

A Process of Change in the Teaching and Learning of Traditional Music Performance in Ennis, Co. Clare 1961-1980

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Abstract

Ennis, Co. Clare is now considered to be one of the principal strongholds of traditional Irish music practice in the world. However prior to 1961, the music practice in the town appears to have been limited to a few musicians, many of whom had roots in rural areas. A history of unbroken effective teaching has contributed to this transformation since then. This paper addresses the emergence of the formalisation of the transmission of traditional music through educational means i.e. the setting up of the first institutionally led class in 17/4/1961. I will examine the conditions which led to it; looking at the ideological foundations which underpinned the introduction of this formal structure, focussing principally on the institutional bodies through which it occurred; namely the Clare Vocational Education Committee and Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. Since then there has been a steady increase in the number of and the diversity of class contexts in order to meet the demands of growing student numbers and the broader changes in society. I will trace the connections between it and subsequent classes in Ennis and its hinterland, considering how it contributed to the reshaping of the identity of Ennis, from being a place largely devoid of traditional music to becoming a place internationally known and recognised as a major hub of the tradition.

Introduction

What prompted me to do this research in the first instance was an awareness that the town of Ennis, Co Clare in the West of Ireland, which had very little traditional music performed in it in the 1950s, changed in the space of a couple of decades into a place that is now a recognised international site for traditional Irish music. It is now possible to hear traditional music performed every night of the week at informal pub sessions and at other venues. Moreover, traditional Irish music is now such an integral part of the fabric of the town's culture that for many people it is difficult to imagine a time when it was not popular here. Perhaps it is not surprising therefore, that for the past ten or fifteen years a considerable number of traditional musicians from all corners of the world have been attracted to living here. Prior to 1961 however, music practice in the town appears to have been limited to a few musicians, many of whose roots were in rural areas. The decades which followed provide confirmation of a momentous development in teaching, which was highly influential in the transformation.

In this paper I address the emergence of the formalisation of the transmission of traditional music through educational means i.e the setting up of the first *institutionally* led class in 17/4/1961. I examine the conditions which led to it, looking at the ideological foundations which underpinned the introduction of this formal structure. I focus principally on the institutional bodies through which it occurred; namely the Clare Vocational Education Committee –abbreviated to (VEC) and Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann(CCE), commonly referred to as Comhaltas.

This class was particularly significant in that it was one of the first structured classes for the teaching of traditional dance music to be recognised by the Department of Education outside of Dublin and Cork.¹ Since then there has been a steady increase in the number and

diversity of class contexts, to meet the demands of growing student numbers and changes in society. I trace the connections between it and subsequent classes in Ennis and its hinterland.

What are the factors that have led to this phenomenon? In particular, what conditions have contributed to this largely *rural pursuit* becoming established in an *urban setting*? It is my contention that the unbroken record of effective teaching, since the first traditional music class commenced under a combined VEC/CCE Scheme in the town in 1961, has been central to this development.

Ennis - a town in transition.

The 1950s; the period leading to the first formal class for traditional music; was a very exciting decade in County Clare. The post war depression of the 1940s and early 1950s was starting to ease. This had been an era of vast emigration from Clare particularly working class citizens of Ennis. Musicians from all areas of the county migrated, chiefly to the large urban areas of Great Britain and the US.

However, during the 1950s Ennis began to industrialize and factories were built in the town. The Lemass Whitaker plan had already been implemented in the 1950s, which culminated in a Programme for Economic Expansion in 1958. This included many incentives to attract foreign investment to Ireland. In 1959 Shannon Development was formed, its remit being to promote the Midwest region. It was instrumental in the rejuvenation of the area both in terms of industry and tourism. By the 1960s there was an increased sense of optimism and confidence in the Midwest particularly following the emergence of Shannon Airport Duty Free Zone in the early 1950s. A new planned town and an industrial estate were built in Shannon and other factories were built in Ennis and other places. Even though unemployment had been a major problem in Clare, rural electrification (1947-1979), the opening of Shannon

Airport and the locally available technical training through the VEC for prospective industries combined, led to a sense of optimism and confidence for the future. The appearance of urban Ennis began to change. The demolition of the many laneways of the town began and the families were relocated to new housing estates. People (many of them traditional musicians) began moving in from the countryside and returning home from abroad, which in turn had an impact on traditional music itself.

The VEC, whose role and mandate was to bring educational opportunities to areas and to people who would not have had them, recognised the changes as an opportunity and cooperated fully with businesses who sought their support. The schools developed many new courses and introduced new subjects. From the earliest stage the local communities had a vested interest in the development of these schools, and from the 1950s on, there was an increase in the interaction between the local communities and the schools. Most local events, whether educational or recreational – for example, lectures, demonstrations, cultural events, debates and so on - emanated from the schools.

In addition, since the composition of the Committee was primarily based on elected members of the County Council, the ethos of the VEC was reflective of that of the Government. For example, the Irish language had a prominent position, in that, as far as it was possible, the business of the Committee meetings was carried out ‘as Gaeilge’ or in Irish. However, this did not extend to music and the arts in general. The arts were not a serious contender for inclusion on the curriculum of the schools in County Clare until the 1960s. In fact there was no permanent appointment of a music teacher here until the late 1970s.

Two significant events occurred in Ennis in the 1950s: firstly the ‘An Tostal Festivities’ was initiated in the early ‘50s. In the Clare Champion (the weekly newspaper for the county) dated January 1953 there was an announcement regarding an ‘Ireland-at-Home’ festival, which was to start on April 5th. This was a weeklong countrywide festival to include:

... pageants, games, marches, military and other displays, musical festivals, decorative effects, drama, horse jumping and a number of other features. (Clare Champion January 3rd 1953)

This was the first mention of An Tóstal; a national event to promote tourism through Bórd Fáilte and to improve the economy and increase prosperity. It also gave a significant boost to morale throughout the country. This was followed by the first Fleadh Cheoil in Ennis in 1956.² The event attracted musicians from all corners of Ireland.

Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann

Although Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann was formed in 1951 for the promotion of Irish traditional music,³ it did not start in County Clare until 1954. Its principal focus in the early years was on the preservation and revival of a tradition that was generally considered to be at in decline. This was done initially through the promotion of music through organising sessions.⁴ In the opinion of many the same pressure was not in County Clare for musicians to be brought together in this way. Locally there was a lot of musical activity and in addition, at a time when very few people owned a car, Seán Reid a musician from County Donegal who moved to Clare when he was appointed as an engineer with Clare County Council, began to organise sessions, bringing musicians from the East and West of the county together.

Following the excitement of An Tóstal in the early 1950s and the success of the All-Ireland Fleadh Cheoil in Ennis in 1956 there was an increased optimism in County Clare but particularly in the town of Ennis. In terms of traditional music there was a creative energy and buoyancy. Clare musicians had been particularly successful at the Fleadhanna Cheoil and many of them were becoming well known through radio broadcasts, particularly those of Ciarán MacMathúna. There was only one Branch of CCÉ in Clare until March 1958, when a new Branch was formed in Ennis.⁵ Although there were plenty of sessions and regular

concerts held, there was a consciousness during this period that young people were not being attracted to the music.

There was a gap. I was 21 in 1960.... 10 years younger than the likes of JC Talty and Michael Falsey. Willie Clancy was about 25 years older.... I suppose we all knew that we weren't bringing the young ones with us at that stage. (Interview with Séamus MacMathúna, January, 2007)

Although discussions had taken place within CCÉ at national level at an early stage around the issue of training teachers to teach Irish music, it wasn't until the approach by members of the Clare Branch of CCÉ to the VEC in the late 1950s that anything formal happened. Because the VEC committee were aware of its mission within the Community they responded and by 1961 the first CCÉ /VEC class was established. Over time CCÉ began to develop and new branches were established throughout county, the country and in due course also internationally.

The First Class for Traditional Irish Music

The organisation CCÉ had already built up a relationship with the VEC having received much support from them during events such as the All Ireland Fleadh held in Ennis in 1956. On 6/10/1959, Sean Reid, secretary of Comhaltas in Clare, approached the VEC and on his recommendation Jack Mulkere⁶ was appointed to teach in Ennis. This class began on 17/4/1961. Classes were held on two nights per week and were attended by 30 students for the violin classes and 28 for the 'flageolet'.⁷ Jack continued to teach in Ennis for many years. In addition, following a request from Fr Minogue, he also began teaching in Crusheen, his local Parish. Initially it was started as '... an experiment on not more than two evenings a week' (VEC Minutes 3/3/1962 Item 31). Even though there was not an actual VEC school in

Crusheen the Committee began an outreach scheme here which was to lead to similar developments in four other villages throughout the County.

By 1969 there were six music teachers being employed by the VEC throughout the County- four of them teaching traditional Irish music. However, of a total of over 800 hours of music tuition only 186 were for the teaching of traditional music while the remainder were Western Art music i.e. music appreciation and choral work. However, by 1970 the allocation had improved and of the paid 1,449.75 hours of music teaching, 728 were for traditional music. By 1972 there were classes held in Ennis and in eight more centres. In 1973 the VEC, following a request by Comhaltas, agreed to increase the number of centres in the county to eighteen provided that the fees covered the cost of the teacher. Although the classes for traditional music continued to flourish the VEC involvement in them decreased over time.⁸ Comhaltas became more active and musicians themselves become more actively involved in teaching.

Cois na hAbhna

Between 1978-1983 Cois na hAbhna, the headquarters for Comhaltas in Clare, was built in the Ennis. It became a centre for the teaching and learning of music not only for the people of Ennis but also the larger community of County Clare. It was the primary reason that this particular association with VEC came to an end.

During the 1970s new teaching spaces emerged. In the late 1970s Kilfenora born fiddle player Gus Tierney established classes in the Maria Assumpta Hall, a parish hall. Similarly, fiddle player, Vincent Griffin taught for many years at the Greengrove, a pub in the outskirts of the town.

One of the major spin-offs of the VEC/ CCÉ classes was that the many school teachers who attended these classes passed on what they had learned to their own student e.g. at Toonagh National School through the school principal Frank Custy, a past pupil of Jack Mulkeres. Many of these teachers established school bands e.g. as increasing numbers of young musicians attended St Flannan's College Fr Hogan saw the opportunity to set up a céili band. Teachers in many other schools followed suit.

There were also a number of musicians who began teaching privately from their own homes. The majority of these began as a result of a demand from pupils for more individual attention and were generally small class groups or sometimes one to one tuition. Up to late 1970s music teachers in Ennis taught whatever instruments students brought to class regardless of whether they played them or not. However, as pupils became more interested and maybe more competitive they looked for more focused tuition. This led to a demand for individual classes e.g. Eamonn Cotter was the first to teach flute and tin whistle from his home in Ennis, similarly with Michael Butler who taught the accordion.

Music has always been available to students of the local schools in Ennis but in terms of traditional music it was the VECs response to the community, as represented by CCÉ, which led the way in terms of traditional Irish music. In County Clare, because of the number of teachers attending them, these classes led to a change in the musical canon of the local primary schools. Many of the musicians who established classes themselves had a connection with these initial classes held in Ennis e.g. Frank Custy and Fr John Hogan who have influenced many young musicians were themselves pupils of Jack Mulkeres.

Ennis in the 1970s

As a native of the town growing up during these significant years I feel I am well placed to trace this transition. My recollection of the 1970s was that it wasn't out of the ordinary to be playing traditional music. This was in stark contrast with the experiences of people in earlier decades. In my view and that of my contemporary 'townies' it was a providential time to be growing up in the town as a traditional musician.

The transformation in Ennis happened during a significant part of my adult lifetime. Furthermore I am part of this account because I am an Ennis 'townie' playing traditional music and, although I did, I did not necessarily have to move outside of the town to learn it. The time was particularly significant in that young 'townies' began playing a music that had been, in County Clare at least, primarily associated with an older generation in rural Ireland.

Conclusion

The first formal class of 1961, run jointly by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and the Vocational Education Committee, left a lasting impression. It not only created the conditions for other formal classes to follow but over time led to new sites of learning and performance practice. It is interesting that a significant number of Clare musicians have musical links which lead back to the original class in 1961.

Unquestionably the impact of these developments on the life and culture of the Ennis is significant. The town of Ennis during the period which I have focused on was at a crossroads both economically and culturally. Ennis was not unique in this but certainly it would seem that the unique conditions here, led to a response from the community which resulted in an outcome singling it out from other population centres. If conditions had been different I expect Ennis would now be a different place musically.

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Endnotes

¹ Leo Rowsome taught uilleann pipes in the Municipal School of Music in Dublin, as did Micheal O’Riabhain in Cork School of Music.

² ‘Fleadh’ means ‘a feast of music’. At that time Comhaltas organised one annual fleadh. The 1956 marked the 6th such Fleadh, the first being held in Mullingar in 1951. Nowadays musicians compete in a number of qualifying rounds culminating in the annual Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.

³ There are now 400 branches of CCE in Ireland and abroad. The local branches are responsible to county boards that in turn are accountable to four provincial councils and ultimately a Central Executive Council.

⁴ Now the organisation promotes traditional music through teaching, fleadhanna cheoil and other festivals, international concert tours and its magazine Treoir, recordings.

⁵ Following this, other branches were formed throughout the county.

⁶ From Crusheen, a village a few miles outside Ennis, Jack Mulkere had an established reputation as a teacher of traditional music in his own locality and in South East Galway.

⁷ Tin whistle

⁸ Other musical genres were supported. In July 1971 George Tweedle was appointed to establish a Brass Band. Clem Garvey, Leonard Sheridan and Kathleen Touhy were also appointed to teach music as a subject within the School Curriculum in Shannon Comprehensive School and in Ennis Vocational School. Other schools were to follow.