thought that the documents may have been lost. At Diane and Chuck's suggestion, I sat at the computer and together we opened every folder. Coming to the very last folder on the computer, I said, 'Click on that'. There it was in full view, the document that Sandy had aptly named 'You Don't Have It - Do You?' Many years of hard work and dedication came back to life. This earlier proposed collection title, 'You Don't Have It - Do You?' somehow had not been shared with Chuck and Diane. Now on a roll, Chuck forwarded the document to

Cindy. Hundreds of miles apart, she and I collaborated during hours of telephone conversations, updating the document and getting the project back on track.

I continued John McGann's work of transcribing the tunes. My friend Bonnie Bewick Brown, who recorded for the collection, also contributed a number of transcriptions and arrangements. Collaborating with another friend, music scholar, music editor, and transcriber Paul Wells, brought this important segment of the collection to a welcome closure. Thanks, Paul, for the knowledge, experience, patience, and commitment that you brought to the project over many months.

During the time when I was working with Paul on the transcriptions, I was also hand-writing narratives and anecdotes about the tunes and songs. When I completed my first draft of these stories, another friend, Brenda Cerino, offered to type them for me. (I am blessed with many friends!) At this same time, music scholar, piper, flute and whistle player Kieran O'Hare and his wife, fiddle player, arranger, and composer Liz Knowles moved to Maine. Keenly interested in the collection, Liz recorded some beautiful tracks for the enterprise and Kieran, another champion for the cause, worked long hours reviewing and editing my music stories and anecdotes. Thank you Kieran for your knowledge and skills. You are indispensable!

I began to record my own tracks for the collection with help from my friend Gabriel Donohue, an extraordinarily talented musician and recording engineer. Gabriel's many contributions included adding his own accompaniment to a few tracks on the sequenced CDs that I brought to his studio, and digitizing a selection of source recordings for project. He matched the volume from one track to another, and never once did he have to edit any of the new tracks. Such was the mastery of these generous and talented musicians, who recorded the tracks while interpreting the source recordings in their own way. It is a testament to their musicality and skills. What a gift they have given to all of us.

With many components of the project completed, and the digital world having complicated many aspects of music publishing, I was at a loss as to how this compilation of music and song might be published and distributed. After many years of hard work, I was concerned that Sandy's and my dream of leaving to posterity this valuable collection, my life's work, might never come to fruition. Then, while in New York City at a Boston College function, Dr. Thomas Wall, University Librarian of the Boston College Libraries, inquired about the status of my project. Upon hearing my concerns, he generously offered the libraries' support and staff to digitally publish the collection. My fear that the collection would not be published disappeared. I knew that from that point on, the collection would be in good hands.

After three years of collaboration with Libraries' staff on this digital project, we have decided that the title of our production from now on will be known as *The Séamus Connolly Collection of Irish Music*. What began simply as 100 tunes for a book and CD

production is now a digital collection of over 330 audio tracks, each with its own transcription and story. And so, it is from this collaboration that the Boston College Libraries and I are delighted to present *The Séamus Connolly Collection of Irish Music* in October 2016, free of charge via the Internet, for all to enjoy, download, learn, and play.

I am indebted to Ciarán Mac Mathúna for his work in travelling the highways and byways of Ireland, collecting the music of our country, and thereby introducing me to the wonderful music of County Kerry and Julia Clifford. Through her music, Julia's name lives on. Somehow I know that the question she asked when I was sixteen years old, 'You don't have it – do you?' will again surface and be put to good use somehow, somewhere in time.

Through their artistry, and love for what they do, the musicians in this project together stand tall as torch bearers, enabling Gaelic music and song traditions to endure the test of time. Such is the work of a true master.

And now, fifteen years after the dawning of this project, I have once again returned to Rome to visit my friends Enrica and Stuart and their two children, Julia and William, now teenagers and still lovely. Enjoying wonderful gelato while we stroll along the grey cobblestones of the queen of roads, Via Appia Antica, Enrica proudly points out the astonishing architecture and describes her native city as an 'outside museum'. We fondly remember my beloved wife, Chrysandra 'Sandy' Walter Connolly, whose incredible determination and inspiration will live forever through this collection. The spectacular country of Italy bore witness to the conception of this project, and whilst here in Italy, the circle is finally coming to a close.

**Now you do have it – don't you?**

Enjoy!

Séamus Connolly

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*A 2013 NEA National Heritage Fellow, Séamus Connolly served as Sullivan Artist in Residence in Irish Music at Boston College from 2004 to 2015.*