

# “The man and his Music”: Gender representation, cultural capital and the Irish traditional music canon

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## **Abstract**

Through a re-examination of canonical Irish traditional music texts and the music-making spaces and practices these inform, this paper proposes that Irish traditional music, as social practice, has normalised hegemonic power structures and relationships, and further, finds that these texts consolidate gender bias, prejudice and discrimination in ensuing practices. Power and authority inherent in music practices and linked to cultural identity and status are a significant form of cultural capital, revealing, amongst other things the complexity of relations between gender symbolism, gendered social organisation and the diversity of gendered dispositions in society. Restrictions to cultural capital accumulation created by gender inequality in the performance and documentation of Irish traditional music practice is highlighted and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is employed to address ongoing social implications of the reproduction of gender inequality in Irish traditional music practice.

**Keywords:** Irish traditional music, gender bias, inequality, cultural capital

## **Introduction**

Irish traditional music, like any music genre, is shaped by performance practices, transmission modes and discourses, all of which inform how gender is constructed and experienced within that musical world. Gender and Irish traditional music is not, therefore, simply about who is performing music but rather how those performers are represented, and interpret discursive intersections as they impact social contexts and the musical activity that occurs in them. In the context of this special issue, the present paper sets out to document and trace the absence of women's voices from the Irish traditional dance music canon in order to demonstrate how that has served to construe and perpetuate music-making arenas as men-dominated spaces. In particular, it examines texts, narratives and collections that date from the revival period of Irish traditional music in the second half of the twentieth century in order to determine the ways in which an Irish traditional music past is accessed and remembered. It employs Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which extends the logic of economic analysis to non-economic goods and services by identifying the location of power within the complex social practice of music-making, and uses this to address the ways that social inequalities are reproduced (2007).<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu's "habitus" and "field" are integral to understanding cultural capital. In this case, Irish traditional music practice denotes the field in which cultural capital accrual is possible, and the set of dispositions (i.e. taste) of musicians and others active in the field is the habitus (Laberge 1995). Implicit in the use of the term cultural capital is the understanding that forms of capital are not equally available to all, but rather are dependant on other material factors constituted by institutions and structures, educational credentials, expertise, genealogy, social class attributes (Navarro 2006) and gender.

### **Collecting the (homosocial) tradition**

The received Irish traditional music canon is informed and shaped by the practice of Irish traditional music collection: a process arguably initiated by the employment of Edward Bunting at the Belfast Harp festival in 1792 (Commins 2014). According to Honko's description of the "folklore process", this initial collecting foray reflects the "first life of folklore" driven by an imperative to preserve the melodies played by the harpers and transcribing the music performed by these vestigial "agents of memory" (Honko 1990: 185; Beiner 2005: 60). Subsequent collecting activity, however, transfers into the hands of practising traditional musicians, moving chronologically from collectors such as Canon Goodman and Francis O'Neill in the nineteenth century to Breandán Breathnach in the twentieth. The narratives that describe this shift suggest an increasingly democratic access to a transcribed native repertory within the community of practice from which they emerge, underscoring a shift from documentation and conservation to revival and performance (Commins 2014; Cooper 2002; Ní Fhuartháin 2011). The cultural disposition (*habitus*) of eighteenth and nineteenth century collectors and the "field" in which revival and collection took place was within sight of the colonial gaze, a process constructed as rational, scientific and male. Unequal power relations between collector (generally men) and collectee (predominantly men) and the exclusion of women musicians from collection methods resulted in the transfer of cultural capital to the collector. Ensuing gender anomalies inhered to the process of collection, subsequent publication and documentation throughout this canon-forming process.

### **Constructing the (homosocial) tradition**

Bourdieu explains social class exclusion as a means of securing the reproduction of the status quo (Ashley and Empson 2017; Bourdieu 1984). Exclusion acts as a defence mechanism practised by existing insiders and when translating this to the field of Irish traditional music, it serves to protect cultural capital and privilege embedded in the handed down, homosocial, tradition. This is exemplified by changes in performance contexts from domestic to public settings which occurred throughout the twentieth century, altering the spaces in which music was collected and performed. When the key site of performance practice was situated in the domestic, an interactive exchange structure facilitated the roles of both men and women musicians, in what Bourdieu (2007) would refer to as the circulation of symbolic power.

Intergenerational transmission and learning in the home are key markers of authenticity, informing this symbolic power. As music practices travelled beyond domestic thresholds, the symbolic power previously available to women musicians was eroded by societal obstructions hindering their ability to access external, public spaces. Authenticity is socially constructed, a discursive trope, predicated on the way that people give music, place, other people and indeed themselves, identity and authority by attributing Irish traditional music with particular social, cultural and ideological characteristics (Stokes 1994). It is structured and defined within discursive contexts in which the community of practice talk about music and decide what is significant about music, informing the embodied properties of cultural capital as it relates to the field of cultural production. When the field primarily consisted the domestic sphere, women potentially had access and input into the value judgements relating to music aesthetics. O'Shea touches on the roles available to women: "play[ing] music for dancing and listening within the domestic domain [and] to a mixed audience of friends and relations" (2009: 13). Such sharing of cultural repertoire and aesthetic understanding within the home is demonstrated by the innumerable citations of women musicians; grandmothers, mothers, aunts and sisters as influence, teacher, or key modality for transmission. These are found embedded, or indeed buried, in musician biographies,

particularly those that preceded the commercialisation of Irish traditional music.<sup>2</sup> The cultural authority available within the symbolic domestic sphere and the governance and access to these roles for women musicians disappears with its disruption. As a result, authenticity is rarely cited as being located in women's performance. Cultural capital, therefore, remains unaccrued due to the assembly of gender boundaries around the new discursive space in which definitions of authenticity are constructed. The outcome for people (in this case women musicians) who do not have access to legitimised forms of capital, in this instance public space, is marginalisation and invisibilisation.

The transference of Irish traditional music performance practice to the pub, and the overt dominance of the pub as a heteronormative male space, replaced the informality of practice and transmission pertaining to domestic space (Donkersloot 2012; O'Shea 2008, 2009). Implicit in this change is the creation of a particular social order that commutes the intersection of gender with inequality and power relations. The advance of the pub session, a development privileged by Irish traditional music scholarship (see for example Hall 1995 and Kaul 2007), is party not only to maintaining, but solidifying covert and overt gender boundaries, engendering a set of norms that continue to be reproduced in the present in both Ireland and the diaspora, shaping the sights and sounds of music as it journeys through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Discourses that describe the shift from domestic to public space, narrativise this change in the context of modernity, rather than interrogating the agency which transfers music from the relatively accessible domestic sphere to one that not only normalises social exclusion based on gender, but controls gender behaviour as a means of controlling the social and political order (Stokes 1994).

Bourdieu lists repeated contact and aesthetic competence as sources of cultural capital and these are embedded in an intuitive understanding of performance practice. While access to cultural capital continues for some women through domestic performance and transmission roles, it is gradually withheld or taken out of circulation on account of diminished access to the field. The agency of societal change in which spaces that permit deliberate exclusions, even if the level of intentionality is not explicitly conscious, are formed remains under-researched. Recording studios and the professional production of music, other substantially male domains, produce both cultural and economic capital and supporting social structures that reproduce themselves according to what is valued in the field (Leonard 2017; Lieb 2013). The construction of boundaries around music-making via its transfer to these new spaces; the public house, concert spaces and recording studios equates to the erasure of many women musicians by diminishing their access to cultural capital as it is traded by individuals who each have a sense of their value within the social structures of the public and published realm.<sup>3</sup>

### **Breathnach the collector**

Key to the period in question in this paper is the voice of Breathnach (1912-1985), an authorial figure in the historiography of Irish traditional music and whose writings, "the artistic bible-tracts of the music revival" (Vallely 2005: 60), shaped discourse and influenced research methodologies, and ultimately the sound, shape and gender of the ensuing canon. Collector, uilleann piper, documenter, commentator and scholar, Breathnach was a pivotal actor in much of the institutional infrastructure of Irish traditional music that developed during the second half of the twentieth century including Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, Na Píobairí Uilleann (NPU), the Willie Clancy Summer School and latterly, the Irish Traditional Music Archive (ITMA). As a result, his outputs have impacted significantly on virtually all aspects of the genre of Irish traditional music and continue to inform contemporary practice. Breathnach came of age in the new state, in which "culture, as the self-conscious construction and

mobilization of difference, was subordinated to the service of politics” (Whelan 2004: 184). Additional attention is required to consider the ways in which the Irish traditional music that Breathnach documented, encoded and enacted a gendered public performance style in keeping with the values of a socio-cultural music and normative gender model of twentieth century Ireland. To what extent did Breathnach play into the discursive production of Ireland and its “native” tradition?

As a twentieth-century collector, a distinct shift in agency is apparent within the collected outputs of Breathnach. Rather than foregrounding tunes as discrete texts, the musical authority of the tradition-bearer is layered onto the tune collection process. If a key aspect of the canon is created, shaped and reshaped in the moment of performance, then tunes are the essential ingredients of this enactment. Breathnach’s tune project, begins, not unlike Francis O’Neill’s, as a personal collection before the prospect of publishing emerges (Carolan 1997). The subsequent dissemination of the rich ethnographic material gathered in the process of his collecting emerges in *Ceol Rince na hÉireann (CRÉ)* a tune collection series which runs to five volumes (two of which were published posthumously) and present a detail-rich, in-depth collection (Breathnach 1963, 1976, 1985; Breathnach and Small 1996, 1999). *CRÉ* treats tunes not as singular, unrelated units, but as part of a wider process; recognising distinct tune versions and acknowledging the hands of the tradition-bearer from whom they were collected as an elemental part of a living tradition.

A civil servant, Breathnach was not a trained ethnomusicologist, developing or adhering to a rigid collecting methodology or self-reflexively taking account of the subjectivity he brought to his scholarship. In hindsight, however, Breathnach’s legacy can be viewed as an early contribution to the ethnomusicological study of Irish traditional music. Nicholas Carolan gave expression to the informal, non-scientific basis of his collection methods referring to Breathnach’s collectees as personal contacts who “formed a part of [his] social circle in Dublin” (2019). Breathnach’s daughter, Éadaoin Breathnach, confirmed this, describing the incessant flow of musicians through the Breathnach household, visits made to the homes of musicians and the pervasive memory of her father at home with paper and pencil, recording and transcribing tunes (2019). Breathnach’s music documentation carries a set of normative values situated primarily within the bounds of male socialisation. His methodology, therefore is representative of ethnographers of the time; focusing on the public, accessible sphere occupied by male musicians (Koskoff 1987).

Simultaneous to the publication of the first *CRÉ* in 1963, Breathnach founded the subscription-based journal *Ceol*, a platform for research to inform the revival of music. “Initially provoked by mistaken assumptions current in the early 1960s about the nature of Irish traditional music and song” (Carolan 1984: 5), it was published somewhat irregularly between the years 1963 and 1986 and received a small subvention from the Arts Council to allay printing costs in 1967, 1971 and 1973 (Vallely 2011: 24). *Ceol* provides an example of one of the many outlets for Breathnach’s voice and brings “a critical eye to a subject plagued by myth-spinning, and attitudinising, opening up aspects of Irish music for study for the first time” (Carolan 1984).<sup>4</sup> Within the pages of *Ceol* Breathnach created the series “The Man and his Music” which as well as providing the problematic title for this paper, formally situates Irish traditional music cultural capital in the masculine. Beginning in the second issue of *Ceol*, each of these short articles highlights a specific man musician with a biographic detail asserting their musical credentials, a comment on performance style, followed by a selection of annotated tunes from their repertoire. Most of these musicians are still familiar names within Irish traditional music discourse (see Table 1), their championing by Breathnach in this forum contributing to their subsequent status.

**Table 1: The Man and his Music series, *Ceol* 1963-1984.**

1.	Breandán Breathnach 1963	The Man and his Music – Sonny Brogan	<i>Ceol</i> 1 (2)
2.	Breandán Breathnach 1963	The Man and his Music – John Egan	<i>Ceol</i> 1 (3)
3.	Breandán Breathnach 1964	The Man and his Music – John Kelly	<i>Ceol</i> 1 (4)
4.	Breandán Breathnach 1965	The Man and his Music – Andy Conroy	<i>Ceol</i> 2 (1)
5.	Breandán Breathnach 1965	The Man and his Music – James Seery	<i>Ceol</i> 2 (2)
6.	Breandán Breathnach 1965	The Man and his Music – Willie Clancy	<i>Ceol</i> 2 (3)
7.	Breandán Breathnach 1966	The Man and his Music – Dennis Murphy	<i>Ceol</i> 2 (4)
8.	Breandán Breathnach 1967	The Man and his Music – Johnnie Maguire	<i>Ceol</i> 3 (1)
9.	Breandán Breathnach 1969	The Man and his Music – Paddy Taylor	<i>Ceol</i> 3 (3)
10.	Breandán Breathnach 1970	The Man and his Music – Micko Russell	<i>Ceol</i> 3 (4)
11.	Breandán Breathnach 1981	The Man and his Music – Johnnie O’Leary	<i>Ceol</i> 5 (1)
12.	Breandán Breathnach 1982	The Man and his Music – Séamus Ennis	<i>Ceol</i> 5 (2)
13.	Breandán Breathnach 1983	The Man and his Music – James Kelly	<i>Ceol</i> 6 (1)
14.	Breandán Breathnach 1984	The Man and his Music – Liam Ó Floinn	<i>Ceol</i> 7 (1-2)

Published over a period of twenty-one years in fourteen of twenty-two volumes, the contraction of these articles into list form (in Table 1) presents on face value a particular and quite singular vision of the tradition. An initial examination of the Breathnach reel-to-reel tapes held at ITMA and subsequent research suggests that the articles were based on information gathered by Breathnach during the process of collecting and recording tunes from these and other musicians. The tapes also demonstrate the contemporaneous presence of women musicians, including those whom Breathnach recorded,<sup>5</sup> all of which confirms that while the discourse may be biased, performance practice is much less so.

Coleman pinpoints a key aspect of the tradition when he describes how “musicians carry...*other people*...as living memories and presences in the here and now” (Coleman 2012: 163, emphasis in original). In effect, the *Ceol* articles “carry” and privilege the cultural capital of the named musicians upon whom they dilate, embedding and perpetuating patriarchal practices into written discourse. Rather than venturing beyond his homosocial circle to incorporate practising women musicians, Breathnach adheres to the gender boundaries in his music-making sphere, which as Stokes maintains, were already in existence, and not uncommon to other social and political boundaries in twentieth century Ireland (1994). In publishing these articles, Breathnach subordinates the voices of women musicians in the documented canon through exclusion, depleting their symbolic and cultural capital by doing so (Bourdieu 2007). Thus, socio-cultural developments between the start and middle of the century further disrupt the symbolic power embedded in the home-centred, cultural repertoire and performance practice of women, none of whom subsequently trouble the gendered series that Breathnach creates.

Regardless of intentionality, Breathnach exerts a gate-keeping function. This selective collected memory subsequently informs the collective memory of the Irish traditional music canon via the pages of *Ceol*, and indeed the many print outlets through which Breathnach authorises a voice for Irish traditional music. McRobbie and McCabe remind us that “our ideas come from who we know, what we read, what we see and listen to” (1981: 7). Situating this within Honko’s definition of culture, one can extrapolate that Irish traditional music is not so much “in things, but in people’s way of seeing, using and thinking about things” (1988: 11). The canon acquires a systemic character through an ordering process of selection, effectively resulting in a selective, rather than collective, tradition. As no woman musician is included in Breathnach’s biographical series, it transpires that we do not know, we do not read, we do not see and we have a limited opportunity therefore to listen to any of them. Instead, the repetition of this title the “Man and his Music” across a span of fourteen issues and twenty-one years normalises the concept and what it inheres. Furthermore, and as

demonstrated in Table 2, the Irish traditional music community conceptually embraces the term “Man and his Music”. It subsequently takes on a life of its own as a viable title for further publications and performance-based events from a variety of authors and contributors (including the collated *Breathnach* posthumous anthology) right up until 2016.

**Table 2: Selection of “The Man and his Music” publications and lectures contemporaneous with and succeeding *Breathnach*’s *Ceol* articles.**

Harry Hughes & Muiris Ó Rócháin	1972 Willie Clancy: the Man and his Music	<i>Dal gCais</i> , 1
Tom Munnelly	1972 The Man and his Music-John Reilly	<i>Ceol</i> , 4
Séamus McMathúna	1977 Patrick Kelly: the Man and his Music	<i>Dal gCais</i> , 3
Breandán Breathnach	1983 Séamus Ennis: A Tribute to the Man and his Music	<i>Musical Traditions</i> , 1
Dermot Hanifin	1995 Pádraig O’Keeffe: the Man and his Music. Castleisland: unpublished leaflet, available at ITMA	
Sean Potts, Terry Moylan & Liam McNulty	1996 <i>The Man and his Music: an Anthology of the Writings of Breandán Breathnach</i> (Na Píobairí Uilleann)	
Alan Jones	2011 Paddy Keenan-uilleann piper: the Man and his Music	<i>The Pipers’ Review</i> , 30
Pat Mitchell	2012 Willie Clancy: the Man and his Music	<i>Lecture WCSS</i>
Mick Moloney	2016 Ed Reavy: the Man and his Music	<i>Lecture WCSS</i>

Of course, *Breathnach* and the authors listed in Table 2 are not operating in a vacuum, nor are they out of sync with the documentation of other contemporaneous music genres. The concept of the “Man and his Music” was well established in 1963. Other research findings in scholarship on music and gender demonstrate how prestige and power continue to be assigned to male-only behaviour, in a broad swathe of social contexts, not just musical (Koskoff 1987). During their interviews, Éadaoin Breathnach and Nicholas Carolan both used the term “a man of his time” to describe *Breathnach*, a concept prevalent in gender scholarship, and a reflection on how in society, both men and women “accept and internalize” ideas about male power and prestige (ibid.: 10). Indeed, Éadaoin described her father as progressive rather than conservative, in relation to her upbringing, asserting that she and her four sisters were encouraged by their father to challenge the patriarchal norms he espoused (*Breathnach* 2019). As Koskoff submits, it is often only in hindsight that “inequalities” in the behaviour (of both men and women) living within that framework, which received little heed at the time, are recognised and identified (1987).

### Handing down the (homosocial) tradition

*Breathnach*’s presentation of the tradition has wielded a considerable influence, consciously and subconsciously pervading the canonical backbone of Irish traditional music. Carolan, a key actor in the research and dissemination of Irish traditional music knowledge, founder and Director Emeritus of ITMA, synopsis this influence, “I was already entranced by the sounds and sights and the personalities of Irish traditional music, but *Ceol* revealed ways of thinking about traditional music, and studying it, and presenting it” (2005: np). Gauging the wider contemporaneous readership of the journal *Ceol* is more problematic. At its height, it had a print run of one thousand, but its fortunes waxed and waned during its existence (Carolan 1986b). The *CRÉ* tune book series, on the other hand, is a standard in the collection of traditional musicians and is indeed still in print. In *CRÉ* 1-3, *Breathnach* presents tunes collected from musicians, manuscripts and recordings. Published by An Gúm, the state’s national Irish language publisher while *Breathnach* was an employee of the Department of Education, it encompasses high production standards. Unlike previous collections, its rich annotation of tune versions, tune names and index informs the reader of *Breathnach*’s

source for each tune. Women musicians are poorly represented: less than 1% of the tunes that appear in *CRÉ 1* were collected from a woman musician and this extends to just 7% and 11% in *CRÉ 2* and *3* respectively. As stated earlier, cultural capital is tied to constructions of authenticity and its parameters of inclusion (and thereby exclusion). Validation is awarded “primarily through repertoire and style of performance [where] what is performed and how it sounds are the crucial elements in creating consensus on what is traditional...and what is not” (Ní Fhuartháin 2011). As the bulk of extant repertoire and its coexistent style parameters are determined through the performance of tunes, and most tunes have been collected from men musicians, then the repertoire itself is the bearer of (in)equality baggage. Slominski concisely summates this “duality of past and present in performing, thinking and writing about music” (2010: 25). The “authoritative and prestigious” *CRÉ* series persists into the twenty-first century with “unprecedented popularity” (Small 2011: 119), continuing to accumulate and mobilise cultural capital for the (predominantly) male musicians from whom its tunes were collected.

While indisputably the most important, Breathnach was not, however, the only collector and publisher of tunes during the second half of the twentieth century. Bulmer and Sharpley’s *Music of Ireland* Volumes 1-4 was published in the UK in 1975 contemporaneously with *CRÉ 2* and in the United States, Miller and Perron published the joint edition of *Irish Traditional Fiddle Music* in 1977 (which combined volumes 1-3 published between 1973 and 75). Differences between these two publications and Breathnach’s abound. While all are ostensibly tune collections, the diasporic publications of Bulmer and Sharpley, and Miller and Perron satisfied tune-thirsty, intergenerational, second and third generation music communities abroad. The ring bound A4 format of *Music of Ireland* is cheap and cheerful, *Irish Traditional Fiddle Music* has marginally higher print production values, but in both, the focus is on the skeleton of the tune itself, rather than the source or particular tune-version (although this information is provided for some of the tunes). In Bulmer and Sharpley’s volumes, source musicians are included only occasionally and the editors admit, frankly, in their introduction that some of the tunes were snatched out of the ether. However, the citation by Bulmer and Sharpley of some source musicians does facilitate a partial gender breakdown. Across the four volumes, just three tunes are acknowledged (out of 335) as collected from women musicians (from Mary Bergin and Katie Taylor). In Miller and Perron, four women musicians (Peg McGrath, Deirdre Collis, Mary O’Hara and Jean Carrignan) feature in the listed discography of twenty musicians from whom the transcriptions are sourced. Notwithstanding their differences, comparing the gender breakdown of tune sources reveals a clear similarity across the three publications.

While not a publisher of tunes per se, Seán Ó Riada (1940-1971), a contemporary of Breathnach, is also active at this time in the formation and articulation of the Irish traditional music canon. Ó Riada’s radio series *Our Musical Heritage*, self-presented on RTÉ radio in 1962, was a key platform for his voice. In the book of the same title published twenty years later in 1982, he directs his audience to specific individual music examples; twenty-five musicians in total (not including singers) (Ó Riada 1982). Like Breathnach’s *Folk Music and Dances* and Ó Canainn’s *Traditional Music in Ireland*, this is an important and canon-forming text (Breathnach 1971; Ó Canainn 1978). Notwithstanding the widely vaunted perspective of Ó Riada as innovator, he too adhered to the normative gender model available, incorporating the description “vigorous masculine music” (1982: 79) and featuring just one woman musician, Mrs Dalton, in the examples given.<sup>6</sup>

At the start of the century Richard Henebry wrote that “almost every funeral of an old woman of eighty means the loss for ever of an uncollected treasure of far greater worth” (1903: 22). Henebry’s old women remain unnamed, and notwithstanding the role they may have played as tradition bearers, are otherwise invisible in the public domain, yet they informed a musical space that facilitated/s the creation of visible men

musicians. Male musicians of the twentieth century, on the other hand, thrived, as not just their tunes, but their individual tune-versions were collected. Breathnach copperfastens inequality in the ascription and thereby cultural capital to particular men and “master” musicians. These foundational texts emerge at a particularly formative time, because in superseding Henebry and his colleagues, they feed directly into the growth of the academic study of Irish traditional music at third level as the work of Ó Riada (appointed to University College Cork in 1963) and his successor Míchéal Ó Súilleabháin starts to take root. The canon, with all its invisible gender biases moves into academia and informs a new generation of musicians and musician scholars.

### **Narrating the (homosocial) tradition**

Gender assumptions are implicit in the revival process and the resultant canon conflates masculinity and authenticity. Irish traditional musicians continuously learn from, look to and privilege the past in their performing present. Therefore acknowledging that the Irish traditional music past is an overtly male-authored space is important because this received canon, regardless of the gender of who is playing now, continues to inform the narrative and discourses of contemporary music making and is problematically complicated by the “gender of nostalgia” (Commins 2014: 204). The deployment of a master-apprentice syntax and gendered language with a preponderance of male pronouns serves to sustain a system of patriarchy (ibid.: 116-118). Carolan suggests an element of patronage underlay Breathnach’s relationship with some of his informants, giving as an example the employment of button accordion player Sonny Brogan to paint the Breathnach household’s kitchen. This idea is consolidated by Éadaoin Breathnach’s memories of the same event as she recalled her mother’s exasperation at the length of time it took to complete what was essentially a small job: “My memory of Sonny was the ladder blocking the door (into the kitchen). He seemed to be permanently there. Daddy sitting at the bottom of the ladder, with his little index cards. He’d be checking things with Sonny and Sonny would be at the top of the ladder. It took months”. She noted the frequency with which the selection of handymen to do jobs in the Breathnach household was based on musical rather than manual abilities, echoing the employment of musicians by Francis O’Neill during his role as Chief of Police in the Chicago Fire Department at the beginning of the twentieth century (Carolan 1997). Breathnach’s documentation of Irish traditional music naturalises masculine ideologies, thereby complicating the musical habitus of women musicians performing a tradition in which authenticity is constructed on the basis of masculine identities. In his revised *A Short History of Irish Traditional Music*, Ó hAllmhuráin draws attention to the recent appearance of women’s voices in both musicianship and scholarship (2017). Irish traditional music is a living tradition; it evolves and changes over time. Many more women musicians are visible now than in the past, traditional instrumental associations have been breached (the uilleann pipes is a case in point)<sup>7</sup> as is the shift in the gender of Fleadh Cheoil winners (Vallely 2011: 303). However, contemporary women musicians continue to perform in a tradition in which their contribution has historically been marginalised, and generational layers of occlusion has left a cultural capital deficit in women musicians’ banks that remains in the red.

### **Conclusion**

Gender influences the very way we organise, think and know about the world. Looking at the “Man and his Music” series through a twenty first century lens, it becomes clear that the historical absence of overt references to Irish traditional music performance by women has enabled masculinity to universalise itself powerfully as the norm. However, cultural capital, develops and accrues within the deeply entrenched discourses on authenticity and Irish traditional music that pertain to this norm. A second updated and revised edition of the Miller and Perron collection published in 2006,

brought to light an additional three women musicians as tune sources. Obscured in the original edition by their male counterparts, they remained, for nearly 30 years, undocumented, evidence central to the argument made here, that historical performance practice was more evenly gendered than current discourse discloses. Criticising Breathnach's efforts on behalf of Irish traditional music, or indeed any of the authors cited here is not the object of this paper. Neither does it set out to dismiss the validity of the received canon of Irish traditional music. Rather it seeks to challenge the passivity with which this history and revival process is received. There is something inherently unmusical about counting tunes in order to undertake an analysis of their gender provenance. Yet it provides clear evidence of gender imbalance in the Irish music tradition, an imbalance that has normalised the exclusion of women's voices in Irish traditional music.

Contextualising a post-colonial, revivalist mind-set as operating within a particular Irish societal gender ideology, reveals how distinctive forms of value, cultural capital and symbolic power have accumulated within the tradition as a consequence of extra-musical economic, cultural and political dynamics governing the field. Breathnach's selfless contribution to the tradition, and the discourse of urgency that surrounded it, masks the construction of a highly gendered site. Joining church and state, the ongoing prescription of gender roles upheld by Breathnach's "moral authority in the field" of Irish traditional music (Carolan 1986a: 9) bears some responsibility for the erasure of women musicians. Notwithstanding the familial experience expressed by his daughter to the contrary, Breathnach was the product of a patriarchy which was "the organising principle of civilised capitalism" (Earner-Byrne and Urquhart 2017: 313). Until now, readings of Breathnach, Ó Riada and the collectors and documenters that precede and succeed them have focused on their role as revivalists, saviours, innovators, heroes and animateurs. Pioneers all in traditional music documentation, their inherent biases and behaviours have been handed down, as part and parcel of the tradition. What is offered here is a new reading which focuses on challenging the status quo—the section of society that holds power within the field of Irish traditional music—and drawing attention to subconscious bias where it continues to infiltrate the canon.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This concept is found in much of Bourdieu's work.

<sup>2</sup> Breathnach's "Man and his Music" series is exemplary in this regard for example the articles on John Kelly, Paddy Kelly and Micko Russell. See also Ní Shíocháin in this volume. Slominski gives a detailed account of Julia Clifford (2020) and biographies of men and women musicians in *The Companion* (Vallely 2011) provide further examples.

<sup>3</sup> The contemporaneous experience of women musicians in the diaspora may well differ and while some biographical research has been undertaken (see for example Dillane 2013 and Slominski 2020), this is an area in need of further attention.

<sup>4</sup> A prodigious writer, Breathnach wrote and/or held editorial positions with *Comhar, An Píobaire, Béaloideas, Dal gCais, Irish Folk Music Studies-Éigse Cheol Tíre, Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society, Folk Music Journal* and *Musical Traditions* as well as contributing book chapters, newspaper articles and lectures.

<sup>5</sup> Breathnach's reel-to-reel tapes at ITMA include women musicians such as Mrs Crotty; Aggie Whyte and Mollie Myers.

<sup>6</sup> A concertina player from Co Limerick, Breathnach also collected two tunes from her that appear in *CRÉ 2*.

<sup>7</sup> While this increase is not documented in published figures, the number of images of female pipers in the recent *NPU Strategy 2019-21 Sharing the Sound* publication speaks to this increase. See also its reference to "Equality and inclusion for all in the traditional arts" under the section on Purpose, vision, mission and values (Na Píobairí Uilleann 2019).

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