Towards a regional understanding of Irish traditional music

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The geography of Irish traditional music is a complex, popular and largely unexplored element of the narrative of the tradition. Geographical concepts such as the region are recurrent in the discourse of Irish traditional music but regions and their processes are, for the most part, blurred or misunderstood. This thesis explores the geographical approach to the study of Irish traditional music focusing on the concept of the region and, in particular, the role of memory in the construction and diffusion of regional identities.

This is a tripartite study considering people, place and music. Each of these elements impacts on our experience of the other. People in some places construct or reinforce their identity through their use of music and the celebration of musicians from that place. The thesis challenges conventional discourse on regional styles that construct an imagined pattern of regions based on subtle musical differences that may, though are not always, shared by people in that region and focuses on the social networks through which the music is disseminated. The thesis also challenges the abandonment of regional styles and the concept of regions in understanding the complex geographies of Irish traditional music. It seeks to find a middle ground between discourse analysis, musical analysis, the experience of music and place, and the representation of music and place.

The dissertation is divided into three parts. Part one considers the development of music geography, noting and critiquing the abandonment of useful paradigms in both geography and ethnomusicology in search of new ways of understanding. Of particular interest is the concept of the region but it also considers the study of landscape and the humanist approach in cultural geography. The second part focuses
on the discourse and study of regions in Irish traditional music and the various agents and processes that shape the concept of the region in Irish traditional music. The final part presents a case study of Sliabh Luachra combining and applying the various perspectives and paradigms drawn from geographical, ethnomusicological and anthropological sources. It attempts to generate an understanding of Sliabh Luachra as a region in the Irish traditional music narrative that is based on a combination of musical, socio-cultural and locational/environmental factors.

The central issue of concern within this thesis is the importance of location, the role of distance and patterns of diffusion. The cultural region is based on a series of social networks and interlinked spaces in which culture evolves and is transmitted or diffused. Greater communications, recording technologies and increased travel and tourism have played an important role in negating the significance of distance on cultural difference yet distance remains a significant factor in the development and evolution of local and regional cultures. While elements of the soundscape and the practices of music making may have become more homogenised, the role of individuals and the individuality of each performance and performance context reinforces the uniqueness of each region. The concept of a sense of place is integral to the narratives of Irish traditional music. The combination of music and place in the design of heritage, the celebration of place within the Irish music tradition and the development of places of pilgrimage present new contexts for a regional understanding of Irish traditional music.

Old ideas of the geography of Irish traditional music that focussed on the connection between Irish traditional music and rural societies located in western counties are still relevant to a new regional understanding of Irish traditional music. A series of maps are presented in this dissertation that highlight the different ways in which regions may be identified and their prominence at different points in time. The maps underline the importance of understanding the perspective from which the region is identified and the motivations in the construction of regions. Collectors of music, intending to publish and broadcast music, selected areas of the country from where they sourced Irish traditional music. In each individual instance, collectors focused on particular regions. The decisions of these collectors have shaped the
geography of Irish traditional music, particularly for their immediate audience. A study of participants at *fleadhanna cheoil* also demonstrates patterns that can inform a study of the geography of Irish traditional music but it is heavily influenced by the role of a particular organisation, *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann*. It is evident, from the research carried out in the development of this study that regions of Irish traditional music have changed greatly over time and the focus has shifted, though some regions have remained the focus of study and commentary across a number of studies. Perhaps the greatest single change, highlighted by the maps, has been the development of a Dublin based community of Irish traditional musicians that reflects the urbanisation of Irish traditional music, concurrent with other changes in Irish society.

The penultimate chapter on the Sliabh Luachra region highlights many aspects of a regional understanding of Irish traditional music. The changing social and spatial contexts for the performance and consumption of Irish traditional music have impacted upon the construction and meaning of regional identities within the tradition. To the fore has been the translation of Irish traditional music into heritage for consumption by tourists but that was preceded by the selection of musicians and their music for collection, recording and broadcasting. The celebration of historical figures through processes of naming, public statuary and festivals contributes to the regionalisation of Irish traditional music.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the geography of Irish traditional music is being reconstructed through a process of intense regionalisation based on the interpretation of history and memory in response to the challenges of globalisation. A regional understanding of Irish traditional music requires an understanding of local traditions, sounds and stories within a global network of people and spaces. This thesis demonstrates the complex web of interconnected processes and agents and their impact on a regional understanding of Irish traditional music. There remains a need for a greater understanding of these processes and the interrelationship of regions in Irish traditional music, as well as a more informed conceptualisation of regions in the discourse of Irish traditional music as presented herein. A number of maps in this dissertation present patterns of musical activity and diversity at a county level,
inviting future research that examines Irish traditional music within the county. In
developing an understanding of the Sliabh Luachra region from the periphery,
influenced by the interpretation of the region by people from outside the region, an
opportunity remains to further explore the Sliabh Luachra region in the context of the
regions that surround it. This dissertation provides a framework for the further study
of regions in Ireland and a greater regional understanding of Irish traditional music.