

“PRETTY YOUNG ARTISTES” AND “THE QUEEN OF IRISH FIDDLERS”: INTELLIGIBILITY, GENDER, AND THE IRISH NATIONALIST IMAGINATION

By Tes Slominski

And yet if you took the hero out of the story, what was left? What female figure was there to identify with? ...The heroine, as such, was utterly passive. She was Ireland or Hibernia. She was stamped, as a rubbed-away mark, on silver or gold; a compromised regal figure on a throne. Or she was a nineteenth-century image of girlhood, on a frontispiece or in a book of engravings. She was invoked, addressed, remembered, loved, regretted. And, most important, died for. She was a mother or a virgin. Her hair was swept or tied back, like the prow of a ship. Her flesh was wood or ink or marble. And she had no speaking part (Boland 1995, p. 66).

Irish poet Eavan Boland (1944-) thus describes her dawning awareness that the heroic stories of Irish nationalist struggles left little room for women activists or commentators. She continues, "to the male principle was reserved the right not simply of action but of expression as well. I was ready to weep or sing or recite in the cause of Ireland. To do any of that, however...I would have to give up the body and spirit of a woman" (Boland 1995, 66). She thus identifies a primary problem for early twentieth-century women activists constrained by categories of acceptable femininity established by personifications of the Irish nation as Mother Ireland, Erin, and other figures. For publicly active women traditional musicians in the early 1900s, such strategies of symbolic identification were vital.

Feminist scholars since the 1960s have worked diligently to return women to historical narratives and to explain their erstwhile invisibility as a function of gendered power dynamics past and present. Visibility, however, is not sufficient, and interpretation is vital.¹ Therefore, this article begins to investigate the historiographical

1 The extensive scholarship on women's history includes the work of Gerda Lerner, Joan Scott, Joan Kelly, and others. Scott makes a particularly vehement call for interpretation in the project of returning women to the historical narrative. My choice of "women musicians" rather than "female musicians" throughout invokes this

disjuncture between the documented public activity of women traditional musicians in early twentieth-century Ireland and their subsequent erasure from the narrative of Irish traditional music history. After a brief exegesis of the categories by which we can understand women's musical participation in the past, I argue that metaphorical connections between women and nation in force in the early twentieth century rendered some women intelligible as traditional musicians but prevented others from participating in public music-making.

Several categories describe women traditional musicians active between 1890 and 1970, and many of these women belong to multiple categories. First, a few — including Mrs. Crotty, Mrs. Kenny, Mrs. Galvin, Julia Clifford, Lucy Farr, and Aggie Whyte — were visible nationally or internationally, and tend to be remembered as extraordinary rather than exemplary. The assumption that these women musicians, however skilled, were exceptional contributes to the erasure of less famous women musicians from popular historical memory. Moreover, the presence of these extraordinary musicians is often cited to refute claims that the Irish traditional music scene was (or still is) irascibly sexist. More generally, though, the tendency to focus on these women is understandable, since information about them is more widely available.

A second category fits the many women musicians who were once known but have since been mostly forgotten outside their families and immediate communities. This category includes Mollie Morrissey and May McCarthy, as well as Peggy Hegarty, Joan Hanafin, Bridgie Kelleher, and many others. Some of these women are easier to trace because they appear in O'Neill's *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, one of the few published volumes that profiles individual musicians active before 1920. Most, however, were better known in their own communities and did not make any commercial recordings, although some appear on archival field recordings.

Third, I contend that an unknown and possibly significant number of women musicians occupied social positions that rendered them invisible to the musical public sphere, such as Galway spinster and flute player Mary Kilcar. A related category might include women musicians like Cork/London banjo player and singer Margaret Barry, who remains on the fringes of traditional music history, perhaps because of her uncommon declamatory style and her origins in the Traveller community. A fourth category involves second-degree visibility, and includes women musicians primarily remembered as tradition bearers — mothers like Molly Morrissey (no relation to the piper), Margaret O'Callaghan, and Pearl O'Shaughnessy who gave songs and tunes to

scholarship, and also reflects the definition of gender (as opposed to sex) as socially constructed rather than biologically determined.

their sons.² Many of these women rarely played outside their homes, but motherhood allowed them to pass on the tradition in time-honored and politically supported ways. Today their names most often appear in connection with their sons.

Encoded in these categories is an unspoken assumption that traditional music's historical gaze still belongs to male musicians. With rare exceptions, Irish traditional music's texts have all been written by men, and the brain trust of the tradition still rests with its "gentlemen scholars." Thus, nearly all the accounts and recordings we have of pre-1970 women musicians come from male authors, interviewers, and collectors. Although this imbalance is slowly shifting, this dearth of female commentators and collectors reveals as much about the situation of women in all areas of Irish life in the mid-twentieth century as it does about the enduringly homosocial traditional music scene.³

O'Neill's *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*: Mothers and Maidens On Stage

Connections between the Irish nation and metaphorical women abound, and by 1900, images of Mother Ireland, Erin, and other idealized women appeared frequently in songs and literary productions, as well as in visual ephemera, including postcards and political cartoons. Personifications of careworn Mother Ireland and long-tressed Erin linked homeland and hearth, and invariably cast the nation's men in the roles of hero, protector, and dutiful son.⁴ Using biographical profiles from Francis O'Neill's *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, I first argue that similarities between personifications of the Irish nation and representations of women musicians enabled these women to perform as good nationalists rather than as threats to the social order. I then contrast these publicly sanctioned women musicians with Mary Kilcar, a nearly forgotten flute player from Galway whose social position as a spinster rendered her illegible as a tradition bearer and excluded her from the semi-public sphere of local musical events, as well as from the national stage.

2 Concertina player Molly Morrissey, whose official last name was O'Connell (according to her grand-nephew Joe Gerhard, Morrissey may have been her mother's maiden name) was Sliabh Luachra fiddler Maurice O'Keeffe's mother; Margaret O'Callaghan (fiddle, concertina) was Sliabh Luachra fiddler Pádraig O'Keeffe's mother, and Pearl O'Shaughnessy (fiddle) is Dublin fiddler and flute player Paul O'Shaughnessy's mother.

3 "Homosocial" refers to settings that customarily include members of only one sex. For example, most knitting groups are homosocial female spaces, while pubs have historically been the province of men.

4 In addition to geographers Gerry Kearns and Catherine Nash, scholars of history and literature have written about the use of symbolic women, especially "Mother Ireland," in the formation and development of the Irish nation, including Innes 1993, *Woman and Nation in Irish Society*, Athens: University of Georgia Press; Kearney 1997, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy*, New York: Routledge; and Gerardine Meaney 1991, *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*, Dublin: Attic Press. This body of work parallels scholarly attention to women as embodied symbols of nation elsewhere, particularly in India, as Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert and Louise Ryan (2002) point out in "Mother India/Mother Ireland: Comparative Gendered Dialogues of Colonialism and Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century," *Women's Studies International Forum* 25/3.

Francis O'Neill's reputation as a tune collector helped popularize his other works, including *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (1913). This volume remembers its featured musicians in internationally circulated print, while most of the musicians of either sex who were not mentioned have presumably been forgotten. For example, current knowledge of early twentieth-century musicians May McCarthy, Mollie Morrissey, and Bridget Kenny depends almost entirely on Francis O'Neill and his sources, which are often items from the nationalist press. Not surprisingly, descriptions of the women musicians in *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* resemble those of feminized personifications of the nation circulated in print around the turn of the century, and the book allows us to explore the ways that nationalist discourse recast women's public performance as a nationalist activity. Although *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* leaves no evidence about what these musicians may have thought about their musicianship or about the rhetoric of cultural nationalism, it presents vital clues about how and why they may have been encouraged to play publicly despite an overwhelming social conservatism that asserted that a women's proper place was in the home.

Mrs. Kenny's Excellent Adventure: From One Public to Another

Of the women traditional musicians publicly active in the early twentieth century, Mrs. Bridget Kenny remains the best known. The daughter of piper John McDonough, Kenny grew up in Galway in the mid-nineteenth century. O'Neill writes at length about Kenny's domestic situation, and emphasizes her ability to bear children and to instill in them a knowledge of Irish traditional music:

Devotion to art does not appear to have unfavorably affected the size of Mrs. Kenny's family, for we are informed she is the prolific mother of thirteen children. Neither did the artistic temperament on both sides mar the domestic peace of the Kenny home, and, though the goddess of plenty slighted them in the distribution of her favors, have they not wealth in health and the parentage of a house full of rosy-cheeked sons and daughters, several of whom bid fair to rival their mother, "The Queen of Irish Fiddlers," in the world of music (O'Neill 1913, p. 389).

Although we can only guess at Kenny's political views, O'Neill portrays her as a proper Irish mother who provides her children a love of music and nation along with their porridge, which though thin was surely Irish.

O'Neill also emphasizes Kenny's success in music competitions, and points out that she was known in the popular press as "The Queen of Irish Fiddlers." Despite this title, O'Neill asserts that Kenny was not adequately recognized for her musicianship:

This remarkable woman's talents ought to have been regarded as a national asset. Yet it does not appear that any effort was made to take advantage of the opportunities presented by her discovery, by the establishment of a school in which the much-vaunted traditional style of rendering Irish music would be taught and perpetuated (O'Neill 1913, p. 387).

Despite the likelihood that Kenny's playing was underappreciated in some quarters, newspaper accounts suggest that the nationalist movement did use her talents. For example, she received top billing at a festival sponsored by the Gaelic League and the Limerick Irish Pipers' Club in Kilkee, County Clare in September 1903, and advertisements in the 18 July *Clare Champion* assured readers that "the best Gaelic talent has been secured for this year's Festival." The success of this concert relied on the importance of music in the expression of cultural nationalism. Because the philosophies of the Irish-Ireland movement situated the teaching of traditional music in the domestic sphere and therefore with women, Kenny's public concert appearances could be seen as an extension of the activities she was encouraged to perform in the home. Likewise, Irish-Ireland discourse about the role of women as tradition bearers allowed Kenny opportunities for performance that would almost certainly not have been available to her otherwise as a woman.

By emphasizing Kenny's poverty and her occupation as a street musician, O'Neill's sketch leads to an important point about the differences between "public" and "the public sphere." Here, I invoke Jürgen Habermas's definition of a "public sphere" as the coming together of private citizens for the public exercise of reason and, eventually, for the shaping of state policy. In this sense, the nationalist movement may have functioned as a public sphere quite distinct from the public street in which Bridget Kenny played:

In no country save Ireland, would a violinist of such demonstrated ability as the subject of this sketch remain unappreciated and practically unnoticed, while obliged by necessity to contribute to the support of a large family by playing for a precarious pittance along the highways and byways of Dublin for a generation or more (O'Neill 1913, p. 387).

Poverty directed Kenny toward the street, where she could be seen and heard—but not where she would automatically be noticed or accepted by the nationalist public sphere. The nationalist movement's disregard for music performance in commercial or semi-public spaces also surfaces in the absence of contemporary published accounts of

music-making outside concert settings: although numerous oral histories mention traditional music at fairs, pattern days, and other such events, this music is largely missing from the public written record, except when a hapless musician runs afoul of the law.⁵ For Kenny, an urban busker and a woman, participation at nationalist public events was remarkable—yet O’Neill’s profile remains the only widely available account we have of this “Queen of Fiddlers.”

Mamas, ~~Don't~~ Let Your Daughters Grow Up to be Pipers

When today’s musicians remember Bridget Kenny, they call her a “fiddler” — a remarkably automatic attribution of traditionality, given the early twentieth-century tendency to use “fiddler” and “violinist” interchangeably. The vehement distaste for the term “violinist” in today’s traditional music circles sometimes leads to confused readings of earlier sources, and the instrument’s integral role in art music as well as in folk styles has prevented it from becoming a primary icon of Irishness. The *uilleann* pipes, however, have been considered ineluctably Irish since at least the late eighteenth century. Unlike the fiddle/violin, the pipes evoked poverty and debauch during the nineteenth century, despite—or perhaps because of—their strong connection with the Irish. By the time O’Neill published *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* in 1913, the dominant narrative held that pipers—whether common men or gentlemen—had once been respected members of society, but that the occupation and its practitioners had fallen into disrepute. “Kelly the Piper,” a famous story by Mrs. S. C. Hall, illustrates the relationship between a piper and his Anglo-Irish “betters.” First published in 1829, the story presents Kelly as a ne’er-do-well drunkard who earns his meager income by playing at the local “pattern,” or patron’s day, a celebration featuring music and dancing. The squalid laziness of Kelly and his family contrasts with the industry and wealth of the Anglo-Irish “quality,” and the skill of the piper, though considerable, is inextricable from his poverty and, ultimately, his Irishness. The story seems to have been widely available in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and Francis O’Neill includes it as a source for *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, as well as for *Irish Music: A Fascinating Hobby* (1910).

A similar report on the falling fortunes of the *uilleann* pipes comes from “A Plain Piper,” an occasional contributor to the *Kerryman* in 1912. This author, presumably male, implores readers to celebrate Ireland’s traditional music as an object of national pride:

The poverty-stricken piper became an object of contempt, and the

5 For an entertaining account of a rowdy party that attracted police attention, see “An Interrupted ‘Soiree,’” *Kerry People*, 7 February 1903.

contempt was naturally extended to his instrument, the cause of his indigence. It is only a few years since a friend of mine, a good fiddler, who expressed an intention of learning the pipes, was told by his relatives that if he did so disgrace himself he need never show his face at home again! Small wonder that the pipes ceased to be generally played just as the language ceased to be spoken and so many of the old customs to be observed! The race of 'gentlemen pipers' had died out and no respectable person would touch the instrument ("A Plain Piper," 1 June 1912).

This tale matches O'Neill's interpretation of the pipes' decline in *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*.⁶ If a male fiddler faced familial disgrace for wanting to learn the pipes in the late nineteenth century, a woman with the same desire must have risked opprobrium of an even greater magnitude, especially since the pipes lacked the connection with parlor music enjoyed by the fiddle/violin and the piano.

According to O'Neill's sources, however, several women did play the pipes in the nineteenth century, even if playing the pipes in public was acceptable only for a woman faced with "dire necessity":

Tradition has preserved the name of Kitty Hanley, a Limerick widow, who on the death of her husband—a blind piper—buckled on his pipes and made a living playing on the streets...(p. 342)—

and—

From [Jimmy Barry, late nineteenth century] was learned the story of a woman known as "Nance the Piper," who flourished at Castlelyons and who had become a performer from dire necessity, on the death of her husband (p. 268).⁷

O'Neill admits that blind Nance must have already played the pipes, but in Kitty Hanley's case, the reader could assume that she strapped on the pipes without previous experience. This assumption is absurd. We have no information to suggest that Kitty

6 In *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, O'Neill describes the post-Famine situation of pipers thus: "Changed conditions, lack of patronage, and other well-understood causes, forced this class of minstrels, many of them blind, to take to the highways for support—a form of mendicancy which brought their once honored calling into disrepute" (p. 153). He continues, defending the collective reputation of traditional musicians: "Indeed, the musicians of Ireland are as harmless and inoffensive a class of persons as ever existed, and there can be no greater proof of this than the very striking fact that in the criminal statistics of the country the name of an Irish piper or fiddler has scarcely if ever been known to appear" (p. 155).

7 Kitty Hanley seems to have been active in the 1830s and 40s. O'Neill does not supply a date for Nance the Piper, but her profile appears in a section about pipers from the late nineteenth century.

Hanley was a particularly good piper, but that she was able to make a living at it suggests that she too was a proficient player.

These reports of nineteenth-century women musicians, however few, indicate that women were playing instrumental dance music, either privately or to avoid privation, before the institutions of cultural nationalism began to celebrate the sounds of the pipes, harp, and fiddle. Such cultural nationalism ultimately counteracted the stigma against the pipes, and briefly allowed some young, probably middle-class women access to national public performance opportunities on the *uilleann* pipes and the warpipes.⁸ That this level of access and encouragement was so short-lived makes it even more remarkable, and only in the last decade or so have women returned in significant—if still comparatively small—numbers to *uilleann* piping circles.

How, then, did the sensibilities of nationalist fervor enable middle-class young women to play the pipes publicly in the early twentieth century? How did the rhetoric of Ireland-as-woman intersect with representations of women playing what had recently been considered a lower-class, disreputable, and male instrument? Francis O'Neill's sketches of Mollie Morrissey and May McCarthy demonstrate the rhetorical work necessary to portray women pipers as valuable semi-professional participants in Irish public life, rather than as unacceptable transgressors or as merely tolerable private amateurs. First, O'Neill and his sources emphasize these pipers' youth and femininity to render them harmless to the social and musical order. Second, descriptions of Morrissey and McCarthy resonate with poems and song texts that portray Ireland as a maiden—a stylistic device that naturalizes the idea that playing traditional music, even on the pipes, is an appropriate activity for young nationalist women. Finally, O'Neill and his sources avoid connecting musicianship with identity in their descriptions of Morrissey and McCarthy. This avoidance sidesteps class and potential gender role confusion and separates them from their male counterparts, for whom the label "piper" is an identifying feature and most likely a source of pride.

O'Neill's biographies of Miss Mollie Morrissey and Miss May McCarthy leave no doubt that these two proficient pipers are women, young, graceful, and mild-mannered. Unlike most of O'Neill's profiles of male musicians, which begin with reports of their own musicianship, his accounts of Morrissey and McCarthy first situate each in relation to Mr. Wayland, their teacher. In Morrissey's sketch, O'Neill also lauds the ease with which she memorizes new tunes—an important attribute, but hardly the cornerstone of traditional musicianship.⁹ O'Neill quotes a 1905 article in the London-based *Ladies'*

8 In the 1913 Oireachtas, 3 of 4 listed winners in the warpipes competition were women. All winners on the union (*uilleann*) pipes were men (*Galway Observer*, 2 August 1913).

9 This portrayal of Mollie Morrissey as the musical equivalent of a bean counter echoes Catherine Lutz's critique in "The Gender of Theory" (1995, p. 251) that women's writing is "more often seen as description, data, case,

Pictorial at length:

I give you an interesting portrait of Miss Mollie Morrissey of Cork, fideogist, harpist, pianist, violinist, bagpiper and stepdancer, at the age of fourteen. I venture to say that not many Irish colleens can boast of such a long list of accomplishments, but such are the attainments of this little girl, whose charming and unassuming manner has endeared her to all who know her. She is the youngest and most proficient female piper in Ireland, playing the famous Irish melodies with great expression, and is also a correct exponent of dance music.... The clever little artiste is decorated with many medals, won at competitions in piping and step-dancing, and at last year's Oireachtas she carried off first prize in female hornpipe dancing from all comers, her graceful carriage and movements combined with precision being much admired.... Miss Morrissey got a special invitation...to attend a reception during Pan-Celtic week, which she could not accept on account of being indisposed at the time (p. 334).

Published eight years before *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, this account emphasizes Morrissey's femininity and youth. Overall, O'Neill's sketch portrays her as a girl of fourteen, rather than as the adult woman she had become by 1913. In the *Pictorial* article, her musical skills are "accomplishments" that would seem to lead to an advantageous match and a future playing in the semi-private parlors of middle- or upper-class homes. The article further feminizes her prowess by citing her expressive performance of airs even as it damns her renditions of faster—and arguably more challenging—dance music as merely "correct." At every turn, Morrissey's successes are diminished by phrases like "little girl" and "clever little artiste." The article's final reference to her "indisposition" reinforces an overall impression of delicacy that eclipses her prizes, precision, and proficiency, and leaves the reader with a picture of an endearing young thing, a retiring, mild-mannered maiden whose medals and pretty face merely decorate the public practice of Irish cultural nationalism.

May McCarthy's biography contains a similar tension between musicianship and its rhetorical erasure. McCarthy is also young—in her teens in 1910—and according to O'Neill, her "progress in piping and dancing is said to have been little short of marvelous" (p. 334). Complimentary as that seems, "marvelous" suggests that McCarthy's progress is extraordinarily uncommon or even supernatural. Attribution of musical skill to otherworldly entities is common in stories told about Irish traditional

personal, or as in the case of feminism, 'merely' setting the record straight." See *Women Writing Culture*, eds. Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, Berkeley: University of California Press.

musicians, but here, “marvelous” draws attention away from musicianship: McCarthy is not a musician, she is a marvel. O’Neill’s next paragraph somewhat inexplicably links McCarthy with John Augustus O’Shea, a journalist and novelist stationed in France in the nineteenth century, identifies her as the daughter of Tipperary parents, and then returns our gaze to the young piper:

Their talented daughter, however, was born within earshot of the far-famed Bells of Shandon, and while neither big nor brawny this versatile Irish colleen can handle with ease a full-size instrument (p. 334).

O’Neill again focuses on the female body and its fully Irish origins rather than on the music that body produces. McCarthy is small, no threat to anyone, and feminine, despite her ease with the pipes. Similarly, O’Neill’s sketch of Morrissey avoids drawing attention to bodily attributes like her preternaturally long fingers or the physical control necessary to dance with “graceful carriage and movements combined with precision” — just her delicacy, small size, and youth.

If youth and femininity ensured that Morrissey and McCarthy presented no threat to the social and musical order, their participation in Gaelic League competitions establishes them as ardent nationalists and frames their musical performance as an expression of that nationalism. Cultural nationalist beliefs in the early twentieth century helped create an environment in which some parents allowed their daughters to learn the *uilleann* pipes, teachers agreed to teach them, and some newly-formed pipers’ clubs allowed women members.¹⁰ McCarthy’s performance career demonstrates the role of nationalist organizations in allowing her access to public stages in Ireland, England, and Wales. Although O’Neill does not supply much detail about these concerts, McCarthy performed in Birmingham and in Manchester, where a branch of the Gaelic League had been founded in 1905. Her diary also lists seventeen concert dates in Cork, Kerry, and West Limerick in 1917 (Mitchell-Ingoldsby n.d.). These concerts may have been part of an informal circuit of Gaelic League-supported events common in the early years of the twentieth century, a circuit on which Bridget Kenny performed, as did fiddler and dancer Teresa Halpin of Limerick, who appeared on the same bill as Mrs. Kenny in Kilrush in 1903. Rarely mentioned by traditional music historians, these concerts seem to have opened a musical public sphere for women performers akin to the political public sphere *Inghinidhe na hEireann* and *Cumann na mBan* created for women activists. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these two public

¹⁰ O’Neill remarks upon the novelty of including women in musical clubs in his discussion of the Cork Pipers’ Club, formed in 1898: “In precept and example it was an inspiration, and not only that but convention was disregarded, barriers were broken down, and the musical franchise conferred on the fair sex.” (*Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, 330).

spheres may also have overlapped: according to Mary Mitchell-Ingoldsby's history of the Cork Pipers' Club, May McCarthy was also a member of *Cumann na mBan*, whose 1917 constitution asserted that members "should participate in the public life of their locality, and assert their rights as citizens..." (C. McCarthy 2007, p. 105). Since *Cumann na mBan* included cultural education among its goals, the organization may have made use of McCarthy's talents as a piper, although no available evidence supports that claim.

That both Mollie Morrissey and May McCarthy were active participants in Gaelic League competitions, and that McCarthy was a member of *Cumann na mBan* connects them to the nationalist movement in obvious ways. Moreover, if we assume that they, as maidens, are destined to become bearers of children and tradition, we can imagine a suitably feminine future for them in keeping with the dictates of the Irish-Ireland movement. O'Neill and his sources further cement the relationship between these musicians and the nationalist movement by echoing the words of songs and poems that personify Ireland as a young woman. Although the poetic use of adjectives like "fair," "sweet," and "graceful," as well as the Anglicized noun "colleen" predate the swell of nationalist broadside ballads and poems that began in the late eighteenth century, these words were familiar components of stock phrases like "fair Erin's isle," "sweetness of sweetness," and "sweet and mild," that referred to the Irish nation-as-woman.¹¹ Particularly striking is a stanza about Morrissey penned by fiddle player Edward Cronin:

'Upon the height of steep Glenview
That looks o'er Shandon's sweet-toned bells,
A maid with eyes of heavenly blue—
Fair Mollie of the music dwells' (p. 334).

In four short formulaic lines, Cronin follows the form of most *aislings*, which begin by establishing setting and usually describe the *spéirbhean* shortly thereafter, often beginning with her eyes.¹² Like Dark Rosaleen's "holy delicate white hands," Mollie's eyes of "heavenly blue" align her with the angelic and saintly. "Fair Mollie of the music" invokes the famous poem and air "Seán O'Duibhir a' Ghleanna," thus supplying nationalist resonance to Cronin's otherwise superficial epithet. O'Neill's prose contains fewer pretensions, but he also refers to May as a "colleen."

11 These phrases appear in numerous songs and poems, and in colloquial speech. Poetic sources include Aogán Ó Rathaille's "Gile na Gile" (late seventeenth/early eighteenth century), Mangan's "Kathleen Ny Houlihan" (nineteenth century), and Pádraig Pearse's "Renunciation" (twentieth century).

12 Compare the first two lines of "Gile na Gile"—"Brightness of brightness lonely met me where I wandered,/Crystal of crystal only by her eyes were splendid."

The Misses Morrissey and McCarthy also visibly match representations of the Irish nation as a young woman. James Clarence Mangan's nineteenth-century verse gives us Erin's "waving raven tresses," Eiré's "golden tresses long and low," and "Maedhbh the young, of ringlets long" (Mangan 1897, p. 179 and p. 184). In graphic representations from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Erin/Eiré/Hibernia often wears her hair down. Depending on the source, her overall appearance either shows her youth and need for Britannia's protection, as in this 29 October 1881 *Punch* cartoon by Sir John Tenniel —



—or invokes the imagined fresh-faced purity of the Irish nation, as in this early twentieth-century postcard scene, which depicts Erin dancing to "The Wearing of the Green" (Raphael Tuck & Sons, #177):



The photos of Morrissey and McCarthy included in *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* fit images of Ireland-as-woman, and their flowing tresses show their youth and connect them with France's Marianne and America's Lady Liberty, iconic figures of national

independence. McCarthy also sports her competition medals—a sartorial choice that binds her photographic image to the work of the Gaelic League (p. 333 and p. 335):



Both portraits anticipate the obligatory curls worn by competitive women Irish stepdancers today.

The enduring view that women are susceptible—and men immune—to the

vagaries of fashion inflects O'Neill's descriptions of Morrissey and McCarthy. Unlike his accounts of male musicians, in which he uses nouns like "piper," "fiddler," "musician," and "composer," O'Neill's profiles of these two women pipers rely on words like "learner," "artiste," "performer," and of course, "daughter," "girl," and "colleen." In addition to emphasizing their sex and their relationships with teachers, parents, and audiences, these words relentlessly assert that for Morrissey and McCarthy, playing the pipes is something they do, rather than the expression of who they are. Although the *Ladies' Pictorial* article O'Neill quotes does refer to Morrissey as a "fideogist, harpist, pianist, violinist, bagpiper, and stepdancer," it lists the pipes last among the instruments.¹³ Nowhere in his sketch of McCarthy does O'Neill refer to her as a piper or as a musician. This reluctance to call Morrissey and McCarthy pipers is remarkable, since O'Neill almost always refers to their male counterparts as pipers, and follows common naming practices by replacing male musicians' first names with "Piper," as with Piper Gaynor and Piper Jackson (p. 182 and p. 201). "Piper" thus defines the identity of these men, and transcends social class: Gaynor was a blind itinerant musician, but Jackson was a gentleman.

In a genre wherein "musician" still often becomes a male player's primary identity, O'Neill's word choice suggests that Morrissey and McCarthy only used the music as an accessory, and that neither assumed the identity of a traditional musician. The distinction between doing and being offers clues to the scarcity of publicly active women musicians after 1922. In reference to Morrissey and McCarthy, O'Neill and his sources term traditional music an "accomplishment" or an "attainment," skills used to adorn the private parlor and entertain the family circle. If early twentieth-century male commentators constructed women's musicianship as a fashion and not a vocation, women's public performance became less threatening, both to male professional musicians and to a symbolic order that expected women to remain in the domestic sphere. By considering a women's musicianship peripheral to her identity, any expectation that she would continue playing through her adulthood was removed, thus enabling what fiddler Bernadette McCarthy today calls "the disappearing act": the tendency for young women musicians to stop playing and vanish from the scene once they reach adulthood. In this context, it is remarkable that May McCarthy continued playing the pipes publicly as an adult, and even formed her own céilí band (Mitchell-Ingoldsby, n.d.).

13 "Fideogist" remains mysterious. Based on context, most likely the word is a misspelled neologism based on the Irish for tin whistle, *feadóg*: perhaps the author of the *Ladies' Pictorial* article meant "feadógist," or perhaps the typesetter, more familiar with Latin roots than with Irish nouns, altered the word. It is also possible, though less likely, that "fideogist" is an unwitting contraction of "fideologist," which would suggest that Miss Mollie's devout faith was her most important characteristic. Thanks to Ivan Goff for pointing out the similarity between "fideo" and "feadóg."

Looking Into the House Where the Music Is: Mary Kilcar and Lucy Farr

I close this article with a brief look at two women musicians absent from O'Neill's *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*: flute player Mary Kilcar (c. 1890-?) and fiddler Lucy Farr (née Kirwan; 1911-2003), who lived in County Galway in the 1910s and 1920s. Lucy was barely two years old when O'Neill's book was published, so her exclusion is not surprising; Mary, however, was approximately twenty years' her senior, and by Lucy's reckoning was a fine player, but never participated in local musical occasions and remained nationally unknown. Previously, I examined the social conditions and symbolic connections that made public music performance possible for Bridget Kenny, Mollie Morrissey, and May McCarthy. Now I ask what conditions relegated Mary Kilcar's music-making to the private realm, and what circumstances gave Lucy Farr the opportunity to narrate Mary's story from her position of a public musical figure reminiscing about her own childhood. Questions of access and (il)legibility are central to our understanding of the musical activity of all these women.

According to Lucy Farr, Mary Kilcar never played the flute outside her own home in Lishenny, a small village near Ballinakill, County Galway. We know that Mary was a spinster who lived with her sister, and we may assume that they came from a prosperous family, since they seem to have lived by themselves—a residential situation that required some means. We must guess about Mary's early musical life, however. She may have learned to play the flute as a child or young adult, and like many girls of her generation, most likely received some sort of formal music tuition in school: by the time she would have entered school, music had been part of the curricula of both the National Schools and convent schools for several decades (M. McCarthy 1999, p. 86). East Galway also seems to have provided a supportive environment for music education for adults in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and violin classes for men and women were offered in Ballinasloe in 1905, according to the 30 March 1905 *Loughrea Nationalist*. The class organizers note that among the male students, all had “more or less a practical knowledge of the violin” before the classes began. These classes seem to have focused on classical technique and repertoire, but the area also was and is known for its traditional music. As in many other Irish communities in the late nineteenth century, opportunities for men and boys to learn and play wind instruments were plentiful, and included local fife and drum corps and brass bands sponsored by area Temperance Societies.¹⁴ Mary Kilcar's sex, however, limited

14 Lucy Farr (unpublished interview by Reg Hall, audio recording C903/374, 1983, British Library, London) gives an anecdotal account of fife and drum bands near Ballinakill. For a brief but salient discussion of temperance bands, see Marie McCarthy 1999, pp. 48-51. Contemporary news items about brass and fife and drum bands abound, including reports in the *Loughrea Nationalist* on March 30 and April 6, 1905.

her access to these avenues of public performance, and unlike her contemporaries Mollie Morrissey and May McCarthy of Cork, she did not enjoy the support of a local pipers' or musicians' club that allowed women members.

It makes sense that Mary Kilcar would have received musical instruction as a girl, and the category of "musical girl" at the turn of the twentieth century was intelligible.¹⁵ But Mary inhabited another social category by the time Lucy Kirwan met her in the early 1930s: she was a spinster. As a single and aging woman in the socially-conservative years of the Irish Free State, Mary would have been symbolically invisible: she was neither a mother nor a maiden in a society whose metaphors of nation defined the behavior and aspirations of real women. However politically and rhetorically invisible, Mary's position as spinster was legible within rural Irish society. The combination of her musicianship and her marital status, however, was not.

Why? After all, her younger friend Lucy Kirwan Farr had few problems finding musical outlets. For Lucy's family, music making may implicitly have been an expression of cultural nationalism, but it was explicitly a form of entertainment to which she had access as a child in a musical household—or more specifically, as the daughter of a musical father. In an interview conducted by Reg Hall in 1987, the way Lucy reports a conversation with Mary Kilcar emphasizes this access, and Mary's awareness of it:

And there was a lady in the next village, and her name was Mary Kilcar, and she would be—when I was 20, she'd be about 40, and she played a flute, and—though she was never part of the scene in my young days—she never—women didn't come down into the houses where the men were. You'd hear Mary Kilcar playing the flute inside in her own house, but you'd never see her in any house where there was music. And so one day, I was walking around, and I knocked at the door.

"Oh!" she said, "Lucy Kirwan! Come in!"

"Well," I said, "I've come in because I'm playing the fiddle, and we've all heard you playing outside, but you never come to our neighborhood dos."

"Oh," she says, "They wouldn't have women—they wouldn't at all them

15 For work on women's music-making in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Ruth A. Solie 2004, *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations*, Berkeley: University of California Press; and Judith Tick 1986, "Passed Away is the Piano Girl: Changes in American Musical Life, 1870-1900," in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950*, eds. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

dos.”

I said, “Well, we do, I do.”

“Ah, but you’re living in the house where it *is*. I couldn’t, I couldn’t do *that*.”

“Living in the house where it *is*” ensures presence, but presence does not automatically produce legibility as a woman musician – yet Lucy’s fiddling seems not to have been particularly transgressive. Why not?

The answer lies in the pervasive ideals of the Irish-Ireland movement, which defined and reinforced the role of mothers as tradition bearers—a term usually invoked without acknowledging the gendered “bearer.” This connection between women, the home, and “tradition” has analogues elsewhere, particularly in those nations we now consider “postcolonial.”¹⁶ So while we might assume that progress marches ever forward, and that Lucy enjoyed more access to public music-making than Mary simply because she was born later, this assumption overlooks a more significant point: that Lucy’s status as maidenly daughter of a musical father placed her, a future tradition bearer, on the receiving end of borne tradition. As a spinster, however, Mary was a transmissive dead end. Although she too may have once enjoyed legibility as the daughter of a musician, she does not fit into the category through which most women musicians of her generation are remembered: as mothers who pass tunes down to their sons. Because she had no children, she became illegible as a tradition bearer, *even though* she did pass along her example and quite possibly her tunes to Lucy Farr. But woman-to-woman musical transmission—including the sharing of tunes between mothers and daughters—is rarely noted among Irish traditional musicians. In a tradition that values the lineage of tunes and players, this omission is noteworthy. Another way of thinking about women as tradition bearers draws from Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women”: only women whose bodies held symbolic and actual exchange value—virgins and mothers—were part of the exchange of tunes. For single women like Mary Kilcar, bodies out of reproductive circulation also meant tunes out of circulation.

16 Many scholars have written about the relationship between tradition and gender, including Anne McClintock 1997, *Imperial Leather*, New York: Routledge; Nira Yuval-Davis 1997, *Gender and Nation*, London: Sage Publications; Tamar Mayer 2000, *Gender Ironies of Nationalism*, London: Routledge; Frank Biletz 2002, “Women and Irish-Ireland,” *New Hibernia Review* 6/1, pp. 59-72; and Partha Chatterjee 1993, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

We might interpret Mary's nonparticipation in community music-making as shyness, but again, comparison with Lucy complicates this overly simplistic explanation. In her anecdote about Mary, Lucy points out that women "didn't come down into the houses where the men were," and Mary's own story — albeit in Lucy's words — reinforces this claim. Mary was not the only woman in turn-of-the-century Galway who never played music outside her own home: in a 1988 interview with Reg Hall, Lucy says that her aunt Margaret, who eventually married later in life, also played, but not in public —

Because there were no other women playing fiddles, you see. There were *no* women fiddle players. My aunt Margaret, who played a bit — she never played out. Never went anyplace to play. She'd play indoors in the house.

Lucy Farr, whose access to the musical public sphere was much greater than Mary's or her aunt Margaret's, also describes the discomfort of going out to sessions alone, even in comparatively progressive London in the late 1960s:

Lucy Farr: Well, I didn't used to go every Sunday morning, but I remember this one Sunday morning that I got all these looks — a *woman* walking in on her own, with a fiddle under her arm. And then all of a sudden I didn't feel too bad, 'cause I found Julia Clifford used to come in as well, but she had John —

Reg Hall: So was it —

Lucy: I think that must be, I think that must be late, that must be around '68 or '9 or something.

Reg: Was it an all-man affair?

Lucy: All old men.

Reg: Old men

Lucy: Yeah.

To misquote Yeats, that was no country for single women. Mary and Margaret could easily have disappeared entirely from the narrative of Irish traditional music, but like

the narrator Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero describes, Lucy gives both Mary and Margaret the posthumous gift of their stories.¹⁷ Her own position as a respected and publicly active traditional musician allowed her to give this gift, but her story leaves its own traces, and reflects her own anxieties about legibility and access.

Conclusion

Single women like Mary Kilcar were demographically distinguished and often economically disadvantaged compared with the maidens, wives, and mothers of popular nationalist imagery. Although the real women who fit these idealized categories were a minority in 1913, these categories nonetheless carried the rhetorical power of acceptability and approval, even when the women who most closely fit them did things that were not quite acceptable or universally approved of, such as playing instrumental dance music in public. Like many of the women working actively toward Irish independence, alignment with the symbolic categories of mother and maiden enabled women playing music publicly to be seen as good nationalists working toward an Irish Ireland, rather than as the stereotype of transgressive, masculinized suffragettes.

In conclusion, an adaptation of a quotation from Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender* supplies a provoking set of questions to ask of the multiple practices that constitute Irish traditional musicianship in the past and today—practices that determine how musicians are recognized (or not) during and after their lifetimes. Here, I substitute “play(ing)” for “be(ing)” and “musician” for “person” or “human”:

What, given the contemporary order of **playing**, can I **play**? [This question] concerns consequential decisions about what a **musician** is, and what social norms must be honored and expressed for “**musicianhood**” to become allocated, how we do or do not recognize animate others as **musicians** depending on whether or not we recognize a certain norm manifested in and by the body of that other (Butler 2004, p. 58).

I acknowledge the life-or-death implications of Butler's original phrasing, but suggest that recognition as a musician may also help determine whether a life is fully liveable. Unlike Mollie Morrissey and May McCarthy, Mary Kilcar did not inhabit the body or the social position of the ideal Irish woman and thus did not “honor and express” the norms that would have allowed her entry into the music scene as a “tradition bearer.” For women traditional musicians in the early twentieth¹⁸ century, the nationalist

¹⁷ See Adriana Cavarero 2000, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, London: Routledge.

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movement and its symbols provided the “contemporary order of playing” that defined the norms of women’s musical and social behavior. By understanding musical participation and aesthetics through these theoretical concepts, we gain insights into historical material, but perhaps more importantly, we also uncover new ways of considering traditional music practices today.

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