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Is Irish music “between tradition and modernity”?

Erick Falcher-Poyroux 2012

“ 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 ”.

Conor Cruise O’Brien, *States of Ireland*.

The last two decades have been in Ireland a period of strong economic growth, followed by an equally strong recession, and the concrete results are easily visible in the towns and cities across the country, and arguably also on people’s faces. The evolution of social behaviours, possibly less visible, is equally marked. As such, one of the most common expressions heard from commentators or journalists, but also from scholars, is that Ireland is "between tradition and modernity."¹

One should first note that the expression, generally intended as a kindly comment, is not limited to the various forms of cultural expressions such as music, cinema or painting but can equally be extended to fields as diverse as religion or cooking, and can even be applied to economic or social areas.

Second point, this *cliché* would seem to conjure up the unstable balance of the country in its present state, thereby indicating the imminent possibility of a traditionalist relapse. Indeed, in the eyes of these commentators, the phrase denotes primarily a tradition rooted in the past, with an indefinable purity and endogeneity. Conversely, modernity for them points to the future and to an exogenous character. We are here at the heart of a conflict between two forces occupying both space and time.

But these two concepts of tradition and modernity, however, are most often used in vague, simplistic and potentially misleading ways. Considered strictly from our cultural perspective, they may however be defined with a few specific traits:

Regarded as essentially rural in its origin, cultural tradition is supposed to be marked primarily by a sharp conservatism, a strong fragmentation, as well as an elitism based on (what is now termed) cultural consumption and the monopoly of cultural expression. The adjective 'traditional' has thus become in most Western languages synonymous with ancient,

¹ See for a very early example : BARRY Frank “Between Tradition and Modernity: Cultural Values and the Problem of Irish Society”, Dublin, UCD School of Economics (Policy Papers), 1987.

past or outmoded, referring only to a process aimed at retaining or reproducing, and denoting *a contrario* what is not modern².

Conversely, modernity is often regarded as urban and characterized by a constant need for change and a formal complementarity between, on the one hand, a strong individualisation of expression (copyrights being one of the most visible effects)³, and, on the other hand, a democratisation of culture engendering the development of mass media.

This dichotomy, usually analysed as a conflict, or as an on-going struggle, brings together two supposedly incompatible forces: being traditional and modern would be as contradictory as being simultaneously oneself and another, as looking towards both the past and the future, or even as being at the same time Irish and foreign. It is to this particular context that is sometimes attributed the genesis of major figures such as Jonathan Swift, James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, Samuel Beckett, etc. In other words, these authors were able to mark their time in finding an exemplary balance between two dimensions: a universal principle of acquired values and the necessity for creative freedom.

But besides the fact that this antithetical notion will take on a completely different meaning depending on whether it is received by an Irishman, a North American, a South African or Japanese person, it reflects the existence of an extremely simplistic view of any human society, which has but one alternative: one should either be traditional or modern⁴. Furthermore, it postulates a unique model of tradition and a unique model of modernity.

In this article, we will first set out to understand what has led some of us to oppose tradition and modernity, via an analysis of the main outside influences and the resulting identity crises that have occurred in music, one of the most vibrant components of Irish cultural life of the last 40 years, as testified by this 1993 article:

“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”⁵.

² Thus, most European dictionaries tend to satisfy themselves with definitions based solely on the relationship tradition-past, and forget to acknowledge the present and future principles. In English: Collins English Dictionary (1979) : “*Tradition* : (...) *the handing down from generation to generation of the same customs, beliefs*”; Concise Oxford Dictionary (1989) “*Traditionalism* : (...) *respect, esp. excessive, for tradition, esp. in religion*”. In French: Littré (1st éd. 1872): “*Traditionalisme* : *Attachement aux traditions, aux anciens usages (...)*” ; Petit Robert (1991) : “*Traditionalisme* : (...) *Voir conformisme, conservatisme*” ; Petit Larousse (1995) “*Tradition* : *transmission de doctrines, de légendes, de coutumes pendant un long espace de temps (...)*”. In Spanish: Planeta (1992) “*Tradición* : *transmisión, generalmente oral (...) de hechos históricos, leyes, composiciones literarias y costumbres*”. In German: Wahrig (1991) : “*Tradition* : *Überlieferung, Herkunft, Gewohnheit, Brauch*”. Only Duden (1989), also in German, mentions the idea of evolution : “*das, was Hinblick auf Verhaltensweise, Ideen, Kultur, o. ä. in der Geschichte, von Generation zu Generation [innerhalb einer bestimmten Gruppe] entwickelt u. weitergegeben wird*”.

³ See for example Falc’her-Poyroux Eric, *Identités musicales individuelles et collectives en Irlande*, CRINI conference: “Made in, Identités culturelles et emblèmes nationaux”, Université de Nantes, 2009.

⁴ See THERBORN Göran, *European modernity and beyond. The trajectory of European societies 1945-2000*, London, Sage, 1995.

⁵ Niall CRUMLISH, “Industry Special : Irish Music - The Blueprint”, Hot Press, Vol. 17, N° 16, 25 August 1993, p. 43.

If we try to summarize briefly what today forms the basis of traditional music in Ireland, and the potential foreign interactions, we should first cite the song genre known today as *sean nós*, whose origins may go back to pre-Norman times. Ballads will also be mentioned, born a few centuries later out of an urban European background. We will of course linger on the harp, which earned Irish musicians a tremendous reputation during the middle ages. Eleven or twelve centuries after its appearance in Ireland's iconography, its genesis can still arouse heated debates: the advocates of the *ex-nihilo* birth of the Irish harp, however, find it more and more difficult to counter migrationist theories. The same applies to the Irish bagpipes, the result of a mix between several types of insular and continental instruments. With regard to the violin or the flute, the endogenous origin makes no doubt, especially for the tin whistle, originally an English instrument, whose production was only made possible by the new techniques brought about by the industrial revolution.

The arrival of the accordion marks an extremely important phase of music in the world, since following its invention in 1826 in Vienna, the instrument spread to many different types of popular music in the world, in a few cases in rural areas (as in Mexico), but mostly in urban areas (Paris, Buenos Aires or South Africa, among other examples). It is also the main instrument of the industrial era, requiring the implementation of complex technology and highly accurate tools not previously available.

More recently, the arrival of the piano and guitar as an accompanying instrument in the 1920s curiously triggered more debate than the integration of the bouzouki in the 1970s...

Regarding dancing in Ireland, the origins are rather clear as well: the reel probably comes from a dance called the hay, and arrived during the sixteenth century via England and the continent. It should also be noted that all the dances appearing during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are probably common to Ireland, Germany, France and Italy. The emergence of dancing masters throughout Europe in the eighteenth century is another example of Europe's intense cultural activity, no doubt grounded in the mixing of populations that came with the Napoleonic Wars. What is remarkable about this is that, unlike Celtic Brittany for example, dancing in Ireland was never as fragmented as the major theories on traditional societies would suggest: if one has to remark that every Breton village had its own dance steps, and even its own rhythms, Ireland showed greater uniformity in this area during the nineteenth century. It was also at this time that the Irish began to question their cultural identity.

The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed a very intense debate on the authenticity of the dances: considered as foreign, a number of them (quadrilles, highland flings and barndances), were subsequently banned by the Executive Committee of the Gaelic League. In those days of course, 'foreign' meant 'English'. These arguments have continued in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and one of the most recent examples was provided by the controversy surrounding the show *Riverdance* (1994).

It was on the creative freedom mentioned in our introduction that its author, Bill Whelan, developed a choreography mistakenly judged for what it was not: traditional Irish dancing. Purists were outraged, but the public was enthusiastic.

Among the incoming influences, one more element to take into account is tourism: this very lucrative market actually originally found its way into tourist areas of the West and South-West. Meanwhile, the central and eastern parts of the country remained rather quiet for a long time, or were lagging behind, depending on your point of view. Sessions in pubs, for example, only emerged there in the 1980s, about 20 years after areas like Kerry and Clare. Obviously, it would be simplistic to consider that tourism is responsible for this growing market, but it is undeniable that it is now one of its vital principles and potentially one of the most important

sources of income for some musicians. However, the state does not benefit directly from this parallel economy where a renowned musician can sometimes earn as much as 1000 or 1500 Euro per month during the summer season, tax-free.

I should also briefly mention here the main outgoing influences: first the countless collectors and foreign travellers who came to observe, listen to and transcribe the music and life of Ireland. And we logically find numerous Irish tunes in the English operas of the eighteenth century, starting with the *Beggar's Wedding* by Charles Coffey in 1728, the *Aria di Camera* the following year by Daniel Wright and *The Poor Soldier* by the English composer William Shield in 1782.

The second outgoing factor of importance is emigration, in particular emigration to the United States, and the urbanisation of Irish music that was to follow. It is now accepted that Irish music survived for decades among the Irish immigrants in the United States, mainly in cities like New York or Boston, before reappearing in the collections published, for example, by Captain Francis O'Neill. This difficult balance between a rural tradition and an urban context, however, turned O'Neill into one of the favorite targets of critics and scholars throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

More recently, Irish music has been able to find its way into the music industry in the USA, beginning with the success of the Clancy Brothers on stage and in the U.S. media in 1961, and to finally enter the world of show business through rock music, via recordings by Mick Jagger, Paul McCartney, Sinéad O'Connor, Kate Bush, Mike Oldfield, etc.. It is now quite clear that most (if not all) Irish musicians wishing to make a living from their art, traditional or not, do so outside of Ireland⁶.

The developments I have described and the resulting conflicts can therefore be summarised in two points:

- Media and tourism marketing,
- The use and value of the words "traditional Irish music", i.e. its authenticity.

We will therefore try and analyse here the reasons for the crisis in Irish cultural expression within the traditional/modern dichotomy, the better to define the concept of tradition.

As was shown in our first part, the modernisation of music in Ireland necessarily involves a confrontation with foreign realities and cultures, to the point that its detractors sometimes point to an alienation from its origin, an *entfremdung*. In such cases, the cultural risk is that the music becomes estranged from its original creators and ceases to belong to its country of origin. This was of course what the Gaelic revivalists feared at the end of the 19th century, and probably what still haunts some actors of the Irish cultural scene today, a century later.

Indeed, up until the 1950's, the changes proposed by the younger generations were strictly limited to the context of Ireland and all the alterations were purely domestic: whether one considers the concept of the band, or the migration of dancers and musicians from the crossroads to the dance halls, all this happened for the sole benefit of the Irish people in Ireland.

This development and the integration of values of modernity of the twentieth century already mentioned, such as urbanisation, the need for change, the development of mass media and the

⁶ See Falc'her-Poyroux Eric, *Naissance d'une industrie musicale irlandaise*, Presses Universitaire du Mirail, mars 2003 (in French).

individualisation of expression, not only reflect the recent changes in Irish society, but also question the very definitions of tradition and modernity.

At the same time, the modernisation of Western countries caused a reversal of their economic logic, now based on production and no longer on consumption. This new representation also found its way into many documents concerned with human rights: whether we pay attention to Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948⁷, or Article 5 of the European Cultural Convention of 1954⁸, we find that access to culture is not concerned so much with the right to creation as with the right to consumption.

One of the great phenomena of recent decades lies in the mass marketing of musical traditions, giving them ‘owners’ (or ‘authors’, in the economic sense of the word), which turns melodies into the property of a single individual. But, unlike classical music, pop, rock, jazz, etc., traditional music has never had individual authors in the strict economic sense of the word: the fundamental reason for its existence is to be shared by all and enjoyed by all, in a unifying representation of the community.

It is thus logical to see many examples of artists foreign to traditional music affixing their name onto a tune whose author is little known or long gone, or even onto an anonymous folk melody⁹. By contrast, traditional musicians have a strong tendency to cite their sources when interpreting a song or a tune on stage or on record, thus paying tribute to the continuity of the transmission with a simple "I learnt this song from the singing of ... " or " I learnt this tune from the playing of ... ".

Still, the commodification of this musical tradition, however one may feel about it, can also be regarded as an adaptation to the environment: it is a testimony to, but also a consequence of the opening of Ireland to the rest the world since the sixties. Some Irish musicians, on seeing their music cross the borders to travel far and wide, may naturally feel dispossessed of a rich culture that they themselves have created. But in all fairness, this is also what some blues, jazz and flamenco musicians must have felt in similar circumstances decades before them. And it may very well be what some musicians from New York feel today when faced with the re-appropriation of rap music by urban youth the world over, from Brazzaville to Moscow. But when the music from a specific cultural context leaves its origins, it is no longer the psychological property of the community that created it, and this may be what some Irishmen and Irish women find difficult to understand.

The Irish Cultural expression was therefore completely reshaped in only one or two decades (the 1970’s and 1980’s), and Irish music found itself facing a crisis due to its spread throughout the globe and its absorption by many foreign cultures. In these new contexts, of course, it no longer has the same meaning.

⁷ Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

1. Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

⁸ Article 5 of the European Cultural Convention: “Each Contracting Party shall regard the objects of European cultural value placed under its control as integral parts of the common cultural heritage of Europe, shall take appropriate measures to safeguard them and shall ensure reasonable access thereto”.

⁹ For example, few people are aware that the melody for “Mná na hÉireann”, based on an 18th century poem was composed by Seán Ó Riada in the 1960's. The English pop group The Christians was thus able to record it in 1990 under the name “Words”, which is considered by the copyrights administration as ‘music trad. arr. H. Priestman’ (The Christians, album “Colours”, 1990, Island-BMG, 410 455).

These new values of traditional Irish music are perfectly integrated into the overall economics of the early twenty-first century. Indeed, the main drive for the recent development, particularly in Ireland, is the third sector, called "service sector". We can therefore consider that music in Ireland supports and participates in the service sector, one of the main hallmarks of post-industrial societies¹⁰.

Post-industrial societies are generally regarded as so close to each others that the phenomenon has been described with the term "globalisation" (of culture, of economies, etc.). The main argument in this regard is that modernisation has eliminated all social and cultural differences between the countries in which it was imposed.

But the dispute over the value of "traditional Irish music" brings an entirely different light on this issue. For many decades, an ambient and almost institutionalised nationalism gave but a single hue to Irish culture, relegating to a minor position any feelings differing from this artificial mind-set. But, like all other nations, Ireland's identity is manifold, and the many meanings of the term "traditional Irish music" provide ample evidence. Clashes between the supporters of different camps in Irish music can only be understood if one accepts the polysemy of the words 'traditional Irish music'. There is no unique musical identity, and there is no unique cultural identity in Ireland¹¹. Among others, the conference held in Dublin Castle in March 2003 and entitled "Talking Irish" expressed almost 10 years ago the idea that the old trinity of Irishness (land, religion and nation) is no longer valid.

The modernisation of Ireland is therefore one that leads effectively, from the 70's onwards, to a diversification and cultural heterogeneity, a process whose effects can now be seen in political, economic and social terms. In other words, Ireland found itself torn between an economic dynamism conforming to the Western model of the twentieth century, and the cultural tension of a fringe of the Irish society, who kept dreaming of an artificial and indivisible identity. Until the 1990's, any other view was either dismissed or marginalised¹².

Thus considered, "traditional culture" has long been seen as an obstacle to modernisation, particularly for the younger generations. It would now seem that this attitude is outdated, and no one can deny that music has been a force and a factor of change in that evolution, rather than a mere response to a new situation. The most striking conscious example of that new maturity acquired by Irish music ever printed on a CD booklet in that respect is probably the explanation given by the duet Lá Lugh for the fifth song of their 1995 album:

While reworking an old song 'Nil 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 changes¹³.

This shows that the dynamics of modernisation is inseparable from the dynamics of confrontation on the theme of identity, in particular cultural identity. This concept of cultural identity is often associated with the image of extreme, if not downright dangerous, nationalism: in reality, such a vision shows the same mistaken opposition between tradition and modernity. The assertion of a broader and manifold Irish identity is therefore, from this point of view, a double victory and also marks a new attitude towards the past.

¹⁰ Colin Crouch has subdivided the third sector into 4 categories, the fourth including the cultural domain. See CROUCH Colin, *Social change in Western Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹¹ See for example Falcher-Poyroux Eric, the image of Irish music in Northern Ireland: <http://www.falcher-poyroux.info/mti> (in French).

¹² See DELANTY, G. and O' MAHONY, P. *Rethinking Irish History: Nationalism, Identity and Ideology*, London : Macmillan, 1998.

¹³ "Brighid's Kiss", Gerry O'Connor et Eithne Ní Uallacháin, LUGCD961.

The attitude which came with the Gaelic revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that consisted in giving the past a quasi-religious value, and in freezing the country in an overpowering respect for ancestors, tends to disappear as the concepts of tradition and modernity start merging. In this respect, tradition is modern, and modernity is traditional or, more appropriately, Ireland's modernity is traditional and Irish traditions are modern.

But, at this point in our reflexion, can one still speak in terms of tradition and modernity regarding the terminology of traditional Irish music and its commodification?

Indeed, as we have seen, the definitions of tradition are most often given by default, for what is not modern. Tradition is too often defined by a lack, an absence, a deficiency rather than as a function, a force or an action.

Similarly, if the process of modernisation is a response to the need for modernity, no equivalent action term matches the concept of tradition. "Traditionalisation" has not yet found its place in the language, while all indications are that it does exist: in short, tradition is not seen as a process. The term 'tradition' thus finds itself describing a product, and most often a cultural product marketed for passive consumption, guaranteed by official texts. Considering any tradition as a mere product, and not as an on-going process, is therefore to deny the right to change to a cultural expression and its original source, to deny it the right to identity, and potentially to sentence it to a slow but certain death.

In other words: should we not rather be talking about the modernisation and traditionalisation processes, rather than the static concepts of tradition and modernity; better still, shouldn't we talk about the modernisation of tradition and the 'traditionalisation' of modernity?

In this current process of the modernisation of traditions, it is certain that Ireland possesses peculiar characteristics, and did not follow in the footsteps of most other Western nations, usually consisting of the industrial and the post-industrial stages. It is commonly assumed, for example, that Ireland never experienced the industrial stage (in the economic sense of the term), going directly from the agricultural stage to the post-industrial and post-colonial stages. This assertion however seems to me in need of tempering, and by several factors.

Firstly, if the industrial stage never actually found its place on a purely technological and social (or political) level, one cannot hold this true for the cultural level; the arrival of the accordion and tin whistle during the nineteenth century are undeniable evidence of the influence of industry over the musical production.

Secondly, it would be extremely difficult to prove that Ireland's musical culture is by and large based on a foreign reality imported from a neighbouring coloniser (the common definition of post-colonial societies). At least, it would be very difficult to prove that that influence was greater between Great-Britain and Ireland than between, say, Central Europe and Ireland. One could however include, among the very few exceptions, the ballad-singing tradition imported from Great Britain with its urban traditions and language.

Finally, it now seems clear that Ireland has managed to develop large areas of its economy thanks to specific aspects of its culture, and notably music. In other words, Ireland nowadays is more a part of the centre than of the periphery in cultural terms, and one should recognise here the success of artists and writers of the late nineteenth century in their efforts to develop a culture unique to Ireland, giving it a cultural importance far outsizeing its actual political size: the Nobel Prizes for Literature is one example, as are the Grammy Awards of the American recording industry.

Irish traditional music has, in short, two facets: a musical one based on internal functions, i.e. functions in use in Irish society (sessions, dances, etc.). And a second one, based on external functions, that is to say commodified and exportable, whose function might appear to

some as primarily commercial. Irish music production thus finds a balance between a 'traditionalist' inward force and a 'modernist' outward force, between an internal and an external function, and thus expresses the essence of tradition, by combining a centrifugal force with a centripetal force, or, rather, a tradition of conservation with a tradition of integration.

Ireland, in her search for identity, has been able to find in its music one of the best expressions of this balance, which appears naturally as one of the most relevant and revealing elements of contemporary Ireland. Constantly evolving, the two processes of tradition and modernity interweave and interconnect: tradition is modern, and modernity is traditional. One should then never say, or let anyone say, that a cultural expression is "between tradition and modernity." It may however be appropriate to honour the term 'traditionalisation'.

It is generally considered that modernisation is driven by an economic and industrial development, bringing in its wake social changes, and then political and cultural changes. But the question can and should be considered in the other direction, because it is likely that cultural modernisation can also lead to a redefinition of economic and social modernisation. In other words, the world needs artists and creators to unceasingly and constantly rethink and reshape itself, especially when morale is low and unemployment high.

ABSTRACT

The concepts of tradition and modernity are often perceived as incompatible: in cultural terms, the problem lies of course in the fact that Western countries tend to privilege a consumer approach which leads to regarding a cultural expression as a product, and not as a process. Indeed, recent conflicts around traditional music in Ireland have all revolved around its definition(s) and its recently acquired value as a commodity.

Thus, the dynamics of modernisation cannot be separated from the conflicts arising from debates on cultural identity: in this respect, Irish modernity is traditional and Irish traditions are modern. The evolutions of Irish music during the 20th century can therefore enable us to understand recent economic, political and social evolutions. But can we still speak of modernity and tradition as we used to ?