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Traditional Irish Music in the Twenty-first Century: Networks, Technology, and the Negotiation of Authenticity

Scott Spencer

Performance paradigm

A traditional Irish musician prepares for months for the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann – an annual music competition sponsored by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (the Irish Musicians' Club). The musicians who have made it to this final All-Ireland championship round have been given excellent marks by highly respected traditional musicians at competitions at the county and provincial levels. On the day of the *fleadh*, competitors perform their pieces for an adjudicator who has been carefully picked by Comhaltas for his or her traditionality and high regard within the musical community. Adjudicators in each competition use a strict set of criteria, also developed by Comhaltas. Top honors go to the musician who, according to the panel of adjudicators and set of category-specific criteria, brings to the stage the most perfect performance. One musician in each category is honored with the coveted All-Ireland prize.

The festival atmosphere surrounding these competitions brings together a great many participants and observers, including family, fans of the tradition, and traditional musicians representing a variety of experience levels. Throughout the festival, music is played informally at all hours in impromptu gatherings called sessions (*seisiún* in Irish), which break out at public and private areas in the surrounding town. Immediately after the day's competitions, many involved visit a few of these local sessions where competitors, adjudicators, and others join to play music and discuss the events of the day.

At these sessions, both competitors and adjudicators immediately set aside the strict competition criteria and relax into a much more informal system. At this gathering, the youngster with that day's top

honors for a flawless fiddle performance may be playing alongside a senior musician who has difficulty holding the bow and is somewhat out of tune. In this informal system, in which decisions are made communally and through conversation, the same musicians informally assess each other using many of the categories used in the competition arena. Yet, in this forum, the senior musician may be considered the most traditional, historically accurate, and authentic of all the musicians present. More remarkably, the senior musician's playing may be considered by the participants as the best that day. The senior musician would be held in such high regard by the participants because she or he represents an earlier generation of traditional musician who learned their repertoire by ear from a lineage of teachers, and embodies the style of the region in which she or he was raised.

Though these two performance arenas are vastly different, the qualities of performance being considered in each space are almost identical. Surprisingly, the determinations of authenticity and traditionality may turn out to be contrary. This duality reflects divergent social situations, or parallel aesthetic systems, and provides a lens through which to view the mechanics of determining authenticity in Irish music.

Framework for thought

In the formal competition setting, musicians are judged through a strict set of criteria developed by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, evaluated and numerically ranked by an adjudicator or panel of adjudicators. Scores are publicly posted at the competition and later published in the organization's newsletter, *Treoir*. In the informal setting, the same criteria are discussed obliquely, often through vague questions, careful use of stock phrases, a nod and a knowing glance, or things understood and left unsaid – a subtle game of knowledge-sharing and tacit understanding in which listening and personal interaction are as important as playing music. The competitiveness of the formal setting is dropped for a sense of cooperation – an understanding that the participants are collectively taking part in a tradition much larger than any one player. Despite the public ranking system of the competition, the stakes are much higher at the informal gathering. Top honors come with a medal and last for a year. An informal reputation amongst one's community of musicians for being authentic and at the core of the tradition lasts well beyond one's own life.

These contrasting systems raise a great number of questions: How can authenticity be dependent on situation? What is authenticity if the

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authentic can change? How is authenticity determined? A few of these questions have been treated to a fierce parsing of words through the fields of musicology, folklore, and anthropology, and yet in many cases, inquiries have mainly been focused on what is ‘the authentic’ rather than how ideas of authenticity are determined and used by traditional musicians. As folklorist Regina Bendix has written, ‘the crucial questions to be answered are not “what is authenticity?” but “who needs authenticity and why?”’¹

Interestingly, ‘authenticity’ is not a criterion in Comhaltas competitions, nor is it often openly discussed by musicians. Yet, a traditional performer bases most of his or her artistic decisions in relation to personal ideas of the authentic. Much of the language surrounding traditional Irish music involves this as well – looking for the ‘pure drop,’ trying to find that ‘wild lonesome sound,’ hunting down a session that embodies ‘great craic,’ searching for older musicians who are ‘the real thing.’ It seems that with most traditional Irish musicians and enthusiasts, the idea of authenticity is so fundamental to the art-form that it is an assumed foundation of every conversation, performance, recording, and publication.²

These ideas of traditionality, historic continuity, authenticity, and quality of performance in traditional Irish music are not inherent in the music as performed. Rather, they are dependent on situation and community, and are constantly negotiated and performed by those who play and discuss the music. This chapter explores the reasons why these concepts are engaged by both musicians and those viewing the tradition from the outside. As the music and its proponents have expanded to a global diaspora, these essential negotiations have become reliant on an intricate web of technological communications, strung together by a wide variety of interpersonal, affiliative, and institutional lines of communication and served by a number of core resources.

The various networks through which musicians determine traditionality within this art-form are representative of the ongoing process of change within this oral tradition, and the constant negotiating and reshaping of the corpus of collective memory within such a tradition. Simply put, practitioners within a musical tradition continuously determine what is traditional and authentic through their interactions.

Our inherited theoretical framework

Authors and artists of Ireland’s Gaelic Revival sought out as ‘Gaelic’ those traditions and aspects of culture in Ireland that were distinctive

to Ireland before British colonization. In their quest for an authentic Irish culture, they imagined as traditionally Irish that which had remained seemingly unspoiled by continental influence. Areas of the Irish-speaking west were singled out as especially pure and were deemed to hold the highest concentration of aspects of Ireland's Celtic origins – still embraced by what was considered an unmediated oral tradition.

Concepts of traditionality, orality, and authenticity were first applied to traditional Irish music by the Gaelic League, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, and other cultural groups, due to a lingering academic engagement with *what* had been passed on in an oral tradition rather than *how* culture is transmitted. The ideas and definitions employed in conceptualizing traditional music mirrored concurrent modernist academic thought on authenticity and oral heritage. The intellectuals of the Gaelic Revival, most of whom were attending continental universities during the formation of the movement, were profoundly exposed to these conceptualizations, especially those developed in the field of folklore by academic disciples of Francis James Child and his ballad collections.³ In many cases, academic treatments of traditional Irish music—not to mention the entire realm of folk music—still follow this modernist academic model of traditional music, associating exclusive orality with authenticity and purity. Only recently has Comhaltas begun to embrace the idea that change is inherent to Irish music, just as music scholars have embraced this idea among traditional forms of music around the world.

In many cases, academic studies of traditional Irish music have assumed that musical traditions deemed authentic and traditional are a product of an exclusively oral transmission process, despite ample evidence to the contrary.⁴ As a result, academics and musicians alike have placed traditional music in an unearned (by their standards) position of purity and authenticity, as they have conveniently ignored the use by traditional musicians of available technologies throughout history.

The fields of folklore and ethnomusicology have traditionally assumed that the effects of mass media on traditional culture are inherently destructive. In *Cassette Culture*, Peter Manuel writes about the role of mass media – especially cassette tapes – in the distribution of popular music in northern India as technology, urbanization, and development spread recorded music throughout the region. “The expense, of course, is the destruction of insular, cohesive traditional societies.”⁵ Though this quote is not representative of Manuel's larger work, such a historically reductive approach toward the role of technology in the transmission of culture suggests that the adaptation of recording technology by a regional oral

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culture would result in a fundamental corruption of that culture, and the reorganization or destruction of traditional modes of communication.

I would instead argue that in the case of traditional Irish music, the musicians have incorporated all forms of recording technology (transcription, print, analog and digital audio, video) into their traditional modes of communication throughout the history of the art-form, and have used these technologies to preserve and maintain their traditional culture. Though incorporation of technology has in some ways changed regional, and especially local, styles, I argue that new media have enabled Irish musicians to transcend their distinctly regional (Irish) cultural and social networks to communicate among an international (Irish, diasporic, and affiliative) base of practitioners allowing a global negotiation within the strict, self-imposed ideals of regionality, traditionality, and authenticity.⁶

Codification of tradition and competition

In traditional Irish music, another wonderful irony exists: the group charging itself with the preservation of this constantly changing oral art-form and repertoire has taken steps to codify its performance practices. By organizing the annual *Fleadh Cheoil, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* has developed a set of categories and a specific lexicon through which musicians are evaluated. Through these criteria, competitors are judged in a way designed to remove individual preference from the aesthetic system. County Clare-based concertina player and scholar Tim Collins, who has adjudicated at many of these events at every level, explains:

The adjudication sheets that you get have a series of criteria by which you adjudicate competitors – solely based on the mechanics of the music. So they would say, X amount of marks for Timing; Y amount of marks for Rhythm; Phrasing; Command of Instrument. And the adjudication sheet then varies slightly, depending on what instrument, what competition, or category they are. For instance, for concertina, they are not going to have tuning in it. So you can see that they're really looking at the mechanics and they're trying to get rid of – this is my understanding – they're trying to get rid of this subjectivity of adjudicating. This is the irony of competition.⁷

In Irish music circles, debates have raged about this codification and institutionalization of traditional music and resulting effects upon the

fluidity and change inherent in the tradition. Many critics of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann point to the emphasis on students' preparation for All-Ireland contests and the codification of critical response to the tradition for *fleadh* adjudicators as factors in the stagnation of a historically oral tradition.⁸ Critics of such movements point to the collection of recordings and transcriptions of music as the first step in stifling cultural change. Yet those who have worried about the possibility of traditions becoming extinct have argued that, though facilitating cultural stagnation at some levels, such institutions are important vehicles for the perpetuation of at least a vestige of the tradition.⁹ In this regard, a student's preparation for a competition highlights dual aesthetic systems. Preparation for competition requires a static interpretation, though the aim of the competition is to foster interest in an otherwise dynamic living tradition.

Dual aesthetic systems such as this also lead adjudicators into odd dualities. This is especially true if a judge considers one player to be more sophisticated within the larger tradition, yet must award top honors to a musician who has performed in a way understood as 'more traditional' within the terms of the competition.¹⁰ Such predicaments occur quite often, as when a competitor uses innovations generally accepted by the larger community – such as individualized ornamentation techniques or newly composed repertoire – but which are considered outside the bounds of traditionality as conceived by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann.

It is generally understood by the adjudicators that the criteria by which competitors are judged reflects an aesthetic system developed during the formation of the Gaelic League and Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in the late nineteenth century – a period just before the widespread impact of the recording age. Yet, these same judges, when the adjudication is over and the informal music session break out in the local pubs, would not play as they adjudicate. As Tim Collins has mentioned, after the *fleadh* the adjudicators and performers

leave the competition arena, and go to a different arena of music, and you'd probably revert back to how you'd play yourself, you know? People tend to play a certain way in competition: they play the game, they know how to perform within the competition in contrast to how they would normally play.¹¹

The nature of the dual aesthetic systems in play at the *fleadh* demands that both musician and adjudicator shift back and forth between

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performance situations and contrasting temporal criteria – they ‘play the game’ by performing such switches. The formal system of competition functions to evaluate the playing of competitors within a strict set of parameters and an institutionalized understanding of the tradition to create a public record, while the informal system imparts its information to the collective memory through constant discussion.

Recordings, location, tradition

In art-forms like traditional Irish music – where many of the influential players are in the diaspora – distance must be bridged and the tradition must allow vehicles for this to happen, or risk fractioning. Because of this distance, and today’s availability of personal recording devices, the culture of recording has permeated traditional Irish music. Musicians have, however, incorporated technology while respecting the tradition. Recording without permission at informal settings is frowned upon,



Figure 1 Louisa Bennion records a tune from Dan Neely on her iPod at a session in New York City. Photo by Scott Spencer.

and those recording will usually defer to those musicians being recorded. Tim Collins has observed that the role recording takes in a session is somewhat touchy.

There's a certain etiquette attached to it. Normally, you'd just ask and listen. Especially younger people would come in and say, 'Listen, I heard you playing a lovely tune recently. I'd love to learn it. Could you record it for me?' With etiquette, you wouldn't really accept them coming in and trying to covertly record anything.¹²

The recordings gleaned from such formal and informal settings are then coveted, learned, and passed from person to person throughout the Irish music scene. Sometimes these recordings have multiple owners or have been reproduced through multiple generations of recording media. These recordings seem to follow established paths between friends, often through mutual interests such as regional repertoire, shared instrumental tradition, or through admiration for the music of particular players.

American fiddle player Cleek Schrey has lived at the heart of this system. As an avid learner of older styles and settings of traditional Irish fiddle tunes, he actively sought out situations in which he could record repertoire and has a voracious appetite for the informal recordings of others:

When I was learning Irish music as a teenager, I would collect and trade recordings obsessively. These recordings laid the foundation for the bulk of my repertoire. Aran Olwell might come back from Ireland and have two or three killer session tapes that he would copy off for friends, and the process would be repeated over and over. This sort of exchange was typical and reciprocated. These recordings were mostly traded among peers, musicians ranging from their teens to their early 20s. It was one way of keeping up to date with new tunes that were added to a collective repertoire.¹³

These tapes and field recordings have proven to be a major influence on the tradition, especially to the younger players who are quite comfortable with recording technology. As many of these younger players live in the diaspora, their connections to the tradition rely in part upon a constant flow of these tapes.

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In the new realm of digital communications, music moves across all borders and media, and a geographic anchor through which to prove authenticity is not necessarily applicable. In his search for the authentic, *Irish Echo* writer Earle Hitchner asked, 'What is authentic Irish music? It's a moving target, hard to hit definitively, and that's not a critical copout. Geography is less significant in this age when a profusion of home recordings and Internet access enables people around the world to develop their avocational or vocational interest in Irish music.'¹⁴

Iain Chambers has also written on regionality and the authentic in Irish music, arguing that the presence of differing regional styles reflects not an inherent quality of the music, but a system through which musicians can develop and express their identity – simultaneously looking out from the local and in from the global. He states that there can be authenticity in the face of regional variances in Irish music, because there is 'a central distinction between music as the assumed site of "authenticity," with its associated closure of community and ready to wear "identity," and music as a source of difference, where unicity and ethnocentricity are constantly contested and denied.'¹⁵

So where does authenticity in Irish music reside and how is it passed on? Anthony McCann, a gifted and patient observer of musical conceptualization, reminds us to react to the social situation instead of dictate it:

We need to be careful not to prescribe cultural activity. We need to assert the contemporary validity of traditional practices as a contemporary response to contemporary conditions ... We need to carefully examine the registers of social interaction within which traditional practices occur, for it is here that the keys to transmission will be found.¹⁶

In the case of traditional Irish music, especially in the light of the All-Ireland competition, parallel performance paradigms arise. In these parallel situations, traditional Irish musicians must be cognizant of the directions through which they are expressing their art-form. In competition, they must be ready to anchor their music in the past by naming their teachers and repertoire sources – even through the names of the tunes and the versions or variations they play. Adjudicators will

interpret these subtleties in performance practice as statements of a player's authenticity.

In the informal session, the player is better able to discuss these aspects of his or her repertoire and engage in dialogue with others on such facets of the tradition. Half the fun of the informal session is that these anchoring details are always open to discussion, elaboration, and contestation. In this way, performances for competition are inherently limited in their scope, in their ability to engage with the tradition, and in their access to the full range of performative and communicative vectors. In a competition, it is the adjudicator's role to rule on such issues – questions are rarely asked of a competitor. With this in mind, competitions are merely an inherently limited expression of ongoing performative behavior – a packaged version of a vibrant, multi-vectored culture presented through the limited vectors of the stage.

Contextualization

Possibly the most important aspect of this personal negotiation of the traditional and authentic resides in the contextualization of the music being played. As musicians perform their tunes formally on the stages of the world, or share their tunes informally in pubs and kitchens throughout the Irish music world, they will constantly contextualize the tunes they are playing. In an informal setting, a tune will always be followed by a discussion of its origins, or a description of where that musician learned it. As Sally K. Sommers-Smith has keenly observed:

More than just the music is transmitted in this fashion. Often, the people who have played the tune – or, in some cases [the person who has] composed the melody – are recalled in the making and remaking of the music. A portion of the social fabric that bound the tune as it was played in the past is thus transmitted as well in the traditional process.¹⁷

This contextualization serves three functions. First, it places the musician in the larger tradition, and helps to establish his or her level of engagement with the tradition. Second, it allows the musician to discuss and develop the authenticity of the tune or setting. Third, it allows a communal experience, which helps to maintain and reinforce the collective memory.

The relation of a tune to specific musicians is vital to contextualization and authentication, and discussing the players associated with

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a particular tune is a major part of determining the tune's role in the tradition. Tim Collins explains:

Associating it with musicians, for me, authenticates music in a very important way. These tunes were composed by somebody. Why did they compose them? Where did they compose them? When did they compose them? What were the influences – what made them compose this tune, you know? And why do people do that? They do that because it is a way that people can express their identity, you know? Through music.¹⁸

With the current ease of website development and the need for the global musical community to engage with these ideas, this system for contextualization has also spread to the Internet. In much the same ways that lines of communication have formed between musicians with mutual interests, Internet sites have been developed – mostly through the efforts of amateur enthusiasts – through which this contextualization can take place. These websites range from informal chat-rooms in which devotees can discuss every aspect of repertoire and the tradition,¹⁹ to formal web presences for the leading institutions in traditional Irish music.²⁰ Most recently, some of the most influential sites for this exchange of contextualizing information, repertoire, and ideas have sprung up for particular instruments.²¹

Lines of communication

As I have argued above, ideas of authenticity, oral tradition, and continuity with history and traditionality were established as essential aspects of traditional Irish music as early as Irish musicians began to solidify their traditions. Today, these concepts have a constant presence in Irish music and are the basis for many musical interactions. As the local has become the global, and the global has become the 'glocal'²² thanks to digital technologies—the sites through which these negotiations are conducted have transcended geographic place, allowing practitioners to be at once global *and* local while engaging with the tradition. The informal session is now but one of many realms used for the negotiation of tradition, especially as younger players who have great comfort in conducting their lives through digital technologies lend their passion to traditional music. Their performances transcend classic performance venues, or rather they perform on a variety of tangible and conceptual stages: live, mediated, digital.

I would suggest that the different performance realms explored in this chapter engage this sort of dialogue in divergent ways, and therefore result in contrasting forms of transmission. The competition, with a static and unidirectional reading of performance by adjudicators, results in the transmission of a historical document and functions as a vehicle for the individual in service of the greater tradition. The informal session, with its constant, omni-directional, dynamic give-and-take, helps to form a series of communal experiences which are the basis for developing the collective memory.

Conclusion

In the competition performance paradigm, the performers on stage conform to and compete within one aesthetic system as they develop and negotiate the 'traditional.' Yet the same individuals, in an informal setting, perform the same music for the same people within a different performance paradigm and set of criteria, and achieve many of the same results, though through a much different process. One could argue that the difference is between an organic system of aesthetics – one that incorporates change and is flexible to respond to external influence, and a static and codified system – where the only realm of change is the personal adjudication of the judges. As the performers shift between realms, they are also shifting between artifice and reality: the real world of traditional music – in which all things are negotiated, and the codified recreation of this world – in which this negotiation is discouraged in favor of tangible (and unchallengeable) results. The role of these ongoing negotiations is vital in the determination of authenticity within much of the tradition. These interactions are performative and manifested at the level of the individual through lines of communication between musicians, their interactions with institutions in traditional Irish music, and practitioners of the greater tradition. With this in mind, and with an eye to the events, institutions, resources, and individual interactions within these structures, it is clear that fundamental concepts of authenticity and traditionality within traditional Irish music are performed and negotiated, rather than imbued or inherent.

Notes

- 1 Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 21.

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- 2 See Mary Trachel, 'Oral and Literate Constructs of the "Authentic" in Irish Music,' *Eire-Ireland* 30 (3) (1995): 27–46. See also Earle Hitchner, 'What Exactly is Authentic Irish Music?', 'Ceol,' *Irish Echo*, 23 August 2006, www.celticcafe.com/celticcafe/EarleHitchner/Columns/Ceol/08_Ceol_Aug.23.06.html (accessed 23 June 2008).
- 3 Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vols. 1–10 (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1882–98).
- 4 See Jimmy O'Brien Moran, 'Paddy Conneely – The Galway Piper: The Legacy of a Pre-Famine Folk Musician,' PhD Thesis, University of Limerick, 2006. See also Scott Spencer, 'Early Traditional Irish-American Recordings and Atlantic Migrations,' in *The Irish in the Atlantic World*, ed. David Gleeson (Charleston, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).
- 5 Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8.
- 6 See Spencer, 2009.
- 7 Tim Collins, telephone interview with author, 12 December 2007.
- 8 Rachel C. Fleming, 'Resisting Cultural Standardization: Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and the Revitalization of Traditional Music in Ireland,' *Journal of Folklore Research* 41 (2) (2004): 227–57.
- 9 Fleischmann suggests transcriptionists capture only 'fossil remains' of musical traditions. See Aloys Fleischmann, ed., *Sources of Irish Traditional Music. 1600-1855* (New York: Garland, 1998), xvii.
- 10 Though Comhaltas does not define ideas of traditionaliy, the Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann Bunreacht (Constitution) reminds readers that the function of the organization is to promote traditional forms. In the 'Aims and Objectives' section of the Bunreacht, printed in every competitor's rule-book, it states that CCÉ functions '(a) To promote Irish Traditional Music in all its forms ... (c) To promote Irish Traditional Dancing; (d) To promote and foster Traditional singing in both Irish and English.' See 'Comhaltas Constitution (Bunreacht),' 29 November 2006, Comhaltas website, http://comhaltas.ie/press_room/detail/comhaltas_constitution_bunreacht/ (accessed 24 October 2008).
- 11 Collins, 12 December 2007.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Cleek Schrey, email with author, 7 March 2007.
- 14 See Hitchner, 2006.
- 15 Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 83.
- 16 Anthony McCann, 'All that is not Given is Lost: Irish Traditional Music, Copyright, and Common Property,' *Ethnomusicology* 41 (1) (Winter 2001): 89–106, 98.
- 17 Sally K. Sommers-Smith, 'Irish Traditional Music in a Modern World,' *New Hibernia Review* 5 (2) (2001): 111–25, 112.
- 18 Collins, 12 December 2007.
- 19 See, for example, www.thesession.org.
- 20 See the Irish Traditional Music Archive's website, www.itma.ie.
- 21 See the website for Na Píobairí Uilleann, www.pipers.ie; or Pat D'Arcy's www.uilleannobsession.com.
- 22 See Tony Dundon, María-Alejandra González-Pérez, and Terrence McDonough, 'Bitten by the Celtic Tiger: Immigrant Workers and Industrial Relations in the New "Glocalized" Ireland,' *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 28 (4) (2007): 501–22.