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Riverdance: Representing Irish Traditional Music

As the archetypal example of the globalization and commodification of Ireland and Irish culture,¹ *Riverdance* can justly be described as one of the emblems for the now rapidly fading Celtic Tiger.² The show also was arguably one of the primary catalysts in the transformation of Irish traditional music from a primarily geographically (and ethnically) situated music into what Mark Slobin has described as an “affinity interculture.”³ Now, participation in the music is governed by choice, and the possibility of “becoming Irish music” is open to all.⁴ This connection between the show and the tradition has been utilized and emphasized in a range of contexts, from tourist promotional literature⁵ to academic course descriptions and writing.⁶ The link with tradition has also been adverted to by its composer Bill Whelan himself.⁷ In the show’s promotional material, Sam Smyth’s description of *Riverdance* as a “two-hour celebration of traditional music and dance” appears to conflate the two.⁸ In the same vein, Fintan O’Toole has noted that what “made *Riverdance* so exhilarating was the

1. G. Honor Fagan, “Globalized Ireland, or, Contemporary Transformations of National Identity?” in *The End of Irish History? Critical Approaches to the Celtic Tiger*, ed. Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 114–17.

2. See: Denis O’Hearn, *Inside the Celtic Tiger: The Irish Economy and the Asian Model* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 117; P. J. Mathews, “In Praise of ‘Hibernocentrism’: Republicanism, Globalization and Irish Culture,” *The Republic: A Journal of Contemporary and Historical Debate*, 4 (2005), 9–10.

3. Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 68.

4. Deborah L. Rapuano, “Becoming Irish or Becoming Irish Music? Boundary Construction in Irish Music Communities,” *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures*, 24, 1–2 (April, 2008), 103, 112.

5. See: Natasha Casey, “*Riverdance*: The Importance of Being Irish American,” *New Hibernia Review* 6, 4 (Winter, 2002); “Irish Dance and Dance Music,” www.goireland.com/BLOG/Article/Irish-dance-And-Irish-music.html.

6. See, for example: *Early Start: Musics in Ireland: Semester Programme at University College Cork, Ireland*, www.music.ucc.ie/early_start_brochure.pdf; Sean Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming); John O’Flynn, “Re-appraising Ideas of Musicality in Intercultural Contexts of Music Education,” *International Journal of Music Education*, 23, 3 (December, 2005), 200; Adam Kaul, “The Limits of Commodification in Traditional Irish Music Sessions,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13, 3 (September, 2007), 704.

7. Bill Whelan and Toner Quinn, “Ireland’s Dance with Music: *Riverdance* Composer Bill Whelan in Conversation with Toner Quinn,” *Journal of Music in Ireland*, 8, 4 (July–August, 2008), 30.

8. Sam Smyth, *Riverdance: The Show* (London: Trafalgar, 1999), p. 14.

sense, not so much of invention as of recognition,” a recognition that traditional music “defined the cultural space in which the whole show operated.”⁹

This suggests that the music of *Riverdance* has been perceived, perhaps strategically, as being traditional—despite Bill Whelan’s explicit statement that he did not intend his music to be heard as such.¹⁰ Nicholas Carolan puts forward a contrasting view when he notes that “the music is new and different and, because of this, it will not be adopted into traditional music.”¹¹ And although Whelan acknowledges that the work is not traditional, he also has commented that he uses “traditional music as an inspiration.”¹² He has described how, when working with traditional musicians as performers, he is

inclined to let the tradition, or my sense of the tradition, lead, and then try and tuck the rest in behind it, rather than write something very smart that pulls bits out of the tradition but doesn’t seem when you listen to it to be anything more than a nod towards it.¹³

That there is a relationship between the show and the tradition is clear; but to depict this inspiration as a form of appropriation from a notionally “pure” tradition would be questionable, given the musical bricolage that typifies much contemporary traditional music. One also could posit that the music is a post-modern pastiche “cut loose from any particular time and place,”¹⁴ which reflects a “simulated version of Irish culture,”¹⁵ and which does not resemble its sources. However, to posit such a claim one needs to overlook the transformations and hybridizations that have accrued in the tradition over the course of the twentieth century.¹⁶ It is more accurate to acknowledge that Whelan, in his compositions, constructs a music that reflects the fluidity, diversity, and hybridity of the modern tradition.

In its centering of hybridity, *Riverdance* both constructs and reflects an image of Irish culture that is postmodern in texture, embracing the ancient and

9. Fintan O’Toole, *The Ex-Isle of Erin: Images of a Global Ireland* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1997), pp. 152, 154.

10. Claire Spreadbury and Bill Whelan, “Riverdance Revisited with Bill Whelan,” *Irish Dancing* (May, 2003), 59; Barra Ó Cinnéide, “The Nonprofit Origins and Impact of *Riverdance*: The Show That Became More Than an Enterprise,” *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 8, 4 (Summer, 1998), 410.

11. Barra Ó Cinnéide, *Riverdance: The Phenomenon* (Dublin: Blackhall Press, 2002), p. 44.

12. Ó Cinnéide, “The Nonprofit Origins and Impact of *Riverdance*,” 410.

13. Whelan and Quinn, “Ireland’s Dance with Music,” 30.

14. Veit Erlmann: “The Aesthetics of the Global Imagination: Reflections on World Music in the 1990s,” *Public Culture*, 8 (Spring, 1996), 475.

15. Rapuano, 103.

16. Helen O’Shea, “Foreign Bodies in the River of Sound: Seeking Identity and Irish Traditional Music” (Ph.D. diss., Victoria University of Technology, 2005), pp. 21–22.

the modern, the local and the global. The show's producer, Moya Doherty, emphasized the modern elements of this culture: "I was tired of clichéd images of Ireland," she stated, adding that she "wanted to show the Ireland I know and love, that it is modern and in step."¹⁷

In fact, this representation of Irish culture was not a simple reflection, but something bordering on the prescriptive. Reflecting on Michael Flatley's performance in the Mayo 5000 concert in the National Concert Hall in 1993—the year before *Riverdance* premiered—in which lay the roots for the updated dance styles of the original *Riverdance* Eurovision performance, Doherty remarked, "that's the way it should be—Irish dancing with a fusion of tap and flamenco."¹⁸ This vision of "the way it should be" recognizes that Irish identity is no longer, in Mary McCarthy's words, "circumscribed by narrowly defined ideas about what it means to be Irish."¹⁹ It recognizes that the cultural representation of a nation, or of other groups, involves "a struggle to articulate multiple identities, identities not based on essential purity but on hybridity."²⁰

However, one must not lose sight of the fact that *Riverdance* is also a global and commodified articulation of Irish culture; the music and dance underlying its construction of Irishness might be described as being "constituted locally . . . with reference to a global cultural market: they are local cultural keys turning global locks."²¹ To draw a parallel with revivalist music practices, the local is represented in *Riverdance* through a selective drawing from the totality of the tradition.²² Iconic instruments like the uilleann pipes and bodhrán are foregrounded, as are the core instruments of fiddle, button accordion, and whistle, all of which are played by traditional musicians. The show's music shares the tradition's emphasis on melody, and many of the pieces are based on such traditional rhythmic forms as the reel, slip jig, and slow air.²³ A close reading of the most familiar motif of the original "Riverdance" piece reveals subtle layers of reflection and representation: the first part of the central motif presents a typical jig rhythm, not dissimilar to the quintessential jig, "The Irish Washerwoman," connoting Irishness through a stereotypical and instantly recognizable

17. Casey, 12.

18. Victoria White, "When Irish went Flamenco," *Irish Times*, 5 May 1994.

19. Marie McCarthy, "Changing Cultural Landscapes: the Co-existence of Musical Genres in Irish Culture and Education," *Irish Studies Review*, 12, 1 (February, 2004), 53.

20. Leith Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender: The Construction of Irish National Identity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 231.

21. Fagan, p. 117.

22. Bruce Feintuch, "Musical Revival as Musical Transformation," in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed. Neil V. Rosenberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 184.

23. Bill Whelan, "Globalising Irish Music," UCD Scholarcast VII, in *The Art of Popular Culture*, ed. P. J. Mathews, www.ucd.ie/scholarcast/transcripts/Globalising_Irish_Music.pdf.

musical trope. The immediate shift to a group of four quaver (or eighth-note) pairs disrupts the familiarity of the jig rhythm, and can be read as typical, or reflective, of innovations that take place within the tradition. However, it is also possible to perceive an external influence in this rhythmic shift, as the juxtaposition of groups of two and three quavers is characteristic of the asymmetrical rhythms of Bulgarian dance tunes.²⁴ Thus, within this signature of the piece lies not just the traditional and the contemporary, but also the hybridity of a global tradition.

Because of its globalization, one could posit that any connection the music of *Riverdance* has with its specific locale disappears, and that it does not reflect or relate to the traditional community or the community's practices or experiences.²⁵ For instance, to contrast the performance practices of *Riverdance* with that of the session—or, indeed, earlier forms of informal music-making—highlights the production's effacing of the centrality of participation and social interaction to the modern tradition. On the other hand, much of our experience of traditional music takes place in unidirectional contexts: we listen passively to its mediated form, or attend formal concert performances. And much important recent scholarship has argued that the session is itself now being aggressively sold and marketed in Ireland as part of the tourist experience; in many cases and spaces its continued existence depends on it being commodified, and similarly globalized, for an international audience.²⁶ As the music of *Riverdance* is (with one or two exceptions) newly composed, the lack of a shared repertoire arguably creates a sense of dislocation from the local tradition. But this is to ignore the importance and commonness of composition as a traditional practice. It would be truer to say that *Riverdance* presents an "a-stylistic" traditional music, which lacks reference to any specific localness, and is totally detached from any local stylistic roots. Yet this is a criticism that also could be made of a lot of contemporary traditional music. A more pertinent observation is that as a consequence of its large-scale (or global) staging, the performance of the music becomes almost entirely uniform and unchanging, lacking the stylistic freedom and spontaneity that distinguishes the most celebrated players in the tradition.

If we consider performative traits that are highly "local" to be those most appreciable by cultural insiders, then the transformation of this "local" results

24. Timothy Rice, "Aspects of Bulgarian Musical Thought," *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, 12 (1980), 62–63.

25. Mathews, "In Praise of 'Hibernocentrism,'" 11.

26. See: Kaul, "Limits of Commodification"; Moya Kneafsey, "Sessions and Gigs: Tourism and Traditional Music in North Mayo, Ireland: Extracts from a Field Diary," *Ecumene: Journal of Environment, Culture, Meaning*, 9, 2 (July, 2002), 354–58.

in such elements being smoothed over in favor of stylistic elements more easily understood by less-informed listeners: speed, virtuosity, syncopated rhythms, and catchy and repetitive hooks. But as Fintan Vallely has noted of the contemporary tradition, these stylistic elements—which emerged through the classicization of contemporary traditional music—also characterize what he calls “Meta-Trad,” seen in such groups as Flook or Solas. Assessing these as lesser or blander stylistic elements is to claim the authority to define such styles, and to fail to properly contextualize an analysis of *Riverdance*.²⁷

Riverdance’s conflating of the local and the global allows us to treat it as belonging to the genre that the music industry has termed “world music,” embracing, as Laurent Aubert posits, “intercultural experiences within the domain of popular music.”²⁸ *Riverdance* was, in fact, originally categorized as world music, at least in the United States when released on CD in 1996, entering the *Billboard* World Music chart at number one. World music could be described as a postmodern hybrid commodity. Considered in this aspect, *Riverdance* is pluralistic, fragmentary, spans different cultures and temporalities, utilizes sophisticated technology, and embraces both high and low culture.²⁹ As a postmodern work, it is “expressive of a saturated personality,” and to experience it richly requires this saturation.³⁰ It is undoubtedly a product of contemporary Ireland, and indeed of contemporary music in general, in which a

plurality of styles [and] techniques . . . appears both plausible and meaningful in a world increasingly shedding its common beliefs and shared customs, where there is no longer a single given ‘reality’ but only shifting, multiple realities, provisionally constructed out of the unconnected bits and pieces set loose by a world stripped of all attachments.³¹

As musicians, we necessarily produce music that either draws on or reacts against our saturated soundscapes. The diverse origins of Whelan’s *Riverdance* soundscape in his earlier compositions are well documented: *Timedance* (1981), *East Wind* (1992), *The Seville Suite* (1992), *The Spirit of Mayo* (1993), and his

27. Fintan Vallely, “Tiger Ireland, Turd-Sniffers and Meta-Trad: People, Power and the Pursuit of Privileged Status in Music in Ireland,” *Journal of Music in Ireland*, 7, 2 (March–April, 2007), 13.

28. Laurent Aubert, *The Music of the Other: New Challenges for Ethnomusicology in a Global Age* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 53.

29. Lawrence Kramer, “The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism,” in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner (New York: Garland, 2002), pp. 16–17.

30. Kramer, p. 22.

31. Robert P. Morgan, “Rethinking Musical Culture: Canonic Reformulations in a Post-Tonal Age,” in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*, ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 58.

work as a member of Planxty from 1979 to 1983. As Whelan himself put it, “I . . . believed in presenting *Riverdance* as a show of Irish music and dance, placed in the context of other dance and music forms and finding ways of interacting with them.”³²

Although Ireland is positioned as part of the West (as opposed to “the rest”) and despite the relative familiarity of its culture in the global arena, the representation and performance of Irishness still can lapse into exoticism. In a global context, Ireland often is projected and perceived as a romantic departure from the everyday, a place where an antiquated and authentic culture is kept alive, and is easily accessible for the virtual cultural tourist. What complicates this perception is that *Riverdance* also includes much that is familiar—both in a global and a local context—in its diasporic dimension. In 1999, Tara Brabazon and Paul Stock pointedly asked of Whelan’s creation, “What is home and where is abroad?”³³ Considering the show in a global context, can we also ask, “What is Irish and what is exotic?”

Barbara O’Connor’s analysis of the dance styles and dance repertoire of the show notes that, for a global audience, the “exoticism is provided by what is regarded as distinctly Irish and different, and the familiarity by dance styles and techniques which have already become internationally disseminated by the mass media of film and television, especially those of Hollywood musicals.”³⁴ Similarly, Whelan’s music is also at once familiar and exotic, embracing an exoticism that is of a double kind. It is exotic in its representation of traditional elements to a global audience, and it is exotic to an Irish audience in its incorporation of hybrid elements from the broader spectrum of popular and world music. At the same time, traditional music is familiar to an Irish audience, and the “world music” and popular elements are familiar to many listeners. *Riverdance*, then, could be perceived from one subject position as being an attempt to evoke a local music, employing, in Ralph Locke’s definition, “characteristic and easily recognized musical gestures from the alien culture.”³⁵

But we also must recognize that *Riverdance* was put together by Irish producers and composers, danced by Irish dancers, and played by Irish musicians. Locke’s theorizing of musical exoticism allows for such cases, where the creator

32. Spreadbury and Whelan, 59.

33. Tara Brabazon and Paul Stock, “‘We love you Ireland’: *Riverdance* and Stepping through Antipodean Memory,” *Irish Studies Review*, 7, 3 (December, 1999), 305.

34. Barbara O’Connor, “*Riverdance*,” in *Encounters with Modern Ireland: A Sociological Chronicle, 1995–6*, ed. Michel Peillon and Eamonn Slater (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1998), p. 56.

35. Ralph P. Locke, “A Broader View of Musical Exoticism,” *Journal of Musicology*, 24, 4 (Fall, 2007), 481.

of a piece of music is from within the culture, but also is part of another musical culture: “Particularly interesting examples of ‘consciously multicultural’ musical composition come from composers with feet in two very different cultures, and who thus may arguably treat neither as, strictly, exotic.” We seem to be in the midst of redefining the very meaning of “exotic”: as such complex origins become more and more common, our understanding of musical exoticism will come to refer to that which is located in a particular historical moment and social context.

The question of *Riverdance*’s relationship to tradition remains a complicated one. Barbara O’Connor has noted how it simultaneously embraces tradition, breaks it apart, and reconstructs it in new ways.³⁶ Such an analysis, though, separates tradition as a thing from tradition as a practice—a dichotomy that returns us to the question of whether there is, in fact, a distinction between “a tradition” and *Riverdance*. This question of cultural boundaries was recently addressed by Sarah Weiss in her analysis of *I La Galigo*, a theatrical production of Sulawesi epic poetry produced by Robert Wilson in 2004, which contains many parallels to *Riverdance*. Weiss proposes that “cultural boundaries and their implicit hierarchical relationships slip into the background when the artist embodies, in one way or another, more than one of the source cultures.”³⁷ The multiplicity of sources evident in *Riverdance*—combined with the notion that we are increasingly inhabiting “saturated soundscapes”—suggests that the boundaries that sometimes are perceived between *Riverdance* and traditional music, or more generally between traditional music and its other extensions, innovations, and hybridizations, are destined to grow more faint over time.

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36. O’Connor, “*Riverdance*,” p. 52.

37. Sarah Weiss, “Permeable Boundaries: Hybridity, Music, and the Reception of Robert Wilson’s *I La Galigo*,” *Ethnomusicology*, 52, 2 (Spring–Summer, 2008), 219.