

Master's Thesis

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Caoine

Spaces for vocalising grief. The de-ritualisation
and re-ritualisation of keening in contemporary Ireland



Telemark University College

Faculty of Art, Folk Culture and Teacher Education

Master's Thesis in Traditional Arts 2014

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**“The oldest of the old follows behind us in our thinking, and yet comes to meet
us”**

Martin Heidegger

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Abstract

In this master's thesis I investigate the trajectory over time of the cultural practice of keening (the Irish funeral cry) – an improvised, sung oral poetry combined with choruses of wailing cries, performed at wakes and funerals. This pre-Christian tradition was primarily performed by women and ceased to be commonplace at funerals from the early twentieth century.

The contemporary keen now presents itself in two contexts: Keening ceremonies, and keening used as part of Holistic Voice Therapy. I seek to contextualise the keens reemergence in Irish society and develop a greater understanding of this cultural practice in its present form. Unlike the works of a number of scholars of folklore, music and literature solely concerned with the traditional keen, that have preceded, this thesis considers the contemporary uses of the keen, aiming to better understand it and to possibly determine the significance of its reappearance in Ireland today. Through participant observation of contemporary uses of the keen, interviewing key informants and through lived experience of it, I identify and analyse the form, context and function of keening today. I interpret this information, abstracting broader themes and generalizations about contemporary Ireland from the data. I discuss what these data may indicate about present day Ireland.

This project aims to gain an integrated understanding of the tradition of keening through study of the history of keening, practice of the keen both individually and in groups, and through interviews with people who use the keen today. The presentation of the practical work – a sound installation – is the culmination of this research, the resultant combination of the learned and lived experience of keening today.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

My oldest memory of the word *caoineadh* (keening) is hearing my father saying the phrase “those dogs are *caoineadh* outside”. He always used this expression when the dogs made a particular sound. My only way of describing this is to say it was a lonesome, forlorn sound, a sound of longing, as if something of immense significance had been taken away from the thing that keened. For the dogs it was usually their freedom that had been taken away, having been put into their bed for the night at a time they considered too early! This sound, difficult to describe but immediately recognisable, became familiar to me very early in life.

As a topic that had a certain amount of social stigma attached to it, keening was not a subject I was told about directly. Like many of the individuals I interviewed, it is as if I always knew what keening was (and I was more than a little curious about it).

A few years before commencing this research I had had an experience of hearing stylised crying and wailing while visiting a hospital in Zambia. I witnessed two women wailing over a recently deceased young boy. The sounds of their cries had an enormous impact on me and the effect their cries had on those present in the room was palpable.

This experience re-ignited my interest in the Irish tradition of keening and led me to inquiring what, if any, remnants of this long-standing, and none-too-recently ceased, tradition were present in Irish society?

With a background in sociology it was natural for me to attempt to look at the contemporary uses of the keen, as to focus on historical texts would leave me dependent on secondary sources and the opinions of others. I wanted to consider the topic as contemporarily relevant. The extent to which keening presented itself in contemporary was beyond anything I had imagined.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my SUPERvisors, Frode Nyvold and Mats Johansson, for their highly professional help with this project. Through their encouragement and much needed probing, they helped draw out my own voice and opinions on what I saw, read and learned. Thank you to Meadhbh Nic an Airchinnigh of University College Cork, Ireland who gave me guidance on the historical chapter of this research. I would like to thank all singers and interviewees for accepting me into their homes and sharing some deeply personal life experiences, thank you for the trust you invested in me and this project. To Elizabeth Ewing and Cáit Branigan for constantly being

there to answer questions on how they use keening with their groups – thank you for sharing your knowledge so freely, without you this project would not exist.

A heartfelt thank you to Delia Fano Yela (and to Cork School of Music for connecting me to her) for the hours spent editing and making the arrangement for the installation recordings what they are today – thank you for your support, for teaching me so much and for loving and respecting the sounds as I do! To Max le Cain and Chris Hurley, of the Cork Film Centre, for making the visuals a reality, thank you for your time, kindness and tuition. Thank you to Mick O’ Shea and the Guesthouse project in Cork for the great experience and opportunity of setting up and exhibiting my first installation. I would like to thank my family and friends, both in Ireland and Norway, for patiently listening to me talk in circles about my work constantly! To the countless seen and unseen hands that have helped the creation of this project along the way – thank you.

During this masters the three men of my childhood, and a beautiful young woman gave me the honour of sharing in their passing. I am forever grateful for this immensely beautiful experience, and for the depth of understanding this brought, thank you.

And lastly - a slightly peculiar expression of gratitude – I want to thank the project itself. The most fascinating, demanding and rewarding thing I have done. And I have loved every challenging minute of it!

Introduction

This thesis considers the pre-Christian vocal tradition of *caoine/caoineadh* (keening) – the Irish funeral cry. This predominantly female tradition consisted of extemporized laments and wails sung by *bean chaointe/mná caointe* (also known as keening women) as part of mortuary rituals in Ireland. Keening, a type of oral poetry and stylised cry/*gol*, was composed and sung in the presence of the deceased at wakes and funerals. Traversing the parallel worlds of this world and the next, traditionally the keener was believed to use her voice to guide the dead person's soul. It is this funeral keen I am referring to in the chapters that follow when I write about traditional or past keens.

Lament can be defined as crying songs, often occurring in a collective ritual context. It involves some form of text decrying and bemoaning the situation at hand. American anthropologist, James Wilce, defines lament as a "combination of three elements - tuneful, texted, weeping. Lament...is often sung or chanted" (Wilce, 2009, p.1). It is a blanket term used to describe very local forms of the tradition. In this thesis I consider the Irish tradition of *caoineadh* (keening) to be a combination of sung improvised text ("tuneful, texted") and ritual wailing ("weeping"). However in this study I also refer to keening as ritual wailing constituted by a variety of unintelligible vocables, sounds, screeches, wails etc., without the presence of text. Considering the alternative - the presence of mournful, bemoaning text without stylised crying – it is not referred to as keening and is termed as lament in this research. This is where, for me, the distinction lies between lament and keening - the term lament only being applicable if there is a text, while keening may refer to text and ritual wailing or wailing alone. In the case of this research I use it (keen) only in relation to Ireland and I identify clearly when I refer to keening as lamenting with text or as a stylised cry alone, the latter being referred to as *gol* or cry.

The current study considers the presence of the keen in Irish society today. Early in this research I was introduced to a phenomenon called Keening ceremonies a practice which has developed in Ireland in the past decade. Keening ceremonies do not take place in the presence of a corpse and so are a recontextualisation of the traditional keen. This group practice is inspired by the traditional funeral keen and uses the sounds of the *gol* or stylised cry part of past keening (no text). During this study I have also come across keening used today as part of Holistic Voice therapy work. When discussing the contemporary uses of the keen it is these two practices that I refer to. This project looks at the form, context and function of past and present keening, in order to understand and analyse these aspects of

this cultural practice, and their implications, in Ireland today. I aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary keen.

Previous research

The traditional keen has been investigated in the academic world by scholars concerned with the music and meter (such as Breandán Ó Madagain (1981 & 2005)) or with a primary interest in the literary, social, cultural and political meanings of the keen (folklorists and historians Seán Ó Súilleabháin (1961), Gearóid Ó Cruaí (1990), Angela Bourke (1988 & 2000), Patricia Lysaght (1997) and Aidan O' Donnell (2013)). Scholars Noreen Sullivan (2009) and Narelle Phyllis McCoy (2007) provide views on the mythological foundations of the *bean chaointe* and the process of de-ritualisation of the tradition in recent times. It appears that no academic research has been carried out on the current forms of keening, its possible functions in our society and reasons for re-emergence. Thus the present research differs from the authors, whose work I discuss in chapter two, as it investigates the contemporary uses of the keen, the functions attributed to it and considers peoples endeavours to re-ritualise the tradition.

Purpose and objectives of this research

This work chronicles the form, context and function of the keen overtime. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the contexts in which keening presents itself in Ireland today, aiming at a deeper understanding of the contemporary keen. In an attempt to gain a more integrated understanding of the present day keen, I will first examine past keens, discussing the earlier contexts in which it was sung, the musical characteristics of past keens and the function the keen and *bean chaointe* played as part of funerary rites in Ireland for centuries. Following collection of data on the present day keen, I will analyse the form this takes, the contexts in which it appears in contemporary Ireland and the role it plays for those who now sing the keen. Through these discussions I aim to gain a comprehensive view of the trajectory of this tradition over time. From this I propose to query what the reappearance of this cultural practice may signify in Irish society.

Secondly I aim to gain an embodied and personal understanding of the keen through lived experience and extensive practice of it, both with groups that sing the keen today and also through my own individual practice. As this thesis will develop my understanding of past and present keening on an intellectual level, so too the personal practice of keening will progress my understanding of the physical impact of singing the keen. It is also an aim of

this practice to develop my understanding of my own voice – both as a singer and as an individual.

A further component of these practical and theoretical undertakings will be the development of a sound installation. This installation is an artistic expression of my deliberation over my experiences of the keen, both through research and practice.

Outline of thesis

Chapter one of this thesis discusses the methodological framework chosen for this research. In this chapter I discuss my research design, conceptual framework, process of selecting and collecting data and how I plan to analyse the data collected. This chapter sets the framework for how information is collected and considered in this study. Chapter two presents a historical overview of the cultural practice of keening. With this as my base I proceed to analysing data collected on the modern practices of keening in chapter three. This chapter provides the observational data collected through use of and participation in the contemporary uses of the keen. I discuss the data gathered from interviews with users of the current day keen. Chapter four presents an interpretive analysis of the data collected and discusses this information through the framework of the concepts of front and backstage, traditionalization and liminality as discussed in the methodological chapter. The final chapter considers the progression to development of a sound installation, the process of developing the installation and the insights and learnings gained throughout this process. I conclude with a brief summary discussion of my main findings in this thesis and discuss possible future researches with this study as a basis.

This thesis addresses a clear gap in knowledge - that of the lack of research done on the uses of keening today. This study explores the contemporary keen, its form, context and function. In the following chapter the analytical framework for this research is discussed, presenting the manner in which I plan to address and resolve this gap in knowledge.

1 Theoretical framework

This thesis is a study of the cultural practice of keening, while also providing an historical survey of past keening. The main theoretical framework is drawn from social anthropology. This research consists of a strong ethnographical component with a methodological aim of this work being to achieve ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) – explaining not only the behaviour of past and present keening but presenting the context as well, and therefore generating meaning.

In this chapter I briefly describe the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for analysis. I discuss the research design that I have used to explore the contemporary keen, state the methods I have used to collect data and the procedures undertaken throughout the course of this research. Lastly I describe how I plan to analyse the data collected.

1.1 Theoretical framework for analysis

Anthropology is the comparative study of human societies, both past and present. It aims to understand social systems and account for social and cultural variation by examining social patterns and practices (Hylland Eriksen, 1995, p.42). Anthropology asks large questions, while at the same time draws its most significant insights from small places (Hylland Eriksen, 1995, p.2). Taking this anthropological notion of studying ‘small places’ to ask larger questions, I look at the phenomena of the contemporary keen in Ireland as a medium through which to consider the wider cultural context of contemporary Irish society. Social anthropology is concerned about those aspects of humankind which are acquired as a result of being part of a culture. It compares the many ways in which people create meaning and make sense of the world around them (Hylland Eriksen, 1995, p.2). As stated in the introduction, the main objective of this study is to describe and gain a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary keen. Implied in this objective is the desire to *make sense* of the phenomena and understand how users of the keen today create meaning and make sense of it. Using this framework, and with this objective in mind, I aim to understand and interpret the present day keen.

1.2 Research design

For the purposes of investigating the form, context and function of past and present keening, I employed the ethnographic techniques of semi-structured interviews, participant observation and textual analysis. The methods of research used for this study include extensive fieldwork whereby I interview individuals who have heard keening at funerals or

have used the keen in any way. The data collection method of participant observation is also employed in this research. I participate in Keening ceremonies, learn the keen and immerse myself in it in an attempt to come to a deeper understanding of the meaning and function of this practice. Textual analysis is the method used to analyse historical texts in an attempt to gain an understanding of the progression of the keen overtime. Lastly the process of self-observation is undertaken in this study. This involves learning the keen – from recordings of past keens and through participating in practices today – and evaluating my experiences and responses to keening as I progress in my learning. I record notes (on Dictaphone) of my experiences of the Keening ceremonies, how it felt physically and emotionally to make such sounds, and how it felt to make such sounds in the company of others. I observed myself, and my reactions to the keen through this process, continually reflecting on how the keen impacted upon me as a singer and as an individual. It is these notes I analyse in chapter three. I incorporated the methods of ethnography as it encompasses the processes necessary for me to come to know the contemporary keen and accomplish the objectives of this research. Ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews and textual analysis allow me to collect the data I need to achieve the objectives of this research. Through the use of participant observation further details were presented on the current context, form and process in which keening is used today. This method of research gave me access to information I needed to achieve my objective of examining and understanding the current keen, how it has been de-ritualised and considering the implications of its re-emergence in contemporary Ireland.

The resulting aim of this design is to achieve ‘thick description’ of the phenomena of modern day keening, so it becomes meaningful and understandable to a person unfamiliar with the tradition. The simultaneous consideration of context and behaviour of the practice is intrinsic to this methodological approach. ‘Thick description’, a term coined by Clifford Geertz in his work *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), refers to a writing methodology that permits anthropologists to interpret a culture by “understanding how the people within that culture are interpreting themselves and their own experiences” (Neni Panourgiá, 2012). This conflicts with the practice of observation from afar and instead of detached observation it supports *attached* observation – where the researcher is incorporated in the report of findings. This methodology involves participation in the cultural practice by the researcher and is practice oriented. Considering the aims of the research – coming to understand the keen and have an embodied experience of it – I chose this research methodology as it was most suitable for this study.

1.3 Concepts

1.3.1 Liminality

In anthropology liminality is the state of ambiguity that occurs in the middle stage of a ritual, when participants in the ritual are between statuses – neither pre-ritual nor post-ritual. At this point in a ritual the individual is at a threshold, a point of transformation between their previous way of being and their new way of being which is established on completion of the ritual.

A class of rituals most significant for this study is that of rites of passage, a concept first articulated by Arnold Van Gennep as a general theory in his book of the same name (*Rites of Passage* 1960), where he denoted rituals marking the transitional phases of an individual's life such as coming of age, marriage, death. Van Gennep stated that rites of passage were marked by three stages¹: separation, transitional phase (*liminal*) and incorporation.

Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner further explored these three phases as proposed by Van Gennep, and expanded theories of the second phase, the phase of transition or liminal phase. Turner stated that the status of people in the liminal phase are socially ambiguous for the duration of this phase and they are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (Hylland Eriksen, 1967. p.97). Turner writes that “Liminality may perhaps be... a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (Hylland Eriksen, 1967. p.97).

With this concept in mind I discuss past and present keening. It seems clear, as I will discuss later in the thesis, that a phase of liminality was entered during mortuary rituals in Ireland, of which keening played a pivotal role. However is this transitional phase a component of the context and experience of modern day keening? If so, what is the group attempting to alter? How is the potential for change being created? What role do the sounds of keening play in the creating a space with potential for change? Why in modern day society is this cultural practice to re-emerging and being traditionalized? I consider the significance of the groups attempt to re-ritualise keening, within the context of Keening

¹*Separation* – whereby the individual is separated and withdrawn from their current status in society (the *preliminal* world), *transitional* phase (*liminal*) – the individual is between the old and new worlds, and finally, *incorporation* – the individual enters the postliminal world, assuming his/her new identity/status in the world

ceremonies, and the possible impact of this in the creation of a liminal phase. Through the concept of liminality discussed by Turner, I will explore the modern day keening and its possibility to create opportunities for change. It is through the framework of this concept I aim to abstract some broader themes and generalizations from the data collected.

1.3.2 Front and Backstage

As another theoretical framework through which to consider data, I have chosen Erving Goffman's concept of front and backstage - basing the idea that parts of traditional keening represents front stage and other sounds of keening represent backstage, on this concept. Goffman's dramaturgy is a sociological perspective discussing human interaction as dependent on time, space and the individuals present. Goffman uses the metaphor of theatre to analyse and describe the way in which an individual presents him/herself to another based on cultural values, norms and expectations. He suggests there are stages or regions where people meet and present each other. Within this concept, frontstage is defined as "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (Goffman, 1969, p.32). In frontstage, people expect certain behaviours and actions from others, the actor adheres to conventions recognised by others present and actions are carried out in a manner perceived as correct by the group. Backstage on the other hand is the space in which actions perceived as forbidden can be acted out. It is the space where acts suppressed in the frontstage can be carried out. This space is a place of concealment, a private space in which the individual is free to behave and express as he or she wishes.

For the purposes of this research I consider frontstage as the public presentation of grief and backstage the private expression of grief. Through this framework I discuss the extent to which various aspects of the contemporary keening can be considered as front and backstage performances. Through viewing data from this perspective I discuss the changes in contextualisation of the keening, relating such changes to changes in function and form that I have identified. Through this discussion, this perspective aims to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon of keening.

1.3.3 Traditionalization

I consider the contemporary keen in terms of a traditionalization of former cultural practices of keening. American scholar Tom Mould defines traditionalization as an “act of contextualisation, grounding performance in specific situational, historical, social and cultural contexts” (2010, p. 1203). Traditionalization implies a continuity with the past, a variation on traditional keening, keening today being inspired by practices. From this perspective, I discuss how the contemporary keen is the adaptation of an old tradition for modern society. I question why this tradition has re-emerged, how it has evolved and how it has been traditionalized. What is the relevance of the continuation and re-emergence of this tradition? I ask why people have turned to evolving and altering this tradition to fit the contemporary setting instead of using modern ways for dealing with grief such as crying circles².

1.4 Selection

At the start of this research project I analysed texts written on keening. This supplied me with information on the form, context and function of past keening. I collected recordings of keens taken in the 1950s from the Folklore Archive of the National University of Ireland, Dublin in Belfield. The findings made from such analysis are described in chapter two of this thesis.

Following this, I used purposeful sampling when deciding who to interview in order to discover, understand and gain insight into keening past and present. By this I mean I selected people I considered information rich cases (people who met with a criteria I had developed) in order to learn a great deal about the issues of central importance – i.e. how, why and where people keen. I incorporated the strategy of network sampling which involved locating key participants who met with the criteria I had established for participation in the study (Silverman, 1993, p.78). Network sampling involved interviewing early key participants, and asking each to recommend another participant that would be a good example to study. I found this a very good way to access information and I continued to do this until I reached a point of saturation – whereby I was being referred to

² Crying circles take place for similar reasons as that of Keening ceremonies but organisers of such circles do not connect themselves to the tradition of keening although they may be aware of the practice.

participants I had already spoken to, or interviews were no longer yielding new information.

I selected participants to discuss past keening on the criteria that they were willing to talk to me, they had heard keening at a funeral in their lifetime and they were remarked upon within their local area as being knowledgeable sources in regards to keening and other traditional funeral rituals. These criteria were important as it ensured that people would have had a firsthand experience of keening at a funeral and could, and would, be willing to describe and talk about it.

In regards to the contemporary keener my only selection criteria was that interviewees had used/use the keener themselves, had keened at least once in a group, and were willing to talk to me about how, why and where they had used it. It was important for me that participants had used the keener as part of a group as it was then no longer an entirely private experience, becoming a shared, communal experience when practiced in a group. Access to participants who keened today was limited and so I wanted to speak to any who was willing to meet with me. Here again I used a network sampling strategy asking informants to refer me to other participants.

1.5 Procedure

1.5.1 Traditional keener

To source participants³ who I would talk to about past keening, I went to the Gaeltacht⁴ region of Connemara, Co. Galway, in the West of Ireland. I chose to visit Connemara as most recordings taken in the 1950s were recorded here and many academics (Lysaght, 1997, p.69) state that keening survived the longest at funerals in the West and can be seen infrequently on occasion in this area (Ó Madagain, 1981, p.312).

Before visiting Connemara in October/November 2013, I contacted local tourist offices, heritage centres and academics in the Departments of Irish and Folklore at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Through this I managed to meet and interview John Connolly of Furnish, a native Connemara man, who had witnessed keening at two funerals in the 1960s (all interview questions attached in appendix II).

³ Details of all participants interviewed in the course of this research is presented in Appendix I

⁴ Gaeltacht regions – the Irish speaking areas of Ireland

Contacting Máirtín Tom Sheáinín (Mac Donnacha)⁵ he suggested I contact singer Sarah Grealish of Muicineachidirdhashaile, Connemara and Fr. Eddie Ó Conghaile parish priest of Lettermullen, Connemara, also known for his knowledge of Irish history and folklore and a regular speaker on Raidió na Gaeltachta to discuss such topics.

Máirtín Tom Sheáinín discussed my research on his radio show, opening up a discussion on the topic of keening. A number of people called into the show who had heard performances of a keen in theatre productions or film. However no one knew of anyone who keened today.

I eventually made contact with *sean-nós* singer Sarah Grealish. The Grealish sisters are known nationally for their singing ability and have won awards for *sean-nós* singing. Sarah had witnessed her aunt, Nan Grealish, keening at a number of funerals, and she herself had keened for film. I interviewed Sarah and recorded her singing a keen in her home.

From direction of the staff at Inis Mór⁶ tourist office, I met with a local female *sean-nós* singer (who prefers to remain unnamed) on the island. Although in her seventies, this singer had never heard keening at a funeral as a parish priest in the 40s had put a stop to the practice in Inis Mór. This singer had been told her grandmother had keened at funerals and, as a result of this and her singing abilities, she herself had been asked to keen for plays in Galway city⁷. I interviewed and recorded this woman singing a keen she had sang for one of the theatre productions.

Following this I was put in touch with Emer Cloherty, a Druid⁸ from Connemara, now living in County Sligo. I interviewed this woman (in her 70s) over the phone as she too had heard keening at funerals. I reference this and the abovementioned interviews in the chapter that follows.

I followed this same pattern in two other main Gaeltacht regions of Kerry and Donegal – contacting tourist offices and heritage centres. I was interviewed on a Donegal radio station and a Kerry radio station. This yielded information on past keening but I was not able to find anyone who sang the keen or had heard it in recent times.

Although I thoroughly enjoyed doing these interviews I began to realise that they did not reveal new information concerning the form, context and function of past keening.

⁵ A local television and radio presenter on Raidió na Gaeltachta, the national Irish language radio station, and Teilifís na Gaeilge, the national Irish language television channel.

⁶ Inishmore, the largest of the three Aran Islands off the coast of the West of Ireland

⁷ A recording of one of these plays is held by the Druid theatre company in Galway.

⁸ Priests/priestesses of Celtic paganism.

However these interviews did corroborate with what I had read about keening and by listening to firsthand accounts, made the process and impact of the former keen more real and understandable to me.

1.5.2 Keening ceremonies

To source participants to interview in relation to the contemporary use of the keen proved difficult at first as I was told, time and time again, that keening was a dead tradition. It was through an encounter with Reverend Cáit Branigan⁹ of Wexford, *bean feasa* that I first learned about Keening ceremonies. Through Cáit I contacted and interviewed a number of individuals who had participated or led Keening ceremonies.

On December 3rd, 2013 in Dublin, I attended the opening event for Ireland's first National Grieving Day¹⁰. I attended the Keening ceremony in Dublin led by Celtic Shaman Karen Ward, whom I interviewed in February, 2014, as part of this research. At this event, I used a method of data collection widely used in social anthropology, that of participant observation. By fully participating in the ceremony I was able to collect invaluable information on the context in which keening is used (the physical setting, who participated in the ceremony, how people were organised etc.) and the form it takes (the activities and interactions before, during and after the Keening ceremony, what did keening sound like in the ceremony, what musical form (if any) did it take? etc.). I also observed myself throughout the ceremony, what my role was, how I responded to the sounds and setting, what the function of keening and the ceremony was for me and the thoughts I was having about the event as it was going on. Following the Keening ceremony I recorded my notes of the event with a Dictaphone. Later I developed these notes on paper. It is these notes that I analyse and discuss in chapter three. As it was a public event I was not allowed to record this ceremony.

In January, 2014, I attended a second Keening ceremony facilitated by Rev. Cáit Branigan in her home in County Wexford. I recorded my observations of this event in the same way I recorded my observations of the ceremony on National Grieving Day. With the consent of the participants I was allowed to record this ceremony.

⁹ Cait is a *bean feasa*, an Irish wise-woman/Shamanic practitioner and healer working within the traditions of Ireland.

¹⁰ National Grieving Day was organised by Lydia Kiernan in 2013 and was inspired by Irish traditions. I interviewed Lydia and refer to this interview in chapter 4.

1.5.3 Keening as part of Holistic Voice Therapy

Through discussion of my research with individuals in my local area of West Cork, I came in contact with Elizabeth Ewing and the Holistic Voice Therapy group she leads. She uses keening as part of a number of vocal practices that are intended to open the voice and help people feel more comfortable with their voice, in turn feeling more comfortable with themselves. I worked with this group and interviewed a number of participants. Following this I contacted voice and sound therapists in Ireland via email. Those that responded told me they did not use keening as part of their work.

1.5.4 Other

Over the course of my research I was put in contact with two women who had keened in other situations. Carmel O Dwyer spoke to me in Wicklow about her experience in 2003 at a gathering of international Shamans. I discuss this interview in chapter three, as it appears to be one of the two origins of Keening ceremonies in Ireland. The second woman I spoke to had used keening as part of the feminist movement Greenham Commons during protests in the 1980s. I discuss this use of keening in chapter four.

Through the course of this research I also conducted interviews with four artists and musicians who sang a keen/used keening or were influenced by keening in their work¹¹. I spoke with these contemporary artists in an attempt to gain another aspect and view as to how keening is being used today. I sourced these participants by an internet search and through connections of acquaintances. These interviews yielded information on how keening has been de-ritualised.

In May 2013, I was told of an occurrence in the southeast of Ireland where a group of Travellers had met on the anniversary of a Traveller piper who had died a number of years previous. On his anniversary Travellers met at his grave and three women keened.

Having heard this story I contacted the Traveller centres in Ireland. I was told by staff members at Pavee Point¹² that keening still existed amongst some of the travelling community and that it was a living tradition that had never died amongst the Traveller community. I called or emailed every Traveller resource centre or community centre in Ireland. Nobody knew of any Traveller families that still used the keen at funerals. In

¹¹ James Kelly, band *Altar of Plagues*, singers Nóirín Ní Riain and Susan McKeown, public artist Ceara Conway.

¹² The main Traveller centre in Dublin

March, 2014, I met with two elderly traveller women at Pavee Point. Neither of the two women had heard keening. I have not been able to confirm if keening still exists amongst the Travelling community. In my search I did not come across any written records of keening taking place within the Travelling community. Due to the scope of this Masters I was unable to look into this further.

1.6 Analysis

The process of analysis was undertaken in two steps. Firstly the data was analysed for surface content, by this I mean observational data and the concrete responses from informants referring to the form, context and function of keening. I discuss this explicit data in chapter three. This discussion includes examination of information collected during participant observation, self-observation and from examination of interview responses.

During the process of collection of data I noted tentative findings. These findings are corroborated, revised and reconfigured during analysis. I begin investigation with a loose set of categories (i.e. – form, context and function) into which I code responses from interviews, observations while participating at events and notes from self-observation. I aim to identify any recurring patterns, consolidating and reducing data.

Following this I proceed to the second level of analysis, in chapter four, whereby the data is analysed for underlying content and meaning. Here I refer to what is implied by the data. Following the initial compilation and interpretive coding of data, I proceed to a deeper level of analysis whereby findings are discussed in terms of underlying meanings and implications. This involves discussing the data within the frameworks of the abovementioned concepts of liminality, front and backstage and traditionalization. Through this analysis I aim to develop broader generalisations about Irish culture.

1.7 Ethics

Before interviewing each individual I explained the purpose of the inquiry and the methods in which I was collecting data. I gave interviewees the option of remaining anonymous. I listened numerous times to these interviews and coded the data in this manner.

At each recording, of the voice therapy group and Keening ceremony, all participants were made aware I was recording, that the recording would be used as part of a sound installation and permission to do so was granted verbally by each individual. Prior to recordings I sent a letter via email requesting consent to the facilitators of the groups (Elizabeth Ewing – Voice therapy group, Rev. Cáit Branigan – Keening ceremony,

Wexford) asking that the letter be forwarded to participants. All individuals verbally consented to recording but none thought it necessary to bring the letter on the day. I agreed with all participants that recordings would only be used as part of the sound installation and would not be used for other commercial purposes.

Permission to use recordings of the keen, sung by Sarah Grealish and the female *sean-nós* singer from Inis Mór, as part of a sound installation, was granted by both participants and consent to agreement was recorded during interview.

2 Historical Chapter

This chapter presents an historical overview of keening. It reviews recordings, interviews and literature, by scholars referred to in the introduction, related to the areas of interest of the present research. The research methodology for this chapter is textual analysis and analysis of data collected through interviews of individuals who have heard the keen sung at funerals.

The present chapter provides the basis for development of understanding of the contemporary keen. In order to analyse and identify how keening is used today, and the possible meanings attributed to it, it is necessary to understand how keening has been used in the past and the trajectory of this tradition over time.

This chapter creates a base from which to discuss the contemporary keen by discussing the form, context, function, decline and de-ritualisation of past keening. The final section of the chapter highlights the implications from the reviewed literature and further develops the conceptual framework for this study.

All over the world there are societies in which public lamentation is customary at funerals¹³. This was no different in Ireland where the practice of keening was part of the “fabric of Irish life for thousands of years” since pre-Christian times (Lysaght, 1997, p. 65). The English term keening is derived from the Irish *caoineadh* and has been used to describe sorrowful cries of people. It is defined literally as crying for the dead and describes the extemporized laments and wails sung by *bean chaointe* (also known as ‘the keening women’ - women who sing the keen) at funerals (Bourke, 2000, p.68)

The English word keening suggests a “high-pitched, inarticulate moaning, but the Irish word *caoineadh*, from which it derives signifies among other things, a highly articulate tradition of women’s oral poetry” which was followed by the *gol*/stylized cry in which all present participated (Bourke, 1988, p.287).

¹³ James Wilce in *Crying Shame* discusses the presence of lament in Bangladesh, Iran, Serbia and Finland, while Nadia writes of the tradition in Greece in her book *The Last Word*.

2.1 Chronology

Keening is first referenced in an elegy in the seventh century and again in a poem (*Come to me, loving Mary*) in the eighth century when an Irish cleric named Blathmac wrote two long poems asking the Virgin Mary to intercede for him with her son. In return he offered to keen for Christ as “...every individual of the host of men and women is mourned; no cry meeting cry was raised over the body of Christ, the bright and gentle one” (Bourke, 2000, p.73).

From this eighth century evidence, it is clear that keening was a well-established and imperative practice at the time of writing of this poem.

Giraldus Cambrensis¹⁴ considers keening in his work *Topographia Hibernia* in the twelfth century and it is noted in secular literature from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries (Lysaght, 1997, p.66).

From the seventeenth century on there is a wealth of references, both religious and anthropological as many visitors to Ireland began to comment on what they mostly saw as a peculiar and barbaric tradition (O’ Donnell, 2013, p.1).

Keening was commonplace and continued to be a significant part of mortuary rituals in Ireland until the middle of the 20th century (Sullivan, 2007).

2.1.1 Subjects – the keeners and the keened

As stated above keening was primarily a female tradition both in Ireland and Europe (O’ Donnell, 2013, p.7) - “the custom of ritual lamentation for the dead in Irish tradition...links its performance primarily to women” (Lysaght, 1997, p.66). There have been exceptions however as discussed by informant Fr. Eddie Ó Conghaile who heard a man keen in Connemara in the 1950s when there was no woman there to keen. (Personal communication. October 29th and 30th, 2013).

Outside of the funeral the keening woman was a typical participant in the community – a mother, a housewife, a nurse etc. However for the duration of the funeral the *bean chaointe* entered into a kind of ‘divine madness’ which allowed her to express “the collective outpouring of grief through her voice and body”, helping those present to release grief

¹⁴ Cambrensis was a Welch medieval clergyman who wrote *Topographia Hibernia* about the landscape and people of Ireland in approximately 1188.

while also leading the community in a public expression of sorrow and lament (Sullivan, 2007).

The typical *bean chaointe* was an elderly woman who was, for the duration of the funeral, “barefoot and disheveled, her hair loose, her clothes” (McCoy, 2009, p.213). Her appearance and behaviour all the time setting her aside, separating her from the rest of the community¹⁵, allowing her role to be communicator with the next world, being inbetween worlds while she is *bean chaointe*. All this added to the impact of her performance, marginalizing her from the community, making her seem not of this world.

In this position as peripheral to the rest of the community, the keening woman was given the opportunity and freedom to do, be and say things, without fear of punishment, that otherwise would have been highly prohibited. For the duration of the mortuary rituals the *bean chaointe* was seen as half-mad and in this state was able to publicly voice and criticize often private matters such as abusive husbands, or public issues like harsh colonizers or priests. This was the one situation afforded to women where they could use their voice and be heard without constraint, “articulating their own concerns and assorted social tensions” (Brophy, 2010, Abstract).

When the funeral was over “life was expected to return to normal and the lamenting woman to resume a normal role in society” (Bourke, 1988, p.290). Returning to her regular role in society, the keening woman also returned to the standard limitations experienced by women in Irish society of the time, no longer having the liberty to express freely as she had done while in the role of keening woman.

Over time keening became professionalized “since it was essential that for a dead person’s honour to be keened, professional and paid keening women were often brought in” (Lysaght, 1997, p.67). In one area there would have been two or three keening women noted for their talent in verse and singing “skilled beyond others in keening, and who make a practice of attending at wakes and funerals” (Ó Madagáin , 1981, p.312). This professionalization was of comfort to members of the community, allowing and giving license to the community to grieve and release emotion, safe in the knowledge that the *bean chaointe* knew what they were doing, not allowing the community to become

¹⁵ It is important to note that sometimes female relatives of the deceased keened also. These relatives (such as Eibhlín Dubh who I reference later in the chapter) could well have been well-dressed and therefore not fit the stereotype. However, even well-to-do widows such as Eibhlín Dubh were said to enter this state of ‘Divine madness’ when she keened her husband, drinking his blood when she reached his corpse.

overwrought with grief and ensuring a return to a balanced state by the end of the funeral ceremony.

This compensation demonstrates the value and importance of *bean chaointe* to communities (Brophy, 2010, Abstract). Should family members of the deceased be unable to lament the dead person formally, semi-professional keeners, who had no personal connection with the family might be hired - payment, more often than not, came in the form of food or drink (Ó Coileáin, 1984, p.107).

It appears that at certain points in time in Ireland every person that passed “even the death of strangers in the community was marked by lamentation” (Lysaght, 1997, p.66). Without a keener at a funeral it was seen as not respecting the deceased. In earlier times Irish aristocracy keened their dead like everyone else (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.85).

This began to change as Irish society developed. Keening at funerals became the reserve of rural societies that had remained largely untouched by outside influence. This demonstrates the prevalence of keening in all of Ireland and highlights its importance as part of mortuary rituals.

2.2 Form

Most of what we understand about keening can be gleaned from descriptions made by visitors to Ireland from the seventeenth century onwards. However we have very little information of the music of keening, with most descriptions given being anthropological in nature (Ó Madagáin, 1981, p.311). Scholar Aidan O’ Donnell’s explanation for this is that “the interest was in folklore rather than in music. There are many accounts of keening that recognize nothing other than a barbarous and pagan practice” (O’ Donnell, 2013, p.5). The exotic and incomprehensible in what the visitor saw and heard is stressed – “the cacophony of cries, the wild behavior” (Bourke, 2000, p.73).

Although keening survived in Ireland well into the age of recording, very few recordings exist. Keening was a serious element of the ritual of wake and funeral, it was regarded with reverence (Ó Madagáin, 1981, p.311). Superstitions associated with the use of keening outside of the ‘proper’ context¹⁶ resulted in reluctance to reenact the keen without the corpse present - “Sure ‘tis no use keening unless the corpse is stretched out before one”

¹⁶ To sing a keen in the ‘proper’ would have been to sing it in the presence of the deceased.

(Croker, 1844, p. 101) and the reluctance of collectors (Lysaght, 1997, p.70) to intrude upon a funeral, explains the lack of recordings of the keen. The most important source of information about the extent and intensity of the practice are available from Church documentation from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries.

Two keens of *caoineadh* were recorded by Sidney Robertson Cowell¹⁷ in 1955 (Bourke, 2000, p.72). The recordings are far more passive than descriptions given from the seventeenth century suggest and are considered by many to be a “faint echo of a tradition recalled by individuals long after it had ceased to have that continual community usage which alone would maintain its vigour and fullness, either musically or linguistically” (Ó Madagáin, 1981, p.312). During the course of my research I came across five recordings¹⁸ of *caoineadh* which I collected from the Department of Irish Folklore at the National University of Ireland, Dublin in Belfield. However I think it important to note that most of these recordings demonstrate only the final part (where the community join and sing the *ochón*, the cry) of the keen, the improvised verse being greatly curtailed. They are an echo of *caoineadh* and not pure examples of the tradition. No recordings were taken at a wake or funeral, nor do any recordings include howling, screeching or wailing referenced extensively in descriptions of keening. Nonetheless from these recordings, and from the descriptions of music and setting noted from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, we can piece together and get a fair idea of what keening was like (Ó Madagáin, 1981, p.311).

Attached with this thesis is a CD with recordings of keening collected in the 50s and 60s. Also on the CD is a recording of a keen written by contemporary musician Susan McKeown, who I refer to later in this chapter. Track listings for the CD are in Appendix III.

The *caoineadh* comprised of three parts – salutation, dirge/lament and *gol* or cry

2.2.1 Part One - Salutation

As the name suggests, the salutation is an address or call to the dead person. Ó Madagáin writes “The mourner...commences by some deep murmuring, repeating over and over the

¹⁷ Album *Songs of Aran*

¹⁸ Track 1: Sean Ó Conghaile recorded by Seamus Ennis in 1946. Track 2: Kitty Gallagher recorded by Alan Lomax in the 1951. Track 3: Sorcha Ni Ghairim recorded by Sean Ó Súilleabháin in 1940. Track four: Bridget Mullin recorded by Sidney Robertson Cowell in the 1950s. Track 5: Joe Heaney recorded at the University of Washington in 1957.

name of the deceased, such as Thomas, Thomas, my sorrow and my loss” (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.81). However folklore scholars such as Angela Bourke in *Keening as Theatre: J.M. Synge and the Irish Lament Tradition* state the deceased was directly addressed without the name being said (Bourke, 2000, p.72).

Should the person’s name be used or the deceased addressed by other fond calling, the first line of the keen was commonly a warm appeal to the deceased¹⁹. It is suggested, from the descriptions which survive, that it worked like a mantra – “repeated over and over, with eyes closed – to shut out distractions and enable the keener to focus her mind and emotions, to access that part of her...where lament were stored” (Bourke, 2000, p.75). This part of the keen gave the *bean chaointe* time to collect herself and formulate the improvised poetry she was about to sing. This address could also however be an exclamation of grief or could address someone else present. For this part of the keen the *bean chaointe* was free to sing or recite this call, once or many times (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.81).

2.2.2 Two – the dirge/lament

The dirge or verse consisted of impromptu poetry, mentioned above, partly extempore, partly prepared, and was “delivered in a kind of plaintive recitative” (Ó Madagáin, 1981, p.312).

According to Ó Madagáin a change in emphasis of the function of keening occurred over time, with the supernatural function of keening becoming secondary to the role of releasing emotion. Ó Madagáin suggests that this change in function led to the development of the second stage in the round of keening, the dirge (Ó Madagáin, 1981, p.312).

This improvised poetry consisted of praising the deceased, mourning his/her passing, and criticizing the enemies of the deceased. *Bean chaointe* at times also aired their own concerns and various social tensions. For the duration of the funeral the *bean chaointe* “occupies a marginal position between the worlds of the living and the dead” (Bourke, 1988, p.290). In this state the keening woman is given the freedom and license to speak vehemently and criticize openly with impunity. This is reminiscent of Victor Turners concept of liminality as discussed in chapter one. By expression of such criticisms,

¹⁹ “Mo chara go daingean tu”, an example of a fond call to the deceased meaning – my loyal friend

inhabiting a disheveled appearance and using normally socially unacceptable sounds such as howling, screeching and wailing, the *bean chaointe* entered a type of liminal state, a state of betwixt and between, inhabiting both this world and the next with the sounds of their voice being the arbiter between worlds. This was very different to women's regular front stage behaviour presented in public which did not allow women the opportunity to behave, dress, act out or publically criticize the world. This will be further discussed in chapter four.

Although improvised, the poetic song composition of *caoineadh* was created by combining and recombining traditional motifs, from a body of stock phrases, according to a traditional metre called *rosc*²⁰ (Bourke, 2000, p.72). These verses were of irregular length and sung by number of people and at a lively speed.

Fr. Ó Conghaile described this part of the keen as “chanting more than anything else. It was saying it (the verse) in a different tone, it would be higher pitched” (Personal Communication. October 29th and 30th, 2013). The verse ended on a falling cadence (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.83). This is very different musically from the regular song-tunes of Irish tradition. This part of the keen is described most frequently as a simple unornamented chant, something similar to that of Latin plainsong. Throughout the dirge complete freedom was given to the language with “several syllables and sometimes whole phrases being sung on the same note” (Ó Madagáin, 1981, p.314). In the dirge the verse was of principal importance, but is given an added element, a further “heightening in dramatic and artistic expression, by being chanted rather than, merely spoken” (Ó Madagáin, 1981, p.314). This freedom gave room to the *bean chaointe* to extol the dead person.

Track two of the attached CD is a keen sung by Kitty Gallagher of Donegal called Keen for a Dead child. This is probably the closest example of the poetic song composition of keening yet is less chant-like than described by most scholars.

As it was simple and chant-like, it could be in common usage over a wide area. According to Ó Madagáin each area had its own adaptation of this kind of music, which all the local people would know from hearing it regularly (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.83).

²⁰ Ó Tuama described *rosc* metre as “a very old metre...used prior to the coming into vogue of the syllabic metres in the eighth to ninth centuries. This ancient metre persisted, it appears, in Ireland and Scotland and was used especially for the purposes of the extempore lamentations for the dead.” (Quoted in *Caoineadh os Cionn Coirp*, by Lysaght, 1997, p.71)

This musical freedom allowed for a highly stylized form of improvised poetry to develop and the keen *par excellence* of the genre, *Lament for Art O Leary*²¹, was composed in the eighteenth century by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill on the death of her husband.

Due to the focus of the present research I have not gone into detail concerning the poetry of this part of the keen.

2.2.3 Third part – the keen/*gol* or cry

The *bean chaointe* led a choral cry at the end of each verse. The *gol* or cry allowed others present to join in and was repeated all through the performance of the keen - as part of the cry the word ‘Och-ochóne²²!’ was repeated throughout (Ó Madagáin, 1981, p.313). The cry was the final stage of the round of keening and was most likely the culmination. This stylized cry gave space to all present to join in. According to Fr. Ó Conghaile “the ochón has a certain tone to it. It has to do with the lifting of the state of the mind to a certain pitch” (Personal communication. October 29th and 30th, 2013) where one can release grief and return to a more stable pitch thereafter.

When discussing both the verse and cry part of the keen Fr. Ó Conghaile referred to the word “pitch”. He inferred that keening was when a pitch was reached which “changed the balance” and allowed listeners to release grief. Changing the balance, “The feelings of people come out. They (the keeners and their sounds) get in at that level” (Personal

²¹ In 1773 Art O’ Leary was shot in ambush in Co. Cork by the men of his Protestant neighbour, Morris. His wife, Eileen O’ Connell, performed *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* (Lament for Art O’ Leary) following his death. Like many of the texts of laments, Lament for Art O’ Leary comprised of...the lamenter addressing the dead person directly, asking him to get up and come home, reproaching him for dying (or reproaching the enemies of the deceased), praising his beauty, his generosity and the splendor of his home, and piles image upon image of the desolation that will now follow his death (Bourke, 2000, p. 72). *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* consists of almost four hundred lines and is known for its emotional power and quality of poetry.

²² I have had difficulty in finding a direct meaning for the word ‘ochón’. Ochón has no real meaning and loosely means ‘my woe my woe’ or ‘alas’. Hugh Shields describes it as “long-drawn-out vocables”. Two interviewees, Fr. Ó Conghaile and Druid Emer Cloherty, believe the word ochón to be a spell word from Druidic times. I was not able to get any literature confirming this. However certain words in Irish have no meaning and are said as protections – like *seoithín seó*. This is sung as part of a lullaby when putting a child to sleep in order to protect the child from the fairies and help him/her get to sleep. Mary Madden’s ‘A Bhean Úd Thíos’ is said to be an example of this. By repetitive musical phrases and long-drawn-out vocables [*Seó hú leó, Seó hú leó ag deireadh gach líne*] she gives the message ‘sleep!’ to the child and to the fairies the message ‘all is well’ (Shields, 1993. P. 75-6). The word ochón, as speculated by interviewees, has two functions also – to protect and guide the dead persons soul traversing from this world to the next and also to help bring out and release the grief of those present at the time. The interviewees suggested that there is no written record of the word ‘ochón’ as to do so would be “like putting a sword in the hands of a child” (Emer Cloherty, Sligo. Personal communication. November 4th, 2013). Due to the spell power of this word it could not be passed on to those that did not understand it.

communication. October 29th and 30th, 2013). In this way, keening is referred to as a tone or pitch reached, causing an effect on the singer and listener, rather than a form of song.

I interviewed Connemara *sean-nós* singer, Sarah Grealish in November, 2013. Sarah heard her aunt, Nan Grealish, keen at a number of funerals in her youth and she herself keened in the film *Raic* in 1984. When speaking of keening Sarah referred to it as a sound, a pitch, rather than a type of song - “even when I was singing at the competitions, there’s a *caoine* in there, a small bit of *caoine* in the song. My son has it as well, there’s a small bit of *caoine* in the song” (Sarah Grealish, Personal communication. November 5th, 2013). This would suggest that keening, for this singer, is related to a sound, a tone/pitch and/or the resulting effect, rather than a type or form of song – it is sometimes put in or added to a song.

According to Ó Madagáin “dirge and *gol* music were independent of each other” (Ó Madagáin, 1981, p.320). The music of the cry was highly ornamented, unlike the dirge which preceded it. However the music of the cry would have been well known to the local community (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.83). The cry used no words and consisted solely of vocables like *och ochóne*, wails and outcries of grief. This allowed the community to give “poignant expression to their emotion in purely musical terms, using their voices as a musical instrument” (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.84). It significantly extended the social function of the keen “to that of a way for the community to release grief collectively” (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.84). The loose form allowed for heightened ability to personally express, both individual and collective grief. Ó Madagáin suggests the likelihood that the *gol* was a key part of the keen in pagan times and states that “as late as the twentieth century keening often consisted of the *gol* alone” (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.84).

2.2.4 Form –Descriptions (physical)

The description below presents us with a depiction of where the keen took place and how it was performed within the context of the wake. This account was recorded by Mr. and Mrs. S. C. Hall²³ (1841-3) at a wake in Kerry. According to the evidence the keening women moved backwards and forwards with arms apart.

“The body, decently laid out on a table or bed, is covered with white linen...The women of the household range themselves at either side, and the keen at once commences. They rise with one accord, and moving

²³ Mr. and Mrs. S. C. Hall, *Ireland: its scenery and character* (3 volumes, London 1841-3) p.222-6

their bodies with a slow motion to and fro, their arms apart, they continue to keep up a heart-rending cry. This cry is interrupted for a while to give the *ban caointhe* (the leading keener), an opportunity of commencing. At the close of every stanza of the dirge, the cry is repeated, to fill up, as it were, the pause, and then dropped; the woman then again proceeds with the dirge, and so on to the close. The only interruption which this manner of conducting a wake suffers, is from the entrance of some relative of the deceased, who, living remote, or from some other cause, may not have been in at the commencement. In this case, the *ban caointhe* ceases, all the women rise and begin the cry, which is continued until the newcomer has cried enough..." (Quote by Ó Coileáin, 1984, p.100).

A distinction is also made between the dirge and the cry, they are separate parts sung by different people, for different functions – the cry beginning amongst the women when a new person arrives helping him/her to cry, the dirge leading into the cry, drawing out the cry and making space for it through the pause that ensues the *ban caointhe*'s extemporized lament. This reveals the importance and central role of the cry.

The performative aspects of keening were striking. Some reports present the women as tearing their hair out and throwing it on the coffin, exposing themselves, wringing and clapping their hands or chewing on themselves while howling, shrieking and unleashing "barbarous outcries" as they beat their breasts (Bourke, 2000, p.73). Keening women, covered in long black shawls and dressed in often torn skirts, rocked their body, from the base of the spine, to and fro, with arms apart clapped hands, beat their chests with their fists, closed their eyes, kneeled, lowered their body so their forehead reached the ground (Lysaght, 1997, p.75) Keening women sometimes jumped on the coffin in the grave and at other times threw themselves down on the earth screeching (O' Donnell, 2013, p.4). This dramatic picture is difficult to imagine at any contemporary funeral in Ireland. This demonstrates that the keeners performance was as "theatrical as it was vocal". (Bourke, 2000, p.75). Bourke suggests the keening women seemed to have taken their "metre from the rhythm of her body's movement, and may very well have used the rocking and repetition to induce an altered stated of consciousness" (Bourke, 2000, p.75) This altered state of consciousness allowing the *bean chaointe* to inhabit a peripheral position, and connect her, through use of the sound of her voice and theatrics, to the Otherworld. This is similar in Finland where lament facilitates a transition to a trance-like state (Tolbert, 1990, p.81)

This common movement of the *bean chaointe* of "swaying back and forth on her stool as she weeps and speaks" followed down through the ages and even being described in the poem by Blathmac, mentioned earlier in the chapter, dating back to the 8th century (Bourke, 2000, p.67). It is suggested these physical actions went hand-in-hand with the "perpetually recurring chant of sobs" (Bourke, 1988, p.288). The loss that was felt by the

community was acted out, not just with words, or wails and screeches, but even through the *bean chaointe*'s body, full dramatic movements displaying the intensity of the grief.

I draw attention to physical actions associated with the traditional keening as it is something my attention has been brought to in my observation of keening today and will be discussed later in this thesis.

Figure 2.1 below depicts a funeral. Here we see the *bean chaointe* travelling on the cart with coffin, leading the mourning community.



Fig. 2.1 *A Funeral in Connemara*. Illustrated London News, May 21st, 1870.

2.3 Context

The backdrop for keening was the wake, on the way to the graveyard, and at the graveyard (Ó Súilleabháin, 1961. P.139).

Caoineadh was a fundamental part of the wake ritual. The *bean chaointe* only performed when there was a corpse present “since a folk belief maintained that the dead person could continue to hear mortals until earth had been thrown on the coffin” (Porter, 2013, p.16). Keening took place for the duration of the period of mourning, normally three days and three nights – “after the body has been laid out and before it is covered with earth in the

cemetery – is a time of disruption of the social order and this disruption is presided over and acted out by the lamenter” (Bourke, 1988, p.289).

It was “an element in a system” and part of a whole set of mortuary rituals (Ó Cruailaoich, 1990, p.146). It is important to consider keening within this context and realize that keening was not an isolated ritual but part of a myriad of events within, what Gearoid Ó Cruailaoich calls, the *merry wake* (Ó Cruailaoich, 1990, p.145). The *merry wake* was the community’s response to death and the suspension to the social order of the community which it brought. This dissolution and renewal of social order was represented by the *bean chaointe* and the *cleansai/bore-keen*²⁴.

“This pair, the *bean chaointe* and the *borekeen*, can be said to represent the widest sense in which the *merry wake* itself constitutes a contest. The force of the *bean chaointe*...is to assert the hegemony of the supernatural in human affairs and to give powerful expression to the sovereignty in supernatural and social realms alike of the goddess figures who are pre-eminent in Celtic and Irish tradition. The force of the *borekeen* on the other hand is to assert the continuing vitality and the potential for creative renewal of the human order and the individual men and women who live by it and who will survive this mortal contact between the supernatural powers of the otherworld and the field of human affairs. While not pitted against each other in direct competition as a part of the wake ritual, nevertheless the opposition of *bean chaointe* and *borekeen* in cosmological terms is clear and enables us to see the *merry wake* itself as a kind of contest in liminal time and space for control or dominance of life” (Ó Cruailaoich, 1990, p.147).

Thus the merry wake is a prominent part of the means by which the community effects “the re-establishment of social order in the face of the disruptive power of death” (Ó Cruailaoich, 1990, p.146).

The context within which the *bean chaointe* presented herself, representing the intrusion from the other world, competing against the jester-like male figure representing this world. The role of the *bean chaointe* in competition with the *borekeen* was symbolic, and for the natural social order of the community to return, after the disruption which the intrusion of death had brought into the community, the *borekeen* had to ‘win’ this competition with the *bean chaointe*, re-establishing balance within the community.

We situate keening at the wake and funeral, where it was most frequently used and is remembered almost entirely as connected only to mortuary rituals. However, when considering the topic of this research I think it important to note that keening, although infrequently, did occur outside of the funeral ceremony (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.85).

Internationally laments were performed other than to mourn the dead - “they were sung in conscription into the army, on the field of battle and during evictions...In Eastern Europe,

²⁴ A man who performs like a jester-like figure and acts as a kind of master-of-ceremonies for the “disruptive rowdiness of the wake-games” (Ó Cruailaoich, 1990, p.147)

from Karelia to Greece, they were sung to brides before their wedding” (Porter, 2013, p.17).

There is some evidence of such usage in Ireland, for example “emigrants leaving for America were sometimes keened” (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.86).

A phenomenon called the American wake developed during the Great Famine in Ireland (1845 – 1852). A loved one emigrating to America, never to return, was keened as though dead. “The day and night before was like a day and night of a wake. Desolate was the cry of the mother about to part for ever from her daughter or her dear son.’ (Ua Duinnín (1950) Quoted by Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.86).

Again during famine times there is an account of a woman that “ran out among the gardens beside themselves clapping her hands, crying aloud and keening their potatoes as they would keened the dead” (Ibid).

And so we see that although most common to the mortuary rituals, keening also took place at other times of great grief and loss. I draw attention to this as today's keening does not take place in the presence of a corpse.

2.4 Function

As mentioned above keening played a central role in funerary rites in Ireland.

“In pagan times, and for long afterwards, it is most likely that keening in Ireland had the same function as in the other countries of Europe and worldwide, that is to say a supernatural ritual function: to transfer the spirit of the deceased from this world to that of the spirits. That is still commonly its prime function today in pagan communities throughout the world” (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.81).

The *bean chaointe* played a pivotal role during this mourning period representing the arbiter between this world and the next and bringing balance back to the disarrayed community. The voices of *bean chaointe* were believed to connect this world and the otherworld, guiding the dead person's soul into the “ambiguous Christian/ancestral otherworld of Irish tradition and in effecting incorporation among the families of ancestors” (Lysaght, 1997, p.69). Keening women were believed, by locals, to have a connection with the spirit world, being the human relative of the Triple Goddess of Irish mythology, and, therefore, were able to help the deceased's spirit to transfer to the next world and in so doing bringing balance back to a community in disorder as death had

imposed itself upon it (Sullivan, 2007). Here Elizabeth Tolbert describes the significance of the lamenter's voice mediating between worlds in Finnish tradition:

“The display of the icons of crying in the lamenter's voice is itself the means to travel to the other world; the crying manner of performance along with other ritual actions...enables the lamenter to ‘go to *Tuonela*’, *the land of the dead*” (Quoted by McCoy, 2009, p.213).

Through the use of her voice the keening woman was an essential presence at funerary rites and ritual to ensure that the deceased departed to the Otherworld (McCoy, 2009, p.212).

2.4.1 Expression of grief

A secondary function to the transfer of spirit, was that of emotional release. Overtime the emphasis in the function of the keen changed with the expression of grief becoming the primary function (Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.83).

The willingness of the *bean chaointe* to experience painful emotions allowed others present to do the same and so had a cathartic effect on all present. In her article *The Irish Traditional Lament and the Grieving Process*, Angela Bourke states that an aim of the practice of keening was “to move listeners to tears, to facilitate them in expressing their own grief. She demanded attention...calling on other women to join in her crying” (Bourke, 1988, p.289 - 290). The *bean chaointe* played a public, community function, in the release of private emotions – of both the keener and the listener of the keen.

Tom Ó Flathartha of Co. Galway in the West of Ireland, gave an account in 1993, of how his mother keened his younger brother who had died in childhood. He describes how, for months after the child's death, when she would feel distressed, she would hug a garment of his and keen him, with sung words and *gol* (crying with the use of the word *ochón*). Ó Flathartha emphasizes the relief this brought his mother in his account:

“I heard her keening a brother of mine. A child. Three years. And she'd draw tears out of the grey rocks, the way I heard her keening. ...And then when she would be keening, she would say ‘ochóne oh, ochóne oh’. The load would be on her, and whenever she would do that keen, she'd get that heavy load out of her. ...And only that she keened him, and got the load out of her, it would go on oppressing her, and she would be all the worse. ...And if so, you know, 'twould do her good: she'd have got rid of the load. She'd be much worse if she didn't keen him” (Quoted by Ó Madagáin, 2005, p.85).

This demonstrates how effective the keen could be as an instrument for the expression of personal emotion.

The keener allowed, and created the space, for intense grieving for the dead to occur. As a result the community could resume its regular pattern of life once the mortuary rituals were

concluded having expressed its grief through the “intercession of the *mná caointe*” (McCoy, 2009, p.214).

The role of the keening woman here was still a public function – to aid in the release of very private emotions, a public expression of private emotions – while also fulfilling the customary supernatural function of aiding in transferring the deceased’s spirit to the Otherworld of his/her ancestors. The keening woman worked as a facilitator of grief, or as Angela Bourke calls her – a “grief therapist” (Bourke, 1988, p.289). From the account from Ó Flatharta, the release of grief enabled his mother to return to everyday life. Similarly, the assembly of mourners were moved to tears while listening to keening at funerals. This was the pivotal role the *bean chaointe* played in mortuary rituals in Ireland.

2.4.3 Voice

As stated earlier in the text, keening women were afforded the opportunity to voice criticisms they felt, both personal and political (Bourke, 2000, p.73).

“women could use the lament tradition to protest at violence, injustice or indignity in their lives” (Bourke, 1988, p.289).

This use of lamentation as an instrument of empowerment by women was common internationally. As well as being a voice to express injustices, this forum also allowed *bean chaointe* the opportunity to state clearly what the mourning family was losing, in practical terms, by the death of their loved one. For instance “he was a great father and a great provider of x, y and z” (Ó Conghaile. Personal communication. October 29th and 30th, 2013). This told the community in clear terms what the family was losing and so the community could help provide for the family until the families grief had settled and life had returned to its new normality. This was a discreet way of letting a community know what needed to be done without the family in mourning having to ask for what they needed.(Ó Conghaile. Personal communication. October 29th and 30th, 2013).

2.5 Decline

Having discussed the form, context and function of keening I now go on to describe how the keen began to disappear from Irish funerals. In the following section I describe the reasons for this decline in an attempt to trace the trajectory of this tradition. My objective, through this process, is to illuminate, in later chapters, the possible reasons for the re-emergence of the newly evolved form of the keen in present day Ireland.

2.5.1 The Church, Famine and the voice of women

The keen was in decline by the beginning of the nineteenth century, and was almost extinct by the end of it (Ó Coileáin, 1984, p.114). One reason given for this is the changes that occurred in Irish society after the Famine, 1846-1849. As Francis Keane remarks, ‘the innumerable deaths which at that time had daily taken place, together with the hunger and destitution which prevailed throughout the country, deprived the people in fact of that natural feeling and regard which they were wont to have for the dead.’ The community had cause to forget how to cry (Ó Coileáin, 1984, p.114). However, it was not so much a sense of grief that was lost but the social significance of death due to the “innumerable deaths”, the need to signify passing, the need to mark it had been lost (Ó Coileáin, 1984, p.115).

The decline of the keen was further precipitated by factors, such as the emergence of a new middle class, post-Famine, in the mid-nineteenth century and the modernization which occurred in twentieth century Ireland (Lysaght, 1997, p.67). The slow decline in the tradition of hiring *bean chaointe* can be associated with “the rise of strong farmers and the decimation of the laboring poor” after the Famine (Brophy, 2010, Abstract). A newly-prosperous and conservative Catholic middle-class congregation emerged during these years. Many of this group modelled themselves on a “Protestant elite with strong Victorian values, for whom traditional funerary rituals involving lively wakes and lamentation for the dead were an embarrassment” (Lysaght, 1997, p.68).

Bean chaointe, once revered in Irish society, were now regarded with embarrassment (Bourke, 1988, p.290). “All decent half-civilised people now laugh at these elegies and hence the better class of farmers have entirely given them up” (O’Donovan, 1858-9, quoted by Lysaght, 1997, p.68) As Irish culture became more and more Victorianised (and largely remains so) the place for keening in this reserved and restrained society disappeared.

The Famine, and the ensuing development of this Protestantised middle-class, may have hastened the decline of the keening, yet does not seem to have been the main reason - “already by the mid-seventeenth century, keening was mentioned, along with the wearing of the traditional tight-fitting trousers, as something abhorrent to the Catholic clergy” (Ó Coileáin, 1984, p.115). Keening women found themselves the objects of criticism before an increasingly western and Catholic attitude (O’ Donnell, 2013, p.8). A concerted effort was made to reshape the religious and moral life of the Catholic population (Lysaght, 1997, p.67) in the post-Reformation period of the Roman Catholic Church (McCoy, 2009, p.214). The Catholic Church went through a period of internal reform and emerged more orthodox in outlook. An attempt was made to bring “religious practices, especially those connected with the crucial rite of passage, death, within the control of the parish church” (Lysaght, 1997, p.68).

A major issue the church had with keening was its lack of reference, in a country that had been Christian for over a thousand years at that point, to a Christian afterlife. The keening made no reference to heaven, hell, or purgatory (Sullivan, 2007) and therefore was seen to glorify earthly life. This was one of the concerns of the Catholic Church (McCoy, 2009, p.215). It was an obvious remnant of the mourning rites and practices of pagan Ireland (O’ Donnell, 2013, p.11) and incongruent with teachings of the church. The Catholic Church described keening as a “heathenish custom” (Bourke, 2000, p.73) displaying “immoderate grief” (Lysaght, 1997, p.67) “as if they were not to rise again”, (Ibid) with “unnatural screams and shrieks” and “bawling” which were considered inconsistent with Christian practices (McCoy, 2009, p.214) and this “savage custom” (O’ Donnell, 2013, p.5) was “to the great shame of our nation” (Lysaght, 1997, p.67)

The “professional” aspect of the lamenting tradition was also viewed with disgust by the church authorities and by most outsiders (Ibid). The clergy was most disgusted by the fact keeners “had a vested interest in the continuance of the custom”.

Along with this keening was primarily a female tradition – keening gave women a voice at a time in society when they had little or no other forum to speak their views and use their voice to do so. The wake lament was not only a pagan remnant of the past but it was a women’s ritual. It was not appropriate to have women as the conduit between earth and the afterlife, this being the sole provenance of the priest (McCoy, 2009, p.216). The superstitions, the screeches and howls, the dishevelled appearance did not coincide with the views of the Church, and so they remained consistently opposed to the custom (Lysaght, 1997, p.68)

However, a great difference in attitudes between lay people and the clergy existed. Laity regarded the practise of keening as much “a part of the complex of rituals surrounding death as the prayers for the dead and the funeral liturgy” (Lysaght, 1997, p.67). The keen had co-existed with Catholic funeral traditions for centuries before its decline. “The Catholic Rosary for the dead sat comfortably beside the pagan *caoineadh* in the minds of the rural Irish,” which created a difficult task for the reforming church (McCoy, 2009, p.215).

This led to confrontations between *bean chaointe* and priests (Lysaght, 1997, p.68). The *bean chaointe* was condemned by the Church and excluded from Mass and the Sacraments for their actions. The keening women were further punished by being excommunicated and denounced should they continue to perform the keen (Ó Súilleabháin, quoted by Lysaght, 1997, p.68). These regulations were issued on a regular basis by the Church and were imposed by priests. The following account by Seán Ó Súilleabháin refers to an instance in County Kerry in the Southwest of Ireland where a dispute occurred between *bean chaointe* and the local priest:

“As the coffin was being taken in a cart to the local graveyard at Kilmackilloge (Co. Kerry), three women keeners sat on top of it, howling and wailing at intervals...“He (the priest) started to lash them with his whip, as the cart passed by, and ordered them to be silent...but on reaching the graveyard, they again took up their wailings, whereupon the priest forced them down from the coffin with his whip. They were afraid to enter the graveyard to howl at the graveside. This put an end to the hiring of keening women in that parish” (Quoted by Lysaght, 1997, p.68).

Further efforts were made by the Church to bring mortuary rituals within control.

Regulations were introduced which targeted the wake ritual, removing the corpse to the church on the second night of the wake. The required removal of the deceased to the church on the second night of the wake greatly constricted the keen as this was the night when the larger crowd of relatives normally attended, and when keening would be more frequent and intense. Keening, and other wake games, began to lose momentum (Lysaght, 1997, p.68).

In the face of this suppression by the Church, keening persisted till the middle of the twentieth century. One way *bean chaointe* justified the use of the keen was by identifying themselves with the Virgin Mary, lamenting the death of Christ at the crucifixion, and in so doing they began to unite keening with Christianity (O’ Donnell, 2013, p.7). The keeners believed it to be their right to lament the dead, (O’ Donnell, 2013, p.8) as they had always done, for the Virgin Mary had lamented her Son when he died on the Cross (Bourke, 1988,

p.290). Even when the keening was no longer allowed at funerals it evolved and found its way into the church in the form of Marian laments such as *Caoineadh na dTri Muire*²⁵.

Caoineadh na dTri Muire, “is an example of this crossover between the remains of a pagan tradition and Christianity” (O’ Donnell, 2013, p.8).

It was not until after the Famine that efforts to stop the practice of keening by the Catholic Church proved successful. As I discussed above, the major social and socio-economic changes taking place in Ireland at the time had transformed Irish culture deeply. Until the middle of the nineteenth century Irish society had been composed of “a majority who combined the practice of Christianity with a traditional allegiance to ancestral cults...whose origins lay in Celtic religion” (Ó Cruaí, 1990, p.145). Post-Famine Ireland now comprised of a strengthened Roman Catholic Church – in terms of status and organization - and a more disciplined congregation (Lysaght, 1997, p.68). By this time the society at large had taken up the view of the Catholic Church and visiting foreigners. They began to see keening as something old, barbaric and ridiculous – a practice associated with ‘old’ Ireland, which had no place in ‘new’ Ireland. The clergy wanted nothing better than to turn its back on the past practices of the old “Celtic” Christianity (McCoy, 2009, p.216).

As we can see by the above paragraphs keening continued to exist, throughout such regulation and censorship, from the seventeenth century until it died out in the twentieth century. It survived in *Gaeltacht*²⁶ regions like Connemara and the islands till the 1960s and later²⁷. Suppression by the Roman Catholic Church, along with great changes in Irish society led to the decline and gradual “de-ritualising” of the ritual of keening (McCoy, 2009, p.216).

²⁵ Marian laments depict the Virgin Mary keening at the death of Christ. This keening may be sung in churches. The text of *Caoineadh na dTri Muire* consists of a dialogue between the Virgin Mary and Jesus on the cross. It is normally sung at Easter. Musically this keening follows the earlier mentioned loose pattern of singing from high to low in a single phrase, ending with a much modified and refined ‘ochón’ at the end.

²⁶ The Irish speaking areas of Ireland.

²⁷ A number of people I spoke with had heard versions of keening at funerals sporadically in the West of Ireland in the 80s and 90s; Maggie Cooke, Fr. Eddie Ó Conghaile (both Connemara) and one individual who heard keening in Connemara but wished to remain anonymous (from Dublin)

2.6 De-ritualisation of the keen

Keening, no longer taking place as part of mortuary rituals, has been ‘de-ritualised’ and presented in theatre - in plays for example by John Millington Synge (McCoy, 2009, p.217) literature – in the songs of emigration and rebellion of Irish diaspora and in the music of popular singers such as Sinead O’ Connor (*I am stretched on your grave*. Album: *I Do Not Want What I Haven’t Got*, 1990), Susan McKeown (*Gorm*. Album: *Bones*, 1996), Iarla Ó Lionaird, Joe Heaney and Nóirín Ní Riain (each sing a version of *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire*) etc. From these expressions of elements of keening we are able to “conjure up a certain quality of sound” which allows us to imagine how keening may have sounded in the past (O’ Donnell, 2013, p.11).

Through the course of this research I spoke with four artists/musicians who sang a keen, used keening or were influenced by keening in their work – Susan McKeown, James Kelly, Ceara Conway and Nóirín Ní Riain²⁸. I spoke with these contemporary artists in an attempt to gain another aspect and view as to how keening, and/or elements of keening, are being used today. These interviews yielded information on how keening has been de-ritualised.

Some artists, such as James Kelly and his band Altar of Plagues, have incorporated recordings of the keen, collected in the 50s, into their song *When the Sun Drowns in the Ocean*²⁹. The recordings used were not altered, with only slight reverb being added, in attempt to maintain the integrity of the original recordings. Other artists, such as singer Susan McKeown with her band The Chanting house, wrote a keen, following extensive research and use³⁰ of traditional keens. McKeown used a similar form (chanted verse and *gol*) and wording as traditional keens but composed her keen in English and addressed contemporary issues such as the grief related to emigration and grief caused by Aids. The form of this keen consisted a verse and cry part using the word *ochón*. This keen, entitled ‘Gorm’, featured on the album *Bones* and was released in 1996. Galway based public artist Ceara Conway has been inspired by keening as part her work *Making Visible*³¹ and Alanna

²⁸ For information on interviewees see provided biographies in Appendix I

²⁹ At the start of the song *Keen for a Dead child*, sung by Kitty Gallagher, collected from the Department of Folklore at the National University of Ireland, Dublin in Belfield, was used. The song also used recording of Bridget Mullin recorded in the West of Ireland in the 1950s at the end of the composition.

³⁰ McKeown played the part of keening wife Eileen in a production of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*.

³¹ *Making Visible* is a socially engaged art project by Connemara Gaeltacht artist and singer Ceara Conway. Drawing upon the old Irish tradition of "Caoineadh", Ceara created a series of ritual performances that have been informed by her time engaging with "Able Women", a group of women who are currently seeking asylum in Ireland.

O Kelly, Irish performing artist, has used keening extensively in her work. As part of some of her performances she keens, a “wordless song of lament”, a “sonorous call, a rhythmic vocalization without words” (Bal, Ndez-Navarro & Navarro, 2011, p.163).

Sarah Grealish³² who sang a keen for film (*Raic*) in 1984, mentioned earlier in the chapter, had learnt the keen from hearing it at funerals as a child. This keen takes the form of the *gol* or cry as described above. It does not include the opening salutation or extensive improvised poetry (only a brief improvised verse) sung chant like described in historical descriptions of the keen. Sarah sang this keen for me at her house in Connemara and has only sung it for film otherwise. This recording can be heard as part of the sound installation.

This demonstrates how the keen continues to inspire, evolve, become recontextualised and used by artists today, with no relation to ritual. Although recontextualised and de-ritualised the artists with whom I spoke had a clear reverence for the tradition, believing the sounds had power and should be respected. This affected the artists’ decisions in relation to how to form the keens they sang or how they used elements of the keen, attempting to respect the traditional form. Each had their own objective in using or being inspired by the keen and so the function of the keen differed between participants.

³² She is a well-known sean-nós singer from Muicineachidirdhashaile, Connemara. She considers herself a keener without a place to keen. Her family are singers, and her aunt, Nan Grealish (and possible relatives before that) were keeners.

2.7 Conclusion

The present chapter provides the historical background of the tradition of keening. By presentation of this chapter we begin to understand the form, function and context of *caoineadh* and the reasons that led to its decline. By reflection on these topics, and consideration of the contemporary uses of the keen in the chapters that follow, we are able to gain insights as to why keening has re-emerged in Irish society and the meaning users give to it today.

Having discussed the ways in which the traditional keen has been de-ritualised, I attempt in this study, to examine how the keen has evolved and people's efforts to re-ritualise it. This chapter identifies this gap in knowledge – i.e. that contemporary uses of the keen have not been documented and related to past keening, and the reasons why people continue to use the keen in new settings has not been considered. Angela Bourke observes that “Death rituals are among the oldest and most persistent manifestations of human culture” (Bourke, 2000, p.67). By reflecting upon the contemporary uses of the keen, and its function for those that use it, I consider the possible insights this information reveals about current Irish culture. Having set our foundations in the history of keening, we now proceed to the present research, the material collected and the information revealed, with a view to increasing our understanding of the present day keen.

3 Observational Analysis

In the following chapter I analyse the data collected in the field. This is a descriptive analysis of data yielded from participant observation, semi-structured interviews and self-observation, discussing the foundations of the contemporary keening. In this section I describe what takes place at Keening ceremonies and how keening is used as part of voice therapy groups, considering the form, context and function of keening today. In chapter four I go on to discuss the possible implications and insights revealed by such findings.

3.1 Keening as part of voice therapy practices

As mentioned in chapter one, I came in contact with Elizabeth Ewing, facilitator of a Holistic Voice Therapy group, in my local area of West Cork. In private sessions with Elizabeth I began to practice her version of keening over the course of six months (January to July 2013). I attended many of Elizabeth's voice therapy groups taking place almost on a monthly basis. These gatherings were consisted of 'Sounding mornings' or lasted a full day. I interviewed Elizabeth and those that participated in the group that were willing to chat with me about their experiences of keening. These interviews presented much information on what function keening plays for participants. Through participant observation at the morning and day long workshops I gained a great deal of knowledge in regards to the context in which the keening is sung, and the form it takes. I recorded two of these events in October 2013 and January, 2014, which can be heard as part of the sound installation. Also through self-observation, especially in the meetings with Elizabeth privately, I gained much information about what it was like to keening myself and the impact it had on me as a singer and as an individual. I made notes on my experiences of this and it is these notes I discuss here.

3.1.1 Form and context

These gatherings often begin with Indian chants, chakra aligning chants or the use of a set of vocal methods from the Naked Voice³³ practices in which Elizabeth is trained. Keening

³³ A method developed by singer and educator Chloe Goodchild that explores the human voice as a source of individual and collective self-discovery. I attended a weekend series of workshops held by Chloe Goodchild in Dublin in May 2013. I hoped to find similar practitioners to Elizabeth who used keening as part of their work. Although most were well aware of the practice and tradition of keening, no one present used it as part of their work and so, Elizabeth's group is the only voice therapy group I am aware of that uses keening.

is used as part of these methods. It is never used on its own, it is always sung as part of a series of sounds called the natural healing sounds. This series was inspired by the work of sound healer James D'Angelo author of *Healing with the Voice*, and facilitator in courses guiding use of the voice therapeutically for self-transformation.

Between four and twelve people went to these workshops during the course of my year of attendance and workshops were open to the public to attend. Two men were present over the course of my attendance. One man attended on a regular basis and used the keen in the same manner as the rest of the group. We sat in a circle but many of the soundings were done standing up or moving around the room. The keen was sung, normally, while standing in a circle, feet firmly planted hip distance apart.

This series of sounds, used in the voice therapy sessions, consist of yawning, laughing on different vowel sounds, sounds of keening, sounds of aggression and soothing sounds. At workshops I attended, the participants are made aware of the tradition of keening in Ireland, its uses and functions, and the facilitator describes her personal experiences of it and how she has been inspired³⁴ to incorporate the practice into the series of natural healing sounds. Prior to singing the keen, instructions are given to participants to make a loud sound, going from high to low on the vowel 'e', often describing it like the sound of a siren. Elizabeth chooses the vowel 'e' taking inspiration from 'ee' in the word keening or grief. She demonstrates what the sound is like, standing up, guiding participants to make a hand movement as they sound the keen. One hand is raised in the air, coming down with fist clenched as the pitch of the sound goes from high to low. Elizabeth believes this hand movement aids in the release of the sound and in turn the release of emotion and was again inspired by the work of James D'Angelo mentioned above. It is a fluid movement, allowing the sound to be released in a fluid manner. This movement differs greatly to the rocking movement natural to traditional keening.

The group sounds the keen three times, starting on different pitches, normally very high, going from as high as they can to as low as they can in one breath. In this way the process can be related to the *ochón* part of former keening which although highly ornamented, followed a loose melodic pattern from high to low with emphasis on the vowel 'o' of the *ochón*. Here each round of the practice takes approximately 10 to 15 seconds and ranges over an interval of approximately two and a half octaves (this, naturally, depends on the range of the individual) over the course of one breath, one long phrase. No ornamentation

³⁴ Inspired by the aforementioned James D'Angelo.

is used.

The sound is made with force, it is as loud as the person allows themselves to be, and often in a group of between four and twelve people the sound was huge. It sounded like a siren, and screech at other points, almost non-human. It often begins with a tensed vocal quality, resulting in a sense of anguish pronounced by starting on a high pitch using only the vowel 'e', and ending in a quiet exhaustion. These sounds are incorporated into the surround sound mix exhibited in the main room of the installation.

Following three soundings of the keen there is a sense of exhaustion amongst the group. The group then proceeds to the next vocal practice of the series of natural healing sounds. This is an expression of aggression and involves the participants roaring.

I enjoyed this practice and found it very freeing vocally to make these loud sounds over such a range and within the presence of others. I felt a release, coming from my gut. However, due to the brevity of the practice, I did not find it highly emotive but it could have the potential to be emotive and lead to more natural and less formulaic keening if practiced for longer. To begin with I found the suggested movement helpful in bringing out large sound. However, with continued practice I found the movement restrictive and continuously felt the desire to slump my shoulders and curve my back while using this sound.

Overtime, when practicing this sound and traditional keens, I would begin by singing older keens and this would lead me naturally into singing the keening sounds used as voice therapy along with the *ochón* before developing into a wail or cry.

Having experienced Keening ceremonies I feel the keen used as part of the voice therapy group midway between the highly stylized form of older keens and the formless keen of Keening ceremonies. Keening used as part of voice therapy has a clear form which is intended to open up the voice and draw out grief - a similar function to that of the traditional keen, which I will discuss in the next section. Keening ceremonies, on the other hand are a space for the sounds of the grief itself to come out – the sounds are not drawing out the grief, the sounds are the grief, and it is the space that is enabling the drawing out of the grief from the individual.

3.2 Keening ceremonies

As stated in chapter one, it was Reverend Cáit Branigan of Wexford that introduced me to the phenomenon of Keening ceremonies. Cáit described Keening ceremonies as infrequent events that took place where groups came together and keened. It appears there are two

origins of this phenomenon. Four of the five women I spoke to who lead Keening ceremonies were introduced to it through workshops held by Frank McKeown, an American spiritualist of Scottish descent who was raised within a Native American community. Being of Celtic descent McKeown reportedly researched the tradition of keening and introduced Keening ceremonies at Shamanic gatherings in Ireland as part of ‘Connecting with the Ancestors’ workshops. It is through the positive experience of this event that a number of individuals were inspired to research the tradition and lead their own Keening ceremonies in Ireland.

Cáit Branigan is the second source of Keening ceremonies in Ireland. As a Shamanic³⁵ healer Cáit journeys³⁶ regularly. From insight gained through this method of consultation Cáit began to research the tradition in depth, seeing a need in current Irish society for a forum and a way for grief to be released. As a result of this research Cáit set up Keening ceremonies.

Through contact with Cáit I was referred to four participants, from county’s Wexford, Wicklow and Meath, who were willing to discuss with me their experience participating or leading a keening ceremony. It was through interviews with these participants that I retrieved most data on the function and meaning of keening for those who sing the keen today. Through attendance and participation at two ceremonies I gathered data about the form and context of keening used in Keening ceremonies.

3.2.1 Context

At Keening ceremonies participants are not keening any one individual’s death; every person keens their own personal grief. This grief is not always for the loss or passing of someone. Sometimes people keen in order to release grief surrounding a tragic event that happened in their life such as rape, inability to have children, abuse etc.

I attended my first keening ceremony (*Dublin, Ceremony 1*) in December 2013, held in a

³⁵ “Shamanic healing is a practice which establishes our connection to the whole of life and helps to restore balance. The practice of shamanism is derived from ancient teachings and is to be found in various forms throughout the five continents of the planet. In Ireland, it was to be found in indigenous healing practices which incorporates the practice of Fairy healing found also in Scotland; it is present in the Druidic practices found throughout the Celtic countries. The term 'shaman' may not be indigenous to these lands, some academics even arguing that the practices are inherently different, however, this is to deny the global nature of indigenous practices. The evidence of such practices are to be found in the texts and, some may say more importantly, in the lived experience of the indigenous population. In Ireland, the term for a shaman is Bean Feasa (f)(broadly translated as Knowing/Wise Woman) or Fear Feasa (m).” (Cáit Branigan. Personal Communication. 10th January, 2014)

³⁶ Shamanic journeying, to journey within oneself, is a method of inner-consultation. It is a way of communicating with your inner spirit or self and retrieving information.

room in the Lantern Centre, Interfaith Hospitality Centre, Dublin led by Shaman Karen Ward. This event was the opening ceremony of National Grieving Day³⁷.

Thirteen people attended the ceremony, ten females, three male with one non-Irish couple. The ages of participants ranged from 20s (two people in their twenties - the youngest participant 24 and myself) to approximately late fifties/early sixties, with the majority of participants over forty. This ceremony was open to the public. Speaking with the facilitator afterwards this was novel as her Keening ceremonies are normally held within the Shamanic community. Large cushions were set in a half-circle in the room for participants to sit on. Blankets were also available for participants.

On the 10th of January, 2014, I attended a second Keening ceremony (*Wexford, Ceremony 2*) in County Wexford run by Reverend Cáit Branigan and members of the Fellowship of Isis³⁸. This was held in “the temple”, a room where the fellowship often holds ceremonies. I recorded this ceremony. Six women attended, including myself and the facilitator. The ages ranged from earlier twenties to late forties. All present had experienced keening prior to this ceremony. All the attendants, excluding myself, were undergoing or had undergone Shamanic training³⁹, working within the traditions of Ireland. Much like traditional keening had taken place within the context of mortuary rituals and the merry wake, Keening ceremonies today take place within the context of this training and Shamanic tradition.

Before both ceremonies the facilitators “cleared the space” in the room. This entailed a process of burning a type of incense/sage around the room in order to prepare the room and “open sacred space” (Karen Ward. Personal communication. February 4th, 2014). At *Wexford, Ceremony 2* participants had the opportunity to meet, have tea and chat while the facilitator prepared the room.

To begin *Dublin, Ceremony 1* the facilitator blessed the room quietly as she placed a

³⁷ National Grieving Day took place on December 3rd, 2013. Ireland’s first National Grieving Day aimed to “incorporate Ireland’s rich heritage around grieving, holding events, like a Keening ceremony, giving people an opportunity to sit with and move through their hurt, loss and grief towards celebration, hope and light.”

³⁸ A spiritual organization devoted to promoting awareness of the Goddess.

³⁹ “Shamanic healing is a practice which establishes our connection to the whole of life and helps to restore balance. Life is the Great Tapestry - what we see is the picture of our lives and experiences. At the back of the tapestry are found the intricate thread connections that form a web of unity among all that exists. These connections are to be found in the invisible/ spiritual realms. Working with shamanic healing, we seek to reconnect these threads, focusing on the unity of mind, body and spirit. By addressing the spiritual causes of illness, the shaman, with aid of her allies, helps to restore balance between the seen and unseen world and helps the client to view the world in a whole and integrated way”. (Cáit Branigan. Personal Communication. January 10th, 2014)

cauldron on cloth in the middle of the circle of cushions. On this cloth she placed the bud of a lily, a budding lily, and a lily in flower, a withering lily and a dead lily – representing the circle of life. Before this ceremony began Lydia Kiernan, organiser of National Grieving Day welcomed the group and told of her reasons for developing the day. Three women, including lead facilitator Karen Ward, sat in a row, while participants sat on cushions in a half-circle facing them.

This differed to *Wexford, Ceremony 2* where there was one lead keener and one facilitator. Facilitator Reverend Cáit Branigan discussed what was about to happen before we entered the temple where the ceremony was to take place. We were told that we were free to make any sound we felt, the only rule was to make sounds that we felt and not to feign feeling. Four of the six women were dressed in long skirts, black/dark in colour. Each had brought a shawl/veil, similar to traditional shawls, to cover them self with. I was not dressed in this manner. Although I was told it did not matter, that there was no dress code, I still felt this was an unspoken understanding within the group. I was given a veil to cover my head and face with. This veil was to help individuals go deeper into themselves, into that private place within themselves to aid in the accessing of grief. Having entered the temple we sat on bean bags in a circle.

3.2.2 Form of Ceremony

Dublin, Ceremony 1

Dublin, Ceremony 1 begun in a similar fashion to the *Wexford, Ceremony 2*, that I describe below. Starting with a meditation and a brief introduction⁴⁰, the facilitator described the keening ceremony as a safe place in which to express and let out our grief. It was recommended that people make a fake wailing and crying sound to begin with as this would lead to a natural keen coming out. Participants were asked not to leave the room if at all possible as this would interrupt the ceremony.

The three lead keeners covered their faces and bodies with black veils (see Fig. 3.1 below) and one began to make slow sobbing, crying sounds without tears. All three lead keeners began to sound while rocking backwards and forwards – the rhythm of their sobbing followed the rhythm of their swaying much like descriptions of traditional keening women at funerals. The women were sounding these cries at different intervals, at different

⁴⁰ A succinct and apt description of keening was give, describing the function of *mná caointe* as feeling the collective unconscious, feeling the energy of the people around them and expressing the grief of the people around them

rhythms and so a feeling of instability was created. The wailing and crying noises increased in volume and intensity and slowly members of the group joined – some following the sounds of the three lead keeners, some moaning. The volume of sound grew and the three lead keeners appeared to be wailing with their entire bodies - shoulders moving to the rhythm of their cries. The sounds ranged from high pitched screeches to guttural sounds. They were raw and unapologetic.

The sounds that presented themselves in *Dublin, Ceremony 1* differed to those experienced in *Wexford, Ceremony 2*. These sounds consisted of a combination of sobbing, crying, wailing, moaning, high-pitched melodic humming leading into screeching and howling – with phrases of these sounds ending in gasps. The crying followed a pattern after a while, high to low in one breath, sobbing and shaking. The sounds of this ceremony corresponded to some of what I had read about of the traditional keen, where *bean chaointe* were seen to be in a state of ‘divine madness’. However there appeared to be less of a procedure to releasing grief here, the ceremony jumped right in at the very end of what I understood of the traditional keen. The traditional keen consisted of the chant-like dirge, the ornamented *ochón* which resulted in wailing, crying and howling. It appeared this ceremony had skipped over the first two steps and went directly into wailing.

This had a huge impact on me. I reacted with fear and did not hear the sounds as music. I could not hear a melodic pattern and I did not hear any form. I realised I had entered the ceremony expecting to hear something that was similar to the traditional keen, a style of singing containing elements that were recognisable to me. This unconscious prejudice resulted in a negative response within me. What I heard was raw emotion and I wanted to leave the room.

In my attempt to really participate in the ceremony I began to sing a melody on an ‘o’ sound, sometimes singing the word *ochón* going from high to low. I used this as a tool in order to help me feel safe and open up to grief, and sound this grief if I felt the need. This was the process I adopted in order to reach and release grief. The woman immediately to my left cried and wailed very loudly. At one point it appeared she was almost hysterical and at this stage one of the lead keening women took the cauldron to the woman and covered her head with her veil. The woman wept into the cauldron. She began to shout and after some minutes my own singing turned into louder sobbing and wailing, almost in support of the woman crying intensely beside me. It was as if I was trying to help her grieve by making sounds in support of hers. I noticed that my crying (crying without tears) took on a rhythm and I rocked back and forth to this, feeling a sense of security through doing so. The sound seemed to travel in waves around the group. At one stage, when

reaching a crescendo where I was sitting, I had the physical reaction of gagging, the same experience I had the following month in *Wexford, Ceremony 2*. This feeling only lasted a few minutes. I noted that swaying and rocking from the base of my spine helped this feeling to pass more quickly.

Comments

The above patterns describe the form and context in which I experienced my first Keening ceremony. The ceremony lasted approximately an hour and a half, including the introduction. By the end of the ceremony the wailing sounds were replaced by unified humming within the group, one voice being sounded. At the end of the ceremony participants were asked if they would like to speak about their experiences and many did. This is a common occurrence, done in order to help the participants “come down and back into the room” (Karen Ward. Personal communication. February 4th, 2014). Many of the group said they had felt they were keening for Ireland, for what had happened and is happening to the land, for the sorrow emigration was once again bringing to the nation, for the betrayal of the government(s). There was also a sense of shame within the group, shame as to what has happened in Ireland during and since the era of the Celtic Tiger. I explore some of these comments in the next chapter.



Fig. 3.1 *The three lead keeners, Opening ceremony, National Grieving Day* (Credit: Dak Photography, Dublin. 3/12/2013)

3.2.3 Self-observation ceremony 1

Observing my physical response to this ritualised event, it is clear it had an impact on me. I found the ceremony frightening. There was nothing familiar about the experience, which led me to feeling lost, and “betwixt and between”. I had not expected the sounds to go straight into wailing and crying immediately and this left me in a state of shock momentarily. The combination of the powerful, raw, unbridled sounds, and a feeling of not recognising anything – not recognising the sounds coming out of myself, nor the sounds from the people around me – left me in fear and wanting to throw up. Only through singing a familiar melody did I calm myself and settle into the ceremony.

Wexford, Ceremony 2:

The following passage is a description of *Wexford, Ceremony 2*, quoted from my notes. These notes were taken immediately following participation in the ceremony and so are written in the present tense⁴¹. Within this account I quote a prayer said by the facilitator at the start of the ceremony. This description presents the form and context of the ceremony, while also displaying my personal experiences and responses in the comments section.

“The ceremony begins with the facilitator offering support – should people feel sick a towel and basin are available. She goes around to each individual with a shaker, this act was to include and unite each individual in the sacred space. The facilitator prays and says poems in English and Irish. The following is a prayer said by Cáit at the opening of the ceremony:

“bring us into awareness of our grief, and the anger which accompanies it. Grief of the land, which mourns the abuse of her bounty and of her gifts. Who mourns our lack of remembrance. Who mourns how we have forgotten our Mother, have forgotten our divinity and so seek to castrate ourselves, to disconnect ourselves and to wound ourselves. May we hear the grief of the land. That the call of the Mother may call us back to her this day. May we breathe into that grief, may we breathe into that lament. May we breathe” (*Cáit Branigan, January 10th, 2014*).

Following this Cáit reads a poem with a participant reading a poem shortly afterwards. We then all stand and are asked to “*breathe in, breathe in one another, the circle that has come together, in trust, in confidence, in unity. May we be a support to one another, may we each feel the freedom of expression...whatever grief and sadness that lies within. May we remember we are a circle together this day*” (*Cáit Branigan, January 10th, 2014*). A

⁴¹ Notes taken having listened to the recording of the ceremony are also contained within this description

lament⁴² is then sung by Cáit in Irish – Grá Geal mo Chroí (Love, light of my heart).

The lead keening woman begins to hum quietly a melody. This is a closed sound. To this point the ceremony is very comfortable, very beautiful. The facilitator joins in with a more open sound, a counter melody, getting stronger, with louder sounds. She sings on vowels ‘a’ and ‘o’.

There seems to be no set rhythm. The woman on my left joins in and her sounds seem to be complementing the flow of Cáit’s sound. All present join over the course of a minute or so. The sounds begin to flow in and out of each other, complementing each other. The sound becomes louder and the pitch begins to rise. After a number of minutes the sounds become more dissonant and the atmosphere in the room changes, the mood becomes more sullen. With the rising sounds and rising pitches the sounds of sobbing increases and it feels like something is about to break. The sounds become less melodic and begin to sound like a siren or screeching sound. Crying sounds develop. The sound travels in a wave around the group, reaching a crescendo and moving on to the next individual. There is polyphony of voices returning to quietly singing again, followed by a lull in the sounds. Following this again the volume increases. The noise is distressing again and it has lost its melody.

After a while coughing erupts around the room. I begin to cough and get caught for breath. There is a low crying and wailing followed by sounds rising in volume and pitch once more, the group holds this high pitch in unison. As this wave of sound passes, there is a lull, going back to a similar melody as at the start of the ceremony. The group is mainly humming, all with their own melody, holding notes till their breath runs out. A pleasant harmony is sung before the facilitator screeches loudly. This is followed by what sounds like cat noises, yelling and howling. Another wave of sounds and grief passes. It is as if the group is following each other’s sounds, when one grieves loudly the rest of the group sounds louder. Following this a melodic harmony and an open sound is sung. There is group cohesion at this point. We are a group with one voice again for a moment.

Higher open pitches, almost church like develop, with the group complementing each other. This is followed sharply by a disharmony and I begin to feel very sick. I cough loudly and gag. The feeling is very strong. The facilitator brings me a basin and towel and I cough into the bowl as I feel I am about to get sick. The sounds are dissonant at this point and I am coughing, coughing coughing. The sounds get deeper, very masculine. Someone

⁴² Cáit later told me she always sings a lament at the start of a ceremony as “I believe it calls out the feelings within” (Cáit Branigan. Personal communication)

sings a vowel sound at a very high pitch and it makes me feel very sick to hear now. The pitch goes up within the group until participants are screeching, roaring and wailing. It is at this point in the ceremony that the sounds are loudest. The group sing at this high pitch in unison, holding a high note, open mouthed. I cough a lot. I am tired at this point and cannot really join the group singing together. My feelings of sickness begin to subside and the group returns to closed sounds with the lead keener humming. The group hums in disharmony. Finally it is only the lead keener humming an improvised melody for a few minutes.

To close the ceremony the facilitator prays, asking for healing from suffering, extending our hands and our hearts to those that are grieving around the world. She sings a song, “Ancient mother”. The ceremony is concluded. Standing up and coming together as a circle we give thanks for the space.”

Comments

This ceremony lasted approximately 45minutes. As can be seen from the opening paragraph of this passage, an emphasis is put on greiving for abuses that have happened the land in Ireland. I also felt that emphasis was put on the unity of the circle of participants. Although grieving is a personal act, stressed by the covering of our heads with veils, the ceremony was presented as a communal act, which required respect for one another, reflected in one of the opening prayers. This unity was also apparent in the flow of sounds beginning as a variety of individual sounds, to a wave moving through the group, resulting in group cohesion of sounds and back to a range of individual sounds once more. This naturally occurring formation of the sounds complemented and supported the flow and expression of grief throughout the group.

Considering the form of the traditional keen, we understand that the contemporary keen does not consist of a salutation or a verse and only consists of a part of the *gol* or cry. Keening used in therapy follows a loose pattern while Keening ceremonies today incorporate the formless sounds of the *gol* part of the traditional keen, as described in historical texts. A number of participants suggested the reason for this is that everyone present is grieving their own loss and so one set of phrases could not express or emote the individual feelings of grief being expressed (Carmel O’ Dwyer. Personal communication. December 17th, 2013). The context of the keen has also been altered. A corpse is not present during Keening ceremonies and the ceremony takes place within the context of a

semi-private group.

3.2.4 Self-observation ceremony 2

I found this ceremony far less daunting for a number of reasons. Firstly, I had built up a rapport with the other participants before entering the room where the ceremony was to take place. This created a feeling of safety and support – I had made a connection with these people, they were no longer strangers. Secondly, as this was my second ceremony I was more prepared for the sounds and what to expect. Thirdly, I found the use of a veil very beneficial. The veil helped me to go in to a private space, a “cocoon” as one of the informants described it (Deirdre Wadding, Personal Communication. January 10th, 2014) while at the same time I felt safe and supported in the group, without feeling exposed. Lastly, the progression to use of crying and wailing sounds in this ceremony was slower. With prayers and a lament sung at the start, the group was gradually brought to a place where grief could be released. This was reminiscent of the traditional keening with the stages of salutation (in the Keening ceremony Mother Earth was ‘called’ into the ceremony, and the group was ‘called’ together to unite) and the verse/dirge (the initial prayers and lament) and then the singing of the cry/*gol*. In this way I found this ceremony more closely linked to the traditional keening, and far easier to release emotion within this space. Although I physically responded by wanting to get sick again, this time there was no fear attached to it. And following the ceremony I felt like I had released a load, and my voice freer.

I now go onto discuss what participants describe as the function of the recontextualised modern day keening.

3.3 Function

In the following section I relate the function of the keen as described by five interviewees who practice it as part of voice therapy and eight individuals who have used keening within the context of Keening ceremonies.

Reviewing the interviews, five categories appeared when discussing the function of the keen. These categories emerged on the basis of what wording interviewees used to describe what the function of keening was for them. These classifications, and the number of interviewees from each group that described the function of keening in such a way, is represented in the following table.

Functions	Keening as Voice Therapy	Keening ceremonies
Getting others to release grief/moving listeners to tears/bringing out grief of others	2	6
As a mechanism to heal	1	1
Letting go/releasing/freeing/expressing grief	5	6
Connecting with the dead and helping into the next life	1	1
Being heard	0	1

As can be seen above approximately 78% of interviewees described keening as a way of releasing or letting go. This corroborates with my personal notes where I described keening as "very freeing and as a way to release emotion" (Personal notes following participation in voice therapy sounding morning, October 2013). While just under 60% described the function of keening as a way to draw out grief, moving others to tears. These functions are the same as functions of past keening described in the last chapter. Although the form and context has changed substantially it appears that users of keening today use the keen for the same purposes. With under 15% stating that a function of keening is to connect with

the deceased, we gather that the earlier function of keening, to aid in the transference of the dead person's soul from this world to the next, is no longer a prevalent function of keening. From the aforementioned experiences of keening, I describe the function of it as a communal way to release grief. It is a communication, letting others know of the grief you carry, and sharing and supporting each other in the release of this grief. Traditional keening on the other hand draws out grief from the listeners and creates a space for the expression of collective grief. This difference is shown in the sounds, as I mention above, the verse of the traditional keen bringing out the grief of those present, whereas the sounds of the contemporary keen are the sounds of raw personal grief. The context also suggests a more personal form of grieving. The contemporary keen, done in a semi-private context, aims to release personal grief and bring the individual back to a place of balance. The traditional keen, performed in the context of the wake and funeral, aimed to bring the whole community to a place of stability and balance.

In the next chapter I further consider the underlying function, form and context of keening today.

4 Discussion

In the following chapter I interpret data collected in the field. This is the second layer of the process of analysis whereby I explore the possible underlying functions extending the analysis to an interpretive reading of the information. Through lived experience of the contemporary keen, researching and writing an historical overview, and through the completion of numerous interviews, I have come to gain an understanding of the development and content of the background of the contemporary keen. With this as my base I endeavour to abstract underlying rationales for the use of the keen today.

Interpretations are viewed and framed through the concepts of frontstage and backstage, traditionalization and liminality, as discussed in chapter one. I have worked through material from interviews while being attentive to the emergence of possibly unrecognised motivations for users of the contemporary keen. I present the main categories that have evolved as a result of this procedure within the frameworks of the aforementioned concepts. These are the interpretive guidelines for this analysis – that interpretations are taken from data revealed in interviews and will be supported by interviewee quotes and/or my own personal observations.

4.1 Front and backstage presentations of keening

Traditionally the keen took place in public – the context for it being the wake, on the way to the graveyard and at the graveyard. Although *bean chaointe* improvised the lament, the text had a body of stock material which was familiar to all. Through the process of using this stock of phrases, the *bean chaointe* made a front stage presentation, witnessed and experienced by those present. This was an expected and accepted process by the congregation. Through this process the *bean chaointe* brought those present to the third part of the keen, the *gol* or cry. This part allowed people an opportunity to join the *bean chaointe* and sing the *ochón*. The space was made for those present to express their grief. Unlike the first two stages of the keen, the *gol* was not done “in a general and fixed fashion” (Goffman, 1969, p.32). During this part of the keen people were given the freedom to sound their grief as they needed to, being led in this process by the *bean chaointe* and the singing of the *ochón*. Through the keening women’s screeches, cries and howls, those present were allowed to express these unfixed, normally socially unacceptable private sounds. Through the sounds and stages of the keen, the *bean chaointe* altered the rules of frontstage expression whereby the private sounds of real grief, normally

contextualized to backstage, became frontstage where people could express in the presence and support of others. The sounds and sentiments of the first parts of the keen (the salutation and the verse) drawing out the emotions of the listeners and creating the opportunity for transgression of boundaries, creating the opportunity for changing the rules of frontstage and backstage context. The third part of the keen, the cry allowed for listeners to become participants and express these normally prohibited and private sounds of grief.

Keening used as part of voice therapy workshops are open to the public. This practice adheres to a form (going from high to low in one phrase while sounding the vowel 'e' is repeated three times) and this is the expected behaviour of all participants who keen in this context. Although not explicitly stated, no room or context for the suppressed sounds of backstage grieving is provided. Although other sounds are not prohibited, I never experienced the group diverging from these sounds and to do so would have been to stray from the expected presentation of keening in this context.

However through the learning and sharing of this experience of keening participants remarked on their ability to go further into their own backstage expression of grief while alone, in a private setting. "Formulaic keening then morphed into 'natural keening', crying, howling, keening on the in-breath, making a sound all the time. It worked, there was a rhythm" (Claire Pollock. Personal communication. February 18th, 2014). The experience of using keening as part of voice therapy had opened within them and allowed some participants to reach a place within themselves where they could express their own personal grief, backstage, in private. Through experiencing keening in this way, participants are provided with a tool to release the personal sounds of grief when in private. As the facilitator of the group commented, "Releasing can feel frightening, we are unused to it. There are lots of sounds we don't make because we are conditioned by our culture to not to make them." (Elizabeth Ewing. Personal communication. January 12th, 2014). This last quote highlights the restrictiveness felt by this interviewee by the expectations of what is acceptable grieving behaviour in the frontstage context.

Within the space of Keening ceremonies on the other hand, permission is given for people's private expressions of grief and pain to be expressed, heard and witnessed by the surrounding group. The group provides support much like the community provided support to the chief mourners at a funeral. "the witnessing of grief, the permission to do that in a space. Deep, intense, cocooned in their own space" (Deirdre Wadding. Personal communication. January 10th, 2014). The sounds of a keening ceremony are reminiscent of those described as part of the *gol* stage of the keen. No form is expected to these sounds – complete freedom being given to the expression of grief felt by participants. Much like the

bean chaointe led the people at funerals in expression of grief, while also maintaining, controlling and overviewing the levels of grief through their sounds, the facilitators of Keening ceremonies today do much the same. As I began to cough and feel ill at the Keening ceremony I felt supported by the sounds of the group. I felt I was being heard and I knew that I was safe in that support. When I felt most that I was about to get sick, the leader of the Keening ceremony brought me a bowl and a towel.

As I mention above, the expression of such private sounds within the context of a group are significant for participants. People are showing these vulnerable aspects of themselves, these backstage sounds, within the presence of others - “you’re absolutely exposing your most vulnerable side” (Deirdre Wadding. Personal communication. January 10th, 2014). As one interviewee noted keening is “a form of communication...people listen to keening.” (Bridget Meagher⁴³. Personal communication. January 17th, 2014). From this I suggest that keening is used to communicate one’s grief in all forms and for that grief to be witnessed and heard.

Considering the contemporary keen through the concept of front and backstage we discover that the keen expressed at Keening ceremonies appears to be a backstage expression of grief being expressed in the semi-private context of a group

“backstage conduct is one which allows minor acts which might easily be taken as symbolic of intimacy and disrespect for others present and for the region, while front region conduct is one which disallows such potentially offensive behavior”. (Goffman, 1969, p.129)

These backstage sounds, once acceptable at funerals through the singing and sounds of the *bean chaointe* are no longer adequate to express in the public region for fear of upsetting or disrespecting others. They may be seen as mad sounds and mad people to be making these sounds which are “potentially offensive behavior” (Ibid). “To an outsider it can like something mad but it’s the soul sounding” (Karen Ward, Personal communication. February 4th, 2014).

⁴³ In the 1980s keening was used as a means of being heard as part of the Greenham Commons women’s protests. Women met in groups and keened in order to be heard. For this group it was extremely important to use this female tradition and to use their voice to be heard. Bridget Meagher was interviewed having been a former member of this group.

According to Wilce “Our thinking about what is current public behavior has changed due to privatization. Displays of passion or sentiment becoming private” (Wilce, 2009, p.97). We now seem to only have the one aspect, one space in which to show our grief – the private sphere, as permission is not given in the frontstage region to express these sounds. The free form of keening at Keening ceremonies allows for an expression of grief that may well be seen as uncomfortable to listen to by the general public. As can be understood from my physical response of feeling sick in Keening ceremonies, these sounds are powerful, unfamiliar and can be considered harsh.

It is significant to note that these backstage expressions, once expressed in the public forum of a funeral during the third stage of the keen, have been moved to the semi-private context of a Keening ceremony. These ceremonies are primarily by invite only (Cáit Branigan, personal communication). However with the emergence of National Grieving Day and its opening event – a Keening ceremony, this may be changing – the sounds flowing between front and backstage, the agreement of what is front and backstage expressions of grief changing. The backstage expressions of grief are being brought into the public sphere with events such as Keening ceremonies opening to the public. As organiser of the day Lydia Kiernan said “It is not just for people who would come along to those events always. We are trying to open it to the mainstream and to people that are underserved” (Personal communication. December 2013). This highlights the potential for the keen to re-enter the public consciousness once more and shows the lines of front and backstage therefore beginning to blur with backstage sounds presenting themselves in a semi-public context and potentially in the public sphere once more.

I now go on to discuss the significance of the use of these backstage expressions of grief within the framework of a tradition.

4.2 Traditionalization

As mentioned in chapter one, traditionalization is the act of grounding a performance in “specific situational, historical, social and cultural contexts” (Mould, 2010, p.1203).

Through drawing on past descriptions of the final part of the keen, users of the keen today validate their own use of it. Traditionalization is accomplished by reference to the past, thereby allowing claim to authenticity of the practice and in turn elevating the status of the practice for the group.

Describing the soundings practiced as part of the studied holistic voice therapy group as keening imbues it with a sense of authenticity. The practice is traditionalized as the past traditional keening, and its functions, are explained to the group, and it is this that inspires the practice. However with such a different form and context can the practice be seen as a continuation of the tradition? I suggest that this practice is imbued with the tradition yet is not a continuation of it. It is not a variation of the tradition but is inspired by the practice of traditional keening and thus is given added significance by naming it so. Although interviewees discussed the function as being to help people release grief, it was my experience that the practices undertaken as part of the voice therapy group led participants to discovering a resource which could allow them to release grief themselves, and take this practice to their home, where they could privately express and release their grief – a valid function in itself. A function of this practice then was to free the culturally bound “pre-conditioned voice” (Elizabeth Ewing. Personal communication. January 12th, 2014) and help people to allow themselves to make sounds of grief should they need to do so. This development highlights the desire of individuals in contemporary Irish society of learning new ways of releasing grief, as is discussed in the next section. However, with the form, context and function being so altered from the tradition, I believe it is difficult to say that this is a continuation of the practice of traditional keening but rather a new practice inspired by aspects of an older cultural practice.

At Keening ceremonies individuals are made aware of the former practices of the ritual of keening and the role of the *bean chaointe* in Ireland. In Keening ceremonies, as expressed by Cáit Branigan (Interview, January 10th, 2014) – “it is really important that they know about the tradition and attempt to follow some format.” The form of traditional keening is also described with acknowledgement of the fact that today’s keen takes any form, mainly elements of the free form part of the *gol* or cry. However only the last part of the keen is used, each individual is expressing their own personal grief and so a form is not assumed by the group as this may inhibit expression of each participant’s personal grief.

Traditionalization is reflected in the content of the ceremony more so than in the form.

This practice is inspired by the ritual of past keening and its power to release grief and bring about potential for change.

The significance of being connected with “our heritage” is emphasized (Deirdre Wadding. Personal communication. January 10th, 2014). I did not feel that the group was trying to elevate the status of the practice by connecting it with the past, rather it appeared that by connecting and respecting this tradition, a sense of empowerment was granted to the individuals, a sense of connection to Ireland, Irish traditions and traditional ways of dealing with grief. It appears that the group is attempting to look back and learn what is “known from the old wisdom” (Monica Devine. Personal communication. December 16th, 2013).

In the case of Keening ceremonies I believe a continuation with the tradition, and an evolution of the tradition, takes place, “people are reaching back to the past and evolving it forward” (Karen Ward. Personal communication. February 4th, 2014). Although the form and context have altered greatly, the intent behind the practice appears to remain relatively the same – the communal expression and releasing of grief. Although recontextualised, an attempt is made to re-ritualise the process and practice of using the keens, respecting the ritual practice of traditional keening while also being aware of and respecting the powerful sounds of keening. Through this process a connection is made with the past. At the first Keening ceremony I attended I felt it was as if this connection to our lost culture was what was being grieved in itself. According to one interviewee the “Lack of keening represents a lack of connection to older times, and a depth of emotion that is missing, a disconnect with cultural identity” (Susan McKeown. Personal communication. February, 2014). This “lack of connection” was expressed by other respondents also. We are “turning to Keening ceremonies – to reconnect with our spiritual tradition but also to release shame of the disconnection with this spiritual tradition.” (Delores Whelan. Personal communication. December, 2013). Traditionalization signifies a desire for stability through connecting with the past.

This traditionalized practice may be considered an important indicator of issues which “might not otherwise be recognised, and developments which are otherwise difficult to identify and to date” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p.12) It is these indicators I now discuss in the final section.

4.3 The liminal phase

As discussed in chapter two, traditional keening was done by a number of women known in the community to have the gift of the *caoine*. The *bean chaointe* was considered to be in a state of liminality for the duration of the funeral ceremony. This phase was seen as a state of ‘divine madness’, the women were “betwixt and between” worlds, the sounds of the keen being the connection between this world and the next. Through holding this liminal state the *bean chaointe* brought the community from a place of intense grief to a place of acceptance. Through their words, sounds and actions the community was given an opportunity to express their grief freely and the grief of the community was also expressed through the *bean chaointe*. Through the stages of the keen – the salutation, the dirge and the *gol* – and within the context of mortuary rituals and *merry wake* games, the community was brought from a state of disarray to a place of peace, from a place where death had intruded and interrupted their community, to a place of new stability. The *bean chaointe* brought the community to a place of acceptance of the passing of the deceased and an understanding as to how life would continue in the future. This liminal state, this “realm of pure possibility” (Turner, 2003, p.511) was created through the use of the sounds of keening. The verse of the keen had the function of “praising the dead persons soul” to the next world (Fr. Eddie Ó Conghaile. Personal communication. October 29th and 30th, 2013) while at the same time beginning to draw the grief out of those present. The cry part of the keen helped those present sound and release their grief. Within the context of mortuary rituals this was the transformative effect of the sounds of the keen.

While occupying this state of liminality keening women created a space for potential of change through what ordinarily would be publicly unacceptable words, sounds, appearance and dramatic actions. They gave the impression of being out of this world, and through inclusion of the congregation during the third part of the keen, created a forum in which change could happen – creating a space out of time and place (by being otherworldly), they created the opportunity for potential of transformation for those present to go from a state of intense grief and disharmony to a place of acceptance and stability.

According to Van Gennep (*Rites of Passage*, 1960), liminality is the middle phase of a rite of passage. Considering the traditional keen, I consider the first stage or pre-liminal stage to be before the intrusion of death on the community, when keening women assume their everyday role as participant in the community. The liminal or second stage then exists for the duration of mortuary rituals, the community is in an intense state of grief and the *bean chaointe* adopts her marginal position, leading the community in a public expression of grief. The third stage or post liminal phase occurs with re-integration into the newly

balanced community. By this point the community has gone from everyday life, to dissolution of the regular and into a state of grief and uncertainty, resulting in an acceptance of this grief and incorporation into a new community life. Between worlds, outside of custom, convention or the law and neither of this world or of the next, the *bean chaointe* and their keen were the means through which transformation occurred, bringing the community to a post-liminal state.

A phase of liminality may not appear as clearly defined in relation to the contemporary keen. To query whether a phase of liminality is entered into we must ask why an attempt is being made to create an interstructural space? If we consider today's Keening ceremony as a threshold we must question what is being altered and what is involved in this time in which a space for potential change is created. Here I distinguish between the use of keening in voice therapy groups and Keening ceremonies. I discuss Keening ceremonies as a re-ritualization of the cultural practice of keening. Keening ceremonies follow a distinct pattern of action and behaviours while at the same time allowing for a freedom of expression of sounds, inspired by the *gol* part of the traditional keen. An attempt is made to respect the power of the sounds, therefore sanctifying the process, by ritual practices such as clearing space by using sage, prayers and poems being said at the beginning of the ceremony. By re-ritualising the practice, the importance with which the group endows the sounds of keening is indicated.

I contrast this with the manner in which the keen is used as part of voice therapy groups. Keening in this regard is part of a number of practices used in an attempt to open the voice and help people connect more deeply with themselves through expression of their voice. The keen itself takes a form but the actions and behaviours that go with the practice differ depending on occasion. This does not suggest the practice is not beneficial in itself. However its lack of connection to past forms of keening, its recontextualisation, altered form and its primary function as a means to open the voice suggest a de-ritualisation of traditional keening and an indefinite connection to past keening.

Through the process of blessing and re-ritualising the Keening ceremony, individuals are invited to share and express themselves in what is considered a safe space. As expressed by facilitators of ceremonies, a space where people have "permission" to express themselves and show their "vulnerability" as they need to within the safe space created by the Keening ceremony. (Lydia Kiernan, Cáit Branigan, Karen Ward. Personal communication. December, 2013, January and February 2014).

Catherine Bell suggests that “In an ever changing society, ritual is the bridge between tradition and constant social change” (Bell, 1992, p.20). Considering Keening ceremonies from this respect we begin to understand the significance of traditionalization and re-ritualisation of this cultural practice for the group. Through altered appearance and connection with the otherworld, traditional *bean chaointe* occupied a state of liminality. In Keening ceremonies, the state of liminality is first made possible by re-ritualisation of the tradition and creation of this safe space. Re-ritualisation also signifying that they are going into a liminal state, a place between, where they are neither pre-ritual nor post-ritual but in ritual.

I suggest that three possible stages are entered into in Keening ceremonies – pre-ceremony, ceremony and post ceremony. In pre-ceremony individuals hold their unexpressed grief and remain unheard, during ceremony they are releasing this anxiety and being heard. Post ceremony, the individuals have released their grief and have used their voice and been heard, returning to the world outside of the space of the Keening ceremony. This middle or liminal phase is a space in which expression of all forms of grief is permitted. I conjecture that my response of feeling sick in both ceremonies could be associated with the disorientation and sense of ambiguity experienced during the liminal phase of the ritual – overwhelmed by hearing the private sounds of grief and the unfamiliarity and uncertainty during the ritual, it is possible to surmise that this may have had this impact on me.

The goal of the ceremony is the communal release of grief with the attempt of healing one’s hurts in the presence of others, as described in chapter three. In this situation the leader of the ceremony takes on a role not dissimilar to that of the *bean chaointe* at past funerals. The facilitator of the ceremony invites participants to express their grief while she at the same time holds the space in which people can do this, not allowing herself to become overwhelmed by grief during the ceremony- “I was aware that I was holding this space, and creating the sound to help them find theirs... I have to hold a type of boundary between that. I was acutely aware of the group, that was my role.” (Deirdre Wadding, Personal communication. January 10th, 2014).

As discussed above we see the significance of re-ritualisation of keening and its connection to what I describe as the development of a liminal phase. Considering Keening ceremonies through the framework of this concept can develop and extend our perspective of this practice.

4.4 Structures for re-emergence

Many speculations were given by interviewees as to the reasons for re-emergence of the keen, “people going away from the Church... People are trying to find their voice after a long period of unexpressed relations.” (Cáit Branigan. Personal communication. January 10th, 2014), “Ireland is trying to find its voice, its identity and its spirituality” (Bridget Meagher. Personal communication. January 17th, 2014), “people are looking for something more fulfilling and whole in their lives” (Elizabeth Ewing. Personal communication. January 12th, 2014). “There isn’t that sense of certainty in people anymore about what’s going to happen – am I going to have a job tomorrow? Are my kids going to be here in six years time (emigration)? Maybe it’s (keening) reaching people because people need some way to cope or some way to release,” (Deirdre Wadding. Personal communication. January 10th, 2014).

It is interesting to reflect on the decline of the keen and what was happening in Ireland at that time. As I mentioned in chapter two, the decline of keening coincided with the strengthening of the Catholic Church and the emergence of a new middle class. To parallel that with the re-emergence of the newly evolved keen now, we see it is happening at a time in Ireland when the role and influence of the Catholic Church is rapidly declining, and Ireland is economically crippled.

Whatever the reasons for the reappearance of the keen in Irish society it is important to note that keening, and awareness of the tradition is increasing. This can be seen in the increasing number of Keening ceremonies being held, the development of National Grieving Day and the interest my own research has received from the onset. This interest shows the desire for a space in which to talk about and express grief, a structure in which people can be heard, a threshold for change.

Considering Keening ceremonies to be a liminal phase we ask then what is being shed, altered or transformed in this state. From my experience throughout the course of this project and from interpreting responses gathered from interviewees, I understand that these ceremonies provide a structure for individuals. When asking interviewees about keening and possible reasons for its re-emergence, 50% of participants of the contemporary keen commented on the changes taking place in Irish society today and the period of “uncertainty” occurring now, with great grief over “emigration”, “loss of jobs”, “failure of economy” and “how the government has behaved”. (Deirdre Wadding, Annette Peard, Lydia Kiernan, Susan McKeown, Cáit Branigan, Karen Ward, Monica Devine and Sarah Nolan, personal communications. November, 2013 – February, 2014).

It appears that Keening ceremonies are a place in which participants attempt to regain an element of control, in a society where individuals feel powerless and unstable; this space allows them to voice their anxieties, be heard, express themselves freely and therefore within this context have control over how to use their voice. Keening is a form of communication, a way of being heard. In Keening ceremonies participants are communicating their most vulnerable and raw experiences. “People listen to keening, even if they don’t want to.” (Bridget Meagher. Personal communication. January 17th, 2014)

The setting of the Keening ceremony provides individuals with a structure, a space where they are free to express themselves, be heard, and are supported by the group. Yet it also appears very important to the individuals I met at Keening ceremonies that they are doing this through the means of an Irish tradition – a sense that it is significant that their voice be heard as an Irish person.

Listening back to the recording of the Wexford Keening ceremony (number two) the sounds of the group can be heard to be supporting individuals in the group that are sounding or in the most intense states of grief - the sound flowing in waves around the group, moving toward and supporting those who seem to need the support, as they are voicing most. “As people’s grief emerged it carried mine. My sound facilitating their sounds of grief and by me hearing that it became real for me, it becomes real grief then for me and for them” (Deirdre Wadding. Personal communication. January 10th, 2014). This last quote highlights the significance of the support of the group in the sharing and witnessing of grief. Keening ceremonies are a space for the sounds of grief itself to come out – the sounds are not drawing out the grief, the sounds are the grief, and it is through re-ritualisation in this constructed space, that is enables the drawing out of the grief from the individual.

This I demonstrate in my arrangement of sounds on the headphone mix of the installation discussed in the next chapter. The sounds also unify at points, becoming one voice almost and then divide again becoming a maze of individual sounds being sung together. I feel it is possible that this ‘form’ could reflect unrecognised functions – a structure in which to express individual sounds, be heard, and supported as part of a community yet still maintaining your individual voice - of the ceremony and therefore the need for the context. In this way the context of the Keening ceremony and the sounds used within this context are the vehicles of transformation. This structure and space where you can be heard allows for regaining of some sense of control: you know your voice will be heard, you can express what you need to in the “betwixt and between”, this ambiguous space. These formless

sounds, gaining a type of form naturally, reflects not only individual griefs and expressions but also our fragmented society.

The emergence of Ireland's first National Grieving Day on December 3rd last shows, I believe, a desire in Irish society at the moment to talk about grief, hurts, shame etc., and for this to be heard and acknowledged. As described by organizer of National Grieving Day (N.G.D) "for people to move through grief, there has to be a forum, there needs to be a space for people to go through their grief" (Lydia Kiernan, Personal Communication, December 2013). This was one of the main objectives of the day - to create a space where people can share and experience their grief. Keening ceremonies are another form in which this space is created. A strong connection was made with Irish funeral traditions in advertising this N.G.D, with a headline from an online article of The Irish Examiner⁴⁴ reading:

"National Grieving Day: The best of Irish traditions sparking healing and hope around the world". (November 29th, 2013. The Irish Examiner online).

This headline indicates the importance of Irish funeral traditions and the attempt to prompt a sense of pride in people about such traditions. With a Keening ceremony being the opening event for the day, this highlights the re-emergence in interest in this tradition and the newly forming contexts in which it is appearing.

⁴⁴ <http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/national-grieving-day-the-best-of-irish-traditions-sparking-healing-and-hope-around-the-world-251161.html>

5 Practical work

This chapter presents the process and development of the practical part of this masters. It illustrates how I progressed from reading about, listening to and practicing keening, to interviewing and recording individuals and to finally developing a sound installation. The written part of this project explains my understanding and comprehension of the Irish cultural practice of keening, both past and present. Through practice of the keen I came to know and have an embodied experience of it. This chapter shows the result of both these aspects of my research, of my coming to know keening intellectually and viscerally - the culmination of this theoretical and practical study results in the creation of a sound installation, an atmosphere of sound created through a re-presentation of this traditional art form. The present chapter considers what a sound installation is, why I chose to create one and how an installation was a suitable medium for me through which to achieve the objectives of this research. I state the desired aims in creating an installation, the process of creation, the experience and insights gained through presentation of the installation and, lastly, the connection between the conceptual aspects of this research and this practical work.

As stated earlier in the thesis, one of the aims of this research is to gain a visceral understanding of keening, using the process of self-observation. Having collected recordings from the Folklore Archive of the National University of Ireland, Dublin in Belfield, I began to imitate the keens I heard. A number of the singers on these recordings were highly skilled and in an attempt to be better able to sing the keen, and learn through doing, I took lessons in *sean-nós* singing for approximately eight months⁴⁵, for although different, similar techniques are used in *sean-nós* singing to keening. Through this experience I became more comfortable singing the keen. However I still had much difficulty singing the *gol/cry* part of the keen. Even in a room or house isolated from other people I was still unable or too embarrassed to allow myself make the sounds of the *gol* as described in the folklore and history books I had read.

In order to help me make these sounds, while also learning a contemporary use of the keen, I met with Elizabeth Ewing privately to learn about how she used keening as part of her holistic voice therapy coaching, and how she placed keening within the framework of her

⁴⁵ My teacher during this time (October 2012 – May 2013) was West Cork based singer and musician Mary Tisdall O’ Sullivan. I also attended workshops with the well-known young *sean-nós* singer Nell Ní Chróinín.

training as part of the Naked Voice⁴⁶. I worked with Elizabeth for a number of months in early 2013 and with this I developed my practice individually. In time I began to allow myself make the sounds of the cry part of the keen. After meetings with Elizabeth and after attending her voice therapy group I would note my experiences. For a period I began to practice keening daily. I noted the effects these practices had on me. I observed myself, and my reactions to the keen through this process, continually reflecting on how the keen impacted upon me, both as a singer and as an individual.

It is these notes I have analysed and reported on in chapter three and with the insights gained from reflection on these experiences I began the process of developing an installation.

5.1 Sound installation

A sound installation is an intermedia, time based and site-specific art form (Rocha Iturbide, 2003). In a sound installation focus is put on the sounds as they are disembodied and disconnected from the source from which they come. “In divorcing sound from image, sound takes on a life of its own, and this is what makes the concept of sound art possible” (Licht, 2007, p. 38). Visuals presented as part of a sound installation behave practically as an instrumental part for the flow of the sound arrangement.

In this context I define listening as a physical, physiological process which occurs when we become conscious of sound, connecting and engaging with it. We listen and we engage our intellect and our emotions. And when we listen, as opposed to just hearing, we are beginning the process of meaning-making. For this reason I chose this medium. A performance of keening or a recording of keening on CD is more detached, setting the listener separate and further away from the sounds. To hear keening on CD one has the potential to remain passive and unengaged with the sounds, often distracted by what else is going on around. By removing the performer I also feel more emphasis is put on the sound itself. In an installation “the sound is closer, more physically with you than in a concert hall” (Licht, 2007, p.46). In an installation engagement is required. Therefore it was significant for me that the experience of the keen would be site-specific, the sounds being experienced in a specific location.

⁴⁶ A method developed by singer and educator Chloe Goodchild that explores the human voice as a source of individual and collective self-discovery.

An installation requires participation from the audience. Individuals are invited into a space, and in the case of this sound installation, invited into an experience. By immersing themselves into the experience, the space is created for audience members to come to have an embodied experience of the tradition. A commitment of sort is made by the individual to open themselves up to the possibility of experiencing and participating, by entering into the space. An installation demands interaction of its audience – forcing the observer not only to observe but also to exist within it and/or as part of it. It is this very involvement that brings about meaning.

With this desire of creating an experience of keening as my practical creation for this MA, I realized to perform a keen would be to fulfill only one element of my goal – displaying the form, while the content, and the relationship between content and form as I had come to experience and understand it, could not be translated to the audience. I endeavoured to artistically express my reflection upon, my experiences of and my interpretations of, keening.

I wanted this experience of the keen to reflect my learnings and interpretations set within the conceptual frameworks discussed in the last chapter. To reflect the liminal phase entered into through use of the keen traditionally and in Keening ceremonies, I considered the temporal nature of liminality, and the temporal nature of intense grief.

A sound installation appeared to be an appropriate medium through which to express this artistic idea, in the representation of the liminal phase. An installation is a temporal work – it is present for the duration of the exhibition, be it hours, days or weeks. In an installation, due to its temporal nature, all time - past, present and future - exist within the same space, as with a state of liminality we are out of time and space, in time and space and beyond time and space all at once. In this place is the space for potential, the threshold for transformation.

The sounds of past keening at funerals was the vehicle for transformation, the *bean chaointe* guided mourners in a state of liminality to a place of stability, where grief had subsided and a post-liminal state reached. As discussed in the last chapter, I assert that today's Keening ceremonies are a place and space for change, with sound being the threshold for change. In my practical work I wanted to express this in-between state, the sense of being out of time, where all is potential and transformation can take place. By inviting people into this space I am inviting them to cross a threshold, to experience the

possibly transforming sounds of grief. This was my artistic idea for the representation of the liminal phase.

And so I chose the medium of a sound installation, a temporal space designated for the experience of keening and the potential for change it can bring. To make a CD of keening, to make it something more permanent would have been to betray the temporal nature of intense grief that the use of keening subsides.

With these thoughts in mind, an installation was the most appropriate medium to represent my artistic ideas.

5.2 Making a sound installation – aims and objectives

As the methodological aim of the theoretical part of this MA is to accomplish ‘thick description’, this artistic endeavour, while it cannot replace ‘thick description’ in promoting understanding of the phenomenon of keening, it can enhance one’s understanding of how I have interpreted keening and experienced keening.

I have framed my experiences of keening within and through the medium of a sound art installation. These sounds aim to invite individuals to reflect upon the sounds they are hearing and the feelings they may cause to arise within them. Why is it now uncomfortable for us to hear such sounds that were once natural to express in a community setting? What does it draw out in us?

Through the process of creation of the installation I too gain a deeper understanding of keening – both past and present – as I interact with the sounds in another way to merely listening and singing the keen. An objective of this installation is to present what I interpret as the essence of my experience of the contemporary keen, a synthesis of old and new tradition.

What the audience takes from this experience is up to them. My role is to create the space for the experience and reflection to take place. I aim to leave the listeners with an impression of keening. I can wish for this space to cause the individual to reflect, to shift perception, to feel but how the participants experiences, understands and interprets keening within the space is out of my control.

5.3 The process

The following section describes the step-by-step process of development of the installation. My concept has been inspired by and developed through ‘the processes/the making of it and through my research.

5.3.1 Recording

The installation incorporates sounds of keening I have collected through the course of this research. As the sound is the determinant factor, I chose to have a linear sound structure in this installation, where the sound develops in a similar way to that of a musical composition. Recordings of singers in Connemara were collected using a zoom H4 recorder. The Voice Therapy group was recorded using a small Phillips Dictaphone and again a zoom H4 recorder. These devices were chosen because they take good quality recordings and are small and unobtrusive. I used binaural microphones, placed in my ears, when attending the Keening ceremony as discretion was of the utmost importance in this situation. Binaural microphones capture the essence of an experience from the perspective of the person recording and record at an excellent sound quality.

When I began to arrange the sounds, my compositional choices were affected by my background in singing - what I had heard and found most interesting was what had jumped out at me musically, the more melodic and harmonious recordings appealing to me more. Unconsciously at first I chose what I heard as a singer, the most musically interesting pieces of recordings and began to arrange the recordings. To achieve the goal of respecting the rawness and wholeness and of the experience, I had to undo this way of categorizing the sounds. I aimed to present an experience of keening, and so the sounds I considered unmusical would have to be presented also to create a holistic experience.

However I was aware of how long it had taken me to allow myself to make these sounds. After over a year of being immersed in keening – listening to recordings, practicing the keens individually and in groups – I had learned to undo some of the vocal restraints my background in singing had engrained in me. I learned to allow myself to make the most unappealing sounds when it felt natural to do so. I learned to sing and sound in groups without form or unity.

I was aware of the importance of not overwhelming the average listener with sounds that most probably were quite unfamiliar to him/her. I realised by inviting listeners into this

experience, I had to gradually introduce them to the sounds of keening, beginning with the most accessible. And so I decided to arrange the sounds beginning with the more accessible sounds of the female singer from the Aran Islands and slowly introducing the sounds used in voice therapy groups and the unbridled keening of Sarah Grealish.

The treatment and arrangement of the recordings were influenced by the works of minimalist vocalist Meredith Monk⁴⁷. I was inspired by her untouched, raw way of using her voice, highly expressive and poignant. The work of Scottish sound installation artist Susan Philipsz⁴⁸ also inspired me in the creation of this installation. In her award winning installation *Lowlands*, Phillipsz sings in a non-performance manner, fragile, unaffected and deliberately unshowy. This creates a haunting effect. This reconfirmed my intention of leaving the sounds remain as they were, natural and unaffected, without the need of developing the composition into a performance. I was conscious that I did not want the installation to be something inspired by an element of keening, creating something unrecognisable and abstract from this inspiration.

5.3.3 The Spaces

While arranging the sounds I became very much aware of the difference between the recordings of Connemara women keening and the sounds of keening at Keening ceremonies – the former being performed, a frontstage expression of grief, the latter being a non-performance, a private, backstage expression. This led to the development of a second, smaller space as part of the installation. Following attendance, participation and listening back to the Keening ceremonies, I decided to develop the two rooms. The reason for this is that I felt the keen I experienced at the Keening ceremony was an extremely personal and private expression of grief, shared within a small group. This differed to my experience of the more traditional form of keening recorded in the West of Ireland and the keening I had heard and practiced with the voice therapy group. Both of these types of keening were more public, and had a form and an expected behaviour. And so to indicate this change in form, I decided to develop the installation into two rooms – one room representing the public sphere, a more public expression of grief. The second, smaller

⁴⁷ Meredith Monk is an American vocalist, composer and filmmaker. She is known for her vocal innovations, extended techniques and minimalist style.

⁴⁸ Susan Philipsz won the 2010 Turner Prize for her sound installation *Lowlands* which consisted of overlapping recordings of the artist singing an ancient Scottish lament in three different versions, played back over a loudspeaker system

room representing the personal experience of keening, of Keening ceremonies - the private sphere.

The first room draws people into an experience of listening to keening. The second room invites people to participate in the experience, listening to the personal, backstage sounds of grief asking the audience to reflect upon grief.

Through being a more private experience of grief the audience is requested to become more involved in the process and participate in the keening by putting on a veil and listening with headphones. The main room – a more detached experience of keening, listening on surround sound, being a viewer/listener as opposed to partaking, much like visitors to Ireland in the 17th century who happened upon a funeral, the audience here experiences the keen as an outsider. In the smaller room the audience is invited to take a step further into the experience, opening themselves up to the experience. In this room more is demanded of the audience, here they are invited to participate by listening in a closed small space to the personal sounds of keening heard at Keening ceremonies. They are invited into the Keening ceremony, no longer a spectator but crossing over into the aspect of engaging in the event by putting on headphones (getting closer and more intimate with the sounds), sitting in the space and wearing a veil. It demands something of the audience – presence, and awareness to the feelings and reactions that may arise.

5.3.4 Practical details and Technical decisions

The installation will be exhibited at Rauland Academy, alongside exhibitions of the works of other MA students. It is entitled *Caoine* – an Irish word for keening. I chose a simple title that to some Irish people will signify something of a past tradition. To others and to those not from Ireland the word will have no meaning but through engagement with the sounds in the installation the word has the potential to gain meaning. The installation will be open from approximately three days before the MA presentations in Rauland. Outside the installation there will be information for audience members before they enter the room. This blurb will give some details about keening and the installation itself. The piece will be written while the installation is being set up as the space of the room where it is to be exhibited will impact to a certain degree on the set-up of the installation. The space will affect the set-up of the installation and in turn the information I give.

Having only a basic knowledge of music editing programmes such as Audacity, I contacted the music technology department at the Cork School of Music, Ireland, asking for guidance

and advice on how to make these installation ideas a reality. Through this contact I began to work with Delia Fano Yelia⁴⁹, a student at Cork School of Music doing a Masters in Music Technology. Over the course of two months (March – April 2014), I have worked with Delia, learning how to use the computer music software application Logic Pro. Logic was the programme of choice for its ease in panning sounds. Learning the skills of how to edit the sounds, ‘clean’ the sounds and arrange them with the help and guidance of Delia, my compositional ideas became realised.

As it was of prime importance to keep the sounds as close to the original source as possible, only the following editing was done.

- Equalizing: high pass filter of cutting frequency of approximately 50 Hz was applied to get rid of noise such as room hum, recorder noise, passing traffic etc., without affecting the sounds of the voices. A low pass filter was applied at times at various cutting frequencies to create the effect of the voice coming closer or moving away (as if entering or leaving the room).
- Compressor: Very slight compression was used to try and reduce a bit of the dynamics of the voices and avoid the track peaking.
- Reverb: Very slight reverb was added to the sounds to mask some room noises and give the impression that the sounds were recorded in the same space. To not apply reverb would possibly be distracting to a listener in the space of the installation.

For the sounds played in the smaller space much the same equalization (excluding the low pass filter), compression and reverb were added, no alteration being done to the voices. However the recording of the Keening ceremony has been cut a good deal shorter in an attempt to hold the attention of the audience longer while still attempting to present the essence of the experience of ceremony.

The arrangement (proposed length approx. 12mins – 18mins) will be on a loop. I felt it necessary to play the installation on a loop as to have it time-bound would be to take away from the potential of expressing a liminal/in-between space. Looping is not time-bound, it creates a sense of timelessness, a flow of sound, a wave of movement, coming and going, which is also achieved through the arrangement of sounds.

On arrival into the room the listener will have the opportunity to sit or stand. Chairs are placed in a horse-shoe shape – reminiscent of how people sit around a coffin at a wake and

⁴⁹ Delia is an electrical engineer working with music applications.

also how people sit at a Keening ceremony. He or she may move about as they wish, experiencing the sounds from different aspects. The coffin-less space in the middle of the room is representative of loss – the loss that is being grieved by keeners but also the loss of the tradition of keening in the majority of public consciousness. Although it is preferable that people experience the installation's entire loop it is not obligatory – just as people come and go from a wake, they may come and go from the installation.

5.3.5 Visual elements of the work

Having attended sound installations such as *Woundscapes*⁵⁰ and installation art like that of Bernadette Cotter⁵¹, I began to realize my initial idea to have no visuals as part of the installation may not be the best decision. I became aware that lack of any visual could be as distracting to the aural impact as too many visuals. However, I was very conscious of not introducing a strong visual element. There needed to be something to focus the eye yet not to distract or detract from the aural experience.

While recording individuals keening, I noted a sort of theatrical movement that takes place when people keen, a swaying, rocking motion with wide movement of arms and infrequent clapping. This shape reminded me of Michelangelo's *Pieta*, and just as the sounds, I felt there were centuries behind these movements. These movements were the same that had been described in historical texts describing keening. This movement appeared to me to be a significant element to understanding and experiencing the keen and so I decided to introduce a silhouette of a woman keening, doing these movements. It was my objective to attempt to create subtle images that I hoped would lend themselves to enhancing the aural experience.

Visuals of this installation were inspired by experimental filmmakers/video artists such as Bill Viola and Maya Derren and their consideration of time and motion in film. As with the sounds, I wanted the images to flow, the movements appearing like subtle, indistinct waves correlating with the sounds. These movements were recorded on film and will be triggered in the installation at particular times, projected onto three walls of the installation.

The shadows will be projected onto the wall directly in front of the person as he/she enters, and two side walls – giving the impression of three keening women. These are outlines for ideas for this installation and are open to change depending on the space provided for the

⁵⁰ Exhibition and installation presented in Lisbon, Portugal in 2012 discussing the lives of immigrants now living in Portugal.

⁵¹ Cork based installation artist and performing artist

exhibition. Should the space not be big enough, visuals may be projected on to only one wall, as three might be too distracting in a smaller space. Also depending on the light and space of the room, the visuals may be projected onto gauze on the wall, diffusing the image and making it more indistinct, while also the gauze representing the thin veil between this world and the next, the veil between public and private expressions of grief.

Experimenting firstly with images, a cameraman and I blacked out a room in my house, set up two large stage lights, covered them with screens and then set up a screen using gauze. I stood between this gauze and another large screen of gauze. After adjustments with lighting we eventually got an interesting effect. The silhouette of my shadow was clear behind the gauze yet the use of two screens created an ethereal effect. Although compelling, I felt the image too bright and distracting.

I contacted the film institute in my local city, Cork Film Centre, to ask for opinions and guidance. Placed in a dark space and backlit from both sides using two 300w lights positioned quite high, Max le Cain and Chris Hurley of Cork Film Centre, filmed me dressed in a black veil and going through the movements of keening. The visuals were edited with video editing software Final cut Pro. The images were faded in and faded out, going from blurry to clear, slowed down, to create the illusion of time suspended.



Fig. 5.1 and Fig. 5.2 – Screen shot images of video for installation (17/04/2014)



5.3.6 My presence

I considered the role of my presence as part of the installation and the dynamic that this would create between aural, visuals, audience and me. I did not feel my presence necessary in the larger space where keening was played on surround sound. With visuals and the potential for a number of audience members to be in the space at one time I felt my presence would be another distraction as opposed to enhancing the experience. However, I felt it necessary to be present in the smaller room. This private space could be daunting to individuals, and I felt my presence there would create a sense of security. The participant's presence causing me to respond to the sounds with movements, the individual's presence causing the presentation of keening and creation of an interactive experience.

I will be present in the dress and role as keener (black veil, long skirt), for two hours a day for the duration of the exhibition is open. This time-limit is due to the intensity of the experience of being in this role. Also a keening ceremony would rarely last for longer than that, and I am in role in the room where the sounds of the Keening ceremony are experienced.

5.4 Artist in Residency – Trial Installation

In February 2014 I applied for an artist-in-residency at the Guesthouse⁵² in Cork, Ireland. I wanted to use the space and equipment and experiment setting up the installation. The residency would conclude with an exhibition of the installation and be reviewed and discussed by local sound artists.

The ten day residency took place in April, 2014. While in Cork, filming for the installation was carried out. During this time I also had a tutorial with Max le Cain on how to edit film using the programme Final Cut Pro.

I set up the two roomed installation, divided by thick curtain. Here I learned about isolation of sound and the problems that this presents. The room was blacked-out and black material and gauze covered the walls.

At the exhibition I dressed as if a keening woman, veiled and long skirt and I sat at the door. I stayed sitting in the larger room until one loop of the sounds had gone through. I then lit sage⁵³ and walked slowly into the smaller room and sat down. Each member of the audience came in one by one to the smaller room, I handed them headphones and a veil. Each put them on. I rocked to and fro to the sounds of keening, recreating the movements the audience had seen on screen in the larger room.

The film had not been fully edited and was not projected as there was no projector available at the time, but shown on an iMac.

5.4.1 Comments from the audience

Ten people attended the installation, one of whom was not Irish.

A number of audience members identified with the sounds of traditional keening, the modern day keen sounds they found too personal to relate to. One man described the strong connection he felt with the older form of the keen. Although he did not recognise the sounds or the song, and it being very different to traditional Irish song in his perspective, he said something in him jumped saying – that's mine, I understand that. It was familiar to him. He did not have this connection with the newer form of the keen, possibly because it was so private.

⁵² An artist collective initiative in Cork, Ireland.

⁵³ I burned sage as I walked into the smaller space as sage was burned at both keening ceremonies I attended.

One individual found the sounds of the Keening ceremony too difficult to listen to. In this regard the audience found my presence comforting, seeing me as protector having invited them into an experience. However, although the audience found my presence very powerful sitting in the room, it also took from the significance of the visuals – there was too much going on and so my presence was mainly of relevance to them in the smaller room. One member brought up the subject of lack of space to grieve in our time – the installation had caused him to reflect on this.

Over half of the audience said they could have stayed in the larger room for hours that time seemed to be suspended in this space. They informed me there was a sense of losing track of time, of being “out of time”, with time being suspended and a vacuum created. I had hoped to translate something of the state of liminality within the installation. I did not expect the response to be so strong and clear. However it is important to note that the one non-Irish member (a Swiss woman) did not have the same response, her only response being that she found it a very emotional experience. The Irish present did not say this but found it enthralling, time-elapsing and were pensive and reflective after it. As the installation will be shown here in Norway I think it relevant to note the historical knowledge and experiential background of this non-Irish audience can be expected to influence behaviour and responses.

The audience was glad to enter the larger room before going into the smaller room - the smaller space would have been too overwhelming too soon. Hearing this reminded me of leading people to a place where they could release grief, much like the dirge of traditional keening brought the congregation to the cry part of the keen. This highlighted the importance of progression into releasing grief, so as not to overwhelm.

This experience enhanced my understanding of keening. By inhabiting the role of keener during the installation I realized the significance the role of the *bean chaointe* played and the role that facilitators of Keening ceremonies play today – that of guardian. They hold the space. They create this space in which grieving occurs and therefore have an obligation to remain detached from the situation in order to protect and help those that do grieve shelter from being overcome by emotion.

This experience also helped me to understand the likely impact of the work on the audience and that individuals from different cultures may possibly have very different experiences of the installation.

5.5 Recontextualising the keen – summary discussion

The keen has been recontextualised, taken from the context of the funeral to that of voice therapy groups and Keening ceremonies. By my work it has been re-contextualised again (re-recontextualised). What does this recontextualisation do to the form, context and function of the keen? What has changed? I have left the forms⁵⁴ of the keen as unchanged as possible. Although the form of the keen has not been greatly altered, the context is entirely different and so the function has been altered also. As already stated the function of the installation is to allow individuals to experience the keen in the hopes that they will come to gain a greater understanding of it and feel it. The possibility for the traditional function (of releasing grief) occurring is not ruled out. However, the first objective of the installation is to open up within the listener the potential of such sounds to emote while at the same time asking individuals to reflect upon grief and tradition and to reflect upon their responses to such sounds.

As mentioned in chapter four the lines between front and backstage representation have been blurred within the context of the Keening ceremony. In this practical work these backstage sounds are brought to the fore, made public allowing the audience to cross a boundary between front and backstage, the rules of frontstage and backstage being changed once more. By crossing this boundary I hope to cause people to question the boundary itself and consider the presence of this boundary in the context of grief.

⁵⁴ By form here I mean the arrangement of verse/dirge, *gol*/cry and wailing sounds.

Summary and Conclusion

This thesis considers the re-emergence of the keen in contemporary Ireland. I have examined past and present keening through practice and research of the tradition. As a result I have gained an integrated understanding of this cultural practice and a comprehensive view of the trajectory of this tradition overtime. This research, and consequential development of understanding, has led me to expressing my reflections on experiences of the keen through the medium of a sound installation. I have the success of my artistic effort of creating an installation to be the impact of the process of the development. My understanding of both past and present keening has been greatly deepened through the process of creation of the installation.

This thesis has recorded and brought attention to a growing contemporary practice – that of Keening ceremonies. Through the process of collection of data by textual analysis, participant observation, self-observation and semi-structured interviews, I have identified and contemplated the traditional context and recontextualisation of this cultural practice, and related this to changes in form and function of the keen. The re-emergence of the keen in contemporary Ireland has been discussed in regards to its place within the broader cultural context, and the possible reasons and implications of this re-emergence. I have used the concepts of liminality, front and backstage expressions and traditionalization as perspectives from which to consider the data. This use of these concepts has provided alternative interpretive structures from which to perceive the information and consider the re-emergence of keening.

Considering the results of this interpretive endeavour, I have come to discuss the re-ritualisation of keening at Keening ceremonies as a structure and space wherein people create and have the opportunity to be heard and witnessed by others. One perspective generated as to what this may imply is that Keening ceremonies have been borne out of a need in current society, for a space where the backstage self can be shown, thus entering the frontstage realm. It appears to be an opportunity for personal change (releasing grief) but also a space in which to re-establish or evolve what it is to be Irish at this time. Along with this there appears to be a sense of pride that an ancient Irish tradition exists, which allows us to express ourselves in the presence of others. It is significant for many participants, and to the development of National Grieving Day, that this candid and powerful tradition is an Irish tradition and has the possibility to inspire other cultures in dealing with grief and loss.

My artistic development

My understanding of the contemporary keening has developed through the connection between theory and practice of this project. One section has lent itself to the other - the installation being created because of the understandings and reflections I gained in the theoretical part of this research. These understandings were then developed and comprehended further as a result of the creation of the installation. The background understanding of the traditional keening was fundamental in creating the practical work. The process of development of the practical work was essential in my developing and explaining the contemporary keening.

The practical part of this project has led to my artistic development. I expressed myself through the use of my voice in a completely new way, using sounds I did not realise I could make – these sounds being heard as part of the installation. By observing myself in ceremony, and my progress as I learnt and practiced the keening, I began to understand the emotional impact of these sounds, and my power as a performer using them. I noted how sick I felt when I really got into a state of keening. I began to realise the power of my own voice to affect change on mood and state. Developing my understanding of my own voice, making sounds that I did not know I could make, and so, expanding my voice. This has led to a freeing of my voice and a newfound comfortableness with the sounds (both appealing and unappealing) of my voice.

My skill of performance has been enhanced through the experience in exhibiting the installation – I learned the power of presence. The very act of sitting and being present was effective in itself without my making sounds.

Implications and future research

This project has the potential to inspire future research. Due to the sensitive nature of this subject, I was very aware throughout of the need to represent my experience of the re-ritualisation of keening as truthfully as I could. The medium of a sound installation gave me the opportunity of doing this while at the same time increasing my understanding of the sacredness and power of these sounds. There is an ethical concern when deconstructing a practice as private and sensitive as keening, and the researcher and artist must take great pains to understand the deep-rooted significance and impact of such a tradition.

Following from this research there is potential for consideration of the impact of mediation of traditionally ritual sounds and practices. How does this process (for example the process of recording and presenting keening in a sound installation) impact upon a tradition so rarely recorded? What is lost through mediation? Is there something added? What is the societal impact of the re-presentation of a ritual through the use of multimedia? And how does the audience respond to the presenting of such private sounds? In a world where continuous attempts are made to “find” authentic behavior, to bring backstage expressions to frontstage, and in the process making these behaviours staged backstage expressions, (for example the numerous reality TV shows that occupy our screens), what is the value of mediating and re-presenting the ritual sounds of a practice like keening? And is it ethical to do so? These questions have the potential to be the basis for a very interesting and topical research.

The interviews conducted in this research, and reflection on participation in contemporary uses of the keen, have been the basis for development of understanding of today’s keen – how, where and the possible reasons why it is used. Through this achievement there is the potential for a deeper understanding of how the use of such sounds in the presence of others, can be applied, as a practical theoretical tool, to the development of a performer’s craft, developing the craft of expressing the authentic backstage self in the presence of other individuals. How can one further develop a method for performance, departing from the use of the keen in the present context of Keening ceremonies? What contributions can the expression of sounds of keening in Keening ceremonies give to performance studies discourse? Here I am suggesting the possibility that through learning to express openly and fully in the presence of others, as a person does in Keening ceremonies, one can bring this learning into their experience as a performer - bringing backstage sounds to the realm of frontstage while at the same time maintaining a respect and understanding for the process of moving such sounds and vocal techniques from back to frontstage.

Consider the universal expressions of grief as culturally framed and mediated, and therefore partly constituted, through stylized and ritualized practices. One implication of this is that the form, content and meaning of grieving are performance and context based. This opens up further possible research into the cultural performance of grief in its different forms and localities

An interesting follow up research would be to look at the corporeal effect of the sounds of keening. What happens when you make the wide range of sounds considered keening in a

space like a dead room. Are some of the informants in this study correct when they suggest that the keening refers to a pitch one gets to that impacts the body leading to an opening and emotional release?

This research provides a basis for investigating numerous fascinating questions of which I have just mentioned a few. I hope that this work inspires reflection on the tradition of keening and the place of tradition in contemporary Ireland.

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Appendix I

Details of Informants

Traditional keening

1. John Connolly, Furnish, Connemara. He runs *Lettermullen and Gorumna Heritage*. Heard keening at two funerals in the 60s.
2. Fr. Eddie Ó Conghaile, Lettermullen, Connemara. Frequent speaker on Raidió na Gaeltachta on local history and folklore. Heard keening in the 40s, 50s and 60s.
3. Sarah Grealish, Muicineachidirdhashaile, Connemara. Well-known champion *sean-nós* singer, from a family of singers. Acted as keening woman in the film *Raic* in 1984. Her aunt, Nan Grealish, keened at funerals.
4. Anonymous singer, Aran Islands, *sean-nós* singer.
5. Emer Cloherty, native of Connemara, now living in Sligo. Druid. Heard keening growing up in the 1940s in Connemara.

Keening ceremony

6. Cáit Branigan – facilitates Keening ceremonies
7. Karen Ward – facilitates leads Keening ceremonies
8. Annette Peard - facilitates Keening ceremonies
9. Deirdre Wadding – led a Keening ceremonies
10. Monica Devine – participated in Keening ceremonies
11. Sarah Nolan – participated in Keening ceremonies
12. Dolores Whelan – participated in Keening ceremonies

Other

13. Carmel O' Dwyer – took on role of *bean chaointe* at Frank McKeown 'Connecting with the Ancestors' workshop
14. Bridget Meagher – used keening as part of Greenham Commons feminist protest in the 1980s

15. Lydia Kiernan – organizer of National Grieving Day

Artists

16. James Kelly – Irish black metal musician, based in London. Incorporated two keens into song *When the Sun Drowns in the Ocean*.

17. Susan McKeown – Irish folk/pop singer, based in New York. Sings a keen called *Gorm*

18. Ceara Conway – Public artist based in Galway. Keening inspired her latest work *Making Visible*

19. Nóirín Ní Riain - Irish singer, writer, teacher, theologian, and authority on Gregorian Chant (plainchant, plainsong). She is primarily known for spiritual songs, but also sings Celtic music, Sean-nós and Indian songs. Sings *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire*

Voice Therapy

20. Elizabeth Ewing – facilitates Holistic Voice therapy groups.

21. Claire Louise – uses keening when participating in Holistic voice therapy group

22. Cloud Gallagher – uses keening when participating in Holistic voice therapy group

23. Claire Barton – uses keening when participating in Holistic voice therapy group

24. Louise Pollock – uses keening when participating in Holistic voice therapy group

Appendix II

Interview questions – semi-structured interviews

When did you first hear of keening?

Are you an Irish speaker?

Have you keened outside of a keening ceremony?

Can you describe what the keens sounded like at the ceremony?

Did you use words?

Can you describe how it felt to keen? (in your body?)

When did you attend a keening ceremony?

How did you hear about the ceremony?

What happened at the keening ceremony?

What format did the ceremony take (what happened when)?

How did you keen?

Why did you go to the ceremony in the first place?

What were you (and others) doing while keening? For e.g. standing, sitting, swaying, jumping, walking etc.

Why did you attend the ceremony?

Did you know anything of the tradition before attending?

And what is your understanding of keening now?

What do you feel the impact of keening was on you? And on others present?

Did you enjoy the ceremony?

How did it make you feel to keen?

What is the function of keening for you?

Will you keen again?

Can you describe the context of the keens?

Can anyone keen?

Do you think this is a lost tradition? If so are we losing anything by losing this tradition?

In our contemporary society do you feel there is room for this tradition?

Do you think there is a need for keening?

Do you think men can keen as well as women? Or are they doing two different things?

Would you like keening to come back in its original context?

Who organised the keening ceremony?

How many at the ceremony?

How do you think keening ceremonies differ to keening in its original context?

Who was at the ceremony? (male or female, age groups)

Have you ever heard keening at a funeral, or otherwise outside of a keening ceremony?

Can you describe the setting of the keening ceremony?

How do these sounds affect you?

Appendix III

Track listing of attached CD

Track 1: Sean Ó Conghaile made by CD &S. Mac Aonghusa (Ennis, Seamus), Year : 1946

from Amhráin File

CBE Copyright - CT0265

Permission granted from Folklore Archives, National University of Ireland, Dublin in
Belfield.

Track 2: Kitty Gallagher made by Ennis, Seamus, Year: 1951. An Bhun Bheag.

Copyright - CT0365

Permission granted from Folklore Archives, National University of Ireland, Dublin in
Belfield.

Track 3: Sorcha Ní Ghuairim made by Ó Súilleabháin, Seán. Year: 1940

Copyright - CT0255

Permission granted from Folklore Archives, National University of Ireland, Dublin in
Belfield.

Track 4: Bridget Mullin made by Robertson Cowell, Sydney. Year : 1957

Album: *Songs of Aran*

Permission granted from Smithsonian Folkways.

Track 5: Susan McKeown and the Chanting house. Track: 'Gorm'. Album: *Bones*. Year:
1996

Permission granted from Susan McKeown.