

Irish Traditional Music
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“There are three ways of telling every story, but a thousand ways of singing every song”.
Irish proverb (in Carson, 1986)

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Clinical Reflection Contributors

Oonagh McMahon (Dwyer) has worked with children and young people with physical and multiple disabilities, emotional/behavioural difficulties and speech /language needs. In 2009 Oonagh was tutorial assistant in Music Therapy at the University of Limerick. Oonagh is currently on career break to be at home with her two young children.

Lorraine Ni Bhriain works in Northern Ireland and has experience in music therapy with children, young people and adults at risk of suicide, self-harm, eating disorders, bereaved by suicide, who have suffered abuse and those who have trauma related difficulties. Lorraine also works with adults with acquired brain injury and with older adults.

Josie Nugent is a music therapist and works for the Northern Ireland Music Therapy Trust in Derry in the areas of neurodisability and autistic spectrum disorder. She is also an All-Ireland champion fiddle player, originally from Co. Clare, active on the gigging scene with many recordings, radio & TV appearances.

Introduction

Music is integral to the Irish condition. Traditional music as practised in Ireland has unique features in terms of instrumentation, style and transmission. It is a living tradition. While incorporating a large body of material from the past, the shedding of material, reintroduction of neglected material, composition of new material and variations in performance of established repertory means that the tradition is constantly evolving (ITMA, 1991).

This report describes some of the main aspects of Irish traditional music. This is followed by clinical reflections from music therapists practicing in Ireland about the influence of the Irish musical tradition on their musical identities and therapeutic work.

Irish Traditional Music

In general, the term “traditional music” in Ireland refers to older dance music and song. It is a broad term that includes different types of singing and instrumental music of many periods as performed by Irish people in Ireland, by members of the Irish Diaspora and occasionally by other nationalities (Vallely, 2011d). While difficult to define precisely (Ó Canainn, 1993; Vallely, 2011d; Williams, 2009), it has certain features of rhythm, style, structure and phrasing that make it recognisable on hearing (Ó Canainn, 1993). It is

essentially oral in character, it is created and transmitted in performance and carried and preserved in memory (Vallely, 2011d). As such, it has fluidity as versions of songs and tunes proliferate through the introduction of variations and ornaments by skilled performers (ITMA, 1991). These changes happen slowly due to the conservative nature of the tradition (ITMA, 1991; Ó Canainn, 1993). Repertoires and styles vary from region to region but the process of diffusion and communication media spread them more widely (ITMA, 1991).

Solo performance of tunes and songs is at the heart of Irish traditional music. Group playing is common also, with instruments being played in unison (Williams, 2009). Counterpoint is not a feature of Irish traditional tunes and harmonic accompaniment, but when employed, tends to be generally simple (ITMA, 1991). Written words and music notation are not used in performance, and only as an aid to memory if used at all (ITMA, 1991).

Another key feature of Irish traditional (or “trad”) music is the “trad session”. This is a “loose association of musicians who meet, generally, but not always, in a pub” (Hamilton, 2011 p.610) to play Irish dance music as well as solo pieces or songs. These may be impromptu or planned meetings of amateur musicians with no fixed set list. However, there are certain unspoken rules about how sessions are conducted, the relative status of attending musicians, and the behaviours of listeners.

Instrumental Traditional Music in Ireland

Instrumental Irish music tends to be fast, isometric music that accompanies dances such as jigs, reels and hornpipes (ITMA, 1991). Steady tempo and clarity are emphasised for this reason (Williams, 2009). Slow instrumental pieces for listening (song airs or composed pieces) are less common.

Instruments

The uilleann pipes and the fiddle are thought to be the two most important instruments in Irish music (Ó Canainn, 1993) with free reed instruments (accordions, concertinas etc) and wind instruments (whistles and flutes) also commonly used (ITMA, 1991). Plucked instruments such as guitars, banjos, mandolins and bouzoukis feature in group sessions as do percussion instruments like the bodhrán and the bones.

Uilleann pipes.

These are similar to Scottish bagpipes but with the air supplied by an elbow-operated bellows (uilleann is the Irish word for elbow”). It has a double-reed chanter with a two octave range as well as a row of regulators. These are keyed pipes played by the wrist and heel of the right hand to play sustained or rhythmic harmonic accompaniment.

Fiddle.

This is the term for a standard classical violin when used in traditional music (Williams, 2009). Although there is no standard way of holding or playing the fiddle, there is a certain emphasis on resonance which gives Irish fiddle playing a distinctive sound (Ó Canainn, 1993; Williams, 2009).

Irish traditional flute.

The Irish transverse flute differs from the silver classical flute in that it is made of wood, has six holes to eight, sometimes with additional keys for accidentals (Carson,

1986). This instrument tends to be associated with north-western parts of Ireland (Williams, 2009).

Bodhrán.

This is a frame drum consisting of goatskin over a round wooden frame struck with a single two-headed stick (or ‘tipper’). It is an old instrument but became very popular in community music making in the latter half of the 20th century (Williams, 2009).

Features of Irish Traditional Tunes

Irish melodies tend to have a range of two octaves and have one or two sharps. Tunes in the Ionian, Aeolian, Dorian and Mixolydian modes are also common and give Irish music its distinctive sound (Williams, 2009). Tunes tend to have an A section and B section of 8 measures each, repeated twice (AA/BB) for 32 measures (Williams, 2009). It is normal for musicians to combine two or three tunes which are related in some way. These “sets” tend to be conventional among groups of musicians (Williams, 2009). Common tune types are jigs, reels and hornpipes – each with associated dance steps. Examples of these will be included in the Appendix.

Airs are a slower type of Irish tune played in free metre. These may be based on Irish *seannós* songs (which will be discussed later on), specifically written on pipes or fiddle or drawn from harp compositions such as those by O’ Carolan (Williams, 2009). These are performed with a breathing rhythm and are known to be extremely difficult to notate as each rendition will vary according to the expressiveness, musicality and experience brought by the performer (Williams, 2009; Ó Canainn, 1993).

The challenge for an Irish traditional musician is to improvise and innovate within these basic structures, as defined by the community of taste that exists between composer, performer and audience (ITMA, 1991), especially when performing the freer airs (Ó Canainn, 1993).

Irish Traditional Song

Ireland has a strong and diverse song tradition with songs sung in Irish and English (or both – known as ‘macaronic’ or ‘Hiberno-English’ songs). There are many types of songs reflecting various circumstances and concerns of Irish experience, but with a shared core accent or singing style derived from the Irish language performance style (McGettrick, 2011). These songs cover themes of: love; war; hardship; dispossession; revenge; praise; sentimentality and nostalgia; hope; despair; sport; local history, and emigration and social upheaval (McGettrick, 2011). Songs may be laments, exhortations, satires or lullabies (McGettrick, 2011).

Song in Irish

‘Sean Nós’ (pronounced ‘shan nose’ with a hard ‘s’) is the Irish term for ‘old way’ or ‘old tradition’ and refers to a style of unaccompanied solo singing (Williams, 2009) that is highly complex and highly personal (Ó Canainn, 1993). These songs are sung in Irish in free metre to give the performer freedom of expression and ornamentation. Singers will often have a small repertoire carefully chosen for particular occasions. In a session, often only one of these songs will be performed.

The words and music are equally vital and in performing a *seannós* song, a performer will often vary the rhythm and melody, from verse to verse as well as between performances themselves to heighten the poetic and expressive qualities of the song and to incorporate the singer's experiences and musicality (Hennigan, 2011). This connection extends to instrumental performances of *seannós* melodies, where instrumentalists must know the lyrics of the tune they are playing before performing the air. *Airs* (as mentioned in the section in instrumental music) based on *seannós* songs are performed in a style that is affected by the implications of the Irish language (Ó Canainn, 1993). *Sean nós* is considered the essential core of Irish traditional music (Williams, 2009).

Other types of songs in Irish include children's songs, lilting songs, tongue twisters and *líubíní* (semi-improvised duets). These tend to be more light-hearted or humorous than *seannós* (Williams, 2009).

Songs in English

Irish ballads are the most common and well known songs in English. These songs were more urban in origin than *seannós* songs (McGettrick, 2011) and are generally considered "good old familiar songs to sing" (Vallely, 2011a). Although sung in English, they tend to carry on the thematic and melodic features of older songs sung in Irish (McGettrick, 2011). They are frequently narrative in nature – either using mythology, folklore or other fictional material or as "broadsides" – with commentaries on contemporary people and events (Williams, 2009). The printing and dissemination of ballad lyrics to popular tunes was one way for politics to be brought to urban and rural lower classes (Vallely, 2011a). These songs are well known throughout Ireland (examples will be given in the Appendix) and are typically learned through passive transmission rather than explicit teaching. Much like the sessions for traditional musicians, singers' sessions are common around Ireland as an informal way of sharing well-known songs. In conjunction with the folk music revival of the 50's and 60's in the UK and the USA, artists like the Clancy Brothers brought Irish music to international attention with their renditions of popular Irish ballads (Curtis, 1994).

Regional Styles

As a predominantly oral tradition, the transmission of Irish music between musicians means that different areas of Ireland have distinctive playing styles and tune types (O'Brien-Moran, 2011). This applies to instrumental music as well as *seannós* songs and ballads. It is most clearly defined on the fiddle - Donegal, Sligo, East Galway, West Clare and Sliabh Luachra each have a well-known style (O'Brien-Moran, 2011). While these styles have links with the historical, cultural and linguistic idiosyncrasies of their respective areas (Williams, 2009), the boundaries are not fixed (O'Brien-Moran, 2011). Processes of diffusion and communications media spread the styles widely (ITMA, 1991).

Transmission

This is the process of passing on musical style and repertoire among peers either during a player's lifetime or to a generation distanced by time or place (Vallely, 2011e). Irish traditional music continues to be handed down from generation to generation more by example than by formal teaching (ITMA, 1991). Oral and aural transmission through "performance learning" with experienced players is common, either in formal or informal contexts. Williams notes that although notation can be used in teaching of traditional music, it

is usually insufficient to convey the *blasor* ‘feel’ of the music (2009). Songs are spread through a community through passive learning (osmosis) as well as by conscious learning ‘at the singer’s knee’ (McGettrick 2011). Traditional music can also be studied at 2nd level, 3rd level and at post-graduate level, most notably at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick (Vallely, 2011b).

Clinical Reflections

Clinical Reflection #1 – Lorraine NíBhríain

As an Irish traditional musician I use many of the musical skills and qualities associated with this type of music in my work as a music therapist. Traditional Irish music is most frequently played in an informal social setting, most usually in a bar, by a group of musicians. A repertoire of thousands of tunes exists and musicians draw from this repertoire. Playing Irish traditional music requires flexibility in relation to tempo, keys, variations, and versions of tunes which may differ from the original version learned by the musician. As such, I am used to fitting in with the music of other musicians. This might involve slightly changing my version of the tune’s melody to more closely match or compliment another musician’s version, playing at the chosen tempo and in the chosen key of those I’m playing with. This is all done by ear, with little or no spoken agreement of how the tune will be played. This ability to follow music so closely, to hold back, listen to, attune, complement another’s music are important skills in my practice as a music therapist. There is no reliance on sheet music or a score. It’s person-to-person communication, being with others and relating to them by making music together. In an Irish traditional music session, the attending musicians may never have met before. This opportunity to communicate with people and build a relationship solely through music is something that has often surprised audiences unfamiliar Irish traditional music.

During a traditional Irish music session, there needs to be an awareness of cues, gestures, and signals by musicians – when a tune is going to change or deciding who is going to lead the musicians into the next tune. This will most frequently be a nod, eye contact, the calling out of a key to the accompanist, etc. This ability to look out for reactions, responses and signals is a key part of relating to clients during music therapy sessions.

In my family, there is a huge respect and appreciation for Irish traditional music. My father is a singer and has a passion for collecting and learning songs. He has a great interest in Irish history, the history and stories associated with places in Ireland, events, tragedies, immigration, people and folklore. The songs teach us these stories. I have noticed in my work with older adults that I try to seek out songs from the area where they grew up or songs that tell stories about particular interests they may have (e.g. songs about a particular sport they enjoyed or historical event they lived through).

As a child, I recall visiting hospitals, residential homes and day care centres for older adults. I became aware of the therapeutic effects of music at a young age and saw people become very emotional in response to music. I listened to them reminisce, discuss memories and associations with the songs and the music, recall relations and friends of theirs that played or sang and watched how content and relaxed they could become as they listened.

Music crosses the boundaries of age and in Irish traditional music sessions, children and adults of all ages play together in a very natural way. At a very young age, I played in

music sessions with much older musicians as well as musicians my own age. In my music therapy work, I work with people from across the life span. I describe my approach to therapy work as flexible and adaptable, two of the qualities I find most important as an Irish traditional musician.

Clinical Reflection #2 – Josie Nugent

My music therapy group sessions with dementia patients in Derry, Northern Ireland, give the patients an opportunity to engage with each other to sing old familiar songs, despite aphasia and memory loss. Some of the songs chosen or recalled come from a great tradition in Derry and across Northern Ireland, where families and friends came together to share experiences, where singing was a central part of these gatherings (Valley, 2011). The songs sung at such gatherings included a mixture of local, emigration, love songs and ballads. Music therapy sessions with dementia patients from Derry will thus include local songs such as: *Mary from Dungloe* and *Boys from the County Armagh*; emigration songs such as *Galway Bay* and *It's a Long way to Tipperary*; love songs, for example *The Rose of Tralee* and *Molly Malone* and well known ballads made popular by the *Clancy Brothers* and the *Dubliners*, for example, *Will you go Lassie Go*, *The Wild Rover* and *The Gypsy Rover*, that have stimulating choruses that the patients sing with great joy and spirit while tapping their chosen percussive instrument. These observations suggest that group singing of familiar Irish songs as a clinical intervention can improve awareness and uplift and enliven a patient's mood and spirit (Clair, 2000; Nugent, 2012).

The fiddle (one of Ireland's oldest traditional instruments) and octave violin have many roles to play in music therapy sessions with dementia patients (Nugent, 2012). Playing either in close proximity to a patient can bring a patient to a more immediate state of alertness, enabling them to communicate in social interactive ways. Both instruments are also ideal to encourage dancing / movement, an activity known to greatly enhance the well-being of dementia patients (Aldridge, 2000). For example, many of the Derry-based dementia patients learnt Irish dancing in their youth and will immediately begin dancing in their chairs to those never forgotten dances when played to them or lilt to specific dance tunes such as *St. Patrick's Day* and *King of the Fairies*. The music therapy sessions with Derry-based dementia patients also include waltz like melodies such as *After the Ball* and *In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree* that some patients dance to and /or reminisce about the dance hall days of their youth. It is my opinion that the therapeutic activities of Irish dancing and singing old familiar Irish songs can greatly enhance the well-being of dementia patients from Irish backgrounds.

Clinical Reflection #3 – Oonagh McMahon

Musical enculturation is something that has always interested me. The music that surrounds our existence from the womb and through our development across the life span can serve us in many ways. This music can often be the music in which we develop an interest. Having meaning for us as individuals, it consequently becomes the music we turn to for support, enjoyment, entertainment, motivation or relaxation. As a music therapy student I became aware of the fact that the music I listened to as a child had significance for me as a young adult, that the music I listened to as a teenager would always be the most meaningful music to me and that any new music that I discovered as an adult had the potential to become meaningful for me. It is well known that Ireland has a rich musical heritage and a vibrant living musical tradition. It is no surprise therefore that the Irish traditional and folk music of

the past is also music of the present. Like a thread, this music weaves from generation to generation in a linear fashion through families, but also spreads outwards through other social contexts and media.

Most of my work as a clinician has involved working with school children from the age of five to nineteen. It is with this population in mind I intend to reflect on my use of Irish traditional and folk music.

Children's songs and all types of popular music (including pop, rock, R&B, rap) featured strongly in my repertoire when working with children and teenagers. However Irish traditional and folk music was also featured. Upon reflection I would say that folk songs were used to a greater extent than traditional dance tunes or instrumental slow airs. One reason why I used Irish folk songs in sessions with clients was if I became aware that this genre of music was listened to in the client's home. Sometimes a child's favourite song or piece of music is one which is played or sung at home by a parent, grandparent or sibling. It isn't always what is number one in the charts! I discovered the importance of discerning musical preferences and interests as a way of connecting with a client especially in initial sessions.

Many of the children and teenagers with whom I worked had physical disabilities and movement to music was used as a technique to promote co-ordination and self-awareness. Irish traditional and folk music was usually played live by the therapist so that the speed would appropriately match the clients' abilities in terms of movement. *The Fields of Athenry*, *Phil the Fluter's Ball*, *Oh Danny Boy* and *The Voyage* are songs that I have used for these purposes.

A song or piece with a strong steady beat often helped to motivate clients. The use of a bodhran or similar hand drum is an accessible way for clients to become part of the music making. I have used songs such as *Dirty Old Town*, *The Star of the County Down* and *The Galway Girl* for this. I have also used the Soundbeam to accompany recordings of traditional music. A piece which comes to mind is *Ah, Sweet Dancer* by Micheal O Suilleabhain. The Soundbeam was programmed to a D minor mode so that any movements the client made through the beam would produce sounds that complemented the piece of music.

Using folk songs with a group of teenagers is often a way to help group cohesion, especially if there are differences in musical preferences among group members. Folk music can often be accepted by all group members. *The Galway Girl*, *Ride On* and *Black is the Colour* are songs that I have used in these situations.

Clinical Reflection #4 – Jason Noone

Music is an intrinsic part of Irish culture and even as a “non-traditional” musician, the cultural norms in Irish music have had a significant effect on my work as a music therapist. Pine (1998) suggests that the Irish are an inherently musical race, that music comes naturally to the Irish spirit, whether in celebration, dejection or defiance. It is not difficult to note a connection between common musical practices in Ireland and those which might occur within a music therapy session. To put it another way, traditional Irish music has generated certain useful templates which I believe support the music therapy process and client engagement.

The notion of passive transmission of Irish music – the learning of Irish songs and tunes within the community by osmosis and exposure rather than explicit teaching – means that there is a vast shared repertoire of songs with diverse themes and moods which can be easily accessed and used within music therapy sessions. The forms and conventions for sharing songs in a music therapy group setting have much in common with a typical Irish music “session”, meaning that group music making can occur in a way that is familiar and non-threatening.

In my work with adults with developmental disabilities, although many genres of music are covered, Irish traditional songs are often a “go to” choice for a group to bond over, to raise the energy of a session or to close a session. In some Irish music sessions there can be a “one voice rule” for contributors and this is often replicated in music therapy sessions, where group members sing solo and are given respectful attention by the rest of the group, perhaps joining in for the refrains. Group members may have a small number of particularly meaningful songs that they alone sing; another common feature of Irish sessions. As part of a music therapy programme which focuses on person centredness, resource –building and empowerment (Noone, 2008), the communal nature of music in Ireland - along with its forms and conventions – lends itself to the effective development of strong musical identities and relationships within group and individual music therapy sessions.

In terms of the more popular Irish traditional songs themselves (particularly ballads), the general familiarity, simplicity of melody and tendency for repetition makes these songs particularly suitable for therapeutic songwriting as the basis of song parody. Again this is consistent with the culture of traditional music in Ireland as it is common for different songs to share the same melody (Vallely, 2011a). The adaptation of Irish songs for therapeutic purposes can often happen spontaneously, when narrative elements of a song are replaced with details of a singer’s lives or other personal material. In group settings, this improvisational approach to therapeutic songwriting can be highly motivating and effective in promoting self-expression and relationship building.

Although I am not (as I mentioned already) an experienced traditional musician, I have used slow airs (such as *My Lagan Love* or *She Moved Through the Fair*) within music therapy sessions to promote relaxation. This is a natural choice as these forms are “free metre” – and use a “breathing” rhythm to enhance the expressiveness of the tune (Williams, 2009). This is quite useful when linked to the breathing of a client as part of a relaxation protocol. The familiarity of the melody is linked with the clients breathing and, potentially, varied according to the iso-principle.

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