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**COMHALTAS CEOLTÓIRÍ ÉIREANN (THE IRISH MUSICIANS' ASSOCIATION)
AND THE POLITICS OF MUSICAL COMMUNITY IN IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC**

By

LAUREN WEINTRAUB STOEDEL

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

2015

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**This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.**

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

COMHALTAS CEOLTÓIRÍ ÉIREANN (THE IRISH MUSICIANS' ASSOCIATION) AND THE POLITICS OF MUSICAL COMMUNITY IN IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC

By

LAUREN WEINTRAUB STOEDEL

Advisor: Jane Sugarman

This dissertation examines Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (The Irish Musicians' Association) and its role in the politics of Irish traditional music communities. A revivalist organization founded in 1951, Comhaltas today is an educational and activist organization whose mission includes the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional music. Its numerous programs—from local music classes to a national festival drawing thousands of participants—intersect at some point with the musical lives of nearly every Irish traditional musician. Because of this widespread activity, Comhaltas interacts, often contentiously, with many of the different musical communities through which Irish traditional musicians define themselves both publically and privately. These include local communities defined by parish, family, or geography; a national and/or nationalist “Irish music community”; and international communities enabled by diaspora, technology, and travel.

Through methodologies including archival research, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews, this dissertation argues that an understanding of Comhaltas' activities can inform current ethnomusicological understandings of the concept of “musical community.” Based on existing literature and my own research, I have chosen to define musical community as *the musical performance of collective selfhood*. My definition is based on three main themes that

appear frequently in research on musical community, including my own: plurality and multiplicity, individuality and collectivity, and process and change. These themes highlight the nuanced ways that musicians “perform themselves into” (or out of) various collectivities over time, often contradicting public extremes of discourse associated with these communities. Chapters cover Comhaltas’ role in Irish cultural policy debates and defining a national(ist) traditional music community, the Comhaltas branch and the role of place/geography in local musical communities, Comhaltas’ impact on the teaching and transmission of traditional music and community, Comhaltas in the United States, and the clash of performance and community at Comhaltas’ annual All-Ireland music festival. In each of these areas, the intensely public and activist nature of Comhaltas’ mission makes questions of identity and cultural politics explicit, challenging musicians and others to define and reevaluate their relationships, statements, and performances. This tension, in turn, demands an understanding of musical community acknowledging that it is flexible, porous, and evolving.

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INTRODUCTION

When I first started playing Irish traditional music about ten years ago in New York City, my entry into that multifaceted musical community was largely mediated by various institutions and organizations, including bars, concert halls, media companies and book publishers, New York's Irish Arts Center, and the international organization Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (which is Irish for "Irish Musicians' Association" and is pronounced KOHL-tuss KYOHL-TOE-ree AY-ren). Comhaltas, as it is often known amongst Irish musicians,¹ hosted a weekly music session in a midtown Manhattan pub that was particularly welcoming to learning musicians, with the added benefit of a paid guest musician each week drawn from New York's large pool of accomplished players. But as I began to branch out and participate in other kinds of formal and informal sites for learning and performance both in New York and in Ireland, I also quickly found that my initially limited and positive experience with Comhaltas was far from the norm—the organization is actually a large and sprawling entity with hard-core supporters, fervent detractors, and everything in-between.

From its grassroots origins in 1951 as a collective of existing groups of musicians, Comhaltas has grown to become international in scope, with an estimated 400-plus branches around the world. These branches, while under the umbrella of the Comhaltas headquarters located just outside Dublin, are also largely independent entities, serving the musicians in their localities in many different ways. Indeed, the volunteer-run local branches organize the "bread-and-butter" activities of Comhaltas (music lessons, dances, sessions, etc.), while the government-

¹ The abbreviation CCE is also frequently used, but I have chosen to refer to the organization primarily as "Comhaltas," for consistency.

funded national headquarters coordinates a consistently growing number of larger-scale projects, including government-focused advocacy, a teacher certification program, traditional music standardized exams, an archive, festivals, and a nationwide series of competitions culminating in the "All-Ireland" festival each summer. Internationally, local branches in the United Kingdom, the United States, and as far away as Tokyo, Buenos Aires, and Budapest participate in similar activities.

With self-stated membership estimated in the tens of thousands,² Comhaltas is unique among music organizations: no other organization devoted to promotion of a single type of traditional music operates internationally on this scope. The breadth and activist nature of the organization has made it a controversial entity. It seems that everybody involved with Irish traditional music has an opinion about Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, and both members and non-members express contradictory and varying feelings about it.

In this introduction, I will trace the thought process that led from my initial experience in New York City to my current understanding of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann as a complex collectivity that can inform our understanding of the politics of musical community in Ireland.

This dissertation will not only provide a glimpse into a unique and controversial music organization, but will also address the question: How does musical performance help to construct the many layers of group relationships that have remained crucial to Irish identity through the late-20th and early-21st centuries? In other words, how do musical communities in Ireland function both symbolically in the context of nation, region, and diaspora, as well as personally in the context of face-to-face interaction and local, everyday life? In answering this question, the chapters of this dissertation will explore such interlocking themes as musical community and

² Accurate documentation of numbers of Comhaltas members is virtually impossible to access.

policy, musical community and place, musical community and diaspora, and musical community and performance.

My goal in highlighting these themes is not to construct a single bounded or universal understanding of musical community, but rather to allow my research on a unique musical organization to inform future use of the term in and outside of academic settings. In examining Comhaltas as a multifaceted musical community in relation to the many other communities which perform and create Irish traditional music, I argue that the Comhaltas community is created by the discourse and actions of its participants over time, regardless of whether or not they have purchased memberships in the organization or even whether they would call themselves members. I am resisting the enclosure of musical community as a concept because, even though the controversies surrounding Comhaltas often stem from organizational discourse which seems to reify or enclose a single Irish “traditional music community,” the experiences of musicians and members are constantly resisting these efforts, illustrating the flexible and fluid aspects of the musical community that are sometimes hidden by its nationalist and revivalist origins.

Introducing Comhaltas: Nationalism vs. Community

When I first began work on my dissertation, I believed that the project was going to be a study centering on the topic of music, revival, and nationalism. Comhaltas was founded in Dublin in 1951 by a group of musicians who were concerned that traditional Irish music was being eclipsed by popular and foreign influences—in that respect, it is a “revivalist” group. The organization was also created in the spirit of a cultural nationalism that emerged in Ireland in the late nineteenth century, and it has emphasized the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional

performing arts in its mission statement since its founding. The current aims and objectives, as defined in the group's *Bunreacht* (constitution), are:

- “To promote Irish Traditional Music in all its forms;
- To restore the playing of the Harp and Uilleann Pipes in the National life of Ireland;
- To promote Irish Traditional Dancing;
- To foster and promote Traditional singing in both Irish and English;
- To foster and promote the Irish language at all times;
- To create a closer bond among all lovers of Irish music;
- To co-operate with all bodies working for the restoration of Irish Culture;
- To establish Branches throughout the country and abroad to achieve the foregoing aims and objects.”³

This mission and the nationalist projects it stems from relate to a conservative understanding of “traditional music” (and Irishness in general) that is constantly and publicly under debate. Most generally, the label “traditional music” in Ireland (often abbreviated colloquially as “trad,” and explicitly opposed to genres such as “folk” or “classical”) has come to be applied to the instrumental performance of dance tunes and song airs with general structural and formal characteristics dating back to musical genres popular throughout Europe in the late 18th century, as well as vocal songs and airs in Irish and English. General use of the term also often refers to the social and communal expectations associated with these musical genres.⁴ The

³ <http://comhaltas.ie/about/goals> (accessed 9/20/14)

⁴ The term “traditional music” in Ireland has been thoroughly explored, debated, and excavated in a variety of publications and contexts, including encyclopedias such as *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music* (Vallely 2011), conferences such as the 1999 *Crossroads Conference: Tradition and Change in Irish Traditional Music* (Vallely 1999), essays and stories such as those by Ciarán Carson (Carson 1998), commentary in magazines (i.e., *The Journal of Music in Ireland*) and newspapers (regular columns in *The Irish Times*), documentaries such as the 1995

evolution of performance style and meaning in relation to these tunes and song types, however, has coincided with repeated public discussions about “continuity and change” and “tradition and innovation” amongst musicians. In fact, Comhaltas’ own conservative discourse is often belied by the actions and opinions of its members and changes in its programming.

The nationalist and revivalist stories about Comhaltas, particularly about its early years, have been told multiple times in the few scholarly publications that already discuss the organization.⁵ Edward O. Henry’s 1989 article in *Ethnomusicology*, for example, provides an overview and evaluation of Comhaltas’ activities at the time with a small amount of commentary from informants. Henry evaluates Comhaltas’ activities positively in the light of government- or organization-“sponsored” traditional music generally (and specifically compared with Yugoslavia), but he provides only glancing context for how Comhaltas’ activities fit into the complex soundscape of traditional music. Many of my informants would take issue with his conclusion that “CCÉ has been quite successful” in balancing “the old and the new” in Irish music (Henry 1989:94). The task of evaluating Comhaltas as a revivalist organization is taken up again by Rachel Fleming in her 2004 article “Resisting Cultural Standardization: Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and the Revitalization of Traditional Music in Ireland.” Fleming focuses on

BBC/RTÉ production *River of Sound: The Changing Course of Irish Traditional Music*, dissertations (i.e., (Kearney 2009; Moloney 1992; Ní Fhuartháin 2011; Slominski 2010), and textbooks (hAllmhurain 1998; Hast and Scott 2004; Williams 2009). In light of this ever-evolving debate and commentary, this dissertation does not attempt to provide a definitive definition of its own, instead referencing various definitions and criteria (including those listed above) as they become relevant to the topic at hand.

⁵ Irish traditional musicians have been particularly self-reflexive in written publications, with many editorials about Comhaltas appearing in early editions of music magazines such as *Ceol*, commentary on the organization in occasional essays and editorials in newspapers such as the *Irish Times*, and brief descriptions and commentary in general histories of Irish music and music encyclopedias. Several scholars have also addressed aspects of Comhaltas’ activities in the context of explorations of larger issues of, for example, regional identity (Kearney 2009; Kearney 2013) and copyright protections (McCann 2001; McCann 2014).

the ways that the conservative nature of Comhaltas (as emblematic of revivalist organizations) can act as a catalyst for self-reflection and activism relating to the tensions between old and new within the tradition (Fleming 2004).

Irish traditional music scholar Helen O'Shea has written more broadly about community and music in Ireland, but in her 2008 book *The Making of Irish Music*, she writes critically of Comhaltas' role in the "commodification and standardization" of traditional music (O'Shea 2008:46). She describes Comhaltas as a negative influence on an "unofficial music culture" that is held up as an ideal by many traditional musicians, including O'Shea herself (2008:47). This is a common position amongst critics of the organization, but O'Shea also provides only a cursory survey of Comhaltas' activities and does not explore their implications through ethnographic research or interviews with its members.

The nature of revivalist organizations and Comhaltas' place in the history of Irish traditional music and Irish culture more generally is taken up most thoroughly in Irish Studies scholar Méabh Ní Fhuartháin's recent dissertation *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann: (Re)Shaping tradition 1951-1972* (2011).⁶ Ní Fhuartháin again takes revival as a core mode of analysis, but her ethnographic and archival research provides an in-depth look at the reality of Comhaltas' positive and negative roles in the development of Irish traditional music. The dissertation, however, openly limits itself to Comhaltas' early decades, through which the organization maintained a more grassroots orientation and a focus on adult musicians. It touches on the transition to a more "professionally driven management structure" (Ní Fhuartháin 2011:4) in the final years under consideration, but leaves the work of parsing Comhaltas' rapid growth,

⁶ Only the Introduction to this dissertation has been made available to me.

increasing media exposure, cultural activism, and shift towards education and family participation of more recent decades to other scholars.

The more I learned about Comhaltas, via both the above literature and personal experience, the more I came to realize that a thematic focus on the national or nationalist leanings of the organization left out many of the other important parts of its story, particularly through the latter decades of the 20th century and into the 21st. Considering the importance of the local grassroots branches within Comhaltas' bureaucracy and ideology, I came to realize that an analysis that focused on nationalism and nationalist revival projects did not adequately address the complex ways that the government and cultural institutions interact with musical performances and group identities on the local, regional, and international levels.

The concept of *community*, however, pervades public discourse surrounding Irish traditional music, both inside and outside of Comhaltas. Among other contexts, community is used in certain musical circles in reference to an intangible sense of Irish national culture and unity, along the lines of Anderson's "imagined community." This can emerge in mild patriotic terms as well as more strident political ones, such as the role of musical performances in conflict and reconciliation between the Catholic and Protestant communities in the North. Community is also used in reference to processes of globalization and diaspora: a shifting and growing global "trad community." This reference stands in counterpoint to the music's perceived roots in locally based performance: participatory traditions evoking the most typical use of community, one based on face-to-face interaction and geographical boundaries. And community is also prominent in cultural policy discussions about traditional music, from "community development" to "community arts."⁷

⁷ Specific examples of these uses will appear throughout this dissertation.

The tensions between these and other notions of community all exist within the everyday operations of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, whose members belong simultaneously to a local musical community or branch and a powerful international organization which they might support, ignore, or even actively disagree with—a situation which has led to public confrontations over various policies and programs as well as, more broadly, the question of the continued relevance of an organization dedicated to a singular vision of an Irish national culture. In short, it became clear that understanding Comhaltas and its diverse membership required viewing it as more than just an “organization,” but rather as a less bounded collectivity: a porous and multi-layered musical community existing in a web of other musical communities.

Given this shift in focus, the crucial question for this project then became: how to formulate a concept of musical community that reconciles all of these different practical applications with existing theoretical analyses of the term? The transition from a focus on music and nationalism to the concept of musical community also meant reconciling previous scholarship, musical and otherwise, on nationalism, cultural policy, and the state with work that addresses the more intimate, private, and informal expressions of these different types of group identification. Irish Studies, cultural policy studies and the anthropology of the state, and ethnomusicological investigations have all approached the politics of community from different perspectives and attempted to solve different problems. A full survey of the myriad ways that community has been used and reinvented as a focus of cultural analysis is beyond the scope of this dissertation, which focuses primarily on community as expressed through musical performance and discourse. I have instead selected appropriate commentary from scholarly perspectives that coincides with core points and themes emerging from my fieldwork and the words and actions of my informants. These different viewpoints have coalesced into my working

definition of musical community, supported by three main thematic or topical areas that have emerged through my research.

Defining Musical Community

As I began my explorations of the idea of community in (ethno)musicological circles and beyond, Kay Kaufman Shelemay's 2011 article "Musical Communities: Rethinking the Collective in Music" was published, reaffirming my sense of the importance of further exploration of the concept and proving complementary to my own theoretical framework. Throughout a relatively thorough survey of the study and analysis of collective musical experience and performance in ethnomusicology and beyond, Shelemay draws attention to "a dearth of critical discussions about concepts of community in musical scholarship" (Shelemay 2011:354). Like Shelemay, I have been struck by the frequency of use of the word "community" in ethnomusicological literature, often with no attempt to define or situate the concept for the reader. As anthropologist Gerald Creed has put it: "...the term has become part of the commonsensical way we understand and navigate the world. Community does not *need* defining, and this is precisely why scholars need to pay attention to it" (Creed 2006:4).

Shelemay responds to this issue with her own definition of musical community:

A musical community is, whatever its location in time or space, a collectivity constructed through and sustained by musical processes and/or performances. A musical community can be socially and/or symbolically constituted; music making may give rise to real-time social relationships or may exist most fully in the realm of a virtual setting or in the imagination. A musical community does not require the presence of conventional structural elements nor must it be anchored

in a single place, although both structural and local elements may assume importance in the process of community formation as well as in its ongoing existence. Rather, a musical community is a social entity, an outcome of a combination of social and musical processes, rendering those who participate in making or listening to music aware of a connection among themselves. (Shelemay 2011:365)

Shelemay then proceeds to refine this definition by proposing three different types or processes of musical community: descent (i.e., collectivities sharing ethnicity, kinship, religion, nationality; a “primordial connection, whether based on historical factors or intervention” (Shelemay 2011:370)), dissent (i.e., minority groups, protest movements), and affinity (i.e., communities of choice, personal preference, prestige).⁸

Emerging from Shelemay’s work with Ethiopian diaspora communities, these concepts prove less useful for my work with Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, in which aspects of identity such as personal aesthetics, nationality, and resistance to authority (among many others) frequently become so hopelessly muddled as to become nearly useless as categories of analysis or classification.⁹ Rather than attempting to adapt Shelemay’s three processes of musical community to my research, I have instead chosen to focus on the three common concepts or arguments about musical community discussed below. These three themes do overlap

⁸ These categories are also found in other commentary on community; for example, Karen Fog Elwig in *Realizing Community* highlights two “focii” in anthropological work on community: community of “belonging” (complex webs of individual interconnectedness with a focus on interpersonal or face-to-face interaction) and community of “sentiment” (connectedness via belief/experience with a focus on diaspora and transnationalism) (Elwig 2002:125–27).

⁹ Shelemay acknowledges the fluidity of her terminology, introducing these processes of community as part of a continuum or “multidimensional framework” in which “multiple communities can be superimposed in one ‘real place’ or within a single musical event” (2011:376). Nevertheless, I have chosen to subsume her tripartite classification continuum within the single “community is plural” argument introduced above.

significantly with aspects of Shelemay's initial definition, particularly through a focus on the *variety* of ways that musical communities are constituted by the performances and discourse of their participants. My analysis has thus led to a consolidated adaptation of Shelemay's definition of musical community, with emphases and caveats particular to my own research.

I have chosen to define "musical community" as *the musical performance of collective selfhood*. The phrase "collective selfhood" is common throughout social science theory, but I have drawn the phrase "performance of collective selfhood" from Michael Herzfeld's work on cultural intimacy and nationalism: "It has become clear that too heavy a focus on the nation-state is unnecessarily restrictive, but that much can be done with the concept of cultural intimacy by analyzing performances of selfhood—collective and individual—in the interstices of many another institutional frameworks as well" (2005:34). Herzfeld explores "cultural intimacy" as a concept that explains the ways that the state and nationalism intrude on everyday experience and local social life (and the types of resistance and protest that emerge in these contexts), but in this quote he also calls for the analysis of "performances of selfhood" in relation to other institutional frameworks as well.

In the context of this dissertation, exploration of the musical performance of collective selfhood is complicated by the variety of musical communities constituting, interacting with, and in conflict with Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. Hence the *politics* of musical community in Irish traditional music in the title of this work: Comhaltas' nationalist roots and its activist role inevitably draw these many communities into a larger debate about institutional control and the role of traditional music in identity formation. Individuals may at any point "perform themselves into" (or out of) a musical community, regardless of whether they would classify themselves as members at the time. These performances, in turn, can impact the constitution of the musical

community over the long term. It is therefore important to keep the following three themes stressing the flexibility of the term “musical community” in mind while exploring the different manifestations of this musical organization.

Exploring Musical Community: Three Core Themes

Plurality and Multiplicity

Musicians typically belong to a variety of different intersecting, interdependent musical communities. Likewise, musical communities are constituted through their relationships to other collectivities. This is apparent not only within Comhaltas’ own internal structure, but in the way that the group and its members interact with other musical communities. Comhaltas itself is made up of a collective of individual branches drawn together by both geography and affinity. These relatively independent branches are in turn linked through geographically oriented county and provincial councils, under the umbrella of the national organization.¹⁰ These various “levels” of musical community within the organization must also interact with a variety of other musical communities in Ireland and abroad, from informal collectivities such as networks of kinship and friendship, to unaffiliated local collectivities such as pub sessions and performing groups, to official groups such as local and national non-profit, educational, and advocacy organizations.

The multiplicity of communities constituting Irish traditional music performance defies simple definitions, despite the attempts of players to lay various boundaries around the concept. As Shelemay suggests in her survey of contemporary attempts to come to terms with “musical

¹⁰ The constitutional structure of this organization’s administration is thus (from “top” to “bottom”): *Ardchomhairle* (Central Executive Council) – Provincial Councils (Leinster, Munster, Connacht, Ulster, Britain, North America) – County Councils – Branches.

community,” many music scholars have actually danced around the idea of community to work instead with other terms (scene, subculture, pathway, etc.) that they feel better acknowledge the flexibility and plurality of musical collectivities and the power imbalances that occur between them (2011:360–64). For example, in 1982, Adeleida Reyes Schramm, one of the first ethnomusicologists to theorize music-related research in an urban environment, placed an emphasis on concepts of diversity and difference in her approach to an “urban ethnomusicology” (Reyes Schramm 1982). She wrote of how most city residents have access to “diverse musical resources and are conversant with multiple sets of socio-musical rules.” They are thus able to “invoke a particular set [of rules] that is appropriate to each of the many contexts that are part of urban existence” (1982:10). This emphasis on choosing between diverse cultural or musical resources remains a common theme in the ethnomusicological and anthropological study of cities,¹¹ but it is a theme that is increasingly complicated by the spread of technologies and the movement of people back and forth between cities and other environments.

Indeed, the “problem” of musical communities that are not easily classified or bounded has preoccupied other ethnographers as well, many of whom have struggled to find an alternative to older, more rigid definitions of community. In an attempt to gain a holistic view of musical activity in a mid-sized English town, Ruth Finnegan wrote of how she believed that more commonly used terms such as network, group, association, world, community, or scene did not quite capture the ways that people related to each other in the town through musical practices (Finnegan 1989). Echoing Reyes Schramm’s emphasis on diversity, Finnegan instead settled on an idea of “pathways” as a metaphor for music-based relationships in the town of Milton Keynes:

¹¹ E.g., Coplan 1982.

Far from being the kind of marginal and unstructured activity often suggested by the label ‘leisure’, with its implications of residual items somehow left over from ‘real’ life, these musical practices were upheld not by isolated individuals in an asocial vacuum or by people merely trying to fill in the time to ‘solve’ the ‘problem of leisure’, but through a series of socially recognized pathways which systematically linked into a wide variety of settings and institutions within the city. (Finnegan 1989:299)

While there are compelling motivations for these scholars to attempt to lay new lexical ground for unconventional or overlapping communities, I have chosen to maintain the concept of musical community as the grounding theme for my own analysis. This is partly because of the many ways in which community now commonly refers to relationships beyond the “traditional” community bounded by discrete (typically rural) geographical or political markers, including communities linked through travel and technologies.

In the study of Irish traditional music, scholars have also begun pushing for a more inclusive or plural notion of musical community which allows for difference and conflict, whether in the idealized experience of musical communion through a single performance (e.g., the Irish pub session; O’Shea 2006), or the more systematic divisions in musical perception between communities in Northern Ireland (Hastings 2003; Uallachain 2003; Vallely 2008). The move towards diversity in stories of musical community in Ireland has also included the impact of gender (Slominski 2010), previously neglected geographies such as islands (Laoire and Ruairí 2005; Ní Chonghaile 2011), and the musics of youth cultures and immigrant/migrant groups (e.g., Fitzgerald and O’Flynn 2014).

Outside of musical performance specifically, Irish historians, sociologists, and philosophers have also been recognizing Ireland’s need for a more flexible self-definition,

incorporating regional, diasporic, and sectarian identities. Philosopher Richard Kearney, for example, calls for a “postnationalist Ireland” in which a “community” means a place where “identity is part of a permanent process of narrative retelling, where each citizen is in a ‘state of dependency on others’. In such a postmodern republic, the principle of interdependency is seen as a virtue rather than a vice; it serves, in fact, as reminder that every citizen’s story is related to every other’s” (Kearney 1997:63).

The reality, however, is that these calls for the transcendence of divisions and the acceptance of difference are not always enacted by groups in positions of power (including Comhaltas) and often run up against highly entrenched boundaries: political, social, and otherwise. Musical performance can highlight the conflicts between communities in a negative way, as Martin Stokes argues: “When we are looking at the way in which ethnicities and identities are put into play in musical performance, we should not forget that music is one of the less innocent ways in which dominant categories are enforced and resisted” (1994:8).

In the case of Irish traditional music, these boundaries and unequal power dynamics can manifest in musical and social distinctions between “Irish” and “not Irish,” regional identities, the distribution of money or grants, and other forms of recognition and influence. In fact, as Gregory Barz maintains (in reference to Henry Glassie’s work in Northern Ireland), “communities may, in fact, as Glassie suggests, often be more *factionous* than we might normally recognize them to be” (Barz 2006:26). The unequal distribution of power and resources between and within communities and their often factionous histories lead some to deny the very plurality which has shaped their evolution. Plurality does not always equal harmony, as is firmly demonstrated by the internal tensions within Comhaltas and the conflicts between the organization and other communities.

Individuality and Collectivity

Anthropologists studying formalized communities such as states or organizations have placed an emphasis on the analysis of both the discourse and actions of the state and other organizations in the public sphere, as well as the decisions and interactions of the *individuals* constituting these structures of power (Sharma and Gupta 2006). The ethnographer is charged with challenging face-value interpretations of organizational or governmental discourse and determining whether individual intentions align with either actions or eventual outcomes in the context of collective power (Miller and Yudice 2002). An individual belonging to a group or a community, formally or informally, might express opinions counter to the ideology of that group, and those opinions might again contradict the individual's actions or the outcomes arising from those actions.

In the case of Irish traditional music, individual musicians both idealize and resist musical community in many different ways. For example, while the mass media and some organizations, including Comhaltas, often promote and emphasize group performances of traditional music, these collective musical experiences also stand opposed to a strong history of recognition of individual innovation and musical mastery in solo performance within the tradition.¹² As Helen O'Shea argues, even within collective musical performances lauded as community-building or educational experiences, conceptualizations of group performance have a "tendency to idealise the process of making music together (as if it *always* produced a

¹² E.g., physical monuments to musicians in their home towns, festivals and schools (including Comhaltas branches) named after renowned players, biographies of important musicians and collectors, award ceremonies such as the television station TG4's *Gradam Cheoil* (presented each year since 1998; see www.gradam.ie, accessed 8/7/14), and the informal circulation of stories and legends about master musicians in various educational and social contexts.

transcendent experience) and to elide the experiences of participants (as if *everyone* had the same experience)” (2008:136). Thomas Turino also urges us to not forget that “any general theories about artistic processes and expressive cultural practices would do well to begin with a conception of the self and individual identity, because it is in living, breathing individuals that ‘culture’ and musical meaning [and, I would argue, community] ultimately reside” (Turino 2008:94–95).

These viewpoints on the importance of the individual within social or communal musical processes strive to balance the perspectives of individual actors with the musical communities that help to form their identities—a process that is particularly relevant in “formalized” communities such as Comhaltas. A study of Comhaltas must acknowledge that the motivations and experiences of individuals who interact with the organization—whether as members, students, teachers, adjudicators, administrators, or audience members—are not always represented by the group’s official discourse.

Process and Change

Musical communities are constantly shifting and changing through time and across space. They are also performed: constituted through time by the actions of individuals (cf. Butler 1990). Using this concept, Gregory Barz writes of the Tanzanian *kwaya* as a community of *performance* that “typically functions as a direct connection between one’s cultural past and present. In this way community is not a static object; rather it is a process by which people come together for a particular cause or purpose” (Barz 2006:26). Indeed, Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, so frequently adapted for ethnomusicological analysis, also stretches to incorporate the performance of the imagined community of nationality, as Kelly Askew demonstrates in an ethnographic

analysis of music and Tanzanian nationalism in which she argues for a “performative understanding of power” (2002:271) in the construction of the national collectivity.

In her definition of musical community, Shelemay links the ongoing process of community formation to the active nature of musical performance, drawing on Christopher Small’s transformation of “music” into a verb (a process, “musicking”) that encompasses its social dimensions as well as its sonic ones (2011:365). In Irish traditional music, the sonic markers of the “traditional” and the social and musical behaviors which constitute its performance have been continually reinvented and contested by the musicians themselves.

This process of communal reinvention (often characterized by the dichotomies of “tradition and innovation” or “continuity and change”) has also played a central role in Comhaltas’ own ideological evolution (or, at times, lack thereof). This evolution is represented in the group’s shift from the more informal adult-focused communities of the early years, to family- and children-focused communities and, most recently, increased emphasis on facilities and bureaucratic structures for everything from archives to public relations to performances. The processes of change can also be found in changing goals and processes for teachers, uses of technology, and rules and procedures for competitions. While these changes have been resisted to various degrees over the decades, they all contradict attempts to portray Comhaltas as an unchanging, one-dimensional ideological entity.

Dissertation Chapters and Major Themes

The chapters of this dissertation focus on four different yet intersecting themes: musical community and policy/politics, musical community and place, musical community and performance, and musical community and diaspora. These themes emerged both from the

literature on musical community discussed above and from my fieldwork in Ireland and the United States; they reflect the different modes of community formation and definition that function within Irish traditional music. It is also important to note that the content of this dissertation shows a strong bias towards instrumental music performance. While song and dance are important modes of expression in the traditional arts in Ireland, my focus on Comhaltas and its activities has led to these activities remaining in the background of this particular study.

Chapter 1: Comhaltas, Cultural Policy, and Community in the Public Sphere (Musical Community and Policy/Politics)

Comhaltas has been extremely active in promoting a national(ist) traditional music community in Ireland, but its efforts in the public sphere have been actively contested in recent decades, demonstrating the multiplicity and political engagement of traditional music communities in Ireland. Starting with the organization's origins in existing cultural nationalist communities, this chapter traces the evolution of Comhaltas' organizational structure and political and cultural activism on the national level through the first decade of the 21st century. The chapter culminates in a discussion focusing on efforts by Comhaltas and representatives of other musical communities to create a targeted national cultural policy addressing traditional music. This chapter is based upon ethnographic interviews with musicians, policy-makers, and advocates, as well as archival research and public documents such as government publications and newspaper and magazine articles or editorials.

The main thematic focus of this chapter is cultural policy, broadly defined, and the politics of musical community in the public sphere. The chapter will explore the ways that the advocacy and policy-making processes intersect with the formation and maintenance of musical communities, symbolically and practically. In the case of Irish traditional music, the process of

defining a national/international “traditional music community,” particularly in a nationalist context, has led to different emphases for the formalized Comhaltas community vs. other groups and individuals. My own use of “traditional music community,” as explicated in this chapter, draws on the themes of plurality, individuality, and change emphasized above to stress the ways that this general term can encompass both the more bounded and formal terminology emphasized by much of Comhaltas’ official discourse, as well as the more flexible and diverse ways that the national community is actually lived and performed by musicians and others both inside and outside of the organizations’ membership.

Chapter 2: Local Branches, Local Musical Communities: Situating Comhaltas in the Irish Musical Landscape (Musical Community and Place)

Drawing on my emphasis on the plurality of community, I believe that it is important to keep in mind, as Herzfeld asserts, that the “imagined” community of the nation is by no means a “unique level of identification at which distinctions between the public and intimate faces of identity are negotiated” (2005:53). In the context of Comhaltas’ growth over five decades as a national—and increasingly politicized—organization, the second chapter of my dissertation examines how the group’s local branches function as musical communities in a complex web of town, county, regional, and national identifications. Connections between musical performance, community, and concepts of place and geography are unavoidable in Irish music. The links emerge most frequently in the canonized history, oral and written, which associates the music’s development and survival/revival with the rural West of Ireland, and in the reverence for and importance placed on the demonstration of regional accents in performance style. The work of Comhaltas branches frequently reinforces these place-based tropes about musical community in Ireland, but also, particularly in the case of urban branches and branches in areas not known for

traditional music, destabilizes them. For the connection between music, community, and place in Ireland resists being fixed; these linkages are, as discussed above, performative, plural, and individual.

Members of the formal branch community often participate in other musical communities bound by place and geography in various ways, from other formal communities identified by organizations or events to more informal groups bound by performance at a local session, family networks, or identification with a particular teacher or performance style. Comhaltas branches exist in both a symbiotic and fractious relationship with these other local traditional music communities. In this sense they represent the specificity of the place-based local music community, as well as transcending it through universal bureaucratic structures and connections to a national network. This chapter includes discussion of the origins and history of branches as alternative or subcultural “safe spaces” for musical community, as well as the explicitly social aspects of the branch community. Emphasis is placed on both similarities and differences among branches in different locations that cause conflict between them and Comhaltas’ role as a national community.

Chapter 3: Comhaltas, Teaching/Transmission, and Musical Community (Musical Community, Performance, and Transmission)

Following upon the previous chapter’s explication of branch identity and activity, Chapter 3 delves into one aspect of the aural manifestation of Comhaltas’ ideology: teaching and transmission. Transmission is an important part of the performance and creation of musical community in Irish traditional music. Comhaltas’ emphasis on teaching and the methodologies it promotes place it at the center of debates about freedom and control in the transmission of music in Ireland. The large numbers of students entering into the traditional music community under

the aegis of Comhaltas give the organization's positions on issues from use of notation to professionalization of teaching unusual weight even as these issues have also been raised by university programs dedicated to traditional music, commercial publishing efforts dating back decades (if not centuries), and the proliferation of workshops and summer schools, among other arenas.

Because the communication of traditional music from the teacher or master musician to the student is such a core part of how the music is conceptualized by its participants, institutionalized interventions such as Comhaltas' into the often-idealized informal relationship between teacher and student are worth intense scrutiny. The chapter explores both the formal teaching mechanisms developed by Comhaltas headquarters (teacher training, exams, summer school, and slow sessions) and the individual methods and perspectives of teachers across the country. Additionally, the chapter will begin to explore how the process of transmission can communicate information beyond musical notes and performance style, including social cues, behavioral expectations, and historical data that allow students access to larger musical communities.

Chapter 4: Comhaltas in America: Globalization, Diaspora, and Musical Community (Musical Community and Diaspora)

The story of Comhaltas, and of Irish traditional music in general, is not complete without the contribution and influence of Irish emigrants and their descendents. In Chapter 4, I begin to address the complex interactions between Comhaltas branches in America and traditional music communities both in North America and Ireland. These branches, while primarily founded or inspired by emigrants and their descendants, have also played an important role in the formation of wider-ranging musical communities including non-Irish musicians and those (re)discovering a

previously unexplored Irish heritage. This chapter is based primarily on ethnographic research conducted in the New York City region and some preliminary investigations in other select regions of the country. As such, it is only the most cursory of explorations of a complex subject.

The presence of Comhaltas branches outside of Ireland raises important questions about the role of institutions in constituting, challenging, or perpetuating communities of diaspora, ethnicity, and/or “affinity,” as Shelemay would put it. Many of these overlap with themes already discussed in relation to Ireland itself, for example: How does the broader musical landscape of the “satellite” country change or shape the role of the organization? Do distinct performance and transmission styles emerge at a geographical distance to the “homeland,” and are these undermined or reinforced by institutional connections? Do those who choose membership in the institutional community also choose to adhere to the political or social motives advocated by the organization’s leadership? The answers to these and other questions can even vary between branches and regions, according to the needs of different musical communities throughout the United States. From education to social cohesion to links with the “homeland,” Comhaltas branches are now interwoven into Irish traditional music communities around the world.

Chapter 5: Community at the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann (Musical Community, Performance, and Competition)

The final chapter of this dissertation focuses on performance and meaning at the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* (The All-Ireland Music Festival, pronounced Flah Kyohl nah HAIR-uhn), Comhaltas’ most publically visible event and a series of competitions which has reverberations throughout the organization’s teaching and performance activities. This annual festival brings many of Ireland’s traditional music communities together in a highly public arena, creating both

conflict and opportunity for change and debate. This chapter is based primarily upon my attendance, observation, and participation at the 2006, 2008, and 2009 All-Ireland *fleadhanna*, as well as many other county- and province-level competitions attended between 2007-2009.

Comhaltas' musical competitions and the festivals surrounding them have been an important and contested site for the negotiation of national and regional musical communities and performance styles in traditional music. Indeed, the *Fleadh* functions as a heightened site of public musical interaction, in which Comhaltas members, non-affiliated musicians, tourists, and others create and contest musical meaning and collective identities. As Comhaltas' oldest and most visible project, the *Fleadh* is also one of its most controversial, with musicians telling countless stories of ignorant non-musician adjudicators, players changing their performance styles to accommodate judging, children and parents who are overly invested in competition outcomes, and pubs and street performances being taken over by drunken "punters" (patron/attendee) with no interest in music. These controversies bring to light important divisions within the multiple musical communities which constitute Irish traditional music performance and identity.

While the official criteria for evaluating an "authentic" performance in a traditional music competition generates much of the tension and controversy surrounding the event, the public performances of the *Fleadh* also obscure other more private musical connections occurring during the festival. The same students who gather each week throughout the year to play and learn together in formal classes constrained by the rules and expectations of the *Fleadh* are frequently inspired by the friendships they form in their assigned groups to discover other modes of performance and the communities therein. They also come to the *Fleadh* for its more informal opportunities for performance, as drilling on their competition tunes during the day

gives way in the evenings to chaotic assemblies of all ages merging in and out of groups playing together in every campground bathroom, hotel lobby nook, pub, and street corner. This final chapter will explore the ways that these multiple modes of performance gathered together under the aegis of one public event create and reinforce musical communities of different kinds.

Fieldwork and Methodology

As the beginning of this introduction hints, this project was, in part, born of my personal aesthetic and intellectual interest in Irish traditional music and Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. During over twelve years of learning and exploration in the United States and during my nearly three years' residence in Ireland (2007-2010, plus other shorter visits), I have been lucky enough to interact with and become a part of a variety of musical communities, both formal and informal. Though I was based in Dublin during my stay in Ireland, I also travelled extensively throughout the island, visiting Comhaltas musicians and communities. I was able to attend Provincial *fleadhanna* in Ulster, Leinster, Munster, and Connacht, as well as various county-run festivals and three All-Ireland competitions (one in Letterkenny and two in Tullamore).

In Dublin and on other trips around Ireland, dozens of generous musicians, administrators, scholars, and activists were willing to speak with me in recorded ethnographic interviews about Comhaltas and related topics. Informal private conversations and various public speeches and workshops have also proved invaluable. In addition to recordings and conversations, I have made use of archival materials including newspapers, journals, government documents, recordings, and videos at the Irish Traditional Music Archive in Dublin, the archives at Comhaltas Headquarters in Monkstown, and the Comhaltas regional archive at *Cois na hHabhna* and the Clare County Archives in Ennis, County Clare.

In addition to Comhaltas-centered research and participation, my interest in Irish flute/whistle performance and social set dancing has been guided by a number of other teachers and workshops/summer schools, as well as more informal attendance at various pub sessions and set dancing *céilis* in New York and Ireland. Formal instruction has included flute and whistle lessons with Bill Ochs and Mike Rafferty in the New York City area, participation in the Washington Square Harp and Shamrock Orchestra with Mick Moloney at New York University, classes at the Catskills Irish Arts Week and the Willie Clancy Summer School with various instructors, set dancing classes at the Irish Arts Center in New York and the Cobblestone Pub in Dublin, and various other shorter day- or weekend-long workshops in both dance and music.

Throughout my travels, these musical communities and many of the individuals who constitute them have demonstrated a particularly engaging and vocal passion for the sounds and relationships of Irish traditional music. This passion manifests itself in everything from musical mastery to political activism, deeply private friendships to public, mass-mediated performances. This dissertation is an effort to explore that passion in relation to one important music organization and the many ways that it creates and challenges notions of musical community.

CHAPTER 1

Comhaltas, Cultural Policy, and the Traditional Music Community in the Public Sphere

Introduction: 1951

1951 would, in retrospect, turn out to be an important year for traditional music in Ireland's public sphere. In that year, a group of Irish musicians met up in Mullingar to discuss collaborating on a national music festival and other projects. This initial gathering soon coalesced into Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (The Irish Musicians' Association). Coincidentally, 1951 also saw the Irish government's first attempt to establish a national cultural or arts policy with the founding of the Irish Arts Council. Even though the stories of Comhaltas and the Irish Arts Council begin in the same year, it would be decades before the missions of the two organizations would overlap in any practical way.

The 1950s in Ireland were not the time of economic expansion and optimism that they were elsewhere in Europe and North America. In spite of the fact that the militarily neutral Ireland didn't experience a post-war economic boom, saw a huge wave of emigration throughout the decade, and remained extremely conservative in social policy-making, the decade also saw the beginnings of social, political, and economic shifts that would set the stage for more radical growth and change in the 1960s and beyond (Ferriter 2005:464). In this context, while initial activities of Comhaltas and the Arts Council were fairly modest in scope, the development of the two organizations indicated some fairly remarkable shifts in the public conception of "Irish culture" and the role of traditional music in Irish public life.

This chapter will move both backwards and forwards in time from this 1951 watershed year in order to describe how Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann "grew up" amidst shifting ideas about

how music and culture intersected with “Irishness” on a national stage and the organization’s relationship to changing concepts of an Irish national community. The first section of the chapter will briefly trace Comhaltas’ early years and place them in a context of Irish cultural nationalism in the 20th century. The chapter will then discuss the trajectory of the national and international development of Comhaltas from the 1970s onward and its role in the changing focus of Irish cultural policy in both the governmental and non-profit arts sectors. Finally, I will conclude with a detailed analysis of recent debates between Comhaltas, the traditional music community, and the Arts Council over the future of national arts policy concerning traditional music, and the impact of these debates both on definitions of a national “traditional music community” and on Comhaltas’ plans moving into the 21st century.

Unlike the other four chapters in this dissertation, this chapter focuses on Comhaltas at a holistic or institutional level—as a national/nationalist community, as opposed to later chapters’ more focused approaches to the organization via teaching, events, and local communities. While the focus of ethnography is often on individual or local experiences, ethnography of the state, bureaucracy, and organizations is also important in order to understand the histories and power struggles through which individuals experience music in a national context. In light of the complex relationships between individuals and the different communities they belong to, this chapter draws on a variety of individual and institutional voices from different public and private contexts to tell the story of Comhaltas’ national development and its involvement in Irish cultural policy, including ethnographic interviews, newspaper and magazine editorials and essays, memoirs, and more. The intention of this chapter, via both content and methodology, is thus to explore an institutionalized community and a national cultural policy that are not monolithic or one-dimensional, but rather nuanced constructions of the individuals who created them. The

story of this institution and its role in the public sphere also remains essential to understanding the many musical communities that constitute and interact with Comhaltas.

Contrasting ideas about the meaning of a national or international traditional music community have constituted a significant portion of internal and external tensions throughout Comhaltas' organizational history and development, which in turn helped prompt my emphasis on the plurality of musical community. Within Comhaltas' upper echelons "the community" has referred most often to a group explicitly bounded by a general interest in traditional music and culture, a willingness to engage with Comhaltas itself, and a specific historical and political concept of the Irish nation/people. Amongst other advocates for traditional music in the public sphere, "the community" has referred more often to a "traditional music community" at-large: a flexible and shifting group of musicians affiliated primarily by an "in-group" knowledge of the social and musical practices surrounding Irish traditional music. This group spans the Irish nation, the island and, in many cases, the world. My use of "traditional music community" in this dissertation aligns more closely with this broader and more flexible definition, which I believe can encompass both the more closely bounded definition assumed by much top-level Comhaltas discourse, as well as the wider range of behaviors and opinions actually manifested by Comhaltas participants in their day-to-day musical lives. This use of "traditional music community" depends as much on behaviors and performances of individuals within the collectivity as on the words and ideologies which they use to describe their community.

This larger community is in some respects an "imagined" one in the sense of Anderson's imagined national community, but this amorphous "trad community" also places an emphasis on opportunities for face-to-face interaction even in the context of travel and diaspora—for example, students and performers converge on summer schools and festivals in Ireland and

elsewhere, many pub sessions welcome visiting musicians and encourage close musical communion amongst virtual strangers, and overseas touring professionals are often hosted at intimate “house concerts” in areas featuring strong Irish emigrant or ethnic communities. Comhaltas leadership’s approach to musical community frequently highlights a sense of community “ownership” of the music (a community often encompassed by a particular concept of the Irish nation), while the more flexible “trad community” approach frequently rejects attempts to regulate or control performance. And, finally, both of these approaches run counter to the most common use of “community” in arts policy language, which presumes a “unified” civil society (Yudice 2003), rather than the “fragmented,” “multiple and diverse” public sphere which is frequently the reality today (McGuigan 1996).

Comhaltas: Precedents and Early Years

When current Comhaltas leaders are asked about the organization’s founding and its first decade, they often skip backwards in time upwards of half a century to the Irish nationalist cultural organizations of the late 19th century and the period leading up to independence in 1921.¹ Indeed, in its public discourse and institutional structure, Comhaltas closely mirrors its predecessors, particularly the Gaelic League² and the Gaelic Athletic Association.³ But while many of Comhaltas’ founders were active in these other nationalist cultural organizations, they

¹ This is a period in which, as Helen O’Shea argues, nationalist interest in traditional music shifted from a relatively benign Celticism (most strongly manifested in the literary revival of the 19th century) towards a more strident, politicized nationalism which emphasized territoriality (“Ireland for the Irish”) and ethnicity (“Irish Ireland”) (O’Shea 2008:17–22).

² *Conradh na Gaeilge*, an organization primarily dedicated to the Irish language, founded by Douglas Hyde in 1893.

³ Frequently abbreviated GAA, an organization dedicated to the preservation and/or reinvention of rural Irish/Gaelic sports such as hurling and Irish football, as well as Irish music, dance, and language. Founded 1884.

were also eager to address what was perceived as the “outsider” or second-class status of traditional music—both in the context of government recognition or cultural policy and within pre-existing Irish nationalist cultural organizations.

The antecedents of modern Irish traditional music had played an intermittent symbolic role in Irish public life for centuries. The Irish harp had been appearing on various coinage since at least the 16th century; harpists, bards, and composers played prominent roles in wealthy households in medieval Ireland; and various waves of preservationist and nationalist fervor in the 18th and 19th centuries had prompted public competitions, concerts, music collecting trips, and publications. On the other hand, this symbolic role in the public sphere had very little connection to the everyday practices of traditional music in local communities throughout Ireland. As ethnomusicologist Fintan Vallely has argued, while music shared a symbolic role with language and sport in the discourse of the late-19th century nationalists, “[m]usic in the 1880s was most likely much more robust than speech or games. It was not being challenged by, respectively, the hegemony of a politically and commercially induced language, English...or by the seduction of new, interesting games... Only records (and, later, broadcasting) changed all that” (Vallely 2004: 8-9). Indeed, traditional music scholar Reg Hall has characterized the period 1850-1950 as the “heyday” of traditional music, a flourishing of creativity and community which has no parallel (Hall 1999).

Traditional music in the latter half of the 19th century in Ireland was a highly local or regional activity, primarily based in the home or in the public spaces of the village such as a barn, a parish hall, a local crossroads. Its commercial impact was mostly limited to the small amounts of money paid to the traveling musicians and dancing instructors who were hired for events or sometimes short-term dance classes within certain districts. The emergence of

nationalist movements such as the Gaelic League did bring traditional music into the public sphere via events such as local, regional, and national *feiseanna*. These cultural festivals often featured concerts, demonstrations, and competitions of traditional music. But while competitions attempted to promote traditional music and song through events for fiddle, uilleann pipes, singing, composition, and occasionally song collecting, these events occurred side-by-side with classical music competitions and were thus often subjected to their more middle-class, urban aesthetic values. Frequently sharing judges and audiences with these classical events, the *Feis* competitions for traditional music were often simultaneously viewed by traditional musicians as both prestigious opportunities for wider recognition and as non-representative of the music as played more commonly in the home and local community (Slominski 2010:109–121).⁴

Beyond the *feiseanna*, however, traditional music's role in the development of Ireland's national identity became most directly relevant in the early decades of the new republic. Still reeling from the civil war and partition and struggling with a dire economy, Ireland's leadership continued to look to the past for a vision of the republic's national cultural ethos. Indeed, an anti-technology and anti-modern conceptualization of "Irishness" was part and parcel of the nationalist culture of many involved in the Gaelic League, the GAA, and later, Comhaltas. Captured iconically a few decades later in *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister) Eamonn de Valera's radio address "The Ireland That We Dreamed Of" marking the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Gaelic League, this idealized vision of Ireland's past became one of its future, as well:

⁴ These issues of class and, importantly, gender in the nationalist organizations and competitions of the late-19th and early-20th centuries are explored in depth in Tes Slominski's 2010 dissertation: *Music, Gender, and the Public Sphere in Twentieth-Century Ireland*. Slominski argues that the nationalist movements of this period were rife with (often fallacious) class assumptions, including the assumption that traditional musicians were inevitably lower-class, that those who participated in the *Oireachtas* and *Feis Cheoil* competitions were middle-class, and therefore middle-class performers could not be traditional and traditional musicians had no training in "art music."

The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit—a land whose countryside would be bright with cozy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age.⁵

This vision, which also encompassed fireside pipers and kitchen dances, was, as seen by nationalist proponents of music and dance, directly threatened by the inevitable encroachment of the modernization on musical performance in the form of new musical technologies and popular music genres imported from Britain and the United States. The dark specter of foreign music and music technologies was an important part of traditional music's relationship to the public sphere in Ireland in the mid-20th century, as well as an integral part of Comhaltas' own founding myth. Eamonn Ó Muirí, one of Comhaltas' founding members and the organization's first president, portrayed the situation as nothing short of a catastrophe: "Among the factors which precipitated the disaster in rural areas were emigration, the importation of foreign dances, the growing popularity of the gramophone, and the erroneous idea that British influence had been swept piece-meal from twenty-six of the thirty-two counties." In Ó Muirí's conception, the traditional musician was replaced by "the mechanical vapourings of London music-halls, in disc-music which flooded and eventually smothered and drowned the latent capabilities of his erstwhile pupils, and dulled the sensibilities of the lovers of the code he favoured. The dance-halls and the

⁵ http://www.rte.ie/laweb/11/11_t09b.html (accessed October 25, 2011).

acceptance of modern innovations completed the rout, stripping the countryside of its sense of musical values” (Ó Muirí 1973:17).⁶

These conservative cultural nationalist ideals—common in musical/cultural movements and revivals throughout Europe—also developed in conjunction with the deep conservatism of a reinvented Irish Catholic Church dating back to the devotional revolution beginning in the 1850s. Attempts to insert the Church into the daily life of the Irish included a deep investment in regulating social interaction between the sexes, a project that eventually made involvement in the social milieu of traditional music communities a necessity. These religious and nationalist concerns, and the concurrent technological developments, led to one of the most significant encounters between traditional music and dance and national cultural policy in Ireland to date: the Public Dance Halls Act of 1935. Nominally a law banning unlicensed public gatherings, this regulation was the legal manifestation of an ongoing state-sanctioned campaign by the Catholic Church to control public and private entertainment at the local and community level.⁷ Dancing and musical performance in the home, which had been primary cultural expressions of rural communities for decades, were now deemed illegal and all local musical performance was theoretically forced into licensed commercial venues and local parish halls under the supervision of the clergy. While private musical performance did continue to some extent post-1935, the

⁶ This nationalist perspective, however, was countered by the importance of the earliest recordings of traditional musicians themselves, which became treasured possessions on both sides of the Atlantic and greatly impacted the transmission of the music (Moloney 1982).

⁷ While the targets of the Church were often the “imported” popular dances and jazz music gaining popularity in Ireland since the 1920s, traditional music and its own “imported” dances such as sets and quadrilles were equally victims of the campaign from pulpits and police stations. Any unsupervised public gathering was suspect, as emphasized by this *Irish Times* article of 1929: “The clergy, the judges and the police are in agreement concerning the baleful effects of drink and the low dancing upon rural morals. Further restrictions on the sale of drinks, a remorseless war on the poteen industry, the strict supervision of dance halls and the banning (by law if need be) of all night dances would abolish many inducements to sexual vice” (Brennan 2004:125).

Dance Halls Act marked the beginning of an important shift in the music-making itself, including the formation of large bands to fill bigger halls (*céili* bands); the popularization of new instruments such as piano, drums, and accordion within the tradition in order to fill out a practice previously featuring solo performances and smaller groups; the expansion of formalized competition and professionalized musical ensembles; and a physical and symbolic separation between musician and dancer in the new public halls (Vallely 1999a:103).

Ethnomusicologist Helen O'Shea describes the symbolic costs of this shift in the starkest of terms: "A social system in which each contribution to an evening's entertainment was valued as a gift and as a way of making or performing community declined as music-making became a business and music a commodity that took musicians away from their localities and demanded of them a more disciplined, standardised, urban aesthetic and demeanour" (O'Shea 2008:36). While I agree with O'Shea that aspects of a previous communal sharing of the music were lost, it is also true that other modes of informal performance eventually emerged, including certain pub sessions and gatherings at the *fleadh* and other festivals right alongside the formal performances/competitions/classes. In addition, there were arguably already some commercial aspects to the house performance, including payment of musicians and dance instructors. And finally, the house did eventually re-emerge as a venue for performance and socialization, sometimes in unexpected places such as house concerts and social gatherings in urban Dublin and the Irish-American diaspora.

In the context of this political and cultural atmosphere, the origins of Comhaltas itself lay in a collaboration between two existing musical communities: the organizers of the annual *Feis*

Lár na hÉireann in Mullingar in County Westmeath in central Ireland,⁸ and the community of musicians based in the Piper's Club in Thomas Street in downtown Dublin. On October 14th, 1951, at *Árus Ceannt*, Thomas Street, Dublin, these players established an organization called *Cumann Ceoltóirí Éireann* with the following original mission:

1. To promote Irish Traditional Music in all its forms.
2. To restore the playing of the Harp and Uilleann Pipes in the national life of Ireland.
3. To create a closer bond between all lovers of traditional music.
4. To co-operate with all bodies working for the restoration of Irish culture.
5. The establishment of branches throughout the country to achieve the forgoing objects.

(Ó Muirí 1973:17–18)

Over the next few years, this organization was renamed Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, other musicians and cultural nationalists began to establish branches of Comhaltas across Ireland and even in Britain,⁹ and the Mullingar *Feis* became the first *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*. Unlike the *feiseanna* described earlier, which historically featured a broader slate of events including classical music and Gaelic language competitions, the Comhaltas *Fleadh* would remain focused

⁸ Willie Reynolds, one of the founders of Comhaltas: “The Feis was held in Mullingar each year, was a leading event in the Gaelic circles in the Midlands and always attracted a big attendance... The music competitions did have nationwide support and in fact many fine musicians did compete....I had a quartette of pipers from the Walderstown Club and I think I competed myself and have a medal from the Feis. There were a number of pipers from the Pipers Club in Thomas Street, Dublin... In all, this was really the roots for a new born organisation. A few months later I would say that Feis Lár na hÉireann in 1951 could be considered a Fleadh Cheoil” (Reynolds 1990:67–68).

⁹ The branch structure was similar to that of the GAA, for example. The history of Comhaltas on the branch/local level is explored in greater detail in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

primarily on traditional music performance, narrowly defined, with language and dance events remaining peripheral.¹⁰

As Comhaltas spread through the first decade of its existence, its focus remained on the system of festivals and competitions that kept growing in popularity, even as many musicians and fleadh-goers often were unaware of the organization's national structure and nationalist origins. The 1956 *Fleadh* in Ennis, Co. Clare, for example, while widely regarded in retrospect as a watershed event in terms of nationwide participation and quality of music,¹¹ was publicized in the local Clare Champion newspaper as simply the "All-Ireland Music Festival" and "the All-Ireland organization" with no mention of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (Eighteen Ceili Bands for Ennis 1956:4). In spite of this, however, the early *fleadheanna* were generally viewed very positively by the musicians involved, and quickly became a concrete, face-to-face embodiment of the more symbolic national musical communities being created by the formation of Comhaltas branches and, perhaps even more saliently, by the concurrent spread of radio programs and recordings featuring traditional music. As flutist and former Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann official Seamus MacMathúna commented:

I remember going to the first one... you know? And it changed my life... It was the fact that, here was a whole weekend of music everywhere. You walk down the street, there were people playing in the street. Into the pub, there were people playing in the pub. And you asked, who was that? And that was Leo Rowsome. And who was that? That was Mrs. Crotty. And who was that? That was Willie Clancy. And if you were in touch at all, and if you happened to have a radio – and again radio was coming in a big way in the

¹⁰ The *feis* in the late 20th and 21st century is overwhelmingly associated with step dance competitions.

¹¹ This event and other early *fleadheanna* will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

‘50s which, rural electrification like... So all this change was happening, but if you were in touch at all with what was happening, you knew that Leo Rowsome was a famous piper. Well there he was on the stage... And for us young fellas from rural Ireland it was the greatest; it was liberation. (Interview with Seamus MacMathuna, December 8, 2009)

The growth in popularity of the *Fleadh*, however, became a mixed blessing as Comhaltas developed throughout the 1960s, expanding its internal structure via provincial councils made up of local branch officials, as well as the structure of the festivals themselves via the creation of county and then provincial competitions in addition to the national event. With little official central management, it became increasingly difficult for Comhaltas to adjust to the many cultural changes in Ireland, including population movements and urbanization, engagement with the European Community, and rapid growth in recording, tourism, and commercialization of traditional music. By the mid-1960s it was clear the days of idyllic *fleadhanna*, seemingly springing unbidden from rural towns throughout Ireland, were over. Traditional musicians, Comhaltas members or no, were now forced to contemplate the future of Irish traditional music in a modernizing and globalizing Ireland.

Times of Transition: 1968-1999

By the end of the 1960s, Ireland was facing increasing urbanization and integration with the European Economic Community and traditional song and dance was riding the coattails of the ballad singing boom. A new generation was engaging with traditional music and, in conjunction with demographic and economic changes, their participation was no longer as strongly linked to nationalist sentiments and motivations. Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, meanwhile, was confronting public controversy over the nature of its premiere event, the *Fleadh*

Cheoil na hÉireann, as well as an undeniable shift in membership. Since its founding in 1950, Comhaltas had solidified into a multi-layered organization with national membership, a fundamental shift from the more loose-knit alliance of musicians and aficionados from the early days. Increased numbers of meetings, required travel, fundraising demands, negative publicity—all made activism and leadership within the organization difficult for the rural shopkeepers, engineers, and other volunteers for whom the work was a labor of love. These developments also drew negative reaction from musicians and commentators who thought that the bureaucracy and formality stood in direct contradiction to the organization's community-based and local roots.

The independent Irish music journal *Ceol*, founded in 1963, was one public venue in which there was much debate about the changing Irish music scene and Comhaltas' evolving role within it. In 1963, Comhaltas' own Public Relations Officer Thomas P. Dempsey mused on the organization's expansion:

It is now sometimes felt that there is more emphasis on organisation at the higher levels, than on the fundamental aims of Comhaltas... There can be no doubt that organisation and administration are most important if any body is to effect its aims, and the better the organisation the more effective the body. But in all its re-organisation Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann seems to an outsider to have made one notable omission. There is no expert committee or official appointed with the specific duty of catering for what must be the main interest of Comhaltas—Irish traditional music. (Dempsey 1963:8)

But perhaps the most trenchant critique came from *Ceol*'s editor, the respected Irish music scholar Breandán Breathnach, who referred multiple times to Comhaltas as “an organisation with a great future behind it” (Breathnach 1966:61). This pithy observation, made less than twenty years into the organization's existence, would be a critique that would stick with it for decades to

come.¹² And while discontent from within the organization was less cutting, there was an indication that perhaps Comhaltas could contribute more to Irish public cultural life, as suggested by PRO Dempsey:

It strikes one sometimes that Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, with its ten thousand active members in Ireland alone, and its well over a hundred thousand keen followers,¹³ is like a too gentle giant, who either does not know or is unwilling to use his own strength. As inheritors of something equally precious and even more powerful than the native language, Comhaltas has the duty and the right to demand for Irish music the recognition and the place to which it is entitled in the National Life—in schools, in Radio and Television, and as custodians and exponents of the tradition, they have the right to be consulted on what is exhibited as exemplifying Irish music. (Dempsey 1963:8)

In spite of criticism from both within and without, Comhaltas' restructuring gathered speed through the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, on two main fronts. Within the branches, members and administrators began to look for new ways to maintain relevance as commercial development and changing populations provided new public forums for musical expression. These changes led to a fundamental restructuring of the execution of Comhaltas' mission and a shift in focus to recruiting children and families as the core membership, and to music instruction as the main branch activity.¹⁴ This new focus on the next generation of musicians was essentially an acknowledgement of the shift in the political climate surrounding traditional

¹² The quote was also referenced countless times during interviews conducted for this dissertation.

¹³ It is difficult to pin down concrete numbers of Comhaltas members for any given year or event. The organization's records are incomplete and its official reports are often imprecise in accounting for membership numbers.

¹⁴ The implications of this shift on performance practice and the role of Comhaltas within local communities will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

music, in which the music was no longer explicitly at risk of disappearing, and the project of preservation was now confronted with change in the form of increased media exposure and cross-cultural experimentation.

The other main front of Comhaltas' change and expansion through the 1970s and '80s was in the group's presence in the public sphere and its interaction with the Irish government: a project that was undertaken largely in the spirit of the nationalist goals of promotion as originally envisioned by the group's founders. As then-president and current Director General Labhras Ó Murchú put it, when he took over the organization in 1968, it lacked a centralized management that would allow it to be a greater presence in the public sphere: "Comhaltas' structure wasn't that well established... It was a very small number of branches... We had no staff, no head office. And the opportunities were there, but we didn't have the infrastructure or the funding to do it. And I suppose the first I felt we had to do was get funding from the government" (Personal Interview, 30 June 2010). The funding process for Ó Murchú and the other Comhaltas officers was, at that time, a strictly behind-closed-doors process. The government only very rarely funded any community-run organizations other than Irish language programs, so, according to Ó Murchú, the then-Finance Minister (and later *Taoiseach*/Prime Minister) Charlie Haughey was at first not terribly inclined to acknowledge Comhaltas:

I wrote a letter to him—he wouldn't have known me from Adam, but I wrote a letter. I told him the work we were doing, I told him the potential, and a couple of members of the parliament, TDs, went to him as well. But we got a blank no at the time... And as I said, when you're young, you don't see—so I wrote a letter to him asking him who he thought he was, in those kind of terms.... Bit cheeky I have to say. And we were doing the work of the state. We were promoting the language, the music, the culture was part of

our aims and objects. And I got a phone call from his office that I was to go in to see him. And I went in, maybe with a degree of fear and trepidation, having got a no, I went in. And there was two very venerable gentlemen came in. Both of them dead now. One was Seamus de Brun, who was president of Comhaltas at one stage.... And the other was Sylvester Mac Connhaigh, a wonderful gentleman who had been president at one stage. And they would be very very much my seniors. They would've been well into their 60s at that stage, you know. So they came in, and Mr. Haughey actually knew them, you know. And he concentrated on them—ignored me... And when it was all over, he just turned to me, didn't say yes, no, he said how much did you ask for for the year? I said I asked for 11,000, which was a fortune of course back then. And this is what month? I said the month of May. Well, I'm giving you 10,000 for the rest of the year. Simple as that. He said my officials are across the hall, and you go over and they'll work it out. (Interview with Labhras Ó Murchú, June 30, 2010)

This new funding and subsequent administrative expansion enabled both aspects of the changes suggested above: the programmatic and arts policy-based developments. In an effort to maintain relevance as an organization and as traditional musicians in a changing Ireland, Comhaltas established its own magazine (entitled *Treoir*, translated literally as “index”); started new festivals (including the *Fleadh Nua*, another annual gathering); continued adding branches outside of Ireland, most notably in the United States;¹⁵ greatly expanded its physical presence in the form of a new headquarters building in the Dublin region and other permanent, dedicated facilities elsewhere in Ireland; produced and hosted radio and TV programs; began a teacher

¹⁵ See Chapter 4.

certification course; and established *Seisiùn*, a series of tourist-oriented summer performances in hotels and other venues throughout Ireland.

This expansion was far from uncontested, however. As Fintan Vallely has written, Comhaltas' national development was paralleled in the traditional music world by a new, "critically-directive front": "the 'one-issue' groups and groupings—so-called 'independents'—who had a dominating aesthetic sense of what was 'traditional', and expressed this by applying themselves to promotion of specific instruments and to provision of education" (Vallely 2004a:19). Some of these new national organizations or events dedicated to traditional music either had little to no connection to Comhaltas, in spite of the organization's aspirations to represent all traditional musicians, or were openly hostile to Comhaltas' programs or politics. In fact, two of the most active and well-known of these "independent" organizations, *Na Píobairí Uilleann* (NPU, dedicated to the *Uilleann* pipes, founded 1968) and the *Scoil Samhraidh Willie Clancy* (Willie Clancy Summer School, founded 1973), were directly born out of philosophical or logistical conflicts with Comhaltas leadership and members in the late 1960s or early 1970s.¹⁶

¹⁶ Barry Taylor's book on the founding of the Willie Clancy Week states that there was a get-together in Bettystown on 6-7 April 1968 that led to founding of NPU. This gathering, on the future of the uilleann pipes and their role within Comhaltas, was actually sponsored by Comhaltas and organized by Comhaltas Music Officer Seamus Mac Mathuna, but ultimately Na Píobairí Uilleann emerged under the leadership of those active in the Dublin Piper's Club, including Breandan Breathnach, Leo Rowsome, Seamus Ennis, and Sean Reid. Later, "at a meeting held in Dublin on 26 October, CCE president Labhras Ó Murchú (now a senator) urged pipers to disband NPU and work as individuals in their local branches of CCE." The meeting "unanimously rejected this proposal" but still invited CCE to send a piping representative to future meetings (Kearns and Taylor 2003:46). Current NPU CEO Gay McKeon comments that he believes the split was less due to politics (many members of NPU remained associated with Comhaltas as well, including McKeon's own parents) and more attributable to different visions for achieving similar goals: "I don't think Comhaltas had the patience for pipes! [laughs] In lots of ways. You know, it's not a numbers game – it's a complex instrument. It needs to be nurtured and it needs to be cherished" (Interview with Gay McKeon, June 29, 2010). Several years later, Comhaltas' administrative clout was important to the 1973 founding of the Willie Clancy Summer School, but Taylor's interviews and research make it clear that politics

Some of these conflicts are tangentially expressed in the NPU newsletter from 1978, a decade after its founding:

It is not an idle exercise to attempt to set down the reasons for these achievements [of the last 10 years]. Some immediately spring to mind: the exclusiveness of NPU, full membership is restricted to pipers who alone may vote and serve on committees; the brevity of our constitution, in its entirety it falls short of 300 words; the structural simplicity of the organisation, no branches, county boards, provincial councils to create dissensions and encourage fraudulent papercraft; the singlemindedness of the Council, its members, being practitioners, like the guildsmen of old, find enough in the art and mystery of piping wholly to occupy their time and attention. (Na Píobairí Uilleann 1978:1)

Around the time that these performance-oriented groups were being established, The Folk Music Society of Ireland (1971-2003) was also founded:

Its aim was ‘to encourage an informed interest in traditional music, to preserve this music and to sustain its traditions, and to promote the study of traditional music’. Its founders felt that the then recent revival of traditional music performance had not been accompanied by an equivalent growth in traditional music study and analysis.¹⁷

The Society’s activities included public seminars and concerts, as well as the publishing of various materials including a newsletter (*Ceol Tíre*) and a journal (*Irish folk music studies / Éigse cheol tíre*). The Society did not shy away from political issues entirely, hosting seminars on

(specifically, Comhaltas’ sidelining of NPU in the inaugural Week) did help ensure the split between the two organizations, with NPU taking over leadership of the Willie Clancy Week and Comhaltas moving on to start its own *Scoil Eipse* week of workshops (Kearns and Taylor 2003:51–66).

¹⁷ <http://folkmusicsocietyofireland.wordpress.com/fmsi-history/> (accessed 10/30/14)

topics including songs of conflict and the effects of modern media on traditional music, as well as a 1993 public discussion on “Official policies and traditional music” with speakers from Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, the Department of Education, the Arts Council, RTÉ, and Ráidió na Gaeltachta. At the same time, however, FMSI’s mission and programming were much narrower and less broadly activist than those of groups such as Comhaltas. While membership for these new groups often overlapped with that of Comhaltas, their differences in philosophy and mission—avoidance of organizational bureaucracy, shunning of active political involvement—would remain relevant for decades to come, playing an important role in the debates discussed later in this chapter surrounding Irish arts policy in the 21st century.

While these organizations developed in parallel with Comhaltas, and while Comhaltas continued to grow with funding and support from the government, political involvement on various levels also became a more visible part of the organization’s activities throughout the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s. The issues of Comhaltas’ *Treoir* magazine from its founding in 1968 are filled with tirades and pleas (many as reprinted newspaper editorials or public speeches) for more government funding for traditional music, more attention and respect for traditional music from the Arts Council, more airtime for traditional music on state-sponsored TV and radio, and many other causes; a strong precedent for the activism discussed later in this chapter.¹⁸ Perhaps the

¹⁸ This activism was defended by Labhras Ó Murchú in his 1971 report to the Comhaltas annual congress: “There are those who would suggest that Comhaltas should restrain itself: that it should confine itself to organising local activities and not be concerned with, say, television, tuitional facilities for traditional music; the welfare of the Gaeltacht, etc. The number which hold these views is fast decreasing as we come to realise that if our endeavours are to bear fruit we must have an environment that is conducive to our work. We will not have young exponents of the native arts unless they are provided with the opportunities of knowing and appreciating them. Our native music, song and dance will not be regarded as part of our lives unless it is featured on present-day media.” (O Murchu 1971:2)

most well-known and controversial political stand taken by Comhaltas, however, was the cancellation of the 1971 *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* in response to the internment of republicans in Northern Ireland. This decision was summarized by the leadership in *Treoir* magazine:

Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann could not divorce itself from the situation as it exists at the present time. We wish to demonstrate our solidarity with our fellow Irishmen in the North at this decisive hour; we wish to associate and involve ourselves with them and indicate our concern for their plight...While CCE may not concern itself with party politics, it does not deny itself the right to national aspirations. Traditional music, song and dance are marks of nationhood and we view them in this context. As it is people who primarily constitute the nation and evolve its character, we cannot—and will not—in this time of emergency withhold our measure of support for the Northern population. (O Murchu 1971:3)

Again, while many musicians and commentators have acknowledged the importance of reinforcing traditional music as a strong constituent of Irish national identity, this type of active political—or even partisan—agenda remains one of the most controversial aspects of Comhaltas’ national identity within the traditional music community. The cancellation of the 1971 *Fleadh* was mentioned frequently in my interviews over 35 years after the fact, a testament to the “long memories” of many Irish and the continued immediacy of political and historical tensions in relation to many musicians’ national identities.

Political intervention on the part of Comhaltas leaders would continue in later years, most notably in the late 1990s as Comhaltas, and particularly Director General Labhras Ó Murchú, intervened in the much-debated expansion of the Irish Music Rights Organization (IMRO) into the traditional music community. Written about extensively by Irish music scholar Anthony

McCann (McCann 2001; McCann 2014), the IMRO expansion raised questions of the purview of “performer’s rights” organizations in general, as well as the specifics of copyright in relation to traditional music. These questions were debated at length both within traditional music circles (for example, at the landmark 1996 Crossroads Conference on the future of traditional music and in Comhaltas’ own *Treoir* magazine) and in public forums such as *The Irish Times* (Vallely 1997) and *Oireachtas* (parliament) debates and speeches.

Ó Murchú and the rest of Comhaltas’ leadership at first fought vocally against even acknowledging any jurisdiction on the part of IMRO in deciding copyright matters surrounding traditional compositions and arrangements. But the reality was that Comhaltas was being served with bills for its events and facilities which, IMRO determined, were presenting public performances of copyrighted music. In December 1998, Ó Murchú signed an agreement with IMRO, including both a nominal fee paid by Comhaltas to cover their performances and venues (£1,000 a year), as well as substantial contributions by IMRO to Comhaltas (£50,000/year plus an additional £25,000 for an initiative supporting composers). The agreement also led to Comhaltas’ support for IMRO’s legislative efforts regarding copyright jurisdiction. This move was galling to traditional music activists both because of the abrupt and private¹⁹ reversal of position on the part of Comhaltas, and because of its implications for traditional music at large, as McCann argues:

What was important about the licence fee, though, was that it officially granted the Irish Music Rights Organisation full nominal jurisdiction in the contexts of traditional Irish music, insofar as Labhrás Ó Murchú and *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* were recognised by IMRO as being the primary authorities in those contexts. (McCann 2014)

¹⁹ McCann asserts that no other members of Comhaltas were informed of Ó Murchú’s agreement until after money had already changed hands (McCann 2014).

Unilateral political decisions and actions of this sort would form a large part of the background of animosity during future debates deciding the future of traditional music in Irish cultural policy.

Meanwhile: Traditional Arts and the Arts Council 1951-1999

Through the second half of the 20th century Comhaltas had begun to expand and negotiate a national presence for itself, sometimes in competition with other organizations and interests. Meanwhile, the Arts Council at first had minimal impact on the arts in Ireland and virtually no interaction with traditional music beyond providing funding for a few select festivals or events. It was receiving only token amounts of money from the government and it took decades for the body to begin to develop a cohesive policy document that would update the 1951 Arts Act. In spite of this, the Arts Council remained one of the most powerful mouthpieces for an Irish cultural policy, even though the Council was semi-independent from the government itself.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Council maintained an emphasis on supporting individual artists and a few select organizations (mostly museums and theaters). A 1960 revision to the Council's standing order or mission statement further codified its commitment to the "fine" or "high" arts to the exclusion of all else: "The Council's main function is to maintain and encourage high standards in the arts." This revision led to "disqualification" from funding of "*feiseanna*, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann functions, or general festivals in which traditional music, dancing, or storytelling are extensively featured," because "they were judged not to be 'fine or applied arts' under the Arts Act, 1951" (Na Píobairí Uilleann 1978:1). Further updates to council and government policy on the arts throughout the 1960s—such as a 1969 update to the tax code providing substantial tax breaks to artists—ignored the traditional arts altogether. "The

total amount of grants-in-aid allocated by the State to the Arts Council in the period 1951 to 1973 was £798,081. The visual arts had received 42% of this sum, music 39%, drama 14% and literature 5%. Dublin absorbed 73% of all expenditure, Cork 9% and the other twenty-four counties 18%” (Kennedy 1990:108–9).

Finally, in 1973, more than twenty years after the establishment of the Arts Council, a combination of public critiques by artists and arts organizations, select agitation within the government, and the economic and social expansion of the 1960s led to the passing of Ireland’s second Arts Act. While far from a revolutionary piece of legislation, the 1973 Arts Act did begin a small shake-up of the Arts Council and, perhaps more importantly, its relationship to the government. Funding to the Council was increased by 50%, although this still only amounted to 50 cents per Irish citizen. In addition, the number of council members was increased and, within a few years, the Council was composed more of artists and arts activists than the civil servants who had previously dominated the membership. Under new leadership, the Council began to assert its independence from government demands and earmarks and, by the early 1980s, had begun to publicly confront the government over what it considered the dismal state of funding for and recognition of the arts in Irish public life.

In the context of increased advocacy on the part of the Council, the 1980s and ‘90s were a period of both rapprochement and contention between Comhaltas, members of the traditional music community, and the Arts Council. Even though 1982 saw the appointment of Ireland’s first Minister of State for Arts and Culture, under the aegis of the Department of the *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister), there was still not a separate government department responsible for the arts, and the minister was immediately confronted with ramped up publicity from artists and the arts community regarding the level of funding for the arts. Comhaltas itself was not reticent in

critiquing funding levels, but targeted the Council more often than the government. A 1983 editorial in *Treoir* complained that the Council's own survey revealed that while traditional music was ranked as one of the most participatory art forms in the country, it still received only 80,000 pounds out of a 4.5 million pound annual budget—a neglect that the editorial called a “negation of democracy” (Eagarfhocal [Editorial] 1983:1).

The small amount of money available was not the only source of tension in the relationship between the Arts Council and the traditional music community. When fiddle player Paddy Glackin was appointed as the council's first Traditional Music Arts Officer in 1983,²⁰ he was not only confronted with a very minimal budget, but also had to work from scratch to figure out how the Council's relationship to traditional music would be similar to or different from those of other art forms, all in the midst of an already contentious relationship between the Council and Comhaltas.

Even though a new Arts Act passed in 1973, it was not until 1987 that the government made a genuine attempt to directly confront cultural change in Ireland. This came in the form of Ireland's very first White Paper on cultural policy. The document, titled *Access and Opportunity*, forcefully called for a more forward-looking, less reactive approach to culture in Ireland: “a first attempt to define the cultural life of Ireland, to examine the role of the Government in this area and to plot a path of cultural development” (Minister of State for Arts and Culture 1987:11). In many ways, this document is distinctive in Irish public discourse about expressive culture, in that it explicitly sets a wide purview for government “intervention”—an

²⁰ According to Glackin, the establishment of a Traditional Arts officer—and the attached budget line—was tied to Arts Council director Colm Ó Briain's attempts to transfer funding for the arts from other departments (e.g., Tourism, Education) to the Council's umbrella (Interview with Paddy Glackin, June 15, 2010).

all-encompassing, very anthropological, definition of culture.²¹

While the White Paper was a theoretical sea change in conceptualizing the government's role in Irish culture, it was a policy document and not legislation requiring action, and addressed traditional music only indirectly, mostly in the context of "heritage" and history. In fact, it was not until the year 2000—50 years after the first report on the arts in Ireland—that a new review of arts policy was initiated by Arts Minister Sile de Valera. This review sparked, for the first time, an explicit discussion about traditional arts in the public sector, a discussion in which Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann would play a key part. It would also end up shaping Comhaltas' own development and priorities moving into the 21st century.

Setting the Scene: The Arts Policy Debates

Before analyzing the language and meaning of this discussion, it is important to mention several developments over the 1990s that provide a context for the public debate. First, the exponential growth of the Irish economy (the "Celtic Tiger") had led to unprecedented growth in support for the arts over the course of the 1990s, to the tune of an increase in Arts Council funding from under 10 million pounds in 1990 to 34 million pounds in 2000. The premise of the 2000 initiative to rethink arts policy was largely connected to this newfound wealth and related demographic and cultural changes that were seen to necessitate a new policy at the start of the 21st century. For example, increased numbers of refugees, migrant workers from elsewhere in the EU, and immigrants from Africa and Asia presented a challenge to traditionally monocultural

²¹ As defined in the report: "Culture is the result of the complex interaction of the people with their environment, their climate, their past and all the various economic and social factors, internal and external, which influence their lives...Irish culture is heterogeneous, reflecting a complex and diverse social fabric, which...includes rural, urban, suburban and traveling communities, old, young, and middle-aged people, English speakers and native Irish speakers, the affluent and the disadvantaged" (Minister of State for Arts and Culture 1987:12).

manifestations of Irish national culture.

Second, in the 1980s and 1990s Irish traditional music entered the commercial “world music” scene, leading to more professional opportunities for certain performers at home and internationally, as well as increased commercial exposure for traditional musicians. And finally, in 1997, Labhrás Ó Murchú, the aforementioned permanent Director-General of Comhaltas, was elected to the *Seanad Éireann* (the Irish Senate) after several years of unsuccessful nominations.²² This placed Ó Murchú in a prime position to push for an arts agenda foregrounding traditional music, and he continued to argue that Comhaltas was the country’s most important advocate for “native culture.”²³ Ó Murchú’s election and increased influence also coincided with a series of forward-thinking Arts Ministers, including Sile de Valera (1997-2002) and John O’Donohue (2002-2007).

Ó Murchú’s attempts to set the agenda for traditional music policy on behalf of Comhaltas included a 1999 report on traditional music for the *Oireachtas* (Irish congress), which consisted primarily of a description of Comhaltas’ activities and accomplishments and was widely criticized by other organizations and musicians for ignoring the diversity of the traditional community. Significant among the recommendations in Ó Murchú’s report was a call for “Consideration of the formation of a national State council for the development and promotion of the traditional arts such as native music, song, dance, storytelling, etc.” (Ó Murchú 1999:38). This recommendation—for a separate policy and funding body specifically dedicated

²² Ó Murchú had already been nominated several times for the *Seanad* by Comhaltas, which serves as one of the “nominating bodies” for the Culture and Education panel of the *Seanad*. In theory, members of each of the five “panels” comprising the majority of the *Seanad* are expected to have knowledge and experience specific to their panel areas. *Seanad* members are not popularly elected. The *Seanad* in general is similar to the British House of Lords, in that the body serves an advisory and revising role regarding legislation.

²³ Ó Murchú has also made conservative stands (occasionally against his own party) on issues such as abortion and same-sex civil unions.

to traditional arts—would, over the next three to four years, help galvanize an unprecedented public dialogue about the future of traditional music in Ireland. Public debates about a succession of arts policy documents took place in the form of public submissions to the government committees on behalf of musicians and community members; editorials, articles, and letters in major news venues such as the *Irish Times*; comments and debates on websites and listservs; and even public protests.

The contentious nature of the policy debates was frequently centered around perceived attempts to control financial resources and related questions regarding “ownership” of or responsibility for traditional music—in other words, the risks of bringing an informal national traditional music community under formal governance. A primary concern for all interested parties was the dismal record of the Arts Council on funding decisions relating to traditional music. By the 1990s, for example, even though the overall budget for the Council increased dramatically with Ireland’s economic success, the total percentage dedicated to traditional music had sunk to around 1% (from 2% in the 1980s). It could be argued that Comhaltas’ national membership and political clout—their continued pushing for increased representation of the traditional arts in arts funding decisions—was what finally started the important national conversation about these funding issues. Comhaltas was able to mobilize a large and active membership to make their voices heard (in the form of committee testimonials, letters to newspapers, and more) in favor of increased funding and, frequently, the separate traditional arts council concept.

A widespread perception among many musicians and other organizations, however, was that Comhaltas’ continued presentation of itself as the primary “stakeholder” for traditional music in Ireland, in combination with the leadership’s perceived reluctance to collaborate with

other organizations, was a claim to exclusive “ownership” of the music that was deeply unsettling. As musicians Christy Moore, Paul Brady, and Paddy Moloney²⁴ stated during a 2002 march on government buildings protesting the proposed arts legislation: “The majority in the traditional music world could not have confidence in the ability of a committee, effectively established at the behest of one organization, to fairly and adequately represent the views of the very wide number of bodies and individuals who do excellent work in the area.”²⁵ But from the point of view of Comhaltas leadership, comments of this sort betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of what their organization was about, because Comhaltas had long viewed itself as more than just an organization. Since the late 1960s, Comhaltas referred to itself as a “cultural movement” as often as an “organization.” Labhrás Ó Murchú’s leadership had been an instrumental part of this reframing, a shift which he elaborated on in our interview:

Lauren: You spoke before about how, you know, since Comhaltas was an organization it didn’t quite fit into the existing models for funding and that sort of thing, but I know that you often refer to Comhaltas as a movement as well, and I’m wondering if you could elucidate a little bit how you see the difference between, say, an organization and a movement? Conceptually?

Labhras: I do, yeah. And I think again the word movement was used in a historical sense as well. It was used even by political parties at times. The idea there was that not only had you your registered membership, but you had your 250,000 people coming to the

²⁴ All three among the most famous living traditional musicians: Paddy Moloney as a piper and founding member of The Chieftains, Paul Brady as an internationally respected singer/songwriter, and Christy Moore as a prolific songwriter and founding member of the influential group Planxty.

²⁵ Comhaltas’ response to this protest, in *Treoir*: “One of the abiding and most pathetic images of the opposition campaign was that of Paddy Moloney and a handful of commercial musicians protesting at the gates of Leinster House (the seat of the Oireachtas) in favour of the status quo of the last 50 years” (Prior 2003).

fleadh cheoil, you had your 20,000 coming to the competitions. We service three million people every year, through our services. They're not all necessarily a registered member, but because they're in close and working with us, they're still part of our movement, and the GAA would be exactly the same. That's a great model. Not everybody plays hurling, but that doesn't mean that the GAA isn't rooted in every parish. You know, so that's why we would use the word movement.

Lauren: So it comes from the numbers participating?

Labhras: Well, participating, attending our functions, availing of our services, looking for information, whatever the case may be, you know. If they come to your class, they mightn't be a registered member. You don't have to be a registered member to compete at the *fleadh cheoil*. That means, it's not a Comhaltas award then, it's an award because it's open to everybody... And because it wasn't our role, therefore, you could say that if somebody entered the fleadh and won, it wasn't a Comhaltas winner, it was among those who actually entered the fleadh... The importance of the membership on the other hand was, that you pay your few euro every year, you now have a direct say in the running of the organization, because the local branch can send a motion direct to annual congress, which decides your policy. So if I pay my ten euro, or whatever it is, I can go into a local branch, and I can say I want this changed, or that changed... But if you don't want to be in, you can still avail of our services. And that's why we use the word movement. In Irish it's nicer, it's called *gluaiseacht* in Irish. And that gives you a sense of not being static or clinical. (Interview with Labhras Ó Murchú, June 30, 2010)

In this conversation, Ó Murchú attempts to align Comhaltas' membership with the common notion of a fluid, non-geographically bound traditional music community,

connected simply through participation in the music and related events. But this is a vision of the organization that is looked at with skepticism by many musicians and other activists. Fiddle player and arts administrator Dermot McLaughlin states these objections quite strongly:

Personally as a musician I have a lot of reservations about the idea of a cultural movement. I certainly don't empathize with what I take to be the Comhaltas vision of things... I actually don't know what is the gap or the objective or the function that Comhaltas is addressing any more. I really don't see what it's doing for musicians, whether it's the majority of musicians who don't rely on the music professionally, or it's the small number who do rely on it professionally. Aside from organizing the competitions and stuff like that, which is grand, I don't know what they're up to... Another thing about Comhaltas... it looks and moves and sounds very much like an ideological movement, based around Labhrás Ó Murchú, who's there forever. So as an organizational structure, does it appeal to me? No, I abhor that kind of structure. You know there's plenty of jokes about the North Korean branch of Comhaltas, down there in Belgrave Square...²⁶ It does look very ideologically slightly cultish sometimes. I think there's an enormous way to travel between the fantastic work people do on the ground, teaching music, which is great, absolutely fantastic. And if you look at all the local energy and commitment and resources that they harness, excellent. After that, I don't get it, you know? They don't speak to me or do anything for me as a musician. (Interview with Dermot McLaughlin, September 22, 2008)

²⁶ In the wake of a scandal following the ejection of the North Dublin Clontarf branch from the organization, a fundraiser for the now-independent branch featured a newly-composed ballad on the topic of "Chairman Lao" (Labhras—pronounced Lao-rah—Ó Murchú).

This view of Comhaltas as, at best, inflexible or ineffective and, at worst, unethical, is common to musicians throughout Ireland and abroad. Many interviewees spoke of real or hypothetical interactions with a stereotypical “old man in a suit” representing Comhaltas, along the lines of arts activist Katie Verling’s experience:

Lauren: So were the objections to that—the traditional arts council—do you think if that hadn’t been a Comhaltas-proposed entity that people would’ve been as vehemently against it?

Katie: Well a huge amount of it was to do with the nature of the perception of the Comhaltas organization. Because the Comhaltas organization was perceived and, from my experience of it now, as a deeply deeply conservative organization.

L: How would you characterize conservative in that context?

K: Well, I had a conversation with a Comhaltas person at one stage, and we were talking about the evolution of Irish traditional music—it was a chit-chat conversation—you know, when on one level you have the whole development of the kind of traditional folk music of the people, and then you also have the other thing that was going on—the Carolan-type stuff,²⁷ which also had a very strong relationship with European art music at the time. That was also still influencing the Chieftains and the upper middle classes or whatever—nobility. And that these things were happening, and the whole thing was continuing to evolve and evolve. And then, you know, music going to America and coming back, and Appalachian or music from Newfoundland, or from Bulgaria or whatever. All that stuff that’s happened, particularly in the last century, you know,

²⁷ A reference to the compositions of harper Turlough O’Carolan (1670 – 1738)

between 1960 and present day.²⁸ And he said, this man said to me, he said, ‘We’ve had enough innovation. It’s time for it to stop.’ And for me that summarized the perception...

I mean, this was a relatively senior person. (Interview with Katie Verling, June 16, 2010)

These practical and ideological criticisms of Comhaltas’ ability to represent a national (or global) “trad community” were common throughout my fieldwork for this dissertation, often in combination with references to generational differences such as those in Verling’s anecdote above. Changing political relationships to nationalism in younger generations of musicians deeply affected perceptions of Comhaltas’ more ideologically outspoken leaders. These changes and criticisms also proved to be a central impediment to any serious consideration of the idea of a separate traditional arts council, as most musicians believed that this council would be controlled from within Comhaltas and would not be friendly to either nonaffiliated musicians or the “independent” or “one-issue” organizations mentioned previously.

In the end, the overwhelming opposition from outside of Comhaltas’ ranks to a centralized, separate policy body for traditional arts convinced the Minister to remove that provision from the bill under consideration. In fact, the Arts Bill itself did not provide any specific recommendations regarding traditional music. The opposing viewpoints were, instead, given the opportunity to compromise through the implementation of a special committee on the traditional arts, designed to develop more specific policy recommendations. The committee, appointed by the Minister, was clearly designed to create a forum for reconciliation, with members drawn from both Comhaltas and non-Comhaltas “camps.” Úna Ó Murchú, wife of Comhaltas director general Senator Labhras Ó Murchú and head of the Brú Ború cultural center in County Cashel, represented Comhaltas’ perspective, along with education specialist Micheal

²⁸ A reference to the cross-cultural relationships that developed as Irish traditional music joined the World Music “scene” via recordings, tours, and festivals.

O hEidhin, who had a long-term relationship with Comhaltas and had helped to develop its teacher training program, among other initiatives. The other three committee members were independent filmmaker and musician Philip King, director of the multidisciplinary Glór arts center Katie Verling, and, representing the Arts Council, Jerome Hynes. Over the course of seven months of meetings the committee was charged with addressing three main concerns:

1. The role of the Arts Council in relation to framing a coherent policy for the Traditional Arts, taking account of existing support systems, facilities and funding programmes for supporting the Traditional Arts across all Government Departments, non-governmental agencies, and Local Authorities;
2. The applicability and relevance of the terms ‘amateur’, ‘professional’ and ‘voluntary’ in contemporary practice in Traditional Arts and;
3. If the Committee considers it appropriate, proposals for an effective framework for assessing funding proposals. This should include a review of whether the position of the Traditional Arts in the cultural life of the nation is appropriately reflected in the assignments within the Council’s authorised staffing complement. Proposals must be framed in accordance with the Government’s current policy on the need to reduce public service staff numbers. (Towards a Policy on the Traditional Arts 2004:8)

While many of the musicians and arts administrators I spoke with were quite happy with the results of the work of the Special Committee, in one very major area it did not make any progress: that of integrating the work and funding of Comhaltas and the Arts Council. Even though public submissions to the Committee revealed the same fundamental goals of recognition and funding, my interviews with committee members and Comhaltas leadership indicate that, while the committee was theoretically founded in good faith and with the goal of reconciliation,

the actual meetings were fraught with attempts at political maneuvering and intransigence. According to committee member Katie Verling and committee Project Officer Toner Quinn, the meetings were frequently taken up with procedural objections and administrative issues brought up by the Comhaltas partisans, and attendance records for the group show that Ó Murchú and O hEidhin were each absent from a substantial number of meetings. In the end, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann refused to endorse the Report generated by the committee and Ó Murchú and O hEidhin authored their own Minority Report, which was issued amidst a flurry of accusations about alterations made to the final Arts Council report after the close of committee meetings (i.e., without Comhaltas' knowledge or approval).²⁹ Tellingly, Comhaltas and the Arts Council are currently receiving funding from two different government departments: Comhaltas from the Department of Community, Rural, and Gaeltacht³⁰ Affairs, and the Council from the Department of Arts, Sport, and Tourism.

²⁹ Project Officer to the Special Committee Toner Quinn (assigned mainly to process public submissions) describes the controversy thusly: "But what happened in the end, though, because Una and Michael didn't contribute anything to the report, we completed and because information was still coming in late, and because when we were reading it again we went, 'Oh that doesn't make sense,' we made a few changes afterwards, and then they sort of held us over a barrel, saying we've changed the report. We've changed the report, so there's two reports! And created this big drama out of it. Well, we were just going, we finished our report. You didn't have anything to do with it. It's got nothing to do with you. You just absented yourself from the whole process, so Jerome, Katie, Philip, and I completed the report. And as information came in – there was information on really key things like *Gaeltacht* arts and *Udaras na Gaeltacta* and other arts council initiatives and other facts and figures that I couldn't just ignore, once they'd come in. I couldn't be held to the fact that Una and Michael had only seen one version and not another. But we discovered that the reason Una and Michael kicked up such a fuss was because they all the time were writing a minority report, critiquing this. Critiquing everything we did. Very sly. Never really engaging with us, all the time. Never making a constructive suggestion, but all the time writing something that critiqued this. So that they would be ready at the end, when we produced this, to put this out and go, 'This is why this is wrong.' Shocking, shocking!" (Interview with Toner Quinn, October 6, 2008).

³⁰ Irish-speaking region

Irish Traditional Arts Policy Debates: An Analysis

Debates over the relationship between government, the public, and expressive culture are, of course, far from new, but scholars of cultural policy such as George Yúdice (2003) have pointed towards an increasing emphasis on an “expediency of culture”—a focus on the perceived ability of culture and performance to act as a resource in achieving goals of social transformation or economic uplift for various communities (much like a “natural resource” such as a mineral deposit or a region with rich agricultural soil). In this increasingly common approach to cultural policy, both the control and the joy of creative expression in informal, non-public communities can be either actively undermined or passively ignored in favor of larger policy goals. In the following analysis, I explore the role that these issues played in the traditional music policy process and debates discussed above. The traditional arts policy discussion was at times dominated by struggles of personality and power, but it also proved to be a provocative exercise in attempting to balance two different discourses: a typical cultural policy language of professionalism, development, usefulness, and structure; and more nebulous, but widely held ideas about informal social structures (“community” of various types) and the uses and pleasures of performative creativity and collaborative learning therein. In examining the language used by various players in this process, I will explore whether it is possible for a public space to be created for a conception of musical performance that moves fluidly between the most intimate of private connections and the most public of global stages. In other words, how do the organic sounds and relationships of traditional music fit into the politics of culture and the formal maintenance of musical communities?

Before addressing the specifics of the Irish debates and their impact on Comhaltas’ development, I would like to expand upon my use of the term “cultural policy” and its

intersection with concepts of musical communities. Critical cultural studies theorist Jim McGuigan has described cultural policy as “the politics of culture in the most general sense: it is about the clash of ideas, institutional struggles and power relations in the circulation of symbolic meanings” (McGuigan 1996:1). When I discuss “cultural policy” in relation to traditional music, I am referring to this intersection between institutions, ideas, and practices surrounding modes of aesthetic creativity and collective ways of life (Miller and Yudice 2002; Lewis and Miller 2003). Lewis and Miller also emphasize the role of cultural policy in creating a public collective: “Cultural policies produce and animate institutions, practices and agencies. One of their goals is to find, serve and nurture a sense of belonging, through educational institutions and cultural industries... Cultural policies are a means of governance, of formatting public collective subjectivity” (Lewis and Miller 2003:2). In other words, policy is a form of governance that strives in various ways to shape the symbolic meanings of cultural practices and collective identities. It works to control the performance of collective selfhood: to help create, maintain, and regulate certain communities.

As discussed above, prior to the second half of the 20th century, traditional music had a relatively limited presence in the public sphere and cultural policy in Ireland, particularly compared to theater and literature. While the development of a new “arts plan” for Ireland in the early 21st century was initially presented as a discussion about the practical adjustments required by social and economic changes, in the case of traditional music, the ensuing public conversation also grew to explicitly include just what McGuigan asserts—the circulation of symbolic meanings. Indeed, for Comhaltas and its culturally activist and nationalist forebears, discussion of culture in the public sphere had always been about an intervention in the symbolic representation of traditional arts. In the case of the turn-of-the-21st-century cultural policy

debates, however, this discussion opened up beyond the constraints of the nationalist project to include questions of the broadest global significance and the most intimate local interactions. The debates represented a remarkable and perhaps unprecedented attempt by musicians and others from throughout Ireland to actively control the *symbolic* representation of traditional music in the country's official cultural policy, thereby flipping the theorem from Lewis and Miller quoted above. Instead of cultural policy acting as a means of "formatting public collective subjectivity," in this case I would argue that the *public subjects* were actively trying to format *cultural policy*. They were not simply reacting to the imposition of policy from the "top down," but were attempting to create policy on the traditional arts where none had previously existed.

Having reviewed the finished report of the Special Committee on the Traditional Arts, various Comhaltas publications, the public submissions to the committee in the Arts Council Archive, public testimonials and letters to the editor, and my own interviews with parties involved in the policy-development process, I have distilled the Irish policy debates into three major questions. Each of these questions reflects the above-mentioned tensions between different interpretations of the symbolic role of Irish traditional music in the Irish nation and conceptions of Irishness, on the part of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and other musicians and arts activists:

1. Why did musicians and others think that traditional arts should be a part of the Arts Council and arts bills? Why bring traditional arts into the explicitly political sphere of government funding and recognition?
2. How should a new policy have defined "traditional" arts and the traditional arts community? How similar or distinct were they from existing arts categories or genres (e.g., "contemporary") and how should policy have reflected this?

3. What did traditional musicians think that cultural policy relating to traditional music should accomplish, and how should it be managed in the future? How far did Comhaltas and the traditional music community think that government policy should go in assisting traditional artists, who are often vocally resistant to top-down intervention?

Why “Policitize” Traditional Music? Representation and Recognition

In relation to the first question, sentiment among all parties invested in any way in traditional music was nearly unanimous: the Arts Council was viewed as at best not particularly relevant and at worst elitist and harmful to traditional musicians. A historical lack of funding for traditional musicians was equated with lingering manifestations in the public sphere of a viewpoint that was more common in the middle of the 20th century: a perspective in which traditional musicians were “second class” citizens, both taken advantage of and taken for granted. As fiddle player and former Arts Council music officer Dermot McLaughlin put it, “I think as well that sometimes it [traditional music] becomes too close or too familiar. People become rather blind to it. Or familiarity breeds contempt” (Interview with Dermot McLaughlin, September 22, 2008).

Starting from this negative baseline, forming a policy for traditional music in Ireland was just as much about reconciling vastly different languages for understanding artistic expression as it was about money or staffing. In the words of fiddle player, scholar, and former Arts Council consultant Liz Doherty, the struggle for funding representation was an important symbolic one:

It was very much about bringing traditional music right into the center of the Arts Council’s thinking... it wasn’t about money, and policy, and structures... there wasn’t a big flashing Euro sign at the end of it... It was just changing that perception, that

recognition for traditional arts. It was about bringing it right into the core, so when people think drama, or film, or literature, that traditional fiddle players are right there at the core along with everything else. Which wasn't, and still isn't, the way [it was] at all – it was, 'blah blah everything else, and then oh god, the traditional arts.' (Interview with Liz Doherty, October 3, 2008)

Doherty's statement indicates that the goal for activists was to make sure that traditional arts played a substantial role in public conceptualization of an Irish national community and its cultural expression.

The 2004 report of the Special Committee on the Traditional Arts reinforced these sentiments, stating that: "Funding is about two principal things. It is about resourcing an organisation or individual to allow them to reach their potential and allow them to create good work; but, critically, it is also about acknowledgement, recognition, the conferring of a certain degree of status on the artist or organisation and their work, and the offering to that artist or organisation a degree of self-confidence and the belief that what they are doing is good" (Special Committee on the Traditional Arts 2004:17).

The language of status, value, familiarity, and contempt used in these arguments also stands in for a generally unarticulated factor in the discussion of the public role of traditional arts: class. Because they were oral traditions historically and symbolically tied to rural areas far from centers of power and wealth, the traditional arts were already encountering issues of representation, money, and control in the public sphere via revival movements such as Comhaltas itself, the proliferation of media distribution, and inclusion in the previously restricted realm of university education. As seen throughout these policy discussions, issues of class were rarely directly referenced by the parties involved, but were obliquely included in comments over

everything from the nature of professionalism in traditional music communities to the inseparability of “authority” in traditional music from the communities within which it is practiced.

So, from the beginning, financial incentives combined with emotional and social ones in traditional musicians’ fight for recognition in official cultural policy—a fight that, at the core, was shared by both Comhaltas and the other parties involved. The split, however, emerged in how musicians and administrators interpreted the symbolic importance of control over these new resources.

Defining Traditional Music

A desire for recognition and acknowledgement was not a simple goal; if the traditional arts were to be recognized on “their own terms,” it would first be necessary to define those terms.³¹ In this context, the proposal for a separate policy-making body for traditional arts brought to the fore a key dilemma: in finally incorporating traditional music into an explicit vision of a national Irish culture, how unique or separate should the conceptualization of “traditional” arts in Ireland be in relation to other forms of artistic expression? How should a “traditional arts community” be defined in relation to an Irish arts community at-large and, indeed, the imagined community of the Irish nation? The historical shifting of responsibility for cultural policy between the Department of the Taoiseach or prime minister; the Department of Education; the Department of Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht; and the Department of Arts, Sport, and Tourism illustrates the government’s confusion over how to define and manage the

³¹ Some historical background on some relatively recent discussions and uses of “tradition” in Irish contexts can be found in Anthony McCann’s article “Riverdance, A River of Sound, and the Ambiguities of ‘Tradition’” (McCann 2010).

arts in Ireland. And, out of minimal funds and occasional attempts at policy, any notion of “traditional” arts received even less support or attention than other art forms. Indeed, from the 1970s, when the first attempt was made to separate out the larger genre of “music,” Arts Council documents demonstrated a difficulty in even settling on a terminology for the repertoire, switching regularly between “traditional arts” and “traditional music,” with occasional “folk musics” and “Irish heritages” thrown in.

Given the Arts Council’s difficulty in coming up with a single phrase by which to refer to the art forms under discussion, it is no surprise that the 2002 Arts Bill prompted a bit of an existential debate about the definition of “traditional” when it characterized the arts in general as: “any creative or interpretative expression (whether traditional or contemporary)” (Oireachtas Éireann 2003:3). This division between “traditional” and “contemporary” was protested by traditional musicians as a false dichotomy. Paralleling both academic and popular conversations about the meaning of “tradition” in Ireland in the 20th and 21st centuries,³² submissions to government committees and the Arts Council drew attention to the ways that Arts Council language stressing “innovation”³³ and the needs of professional artists did not necessarily apply to the practice of traditional music.

These submissions also drew attention to the unique and sometimes challenging position of traditional musicians attempting to make a living at playing music, but every statement singing the praises of the economic benefits of performance at home and abroad was balanced by even more strongly worded testimonies emphasizing the unique ways that traditional music was

³² See McCann 2010; O’Shea 2008; Reiss 2003; Vallely 1999b and many others.

³³ As previously mentioned, notions of innovation and “progress” have remained at the heart of public controversies over Comhaltas policies in general, with Comhaltas often viewed as advocating an anti-innovation, backward-looking preservationism (regardless of how the organization actually operated “on the ground” through its branch activities).

seen to be integrated into Irish lives and communities. Traditional music manager and promoter Tom Sherlock put it this way in testimony before a government subcommittee: “When, for instance, [professional musicians] Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh or Liam O’Flynn sit down to swap tunes and socialize with [non-professional master musicians] Vincent Campbell or Peter Horan the important issue is that they are all musicians. Their status within the traditional music community is not determined by the fact that one is a farmer and the other earns their living full time from the music” (Select Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs 2002).

As leading music organization *Na Píobairí Uilleann* (The Piper’s Club) put it: “We note the form of words chosen by the Committee—‘development of the sector’ with some concern. We are anxious that the Traditional Arts should not be viewed as an economic resource to be exploited. It is a powerful expression of Irish artistic genius and a unique one in that, unlike most or all other Irish artistic activity, it is dispersed among tens of thousands of ordinary Irish people and forms a vital part of their lives” (Na Píobairí Uilleann 2004). Writing on behalf of the Comhaltas agenda, McGlinchey Summer School organizer Marcus O hEarcéim reinforced this perspective, emphasizing music-based notions of “community” over those of economic or professional “sectors”: “Place is very important in Ireland...[Place is] made up of memories of people we have known and which are warmed with human breath, the breath of stories and traditions and folklore. For our place is not just a landscape but a community of people, a community of the dead as well as the living...Community arts ought to acknowledge the rich heritage of each place, build on it and enhance the cultural life of the local community” (O hEarcéim 2004).

Indeed, the final “Towards a Policy on the Traditional Arts” document is purposely vague and self-referential in its definitions, attempting to leave the pinpointing of “tradition” to its practitioners, even if they themselves have differing opinions about what does or doesn’t qualify. Even the term “traditional arts” is adopted reluctantly, in acknowledgement of the fact that it is rarely—if ever—used by the artists themselves. The document acknowledges that “traditional” expressive culture encompasses commercial aspects, but refuses to define them in the terms used for so many years in relation to the fine arts (e.g., professional vs. amateur), instead keeping the definition flexible and context-based. This flexible definition, in turn, precludes top-down inclusion or exclusion of certain activities from funding,³⁴ creating yet another level of tension between community-based or grassroots traditional arts and prescriptive Arts Council programming. Regarding traditional music specifically, the difficulties encountered by the Committee in defining or delimiting “traditional arts” reflected the statements of musicians and activists with a variety of policy agendas, but a surprisingly common perspective on musical community and traditional music: it encompasses commercial activity but does not prioritize it, it acknowledges the importance of both place-based communities and the important individuals who shape the music locally and nationally, it is hierarchical in a relatively democratic way that utilizes formal and institutional resources but is not defined or constrained by them.

How to “Manage” Traditional Music: Assistance and Resistance

³⁴ The Special Report and later Arts Council documents pertaining to the traditional arts remain defiantly unrestrictive in defining what specific activities are eligible for consideration as “traditional.” This leads to a two-step process in which applicants self-select as traditional artists and then are evaluated as such by peers who staff and support the funding process (see: *Deis* funding scheme discussed later in this chapter).

The two previous sections demonstrate how demands for funding were not necessarily just about money, and how attempts to define “tradition” also became resistance to the appropriation or “governmentalization” of traditional music. Submissions and testimony demanded that the Arts Council attempt to carefully walk the line between assistance to already-occurring performance and transmission and resistance to any policies or initiatives seeming to impose new measures of control or bureaucracy over performance and communities within the traditional arts. It was, in fact, fear of control or isolation of traditional music that galvanized many musicians to write letters and even protest in the streets against the Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann-promoted idea of creating a “traditional arts council” completely separate from the current Arts Council. While that idea was suggested as a means to move beyond the history of negative relationships between the government and traditional music, it was viewed by many as too restrictive and too likely to place control over funding decisions in the hands of too few people.

In rejecting the “traditional arts council” idea, for example, piper Terry Moylan returned to an idealized notion of “tradition” as emerging organically in the moment of performance: “When somebody meets a friend, or group of friends, in any location and they feel like creating traditional music, then traditional music comes alive at that point. It does not need any other kind of superstructure in order to keep it alive. It does, however, need the provision of support for resources in traditional music” (Select Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs 2002). It is important to note this final caveat, in which a rejection of intervention is counterbalanced by a plea for investment. This caveat was repeated by fiddle player Matt Cranitch in his submission to the Special Committee on the Traditional Arts: “Any initiatives and recommendations that are proposed should not interfere with the process of

making the music, nor indeed should they stifle creativity, either overtly or by default. Perhaps, the efforts of the committee should be focused primarily on what may be termed the support structures needed” (Cranitch 2004).

Comhaltas’ top-level discourse, by way of contrast, had continually asserted the exceptional nature of Irish traditional music as a “unique heritage” that required centralized preservation efforts in the face of “increasing globalization, homogeneity, and threats to the rich heritage that distinguishes nations” (Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann 2004a). From this perspective, an argument for separate consideration of traditional music by a powerful centralized body was supported by both a past history of discrimination and a future threat of dissolving cultural boundaries.

Other musicians and individuals interested in policy decisions, however, asserted that an overly active centralized policy was anathema to the local or intimate communities constituting traditional music. In 2002 testimony to the government, for example, Piper’s Club archivist Terry Moylan said that “Irish traditional music is a pyramid. Authority rests at the bottom, not at the top” (Select Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs 2002). Similarly, arts activist and fiddle player Dermot McLaughlin stated, in retrospect:

I was always a little bit concerned, or skeptical in the literal sense, about the strategic value of special pleading, or saying that traditional music is such a unique and incomprehensibly fantastic thing that you have to abandon all prior experience of culture and the arts and think differently. I think that’s rubbish. I do think that there are a couple of values or principles that help make sense of an arts council being involved or a state being involved... There is something nonreplicable about traditional music in Ireland that adds something to it, because Ireland is seen as maybe the source or the arbiter of

standards in this particular art form—there is something unique about the music and dance and song that is attributable to the place and to the people. (Interview with Dermot McLaughlin, September 22, 2008)

In contrast to Comhaltas' position, this perspective advocated an approach to policy which acknowledged and supported the aspects of traditional music that were connected to specific places, values, and histories, but that did not attempt to isolate them from other forms of Irish cultural expression, their communities, or their institutional structures. This policy approach would accept the notion of a traditional arts community that is both different from and integrated within other communities of the arts and Irish culture (i.e., the community is plural, encompassing many other collectivities). This widespread view of a more open traditional music community, which nevertheless requires institutional support, is perhaps a more nuanced view than Comhaltas' exceptionalism, but one that also had an inherent contradiction at its core: Incorporating traditional arts into existing cultural policy structures would mean subjecting them—to some extent—to apparatuses of power that have some control over the Art (with a capital A) that they fund.

The committee creating the “Towards a Policy on the Traditional Arts” document was faced with the challenge of crafting language that would articulate this balance between assistance to the artists and their resistance to control. Or, if as George Yúdice claims, cultural policy is the conjoining of emancipation and regulation (Yúdice 2003:25),³⁵ it would appear that traditional musicians had realized this and attempted to gain the emancipation with minimal regulation. Fintan Vallely's submission to the committee perhaps captures it best: “Policy must

³⁵ “This conjoining is perhaps the clearest expression of the expediency of culture. It is called on to resolve a range of problems *for* community, which seems only to be able to recognize itself in culture, which in turn has lost its specificity. Consequently, culture and community are caught in a circular, tautological reasoning” (Yúdice 2003:25).

have as a priority the view of Traditional music... as artistic expression, aesthetically motivated and appreciated. Other considerations—identity, therapeutic effect, community cohesion, and emotional meaning—are indeed part of Traditional music’s uptake and expression, but should not be part of the State’s direct commitment to it; rather these should be *open* territory of personal and community interpretations of the artform” (Vallely 2004b). Vallely’s statement also recalls Yúdice’s work on the “expediency” of culture mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, calling attention to the benefits and pitfalls of focusing on the “useful” aspects of culture in the public sphere, while perhaps losing sight of the joy of creativity on an individual or nonpublic level. The committee’s response to this conundrum is encapsulated in the following statement:

The traditional arts throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first have had to develop without the state support that many might have considered appropriate. The vibrant cultural scene that has developed, which is ad-hoc, geographically far-reaching and self-reliant in nature, gives great room for expression to traditional artists. It [the cultural scene] provides them with informal and formal opportunities to perform and allows them to develop their art in an organic way. Any coherent policy should, therefore, be resolute about adhering to the considerable inherent strengths within the traditional arts and allow it [sic] to follow its course naturally as opposed to imposing any particular direction on it. (Special Committee on the Traditional Arts 2004:12)

This statement can be seen as a 21st-century response to some of the same issues and goals that inspired the founding of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in the first place: the creation of a symbolic national space for the recognition and reconciliation of the different communities that constitute traditional music in Ireland. This chapter has shown that Comhaltas’ own development has not always met the pitfalls of centralization without controversy. Moving forward from the

turn-of-the-century debates, traditional music policy would continue to reflect similar but divergent efforts to situate traditional music in the public sphere.

After the Debates: Separate Paths, Overlapping Communities

As of 2004, the council's new action plan for the traditional arts consisted primarily of an attempt to shore up existing organizations, combined with a new funding scheme called *Deis* which was designed to be flexible and dynamic enough to convince musicians who had never previously had anything to gain from government intervention that the Council could respond to their needs. The *Deis* awards were drawn from a flexible fund for a variety of activities, including work with archival material, audience development, transmission, production and performance, professional development, programming and research. In general, this approach was relatively non-interventionist, with very little developmental initiative suggested by the council. Awards decisions were instead intended to be driven by the requests received from musicians, groups, and organizations, solicited, guided, evaluated by peers.

Meanwhile, Comhaltas also forged ahead with its own development plan, conceived around the central idea of *Meitheal*, an Irish concept referring to a group, collaboration, or community.³⁶ In line with the organization's previous public positions, the Comhaltas development program was a much more proactive vision of what development should mean for traditional music. The plan's goals, in contrast to those of the Council, were more targeted and much more value-laden, stating that "The traditional arts should be an enriching part of the lives of Irish people everywhere, particularly our young people; they should be a living, highly visible and vibrant part of society; they should be easily accessible to all; and their unique social,

³⁶ Also often used in reference to pre-modern agricultural cooperatives.

cultural and economic benefits should be fully realized by communities and individuals throughout the country and in Irish communities abroad” (Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann 2004b:5).

In order to accomplish these goals, Comhaltas’ plan emphasized the need for expansion of areas in which it has been most active in the past: national programs promoting teacher training and expansion of education both at the local level and in national education policy, as well as branch activity at the local level. Where the language of the Arts Council documents targets the needs of the “traditional artist,” the Comhaltas plan highlights the notions of “volunteer” activity and community or non-professional involvement. As Comhaltas administrator Jim McAllister noted, when asked about the continued split between Comhaltas and the Arts Council:

Again, a lot of the people who have gotten funding over the last year from the Arts Council, they come from Comhaltas. You know. But we looked at our money and we said, we’re more interested and more concerned with the educational development, and making sure that the voluntary sector which makes up Comhaltas—the 40,000 members—are properly supported through our mechanisms. Not the individuals.

(Interview with Jim McAllister, May 7, 2009)

In addition, the plan called specifically for increased collaboration with non-Comhaltas or non-musician community members on a local or regional level under the *Meitheal* umbrella, as well as an emphasis on bringing access to traditional music to urban communities and other areas where the music occupies a particularly small niche. A large part of this effort involved an attempt at decentralization of the organization’s programs via the establishment of regional resource centers throughout the island. These centers were intended to serve as physical manifestations of Comhaltas’ mission through access to archival materials (both physical and

digital), sponsoring of concerts, direction of field research, publication of sound and written documents, and hosting of events.

Comhaltas' more aggressive approach of prescription and expansion aimed to use activism in the public sphere (advocacy for government funding, a prominent political presence) to directly influence the ways that musical performance and interaction are experienced in more intimate or local communities. This stands in contrast to the Arts Council approach, in which proposals for new structures or systems of support leave the "bottom of the pyramid" (as conceptualized above by Terry Moylan) to find its own way to funding or assistance, and which explicitly calls for as inclusive a definition of traditional expression as possible.

Conclusion

In 1998, before traditional music even became a source of unprecedented public debate about Irish cultural policy, journalist and historian Fintan O'Toole wrote of nascent changes in Arts Council business: "This [new arts council] has happened at a time when all certainty about the meaning of Irish culture and any vestige of a consensus about the common values which underlie it, have disappeared. The arts have arrived on the national agenda at precisely the moment when the idea of a national cultural project has evaporated" (O'Toole 1998:14). The policy debates that followed in the decade after that statement proved that it was possibly both prescient and misguided. The national conversation about traditional music policy led to both a call for recognition of the exceptional role of traditional music in Ireland, as well as a call for integration—for closing the conceptual gap between traditional arts and other forms of cultural expression that had existed for centuries as part of the legacy of the colonial encounter. But the attempt to adapt arts policy to 21st century Irish socio-economic circumstances is just one aspect

of more widespread changes in a societal approach to traditional music over the last decade or more. While most contemporary definitions of Irish traditional music still highlight the “informal” nature of the community—oral transmission, the importance of social interaction in the context of musical performance, etc.—the music is also increasingly being incorporated into the more formal structures, institutions, and communities already surrounding other forms of cultural expression, such as universities, exams, educational pedagogies, and professional development. These developments create a tension between various types of musical community: local and national, informal and institutional, participatory and mass-mediated.

Members of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann belong simultaneously to a local community and to a national “umbrella” organization/community that they might either support or possibly even actively dispute. This was a contradiction that was less important in the early days of the organization, when the nationalist project had yet to confront the changes that modernity, immigration, and the Celtic Tiger would bring to Ireland. More recently, however, these internal and external tensions have already led to public confrontations over the Comhaltas development plan and, more broadly, questions about Comhaltas’ role as a self-styled representative of other Irish musical communities.

The growth and development of Comhaltas as a national organization since 1951 illustrates the powerful role that musical performance and the discourse surrounding it can perform in symbolically constructing mainstream national identity and providing for important alternative modes of national community, particularly in the realm of official cultural policy. Comhaltas’ organizational history and the traditional arts policy debates also demonstrate that the national musical community is not the impenetrable monolith that it sometimes appears to be. Toby Miller and George Yúdice have written that “[S]ocial research has cast serious doubt on

the notion that policy works because of the utterance of actionable rather than expressive proposals. The literature demonstrates the error of aligning organizations and actors with their statements, their statements with their actions, or either with actual outcomes” (2002:31). In this chapter I have begun to explore these three areas—statement, action, and outcome—through the story of the development of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann as a national community and its significant role in the nascent world of cultural policy and the traditional arts in Ireland. Comhaltas’ national “head office” and the policies advocated therein primarily encompass the “statement” role in the quote above, although the perspectives of individuals in this chapter and the actions and outcomes delineated in the following chapters illustrate the disjunctures that exist between Comhaltas as a national community and how it functions in a variety of other contexts.

In the case of traditional music and different conceptions of musical community, “statement” and “outcome,” as delineated by Miller and Yúdice, can be extended beyond the language of policy or identity to that of performance, to the tensions that emerge in a music that continues to move ever more rapidly in and out of public, commercial, private, or intimate realms of experience. As this chapter has shown, Comhaltas is a national musical community, but it is not *the* traditional music community. Because traditional music encompasses multiple and flexible communities, smaller collectivities united by links of place, family, and everyday interaction must also be considered. These areas of local communities and the performance of community are the central themes of the next two chapters as I discuss the realms where Comhaltas has had the most concrete impact, those of the local branches and their role in teaching, performance, and transmission in communities throughout Ireland.

CHAPTER 2

Local Branches, Local Musical Communities: Situating Comhaltas Branches in the Irish Musical Landscape

While the previous chapter explored Comhaltas' role in public conflicts over cultural policy and the formation of a national sense of musical community in Ireland, this chapter looks more closely at the geography of musical community on a local or regional level via the activities and histories of Comhaltas branches. Comhaltas theoretically attempts to balance national, regional, and local (branch) affiliations; therefore the varied manifestations of the organization in different parts of the country provide helpful insights into the ways that the Irish have attempted to codify the relationships between traditional music, their local identities or communities, and their sense of belonging to the Irish nation.

Comhaltas' administrative structure is complex and geographically oriented, with the central or head office and *Ardhcomhairle* (central committee) supervising the provincial councils (in Ireland: Ulster, Munster, Connacht, and Leinster).¹ Provinces govern the county councils, which in turn coordinate the local branches. The actual functioning of the organization, however, allows the county and provincial boards to carry out mainly administrative duties,² in contrast to the branches' role as primary enactors of the organization's mission.³ In this respect, Comhaltas

¹ Provincial councils were established in 1960. Interestingly, the Provinces themselves could be considered a political statement, as in addition to the Ulster province, there is a British "province" which includes England, Wales, and Scotland, but not Northern Ireland. While the four Provinces of Ireland are important political/geographical markers on the island, they play a negligible role in the functioning of musical communities in Ireland. Within Comhaltas, they are primarily administrative entities, with their main independent function being to help organize the provincial level of competitions leading up to the *Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann*.

² These duties include, for example, organizing festivals/competitions, collecting fees and information from branches, settling disputes, etc.

³ The Comhaltas *Bunreacht*, or constitution, states: "The principal task of a Branch shall be:

is actually made up of what former branch leader Maurice Mullen calls “a collaboration of a whole series of interacting independent groups” (Interview with Maurice Mullen, Dublin, September 26, 2008).

The most public—and perhaps most controversial—face of Comhaltas is its role as a national and international advocacy organization, but many if not most members think of themselves first and foremost as members of their local branch. Because I view “musical community” as a flexible, umbrella term encompassing musical collectivities both formal and informal, I view the Comhaltas branch as a formalized, local musical community that exists in relation to many other local collectivities. In terms of musical community, it is generally the branches and the national organization (rather than the Provinces or the county boards) that function most to enable the performance of collective selfhood, in both a social and musical sense.⁴ And while the degree of social and musical involvement in any given branch varies widely from member to member, many participants do not identify their local branch as their “primary” local musical community. The tensions between Comhaltas’ local work, its national ambitions, and its relationships to other musical communities suggest that communities outlined by the geographies of maps or politics often exist simultaneously with less formal group identifications. As Henry Glassie writes of the delicate communal balance in the Northern

(a) The enrolment of traditional musicians (both vocal and instrumental), traditional dancers and supporters of the aims and objectives of An Comhaltas

(b) Setting up facilities for teaching Irish traditional music, singing, dancing, and language to our members

(c) Spreading information about An Comhaltas and its activities

(d) Performing any other tasks reasonably assigned to it by the County Board, Provincial Council, or Central Executive Council.”

(http://media.comhaltas.ie/docs/CCE_Bunreacht_English.pdf, accessed 8/12/13)

⁴ Comhaltas members might also refer to themselves via their county/regional designation (e.g., “a Clare musician” or a “Sliabh Luachra fiddle player”), but these identifications don’t have much to do with Comhaltas county or provincial administrative boards.

Ireland border town of Ballymenone: “The map’s community exists in the mind, but it is not the same as that created by day in work, and work’s community is not the same as that built out of courteous nightly chat. The community suggested by tradition, refined by work, is separated by creed, torn by politics” (1982:149).

For members, the branch can fulfill one or both of two main social functions. For some members, local Comhaltas membership solidifies or makes explicit other local social connections or communities, such as family relationships, neighborhood and parish affiliations, school friendships, or relationships developed via spaces such as pubs or other clubs. For other participants a local club or association such as the Comhaltas branch acts as a gateway for those who are not yet part of an existing musical community, replacing access points such as family musical history or peer exposure as a stepping stone for becoming involved in participatory music. These two social functions are relatively consistent in branches throughout the island, from rural to urban and in-between.

It could seem that circumscribing the branches as musical communities assumes a narrow understanding of musical collectivities, insinuating that they are forged through participatory musical performance bounded primarily by narrow geographical areas. But examining Comhaltas and Irish traditional music in the twenty-first century also requires an exploration of not only the face-to-face transmission and performance that forms the historical bedrock of traditional music, but also topics such as the movement of peoples via migration and tourism, changes in musical communities between generations, and the interaction between these local communities and the “imagined” national community through traditional music performance and transmission.

Comhaltas Branches and the Musical Geography of Ireland

In 2009, two young Dublin-born traditional musicians released an album to much acclaim. Entitled “Dublin Made Me,” the CD features duets played by Liam O’Connor on fiddle and Sean McKeon on uilleann pipes, both musicians raised in prominent musical families hailing from the capital city. In a radio interview promoting the CD’s release, Liam O’Connor mentioned that while his flute-playing father Mick was born in Dublin’s Liberties neighborhood, his mother actually came from Clare, and the family frequently spent much of the summer there after attending the Willie Clancy Summer School each year. One summer in the rural west of Ireland, a friend introduced O’Connor at a session as “a young fiddle player from Dublin...but his mother is from Clare!” The implication here was that O’Connor must have gotten his music from the side of his family based in a rural county (Clare) now thought of as one of the “heartlands” of traditional music, when in fact the fiddle player acquired much of his music and inspiration in an urban setting from his Dublin-born father.

This story hints at one of the more complex relationships manifested in the geography of traditional music communities: the urban/rural dichotomy, a geographical distinction that emerges frequently in the history and development of Comhaltas and is related to the notion of “regional style” in Irish traditional music. Traditional music scholars have written extensive commentary on the origins of the modern concept of stylistic regions in Ireland, with many scholars tracing the strength of the regional model in the rural west of Ireland back to the early-to-mid-twentieth century and the impact of the mass media: early recording artists (e.g., fiddlers Michael Coleman and Padraig O’Keefe as ambassadors for Sligo county and the Sliabh Luachra region, respectively), the 1962 educational radio programs entitled *Our Musical Heritage* by Sean O’Riada, and the early field recording efforts of national radio programs (Kearney 2013;

Gubbins 2008; Kearney 2009; Vallely 2011; O'Shea 2008:54–62). Many of these formative moments for the “regional style” concept focused on musicians and musical communities in the west of Ireland.

Ethnomusicologist Helen O'Shea also makes a strong argument for the role of revivalist sentiment in the persistence of regional styles as a marker of “authentic” traditional music performance in Ireland (and elsewhere):

The relatively recent focus on regional styles in Irish traditional music is informed by a nativist discourse within which the unique, national culture is perceived to be at the point of extinction.... [R]egional style is valued as much for what it signifies as for the way it sounds.... [T]hese influences have led to the expansion of recognized styles, despite the fact that the isolated conditions under which localized performance practices flourished have long since passed. (O'Shea 2008:54)

Connections between the local or regional and the nation as emphasized by O'Shea are common throughout Europe, dating back to European Romanticism and the work of Johann von Herder, who drew connections between the local landscapes and traditions as the embodiment of the nation's soul (Bithell & Hill 2014:6). These revivalist discourses include, but are certainly not limited to, those promoted by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, in spite of the organization's contradictory reputation for promoting a national or standardized “Comhaltas style,” particularly via its competitions (see Chapter 5).

Named and recognized regional styles in Irish traditional music tend to be associated with rural areas, primarily in the west of Ireland, including Donegal, Sligo, East Galway, East and West Clare, Sliabh Luachra, and others. Geographer Daithi Kearney has noted that the process of mapping Comhaltas activities and programs such as competition winners, *Seisiún* performances,

regional resources centers, and *Fleadh* host towns shows a marked preferential trend towards these Western regions. He comments:

Despite the success of the organisation over the past sixty years there are many areas of the country that have not developed branches of CCÉ, where Irish traditional music is not an overtly strong part of everyday local culture and from where few young musicians go forward to success in competitions. There are also many people and groups involved in Irish traditional music throughout Ireland and the world who are not involved with or affiliated to CCÉ. (Kearney 2013:91)

These observations about Comhaltas' possible regional biases are reinforced by language used by the Comhaltas head office. As briefly discussed in Chapter 1, Comhaltas' institutional discourse throughout the decades has frequently featured a vision of a pastoralist Irish culture that looks toward a rural past to constitute its heritage. This vision, which contradicts the type of development and cultural mixing associated in particular with the city, is exemplified by this excerpt from the recent Comhaltas development plan:

Our traditional arts are a unique heritage of great sophistication and antiquity. They are a heritage grounded in stability rather than in frenetic, market-driven changes of fashion, and they encompass key concepts like community, participation, apprenticeship, responsibility and the development of identity. Such a heritage draws us closer to former generations but its future depends on the constant forging of links between old and young, a constant bridging of generations through an unbroken thread from ancient times (Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann 2004:8–9).

This idealized notion of a unified community of Irish musicians going back generations has long been a rallying cry for Comhaltas, but in reality, the experiences of many musicians deny such

simplistic categorizations, contrasting strong connections to multiple musical “homes” with different types of movement and migration both physical and technological. Indeed, as Kearney notes above, in many areas of Ireland traditional music communities are tenuous or even non-existent either inside or outside of Comhaltas.

In areas where it is a presence, however, the Comhaltas branch can play a very particular role in the process of musical/geographical identification. With upwards of 400 branches in Ireland and abroad, Comhaltas is, at some point, a part of musical life for a majority of traditional musicians in Ireland, even if there is not a strong local branch.⁵ These musicians live in urban and rural communities, in areas with little history of traditional music performance and ones with long and complex local and regional traditions. While it is tempting to focus on the contrasts and differences between Comhaltas branches in varied geographic locations, the reality is that Comhaltas branches often share similar histories or origins, and members in vastly different areas speak in similar terms about the social roles that the branches play for them personally and in their local communities, musical and otherwise.

My intention in this chapter is not to place undue emphasis on geographical categorizations of different musical communities, but rather to make connections between different “types” of branches and examine the everyday creation and dissolution of musical life in different locations in its own right. Therefore, the first half of this chapter traces the common histories and functions of various Comhaltas branches. I examine the emergence of local branches in the mid-20th century and their roots in other local clubs and organizations, the role of the branch as a “safe space” for musicians during the 1960s and ‘70s and the shifting of the branch community from an adult-oriented club to a more family- and education-centered

⁵ This involvement could vary from learning as a younger musician to performance to teaching to simply competing in one or more competitions.

collective, and the prominent social function of the branch for more contemporary members. Later sections of the chapter will discuss some of the variations that emerge in branches in different geographic locations and musical communities, as well as some of the differences and conflicts between the local branch and Comhaltas as a national organization.

Community Within a Community: The Branch Emerging

Throughout Ireland, Comhaltas branches often emerged in conjunction with pre-existing musical communities, including other music clubs, schools, unions, and culturally nationalist organizations. Comhaltas branches joined these groups in acting as symbolic umbrellas under which musical communities could grow and change. Comhaltas branches and their mid-20th century predecessors also emerged at a time when the evolution of Irish traditional music was trending away from a historical focus on individual performance and towards various types of group performance.⁶ These included clubs and organizations which were focused inward on the enjoyment and education of the musicians and community members, the *céilí* bands and other performance groups whose music was directed outward at dancers and passive audiences, and the newly-emerging pub sessions, which fit anywhere on a spectrum from semi-private sharing of music among musicians to informal public concerts. Early Comhaltas branches in the 1950s and '60s adopted these relatively new social venues for communal performance, but many most

⁶ Writing in 1971, noted Irish music scholar Brendan Breathnach asserted that solo or individual performance was still the benchmark for traditional music: "Group playing is another modern fashion to be avoided. Certainly it is more convenient to teach an air to a group, and in training each child to subordinate or direct his activities toward the desired group effect. Traditional playing, it must be remembered, is of its very nature a personal expression, and the restraint demanded in playing in a band or other ensemble kills the spirit which animates it" (Breathnach 1977:122). Hammy Hammilton traces the origins of widespread communal or ensemble playing to emigrant communities, early 78 recordings, and the burgeoning of the *céilí* band format in the mid-20th century, as well as the increasing popularity of the pub as a social center in Irish life post-World War II (Hammilton 2011).

closely resembled a certain kind of nationalist and/or revivalist club or organization. These groups drew together musicians who were informally tied by membership in a flexible traditional music community into more formal collectivities bound by common interests and experiences, including political ideologies and geographical affiliations or affinities.

In Dublin, for example, these types of cultural groups historically served an important role in the development of urban musical communities, both through their own activities and through building on and fostering relationships connected to physical spaces such as neighborhoods, pubs, and union or political halls. While one of the oldest examples of these musical/social groups was the Dublin Piper's Club (founded 1900; O'Connor 2007), some of the strongest associations emerged in the mid-20th century as the migration of musicians from the countryside to the city created a strong demand for new physical and symbolic spaces for participatory musical expression. Piper and activist Gay McKeon spoke fondly of the early years of the Thomas Street Piper's Club, for example, in which musicians and musical aficionados such as his parents found a sympathetic community based around shared experiences of migration as well as shared political and cultural affinities:

A social event for my parents was going to the piper's club, and committee meetings....
 And I was only reflecting on it recently that there was a real sense of community, there. It was really strong. And a huge emphasis on young people... It was very much a sense of identity. And it felt, very—I wouldn't necessarily say republican, but Irish heritage and culture. But it was mainly run by countrymen and women, who came to live in Dublin.
 (Interview with Gay McKeon, June 29, 2010)

Fiddle player Pearl O'Shaughnessy also looked back on the Thomas Street Piper's Club as a formative experience for her in a time when "there was very little interest in young people learning traditional music":

Lauren: Did other people know that you played traditional music?

Pearl: Oh they did, but they didn't—that was way down on their scale...

L: Did that bother you at all?

P: It didn't bother me, no. Because I had good encouragement from my father, at home.

But at the same time, you were different because you were playing. And it took me a while to realize that there was no difference between a fiddle and a violin! Because the girls, they'd learn the violin and I'd be playing the fiddle. (Interview with Pearl

O'Shaughnessy, November 11, 2009)

While all of her school friends were learning classical music, O'Shaughnessy eventually found a musical home in the Church Street music club run by Sligo-born flutist John Egan.⁷ While the Thomas Street club had a more formal and political orientation, the Church Street group was more like a forerunner of today's pub session: an informal weekly gathering in a room above a pub with a focus on tunes from County Sligo and the northwest, played primarily by Sligo musicians living in Dublin. Every Wednesday night adults and children gathered above the pub, in a room with noticeably slanting floors, and the "juniors" would sit in a circle around the "senior" musicians to listen and play along whenever possible. As O'Shaughnessy describes the session, occasionally Egan would turn to the young players and ask them to start a tune, but primarily it was a listening and learning experience. "And then, at about half-ten the older members all disappeared downstairs to the pub, and that was the end of the session. And so we

⁷ O'Shaughnessy would later go on to lead an equally welcoming "descendent" of the Church Street session each Tuesday night at Hughes' pub in central Dublin.

had to leave...It really got going when they came back from the pub [and] went on to half-one in the morning” (Interview with Pearl O’Shaughnessy, November 11, 2009).

Clubs such as the Thomas Street and Church Street gatherings proved to be important spaces in which participants could publically negotiate their own relationships to the realities of migration and musical and social change. These clubs also played a role in the shifting perception of traditional music outside of the club’s “safe space” in the public sphere of mid-20th century Ireland. Members of these clubs were active in the founding of Comhaltas and its branches in the 1950s, and brought their experiences as cultural activists and musical community leaders into the new organization.

Safe Space: The Branch as a Refuge in the 1960s and 1970s

A common anecdote shows up in descriptions of musical life both urban and rural in the mid-twentieth century: the fiddle player who must hide his instrument under his coat as he travels to and from home in order to avoid being “outed” as a musician. Even as the 1960s spawned “ballad bands” such as The Clancy Brothers and The Dubliners, soon followed by burgeoning interest in the instrumental arrangements of The Chieftains and other innovative commercial groups such as Planxty, The Bothy Band, and Dé Dannan, instrumental Irish music remained (and to some extent still remains) a subcultural phenomenon throughout the island. The music was still tied to negative cultural stereotypes about rural Ireland as the nation struggled to catch up with economic modernization and counter-cultural movements on both sides of the Atlantic. While growing popular interest in select bands and venues opened some

doors,⁸ entrance into a traditional musical community was still difficult to access in many parts of the country. Those who did play during this period often benefitted from a strong family history in the music and dance, and therefore special access to a traditional music community, and/or a strong nationalist, revivalist, or cultural activist background which privileged formalized communities like organizations or clubs.

The activist cultural clubs and new Comhaltas branches frequently stood in contrast to the negative views of traditional music that caused some musicians to hide their instruments in public. Those active in Comhaltas often allude to a sense of Comhaltas-sponsored activities functioning as a safe space for traditional music and dance, particularly during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, when today's leaders were young and traditional music was far from accessible in every Irish community. Comhaltas staff member Siobhán Ní Chonaráin spoke of her own childhood in County Limerick in the West of Ireland:

I came from a part of Limerick that had no tradition whatsoever. No history of traditional music. My father was an accordion player, who played what would have been recorded as platform dance music. Meaning, daddy played the waltzes of the 50s and 60s... My parents and all of my family would've been very upper middle class—right, type of strong farmer tradition. Generally married to educators, business people. Within the area I came from, traditional music would definitely have been still looked upon as belonging to kind of a rural, west of Ireland, not quite working class because it wasn't there at all... classical music would've been what you went to. Or you played something that was light entertainment or ballads or something. There wouldn't have been any sort of—I'm not

⁸ See Chapter 1 for a brief discussion of Comhaltas' struggles with the new interest in the *Fleadh* during this time.

saying negativity towards it, but most definitely it wouldn't have been part of the culture from which I came. (Interview with Siobhán Ní Chonaráin, May 28, 2009)

Once Ní Chonaráin discovered an affinity for traditional music, she had to cycle for miles along rural lanes to attend the nearest Comhaltas branch for lessons.

While Ní Chonaráin had to flout her middle-class background in order to find her way to traditional music, Clareman Pat Liddy argues that even though his family was committed to traditional music and dance, he still fought powerful stereotypes:

Those who danced a set in Newmarket-on-Fergus... you were perceived by the townies—the ones who were working in the airport, the ones who had money—as being a county fella, who still had bits o' cow dung stuck to the heels of your shoe. A shirt that was two sizes too big for you, closed up with an old tie. Half-shaven...plastered and dirty hair. A rustic peasant [laughs]...And that's what you were, like, unfit for the showband hall. (Interview with Pat Liddy and Joseph O'Connor, November 19, 2009)

The set dancing and traditional music community offered a place to Liddy and his friends, while the popular dance halls of the 1960s were out of reach culturally and socially.

But Liddy argues that even into the 1980s, it was hard to find a way to broaden interest in and acceptance of traditional culture, in spite of the persistence of Comhaltas branches:

The other thing was there... You come along to the '80s, economically things were not good here then—see we've now gone back to that again⁹—and Frank [Custy] made a statement, he said, "You're wasting your time talking culture to a man with an empty belly."... In the 40s and 50s, in bad times, music and culture was way way down the list of priorities. And the people who were... they held it, they kept it, but it was more a tight

⁹ Reference to the fading "Celtic Tiger" economic boom of the earlier 2000s.

circle of people. And nobody's ever done a study on this—was it because they felt it wasn't popular? There wasn't too much interest from the paying public. Or, or, there was another side to that... was it because they felt they had something special and, fuck it, we're not going to share this with other people? (Interview with Pat Liddy and Joseph O'Connor, November 19, 2009)

With each successive generation of musicians and activists, the nature of the branch community shifted to accommodate new goals and cultural realities. The flourishing of Comhaltas festivals and branches in the 1950s waned into a lull in the 1960s, and even the “safe spaces” of the branches often proved difficult to maintain and access, particularly for those without previous links to musicians in the family or a parish with a strong musical history.

It took a new emphasis on families and teaching young musicians in the 1970s to begin to shape the organization and its branches into the educational powerhouse that it is today. Moving with the demands of a shifting musical landscape, the idea of the Comhaltas branch began to change from a club primarily for adults to a broader musical community for families and children. As Pat Liddy explains:

It's difficult to pinpoint where the [Comhaltas] hype of the '50s died in the '60s, then came back in the '70s and blossomed in the mid-'70s onwards—that wasn't just here now. And I would put it down to—at the time, you had people in Dublin for instance, in the city life, first generation up from the country and their children were now coming along to 15, 16, 17 and because the parents were working and had money they were going back to the old style, and they want their children ... And it was that realization—the first generation away from the country coming back out to the country hall in the summertime and their children were Dubs and...their parents want them to fit in more

with the lifestyle that *they* had. Plus, I suppose, a worldwide revival of interest in folk music, generally. (Interview with Pat Liddy and Joseph O'Connor, November 19, 2009)

During this time of transition for Comhaltas, Denis Liddy (nephew of Pat and now a well-known fiddle teacher) was struggling to find his own niche in the traditional music world of West Clare; a task that began with very unsuccessful “lessons” with a local musician in the 1970s:

Lauren: So you didn’t enjoy the playing very much at that point?

Denis: Hated it. So after one year I had a full three-quarters of a march learned. That’s how bad it was. So then my dad got kind of more proactive, and we did a school pretty much every day. You know, during break time, play time kinda thing. [After a couple of years of school classes] there was a regular session in Cratloe on the Friday nights with old guys like Tom Ward... and an old couple Tom and Lill. In their 90s when I met them. And they were pretty much the pioneers of the Comhaltas thing in Clare in the ‘50s really. So I got to sit down on a Friday evening with him. So I kinda got stuck in with the old guys and they told me I was great, even though I was awful. And they encouraged me to play along with them, and I was literally picking up tunes as I sat down. I didn’t know how that was happening, but it was just kind of osmosis more than anything else. (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009)

The organized session provided a learning experience that exposed Liddy to nuances of style and repertoire that even an enthusiastic parent and a strict teacher could not match. Additionally, Liddy’s experience demonstrates both the difficulties of replicating the casual interdependence of a less formal traditional music community in a manufactured class or session atmosphere, and the helpfulness of these kinds of structured interactions for some musicians new to the tradition.

Even by 1982, however, Liddy still felt that there was a subcultural aspect to his life in traditional music:

Denis: All my friends had given it up at that stage and we were the only ones who hadn't.

It wasn't a cool thing to do...there was still a huge social stigma. You couldn't walk down the street with the fiddle hangin' off ya. It would be taken off you or at the very least you'd get a stone thrown at you.

Lauren: Did that actually happen to you?

D: Yeah.

L: So did you just not talk to your friends at all about music or anything?

D: No. It was like a second life. (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009)

Opening up access to this “second life” in traditional music for more families meant that Comhaltas branches increasingly began to move beyond fleadh organizing and regular sessions in pubs towards fully-fledged music schools based in both new Comhaltas facilities and existing community centers and schools. While there was acknowledgement in the central office that national developments might warrant some changes in Comhaltas' programming (see Chapter 1), the actual development of local projects and classes was driven by grassroots, branch-level efforts.¹⁰

In Dublin, for example, the Northside-based Sean Tracy and Clontarf branches both transitioned from city center-focused concerts and sessions in hotels and pubs in the 1970s and 1980s to larger, more formal music schools based at colleges and community centers located in suburban areas. In the Ennis area in County Clare, students like Denis Liddy who learned to play

¹⁰ The increasing branch-level focus on teaching would later be supported by centrally coordinated efforts such as the TTCT teacher training course (founded in 1980) and the SCT music exams (created in 1999). See Chapter 3 for more detail.

in school and in informal music clubs and sessions often grew up to teach more formal classes and lessons through Comhaltas branches.

Eventually, as former Comhaltas music officer Seamus MacMathuna describes, there was a whole new generation who began playing, as well as a number of adults who found their way back to music that had been a part of their childhoods. While the traditional music community at-large seemed to benefit and expand through increased opportunities for public and private communal performance during these decades, the expansion of Comhaltas branches' activities beyond hosting weekly sessions and administrative meetings meant that these particular musical communities played a significant role in the revival process. As the revival became more and more successful, the branches became “a community within a community” (Interview with Seamus MacMathuna, December 8, 2010), orienting themselves in relation to a larger, more amorphous traditional music community across the country and, in some cases, stronger local musical communities bound by geographical markers and face-to-face relationships of performance, kinship, and more.

The Social Role of the Branch Community

Beyond the explicit musical goals of teaching, transmission, and competition, the goals of branch members often also included personal self-expression, family convenience, and socialization opportunities. For both students and parents, one of the key benefits of belonging to a branch was the face-to-face interaction that the traditional music community widely considers essential to the transmission and enjoyment of traditional music.¹¹ Students I spoke with consistently remarked that they made close and lasting friendships with their fellow musicians in

¹¹ See Chapter 3 for more on teaching/transmission and traditional music.

the local branch, as well as with the other musicians they met across the country at various competitions and festivals in the summertime. The organized and controlled environment of classes and other branch activities provided guided opportunities to “perform their collective selfhood” that might not have been available in other contexts.

For example, accordion player Aisling Lonergan grew up with Comhaltas. She explained that she started playing in groups through Comhaltas at age seven or eight and ended up growing up with many of her fellow students:

[W]e really did become really close... A lot of the people I was in the under-12s with I consider my best friends now. Because, obviously you have friends from school, but when you're friendly with someone who has the same interests as you then you kind of tend to be friends with them more. (Interview with Aisling Lonergan, July 16, 2008)

While Lonergan grew up in Dublin surrounded by a thriving traditional music scene that was relatively integrated with the everyday life of the city, Majella Bartley grew up in Monaghan in Northern Ireland at a time when traditional music was practically nonexistent in the area. For Bartley, the branch provided pretty much the only social outlet involving music: “within that Monaghan kind of circle, it was always the branch. I never [played anywhere else], apart from just going to the odd *feis* [competition] here or there” (Interview with Majella Bartley, November 17, 2009).

Parents and other relatives of young Comhaltas members became involved as well, filling the heavy demand for volunteer leadership within the branch, as well as participating in group holiday trips and other events. Branch leaders and members organized non-Comhaltas-focused

events such as taking a group out “on the Wren,”¹² to perform in a local festival or benefit, or on exchange trips abroad. These trips were either intra-Comhaltas events, such as Dublin branch *Craobh Naithí*’s¹³ 2009 visit to Manhattan hosted by New York’s *Úll Mór* (“Big Apple”) branch, or cross-cultural, such as multiple exchange trips to Bulgaria and Sweden arranged by Denis Liddy for his students from Clare.¹⁴

Comhaltas teachers and leaders acknowledge that this social aspect of the branches is key to the creation of a “community within a community.” The branch can fill a social niche for young children and newcomers to traditional music that other local traditional music communities don’t because, among other reasons, they are geared towards adults or are less explicit about the social and musical behaviors expected of community participants. A pub session, for example, is held in an environment and at a time that is often unfriendly to children and families. Sessions are also driven by their own codes of behavior and unspoken rules for performance that often require significant experience or exposure to unearthen, even though their increasing popularity has led to countless websites and publications outlining these expectations (e.g., Barry Foy’s 2008 *Field Guide to the Irish Music Session*).

Music teacher and Comhaltas activist Attracta Brady spoke particularly passionately about the importance of the social connections she made while attending Comhaltas classes when she was young:

¹² Also called mummers or strawboys, “wrenboys” travel from house to house through a parish/town/neighborhood on St. Stephen’s Day (December 26), singing, dancing, and playing, while often wearing old clothes or various costumes including straw hats/masks. Wren Day escapades can also involve short plays or skits on various local or religious themes. Collecting money from the “audience” is also common, and Comhaltas branches often raise money for their own coffers or for various charity causes. “Wren Night” parties or céilís are common amongst American branches, as well.

¹³ *Craobh*=branch; *Naithí* refers to an area in South Dublin associated with St. Nahi.

¹⁴ These trips involved learning tunes from the partner culture and performing for the host groups. In New York, *Craobh Naithí* members also participated in local sessions and *céilís*.

The classes themselves were really important, Lauren, but what was more important was the social aspect to the music for the children, and the community outlet. Where he [her father, a teacher] put us into *céili* bands and duets and trios and carted us off to *fleadhs* and made us practice in groups. And our band practices were great fun...ten little children playing their tunes in one of the parents' houses, where you know that you were going to get tea, and biscuits, and cakes, and really nice things if you worked hard enough.... I suppose my memory is sunshine, and sticky fingers on the fiddle, and laughin' and messin' and you know. And to have tea. (Interview with Attracta Brady, June 22, 2009)

This sense of friendship and fun is one that Brady has continued to emphasize now that she is a teacher and Comhaltas leader in her own right, and that she sees moving down the generations now that her former students are old enough to teach. There is a sense that the shared “otherness” of the traditional music community in general has an ability to bridge other social divisions, as Seamus MacMathuna described regarding some Comhaltas students he once knew:

And they'd be maybe not very enthusiastic, but suddenly they had a few friends, and they could be fellas or girls or whatever, and there was the crowd of 'em... because I remember one man telling me like you know that his sons and his other family, they never got on because the sons hated one another, the two boys did, because they were playing for two different schools. Playing hurling and football, and gettin' dirty playin' and so on. And suddenly they were meetin' at *fleadhs* and they realized that, “these fellas are great *craic* [fun].” (Interview with Seamus MacMathuna, December 8, 2010)

Indeed, this social connection is a key part of Comhaltas' mission: “to promote traditional music in all its forms” and “create stronger bonds between lovers of traditional music.”

In spite of the popularity of competitions and other metrics of educational “progress” and evaluation (see Chapter 3) within Comhaltas, administrators such as Dublin’s Jim McAllister also emphasized other ideas of “success” for the organization:

Success in music is that, at eighteen years of age, when the competition stops—because it does by-and-large stop at eighteen—your child will continue to play, and will still seek out the people that they learned to play music with. They will find a venue, whether it’s in a pub, or in someone’s house, and they keep on playing. And they’ll be playing at 28 and at 38 they bring their kids back. That’s the measure of success. (Interview with Jim McAllister, May 7, 2009)

This is also a measure of success that confounds Comhaltas’ attempts to keep young adult musicians within the fold of the organization, as many student musicians grow up to further expand the types of musical communities they interact with socially beyond the branch itself. This has led to the institution of “youth officers” representing students and young adults on the national council and in the provinces, as well as attempts to provide Comhaltas-based performance outlets for young performers such as Munster’s *Ceoltóirí na Sionainna* youth ensemble, founded by Majella Bartley:

It was trying to get more people involved in this kind of activity... What I was kind of focused on was that there was a lot of people that were fading off from Comhaltas, even fading off from music. Hitting 16, 17 years of age, they’re gone from it like... And because the emphasis was so much on competition, there’s no other outlet for performance. Hence the *Ceoltóirí na Sionainna* idea. That’s where it all came from. (Interview with Majella Bartley, November 17, 2009)

Beyond the perpetuation of the performance of the music itself, Comhaltas teachers and administrators often also point to a notion of success involving the nurturing of “good” citizens and strong local communities, as expressed by Attracta Brady:

If you have this sense of belonging to a group where they all are likeminded, you don’t need smoking and excess drinking, etc... That doesn’t happen among these people. And I think if we never made musicians, Lauren. If we made people who appreciate themselves, their culture, it gives them a sense of belonging in that community, then we will have achieved a huge deal. That’s the way I look at it. (Interview with Attracta Brady, June 22, 2009)

These wider, aspirational social goals tie back to Comhaltas’ arguments during the national cultural policy discussions covered in Chapter 1, in which the organization positioned traditional music communities as a counterweight to “threats” of modernity and social decay. This argument for the “social good” of the branch as a traditional music community is less explicit in local musical communities based around pub sessions, for example, or less publicly demonstrable in informal local musical communities formed around family or friendship bonds, even though these other types of musical community are often also essential parts of the network of local musical life that sustains the branches. Even within Comhaltas branches, however, broader goals of social improvement or national cohesion often are subordinated to the musical and social needs of different branches in widely varying locations.

Situating the Branch: Different Places, Different Branches

The branch-as-community is both separate from (“safe space”) and integrated within (present in public sphere) any larger geographical and social communities that also define a

particular locality. This means that the role of a Comhaltas branch is often distinct to the particular histories and geographies that shape musical performance and community in a given county, region, town, parish, or city. The connection between the traditional musician and his or her musical/geographical “home” is one of the most important aspects of musical community in Irish traditional music, and is an essential part of how the Comhaltas branch defines itself.

What creates and defines a musical home for an Irish traditional musician can vary greatly from place to place and musician to musician, but Comhaltas branches can highlight some of the aspects of this identification process. One of the main ways that musicians identify with a particular geographic location involves association with a particular performance style linked to that area (often referred to as “regional styles” as discussed earlier in this chapter and in Chapters 3 and 5). But this identification is a complex process, particularly in parts of the country outside of the Western coast that do not feature one of the iconic documented styles such as Sliabh Luachra, West Clare, East Galway, Sligo, or Donegal.

In Dublin, for example, even a long and strong history of traditional music performance has not led to an identifiable “regional style.” This means that particular types of tunes and styles of performing were not always available to local Comhaltas branches and teachers as a means of locating their musical communities. That said, many of the current Dublin Comhaltas students were, unlike some of their parents, born and raised in Dublin and feel a strong identification with music in the city. These students are well aware of both the current strength of traditional music in the city and the city’s unique position as an iconic location for traditional music that does not fit into the rubric of a rural region with a distinct musical “style” or accent. In an interview with Northside community radio station NearFM, Beaumont Comhaltas teacher Aoife O’Brien says that she believes that trad in Dublin today is:

definitely strong. I don't see how anybody could say that it's weakening in any way. It's definitely going from strength to strength. And...we're so lucky in Dublin to have people coming to work in the city from the four different corners of the country, you get all the different styles kinda mixed into one, which makes it really interesting.

Clontarf teacher Aisling Lonergan makes a similar point, explaining that

I never really learned just one particular style. I suppose, being from Dublin we never—having no real connections with like Clare or Sliabh Luachra or anything like that, we just learned from a variety of different people. So, the first years, the people I was learning from were from Dublin so it wasn't any particular style or anything. And saying that, it's not any worse or anything than people from Clare. It's deadly,¹⁵ like. (Interview with Aisling Lonergan, July 16, 2008)

These perspectives from Dublin emphasize the aspects of regional style in Irish traditional music that skew towards strong personalities, local histories, and specific tunes, vs. particular instrumental techniques, improvisational repertoires, or general tune types. While the musical aspects of regional style that manifest in an instrumental player's specific performance choices will be discussed further in Chapter 3, the musical "region" as a community is also performed via the stories, memories, musicians, and repertoires that are associated with a geographical area and reinforced through the sounds of its players.

Indeed, links between the individuals who constitute a geographically bounded musical community and the characteristics that define it musically and socially are particularly important to the history of Irish traditional music. For example, while County Offaly in central Ireland ("the midlands") is not popularly recognized as having any particular "regional style" and does

¹⁵ "deadly" = slang for "excellent" or "good fun"

not often figure in general histories of traditional music in Ireland, local musicians still emphasize a pride in a “community style” drawn from particular teachers and shared musical experiences, as expressed by fiddle teacher and administrator Attracta Brady:

I don't for one minute believe that style has got anything to do with the terrain or a topography or a mountain or a river. So why would you call it after a county? It's not necessarily a county... Our music will go from community to community, and I think an awful lot of our styles are determined more by the personalities within the community who lead the sessions, who lead the music, than by the topography of the country itself. I look at strong people—my dad included—in this area. As a flute player, he would've trained most of the adult flute players in this area. They're gonna play like him! Is that an Offaly style? No its not. It's a community style. It's a style that's based on people when they happen to play in the same area... You will speak like your forefathers, you will play music like your forefathers. (Interview with Attracta Brady, June 22, 2009)

Comhaltas branches throughout the country are sometimes named in honor of these “strong people” who have shaped local branches and communities, from the “Fred Finn” branch in Sligo to the “Sean Tracy” branch in Dublin. These branches and the individuals who inspired them harken back to Irish traditional music's roots in solo performance, as well as the importance of the individual in the context of the musical communities in which he or she participates.

Most Comhaltas branches in Ireland, however, are named geographically: after specific towns, parishes, or neighborhoods. These branches can overlay and represent their geographical territories in different ways. For example, even though both County Donegal and County Clare have strong regional traditions and long musical histories, Donegal's eight branches are spread widely over the county's hilly territory, while Clare's twenty branches are often right down the

road from each other in neighboring towns. Donegal's strong history of fiddle playing and tune/dance repertoires often aligns more with those of Scotland than those of Ireland's more southern counties, and these tunes and styles have not always fit neatly into Comhaltas' advocacy for a unified Irish traditional music community. Likewise, unlike other Irish-speaking *Gaeltacht* regions in the West and Southwest of Ireland, the northern-inflected Donegal *Gaeltacht* does not feature a significant Comhaltas presence.

Fiddle player Tara Connaghan grew up in Donegal in a strong musical community, but Comhaltas was never part of her own learning experience:

Comhaltas wouldn't be very strong in certain areas of Donegal. [It's] primarily in North Donegal around Letterkenny. In South Donegal, where I'm from, not really at all. And I actually didn't know they existed—yeah, I had no idea there was such a thing until I was about 17 or something.... And I know in Letterkenny they'd have a very standard repertoire. You know, a common repertoire that's the same as the rest of the county. Whereas in South Donegal, there's a huge amount of other material as well. Like we'd have a lot of standards, but there's a huge amount of highlands and barndances and marches and waltzes that are not played anywhere else, almost. (Interview with Tara Connaghan, December 20, 2009)

Later on, however, Connaghan moved to Clare and she remarked on both the relative ubiquitousness of traditional music in that county, as well as the larger presence of Comhaltas branches, for which she ended up teaching.

Unlike relatively rural Donegal and Clare where branches typically represent towns or parishes, urban and suburban Dublin branches nominally represent neighborhoods within the city, although they also more generally fall into the "Northside" and "Southside" geographical

distinction dividing Dublin. Dublin's most obvious geographical feature is the river Liffey, which divides the city's center into two halves, each of which features other neighborhoods or areas—named and unnamed—stretching from a few square blocks to a few square miles and featuring everything from wide boulevards to crooked and twisting alleys. Over the past fifty years or more, suburban neighborhoods have also spiraled outwards from the more concentrated city center, each with more or less of a discrete identity. These outer neighborhoods or suburbs, sometimes incorporating formerly rural towns, center on identifying features from shopping malls to schools to more typical “town centers” featuring restaurants, shops, and pubs.

Dublin's Comhaltas branches include some of the country's biggest, reflecting the city's uniquely dense and large population relative to other population centers in Ireland. While several of the older branches, founded in the 1970s, were originally based in the city center, the greater Dublin area is currently served by thirteen branches of various sizes, each based in a specific neighborhood either just outside the city center or a little bit further out in a more suburban community. Branches usually do not have their own facility dedicated to music, and so activities such as music lessons, group rehearsals and sessions often share spaces such as GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) clubhouses, local schools, and multi-purpose community centers. But while a Dublin neighborhood such as Beaumont, Clontarf, or Ballinteer may serve as the nucleus for the branch, the largest branches draw members from around the city for a variety of reasons and from a variety of backgrounds. This reinforces the idea that the branch also (and perhaps more importantly) represents a community of people in addition to a specific geographic location.

Finally, it is important to note the ways that the larger organizational structure and history of Comhaltas as a national and international organization shapes the way that branches situate

themselves in relation to each other. The competition system, for example, encourages different alliances, as groups from different branches first compete against neighbors (in the county-level competitions), then against other groups within the same general region of the country (in the Provincial-level competitions), and finally against groups from all over the country and around the world (in the All-Ireland). In this way, two *céili* bands from County Clare might start out as competitors representing the eastern or western part of the county, but end up rooting for each other as fellow Munster bands in the All-Ireland competition.

Likewise, the relatively recent restructuring of Comhaltas under the 2004 Development Plan divided the country into seven regions based on existing cultural, geographical, and political affiliations. All of the branches within each region are then loosely affiliated and represented by one of the “Regional Resource Centres” in Tipperary, Clare, Dublin, Sligo, Louth, Westmeath, and Tyrone. The Centres, often based in existing facilities dedicated to Irish culture in some way or another, are intended to provide resources reinforcing local and regional musical traditions throughout the country, including archival facilities, the production of audio and visual materials, performance venues, and tourist facilities. As the following section of this chapter will discuss, these facilities often provide a prominent public space for the negotiation between local musical communities and a Comhaltas-sponsored vision of an Irish national culture.

Local vs. National Communities: Difference and Conflict

Despite the many similarities in the musical and social functions of branch communities across the country, the local branch and the national organization can sometimes be in conflict, and branches often face unique challenges related to varied geographical locations. The most obvious arenas in which conflicts and challenges arise include the most public of the branch’s

endeavors: the local festival or *fleadh* (competition), stage concerts, and, for some branches, their physical manifestation in the form of a Comhaltas-built and/or -run building. These arenas are all designed to represent the essence of the local branch or community and share it with the public, and this essentialism is frequently the source of conflict.

Facilities

One of Comhaltas' more contentious goals has been to establish physical spaces to represent the branches and the organization as a whole throughout the country. This began in the 1970s with the purchase and development of a headquarters building in the South Dublin seaside suburb of Monkstown. While the organization had previously made do with a few rooms in Dublin city as its only dedicated head office space, when now-Director General Labhras Ó Murchú took over the running of Comhaltas in 1968, he believed that the administration needed to grow and needed dedicated space to do so (Interview with Labhras Ó Murchú, June 30, 2010).

The implementation of this goal over the years—and the funds required to do so—has provided an ample target for critics of Comhaltas. Critics often question whether the construction of a facility dedicated solely to Comhaltas strengthens the musical community or simply isolates Comhaltas from the community-at-large. Arts advocate and trad musician Dermot McLaughlin argues that:

[T]here's an enormous amount of built infrastructure in the Republic of Ireland. There's an awful lot of stuff sitting there, twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year, that's poorly utilized. I know I've said this before—I remember having a debate on *Radio na Gaeltachta* with Labhras about this—that they would've been better off instead of looking for another thirty million or whatever they were looking for to build more bloody

buildings, for classes of all things? Jesus there's schools everywhere! There's libraries everywhere. Taxpayers' buildings all over Ireland. I don't think it's a major management challenge to say, I need three hours.... What's so hard about that? Where do people get this fixation on buildings? (Interview with Dermot McLaughlin, September 22, 2008)

A recent widely publicized struggle between the (now former) Clontarf branch and the Comhaltas headquarters over control of a gleaming new purpose-built traditional music center just northeast of the Dublin city center illustrates how the priorities and personalities at the center of a local community can come into conflict with the leadership of a less concrete “imagined” national community. The eventual forced dissolution of the Clontarf branch and its departure from Comhaltas (it now exists as an independent music club and school) ostensibly resulted from a conflict over the legalities of the funding of the new *Clasac* traditional arts center. Former Clontarf Comhaltas leader Maurice Mullen suggested, however, that the conflict might have also had something to do with incompatible visions for the purpose of the facility:

I was approached to take it on as a *teach cheoil*, which means simply “music house” [in Irish]. A lot of the people who were around Clontarf at that stage would have had some rural interaction, and *teach cheoil* was like, you know, the little parish hall that had an almost nondescript—used for everything else as well. You know, parish events, etc.¹⁶ That's what they envisaged [for] it, but I did some work, then brought a report. I pulled together a report in late '93, suggesting that it wasn't as simple as that. We were living in the city...the challenges are different. They're city challenges, as is the case with arts

¹⁶ The association of the *teach cheoil* with a conservative cultural philosophy is exemplified in this quote from *Treoir*: “The *teach cheoil* can be a powerhouse for our native traditions; a focus for the heritage of a locality. This tangible symbol of a nation's identity in a fast-changing world is a source of encouragement and permanency. The *teach cheoil* is a constant reminder of how the homes of Ireland were the foundation on which our survival was secured” (Eagarfhocal [Editorial] 1993)

generally... So I effectively disabused them of the idea of a *teach cheoil* and said, we need to start thinking about what we're trying to do with *Clasac* in terms of an outreach into the community—community engagement. (Interview with Maurice Mullen, September 26, 2008)

Mullen's roots in the urban environment led him to see the role of a facility in cultivating and growing a musical community differently from that of the typical Comhaltas facility in a rural environment, as he perceived it. His ideas for community engagement included keeping most of the local teaching/classes out of the new facility and instead using it as a progressive and engaged space for gatherings and events in partnership with other organizations, all managed by an artistic director hired in a public (non-Comhaltas-specific) search. Some of these outreach projects have indeed been attempted, according to *Clasac* manager Jim McAllister (Interview with Jim McAllister, May 7, 2009) but the center's programming remains primarily Comhaltas-centered (barring some rental productions). Uses include sessions, choral groups, an Irish conversation circle, and music lessons. Unfortunately, due to the fallout from the ejection of the Clontarf branch, the building is never used by what used to be one of the largest Comhaltas branches in the world, and it has struggled to engage with the lower-class urban neighborhoods that surround it.¹⁷ Mullen's ideas for broader community engagement, however, were also incorporated to some extent into Comhaltas' *Meithal* development initiative from the early 2000s (see Chapter 1). The actual implementation of such partnerships varies widely from branch to branch and region to region, ranging from benefit concerts to scholarly lectures to art exhibits to rentals by other arts groups.

¹⁷ Manager Jim McAllister mentioned that some preliminary classes in local schools had been organized, and it was immediately clear that the vast majority of students had only the most superficial and stereotypical understanding of Irish traditional music (Interview with Jim McAllister, May 7, 2009).

While the Dublin branches and facilities' physical proximity to government funding and power allows them access to particular resources and influence, the Comhaltas facility plays an ambiguous role in the life of non-urban branches as well, in that other facilities have also provoked both positive and negative responses and experiences. The funding and construction of Ennis, Co. Clare's *Cois na hAbhna* music center was also an arduous and difficult process, with little support from Comhaltas headquarters. As Pat Liddy explained, the local drive for a new space for traditional music grew along with Comhaltas' new teaching and family-oriented activities in the 1970s: "with all that impetus, you can see how momentum was growing for a headquarters of our own—a place to meet, carry on activities, and so on" (Interview with Pat Liddy and Joseph O'Connor, November 19, 2009).



Image 1. *Cois na hAbhna* facility, Ennis, County Clare.
(Photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebe)

Purchasing and renovation of *Cois na hAbhna* was instigated entirely at the local level, with funding eventually provided via personal guarantees on the loans by local Comhaltas organizers and years of small-scale fundraising events and loans from branches. Although the facility has seen varying success and use since its opening in 1983, it has more recently

benefitted from the *Meithal* initiative, through which the Comhaltas headquarters has attempted to better connect the activities of the different regions encompassing the branches. Among other things, the *Meithal* project has led to the hiring of a full-time (paid) organizer/archivist at the center (Joseph O'Connor). This position, while controversial amongst those who questioned the switch from long-time volunteer leadership,¹⁸ has also led to increased Comhaltas use of the center, as well as an attempt to connect more actively to the Ennis/Clare community via partnerships and rentals. O'Connor explains, "Pat mentioned the rental here—apart from the fact that it's projecting a positive image of Comhaltas as a community-based organization rather than a stand-alone elitist organization, you know, that you need to be well able to dance and sing and play to go in there sort of thing. That's not happening any more. ... And as an organization if you have a home there's a sense of belonging and that, you know" (Interview with Pat Liddy and Joseph O'Connor, November 19, 2009).

The reality in Ennis, however, was that there were differing opinions about the extent to which the Comhaltas facility really represented the totality of the diverse traditional music scene in the area as a musical "home." Ennis stands in a central location in the county, drawing from even more localized musical communities designated by performance style (e.g., "East Clare," "West Clare," "Slieve Aughty," etc.), parish, and social circles, among other distinctions. Aside from performing arts venues (e.g., *Glór, Cois na hAbhna*), pubs, schools (St. Flannan's has been invested in traditional music since the mid-20th century), and shops (Custy's traditional music shop has been a gathering place for musicians for over two decades) in the town itself, the

¹⁸ As articulated by Denis Liddy: "And the political system has been very favorable to Comhaltas in the last 10, 15 years. Lot of money going in there. Where it goes, I don't know! I know a lot of it went into Cois na hAbhna this year. That's good and bad. Lot of people in the grass roots were pushed out for people to be paid to do what was being done for voluntary for 30, 40, 50 years" (Interview December 14, 2009).

general vicinity abounds with musical resources of varying types, from the Willie Clancy Summer School and other local festivals to locally based cultural organizations such as *Oidhreacht an Chláir* (The Clare Institute for Traditional Studies) to countless informal, private musical networks. Like the Comhaltas branch, these groups and gatherings often stand as musical communities in their own right, while operating symbiotically with other local communities. Buildings and public spaces play varying roles in the coherence of these musical communities.

Katie Verling, director of Ennis performing arts center *Glór*, encountered mixed reactions to her own facility's attempts to offer a home to local trad musicians just a few minutes' drive away from *Cois na hAbhna*. Local Comhaltas leadership appeared to be unfriendly and resistant to a traditional arts center that did not follow the model of existing Comhaltas facilities:

I was being told about the wonderful success that was being achieved by Una O'Murchú¹⁹ [at the Comhaltas facility] down in Cashel...and how that had been developed effectively privately, and they were doing all this. And I didn't know that Comhaltas was against the development of the center [*Glór*]*—that they had Cois na hAbhna*. That they didn't see any need for it. (Interview with Katie Verling, June 16, 2010)²⁰

¹⁹ Wife of Comhaltas Director General Labhras O'Murchú.

²⁰ The older Comhaltas representative standing in the way of new projects is not an unusual trope, as described by Dermot McLaughlin: "What you do find, sometimes at the local level, you can find somebody—I hate to stereotype—but generally an older man in a suit will get in the way of collaborations and things happening. I don't know why?" (Interview with Dermot McLaughlin, September 22, 2008)



Images 2 & 3. *Brú Ború* facility, Cashel.
(Photos by Lauren Weintraub Stoebel)

In fact, the local Comhaltas official's presentation of the Comhaltas facility in Cashel as an exemplary home for traditional music fails to discuss the many issues of representation and control surrounding that facility, as well. With a prime location just beneath the Rock of Cashel—an ancient encampment and one of Ireland's most-visited tourist sites—the *Brú Ború* Comhaltas facility consists primarily of a performance space and a small museum/theater designed to present the history of Irish traditional music (or at least its Comhaltas-selected highlights). Such a prominent location affords the facility prime access to tourists' euros and eyeballs, and the performing group based at *Brú Ború* is frequently asked to represent Irish traditional music at official Irish events, on tours, and in festivals abroad.

The *Brú Ború* center is very much shaped by the outreach goals of its national parent organization but, unlike some other local Comhaltas facilities, is not particularly geared towards meeting the needs of local traditional musicians. The struggles to build and define the role of the

Cois na hAbhna center in Ennis demonstrate the difficulties encountered by Comhaltas branches attempting to balance the grassroots ethos and history of the branch with the increasing professionalization of the organization as a whole. And as the ultimate split between branch and Comhaltas head office surrounding Dublin's *Clasac* center demonstrated, the conflicts between the goals and personalities in local and national musical communities are sometimes insurmountable.

Festivals and Stage Shows

The challenges of representation and control in the public presentation of the branch as a musical community can also be found via the other most public manifestations of the branch: festivals and stage shows. While the national All-Ireland *Fleadh* is Comhaltas' premiere festival and competition, individual branches and local committees also host county- and province-wide *fleadhs* each year leading up to the *Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann*. These festivals have ebbed and waned in scope and attendance since they were established in the 1950s, but even at their height of popularity they were frequently seen more to represent the local community than Comhaltas as an organization:

Pat Liddy: If I might Joe, comment there. The county *fleadhs*, they took off, but the ordinary population—we'll call 'em the people at large—didn't identify the organizing of the county *fleadh* as being a Comhaltas promotion.

Lauren: Oh really? It was just a festival?

Pat: It was just people coming together to play music for three or four days.

Joseph O'Connor: It just kinda happened.

Pat: No one saw that this was coming from an organized body at all. (Interview with Pat Liddy and Joseph O'Connor, November 19, 2009)

Early advertisements and coverage from the local *Clare Champion* newspaper confirmed the backseat Comhaltas as an organization took in relation to local communities in these early festivals. Promotional materials often resembled headlines about the 1956 fleadh which advertised “The All-Ireland Musical Festival” and “The All-Ireland Organization,” with no direct mention of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (Eighteen Ceili Bands for Ennis: 400 Entries for Music Festival 1956).

Representing the local musical community through a festival entails vastly different challenges for different branches and locations. This can result in varying prominence for local festivals, and the communities they represent, in different musical landscapes. For example, while an urban location and the resources and influence which emerge from physical proximity to government funding and power can be of great benefit to a Dublin Comhaltas branch, urban branches are also fighting with numerous other interests for a practical and symbolic role for traditional music in the public spaces of the city. The annual provincial *fleadh* or competition in the provinces of Munster or Connacht can literally take over the town that hosts it—closing down streets, recruiting merchants through window display contests, hosting amplified outdoor concerts that can be heard through nearly the whole town, and prompting pubs and restaurants which normally would not sponsor a session to host music.



Image 4. Fancy Dress Parade. 2008 Munster *fleadh*.
(photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebe)



Image 5. *Sean nos* barrel dance. 2009 Connacht *fleadh*.
(photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebe)



Image 6. 2008 Leinster *fleadh* winners' performances, Dundrum shopping center. (photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebel)

By way of contrast, the 2008 Leinster *fleadh* was held in the Dublin suburb of Dundrum, and while a few extra sessions were held and local schools were taken over with competitions, the colonization of local public space mostly extended to a few square meters of the plaza in the middle of the Dundrum shopping center. Even though recent local *fleadh* parades and concerts in more rural areas generally pale in comparison to their predecessors in the early days of Comhaltas, they are still more of an event and destination than the Dublin competition winners' mall performance, ignored by the vast majority of milling shoppers. Leinster's provincial *fleadh* was much less of a visible presence in Dublin's urban landscape than those held in the smaller towns in Munster, Connacht, or Leinster.

The other major point of contention frequently referenced by musicians and others critical of Comhaltas involves the branch/region-produced tourist-oriented series of concerts under the *Seisiún* scheme. Each summer, branches or regional resource centers around the country present multiple performances of a stage show featuring traditional music, dance, stories,

and song. Comhaltas advertises *Seisiún* as “not just a concert but also a unique traditional cultural experience enabling visitors from both Ireland and overseas to enjoy a taste of the real Ireland.”²¹ There is little guidance from the “head office” about how branches should present these shows, but when it comes to perceptions from Irish musicians, *Seisiún* performances are operating under a burden of decades of stereotypes and clichés when it comes to the public presentation of Irish culture.

Katie Verling of the *Glór* performing arts center in Ennis feels very strongly about the impact of old-fashioned or backward-looking presentations of Irish culture, particularly in tourist-oriented settings such as hotel presentations or the Bunratty Castle and Folk Park’s “medieval” banquets:

I felt from the very beginning there was no relationship between what was actually happening on the ground—the community of musicians and sessions and dances and all that—there was no relationship with that, which is the living culture of Irish music, and the product that was Bunratty or those kind of events. The Jury’s *céilí* was very famous at that time, up ‘til the late 90s, early this century. But it’ll be very packaged things and it always had. An emcee was called a *Fear a’Ti* [male leader], and he told funny jokes, and he made kind of Paddy the Irishman type jokes. And he wore tweeds and he had a cap. And it was all very Irish [in countryman’s accent]. You know that word? O – I – R – I – S – H. It was all of that. And it really—you know, my generation would—their toes would curl and we would cringe at that. That kind of packaging of ourselves. Because you know, by the time the 90s came, it was absolutely at odds with who we thought we were. Who we Irish thought we were. You know, we saw ourselves as being European,

²¹ <http://comhaltas.ie/events/seisiun> (accessed 11/25/13)

worldly, sophisticates. Now, that could've maybe been only skin deep, but to be associated with this concept of—in some ways I suppose it's a concept of poverty, and thatched cottages, and drinking the tea [pronounced "tay"] and eating stews. (Interview with Katie Verling, June 16, 2010)

Images from Comhaltas-produced stage shows from as recently as the 1990s are filled with costumes and tableaux evoking rural peasant life as described by Verling (or occasionally medieval-style gowns or costumes), and these choices feature prominently in the criticisms of musicians and others who question Comhaltas' practices. Audiences for Comhaltas shows also often reflect their presentational style, with *Seisiún* attendees drawing heavily from tourist populations, in contrast with more commercial bands or shows such as Riverdance which can also be popular with general Irish audiences..

Nevertheless, the rosters of early Comhaltas concert tours and *Seisiún* performances are filled with the names of musicians who are now eminent performers in the tradition, regardless of whether or not they are currently involved with Comhaltas. Today's *Seisiún* performances likewise predominantly feature young musicians who are paid nominal fees for participation and are encouraged to view the shows as an opportunity to gain performance experience. But today's *Seisiún* shows have also largely moved away from many of the rural/peasant trappings that had previously characterized Comhaltas stage shows.



Image 7. *Seisiún* 2008, *Cois na hAbhna*, Ennis, County Clare.
(photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebel)

The 2008 *Seisiún* show at *Cois na hAbhna* in Ennis, County Clare provided an example of this updated type of presentation. Instead of peasant dresses, aprons, tweed jackets, and caps, the young performers all wore coordinating blue and black outfits, including sequined cocktail-style dresses and heels for the women and slacks, shirts, and ties for the men. These outfit choices echo the glamour of the *Riverdance* productions, by all measures the most widespread representatives of Irish culture around the world. The five women and three men performing hailed from Limerick, Kerry, and Clare, and their program was a mix of instrumental solos, duets, and groups, mixed with songs in English and Irish and dancers joining in with solo and group performances in different styles. The presentation avoided tableaux, jokes, and skits, but it also did not address the specifics of traditional music in Clare. There was little attempt to elaborate on instrumental repertoire associated with the region, varied fiddle or concertina styles in different parts of the county, historical figures associated with traditional music in Clare, or songs featuring Claremen/women, history, or geography.

In spite of this updated presentation style and repertoire, today's *Seisiún* performances—like today's local *fleadhanna cheoil* (competition/festivals)—still struggle to find a niche in the crowded slate of traditional music performances and festivals in Ireland. Over the last five or six decades, the number of public festivals, concerts, tours, and workshops across the country has expanded to fill nearly every weekend over the summer and many throughout the rest of the year, in spite of struggles over traditional music's national representation through Irish cultural policy (see Chapter 1). This variety of for-profit and community-based events and concerts places *Seisiún* in a vastly different musical landscape than when the program was founded over thirty years ago. The young performers who fill its ranks are thus faced with a plethora of opportunities through which to represent their musical communities on stage, to tourists and locals alike.

Conclusion

Even as the Comhaltas branch has solidified its role as a prominent force in the teaching and transmission of Irish traditional music and an accessible entry point into a formalized musical community for new musicians, branches continue to orient themselves in relation to other local musical communities, as well as Comhaltas' own national and international ambitions and agendas. Since the 1960s, Comhaltas branches have had to contend with an increasing number of “independent” (non-Comhaltas) local traditional music classes, performance venues, tourist attractions, festivals, archives, and more. The revival's success, from the mid-20th century onward, in highlighting group performance and increasing public performance opportunities in many locales, has given individual musicians a multitude of ways to “perform their collective selfhood.” Whether Comhaltas-affiliated or not, these local musical communities might be drawn

together through the physical spaces they inhabit (the pub, the performance center, the parish hall, the school), performance choices (regional style, allegiance to a teacher, shared repertoires), political affiliations, non-musical social connections of kinship and friendship, or any combination of the above.

My conversation with fiddle player Tara Connaghan stands as a prime example of the multiplicity of musical communities within Irish traditional music, and especially their links with local geography. As mentioned above, Connaghan grew up in Donegal and moved to Clare as a young adult. She has a strong affinity for the informal but tight-knit musical community of her youth and Donegal-style fiddle playing as her “home” style, but she also spoke fondly of the strong and thriving diversity of the traditional music world in Clare and the fun she had playing with musicians there in pubs and at festivals. She was able to adapt her playing style and repertoire to participate in musical communities in Clare, while maintaining her connection to her Donegal home. Connaghan also engaged with more formal musical communities via her role as traditional music officer in County Clare, working with musicians and musical organizations throughout the county to meet their various needs. At the same time, she participated in a local Comhaltas branch as a teacher, even though she also expressed reservations about the organization as a whole. For Connaghan, the Comhaltas branch was a small collective in a much larger network of musical communities, both formal and informal. Unlike many of my other informants who also participated in administrative duties, coached students in national competitions, subscribed to nationalist cultural politics, or utilized national teacher training or music exam resources, Connaghan’s interaction with the local branch had nearly no connection to a national community of Comhaltas members.

Because of this ability to act as an “independent group,” the Comhaltas branch serves as a “community within a community”—able to both shape and be shaped by its overlapping musical communities inside and outside of Comhaltas, through collaboration and conflict. Branch members are situated in relation to their musical activities both within and outside of the branch, and each branch is situated in relation to its own musical environment. While branch origins, goals, and social functions might overlap from place to place, my conversations about and observations of branch communities in locations as diverse as Counties Clare, Monaghan, Offaly, Dublin and more have shown that the varied histories and current realities of traditional music in these areas have led to Comhaltas branches that run parallel to, stand in conflict with, and occasionally even primarily constitute the entirety of local musical communities. The nature of these relationships between musical communities can depend on everything from the strength of local personalities and politics to how far back traditional music can be traced in local memory and performance. In spite of this local geographical variation, and in spite of members’ occasional vocal disagreement with Comhaltas’ perceived politicized or nationalist agenda, the branch remains a viable community in the traditional music landscape. This influence proves to be particularly strong—and contested—in the realm of traditional music teaching and transmission to be addressed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Comhaltas, Teaching/Transmission, and Musical Community in Irish Traditional Music

The previous chapter discussed the geography and social functions of Comhaltas branches but glossed over the sound or aural formation of these local musical communities. The primacy of teaching within contemporary Comhaltas programming means that community and belonging are often shaped within the branch via the transmission of tunes and performance style in a classroom environment. There is a strong connection between understandings of performance and style in traditional music and the development of musical communities; therefore, the means by which performance style, repertoire, and history are communicated is an important aspect of the connection between teaching and community in traditional music.

Part of this connection resides in the concept of “transmission,” used frequently by traditional musicians to communicate about the formal and informal ways that the music and its social context are shared and “passed on.” John Blacking, as quoted by Jim Cowdery in an exploration of melody in Irish traditional music, has suggested that the “rules” of Irish music should be “related to the rules of Irish culture, and especially to the constantly changing relationships of individuals within more continuous patterns of community organization” (Cowdery 1990: x-xi). If the rules of music and community organization are thus linked, then there is also a link between the learning of music and the learning of culture. The transmission of music can thus become a part of the process of subject formation: becoming a member of a traditional music community through development of a habitus in line with its rules, both explicit and implicit.

Musicians and scholars have interpreted these “rules” connecting musical sound to community in Ireland in different ways in different historical contexts. In 1971, for example, Breandán Breathnach wrote the following treatise on acceptable modes of transmission:

Here it is necessary to repeat that traditional music can be learned properly only by ear, which is the way a child learns his first language. A teacher who is not himself a traditional player should go no further than demonstrating to his class the fingering for the scale. Attempting to teach airs and tunes by playing them from a printed text...could quite easily result in unfitting the children ever to play music in an accepted traditional style. Group playing is another modern fashion to be avoided...Traditional playing, it must be remembered is by very nature a personal expression, and the restraint demanded in playing in a band or other ensemble kills the spirit which animates it. (Breathnach 1977:122)

The 2011 edition of *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music* places a more varied description of the transmission process in the middle of its entry defining “Tradition” in general:

It is handed down from one generation to the next, or passed from one performer to another, more by example than by formal teaching. The traditional learner normally acquires repertory and style through unconscious or conscious imitation of more experienced performers. But nowadays learning also takes place in groups organised for teaching, and occasionally within the formal education system. Printed and manuscript song and music has had an influence on the tradition since at least the eighteenth century. Throughout this century books, sound recordings, radio and television have played an important part in the transmission of the music, and there are always traditional performers with experience of popular and classical music. (Vallely 2011: 689)

This definition includes notation and electronic media, as well as group learning, while still prioritizing face-to-face exposure to the music in a community context. This changing nature of the “rules” of transmission and community membership is a process requiring a continual effort at learning and attention to musical change, even for a mature musician, as poet Ciarán Carson emphasizes:

I learned a new tune last week. Or rather, I’m still learning a tune I heard last week: it’s presumptuous to ascribe a past tense to the present ongoing process of getting a tune into one’s head or one’s fingers, not to speak of how the fingers often seem to have a mind of their own, controlled by an automatic pilot which remembers fragments of similar tunes, and hence leads one to sometimes gloss over the subtle twists and turns of the tune in hand, the little particulars that make this tune what it is, as opposed to others in the same family. The difficulty of ‘learning’ is compounded by the fact that in the matter of traditional music, there is no Platonic form of the tune, no ultimate score we can refer to as authoritative. The tune is all of its various renditions, and the memory of those renditions in the ears of countless musicians and listeners. As for transcriptions, they are only idealised snapshots of what the tune might look or sound like under one set of temporal circumstances. The tune itself is a process. (Carson 2008)

The links between transmission and community formation are also found in the relationship between geography and performance that I explored preliminarily in Chapter 2. In *The Making of Irish Traditional Music* (2008) ethnomusicologist Helen O’Shea explores the contradictions which can emerge from different modes of transmission and their intersection with geographically oriented regional styles:

Closely linked with the anxiety over loss of regional style is the advocacy of ‘traditional’ ways of teaching and learning Irish traditional music, with the implication that a student who learns through the ‘traditional’ method of face-to-face aural learning from an older musician is more likely to acquire a ‘traditional’ style of playing than one who learns by other methods such as by imitating recordings. (O’Shea 2008:61)

Analyzing often contradictory commentary by scholars and musicians, O’Shea argues that value is clearly placed on a connection between physical presence in and personal interaction with the communities associated with a regional performance style. The anxiety over breaking the links between style and local community was also expressed by Clare music scholar Barry Taylor, who spoke with concern about “how remote a lot of the real tradition is from a lot of the kids who are playing traditional music... To my mind the ethos is just gone completely from the days when people learned because it was kind of a community thing—a community activity...an obligation to pass on free and regardless, what you knew” (Interview with Barry Taylor, November 19, 2009). These values, however, are repeatedly complicated by assertions questioning the ability of “outsiders” to truly adopt a regional style (and its related markers of community belonging) and the role of “hybridity and eclecticism” within regional styles themselves and traditional music at large (O’Shea 2008:61–62).

The communication of style (i.e., transmission) gets at the heart of the “sound” of community in Irish traditional music and the communal limits placed on creativity. In his essay “The Creative Process in Irish Traditional Dance Music,” Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin (1990) discusses the creative options of the musician within what he calls the “frame” of the tune. This frame, or the basic structure (with variations) of most Irish traditional dance tunes, consists of two (or sometimes more) parts (the “tune” and the “turn”), each of which is usually repeated or

“doubled” within a single “round” of the tune (Ó Súilleabháin 1990:117–18). According to Ó Súilleabháin, this frame, in most “traditional” interpretations, also includes a set of characteristic “set accented tones”—a skeleton of pitches that interacts with and emphasizes the natural phrasing and inherent “motor rhythm” of the tune. These pitches can be varied or “disturbed” only to a certain extent, beyond which the basic nature of the melody changes and a new tune emerges (1990:123).

In addition to these most elemental melodic interpretive choices, ethnomusicologist Lawrence McCullough (1977:85) writes that the term “style,” as used by traditional Irish musicians, denotes “the composite form of the distinctive features that identify an individual’s musical performance.” These distinctive features can include rhythmic and melodic variation (as stressed in the Ó Súilleabháin quote above), tone, ornamentation of specific notes or phrases, and instrument-specific choices such as breathing, bowing, articulation, or fingering. To this definition I add a second part: style also comprises the ways that those distinctive features fit into a wider grid of interpretive options and their social and political meanings. As Sally Sommers-Smith puts it in the *Companion*’s definition of “style and authenticity”:

The evolution of traditional Irish music can thus be viewed as a series of inter-connected stylistic lineages, traceable to different locales and master players within those locales.

The styles are likened to dialects of a single language... The limits to innovation are conditioned by awareness that 1. the music must inevitably change and be changing, as individual players hear, interpret, and teach the traditional sound in their communities; 2. though the traditional process of transmission may normally be slow and gradual, radical departures from the traditional stream may be incorporated into the mainstream through the acceptance by local playing circles; 3. future trends can be expected to be centred

around the individuals whose playing sounds attractively different. (Sommers Smith 2011: 671-2)

In this definition, “style” is linked to the interaction between individuals, locations, and innovations inspired and constrained by the values of the musical communities these individuals interact with wherever they are playing. The creativity of the Irish traditional musician is therefore exercised within a set of communally understood limits, both aural and behavioral, and it is in the extent and malleability of these conventions that the social and political meanings of the music often come into play. While the folk characteristics of Irish traditional music emphasize the role of the individual master musician and his or her lineage of influence, these individual styles are also often extended to regional localities of stylistic influence or congruence. A “regional style” in this sense can include the circle of stylistic influence of a single musician, but can also include geographical trends in the choice of instruments, tune types, repertoire, performance contexts (dancing, listening, weddings, etc.), and generally shared interpretive choices (Vallely 1999:309).

Regional styles most likely developed and cemented in the post-famine years of the late 19th century, when economic stagnation and rural marginalization effectively ended the cultural interaction with continental Europe which had brought the tunes and tune types to Ireland in the first place (Vallely 1999:309). Such geographical segregation, however, has been waning as a factor in the perpetuation of regional styles for decades. The effects of the global development of recording techniques and distribution, radio broadcasts, festivals, workshops, and Comhaltas competitions and classes, as well as the absorption of Irish traditional music into the “world music” market and the internationally increasing numbers of non-Irish musicians, have all played a role in expanding stylistic options beyond strict regional or even national boundaries.

Today, many players who become immersed in the traditional music community are able, due to ease of technology and travel, to choose to participate in or identify with a regional style (or not), whether because they identify with it as a current or former resident of the geographic area or because perhaps the regional style may be seen as older, more authentic, or even as a more aesthetically pleasing option among all the available stylistic resources. It should be noted, however, that even those performers who play with a strong regional or personal style or accent often consciously adapt their training and preferences to different communities and settings. As Donegal fiddle player Tara Connaghan put it, in reference to varied performance settings (particularly competitions) away from her musical “home”:

All year round I compromise on style, because I play with people not from Donegal. And I find, going to competitions or showcases, and my playing—I’m not going to play the same way that I play with everybody else. That’s actually my compromise style. And I think most people don’t realize that about my playing. But I actually play much different to what I play in the sessions... Like I play really slow—that’s why I think that adjudicator was quite surprised. They were like, that’s not the Tara I know!... But that’s actually how I play by myself. (Interview with Tara Connaghan, December 20, 2009)

All of these motivations behind performance choices and identification with regional styles could be seen to represent a slightly more conservative, or perhaps, preservationist, approach to the music. In effect, if a musician chooses to identify with a regional style, he or she is choosing to focus on a specific collection of stylistic resources often identified with a master player from the past and a local community of players. The musician identifying with a regional style is also often choosing not to range farther afield to incorporate musical options associated with other regions or with a more cosmopolitan, syncretic style. Or, at the very least, he or she can

segregate those stylistic innovations associated with communities bound by technology and travel from an identity grounded in specific locations and relationships. And finally, those identifying with a specific regional style are also choosing to identify with the musical community associated with it—a choice that is addressed to varying degrees throughout different Comhaltas branches.

As this chapter illustrates, Comhaltas teachers are provided with and encouraged to take advantage of various “top-down” teaching initiatives, originating in a very structured and formal national community. These initiatives can also stand in contradiction to the emphasis placed upon face-to-face relationships and performance in the definitions of “style,” “creativity,” and “authenticity” mentioned above. Beyond teacher training and exam systems, however, Comhaltas teachers confront the same challenges of teaching the sounds of local communities in the context of changing technologies and media resources that non-branch teachers do. The second half of this chapter therefore addresses some of the techniques that Comhaltas teachers use in the context of local branch communities.

Comhaltas’ Top-Down Teaching Initiatives

In spite of the general independence of Comhaltas branches and their teachers, there are several main programs through which Comhaltas headquarters reinforces musical values and guides its teachers and the learning process for Comhaltas students. Top-down teaching initiatives can shape both the performance of a national traditional music community, as well as the aural constitution of the local communities via the branches and their music schools. These national programs include a teacher training course (*Teastas Teagaisc Ceolta Tíre* or TTCT), an examination system (*Scrúdú Ceol Tíre* or SCT), a series of tune collection books aimed at

session playing (*Foinn Seisiún*), and the *Scoil Éigse* (music school) run in the week leading up to the All-Ireland *Fleadh* each summer. Each of these formal programs can have an impact on students' development of musical style, outside of the idealized informal communal transmission described above.

Branch teachers are typically free to use or ignore these various resources as they see fit, but the organization's culture encourages their adoption and adaptation in various educational settings. Certified teachers, for example, are given a credential which could prove meaningful to parents or employers unfamiliar with the traditional music community, and the SCT exam system is promoted as giving students a means of conveying a sense of "progress" in learning to those outside of the traditional music community who might not understand its internal modes of achievement and recognition. Anecdotally, completing the teacher certification process also appears to give teachers an advantage when it comes to being hired as Comhaltas competition adjudicators, workshop tutors, and *Seisiún*/tour performers.

TTCT Teacher Training Course

The TTCT diploma course is a five-day program designed to give teachers who have already had some teaching experience a chance to reflect on and refine their teaching style and resources. As current TTCT tutor (instructor) Majella Bartley explains, "the goal of it is just to produce teachers with a broader idea of how best to transmit music to the student" (Interview with Majella Bartley, November 17, 2009). The advertisement for the inaugural year of the course read:

A course for Irish traditional music teachers will be conducted at *Culturlann na hÉireann* [Comhaltas headquarters in Dublin] from the 19th to the 25th July, 1980. The Course,

which is organized by Comhaltas, will be planned and conducted by well-known music personalities. There will be four streams as follows: fiddle, uilleann pipes, accordion and wind instruments. The course will be limited to thirty participants for the first year and is designed for advanced adult exponents. (TTCT Advertisement 1979)

The course was initiated by Mícheál Ó hEidhin, a schools inspector of music, who would later go on to help create Comhaltas' traditional music exam system.

In the context of the development of teaching within Comhaltas as an organization, the TTCT program is a logical extension of early efforts to bring traditional music into an institutional setting and make it accessible to new participants (the “safe space” mentioned in Chapter 2). Many of my interviews with older Comhaltas teachers and administrators included stories of a freewheeling transition period for branches in the 1960s and '70s as master musicians were recruited as teachers for Comhaltas branches and were forced to figure out how transmission of traditional music would work in a more formal educational setting. As former Comhaltas Music Officer Seamus MacMathúna put it:

So you had to say, there's Paddy Kelly or somebody, you know... could you persuade him to teach? And, of course, the thing was when Pat Kelly or Johnny Murphy was approached they'd say, “Me?! Sure I never learned it meself!” as one man said. [laughs] I say, “You must have!” He says, “Only me father taught me.”... We had branches, you know, who suddenly decided, right, what we want to do is to start teaching young people. They had to persuade somebody who was a traditional musician, but who had never taught or even thought about teaching music in his life... I remember one person that I know, Kathleen Nesbitt, she had married a man from Tipperary, and had both been working in Dublin but they moved to Tipperary, and she was only there a week when she

was approached by a group of ladies who knew that she played the fiddle and wanted her to take on a class. She said they said they'd meet her in the local school on Tuesday night. So on Tuesday night they all arrived with their various sons and daughters, and there was piano accordions, and a couple of two-row accordions, and a fiddler or two, and one or two with a banjo, and several others, and they said, well there you are now! [laughs]... And there she was. And I remember her telling me about it and said... she never had been taught herself in a class sense, but her mother played the fiddle and she taught her a few tunes, now and again... So, she knew how to play, and as she said herself, well, she knew how some of the other instruments worked anyway. So there she was, confronted with about twelve—with five or six different instruments, and she got down to it and said, right, we'll all play – try playing the scale anyway for a start or something. But like within two years she had a little band Under-12 at the fleadh.

(Interview with Seamus MacMathuna, December 8, 2010)

The distinction made in these anecdotes between learning/teaching and actually knowing/understanding the music (e.g., “Sure I never learned it meself!” said by a master musician) gets to the heart of the nuances of the transmission of traditional music in Ireland and elsewhere. It also illuminates the difficulties inherent in translating the cultural practices of informal transmission to an institutionalized system of learning.

Siobhan Ní Chonaráin, the current Comhaltas staff member in charge of education programs, administers the TTCT course and runs a series of shorter workshops for traditional music teachers. In these workshops, she often addresses more philosophical questions such as “when not to teach,” “what is a teacher,” and “what is transmission.” For Ní Chonaráin, “a teacher in traditional music is somebody in very very different settings. It depends on who the

learner is. Why the learner is there.” In her view, the traditional music teacher must remain aware that they are part of a larger process of musical development; an off-hand request to help a child with a piece for a competition should not be taken lightly. In addition, she argues, teaching traditional music is just as much about teaching a student to listen and to be sensitive to a musical community as it is about teaching tunes and technique (Interview with Siobhán Ní Chonaráin, May 28, 2009).

The challenge of programs such as TTCT is to supplement a more organic understanding of traditional music transmission, in which the music is simply “passed along” from generation to generation as characterized by long-time Comhaltas fiddle teacher Attracta Brady: “I taught the way I’d been taught. It’s a process of elimination and trying different ideas... There is no one style, and there is no one method” (Interview with Attracta Brady, June 22, 2009).

Supplementing informal transmission with formal music education and teaching techniques is a delicate challenge that is often overshadowed by Comhaltas’ reputation for contributing to an unwanted standardization of the highly individual process of transmission. This challenge is also taken up by Comhaltas’ other main educational framework: the SCT exams.

SCT Exams

The exam system was originally created in 1999 as a joint project between Comhaltas and the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM), but has been run solely by Comhaltas since 2003. The official rationale for the exams as described by Comhaltas argued that while the *Fleadh Cheoil* competitions provided a certain kind of assessment of musical performance:

It seemed appropriate to create a broader framework of measurement for traditional music to include not only performance, but also sources of tunes, regional styles and so

forth. The programme set out to offer formal recognition to a broader group of traditional musicians while at the same time strengthening the tradition itself through more intensive study.¹

The exams are divided into three levels of “competency”: elementary, junior, and senior. Each level is then divided into several sub-levels, assessing the musician in four areas: Aural Awareness, Performance, Discussion (including written submissions for seniors), and Literacy.

The syllabus given to those teaching for and participating in the SCT exams provides detailed descriptions and examples of the progressions of skills required within each of these levels and categories. The “aural awareness” category requires students to recognize and repeat increasingly complex rhythms, recognize and name tune types, demonstrate an ability to remember and repeat increasingly difficult melodies, hear and understand melodic intervals, and, at the senior level, recognize time signatures and scales/modes played by the examiner. In the “performance” category, each exam level requests that the student play more tunes from an increasing number of tune types (e.g., elementary students must play two or three stand-alone tunes from common tune types, while seniors must play up to six different tune types, including several different “sets” of tunes arranged into groups). The “discussion” exam category calls for increasing knowledge of traditional music history, instruments, performers (current and past), performance styles, and written and aural sources for traditional music (collectors, composers, instrument makers, etc.). And, finally, the “literacy” area calls for increasing ability to read staff notation (sight reading) and demonstration of basic knowledge of Western classical music theory.

¹ http://comhaltas.ie/education/sct_exam, accessed 9/5/13.

The SCT syllabus gives only limited discussion of or justification for these specific exam categories, mostly in the following introduction from coordinator Mícheál Ó hEidhin:

Performance has of course been given pride of place and there are three other areas in which these musicians can avail of credits. Aural Awareness because the music is passed-on aurally and it is accepted that ear training should be of great benefit to any participant. Informal Musical Discussion (Written Submission at Senior Levels), where the applicant can talk to the examiner, informally, at the early stages, about varying matters from local musicians to particular projects in the traditional music field. Literacy because of the benefits that accrue and can further expand their knowledge as they delve into old manuscripts, learn new tunes and even sample music from other traditions.²

The equal weight given to oral learning and social/historical understanding vs. aspects of Western music theory (reading staff notation, understanding scales/modes, etc.) in the SCT exams suggests a shift away from the traditional understanding of what makes a “master musician” within an Irish traditional music community. Many of the older or deceased musicians revered within a given musical community might not be able to fulfill the exam’s “literacy” requirement or be able to explicitly discuss aspects of theory acquired via oral transmission. Indeed, even contemporary musicians often make use of systems of written musical literacy (i.e., the “ABC” notation system and various adaptations of staff notation) which do not always align with those used in Western music theory and which often require orally transmitted knowledge for correct interpretation of the written symbols.

Many teachers who make use of the SCT syllabus in some way or another, however, agree with Comhaltas’ rationale stated above, in which the exams serve as a corrective tool for

² http://comhaltas.ie/images/press_room/SCTSyllabus.pdf (accessed 4/10/14)

teachers and/or students who are overly focused on competition and technique. Flutist and teacher Gary Shannon explains:

Because the trap, when you're teaching people to play, is that you only teach people to play, and the whole emphasis is on virtuosity. Whereas when the exam system came in, it forced us to delve more into the background of the music and the musicians from which the music came. And I think that's a good thing... [The exams can help determine whether a student is just] using a formula to produce a tune, and if they have any depth of the tradition within them at all. (Interview with Gary Shannon, November 16, 2009)

Fellow teacher Majella Bartley also agrees that the exams are just a “good tool” for a teacher and student, and she emphasizes that she does not require students to participate in the exams themselves, even if she is using the syllabus as a teaching guideline. Bartley's own experience as a young fiddle player in a Comhaltas branch isolated from strong, independent musical communities spurs her desire to stimulate her own students to understand the breadth of traditional music. She wants to widen her students' horizons: “Because we never did any of that. I never knew there was a different tune type from a jig or a reel or a hornpipe until I was about maybe 11 or 12” (Interview with Majella Bartley, November 17, 2009). The SCT exams, then, fit into a reality of traditional music transmission in late twentieth and twenty-first century Ireland in which students new to the music do not always have access to the types of musical communities that shaped the development of the tradition over previous centuries.

Foinn Seisiún (The Slow Session)

Another widely used educational resource produced by Comhaltas is a series of tune books with various instrumental dance tunes arranged into sets of two, three, or four as they

might be played in a pub session setting. The concept for this *Foinn Seisiún* resource emerged from a “slow session” held at the Comhaltas headquarters building in suburban Dublin. The Monkstown headquarters building, *An Culturlann*, had a basement area set up as a pub. Comhaltas staff member Brian Prior hosted a weekly gathering there in which learning musicians played tunes at slower pace than would be acceptable at a regular (public or commercial) session. Prior writes in the introduction to the first book:

For sessions to be successful it is important that participants have the opportunity to join in as much as possible and the sets of standard tunes in this publication should help musicians in this regard. The selections are based on a consensus achieved at our regular Wednesday night sessions held at the Culturlann in Monkstown over a two-year period. When these started, because of the backgrounds of many of the musicians (some from France, Mexico, Spain plus one or two from Clare and Dublin!), it was very difficult to maintain any degree of continuity due to the varying repertoires of the participants, hence the need to adopt this approach. (Prior 2001:1)

As a beginning musician and later as a researcher I attended and observed both the Monkstown slow session and another branch-hosted adult class/session which used the *Foinn Seisiún* books as a framework for increasing repertoire and building group-playing skills. The *Culturlann* session, in my experience, struggled to meet the challenge of any “slow session”: to remain inspiring musically and engaging socially when the group is made up of mostly beginning musicians, many of whom do not know each other well. Musicians in the *Culturlann* session frequently read the notes of tunes from sheet music in front of them, and conversation between tunes was often stilted, contrary to the accepted practice at successful public sessions that generally prize spontaneity, oral transmission, and a social connectedness that depends on

close listening and body language perception.³ Ciarán Carson hints at some of the ways that performance and communication in a session depend on knowledge of the nuance and history of a particular musical community when he writes of a particularly opaque interaction determining the next tunes to be played by the group:

A pub session: someone has just played a bar of a tune:

A: What do you call that?

B: I don't know.

C: Ah...

D: No, I don't know either.

B: I'll tell you what, we'll play that one anyway...

C: And then we'll play the other one after it, you know, the one we used to play before it.

ALL: Right!

They launch into "The Tune," and then, "The One After It". Or maybe it's the other way around. (Carson 1998:12–13)

Or, likewise, nonverbal interaction:

Such is the bent of Irish traditional music that tunes repeat: they are played at least twice, or maybe three, four or more times; then the players generally change to another tune.

Getting 'the change' is a skill; it has to be watched for, and listened for, even if the number of repeats has been determined in advance (some players can't count). If the repeats have not been predetermined, the players will use body language to communicate the change—eyes, shoulders, elbows, knees, feet and hands may be deployed. Hence, the manic widening of a flute-player's eyes at the end of the first tune the third time round, or

³ For more on meaning, practice, and communication within the Irish session, see: Foy 2008; O'Shea 2006; Morton 2005; Smith 2005; Vallely 2011.

the shaking of her head which means you play the first tune again. If not agreed in advance, it will be assumed that the second tune will be that which is normally associated with the first... But sometimes there might be two or three possibilities for the second tune in the set, or you are playing with unfamiliar musicians who have a different notion of the set... On such occasions silent questions will be asked by the participants: an eyebrow raised, a finger pointing to the heart, a deferring nod in someone else's direction. (Carson 1998:29)

The "success" of a session can often depend on this communal understanding of both the musical and social rules of that particular space, time, and collectivity of individuals, as Sean Williams writes in her instructions on "Attending a Session":

It is relatively easy to tell who is an insider and who is an outsider. The insiders are often the ones playing for enjoyment rather than in competition with others. They might start tunes more slowly then warm up in speed, or they might offer more variation in the tune forms they choose. They don't jump in instantly to start 'their' tunes when a set has finished. These musicians are highly unlikely to present you with a list of acceptable tunes at the door! Instead they let the evening unfold according to the desires of the group; if the session devolves into talk about politics or sports, so be it... Do not be surprised if you do not get asked to play at all; some sessions have great music but suffer from rigid hierarchies, strict codes of behavior, and clashing personalities. (Williams 2009:18)

While sessions can range from spontaneous public musical gatherings to regularly scheduled formal, paid performances with amplification, the best sessions, as Carson's anecdotes suggest, often function as mini-musical communities in their own right, with their own musical histories

and languages. In the course of an evening the musical and social exchange of a session can offer participants the opportunity to perform themselves into a collectivity with shared musical and social values.

As ethnomusicologist Chris Smith notes in an essay on the pedagogical challenges of the introductory “session workshop,” the challenges for beginning musicians (and their teachers) attempting to gain access to a session environment lie in the inextricable link between the sound of the music and its social meaning:

As has been the case throughout the history of trad music, in a pub session the playing itself is still only one part of a complex social and communal context.

Anthropologists describe the process by which learned skills teach social behaviours as enculturation. As with many other such behaviours, learning trad music requires that players learn not only how to play, but when and, most importantly, why to play. The music becomes a tool for teaching behaviour as well as musicianship, in other words, a tool for enculturation. But, only if it is taught in the traditional, person-to-person, one-tune-at-a-time; enculturation cannot be transmitted in prose, audio or video. (Smith 2005:74)

This enculturation process can extend beyond how/when/why to play to other social behaviors associated with musical communities local and national.

Smith’s perspective is particularly aimed at North American newcomers to traditional music, but the reality is that the traditional musical community remains a subculture in many areas of Ireland as well, where it can be equally difficult to gain access. Through production of the *Foinn Seisiún* books, Comhaltas obviously does not reject the usefulness of written texts as a

tool for new learners, but the extent to which the books are “leaned on”—and therefore the socio-musical value of the experience—varies from class to class and setting to setting.

The adult learner’s class (tuition required) that I attended from 2007-2009 was hosted by the former Clontarf Comhaltas branch and was divided into a formal class and an informal slow session. While the class drew almost exclusively from the repertoire in the *Foinn Seisiún* books, the two young teachers taught the tunes orally, allowing students to record their versions of the tunes and then teaching phrase-by-phrase. Teacher Aoife Mullen, who taught the first half of the class, would frequently consult the book and comment that something just “isn’t played that way” and give us an alternate version. The sets of tunes were also sometimes questioned by Aisling Lonergan, the accordion player who led the more informal second hour of the class, in which the group played relatively slowly through old sets of tunes learned earlier in the year. Lonergan occasionally commented on whether the sets featured in the *Foinn Seisiún* books were ones she had encountered previously, or whether they seemed like awkward or forced arrangements to her.

The class was made up of students primarily middle-aged or older, with a few other players who seemed to be younger adults like myself. Conversations with fellow students showed that most of them came to traditional music later in life; some started from scratch, others played when they were kids or played classical music before picking up, for example, the fiddle or wooden flute. The *Foinn Seisiún* books and related classes and “slow sessions” are meant to provide an entrée into traditional music for parents of Comhaltas students or interested adults. Unlike many of the educational programs for young students or more generalized short-term summer “music schools,” however, the slow sessions and adult classes do not often provide external motivators (e.g., public performances or competitions) for musicians to improve their

playing or enter the wider traditional music community. They can create very inward-focused or insulated communities unless the instructors or leaders suggest otherwise, or students have their own individual motivation to transfer the skills of the session class or workshop to a different session community.

Scoil Éigse

Discussions of the transmission of Irish traditional music, both within and outside of Comhaltas, must include the music festival as a crucial site for organized teaching and transmission, most frequently in the form of week- (or weekend-) long classes and workshops. The relationships, skills, tunes, and stories created and learned in the short-term festival or workshop can reinforce existing collectivities while also making new connections between participants through performance and socializing. Students often have the option to take classes with teachers who share similar performance styles and geographical orientations, or to range further afield and expose themselves to new musical styles, backgrounds, and modes of transmission.

Comhaltas' *Scoil Éigse* (loosely translated: "music school"), traditionally held during the week prior to the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*, serves as a selective microcosm of the organizations' teachers throughout the country.⁴ School coordinator Siobhan Ní Chonaráin articulated her goals for the gathering at the 2003 *Crossroads* conference centering on education in Irish traditional music:

⁴ Comhaltas' *Scoil Éigse* descends directly from Ireland's most popular summer music school, The Willy Clancy Summer School, which Comhaltas had a direct hand in founding (see Chapter 1).

Scoil Éigse cannot claim—and doesn’t—to compare with the monumental gathering of master musicians, and the source of live musical discourse that takes place at the annual Willy Clancy school in Miltown Malbay every year. But like other CCÉ educational events, it hopefully further enables young musicians to become part of the broader community of traditional musicians. (The Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann Experience 2003)

Like many of the other similar short term “music schools” in Ireland and abroad, the *Scoil Éigse* features workshop-style classes separated by instrument and performance level.⁵ Depending on the teacher’s approach, the class learns a select number of tunes and accompanying instrumental techniques over the course of the week. Teachers come from a variety of backgrounds: most teach for Comhaltas branches, but many also have other careers ranging from health services officer to organic farmer to school teacher. Students are primarily younger competitors in the following weekends’ fleadh, although most classes include a few other students as well (siblings, tourists, adult learners, etc.). In fact, one of my first exposures to Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann was as a whistle student in an advanced whistle class at the 2006 *Scoil Éigse* in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal.

During my own experience as a *Scoil Éigse* student and continued attendance of *Scoil Éigse* as a researcher during the 2009 *Fleadh* in Tullamore, I experienced a variety of approaches to group teaching from Comhaltas teachers. Two main areas of interest emerged through reviewing the techniques used by the teachers at *Scoil Éigse*: the use of written notes and recording, and the communication of aspects of instrumental style for the different instruments being taught.

⁵ Other events over the course of the week include concerts by the school’s teachers, sessions for students, and lectures and demonstrations on repertoire, history, and technique.

Scoil Éigse teachers face different challenges with different skill-level groups, but even within groups, students have varying abilities when it comes to oral learning of tunes. Piano accordion teacher Dean Warner took a typical approach in his class, in which he broke the jig “Kimmell’s” into sections, teaching two measures (half a phrase) at a time. Each new two-measure section was played first by Warner (often in the context of the phrases surrounding it and then alone), followed by multiple group repetitions at slow speed, and finally by each student solo. Subsequent phrases were then added cumulatively onto those already learned. Warner would work with individual students for slightly longer as needed, reinforcing everything from the “skeleton” notes of the tune to fingering and phrasing tips.

In a slightly more advanced concertina class, Mairéad Curtin took a similar approach, teaching an unnamed jig from her native Limerick. She gave her students phrases measure-by-measure, alternating between her own demonstrations, group repetitions, and solo playing by the students. The remainder of the class was spent giving her students alternate fingerings, phrasing tips, and options for ornamentation, with the caveat that “I’m after adding in lots of ornamentation but I’m not saying you have to use it all at the same time.” In fact, Curtin even challenged her students to come up with their own options for inserting ornaments into various phrases.

Button accordion teacher Sharon Connell took the simplest approach to this oral teaching technique with her class of beginner accordion students (mostly under 12 years old). This class clearly demonstrated the early stages of oral learning of a tune, as they repeated the same few phrases both with Connell and alone for most of the class. New phrases were slowly added on to

earlier ones, with Connell clearly describing the structure of the tune and demonstrating similarities and differences between phrases.⁶

With her beginning-level students, Connell was also the only teacher I observed who did not make use of any written notations, cues, or aids during her class. Given Comhaltas' emphasis on musical literacy via the SCT exams and other sources, I was curious to see how the various *Scoil Éigse* teachers approached this issue in a workshop format. By far the most frequently used technique was what is usually referred to as "ABC" notation in the Irish traditional music community. In Mairéad Curtain's version of this notation, for example, each note of the tune was indicated by its corresponding letter name, grouped into threes to indicate the meter of the jig being learned. "Measures" were demarcated by vertical lines, rests by dashes, and notes in the concertina's higher octave were indicated via an apostrophe-like mark after the note in question. Basic stylistic techniques and ornaments could be indicated: for example, a slur/tie-like line demarcating a triplet or occasional writing out of "roll," "cut," or similar ornaments. For example, a triplet into high E to high A:

B C# D | E' A' A'

Curtain wrote her tunes out on the classroom's blackboard, but the notation by no means covered the multitude of variations and ornamentation options she offered her students during the class.

Each teacher also had a slightly different approach to how and when notation and recording were used in their class. Some teachers allowed the students to record the complete tune (as played by the teacher) before learning it phrase-by-phrase, others waited to record the full tune at the end of the class. Some teachers wrote out the tune on the board or handed out

⁶ Upon learning that the third phrase of the tune was nearly the same as the first but that the fourth was even harder one student asked, "can't we just make the fourth the same as the second?!"

printed notations before teaching the tune orally, others wrote the tunes out after phrase-by-phrase oral teaching. In general, the methods of the *Scoil Éigse* teachers closely paralleled those of teachers I observed at other short-term workshops or summer schools throughout Ireland and the United States, from the renowned Willie Clancy Summer School to the Catskills Irish Arts Week in upstate New York.

Teaching and Community at the Branch Level

While the teaching methods of the *Scoil Éigse* teachers can be extrapolated to their branch teaching to some extent, there are motivations towards community-building and competition preparation for year-round teachers that go beyond the workshop setting. As former Comhaltas Music Officer Seamus MacMathuna put it:

I mean, people always talk in December about these great summer schools like, you know? But they're only useful because of what's been happening [all through the year]. I mean, people don't go to summer school expecting to learn to play the fiddle in a week, you know? They go because they've been playing already. (Interview with Seamus MacMathuna, December 8, 2010)

As dynamic and important as the festivals and workshops have become for traditional music transmission, the important work of recruiting new/young musicians and fostering long-term love of the music happens at home, or in the branch setting for many Comhaltas members.

My conversations with and observations of teachers from branches throughout Ireland have highlighted several central issues related to transmission at the branch level and Comhaltas' mission of promotion and preservation. These include generational differences and the organization of classes by level and skill, the use of notation versus oral transmission (i.e., the

musical literacy issue), and the explicit transmission of community and “the local” in the branch teaching setting.

Organization of classes

It is impossible to discuss the organization of instrumental music classes in Comhaltas branches without considering the importance of competitions as a motivating and structural force for Comhaltas educators and the branch communities. While the teacher training and exam systems discussed above ostensibly operate independently of the organization’s annual competitions, it is undeniable that preparation for competitions and competition-based requirements for solo and group performance play a role to varying degrees in how Comhaltas teachers arrange and teach their classes and the organization of branch activities. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, competitions themselves can create and reinforce various musical communities, from the coaching and training process through adjudication of performance styles and support for certain towns or counties during the event itself.

Nearly all of the Comhaltas teachers I spoke with acknowledged that there are teachers and even branches within the organization who place a primary emphasis on competition preparation and training to the exclusion of all else, an approach which engenders much criticism both within and outside of the organization and can be prompted by competition-focused parents as much as teachers. Fiddle player Tara Connaghan, who has taught for Comhaltas branches in the past, was often taken aback when asked to just prepare a student for a competition, rather than simply teaching them how to play: “There’s a lot of teachers who are very focused and geared on getting results... ok, you didn’t win last year, so this year we’re going to change your style. It’s like, this is not a football match. You don’t change tactic [mid-game], you know [laughs]” (Interview with Tara Connaghan, December 20, 2009). But even for those teachers

who have other goals and agendas, competitions are in the “back of the head” throughout the year, even when they are not the “main focus” (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009).

Starting from the early years during the transition to an education-focused organization, Comhaltas classes for instruments have largely been organized into groups. Many branches, and especially the larger ones, offer both single-instrument-based group classes and multi-instrument groups, but rarely one-on-one instrumental lessons in the style of Western classical music instruction. This group-based system syncs nicely with Comhaltas’ community-based ethos and emphasis on the music as a basis for community building, but it also allows teachers to try out repertoire and arrange students into ensembles for the annual year-end slate of group-based competitions. The ensemble competitions at various *fleadhanna* are divided into two major categories: the *céilí* bands and the *grúpaí ceoil*, each requiring different coaching and repertoire.⁷

Likewise, group classes are also usually arranged by age (with a few exceptions) so as to align with the age divisions used in competitions: under-12, 12-15, and 15-18. These age divisions also often (by default or design) serve as the divisions for different skill levels, although teachers must also address the challenges of variations in experience and background within the groups. Variations in skill within a group also affect how students are assigned to competitions, particularly in large branches where there are too many students in a group for all of them to be given the opportunity to compete.

The core of most Comhaltas classes remains the transmission of the tune, which is achieved through aural learning and various other tools as described in the section on *Scoil Éigse* classes. Younger and less-experienced players might begin with well-known melodies such as

⁷ Competition groups will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

“London Bridge” or “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009) or work on as little as one-half of a traditional tune per class (Interview with Attracta Brady, June 22, 2009; Interview with Gary Shannon, November 16, 2009), while older students can progress to learning several tunes per class and/or additional work on interpretation and technique (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009; Interview with Gary Shannon, November 16, 2009). Denis Liddy emphasizes that for the youngest students it is about selecting instruments and building up repertoire, but the most important message is that playing is fun and that it is about a much larger community than just the teacher and the other students in the class (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009).

Older students in multi-instrument groups, depending on the teacher, spend more or less time on preparing for competitions as the “competition season” (generally late spring and summer) approaches. Siobhán Ní Chonaráin, Comhaltas head office staff member, is also very active as a teacher in her hometown branch in Limerick, which she considers in many ways a “model branch.” She emphasizes that her branch focuses on a core repertoire above and beyond competition preparation:

We have a certain program of tunes we use. Each instrument has the tunes that suit the instrument to get the basic command. But then we have a melting pot of tunes that we make sure that after the end of say two years, that there’s a fundamental six selections of tunes that they all have. (Interview with Siobhán Ní Chonaráin, May 28 2009)

Other teachers and branches take a less structured approach, assembling a teaching repertoire based upon a mix of personal preference, local prevalence, and strategy aimed at ensemble competitions. While *céilí* band competitions are very regimented and much more constrained in repertoire choice, often focusing on tunes played by well-known professional

bands or previous winners (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009), selection of tunes and performance styles for the *grupa cheoil* competition is much more flexible and open to individual approaches. Denis Liddy, for example, often uses rare printed sources for unusual versions of tunes and explores localized repertoires both in Clare and elsewhere for his groups (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009). Aisling Lonergan, along with her teaching partner Eamonn Mullen, selects her groups' repertoires from sources varying from recordings by popular traditional bands to rarely heard tunes dug up in Dublin's Irish Traditional Music Archive (Interview with Aisling Lonergan, July 16, 2008).

Grúpaí ceoil competitions also allow teachers to take different approaches to handling the varied skill levels in their mixed classes. Since the "groups" performances feature highly arranged sequences of a number of different tunes and tune types, teachers are able to highlight strong players through solos and allow learning performers to lean on other performers playing the same part. For Denis Liddy, since he works with smaller numbers of students, each particular class dictates repertoire and approach:

Basically for me, if I have twenty for the group, all twenty of them go in, even though one or two of them would be passengers. Sometimes four or five. I try to hide them if I can. Not physically, but hide musically. Then I'd pick the best ten or so for the band. And hopefully have a decent combination of instruments that would work, band-wise. And get them to know the difference... at the under-18 level they'd instinctively know the difference in approach for a [*céilí*] band. As opposed to the subtle approach for the group, band's about power. (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009)

In Aisling Lonergan's larger Dublin branch, however, all students in a class might learn the tunes and arrangements, but competition rules dictate that the groups be winnowed down for the actual

event: “For the band competition last week, we only picked people on the day. Just because they had all bothered to turn up at the practices, so we didn’t want to tell them they weren’t [in the competition]—‘cause obviously some people would get quite upset” (Interview with Aisling Lonergan, July 16, 2008).

Teachers also involve their students in the preparation of the arrangements of tunes to various extents, and invent different techniques for practicing the tunes, all with the end goals of more sensitive listening and increased inter-group communication. Flutist Majella Bartley emphasizes listening skills particularly while teaching *céilí* bands, which require precision ensemble skills: “Even if the drummer went wrong we’d have to go wrong with ‘em. And we’d actually make the drummer wrong in places to make sure we were listening to go with them” (Interview with Majella Bartley, November 17, 2009). And Denis Liddy asks his students to listen to tunes and arrangements and discuss their opinions: “I’m inclined to give them as many options as I can. And ask them things like, ‘will we go for a polka or slide or both?’... We kind of let it grow organically” (Interview with Liddy, December 14, 2009). While these techniques are more immediately geared towards competition readiness, they also encourage the type of listening skills and repertoire knowledge that could serve students well outside of formal classes in a wider musical community.

Tools for Transmission

An emphasis on oral transmission of tunes and technique in Comhaltas classes is, in reality, supplemented by strategic use of notation and technology, both by choice and by necessity. Recording devices are now virtually required in nearly all learning contexts for traditional music, and recordings made in classes are viewed as essential memory aides for those

learning by ear. CD and video recordings available commercially and online are also often considered invaluable resources for teachers using oral transmission techniques. Flutist Gary Shannon counts recording devices and a proliferation of recordings as clear improvements to the teaching he himself received as a young musician:

After a few years, then, there was this wonderful invention of the tape recorder and we'd record the tunes, and it made things a lot easier. If you had a good ear, it made it a lot easier anyway... And when I'm teaching flute it would be completely different to what I did myself. In the specific flute classes we'll use a lot of YouTube and video clips and huge emphasis on technique and so on. (Interview with Gary Shannon, November 16, 2009)

Shannon, like many of today's active teachers, was actually taught mainly via written notation when he was a student. Siobhán Ní Chonaráin counts her own early notation-dependant instruction as a big disadvantage for her, especially since her first teachers used an unusual notation system:

We didn't learn by ear. Everything in that class was done by a numbers system. Which meant when the classes ceased, you had no method of acquiring music. And if you bought a book it was in staff notation, so if you couldn't read staff, and you were used to reading 6-5-4-3-2-1, the Armagh piper's⁸ system—so when Sean [her first teacher] left I had no way of learning music. And at no stage did anyone say, this was to be picked up by ear. And the big problem was, you see, there was no records at home. There was no radio. So I wasn't hearing any tunes by ear. So it was a very kind of unusual kind of a situation to be in. (Interview with Siobhán Ní Chonaráin, May 8, 2009)

⁸ Founded in 1966, the Armagh Piper's club is a Northern Ireland-based organization focused on the promotion of the uilleann pipes and various educational programs for traditional music.

But in spite of the preference for oral transmission, some teachers contend that a mixed-instrument and mixed-skill level group class structure can make supplemental notation a necessity. Pearl O'Shaughnessy, who teaches young fiddle students in a Dublin branch, laments only having a half-hour with each group, a portion of which is taken up by practical issues of tuning and instrument preparation:

Sometimes it's just not possible to get anything out of them in that twenty minutes.

Otherwise we'd be doing one tune for about a month...So what I do is, I give a tune and sheet of music. I do the music up myself [combination of staff notation and ABC notation]. Whatever tunes are in my head....There's no time to do it by ear. (Interview with Pearl O'Shaughnessy, November 11, 2009)

Like O'Shaughnessy, Majella Bartley feels time pressure when teaching a new tune to a mixed-instrument group of less-experienced students: "So for them to try to get around to everybody and get everything done...you only had a small amount of time to do it. So the handiest thing was to hand out the notes, play over all the tunes" (Interview with Majella Bartley, November 17, 2009). The compromise, then, for many of today's teachers is measured use of notation as a memory aid, usually distributed for use in practicing at home after the tune is taught "by ear" in class.

The stand-alone traditional music class thus presents a striking challenge for the instructor, who out of necessity must use aids and props such as written notation, while also communicating the larger context of the tune, as described by Ciarán Carson:

It is possible, of course, to 'learn' a tune from the page, from what is there in black and white, but this requires negotiation and imagination. It requires you to know that what is written is a mere mnemonic, not an actual performance...nor the dynamic pulse of what

it can be when it's played and heard and danced. You have to go by your experience of other tunes which seem to have the same shape, and to perceive when this particular tune is different, and the value of that difference. (Carson 1998:11)

Because the definitions of transmission in Irish traditional music discussed at the beginning of this chapter stress the necessity of this communal exposure to the performance of tunes in contexts outside of the classroom, teaching students these listening and perception skills becomes a major part of classroom-based transmission, as well.

Listening for Community

The aural/oral creation of community through music transmission is a more intuitive process for young musicians who have families or existing friendship networks who listen to and value traditional music. But Comhaltas, by design, acts as an entry point into the tradition for new musicians who might not have any experience with traditional music outside of their classes. Even Denis Liddy, who teaches in a region of Clare with a strong musical history and coaches bands and students who frequently fare well in competitions, must start from scratch with a vast majority of his students:

Lauren: Do you find that many of your students are coming in with a background where they're hearing the music at home?

Denis: No. No. No. No, in fact, one in a hundred would have a parent that played.

L: Really? Wow! That few.

D: Yeah, there's no tradition with any of these families. (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009)

Recordings, videos, tune books, guest teachers, and other teaching tools help play a role in filling the gaps for those not raised in or around traditional music communities, but even self-motivated students can be at a disadvantage if they did not grow up with traditional music. Comhaltas' top-down programs such as the SCT exams and *Scoil Éigse* workshops attempt to provide students who are more isolated from other musical communities outside of the branch with some of the social, historical, and musical context of a larger, national traditional music community which they might otherwise be missing. But these resources are not universally available and are only substitutes for some of the more informal interactions that constitute transmission outside of formal classes.

Fiddle teacher Pearl O'Shaughnessy grew up attending the Church Street music club in Dublin and credits it to a large extent with her own continued dedication to traditional music. She speaks about how important community participation is for her students, even when their families clearly place value on the music as a cultural phenomenon:

Well, I think the parents, you see, a lot of them are coming—they're attending all-Irish schools, they're learning everything through the Irish language. And then the music is part of the whole thing. And so, I don't know what they're thinking... It's actually a lifetime of learning. [You have to be] constantly learning by listening and playing and playing with other people. But a lot of them don't understand that. They don't realize that... There's one girl, she's attending now for years. And she still finds it hard to play a tune by ear. And I said to her, do you listen to any music at home? And she says no, my mother and father don't play and don't listen to any music. So she doesn't hear anything. (Pearl O'Shaughnessy, November 11, 2009)

For O'Shaughnessy's students, a familial commitment to a national Irish culture is also often aligned with exposure to the social and musical world of a national traditional music community, but those who lack that background face more challenges in learning to perform themselves into musical communities beyond the classroom.

So while many teachers speak of the general social benefits of participating in musical performance—similar to the benefits of participating in sports or other “extracurriculars”—they also acknowledge that there are aspects of belonging to a musical community which demand ways of listening and learning that are difficult to teach in a classroom setting. This echoes the comment from a master musician quoted in the previous chapter who insisted he could not possibly be a traditional music teacher, since he never “learned” himself—he never received organized instruction. Comhaltas-based transmission must thus function as a hybrid: not a solely oral tradition, not as formal as Western classical music lessons, but somewhere in-between.

Conclusion

Examining musical community in a teaching/branch setting necessitates a return to the idea of Comhaltas as a socio-cultural umbrella or safe space. Many contemporary teachers emphasized that some students/parents just view a Comhaltas class as another after-school activity on a par with sports or even classical music pursuits. But Comhaltas classes and the social activities and performances that surround them within the branch also provide—to varying extents—an entrée into the multi-layered experience of people, sounds, and spaces that help constitute a musical community.

Comhaltas branches and classes can give musicians and others a sense of connection: a sense of place and community that's connected to local or regional performance styles, but not

bounded by it. This is, perhaps, what geographer Doreen Massey refers to as “progressive” or “global” sense of place, “the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world” (1994:8). Massey does not deny the uniqueness of a bounded sense of place, but she asserts that a sense of place can also be defined by conflict, contradiction, and flexible links based on ethnicity, migration, and technology. In the performance and transmission of Irish traditional music students can be exposed to a sense of place that is intensely local: grounded in face-to-face participation. But they are also linked in ever widening circles to the sounds and social expectations of musical communities grounded in regional affiliation, national(ist) cultural ethos, and international movement and migration via tools such as workshops, printed and electronic media, and instructional programs.

For traditional musicians, learning and absorbing this “progressive” sense of musical community also now requires an understanding of the multilayered geography of musical style and transmission in Irish traditional music. This kind of amorphous and flexible relationship between music, people, and place is summed up eloquently by Paddy Glackin who, when asked to describe what being a “Dublin musician” means to him, responded:

Ok, it's very simple. It's to do with your environment. It's to do with the people you've met. It's to do with association. It's all very very personal stuff. It's to do with people you've grown up with. It's to do with their accents. It's to do with the sounds that they make. It's to do with the physical environment. It's all of that which makes a Dublin musician. It's to do with our sense of humor. Which would be quite different to people of the country... And there's a feeling I have that I find very difficult to put a word on. But it's a kind of a comfort... and all the architecture of Dublin and all the sounds of Dublin are compatible, as far as I'm concerned. So it's not just about—I'm not wearing a badge.

I'm not wearing a football jersey. I'm not wearing a color here. It's a very deeply personal thing. That's what being a Dublin musician means to me. (Interview with Paddy Glackin, June 15, 2010)

In the end, Comhaltas' educational programs and branch activities are a long running experiment in initiating this type of experience—creating the sounds, relationships, and feelings of a local musical community. The branches are formal musical communities which adopt various modes of transmission in an attempt to create aural links between and enable access to the people, places, and performances of a much wider network of communities, both musical and otherwise.

CHAPTER 4

Comhaltas in America: Globalization, Diaspora, and Musical Community

Generations of Irish-American immigrants and their descendants have performed and enjoyed music as one of many means of establishing livelihoods, communities, and identities in a new country. The music performed by Irish-Americans has also spread beyond communities of diaspora and ethnicity to include non-Irish/Irish-American musicians and aficionados drawn to the music and dance and the strong communities often centered around them. In Ireland, the waxing and waning in popularity of traditional music through the 20th century revealed changing attitudes about whether and how the music played a role in defining a new and modernizing Irish nation. For the Irish in America, however, these negotiations were complicated even further by the necessity of defining Irish culture in relation to an equally complicated and evolving notion of American identity. Throughout the last century, trans-Atlantic and American cultural organizations have been influential in both the preservation of Irish traditional music and dance and its redefinition in the face of modernity and the changing political orientations of Irish, Irish-American, and American musicians alike. This chapter looks in more depth at how Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann participated in this process of community formation.

In 2007, Comhaltas debuted a slick new website (see Image 8). The old website and promotional materials for the organization highlighted the groups' dedication to "the living tradition" of Irish music, and heavily featured the twin goals of promotion and preservation. In addition to taking advantage of new internet technologies to provide an internet radio station and downloadable music and video files, the new site also prominently featured a new addition to

Comhaltas' mission or motto: on the main page, in the Google tagline, in the page's title, the site highlighted the *global* promotion of traditional Irish culture.



Image 8. Comhaltas' website home page, 2007.

A 2004 promotional brochure and essay in *Treoir* echoed this sentiment, stating that: “A major concern of Comhaltas today is that, despite undeniable progress in restoring the traditional arts to a prominent position in the life of the nation, the goal of reaching everyone and Irish communities abroad has yet to be genuinely realized.”¹ This comment was made in spite of decades of involvement in the United States and Britain, as well as the founding of branches in such far-flung locations as Argentina, Finland, Australia, Japan, and Italy. Indeed, Comhaltas' administrative structure enshrines North America and Britain as “provinces” within the organization on a (theoretically) equal footing with the historical four provinces of Ireland itself

¹ http://comhaltas.ie/music/treoir/detail/the_comhaltas_vision_for_the_traditional_arts/ (accessed 4/16/14)

(Ulster, Leinster, Connacht, and Munster).² The extent to which this message of globalization is reflected in actual influence and reach outside of Ireland is clearly still evolving, including the relationship between Comhaltas and non-Irish musicians abroad.

The emphasis on global development within this traditional music organization is particularly relevant to my research on musical communities. Through their global reach, organizations such as Comhaltas³ can be interpreted as giving a formal and concrete structure to musical diaspora, through both artistic and financial networks and flows. But theorizing an organization such as Comhaltas as “the institutionalization of diaspora” is complicated by the discrete needs of the individual branches, the group’s role in the development of a notion of Irish-American ethnicity, and the expansion of traditional music communities in the United States to include musicians not necessarily connected to the music by Irish lineage or ancestry.

The combination of a nationalist music organization based in the “homeland” and the diverse experiences of Irish traditional musicians in America has created a variety of roles and challenges for Comhaltas branch communities that have grown out of the Irish diaspora. For, as Thomas Turino asserts:

[D]iasporas consist of groups of people in multiple sites...who regardless of geographical distance maintain a common social identification and often concrete links and cultural

² Branches in other parts of the world are not included in the official administrative structure of the organization in this way.

³ The importance of various organizations, clubs, and societies in immigrant communities in North America is well documented, from various singing societies (common to many different European immigrant groups) to the Norwegian-American Hardanger Violinist Association of America (1914-1952) to the Caribbean American Sports and Cultural Youth Movement (CAYSM) and its steelbands (1983-present) to a plethora of opera clubs and societies sustaining Cantonese and Peking opera traditions in America (Zheng 2010:291–92). While increased ease of international travel and electronic communications have enabled strong connections between these types of groups and musicians or groups in the “homeland,” it is rare to find an international organization such as Comhaltas which has a (mostly one-way) relationship of influence or control codified in the group’s structure and management.

exchange around the symbol of ‘home’ ... [A]s socio-cultural *networks* that span multiple nation-state boundaries, diasporas are distinguished from immigrant communities that primarily have a binary relation to the homeland. (Turino 2004:6)

Scholars have written extensively about the ways that Irish-American musical communities have been defined by nearly constant flows back and forth across the Atlantic via both travel and technology (e.g., Moloney 1982; Moloney 1992; Spencer 2010). The trans-Atlantic relationships within Comhaltas, however, have trended towards a more one-way flow of influence and control from Ireland to the United States. Different musical communities in America have therefore adapted this particular formal diasporic relationship to suit their varied needs by reshaping the structure and function of their local Comhaltas branches and the relationships between branches across the country.

Likewise, many Irish music communities in the United States are rooted in diasporic and emigrant identifications, but the communities have, in many cases, welcomed non-Irish or Irish-American members who have made the effort to “perform themselves into” the musical collectivities via immersion in their musical and social identifying features. Indeed, the relative strength of these traditional music communities has even inspired the attempted recreation of their sounds, spaces, and relationships by musicians living in areas with little-to-no Irish-American history or ancestry. Each of these variations on musical community in the diaspora and beyond emphasizes that, beyond the seemingly formal and fixed relationship between “home” and “away” embedded in the Comhaltas organizational structure, there lie flexible and evolving musical communities of many different shapes and sizes.

Coming to America: Comhaltas and Traditional Music in the U.S.

Comhaltas came to the United States in the early 1970s through outreach concert tours and the establishment of local branches in regions with large Irish-American populations. The first Comhaltas forays into Irish-American communities were greeted with a mixture of excitement and resentment, in spite of the fact that many American musicians were already aware of the organization's activities in Ireland. Some traditional musicians were already organized through local Musicians' Associations, county societies, and other groups and clubs. In addition, competitions in music, dance, and other activities had already been organized by various groups for decades.⁴ In Chicago, for example, an official association of musicians had been formed by Francis O'Neill as early as the turn of the 20th century, although it dissolved in less than a decade due to internal personality conflicts (Nicholsen 2007:177–78).

In addition to these more locally oriented groups, traditional musicians from New York, Boston, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Kansas City, Detroit, Houston, and Chicago banded together as early as 1956 to form the Irish Musicians' Association of America (IMA).⁵ Using Comhaltas as

⁴ See Moloney 1992; Miller 1996; Nicholsen 2007 for more on *feiseanna* (cultural festivals/competitions, often sponsored by the Gaelic League), parades, immigrant clubs, and other pre-mid-20th century performance opportunities.

⁵ Historian Michael Nicholsen describes the genesis of the IMA: "By the mid-twentieth century, the audience for traditional music consisted largely of other musicians. As such, Chicago's traditional music community adapted to the failure of their predecessors in futile efforts to incorporate traditional music into the construction of Irish-American identity. Instead they created a national and international support network for musicians, accepting the indifference of other Irish Americans to their tradition. The organization that formed a musicians-only support network was the Irish Musicians Association of America, and its germination lay in active efforts by Chicago Flutist Frank Thornton. Inspired by the formation of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in Ireland... Thornton believed that an Irish music association was vital to the survival of Irish music in Ireland and America" (Nicholsen 2007:241). Nicholsen's analysis differentiates between the inward-looking IMA and the outreach-motivated goals of Comhaltas. In addition, he emphasizes that the relationship between Comhaltas and the IMA and its perceived influence on the American organization was instrumental in the disagreements that ended in the dissolution of the IMA.

a model, the affiliated groups held annual conventions and eventually the number of branches reached twenty-two. While this nationwide association also eventually succumbed to factionalism and leadership disputes, some related to affiliating with Comhaltas, the coalition and the individual organizations founded within it played an important role in stimulating the revival of interest in Irish traditional music in the United States starting in the 1960s, particularly in Irish-American communities.

By the time Comhaltas made official overtures towards forming North American branches, many American musicians were thus already well aware of Comhaltas' activities in Ireland and had even modeled their own groups on the organization. But cementing an official tie was not a foregone conclusion. Some of the leaders of these already established, locally oriented groups were wary of a large Irish organization taking over their administration and, particularly, taking over their finances. As Mick Moloney has written, groups were concerned about maintaining regional autonomy upon affiliation (Moloney 1992:483–86). There was also concern about how Comhaltas would use membership fees and other funds raised in the United States, as the organization was in the midst of buying and renovating its new headquarters building just outside of Dublin at the time (Moloney 1992:484–5).⁶

These negative feelings were counterbalanced by excitement over the potential seen in an institutionalized musical connection between the U.S. and Ireland through Comhaltas. While the 1960s featured a surge in popular interest in Irish folk revival performers such as the Clancy

⁶ There was no small amount of questioning whether the new U.S. branches would just be serving as fundraising tools for the Irish headquarters expansion. This concern was justified by a long history of Irish-American financial support for various political and cultural endeavors in the “homeland,” not to mention the candor about motives coming from the head office itself. For example, a *Treoir* article in reference to the first U.S. tour: “The tour is being organised to raise funds for the proposed Cultural Institute in Ireland which will incorporate the Comhaltas Library, Recording Studio, Head-Offices, facilities for training courses, academic research and recreational facilities” (“Concert Tour for America” 1972:1).

Brothers, this trend did not have a strong impact on participation in traditional music (Moloney 1999:125–26). In fact, traditional music in America continued to struggle with some of the same negative associations which had originally prompted the founding of Comhaltas in Ireland. These included the widespread perception of traditional music as backward, and the replacement of traditional music with hybrid and American popular musics as a cultural symbol for the vast majority of Irish-Americans.⁷

Moving into the 1970s, however, as Americans of various ancestries were increasingly identifying with what they viewed as “authentic” ethnic backgrounds, it became obvious that organizations could play an important role in promoting traditional music as a prominent symbol of Irish ethnicity in America, both within and outside of the community. The music would become a cultural symbol that played a role in the Irish-American community beyond the commercial Irish pub or St. Patrick’s Day parades. Emigrant Irish musicians began to feature more prominently in the American public sphere, including the 1976 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, field and studio recordings released commercially and funded by the National Endowment of the Humanities, and NEA National Heritage Fellowships (Moloney 1999; Miller 1996; Collins 2010). This public recognition not only affirmed the importance of traditional music amongst the musicians themselves, but provided unprecedented visibility for traditional Irish instrumental music and song amongst the general population.

In this cultural context, in 1972 The Mulligan Club—a Long Island-based Irish music club founded in 1959—became the Mulligan-Quinn branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and,

⁷ These “hybrid” musics included the popular Irish show/dance bands of the 1940s-50s described in Gedutis 2004 and Miller 1996. These bands specialized in blending Irish traditional dance music tunes (occasional waltzes, polkas, and figure or *céili* dances) with other more generally popular dance music of the era. Bands often featured musicians—frequently recent immigrants—who had a strong background in traditional music.

up in the then-Irish-dominated areas of the Bronx, the Michael Coleman Comhaltas branch was founded. These groups were soon followed by branches in other New York City boroughs, St. Louis (1973), Boston (1975),⁸ San Francisco (early 1970s), and beyond. Many American branches, when not named after their geographic location, were christened with the names of esteemed Irish musicians who immigrated to the United States. These tributes were frequently done in memoriam, but not always: when the founding of the Michael Rafferty Branch was suggested in 1993, the very-much-alive New Jersey flute player Mike Rafferty laughed and asked “don’t you have to be dead for that?”⁹ (Interview with Michael and Terry Rafferty, March 20, 2007).

Two decades later, in 1992, when the administrative relationship between Comhaltas in the U.S. and in Ireland was cemented by the official creation of a North American “province,” there were 32 branches (Short 1992:19) and about 1900 total members. As of 2014, the North American province supports 44 Branches with a total of 3,171 members (2467 Senior and 704 Junior members).¹⁰ The fact that Comhaltas membership in the U.S. and Canada more than doubled in a decade is the result of several converging factors, including generational change

⁸ A recent IrishAmerica.com article describes the founding of the Boston branch: “In Boston, fiddler Larry Reynolds, who emigrated from Ballinasloe, Galway in the 1950s, remembers Comhaltas as a welcome addition to Boston’s flagging Irish scene. ‘The Dudley Street dance hall scene had closed, followed by the State Ballroom on Mass Ave, and after that, the music went into pubs and small halls around the city, in Dorchester, Somerville...it was all spread out,’ he says. In 1975 Reynolds, along with Pat and Mary Barry, Billy Caples and John Curran, formed the Boston branch, starting at the VFW Hall in Allston, then moving to the Canadian American Club in Watertown, where it meets today. The group’s weekly sessions and set dancing classes quickly attracted Irish and Americans, college students, and Cape Breton and American folk musicians. Today the Boston branch has 500 members, making it one of the largest chapters in the world.” (<http://irishamerica.com/2011/10/comhaltas-making-music-for-sixty-years/>, accessed 5/11/14)

⁹ Rafferty passed away in 2011.

¹⁰ These numbers are courtesy of North American Public Relations Officer Paul Keating.

within Irish-American communities and the aforementioned recent growth in interest in Irish traditional music and dance among the general North American population.

American Comhaltas officials have been relatively candid in interviews in discussing ways that the organization has not always been very effective at absorbing these demographic ebbs and flows. The children of the groups of immigrants who established Comhaltas branches in the 1970s and early 1980s, the first generation of Irish-Americans to compete and win in the All-Ireland competition, had in many cases moved on from the music or away from Irish-American communities by the 1990s, leading to a lull in Comhaltas participation. More recently, however, the next generation (the grand-children of those mid-20th century immigrants) have started playing music and these families are increasing Comhaltas' membership ranks once again, either as active members or just via memberships-of-convenience needed in order to participate in Comhaltas competitions.

The bureaucratic, preservationist side of Comhaltas may have also, in some respects, kept it from acknowledging or even taking advantage of the role that technological and demographic changes have played in recent expanding interest in Irish traditional music outside of Ireland. Set dancer and long-time Comhaltas administrator Maureen Donachie candidly told me that she had been concerned about low membership numbers, particularly among younger musicians, in her old branch. She felt that Comhaltas needed to start thinking of dancers as "consumers" and provide quality services (dance bands, food, etc.) accordingly. Branch and region leaders, however, had been unreceptive to her suggestions about various new discounts and programs to bring in new members. "A while ago," she told me, "if you weren't Irish or were female or under 60 you had virtually no voice in the organization," but that she felt that this has begun to change more recently (Interview with Maureen Donachie, April 10, 2005).

Donachie argued that in light of the older Irish-American immigrants who had been running Comhaltas, the organization was actually in some ways a victim of its own earlier success; growth of interest in traditional music was creating many more alternate venues for performance and participation, putting Comhaltas in danger of becoming redundant. This point of view was widespread, according to prominent fiddle player Brian Conway, who said that one of the most common criticisms he hears of Comhaltas is that it's become "a bureaucracy that...tries to justify the existence of the bureaucracy more than anything else" (Interview with Brian Conway, October 15, 2006). North American Publicity Officer Paul Keating also spoke of how the "rising tide" of interest in traditional music had in some ways passed Comhaltas by, placing the organization in a defensive position. Keating spoke of a need for Comhaltas to modernize its outlook—taking more advantage of technology for promotion and recruiting, and perhaps even starting to look for alternate sources of funding from state arts agencies and other grants. "In order to get your message across in a wider way," Keating said, "you can't just put it in the parish newsletter." This was a "lesson [the organization] should have learned a long time ago." The challenge, in the mind of Keating and some of the other administrators I've spoken with, is to "get new members who may not have heard about Comhaltas before and maybe skew the demographic a little younger," since the membership has tended towards the older immigrants from the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, who have a nostalgic view of the music (Interview with Paul Keating, March 23, 2005).

While Comhaltas has had its challenges in North America, there are several Province-specific activities which distinguish the Comhaltas community in the United States from the organization in Ireland. Most notable of these is the annual convention, which draws musicians and administrators to what is ostensibly a business meeting for Comhaltas leaders, but can also

serve as a gathering and festival featuring workshops, *céili* and set dances, sessions, and other formal and informal performances. Another notable effort in the North American Province involves the Hall of Fame: an honor bestowed upon musicians (and occasionally community members) living and deceased who are particularly important to local Irish music communities. The Mid-Atlantic region of Comhaltas began the Hall of Fame tradition in 1990, with other regions (Northeast, Midwest, Canada) following suit. Mid-Atlantic Hall of Fame inductees are generally known for their performance skills and/or service to the community via teaching, mentorship, and advocacy (not necessarily their participation in Comhaltas-related activities). The annual induction ceremony, which usually features two or three new inductees, is well attended by regional musicians and their families, who socialize, dine, dance, and play music often late into the night.

The other program specific to the North American “province” of Comhaltas is the North American Tour,¹¹ which was, as previously mentioned, Comhaltas’ first foray into North America. As described by *Treoir* magazine:

The idea of a Comhaltas Tour was first mooted by the late revered accordionist Paddy O’Brien. In 1968, Paddy was leading a Tour of the United States, which was being organized by that Chicago-based stalwart Frank Thornton, and he invited the newly elected President of Comhaltas, Labhras O Murchú, to accompany the Tour with a view to promoting Comhaltas and researching the possibility of a Comhaltas Tour.¹²

The official North American tours then began in 1972. Referred to by Comhaltas archivist Ted McGraw (Interview with Ted McGraw, September 27, 2007) as “the only investment that [Comhaltas in] Ireland has in North America,” the tour traditionally consists of a group of

¹¹ There are also now annual Comhaltas-produced tours through Ireland and Britain.

¹² http://comhaltas.ie/music/treoir/detail/touring_north_america_for_25_years/ (accessed 3/3/14)

musicians and dancers from Ireland performing a cabaret-style revue of different instrumental solo and group performances, stories and jokes, and dance numbers. The performers are frequently selected from amongst Comhaltas competition-winners, teachers, and other active performance groups (e.g., *Seisiún*), and they are paid an honorarium to travel to the small towns and community-based venues (high school auditoriums, local Irish-American centers) that typically constitute the tour.

Dublin uilleann piper Gay McKeon was a member of one of the first American tours in 1974. When asked about the experience he stressed mostly the intangible benefits and personal connections made:

Lauren: Where did you go?

Gay: We did something like 21 cities in 23 days.

L: Oh my goodness!

G: I landed in New York. It was great because I'd never been to the United States and we had a couple of days off to stay with my uncle who had a pub in New York. And then we hit the road. I think Mineola was the first place we had a concert, then St. Louis, St. Paul. Then we went to Toronto. Tom Glackin was the tour manager. People like... Brendan McGlinchey, Daniel Crehan, lots of really good musicians and singers. A great dancer from Kerry... It was great because you got the time out of school to go on tour for a month, and we got to see a lot of America. A lot of airports. And made lots of good friends.

L: Did you meet a lot of American fans and musicians?

G: Yeah, the first night, I remember we met Louis Quinn.¹³ He was a very good friend of Carl Mulligan and there was a strong Leitrim connection—my father had grown up near neighbors to the Mulligans.... So I met loads of musicians around in America. (Interview with Gay McKeon, June 29, 2010)

From an American perspective, fiddle player and teacher Seán Cleland was even more strongly affected by the musical connections made via the early North American Comhaltas tours, as he explains in an online biography:

He started classical violin lessons at age 7, and at age 9 his parents took him to one of the first North American concerts of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann [in 1973]. There were three great, fiery fiddle players playing that night: Paddy Glackin, Paddy Ryan and Antoin MacGabhann. "I was absolutely bowled over by their music that night," says Cleland, "And I decided that that was how I was going to play the fiddle!"¹⁴

But the tours of the mid-1970s were occurring at a very specific historical moment for Irish traditional musicians in America, in which the music was just beginning to gain widespread attention and respect. Ease of trans-Atlantic transportation and the rapid growth in media-driven markets for Irish music have vastly changed the social and commercial landscape for Irish musicians performing abroad today. Because Irish musicians in the early 21st century regularly tour the United States, performing in various commercial venues, Irish/Celtic music festivals, and house concerts, the Comhaltas tours of today struggle to remain relevant in this new reality. Like many of Comhaltas' other activities in the United States, they form just a part of the complex and evolving Irish traditional music and Irish-American communities.

¹³ A Long Island-based fiddler and one of the early leaders of Comhaltas in the United States.

¹⁴ Seán Cleland bio, <http://irishmusicschool.org/teachers/> (accessed 10/16/14)

The Comhaltas Branch in the United States: Different Places, Different Communities

Even more so than in Ireland, the vast geography of the United States and its different musical communities has led to very different roles for Comhaltas branches in different regions of the country. As Ani Yazedjian emphasizes regarding the Armenian diaspora: “Diasporic communities are not static, monolithic structures...The emerging construction of cultural identity and resulting practices reflects the nuances of the specific community within which Armenians are located and the specific time periods in which events occur” (2004:50). In various locations, Comhaltas branches therefore fulfill a variety of needs for Irish-American and traditional music communities of vastly different sizes and histories, yet linked through common sounds and experiences, illustrating the complexity of diasporic musical experience as it intersects with a nationalist organization ostensibly dedicated to a singular vision of Irish culture.

Comhaltas branches abroad can reinforce already strong histories of musical transmission and they can introduce traditional modes of transmission to areas where they were previously difficult to access. They can also foster a dependence on competition to the exclusion of other modes of performance, or they can utilize competition as a motivational tool in addition to other forms of musical transmission. Branches can provide an entry-point into independently thriving session and performance scenes, and they can constitute some of the only opportunities for dance and music participation in a given region. Across many different regions, Comhaltas branches can sustain interest in traditional music through generational change in Irish-American communities, only to then fade into the background as other commercial and communal venues move to the fore. Comhaltas branches can reintroduce Irish and Irish-American cultural heritage to those who have Irish immigrants in their ancestries and they can enable those who have

discovered the music through mass media exposure to gain further access to the nuances of the musical community.

In this chapter I survey the activities of various American branches, with a focus on the New York City region where I carried out the majority of my ethnographic research on Comhaltas in the United States. The branches discussed are by no means an exhaustive survey, but rather a selective representation of the diverse manifestations of Comhaltas throughout the country.

Greater New York City Region

The branches in and around New York City (including Westchester county, Long Island, northern New Jersey, and the five boroughs) are actually relatively unique in that they do not focus on teaching and education as their main mission. Instead, they tend to sponsor dances and dance bands, with occasional other concerts, sessions, and workshops. Teachers remain semi-independent from Comhaltas branches, teaching alone or in their own “schools,” with families and young musicians joining branches mainly in order to participate in competitions.

While there are many smaller competitions, mostly geared towards step dancers, occurring throughout the year in the New York area, the major music-oriented competition of the year is the annual Comhaltas *fleadh*: a regional competition run by the Mid-Atlantic region¹⁵ each spring in which the first and second place winners in all categories are allowed to travel to Ireland to compete against musicians from throughout Ireland and the U.K. for the “All-Ireland” title. Competing in the All-Ireland *Fleadh* has played a role in the musical development of

¹⁵ The Midwestern region hosts North America’s other *fleadh*. Winners of both competitions are eligible to compete in the All-Ireland that summer.

American trad musicians for decades, with both immigrants and American-born musicians remaining a presence in the ranks of *fleadh*-winners since the 1970s.¹⁶

Many of today's master musicians and teachers in the United States were *fleadh* winners in their youths, but, just as in Ireland, there are many conflicting feelings regarding the role of competition as a teaching tool and an experience for young musicians. Opinions on the role of competition in teaching and transmission in the United States are generally divided between two camps. Some teachers and students admit that competition is a goal to work towards or a motivating factor, and that having some sort of "standard" to aim for might increase overall performance level in other contexts. Other musicians argue that a perceived national "Comhaltas standard" for competitions is in danger of "standardizing away" regional and individual playing styles, that this so-called standard is too ambiguous or subjective, and/or that competition itself is artificial or antithetical to the communal, evolving nature of traditional music communities and their transmission.¹⁷

My interviews, conversations, and observations confirm these varying perspectives, sometimes even coming from the same informant. The *fleadh* is technically open to anyone who wants to compete, including non-Comhaltas members. In reality, however, there are a number of teachers throughout the New York City area who teach large numbers of students and who are particularly well-known for coaching students who go on to compete and occasionally win in the *fleadh*. Dancer and accordion-player Annemarie Acosta, who has built up an impressively large

¹⁶ In general, competitors from the United States have had more success at the All-Ireland *fleadh* in solo and duet/trio competitions than in *céili* band and group competitions. When discussing his own senior *céili* band's failed attempts to medal in the All-Ireland competition, Mike Rafferty mused that, "Well the problem was too, that everyone wanted to be in the band, but no one wanted to practice" (Interview with Michael and Terry Rafferty, March 20, 2007).

¹⁷ Experiences and opinions relating to traditional music competitions in Ireland will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

roster of students in music and step dancing, says that most of her students compete, and she doesn't discourage it, but that her number one goal is to "keep them normal." She wants to give her students the skills to compete at whatever level they want to compete, but that she never wants them to feel like they let down their parents or their teacher if they don't win (Interview with Annemarie Acosta, February 6, 2006). Acosta, along with fiddle teacher Brian Conway and others, say that they teach whatever style of playing they want; they don't gear their teaching style towards competition success.

Rose Conway Flanagan is another prolific teacher who teaches fiddle, but who, along with Acosta and other active teachers, also coaches many of her students in ensemble performance geared towards the *fleadh*. Both Flanagan and Acosta agree that while both students and their parents do want to compete in the solo categories, the students get the most excited about playing in ensembles. Annemarie Acosta says that she "just wants them to have fun. The more stuff they do as a group, the more fun they have" (Interview with Annemarie Acosta, February 6, 2006). Similarly, Rose Flanagan says that while negotiating the details and politics of the groups with her fellow teachers is a lot of work for her, she knows that her students are just "dying to be in the *céilí* bands," asking months in advance who is going to be in their groups and what kind of group they'll get to be in (Interview with Rose Conway Flanagan, March 10, 2006).

Participating in a competition *céilí* band presents unique challenges for American musicians. Teacher Patty Furlong recognizes that Irish *céilí* bands might have an advantage since the children can start playing traditional music as young as kindergarten, learning instruments and developing talent, while students in the U.S. often start later in life, aren't exposed to the music as frequently, and even have to drive an hour or more just to get to a teacher. There's also

the issue of cost, with Furlong emphasizing to the parents of her students that they must fully commit to lessons and competitions, since a band traveling to Ireland for the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* can cost tens of thousands of dollars for travel, food, and housing (Interview with Patty Furlong, September 18, 2007). Teachers in the New York area even host fundraisers for these expenses, presenting evenings of performances by students and teachers to help fund travel for their bands (see Image 9).



Image 9. Flyer for *Fleadh* fundraiser.

For these young musicians, the competition provides not only motivation to become better players, but also an opportunity to socialize in the context of the music, developing friendships that can be shared primarily through rehearsal and performance. And, of course, there is the additional motivation of the social and musical experience of traveling to Ireland for the local competitions' winners. The competition itself serves as a direct musical connection

between Ireland and the U.S., and while the teachers all emphasize process over results, it can't be denied that there is an element of cross-Atlantic competition going on—the feeling that the Americans have something to prove. Accordion teacher Patty Furlong travelled to Ireland as a young musician to compete in the *fleadh* and found it a fairly stressful endeavor: “Mom made me practice morning, noon, and night ... I practiced for my first competition going over there three hours a day” (Interview with Patty Furlong, September 18, 2007). American musicians also often note that their non-Irish background is a prominent marker of their experience at the All-Ireland *Fleadh*. Competition announcers often introduce U.S. competitors as “all the way from America,” and, as Furlong notes, there's a sense that she and her students are still “the Yanks playing their music” (Interview with Patty Furlong, September 18, 2007).

Outside of performance in competitions, however, most of the participation in regular New York area Comhaltas branch activities comes from adult dancers and non-musicians. New York's thriving and diverse public and commercial venues for instrumental music sessions and concerts provide numerous opportunities for performance outside of the branch community, while teachers often make use of their homes and other communal spaces for teaching, starting their own nonprofit schools to handle practical issues such as insurance and promotion which might otherwise be covered through Comhaltas branches. In addition, diasporic organizations such as county or social clubs—which served as progenitors of many Comhaltas branches—also have a long history of sponsoring dances as a means of maintaining cultural connections to home communities, as discovered by Tim Collins in his interviews with New York accordion player (and Irish emigrant) Joe Madden:

[H]is reference to “being home” when playing for set dancers points to the power of music and dance in recovering an embodied past, and thus establishing an imagined link

with home. The familiarity of playing music for set dancers, such as those who patronized the Doonbeg and the Miltown Malbay clubs, became a vital means of perpetuating a sense of continuity with the culture he experienced in his native Sliabh Aughty. (Collins 2010:501)

While some of the contemporary dancers are the parents of younger children involved in the music (Interview with Maureen Donachie, April 10, 2005), others like Comhaltas administrators Maureen Donachie and Paul Keating became involved in social set dancing as a way to discover and/or perpetuate Irish ancestry. For Keating, whose parents were set dancers who immigrated to the U.S. from County Clare, he grew up exposed to the music and dance, but it was organizations such as the Irish Arts Center (beginning in the 1970s) and Comhaltas which gave him the opportunity to learn to dance himself (Interview with Paul Keating, March 23, 2005). These institutionalized communities provided his entrée into the set dancing and traditional music communities both in the U.S. and in Ireland.

Particularly in the 1990s, as a set dancing revival took off in Ireland and the U.S., Comhaltas branches found themselves catering to this increased interest at a time when generational shifts in musical participation meant that there were fewer musicians looking for performance outlets (Interview with Paul Keating, March 23, 2005). During this slow period, the Bronx's Michael Coleman branch (one of the oldest in the country) nearly faded into extinction. According to former chairman Ira Goldman:

So what I started doing was, one month our Sunday would be a *céili*, and one month it would be a session. And I started paying musicians to play for the *céili*. ... And that started building membership. And then the other branches started having *céilís* and things

started growing and growing. Um, and as set dancing became more and more popular, the set dancers sort of took over the *céilís*. (Interview with Ira Goldman, March 13, 2005)

Set dancing and *céilís* also sustained the Michael Rafferty branch in northern New Jersey, in spite of attempts to also offer a session (often before or after the *céilí* dances):

Lauren: Why do you think the session died out?

Terry Rafferty: Because that's where the money was. [dancers]

Mike Rafferty: They didn't want to hear about sessions, they just wanted to dance.

T: The dancers are what pay the bills. (Interview with Michael and Terry Rafferty, March 20, 2007)

One of the few exceptions to the local New York area branches' focus on dance was a relatively short-lived weekly music session hosted by Manhattan's *Úll Mór* ("Big Apple") Comhaltas branch at a pub called Blaggard's.¹⁸ In their weekly announcement emails, an *Úll Mór* flyer touted the Blaggard's session as providing an unusually open atmosphere:

All musicians and student musicians are welcome, Blaggard's is the session where you will be made to feel welcome and encouraged to play a few tunes you know, and to play along quietly to those you don't. The best way to learn the music is by repeated playing at a session where you can participate in a relaxed atmosphere in a venue where every musician is respected.

In fact, it was these very claims of accessibility to learning musicians that drew me to Blaggard's when I was first learning to play Irish tinwhistle and flute. I had discovered that there

¹⁸ It can be difficult to find a pub or other commercial, centrally located venue for a session in Manhattan with consistently music-friendly management. While the Blaggard's session was originally financially sponsored by the pub (they paid the guest musicians in return for increased patronage on slow Sunday afternoons) the session eventually fell victim to unfriendly management.

were some pitfalls to gaining access to the session-playing traditional music community as a non-Irish, beginning musician. A local pub called Dempsey's, for example, hosted an extremely friendly open session which could also occasionally be very slow or stilted musically, with many beginner musicians with limited repertoires allowing little chance for learning new tunes. On the other hand, many professional-level sessions were frequently intimidating because of amplification (against bar noise), the speed of playing, or the performance of unfamiliar repertoire. My visits to Blaggard's showed that it, for the most part, helped bridge some of this dichotomy in performance level, as each week the *Úll Mór* administrators brought in one or two professional-level musicians (well-known on the New York "scene") to anchor the session and provide a more dynamic musical experience.

Blaggard's was in many ways intended as an environment for teaching and learning about music. Flute player and set dancer Lisa Farber spoke enthusiastically about the opportunities that Blaggard's offered her both musically and socially: "There really is no substitute for being able to play with some of these major musicians and I love it because I get to know them... Once you become acquainted with the person at that session then they'll talk to you at another session, you know, you're not an unknown person to them" (Interview with Lisa Farber, March 1, 2005).

The experience of leading a slow or learner session can be different for more advanced musicians. Flute-player Ben Power remarked that leading a "slow" or beginner session was sometimes a bit of a "head wreck." While he was "pleasantly surprised" by how well the music held together when he led the Blaggard's session, he told me that knowing how many lower-level players frequently come to Blaggard's, going into the session he was looking at it more as a

“job-slash-teaching experience rather than as a musical experience” (Interview with Ben Power, April 3, 2005).

Niall O’Leary, the founder of the *Úll Mór* branch, told me that one of his goals in founding the branch in 1996 was to bring the focus of Comhaltas in the area back to music (in opposition to the other more dance-centered branches) (Interview with Niall O’Leary, March 6, 2005). As demonstrated in previous chapters, the social and musical scene in Ireland is such that many teachers teach in classes run directly by local branches of Comhaltas, whereas in the New York area, musicians tend to teach independently or form their own schools, which can then affiliate to various degrees with a branch.¹⁹ In the past, other branches have also run sessions, but ever since the large growth of interest in Irish set dancing in the early 1990s, the majority of activities sponsored by New York City branches have been the dance-centered *céilís*. These events employ independent musicians or *céilí* bands to provide music for the dancers, but some musicians suggest that playing for *céilí* dances is not always the most personally rewarding musical activity. Even though, as Niall O’Leary tells it, *Úll Mor*’s early attempts to run a regular session were hampered by lack of venue and interest, the weekly Blaggard’s session filled a niche in New York’s busy Irish music scene: providing a learning experience for those not quite ready for a pro-level session, an alternate way to begin to meet musicians and enter “the scene” socially, and even an extra source of income for the musicians hired to lead the session.²⁰ While the weekly session may not have continued at Blaggard’s, the *Úll Mor* branch still hosts a monthly session at their new venue, the New York Irish Center in Queens.

¹⁹ Not the case in Boston, where some teachers are affiliated with the school run by a single Comhaltas branch that covers the whole city.

²⁰ Blaggard’s was not the only session to use the “guest musician” formula in the New York region. While the typical session relies on a core group of musicians to maintain social and musical continuity, many different NY sessions (both “open” or beginner-friendly and more advanced) have (and still do) bring in outside musicians on a weekly or semi-regular basis.

San Francisco

San Francisco's Cooley-Keegan branch was founded in the early 1970s like many of the other early branches throughout the country, but due to its geographic distance from Ireland and even from other branches in the U.S., it has its own issues and challenges. Like many of the other Comhaltas branches, both in the U.S. and in Ireland, Cooley-Keegan's very name invokes both the history of the area and a direct connection to Ireland. Friends and fellow accordionists Joe Cooley and Kevin Keegan were immigrants from Galway who eventually settled in the San Francisco area, remaining active in playing and teaching there.

The Cooley-Keegan branch places an emphasis on inclusiveness and recruitment of new members, claiming: "We encourage everyone to take a glimpse into the wonderful culture of Ireland. If you have never experienced Irish set dancing or céilí dancing, let our excellent dance instructors put you at ease. We do not have any religious affiliations and we are open to people of all backgrounds. You need not be Irish to join!"²¹ The branch members participate in frequent dances, sessions, occasional singing sessions and Irish-language activities, a few group instrument classes for children and adults, and several annual events such as a Christmas-time "Wren Boys" evening and St. Patrick's Day parades.

In their activities, again like many of the other U.S. Comhaltas branches, Cooley-Keegan partners with other Irish commercial and cultural organizations in the San Francisco area. Their sessions and dance events are frequently held at popular pubs such as the Plough and Stars and Ireland's 32, and the organization frequently partners with the United Irish Cultural Center for *céilís* and special events such as benefits. The interdependence of all of these institutions—in terms of both finances and mission—is a testament to the entrenchment of traditional music

²¹ sf.ccewest.org (accessed 5/13/14)

within the Irish-American community, both for families who have actively identified with the traditions for generations, and for those newly returning to their Irish-American “roots.”

Cooley-Keegan’s former chairwoman, Kasey Miller, wrote in the branch’s January 2007 newsletter of her own relatively recent identification with Irish culture, saying that upon her initial involvement with Comhaltas:

My love affair with this organization started to grow and continues to this day. I have learned much about my Irish heritage and the rich culture that it embodies. At the heart of all of this are the Irish people. The generosity with which they share their prized traditions with all who come and partake. I feel fortunate that my children are growing up with this gift.²²

Boston

More so than many other American branches, a focus on teaching and transmission is key to the activities of Boston’s Reynolds Hanafin Cooley Branch. Another older branch (founded in 1975), Reynolds Hanafin Cooley is a particularly large branch which differs in a couple of distinctive ways from Comhaltas incarnations in other cities with equally old and well-established Irish-American communities. Unlike New York, for example, where branches are scattered throughout the boroughs and in surrounding areas on Long Island and in New Jersey, the Boston area boasts only the one single branch—one of the largest in North America. Reynolds Hanafin Cooley was founded by a core group of musicians, including recently deceased chair Larry Reynolds (1933-2012), who had been active in the 1940s and ‘50s in the city’s dance halls, playing a hybrid mixture of American popular dance musics and Irish

²² *Sceal Eile* (branch newsletter), http://sf.ccewest.org/sceal_eile/pdf/sceal_eile_jan07.pdf (accessed 5/14/14)

traditional dances. Founded in 1975, in the midst of the folk revival and the first years of the Comhaltas concert tours to America, the Boston branch quickly gained momentum in promoting this “purer”²³ type of traditional music; the group produced an album around 1980 entitled, “We’re Irish Still” (Boston Comhaltas Records).

In addition to the dances, slow session, and other activities common to many Comhaltas branches, Reynolds Hanafin Cooley also boasts an extensive music school which has been affiliated with the Irish Studies Program at Boston College and the Harvard Celtic Department. The school offers group classes in a number of different instruments, as well as classes in ensemble performance and “tune learning” classes such as a slow session and a multi-instrument “popular session tune” class. All classes meet on Saturday mornings in a local Catholic school.

This large and cohesive music school contrasts with the more independent teaching scene in New York, for example. Whereas Comhaltas in New York seems to encourage supplemental activities such as competition and performances for traditional music students, the Boston branch provides a more structured curriculum and centralized geographic location for learning and socialization. The Boston CCÉ Music School²⁴ is therefore much more similar to the workings of some of the larger branches in Ireland, for whom teaching and classes form the core the branch’s community-building mission and influence.

²³ Boston branch founder Larry Reynolds, as quoted by Susan Gedutis, on the founding of the branch: “the music was becoming purer again. It was spreading here, because there were great musicians coming out from Ireland. Seamus Connolly, Paddy O’Brien, Joe Burke were on the first Comhaltas tours in America... You were getting a very pure strain of traditional music” (Gedutis 2004:204).

²⁴ www.ccebostonmusicschool.org

Atlanta

In contrast with these older, more established branches, the Irish Music Traditions branch in Atlanta was founded in 1999 and serves a very young and less cohesive musical community. IMT is associated with the only set dancing group in Atlanta (as of 2014), promotes several sessions around the Atlanta area, and hosted the first annual IrishFest Atlanta festival in 2013. IMT is also associated with the Atlanta Irish Music School run by Katherine Irwin Thomas, who has completed the Irish music teaching certification offered by Comhaltas. The School is centered around the Atlanta Junior Céili Band (AJCB) ensemble, and offers some individual instrumental instruction in addition to ensemble classes divided by experience level. The AJCB participates in various competitions, including Comhaltas' Midwest *Fleadh*, and the School offers annual workshops and summer camps.

Part of Thomas' goal in founding the IMT and getting involved in Comhaltas was to counteract her own slightly negative experiences attempting to gain entry to the local Irish music community (Interview with Katherine Irwin Thomas, July 14, 2008). A classically trained violinist, Thomas discovered Irish traditional music through an initial interest in Scottish fiddling and via mass media (cassettes and CDs). While attending workshops and summer schools in Ireland and the United States, she went to local Atlanta sessions, but found that she wasn't always welcomed, and was often told to just listen without playing. She commented, "if you don't have somebody helpful in the community, you can get excluded" (Interview with Katherine Irwin Thomas, July 14, 2008). Eventually select musicians helped her to find the right repertoire for the local sessions and she travelled regularly (for ten years in a row at one point) to Ireland to learn and play. Many of the activities and classes she plans and participates in now

provide an entry point into the music and culture that was not there for Thomas herself when she began playing.

From 2006-2008 Thomas also hosted the Atlanta Irish Music Competition: a traditional music competition in the vein of the Comhaltas *fleadh*, but not run by the organization. This competition brought in outside adjudicators—from the New York area and from Ireland—to join with local musicians in evaluating students of all ages in various instrumental categories. In this case, however, the “miscellaneous” category of instruments remained a catch-all for usually popular instruments such as the accordion, due to a lack of encouragement and instruction in the instrument in the region through the rest of the year. In 2007, the Irish Music Traditions branch also hosted the annual Comhaltas North American convention (dubbed “Ireland in Dixie”), bringing another fresh infusion of musicians and dancers into the region.

In its fledgling use of competitions and frequent importation of outside musicians for special events, as well as its emphasis on inclusiveness and beginning instruction, the Atlanta branch of Comhaltas is closer in goals and activities to where many of the Irish-American musicians’ associations were in the mid-20th century. But while the early musical associations were designed to promote the music within the diasporic community, Comhaltas branches such as Atlanta’s Irish Music Traditions must look beyond particular ethnic identifications in an area without a strong history of Irish-American communities. Out of necessity, this branch must adhere to the message of inclusiveness emphasized in Comhaltas headquarters’ message of global outreach.

Conclusion

The unique role of Comhaltas branches in American musical communities is encapsulated in a moment from a Comhaltas-sponsored event in the New York City area. On the evening of Saturday, February 4, 2006, a hundred or more musicians, dancers, friends and family members gathered together at a New Jersey Knights of Columbus Hall for an evening of Irish tunes and set dancing.

This was the 16th annual *céilí* honoring inductees into the Comhaltas' Mid-Atlantic regional Musicians' Hall of Fame, one of the few Comhaltas activities specific to North America. The year's honorees were the fiddle player Brian Conway and the late accordion player Frankie O'Neill, who were to be recognized (as Comhaltas states) for "promot[ing] the objectives of Comhaltas in fostering the love of Irish music and dance."





Images 10 & 11. Brian Conway speaking and performing at the 16th Annual Hall of Fame *Céili*. (Photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebe.)

Around the middle of the evening, the dancing was called to a halt and the O'Neill family and Conway were presented with trophies and allowed to speak to the gathering. Brian Conway, in accepting his award, went on to make the following comments:

I think that the Hall of Fame means as much or more to me because of who is already in it, as it does because it's *a* Hall of Fame or that it's a *Comhaltas* Hall of Fame. All of the great people who are preceding me into it, it just gives me chills to think that I'm in the Hall of Fame with people like those who are on stage here, and others like Andy McGann. It's really an honor... I mean awards are wonderful and they certainly shouldn't be diminished, but I think that they pale in comparison to the gift that you get, that derives from the music, from the friendships, the bonds that you make.

I believe that these sentiments epitomize the complex relationship between Comhaltas and Irish traditional music in the United States. In highlighting the inter-personal *relationships*, musical and social, that fostered the accomplishments being so publicly honored by Comhaltas that night, Conway suggests that, while institutionalized networks and support are important, the

institutional global connections are meaningless without intimate musical and social connections in local communities.

CHAPTER 5

Musical Community at the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*

In previous chapters I have briefly discussed the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*'s¹ role in the history of Comhaltas as a national community, as well as competition's function in the teaching and community-building activities of local branches and musical communities. In this chapter I will take a step back and consider the *Fleadh* as a multi-faceted event in and of itself. I argue that the *Fleadh* serves an important symbolic role in debates about the role of traditional music in Ireland as a nation as well as in the diaspora and in local musical communities around the world. The intensely public nature of the *Fleadh* acts as a lightning rod for public criticism and debate, but it also hides more private interactions and performances that often contradict the event's public presentations. As both a series of competitions and a festival, the *Fleadh* attempts to interweave many different performance contexts—formal and informal, public and private, and everywhere in-between—often bringing these similar-but-different forms of musical expression into conflict with each other in provocative ways.

Changes in meaning, intent, and impact over the fifty-plus years of the *Fleadh*'s existence reveal crucial shifts in the relationship between individual musicians and the various concepts of community surrounding traditional music which I have discussed in previous chapters: cultural nationalist, diasporic, and regional or local, among others. By interweaving my own observations and analyses of contemporary *fleadhanna* (sections labeled “Soundscaping the *Fleadh*”) with examination of moments from the *Fleadh*'s history, I argue in this chapter that

¹ The literal translation of *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* (pronounced flah KYOHL na HAIR-uhn) is “Music Festival of Ireland.” The gathering is often referred to as simply “the *Fleadh*.” In this chapter references to the All-Ireland festival capitalize the “F” in *Fleadh*, while other non-specific festivals are *fleadh* (singular) or *fleadhanna* (plural).

official statements about performance style and criteria of evaluation for “authentic” performance do not necessarily always cause, or even correlate with, negative effects such as standardized performance practices, the erosion of intimately experienced musical performance, or centralized control over the formation of musical community and identity. These effects, cultural/musical “crises” emblematic of long-term debates about the meaning of traditional music across the globe, are not created by the *Fleadh*, but rather the event brings these ongoing debates into sharper focus within the extraordinary time and space of the festival soundscape.

Soundscaping the *Fleadh*: Walking Tullamore Town

Walking into Tullamore it is immediately clear that it is not business-as-usual in this mid-sized town in Ireland’s midlands.² Even though I have arrived before the most of the crowds who will attend the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* over the upcoming week, the town has already been marked as the location of a musical festival of large proportions. The *Fleadh* has been hosted by different towns all over the island each year since 1951,³ and Tullamore is hosting for three years in a row, so by now the logistics are well planned out. Barricades are in place which will prevent cars from entering the center of town; multicolored flags and banners wind back and forth over the wide and currently mostly empty streets; store windows sport musical instruments and other music-themed decorations amidst the usual books, cosmetics, and clothing; the two major public squares on either side of town are dominated by enormous portable stages and

² The observational sections of this chapter labeled “Soundscaping the *Fleadh*” result from combining my field notes and recordings from two years of *Fleadh* attendance in Tullamore (2008 and 2009). I have chosen to combine these years and keep commentary on bands and individuals relatively abstract or anonymous in these descriptions.

³ See Appendix 2 for complete list of *Fleadh* venues. While the All-Ireland *Fleadh* has indeed been hosted throughout the island, mapping of venues does show that venue selection has favored relatively rural areas in the West of the island (Kearney 2013).

sound systems; strains of music drift from the open doors of most pubs and hotels; and a PA system blasts traditional tunes and songs from every street corner.

I head first to the *Fleadh* Office, the event's administrative headquarters housed in a school on the edge of the town's center, where I can purchase the main program for the event. The colorful, glossy booklet contains the schedules for official events and competitions for the week, as well as their locations, and I consult it as I wander back through the town, attempting to orient myself in relation to the various performance spaces. Tullamore, in County Offaly in central Ireland, is a large town of about 13,000-14,000 residents with a relatively prominent role in Ireland's colonial and economic history. Physically, the town features grid-like and wide streets that are unusual for Ireland, centered around and between two main squares: O'Connor Square and Market Square. Unlike the narrow and winding streets of many of Ireland's other "county towns" (the largest towns or major market towns for each county on the island), many of Tullamore's main streets are extraordinarily wide and lined with hulking, flat-fronted, grey-stone buildings of up to three or four stories.⁴

Over the next week, as the *Fleadh* kicks off with sessions, a music school, concerts, dances, and, by the weekend, the competitions themselves, the wide boulevards, public squares, campgrounds, and small pub nooks of Tullamore will fill with musicians and tourists. Traffic will jam up surrounding streets, spare bedrooms in houses for miles around will be turned into

⁴ Up until the 17th century, Tullamore was a rather small town in a wooded and boggy area of central Ireland known for monastic settlement. Beginning in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, however, the town began to attract larger numbers of colonial settlers from England, including the Moore family (the Earl(s) of Charleville) who were deeply involved in creating the architectural feel of the town and committed to its economic development. Over the next two centuries—and particularly after the expansion of the Grand Canal to link the town to Dublin and its ports in the east—Tullamore expanded to become an industrial center, processing and exporting whiskey, grain, turf, and limestone, among other products, as well as a political one (location of the county jail, county courthouse, etc.).

temporary bed and breakfasts for competitors and visitors, street corners will be populated with buskers, pubs will be crammed to overflowing, and by night the town's streets will be crowded with drunken revelers and their detritus. As these crowds ebb and flow through the public spaces of Tullamore, other musical encounters thrive in the town's nooks and crannies: a class of five beginning accordion players sits in a small primary school classroom to learn tunes and technique, several teenagers and some of their parents set up in the restrooms of a damp campground to share some music, an 18-year-old flute player stands in front of a silent crowd in yet another school classroom to play her competition reels, two old friends meet on a sidewalk and spend an hour standing and talking about life and music, and a 5-year-old *sean nós* ("old style") dancer leaps up to dance to the music played by his brothers and sisters in a hotel courtyard.



Image 12. *Fleadh* parade through Tullamore town.
(Photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebel)



Image 13. “World’s Largest Session” at the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*.
(Photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebel)

The festivities begin in earnest on the Friday afternoon, with two major events further claiming the town as an extraordinary musical space: a parade, and an effort to gain entrance in the Guinness Book of World Records with the “world’s largest session.” The parade features musicians from each county in Ireland, as well as various other nations participating in competitions, including the United States, Britain, Canada, and even, this year, Japan. Groups represent their homes through banners, flags, and, frequently, county “colors” in the form of sports jerseys. The parade winds down the main boulevard to the large O’Connor Square, where speeches are made welcoming crowds and inaugurating the event, local and national politicians (including the *Taoiseach*, or Prime Minister, who happens to hail from County Offaly) are in attendance, and featured groups perform. The ceremonies conclude with the “largest session” attempt, in which a group on stage leads the standing crowds in playing several pre-determined tunes. I have neglected to bring my own instrument, but as I stand pinned amongst musicians with phrases echoing over the PA system and out-of-sync amongst the hundreds of musicians

who cannot really hear each other, an exceedingly drunk man holding a guitar stumbles out of the crowd with blood trickling onto his instrument from a scraped-up hand as he collapses onto the curb, still attempting to play along with the “session.” And so begins the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*.

The *Fleadh* as a Public Event: Community and Controversy

The public rituals and encounters of today’s *Fleadh Cheoil* have emerged not only from a long and sometimes conflicted history of the *Fleadh* as an event itself, but also from a complex history of both positive and negative moments for traditional music in Ireland’s public sphere. While the Comhaltas *Fleadh* is a unique event, it is also a contemporary manifestation of a long history of musical/cultural festivals and competitions in Ireland, from bardic harping and song competitions in medieval Ireland, to the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792, to the nationalist *feiseanna* that were the *Fleadh*’s direct predecessors. Public conversations about the *Fleadh* and its competitions continue in this tradition of public musical competition as a means of expressing Irish local, regional, and national identity.

The *Fleadh* was originally designed in the 1950s around a series of competitions staged to attract top adult musicians from around the country in both solo and dance band performances. The festivals of that first decade, however, would eventually be remembered less for those formal performances, and more for the unprecedented throngs of talented musicians showing up to play in informal gatherings throughout the host town. These spontaneous performances included pub sessions, sidewalk and campground sessions, and other similar musical encounters. The 1956 *Fleadh*, held in Ennis Co. Clare, is widely acknowledged as one of the most successful

of the early festivals,⁵ and was commemorated as such by Clare songman Robbie McMahon in his composition “The *Fleadh* Down in Ennis”:

They came from the North and they came from the East
 From the West and the South ‘twas a thriller to see;
 With fiddles and bagpipes and piccolos too
 And drum sticks to keep them in order.
 They came down from Dublin so hearty and gay
 They brought Leo Rowsome to show them the way;
 Himself and Sean Seery they played all the way.
 With their flute payer Vincent O’Broderick,
 -- Sciddery-Idle dom-diddery dom-diddery die dee...

With these lyrics, McMahon captures the excitement generated by such a diverse gathering of musicians, many of whom were simultaneously gaining national recognition through popular new radio shows based on field recordings of mostly rural traditional musicians. While fiddle player Paddy Glackin began attending the *Fleadh* a bit later, his comments on the experience echo the wonder and excitement of McMahon’s lyrics:

Lauren Stoebel: So what was going to the *Fleadh* like for you when you were little?

⁵ An article in the local paper describes some of the “innovations” of this festival, including more structured competitions (provincial semi-finals, closing competitions in advance to have a programme) and more dances. The *Fleadh* Committee even reportedly allowed dancing of “some sets” in addition to *céili* dances, but also stated: “The National Executive have ruled that this is not to be taken as a precedent for future *Fleadhanna* and are emphatic that no music is to be played for waltzes as this would be contrary to our national dignity on the occasion of a great festival specifically dedicated to our national culture. *An Comhaltas* does not object to waltzes as such but feels that there is a time and place for everything and that Whit weekend 1956, Ennis, is neither the time nor the place” (Ennis to Host the Traditional Musicians of Ireland 1956).

Paddy Glackin: Oh, they were fabulous. Absolutely. My memories are just—I have so many memories that were just absolutely brilliant. It was a completely different world.

L: A different world how?

P: Ah, a different world. Coming up in the city, you get out to the country, you meet people—I mean, I didn't have many friends about the same age as me who played the music. So I went down there and, I mean, meeting people like Dennis Murphy and all these great musicians. Meeting them, and—magic, absolute. It was another completely different world. And it was—I was completely sort of intoxicated by it. I was very very young, and I just, I was comfortable in the company of these guys, these people, you know. It was fabulous. I met great people, lovely people. And had wonderful—I just couldn't quantify it really. Just very, very special. (Interview with Paddy Glackin, June 15, 2010)

By the end of the 1950s the popularity of the *Fleadh* had led to the growth of county-based and, eventually, provincial levels of competition leading up to the All-Ireland itself. County *fleadhanna* in regions where traditional music communities were already fairly healthy became nearly as well attended as the All-Ireland itself, and local business owners became increasingly involved in the planning of the event, recognizing the financial boon brought about by the throngs of visitors.

Ethnomusicologist and flutist Fintan Vallely argues, “The *Fleadh Cheoil*...is a major political event for a village or town—for it is the occupation of public spaces and hospitality facilities by Traditional music makers regardless of the sensitivity of differing artistic voices locally. The music is rarely a stranger in the *Fleadh* host town, but considered as its share of consumption of musics in Ireland—particularly popular music—yes, the *Fleadh* could be seen as

a *political act of imposition* by a minority” (Vallely 2004:23; my emphasis). While I agree with Vallely that the political impact of the *Fleadh* has been present to various extents since 1952, it’s also worth mentioning that many public and private accounts of that first decade of festivals—outside of the personal accounts of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann leadership—do not associate the gatherings with either the nationalist organization or its cultural nationalist aspirations, rather referring to it simply as “The All-Ireland Music Festival,” or by other slightly generic titles, and emphasizing the personal revelations and connections made there over all else. The emphasis in the early years was focused inward on the community of musicians attending, gathered together from throughout the island, and therefore the “political act of imposition” was geared towards claiming space for their own enjoyment and interaction.

While stories about the first decade of the *Fleadh* often de-emphasize its political motivations and its wider impact on public perceptions of traditional music, by the mid-1960s through the 1970s the festival gradually became a lightning rod for changing perceptions of traditional music in the public sphere and the evolving role of its sponsoring organization, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. In this period, the *Fleadh Cheoil* came closest to fulfilling Philip Bohlman’s maxim that “[c]ompetition, in most basic terms, transforms the national into the nationalist” (Bohlman 2004:xxvi).⁶ The *Fleadh* was a competition and festival bringing together

⁶ Michael Bakan also highlights the use of competition in translating a musical genre into a national/nationalist context in his study of Balinese *gamelan beleganjur*: “The widespread popularity and official endorsement of contests have resulted in the development of a new, important cultural institution from the synthesis of an old, function-driven music with modern artistic and sociopolitical sensibilities. The modern *lomba beleganjur* has placed *beleganjur* music and imagery in the ideological service of Indonesian cultural nationalism, making it a symbol of mediation among traditional Balinese cultural values, modern Indonesian political ideals, and the realities of contemporary Balinese-Indonesian life. In addition, it has furnished a hospitable and stimulating environment for creative musical endeavor, as is manifest in the innovations of the *kreadsi beleganjur* style” (1999:85).

a national traditional music community that became linked to the nationalist politics and aims of its sponsoring organization and their manifestation in public performances. As Bohlman suggests, the integration of competition into the national festival had the potential to manifest nationalist ideals in musical performance in a more explicit manner than other types of featured performance. New and expanding audiences for the competitions throughout this period brought the politics of competition and performance into the public sphere in unprecedented ways.

Several factors contributed to this shift in the audience for and impact of the *Fleadh*. Within Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann itself, a gradual change in demographics had begun to take place, as the organization began to shift from a focus on events and gatherings for adult musicians to local programs and educational initiatives focusing more on children and families. This shift, in turn, led to increased interest in competition from younger musicians. Meanwhile, the folk music boom underway in the United States and Britain arrived in Ireland, overlapping substantially with traditional music performance and creating new audiences for Irish song and instrumental dance music. This newfound interest in traditional music festivals from young, mostly urban Irish men and women contributed to a huge increase in attendance at the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*, with throngs of attendees overwhelming the capacity of organizers to manage the crowds, leading to problems with public order and forcing many of the musicians out of the very public spaces they'd previously been so proud to colonize.

The chaos of the *Fleadhs* of the late 1960s—particularly the 1965 *Fleadh* in Thurles, held on a holiday weekend—became national news as stories and editorials flooded the newspapers, placing traditional music directly in the middle of a nationwide discussion about popular music,

youth culture, and culturally redefining the Irish nation in a time of newly opening financial, political, and social borders. As Catherine Curran wrote of the conflict:

The debate over the *Fleadh* was not simply about a preference for particular styles of music. It was about the question of audiences and their right to participate in cultural events. The definition of ‘the people’ as rural connoisseurs of traditional music, and the right of a small group to define what was authentically traditional Irish music was being asserted and contested in the sphere of the Irish music festival. (Curran 1999:62)

In other words, the debate over ownership of the *Fleadh* and its public spaces was also about who should have access to membership in a national traditional music community. Did the community belong specifically to those who were already fully integrated into its particular relationships and performances, or was there a national traditional music community that could also incorporate newcomers who did not yet have that understanding? What role could the *Fleadh*, as a single annual event, play in answering these questions?

Comhaltas defended the crowds by pointing to the section of its mission statement emphasizing promoting or popularizing traditional music with new audiences. Much of the commentary from within the Irish traditional music community, however, not only expressed resentment at the co-opting of public space by non-musicians at a music-centered event, but also rejected the association of traditional music with long-haired guitar players and folk singers who they believed had no interest in understanding traditional dance music performance. A 1965 commentary in the Irish music journal *Ceol* claimed that:

Spontaneous performances were the main attraction for the musician; they were the justification of the *Fleadh*, but they are now no longer possible. They have been silenced by the guitar and banjo groups or smothered by the crowds who wander aimlessly around

the streets. Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann is now reaping the whirlwind of past publicity campaigns which were aimed at attracting ever increasing numbers to these festivals.

Objections to this glorification of numbers were met by the reply that the business of the organisation was to popularise Irish music... [but] this type of music can not be popularised in that sense, no more than home made bread or *poitín*⁷ can, the one would degenerate into sliced pan, the other into parliamentary whiskey watered down to thirty under proof. (Ceol 1965: 32; comments on 1965 Thurles *Fleadh*)

While more rural *Fleadh* locations, better organization, and the proliferation of more wide-ranging folk festivals calmed matters down to some extent in the following years, the balance between the *Fleadh* as a musicians' event and as a festival for the general public with nationalist goals has remained a delicate and fraught one.⁸

Soundscaping the *Fleadh*: Group Competitions

By Saturday morning, the *Fleadh* has already been ramping up in intensity for a week,⁹ and both of the weekend days will be filled with competitions. Over the next two days, nearly 150 competitions will take place in over twenty venues scattered throughout the town, from school classrooms and auditoriums to empty warehouses to hotel ballrooms. This first day of competitions at the All-Ireland *Fleadh* will mostly feature the younger competitors in the Under

⁷ *Poitín* is a (very strong) traditional Irish alcohol distilled from malted barley or potatoes; the equivalent of “moonshine” in the United States.

⁸ Although overseas or emigrant musicians had been competing in the *Fleadh* since its inception, the transitional years of the 1970s also saw the establishment of Comhaltas branches in the United States and therefore increased participation and success at the *Fleadh* from young Irish-American musicians (frequently the children of emigrants). American musicians' relationships to the *Fleadh* and competition are explored in slightly more depth in Chapter 4.

⁹ Many students, teachers, and others arrive before the actual festival begins for the *Scoil Éigse*, a music school that runs for the week prior to the competitions.

12 and 12-15 age categories, but including all of the different types of competitions: solo instruments, duets, trios, *céilí* bands, *grúpaí ceoil*, pipe bands, solo singing, Irish-language conversation, and group/social dancing. The afternoon will also include a few solo instrumental, duet, trio, and *grúpaí ceoil* competitions for the 15-18 age category. Tomorrow will feature older performers in the 15-18 and Over 18 age categories in the same solo and group competition categories.

Because I've had the program and competition schedule since early in the week, like many *Fleadh* attendees I have already carefully gone through the schedule grid and circled the competitions I'll be attending over the course of the day. Just before the competitions begin at 10:30 a.m., I follow crowds of children, parents, and onlookers into Tullamore College, a secondary school which has been one of the homes of the *Scoil Éigse* the previous week and which will now feature competitions in its canteen, gym, and classrooms. Outside the gym, I purchase my ticket, receive my wristband allowing entrance to all of the day's competitions, and wander in to find my seat for the duets competition for 12-15 year-old musicians. The typical high-ceilinged gym space has been filled with folding chairs arranged in semi-circles around a two-foot-high portable stage against one long wall. Behind the stage hangs a *Fleadh*-themed banner, and about ten feet in front of it sits a long table behind which the two judges will sit. Like nearly all *Fleadh* competitions except the Senior *Céilí* Bands, the audience for this event is made up almost entirely of musicians, friends, and family members of the competitors.¹⁰

Minutes later, the judges take their seats facing the stage, and the competition is called to order by one of the volunteers who are present in every room for every competition throughout

¹⁰ While the attendance numbers for the *Fleadh* have generally increased since the 1950s, the competition performances today are focused more internally on the Irish traditional music community and do not appear to attract general audiences, unlike the various public concerts and performances in the gig-rigs, hotels, streetcorners, and pubs.

the weekend. Welcoming the crowd in both English and Irish, the volunteer announcer asks for silence while performers are on stage, calls everyone's attention to the other volunteer making sure the entrance door to the hall only opens in-between performances, and calls the first duet to the stage, reminding the second group in the program list to be prepared to play shortly. For the 12-15 age group, the duet competition consists of the successive performance of two tunes from two different tune categories as specified by Comhaltas, including: Air (slow or lively), Reel, Polka, Hornpipe, March, Jig (double, single, slip), Slide, Set Dance, Mazurka, Planxty, Fling, Barn Dance, Schottische, and Clan March.¹¹ The two instrumentalists in each group must both play the melody of the tune,¹² and the groups consist of a wide variety of combinations of instruments, from banjo and fiddle, to accordion and flute, to piano and concertina. The audience is completely silent during the performance of each group.

After each group leaves the stage, the judges are given a few minutes to assign marks and make comments on adjudication sheets, while the main doors are opened and audience members and performers enter and leave the gym. Some performers may have simultaneous competitions to run in-between (e.g., duets and flute slow airs) during the same time slot—a complicated proposition on the rare occasion that the two simultaneous competitions are occurring in separate

¹¹ These rules also apply to all other solo instrumental, duet, and trio competitions for the Under 12 and 12-15 age groups. From the official 2014 *Fleadh* rules for Duets/Trios: “Age Groups A & B: One tune from each of two tune categories listed above. Age Group C: One tune from each of three tune categories listed above. Age Group D: One tune from each of four tune categories listed above. A Duet shall comprise of two melody instruments. A senior duet (Age Group D) shall comprise of two different melody instruments. Duet members must at all times play the melody of the tune. A Trio shall comprise of three melody instruments. A senior trio (Age Group D) shall comprise of at least two different melody instruments. Trio members must at all times play the melody” (http://midatlanticce.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/rialacha_Fleadhanna_ceoil_2014_electronic_pdf_file_version.pdf, accessed 5/28/14).

¹² This means that, for example, in a piano and accordion duet, the piano cannot only play a chordal accompaniment, although chords are allowed as long as they are ornamenting the melody played by the other hand.

buildings across town. By the end of the competition over an hour and a half later, however, nearly all of the performers have gathered back in the gym as the two judges put their heads together to decide on the medal winners. One of the two judges stands up after several minutes of deliberations, takes the microphone from the volunteer announcer, and proceeds to briefly outline some of the observations and criteria used in evaluating the performers,¹³ before announcing the 3rd, 2nd, and then 1st place winning groups to applause and cheers. Winners receive small medals commemorating their success, and then the crowd quickly disperses as everyone scatters to attend their next competitions, meet up with friends, rehearse for upcoming performances, grab some food, or head back to hotels, bed and breakfasts, and campsites.

My schedule has me attending five more competitions throughout the rest of day: 12-15 year old Fiddle, 12-15 year old Whistle, 15-18 Duets and Trios, and 15-18 *céili* bands. I'll be spending most of that time in the gym and various classrooms at the Sacred Heart School, next door to Tullamore College on the edge of Tullamore's downtown/center. As I walk the halls of the schools in-between competitions, music pours from every corner as empty classrooms, outside courtyards, and sometimes even bathrooms are appropriated for group and solo practice. Students and parents rush from one competition to another, or occasionally just hang out on a vacant bench chatting. While the physical and emotional atmosphere remains relatively consistent between solo, duet, and trio competitions, it is impossible not to notice a ratcheting up in boisterousness and excitement as the day winds towards the evening large-group competitions.

Much as the rehearsals for bands and groups are often viewed as the most fun and social of branch-based activities for students, the *céili* band and *grúpaí ceoil* competitions tend to be the most dramatic and highly anticipated of the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*. These two competitions

¹³ A more detailed discussion of *Fleadh* judging and adjudication criteria appears later in this chapter.

are semi-chaotic events, with packed audiences filling chairs and aisles, and performers jamming every spare space outside venues for last-minute tuning and preparation. Befitting its more regimented nature, the *céili* band competition for 15-18 year olds is held in a school auditorium, with friends, family, and onlookers filling nearly every folding chair. As I settle into my seat a few rows behind the judges' table, facing the raised and curtained stage area, the first band emerges to take their places on stage. Three fiddles and two flutes sit in the first row of chairs at the front of the stage, with an accordion and a banjo seated just behind them. Slightly farther back on the stage, a drummer sits behind a woodblock, snare, and bass drum set, while a pianist perches in front of an upright piano stage left behind the fiddle players. The musicians all wear matching outfits: collared shirts in red, black pants, and black vests with gold trim. After a couple of minutes of tuning, the musicians make eye contact, the drummer cues everyone to raise their instruments to playing position with two sharp raps on his woodblock, followed by two quick chords from the pianist which set the tempo for the ensuing performance of the group's jig.¹⁴

¹⁴ Like the duet competition discussed earlier, the *céili* bands have a long list of available dance tune types from which to choose their three competition pieces, but with rare exceptions all groups end up selecting to perform a jig, a hornpipe or march, and a set of two reels to finish off. The most frequent exception is the performance of a polka instead of a hornpipe or march, but this is still quite rare.



Image 14. The 15-18 *céili* band competition at the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*. (Photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebel.)

Unlike the performances in the *grúpaí ceoil* and solo instrumental competitions, which are arguably more flexible in terms of the expected stylistic characteristics adhered to by the performers, this *céili* band performance sticks to a strict formula of rhythmic and melodic features. The band plays the typical (double) jig, consisting of two or more parts of eight bars each, with each part doubled to create the form AB AB. They repeat this basic structure twice, as dictated by competition rules, but informal competition expectations dictate that it is in the repeats that the group distinguishes its stylistic approach, particularly during the second repetition of the tune. As expected, the band displays unison melodic and rhythmic variations that are both unique to their performance and not so adventurous as to distract from the melodic skeleton of the tune—a distinction that can vary from adjudicator to adjudicator.

Both jig and hornpipe performances are concluded to applause from the audience and raucous cheering from partisans hailing from the band's town or county. The following reels,

however, deviate a bit from the first two selections played, as the band is required to play a set of two tunes in a row instead of just a single tune. The transition between the two tunes is a featured moment in the performance of the reels, as the band attempts to maximize the excitement in the performance through use of tune selection (e.g., dramatic harmonic modulation between tunes), a strategically deployed beat of silence anticipating the transition between the tunes, and the increased opportunity to show off tight unison performance of more variations through the second tune. The audience seems to anticipate this particular moment in the group's performance, erupting into cheers as one tune segues into the next.

The next afternoon, in the large, empty warehouse space in the center of town where the *grúpaí ceoil*¹⁵ competitions are taking place, it is immediately clear that this type of group performance will be very different from the *céili* band competitions. While the *grúpaí ceoil* performing groups are similarly dressed in matching costumes or uniforms, they are much larger: *céili* bands must have between five and ten members, *grúpaí ceoil* can have between four and twenty. They also feature a much wider variety of instruments: fiddles, flutes, accordions, concertinas, and banjos still dominate, but there are also groups milling around the hall carrying guitars, harps, *uilleann* pipes, mandolins, *bodhráns* (frame drums), and even the occasional viola, cello, clarinet or saxophone.¹⁶

¹⁵ Literally: “music groups,” a more recently added ensemble category, as described in the next section of this chapter.

¹⁶ The rules for *grúpaí ceoil* according to the 2014 *Fleadh* rule book: “Minimum of 4 and maximum of 20 members. Own choice of music for a min. of 6 and maximum of 8 minutes, but with a limit of 10 minutes on stage. In competitions for Grúpaí Ceoil, whistlers and lilters may be included, as well as players of bodhrán and bones, but piano and drums are not permitted. Special attention should be paid to selection of tunes, and efforts should be made to play tunes other than jigs, reels and hornpipes, e.g. slow airs, set dances, marches, flings, mazurkas, polkas, slides, schottisches, planxties, barn dances, clan marches, harp music etc., to provide as much variety as possible. Slow airs need not be played by a solo performer. The group shall perform



Image 15. The 15-18 *grúpaí ceoil* competition at the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*. (Photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebe.)

As the first group settles into place on the makeshift stage and begins to play, the musical contrast between *céilí* bands (often just referred to as “bands”) and *grúpaí ceoil* (“groups”) is also immediately clear. In contrast to the regimented, unison playing of the band, the group’s performance begins with the flutes playing a unison march with *bodhrán* accompaniment, but accordions soon join in with a droning accompaniment, followed by fiddles and then other instruments on the melody. After the march, the group plays a hornpipe, again with various instruments or combinations of instruments joining in and dropping out on various strains of the melody or harmonic accompaniment. In another signal that this is not a dance-oriented performance in the way that a *céilí* band’s would be, the hornpipe is slowed down dramatically

its own choice of music for a period of 6 to 8 minutes. 2 marks shall be deducted for each minute or part thereof, in excess of 8 minutes or less than 6 minutes as determined by the adjudicator. Attention should also be given to instrumental arrangements and presentation of the music. A list of music pieces in the order to be played, e.g. slip jig, march, etc. and a list of instruments, shall be submitted by each group leader to the competition clerk prior to the performance.” (http://comhaltas.ie/images/press_room/2014%20Rialacha%20Fleadhanna%20Ceoil.pdf, accessed 5/20/14)

in the last phrase to transition into an air, played primarily by a solo fiddle and whistle, with various types of droning accompaniment. And finally, the tempo accelerates towards the end of the “suite” with a reel, followed by a slide and a polka, again with different instruments taking the lead on various phrases of the melodies. The performance is followed by raucous applause and cheering by the hundreds of onlookers.

The rest of the performances in the competition take various other approaches to the arrangement of their tunes, featuring more or less harmonic or rhythmic accompaniment to the melodies of tunes, spending more or less time on creative transitions between tune types, using solo instruments or sections to varying degrees, and incorporating extremely common tunes and tune types (e.g., reels and jigs heard frequently at sessions) as well as very rare tunes and versions of tunes. But the basic structures of the performances do often take advantage of common techniques to build interest and drama, including the positioning of an air (often featuring a skilled solo performer) in the middle of the “suite” of tunes and building towards a tune or tune type in a major key with a fast tempo at the end of the performance. In general, for the casual listener the *grúpaí ceoil* competition contains more variety and excitement than some of the other categories of *Fleadh* competitions.

After a full day of competitions, the dozens of venues empty out towards late afternoon, filling the streets to capacity as musicians and others search for food, friends, and tunes. I head for dinner, myself, and think about how I’d like to spend my evening as the formal competitions turn to informal music and dance across the town.

***Fleadh* Competitions Evolving**

While the *Fleadh* as an event and festival has changed significantly over its 60-year existence, the competitions that serve as its *raison d'être* and focal point have also been undergoing constant adjustment and expansion, often following or inspiring performance trends in traditional music communities in a variety of other contexts. The descriptive passage above captures the experience of performance in *Fleadh* competitions in the first decade of the 21st century, but in this section I will discuss the evolution of competition structures and rules since 1951, outlining several important debates and controversies that have echoed over the decades in public and private discussions about the role of competitions in Irish traditional music performance.

The exact nature of these debates is unique to Irish historical circumstances, but it is also clear that there are many parallel debates and questions surrounding musical competitions in other countries. Ethnomusicological research has long documented the role of musical competition in relationship to musical revival movements throughout the 20th century, as well as the use of competition by political movements and governments as a tool to shape collective musical performance and meaning. No matter the political or ideological background surrounding the competition, scholars, musicians, and others have repeatedly noted the impact that structured musical competition can have on musical performance and meaning in other contexts.¹⁷ A 2003 issue of *Worlds of Music*, for example, explores the role of competitions in “defining and refining performance practice and repertoire, as well as its importance in forming and solidifying visions of community identity” (2003:7–8). Even though contributions to the

¹⁷ For example: Gunderson and Barz 2000; Rice 1994; Goertzen 2007; Pier 2009; Ako 2009; Bohlman 2004; Bakan 1999; Raykoff and Tobin 2007; Slobin 1996; and all of the articles in 2003's *Worlds of Music* 45(1): Contesting Tradition: Cross Cultural Studies of Musical Competition.

issue range in subject matter from Trinidad to Indonesia, editor Frank Gunderson asserts that “all of the authors discuss the potential role that competitions play in defining and consolidating community identity via public displays” (ibid.).

This process of community definition and debate is articulated through the public pageantry and discourse of the competitions, but also through the rules and regulations shaping the musical performances themselves. The role that the competitions play in identity formation and different types of community can, of course, vary according to different cultural and historical contexts. In Norway, for example, where fiddle competitions are sponsored by independent musical organizations with cultural nationalist origins similar to Comhaltas, the events spark parallel conversations about regional style and identity and the performative qualifications necessary for membership in a national musical community (Goertzen 2007). Many Eastern European and former Communist countries, however, have histories of government sponsored competitions which are much less subtly restrictive of style and repertoire in musical performance, and more obviously nationalist in intent (cf. Slobin 1996).

The *Fleadh Cheoil* competitions have changed in significant ways over the 60+ years of festivals, including such areas as instruments featured, tune types allowed, age groups featured, and types of ensembles. The first *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*, held in County Monaghan in 1952,¹⁸ was a relatively small affair, featuring few enough competitions (in categories such as flute, fiddle, button accordion, and *céilí* band) to fit into one room over the course of a weekend. By 1956, however, and the extremely successful *Fleadh* mentioned above hosted by Ennis in County Clare, the festival had grown significantly and included thousands of attendees and an expanded list of competitions, including concertina, singing, and small ensembles. From this

¹⁸ There was a festival and competition held the previous year in Mullingar (the year of Comhaltas’ founding), but 1952 was the first one to hold the title of *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*.

point on, the number of instruments and ensembles featured would continue to expand, often paralleling larger trends in commercial performance of traditional music and their impact on musical communities throughout the country and abroad.

For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, following upon the transatlantic ballad-singing boom and the growing success of small traditional ensembles such as Planxty and Dé Danann, new melodic and accompanying instruments became increasingly popular in the traditional music community. While the banjo had been present to some extent in Irish and Irish-American traditional music since before the turn of the 20th century, the instrument's use in popular ballad-singing groups such as The Dubliners brought it to a new level of popularity (Vallely 2011:55), and in 1973 Comhaltas included its first banjo competition in the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*.

Likewise, while there are some images and stories confirming frame drum use in Ireland prior to the mid-20th century, the *bodhrán* was historically far from a mainstream percussion instrument in traditional music circles prior to that time. Seán Ó Riada adapted the instrument for use in his groundbreaking ensemble *Ceoltóirí Chualann* in the 1960s, which gave it significant exposure. Its virtuoso use by later players in popular commercial groups¹⁹ brought the instrument into the mainstream, but early Comhaltas leader Willie Reynolds wrote in his autobiography (1990:38) that *Fleadhanna Cheoil*, which began featuring *bodhrán* competitions in 1972, helped bring the instrument into widespread popularity.

Commercial success and increased media exposure led to an expansion of the traditional music community both in terms of educational and performance opportunities for new participants and in terms of the sounds that could be considered an acceptable or authentic expression of the collective. This expansion drove the growth of instrumental categories in the

¹⁹ E.g., The Chieftains' Peadar Mercier, Christy Moore of Planxty, and Dé Danann's Johnny "Ringo" McDonagh.

Fleadh, and it also correlated with the expansion of group performance competitions to include the *grúpaí ceoil* category described in the previous section. From the competition's inception, the senior *céili* band competition has remained one of the *Fleadh*'s premiere events; today it draws the largest crowds of any competition,²⁰ is given a prime evening time slot, and requires separately purchased tickets which typically sell out in advance. The *céili* band competition was created, along with the *Fleadh*, at a time when formats and venues for formal group performance (versus informal group playing in house parties or dances) of Irish traditional music were limited. As described in Chapter 1, public performance of traditional music shifted dramatically in the first half of the 20th century surrounding the 1935 Public Dance Halls Act and additional pressure from socially conservative religious and cultural organizations, as well as later patterns of technological development, economic migration, and emigration. Larger dance music ensembles, often associated with dances hosted by culturally nationalist organizations such as the Gaelic League both in Ireland and in emigrant communities, were needed to sonically fill out the larger public venues.²¹ Inclusion in the *Fleadh* further cemented the “*céili* band” format of traditional dance bands, and for several decades many of the country's top dance bands vied for the honor of winning the All-Ireland competition.²²

The changing landscape of commercial traditional music bands starting in the 1960s most noticeably affected the Comhaltas musical lexicon in 1978 with the inclusion of the

²⁰ I estimated nearly 1000 audience members at one of the senior *céili* band competitions I attended.

²¹ For more on the origins of the *céili* band, see *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music* (1999:85).

²² While the senior *céili* band competition is still hotly contested each year, many of the bands are formed solely for competition purposes and the repertoire and style of performance may vary widely from that used by bands playing in a dance setting. Some of the most legendary and active *céili* bands still playing for dances (e.g., the Kilfenora and Tulla *céili* bands, among others) gave up competing at the *Fleadh* decades ago.

“instrumental groups” or *grúpaí ceoil* category. This new category allowed for greater flexibility of instrumentation and tune choice than the popular *céili* band competitions, but it also opened up a whole new arena for debate via the need for creative arrangement of multiple tunes into a coherent longer whole: a dance music “suite” of sorts. Different commercial groups had taken various approaches to group performance and arrangement, from the more “classical,” highly detailed arrangements of Ó Riada’s *Ceoltóirí Chualann* and The Chieftains to the brisk, folk/pop inflected rhythms and arrangements of De Dannan and The Bothy Band. Each of these groups incorporated harmonies, instrumental combinations, and accompaniment in different ways, and the *grúpaí ceoil* competitions became a platform on which judgments about these stylistic choices were debated.

For example, in the 1990s current Comhaltas music officer Siobhán Ní Chonaráin was asked to participate in adjudicating the *grúpaí ceoil* competition:

Siobhán Ní Chonaráin: Seems there had been a very strong classical bent in some of the groups and so somewhere someone had come up with this idea well, like, look, we really need to get some sort of a grip on what this is about...

Lauren Stoebel: So what was more classical about them?

S: It was—the arrangements were all being done in SATB scoring. The winning groups were basically kind of like putting harmonies to dance tunes. It sounded very impressive—you were getting a wall of sound. Great intonation, great tonality. The problem was that the phrasing of our dance music wasn’t in it. There was three or four fundamentals that weren’t there. Fundamentals that if you take them from Irish traditional music, you don’t have Irish traditional music any more. So for example reels were going [lilts (sings) a tune to demonstrate how the reels were very boring/square]. And slip jigs,

[lilts again]. Polkas, [lilts], strict measures. Very good music teachers doing great work, but you see, fundamentally, a number of people would've been concerned it was happening. (Interview with Siobhán Ní Chonaráin, May 28, 2009)

Even today, group coaches take different approaches to arrangement and instrumentation with varying degrees of success, as Denis Liddy explains:

It's not necessarily always about harmony. I wouldn't be one for overharmonizing. I know Gary [Shannon] likes to harmonize a lot, but that's not everybody's cup of tea. And then Timmy [Collins] would have a more traditional approach, that I'd be kind of in the middle of the two of them. And that's not deliberate. It's just the way we are by personality... I would always have, if possible, a harp and pipes. And they're dominating the sounds. But there'd be a very strong fiddle line. There'd be always 8-11 fiddles in a group, and some of them double up on viola... I wouldn't have many boxes, I wouldn't have many concertinas if I could. Two or three would be nice. Four or five or six is a bit unwieldy. You know, because they have a good strong sound anyway. Above all, enjoyment. You know, if they're enjoying the program it comes out. If they're sick of the program, it comes out! (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009)

As Liddy and Ní Chonaráin imply, different tastes and trends within Irish traditional music communities guide group coaches and adjudicators in the relatively subjective presentation of traditional music ensembles.²³ The *grúpaí ceoil* competition inherently allows a much more fluid

²³ The subjectivity of this category and attempts to shape what types of creativity are appropriate in the group competition are also noted by an American teacher in an essay on the capriciousness of adjudication: "‘Harmonies, over arrangements, pointless transitions’ were a few of the comments made by the judge who was one of two at the competition. The phrase ‘not traditional’ was to be heard several times in the short disparaging monologue." (http://www.detroitima.org/2000/08_00_enniscorthy2000/editorial_090500.html, accessed 6/28/14)

interpretation of local and commercial group performance styles than the *céili* bands, while adjudication in the category can also reward greater acknowledgement of local music communities' repertoires and selection of rare historical tunes (see descriptive passage in previous section for elaboration of tune varieties chosen by different groups) than the *céili* band competition.

The incorporation of a wide variety of tune types in both group and individual performance categories in Comhaltas competitions has not always been, and often is still not, allowed or encouraged. Another major historical shift in competition rules and regulations was an official expansion of the number of acceptable tune types. Like many of the cultural nationalist organizations from which it emerged, Comhaltas has long had a stake in setting boundaries around which cultural expressions were or weren't sufficiently "Irish," including instruments, ensembles, dance styles, and tune types. In 2004 the rules were expanded to include tune types such as mazurka, schottische, fling, and barn dance that had previously been excluded. The implication of the exclusion, originally, was that these tune types had recent origins outside of Ireland and were not appropriate for an Irish traditional music competition. These tune types were also associated with different regional performance styles that had become significantly more prominent and well known nationwide via recorded media and touring groups. Today, many of these rarer tune types are technically allowed in nearly all competition categories, but they are still not commonly chosen by competitors outside of the *grúpaí ceoil* category.

The evolution of instrumentation, tune types, and performance styles at the *Fleadh* exists in a symbiotic relationship with the expanding sonic and social boundaries encompassing the Irish traditional music community. The rules and regulations governing Comhaltas' competitions have often posed constraints on changing musical tastes in local, national, and

media-driven international musical communities, but the conservative leanings of Comhaltas's "standards" have also not remained static. The competitions have been forced to engage with the constantly changing nature of the communities that participate in them.

Soundscaping the *Fleadh*: Nighttime at the Festival

While the sky stays light well into the night in Ireland in August, as the day's competitions draw to a close in the evening the town begins to transition to a more raucous atmosphere as formal public performances give way to more participatory music-making and socializing. This transition becomes immediately obvious as I wander around the town after dinner; even the look and feel of the activity out in the streets has changed from the daytime festivities. In the main squares, the two "gig rigs"—the large, open-sided trailers-turned-stages—are still featuring performances for a little while longer as winning individuals and groups from the day's competitions alternate sets with professional performing groups, Comhaltas-sponsored *Seisiún*-style performances,²⁴ and local musicians and dancers. Commercial shops are now all shuttered for the night, but many pubs are now taking advantage of relaxed public-drinking laws during the festival and have opened up front windows and doors (and sometimes walls!) as far as they can go, serving alcohol and sometimes food to crowds both inside and outside. The streets themselves are crammed with a mix of musicians of all ages, mostly en-route from one venue to another or lingering in tents or seating-areas outside hotels, and socializing non-musicians, many of whom are already visibly drunk and of doubtful allegiance to traditional music or culture.

²⁴ See Chapter 2.



Image 16. The *Brú Ború* performance group in an evening performance on the O'Connor Square gig rig. (Photo by Lauren Weintraub Stoebe.)

Weaving through the disorder in the streets, my first destination for the evening is the Bridge House Hotel, a popular meeting-spot for musicians as many of the *Scoil Eipse* teachers, adjudicators, and competitors are housed there. Entering the lobby I'm immediately overwhelmed by a roar of conversation from the crowds and the warring sounds of at least four competing sessions encamped in the lobby (surrounding an appropriated upright piano and in a seating area), on the balcony, and in the adjacent bar area. Compared to the increasingly raucous pubs elsewhere in town, the public spaces of the hotel are relatively family-friendly, so many of the readily visible sessions crammed into every corner feature pre-teen and younger musicians, on their own or mixed with older musicians. As the night has remained relatively mild, my friends and I decamp to the upstairs outdoors balcony for a drink, passing a ballroom en route which has been reserved by a rather unfortunately scheduled wedding party that over the course of the evening spills out and mingles with the roaming hordes of musicians. The balcony fortunately has a few empty tables to accommodate us, but a large portion of the space is also

taken up with a group of some 20-30 young musicians, most likely twelve years or younger, seated in a circle several rows deep. They are attempting an ad-hoc session unsupervised by adult parents or mentors, with dubious success as students struggle to play along with tunes that they do not know very well.

After our stop at the hotel a couple of us wander the town for a while, wedging ourselves into various pubs which are, for the most part, already uncomfortably filled to capacity and beyond with musicians and drinkers. The gig rigs in the squares are now shuttered and quiet, while the non-musician drinkers crowding the streets have started getting messy: shouting, stumbling, and depositing piles of empty cups and cans in the gutters.

My own next destination is one of the more sedate evening entertainment options at the *Fleadh*: a set dancing *céili* in the Tullamore Court, one of the other main hotels in town. Passing through yet another lobby with nary a seat unfilled by musicians or friends socializing, I pay an admission fee and enter the large hotel ballroom. A *céili* band is in full swing on the stage at the far end, in front of a large dance floor filled with a dozen or more sets of eight dancers, each swinging their way through the Plain set. The remainder of my evening will be filled with dancing and chatting with friends, until I wind my way back to my lodgings through the remaining carousers and their detritus lining the main streets of the town—all waiting to be cleared away for the competitions to resume bright and early the following morning.

Soundscaping the *Fleadh*: Solo Instrumental Competitions

In the early years of competitions, the focus was on adult competitors and the prestige of winning a “senior” title. Today, however, the 15-18 year olds’ solo instrumental competitions are arguably the best attended, most debated, and most competitive of all of the non-group

competitions held at the contemporary *Fleadh*.²⁵ I am therefore usually excited to block out my schedule to attend the 15-18 flute competition from start to finish. Entering the grade school classroom first thing on Sunday morning, I take my seat in the middle of the rows of chairs for audience members, set up facing an empty area at the front of the room. To one side of the performance area sits a long narrow table with two chairs for the judges. Like the duet competition I saw the day before, the room is manned by two volunteers charged with guarding the closed door while musicians are playing, maintaining quiet inside the competition room, and announcing the names and towns of origin of each of the competitors.

Because the *Fleadh* is the culmination of a tiered series of competitions (county/region, province, All-Ireland), today's flute competition will feature two performers each from Ireland's four provinces, plus Britain and the North American Mid-Atlantic and Midwestern regions. The fourteen performers, arranged in random order, will each play three selections for the judges. According to the rule book, players must choose their three tunes from a list of dance-tune styles including Air (slow or lively), Reel, Polka, Hornpipe, March, Jig (double, single, slip), Slide, Set Dance, Mazurka, Planxty, Fling, Barn Dance, Schottische, Clan March. This list, however, is little more than a formality, as performance practice and competition tradition dictate that virtually all of the performers will perform the same three tune types, often in the same order: a jig, a hornpipe, and a reel. Each tune is only played through twice (with all of the requisite internal repeats, e.g.: AABBC, etc.), but—particularly for the jig and hornpipe—it has become common practice for solo performers to pick tunes that have at minimum three parts, leading to longer performances and more opportunities to show off technique and variations.

²⁵ While each age bracket of solo competitions has its own set of rules and requirements, and different instruments have different rules and demands, the following description of a 15-18 solo flute competition is intended to stand as an example of solo competitions at the *Fleadh* in general.

The first competitor, a young woman from County Roscommon, is called to the stage and, like most the players who will come after her, chooses to sit down for her performance. Also like most of the ensuing competitors, this first performer plays what has come to be known as the “Irish flute”: a variation on the Western transverse, simple system or baroque flute which is made of hardwood with 0-to-8 metal keys. After blowing a few notes to warm up her instrument, she launches straight into her first tune of the competition: a four-part jig. The solo melody of the tune is accompanied only by the steady tapping of the performer’s shoe on the floor, as she moves her foot in time to the tune. After playing her jig through three times, the performer sits quietly for half a minute before the judges look up from their adjudication sheets and nod for her to continue on to the next tune, a hornpipe. After the hornpipe and the final reel are played, the audience applauds and the judges bend over their adjudication sheets for several minutes before the next competitor is called to the front.

The volunteer who is serving as announcer for the competition adds a few off-the-cuff comments to his introduction of the next competitor: a young man from Chicago. The announcer emphasizes that the performer has travelled all the way from the United States and talks at some length about how remarkable it is that young people in the States are working so hard to learn Irish traditional music. The commentary leaves me smiling as it carries the slightly condescending tone of many competition announcers as they discuss American competitors. The Chicagoan plays confidently through his tunes, and is followed by several other competitors, some of whom show their nerves more than others through occasional missed notes, wobbly ornaments, or mistimed breaths.

The flute player who ends up winning first place in the competition is a young woman from England who has had a history of unusual success in *Fleadh* competitions, with many

previous wins in different age groups. She has chosen to perform three very challenging tunes, including a four-part jig, a five-part hornpipe, and five-part reel. The extreme length of these tunes and their repeats mean that she is playing, in total, for nearly twice as long as many of the other competitors. Each tune is also replete with nearly every ornament or breathing/articulation technique available to the modern Irish flutist, and the many repeated parts allow demonstration of multiple approaches to melodic variation as well. She is a very composed and impressive musician, and there is little surprise from the audience when she is awarded first place at the end of the competition.

Judging Tradition, Judging Community

While the social and commercial aspects of the *Fleadh* have courted their own measure of controversy over the years, as described above, critiques of the *Fleadh* amongst musicians (both affiliated with Comhaltas and not) often focus on the criteria by which the competitions are adjudicated. Indeed, academic evaluations of Comhaltas have also focused heavily on this most public and explicit of attempts to shape performance practice and, by extension, musical community. The analyses of Fleming (2004), O'Shea (2008), and Henry (1989) all highlight informants' impressions of Comhaltas as a "standardizing" force and the frequent arbitrariness of adjudication: the perception that adjudicators are not musicians or qualified members of the musical community, with the proper musical and social understanding to evaluate other performers. These perceptions contribute to the sense of a "Comhaltas style" of performance, favored in competition judging, which glosses over the musical choices and identifiers of certain regional and local communities.

Opinions from musicians about the impact of competitions on performance and community tend to fall into three categories: enthusiastic, ambivalent, and/or actively hostile towards competition as a force in shaping traditional music. Paddy Glackin fell into the ambivalent category when, after describing how much the *Fleadh* meant to him as a student attending sessions and other informal events, he both dismissed the relevance of the competitions and mentioned how confusing and untrustworthy the adjudication often was:

Lauren Stoebel: And what were the competitions like. Did you enjoy that?

Paddy Glackin: They were what they were, it was something you did, you know. Like you know... I did it, and it was grand. But at the end of the day you walked out of the thing and, you know.

L: Nobody cared?

P: So what? You know, I mean, again, you don't need that particular type of validation, I don't think.

L: So did you just, sort of, do it because other people were doing it?

P: I did it because it's just what you did, you know. And I have a particular view on how I—I don't particularly see a value in it. I really don't. But that's cause, again, that'll be me being seen as a crank.

L: Well, you're not alone there, that's for sure... I mean there are people who argue that they're really a great inspiration for the kids to play more.

P: They are, provided that you see them for what they are. I mean, any of the great players I ever played with never played in a competition. They all didn't need it, you know. Now, there is another argument that it helps standards and it gives young kids a

focus. Don't argue with that. My only problem is that when the guy adjudicating doesn't know what he's talking about...

L: [laughs] Did that ever happen with you?

P: Yes, it did, of course. No musicians adjudicating. That used to really bug me. To have an adjudicator that's sitting there commenting on you when he couldn't play. That's, like, that's just again, by the by. (Interview with Paddy Glackin, June 15, 2010)

Even though he now spends months every year preparing his own students for the *Fleadh* competitions, fiddle player Denis Liddy also had mixed feelings about the competitions of his youth. When asked about how seriously he practiced for the competitions, Liddy said that he “didn't see the point” of practicing hard:

It wasn't a quest to be winning. We didn't care at all. It was nice to win something, but it wasn't the end of the world. My dad always said that if you go first or last, it didn't matter because you weren't any better at the start of the day then you were at the end of it. (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009)

This type of perspective—placing the competitions within the larger context of playing music in a traditional music community—is of great concern to many older musicians, who see some young players as overly competition-focused. *Uilleann* piper Gay McKeon shared mixed impressions of the impact of competitions on contemporary students, particularly in comparison with the first decade of the *Fleadh*:

Gay McKeon: [Y]ou're seeing hot shots, inevitably—very often competition leads them astray.

Lauren Stoebe: How does it lead them astray?

G: I think it—they feel, or people tell them that they’re great, but it’s all relative. And then the hard reality of development—development happens at different stages in different people’s lives. Particularly between the ages of 12 and 18. Or 20... And some people come on and need some balance. Some people feel validated by the competitions, and all of a sudden, the people who are getting last or not even getting placed are way better. And they find it hard to take it... So I would think that there’s an imbalance, and I’m not a big fan of competition I have to say. But my kids have gone into competitions and I say fine. Take it with a grain of salt, don’t be bothered if you get first, last or different. But use it as a platform to practice and do the best you can. But I would never be an advocate of that. And I think that competition for adults is absolutely bizarre.

L: But it was so different back in the ‘50s it seems like, people then—it meant a lot to people, right?

G: Oh it did. And the point about it was, see the numbers were much smaller. They needed an excuse and a reason to get together. That ethos was there. And people strutted their stuff. And it was very important... The *Fleadh* is like, coming together and meeting people that you’d never met, and playing music with them and all that. I think that’s a great aspect of it. (Interview with Gay McKeon, June 29, 2010)

A major strain of ambivalence also comes from the nature of competition in and of itself, and the idea of all musicians working towards a common sound or standard. Even long-time teacher and *Fleadh*-organizer Attracta Brady expressed concern on that front when asked whether the subjectivity of judging and the pressure to conform are issues for her:

Lauren Stoebel: Do you think that ever has a negative impact? Or do the positives outweigh the negatives?

Attracta Brady: I think the positives outweigh the negatives, but you're right in saying there is a negative impact. That you get people going into competitions where they don't achieve—where maybe on a different day with a different judge they would achieve. And sometimes it turns people off. But at the end of the day, the whole lot is a quagmire, because how do you sort it out? How do you get everybody to think the same? Because you don't *want* everybody to think the same. And then if you have a standardized set of expectations in a competition, then you're going to produce a standardized set of musicians, then your local musician and your local style is obsolete, and you don't want that either. (Interview with Attracta Brady, June 22, 2009)

But there are also many musicians who are unapologetic in their support of the competitions. Flutist and teacher Gary Shannon, who grew up playing in competitions and now coaches his own students for the *Fleadh*, had a perspective that aligned more closely with Comhaltas' own goals:

Lauren Stoebel: Did you enjoy competing in competitions? Or was it just something that was expected?

Gary Shannon: Oh I did, yeah. Well, I think competition's natural. It's part of the human condition. I mean, we're all competing with each other. From when you're two months old, you're competing with your siblings... It's a natural extension of that. People enjoy to compete, and enjoy the tension and the dynamic between yourself and other people. And the satisfaction you get from succeeding. Or even the adrenaline you get from the process itself. So I would say definitely I enjoyed it. It disappoints me sometimes that people would criticize competition, just for the sake of criticizing competition. That it's unnatural and that. Yes, music exists outside of competition, and obviously from a purist

musical point of view competition would seem to be something inflexible and a straightjacket and would seem to be shoehorning music into a particular category and style. But at the same time it does have plenty of merit. (Interview with Gary Shannon, November 16, 2009)

Shannon argued that while competition can remove performance from the context of its local community—both socially and stylistically—he believed that the tradition is flexible enough to withstand or even thrive on that process.

Regarding Comhaltas competitions, Shannon and others acknowledged that if you are concerned with winning, it is often necessary to consciously adapt to either a perceived “competition style” or the known preferences of certain adjudicators. Majella Bartley was very upfront about how this worked for her when she was a competitor in the solo flute category:

Majella Bartley: This is one bad element about competition, is that it does create this kind of different style that isn't a regional style. It's like a more of a—it's hard to explain...anyway, it's a style that's kind of across the board, where everybody in Ireland is playing this one thing. This is how you have to play to win. And you would go into a competition, you would see who was sitting there adjudicating, and you'd say, right, this is how I have to play to win here. That's going on a lot.

Lauren Stoebel: Would you adjust on the spot?

M: Yeah, you would do that. And you'd maybe change tunes, do this, do that, to try to suit the adjudicator that's sitting there. And you went in and you weren't playing your own style. You were being a little more refined, holding back a little bit. Because the Comhaltas element—there's a certain way to play to win a competition... which is still a lovely style of playing, but it doesn't lead into an individuality. Do you know what I

mean? You couldn't just go in and play how you wanted to play and be judged on your capability of maybe doing loads of extra little bits and pieces, extra little technique and stuff like that. That mightn't be seen as just 100% percent traditional...

L: So what's an example of adjusting to suit a judge?

M: For a certain adjudicator you'd have to go in and you'd have to play very diaphragmy, very breathy, which wouldn't be my style [on the flute] at all. Like I'd be more flowing, straight playing like Matt Molloy kinda thing. But if you played like that, this adjudicator would say that isn't actually flute playing, you'd have to use your diaphragm to play a flute. You have to do this to get anywhere in the competition.

(Interview with Majella Bartley, November 17, 2009)

But Gary Shannon, again, puts the onus on the musicians to place the restrictions of the “Comhaltas style” in the perspective of a lifetime of performance in various communities and contexts:

Gary Shannon: I think if a musician sees the full picture they realize you put on a hat and you play that style and then you put on a different hat when you're playing in a session, when you're touring and so on.

Lauren Stoebel: So you'd actually play differently for a competition than you would for something else?

G: Yeah.

L: What would the differences have been in style and—

G: Well, one has to be more conservative. Yeah, because the aims of the organization are conservation. Therefore it's ingrained that competitions have to be conservative because the organization set out to preserve a particular style and to preserve the integrity of what

was there in the 50s. Which at the time was the remains of what had been there in the 1920s and '30s and '40s... That is respectable as an aim. And I think that only for the fact that they're there, there wouldn't be so many people playing traditional music now in the old way. So the people who are playing, through having been in competition, are kind of a living archive. An archive of flesh and blood. Which is no bad thing. And I mean anybody is free to play anything they like outside of that as well. But there's always this magnet that draws people back, even if they've left it. When they want to maybe put their kids through competition and be traditional musicians, there's this thing, this magnet of the Comhaltas system which draws people back to play in the old fashion... But I know how restrictive it can be. Because I remember very well when I was in third or fourth year in school, I was competing and I wasn't happy with how I was getting on. I had this innovative style and I used to over elaborate and put in too much embellishment and so on, for Comhaltas competitions. And it frustrated me when I wouldn't come first, second, or third, and I'd say aww these other guys, they're not doing as much as me and so on. But I just didn't see the bigger picture. And I remember writing this letter to Comhaltas, and oh I was soooo conceited, in retrospect, about how there's no recognition given to people who are trying to push the boundaries and be a bit more adventurous and have more interesting style and try to be more sophisticated and so on and so forth. I mean, what I didn't understand was that wasn't what Comhaltas was about! Comhaltas is about preserving something that is already there. And if you want to do that, of course, go away, do it. But not within a Comhaltas competition... What I'm trying to say is that I understand how people feel, when they come up against the

conservative aspects of Comhaltas, but it is what it is. And it has merit. (Interview with Gary Shannon, November 16, 2009)

While the conservative nature of the competitions was implicit rather than explicit within the rules and regulations of the *Fleadh*, processes of selecting and training adjudicators could reinforce certain performance aesthetics. Roscommon fiddle player, broadcaster, and Comhaltas Music Officer Paddy Ryan was frequently at the center of the adjudicator selection process for the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*. Ryan explained that he had a large database with all of the names of potential adjudicators, divided into an “a list” and a “b list,” with the goal being to include as many “a list” names as possible. These ideal adjudication candidates were often former All-Ireland winners, as well as those who had participated in other Comhaltas activities, from teacher training to *Seisiún* performance (Interview with Paddy Ryan, August 20, 2009). But Ryan and others admit that these ideal adjudicators were often hard to find for all categories of competition. Adjudicators cannot judge competitions in which their own students are performing, among other restrictions, so occasionally the ideal teacher/performer cannot be found. Regular seminars for adjudicators are run throughout Ireland; attendance is strongly encouraged, although not required.²⁶

From the *Fleadh* organizer’s perspective, choosing a more “independent” musician as an adjudicator does not always suit the goal of a smoothly running event, as administrator Jim McAllister asserted:

You see the one thing a *Fleadh* organizer doesn’t want is controversy. You know, they don’t want to find themselves at the end of a competition, with, you know, six mummies all standing outside waitin’ on the *Fleadh* secretary to appear. So they can give him a

²⁶ Comhaltas began officially guiding its adjudicators in 1968 with the publication of a booklet (*Notai do Mholtóirí*; Notes for Adjudicators) with guidelines for competition judges.

hard time. So they want it to be fair, obviously, because again you find that the people who take the time to do administration at that level, their kids have gone through music by and large, you know, they've been involved through the competition thing. They stay on in the branch because it's a social thing, it's a family thing, and they're of a certain age profile, but their own kids aren't competing so by and large they don't have an axe to grind. So what they want is, they want fair adjudication, they want everything to run nice and smoothly, and they really don't want anybody coming around afterwards and sayin', oh yeah well, it's quite obvious why you picked him, because you're family come from Galway and he's a Galway adjudicator and they knew your grandfather—all of that. No one wants that. They really don't, you know. So you make it as easy as—so, you know, you look and you try to pick adjudicators who aren't going to be contentious. You try to pick adjudicators who are not going to have preferential styles. (Interview with Jim McAllister, May 7, 2009)

Once the adjudicators are selected, organizers often try to pair up musicians with differing amounts of judging experience. For competitions adjudicated by pairs of judges, one judge will often therefore take the lead in both assigning scores and communicating judging criteria in the required final public discussion of the comments and criteria used.²⁷ In this way, as Denis Liddy explained, the values and processes of adjudication at Comhaltas competitions are passed along to new judges:

²⁷ Multiple judges on a panel does not automatically indicate that one judge's decisions will receive precedence. Several adjudicators indicated to me that they have been involved in disputed decisions or arguments over scoring and placement of winners. One way of sorting out these types of disputes is a "recall" of top competitors, requiring them to perform one additional selection for the judges, to allow them to reach a decision.

Lauren Stoebel: What was that like the first few times? Did you find it challenging? Or did you know exactly what you were doing?

Denis Liddy: No, I didn't. I didn't have a clue what I was doing. I didn't find it challenging in the least bit, because I was never left high and dry.

L: How so?

D: Because I was always with someone who was 50, 60, 70, d'you know? I remember 1983 in particular, the funniest day I've ever had as an adjudicator was sitting down with Martin Hayes. He thought I was adjudicating, and I said, "You must be joking me! You're the one that's adjudicating!" He started laughing at me. He said, alright I'll do the adjudicating if you do the writing. And I walked into that one! But yeah, I never felt any kind of pressure or whatever. For the first, I'd say, four or five years adjudicating. Simply because I wasn't in the deciding seat. I was just there as a critical ear, and I learned a lot from it. (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009)

In addition to the guidance of other adjudicators, competition judges' comments are also shaped by the forms that they must fill out during and after the performances. These forms ask for comments and a score in various categories of evaluation, with some categories weighted more or less than others. Categories include style and ornamentation, variation, rhythm, and command of instrument, with the most points allocated to style and ornamentation.

7comhaltas ceoltoiri eireann

Uilleann Pipes

Official Adjudication Sheet

Fleadh Cheoil:

Name of Competitor: _____

Location:

Instrument:

Grade:

Classification of Piece	Comments:	Marks:
Uilleann Pipes Suggested Marking Guidelines: Style & Ornamentation 25 marks Technique & Ornamentation 25 marks Rhythm & Phrasing 15 marks Tuning (inc drones) 15 marks Regulators 10 marks Choice of tunes 10 marks		
		Total:
	Date:	Adjudicator:

Image 17. Sample adjudication sheet from a 2014 *fleadh* competition.

Adjudicators are also instructed to provide a brief verbal discussion of their evaluation process prior to announcing the winners at the end of the competition. My own notes on these comments for the 15-18 Flute competitions, for example, at *Fleadhanna* from County- to All-Ireland-level over multiple years demonstrated the variety in approaches and emphases amongst

different adjudicators. Several adjudicators specifically mentioned that they expected “the basics” to be there for all flute competitors, including good intonation from lower to upper octaves, and a “strong” tone, linked to breathing technique, articulation (use of tongue or throat to emphasize notes), and embouchure (control of mouth muscles).

Another commonality across adjudicators was an expectation that competitors make use of a “broad palette” of ornamentation, or the decoration of particular notes and phrases with adjacent notes. Language used to describe how this ornamentation should be deployed did vary from judge to judge, however, with one judge commenting that she heard some players just using the common technique of “rolls” (ornamenting a base or primary melodic note with upper and lower adjacent notes) when she expected a greater variation of technique at this level, including “crans,” a more challenging ornamentation technique borrowed from *uilleann* pipers. Another adjudicator, however, commented that competitors should be careful in how they deploy their arsenal of ornamentation, since ornamentation is “like make-up”: if you wear too much of it all you see is the make-up; too much ornamentation and you lose track of the tune.

Use of ornamentation (frequency and type) and articulation, while in some respects an individual aesthetic choice, can also be linked to individual teachers and/or their regional or local style preferences. Celebrated flute players from different regions of Ireland will often make drastically different choices regarding use of throat, breath, or tongue articulation, varying from emphasizing notes several times per phrase, creating a very “punchy” or rhythmic sound, to using none at all, creating a more flowing and smooth sound. As Majella Bartley commented above, in her experience different adjudicators had sometimes shown a preference for one sound over another, requiring her to adjust her playing on the spot.

Some of the 15-18 flute competition adjudicators I observed, however, did make an effort to acknowledge both the wide array of stylistic options available to competitors and the difficulties of comparing them in a competition. One judge, who herself had roots in County Clare, emphasized that she was looking for “development of individual expression and individual style.” She commented that she expected a “sense of integrity” in a flute player, and while it was nice to choose well-known flute tunes such as those favored by renowned flute player Matt Molloy (of Chieftains fame), she expected competitors to “give it their own style” and “tell us a story” with stylistic choices.

Another judge, with roots in County Sligo, scolded players for not being consistent across tune types, i.e., comfortable with reels and jigs (the most common tune types across regions) but struggling with hornpipes. He also suggested that stylistic choices for flute players should also extend to the choice of particular tunes, and that he was disappointed that some players chose tunes better suited to the fiddle than the flute: “some people picked tunes so difficult for the flute that there was no point coming up here...why play Paddy Fahey tunes when you could pick Vincent Broderick”?²⁸ Comments on the tempo of competitors’ playing were also inconsistent across adjudicators, with one judge suggesting that “very slow playing is not dance music,” while another commented that players were playing too fast and should “slow down a tad to get a nicer rhythm.” These adjudicators could have been asking for a similar goal of an ideal tempo for “lift” and “swing” in dance music, but their comments illustrate the difficulties of articulating this concept in a competition setting.

²⁸ Paddy Fahey was a well-known fiddle player, many of whose compositions have entered the traditional music lexicon. Many of flute player and composer Vincent Broderick’s tunes are also commonly played in many different performance contexts.

On the extreme end of criticism of competitions, musicians spoke scornfully of adjudicators highlighting seemingly trivial items, from toe tapping to clothing choices of competitors, as Denis Liddy mentioned:

Oh, I had one lady this year: at the Munster *Fleadh* she commented on people's socks! Socks! She said 'presentation matters.' And presentation in her book was not the music alone. It was how you looked on stage. Now, I'd be a stickler for people looking good on stage and all the rest of it. But when she actually said that somebody was wearing yellow socks in a group! I said, I know women can do everything, they can focus and multitask and all the rest of it. But you're focusing on somebody's socks, you ain't listening to what's going on. There's nobody that good. (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009)

But when asked about what they looked for when acting as adjudicators, or what they believed makes a good adjudicator, many of my informants spoke not of specific techniques or interpretive choices, but instead mentioned more ineffable (or subjective) aspects of performance such as "feel," "color," or "musicality." As Majella Bartley put it: "And how is their understanding of music—you can get an understanding from them, kind of a feel, you know what I mean?" (Interview with Majella Bartley, November 17, 2009). And Denis Liddy:

And it's not about just tone, it's about expression. It's not just about expression, it's about being able pull off the little things that make any music outstanding... What I'm teaching my students, I tell them, 'listen, this is what we're looking for. We're looking to give a certain sense of color in the performance.' Variation isn't just melodic. Variation's about tone, mood. You know, putting that kind of color into your

performance, whether it's with the bow or your hands, your fingers. Whatever. And very very few people can do that. (Interview with Denis Liddy, December 14, 2009)

These perspectives call to mind the processes of transmission discussed in Chapter 3, in which more easily articulated aspects of individual and communal performance styles must be communicated, as well as more challenging skills of listening and sensitivity to community norms of behavior and performance. Musicians' experiences clearly demonstrate many aspects of competition standards and the often conservative "Comhaltas style" that would seem to contradict these efforts to cultivate individuality and sensitivity to the local and regional sounds of traditional music communities. The effects of Comhaltas' conservatism and the subjectivity of adjudication efforts emerge in competition commentary and, occasionally, results, but my interviews and observations do not demonstrate a clear relationship between how musicians prepare and play for competitions and the way that they perform as part of various musical communities, from their home Comhaltas branch, to local sessions, to concerts and other festivals. The teachers and administrators quoted above appear, for the most part, to be concerned with making the distinction between different performance contexts and community settings, but their complaints and observations suggest that others may not be as diligent in contextualizing the competition experience for younger students.

Conclusion

Critics of the *Fleadh* insinuate that competition, particularly as shaped by Comhaltas, stands diametrically opposed to the organic growth and flexibility of an Irish traditional music community. The reality, however, is that the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* and, by extension, its sponsoring organization Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, functions in a spectrum between perceived

extremes of centralized control or authority, on one hand, and popular ideals of musical creativity and freedom, on the other. Regarding competition's role in the musical expression of communities in Ireland and abroad, the key to analyzing the *Fleadh* lies in the relationship of the competitive performances at the event to the complex musical lives and identities of the performers. While competition plays a unique and powerful role in shaping conceptions of tradition and authenticity in public policy and the public sphere, competitive performance in and of itself does not completely determine musical identities.

In the context of an article on music and nationalism in Latin America, Thomas Turino argues that, "Contests are thus a key device for bringing ad hoc participatory traditions into formal presentational contexts—often initiating the profound conceptual shift of 'music-dance as play or ceremonial interaction' to 'music-dance as art product'" (2003:185). But in the case of the *Fleadh Cheoil* musicians often move fluidly in and out of these formal and informal performance contexts, and many openly refuse to place themselves definitively in one category/community or another, either stylistically or ideologically. At the *Fleadh* and at home, they have multiple opportunities to move in and out of different participatory and presentational contexts for performance.

This pattern—a highly controlled environment bringing together different musical communities, creating both conflict and coherence—has appeared again and again throughout studies of musical competition, particularly (but not exclusively) in European revival movements. As Judit Frigyesi has written regarding the Hungarian folksong revival: "These [folksong] competitions were not without problems, but they had a positive effect in giving live performance of folk music a rank in cultural life. Also, they brought together traditional peasant performers from the villages with young performers from the cities" (1996:72). The bringing

together of musicians from different communities and backgrounds, in a positive sense, is also a focus of Gunderson and Barz's analysis of musical competition in East Africa:

Competitive environments foster cooperation because it is evident that opposing sides have to work together on several levels. Several contributions [to the essay collection] grapple with this paradox, and investigate furthermore the role that music competitions play in the goal of community formation and solidification, bringing and holding individuals, clans, voluntary associations, ethnicities, and nation-states together in both traditional and creative new ways. Music competitions are a place where community values are displayed, remembered, and reinforced. (Gunderson and Barz 2000:15)

As in the case of the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*, the “paradox” created by joining so many types of performance and their communities of origin in one event continues to prompt musicians’ reevaluation of membership in those communities. The formal and informal performances of the *Fleadh* also necessitate public and private discussion of the extent to which certain communities or groups exercise control over the public performance of their values and histories. The musicians quoted in this chapter have, for example, stressed the ways that a national gathering such as the *Fleadh* has brought the depth and breadth of the national traditional music community into sharp focus for them personally. At the same time, the difficulties of judging and being evaluated in the context of competition have caused them to both strengthen and question performance styles derived from their own local teaching and performing communities. The extraordinary space and time of the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* provides myriad opportunities for the musical performance of collective selfhood.

CONCLUSION

Four Moments of Musical Community

The Tullamore Catholic church is filled to capacity for the final competition of the 2008 *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*: the Senior *Céilí* Bands. The *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister of Ireland) has just given a speech, followed by Comhaltas Director General Labhras Ó Murchú, and a low buzz of conversation and anticipation fills the sanctuary as the crowd waits for the first of fifteen bands from Ireland, the United States, England, and Scotland to demonstrate precision ensemble playing unlike that heard in any other performance context of Irish traditional music. As I wait for the competition to begin, I chat with the elderly woman sitting next to me in the pew. She tells me that she has attended every All-Ireland Senior *Céilí* Band competition for decades: an annual ritual she shared with her husband, who is now deceased. She speaks with emotion about how important the ritual has been for her over the years, and how much it means to her that she can still attend. The first band enters the hall and the crowd settles into complete silence. The five adjudicators take up their pencils and my neighbor turns to listen, riveted on the musical performance before us.

It's a cool and rainy night in Dublin, and the basement performance space and bar at the Teachers' Club union hall is packed with members and supporters of the soon-to-be-former Clontarf branch of Comhaltas. The north Dublin branch has been embroiled in a struggle with the Comhaltas head office over the management, funding, and construction of a new facility, and they are holding a fundraiser to support their cause as the branch faces dissolution by the *Ard Chomhairle* and Comhaltas Director General Labhras Ó Murchú. The controversy has drawn significant negative publicity for Comhaltas in the mainstream media and brought forth a lot of

criticism of the power structures governing the organization. As the night wears on, local musicians perform solo sets of tunes, adult and children's *céili* bands play, and much beer is consumed, when Dublin singer and composer Pat Goode is invited to the stage to perform a brand new song, in honor of the cause:

Oh, 45 years in *Chluain Tarbh*, *Chluain Tarbh*, *Chluain Tarbh* [Irish for Clontarf]
 Now our branch could be soon *marbh* [dead]
 If Labhras, he gets his way.
 Larry Murphy [English version of the name Labhras Ó Murchú], he gets his way...

Chairman Lao, he has the solution, dissolution, dissolution
 And it might cause a big revolution,
 Let the Battle for Clontarf¹ begin.
 We're determined, not to give in...

And that's not the end of the story, the story, the story,
 At your peril, ignore the *ceoltóirí* [musicians],
 When they're playin' The Rights of Man [a popular hornpipe],
 When they're playin' The Rights of Man,
 It's time the battle began.

The crowd erupts in whistles, cheers, and clapping as Goode finishes his performance. The night continues with good cheer. Funds raised will eventually assist in establishing Clontarf as an independent music school after they are ejected from Comhaltas.

The New York Irish Center in Long Island City, Queens, is warm and steamy as snow falls on quiet streets outside. The *Ull Mór* (Big Apple) Comhaltas branch's monthly set dance *céili* is under way, and the room is packed wall to wall with sets and lined with chairs and with tables laden with Irish soda bread and tea. A slightly elevated platform stage showcases a local *céili* band featuring drums, flute, fiddle, and accordion, currently playing a rousing set of reels as

¹ A reference to a famous battle in 1014 between high king of Ireland Brian Ború and an alliance of Viking and Leinster forces.

the dancers move through the line-ups in the second figure of the Clare Lancers set. My own dancing partner is an elderly Irish gentleman, who arrived in New York in the mid-1950s and regularly attends *céilís* around the New York City region, and the other six members of our set include a musician friend of mine with no Irish ancestry, another friend who is the daughter of Irish immigrants, a young woman about my age who has a long background in competitive Irish step dancing, and a middle-aged man who regularly attends folk dances of various traditions all over the city. The crowd is multi-generational, the atmosphere welcoming to new dancers, and the tunes being played frequently call to mind the playing of the Sligo master musicians from early-20th century New York whose repertoire has long dominated the region. As the set comes to an end several figures later, everyone erupts into applause for the musicians, the dancers thank each other for the pleasure, and the crowd mingles to the taste of cool water, warm tea, and sweet soda bread.

It's the inaugural night of the County Kerry *fleadh*. After the official speeches and concerts, a couple of friends and I are ensconced in a cozy, semi-public pub/social hall accessed through an unlabeled white door at the back of a small grocery shop. Every stool and booth is filled with area musicians, family, and friends, and the room roars with conversation and laughter. The night only gets more raucous, however, as two well-known piano and button accordion players grab their instruments and begin what could only be described as a musical duel. Tunes blast from their instruments, nearly drowning out attempts at conversation, while dancers of all ages clear a wooden floor in the middle of the room and begin dancing a polka set native to the area. The musicians sweat and laugh as they play, the rhythm and lift of their tunes keep the whole room buzzing. Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann has not been mentioned since we

entered the room, but the tunes and sets continue late into the night even as competitions are set to begin bright and early the next morning.

These four moments highlight the variety and interdependence of the musical communities discussed throughout this dissertation. At the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*, it appears that the elderly spectator has maintained a long-term and emotional, if peripheral, connection to a national cultural community prioritizing a specific style of musical performance. Our conversation suggests that her connection to the music is less about local, everyday relationships and performances, and more about a national cultural identity and sense of history. These national and nationalist connections were a large part of the drive from within and outside of Comhaltas to insert traditional music into the language of cultural policy in Ireland, as described in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. The extra-ordinary space of the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* draws together explicitly political figures and discourse with musical performances of many types. While the politics of the event are of more or less importance to different musicians and attendees at the Senior *Céili* Band finals, the evening manifests the methods by which traditional music draws together a national musical community in the public sphere. The national community, however, reflects a plurality: a collective of collectives with all of the ensuing tensions and opportunities therein.

In Dublin, at the Clontarf branch protest fundraiser, we get a glimpse of both the strength of the local musical community as a social and performative collective, and the conflicts that these strong local bonds can cause when intertwined with a broader national community. As seen in interviews quoted throughout this dissertation, musicians and local branch members are often able to live and perform in relation to the larger Comhaltas collective in spite of internal doubts

about aspects of the organization, from competition to teaching methods to political connections. In the case of the former Clontarf branch, however, members were unable to support what they viewed as the overreach of the head office and Director General Labhras Ó Murchú. Even though members of the now-independent *Ceoltóirí Chluain Tarbh* music organization still participate in Comhaltas-run competitions and often speak in positive terms of the group's general mission, the song lyrics quoted above demonstrate the depth of the animosity towards the political side of the larger musical collective that once prompted the founding of their own local musical community. In this case, the politics of musical community work contrary to the performance of collective selfhood within the organization. The situation also demonstrates, as stressed in the introduction to this dissertation, that the actions of individuals—powerful or not—within a collective cannot always be conflated with the mission or sentiment of the community as a whole.

The New York Comhaltas *céilí* is in some ways the antithesis of the Clontarf benefit, as the participants who come together for that single event are more members of multiple loosely intersecting communities of ethnicity and affinity than hard core partisans of a strong local collective. For the members of the diverse New York Irish music and dance community, a Comhaltas *céilí* is often a peripheral event, indistinguishable from similar dances hosted by county clubs and other cultural organizations. But the participants also reflect the continued role of Comhaltas in the United States as an entry point—a “safe space” as created by various Comhaltas branches in Ireland at different point in history—into a unique local and international musical community. The dance provides exposure to the specific movements and sounds, as well as the more general stories, tastes, and memories, that define both Comhaltas and Irish traditional music as a collective of collectives.

And at the Kerry *fleadh*, a formal national community provides the impetus for a spontaneous musical gathering drawing together local and regional musicians who share repertoire, style, and social connections, whether or not they support the sponsoring organization. The musical community, in this case, is performed through instrument choice (accordion), tune choice (polkas and slides, among others), performance style (driving rhythm and strong lift), conversation (humor and anecdote), and movement (sets and steps danced). The strength of the collective being performed that night is so powerful that even peripheral participants such as myself are drawn into the rhythms and sociability of the community. There may be aspects of the evening's performances and relationships which are nurtured through broader collectives of region and nation, but the joy of the evening is located in that specific time and place: a musical community which is rooted in specific families, friendships, and performances, but is not immutably bound by them.

These musical moments demonstrate the ways that Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann draws together and interacts with different musical communities, often bringing them into contact (and conflict) via politics of identity and power in the public sphere. But because these identity politics are so multi-layered and complex, they also highlight the preliminary nature of much of the work in this dissertation. There are many new directions in research suggested by Comhaltas' role in the complex of musical communities constituting Irish traditional music, some of which involve moving beyond musical communities to the ways that musicians and others perform their collective selfhoods in other public ways.

The increased migration within the European Union and the flows of refugee and immigrant populations into and out of Ireland in the latter decades of the 20th century and into the 21st raise important questions about how these populations fit into national and local

communities incorporating traditional music. How, for example, do these newer communities play into evolving discussions of music and Irish identity on the level of cultural policy? To what extent do local Irish traditional music communities provide access to emigrants or refugees? Do music organizations play a role in any of these interactions? Likewise, are the musics of these “new” diasporic and migrant musicians recognized as “traditional” in a discourse that has formed around a relatively monocultural society?

In addition to these areas of inquiry, an emphasis on the process of community—the constant changes shaping community identity formation and dissolution—requires further examination of the ways that Comhaltas’ own self-identification has changed in the wake of the *Meitheal* development program of the early 2000s, after the major period of fieldwork for this dissertation. Other traditional music-oriented organizations in Ireland have also expanded goals and operations in the past couple of decades, demanding further inquiry into the musical communities they nurture and support. And finally, an examination of the politics of musical community could ideally be extended to more systematic cross-cultural comparison of traditional music organizations and the impact of cultural policy and funding on musical communities. Each of these future lines of inquiry builds upon the central theses of this dissertation: the importance of musical community as a unique site for the performance of collective selfhood, and the flexibility and fluidity of these communities as lived and performed by their participants, often in the face of apparently rigid ideologies and politics.

Appendix 1

Interviews Conducted by the Author

- Acosta, Annemarie (Accordion player, Accompanist, Teacher). Personal Interview. February 6, 2006. New York, NY.
- Bartley, Majella (Flute player, Teacher, Comhaltas Youth Officer). Personal Interview. November 7, 2009. Limerick, Ireland.
- Brady, Attracta (Fiddle player, Teacher, Comhaltas officer, Fleadh organizer). Personal Interview. June 22, 2009. Tullamore, Co. Offaly, Ireland.
- Connaghan, Tara (Fiddle player, Teacher, Arts Administrator, *Deis* advisor). Personal Interview. December 20, 2009. Dublin, Ireland.
- Conway, Brian (Fiddle player, Teacher). Personal Interview. October 15, 2006. Bronx, NY.
- Doherty, Liz (Fiddle player, Scholar, Teacher). Phone Interview. October 3, 2008.
- Donachie, Maureen (Dancer, Concertina Player, Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. April 10, 2005. Queens, NY.
- Farber, Lisa (Flute player). Personal Interview. March 1, 2005. New York, NY.
- Flanagan, Rose (Fiddle player, Teacher). Personal Interview. March 10, 2006. Bronx, NY.
- Flynn, Paul (Fiddle player, Head of Traditional Arts for the Arts Council). Personal Interview. September 16, 2008.
- Furlong, Patty (Accordion player, Teacher). Phone Interview. September 28, 2007.
- Glackin, Paddy (Fiddle player, Broadcaster). Personal Interview. June 15, 2010. Dublin, Ireland.
- Goldman, Ira (Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. March 13, 2005. New York, NY.
- Johnston, Derek (Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. November 4, 2009. Dublin, Ireland.
- Keating, Paul (Dancer, Arts administrator, Journalist, Comhaltas officer). Phone Interview. March 23, 2005.
- Liddy, Denis (Fiddle player, Teacher, Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. December 14, 2009. Crusheen, Co. Clare, Ireland.
- Liddy, Pat (Dancer, Comhaltas officer), and Joseph O'Connor (Comhaltas Regional Resource Center administrator). Personal Interview. November 19, 2009. Ennis, Co. Clare, Ireland.
- Loneragan, Aisling (Accordion player, Teacher). Personal Interview. July 16, 2008. Dublin, Ireland.
- Mac Mathúna, Séamus (Singer, Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. December 8, 2009. Dublin, Ireland.
- McAllister, Jim (Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. May 7, 2009. Dublin, Ireland.
- McGraw, Ted (Archivist, Broadcaster, Comhaltas officer). Phone Interview. September 27, 2007.
- McKeon, Gay (Uilleann piper, NPU administrator, Teacher). Personal Interview. June 29, 2010. Dublin, Ireland.
- McLaughlin, Dermot (Fiddle player, Arts administrator). Personal Interview. September 22, 2008. Dublin, Ireland.
- Mullen, Maurice (Flute player, former Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. September 26, 2008. Dublin, Ireland.
- Ní Chonaráin, Siobhán (Flute player, Teacher, Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. May 28, 2009. Dublin, Ireland.

- O'Leary, Niall (Dancer, Accordion player, former Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. March 6, 2005. New York, NY.
- Ó Murchú, Labhrás (Comhaltas Director General). Personal Interview. June 20, 2010. Dublin, Ireland.
- Ó Nualltáin, Breandán (Flute player, Scholar, Former Comhaltas staff member). Personal Interview. April 26, 2009. Dublin, Ireland.
- Ó Rócháin, Muiris (Arts administrator, Teacher, Song collector). Personal Interview. December 12, 2009. Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare, Ireland.
- O'Shaughnessy, Pearl (Fiddle player, Teacher). Personal Interview. November 11, 2009. Howth, Ireland.
- Power, Ben (Flute player, Teacher, Scholar). Personal Interview. April 3, 2005. New York, NY.
- Quinn, Toner (Fiddle player, Journalist, Publisher). Personal Interview. October 6, 2008. Dublin, Ireland.
- Rafferty, Michael (Flute player, Teacher) and Terry Rafferty (Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. March 20, 2007. New Jersey.
- Ryan, Paddy (Fiddle player, Broadcaster, Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. August 20, 2009. Tullamore, Co. Offaly, Ireland.
- Shannon, Gary (Flute player, Teacher, Comhaltas officer). Personal Interview. November 16, 2009. Ennis, Co. Clare.
- Taylor, Barry (Scholar, Author, Concertina player). Personal Interview. November 18, 2009. Cooraclare, Co. Clare, Ireland.
- Thomas, Katherine Irwin (Fiddle player, Teacher, Comhaltas officer). Phone Interview. July 14, 2008.
- Verling, Katie (Arts administrator). Personal Interview. June 16, 2009. Ennis, Co. Clare, Ireland.

Appendix 2

Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann Venues

	Town	County	Host Year
1	Mullingar	County Westmeath	1951
2	Clones	County Monaghan	1952
3	Athlone	County Westmeath	1953
4	Cavan	County Cavan	1954
5	Loughrea	County Galway	1955
6	Ennis	County Clare	1956
7	Dungarvan	County Waterford	1957
8	Longford	County Longford	1958
9	Thurles	County Tipperary	1959
10	Boyle	County Roscommon	1960
11	Swinford	County Mayo	1961
12	Gorey	County Wexford	1962
13	Mullingar	County Westmeath	1963
14	Clones	County Monaghan	1964
15	Thurles	County Tipperary	1965
16	Boyle	County Roscommon	1966
17	Enniscorthy	County Wexford	1967
18	Clones	County Monaghan	1968
19	Cashel	County Tipperary	1969
20	Listowel	County Kerry	1970
21	Dublin (Was postponed and held June 1972)	County Dublin	1971
22	Listowel	County Kerry	1972
23	Listowel	County Kerry	1973
24	Listowel	County Kerry	1974
25	Buncrana	County Donegal	1975
26	Buncrana	County Donegal	1976
27	Ennis	County Clare	1977
28	Listowel	County Kerry	1978
29	Buncrana	County Donegal	1979
30	Buncrana	County Donegal	1980
31	Listowel	County Kerry	1981

32 Listowel	County Kerry	1982
33 Clones	County Monaghan	1983
34 Kilkenny City	County Kilkenny	1984
35 Listowel	County Kerry	1985
36 Listowel	County Kerry	1986
37 Listowel	County Kerry	1987
38 Kilkenny City	County Kilkenny	1988
39 Sligo	County Sligo	1989
40 Sligo	County Sligo	1990
41 Sligo	County Sligo	1991
42 Clonmel	County Tipperary	1992
43 Clonmel	County Tipperary	1993
44 Clonmel	County Tipperary	1994
45 Listowel	County Kerry	1995
46 Listowel	County Kerry	1996
47 Ballina	County Mayo	1997
48 Ballina	County Mayo	1998
49 Enniscorthy	County Wexford	1999
50 Enniscorthy	County Wexford	2000
51 Listowel	County Kerry	2001
52 Listowel	County Kerry	2002
53 Clonmel	County Tipperary	2003
54 Clonmel	County Tipperary	2004
55 Letterkenny	County Donegal	2005
56 Letterkenny	County Donegal	2006
57 Tullamore	County Offaly	2007
58 Tullamore	County Offaly	2008
59 Tullamore	County Offaly	2009
60 Cavan	County Cavan	2010
61 Cavan	County Cavan	2011
62 Cavan	County Cavan	2012
63 Derry	County Derry	2013
64 Sligo	County Sligo	2014
65 Sligo	County Sligo	2015

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