

Muhamad Al Hussain - The sean-nós-singing London Imam

LONDON based Muslim cleric Muhamad Al Hussaini was one of the more notable guests at the Labour Party Irish Society's St. Patrick's Day reception in Westminster last week (see page 4).

The Imam made headlines over the past week as various news outlets picked up on his accomplished sean nós singing.

The liberal academic started to learn the traditional singing style after taking up fiddle lessons with his 'maestro' Karen Ryan. He then met her uncle Pat Connolly who introduced him to the traditional style.

Since then he's gone from strength to strength, going to the Fleadh Ceoil and judged to have sung with distinction after winning the all-Britain.

On Saturday he spoke to Christian Jessen on his BBC Radio 4 show about why he is just as at home singing in Irish than he is praying at the mosque.

Al Hussain spoke of growing up in a mixed community in London during the 1970s and 1980s when he first came by Irish traditional music.

"One of the great privileges of my life is growing up with very close Irish English, Jewish, American friends who are brothers to me," he said.

"I have Irish friends who read Arabic literature at university. I was in this great debate about whether I am more British or Muslim and I just thought 'well, I'm a fiddle player!'

"I've played since I was six or seven years old but nobody ever questioned me playing Bach or Beethoven, and the Irish tradition itself deserves recognition.

"We are intimately connected on so many levels, theological as well as artistic. Some people preach that free thinking is unbelief, god taught the birds to sing, so let's celebrate that diversity.

"It's quite a shy experience for me, and usually if I'm getting interviewed by the BBC it's to speak about extremists and terrorists!



"This is a completely different experience for me. Until a few months ago the only singing I really did was in the shower. Recently when I've been recording I've actually had to take my shirt off so I could pretend I was in the shower!

"From boyhood I was taught cantillation, (ritually chant). This was repeated later on in my Imam training and, in some ways, when I sing that unaccompanied Gaelic verse it feels very much like reciting sacred verses in Irish.

"If you've got music in the blood, then being a minister doesn't change that.

"If you listen to folk traditions globally there's a commonality between them, and as I always say we're all Irish deep down.

"I don't know of any other nation that places its music tradition right at the heart of what it means to be Irish. Instead of a history of empires or an ethnic background it's the music and the poetry and the artistic endeavour that makes you Irish. And loving it and participating in it warmly welcomes you into the culture.

"One of the wonderful affinities between the two traditions is epic poetry that have been passed on from generation to generation. I have a sense of needing to respect all the traditions that have passed down these songs for me.

"Some of them are secular themes of unrequited love that I probably shouldn't really do as an Imam. Then there are themes about exile, about the Famine, about the English! There's a range of subject areas that are covered in this tradition."

UK watchdog raps Irish airlines

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three carriers facing legal action, including Contempt of Court, over alleged breaches of consumer law in how they deal with passengers hit by disrupted flights.

Last weekend the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) launched enforcement action against the airlines and will seek a court order unless they comply.

The CAA said that Aer Lingus "failed to give us satisfactory evidence that they proactively provide passengers with information about their rights, during disruption, in line with the requirements set out in regulation EC261."

"The action involving Aer Lingus regards airlines' obligations to proactively give passengers information about their rights, when disruption occurs.

"This is an important element of the regulations that protect passengers during disruption as without this information, passengers may well not be aware of the assistance they are entitled to including refreshments, accommodation if delayed overnight and in some instances, compensation," it said.

It also questioned Ryanair's procedures for passenger claims.

"The CAA also has concerns about the way Ryanair is assessing some passenger claims.

"Although Ryanair is not applying a two-year limit on claims, the CAA has issued an information notice under Part 8 of the Enterprise Act 2002 to review the airline's approach to assessing passenger claims for flights disrupted by technical faults."

In the regulator's review of 15 carriers, based on the highest passenger figures in the UK, only three airlines were found to have breached consumer law.

The airlines reviewed cover 80 per cent of the UK's aviation market.

Jet2 and Wizz Air also face legal action as they failed to satisfy the CAA that they consistently pay



Andrew Haines, Chief Executive of the CAA

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compensation for disruption by technical faults and that by imposing two-year time limits, have breached a ruling that passengers have six years to take a claim to court.

Aer Lingus have denied that they are in breach of consumer law and state that they fully co-operate with the

regulations put in place.

"Aer Lingus' procedures relating to the provision of information to customers affected by operational disruption are fully compliant with all the relevant regulations," they said.

"We have provided a number of documents to the CAA in recent months to substantiate this point and we continue to engage with the CAA to address its concerns."

But the CAA, who enforce operational safety standards and protect the consumer said the three airlines in question are continuing 'to let people down'.

"Airlines are well aware of the support they must provide when there is disruption and passengers have every right to be disappointed that a small number of airlines are not complying with the Court of Appeal rulings and continue to let people down in this way," said Andrew Haines, Chief Executive of the CAA.

"Since the law was clarified last year, we have been active to ensure airlines are applying consumer law appropriately and I warmly welcome the response of those airlines that have changed their policies as a result of this work.

"Our job is not done until all airlines can demonstrate they are providing care, assistance and compensation as required by law.

"While we have no power to secure redress for individual consumers, we are determined to stand up for passengers and are taking this action to safeguard their rights.

We are making sure all airlines consistently provide their passengers with the support and compensation they are legally entitled to."

The six month review of airline policies resulted in a number of airlines changing their guidelines.

They state that if Aer Lingus, Jet2 and WizzAir do not carry out the required changes they will face the prospect of a court order.

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The Bulgarian station was used to broadcast the plenary sessions of that country's National Assembly but these have been switched to FM and internet transmissions.

Conversely, Radio Algiers has recently boosted its transmissions with a powerful new transmitter. The programming is aimed primarily towards Algerian emigrants living and working in France and now drowns out RTÉ.

RTÉ was forced into a stay

of execution for its Long Wave service earlier this year after TDs and Senators were deluged by protests from Irish people in the UK who find the frequency more practical than using digital or satellite receivers.

RTÉ had previously announced that it would be ceasing its Longwave 252 service from the Clarkstown longwave transmitter on 27 October and migrating its Radio One service to digital platforms.

The Irish state broadcaster has been scaling

it down with a view to switching it off completely in 2017.

It says it cannot afford the £250,000 to £300,000 a year it says it costs to maintain LW and believes digital and satellite transmissions are better suited and future proof.

It used the frequency to broadcast its Cheltenham coverage earlier this month.

Head of RTÉ Radio 1 Tom McGuire said: "We've listened particularly to the concerns raised by and on behalf of the elderly Irish in

the UK. Cost-reduction remains a key priority for RTÉ and we remain convinced that, in the longer term, Long Wave has had its day. Nonetheless and despite the mid-term cost impact, RTÉ believes it is necessary to take a collaborative approach and slow this transition."

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is this year due to fund a professional study "to better understand the community in the UK who listen to the long wave service".