Irish Traditional Group/Performer | Sample answer

2018 Q5(B)(ii) Discuss the musical style of any well-known group that you have studied in the context of Irish traditional music.

Altan are a well known Irish traditional group, formed in 1987 by Donegal singer Mairead Ní Mhaonaigh and her husband, Frankie Kennedy, a whistle and flute player from Belfast. They did a small tour as a duo in America and after discovering there was a market for Irish music across the Atlantic, they both took a career break from their jobs as teachers to form a band. This career break ultimately became permanent when the band, *Altan,* was formed to include Mairead, Frankie, Ciarán Curran and Mark Kelly.

The current line-up of the group is:
Mairead Ní Mhaonaigh on fiddle and lead vocals
Ciarán Curran on bouzouki
Mark Kelly on guitar
Dáithí Sproule on guitar and vocals
Martin Tourish on accordion (replacing Dermot Byrne in 2013)
Clare Friel on fiddle (replacing Ciaran Tourish in 2023)

This lineup is sometimes altered when touring and guest musicians and songwriters are often featured on their recordings. The band does not have a permanent tin-whistle or flute player as Frankie Kennedy was never replaced after his death from cancer in 1994.

The name Altan comes from the Irish word for *stream* and is the name of a lake which sits in the shadow of Donegal's highest mountain, Errigal. It is also the name given to the groups debut album, released in 1987. The impact of the band's roots in Donegal cannot be understated and is made evident in the style of their music. Mairead plays the fiddle in a Donegal style (fast, single-bowing, sparse ornamentation), learned from her father and Frankie's repertoire of lesser-known flute tunes come from his travels in neighbouring Tyrone and Fermanagh.
They are known for their Irish language songs; a result of Mairead's upbringing in the Donegal Gaeltacht area of Gweedore. Their earlier albums also featured Paul O'Shaughnessy, a virtuoso on the fiddle and another key exponent of the Donegal style. The only collection of Donegal music currently in print is 222 tunes collected and recorded by Altan and produced together in the book *Altan*: *The Tunes*, released in 2017.

The influence of Irish folk bands like Planxty and DeDanann can be heard in their music, but they have put their own stamp on Irish music, particularly with Curran's unique bouzouki playing style (another Donegal native) and Kelly's experience playing rock, jazz and country guitar. Their blend of ethereal, touching songs of old-Ireland and hard-hitting traditional reels and jigs has earned them a loyal following all over the world and many awards and accolades.

Altan were the first Irish traditional group to be signed to a major label when they negotiated a deal with Virgin Records shortly before Frankie's death. It was under Virgin Records that they released the album *Runaway Sunday*, which features a song written by Mairéad's father "Gleanntáin Ghlas Ghaoth Dobhair" (Lovely Glens of Gweedore) which is a favourite at their live shows and has been recorded by many other musicians including Paul Brady.

As the group continues to record and tour, they have experimented with their style. They have created what has been described as a "Celtic Fusion" by collaborating with artists of other genres, for example, American country singer Dolly Parton in 2002, and are set to record with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra for their yet-to-be-released album, *Donegal*.