

(Re)locating Irish Traditional Music: Urbanising Rural Traditions

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I Introduction

Irish traditional music is an integral part of Irish culture and identity, enjoyed and performed by large numbers of people around the world in a variety of spaces and social contexts. This paper traces the changing geography of Irish traditional music in the twentieth century and examines the processes and power geometries involved. It examines concepts of regional styles in music and the connection between Irish traditional music and places in Ireland. It argues that the concept is, in part, an urban myth, generated by a new urban audience in the 1950s. The impact of social movements, economic change and various organisations is also assessed in an attempt to understand the geography of Irish traditional music at the start of the twenty-first century. This paper focuses on the growth of an urban context for a tradition popularly perceived as rural and, in particular, the development of Irish traditional music in Dublin. Throughout the paper, the 1950s is presented as a key period in the evolution of the geography of Irish traditional music, particularly in relation to the ‘sense of place’ place in Irish traditional music.

II Music and Irish Society

Music is an integral part of society. Indeed, “we know of no culture, no single civilisation of the past, no isolated tribal group in a wilderness or jungle, that does not have and has not had, as far back as our knowledge goes, a body of music” (Nettl, 1975: 71). In an Irish context, McCarthy acknowledges the role of Irish traditional music as “an important marker of cultural identity in communities all over the world” (2004: 59). Geographical interest in music may be linked to a longstanding interest in finding ‘a rational and fundamental basis for dividing the earth’s surface into its most significant parts’ (Russell and Kniffen, 1969: 6). Yet, the geographical study of music is a relatively new area. In the mid-1990s, a number of geographers questioned geography’s fascination with the visual at the expense of a sonic experience of the world (Smith, 1994, 1997; Kong, 1995, 1996). Carney attempted to create an understanding of American culture through various phenomena and processes, including the evolution of musical styles and genres that could be traced to cultural hearths (1995; 1998). Almost all geographical studies of music have engaged in a discourse around identity and the creation of boundaries, borders and regions. Thompson suggests that “[m]usic geography is emerging to provide valuable perspectives that question the socially constructed boundaries around the production and consumption of music” (2006: 67). Through the identification of various sounds and spaces, geographers attempt to understand the processes that impact on the generation of music at the margins and the development of new cultural cores (Leyshon et al, 1995; Kong, 1996; Morton, 1998, 2001; Jazeel, 2005).

The discourse of Irish traditional music has been imbued with strong geographical resonance. Irish traditional music has conventionally been considered an integral element of rural culture in Ireland (Government of Ireland, 1999). As such, it has been associated primarily with the west of Ireland, particularly through the discourse on regional styles (Ó Riada, 1982; Vallely, 2005). Through the course of the twentieth century, the popularity of Irish traditional music has waxed and waned in different places at different times.

Various agents hold an interest in the development, popularity and location of Irish traditional music. The power geometries that developed through the twentieth century combine to diversify and complicate the geographical narratives of Irish traditional music. Smyth writes “[t]raditional music’s role in contemporary Ireland is seminal, yet it remains a curiously undertheorized practice” (2004: 9). The following article builds on Smyth’s cultural study of Irish traditional music and explores the concept of locating a musical tradition through the identification of possible cultural hearths, the diffusion of culture and the identification of particular places with Irish traditional music.

A central focus of this article, that seeks to present a model for further investigation in Irish traditional music, is the process of change in Irish society that is reflected in the location of Irish traditional music. The distribution patterns of Irish traditional music have changed greatly over the past two centuries. So too has Irish society. Possibly the biggest change in Ireland through the twentieth century has been the growth of urbanisation, with Ferriter noting that the “viability of some farming communities was seriously in doubt by the 1990s” (2005: 666). Despite the historical links between Irish traditional music and rural Ireland, the 1990s was a period of intense growth and increased interest in Irish traditional music, linked to both an improved economy and the success of Riverdance (Ó Cinnéide, 1996, 2002; Sommers-Smith, 2001). Yet the persistent preoccupation with a regional discourse in Irish traditional music that gazes nostalgically in to a pristine rural past continues to distort understanding of the reality of cultural practice (Corcoran, 1997). Ireland has become a confident, urban-based, service-driven economy and Irish traditional music has evolved in that context.

The movement of Irish traditional music from west to east and out around the world, particularly from rural to urban settings, is part of the development of folk music. As Bohlman argues:

[t]he geographic basis of folk music has not disappeared, but it has effectively migrated from rural to urban models, from simple to complex settings. Here, new boundaries arise; the influences on musical genres are greater, but no urban musical grayout is in sight (1988:67)

The development of an urban-based Irish traditional music community may be linked to a historical process of development. Migration in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to America led to the development of new communities of Irish traditional musicians in American cities, principally New York, Boston and Chicago. These urban centres play a crucial role in the development of Irish traditional music (O’Connor, 2001). It was in New York that the recording industry of the 1920s focused on ‘ethnic musics’. Musicians including Michael Coleman, James Morrison

and John McKenna became stars of this new industry and they were among the most influential Irish traditional musicians of the twentieth century (Ó Riada, 1982; O'Connor, 2001). It was in Chicago that Francis O'Neill rose through the ranks of a city police force whose membership included a large number of Irish traditional musicians. O'Neill collected a huge number of melodies and, with the help of James O'Neill, published some of the most influential collections of Irish traditional music to this day (Carolan, 1997; O'Connor, 2001; MacAoidh, 2006). Hall has documented the development of Irish traditional music in London through the twentieth century, noting the influence of the increase of Irish immigrants after World War II (1995). It was in London and other English cities that group-playing in public houses or the concept of the session was developed (Hall, 1995; Ó hAllmhuráin, 1998). It was at this time also, the 1950s and 1960s, that Dublin became the site of intense development in Irish traditional music.

Ferriter notes that, despite the demise of rural Ireland and the threat to its 'traditional way of life' throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century, the links between Irish people and local identities were strong and were expressed most overtly through the GAA (2005). Similarly, in relation to Irish traditional music, Corcoran notes:

Concepts of place and region have long had a powerful role in the history of Irish thought. These concepts have been largely ideological constructs with little correlation with cultural distribution patterns, and have been widely accepted in popular attitudes relating to music, song and dance (1997: 25)

The pride in place expressed by Irish people and their links with rural life in the west of Ireland was strongly challenged in the 1940s and 1950s. A number of people recollect the sight of fiddle players hiding their instruments beneath a coat when walking in public. Writing about this period in Irish history in relation to Irish traditional music, Ó hAllmhuráin notes:

The traditional musician remained as susceptible to the ebb and flow of the Irish economy as any of his contemporaries. Only inheriting males could enjoy any modicum of certainty in rural Ireland. Non-inheriting females, as well as the working classes in small towns and cities, continued to emigrate throughout the 1940s...While England claimed the lion's share of Irish emigrants, Dublin too attracted its quota of migrant workers, among them musicians who deserted Ireland during the 'Hungry Forties'. Pipers and fiddlers became so numerous in Dublin during the Emergency that the Dublin Pipers Club, which had been defunct since 1926, was successfully revived in 1940...Its home in Thomas Street became a meeting place for traditional musicians from all over Ireland (1998: 136, 137)

Spaces for socialising and music making, such as that on Thomas Street, were mirrored in other destinations in England and America. Gross describes the importance of musical culture in creating and maintaining social networks and kinship links in migration destinations (1992). Similarly, Cohen writes: "Music is one means through which such relations are established, maintained and transformed" (1995: 438). Irish traditional music continues to be a valuable tool for expression, communication and admission to groups, particularly in centres of migration.

Dublin grew in population and stature at the expense of rural Ireland. The close ties that many recent immigrants maintained with rural Ireland influenced the growing cultural importance of a Dublin-based society (Johnson, 1994). Bradley outlines the 1950s as a period of transition in the Irish economy and economic policy and acknowledges that “[t]he modern economic age dawned for Ireland in the late 1950s” (2004: 114). The economy, like the Irish music revival, mirrored the DeValerian ideologies of the time. Uncertainty and ultimate failure characterised Ireland's economic policy-making as it struggled to negotiate its own identity. There was a conflict between the identities, economies and cultures of rural and urban Ireland. In a paper outlining changing audiences for Irish traditional music, Curran highlights the fact that the power and influence of urban areas in the 1950s far outweighed that of rural Ireland (1996).

Curran highlights “the official culture of Ireland was still that of ‘rural Ireland’, a state of affairs which the traditional music revivalists were determined to maintain” (1996: 58). Dublin, a city of rapid growth and immigration, was the place in which much of this cultural revival was stirred. Writing on the history of The Dublin Pipers' Club, Mick O'Connor writes:

Irish music, and particularly piping, has always survived and flourished well in inner-city Dublin...It is through the Pipers' Club that the development of Irish music in Dublin can best be traced too over the entire twentieth century (1999: 110, 111)

O'Connor acknowledges the links between the Pipers' Club and various groups including the Gaelic League and the Irish Volunteers and the profound effect of politics on musical activities at the start of the twentieth century. O'Connor places the date of revival of the Pipers Club as 1936 and notes that “Cumann na Píobairí was key to the setting up of ‘Cumann Ceoltóirí na hÉireann’ in 1951, then CCÉ” (1999: 111).

Amongst the most significant developments in Irish traditional music in the 1950s and 1960s were Seán Ó Riada's residence and activities in Dublin between 1953 and 1963, increased popularity in Irish traditional music programmes on radio and the foundation of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 1951. Also important, especially in consideration of the subsequent development of the industry, is the increased interest of politicians and economists in the potential of tourism and, in particular at this time, An Tóstal (Furlong, 2004). Ultimately these developments may be seen to relocate Irish traditional music in the places of romantic Ireland if, ultimately, in realigned cultural contexts of the twenty-first century. The concept of regional styles is a recurring theme in the discourse of Irish traditional music in the latter half of the twentieth century.

III The Regional Debate

Regional music styles in Irish traditional music are regularly dismissed as a thing of the past, a feature of isolated musical communities that existed before recorded music and radio broadcasts (Feldman, 1979; Corcoran, 1997; Vallely, 1997, 1999). Keegan has outlined the difficulties in the “empirical examination” of regional styles and the lack of clear definition (1997, 2006). Vallely similarly points to difficulties in defining the sounds of a region, linking the obsession with regional style with

nostalgia (1997b). In a somewhat simplified form, Ó Súilleabháin attempts to outline the concept, stating: '[w]here others share the same style in a particular locality, we are dealing with a recognisable regional style' (1990). Similarly, regional style is defined by Vallely as "[t]he varying ways in which music is played from region to region" (1999: 308). Yet it is very difficult if not impossible to outline or define these regions. For example, Kelly argues that Sliabh Luachra is not a place but "a state of mind" (1999:11). Similarly, in a study of Appalachian music, Thompson writes:

Like the rest of space, regions are now conceived as multiple, shifting, and contingent, with porous boundaries if they are "bounded" at all. The processual, historically contingent nature of a region and its entanglement with various networks of social relations makes it hard to characterize or describe, as it is constantly changing and evolving, with different parts changing at different rates and continually forming new webs of connection (2006: 67)

Concepts of regions in Irish traditional music are continuously challenged and their scale questioned (MacAoidh, 1994; Vallely, 1997; 1999). Both MacAoidh, in an analysis of Irish traditional music in Donegal, and Vallely, in an examination of concertina playing in Clare, note the sub-regional variations in musical styles. In contrast, Con Houlihan suggests that Sliabh Luachra has, in recent years, threatened to consume all of Munster (1989, 1995, 2002). Places are an accumulation of folklore and stories (Glassie, 1982; Ryden, 1993, 1999; Massey, 2005). The discourse of regional styles in Irish traditional music is such a collection of stories. Keegan asserts: "[s]peech about regional style is important in that it creates a sense of place, identity and tradition amongst many musicians in the face of the apparent destruction of these sensory footholds" (1997: 121). Thus, the discourse on regional styles, serves a purpose of locating Irish traditional music. Yet this discourse continues to be concerned with rural Ireland, largely ignoring the realities of urbanisation.

The development of scholarly research on Irish traditional music has failed to create a sense of definitiveness about regions or regional style in Ireland. Keegan asserts that the first account of the diversity of regional styles was by Ó Riada in *Our Musical Heritage* and suggests that his theories concerning regional styles were "informed by his initial experiences of working and socializing with traditional musicians in Dublin, all of whom were trying to make sense of their different sounds and of course rooting their organisation and rationalization of this in the context of what they hold dearest and idealise, the home place and the people of that place" (2006: 12). Despite the dismissal of regional styles in contemporary geographical studies (Morton, 1998, 2001), the popularity of the concept demands attention in the study of attitudes and contexts for Irish traditional music, particularly in relation to Ireland in the mid-twentieth century. The concept of regional styles may be examined as a critical element in the discourse of a rapidly urbanising tradition that seeks to maintain links with a rural past. Regional styles owe more to an urban tradition that becomes prominent in the 1950s than the strength of local regional narratives.

It has been noted that the development of recording and broadcasting both undermined and preserved regional styles (Vallely, 1999; Cranitch, 2000). In his

history of Irish traditional music, Ó hAllmhuráin notes the role played by Séamus Ennis in collecting and broadcasting Irish traditional music: “Among Ennis’s chief sources were the Dohertys and O’Beirnes from Donegal, the Russells and Willie Clancy from Clare and the celebrated Pádraig O’Keefe from Sliabh Luachra” (1998: 139, 140). The musicians recorded by Ennis were to become reference points for the musical distinctiveness of their regions and reinforced the perception of these ‘regions’ as primary locations of ‘authentic’ Irish traditional music. Ennis joined the BBC in 1951 and his recordings were broadcast on the radio programme ‘As I Roved Out’ (Ó hAllmhuráin, 1998). Ó hAllmhuráin also notes:

[w]hile certain parts of Ireland were too remote to pick up the BBC’s ‘As I Roved Out’, Ciarán MacMathúna’s ‘Ceolta Tíre’ and ‘Job of Journeywork’ were winning huge audiences all over Ireland by the mid-1950s...With the assistance of a mobile recording unit, he managed to tape traditional musicians in their own localities. His recording sessions, which were conducted in country kitchens, public houses and small halls, reflected the natural milieu of the musician in a manner which was far more authentic than studio or concert hall recordings” (1998; 140, 141)

There are two obvious outcomes of MacMathúna’s work. It created and satisfied a new Dublin audience for Irish traditional music and firmly located Irish traditional music in rural Ireland. The legacy of this process is highlighted by König who observes the desire of young Dublin musicians to go to Clare as a result, in part, of the popularising of Clare music on the radio (1980). In some ways, it was a return to romantic ideologies of an earlier era of cultural nationalism that is now expressed through a cultural revival, of which Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann is a crucial cog. Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) is the “largest body involved in the promotion of Irish traditional music” (Vallely, 1999: 77). It operates through a network of branches that are located throughout the country with committees and branch, county, provincial and national level. The headquarters of the organisation, opened in 1974, remain in An Cultúrlann at Belgrave Square, Monkstown, Co. Dublin but regional centres are now located around the country. As can be read from the pages of Treoir, the journal of the organisation, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann present an idealist ideology that concerns all aspects of Irish culture and the presentation of an Irish national identity. The organisation presents a particular narrative of Irish traditional music, with carefully chosen characters that were located firmly in rural Ireland. Despite the importance of Dublin in the narratives of the organisation, Comhaltas “continued the approach of cultural nationalism in resisting cosmopolitanism and urbanisation” (Curran, 1996: 58). The organisation continued to identify Irish traditional music with rural Ireland. Through the growth of fleadhanna, an ever-growing audience for Irish traditional music, dominated in the early years by a large Dublin contingent, experienced Irish traditional music in a new context (Curran, 1996). Despite an ideological attempt to preserve Irish traditional music as an identifiably rural culture, Comhaltas performed an important role in the urbanisation of Irish traditional music.

Education and the transmission of tradition are at the core of the ideology of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. The organisation is considered successful at presenting a range of educational and assessment services across the country that has aided improved playing standards and “contributed to a professionalism

throughout traditional music which is its major visible evidence today" (Valley, 1999: 79). In many ways, the success of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and the vibrancy of the Irish traditional music community are in stark contrast to the poor levels of infrastructure for music education in twentieth century Ireland. McCarthy writes:

A number of historical factors contributed to the fact that Ireland does not have a strong infrastructure at the national level for organising, teaching, and disseminating music. These factors include cultural fragmentation caused by colonialism; lack of official support for the arts in independent Ireland; a weak economy that could not support the kind of infrastructure necessary for the artistic development of a nation; and an over-reliance on Ireland's past reputation as a musical nation as a means of musical development and cultural renewal (2004: 53)

Acknowledging the lead position of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 1951, McCarthy lists a number of developments that began in the late 1960s with significant developments in higher education not occurring, on a large-scale basis, until the 1990s. Despite these developments, the provision of music education and performance, in all genres, is not evenly spread around the country. The existence of music in a community is an integral part of the formation of identity and implicitly suggests boundaries (McCarthy, 1998, 2004). As McCarthy notes the possibility for the formal education system to change the geography of music in Ireland, stating:

In local community settings, children internalise not only the natural sounds and aural images of the locality but also the living musical traditions of the area. However, not all children experience the wealth of local musical traditions and this is where the school can serve to bridge the gap between music in the community and music in the child's education (2004: 57)

Through an education system, local traditions are constructed that communicate local and regional identity. The provision of music education links with wider ideologies in Irish society for the holistic development of society and the desire to challenge processes of globalisation through reinforcing local identity.

Seán Ó Riada is one of the most influential figures in Irish traditional music. Ó hAllmhuráin writes: "[a]lthough the fleadh cheoil movement and the seminal broadcasts of Ciarán MacMathúna raised the morale of musicians in the 1950s, few could have anticipated the phenomenal influence of Seán Ó Riada, who transformed the status of Irish traditional music in the 1960s" (1998: 147). Various commentators on the life and legacy of Ó Riada note how he led a spatial revolution in Irish traditional music, opening up "the 'high art' concert halls of the nation" and declaring the presence of a once rural art form in urban Dublin (Ó hAllmhuráin, 1998: 149; see also Ó Canainn, 2003). Ó Riada developed his interest in Irish traditional music through the radio programme Our Musical Heritage, broadcast in 1962 (Ó Riada, 2006). Through the programme Ó Riada provided a framework for the discussion of Irish traditional music and, like Séamus Ennis and Ciarán MacMathúna, introduced audiences to a diverse range of musicians from around Ireland.

The Ó Riada home in Dublin became a laboratory for experimentation and discovery in Irish traditional music (Ó Riada, 2006). Through his work with Ceoltóirí Chualann

and for Our Musical Heritage, Ó Riada explored some of the history and diversity of Irish traditional music. However, Ó Riada was on a quest for An Saol Gaelach, an Irish way of life (Ó Canainn, 2003). A significant element of this quest was the Irish language. During the late 1950s, Ó Riada took a trip to the west Kerry Gaeltacht. Ó Canainn notes:

It is clear that Seán was impressed by what he found in Kerry in 1959. For the first time in his life he experienced the Irish language and and Irish way of life, in their natural surroundings" (2003: 34, 35)

Ó Riada left Dublin in 1963 upon attaining a post at University College Cork. He settled with his family in Cúil Aodha, a Gaeltacht region in Cork. During his time in Cúil Aodha, Ó Canainn notes that Seán moved "closer and closer to native traditions" (2003: 145). Ó Riada's decision suggests that, contrary to the geographical developments within Irish traditional music, it remained, in the minds of many, a rural tradition that could only be experienced in a rural social context. The figure of Seán Ó Riada became part of local identity and folklore in Cúil Aodha. His abandonment of Dublin reflected his abandonment of a process of which he was an integral part: the urbanisation of Irish traditional music. In many ways he began a new process, the return of Irish traditional music to rural Ireland. The legacy of the processes facilitated by new musical spaces and contexts in Dublin was the development of a new confident musical tradition in Ireland that could be both urban and rural.

IV Conclusion

This paper has considered the social and cultural geographies of the relocation of Irish traditional music from the rural west to urban Dublin. It acknowledges the geographical rhetoric of Irish traditional music discourse, particularly in relation to the concept of regional styles. The paper outlines the critical link between Irish traditional music and the socio-economic development of the state. The growth of Dublin and decline of rural Ireland pervades the narratives of Irish traditional music. The 1950s was a period of transition, musically, geographically and economically in Ireland. The processes of change in Irish traditional music were both challenged and supported by a growing urban community of musicians who discovered and rewrote the narratives of the rural tradition. Amongst the factors in the evolution of Irish traditional music and its perceived geography were Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, radio broadcasting and Seán Ó Riada. The legacy of the changes in Irish traditional music from the 1950s informs an understanding of the geography of Irish traditional music in the twenty-first century.

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