

## MUSICAL DEVELOPMENT IN IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC: AN EXPLORATION OF FAMILY INFLUENCES<sup>1</sup>

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This essay explores a number of social interactions that contribute significantly to the musical development of Irish traditional musicians from a socio-cultural perspective. I primarily focus on my interviewees' learning experiences with their parents, but also discuss their experiences with other family members, including siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Prior to fieldwork, I anticipated that traditional musicians would emphasise the importance of family to the learning process. This presumption most likely stemmed from the common belief that exceptional traditional musicians often come from musical families. My interview data suggests that Irish traditional musicians experience diverse types of family interactions, which significantly effects musical development in correspondingly diverse ways. Therefore, the influence of family on the musical development of Irish traditional musicians is not homogeneous, and often difficult to generalise. Some of my interviewees experienced numerous musical interactions with members of their immediate and extended families. Others experienced music-making only with members of their extended families, while others experienced little or no music-making in a family context. I have identified four major categories of socio-musical interactions within families, including exchanges with:

- parents<sup>2</sup>
- siblings
- members of the extended family
- family members who are not musicians, singers, or dancers<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, only a small number of my interviewees developed their instrumental abilities directly from their parents. In contrast, interviewees much more commonly interacted socio-musically with their siblings. Members of the extended family, including aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, etc., also play an important role in enculturation, especially for interviewees who did not play music with members of their immediate family. The fourth category is often overlooked by education researchers, but according to my interviewees is quite significant in terms of

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<sup>1</sup>This article is adapted from a paper presented at the Society of Music Education Conference at University College Cork (11-13 November 2011). I appreciate the discussion and feedback provide by other academics and musicians on this occasion. This article is an abbreviation of research presented in my PhD thesis (Cawley 2013). I am sincerely grateful to the twenty participating traditional musicians. This study would not have been possible without their contributions.

<sup>2</sup>Caregivers and guardians also belong in this category. In this particular study, all interviewees discussed interactions with their birth parents.

<sup>3</sup>For sake of brevity, in this article I refer to people who do not play music, sing, or dance as 'non-musicians'.

developmental processes. Many of my interviewees were raised in families without a tradition of music-making, singing, or dancing, but described their family members as traditional music 'enthusiasts'. These non-musicians had a passion for Irish traditional music and were active in encouraging the learners' musical development. Within Irish traditional music, these various socio-musical interactions significantly impact musical development. Although all four of these categories are mentioned in this article, the analysis focuses primarily on the influence of parents on musical development.<sup>4</sup>

As part of my ethnographic research, I interviewed twenty accomplished Irish traditional musicians about their prior learning experiences and educational backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> Musicians of a high or professional skill were approached in order to gain insight into patterns of successful musical development and enculturation. I used an open-ended, informal interview method, which allowed the musicians to freely discuss the learning experiences that they felt were the most influential. Many of my questions were broad in nature. The first question, for instance, was: 'Throughout your life, what do you consider the greatest influences to your musicianship?' Answers to this primary question were diverse, and the interviewee's narratives revealed numerous experiences engaging with friends, family, teachers, commercial recordings, ensembles (céilí, marching bands and other groups), traditional music sessions, festivals, and classes. In response to the first question, eight musicians explicitly and directly listed their families as a major influence on their musical development. Over the course of the entire interview, a further ten musicians stated their families played an influential role in their development. Mick Daly was the only musician to emphasise a lack of family connections.<sup>6</sup> He states:

None of family played or was interested. Well, they liked music, but no one ever played anything. My brother played a small bit of guitar. My parents didn't play musical instruments, so there was no music in the family in that sense (M. Daly, personal communication, 28 Sept 2010).

Interestingly, as evident in Mick's statement, even when a musician comes from a 'non-musical' family, there are often musical occurrences within the family unit. Although often overlooked, I argue that these experiences need to be recognized as potentially important to learning and enculturation processes. Musical interactions are never fully absent in families comprised of non-musicians, and therefore can play a significant role in musical development.

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<sup>4</sup> For a full discussion of all four categories see (Cawley 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Most interviewees are successful recordings artists and all have excellent reputations as traditional performers. Musicians from 11 different counties (rural and urban areas) and ranging from ages 18-80 were selected in order to present a broad view of musical development within Irish traditional music. The participants of this study were approached during my fieldwork in sessions and at music festivals. Some of my interviewees also suggested other musicians who would be insightful participants.

<sup>6</sup> Mick Daly (b.1950) is a singer and guitar player from Cork City.

### Family Influences in Irish Traditional Music

Before detailing specific interactions with parents, a general discussion of family influences within Irish traditional music is necessary to contextualise the following findings. As part of my research, I reviewed Irish traditional music literature for references to family, learning, and transmission practices. This provided historical and cultural information, and revealed a few interesting patterns about the role family plays within Irish traditional music culture. Scholars often discuss how Irish traditional music is transmitted from 'generation to generation'. Some also define Irish traditional music, in part, by the aural transmission process which occurs between older and younger generations of musicians.<sup>7</sup> Children reared by instrumentalists, singers, and dancers experience and absorb the music-making of their musically experienced family members. Children who do not come from musical families also learn from older generations of players during interactions with neighbours, mentors, teachers, and performers.

Within the literature and everyday discourse, influential families with a long tradition of participation within Irish traditional music are occasionally referred to as 'dynasties'. The Rowsome family in Dublin and the Doherty family in Donegal are two examples of families who helped to sustain traditional music during its low ebb, around the 1930s until the 1950s. These families did not merely transmit music within their own family units; families from the traveling community, such as the Doran's and Doherty's, taught students and influenced other musicians throughout the countryside. Willie Clancy, for example, first heard the uilleann pipes as a teenager when he met the traveling piper, Johnny Doran, at a local fair (Kearns and Taylor 2003:24-5). Doran had a huge effect on the young Clancy, who eventually became an exceptional piper. In this way, the influence of musical dynasties can be widespread.

Within the interview data, there are a number of references to influential musical families with unbroken traditions of music-making. For instance, John Reid<sup>8</sup> emphasised the value of musical families:

What I've noticed over the years in competitions, people who've reached the pinnacle with their music normally come from a musical family and it can go back four or five generations. So there's a certain breeding factor. Like myself, my grandfather was a piper, his father was a fiddler and the father before was a fiddler... My mother's side then, my grandmother's a concertina player...Garrett Barry would be related to me... and all my

<sup>7</sup> For example, Cranitch states Irish traditional music 'is played 'by ear', and passed on from one generation to the next' (2001:7). For more examples of definitions of Irish traditional music which include a statement about aural learning, see (Breathnach 1996:2; Hast and Scott 2004:17; Kaul 2007:704; Ó Canainn 1993:1; O'Connor 2001:3; Ó hAllmhuráin 2008:8; Vallely, Piggott, and Nutan 1998:7; Vallely 2008:7-10).

<sup>8</sup> John Reid (b.1971) is a uilleann piper from Inch, Co. Clare.

mother's people were dancers. My grandfather, Sean Reid, married into a singing circle of people from Kilkenny (J. Reid, personal communication, 26 July 2010).

John also suggests that 'the unbroken chain of musicians' in his family allowed him to imitate traditional music which was 'closer to the root' (personal communication, 26 July 2010). He considers family as a major influence on his musical enculturation and development. Consequently, he carefully illustrates his own family connections, especially highlighting well-known family members and multiple generations of music-making. From John's perspective, family connections are not simply a matter of prestige and pedigree, they are also a direct source of musical knowledge from the past. Within the literature, learning from older family members is described as one of the highest status methods of transmission within Irish traditional music (Hamilton 1978:42; O'Shea 2006-7:7). While it is not my intent to explore the authenticity of learning practices in this article, noting the status of this particular learning experience establishes a useful cultural context for our discussion here.

In Liz Doherty's view,<sup>9</sup> musical families were once a primary (if not the only) source of musical transmission, especially within instrumental traditions in decline, such as the uilleann pipes. Liz discusses how the establishment of clubs and organizations has changed transmission practices:

In the past, obviously to be a piper you were coming through these great dynasties<sup>10</sup> of piping but then once you had the Cork pipers club in place, that allowed everybody to come in and engage in piping (personal communication, 18 Feb 2011).

Prior to 1950, pipers were likely to descend from musical families. However, over the past sixty years, newly established clubs and institutions, such as Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann,

Scoil Samhraidh Willie Clancy, and numerous pipers' clubs, has provided learners of all backgrounds an opportunity to learn and perform Irish traditional music. While the influence of family is still prevalent within Irish traditional music, the diversity of educational experiences has broadened the possibilities for learners who do not come from families with a tradition of music-making, singing, or dancing.

In general, while my interviewees acknowledged that family connections play a significant role in musical development, many also emphasised that one does not have to be born into a musical family in order to become an experienced and creative Irish traditional musician. Liz Doherty also suggests:

It's definitely changing, even in my own experience. If we look at the tradition, you can see who's coming from huge families - that their parents, or siblings, or aunts and uncles played. I would very much be like 'Orphan

<sup>9</sup> Liz Doherty (b.1970) is a fiddle player from Buncrana, Co. Donegal.

<sup>10</sup> This is an example the term 'dynasties' used to refer to influential musical families that transmitted traditional music over multiple generations.

Annie' in the middle of that because I really don't have anybody who played. But, I had every opportunity that I could have had. The tradition is today - the opportunities are all there.... So I don't think you have to come from a long line of musicians anymore... (L. Doherty, personal communication, 18 Feb 2011).

Liz believes there are still influential family connections within Irish traditional music ('you can see who's coming from huge families'). However, she also believes that one does not have to descend from a long line of musicians in order to develop as a musician. Additionally, Mary Bergin<sup>11</sup> said:

I suppose children of musicians would have a head start getting some recognition whereas somebody from a non-traditional background would probably have to be pretty good before they get a look and get encouraged...but, traditional music was a music of the people. It wasn't a status thing... It was more on merit and always has been on merit rather than who you are or where you come from. In my opinion, the merit of your playing is how you would get the recognition and respect (personal communication 20 May 2011).

While Mary acknowledges that children from musical families may be at an advantage, especially during the early stages of learning, she also suggests that recognition and achievement originates from individual merit. Based on my interview data and field observations, I suggest that musical development in Irish traditional music is strongly influenced by family background, but is not *predetermined* by it; children raised by Irish traditional musicians do not always necessarily develop into traditional musicians, and many accomplished traditional musicians were not raised by musical parents.

### **Socio-musical Interactions with Parents**

My interviewees' musical experiences with their parents varied greatly. Experiences ranged from multiple and consistent interactions to little or none. Some parents were active or occasional instrumentalists, singers, and/or dancers, while others did not participate in music-making at all. Additionally, the interviewees who had parents active in music-making did not have uniform experiences. Some formally learned their instruments from their parents, while others had only informal or non-formal learning experiences. The level of formality principally depended on social relationships, personalities, and the particular family context.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Mary (b.1949) is a whistle player from Shankill, Co. Dublin.

<sup>12</sup> Formal and informal learning processes are a spectrum of experiences, rather than a dichotomy (Green 2002). Additionally, the level of formality within family learning environments is not fixed, but can change over time due to numerous factors (such as family dynamics, educational necessity).

Only five interviewees stated their parents were instrumentalists (Mary Bergin, Matt Cranitch, Martin Hayes, John Reid, and Niall Vallely).<sup>13</sup> When asked about their major musical influences, all five interviewees listed family as their primary musical influences. Niall Vallely was formally taught by his parents, who established and taught at the Armagh Pipers' Club.<sup>14</sup> Matt Cranitch, Martin Hayes, and John Reid described formal, non-formal, and informal interactions with their fathers. Mary Bergin picked up her father's repertoire entirely by what she described as 'osmosis'. Learning by osmosis is an informal, subconscious process of musical absorption.<sup>15</sup> The considerable differences in these experiences create a rich and complex area of investigation. The effects parents have on musical development is, therefore, difficult to generalize and must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Niall Vallely's learning experiences with his parents were structured and relatively formal:

I suppose the first biggest influence would be my parents, in several different ways. In terms of just learning traditional music in the first place, or even wanting to learn it. They both played music, but more importantly they both taught music. They put on a series of classes called the Armagh Piper's Club. So it was a pretty natural thing to move into learning music. And I suppose my listening to music and everything connected to it was shaped the things they liked - certainly up until my teens. As it turns out, I kind of like some of the same things anyway (N. Vallely, personal communication, 7 Feb 2011).

Niall was influenced by his parents in numerous ways. They introduced Niall to traditional music, instilling in him an interest and passion to learn it. Niall asserts that his parents continued to shape his musical tastes and sensibilities into his teenage years. Additionally, Niall learned much of his early repertoire and basic instrumental technique during his parents' structured weekly classes at the pipers' club. Niall also described numerous informal learning experiences outside of structured classes, as his parents frequently brought him to sessions, dances, house parties, concerts, festivals, and other socio-musical gatherings (N. Vallely, personal communication, 7 Feb 2011). From an educational point of view, Niall's formal learning experiences were reinforced by informal musical and social interactions with his parents and his parents' peers. This combination of experiences grounded Niall's musical development in everyday social life. He was enculturated into the Irish traditional music community from a young age.

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<sup>13</sup> Matt Cranitch (b.1948) is a fiddle player from Rathduff, Co. Cork. Martin Hayes (b.1962) is a fiddle player from Maghera, Co. Clare. Niall Vallely (b. 1970) is a concertina player from Armagh.

<sup>14</sup> To clarify, Niall was *formally* enrolled in his parents' traditional music classes. The style of teaching and learning in these classes would more appropriately be labeled 'informal' or 'non-formal.'

<sup>15</sup> Berliner states: 'Reflecting on their early childhoods, many jazz artists describe the process by which they acquired an initial base of musical knowledge as one of osmosis. They cultivated skills during activities as much social as musical, absorbing models from varied performances' (1994:22).

John Reid, Matt Cranitch, and Martin Hayes describe informal, non-formal, and formal socio-musical interactions with their parents. They were occasionally taught or guided by their fathers, but did not experience the level of formality or structure Niall experienced in his parents' classes. Matt Cranitch describes his experiences with his father:

When I started first doing the fiddle at home with my father teaching me but, as my mother has often related, the lessons tended to take the form of he'd play the fiddle and I would sit watching him playing. The actual teaching didn't amount to a huge amount. So they sent me to, when I was about nine, to Cork School of Music (M. Cranitch, personal communication, 1 Feb 2011).

Matt's informal lessons with his father were mainly based on observation and demonstration. Although unstructured, these lessons provided a model and initial exposure to traditional fiddle playing, and influenced Matt's enculturation until age nine. Recognizing the haphazard nature of these encounters, Matt was enrolled in classical violin classes in order to receive some formal training and understanding of music. Although lessons between father and son stopped, Matt and his father frequently played music together throughout the enculturation process, particularly in their family band (M. Cranitch, personal communication, 1 Feb 2011). Matt continued to learn from his father informally and non-formally during these interactions. The longevity and consistency of these family interactions were vital to Matt's musical development.

Martin Hayes experienced a spectrum of formal, non-formal, and informal socio-musical interactions with his father, PJ Hayes. Martin explains:

He encouraged me a lot, but he never asked me to practice or suggested anything, or pushed me in anyway. But he was always available for an opinion or to get a point of view on something, or to get some sense of direction. He didn't like a direct one-on-one teaching scenario too much, although I did learn my first selection of tunes directly from him by sitting across from him in the kitchen. He played and I'd listen, watch, and copy him. So I basically learned my music that way (M. Hayes, personal communication, 4 Feb 2011).

The types of socio-musical interaction between Martin and his father changed throughout the different stages of the learning process. Initially, PJ provided direct instruction based on informal guidance, observations, and imitation. PJ's instruction can be considered informal or non-formal in nature since he did not have a predetermined agenda; he did not require Martin to practice, or formally assess his ability or progress. Martin did not receive tuition from his father consistently throughout his learning processes, in part because PJ did not particularly enjoy direct teaching situations. As Martin developed as a fiddle player, interactions

between father and son became even more informal. Martin describes his learning experiences after a period of learning from his father in his kitchen:

But after that, it was like tapes and records, and it was me locked away in a room with a fiddle having an idea that I wanted to sound like. I would learn tunes, and try this with them, and try them that way, then play them for my dad and get his opinion. And he didn't play any pop psychology with me, no reverse psychology. There was no need for him to nurture me or anything like that. He would tell me exactly what I was doing, so I knew when he told me something it really was exactly what he thought. It wasn't what he thought I should hear in order to encourage me; He would just tell me it was no good, if it was no good. If it was good, he would just say it. So I had this barometer that could always tell me what was happening, which was very useful (M. Hayes, personal communication, 4 Feb 2011).

Martin began learning aurally by listening and playing along to commercial recordings. Once this self-directed learning practice was initiated, exchanges between PJ and Martin became less instructional and more based on casual discourse. Martin felt able to openly ask his father for advice on his fiddle playing and progression. PJ consistently provided honest feedback, so Martin never wondered if his father's critiques were too harsh or sugar-coated. Raised in this atmosphere, Martin appreciated his father's support and candour, wholeheartedly trusting and respecting his father's critiques. This type of direct and trustworthy relationship created a positive learning environment. Additionally, Martin learned informally by listening and playing along with his father during rehearsals and performances with the Tulla Céilí Band. As a child, Martin observed rehearsals and performances, and he later joined the band and played alongside his father and uncle, Paddy Canny (M. Hayes, personal communication, 4 Feb 2011). In this way, Martin had prolonged and consistent musical interactions with his father into adulthood.

Martin's musical relationship with his father can be characterized as close, but not stifled. From an early age, Martin absorbed the sound of his father's east Clare fiddle style, but he did not slavishly copy his father's music. As described above, Martin learned from and was influenced by commercial recordings of Irish traditional music. Martin is well-known for his exceptional technical prowess, personal style, and expression. His proclivity for independent thinking and learning, coupled with consistent exposure and support from his father are major contributing factors in his musical development.

Mary Bergin considers her family the first and primary influence to her musical development. Musical interactions with her father were completely informal. Mary states about learning her first tunes: 'I had no one in particular teach me. My father just use to play the tunes slowly and I'd hear the tunes and just pick them up myself' (M. Bergin, personal communication, 20 May 2011). Her father

loved traditional music, but only played a handful of tunes on the accordion, including polkas and waltzes. While Mary's father did not directly teach her technique or repertoire, he acted as a musical model and inspired Mary to become a traditional musician. He also encouraged her music-making and took her to countless musical events, such as sessions, house parties, and festivals. Mary unconsciously developed her style, technique, and early repertoire through listening, playing, and experimenting with traditional music in numerous settings. This process was initiated in her home environment. Similar to Martin, while Mary is significantly influenced by her father, she also developed through self-guided, autonomous learning practices.

While only five musicians had parents who played instruments on a regular basis, three other interviewees had parents who occasionally, but inconsistently, played instruments. Ciara Ní Fhearghail, Tomás Ó Canainn, and Connie O'Connell's parents played a little accordion, fiddle, and melodeon respectively.<sup>16</sup> However, their parents either gave up playing at a certain point or only played the instruments very occasionally. Ciara, Tomás, and Connie did not learn technique or repertoire from their parents, but they experienced traditional instruments and music-making from an early age. Because their parents were interested in music and supportive of their children's musical interests, Ciara, Tomás, and Connie were raised in a musical atmosphere which encouraged their musical curiosity and development.

Other interviewees were introduced to Irish traditional music through their parents' singing or dancing practices (Aoife Granville, Geraldine O'Callaghan, Cormac De Frein, Lisa O'Sullivan, James Duggan, Tomás Ó Canainn, Ciara Ní Fhearghail, Connie O'Connell, John Reid, Martin Hayes, personal communications).<sup>17</sup> Interviewees often described memories of their parents' (and other family members') singing and dancing as profound, particularly for interviewees who did not have a tradition of instrumental music within their families. Through exposure to traditional singing and dancing, interviewees also often developed or expanded their interest in traditional music. Geraldine O'Callaghan discusses singing practices within her family environment:

My mother and my grandmother sing, but there was no instrumental tradition really in my family. I have an uncle who played a little bit of tin whistle and he would have been very encouraging when I was growing up, but there wasn't music being played at home or anything like that (G. O'Callaghan, personal communication, 3 May 2011).

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<sup>16</sup> Ciara Ní Fhearghail (b.1991) is an accordion player from *An Rinn*, Co. Waterford. Tomás Ó Canainn (b.1930) is a piper, singer, whistle and accordion player from Derry. Connie O'Connell (b.1943) is a fiddle player from Kilnamatra, Co. Cork.

<sup>17</sup> Aoife Granville is a singer, flute, fife, and fiddle player from *An Daingean*, Co. Kerry. Cormac De Frein (b.1980) is a flute and whistle player from *Dún Laoghaire*, Co. Dublin. James Duggan (b.1989) is a fiddle player from Listowel, Co. Kerry.

Tomás Ó Canainn is also strongly influenced by his mother's singing. Tomás explains how being from a family with a strong singing tradition effects his instrumental playing and style:

Many of the things I do are connected to the way I sing... When I'm playing a slow air of a song, I don't know whether I'm playing or singing it's so much a part of me. So I'm sure that very much influenced my way of playing... Singing was always an important thing for me from the very beginning. But then again my family were all into singing so that just happened naturally (T. Ó Canainn, personal communication, 8 Dec 2010).

When children are exposed to singing, they begin to absorb musical syntax, which is a crucial first step musical development (Bluestine 2000, Gordon 1997). From this, I suggest that families who do not have a tradition of instrumental music-making can play a significant role in musical development. Singing and dancing practices can expose children to melodic, rhythmic, and stylistic nuances of Irish traditional music. This musical exposure can encourage musical interest and provide a foundation for future development, learning, and enculturation.

### **The Importance of Early Exposure**

Regardless of their family's musical background, the vast majority of interviewees were exposed to music from a very early age. This is consistent with Veblen's findings that traditional musicians start learning at a young age (5-7 years old) (Veblen 1991, p. 59).<sup>18</sup> Even interviewees who did not have parents who were active in music, singing, or dance often experienced early exposure to Irish traditional music. For instance, by listening to commercial recordings and attending concerts, many described memories of listening and discussing Irish traditional music with parents. Listening together was an important socio-musical experience and served as an introduction to traditional music.

Developmental researchers suggest one of the most important factors in musical development is early exposure to music (Bluestine 2000; Fox 1990, 1991; Gordon 1997, 1998, 1999; Ostwald 1990; Rogers 1990; Shetler 1990; Valerio et al 1998).<sup>19</sup> For example, Gordon emphasises that 'there are critical periods associated with surges of neurological connections and synapses that take place prenatally and during early childhood (Gordon 1998, p.1). Gordon also argues that children develop 'listening abilities' before the age of 5 or 6, and therefore, in order to achieve their musical potential, he asserts that children should absorb and experience music

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<sup>18</sup> Interviewees in my study were exposed to music at a young age, but structured learning in classes, workshops, and summer schools often occurred later in childhood, around ages 7-9 (if at all). Matt Cranitch's musical development discussed above is a good example of this.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to music education scholars, many musical cultures also believe that early exposure to music-making is critical in the development of musicality. For instance, in Afghani musicians believe that '*early exposure* to the sounds of music was especially important in the development of musical ability' (Baily and Doubleday 1990, p. 95).

informally before the start of formal schooling (Gordon 1999:43). From this perspective, musical development is largely dependent on early experiences provided by parental figures and close relatives. Rogers also suggests:

Because young children are quite attuned to music, musical experience in early childhood will result in greater musical development. This premise draws its support from evidence of increased musical development in those children who have received considerable musical experience in early childhood (Rogers 1990, p.3).

Infants, toddlers, and young children seamlessly and efficiently absorb the musics of their culture through play and interaction. Because children absorb and imitate the social world around them, enculturation occurs naturally during early childhood experiences of music-making.

Early exposure to music often correlates to a sense that musical participation and learning is a 'natural' process. Several of my interviewees describe their music learning experiences during early childhood as easy, fun, or natural. For instance, Niall Vallely states:

I learned the first couple of tunes on the whistle when I was very small, I was about 4 or something.... I never thought of it being difficult... I learned so much stuff when I was so young that a lot of it just seemed second nature. I don't remember the earliest things to be honest (N. Vallely, personal communication, 7 Feb 2011).

Although his earliest memories are not acutely detailed, Niall's immediate memory and impressions depict his early learning experiences as natural and enjoyable. One might suggest that Niall has, perhaps, forgotten the challenges during these early stages of the learning process. Although this may be the case, it is significant that Niall remembers the learning experience as relatively easy and natural, not as an endeavour which required sacrifice or discipline, for example. It is also significant that Niall's enculturation began prior to his earliest memories, because this indicates that Niall's introduction to music-making began at a very young age. Music was entwined with everyday social life in the Vallely household. At the age of four, Niall did not analyse the learning process. His musical experiences were based around playing, absorbing, listening, and imitating the world around him. His parents' passion for music created a rich musical environment, encouraging Niall's musical enculturation and development.

Other interviewees described similar types of 'natural' learning processes.<sup>20</sup> For instance, in Matt Cranitch's family, music-making was a part of everyday social life. Matt was naturally and gradually introduced (enculturated) to musical life. His musical enculturation is similar to how we learn language – through consistent

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<sup>20</sup> (M. Bergin, M. Hayes, N. Vallely, J. Reid, C. O'Connell, L. Doherty, T. Ó Canainn, L. O'Sullivan and M. Cranitch, personal communications).

exposure, interaction, play, and imitation. Matt Cranitch discusses his learning experiences:

I grew up in a musical family. I was playing the fiddle since I was eight years of age. My father played the fiddle and accordion. We had a family band situation at home. We went to the fleadh cheoil, feis, and social occasions played at school concerts, parish concerts and so on. So I suppose music was part of what I always did. When other people went to lots of games and matches, and I went to some, but for us music was just a part of the growing up process (M. Cranitch, personal communication, 1 Feb 2011).

Early exposure to music is a significant factor in how Niall Vallely and Matt Cranitch developed into such confident, able, and creative traditional musicians. I suggest that learning, developmental, and musical enculturation processes are naturally fostered when parents provide their children with early exposure to music-making.

In addition to early exposure, parents active in traditional music-making provide opportunities for their children to experience longevity of participation within Irish traditional music. In a discussion of Old-time music culture and identity formations, Turino proposes that longevity is necessary for stylistic and creative development:

Longevity of socialization within and investment to the activity influences the degree of competence, comfort, and creative freedom during performance. Usually people who grow up with a style are simply more comfortable than those who did not, because the habits of performance were formed at an early age (Turino 2008, p.162).

When children frequently experience music-making, even by early adolescence they can experience longevity of participation within Irish traditional music, fuelling their enculturation. A child raised by a fiddle player, for example, grows accustomed to the style and cultural practices of Irish traditional music by frequently observing and listening. By age ten, the child has a decade of experience listening and absorbing the syntax and musical practices. Although children from musical families benefit from experiencing early exposure and longevity of participation, it must be emphasized that children from all family backgrounds can experience longevity of participation within Irish traditional music. My interviewees who did not have parents who were active singers, dancers, or musicians, listened, absorbed, and learned Irish traditional music in other ways, including listening to commercial recordings, attending live concerts, sessions, classes, workshops, summer schools and festivals. Their musical development was possible, in part, because these multiple opportunities to listen, learn, and practice Irish traditional music.

During early childhood, important emotional connections are also made between parents and children. Developmental researchers emphasize that positive

experiences and emotions establish a healthy association to music. For instance, Rogers states:

An infant's early experiences of loving parents' songs imbues music with an emotional connection to these loved parents, and the child's own music may create a feeling of connectedness which can last a lifetime (Rogers 1990, p.4).

Due to many positive associations, it is easy to romanticize family socio-musical interactions. However, as with all human relationships, interactions between family members are complex and can affect learners in both positive and negative ways. The relationship between uilleann piper, Paddy Keenan, and his father comes to mind here. Paddy Keenan descends from a family of traveling pipers, and a common story describes how Paddy was locked in a room until his father, John Keenan, was satisfied with his progress (Ó Canainn 1993, p.121). In an interview with Zena Lee (2001), Keenan discusses his father's strictness, stating John's possessiveness caused him to run away to London. Paddy states:

I felt I should get away from my dad's strong influence. As protective and right as he might have been, I found it sometimes impossible... I needed to find a way to grow and express myself (Keenan quoted in Lee 2001).

If negative socio-musical interactions occur between children and parents, there is a risk that children may start associating music with negative emotions. When music-making involves more negative feelings than positive, children are likely to rebel or abstain from future participation because of the emotional risk involved. However, whether or not a child abandons music depends on a number of factors, including their personality traits, the type and frequency of the negative emotions, and how much autonomy and control they have in their musical life. In Paddy Keenan's case, he rebelled for a time against his father, took a break from traditional music, and developed an interest in the blues. However, Paddy remained an active Irish traditional musician throughout most of his life.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

While parents who are instrumentalists have a profound effect of on their children's musical development, it is descriptive rather than prescriptive to suggest that musical parents 'cause' their child's successful musical development. It is too simplistic to suggest, for instance, that children raised by traditional musicians will become traditional musicians. While this certainly can be the case in many instances, many accomplished Irish traditional musicians were not raised by musicians, including several of my interviewees. Furthermore, not all children raised by active traditional musicians develop into traditional musicians themselves. Some children born into musical families may become more interested in sports or visual art, for example. While the influence of parents cannot be denied, free-will, personalities, individual learning styles and thinking dispositions ultimately determine if a person

will commit and start identifying themselves as a musician (Tishman, Jay, and Perkins 1993). The effect parents have on musical development and enculturation, therefore, must be judged on a case-by-case basis.

Martin Hayes, Matt Cranitch, Niall Vallely, John Reid, and Mary Bergin's parents played a significant role in their becoming outstanding traditional musicians. However, these musicians did not develop musicality *merely* due to heritage or genetic make-up. From birth, they were exposed to music as an important part of social life, and therefore, were more likely to consider music an important life skill. They also benefited from absorbing the musical syntax of Irish traditional music from an early age. While parental influence can partially explain how some Irish traditional musicians have achieved exceptionally creative musical abilities, we must not lose sight of the suggestion that musicality can also be achieved without descending from a family with a background in Irish traditional music, dance, or song. Without musical connections within the immediate and extended family units, learners can still experience early exposure and longevity of participation by engaging in multiple, consistent, and frequent musical experiences. Many such informal and non-formal learning experiences include attending classes, workshops, sessions, festivals, and engaging with various media and forms of technology.

Throughout this article I have explored the diverse ways family members can play a role in the musical development of Irish traditional musicians. I specifically highlighted the influence of parents, and suggested that family members who are not musicians, singers, or dancers also contribute to musical development. Not all traditional musicians learn from their parents, and those who do can engage in informal, non-formal, and formal learning experiences. I have argued parents and other family members can naturally expose children to musical sounds on a daily basis. Through early exposure, musical development can occur as naturally as language development. By listening, singing, dancing, discussing, and playing with their children, parents of all backgrounds can introduce and expose their children to the music syntax of Irish traditional music. Additionally, these interactions may provide a basis for future learning experiences, and supply children with a relevant social introduction to Irish traditional music.

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