Music as Dialogue

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In the television ad campaign for the privatization of Telecom Éireann, singers in locations all over Ireland sing verses from the traditional song, *Dúlamán*. Then there are people dancing in Macnas-style costumes, some fine print appears about the terms of the share offer, and at the very end, we see a shot where people are approaching a bonfire somewhere in the mountains, carrying burning torches. Other bonfires are visible in the distance. This image grabbed my attention because I had just been thinking about St. John's eve, *Oíche Shin Sheáin*, and its customs. Bonfires would be lit on heights. Children would ignite wads of paraffin soaked rags in the fire and throw them like flaming missiles into the air. "Fóid choise" or "travelling sods" of turf were taken from the fires and hurled at animals, into fields, and placed in individual hearths — using Otherworld power to ensure the fertility of individual hearths in the coming harvest (Danaher 1972; cf. Ó Giollagáin 1999:78). The Telecom ad, though, ran this ritual *backwards* — people brought fire from individual hearths *to* the central fire. It was as if, run backwards, this Telecom flotation ritual siphoned off goodness from individual hearths, *creating* an otherworldly power—a multinational corporation.

Here, the state was selling back to its people something that already belonged to them—a state company— but it was also selling back to them an idea of their own "traditions." According to information posted in March 1999 on a website called Adworld.ie,

> The brief handed down to [the ad agency,] Irish International [,] was straight forward - design a campaign to generate awareness about the flotation and to inform the public that the shares are available to everyone. Irish International operated in accordance with European law which limits the content of any campaign for a public flotation to purely factual information without any persuasive elements. [...] *The decision to use traditional Irish vocalists rather than mainstream singers is intended to reinforce the message that everybody is eligible to buy shares*. The commercial is supported by press, outdoor posters and local and national radio, all of which run with the strapline "whoever you are" [www.adworld.ie; italics mine].

The ad was part of the State's ongoing dialogue with its citizens and their traditions—the creation of a national identity-space within which local traditions are re-valued.[1] Disappointed investors in the new company, Éircom, would later complain that the ad campaign "skilfully managed to convey the message that it would be almost unpatriotic to buy shares" (Irish Times, 25/9/00). Strangely enough, the song itself, *Dúlamán*, consists of little more than the words of a street-crier selling seaweed. It is a celebration of a specific place, Gaoth Dobhair in Donegal. Using the song to sell a corporation (or a nation) drains it of this specificity.

The Telecom ad was just one example of a process where local cultural elements are elevated to the national sphere, where they shed old meanings and take on new ones. Although many theorists have commented on the artificial nature of national cultures (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), fewer have noted that national cultures are the product of dialogue with and between elements of local as well as other national cultures. This was evident even in the sale of Telecom Éireann, when jigs were danced and bodhráns banged on Wall Street the day the new shares began to be traded on the U.S. stock market, the Irish Government having understood the dynamic of first selling something to one's own citizens in order to sell it externally.

Irish traditional music might never have achieved the exalted status of official national culture if it were not for the efforts of scholars and revivalists, like Seán Ó Riada, to elevate local traditions, in dialogue with the power and prestige of "high" cultural forms in the national and international sphere. It is a measure of the very success of this effort that statements like Ó Riada's "Coda" to *Our Musical Heritage* seem a bit overblown today:

> While preparing these notes, I made several trips around the country collecting material. I found great enthusiasm everywhere, the kind of enthusiasm which attaches only to something felt to be of the greatest importance. It is clear that the vast majority of Irish people think of Irish music as being of the greatest importance. This is as it should be; it is one of the few things left which we can call our own. There are some who sneer at it; they are the ignorant and the stupid, slavish lackeys of foreign traditions, servile lapdogs who lick up the crumbs which fall from the stranger's table. Let nobody say that our traditions are inferior to those of

> any other country. They are our traditions, and as such they suit us best. If they had not suited us, they could not have become traditions in the first place. It is precisely because of their suitability that they have survived so long, in the face of so much opposition, from our own people and also from our oppressors (Ó Riada 1982[1962]:80).

In *Our Musical Heritage*, Ó Riada described the formal structures of traditional music and the mechanisms of ornamentation, valorizing these as signs of authenticity. In doing so he exactly paralleled the process of language revival where linguists formally describe despised local languages or dialects to show that they are just as grammatical as any other language and have their own logic and internal consistency. Ó Riada's description of Irish-language song, for example, was also a revalorization of Irish language song as a "tradition" as opposed to other traditions. Following the lead of language revivalists, scholars like Ó Riada took elements of the singing styles they found in their travels around the Gaeltacht and gave them a label, "sean-nós," an emblem of the new place of pride occupied by the tradition in national and international culture (cf. Ó Laoire 1993, n.d.).

Once accepted, a term like "sean-nós" can be applied to other activities, like dancing. The term acts as a go-between, living its life in both local and national cultural spheres. It is used "from above" as a label for a newly nationalised tradition. But such terms are also used "from below," by local people to talk back to the nation, making a claim for the locality. Thus, at a performance in 1998 a pub in Dunderry, Co. Meath, Colm Dubh Ó Méalóid, a Ráth Cairn man, introducing children who were going to do some solo step dancing, said "This is sean-nós, that's something that comes from your heart. From the heart down to the legs." Nothing could be further both from officially regulated, "nationalized" step-dancing and from the globalized, commercial Riverdance-style spectacle. But Ráth Cairn kids can speak all three "dialects" when it comes to step-dancing.[2]

Most of the time, in Irish-speaking communities that I have been to, the term "sean–nós" is only used in public performance or when talking to outsiders. Otherwise, generic terms like "step" or "damhsa" (for dancing) or "amhrán" (for singing) are used. Using the term "sean-nós" when performing for outsiders looks like an example of what Michael Herzfeld terms "disemia" — the difference between how local people and communities think about themselves 'when they're at home' and the way they present themselves to the outside world. In Herzfeld's words (1988:112), there is an "ideological tension"

— a dialogue — between "self-presentation and self-knowledge."

But what about the "sean" in "sean-nós?" The term captures one of the most important things about both singing and dancing — the fact that they are *local* traditions, where what is handed down is not so much a generically "Irish" way of doing things,[3] but the particular songs, steps, ways of holding the body or ornamenting a line that came down from local people, people with names and stories. What's "old" in sean-nós is "the old people" who left their marks upon the tradition. As Bakhtin has pointed out, it is as if, in performance, people "infect" cultural forms with their own specific ways of being:

> Every socially significant [...] performance has the ability—sometimes for a long period of time, and for a wide circle of persons—to infect with its own intention certain aspects of [culture] ... imposing on them specific semantic nuances and specific axiological [moral or aesthetic] overtones...[4]

Bakhtin's ugly term for leaving one's mark on culture is "stratification," a process which "destroys unity" and "challenges fixed definitions" (Holquist 1981:433). In local communities, stratification is largely a personal matter, something that comes from the heart, but it happens in other ways on all levels of society:

> Various tendencies, circles, journals, particular newspapers, even particular artistic works or individual persons are all capable of stratifying [culture], in proportion to their social significance; they are capable of attracting [cultural] forms into their orbit by means of their own characteristic intentions and accents, and in so doing to a certain extent alienating these [cultural] forms from other tendencies, parties, artistic works and persons (Bakhtin 1981:290).
>
> As a result of the work done by all these stratifying forces in [society], there are no "neutral" [...] forms — [...] forms that can belong to "no one"; [Culture] has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, [culture] is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All [cultural elements] have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each [cultural element] tastes of the contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all [cultural elements] are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable

in [culture] (Bakhtin 1981:293).

In this light, we can see Ó Riada's struggle against the "lap dogs of imperialism" as a two-way dialogue (at least) — he addressed himself to a "national" audience, imploring them to respect "local" traditions and thus be able to hold their heads up on an international stage. He was up against the notion, analyzed by Bakhtin, that "local" cultural forms have to be transformed in order to play on the national (or international) stage. Just as with national languages (based on the suppression of dialect), the state and its institutions tend to standardise and "officialise" cultural forms. Officialising discourses tend to reify and alienate folk culture even while exalting it; witness the experience of Máire Áine Ní Dhonnchadha,[5] from An Cnoc, Indreabhán, Co. Galway:

> It was only after leaving school and the colleges that I learned about the thing I came by naturally. At one point I thought I couldn't sing at all, due to something that happened in college. The nun we had used to force us to learn the notes of songs first, then to put words to the notes. And we had to go up and beat time to the notes. We were learning "An Raibh Tú Ar An gCarraig?". She would call on us and make us sing the notes—we had books. I passed that, on the first try, at any rate. Then we had to go up and sing the song out of the book, Ceol Ár Sinsear [Music of our Ancestors]. I did that. Then we would have to put down the book and sing the song ourselves. And as soon as I had put away the book and got into it [singing the song], I started putting little things into it without knowing what I was doing. She just about threw the book at me and told me to go back and learn the song. It's only since leaving the college that I learned the value of what I had.[6]

The state relates to popular culture as "folklore" — an example of one type of entextualization, dissemination and recontextualization of cultural artifacts: collecting folk music, transcribing it in a normative form, elevating it to the status of "high" or "national" culture (Ceol Ár Sinsear), and teaching it back to the citizenry. Its provenance is transformed, from local traditions and gatherings to a national identity-space. Normalized texts are then taught by state institutions to citizens, exactly like a standardized national language (reified as "grammar") is taught back to speakers of what are retrospectively labelled local "dialects."

In Carna, down the road from Máire Áine Ní Dhonnchadha, singers like Joe Heaney and Seán Mac Donnchadha seem to have had an easier time of it at school, having teachers with a much greater sympathy for and understanding of

the tradition (Mac Con Iomaire 1994). But arguably, all singers from their generation formed a sense of their own tradition as a thing of value in response to experiences like this, in dialogue with the nation.

What caused the nun to almost throw the book at Máire Áine Ní Dhonnchadha? The "little things" she started "putting into it" as soon as she had worked her way into the song. These "little things" come "from nature" (ó nádúr), products of what Lillis Ó Laoire terms "embodied knowledge" (Ó Laoire 1999:71); she puts them in unconsciously ("ag cur rudaí beaga isteach nach raibh a fhios agam a bhí mé a dhéanamh"). It was an encounter between different cultures, different ways of construing musicality, textuality, tradition, and the body itself: she saw "the little things" as an aspect of herself, in relationship to real, specific persons, stories and places.[7]

Something of the difference involved can be gathered from Freeman's (possibly exaggerated) account of the attitudes to the musical form of song he encountered among singers in Cork in 1920:

> However minutely a song may be discussed, only the vaguest references to the tune will be heard. The tune is an elusive essence, the mysterious soul of the words. It has no independent existence. It is part of the singer's secret, indistinguishable from his voice. [...] Only experience in the country and long conversations about songs will bring you to this conclusion: that the people hardly know anything about their tunes. [...] If you tell [a singer] that two of his songs have the same tune, he will answer that is impossible, since they are different songs. If you then say, that the tunes are very much alike, he will agree, and look upon you as a musical genius for having noticed it. "What a marvellous thing," he will exclaim. "for a man who was not brought up in Irish to know so much about our songs!" For—may I repeat it?—the tune without the words is as little imaginable as a voice without a mouth. He thinks you understand the song (that is, the words) so perfectly, that you have got the tune (Freeman 1920:xxiv-xxv).

In Freeman's account, singers were intent on making their audiences understand that songs consisted of the actual words of their long-ago protagonists, in dialogue with each other. Some singers even provided quotation frames, inserting the (spoken) equivalents of "he said" and "she said" between the (sung) lines of songs.

Up till now I have been speaking more generally about "dialogue" between different ways of construing traditional music and song. But music and song itself bear many dialogues. Joe Heaney went farther than most singers in

trying to articulate what the Irish-language song tradition was about. Joe saw the tradition as dialogic — as the bringing together of and exchange between specific persons, both in the past and in the here-and-now. As he imagined it, the act of singing establishes a parallel between the singer's and the protagonist's lives and agonies, and between these common experiences and the melodic *form* of the song. At a recital he was asked to sing a verse of a song without, and then with ornamentation. After trying this (without much success), with *The Rocks of Bawn*, he offered this explanation:

Example 1. — Joe Heaney in conversation with Mike Seeger; *The Rocks of Bawn*, Wesleyan College, 1978

In the example, Joe sings the song, and then says:

> There's a big difference in them two verses of that. In one of them you're in a hurry to go somewhere and the other one, you're playing the act, you're working exactly what Sweeney was doing, you're going through the same thing that he was going through, before the song was ever made. You have the picture before you of the man going through this agony, and if he'd stop for one minute, somebody else would get the job. And that's exactly the picture you must follow when you're singing an old song. Especially if it's a sad one. Now if it's a love song or an old man marrying a young woman that's a different story you can do what you like with them, because they deserve it in the first place. ...you've got to have the picture before you. And always have that picture and then you'll do the song properly then. [Joe Heaney 78-15.10]

For Joe, the meaning of a song's "story" — events of long ago in the lives of the song's protagonists — becomes manifest in the melodic form of the song when it is properly sung. Singing correctly is a gesture of respect to the protagonists of a song. Ornamentation is a kind of dialogue with them.

In the remainder of this talk, I'll try to show how traditional music is full of dialogue, in the wider sense meant by Joe Heaney.

Example 2 — Darach Ó Catháin singing *An Binsín Luachra*

In this song two people converse, a young woman and her would-be suitor. He assures her that the priest won't hear of their secret until blackbirds can speak and song-thrushes [céirseach - also used for a female blackbird] speak Greek!

Just to make sure that we realize this isn't the only conversation going on, here is the song again, as heard from the back of a fairly noisy session in Ráth Cairn:

Example 3 — Session in Ráth Cairn, Bríd Uí Chonaire singing *An Binsín Luachra*, 29/11/92

Here, the characters in song converse; their voices are represented by the "I" [mé] in the song. But the words of many of the songs carry double meanings and allusions, so there might actually be more than one conversation going on at the same time. Even if this is not the case here, we still have at least the following sets of voices: (1) the poet (anonymous) who composed the song and whose words they are, (2) the song's protagonists, whose words are represented in the song, (3) previous singers who have sung the song and impressed their style on it, such as the singer's uncle, Darach Ó Catháin, (4) Bríd's own voice, singing the song in the here and now of performance, (5) the voices of all the people surrounding her, making comments and egging her on. "Up Lambay!" refers to her townland in Ráth Cairn.

"Up Lambay!" reminds us that musical dialogue is connected with place as much as with persons. The next example is from the Chicago piper, Joe Shannon. When I first met Joe in the late 1980s, I was just learning the pipes; I nervously called to his house, and the first thing he did after welcoming me in was say, "Sit down and play a tune!" I played a tune for Joe, and he asked me why I was "playing like a Clare man" when I was American and living in Chicago. "You sound like Eugene Lambe!" (Lambe made my chanter). Then Joe started talking about Patsy Touhey and how he learned from Touhey's 78's. Although Joe can play Touhey's music note for note in ventriloquist fashion, he has his own highly developed style, based on aspects of Touhey's style: a certain type of pace, rhythm, ornamentation, etc. that Joe feels is appropriate to the U.S.A.

For Joe Shannon, one's style of playing ideally reflects one's place, in a moral as well as aesthetic relationship. This still allows plenty of room for musical dialogue, as you can hear from this example. Here, Joe is playing Miss Macleod's, a tune he associates with Patsy Touhey, along with John Williams on concertina. John's parents are from Doolin in Co. Clare, but his family and Joe Shannon's are related by marriage.

Example 4 — Joe Shannon and John Williams playing *Miss Macleod's*, Chicago 16/3/92

At the end of the tune, you can hear Joe saying, "Patsy Touhey would be proud of us... He's probably up there in Heaven, he's saying, 'All those years I've been dead and here they're playing my music now'."

For Joe Shannon, Patsy Touhey is a real presence. Playing Touhey's music brings us into a kind of personal relationship with him. Just as with Joe Heaney, musical style marks the presence of real others in one's own actions as a performer.

In the anthropologist Franz Boas' concept of culture, almost all cultural "traits" are revealed as borrowings. Everything comes from somewhere else, so the uniqueness of a culture depends on something more than just having a set of particular traits. For Boas, "culture" is the hidden symbolic organizing center (of an individual, a locality, a society), which manifests itself entirely through this reworking of borrowed culture traits. For Boas and his student Edward Sapir, the mark of a "genuine" tradition is not stasis, but a process of change, as new elements are reworked according to a culture's (mostly unconscious, embodied) organizing principles. The Irish musical tradition is an example of this — with almost every element (instruments, dances, musical forms) originating elsewhere, but reworked so completely that those origins are visible only to (and hotly debated by) scholars. But in the short term, musical borrowing and reworking shows its own genealogy; as Bakhtin would say, elements of the tradition retain their voices for a generation or more, living on in new mouths as "double voiced" forms. What makes the tradition a tradition is precisely this claiming of genealogy, a striving to hear other voices in performance. In Ireland, it seems to me, this process of "traditionalisation" (Bauman 1992) is particularly tied up with representations of persons, more than with places or with musical style *per se*, and it is this personal element that is most threatened by the commodification of music. As Glassie maintains for the district of Ballymenone, Co. Fermanagh,

> Any consideration of a work of art, a story or a song, in Ballymenone leads you to an exceptional individual. Individuals lead through conversation to the human type he or she exemplifies, and artistic personalities lead from genre to genre, from bid to pant, from story to song, from item to culture. The District's culture is not something apart from the particular individuals who are the force of its coherence, the reason for its existence (Glassie 1982:681).

In Boas' historical particularism, the ethnographer was to become a

"cosmographer," describing the life and historical transformations of cultural elements, and doing so in phenomenological terms hopefully not unfamiliar to the natives themselves. But the personalist aesthetic I have been describing in Irish popular culture functions as cosmography without need of an ethnographer. Cultural forms, embodied in personal style, are interrogated and their diffusions are traced through a moral universe of specific persons, performances, and communities. An example of this is Ciaran Carson's "doppelgänger vision" of the Dublin-born fiddler James Kelly in the style and playing of Fred Lail in the Bear's Lair bar, North Carolina. Fred Lail has

> a Carolinan accent you could cut with a Bowie knife, but he is playing this graceful bouncy Irish music and I'm trying to put my finger on it — the set of tunes, the way he bows them and the way he holds himself — till it strikes me that he knew the playing of James Kelly, the Irish fiddler now resident in Miami. And now I can see James in the way Fred sits, how he leans into the tune at some crucial point with a gesture of the shoulder and head, how he signals the onset of the next tune in the series with a dainty semi-pirouette of the foot raised off the ground, as if he made a bracket or a comma.
>
> I am so taken with this doppelgänger vision that I go up and whisper 'James Kelly' into his ear just as the set is coming to a close. 'You have James to a T.', I say. Fred is pleased as punch, and so am I, for it turns out that hearing James play was what started him off, and we both love James' playing. We go through a litany of other names: Fred Finn, Peter Horan, Bobby Casey, Patrick Kelly — signposts or guides through a terrain we have both explored from our very different necks of the woods, and yet have stumbled on the same nexuses.
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> By their names and the names of tunes we delineate the interdigitations of the music and its players; we form an instant kinship through a repertoire as we recite its genealogy (Carson 1996:74).

In the ad for Telecom Éireann shares I began with, traditional song in the Irish language functioned, for the ad's creators, as a transcendant symbol of everyman ("whoever you are") and an emblem of Irishness, emptied out of its specific meanings. The new privatised corporation immediately changed its name to Éircom, a name reflecting its new international provenance and presaging a withdrawal from its earlier commitment to Irish language policies.[8] My last example is the first two verses of a song that brings this ad back down to Earth, re-personalising it by naming some of its "culprits."

Example 5 — Ray Mac Mánais agus Gearóid Ó Mórdha singing *Dúramáin* (dimwits), Oireachtas na Gaeilge 1999, broadcast on Raidió na Gaeltachta, 29/11/99

> Ó mo mhallacht ort [Antaine] Ó Faracháin is tú a bhí iontach mealltach,
> An fógra sin ag Telecom, sin fógra a bhí fealltach.
> Dúramáin gach duine acu, dúramáin ghaelach,
> Fagtha ar phócaí falamh ag Telecom Éireann.
>
> Bhí Tomás MacEóin ag ceol go binn do chach ó Chóbh go Málinn
> 'Se an truaí mhór nar fhan sé ciúin, nó ag cloí le "Cailín Álainn."
> Dúramáin gach duine acu, dúramáin ghaelach,
> Fagtha ar phócaí falamh ag Telecom Éireann.

With this last example we hear a counterattack from the traditional sector, bringing the performances in the Telecom ad back into the personalised dialogue appropriate for the local "neighbourhood."[9]

I hope this and the other examples have shown that space and time are not necessarily barriers to personalism and "locality" in Irish music and dance. It seems to me that the tradition has a lot to teach us about the possibilities for autonomy and community in the world as it is today, from the personal and local levels all the way up to the global. We are all indebted to Seán Ó Riada for starting us out on this journey of discovery.

Notes

1. C.f. Ó Giolláin (2000) for a more general discussion of the role of folklore in nation-building.

2. Foley (1997) writes of "body dialects" in Kerry dancing.

3. "...most traditional musicians did not (and still do not) play or sing in order to make a political point, or to assert their Irishness, but because this was the primary form that music-making took in their locality. The Hudie McMenamins of this world were not generally out to do down the Yehudi Menuhins" (Ó Seaghdha 1999:18).

4. Bakhtin 1981:290; in this and the following quotes from Bakhtin I have substituted "culture" or "society" for "language," "cultural element" for "word" and "cultural forms" for "words and forms."

5. She was born in 1919, the same year as Joe Heaney (from Carna).

6. Mac Con Iomaire 1999: 13-14. "Is ó d'fhág mise an scoil agus ó d'fhág mé na coláistí a

chuir mé eolas ar an rud a bhí agam féin go nádúrtha. Cheap mise uair amháin nach raibh mé in ann amhrán ar bith a rá, mar gheall ar rud a tharla sa gcoláiste. An bhean rialta a bhí againn, bhíodh sí ag cur iallach orainn na hamhráin a fhoghlaim ina nótaí i dtosach agus ansin na focla a chur leis na nótaí. Agus bhíodh orainn dul suas agus an t-am a bhualadh amach agus na nótaí a rá. Bhí muid ag foghlaim "An Raibh Tú Ar An gCarraig?". Ghlaodh sí aníos orainn agus an leabhar againn agus chuireadh sí orainn na nótaí a rá. Phasáil mise, ar aon chuma, sa gcéad iarracht sin. Ansin bhíodh orainn dul suas agus an t-amhrán a rá as an leabhar, as Ceol Ár Sinsear. Rinne mé é sin. Bhíodh orainn an leabhar a chur uainn ansin agus an t-amhrán a rá asainn féin. Agus chomh luath is a chuir mise uaim an leabhar agus a bhí mé tagtha isteach air, thosaigh mé ag cur rudaí beaga isteach nach raibh a fhios agam a bhí mé a dhéanamh. Is beag nár chaith sí an leabhar liom agus dúirt sí liom dul ar ais agus é a fhoghlaim. Is ó d'fhág mise an coláiste a chuir mé eolas ar céard ab fhiú an rud a bhí agam."

7. Bourke (1995:72-73) examines Douglas Hyde's and W.B. Yeats' radically different approaches to Irish-language "tradition."

8. Raidió na Gaeltachta reported on Irish-language activists' objections to the new corporation's policies, grievances brought forward at Éircom's stormy A.G.M. on September 13, 2000. In votes at this meeting, small Irish investors found themselves up against the company's chairman, Ray MacSharry, who controlled 1.15 billion proxy votes from large corporate investors (Irish Times, 14/9/00). It obviously matters a lot "who(ever) you are."

9. For a discussion of the dynamics of local, national and global culture, see Appadurai (1996).

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