

Commercialisation, Celtic and women in Irish traditional music

Joanne Cusack

Abstract

Recent initiatives concerning gender equality and Irish traditional music have raised questions regarding women's performance and participation. Focusing on the impact of commercialisation and consequent use of the "Celtic music" label from the 1990s, this article examines the impact of the commercial music industry on women in Irish traditional music. Utilising Lieb's (2018) "lifecycle model" as a form of analysis, this research draws on lived experiences of the scene aided by a statistical analysis of a select discography. A subsequent research aim provokes dual understandings pertaining to the impact of *Riverdance* and Michael Flatley's later dance shows on women performers. Although the 1990s can be regarded as transformative for women and music in Ireland with an increased visibility of women performing on the commercial scene, such progress can be understood in terms of "ebb and flow" with gender biases continuing to be experienced.

Keywords: Irish traditional music, commercialisation, Celtic, gender, women studies

Introduction

This article explores and analyses the experiences of women active in the commercial Irish traditional music scene during (and after) the transformative period of the 1990s (Barrington 2017; Connolly 2001; McCarthy 1992). In doing so, it questions how and in what way musical acts differ according to a musician's identified gender (O'Shea 2008a: 66). A second research aim is to explore the impact of *Riverdance* and more specifically, Michael Flatley's Irish dance shows on women performers in Irish traditional music. Although this research primarily focuses on women musicians, given the ensemble nature of these shows, dancers are implicated in much of the analysis.

The analytical framework draws on and modifies Lieb's (2018) "lifecycle model", in which she suggests women in the popular music industry follow a particular lifecycle; they are expected to look "exceptionally gorgeous"; and as they age, are "partially forced to exit the industry" as they are deemed "less attractive by contemporary music industry standards" (110 -11). Although this model focuses on the popular commercial music industry and may present certain hazards in "labelling" musicians, I propose Lieb's model has relevance for an analysis of women in the commercial Irish traditional music (and dance) industry. Here, the "commercial industry" is understood as the various "recording companies, media moguls...agents, promoters and marketing gurus" that functioned to increase the market commodity value of Irish traditional music during the 1990s (Ó hAllmhuráin 2017: 185) whereas the term "scene" is employed as a "collectivity" of spaces (Straw 2015: 477). In doing the above, I discuss the impact of the "Celtic music" label on Irish traditional musicians, a subcategory of "World Music" that is distinctly linked to marketing, sales, and branding (Taylor 1997). The fieldwork for this project comprised statistical analysis of a "select discography" in Irish Folk Music Studies/Éigse Cheol Tíre (Carolan et al. 2001) combined with ethnographic

research in the form of a series of questionnaires and interviews with industry professionals (Barz and Cooley 2008). My analysis of this data is informed by the above feminist frameworks and research from contemporary music studies, and reveals attitudes and experiences which exist(ed) within the Irish traditional music/dance scene.¹

Women and Irish traditional music

Studies show that from the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 the most acceptable role for many women in Ireland was that of a homemaker/mother/wife (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Fine-Davis 2015; Flanagan 1975; McKiernan and McWilliams 1997). This was due to a multitude of factors including the influence of the Catholic Church and its relationship with the State; social norms or attitudes towards traditional gender binary roles; constitutional interpretations; and fixed symbolic representations of Ireland which enforced a idealised image and role of women for much of the twentieth century (Cullingford 1990). During this time, comparable attitudes towards the position of women in Irish society were likewise visible within the Irish traditional music scene as demonstrated in the work of Slominski (2010; 2020), O'Shea (2008 a/b) and the recent TG4 television series *Mná an Cheoil* (2019). Biggins believes:

It was a man's world, and the world of Irish traditional music was no exception. Pub sessions—where much of the music was made—were mostly a male domain, and the lion's share of the early and influential recordings of Irish traditional music were made by men...who are still revered and whose styles are emulated even today. However it may seem, women were not excluded nor discouraged from playing music; they just did it more discreetly—in the home. It was very often the mother who taught her children the songs and tunes and how to play them on their instruments. Some of the women who distinguished themselves in the period up to the 1950s were Mrs. Elizabeth Crotty, a concertina player from County Clare; fiddlers Aggie Whyte from East Galway and Julia Clifford from Sliabh Luachra; pianist Eleanor Kane Neary from Chicago; and Sarah Makem (mother of Tommy) from Country Armagh. (1998)

Although Biggins is correct in stating that women musicians mostly performed within the confines of the home, studies have also shown that women were often prohibited and discouraged from performing in public spaces (O'Shea 2008a/b; Slominski 2010; 2020). Domestic responsibilities also restricted women from playing music as frequently as men, and “many married women put aside their instruments altogether, unless they taught their children to play” (O'Shea 2008a: 57). In the TG4 series *Mná an Cheoil* (2019, episode 5), Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh recalls how Nábla, a fiddle player from Gort an Choirce was branded as a sort of “witch” because she kept up her instrument and went against the “unwritten rule” (12:30).

Fine-Davis notes that although changes in attitudes towards the role of women in Ireland came somewhat later than other European countries (predominantly due to the strong influence of the Catholic Church), “the process of change from the mid 1970s was rapid...[due to] Ireland's economic development...women's movements—both internationally and in Ireland itself”, the impact of EU membership, and important “administrative and legislative” reforms (2015: 5). Yet despite significant economic growth and positive changes towards the role of women, the 1980s saw the “arrival of a new crisis” as emigration and unemployment reached all-time highs with continuing migration from rural Ireland to urban centres, most often Dublin, in which “female labour force participation remained extremely low” (Ó Riain 2014: 32). Concertina player Mary MacNamara believes these broader changes in Irish society positively impacted the role of women in Irish traditional music. She states that as people started arriving into the bigger cities seeking education or employment, they also played music, “you'd get to know each other. It encouraged people, it happened naturally” (MacNamara 2019). While there was a growing visibility of women performing outside

of the home particularly within urban society, singer Seosaimhín Ní Bheaglaoich recalls that "there were lots of musicians who were never asked to join in a session in Dublin...And 99 per cent of them were women" (Long 2004). She recalls an occasion where "someone suggested to us [women musicians] that we were no more than groupies, following the musicians around" (ibid.). Ní Bheaglaoich's experience of the Irish traditional music scene in the 1980s is reflective of people's conflicting attitudes towards women in Ireland during this time: "in 1986, 46% of people, interviewed about their attitudes to life in Ireland, still thought that a woman's place was in the home and not outside of it" (Fine-Davis (1988:48) as quoted in McCarthy 1992: 38).

In March 1984, Ní Bheaglaoich became a member of the newly-formed women-only band Macalla. Macalla made their debut on International Women's Day that month at the Dublin Folk Festival and released their first album *Mná na hÉireann* in 1985. Ní Bheaglaoich reflects:

looking back on it now, women accepted their traditional role...we were of a generation who were spreading our wings. We wanted to express our independence through being in Macalla. There was a strength in numbers in a very quiet way...After us, you had the likes of Cherish The Ladies, and Sharon Shannon. Before that, it would have been unheard of that a woman would have that kind of profile in traditional music. (Long 2004)

Testing this further, an analysis of 104 Irish traditional music recordings released between 1985 and 2000, taken from a "select discography" in *Irish Folk Music Studies/Éigse Cheol Tíre* (Carolan et al. 2001), reveals just nine bands featuring women musicians were released between 1985 and 1990, which increased to forty-six released from 1990 to 2000.

These figures combined with Ní Bheaglaoich's response indicate an increased visibility of women musicians performing in the scene from the 1990s, thus demonstrating the impact of groups such as Macalla, as they provided a role model for women musicians who wanted to perform. The increased visibility and commercial success of women performers might also indicate a change in attitude towards the role of women in Irish traditional music. This was certainly the case for banjoist Mary Shannon, who recalled the 1990s as a "fantastic" time where she performed frequently in the Galway music scene and never noticed any gender imbalance (Shannon 2019). MacNamara says that although some people may have had bad experiences performing within the scene, her experience was only positive and she never experienced any form of gender injustice (MacNamara 2019). Accounts of positive experiences in the Irish traditional music scene reflect concurrent changes within Irish society with the appointment of Ireland's first woman president in 1990, the election of twenty women to Dáil Éireann, the national parliament, in 1992 (an increase of 4.2% from 1989) and a number of constitutional changes including the introduction of divorce in 1996. A final key factor in the commercialisation of Irish traditional music from the 1990s was the expanded usage and popularisation of the "Celtic music" label within an expanding World Music market. Irish traditional music broadened from a folk niche into the wider category of "Celtic music" creating additional performance platforms for musicians and an increased potential to earn a more profitable income from the art (Taylor 1997: 209-30; Thornton 1998: 264).

The "commercial, bankable formula"

A critical question arises as to what extent transformative changes in Irish society and growing commercial opportunities impacted women musicians in the Irish traditional music scene from the 1990s. In many successful Irish traditional music bands that toured the national and international commercial circuit during (and after) the 1990s, women featured most often as singers, usually fronting a band consisting of men (see: O'Brien Bernini 2016: 240 - 243). Dolphin's thesis further underpins this in

which she maintains that women singers often became the “visual centrepiece of the band, regardless of whether their personality would naturally lead them to take these roles or not” (2013: 12). Testing this hypothesis further, the analysis of Irish traditional music recordings released between 1985-2000, referred to earlier, revealed just 9% of recordings were of a women-only band, in comparison to 47% consisting of men-only. In mixed gendered acts, 30% of recordings contained one woman in the band, whilst only 14% of recordings had two women or more. Furthermore, 76% of guest musicians listed were men and just 24% were women, meaning that guest musicians were three times more likely to be men. Focusing on the occupation of band members, 44% of women musicians had vocals listed within their occupations in comparison to 22% of men.

A detailed analysis of bands consisting of a multiple number of men and one woman reveals key patterns (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

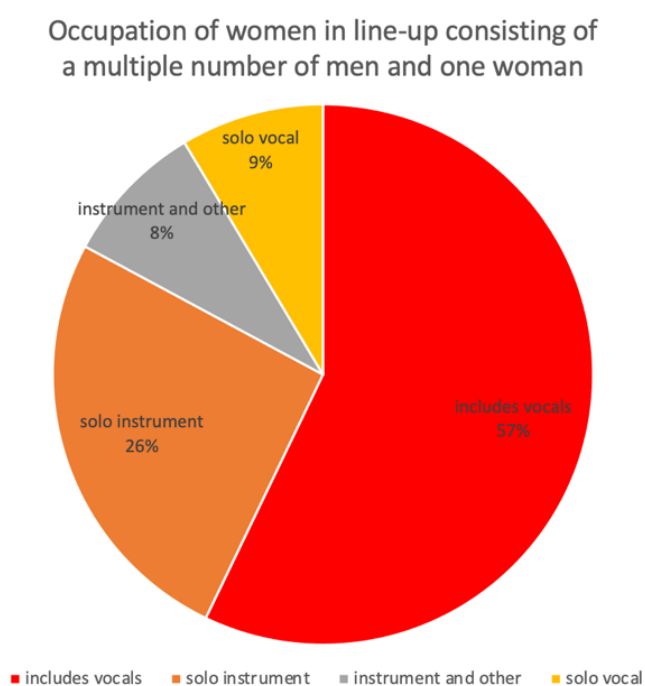


Figure 1: Occupation of women in band consisting of a multiple number of men and one woman.

Occupation of men in line-up consisting of a multiple number of men and one woman

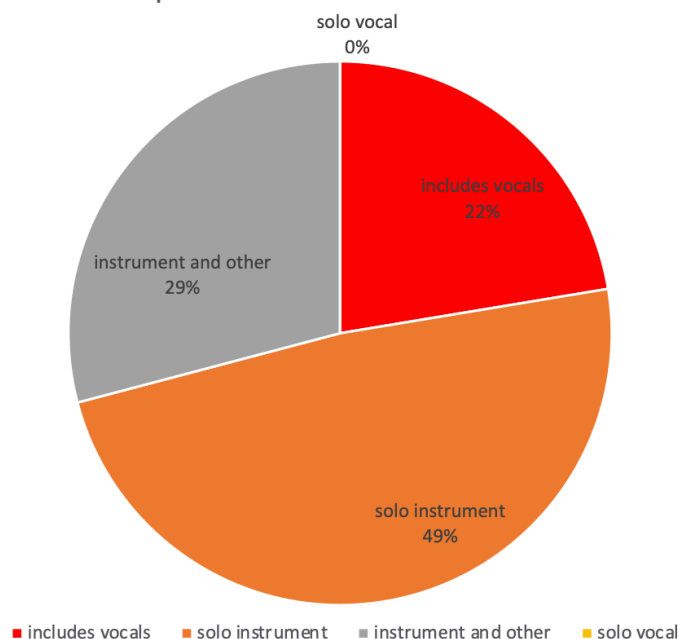


Figure 2: Occupation of men in band consisting of a multiple number of men and one woman.

For the purpose of this analysis on bands consisting of a multiple number of men and one woman, “solo” is understood as only one instrument listed or solo vocal; “includes vocals” designates any type of vocal unless specified; and “multiple instruments” indicates more than one instrument listed (not vocal). Data confirms that women were more likely to be singers in bands than men. Moreover, the overall findings from the discographical analysis demonstrate that the music industry still predominantly consisted of men in comparison to women, despite the increased visibility of women performing on the traditional music scene and significant societal change in relation to gender inequality from the 1990s. At the Rising Tides event (hosted by FairPlé in 2018), traditional musician Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh spoke about her experience as a lead singer, stating that “if you are front and centre in photographs...it doesn’t necessarily mean you’re front and centre musically or in terms of equality” (Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh Rising Tides 2019: 0.33):

A lot of people said to me: “I don’t know why you’re involved with FairPlé, sure you used to swan out there, everyone was looking at you”. That’s not always a great thing. I didn’t always want them to be looking at me. (ibid.: 0.44)

In a subsequent response to a questionnaire conducted as part of this research in 2019, Nic Amhlaoibh maintained her role as lead singer was “insisted upon by her agent” because the role of a woman as lead singer is a “commercial, bankable formula” and “it sells”. This response demonstrates the presence of the “male gaze” within the Irish traditional music scene, thus further exemplifying the men-dominated music industry (Frazier 2015; Hunter and Cuenca 2017; Mulvey 1975). Nic Amhlaoibh observed that:

looks became quite important as the scene had become quite commercial, *Riverdance* and other dance shows contributed to this...The role of the “girl” in the band was clearly defined that she be front and centre, smiling and amenable. The men didn’t seem to have to convey a personality from the stage if they didn’t wish to. (Nic Amhlaoibh 2019)

Nic Amhlaoibh's experience evokes two understandings of the commercial scene. Firstly, reminiscent of Butler's (1990) hypothesis in which gender is a repetition of acts, Nic Amhlaoibh was expected to pursue a role that was most suited to her gender when performing with the band Danú for over a decade: which consisted of Nic Amhlaoibh and five men. This in turn suggests that men musicians had more choice and control over both their image and role in comparison to women. Secondly, Nic Amhlaoibh's response demonstrates the impact of the commercial industry on the image and role of women musicians in Irish traditional music as her role in the band was insisted upon by her agent for the purpose of consumer consumption. Evidently, an increased presence of women musicians performing on the scene should not necessarily be interpreted as women musicians having autonomy or equality.

Lieb argues that women in the popular music scene follow a similar lifecycle and her fieldwork with industry professionals found that all interviewees "reported, to varying extents, that the music industry treats women differently than men" (2018: 111). Lieb bases her lifecycle model on several recurring themes, such as the expectation that women must: "be exceptionally gorgeous"; "leverage their core product or asset—their bodies and perceived sexual availability—into as many other entertainment arenas...to maximize short-term financial success"; and "must play a vastly different career game than their male counterparts" (ibid.: 110). Although Lieb focuses on the popular commercial music industry, the model has relevance for an analysis of women in the commercial Irish traditional music scene, especially when considering the impact of the Celtic music label on Irish traditional musicians with its considerable ties to mainstream popular music, world music, and consumable culture.

Similar to Lieb's findings, many of the responses collected for this research spoke about comparable expectations in relation to conforming to constructed ideals of gendered beauty. Traditional musician Niamh Ní Charra stated that she often "felt required to pay more attention to her clothes and to wear makeup in a concert setting" (Ní Charra 2019). Another musician explained how she often felt that her "look" was important to the men that hired her and recalled how she would often hear them saying: "she looks great and she can sing too!" (Anonymous 2019).

"Celtic" image

Reflecting on the late 1990s, Nic Amhlaoibh also believes that "Americans especially loved the idea of the ingenue, the Celtic fairy" (Nic Amhlaoibh 2019). This reference to both the "Celtic" image and American spectators exemplifies several key developments: the increased use of the Celtic music label from the 1990s; the impact of *Riverdance* and Michael Flatley's Irish dance shows on the image and sound of Irish traditional music; and the expansion of the numerous worldwide Celtic music stages for Irish artists from this time, demonstrating the presence of what Melhuish describes as the "Celtic tide" (Melhuish as quoted in Campos Calvo-Sotelo 2017: 372; Nichol森 2016).

Considering this "Celtic fairy" perception further, along with the obvious "Celtic" connotations, the image is romanticised as one of beauty and innocence or purity. With this thought in mind, perhaps the Celtic music label placed women [back] within the confines of a stereotypical idealised image and role that is reflective of historical personifications of Ireland as feminine whilst also encapsulating traits of romantic cultural nationalism (a significant characteristic of postcolonial identity) and even "magic nationalism" (Slominski 2020: 35, 137; Cullingford 1990; Kearns 2004). Stevens et al. argue such "romantic cultural nationalist narrative that persists in representations of Ireland and Irishness...persists in categorizing and oppressing...Irish women" (2000: 419). Therefore, what has come to be understood as Irishness under the umbrella of the Celtic music category "may encapsulate or expunge the female, denying or seeking to define and legitimize what the 'Irish woman' may be" (Graham 2001: 102). This is in

contrast to the significant positive changes which occurred in relation to the role of women in Irish society during the so-called “transformative” period of the 1990s. This “Celtic fairy” persona also resonates with the first phase of Lieb’s lifecycle model, the “good girl” phase which implies that the pop star “must adhere to set cultural templates of femininity” (2018: 117). This “good girl” phase is also reflective of O’Shea’s informant, fiddle player Anna’s experience. Reminiscent of Butler’s theory of gender performance (1990), Anna believed that she must perform an “acceptable feminine role” in order to avoid sexual harassment whilst performing in her local session (O’Shea 2008a: 61).

As noted previously, many women who perform in the commercial Irish traditional music scene are singers and are often fronting an all-man band. Examples of this can be seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Imagery of well-known Irish traditional music bands (Right – Left: Clannad, Dervish, Danú, and Altan).²

Lieb’s work suggests that as a woman singer “hits a certain point” in their life or particular age, they are no longer marketable and therefore the “stars and their handlers pursue other strategies for remaining desirable, popular, and relevant. Increasingly, this takes the form of emphasizing one’s physical appearance, sexual availability, and overall accessibility...this means entering the realm of the temptress” (2018: 123). Interpreting Lieb’s temptress phase in the context of the commercial Irish traditional music scene, it may be argued that lead women singers in bands—whether they even think of themselves in this way—find themselves positioned in this later phase. Although their clothing choice perhaps resonates more with the romantic, feminine characteristics of the “Celtic fairy” persona than that of a “temptress”, it is clear that each woman is placed front and centre, as a visual focal point: “as

musicians, women have traditionally been viewed as singers, positioned in front of a band, the focus of audience attention not simply for what they sing, but for how they look" (Whiteley 2000: 52). This was certainly the case for singer and fiddle player Niamh Dunne, who referred to herself as the "token female" in the all-man band, Beoga and believed "that her wardrobe selection is more significant and symbolic than her male band mates" (O'Brien Bernini 2016: 241). Similarly, Lieb argues that "audiences have come to expect a beautiful face, body, and voice to travel together in one person as a perfect packaged good" (2018: 176).

Yet, irrespective of whether a woman's image or role reflects characteristics of a "Celtic fairy", "good girl" or "temptress", the difficulty arises if women performers feel they have no choice or feel pressured/required to look and perform a certain way according to their perceived gender in order to meet the commercial industry's desires. This becomes particularly problematic when their men equivalents are not faced with the same expectations. As O'Flynn points out, "one observable pattern in the marketing of some female 'Celtic' musicians...is how they can come to be collectively represented as a gendered category, in a manner that would be rarely, if ever, be applied to male musicians" (2014: 253).

***Riverdance* and Michael Flatley's Irish dance shows**

An additional catalyst which impacted the Irish traditional music scene from the 1990s was the creation of *Riverdance* and the success of Michael Flatley's subsequent Irish dance shows, *Lord of the Dance* (1996), *Feet of Flames* (1998) and *Celtic Tiger* (2005). From 1995, *Riverdance* tours provided a new world-wide platform for Irish traditional music and dance, ultimately aiding commercial music industry expansion and consumer consumption of Irish culture (O'Flynn 2009: 2). Bearing in mind the significance in the number of platforms provided by these shows for both musicians and dancers, the implications for women performers and the roles available to them is significant.

The romanticised, feminine Celtic fairy image is visible throughout *Riverdance* and Flatley's shows, displayed in the dancers' costumes, stage props (Carby 2001: 338) and wigs (O'Flynn 2014: 253). However, not only are women expected to portray characteristics of the "Celtic fairy", costumes are often provocative, emphasising the female form. Although there are some instances where this sexualised image can be seen in the various *Riverdance* productions, Flatley's shows placed *significant* emphasis on sex appeal with provocative costumes and performances visible throughout (see Figure 4).

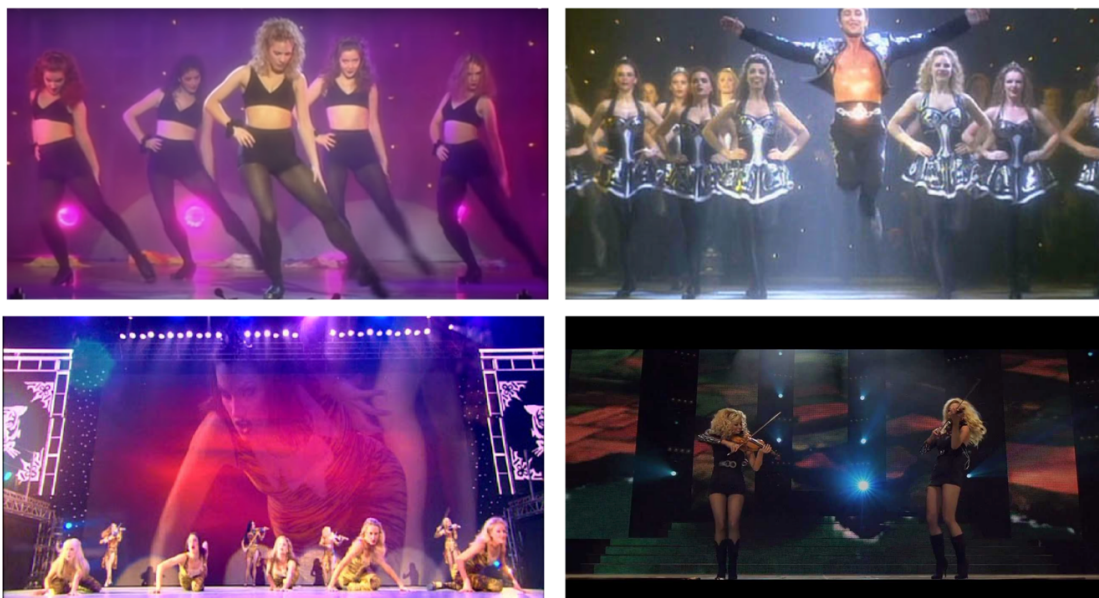


Figure 4: Imagery from Michael Flatley *Lord of the Dance* and *Celtic Tiger* productions.³

Focusing on the musicians' wardrobes for the various Riverdance productions, Ní Charra explained that the musicians' outfits were understated in comparison to the dancers and they were often not given any particular character or role to play, the emphasis being on the music rather than the musicians' image (Ní Charra 2020). In the case of Flatley's later productions, Máire Egan (a fiddle player who performed in *Riverdance* and Michael Flatley's *Lord of the Dance* and *Celtic Tiger* productions) explained that as "the costumes evolved and got shinier and glitzier...so did the dancing, so did the music, and so did the people playing the music" (Egan 2019). Yet in saying this, Egan maintained that an individual's comfort level was always taken into account (ibid.). Another musician, who performed frequently in Flatley's shows, explained that she had limited choice in what she wore, and as subsequent shows became more sexualised, many of the dancers wore more provocative clothing (Anonymous 2018). This more sexualised image of both dancers and musicians in Flatley's productions is reflective of Lieb's "temptress" phase of the lifecycle, in which "an artist transitions from being presented as a good girl to...a temptress" (2018: 124).⁴ In doing this, the artist "wears more form-fitting, body-revealing clothing...begins an active seduction of her audience...and becomes more publicly accessible" (ibid.). Although it has been claimed that these commercial shows brought to the forefront sexual undertones that were already present in the Irish dancing scene (Brennan 1999: 155; Wulff 2007: 117) one must question whether the same can be said in relation to the Irish traditional music scene. Prior to the advent of commercial dance shows and when compared to the dance scene, traditional music spaces were less likely to contain such sexual undertones as women were so often excluded from public performance spaces to begin with and/or had to be willing to perform an "acceptable feminine role" (O'Shea 2008a: 61). However, with the increased commercialisation of Irish traditional music as a result of these dance shows, this also contributed to an increased sexualisation of the industry. Citron considers similar trends within the classical music scene, stating:

In art music one doesn't have to go far to see beauty culture on display. Female sexuality and feminine allure are front and center in leading female performers. Do I go too far in saying "flaunting"?...So what does this mean? Is sex necessary for women to succeed in classical music? (2004: 49)

With this thought in mind, Flatley's shows can be critiqued for the objectification of women performers for the purpose of consumption. Similar concerns were expressed by one musician who believed that in the spin-off shows of varying quality based on the *Riverdance* formula, both the "musicians and dancers were commercially taken advantage of" (Anonymous 2019). However, to Egan, wearing a "teeny sparkly thing" was "art or performance art", and she surmised "if you want to be successful, you have to pull out all the stops":

Every [show] was bigger and better. It maintained the same basic core because it's Irish dancing...I don't think it was over-sexualised...I think they're just the times we live in too... [it's] just a representation of the time. We were just seeing it in Irish music maybe for the first time...Like I said, you go to see the Broadway production *Cabaret* or *Cirque du Soleil*, you're going to see the same type of thing. It's going to be appealing to somebody, and it's going to be offensive to somebody else. Pick your poison, I think it's all good. I just see it all as art and performance art. (Egan 2019)

Egan is not alone in stating that these shows were a reflection of the time as according to Adagh, there was "a kind of sexual revolution" in Ireland from the 1990s (quoted in Ferriter 2009: 535). Furthermore, during this time women-only bands such as The Spice Girls built their success with messages of "girl power" and ownership of sexuality, further popularising "an avalanche of material that elides empowerment, sexuality and clothing in the figure of the 'sexy', 'cute' and 'hot' girl" (Jackson et al. 2012: 146).

Egan's description of Flatley's shows as "performance art", a view shared by MacNamara (2019), is also valid. Flatley's shows are highly theatrical in nature with storylines and dramatic staging which require performers to not only dance or play music, but also to act, especially if they play an important character within the storyline. An example of this can be seen in the *Lord of the Dance* stage production, where Flatley (depicted as the only lead character) must save Ireland from a dark lord, whilst two dancers—Saoirse (Irish cáilín) and Morrighan (gypsy temptress)—duel for Flatley's attention. The "Celtic fairy"/ "good girl" and sexy "temptress" characters are visible in this storyline, further displaying the commercial qualities of these shows and the presence of gendered categories/performances.

According to Egan "certain roles were designed for certain people":

There was the female singer, and she was a goddess. Only a woman could play that role...If there were two girl fiddlers, [then] that was the dynamic...Sometimes, you can go to the show and you can see there are just some roles that are better suited to [certain people]. If you're a piper, you can't stand up and run around the stage, and play energetically and flip your hair around the place. (Egan 2019)

While Egan's response signifies that the instrument is a crucial factor in relation to these performances, she also illustrates the limited and limiting nature of these commercial shows as performers not only had to conform to an idealised image of beauty whilst wearing sexy clothing but also had to perform roles that are gendered. Gender performances demonstrated in these shows amplify "pre-existing societal gender norms through highly feminized performances of gender... [and] may look a bit more like grand actions performed in theatrical settings" (Lieb 2018: 183-184). These "gender performances", sexualised costumes and beautified images pertain to the commercial industry and while they can be conceptualised as performance characteristics of Flatley's shows, they also highlight the impact of the commercial industry on gender expectations, performance style and freedom of choice.⁵ Ní Charra (a fiddle player with *Riverdance* for eight years) recalled one experience in doing emergency cover for a "copy-cat show" in which she was given specific choreography which involved kicking legs, bum wiggles and more: "it couldn't have been more removed from my work on *Riverdance*" (Ní Charra 2019). Clearly this shift towards emphasising temptress characteristics was not appealing to Ní Charra, who

subsequently asserted that she had been hired for her musical ability, refused to do such moves and turned down further work with the production.

Contemporary reflections and critiques of Flatley's dance shows informed by recent feminist and musicological scholarship should not undermine the positive impact of these productions on performers' lives. Lead dancer Bernadette Flynn described performing in Flatley's *Lord of the Dance* as an "incredible time" (Parkes 2007). Similarly, Máire Egan recalled only positive experiences when performing with Michael Flatley's *Lord of the Dance* and *Celtic Tiger* productions. She explained how she had little confidence and "no idea of movement on stage" or experience of performing whilst standing up, prior to performing in these productions:

I've great respect for Michael Flatley and what he did for all of us in Irish music and Irish dancing. For me, my experience in that show was only wonderful...It did great things for me. If you want to talk about femininity and comfort level, I was the biggest hippie and bohemian chick, you ever met in your whole life...I never wore anything tight or figure-hugging or revealing because it wasn't who I was...It's funny, joining *Lord of the Dance* allowed me to develop a side of myself that I would never have looked into or felt comfortable in...In a way because I had to do it, you had to step up...it did me a lot of good because it helped me in many areas of my life. (Egan 2019)

Although the need to wear such costumes further illustrates the aesthetics of these performance platforms and even if Egan had limited choice in what she wore or how she performed, she chose to embrace the requirements of performing in these shows. As a result of performing in Flatley's *Lord of The Dance* and *Celtic Tiger* productions, Egan's confidence increased, which in turn positively influenced other areas of her life.

Conclusion

This research suggests that the dominant themes which recur in Lieb's work (2018) are also prominent within Irish traditional music, reaffirming the impact of the commercial industry on women performers in this field. Despite the 1990s appearing to be a "transformative period" for women and music in Ireland, with a significant increase in the number of women performing on the scene, it is clear that this did not necessarily mean that women had equality or autonomy.

As a result of marketing Irish traditional music acts under the commercial category of "Celtic music", some women musicians were expected and/or felt pressured to conform to the commercial music industry's expectations and standards of what they deemed as appealing for their audiences. In addition, women were also often expected to pursue a role or occupation that was deemed most "natural" for their gender in comparison to their men performer equivalents—a fact that is particularly visible in the context of a band consisting of a multiple number of men and one woman (Mayhew 2005: 150). The "Celtic music" label also placed women musicians [back] within the confines of a stereotypical idealised image and role, a gendered category more reflective of historical romantic personifications of Ireland rather than the changing role of women in Irish society from the 1990s.

This research also opens up dual understandings on the subject of Irish dance shows. On the one hand, dance shows are acknowledged for introducing more performance opportunities for women in Irish traditional music and dance, and positively impacting performers' careers and lives. However, with this increase in performance opportunities, women have also become more susceptible to the pressures of the commercial industry. Flatley's shows in particular could be described in some instances as sexually objectifying performers where women feel they have no choice or feel pressured/required to look and perform a certain way in order to meet the commercial industry's desires. This becomes particularly problematic when their men performer equivalents are not faced with the same expectations. Although these shows present requirements that portray aspects of gender performance (Butler 1990), this does not necessarily denote that the experience of women who performed in these

highly theatrical shows is the same as the experience shared by women who fronted bands. In Flatley's shows there is a written and visible storyline which shapes performances of gender in what Lieb describes as "grand actions" (2018: 184). For women who perform in bands consisting of a multiple number of men and one woman, they are still expected to pursue a role that is reflective of their assumed gender, even though there are no such storylines governing this. They are perhaps different versions of the same larger problem.

While recognising that there are often limited choices in relation to performance platforms, women still face different expectations than men in order to be commercially successful. Thus, the lived experiences shown in this research demonstrate that the role of women in the commercial Irish music scene can be understood "in terms of ebb and flow rather than just this clear story of constant moving on and progress" (RTÉ 2020 *Herstory*: 22.55).

Notes

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I refer to "woman" rather than female, and "man" rather than "male" (other than that used in quotations) throughout, whilst also allowing for non-binary and non-essentialist understandings of gender.

² *Clannad* <<https://images.app.goo.gl/MfJX4nYw9o9T8oRCA>>. Last accessed: 28 October 2019.

Dervish <<https://images.app.goo.gl/PHNYs3pohm4xYqTx6>>. Last accessed: 28 October 2019.

Danú <<https://images.app.goo.gl/37PTYwdkYpzxM11a6>>. Last accessed: 28 October 2019.

Altan <<https://images.app.goo.gl/CdFsk5ZrEib6kz9S8>>. Last accessed: 28 October 2019.

³ "Breakout" scene *Lord of the Dance* 1996

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEjclME_BM4>; *Lord of the Dance* 1996

<<https://images.app.goo.gl/Fh56NSo6i4Caya6f8>>; "Celtic Kittens" scene in *Celtic Tiger* 2005

<<https://images.app.goo.gl/rpwFmhMjPwZCXV9J6>>; "Strings of Fire" scene in *Lord of the Dance* 2011 <<https://images.app.goo.gl/HUKjXLcTJm9WibVV7>>.

⁴ The temptress image can be seen in Flatley's *Lord of the Dance* production where Irish Cailín Saoirse rips open her dress to unveil sexier clothing underneath, competing with temptress Morrighan to gain the Lord of the Dance's affection. *Lord of the Dance—Breakout* HD. TheEgyptMau. 12 January 2011. www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEjclME_BM4 Last accessed: 20 July 2020. See: 1.51.

⁵ In saying this, it is also necessary to acknowledge the time period in which these shows emerged as one that rarely featured non-binary characters in Irish dance shows (except perhaps in the case of the "little spirit" character from Flatley's *Lord of the Dance*).

Acknowledgements

Firstly, my sincerest and deepest gratitude goes to all who have participated in this research, for without their support and participation, it would have been impossible. I would also like to thank the Irish Traditional Music Archive for their help in locating materials needed for the statistical analysis and also to Maynooth University librarian, Patricia Harkin for her kindness and help during a pandemic. I am likewise indebted to the supervisory guidance provided by my primary supervisor Dr Adrian Scahill, and external Dr Daithí Kearney. I would also like to acknowledge the organisers of the Women and Traditional | Folk Music Research Symposium for facilitating a day of important discussions on women in music. Finally, I am sincerely thankful to Dr Méabh Ní Fhuartháin for her valuable feedback and time, and also to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

References

Bibliography:

- Barrington, Anne (2017) From marriage bar towards gender equality: The experience of women in Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs 1970–2000. In Jennifer A. Cassidy Ed. *Gender and Diplomacy*. London: Routledge: 48-65.
- Barz, G. and Cooley, T. (2008) *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Biggins, Kathleen (1998) Liner notes. In *One and All: The Best of Cherish the Ladies*. CD. USA: Green Linnet Records.
- Brennan, Helen (1999) *The Story of Irish Dance*. United States and Canada: Roberts Rinehart Publishers.
- Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Byrne, Angela (2020) *Herstory: Ireland's Epic Women*, "Kay McNulty", (episode two), RTÉ Documentary: 10 February.
- Campos Calvo-Sotelo, Javier (2017) I Celti, la prima Europa: the role of Celtic myth and Celtic music in the construction of European identity. *Popular Music and Society* 40 (4): 369-389.
- Carby, Hazel V. (2001) What is this "Black" in Irish popular culture? *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 4 (3): 325-49.
- Carolan, Nicholas et al. Eds. (2001) *Irish Folk Music Studies; Éigse Cheol Tíre: volumes 5-6 1986-2000*. Ireland: Irish Folk Music Studies.
- Connolly, Linda (2001) *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution*. Ireland: Springer.
- Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler (1990) "Thinking of her...as...Ireland": Yeats, Pearse and Heaney. *Textual Practice* 4: 1-21.
- Dobash, R. and Dobash, R. (1979) *Violence against Wives: A Case against the Patriarchy*. New York: Free Press.
- Dolphin, Christina (2013) *Reels, Heels and Glass Ceilings: Women Musicians in the Professional Sphere of Irish Traditional Music*. Thesis (B.A.). University of Limerick, Ireland.
- Ferriter, Diarmaid (2009) *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*. Great Britain: Profile Books Ltd.
- Fine-Davis, Margret -
 (2006) Personality correlates of attitudes toward the role and status of women in Ireland. *Journal of Personality* 47 (3): 379-396.
 (2015) *Gender Roles in Ireland: Three Decades of Attitude Change*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Flanagan, Donal (1975) The more subtle discrimination. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 64 (255): 231-42.
- Frazier, Kathryn E. (2015) *Empowerment, Sexualised Femininity and Violence against Women in the Age of Postfeminism*. PhD. Clark University, Massachusetts.
- Graham, Colin (2001) "Staged quaintness": Subalternity, gender and popular identity. In Colin Graham Ed. *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd: 102-132.
- Hunter, M. and Alhelí Cuenca, M. (2017) Nicki Minaj and the changing politics of hip-hop: Real blackness, real bodies, real feminism? *Feminist Formations* 29 (2): 26-46.

- Jackson, Sue et al. (2012) "The whole playboy mansion image": Girls' fashioning and fashioned selves within a postfeminist culture. *Feminism & Psychology* 23 (2): 143-162.
- Kearns, Gerry (2004) Mother Ireland and the revolutionary sisters. *Cultural Geographies* 11: 443-467.
- Lieb, Kristin (2018) *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Long, Siobhán (2004) Coming back for more. *The Irish Times*, 15 May. www.irishtimes.com/news/coming-back-for-more-1.1140644 Last accessed: 17 September 2019.
- Mayhew, Emma (2005) Positioning the producer: Gender divisions in creative labour and value. In Sheila Whiteley et al. Eds. *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity*. England: Ashgate Publishing: 149-163.
- McCarthy, Imelda C. (1992) "Out of myth into history": A hope for Irish women in the 1990s. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 4 (3/4): 37-46.
- McKiernan, J. and McWilliams, M. (1997) Women, religion, and violence in the family. In A. Byrne and M. Leonard Eds. *Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications.
- Nicholsen, Michael D. (2016) "File under Celtic": The uses and misuses of a musical myth, 1882-1999. *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 39 (2): 134-161.
- O'Brien Bernini, Leah Marie (2016) *The Neoliberalisation of Cultural Production: An Ethnography of Professional Irish traditional Music*. PhD. University of Limerick, Limerick.
- O'Flynn, John –
(2009) *The Irishness of Irish Music*. UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
(2014) Kalfou Danjere? Interpreting Irish-Celtic music. In M. Fitzgerald and J. O'Flynn Eds. *Music and Identity in Ireland and Beyond*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd: 233-259.
- Ó hAllmhuráin, Gearóid (2017) *A Short History of Irish Traditional Music*. Dublin: O'Brien.
- Ó Riain, Seán (2014) *The Rise and Fall of Ireland's Celtic Tiger: Liberalism, Boom and Bust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Shea, Helen -
(2008a) "Good man, Mary!": Women musicians and the fraternity of Irish traditional music. *Journal of Gender Studies* 17 (1): 55-70.
(2008b) *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*. Cork: Cork University Press.
- Parkes, Diane (2007) Dancing queen!; Bernadette landed top role at just 16 *Birmingham Mail* [Worcestershire edition], 12 January. <https://search-proquest-com.jproxy.nuim.ie/docview/321669382?accountid=12309> Last accessed: 30 July 2020.
- Straw, William (2015) Some things a scene might be. *Cultural Studies* 29 (3): 476-485.
- Slominski, Tes -
(2010) *Music, Gender, and the Public Sphere in Twentieth-century Ireland*. PhD. New York University, New York.
(2013) "Pretty young artistes" and "the queen of Irish fiddlers": Intelligibility, gender, and the Irish nationalist imagination. *Ethnomusicology Ireland* 2(3): 1-21.
(2020) *Trad Nation: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Irish Traditional Music*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Stevens, Lorna et al. (2000) Gender, nationality and cultural representations of Ireland: An Irish woman's place? *European Journal of Women's Studies* 7(4): 405-421.

Taylor, Timothy D.

(1997) *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*. New York and London: Psychology Press.

Thornton, Shannon L. (1998) Fanning the Celtic flame: Music patronage and practice in contemporary Ireland. *Western Folklore* 57 (4): 261-274.

Whiteley, Sheila (2000) *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*. London: Routledge.

Wulff, Helena (2007) *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility in Ireland*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Discography:

Cherish the Ladies -

(1998) *One and All: The Best of Cherish the Ladies* [CD]. USA: Green Linnet Records.

(1984) *Mná na hÉireann* [vinyl]. Dublin: Gael Linn.

Images:

Clannad <https://images.app.goo.gl/MfJX4nYw9o9T8oRCA>. Last accessed: 28 October 2019.

Dervish <https://images.app.goo.gl/PHNYs3pohm4xYqTx6>. Last accessed: 28 October 2019.

Danú <https://images.app.goo.gl/37PTywdkYpzxM11a6>. Last accessed: 28 October 2019.

Altan <https://images.app.goo.gl/CdFsk5ZrEib6kz9S8>. Last accessed: 28 October 2019.

"Breakout" scene in *Lord of the Dance 1996*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEjclME_BM4. Last accessed: 2 August 2020.
See: 2.48

Lord of the Dance 1996 <https://images.app.goo.gl/Fh56NSo6i4Caya6f8>. Last accessed: 2 August 2020.

"Celtic Kittens" scene in *Celtic Tiger 2005*

<https://images.app.goo.gl/rpwFmhMjPwZCXV9J6>. Last accessed: 2 August 2020.

"Strings of Fire" scene in *Lord of the Dance 2011*

<https://images.app.goo.gl/HUKjXLcTJm9WibVV7>. Last accessed: 2 August 2020.

Interviews, correspondence and questionnaires:*

Anonymous. Questionnaire, received 12 January 2019.

Anonymous. Questionnaire, received 10 November 2018.

Egan, Máire. Skype interview, 16 May 2019.

MacNamara, Mary. Skype interview, 13 August 2019.

Ní Charra, Niamh-

Questionnaire, received 10 January 2019.

Email correspondence, 31 July 2020.

Nic Amhlaoibh, Muireann. Questionnaire, received 12 January 2019

Shannon, Mary. Questionnaire and audio interview, 20-21 June 2019

*Please note, the opinions of the authors expressed in this research do not necessarily state or reflect those of cited. Ethical approval for this research has been granted by the Maynooth University Ethics Committee (SRESC-2018-054).

Television:

RTÉ. 2020. *Herstory: Ireland's Epic Women*, "Kay McNulty" (episode two). 10 February.

TG4. 2019. *Mná an Cheoil* (6 part music series). 2 February.

Videography:

Celtic Tiger Michael Flatley HD Modified, Birmingham UK 2005. HAN PO YANG. 25 September 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zSc82liplc>

Lord of the Dance–Breakout HD. TheEgyptMau. 12 January 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEjclME_BM4

Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh Rising Tides | FairPlé. FairPlé. Uploaded 5 August 2019. <https://youtu.be/QeaRASwWNCc>

Riverdance at the Eurovision Song Contest 30 April 1994 Dublin #Riverdance20. Riverdance. 29 April 2014. https://youtu.be/w0v_pu6miJ8

Riverdance slip into spring. Minea Ionut. 20 September 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrPwu5LjqFs>