

THE INVENTION OF ETHNICITY: TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND THE MODULATIONS OF IRISH CULTURE

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Izleček: Zgodovina tradicijske glasbe na Irskem ostaja še nenapisana. Te naloge se ni mogoče lotiti, dokler se irska muzikologija ne osvobodi pritiskov dela stroke, ki se za ceno kritične obravnave osredotoča na zbiranje in analizo. Prvi bistven korak k omenjeni emancipaciji je prepoznavanje in razrešitev nenehne težave zaradi opiranja na nedefinirano »notranje« videnje o tradicijski glasbi, ki ovira širjenje irskih muzikoloških raziskav znotraj širšega področja muzikologije.

Ključne besede: tradicija, etničnost, Irska, socialna antropologija, narativnost, kulturna zgodovina

Abstract: The history of traditional music in Ireland remains to be written. This task cannot be undertaken until Irish musicology emancipates itself from the constraints of a scholarship which concentrates upon collection and analysis at the expense of critical discourse. A vital first step in this emancipation is to recognize and resolve the abiding difficulty of relying upon an unformulated "insider" knowledge of traditional music which inhibits the transmission of Irish musical scholarship within the wider domain of musicology.

Keywords: tradition, ethnicity, Ireland, social anthropology, narrative, cultural history.

1

Invention and identity are close kindred in the cultural history of modern Ireland. When Declan Kiberd remarked at the outset of his monumental reading of Irish literature (significantly entitled *Inventing Ireland*) that "the struggle for [Irish] identity was conducted in language", he gave due priority to that synthesis of invention and identification which periodically surfaces in the Irish mind ever since a mercenary in one of Shakespeare's plays paused to enquire, 'what ish my nation?'.¹ Four hundred years later, the brogue has been smoothly polished away, but it cannot have escaped many people's attention (at least in Ireland) that we are still asking the same question. It seems to be a perennial condition of Irish studies, and not only for the duration of what David Lloyd has called Ireland's "post-colonial moment", to revisit and revise the parameters of Irishness itself.²

¹ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1995, p. 3

² See David Lloyd, *Anomalous States. Irish Writing and the Post-colonial Moment*, Dublin, Lilliput Press, 1993, especially 'Writing in the shit. Beckett, nationalism and the colonial subject', pp. 41–58.

Anyone conversant with the reception history of music in Ireland would immediately concede that these parameters have loomed large not only in regard to the status and perception of traditional music as a culturally authentic mode of Irish identity, but also in other domains of musical practice which excite a no less vehement discourse, in which the polemics of identity are never very far away. This obtains to such an extent that we can justly paraphrase Kiberd's remark in order to observe, with equal legitimacy, that the quest for identity in Ireland has also been conducted in music. It is by now axiomatic to recognize the intimacy between cultural formation and the politics of nationalism (and not just in Ireland), but in music the striking intensity of this communion (recognized and opposed in Irish cultural discourse no later than the Bunting-Moore controversies of the early nineteenth century) has in significant measure inhibited the formation of historical models emancipated from the anxiety of political influence.³ Instead, as I shall argue in this paper, the taxonomy of Irish traditional music has, in its empirical assent to antiquarian models of collection and recension, eclipsed the prospect of historical interpretation and sociological discourse.

This taxonomic rigour has come at a price. But it has also encouraged a master narrative of cultural autonomy in which modes of ethnicity and identity take unmistakable precedence over the social anthropology of music in Ireland, and in which a fairly casual mode of journalistic commentary (which has its own history in the sour polemics of nationalistic debate) merits more attention than anything which a professional musicology might hope to produce. There is by now a conventional authority attached to the ethnicity of Irish musical culture, and not simply because of the immense prestige which traditional music enjoys as an icon of *echt*-Irishness throughout Ireland and the western world. It is rather that ethnicity itself has become such a powerful *donnée* precisely in that transcultural fusion of musical traditions (including, self-evidently, Irish musical traditions) that the thing justifies itself. Irish traditional music is no longer the protected species of a nearly depleted civilization, but rather the hallmark of a contemporary Irish identity.

The proprietary nationalism of this state of affairs doesn't unduly concern me in the context of this paper, although at the outset I hope it is fair comment to remark on the ascendancy of the traditional arts in Ireland, an ascendancy which coincides with an economic prosperity which has only now begun to recede. But that, too, has its own cultural history, so that the observation in Roddy Doyle's novel *The Commitments* (1987) that "the Irish are the blacks of Europe" sounds more arch and more expressive of "fakelore" as the years pass, given the emergence of a new Ireland that would make James Connolly and the architects of Irish socialism spin in the grave. In musical terms, this emergence carries with it a degree of cultural commodification in respect of the tradition which affects the tradition itself.⁴

The social condition of music in Ireland and of traditional music in particular, has undergone a sea-change which its icons of identity, however powerful, cannot adequately

³ See Harry White, *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland, 1770–1970*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1998, *passim*, for a discussion of this problem.

⁴ On the question of folksong as a category of invention, see David Harker, *Fakesong: the Manufacture of British Folksong, 1700 to the Present Day*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1985.

comprehend. Those masterful images of an oral culture (which yet fresh images beget) now project something decisively beyond the private recreations of a repressed culture, and they carry forward a history of ideas which I think deserves more consideration than it has received. Such images also deserve a measure of historical analysis which might close the gap between scientific recension (as in the collection and technical description of folksong, for example) and cultural commentary. The hidden Ireland of Daniel Corkery (or of Edmund Burke, for that matter), no longer exists, and its currency in the transmission of traditional music is no longer valid. But this interior history of music in Ireland is thereby all the more urgently in need of a narrative which might extend decisively beyond the benevolent Celticism of the nineteenth century, in which the invention of ethnicity, Irish or otherwise, came into its own.⁵

The obvious response to this cry for attention would be to point to some of the work which Irish musicologists have undertaken (and are undertaking) in recent years as evidence that such a narrative is a more likely prospect than it was even a decade ago. I shall consider some of this work below in seeking to address the general absence of Ireland from the canons of international musicological discourse, and I shall also refer to a new taxonomy of music in Ireland which might allow that music to inflect, as it were, received opinion about the cultural history of European music in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the status quo of reception history in relation to traditional music takes precedence.

When the aperture is narrowed to traditional music, wherein the boundaries or borders of ethnicity remain for the most part closed, I think there may be some justification in calling as my first witness to this historical deficiency the late John Blacking, whose urgent prescriptions for ethnomusicology thirty years ago still await fulfilment, at least in Ireland. Ten years after Blacking wrote *How Musical Is Man?* (1973), I published an article entitled “The Need for a Sociology of Irish Folk Music”⁶ and corresponded with Blacking because I could not grasp why the Professor of Social Anthropology at Queen’s University Belfast could adopt a complacent attitude to such a sociology in respect of Irish music, whereas the impassioned author of *How Musical Is Man?* insisted upon the primacy of extra-musical relationships in the investigation of patterns of sound, ethnic or

⁵ I use the term “invention of ethnicity” in the sense which is implied by recent studies of traditional music from other countries, most notably Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007. Gelbart’s study is striking for its careful retrieval of Scottish musical history in order to establish a history of musical ideas specifically devoted to the cultivation of ethnicity in European music. What is perhaps striking in turn is that Gelbart’s cognizance of the part played by Irish music in this development is very low. There is certainly a major discrepancy between the prominence of traditional music in Irish cultural history and its very modest presence in musicological discourse. See, however, John O’Flynn, *The Irishness of Irish Music*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, which has recently appeared (April 2009) and which promises at least to address many of the scholarly lacunae nominated in the present discussion.

⁶ See Harry White, The need for a sociology of Irish folk music, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 15 (1984), 1, pp. 3–13.

otherwise.⁷ Blacking told me that he had grown tired of American ethnomusicologists assuming and discarding at will the musical culture of other countries, but notwithstanding this momentary irritation, I would respond now (as I did then, albeit as an apprehensive graduate student importuning the Master in his Den), that the imperatives of extra-musical meaning are so far from being addressed in Irish music (other than by way of hostile repudiation, insofar as commentary is regarded as an encroachment unless it issues from the practitioners themselves), that Blacking's project has either been left to one side or been absorbed by historical musicology, certainly insofar as sociology and cultural history are concerned. I can see clearly enough that ethnomusicology has not neglected the plural condition of "Celtic music" (although that designation, surely, is an historical construct, if ever there was one), to say nothing of the host of popular music practices attached to this term.⁸ Nevertheless, in the context of two centuries of Irish traditional music as a holistic category of cultural experience, I can find little evidence of the sustained extra-musical discourse which Blacking prescribed with such urgency in regard to the music of other countries. In the void created by this absence, the aesthetic perception of traditional music poses problems of its own, especially in a cultural climate which substitutes this music for the organisms of art music. If the alternative to this substitution is a vehement anti-intellectualism (which, alas, it not infrequently is), then the problems of perception, to say nothing of historical interpretation, correspondingly increase. In such a trajectory, cultural fetishism can very easily take the place of history in any case.

2

The dangers of cultural fetishism came home to me with particular force when I visited the Irish Traditional Music Archive on the occasion of its relocation to a magnificently restored Georgian house in Merrion Square, Dublin, in November 2006. In its new home, the Archive consolidates its reputation as one of the very finest such repositories in Europe, and for my part it continues to excite admiration and inspiration in equal measure. Simply and by itself, the Archive testifies to the national standing of Irish traditional music and to the official status which such music enjoys as a symbol of Irishness rivalled only by the Irish language. The Archive also speaks to the fundamental role which traditional music plays as a marker of Irish identity. The nature of that identity will preoccupy me in this paper, but for now all I want to indicate is that the rhetoric of public utterance

⁷ The key passage from *How Musical Is Man?* in this respect is reproduced in *Music, Culture and Society*, ed. D. B. Scott, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 98–99: 'We can no longer study music as a thing in itself when research in ethnomusicology makes it clear that musical things are not always strictly musical, and that the expression of tonal relationships in patterns of sound may be secondary to extramusical relationships which the tones represent [...] Ethnomusicology's claim to be a new method of analysing music and music history must rest on an assumption not yet generally accepted, namely that because music is humanly organized sound, there ought to be a relationship between patterns of human organization and patterns of sound produced as a result of human interaction'.

⁸ See *Celtic Modern. Music at the Global Fringe*, ed. Philip Bohlman and Martin Stokes, Oxford, The Scarecrow Press, 2003.

and private feeling seemed to me to be very closely aligned on the evening of my visit. When, on that occasion, the Irish Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (a designation which embraces a significant conjunction of responsibilities) spoke of traditional music as the expression of a national psyche, there appeared to be general agreement that such an expression was still valid, despite (or perhaps because of) the postmodern affluence in which this was proclaimed. The minister's enthusiasm sounded like good old-fashioned tribalism to me, but I couldn't deny its power. But the Minister spoke as if such expressions not only had the same empirical value as the tens of thousands of traditional airs whose preservation we had gathered to celebrate, but that the latter attained corporate meaning by virtue of such feeling, which amounted to a conventional degree of communal assent. The claim, the assumption was that traditional Irish music could tell us (the inner Irish, the "real" Irish), who and what we are. I think it might now be time to look at this claim afresh.

If traditional music is construed in this way, as a master narrative of the Irish psyche (in silent contradistinction, perhaps, to those narratives of art music which enjoy a much more modest level of state support), the relationship between ethnicity and national identity becomes strikingly clear. You cannot have one without the other. Rival traditions or musical practices, which may summon connotations of Irishness from time to time, do not as yet function at this level of nationalist symbolism and "universal" identification.

In this construction, traditional Irish music is not European (Sean Ó Riada's favourite negative) nor is it Celtic or North American, but intrinsically *green*, as in the sense that Seamus Heaney intended when he used this word to rebuke the editors of the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) when they included his work there: "Be assured, my passport's green." One would not want to confuse the artefacts of Irish musical culture with anything they might resemble or influence, because too casual an amalgamation might attenuate the hard-won political and cultural autonomy which these artefacts have come to represent.

This collective mode of identity which Irish traditional music has accrued cannot be dismissed, as it once was, by those avatars of Irish literary modernism (including Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett) who once upon a time repudiated from within and beyond the domain of the Irish language the young State's cultivation of ethnicity as the hallmark of cultural integrity. For one thing, the transmission of Irish musical culture, traditional or otherwise, has until very recently been much more widely and easily disseminated than the language itself; for another, the characteristic impatience with Ireland ("the sow who eats her own farrow", in Joyce's rebarbative phrase) which writers of the 1920s, 30s and 40s felt impelled to register is no longer necessary, as it once seemed to be. Irish writers are no longer "writing in the shit", to cite David Lloyd's arresting pictorialism. The phrase is meant to indicate both cultural oppression and a corresponding desire for emancipation from the shibboleths of Gaelic authenticity by which the Irish Free State sought to define itself (an attempt limited in any case by the boundaries of a religious oppression that would take the better part of the twentieth century to recede). Lloyd cites a fairly well-known passage from Beckett's prose to illustrate this "excremental vision" of how things once appeared to a writer impatient of the tyranny of self-definition. It is worth quoting here:

What constitutes the charm of our country, apart of course from its scant population, and this without the help of the meanest contraceptive, is that all is derelict, with the sole exception of history's ancient faeces. These are ardently sought after, stuffed and earned in procession. Wherever nauseated time has dropped a nice fat turd you will find our patriots, sniffing it up on all fours, their faces on fire. Elysium of the roofless. Hence my happiness at last. Lie down, all seems to say, lie down and stay down.⁹

I think it is fair to say that the author of this passage has not only been overtaken in his savage indignation by a postmodern Ireland more likely to find such a passage offensive rather than anything else, but that even within the pale of his own profession, the bleak, no-where, no-man nothingness of Beckett's imagination has been undermined not only by the implausibility of rural repression as a satisfying trope for Ireland's cultural condition, but by a later generation of dramatists whose work in the world at large is nevertheless defined by taxonomies of Irishness and Irish culture. We are no longer writing in the shit. To judge by a play like Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1992), we are no longer singing or playing in the shit either. It would be a pointless provocation to suggest that Irish traditional music scholarship behaves as if we still were, but I do mean to allege that the impact of extreme (and often hostile) conservatism with regard to identity, when combined with a notably positivistic taxonomy of collection, preservation and analysis, makes it extremely difficult to achieve a sense of historical perspective on this music, to say nothing of that discourse of extra-musical significance which it might otherwise afford. By contrast, Irish literature has by now amassed a corresponding body of critical and historical commentary worthy of its own prolific estate and responsive to its protean condition of meaning.

Traditional Irish music does not want for prolificity – its sheer accumulation is in some measure part of the problem – but it does cry out for some kind of reception history. The morphology of such an enterprise would certainly acknowledge the Herderian romanticism in which Irish music “begins”, so that Bunting and the early collectors would be much less casually attached to the cult of German positivism which so radically informs the whole endeavour of reclaiming (or even inventing) Irish identity than they currently are. Likewise with George Petrie in the mid-nineteenth century: the motivations induced by famine (and by exile) must be distinguished from the kind of influence exerted by Ó Riada in the projection of Irish music as an emphatic refusal of European modernism in the 1950s and early 1960s. Such motivations and the distinctions between them are essential to the intelligibility of the music itself. A conceptualization of Irish musical culture which liberates itself from the material it surveys would concede the requirement of such a morphology, rather than collapse inwardly under the weight of indefinite exemplars, those burdens of accumulation which either silence or neutralize the discourse of criticism.

One student of German folklore has remarked that “unlike an authentic Van Gogh, folklore can be endlessly replicated and imitated- any member of the ‘folk’ should be

⁹ Samuel Beckett, *First Love* (1945), cited in Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, p. 41ff.

equipped with the skill and spirit to produce some lore”.¹⁰ I think I can not only intuit the exasperation implicit in this observation, but also make use of it with regard to the “endless replication” of traditional Irish music. I intend this not as a criticism of the music itself but as an indictment, and a pretty mild one at that, of the static mode of its reception. Other than by means of a cursory historical survey (often routine, occasionally defensive and almost always innocent of any critical engagement with the discourse of nationalism), Irish “folk music studies” draw sharply back from the periphery of historical interpretation. To collect and to classify, I would argue, is not to interpret.¹¹

I am no longer alone in this opinion, as recent edited collections in the field itself will attest. Volumes such as *Celtic Modern* do tend to harbour an unusually aggressive strain of internal debate as to the very nature of traditional music itself, a by-product, I think, of that conventional authority which allows little or no difference between the judgement of the practitioner and the apprehension of critical commentary. It would be otherwise difficult to explain the undisguised puzzlement of a scholar such as Scott Reiss when, deferring to this convention, he seeks and fails to confirm his own analysis of stylistic practices from Niall Keegan. Keegan, in turn, maintains that the “tradition” remains paramount, however vulnerable this category seems to “objective” analysis.¹² The construction of postmodern fields of semantic discourse, “imaginary landscapes” of Irish and/or Celtic musical practices, shows, as in Reiss’s work, at the very least a willingness to countenance a style criticism which no longer takes refuge in the elitism of the tin god (or tin whistle) of unreclaimed “tradition”. This does not prevent Reiss from referring to himself as an “outsider”. But it does suggest ways in which a discourse surrounding traditional music can be emancipated from the hermetic conservatism of the “insider’s” refuge.

3

John Blacking’s imperative insistence that music cannot be studied in a vacuum may as yet have found no general resolution in terms of Irish traditional music, but that does not mean that cognitive responses to other traditional art forms in other countries are unavailable. One such response, in a literature that has begun to attract a very wide degree of

¹⁰ See Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity. The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, pp. 8–9.

¹¹ The lack of even *one* comprehensive account of traditional music in Ireland which might be equal to its history, revival and collection (to say nothing of its cultural impact on other modes of music) is itself a silent commentary on the failure of musicology in general (and of Irish musicology in particular) to supervene the impoverished condition of historical interpretation in relation to this repertory. By contrast, the curatorial expertise represented not only by the Irish Traditional Music Archive but by a continued commitment to the collection and classification of Irish music, remains undiminished.

¹² See Scott Reiss, Tradition and imaginary: Irish traditional music and the Celtic phenomenon, in Bohlman and Stokes (eds.), *Celtic Modern*, pp. 145–169. Reiss’s account of the debate between innovation and tradition in the mid-1990s relays, in my view, the characteristically emotional and heated terms in which issues concerning Irish traditional music are often discussed.

attention (and which speaks to the formative influence of writers such as Clifford Geertz and Erich Hobsbawm), is Regina Bendix's critique of authenticity, to which I have already referred.

I am not so much interested in Bendix's persuasive account of an old story, in which "textualised expressive culture such as songs and tales can, with the aid of the rhetoric of authenticity, be transformed from an experience of individual transcendence to a symbol of the inevitability of nationalist unity".¹³ That reading is secure, and the function of music within Irish cultural history provides an exemplary instance of how this process develops. Of far greater novelty is Bendix's diagnosis of the authenticity quest, with its firm roots in Rousseau and Herder, as a characteristic trope of European invention, in which the fundamental dialectic of Self and the Other becomes invariably politicised and is itself expressive of that quest for "purity" which motivates European discourse in the humanities no later than the Enlightenment.¹⁴ In such a construction, the relationship between the whole enterprise of Irish traditional music collection and the powerful reach of German idealism becomes strikingly clear.

To deconstruct "authenticity" in an age of transculturation (Bendix remarks that "once tomato sauce carries the label 'authentic', the designation loses its special significance"),¹⁵ is also, I would suppose, to distinguish between the empirical positivism of folksong collection and the motivations which underpin this activity.

If ethnicity is an invention, which is to say the expression of an intellectual construct that answers a fundamental desire to classify and understand the "Other", this does not mean that such a construction necessarily inhibits, in and of itself, the development of historical and critical modes of engagement with music designated as "ethnic". This development stands behind Blacking's insistence upon a discourse which gives due prominence to explaining the relationship between patterns of sound and patterns of human organization. Blacking, self-evidently, describes the explanation of this relationship as the social anthropology of music, but it is hard to see how social anthropology in turn can exist in a historical vacuum. With regard to traditional music in Ireland, it is likewise difficult to envisage how modes of engagement other than classificatory ones can generate a discourse between music and the history of Irish ideas, unless concepts such as "ethnicity" are more stringently interrogated than has hitherto been the case. This is especially true, I think, in a country whose cultivation of ethnicity in music, as a value-system which incorporates (and validates) identity, is profoundly at odds with the promotion of music elsewhere, at least in Europe. At its most oppressive, the folksong fetish, so to speak, becomes an obstacle to the reception of music emancipated from (but not unrelated to) the dominance of German or Italian models of musical discourse. At its most extreme, the transmission of Irish traditional music becomes tightly bound to a template of identity which language might otherwise assume. But in either case, the cultural dominance of traditional music as a marker of Irish identity is much more problematic than would be the case were it more accountable to the processes of historical and critical discourse.

¹³ R. Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, op. cit., p. 20

¹⁴ This account is mirrored by Matthew Gelbart in *The Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music"*, passim.

¹⁵ R. Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, op. cit., p. 7

In order to resolve this problem, one needs to close the gap between a conventional understanding of Irish music, vested in the sheer accumulation of musical materials, and the plurality of Irish musical discourse, much of it indebted to an unformulated but nevertheless powerful intuition of “the tradition” by means of an historical narrative. This narrative, as far as I can understand the matter, has two imperative obligations, and both of them relate to John Blacking’s prescriptions in respect of the social anthropology of music. The first obligation is to distinguish between the accumulation of source materials (however meticulously and scientifically understood) and the mere topography which narrative itself affords.¹⁶ In this respect, I might simply suggest that the ethnicity of Irish music, for all its prowess as a cultural idea, nevertheless deserves a context which would locate this idea within the continuum of cultural history. The second obligation is to emancipate the tradition from its hermetic condition of “insider” understanding (insofar as this is asserted), so that the cultural reception of traditional music in Ireland might begin to acknowledge its strong correlative status in relation to ethnic projections elsewhere.¹⁷ To deny that emancipation, to yield to the conservatism of “insider” and “outsider” status with respect to *any* kind of discourse on Irish traditional music is to affirm, as far as I can see, a kind of ethnocentric conservatism which not only privileges Irish music to an impracticable degree but which also inhibits the absorption of Irish traditional music into the discourse of musicology at large. If the subject continues to remain off limits to general commentary, then the strangest dislocation which currently obtains between music in Ireland and musicology in Europe will abide. This state of affairs is apostrophised by Ireland’s absence, to cite two prominent examples, from Richard Taruskin’s article on nationalism in the revised *New Grove* and also from Taruskin’s magisterial *Oxford History of Western Music*.¹⁸ No such comparable absence in respect of Irish literature could be envisaged, other than as a wilful distortion. At one and the same time, traditional Irish music enjoys cardinal importance as an aural icon of Irishness – not just in Ireland, but throughout the Western hemisphere – and yet remains (an almost) silent partner in the prodigious literature which musical scholarship devotes to the history of music in Europe.

¹⁶ It is useful to note that the annual conference of ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music) Ireland held in University College Dublin in February 2009 featured a number of graduate student papers which impressively sustained a sophisticated and persuasive application of textual criticism in relation to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources of traditional music. One waits for a similar degree of professionalism in relation to historical criticism.

¹⁷ Once again it is Matthew Gelbart’s research in relation to Scottish music which prompts this suggestion.

¹⁸ Other than a passing reference to the *Melodies* of Thomas Moore, Taruskin’s *magnum opus* is wholly silent on Irish music. When one contrasts this (entirely understandable) reticence with the global presence of Irish music in the present day, the difficulties addressed in this paper become vividly illuminated.

The sheer ubiquity of Irish music – as a global phenomenon, as an aural signature of identity, as a most carefully retrieved accumulation, indeed as a cultural commodification of immense proportions – might lead one to suppose that there is a corresponding discourse answerable to this presence, and not only in Ireland. If I dare to contradict this supposition, it is not because I would wish to eclipse in turn the growth of an Irish musicology which has begun to engage with this phenomenon (on the contrary), but because the felt life of Irish music does not yet enjoy a commensurate level of evident discourse. As far as I can see, the formative presence of music in Irish affairs, and in European affairs, has not yet acquired the history it deserves. The influence of music, and of a retrieved tradition of music in particular, on the formation of Ireland as a European nation-state should occupy a much more prominent position as an exemplar of cultural formation than is presently the case. When scholars look to European models of ethnicity, at least in regard to music, the Irish experience ought to be much more instructive, abundant and exemplary than it currently is. This is not only because the formation of Irish musical identity in the past two centuries was foregrounded to an extraordinary degree by a linguistic dispossession unmatched in its severity throughout Western Europe, but also because the canonic presence of an ethnic signature in Irish music extends far beyond the terrain of traditional culture. It extends to the present day.

In Ireland, the modulations of this ethnic signature have begun to attract a considerable body of commentary. This commentary is itself part of a wider engagement with music and musicology, so that the formation of associations such as the Society for Musicology in Ireland (2003–) and ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music) Ireland (2005–) may justifiably be taken as an index of this engagement, even if this naturally extends beyond the domain of Irish music.¹⁹ But there can be little doubt that the scholarly initiative represented by the work of ethnomusicologists such as Philip Bohlman and Martin Stokes in the United States has helped to re-shape a domestic musicology in Ireland, so that scholars such as Lillis O’Laoire, Adrian Scahill and Fintan Vallely have, through the agency of their published work, re-opened the question of traditional music, even if this question remains in large measure unanswered, notably in relation to contemporary modes of cultural theory pursued elsewhere. The tradition itself remains something of a sacred cow, and its canonic esteem as the inviolable marker of Irish identity continues to encourage a quest for authenticity which contemporary musical scholarship elsewhere disdains. It is difficult to escape the impression that Vallely, for example, for all his ebullient (and provocative) engagement with the plural condition of Irish popular music, yet retains a strong allegiance to the holistic integrity of a “pure” and incorrupt Irish traditional music. Certainly I can find no evidence to suggest that he would want to deconstruct this tradition as an agent of historical process.²⁰

¹⁹ For information on the scholarly activities of the Society for Musicology in Ireland (SMI), see the society’s website (www.musicologyireland.com); see likewise www.music.ucc.ie/ictm for ICTM Ireland. The SMI also publishes an online peer-reviewed journal which can be accessed through its website address.

²⁰ For a characteristically trenchant account of contemporary Irish music in relation to notions of

As long as narratives of traditional music in Ireland remain immune to this process, the claims of an older “ethno-nationalist project” (Bendix) will continue to take precedence over a more pliant critical discourse, and ensure the perpetuation of “collection and transcription” which these claims promote. Even in this respect, the scientific redaction of material, immensely valuable though it is, can unwittingly fortify the assumption that traditional music lies beyond the borders of critical inquiry, other than as a means of confirming the romantic authority of “insider” knowledge and taste. In that scenario, the kind of enquiry promoted by John Blacking (to say nothing of subsequent scholarship) constantly defers to an intellectual intransigence which sternly insists upon its own inviolable condition of being.

As I have already indicated, this scenario no longer enjoys the general authority it once did. Even if in many quarters traditional music persists as a holistic category, the development of musicology in Ireland over the past two decades has entailed a much more plural and engaged encounter with the history of Irish musical ideas than was previously the case. Moreover, the very taxonomy of Irish musical experience is incomparably richer than before, not least because of a determination to see beyond those old polarities of ethnicity and colonialism which shaped Irish musical history for the better part of two centuries. One expression of this determination is the forthcoming *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland* (EMIR), which is due to be published in 2010.²¹ The prominence of traditional music (and musicians) in this project is unmistakable, but so too is the context which EMIR itself will provide, by virtue of its unprecedented taxonomy of music in Ireland. This taxonomy will not only loosen the bonds of Irish musicological discourse: it will also historicize Irish musical awareness to a degree which is likely to promote a more flexible (and less canonic) approach to music in Ireland than is currently the case. But above all, as a *mere taxonomy* (however diverse, however detailed), EMIR should symbolise the plural condition of a musical experience that is not only amenable to critical discourse (and historical narrative) but which has been formative in Western culture to a degree which has not yet received the inquiry it deserves. An inventory of musical experience is not the same as a history, and an encyclopaedia permanently attests its own incompleteness. But if music in Ireland is to emancipate itself from its own mythologies, and correspondingly to embrace those discourses of invention and identity which elsewhere have decisively enriched the perception of musical experience, a new map of that terrain is required. In that topography, the significance of traditional music should not be diminished, but clarified.

a received tradition, see Fintan Vallely, *The Apollos of Shamrockery: traditional musics in the modern age*, *Celtic Modern*, eds. Bohlman and Stokes, pp. 201–217.

²¹ The general editors of EMIR are Barra Boydell and Harry White. Approximately 2,500 head-words designate an attempt to register the taxonomy of music in Ireland through the agency of over 150 contributors. The project thus represents by far the most ambitious and far-reaching research into music in Ireland undertaken to date. EMIR will be published by UCD (University College Dublin) Press.

IZNAJDBA ETNIČNOSTI: TRADICIJSKA GLASBA IN SPREMINJANJE V IRSKI KULTURI

Povzetek

Čeprav je irska tradicijska glasba v zahodni kulturi vsesplošno prisotna, se je sodobni tokovi v muzikološki stroki niso dotaknili. Kljub razvoju kulturne zgodovine in etnomuzikologije na Irskem je odsotnost irske glasbe v mednarodnih muzikoloških razpravah še vedno v presenetljivem nasprotju s popularnostjo irske glasbe. Ta neskladnost je še večja zaradi nenehnega opiranja na tiste raziskovalne metode (zlasti glede zbiranja in analiziranja irske glasbe), ki so neobčutljive za kakršenkoli zgodovinsko pripovedno ali interdisciplinarno delo, kar pogosto privede do tega, da je prezrt formativen vpliv irske tradicijske glasbe na razvoj etničnosti. Problem pri opiranju na zastarelo razlikovanje med »notranjim« in »zunanjim« poznavanjem te glasbe ponazarja splošen odpor do obravnavanja tradicijske glasbe s stališča kulturne zgodovine. Vendar pa trenutna prenova muzikološke stroke na Irskem, zlasti (toda nikakor izključno) s pomočjo projekta *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, kaže na to, da bi ustrezno širši kontekst za tradicijsko glasbo lahko po drugi strani privedel do pripravljenosti za soočenje z zgodovinsko in kritično obravnavo tradicije, ki je vse prej kot statična.