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TBC – the continuing story of Irish traditional music

Erick Falc'her-Poyroux – AFIS Conference, June 2023 – La Rochelle

The call for papers for this conference appealed to me because of the etymology of the word "adventure" (from the Late Latin word meaning "about to happen"), and to its potential link with the idea of tradition and traditional music. The word 'adventure', used in English since the 14th century, refers to an activity or event associated with exploration, travel, or taking risks and that often involves thrilling or unusual encounters: and all of these concepts are perfectly relevant to arts in general, and to music in particular.

But it struck me that over the last 30+ years I have consistently focused on the history & the past of Irish traditional music, although I have just as consistently defended the idea that tradition is not only about the past, but that it's a perfect balance between past and future. And so it dawned on me that maybe, maybe, it was about time I considered the future of ITM – a risky adventure in itself.

I must confess I had no idea that the word "adventure" in its early usage referred to an unexpected event or an uncertain undertaking. But I did know that the meaning later expanded to encompass a broader range of experiences involving excitement, novelty, and exploration, something both promising and precarious.

And incidentally, over the last decade, something quite remarkable has happened in terms of Irish arts, not just in Ireland, but across the world: Irish traditional music has once again revitalised itself, with two distinct strands: a vibrant and growing "new generation", and a more traditionalist "old guard". However, this is not a story of conflict or what I could call "virtual exclusion", but rather one of dialogue, integration, and, at times, realignment.

By realignment, I mean that for most musicians and researchers today, the future of Irish traditional music is precisely both promising and precarious. But where is Irish traditional music going, or rather, what could be in store for Irish Traditional music? What comes next?

I can't claim – to paraphrase Jon Landau in 1974 about Bruce Springsteen – to have seen the future of Irish music, but my deliberately very general question will lead me (or so I hope) to touch on various issues related to artistry, economics, instruments, gender, law, and even genetics (in a way)!

The evolving artistry within the genre is the primary aspect to explore. And one of the most important traits of arts, and among them Irish trad music as a performative art – even one of its defining characters – is that, unlike many other social activities, it appeals to all generations and to all walks of life. This major feature should not be underestimated: new generations of amateur and professional musicians constantly bring fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to traditional tunes, inject new life into old melodies and songs with bold arrangements. This is for example the case with artists such as Lankum & Jiggy in Dublin, or Caoimhe & Séamus Ó Flatharta in Connemara, to name but a few.

But in fairness the future of Irish traditional music in the coming decades for professionals will probably rely even more on economic factors, whether for international tours (the centrifugal movement which started in the 60's with professional luminaries such as The Chieftains) or for local tourism around both professional and amateur musicians (the centripetal movement in places such as Co. Clare, or Co. Kerry, etc).

And in this case, I am also speaking about the legal aspects surrounding Irish traditional music, such as copyright laws and protection of intellectual property. Since 1989, music recently composed in Ireland – if it is declared as such – can be protected by IMRO (the Irish Music Rights Organisation) for 70 years after the death of the composer, which is a common international practice. Although they argue against it, this position could push many traditional musicians to declare their compositions, which is almost never the case today: recent albums of Irish traditional music are full of new trad-sounding compositions that are not always referenced under the name of the author.¹ This is because traditional music has no owners, it has no authors in the economic sense of the term, unlike pop, rock, jazz, etc.

Few people, for example, are aware of the fact that the famous melody entitled “Mná na hÉireann”, popularised by the Chieftains in Kubrick's movie *Barry Lyndon* in 1975, is a composition by Seán Ó Riada. In 1990, however, it was covered under a different name by an English pop group (The Christians) and officially – but wrongly – considered by international copyright institutions as “trad. arr. H. Priestman” (i.e., “traditional music arranged by H. Priestman”), the tag allowing the British musician to receive royalties for the arrangements.

So in a sense, the current shift towards an individually focused economy indirectly promotes and will continue to promote cultural innovation. While this can be seen as a positive

¹ To name but a few of the best-known melodies by traditional musicians: “The Trip to Gort” (reel by accordionist Máirtín O'Connor), “The Trip to London” and “The Golden Stud” (jig and reel by fiddler Maurice Lennon), “Dinny O'Brien's” (reel by Paddy O'Brien of Nenagh), The Trip To Cullinstown (reel by Phil Murphy), The Kerfeunteun (jig by Hammy Hamilton), “Farewell to Whalley Range” and “The Trip to Hervé's” (slip jig and reel by flutist Mike McGoldrick), and countless other tunes that have never been officially declared by their rightful authors.

development, it also diminishes the space available for a cultural framework rooted in the shared ownership of music, which is fundamental to fostering a sense of communal identity.

Another avenue for the future – in the need for professional musicians to balance artistic honesty with commercial viability – is to find new and innovative ways to monetise their art, since this is bound to become a lasting aspect of the trad Irish scene: as most professional musicians in the world, Irish artists have started evolving towards more financial independence via online music tutoring and self-produced recordings and controlled distribution, with the use of new media and platforms, and there’s ample reason to believe that this trend will persist for the foreseeable future.

I can think of individuals such as Caitlín Nic Gabhann in Donegal, who is a great example of an outstanding musician and dancer, who also tutors dozens of concertina players in the world².

I can also think of collective organisations such as OAIM (Online Academy of IM) or tradirishmusic.com with amazing professionals such as Niall Vallely on concertina, Gerry O’Connor on banjo or John Doyle on DADGAD guitar.

In terms of sound shaping, a crucial role is played in this regard by instruments and instrument-makers. Future developments can be anticipated in particular for the emblematic instruments of Ireland, the harp and the uilleann pipes, which have both been inscribed onto UNESCO’s representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, but pose ethical questions about the materials used, such as ebony, leather, horse and fish glue. And I have also heard serious discussions about vegan-friendly uilleann pipes or vegan varnishes for string instruments³.

On the other side of the technological spectrum, we can certainly anticipate that new technologies will also influence the future of Irish traditional instruments. I am not thinking about MIDI instruments or virtual instruments (that’s old news by now...), but rather about augmented reality with VR headsets that could enable people to play an instrument, and I’m thinking about incorporating new sensors, actuators, and new digital interfaces to enhance the playability, tone, and versatility of existing instruments. And I’m also simply thinking about the potential inventions and/or adoptions of new instruments.

Finally, instrument makers will likely be interested to take into account the ever-increasing plague of musicians (especially older ones) by defining and refining solutions in ergonomics and

² www.caitlin.ie

³ See the new PipeCraft courses and workshops in uilleann pipes making by NPU. PipeCraft is situated in Clonshaugh Industrial Estate, Dublin 17. The courses are organised in partnership with Ballyfermot College of Further Education (BCFE). See NPU’s report <https://pipers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/PipeCraft-Update-220419.pdf>

design to improve the comfort, playability, and physical well-being of musicians through design modifications: yes, tendonitis is a major issue for musicians and dancers due to the repetitive movements, and I would passionately urge instrument-makers to assist us older musicians in finding ways to continue enjoying our instruments as we age.

More importantly, gender representation is another area that deserves particular attention: although some progress has been made, with a gradual shift towards greater inclusivity and recognition of female musicians mostly in amateur circles, the Irish trad music scene is still waiting for its revolution and the male-centred culture still remains in professional circles, as evidenced by recent campaigns such as Fairple, the website www.soundingthefeminists.com or, *#mifefosta*, all specifically about the trad music and dance scene. We can sincerely hope that the ongoing efforts to provide platforms and opportunities for women in Irish music will continue to reshape the gender dynamics within the genre and contribute to its ongoing evolution.

Lastly, the future of Irish traditional music may finally intersect with its international recognition and appeal, resulting in an even broader and more diverse community of enthusiasts. Irish traditional music today is therefore as much a direct product of the Irish people and their culture as it is a part of the world's artistic heritage, since it is catalogued, classified, recorded and broadcast: it can be considered to belong to the Irish people first and foremost, but in some respect also to all those who appreciate it all over the world, in the same way that jazz, flamenco or reggae have become part of the world's heritage.

So, to my first central question today, "Will Irish music survive in the coming decades?" I would like to answer: Yes, it is not only plausible but also highly probable, since the inherent resilience of the genre stems from its remarkable diversity, which enables it to adapt and endure over the long term: in other words, the more diverse a species is, and the more likely it is to adapt and to survive.

My second question today relates to what we can learn about the future, not only of the music itself and not even about arts only, but also about Ireland as a whole.

The first thing we need to remember / or establish (although it will seem evident to most of us) is that tradition is a living thing. This naturally ensures its relevance and adaptability.

However, in recent times, there has been a shift in perspective, as societies adopt a more cautious approach, similar to the historical "Arts and Crafts movement" of the 19th century, but

of a more radical nature: there is a contemporary yearning for a moment of reflection and questioning in Western societies, clearly visible among the younger generation.

There exists today a noticeable conflict between a perceived accelerating pace of progress and the movements that strive to decelerate this progress. This tension highlights the presence of opposing forces, which is not entirely new and can probably be traced back to movements like the slow food movement, created in 1986 in Italy (and which reached France in 1989, Germany in 1992, the USA in 2000, Japan in 2004, the UK in 2006)⁴.

Still in terms of popular culture, a recent parallel can be drawn with the contrast between the rising popularity of high-tech multi-cookers and the simultaneous longing to embrace traditional cooking methods within the family, or with in-person cooking lessons, or with TV programmes.

Another recent example concerns the technological quest for new materials and new techniques such as nanotechnologies, while at the same time, we can see a growing appreciation for traditional building techniques like timber framing or adobe bricks, or the revival of natural dyeing techniques in the textile industry.

Again, these opposing forces are not new, but there's a feeling (on my part anyway) that this interplay sets the stage for a potential breaking point between generations and a transformative shift in how tradition will be perceived and transmitted. For example, the younger generation's embrace of digital media and virtual experiences challenges conventional forms of cultural transmission. Virtual reality exhibits and interactive platforms redefine the way traditions are shared, bridging the gap between modern technology and heritage preservation.

Please allow me to briefly speak, after the future of music and the future of the transmission of tradition, about the future of Ireland, and what we can infer from my first two considerations.

It's certainly a gross understatement to say that Ireland's future will be paved with many challenges, including global ones – such as gender-related issues or the climate crisis – and some national ones – such as the housing crisis or the healthcare crisis.

But probably no challenge is more important in my view than the elephant in the white elephant in the room (or, should I say, the green, white and gold elephant), which is the potential reunification of Ireland in the coming decades.

While political and economic challenges are frequently cited as the primary concerns in this context, it is crucial to recognise and prioritise the cultural, social and artistic challenges as well.

I have shown in a previous article how the musical traditions in Northern Ireland did not evolve separately from the rest of the island, and how the so-called difference between a

⁴ <https://www.slowfood.com/about-us/our-history/>

protestant musical culture and a catholic musical culture is a figment of some people's imagination.

I have also shown in different writings that what constitutes today the most important element of Ireland's new identity is precisely the fact that the country now embraces and cultivates its fragmented nature by becoming one of the most tolerant nations in the world. This new social climate can for example be observed in a growing focus on equality and human rights, with increased awareness and advocacy for marginalised groups. Issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, disability rights, and racial justice have gained significant attention and support in Ireland. And legislative changes, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage and the repeal of the Eighth Amendment clearly reflect a shift towards a more inclusive society, a society whose identity is multifaceted.

In my perspective, it is this social shift, even more than political or economic action, that will provide the most powerful leverage for a profound evolution in the decades to come and that will enable (or not) the reintegration of the 6 counties into the Republic of Ireland.

More importantly, this social shift is being – and will continue to be – driven by profound cultural and social changes, which are a consequence of this pause for reflection, and are not only reflected but often led by artists and musicians.

By promoting dialogue, breaking down barriers, and fostering a sense of shared identity, artists and musicians contribute to a more consistent and interconnected society. But they also have a unique ability to challenge norms and outdated beliefs, amplify marginalised voices and spark conversations on important issues.

More than any other component of society, artists inspire, unite, and shape the collective consciousness necessary for a more inclusive and interconnected future for Ireland.

Finally, as a side note, I mentioned in my introduction the fact that in its early usage, "adventure" referred to something both promising and precarious, and became widely used in the English language during the 14th century.

As a matter of fact, I looked up the Irish word for adventure and uncovered an intriguing connection. The Irish word is *eachtra* [axtra] From Old Irish *echtra*, from *echtar* ("outside")⁵ and related to modern Irish 'eachtar' [axtr] = (used as the prefix Out- as in outlying), or as an adjective meaning external, foreign. (cf Teanglann).

⁵ Dumville, David N., *Echtrae and Immram: Some Problems of Definition*, *Ériu*, 1976, Vol. 27 (1976), Royal Irish Academy, pp. 73-94.

I think it is quite appropriate (especially at this time of unrest - not only in Co. Clare) to remind ourselves that the range of experiences involving novelty, stimulation and exploration in Irish music today – and in Irish culture as a whole – should also come from foreign influences and denote more of a promise than a peril, to encompass the notion of remarkable and exhilarating artistic encounters.