

Review: *Singing the Rite to Belong: Music, Ritual, and the New Irish*

Helen Phelan

Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2017

ISBN: 9780190672232 (PB).

This book explores the use of group singing as a tool for establishing a sense of belonging and *communitas* amongst migrant and minority groups in Ireland. As a past director of the MA in Ritual Music at the University of Limerick and director of several choirs in the region, Phelan is an authority on ritual music repertoire; including Irish chant and music from the medieval period. Contrary to expectation, this monograph defers from an analysis of ritual chant repertoire amongst migrant communities to one which explores the physiological, emotional and cultural aspects of song performance by Russian and African religious groups in borrowed and shared spaces. Rather than dwelling on the traditional discourse of church music acting as ‘the handmaid of the liturgy’, Phelan frames the central chapters around five fundamental characteristics of singing: resonance, somatics, performance, temporality and tacitness and explores how these enable participants to achieve a deeper level of engagement in ritual practice and a greater sense of unity through the communal expression of shared meaning. The author is an active agent in this research and consequently this work documents her practical approaches to working with new Irish and Irish Travellers in performance contexts, her ambition to explore and convey the meaning of ritual in academic contexts, and her personal experience of engaging with migrant groups as a music facilitator in community contexts. This rich discourse illuminates the destructive impact of Ireland’s immigration policies on migrants and debates the place (and face) of spirituality and ritual in modern Ireland.

Of the key ideas investigated, somatics proves interesting in its attempt to re-unite the mind and body in an expression of faith. Phelan supports the use of movement during performance since music making is a social activity, a point which relaxes the Catholic churches preference for restrained, non-dramatic and non-affective performances. The discussion around the theological appropriateness of repertoire presented during ritual ceremonies at the start of the book leads the way for a profound argument around tacitness (communication without words). This discussion evolves into a call to broaden spiritual expression in ritual contexts beyond set liturgies. In so doing, it advocates a more inclusive approach which personalises the ritual experience and proports an unconditional sense of belonging amongst participants. Throughout the book Phelan provides commentary on the diminished influence of the Catholic church in Ireland due to the recent child abuse scandals, community disengagement and the rise of other faiths. Low participation rates might also be attributed to the low level of music practice in Catholic churches, the perceived outdatedness of the biblical stories by younger congregations and regular church services lacking in spirituality. In this light, Phelan may be apt in proposing an inclusive community approach to spirituality that will enhance people lives in modern Ireland.

This study is situated in Limerick, Ireland at a period of inward migration during the Celtic Tiger (c. 2000). Phelan identifies the period as one of emerging multiculturalism, changing patterns of migration, the fall of the Catholic Church, and synergies between the local and global in ritual contexts. Consequently, issues of belonging and appropriate acoustical and ritual space became pertinent to Congolese, Nigerian and Russian Orthodox communities celebrating rituals in borrowed ritual spaces (Augustinian Church and St. Michael’s Church of Ireland). Phelan’s work not alone highlights the hospitality of churches in accommodating new faiths but also highlights deficiencies in dealing with migrant groups by the State and the wider Irish community. In particular, the impact statements concerning the isolation and confinement of new mothers are harrowing. Their plight of uncertainty is further discussed in

regards the perceived significance of Catholic baptismal rituals in the context of the Irish citizenship referendum. While Phelan concludes that singing alone cannot assure belonging, she notes that it can signal the possibility.

Section two focusses on the creation of a ritual space within academia. This challenge is not restricted to the provision of a suitable physical space but more an academic space for disciplines which are primarily affectual. In this respect, Phelan sought parity of esteem between affectual, intellectual and practical approaches in the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick. This effort was supported by the Academy not alone in regards course provision but also in mythologizing the academic space to reflect the cultural value of *Imbas* (or knowledge) and the river goddess *Sionna*. In addition, the Academy adopted the principles of individual creativity and diversity, as well as inclusivity and equality in their mission statement. This enabled a broadening of research towards ritual practice amongst the New Irish and greater engagement with the local community.

Of interest to ethnomusicologists is the issue of undertaking fieldwork in a domain which is deeply personal and where recording and questioning is regarded as intrusive. Fortunately, Phelan's work in the area of singing and social integration has been considerable over the last two decades through her work with church choirs in the Limerick area, ritual music festivals, and University initiatives such as the Sanctuary choir, *Nomad* and the *Sound Out with Strings* School programme. These experiences and the dialogue therein have enabled her to discuss the issue of belonging in ritual and multicultural performance through reflection and description. Consequently, this work may be described as autobiographical and autoethnographic with considerable space given to the discussion of ritual song performance from philosophical, pedagogical, religious and cultural perspectives. In this subject area the candidacy and authenticity of the author is both compelling and praiseworthy.

There is a wealth of critical material yet to be mined from this research and in particular, at times, the musical discussions finished too early. For example, a lengthier discussion around the achievements of the *Sound Out* project and the response of Irish composers to Vatican 2, is warranted for this reader.

However, the breath of this work ensures its significance to ritual studies, ethnography, philosophy, religion, vocal pedagogy and cultural studies. I commend this work for its originality in focus and opening a dialogue for the need for greater inclusion in modern Ireland.

Susan Motherway
Institute of Technology, Tralee