

# **Studying the Musical Ecology of Place in Irish Towns through Deep Mapping**

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## **Introduction**

The value of the study of art and place has become well-advanced in Art History, Geography and other fields in recent years. For instance, Tuan (2004a, 2004b) likens art works to ‘cousins, twice or three times removed’ of places, since they can appeal to the senses and to the values and preferences of those experiencing them. He further argues that art works can capture and convey some slice of time and experience, in a manner in which words are not necessarily as well equipped to do. But little work has considered musical practices in relation to place-making, despite Tuan’s description of music as ‘the supreme art’ in evoking and communicating our sensual imaginations of and experiences in place (Tuan, 2004a, 52). My PhD project seeks to explore the interrelated processes of music- and place-making in three town settlements in the south-east of Ireland: Carlow, Kilkenny (city), and Wexford. I understand places as woven meshworks of lived experiences, memories, and rhythms (Ingold, 2011; Adams et al., 2001; Buttimer, 1976; Tuan, 1977), in which music-making or ‘musicking’ (Small, 1998) happens. Rather than focus on music as an object or output, my work investigates the particular and varied ways in which these everyday processes of making music and place are co-constitutive, shaping and affecting each other. In this essay, I discuss my theoretical framework, what I term the ‘musical ecology of place’, which draws on perspectives from a wide variety of disciplines and approaches, as well as illustrate my approach through research in progress.

## **Towards a Musical Ecology of Place**

In geography, interest in art and artistic practice has grown most significantly in the past number of decades. As a consequence, more sophisticated approaches to studying art works and artistic practice have moved away from purely descriptive and historical analysis, or using art works as objects that merely provide material to study

existing geographic themes. Instead, 'creative geographies' consider the actual experiencing and 'doing' of art work itself as an integral methodological part of research, in addition to contributing to research themes (Hawkins, 2013, 2015). Geography has given significant emphasis to visual art work (Smith, 1994, 1997), though approaches have also developed with regard to literature and performing arts, such as dance, theatre, and music. Duffy (2009) argues that research on music in geography, while dating back some forty or fifty years, is in need of further development, particularly in terms of methodology. Thematic work in the area gaining pace in areas such as health geography (for example, Andrews et al., 2014). My research, in bringing together an empirical study of musical practice and artistic process through a geographic lens, comes at a resonant point in the discipline's development, as well as in related fields of musicology and music education.

The 'musical ecology of place' framework for this study brings a geographical approach to other frameworks being developed in musicology, ethnomusicology, music education, and sociology (Watkins, 2011; Finnegan, 2007; Kenny, 2016). At its most basic level, ecology is defined as 'the study of the interrelationships between organisms and their surrounding, outer world' (The Oxford Dictionary of Geography, 2015). An ecological approach to understanding human systems or even types of places, such as cities, has been applied in a vast array of disciplines (Pickett and Cadenasso, 2002), in particular sociology. However, place and environment in this musically-interested research are sometimes assumed to be passive, understood as location, stage, or container. This contrasts diverse theoretical developments in geography and elsewhere, and the approach in this project too, which understands places as much more than mere location. For example, Casey (2001, 684) argues that place, things and people are intricately linked via 'constitutive coingredience'. Archer's (1964) work may be considered the first to use ecological thinking with regard to music, focusing on the 'mobile, fluid, dynamic interrelationship' (28) of music and other social facets. Later work takes similar views, with approaches such as 'acoustic ecology' (Schaefer, 1977), 'soundscape ecology' (Pijanowski et al., 2011), 'ecomusicology' (Allen, 2011; Allen et al., 2014), and 'ecology of music sustainability' (Schippers, 2016; Sound Futures, 2018).

These examples have all emerged through an interest in understanding music's development, organisation, sustainability and work within a wider context. There are thus multiple perspectives on the actual attributes and components of musical ecologies, which cannot be explored here. Based on how my own framework is developing, the facets of the musical ecologies I have studied include: *actors* playing various (musical and non-musical) *roles* in the musical ecology, who form *connections* which support musical practice in place, and also deploy important *resources* for musical practice. The *work of musical practice* is far reaching, and affects all people within the musical ecology, and indeed is a strong part of place-making.

### **Mapping Musical Ecologies of Place**

The idea of mapping musical ecologies of place is critical to the conceptual and methodological frameworks of my PhD project in at least two ways. Firstly, by bringing together multiple approaches, perspectives, methods, and actors' stories, the project as a whole resembles a 'deep mapping' approach. Biggs (2010) describes deep mapping as an intensive exploration of a particular place, usually a small place, with artistic approaches and perspectives at its centre. In deep mapping, multiple (even opposing) voices, of insiders and outsiders, 'amateurs' and 'professionals' (Finnegan, 2007), official and unofficial, come together to contribute to the whole (McLucas, n.d.). Deep mappings do not seek to be objective or 'correct' in any cartographic sense, but are in fact as partisan and politicised as one might expect of such a polyphonic construction. In addition to deep mapping, new approaches to mappings are now increasingly deployed at the meeting point of art and geography practices to explore complex spatial issues and processes, and indeed can contribute to the movement towards change (Hawkins, 2013).

A second facet of my project makes extensive use of a form of community mapping (for example, Lydon, 2003) as a central research method. The community music mapping I have developed resembles the model of community asset mapping, wherein the assets available to particular communities are mapped to produce an output or resource which can be put to use by that community (for example, UN-Habitat, 2010). Music has been mapped in similar ways through a variety of guises, including, for instance, a mapping of popular music with a focus on tourism in Dublin

(Mangaoang and O’Flynn, 2015) and mappings of musical practices, histories, and venues in Liverpool (Cohen, 2012; Lashua et al., 2010). Creative, participatory and other forms of mapping, in geography and elsewhere, continue to develop in diverse ways too, which has also informed the development of my method (for example, Solnit and Jelly-Shapiro, 2016; Pánek and Benediktsson, 2017).

The actual design of my mapping develops Rebecca Krinke’s (2010) artistic mapping of joy and pain in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. In a number of public spaces, including parks, museum galleries, and main streets, Krinke invited passers-by and invited guests (students and colleagues) to mark where they experienced joy and pain. They gathered around a large wooden map onto which the street map of the city had been carved. A number of participants could gather around the map at once, with the option to converse with others and the researcher. Individuals had the option to mark multiple places or merely one. People could also participate by not mapping, but observing or offering their own stories.

Overall, this design struck me as accessible, engaging, clear, flexible, and practical, especially with limited resources and time. It could allow significant places to be easily identified and marked. Participants could simultaneously describe their memories, experiences, and opinions of musical practice in their place (which could be recorded and transcribed for later analysis). The map could allow multiple people to converse at once (a polyphony of voices), creating a dynamic, interactive experience which could also be open to debate. Musicians of all ages, musical backgrounds and interests could have their say around this map. All of their views could be brought together with the rest, forming threads within the weaving of the meshwork (Ingold, 2011). The approach could also map the ways in which places relate to each other and other places through musical experience (Massey, 2005).

Importantly too, such participatory mappings, as map-along interviews in a sense, provide insights into on-the-ground, lived experiences of sustaining musical practices in place. Other narratives, for instance those of policy-makers or official reports, might not capture these aspects of a place in quite the same way (Lydon, 2003). As Lydon also details, collectively produced maps provide rich insights into stories of musicking from across perspectives, in ways that could scarcely be reached through more conventional practices or existing sources. This mapping method

therefore clearly accesses the perspectives of actors and roles across the musical ecology of place, and the networks and connections they form. The mapping also explores the work musical practice does more broadly, and the ways it influences and is influenced by the contexts (for example, political, social, cultural, economic) in which it happens.

In addition to mapping, the other central methodological element of the project is musicking ethnographies. Here, in-depth interviews with a range of musicians contributing to and sustaining the musical ecology of place are combined with participant observations of their practice. These musicians are drawn from across the amateur-professional continuum, including community musicians, small ensembles, and individual artists (Finnegan, 2007).



*Figure 1: In conversation with Carlow-based choristers, May 2017. Photograph: author's own*

## **Concluding Notes**

My theoretical and methodological approach to mapping and understanding musical ecologies of place is still under development. The deep mappings taking place in this project do not claim to be representative either. They provide a small insight into not

only the richness and diversity of musical practice in these places, but the ways in which musicians develop and deploy strategies to ensure this richness despite the challenges they might face. Nonetheless, this deep mapping conceptual model, which includes the larger scale construction of mappings of music from a variety of on-the-ground perspectives in combination with close and focused ethnographic case study work with musicians across the professional-amateur continuum, is so far proving an effective approach. I conclude by offering some preliminary conclusions about the significant ecological interrelations emerging between actors, places and musical practice. These exemplify what Massey (2005, 81) calls the 'throwntogetherness' of places (and musical ecologies) and include place-based stories, memories and rhythms, musical fields of care, the work of musical practice, challenges to sustainability, and the importance of connections.

*Place-based stories and memories* (resonating with oral history approaches in many ways too) of musical experiences of times in old, that might otherwise go forgotten are told, often with a sense of warm recollection on the part of the storyteller. This sense of time, of change in musical practice and in place, comes across vividly when the polyphony of voices, musicians of so many age groups, bring their stories to the map, as do the *rhythms and journeys* by which musical practice and place-making happen on a daily, weekly, and seasonal basis, as well as within the lifecourses of musicians. At different life stages on one's musical journey, for example, different rhythms come to the fore; young people who map speak about learning music in school, going to live concerts, some are even considering a career in music. For adults, accounts focus significantly on musical practice as a parent, or on musical practice as a child which may or may not have continued. Older people speak very fondly about the past, but also now experience new rhythms, with many joining musical groups in retirement. They very often acknowledge the important role these activities perform with regard to socialising, staying active, and challenging oneself, and note the experience of musical practice can be a high point in one's weekly rhythms.

Also emerging is the creation of *musical fields of care* (after Tuan, 1979), important spaces for rehearsal, learning, performance, listening, or reflection. These fields of care, which are clearly highlighted as spatial patterns in the mappings, encompass formal arts and/or music spaces as well as schools, churches, community

centres, pubs, hotels, and outdoor spaces (among others). They are enabling places (cf. Duff, 2011) of development, support, enjoyment, fulfilment, and challenge for musicians in creating nurturing environments. As such, they are rich sites of place-making too. They are places which support musical practice, through their existing resources, their accessibility, their centrality, for instance, or through their familiarity or connections to the life of the place in question, although this may not be known or recognised more broadly.

The creative *work of musical practice* (following Hawkins, 2013 and Rice, 2003) becomes clear in mapping conversations. There is a sense of value in the musical experience which goes beyond the actual participation in or production of musical practice. This value enriches musicking for participants in various ways, and contributes to place-making. Mapping participants describe the experiences of learning, enjoyment, socialisation, well-being, reflection, escape, and personal development they experience through musical participation. Lum (2011) urges practitioners (in her case music educators) to ‘appreciate the multifaceted functions of music, of which musical skill development is sometimes hardly significant’ (194). Bracken (2015) and Goodrich (2013), similarly underline the equal (and sometimes greater) significance of the non-musical fruits of musical practice.

The *challenges* faced by musicians in place, particularly practitioners making their living through musical practice, become clear in mapping discussions too. From the point of view of place scholarship, it is important to consider negative experiences as much as positive ones (Tuan, 2004b). In my own mappings, negative experiences have manifested in the guise of accessing resources, finding work, building new audiences, sustaining practices in challenging funding climates, and the multiple roles in and increasingly mobile nature of musical practice. Often, the connections and networking fostered through musicking, with musical colleagues in particular, help to overcome some of these challenges. Personal and place-based connections also feature extensively in the accounts of community musicians, most especially those of family and friend groups, but also neighbours and the wider community. As a way for musicians to reflect on and work through their place and the challenges they face there, the project (and similar research endeavours) empowers those who participate

in it, fostering community and place wellbeing, and providing opportunities to uncover and consider paths to sustainability for their musical communities.

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