

JOHN O'FLYNN, *THE IRISHNESS OF IRISH MUSIC* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) ISBN 978-0-7546-5714-9, 256 pp, £55 (hardback)

I try to make an effort to visit Irish pubs when on holiday in Continental resorts. This isn't motivated by an ironic intention to mock the kitsch Irishness they reify, for it often seems to me that such places, set at a distance as they are from the culture they purport to represent, can crystallize the characteristics through which Irish identity is encoded. They are often also great fun. Perhaps the strangest one I've experienced was in the old town of Albufeira in southern Portugal, which was set in a small store on the first floor of a rather unprepossessing shopping centre. This pub, thanks to its landlord who acted as *pater familias*, managed to generate a *gemeinschaftlich* atmosphere in which Irish tourists and expats seemed to interact naturally as members of a shared community. Central to the space was music—Irish music—whether broadcast on the PA or performed by the host and his customers (inevitably several of whom would prove to be all-Ireland champions on one instrument or another). Dare I say that it seemed to generate a ring of 'authenticity'?

Having recently published a book of my own about uses and abuses of traditional music in Northern Ireland in the same series as John O'Flynn, I have for a long time been considering many of the issues of identity that he explores, as they are played out in that part of the island of Ireland.¹ Irishness is, of course, a construction, but it is one that is rooted in the artefacts which are created and consumed in its name, and which symbolically encode it. In my study, I am primarily concerned with the material basis for this encoding and the malleability of the codes that are employed.

O'Flynn remarks that his monograph 'juxtaposes established theories of Irishness and music with everyday assumptions and beliefs, a central tenet being that any investigation of ideology about music needs to be grounded in the views of a wide range of social actors' (17–18). Although his approach does take some account of 'intra-musical content and structure', his move beyond this into the differential ways Irishness can be perceived according to style, and the investigation of the reception contexts and values ascribed to Irish music, is undoubtedly sensible given the interview methodology that underpins the research. The fieldwork was undertaken in 1999–2001 as part of his PhD research, under the supervision of Lucy Green at the Institute of Education, University of London.² He conducted some 28 informal interviews with 67 attendees at tradi-

¹ David Cooper, *The Musical Traditions of Northern Ireland and its Diaspora: Community and Conflict* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

² John H. O'Flynn, *Perceptions of Irishness in Irish music: a Sociological Study of National Identity and Music* (PhD diss., Institute of Education, University of London, 2004).

tional-music sessions in pubs in Dublin, Listowel (Co. Kerry) and Ashbourne (Co. Meath); popular music events at Temple Bar Music Centre and at HQ in Dublin, and at Dolan's in Limerick; and 'classical' events at the National Concert Hall in Dublin and the University Concert Hall, Limerick.

The overall shape of the book reflects its roots in doctoral study, the necessary methodological and theoretical underpinning in the first chapter, 'Irishness and music: Towards an interpretive framework', giving way to historical contextualization of Irish music in the second. The third chapter presents an extremely useful overview of the music segment of the cultural industries in Ireland, summarizing the roles of statutory bodies and policy, support agencies and education; and the production, distribution and consumption of recordings, and music broadcasting.

At this point O'Flynn's own qualitative research starts to take centre stage, firstly with a series of 'snapshots' of the musical events in Chapter 4. A simple theoretical model, presented as Figure 4.1, draws on Kurt Blaukopf's complementary usage of 'performance music' and 'participatory music' (terms derived from Heinrich Bessler) to differentiate the types of event. According to Blaukopf, 'participatory music requires audience involvement, while performance music is produced for passive listeners'. Blaukopf's model involved the categories of folk music, 'mesomúsica' ('the complex of musical creations...which can be classified functionally as entertainment, social dance, public functions, ceremonies, school classes, games, and so on, and which the audience in those classes of society that participate in modern cultural forms of expression has made its own'), and art music. In distinction to classical (performance) music, folk musics and mesomúsica were seen as being particularly strongly tied with participation.³ While O'Flynn's approach broadly follows Blaukopf, he substitutes popular music for mesomúsica, and presents it, like classical music, as being coupled with performance music. However he acknowledges other weaker ties which connect popular and classical music to participation events and traditional music to performance events; and acknowledges that in traditional music 'both participatory and performance modes of production can be seen to occur with some frequency' (66).

It is a matter of note that almost all of O'Flynn's interviewees cited some level of interest in traditional music, with more than 40% expressing an unqualified preference for it. More surprising, perhaps, was that the second most cited category was classical, with 51 out of 67 mentioning an interest, and around 30% having an unqualified

³ Kurt Blaukopf (translated by David Marinelli), *Musical Life in a Changing Society: Aspects of Music Sociology* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 194.

preference. This is a very different distribution of listener groups to that reported by Blaukopf from a large-scale Swiss Radio and Television Corporation survey published in 1979. Here 21% of subjects were categorized typologically as 'folk' and just 16% 'classical'.⁴

O'Flynn indicates that his interviewees 'were not approached on the basis of their constituting a representative sample among various sectors of the Irish population or, for that matter, on the basis that they were members of particular subcultures within Irish society. Rather, they were approached because they had chosen to attend certain types of music events.' (19) Clearly, therefore, one must exercise some care in drawing generalized conclusions about the relationship between the views expressed by this sample and those of the broader population. This is not intended as a criticism of a widely used methodology, but is simply a caveat that the views expressed may not necessarily be typical.

Observations of O'Flynn's interviewees are presented and analysed in Chapter 5, 'Ireland in music', the longest section of the book. Their responses are considered in three broad groupings: style categorizations and perceptions of Irishness; 'Irish sound' and 'Irish soul'; and 'Cultural Irishness' or 'Irishness by association'. Almost invariably for this sample, Irishness is constructed through traditional music and its performance, and traditional and classical musics are held to be antithetical style categories. At the same time, O'Flynn finds a 'pattern of identification' in which 'the emblematic status of Irish traditional music figures more in the imagination than does the music itself' (112), reflecting a view that has been promulgated by Harry White.

O'Flynn's research was conducted during a liminal (and transformational) time for modern Ireland, the period from the mid-nineties to around 2008, which saw such an extraordinary boom that the epithet 'Celtic tiger' could reasonably be applied to its economy. Almost simultaneously *Riverdance* hit the international stage and presented an Ireland that was Janus-like: modern, exciting and eclectic but connected to deep mythic roots. By 1999, the balance of migratory movements started to favour immigration, with just over 10% of the population in the 2006 census being classified as non-Irish by nationality.⁵ The impact of social and economic change is analysed in Chapter 6 'Irishness and music in a changing society'. O'Flynn notes here the increasing plurality and heterogeneity of musical identity and 'how the interaction of

⁴ Blaukopf, 199–200.

⁵ Central Statistics Office: <http://www.cso.ie/statistics/popnclssbyreligionandnationality2006.htm>, accessed 27 May 2010.

changing social contexts, musical genres and individual experience can lead to alternative articulations of Irishness and music' (143).

Two further chapters consider music and authenticity respectively. In the former chapter, the interviewees, perhaps unsurprisingly, struggle to express more than relatively superficial explanations for the material basis of the Irishness of the music, though O'Flynn's analysis is always articulate and perceptive. In the latter chapter, a theoretical model of authenticity, derived from the work of Allan Moore, is presented.⁶ Moore proposes first-, second- and third-person modes of authenticity in which 'artists speak the truth of their own situation', 'speak the truth of the situation of (absent) others' or 'speak the truth of their own culture, thereby representing (present) others' (175). O'Flynn finds that:

General identifications of Irishness in music appear to involve both second and third person authenticities. The greater the remove there is between the listening subject and the imagined place and time of the music, the more that conceptions of 'us' and 'others' become blurred. Put another way, when the perception of inherent Irishness arises from idealizations of Irish musical culture along with the filtering out of unique and/or exotic musical elements, this suggests a dual process of authentication in which alterity and identity are simultaneously conceived. (194)

In the discourse of both music journalism and his interviewees, O'Flynn finds a dichotomy between, on the one hand, authenticity/integrity/tradition and on the other commerce/technological mediation/innovation/kitsch. In my own writing I have examined an essay entitled 'Race Purity in Music' written by Béla Bartók in the United States in 1942, where he asserts the importance of impurity and hybridization in the development of a national folk music.⁷ Such a view was clearly anathema to Séamus Tansey, who O'Flynn cites as remarking in the 1996 Crossroads conference that 'If that is change i.e. the mongrelisation, the bastardisation, the cross-pollination, the copulation of our ancient traditional music, with other cultures, then I say we want none of it.' (182)

In a brief concluding chapter, 'Irishness and music "inside out"', O'Flynn summarizes his findings and notes that 'the hegemony of Irishness...appears to be holding fast' (201). Given the large number of people worldwide who see themselves as connected to the island of Ireland by ancestry or other affiliation (and it is worth noting that in the United States alone, in the 2000 census, 12.3% of the population, or

⁶ Allan Moore, 'Authenticity as Authentication', *Popular Music*, 21/2 (2002), 209–33.

⁷ David Cooper, 'Béla Bartók and the Question of Race Purity in Music', in Harry White and Michael Murphy (eds), *Musical Constructions of Nationalism: Essays on the History and Ideology of European Musical Culture 1800–1945* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 16–32.

around 35 million people, claimed either Irish or 'Scotch-Irish' ancestry) it seems likely that the encoding of Irishness in music will be an enduring topic. Of course, through the increasing heterogeneity of the Irish people within Ireland (and potentially new models of authenticity), endogenous identity markers may well move further out of synchronization with more rigid constructions of Irishness found within its diaspora.

Overall this is a well argued monograph that pays serious attention to its subject and provides a number of persuasive and perceptive insights. While students and scholars of Irish music (and more broadly, Irish cultural industries) will most certainly find it valuable, the underlying themes of the construction of musical identity, and of authenticity and innovation, which link it to many other national musics and postcolonial situations, should ensure that its impact will extend well beyond this readership.

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