

PhD Vignette: Changes in Society and Scene: An Examination of the Role of Women Performers in Commercial Irish traditional music



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The topic of gender and Irish traditional music continues to gather increased attention from both scholars and musicians alike. Although research had in fact already emerged in the work of scholars such as Tes Slominski (2010; 2013; 2020; 2021) and Helen O'Shea (2005; 2007; 2008a/b; 2012), the establishment of FairPlé in 2018, aided by the MiseFosta movement in July 2020, urged more and more musicians to reflect on their tight-knit community and question social gender norms. My own interest in gender and Irish traditional music pre-existed these developments, stemming from my experience as a female musician and needless to say, my experience as a woman growing up in an ever changing (but slow to change) Irish society.

As I was beginning my project in Maynooth University, several things came together which confirmed my chosen research direction. During my second semester of my first year, I met with musicians Karan Casey, Pauline Scanlon, Kate Barry, Niamh Dunne, Úna Monaghan, Niamh Ní Charra, Síle Denvir to name a few, and co-founded the organisation, FairPlé. FairPlé, meaning "Fair discussion" initially set up to promote gender balance in Irish traditional and folk music. With this community, came a network of support for performers who had experienced sexual harassment within the Irish traditional and folk music scene, and/or Irish society. By this stage, my research had grown from a relatively niche topic on women musicians in the 1990s, into a more broader conceptual framework, one in which now questions social norms and attitudes towards gender, not just in Irish traditional music, but in Irish society in general. Encompassing a broader time frame to include a comparative analysis of changes happening in today's society, the feminist/ musicology style project no longer exists in a vacuum but is interventionist in nature and endeavours to create change by engaging with the lived experiences of performers.

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Thus, the main goal of my research is to examine how musical activity/participation in music/ the music industry reflects changes in society and politics in Ireland relating in particular to the role of women in Irish traditional music. While many studies have engaged with gender in Irish traditional music in the context of the community (Slominski 2010: 2020; O'Shea 2008), my research engages with the representation and performance of gender in commercial contexts. The fieldwork for this project comprises of ethnographic research in the form of a series of questionnaires and interviews with industry professionals. The analysis of this data is informed by feminist frameworks and research from contemporary music studies, and reveals attitudes and experiences which exist(ed) within the Irish traditional music/dance scene.

Beginning with the history of women in Ireland from the establishment of the Free State to a more current look at societal change, the research lays down the foundations for a comparative analysis between the attitudes and experiences of women in Irish society and in the Irish traditional music scene. In this process, I explore social, political changes in Irish society alongside the influence of the church and state on legislations, women's sexuality, and women's lives in general. The research continues by examining parallel changes in the Irish traditional music scene and Irish society with extensive case studies on women performers in the commercial Irish traditional music industry.

One of the focal points of this project is *A Woman's Heart*- a collaborative album released in 1992 featuring Mary Black, Eleanor McEvoy, Maura O'Connell, Dolores Keane, Frances Black, and Sharon Shannon. The album "sold in excess of 750,000 copies worldwide, making it one of the bestselling Irish albums of all time" (Harrington, 2012). The group of singers and a single instrumentalist went on to perform international tours and produced two more albums in 1994 and 2002. In 2012, they released a 20th anniversary album, resulting in a number of sold-out concerts in the Olympia theatre and in February 2020, *A Woman's Heart* was brought to the fore once again as an orchestrated performance with the RTÉ concert orchestra.

Reflecting on the success of *A Woman's Heart*, I investigate how the collaboration became so commercially successful in an industry which was (and continues to be) largely dominated by men. Moreover, I question why and how the collaboration, and more particularly McEvoy's hit title-track – 'Only A Woman's Heart', became entwined with messages of feminism and equality. In answering these questions, I analyse the reception of the album from the initial release in 1992 to today's more recent orchestrated version.

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Adopting Everest's (1999) approach, I explore several catalysts which contribute(d) to the album's popularity and "feminist" reception including: the socio-cultural and political context at the time of the album's reception; the mistreatment of women in Ireland historically and currently; legislative changes; and the role of women in music. In doing this, I explore the use of art as political activism. A second research method positions the album within the context of third and fourth-wave feminism and related music movements such as Riot Grrrl. My findings suggest that McEvoy is correct in believing that women in society and music still had a lot further to go in terms of the fight for gender equality (McEvoy 2018). This is despite the hugely positive impact that the collaboration had on society and scene, and the various positive advancements in Irish society from the 1990s. Indeed, many of the problems faced by women historically remain evident in today's society as domestic abuse remains at an all-time high and male sexual violence is unfortunately still a stark reality.¹ Even in the Irish traditional music scene, accounts of sexual violence have emerged through the #MiseFosta movement in July 2020 and Dr Úna Monaghan's recent Ethnomusicology Ireland publication (2021). Furthermore, the reaction to the mother and baby's home report in 2021 also signifies the level of healing and acceptance we have yet to have as a society.

This research also considers the impact of commercial Irish dance shows on women performers from the 1990s to present day. It is widely accepted that the development and commercial success of Riverdance and Michael Flatley's productions have had an immense impact on the commercialisation of Irish traditional music – a discussion which often ignites debates of authenticity (Ó hAllmhuráin 2017; O'Flynn 2009). This research explores Irish dance productions from two perspectives by demonstrating how musicians might benefit from performing with these shows, while at the same time be negatively impacted by the performance requirements and expectations pertaining to this commercial music industry. Utilising postfeminism as an analytical framework, I discuss the evolution of costume design, sexual liberation/ objectification/ subjectification, and gendered performances/ roles within the context of an ever-changing society and music scene. Some of my findings suggest that Riverdance and Michael Flatley's Irish dance shows challenged and diversified the representation of gender in Irish traditional music which may be understood in a broader context of changes in societal attitudes towards women- a development which continues to evolve. Throughout the project, I explore feminist critiques of commercial platforms by presenting alternative arguments based on performer's own lived experiences of the scene. This research concedes that feminism can be expressed in a multitude of ways and neither way should be condemned by another.

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Like Braithwaite, this research does not necessarily argue for an “‘anything goes’ feminism, nor for the possibility of absorbing all those crucial differences into one ‘big tent’ feminist camp” (Braithwaite 2002: 342), but one that explores “meanings of femininity that escape limiting, repressive boundaries” (Jackson, Vares & Gill 2012: 144).

A final aim of this project is to contribute to a new and critical insight into the placement/position of feminism within the Irish traditional music scene. This is achieved through a comparative analysis between feminist waves/ social movements such as the #MeToo movement, and collectives in the music industry: Sounding the Feminists; Waking the Feminists; FairPlé; and the #MiseFosta movement. I conclude that the Irish traditional music scene is a microcosm of Irish society and as such, many of the obstacles faced by women in society are also visible in the Irish traditional music scene. The #MiseFosta campaign in July 2020 is just one example of this. While there has been significant advancement/progression towards gender balance/equality within the music scene, the experience of women performing on the commercial platforms of Irish traditional music ‘can be understood in terms of “ebb and flow than just this clear story of constant moving on and progress” (RTÉ 2020 Herstory: 22.55)’ (Cusack 2021). This is indicative of the experience of women in Irish society in general. The project’s expected completion date is 2022.

Endnote

1 In relation to domestic violence, calls to Women’s Aid increased by 43% between March – July 2020, and reports of domestic violence and related crimes increased by approx. 17% from March – November 2020 (Lally 2020). Recent findings of a study carried out by researchers from Trinity College Dublin and Maynooth University reveals that “sexual violence varies ‘significantly’ between men and women. One in five women have been raped in their lifetime, compared to one in 10 men...Almost 15 per cent of Irish adults have been raped at some point in their life, while one in three experienced some form of sexual violence” (as quoted in Bowers 2020).

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