

Chapter 5

Performing Local Music: Engaging with Regional Musical Identities through Higher Education and Research

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Regional differences in Irish traditional music are challenged by processes of globalization but supported by an apparent tribalism and localism amongst Irish people and potential economic valuing of regional traditions. Local musical traditions underpin regional identities, particularly in parts of the west of Ireland, but they also create networks that enhance a sense of community underpinned by intangible cultural heritage. Many students who undertake undergraduate music studies at Irish institutions engage in the study of regional musical styles, requiring them to critically listen to selected performers, often from regions in the west of Ireland. This can create or reinforce a limited canon that places an emphasis on historical recordings. Understanding both regions and traditions as processes, the canon must be revised in the context of new modes of learning and engagement with tradition and communities that are shaped by new technologies and virtual spaces, and by new geographies of the tradition that relocate music-making nationally and

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internationally. Students become part of the musical community of the region in which they undertake their studies and can most readily immerse themselves in local cultures through observation and participation beyond the classroom.

I am a lecturer in music at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) and was the director of the traditional music ensemble from 2011, when I was appointed, until 2019. Located on the east coast of Ireland, the promotional material concerning music in the Institute has evoked a connection with the Oriel region. Often neglected in the narratives of Irish traditional music, recent research by academics and performers has not only developed a narrative of musical traditions in this part of Ireland but has led to students and staff at the Institute staging themed music performances that have engaged the local community in the process of musical regionalization. This chapter critically examines the impact of music research and related performances on an understanding and awareness of a local or regional musical heritage in Dundalk and its surroundings in the past decade, and it explores the implications for a spatial understanding of Irish traditional music in the twenty-first century that engages with communities of musical practice (Kenny, 2014, 2016).

The field of ethnomusicology has evolved to focus on process over product, as 'interest shifted from pieces of music to processes of musical creation and performance – composition and improvisation – and the focus shifted from collection of repertory to examination of these processes' (Myers, 1993: 8). Education and transmission are also important in the development of music cultures, and academic institutions play an integral part here. But these processes also lead to products in the form of new collections, publications, audio recordings, and performances or the reinforcement of musical canon through pedagogical practice. As musician and scholar Jack Talty notes, 'Since canonicity is frequently constructed (and occasionally challenged) through pedagogy, faculty should be conscious of their influence' (2017: 104). Thus, this chapter is largely self-reflective, focusing on one cultural region and an Irish academic institution that engages with the study and performance of Irish traditional music; but I am cognisant of developing pedagogies and philosophies in higher education elsewhere in Ireland and internationally (see Hill, 2009a, 2009b; Talty, 2017). I draw upon the work of Ted Solís (2004) and Simone Krüger (2009), whose books provide themes for

critiquing the activities and impact of the ensemble at DkIT from an ethnomusicological perspective. Recent doctoral theses engaging with folk or traditional music in Higher Education include those of Elise Gayraud (2016) on English folk music revivals and Jack Talty (2019), who focuses on Irish institutions (including DkIT) with reference to some other European counterparts. Talty's thesis, in particular, creates a lens through which I can engage in critical reflection on my own practice and institution. Drawing on these themes, in this chapter I consider in particular how students can engage with the music of a place. This chapter is further informed by a survey of graduates, and engagement with the local community, notably through an ongoing study focused on the Oriel Traditional Orchestra (OTO), an ensemble-in-residence established at DkIT and interviews with musicians, music teachers, and other stakeholders. These sources help balance the weight of my positionality within the institution.

1.2 LOCATION

Co. Louth is located on the east coast of Ireland with the town of Dundalk approximately halfway between the major cities of Dublin and Belfast. The Oriel region comprises parts of Co. Louth and surrounding counties Meath, Monaghan, Armagh, and Down, and definition of its geographical scope is based upon the area of the ancient kingdom of Orialla or Airialla. The concept of Oriel as a musical region is presented in Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin's seminal study, *A Hidden Ulster* (2003), which places particular emphasis on the language and song traditions of the region. The location of the Irish border through this region from 1922 has implications for the imagination and performance of cultural identity but a number of cultural projects have also benefitted from cross-border and peace funding since the 1990s in particular. DkIT is located approximately 10km from the border and has engaged in various cross-border and local cultural initiatives. Despite the prominent use of the term Oriel, this is often done without in-depth critique and, with greater engagement with the musical traditions, an understanding of other competing identities in South Louth and Co. Monaghan is emergent.

Programmes of study in the arts and humanities seek to educate students to think critically and challenge orthodoxies, and it is important to look beyond a narrow canon of sources and examples, such as the

narrative that locates Irish traditional music and exemplary performers in the tradition on the west coast of Ireland. Despite a rich local musical tradition, the Oriel region does not feature significantly in the narratives of Irish traditional music in the twentieth century and does not form part of a canon for the study of Irish traditional music. Its location on the east coast, impact of English conquest, and the development of major urban centres contrasts greatly with the rural, seemingly untouched west of Ireland. Research and discourse demonstrates an emphasis in Irish traditional music studies on counties along the west coast (Kearney, 2009a, 2009b; Ó hAllmhuráin, 2016; O'Shea, 2008), influenced by the development of a 'myth of the west' and issues of music and identity in Northern Ireland (Vallely, 2008) and a romantic nationalist focus on western places, but also recognisable in other studies relating to competitions and the activities of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (Kearney, 2013).¹ Flute player and academic Niall Keegan asserts: 'In traditional music today there are discourses and vocabularies that are privileged above others... Such terminologies are built around issues of regional style and past, privileged practice' (2011: 40). Critically responding to these narratives of tradition with references to music and musical figures beyond the canon is an important aspect of academic study.

The location of DkIT in the Oriel region provides an opportunity for engagement with its local musical traditions. However, it is important not to seek to create new canons through the rejection of established knowledge or become insular in the approach to teaching and research. Faculty and students engage with, and bring their learning into, the communities of musical practice outside of the institution. The relationship between these two communities is part of the development of regional musical practice, and each can inform and influence the other.

1.3 UNDERSTANDING REGIONS

¹ Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) is an organisation committed to the promotion of Irish traditional music, song, dance, and the Irish language. It operates a network of branches in Ireland and internationally and organises a number of music festivals, competitions and workshops.

Presenting at an early academic conference focused on the concept of regional styles in Irish traditional music, Co. Louth singer and collector Seán Corcoran stated:

... concepts of place and region have long had a powerful role in the history of Irish thought. These concepts have been largely ideological constructs with little correlation with cultural distribution patterns, and have been widely accepted in fields of folk-music and folklore studies, where they are linked with various related concepts, like 'remoteness' and 'authenticity'.

(1997: 25)

Despite the perceived acceptance of 'place' and 'region' in Irish traditional music, the discourse on regional styles is quite recent and in some instances attempts to force the identification of regions with particular aspects of musical style, a connection that can be overly romanticized or easily problematized. Seán Ó Riada is an important figure in this context, particularly through his radio series *Our Musical Heritage*, first broadcast in 1962 and later published as a book in 1982. His influence on the study and performance of Irish traditional music extends far beyond that. The radio series and book focus on a small number of regions, not including Oriel. *Our Musical Heritage* began an examination and discussion of stylistic differences in Irish traditional music based on a regional model that was already being eroded by changes in technology and society during the 1960s. Nevertheless, the doomsayers who predicted the extinction of regional styles and the homogenization of Irish traditional music (Ó Bróithe, 1999; Ó Riada, 1982) have been challenged by a desire amongst practitioners and listeners to engage with diversity in the tradition (Dowling, 1999; Kearney, 2012), some of which remains connected at some level with a sense of place and motivated in part by a desire to commercialize regional identities in Irish traditional music within the tourism, recording, and entertainment industries (Kneafsey, 2003; Laffey, 2007; Vallely, 1997). The relevance of regional identities in Irish traditional music today relates to both the continuing importance of local music activity and the influence of marketing and commercialism on regional styles and identities (Ó hAllmhuráin, 2016; O'Shea, 2008).

The initial focus of my own postgraduate studies was the concept of musical style, but as my understanding developed, I became more interested in the importance of regional identities expressed in relation to music and in the networks, infrastructure, and ecosystems through which musical culture is shaped, supported, and nurtured. As Gergory Dorchak

writes in relation to Cape Breton fiddle traditions, 'to think of cultural practices only via stylistic terms can hamper the ability of a tradition to adapt to the inevitable changes that occur within a community' (2008: 153). Thus, this chapter is not about musical style, although regional musical styles are a component of what I am discussing. More than this, I am referring to what Corcoran terms 'tribalism' (1997), cognisant of the problems he presents when discussing the processes that shape a regional understanding of Irish traditional music. Musical sounds are not abandoned as we listen to traditional music, but they are contextualized by a geographical narrative that considers the wider social and cultural contexts.

As I have stated elsewhere, 'local contexts remain important for the transmission, performance and consumption of Irish traditional music' but 'local distinctiveness is challenged by changing social and economic conditions, technology and the distances that many musicians travel to take part in musical events' (Kearney, 2012: 1). Whereas early attempts to identify regions in Irish traditional music focused on aspects of musical style, Sally Sommers Smith states that 'regional styles, and indeed dance music in its entirety, are no longer geographically bound' (2001: 115). Yet it is not unusual to meet a musician who emphasizes their connections to a place, read a review that interprets a recording in the context of a regional style, or supervise an academic project that seeks to highlight the musical heritage of a particular region. Thus a new understanding of regions is required. As geographer and musician Deborah Thompson notes in a study of Appalachian musical traditions:

Like the rest of space, regions are now conceived as multiple, shifting, and contingent, with porous boundaries if they are 'bounded' at all. The processual, historically contingent nature of a region and its entanglement with various networks of social relations makes it hard to characterize or describe, as it is constantly changing and evolving, with different parts changing at different rates and continually forming new webs of connection.

(2006: 67)

Irish traditional music has become a globally performed art form, and that many of its participants have no hereditary links with the country provokes questions about the connections between music, place, and concepts of authenticity (see also Keegan, 2011: 40). Place and tradition must be understood as processes and, to this end, Mats Melin notes the

internal and external forces that shape a dance tradition and the 'paradoxical concept of continuity and change in tradition and issues of selectivity, creativity and ongoing reconstruction within tradition' (2012: 132). Regional identities, though often based on the construction of historical *raison d'être* or foundation myth, are also a process that can be revised, reshaped, and resounded. As Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin has noted, the music of regions has changed as it has moved into new spaces, such as the pub, and more recently become part of the tourism industry (2016: 228). The development of academic communities engaged in the research and performance of Irish traditional music involving selectivity, creativity, and ongoing reconstruction have also created new spaces and soundscapes that are part of the evolution of regional identities in the tradition. While the community of musical practice may itself be divided, sometimes by oversimplified binaries of 'tradition' and 'innovation', the academic institution becomes a space for research, dialogue, and experimentation (see Hill, 2009b). The institution can instigate change but is more likely to reflect changes, attitudes, and practices in the wider traditional music communities. Reflective practice and increasing global interaction amongst academics brings new perspectives on and to the local.

Understanding changing contexts for the transmission, performance, and commercialization of Irish traditional music is integral to its academic study. A central focus of this is the music's globalization, which can be examined historically (Motherway, 2013) but is particularly prominent in the 1990s. Even after the significant influence of *Riverdance* (1994) on the commercial market for Irish traditional music, Seán Laffey, editor of *Irish Music Magazine*, stated:

Riverdance was a phenomena that raised many boats on the tide of its popular commercial success, and yet running counter to its jazzy glamour has been a strong re-awakening of the local traditions, the rise of a new generation of solo and duet players re-interpreting the best of the past in a faithful and diligent fashion (2007: 1).

Laffey's statement suggests a 'revival' but, alongside a rediscovery of the past through music, there is also a process of constructing new local soundscapes within the commercial music industry. Connell and Gibson critique the association between music and place in the commercial music industry and examine the process of deterritorialization in music, acknowledging that:

musicians are situated in multiple cultural and economic networks – some seeking to reinvent or revive traditions, others creating opportunities in musical production to stir national political consciousness or contribute to transnational political movements, and some merely seeking to achieve commercial success’ (Connell and Gibson, 2004: 343).

The attachment of a commercial value to musics that are accompanied by a local or regional narrative is examined by Valley (1997) and Keegan (2011), but these narratives do not necessitate a distinctive local sound or an adherence to older musical styles.

1.4 IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN ACADEMIC SPACES

Academic institutions have a role in changing and shaping local musical processes, through interaction with students who travel from and study at a distance from the institution’s location, and through engagement with their local communities. These local communities can and do become the subject of research. Within Irish traditional music, Talty has noted that ‘young practitioner-researchers are engaging in “ethnomusicology at home” at an unprecedented rate. Their research projects explore cultural and musical aspects of Irish traditional repertoire in great detail and in the process diversify students’ understanding of it within and beyond academic institutions’ (2017: 105). Moves towards applied ethnomusicology include facilitating workshops for, and sharing research outputs with, schools and community groups, leading to the reintroduction of forgotten repertoires and enhancement of local festivals (see Nettl, 2005; Pettan and Tilton, 2015). In this chapter I critically examine these processes from my own experience in Co. Louth and the surrounding Oriel cultural region.

The Irish traditional music community has conventionally existed outside of academia but through the twentieth century gained a greater presence at Irish institutions. This is not unproblematic. As Talty notes, ‘Traditional musics are communal, extra-institutional forms of expression associated with unique processes of transmission, enculturation, and social interaction’ raising questions as to how these cultural processes are represented in higher education and ‘what aspects of community music making... traditional music curricula hope to impart to their students’

(Talty, 2017: 102). Talty challenges academics to consider their role not only in the transmission of knowledge but as factors in the evolution of a musical community. As members of the Irish traditional music community increasingly engage in academic studies, and as academic institutions increasingly include the study of folk music traditions in their curricula, the role of the institutions in shaping the geography of Irish traditional music becomes more apparent. Nevertheless, an academic institution is only one factor in the development of music and regional identities, and its role in a musical ecosystem should not be overplayed.

Academic institutions are spaces in which social relations are both constructed and analysed but as they draw upon international literature and research, and teach students from a wide geographical area, they facilitate the opening up of their regions intellectually, creatively, and geographically. Academic institutions can assert a local identity and highlight their role within their region – ‘DkIT has earned a reputation as the leading higher education provider in the North East of Ireland... [and] we have contributed to the transformation of our region’ (Dundalk Institute of Technology, n.d.) – while simultaneously promoting a strategy of internationalization. The music of the Institute’s community reflects this Janus-like vision, but this does not necessitate a fixed musical sound or style.

The study of traditional music is a component of both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at DkIT and is an integral area of research in the Creative Arts Research Centre. Students engage with the cultural, social, and historical study of traditional musics while also developing their performance skills. The *Ceol Oirghialla* Traditional Music Ensemble, which is comprised of staff and students from the Institute and, latterly, the OTO, an intergenerational community orchestra that is an ensemble-in-residence at DkIT, have been to the fore in the performance of traditional music in the Institute. The ensembles enrich the cultural life of the Institute and the region, performing at a number of events throughout the year.

Keegan (2012) highlights a focus on solo performers in the tradition but also acknowledges a growing relevance in ensemble performance. Academic institutions provide a space in which musicians come together and explore their practice in groups, often with credits assigned to ensemble playing. Thus, it is useful to think of tradition as a process (Glassie, 1995) or a ‘work in progress’ (Spalding and Woodside, 1995: 249).

New sounds that shape regional music identities can evolve and develop, but with institutions attracting new students each year, the sounds produced by these musicians might constantly change.

1.5 ACADEMIC AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Traditional music in Dundalk and the wider Oriel region was well established prior to the development of music programmes at DkIT. A branch of CCÉ was first founded in Dundalk in 1958 and the Dundalk-based Siamsa Céilí Band won the All-Ireland senior title three years in a row from 1967 to 1969. The music of the area was significantly influenced by outsiders including Sligo musician John Joe Gardiner (1893–1979). The emulation of a Sligo style and focus on a Sligo repertoire significantly influenced music-making in the area in the mid-twentieth century and may have slowed the emergence of a distinctive regional musical identity centred on Dundalk. Later artists including Gerry O'Connor (b. 1958), who was a faculty member at DkIT for a time, and his wife Eithne Ní Uallacháin (1957–1999), evoked a regional identity in their recordings (Lá Lugh, 1995; Ní Uallacháin, 2014) through reference to local folklore and themes, and the performance of repertoire from local sources. This sense of regional identity was further promoted through the publication of *A Hidden Ulster* (Ní Uallacháin, 2003), recordings by Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin (b. 1950) including *A Hidden Ulster* (2007) and *Ceoltaí Oiriala* (2017), and by the group Oirialla (2013). These local traditions inform the development of Irish traditional music at DkIT, which engages with local cultures alongside national and international ethnomusicologies.

Commenting on the institutionalization of numerous oral folk and traditional musics in formal education programmes in Western-style conservatories and music academies, Juniper Hill notes: 'These programmes can have huge impacts not only on musical transmission methods, but also on aesthetics, repertoire, style, performance practices, creative opportunities, hierarchies, political manipulation, economic considerations, valuation, status, and public perception' (2009a: 207–208). Focusing on the goals of the Sibelius Academy in Finland, she outlines aspects that are shared with DkIT: 'to resuscitate moribund traditions, to diversify the field of folk music, to increase the status and image of folk music, to produce highly skilled and knowledgeable folk musicians, and

to turn folk musicians into artists and folk music into a respected art form' (Hill, 2009b: 88–89). Through engagement in traditional music in the form of academic research and recognition, academic institutions inform, support, and even advocate for the music in the region, engaging with local musicians, attracting musicians from outside, and facilitating rehearsals and performances.

Linking between regional and academic communities of musical practices can be mutually beneficial and reciprocal but will not, for various reasons, include everybody. The OTO was established in 2017 and, as well as rehearsing in DkIT, it includes members of faculty amongst its directors and membership. The OTO received two EPIC Awards from the organization Voluntary Arts in 2019. The Institute is also a partner in Music Generation Louth and hosts some of their activities. Music Generation Louth have also recently partnered with CCÉ to establish a youth orchestra engaging with Irish traditional music. Researcher-practitioners at DkIT facilitated a variety of activities for Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in 2018, the festival that focused on the musical traditions of Louth and Oriel,² and this follows a series of concerts since 2012 that have presented and highlighted local music and musicians. Féile na Tána (est. 2015), organized by local musicians Zoe Conway and John McIntyre – who have also contributed to instrumental tuition at DkIT – has also promoted some regionally focused musical projects. Staff and students from DkIT have also performed in An Táin Arts Centre and the Oriel Centre in Dundalk,³ both venues that regularly programme Irish traditional music. Thus, as in other music scenes, it is the emergence of several actors that underpins musical development; the academic institution is one and the incorporation of traditional music into academic programmes is only one aspect of the role of the institution.

Shortly after moving to Dundalk in 2011, I joined the local branch of CCÉ and began participating in local music sessions. I became more aware of the sense of tradition and, in some ways, of a lack of this sense amongst

² Organized by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, translated as the 'Festival of the Music of Ireland', is the largest annual festival of Irish traditional music in the country and places an emphasis on competitions.

³ The Oriel Centre at Dundalk Gaol is the Regional Resource Centre for Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and, in addition to performances, it hosts classes by the Dundalk branch of the organization.

a greater part of the community, particularly in terms of a regional identity.⁴ And yet a sense of regional identity is explicitly present in the work of a variety of musicians and ensembles in the region, reinforced by promotional rhetoric and reviews. The music department with which I took up a lecturing position was referred to as *Ceol Oirghialla*, directly translated as ‘the music of Oriel’. This potentially sought to create a status for the Department and connect its identity to the region. Building upon the work of my colleagues and predecessors, I had an opportunity to ‘create a new music (sub)culture... through a combination of ideas with education and institutional power’ (Hill, 2009b: 86). Over the past nine years I have endeavoured to develop a focus in my teaching, particularly through the DkIT *Ceol Oirghialla* Traditional Music Ensemble, on the traditions of the region but placing these in a broader soundscape of Irish traditional music. Concerts have included *Bearna Uladh* (2017) which focused on the musical traditions around the Irish border, and *Oirghialla Oscailte* (2018), when the Ensemble was joined by the OTO. Other concerts, such as *Imirce an Cheoil* (2012) and *Ó Chladach go Cladach* (2015) reflected the region’s links with musicians from Sligo and the influence of Irish-American musical traditions on the development of traditional music in Ireland. Performers in all of the concerts included many students encountering Irish traditional music from a background in other musical genres, and their perceptions, creativity, and interpretation shaped the music heard.

Two aspects of academic engagement with Irish traditional music at DkIT worth considering are how development of historical research informs current practice and leads to a revival in aspects of a musical tradition (see Rosenberg, 2014), and how engagement in creative arts practice and teaching impacts on changing musical aesthetics within the tradition. In addition to research undertaken by academics in the department, a number of undergraduate and postgraduate research dissertations have focused on local or regional issues, including through creating critical editions from manuscript sources, developing

⁴ My reflections as a ‘blow-in’ engaging in a local Irish traditional music scene are informed by the work of anthropologist Adam Kaul (2013) and his study of Irish traditional music in Doolin. ‘Blow-in’ is usually used to refer to a person who becomes resident in a community other than their place of birth and can often be applied for a long and indefinite period of time.

biographical studies of local musical figures, and exploring performance practice and the musical styles of influential performers. Performing groups and teachers incorporate knowledge and skills from this research into their practice, changing pedagogy and using new or rediscovered repertoire, which may also be arranged to fit various instrumentations or aesthetic concerns. The development of larger scale ensembles or 'traditional orchestras' reflects a changing aesthetic and performance practice in the tradition (see also Keegan, 2012).

The DkIT *Ceol Oirghialla* Traditional Music Ensemble draws inspiration from a variety of Irish traditional music groups, exploring inspirations and arrangement possibilities with respect for both tradition and new tastes. The ensemble also draws upon research into the musical traditions of Louth and Oriel by staff and postgraduates in the Institute. Concerts in recent years have celebrated famous local musical figures including fiddle players John Joe Gardiner (2012) and Josephine Keegan (2013), dancer Mona Roddy (2014), and piano accordion player Brian O'Kane (2017). Students had the opportunity to meet, speak, and perform with Keegan and O'Kane, the central musical figures in the concerts *Ómós Josephine Keegan* (2013) and *Marching in Tradition* (2017) respectively. For *Marching in Tradition*, the compositions of O'Kane were transcribed from both manuscript and audio sources as part of a research project. Some local performers have participated in performances at the Institute with the students. These have included students of Mona Roddy and the Walsh School of Music. All of the concerts reflect students' learning from both aural and written sources within the classroom, and the students are involved in the development of arrangements and the final selection of repertoire. Some students who teach in the community and for local branches of CCÉ have incorporated this repertoire into their own teaching.

All the traditional music activity referred to in this chapter reflects a move towards ethnomusicology at home, and this brings with it several challenges. Writing in the second edition of the seminal ethnomusicological book on fieldwork, *Shadows in the Field*, Bruno Nettl contends:

We came to realize that we should do field research in our own communities, something that was both easier (it's our turf) and harder (be 'objective' about one's own family and friends?) than working abroad. We began to question the role we were playing in the 'field' communities, whether we were doing harm or good, and about our relationship to ethnomusicologists from those host communities. We worried that our very

presence would result in significant culture change (and sometimes it did).

(2008: vi)

Similarly acknowledging the potential impact of academia on communities of practice, Scottish geographer and flute player Frances Morton argued:

There is currently concern within Geography, surrounding the intrusion of academic research performances on lay social practices and performances. There is a worry that the lay practices may change due to the influence of academic research. However, recognising that research is a performance in its own right allows better critique of how we undertake our research, accumulate and understand our geographic knowledge, and relate to our research participants.

(2001: 67)

As is outlined in this chapter, it is clear that there is a close connection between academic research and practice in Irish traditional music with many academics identifying themselves and being identified as practitioners.

There are two competing geographies evident in the discourse created by my reflections and communication with stakeholders. One, a historical geography that focuses on the past and the creation of heritage (Ronström, 2014; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). The second, a musicking geography (Kavanagh 2020) that embraces the lived musical experience in the present. The former is potentially easier for higher education to engage with in the context of curriculum and the logistics of scheduling, but the latter may create more opportunities for engagement with the community of musical practice. Each connects people, music, and place but with different learning outcomes and understandings of the role, value, and nature of traditional music. The emphasis defines the experience of learning Irish traditional music in a higher education and the engagement with regional music identities.

1.6 ACADEMIC OBLIGATIONS AND COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

In contrast with the programmes to the fore in Gayraud (2016) and Talty (2019), the BA (Hons) Music is not a programme that specifically focuses on traditional or folk music. For many of the former members of the

traditional music ensemble, the study of Irish traditional music performance amounted to less than half of a module each semester, with some additional opportunities to engage in theoretical or historical studies of Irish traditional music. It is also important to note that the programme is not a performance degree but does provide opportunities for solo performers to specialize in performance. This manifested itself in the context of the traditional music ensemble through opportunities for solos or small group performances at concerts.

In contrast with the concept of enculturation, employed by Cawley (2013) in relation to the learning of Irish traditional music, the study of Irish traditional music at DkIT introduces many students to the tradition without facilitating their development to proficient practitioners of the culture. Nevertheless, some former students have transitioned from beginners to professional performers of Irish traditional music, while some students with extensive prior learning in the genre benefitted from an academic approach to the study of the culture. The positive aspect of including Irish traditional music on the programme at DkIT was identified by local musician and former fiddle tutor Zoe Conway:

Having a traditional music element to the courses at DkIT has given a focus, drive and outlet to the traditional musicians taking part in the courses. These musicians have gone on to become traditional music teachers and practitioners in our area which helps to promote traditional music here (personal communication, 25 May 2020).

A challenge for any academic programme is ensuring that graduates achieve a sufficiently high standard to meet the requirements of their industry or sector. Writing about world music ensembles in US universities, Solís notes the difficulty of developing an ensemble to 'a level of achievement commensurate with the director's hopeful expectation' (2004: 14). He highlights turnover in membership amongst the factors that impact on the ability to progress. Understanding the pedagogical goals of the ensemble are critical and the purpose of the traditional music ensemble at DkIT may align more directly with the rationale provided by John Baily to Simone Krüger (2009), whereby learning to perform is understood as a research technique and it is not expected that all of the students should achieve a high standard. Nevertheless, all members of the traditional music ensemble at DkIT participate in public performance and some members have pursued subsequent professional engagements as performers of Irish traditional music.

Under my direction from 2011 to 2019, the traditional music ensemble at DkIT developed a particular focus on local musical traditions, albeit with explorations of musical links between Ireland and Scotland and the USA. The local focus of the ensemble was complemented by a number of postgraduate studies that also focused on the surrounding region, many of which were under my supervision. This approach provided a specific focus and identity for the ensemble, placed a particular attention on aspects of Irish traditional music that had not previously received significant attention, and attempted to make connections with the local community. There was an inclusive classroom approach that sought to be student-centred. There were no pre-requisites or auditions for joining the traditional music ensemble. This resulted in a membership that presented a wide range of abilities and experience in traditional music, including international and Erasmus exchange programme students. This was noted, positively and otherwise, by former students in their responses to a survey I carried out in May 2020. 45 respondents, representing over half the membership of the Ensemble during this time period, provided often similar reflections that, in the following discussion, is complemented by interviews and personal communication with a variety of other local stakeholders in Irish traditional music.

The make-up of the ensemble has a significant impact on the pedagogical approach, learning outcomes, and performances. The ensemble did not train all members to be proficient performers of Irish traditional music but the experience of musicking supported by lectures in history and critical theory developed the appreciation amongst members for traditional music, their sense of place, and the role of music in society. Some former students indicated a desire for a higher level of engagement in technical aspects of performance but the overwhelming majority of respondents identified the approach as creating an opportunity to engage with a musical tradition that they had limited or no prior experience with.

Creating and sustaining a connection with the local community is a challenge for the academic institution and this can be affected by the approach and ethos of the academy and the awareness and perception of the academy's activities amongst the community (see also Talty, 2019). Writing about the BMus Honours in Folk and Traditional Music degree at Newcastle University, UK, Gayraud notes:

This Folk Degree initiative has not always been well received by the folk community. In discussion and interview, many of those whose musical lives have are firmly rooted in local sessions expressed profound scepticism regarding the feasibility of communicating folk musical culture effectively within the context of a formalised higher educational programme that is characterised by the standard models of lectures and tutorials, graded learning, examination and assessment.

(2016: 128)

In relation to the programme at DkIT, local musician and music teacher Olive Murphy noted that although she did participate in some sessions involving the students from the Institute, the concerts each semester were the only occasions that she was aware of (personal communication, 18 May 2020), while one of the graduates commented that ‘performances outside of the college made us more present in the Dundalk arts community as a whole’. However, during the time period in question, a small number of the students participated regularly in local sessions, attended traditional music concerts, or engaged in teaching Irish traditional music locally. This, combined with a low presence of former members engaged in these activities in the region post graduation, limits the long-term impact of the traditional music ensemble on the local music scene. Local music teacher and DkIT fiddle tutor Noreen McManus also linked participation in local sessions to the learning experience, recognizing that the concerts gave the students confidence (interview, 22 May 2020), a point also made by many former ensemble members, but highlighting the value of the sessions for learning about the culture and enhancing their playing. David Hughes of SOAS, University of London, is one of a number of authors who point to the challenge of attempting to create a learning experience that would parallel a home culture (Hughes, 2004). Even at DkIT, where the ensemble focuses on the culture of the surrounding region, a challenge remains to create links between the classroom and the wider community. Nevertheless, McManus pointed to a number of students and former students who did engage in teaching, noting that they were ‘teaching what they were learning’, thus bringing the ensemble repertoire into the wider community.

Musician Tommy Fegan, who initiated the opportunity to develop a concert on the music of Josephine Keegan in 2013, noted that activities at DkIT provided ‘a deeper appreciation of our local repertoire, performers and traditions’ (personal communication, 25 May 2020). While Fegan highlighted the potential for further concerts on older generations of

musicians, one critique of the approach taken to date was that there was a focus on historical aspects of traditional music in the area rather than a representation of the musicians currently active on the scene. Noting a focus on the 'big names', McManus highlighted the potential to include other musicians from the region that might not normally have such a platform. Acknowledging previous collaborations with music and dance schools, she stressed the potential for further collaboration and the impact that this might have. Other respondents also noted the potential of the concerts to serve as a public platform for local artists. McManus also highlighted the impact on her younger students of experiencing the traditional music concerts at DkIT. Teenagers who see the young adults in the DkIT Ensemble aspire to be like them: 'it's cool'. Paul Hayes, Director of An Táin Arts Centre in Dundalk, also recognized the potential for concerts and other activities to provide inspiration for young people in the region (interview, 25 May 2020).

Many of the traditional music concerts by the ensemble at DkIT would not have been possible without the support of external musicians such as Brian O'Kane, Josephine Keegan, and Mona Roddy. One graduate noted: 'I was introduced to a number [of] renowned Irish musicians around Dundalk'. This was echoed in the response of another graduate who wrote that participating in the ensemble activities: '[i]ntroduced me to other musicians both local and attending DkIT'. On some occasions, when a particular musician was featured prominently, members of their family were often present in the audience and this impacted on the atmosphere and occasion. O'Kane noted that the concerts provided young musicians studying music the opportunity to hear an older generation and use this as a yardstick and, through hearing their stories, to understand the social aspect of music historically, learning where it came from and what it meant to people (interview, 24 May 2020). The concerts were valued by many of the local musicians as a public platform and, for O'Kane, an occasion to relive memories and create new ones.

In developing concerts on specific themes and, in some instances, honouring individuals, it is necessary to make choices. A number of musicians from the region have been identified, with some suggestions coming from the community but, with the norm of one concert per semester until 2019, it would take some time to feature all aspects. While some musicians have engaged and supported the concerts and the

ensemble, the decision of some local musicians not to participate in activities, events, or reviews of traditional music activities in the Institute hampers the sharing of information and ideas that may work towards greater collaboration and integration. Some stakeholders imagine a public service role for the Institute, whereby it documents and features local musicians and traditions, or acts as a patron for local artists. Many have considered the Institute a beneficial collaborator, but it is evident that some may view the Institute as a competitor. Given the small number of public events at DkIT, it is unlikely that the Institute would have a negative impact on audiences in other venues and efforts have been made to support, participate in, and promote events hosted and promoted by others in the region.

The opportunity to meet the students was welcomed by some of the musicians, such as O’Kane, who visited the campus in preparation for a concert of his music and returned on other occasions to help with research projects and attend other performances. While some graduates indicated that they had been involved in local sessions, many did not engage in this scene, which is critical to the local Irish traditional music community. However, another graduate noted how participating in a performance by the DkIT Traditional Music Ensemble in an external venue introduced them to other artists and a network to which they still now belong. It is also evident from the responses that international students valued participation in the traditional music ensemble not only as an opportunity to engage with Irish culture and gain performance experiences but also to integrate more into the Institute community. The opportunity to experience and learn about social contexts for music is important, as indicated by many respondents.

While the impact of ensemble on the wider community is difficult to assess, there is a clear sense from former members of the ensemble that their awareness of regional diversity and local traditions was enhanced. One respondent stated: ‘My participation in DkIT Traditional Irish Music Ensemble has facilitated a greater appreciation for local and regional collections of Irish Traditional Music’ and ‘[b]rought to my attention the wealth of traditional music and musicians in the Oriel region’. Another graduate wrote: ‘each performance at the end of a semester was made all the more interesting and educational for its content and how it was focused on a particular area. It highlighted selected tunes composed or played in a specific region’. Another stated: ‘Through the trad ensemble, I

learned more about the music of the Oriel region that I may not have otherwise examined. For example, examining some of the works of Josephine Keegan, working with local musicians such as Gerry O' Connor, learning tunes with roots in the area'. Audiences and other stakeholders have also noted this impact. Mary Capplis, the acting Arts Officer with Louth County Council commented that the DkIT Traditional Music Ensemble:

... have provided a spotlight on their music, for example by focusing on the 'Gap of the North' and the music, song and dance traditions of the 'Oriel' region, they have substantially raised the profile of this rich heritage. For those previously unaware of Oriel music and traditions, the themed concerts provide an opportunity to highlight the cultural legacy both here in the region and further afield.

(personal communication, 25 May 2020)

For Capplis,

Promoting the research and performances of local musicians has in turn informed audiences of the dedication of local musicians Pádraigín Ni Uallacháin and Gerry O'Connor who strive to promote the Oriel region's rich cultural musical heritage. This consequentially has inspired young musicians to delve into the music, learn it and perform it, thus keeping the legacy alive for future generations.

(*ibid.*)

Similarly, local Irish dancing teacher Dearbhla Lennon noted:

The opportunities for platforms of this nature are somewhat limited in the area, particularly when it comes to more niche aspects of local culture — this provides one. Exposure on social media platforms ahead of events is also beneficial in raising awareness, not just of the upcoming event but of the artist/art in general.

(personal communication, 26 May 2020)

Communicating to and attracting an audience beyond an established cohort for a genre or artform is a challenge not only for the academic institution in terms of sharing research in the community but for local arts centres and organizations.

Another challenge shared with the local arts centre is striking a balance between programming local artists and visiting artists with a national or international reputation (Hayes, 25 May 2020). The concerts at DkIT may have focused on local themes but there was space for individual

expression and guest artists from Ireland and America also featured. As Capplis reminded me, 'the membership spans from all over Ireland, they bring different styles of playing as well as different music (tunes) to the audience. It therefore broadens the players' repertoire significantly and brings previously unheard music to a wider audience'. While the concerts did include a number of well-known tunes in Irish traditional music, the themes and approaches distinguished the experience of studying music at DkIT from at other institutions. This is critical, as Talty notes: 'Challenging the processes and consequences of canonicity in music education is absolutely necessary in order to optimize the diversity, inclusivity, and relevance of third-level music curricula' (2019: 266). Writing about folk music in England, Gayraud notes a debate in folk music circles regarding the institutionalization of folk music and the development of new opportunities in Higher Education for the study of folk music, stating: 'it is clear that the institutionalization of resources and transmission processes is having a profound impact both on musical canons, determining which tunes become central and which become peripheral, and on the styles of performance that are accepted as normative' (2016: 26). It is not clear if the activities at DkIT had a direct impact on the canon but it is noteworthy that recent awardees of the broadcaster TG4's Gradam Ceoil prizes for Irish traditional music include Seán McElwain for a project related to his doctoral studies on Sliabh Beagh completed at DkIT (McElwain, 2014a; 2014b). In 2018, Gerry O'Connor published a book based on the MA that he completed in 2008 and has both recorded and taught many tunes from it. Padraigín Ní Uallacháin has developed a website on the traditions of the Oriel region, which also features material from Sylvia Crawford related to her MA research at DkIT (Crawford, 2019). Arrangements originally made by me for the traditional music ensemble at DkIT also became the basis for the early arrangements and repertoire of the Oriel Traditional Orchestra. Local bands involving graduates from the undergraduate music programme include Kern and Alfi, who have included reference to traditions from the region on their recordings including *False Deceiver* (Kern, 2016), *The Left and the Leaving* (Kern, 2019), and *Wolves in the Woods* (Alfi, 2019).

While there is an emphasis on historical aspects of the musical culture of the region evident in the programming of concerts involving the DkIT Traditional Music Ensemble, there is a need to challenge the perceived duality of tradition and innovation, a prominent theme in Talty's (2019)

dissertation. Creativity is embedded in the ethos of the School of Informatics and Creative Media at DkIT and the Carroll Building provides a space for a number of creative disciplines including music, television, film, theatre, and creative media. The situating of the traditional music ensemble in this milieu mirrors Doherty's identification of the potential of higher education institutions to develop a creative environment that encourages experimentation and innovation in traditional and folk music performance (2002: 10). Creativity and experimentation were a critical aspect of the traditional music ensemble at DkIT and the musicians within the ensemble created opportunity for this. One graduate noted: 'I found it very interesting and exciting at times, when it would all come together, but even more so when we would experiment and amalgamated styles, even if it didn't work out'. Another graduate wrote: 'I always found that the traditional music ensemble allowed for more creative expression, with musicians who were particularly passionate about Irish music' and another commented how they 'enjoyed exploring more contemporary ideas in the context of a traditional ensemble'. While the ensemble did not directly engage with popular music, it did draw influence from popular music. This echoes observations by Simone Krüger (2009), drawing in particular on interviews with David Hughes at SOAS.

A challenge for an institution can be related to its size and budgets and this can impact on its ability to support a multitude of workshops and masterclasses involving visiting artists or other research related activities such as documentation and archiving. Conway noted the involvement of high-profile practitioners as part of the faculty at DkIT previously, stating:

I think promotion of traditional arts starts with the expertise of practitioners and the key to it is including and building on a strong base of people who are knowledgeable about traditional arts in Louth, and giving them opportunities to share and inspire students and the community in general.

(personal communication, 25 May 2020)

While instrumental tutors are often drawn from the locality and have included a number of prominent local performers, it is not feasible for a small institution to host a large number of masterclasses or offer regular remuneration to local artists to be more involved in campus life. Fluctuating student numbers make it difficult to guarantee sustained employment, particularly for instrumental tutors of Irish traditional music. While some institutions engage and have developed a network that

extends into its community, sometimes engaging this network in curriculum design, this has been developed to a limited extent at DkIT. This leads to a potential for pedagogues such as myself to potentially ‘impose personal biases and perspectives that may be at odds with the expectations and values of the wider community for whom ownership of this music remains a considerable concern’ (Talty, 2019: 306). There is a celebration of local figures at DkIT and the curriculum draws on the work of local researchers and practitioners and research on the local area but there is potential for stronger connection with the community of Irish traditional music in the region. Facilitating the OTO at DkIT has been one step in this process. The establishment of the OTO was noted by some respondents as something that, although not led by the institution, opened up the space to the wider community. While one local musician indicated that there was a large number of adults interested in taking courses in Irish traditional music, when the institution did offer a part-time programme, the number of applications was limited.

A further challenge is the sustainability of programmes and curriculum. As part of Programmatic Review in 2019, the Traditional Music Ensemble was removed from the curriculum in spite of strong stakeholder support. Nevertheless, a traditional music ensemble continued at the Institute in a voluntary and extra-curricular capacity during the 2019–20 academic year but activities and events, including a planned concert, were cancelled due to COVID-19. It is apparent from meeting former attendees, and from the feedback from former students, that the ensemble was significant both in the context of adding to the learning experience of students and in the cultural life of the region.

1.7 CONCLUSION

Performances and discourses of Irish traditional music often express or refer to regional identities. A trend towards regionalization and regionality in the tradition is influenced by local politics, commercial endeavour, and academic study. In many instances there is an emphasis on story over musical style through the processes of naming tunes and presenting narratives that associate repertoire with people and places, rather than on performing in a particular musical style or creating an identifiable regional sound. Audiences can relate to and interpret the musical performance based on their own prior experiences, knowledge of

music and culture, and ability to relate to extra-musical geographical narratives. The authenticity of performances may be judged differently by local and global audiences and understanding differences in the interpretation of authenticity in performance practice is central to identifying regional differences in aesthetics and musical identities.

Regionalization can challenge the established canon and narratives of the tradition, drawing attention to neglected places and highlighting alternative soundscapes and approaches. The academic institution is a space in which regional identities are constructed, deconstructed, and performed through research, learning, and teaching. Through a variety of research practices including archival research, performance practice, composition, and applied ethnomusicology, Dundalk Institute of Technology plays a role in the (re)construction and dissemination of a local regional identity for the Oriel region. Reflecting and contributing to the activities of a wider community of musical practice in the region, faculty and students are active agents in the processes of musical evolution and the expression of a regional identity locally and globally.

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