**Review: *Becoming an Irish Traditional Musician: Learning and Embodying Musical Culture*, Jessica Cawley, Routledge, 2021. 249 pp. ISBN 9780367537951.**

Gaining access to the heart of a traditional music community and becoming part of it might sometimes seem an aspiration for the very dedicated who might do it for purposes of academic study and, even then, only arrive at the outer edges. While Jessica Cawley evidently and purposefully sets out to undertake an academic study in Irish traditional music, through her participation in the community, she has developed a strong insight into this musical world. Despite statements in the book that musicians are always in a process of becoming, it is clear that she is an informed Irish traditional musician who has thoughtfully drawn on the reflections of 22 musicians and her own ethnographic experience to share a narrative of becoming with her readers.

As an Irish traditional musician, in addition to being acquainted with the author and interviewees, I experienced a comfortable familiarity with many of the points, stories and opinions in this book. Although I can relate to much of the book's contents, the different views expressed throughout highlight the challenge to write a distilled understanding of how to become an Irish traditional musician, reflecting Cawley’s central thesis that there are many pathways to becoming an Irish traditional musician. Cawley acknowledges this challenge at various points in the book, for example on p.120 and again beginning the conclusion, but this does not undermine her research aim.

Cawley’s own journey and story is critical to the development of the narrative. Although she is strongly present in chapter 1, her own experiences and reflections, which would be rich in ethnographic detail, are sometimes absent through the book as she relies on quotes from her interviewees. Statements such as "throughout my fieldwork..."(p.66) and "in my own experience" (p.167, 176) are valuable but infrequent triangulations of interviewees’ testimonies. Cawley incorporates (rare) quotations from her fieldnotes to introduce Scoil Samhradh Willie Clancy (p.126), her own subconscious learning of repertoire (p.156), and engagement with other members of the Irish traditional music community (p.177), which are both informative and offer an opportunity for the reader to connect with the author’s own journey of becoming. The concluding chapter presents a more confident authorial voice with greater reference to her own experiences. This chapter arguably provides the richest body of writing, incorporating substantial quotes from the interviewees and making clear, insightful points and critical observations on the musical culture.

Cawley’s methodology is highly dependent on interviews with 22 Irish traditional musicians. Within this group, there is an effort to gain insights from different generations but there is an imbalance towards the south west of Ireland and musicians involved in the same Cork city scene and community as Cawley herself. It is noteworthy that the majority of interviewees took place a full decade prior to publication as part of research completed for a PhD completed in 2013. Some of the very short quotations from interviewees demonstrate a desire to include their voices but some are of limited impact and could be better generalised or paraphrased. However, longer quotes facilitate the presentation of a narrative from practitioners. Some of these quotes are presented without interrogation; a shortcoming here but an opportunity for Cawley and others to reengage with the richness of the interview data. The second part of Chapter 5 introduces a netnography that, while appropriate to the contents of this section, marks it as distinct from the rest of the book and more netnographic data could have been incorporated into earlier chapters.

Cawley provides an extensive bibliography, which very clearly informs her approach, analysis and understanding. She draws significantly and appropriately on the proceedings of the second Crossroads Conference on Irish traditional music, expanding on themes and topics on what was a pivotal discussion on education and traditional music (Vallely et al, 2013). Beyond studies focused on Irish traditional music, Cawley reaches out to academic texts and theories from other areas and disciplines. Étienne Wenger’s (1998) writing on communities of practice, also developed by Irish academic Ailbhe Kenny (2016) with a specific focus on music, underpin much of the contents throughout the entire book. Several of the texts cited were published subsequent to Cawley completing her doctoral studies, and exemplify the development that has taken place from dissertation to monograph.

Challenges to the story that Cawley seeks to tell relate to memory and romanticisation. Cawley recognises the variation in what an Irish traditional music session may be (p.45), a topic that requires further consideration. She recognises the romanticisation of the session by some previous authors on the subject and the chapter leading to this point sometimes verges on adding to this body of literature. Similarly, the concept of musical style can suffer from a lack of critique, such as the unproblematic and romanticised generalisations of travelling musicians such as Padraig O’Keeffe sharing his music (p.74) or comments on how Séamus Sands developed his own personal fiddle style (p.75). Both instances require greater interrogation to allow the reader a greater depth of understanding regarding the process of becoming an Irish traditional musician, as signalled in the book’s title. Another area requiring further interrogation relates to the formal education system and the second level curriculum in particular. Cawley uncritically points to improvements to music at secondary level (p.86). It is not clear if this refers to curriculum or otherwise but it ignores the critiques of the 'new' Leaving Certificate curriculum first examined in 1999 (see Boydell, 2001).

Cawley’s research contributes to a growing literature on the institutionalisation of Irish traditional music, particularly in relation to CCÉ and the Fleadh, as well as smaller yet impactful organisations that also contribute to nurturing/creating opportunities for learning and enculturation. Within the context of institutionalisation, Cawley repeatedly questions the processes of learning, without always providing answers or following through on her own signposts. Examples of good practice in relation to teaching Irish traditional music that emerge from the interviews raise quantitative questions of geography and scale to which these practices exist that are beyond the scope of Cawley’s research. While chapter 3 highlights particular school environments in Cork and Mayo, underpinned by research highlighting the benefits of connecting school activities with community music groups, there is no sense of how common or widespread it is, if at all. An effort to consider such data is evident in tables on festivals and summer schools (pp.104-106), which is part of a larger set of questions on the geography of Irish traditional music. Nevertheless, a strength of Cawley’s text is that it reveals a more diverse (and disconnected p.98) musical world that many, including Irish traditional musicians, are unaware of.

Cawley's study is wide-ranging, seeking to capture the entirety of a complex musical world that is no longer confined to the geographical island of Ireland and increasingly flourishes in virtual spaces as exemplified in part 2 of chapter 5. At various points in the text, Cawley explicitly notes interesting areas for potential future research, such as issues of gender (which has been a notable topic of recent publications). Other areas, such as summer schools, new technologies, or the experiences of Irish traditional music in other countries highlights the value of this publication as a stepping stone.  The book provides a positive, can-do message, revealing the accessibility and pathways into Irish traditional music for those who wish to engage and add their story to the multitude of stories that comprise the narrative of a community.

**Works cited**

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