

## **Researching Music- and Place-Making through Engaged Practice: Becoming a Musicking-Geographer**

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*How might geographers better understand the active, lived, on-the-ground experiences of musicians in places, and their role in place-making? This paper describes how I have developed a methodological framework that brings together two approaches, musicking ethnography, and music mapping, to examine the co-constitutive processes of music-making and place-making in three Irish towns. As a professional musical practitioner, I bring to geography the perspective of a musicking-geographer, drawing on Christopher Small's (2011) concept of "musicking", and Harriet Hawkins' (2011) work on geography-art "doing". Working with musicians of all age groups, musical backgrounds and interests from across the amateur-professional continuum (cf. Finnegan 2007), I aspire to create egalitarian, engaging, respectful and useful research experiences for the musicians with whom I work. I consider how my approach has developed in response to these aspirations, how my dual-positionality impacted the approach, and how it might be further developed and adapted by practitioner-geographers.*

***Place, music, art, practice, creativity***

Geographers have studied music as an element of folkways (Carney 1998) or analysed the economics of World Music (Brandellero and Pfeffer 2011). More nuanced projects have considered the role of making music in understanding place (Leyshon et. al. 1995; Connell and Gibson 2003) and landscape (Smith 1997; Watson and Drakeford-Allen 2016), such as Wood et al.'s (2007) discussion of creating intimate encounters that temporarily constitutes a community. As Duffy (2009) points out, however, more rigorous methods for understanding musical experience from a geographic point of view are needed. Harriet Hawkins (2011) has also recently called for geographers to explore art and artistic practice through "doings" (p. 464), undertaking artistic practice to further understand themes of mutual interest to artists and geographers.

In this article, I respond to both Duffy's and Hawkins' appeals by proposing two innovative methods to explore the doings and happenings of music, what Small (2011: 9) describes as "musicking." As a musical practitioner, I extend Hawkins' (2013) discussion of the value of active participation in artistic practice, which goes beyond more standard social science forms of participant observation. Hawkins (2011, 2015) argues that the specialised nature of such active participation can teach geographers to observe in new and different ways, to see what they might otherwise miss or take-for-granted. By exploring a perspective rarely sought in geography, that of the musical practitioner from the perspective of a musical practitioner, my approach combines the many "doings" of musicking, and thus rich insights from the many stances of musicians, with geographical investigations of lived and on-the-ground experience.

Being a musician and musical educator, my case of "doing" is not straightforward. I am not necessarily learning new musical skills, but am learning to deploy those skills to

explore taken-for-granted aspects of life and place to further geographic understandings of the dialectic processes of place-making and music-making. I began earning my living as a professional musician when I began my undergraduate studies in Music and Geography, which continued to develop through my postgraduate studies. In this dual position, I have occupied numerous roles, including as performer, session (recording) musician, choral accompanist, teacher and group music facilitator, playing three instruments professionally. Because of my long association with and interest in music, when I chose to explore musical practice from a practitioner's perspective through geographical fieldwork methods, the knowledges developed in my musical life so far have been invaluable in developing and carrying out the fieldwork. I argue that geographically sensitive work about "musicking" demonstrates the significance of musical practitioners' varied experiences as they are lived, played out in and influenced by the specific locales, venues and cultural contexts in which "life take place" (Seamon 2018: 1). I understand places as textured meshworks of experience, emotion, memory, value and meaning (Ingold 2011; Tuan, 1977; Adams et al. 2001; Casey, 2001). Places are important settings for and fundamental to musical practice and experience. Musical experience provides opportunities for the rich and meaningful encounters and memory-making that are integral to place-making.

To understand the reciprocal relationship between musicking and place, I have developed two methodological strands, musicking ethnography and music mappings. These methods develop Morton's (2005: 673) and Kearney's (2013) research, which accesses the "here and now" of the experience of Irish traditional music performance spaces, and extends Finnegan's (2007) case study examination of musical genres in 1980s Milton

Keynes (UK). With Pitts (2005), the above scholars have researched different aspects of musical practice, including direct performance, audience participation, rehearsal, and musical learning (also Kenny, 2016), though the multiple modes of musicking I propose are not often adopted in other studies.

### **Musicking ethnographies**

The first strand to my approach is what I term **musicking ethnography** (Figure 1). Small (2011: 9) defines “musicking” as participating in a musical performance in whatever capacity, including performing, listening, composing, dancing or rehearsing. A focus on the living-doing-practice of musicking combines a rich, hands-on engagement with musicians’ practice, from the perspective of a musician, through participating in performances or rehearsals, together with audience observer and listener’s perspectives, and with more traditional ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviewing (for the latter, see: Till 2009; Emerson et al. 2011). For my PhD, I researched three different examples of musical practice in three different small Irish towns, including community and voluntary groups, such as choirs; smaller ensembles or collectives, such as bands; and the music-life of an individual artist. I endeavoured to choose examples along the amateur-professional continuum (following Finnegan 2007), and with as wide a variety of age groups as possible, to access as many perspectives as I could. I invited musicians or ensembles with whom I had already worked or was connected through other colleagues to participate in my study. I invited the selected musician or ensemble to choose a mode of engagement that would best suit them. In total, I participated directly in two performances, attended two performances as an audience member, attended and participated in two rehearsals, and analysed musical scores or albums for three.

***Figure 1. Musicking ethnography: stage set up before a performance. My fieldnotes lie on the floor beneath my music stand. 1 September 2016, Seven Oaks Hotel, Carlow.***

***Photo: author.***

Each mode of musical engagement had advantages and challenges. Participating in and simultaneously researching musical performance was the most challenging. It was to split my attention between performing and observing and noting as a researcher as much detail as I could. I had to watch and listen for cues, follow scores, and manage multiple instruments, while simultaneously observing and taking notes. In the end, I developed a notetaking shorthand, scribbling short words or symbols on my scores. I could not clearly see the audience due to stage lighting, nor could properly hear the balanced totality of the performance due to sound on-stage (which has a different balance to sound off-stage). I could, nonetheless, very vividly capture the performers' and my experiences and responses, which proved valuable when interviewing these musicians later (cf. Duffy et al. 2011). The most effective mode of engagement was attending rehearsals. This more

relaxed rehearsal environment allowed easier observation and notetaking. I could chat to individual musicians in a less rushed way, experiencing their practice in their own special spaces, what I consider to be their musical “fields of care” (Tuan 1979: 416). A drawback of rehearsal engagement was the lack of audience, and the lived dynamic between musicians and their listeners.

After my observations of and engagement with musicians’ practice, I reflected and wrote fieldnotes, and analysed musicians’ practice through media and any other available outputs. I then conducted in-depth interviews with musicians, with reflections from my engagement with their work leading to wider issues about musical practice and place.

One particular encounter illustrates the value of my existing practice-based knowledge. I was privileged to interview a very well-known and respected song-writer for a musicking ethnography. I had engaged with his practice by analysing his most recent album, and had previously performed his music. Though we had never met, our connection through a colleague and my experience meant that when I discussed the detail of his work, I could quickly describe musical features and structures in intricate detail, like rhythmic patterns and chord structures. I also commented on the styles of the musicians who had recorded on the album, having worked with some of them before. This is a sort of language and “shared repertoire” (Kenny 2016: 12, citing Wenger 1998) I had with the larger community of musicians; it would be difficult for a non-musician to conduct such a streamlined conversation in as conversant a manner. Further, I have perfect pitch, and can identify notes and chords without reference to a score or other instrument or note. I was thus able to recall his music in detail quite easily, leading to a smoother process again, since I did not have to rely on extensive notes or notetaking in conversations, and

felt very “at home” in drawing on these musical skills in conversation. My point here is two-fold. When research participants give their time to support a colleague in research, it is respectful to make the process as streamlined and effective as possible. Secondly, when I connected as a musician with another musician, there was a sense of resonance and momentum when discussing the participant’s professional practice. I especially enjoyed these moments: they enriched the fieldwork experience in positive, memorable ways for us both.

Similarly, but for an ensemble of three female musicians, I found a shared sense of enthusiasm for our conversation when we discussed common challenges we faced as young musicians. We shared different strategies we had built or tried during our work. Rather than having merely gained for myself in terms of learning and conducting fieldwork, I felt I had provided possibilities for enriching the work of those musicians, and gained beneficial insights for my musical practice, which was very special. This example points to the importance of identifying with fellow working musicians in similar positions.

It was also my special privilege to interview a highly respected composer of choral and children’s music, who was very ill. I only learned afterward, through a mutual colleague, that she had found my questions and the opportunity to reflect overall a very valuable one, and it had given her a diversion on which to focus during a very difficult time. She has since sadly passed away, but my fieldwork experience with her in particular has made a lasting impact on me, in terms of my research and personally. This sense of reciprocity is an important consideration in social research, and, as Sasser (2014) argues, each research situation is unique in terms of how researchers can give back. My own position and knowledges, as shared with participants, allowed for an exchange in quite a direct

sense during the fieldwork, which may become an engagement which may continue longer term. Fiorella (2014) also describes the possibilities of an everyday and situational sense of giving back during research, which, in my own case, included smaller musical gestures (cf. Gupta 2014) of assisting with arranging and distributing scores before performances, helping with grant proposals, and occasional collaborations on a voluntary basis.

Musicking ethnographic research is more involved and focussed on the practical intricacies and details of musical experience than a more general type of ethnographic observation of music, which may not attend to the nuances of musicking so closely. My working knowledge as a professional musician meant our common experiences and day-to-day working challenges were acknowledged and interrogated, which may not have flagged particular attention to a non-musician ethnographer-geographer.

### **Music Mapping**

The second method is **music mapping**. Mapping has been deployed in studying musical experience and participation in a number of cases (Mangaoang and O’Flynn 2015; Cohen 2012; Lashua et al. 2010). I wanted to consider how the stories of musical experience, from a wide variety of people, with different age groups, musical interests and backgrounds, could be brought together and shared around a participatory experience of making a collective map. The experience could be novel, even empowering, for those who chose to participate, allowing them to consider their everyday geographies in a new way (Figure 2).



I chose to create a mapping methodology drawing upon artist-landscape architect Rebecca Krinke's (2010) "Mapping of Joy and Pain," in Minneapolis. Krinke used a wooden map with a laser engraving of a political map placed at table top level in public spaces. People could approach the map and add their own happy or sad stories, identifying and marking where the particular places their life stories had played out on the map, and actually tell these stories, if they wanted to. Krinke's approach resonated with me because it is inventive, effective, and relatively easily deployed, and resulted in a public conversation about place and place-attachment. Her approach, when combined with "asset mapping" (Whiting et al. 2012), captured what I wanted to learn about and explore with musicians, their experiences of music in and through places.

***Figure 2: Music mapping on a beautiful, sunny day. 9 June 2018, Market Cross Shopping Centre, Kilkenny. Photo: author.***

In conducting the music mappings, I asked a range of musical groups to participate, and following rehearsals, I asked small groups of musicians to gather around a map of their town. I asked participants to tell me (and the others) about their musical lives in place. Musicians simultaneously marked the important sites, adding new ones if necessary, and recounted their stories, thoughts and opinions on music and place more broadly, which I recorded and subsequently transcribed. It is a simple method which worked extremely well in the majority of cases.

My own maps, one for each of the three small towns, were constructed of a relatively cheap, very durable plywood. I projected a political map onto the base boards - four sections joined via detachable hinges - and traced only the outlines of streets and rivers, adding prominent buildings in bright colours (not necessarily to scale), so that there was enough room to accommodate the markings participants might add, for instance other buildings or sites that might come up in conversation. I added large bubbles on the outskirts of this drawn map with the names of neighbouring villages, towns and cities that might be mentioned in mapping conversations. Towns and cities across Ireland appear on the maps, meaning that musicians' networks are represented (but not to scale!). I could transport the maps by myself by car, and lift and manoeuvre them. When unfolded, the maps were still a reasonable enough size for a number of people to comfortably participate at once (c.1.8m square). While I intended to place the maps on a table or similar surface, if that was not possible, they could stand by themselves.

Two other factors influenced the design of the maps. The first was cost. I am fortunate to be a funded PhD student, but I still had to be careful about using the resources I had as effectively as possible. I was lucky that my father, an engineer and craftsman, helped me

with designing, constructing and preserving the maps. My primary costs were the mapping materials themselves, i.e. timber, hinges, and pencils and pens for drawing and marking the maps. I decided to draw the map face myself, rather than engaging an artist or graphic designer, which feeds into the second factor shaping the map design.

Throughout the research, I believed that participating in the project should be as enjoyable, engaging and inclusive as possible for the musicians with whom I worked. I felt that my hand-drawn maps, which are not without their little mistakes, were in ways very down-to-earth. Many participants were captivated seeing a version of their town drawn by hand: some wanted detailed explanations of how I had done it, expressing great enthusiasm for the exercise. A few were quick to point out issues of scale (there by design, but this was perhaps not obvious), as well as mistakes in the colouring or drawing details at points. Some were incredulous to learn that, though studying Geography, I did not in fact know every street name or building location in a particular town! I felt that all of these things placed me, as the researcher, on a more even keel with the participants; I wanted to explore and learn about their place with non-expert but interested eyes, and share in dialogue and creation rather than merely posing and answering questions. The jokes, laughter and expressions of wonder during the mapping conversations were mine as well as the participants. Had I brought out a printout of an existing political map, it would have been less accessible and clear, by virtue of its busy-ness and detail, than my own maps. I used colloquial names for places and roads, rather than those named on political maps, which further helped to build a more familiar and locally grounded map with participants.

I was touched when some of the musicians expressed their happiness at being included in the project, being asked their opinions, and being given the chance to share memories and stories that may have been forgotten or gone unknown by younger people. One memorable conversation was with an older lady who, in advance of the mapping, had discussed with her sister what important places they would both like to mark on the map. She took notes on the back of a utility bill envelope, which she carried in her handbag, and added these to the map. This example gets to the empowering nature of the method which reaches out to a range of people whose opinions might otherwise go unsought or unheard. It allowed the musicians to tell the story of music in their places and to shape the map of music and place accordingly, perhaps painting a different picture to what might be thought or portrayed elsewhere.

A method like this, where conversation and sharing is crucial, requires planning and cooperation. It also requires flexibility on the researcher's part, and recognition of organisations' busy working rhythms, which might result in a less than ideal mapping encounters. For musicians who are often busy preparing for upcoming projects and may not be able to give to the project the optimal time for small groups to participate, this can mean having mappings with as many as ten or fifteen people at a time. From practice, I found the ideal was about five people at a time. This does not mean that the larger mapping conversations weren't rich, but that details might be missed because so many people may be talking at once, or some might get to speak more than others. I did my best to ensure focussed mapping conversations, but when the musical groups had to prepare for projects, such as Christmas or summer performances, I often had to condense the process, so as not to impinge on their rehearsal time.

Logistical issues presented when, for example, I held a public mapping event in a gallery-venue space, thinking that this would be an excellent location to gather musicians' and audiences' experiences. However, the space had little natural footfall, so did not bring nearly the number of participants I would have hoped for. Though there are more apparently suitable "public" options, participatory mapping projects have different outcomes depending on context. Here I noted that the weather played its part too, with people naturally less likely to be inside during the very rare episodes of sunny weather (for Ireland!), which I (luckily) enjoyed during two public mapping events. I used a public shopping centre in the final public mapping, which was much more successful.

### **Conclusion: ethics, positionality and the musicking-geographer**

And so to conclude; an effective and innovative methodology, but not without its challenges. When I began the fieldwork for my PhD, I was 22 and had worked professionally as a musician for about four years. Resident in one of the three places researched (my home town), I conducted musicking ethnographies with colleagues, and music mappings with ensembles, including some of which I was a member during my youth and others with whom I had previously collaborated. There are positives to this scenario which scarcely require stating: the rapport already built, resulting in both access and generous assistance when making new connections. There is a challenge here too. Some musical practitioners I met during fieldwork said that it was difficult to expand one's musical practice in one's home town. Kusek and Smiley (2014: 157) discuss the "betweenness" of insider-outsider positionalities which was obvious in my own case. My knowledge of musical practice, and the accrued experiences to which I referred above as shared repertoire, made me, in some senses, as much an insider in the places where I had

far fewer connections or previous working experiences as in my hometown. I was still, in other senses, an outsider, lacking the same levels of familiarity, and thus access. In my fieldnotes, I called myself an “unknown quantity”. Relatedly, I have found that it is difficult to be seen in a different light, interested in musical practice from a research perspective, in my home town, by people who have known me previously as a student, voluntary participant, colleague in music, and/or younger person. This is not to say that the project was not embraced, but that I sometimes felt I had to make a particular case for my research at home, which was not the case for other two towns where I was less well-known, without a history of different positionalities. Zhao (2016) argues that one side of the insider-outsider dualism might outweigh the other at different points, but the duality still remains.

The dynamic of conducting research with friends and colleagues, and from an insider position, was explored by scholars in an earlier *Geographical Review* fieldwork special issue (Till 2001; DeLeyser 2001; Myers 2001; see also Hall 2009). DeLeyser underlined the need for researchers to recognise their own effect on the places and people with whom they work and Till detailed the complexity of her own position, never entirely insider or outsider, and the difficulties that can come with navigating friendships and connections while simultaneously maintaining formal and ethical research practices. I would add that further complications arise when the researcher’s positionality has changed significantly in a short space of time, and particularly where there is an age difference, which is often associated with authority. Challenges emerged for me when ethics information and consent forms were presented to my friends and colleagues. A familiar conversation changed into something more removed and formal. When I researched with musicians in

the places that were not my hometown, I could present myself (at that moment) as a PhD candidate rather than be identified as someone familiar, with a certain history (cf. Zhao 2016).

My musicking geographer methodologies outlined above have resulted in rich insights in the mutually constitutive processes of music-making and place-making. Through the direct “doings” involved in musicking ethnography and music mappings, the memories, stories, emotions and on-the-ground experiences of musicians in particular places were spatially and experientially explored. The lens through which I have examined music- and place-making, that of the musicking-geographer, can be adapted by other practitioner-geographers to advance research on their own areas. My mapping approach, developed with engagement, equitability and cost-effectiveness in mind, can be easily replicated and reach communities who may also wish to explore their everyday experiences of “doing” forms of place-based artistic practice. I have suggested that these two methods are empowering means through which to research artists, communities and places of practice.

Fieldwork is about much more than research. For example, when I began my fieldwork, I was still making my living as a musical practitioner. This helped my research efforts because I could weave my fieldwork into my musical work, which enriched the experience of both significantly and which proved especially valuable in terms of giving me the confidence, as a new PhD student, to experiment with and develop my research methods in a more comfortable setting, as I started fieldwork in my home town with familiar people. However, the negative side was the immense rush of work that would be placed on me when these two things came together. For example, I had to prepare for

and give a performance while simultaneously preparing for, conducting and writing up fieldwork, and also balance a weekly schedule of teaching. As the PhD progressed, my musical practice took a back seat.

Fieldwork is also a chance to develop personally too, to connect with new people and to gain fresh perspectives on life and the world around us. As Hyndman (2001) notes, we change and are changed by the field through our experiences here as well as there. We are lucky as geographers, I believe, to have the opportunity to learn in the field. I have been privileged, to bring my musicking self to the field and to reflect on what has always been a central aspect of my whole being for most of my life (Tuan 2001).

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