# Seachta frisa toimsiter Gaedhelg
# – Seven Things by which *Gaedhelg* is Measured

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While it is generally accepted that *Auraicept* deals with the medieval concept of *grammatica* it cannot be considered solely as grammatical explanation (Poppe 1996, 55-74). The authors of the text did not imitate the *grammatica* of the Latinist because, as they said, much of what was contained in Latin grammars was not suitable to the Irish language (Calder 1917, 38.492-516). *Auraicept* was a basic text in the training of the Irish literati and as such must have reflected the immediate concerns of the teachers in the schools of poetry. Modern scholars agree that many of the doctrines contained in it deal with poetics rather than grammar (Hofman 1993, 20.112-113). This paper argues that that part of the *Auraicept* known as *Lebor Ferchertne* focuses on one of the primary preoccupations of the poets which was the concept of the appropriate performance of compositions (see Breatnach 1987, 36.8-9). Though they model their tract on contemporary Latin grammars which contained many more elements of grammar (Isidore's *Grammatica* contained thirty elements) the authors seem to have selected seven items for discussion on the basis of their relevance to performance.

I draw attention to three facts that are important when discussing poetics in the Irish context:

1. that poetical compositions in Ireland were typically accompanied by music
2. that music was an integral part of the training of the poet
3. that music-making, in the form of chanting the hours, was one of the identifying characteristics of Christian foundations (Stokes 1900, 1-438).

Therefore the place of music in performance cannot be overlooked in reading this short teaching text of just under three hundred lines. It is accepted that without notated examples of music we cannot retrieve the actual sounds of music-making in early Irish society but by careful attention to pedagogical instruction as given in *Lebor Ferchertne* we can uncover a dialogue in which the teachers of the *filid* engage with mainstream European musical thought which was, at that time, dominated by the liturgical needs of the Christian Church. This paper discusses the *Seachta* (hereafter referred to as 'the seven aspects') as they appear in *Lebor Ferchertne* in the *Book of Ballymote* version (Calder 1917, 54.739-68.916).

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## 1.    *Seachta* – The seven aspects

The canonical material in *Lebor Ferchertne* comprises a summary of the aspects of performance which must be attended to, 'S*eachta frisa toimsiter Gaedelg*—seven things by which *Gaedelg* is measured' and a short description of the use of the *Ogam* series as a measurement of *fid*. The *Seachta* are arranged in two pairs, *fid 7 deach* and *réim 7 forbaid,* followed by three single items *alt, insce* and *etargaire*. While it must be acknowledged that there appears to be more than one commentator and that grammatical explanation frequently intrudes on the argument, the consistent underlying thread throughout the commentary on the *Seachta* and the lines which immediately follow, is the idea of *tomus* 'measurement' (Calder 1917, 56.750-61; 68.917-70.925; 70.943.-72.951). Why would the author and commentators be preoccupied with measurement? I would argue that it was because they were thinking and talking about the efficacy of the performance of their compositions. Performance was the customary form of presentation of literary works in medieval Ireland.

   In the commentary each of the seven aspects  is subjected to an analysis under the headings *bunad* 'derivation',  *inne* 'meaning', and *airbert* 'use' and also to categorisation under the headings *ruidles* 'peculiar'*, diles* 'proper', *coitchenn* 'common' and *indles* 'improper'.  Eric Poppe (1996, 69) argues that these latter four may have been influenced by a discussion of the word *differentia* found in Boethius's translation of Porphory's *Isagoge*. In this text they are used to highlight the fact that each of the seven words can be understood in several senses. The seven aspects are further analysed under the heading *cenel 7 gne* 'genus and species' and the word *esse* 'essence'. While the Latin word *esse* 'essence' is frequently used to gloss difficult terms in a variety of texts, classification under the heading *cenel 7 gne* 'genus and species' only appears in *Auraicept* and some Law texts. It was, however, a classification which was widely used in medieval music tracts (Burkholder, Grout and Palisca 2006, 18). The use of four different analytical approaches indicates that tutors were dealing with important but difficult concepts that needed to be reinforced by philosophical as well as grammatical considerations.

## 2.    *Fid*

There appear to be at least two commentators on the word *fid.* Both discuss it in relation to the *Ogam* series (Calder 1917, 56.762-66). The first commentator, using the analytical framework *bunad, inn*e and *airbert*, understands it to mean 'good measurement', 'foundation' and the '*fid* of art'. The second, using the framework

of *ruidles, diles*, *coitchenn* and *indles*, understands it to mean 'a letter of the alphabet'.

In a fuller discussion of the word in *Lebor Cenn Faelad* (Calder 1917, 30.395-406) it is claimed that *fid* derives from a Greek word, (Latin *funo* , 'I sound'), and that its function is both 'to sound' and 'to supply a basis for sound'(Calder 1917, 30.398-406). Presumably the commentator is talking about the production of sound. Given that the interdisciplinary quality of the text of *Auraicept* is well established it is not unreasonable to seek a source for this definition in contemporary discourse on the allied art of music. The idea of a sound or note as the basis of all music systems is a tenet of early Greek theory of music as recorded in the works of Aristoxenus, a contemporary of Aristotle. His teaching was summarised in the *Eisagoge* of Cleonides (Strunk 1950, 34-46)  which was written in the early Christian era. Medieval writers had access to the ideas of the Aristoxenian tradition in Boethius's tract entitled *De Institutione Musica* 'The Fundamentals of Music' (Palisca and Bower, 1989) and in the *Institutiones* of Cassiodorus (R.A.B. Mynors, 1937).

 Analysing the word *fid* under the heading of *cenel 7 gne* 'genus and species' (Calder 1917, 64.853-58) the commentator on *Auraicept* introduces the idea of *fid saerda* 'artificial sound' and *fid aicenta* 'natural *fid'* which he understands to be 'wood'. However under the heading *esse* 'essence' the commentator states that the essence of *fid* is 'air' which, of course, points to the spoken or sung sound (Calder 1917, 68. 899-902).

The possibility that the word *fid* could mean a sound or musical note is borne out by its use in a passage in 'An Old-Irish tract on the privileges and responsibilities of poets' published in *Ériu* 13 (Gwynn 1940-2*,* 36.3-5, 21-23). This passage appears to parallel the lines from Isidore's *De musica* (Strunk 1950, 96) where he discusses the voice quality of nine common environmental and human sounds. In the Old-Irish passage quoted by Gwynn related sounds are grouped in pairs and *feda daoine* is paired with *gotha en* 'birdsong' (Gwynn 1940-2, 36.23). In this text normal speech or continuous sound is referred to as *certiomagallamh* 'speech proper' so we may deduce that *feda daoine* is some kind of discontinuous sound such  as a musical note.

## 3.    *Deach*

The second aspect to be considered is *deach* (Calder 1917, 58.771-79). The commentator tells us that it is of Latin origin and that it means 'two sounds' or 'good sound' and is the equivalent of the versefoot. This last is incorrect. In the section on *esse* 'essence' of *deach* (Calder 1917, 68.903-5) we read that it is a measurement

of one to eight syllables. Seán de Búrca has demonstrated that this is comparable to the Greek *metron* 'a segment of speech of fixed syllabic length' (1971-2, 131-51). Under the heading *cenel* 7 *gne* 'genus and species' (Calder 1917, 64.859-60) we are told that there are seven *deich na filidechta* 'measures of poetry'.

It is significant that the words *fid* and *deach* appear as a pair in the *Seachta* and that they also appear as a pair in *Ériu* 13 (Gwynn 1940-2, 18.22) in a section that deals with the performance of poetry. As I have already identified *fid* as a term used to signify 'a sound' or 'musical note' and *deach* as the structural unit that determines the rhythm of a verse-line I would argue that the pair represent the two essential elements of music-making which are 'pitch' and 'duration'.

## 4.      *Réim*

The second pair is *réim* and *forbaid*. *Réim* has passed into medieval and modern grammatical terminology. However, the commentator on the *Auraicept* discusses it as a grammatical term only in the context of prose. When he uses it in the context of *filidecht* 'poetry of the professional poet'and *bairdne* 'verses composed by bards' it means 'movement' or 'pace' (Calder 1917, 60.800-809).The commentator gives examples of two distinct types of movement, *do fid for fid* which is a slow deliberate pace and *taebreim do fid for fid* which, starting on the upbeat has a light tripping movement (Calder 1917, 64.866; 64.868-9). That Irish poets had a clear understanding of the concept of movement in music is borne out by the frequent use of the verb *luïd* 'moves' in poetic descriptions of music-making (see Mac Mathúna 1985, 36.20; SP 295.3).

We would suggest that 'movement' in these examples would be the equivalent of 'musical phrasing' in modern terminology.

## 5.      *Forbaid*

The word *forbaid* also appears to refer to the enunciation of words or phrases. The commentator (Calder 1917, 60.812-18) says that it can mean 'vivifies', 'completes or perfects' or simply 'on the word'. He argues that a form of *forbaid* establishes the length of a word. Under the heading *esse* 'essence' (Calder 1917, 68.907-8) he develops the idea of lengthening and shortening a sound but in this instance he uses the word *aimser* 'time' which immediately introduces the concept of musical duration. He also argues that *forbaid* is the Irish equivalent of the Latin *accentus* (Calder 1917, 60.810). However, the Latin *accentus,* as described by Isidore, refers to the rise and fall of the voice in performance rather than the length of the vowel.

Therefore the *forbaid* he specifies (Calder 1917, 60.813-18), *forsail* or 's' which lengthens a sound, *dinin disail* or 'd' which shortens a sound and *ernin* or 'n' which sits on a sound,  cannot be equated with the Latin acute, grave and circumflex.

The question then arises as to the source of the letters s, d and n. The answer can possibly be found in the neumatic renderings of the liturgy used in Christian foundations associated with the monastery of St.Gall. We know that 'a great many of the manuscripts of the ninth through the eleventh centuries contain, in addition to the neume figures, certain other signs in the form of single letters' (Parrish 1958, 11). Melodic signs include s (*sursum*) indicating a rise in pitch; d (*deprimatur*) for a lowering in pitch; and n (*naturaliter*) the usual value. These were all inflections colouring the melodic line. If we accept these *forbaide* as musical in origin then we have a logical explanation for the terms *forsail, dinin disail*, and *ernin* 'on the note'. They would simply mean 'raise the note,' 'lower the note' and  'the usual value'.

## 6.      *Alt*

The word *alt* is analysed by using the framework of *bunad, inne, airbert* (Calder 1917, 62.826-9). The commentator tells us that *alt* is 'nurtured in the mind' i.e. it is learned and retained in the memory and that it is used for identifying the *ailt aircetail* that are to be applied to each of the seven forms of poetry. He names six of  these forms of poetry *in nath, inn anair, inn anamain, in laidh, in setrad, in sainemain.* He also understands *alt* to mean *in re n-aimsire bis eter in da shillaib* 'the length of time between two syllables' (in prose) (Calder 1917, 62.830).

The word *alt* basically means 'joint' or 'juncture'. The logic of choosing this word to convey the sense of something 'nurtured in the mind' is not immediately clear. However we suggest that a parallel usage can be found in Greek musical theory.

The Greeks used the word *tonos* in four distinct senses : as note, interval, region of the voice and pitch. In the sense of interval *tonos* 'tone' signified the length of time between certain steps of a scale. The interval that joined the two tetrachords which make up the octave or perfect consonance was an interval of a tone. On this important fact I suggest the Irish commentators built the equivalence of the words 'interval' and 'joint'. *Tonos* in the sense of 'region of the voice' is explained by Cleonides (Strunk 1950, 44) as the Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian or any of the other tones (what we loosely term modes). The choice of 'tone' or 'region of the voice' in this sense was a crucial element in performance because it affected 'ethos'.

I suggest that in reading the commentary on the word *alt* one may interpret it as *alt* 'a note learnt as part of a musical system', *alt co feser* 'the note identifying which region of the voice is to be used' and *alt aircetail* 'a specific region of the voice producing a musical ethos as demanded by different forms of poetry such as *nath* or *laid*.' An example of its use in this sense is the word *marbalt* 'a death dirge' which is found in MD 3.50.3. It is also interesting that the words *alt* and *aircetal* occur together in Corm Y 41 which offers several explanations of the word *anair*:

> *Is fuirmed filed romīdair ina hanmand sa dona airc[h]etluib do shluind na*
> *n-ilaltae 7 dia ndechrugad, nī haicned romīdir leo.*

> It is the invention of poets that assigns these names to the chants for declaiming the various forms of poetry and distinguishing between them; it is not an inherent quality they are judged to have.


## 7.　　*Insce*

*Insce* basically means speech. It is attested in glosses and legal documents and was used in the enunciation of hereditary knowledge such as genealogies and the definition of land ownership. It was also used to express the word of God (DIL s.v. *insce*). The knowledge contained in *insce* was not open to question or change. It carried the weight of generations of wisdom. *Insci* were probably solemn enough to require formal accompanied performance.

The concept of an immutable ordering of sound was contained in the Greek idea of the *genus* as a musical system. It referred to a fixed ordering of tones, semitones and smaller intervals each of which affected what was known as the 'ethos' of a melody i.e. its appropriateness to a poetic theme or subject-matter. The diatonic *genus* became the basis of musical thinking in medieval and modern Western Europe.

The essence of musical *genus* is 'a certain ordering of four notes' resulting in melodic ethos. The analysis of *insce* under the framework of *bunad, inne* and *airbert* (Calder 1917, 62.836-7) is:

> *scientia* knowledge, *in deschae* 'the right /good way' or *insci co feser in aisti urdalta* '*genus* how you may know the predetermined way'.

This analysis implies the existence of a well-known, established method of performance. It meshes in well with the Greek concept of musical *genus*.[1]

It can be argued, therefore, that in the present context which discusses the seven aspects by which performance should be assessed, *insce, i.e. genus,* refers to the musical system which produces an ethos suitable to the subject in hand. *Insce* is also mentioned as one of five aspects of *aircetal* 'the performance of poetry' (*deach* 'measure', *alt* 'form' *insce* 'musical system' *etargaire* 'distinction' and *réim* 'movement') in 'An Old-Irish tract on the privileges and responsibilities of poets' published in *Ériu* 13 (Gwynn 1940-2, 15.2).

Since there is no relationship between *insce* 'speech' and gender, and there is an obvious parallel relationship between *insce* 'an immutable statement or dictum' and *genus* 'a predetermined order of musical notes', it is suggested here that *insce* meaning 'gender' was a secondary adaptation of the Latin word *genus.* In other words when grammarians came to deal with the concept of gender the word *genus* had already been translated into Irish as *insce* by working musicians.

## 8. *Etargaire*

*Etargaire* finds its place in the seven aspects of performance by virtue of its literal meaning which is 'between voices'. The greater part of the discussion using the framework *ruidles,diles,*etc.centres on the grammatical use of the word as laid out in the canonical material in *Lebor Cenn Faelad* (Calder 1917, 48.639-59).

In order to discern the reason for its inclusion in the seven aspects one must return to the text (Gwynn 1940-2, 15.3-4) which states:

> *Ar an fers lasin laidneoir as fuach a ainm lasin fhilidh. Asedh an eadargaire idir gach da fhuach.*

> Because the line according to the Latinist, is *fuach* according to the *fili*. Between every two lines is the *etargaire*.

Assuming that the Latinist referred to is a Christian cleric his preferred medium would be spiritual song. Literary texts indicate that Christian foundations were noted for their numerous psalmsingers and for the daily chanting of the hours. One can infer from this that they were influenced by mainstream European practice particularly as it is known that from the seventh century onwards efforts were being

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1 The analysis is followed by the statement that *insce* tells us how to know whether a metre is masculine or feminine. I am not aware of any metre in Irish that is said to be feminine or masculine but gender classification did apply to classical musical modes.

made by Rome to introduce a standard chant throughout the Church. Irish clerics would have been aware of the Latinist style of performance of Church chant. There was no standard method of indicating musical time in chant and every pause had to be accurately counted. Consequently, chanting was strictly regulated. One of the rules concerned the pause between two verses of a psalm. The pause therefore was counted as an integral part of the movement or rhythm of the whole psalm. The places at which a melody repeatedly paused were called 'distinctions' (Odo of Cluny c.935 cited in Strunk 1950, 113). We know that Irish musicians were acquainted with this word and its function because it is used in Wb 12c43;

*Nisi distinctionem sonituum diderint, quomodo scietur id quod canitur*

*Manibée dechur isint senmuim nítucatar inna rríara*

Unless there be a difference in the sound, the notes are not understood.

As I cannot find any other instance of the word *ríar* meaning 'note' I would prefer to translate the above:

Unless there be a distinction (pause) in the playing, the divisions (phrases) are not understood.

I would argue that *etargaire* ' pause , distinction' is used in a musical sense in this section of *Lebor Ferchertne.*

The dialogue or interconnection between the teaching of the *Seachta*, contemporary European musical forms and ancient musical theory is illustrated in the following table which shows how the terms are variously used in the grammatical or musical sense and how they are related to church music and ancient musical theoretical terminology.

*Figure showing the occurrence of the words in Irish texts both as grammatical and musical terms and some musical equivalents in ecclesiastical and ancient musical treatises.*

| Item | Grammar | Secular Music | Ecclesiast. Music | Ancient Mus. Theory |
|------|---------|---------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| *fid* | *Auraicept; IGT.* vowel, letter | *Ériu* 13; *Auraicept.* sound, note | | |
| deach | | *Ériu* 13; *Auraicept.* measure | syllaba? | metron |
| *réim* | *Auraicept; IGT.* declension | *Ériu* 13; *Auraicept.* movement, phrasing, phrases. | | |
| forbaid | | *Auraicept.* sign. | D, n, s. (litterae significativae) | |
| *alt* | *Mod. Ir.* article | *Ériu* 13; *Auraicept.* interval, a specific note, a system of notes | | tone, interval, a region of the voice |
| *insce* | *Auraicept;* *Mod. Ir.* gender | *Ériu* 13; *Auraicept.* speech-path | | genus, sound-path |
| etargaire | *Auraicept.* distinction | *Ériu* 13; *Auraicept.* pause | distinction, pause | |

# 9.    Conclusion

The foregoing interpretation of the *Seachta* suggests that the material contained in *Lebor Ferchertne* may have been the basis for a tract on performance which took into account the complex interaction and interdependence of poetic form and music. Notwithstanding the fact that five of the seven are attested as grammatical terms at different times in the history of the development of the language the application

of the *Seachta* to the measurement of verse which appears in the second part of *Lebor Ferchertne* (Calder 1917, 68.916-70.931) confirms their use as part of the vocabulary of poetico-musical theory in Early Irish.

The summary of the ways in which verse may be measured *Cate tomhus fri sechta?* is followed by the question: *Caite tomus fri fid?* 'What is measurement by sound?' The answer given is a description of the *Ogam* series (Calder 1917, 70.943-72.951). In what way can the *Ogam* series be understood as a measurement of sound? This is a subject for further investigation.

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