

Essay: Music in the community

The aim of this essay is to compare and contrast Irish music communities both within and outside Ireland, focusing on matters of inclusion; looking into aspects which are key to communities in particular places and the conditions that are required to identify with the Irish community. This essay focuses on the Irish traditional music community due to the variety of pre-existing research and material on the topic. Other strands of Irish music such as Irish pop, are less sonically identifiable as Irish, and often grouped into generic pop, therefore, forming a community that is not Irish specific.

When defining a musical community, certain factors are considered and general criteria include: enriching “the cultural life of the community”; developing active musical knowledge; being accessible for all members; and “honouring the origins and intents of specific musical practices” (Veblen et al., 2002).

Comparison of communities within and outside of Ireland

Communities also change from place to place, with research showing a musical identity in one place will not translate directly when a member of the community moves elsewhere. Within the paper ‘Becoming Irish or Becoming Irish Music? Boundary Construction in Irish Music Communities’ (Rapuano, 2001) the author compares their findings with Moloney (1992), which states “an Irish traditional music musician who stands outside Irish culture cannot “become” Irish in the sense that they are able to identify with Irish culture.” Rapuano expands on this point, agreeing with Moloney, stating “Musicians, who are not Irish, cannot be Irish in the same way that a person born into Irish culture is Irish”.

Particularly in “pluralistic, multicultural societies”, globalisation along with many other factors have allowed individuals to incorporate many identities into their personal identity. Today communities are perceived as a choice, rather than an integral and defining part of ones heritage. In the 2001 study, Rapuano's conclusions suggest that Americans felt the need to “become Irish” with their stringent rules and traditions. The paper states that these communities “adopt all the tenets of the music tradition without question”, and refers to this level of control as a “peripheral fetish” as they will never be perceived as Irish as someone born into the Irish culture.

The standard of the musicians involved within the Irish music communities abroad is also not reflective of the scene in Ireland. In the US “professional musicians are the only participants allowed. On the other hand, anyone can join in the rural, non-tourist sessions in Ireland, provided they can at least minimally play or sing.” (Rapuano, 2001). Increased professionalism also creates a boundary between spectators and musicians, as traditionally anyone could join in. These professional settings have a more stringent membership criteria in comparison to Irish music communities in Ireland, which are normally held in public bars for anyone to attend. This new stringent membership criteria has resulted in a loss of authenticity as a result of building communities with few physical ties to the Irish community itself, such as having relatives from Ireland. The idea of ‘becoming Irish’ and trying to keep the Irish music as traditional as possible with musicians playing exact ornamentations of traditional Irish music, is detrimental to the music itself, but is seen as a key aspect of integrity to foreign Irish music communities.

Rapuano (2001) compares an Irish-owned pub, which hosts an Irish music night, and a coffee shop with no direct Irish links, which also hosts an Irish music night. The bar is described as having “many Irish national symbols adorning the walls. No one in this session makes a point of either mentioning it is an Irish session nor do they ask a person's surname. Furthermore, they are less likely to exclude musicians who do not have ancestral links to Ireland.” This inclusive environment in the bar contrasts with the exclusive entry criteria in the coffee shop, which disregarded musicians without an Irish surname but who played traditional music. In bars with direct Irish links, the Irish music is less altered and pretentious, proving a similar standard of inclusion as in Ireland. In a similar study carried out in Wellington, New Zealand, Irish music communities were found to be more informal like the authentic Irish scene, with less emphasis on

performing formally for an audience, and rather making music as a group of people who appreciate Irish music (Thurston, 2010).

The paper 'Irish Traditional Music: in a Modern World' (Smith, 2001) explores how much change traditional music can endure before it is no longer representative of a place, time and identity. It reports the names of tunes are often changed outside Ireland, with individual musicians styles accounting for the biggest development in traditional music evolution. In the past, ethnomusicologists were able to localise the "practice of Irish traditional dance music to Ireland, and to immigrant communities in North America or Australia." However, Smith (2001) argues this is becoming increasingly difficult as Irish music is adopted as "a world music". Increased notation has also made it harder for ethnomusicologists to analyse the origins of particular styles of Irish music. Similar to accents, music is often reflective of an area, seen in different ornamentations of an arrangement; however, due to increased notation and the global nature of playing, it is becoming harder to gauge the origins of particular traditional techniques.

Technology and Development within the Irish Music Community

With the Irish music community developing over time with technology and from place to place, there have been some obvious changes in transmission. In terms of teaching, now "over 80 per cent of Irish traditional musicians cite they use the Internet for learning" (Ward, 2019). With this figure, it is evident that globalisation through both the movement of people and movement of knowledge through the internet has the ability to change the community. In terms of teaching traditional Irish music, there is often tension due to the wide variety and scope of the music.

The ability to learn music in more informal settings such as community groups is different from the formal settings of music schools (Verbena et al., 2002). While being interviewed for the paper 'Technology and the transmission of tradition: An exploration of the virtual pedagogies in the Online Academy of Irish Music' (Ward, 2019), one participant touched on the need for music as a social experience, citing a "human quality" of Irish traditional music, while also suggesting being a part of the same community online would not provide the same satisfaction (Ward, 2019). Further comments reflect the same opinion, that the online learning of Irish music is the 'diluted version'. Traditionally, Irish music is "passed on aurally", with informal and unintentional pedagogy being what "ethnomusicologists refer to as enculturation". This is defined as the "musical development that takes place without self-conscious effort as a result of a child's spontaneous interaction with a shared set of musical experiences provided by the culture" (Ward, 2019).

Enculturation also plays a role in why many Irish musicians suggest no one taught them how to play, with similar numbers citing "their mother, father or other family member as their primary musical influence." (Veblen, 1991). It is suggested that when you grow up as part of a music community, you 'know the music before you actually start to play it'. Hence music learning takes place within the process of enculturation, which can be a social factor in the development and transmission of traditional music.

My interviewee Brain O'Neill also drew attention to the idea that children often follow their parents footsteps in terms of musical endeavours, with one potential musician 'May' who is being considered for the dimple discs label, being influenced by and following the footsteps of her mother who is going to release music through dimple discs herself, quoting "her mums going to be on the label anyways". This adds a real life example to the idea that Irish musicians often pick up the music and culture from parental figures and continue the line of traditional Irish musicians.

In the past, research on the Irish traditional community was conducted by visiting the sites of Irish music and interviewing the community members. Scholars such as Rapuano (2001) and Thurston (2010) conducted field research by visiting sites where traditional Irish music took place and conducting informal interviews. This is how research on communities would have traditionally been done, needing to travel, whereas today, due to the internet, a lot of the research can be done online remotely. Alternatively, studies such as Ward (2019) focused on the transitions of the community, by using interviews as a tool to understand the present music through comparisons to the past.

Workflow

Technologically, for my interviews, I utilised zoom to both host and record my material. This was the most effective way for me to carry out my research due to splitting my interviews between Ireland and London, along with my London based interviewee contracting covid when we were initially scheduled to meet. I utilised the built in features on my interviewees side and the zoom recorder on my side, paired with my Rode NT-USB microphone. This microphone is simple to set up to use with video platforms due to not needing to connect it through an interface, hence recording doesn't need to be set up through logic or a DAW. Following the interview recordings, I edited the content to bring clarity and cohesion to my creative work.

As an interviewer, I took an interest in this topic due to feeling simultaneously like an outsider within the Irish music community within Ireland, while also perceived as a member of the community outside Ireland. Growing up in Northern Ireland, there is a stigma surrounding the Irish music community; however, it is becoming more open and accessible in the North. Nevertheless, there is an aspect of gate keeping whereby people with Protestant sounding names or those who grew up in Protestant areas being considered outsiders and not as welcome in an environment which was traditionally majority Catholic. This stigma stems from 'the troubles', an era of political tension ending in 1998, which segregated both Protestants and Catholics and created a barrier for cultural communication.

The traditional music scene in particular parts of Northern Ireland, often Catholic areas, is very reflective of the Southern Irish scene. Also having experience living just outside of Dublin, the southern Irish scene is definitely more inclusive of everyone regardless of background, having not had the same level of political tension between groups in the past. With my experience I wanted to contrast both the scene in Ireland and Northern Ireland to what the Irish community is like in London and elsewhere to understand why there is such a divide in inclusivity from place to place.

Interview Content

Firstly, due to the interview being hosted on zoom, internet connection was an issue, and I am unsure whether I lost any valuable information in some sections. My first interviewee Brian O'Neill, founder of Dimple Disc Records. I found it hard to steer the interview and subsequently there was a lack of clarity in the question answers. Brian answer the questions asked in plenty of detail, but included a lot of additional information not directly linked to the question, which took up a lot of the interview time. The interview was scheduled for 30 minutes to ask 7 questions, but in an hour only 3 questions were answered. Editing the interview footage was challenging because the interview lasted an hour and I did not want to drastically alter the order of the conversation and create a greater misinterpretation; however, I removed sections I deemed irrelevant to this research. One could argue any editing creates a loss of authenticity, as information I believe is irrelevant, someone else could argue is relevant.

To begin the interview, I asked my interviewee Brian to introduce himself, giving a brief overview of his career and association with the Irish music community. Brian previously worked in a community centre in Peckham, putting on music events. He then went on to start his record label which advocates for Irish music from a base in Peckham, where an Irish community formed through dimple discs. When asked if he thought an Irish community had formed around Peckham, where his label is based, Brian suggested it is not that an Irish community was intentionally formed, but instead Brian chose to surround himself with people from within the wider Irish community he feels a part of. His idea of forming a community is less focused on seeking out those who would like to be involved in the community and more based on the proximity affect in terms of finding those who you relate to, who are in the same place "you tend to associate with people who are culturally, [...] you're comfortable with". Brian claims it is easy to feel close to Irish people "I just feel very very close to them very quickly", hence the reason that a label of Irish musicians has formed around him in Peckham. He talks about being influenced by Irish politics and culture and how that often gets reflected in the music. Brian puts emphasise on giving people

a leg up and how that is a priority in relation to community. One example being a Sri Lankan flute player, with her main interest being Irish music and the label commissioning her to add flute to four electronic tracks.

During my second interview, my interviewee Saoirse Eirinn, a traditional Irish harpist, had a slightly different perspective on the Irish music community. Saoirse has a very open view on the community and quotes “you’re automatically taken in with the Irish musicians if you can play any of the tunes”, suggesting that the music itself has no barrier to inclusivity. Saoirse also discussed her opinion on the religious divide within music in Northern Ireland, suggesting there was no longer as prominent. A quote which heavily resonated with my interview with Brian was “we kind of all find each other very easily and we connect very quickly” drawing on the same idea that there is a certain closeness within the Irish music community. Saoirse goes on to say “I think Irish music holds a very strong sense of pride” tying that back to the international exposure of Irish music and how it has traveled. She believes the best place to get involved with Irish music is in Ireland itself, noting that music has been passed down aurally for hundreds of years. She continues, Irish people are fond of story telling and performance rather than reading physical sheet music, hence this is the most authentic place to learn and practise. However, she acknowledges there may be interesting aspects found within international communities which she would love to be involved in.

Conclusion

To conclude, after both researching and interviewing in regards to Irish music, certain aspects of the communities both within and outside Ireland can be compared. The barriers of entry to the community are often strictest abroad, particularly in America and often where there are diluted or indirect Irish links. Within a traditional Irish setting, anyone who knows the tune to a certain extent is welcome to involve themselves in the song and hence community, reinforced in my interview with Saoirse. Increased professionalism as an attempt to preserve the culture is in fact doing the opposite, creating a barrier to traditional education and whereby songs are passed down from one member of the community to another. In terms of the transmission of Irish music, it still maintains a lot of its original methods, being passed down through family and community involvement; however, due to globalisation and the internet, the community has grown due to increased accessibility to authentic materials. In terms of finding an Irish community, both within and outside of Ireland, the proximity effect is often a major factor, with Irish people finding other Irish people and hence forming their own version of an Irish community.

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