

# AN INVESTIGATION OF THE TRADITIONAL MUSIC SESSION IN IRELAND'S SHANNON REGION

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*Irish traditional music acquisition used to be restricted to specific regions and focused on personal instruction. Now that the individual player is being replaced by larger, less-personal groups of musicians, the question of how traditional learning is being accomplished becomes more critical.*

Keywords: Ireland, traditional music, sessions, repertoire, tune.

*Seznanjanje z irsko tradicijsko glasbo je bilo v preteklosti omejeno na specifične regije in se je opiralo na individualno poučevanje. Danes, ko posameznika nadomeščajo večje, manj osebne skupine glasbenikov, postaja vedno pomembnejše vprašanje, kako poučevati tradicijo.*

Ključne besede: Irska, tradicijska glasba, učne ure, repertoar, napev.

Ethnomusicologists who head out into the field are often warned beforehand that the music they hope to document is dying out; at best they will find survivals of a once-vibrant tradition. In some cases, those who issue the warnings are right, and the researcher will return with half-remembered fragments from community elders. In the case of traditional musical performance in Ireland, however, those who speak regretfully of a moribund culture are wrong. The Irish traditional music “scene” is thriving. From intimate gatherings of local residents in village pubs to packed sessions in larger cities, music flows well into the night. At the end of the evening the musicians are tired, yet curiously energized, staggering not so much from the drink as from the wealth of tunes they have heard and shared, tunes that are still rolling through their memory, savored in a low whistle, in a rhythm tapped out on a table, or in a spontaneous dance step across the kitchen floor the following morning.

This article draws on fieldwork that I conducted as a Fulbright scholar, from January through June of 2010 at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance in the University of Limerick. My project was to examine traditional tune acquisition in Ireland’s Shannon Region. Shortly after my arrival at the academy, the faculty, staff, and students began a long-awaited move from the County Limerick side of the university campus into new quarters on the County Clare side, across the Shannon River. The director of the Academy, Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, noted with pride that the academy would be relocating in the county best known for traditional music performance. As I came to know musicians in both counties, I found talent everywhere, but the common perception was that traditional music performance was stronger in County Clare. “You should go to the sessions in Doolin,” one woman advised. “They play fast.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Doolin, in County Clare, is noted for sessions that are popular with young players, with lots of reels, played at breakneck speed.

What would I be finding in the Shannon Region of Ireland in the early months of 2010? First, there was an overwhelming abundance of sessions. By this I am referring to informal gatherings in public houses (“pubs”) for the purpose of sharing tunes and songs. In a relatively small geographic region surrounding my apartment in the village of Annacotty, near the University of Limerick, there were at least three or four traditional music (“trad”) sessions in progress every night of the week—all of them held in pubs. Some of them were large, hosting twenty or thirty musicians, and others were relatively small, with a core group of four or five musicians and occasional visitors who pulled up chairs, unpacked their instruments, and joined in. The instruments played were standard for the current Irish traditional music scene: fiddles, concertinas, accordions, Uilleann pipes, tenor banjos, flutes, tin whistles, guitars or bouzoukis, and a bodhrán (Irish drum) or bones. The sound was acoustic, not amplified. In one rare exception, a session included a small electric piano, used only for melody. The players typically formed a circle in a corner or the side of an open room. Sometimes a table where they assembled would have a hand-written sign on it, “musicians,” which was a signal that pub-goers who were not going to perform would have to sit elsewhere. According to



Figure 1. The musicians’ circle at Nancy Blake’s pub, Limerick City, County Limerick, Ireland.



Figure 2. Leaders of Nancy Blake’s session: Cathal (fiddle) and Mick (bodhrán). (Photos by N. McEntire)

well-established custom, musicians engaged in the ritual of an Irish session were expected to form their own subgroup within the larger social and cultural context of the pub. As the pub patrons came and went, drinking and talking, the musicians held their own, playing exclusively for each other and ignoring the swirl of activity around them. However, sometimes the musicians would attract the attention of those around them with an especially lively tune or a poignant slow air. There were also times when a band member would invite an acquaintance to join the musicians to sing, play an instrument, or even to dance. According to musician and scholar Scott Reiss, “The pub session is an arena in which symbols, both concrete and aural, define the boundaries of the traditional music community.” He further defines the session as a “. . . ritual of sharing in which the values of the community are enacted.” (Reiss 2003: 148). As both a participant and an observer in Irish sessions in the Shannon Region, I was able to understand firsthand the boundaries and the ritual sharing that Reiss defines.

One thing that was obvious at first glance was that the structure of the session was relaxed. The musicians seldom organized themselves according to their instrument, as more formal musical ensembles might have done. Fiddle players would be scattered here and there, as would flute or whistle players. The tunes were played in unison, with no harmonies. During the repetitions of the tunes there were no solo “breaks,” as there are, for example, in bluegrass music. Although there was individual ornamentation, it was not emphasized to the point that it interrupted the general flow of the tune for the entire group.

The goal of the session, understood by those who participated but was seldom articulated, was the joy of shared music, with an emphasis on group performance. This goal shifted, of course, if someone decided to sing a solo, in which case the room would be “hushed” in order for an unamplified voice to be heard beyond the clinking of glasses and the peripheral hum of conversation.

Most of the evening, however, was devoted to groups of tunes, called sets. If the initial tune of a set was a reel, the next tune would also be a reel, continuing the rhythmic pattern that had been established. The types of tunes that a musician could expect to hear would be reels, jigs, slip-jigs, hornpipes, polkas, waltzes, or marches. Most tunes were performed in the standard AABB format, in which an eight-bar melodic theme was played and repeated; this was followed by another eight-bar melodic theme, which was also repeated. Then the entire tune was played again, but usually no more than once or twice. As a tune moved through the repetition of its B section, musicians often looked to the person who had started the tune for a subtle cue regarding its conclusion. A nod or a glance or even a vocalized exclamation (*whop!*) would be enough to signal to the entire group that the ongoing tune was about to end and that another tune would be taking its place, continuing or rounding out the set. At the conclusion of a set of tunes, the musicians would take a short break, welcoming a chance to drink, talk, and tell jokes. In public houses, this pattern of playing and singing, drinking, storytelling, and joke telling would continue throughout the evening until closing time. Depending on the strictness of the proprietor, the session would either come to an end and the musicians would have a last set of tunes or a final song, such as “The Parting Glass,” or it would continue unofficially after the ostensible closing of the pub. In this case, the blinds would be pulled down and the main door locked. Snug and companionable, the musicians would play on, often for hours. At the end of this late session, the remaining guests would leave through a side door, darting into an alley, supposedly to avoid the watchful eye of the police as they made their way home.

As the weeks passed, I visited sessions regularly—early and late, occasionally joining in on the whistle or singing. I took advantage of the breaks between sets of tunes to talk to nearby musicians. In some cases I made arrangements to interview them at a later date. During the sessions themselves and in subsequent interviews with individual players, I learned that patterns of seating and of interactions during the sets and during the breaks between sets provided useful ways of understanding the session as a dynamic social event as well as an informal musical performance. Paying close attention to these behaviors

helped frame isolated music performances within a larger ethnographic context (Knetia 1990: 82-83).<sup>2</sup>

The scope of what is described as Irish traditional music has expanded greatly since Sean Ó Riada's early description of it as ". . . untouched, un-Westernized, and orally transmitted." Times have changed—and they continue to change. Following the advice of Ó Riada's famous student, Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, who noted the impracticality of talking about Irish music in its ". . . narrow tribal sense," scholars have continued to rework their definitions of Irish traditional music.<sup>3</sup> The music has not remained untouched, with world-music, rock, country and western, and electronic-music influences continuing to make significant contact with Irish traditional tunes. Similarly, tunes are learned orally, but they are also learned from sheet music, from Internet communications, from YouTube videos, and from widely distributed MP3 files. For those who have access to the Internet, popular websites for learning Irish traditional music abound. All of them provide electronic "shorthand" transcriptions, sheet music, Midi recordings of tunes, and opportunities for on-line, virtual discussions about Irish music.

Similarly, the process of tune acquisition has changed significantly in recent decades. It was, in the past, ". . . a matter of listening closely to a well-regarded player, or a small collection of players, and then using those examples as guides for proper forms of expression, techniques, and repertoire" (Smith: 118). It emphasized education through listening and imitating the style of a master player, someone who lived nearby or even in the same household. Whereas Irish traditional music acquisition used to be geographically contained within one region and more private in its method of dissemination, it is now widely accessible and public. The individual performer is being replaced by the group, and regional style, especially in urban areas, is evolving into a uniform, fast-paced music session, packed with performers.<sup>4</sup> Trad sessions are now a familiar component of Irish-themed bars and restaurants throughout the world.<sup>5</sup>

Within my own scope of the Shannon region in Ireland, as the months passed I found that despite the emphasis on uniformity and speed, quite a bit of learning was going on in Irish sessions. Although it was not rote learning—a process often associated with music

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Kwabena Nketia notes that the word context can refer to many frames of reference: historical contexts, ethnographic contexts, musical contexts, etc. "Indeed," he writes, "every discipline seems to have its favorite contextual frames of reference" (1990: 81).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of both of these definitions, see Vignoles, Julian. "What is Irish Popular Music?" *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1984): 70–72; see also Kinsella, Thomas and Ó Cannain, Tomas. *Our Musical Heritage*. Mountrath, Ireland: Fúndúireacht an Riadaig and The Dolmen Press, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Speed is also a highly politicized parameter of style. The age-old paradigm of many musics, that young people play too fast, occurs here [in discussions of Irish traditional music] (Keegan 88).

<sup>5</sup> It is widely believed that the first known of these modern pub sessions took place in 1947 in London's Camden Town at a bar called *The Devonshire Arms*. (Some researchers believe that Irish immigrants in the United States may have held sessions before this); the practice was later introduced to Ireland.

acquisition—the player who attended a session often approached it as an opportunity to hear new tunes and to improve his or her performance of known tunes. Furthermore, a player who was new to a session had much more to assimilate than a rhythmic arrangement of notes. The learning process was as much social as it was mental. The ritual behaviors, seating arrangements, selections of tunes, and acceptance or, in rare cases, rejection of musicians, were based on “understood” yet unspoken behavioral cues. Galway accordion player and piper Eamonn Costello had this to say about the session:

*A lot of it [session playing], I suppose, is about knowing your position. Knowing your place. That means that you don't try to play on every tune. You don't want to ruin a tune. Generally speaking, I'd say that most people would feel that it's better to have a certain amount of tunes before you come in [to a session]. Even if it's only ten tunes that you can play. It isn't good for your own development to come to a session too early, for a number of reasons. One, if you start making a lot of mistakes, you might get very discouraged. You might start developing a pattern of nervousness. On a second level, you might get negative feedback, which could make you think, "These people aren't nice." You might have a bad experience. On the other hand, a good experience at a session can be uplifting, and the player will want to come back or even to attend regularly.* (Costello, Interview, March 29, 2010)

Further examinations of the process of tune acquisition revealed more about the social dimensions of informal music learning. For example, players who knew each other well and were comfortable playing together tended to form more of a circle, whereas players who were not familiar with each other tended to group themselves less intimately, sometimes sitting in lines, with less chance for face-to-face contact. The stronger players were at strategic positions, always maintaining eye contact with each other, and sometimes seated close to each other. Less-secure players tended to sit in the outside edge of a circle or would form



Figure 3. Master flute player Paul Smyth (*upper right*) leads a session at Liam o Rian's pub in Ballina, County Clare, Ireland.

outer circles around the core players. If a newcomer played well during the evening, he or she might eventually move into the core circle of players, and most certainly would be offered a drink—another clear sign of acceptance.

The outer fringes of the session might continue to sustain less-secure players, but too many of them could have a negative effect on the musical quality of the group as a whole. Eamonn Costello offered further observations of session dynamics:



Figure 4. Fiddle player Noel McCarthy is an honored guest at the musician's circle, Guerin's pub, Castleconnell, County Limerick, Ireland. Note the variety of instruments.



Figure 5. A newcomer, playing the fiddle, (*right*), is welcomed to the circle at Nancy Blake's pub in Limerick City. The bodhrán player, Mick, is inviting him to join.



Figure 6. Hughes' pub, Dublin, Ireland. Two whistle players are seated "outside" the circle.

*A friend of mine was talking about this phenomenon—it happens, where someone plays in sessions, and their ability to play alone might not be great, but they can kind of hang on to the other musicians. . . . We call them "chancers." They want to play, and they say to themselves, "Well, it's loud enough, I can play this now." (Costello, Interview, March 29, 2010)*

Too many chancers could bring down the general level of musicianship, resulting in a dull or uninspired session. At the lowest end of the session behavior were players who played out of tune, out of rhythm, or played wrong notes so consistently that they were disruptive. Eventually these players might be asked to put away their instruments, although that was considered to be a drastic action.

Based on my observations during my Fulbright research in the Shannon region of Ireland, Irish sessions are welcoming and energetic. People of all ages participate, from children to grandparents. In some cases, children sit next to a parent, watching, listening, and imitating. In these cases, the session is truly a learning experience. The process of listening and acquiring tunes orally and informally continues with remarkable success. Visitors to an Irish session can witness this for themselves: A new generation of players is being trained as a natural part of community life. These young musicians are absorbing and acquiring culture within the context of a well-established ritual of listening, absorbing, and imitating. They may be listening to tunes on an iPod® or watching and listening





Figure 7. Father and son, Miltown Malbay, Co-  
 unty Clare, Ireland.



Figure 8. Mother and daughter, Miltown Malbay,  
 County Clare, Ireland.

to other musicians on YouTube, but the fact is that they are still imitating what they see and hear, and that they bring this knowledge to a session, where it is “tested” within a community of musicians, face to face.<sup>6</sup>

No two sessions are alike, even if the same musicians gather week after week in the same pub and often repeat favorite tunes. The pace will vary; new musicians will show up and add their own tunes to the mix; one tune will spark a memory on the part of one of the players, resulting in a new variant of a well-known tune or a fresh tune altogether. A quote from Ciaran Carson’s tantalizing book, *Last Night’s Fun*, evokes the joy of a good session. In a pub called The Bear’s Lair, he has met a fiddle player named Fred Lail, and the two of them pass a joyful evening of “kinship” through the discovery of a shared repertoire. Carson writes:

*At the end of the night we play “The Mountain Road” about twenty-something times for the sheer joy and hell of it, and because it’s a good, well-constructed tune that bears playing again and again. Each time round we find another nuance, another way of going off the metronome while keeping to the wavy underlying beat, and after so many times you lose count of them. There is no chronological time, because the tune invents its own dimensions. The mountain road winds up and up in ornamental gradients, each twist with yet another view: so many zigzags, till you hit the plateau and you see how far this road extends; now you’re on a steady rolling level, it’s as if the road is taking you, not you taking it. (Carson 74–75)*

In her recently published article, “The Inner and the Outer at the Time of Performance of the Scottish Folk Play ‘Galoshins,’” Emily Lyle refers to the physical inner and outer spaces

<sup>6</sup> Although much learning of tunes occurs informally, with a young person listening and imitating an older family member or a talented neighbor, the founding of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) in 1951 has led to competitions and classes for thousands of young people throughout Ireland and a widespread recognition of the importance of traditional music and dance (see Williams 2010: 228-229).

for the ritual performance of a traditional guising tradition, with the house that the guisers visit serving as a temporary “theater,” and the door of the house serving as a threshold between the inner world of the performance and the outer, nonperforming world (Lyle 2011: 313–317). Lyle extends her interpretation to include less-tangible, imagined spaces, in which the performer’s inner world exists “... in contrast to the outer world of the everyday” (Lyle 2011: 321). In the case of the Irish session, a similar dichotomy presents itself through the physical separation of the musicians from the pub-going audience. A separation also occurs within the circle of players: The core players constitute the inner space, and players who sit outside of the circle inhabit a less-intimate, outer space in which to perform. Finally, when considering the imagined, inner world of the session performance, musicians often mention that playing with others can be a transforming experience. The sensation of being outside of time is often mentioned. The evening hours will seem to fly past, the worries of the everyday world will not penetrate the inner world of music, and a sense of shared enthusiasm will lift the spirits of everyone who is involved. This non-tangible realm is magical. It is created within the ritual of the Irish session, separated from the outer world of ordinary life.

In an interview at the University of Limerick, Irish musician Charlie Piggott recalled an extraordinary experience that he had shortly after a lively session:

*I remember playing with this girl that I recorded a CD with one time. We weren't particularly drunk or anything. We were . . . getting into playing reels, and getting in on this thing where you are just moving, you know. And suddenly she began to play reels that I'd never heard in my life before. And I played them along perfectly. I mean note for note. And I remember being really surprised by this myself, saying, "Where is this coming from? I don't know these tunes at all." I never knew them. I played them perfectly. I wasn't following her, but playing with her, you know. And it really frightened me. I think there's some other level there that we're not connected with in normal thinking. Definitely there's some sort of an area where—that whole music thing, it's sitting somewhere else. Lots of people talk about music having a life force of its own. We don't know, I suppose, really. It's quite amazing, isn't it? Incredible energy. I remember I'd often go to a session, and I'd be so tired, I wouldn't even feel like going out. [It would be] 9 or 9:30, but the playing would be incredible. This wouldn't be 'normal' playing; this would be, oh, you could tell. You were just saturated with the energy. You're completely energized by one or two o'clock. You'd wake up the next morning and you'd be fresh. Amazing! Music has a very powerful effect, doesn't it? (Piggott, Interview, April 9, 2010)*

In this example, the ritual of the session has led to a music “bond,” and the two players continue to move into an inner realm of communication together, playing reels late at night. This leads to a startling discovery, an awareness of a mysterious inner world that is accessible through a rare and seemingly mystical shared musical experience. Piggott



also mentions the remarkable power of a good session to provide the musicians with an unexpected gift of energy. Not everyone will have Piggott's experiences, but for many who participate in Irish sessions, the act of sharing melodies, enjoying lively conversations,<sup>7</sup> and renewing a sense of community are essential to its success. Although some sessions certainly are livelier than others, the basic values of the session remain "understood" by performers and audience members alike:

- 1) Musicians may congregate in a pub for the purpose of sharing tunes and songs.
- 2) They may sit at a certain table or in a certain section of the pub that is traditionally "reserved" for sessions.
- 3) Key players, forming an inner circle, will guide and control the session, establishing both physical and aesthetic boundaries.
- 4) Less-experienced players may sit on the periphery of this inner circle.
- 5) Tunes are played by ear; sheet music is neither necessary nor desirable.
- 6) The music itself will consist of sets of specific tune types, such as a set of reels, or jigs, or hornpipes.
- 7) Tunes are played in unison, and are repeated as desired by the players.<sup>8</sup>

These core values, although they are seldom articulated, serve as traditional guidelines: They control the pace and structure of the session; they establish boundaries between the core musicians and those outside of the core, allowing both aural and social learning to take place. Under most circumstances, the ritual of the session provides a positive experience for all players, no matter how far from the circle they might be.

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<sup>7</sup> Irish session participants often refer to a lively evening of witty conversation and general fun as good "craic," further distinguishing the event as being better than (or outside of) everyday life.

<sup>8</sup> The ending of a tune (and how many times it is repeated) is usually controlled by the player who has initiated that tune, although this also can be decided by one of the key players in the session.

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## RAZISKOVANJE POUKA TRADICIJSKE GLASBE V IRSKI REGIJI SHANNON

*Izvajanje irske tradicijske glasbe danes cveti: tako pri tedenskih srečanjih lokalnih prebivalcev v krajevnih pubih kot pri učnih urah v večjih mestih so irski glasbeniki pogosto obkroženi z mladimi instrumentalisti, ki jih željno poslušajo in se učijo njihovega repertoarja. Kako se danes izvaja učenje tradicijske glasbe? Kateri vrsti stila, če sploh, sledijo novi instrumentalisti? Razprava temelji na pogovorih s številnimi glasbeniki v okrožjih Limerick in Clare na Irskem in dokumentira nekdanje in sedanje načine učenja in izvajanja irskih napevov. Avtorica ugotavlja, da je bilo seznanjanje z irsko tradicijsko glasbo v preteklosti geografsko zamejeno znotraj posamezne regije, njegova metoda razširjanja pa bolj osebna. Tradicijski glasbenik je zrasel v specifičnem glasbenem okolju in si postopoma – skozi proces, ki ga je eden od glasbenikov opisal kot osmozo – osvojil tako repertoar kot stil. Danes je skoraj vsak napev dostopen na spletnih straneh. Namesto posameznika, instrumentalista igra skupina; namesto individualno, regionalno obarvanih izvedb slišimo enotni stil, ki ga izvajajo številni izvajalci s širokim naborom instrumentov.*

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