

Introduction

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This volume represents a selection of papers delivered at a colloquium on laments sponsored by the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), The Australian National University (ANU), the National Folklore Conference (NFC) and the National Folk Festival (NFF) on 20–22 April 2011. The title was ‘One Common Thread: A Colloquium on the Musical Expression of Loss and Bereavement’. Nineteen papers were delivered over three days at the ANU School of Music and the National Library of Australia (hosting the NFC). A ‘conversation with renowned Australian collector and folk musician Rob Willis on Australian folk laments with scholar and folklorist Jennifer Gall from the National Film and Sound Archive’ was held as a preliminary public event.¹ The program of the colloquium consisted of keynote addresses, paper sessions, roundtable presentations and discussions, concerts and a public forum at the National Folk Festival. A conscious effort was made to include a variety of presentation forms and opportunities for public participation.

The idea for the colloquium was initiated by a lecture-recital on Scots Gaelic laments given by visiting singer Christine Primrose at the Research School of Humanities, ANU. At the colloquium Christine illustrated this tradition by singing to accompany the opening keynote address with Ruth Lee Martin: ‘Songs of Loss and Longing in Scots Gaelic.’ The organisers sought to be cross-cultural as well as historical in scope, including presentations on Indigenous Australian, Scottish Australian, Chinese Australian, Fijian, Korean, Mongolian, Irish, Uzbekistani, Papuan New Guinean and Hawaiian laments, not all of which made it into this volume. In addition, presentations were made on Western popular music and Western art music. Undoubtedly it is a huge topic and this volume only scrapes the surface.

The concept of laments was deliberately defined broadly as ‘the musical expression of loss and bereavement’ whether or not the traditions represented included self-identified genres of laments. The colloquium brief also included ‘expressions of loss of culture, language, home or country, or personal loss’. Three main themes were identified

- loss of place/displacement
- personal loss
- cultural/language loss.

¹ From the program introduction to the colloquium.

All of the themes are represented in the papers of this volume.

The broader context of laments is the musical expression of emotion—a theme that is gathering momentum in international musicological and ethno-musicological circles, prompting the organisation of panels and whole conferences. The editors of this volume are not aware of any previous colloquium of the International Council for Traditional Music on the narrow or wider theme, although a world conference panel was convened in the past on the latter (Vienna, in 2007). And yet, laments are part of the cultural history of a people, especially of oral cultures. Through the private or public outpouring of grief, a healing process is enacted, and positive memories and connections are evoked and passed on through generations in eulogies or panegyric forms. We hope that this volume will contribute to and stimulate the further study of laments and of the wider musical expression of emotion.

The papers are grouped on principles of generality, genre, region and prominence in the colloquium. The first, by Sorce Keller, wide-ranging and erudite, acts as an introduction to the topic of laments. The last, by Corn, is, in part, a lament on the loss of Australian Indigenous song traditions—an appropriate, if sad, note on which to conclude an Australian volume on laments. Corn's oral presentation was given with Joe Gumbula, an Indigenous singer from Arnhem Land, northern Australia. Papers two to five are concerned with European laments: Porter's on Irish songs, Lee Martin's and Bowan's on Scottish songs in their diasporas, and Gall's on Irish-Australian songs. Papers six to nine have Asian-Pacific themes: Ng's on Chinese-Australian songs, Kaeppler's (Hawaiian), Plueckhahn's (Mongolian), and Gillespie and Hoenigman's (Papua New Guinean) on laments in their original locations. Loy's paper (10) is on Western popular music while Powles' (11) is on Western art music. The groups reflect the interests of sponsoring bodies, the diversity of the topic and the broad scope of the colloquium.

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