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# THE “*REEL* THING” BEYOND THE DIASPORA: DETTERRITORIALIZING IRISH MUSIC IN FRANCE

Erick Falc’her-Poyroux

Unlike other conquerors, the Irish have undoubtedly subjugated the world in the most peaceful and joyful of manners: with their music, songs and dances. Every city in Europe and beyond now has its own Irish pubs, and most have their Irish music sessions and set-dancing classes where European nationals join in and become musically *Hiberniores Hibernis ipsis*. This paper will consider the multiple factors that give Irish music such a universal appeal, far beyond the Irish diaspora. We will first trace briefly the development of a music-based economy in Ireland from the 20th century to the present. We will then attempt to explore the origins of the expansion of an Irish music scene beyond the Irish diaspora, with a particular emphasis on the French case, before concentrating on the significance of the French summer schools. Our final part will analyse the large-scale adjustments that have transformed Irish music into a global phenomenon, while Ireland itself seems eager to reterritorialise its cultural creativity.

## AN INDUSTRY IN ITS OWN RIGHT

In the early 1990s in Ireland, music magazines such as *Hot Press*, previously more interested in rock & pop music, began publishing articles on Irish traditional music and its cultural and economic importance. It was around this time that the idea of a campaign was developed to intensify state support for all genres of music as a new economic vehicle. This campaign, initiated by *Hot Press* in 1993 and simply entitled “Jobs in Music”, was already sensing what a tangible music industry could look like, in a buoyant global context:

“There is absolutely no doubt that additional wealth, and jobs, can be created in the music industry in Ireland (...). At the risk of being repetitious, music is one of this country’s greatest natural resources. South Africa has its diamonds, the Middle-East its oil, France its food - we have our music. (...) Irish bands, songwriters and artists have proven that they - that we - are very good at this thing. Without any kind of government strategy an enormous amount has been achieved. Much more can be”.<sup>1</sup>

From the outside, the history of the music industry in Ireland could be seen therefore to begin in 1993. But on closer examination, this phase was only the culmination of a long process that had begun decades earlier.

The very first recordings of Irish traditional music were not made in Ireland, but in the United States and England, as the first studio in Dublin did not come into being until 1937. The rise of the American recording industry then saw the (future) big companies conquer the huge market of immigrants, be they Italian, Polish or Irish. It is therefore from the United States that the legitimacy of the Clancy

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<sup>1</sup> Niall CRUMLISH, “Industry Special : Irish Music - The Blueprint”, *Hot Press*, Vol. 17, N° 16, August 25 1993, p. 43.

Brothers' success came first, in the wake of John F. Kennedy's election as President of the United States in November 1960. Consecration was reached when they were invited onto the national Ed Sullivan Show in 1961, then asked to play at Carnegie Hall in 1962, and requested to play at the White House in 1963, where they ironically sang "We Want No Irish Here".

In addition to the ballads of the Clancy Brothers, the Chieftains offered instrumental music under the direction of a classically trained musician, Seán Ó Riada. From 1962 to 1975, the Chieftains remained an amateur group and were satisfied with occasional concerts in Ireland or Europe. They only moved up a gear after their first tour of the United States in 1974 when they hired an American manager. This strategic vision, now expected from all professional Irish musicians, was very innovative at the time. As the Irish market was notoriously too small to provide a decent living for Irish musicians, those who did not opt for emigration had to take advantage of their privileged access to certain countries, in particular the United States and Great Britain. This trend towards the export of Irish music and dance was the result of an inescapable economic fact: Ireland was and would remain too small a market for bands like the Chieftains, Planxty, Altan or Lankum.

## BEYOND THE DIASPORA

At the beginning of the 21st century, statistics on the Irish diaspora varied greatly depending on the chosen criteria. An official government report from 2015 indicates however that approximately 17% of those born in Ireland currently live abroad<sup>2</sup>. Not surprisingly, Irish music has become particularly well established in countries where this diaspora has been omnipresent for centuries: England, the USA, Canada and Australia, in particular. The growing popularity of master classes in Irish music and dance outside this diaspora is a more recent phenomenon: in Europe, Asia, South America, etc., most local musicians do not claim any particular Irish ancestry and only seek to perfect their technical knowledge and their practice of music and dance. This has been the case since the 1970's, as the Dutch uilleann pipes-maker Marc van Daal explains:

"The place where I live is very near the Belgium border and so I visited, with great regularity, folk concerts in Belgium where folk music is much more alive than in The Netherlands. This is also where I first got in contact with traditional Irish music. In 1975 I went to a concert of the, then totally unknown here, group Planxty [and] saw and heard an Irish piper (a very young Liam O'Flynn) demonstrate his abilities on this enchanting instrument. I was hooked on the uilleann pipes straight away and HAD to play the pipes no matter what".<sup>3</sup>

Irish music thus started making a major impact outside the Irish diaspora during the seventies, particularly in Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> The official government report of March 2015 remains rather vague on the question: *"it is believed that there are up to 70 million people around the world claiming Irish ancestry and heritage (...) There is no clear evidence to support this figure, but it certainly runs into the tens of millions"*. Global Irish - Ireland's Diaspora Policy, Bunreacht na hÉireann, March 2015.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.uilleann.net/uilleannHistory.htm>

Germany was also, and still is, one of the main areas of expansion, with the creation of the Irish Folk Festival tour by Carsten Linde in 1974: since then this major tour has helped continental Europeans discover household names in Irish music such as the Furey Brothers, Micho Russell, Clannad, De Danann, Altan, and many more.

In France, interest in Irish music first developed in the West, where musician and collector Polig Montjarret (1920-2003) was the main promoter of Brittany-Ireland relations, and the mastermind of the first Breton-Irish twinning between the cities of Lorient and Galway in 1975. It was in the same frame of mind that one of the most important festivals in Europe was created in 1971: the Lorient Interceltic Festival has since then brought together all the Celtic nations, welcoming more than 700,000 visitors annually and remaining one of the largest festivals in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

From very early on, the pioneers of "Celtic" music were particularly receptive to Irish sounds: Alan Stivell<sup>5</sup> and his guitarist Dan Ar Braz, and bands such as Tri Yann<sup>6</sup> or An Triskell (brothers Pol and Hervé Quefféléant), all emerged from Brittany and are still active almost fifty years later. It was also in Brittany in the middle of the 1970's that genuine enthusiasts learned to play "like the Irish": Alain Le Hégarat and Alan Kloatr (Alain Cloâtre, 1952-2018), then Patrick Molard (1951-) on the uilleann pipes, or Jean-Michel Veillon (1959-) on the wooden flute, encouraged by Robbie Hughes and Desi Wilkinson: they both continue to teach their passion and to tour the world, while another early follower in Brittany, flute-player Michel Bonamy, has become an Irish flute maker.

Largely thanks to the famous Parisian restaurant Ti Jos and to the Mission Bretonne in the Montparnasse district, Paris also became an important centre of Irish musical *joie de vivre*<sup>7</sup> and Christian Lemaître was one of the very first Frenchmen to master the fiddle technique. The Irish influence continued to spread during the 1980's with the creation in 1982 of the *Centre de Musique Irlandaise* and in 1984 of the *Association Irlandaise de Paris*<sup>8</sup>; that same year, the group Shamrock, created in 1981, was awarded the prize for "best music group" in Ireland at the Fleadh Cheoil in Kilkenny and subsequently signed a record deal with Polydor<sup>9</sup>: among its musicians are renowned and still very active figures of

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<sup>4</sup> Jean-Pierre Pichard was its director between 1971 and 2007, now replaced by Lisardo Lombardia. See [www.festival-interceltique.bzh](http://www.festival-interceltique.bzh).

<sup>5</sup> See in particular Alan Stivell's second album, *Renaissance de la harpe celtique*, Fontana 6325.302 (1972), as well as his album recorded live in Dublin: *Stivell - In Dublin, Am Baile Atha Cliath, Yn Nulyn*, Fontana 9299 547, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the Irish influence can be found in many traditional instrumentals throughout their albums, notably through cover versions of the little-known Irish group Skarae Brae, in particular "Cad é Sin don Té Sin" on *Suite Gallaise* (Marzelle 6325 700, 1974) ; "An Cailín Rua" (under the title "Si Mort a Mors") on *An Heol A Zo Glaz* (Marzelle 6313204, 1981); "An Suantraí" (under the title "La Ballade Du Cheval Mallet"), on *Anniverscène* (Marzelle 826 074-2, 1985). Unfortunately, the group never cites its sources.

<sup>7</sup> Two record companies in particular were involved: Arion and Ocora (Radio-France); see the recordings of Gérard Krémer, *Irlande Éternelle - Harpe Irlandaise, Pub Music*, Arion ARN 33196, 1973; and those of Josyane Bériou, *Ireland - vol. 1 Héritage Gaëlique Et Traditions Du Connemara*, Ocora 558 541, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> See [www.association-irlandaise.org](http://www.association-irlandaise.org)

<sup>9</sup> See the album Shamrock, *Mo Cheol Thú*, Polydor 825 577-1, 1985.

traditional Irish music in France such as Emmanuel Delahaye and Michel Sikiotakis. The latter created in 1988 one of the leading Irish music groups in France, Taxi Mauve, which also recorded an album in 1992<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, Marc(o) Pollier began to learn the uilleann pipes in Birmingham and, in the North of France, classical harpist Katrien Delavier became passionate about the metal string harp and produced two solo albums, and a third with the group Hempson<sup>11</sup>. She also shared the stage and her passion with Violaine Mayeur, a native of the Cévennes, who plays on a copy of Queen Marie's harp made by her husband Joël Herrou, and continues her research on the old playing technique<sup>12</sup>.

The 1990's were of course the peak era for musicians in France and around the world, benefiting from the fashion for "Celtic" music, notably Dan Ar Braz and his show "L'Héritage des Celtes", which was itself partly responsible for this renewed interest<sup>13</sup>. Among the dozens of musicians in his show are those who have made Irish music one of their specialities: Patrick Molard and Ronan Le Bars on bagpipes, Gilles Le Bigot, Nicolas Quemener and Jacques Pellen on guitars, Christian Lemaître on fiddle and Jean-Michel Veillon on flutes. At the same time, on the other hand, several professional French musicians who were passionate about Irish music chose to live abroad: this was the case of two fiddlers, Patrick Ourceau and Philippe Varlet, who have been living in North America since the 1980's, where they have pursued their careers as musicians and teachers.

This global musical wave gave birth in France to countless bands and Irish music sessions: the phenomenon has since then benefited from a new trend, as a considerable Irish pub industry developed globally at the same time<sup>14</sup>. Faced with the multiplication of Irish music enthusiasts residing all over France, Dominique Renaudin logically created the *Irlandetradfr* discussion list on the internet in 1998 to facilitate exchanges, which was to a large extent transferred a few years later to the Facebook page of the same name and which now boasts more than 1200 subscribers.<sup>15</sup>

## FRENCH SUMMER SCHOOLS

For the past thirty years, most of the major cities in France - and some smaller towns - have also had associations dedicated to Irish dancing and regular Irish music sessions, sometimes with specific slow sessions for beginners. Thanks to this popularity, some of these associations have also started organising intensive Irish music master classes, in summer or winter, which can claim to be as good, and sometimes better, than many similar events in Ireland, according to Irish musicians themselves. While many amateur French musicians do go to Ireland on

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<sup>10</sup> See the album Taxi Mauve, *Far Off Fields*, Keltia Musique KMCD 37, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> See Katrien Delavier, *La Harpe Irlandaise*, Playasound PS 65095, 1992 ; *Harpes d'Irlande - Fishing in the rain*, CD Playasound PS 65148, 1995. Hempson - *Irlande - Musique Ancienne Irlandaise / Early Irish Music*, Auvidis Ethnic, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> See Violaine Mayeur, *D'Eau et de Lumière*, VM04, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> See Dan Ar Braz, *Héritage Des Celtes*, Columbia, COL 477763 2, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> All major Western cities now have at least one Irish pub, often supplied to the owner on a turnkey basis by a company specialising in this industry, and based on the desired category (gastronomic, Victorian, brewery, boutique, Celtic...): see for example the catalogue of the company that created the concept, the Irish Pub Company, founded in 1990 and a partner of the Guinness brewery: <http://irishpubcompany.com>

<sup>15</sup> See [www.facebook.com/groups/IrlandeTradFr](http://www.facebook.com/groups/IrlandeTradFr)

a regular basis to attend master classes in festivals, or simply sessions in their favourite counties, Irish music master classes in France represent an easy way to meet “the *reel* thing” in a cheaper and warmer environment: among the main summer schools, “*Celticimes*” in Albiez-Montrond in Savoie is the most recent and was created in July 2010; the Irish rendez-vous festival each autumn in Morbihan has been in existence since 2009; the Morbihan winter school (formerly “*Bono Winter School*”, now renamed “*Brittany Winter School*”) in the commune of Arzon has existed since 2007; and “*An Seisiún / La Session*” in Mesquer, in Loire-Atlantique, has been running since 2002.<sup>16</sup>

But the most important and oldest of these master classes was created in 1991 in the Dordogne region by Claude Fossaert and Philippe Giraud, two French fiddlers. Every July, the *Rencontres de Tocane* recruits the *crème de la crème* of Irish musicians to teach their passion, and attracts musicians from all over Europe for an intensive week of Irish music<sup>17</sup>: since its beginnings, and thanks to the coordination of Irene Martin, Tocane has seen more than 200 Irish musicians teaching master classes. The list of teachers is a veritable pantheon of Irish music: After Gerry “fiddle” O’Connor, Desi Wilkinson, Eithne Ní Uallacháin and Brendan Begley in the first year, Tocane saw the arrival of Martin Hayes, Jackie Daly and Kevin Burke during the same decade, Paddy Glackin, Lillis Ó Laoire, Geraldine Cotter, Mary McNamara, Maighread Ní Dhomhnaill, Ronan Browne, Julia O’Keeffe, Kevin Crawford, Fintan Vallely, Terry Moylan, Séamus Creagh, Nollaig Casey, Liz Doherty, Kevin Glackin, Charlie Piggott, and since the turn of the millennium Matt Cranitch, Hammy Hamilton, Conal Ó Gráda, Áine Uí Cheallaigh, Siobhán Peoples, Siobhán Armstrong, Kieran Hanrahan, Laoise Kelly, Paul de Grae, Dermot Byrne, Kevin Conneff, Niall Vallely, Karen Casey, Caitlín Nic Gabhann, Zoë Conway, and many others.

The special significance of the discreet Tocane has been confirmed by the interest shown by the Irish Traditional Music Archive which, since 2014, has been collecting documents relating to the history of the *Rencontres Musicales Irlandaises de Tocane*. This unprecedented recognition outside the Irish diaspora is here explained by Nicholas Carolan, its then director:

“It seemed a perfect sample of globalisation (...), but there wasn't any documentation. And one of our remits is to document Irish traditional music, collect the materials of Irish traditional music and information about it, not just in Ireland, not just among the Irish diaspora, but worldwide because we're interested in all performers of Irish traditional music wherever they are.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See [celticimes.org](http://celticimes.org); [bws-irl.com](http://bws-irl.com); [www.anseisiun.fr](http://www.anseisiun.fr). The French phenomenon is not unique in Europe, and Italy has some excellent small festivals, including two in Emilia-Romagna: Bobbio, which since the 7th century has been home to a monastery founded by the Irish monk Saint Columban, has been hosting the *Irlanda In Music* festival in mid-July every year since 1998 ([www.irlandainmusica.com](http://www.irlandainmusica.com)); and Umberto Bisi created in 2012 the small *Éire!* festival in Bondeno, which takes place every year at the end of August ([www.eirelafesta.it](http://www.eirelafesta.it)).

<sup>17</sup> See [www.rencontresmusicalesirlandaisestocane.fr](http://www.rencontresmusicalesirlandaisestocane.fr)

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Carolan, interview with the author for the documentary *Tocane: Ceol agus Dordogne*, Erick Falcher-Poyroux, 2017 (<https://youtu.be/LdtkxlWG2iM>). Nicholas Carolan retired in September 2015 and was replaced by Grace Toland, who also taught at Tocane (singing, 2005).

All these encounters between Irish music enthusiasts are thus an opportunity for musicians from all over France to meet "in real life" and not only thanks to the internet<sup>19</sup>; more importantly, the essential activity of these few days is to "*sessionner*" (a recent neologism of a verb) for long hours, until very late at night, or even until the early morning, to play and play again all the great classics of "Irish trad" and if possible learn new rare melodies. Everyone will leave after a few days, determined to improve their technique or to widen their repertoire to come back the following year in the best conditions.

As in Ireland, these collective communions of the new age are not without some religious connotations; one will thus find, around a high priest (the musician coordinating the session), all the main attributes of the classical liturgy: songs and recitatives, the ritual of tuning, the sacred language, the tacit communion for the sequence of melodies, maybe some dancing, devotion to the great figures of the past, a passionate fervour for the tune names, the endless prayers to obtain a drink from the waiter, the discreet consultations and whispers, and so on. Were it not for the almost ritual absence of bursts of laughter, one would think one was in Ireland.

A new generation of French musicians has therefore emerged over the last fifteen years or so and, for many of them, it is their parents who have passed on this passion for the country and its music: some of them have even become established professionals in Irish music in France. Although few bands last more than a couple of years, and even fewer are those that make a living solely on Irish music and dance, one should mention names such as Avalon Celtic Dances, Blackwater, Broken String, Dirty Linen, Doolin, Dusty Feet Céilí Band, Faolan, Gaolta, Garlic Bread, Poppy Seeds, Shelta, The Boys in the Gap, The Rolling Frogs and many others.

### **RETERRITORIALISING?**

One of the spectacular consequences of the deterritorialisation of Irish music, however, has been the attempt at repatriating it, notably with the successful attempts of the – somewhat fragmented – Irish musical world at reterritorialising its music-making creativity and resources via campaigns aimed at securing a place on Unesco's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage for the uilleann pipes and the harp.

The very nature of Irish music at the beginning of the 21st century is thus a far cry from what it was a century or so ago. A new musical universe has emerged, in many ways, summarized here by Susan Motherway :

- 1. the identification of general rules and codes of practice for the performer*
- 2. the emergence of musical arrangements with increased instrumental diversity*
- 3. a change in the performance context*
- 4. the establishment of a common repertoire*
- 5. the establishment of a formalized learning system*
- 6. the establishment of an evaluation process and performance standards*

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<sup>19</sup> In addition to the Facebook group [www.facebook.com/groups/IrlandeTradFr](http://www.facebook.com/groups/IrlandeTradFr) for general discussions, the website [www.bzh-session.org](http://www.bzh-session.org) is packed with information about Irish music sessions in Brittany. Several cities in France also have dedicated websites and [www.agendatrad.org](http://www.agendatrad.org) offers broader information on all types of traditional music.

7. *the evolution of a competition process for validating proficient performers*
8. *the emergence of professionals and masters of the tradition*
9. *the reification of 'super-star' performers*
10. *the establishment of a fee scale for public performances.*<sup>20</sup>

The transmission of musical knowledge, which was once the preserve of itinerant musicians and dancers, can therefore be witnessed today— and since the 1960s – mainly in pubs, and has taken on a new dimension outside the Irish diaspora and on the Internet since the turn of the millennium.

Symbolised by the creation in 1987 of the Irish Traditional Music Archive in Dublin, the revival of Irish music has also been marked by a series of facts, which can be listed as follows: 1/ the multiplication of university institutions and associations in Ireland and abroad – whether with a global vision or specialized by instrument; 2/ the revival of step dancing in Ireland, then well beyond the borders thanks to the worldwide success of the Riverdance show and its imitations; 3/ the development of dance competitions and the positive emulation they generate all over the world, despite the valid criticisms; 4/ the constant regeneration and sharing of the repertoire, styles and instruments used by musicians, with the global participation of online communities<sup>21</sup> and even thanks to Artificial Intelligence<sup>22</sup>; 5/ the technological inventiveness and meticulousness of contemporary instrument makers, many of whom are not Irish – even by descent – and hail from places as far apart as Australia, the USA, France or Japan.

## CONCLUSION

At this stage in our historical and cultural journey, it seems obvious that no one can reduce Irish music to its mere presence in pubs, although this reductive vision adequately sums up the road travelled: from its original sacred or recreational character, music and dance in Ireland were transformed in the 19th century into an affirmation of identity, later into a patriotic vector and sometimes into a tool of control by certain activists, and more recently into an entertainment and consumer product. But music as a cultural reality also remains a process driven by constant amateur practice, an uninterrupted tradition that is now particularly widespread. While this evolution essentially took place in Ireland at first, it now extends beyond the limits of the island and is now widely exported. Some may see it as the loss of the Irish soul, but no one can deny that it would have disappeared body and soul with many of its European, American, Asian, etc., counterparts, without this constant adaptation.

In spite of all this, the Irish public remains largely unaware of the unparalleled importance of Irish music in its internal and external economy, and unaware of the avant-garde nature of the music market in particular and of the cultural agenda as a rule. Irish music is fascinating precisely because of this capacity for evolution,

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<sup>20</sup> Motherway, Susan H., *The Globalization of Irish Traditional Song Performance* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2016), 149.

<sup>21</sup> See [www.thesession.org](http://www.thesession.org)

<sup>22</sup> See [www.themachinefolksession.org](http://www.themachinefolksession.org) and [www.folkrrn.org](http://www.folkrrn.org), as well as the extrardinary fake story of the O'Conaill family: [www.highnoongmt.wordpress.com/2018/09/24/an-experimental-album-of-irish-traditional-music-and-computer-generated-tunes](http://www.highnoongmt.wordpress.com/2018/09/24/an-experimental-album-of-irish-traditional-music-and-computer-generated-tunes)



and because of this fertile adaptation to changes both in time and space: from a small island on the edge of an old continent to the Irish diaspora around the world, from an aristocratic profession to a popular activity, from an essentially rural existence to an urban enthusiasm, from small kitchens to world stages, from dance music to orchestral compositions, from seasoned Irish musicians to French beginners joining sessions in pubs, etc., its capacity for integration seems boundless.

Irish music has therefore achieved a real *tour de force*: offering the world a piece of its culture while retaining an authentic function within its own society. And this artistic duality is all the more relevant since, at the same time, this contribution has been reintegrated by Ireland as a validation of its identity by the international community.

As a result, Irish music now extends far beyond the confines of its home territory and is taking root in many parts of the world, often without the Irish diaspora playing any role in it. From this perspective, it remains very difficult to circumscribe too precisely what will become of the Irish musical tradition as it challenges today's vision of Irishness in favour of multiple and flexible forms of identity. In the same way as it would have been difficult to predict in the early 20th century what was to become of jazz music, or to foresee in the 1960's the future of reggae music, no one really knows where Irish music will choose to go: from now on, it belongs both to Ireland and to the world, and it is up to anyone, anywhere, to pass on this peaceful and joyful conquest of the world, with Irish music.