

Heritage horns link cultures

SMH 5/05/1993

By BERWYN LEWIS

NO-ONE knew what dords, or Bronze Age Irish horns, sounded like. The 3,000-year-old instruments had musicologists and archeologists baffled. Some thought they were just ornaments until a chance meeting with Rolf Harris blew life back into them. Their mysterious sounds, unlocked by didgeridoo circular breathing techniques, forged a strange "sound line", linking Ireland to Arnhem Land.

Dubliner Simon O'Dwyer has since perfected the art of dord playing with Reconciliation, his group of two Irish and two Australian musicians, but many mysteries remain.

The dords, which are thought to have been buried around 800 BC to conceal them from invading Celts, were unknown until about 200 years ago.

In 1857, the curator of the National Museum, Dublin, Sir Robert Ball, tried to play one.

"He produced a big, roaring sound but he overblew and had a stroke. No-one tried them until an Irish musician, Sean O'Reader, tried in the 1940s. He also failed," says O'Dwyer.

People tried to insert mouthpieces in the dords' wide, didgeridoo-style openings.

"They weren't designed to be played like that so they were left in museums until Professor Peter Holmes came along," he says.

An English musicologist and trumpet-player who was fascinated by the horns, Holmes was employed to undertake a study of their metallurgy. During this time, he met Rolf Harris, who asked if he could "have a blow".

For the first time in millennia, the dords droned. Unearthed in bogs, marshes and fields across Ireland the 104 "side" and "end blow" dords found to date, mostly in hoards of up to 26, have no relatives in the northern hemisphere other than the Scandinavian "lurs" (Bronze Age trumpets).

"They represent nearly half of all the pre-Renaissance musical instruments

in existence today," says O'Dwyer.

Holmes identified the dords as belonging to the "single cavity branch" of the wind instrument family.

"With single-cavity wind instruments, the mouthpiece is open, creating a vibration and a note in the whole length of the instrument. This family includes didgeridoos, conch shells, various African animal horn instruments and South American wind instruments as well as Irish horns," says O'Dwyer.

"They're essentially more of a rhythm instrument."

The dords' construction suggests the pre-Celtic people had a knowledge of physics.

"The craftspeople who made these instruments designed them to give a perfect sound at a particular frequency, indicating they knew about sound waves. It's a very exciting prospect," he says.

The horns' purpose is a mystery. O'Dwyer believes their low droning would render them inaudible on battlefields and their cost excludes them as animal-herding instruments. Their intricacy and decorative appearance, spikes and rings indicating their region of origin, suggest the horns were used for sacred or royal occasions.

Dords made their debut into the modern world after O'Dwyer contacted Holmes and arranged to have modern replicas made.

In 1988, after collecting his new instruments, taking them back to Ireland and playing them, O'Dwyer decided to test the horns on the didgeridoo players of Arnhem Land.

"The Aborigines were amazed. The instruments I have make a higher note. The Aborigines said, 'oh yeah, a bit like a didg but not really.'"

Returning to Ireland in 1989, O'Dwyer met a Kerry musician, Maria Cullen.

"We started playing together at Irish traditional sessions. The audience were delighted with the dords, but I got some odd reactions from other musicians. They were a bit resistant to a pre-Celtic instrument," says O'Dwyer.

The presence of the dords, worlds



Reconciliation . . . Simon O'Dwyer, Alan Dargin, Maria Cullen and Phillip Conyngham.

apart from fiddles, squeezeboxes and bodhran (drums), mandolins and guitars, typical Irish session music instruments, stirred bitter memories of a heritage lost and found, which has parallels with the Aborigines.

Playing typical Irish tunes, accompanying other musicians, O'Dwyer discovered how the horns' rhythmic drone "lifted the other session instruments".

In 1992, on another visit to Australia, O'Dwyer and Cullen met didgeri-

doo players Phillip Conyngham (the nephew of composer Barry Conyngham) and Aborigine Alan Dargin. The group Reconciliation was formed, and they began busking and touring Australia, Ireland and Europe.

Reconciliation is now touring Australia after the release of their first album, *Reconciliation - Two Stories In One*, recorded by Natural Symphonies and following O'Dwyer's first album, *Dord*.

At the end of May, O'Dwyer will

play with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland.

"It's the first piece written for the dord with a full orchestra. I'll be the bronze section," chuckles O'Dwyer.

"Dords are truly indigenous, the only instruments invented in Ireland for the Irish."

Details about Reconciliation are available from Natural Symphonies (046) 55 1800 or (toll free) 008 025 358.