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Fintan Vallely

'Traditional' music In Ireland is, loosely speaking, the one-time popular music of its rural people – indigenous recreational music. Before the assembly of Gaelic consciousness and the age of recording this was unremarked upon. The invention of the recorded and broadcast sound object altered that, as did new forms of transmission which came out of revival, changing technologies, tourism and fresh identity within Europe. The music evolved from onetime decline to become a strong artistic and ideological constituency by the second half of the twentieth century. Its development of high artistic standards and economic and academic dimensions now round it out comfortably as a distinctive and often celebrated marker of Irishness. In this role it rivals European Art music in Ireland as a nationally-presentable status symbol. The nature of this process and the role of state initiative in it has been a progressive intervention which has worked in tandem with a high degree of extra-state cultural commitment and organisation.

Ethos, aesthetics and art

The compulsion to play music of any genre is generated by a host of factors of which instinctive musicianship is the most compelling and enduring. Music-related considerations such as peer involvement, local reputation and school training can be equally important, but extra-music issues are quite powerful agents too. Thus cultural identification and current politics are generally present as a guiding hand behind the visibility and uptake of Traditional music, an osmotic sponsorship which has played a significant role in Irish music development since the mid-nineteen hundreds.

Traditional music in Ireland is, at a personal level, for many, deeply embedded in the idea of national identity and is officially so at international or diplomatic level. It has multiple layers of aesthetics, styles and forms, and it occupies a niche in entertainment practices. Its most typical expression is the sport-like, energetic, casual performance 'session', but there is also

considerable formal and informal gig, concert and specialist festival activity. Instrumental music and song in Irish and English dominate these, but ballads, and social, competition or big-stage dance types are part of the greater genre as well. Artistes do not typically perceive their activity as being primarily about 'entertainment'. It is about itself – in an artistic sense – *'The Music'*. It is about melody, not harmony, and has been learned respectfully, note by note, from perceived superior players or mentors, often one to one. It carries a loading which while it could relate to national identity is more clearly felt as an honorary inclusion in a society which demands respect (towards evolved, established artistic norms) and responsibility (to pass it on – correctly). Despite the heady public edge of it that can be observed in tourism or youth scenes, it retains a sizable core, conservative bedrock of mostly older performers and aficionados who set standards and parameters by example, critique and organisational leadership. An Comhairle Ealaíon (The Arts Council of Ireland) has respected this set of learning practices and standards as the music's self-definition since the 1980s. So too have the many thousands of non-Irish people who perform the music globally as a style of choice. This renders the music not just an identity adjunct for global Ireland, but also a deeply satisfying, meaningful, internationally-sustainable and marketable music genre.

Where it is played

A range of outlets for the music maximize its economic potential. The gamut of these runs from tourist kitsch and muzak to expensive instrumentation and large-scale concert promotion. They include tourism (it brings many thousands to Ireland annually), album and literature sales internationally, the entertainment industry (and its supply, catering, public relations and logistics), education (instrumental, dance and academic), print, audio and visual media, and live performance at home and abroad. Driving these, but also existing separately for many people, are more aesthetic considerations which view the music as:

- part of an individual's personal, family or community life, organic to or acculturated by the locale, and uncomplicatedly available
- a demonstrable component of individual well-being, self-expression and sub-cultural confidence

– contributing to fulfilled, optimistic or satisfied people, from very old to very young, in a mutually-respective continuum.
– a visible artistic environment which underpins commercial Ireland

It is the last of these points, the 'national visibility', which is significant in intra-national or global considerations, for it indicates

– a demonstrable reality to what is a distinctive cultural icon
– a convenient and unique organic association of state and art
– a nation which places value on its own music
– a set of distinctive national aesthetics which operate at both high art and Popular levels
– an internationally-commercially-viable music product

Associations and economics

Irish Traditional music is no longer confined to the island and its Diaspora, and it holds meaning abroad in addition to its distinctive Irishness. This renders it expressive or evocative of other sought-after values such as 'pre-electric', 'self-entertainment', 'artisan culture', 'natural', 'elemental', 'authentic' and 'earth-based' – *'the way things were'*. Such have been strong factors in the music's popularity in England, Germany, Holland and west-coast USA. Indeed, each of these dimensions is valuable not only to the music itself, but to advertising and promotion of Irish-related consumer commodities – everything from cheese to computer peripherals. This is, however, but one aspect of Traditional music economics which engages with Irish and global society as follows.

1 Regional / national identity in music

Folk or traditional musics are – like accents, or languages – markers of local, regional and national boundaries. Since their twentieth century revival such musics can also be seen to represent class and urban values in addition to geographical associations. Traditional musics are now typically the territory of organised and conscious choice rather than of handed-on custom. Somewhat paradoxically they are no longer real 'Folk' music either, for strictly speaking that role is now fulfilled by what we know as Popular music with its mixed

pedigrees and random, free selection. But even though Popular music as consumed overall in Ireland is most likely to be predominantly 'outsider' in its artistes, melodies and lyrics, still, its local spectrum also includes 'ballads', and a smattering of Traditional dance music. That is, local Popular music in Ireland is coloured by Irish Traditional music (in much the same way as all European Popular musics have local 'sound'). And even though Traditional Irish music products today are no more than 8% of total national music consumption, they are unequivocally recognisable and/or are relished for being distinctively Irish. Additionally, with Traditional music having elbowed its way on to the authority podium (in education and Arts funding) it now also commands attention as a free-standing genre, one which is nationally and culturally 'authentic', intellectually substantial, and artistically satisfying. In this role it commands a considerable degree of cross-class respect as 'Irish'.

2 Social cohesiveness and non-material Irish wealth

Music could not be said to be crucial to everyone for day-by-day social cohesiveness in the modern world. But in any era of crisis it does tend to emerge as a rallying point. For instance, following the various election victories in the former Soviet states, people celebrated for international TV news in the streets by going through rudimentary 'Folk' dance routines and singing regional patriotic songs. Two decades previously, in Belfast, 1969, because the period of 'the Troubles' coincided with the revival of Traditional music, a parallel interest in Irish music developed as part of the social connectedness of civil rights and socialist politics.

It is a fact of history that Traditional music comes to be felt to express an Irish national sentiment rather than, say, an Anglo-Irish empathy, or, in Northern Ireland, a Loyalist aspiration. This is despite the mixed-nationalities origins of the music. There have been periods in the twentieth century when links between it and nationalist political ideology appeared overt – for instance musicians playing behind the barricades in the beginnings of 'Free Derry', or music being played on 'Free Belfast' nationalist radio in 1969, and the All Ireland Fleadh being cancelled in support of northern nationalists in 1971. The 1970s produced another such hiatus for national identification with music south of the border too, the period around Ireland's entry and integration into the EU, wherein the Irish had to accept that since Irishness was no longer exclusively about feeding, financing or providing for oneself as a nation, it must also mean

other things. Traditional music was perhaps strongest among these. Along with song and dance in Ireland it fulfils the kind of historic cultural functions which might be expected nationally in any society. It also underpins much local self-reliance and cohesion. Its participants are more producers than consumers for whom the music is built into both history and being.

The cynical may cringe at the wee girls going to dance classes with their ringletted hair, at the posse of children carrying tin whistles to a schoolroom on a weekday evening, or at the seeming dullness of a local or parish céilí or concert. One may shudder too at the sight or memory of the furrowed-brow, Irish dance facilitator, or a primary-level teacher demonstrating Irish-language song badly. Yet these things are of the place, and fundamental to a culturally grounded or conceived sense of community life. They tap into and stimulate individual self expression, develop artistic connectedness and build social consciousness. People do not live in wide-screen choreographed, scripted perfection, or in the misery, nastiness, ego, greed and stupidity of Television 'gong show' public, global humiliation. Much as one may consume such products, one does not see this as life for one's children. Music, broadly speaking, is one of a number of activities (all of which are most likely interchangeable) which, voluntarily initiated and often local authority or state supported, initiate meaning in young people's lives. It remains as a base to identity, even where economic disaster may otherwise damage the quality of life. One teaches language in the language of the locality, and in its accent, inside an education framework which is of the language by ethos and tradition. Therefore it is logical that the same should be done for music.

3 The Arts as provocative

All composers, performers and consumers in music seek satisfaction and aesthetic fulfillment, but in different degrees. A broadly-applicable artistic awareness will be seeded for most participants by immersion or enculturation in any music genre. This can stimulate or precipitate fresh thinking, but it will not be the same for everyone. The adventurous, courageous, impatient or simply *different* few will need to break out from the basic boundaries by challenging a variety of perceived constraints – such as sameness, low standards, restrictiveness, conservatism – and may abandon a genre, and even a place, in order to engage with an environment of otherness. But since these people will likely go on to engage with some other particular music, this is not

an argument for not basing music education in one genre, such as that which is most readily, and meaningfully, locally available. A core but non-specific artistic awareness is passed on in the process of learning the instrumental skills, aesthetic consideration and rhythmic ability required for all musics, including indigenous, regional or local musics. Such levels of expression become the basis for any further progress, whether inside or outside the genre. But since the nature and quality of how these factors are imparted to a learner are critical to one's development of open-ness, the ability to challenge and to imagine newness, the actual quality of teaching and learning of music becomes more important than actual genre.

4 Regional and national identity

Strong senses of regional music identity exist in several places in Ireland, in some more intensely than in others, only not as visibly perhaps as the centuries-long, literate, material associations which Leipzig or Salzburg have with European Art music. The strongest Irish style region historically has been Co. Sligo, an image generated by local players who recorded and broadcast in the USA during the first half of the twentieth century. This provided a stimulus also to a national sense of value in Traditional music, the benefit of which has been successfully promoted by another region – Co. Clare. This was on account of a combination of factors, not least being that Clare had the advantage of already having a tradition of providing facilities and entertainments for summer tourism. It also has spectacular sea-coast scenery, and, being in the west, has topographical and architectural features which mark it as a place associated with beauty, escape and difference. Its music marketability was initially built around the uilleann pipes, was boosted by local broadcasters, and has been developed by canny business minds. The Northern Ireland tourist board indeed has also for many years been capitalising on the 'local music distinctiveness' angle with Fermanagh music in advertising, and even, in the early days, using music session photos taken in Co. Clare.

Ireland's Traditional music is internationally valuable. It is rendered particularly attractive on account of the fact that English is spoken and understood in the country. Thus the music, its associations, literature and recordings are quite accessible to the largest English-speaking tour blocs, Britain and the US, and to a European community which has familiarity with English.

5 Activists and the market

Music in Ireland has a three-chambered polarisation – Classical, Traditional and Popular, with considerable inter-referencing among them. In a world where 'music' was once officially an elite preserve, each has come to dominate in particular spheres of influence – Classical in school music; Traditional in organised music teaching; and performance around Irishness, Popular in free choice environments. However, boundaries became somewhat porous, beginning with the icons of the popular 'ballads' such as The Dubliners and The Clancy Brothers who opened up Traditional instrumental music to a new generation of popular interest and participative talent. The composer Seán Ó Riada and others otherwise colonised Classical with Traditional ethos, and, aided by this, Traditional began to move into the education space – including third level which was once the exclusive terrain of Classical. Behind the economic scenes in Ireland, however, a major labour of patient preservation, documentation, organising, rebuilding, analysis and publication was being done by Traditional music revivalists, aesthetes and ideologues. This gradually garnered respect from the state's Arts Council, the support of which became crucial to nurturing an independent artistic ethos and self-image within Traditional music society. Market forces have been and remain of tremendous impetus and directional value to Traditional music. But they require complementary intervention by committed music activists and by the state in order for the artistic integrity of the genre to be maintained.

6 Ireland and Scotland in music

Irish and Scottish musics are deeply linked and structurally similar, but each has a distinctive accent and styles of practice which derive from different post-eighteenth-century historical conditions. Traditional music in Ireland did benefit from the island's political miseries and economic marginalisation in that it came to be revered for its representation of history in a recreational fashion. The organised structures of teaching, peer learning and performance which were provided in Ireland, some of which were state- or local authority-supported, yielded a pool of high talent which has filtered out internationally. Thus education – albeit voluntary, and ideologically motivated, and largely extra state – seeded and nurtured talents which drew on resources that were assembled by earlier generations of cultural ideologues and forward thinkers.

Scotland has an equally large song and music body and instrumental practices which are also moulded by political experiences. These are now considerably facilitated by devolution, rendering them both competitive with and complementary to Irish Traditional music practices. In this sense the new Scotland has rushed to provide for 'its own music', and in doing so opens up facilities for Irish performers to play in Scotland, and vice versa. The present-day burgeoning Scottish Traditional music scene was indeed sparked by considerable Irish music performance in urban venues in the major Scottish cities until as late as the 1990s. The fact that this is now replaced by Scottish music says much for Scottish performer and audience taste and confidence, and for education in and / or faith in local or indigenous arts. The rapid development of the huge annual Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow underscores this as well as affirming Scottish Traditional 'sound' within a Popular music panoply

7 Traditional music in EU cultural identity

Irish Traditional music is seen by itself as itself, and eschews representation by others. Europe, with considerable damage done to its own regional musics as a result of appropriation in the Second World War period, has been open as a market to it, perceiving it as more genuine, or less amended by industrialisation. There it fulfils the desire for an organic music 'of place' which does not share the hierarchical canon of major state and religious institutions. Such a niche may not have opened up without the opportunity of the EU, which is now a terrific market for Irish and Scottish Traditional music performance and products. This leads to another challenging issue, that of the musics being 'copied'–played casually, socially and commercially by people of other nationalities. Irish music has now almost indiginised in German, French and Italian contexts (as has Jazz in Czechoslovakia, or Salsa in Norway) so that today a considerable number of bands play exclusively Irish music, occasionally hybridised with other European folk musics. As for 'straight' performance of Irish music, there remains a sizeable market for this, with thirty two Irish Music festivals outside Ireland, many of which are in Europe. The one in the Dordogne region of France teaches some 150 mostly mature students each year, and others deal with smaller numbers of learners who typically play in bands through which they exercise further influence. The teachers in such schools are generally Irish, for the same reasons that one

would naturally give greater status to a French-born teacher of French, or to a games teacher who themselves has been a sports professional.

8 Small scale versus large scale

Many large-scale interventions are made by Traditional musicians, and by touring bands at festivals in Europe and the US; these often play to large houses of 2000–8000. *Riverdance,* at the top economic end of the full span of this genre, is the exception in that it has played live to some millions in addition to television audiences of scores of millions. Such 'spectacular' presentation creates fresh eyes and ears for the music of Ireland, and opens the swathe for smaller enterprises. *Riverdance* alone has fed many hundreds of mouths among Irish musicians since 1995, and The Chieftains too helped establish Irish music on the map, one result of which was the inclusion of the Kilfenora Céilí Band at the massive Glastonbury Rock Festival in 2009.

Amplification, magnification, reproduction and marketing are how musics are made 'mass', and this intervention is available to any music form. But such technological devices alone do not make a music compatible with large scale production, or guarantee success. Traditional musics as they stand can be seen to be of most enduring, and meaningful, value within their communities. Socially, they are more likely to be played in local context in their core, standard form, and thus can mediate community music-making fabulously. In such situations they are on many occasions done largely for the performers themselves, and for a small number of aficionados who know the music intimately, and often have had instrumental, song or dance education in their early years. Outside consumers / attendees are no more necessary for a music session of like minded players than they would be for a choir or band practice. But this doesn't devalue the importance of the particular event for the players or community.

As for the material and psychological community value, for instance, behind a seemingly quiet music session of a dozen people there are, variously, typically family structures with music consciousness and most often considerable financial investment in teaching, travel and instruments. This broadens the involvement to upwards of fifty people, and to much more where there are other relatives locally. There are also local friends who know the players and while they may not themselves play, are aware of the significance of playing, and may experience its interconnectedness to other things – sport, work, church or

school. This might bring the tally of directly- and indirectly-involved persons up to a hundred or more, a figure which is expanded when local service-providers are included. The social and economic impact of what appears to be a small event is considerable, and in this way a cumulative awareness of music culture and tradition is established and maintained.

9 Exploiting tourism potential

Most of those involved in Traditional music today have no problem about utilising an indigenous artform to promote an individual performer, the music of the place, and the nation. But it is argued here that *it is imperative that such musics be marketed for what they are*—for that is what makes them distinctive. While it is the band's or performer's name of course which ultimately gets to be known, nevertheless it is performance in a genre—a specific sensibility, accent and aesthetic of music—which in Traditional musics carries the recognisable *national* identity tag. Yet there is an obligation for a professional performer to be different as well as excellent, with a technical brilliance or compositional savvy which re-interprets the familiar and revives the obscure with aesthetic sensibility, yet is creative and challenging within the genre. However, no 'national' band of exceptional ability will be internationally-free-standing. For the selective mind of the performer is working within the choice of music and style which their national genre uniquely provides and has conditioned them to best perform. Irish performers have demonstrated that commodification of art in relation to nationality is possible with dignity under national labels, without xenophobia or elitism, and without resorting to cliché.

10 Spin-off economic potential

Irish national broadcasting has always promoted Traditional music in some degree as part of its social commitment, producing many iconic and timelessly valuable radio and early television shows. All the material was hugely influential in providing listening, learning and promotional opportunities which themselves became part of, if not the key to, revival and the seeds of professionalism. These have been of incalculable benefit nationally. The advent of independent television sub-production however has, since the 1980s, made it possible to generate strictly money-making or 'resalable' programmes.

This era was begun proper with the 1991 *Bringing it All Back Home* Irish television series. The next production was *Riverdance*, a television filler which was expanded to a spectacular show and went on to reap rewards without end on tour, on CD, Video and DVD. Then came *River Of Sound*, 1995, and later, many other documentaries – including those on Christy Moore, Dónal Lunny and Paul Brady. Such series are the work of a different production logic which has no particular constraint on it other than paying fees for rights. The producers own their material outright rather than holding it in trust as did the National broadcaster in the past, and they market it wherever there might be an audience. Logically this kind of activity is restricted to 'big' or known names, those with one foot in popular music, but it can apply successfully to major Irish music events also – such as is done by Scottish TV with Celtic Connections.

Much of the 'living' for musicians is made in album sales where a serious trickle of revenue can be generated, especially among the many hundreds of lesser known figures who ply Folk Club and Festival paths. Contributing too to these invisible earnings for the homeland are album and internet download agencies. In addition to listening and viewing music as entertainment there are other outlets, in particular the academic and educational, archival and library, which provide work in live performance, lecturing and research. Yet Traditional music is far from competitive with major industry for productivity, and it directly sustains a community of individuals and families which is quite small. But it does make an impact on Irish cultural life which is disproportionately greater than its earnings. For it contributes to an immediate music culture which renders Ireland a visible marketable *presence* from which tourism's labour-intensive services of accommodation, eating, drinking and travel benefit greatly.

Enterprise

There has always been such spin-off money in Traditional music. The early music festival – the Fleadh Cheoil – attracted huge interest from a young population which craved difference and experience. This was the beginning of mass music culture in Ireland – the one large crowd all going to the one multi-venue event in order to enjoy themselves simultaneously and collectively. At a 1960s fleadh one improvised culinary emporium reported that seven hundred roast chickens, and chips, were sold in a day. The streets were carpeted with

chicken bones and paper; the riot squad was used to clear the bars at closing time. High sales for entrepreneurship and hospitality, overtime for the street sweepers and police.

Today's music festivals and schools are less giddy and highly organised. They attract up to 40% of their several hundred thousands of participants from outside the state. There is also a perpetual presence of music tourists throughout the year who support a network of dedicated Traditional music bars and events. In 2009 twenty-six Traditional music festivals were current in Ireland, and a further thirty-two abroad. In addition to these there were forty-one fleadh cheoils (the biggest set to attract over 200k people), seven others in the USA and Britain. There are twenty non-State, seasonal Traditional music schools in Ireland, most in the summer time, and nine of the Irish universities and third-level colleges provide teaching and supervision in Traditional music up to post-Doctoral level. There are a dozen major dedicated Traditional music teaching and performance facilities on the island, the biggest being the Clasach venue in Dublin.

The Arts Councils

The greater part of economic data on Traditional music is difficult to gather. Most visible is State support. Both the Arts Council of Ireland and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland fund the music considerately and directively. The Northern Ireland agency, in addition to covering its own territory, contributes to the Willie Clancy Summer School in Clare, as well as to the Irish Traditional Music Archive in Dublin. Both of these are outside its material jurisdiction, but it recognises that each is a significant contributor to the music education and sense of well being of the many northern Irish citizens who play and appreciate Traditional music. The Arts Council of Ireland in Dublin began support for Traditional music in earnest in the 1980s, reaching a high in 1991, when it gave it 31% of all music funding. Since 2005 it administers this directly to small, medium and large scale Traditional music initiatives and agencies through combination of bursaries, capital grants, festivals support and the *Deis* music awards scheme. Deis's budget began with c. €70k in 2005, rising to €700k in 2008, over which time the artiste-monitored scheme supported 250 initiatives.

Arts Council involvement with Traditional music in Ireland can be summarised as being supportive (to the genre via events and the individual performer), educational (via provision for master [sic] classes, research and

archives), standards enhancing (via select performance funding) and directive (through policy on any or all of these issues).

Traditional music in the economy of the future

Edinburgh theatre director Andi Ross said in 1997 that "the State doesn't support Art–*artists* support Art". So it is for Traditional music, around which there is ranged a diverse set of economies, many of which only exist on account of its 'special nature'–the relation to identity and nation. These include, in addition to the personal value to players and to their immediate associates, regular and occasional local playing, and high-visibility national, international and media performance. Hinging on this is a network of teachers and teaching, second- and third-level academic education and assessment, media production, books, journalism, representation and PR, music and instrument sales–all of which generate part-income and boost local economies in addition to providing business for national enterprises such as CD manufacture, printing and instrument making. The psyche of citizens cannot be overlooked either, especially in a climate of economic downturn where increasing use is being made of self-entertainment and add-on education.

This not something that can happen undirected, for, left alone, musics are subject to human attention-span limits, superficial or ephemeral consumption, fashion and fetishisation. Increase in marketing of Traditional music outside its homeland or Diaspora demands parallel multi-level, educative effort. This can be implemented via dedicated magazines, academic journals, end-user oriented literature and digital products and international discursive events.

Such a scenario likely will not be achieved, however, by any one Traditional music 'going it alone', but in cross-national alliances where like is respected as like. A logical approach in this is to learn from the rubric 'Classical' which is accepted to contain and express many different approaches and associations in music from the very old to the post modern, but all united in a shared sense of scale and literacy-related aesthetic. With equivalent accuracy the term 'Folk' could be applied as an umbrella category which includes all of Europe's folk musics wherein there is a common sense of aurally / orally transmitted aesthetics and style, selective use of literacy, and large areas of structural similarity, peripheral overlap and mutual borrowing.

One does not want Irish or Scottish traditional musics to 'sweep the world', but they should continue to value their established artistic distinctiveness. They

need to compete for their appropriate share of national and international mind-space in a world which pushes relentlessly toward Alan Lomax's 'cultural gray-out'. This suggests the desirability of Irish-Scottish collaboration, and liaison with complementary genres in Europe. Such can only be implemented by musicians and thinkers in Traditional musics, but the State, through the Arts Councils, must also be on hand too – informed, confident, eager and willing.

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