BEYOND FINGAL'S CAVE

OSSIAN IN THE MUSICAL IMAGINATION

JAMES PORTER

Beyond Fingal's Cave

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Beyond Fingal's Cave

Ossian in the Musical Imagination

James Porter

University of Rochester Press

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To my family: Christina and James

Toi qui chantais l'amour et les héros,
Toi d'Ossian la compagne assidue,
Harpe plaintive, en ce triste repos
Ne reste pas plus longtemps suspendue!
Du vent du soir j'entends les sifflements;
L'obscur brouillard se promène à pas lents;
Porté vers nous sur des nuages sombres,
Je vois venir le peuple heureux des ombres:
Chante! ta voix saura les arrêter.
De leurs exploits recueille la mémoire.
Sans doute encore elles aiment leur gloire;
Oui, je le vois, elles vont t'écouter!

(Thou who hast sung of love and heroes,
Thou diligent companion of Ossian,
Mournful harp, in thy sad repose
Do not any longer stay suspended!
I hear the whistling of the evening wind,
The gloomy mist advances slowly;
Brought down upon us by darkling clouds
I see, nearing, the blissful folk of the shades:
Sing! Thy voice will know how to stop them.
Gather the memory of their feats,
Without doubt they still love their glory.
Yes, I see now, to thee they will listen!

—Alphonse de Lamartine, 1808

Translated by James Porter and Jehane Zouyene

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Preface

James Macpherson published his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland and translated from the Galic or Erse Language* in Edinburgh in 1760. The success of this work was followed by the publication in London of *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763). Together with the later editions, *The Works of Ossian* (1765) and the revised *The Poems of Ossian* (1773), this poetry was hugely influential on the course of European Romanticism. With their novel emphasis on heroic ideals, noble behavior, and feeling rather than the formal elegance of Enlightenment verse, these prose poems impressed personalities such as Thomas Jefferson and Napoleon as well as literary giants from Goethe and Schiller to Byron and Pushkin. Composers such as Franz Schubert and Johannes Brahms set the poems that Macpherson (and others, including the Irishman Edmund de Harold) had rendered, sometimes very freely, from oral and written Gaelic sources attributed to the legendary third-century bard Ossian (the anglicized version of the Gaelic name Oisín). While the English-language versions, principally those of Macpherson, were met with enthusiasm and also skepticism as to their authenticity, they inspired translations into most European tongues. In turn, the translations as well as the English-language originals provided the basis for a remarkable number of music settings. Over three hundred compositions (monodramas, operas, cantatas, pieces for solo instrument, symphonic poems) poured forth, from the late eighteenth century even into the twenty-first—works that are largely unknown or obscure but at times astounding in their originality and inventiveness. This book is chiefly about them.

The period that receives most attention here is the flowering of "musical Osssianism" just before, during, and for some time after the Romantic era, from about 1780 to 1900. My mainly chronological examination of this long century is buttressed near the outset by discussion of "traditional" sources of music and their role in the genesis of the poems (chapter 2) and towards the end by a brief exploration of "modernity" (chapter 16). We can view modernity here not just as a convenient term for an opaque time period but as a force that qualifies and modifies the dominantly "romantic" stance of composers in their emotional reaction to and realization of the poems. In the dialectic between feeling and structure, modernity can act for the latter as a counterbalance: it suggests the cumulative weighing of rationality, compositional skill, and awareness of public expectation as against the surge of inspiration. Equilibrium between the two forces is not always achieved satisfactorily,

or even achieved at all. But sufficient masterpieces have emerged to prove the powerful impetus of the Ossian poems in the creation of original music.

One concept that is invoked throughout this study of musical works based on the poems ascribed to Ossian is that of *transmediation*, a term derived from semiotics. I use it in the sense of adaptation or transference from one medium to another in the creation of a different genre (that is, from poetry to a musical form, whether monodrama, opera, cantata, symphonic poem, or work for solo instrument). I outline this process of transmediation, the thread that connects the book's chapters, in more detail in chapter 1. With this concept in mind I decided to deal relatively briefly with the most celebrated (and analyzed) piece of abstract music associated with Ossian, Mendelssohn's overture *Die Hebriden* (the "Hebrides" overture, 1832; also called *Die Fingals-Höhle* or Fingal's Cave), in an excursus, outside the standard chapters, because of the extraordinary physical as well as psychic effect on the composer of his voyage to the island of Staffa in 1829.

On the other hand, I have chosen not to treat here the two Ossian-derived works by Mendelssohn's Danish friend and contemporary Niels W. Gade, namely the overture "Echoes of Ossian" (1841) and the cantata *Comala* (1846), since a number of commentaries on these works already exist. Nor have I elected to discuss Jean-François Le Sueur's epochal and sensational opera *Ossian, ou les Bardes* (1804), which has likewise undergone descriptive analysis at other hands.[1] Many musical works influenced by Ossian are accessible in published form while others, catalogued in library manuscript holdings, are normally available for study. Less fortuitously, published lists of composers' works often lack those directly inspired by Ossian. My decisions on which compositions to select for discussion in this book were based partly on ease of access, partly on personal judgment.

The chapter organization here is largely chronological (from late classical through Romantic to modern) because the gradual progression from opera to cantata and purely instrumental pieces, as well as the persistence of solo song, signifies the developing way in which composers perceived and realized the poetry of Ossian in the long nineteenth century. Chapters 7 and 12, however, depart from this progression by pausing to consider in detail first the thematic grouping of certain opera plots and their dissemination throughout Europe (chapter 7), and second, genre development and variety in the multiple settings of one outstanding poem ("Dar-thula") from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century (chapter 12). Following chapter 4, and again after chapter 8, the discussion assumes some knowledge of musical terminology and analytical method in the reader. But this book, though part of a well-established series of music monographs, is a work of musical historiography rather than of abstract theory. It is intended as much for a broadly-informed readership as for specialists in music, simply because the central topic is of extensive literary and cultural interest. It aims at clarity of exposition, and readability.

While the early Ossian lieder of Schubert, Mendelssohn's "Hebrides" overture, Brahms's two cantatas "Gesang von Ossian" (op. 17) and "Darthulas Grabesgesang"

(op. 42, no. 3), and Massenet's Ossian-derived aria "Pourquoi me réveiller, ô souffle du printemps?" in his opera *Werther* are relatively familiar, it is heartening that lesser-known works inspired by the poems have lately been revived, both in live performances and recordings: Friedrich Wilhelm Rust's astounding monodrama *Colma* (1780), for instance, and Étienne Méhul's dark one-act opera *Uthal* (1806), each a masterpiece. Pietro Morandi's groundbreaking opera in pre-Romantic style, *Comala* (1780), was staged in Vadstena, Sweden, in 2015. Commercial recordings of Romantic and, especially, modernist works inspired by Ossian, such those by Erik Chisholm or Jean Guillou, are readily available in recordings and scores.

Although this book is concerned chiefly with concert music, I also consider (chapter 2) the traditional oral culture in which Macpherson located his sources for Ossian's poems. It has long been shown that the poet drew the subject matter from personal knowledge of his native Gaelic-language tradition as well as from manuscript sources such as the sixteenth-century "Book of the Dean of Lismore," an important compilation whose survival we owe to Macpherson. In the Scottish Highlands traditional forms of communication such as tales and songs were a dominant cultural fact. Thematic novelty played a much less prominent role; repetition and standard epithets represented a world of steely but vulnerable warriors, beauteous and valiant women, both set against a brooding landscape of mountains, storms, torrents, with the occasional armed foray through perilous seas; the names of known personages and locations were resonant.[2] Stories about the bard Ossian, and songs reputedly by him about his father, Fionn (Macpherson's Fingal), and the Fenian warriors as defenders of Erin (Ireland), were recorded in Gaelic-speaking areas of the Scottish Highlands and from emigrant Gaels well into the twentieth century. Whatever the quality of Macpherson's English-language poems, their long-term influence on representational art and literature is by now well attested, but their influence on music is much less so. This book may, I hope, go some way toward redressing that gap.

Finally, some critics may feel that Ossian symbolizes the attempt by Anglophone Europeans to dominate and colonize the world, militarily, economically, and culturally (and perhaps ideologically as well). Macpherson, after all, was for a time an agent of the British administration in Florida and became, in the wake of his literary success, an apologist for state domination of the American colonies. This domination, after independence, morphed into racism, giving continued support to slavery and, later, to race-based segregation and exclusion in the United States and elsewhere. But one answer to the charge of cultural appropriation by the forces of domination is that the poems also powerfully appealed to and encouraged aspiring nations of the Romantic era as they sought to break away from imperial suppression.

The accusation of racism in Ossian is troubling; that of sexism less so. How did the poems, and the music they inspired, embody domination when their narrative was so often one of heroic struggle, frequently by women, or moral behavior toward antagonists? Many readers esteemed the Ossian poems for their generosity toward

enemies, unlike the mutual savagery of combatants in Homer. Women are admired not just for their beauty but also as part of a sophisticated view of gender, for assuming male roles in armed conflict, at the same time that their male warrior counterparts display "feminine" traits such as weeping and consolation. It is not surprising, then, that a female composer in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Marie Jaëll, should compose a symphonic cantata in which Ossian has become a woman.[3]

Edmund Burke's twin concepts of The Sublime and The Beautiful (1757) penetrated deeply into the consciousness of eighteenth-century readers, preparing the way for a new landscape of feeling, and with it, poetry of sensibility, prime among which was the poetry of Ossian. Ossian has endured because the Romanticism it fostered powered its way into the twentieth century (despite fierce resistance) partly through the resonance of its names and the poetic narratives associated with them. For some composers, the fashion of modernity (making present the new, and also as a more generalized concept than modernism) was not wholly able to counter the appeal of Romanticism as they came to grips in their music with questions of style and appropriateness. But I suggest that while Romanticism tended to give way, from World War I, to varieties of modernity, it is surprising that more composers have not exploited the episodic structure of the poems to devise a musical narrative that is more authentically true to the texts. For such work, we must turn to Rust's monodrama *Colma* (1780) and to pieces written much later: Erik Chisholm's virtuosic piano nocturnes *Night Song of the Bards* (1941–44) and Jean Guillou's rhapsodic *Ballade Ossianique, No. 2: Les chants de Selma* for organ (1971, rev. 2005).[4]

As I reflect on the motives that drew me into this work of some years, I should confess to an involvement with European traditional music and its links with composition, performance, and reception. The complex character of traditional expressive genres has been a major source of engagement, just as it has been for all those who found in the poems of Ossian, as in European folk ballads, a lost world of heroes, bards, and warrior women, along with descriptions of nature that conjure up the ferocity of the elements but also their gentler side. As in the folk ballads, there are no moral judgments, no Christian God, only a stoicism, a retrospective on an aging bard, familiar in popular tradition: "Ossian after the Fenians" is a title well known in Gaelic folk narrative. The narrative style of the poetry of Ossian, with its unconnected leaps (parataxis) similar to those in the folk ballads, appealed to no less a pioneering culture theorist than Johann Gottfried Herder. The episodic nature of both Ossian and ballad poetry led Herder to consider the distinctiveness of a popular expressive style, practiced and loved by generations of performers, good, bad, and indifferent, throughout the course of European oral tradition. Composers, too, caught between Romanticism and modernity, have tried to capture the manifold but elusive qualities of Ossian, even into the new millennium.

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Note to the Reader

In citing musical works, I have placed shorter examples such as individual vocal or instrumental works in quotation marks but larger compositions like cantatas, song cycles, symphonic poems, suites, and so on (but not sonatas or symphonies, by convention) in italics. Thus, songs such as Beethoven's "Trocknet nicht" are set in quotes whereas a cycle of instrumental pieces has its title in italics (e.g., Chisholm's *Night Song of the Bards*). Exceptions to this general plan are works with a nickname, such as Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 ("Eroica") and Schubert's Symphony No. 8 ("Unfinished").

Another difference is in the interpretation of a particular episode such as that of Colma from "The Songs of Selma." The extensive settings of the poem by Rust, Zumsteeg, and Zelter are conceived and built in contrasting, through-composed sections. Somewhat like Rust's monodrama, which contains within it recitatives, spoken interpolations, and arias, these settings resemble a solo cantata rather than a single song. I have therefore placed the titles of these compositions in italics but the ostensibly simpler, strophic settings by Reichardt and Schubert in quotation marks.

A minor point concerns the occasional use of the apostrophe in German titles such as *Kolma's Klage* in chapter 9 or *Darthula's Grab[es]gesang* in chapter 12. Johann Gottfried Herder's original poem on Macpherson's "Dar-thula," published in his *Volkslieder* (1778), does in fact use the apostrophe, and some composers setting the poem have followed his example in the title, while others omit it. The older usage is often found until the twentieth century, when the form of German plural nouns was standardized (without the apostrophe). I have retained the apostrophe in those few settings that use it in the title. Similarly, I retain the comma before "e" in Italian texts and titles (chapters 6, 7) when it appears in the original source, even though that usage is no longer observed. For the Italian libretto texts, which are full of other inconsistencies (such as "dio/Dio" and so on), I have generally kept the original forms even when they are, in modern terms, faulty.

The music examples largely follow the notational practices of the time, including spelling and syllabification.

Chapter One

Battling Critics, Engaging Composers

Ossian's Spell

In 1763, Europe was full of ghosts, of military dead. That year saw the end of the disastrous Seven Years' War—involving all the great powers, Austria, Britain, France, Prussia, and Russia, and with around one million fatalities—in the Treaty of Paris and the Treaty of Hubertusburg. Britain was one of the victors, though at a cost of perhaps 20,000 combatants. But it was ultimately from an earlier, smaller, but significant local conflict in Britain, the Jacobite Uprising of 1745–76—in essence a dynastic quarrel between supporters of the Stuarts and the Hanoverians over the succession to the throne—that there emerged a poet who caught Europe's imagination in celebrating its ancient hero-warriors and *their* ghosts. A Gaelic bard apart, a rival to Homer, James Macpherson's Ossian seduced a continent. Napoleon, an enthusiast for Ossian, and his battlefield opponents alike carried the poems in their saddlebags, despite heated accusations among literary critics of the time that they were literary forgeries.[1]

As a young boy, however, Macpherson had experienced the savage reprisals of Hanoverian troops against his fellow-Highlanders in the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden (1746) that ended the Stuart claim to the British throne. Exposed from birth to the oral traditions of the Gaelic-speaking Highlands, he later attended the lectures of the noted Homer scholar Thomas Blackwell at the University of Aberdeen. Struck by the stirring episodes of the Homeric epics, and with encouragement from Edinburgh intellectuals such as Hugh Blair (1718–1800), professor of rhetoric and belles lettres at the University of Edinburgh, who contributed an important and influential "dissertation" to the 1765 edition, he claimed that the poems he published were "translations" from Gaelic. The tone of the poems, with their dwelling on feeling, heroism, and transitoriness, appealed to readers tired of clever but arid neoclassical verse. But critics such

as David Hume and Samuel Johnson, tied to the classical world of literature and current French literary fashion—at the same time ignorant of the Highlands and Gaelic poetic traditions—demanded that Macpherson produce the "originals" from which he had made these. Although Macpherson drew from both oral and written sources, he was clumsy and defensive in the explanation of his methods; oral tradition was not, at that time, considered a trustworthy source of literature by urban intellectuals. Their skeptical view has tended to persist in the debate over the "authenticity" of the poems. Macpherson himself, it appears, began to believe that the "fragments" were part of a larger "epic" creation and increasingly began to believe in his own destiny as the "bard" who had reconstituted the epics of *Fingal* and *Temora* (the equivalents to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*).

The twenty-two poetic creations of Macpherson that comprise the poems of Ossian, including the *Fragments*, *Fingal*, *Temora* and others that are shorter and possibly less well known, are constructed, for the longer poems, in "books" (or *duans*, episodes) and in a kind of rhetorical prose that is anything but prosaic. They conjure up the majesty, ecstasy, and casual horror of a world akin to that of Homer with, however, two important motifs: the honorable treatment of vanquished enemies, and heroic female participation in battle. These motifs were valued by readers across the boundaries of translation. But the overall feeling of the poems is one of lament. A typical scene at the conclusion of *Fingal* Book III captures the pervasive tone of regret for a lost heroic world:

> Many a voice and many a harp, in tuneful sounds arose. Of Fingal's noble deeds they sung; of Fingal's noble race. And sometimes, on the lovely sound, was heard the name of Ossian. I often fought, and often won, in battles of the spear. But blind, and tearful, and forlorn, I walk with little men! O Fingal, with thy race of war I now behold thee not! The wild roes feed on the green tomb of the mighty king of Morven! Blest be thy soul, thou king of swords, thou most renowned on the hills of Cona!

It is only lately that a challenge to the conventional disparagement of Macpherson's work, a view qualified already in the nineteenth century by authorities such as Matthew Arnold,[2] has begun to filter into the ken of music historians, whose knowledge of the poems is often secondhand or displays accumulated prejudice in their constant use of the damning terms "forgery" or "fraud."[3] Few seem to have actually read the poems or to be aware of current studies that assess their inherent qualities and, just as decisive, their enduring international impact.[4] Current books and essays by musicologists that mention Ossian tend to use epithets such as "half-faked," "pseudo-Celtic," "purported translation," "counterfeit," and "fabrication" without further comment, as if the poems are presumed worthless, while their influence on Thomas Jefferson, Napoleon, and generations of poets and writers from Coleridge to Walt Whitman and composers from Schubert to Schoenberg is brushed

aside. But the powerful effect of Ossian in German-speaking lands, for instance, arguably more profound than in any other area of Europe, has been well documented.[5] Skepticism, not only in English-speaking lands, appears to have affected those who have absorbed the criticism of anti-Ossian propagandists from Samuel Johnson to Hugh Trevor-Roper.[6] Macpherson may not be a great poet, but he has his visionary moments, especially in poems like "Comala," "The Songs of Selma," and parts of *Fingal*. These are the poems that appealed most strongly to composers.[7]

In her insightful biographical study, Fiona Stafford, briskly rejecting the charges of fraudulence or forgery against Macpherson, asks what it was about the poems of Ossian that caused such a furor during the late eighteenth century and the Romantic period. Neither emerging nationalism nor antiquarianism can account for the fact that the poems were read, reprinted, and translated, during the half century following their appearance, into Italian, French, German, Polish, Russian, Danish, Spanish, Dutch, Bohemian, and Hungarian, even influencing Japanese writers.[8] It was, indeed, the inspirational quality of the poems that elicited reaction across linguistic boundaries. Two of the main conduits for the poems on the European continent were the Swiss writer Mme. de Staël, who referred to Ossian as "the Homer of the North" and "the mother of Romanticism" (1800), and Johann Gottfried Herder, whose influence as a poet, essayist and cultural historian spread his enthusiasm for the poems throughout German-speaking lands and beyond.[9] While writers in Britain, Ireland, France, Italy and elsewhere were powerfully influenced by the poems, it was in Germany that they had possibly their greatest impact, through figures such as Goethe, Schiller, and Herder. The translation made by Michael Denis (1768–69), a Jesuit priest living in Vienna, had been cast in hexameters and for that reason was strongly attacked by Herder, who felt that the poetic language of Ossian required a more fitting and sensitive linguistic transference. But it is a well-attested fact that every poet of consequence in Germany proclaimed their debt to Ossian.[10]

These inspirational poems of Macpherson display the conflicted aims of their author, as "translator" on the one hand and "poet" on the other. They have one foot in Gaelic tradition, the other in the world of modern literature, with its turn toward sensibility and feeling, the "fragment" being the means of bridging the two.[11] A further implication of "fragment" is that of an early modern world in fragmentation, one that was already in danger of losing its smaller, more fragile cultures and attempting to rescue what is deemed of value to an urban world of consumption. But as Stafford notes, the poems offer readers of different cultural sensibilities "the opportunity to enter the text and begin creating their own imaginative worlds."[12]

Major Topics in the Poems

The musical response to Ossian over the two and a half centuries since the poems' publication has been constant and prolonged, if at times spasmodic.

Composers, librettists, and stagers of musical drama, of differing national traditions, social classes, and technical skills, reacted to four major aspects of the poetry. First is the gentle melancholy that suffuses the texts: Ossian is the singer of "the joy of grief," a species of emotional ambivalence that releases the subject from despair and instead conveys a kind of dignity, as suggested in a short passage from "Carrick-Thura:[13]

> Pleasant is the joy of grief: it is like the shower of spring, when it
> softens the branch of the oak, and the young leaf rears its green head.

Second is the loneliness of the artist: Ossian is the last of the bards, grieving for the spirits of dead warriors as echoes of a Golden Age. In "The Songs of Selma" the poet concludes,

> I hear the call of years! They say, as they pass along, why does
> Ossian sing? Soon shall he lie in the narrow house, and no bard
> shall raise his fame!

Third is the dramatic opposition of characters as they conform to Edmund Burke's gendered categories of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757) in their qualities of bravery, justice, and wisdom (male), on the one hand, and on the other hand, forbearance, kindness, and liberality (female). But the poems, significantly, allow gender roles to overlap: heroic males weep and are compassionate, while females take up arms on behalf of their beloved. Finally, the background of a wild, untamed Nature acts as a counterpart to human action; sun, moon, stars, lightning, meteors, precipices, torrents, waves, and gloomy moors all contribute to the atmospheric deployment of the "poetic fallacy" in Ossian.

Against this tumultuous landscape, Ossian, the last of the bards, is invariably portrayed bearing a harp, and composers often highlight the "bardic" instrument in rippling piano figuration alongside French horns as symbols of heroism in battle and also the hunt for wild animals. Several times the harp is described in the original poems as "half-viewless"—dimly perceived, barely visible. The stage action is set in extreme or liminal areas: remote beaches, dense forests, underground caverns. Storms often accompany or preside over the progress of the plot. A small army of ingenious librettists, especially in Italy, found ways to soften the deadly conflicts in the original poems and provide a comfortable ending to the drama in which the romantically linked characters are paired off in conventional fashion and the threat to their happiness, usually from a tyrant-father figure, is dispelled. These strategies of plot, however, could be read as political by audiences of the time. In the poems, the hero (Fingal or Ossian) is poised against the ancient enemy, often the pagan Scandinavians. But in Romantic times, the foe ranged against the heroic Caledonians—the localized defenders of both Alba and Erin—was seen as symbolizing the dominant imperial power, whether Austria, France, or Sweden.

Musical Responses to Ossian

The Ossian poems that composers fastened on for their settings are primarily "Fingal," "Berrathon," "Comala," "Dar-thula," and episodes such as that of "Colma" from "The Songs of Selma," although at least one composition (Liza Lehmann's *Leaves from Ossian*, 1909) draws on multiple poems. Among the poems' characters, composers found Fingal, and Comala, daughter of Sarno, chieftain of Inistore, far and away the figures most attractive for musical treatment. From the very beginning, these two inspired operas, cantatas, ballets, and lyric scenes (increasingly, toward 1900, symphonic poems) because of their tragic relationship, recounted in the tales. The huntress Comala, for instance, dies in the mistaken belief that her beloved, Fingal, whom she has followed to Morven in disguise, has been slain in battle. The fair-haired Agandecca, another love interest of his, is killed by her father, Starno, for warning Fingal of a plot to assassinate him under cover of hospitality. Composers chose the lonely, lamenting Colma (from "The Songs of Selma") and the warrior maiden Darthula almost as often as Comala and Agandecca: again, both have lost their beloved. Then there is King Toscar's daughter Malvina, the lover of Ossian's son, Oscar, who is left desolate when he is killed.

The characters and their narratives, often rather static in the poems, have in general been better served in cantatas than on the operatic stage, at least insofar as fidelity to the source is concerned. Librettists often felt they had to revise the plots (such as they were) to provide a dramatic edge to the stories. It is hardly surprising that these liberties taken in giving operatic form to a disjunct narrative were most assiduously cultivated in Italy. But the mere names of main characters in the poems of Ossian had the power and resonance to trigger rhythmic and tonal motifs even in abstract symphonic works.

The musical response to Ossian thus slots aptly into Stafford's notion of composers creating their imaginative worlds. Beginning first with settings of the prose poems themselves, the trajectory of compositions over the century and a half following Macpherson's publication runs from monodramas, songs, and stage works to cantatas, symphonic poems, and solo instrumental pieces. Almost every musical genre was exploited, and the works flowed in an unbroken stream, from before Schubert to Brahms, from Mendelssohn to Massenet, Saint-Saëns to Schoenberg, up to the twentieth century and beyond. This stream carries not only the flotsam and jetsam of mediocre compositions but a few major and some minor masterpieces that have been ignored or are relatively unknown.

Text settings were produced not only in English, in Britain, but in a dozen other languages, mainly French, German, or Italian. Even composers whose native language was English still had to decide how the language of the poems was to be handled. The genre they chose was predominantly the cantata rather than opera, which, for cogent cultural and historical reasons, came to be the preferred medium in Italy. The German counterpart of the Italian opera was the *Singspiel* with its spoken

Figure 1.1. Friedrich Georg Weitsch (1758–1828), *Klage um Comala* (Lament over Comala), 1802. GK I 3220. Photograph of lost painting. Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg/Photographer: Oberhofmarschallamt/Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlösser und Gärten (1927–45).

dialogue, a genre that culminated in Mozart's two brilliant examples.[14] Writing an opera on Ossian topics presented a serious challenge, for the "epic" or "heroic" qualities of the poems often had to be adapted, not only for reasons of internal dramatic action but also to accord with the tastes of the audience. The cantata, on the other hand, because it avoided the bizarre plot interventions by librettists and the hazards of awkward dramaturgy, was taken up intermittently all over Europe, as early as the 1770s and increasingly after 1850.

The much-favored poem "Comala" has a plot of sorts. Even though it is written in dialogue form it was well suited to both opera treatment and cantata. Most composers stuck by the original narrative, in which Fingal's affianced, Comala, is falsely informed by Fingal's jealous lieutenant, Hidallan, that her betrothed has been slain. She then commits suicide (or dies of grief).[15] Whereas the lament of "Colma" for her brother and her fiancé (who slay each other in combat) was mostly set as a solo song in Germany, "Dar-thula" there received numerous settings, both solo and choral, between 1850 and 1900 using the verses of Johann Gottfried Herder.[16] The figure of Oithóna, like Darthula a warrior woman who dies with her beloved in battle, inspired four operas, including the very first attempt to set the drama for the musical stage, in 1768.

In the period 1780–1815 Macpherson's reconstructed epic *Fingal* was mined for metropolitan glees, madrigal-like settings for the small singing groups that flourished in London and elsewhere in Britain. These settings, in their choice of text, were powerfully influenced by the war with France and, ironically, Napoleon Bonaparte, Ossian's stoutest champion. The poem "Berrathon," or episodes adapted from it, was especially attractive to Napoleonic composers such as Méhul (his one-act opera *Uthal*, 1806), while "Calthon and Colmal," a tale of lovers united against paternal interdict, found favor as the basis of opera plots, notably in Peter von Winter's *Colmal* (1809). After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, composers began to view the relationships of Fingal and Ossian with women (particularly Agandecca, Comala, and Malvina) as more suitable for cantata treatment than for opera. The tender dialogue between Shilric and Vinvela in the poem "Carric-Thura" and its appearance in other versions of Ossian, such as the "translations" of the Irish Edmund de (or von) Harold, served as material for composers, notably Franz Schubert.[17]

The Relevance of Transmediation

The concept of transmediation, as I use it here, is the process by which an agent (the composer) adapts a plot as evidenced in a poetic text or its translation to a musical form, attempting at the same time to crystallize the import or meaning through devices of tonal shaping, color, texture, and, occasionally, motifs or topics extraneous to the style, so as to create referential meanings beyond the musical score.[18] The process of transmediation from plot or poetry to a musical genre or genres involves three

main types or orders: first, *convergent*, in which a song or cantata, chiefly, remains closely bound to the poem and its narrative, emotionally as well as structurally; second, *divergent*, whereby an opera or parody departs, sometimes sharply, from the original, affecting the nature of the musical genre and setting; and third, *symbolic*, in which the work is purely instrumental and becomes thereby a meditation on the original poem; this last type is the most difficult to interpret, and can sometimes assume aspects of the first two types in the degree of adaptation.

The categories of transmediation, in other words, are not hard and fast, or mutually exclusive. With the second type, *divergent*, Italian librettists thought nothing of changing names and plots from Ossian to suit their imagination and their audience's idea of how the operatic plot should proceed onstage: for instance, in Francesco Bianchi's three-act opera *Calto* (1788), the plot is from Macpherson's poem "Calthon and Colmal," which has "Calthon" for its hero. But the opera's librettist, Giuseppe Foppa, adjusted the plot to suit the prevailing Venetian taste for dramatic action, removing Ossian, as well as the murder of Calthon's brother, Colmar, by Duntalmo, from the action and introducing a happy ending. The transmediation of the plot to operatic form aligns with the libretto, but in doing so diverges from the basic narrative, and in terms of the music from the drama and emotional import of the poetic original.

The same plot was used in the stage work *La disfatta di Duntalmo* (1789) with music by Luigi Caruso, performed in Rome a year after the Venetian *Calto*. As with several other proper names in the poems, a somewhat later work was titled, confusingly, with a similar name, in this case *Clato* (adapted from the name of Fingal's second wife, Clatho)—this second *Clato* was Pietro Generali's "dramma serio in musica con cori" (1816). Pietro Raimondi's two-act "tragedia lirica" of the same name followed in 1832.[19]

These works for staged action with music—"azione teatrale," "dramma serio per musica," "tragedia lirica," and so on—signify a search for an appropriate designation in a genre that did not conform to accepted ideas of how opera should be constructed: the search for an appropriate named type was the result of an evolving perception among librettists and composers of how episodic poetry like that of Ossian might be molded into something resembling a coherent opera plot.

These ploys of the operatic stage, however, can be set aside in the face of two transmediated works of the third type affected by *The Poems of Ossian*: Mendelssohn's concert overture "The Hebrides" (or "Fingal's Cave"), op. 26 (1832), and, less patently, Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, op. 55 (1804). While the relationship of Mendelssohn to the poems and to the Highland seascape is well documented, that of Beethoven to Ossian at the time he completed his Third Symphony is more problematic, although I argue that Ossian is a contributory factor in Beethoven's conception of heroism and thus his motivation behind his composition of the work.[20] In the mass of commentaries the "Eroica" has provoked since it first appeared, many writers

do not mention Ossian at all, preferring to dwell on, for example, the Napoleonic dimension, especially in the first movement, or the Promethean aspect of the work as it unfolds in the finale. All this is discussed in chapter 8 below.

Four Stylistic Phases

Composers' responses to *The Poems of Ossian* fall into four broad periods; these cannot be strictly delimited because chronology and periodicity are not always in alignment. In terms of music historiography, chronology tends to promote the idea of a temporal unfolding of styles, each of these successively built on its predecessor, and with an assumption of greater complexity. But that is an illusion, especially in the twentieth century, when heterogeneous styles of composition proliferated in the wake of the information explosion. The emphasis on set periods, on the other hand, supplies a different kind of illusion, namely that of delimited time periods in which a common style crystallized. But even in so-called stable periods such as those following the Congress of Vienna in 1815 or the 1848 revolutions, composers could be found groping for an individual style as the poeticizing of content and fragmentation of form proceeded apace.

Yet we can discern four broad periods of composition based on Ossian. For convenience these are as follows: from approximately 1780 to 1815, from 1816 to 1880, from 1880 to 1918, and from 1918 to the present. Opera dominates the first of these periods, the cantata the second, and the symphonic poem and instrumental works the third and fourth phases. The evolution of musical responses traces a path of increasing abstraction as the persons and events in the poems recede into the aesthetic and temporal distance. In later compositions the "voices" of Ossian's characters give way to the "instruments" of his bards: the undulating harp or plangent *cor anglais* gradually assumes the narrative that heroes and maidens once enunciated in operatic or cantata form.

This does not mean that vocal expression of the narrative was suppressed or denied; rather, a receding emotional reality and gradual relinquishing of "heroic" situations and dated language meant a sharper focus on symbolic gestures, on orphic penetration to the essence of the poems to retrieve their meaning. Macpherson, after all, believed himself to be to Ossian as Homer had been to Orpheus; the turn to nature and to antiquity as the sources of musical creativity had, around the same time as the publication of the Ossian poems, manifested itself in Gluck's renowned version of the Orpheus myth, *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Vienna 1762, Paris 1774).[21] While Méhul's Ossianic opera *Uthal* (1806), with its motif of the hero's search for the beloved in the forest, displays influence from Gluck's masterpiece, works such as Liszt's symphonic poem *Orpheus* (1854) allowed contemplation of these relationships in light of the conflict and social tension in Europe after 1848.[22]

First Phase: Proto-Romanticism (ca. 1780–1815)

The first phase of Ossian composition stems from around 1780 to the early songs of Franz Schubert (1815–16), a stretch of time that has been termed "pre-" or "proto-Romantic." The classical norms of balance and harmoniousness in music such as Haydn's and Mozart's were giving way to a freer, more questing style prone to upheaval in its dynamic, emotional, and harmonic language. In Germany, the period between roughly 1765 and 1785 is known as *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress), the early stage of Romanticism. Its features include a predilection for the natural, rustic, or primitive; revolt against authority; individualism that borders at times on extremism; and a rejection of the class equilibrium, manners, and good taste valued by the Enlightenment. Ossian was congruent with this general movement in the arts—indeed, helped it along from around 1780 until the Romantic movement found its feet at the turn of the century.

This restlessness affected those composers who went searching not only for new sources of employment outside their own country but for fresh sources of inspiration.[23] That it should be a French immigrant in London who composed the first musical work based on Ossian is, in this context of greater migration, both unsurprising and prophetic when we consider the later, post-Revolutionary enthusiasm for the poems. François-Hippolyte Barthélémon, encouraged to settle in London by Thomas Erskine, earl of Kellie, whom he met in Paris, composed his opera *Oithóna* in 1768.[24] This can claim to be the first musical work of cosmopolitan urban taste to be based on the poems of Ossian, except that only the libretto survives.

Within this earliest phase of Ossianic composition, the work that excited public attention in the British capital was not *Oithóna* but the picturesque "ballet-pantomime" entitled *Oscar and Malvina, or, The Hall of Fingal* (1791), a work cobbled together by William Reeve and William Shield.[25] The connection of *Oscar and Malvina* with the Ossian poems, while fugitive and superficial, was acceptable to a London theater audience by then relieved that the Highlands were safe from Jacobite aggression.

As audiences in Paris would discover, parody was never far away from the attempt to put Ossian on the stage.[26] In London, parodies of the poems, in pamphlets by Charles Churchill and John Wilkes, were in fact coded attacks on the current prime minister, John Stuart, third earl of Bute, Macpherson's patron. Scots were felt by some to have been unfairly favored and to constitute a threat to metropolitan judgment and political stability.[27] But versifications and adaptations of the poems continued to multiply, and dramatic versions of Ossian had wide appeal. David Erskine Baker's *The Muse of Ossian: A Dramatic Poem in Three Acts*, performed in Edinburgh in 1763, for example, wove together passages from Macpherson's prose poems "Comala" and "The War of Caros."[28]

Unlike the pantomimic *Oscar and Malvina*, the opera *Comàla* was, like *Oithóna*, "a dramatic poem." "Set to music by Miss Harriet Wainewright," it was performed

at the Hanover Square Rooms on January 26, 1792, and constituted a landmark in concert programs of the time, produced during Joseph Haydn's first visit to London. Although the composer herself always referred to the work as an opera she had encountered difficulty in getting it staged at any of the theaters; audiences, she was told, wanted lighter, comedic distractions. *Comàla* was therefore given as a concert piece with assistance from prominent figures in London musical life such as Samuel Arnold. Haydn, of course, was far too famous and busy with his own composing to attend an opera by an unknown female, even if he knew of its existence. This unique event and Harriet Wainewright's composition of the work merit separate discussion below.[29]

This first phase of the musical response to Ossian falls within a context of dissatisfaction with neoclassical formalism (particularly of a French kind) in literature and philosophy; the seeds of the movement were contained in a firm rejection of Enlightenment rationalism. Haydn, however, had actually prefigured this shift to some extent in his middle-period symphonies and string quartets.[30] In Germany, the poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724–1803) began to free his country's literature from the tyranny of the French alexandrine and introduce into German poetry a new emotionalism, derived largely from his encounter with Ossian. Goethe, the central personality in the *Sturm und Drang* period, came under the influence of the poet and philosopher Herder, who had been taught by the anti-Enlightenment philosopher Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), now seen as the true prophet of the movement in German-speaking lands. Eventually it was Herder, even more than Goethe, who spread the word about Ossian and stoked the poetry's influence in Germany and other parts of Europe.[31]

The power of Ossian's surge was evident by 1780, when Friedrich Wilhelm Rust (1739–96) produced his masterly *Colma, ein Monodrama mit Prolog nach Ossian*, for soloist and orchestra, which alternated solo arias and monologue with instrumental accompaniment.[32] The writing of songs on Ossianic themes increased in the final decades of the eighteenth century and the first years of the new nineteenth. It had already begun in the 1770s with such composers as Beethoven's first teacher, Christian Gottlob Neefe (1748–98), and his contemporaries in Germany. This paralleled technical improvements in piano construction, and the expanding repertoire of the instrument found its way into domestic life. Ossian had a foothold even in the United States, where the harpsichord still had its uses: Francis Hopkinson, born in Philadelphia in 1737, composed his "Ode on Ossian's Poems" for voice and harpsichord in 1788, shortly after Thomas Jefferson had proclaimed Ossian "the greatest poet that ever existed."[33] Meanwhile, Johann Friedrich Reichardt (1752–1814) had energetically cultivated the *Singspiel*, and the song with spoken interpolations multiplied in such works after Ossian as Bernard Anselm Weber's duodrama, *Sulmalle* (1802), Franz Cramer's *Hidalan* (1813), and Peter von Winter's *Colmal* (1809), a stylistic intermediary between Mozart and Carl Maria von Weber. Winter, indeed, thought *Colmal* his best work.

The fateful year of 1792 in Europe heralded the post-Revolutionary wars, the advent of Napoleon, and the founding in Britain of the radical Society of the Friends of the People that agitated for reform of Parliament, as well as one event of political significance in Ireland, namely the Belfast Harp Festival, held in July to coincide with the third anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. The harp thus became a kind of totem in claims by the Celtic world to ownership of Ossian, while to the Friends of the People in Ireland the instrument signified a desire for political independence from Britain. Shortly afterward, from 1796, Jean-François Le Sueur began work on his epochal five-act opera *Ossian, ou les Bardes*, which was finally staged in Paris in 1804, to Napoleon's delight.[34] Etienne Nicolas Méhul's atmospheric one-act opera *Uthal* followed, in 1806.[35] Both operas immediately drew mockery in stage works parodying their pretensions to accurate historical dramaturgy.

After the Revolution, the craze for Ossian on the Continent—not only in France—was the consequence of the enthusiasm of one man: Napoleon Bonaparte, whose intimate acquaintance with the poems was already under way by 1790. One witness to Napoleon's early taste for Ossian was Victorine de Chastenay (1771–1855), who had a four-hour conversation with him about the poems at Châtillon-sur-Seine at the end of May 1795.[36] The later 1790s was the beginning of, as Van Tieghem describes it, the "mode ossianique" that was to inspire authors and poets in France such as Chateaubriand and Lamartine or painters like Gérard, Girodet, and Ingres at the moment when Napoleon swept to power, first as consul, then later as emperor. As is well known, Beethoven was profoundly affected.[37]

This period was to last until just after the final defeat of Bonaparte at Waterloo in 1815. Le Sueur's opera, with its eight harps as part of the orchestration, was staged for the final time in 1817.[38] The sensational effect of this work spread to Russia, where, in the hands of the dramatist Vladislav Ozerov, the stage tragedy *Fingal* (1805), with incidental music by the Polish-Russian composer Osip Kozlowski (1757–1831), was performed to great success.[39] In the meantime, ballets based on Ossian were flourishing, such as those by Antonio Landini (*Oscar e Malvina*, 1801), Armand Vestris (*Calto e Colama*, 1822, music by Carlo Romani), and Antonio Monticini (*Clato*, 1833). These often bore subtitles such as "ballo eroico-tragico" or "ballo tragico pantomimo."

Comparable developments had been afoot in the Italian *melodrama* (sometimes subtitled *dramma per musica*) and the German *Singspiel*, as both moved toward a more "operatic" style, with formal recitatives and arias. This was evident ever since Pietro Morandi's *Comala*, Francesco Bianchi's *Calto* (1788), and Ettore Romagnoli's *Comala* (1798) had emerged around the same time as Rust's monodrama *Colma* (1780). William Bach's *Colma* (1791), composed at the court of Frederick II of Prussia in Berlin and entitled "an episode from Ossian," has no spoken narrative for its characters and therefore is not a *Singspiel*; unfortunately, its music is untraced.[40] F. L. Æ. Kunzen's three-act *Singspiel Ossians Harfe* was completed in 1799, published in 1802, and performed in Vienna and Hamburg in 1806. From the turn of

the nineteenth century, operas proliferated in Italian theaters: Stefano Pavesi's two examples, the successful *Fingallo, e Comala* (1805) influenced by Le Sueur's *Ossian, ou les Bardes*, and the less-applauded *Ardano e Dartula* (1825), were first staged at La Fenice in Venice.[41] They rode a wave of operatic productions based on Ossian: Morandi's early *Comala* (1780) with a libretto by Gluck's master collaborator, Ranieri de' Calzabigi, and others with texts by Salvatore Cammarano, who was later to provide librettos for Donizetti (*Lucia di Lammermoor*, 1835), Verdi (*Luisa Miller*, 1849), and Giovanni Pacini (*Malvina di Scozia*, 1851).

Second Phase: Romanticism (1815–80)

The defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 may have brought the French love affair with Ossian to a temporary halt, but it had little or no effect on the culture change in Europe as a whole that was already well under way before 1800. Full-fledged Romanticism in German-speaking lands did not in any case begin with Schubert, for the remnants of *Sturm und Drang* emotionalism found their way into his group of Ossian settings through the influence of songs by Reichardt and Zumsteeg: Schubert's "Kolma's Klage" (1815) is known to have been influenced by Zumsteeg's setting in particular.

But within a decade there was composed the most frequently performed piece with Ossian associations, Felix Mendelssohn's "Hebrides" overture, op. 26 (1832), which might more accurately be entitled "Fingal's Cave" because of its stormy climax at the close of the exposition.[42] Mendelssohn's techniques in the overture were imitated to some extent by his Danish contemporary Niels W. Gade (1817–90), whose prize-winning, folk-inspired overture *Efterklange af Ossian* (Echoes of Ossian, op. 1), composed in 1840, was performed by the Royal Danish Orchestra in November 1841 and later throughout Germany.[43] Gade's cantata *Comala* (op. 12, 1846) was often held by reviewers to exude "Nordic character," with its use of minor keys and modal or folk-like melodies, somber orchestration, and harp interludes.

The revolutions of 1848 marked a significant break, as composers came to terms with the settlement imposed by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, one that restored the old order through the repressive regimes of statesmen such as Prince Metternich in Austria-Hungary. Indeed, Ossian, as an exercise in the recovery of orally transmitted narratives, can be said to have inspired the discovery (and invention) of "foundational" epics that endowed smaller nations eager to cast off the yoke of imperialism with cultural energy as well as political identity. The ideology of linguistic and narrative dispersal from a hypothetical original, an *Ur*-form, motivated antiquarian field collectors such as Elias Lönnrot, whose reconstruction of the Finnish national epic, *Kalevala* (1849), owes a great deal to the example of Macpherson.[44]

As noted above, Herder had a huge influence on the reception of Ossian, especially in Germany but also throughout central and northern Europe. His poem on the fate of the warrior maiden Darthula, based on Michael Denis's translation of

1768–99, was written about 1770 and published in his *Volkslieder* of 1773; it gave rise to settings by composers, mainly in Germany, that multiplied from mid-century.[45] Choral music saw the rise of the *Männerchor* (male voice choir) in this time of incipient national aspiration. Herder's "Darthula's [*sic*] Grabesgesang," with its stirring evocation of spring ("Wach auf, Darthula, Frühling ist draussen!"), offered, furthermore, the hope of spiritual resurrection.

The desire for political unification gathered momentum in cantata settings by Brahms and his associates such as Carl Reinthaler (*Das Mädchen von Kola*, ca. 1865), the influential teacher and conductor Carl Reinecke (*Fingal und Ossian*, 1876), and the ailing Berlin composer Bernhard Hopffer (*Darthula's Grabesgesang*, 1878).[46] Paul Umlauft (1853–1934), who had studied with Reinecke, composed a Wagner-influenced cantata for soloists and male voices on the episode of the unhappy *Agandecca* (1890).[47] Another pupil of Reinecke, Arnold Krug (1849–1904), whose cantata *Fingal*, for soloist, male choir, and orchestra, appeared in 1891, displays again the potent influence of Brahms in positioning the cantata form as an alternative to Wagnerian opera.

A preference for Fingal as musical protagonist in the second half of the nineteenth century resulted in some sixteen or more works involving the epic hero: for instance, Edmond Membrée's *Fingal*, scored for reciters, chorus, and orchestra, premiered in 1861. A concern for the clarity of text is evident, in this as in other French settings of Ossian. A lesser-known topic from the poems gave rise to Ferdinand Heinrich Thieriot's opera *Armor e Daura* (1869, described as a "tragische Episode aus dem Schottischen auf Ossian") with a libretto by the German feminist poet Louise Otto-Peters (1819–95), who was also librettist for the opera *Leyer und Schwert* (Lyre and Sword, 1863).[48] Thieriot (1838–1919) established a firm reputation for well-crafted symphonies, cantatas, and chamber works, with some influence from Mendelssohn and more immediately again from Brahms, in whose circle he moved.[49]

A gifted composer who emerged from cultural borderlands, Louis Théodore Gouvy, divided in his cultural heritage between France and Prussia, drew the admiration of both Berlioz and Brahms. The genre of the *scène lyrique* that Gouvy helped develop (*Le dernier Hymne d'Ossian*, op. 15, for bass voice and orchestra, 1858) was originally conceived for voice and piano at the beginning of the century. Later, in 1880, the *Fingal* of Lucien Hillemacher (a Parisian, but of Belgian ancestry) carried off the Prix de Rome of the Académie des Beaux-Arts.[50] Another work of the same title (also entered for the Prix de Rome that year) was by Raymond Bonheur, a confidant of Debussy.[51] Around this time Jules-August Bordier, a native of Angers, composed an impressive *scène lyrique*, his *Un rêve d'Ossian* (1885) for soli, chorus, and orchestra; this opens with a recitation that underscores the French concern, noted above, for clarity of text. These last three works were created during a period of economic depression in France, one that lasted from the collapse of the Paris Bourse in 1882 to the end of the century. Some have argued that this situation stemmed from the reparations imposed on France after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71.[52]

Indeed, the echoes of that conflict, and the tragedy of the Paris Commune, are vividly present in Bordier's dramatic fresco.

Operas and cantatas on the subject of Fingal and Comala continued to appear in Italy. By 1847 the melodrama *Fingal*, to a libretto by Gaetano Solito and with music by Pietro Antonio Coppola, had been produced in Palermo; it was staged in Lisbon, in 1851 and again in 1864.[53] Another opera, *Komala*, premiered by Franz Liszt in Weimar in October 1858, came from the pen of the Polish-American Frydryk Eduard Sobolewski who, born in Königsberg, had studied with Zelter in Berlin and with Carl Maria von Weber in Dresden. Liszt had already conducted the premiere of Sobolewski's Ossianic cantata, *Vinvela*, for soli, string quartet, and harp, in Weimar in April 1853.[54] Emigrating from Germany to the United States in 1859, the composer promoted opera and symphony concerts in Milwaukee and later founded the Philharmonic Society in St. Louis. A native of New Orleans, Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–69) was not merely an international-level virtuoso but also the composer of several atmospheric Chopin-influenced piano pieces: his Ossian *Ballades*, op. 4 (1843), *Danse ossianique*, op. 12 (1850–51), and the popular *Marche de nuit* with its catchy rhythm (1855).[55]

Third Phase: Late Romanticism (1880–1918)

As the century wore on, operas on texts from Ossian gave way to cantatas and symphonic poems, largely because of a dearth of compelling librettos and, in many countries, lack of resources for the costly genre of opera. Two Greek composers revived the drama of *Oithóna*, the neglected subject of Barthélémon's 1768 attempt. The operas by Dionisio Rodoteato (1876) and Dionisio Carradi (1891) may have had limited time spans and audiences, but they, like the Lisbon performances of Coppola's *Fingal* in 1851 and 1864, show how far Ossian had penetrated into southern European culture.

In more northerly climes, Massenet's opera *Werther*, premiered in Vienna in 1892, is one of his most inspired works, and contains the famous scene in which the tenor "reads" (sings) from a translation of the Ossian poem "Berrathon" ("Pourquoi me réveiller, o souffle du printemps?"). In contrast, the opera *Darthula* by Simon van Milligen, which premiered in Amsterdam in 1901, marks a minor strand of musical Ossianism, a sideshow to the Bayreuth bandwagon. Milligen had studied with Franck and d'Indy in Paris, but the main influence in his opera is patently that of Wagner.[56] In the New World, the Mexican composer Julián Carillo Trujillo, trained partly in Europe, composed a one-act opera on the unusual topic of Macpherson's poem "Oina-Morul" (1903). Apart from Massenet's *Werther*, many of these operas were never published and remain in manuscript.

A fair number of Ossian settings in the later nineteenth century fell under Brahms's spell: several German composers of the time who wrote Ossian-derived pieces knew him personally. As German nationalism intensified after 1848, choral

compositions were given impetus as singing societies, especially male ensembles, proliferated in northern as well as central Europe. Choral works on Ossian came out of the Finnish north—for instance, those by Erkki Melartin (1897) and Selim Palmgren (1913), both composed on a Swedish translation of Herder's "Dar-thula" poem. The year 1903 marked, significantly, the emergence of a draft by Arnold Schoenberg on the subject of Darthula, a large-scale cantata for chorus and orchestra on the same verses by Herder.[57]

Cantatas and symphonic poems were by now in the ascendant. Some cantatas began to approach an operatic conception, with quasi–stage directions: those, for instance, on the subject of Comala by Joseph Jongen (1897) and Jørgen Malling (1902).[58] At the same time, composers accelerated the drive toward abstract orchestral works. Symphonic poems by the French composer Arthur Coquard (*Ossian*, 1882) and the Belgians Sylvain Dupuis (*Moina*, 1884) and Adolphe Biarent (*Fingal*, 1894, and *Trenmor*, 1905), for example, with their coded allusions to the Franco-Prussian hostilities of 1870–71, evince anxiety over Prussian militarism and the threat of a larger European conflict. Concurrent works drawn from Ossian include the Brazilian Alexandre Levy's tone poem *Comala* (1890), the Italian composer Nicolò Celega's *Il cuore di Fingal* (undated, but ca. 1895), and Charles Villiers Stanford's *Irish Rhapsody No. 2: Lament for the Son of Ossian* (1903), written at the climax of the Second Boer War.[59]

This period of "crepuscular" Ossianism, with the backdrop of the Franco-Prussian conflict and German unification as a threatening prelude to continental involvement, has a parallel in the "Celtic twilight" researches of field explorers such as Marjory Kennedy-Fraser around the time of World War I. She arranged, in voice and piano versions intended essentially for drawing-room consumption, Gaelic-language lays that she had recovered from Highland oral tradition. For composers, the heroism of the early Romantic passion for Ossian was waning in the light of the human cost of armed antagonism, just as European powers braced themselves for an even greater conflict.

Fourth Phase (1918–Present)

British composers working between the two world wars turned again to Ossian, among them the prolific Granville Bantock (1868–1946) and the Yorkshire bandmaster Joseph Weston Nicholl (1875–1925), whose opera *Comala* (1920) illustrated the battle between a Celtic heroine and her Germanic adversaries.[60] The libretto of Nicholl's opera, by Reginald Buckley, began as a one-act lyric tragedy, "Comala," which appeared in the *Poetry Review* in the summer of 1915. The plot is nationalistic: Comala is a Dark Age Celtic princess receiving shelter from Christian Britons on a Northern Isle. She symbolizes the spirit of Celtic-Christian Britain, while the invading Norse rovers represent the light and dark sides of "Teutonism."[61]

Nor was Nicholl the only composer to rediscover Ossian after World War I. In Russia Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov (1859–1935), a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, completed his *Three Musical Tableaux from Ossian*, op. 56, in 1925, although it was published only in 1938.[62] Russia had long celebrated the poems, mainly in the 1792 translation by Ermil Ivanovich Kostrov (1755–96) that drew on Le Tourneur's French version of 1777. But the Soviet Revolution, in suppressing individualism, was ambivalent about the heroic characters portrayed in epics of the past (*byliny*, *stariny*) and wished to portray them (in the newer genre of *noviny*) as representations of the spirit of the people as a whole.[63]

The composer John Laurence Seymour is one of the few Americans to write songs based on Ossian. Around the same time as Seymour's *Six Ossianic Odes* (1936), the Scottish composer Cedric Thorpe Davie completed his cantata *Dirge for Cuthullin*.[64] Twenty years later the prolific André Amellér (1912–90) produced what may be the last opera on an Ossianic theme, the one-act *La lance de Fingal*, op. 50 (1957). Around this time the French musical appetite for Ossian surfaced again. Jean Guillou (b. 1930) devised two technically challenging pieces for organ, *Ballade Ossianique, No. 1* (*Temora*), op. 8 (1962, rev. 2005), and *Ballade Ossianique, No. 2* (*Les chants de Selma*), op. 23 (1971, rev. 2005); these rhapsodic, tumultuous works are among solo items inspired by the poems.[65]

A few works for other solo instruments exist, some from the Romantic period: for guitar, by Johann Kaspar Mertz (1806–56), "An Malvina" and "Fingals-Höhle" (1847); for piano, Gottschalk's pieces referred to above, Wilhelm Fritze's *Bilder aus Ossian*: *Fünf Stücke*, op. 7 (1866),[66] Erik Chisholm's *Night Song of the Bards* (1941),[67] and Carlo Alfredo Piatti's *Ossian's Song*, for cello and piano, undated. The Ukrainian composer Valery Kikta's stylish, Ravel-like four pieces, *Ossian, Suite for Harp* (1968), show how far away in time and space European modernity found inspiration in the bardic images of Ossian. Oddly, however, the urge to musical modernity was evidently in conflict with Michael Denis's remark, at the time he completed his complete translation (1768–69), that the poems were very *un-modern*, thus raising the question for composers of aesthetic appropriateness.[68]

Chapter Two

On Macpherson's Native Heath: Primary Sources

The poet Robert Burns, owning himself a great admirer of Ossian, remarked that the poetry was "one of the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct."[1] Burns was a major contributor to James Johnson's collection *The Scots Musical Museum* (1787–1802), which includes songs related to Ossian. Commenting on the song "The Maid of Selma," number 116 in the poet's interleaved copy of the second volume of the *Museum*, the antiquarian Robert Riddell (1755–94) refers first of all to the tune attributed to James Oswald,[2] then describes some "Fingallian" airs he had come across in John Bowie's *A Collection of Strathspey Reels & Country Dances* (1789):

> This air began to be admired at Edinburgh about the year 1770. The words are a little alter'd, from the original, in the Poems of Ossian, and I am doubtfull whether the tune has any pretensions to antiquity. That very valuable Collection of Highland, and Western Island Music published by the Revd Mr McDonald of Kilmore, which is the ancient and undoubted oldest Scottish music existing, is different from this air—which breathes more of an Italian, than an old Ergadian Composition [i.e., from the districts of Argyll, Lochaber, and Wester Ross]. —RR. Since I wrote the above I have met with a Collection of Strathspeys &c by John Bowie of Perth—In the end of this collection are three airs, (said) [to be] by Fingal and the following note precedes them—"The following pieces of ancient music were furnished to the editors by a gentle-man of note in the Highlands of Scotland—were composed originally for the Harp, and which were handed down to him by his ancestors, who learned them from the celebrated Harper Rory Daul, who flourished in the Highlands in the reign of Queen Ann—this air here called the Maid of Selma seems to be taken from these ancient Fingallian ones.[3]

On the "The Maid of Selma," with its text adapted from Macpherson's "Oina-Morul," Riddell remarked further: "Here is another Fingallian air said to be—But the moment a Tune suffers the smallest alteration, it loses its prominent features,

its Costume, its everything—Music, like a fine painting, can admit of no alteration, no retouching by any other hand, after it has come from that, of the original composer. RR."

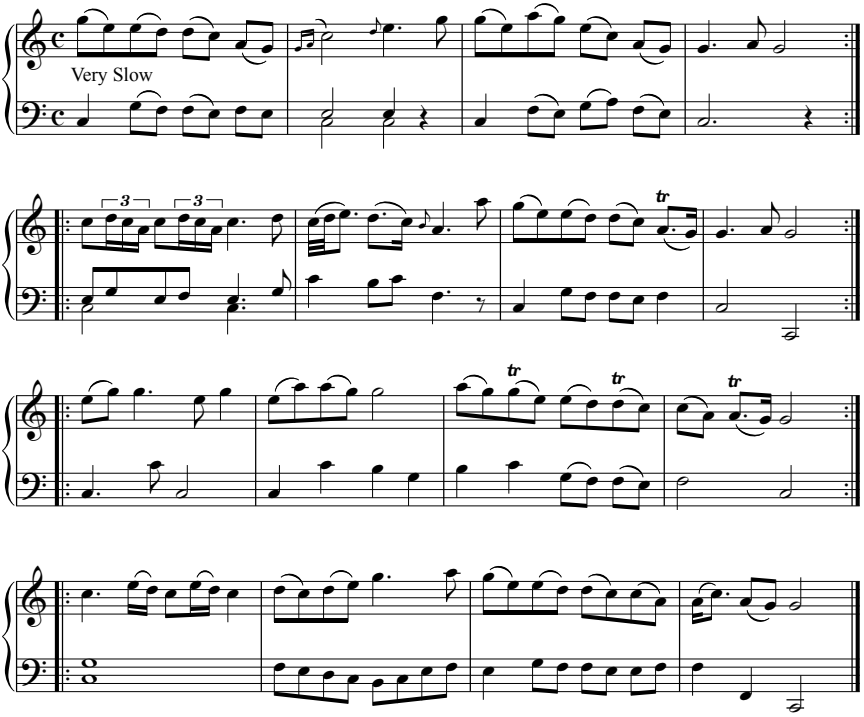
This remark reveals the very different attitudes toward melody as codified in print and music as orally transmitted. It suggests that there is an identifiable composer, even for popular folk songs; it is not surprising that the Lowland tunes, at a time when Scottish identity was in danger of being overcome by conceptions of "North Britain" and imperial expansion, often were assigned to living persons who had supposedly composed them. These native "compositions" often were reworkings of known songs or tunes—a task at which Burns was adept. The acknowledgment that a tune might be "traditional," however, without a known author, would have been Riddell's escape from too restricted a view of how oral transmission was "authenticated" only when it was committed to writing or print. The episode of the desolate Colma in "The Songs of Selma" shows how composers such as Oswald could adapt the text of Ossian, by using melodic progressions like the 5–6–1 cadence, evident also in "The Maid of Selma," to cobble together tunes that sounded "Fingalian."[4]

In the Highlands, oral tradition was much more fluid than in the Lowlands. It often operated in families or local townships rather than in the order of bards, which had already disintegrated by the early eighteenth century. Melodic formulas, aurally absorbed and largely pentatonic, could be manipulated at will in varying contexts and were well known to musicians, whether singers or instrumentalists. Thus, the "alterations" Riddell refers to were normal in a tradition where literacy existed and was valued but where oral communication retained a vitally important social function. This was evident in the Highland *ceilidhs* (evening social gatherings) in Highland townships recorded by students of tradition in the later nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. These cultural events have been well described for the Scottish, Irish, and New World contexts.[5]

David Hume, Samuel Johnson, and other eighteenth-century literati located authority in the writing down of orally transmitted songs and tales: script and print embodied authenticity and, increasingly, legality as well as legitimacy. But unlike these gentlemen, Burns recognized the vitality of oral tradition and its importance to the culture of both Highlands and Lowlands. In any case, the two cultures were never entirely separate, despite the language difference, as the instrumental and song collections of the period clearly show. Preparing his collection of airs "peculiar to the Highlands" (1816–19), Capt. Simon Fraser (1773–1852) articulated this melodic consanguinity by listing in his preface some twenty-five tunes common to both traditional repertoires—and there were certainly many more as contact between Highlands and Lowlands increased during the later eighteenth century with the opening up of communications.[6]

But Fraser also intimated that he had entered his collection of tunes into Stationers' Hall, so that "no other may assume the right of publishing them without consent." The authority of written tunes was now being tied to personal ownership,

Example 2.1. John Bowie, "Air by Fingal," *Collection*, p. 32



to intellectual property, something that would have been possible in a song tradition formally sustained by specialist bards with a precise repertoire, but which latterly, with the demise of their order, had become an oral one communally shared. As eighteenth-century antiquarians became interested in "older" or "fragile" traditions, it was not so much "the tune" that was owned but the "version" published by the collector: essentially what Fraser was claiming. Nevertheless, with songs or tunes that were rare, the version recovered and printed was often considered the only "authentic" existence it had. This clearly matters in the case of Ossian.[7]

In his note on "The Maid of Selma," Riddell refers to the Rev. Patrick McDonald (1729–1824), minister of Kilmore (Argyll), who had published his *Collection of Highland Vocal Airs* (1784). One of his "Argyleshire airs" is "Ossian 'am deigh nam Fion" (Ossian after the Fianna), the poet's soliloquy on the death of his contemporaries the Fenian warriors, a prose narrative and also an associated air well known in Highland tradition. McDonald included the melodies of eight heroic lays, including that of *Laoidh Mhanuis* (The lay of Manus).[8] A version of this Ossianic tale of Magnus [Manus], similar in substance to that of Fingal, was included by John Francis