

THE LINGUISTIC TURN AT THE TURN OF THE TUNE: THE LANGUAGE OF 'CONTEMPORARY ENSEMBLE' IN IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC.

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The English language plays a pivotal role in ensembles as they exist in the world of what is called traditional Irish music.¹ If we take the linguistic turn, this language is essentially encultured, bring a shifting world of meaning into play at all levels of discourse; even the use of the term 'ensemble' in itself is one that brings a plethora of dialogic ideas such as cultural hegemony, value and class into play, despite my attempt to treat the term as neutrally as possible. The music performed in any number of ensemble contexts, whether the session, the *céilí* or the concert performance is rehearsed, directed and accounted for aesthetically through the use of language, all of which is essentially metaphorical in nature. This language reflects aspects of the performed identities of all participants in these events. Indeed it could be argued that these multiple and often conflicting identities are created in the use of language for and about the ensemble as well as in the musical sounds themselves. This paper will look at instances of the framing of ensemble by language and examine the use, function, and sources of such linguistic expressions in the context of the concert performance of ensemble and its creation. From this we can see how such a framing can reflect and contrast with the paradigmatic political and aesthetic identities assumed for the sounds of the music itself, providing contrasting and yet confluent dialogues for traditional Irish music.

I have garnered material for this paper from three particular sources. Firstly from an extended ensemble rehearsal of a large band (band members will remain anonymous), secondly from interviews with professional ensemble members and thirdly from responses by traditional musicians to excerpts played from recordings of bands. The focus therefore is on the modern phenomena of concert bands, removed from the paradigm of dance and/or session-focused domestic and local performance and central to the

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contemporary paradigm of concert performance that is modelled on western popular and classical practices and contexts.

As a community, traditional Irish musicians have specialized vocabularies, all of relative emic and etic values and natures that facilitate and account for the performance of traditional Irish music. There are various specialized vocabularies, some of which are more privileged than others, in particular the structures of regionalism, the language worlds of piping, the language of instrumental techniques and styles. Some of these specialized vocabularies are what John Baily would call 'operational,' that is necessary for the day-to-day life of the tradition of ensemble making, and some are what Baily goes on to describe as 'representational,' or I would term 'descriptive,' not informing performance practice but occurring after performance. Baily terms the operational model as a taught music theory that informs and has a 'dynamic role in the control of ongoing musical performance' as opposed to representational models that have 'no direct role in performance' (Baily 1988, p. 114). However, it is obvious that much of the language involved plays a role in both models to different levels of efficacy in the context of traditional music. There is certainly an operational language that is necessary for the social functioning of Irish traditional music, but one might wonder if an etymological examination of such terminology would not always show that the roots of the language are not essentially representational or descriptive. On the other hand, much language that would be credited as being representational obviously has a role in an operational context. And some terms perhaps have an equal existence in both models. For example, in the dialogic worlds of traditional Irish music the 'life' metaphor and its extensions occur frequently in performance instruction ('put some life into it') or in accounting for performance ('that east Galway music is too dead for me'). Also, in a discussion of traditional Irish music it is useful to not insist on the possible use of operational terminologies in performance (as perhaps implied by Bailey in his description of the operational model being involved in 'ongoing musical performance'), as this would be fairly uncommon. These terminologies more often occur before performance, being more prescriptive than operational in nature and never informing the totality of performance. However, the fact that terminology has a role that allows it to be used in both models does not mitigate from Baily's structure, but shows the utility of such terminologies as a musical, political and social set of tools that not only account for Irish traditional music but allow musicians to shape the way it is perceived and imagined and even to create it.

Roland Barthes tells us in his famous essay, 'The Death of the Author,' that,

A text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (Barthes 1990, p. 146)

This observation has relevance in the discussion of terminology used by traditional musicians. Barthes could be superficially interpreted as saying that creativity is not evident in the processes of authoring because of the absence of originality but perhaps is more faithfully interpreted as implying that the site of creativity is shifted from the author to the social terrains of reading. Speech about traditional Irish music uses an encultured vocabulary that is drawn from a number of sources. These include nature, our embodied experience of this music and our embodiment generally, society, other music practices among others. As such, this speech has a life that moves through a multi-dimensional environment. Creativity is thus evident through choice, employment and combination in specific cultural contexts.

In examining such language practices we must take care to avoid an 'abstract objectivism' (see Allen 2000, p. 17) that focuses on relational structures of language and avoids any question of meaning for which language is utilised, in its day-to-day life. When we look for categorical structures to account for language about music we are tempted to understand such structures in the absence of the music it accounts for. The structuralist and post-structuralist approach can forget the 'turn of the tune' – in examining language we can lose its relevance to what the language is about, music. I was recently criticized for an article written for the *Journal of Music* (December 2009 – January 2010) for having a negative take on contemporary tradition because of my focus on the need for a more critical use of language in tradition. In his response to that article, Daithí Kearney writes:

Instead of being concerned with language, I propose that we strive for a greater understanding of the processes in traditional music. (Kearney 2010)

Admittedly, abstract objectivism is a problem with this sort of examination but how can we strive for a greater understanding outside of performance itself (especially in the pages of publications) without a critical examination of the language, written and spoken, used by commentators from any perspective to produce 'understanding'? We must always remember that

for Barthes the author only had 'the power to mix writings'; for my informants their power is in the creative practices of their music but their language practice can just as creatively frame and enable these practices. What primarily informs what we say and write about traditional (or any) music and its processes is a tradition of saying and writing. The 'power' of the author or speaker does not come from the relationship of word to music but rather that of word to word. This is arguable the root of the contemporary western division and disjuncture of music and musicology. To engage 'process' in music we initially, and primarily, engage philosophical, academic and political language processes and structures. I would that a critique of these language structures is essential for a meaningful academic engagement with music.

In traditional music today there are discourses and vocabularies that are privileged above others. They are usually associated with issues of authenticity, locality and the solo performance (which is perhaps perfectly understandable and to be expected in our globalised environment with multiple performance practices jostling for attention). They also seem to be the most identifiably 'Irish' although it is arguable that their form and structure is a lot more general. They are also, implicitly more emic (by this I mean they are understood by cultural 'insiders' in a scale directly equating to the individual's relative 'insiderness'). Such terminologies are built around issues of regional style and past, privileged practice. We could take a post-structuralist approach and argue that the establishment of privileged language structures to account for Irish traditional music performance reflects the interests of dominant, established groups within the community of sound to evaluate and encourage or discourage performance practices. Such vocabularies would perhaps be accounted for by Bakhtin as a trend towards a musical 'monoglossia' (see Bakhtin 1981). However, contemporary concert bands, as we shall see, have a peripheral role in relation to these more 'traditional' privileged practices accounted for by such vocabularies. The music practices that these monoglossic vocabularies relate to are emerging from perceptions of the first mass mediated sources of this music and organized along lines which are relevant to issues of locality and value. The contemporary concert band is conceived as a new phenomenon, one that in popular folklore was started by Seán Ó Riada and *Ceóltoirí Chuallann* in a classical context and which was then moved onto a popular music stage in the 1970s by *Planxty* and *The Bothy Band*. Ensemble is essentially a social activity and so naturally engenders objective and representational / descriptive vocabularies for its own needs. However, one of functions of language about ensemble is to maintain a connection with the native tradition and that

tradition's vocabularies, recognizing the centrality of authenticity in word (Bahktin's monoglossia) and practice, while allowing for potentially contrary practices.

Language in Making Ensemble

To collect language used in the creation of ensemble, I recorded the rehearsal of a large ensemble consisting of seven musicians. The make-up of this rehearsal was primarily traditional musicians with a substantial amount of experience of traditional Irish music or related traditions, such as Scottish or North American fiddle playing. Some members had a little previous experience of institutionalized learning of music and framing of ensemble, but this situation is not unusual among the communities that create ensemble in a contemporary context (indeed some commentators have referred to the 'classicalisation' of the tradition through such processes). None of the band members in this case had worked significantly in ensembles in a western art or popular music context.

The language used in this setting proves to be reasonably consistent and operational. This ensemble was at a stage of development where they were all familiar with the repertoire and they were producing and trying to remember a fairly intricate arrangement (by Irish ensemble standards) of a barndance (a dance tune that can be accounted for in 4/4 time with a symmetrical eight-bar structure). They consistently used general language from western music: note names were used to teach counter-melodies or correct and enquire about perceived mistakes; octaves are referred to (i.e. 'You play down the octave there'). Structural terms, in particular 'note' and 'bar' were common. One term taken from western popular culture and used a lot to account for repeated melodic lines is 'riff'. Interestingly, there were references to harmonies on accompanying instruments, but no more harmonic operational language than that – provision of harmony and accompaniment was left to the 'backer' and melody players did not ever give harmonic direction (despite the fact that many of them would have had the skills to do so). Indeed, some of the melody players sought direction from the accompanists when they had a counter-melody or other harmonic role in the performance. The furthest some of the melody players went in reference to harmony is to talk about the 'tension' of a particular chord and it 'resolving'. The fiddlers commonly use the term 'Pizzicato' or 'Pizz.,' while the rest of the ensemble members refer to 'notes being staccato'.

There was a considerable amount of structural language that envisages the performance as a narrative with discrete parts. Terms such as 'first part,' 'second part,' 'first round,' 'second round,' 'A part,' 'B part,' 'first B part,' 'second B part' provided structure tools for the musicians to engage their music. It is evident from the recording that some are taking notes while others are not, that is attempting to remember the arrangement without aids. No ensemble member was using manuscript paper although all would have been able to. The musicians spent a lot of the time communicating in the following way:

So the second half of the barndance, the second time through the second part, the very last B altogether, [band member A] brings in the riff, you're doing EBA harmonies, [band member B]'s doing harmonies to the other tune, not the barndance, I'm doing the dronie riff thing and then [band member A] takes the riff out of the barndance. So it's just the fiddles and the piano and then you [the piper] come in with the [the piper shrieks], into the tune. Because we do the riff twice through and it speeds up – the third time through it's actually the third part, yeah, exactly, oh yeah!

Of course there is much operational language that is necessary for the social and performed functions of the tradition to be heard here. There is little ambiguity about instrument names although some have perhaps less than perfect synonyms (keyboard / piano, fiddle / violin) and there is one instance of an accordion being directed to play in a 'melodeon' style (i.e. reminiscent of a single row rather than a two row button accordion). Also there is much reference to the speed of the tunes rehearsed as members often question whether a piece is too fast or too slow.

The rest of the operational language for creating ensemble is essentially made up of more mundane metaphors, particularly ones that are spatial and embodied, taken from our physical engagement with our environment to fulfil particular needs. One member asks 'Do we need to work on it?' as if the tune was a material to work at, to transform it or refine it. There are constant references to 'coming in' and 'dropping out' (strangely perhaps the expression 'coming out' isn't used at all). The arrangement is often being 'built up' while tunes are being 'dove-tailed' into each other. Harmonies can be 'intrusive' while someone can 'run away' (increasing in speed) and sometimes it's important to make the rhythm 'really bouncy' while one member of the ensemble was very fond of looking for 'power' in the ensemble (Perhaps its only a coincidence but this comment came from the only man in the group). Interestingly, the recurrent self-criticism is that things are too 'messy' and need to be 'tighter'. These spatial metaphors (and there are more) may seem

mundane and run-of-the-mill but they are absolutely essential for the creation of ensemble.

Language in Accounting for Ensemble

About ten years ago I engaged in some research where I played excerpts from thirteen separate traditional music recordings to a group of eight traditional musicians. These were mostly taken from commercial recordings and included three from what would be regarded as concert bands (the rest were from solo recordings, dance bands or sessions). I asked them to describe what they heard and let me know what they thought of the performances. The language of response here is more easily characterized as representational or descriptive as none of the language was recorded in a setting where ensemble was being made.

However, in their responses we can still see more operational, western musicological terms being used in this category (perhaps naturally enough as the informants are all musicians themselves and would use these terms in operational contexts). Some refer to 'a bit of harmony' while others refer to 'counter-melody' and some speak of the 'musicianship' of members of the band. There are several sets of more mundane, everyday metaphors used to describe and account for ensemble, the majority of which are spatial. Informants complain of performances being 'cluttered' (usually referring to harmonies) and sometimes the tune gets 'lost' or the accompaniment is 'overbearing'; some speak of 'messaging around,' implying a lack of purpose and over-elaboration (obviously related to the 'mess' metaphor as we have seen used in creating ensemble); many informants speak about the balance of the band being good or bad (for instance the 'balance' is bad when the accompaniment is 'overbearing'). Sometimes more emotive words are used such as 'exciting', 'sad', or 'relaxing'. More embodied metaphors, sometimes implying agency, or the lack of it, are also prevalent; some performances are regarded as having great 'life' while others are 'dead'. Other common metaphors used by respondents are physical and tactile. Some performances are seen to have 'fire,' while arrangements can be perceived to be 'rich' (presumably a metaphorical extension of texture rather than economic wealth, although the two could be considered to be related). There is very little peculiar to ensemble or even to Irish traditional music in these metaphors but it is interesting to note that they work around two axes – the perceived effectiveness of their rhythm (life, fire etc.) and the effectiveness of the arrangement and its relationship to the main melody ('cluttered,' 'messaging about,' 'losing the tune,' etc.).

More recently I conducted interviews with three members of prominent professional traditional music ensembles, asking them about the ideas behind their bands, how they relate to audiences through speech (introductions, stories etc.), and what they found most satisfying and liked most about playing in a band.

Two of the ensembles would be regarded as concert bands in a standard, popular format, *Danu* and *Munnelly*, while the last is a new band consisting of just three Donegal fiddle players, *Fidil*. The language of Muireann Nic Aoiimhlaobh, singer and flute/whistle player in *Danu* and Kieran Munnelly, flute and bodhran player in *Munnelly*, is business focused and their performance lives revolve around contemporary performance practice, occurring in concerts and CD recordings. When asked about their favourite numbers in a gig they tend to contextualise them first in a recording and then to talk about their affect in performance. Indeed both present their material differently to different audiences – so much so that Muireann conceptualizes performances in two different contexts completely differently, giving them different names.

You have to tailor it (language introducing numbers) to the audience. A concert in America is very different to a gig in Ireland, even the language we use to describe them are not the same thing. They've got a concert, you've got a gig, you know?

Kieran, on the other hand, only seems to be concerned about the perceived traditionality of his performance closer to home.

I don't worry about that [presenting non-traditional material] until we come to Ireland or Europe where people expect it [traditional material].

To all the informants a central concept is of difference between performances as described by Kieran:

There's one set that we're playing for years. I like it because over the years it's grown through live performance, through us being not afraid or not stagnant, something that has changed and is different every night.

Also central to all the informants is the difference between band members, as described by Aidan O'Donnell from *Fidil*:

You can probably hear the three individuals in the band... there's layers of sound to work with then.

And difference from other bands is as well described by Aidan.

We were playing what we learned at home. The interest was to try and go to that than not try and sound like other bands... We were interested in the traditional tunes but trying to put a *Fidil* stamp on it.

Each of these bands seems to have a very different central philosophy to their performances. Muireann says about her band, *Danu*, perhaps the most mainstream of the three groups mentioned here, that their central idea is to get across the feel of a session on the stage. She says

We like to think of ourselves as a trad band, not a very frilly one, not always the slickest or the most adventurous in arrangements but the heart of it is the session format really and we don't really stray from that too far.... It's kind of an old-fashioned trad band... The thing that works the best for us is to keep it simple and to keep it honest. When we were younger we spent a lot of time coming up with very complicated and very fairly fancy arrangements and chord progressions and harmonies that I enjoy, but at the end of the day we have reverted back to good old tunes and songs that we can't really go wrong with.

Certainly *Danu* is the band musically closest of these to what is perhaps the prototype traditional dance tune based band, *The Bothy Band*. Muireann speaks of the rejection of complexity of arrangement and harmony, depending on the value of traditional material, the virtuosity and musicianship of its members and the overall 'blend' in the band ('blend' is a metaphor like 'balance' or 'mix' which is commonly heard in comments in and about a number of performance practices). Also interesting and common is the use of 'honest' to describe uncomplicated ensemble performance of older traditional music.

Kieran presents *Munnelly* as a band that is a co-operative. Involving of a number of different musical approaches that do not compromise, but where band members allow each other to express their own preferences and aesthetics. For both Muireann and Kieran important metaphors for their sound are 'life' and 'energy'.

Aidan O'Donnell presents a different but not unconnected aesthetic for ensemble. Like the band *Altan, Fidil* attempt to represent the music of their particular region, Donegal, or perhaps even more specifically, that of south West Donegal (although this was not a distinction made in my interview with Aidan). They want to reflect their roots and, unlike *Altan*, reject many of the musical conditions of contemporary ensemble performance. Aidan tells me about *Fidil's* sound:

The basic sound was to go back to the roots in terms of listening to Doherty and Frank Cassidy... Every CD we heard, even if was a solo fiddle CD, still would have bouzouki or guitar, even though it was deemed solo. So what I wanted to do, and what Ciaran wanted to do was to break that down using just the fiddle. Obviously you had to do something else with it, you couldn't just leave it static,

it challenges you to do something new and different; but at the same time the route was through the old octaving, the old Donegal players.

Central to every aspect of their performance is what he regards as traditional Donegal fiddle performance (although he does admit in taking some liberties for the sake of individuality). Even the way they introduce the tunes is important.

We try and bring a lot of folklore that went with it [introductions]... It's not just about the music, it was made socially relevant, they tell the story about the place and about the tune that relates the tune to the audience. It's not just about the music like... We try and get the audience. At the end of the day you're trying to break down a barrier to make these people comfortable and enjoy it probably the way we enjoyed learning it. We enjoy ourselves first and foremost but then when we do that we try and get the old stories the way we heard them from the likes of Vincey [Campbell] and especially the likes of [Danny] Meehan and all.... It makes the stuff more accessible I suppose.

Aidan is here presenting perhaps an extreme form of a more recent type of ensemble that focuses deliberately on more privileged traditional practices (such as regional styles). For example, *Altan*, as stated, do this for Donegal music and the Band *Sliabh Notes* do so for Sliabh Luachra music. However, these bands do so in the musical context of the model for the concert traditional band that was set by 70s by ensembles such as *The Bothy Band*. *Fidil* have gone so far as to reject that format, refusing to have accompaniment from guitar, bouzouki, bodhrán or keyboard. They also refuse to go with the standard inclusion of a singer. However, it must be remembered that a significant part of the life of *Fidil* is more substantially modeled on contemporary performance context (the concert stage, featuring standard length sets), contemporary technology and contemporary business practices. Aidan refers, just as much as the other two informants, to such contexts (the concert, the session) and the ubiquitous CD.

Conclusion

The responses I elicited to musical excerpts from musicians ten years ago also featured recordings taken from solo musicians and a session. In these responses issues of place and traditionality were far more prevalent in their analysis than they were in their analysis of the excerpts of ensemble. However, operational language was less prominent in the solo and session contexts although such language is invariably mentioned with the regional metaphor. The vast majority of ensemble playing (with the notable exception of bands like *Fidil*, *Altan* and *Sliabh Notes*) is not evaluated *with the same language based tools*

and according to the same criteria as more privileged solo (in an Irish style) performance. Responses to ensemble exist in a different, if related, sphere of language, dominated by operational terminology, emotive responses (such as excitement) and ideas of individuality. What becomes very apparent in an examination of these responses, in comparison to others, is that much of the rich, privileged language associated with solo traditional music is not there. The local references and the language of technique are not at all apparent in these responses to ensemble performance. It is really telling that Muireann, when asked if Danu had any regional focus or message, replies that this wasn't the case as Danu are 'kind of an old fashioned trad. band'. While Aidan, in an ensemble that reflects the paradigmatic old-style of Donegal fiddle, characterizes their music as being different and innovative. This encourages us to believe that the sense of traditionality in a concert ensemble context is more contemporaneously focused. For Muireann, the older, more traditional band form precludes issues of regionality; for Aidan *Fidil* are an innovative band because they have a distinctive regional nature. Thus we are left with a conflicting aesthetic, nearly a Bahktian conflict of monoglossia and heteroglossia,, between tradition where the authentic is often regional and traditional ensemble where the regional is innovative and new.

The late great Dennis Doody, one of the informants in my earlier research, once said to me:

There's no doubt about it that bands do have a tendency at first to compromise [i.e. lose their regional nature], we'd say Altan now for instance, they wouldn't have compromised at all because they all came from the same background, or if you had a band from Sliabh Luachra for instance, they wouldn't compromise. But if you get a band from Dublin then they all compromise you know. Because they have to. By and large for a lot of the groups in the break-up, I think that it is a training ground for a lot of young musicians anyway and suddenly as they get more experience and knowledgeable about the music, one day they leave the thing go and go off and do their own thing, they have other ideas. I can't say that they are doing any harm at all, but what I think they are doing as well of course is they are introducing a new breed of young people to listen to music.

An implicit part of what Dennis refers to as 'compromise' is the abandonment of regionalism in performance style although it undoubtedly also involves a loss of individuality. The relationship between this and the use of different terminologies for accounting for and creating ensemble is clear if complicated. The language of ensemble does not threaten the hegemony of the privileged language of tradition; despite the contradictions presented when the two are

examined together. In the day-to-day life of ensemble, as Dennis suggests, ensemble may serve more mainstream tradition, attracting musicians and an audience into it. For many, ensemble playing is seen as something ephemeral and, externally at least, a practice that involves a compromise for the individual musician, a compromise that lies at the heart of the ensemble. The language of ensemble clearly emphasizes contemporary aesthetics of traditional music, in particular through terminology associated with individuality and difference and with a greater emphasis on the operational terminology necessary for 'banding' (Slobin 1993, p. 98). It certainly generates a dialogic disjuncture but perhaps not one that is insurmountably un-traversable or oppositional. An examination of these language practices show us that ensemble rarely does, as yet, touch the heart of the tradition (and perhaps ensemble survives because it does not) but rather, creates a different discourse rooted in contemporary expressions of traditional culture, playing to at least part of the identities of many musicians today. This conclusion begs the question – will this ensemble discourse become the discourse that is privileged, replacing discourses of authenticity, locality and the solo musician? It is my feeling that this is unlikely. Arguably, bands like *Fidil* show a middle way, marrying the two discourses, creating a new dialectic to be challenged by the chat and music of future generations of musicians.

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