

# The Ossian Cycle and Inspirations in Art

## Ossian cycle

The Macpherson Cycle first attracted attention with the relatively slim first volume *Fragments* (1760), followed by the epics *Fingal* (published in 1761, 1762), *Temora* (published in 1763, 1765, and 1773), and *Works of Ossian* (published in 1765)<sup>1</sup>. These epic poems in English, presented as translations of the Gaelic poetry of Ossian, the son of the mythical bard Fingal from the 3rd century<sup>2</sup>, sparked almost immediate reactions.

It fascinated the intellectual elite of Edinburgh<sup>3</sup>, but in other parts of the British Isles, they provoked more debate and criticism. The Irish considered the work a cultural theft (claiming the poems had been known to them for generations), London society (perhaps also due to concerns over the rise of Scottish national consciousness) regarded the translation as a scam, entirely questioning the historical context of the epic<sup>4</sup>.

These opinions somewhat overshadowed the essence of the work in literary and academic circles, especially its monumental influence on 19th-century European art. Although the work is still considered a mystification, there are also studies defending the historical sources of the poetry. In addition to the defense of the Scottish Highlands Society in 1805, it was Derrick Thomson (1921–2012) who traced the source material related to Ossian's poems<sup>5</sup>. Macpherson thus gathered both oral and written sources to create his version of the national epic, which led to a paradigm shift in European literature. More importantly, he achieved this effect precisely through the method for which he was most criticized: combining the gathered material into an epic form<sup>6</sup>.

Macpherson's works contributed to the rise of national awareness among Europe, intensified interest in folk poetry and traditions, and Ossian's poetry, through the reinterpretation of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> MACPHERSON, James: *Fragments of Ancient Poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland*. Edinburgh: G. Hamilton and J. Balfour, 1760; MACPHERSON, James: *Fingal, an ancient epic poem, in six books: together with several other poems, composed by Ossian the son of Fingal. Tr. from the Galic language*. London: T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, 1762.; MACPHERSON, James: *Temora, an ancient epic poem, in eight books: together with several other poems composed by Ossian, the son of Fingal. Tr. from the Galic language*. London: T. Beckett and P. A. De Hondt, 1763; MACPHERSON, James: *The works of Ossian: the son of Fingal translated from the Galic language*. 3rd ed. London: T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt at Tully's Head, 1765. 2 vols.

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes named as Fingal.

<sup>3</sup> KRISTMANSSON, Gauti: Ossian, the European National Epic (1760–1810). In: *Europäische Geschichte Online (EGO)*. Mainz: Leibniz-Institut für Europäische Geschichte (IEG), 2015-11-09. Accessed: <<https://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/models-and-stereotypes/anglophilia/gauti-kristmannsson-ossian-the-european-national-epic-1760-1810>>. Kristmannsson refers Adam Smith (1723 – 1790), David Hume (1711 – 1776), Hugh Blair (1718 – 1800) and Adam Ferguson (1723 – 1816), par. 2

<sup>4</sup> KRISTMANSSON, c. d., 2015, par. 3.

<sup>5</sup> THOMSON, Derick: *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's "Ossian"*. Accessed: <<https://archive.org/details/gaelicsourcesofm0000thom/page/n5/mode/2up>>

<sup>6</sup> KRISTMANSSON, c. d., 2015, par. 19.

More, it provided national groups or those striving for their own statehood a sense of cohesion and a kind of "defense". Drawing from historical precedents (Homer, Milton, or the King James Bible), Macpherson formed an idea that became beloved by ordinary people, turning away from the formality and insincerity of classicism, as well as by artists and politicians in the European sphere.

The Ossianic cycle presents primarily themes of heroism, sentimentality, mysticism, and naturalism. It emphasizes the virtues and nobility of characters, with frequent moments of unfulfilled feelings, separation, and sorrow (the Joy in Grief), and images of nature set in gloomy, foggy environments.

Macpherson creates emotion through a dramatic story with sudden plot twists that intersect misty, fantastical images and episodes. Furthermore, the epic is filled with a wide variety of characters and heroes. This created ambiguity (and even confusion) draws the reader into the plot, offering space to create their own imaginary worlds, making the text adaptable and easier to internalize. "*It is one of those rare texts that generates a life beyond its own pages*"<sup>7</sup>

The intensity of the artistic experience offered by Ossianic poetry is evident in the speed with which the texts spread across Europe through translations. *Fragments* appeared in French almost immediately (1760)<sup>8</sup>, and the first (anonymous) German translation is from 1762<sup>9</sup>. That same year, Ossian was discovered in the Netherlands<sup>10</sup>, followed by new translations in Germany<sup>11</sup> and Italy<sup>12</sup> in 1763, and in Sweden in 1765<sup>13</sup>. The most well-known German translation today is Goethe's *Songs of Selma*, which is found as part of his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.<sup>14</sup> The Austrian "bard" Michael Denis (1729–1800) is credited with the hexametric German translations<sup>15</sup>, which served as a model for Hungarian translations (1788/1789)<sup>16</sup>. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the texts were also available in Danish (1790), Polish (1793), Russian, Spanish (1800), and Czech (1817). Related to the region of Hungary is the German-language novel *Harald oder*

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<sup>7</sup> STAFFORD, Fiona: Introduction. In: *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*. Howard Gaskill (ed.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, s. XV.

<sup>8</sup> Translation: Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727–1781), later Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard (ca 1734–1817) and Denis Diderot (1713–1784).

<sup>9</sup> Zwei Fragmenten der alten Dichtkunst von den Hochländern in Schottland, aus der alten Gallischen oder Erischen Sprache übersetzt. In: *Bremisches Magazin zur Ausbreitung der Wissenschaften Künste und Tugend*. Bremen und Leipzig. Year 5, 1762, no. 2, s. 448–452. (Cit. in: TOMBO, Rudolf: *Ossian in Germany*. New York: Ams Press, 1966.)

<sup>10</sup> Translation: Egbert Buys (1725–1769).

<sup>11</sup> Translation: Rudolf Erich Raspe (1736–1794).

<sup>12</sup> Melchiorre Cesarotti (1730–1808).

<sup>13</sup> Translation: Johan Gothenius (1721–1809).

<sup>14</sup> GOETHE, Johann Wolfgang: *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. 1774, p. 192–206.

<sup>15</sup> DENIS, Michael: *Die Gedichte Ossians, eines alten celtischen Dichters*. 3 sam. Wien: Trattner, 1768/1769; MACPHERSON, James – DENIS, Michael: *Ossians und Sineds Lieder*. Wien: Chr. F. Wappler, 1784.

<sup>16</sup> HARTVIG, Gabriella: *János Batsányi's Early Translations of Ossianic Poems*. In: *The AnaChronisT*, year. 12, 2006, p. 79–100. ISSN 1219–2589

*der Kronenkrieg. Eine nordische Erzählung* (published in Košice in 1794), which has Ossianic themes.<sup>17</sup>

## Ossian in Art

The Ossianic theme can be found in virtually all forms of art. It influenced visual arts in the British Isles, Denmark, Germany, and Austria. Thanks to the generous "imperial support" of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), who was a fan of Ossianic stories, a significant number of visual works were created in France<sup>18</sup>. Natural scenes of gloomy environments (Charles Steuart: *Waterfall* (1765), Joseph Mallord William Turner: *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* (1831/1832)) alternate with depictions of the epic's main characters (Anne-Louis Girodet de Roucy-Trioson: *Malvina Mourns the Death of Her Fiancé Oscar* (c. 1800), Johann Peter Krafft: *Ossian and Malvina* (1810), Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres: *Ossian's Dream* (1813)), with a dominant image of the bard Ossian always shown with a harp in his hands.

Musicians responded to the Ossianic cycle from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Their inspiration logically peaked in the following century, as many Romantic composers found inspiration in it. The issue of Ossianism in music was explored by Manuela Jahrmärker<sup>19</sup> and Matthias Wessel<sup>20</sup>, and was comprehensively treated by Paul F. Moulton in his work *Of Bards and Harps: The Influence of Ossian on Musical Style*.<sup>21</sup> Their research reveals interesting statistical outputs, showing 300 compositions directly referencing Macpherson's texts, and over 40 pieces influenced by Ossianic aesthetics. It is clear that this number is not final and can be expected to grow with further research.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ossianic texts appear in songs by Joseph Haydn (1786) – *Sit by the Mossy Fount*<sup>22</sup>, and Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf (1795) – *Das Mädchen von Kola*<sup>23</sup>, and the theme significantly influenced the opera genre. The trend was complemented by French operas such as *Oithóna* (1768) by François Hippolyte Barthélemon (1741–1808), *Ossian, ou Les bardes* (1804) by Berlioz's teacher Jean-François le Sueur (1760–1837), *Uthal*<sup>24</sup> by Étienne Nicolas Méhul

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<sup>17</sup> TOMBO, Rudolf: *Ossian in Germany*. New York: Ams Press, 1966.

<sup>18</sup> Anne-Louis Girodet de Roucy-Trioson (1767 – 1824), François-Pascal-Simon Gérard (1770 – 1837), Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780 – 1867).

<sup>19</sup> JAHRMÄRKER, Manuela. *Ossian: eine Figur und eine Idee des europäischen Musiktheaters um 1800*. Cologne: Medienservice und Verlag Dr. Ulrich Tank, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> WESSEL, Matthias: Die Ossian-Dichtung in der musikalischen Komposition. In: *Publikationen der Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hannover*, zv. 6. Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1994, ISBN 3-89007-295-X.

<sup>21</sup> MOULTON, Paul F.: *Of Bards and Harps the Influence of Ossian on Musical Style*. [Diplomová práce.] Florida State University College of Music, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> HAYDN, Joseph: *Sit by the Mossy Fount*. 12 English Ballads, Hob.XXVIa: Anh.a 3 (1786).

<sup>23</sup> DITTERS VON DITTERSDORF, Carl: *Das Mädchen von Kola, ein Gesang Ossians* (1795).

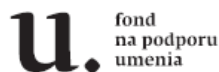
<sup>24</sup> Berlioz rated the opera positively and mentioned it in connection with the unique instrumentation, which is dominated by the viola group in the orchestra and the absence of the upper register of the violin..

(1763–1817), and *Comala* (1792) by British singer and composer Harriet Wainwright Stewart (c. 1766–1843)<sup>25</sup>.

Among notable Romantic composers, Robert Schumann (1810–1856) found direct inspiration in Ossian in at least sixteen works<sup>26</sup>, Franz Schubert (1797–1828) in ten, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809–1847) and Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) in four, Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–1869) and Jean-François Le Sueur in three, and Niels Wilhelm Gade (1817–1890) in two compositions. Hector Berlioz (1803–1869) and Georges Bizet (1838–1875) each contributed one work<sup>27</sup>. Moulton also notes Mertz's *Bardenklänge* cycle, listing fourteen pieces (notebooks I–VII)<sup>28</sup>. Referring to Moulton's study, it can be confirmed that no other guitar composer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century responded to Ossianic themes in this way.

Text is based on the article

KRAJČO, Martin: *Bardenklänge – ossianovský gitarový opus J. K. Mertza*. In: Slovenská hudba 2024/4



Článok bol realizovaný ako súčasť výskumného projektu *Joseph Kaspar Mertz – gitarista a skladateľ európskeho významu*. Realizáciu výskumu podporil z verejných zdrojov formou štipendia Fond na podporu umenia.

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<sup>25</sup> The London performance received favourable reactions from both Pleyel and Haydn. Interestingly, the work was performed in 1804 in Calcutta, India.

<sup>26</sup> DAVEIRO, John: Schumann's Ossianic Manner. In: *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, year 21, 1998, no. 3, p. 247 – 273.

<sup>27</sup> MOULTON Paul F. *Of Bards and Harps the Influence of Ossian on Musical Style*.

Florida State University College of Music. 2005, p. 84 – 101.

<sup>28</sup> MOULTON, c. d., 2005, p. 103, 109.