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An Alternative Model of Music Learning and ‘Last Night’s Fun¹’: Participatory Music Making in/as Participatory Culture in Irish Traditional Music

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An Alternative Model of Music Learning and ‘Last Night’s Fun²’: Participatory Music Making in/as Participatory Culture in Irish Traditional Music

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Exploring emergent music learning and teaching models facilitated by global Web access can reveal alternative music education practices and delivery systems not seen in “traditional” conservatories and schools. One example of an alternative music learning model comes from the Online Academy of Irish Music (OAIM), a community music “school” specializing in teaching Irish traditional music (IrTrad) and which is situated in both on (www.oaim.ie) and offline (Liscannor, Ireland) contexts. Using Thomas Turino’s (2008) ideas of “participatory music making” and Henry Jenkins’s (2006) concept of “participatory culture” as frameworks, the purpose of this ongoing ethnographic/cyberethnographic field study was to explore how Irish traditional music was learned by OIAM’s students at its “offline” summer school flute week in July 2013 in Liscannor, Ireland. While Turino’s and Jenkins’ ideas come from wildly divergent fields—ethnomusicology and new media respectively—both are based on similar social learning ideals, that, when integrated, have broader implications for music learning and teaching.

Keywords: *Online music school, participatory music making, participatory culture “informal music learning practices 2.0,” online/offline music learning, sessions, Irish traditional music, adult music learning, Online Academy of Irish Music.*

In *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, Thomas Turino (2008) posits that music making be “conceptualize[d] in relation to different realms or fields of artistic practice” (15). According to Turino, ‘real time’ music making can be divided into one of two categories: 1) *presentational music making*, in which “one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience,” and 2) *participatory music making*, where “there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, the primary goal being to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role” (26). Of particular importance to

this paper is the latter category because key to Turino's proposition is the idea that, for successful participatory music making to happen, it must be socially situated and culturally contextualized in community.

While from a very different field than ethnomusicology—that of new media—Henry Jenkins (1992, 2006, 2009) and his concept of 'participatory culture' shares similar aspects of Turino's ideas of 'participatory music making.' Jenkins (2006) originally developed the idea of 'participatory culture' with new media education settings in mind; he defines it as the culture that results when "private persons do not act as consumers only, but also as contributors or producers" within an affinity group (6).

One illustration of a participatory music practice also now firmly established worldwide as a popular participatory culture phenomenon is the genre of Irish traditional music (IrTrad). IrTrad began as a local participatory music making tradition in Ireland over three hundred years ago, but since that time has evolved from a "local" traditional music and dance genre to a "glocal" one; this transformation has happened relatively recently and fairly quickly. This "spreading" of IrTrad has been expedited via the plethora of 21st century technological convergences and, and at the same time, has also served to generate a huge demand for music learning resources in the genre – mp3s, YouTube videos, notation, and general advice – for individuals wanting to learn and become involved in the participatory music making practice of IrTrad.

Until recently, learners spread around the globe had to "make do" with learning IrTrad on their own via sifting through what could be an overwhelming barrage of Internet resources, and which then could also be supplemented by traveling to a physical geographical place to learn from IrTrad teachers face-to-face, typically at an adult "summer school"³ (Cawley 2013, Waldron and Veblen 2008). Until the founding of the OAIM however there has been no coordinated institutional effort to combine online with offline learning in IrTrad.⁴

Founded in October 2010, the Online Academy of Irish Music (OAIM) began as an alternative music learning model of a community music "school" originally only situated (www.oaim.ie) online, with its physical headquarters located in Liscannor, County Clare, Ireland. In the online OAIM, formal music instruction is integrated with informal music learning practices delivered digitally through video, audio, and community forums; teaching and learning are thus situated in a re-contextualized online community setting. In June 2013, from its physical location in Liscannor, Ireland, the OAIM began sponsoring offline "summer school" music weeks to its students, with the aim of intertwining skills already developed through virtual instruction with teaching in a more "authentic" geographical community setting delivered face-to-face by OAIM's tutors.

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Previously (Waldron 2013, Waldron 2011, Waldron and Bayley 2012), we examined the online OAIM through teacher narratives; in this, the second part of a three-part study, I explored the OAIM from the perspectives of the students enrolled at the July 2013 OAIM “summer school” IrTrad flute week in Liscannor, Ireland.⁵ Framed with Turino’s (2008) idea of participatory music making and Jenkins’ concept of participatory culture (2006), the purpose of this qualitative field study was to explore IrTrad music teaching and learning at the 2013 OAIM flute week from the students’ perspectives. Questions for this part of the study were:

- 1) What is so attractive about IrTrad as a participatory music making genre that participants from outside a “traditional” Irish culture/ geographical area are motivated to learn it?
- 2) How do participants perceive the difference between live, unfettered, participatory community music making in the culture of origin and music learning and teaching in a structured online environment, which, it could be argued, is a simulacra of participatory music making (after Turino 2008) and participatory culture (after Jenkins 1992, 2006, 2009)?
- 3) What role does Jenkins’ concept of ‘participatory culture’ have in participants’ learning?

Next, in order to contextualize and frame the study, I discuss the evolution of IrTrad as a 21st century worldwide cultural participatory music making and participatory culture phenomenon.

21st Century IrTrad: Participatory Music Making, Participatory Culture, and “Informal Music Learning Practices 2.0”

Since the large wave of Irish emigration in the 19th century, many large pockets of Irish diasporas came to exist in many parts of the English speaking world, famously in cities such as Boston, Chicago, New York, and London, as well as others (Bakan 2012, Valley 1999). Although many of those living in Irish diasporas retained strong cultural roots, interest in IrTrad music in those communities did wane with the passage of time (Valley 1999). However, since the burgeoning folk revival of the 60s, interest in IrTrad music and dance both in and outside of the Irish diaspora has re-emerged with a vengeance for several reasons.

Three confluent factors have played a key role in IrTrad’s resurgence since the 90s. First, the rise of “Riverdance”⁶ as a worldwide cultural phenomenon in 1994 popularized the genre of IrTrad to a general non-Irish audience; the show, along with its star, Michael Flatley, quickly became part of the public pop culture *zietgiest*⁷ (Waldron, Mantie, Parrti, and Tobia, n.d.). Second, the rise of and easy

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availability and accessibility to the Internet (and later, social media),⁸ served to spread IrTrad from its geographical Irish base to a global one (Waldron, Mantie, Parrti, and Tobias, n.d.). Jessica Cawley explains:

Social networking sites, such as Facebook and TradConnect, allow [Irish] traditional musicians to keep abreast of upcoming gigs, festivals, and other events in the traditional music community. This type of online communication is a relatively new social practice within the [IrTrad] community of practice, *but it is becoming influential in terms of promoting Irish traditional music* (italics mine) (2013, 84).

Third, the two factors above further coincided with the emergence of what Thomas Turino (2008) has suggested is the longing of people in so-called “developed” societies to re-connect to their cultural roots, be they real or imagined. Although Turino uses the example of the rise in popularity of Old Time music and dance in North America to illustrate this point, his arguments are equally applicable for understanding the global appeal of IrTrad for those living outside of Ireland, often to people with no obvious Irish connections (Waldron, Mantie, Parrti, and Tobias n.d.). Specifically, Turino (2008) posits that:

Why old-time music for the musically dedicated people who choose it over more mainstream styles like rock or jazz or bluegrass or hip-hop? There are probably myriad reasons for given individuals, but I believe that there are some basic aspects that many of us share. Contemporary old-time is a well-developed participatory tradition in terms of the variety of musical challenges, the wealth and the attractiveness of the tunes and dances themselves, and the normal, homegrown, participatory communal imagery that surrounds it. The music and dance are facets of, both iconic and indexical for, a much broader set of values that are held in common by many participants in middle-class old-time dance and music scenes ... (169)

[Old Time] was originally grounded in rural community music making; it continues to have this indexical meaning for contemporary middle-class participants, and this has proved attractive for people looking for an alternative community. Old Time is iconic of a simpler, preindustrial life. (170)

Last, by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s 1984 work on judgment and taste, Turino (2008) concludes that:

There is often a great deal of coherence among the habits and dispositions that constitute individual selves. People drawn to Old Time music and dance share many habits, dispositions, and attitudes because the attraction to Old Time is part of broader patterns of coherence within these individual selves (170–71).

Take out the words “Old Time” and insert “IrTrad music and dance” in their place, and the ideas that Turino borrows from Bourdieu also explain the widespread global appeal of IrTrad music and dance.

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Further, Jenkins' (2006) idea of "participatory culture" has now added an online 21st century global twist to what was an Irish/Irish diasporic offline tradition. As discussed above, numerous websites⁹ exist that supply learners and players with a generous cornucopia of resources, including contacts to IrTrad online communities and information about IrTrad "summer schools." What is most important from a participatory culture perspective however is that these sites also allow—and encourage—posters to upload and share newly written/composed IrTrad tunes in various forms of media—i.e. user-generated content (UGC). Those uploading UGC can then—and often do—ask for feedback on their own newly composed "pieces" (Cawley 2013, Waldron 2013). These tunes can then spread globally both via offline IrTrad sessions and online IrTrad sites very quickly, thus further expanding the canon of IrTrad music in the style of the genre based on established performance practices and canon (Waldron, Mantie, Parrti, and Tobias, n.d.). As a result, IrTrad—already a participatory music making genre—has now become a participatory culture in both on and offline contexts ((Waldron, Mantie, Parrti, and Tobias, n.d.).

Many IrTrad websites also have a site function that allows IrTrad musicians to locate other IrTrad musicians and sessions globally.¹⁰ Easily found in places throughout the Western world, sessions now exist in unexpected cities such as Tokyo, Istanbul, and Dubai (www.thesession.org). Often those participating in sessions have little or no cultural ties to Ireland—they are simply people who want to play IrTrad music in the participatory music making context of an IrTrad session (Waldron, Mantie, Parrti, and Tobias n.d.).

For those unfamiliar with what an IrTrad session "is," Foy (2009) explains that:

The general aim of a session is to get the maximum number of musicians playing together on the maximum number of tunes; it is not an occasion for trotting out carefully wrought arrangements, nor is a session for entertaining a paying audience from a great height. Both are unsuited to sessions, which run on different principles altogether.

The session is where [IrTrad] music lives and breathes, where it does its homework, where it flexes its muscles and idly picks its nose. If a musician has a mind to package Irish music for maximum market ability, or polish it to a dazzling sheen, or encase it in amber like some kind of prehistoric gnat, a session is neither the time nor the place to do it (14).

Thus, after Turino (2008), IrTrad sessions are embodied examples of participatory music making.

Regardless of their location, IrTrad sessions share common elements that characterize and define IrTrad as a global participatory music culture. These are:

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- 1) A “standard” core repertoire.¹¹ Although IrTrad is a “living breathing tradition”– new tunes are added while others fall from popularity –it does have a body of common repertoire at its core which functions as “canon” (Vallely 1999).
- 2) An (often) unarticulated but expected knowledge and display of appropriate etiquette at IrTrad sessions by participants (Foy 2009).¹²
- 3) Learning IrTrad through genre appropriate learning modes, that is, aural/oral music learning supplemented with observational and kinesthetic learning (Foy 2009).



Figure 1: Traditional Irish Session at the Gaelic Club in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia¹³
(<https://youtu.be/vj5Gu8fAUKQ?list=PLEqcbN7D7TaWgKxIn8G9TsnJeNmBy2fuq>)



Figure 2: Session at Fergie's Pub, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA¹⁴

(<https://youtu.be/6aWHV4zxYmo?list=PLEqcbN7D7TaWgKxIn8G9TsnJeNmBy2fuqyou>)

For new players living outside of a geographical or diasporic context who are only familiar learning music visually using Western notation, the last defining element of IrTrad on the above list—that of playing “by ear”—is often the biggest challenge to overcome when learning IrTrad (Waldron, Mantie, Parrti, and Tobias n.d.). From a skill perspective, learning “by ear” is problematic for most adult learners because they have often had no previous experience doing so either in school or informally – indeed, for many, just the *concept* of having to learn to play without written Western notation is terrifying. For perspective learners, this often becomes even more complicated by their own preconceptions that music, regardless of genre, can (and should) only be learned in the one “correct” way—that is, through the standard Western art music practice of reading, decoding, and then reproducing written notation via an instrument¹⁵ (Waldron, Mantie, Parrti, and Tobias n.d.).

However, motivated adult learners can and often do learn IrTrad on their own informally by tapping into Web resources (Waldron and Veblen 2008). Because widespread Internet access was relatively nonexistent in most peoples’ everyday lives when Lucy Green (2002) first codified the concept of “informal music learning practices” in the late 90s “informal music learning practices” were much more limited then than they are now. For example, before wide-spread Internet availability, people wanting to learn a new vernacular music had to find hard

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artifacts like records, CDs, and tape cassettes on their own; finding a supportive mentor or a community of learners was problematic as well and done through word of mouth (Waldron in press) With apologies to Green, I label her original definition as “informal music learning practices 1.0.”

As I have discussed elsewhere, because the term “informal music learning practices 1.0” does not include the many ways of how self-directed learners use the Internet to learn vernacular musics, I have amended Green’s original 2002 definition of “informal music learning practices 1. 0” to what I call “informal music learning practices 2.0” (Waldron in press). Through “informal music learning practices 2.0,” learners can now:

- 1) A “Pick up,” via networked technologies, resources, tools, user-generated content (such as YouTubes and mp3s) 24/7 in any number of diverse musical genres. Hard artifacts are no longer necessary and cloud storage makes for easy safekeeping and collaboration, and,
- 2) Locate and join a networked online community of learners for support, information, discourse, and collaboration. Because connections made through online music communities/social networking sites often overlap with corresponding offline ones, this can lead to “real life” opportunities for connecting, playing/performing, and music learning and teaching (Waldron in press, 14)

The below diagram illustrates 21st century IrTrad practice as a participatory music culture in which participatory music making incorporated with “informal music learning practices 1.0” and 2.0” are integral both in and to the genre.

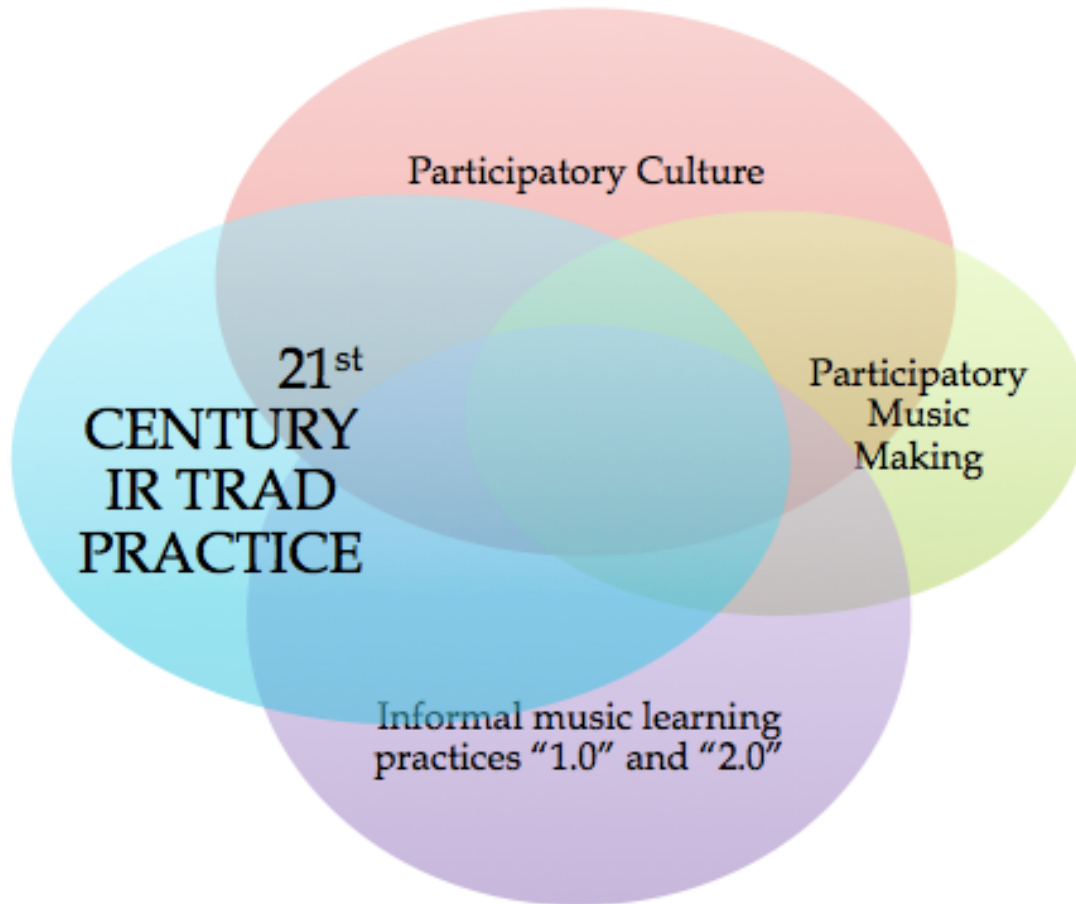


Figure 3: Diagram of 21st Century IrTrad as Participatory Culture, Participatory Music Making, and “Informal Music Learning Practices 1.0 and 2.0.”

The Online Academy of Irish Music: Background

As I have discussed elsewhere (Waldron and Hopper in press) Director Kirsten Allstaff founded the OAIM in April 2011, and its geographical administrative base is situated in Liscannor, County Clare, Ireland – the location itself being a powerful signifier to Irish trad musicians (Waldron & Hopper in press). The OAIM is comprised of a faculty-community of paid IrTrad musician-teachers based in Ireland and nonenculturated adult learners from around the world who pay a modest tuition fee in exchange for OAIM access. Formal music instruction is integrated with informal music learning practices and delivered in an online context.

In June 2013, the OAIM began offering a series of offline “summer school” music weeks at its home base in Liscannor, Ireland. There were three weeks in

total; the first OAIM week was dedicated specifically to IrTrad ensemble playing, the second focused on all aspects of Irish flute, while the third week was devoted to learning Irish fiddle. The aim of all three “summer school” weeks was to offer students the opportunity to contextualize their previous online IrTrad music learning done through the OAIM, intertwining skills they had already developed through virtual instruction with face-to-face teaching delivered in the more “authentic” setting of Liscannor.



Figure 4: Liscannor, County Clare, Ireland, July 2013

Liscannor (population 500) itself (along with the surrounding area) is the kind of place the Irish Tourist Board (ITB) loves to feature, with good reason. Situated on the coast of picturesque County Clare—the area, to nonIrish visitors at least – is a veritable stew of Irish signifiers—gently rolling green hills criss-crossed with rock walls, thatched Irish cottages, sheep, donkeys, cattle, along with a panoramic view of the Aran Islands and the Cliffs of Moher. Most nights in Liscannor there is some type of informal music making in the two local pubs—most notably IrTrad—but also Bluegrass (which the locals love), impromptu ballad singing (much from the town “character” Mick Dunne), and various

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pop/rock incarnations from drop-in guitarists and singers. Live, unstaged, participatory music making—after Turino—is the norm in the village.

The focus of this study was the 2013 OAIM flute week, which, in addition to an intense weeklong schedule of classes, included field trips and nightly excursions to Irish sessions in Liscannor and nearby. Student participants were parachuted into the local culture, with the various field trips serving as further immersion into musical life in Clare, famous globally as a “hot spot” for Irish traditional music. Most of the OAIM’s flute week students had previously learned IrTrad primarily through its online school—in other words, through digital videos, audio files, forums, and e-mail texts.

I attended the 2013 OAIM flute week as a participant researcher-observer to explore IrTrad music teaching and learning from the perspective of the OAIM students. Classes for the week were held in the Liscannor Town Hall and were taught by OIAM founder Kirsten Allstaff along with several well-known guest tutors, including Irish flute “superstar” Kevin Crawford (of the well-known Irish group *Lunasa*¹⁶), Dr. Niall Keegan (Graduate Director of the Irish traditional music performance program at the University of Limerick), and Patrick Olsen, who is a well-known IrTrad musician and flute pedagogue. Allstaff believed that Kevin Crawford would be the big motivational “draw” for student participants to attend and she was right; after Crawford’s presence was announced and confirmed on the OAIM’s website, the ten spots for the week filled up quickly.

I stayed in a rented cottage across the road from Egan’s Pub for the week, while the other students lodged at the Liscannor Hotel in town; everything was within a comfortable walking distance. It was a short but tasty immersion into the local culture.



Figure 5, above: Interior of Egan's Pub at 12:00 PM, just after opening time



Figure 6, below: Exterior of Egan's Pub at 9:00 PM, Liscannor, Ireland, July 2013

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Methodology

Because of the dual online/offline nature of the OAIM, both cyber ethnographic and ethnographic techniques were employed in this qualitative field study. After receiving clearance from OAIM founder Kirsten Allstaff and my institution's Research Ethics Board, and before I travelled to Liscannor in July 2013, I collected cyber ethnographic data—in the form of forum posts, emails, and digital videos—from the online OAIM's flute forum. This online data served three purposes: 1) to situate and contextualize the OAIM flute week prior to attending, 2) to serve as observational data in its own right, and 3) to triangulate data interview and observation data collected offline at the OAIM flute week's physical location in Liscannor, Ireland.

Of the nine students in attendance at flute week—I was the tenth—seven volunteered to be a part of this study. There were two women and five men, ranging in age from 40 – 68, their nationalities were American (three), British (two), one Scot and one Canadian. Of the ten of us, five people held Ph. D.s—which proved to be a major source of jokes throughout the week (for example, how many PhD's does it take to play an Irish flute?). All of the student-participants were intermediate-level IrTrad “fluters.”¹⁷

Physical observations at the OAIM flute week took place at various places throughout Liscannor, and included classes at the Town Hall, sessions held at Egan's Pub, McHugh's Pub, as well as in towns Doolin, Ennis, Ennistymon, and Lisdoonvarna located throughout County Clare. Field notes, digital video observations, and photographs were collected via smartphone and iPad.

While the seven participants were eager to be interviewed for this study, the OAIM flute week proved to be so jam-packed with activities that it was difficult to find time to schedule interviews while in Liscannor. As a result, interviews were done after the week was over via Skype, thus adding another, albeit unintentional, cyber ethnographic element to the research. After transcription, interviews were member checked; analysis was interpretive and iterative as categories and themes emerged from the coded data; I then further framed the coded data with both Turino's and Jenkins' respective ideas of participatory music making and participatory culture.

Triangulation of learning/teaching events was made possible through the comparison of participants' perspectives with observer/researchers relative to the same.

Results

After the coded data was analyzed and framed using Turino (2008) and Jenkins (1992, 2006, 2009), three main themes emerged. These were:

- 1) Becoming competent enough to play flute in sessions as the primary goal for learning IrTrad (i.e. wanting to be participatory music makers),
- 2) Being culturally and contextually situated in Ireland, even for a short period of time, as a central factor in learning IrTrad,
- 3) Participating in online IrTrad participatory culture as an essential part of music learning.

The Importance of Sessions for Participatory Music Making

First—and most tellingly—there was an underlying assumption from participants that the primary reason and ultimate end goal for learning IrTrad was to be able to play at a competent level in sessions with other people. This was so important that, ironically, it remained largely unarticulated until I asked participants questions about sessions directly in their interviews – the assumption being that the importance of sessions as a motivator was so blatant and patently obvious that it was unnecessary to articulate it. “Of course I want to play in sessions!” was the first response from participants when I asked them what their primary motivation was for learning IrTrad. Second, sessions were attractive to the participants for the same reasons mentioned by Turino (2008) regarding Old Time music and nonenculturated older adults, discussed earlier. Last, all of the participants had some type of music background before getting into IrTrad (this ranged from classical, blues, to pop/rock and school music), and, as they grew older, missed making music with others. Playing in IrTrad sessions offered a way to make music in a semi-spontaneous way that was also engaging, musically challenging, enjoyable, and just “plain fun” in an adult social setting (i.e. a pub). The opportunity to socialize, engage, and relax with other like-minded people—along with the availability of beer—played an important role in the attractiveness of playing in sessions for participants.

For two of the participants, the “intimidation factor” sometimes associated with session playing interfered with their actual participation in sessions as players. However, both still expressed a desire to eventually be able to do so as an end goal.

For participant Ani, an American originally from Georgia, easy accessibility to and playing in sessions was such a motivating factor for her that, after retiring, she moved to the West of Ireland in order to be in as close proximity to as many good sessions as possible. She said:

I want[ed] to play sessions. And someone said “Go to Ireland. If you want to learn how to play music then go to County Clare.” This is my fifth year [*living*] in Ireland, and it's very humbling—the density of wonderful musicians. It was beyond my expectations.

Ani currently lives in County Clare in the tri-town area between Ennis, Ennistymon, and Lisdoonvarna, where a good session with “mighty craic”¹⁸ can be found on any night of the week. Ani takes advantage of this and attends local sessions as often as possible, participating as a player, a listener, and/or both.

Participant Alex plays bouzouki as well as flute. Bouzouki was his first IrTrad instrument, but because it is primarily a “backing” instrument, Alex does not get to play “tunes”—i.e. the melody line—at sessions, so he took up the flute in order to be able to do so. He said:

I hope I can get [good] enough so that I can play flute in sessions and have a great time. That's where I'm at right now—I want to [be able to] play well enough that I can add to whatever session I'm in.

He also commented that the “social factor” (or lack thereof) was an important motivator to attend sessions, particularly so if the session in question was geographically inconvenient, thus taking some extra effort to attend:

There was a session that started up in Exeter – which was really sociable and nice—but it was a little over an hour drive. And there were flute players there and everybody was pretty nice. Not that anybody was going to teach me anything—but they were very social.

An isolated learner who currently lives in Switzerland, Marlene had this to say about session playing from her experience as someone who resides in an area with very little access to live IrTrad:

I've found one woman who plays the fiddle—near Zurich—and I went and had a jam with her—and I'll probably go again. There's also a session in Constance which is in the South of Germany, [but] it's about an hour and half from here . . .

I need to seek out sessions—badly, I think. [Because] that's what it's all about, really . . . it would be nice to be able to play with other people, and it's not quite happening [now]—so—the second best thing is to play on my own.

I asked Marlene if she ever played at sessions when in Ireland (to which she'd previously been), but the intimidation factor—freely acknowledged by Marlene as self-imposed—at Irish sessions was problematic for her:

I would have liked to [play], but I did find it a bit intimidating because I just thought, I'm not good enough. The intimidation, I'm creating it myself [and] that's the trouble. You don't want to make an idiot of yourself, do you? The fear of doing it—and the level [of playing]—in Ireland is quite high, so it's not like it's in

a little bar where they're all just average. I'd probably be ok . . . but they're bloody good here, aren't they?

Roger, from the UK, was also intimidated at the idea of playing in sessions, although he would really like to do so. There is a session near where Roger lives which he used to attend as a listener, but he doesn't go anymore because:

They [*the session musicians*] know I'm a musician now—I've stopped going because I don't want to be asked to play. I'm not competent enough—I'm not good enough to feel comfortable doing it. It would just terrify me to be put in the forefront and asked, "What tunes do you know?" That would be really scary for me.

But Roger has found a substitute session solution that works for him. Because of his reluctance to play in public, Roger explained that YouTubes have another use for him in addition to being a direct learning aid—as a substitute for playing "live" with others. So, it could be argued that, for Roger, using YouTubes for music learning and playing are a "simulacra" of sorts but with a positive connotation instead of the negative one the term usually denotes. He gets the experience of playing along with good musicians on YouTube but without the intimidation factor that goes along in playing live with others. In Roger's words:

After I've found a YouTube I like, I learn it and then play along with it. And that gives something of the feel of playing in a session.



Figure 7: July 2013 OAIM flute week final Friday night session at McHugh's Pub, Liscannor, Ireland. All of the study participants (Roger included), as well as the OAIM tutors, are participating in the above session. (<https://youtu.be/JGK9RDxWyKU>)

Irish Cultural Context and IrTrad Learning

It was believed by all that, in order to “really” learn IrTrad, it was necessary to spend time in Ireland, even if only for a short duration. Ani described the “embeddedness” of “the music” in everyday life in Clare through the following story: One day I saw my neighbor just start up a jig. He started dancing [*in his front yard*—and he wasn’t even aware of it—that’s just so a part of County Clare.

A Brit by birth, Marlene just “knew” that it was necessary to go to Ireland if she was going to learn IrTrad “properly.” She had lived in London prior to moving to Switzerland, and, while there, had attended an Irish cultural center in Hammersmith to learn IrTrad flute. But she felt that it was not enough for her to “really learn.” Searching the Internet, she found a “dodgy old bloke” in Ireland who advertised a music school in West Clare; she then traveled to Ireland to learn flute from him:

I had my first lessons in Ireland with a guy in West Clare—I couldn’t play the flute at all. You have absolutely no idea! So – I just went there. I thought—right, I’m going to go for three weeks and I’m going to learn the flute. So that’s what I did.

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It worked out OK in the end for me. But that's how I got into it – and that's [also] how I got to know the people in Ennis [which is near Liscannor in County Clare, Ireland].

Marlene implicitly understood the importance of enculturation for learning an unfamiliar music genre like IrTrad, which she illustrates here:

I [also] play the bass [which] you can learn out of context much easier. You put on a Red Hot Chili Peppers CD [for example] and you can transcribe the tunes, you can learn them, and you can learn how to play in rhythm. It's much, much easier to do [than learning IrTrad]. I think it's hard and I think it's because the Irish thing is much more of a context thing.

She further reiterated the role that the activities at the OAIM flute week had for her IrTrad playing, and how much hearing IrTrad in an offline participatory music making context helped her learning:

One thing about this week [meaning the flute week], I *really* heard what [IrTrad] is supposed to sound like. When you're here, you get a feel of the energy and the tone and the rhythm; you really hear how it's *supposed* to sound. That's the one thing that I absolutely came away with. I really got much more of an idea [of what the music is supposed to sound like]—you always get that when you go to Ireland—but in this situation I thought, “Yes! That's actually what it's supposed to sound like!” You really become aware of that when you're actually here. Because you're immersed in it.

Roger as well talked about how enjoyable it was to hear IrTrad played in an Irish context; more significantly, he was aware of what makes up a “good” session from a socio-cultural perspective (Foy 2009), and what he says below is also analogous to Turino's (2008) discussion of the appeal of Old Time participatory music making to nonenculturated adults:

I sat in and listened [at sessions during the OAIM week] and that was fantastic. *You know where the music is from, you hear it, and you see the respect that people give to each other. And how supportive they are of each other as musicians, it's really good to see* [italics mine].

Roger had been to Ireland numerous times for holidays before he began playing IrTrad flute, and had not paid much attention to what was available musically there until after he started playing. However, when the 2013 OAIM flute week was over, he took a trip around the southwest of Ireland specifically to hear as much live IrTrad music as he could:

It was good to be there [Ireland]. [Because] what was really fantastic [was hearing] all the different musicians who were [playing] in the pubs. We went [on a driving tour] after we had been in Liscannor—we went down to Dingle—and we toured the pubs there also. Before being at the OAIM week, listening to the music

in the sessions in the pubs is something which I wouldn't have done in previous visits to Ireland.

Online Music Learning and Participatory Culture

Despite acknowledging the significance that being in an Irish context has for IrTrad music learning, all of the participants were adamant that, without online resources—and, in particular, the OAIM website, they would not have been able to learn IrTrad on their own. Several participants mentioned the difficulty of finding a IrTrad teacher where they lived – often, the only teachers available were classically trained on silver flute and did not have any knowledge of IrTrad practice. Books and other printed resources were also deemed by all to be woefully inadequate for IrTrad learning. Roger explains his situation below; he was also aware that aural learning is fundamental to IrTrad:

I couldn't find a local tutor who could teach me—I went to a silver flute tutor, and he wasn't very good, but he made me learn to read music better, which was a good thing. ***But it wasn't helpful for me to learn Irish music.***

Roger has now found a good local IrTrad teacher, but he still uses YouTube regularly:

I've realized that there's an enormous resource out there in YouTube videos. People playing all kinds of Irish music—at all skill levels—I use that quite a lot now. Every time I want to learn a tune, I listen to every copy I can find on YouTube first to hear what different people make of it before I try to learn it. And that's fantastic!

Even more interesting were the two participants who equally valued both online resources/websites and their time in Ireland for their own music learning. While all of the participants used online resources to some extent, several of them were active seekers of user-generated content and were also involved in online IrTrad participatory culture on different IrTrad websites in addition to the OAIM. For example, participant Alex now writes his own tunes and uploads them to share with others in the online IrTrad community as well as having gathered and curated his own large collection of IrTrad music from various online websites.

He elaborated:

Over the past 12 years, I've gathered so much Irish music. Downloaded from here and there. I've got hundreds and hundreds of tunes. And most of the tunes are already there [meaning online]. It's just a matter of finding them . . .

[On the IrTrad forums] you get other peoples' views and take the question that you might want to ask [and sometimes it] has already been asked. So, you can read it and go, oh, ok that answered my question. Then you can ask it again or you ask it in a different manner. I think that's great. The forum and the feedback

and all that stuff that's on there [meaning the OAIM website as well as others devoted to IrTrad].

And although he really valued what he learned during the OAIM flute week, Alex concluded that:

What I learned here [at the OAIM flute week] is that going online now is a little bit more essential for me. If I want to progress, I need to go and learn online. . . For me, if I want to learn the flute, my only option is to go online. That's it. I think the online stuff is the best thing that could have happened to folks who are not within the reach of a teacher.

Roger also talked about the wealth of IrTrad user-generated content available online and how he incorporates what he collects into his own playing:

And [the IrTrad tune sites and YouTubes] are interesting, because you'll find that, when you're looking for a tune, you just don't get one version of the tune, you'll get 20 versions of it. Some of which aren't even the tune you were looking for, but they have the same name. And I really find that quite interesting. I sometimes do go through and use two or three of them – just to see what slight variations that I might use and how I can incorporate them into what I'm playing to make it more interesting.

To conclude, all of the participants wanted to be competent enough at IrTrad to play with other people in sessions; in other words, participatory music making was everyone's learning goal. Participants also stressed how important being in the culture from whence it came from was a necessary part of learning IrTrad, but they also emphasized the importance of being able to go online because doing so afforded them access to music resources not previously possible before the advent of the Web. All of them employed "informal music learning practices 2.0" when learning IrTrad to some extent. For most, however, music learning through access to an online participatory culture did not trump learning and playing in a participatory music making context like a session. The one exception was participant Roger; YouTubes were actually a better alternative to live session playing for him because of the intimidation factor. Despite this, the study findings were, overall, consistent with the following quote from new media scholars Rainie and Wellman (2012):

Critics used to worry that the Internet would be an inadequate replacement for human contact because hugging a computer screen is less satisfying than hugging a friend. In fact, evidence shows that Internet communication technologies supplement—rather than replace—human contact. People will make do with electronic contact if they cannot be together in person. (144)

Conclusion

What began as a local traditional music bounded by geography can now be found throughout the world in physical contexts and online in a multitude of websites and online communities. IrTrad began as a participatory music making genre 300 years ago in rural Ireland, and the importance of participatory music making in IrTrad has not changed despite its global spread. Although IrTrad has always been intertwined with elements of participatory culture, easy accessibility to the Internet has now firmly established 21st century IrTrad as a worldwide on and offline participatory culture phenomenon. The latter, along with the desire to become participatory music makers, was illustrated by the experiences of this study's participants.

Although qualitative research is not considered to be generalizable, there are lessons to be learned from it. On the surface, this study was about adults learning IrTrad on the Irish flute in different online/offline contexts, mediums, and modes. But it was also more than that. Like the participants in Turino's work (2008), participants in this study very much wanted to be able to make music with other people in a musical culture, that for various reasons, was attractive to them regardless of their own cultural backgrounds. And they wanted to learn it so badly that they were motivated enough to travel to Ireland to do so – this in addition to learning IrTrad on their own by trawling through Internet resources and searching for people with whom to play in their own locales. Although they all had some kind of formal music instruction in their backgrounds – either school music or conservatory lessons – neither of those experiences “filled the bill” when it came to playing and learning music as an adult.

The OAIM flute week offered participants a unique opportunity to apply and integrate what they had already learned in an online participatory culture with learning in an authentic contextualized offline setting face-to-face. The appeal of musics like IrTrad and alternative learning models like the OAIM have implications for music education that are connected to many of the same issues that we as a field have debated for some time now. First, we need to consider other music learning models and musics that are “out there” besides that of the large performing Western ensemble, and second, we need to figure out how to put those alternative models into practice. Only then we will be able to meet 21st century music learners' needs.

About the Author

Dr. Janice Waldron is an Associate Professor of Music Education at the University of Windsor. Her research interests – informal music learning practices, online music communities, social media and music learning, vernacular musics, and participatory cultures – are reflected in her forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Social Media and Music Learning* (with Dr. Stephanie Horsely and Dr. Kari Veblen). Published in *Music Education Research*, *The International Journal of Music Education*, *Action, Criticism, and Theory in Music Education*, *The Journal of Music, Education, and Technology* and *The Philosophy of Music Education Review*, Dr. Waldron also has authored several *Oxford Handbook* chapters in its Music Education series. She serves on the Editorial Boards of *Action, Theory, and Criticism in Music Education*, *The International Journal of Music Education*, *The Journal of Music, Education, and Technology*, *T.O.P.I.C.S.*, and was named the 2012 “Outstanding Researcher: Emerging Scholar” at the University of Windsor.

Notes

¹ “Last Night’s Fun” is a popular IrTrad tune—see <https://www.irishtune.info/tune/1104/> for its complete history, written notation, soundfiles, and discography of the tune.

² “Last Night’s Fun” is a popular IrTrad tune—see <https://www.irishtune.info/tune/1104/> for its complete history, written notation, soundfiles, and discography of the tune.

³ Irish music “summer schools” typically offer an intense weeklong opportunity for people to learn and become immersed in IrTrad through classes, concerts, dances workshops, and informal activities like sessions (<http://www.irishcentral.com/opinion/others/summer-schools-keep-the-tradition-of-irish-music-alive-210741331-238185071.html>).

⁴ This is not the same as blended learning—as that implies schooling in a formal institution using a formal curriculum.

⁵ See Waldron and Hopper in press.

⁶ Ten companies are currently touring; Riverdance is also the resident musical in many places in Ireland (www.Riverdance.com).

⁷ As can be seen in commercials and TV shows. For example, the Robaxcet commercial referencing Irish stepdancing (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRresOqKW7I>), as well as inspiring a plethora of satirical TV comedic sketches

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(shows <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/03/16/mike-myers-mtv-awards-stavros-flatley-ozzy-osbourne-and-irish-dance-scenes.html>).

⁸ Because myself and others have already written extensively on this topic I will not discuss this here; recommended to interested readers are Cawley's (2013) and Waldron and Veblen's (2008), Waldron's (in press) work among others. Cawley in particular charts and explains the functions of the many varied Internet IrTrad sites in-depth.

⁹ For example, tradconnect.com, thesession.org, chiff and fipple.com, to name a few.

¹⁰ Speaking from my own experience, I always check the session listings on thesession.org before I travel so that I can "drop in" on any local existing sessions in the area where I am going.

¹¹ Diligent readers who listen to all three YouTube session examples in this paper will notice common tunes among all three.

¹² For more on this topic, see Waldron in press.

¹³ More information about this session can be found at <https://thesession.org/sessions/5797>.

¹⁴ Information about this session can be found at <https://thesession.org/sessions/275>. Interested readers should note the comments posted below general information about the Fergie's session for more revealing sociological and cultural contextualization.

¹⁵ Written notation can be used, but it is always a skeletal version serving as a mnemonic device, functioning very much like a lead sheet in jazz. Like other genres based in informal music learning practices (Green 2002), when written notation is used, it is often an alternate form of notation to standard Western notation, for example abc, "whistletab" or guitar TAB¹⁵ (www.thesession.org).

¹⁶ Those interested can read more about Kevin Crawford here: <http://www.lunasa.ie>.

¹⁷ "Flutter" is the slang term used by IrTrad players to describe a person who plays Irish traditional flute (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/flutter>).

¹⁸ "Craic" is an Irish term denoting social activity that includes good conversation, good company and which can also include music, dancing, and beer (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Craic>).

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