"The Given Note": Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry

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Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry

By

Seán Crosson

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................. ix
Foreword, by Lillis Ó Laoire .............................................................................................. xi

**Introduction** ..................................................................................................................... 1
   Traditional Music: Continuity and Change ................................................................. 4
   Traditional Music: Ritual as Process ........................................................................ 8
   Traditional Music and Community .......................................................................... 12
   Traditional Music and Contemporary Irish Poets ................................................ 14
   Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 15

**Chapter One** "The music of poetry": A Theoretical Survey .............................. 17
   Calvin S. Brown ........................................................................................................... 18
   The Tripartite Framework for Word and Music Studies ......................................... 20
   Problems with the Tripartite Framework ................................................................ 22
   Orality Studies and Performance ............................................................................. 23
   Context in Word and Music Studies and New Musicology .................................. 37
   Literary Theory ........................................................................................................ 39
   Ethnomusicology ..................................................................................................... 42
   Conclusion: Overt and Covert Intermediality ......................................................... 46

**Chapter Two** "One essential fact": A Historical Review ............................... 49
   Historical Relationship Internationally .................................................................. 50
   Music and Poetry in Early Ireland .......................................................................... 51
   Early Modern Ireland .............................................................................................. 53
   Ireland: 1600-1800 ................................................................................................ 57
   The Emergence of Irish Poetry in English .............................................................. 63
   Charlotte Brooke and Edward Bunting ................................................................. 65
   Thomas Moore .......................................................................................................... 68
   The Young Ireland Poets, *The Nation* and the Ballad ........................................ 72
   The Literary Revival ................................................................................................. 77
   William Butler Yeats ............................................................................................... 79
   Irish-language Poetry in the Early Twentieth Century ....................................... 85
   Early Twentieth Century English-Language Poetry ........................................... 90
   Patrick Kavanagh .................................................................................................... 91
   Austin Clarke ........................................................................................................... 95
   Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 99
## Chapter Three  Bridging the Gap: The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella  ….. 101
- Seán Ó Riada ................................................................. 103
- Thomas Kinsella .............................................................. 104
- Kinsella and Gaelic Literature .............................................. 107
- Discontinuity ................................................................. 112
- Audience ........................................................................... 118
- Performance ....................................................................... 119
- Circularity and the Ouroboros ............................................. 124
- Conclusion .......................................................................... 130

## Chapter Four  “The metrical, linguistic and emotional style of the old songs”: The Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh  … 133
- The Irish Language and Innti ............................................... 135
- Performance ......................................................................... 141
- The Relationship of Poets to Tradition .................................. 149
- Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Tradition ...................................... 150
- Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Tradition ......................................... 160
- Gaelic Song Forms and Metre .............................................. 166
- Intertextuality and Evoking Community ................................. 173
- Comparative Intertextual Practice in the Gaelic Song Tradition .... 185
- The Gaelic Song Tradition: Providing Hybrid and Enabling
- Contemporary Voices .......................................................... 192
- Conclusion .......................................................................... 202

## Chapter Five  “The Given Note”: Traditional Music and the Poetry of Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson, and Gearóid Mac Lochlainn  ….... 204
- (Dis)continuity in Seamus Heaney’s and Ciaran Carson’s Poetry .... 206
- Poetic Voice ........................................................................... 213
- Process in Traditional Music and the Poetry of Carson and Mac
- Lochlainn .............................................................................. 220
- Seamus Heaney and Traditional Music .................................. 224
- Finding Community in the Poetry of Carson and Mac Lochlainn .... 232
- Traditional Music and Form in Carson and Mac Lochlainn’s Poetry 241
- Conclusion .......................................................................... 254

## Conclusion ........................................................................... 257

## Bibliography ........................................................................ 261

## Index .................................................................................... 291
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“Tír álann trína chéile…”

“With comfort at the hart” is how John Derricke characterized performances of bardic poetry to the accompaniment of harp music in medieval Gaelic courts. Seán Crosson’s study of the connections between music and poetry in the work of contemporary Irish writers disagrees that comfort is the main element in a literary and musical tradition that has been, at least since Derricke’s time, displaced, fragmented and discontinuous. Yet, a quest for a union with this imagined state of “comfort” seems to inform the work of many of the poets Crosson studies in this groundbreaking work.

The close association of music and poetry in the literary tradition of Ireland goes back to early medieval times. The centrality of the poet and his work to the realities of Gaelic politics, society and culture are undoubtedly ultimately responsible for this intimate connection. However, before Seán Crosson’s research, no focused, comprehensive, systematic treatment of the complexities involved in this symbiotic relationship existed.

This book draws on a wide range of theoretical perspectives to construct an exploratory inquiry detailing and interrogating previously unarticulated connections between words and music. Despite the breathtaking wealth of referential material, the model that emerges is subtle, nuanced and flexible, handled with the sure and elegant touch of one who is supremely aware of the possibilities of effects at the nexus of these two intertwined media. It provides the reader with a survey of the historical connections between poetry and music in Ireland, drawing on theories of orality and literacy, on the discipline sometimes referred to as melopoetics, but more usually as “word and music studies” to illuminate the issues that concern today’s writers engaging imaginatively with a historical tradition. The concern with community and audience informs the work of a number of the writers considered here as indeed does the desire to find a place to reside in a tradition considered broken and ruptured. Music performance in various guises seems to provide a bridge between the past and the future, creating a moment in which bodies in space cooperated to enact the rituals of traditional music. This process promotes
a connective web through which the alienation of post-colonial modernity may be temporarily canceled. Such a process is attractive to writers daunted by the great cultural losses experienced by the Irish literary tradition in its attempts to come to grips with the reality of linguistic and cultural change in post-Famine Ireland. Crosson, however, shows also how such an attractive prospect is not without its own contradictions that emerge particularly in the work of Thomas Kinsella and his generation. In traditional music performance, and particularly in the performance of traditional song, musicians and audience are in perfect communication. Such ideal conditions for the exchange of meaning appealed to poets such as Kinsella as they strove to communicate their own work to a wider readership. Yet music is also entertainment and Kinsella rejects the idea of his own work as an entertainment. Communication is paramount. Kinsella was also concerned with the future of poetry in the Irish language and was rather tormented by his own decision to write exclusively in English. For him, the break, the change in language was permanent. Other poets, however, continued to write in Irish and found that the linguistic and musical resources of the Gaelic song tradition provided a rich and sustaining resource. Crosson discusses the work of Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh in particular, revealing how their work is inflected in various ways by their interest and participation in Gaelic song traditions. The pastness of song is one of the most appealing characteristics for poets, coupled with the mysterious moment of performance when texts over two hundred years old emerge on the breath of contemporary voices. This miracle of controlled bodily practice, comprised in the immediacy of performance can seem to heal temporarily the rupture, dislocation and instability felt by writers towards their indigenous heritage. Whether such an impression is justified or not, the dynamism of the living moment retains a compelling allure for Irish poets and other writers. Crosson shows that this allure has been a constant draw for Irish writers in both linguistic traditions and that it arguably represents one defining characteristic of the poetic traditions of the island. This pioneering work is sure to herald other studies in this rich field of inquiry, and provides an exemplary model which leads the way with confident assurance.

Lillis Ó Laoire
Lá Coille 2008
INTRODUCTION

Let your quacks and newspapers be cutting their capers 'bout curing the vapours, the scratch and the gout, With their powders and potions, their salves and their lotions, Óchon! in their notions, they’re mighty put out. Would you know the true physic to bother pathetic And pitch to the devil, cramp, colic and spleen? You will find it, I think, if you take a big drink With your mouth to the brink of a glass of whiskeen.

So stick to the craytur, the best thing in nature For sinking your sorrows or raising your joys: Oh, whack botheration, no dose in the nation Can give consolation like whiskey, me boys.¹

On the 22nd of April 2005, Ciaran Carson launched his translation of Brian Merriman’s classic eighteenth-century Gaelic² poem, “Cúirt an Mheán Oíche”, by singing the verses above from the song “Paddy’s Panacea”, a song he learned from Clare singer Tom Lenihan.³ The song is set to the jig “Larry O’Gaff”, a tune first recorded by Michael Coleman, the Sligo-born fiddler whose recordings after emigration to the US in 1914 were to have a considerable influence on Irish traditional music in the twentieth century.⁴ Carson chose this song to illustrate his own use of the metre of a jig in approximating the rhythms of Merriman’s original Gaelic text in the English language. In the foreword to the translation Carson maintains that Merriman’s prowess as a traditional violin player may have influenced the metre of “Cúirt an Mheán Oíche”, even going so far as to suggest Merriman as a precursor to the “great Clare fiddle masters”, Junior

² In this book the term “Gaelic” will be used to refer to Irish-language literature and song up to the twentieth-century. The term “Irish-language” is the more accepted term, by writers and critics, for literature in this language written since the early twentieth-century and will be used when discussing poets from this period.
³ Carson, The Midnight Court, p. 11.
Crehan, John Kelly and Martin Rochford. The measures Carson found in “Paddy’s Panacea” were, he posits,

not such a far cry from the prosody of ‘Cúirt an Mheán Oíche’, with its internal rhymes and four strong beats to the line; and I decided to adopt it as a basis for my translation. The 6/8 rhythm is essentially dactylic, for the one long and two short beats of the dactyl correspond to the crochet [sic] and two quavers of a jig.

There is no evidence, however, that Brian Merriman was an accomplished traditional musician as Carson suggests. While John O’Daly does record, as Carson indicates, that Merriman was “an excellent performer on the violin”, there is no suggestion that he was playing “traditional tunes”. Further, the rhyming scheme of “Cúirt an Mheán Oíche” (rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter) arguably owes more, as Declan Kiberd contends, to the influence of Augustan poets such as Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and Oliver Goldsmith “which is plausible given that Merriman had exposure to their work through his membership of the Royal Dublin Society”.  

Carson has elsewhere described the lines of his poetry as comparable to the rhythm of a reel. However, his comments are not consistent and the equation of the reel’s metre with the length of the distinctive line as found in his poetry collections, such as The Irish for No, has changed from four to eight bars of a reel in separate interviews. Carson’s allusion to traditional music, in common with the work of other poets examined in the following chapters, reflects more an anxiety regarding the historical discontinuity in Irish writing and poets’ own uncertain relationship with a contemporary audience. Traditional music offers, through the rituals of its

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5 Carson, The Midnight Court, p. 10.
6 Ibid., p. 11.
7 Erionnach (George Sigerson), The Poets and Poetry of Munster: A Selection of Irish Songs by the Poets of the Last Century. Second Series with Metrical Translation (Dublin: John O’Daly, 1860), p. 86.
performance, a perceived authenticity and sense of community which Irish poets have attempted to recreate for the reception of their own work.

Carson’s launch of *The Midnight Court* highlights a number of issues central to this book. His choice of the song “Paddy’s Panacea” indicates the poet’s engagement with music and performance techniques to introduce the work to the audience. The audience’s positive engagement with his rendition, through shouts and exclamations, approximated a process Henry Glassie has described as “goodmanning”, a practice through which members of an audience insert comments between the stanzas to indicate their attentiveness.  

In that moment, a connection is made between artist and audience, a brief “community of engagement”, and it is this engagement that Irish poets, like Carson, have attempted to address through performance.

Carson’s translation of Merriman’s poem also reflects a frequent interest among Irish poets in Gaelic texts. Seamus Deane has noted the recurrent tendency of Irish poetry to avail of antiquarian and historical research into the past as it sought for a principle of continuity with which to ally itself. This search was itself a symptom of the Irish writer’s sense of disorientation in relation to a past which seemed hopelessly fragmented and discontinuous.

As I will consider below, this discontinuity has been a continual anxiety among the poets considered here, reflected in their comments and through the incorporation of elements from Gaelic texts into their poetry, as well as their translations of earlier, and contemporary, work from Irish to English.

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11 Another example of a poet using song, and performance, to introduce a new volume to the public is the manner in which the late Michael Hartnett (a poet for whom the Gaelic and ballad traditions were a vital resource and whose work indicated a concern with both a contemporary and historical community) launched his *Maiden Street Ballad* in 1981. Róisín Ní Ghairbhí notes that when Hartnett launched this book, “chan sé féin é oíche seolta an leabhar” [“he sang it himself the night of the book’s launch”] [Róisín Ní Ghairbhí, *An tSiobairne idir Dhá Theanga: Saothar Beirt Scribhneoirí Dátheangacha, Michael Hartnett agus Eoghan Ó Tuairisc* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, National University of Ireland, Galway, Scoil na Gaeilge, 2004), chapter 10, p. 10].

Carson’s engagement with traditional music to both inform and communicate his work is also mirrored in the work of his contemporaries who, like audiences both in Ireland and abroad, have displayed a growing interest in traditional Irish music since the late 1950s. As Dillon Johnston has noted, an “enthusiasm for traditional Irish music seems as pervasive among [Irish] poets as their interest in Gaelic”.\(^{13}\) Johnston contends that “traditional music offers the Irish poet an encouraging example of a wider audience responding enthusiastically to a traditional art”.\(^{14}\) However, he qualifies his remarks by denying that the impact of traditional music has been “as influential on their writing”.\(^{15}\)

In approaching this study of the relationship of traditional music to the work of modern Irish poets, I am aware that Johnston’s reservation is representative of a general scepticism that exists regarding any possible role or presence, beyond the most superficial, of traditional music in Irish poetry. A central question this work attempts to address, therefore, is whether the manifestations of traditional music in the work of Irish poets indicate a more significant influence. I will argue in the following chapters that the presence of traditional music in modern Irish poetry reveals an anxiety regarding the relationship of poets’ work both to the tradition of Irish writing and to contemporary audiences. These concerns, regarding tradition and audience, are complex impulses that result in sometimes contradictory remarks from poets, but remain recurrent preoccupations, particularly from the late 1950s onwards (a period examined in more detail in Chapter Three) and it is these years that are the central focus of this work.

**Traditional Music: Continuity and Change**

Traditional music implies continuity, the creation of new music within an established framework. That framework is musical language [...] it is learned by listening, by imitation, by engaging in social discourse.\(^{16}\)


\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, p. 47.

As noted by several writers on the area, it is difficult, if not impossible, to give a simple definition of traditional Irish music. Nicholas Carolan, director of the Irish Traditional Music Archive, defines it as “a very broad term that includes many different types of singing and instrumental music, music of many periods, as performed by Irish people in Ireland or outside it, and occasionally nowadays by people of other nationalities.” According to Dorothea E. Hast and Stanley Scott, “Irish musicians use the term ‘traditional’ to describe several categories of music and dance: songs in Irish Gaelic, songs in English, instrumental slow airs (which are usually based on song melodies), dance music, solo step dances, and group step dances”. Ciaran Carson also defines traditional music as “two broad categories; instrumental music, which is mostly dance music (reels, jigs, hornpipes, polkas, and the like), and the song tradition, which is mostly unaccompanied solo singing”. By the song tradition, Carson is referring particularly to sean-nós [old-style] singing in Irish found primarily in the Gaeltacht regions along the west coast of Ireland. For the purposes of this work (unless otherwise stated), I will be referring to these forms of traditional music, instrumental and sung, as outlined by Hast and Scott, and Carson.

Since the late 1950s, and particularly in the 1960s, traditional music has experienced a significant revival in popularity. As I will consider in more detail in Chapter Three, this has also been a time of considerable change during which traditional music provided an important point of perceived continuity. There is also some evidence, as indicated in Chapter Four, of a re-engagement with the Irish language in this period. Those cultural artefacts that offered continuity with what was considered a more assured past became increasingly important in this context of rapid

17 As well as the writers considered above, see also Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 1998), p. 8.
change. “Tradition” as Simon J. Bronner has noted, “guides and safeguards continuity in a world of change”. 22

Bernadette Quinn has attributed the popularity of traditional music to “nostalgia for the past which characterises the post-modern era. Viewed as such, traditional Irish music represents a much sought after ‘authenticity’”. 23 Walter Benjamin has defined authenticity as “the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced”. 24 For many Irish people, particularly at points of revival, traditional music seemed to offer this point of reference to the past while contributing to the creation of community in the present. As John Hutchinson has observed in his discussion of the cultural revival of the late eighteenth century, its aims were to “reconcile the different traditions of Ireland and guide a reunited Irish people into a golden future via a return to the exemplars of the ancient past”. 25 For these revivalists it was the music of the surviving harpists (“who practiced an art form that had flourished in the households of the Gaelic nobility until around 1600” 26) that provided, what Edward Bunting described as, “the mental cultivation and refinement of our ancestors […] in a perfect state from the earlier times” 27.

In the revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the popular folk dance music of Ireland, including jigs, reels and hornpipes, that represented (as the major collector of this period Francis O’Neill noted) “the ancient melodies of a country”. For O’Neill, these

27 Edward Bunting, The Ancient Music of Ireland: An Edition comprising the three collections by Edward Bunting originally published in 1796, 1809 and 1840 (Dublin: Waltons, 1969), p. 8. Bunting, as we will see in Chapter Two, was the foremost collector of Irish music in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.
tunes “afford us one of the most unerring criterions by which we can judge of the natural temperament and characteristic feelings of its people”.28

By the 1950s and 1960s it was organisations such as Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) (founded in 1951 to promote traditional music and organise an annual festival, An Fhleadh Cheoil) which promoted their own concept of Ireland’s “ancient music”. As Helen O’Shea observes:

CCÉ, with its centralised, state-supported and Fianna Fáil-supporting bureaucracy, was a powerful agent in co-opting selected rural musical practices and repertoires to become “Irish traditional music”, emblematic of a unified national culture. The organization’s competitions encouraged standardization of performance practices and repertoires. Diverse domestic musical practices from the very recent past were idealized as part of an ancient national culture at the same time as they were being commodified and transformed into standardized, public, folkloric performances, largely within the expanding tourist industry.29

Traditional music was perceived to provide an important link both to the past and to community, involving, as Geoff Wallis and Sue Wilson have noted,

[a] continuous link between present and past; [incorporating] degrees of variation emanating from individuals and within communities; and [involving] a process of selection by the community determining how the music survives.30

This perception has had important consequences, considered below, for the engagement of Irish poets with traditional music.

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Traditional Music: Ritual as Process

Anthony Giddens has noted several key elements associated with “tradition”, notably including the concepts of ritual and collectivity. Giddens argues that,

[t]radition’s truth is ritual and bound up with its practice. Taking part in a tradition doesn’t involve the cognitive question of whether what you’re doing approximates to something valid in the world. Tradition’s truth and authenticity is carried in its ritual, and it is the ritual which gives it its power. Ritual repeats the past (even if that past is invented), enshrining it in the repetitive nature of the ceremonial.

Ritual, as Giddens suggests, is process rather than content, and it is a process realised for traditional music through its performance. As a form essentially oral in character, Irish traditional music has typically been “transmitted from one generation to the next through a process of performance”.

Indeed, Micheál Ó Súilleabháin, director of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance in the University of Limerick, has argued that sean-nós singing itself “is process” in his description of the singer Nioclás Tóibín:

Tradition bearer a bhí ann, Nioclás Tóibín, tradition bearer, sin a thuig sé. Thuig sé go raibh an traidisiún aige agus go raibh sé ana-thábhachtach go mbeadh an traidisiún san i lár an tsaoil a bhí aige, agus do bhí […] sean-nós, is process é agus do thuig Nioclás é sin, ionas go raibh sé in ann an process sin a chur i bhfeidhm air mar shampla product nó amhrán taobh amuigh den traidisiún […] Bhí sé mar mediational point idir an saol a bhí imithe nó a bhí ag imeacht agus saol a bhí tagtha nó ag teacht nó le teacht – ní féidir domsa an dárud a scaradh.

[Nioclás Tóibín understood that he was a tradition bearer. He understood that he had the tradition and that it was very important that that tradition should be at the centre of his life, and it was […] sean-nós is process and Nioclás understood that, such that he could implement that process, for

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32 Giddens, “Tradition”.
33 Nicholas Carolan, “‘What Is Irish Traditional Music? Definition And Characteristics’”.
34 Micheál Ó Súilleabháin in Seán Ó Cualáin’s documentary Orpheus na nDéise (Galway: TG4, 12 Nov. 2005).
example, on a product or song that was from outside the tradition [...] He was a mediational point between the world that was gone or was going and the world that had come or was coming – I can’t separate the two things.]³⁵

While oral traditions, such as traditional music and song, may be believed to constitute permanence and continuity, as Ó Súilleabháin suggests, they could more correctly be described as “process”. For Jan Vansina “any given oral tradition is but a rendering at one moment, an element in a process of oral development that began with the original communication”.³⁶ Timothy R. Tangherlini also argues that “it is more worthwhile to view tradition as process” suggesting the expression “will to permanence”³⁷ as more appropriate to the dynamic involved in oral traditions. As will be discussed in coming chapters, process has also been a recurring concern of some of the poets under consideration in this work, including Thomas Kinsella, Ciaran Carson and Gearóid Mac Lochlainn. Indeed, Mac Lochlainn includes, in his 2004 collection Rakish Paddy Blues, examples of the creative process taking shape in his work.

The transmission process in traditional music, as realised in moments of performance, could be described using Milton Singer’s phrase, as “cultural performances”³⁸. Clifford Geertz has described this phrase, in religious terms, as representing “not only the point at which the dispositional and conceptual aspects of religious life converge for the believer, but also the point at which the interaction between them can be most readily examined by the detached observer”.³⁹ As the co-author of a study on traditional Irish music, American composer Stanley Scott could not be described as a completely “detached observer”. Scott recorded encountering “the interplay of two sets of rituals” in a traditional session in the Góilín Singers’ Club in Dublin, that is, “those of Irish pub life in general, and those of this singers’ club in particular”. He goes on to note that these “special rituals” come “into play when the singing is about to begin”.⁴⁰ Scott then details these “rituals” including the prearrangement of

³⁵ All translations in this book, unless otherwise indicated, are by the present author.
⁴⁰ Hast and Scott, Music in Ireland, p. 85.
the first few songs by club members to set the tone for the evening; the procedure for getting permission to sing, processed through a club member; and the rituals of the performance of songs themselves. In these, he notes a concern among club members with the authenticity of their performances, apparent in the absence of instrumental accompaniment:

The art of accompanying Irish singing on the harp, only recently revived after a break of almost two centuries, has not reentered common practice, and the guitar, in the minds of many traditional music enthusiasts, is associated with staged, professional (and therefore ‘inauthentic’) performances.  

This quest for authenticity, and the existence of rituals within such traditional performances, indicates the importance of continuity and of preserving a link with the past for practitioners. Their concern with the use of the guitar, a non-indigenous instrument, also indicates an unease regarding the relationship of performers with audience. When belief in the rituals that preserve a tradition no longer hold, those who were formerly participants become simply an audience. The ritual is transformed, consequently, into something to be “staged”, artificial and, in effect, a form of entertainment. It is this tension between community and audience which is a recurring concern of poets considered in this study and one they have observed within the performance of traditional music.

The place of traditional music in Irish society has changed significantly during the twentieth century. While traditional music was played for generations in homes and at crossroads throughout the country to accompany dancing, the introduction of the Dance Hall Act in 1935 was interpreted as prohibiting these activities. Its consequences would be far reaching. As Bernadette Quinn has noted:

Traditional Irish music has shown a relentless movement away from the home, and into the pub, onto the stage, into the recording studio, the summer school, the festival. In short, traditional Irish music has moved into spaces with which it was once entirely unfamiliar but in which it now seems to be increasingly ‘at home.’  

While it may appear to be “at home” in these spaces, this movement has had significant consequences for the relationship between the community and the performer. As I argue in Chapters One and Two,  

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41 Ibid., p. 85.
42 Quinn, Tradition, Creativity and Change in Irish Traditional Music, p. 7.
Traditional music played a central role historically in connecting communities to their past and to each other in the present. However, as its place in society changed, so too did its relevance in people’s lives. As the Clare fiddler Junior Crehan has noted,

The country house was the center of all social activity in those days. It was not only a place of entertainment, it was also a school where the traditions of music making, story telling and dancing were passed on from one generation to the next, and when the house dances passed away, much of our native culture was lost. The clergy started to build the parochial hall to which all were expected to go, and the government collected twenty five percent of the ticket in tax. In these halls, modern dance bands played a different kind of music for a different kind of dancing - Foxtrot, One Step and Shimmy Shake. But country people found it hard to adjust and, to them, the dance halls were not natural places of enjoyment; they were not places for traditional music, storytelling and dancing. They were unsuitable for passing on traditional arts. The Dance Hall Act closed our schools of tradition and left us a poorer people.\(^\text{43}\)

As will be considered in Chapter One, while commentators have observed the important role traditional music has played historically in connecting community members to their past as well as to each other, most people encounter traditional music today primarily for entertainment. In the work of poets considered below, one senses a concern with the changing nature of this relationship between performer and audience in traditional music. Similarly, while poets are concerned about the relationship of an artist with an audience, they seek a more intimate relationship with an engaged community, sometimes a community they feel impelled to imagine for their own work, as apparent in the study of Thomas Kinsella in Chapter Three.

Traditional Music and Community

The interpretation of the term “community” has changed considerably over the past two hundred and fifty years. The onset of modernity, particularly, has had a crucial bearing on how community has been understood. As Gerard Delanty notes:

[m]odernity produced three major upheavals, which gave rise to the main discourses of community: the American and French revolutions, industrialization from the end of the nineteenth century, and the present age of globalization. The many expressions of community that have derived from these and other developments have varied from alternative and utopian communities to traditional villages and urban localities in industrial cities to transnational diasporas and virtual communities. Communities have been based on ethnicity, religion, class or politics; they may be large or small; ‘thin’ or ‘thick’ attachments may underlie them; they may be locally based and globally organized; affirmative or subversive in their relation to the established order; they may be traditional, modern and even postmodern; reactionary and progressive.44

In addition to the bases noted by Delanty above, as is discussed in Chapter Two, language has also had an important bearing on definitions of community in the Irish context.

While it has acquired many different meanings since first entering the English language, the word “community” is derived from the Latin terms munus, meaning, among other things, “gift”; specta, “service” or “tribute”, and cum, which includes among its meanings “with”, “together” or “accompaniment”.45 In other words, the word implies the sharing of gifts (and possibly through performance as the word “spectacle” suggests), a process readily apparent in traditional music. While there are many definitions of traditional music they almost always share an emphasis on the oral, and aural, characteristic of the music as it is “passed on by mouth

45 Interestingly, Pádraig de Paor has pointed out that the Irish word for poem, dán, is related to the Latin word donum which also has the word “gift” among its meanings. See Pádraig de Paor, Na Buachaillí Dána: Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Gabriel Rosenstock agus ról comhaimseartha an fhíle sa Ghaeilge (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhár, 2005), p. 17.
and by ear, not by written word or musical notation”. As Micheál Ó Súilleabháín notes “[t]raditional music has to come out of an actual meeting of bodies in space, you know, people communicating; and I think it always has that immediacy and root and warmth as a result”.

For G. Crow and G. Allan “community’ plays a crucial symbolic role in generating people’s sense of belonging”. Their emphasis on the “symbolic” reflects the influence of one of the most persuasive and influential studies of community in the twentieth century, Anthony P. Cohen’s *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. For Cohen “[p]eople construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity”. The rituals that have historically surrounded the performance and transmission of traditional music and song have provided precisely such a symbolic construction for the communities participating in these performances. “Ritual” according to Giddens, must be “collective for tradition to exist […] [it] is primarily social and collective, and it’s something to do with the relationship between ritual and collectivity that defines something as traditional”. Alan P. Merriam has also noted the important relationship between music and collectivity arguing that “[m]usic provides a rallying point around which the members of society gather to engage in activities which require the cooperation and coordination of the group”. Similarly, for Jacques Attali, “[a]ll music, any organization of sounds, is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community”, while Benedict Anderson has emphasised the “special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests – above all in the form of poetry and songs”.

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48 Quoted in O’Connor, *Bringing it all back home: The Influence of Irish music*, p. 3.
51 Giddens, “Tradition”.
Traditional Music and Contemporary Irish Poets

The rise in popularity of traditional music, as noted above by Dillon Johnston, offered an example for contemporary Irish poets of a large audience engaging again with a traditional art form through performance while also offering a degree of continuity with an older Irish tradition. A sense of tradition encompasses both of these elements and is an important concern among Irish poets, reflected in their engagement with Gaelic texts, both from the distant past and from the present. As Peter Denman has noted:

A sense of tradition may be useful to a writer on any one of a number of counts. As a formative influence it situates him vis-à-vis his material and audience, for, irrespective of whatever he claims to write within or outside some perceived tradition, it provides a necessary reference point. The sense of a tradition can also be of comfort to an artist; it is a token of continuity and so confers some permanence on the artistic endeavour. Tradition also embodies a collective literary memory; as with all memory, it may be random and lead to distortions and miniature oblivions, and be characterised by an arbitrary selectivity, but it nevertheless constitutes a source of strength.55

However, as Seamus Deane observes, “one of the recurrent paradoxes of Irish writing” generally is “its continuous preoccupation with the experience of discontinuity”.56 Thomas Kinsella was one of several poets in the 1960s who articulated a sense of discontinuity evident in Irish society during this transitional period, a sense that alerted poets to what Kinsella describes as the “rift” apparent within the tradition of Irish writing itself. Among poets writing in the 1960s there was what John Goodby describes as, “a keen awareness of the threat it was felt modernity offered to traditional Irish culture”.57 In 1966, Kinsella delivered an address to the Modern Languages Association in New York in which he indicated his own sense of disconnection from Irish literary history:

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56 Deane, A Short History of Irish Literature, p. 248.
For my own part I simply realise that I stand on one side of a great rift, and can feel the discontinuity in myself. It is a matter of people and places as well as writing: of coming, so to speak, from a broken and uprooted family, of being drawn to those who share my origins and finding that we cannot share our lives.58

Kinsella’s work suggests, both through his translations of Gaelic texts and through the incorporation of motifs from Gaelic literature into his poetry, an attempt to connect with an earlier tradition of Irish composition. Chapter Three will describe parallel developments in traditional music, including in the work of Kinsella’s close friend Seán Ó Riada, a central figure within the revival of traditional music. As Nuala O’Connor has noted:

Traditional music changed radically and became accessible to a modern audience largely under [Ó Riada’s] visionary direction. It was through traditional music that the cultural life of Ireland would be invigorated.59

Ó Riada also collaborated with Kinsella’s contemporaries, John Montague (who along with Kinsella was among the pallbearers at Ó Riada’s funeral on October 3rd 1971)60 and Richard Murphy, and would also feature in the work of other poets to emerge in the 1960s. Foremost among these was Seamus Heaney whose work is considered in Chapter Five.

**Conclusion**

The issues of a broken tradition and community lie at the centre of this work as it explores the relationship, both historically and contemporaneously, between Irish poetry and traditional music. Chapter One examines theoretical paradigms in Word and Music Studies and argues for a more flexible framework – cognisant of research in orality studies, ethnomusicology and recent literary theory – which may offer a more nuanced understanding of how Irish poets are influenced by traditional music. Chapter Two provides a historical overview of the relationship between music and poetry in Ireland and highlights the centrality of the

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59 O’Connor, *Bringing it all back home: The Influence of Irish music*, p. 74
themes of community and continuity to this relationship. Chapter Three turns to the work of Thomas Kinsella. Kinsella is a seminal figure in Irish poetry since the 1950s, a poet whose work and relationship with Seán Ó Riada marks a significant engagement both with the tradition of Irish literature and with Irish traditional music. In his commentaries and poetry, Kinsella has described the discontinuity, as highlighted above, while constructing a space in which the relationships between the past and the present can be articulated. Chapter Four will examine two of the foremost contemporary Irish-language poets, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh, whose work reflects a continuing engagement with the tradition of Gaelic composition and with Irish song, providing Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh with enabling forms, and occasionally transgressive voices, for their work. Chapter Five focuses on three Northern poets, Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson and Gearóid Mac Lochlainn. Heaney’s continuing preoccupation with traditional music resulted in his recording of the album, *The Poet and the Piper*, in 2002, with the uilleann-piper Liam O’Flynn, an album which will be examined as part of this chapter. Accomplished traditional musician, Ciaran Carson, writes poetry and prose which are informed considerably by traditional music while his performances are often accompanied by song and music. Finally, Gearóid Mac Lochlainn represents the latest generation of poets to recognise the importance of traditional music to their work as they attempt to articulate a distinctive poetic voice, anxious to connect with an older tradition while relating to a contemporary community. This final chapter also contrasts the understanding, and relationship, of Heaney with traditional music with that of the two Belfast poets. While Heaney’s work focuses on a perceived stability within traditional music, Carson’s and Mac Lochlainn’s respective engagements are informed more by concerns with process and community.

The title of this book is taken from an early poem by Heaney. The phrase “The Given Note” evokes a number of issues that are central to this study with the ambiguity of the word “given”, in particular, providing a pivot on which this book’s findings turn. “Given” implies something that is passed on, inherited, granted - something that one may acquire through tradition - but it also suggests something that may be passed on in the present to a contemporary community. The placing of this phrase within inverted commas, however, indicates the uncertainty regarding both tradition and community that I argue is a recurrent feature of contemporary Irish poetry.
CHAPTER ONE

"THE MUSIC OF POETRY":
A THEORETICAL SURVEY

The music of poetry, however understood, is of primary importance. Rhythms and rhythmical structures and the rhythm of form – not merely the audible rhythm line by line but the achievements of a totality and the thematic connections against one’s material – all of that is absolutely primary.
—Thomas Kinsella.¹

Music and poetry have often been viewed together as both are considered “auditory, temporal and dynamic art forms”.² Studies of the relationships between these arts have grown throughout the twentieth century. This was underscored in 1997 with the foundation of The International Association for Word and Music Studies (WMA), dedicated to the promotion of “transdisciplinary scholarly inquiry devoted to the relations between literature/verbal texts/language and music”.³ However, its relative youth as a field of enquiry is apparent in the disputed nature of its title. Sometimes referred to as “melopoetics”, this term, as Werner Wolf observes, appears “somewhat arcane […] because it implies, or at least suggests, a questionable, not to say misleading, privileging of some aspects of the interrelations between music and words/literature”.⁴ Wolf

suggests, therefore, that “word and music studies” seems to have gained the upper hand over “melopoetics” in recent years. The use of the term “melopoetics” does indicate, nonetheless, a major focus of the discipline which has often tended to be from a musical, rather than a literary, perspective. It is also, as Wolf notes “a discipline in which the construction of a theoretical and terminological framework has not received due attention”.\(^5\) Where a framework has been suggested, it is focused primarily on the relationship between classical music and literature and gives little consideration to how the performance of music and song of an essentially oral character or in non-classical forms (such as traditional Irish music) may influence a poet’s work. This chapter will examine the existing schemas and argue for a more flexible framework, cognisant of research in orality studies, ethnomusicology and recent literary theory, which may offer a more discerning appreciation of how Irish poets are influenced by traditional music.

**Calvin S. Brown**

The field of Word and Music Studies owes much to the pioneering work of Calvin S. Brown whose book, *Music and Literature*,\(^6\) was the first major study of the relationships between the two arts in the twentieth century. His reputation in the field, as Walter Bernhart has noted, “is so high and his seminal role as the father of modern research in this area so undisputed that an assessment of his scholarly achievement seems almost superfluous”.\(^7\) When Brown first published *Music and Literature* in 1948, the area of comparative literature as an academic discipline was still quite new.\(^8\) Brown’s approach was focused firstly on exploring the raw

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