



ORAL HISTORY

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Interviewee:	Annie Kissack
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Interviewed & recorded by:	Charles Guard
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CG Anne, Caarjyn Cooidjagh, first of all let me ask you how long has it been together as a group?

AK I think it's about ten years now, but not in the same form it is at the moment, we started off with about four of us, Yn Chruinnaght and we had a sort of temporary name which, we didn't really know what to call ourselves and we had to wait for the Chruinnaght entry, no we were late for the Chruinnaght entry forms so we just thought of the first thing, we were, we're friends and we're all together in one place so we'll call ourselves that and we never got round to altering it but gradually people, friends, acquaintances, husbands and all joined and a few people have left.

CG Were you the inspiration behind it?

AK Yes, I mean I didn't set out to form a choir, I set out to do more things in the Chruinnaght competitions as far as singing was concerned. I wanted to sing myself a lot but not on my own, because I don't enjoy singing on my own and I found there were quite a few people like that as well they wanted to sing, they didn't want to sing in a great big group and have some input but they wanted to do something for Manx music but didn't feel confident enough or just didn't want to sing on their own and it's surprising the number of people that felt like that, in fact I think all the choir now feel like that, there's no real soloists as such though odd people have their moments.

CG But the actual style of singing which is very different from any other choir on the Island and most of the choirs, it's not got that Choral Union feel about it, it's got the what I would say the Folk feel, that is something that presumably has just grown naturally because it's Manx music and it's those sort of people involved.

AK Yes, I think if anybody tried to join who had a wobbly voice we would politely tell them not to and we have had a few people trying to join and we've had to be, it's quite difficult to explain why they would be unsuitable. Most people who have had a musical background, but perhaps in playing instruments and this sort of thing rather than singing, not in my case particularly, and I think as long as we sing like ourselves and try and find our real voices through this and sing out. There are no passengers, well not too many anyway, we try to aim everybody does something and in theory at least if we all had to sing a solo bit we would, I think everybody is capable of doing that. They might not want to but this is the sort of understood thing at the back of it so only keen people persevere. A couple of people taught themselves to read music so they could join in.

- CG** Does everybody read music then in the group?
- AK** Not terribly easily but a few people made an effort to do so just to speed things up but it's still not terribly easy, especially the men generally speaking learn a lot of things by ear. They do refer to the music but it's not as easy for them not being brought up reading music.
- CG** So it's quite a commitment because they meet with you every week now?
- AK** Yes, it's once a week, we rehearse on a Saturday as well which precludes most people who have an active social life. We are trying to keep it going so that as we've ended up with quite a lot of us having young children since the choir started and we've kept the Saturday night thing going. In a way it was the only social life at some point when the children were very very small. We tried to work it so we could involve people with children and work round their houses so we don't rehearse in halls or anything like that.
- CG** So it's a social event in its own right really?
- AK** I think so, we are all friends genuinely outside of the group, I mean, we were very cautious about anybody, if we don't know anybody we have to all decide we like them which sounds terrible but we do feel we have to get on with people and also of course you've got to be sympathetic to the Manx language and prepared if you don't know any to listen to how words are going to be sounding that's very important.
- CG** Do you all speak Manx reasonably fluently though?
- AK** No we don't all speak Manx, about a third of the choir speak Manx fluently, another third are in various stages of learning, perhaps the other third intend to at some point but are sympathetic enough to know that they've got to, obviously they've got to pronounce things properly and they have to know what the songs are about, obviously.
- CG** But some of you do speak Manx fluently and obviously guide the others with pronunciation?
- AK** Yes, that's right, I do and my husband, and there's quite a few of us so we do try and get the pronunciation right, it's quite hard when you are singing sometimes, sounds disappear.
- CG** As the musical force behind all this you do the arrangements, what do you draw on in the way of style for this, for harmony,

you're not tight, what's giving you the feeling about what you can do and can't do in your harmony. doing Victorian arrangements, they're really quite fresh and quite

AK

I'm not conscious of any particular influence in it only when I was quite young, perhaps fourteen or fifteen, and I'd had a background of going to Aeglagh Vannin and I'd learnt a lot of songs with Mona Douglas and when I was a little bit older you could have free access to the books in the Rural Library and of course you could get the old Manx Society books and I remember finding some of, I think it was Mannin from 1916 and there were just lines of music of songs I'd not come across with Mona, I was quite interested in this. But I was very naive, I thought that I would just play these on the, I could play the piano a little bit, I'm not particularly trained in any instrument but I can knock things out on the piano and they seemed so empty and I was really disappointed and I sort of had a change in my way of viewing music after that. I started to try and hear sort of thicknesses to the sound so to speak. I did do music A level at school, I didn't play anything, I did the theory there, nobody else did that but as I couldn't play anything or sing particularly well I had no option so I had a sort of vague idea of what to do but I didn't do any arrangements for anything until I came back to the Island and started up with Caarjyn Cooidjagh when I started doing some two part things. Really just with a view to the people I was with and what they could sing and what I could sing.

CG

Right.

AK

If I can't sing it I tend not to write it and I'm not very good at singing alto and that sort of thing myself so I try and work it on the principle that I'm not terribly wonderful singing parts and other people might not be as well so I try and make them as singable as possible, it doesn't always work but no I don't have anybody in mind or base harmonies on or anything like that.

CG

Because you will have grown up listening to the Arnold Foster arrangements of all Mona's songs.

AK

Yes I did and I know them all off by heart really.

CG

I'm sure we all do but there is virtually no trace of that whatsoever in your arrangements which I find extraordinary.

AK

Well I don't know, I tend to, my main influence must have been church influence, I did sing in the choir at Onchan church for a long time and I used to hear tenors and things booming

behind my ear so subconsciously I must have absorbed some of that but I've not been in any choir or anything.

CG You've never fallen into a sort of maudlin way of putting the Manx songs across which I must compliment you on?

AK Well I don't know, I hope not, it's very hard to know ...

CG You've kept sentiment out of it which is good.

AK ... it's very hard to know what you do really. I do worry about it, I worry constantly that I've lost it, or I'm seldom particularly pleased, occasionally I am when things eventually come through, and sometimes I feel I get it muddy.

CG And is it all Manx now then, is your repertoire entirely on the traditional Manx, because I know you do Ushag Varrey and one or two others, they're sort of new songs aren't they?

AK Well we didn't make a conscious decision to set out doing anything but because we were the only people who, well other than Cliogarree Twoaie the northern Manx choir who are actually singing chorally these songs, it seemed as well to stay in our, well what other people didn't do, I mean we could no doubt sing things that other people sang but by and large the people in the choir felt they wanted to do something different. There's loads and loads of songs which you think about for a while, but if you think about them too much you get a bit fed up so it's rather nice when the likes of Bob Carswell started, well they've been producing quite a lot of songs over the years but only recently have these come to light and I hope to include quite a few of these in the CD when we ... He's got some lovely tunes especially recently I think he's really on form and the Manx is good, singable, fits a lot easier than some of the older things where you feel the words and the tunes have been hemmed together rather unfortunately and it's a real job to try to work out how it ever fitted if indeed it did. I think you are quite, because there's quite a lot of uncertainty about what Manx music was if it ever was as such, you've got a great freedom to do what you like with it and I do feel that, I don't feel I owe it to anybody. There's not somebody hovering, standing over your shoulder, perhaps Mona Douglas is, in a sort of way, but I'm sure she would be quite happy, whatever we do as long as it's Manx.

CG I'm sure she would be thrilled hearing what you do. Is there, have you an idea how big your repertoire is? I mean how many songs have you done over the years?

- AK** Not a huge number, probably twenty or thirty, lots of things start and never see the light of day because it does take a long time to teach things and also I'm not wonderfully fast at transcribing and that sort of thing.
- CG** But you are always presumably working on something, new arrangements?
- AK** Oh yes, I've always got things on the go, they tend to go in two or threes, I've two or three things on the go and then I have a lull for a month or two.
- CG** And how often does the choir perform in public, I know you gave a full recital here at the Erin Arts Centre just before Christmas but do you say have an engagement every two months or how often is it?
- AK** Well this year it's going to be busy. We have a pretty good relationship with the churches in the west of the Island, they like us so we're fairly regular at Dalby, St Johns Methodist, and a lot of churches actually. We've been booked up by Glen Maye WI for next Christmas.
- CG** That's a major event, yes.
- AK** But we like doing that, I mean the people like, really genuinely do seem to like the music but by and large no we've not really done a huge amount of performance. We go to support Yn Chruinnaght which was the original aim in a big way as much as we can. Feailley Ghaelgagh has provided opportunities to sing. We might be going to Glasgow as part of the Celtic Congress. We've only been partly asked so far but we are waiting to see if they want all of us or just a few, so that would be quite nice this year in the summer.
- CG** So things can only get busier?
- AK** Oh, they can, but not too busy, because we do want to have time to learn these things.