

A musical journey home

Cormac Breatnach's visit to the Basque country was more than just a chance to play with new musicians – it was an opportunity to appreciate his mother's homeland, he tells **Siobhán Long**

The hearth was long the centre of exchange for traditional music. It was the place where tunes were swapped, songs were aired and stories shared.

Now that our horizons have widened and at the same time the world has seemingly shrunk in size, our music crosses boundaries previously only dreamt of. TG4 has attempted to capture that zeitgeist with a new six-part TV series, *Ceolchuaire*: giving a chance to seven traditional artists to dig deeper beneath the surface of their music and to explore its links to places which have held a fascination for them over the years.

With a carbon footprint that would draw the wrath of Al Gore upon them, this series visits Senegal with John Spillane, Norway with Altan's Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh, Varanasi in India with Kíla's Rossa and Ronán Ó Snodaigh, Harlem with sean-nós dancer, Seosamh Ó Neachtain, Bulgaria with Muireann Ní Amhlaoibh and the Basque country with whistle player, Cormac Breatnach.

For Breatnach, perhaps more than any of the other musicians, this was a sort of homecoming. His mother, Lucy Bhreatnach Hellmann Menchaca, was born in Algorta in Spain's Basque country. Her personal story is one worthy of a full-screen treatment all of its own. Brought up in a Spanish-German speaking household, her family moved to Madrid when she was only five or six years of age. During the Spanish civil war, when there was much antipathy towards "foreigners" in Spain, she was sent to live with her German aunt.

During the second World War she worked for the German embassy in Madrid on the infamous Enigma decoder. After moving to Ireland in the 1950s with her husband, Deasún Breatnach, she had six children, and practised yoga and transcendental meditation at a time when such pursuits were as alien as salsa dancing at the crossroads. Ironically, despite her picaresque past, Cormac Breatnach knew very little about the details of his mother's life until recent years.

"I think like a lot of people who left Ireland to go to America," Breatnach explains, "many of them found it difficult to talk about their past. In my own personal experience, my memory of my mother was supported by what was in the house in the way of records. My father had Willie Clancy and old 78s and my mother had a Bulgarian album of an orchestra, and she had this song about *Gernika Ko Arbola* – the tree of Guernica, which was left standing after the town was razed to the ground by German aircraft belonging to the Condor Legion, which were sent by Hitler to support Fran-



co's troops during the Spanish Civil War. For almost four hours bombs rained down on Guernica in an 'experiment' for the blitzkrieg tactics and bombing of civilians seen in later wars."

Other fragmentary memories populated Cormac's conception of his mother's home place, in particular, ball games such as pelota, and the memory of his mother describing how, when Basque political prisoners died, their ashes would be wrapped in the Basque flag, taken up to the top of the nearest mountain or cliff, and scattered to the four winds. Lucy died last October; her husband Deasún died just two days later. Breatnach's journey to her home place came about just five months before her passing, and gave him extraordinary insight into her early years.

THIS WAS A musical and personal journey that Breatnach relished. Travelling from Bixarritz to San Sebastian, Bilbao and Algorta, he made a point of not over-preparing himself for the adventure, apart from suggesting to the producers a number of musicians with whom he'd love to work, including Barcelona musician Lúcia Pujol and Basque accordionist Kepa Junkera. Alan Griffin, an Irishman living in Donastía (San Sebastián) who was later introduced to Cormac, is a recognised player of the Alboka in-

strument and a member of Alboka, a Basque ensemble named after the Basque horn-like instrument of the same name.

"My first impressions of the music were that it was kind of repetitive," Breatnach admits openly. "I suppose that's what a lot of people say too when they hear Irish music: it's very cyclical in nature, but of course the instruments are totally different. For example, the txistu (cheestoo), a three-holed whistle, is played with a drum, so the musician plays the whistle with one hand and the drum with the other."

Experiencing a resurgence since the 1980s, Basque music might not enjoy the international profile that Irish traditional music does, but it mines a rich vein of musical expression, propelled by indigenous instruments such as the txalaparta (long, percussive wooden boards), the alboka woodwind instrument and the trikitixa, a two-row button accordion. Breatnach discovered that many of the tunes played are newly composed, evidence not only of the vibrancy of Basque music in the 21st century, but of the need to replenish the repertoire as so many tunes have been lost over the years.

Marrying his own Irish traditional music with its Basque counterparts proved surprisingly easy, Breatnach insists, although he does admit that the early notes

'Musicians don't need to talk once they start playing': Cormac Breatnach in his home in Wicklow.
Photograph: Cyril Byrne

Tomorrow
Where Irish literature is classed as English

collided with the help of a few well-chosen glasses of cider.

ALTHOUGH A FLUENT speaker of Castilian, he doesn't speak Basque, so establishing a rapport with local musicians demanded that musical notes would be exchanged, notes that both parties at worst enjoyed, and at best swapped and explored in unison. Breatnach also believes that the Irish and Basque gene pools have much in common, which may go some way towards explaining the comfort zone he found when playing with local musicians.

"Musicians don't really need to talk once they start playing," he says, smiling. "I played with a txistulari band, who are like town criers, employed by the town council to go around the town on a Sunday morning. So at 9.45am, I joined them, learning the tunes as we walked around the town, and it really was a fantastic experience."

For Breatnach, the making of this programme was truly a voyage of discovery. A chance to tap into an undiscovered part of himself that had lain dormant for far too long.

"I was brought up primarily in Irish culture," he explains, "with a nod over my shoulder to the quarter of me that's Basque and the quarter of me that's German. Then, when I travelled with Deiseal

in the Azores back in the mid-1990s, I met this band called La Musgaña in which Quique Almendros was then one of the best Spanish three-holed whistle players. When I met him, I felt a connection with Spain that I hadn't felt before and I knew that I wanted to explore it a lot more. Going to the Basque country was another exploration that allowed me to dig so much deeper than I had expected."

Ultimately, the journey was one he undertook for himself and for his mother, Breatnach insists.

"It was a chance to see the Basque country through my eyes and through my mother's eyes," he says. "It was an opportunity, maybe, to try to close a chapter for her in her life, to bring something back to her, and to try to understand something more about her early life. The timing was crucial of course, because I went there in May, and five months later, she died. I'm a firm believer in fate. So many things in my life have happened at the right time, even though I mightn't realise that at the time of course."

♦ The six-part music series *Ceolchuaire* begins on TG4 this Sunday at 10pm and is repeated on Friday, Feb 1 at 8pm. Cormac Breatnach's programme on Basque music is on Feb 24. www.tg4.ie