

Women and traditional/folk music: Building a research field

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Abstract

This introductory article offers a brief overview of the context and rationale leading to the publication of the special issue of *Ethnomusicology Ireland* with Women and Traditional/Folk Music as its theme. It situates this volume as a response to international and national movements of equality and change. Finally, it offers a summary literature review of available scholarship on the specific theme of Women and Irish Traditional/Folk Music, acknowledging the significant contribution of this issue to that field.

Keywords: Women, traditional music, folk music, research

Introduction

Recent social action movements in Ireland and elsewhere draw stark attention to matters of (in)equality in the public sphere. In particular, inequality in sites of cultural production and the workplace are central to that reckoning. Responding to these initiatives, this special issue of *Ethnomusicology Ireland* is built on the theme of “Women and traditional/folk music”. It gathers together proceedings from a research symposium of the same name hosted by Comhrá Ceoil (the music research network at National University of Ireland Galway) in response to and in partnership with FairPlé. This introductory article provides context to that research event and a brief survey of the research field of women and traditional/folk music, with particular reference to an Irish framework.

National and international contexts

The centenary celebrations of the 1916 Rising in Ireland presented an opportunity, or more correctly, laid bare the necessity, to recalibrate contributions of those outside received hagiographies of nation building and identity making. In particular, almost one hundred years on from suffrage, the role of women, a role typically and historically occluded from sanctioned histories, was reassessed. The significance of Ireland’s centenary celebrations should not be underestimated in this regard, forcing and facilitating in equal measures reconsiderations of identity, nation and (in)equality. Commemorative celebrations are necessarily reflective of the past, the present and what has taken place in between. In Ireland in the run up to 2016 “critical debates on Irish history and where the nation is headed next” took place (O’Toole 2017: 134) coming at the tail end of years of harsh fiscal austerity. There was a coincidental intersection of Ireland’s own commemorative (reflexive) period and revitalised equality and feminist movements transnationally (Cochrane 2013). In addition, within Ireland, the successfully passed Marriage Equality referendum in 2015, meant that the

language of equality and inclusion was pre-activated in public discourse, creating, at the very least, a possibility for forging change.

Chief among the activist responses in Ireland to historical and continuing structures of exclusion in the area of cultural production was Waking the Feminists (WTF), a “grassroots campaign calling for equality for women across the Irish theatre sector that ran from November 2015 to November 2016” (Waking the Feminists, 2019: web source). Initiated as the online hashtag #WakingtheFeminists in reaction to the publication of the Abbey Theatre’s 2015 *Waking the Nation* centenary programme of events, the planned programme evoked a swift and robust response from women (and many men) in Irish theatre and beyond. As devised, the national theatre’s Waking the Nation programme included plays by lions of Irish theatre (Sean O’Casey and Frank McGuinness) and contemporary dramatists (Sean P. Summers, for example); remarkably, though not unsurprisingly, of twenty writers and directors listed on the programme only two were women. The intense and immediate reaction coalesced into WTF, a one year campaign which declared as its mission to demand “sustained policies in achieving female inclusion in the arts, equal championing of female artists by Irish arts institutions, and economic parity for women working in the sector” (O’Toole 2017: 138). The very public success of WTF functioned as a template of possibilities in other cognate areas. As O’Toole notes, “the questions raised by WTF are important not only for women in Irish theatre, but for many feminist movements struggling to change patriarchal national and political narratives” (136).

In the cultural field of music, Sounding the Feminists (STF) held its first public meeting in 2017 as a response to the lack of female composers in the national *Composing the Island: A Century of Music* in Ireland concert series announcement in 2016 (another in the commemorative cultural cycle and similar in its deficiencies to the Waking the Nation programme). A sister movement to Waking the Feminists in Ireland, STF declared its purpose to promote and publicise “the creative work of female musicians” (Sounding the Feminists 2019: web source). Other music practitioner-focused organisations and initiatives were also established during this period including Mnásome “celebrating badass women in music” (Mnásome 2020: web source), the Gash Collective, Girls Rock Dublin, She Said So Dublin and most recently, The X Collective (Hayden 2020) and We’ve Only Just Begun (Smither 2020). These networks share a common interest in providing and advocating for increased support and opportunities for women in music across a range of genre territories and roles.

It is in this wider national and international context that the genesis of FairPlé is rooted; a grassroots organisation seeking equality in the world of traditional and folk music. Established in 2018, FairPlé is part of a broader insistence by individuals, networks and organisations, in Irish and transnational contexts, to address inequalities of participation, representation and reward in public life and private music-making domains. Similar to its sororal campaigns, it emerged in a moment of frustrating clarity in early 2018. Singer Karan Casey, a long established, successful performer in the Irish folk-traditional music world, found herself once again on stage in a woman-free zone (barring her own company) (see Casey in this issue). A subsequent call to gather, discuss and address the realities of gender disparity in traditional and folk music provoked a modest response, but gained currency as the campaign sought to identify obstacles to gender equality, propose solutions to those structural barriers and demand inclusion. Discussion days, workshops, professional development seminars and a “Day of action” followed suit (O’Halloran 2018).

FairPlé in name encompasses a number of layered meanings: the expression “fair play” to indicate all that is being asked for is a level playing field, but aligned to that is the Hiberno-English understanding of the expression, “fair play”, an encouraging salutation indicating a job well done. Phonetically denoting “play” as “plé” (“to discuss” in the Irish language), adds yet another layer of meaning, proposing an open discursive forum, a conversation to which all, in principle, are invited. Having broadly parallel

goals to WTF, FairPlé's aims set out "to achieve gender balance in the production, performance, promotion, and development of Irish traditional and folk music" (FairPlé 2019: web source) and its work extended well beyond its planned one-year strategic deadline. In conception and structural delivery, FairPlé is practitioner-focused, drawing attention to inequalities from performance to production, providing fora in which those experiences of inequality may be heard and developing pillars of support to counter those patterns of inequality.

Research symposium: Building a research field

These discussions, in theatre making and music making, in Ireland and elsewhere, warranted a coherent contemporaneous response within academia, hence the research symposium "Women and Traditional | Folk Music" was devised.¹ The organising committee (the co-editors of this issue) published an open call to academics, practitioners, researchers, archivists and listeners to contribute to the conversation. The thorny issue of what constitutes traditional or folk music was deftly side stepped, with an inclusive organisational (and subsequently editorial) approach, relying on contributors' self-declared parameters, experiences and interests. Run in partnership with FairPlé, but also offering an opportunity to respond to and critique FairPlé, the symposium afforded a long-overdue chance to explore, challenge and react to the experiences of women in traditional and folk music practice, production and performance. The symposium and the resulting proceedings, published here, can be viewed as another pillar in the developing discourse of Women and Traditional/Folk Music, and in that sense exist in parallel to FairPlé. The symposium's Call for Papers invited contributors to undertake empirical research on gender participation; to consider strategies of equal opportunity and diversity within traditional and folk musics; to explore the experience of women in traditional and folk musics and in traditional and folk music industry. While not prescriptive, further areas of suggested research were media and traditional/folk musics; gender divisions, traditional music and the State; hierarchies and power distributions in traditional and folk musics; and historical perspectives. Though participants were not confined to Irish traditional and folk music topics, the majority of contributions were ultimately in this area.

The paucity of research particularly in the area of women and traditional/folk music in Ireland was brought home most keenly to me when I was preparing a new undergraduate module "Music, Gender and Ireland" a number of years ago (first offered in 2018 at NUI Galway). In its scope, the module is multi-genric and was prompted primarily, though not exclusively, by my own research interests in popular music and gender (Ní Fhuartháin 2018; 2013). The broad field of popular music and gender is a resource-rich one where there is an abundance of output internationally and increasingly, in Irish popular music too (Negus; Miller; Ní Fhuartháin; McLoughlin and McCloone; Sullivan; Dillane). However, when it came to collating the proposed reading list for a dedicated module section on the subtopic of gender and Irish traditional and folk music, the lack of resources that I was able to provide to my students was deeply frustrating. While Davis's work provides a useful exploration of gender and music in an Irish colonial context, it relies on pre-twentieth century historical textual analysis, with orality or the practice of traditional/folk music outside its frame of reference (2006). In this it shares some methodological approaches also applied by Ní Shíocháin (2018). Furthermore, and unlike popular music gender studies, I found limited comparative resources in the field of women and contemporary folk and traditional musics which were applicable for undergraduate teaching in an Irish Music Studies context (one exception I did use was the unpublished PhD thesis, Gall 2008).

In the sub-field of women and Irish traditional/folk music what scholarship is available can be broadly categorised under the methodological headings of either musical folklore or ethnomusicology. Musical folklore, a practice reaching back to the

nineteenth century, concerns itself with the collection and documentation of repertoire from the “folk” and often a coincidental documentation of attendant stylistic practices (Bartok 1992). Though initially relying on transcription, recording technology expanded the possibilities and richness of musical folklore beginning in the late nineteenth century. The project of musical folklore from the twentieth century to now has dissemination as its primary goal with published volumes of repertoire and recordings as vehicles for that. While there are Irish men musicians’ biographies and/or life stories (see for example Mac Con Iomaire 2007), with many incorporating repertoire collections (see for example, Graham 2010; Vallely 2001), far fewer are available which have a woman musician as their subject. A notable exception is *The Songs of Elizabeth Cronin: Irish Traditional Singer* (Ó Cróinín 2000) which provides a comprehensive inventory of Cronin’s songs, in addition to what Bartok identifies as collateral stylistic and biographical information (1992). Cronin is what can be described as an example of the exceptional woman musician (Slominski 2010; 2013); she was a singer whose music was documented by national and international collectors, released commercially during her lifetime and played on Irish and British radio (Ní Shíocháin in this issue; Ó Cróinín 2000).

While there are a number of individual research articles, chapters or encyclopaedia entries with women and Irish traditional or folk music as their declared interest (Connell 2013; Lawlor 2012; Ó hAllmhuráin 2016, 2017; Schiller 1993; Spellman 2003; Smith 2008; Waldron 2006; Vallely 2011), substantial scholarship (in importance rather than quantity or scope) on gender and Irish traditional music with women’s experience looming large has been published primarily by O’Shea (2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2012) and Slominski (2012, 2013, 2020, and in this issue). This scholarship utilises ethnomusicology as the primary method and theoretical discipline and sits in the intersecting fields of gender and Irish traditional music studies, which Ó Laoire and Williams have also furrowed in their discussions of Joe Heaney (2009, 2011; Ó Laoire 2020). O’Shea and Slominski offer interesting commonalities of discourse as well as counterpoints of time and reception. An explication of these shared and disparate elements warrants full investigation (outside the remit of this introductory article); nevertheless a number of points may be made. Both O’Shea (2008a, 2008b) and Slominski (2020) are concerned with exclusionary tactics of identity-making that operate within Irish traditional music practice. These tactics are not just gendered; ethnicity and sexuality also come into play, but nonetheless for our interest here, “woman” as category is clearly demonstrated as one which is frequently othered, silenced and excluded. O’Shea’s monograph (2008a) was critically well received, but even in the most positive of reviews, a reluctance to accept her stark findings of exclusivity is found (Motherway 2010). It is yet to be seen if Slominski’s work, in 2020, will receive a more nuanced reception, coming as it does in the wake of cultural and societal reckonings of inequality in the past few years.

Conclusion

In the way that frequently happens with such things, when I and my fellow co-editors for this issue (Verena Commins, Síle Denvir and Úna Monaghan) were organising the 2018 research symposium at NUI Galway, a spontaneous short-hand abbreviation for the event emerged in the innumerable emails being exchanged. The symposium title Women and Traditional | Folk Music was acronymised to WTFM, which in intra-editorial written communications then quickly became WTFMná (the first half being the vernacular expletive and widely understood; the latter “Mná”, being “Women”). Resonating with WTF and STF, WTFMná as shorthand reflects our frustration with the deficit of research available, but it also acts as an encouraging vocative to those writing and performing, thinking and listening in the field of women and traditional/folk music. This article offers a context and rationale for the special issue of *Ethnomusicology Ireland: Women and Traditional/Folk Music*, however just as importantly it contributes

and looks forward to a continued expansion of research in this area: a beginning of sorts, rather than any ending. WTFMná indeed.

Notes

¹ Other events by cognate organisations included the Sounding the Feminists Symposium: Women in Popular & Traditional Music in Ireland, hosted at Dundalk Institute of Technology in 2018 (Sounding the Feminists Symposium: web source). Before that, Women and Music in Ireland conferences at Maynooth University (2010) and at the Royal Irish Academy of Music (2012) respectively, are acknowledgments of interest in the wider field prior to 2016.

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