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"Nonsynchronism," Traditional Music, and Memory in Ireland

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"Sound," the American composer Morton Feldman wrote, "does not know its history" (2000, 22). Feldman's statement captures a particularly modernist approach to the material aspect of art: in the case of music, sound is to be encountered as a thing in itself, without any immediate connection to exterior meaning or reality. The desire for the experience of pure artistic form implies its converse, also desired, in which art is experienced as an object in time, linked to tradition and occasion. To set these two aspects of artistic experience against one another is the hallmark of the modern sensibility. Modernity, as a "structure of repression and displacement" in which "the worlds of memory are rapidly replaced" (Seremetakis 1993, 9), gives rise to the artistic desire to encounter "things in themselves," stripped of their histories. This structure of displacement is also evident in the development of scientific modernity, in which (for the philosopher John Locke) even language needed to be stripped of "indexicalities of time and place and interest and intertextuality" (Bauman and Briggs 2003, 11). Anxiety about these "encumbrances" upon thought formed the basis of the modern concept of tradition, "the intertextually constituted medium of reiterations by which the language . . . of the past survives into the present" (9). Modernity defines itself in opposition to this notion of tradition, which it sees as mired in intertextuality—links away from the here and now (11). Tradition is feared as a gabble of voices always threatening to pull us away from, to drown out, the sensuous reality of sound. It is also desired, as a humanizing corrective to modernity's excesses. In the modern world, "tradition" thus has a dual character, in which the two most basic

elements of artistic practice and experience are set against one another; in the case of music, this duality represents two modes of listening: the enjoyment of sound in the here and now, as something *always new,* versus the perception of sound as an embodiment of time and memory.

These two modes of listening necessarily coexist for the Irish traditional musician, which puts her or his practice at odds with modernist sensibility. Irish traditional music is both valorized and denigrated as belonging to the past, existing in more than one time, even at the moment of performance. The term "Irish traditional music" usually refers to instrumental dance music and song, often in solo or unison performance. The musical traditions of Ireland have been constantly changing. Throughout history, new instruments, dances, time signatures, songs, and singing styles have been imported and assimilated into the "tradition." At the same time, considerable continuity has been evident, with titles mentioned by Shakespeare still alive in the tradition and performed today. In recent decades, new performance styles such as "session" playing and "fusions" with other folk and popular musics have become common. Performance has always involved considerable variation and improvisation in both melody and ornamentation.

Nonetheless, Irish traditional music is regarded as "old." It is thus part of what the German historian Marc Bloch termed "nonsynchronous" elements of cultural life. Bloch was understandably ambivalent toward the manifestations of the past in the here and now, seeking to trace and redeem the utopian potentials of popular and folk culture for the development of a critical historical memory, one that resurrects moments of the past that are incompatible with, and thus challenges to, the dominant narratives of the present. In Ireland, a critical historical memory rooted in the "nonsynchronicity" of popular culture has been durable, surviving the era of grand, national projects and linear histories, only to confront the endless now of mass consumer capitalism in the "Celtic Tiger" era. The past, as embodied in popular musical culture, has been deployed both with and against the grain of mass commodity culture.

As Irish society finds itself cast out of prosperity once again, perhaps we can expect what Bloch termed "earlier forces, from a quite different Below" to come to our rescue. "[N]ot all people," Bloch wrote, "live in the same Now. . . . Rather, they carry earlier things with them, things which are intricately involved" ([1932] 1977, 22). The "earlier things" that traditional

musicians carry with them are often *other people,* carried as living memories and presences in the here and now. Songs and pieces of instrumental music are often transmitted with anecdotes about particular musicians associated with them, and even imitations of their ways of speaking and behaving (Coleman 1997, 49; 2004, 382). Certain musicians make a public role of their own haunted being, letting the disruptive presence of others in their own psyches decenter the present:

> It was the two blind Dunne brothers who first split my darkness open.
>
> I was ten. Their music had a sort of call, dragging at my innards like a bad dream at breakfast. The fiddle and banjo being played into my face in the Ennis market-place that afternoon had a rough and raucous sweetness, as if two jug-fulls of music pleasure were being poured at the same time into my two ears. . . .
>
> Years later I found out their names, and the name of the first reel I heard that day, "The Broken Pledge." Christy Dunne played the banjo and his brother Michael the fiddle. Michael stood small and frail in a suit of shabby brown, his left cheek glued to the yellowing violin, his mouth slightly open, his eyes a milky grey-white, seemingly sightless. Christy was tall and magisterial, better dressed. Also partially sighted. Thirty years later I had the joy of inviting them to appear on a television show I was producing at the time for RTÉ called *The Pure Drop,* and while waiting for the artists to come on stage, an official of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann knocked, entered the control room, and asked if I wanted two tinkers waiting outside for me to be sent away. (Mac Mahon 2009, 24–26)

For Tony Mac Mahon, the reality of music is inseparable from the being of the men and women who perform it; looking for music, one finds people, in all their otherness and uncanny particularity. The reality of the Dunne brothers as persons unsettles the young Mac Mahon, and then, years later, it exposes the class prejudices of an official of Comhaltas, the quasi-official organization dedicated to "preserving" traditional music.

If for some musicians, singers, and their audiences particular songs and tunes are infused with the memories and personae of others further up the lines of transmission, and redolent of the histories of their performance, perhaps we should ask ourselves *what* music is, if its very being can be filled

with others and otherwhens. In a comparison of Balto-Finnic, Saami, and Irish-language lyric song traditions, Thomas Dubois shows us that systems of "native hermeneutics" permeate the very being of a text—what music and song *is* depends on the way these are received by their listeners. In the case of lyric song, "the lyric's images are presented from the point of view of a speaker whose experiences and emotions lie at the heart of the work" (1996, 237). Who or what this "speaker" is for the listener makes an enormous difference for how the song is heard and for its social life in the community.

Dubois distinguishes between two "poles" of interpretation in lyric song traditions: "*Narrativization* involves the application of a temporal, local, and character-specific narrative framework as a means of conceiving and appreciating the situation described. *Proverbialization,* in contrast, involves the application of atemporal, nonlocalized status—or station-related understandings of the situation" (1996, 238). Dubois notes that the former is particularly common in Ireland. In addition to these interpretive strategies, Dubois also describes various ways in which performers and audiences direct their attention to different *participants* in performance, participants who may exist in the past, who may be virtual or generic versus actual or specific persons, who may be performers or audiences, and whose very presence may be a product of performance.

These dimensions all involve particular construals of what have been called "participant frameworks"—types of social organization of participation in a speech event (Goffman 1981, 137). Judith Irvine notes that performance situations often involve multiple, "laminated" participant frameworks; thus both prior and subsequent instantiations of a text can be implicated in a performance event. While her examples involve temporal relations between speech or performance events, Irvine's examples also imply multiple and ambiguous frameworks within the here and now of music performance (1996, 146)

An example from the Irish tradition of these ambiguities is in a lyric song popularized by Seosamh Ó hÉinniú (Joe Heaney), "Caoineadh na dTrí Muire" (The lament of the three Marys), said to originate in Mary's keening of Christ. The song's words are addressed by Mary to her son and various others at the scene of the Crucifixion. As direct speech, the song conveys a strong sense of the here and now; Heaney regarded it as being an actual *caoineadh* (keening) as well as a "song," and maintained that in performance the participants could

"see what was happening, the event taking place which was the real meaning of the song anyway—to follow a story, to follow a path, until you come to the turn" (Coleman 1997, 39; Heaney 1978). The song is strongly associated with women's culture in Connemara and has been used ritually as a substitute for keening of the dead (Partridge [Bourke] 1983). In such a situation, there are clearly two heres and nows, and two sets of "participants"—those at the present-day scene of mourning and those at the Crucifixion. Thus the act of singing a sacred song brings into play a chronotope in which two different "times" come together—the ritual act of keening, portrayed as happening at the Crucifixion, and the here and now singing of the song, which is portrayed as that very act of keening Christ: in Christ's words (in Joe Heaney's version), *"Ta mná mo chaointe le breith fós, a Mháithrín"* ("The women who will keen me are yet to be born, dear Mother"). In a double ventriloquy, the here and now singer puts words in the mouth of Mary, whose keening of Christ then becomes the singer's keening of the here and now dead (Coleman 1997, 45–46).

Lyric songs in a "narrativizing" tradition thus exist in multiple times even in the here and now of their performance—they are a type of speech that is inherently "interdiscursive," embodying chronotopes in which past and present are intertwined (Silverstein 2005, 8–9). In particular, local traditions, songs, dances, and so on may acquire multiple "pasts" or "stories" that refer not only to their origins but also to their performance histories (Ó Laoire 2005, 198; Coleman 1997, 46). In music and song, *sound* becomes the unifying medium in which multiple and ambiguous situations, emotions, and "pasts" are brought into co-presence. Sound not only "knows its history" but also is felt to embody it.

Sound can embody history in different ways. In the nineteenth century, debates about the nature of Irish-language song revolved around the question of what sort of time it existed in. For James Hardiman, the song tradition was allegorical and nationalist in essence, but required an act of re-membering to recover its original meaning, as he demonstrates here regarding a particular song, "Roisin Dubh":

> "Roisin Dubh," *Little Black Rose,* is an allegorical ballad in which strong political feelings are conveyed, as a personal address from a lover to his fair one. The allegorical meaning has been long since forgotten, and the verses

> are now remembered, and sung as a plaintive love ditty. It was composed in the reign of Elizabeth of England, to celebrate our Irish hero, *Hugh Ruadh O'Donnell,* of Tyrconnell. By *Roisin Dubh,* supposed to be a beloved female, is meant Ireland. The toils and sufferings of the patriot soldier, are throughout described as the cares and feelings of an anxious lover addressing the object of his affection. (Hardiman et al. 1831, 351).

Hardiman sees an "original" meaning, linked to an original context, in a manner similar to that of the narrativizing interpretive tradition discussed by Dubois. But nationalist "allegory" saw itself as a triumph over time, a clearing away of interpretive dross, a recovery of a *timeless* national essence. This meaning is quite different from the "traditional referentiality" of the folk (Ó Laoire 1999, 78), for whom the emotional value of a song only deepens when it becomes associated with multiple times and contexts.

Sometimes participants think of this aspect of music in terms of "secrets"—diverse, nonexplicit references and associations that are quite difficult to explain to the outsider. Irish-language lyric songs in particular are often linked to multiple narrative contexts, as in the medieval and Jacobite topos whereby, in a love song, a female character may embody Sovereignty, speaking as or speaking to "Ireland" or its messianic redeemers. The emotional depth and energy of the aisling genre derives from this element of contingency—the presence of more than one "story," a series of histories embodied in a lyric and nonnarrative surface. This multiplicity runs through the song tradition, where, for instance, a *chanson de jeune fille* may be locally used to commemorate a male sibling lost through emigration or calamity (Ó Laoire 2005, 193). This type of contingency is what is lost in nineteenth-century nationalist allegory, which de-eroticizes the genre through a type of national sublimation. Nationalist interpretation focuses on a recovery and fixation of linguistic reference—restoring the true meanings of lyrics—which also in effect deemphasizes the role of musical sound as a vehicle of meaning; one could put old songs in modern settings provided their allegorical meanings remained intact.

Hardiman's critic Samuel Ferguson, by contrast, fetishizes the erotic content of Irish-language song, seen as the inchoate emotional sublimate of a primitive mentality confronting historical tragedy. He identifies this

emotional element with the musical form of song, embodiment of a timeless Irish character, while the poetry itself belongs to a prelogical state of human development, in need of modernization. Whereas for Hardiman the presentness of the past in Irish song consisted in its reference to the timeless Irish nation, for Ferguson it was sound itself that was both uncannily "past" and essentially "Irish." Ferguson aligned himself with antiquarian philology as a scientific discipline, which, while aimed at the vindication of Irish civility, located Gaelic civilization firmly in the past.

Yet Ferguson's project is in a strange alliance with Hardiman's; both are directed at creating hybrids of Gaelic and English Romantic aesthetic culture (Campbell 2000, 3, 11), and both are modernist projects predicated on the straightening out and recovery of time. Moore's *Irish Melodies* are the heir to both interpretive traditions—the nationalist and the antiquarian—and Moore's songs do not have the same relationships to time as do the songs of the folk tradition, which, as described by Dubois, Ó Laoire, Shields, and others, represents a third interpretive approach (Coleman 2004; Dubois 1996; Ó Laoire 2005; Shields 1993), one more consistent with Bloch's conception of "nonsynchronicity." Gibbons somewhat confuses matters by using the term "allegory" to refer to this wider nonsynchronous aspect of Irish culture:

> For allegory to retain its critical valency, it is vital that there is an instability of reference and contestation of meaning to the point where it may not be at all clear where the figural ends, and the literal begins. . . . [T]he instability of reference is such that it may not always be possible, on *textual grounds* alone, to decide whether a work is functioning allegorically or not, and hence we have to go "outside" the text itself, to its *historical conditions of meaning,* in order to give full scope to its semantic potential. The multiple references are not, in the strict sense, inherent in the text, nor are they simply added by ingenious critics in retrospect: rather they derive from the historical contiguity of the text to other narratives and symbolic forms that are working their way through the culture. (1996, 20–21)

It is this process of "historical contiguity" that nationalist allegory denigrates or effaces, yet it is the emotional lifeblood of the folk tradition and provides the basis for challenges to modernist time.

In traditional music circles in Ireland, debate continues in the present about the traditional versus the modern; counterattacks are directed by "carriers of earlier things" against modernist musical practices. Older citizens in the Gaeltacht, listening to the radio, are appalled when young singers change the gender of a song's protagonist to match their own in blatant disregard for the "story" of the song and the identity of the original protagonist. A hidebound traditionalist like Joe Heaney, while railing against the use of guitar accompaniment by the likes of (his friends) the Clancy Brothers, would happily collaborate with John Cage on his postmodern Joycean opera, *Roaratorio* (Mac Con Iomaire 2007). While Heaney's objections were directed at musical form (accompaniment spoiling the rhythm of a song), these were was grounded in a sense that musical form was the outcome of the more fundamental question of *orientation,* of the singer and audience to the song, its protagonists, and so forth, as a framework of participation. Provided that these things were respected, Heaney had no problem even with Cagean settings of *sean-nós* songs.

Something similar to this attitude seems to motivate the musician Tony Mac Mahon. His album *Noel Hill & Tony Mac Mahon i gCnoc na gCroí* features musicians and set dancers from County Clare performing for a local audience and was recorded in a village pub on the Cork-Kerry border, with a setup that included microphones for picking up the sound of dancers' feet. Listening to the recording we seem to occupy several places at once—we are in front of or even inside Hill and Mac Mahon's instruments, under the dance floor, among the dancers, and in the enthusiastic audience. The product of careful social and acoustic engineering, the recording succeeds spectacularly in projecting us, from our hyper-real vantage point, into the world and spirit of the music. It is, in some senses, an exercise in nostalgia: liner notes describe the live recording session and suggest that "it was for all the world like the house dances of long ago." While not above using sophisticated artifice for nostalgic ends, Mac Mahon carefully recenters the music in its social context, albeit a reconstructed one.

A similar drive to recenter the music and its audience is evident in Mac Mahon's critique of the television series *River of Sound* (1999). This series, broadcast in the mid-1990s, presented the tradition as undergoing a creative explosion, spinning off modernized and popular musical forms. Mac

Mahon attacks it on two fronts: he maintains that the "new" music featured does not sound right, and he claims that this arises from the musicians' superficial involvement with the past, which he portrays in entirely personal terms—he identifies "the tradition" with musicians of the past, more than a dozen of whose names and localities he lists. These musicians performed in an essentially solo tradition, and music for them was primarily a vehicle for the expression of emotion. He presents himself, in effect, as a metonym for traditional process itself, invoking his own "many years apprenticeship as a listener" to "people of artistic modesty and generosity of spirit, larger-than-life characters who inspired us, taught us, and brought light into our lives." These artists embodied "the principle of care, and of respect—care for the shape and form of the music that was a gift from previous generations, a gift of great significance and value, a gift that was freely given. . . . They often spoke of the effect of a great performance on both musician and listener—how the whole climate of the mind could change in seconds, binding listener and musician in a shared spiritual moment" (112). Like Heaney, for Mac Mahon these social relationships are paramount, and musical form is taken as evidence of their presence. He rejects the modernist framework that opposes "tradition" to "innovation" (because the old musicians created unique performances), instead contrasting right and wrong relationships between performer, music, and audience. These he sums up in a contrast between "gift" and "business" relationships, in a way exactly parallel to Joe Heaney, who contrasted the desire to "do justice" to a song with the desire to make money from it. Most tellingly, Mac Mahon accuses the modernized music of *River of Sound* with temporal superficiality—having shallow roots, it will soon be forgotten. Music, for Mac Mahon, is properly an embodiment of time, one that, to use Bloch's phrase, is "nonsynchronous" only from the point of view of the perpetual now of the commodity: "Let us gaze forever forward through the lens of the powerful and majestic past, and imagine how bleak, how barren the future Irish landscape would be without our Irish traditional music" (120). And yet, the traditional musician, as portrayed by Mac Mahon, can equally claim *forgetting* as his birthright and say to the modernist musician, "I've forgotten more than you will ever know." Every accumulation of meaning involves a partial forgetting of the older contexts and stories that were attached to an element of the tradition.

Tunes are valued for their newness to a locality, when brought in by traveling musicians; likewise, valued performers put their own stamp on a tune or song, renewing it to the extent that it might be passed on as a different tune having a new name, often the name of the performer with whom it is now associated. Traditional music has always been a product of what Seremetakis terms "colportage"—the passing on of fragments of a tradition, often as semicommodities, through nomadic exchanges—"Colporteurs tell stories of the exotic and the different with artifacts as well as with language. Their stories, their small goods are bits and pieces of alterity that bring with them semantic possibility in miniature" (1993, 7). As Scahill points out, one of the "golden ages" of Irish traditional music (the main touchstone for the musicians celebrated by Mac Mahon) was defined by commercial 78 rpm recordings made in the USA in the early twentieth century. The advent of recording created a new form of memory, but also lent a new exoticism to the music as commodified, fixed, virtuoso performance (2008, 6).

The erasure of context facilitated by recording (and also printed versions of tunes and songs) paradoxically aided the process of traditional memory formation, as it cleared the air for new associations and musical transformations as new tunes were taken up in local repertoires. Ciaran Carson's book about musical memory, *Last Night's Fun* (1996), is a testament to this dialectic of memory and forgetting. The model of history that Carson discovers in Irish traditional music is deeply contextual, endlessly flawed, and constantly being patched together from newly discovered fragments. In Carson's memoir, we encounter layers of recorded history: early 78s, LPs made by the generation after that, and session tapes recorded by Carson himself. These recordings make a history that punctuates and gives form to Carson's own memory of particular tunes, musicians, and sessions. As with Mac Mahon, we feel the *shock* of recognition (of particular tunes, styles, etc.)—the attention to *sound in itself*—in constant dialogue with the memories, contexts, and histories that are called to mind by this very shock, which is the shock of recognizing oneself.

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