Crossing the River: Exploring the Geography of Irish Traditional Music[1]

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The topography of the campus at University College Cork, which spans the River Lee, regularly reminds me of the interdisciplinary nature of my research. I find myself straddling that river as I seek to explore and understand the geography of Irish traditional music. Of primary concern in the geographical study of music are the varying degrees of difference in the soundscape of different places. Differences in sound, in the act and meaning of making music; the diffusion of musical ideas and institutions, as well as processes and myths of identity, are all elements of this research. This article assesses the benefit of musical knowledge to the geographical understanding of identity and reflexively the advantage of geographical investigation to the comprehension of music and the act of making music.

There are a number of factors that have provided the inspiration and stimulus for this article. The development of my own research, alongside the growth of the geography of music, has highlighted the possibility for interdisciplinary research in Irish traditional music. Here, I briefly assess developments in ethnomusicological and geographical research, concentrating particularly on the last fifty years. Moreover, this article focuses particularly on the link between the act of making music and national identity, and on the overt evocation of identity through musical performances.

Despite being an island surrounded by water, Ireland has regularly sought to reinforce the otherness of Irish identity. Changes in migration patterns, recent moves towards peace in Northern Ireland and the commemoration, in 2006, of the ninetieth anniversary of the Easter Rising have focused attention back on the meaning of Irishness and Irish identity. In addition, Irish traditional music has been assigned representational values and associations that are sometimes read or perceived in

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tandem with trends in Irish society. How Irishness is imagined and constructed is connected with the history of Ireland including colonialism and migration. By contrasting the spatial implications of such phenomena, the relationship between contemporary theories and trends in both geographical and ethnomusicological research may be assessed. Finally, the creation of an institutionalized identity for Irish traditional music, the concept of an Irish sound and how Irish traditional music is and has been used by a number of organizations, is outlined here. Thus, one aspect of the evolving geography of Irish traditional music is explored.

Connecting disciplines: the evolution of research

An important development in the field of human and cultural geography in recent years has been an increased geographic interest in artistic culture such as the visual arts and music. As geographer Susan J. Smith stated in *Progress in Human Geography*:

> Human geography, like the social sciences more generally, has become sensitive to the politics and pleasures of art. Aesthetics as much as economics guides the interpretation of social life, painting and poetics are as important as cartography to understanding of space, place and landscape.[2]

The developing interest in artistic endeavour as an element of culture is embedded in geographical thought as culture provides 'a rational and fundamental basis for dividing the earth's surface into its most significant parts'.[3] Indeed, according to Doreen Massey, it is the geographer's fundamental interest in place and understanding the differences between localities that 'has often led it to the study of how those different elements come together in particular spaces to form the complex mosaic which is the geography of society'.[4] It may be argued that this remains the essence of modern cultural geography as (to quote another geographer, David Crouch) 'cultural geography is persistently concerned with the constitution and construction of meaning in human activity and in its encounters with space'.[5] The performance of live music is

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2 Susan J. Smith, 'Beyond Geography's Visible Worlds: A Cultural Politics of Music', *Progress in Human Geography*, 21/4 (1997), 502–29: 502.

3 Richard Joel Russell and Fred Bowman Kniffen, *Culture Worlds*, brief edition, revised (London: Macmillan, 1969), 6.

4 Doreen Massey, 'Introduction: Geography Matters', in Doreen Massey and John Allen (eds), *Geography Matters!* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1–11: 1.

5 David Crouch, 'Introduction', in Ian Cook, David Crouch, Simon Naylor and James R. Ryan (eds.), *Cultural Turns/Geographical Turns: Perspectives on Cultural Geography* (London: Prentice Hall, 2000), 69–74: 69.

one of the most prominent activities through which people express and construct meaning and identity within specific spatial parameters. My attention in the later sections of this article focuses on the construction of national identity.

The connection between music and society and the meaning of music in a society have been a central focus of ethnomusicological research.[6] Early twentieth-century ethnomusicological studies were highly influenced by a desire to investigate national identity.[7] Critiques of ethnomusicological work influenced by national and nationalistic motives question the objectivity of the research, particularly in the context of cultures that transgress political boundaries.[8] However, scholars such as Philip Bohlman have returned to issues connecting music and nationalism, reflecting on both the notion of the national composer and the role of folk music.[9]

The celebrated article on soundscapes by Susan J. Smith led to great progress in the development of music geography, allowing the disciplines of geography and music to demand equal attention in common discourse.[10] It challenges the visual bias that exists in geography and outlines how the sound of landscapes can enrich our understanding of social and cultural geography. Music, defined as organized sound, provides unique insight into the world of noise and demands particular interest.[11] The interdisciplinary study of music as outlined by Smith takes on three aspects: the connection of sound and context; the meaning of music making as a spectacle that reproduces symbolism of place; and how music, if it is part of the imagining of identity, is also shaped by that identity. Lily Kong, whose research focuses on the geography of popular music, suggests five themes in the geographical study of music: spatial distribution; patterns of diffusion; the delimitation of areas that share musical traits; the evocation of place in

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6 Notably in Philip V. Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988); and Bruno Nettl and Philip V. Bohlman (eds), *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music: Essays on the History of Ethnomusicology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

7 Oskár Elschek, 'Ideas, Principles, Motivations, and Results in Eastern European Folk-Music Research', in Nettl and Bohlman, *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music*, 91–112: 91. Jeff Todd Titon, 'Knowing Fieldwork', in Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (eds), *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 87–100.

8 Elschek, 100 and 101. Philip V. Bohlman, *The Music of European Nationalism: Cultural Identity and Modern History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004).

9 Bohlman, *The Music of European Nationalism*.

10 Susan J. Smith, 'Soundscapes', *Area*, 26/3 (1994), 232–40.

11 Smith, 'Soundscapes', 233.

music; and the use of geographically relevant themes in lyrics.[12] The ideas presented in this article focus on the role of music in imagining identity, how Irish music has been shaped by the imagination or desires for Irish identity, and the evocation of Irish identity through Irish traditional music.

The performance of live music, of necessity a local and ephemeral experience, helps define the characteristics of a place and create a sense of community. The sounds produced may be contrasted to represent differing social groups inhabiting the same or neighbouring spaces. Tariq Jazeel, a music geographer who cites the work of Smith as groundbreaking in the development of music geography, recently stated

> The analysis of music in the social sciences raises inherently geographical questions, particularly around how musical practice carves spaces of performance, expression and culture, and how it shapes social spaces of identity, belonging and community.[13]

The space of musical performance helps create the context in which the music is experienced and interpreted. The study of spaces of Irish traditional music, and in particular the session space of a public house, has been the focus of Scottish geographer Frances Morton.[14] Morton acknowledges the crucial roles played by performers and audience in the development of these spaces and the relevance of space in musical performance. Christopher Small has outlined the meanings conveyed through the design and nature of musical spaces such as a concert hall.[15] Other spaces of meaning are constructed through the formation of a landscape of memory through the creation of monuments and statuary, outlined in the Irish context by geographers such as Yvonne Whelan.[16] At the core of each approach to the study of music and space is the acknowledgement of agents in shaping that space and the communication of meaning. The meanings invested in the visual landscape and the sounds of that landscape, when combined, can offer perspectives about the people, society or

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12 Lily Kong, 'Popular Music in Geographical Analyses', *Progress in Human Geography*, 19 (1995), 183–98.

13 Tariq Jazeel, 'The World is Sound? Geography, Musicology and British-Asian Soundscapes', *Area*, 37/3 (2005), 233–41: 233.

14 Frances Morton, *Performing the Session: Enacted Spaces of Irish Traditional Music* (MRes diss., University of Strathclyde, 2001). Frances Morton, 'Performing Ethnography: Irish Traditional Music Sessions and New Methodological Spaces', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6/5 (2005), 661–76.

15 Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, University Press of New England, 1998).

16 Yvonne Whelan, *Reinventing Modern Dublin: Streetscape, Iconography and the Politics of Identity* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2003).

organization that designed, composed and constructed them. The organizations themselves present less tangible agents for study in the examination of the connection between Irish traditional music and Irish identity.

Irish traditional music is shaped by the spaces in which it is performed and by those who perform, collect, listen to and patronize it. Irish traditional music may also communicate ideas that may be interpreted in different ways. These interpretations are influenced by a number of agents. The study of the geographical consequences of Irish traditional music can focus at different scales from local to national. The various levels at which the tradition is examined are related to and shaped by the others. The diversity within the tradition may be promoted, obscured or ignored by different agents seeking to progress particular ideologies. In the context of Irish traditional music, the narrative of the tradition may also be linked to a discourse on Irish identities.

The performance of music or act of listening to music in a particular space can indicate identities of the individual, group and space. In the following sections I consider the discourse on Irish identity and examine some of the factors involved in the development of Irish identity. Of particular importance is the conflict between local, regional and national identities in Ireland. Irish identity is then studied in the context of musical performance with particular focus on the evocation of place in music and the assertion of identity and belonging in the context of three organizations: The United Irishmen, The Gaelic League and Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann.

Imagining Irishness: history, migration and togetherness

The most obvious changes in Irish society in recent years have focused on secularization, changing migration patterns, increased wealth and the diversification of culture. As Fintan O'Toole has suggested, Ireland stands at a pivotal point in time, desiring greater understanding of our culture and heritage that is both reflective and forward-looking.[17] Romantic myths of Irishness promoted by the speeches of De Valera, the paintings of Paul Henry or the poetic imagery of Yeats no longer resonate with Irish society. The events of history and the changing nature of space, time and distance have also impacted on the meaning of the sound and performing of Irish traditional music. Migration patterns and increased communication has facilitated the further evolution and fusion of cultures. The way in which culture evolves can create conflict in the understanding of national consciousness and official culture.

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[17] Fintan O'Toole, 'Homeland', *The Irish Times,* 20 January 2006, 2.

Colonization has also played an important role in the development of Irish identity and Irish culture. The development of a post-colonial identity and the ideologies of post-colonial Ireland further shaped the musical traditions of Ireland. While the Irish language was to the fore in government policy from the early years of the new state,[18] Irish traditional music, and the arts in general, were somewhat neglected.[19] Borrowing from Benedict Anderson, Declan Kiberd argues that Ireland was not sufficiently imagined.[20] In spite of this, a number of groups attempted to shape forcefully the imagination of Irish identity and simultaneously affect the development and meaning of Irish traditional music. The impact and legacy of colonization is evident in the three institutions studied in the final section of this paper.

The impact of emigration from Ireland on Irish society and identity is hugely significant.[21] The awareness of the role of the diaspora in Irish identity and the 'Irishness' of people abroad became a prominent concern of Irish society when adopted as a theme during the presidency of Mary Robinson in the early 1990s. The growth of an influential diaspora that included musicians and collectors has impacted greatly on Irish traditional music for nearly a century. The legacy of recordings of Michael Coleman and his contemporaries, as well as the notated collections of Captain Francis O'Neill outline the fact that Irishness has not, for over a century, been 'co-terminus with the geographic outlines of an island'.[22]

Following the economic developments that became known as 'the Celtic Tiger' and the enlargement of the European Union, the pattern of migration has been reversed. There has been a noticeable growth of non-national communities within the national boundaries of Ireland itself. These communities bring with them a range of cultural elements including language, dress, food and music. Recent intercultural programmes,

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18 Declan Kiberd, 'Modern Ireland: Postcolonial or European?', in Stuart Murray (ed.), *Not On Any Map: Essays on Postcoloniality and Cultural Nationalism* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 81–100: 82.

19 Marie McCarthy, *Passing It On: The Transmission of Music in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), 109.

20 Kiberd, 82. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

21 Jim McLaughlin, *Location and Dislocation in Contemporary Irish Society: Emigration and Irish Identities* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997).

22 The phrase is borrowed from Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Literature, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), 99, where he develops a discourse on the concept of a fifth province of Ireland, that of the diaspora. The idea is also a recurring theme in a number of chapters in McLaughlin, *Location and Dislocation in Contemporary Irish Society*.

such as those between University of Limerick students and refugee groups, or Kerry County Council's participation in 'Dialogue through Tradition', have facilitated the sharing and fusion of diverse musical cultures. Technological developments and economic growth have also facilitated cultural interaction. Changes in spatial and temporal distances such as increased ability to communicate and the shortening of commuting times between places have challenged traditional ways of thinking about space, place and geography.[23]

The ability of people to travel, communicate and access information is a central part of what is often termed 'globalization'. However, globalization is a contested term. The strengthening of some religious sects and calls for autonomy from many of Europe's smaller regions has made a significant impact on world politics and emphasized the need for understanding and respecting different cultures.[24] Geographer Peter Haggett presents a counter argument to globalization which focuses on the processes of regionalization and localization that empower communities at a smaller scale to express distinctive identities.[25] Similarly, Anssi Paasi has pointed to the resurgence of regional geography as an indicator of the importance of regional difference.[26] In terms of identity and globalization, concepts particularly relevant to a study of Irish traditional music in the present, Richard Kearney points out 'the drift towards a more global understanding of identity calls for a countervailing move to retrieve a sense of local belongings'.[27] Such a move is particularly noticeable in the growth of festivals and monuments that celebrate and focus on particular, located individuals within the tradition, not all of whom have had a major or immediately discernable national or international impact on the development and performance of Irish traditional music.

Ethnomusicological research is also conscious of the importance of local and regional musical identity in the modern world. Bohlman presents the argument that

> far from homogenizing folk music style, modernization emphasizes diversity by bringing it together and concentrating it. By collapsing time and space, modernization encourages new

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23 Peter Haggett, *Geography: A Global Synthesis* (Harlow and New York: Pearson, 2001). Doreen Massey, 'Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place', in Jon Bird and Barry Curtis et al (eds), *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures Global Change* (London: Routledge, 1993), 59–69.

24 Don Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 7.

25 Haggett, 136.

26 Anssi Paasi, 'Region and Place: Regional Identity in Question', *Progress in Human Geography*, 27/4 (2003), 475–85: 477.

27 Kearney, 102.

> ways of looking at older styles and different repertories and sets the stage for revival and revitalization.[28]

The role of technology in musical activity, particularly the recording process, and greater accessibility to recorded and especially archival material have heightened awareness of musical difference. The ability to negotiate and break down spatial boundaries has not been automatically reflected in the homogenization of musical culture. Modernization provides contemporary society the opportunity to recognize and sustain both musical and geographical boundaries and simultaneously to fuse differences if desired.

The changing meanings attributed to music are reflective of its use as a display of difference and the impact of society on shaping music and musical performance. When discussing folk music, Bohlman has written:

> Changes in a community's social structure thus influence not only its folk music repertory but also the ways in which this repertory is transmitted. Musical change reflects—indeed, becomes a metaphor for—cultural change.[29]

The dance show *Riverdance* represents, for many, a symbolic commentary that mirrors in sound, as well as presentation, the Ireland of today. The introduction of 'sex' to the discourse of Irish dancing, the prominence of Irish-American performers, the lavishness of the production and the use of flamenco, Russian ballet and American tap all reflect the changes in Irish society mentioned above. The sound of *Riverdance*, as a commercially-presented sound bite in the global soundscape, has become coloured with meanings of Irishness, yet the close connections of its sound with Irish traditional music is questioned not only by critics but by the composer himself, Bill Whelan.[30] Similarly, Christine Madden's review of *Celtic Tiger*, Michael Flatley's latest production, highlights a dichotomy in Irish society. Those who attend such lavish, commercial productions in large numbers are nowhere to be seen when 'equally able and wonderfully expressive dancers' are performing in smaller venues throughout the country.[31] The meaning attached to attending performances of music and dance replicates the meaning attached to the performance by the space in which it is performed. There is a desire amongst many members of society to identify with success, wealth and the global. However, the Ireland represented by *Riverdance* and

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28 Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music*, 124.

29 Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music*, 15.

30 Barra Ó Cinnéide, *Riverdance: The Phenomenon* (Dublin: Blackhall, 2003), 94.

31 Christine Madden, 'Celtic Tiger', *The Irish Times*, 22 April 2006, 2.

other such productions is not acceptable or even recognizable to every Irish person. Those productions are, however, part of a culture that reflects the society from which they develop.

Institutionalizing otherness: nationalist sentiments in Irish traditional music organizations

The necessity of emphasizing the otherness of Irish culture in an attempt to create an unique identity separate from Britishness has long been part of the Irish nationalist movement. For the geographer, otherness accentuates the boundaries of a culture that may be representative of regions or nations. The desire to emphasize otherness can change the context of musical performance as well as the acceptability of some or all of that performance in the given context. I have selected three Irish organizations that have attributed meaning to Irish traditional music and have evoked the concept of a national sound: The United Irishmen, a group central to the 1798 Rebellion; the Gaelic League, a cultural movement with particular emphasis on the Irish language; and Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, a cultural movement initially set up to promote Irish traditional music. In each instance the musical space, the sound and the audience are different, thus constructing a different representation of place and inevitably different geographies of the nation.

Today the harp is central to symbolism in Irish identity, appearing on coins and government documents. It provides a link between geographic location and the culture of that place. Colette Moloney, in her study of the work of Edward Bunting, reflects on the possible political motives behind the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792. The festival, which sought to preserve the fading Irish harp tradition, was planned

> to coincide with celebrations to commemorate the storming of the Paris Bastille in 1789 and with the presence in the city of Theobald Wolfe Tone and other members of the United Irishmen…it was perhaps felt that people of nationalist fervour would also be interested in their native harp music and would attend the concerts.[32]

The identification of musical culture with a political organization seeking to change the geographical definition of a nation can reflect meaning upon the performance of that music. The harp tradition, often celebrated as 'ancient', was portrayed romantically as something uniquely Irish in contrast to colonial elements of Irish culture.

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[32] Colette Moloney, *The Irish Music Manuscripts of Edward Bunting (1773–1843): An Introduction and Catalogue* (Dublin: Irish Traditional Music Archive, 2000), 8.

The Gaelic League, set up in 1893 ostensibly to promote the Irish language, utilized the social and symbolic power of Irish traditional music. They organized the first *ceilithe*, formal gatherings for participation in Irish dancing, and even developed new forms of dance that were viewed as more appropriate than the quadrille type sets danced in many kitchens and barns around the country.[33] The meaning is evoked in the following quotation:

> The 'céilí' soon became a venue for, and indeed an expression of belief, in the new gospel of nationality. The p[r]opagandist value of such gatherings was quickly seen. Here the language enthusiasts had a centre for their idealism. Here the Irish language was largely, though not exclusively, spoken and it was especially through the 'céilí' that Irish dance music began to receive the recognition long denied. With the advent of top-class bands, the céilí became popular and, especially in the cities and larger towns, even socially acceptable.[34]

The association of music with other cultural identifiers such as language and its ability to carve out spaces of meaning presents the geographer with a broader frame of reference for recognizing cultural diversity, thus impacting on the creation of boundaries.

Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (hereinafter CCÉ), set up in 1951 in an effort to instigate a revival of Irish traditional music, expanded its aims to include the promotion of dance, language and a sense of community. Despite some divisions amongst its members, it has often been associated with the nationalist and republican movements. *Treoir*, the official publication of CCÉ first issued in 1968, provides a historical overview of the development of the association and the opinions of its members. It has included a series of editorials and articles that overtly proclaimed a very nationalist version of Irish history, claiming patriotic rather than political motives.[35] In the 1970s and early 1980s it highlighted the harassment of branch members by forces in the North[36] and the brief detention by British police of Labhrás Ó Murchú, its Árd Stiurtheoir (Director General), during a visit to England.[37] The organization also felt it necessary to postpone the 1971 Fleadh Cheoil in response to internment and to comment on the H-Block crisis in the North (1980–1). The

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33 Helen Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance* (Dingle: Brandon, 1999), 29–36.

34 Luai Ó Murchú, 'The Decline of Irish Dancing: A Look at the Céilithe Once Popular in Dublin', *Treoir*, 20/1 (1988), 19–21: 19.

35 Labhrás Ó Murchú, 'Eagarfhocal', *Treoir*, 18/1 (1986), 1. Alice Stepford Green, 'The Second Irish Revival—1200–1520', *Treoir*, 13/2 (1981), 13–15.

36 Craobh Carrickmore and editorial comment, 'Hands off! say Carrickmore Minstrels', *Treoir*, 12/2 (1980), 41.

37 Labhrás Ó Murchú, 'Eagarfhocal', *Treoir*, 9/2 (1977), 1.

organization has also sometimes sought a role in Northern Irish politics.[38] In the 1990s CCÉ, through its Árd Stiurtheoir, proclaimed support for the peace process while maintaining a desire for a united Ireland.[39]

The sectarian image of CCÉ at a local level also impacted on funding opportunities. During the 1980s, in response to the local council's rejection of plans to host a Fleadh in the town of Dunboyne, the Tyrone County Board released the following statement:

> The constitution of Comhaltas deems it to be non political, non sectarian, but no apology is made for holding a great sense of pride in our Irish distinctiveness and in particular the joy we derive as a people in the playing, singing and dancing of our native art forms.[40]

In more recent years, CCÉ has played a role in cross-border initiatives and has, alongside many other groups, benefited greatly from the peace process. The act of performing Irish traditional music has become an inclusive action, not only for members of divided communities North and South but also by the way it has sought and attracted membership from immigrant communities. In this sense, CCÉ now seeks to present an image of a united modern Ireland inclusive of all people within its boundaries who perform Irish traditional music. The idealism communicated by the organization is challenged by the historical legacy of the interplay between music and politics and by the continuing role of prominent individuals in the organization. Like Irish society in general, CCÉ must also negotiate new challenges, including the challenge presented by peace, in the twenty-first century.

CCÉ, as an agent in the transmission of Irish traditional music, also impacts on the creation of a concept of a single Irish music tradition. In contrast, the discourse of Irish traditional music celebrates diversity, regional styles and local traditions.[41] Through the processes of institutionalization, CCÉ shapes the geography of Irish traditional music, creating and communicating concepts of cores and regions. Many aspects of the organization are part of this process. Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, commonly referred to as 'The Fleadh', is the annual competition administered by CCÉ. Initially, when first

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38 Labhrás Ó Murchú, 'A Continuing Concern', *Treoir*, 4/2 (1972), 1. Labhrás Ó Murchú and Séamus de Brún, 'Concern for Fellow Irishmen', *Treoir* 3/5 (1971), 2. Labhrás Ó Murchú, 'Fleadh Without Fear', *Treoir*, 13/3 (1981), 7. Labhrás Ó Murchú, 'Heritage Older Than Divisions', *Treoir*, 13/3 (1982), 4. Harry Mullen, 'Of Musical Bondage', *Treoir*, 14/5 (1982), 44.

39 Labhrás Ó Murchú, 'Eagarfhocal', *Treoir*, 26/4 (1994), 1.

40 Tyrone County Board statement published in *Treoir*, 17/2 (1985), 37.

41 Dermot MacLaughlin, *Donegal and Shetland Fiddle Music*, Seán Ó Riada Memorial Lecture 7 (1991) (Cork: The Irish Traditional Music Society, University College Cork, 1992), 2.

mounted in 1951 and 1952, Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann was envisaged as a festive space that constructed an ideal physical meeting place for members of an imagined community. It facilitated and was facilitated by the increasing negation of spatial boundaries in the diffusion of music and musical ideas. Increased accessibility to printed and recorded music sources had helped the formation of a large, unlocated community that desired spaces in which to converge. Thus, the Fleadh further strengthened the bonds of the Irish traditional music community, negated local ties and facilitated the dilution of discernable local sounds. In the words of Hazel Fairbairn:

> The Fleadh instigated a new national network of musicians and with it the opportunity for musicians to play with a much wider and more diverse selection of people than they would normally encounter. Sessions dissolved boundaries, and large numbers of musicians, with or without previous experience of one another's playing, representing diverse musical backgrounds, styles and experience, came together to play tunes.[42]

The Fleadh continues to impact greatly on the development of a common national and arguably international 'Comhaltas' sound. Through the imposition of rules, the celebration of certain individuals and the mimicry of previous winners, Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann attempts to define a sound that is acceptable to members of the association as 'Irish'. The diffusion of musical ideas, and the continued acceptance of these ideas, can be mapped in relation to the development and extinction of Comhaltas branches nationally and internationally.

Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann continues to develop and evolve. The recent policy document, *Athnuachan* ('Renewal'), outlines the desire for *Meitheal* projects (community team projects) whereby branches of the organization from different places work together in partnership.[43] Geographical boundaries are further dissolved while simultaneously the policy and development plan outlines the development of new Meitheal regions with regional and outreach centres. The development plan was endorsed by the Irish government in 2005 and has received significant financial support.[44] Thus a new map of Irish traditional music evolves that relates to a particular organization within Irish traditional music, a map that communicates and diffuses particular notions of identity and place.

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42 Hazel Fairbairn, *Group Playing in Traditional Irish Music: Interaction and Heterophony in the Session* (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1993), 122.

43 Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, *Athnuacan* (Dublin: Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, 2005).

44 Labhrás Ó Murchú, 'Green Light for Community Culture: Major boost for Comhaltas', *Treoir*, 37/1 (2005), 4.

Conclusion

In recent years the already broad discipline of geography has opened up to include the investigation of the role of music in the creation of spaces and definition of place. Both geographical and ethnomusicological research has had more than a passing interest in the role of national identity on society and culture. The creation of sound and music, its social significance and, in some cases, institutionalization is part of the conceptualization of a cultural world.

The changes in Irish society, particularly at the end of the twentieth century, allied to a long history of emigration and colonization, as well as increased commercialization of Irishness, has led observers such as Breda Gray to point out that 'it is becoming increasingly difficult to locate Irishness either culturally or geographically…Irish identity is now frequently represented as a globalized transnational phenomenon'.[45] Irish identity is shaped, imagined, communicated and diffused by a variety of agents with differing aims and ideologies. Theatrical and staged representations of Irish society and culture, even when occupying the same space, emphasize the differences found in Irish identity and question the very meaning of Irish identity. Musical change, which is shaped by both individuals and institutions, can both reflect and symbolize the changing social and political geography of the nation.

As a result of the recent fervour in seeking Irish identity for contemporary Irish society, Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' and Michael Billig's 'banal nationalism' are still relevant.[46] The importance of culture in the creation and maintenance of identity is also crucial in the understanding of the act of performing and the various sounds of Irish traditional music. The use of Irish traditional music and musical performances by various institutions contributes added meaning to both sound and activity. The differences in both sounds and activity highlight not only the temporal differences in society through the last three centuries but also the variety of musical identities and musical examples of Irishness that exist today.

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45 Breda Gray, 'Unmasking Irishness: Irish Women, the Irish Nation and the Irish Diaspora', in McLaughlin, 209–35: 209.

46 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Thousand Oaks; New Dehli: Sage, 1995).