KEEPING THE TRADITION ALIVE: IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC SESSIONS DURING COVID-19

By

Andrew Bobker

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ABSTRACT

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In the spring of 2020, performers of traditional Irish music responded to pandemic-induced social distancing by creating a new variant of an old tradition: the *virtual* Irish session. Unlike conventional pub sessions, virtual sessions occur entirely in virtual space, facilitated by conferencing applications like Zoom or YouTube livestreaming. The move to virtual sessions presents numerous challenges to the traditional structure and norms of Irish traditional music. This thesis will explore the strategies and motivations of Irish musicians as they have adapted to the conditions of COVID-19 and isolation. Maintaining an authentic practice within the auspices of technological innovation involves the negotiation of geography, ethnicity, and selective tradition in a complex social space.

This work is based in large part on ethnographic research conducted between March and December of 2020, including both in-person interviews and Internet ethnography. Interviews were conducted with musicians in Austin, Texas; Portland, Maine; Seattle, Washington; and Boston, Massachusetts.

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I would also like to acknowledge the correspondents who were kind enough to welcome me to their sessions and provide interviews: Ian Varley, Shannon Heaton, Michael Connolly, Kevin McElroy, Ming Chen, and Sheila Murphy. Each of them generously shared with me their perspectives, thoughts, and knowledge. I have tried to ensure their voices are present in this thesis, in order to reflect the influence they have had on my understanding of the community they represent.

Finally, I offer my gratitude to my family, who have encouraged me not only in the process of this particular thesis, but in every pursuit that has led me to this point.

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Introduction

In retrospect, Friday, March 13, 2020 may be remembered as the day that changed everything. There is an appeal to choosing this day—it bears the curse of Friday the Thirteenths—but in truth it was a series of changes and reactions spread throughout the month of March and beyond. The process was gradual, but definite: one by one, institutions, businesses, cities, and nations closed doors, sent students home, and locked down to slow the spread of the deadly and contagious SARS coronavirus known as COVID-19. As work, school, and social life began to be conducted entirely from home, people came to grips with life during the pandemic, and then came to grips again with the possibility that it would not end by the summer, nor by the start of the next school year, nor even possibly by the start of the following summer, eighteen months after the virus was first identified.

As various corners of society settled in for an indefinite period of lockdown, people found new ways to adapt, cope, socialize, and survive their newfound isolation. Many adaptations involved turning to the Internet: not only schools and universities, but also informal social gatherings previously held in public places found new homes in applications like Zoom. New social circles were formed, and old social networks maintained, with no regard to intervening distance and sometimes little regard to time. Words such as "synchronous," "asynchronous," and "socially-distanced" entered common usage to describe various forms of interaction.

The following thesis seeks to document *in media res* the changes resulting from the pandemic in one particular corner of society, the Irish traditional music community. More specifically, this thesis looks at networks formed around traditional Irish sessions in the United States. The majority of my data comes from virtual sessions held on Zoom, but other online and

offline components of the Irish music scene have important parts to play. As will be seen throughout, any efforts to maintain a narrowly defined geographic location have been confounded by the geography-defying and space-defying nature of Internet mediation. While my initial impulse was to focus on the state of Maine, I soon found myself interacting with musicians from California, Washington, Texas, and New York, generally without leaving Michigan.

The dissolution of geography as a defining element of practice is one of the developments in Irish music under lockdown. Many other aspects once thought fundamental to Irish traditional music have also been challenged or redefined by the circumstances. The participatory, open structure of ensembles, the nature of socialization within sessions, and the role of the pub as a physical gathering space have all been altered by the format of virtual sessions. In attempting to make music online, over vast distances and outside of each other's physical presence, Irish musicians have pushed the limits of technology and of their own tradition.

At the same time, the tradition of Irish music can be viewed as a powerful tool for Irish musicians to understand their own role within their community. Practitioners of Irish traditional music have built upon and extended the tradition, following existing trends and turning to the ideals of the music as a source of guidance. Like many other communities, Irish traditional music already enjoyed a significant presence on the Internet prior to 2020, and web forums like *The Session* (thesession.org) were integrated into the common practice of many musicians. In some ways, the move to virtual sessions was a natural progression and may have taken place even without the instigation of the pandemic.

Irish music is also intimately connected in the collective memories of musicians with the history of the Irish people. Even though Irish ethnicity is neither necessary nor sufficient for

being an Irish musician, many Irish musicians identify with Irishness and especially with the view of the Irish as a suffering people. The pandemic is related in this way to historical events such as the Great Famine. Music and community, united in the session, serve as shelter and respite for musicians suffering physically, emotionally, and psychologically. The session keeps its participants alive while at the same time the participants use ingenious devices to keep the session alive.

The first chapter of this thesis covers the historical roots of Irish music leading up to the year 2020. Irish music is a broad field with a long history, so this overview is necessarily brief and incomplete. The focus is on two major turning points: the emergence of a national Irish music concept in association with ethno-nationalism following the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792, and the development of the modern pub session during the mid-twentieth century. This chapter will also lay out some of the important issues around Irish music: the idealization of sessions as participatory, democratic, egalitarian events and the role of ethnicity as a point of contention.

The second chapter introduces the novelty of the virtual Irish session and explores the consequences of this innovation for the musical practice. I use the term "virtual session" to encompass several different forms of mediated music-making: Zoom-based participatory sessions, livestreamed play-along sessions, and events that hybridize these forms. All of these gatherings are modeled after in-person traditional Irish sessions, but all necessarily modify session norms to accommodate the limits of their chosen technological solutions. Technological mediation obfuscates the capacity of musicians to freely interact, both musically and verbally, and to inhabit the same physical space. However, as a form of sonic tourism, virtual sessions fit in alongside conventional sessions and the use of recordings as another way for musicians to invoke Ireland from a mediated position, at a geographical remove.

The third chapter places virtual sessions in the context of the broader Irish traditional music community. Returning to issues of history and ethnicity, I consider the construction of Irish music as a practice rooted geographically in place and retained from the premodern past. Irish music has survived modernity and diaspora, connecting generations of musicians in the United States to a different place and a different time. Irish music is also connected to the survival and migration narrative of the Irish people following the Famine. These survival narratives create a sense of obligation among Irish musicians to both their extant communities and to the living tradition. The session, in the sense of both the practice and the social network, is something worth keeping alive. I also show how the use of sites such as *The Session* constitutes an extension of previous strategies of interregional exchange to keep the Irish traditional music community connected through isolation. In light of these existing narratives and strategies, virtual sessions constitute a natural and necessary step for the continuation of Irish traditional music.

Research for this thesis began when the move to virtual sessions was already underway, and this document is written while the pandemic goes on. My intent is for this study to document a community in the middle of a challenging transition. What remains to be seen is how the crisis of the pandemic and the solution of virtual sessions influence the practices of Irish traditional music in the long view. Virtual sessions offer clear benefits and build on the general integration of new communicative technologies in everyday life. Moreover, musicians are paying close attention to issues of authenticity and legitimacy in their practice. Therefore, the case could be made for the longevity of the virtual session within Irish traditional music. Virtual sessions may even provide a model for other styles of music to operate in virtual space.

The changes that began to take place in Irish traditional music around March 13, 2020, may be recognized in hindsight as the product of a strange time, disconnected from normal life, but revealing in their deconstruction of conventional practices. Alternatively, the practices developed during the pandemic may set off more lasting innovations, directing Irish music toward an interconnected future in a virtual space.

Chapter One

History of The Session and Irish Traditional Music

In order to understand the changes taking place in the Irish traditional music community under COVID-19, it is necessary to have some knowledge of what the session looked like prior to the pandemic. The idea that the music regularly performed in pubs is "Irish" and "traditional" carries with it some important historical associations. Sessions are therefore best understood as part of the broader field of Irish music. This chapter will begin with a cursory overview of the history of Irish music, beginning with the formation of what is now considered a national Irish style and leading up to the development of the modern pub session.

What is now referred to as Irish music has been subject to the influence of many different musical styles and aesthetic ideas, both within and beyond Ireland. The ancient harpers and *sean-nós* singers are part of the story, as are American minstrel performers and folk revivalists. The modern practice of Irish music has been established through transnational dialogue, particularly involving the United States, England, and Ireland. Nevertheless, Ireland, both as a real geographic place and as an imagined ideal, continues to be at the heart of this music.

The Belfast Harp Festival and the Roots of Irish Music

The development of a national Irish music style began in earnest with the Belfast Harp Festival. While there has been music in Ireland for as long people have lived there, the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792 began to point toward the coalescence of a true national Irish music concept. Harpers had long carried the tradition of Irish music, but they came under siege during

the reigns of King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I.[1] By the time of the Belfast Harp Festival, few harpers remained in Ireland. In an effort to preserve what remained of the tradition, ten elderly harpers were brought to Belfast, and their music was notated by Edward Bunting, who published his transcriptions in several volumes.[2] Thomas Moore used these transcriptions, along with songs collected from other written and oral records, to produce *Irish Melodies*, translating the tunes both in language and in musical idiom to make them palatable to English parlor audiences.

The collected volumes of Bunting and Moore constituted some of the first instances of Irish music being written down and distributed beyond the shores of Ireland itself. The fact that Moore arranged the tunes in the style of contemporary European art music and translated the songs into English contributed to a prevailing sense of the inferiority of Irish language and music to that of the English.[3] This sense of inferiority can be traced to economic circumstances as well as legal structures designed to disenfranchise and suppress the Catholic Irish majority.[4] For the most part, the tradition of Irish harping died off with the death of the last harpers, but the songs survived through the work of Bunting, Moore, and other song collectors. Eventually, the work of revivalists such as Seán Ó Riada returned the harp to living performance, though harpers may

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[1] Sean Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 58; Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History of Irish Traditional Music* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1998), 29.

[2] Williams, *Focus*, 65.

[3] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 72; Helen O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 8; Williams, *Focus*, 66. The Irish aristocracy consciously worked at this time to associate themselves with England and continental Europe, whereas cultural objects associated with "Irishness" were generally thought to be appropriate only for poor, rural, and typically Catholic Irish.

[4] O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 150n15.

never again achieve their former high status in Irish society.[5] Nevertheless, the songs collected Bunting and Moore formed an early basis for a singular national music tradition in Ireland.

Another musical style closely associated with Irishness via Irish language is *sean-nós* singing. According to Sean Williams, the term *sean-nós* ("old-style") is a twentieth century term, but it refers to a performance practice with roots in early Irish history.[6] The modern form of the tradition, which combines unaccompanied song with narrative storytelling, emerged in the sixteenth century. *Sean-nós* songs are characteristically performed in the Irish language, in free time, and with extensive use of ornamentation.[7] The use of Irish-Gaelic somewhat restricts the audience for the music, especially since Irish Gaelic is not widely spoken even in Ireland. As a result, *sean-nós* is closely associated with Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) regions such as Connemara.[8]

Although harp and *sean-nós* are integral aspects of Irish traditional music, the core repertoire and performance practice of traditional music sessions came from dance music. In Ireland, group dancing and step dancing had long been practiced inside the homes of the peasantry as well as at so-called "crossroads dances".[9] The music accompanying these dances took forms familiar to modern Irish session musicians: jigs, reels, and hornpipes, among others.[10]

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[5] Michael Moloney, "Irish Music in America: Continuity and Change" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 64.

[6] Williams, *Focus*, 176.

[7] Williams, *Focus*, 178.

[8] Williams, *Focus*, 174.

[9] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 57; Williams, *Focus*, 17.

[10] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 58.

These house and crossroads dances lasted until 1935, when a combination of political conservatism and religious puritanism led to the passage of the Public Dance Halls Act, a "draconian attempt to control public morality."[11] The act banned both house dances and unlicensed dance halls (in which jazz music was growing in popularity), requiring dance halls to be licensed by the clergy.[12]

The end of house dances led to a flourishing of *céilí* bands. *Céilí* dances, public gatherings influenced by Scottish *céilithe* and characterized by organized line dances to jig, waltz, and quadrille music, had been an ongoing practice since 1897, instituted by the Gaelic League in London as part of its efforts to revive traditional Gaelic culture.[13] Though they were new in the early 1900s, by the 1930s they were generally popular, and the Public Dance Halls Act cemented their success over private dances.

The point about cultural revival organizations is worth expanding upon. In the late nineteenth century, two major organizations were formed to promote Irish traditional culture: the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge) and the Gaelic Athletic Association.[14] Both of these organizations continue to have an international presence to the present day. As was mentioned previously, it was the Gaelic League that organized the first *céilís* in London in 1897. More recently founded—and more directly related to sessions—is Comhaltas Ceoltóri Éireann, or CCÉ. According to Ann Morrison Spinney, CCÉ was founded in Ireland in 1951 to promote

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[11] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 132. Williams, *Focus*, 73.

[12] Susan Gedutis, *See You at the Hall: Boston's Golden Era of Irish Music and Dance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 34.

[13] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 35. The word "*céilí*" previously denoted friendly house visits.

[14] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 97.

Irish traditional music.[15] The organization's activities took the form of competitions (*fleadheanna*), schools, pub sessions, concert performances and tours. Regional branches were organized in places with significant Irish populations, such as the Hanafin-Cooley Boston branch, founded in 1975.[16] Many Irish Americans are drawn to Irish music by the activities of these organizations.

Because *céilí* dances were promoted as part of a deliberate revival of "authentic" Irish culture, significant efforts were made to differentiate them from contemporary popular dances as well as other traditional dances. Susan Gedutis writes that the dances, collected from rural Ireland, were "presented as more authentic than the less rigid set dance forms that were in favor at the time."[17] According to Ó hAllmhurain, the collection expeditions were intended to "separate Irish from Scottish dances, and also weed out 'foreign elements' in the Irish dance tradition."[18] The instrumentation of *céilí* bands (the ensembles hired to play the dances) is familiar to modern session musicians: "fiddle, flute, button accordion, piano, snare drum with woodblock, banjo, and occasionally double bass, Irish bellows-fed pipes known as the uillean pipes, piccolo, or saxophone," all played in unison.[19] Of these instruments, only the snare drum, piccolo, and saxophone would be significantly out of place at a modern session.

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[15] Ann Morrison Spinney, "Kitchen Racket, Céili, and Pub Session: Traditional Irish Music in Boston, Massachusetts," in *The Music of Multicultural America: Performance, Identity, and Community*, ed. Kip Lornell and Anne K. Rasmussen (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 62-64.

[16] Spinney, "Kitchen Racket," 63.

[17] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 35.

[18] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 112.

[19] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 35.

It is also important to consider the influence of Seán Ó Riada. A classically trained musician and composer, Ó Riada formed a traditional music ensemble called Ceoltóiri Chualann in 1960 in part to supply music for a film scoring project. [20] The ensemble, featuring fiddles, pipes, flute, accordion, bones, bodhrán and harpsichord, introduced a new version of the traditional sound to the Irish public. The music of Ceoltóiri Chualann was heavily arranged in order to stand up to more prestigious European art music. Through his work with this ensemble as well as his radio series *Our Musical Heritage*, Ó Riada worked to promote his vision of Irish traditional music, which favored *sean-nós* singing and harpers and opposed newer developments such as *céilí* bands. Members of Ceoltóiri Chualann later split off to form the Chieftains, who, according to Mick Moloney, "have done more than any other group of artists to introduce traditional Irish music to people all over the world."[21]

Irish National Music Abroad

While Ireland revived and developed national musical styles, members of the Irish diaspora also contributed to Irish national music. As was mentioned above, *céilí* bands had their origin in London before taking off in Ireland. London Irish would continue to be influential in the story of Irish music, as would Irish Americans. While Ireland at times sought to dismiss traditional music as a relic of a shameful rural past, it was arguably in the external gaze that the concept of Irish nationhood, particularly as it relates to music, came to full fruition.

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[20] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 148-151.

[21] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 114.

Some of the strongest sentiments of Irish nationalism come from Irish American popular song.[22] Many of the most well-known "Irish" songs, especially those with direct references to Ireland or Irishness, come from Irish American songwriters, including "Danny Boy" and "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling."[23] These songs were often closely connected with American popular song styles such as minstrelsy and vaudeville, which experienced a heyday during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As William H. A. Williams has documented, these songs often played on and generated popular stereotypes about Irish people, including poverty, alcoholism, sentimentality, and extremity of emotions.[24]

American popular music also directly influenced music in Ireland. The banjo, now a standard instrument in traditional dance music, was introduced by American minstrel performers in the nineteenth century, and bones also have their origin in minstrel performance.[25] As has been noted elsewhere, *céilí* bands took after swing bands in many ways, including their presentation style and the inclusion of saxophones, pianos, double basses, and drums.[26] Later, Irish music adopted elements of rock and roll in the form of showbands, which combined the four to five piece instrumentation of rock bands with the musical repertoire of traditional ensembles and *céilí* bands.[27] In each of these cases, the adaptions of American popular music to

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[22] William H. A. Williams, *'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 108.

[23] Williams, *'Twas Only*, 225.

[24] Williams, *'Twas Only*, 75, 83, 214, 222, 225.

[25] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 69. Other "foreign" instruments, such as the bouzouki, have also been integrated into Irish music, though it is not entirely clear why some instruments are more easily adopted than others. It should be noted that the banjo and the bones were adapted to minstrelsy from African predecessors.

[26] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 35.

[27] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 165; Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 127.

Ireland were then exported back to American and Irish American audiences, where they often remained popular long after they had died out in Ireland.

By the middle of the twentieth century, traditional music in Ireland was at a nadir. As was written previously, early collections of traditional music such as that of Thomas Moore sought to arrange the tunes to suit an English-speaking, aristocratic audience. While the traditional melodies were seen as valuable cultural heritage, the Irish language and traditional instruments and styles were seen as inferior and unsuitable to the upper class. Music collector George Petrie described the music of Ireland in 1855 as "the exclusive property of the peasantry."[28] Ireland went through multiple cultural revivals, but the association between traditional music and rural poverty persisted, returning to cast a shadow on the music in Ireland in the 1940s.[29]

At the same time, persecution, famine, and other pressures had led to a long history of Irish emigration. Ó hAllmhurain points to the traditional music of Appalachia, Newfoundland, and other regions around the world as having their foundations in Irish music.[30] While Appalachian "old-time" music is not explicitly identified as "Irish music," the music of more recent immigrants to the United States does have the explicit "Irish" designation. Given this environment, it is not surprising that some of the most significant collections of Irish dance music in the early twentieth century were produced by an Irish American, Captain Francis O'Neill.[31] Though not the first collections of Irish music in print, O'Neill's works, beginning with *The Music of Ireland* in 1903, may be seen as a launching point for modern interest in Irish

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[28] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 7.

[29] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 57.

[30] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 62-70.

[31] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 114-116; Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 50.

traditional music, at least in the United States. Despite countless more recently published collections, Mick Moloney writes that he has not "come across an older Irish musician in America who did not possess at one time or another a copy of either O'Neill's *Music of Ireland* or O'Neill's *Dance Music of Ireland.*"[32]

Additionally, many sources agree on the extraordinary influence of three New York-based fiddle players who emigrated from County Sligo in the 1910s and 1920s.[33] Paddy Killoran, Michael Coleman, and James Morrison all arrived from Sligo to New York around the same time, and their arrival coincided with the emergence of the music recording industry in the United States. As a result of this fortuitous timing and their exceptional musicianship, the three musicians produced influential recordings of many tunes that would become standard in the Irish traditional music community. Ó hAllmhuráin writes that these recordings, along with O'Neill's *The Dance Music of Ireland*, were popular in Ireland as well as the United States, and local tunes, techniques, and performance standards in Ireland were superseded by those represented by the New York Sligo fiddle masters.[34]

In American cities with significant Irish populations, such as Boston, private house dances much like the dances in Ireland were a common practice.[35] House dances were not outlawed in the United States, but dancers were nevertheless drawn to more public settings. One such setting were the Irish music clubs, in which musicians would take turns playing tunes solo

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[32] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 349.

[33] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 127-130; Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 50; Williams, *Focus*, 81-82.

[34] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 130.

[35] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 29; Spinney, "Kitchen Racket," 64.

for dancers.[36] After World War II, dance halls in Boston entered a golden age driven by the combination of new immigration from Ireland and an economic boom in the United States.[37] The music played at these halls was not exclusively Irish: usually, the bands in the upper ballroom would play more modern swing, while the lower floors would provide traditional Irish music.[38] Even then, the *céilí* bands playing on the lower floors presented themselves in the costume and seating arrangement of swing bands and played a mixture of Irish and American tunes.[39] Nevertheless, the music played in American dance halls was recognizably Irish.

Dance hall music would continue to be relevant in the Irish traditional music community into the late twentieth century. As Irish fiddler Sheila Murphy told me,

> [My husband] was really involved, actually in set dancing, which is different than *céilí* dancing. It looked a lot like square dancing, where you're looking at—you know, four couples facing each other in a square. But the footwork is all different than square dancing, and the music is of course different. But that was a huge driving thing, say, thirty years ago in the Boston community. And I think my husband, now, that guy, he probably could have danced five nights a week with the big load of dancing that was going on. … I was dancing, until I finally realized that, 'oh, could I be playing?' Because I was already a violin player. And then I started doing more playing than dancing because that's really where my heart was. … So, a lot of the places where you would have these set dances would have a band that was semi-open-ended. The heart of the band would be miked, but they had a lot of other players that were just playing along.[40]

For Murphy, whose Irish heritage was "pretty much white-washed out of" her family, set dancing was a point of reentry into Irish traditional culture, and it led to her taking up playing in

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[36] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 37.

[37] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 41.

[38] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 60.

[39] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 57-58.

[40] Sheila Murphy, interview by author, Brunswick, ME, June 12, 2020.

Irish sessions. The dance bands she described occupy an intermediate area between the professional *céilí* bands described by Gedutis and the truly open pub session, maintaining a stable, reliable core for the sake of the dancers while allowing amateur instrumentalists to come and go at will.

In the mid-twentieth century, Irish traditional dance music began to separate from its dance associations. This was in part due to the decline of the institution of the dance hall. As Gedutis writes, a combination of demographic shifts and changing youth culture caused dance halls to lose popularity.[41] Other venues had been growing concurrently with dance halls that also hosted Irish music sessions, with less emphasis on dance. These included Irish music clubs, which had hosted "sessions" since the 1930s in which players would take turns playing tunes solo.[42] These clubs existed in many cities with major Irish populations, including Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Chicago.[43]

The move away from dance was also influenced by the international folk music revival. Folk revival placed a new emphasis on Irish music as music for listening rather than dancing. Gedutis cites folk revival groups such as the Clancy Brothers as moving Irish music away from showband performance.[44] These groups popularized and built on English and Irish ballads, or what Mick Moloney refers to as "traditional 'come-all-ye' singing."[45] Spinney emphasizes the role of "collegiate culture" within the Boston folk revival as a driving force behind the separation

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[41] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 185-199.

[42] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 37.

[43] Spinney, "Kitchen Racket," 63.

[44] Gedutis, *See You at the Hall*, 201.

[45] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 91.

of music and dance in Irish traditional music.[46] Indeed, the role of American universities in the dissemination of Irish traditional music should not be understated. In her book on the life of famed *sean-nós* singer Joe Heaney, Sean Williams describes how Heaney found a home at the University of Washington in Seattle, which now houses the Joe Heaney Collection within its Ethnomusicology Archives.[47] However, it is worth noting that many musicians, including Heaney, distinguished between authentic folk music and "folk revival" music, the latter of which is often viewed with disdain or suspicion.[48]

Rise of the Modern Pub Session

With the propagation of *céilí* bands, the establishment of a semi-standard national repertoire, and the separation of instrumental music from dance, the practice of Irish traditional music in the twentieth century has begun to resemble modern performance practices. The last piece of the puzzle is the stereotypical setting for Irish sessions: the Irish pub. The move from informal gatherings and dances in private homes to barroom sessions occurred among migrant Irish workers living in hostels in England after World War II.[49] As Augusto Ferraiuolo describes, the temporary lodgings of these workers did not permit social gatherings or music making, so pubs became the center of social life and the primary sites for activities including conversation, drinking, and music.

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[46] Spinney, "Kitchen Racket," 70.

[47] Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoire, *Bright Star of the West: Joe Heaney, Irish Song-Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 185.

[48] Williams and Ó Laoire, *Bright Star*; 189-190; Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 424.

[49] Augusto Ferraiuolo, *Rites of Spontaneity: Communality and Subjectivity in Traditional Irish Music Sessions* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 39-44.

The rise of pub sessions is inextricably linked with the rise of pubs in English and Irish social life. According to Elizabeth Malcolm, modern pub culture is the result of targeted legal statutes designed by the English to control Irish populations.[50] In the sixteenth century, Irish drinking and recreation took place primarily outdoors, in contrast with the English habit of drinking in specialized indoor facilities.[51] It is important to note that Irish drinking at this time was irregular, generally tied to special occasions and festivals. Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, English authorities began restricting both outdoor recreation and unlicensed pubs, preventing disorder and political dissent while encouraging patronage of licensed pubs.[52] As a result, drinking became a regular form of recreation among the Irish, setting the stage for the centralization of pubs in Irish social life.

Around the same time pub sessions took off in England and Ireland, bars in the United States also began promoting sessions. The word "session" may even be borrowed from American jazz.[53] According to Spinney, the decline of dance halls in Boston created a need for new locations for Irish music, and it was Irish bars that filled in niche.[54]

The move to pubs had significant influence on the form of sessions. It minimized the role of traditional social hierarchies based on age and status, imposing instead what Ferraiuolo calls

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[50] Elizabeth Malcolm, "The Rise of the Pub: A Study in the Disciplining of Popular Culture," in *Irish Popular Culture 1650-1850,* ed. J. S. Donnelly Jr. and Kerby Miller (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 50-77.

[51] Malcolm, "The Rise of the Pub," 55. Gedutis, See You at the Hall, 29; Spinney, "Kitchen Racket," 64.

[52] Malcolm, "The Rise of the Pub," 70.

[53] Spinney, "Kitchen Racket," 59.

[54] Spinney, "Kitchen Racket," 59.

"benevolent meritocracy," in which musical skill and knowledge defines one's status.[55] It also contributed to the decline of dance within sessions, as well as the rise of professional and semi-professional musicians. As will be discussed in chapter three, the space and spatial relationships within pubs have become integral aspects of the conceptualization of pub sessions—creating the need for adaptation when sessions move to virtual spaces.

The Typical Session

The course of events described above has led to a relatively stable art form in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, known as the Irish traditional music session. Many authors have provided descriptions of standard session norms and performance practices.[56] The following summary, gathered from various scholarly and popular sources, direct correspondences and interviews, and personal experience, is therefore not intended to be exhaustive, but will only provide the basic context necessary to understand the significance of virtual Irish sessions.

Despite the primacy of the pub as the stereotypical session location, modern sessions take place in a variety of venues. Sessions in book shops, schools, or libraries are not unheard of. Musicians (primarily instrumentalists) will gather in a dedicated corner of the venue, sitting in a circle facing one another. Gatherings are kept deliberately informal, so even if there is an official starting time, the music may not begin promptly at that time, and the playing usually begins by

[55] Ferraiuolo, *Rites of Spontaneity*, 39-44.

[56] Williams, *Focus*, 144-170; Erin Michele Flynn, "Participatory Music Making and Affinity in Washington, DC Irish Sessions" (master's thesis, University of Maryland, 2011), 29-55; Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 58-72, 172-233.

informal consensus. There may be one or two official session hosts hired by the venue, or an individual may take on the role of host as a volunteer. The host calls on people to lead sets of two or three dance tunes. To lead a tune involves simply starting to play the tune; other participants will join in immediately or after one repetition if they are familiar with the tune or can quickly pick up the melody by ear. Tunes are played two or three times through before proceeding to the next tune in the set, and when two or three tunes have been played, musicians end the tune set either by coming to a deliberate close or by trailing off individually.

The tunes follow a relatively standardized structure.[57] Two four-bar phrases form an eight-bar segment, which is repeated. Most tunes use two eight-bar sections, forming a thirty-two-bar round, although three- or four-section tunes are not unheard of. A variety of metrical forms named for dances are used, including reels (the most popular), jigs, hornpipes, polkas, waltzes, and others. The primary distinction between these forms is in the meter: reels use simple quadruple meter, jigs compound single, duple, or triple, and so on. However, there are subtler distinctions in terms of rhythmic feel, tempo, and common melodic gestures, and the finer details concerning various dance forms are a frequent topic of discussion at sessions, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

Instruments are divided primarily into melody and accompaniment. All melody instruments play the melody of the tune in unison. The most common melody instruments are flute (a wooden "concert flute", rather than silver, keyed flutes used in Western classical music), violin or fiddle, tin whistle, mandolin, accordion and banjo. Accompanying instruments include the *bodhrán* (a handheld frame drum) and the guitar, and instruments such as the accordion and

[57] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 60-62.

the banjo can also provide chordal accompaniment. A session may have more or less strict rules regarding what instruments can play and when. For instance, guitars are sometimes barred from a session, and it is common for sessions to restrict the ensemble to one chordal accompanist and one percussionist playing at a time.[58]

While instrumental music is essential to sessions, singers and dancers also have a place in the proceedings. *Sean-nós* and ballad singers may offer a song or be invited to sing, usually as a departure from the ensemble music.[59] It is also generally acceptable for trained step dancers to dance along with music being played, although whether this is appropriate may vary from session to session.[60] Singers have been known to hold sessions of their own, but these seem to be less common than instrumental sessions.[61] Sessions are therefore important venues for multiple strains of Irish music, rather than being exclusively about instrumental dance music.

Almost as important to sessions as the music is *craic* (sometimes written as *crack*), which refers to lively conversation and socialization. Moloney calls *craic* "the essence of entertainment" and "central to social life in rural Ireland."[62] Though sessions are ostensibly about making music, the measure of a good session for many participants may in fact be the *craic* rather than the musical performance. This is an issue that will be explored in greater depth in subsequent chapters.

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[58] Martin Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 9.

[59] Flynn, "Participatory Music Making and Affinity," 47; Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 223.

[60] Flynn, "Participatory Music Making and Affinity," 70; Spinney, "Kitchen Racket," 81.

[61] Vanessa Thacker, "Experiencing the Moment in Song: An Analysis of the Irish Traditional Singing Session," *Ethnomusicology Review* 17, (2012); Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 228.

[62] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 185. See also Flynn, "Participatory Music Making and Affinity," 52.

Values in Irish Sessions

Among Irish musicians, there is considerable emphasis given to the ideals upon which performance practices are based. Deborah Rapuano writes that the major role of so-called "guardians of tradition," or professionalized musicians, is to enforce and pass on the values of sessions, and these values are held to be a microcosm of Irish culture generally.[63] These values are contrasted with those of non-Irish musical styles as well as other performance contexts within Irish music.

To begin with, sessions are emphasized to be a form of participatory music making. In Thomas Turino's conception of participatory and presentational performance, the quality of a participatory music event is judged by the degree of participation and social interaction.[64] Turino also writes of the necessity of a variety of roles of differing complexity within the musical texture, so that inexperienced musicians can feel comfortable joining in while more experienced musicians are still challenged and engaged.[65] Irish sessions contain musical features that address these considerations. The basic musical form—heterophonic unison melody with optional rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment—is highly flexible and allows for a variety of levels of participation. A musician can simply play the standard melody or an accompaniment instrument, but a more advanced player can add stylistically appropriate ornaments at will to give variation to the performance. The effect is a dense, complex, and varying musical texture that is forgiving

[63] Deborah L. Rapuano,"Every Drop Hollows the Stone: An Ethnographic Study of Traditional Irish Music Pub Sessions" (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2005), 157-158.

[64] Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29.

[65] Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 31.

to individual error.[66] Additionally, it is common practice to have separate beginner (or slow) and advanced (or fast) sessions, sometimes at the same venue on the same night, to accommodate musicians of wide-ranging skill levels.[67]

Related to this conception of participatory music is the idea that sessions should be democratic, egalitarian, and open. While sessions typically have more or less formally designated hosts or leaders, their role is generally one of gentle guidance or shepherding rather than total control. The will of the group is meant to take precedence over the will of the individual.[68] In theory, this also requires every participant to be on the same page, or, in the words of Mick Moloney, there must be no "deviant behavior."[69] Of course, this is only an ideal, and usually it is the job of a session host or veteran to address musicians who are out of step or play outside of the repertoire of the group. Spinney describes hearing an account of such an occasion, in which famed Boston session host Larry Reynolds kept an unskilled musician occupied with conversation "so he wouldn't ruin the session for anyone else."[70]

The extent to which sessions live up to these values may be in question. Rapuano contrasts Irish sessions in the United States with the more traditional variety in Ireland, referring to sessions in the Midwestern United States as "performance venues" as opposed to pure

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[66] Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 44.

[67] Spinney, "Kitchen Racket," 74; Rapuano,"Every Drop Hollows the Stone," 24; Flynn, "Participatory Music Making and Affinity," 58.

[68] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 191.

[69] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 190.

[70] Spinney, "Kitchen Racket," 73.

recreation.[71] She argues that strict ideas of ethnicity and tradition surrounding sessions constitute barriers designed to promote exclusivity, so that sessions more closely resemble sites of identity formation than of open recreation. Helen O'Shea is especially emphatic in drawing a distinction between the ideal and the reality of sessions. She describes one particular East Clare session as "neither as one (homogenous), nor at one (harmonious)."[72] In her field research, she encountered tension between regular musicians and newcomers, between musicians and non-musicians, and between locals and foreigners. She also discusses the distinction between known, written rules of etiquette common to all sessions and the unwritten, locally established rules of individual sessions, which occasionally intersect or cause conflict between regulars and experienced visiting musicians.

Ethnicity in Irish Traditional Music

One of the most frequently debated aspects of Irish sessions is the role of ethnicity. To risk repeating the obvious, Irish music is primarily defined by its connections to Ireland geographically and nationally and to ethnically Irish people. However, the instrumentation, performance practice, repertoire, and stylistic elements associated with Irish traditional music are not necessarily made "un-Irish" by being performed by non-Irish individuals. Ó hAllmhuráin identifies a trend toward more inclusive, less ethnically strict attitudes toward Irish music, writing, "Being Irish, or of Irish origin, is no longer a prerequisite to playing or enjoying this

[71] Deborah L. Rapuano, "Becoming Irish or Becoming Irish Music?: Boundary Construction in Irish Music Communities," *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 24, 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2001): 106.

[72] Helen O'Shea, "Getting to the Heart of the Music: Idealizing Musical Community and Irish Traditional Music Sessions," *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland,* 2 (2006-2007): 3.

genre – not that it ever was."[73] However, this is not to say that ethnicity does not continue to play a role in the performance of Irish music, or that there is not a wide spectrum of views among scholars and participants.

Despite Ó hAllmhuráin's observation, the view that Irish ethnicity is vital to understanding Irish music is still common among many musicians. In her ethnographic work on Irish sessions in the Midwest, Rapuano spoke with a session host who said, "Only the Irish can hear and play Irish music."[74] Although most musicians do not seem to regard Irish ethnic heritage as essential to participation in Irish music, there is a prevailing notion that one's legitimacy as an Irish musician is directly correlated with one's proximity to Ireland. There is a wide range of features used to establish this proximity. Being born in Ireland, having Irish ancestors, living in a city with a significant Irish American population, and engaging with nonmusical features of Irish culture and social life (such as speaking Irish Gaelic) are all ways in which one can establish oneself as a legitimate Irish musician. Moloney characterizes this phenomenon as a matter of respect, writing that musicians born in Ireland or identifying as Irish or Irish American are treated with heightened deference in the context of sessions.[75] He also reports that Irish music enthusiasts will occasionally "discover" a forgotten Irish ancestry after developing an interest in Irish music as an outsider.[76] This situation constitutes the reversal of

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[73] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 194.

[74] Rapuano, "Becoming Irish or Becoming Irish Music," 109.

[75] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 193.

[76] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 446.

families pushing their children toward Irish music as a way of getting in touch with a known Irish heritage.[77]

While Moloney considers the legitimizing nature of Irish ethnicity as an informal series of relationships, other scholars have observed more formalized institutions surrounding ethnicity. Rapuano refers to "guardians of tradition," or professionalized musicians who preserve the authenticity of pub sessions by enforcing ethnic distinctions and values within the session.[78] Musicians become "legitimate bearers of the tradition" either by being born into it (i.e. being born Irish, and particularly being born into an Irish music family) or by going through rigorous technical training.[79] On the other hand, Erin Flynn observed that a session in Washington, D.C. led by an Irish-born musician was more flexible regarding traditional session etiquette, which suggests that Irish-born musicians use their inherited legitimacy to push the boundaries of the tradition.[80]

In addition to being the primary marker of legitimacy for Irish musicians, several authors have suggested that the association of Irish music with ethnicity is part of what draws people to the music. In his dissertation, Moloney comments extensively on the attraction of Americans with little or no connection to Ireland to Irish music.[81] These participants are "overwhelmingly from the white middle and upper middle classes in urban or suburban America," and while their

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[77] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 415.

[78] Rapuano,"Every Drop Hollows the Stone," 157-176.

[79] Rapuano,"Every Drop Hollows the Stone," 167.

[80] Flynn, "Participatory Music Making and Affinity," 59.

[81] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 422-449.

interest is partly musical, they are also drawn to the ethnic Irish community itself.[82] Moloney interviews non-Irish musicians who express a sense of "rootlessness" that may be addressed by the Irish traditional music community.[83] This view is supported by Catherine Eagan's discussion of Irish ethnicity as related to whiteness, in which she asserts that Irish Americans are attracted to Celtic and Irish imagery as a way of regaining a sense of ethnic identity while retaining white privilege.[84] Rapuano, too, points to the loss of one's identity and connections to the past as a common motivator for engaging with Irish music, both among Irish Americans and non-Irish who sometimes "invent links to an Irish heritage."[85]

This understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and music necessitates a relatively fluid understanding of ethnicity. Rapuano considers ethnicity as a process, rather than something that is exclusively inherited, but both she and Moloney are skeptical of the extent to which a non-Irish person can become Irish through music alone.[86] As was previously mentioned, Rapuano argues in her discussion of "guardians of tradition" that rigorous professional training can substitute for Irish heritage in granting legitimacy within this ethnic tradition. The idea that an individual might "become Irish" or re-emphasize their Irish heritage by adopting cultural practices and skills is not limited to music. Malcolm Chapman argues that music should be

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[82] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 423, 435.

[83] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 441.

[84] Catherine Eagan, "Still 'Black' and 'Proud': Irish America and the Racial Politics of Hibernophilia," in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture,* ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 27.

[85] Rapuano, "Becoming Irish or Becoming Irish Music," 104.

[86] Rapuano, "Becoming Irish or Becoming Irish Music," 105-106; Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 422-425.

considered alongside skills such as language as part of a suite of activities intended to promote "Celtic ethnic consciousness."[87] However, while Celtic languages are difficult and time-intensive to learn, Celtic musics are comparatively easy and so tend to be more popular. For this reason, music plays a particularly important role in forging and reinforcing identity.

Conclusion

The preceding material is intended to situate the Irish session in terms of history, performance practice, and the broader context of Irish music. Instrumental sessions are not the only form of Irish traditional music, but for many, instrumental music is "the heart and soul of Irish music," and the session is the most authentic iteration of Irish instrumental performance.[88] In many ways, sessions reflect the social circumstances of Irish and Irish Americans broadly. Singing and dancing have their place in sessions, but instrumental performance takes priority. Instrumental session music provides the right balance of authenticity and accessibility to participants who no longer speak Irish Gaelic. Regular pub sessions become regional gathering places for like-minded individuals who share a passion for music as well as for history and heritage. Music is expected to forge group cohesion and ease tensions, though the reality may be considerably more political than the ideal.

While the events of 2020 have neither erased nor supplanted the historical situation of Irish sessions, prolonged social distancing measures in the United States have made conventional sessions and performances impossible. Rather than causing the complete destruction of Irish

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[87] Malcolm Chapman, "Thoughts on Celtic Music," in *Ethnicity, Identity and Music*, ed. Martin Stokes (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 33-35.

[88] Williams, *Focus*, 144.

traditional music, this new development has resulted in new adaptations. The etiquette, values, and common practices of sessions have been brought with varying degrees of fidelity into virtual settings. In the following chapters, I will consider how the adaptation of sessions to virtual media supports or modifies previous understandings of the values and norms of the Irish traditional music community.

Chapter Two

Reeling in a Virtual Space

Having established the historical context for traditional Irish music sessions, it is time now to turn to the recent innovation of the virtual session. Prompted by pandemic-induced isolation, musicians adopted a variety of measures in order to continue sharing music, playing music together, and socializing throughout 2020. As will be shown in this chapter, the success of virtual sessions in replicating the conventional experience of traditional Irish sessions is mixed. In order to understand how virtual sessions succeed or fail in their goals, I will break down some of the component parts of Irish sessions as they have transferred to the virtual setting. Of particular significance are the idealization of sessions as participatory music gatherings and the role of *craic.* An examination of these features can help explain why some musicians are drawn to virtual sessions and what value is provided by various alternative models.

Virtual Sessions

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced governments to introduce social distancing measures. In many regions of the United States, these measures included the closure of restaurants and other public spaces, which cut off session musicians from most of their usual venues and effectively ended Irish sessions as they were previously practiced. Like so many other activities, Irish music moved from physical to virtual spaces. In practice, this meant the instantiation of a wide array of creative solutions, all of which were intended to capture some aspects of conventional sessions.

The virtual session variants I encountered can be classified first by the technology used: some sessions used conferencing applications such as Zoom, while others were livestreamed using Facebook or YouTube livestreaming services. Sessions also differed in the form of musical participation. In some sessions, a single host would play for the entire session, inviting others to play along, while other sessions would rotate through tune leaders in a "round-robin" style. Still others would consist of musicians playing along with pre-recorded videos, and in many cases these formats were mixed.

From my observations, the most common solution was "round robin"-style sessions facilitated by Zoom. These services allow large groups of participants to gather in virtual "rooms" with each participant's video feed displayed in a small window of a gallery-style page.[89] While these services generally allow for more or less simultaneous audio and video feeds, they introduce a small amount of latency. This latency is brief enough to go unnoticed in conversations, but where precise musical timing is required, it becomes a significant issue. To address this issue, every musician other than the one leading the current set mutes their audio, so that only one musician's performance is audible. Visually, it appears as if all the musicians are playing together, although if you were to look closely you would notice a lack of synchronization due to the latency described above. Sonically, everyone except the leader feels as if they are playing with one other person, and the leader feels as if they are playing alone. As with in-person sessions described in chapter one, these sessions each have a designated host who manages the logistics of the session and calls on other musicians to lead tunes.

[89] Zoom, the most popular platform, easily supports up to 25 participants. Greater numbers can be supported, but participants must scroll through multiple windows to see every participant's face.

Although these sessions are "virtual", they each retain a strong association with a physical location. In each case, the host and the majority of attendees were in some way associated with a previously extant in-person session. During my field research, I frequented three such round-robin sessions. One session was connected to a pub called B. D. Riley's in Austin, Texas, hosted by an accordionist named Ian Varley, and met on Thursday nights. The second, based out of The Ould Sod in San Diego, California, was hosted by a man named Michael Eskin and met on Tuesday nights. The third, based out of a book shop called Couth Buzzard Books in Seattle, Washington, was hosted by a flute player named Ming Chen and met on Saturday afternoons.

While Zoom-based sessions typically use the round-robin format common to in-person sessions, other models are also possible. A prominent Irish musician may be commissioned by a session group to guest-host the session, in which case they will be the only unmuted performer for the evening. These kinds of events were often associated with special occasions; many of the guest-hosted sessions I observed took place under the auspices of the O'Flaherty Irish Music Retreat, an annual Irish music intensive festival. Like round robin-style sessions, these events have a close analog in in-person sessions: according to my correspondent Sheila Murphy, sessions in which one musician leads tunes for the entire night were less common than round-robin sessions, but they did occasionally take place. [90]

Other session formats occupy a liminal space between livestreamed concerts and true participatory sessions. At the O'Flaherty Irish Music Retreat, I observed a Zoom-based session in which the host, rather than, playing tunes herself, queued up pre-recorded videos of musicians

[90] Sheila Murphy, interview by author, Brunswick, ME, June 12, 2020.

and groups performing tunes. In this case, the role of the host shifted from a fellow musician to something akin to a radio deejay, providing commentary and conversation between performances of recorded media. There are also play-along sessions facilitated by YouTube or Facebook livestream, in which the hosts remain on-video throughout the session and interact with participants via chat windows. One regularly occurring session, titled Common Tunes and Reasonable Speeds (CTARS), combined these two models, switching between livestreamed video of the hosts (who played tunes and conversed with each other and the audience) and pre-recorded videos of other musicians.

Presentational and Participatory Music

One of the most interesting developments of the virtual session has been a change in the understanding of sessions as participatory music. As discussed in the previous chapter, sessions are idealized as participatory events. This idealization has deep implications for the music, affecting the structure of tunes, instrumentation and ensemble organization, the physical seating arrangement of the musicians, and attitudes regarding expertise and the goals of sessions. In virtual sessions, the ideal of full sonic participation comes into conflict with the limitations of technology.

In the case of Zoom-based virtual sessions, elements of participatory and presentational performance are blended. At the very least, this round-robin format may fit better with Turino's idea of sequential participatory performance.[91] I frequently observed participants expressing feelings of "stage fright" and the sense that they were performing for the other participants when

[91] Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 48-51.

leading a tune; clapping after a tune set has become commonplace for some groups. One participant even found himself unable to lead a tune on account of his nerves, despite having practiced it while muted moments before. In this sense, it can be surmised that for some musicians, virtual sessions feel like presentational performances, even while they are intellectually understood to be participatory. Participants believe they are playing with others but only hear their own instrument.

Livestreamed sessions heighten this ambiguity, using technological mediation to shift between live and recorded fields of musical performance. In these events, interactions are not face to face, but occur primarily through text-based chat windows. The interpolation of pre-recorded videos further complicates the idea of "real time." For instance, one livestreamed session asked viewers to send in video recordings of a given tune played at a specified tempo; when all the videos were assembled and played simultaneously, the effect was that of a large ensemble playing the tune together. The video was played during the livestream, so that in some sense, participants could hear one another playing, but what they heard was not an actual real-time performance. This technique is similar to the longstanding practice of overdubbing in studio recording. Returning to Turino's recording fields of studio audio art and high-fidelity recording, we have an example in which a method associated with studio audio art is being used to simulate a high-fidelity recording, which in turn is being presented as a simulacrum of a live, participatory music-making event. To go further, livestreamed sessions undergo a shift from quasi-real-time, mediated events to recorded, asynchronous recordings, because YouTube livestreams are converted to videos after the stream.

The focus livestreamed sessions on a small group of audible hosts blurs the lines between participatory sessions and presentational concerts. Traditionally, Irish music makes a clear

distinction between sessions and concerts. It is possible for a concert to morph into a session, but usually there is no question for those involved which event they are participating in at any given moment.

In the process of adapting sessions and concerts to virtual spaces, the lines between these two types of activity have become blurred. A guest-hosted session or a livestreamed play-along session has an apparent audience-performer distinction normally absent from sessions, and sonic transmission is one-way for these kinds of events. Spatial cues, such as physical stages or the circular seating arrangement common to in-person sessions, are necessarily artificial if they are implemented at all.[92]

In this context, I propose that musical arrangement plays a key role in facilitating the participatory-presentational distinction. By choosing to play with more or less attention to arrangement, musicians can embody the role of either session host or concert performer, even when both performances are mediated by the same livestreaming technology. In the twentieth century, Sean Ó Riada pioneered a new approach to Irish traditional music, implementing complex arrangements to produce variety in terms of instrumentation, texture, and tempo.[93] This approach was intended to elevate traditional music to the level of art music, and it resulted in engaging, highly listenable performances. In other words, Ó Riada shifted Irish traditional music from predictable, simple music intended for ease of participation and dance to unpredictable, complex music ideal for listening. In sessions, playing tunes in this way would require far too

[92] In one livestreamed concert I (virtually) attended, musicians were recorded playing on a wooden stage, so that multiple, asynchronous recordings could be played alongside one another, giving the illusion of a band playing together.

[93] Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Short History*, 150.

much time and effort in teaching and planning individual arrangements, but a regularly rehearsed ensemble can easily employ this approach for concerts and recordings. For this reason, there exists within Irish music two corelated musical styles based on the same traditional dance repertoire.

Writing in 2008, Turino was unable to anticipate many of the technological developments of the last decade. Some hints of the role of the Internet were in place: Turino provides an example of a project in which "people can go online and electronically manipulate sound files in interactive music Web sites."[94] He recognizes the ambiguity of this situation, concluding that the absence of "face-to-face interaction and real time performance" made these websites something other than participatory music making. In the case of virtual sessions, interactions are "face-to-face" in the sense that other participants' faces are visible, but this face-to-face aspect is mediated by cameras. The performance is nearly real time, but there is an inescapable delay that prevents true synchronicity. Participants do not occupy the same physical or sonic space, and technological limitations or failures threaten to dissolve the illusion at any time. Altogether, the experience of virtual sessions is a complex application of Turino's four fields, dependent on participants' mental labor to be sustained.

The Social Experience of The Virtual Session

The musicians I interviewed seemed to agree that virtual sessions were not as musically satisfying as in-person sessions, but some felt that they are equal or nearly equal in terms of socialization. Shannon Heaton, who has been running a livestreamed session for several months

[94] Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 87.

and who has led some Zoom-based sessions, said that the social experience of a Zoom session was lacking.

> In between tunes, if we finished and you had a comment to say about something that happened while we were all playing, that was very spontaneous and quick-witted sometimes it's a bit cumbersome to be able to do that because then you have to unmute, and if somebody is unmuting at the same [time]… you might just not be able to do your quick quip. And so much of the session is about that wit that banter.[95]

As Heaton points out, Zoom *craic* is limited compared to an in-person experience. In a physical session (or any physical gathering), there are complex dynamics of space and volume, and one has a variety of means at their disposal to control the audience of their speech. On Zoom, everyone hears the audio feed through one set of speakers, so there is no sense of real acoustic space, and simultaneous conversations tend to drown each other out.

The necessity of muting and unmuting oneself is also cumbersome and can create awkward situations. Anyone who has used Zoom regularly will be familiar with the necessity of informing someone that they are still muted while they are talking. The typically fluid transitions between conversation and musical performance that make up the fabric of sessions become awkward and unwieldy. In one representative incident, a musician at a session repeatedly forgot to mute himself when others were leading tunes, causing an unpleasant latency-related clash of two instruments performing the same tune, offset by a short duration. Each time, other musicians were forced to stop playing and tell him, either through the Zoom chat or vocally, that he needed to mute himself. He was visibly embarrassed by these incidents, and flow of the session was in each of these moments momentarily interrupted. It is ironic that in a musical activity, the

[95] Shannon Heaton, interview by author, October 29, 2020.

normally essential quality of being heard by others became in this context an impediment to the activity itself.

Aside from the limitations of technology, nearly every musician I spoke to agreed that the social experience of the session was vital, and in some cases more important than the music itself. According to Ian Varley, the musical experience of playing with someone over Zoom is "demonstrably worse in almost every way" to that of playing with a recording.[96] Since the advent of sound recording, and even more so today with music streaming services like Spotify, it is convenient for any musician to "play with" the top Irish musicians in the world. It is extremely unlikely for any amateur musician to be able to compete with that in terms of musical skill. Rather than being a showcase of musical virtuosity, the purpose of sessions is to provide the opportunity to play with specific musicians with whom one has a personal relationship.

There is also a measured informality during sessions that purposefully relegates concerns of musical skill or polish to the sidelines. This can be witnessed in many common occurrences during sessions. Musicians will introduce tunes with things like, "let's just see what comes out," or "I'll play a couple of reels," downplaying any possibility that their performance is prepared and avoiding the appearance of taking on the limelight. Musicians who repeatedly lead tunes or monopolize attention in other ways are usually reprimanded or discouraged by session hosts, and the art of session hosting includes the ability to enforce an appropriate amount of time between tune sets for conversation.

When defining the session, it is common for Irish musicians to be inclusive of non-musicians as well. In his dissertation, Mick Moloney makes a distinction between a concert

[96] Ian Varley, interview by author, Austin, TX, August 21, 2020.

audience and what he calls the "non-playing participants" of a session.[97] Shannon Heaton described a similar sense of sessions in a story to me.

> There's a wonderful gentleman here in Boston… [who] would frequent the sessions. And he would often bring his own lawn chair so that he would have a place guaranteed to sit in the session…. He doesn't play an instrument, but he really knows the music. And he has a real sense of where it's going and when it's getting' good.[98]

Playing music was not as essential to being part of the session as having knowledge of the music. The session is a musical event in that it is centered on Irish music, but it is primarily a social event, and playing music is not as important as being present and having an interest in the music, the scene, and the tradition.

The Irish Music Aesthetic and Ethics of Style

Virtual sessions arguably constitute a fundamental challenge to the conventional aesthetic of Irish music. The substitution of individual, sequential-participatory music making for the dense texture of simultaneous participatory performance subvert commonly held notions of what Irish music should sound like. In order to reconcile this potential conflict, I would consider the possibility that Irish musicians are prioritizing the perceived ethics of Irish music in their decision to make music online. In *Mek Some Noise*, Timothy Rommen proposes an ethics of style, in which "ethics is prior to aesthetics."[99] As Rommen, argues, the ethics of style is most relevant in communities where the musical style is contested and identity formation is at play.

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[97] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 203.

[98] Shannon Heaton, interview by author, October 29, 2020.

[99] Timothy Rommen, *"Mek Some Noise": Gospel Music and the Ethics of Style in Trinidad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

Participation in sessions is often central to the identities of session musicians, and although the musical style of Irish traditional music is not always contested, COVID-19 placed conventional performance practices into a unique state of fluctuation.

Irish sessions are idealized, or, in the words of Helen O'Shea, romanticized, as welcoming, democratic, egalitarian settings. One of the session hosts I spoke with, Ian Varley, regularly gives a talk at the O'Flaherty Irish Music Retreat titled, "How To Run A (Friendly) Session."[100] In this talk, Varley separates the logistical process of starting and running a session from the more abstract process of "making it friendly." For Varley, running a session that was welcoming to both veteran performers and beginners took priority over musical perfection in performance. For this reason, he said he found it easier to deal with total beginners than with musicians who possessed virtuosic skill in another style but no knowledge or respect for Irish music. Another host, Ming Chen, expressed a similar view, observing that some of the musicians at his session lacked the skill to confidently lead tunes, but he still tried to make sure everybody had the opportunity to lead a tune.[101] In both cases, the ethic of egalitarianism took precedence over musical aesthetic considerations.

Another aspect of Chen's observation was that at a live session, a weak tune leader could be sonically supported by stronger musicians in the group. This structure of mutual support is an important facet of Turino's participatory music concept, discussed in chapter one: the thick musical texture of traditional Irish music helps cover any errors or tuning problems and invites musicians of all skill levels to play confidently. Virtual sessions lack this critical component,

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[100] Ian Varley, "How To Run A (Friendly) Session," presentation, O'Flaherty's Irish Music Retreat, accessed August 21, 2020.

[101] Ming Chen, interview by author, Seattle, July 23, 2020.

reducing the musical texture to two musicians, one of whom might be a relative beginner or have a low-quality audio feed. The persistence of virtual sessions in this format shows the importance of the egalitarian ethic to Irish sessions. Given the choice between sacrificing the sound of the session and sacrificing the ethic of universal participation, virtual session participants have generally chosen the former.

At the same time, there have been concerted efforts by some musicians to recapture the sound of Irish sessions in the virtual setting. I have observed musicians using karaoke-style backing tracks, either recording several tracks with different instruments ahead of time or playing along with a professional recording. Similarly, some musicians use chained Zoom rooms, with one musician's sound travelling through Zoom into the acoustic space of another musician, so that the sound of both of their instruments is sent in sync to the main Zoom room. These techniques have the effect of increasing the number of simultaneously sounding instruments and allowing for accompaniment as well as melodic parts. The effort put towards this outcome shows the importance of the sound of Irish music despite its secondary status to the ethic.

Accessibility, Technology, Informality

As I wrote in chapter one, sessions are idealized as egalitarian, accessible, informal, and spontaneous. The dependence of virtual sessions on technology has a significant effect on these session ideals. While virtual sessions improve some aspects of accessibility, they also solidify

the distinction between true amateurs and the semi-professional musicians referred to by Deborah Rapuano as "guardians of tradition."[102]

In some ways, the use of the Internet would seem to improve the accessibility of Irish traditional music. Distance and travel are reduced to zero, allowing musicians to play together regularly while living thousands of miles apart. At the same time, distance becomes meaningless: the isolation of a pandemic causes one's next-door neighbor to be just as far away as someone on another continent. While the distance is easily traversed in terms of physical effort and expenditure, there is a heightened formality imposed on virtual sessions and interactions. Whereas a physical building is always in its place and can therefore act as a constant container for music, the fact that a Zoom room must be generated requires a greater degree of planning and coordination. An individual can simply go to a local pub during certain times of day and reasonably expect others to be there, ready for socialization, if not music, but there is no guarantee that a Zoom room will even exist unless the host has agreed to operate it. The need for prior planning and deliberate choice (it is extremely unlikely for one to stumble into a virtual session without knowing about it beforehand) make Zoom sessions more formal events, subject to coordination and organization which often must be top-down.

The Zoom host mechanism also causes virtual sessions to be more dependent on technologically capable hosts, which further disturbs the egalitarian ideal of sessions. In order to host a Zoom session, one must have a Zoom account. While Zoom offers free accounts, they are severely limited in terms of functionality (with maximum numbers of participants and meeting durations), forcing virtual session hosts to either possess an institutional account or pay for a

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[102] Rapuano,"Every Drop Hollows the Stone," 157.

premium account. The musical experience of virtual sessions is also enhanced by the enterprising use of technology. Some musicians have invested extensive time and effort into creating latency-free audio chains, with professional recording microphones, audio interfaces, and software intended to produce a clear, latency-free and reliable audio signal for virtual sessions. Other musicians have arrived at clever solutions to the problem of simultaneous performance, such as the karaoke-style backing tracks and chained Zoom rooms described earlier in this chapter. All of these solutions require both time and resources to invest into what is ostensibly an amateur hobby.

Because of the expense and expertise required to effect the above measures, as well as to host a session, virtual sessions seem to encourage the existing distinction between hobbyists and semi-professional musicians within the Irish traditional music community. Moreover, the technological requirements of hosting a session—specifically, the necessity of one individual to effectively generate and sustain the space within which the session takes place—mirror and heighten the physical gatekeeping of sessions described by Helen O'Shea.[103] Regardless of intentions, the host of a virtual session is vested with power and status contrary to the egalitarian ideal of the session.

Space and Place in Virtual Sessions

Virtual sessions have a very different relationship with space compared with physical sessions. To state the obvious, in virtual pub sessions, there is no pub, nor any shared physical space among the participants. Augusto Ferraiuolo argues that the modern form of Irish sessions

[103] O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 124.

is intimately linked to the status of pubs as "third places" according to Ray Oldenburg's model.[104] As I wrote in chapter one, the modern Irish session was defined in part by the move from private home gatherings to regular events in Irish pubs. Pubs quintessentially fulfill Oldenburg's idea of third places, and, according to Ferraiuolo, session ideals such as egalitarianism can be traced to the association between sessions and the open, neutral space of pubs.

Virtual sessions arguably constitute a return to first places (that is, the home) from third places for sessions. Typically, participants attend virtual sessions from their own home. When one attends a session, they bring with them a window into their private life. The choice of location, or lack thereof, reflects aspects of the participant's identity and status. For instance, some musicians attend sessions from what appear to be dedicated music rooms, with musical instruments lining the walls or a piano in view. This space suggests a degree of affluence as well as dedication to music as an occupation at either an amateur or professional level. Other musicians may not have access to private music rooms and may attend sessions from a common living room with other members of their household present. In one virtual session, a musician played a tin whistle from her car. Though I did not have the chance to ask her directly, I reasoned that this choice of location may have been the only space in her home where she could make music without disturbing other people at a late hour. Similarly, one session host would, on a nightly basis, refer to "accordion bedtime," meaning the hour (around nine P.M.) when he could no longer play his accordion without disturbing his children and would be forced to switch to a different instrument or stop playing. Domestic activities also bleed into virtual sessions.

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[104] Ferraiuolo, *Rites of Spontaneity*, 39-44.

Personally, there were some nights where I would cook dinner for myself while attending a session. I could turn off my video and step into the kitchen without "leaving" the session. Other session attendees would also come and go to eat or for other reasons in a manner that would have been impossible in a physical located session.

Furthermore, session participants have the power to manipulate the window into their private life—that is, their personal video feed. Within the context of Zoom sessions, the video feed is a surprisingly flexible source of personal expression and place-making. An individual's choice of location as well as the angle of their camera are likely carefully chosen to portray a certain image. Many musicians are sure to include the instruments lining their walls in the background of their video, and it is common to see cameras angled slightly towards the ceiling rather than the floor. Part of the reason for the prevalence of this camera angle is the tendency of built-in laptop cameras to be placed below the eye-level of users, but deliberate choice may also be a factor: in a living space, the floor can be cluttered and dirty, whereas a ceiling is usually clean and bare, giving the appearance of a clean and polished household.

Beyond the camera itself, Zoom offers the ability to use greenscreen-like virtual backgrounds, including moving images. This feature allows participants to hide any distracting background activity, but it also allows participants to place themselves in exotic or thematic settings. Musicians at sessions frequently choose musical or Irish-themed images, such as a group of dancing flute players or a close-up of a glass of Guinness. Perhaps most unique is the practice observed at one session of copying the video feeds of other participants, so that two participants appear to be in the same room, as if in an alternate reality. This background-copying is done partly in jest, and participants usually laugh when they notice it, but it also serves to create a sense of shared space and place.

The Zoom "rooms" in which virtual sessions take place have characteristics of first places rather than third places. Oldenburg's third places are publicly accessible, neutral ground, and provides food and drink as well as conversation. By contrast, access to a virtual session usually requires an explicit invitation (hosts usually send out Zoom links by email and may require a password), are controlled by the host (who has the power to mute or eject other guests), and, short of the invention of a Star Trek-style Replicator, do not serve food or drinks. In other words, being at a virtual session is more like being a guest in the home of the host, rather than attending a session in a bar or other public space. The activity is also highly focused; whereas a pub can host many simultaneous conversations, cliques, and activities at once, everyone at a virtual session is either playing music or listening.

At the same time, the place in which virtual sessions occur could be seen as a hybrid or even a "fourth place." A Zoom room is a virtual space, generated for a specific purpose. It includes a small piece of the "first place" of everyone involved, but in terms of proxemics, it is impossible for participants to cross over into each other's spaces. The body is in some sense extended into a virtual sphere, albeit in a sensorially limited form.

The existence of this virtual space as a hybrid place has important implications for the idea of place-making. Following the reasoning of Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, patterns of migration and globalization have created a world of cultures not fixed in place or territory, so that it is necessary to view the making of "the local" as a series of practices and processes.[105] The designation of a pub as "Irish", and the extent to which that pub is part of broader Irish culture, is therefore the result of the habits, activities, and beliefs of its patrons. This active placemaking is

[105] Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds., *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 3-7.

related to Pierre Bourdieu's idea of "habitus," in which behaviors and systems of thought are continually remade and reiterated.[106] Furthermore, I propose that the local-ness of pubs sessions can be extended by the same practices to virtual spaces and to the people who virtually enter these spaces, despite widespread geographic dispersal.

Music plays an important role in this place-making process. As Frances Morton writes, music has the power to create temporary, performed spaces, which can only be accessed through participation in the musical event.[107] In this case, the pub is created through the performance of Irish music, and the local-ness of a particular session is reinforced through the performance of specific tunes along with inside jokes and rituals specific to that session group. Furthermore, music has a unique power to invoke locality sensorially via sonic tourism, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have relayed some of the strategies adopted by Irish musicians during COVID-19 to keep playing music despite the necessity of isolation. It was perhaps inevitable that virtual sessions would be imperfect in their replication of the session experience. Simultaneous group performance, both an organizational principle and a core aesthetic feature of Irish music, is impossible in the context of virtual sessions. Lively, informal social interactions, accessibility, egalitarianism, and the intricate use of space are all difficult ideas to enact in

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[106] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[107] Frances Morton, "Performing Ethnography: Irish Traditional Music Sessions and the New Methodology of Spaces," *Social and Cultural Geography* 6, no. 5 (October 2005): 670.

mediated social gatherings. All of these factors present challenges to the legitimacy of virtual sessions.

Musicians seem to be acutely aware of these challenges and shortcomings. When sessions are moved into a virtual space, musicians are forced to rethink their sense of place, engaging in deliberate acts of placemaking in order to accomplish the social and cultural work that was previously done by the walls of the pub itself. Creative solutions are developed to re-create the aesthetic of Irish music. Music, in addition to being the goal of the session, is also a tool, providing session participants with the means to experience Ireland, visit one another, and travel through time without leaving their homes.

The decision to face these challenges and put in the intellectual labor required not only to make virtual sessions happen, but to make them into legitimate renderings of the session experience, is not one musicians have taken lightly. Virtual sessions, I believe, are directly connected to the narrative of Irish music as a tradition of struggle and survival. In the following chapter, I will discuss how this survival narrative influences the selective tradition of Irish music and provides a point of familiarity for Irish musicians during pandemic-induced isolation.

Chapter Three

Keeping the Session Alive: The Virtual Irish Session in Context

In this chapter, I will explore the place of the virtual session among broader trends in Irish music. The advent of the virtual session is best understood as an extension of existing discourses on suffering and resilience. The novel threat of COVID-19 has been addressed with new as well as old technological solutions, but the underlying narrative of survival in the face of adversity provides a point of familiarity for musicians in the face of a crisis.

Irish music has survived both struggle and the isolation of diaspora. Prior to the pandemic, Irish music was already practiced in states of partial isolation, held together primarily by periodic interregional interaction. Sessions are isolated not only from each other but also from Ireland itself. In the past, physical travel has helped bridge these gaps. Travel between sessions is a common, regular practice for musicians. By travelling to other sessions as well as travelling to Ireland, musicians forge connections in the Irish music community and acquire legitimacy as guardians of the tradition. Similarly, annual festivals, which attract musicians from a given region or from around the world, depending on the renown of the event, facilitate the exchange of ideas, styles, and tunes.

In addition to the longstanding practice of interregional exchange, online forums have recently become another mechanism for the maintenance of Irish traditional music networks. One of the most prominent forums for Irish music, a website called *The Session* (thesession.org), has experienced elevated importance during COVID-19 as a way for musicians to find sessions and interact without the usual hubs of Irish bars and restaurants. In addition to connecting

musicians with sessions, *The Session* provides a repository of notated tunes used for both tune learning and active performance. This feature, along with discussion threads, serves as a mechanism for the establishment of legitimacy in the practice of Irish music. All of the content on *The Session* is produced by users, so its form mirrors the democratic ideal of Irish music, further supporting the website as a central hub for musicians.

With the mechanisms of interregional travel and web forums, the traditional Irish music community was therefore already well-practiced at maintaining norms and networks in the face of isolation. As the form of isolation escalated from the separation of communities by physical distance to the separation of individual community members by health concerns, virtual sessions have entered into this scene as another tool for forging and maintaining connections built around shared music-making.

Keeping the Session Alive

Like so much of life during a pandemic, the virtual Irish session follows a narrative of survival. Specifically, I frequently observed participants using language that suggested virtual sessions were temporary measures rather than legitimate forms of performance. Particularly in the early months of the pandemic, conversation during sessions turned almost invariably to the future and to the expectation that in-person sessions would resume. These virtual sessions serve to sustain existing social networks of sessions and keep musicians "in practice," and they are motivated in part by the belief that a return to "normal," in-person sessions is imminent.

The goal of keeping the session going was a central motivator for many hosts to adopt virtual sessions. This motivation can help explain why musicians tolerate the numerous technological issues that come with the virtual session experience. For host Ian Varley, the

regularity of his weekly session had been a major factor in its success, so pausing sessions during the pandemic would have constituted a major setback.[108] Ming Chen expressed a similar sentiment when acknowledging the weakness of having a tune set led by an unskilled player during a virtual session: "When they're playing, you know, if they're the only person that you're hearing besides yourself it can be a bit jarring. But I'm willing to put up with that because I just want to keep the community together until we can gather in person again."[109]

Maintaining sessions was sometimes connected to narratives of survival. During a livestream of the Mary O's Virtual Session, a participant thanked the hosts for creating a space for "…friends who've missed their own sessions and perhaps needed a temporary shelter." The use of the word shelter implies protection from danger, which in this moment may have included both the physical danger of coronavirus and the psychological danger of isolation. For some, the experience of survival in the face of danger is connected to Irish music history. In particular, the memory of the famine is called upon as a comparison to the pandemic. To quote Shannon Heaton:

> Ireland and Irish music have been through much more terrible times, and the music has always continued and the people who play it have stayed connected through this music. So, you know, famine sucks, pandemic sucks. Also, who knows what tunes come out of this time, that stick around, that are part of the COVID narrative.[110]

Heaton refers to the idea that the beauty of Irish music is born out of suffering, often summed up in the quotation: "Those in power write the history, those who suffer write the songs."[111] It is

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[108] Ian Varley, interview by author, Austin, TX, August 21, 2020.

[109] Ming Chen, interview by author, Seattle, July 23, 2020.

[110] Shannon Heaton, interview by author, October 29, 2020.

[111] This quotation was recited to me by Heaton and is commonly attributed to Frank Harte.

possible that the emphasis on the famine in association with Ireland is a distinctly American viewpoint. Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoire argue that interest in the famine is much greater in the United States than in Ireland because of its association with immigration.[112] Whereas Irish in Ireland seek to repress memories of the famine, Irish Americans consider it an essential part of their migration story.

The decision to use virtual sessions to keep the session alive is in some sense an extension of this attitude. The survival of the institution of the session, which plays such a vital role in the lives of Irish musicians, is worth the sacrifice and effort required to organize virtual sessions, just as the music and the people have survived diaspora and famine.

Traditionalization

In order to address the narrative of survival in Irish music sessions, it is necessary to consider what exactly constitutes the tradition of Irish music. While it is common to think of a tradition as a repertoire or an entity retained from the past, the Irish music tradition is better thought of as a process of traditionalization through which music is selected, disseminated, learned and performed. This view follows the scholarship on traditionalization as described by Dell Hymes.[113] According to Hymes, the process of traditionalization fulfills a social need; individuals use the past as a way of understanding their position in time and in social life. Irish musicians use traditionalization as a means to forge a sense of local community in opposition to modern mass-mediated commercial culture and the isolation of diaspora.

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[112] Williams and Ó Laoire, *Bright Star*; 78.

[113] Dell Hymes, "Folklore's Nature and Sun's Myth," *Journal of American Folklore* 88, no. 350 (Oct.-Dec., 1975): 353-354.

The process of traditionalization is characterized by selection and boundary negotiation. Raymond Williams emphasizes the role of what he calls "selective tradition" in the shaping of culture.[114] According to Williams, this process of creating "an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present" has a strong influence on current narratives of boundary negotiation and identity. Both individuals and institutions are constantly in the process of working out the boundaries and divisions of their culture.

In the case of Irish traditional music, the ideal of authenticity is one of the major tropes used to explain and justify boundaries. The "authentic" tradition is often placed in opposition to both modern, mass-mediated commercial culture and highbrow European art music. These oppositions valorize rural, ancient Irish ways of life in the imagination of Irish musicians. While connections to Ireland and Irish history are valued, practices without connection to Ireland can sometimes find their way into Irish music, provided they are not too "classical" or "commercial."

In my fieldwork, I observed many instances of Irish musicians negotiating issues of innovation and tradition. Consider, for instance, the topic of instrumentation. The Irish music tradition is restrictive as to which instruments are permitted. Some instruments are universally accepted, such as the fiddle and the wooden flute; other instruments, such as the guitar, are relatively new and not always readily accepted at sessions. For certain instruments, specific versions are preferred, such as the four-string open-backed tenor banjo over the five-string banjo.[115] Whether or not an instrument is considered authentic may be related to how long the

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[114] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115.

[115] Williams, *Focus*, 156; Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 69-71.

instrument has been used in Irish traditional music as well as whether the instrument is considered "native" to Ireland. The fiddle is not native to Ireland but has been in use in dance music there for centuries.[116] Instruments like the bódhran and the harp were not used in traditional dance music until quite recently, but they are identified with Ireland, so they are readily accepted at sessions.

Musicians also seem to prefer instruments with "ethnic" associations over instruments associated with popular "mass culture": for example, the bouzouki, a late-twentieth century addition with origins in Greece, may be slightly more acceptable than either the piano or the acoustic guitar, and is certainly more acceptable than a drum set or an electric guitar, in part because those instruments are generally associated with cosmopolitan popular music.[117]

Whether or not an innovative instrument choice is accepted depends in part on the perceived legitimacy of the musician. Late into one session, I observed a pianist showing off the Rhodes patch on his electric piano. At the urging of other attendees, he played a couple of tunes with that sound. Someone remarked that this was a sound "they had never heard in a session before." The fact that other musicians encouraged the pianist to use this nontraditional sound may be due in part to his status as a session regular and established professional musician. Another musician frequently brought a West African *kora* to sessions. This was evidently acceptable because this musician was an experienced Irish musician with an extensive tune repertoire and established skill with several conventional Irish instruments, including the accordion and the banjo. It was difficult to gauge the reactions of other musicians to the *kora*,

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[116] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 68.

[117] Williams, *Focus,* 157.

but sonically the instrument seemed well outside of the ordinary for Irish traditional music: the long sustain and resonance of the *kora* tended to obscure the melody, whereas instruments such as the fiddle and the banjo tend to have shorter sustains in order to render clearly the fast, complex melodies of Irish dance tunes.

Repertoire is occasionally a contentious topic during sessions. Specifically, musicians sometimes debate whether a given tune is appropriately part of the Irish traditional music session repertoire. This is not a simple matter of being written by an Irish musician or having particular musical elements; tunes are included or excluded as a result of a complex array of factors. Tunes from "Irish-adjacent" regional styles such as Scottish dance music may be acceptable, and tunes and songs that seem to be Irish may be rejected from session contexts. Once, a musician called a waltz called "Josephine's" and quickly added, "even though it's not Irish." He went on to say "it's part of the canon, I guess," to which another participant added that they had heard it in an "Irish setting," implying that it had legitimacy as a result of this contextualization. At another event, a musician told the group that he had been playing a lot of Scottish tunes and had recently discovered some Scottish ancestry in his heritage. He did not explicitly connect these two ideas, but it could be inferred that this musician was using his Scottish ancestry as a way of explaining his attraction to Scottish tunes.

Many of the tunes in the repertoire of Irish traditional music are too old to have known authorship, but a significant number are recent compositions by known, living composers. In contrast with composer-oriented traditions such as European classical music, tune authorship is somewhat de-emphasized in Irish traditional music. To be sure, musicians are generally aware of the authorship of a tune, and writing a good tune can elicit praise and respect. At one session I attended, a musician played a tune toward the end of the night, then announced that it was

written by another musician present at the session. Other attendees responded by praising the tune and the writer.

At the same time, publishing tunes is rare, and I have encountered no musician whose primary involvement in Irish traditional music is in writing tunes as opposed to performing them. In discussing a tune she had written titled "Cat's Meow," veteran professional performer Joannie Madden said the fact that it was mistaken for a centuries-old tune was "the greatest compliment" to her work.[118] This tune was disseminated in an idealized manner, being picked up by a stranger by ear from a performance by Madden and distributed through oral networks to other musicians in the British Isles. Even when musicians enjoy praise for their tune-writing, they do not expect any degree of ownership or control over the performance of their tunes.

When Irish traditional musicians discuss authenticity, they often do so more in terms of process than product. For many, the process of learning tunes and becoming familiar with the tradition is an important site of authentic practice. The use of sheet music is generally considered to be inferior to learning tunes by ear. Because knowledge of tunes is so highly valued, musicians pride themselves on their ability to perform a large repertoire from memory, without memory aids like sheet music. Additionally, the association of sheet music with classical music may also contribute to the stigma, since much of the discourse around Irish music emphasizes its non-European and non-classical nature. Sheila Murphy told me a story about a conversation at a festival:

> I was trained as a classical player, but I've always had a good ear, but there's not much ear for learning tunes in the classical venue, right? The ear is for playing in tune and for maybe hearing the nuances of different styles of playing and stuff like that, but mostly the ear is not for listening to tunes, to learn tunes, that's not

[118] *Irish Music Stories*, episode 40, "Irish Tunes in the Key of C-19," produced by Shannon Heaton, aired April 14, 2020, podcast.

> how it goes. But that's a strength that I had…. They had just come from maybe an accordion workshop and I was at a fiddle workshop, of course, I said, "it was great," and she said, "did he have you write some tunes down?" Which a lot of the teachers do, which I really don't understand why they would take the time to have you write tunes down, but I think it's a practice that happens a lot. And I think maybe some people learn by writing them down. For me, I'm just like, if you want to give us a written piece, give it to us, but let's do something else with our time…. Anyway, he didn't really have us write much down, but he, and then she said, "or did he teach you by rote?" And I was kind of like saying, "well it was a combination of rote but also, like, learning phrases." He taught it really different than just, kind of, "play this back, what I'm playing to you." It's really interesting, the way he was doing it…. And then she gave me the great question, which I just have loved ever since: "Do you have the gift or do you need the dots?" And I'm like, "thank you, no I don't need the dots."[119]

Later in that same conversation, she mentioned a beginner session in which some musicians might "actually be using sheet music still," saying, "if you have sheet music, we don't want to hear about it. Maybe you need that at home but there's no place for that here."

The stigma of sheet music is partly due to practical considerations: tune transcriptions are often shorthand and not intended to capture the nuances of performance, and the semi-improvisatory nature of Irish traditional music precludes any concrete, permanent notated music. At the same time, it is implied that even a perfectly precise musical notation would not be true to the Irish music tradition and would be rejected. Without the standardizing influence of authoritative sheet music, the process of gradual transformation through individual ornamentation is built into the transmission of Irish traditional music, making the learning of the music an inherently individual, communal, and social experience.

The preference for learning by ear rather than using sheet music is indicative of the value placed on historically informed practice in Irish music. In this case, musicians are interested not only in reproducing the sound of Irish music, but also in reproducing the process by which that

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[119] Sheila Murphy, interview by author, Brunswick, ME, June 12, 2020.

music has traditionally been learned and performed. There is a certain degree of mythos around stories of musicians learning Irish music by sitting at the edge of a session, quietly picking along to what the group was playing. The value of musical illiteracy supports the ideal of rural Irish musicians practicing an oral culture, and places traditional Irish music in opposition to European classical music.

The rote-learning ideal seems to be deliberately and consciously imposed. While sheet music has been generally rejected as an inauthentic device, other adaptations involving far more recent technologies are readily accepted into the practice. My consultant Ming Chen described the practice of using a smartphone to produce an on-the-spot recording of a tune after a session, which he called "a very digital-age way of spreading the folk process."[120] By producing their own recordings, students of Irish music retain not only the process of learning tunes by ear, but also the interpersonal transmission aspect of oral tradition, something which is lost when learning from commercially produced recordings.

Learning tunes interpersonally is also prized as a means to resist homogenization and standardization. In an interview, veteran musician Kevin McElroy criticized young players for having what he called an "academic" style, which he described as "homogenized" and "highly technical."[121] In his view, the rise of centralized, widely available resources for learning Irish music, such as YouTube videos, led to both standardization and an excessive emphasis on mass appeal. By contrast, McElroy said that he had learned directly from older musicians, whom he "would follow… around with a little recorder." Indeed, this description echoes the reports of

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[120] Ming Chen, interview by author, Seattle, July 23, 2020.

[121] Kevin McElroy, interview by author, Portland, ME, July 24, 2020.

other musicians as well as scholars. A common description involves sitting on the edge of a session, trying to pick out tunes as they go by.

Implicit in McElroy's criticism was the idea that Irish music had become too easy to learn, both in the sense of accessibility and in the aesthetic difficulty of learning an unfamiliar musical style. McElroy recited an unattributed quote to me: "One thing about our music is that if you like it from the beginning, you're probably not hearing real Irish music." Real Irish music, in this case, is aesthetically difficult to understand and perhaps immediately unpleasant to listen to, but over time, one can grow to love the music and be rewarded for it.

Style is perhaps more of a point of contention than repertoire. The above events imply the possibility of a tune being deemed inappropriate for an Irish session, but points of style were more likely in my observations to elicit actual statements of anger or rejection from participants. In one exchange, a musician admitted to having learned Quebecois tunes (Quebecois being an Irish-adjacent style) "wrong" by learning them in the context of contredanse. Quebecois tunes traditionally have a distinctive asymmetrical form with a short phrase followed by a longer one, but contredanse ensembles conventionally make this form symmetrical, according to this musician. Another musician replied that it was "not wrong, just different" and defended the contredanse variation as an instance of evolution, to which the first musician said, "more like revolution." In this case, the musicians were working out exactly how far they were comfortable altering tunes and metrical forms within session music.

Keeping other styles out of Irish music is often a priority for Irish musicians. One of the musicians I spoke with, Ian Varley, considered playing in the wrong style the worst musical offense within a session:

> So sometimes you'll get bluegrass players who come into an Irish session and they "plunkety plunk" it up, you know? They're improvising and doing all the

> bluegrassy stuff. And it's like, "nope, sorry, take that somewhere else, that's not this kind of music." Or sometimes, you'll get people who come in and really just think that it's an improvisational form and they'll just, like, noodle along to what everybody else is playing. And that's even worse… You've gotta learn the tunes, you can't just play whatever you want to. This isn't jazz.[122]

For Ian, a deep understanding of and respect for the tradition was essential prior to any attempts at innovation or stylistic cross-pollination. He went on to list several examples of musicians whom he felt had pushed the boundaries with the appropriate respect for tradition, such as Cormac Breatnach, whose music borrowed from jazz and included ornamentation bordering on improvisation.

Musical practices identified as Irish may still be considered to be outside of Irish traditional music circles. Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoire write extensively about how the authenticity of *sean-nós* singer Joe Heaney was often diametrically opposed to the perceived inauthenticity of folk-revival artists such as the Clancy Brothers.[123] Michael Connolly strongly outlined this distinction for me: "For a while, all they could hear was "The Unicorn Song" [by the Irish Rovers] or the Clancy Brothers. And then all of a sudden, they were hearing young people… playing real traditional music."[124] For Connolly, there was a clear and meaningful distinction between the commercially produced, folk-revival music of the former artists and the authentic tradition.

Irish music competitions are also contentious. While they generally promote Irish music, they are also sometimes criticized as distracting from the collaborative spirit of Irish traditional

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[122] Ian Varley, interview by author, Austin, TX, August 21, 2020.

[123] Williams and Ó Laoire, *Bright Star*; 174, 189, 202-203,

[124] Michael Connolly, interview by author, Portland, ME, July 24, 2020.

music. During a session, I observed some musicians discussing competitive Irish dance, which they considered to be an entirely separate world from the one they occupied: with pre-recorded, "commercial" musical arrangements and flashy costumes, this form of Irish dance was placed in opposition to the anti-commercial folk world of traditional music sessions.

From the above examples, it is clear that the boundaries of Irish traditional music are constantly being negotiated. Over the course of these everyday negotiations, musicians create narratives about themselves and their community. Participation in Irish traditional music is at times a rejection of modernity and mass media in favor of rural, ancient ways of life. This belief about what Irish music is colors the features that are accepted into the tradition. That which is perceived to be commercial or cosmopolitan is seen less favorably than that which is anti-commercial and local.

Perhaps just as important as the opposition to modernity is the connection of Irish music to Ireland and the Irish diaspora. Even when musicians do not identify themselves as ethnically Irish, they still habitually connect the music they make to the geographic place of Ireland and the narrative of survival, migration, and separation surrounding Irish people. It is this aspect of traditionalization that is most salient to the adoption of virtual Irish sessions and Internet communications as components of the traditional Irish music community.

Diaspora, Isolation, and Community

The community of Irish music is often thought of in the context of diaspora and isolation resulting from Famine-related immigration. Historically, Irish Americans arrived in the United States and formed ethnic enclaves in several cities, maintaining aspects of their culture in isolation from each other and Ireland itself. Similarly, each session exists as a self-contained

group, isolated from other sessions and from Ireland. Of course, this isolation has never been absolute. Individual travel between sessions and occasional gatherings at festivals have long been mechanisms facilitating exchange between localities and the maintenance of a larger Irish music network. For Sheila Murphy, the act of traveling and connecting with the wider world of Irish music is an important part of establishing one's legitimacy as an Irish musician, especially for session hosts.[125]

A major aspect of connecting with other sessions is the exchange of repertoire. Bringing new tunes to a session, especially from other places, is seen as a valuable and impressive act, in part because it connects a group of musicians to the wider world of Irish music. For instance, Maine musician Michael Connolly praised fellow musician Kevin McElroy for maintaining connections in Boston, which has a more prominent Irish music scene, and bringing tunes back to Maine from there.[126] Ian Varley also told me that in his role as a session host, he would use tunes to connect with newcomers by purposefully learning tunes that *only* they knew.[127] In this way, tunes constitute a passport into the community of Irish traditional music. In order to gain entrance, one is expected to know and to share tunes.

Annual festivals and camps for Irish music also serve the function of maintaining broader Irish music networks. As Sheila Murphy pointed out, festivals like the Acadia Trad School in Bar Harbor bring musicians from all around the world to teach Irish music, giving students exposure to Irish music beyond their immediate locality.[128] Moreover, bringing high-level

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[125] Sheila Murphy, interview by author, Brunswick, ME, June 12, 2020.

[126] Michael Connolly and Kevin McElroy, interview by author, Portland, ME, July 24, 2020.

[127] Ian Varley, interview by author, Austin, TX, August 21, 2020.

[128] Sheila Murphy, interview by author, Brunswick, ME, June 12, 2020.

musicians from Ireland is seen as a way to get in touch with the authentic tradition without having to travel to Ireland individually.

Virtual sessions were not initially intended to engage with interregional exchange, but they have effectively facilitated easy, instantaneous interaction across sessions. All of the musicians I spoke with who have been hosting virtual sessions told a similar story: they started their session as a way of keeping their own local musicians connected and in practice, but they soon started seeing visitors from around the United States and around the world. In the case of Shannon Heaton's livestream session, Heaton seemed proud of the international audience her session had attracted:

> …so now it's this lovely international community. We have, like, forty-four languages represented there, which is beautiful. It's truly beautiful that there are people all over the world who love this music and who are coming together to play along in this YouTube session.[129]

Whereas travelling to sessions all over the world was previously prohibited by distance, the virtual session has allowed musicians to instantly move between sessions in far-flung locales. The three Zoom session hosts I interacted with were based in cities throughout the western United States, but they have nevertheless all taken to attending each other's weekly sessions on a regular basis.

Festivals like the O'Flaherty Irish Music Retreat have also experienced a similar shrinking of distance by moving online. While travelling to a virtual festival is much easier than travelling to an in-person festival, it is arguably a less meaningful experience because attendees "go home" at the end of each day. Ian Varley, who plays a prominent role as a participant and organizer of the O'Flaherty Retreat, highlighted this distinction to me: part of the value of the

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[129] Shannon Heaton, interview by author, October 29, 2020.

festival for him was the act of eating and sleeping in close proximity with other festival attendees, an aspect of the retreat that was lost for the virtual retreat of 2020.[130]

New Mobilities Paradigm, Sonic Tourism, and Session Networks

The maintenance of Irish traditional music communities is heavily dependent on geographic orientation and inter-regional travel. For many Irish musicians, travelling to sessions outside of one's usual locality is an essential aspect of their musical practice. Pilgrimages to Ireland are seen as especially important for connecting with the authentic tradition. Because of this, Irish session participation is in part related to tourism and cosmopolitanism.

Given the centrality of geography and travel for Irish music, it is possible to view both virtual sessions and other Irish music performance practices as a proxy for physical tourism, connecting diasporic communities and music enthusiasts to an imagined Ireland. To understand this, I refer to Michael Largey's concept of sonic tourism, informed by the new mobilities paradigm of Mimi Sheller and John Urry.[131] According to Largey, sonic tourism involves the use of circulated recordings of Haitian Rara bands as a means by which Haitians abroad connect with the physical space of Haiti and engage with social and political currents there. The affective power of music is instrumental in invoking the home country for Haitian expatriates. I argue Irish traditional musicians engage in a similar kind of sonic tourism. Through listening to and playing along with Irish music records, as well as weekly performances in sessions, Irish

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[130] Ian Varley, interview by author, Austin, TX, August 21, 2020.

[131] Michael Largey, "'Hello, New York City!': Sonic Tourism in Haitian Rara,"iIn *Sun, Sea, and Sound: Music and Tourism in the Circum-Caribbean.* ed. Timothy Rommen and Daniel Neely (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 101-121.

musicians create a "little Ireland" in their homes and pubs on a regular basis. Furthermore, there is a sense of obligation, especially among hosts and core players in the community, to travel to Ireland and bring pieces of repertoire back to share with the local group.

The role of the repertoire is crucial in this context. While the core repertoire is treated as an import from Ireland, tunes are simultaneously allowed to develop in the hands of individual performers and local scenes, so that many different versions of popular tunes may coexist. Because tunes are often taught to amateur performers by master musicians, many of whom have a "home base" or region of close association, and because musicians place emphasis on from where they learned a tune (whether directly from an individual or from a recording), the specific version of a tune performed is a clear signal of one's local associations within Irish music. These regional associations and divergences are encouraged, arguably as a way of mirroring the historic counties and regions of Ireland, many of which had specific musical styles or performers associated with them.

As Helen O'Shea writes, the emphasis on local styles and their preservation is strongly associated with narratives of authenticity and the "nativist utopia of a unified national culture."[132] Playing in a local Irish style is valorized, and playing in a "hybrid" style is seen as both common and somewhat inauthentic. O'Shea argues for a fundamental inconsistency of this position with the idea that musicians outside of a given region can learn to play traditional Irish music. Local styles are intimately associated with place, but are at the same time considered to have "innate and transferable values" that follow wherever the music is played.[133]

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[132] O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 58.

[133] O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 59.

Virtual sessions allow for more instantaneous inter-regional transmission, but they also may blur the lines of traditional regional lineages. To momentarily speculate, one could imagine that the practice of virtual sessions over a long period of time could result in virtual session communities, which share in common values, rules, and stylistic elements, but which do not share a common space or place. However, this would in fact be a continuation of existing trends in Irish music. Organizations such as Comhaltas Ceolteori Eirann have long been criticized as standardizing influences, particularly in their promotion of national competition, which demands a single, national aesthetic standard.[134] Moreover, as was noted in chapter one, Irish music recordings such as those made by Sligo fiddlers in New York have had the effect of promoting a standard, universally "Irish" sound.

In response to the trend of standardizing and based on the belief in the inherent authenticity of local styles, it has become common for musicians to cite the sources of the tunes they play. Often, participants will include their source when they call a tune, using the phrase, "I got this from…" Participants will also ask each other from where they acquired a tune, especially if there are some discrepancies in the way they play a tune.

Participants seem just as likely to cite a recording as to say they learned a tune directly from a teacher. As will be covered in the following section, the preference for learning from recordings and teachers emphasizes the interpersonal aspect of Irish music as an oral tradition and constitutes a rejection of perceived elite musical practices such as notated sheet music. Learning a tune from a commercial recording is just as valid as learning a tune in the context of a session or at a workshop, but learning a tune by reading sheet music is considered less legitimate.

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[134] O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 46.

Undoubtedly, many participants do learn tunes from musical notation, but they almost never mention it.

Ethnicity, Geography, Nationalism

The status of Irish music as a diasporic tradition has created a keen interest among participants in the idea of ethnicity. The need to travel and connect with session musicians outside of one's immediate area is often connected with the desire to connect with ethnically *Irish* musicians, ideally in Ireland. At the same time, ethnicity is not the only factor in making a good Irish musician, and for many, it is an insignificant consideration. In *Rites of Spontaneity*, Augusto Ferraiuolo points out the variety of ethnic backgrounds of performers and audiences of Irish traditional music.[135] This phenomenon, according to Ferraiuolo, goes back at least as far as Francis O'Neill, who wrote of "Irish, German, French… and the gigantic Kentuckians."[136] The fact that so many non-Irish people participate in Irish music might seem immediately to be contradictory, but many have observed that, in the words of Ferraiuolo, "ethnicity might be important but not fundamental."

Generally, all of my correspondents seemed to fall somewhere between the extremes of "one must be Irish to play Irish music" and "ethnicity and nationality have no bearing on Irish music." Questions along these lines also seemed to cause some consternation and indecision for the musicians I spoke with. When I asked Kevin McElroy whether it was necessary for a musician to learn Irish music in Ireland, he initially told me, "I think a lot of people have learned

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[135] Ferraiuolo, *Rites of Spontaneity*, 62-65.

[136] Francis O'Neill, *Irish Folk Music: A Fascinating Hobby* (Chicago: The Regan Printing House, 1910), 16-17.

in the United States without ever going to Ireland," but a few seconds later he seemed to change his mind, saying, "I think… you really do need to go."[137] To him, as well as fellow musician and historian Michael Connolly, there was a real distinction between Irish music as it was performed in Ireland compared to the United States, but they were reluctant to describe specific points of difference, often resorting to anecdotes about individual musicians.

One of McElroy's main points was the familial nature of the music in Ireland. He told me, "it runs really, really, really deep in some families in Ireland," implying that American musicians more often come to the music as individuals. The emphasis on several connected generations of musicians provides a link to the past for modern players. According to this line of reasoning, whereas Irish music in America is something that has been "revived" in the past century, Irish music in Ireland has run in the blood of the people since time immemorial. The direct connection to the past is seen to be more authentic than an indirect connection via written records. Shannon Heaton also referred to the ideas of family and birthright when I asked her whether she considered herself to be an outsider in Irish traditional music:

> I have to be honest, like, I am [an outsider]. I know a lot about this music. I know a lot of the people who play this music, I know about how this music is constructed. I've really paid my dues. I've really spent a lot of time in Ireland and in Irish enclaves in Chicago and in Boston here. So I feel comfortable with the music. I identify as an Irish musician… and I love Irish traditional music. That is my music. That's how I express myself. But, I mean, you know, I'm an American and I'm not born to an Irish music family. So I don't feel very comfortable with this world. It's a huge part of my life, but I can't really lay the same claim to it that somebody who's Irish could. Nor do I need to.[138]

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[137] Michael Connolly and Kevin McElroy, interview by author, Portland, ME, July 24, 2020.

[138] Shannon Heaton, interview by author, October 29, 2020.

Despite being a successful professional performer and teacher of Irish music, Heaton saw her position as weaker than someone "born to an Irish music family." Knowledge, experience, and self-sacrifice were important for attaining legitimacy as an Irish music performer, but they could not replace an accident of birth. Heaton may be considered a "guardian of tradition," to use Rapuano's terminology, but contrary to Rapuano's argument, Heaton did not consider her technical training to be a replacement for hereditary legitimacy.

Many musicians refer to Ireland as the "source" of Irish music. While it is possible to learn Irish music from a variety of sources, the value of these sources seems to be correlated with their proximity to Ireland. McElroy criticized young musicians who learn from the Internet, in part because they did not show respect to older musicians by learning directly from them, and in part because their style was "homogenized" and did not retain region-specific idiosyncrasies.[139] These deficiencies came about because of the distance of American musicians from Ireland and from Irish musicians: as Connolly put it, "They never went to the source." Connolly went on to tell a story about an experience in Sliabh Luachra, a region in County Kerry:

> Oh my god. It's the best of the best… it's Mecca! For music and dancing. And so I was dancing, of course. But then I came up to the pub and was listening to the music. And who should walk in…but Johnny O'Leary himself. And one of the musicians got all excited and said, "Johnny, come up here." And there's a *style* to that, you know? He'll come up when he's ready! And it was kind of embarrassing, you know? So it went on a little bit further, and then Johnny opened up his box. And of course… Begley made—I don't know whether it's Brendan or Seamus—made a spot for him up there on the stage. Oh my god, and he started playing. And it was like, the best of dancing was going on in the back, and the best of music was going on in the front.[140]

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[139] Michael Connolly and Kevin McElroy, interview by author, Portland, ME, July 24, 2020.

[140] Michael Connolly, interview by author, Portland, ME, July 24, 2020.

Connolly's story emphasizes geography, showing the value of travelling to renowned musical regions like Sliabh Luachra. This value is given a quasi-religious connotation by Connolly's analogy to Mecca. Also emphasized by this story is the importance of respecting elder musicians. The musicians make space for O'Leary, interrupting the ensemble and the music that were already in place, but at the same time, they must not appear too eager in inviting him on stage. In the end, the "best of the best" in Irish music experiences results from a combination of being in the right place at the right time and giving the correct degree of respect to elder musicians.

In Seattle, session host Ming Chen held a similar notion of Ireland as the original "source" of Irish music. Like some other musicians I spoke with, he spoke highly of pilgrimages to Ireland and "learning tunes from the original sources," something he had himself done only once.[141] He also talked about learning from "source recordings," referring to, for instance, the recordings of Sligo fiddler Michael Coleman. But the musicianship of those source recordings was, in his view, either inferior or distinct from modern playing: "It sounds like they're scratchy and out of tune, although who's to say that that's not intentional?" Authenticity to the "source" was generally less important to Chen than to other musicians I spoke to. For him, it was authenticity to the "folk process" that took precedence. He reminded me of the various changes to tuning and instrumentation that had taken place in Irish music in the twentieth century. For him, the experience of the music in the present was more important than reverence to the past.

Ian Varley's view was similar on this point. While he affirmed that Irish music is "rooted very specifically in place," he also acknowledged the legitimacy of new interpretation by

[141] Ming Chen, interview by author, Seattle, July 23, 2020.

musicians, provided this interpretation came from a position of familiarity with the tradition.[142] Geography and ethnicity may play a role in the disparity between the view of Varley and Chen and that of Connolly, McElroy, and Heaton. Connolly and McElroy frequently emphasized the Irish immigrant history of Portland, Maine, as well as the Irish heritage in their own families, and Heaton talked about spending time in Irish enclaves in Chicago and Boston as part of "paying her dues."[143] Although Texas and Seattle are likely not without significant Irish American populations, they do not have the same history of immigration and ethnically-oriented Irish communities. Therefore, while Irish music was an ethnic tradition and a statement of identity for Heaton, Connolly, and McElroy, the focus for Varley and Chen was primarily on the aesthetics of the music itself.

The distinction between ethnic and aesthetic foci is supported by Moloney's observation that non-Irish musicians are more likely to be involved in several music scenes in addition to Irish traditional music.[144] Varley, for instance, was a trained jazz musician and had toured professionally in non-Irish ensembles prior to taking up Irish music.[145] Chen discussed the close parallels in the Seattle scene between Irish music, old time string bands, and bluegrass, all three of which being musical styles he engaged with, in addition to his classical training.[146] Many of the leading Irish musicians in Seattle, according to Chen, were equally involved in old time string bands. By contrast, Connolly, Heaton, and McElroy did not mention performing in any

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[142] Ian Varley, interview by author, Austin, TX, August 21, 2020.

[143] Shannon Heaton, interview by author, October 29, 2020.

[144] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 436.

[145] Ian Varley, interview by author, Austin, TX, August 21, 2020.

[146] Ming Chen, interview by author, Seattle, July 23, 2020.

other musical styles. However, it is worth noting that Heaton and McElroy's status as professional musicians may also contribute to this focus. It may be necessary for them to spend all their time in one style for the purpose of achieving a high level of performance, or it may be that they were presenting the professional narrative of authenticity and commitment to the tradition to me in our interviews.

It is important to recognize that while I have emphasized the differences in the views of the musicians I interviewed, the similarities between their positions are probably stronger than the differences. For all Irish musicians I encountered, the country of Ireland and Irish people played a significant role in the tradition, either as the recognized point of historical origin for the music or as a fountain from which the music continually emerges and to which one is obligated to return. For some, being Irish improved one's connection to the music, but no musician claimed that Irish blood imparted some kind of magical ability to understand or perform the music. Rather, it was from the practical perspective of having access to experienced musicians and lively musical scenes, or in terms of nominal legitimacy, that musicians tended to value Irish ethnicity and nationality.

Related to the idea of ethnicity is nationality and nationalism. While Irish traditional music is not treated as necessarily nationalistic, Irish nationalism is nevertheless a common topic in sessions. This is especially true for the songs performed at sessions. As discussed in chapter one, there are multiple distinct song traditions under the umbrella of Irish music. *Sean-nós*, one of the oldest traditions, tends to avoid overt nationalism, although some songs may still present nationalistic themes by way of metaphor.[147] It is within what Moloney calls "come-all-ye"

[147] Williams and Ó Laoire, *Bright Star*; 52.

singing or ballad singing, as well as Irish American songs, that the most overtly nationalistic themes seem to be present.[148] Both ballad singing and *sean-nós* occurred at the virtual sessions I attended, but individual singers tend to stick to one style or the other. At the San Diego-based virtual session I attended, a man known to be a ballad singer offered the song "A Nation Once Again" two weeks in a row. This song, written by poet Thomas Osborne Davis of the Young Ireland movement in 1840, expresses a strong political sentiment against British rule.[149] Despite the majority of Ireland existing as an independent country in the twentieth century, the song has retained relevance, seeing popular recorded renditions by groups such as the Wolfe Tones.[150]

It is possible to interpret the performances of "A Nation Once Again" observed at this session not as literal political statements, but rather as the performance of the archetype of Irish ballad singer. This is supported by the fact that, despite the technological impossibility of simultaneous performance, the singer still employed gestures and mannerisms designed to encourage his audience to sing along, just as he would in a live setting. He displayed scrolling karaoke-style lyrics through his Zoom video feed and shouted things like "Everybody sing" before launching into the chorus. The inability of other session participants to actually sing along, sonically and synchronously, highlights the ways in which musicians "perform the session," re-creating the same mannerisms and musical styles despite the stark differences in terms of media. In this view, the nationalistic lyrics of "A Nation Once Again" are a component of the performance.

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[148] Moloney, "Irish Music in America," 91.

[149] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Thomas Osborne Davis," accessed March 23, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Osborne-Davis.

[150] "Irish Song Voted World's Favourite," *BBC News Entertainment*, December 20, 2002.

Interest in the country of Ireland, nationally and geographically, also comes out in the unique forms of self-expression afforded to participants in virtual Zoom-based sessions. The Zoom platform provides users with tools for self-labeling and self-representation. Users can choose a name to be displayed under their video feed and can generate virtual green screen-style backgrounds from images and videos. At virtual sessions, I observed several instances of musicians deliberately employing these tools to express "Irishness". One user went as far as changing his name to "IR1SH". Others put images of Guinness beer or videos of choreographed jigs and hornpipes in their background or turned to naturalistic imagery commonly associated with Ireland, such as rolling green meadows. According to Ming Chen, one of the participants in his session used pictures taken from a personal trip to Ireland, highlighting this way not only "Irishness" in the abstract but also her personal experience in Ireland.[151]

These efforts suggest more than just the Irishness of Irish music; they indicate a deep significance of the nation of Ireland within the session. Many musicians, for various reasons described above, seem to regard sessions in the United States as less desirable or less authentic musical events when compared with sessions held in Ireland. Even musicians who consciously support the idea of folk music as a diasporic, present-day process are still interested in travelling to Ireland and meeting Irish musicians. Because of this, virtual sessions may present either a problem or an opportunity. In one sense, they are even more removed from the authentic source than sessions in the geographic United States, taking place outside of not only Ireland but also ethnic-Irish enclaves in the U.S. At the same time, their placelessness may be treated as a void to

[151] Ming Chen, interview by author, Seattle, July 23, 2020.

be filled with whatever place musicians choose, so that a musician can be virtually "in Ireland" as much as they are anywhere.

thesession.org

The processes of interregional exchange described above have long served to connect session communities, but in the twenty-first century, musicians have begun connecting using online forums. The role of the Internet in Irish music communities can be understood through the lens of Christine Hine's E^3 Internet.[152] The E^3 Internet is one that is embedded, embodied, and everyday: people use the Internet in conjunction with offline activities in the course of daily life, and their offline and online identities are closely related. This is in contrast with the early view of the Internet as a separate "cyberspace" that people would occasionally visit. As with Internet adoption in society at large, usage of the Internet was not immediate or universal among Irish musicians. Still, most of my consultants had at least some experience with online forums, especially *The Session.*

Outside of sessions themselves, *The Session* or thesession.org is one of the central hubs for Irish traditional music. The site contains notated melodies of thousands of tunes, listings for sessions and events by location, recordings, a place to notify the community of planned trips, and a discussion forum. The organization of the site reflects the kinds of information and activities seen as important within the Irish traditional music community. For instance, visiting other sessions while travelling is an important aspect of the Irish music community, so users of the site can announce planned trips and look up sessions by city.

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[152] Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsburry Academic, 2015), 19-54.

The Session has become especially important during COVID-19, replacing typical points of connection for musicians. In the time before COVID-19, musicians found out about sessions in several ways. Sessions might be advertised at the locations where they are held and in other public spaces, and word of mouth also plays a role. Since its founding twenty years ago, thesession.org has also become a valuable tool in this regard. Some musicians described discovering their first session on the website. During COVID-19, thesession.org became the primary means for discovering and connecting to virtual sessions.

The tune database on *The Session* has also become an important tool for tune learning and performance. The website allows any user to add tunes and new arrangements of tunes as well as information about the tunes. This information greatly facilitates the tune learning process. Whereas previous generations would have to track down published tune books, consult recordings, receive a tune by rote from a teacher, or pick tunes up by ear in the moment, thesession.org allows twenty-first century Irish musicians simply to search a tune by name and instantly access many notated settings. Of course, the older methods remain in use, and every individual will have a preferred method for learning repertoire.

The ease of access to sheet music via *The Session* seems to have instigated a shift in attitudes toward the use of sheet music in performance. As discussed previously, the use of sheet music is a highly contentious issue in Irish music. Using sheet music either to learn tunes or to perform Irish music is highly discouraged, both because of the quasi-improvisatory nature of Irish music and because of the associations between sheet music and European classical music.

Contrary to this traditional view of sheet music, I did observe musicians turning to thesession.org during sessions, either performing directly from the notation or using it to jog their memory. It is possible virtual sessions create an additional temptation to turn to sheet music

because participants are already in front of an electronic device with Internet capabilities. When musicians do use sheet music during sessions, it is usually with some degree of guilt. In one session I attended, a musician told us he was looking up a tune on thesession.org, to which the host replied, "You don't have to admit that!" The musician explained that he had already been taught the tune many years prior but could not remember it. In this way, the musician defended his use of notation as a memory aid, rather than direct sight-read performance, which is verboten. At another session, a host welcomed newcomers with the advice that they announce their tunes before they play them, in part to allow others to pull up the notation from thesession.org, which he simultaneously called "an advantage of a virtual session" and "cheating."

As a virtual gathering place for Irish musicians, *The Session* provides a space for working out contentious issues such as the sheet music question. In one thread, titled "The dreaded dots," a user takes issue with musicians who insist "that you just CAN'T play [Irish traditional music] if you learn it from 'the dots.'"[153] The user argues for the acceptance of sheet music, citing its use by prominent players such as Johnny Cunningham and Natalie MacMaster. The thread includes a variety of sympathetic responses, including one from a user who agrees that learning with sheet music is appropriate, but playing music from memory "seems to bring out the best (and the zest) in the music."[154] These discussions play on tropes of authenticity: it is commonly believed that using sheet music is inauthentic, so the user Antikhntr refers to inarguably authentic musicians to show that it does indeed fit within authentic practice.

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[153] Antikhntr, discussion post, 2008, https://thesession.org/discussions/13426.

[154] Here Lyeth, comment on "The dreaded dots," discussion post, 2008, https://thesession.org/discussions/13426.

The tune repository on thesession.org also serves the function of legitimizing tunes. If an unfamiliar or obscure tune is called, someone in the session might report that "*The Session* has it," as if to reassure other participants that the tune is, indeed, part of the repertoire. When amateur musicians write tunes, they are free to add them to the website, thereby placing them alongside undeniable standards of the repertoire. Ironically, this act might carry more legitimacy than professionally publishing one's tunes, since it obscures authorship and fits better with the non-commercial ideal of Irish traditional music.

Returning to Hine's E^3 Internet, it is clear that usage of *The Session* is embedded, embodied, and everyday. Session musicians consult the site during sessions and outside of sessions as a means to connect socially to other musicians, to learn tunes, to facilitate travel and session participation, and to contribute music and thoughts to the Irish traditional music community. All of these activities have an offline, physical component and existed prior to the Internet. Furthermore, it is impossible to use thesession.org on its own—to my knowledge, there are no instances of individuals regularly posting to or visiting thesession.org without also participating in some way in the physical Irish traditional music community, even if it's only playing the music to oneself. Therefore, *The Session* is seamlessly integrated into the Irish traditional music community, especially as music activities have moved online. The ascendance of this site as a gathering place and as a source of legitimacy during COVID-19 has been a natural progression of previous trends.

Conclusion

To return to the point that began this chapter, the turn to virtual sessions can be viewed as a reaction to the threat posed by COVID-19 to Irish traditional music. COVID-19 afflicted

every corner of human society, but it also played into the existing narratives of survival and isolation specific to Irish music. The physical danger of the virus as well as the psychological danger of isolation bore similarities to the Famine in Ireland and the resulting emigration, diaspora, and geographic isolation of Irish Americans and Irish musicians in America. The parallels in these experiences encourage Irish musicians to turn to their music and their communities as a temporary shelter and resource throughout the pandemic.

Keeping the tradition alive also requires establishing what the tradition is, necessitating a constant process of boundary negotiation. Musicians engage in conversations about their tradition during sessions, including virtual sessions, but they also use modern tools like thesession.org as places to establish and debate the legitimate bounds of the music. Again, the survival narrative suggests that Irish music is an entity which has been retained from rural Ireland in opposition to modern commercial and elite musical styles, but musicians are also conscious of their role in establishing a living tradition. In this respect, musicians feel free to innovate and introduce new approaches to Irish music by focusing on the values underlying their practice: encouraging participation, sharing knowledge, and sustaining the community.

In a tradition committed to authenticity in the form of perceived locality and ancientness, it would be reasonable to assume the practice of performing on the Internet would be widely regarded as inauthentic and antithetical to the practice. To some extent, this is true, and many musicians I encountered expressed misgivings about virtual sessions. At the same time, the virtual session model has integrated well with the existing paradigm of Irish sessions in the United States for several reasons.

To begin with, as outlined above, Irish sessions in the United States constitute a sort of sonic tourism. Although sessions are real and local practices, they also serve to invoke Ireland at

a distance. In this way, Irish sessions are experienced as simultaneously immediate and removed from the "real thing." Also, one could argue the longstanding practice of playing along with recordings constitutes a virtual session in itself, involving participants at a remove of both distance and time. Musicians often talk about playing "with" the legendary figures found on favorite recordings. Finally, I refer to Christine Hine's concept of the E^3 Internet. For a significant portion of the population in the current year, the Internet is not a separate, futuristic environment standing in opposition to traditional society. Instead, it is embedded, embodied, and everyday, seamlessly integrated with life and society such that making traditional music on the Internet creates few contradictions in the minds of musicians.

In many ways, virtual sessions demonstrate the priorities of Irish traditional music. Irish music is ultimately a living tradition, predicated on interpersonal interaction and live performance. Irish musicians are evidently not content to allow their music to reside in archives, recordings, and web forums, but feel a strong need to bring the music to life. The music also carries intrinsic value to participants. Professional musicians suffered during the pandemic from the loss of income and opportunities, necessitating inventive solutions. Professional Irish musicians certainly fell under those same pressures, but it is telling that amateur musicians with no material need invested time and resources into organizing and improving virtual music-making. The people and the music are thus reciprocally bound: there is a sense of obligation to keep the music alive, just as the music provides "temporary shelter" for the people who make it.

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