

## **Marginalised and Emerging Identities: The Traditional Voice in Irish Contemporary Music**

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Over the past three decades, the relationship between Irish traditional music and contemporary ‘art’ or classical music has been extensively documented and critiqued by musicologists and ethnomusicologists alike. The predominant focus of this scholarship, has more often than not, been in the realm of instrumental music. With the exception of a small body of research dealing specifically with hybrid forms of vocal music and the wider global and European contexts of Irish musical culture, such as the works of Susan Motherway (2013) and John O’Flynn (2009) for example, discussions about what the traditional music/contemporary art music relationship might mean for Irish cultural identity have, as consequence, also been limited to instrumental music. The longstanding European modernist idea that an independent instrumental art music is the sole marker of a highly developed musical culture has contributed to this discursive limitation, and has held influence (whether consciously or not) over Irish musicology. The fact that Irish musical culture has struggled to gain the same strong foothold as its literary equivalent within the field of Irish studies (White, 1998, 2008, 2014; Smyth, 2010) has also served to sideline discussions of Irish musical identity within broader cross-disciplinary contexts in the past. As a result, collaborations involving vocal music, particularly between sean nós and contemporary music (a relatively recent musical development that has gained momentum over the past decade) have been largely overlooked, as have discussions surrounding what collaborations between these two genres might mean for previous conceptions of Irish musical identity.

With this lacuna in mind, this article seeks to question how marginalised and emerging identities are negotiated in a particular type of musical collaboration: that between sean nós singers (the traditional voice) and contemporary music in Ireland (by which I mean contemporary music composed in the European ‘art’ music or classical style), drawing on musical examples to highlight the various nuances of these negotiations. Keeping in mind ethnomusicologist’s Philip V. Bohlman’s (2008) ‘paradox of alterity’, in which what seems new is in effect only different or ‘other’, and eschewing the realms of highly technical musical analysis in its discussion of this negotiation, I will instead focus on music and identity from a theoretical perspective, drawing on postmodern considerations and concerns more broadly across the field of the arts and humanities.

In addition, I wish to explore how the relationship between particular musical collaborations and identity in Ireland can also contribute new perspectives to musicology in terms of revising existing issues within the discipline in relation to the theoretical, linguistic and descriptive frameworks used to analyse and explain the meaning of this music from an identity perspective. My approach aims to offer some possible exploratory directions in relation to the issues of musical identity highlighted above, which can be framed within the context of this relatively new coming together of genres (bearing in mind Bohlman’s aforementioned caveat in relation to musical newness). It will also consider whether the concept of musical collaboration (an as of yet limited theoretical area of musicological study) can offer new perspectives on the well-trodden scholarly path of Irish identity. This is a somewhat challenging task, given that the

historical portrayal of traditional music and art music as binary opposites has overshadowed discussions of Irish musical identity within musicology (White, 1998, 2008, 2014; Dwyer, 2014; Deane, 1995, 2005). Before delving into the discourse between these two genres (more specifically between sean nós and contemporary music) and exploring some of the areas outlined above, it is first necessary to look at how the socio-historical discourse of sean nós has been shaped within musicology, and how its development as representative of both an emerging and marginal identity in Irish musical culture has led to its collaboration with contemporary music.

### **Sean nós singing: history and discourse**

In a general sense, sean nós (translation: ‘old style’) singing can be defined as unaccompanied solo singing in the Irish language, whereby variation and ornamentation of the melody are features. Although this is a common and widely accepted definition of the term, variations of what constitutes sean nós in terms of style and practice is the norm in academic literature, with scholars’ own cultural and political agendas often coming into play when defining the term and the practice it refers to. The issue is further complicated by the use of ‘traditional singing’ and ‘sean nós’ interchangeably, the former often covering a much broader remit of song and singing styles in Irish and English. Furthermore, much work has been done by scholars Lillis Ó Laoire (1998, 2005, 2011) and Éamonn Costello (2015) in relation to the Gaelic League’s official adoption of the term ‘sean nós’ in singing competitions. It is generally accepted that the term is more recent than the tradition or practice it relates to, and that it was applied as a label during the period of the Gaelic Revival to unaccompanied solo singing in the Irish language, specifically in the context of the Gaelic League’s Oireachtas festival, which was dedicated to the promotion and preservation of the Irish language (Ó Laoire, 1998). This distinction was deemed necessary in order to distinguish it from less ‘authentic’ vocal forms which existed and were practiced by Irish and non-native speakers alike in the first half of the 20th century (Ó Laoire, 1998). If by the twentieth century sean nós was actively promoted as the ‘authentic’ voice of the nation by the Gaelic League, an appreciation of the art form outside of the Gaeltacht areas in which it was practiced was not particularly forthcoming, as the following quote from scholar Róisín Nic Dhonncha (2012, p. 160) illustrates:

The sense of the ‘alien’ quality of sean nós was conveyed in articles which appeared in newspapers and journals in the early 1900s, such as the following in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, which was at the time edited by Patrick Pearse: ‘There is a really large body of the public who do not for a moment wish to sneer at traditional singing, though it be unpleasant to their ears’.

The aftermath of postcolonial nationalism and the dominance and importance of competitions in traditional music culture, coupled with the perception that sean nós singing was the preserve of Gaeltacht areas ensured that the practice also inherited a discourse which portrays it as a highly specialized and ‘unique’ form of Irish musical culture. It is considered an elite practice within traditional music itself, as the following extract from Nicholas Carolan (2007, p. ii), who is fondly remembering the ‘folk-revival’ period of the 1950s-1960s demonstrates:

There was a certain puritanism involved: in contrast to the overtly commercial musical worlds, traditional singing has a natural simplicity, directness and sincerity: it had deliberately uncomplicated musical textures and deliberately small musical forces. It

had an internationalism all of its own, and a certain feeling of being part of an aesthetic elite.

These examples highlight that sean nós is more often than not portrayed as a peripheral musical practice that is doubly excluded within academic scholarship. It is excluded both by the wider culture of traditional music, in which instrumental music is more popular and where sean nós is considered ‘elite’, and by the English speaking culture of Ireland, where the prevailing perception of sean nós as an Irish language tradition (as opposed to its reality as a hybrid tradition encompassing repertoire in Irish and English) and its associations with the more zealous strains of cultural nationalism within the Gaelic Revival context have cemented its position on the peripheries of Irish musical culture, its musical identity and voice characterised by its marginality.

### **Sean nós as emerging identity**

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this article raises the issue of whether it is possible for sean nós to be considered as representative of an emerging musical identity in light of the growing popularity of sean nós in new musical contexts, given that its position has always been on the peripheries or margins of Irish musical culture. This marginality is not unique to sean nós, and can be seen within the broader context of global folk and popular musics. For example, popular music scholar Fabian Holt (2008) has highlighted that some of the popular musics native to the USA are perceived as partially ‘foreign’ and have a marginal status in both the corporate music industry and American music studies. However to understand how what appear to be conflicting conceptions of sean nós are related and can co-exist within Irish culture, it is necessary to frame contemporary conceptions of sean nós within the context of globalisation and its homogenising forces alongside opposing postmodern concerns, which seek to highlight marginalised narratives and voices in a bid to accurately represent the fragmented and pluralistic nature of culture. Music has not been exempt from these opposing forces, and as scholar Susan Motherway (2013) has highlighted, the impact of the wider availability of recordings and technology and the opening up of new performance contexts and performance spaces to traditional singers as a result of these developments has meant that artists can now choose between the local/particular and the global/popular, or can enter into what Homi Bhabha determines as a third space, a non-localized place where mediation occurs—a space where musical collaborations exist.

The new developments mentioned above have meant that the audience for sean nós in hybrid and collaborative forms has grown, as it is presented in a variety of new cultural contexts. For example, sean nós singer Sibéal Ní Chasaide recently featured in a musical variety show at the Bord Gais theatre which was also broadcast on RTÉ entitled *Centenary*, as part of the official programme of the 1916 commemorations. The theatricality of the show was about as far removed from the traditional context of sean nós as is possible. However, the criteria which had previously served to marginalise sean nós in its traditional form, its uniqueness and aesthetic eliteness, its perceived ‘Irishness’, and its associations with a particular geographical place (The Gaeltacht) and time (historical Ireland) are celebrated in this particular performance context, its sense of ‘otherness’ brought to the fore. The irony of this is that the song sung by Ní Chasaide is a newly-composed piece in the sean nós style with orchestral accompaniment by composer Patrick Cassidy, based on a poem in the Irish language of the same name written in 1912 by Republican revolutionary leader Patrick Pearse, in which Ireland is personified as

an old woman who has lost her former glory and dignity. Once again, Bohlman's (2008, p. 108) paradox of alterity is at play here, where 'new' in this musical instance 'is not so much the product of historical change as it is of engagement with the displacement and disruption produced by alterity'.

Framing the contemporary development of sean nós within the context of the dual forces of postmodernism and globalisation enables us to understand how it can be considered as an emerging identity in the musical sense, in its extension beyond the boundaries of its traditional practice to create new performance contexts and opportunities for musical developments and collaborations, which has resulted in a larger public interest in contemporary sean nós music. However, as the previous musical example demonstrates, its representation as an emerging identity is contingent on its perception as an outsider in the mainstream musical culture of Ireland. It is through the voicing and representation of 'otherness' that sean nós as an emerging identity is characterised in the postmodern context.

This musical example demonstrates some of the limitations of Bhabha's third space theory, which Fabian Holt (2008, p. 46) has highlighted in his approach to American popular music studies, in that the marginal or postcolonial subject is being 'othered' rather than being brought into closer contact with the centre. Holt (2008, p. 46) instead conceptualizes marginality as located 'in-between' musical and cultural categories, much like Bhabha. However his approach favours the working ethnographically as well as theoretically in order to give marginalised musics and voices the attention they deserve so that they do not remain isolated. What is interesting about this shift towards a more ethnographically-inflected theoretical approach is that it takes account the individual agency of the singer or the performer, not just in terms of their creative engagement with the music but also in terms of their influence on the shaping of musical identity. This enables us to view the 'otherness' of sean nós from another potential angle, as a possible deliberate artistic choice on behalf of the creative agent, and thus opens up the in between 'space' for musical collaborations between sean nós singers and contemporary composers, as the processual qualities of music are able to break the stasis that categories or genres produce (Holt, 2008, p. 45). Conceptualising the 'otherness' of sean nós in this way may go some way towards explaining how it can be considered as representative of both an emerging and marginal musical identity in contemporary Irish culture.

I have attempted to describe how sean nós can be considered as both an emerging and marginal identity in musical culture in Ireland, through tracing the development of its socio-historical trajectory and through an exploration of the new ways in which sean nós has developed in light of the twin influences on globalisation and postmodernism, drawing on a specific and very recent musical example to illustrate this. However, this does not explain how or why sean nós and contemporary art music collaborations occur from the perspective of musical identity. In order to do this, it is necessary to draw our attention to the development of contemporary art music in Ireland, paying particular attention to the discourse of marginality within this development.

### **Contemporary music: history and discourse**

A struggle for recognition and a deep self-awareness of its peripheral status has characterised the history and environment of Irish contemporary art music. This status is the result of postcolonial prejudices against the genre, prejudices which were subsequently cemented into

government policies, state institutions and national cultural development programmes during the establishment of the Free State. One only has to take a cursory glance at Arts Council funding allocations for contemporary music to see that although steadily improving, this is still the case. As composer Raymond Deane (1995, p. 200) has proposed in an essay tellingly titled ‘The Honour of Non-Existence: Classical Composers in Irish Society’, a new elitism within Irish society emerged in the late twentieth century which elevated popular, traditional and commercially friendly forms of music. He claimed that this musical elitism ‘has the net result of stultifying the growth and dissemination of classical ‘contemporary’ music (whether or not that music chooses to incorporate elements of cultural crossover), rather than celebrating the diversity of musical possibilities’ (Deane, 1995, p. 210). Furthermore, Harry White has argued that postcolonial culture actively sought to displace classical music (which was deemed too colonial to be included in the development of a national musical culture) with traditional music, an endeavour which coupled with the dominance of the Irish literary revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries served to marginalise and hinder the development of art music in Ireland (White, 1998, 2008, 2014). The recurring theme of traditional music versus contemporary art music has permeated and divided musicological discourse on Irish musical culture, and claims of essentialism have been ascribed to those on both sides of the debate. This dichotomy is naturally problematic to discussions of collaborations between sean nós and contemporary music.

In a bid to restructure this theoretical binarism within the context of contemporary musical culture, I will turn to another musical example. The work in question is by Irish contemporary composer Donnacha Dennehy, entitled *Grá agus Bás*, a collaborative composition originally written for the contemporary music group Crash Ensemble and sean nós singer Iarla Ó Lionáird in 2007. The piece uses the voice of Ó Lionáird as the starting point not only for the vocal lines of Dennehy’s work, but for the textures that support them, something which appears to permeate not only the musical material but also other aspects of the compositional process as well, such as the matter of notating this type of music. In an interview with composer Dave Flynn, Dennehy elaborates on this aspect and on the influence working with a sean nós singer has on the compositional process:

One great thing was having Iarla there, so often the way he sang would influence the way they were playing it [...] I remember the first time doing it, I was very insistent about particular ways of doing it and I wonder whether I’ve put all that into the notation. I keep on updating the notation so that it can be possibly done by others at different stages, because there was so much that I was saying verbally as well that I have updated into the notation so that each time you come back to it you haven’t forgotten it then, because when you’ve written it first you’re so fresh about exactly what you want. (Interview with Donnacha Dennehy conducted by Dave Flynn, March 6, 2009, from Dave Flynn (2011, p. 60). *Traditional Irish Music: A Path to New Music*. PhD thesis, DIT.)

Flynn (2011, p. 60), in his analysis of the piece in his PhD thesis, points out that there are a number of places where the members of the ensemble are required to imitate Ó Lionáird’s sean nós singing style, and that the instrumental parts are littered with grace notes which echo Ó Lionáird’s ornamentation. In addition, he notes that the dynamic markings and the instruction to swell on certain notes throughout the piece are also a clear imitation of Ó Lionáird’s general

singing approach (Flynn, 2011, p. 60). This is clear evidence that the compositional process worked in both directions, with singer and composer collaboratively creating the piece in the process of musical practice and the exchange of musical ideas. What does this type of collaborative musical work mean for the traditional music/contemporary music dichotomy? More importantly, how can such a work represent sean nós as both a marginalised and emerging musical identity?

Returning to Holt's (2008, p. 46) concept of locating marginalised musics 'in-between' cultural categories and genres (what he terms 'in-between poetics') may provide a means by which to eschew the binarisms of critical thinking. It is within this 'in-between' space in which the processual qualities of music are able to mediate core-boundary models that the use of sean nós songs and singing in contemporary music is of interest from an identity perspective, as it is within this space that musical collaborations occur and there is room for a pattern of marginality to emerge, one in which the 'hidden' or marginal voice of sean nós finds a new space and expression within a genre which has remained on the periphery of Irish musical culture. The concept of an 'in-betweenness' offers a conceptual framework in which music at the borders or boundaries of its own tradition or practice can find new ways to mediate its marginality and 'otherness' and to negotiate musical identity. Thus marginality as a concept functions creatively within these collaborations, finding a space for a new or 'emerging' voice to be articulated in the process. However, while this concept allows musical collaborations between sean nós and contemporary music to inhabit an area within Irish musical culture, the final question of what the implications of an emerging voice on a peripheral art form might mean for previous conceptions of Irish musical identity remains to be addressed. The final section of this article will address this issue and offer some possible theoretical directions for negotiating the complex question of musical identity in this music.

### **Musical identity: some directions**

Drawing once again on the area of popular music studies, Simon Frith (1996) offers an alternative way of conceptualising musical identity within popular music, a way which seeks to move away from interpretive frameworks that express identity in music as purely representative. He suggests that music creates identity in the process of its performance. He states that 'the aesthetic question about postmodern music concerns not meanings their interpretations—identity translated into discursive forms which have to be decoded- but mutual enactment, identity produced in performance' (Frith, 1996, p. 115). While Frith sees this framework as being particularly applicable for popular music, this way of conceptualising musical identity is useful in the context of collaborations between sean nós and contemporary music as well for a number of different reasons. Firstly, this conceptualisation allows space for the articulation of multiple or concurrent identities within a musical work, as it is how the music works to form identity (i.e. the performance or process of music making) that stays the same. Its emphasis on music as process and music as performance also offers the possibility of creating a new set of aesthetic standards by which the value of these new musical works can be assessed, standards which are better suited to the experimental and improvisatory nature of collaborations between sean nós and contemporary music. While Frith's framework is not without flaws, his approach to music as a creator of identity within enactment offers a solution to the problem of negotiating the multiple identities and socio-historical discourses of the individual practices of sean nós and contemporary music, as well offering a way in which to mediate musical differences.

Another interesting route for conceptualising identity in music draws on theories of marginality, more specifically the ideas of Adam Weisberger's 'Marginality and its Directions' (1992). Although perhaps an outdated text at this stage, Weisberger's categories of marginality and his belief that ambivalence is the foundation of marginality facilitates the idea of transformation within marginality as a concept. In his 'transcendence' category of marginality, ambivalence in identity is resolved by overcoming the opposition of two cultures by means of a third orientation—similar to Bhabha's concept of a third space. Taking this idea, it could be argued that the collaboration between two marginalities (i.e. that of sean nós and of contemporary music) creates a double ambivalence and that when two marginalities come together they create a kind of transcendence, opening up a new web of musical interconnections and conversations. This idea also facilitates identity creation in music and ties in with Frith's conception as music as process, performance and ultimately music as connection.

### **Issues of musicological thinking**

While the theoretical directions discussed all offer possible solutions to the problem of conceptualising and negotiating music and identity, the points raised by Frith (1996, p. 114-19) in relation to the way music scholars speak about musical identity in musicology and ethnomusicology, combined with the discussion of musical collaborations which are very new and contemporary brings into question the suitability of existing musicological discourse and the theoretical and descriptive framework used by musicology in relation to identity. Unlike Irish literature, where a solid and nuanced theoretical framework has developed and can confidently analyse the Irish vernacular style of Anne Enright, Colm Tóibín and others (Gibbons, 2015, 1996; Cleary, 2004, 2007), the theoretical framework for discussing identity in sean nós and contemporary music is lacking, partly because these collaborations are so new and partly because the language and frameworks used to negotiate identity in Irish musical culture lag behind other disciplines in terms of innovation and adaptation of new modes of thinking. Highlighting this in relation to my specific research interest of sean nós and contemporary music demonstrates the need for musicology to update its modes of thinking in relation to musical identity, if it is to ensure its ongoing relevance as an academic discipline in the future, something which has not gone unnoticed in recent years by musicologists and ethnomusicologists (Bohlman, 2008; Cook, 2008; Taylor, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

Although impossible to give a complete account of the socio-historical trajectories of sean nós and contemporary music or a full explanation of how and why these two traditions have come together, in choosing to highlight a small aspect of this largely unexplored musical territory I hope to have offered some new perspectives on the concepts of emerging and marginal identity within music, by seeking to understand and deconstruct these concepts within the specific context of collaborations between sean nós and contemporary music. This has been an exploratory paper which does not claim to offer concrete findings, rather it tentatively suggests that a renewed focus on an interdisciplinary approach which encompasses the social, political and cultural contexts and importance of music and musical identity in relation to other areas of the arts and humanities is critical to the ongoing development and expansion of the discipline. It stands to reason that concentrating not only on what is combined, but also on what has been left out and what can arise from that interplay in-between is perhaps a fruitful place to begin

our interesting journey into new musical territories in the wake of worldwide political and cultural change in 2016.

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