

FROM DONEGAL TO SENEGAL: AN EXPERIENCE OF THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATION IN INTERCULTURAL ENSEMBLE PRACTICE

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Introduction

People 'get together' (or are voluntarily organised in ensembles or groups) for a wide variety of context specific and socially meaningful reasons.¹ Symphony orchestras, ritual performance groupings, friendship groupings or professional bands; each shares to a significant extent an 'artworld' of aesthetic preferences, forms of formative enculturation and an organisational structure which is specific to their generic 'ensemble'. A group's creative dynamic may be led by one individual or arrived at by a more apparently democratic negotiation of a performed end result, which must be both imagined and communicated by the musicians involved.

Where the participants in an ensemble come from very different cultural backgrounds, with divergent musical and possibly career aspirations this web of creative negotiation can become both complex and revealing. In this paper I will examine one example of such a process by offering a brief description of the specific socio-cultural and musical dynamics of a production that I was involved in during 2002. This production was comprised of Irish traditional musicians and Senegalese musicians. The description below does not provide a theoretical overview but it is an illustrative case study based on first hand experience and as such contributes to a topic in need of scholarly investigation.

Over a the period of a week together comfortably ensconced on a small island on Lower Lough Erne in Co. Fermanagh, two groups of musicians, four from Ireland and four from Senegal were tasked to find, not only musical common ground between 'our traditions', but also a convincing sense of collective identity and purpose. The process of negotiation involved in making a group work exposed the musician's micro-political strategies for positioning themselves comfortably within

¹ Illustrations in various media to accompany this essay may be accessed through the online version of this journal at www.ictm.ie. An earlier version of the paper was first presented orally at the 5th ICTM Ireland Annual Conference, 'Ensemble: Playing Together', Limerick 26-28, Feb. 2010.

an ensemble thereby shedding some light on the difficult work of imagining collectively.

The background

In December of 2001 an Irish based world music producer who had lived and worked in Dakar, Senegal, asked me to become involved as a performer in a musical production project provisionally scheduled to take place early the following year. This project involved bringing together musicians representative of 'Irish traditional folk music' and 'Senegalese music' broadly defined. The Arts Council for Northern Ireland financed the project, with some additional support from local sports, cultural and commercial concerns. The idea was deceptively simple and attractive; the participating musicians were to spend a five-day rehearsal period at a suitable location in Co Fermanagh, Northern Ireland and then present two concerts, one at a GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) club in the border village of Roslea the other at a hotel in Enniskillen, the county town.

I did not know any of the Senegalese musicians, but they were all professional players, associates of the producer and active in the world music scene. They had worked with many leading West African artists among them Yossou N'Dour and Salif Keita. I knew all the Irish musicians the promoter suggested and I was asked if I could foresee any problem working with any of them. All had played music professionally and two were full time musicians; all were known in the Irish traditional music scene both in Ireland and in most cases internationally. By happy circumstance they were all friends of mine with whom I had associated both socially and professionally in the past, so at least in that aspect of the project I knew there would be a fair degree of comfort and familiarity. It was local traditional musicians in Fermanagh who had, in turn, suggested each of us to the promoter as individuals who would be interested in such a project. In retrospect this element of the selection process was the first bit of social engineering that I had direct knowledge of. There had clearly been a lot of other random elements in the gestation of this project that I am not aware of, and I have not been in contact with the organiser again with regard to this detail.

It is important to point out here too that in 2002, Northern Ireland was emerging from a period of over 20 years of acute political upheaval and sectarian violence. The Hillsborough peace accord of April 1998 had created an atmosphere of relative calm and normality and finance from a variety of local governmental and international non-governmental sources, had been made available by way of grants and subsidies in order to promote healing and a growth of mutual understanding among its divided community. Initiatives that brought together Protestant and

Catholic, Unionist and Republican in harmonious environments, for example community Arts projects, were quite rightly seen as something to be encouraged.

Bearing this backdrop in mind I was given to understand at that time that in order to attract the much needed seed funding from the NI Arts council, this particular project would therefore stand a better chance if local 'cross community involvement' was in evidence. In the crudest of terms this meant the participation of locals from both sides of the *popularly perceived* politico-religious divide in Northern Ireland. The organisation was able to demonstrate that in addition to an unambiguously international cohort of four Senegalese artists, we also had musicians, core organisation and a potential audience that were drawn from 'both sides' of Northern Ireland's political divide; and all this, tellingly, without having had to change any substantial detail regarding the potential participants that were mooted by the organisation at the outset.² In addition two of the musicians, of whom I was one, were based in the Republic of Ireland thus adding the additional desirable element of cross border co-operation. All these considerations in effect needed to be in place before a note of music was played; but once established the project was modestly yet securely funded and work on it could begin.

The Experience

The site proposed for the rehearsal period was the idyllic island of Lusty Beg in Lower Lough Erne and the conditions were ideal. We were housed in fully equipped comfortable wooden houses, we had the use of a separate rehearsal space – a building that habitually served as a conference centre – and we had a catering assistant. On the Monday morning of the second week in March 2002 rehearsals got under way and the eight musicians, four from Senegal and four from Ireland assembled in the rehearsal space.

The first difference between the two groups was evident straightaway; it had little to do with our ethnic backgrounds and it manifested itself in the way we approached setting up a rehearsal environment. The Irish brought their acoustic instruments and prepared for an exchange of ideas and tunes whilst sitting in a loosely configured circle. The Senegalese musicians, although two of them played

² Fintan Vallely has pointed out that 'Perceived native music's are very often seen as galvanising forces in bringing together the people of one territory or land mass' (Vallely, 79:2008). Since Northern Ireland was and is a disputed geo-political space, the politicised question as to the character or ownership of traditional music in Northern Ireland has been problematic ever since some commentators first began to target it as a possible issue; as I remember it this happened in the late 1980s.

West African traditional instruments (*Kora* and *Jenbe*), were plugged into a fully functioning sound system and had established the idea of a stage set-up already. The Irish musicians had worked with PA systems, but a fully set up sound system did not figure in our rehearsal imaginings at this early stage. The Senegalese musicians however had come to the project from quite a long experience of performing in the particular environment of the world music scene. As western rock music is, in sonic terms at any rate, one of the formative influences in the world music soundscape they were arguably more linked into the rehearsal modus operandi of western rock and jazz idioms. In any event the electric bass needed to be plugged in to function properly. As Jocelyne Guilbault has pointed out, the strategy of adopting elements of 'the musical language of the dominant traditions', (and in the case of world music this is the western rock idiom) and juxtaposing this with elements of their own traditional music is, albeit apart from any active aesthetic consideration on the musicians part, a commercial calling card with which 'to enter the industrialised countries networks' (Guilbault, 2006: 143).³ Looking at the situation in very simple terms, that is, the electric v acoustic juxtaposition, one could argue that these two groups of musicians were on the face of it, mismatched.

Equally true however is the fact that all of us were players who were both individual creative practitioners and representatives of our respective folk traditions. In addition we were all experienced public performers who understood the imperative of show time. All that remained for us to do at this point was to get on with making music and this we did with great enthusiasm and energy. Adopting the role of accommodating hosts the four Irish musicians made a quick decision to enter the scene as set and amplified our instruments appropriately. Retrospectively this decision may have influenced the type of musical offering that eventually emerged in that a certain volume level became quickly established as the group norm. Thus set up however the manner of exchanging musical information was essentially the same –everyone worked without reference to written music and the only information committed to paper were sparse directions concerning arrangements and the making of a set list and running order. In principal we decided that each individual would come up with an item and arrange it to their liking, and by and large this strategy was adhered to. There were eight of us in the group and this was by happy coincidence a good democratic basis on which to deliver a gig lasting an hour or thereabouts. A significant aspect of the different approach to performance that also emerged during rehearsal was the high priority the Senegalese players gave to free solo improvisation over an established repetitive rhythmic and melodic pattern. This

³ Clearly they had done this successfully as all were established professional musicians.

type of approach, typical of free Jazz, is not so familiar in Irish vernacular traditional music performance, where in ensemble contexts solo improvisation is habitually more understated, if indeed it occurs at all, and a form of collective heterophonic virtuosity is most highly valued. It was a highly enjoyable activity for all of us however, and the Irish players, though not accustomed to this in their usual performance practice took to it instinctively. Even though we did exchange and integrate both Senegalese and Irish tunes into the set it must be said that the common ground, the mediator between our traditional musics was probably our shared knowledge of western rock and jazz practise more so than an exploration of the nuances of Senegalese and Irish traditional themes per se.

The rehearsals were fun-filled and full of positive energy, and I appreciated the fact that because I could converse in French, I was able to speak to all of the Senegalese musicians individually – only one of them spoke English fluently and he took on a similar role to me in that he could converse freely with all the Irish players. In this way I came to know of some of the issues existing between them that I may have remained unaware of otherwise. Among these were retrospective individual fee negotiations with the organisers and personal perceptions of roles. I will attempt to make some sense of this dynamic in the section below.

Observations on the Experience

Two of the players were urban based from Dakar and the other 2 were *griots* from rural Senegal/Mali.⁴ Transposed to a foreign environment where their musical identities, roles and status were less clearly defined than at home, it is likely that they were negotiating a change in status perceptions among themselves. In traditional society in Senegal/Mali *griot* musicians/poets come from well known musical lineages that stretch back generations and they have high symbolic and musical status. In our circumstance the situation was different on occasion in that the bi-lingual urban musician among them often took a lead role in rehearsal organisation. That said a genteel respect for the Kora player in particular was clearly evident. In addition, the fact that he always had his instrument with him (at meal times and while strolling around) at the ready to play at any time, perhaps by way of commentary on the scenario, was in some way reminiscent of the important role of the *griot* as the '*maître de la parole*' (master of the spoken word/utterance) in West African society (see Camera S: 1992 and Hale T: 1998). Although less dramatic, possibly because of my familiarity with the individuals and the culture, the Irish musicians too began to assume quite definite roles in the search for a personal comfort zone. These creative

⁴ Traditional professional bardic musician/poets of West Africa.

tensions were to manifest themselves in many interesting, amusing, sometimes confusing and even spectacular ways during the course of the week.

In all musical groups individuals display varying levels of passivity and proactivity and at different times different skills – as much to do with the social as the musical – come to the fore. In a project like this where we only had a week to rehearse, the rehearsal time itself in which the social aspect of music making was foregrounded, was the most important part of the experience. For sure, some intercultural negotiation took place in that context, but it must be stressed that the successful coherence of the project rested more with the different personalities involved working together in the given situation than anything else, and having said that I think we did produce some very attractive and vital soundscapes in our two performances. Also in its favour was the egalitarian nature of the project, rather than an inclusion of ‘ethnic sounds’ in a work arguably predetermined and produced by a rock star, it was by comparison a project where all the participants had shared ownership of the musical outcomes.

The genesis of much ensemble formation is often a highly subjective affair. Consider for a moment all the elements that came together to make this particular project happen. The producer was Irish, enjoyed Irish traditional music and participated in the local traditional music scene in county Fermanagh. Working in London as a world music producer brought her to Senegal, where she became involved in the production and promotion of that country's music, meeting and befriending artists there and eventually representing many of them on the world music circuit. As stated above local traditional musicians, friends of ours (the Irish contingent) in Fermanagh identified us as musicians who were of ‘the type’ who could engage fruitfully with musicians from a very different cultural background on a project of this nature. At a time when people in Northern Ireland badly needed things to feel good about there was financial assistance available for cross-community and cross-cultural events. This project was at once a valorisation of local cultural heritage (in the Irish sense) and a window into a form of musical expression from a considerably different cultural world.

These particular set of social, economic and indeed politico-cultural circumstances coalesced on a tiny island in a big lake in Fermanagh where a small-scale international flight of fancy from ‘Donegal to Senegal’ took place.

A few summative thoughts

From my conversations with all the Senegalese musicians it was possible for me to make some attempt at deducing what informed the social dynamic among

them; however I cannot say how they viewed the details of their experience, and this remains something I would be interested to find out. Nor have I carried out in depth interviews with any of the Irish artists. Essentially I can only speak from my own perspective as one of the participating musicians. As indicated above in addition to my role as a musician I came to assume the ancillary role of occasional translator, as did one of the Senegalese players as well. This role was valuable in an overall sense in that it did ease the flow of communication in certain circumstances, but nonetheless I felt it sometimes compromised my involvement as a musician. This experience demonstrates for me the dilemma of the musician as facilitator/performer and made me appreciate just how difficult it can be to take on both roles at the same time. I feel too that the most important element in ensemble work rests more upon the will to work together through negotiating towards a shared performance goal, rather than the ethnic or musical backgrounds of the participants. In this we accomplished something worthwhile; however as I have indicated already I also feel that the outcome (the concerts) was less valorising than the rehearsal process and that this in turn may serve as some small indication that the deliberately constructed genre now habitually called 'world music' when viewed as a conceptual 'field of cultural production' does not fully facilitate explorations of musical hybridity.

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