

The Importance of Story in Irish Music

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The purpose of this essay is to draw attention to verbal art performance that is practised in Irish traditional music. In particular, I would like to highlight a type of storytelling called a 'Yarn', oft heard in public houses many years ago, but seldom practiced in Ireland today. This type of storytelling exists within the 'session', where groups of Irish musicians gather to perform mainly dance tunes - mostly consisting of Jigs and Reels (Irish dance music played in 6/8 and 4/4 time respectively), and storytelling or songs are sometimes performed in between sets of these tunes.

I shall examine the impact that yarn storytelling has upon the Irish Traditional Music session, drawing from some recordings of yarns that I have made of musician, singer and storyteller Des Mulkerre from Crusheen, County Clare. The purpose of including the yarns stems from the fact that their complexity, structure, and importance cannot be explained through the use of the written word alone.

*It is worth noting that the stories recorded that accompany this account have been taken out of their original context, at a public house. Nonetheless the two settings that I have chosen to record these stories reveal contrasting and comparable details on the performer in question. The first two yarns, namely Yarn1 and Yarn2, were recorded during a one-on-one interview with Des on the 22nd of December 2006. The third yarn, namely 'BanjoSeminar', was recorded during a Banjo Seminar at the University of Limerick on the 14th November 2006 in which Des was asked to attend. This seminar focused on the introduction of the Banjo (Des is an accomplished Banjo player) into Irish music. The yarn recorded in this seminar is the same story as 'Yarn1', so we can gather some insight into how Des performs the same yarn in a different context. I also recorded a song performed by Des in the same interview conducted with Yarn1 and Yarn2, the inclusion of this song will be a subject of discussion in relation to the yarns later on in my account.

I will also examine the view of the performer, of what these stories mean to him, and provide a significance of what the stories hold in the future for these rare stories within the changes we face in Irish music sessions today.

My discussion is divided into the following categories: Introduction, Structure, Complexity, Colloquialism, The truth or lies in a yarn, Myth as the trigger, Values of the people, Identity within the Irish traditional music session, Life Story, Threats to the existence of the yarn, Implications on Irish traditional music sessions, Conclusion.

Introduction

I had once heard Yarns and stories being told by the local people in my father's public house in County Wicklow. I had noticed from the moment I heard them the joy and laughter that followed by audiences of maybe just four or five people drinking and sharing these stories and chatting through the night.

It was through chatting with a good friend, Vince Keehan, in San Francisco that my attention was drawn to the characters, the stories, music and song in the area of east Galway. After visiting an Irish traditional music festival therein, I noticed the stories that were being told as the same yarns I had heard at home in Wicklow, and moreover, the enormous sense of community created in the Irish traditional music session through the addition of verbal art performance. One man, a close friend of Des's, from the coastal village of Letterfrack in the west of Connemara, who had been visiting this festival for a number of years, told me that himself and Des were "The last of the last", and that I should "Listen to the stories and song that myself and Des have to give."

Des has come from a background of a family of musicians. In “Interview1”, he mentions his siblings and the instruments that they play. He also refers to his father’s playing and formation of the Aughrim Slopes Trio band, and the singing of his mother. This depth of music knowledge and history of music making makes Des a well respected figure in music circles. His physical presence of well over 6ft and strong voice enable his authoritative image among others at a session of Irish traditional music, but it is not just a strong presence and a good yarn that provide for a good performance and the attention of the public.

Structure

The structure of the Yarn, from beginning to end, draws on many different aspects of culture within the local community involved in the session.

For example, in Yarn1, historical and geographical facts are given by the performer as an introduction to the story being told. The geographical location of the people involved and also that of the performer is stated. Yarn1 for example, even tells us where the performer had once lived.

The values, thoughts, and characters of the ordinary people involved are described, drawing on their everyday experiences and their daily working lives. We get a glimpse of the life of these ordinary people; the performer uses some dialogue and the third person to illustrate their characters.

Towards the end of a yarn, there is a punch line, which is usually absurd or metaphorical and joking in nature. Most often, this is the structure that the story takes.

Complexity of the performance

The art of storytelling requires many qualities for the performance to be successful. Des mentions himself of the need for ‘colour’, hinting that a good performance requires a well conceived yarn, he states in yarn2, “But when there’s a yarn goin’ on, especially if there’s a bit of colour to it they’ll listen then you see”.

To understand the complexity of the factors of storytelling that Des uses in his verbal art performance, we must not analyse the text of the story alone, but also a wide range of constraints involved and the nature of the performance.

Bauman outlined a “Range of possible interpretive frames within which communication may be couched”. Some of these “frames” (concepts that constitute a verbal art performance) that are cogs in the engine of storytelling are evident when Des is telling of a yarn. For example,

Imitation and Quotation- The performance of these yarns involves dialogue between the subjects involved in the story of which the performer imitates the subjects and also quotes what they say. We hear the quotations of these subjects at the end of the yarns, right up to the punch line. For instance, in Yarn2, the quotations are numerous as the yarn draws to a close, between both characters, the dialogue flows: “That’s the greatest news, he said, I ever heard. Are you sure? I am, she says. How do you know?, he said. I got a letter, she said, from my mother, she’s comin next week.”. This adds a sense of drama the performance, and gives the listener a picture of what these characters are like and how they converse.

Joking - With all yarns, at the end of the story there is an absurd punch line, in both Yarn1 and Yarn2 we can hear them in the last sentence. The joking aspect of yarns comes to a climax in the last sentence, and reflects back on the information that was given in the story.

Repetition - The use of repetition is a tool used in the performance by the storyteller on a number of occasions, used in many different ways. For example, in yarn2, the passage that leads up to the punch line repeats and makes the punch line itself stand out: "I'm alright, and the land is alright she said, and the cattle is alright, and the peace and quiet is great here, she said, and I'm also feelin a new man...".

In all three of the recorded yarns, Des uses the word 'Anyway' on a number of occasions which holds the attention of the audience present, but also presents the story in a way that portrays that he is not veering away from the point of the story. In 'BanjoSeminar', he uses the word to move on from one section of the story to another, "She was an awful bad cook and he was fed up to Christ, this awful, this awful cold morning... anyway".

The performer's ability to adapt to the audience present is another tool that adds complexity to the performance and the live aspect. In BanjoSeminar, Des is speaking to an audience about certain aspects of a woman's life where he feels he should be courteous, and so before mentioning this aspect, he states, "with all respect to the lovely ladies present". The complexity of performance here shows that Des considered his particular audience before he talks, in yarn1, he doesn't add this sentence to the yarn when the male interviewer is the only audience that is present. Also the fact that he doesn't reel off the story, adding what he calls "colour" to them, shows his ability to add to a story on different occasions in different contexts.

Colloquialism

Many uses of colloquialism can be found in Des's performance. The audiences' attention is attained by frames, mentioned by Bauman, the performer speaks in their own accent, using colloquial language, being one of the people, part of the audience. The stories that Des tells are about the ordinary people and many of them are attributed to people that had lived in the locality. For example, in "Yarn1", one can hear a description of where the subjects of the story come from.

The use of colloquial language is evident throughout, the language of the rural farming community is evident in the line "this awful cold morning after Christmas he was after feedin' a few auld cattle, and she was getting the drop of tea and she was putting torque in him". Colloquial language here gives us the viewpoint of the ordinary people, the focus is on their daily lives and this is what the audience has to relate to in order for the storytelling to gain full attention.

The Truth or Lies in a Yarn

Yarns told about the ordinary people are sometimes true. In Yarn1, Des introduces the story as something "Was supposed to have happened", and also states where it had actually happened. However, the nature of a story, to make it sound interesting, is to exaggerate, make it absurd, mischievous, or bawdy. This adds to the interest of the performance, but also casts doubts over the truth of the story. As he states himself to "Believe it or not", sets up the story and engages the listener to think about what the performer is talking about. The myth aspect of the story is introduced at the start of the story, and strikes this connection between performer and the audience.

Myth as the Trigger

The use of myth in Irish folklore can be traced back through the centuries. Through historical evidence we have heard stories, for example the account of the Children of Lir, which use the power of myth in their stories, i.e. the transformation of children into Swans, a process that today could be scientifically proven impossible to have happened. The reason why these stories have existed is not that they happened, but it is in their sense of mystery. Within the

performance of a yarn we find a parallel intrigue, albeit less mysterious. This intrigue is set up where the listener is opened up by a performance to a world which is fictitious but based on real subjects. It is in basing the story on real subjects and exaggerating the story to a point which makes the story even more interesting and listenable by audiences.

Values of the people

We are given a glimpse of the values of the people involved in these stories. In Yarn1, Des says that, "All farmers likes to have an heir to the throne", telling us one of the values of the farmers in rural communities are to have a family. He delves into the goal in life of the characters involved, mentioning of the husband in question that, "He thought he'd have a family every day", showing what the subject had held important to him. The complex that a farmer had to deal with is told in yarn2, Des mentions that, "the good lady in question was the boss, she was wearing the pants as they say, anyway, she was bossin' him and bossin' him". Life in rural Ireland can be found in these performances, a variety of the descriptions above give us a hint of the identities of these peoples.

Identity within the Irish traditional music session

Small states of the performance as a performer reaffirming our identity:

"...How we relate is who we are. If that is so, then those taking part in this or any other musical event are, at some level of awareness, saying, to themselves, to one another and to anyone who may be taking notice, This is who we are."

Much of the storytelling of yarns within sessions describe the identity of the people who perform them. As I discussed above, the use of colloquial language, the history and geographical introductions to the stories, the dialogue between the people and the values of the rural community that are being described are all suggestive of who the performer is and of the people that he might know. Des is himself a farmer, claims to have known the people that were the subjects in one of his stories and regularly converses in the same way as his performance language. At the end of yarn2, Des tells me that, "sure I was telling them yarn after yarn after so many tunes I'd tell the a yarn like and, you know people enjoyed it great like, and, well the people likes to laugh too you see you cant, cant beat a laugh like". The repetition used throughout the yarns can be heard in Des's day to day speech.

The sense of identity is important to his generation of performers of music, story and song, and the performance of a session that includes these performances serves to illustrate the sense of community, the sense of unity between the people that take part. The stories are connected to the audience he is performing in front of, the words used by the performer are used outside the performance context, and songs are also interlinked in this way. For example, sense of identity is evident in the song recorded that accompanies this account. The subjects of the story are cows, but the lyrics of the song have a very strong and local focus on the places in the locality and the politics that exist between members of the community.

If these stories and songs are part of our identity, and are the voice of our culture, then the presence of the story that constitutes the yarn and song is extremely important in the expression of who we are.

In Paul Wilkins' account of Des Mulkere and the Metaphor of Story, he cites that "The continual storying of life interpenetrates with the act of transferring metaphor from story to life." Storytelling and song, be it absurd, mischievous, or bawdy, contains a narrative that is meaningful, in a small extent in the mention of a word used by the local people. On the other hand it may be some long winded descriptions of their values. Whichever route is chosen, story has a marked significance, otherwise there would be no meaning or existence for these acts of life story.

Threats to the existence of the yarn

As Des mentioned himself, “There are not many at the yarns only myself“. The survival of the yarn is questioned when one thinks about the community in which the stories are told to in today’s world of change. Rural Ireland now has a different perspective; the cultural landscape is changing dramatically as a result of the economic boom of recent times. The values of the ordinary people outlined in Des’ stories are not as widely shared by the people. As Ireland moves from a predominantly farming industry into the technological age, the worth of these stories to the rural people are in jeopardy. When forgotten and left behind, the spectrum of complexity, performance and importance of these stories may be lost as this is a literature passed down only by word of mouth.

Implications on Irish traditional music sessions

Christopher Small states of ritual that; Symphony concerts, Executive lunches... ideas held in common about how people ought to relate to one another, of course, define a community, so rituals are used both as an act of affirmation of community, as an act of exploration, and as an act of celebration.

The Irish traditional music session coupled with song and storytelling is a foundation for all three of these acts. Affirmation of a community comes about through the use of story in the session, the telling of tales, and the singing of song about the culture in which the performer and audience live. The presence of characters in the audience is an act of exploration, as we hush the noisemakers to listen to a song, or when the performer mentions a member of the audience while telling a story, breaking down barriers and feeding the intimacy. Our celebration of our identity is in part gestured in the playing of the music that our forefathers taught us.

However, without the use of story, the vocal element in a session being a strong affirmation of community, to break down the barrier between performer and audience, the ritual would lack a vital ingredient.

As stated before this form of verbal art performance shows how the audience may be drawn to a session, and that the stories reflect the lives of the ordinary people. In creating an atmosphere of joy and also a sense of community, this secular ritual influences the session in many ways.

First of all, the crowd is commanded and controlled by the story teller to listen. They also take part in an experience that describes the lives of the ordinary people and leads them to laugh and listen in more to the session.

In Musicking, Small points out that the Oxford dictionary defines myth as, “Purely fictitious narrative, embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena” or “fictitious or imaginary person or event”. He explains how the myth is held in low regard by this “reputable” definition. “Modern science has enabled modern westerners, at least, to outgrow such purely fictitious narratives and to see the universe and it’s origins as they really are.

But what the myth has had power to do has take the person away from the world in which we live in, to take part in a fantasy world, if only for a short while.

Small goes on to say “A myth, therefore, no matter how ancient it’s origins or its subject matter, is always concerned with contemporary relationships, here and now. Whether or not it is historically true is beside the point.”

To play Irish traditional music in a session without including the audience is detrimental to the sense of community, unity and the cohesive nature of all present in the performance. One only has to experience the modern contexts of performances of traditional Irish music where public houses are packed with audiences that listen quietly to a performance of tunes by the musicians who play on a stage that has sound amplification, that makes sure it is only the sound of the performer that prevails. The performer may sometimes merely give the background of the music performed. Sometimes short, snappy jokes are uttered, to break down the imaginary barrier that exists between the performer and the audience. As these performances become more formal, the audience is ever increasingly becoming more and more distanced from the performer. The stronger sense of identity so prevalent in sessions of music with the presence of story and song is therefore lost and we are left walking away from the performance with a much different experience.

Conclusion

It has been my understanding for many years that these yarn stories are generally not taken seriously by audiences, due to their joking nature, and moreover that it is rare to find a commercial publication of collections of them. However one only has to examine the underlying concepts, structure, performance and the implications upon traditional Irish music sessions of these stories to realise that they are an invaluable contribution to the culture and unity of the people involved.

The context in which the performance of the yarn takes place is of very high importance. This ritual of solidarity that results from the performance of a yarn becomes void because we don't share feeling of nostalgia with the performer, as a new audience comes into existence in the changing world we live in. As mentioned earlier, the lives of the rural farming community of Ireland are documented, and it is when the context of the performance of these yarns no longer fits the lives of the audience that they become less interesting to a different type of audience. Perhaps the yarn is part of this community alone, and should be left with the people who conceived and performed them within this community. Or, maybe the performances of Irish music now enter a new age of the ever becoming silent performer, their background and life unknown to their audience. This process of change may lead us in the direction of formal gatherings that accept the music as it is played without knowledge of the context from which the music of the land was born.

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