



**HAL**  
open science

## Irish Music Redefined, An Outsider's Viewpoint

Erick Falc'Her-Poyroux

► **To cite this version:**

Erick Falc'Her-Poyroux. Irish Music Redefined, An Outsider's Viewpoint. Music and the Irish imagination - Like a Language That We Could All Understand, 2013. halshs-01147773

**HAL Id: halshs-01147773**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01147773>**

Submitted on 4 May 2015

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## IRISH MUSIC REDEFINED, AN OUTSIDER'S VIEWPOINT

Erick Falc'her-Poyroux 2013

Over the past thirty years, Irish music has spread all over the world and, on a par with Irish literature in the twentieth century, has “put Ireland on the map”. Celtic music festivals flourish in Tokyo or in Buenos Aires, Riverdance shows and their offshoots appear on several stages simultaneously, and hundreds of tourists invade Doolin’s two main pubs every week for a little bit of “the pure drop”.

Perhaps guided by Conor Cruise O’Brien’s powerful remark, this article proposes a starting point for the study of Irish music from an outsider's point of view: “There seems to be a curious delight in the feeling that the stranger knows far more than oneself and yet - being a stranger - understands nothing”<sup>1</sup>. By ‘outsider’ we mean any person economically, socially and culturally detached from the everyday activities or concerns of a given community and, in this particular case, adopting this posture will give us the occasion to bring questions that might have been slightly overlooked by everyday actors in Irish cultural life, musicians and academics alike.

O’Brien’s remark, by stating the obvious dichotomy between knowing and understanding, could lead some to believe that only the ‘locals’ have a deep and thorough understanding of the genesis of such a cultural phenomenon as traditional Irish music and, in our case, of the environment from which it originated. This is far from being true, and personal experience shows that very few traditional musicians in Ireland actually share an interest in academic discussions about their jigs and their reels. While, for this very reason, uncovering original and novel deconstructions of the Irish musical psyche is no easy task, it might still seem appropriate to develop here a different perspective on the recent evolutions of Irish music, as seen from a distance, simply considering that, if it has no more validity than the insider’s, it certainly has no less either.

Our aim - the study of Irish music from an outsider's point of view - will thus require us to start from the very beginning, and to pose the unoriginal question of its definition from a different point of view, in order to fully appreciate its global importance if one wishes not only to “know Ireland”, but also to try and *understand* this fundamental, yet largely under-investigated, aspect of Irish culture. Several definitions surface when we speak about Irish music. From a musicological point of view, it has been said that “Irish music is not European”<sup>2</sup>. Even though this is an extraordinarily fascinating debate, with multiple examples but also counter-examples, the technical validity of the assertion itself is beyond the scope of this article. The implications, however, will certainly be examined in our second part.

---

<sup>1</sup> Conor Cruise O’Brien, *States of Ireland*, London, Hutchinson, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Seán Ó Riada (Thomas Kinsella & Tomás Ó Canainn, eds.), *Our Musical Heritage*, Mountrath / Portlaoise, Dolmen Press, 1982, p. 19.

From a historical and sociological point of view, however, asking “what is Irish music?” remains the only way to start our considerations, however *clichéd* this may sound. And so our starting point will be one of the first attempts at defining and analysing Irish music in academic terms, namely Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin's seminal 1981 essay "Irish Music Defined"<sup>3</sup>. In his article, the perception of Irish music as a unified body sent from the past was analysed through the concepts of creative reworking i.e. the music-making process, including a constant reshaping of the traditions, and music systems i.e. the audience it serves.

Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin conclusively showed that "it is unlikely that there ever was only one music-system in Ireland at any one point in history."<sup>4</sup> In other words, three music systems co-existed in 17<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, linked with three distinct social groups: the Medieval Gaelic aristocracy, the English-speaking Protestant ascendancy, and the Gaelic peasantry. The first one disappeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the two others interacted to take part, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the birth of Jazz, Country & Western and Rock music. In this article, it is clear that Ó Súilleabháin meant to address the ramifications of Irish music both in space and time in order to bring forward a novel approach in the definition of Irish music: beyond a very sensible remark on the appropriation of the word 'music' by classical musicians, it was probably the first written piece of investigation to emphasise the fragmented nature of Irish music: "Irish music must be defined as encompassing all creative music-making in Ireland (...) it is becoming increasingly impracticable to talk of 'Irish Music' in its narrow tribal sense"<sup>5</sup>. But to a large number of observers, particularly musicians, this seemed too irreverent to be considered seriously, at a time when Ó Súilleabháin was not yet the respected Professor he has become.

Almost three decades later, it would seem appropriate to re-assess some of Ó Súilleabháin's conclusions in view of the tremendous changes that have occurred, whether regarding Ireland's domestic music scene or on the global economic level. What has happened in the world of traditional Irish music since 1981?

In terms of performance, the main changes that can be detected are manifold: the most visible is certainly the trend towards group performance, an innovation rejected by many, since Irish music is based on intricate ornamentations that cannot be rendered or heard properly in this context. This practice was initiated in the 1960s primarily thanks to Ceoltóirí Cualann and Seán Ó Riada (in the pre-Chieftains days). And if one is to judge by the performances of Irish music sessions in pubs, it has developed into a new Irish ritual. It may be argued that group-playing existed before the 1960s (in Céilí bands, for example), but it should be pointed out that, in that case, they all played the same melody in unison, unlike the Chieftains. It may also be argued that hard-core enthusiasts still favour solo music over group-playing: we are however not talking about taste but only about general trends, and they clearly point towards new musical practices originating in jazz, i.e. in the US:

---

<sup>3</sup> Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin , “Irish Music Defined”, in *The Crane Bag*, N°5, Dublin, 1981, pp. 83-87.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86. One should probably understand “narrow tribal” as ‘centripetal’ and ‘looking towards the past’.

organised improvisation, an invisible hierarchy of players and a down-to-earth nature.

The second transformation, directly linked to group playing, is a change of setting: the relocation from the kitchen to the pub. Before the 1960s, musicians were rarely seen in pubs, whatever the region; even in the 1970s and 1980s only tourist areas experienced his new enthusiasm for music sessions, while in less-visited counties like Offaly or Longford, music sessions did not reach any level of significance until the 1990s. Few musicians today in the West can remember the time when there was no music in pubs. In this case, music travelled from the private sphere to the public sphere, and left the home to find shelter in a business-related surrounding, thus making its first step towards commodification. As a consequence, music in Ireland has progressively become, in the words of hundreds of traditional musicians today, “music for the ears” and not “music for the feet”: if good musicianship used to be measured by the ability to perform for demanding dancers, a lot of musicians today do not play music with dancers in mind but for their own enjoyment.

A third major modification involves a shift from a rural background to an urban background: up until early Clannad recordings in the 1970s, Irish music was associated with rural areas, in particular the *Gaeltachtaí* (the Gaelic-speaking regions of Ireland). Other 1970s bands like Planxty or the Bothy Band reveal an initial urbanisation of the musical tradition, whether via the origins of some of their members, the venues they frequented or the sheer energy produced during their performances. Today, in keeping with the global tendency of western societies, the trend is more about students forming ‘trad’ bands in Dublin, English musicians from Manchester or Newcastle winning the *Fleadh Cheoil*<sup>6</sup> competitions, or New York Irish dancers working for Riverdance and the like. Here again, the US influence may be perceived in the urbanisation of the music.

The transmission of the tradition has also undergone a formidable alteration, from orally transmitted to media-transmitted channels: for instance, older musicians will tend to say “I learnt this song from the singing/playing of [such a person]” more than younger musicians, who will readily admit other types of sources: “I heard this song on a CD... / the radio... / the internet.”. Thus, a limited and local interpersonal transmission of the practice has been replaced by virtually unlimited global exchanges.

Regarding the production of these recordings, the first studios in Ireland were created in 1937 in Dublin, but Ireland did not have a serious studio for traditional music until 1978 (Windmill Lane). In 1964, the first Chieftains album had been recorded on very basic technology and had only sold a few hundred copies; more recent productions by the same group sell millions and are recorded in the same studios as U2 or a symphony orchestra, using between 50 and 70 separate tracks, one for each instrument during the recording process, culminating in the final “mix-down” of the song or of the tune. From basically recorded to multi-tracked, the music-making process itself in Ireland has been reorganised and highly individualised.

---

<sup>6</sup> The *Fleadh Cheoil* is the annual festival of *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann*, an association created in 1951 to revive Irish music, whose main attraction consists in the numerous competitions for instruments, vocal music or group performances.

In recent years, experience shows that there seems to be less demand for Irish music in pubs, even in tourist areas like Co. Clare or Co. Kerry, for reasons that have not yet been fully identified. On the other hand, there is a massive demand for Irish bands all over the world for tours or festivals (even for small groups and solo performers). It is also rather easy to observe that a small country like Ireland can not sustain its incredible number of bands on its limited number of venues. From local pub music to global stage music, Irish music is experiencing a new degree of commodification.

If one wishes to take a look at more minor changes in Irish music since the early 1980s, several other aspects have to be taken into account: regarding the language, a slight evolution can be detected from *sean-nós as Gaeilge* to *sean-nós* in English. It has now become accepted, in many circles at least, that *sean-nós* can also be sung in English, and not exclusively in Irish. Clearly this seems to sanction a full recognition of English as the language of Ireland, and not only as a second language as implied by Article 8 of the Irish constitution<sup>7</sup>. It also confirms the natural disposition of Irish music to adapt to its time as a vector of Irish culture.

On the socio-political side of Irish life, and essentially in Northern Ireland, we should also mention a shift in patterns of identification with traditional Irish music, from non-denominational to Catholic. Even though it used to be shared equally between the Catholic and Protestant communities, the last couple of decades have witnessed a stronger degree of association with Catholics in the North, or at least a certain rejection of traditional music by many Protestants<sup>8</sup>. This may be due, in part, to its association with the Gaelic language, which is also rejected by the Protestant community. Alternatively, this might be a side effect of the influence in Northern Ireland of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, officially a non-political organisation working for the development of Irish music, but headed since 1968 by Labhrás Ó Murchú, who also happens to be a senator for Fianna Fáil, not a very popular party among Protestants. In other words, music has become an artificial means of division, mostly used by some members of the Protestant community, in the hope of finding a cultural definition of their Irishness, *a contrario*.

On a lighter note, the instrument used to represent Ireland in the general media seems to have gone through a substitution: one may have noticed that, sometime around the 1990s, advertising started using uilleann pipes instead of harps for anything that meant to characterize Ireland on TV (from ESB ads for electricity to Kerry butter). In the same vein, more and more international rock stars, from Paul McCartney to Mike Oldfield or Mick Jagger, started asking uilleann pipers to enrich their songs<sup>9</sup>. In other words, a typically aristocratic instrument was replaced by a more popular instrument to symbolise Ireland both within and outside the country.

---

<sup>7</sup> “8.1. The Irish language as the national language is the first official language. 8.2. The English language is recognised as a second official language”.

<sup>8</sup> For details, examples and analyses of this recent controversy see for example FALC’HER- Erick Poyroux, *La perception de la musique traditionnelle en Irlande du Nord*, Caen, 2002. <http://www.falcher-poyroux.info/mti/mti-idn.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Paddy Moloney plays on Mike Oldfield "Ommadawn", (1975) and "Five Miles Out" (1982), on Paul McCartney's B-side for "Ebony and Ivory" (with Stevie Wonder, 1982), and on Mick Jagger's "Primitive Cool" (1987). Liam O'Flynn recorded for Kate Bush's "Hounds of Love" (1985) and Davy Spillane for Gerry Rafferty's "North & South" (1988).

On the visible surface, several aspects confirm a growing interest in the world of music in Ireland: the birth of the Irish Music Rights Organisation (IMRO) in 1989; a wave of interest in the Irish media (Bringing it all Back Home, 1991; Riverdance Eurovision, 1994; River of Sound, 1995) and later in the international media;<sup>10</sup> and academic interest, first within Ireland, starting with the 1996 Crossroads conference, then on the international stage (though still confined to English-speaking countries).

It is worth noting that, in this interface between the public and the music, the economic question of ownership actually came first, maybe leading us to sense that in the first years of the economic boom, individual identity meant much more than group identity.

One should not, of course, hastily conclude that the evolutions in Irish music described here suddenly appeared out of nowhere during the 1980s, but the sheer amount of changes in the course of just a few decades is impressive. In my view the finest example of this change in attitudes in Ireland is offered in the liner notes to the 1995 album of the duet Lá Lugh, as an explanation for the variation on a classic theme:

“While reworking an old song ‘Níl sé ’na lá’ or ‘It is not yet day’, the sentiments of this song came to mind. The song thus evolved to ‘Tá sé ’na lá’, It is the day, the time for many changes”<sup>11</sup>.

Music making, like any human activity, is a process. When a tradition ceases to evolve it ceases to be a tradition, as it becomes a conscious convention. At that stage, it is ready to be abandoned and to become a museum piece. In fact, every one of the changes mentioned above means the music is still with us, it has survived, it has adapted, when most of the rural traditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have disappeared in the Western world e.g. costumes, eating habits, meeting occasions, etc. The reason it has survived is that it has adapted to a new function, in the same way for example that classical music has developed a new function as film music. And the new functions developed by Irish music are directly linked, as shown in Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin’s 1981 article, to “who listens to it?”<sup>12</sup>. Our own interpretation of the question would be that, in the last 40 years: Irish people (musicians and non-musicians) have completely renewed its significance as a vector of social links, especially (but not exclusively) in the winter sessions; Irish music has acquired a new economic function in particular in counties like Kerry, Clare, Galway, etc. as an undemanding way of attracting tourists to pubs; it then went on to be exported to other countries, mainly to the US as a somewhat nostalgic ethnic bridge, and then to Europe as a romantic holiday reminder.

---

<sup>10</sup> See for example Michael Walsh’s article, “Emerald Magic” in *Time Magazine*, March 11<sup>th</sup> 1996, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> “Brigid’s Kiss”, Gerry O’Connor et Eithne Ní Uallacháin, LUGCD961.

<sup>12</sup> This idea has also been dealt with by Curran Catherine, Changing audiences for traditional Irish music, in Valley F., Doherty L., Hamilton H., Valley E. (ed.) “Crosbhealach an Cheoil - The Crossroads Conference 1996”, Whinstone Music, Dublin, 1999, 243 p.

Despite Julian Vignoles' 1984 statement in another issue of the *Crane Bag* that "Development and tradition are of course paradoxical,"<sup>13</sup> one should simply remember that, in terms of function, tradition *is* change. One quote will probably suffice here to sum up the general trend since the 1990s, which is still valid 16 years after having been written by Niall Crumlish in *Hot Press*:

"There is absolutely no doubt that additional wealth, and jobs, can be created in the music industry in Ireland (...). At the risk of being repetitious, music is one of this country's greatest natural resources. South Africa has its diamonds, the Middle-East its oil, France its food - we have our music. (...) Irish bands, songwriters and artists have proven that they - that *we* - are very good at this thing. Without any kind of government strategy an enormous amount has been achieved. Much more can be".<sup>14</sup>

Seen from outside, the history of Irish music as an industry could then seem to have started in the 1990s. But when things are examined a little more closely, it is clear that one should first look at the early 1960s with the conjunction of the McPeakes and the Chieftains in Ireland, as well as the Clancy Brothers in the US where, in 1961, they appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show, the most famous US variety show of all time.

And, looking even further, all Irish-music lovers know that the first wave of interest for Irish music started in the US in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with companies like Parlophone, H.M.V. and Columbia selling records of Patsy Touhey or James Morrison to the Irish-American diaspora. In other words, Irish music-making first became a product in the US and subsequently spread back to Ireland, establishing prominent regional styles as the norm against which everything was measured for a few decades. The recordings by Michael Coleman, Paddy Killoran or James Morrison are good examples in this regard.

Closer to us, the forty-five years of the Chieftains' career give a pretty good image of the evolution of Irish music: from amateurs to professionals, from small town musicians to the stages of the world, from a few hundred records to Grammy awards, from Wicklow to China, etc. This, of course, resulted from a conscious strategy organised by Paddy Moloney, gentleman-piper turned businessman-piper. In the spirit of the 1960s the Chieftains remained amateur musicians for the first ten years of their recording career (1964-1974), turning professional with an American manager on the occasion of their first US tour, and being voted in 1975 "band of the year" by the British magazine *Melody Maker*, ahead of the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin! The world tour that followed lasted 18 months and took them to mainland Europe, New Zealand and Australia. The next step was the mass celebrated with Pope John-Paul II in Phoenix Park in 1979 in front of a million people, or playing support for the Rolling Stones in Co. Dublin in 1983. International recognition also came with

---

<sup>13</sup> Julian Vignoles, in *the Crane Bag*, 1984, vol. 8, N°2, p. 71. The comment was mainly written as a response to Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin's 1981 article.

<sup>14</sup> Niall Crumlish, "Industry Special: Irish Music - The Blueprint", *Hot Press*, Vol. 17, N° 16, August 25 1993, p. 43.

These words are actually quite similar to what Sir George Martin said about England in 1996 when knighted: "Perhaps it will make people realise that the music business and the record industry in particular is a very good thing for this country" in Mark Cunningham, "Due Reward for Hard Day's Knight" *Pro Sound News Magazine*, European edition, Vol. 11, N° 7, July 1996, p. 3.

their new recording contracts with Polydor and Island in 1975. After several Grammy nominations, the first real awards came logically in 1993 for “An Irish Evening: Live at the Grand Opera House” with Nanci Griffith and Roger Daltrey, a type of cooperation that was to become the hallmark of the Chieftains for the coming decades, with guests as diverse as the Mick Jagger, Carlos Nuñez, Ziggy Marley, Van Morrison, the Corrs, Sting, Mark Knopfler, etc.

In terms of international reputation, it is clear that, whatever what some may say, the Chieftains or the Clancy Brothers (and probably Bill Whelan as well, with Riverdance) have done much more for the recognition of Ireland abroad than all the *Taoiseachai* (Irish prime ministers) of the last four or five decades. Today, millions of people around the world enjoy Irish music. For the world at large, music has put Ireland on the map, and much more than Nobel prizes in the eyes of millions of Irish people.

Going back to our initial question of definition, when one is looking for recordings of Irish music in a shop, under which label should one look? Depending on the country, the region even, the type and size of the shop, the current fashion, the age and personal choices of the owner, one may have to look under any of these: Celtic, traditional, folk, folklore, popular, national, ethnic, acoustic, typical, authentic, roots, world music, even country music, and in some cases New Age or unplugged. This multiplicity of definitions, this absolute impossibility of grasping an ever-changing reality led the *Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music* to say in the 80's:

“Folk music revival always seems to be happening; in fact folk music never goes away: it just requires a new definition every decade or so”.<sup>15</sup>

The second question that should be asked as the basis for future investigations is simply “why should we study Irish music?” And the answer is not as simple as it may seem. One immediate answer is that music is ubiquitous in Ireland. Whether one specialises in economic studies, media studies, gender studies, the question of languages (evolutions or cohabitation), new technology, etc., music is everywhere and, more than in most countries, one cannot fully understand Ireland without understanding its music.

A second answer might also lie in the fact that Irish music is culturally, socially and politically charged: consider again Seán Ó Riada's assertion given in the first part: "Irish music is not European"<sup>16</sup>. We did admit that the technical validity of this musicological assertion was beyond the scope of this article, but the implications contained in such a contention must be examined. What should we understand about the evolution of the Irish society when we consider that, in that same 1962 radio programme, Seán Ó Riada explained that "our innate conservatism (...) has kept Irish music alive for us, its basic characteristics unchanged, with very little outside influence"<sup>17</sup> ?

---

<sup>15</sup> *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, Donal Clarke (dir.), London, Penguin Books, 1990 (1st ed. 1989, Viking), p. 423a

<sup>16</sup> Seán Ó Riada (Thomas Kinsella & Tomás Ó Canainn, eds.), *Our Musical Heritage*, Mountrath / Portlaoise, Dolmen Press, 1982, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

'Untouched', 'Unwesternized', 'unchanged', 'little outside influence'? The adjectives with their obvious social, cultural and political connotations are at the heart of the analysis of the Irish society. We are talking here about an attempt at signifying that Irish culture is pure from foreign influences, has always been and will always be. Again we are not talking about the nominal validity of the assertion itself, but only about the implications for the Irish society in the 1960s, namely the display of a certain cultural, social and political unity. And, here again, opinions regarding this question remain extremely fragmented, which provides us with all the more reason to confront academic views and analyses.

At that stage, one cannot fail to remark again with Tom Munnely that, unlike writers, most musicians are not remotely interested in the study of their own art. In other words, academic interest in Irish traditional music has very little influence on the music-making process itself, and interaction between the academic world and Irish music is virtually nil. If one has to find an answer to this puzzle, one might have to consider that we, academics, tend all too often to examine art (and thus music) as an end-result, as the manifestation of culture at a given moment, and as a product, not as a process.

Of course, by 'product' we do not mean merely a commercial product. As explained earlier, the tendency to consider tradition as something which is fixed in time also tends to turn tradition away from a process and into a fixed product. But this opposition between process and product is, in my view, one of the keys to understanding culture in Ireland. Whether these views are complementary or opposed remains to be debated in other circumstances, but the integration of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century values has led to a deep identity crisis in society which is visible at a global level and, as far as we're concerned, at the Irish (musical) level.

In Ireland the quest for the past has been, more than in most other countries, a quest for identity where music played a central part. It is a type of music which has travelled the world with emigrants, which has adapted to a different type of world, an urban world, an industrial world, and has brought back many alterations in the way the people live the music and play the music and, logically, many changes in the way people live. Of course, these changes have also brought about an incredible number of tensions and dissensions and led to the social upheaval at work in Ireland since the 1960s.

Controversies over whether guitars are traditional or not, or the "Planxty-is-not-traditional" dispute or the Riverdance dispute are in fact potent illustrations of the evolution of Irish society. They are simply revealing the intense bubbling of life within the Irish society and, far from revealing the worst aspects of Irish life, they should be considered as images of cultural evolutions which make Ireland the passionate and intense country it is. Music is a mirror, once again revealing the cultural and social fragmentation of Irish society.

The same goes for the intricate question of copyrights, i.e. who owns what in music: if someone invents a tune and gives it to everyone to enjoy without officially registering it under a name, it will soon be considered as the community's property. But in today's vision (and in fact later in Ireland that in most European countries, with IMRO having been created only in 1989), music does not belong to the group, it belongs to individuals. This evolution has been theorized in the last decades as the commodification of cultural processes, which were previously not considered in economic terms, but first and

foremost as active binding tools. In other words, music in Ireland and in the rest of the world tends to lose its function as a binding cultural process to become a dividing cultural product made for consumption.

This outsider's view of Irish music tends to show the forces at work today in Irish society, and demonstrates the double function it has acquired: the natural process it remains and the product it has become (in the two senses of 'commercial product', and 'fixed tradition'). It also confirms Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin's point that a rigid view of Irish music is not viable, and so points to an increasing fragmentation of Irish society, which cannot be as monolithic as some would like to see it.

This attempt at re-assessing Ó Súilleabháin's timid conclusions in the light of almost thirty years of evolution in the world of Irish music has shown, through a multitude of examples, that there is no unique Irish musical identity, and that there never was one, in the same sense that there is no unique Irish cultural identity. There are many ways of playing Irish music, in the same sense that there are many ways of being Irish. Ireland is now a European nation founded on the diversity of its identities, entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a clear vision of its origins and history. It is a dynamic vision which it must consolidate in order to perpetuate its exceptional economic and cultural development of the recent decades.

Looking beyond Ireland now, we, as humans, are facing two challenges, both aiming at "living together" better: one is a social challenge on a local basis, the second is an economic challenge on a global basis. In this human society, music can help us create social links and what has been called "the binding ties of a communal culture"<sup>18</sup> as a hobby and an art for some, or as a job for others. Music, like any form of art, can help us project a better image of ourselves, an image that is perceived by our neighbours as distinctive, and perceived positively.

Equally, it can help us understand (and not only know) others better, even if only partially or imperfectly, and help us create a better world, which is after all what we, academics, are supposed to give the world through our work. Many people, in particular Mick Moloney, have pointed out that Irish music has been in the vanguard of an Irish cultural renaissance since the 1970s, and the reason for that is quite simple: we, as human beings, need artists to constantly rethink and reshape the world, to help us understand the world, and to even change the world, and if some people think the English have invaded the world - the Irish have done it even more thoroughly, and more peacefully, with their music.

---

<sup>18</sup> The Re-imaging Communities Programme comes to mind in particular. Funded in 2006 by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland for a period of three years, it is a "programme for local communities, aimed at tackling the visible signs of sectarianism and racism across urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland" (ACNI Annual Report 2006-07).

## **ABSTRACT - IRISH MUSIC REDEFINED, AN OUTSIDER'S VIEWPOINT**

Over the past thirty years, Irish music has spread all over the world and, on a par with Irish literature in the twentieth century, has “put Ireland on the map”. In 1981, Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin’s analysed the perception of Irish music through the concepts of creative reworking and music systems. Since then, Irish music has experienced a new degree of commodification, from local pub music to global stage music, and confirmed its natural disposition to adapt to its time as a vector of Irish culture. In what sense, then, can we speak of a redefinition or Irish music?

Another question that should be asked is “why should we study Irish music?”, whether one specialises in economic studies, media studies, gender studies, the question of languages or new technology. One should then recognise that, Irish music being culturally, socially and politically charged, one cannot fully understand Ireland without understanding its music. In that sense, music is a mirror, once again revealing the cultural and social fragmentation of Irish society.

## **RESUME - LA MUSIQUE IRLANDAISE REDEFINIE - UN POINT DE VUE EXTERIEUR**

Depuis une trentaine d’années, la musique irlandaise s’est répandue à travers le monde et, à égalité avec la littérature irlandaise, fait partie des éléments définissant l’identité irlandaise aux yeux du monde. En 1981, Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin analysait la perception de la musique irlandaise à travers deux concepts : la reproduction créative et les systèmes musicaux. Depuis cette période, la musique irlandaise a franchi une nouvelle étape dans la commodification, passant du *pub* local aux représentations dans le monde entier, et confirmant sa disposition naturelle à s’adapter à son époque comme vecteur de la culture irlandaise. Dans quel sens pouvons-nous alors parler de redéfinition de la musique irlandaise ?

Une autre question qui mérite d’être posée est « pourquoi faut-il étudier la musique irlandaise ? », que l’on s’intéresse aux questions économiques, aux médias, aux études de genre, aux langues ou aux nouvelles technologies. Il faudra ainsi reconnaître que, la musique irlandaise n’étant pas un concept culturellement, socialement et politiquement neutre, on ne peut comprendre totalement l’Irlande sans comprendre sa musique. Dans ce sens, la musique est un miroir, révélant une nouvelle fois la fragmentation culturelle et sociale de la société irlandaise.