

A NEED FOR PIED PIPERS?: MAKING CONNECTIONS IN A COMMUNITY ARTS SONG-MAKING PROJECT

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Abstract

Music and musicking are powerful contributors to a sense and awareness of place. A community music project in 2021 focused on the small town of Dunleer on the east coast of Ireland. Overshadowed by the larger towns of Dundalk and Drogheda to the north and south respectively, Dunleer has a rich history and many opportunities for the local community to engage in the arts. However, despite much talent, the groups and individuals involved are largely disconnected from and sometimes unaware of each other. This paper considers how a participatory, arts-based virtual project that sought to encourage collaboration through artistic endeavour highlighted the potential for greater collaboration between stakeholders to achieve increased participation in the arts and the local community. Drawing on the author's perspective as an artist and lead facilitator, it details the process and critiques the role of various stakeholders in the project, incorporating an autoethnographic approach that focuses on the role of third-party facilitators in community music initiatives.

Keywords: *Community Music, Music and Place, Songwriting, Collaboration, Music Participation.*

Introduction

During a radio interview on 1 September 2021 about a community project I was leading entitled “Songs of Lann Léire”, local radio presenter Gerry Kelly described me as a Pied Piper-type figure. Kelly was referring to a mythological figure who

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captivated and led rats and people away from a town by playing music. Although the legends have darker aspects and meanings, his comment was meant as a compliment to me, reflecting my presence as a musical outsider who prompted change in the town. I felt immediately uncomfortable with the focus on my role and made reference to the many other people involved in the project. Nevertheless, the conversation prompted me to reflect critically on the project, which involved the recording of two songs by individuals across the community in Dunleer, a growing town with a population of approximately 2000 people on the east coast of Ireland. Funded by the local authority and undertaken during COVID-19 restrictions on social activities, the project sought to develop a sense and pride of place and community through participating in an arts-based project that focused on local themes. I initiated and led the project as a locally-based artist, although I was not from the town. This paper critically reflects on the project and aims to demonstrate how a community arts project can lead to greater levels of collaboration and connectivity in a community.

My association with Dunleer began when I was appointed organist and choir director for St Brigid's Church in 2017. Beyond the choir, I had little interaction with other aspects of community life aside from visiting the secondary school to give a workshop on Irish traditional music and to facilitate banjo lessons for a few weeks at the Scoraíocht, a local cultural centre. I initially composed one of the songs used in this project, "Brigid's Cloak", for the choir in 2019. It was based on stories and mythology related to the patron saint of the church, St Brigid and the choir sang it for the feast day and through the month of February each year. The second song, "Wee Dunleer", had been composed some time previously by a regular singer in the church, Pat Roche, who wished to share his song with others in the community. Pat's song was inspired by the locality and its people and demonstrated a sense of pride of place. For the project, I created a number of resources including scores, tutorial videos and backing tracks that were shared online, inviting people to learn the songs and submit recordings of themselves performing. To complement the songs, photographs and video of the town were compiled, which were then edited by two professionals and shared as videos on the parish website and social media.

The project placed a strong emphasis on local folklore, heritage and a sense of place or local identity in the songs and videos – "Lann Léire" is the Irish language name for the place, translated as "the church of austerity". The subject matter of the songs referred to Brigid, the matron saint of Ireland with local connections, and other aspects of local life in the place. Tradition holds that Brigid was born in the north of County Louth at Faughart and a legend has it that her sight was restored at a well in Dunleer after an incident where she blinded herself to make her less attractive to potential husbands. Prior to writing the hymn to St Brigid, I had approached the Parish Priest for resources and he provided me with notes that he had on file for the

purposes of liturgy, as well as a recently published book on St Brigid by Noel Kissane entitled *Saint Brigid of Kildare: Life, Legend and Cult* [2017]. Although Kissane's work affords little attention to Brigid's connections with Louth, these resources became the basis for the lyrics of the hymn.

While collaboration was a central aim of the project, the acts of musicking were largely done in isolation owing to COVID-19 related restrictions at the time. My role reflected in part what Maurice Mullen [2022] refers to as "evangelists" in the context of Irish traditional music; I was an advocate for community engagement in the arts and hoped to encourage individuals and groups in Dunleer to participate in a collective arts project. I was an outsider with experiences from other places who called on others to join in promoting musical engagement but I had limited prior connection with members of the community. However, a number of community leaders were already present in the community, each integral to the development of different groups and artforms. They can be termed "sentinel musicians", individuals who have served their society "with vigilance, drawing on heightened sensory powers of perception and an ability to shape sound" [Shelemay 2022: xxv]. As collaboration was a critical aim of this project, it was necessary to understand the complexity of collaborating in the context of COVID-19 restrictions, recognising the benefits of collaboration for creativity and "success" [see Eglite 2023]. Beyond the context presented by the COVID-19 restrictions, many of the learnings outlined in this paper remain relevant but the significance of third-party involvement for the sustainability of community music requires further consideration.

Despite the presence of a number of artists and groups in the town, I observed an unconscious silo mentality that meant many activities in the community happened in isolation and did not cross-fertilise as creative, cultural activities that enhanced the sense of place and community. Many of the groups in the town, including church choir, traditional music group and Irish dancing school, were engaged in arts activities in isolation without collaborating or even being aware of each other's activities. Therefore, I was a "creative broker", as I sought to establish interaction among talented individuals and facilitate collaboration [Tjarve et al. 2021; Eglite 2023].

My reflections on this project are guided by scholarship on community music and the geography of music engaging with music, identity and society. Examining the expression of Scottishness, Nicola Wood highlights the exploration of "the epistemological potential of music as a vehicle for social enquiry" [2012: 198]. Mirroring some of the outcomes of this project, Wood argues that music provides "a medium through which notions of identity and place can be created and lived" [2012: 199]. Like Wood, I am a geographer and: "non-representational thinking is also valuable to me as a geographer because it [albeit implicitly] promotes an awareness of

the social, cultural, political and emotional geographies through and in which social practices are negotiated and performed” [2012: 201]. The importance of music for understanding society is also evident in the work of Jacques Attali [1985] and Edward Said [1991], who argue that we can achieve a greater understanding of the world and what is possible through engagement with the performance of music. Engaging primarily with popular music, Simon Frith [1996] advances an understanding of music as a medium of experience while Tia DeNora [2011] highlights how many musical experiences can be individual and hidden, disconnected from the experiences of others but there are opportunities for sharing. Echoing the work of Lee Higgins [2012], who described community music as a form of hospitality, “Songs of Lann Léire” invited participation from across the community, raising awareness of what was present in that community in terms of the arts, and reflecting the need to create connections within the community, particularly in the context of social restrictions imposed in response to a pandemic.

As an artist, my role is also increasingly complicated, as exemplified in a recent edition of *Culture Crossroads*. While my artistic work is evident in my composition and arrangement of songs, Zemīte et al. recognise the impact of a growing digital market whereby “artists have to invest increasing time and energy in production, networking, administration and coordination – a multiplicity of individual initiatives” [2023: 29]. They draw on the distinction between *artistic work* and the *work of an artist* [Lesage 2005], and my networking with local groups and developing my online presence exemplifies the latter.

Methodology

Prompted by the radio interview, I invited ten stakeholders from the “Songs of Lann Léire” project to respond by email to a series of questions, which were developed during a reflection phase after the completion of the project. These stakeholders included leaders within various groups and those involved in the production of the videos. The questions focused on their motivation to engage in the “Songs of Lann Léire” project and what they hoped to achieve, the main challenges to participating in the project, their opinions on the process and outcomes of the project, and their willingness to engage in a similar project in the future. I triangulated these responses with my own autoethnographic reflections that focused on my own experience as artist-facilitator and “blow-in” [Kaul 2009] or third-party collaborator.

“Songs of Lann Léire” was a participatory, arts-based project funded by Creative Ireland, a government-led programme established in 2017 that connects people, creativity and wellbeing across Ireland [Creative Ireland 2023], and the local authority, Louth County Council. The funding application was submitted on behalf of various stakeholders by the Parish Priest and stakeholders included the Parish Choir, local

schools, Men's Sheds Group, the Lolo Robinson School of Irish Dancing and the traditional music organisation Scoraíocht Lann Léire. I had prompted the project and developed the application following conversations with various stakeholders but, as an artist, I was advised that the application would be stronger were it to come from a representative of the community. Indeed, I was happy with this. As the idea had originated with the Parish Choir, I approached the Parish Priest, who was happy to support. He had a great interest in local history and folklore and was an advocate for community enhancement.

The aim of the project was quite simple and reflects many community music projects: To bring together members of the community to create a video of two songs composed for the local community and encourage local participation in the arts. In an effort to encourage participation, in addition to inviting contributions in the form of song or music, we invited people to share photographs, drawings and paintings of the town of Dunleer. The song "Brigid's Cloak" could include rhythms typical of Irish dancing and so we sought to include local Irish dancers. The funding allowed for the involvement of a skilled audio and video editor to create videos that could be shared on social media. The videos featured a variety of voices, faces and images of Dunleer.

There were a number of challenges to developing the project, not least the ongoing social restrictions related to COVID-19. My initial motivation for the project was to encourage choir members to continue to engage in musicking. The first idea was grounded in positive experiences with the Oriel Traditional Orchestra, a community orchestra based in the same region who created a number of videos in isolation over the previous two years [Kearney et al. 2021]. This research highlighted in particular the social benefits of musicking and the need to maintain connections during a period when face-to-face rehearsals were not possible. We also recognised that these provided goals to encourage musical development. The emphasis on connecting communities with their places and engaging with local heritage and folklore, influenced my thinking in relation to the project for Dunleer.

Context and Challenges

The seed for the "Songs of Lann Léire" project was a hymn to St Brigid entitled "Brigid's Cloak" that I had composed for the choir in Dunleer, which we first performed in February 2019. The intention was to invite other groups to learn and record the hymn with the choir, albeit it had to be done adhering to restrictions and Public Health guidelines. This placed an emphasis on technology but, informed by what was happening in education and amongst music groups, plans were developed that, it was hoped, would engage a wider cohort of the community than might ordinarily have participated. When discussing the project with others, another

individual who also contributed to music in the church, folk singer Pat Roche, told me of a song entitled “Wee Dunleer” that he had written about the town, which also mentioned St Brigid. He had already taught his song to the Men’s Shed group and he was eager to see if we could include it in the project. Guided by Higgins [2012], I said “yes”. I was happy to do so as it supported and encouraged participation beyond the choir. Roche was also involved in the Tidy Towns Committee in the town and valued the opportunity to promote the area.

Even though the project was officially led by the parish and included religious references, I did not view the project as one that was explicitly religious. I valued the role of the Parish Priest in the community [see Kearney 2022] but I was very conscious of the extensive discourse on the role of the Catholic Church in contemporary Irish society, often influenced by a need to deal with historical crimes by members of the clergy [Inglis 2017]. Informed by Higgins [2012], I recognised that the community with whom I was engaged with was not static and bounded but rather organic and plural and the project invited individuals and groups whose sense of belonging to the community was varied. My hymn was based on folklore and although Brigid is one of Ireland’s patron saints, she is not a canonised saint and in 1969 she was expunged from the list of saints by the Vatican and her feast day of 1 February was revoked. It may be argued that her standing in both religious – being recognised in at least three Christian religions: Roman Catholicism, the Anglican communion, and Eastern Orthodox Catholicism – and non-religious contexts, makes her an appropriate subject for a project that sought to embrace different groups across the community. On this occasion nobody had any objection to the involvement of a church group or religious references. Furthermore, the priest’s local knowledge and relationship with the community enabled communication with stakeholders and encouraged some participants.

Process

When funding was awarded, it was necessary to create resources that could be shared and engaged with virtually. I composed arrangements of the two songs and recorded a series of short videos teaching the songs in segments that were shared on Facebook and by email. The arrangements were developed with various stakeholders in mind. While it was presumed that most participants would sing melody, for “Brigid’s Cloak”, harmonies for alto and bass voices were included in recognition of the singers involved in the Church Choir and Men’s Sheds. Prior to the project, the choir had sung “Brigid’s Cloak” in unison. Other parts were included based on my knowledge of instrumentalists in the community.

It had been hoped that I would be able to go to the schools as part of the project. This was not initially possible due to restrictions but one of the school teachers in

the Primary School coordinated the project in that space. Children in the school had already created artwork about St Brigid and were encouraged to draw pictures in response to the narrative of “Wee Dunleer”, resulting in a display of drawings of various buildings in the town. The teachers of Junior and Senior Infants also incorporated movement by choreographing the chorus of “Brigid’s Cloak” and this enhanced the creative experience for the children. The development of artforms beyond singing contributed to enabling the creative potential of every child. Permissions were sought from parents for the children to participate and the majority granted permission for the children to be recorded.

For the recording process, I created two backing tracks to which each participant could record. There was no limit to the number of people who could be involved and the project sought to reach out to all groups in the community, as well as individuals who may feel isolated due to COVID-19 restrictions. Existing structures and community groups assisted in the dissemination of material and encouraging engagement. The parish Facebook page and website were the principal domains for dissemination and a Parish Council member provided invaluable assistance, not only in terms of content but also in relation to release forms and other administrative aspects.

COVID-19 had enforced a greater use of technology across society and this project sought to benefit from increased comfort amongst various demographics with available technology. Participants required access to two electronic devices. They were able to stream/download and listen to the backing track through headphones on one device and record their own performance on another. Most mobile phones were sufficient to facilitate participation. Nevertheless, despite instructions on how to record integrated into tutorial videos for the songs, a number of participants indicated that they were unable to or not confident enough to create videos for submission. For the choir, some members expressed a lack of confidence with technology so individuals and family groups were recorded in the church by me as the choir director. Although they were successful, one of those involved from the Men’s Sheds admitted: “At the beginning I didn’t think we could get it together especially recording it on the phone.”

Ultimately, the majority of those who submitted material were already involved in the church activities, Men’s Shed, school and traditional music organisation. In relation to the latter, Scoraíocht Lann Léire, representatives noted that there was a lower-than-expected level of participation and this was adjudged to be based on fatigue with online learning, coming at the end of a period when all activities were virtual and members had expressed a desire to return to social gatherings. For the Primary School, when restrictions eased sufficiently in June 2021, I visited the school on two days. The school was divided so I could not meet all students on one day.

I video recorded the students performing to a backing track played on a speaker in the grounds of the school and soloists were audio recorded in a classroom. The coordinating teacher reflected that the children felt like popstars and film stars for the day.

It was evident that many of the children enjoyed participating in the project but there were some exceptions. As a group, the older pupils in sixth class demonstrated less enthusiasm but it was clear that some, who were naturally inclined towards music and performing, were very engaged and delighted to participate in the activities. While their impending summer holidays and recent “graduation” from Primary School were possible factors in their performance, some children indicated that they did not like singing. The limitations of the project did not allow me to engage with this challenge as I might have liked but in some instances, I asked some of these individuals to monitor the sound levels while others sang. It was possible to find other roles through which they could participate in musicking. A reluctance to sing was not necessarily based on talent – some weak singers were very enthusiastic, and some strong singers required encouragement. The children had differing perspectives on what could be deemed “a good singer”.

I compiled the audio, video and photograph files and provided these to music producer Stephanie Caffrey and video editor Luke Malone, both recent graduates of DkIT. They worked separately to edit the visuals and audio, providing me with drafts for commentary. Various stakeholders were also invited to give feedback prior to the release of the videos. In this way, a sense of shared ownership was fostered. Commenting on the production process, film editor Luke Malone noted:

“Working remotely on both cuts was a challenge in that communication with other project participants was limited and coordination was difficult at times. Nevertheless, email exchanges, phone calls, and video calls allowed me to overcome this separation from the others and we ultimately produced two music videos of high quality despite the restrictions caused by distance” [correspondence with author, 1 October 2021].

While audio editor Stephanie Caffrey noted challenges with the quality of some of the audio recordings, often created using mobile phones in poor locations, she valued the community nature of the project:

“I am a big advocate for collaborations: whether they’re local or global. For me, this year in particular has led to projects where I’ve created music or worked on projects with musicians from the Louth area and from abroad. It’s exciting to work with international musicians but there’s always a sense of pride when I work with musicians from my locality. I feel it’s important to recognise where you

come from and as a musician, to celebrate that: because who else will? Celebrating your community and locality is always interesting to other people, and sometimes it's easy to forget that. And I think pride is infectious: when the community sees it's being celebrated, that feeling can spread and cause a general sense of positivity" [correspondence with author, 26 October 2021].

Was it a success?

Having experienced various community music projects and read scholarship and reports in the area, I was a little frustrated with the process, questioning at times my own role and my expectations of the community and various stakeholders. Due to COVID-19, I was unable to meet the various groups in person. This challenges the fundamental relationship in hospitality between the host and the guest, or facilitator and participant as described by Higgins [2012] in the context of Community Music. Given the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, I did not always feel that I was a good host. As I was not familiar to many in the community, it was difficult to engage in encouragement as I might have on previous projects, when face-to-face activities and social gatherings gave impetus and momentum. Using the Parish social media and website allowed the project to attract the attention of a significant cohort from the community but it was more difficult to engage those outside of the established stakeholder groups. Nevertheless, the project brought together many in the parish who had not previously been involved in a project together, albeit only in a virtual capacity.

In terms of the workflow, files were submitted at different times, which was a little frustrating for the audio and video editors. A positive aspect was that when first cuts of both video and audio were completed, elements were identified and new images, video footage and sound files could be incorporated to enhance the video.

While it was hoped that much of the project could be done in a short timeframe before the summer, time was allowed and deadlines extended to try and encourage greater participation. While I visited the Primary School in the weeks immediately preceding their summer break, the secondary school had already begun their summer holidays and the involvement of the secondary school students was not realised as desired. Taking place at the end of a period of online activity, many potential participants were experiencing zoom fatigue and the novelty of participating in online video projects was waning.

There are different measures of success and my own reflections are influenced by the feedback of participants and viewers. One participant noted:

"I have over 50 years of musical experience on stage and in Church since early childhood and I was really taken aback by the wonderful recording that was

produced from the song I wrote. It was my first time seeing one of my songs written in musical notation” [correspondence with author, 7 October 2021].

For others involved, it challenged them to develop their skills in new ways:

“I am not used to making music videos so this project encouraged me to try techniques that I was not familiar with, broadening my skills. I also enjoyed creating something that a small community could be proud of, and it made me feel closer to that community” [correspondence with author, 1 October 2021].

The feedback on social media was largely positive, although the reach was largely within the community connected to the participants or regular attendees at the Church. Ultimately, the community were happy and it highlighted opportunities and a desire for greater collaboration on arts activities in the future. Some stakeholders indicated that although they “do their own thing”, they would be very open to joining with others and that themes of local history, heritage and folklore provide obvious areas for exploration.

Conclusions

Uncomfortable with the term “the Pied Piper”, it is telling nonetheless that some of the answers from participants to their reason for being involved amounted to, or were literally, “because you asked me”. Sometimes there is a need for somebody to initiate an invitation, to provide a form of leadership that mobilises talented individuals within a community and bring them together. There is significant talent and activity in many communities but large scale, collaborative projects require somebody to take the lead. It is not only about money – and some projects require small amounts of financial support – but a lack of awareness of funding, or indeed perhaps poorly communicated funding possibilities or strategies and policies that do not give enough consideration to community and voluntary groups is a significant factor that must be overcome to increase participation and musicking. Small grants for community music projects are very beneficial but often result in short, singular projects that have a limited legacy. While often artist driven, it is expected that groups rather than the artist-facilitator make the applications. Many of these groups are unaware of or lack the experience to avail of the opportunities.

I did not seek to be a Pied Piper but my experience suggests that such a role can enhance communities’ abilities to create connections and enhance the social and cultural life of their places. Too many organisations, groups and individual teachers operate in a silo, often without the time and resources to reach out to others. Such connections could enhance the overall experience of their members and students, and create new opportunities that further motivate engagement with the arts.

Furthermore, some of these activities can enhance a pride of place and create links with local folklore, geography and ecology. While this paper raises questions about the sustainability of community music projects and activities in and of themselves, these projects can also contribute to a wider sustainable agenda. If we consider them as events, we can draw on the recent scholarship of Judith Mair and Andrew Smith who argue that “we should focus on how events can contribute to the sustainable economic, social and environmental development of the places which host them” [2021: 1740]. Rather than funding strategies furthering ongoing competition between groups in a community, consideration should be given to the potential of funding third-parties to develop links that involve a greater number of stakeholders. A legacy of this project includes greater awareness of existing opportunities that exist in communities for participation in the arts.

To conclude, one participant wrote:

“While we were in the middle of lockdown and nothing to do, this was a great project, and it gave a great lift to the mood of the men in the Shed. Well, it really is a sign of things to come. Because we are not stopping there and hope to have a more permanent men’s shed soon where we will devote some time to our next musical endeavour” [correspondence with author, 7 October 2021].

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“Brigid’s Cloak” can be viewed here: <http://www.dunleerparish.ie/2021/09/local-song-brigids-cloak/>

“Wee Dunleer” can be viewed here: <http://www.dunleerparish.ie/2021/09/wee-dunleer/>