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# The Irish Experience: Identity and Authenticity in Irish Traditional Music

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The Irish Experience:  
Identity and Authenticity in Irish Traditional Music

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Ethnic Studies/Ethnomusicology  
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## Introduction

Brogan's Pub buzzed with energy on a Tuesday night in August. A group of musicians formed a circle around a reserved table in the corner and chatted while they took out their instruments—three fiddles, a guitar, a bouzouki, a concertina, two bodhráns [bæwr̥n̪z] and a harmonica—and bought drinks at the bar. A Hawaii-born flutist who lived in Ennis recognized my case and invited me to join the session. I sat between the flutist and a bodhrán player from Baltimore who'd spent eight consecutive summers in Ireland. After a few sets, an Irish fiddler invited a young Swedish woman sitting by the wall to take out her fiddle and join the circle, now much larger than the small table that had been reserved for musicians. Two of the fiddlers led most of the music, but each visitor was asked to lead a set of tunes. Players smiled and were generous with praise of a good set. We laughed often, and though I didn't know every tune they played, I managed to join in and pick up a few notes. An Irish woman sat among us and sang "My Heart's Tonight in Ireland," eliciting applause and congratulations from the other musicians and the international audience.

The performance of Irish traditional music extends beyond the bounds of ethnically Irish communities. The advent of recordings in the early twentieth century, and later of computers and spectacles like *Riverdance* toward the end of that century have turned Irish traditional music ("trad") into a global phenomenon that has "burst its ethnic boundaries" and taken root in communities from the United States of America to Australia to Japan (Ó Súilleabháin, lecture, June 23, 2014). A musician need not be Irish in heritage to play and do justice to Irish traditional music or to feel a strong emotional connection to it, yet ethnic ties, real and imagined, constitute a powerful reason to play. Thus the music is inextricably linked, because of its history,

perceptions of authentic performance, and the myriad events in which it takes place, with the poetically-titled Emerald Isle, even if its musicians are not.

In this paper, I explore and analyze the many facets of the perception of and participation in Irish traditional music, focusing on ethnic identity, issues of authenticity in performance, and the emotional connection between performers and the music: Do musicians need to be Irish to be successful? What is an authentic Irish experience? What attracts people from all over the world to play Irish traditional music, and to travel to the island itself? Through my own interviews, I build on Helen O'Shea's research on ethnic identity among Australian trad musicians, and I draw on my own experience and the experiences of my interviewees, expanding upon efforts by anthropologist Adam Kaul, and music scholars Steve Redhead and John Street to define authenticity in the context of Irish traditional music.

This paper is the result of fieldwork completed in Ireland over the course of July and August 2014, and in Wisconsin, US, during the preceding and following months. I interviewed ten practitioners of Irish traditional music from varying ethnic backgrounds, including four ethnically Irish individuals and six non-Irish individuals. I participated in sessions—events, usually in pubs, where musicians gather and play Irish tunes together—in Limerick, Miltown Malbay, Galway, Carrick-on-Shannon, Cork City, Ennis, Feakle and Sligo Town, Ireland, as well as at McGuinness's Pub in Appleton, Wisconsin.

### **Ethnic Identity, Place, and Time in Irish Traditional Music**

Ostensibly, the form of music called Irish traditional music, or “trad,” has a clear connection to Irish heritage. Before the advent of recording technology, trad music was often found in Irish communities in London, Boston and New York. As the Irish fought for

independence from the English, trad music was touted as a symbol of a unique Irish ethnicity. Sociologists Cornell and Hartmann identify three claims involved in the definition of *ethnicity*: real or perceived kinship, common history, and symbolic elements representative of “the core of the group’s identity” (1998: 19). They also claim that “ethnicity is a matter of contrast,” an identity that exists as a means of separating groups of people (ibid. 20). Irish traditional music, because of its history and social context, represents an ethnic group—a people defined by kinship, history and symbols.

If trad is so closely tied to an ethnic group, are its musicians required to be Irish as well? In spite of the name *Irish* traditional music, there is a general consensus among practitioners that one need not be of Irish descent to play trad well. But there is still a perceived connection to Ireland and to being Irish that draws people to the island and to the music itself. All four of the ethnically Irish people I interviewed grew up with the music—someone in their family played, or it was a frequent presence in their youth. Dublin-born accordion player Mick G. said that Irish traditional music is “in the genes of this country [Ireland]” as well as in “the blood of the family.” His eponymous grandfather was the first man in Ireland to record Irish music on accordion in the 1920s. Most of Mick’s uncles and his father played accordion and encouraged him to play; here Mick emphasized again that music and the accordion were in his blood (p.c., July 8, 2014). For Mick G. and practitioners like him, family ties are clearly important to their experience of Irish music, though the heritage is not required to participate in it.

Flute player Mick M., also ethnically Irish, declared, “I don’t care if somebody’s from flipping Mars, as long as they can play.” A member of the Moylurg Ceili [kili] Band, the 2013 champions of the All-Ireland Senior Ceili Band competition, he grew up in London, where trad was a subculture among Irish immigrants. None of his three siblings or his parents played trad,

but he grew up in the context of a “mini explosion of...great musicians” who gained prominence and formed a community of musicians in the London pubs. That community then helped Mick form an ethnic identity as an Irish person growing up in England. For him “there is a huge amount of ethnic identity involved in traditional Irish music.” Even so, he pointed out that ethnically Irish trad players constitute a “particular sector of the Irish community”—not all Irish people play Irish traditional music, and many non-Irish people do. “Traditional Irish music is not the preserve of the Irish,” he explained, because many tunes are borrowed from England, Scotland and other parts of Europe, and they are not “uncontaminated” by other cultures or musical styles (p.c., July 27, 2014).

The non-Irish people I spoke with agreed that Irish ethnicity was not a prerequisite for Irish traditional music, but most still recognized an “advantage” to a musician’s Irish heritage or speculated about their own possible connections to Ireland (Reddan, p.c., July 10, 2014). Yossi, a guitar player from Israel studying trad music in Drumshanbo, pointed out that many great players come from “generations of great musicians” (p.c., July 27, 2014). Mexican-American singer Marisa speculated that her father may have been Irish; it was he who had introduced her to Irish music by playing CDs at home. While she did not know his ethnicity—she told me he may have been Irish or Swedish—Marisa associated her father with Ireland because of his love of Irish traditional music and mythology. For Marisa, Irish traditional music was as much about family as it was for Mick G., but it was also about relating to the music itself on an emotional level (p.c., July 3, 2014). When asked why she played Irish music, Japanese whistle player Rie answered, “I think I was Irish [*sic*]. I feel really natural,” implying that the comfort she felt with Irish traditional music made her feel as if she had Irish heritage herself (p.c., July 12, 2014). Rie’s comment indicates the power of symbolic elements, described by Cornell and Hartmann

above, to create a sense of ethnic identity even when the other two claims to ethnic group membership, kinship and history, are not present.

Australian ethnomusicologist Helen O'Shea's contacts tend to agree with mine, that Irish ethnicity has "no more than a superficial bearing on the ability to play Irish music authentically" (2008: 91). They do, however, consider it important to sound "like Irish musicians;" they believe, like Yossi, that while Irish heritage is not necessary to play trad well, it is an advantage that makes Irish music "'second nature' to Irish musicians" while others have to devote time and effort to achieving the same sound (ibid. 93). To me, it seems that the primary advantage that Irish musicians might have is familiarity with the music. As Irish traditional music is an oral tradition, the first thing a trad learner is instructed to do is listen in order to learn the tunes and the style by ear. Flute maker Hamilton points out that trad "was initially an aural and unwritten [tradition]" which developed in a society where "the aspiring musician...would have been constantly exposed to traditional music, song, and dance, from an early age" (2008:55). For some Irish musicians, the aural transmission that Hamilton describes still exists. Players like Mick G., Patrick M. and Patrick R., who heard trad music in their youth, are already familiar with its common tunes and its characteristic style of ornamentation, variation, and rhythm, which they can then translate to their instrument more readily than someone who discovered Irish music later in life. One fiddler I met in Feakle told me that "you should always be able to lilt [sing] a tune before you play it."

The idea that Irish people have an advantage or inborn affinity for Irish traditional music was common among the non-Irish people with whom I spoke, and was part of a more general idealization of Ireland and Irish people that accompanies trad music. There is a sense among non-Irish musicians that Irish people represent the music and that the music represents Irish

people, even though people of any ethnicity or nationality can play it. German jazz, pop, and trad singer Vera observed a particular way of experiencing emotions in Ireland: “Sadness or grief, I’ve discovered, is very differently dealt with in Ireland...Grief and sadness, they’re part of life.” She related those emotions to the music and the way it is performed. She also said that when Irish people play a “happy song” like a reel, “they’re just happy:” the music and the people embody each other (Szewczuk and Zoller, p.c., June 27, 2014).

Ethnically Irish musicians were also perceived by some of my interviewees as more naturally successful with the music itself. As mentioned above, Yossi felt that many Irish people came from musical families, which made him unsure whether he “[would] have a chance” to succeed as a musician in Ireland competing against native Irish people (p.c., July 27, 2014). Anna, a Polish fiddle player, hoped to learn technique by coming to Ireland and playing in a “real Irish session with Irish people who know those styles, cuts and rolls,” which suggests that she sees Irish people as knowing ornaments and as better references for learning than other practitioners of Irish traditional music—they “grow up here [in Ireland] and have it in blood [*sic*]” (Szewczuk and Zoller, p.c., June 27, 2014). O’Shea discusses the way her contacts believe that trad music “spills effortlessly from the ‘master’” as opposed to the challenge experienced by foreign musicians (2008: 98). Marisa felt intimidated to sing in front of Irish musicians in Ireland where, as Vera presumed, “most people in the audience know things about music” (p.c. July 3, 2014; Szewczuk and Zoller, p.c. June 27, 2014).

While many Irish musicians do grow up surrounded by Irish music in their families and towns the way Mick G. and Patrick R., an accordion player from Mount Scott, did, it is not true that the music “spills effortlessly”—rather, ethnically Irish traditional musicians “work at their craft” with the same level of dedication as non-Irish trad players (O’Shea 2008: 98). Many



children attend lessons in or after school to learn instruments, or pick up instruments that their relatives play. Quite a few of the young people I met had started playing trad on the whistle in grade school and then moved on to other instruments, and my classes at festivals were as populated by local Irish children as by foreign trad enthusiasts.

The Irish musicians with whom I spoke agreed with many of O'Shea's contacts that trad is in some ways an "international genre," though still connected very closely with the people and history of Ireland (ibid. 91). The diversity of my ten interviewees indicates that musicians throughout Europe, the Americas, and Asia play trad. Because of recording technology and computers, a modern trad player need not live in an Irish neighborhood to hear the music, making it truly world music in the sense that it is heard and played in many countries and by people of many ethnicities, while still being strongly associated with its place of origin.

Along with idealizing Irish musicians, for some of my interviewees Ireland itself was what O'Shea called a "pilgrimage" site, a destination for players to hone their craft and soak up the local culture to enhance their proficiency at trad music (2008: 78). If trad musicians do not need Irish heritage, what brings so many to Ireland every year? To Vera, singing a song in its country of origin was very important. Anna imagined that she might find out why Irish music has "a strange impact" on her as part of her first trip to Ireland, though she had yet to find it when we spoke. Anna speculated that her love of and emotional attachment to Irish traditional music may be due in part to hearing songs by the Dubliners and the Chieftains in her house as a child, some of which led her to tears (Szewczuk and Zoller, p.c., June 27, 2014). Marisa associated Ireland with her father, and chose to travel to Ireland as a way to connect with him, to "go to this land that he was so in love with." She grew up hearing ballads, and immediately associated certain songs with her childhood. But for her, the idea of Ireland was as much a result

of her father's love for Irish music as of his stories "about the Druids and the pagans and...how they worshipped nature" (p.c., July 3, 2014). *Ireland* in this context represents an idealized past inspired by Celtic traditions – images which were not mentioned in any of the sessions or festivals I joined.

Little was said in my interviews or workshop classes about Irish mythology other than Marisa's memories of her father. Instead, discourse about tunes focused on the history of trad music in Ireland and abroad, or on the stories of individual tunes: who wrote them, what they were about, who was known for playing them. The teachers and performers I observed always introduced a tune by its name and the person from whom they had learned: "I learned this from the playing of Finbar Dwyer" or "I got this tune off of Martin Hayes."

In addition to the idealized past that Marisa described, Irish music also represents a lived past for many players. Patrick R. described growing up surrounded by trad music. He said that he "grew up in the environment of music," which streamed from the radio and was played in friends' homes. In time he started going to pubs and hearing the music there, and "gradually [got] drawn into it" (p.c., July 10, 2014). Irish traditional music reminds him of his youth in Ireland, but as Anna and Marisa both demonstrated, the music's power to elicit memories of childhood is not limited to Irish people.

A few of my interviewees noted similarities between Irish music and that of their own respective heritages. Marisa noted the theme of homeland, the importance and expressive quality of the language, and the threat of losing the language as themes that related to her Mexican cultural heritage (p.c., July 3, 2014). Naoko, a Japanese fiddler player, noticed a comparison between trad music and Japanese music: "Irish music is very simple...the old Japanese song is very simple music, so I feel [similarly when hearing them.]" She expressed

interest in playing Japanese traditional instruments as well, and said that she experiences comparable feelings when listening to Japanese traditional music. “I don’t know why, but I feel nostalgic from Irish music [*sic*],” Naoko said in explaining her experience with Irish music (p.c., August 9, 2014).

Nostalgia is relatively common among Japanese practitioners of Irish music. Irish tunes and songs remind many Japanese musicians of childhood and home, and some consider Irish songs to be versions of “the original Japanese” songs referring not to the Irish countryside but the Japanese one<sup>1</sup> (Williams 2006: 102). The claim is not without basis; during the Meiji reformation, strophic song forms from the British Isles and the United States were incorporated into Japanese schools (ibid. 106). Japanese poems were set to the Western melodies and taught in schools (ibid. 108). The “old Japanese song and music” that Naoko said she heard in school were likely these Western melodies, though she gave no examples (p.c., August 9, 2014). Because of this interconnectedness of Irish and Japanese musical histories, Naoko’s nostalgia is a claim to a common history, as described by Cornell and Hartmann, that makes Irish traditional music an important part of her ethnic identity.

Long before it traveled overseas, Irish traditional music played a significant role in the history of Ireland. Beginning in 1171, Ireland was colonized by England, during which aspects of Irish culture were aggressively suppressed (Hast and Scott 2004: 22-23). Central to the tension between native Irish people and their English colonizers was the role of religion. Most Irish people were Catholic, while the vast majority of English were Protestant. Irish music almost always had cultural and political meanings (McCann 1995: 54). Queen Elizabeth I

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see Williams, Sean. 2006. “Irish Music and the Experience of Nostalgia in Japan.” *Asian Music* 37(1): 101-119.

suspected itinerant poets and harpers of being political spies whose “songs in praise of their aristocratic patrons” undermined the crown (Hast and Scott 2004: 23). In the late sixteenth century, the Lord President of Munster issued a proclamation “for the extermination” of poets, bards, and pipers in response to “their role in the last upsurge of Gaelic Ireland against the English” (McCann 1995: 54). Facing intimidation and persecution, the harping tradition declined even as musicians sought ways to continue playing within the new English social system (Hast and Scott 2004: 23).

In the late eighteenth century, antiquarians from “the Protestant Anglo-Irish propertied classes” began trying to preserve what remained of the waning Irish musical tradition (O’Shea 2008: 9). John and William Neal published the first book of Irish traditional music in 1724 in Dublin, inside what was called the Pale. The Pale was the part of the city in which the English upper class lived, whereas the Irish lower class resided outside the Pale. Given that most practitioners of Irish music did not read music, this first book, as well as collections published throughout the following century, were intended not for those in Ireland who practiced Irish music learned by ear from their fellow musicians, but for those with little exposure to the art (Ó Súilleabháin, lecture, June 23, 2014).

Edward Bunting was one of the early collectors who transcribed harp music in the 1800s. Like others, he was motivated by antiquarianism and the desire to preserve the Irish tradition. Collectors of Bunting’s time used the music as a political statement, symbolizing Irish culture and language in the fight against English colonialism that would last more than a century (White 1996: 127). Bunting’s collections became “the basis of a canon of Irish music,” which served to connect Irish music to “an imagined pre-colonial Ireland” with which all Irish residents could identify: upper and lower class, Catholic and Protestant, musician and non-musician. This

collective identity would allow both Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Irish people to claim Irish heritage in the battle for independence from Great Britain (O'Shea 2008: 9).

First publishing in 1855, George Petrie followed in Bunting's footsteps in the quest to preserve Irish traditional music as a representation of Irish ethnicity and nationality. Like Bunting, Petrie was motivated by Protestant patriots seeking a national identity to separate themselves from England (O'Shea 2008: 15). Petrie had the additional motivation of the Great Famine of 1845-50, which dramatically reduced the island's population through death and forced emigration. The Famine drove collectors like Petrie to recover what remained of the Irish tradition because the population of practitioners had been endangered (White 1996: 131).

As May McCann said, "Irish culture is prone to revivals," and multiple movements and organizations viewed the revival of traditional music as a significant component of the establishment of a distinctly Irish identity (1995: 51). The Gaelic League, founded in 1893, focused primarily on the restoration of the Irish language in its Gaelic revival, but incorporated music, art, and sport as symbols of Irish heritage from both an ethnic and a nationalistic perspective (ibid. 61). The Irish music collected by Petrie and his contemporaries represented "the culture of the Gael" and was kept as what musicologist Harry White calls an "ethnic repertory" distinct from Western art music (White 1996: 130, 132).

Ireland formally acquired independence from Great Britain in 1922, after which trad music continued to be promoted as a cultural treasure (Hast and Scott 2004: 39). In the 1930s, Irish traditional music was "elevated to a position of official esteem" as a representative of the ideals of Irish culture, born of the struggle for independence (Henry 1989: 69). Clubs and events arose in the next few decades to encourage the practice of Irish music and dance, and in 1951 Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann [koltəs kjoltori □r□n] (Society of Irish Musicians, CCE) was

founded (ibid. 70). CCE's goals were to promote Irish music, particularly harp and uilleann pipes; to create a bond among trad musicians; and to restore and promote Irish culture and language (ibid. 69).

Since its founding, CCE has taught classes, held sessions, and sponsored competitions, all of which have motivated a large number of people to take up Irish traditional music (Henry 1989: 92). "All music will only survive if it's practiced by somebody," and CCE "did do a lot to maintain and preserve traditional music" through fostering young musicians (Mulvey, p.c., 2014). CCE sponsors an annual Fleadh Cheoil [fl̩ kjol], a music festival and competition, in each county and province in Ireland, culminating in the international Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann [fl̩ kjol nə h̩r̩n] in mid-August (Henry 1989: 75). Competitions are held for singers, dancers and players of traditional instruments on tune types from slow airs to reels and jigs to marches and set dances, and competitors hail from every province and from abroad (ibid. 78).

While a large number of foreigners visit Ireland to attend or compete in the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, many of the musicians around the world who flock to Ireland do so to participate in school-like festivals such as the Willie Clancy Summer School in Miltown Malbay and the Feakle Festival in Feakle. But they all come seeking something different. Anna and Rie came looking for lessons on ornamentation and technique (Szewczuk and Zoller, p.c., June 27, 2014; p.c., July 12, 2014). While Patrick M., a Galway-based multi-instrumentalist, sought knowledge and technique, he also came for the atmosphere and the opportunity to meet people (p.c., June 30, 2014). Patrick R. said that Willie Clancy Week is "like a magnet" that drew him into town every year, even though he never planned to come. He comes because the festival is an opportunity to meet people and play music, and because even though it took him three days to

recover from one late night, “if you don’t come out, you feel that you’re missing something” (p.c., July 10, 2014).

Mick G. and Naoko both came to festivals for the music itself. Mick G. identified the high standard of music as a draw for him, as well as the opportunity to play with people he knows (p.c., July 8, 2014). Naoko came looking for live music; she explained that she knew of no live trad music in Japan, “so [she wanted] to hear the live music in [Ireland]” (p.c., August 9, 2014). She spoke to me at the Feakle Festival, but also stayed for a week-long festival exclusively for Japanese practitioners of Irish traditional music. This next festival would be an opportunity for Japanese musicians to play trad in Ireland, indicating again that Irish ethnicity is not necessary for playing trad and that, though there is a community of trad musicians in Japan, there is still a desire for experience in Ireland. The festival also raises questions of the relative authenticity of an Irish musical experience populated only by non-Irish players: is it still an authentic experience of trad in Ireland if none of the other practitioners are Irish?

### **"Irishness" and Traditionality: What is Authentic?**

Many people I spoke with expressed interest in "authentic" Irish music, so I determined to define authenticity as trad musicians perceived it. Because trad music is so closely linked to Ireland, I define the search for authenticity in terms of two key elements: “Irishness,” or the features of trad music that make it and its performance unmistakably Irish, and for traditionality—the aspects of music and performance that situate them within the canon of values, styles, and repertoire that is called *Irish traditional music*. I asked my interviewees for their views on authenticity: What makes Irish traditional music Irish? What is an authentic Irish music experience? Their answers varied depending on how I asked the question, whether overtly

or through conversations about tourism, *Riverdance* and the thin lines that demarcate traditionality.

As a group, my interviewees listed certain tangible elements of trad that qualified as aspects of Irishness: the tin whistle, ornaments, and dance rhythms. Reels, jigs, and hornpipes were mentioned often as essentially Irish tunes. Above all, the sound, difficult to define but clearly recognizable, was the most common answer to the question of what makes the music Irish. None of the people I spoke with could define the sound of Irish traditional music, though all claimed to know it when they heard it. But even within this list there are disagreements and missing components. Reels, jigs, and hornpipes are Irish, but many reels, jigs, and hornpipes come from Scottish or English traditions. Slides, polkas, and barndances are also fairly common in trad musicians' repertoire, though polkas, as Mick M. pointed out, are actually Eastern European (p.c., July 27, 2014). Notably absent from the list my interviewees provided is the ethnicity of the person playing the music. My interviewees agreed that one need not be ethnically Irish to play Irish traditional music well, which they tended to value above any explicit claims to Irishness.

The claim made by many of my interviewees that Irishness is in the sound, that it is otherwise challenging to articulate, became clear to me by the end of my two months of fieldwork. Wandering through Cork City, I entered one pub because I heard the sound of music playing. I considered joining in, but something about the music sounded inaccessible in a way that traditional music was not. The music did not *sound* Irish. I realized after thirty minutes sitting in the pub that the music was probably bluegrass, a similar and similarly popular form of jam session music found in pubs in Ireland, which was why I felt that I could not join in.



The age of tunes was a common claim to traditionality—many tunes are perceived to be centuries old, though many more have been and are being composed by living musicians. Some argue that the music of Turlough O’Carolan is “the only real, pure traditional Irish music” by virtue of its age (Mulvey, p.c., 2014). O’Carolan was a blind harper who lived from 1670-1738, during the Baroque period in classical music (Hast and Scott 2004: 23). O’Carolan composed music in honor of wealthy patrons, and many of his tunes have found their way into the modern trad musician’s repertoire, although his pieces are not dance tunes and are played with a simpler style and fewer ornaments than dance tunes. O’Carolan’s tunes could also be considered classical, yet they are not commonly found in classical repertoire.

Photographer Tony Kearns and music scholar Barry Taylor suggest that the process by which the music is learned is an important aspect of traditionality. “What sets apart the ‘classical’ and the ‘traditional’ musician is largely the context in which the repertoire is both learned and performed,” referring to both aural learning and informal performance spaces like pubs (2003: 127). Irish traditional music is typically taught without the use of sheet music, with emphasis placed on listening and establishing a style, while classical music is much more focused on the page.

Referring to the music itself, Mick M. prefers the word “pure,” focusing on traditionality as a more important aspect of authenticity than Irishness. He included in this category “what you would hear on a typical trad night,” as well as “less commercial recordings” and the recordings created by Michael Coleman, James Morrison and other Irish emigrants to New York in the 1920s, which appeared often in my conversations as icons of Irish traditional music. The boundaries between “pure” Irish music and other Irish music are unclear and depend on the perspective of the individual player, though there are certain sounds that can be clearly

recognized. As Mick M. explained, members of commercial groups like Solas may experiment with their own music, but in a session they would refrain from “pushing boundaries.” The music they play on stage, while entertaining, is more virtuosic and esoteric than the music usually heard in sessions, where the goal is to play together with other musicians. Playing with the same experimental style that Solas and similar groups use in performance would alienate other session musicians. He did not, however, define traditional Irish music as tunes created in Ireland; many tunes were adopted from England, Scotland and other parts of Eastern Europe, or from classical and military music, but are still recognized as part of the Irish traditional canon. Rather than being truly “pure” and “uncontaminated,” he explained, trad music carries with it many “outside influences” (p.c., July 27, 2014).

Other interviewees were less strict about the concept of “pure” or “authentic” traditional music. Yossi incorporated jazz sounds into his music, stating that “music is just blend” and that there is already strong jazz influence in Irish traditional music:

Jazz is traditional and gypsy music is traditional. They collide. They inspire, they embrace one another...It’s inspired from America, it’s inspired from American music, American folklore music. It’s there.  
(p.c., July 27, 2014)

Marisa also welcomed experimentation with the music, but cautioned that it was important to learn a song well and in the traditional way first. She said that it is important for a musician to internalize the song as it was taught, so that the musician can “change it mindfully,” with a reason for every decision. Such a change can be as simple as a slide between pitches, or can involve varying the pitches or rhythm of a song’s melody. Melodic variation and ornamentation

are forms of expression and personalization, but must be grounded in the original song to maintain its character (p.c. July 3, 2004).

Concerns about authentic performance did not arise in the context of the music itself, but were more likely to be raised when I asked about tourism. Only two of my interviewees, Vera and Marisa, actually said the word *authentic*, and Mick M. was the only other one to voice concerns about the effect of tourism on trad. Some of those concerns focused on what Kaul calls the “commodification” of Irish traditional music, which “entrenches an object or practice in a commensurable definition of ‘value’” (2007: 706). According to Kaul, payment for trad music is perceived as a mark of commodification, and therefore a mark of inauthenticity (ibid. 711). Marisa’s reservations about tourist-oriented events fit this line of thought. She worried that a session meant for tourists offered “what the audience thinks is what the audience wants” (p.c., July 3, 2014).

Most of my interviewees expressed little concern over the effect of tourism on Irish traditional music. Mick G. valued the audience as an essential piece of music making, whether tourists or more familiar with the music. “Tourists always like Irish music,” he explained (p.c., July 8, 2014). Patrick R. agreed that tourism was good for the music, and added that it was financially beneficial to the pubs (p.c. July 10, 2014). To Patrick M., tourism was evidence of the way trad has spread outside of Ireland, and he enjoyed the opportunity to meet and play alongside foreign nationals (p.c., June 30. 2014).

Others were more concerned about the unspoken rules of etiquette that were often broken by unknowing tourists. Mick M. cited what he called the “Bórd Fáilte Effect,” [bord f<sup>h</sup>iltə] wherein the trad music scene is advertised as a “completely open, completely unfettered form of *craic*,” [kræk] (fun or a good time) and as such sessions are invaded by overzealous visitors

“with very little knowledge.” He explained that trad music “at its highest level is extremely complex” and takes years of practice to play well. He compared the Bórd Fáilte Effect to a set dance: “You can’t join in with a set dance unless you can dance,” or you risk ruining the dance for all involved. Along with knowing the music, rules of etiquette like asking permission to join and respecting older musicians diminish as a result of the Bórd Fáilte Effect (p.c., July 27, 2014).

The Bórd Fáilte Effect also includes “Come All Ye” sessions, trad sessions meant to entertain tourists through paid musicians or song sessions featuring familiar tunes such as “‘The Wild Rover’ or ‘The Fields of Athenry.’” These sessions fit into the same category as those that Marisa mentioned, which aim to give the audience what it thinks it wants; Mick M. “would not necessarily call that a traditional Irish session” (Mulvey, p.c., July 27, 2014)

Unlike sessions marketed to tourists as “authentic,” *Riverdance* represents a conscious departure from Irish traditional music, though it draws from a solo dance genre that played a similar role to trad in establishing a uniquely Irish national identity<sup>2</sup> (Foley 2001: 36). A global phenomenon combining elements of trad music and Irish dance with Eastern European rhythms in a modern, commercial form, *Riverdance* has been responsible for spreading Irish culture and attracting new musicians since it opened in 1995 (Hast and Scott 2004: 126). Through its use of dance tune forms, traditionally Irish instruments like the tin whistle and accordion, and themes that resonate with Irish people in Ireland and abroad, *Riverdance* is “undoubtedly Irish” (Mulvey, p.c., 2014). As Mick M. pointed out, *Riverdance* is “derivative of Irish traditional music,” but it is a “spectacle,” a “stage show” meant to entertain, not to demonstrate the tradition (p.c. 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about *Riverdance*, see Foley, Catherine. 2001. “Perceptions of Irish Step Dance: National, Global, and Local.” *Dance Research Journal* 33(1): 34-45.

Given that *Riverdance* is not meant to represent the Irish tradition, my interviewees had little difficulty enjoying the show. Vera said that the show is “just fun,” and Anna agreed (p.c., June 27, 2014). Referring to the composed nature of the music, Yossi called it “smartened up” trad, written for the theatre (p.c., July 27 2014). Mick G. thought *Riverdance* was a “fabulous” show and introduction to Irish music (p.c., July 8, 2014). Marisa was the only person I spoke to who had reservations about the show, because she felt that a listener would “have to go deeper than commercial events and successes to really understand the pathos of the people,” which she felt was an important component of the music—again, connecting Irish traditional music to the people of Ireland. Marisa’s reservations highlight the spectacle inherent in *Riverdance*: the show brings together Irish song, music and dance into a larger-than-life performance that, taken at face value, gives the viewer the impression that all Irish traditional music looks and sounds like the show. A viewer would have to find other forms of trad, to “go deeper” as Marisa claims, in order to learn that these three art forms are usually distinct entities, and that Irish traditional music does not always involve dance, song, or a stage. In the end, though, she felt that *Riverdance* was a positive addition to Irish culture because it “spread the popularity of that music worldwide,” and “anything that’s promoting Irish culture and tradition...[is] helping that tradition live” (p.c., July 3, 2014).

In one stage performance at Oliver Plunkett’s in Cork City, a two-man act performed a trad set that consisted of a slow air, a polka, a jig and a reel, declaring that the set would demonstrate “the whole idea of what Irish music is about.” Such a set mixing four different types of tunes would never occur in a session, where a set usually consists of a string of similar tunes—a set of reels, for example, or a set of jigs—but was presented as representative of all Irish traditional music for the sake of the tourists present, who were presumed to have little

experience with the subject. Similarly, an accordion and guitar duo performing at Blarney Castle played a variety of tunes including a set of slides, Danny Boy, and Shenandoah—an American folk song. Both duos offered a form of music that would indulge tourists and make them feel as if they were experiencing Irish music, though they were completely different from any session I attended. One of O’Shea’s contacts complains that playing in sessions meant for tourists required pretending to have fun and create an experience “just like it would be if there were no tourists!” (2008: 86).

Vera was also concerned with the intent of a performance meant for tourists. She was “suspicious” that a tourist-oriented session “might not be authentic” because it may “create an atmosphere that is more familiar to tourists,” and therefore less consistent with one that a typical, or “authentic,” session might create. She would ask such a session if “they try to create something for the tourists, or do they just play music because they want to?” (Szewczuk and Zoller, p.c., June 27, 2014) Vera’s concerns are consistent with a central question of authenticity that Kaul identifies: “Is a thing what it claims to be?” (2007: 711). Is a given session truly what a typical session looks like? Is a performance truly in the style that one would expect of traditional Irish music? All of these concerns about tourism point to the importance of a traditional context—an informal session as opposed to a more formal performance—as well as a traditional sound in identifying an “authentic” event.

The question of authenticity is a broad and abstract one. As Kaul explains, “‘Authenticity’ is a clumsy but powerful trope,” a concept that guides researchers and tourists but has little real substance (2007: 711). Kaul’s question above is the surface of a much more complex concept. Whether a performance is considered “authentic” depends on the perspective of the audience: someone unfamiliar with trad sessions may assume that a staged concert is more

authentic than a pub session, while someone who grew up attending sessions may consider the stage an inauthentic presentation (ibid. 710). Kaul suggests that what people seek in an *authentic* performance is in fact closer to “credibility,” which accounts for the amount of control a performer has over his own performance (ibid. 713). Redhead and Street add the concepts of “legitimacy”—a musician’s behavior, image, and interpretation of their genre—and “integrity,” or the power of the musician to make their own decisions about the music (1989: 179). All of these concepts focus on the individual musician and the amount of agency that musician claims: is he experienced enough to play in an appropriate style? Does he come from a family of musicians that taught him how to play mindfully, as Marisa discussed above? Kaul’s concept of credibility also addresses the dangers of commodification: can the musician play what she likes, or is she restricted by the fact that she was hired to play? Some of these questions focus on a musician’s kinship as both their claim to ethnic group membership and to musical credibility. The rest emphasize the importance of symbolic elements, in this case the ability to play trad music with the correct style and sound. A musician’s claim to credibility, legitimacy, and integrity is a claim to membership in the Irish ethnic community. While these titles are most often awarded to ethnically Irish players, any trad musician may strive to “sound Irish,” as O’Shea’s contacts did, regardless of his own heritage (2008: 94).

The location and setup of a session are also subject to these critiques. Whether a session is played on a stage or marketed as a tourist attraction affects the viewer’s expectations. One session I played at the Crane Bar in Galway was situated on a stage and bathed in red light. Musicians were seated in a circle, but the pub was arranged so that the tables on the stage were the center of attention, and the rest of the room was silent while we played. For the audience, many of whom were tourists, this was a reasonable setup. As a musician who has usually played

in less presentational settings, I felt uncomfortable sitting in the spotlight, and that session felt less authentic to me than other, more informal sessions.

Despite the relative ambiguity of their meanings, the definitions of authenticity that Kaul, Redhead, and Street offer all indicate that certain performers have earned the authority to make decisions about Irish traditional music and the way it is performed. The specific behaviors, image, interpretations, and independence that give a performer authority are, like authenticity, much more a matter of perception than of reality, and likewise they depend on the audience. O'Shea points out that, "an aura of authenticity does cling to foreign musicians returning from Ireland." This "aura of authenticity" results in higher status, "respect and attention," especially if the musician returns with a new repertoire, a "more Irish sound," and stories of acceptance in sessions in Ireland (2008: 103).

I encountered a similar sentiment when, after completing the fieldwork for this paper, I performed a set of jigs for a group of American classical flute players. Some of those players wrote anonymous feedback, one of which included the sentence, "I'm not the one who spent 2 months in Ireland, so I'm not really the authority on this stuff!" This caveat implies both that the feedback offered had limited value because of the writer's lack of experience, and that, because of my experience, I had become an "authority on this stuff."

Trad musicians have different opinions about what makes someone an authority on Irish traditional music. Simply being in Ireland is not enough—indeed, none of my interviewees, Irish or not, claimed to be an authority themselves, and all cited traits that might determine a musician's legitimacy and credibility. Marisa explained that she has not specialized in Irish traditional music (p.c., July 3, 2014). Anna thought that experience, love for the music, and the proper style and feeling in playing made someone an authority (Szewczuk and Zoller, p.c., June



27, 2014). Patrick R. said that an authority “sets the level” of a performance, but that everyone taking part in a session has an influence on the music, making it difficult to choose specific people who could be considered authorities (p.c., July 10, 2014). Mick M. explained that no one is qualified to define or govern Irish traditional music, which, in part, is why its Irishness and traditionality are nearly impossible to define, though they motivate musicians from all over the world to visit Ireland and seek them out (p.c., July 27, 2014). Yet musicians flock to Ireland in search of a genuine experience. The drawing power that Ireland has as a place to find authenticity proves how closely trad music is associated with its island of origin, and that so many musicians make the pilgrimage indicates that one need not be of Irish heritage to achieve such an experience.

### **Sessions: Who Do We Play For?**

As the primary arena for performance of Irish traditional music, sessions vary widely in their format and perceived purpose. Sessions are where Irish traditional music is played; for some, that is all they are. For others, however, sessions occupy a more social role than just a performance opportunity. Many of my interviewees indicated that sessions were a way to meet people. Patrick R. highlighted the “social aspect” of Irish music as an important part of his experience. He said that by playing Irish music in any setting, “you can meet lovely people” (p.c., July 10, 2014).

Both Rie and Patrick M. pointed to the nature of the music as a source of camaraderie among musicians. As Patrick M. explained, “You meet some very interesting people and you’ve always something in common with another musician...there’s instantly a connection” (p.c., June 30, 2014). Rie talked about the capacity that the music has for facilitating friendship because,

“everyone has the same notes. Anyone can join in” and connect with the other musicians involved (p.c., July 12, 2014).

As a gathering of musicians, a session appears to be an inherently social activity, but the characteristics of an ideal session are debatable. For Anna, a good session was one wherein players are enthusiastic about the music and talking is kept to a minimum, where people know a variety of tunes and string them together in long sets that can last up to 13 minutes. Anna considered talking and getting to know her fellow performers peripheral: “We don’t waste time for that; we just play, like three or four hours, and we go home” (Szewczuk and Zoller, p.c., June 27, 2014). At a particularly slow session with Anna in Limerick, she leaned over to me during a long silence and asked, “Why aren’t we playing?” Both Mick M. and Mick G. also emphasized the importance of the “quality of the music” as a determining factor of a good session (Grogan, p.c., July 8, 2014).

Others considered the session a social form of music making—what Marisa termed a “creative collaboration.” Marisa asserted the importance of ensemble playing, wherein the players listen to each other and actively play not just simultaneously, but together (p.c., July 3, 2014). Irish traditional music is played heterophonically in sessions, meaning that while everyone at a session plays the same tune, each person plays his own version of the tune. Mick M. said that, when the musicians are good, “there’s a way it [the music] gels,” and added that he believes that sessions should be made up of six to eight people so that the players can “hear the intricacies of what other musicians are doing” (p.c., July 27, 2014). Tunes are played with ornaments and melodic variation that are relatively improvisational in nature, giving each musician the freedom to play the tune as he likes.

Micheál Ó Súilleabháin likens the musician's identity, expressed through music, to a fingerprint, which is "unique and precious, but it must meet other fingerprints if it is to make a way in the world" (1998:78). This fingerprint is the background that each musician brings to the music: it includes other cultural and musical experiences as well as individual ideas and personality. It is the personal touch that makes each player's style unique, which in turn draws musicians to listen to each other. In order to exist in the world and continue to grow, players must interact, play together, and learn from each other. The interaction of individual styles to create a community through music is the premise of the session that "gels" as Mick M. described it (p.c., July 27, 2014). A player might get ideas from others in a session, or try some variations of his own. The session also provides the safety of numbers that allows any player who knows the tune to participate and be part of a community while still finding her own style and learning from the musicians around her, all without being on stage or feeling criticized by the other musicians. Bodhrán and guitar players at McGuinness's often receive coaching from more experienced players while the melody instruments play the tunes. A good session, then, is one in which players dialogue through personalized forms of an otherwise shared repertory.

The sessions that I have enjoyed most have been the more social ones, where talking is common between sets and musicians are invited into the circle to talk and to play. Players in these sessions will share information about tunes, ask about each other's days, and sometimes report on the lives of mutual friends. The words exchanged are just as important as the music shared in these sessions—more than once has someone at McGuinness's in Appleton, WI, has been told to wait to play a tune so that someone else could finish a story. The anecdote at the beginning of this paper is an example of this open social session, in which strangers gathered, played together, and enjoyed each other's company. Between sets in Brogan's, musicians were

quick to offer praise for well-led sets and the fiddlers and the flute player who had invited me in chatted about their work and suggested that they get together after work one night for an impromptu session.

O'Shea discusses two sessions she experienced in Feakle, one in Pepper's and the other in Lena's. The Pepper's session was a "tight circle of regular session musicians," one quite difficult to enter, and one which, by virtue of its reputation as an authentic experience with famous musicians, attracted rude new players and tourists from other parts of Ireland and abroad and was consequentially unwelcoming to newcomers (O'Shea 2008: 129, 126). The Pepper's session was home to the famous fiddler P.J. Hayes and other members of his well-known Tulla Céilí Band (kíili). These high-status regulars and their friends formed an inner circle of musicians, while the new players who visited for an evening or were not part of the inner crowd played a form of "musical chairs" in which they sat in an outer circle until invited farther in (ibid. 124).

The session at Lena's, as O'Shea describes it, was much more welcoming to visitors. The leader was paid and led most sets, but accommodated his friends and invited guests to join in the music making and occasionally lead a set of tunes, tell a story, or sing a song. The repertory played at Lena's was also more modern and more eclectic than the familiarly traditional sets played at Pepper's (O'Shea 2008:128). The Pepper's session was considered by its musicians to be a more genuine session, while they perceived the one at Lena's as "less authentic." At the same time, the Lena's session was more local and energetic, "every newcomer was welcomed and every musician asked to play," and those who chose Lena's over Pepper's did so because the engaging atmosphere made it a more enjoyable experience (ibid. 129).

The tempo at which tunes are played can be an indicator of players' opinions about sessions as social or purely musical events. One flute player I met claimed that if a tune is not played fast, it is not traditional. Session guides like the one at the front of Phil Rubenzer's *Midwestern Irish Session Tunes* make no indication of required speed, but caution that whatever tempo is chosen must remain constant throughout the set (2000: xi). Yet at times throughout my fieldwork, a player would start a tune slowly and another would pick it up and speed up, immediately excluding the person who had started it. Other players are more lenient with tempo, and often a musician starting a tune will be told to slow down and play only as fast as that person can play the tune successfully.

Tunes can be played at any tempo, or in any style—certain speeds facilitate dancing, but as sessions are designed for musicians rather than dancers, tunes are played as fast as they can be played comfortably. Players at the McGuinness's session in Appleton typically play one hornpipe, "Flowers of Edinburgh," as a reel, and once did the same with "King of the Fairies." During one evening, they played the reel "Dunmore Lasses" at half-speed and then sped it up and played it through again. They laughed. They didn't just play the tunes, they played with the tunes and with each other.

All these conflicting experiences raise the question, who do session musicians play for? Four distinct categories of people are involved in a typical pub session: the individual musician, the other musicians at the session, the audience, and the publican. While all of these categories are present, they have different weights when it comes to making music, and some are stronger motivators than others.

As discussed earlier, pubs often hire musicians to anchor sessions and bring in audience members to drum up business. Kaul identifies a triangle of business among the publicans,

musicians, and tourists, in which the pub stands to make the most money but pays a significant portion of profit to the musicians (2007: 709). The audience does not pay the musicians, the publican does; and most musicians have “day jobs” and do not consider gigs at sessions to be jobs (ibid. 710). Instead, the presence of music and of specific lead musicians attracts an audience that will purchase drinks or food and spend time in the venue. Then the music is played for financial gain of the publican.

Mick G. considered a session good “when the public appreciates” the music, because “if it wasn’t appreciated by the public nobody would be listening” (p.c., July 8, 2014). Patrick R. also welcomed an appreciative audience (p.c., July 10, 2014). By this reasoning, music is meant to be heard by those outside the circle of musicians—it is played for the audience.

But sessions are not typically staged performances, and are always played in a circle, a “carefully balanced but permeable social boundary between the musicians and the audience” (Kaul 2007: 704). Audience members and musicians can enter and leave the circle and interact with the musicians, but a barrier does exist. Audience members inevitably look at the backs of the musicians. Musicians typically look at each other or downward, or close their eyes altogether. The session is a reason to come together in pubs and play together, and to attend festivals and meet other practitioners. Trad is a social music, and while the audience is an important aspect of the session experience, it is played for the musicians.

Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino defines two types of music performance: participatory, in which there is no distinction between audience and artist, but rather everyone is a participant or a potential participant; and presentational, in which artists prepare and perform for an audience that does not participate in the music making (2008: 26). Irish traditional music, which involves musicians gathering in an informal, unprepared setting but also values the

listeners, is somewhere in between participatory and presentational performance. The audience is not entirely distinct from the musicians, but it is separated by the thin, permeable barrier of the closed circle. Sessions occur in pubs because they are accessible meeting places, but also because non-musicians will gather, purchase drinks and listen. Applause is not expected, but is still common after a set, and both musicians and audience members will congratulate a player on a well-led set of tunes. Thus the audience is an important component to the session, though it does not actually participate in the music itself.

While it is a social activity, trad is also a personal one, and it is played for the individuals who play it. As I have demonstrated in this paper, Irish traditional music is inextricably linked to one's identity, heritage and emotions. Whether or not its practitioners are Irish, something in the music touches them and makes them seek out sessions or go to Ireland. Irish traditional music is a social music, but it is also a personal music. None of the intricacies that Mick M. mentioned would exist if practitioners did not personalize the tunes. Strong opinions about authenticity and purity of trad exist because people connect with the music on a personal level. Regional and personal styles create the variety that is heard at sessions—even within the social context of a session and the indefinable boundaries of “traditional” style, Irish music is inherently a personal music.

Yossi described Irish traditional music as “magnetic” and “grasping” (p.c., July 27, 2014). Patrick R. said of it, “It’s like a drug, but a good one; it won’t do you any harm” (p.c., July 10, 2014). Both were describing the emotional aspect of Irish traditional music that outweighs any ethnic ties to the word *Irish*. Emotional connections with trad music, more than ethnic ties or aspirations to authenticity, draw players to the music, and inspire them to seek experiences in Ireland. All ten of my interviewees described a personal connection that they felt

with the music, something that resonated with them and made them want to play and listen to trad. Marisa, Anna and Vera all described crying upon hearing certain songs or instruments. Marisa explained that the music expresses “great loss and sorrow” as well as happiness in a way that “I get chills on my body, I cry” with the songs or “I want to move” with the dance tunes. She said that, as an emotional and expressive person, she feels that the music “resonates with [her] personality” (p.c., July 3, 2014). Vera commented on the way Irish songs deal with grief, saying that the music “touches [her] in a really deep way.” Anna described a burst of energy she felt when she first heard Irish tunes in a dance class, which enabled her to dance for 90 minutes in a way she never had before. The music “touches my heart,” she said (Szewczuk and Zoller, p.c., June 27, 2014).

Patrick R. stated the power of this emotional connection most clearly: “I wouldn’t be in it if everyone didn’t have a great love for it” (p.c., July 10, 2014). Among the many other reasons to play, people play Irish music because it makes them happy. The Irish people I interviewed talked about the familiarity of growing up with the music, and said that they play it now because, as both Mick M. and Mick G. explained, they “love it.” Mick G. said, “I’m delighted to have been encouraged to play,” and that was very important to him (Grogan, p.c., July 8, 2014).

For Patrick R., Irish traditional music was a way to build bridges and to heal. He described a trip to England he took in the midst of political tension over Northern Ireland, the area of Ireland that remained part of Great Britain after Ireland declared its independence. While in a pub surrounded by English people, he said that he was somewhat afraid to play but once he did, “all of a sudden they gathered around” and another man joined in on the piano. He also mentioned that the music was very helpful when members of his family passed away; music is “great for the psyche,” as he explained (p.c., July 10, 2014).



For Rie, the emotional connection is not only the joy she feels when she plays, but a turning point in her life: “I came to Ireland to study English and my friend invited me to go to whistle class to play Irish music, so I just fell in love suddenly.” Rie found comfort and confidence playing Irish music on first the tin whistle, then the accordion, so much that she no longer wants to return to Japan. Speaking of the power that Irish traditional music has to affect people, she told me, “music changed my life” (p.c., July 12, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Simultaneously social and personal, Irish traditional music transcends national and ethnic boundaries. Trad music offers claims to a common history and a symbolic representation of the Irish ethnicity to people of any background willing to make the effort to learn it, which makes it a music that, while defined by its origin, creates its own multiethnic community through the same criteria that Cornell and Hartmann use to define ethnicity. It is a global phenomenon that to many people represents an idealized Irish culture, but also a broader sense of deep emotion and pastoral history. It is a music with which people all over the world identify, regardless of their heritage, because its melodies and themes resonate with the human experience. Even so, it is a music strongly connected with its origins both in early rural Ireland and in the revivalist and nationalist movements of the twentieth century.

Many of the people and sources I consulted pointed to Irish traditional music’s role in the politics of a very old island and a very new country. Trad music has for centuries been perceived as an ancient tradition, one that represents a pre-colonial Gaelic Ireland. A tour guide from Denmark whom I met briefly in Carrick-on-Shannon, wistfully called it a “thousand-year-old tradition, like a spiral, continuing.” For centuries, this perception has rooted Irish traditional

music firmly in the soil of Ireland even as it calls to players of all ethnicities. This same perception, the romantic ideal of a centuries-old Gaelic Ireland and a culture that has survived colonization, famine and war, attracts people to take up Irish music, song and dance. While it may never be possible to know the true age of an oral tradition, future research might focus on the role that this perception has played in the global promotion of Irish traditional music. It might also look at the political conflicts of religion and class, both of which are prominent and interconnected with ethnic and national identity in Ireland.

Beyond its roots and role in shaping the history of the Emerald Isle, Irish traditional music is a form of world music that is truly found worldwide. It has traveled to nearly every continent with Irish emigrants, who maintained their music as a way of expressing their identity. In doing so, those emigrants introduced the music to new audiences and opened the door for more people to partake in the Irish musical experience. Social and personal, ethnically defined and globally far-reaching, Irish traditional music's reputation as a welcoming form of music is well deserved. It is a validating form of music—each individual's experience is valuable, and the social aspect of the session reinforces the personal aspect such that an individual can engage with herself and with a larger community through a music that touches people across the globe.

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