**Exhibition Plans to Support the Preservation of Gaelic Song Traditions**

Research to highlight traditional forms of Gaelic singing has now been turned into an exhibition which will tour Hebridean communities in 2024 and 2025.

Dr Frances Wilkins, a Senior Lecturer in Ethnomusicology at the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, has spent the last six years undertaking fieldwork in the West Highlands and Western Isles and exploring sacred and spiritual singing from the region.

She has been compiling and recording Gaelic song traditions, including hymnody, Gaelic psalmody and spiritual bàrdachd which are diminishing in Hebridean communities.

Dr Wilkins said: “In past centuries the Church played an important role in nurturing Gaelic language when it was excluded from schools.

“Today, ironically, the roles have been reversed. Gaelic and English bilingualism which in the past was given little or no credit, is now recognised as hugely beneficial to learning across the school curriculum but there are very few church services conducted in Gaelic, and this has contributed to a steep decline in the Gaelic sacred singing tradition.’

To help support the safeguarding of the tradition Dr Wilkins has been documenting and recording Gaelic sacred and spiritual singing to create an archive and bring the music to a wider audience.

Her research will form the basis of the new interactive exhibition, *Seinn Spioradail: Sacred Soundscapes of the Highlands and Islands* which she has co-curated with designer Ronan Martin. The exhibition is at Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway from 19th January – 12th April 2024 before touring Highland and island communities including Balallan (Lewis) from April - June 2024, Portree (Skye) from June - November 2024, and Lochmaddy (N.Uist) from December 2024 - February 2025. Visitors can learn more about sacred song traditions of the region and explore sound recordings, film, objects, and a digital archive, soundmap and interactive virtual tour.

Dr Wilkins says, “While the contexts for singing are currently in decline, the music continues to be a soundscape to a way of life for many people. The purpose of this exhibition is to explore how sacred singing was, and continues to be, integral to many aspects of community life, and to highlight the wealth of hymns, psalms and spiritual songs being sung in the region today.”

Co-curator Ronan Martin adds, ‘it’s been a privilege to work with the material collected by Dr Wilkins and learn more about this remarkable tradition, which plays such an important part in many people’s daily lives.’

Gaelic psalm singing, which has been integral to church and community life in the Hebrides for centuries, is a particular focus in the exhibition. One contributor to the project, Alex ‘Bhaltos’ MacDonald, expressed the importance of the tradition for him, saying ‘There’s just something about Gaelic psalm singing that moves me. It doesn’t matter where I am. If I hear it, it just brings me back to my youth. It brings me back to happy events … and very sad events. It was, is and always will be powerful in my eyes.’

Many of the sound recordings, photographs and videos made during the project form the basis of a website and online digital archive (at [www.seinn.org](http://www.seinn.org)), developed in partnership with the Open Virtual Worlds team at St Andrews University. A CD and book publication showcasing some of the sound recordings is due to be released later in 2024 and sold within the exhibition.

Dr Wilkins adds: “Language is a way to express culture. The deep spiritual connection it has with its people and the role which music plays in this, must be recognised and supported into the future if we are to keep some of the most precious aspects of Gaelic culture alive.”

She goes on to say, “Doing the research in the Hebrides was an incredible experience. I have met so many inspiring people and am very grateful to everyone who has been involved and helped me with the project. I am pleased that my research and its publication is playing a part in the preservation of these unique song traditions.”

“I will be at the opening and look forward to returning to Lewis and meeting some of the project’s contributors again. It will be wonderful to have singers who were involved in the project at the exhibition opening.”

“The exhibition would not be possible without financial support from the British Academy, Carnegie Trust, and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, and the support and valuable input of staff at Museum and Tasglann nan Eilean in Stornoway.”

The exhibition opening event will take place on Friday 19 January from 5:00-7:30pm at Museum nan Eilean. Entry is free with refreshments provided.

Opening hours at Museum nan Eilean are:

Thursday-Saturday, 1-4pm (until 31 March)

Tuesday-Saturday, 10-5pm (from 1 April)

Sunday-Monday - closed

More information can be found at: [www.seinn.org](http://www.seinn.org)

Venues interested in hosting the exhibition after February 2025, please contact Frances Wilkins.

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