Beyond location: The relevance of regional identities in Irish traditional music

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Introduction
Irish traditional music has moved from local contexts to a global community leading to questions regarding the links between music and place. While local contexts remain important for the transmission, performance and consumption of Irish traditional music, local distinctiveness is challenged by changing social and economic conditions, technology and the distances that many musicians travel to take part in musical events. Musical styles in Irish traditional music are often studied through the concept of regional styles, based on the assumption that musicians within a loosely defined region share a common musical style. The first significant investigation of regional styles in Irish traditional music was by Seán Ó Riada in his radio series Our Musical Heritage, first broadcast in 1962. Even at that point, Ó Riada was aware of the challenges to developing an understanding of stylistic differences in Irish traditional music based on a regional model and the fact that, in many places, these differences were being eroded by changes in technology and society (Ó Riada, 1982).

The concept of regional styles in Irish traditional music has become well known, evidenced through reading reviews of recordings, discussions on radio and studies of regions beyond the outline established by Ó Riada half a century ago. However, the concept of regional styles in Irish traditional music has been undermined by greater awareness of the individuality of performers within regions and the difficulty in determining the location and boundaries of regions (see also MacAoidh, 1994). Despite these challenges, the increasingly globalised nature of the tradition and community has also led to increased awareness of locality and a desire to understand the roots of the music and develop regional identities. An understanding of regional styles and their existence beyond location strengthens the concept and provides a more accurate reflection on the developments in Irish traditional music.

In this paper, I consider the relevance of regional identities in Irish traditional music today, the importance of local Irish traditional music activity and the influence of marketing and commercialism on regional styles and identities in Irish traditional music. I focus in particular on the Sliabh Luachra cultural region in the south west of Ireland and the promotion of a musical style and sound associated with that region, noting the many discrepancies within that soundscape.

Regional styles in Irish traditional music
Despite the globalisation of Irish traditional music, there is a resilient attachment to regional styles amongst musicians in Irish traditional music (Dowling, 1999; Ó Cinnéide, 2001). Discussing the existence of Irish traditional music in a modern world, Sommers Smith notes:

regional styles of Irish traditional music performance are not rigidly determined entities, defined by discrete localities or such social structures as language or accent. They are conventions, a series of agreed-upon approaches to the music that demand musical correspondence and discussion for their adoption and maintenance. It is also
clear that regional styles, and indeed dance music in its entirety, are no longer geographically bound (2001: 115).

The most difficult challenge when considering regional styles in Irish traditional music is not so much that they are no longer geographically bound, if they ever were at all, but that they are not, as Sommers Smith suggests ‘agreed-upon’ but rather in the process of being defined. The pattern of regions in Irish traditional music that emerges from Ó Riada (1962/1982) highlights a western bias, evident also in the activities of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (Kearney, 2010), and an integral element in the construction of Irish identity (Nash, 1993; Ó Giolláin, 2000).

Identifying stylistic features in the music of a number of solo musicians, Ó Riada focuses on the regions of Donegal, Sligo, Clare and North Kerry/West Limerick, as well as paying particular attention to the Gaeltacht regions when discussing the Irish song traditions. He also includes a number of examples from musicians in Dublin with whom he was familiar and through whom he arguably became aware of regional distinctiveness in Irish traditional music (Keegan, 2006). Séamus Ennis also spent much time in the west of Ireland and had a specific remit to visit and collect in Gaeltacht areas (Uí Ogáin, 2006). Other regions that have been the subject of subsequent study include Donegal (MacAoidh, 1994), Sliabh Luachra (Hickey, 1999; Cranitch, 2006; Kearney, 2010), Oriel (Ní Uallacháin, 2003), Fermanagh (Maguire, 2003), Sliabh Aughty (Collins, 2010) and the Aran Islands (Ní Chonghaile, 2011). With the exception of Oriel, these regions are also located in the west of Ireland.

The television series Caniúntí Cheoil (2007) is the next examination to create an overview for a general audience of regions in Irish traditional music and focusing on Sliabh Luachra, Clare, North Connacht, Fermanagh and Donegal. These studies do not just examine regional styles but are part of the construction of regional identities. These identities may then be used to inform people beyond those locations of the cultural traditions and social environment of the region.

Many studies of regions in Irish traditional music focus on particular and prominent individuals within those regions. Often concentrating on musicians from the end of the nineteenth or start of the twentieth century, the studies may develop foundation myths and consider musical style through the transmission process and popularity of recordings. A significant aspect of many of these regions that is not always recognised is the existence of factors that are beyond the location. The most prominent musicians of some of these regions often spend much of their musical life and gain acknowledgement outside of the region with which they are associated. In some instances it is not isolation but rather connectivity with other places, such as through migration patterns and seasonal migration, that helps shape the soundscape of the region. Outsiders also play a role in recognising the regionality of the soundscape which they encounter when visiting the region.

The region variously referred to as Sligo, South Sligo and North Connacht, is one of the most prominent regional identities in Irish traditional music and provides examples of the factors that are beyond location. The central figure in the story of the Sligo musical style is often considered to be fiddle player Michael Coleman (1891-1946). Coleman emigrated to America where he was a professional musician at the forefront of the recording industry from the 1920s to the 1940s. His was a confident, highly embellished musical style with a long, legato bowing technique and whose repertoire was dominated by reels. Much has been written about Coleman and a number of his contemporaries, many of whom came from a small geographical area in north Connacht but whose fame developed through their location in America (see also Lyth, 1981; O’Connor, 2001). The
musical style is not necessarily a ‘Sligo style’ but a ‘Sligo-American’ style which exists beyond location.

From a geographical perspective, these musicians also heralded a new sphere of influence in Irish traditional music as the musical style of this region came to dominate the soundscape of Irish traditional music in the first half of the twentieth century. Their choices regarding repertoire and the musical styles in which they performed set trends amongst Irish traditional musicians of their generation. Through processes of time-space compression and distanciation, these musical trends were transported back across the Atlantic. The influence of Coleman and his contemporaries in America on traditional musicians outside of north Connacht is seen as the death knell for many of the regional styles that existed in Irish traditional music prior to the early twentieth century (Ó Riada, 1982; Ó hAllmhuráin, 1998). Amongst the most distinct of regional styles in Irish traditional music to survive the development of a Sligo-influenced pan-Irish style is the Sliabh Luachra style from the south-west of Ireland.

**Sliabh Luachra**

Though Sliabh Luachra was not part of Ó Riada’s *Our Musical Heritage*, it has become one of the most prominent regional identities in Irish traditional music since the 1970s. The Sliabh Luachra region is located in the border area of counties Kerry, Cork and Limerick but the boundaries are poorly defined. It has been described as less a place and more a state of mind (Kelly, 1999). Though the historical narratives of this region highlight the travelling music teacher Pádraig O’Keeffe as a figurehead, many of the best known musicians associated with the music of Sliabh Luachra have and do spend time or live outside of the area generally regarded as the region.

O’Keeffe learned much of his music from family members but his style was neither entirely local nor representative of the diverse musical practices of the region. Described by Nicky and Anne McAuliffe as “a distinctive playing style which he passed onto his pupils” (1985: 4), O’Keeffe’s musical style was in part influenced by Coleman and other recorded artists and he learned many tunes from the publications of Francis O’Neill. Lyth has outlined how during the single period of time that Pádraig spent away from his homeplace, for the purpose of training as a school teacher in Dublin, he merged the music that he had inherited at home with that of the new soundscape of Dublin and the increasing number of recordings that became available:

> Through this period - 1920s and ’30s - Pádraig would seem to have perfected his style, incorporating influences from the ’78 recordings then available into his inherited local tradition and in doing so probably introduced a wider range of expression into the fiddle playing than had previously been common in the area (1996: 25).

O’Keeffe played much music for dancing in the locality, which demanded a repertoire of polkas and slides, but he also played many reels and slow airs for his own enjoyment. His importance as a teacher is significant in the region but he is also amongst the first musicians from this region to be recorded. His pupils, who are considered later, include Denis Murphy (1910–74), Julia Clifford (1914–97), Johnny O’Leary (1923–2004), and Paddy Cronin (b. 1925).

In the case of the Sliabh Luachra region, regional identity develops largely outside of the region. Those who visited the Sliabh Luachra region in the late 1940s and through the 1950s, including collectors and broadcasters Séamus Ennis and Ciarán MacMathúna, encountered a soundscape of
strange accents in which the fiddle provided the dominant musical sound that they then shared with a wider audience through the medium of the radio. As well as the standard repertoire of jigs and reels, they encountered a repertoire of polkas and slides that were played primarily for dancers. For most people in the region now defined as Sliabh Luachra, the sense of identity associated with the region, particularly in the context of music, did not develop until the latter half of the twentieth century at which point the radio and various recordings played a significant role.

Notable accordion player Johnny O’Leary stresses the role of Ciarán MacMathúna from the 1950s:

That time, the music of Sliabh Luachra wasn’t known as well as it is now. Séamus Ennis did the first radio broadcast in the early 1940s. People like Seán Mac Reamoinn, Ciarán Mac Mathúna and Seán Ó Riada came after that. They put Sliabh Luachra music where it is in Ireland today (1982: 22).

Ó Siodhacáin also credits MacMathúna stating: “For creating outside awareness of Sliabh Luachra music first and primary credit must go to Ciarán MacMathúna” (1982: 100). Herlihy (2007) also argues for the significance of recordings released in the late 1970s in creating a musical identity for Sliabh Luachra, as well as highlighting and diffusing the traditions of the region. The sense of identity that was created was based on the existence of a different musical style and repertoire that attracted and interested some listeners.

The importance of the activities of Ennis and MacMathúna in Sliabh Luachra is further emphasised by a story from Dan Herlihy. The recordings made by Seamus Ennis at Charlie Horan’s in September 1952 went into the BBC Sound Archives and disseminated in 1977 as an LP entitled Kerry Fiddles - Music from Sliabh Luachra Vol.1 released under the Topic label. Speaking on The Rolling Wave, Dan Herlihy recollected:

Well you see when I left to go to England, there wasn't an awful lot of talk of Patrick Keeffe at all or even Sliabh Luachra because, you won't believe this now but I was over in Dave Lyth’s house one night and he said to me “I got this new ah thingame, this new ah, big round records, what do you call 'em, [Peter Brown: “LP’s”], yes, ahm music from Munster he said, it’s from Sliabh Luachra”. And I said to him “where the hell is Sliabh Luachra?” you know and he said “it's, it’s on the Cork Kerry border it says here on the thingame” and I said “who are the players?” and he said “Denis Murphy and Julia Clifford and Patrick” and sure I says “ah for Christ’s sake sure that's where I come from”. But I didn't know the Sliabh Luachra before I left but ‘twas all Sliabh Luachra when I came home (The Rolling Wave, broadcast 10th January 2007).

Herlihy’s memories reflect the historical and imaginative invention of Sliabh Luachra within the Irish traditional music and the juxtaposition of time and place. Herlihy’s realisation in London reflects a comment by another accordion player, John Cronin: “When I was young we weren’t told what it was. It was just there” (interview with author, 23rd July 2011). John’s uncle received lessons from Pádraig O’Keeffe at the family home and John himself continues to play in a Sliabh Luachra style though he now lives some distance from the region.
Amongst the recordings that helped define and disseminate the music of the Sliabh Luachra region was the *Music of Sliabh Luachra* series released by Topic Records to which Herlihy was referring. In a review of the first three volumes, McCullough notes:

> The three-volume set focussing on Sliabh Luachra, Kerry is to date the most ambitious attempt to document the musical tradition of a district by means of its most renowned exponents (1978: 390).

The exponents to which McCullough is referring include Pádraig O’Keeffe, two of his students – Denis Murphy and his sister Julia Clifford – and Julia’s husband John and son Billy. The three volumes relate in different ways to the region and highlight the movement of the music of Sliabh Luachra to ‘transplanted settings’ that are beyond the accepted location of the region.

The first volume in the series is drawn from BBC recordings made in 1952 at a pub in Castleisland, Kerry and forms the basis for defining a Sliabh Luachra musical identity that was not yet established. The recording featured noted fiddle player Pádraig O’Keeffe with two of his students, Denis Murphy and Julia Clifford. McCullough’s (1978) review of this and other albums in 1978 highlights the connection between music and place, which is reinforced through the many recordings at that time. Despite the common association of Sliabh Luachra with polkas and slides, this particular recording only features one set of polkas and two sets of slides alongside jigs, reels and hornpipes. The recording also features two airs by Pádraig reflecting his liking for them. The nomenclature present makes reference to notable local characters including Tom Billy and Danny Ab, as well as local places such as Ballydesmond, though it is noticeable that this is prevalent in the slides and polkas rather than the more generic tunes. The influence of these recordings in informing different generations within the Irish traditional music audience on the concept of regional styles is noted by Condon (1995) and Winick (1997), particularly in relation to Topic Records.

The series highlights the movement of tradition and the importance of understanding regional styles in Irish traditional music beyond location. As McCullough explains:

> Volumes 2 and 3 present the O’Keeffe-Sliabh Luachra tradition in transplanted settings. During the late 1950s and early ’60s Julia Clifford, her husband John (piano accordion), and son Billy (flute) played throughout London as the Star of Munster Trio. Volume 2 is less concerned with the Sliabh Luachra repertoire; instead, the functional repertoire of a working Irish band in the London pubs and dancehalls of the period is emphasized. The addition of the piano accordion noticeably de-localized the music, giving it a more mainstream sound. Still, there are several unusual tunes, and the level of performance is consistently high (1978: 390).

Though Vol. 1 is recorded in Sliabh Luachra, the fact that the region is subsequently represented by musicians who left the region is important to note. Emigration was a prominent part of life in Sliabh Luachra in the twentieth century, as it was in many other parts of Ireland, and impacted greatly on various aspects of the region’s culture. As well as Julia and John Clifford, Julia’s brother, Denis Murphy, who also featured in Vol. 1 and previously with Julia on *The Start Above the Garter* (1969), spent a number of years in America before returning to live and play music in Kerry. The last track of Vol. 3 is a live recording of a three-tune medley performed for polka dancing in Scartaglen, Kerry,
which brings the listener to a located regional soundscape, almost like a musical voyeur as suggested by Vallely (1997).

Volume four in the Music from Sliabh Luachra series featured Julia’s son Billy Clifford. Entitled Irish Traditional Flute Solos and Band Music from Kerry and Tipperary (1977), it stretched the parameters of the series to include music from Tipperary where he went to live. Volumes five and six featured accordion players Johnny O’Leary and Jackie Daly, highlighting the changing soundscape of the region which is now arguably dominated by the accordion. Daly is accredited with attracting a new audience for Sliabh Luachra music in the 1970s but unlike O’Leary who played regular sessions in Dan O’Connell’s pub in Knocknagree until his death, Daly becomes something of a dislocated professional musician, appearing with various bands and now living in Co. Clare. Dan O’Connell’s pub for many years a focal point for musical life in the Sliabh Luachra region, is now closed.

A recording of Denis Murphy, compiled from recordings made by RTÉ between 1948 and 1969, was released in 1995 and was also entitled Music from Sliabh Luachra though it also included American fiddler player Andy McCann who, in duet with Murphy, demonstrated the latter’s ability in the style of the aforementioned Michael Coleman. Another pupil of Pádraig O’Keeffe, Paddy Cronin, also went to America where his style of playing developed in a scene dominated by Sligo music (Cranitch, 2010). Despite his changing musical style, Cronin remains a central figure in the story and construction of a Sliabh Luachra identity and was awarded the TG4 Gradam Saoil (Lifetime Achievement Award) in 2007.

**Beyond Location**

While Pádraig O’Keeffe and Johnny O’Leary are part of a located regional soundscape, many other musicians who perform and evoke the music of Sliabh Luachra exist beyond any loose boundaries that may be affixed to the region. Indeed, location is not a prerequisite for musical allegiance. As Killarney born fiddle and concertina player Niamh Ní Charra points out:

> To me, I would not consider myself as being from Sliabh Luachra, even though I’m about two miles down the road from it and have been surrounded by Sliabh Luachra musicians. But at the same time you have people living further away and still going on about how much they’re immersed in it (quoted in Copley, 2008, p. 23).

Interestingly Kerry-born concertina player Tim Collins has experienced an opposite reaction, being portrayed in some media as a Sliabh Luachra musician without any attempt on his part to suggest such an identity (Long, 2007; O’Kane, 2007). It also happens at an immediate level. Now living in Clare and a member of the Kilfenora Céilí Band, he is often asked to play some of ‘his music’, a reference to polkas and slides, while people from West Limerick now view him as a Clare musician.

Another musician, Paudie O’Connor from Ballyhar, near Killarney but now living in Dublin, focuses on style rather than the notion of regional identities.

> Anybody can chose to identify themselves with a region by playing the tunes associated with a region but unless you play the music of that region in the authentic style, in my opinion their identity as they might like to see it is questionable. A function of that, is that listeners won’t identify the musician in question with that style either. If someone from New York takes up playing and plays just like Johnny O Leary, that’s
brilliant and people will identify the musician with Sliabh Luachra but in my opinion only if the style is authentic (personal correspondence, 5<sup>th</sup> January 2012).

In this way, regional identities remain relevant but displaced. In some ways Sliabh Luachra becomes an entity that appears to “keep expanding as its fame increases” (Hanafin, 1995: 2).

In her discussion of contexts for group performance, Fairbairn is less assured on the matter. Though she acknowledges that recording technology has created a situation where musicians can study and imitate regional styles from the perceived masters, such as a Pádraig O’Keeffe or Johnny O’Leary, she states:

Although the phenomenon of players learning tunes and styles from old recordings may preserve and even regenerate the surface technical features of regional styles, by definition these styles cannot be reproduced. The intimate relationship between music, dance and social gathering, and their high profile in rural lifestyle, is the source of regional styles. There is an integrity about the practitioners of these styles, who employ a form of musical expression inherited from and evolved among local musicians and players in the family. It is the exclusivity of this relationship between an individual and the music of his or her area which imparts the great value of the resulting musical styles, and the respect and regard they command today (1994: 577).

Where Fairbairn and O’Connor diverge is, I believe, an important juncture in the discourse on regions in Irish traditional music. Whereas musical styles – understood to include ornamentation, phrasing, articulation, variation, intonation, tone, dynamics, repertoire, duration, emphasis, speed, instrumentation, and instrument specific techniques – can and are reproduced or imitated to a significant degree with O’Connor himself an excellent example, regional social contexts are more prone to change and are, in many instances, part of the history rather than the story of the region.

Following from Fairbairn’s argument, in which she goes on to suggest that “[r]egional styles are in danger of extinction, eroded along with the traditional lifestyle with which they are integrated” (1994: 578), it is important to consider the existence of regional styles and their relevance beyond location. For the past number of years I have lived in East Cork, an area whose musical culture is largely unexplored. During my time there I played a regular session with accordion player, whom I previously identified as the nephew of a student of Pádraig O’Keeffe. John migrated to Midleton in the 1970s and since the late 1990s has become a prominent musician in the area. He performs in a distinctive Sliabh Luachra style influenced by his father and neighbours and the accordion players Johnny O’Leary, Jackie Daly and John Brosnan. In the same way that New York existed as an outlier of the Sligo or North Connacht musical region in the early twentieth century, Midleton becomes an outlier of Sliabh Luachra music in the twenty-first century.

**Regional relevance and the global market**

I propose three arguments for the relevance of regional styles in Irish traditional music today. One relates to arguments proposed by Corcoran (1997) – that we are predisposed to regionalism – a fact also presented by Dowling (1999) who argues that despite the de-localisation of Irish traditional music, there has been a resilient attachment to regional styles and concepts of place amongst musicians in Irish traditional music. Influenced to some degree by Bloom’s Taxonomy in education, I
would argue that regional styles remain relevant in the study of Irish traditional music today on the basis of evaluating and analysing the music. The third argument relates to Vallély’s (1997) suggestion that regional styles carry with them a commercial value, a point that I would argue has led to regional identities becoming part of the brand identity of some musicians and bands.

The argument for regionalisation is evident in a number of ways. Local groups have established a number of monuments which relocate the story of regional musical traditions in the places with which they are associated (Kearney, 2010). This is very evident in Sliabh Luachra where three monuments to Pádraig O’Keeffe, as well as one each to Denis Murphy and Johnny O’Leary amongst others, create spaces for musical heritage in the landscape. In various regions, local organisations have sought to create contexts for the transmission and performance of regional musical culture and style. In Sliabh Luachra this is evidenced through the activities of Cumann Luachra and various branches of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, particularly those in Rockchapel and Gneeveguilla. Many artists also make reference to their regional identities, though I will return to that subsequently in relation to the global market for Irish traditional music.

In relation to constructing models for understanding and teaching Irish traditional music, the concept of regional styles provides a model for the evaluation and analysis of performance and performance practice. Through a greater understanding of regional styles we can move beyond the limited critiques of musical performance as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and consider the nuances of the style that is being performed. This is particularly important in the context of competitions in which musicians, including those from Sliabh Luachra, have expressed frustration at perceived regional bias (Long, 2005; Kelly, 2005). The concept of regional styles can also help students or audiences comprehend the diversity of styles in Irish traditional music, summarise the approaches to the performance and perhaps assimilate aspects into their own playing. At the most basic level people should be able to define what playing in style is, recognise a style through listening, list musicians who play in or use elements of that style, and label or critically discuss musical performances.

The initial development of the concept of regional styles may have been motivated by regionalisation and the desire to create a sense of order within the tradition, as demonstrated by Ó Riada’s landmark radio series in 1962. Initially the process of regionalisation focused on differences in musical styles, techniques and repertoires and focused on individual musicians who become a reference point for organising a sense of musical difference based on geographical location. In some areas the regionality of the music related to other social and cultural factors, thus creating a wider context for musical difference that was part of regional identity. In some places, the process of regionalism develops through which people seek to express and promote regional difference motivated by pride of place and, sometimes, economic factors. While Carson notes, “All great musicians recognize their ancestry and pay respect to it” (1996: 61), this is also an important element in the branding of a musician or band. Considering the relevance of regional styles, Vallély (1997) recognises that they have achieved a commercial value. Thus, understanding changing socio-economic conditions, particularly in relation to professional opportunities for Irish traditional musicians, is also important in understanding the relevance of regional identities in Irish traditional music.

The recordings of music related to Sliabh Luachra are important in understanding the identity and, in a sense ‘branding’ of the Sliabh Luachra region. As previously highlighted, the recordings – even
those bearing the title *Music from Sliabh Luachra* – do not always relate to the located soundscape in Sliabh Luachra. More recently a number of recordings have highlighted different aspects of understanding the region beyond location. *As it was in Toureenderby* and *Echoes of Sliabh Luachra* suggest antiquity and reference to particular places that are part of the region. *Different State* may be variously interpreted as referring to the concept of Sliabh Luachra as a state of mind or to the music as existing in a different state to other styles. Accompanied by imagery related to places in Sliabh Luachra, O’Connor locates the sound in his homeplace in Sliabh Luachra though he now lives in Dublin. *Midleton Rare* suggests a value through the rarity of music. Though the title does not refer to Sliabh Luachra, the soundscape and sleeve notes highlight the significance of regional identity and the movement of the music beyond its original location.

**Conclusion**

Regions exist regardless of county boundaries based on the networks that people create, be they local or global. Changing social and economic conditions, infrastructure and technology have impacted on the nature and boundaries of these regions and their cultural hearths but in some instances have solidified their existence, at least as a historical concept. The existence of something unique and different attracts attention and can possess an aesthetic and economic value but these value factors may be imitated by anyone, anywhere. Though some attempts are made to relocate regional identities they exist, as perhaps they have always done, as much on a recording or radio broadcast for the enjoyment of the listener as they do in minds of the performers.

Regional styles are a way or means of organising, contextualising and teaching the ever-developing and expanding soundscape of Irish traditional music. The study of regional musical traditions highlights diversity in Irish traditional music and contributes to the processes of regionalisation and the creation or reinforcement of identity. The use of these identities to develop a niche in a global market where the audience seeks to relate to the ‘roots’ of the music gives further credence to the on-going relevance of the concept of regional identities.

**Discography**

*Music from Sliabh Luachra* series:


Other select recordings:


Cronin, John and Kearney, Daithí, 2012, *Midleton Rare* Own Label JCDK001.


Murphy, Denis and Clifford, Julia, 1969, *Star above the Garter* Dublin: Claddagh Records CC5CD.

O’Connor, Timmy, 2009 *As it was in Toureenderby* TOC CD 001.


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