The Search for Authenticity: Media’s Construction of Irish Musical Identity

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The Search for Authenticity:

*Media’s Construction of Irish Musical Identity*

by

Logan W. Macomber

A Senior Honors Thesis submitted to
the Department of Communication,
Boston College

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Michael C. Keith

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for their support and encouragement.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines global media’s construction of Irish musical identity beginning with Irish radio in the 1920s and focusing on the Irish traditional music organization Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, which was founded in 1951. Central to the arguments in this paper is the claim that media outlets in Ireland and abroad package a simplified version of Irish culture for the purpose of cultural tourism. Through the analysis of both Irish and American media productions, as well as existing research on the topic, this paper argues that: Global media’s presentation of Irish music fails to accurately portray the reality of Irish musical identity.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

With such a large and widespread diaspora, Ireland has attained a tremendous global audience for its cultural productions. As Nicholas Carolan, Director of the Irish Traditional Music Archives says, “People who hardly know where Ireland is learn to perform its traditional music from recordings and in turn issue their own…This has increased the audience for Irish traditional music, an audience which is more and more international” (Carolan “Recent” p. 2). Global media has capitalized on this audience by emphasizing romanticized and, often, stereotypical aspects of Irish culture, and commoditizing anything that gives a general sense of the “Irishness.” As a result of this relatively recent boom in the worldwide consumption of Irish culture, organizations and media outlets in Ireland and abroad have begun to package a simplified version of Irish culture for the purpose of cultural tourism. Cultural tourists are driven by the desire to experience “authentic” Irish culture and are enthusiastic consumers. This increasingly profitable market for Irish culture, however, has damaging effects on Irish cultural traditions and the image of Irish identity.

Central to Ireland’s cultural identity is Irish traditional music. Since the founding of 2RN in 1926, Irish radio has played a crucial role in the construction and perpetuation of Irish musical identity. The relationship between Irish national radio and Irish traditional music has been crucial to the development of a constructed Irish musical identity, and the history of that relationship will be analyzed to identify the roots of more recent issues in media’s presentation of Irish music.
Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, which in Irish means, “gathering of musicians of Ireland,” is the self-proclaimed largest group involved in the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional music. Comhaltas has hundreds of local branches around the world and organizes traditional Irish music classes, competitive festivals, workshops, sessions, and concerts. The organization also publishes recordings, books, tutorials of traditional Irish music, and other media. Since its founding in 1951, Comhaltas has become the sole powerful authority on Irish traditional music and has recently become increasingly commercialized. Early Comhaltas media tied Irish music to a conservative, nationalist identity, and recent Comhaltas media contains evidence of the packaging of Irish identity for the purpose of cultural tourism. An examination of Comhaltas media productions will expose the dangers in the organization’s preservationist approach to Irish music and identify shifts in Comhaltas’ presentation of Irish identity.

Since its revival, Irish traditional music has taken center stage in mainstream broadcast media as well. In the second half of the 20th century, Irish musicians, like The Clancy Brothers and The Chieftains, were featured on primetime American television. In the 1990s, Riverdance emerged as a global media phenomenon, capitalizing on the mysticism that accompanied the popular image of Irish music, dance, and culture. Media productions such as these will be examined for stereotypical imagery and common aspects of the constructed Irish identity will be identified.

Through the discussion of the historical relationship between Irish music and media, the analysis of both Irish and American media productions, and the collaboration
with existing research on the topic, this paper argues that: *Global media’s presentation of Irish music fails to accurately portray the reality of Irish identity.*
CHAPTER TWO:

IRISH RADIO AND TRADITIONAL MUSIC

The “disjunction between perception and reality” has been a crucial issue in the presentation of Irish music by the media since the early days of Irish radio (Carolan “From 2RN” p. 1). Broadcasters of traditional Irish music have forever been faced with the difficult task of imposing order on a music that is by nature chaotic (Carolan p. 1). According to Nicholas Carolan, Director of the Irish Traditional Music Archive, Irish traditional music is a “rich and layered patchwork” that exists in many different forms: “vocal and instrumental, solo and group, ancient and modern, local and national, popular and esoteric” (Carolan p. 1). Carolan also points out the complications of Irish traditional music that reach beyond its musical complexity. These complications are rooted in the cultural and political ideologies of traditional music’s radio companions, including nation-building, educational provision, rural and urban division, stresses arising from social class, paternalism, underfunding, and recent competition and ratings chasing (Carolan p. 1). These issues surrounding Irish traditional music have made its accurate representation on radio unachievable.

The first broadcasting station in the Irish Free State, Radio 2RN, opened in Dublin on January 1, 1926, with Irish traditional music at the forefront. The radio’s opening night program ran for two hours and featured an opening address from the former president of the Gaelic League, Dr. Douglas Hyde. In his address, Hyde emphasized the importance of Irish music and song, which, he said, was second in cultural importance only to the Irish language. Also in the opening program was a
performance by the new director of radio, Seamus Clandillon, a singer of traditional songs and a concert and festival organizer. The rest of 2RN’s opening night was devoted to traditional dance tunes and airs, classical pieces, and several national melodies and songs in both Irish and English, the two official languages of Ireland. The program was viewed as a great success by critics, but as a reflection of traditional music as it actually existed in Ireland in 1926, it failed (Carolan p. 2).

In his article, “From 2RN to International Meta-Community: Irish National Radio and Traditional Music,” Carolan points out several issues with 2RN’s opening night broadcast in terms of its accuracy in portraying Irish musical identity. First, all of the performers were semi-professional, experienced concert-hall performers, as opposed to the non-professionals who made up the majority of traditional performers throughout Ireland (p. 2). Second, the presentation of the music was dominated by a feeling of “solemn formality,” which is in stark contrast to the everyday informality that is the norm in traditional Irish music performance (p. 2). Third, all of the performers were Dublin-based, while the tradition of Irish music existed in different regional variations across Ireland (p. 2). These issues of formalization and standardization of traditional music by the media will only become more prominent in the second half of the 20th century with the formation of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 1951 and the growth of competitive fleadhanna ceoil, or music festivals.

Irish traditional music scholar Hilary Bracefield supports Carolan’s assertions about the accuracy of the Irish musical identity being portrayed by 2RN in her article, “Gramophone or Radio: Transatlantic Effects on the Development of traditional music in
Ireland.” She states, “[2RN] perceived it [Irish traditional music] as a genteel occupation by trained, even semi-professional, musicians, performing live in the Dublin studios. The idea of outside broadcasts had to wait until the late 1930s, and the atmosphere of country performances in homes and pubs was of course completely missing” (Bracefield, p. 115). Here, Bracefield echoes Carolan’s sentiments toward the feeling of formality in early Irish radio programs, as well as the imposition of professional musicians on the largely non-professional music.

One basic problem underlies the inaccuracies of Irish radio in presenting Irish traditional music, and has ever since the launch of 2RN. That problem is: “How to represent the totality of traditional performance when essential elements of that totality are necessarily absent” (Carolan “From 2RN” p. 2). In other words, the social human interaction that is essential to Irish traditional music is missing when that music is played on the radio (Carolan p. 2). The visual dimension that is so prominent when experiencing Irish music, whether at a session or in your home, is lost. As Carolan states, “The song or melody is like a flower unrooted from its soil and presented in the vase of radio” (Carolan p. 2). In order to fill the void left by the lack of social, visual interaction, modern alterations were made to the music on the radio. To compensate for the empty space in a solo fiddle tune, a space that would be filled with body language, emotion, and atmosphere in an in-person performance, piano accompaniments were added and classical techniques were applied. With the total pool of performers relatively small, “proximity to the Dublin studio was of more importance than musical authenticity” (Carolan p. 3).
Traditional music purist and voice of the 1960s radio talks *Our Musical Heritage*, Sean Ó Riada identified the inclusion of piano on early traditional music albums and radio broadcasts as problematic for the tradition. In a 1962 broadcast, he said of piano accompaniment, “The use of the piano to accompany traditional fiddle playing is unfortunately prevalent. This is a scar, a blight on the face of Irish music and displays ignorance on the part of all those who encourage it” (Bracefield, p. 119). These are harsh words of disapproval, and they indicate a preservationist, anti-progress view of Irish traditional music similar to that of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Eireann that I will be arguing against in Chapters Three and Four. Ó Riada’s argument against the incorporation of piano into Irish music, however, is based primarily in opposition toward the attempted refinement of the music, rather than opposition toward the progression of the music. Ó Riada believed that the addition of piano to traditional Irish music was the result of a “desire for respectability” (Bracefield, p. 119). He said of a particular Michael Coleman recording, “The tragedy is that the people in charge of recording Coleman were ignorant enough to think he needed a piano accompaniment. The piano accompaniments on his records, far from enhancing his playing, are a blotch and a blemish on it” (Bracefield, p. 12). It was the assumption that a classical instrument, the piano, would improve Irish traditional music that bothered Ó Riada the most.

In the 1930s, Irish radio became closely linked with the Irish record industry. Musicians who became popular by performing live on Irish radio were given the chance to record commercial albums and popular albums were featured prominently on the radio. This relationship between Irish radio and the record industry influenced the living
tradition of Irish traditional music by promoting an approved playlist of styles and repertory (Carolan “From 2RN” p. 3). What had always been a fluid, oral tradition rooted in individual expression and regional variations, faced the danger of becoming a music based in the emulation of standardized tunes and playing styles.

The 1930s and 1940s were difficult times for Irish traditional music, as people increasingly failed to comprehend its cultural value as a distinct, unique tradition. In 1933, 2RN was succeeded by Radio Athlone as the centrally positioned Irish radio station, and in 1935, Dr. T.J. Kiernan was appointed as director of radio. Kiernan was one of several Irish radio directors during the middle part of the 20th century to find traditional Irish music to be culturally alien and inferior (Carolan p. 4). In his first year as director, Kiernan referred to traditional music as “jigs and reels and hornpipes, played on a bad instrument after a few years of untaught or badly taught desultory playing” (Carolan p. 4). Charles E. Kelly, who was appointed director of Irish radio in 1948 maintained a similar stance. He said, “Really good elements of this music are few and far between” (Carolan p. 4). Kelly’s successor, Maurice Gorham, was less critical, but also saw the popularization of traditional music on the radio as an unworthy task because of the intrinsic nature of unaccompanied performance (Carolan p. 4). Despite the incomprehension of Irish traditional music by those at the top of Irish radio, state policy and popular listener demand forced Irish radio to continue to broadcast traditional music to some extent. The lack of concern for the integrity of traditional music by those in control of its destiny, however, led to an inaccurate portrayal of Irish musical identity. The majority of directors of Irish radio have come from a world of western European
classical music and its well-tempered scale, intonation, and finish (Carolan p. 4). As a result, those directors were compelled to draw comparisons between Irish traditional music and classical music, and attempt to adapt the former to meet the standards of the latter. As Carolan says, “In trying to force the older (Irish) music into the procrustean bed of the classical music, they have mostly found it wanting, and at best have seen it as a reservoir of beautiful melodies which might reach their apotheosis if properly arranged for choir or orchestra. Most would have agreed with Erskine Childers, a 1950s Minister for Posts and Telegraphs and in political charge of radio, that a symphony orchestra is the apex of culture in any country (Carolan p. 4). This disregard for Irish music as a legitimate, culturally valuable tradition led to the packaging of the music in a way that was meant to maximize popularity and profit. It started with the rearranging of melodies, but in more recent years has led to the imposition of stereotypical imagery and vast commercialization, as I will discuss in later pages.

The disjunction between perception and reality in relation to Irish traditional music was not only damaging to the music itself. It was also restricting to the musicians who continued to practice unadulterated Irish music. Willie Clancy, a renowned traditional piper was denied an appearance on Radio Éireann, established in 1937, because he made the mistake of showing up to his audition solo. His fellow piper, Martin Talty, however, appeared with a backing pianist and was accepted by Radio Éireann. Talty himself admitted that he was an inferior piper to Clancy, but he used the system to his advantage (Carolan “From 2RN” p. 4). This instance is evidence that the “system” was becoming more important and more powerful than the musical tradition. An even
more blatant slight to the authenticity of Irish music by Radio Éireann is evident in the testimony Bryan MacMahon, who was employed by Radio Éireann in the 1940s. MacMahon, a Listowel writer and teacher, made wire recordings of Kerry country singers, who were then imitated by professional actors for broadcast on the radio (Carolan p. 5).

The year 1947 marked a crucial change in the relationship between Irish traditional music and radio. Under radio director Robert Brennan, Seamus Ennis and Sean Mac Reamoinn were appointed as Outside Broadcast Officers to travel to rural areas of Ireland in a Mobile Recording Unit and record traditional music as it naturally existed. The recordings were then sent back to Dublin and aired on radio programs. The project was successful in presenting traditional music that was free from the biases of radio officials, and exposing listeners to previously unknown tunes and performers. The primary motivation behind the field recordings, however, is problematic. The project was a result of the emergence of post-WWII interest in Irish culture among urban audiences in Britain and America (Carolan p. 5). It was commercially driven, and is an early example of media packaging Irish music and Irish cultural identity for the sake of cultural tourism rather than native appreciation. The Radio Éireann field recording broadcasts only increased the desire for Irish cultural consumption by urban audiences abroad, and set the stage for Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Éireann, or “gathering of musicians of Ireland,” to harness that desire in the second half of the 20th century and through today.

In 1962, Telefís Eireann, Irish national television, opened and combined with radio to form RTE, Radio Telefís Éireann. Television programs featuring Irish traditional
music were all but absent and traditional music continued to be featured frequently on Irish radio. Commercial recordings, however, replaced field recordings as a cheaper and easier way of filling air time and a more successful way of attracting and appealing to new audiences (Carolan p. 6). Field recordings reemerged with the radio magazine program, “The Long Note,” from the late 1970s until the onset of the commercial boom of the 1990s. “The rising economic tide of the over-mediated 1990s produced a torrent of commercial recordings of the music, and a succession of television series, which have replaced radio as the main access point for recorded traditional music” (Carolan p. 6).

This turn toward the visual construction of Irish musical identity by the media has led to an increase in stereotypical imagery and has magnified the damaging effects of framing, and often simplifying, Irish music for a cultural tourist audience.
CHAPTER THREE:
A BACKGROUND TO COMHALTAS

The influence of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann on the revival of Irish traditional music in the second half of the 20th century should not be underestimated. In the 1940s and 1950s Ireland was suffering from a climate of poverty and emigration. The people of Ireland were faced with dual pressures to maintain a distinct national identity through cultural symbols and to modernize and join the economic and social community of Europe (Fleming, p. 232). Much of the young Irish population associated traditional music with a rural, Irish-speaking, backward way of life (Fleming, p. 232).

Comhaltas was formed in 1951 in an atmosphere of urgency. Renowned Irish fiddler Seamus Connolly is a former competitor and judge of the All-Ireland Fleadh Cheoil. He is the only person in the history of Comhaltas to win the All-Ireland fiddle competition ten times. Connolly said of the years leading up to Comhaltas’ founding: “After the last war, people were trying to put their lives together. The music in Ireland was beginning to fade. People were emigrating to England and the US and there wasn’t time for the music.” (Connolly Interview). According to Irish music historian Fintan Vallely, “Revival was seen as a mission to pass on valued traditions and ensure their survival and enhancement for posterity” (as cited in Fleming, p. 233).

Comhaltas played a central role in the resurgence of the popularity of Irish traditional music in the second half of the 20th century. It established the following goals, which remain the stated goals of the organization today: to promote Irish traditional music in all forms; to restore the playing of the harp and uilleann pipes in the
national life of Ireland; to promote Irish traditional dancing; to create a closer bond among all lovers of Irish music; to cooperate with all bodies working for the restoration of Irish culture; to establish branches throughout the country and abroad; to achieve the foregoing aims and objectives; to foster and promote the Irish language at all times (Henry, p. 69). These goals are rooted in nationalism and the idealization of rural Irish peasant life (Henry, p. 69). This idealization of rural Irish peasant life is dangerous in that it lends itself to the perpetuation of stereotypical imagery. By tying Irish music to the simple life of rural Ireland, Comhaltas inherently limits the progression of traditional Irish music and prevents traditional Irish musicians from being taken seriously. In order to be deemed “traditional” by Comhaltas, Irish musicians must limit themselves to a romanticized, nationalist image of the rural Irishman. Thus, Comhaltas’ focus has shifted from the preservation of the music, to the preservation of a stereotypical, standardized image of the Irish musician.

Comhaltas has been largely state-sponsored since its formation. According to British historian Eric Hobsbawm, “State sponsorship of a folk music revitalization effort, often motivated by nationalism, has the potential both to authenticate a particular style of music over other styles and to ‘reinvent’—and so alter—traditional music” (as cited in Fleming, p. 228). Here, Hobsbawm summarizes the danger that Comhaltas, as an organization that is sponsored by the Irish government, presents to Irish traditional music. The power and influence of Comhaltas has created fears among musicians about music standardization and a lack of control over how Irish traditional music and musicians are
publicly portrayed (Fleming, p. 229). This paper will use Comhaltas media productions as evidence that these fears are justified.

As previously mentioned, the fleadh, or competitive music festival, is central to Comhaltas’ success and to many of its media productions. Therefore, the structure and adjudication of the fleadh system needs to be clearly understood before examining its effects. The following rules and information can be found in the Rialacha Fleadhanna Ceoil 2010, Comhaltas’ Music Festival Guidelines, which are available on the organization’s website. There are four types of fleadhanna: the regional fleadh, the county fleadh, the provincial fleadh, and the All-Ireland Fleadh. To qualify for the All-Ireland Fleadh, musicians must first place in the top of one of seven qualifying fleadhanna, which include one for each province in Ireland, one for Britain, and two for North America, the Mid-Atlantic and the Mid-West. Competitors can choose from 14 different tune types, including: air, reel, polka, hornpipe, march, jig, slide, set dance, mazurka, planxty, fling, barn dance, schottische, and clan march. The fleadhanna are further broken down by instrument, age group, and number of performers. The age categories for solo competition include: under 12, between 12 and 15, between 15 and 18, and over 18, or “senior.” There are 14 instrument categories for solo competition, including: fiddle, two-row button accordion, concert flute, whistle, piano accordion, concertina, uilleann pipes, traditional harp, mouth organ, banjo, mandolin, old-style melodeon, and bodhrans. Solo competitors under 15 years of age must choose one tune from two of the specified classes; competitors between 15 and 18 years of age must choose tunes from three categories; competitors over 18 must choose from four
categories and must include a slow air if competing on the fiddle, whistle, concert flute, or uilleann pipes. Along with the solo competitions, there are also ensemble competitions for duets, trios, ceili bands, and marching bands. Not all of the music at a fleadh is instrumental and not all of the competitions are for musical performance, however. There are also competitions for traditional Sean-Nos singing and English singing, ceili and set dancing, and Irish language conversation.

The Comhaltas adjudication guidelines are extremely detailed, structured, and objective. In a Comhaltas fleadh, there is generally one adjudicator at solo competitions, two at duet, trio, and ceilidh band competitions, and three at marching band competitions. Judges issue individual marks for each tune performed and are given the primary guideline of recognizing and commenting favorably on “all traditional styles of playing” (Rialacha, p. 7). According to the 1969 Comhaltas “Guide to Adjudication,” the adjudication rubric is a 100-point system, broken down for singing competitions as follows: 45 points for style and ornamentation, 15 points for quality of voice, 10 points for quality and choice of song, 10 points for phrasing and clarity, 10 points for rhythm, and 10 points for interpretation and expression (Carson, 1996, p. 91).

According to Seamus Connolly and renowned tin whistle player Jimmy Noonan, who is also a former Comhaltas competitor and judge, the actual adjudication process at Comhaltas competitions is far more subjective than it appears. According to Connolly, the instrumental rubric is broken down into 50 points for “traditional style” and 50 points for various categories like intonation, phrasing, and rhythm. Immediately after describing the rubric, though, he said, “It’s all subjective, anyways. I sometimes thought,
‘What’s that person judging for? They haven’t a clue” (Connolly Interview). Noonan described the subjectivity of the adjudication process in greater detail. “What I would do to judge is set an arbitrary number. So I’d give the first person playing, no matter how good or bad they were, an 85,” he said. Then, Noonan would judge the rest of the competitors relative to that number. If they were just slightly worse than the first performer, he would give them an 83, for example. Noonan also said that judges that were sent to the United States from Ireland did things quite differently. “Judges will come out from Ireland and give 40s and 50s, and it would break these kids up. What you want to do is keep it in the 80s or 90s, but you don’t want to go too high, because you won’t have any room for improvement,” he said. Noonan called the 100-point rubric “just a guideline,” and his description of the adjudication process exposes the weaknesses of an objective grading system for Irish music. Even an objective point breakdown is necessarily subjective if the categories do not lend themselves to quantification. Noonan said, “We don’t strictly adhere to the numerical values of the rubric. We have a job to do there. First, you need to try to see who are the best players there, but the other thing is choosing who you want to represent [your region] at the All-Ireland Fleadh.” These accounts from former Comhaltas competitors and adjudicators expose the flaws in opposing an objective, standardized system on Irish traditional music. They also expose the politics involved in Comhaltas adjudication.

The competitive and performatory nature of the Comhaltas fleadh as well as the strict adjudication guidelines that Comhaltas applies to Irish traditional music have potentially limiting effects on the music itself. Sociability is at the core of Irish
traditional music, which thrives in the setting of the informal session. Placing musicians on a stage or in front of a judge prevents them from interacting with each other and their audience. Objectifying Irish music by applying adjudication criteria and producing sheet music also prohibits the progression of the music by standardizing a tradition that is rooted in oral tradition and based on personal expression and regional styles.

Conversations with fleadh competitors often reveal that the critique of their fleadh performance was that it was not “traditional” enough. The term “traditional” is inherently subjective, but Comhaltas has become the sole authority in defining “authentic” and “traditional” Irish music. As a result of Comhaltas’ power as the sole authority on Irish traditional music, music that Comhaltas deems “non-traditional” becomes stigmatized and excluded.

Connolly provided a telling justification for Comhaltas’ emphasis on traditional style and discouragement of the incorporation of outside influences in a May 2011 interview. His reasoning went back to the advent of records and the beginning of the rapid globalization of music. This globalization, which led to the appearance of other musics in Ireland and challenged traditional style, led to a movement among traditional musicians to preserve and promote tradition. Comhaltas was at the center of this movement. According to Connolly:

Regional styles were being lost at the time because of the advent of records. There were so many different influences creeping into Irish music. So many different styles were incorporated into recordings. In competitions, they [Comhaltas officials] wanted to hear the traditional styles. Outside influences infringe on what the music is supposed to be about in Ireland. (Connolly Interview)
This opposition to globalization and concern for “pure” traditional Irish music that was being fostered by Comhaltas even influenced the tunes that competitors chose to perform at the fleadhanna. “It was a catch twenty-two,” Connolly said. “You could play like somebody local whose style wasn’t changed, or listen to the records and take a chance. I used to kind of go in between, play a local jig and a reel from a recording.” This statement is exemplary of the burden that is placed on traditional Irish musicians by Comhaltas to maintain tradition, propagate an “unaffected” style, and resist modernization.

Irish music historian and collector Tom Munnelly highlights the negative effects that Comhaltas has had on Irish traditional singing in his article, “After the Fianna: Reality and Perceptions of Traditional Singing in Ireland.” According to Munnelly:

The songs favoured by the judges are romantic and patriotic songs, and, more often than not, a very solemn delivery is preferred. On the odd occasion when a misguided singer, who is not wise in the ways of Comhaltas, sings a genuine ballad like ‘The Holland Handlerchief’ or ‘Lord Bateman’ their efforts are immediately filed under ‘Burn everything British but their coal!’ The actual tradition of ballad singing, which has a very ancient repertoire and vibrant life in Ireland, is a field either totally unknown or mistrusted by Comhaltas, who look on it as a product of perfidious Albion that may in some way corrupt our pure Celtic spirit. (Munnelly, p. 3)

Here, Munnelly points out, sarcastically at times, that Comhaltas is not only guilty of the standardization of a backward-looking traditional Irish musical identity, but also of altering the repertoire and musical tradition it claims to preserve. The organization’s patriotic, nationalist political agenda penetrates the competitions and weeds out songs that do not line up with Comhaltas ideologies, despite their rich history as part of Ireland’s musical tradition.
Later in the article, Munnelly addresses the strict adjudication guidelines of Comhaltas and the effects that the organization’s definition of “traditional” has on the music. He says:

Most older singers have, quite understandably abandoned the practice of entering such competitions…Many more, however, learned to abandon or modify genuine aspects of their singing tradition in order to please the adjudicators they found themselves before. It is in the nature of singing competitions that competitors soon become adept at adopting their performance to suit the prejudices of the adjudicator. The end result of this was, and is, a hybrid house style favoured by Comhaltas, po-faced, precisely enunciated, using non-traditional techniques like swelling and vibrato, and generally soulless. (Munnelly, p. 3)

Rather than preserving and fostering Ireland’s musical tradition, Comhaltas has created its own brand of Irish music, one that is adapted and refined for commercial purposes. In the process, however, the intangibles that keep Irish music alive are lost. In the second half of the 20th century, Comhaltas recognized that the tradition of Irish music is a saleable commodity, and its deliberate deconstruction and reconstruction of the music is driven by that realization (Munnelly, p. 4). As Munnelly says, “We have arrived at a stage where leaders of opinion feel that the tradition must be deliberately moulded to cater for individual and/or commercial perceptions. This mind-set would have you believe that musical evolution is a matter of individual and boardroom decisions rather than natural selection (Munnelly, p. 4).

Along with the issue of standardization that arises from a formal adjudication process, a major area of contention with the Comhaltas fleadh is the competitive atmosphere that it fosters. The very nature of competition compels musicians to adjust their style of play according to what they think the judges are looking for and discourages
the departure from tradition. According to ethnographer Rachel Fleming, who performed fieldwork at music festivals in Ireland:

> Competition in music has two effects. First, competitions set standards for performance because they are judged by certain criteria. An ideal theoretically exists, toward which competitors should strive and against which judges should objectively compare performances. Second, competitions create social tension among musicians competing for recognition (Fleming, 2004, p. 242).

Both of these effects are potentially restricting to traditional Irish music. The standardization of music and the establishment of an ideal to which performers strive favors assimilation over individuality, and the competitive atmosphere of social tension created by competition is not only opposed to the sociability that is at the heart of Irish music, but also discourages progressive styles and expressions for fear of not appealing to the judges, and therefore not winning. In other words, individual and regional expression becomes second to winning in a competitive atmosphere.

In his critical essay entitled “Policing Tradition: Scottish Pipe Band Competition and the Role of the Composer,” Jerry Cadden provides another perspective on musical competition. He says, “Creativity and musicality exist in the framework of competition almost at their own peril…the goals seem more about the maintenance of tradition than the invention of tradition” (Cadden, 2003, p. 138). Cadden is speaking in terms of the Scottish pipe band tradition, but this is precisely the fear of standardization that many feel toward Comhaltas, which results from its preservationist approach toward a musical tradition. Cadden says that some aspects of music do lend themselves to being judged empirically, such as technical proficiency, intonation, and rhythmic precision (Cadden, 2003). He takes issue, however, with the categories that belong outside the realm of
empirical judgment, including “musicality” and “effect,” which are poorly defined gray areas that are commonly found in musical competition (Cadden, 2003, p. 120). It is through the definition of these categories that competition as an institution controls innovation, polices tradition, and mediates “a cautious engagement with other kinds of music” (Cadden, 2003, p. 120).

Comhaltas’ preservationist mentality, which shines through in its media productions, has restricted the development of Irish traditional music by focusing on preserving an altered past and by excluding “non-traditional” Irish music from its media and events. This exclusion of Irish popular music alienates a significant part of Irish popular culture. It does so by creating an opposition between the notion of patriotic nationalism that Comhaltas has tied itself to and the consumption of popular music or Irish music fusions. Irish traditional musicians who are not associated with Comhaltas and do not pay the annual membership fee are also negatively affected by the authority of Comhaltas. This negative affect is two-fold: first, non-Comhaltas Irish traditional musicians are excluded from Comhaltas medias and therefore are prevented from reaching Comhaltas’ wide audience; second, they become associated with the harmful image of the Irish musician that Comhaltas constructs and perpetuates through its media.

Today, Comhaltas is continuing to grow in power and popularity. According to the organization’s 2011 Clar Forbatha, or “program development” update, Comhaltas has over 40,000 members and 400 branches worldwide and provides services to three million people annually (Clar Forbatha). Membership costs 25 dollars per year per person, meaning that Comhaltas brings in over one million dollars per year in
membership fees alone (Membership Renewal Form). Comhaltas has been largely successful in achieving its original goals and there is no doubt that the revival of Irish traditional music around the world owes itself in large part to the organization. Traditional music has once again become a symbol of national and ethnic Irish identity and Comhaltas’ international branches and tours are thriving. More Irish children, in Ireland and among the diaspora, are picking up tin whistles and fiddles than ever before and the Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann, or All-Ireland Traditional Music Festival, brings hundreds of thousands of musicians and spectators from around the world to Ireland.

Chapter Four will examine the progression of the All-Ireland Music Festival since it was first held in Mullingar in 1951. It will trace translation of the inaccurate representation of Irish musical identity from Comhaltas competitions to Comhaltas media and argue that the festival has departed from its original goal of providing traditional musicians with a platform for performance and competition. Today, the Fleadh has become a commercialized media event that is geared more toward tourists than ever and has a primary goal of maximizing profit.
CHAPTER FOUR:

ANALYSIS OF COMHALTAS MEDIA

Since its foundation, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann has produced media, including albums, films, magazines, and daily video broadcasts, that perpetuate the ideals of the organization. A large part of these media productions are based around the Fleadh Cheoil, or competitive music festival, which is the most well-known and influential outlet for Comhaltas’ preservation efforts. Over the course of Comhaltas’ existence, there has been a shift in the image of Irish identity that is constructed by Comhaltas and perpetuated through its media productions. This shift is evident through an increase in stereotypical imagery and commercialization and reflects a departure from the original music-oriented goals of the organization. In addition, Comhaltas’ preservationist mentality and opposition to popular Irish music and traditional music hybrids is restricting and damaging to Irish music itself. As a result of Comhaltas’ power as the sole authority in defining “authentic” Irish music, any music that Comhaltas deems “non-traditional” is stigmatized and excluded. Through an examination of Comhaltas media and related research in the field of Irish traditional music, this chapter will argue that Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann’s media productions create a harmful public misconception of Irish music and Irish musicians.

Treoir, which is Irish for “guidance,” is a quarterly magazine that has been published by Comhaltas since the late 1960s and has a readership of over 35,000 (Clar Forbatha, p.13). The magazine is seen to “reward service to Comhaltas as well as commitment to and accomplishment in traditional Irish music” (Henry, p. 86). A content
analysis by ethnomusicologist Edward O. Henry of six issues of *Treoir* from 1981 to 1985 revealed the relative importance of topics in the magazine. The results of Henry’s tabulation of column inches devoted to different types of subjects are as follows:

1. Articles regarding the larger CCE organization: 1,070
2. Music or lyrics: 831
3. Individuals identified with CCE: 814
4. Articles in Irish: 745
5. Regarding CCE branches: 560
6. Reminiscence: 412
7. Old (and some continuing) customs: 391

(Henry, p. 86)

Evident in Henry’s analysis is a focus on the organization rather than the music. The amount of space devoted to Comhaltas dwarfs the amount of space devoted to Irish music itself. This is relatively early evidence of Comhaltas’ change of focus from the music to its own power and influence as an organization. In other words, the 2,444 inches (more than half of the total content and roughly three times the music-related content) devoted to Comhaltas, individuals identified with Comhaltas, and Comhaltas branches exemplifies the growing exclusiveness of the organization in terms of the music and musicians that it recognizes as legitimate and noteworthy.

Breandan Breathnach, a renowned Irish uilleann piper, writer, organizer, and music collector, identified the flaws in the Comhaltas hierarchy early on in the organization’s life. He used his magazine, *Ceol*, which ran from 1963 to Breathnach’s
death in 1985 as a forum for his critiques of Comhaltas leadership. Breathnach joined Comhaltas in the 1950s and served as Assistant Secretary of the organization for a brief period. According to Nicholas Carolan, Director of the Irish Traditional Music Archive and author of an article on Breathnach’s life and work, “Breathnach began his connection with the opinion that the membership of Comhaltas nationally incorporated Irish traditional music, but he eventually resigned in disillusionment and remained implacably opposed to its leadership until the end of his life” (Carolan “Because” p. 2).

Breathnach’s primary accusation of Comhaltas was that the organization was more interested in imagistics than in music (Carolan “Because” p. 2). Some accuse Breathnach of overlooking the positive aspects of Comhaltas by focusing only on the public relations of the organization, but Breathnach was in fact ahead of his time in his criticism of Comhaltas. Recent Comhaltas media is evidence that the organization’s focus has continued to shift away from Irish traditional music and toward the perpetuation of imagery that serves Comhaltas and its leaders, rather than lovers and makers of Irish music.

Another striking element of Henry’s content analysis is *Treoir’s* emphasis on the past. A total of 803 inches were devoted to reminiscence and old customs. This corroborates Henry’s assertion that, “It [*Treoir*] fans the glowing embers of nostalgia centered on the role of music in the days when there was perhaps more community” (Henry, p. 86). This emphasis on the old, rural customs associated with traditional Irish music not only has potentially limiting effects on the progression of Irish music, but also
has become the root for much of Comhaltas’ stereotypical imagery surrounding Irish music and musicians.

The fourth issue of the first volume of *Treoir* is only eight pages long, but the 1968 publication features several telling articles. The first, entitled “The Musician and the Non-Musician,” emphasizes the significance of the fact that Comhaltas was formed by musicians and non-musicians alike. According to the article, “Comhaltas became a movement of the people of Ireland and through its dual representation fostered tuition and appreciation; its structure ensured that it would not become insular and create a barrier between the musicians and the people of Ireland” (*Treoir*, 1968, p. 1). This early declaration of inclusiveness and openness by Comhaltas is controversial when compared to the self-promotion and authoritarian assertions that appear in other Comhaltas media.

Seeds of Comhaltas’ aggressive exclusiveness are even evident on the same page of the 1968 *Treoir* publication as the article that is quoted above. An article entitled “The Way of the Worm” addresses media coverage of the 1968 Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann. It states that while most sections of the press acclaimed the Fleadh as a successful event:

> We had the sensationalist reporter who cannot see beyond the tip of his nose and who, because his own little whims and fancies were frustrated, resorted to journalistic sabotage... One provincial newspaper in the Six Counties, owned by a ‘Nationalist!’ I am told, allowed a diatribe of a scurrilous nature to be published in its columns, and one can only wonder what the personal vendetta involved here. The columnist was either never at a Feadh Cheoil or has a habit, like a worm, of ignoring the lilies in the field and taking refuge in the dung which the more sophisticated would not even see (*Treoir*, 1968, p. 1 and 8).

This is startlingly aggressive, self-important, and authoritarian language for an organization that simultaneously claimed inclusiveness and good will for all to use. This
article condemns opposing viewpoints and, in effect, freedom of the press itself in an attempt to intimidate and eliminate anyone who dare challenge the organization’s self-appointed authority. The inclusiveness and openness that Comhaltas claims toward the people of Ireland is clearly only under the condition that those people blindly accept Comhaltas’ way of thinking. Comhaltas’ strong nationalist sentiment, political involvement, and government sponsorship also penetrate the article. The “Six Counties” refers to Northern Ireland, and the author of the Treoir article is taken aback by the fact that a Nationalist would allow a criticism of Comhaltas to be published. In 1968, Comhaltas seems to have already put itself on a dangerous and self-important pedestal.

Continuing with Volume 1, Issue 4 of Treoir, the article “The Musician and the Non-musician” contains another passage that is extremely telling when looking ahead to Comhaltas’ rapidly increasing commercialization. The article states, “The present leaders…are planning to expedite the advancement of the music and ensuring that the selfless work of many members will not be exploited by commercial concerns simply because the organization was not geared to expansion” (Treoir, 1968, p. 1). A brief look at the current state of Comhaltas and the extreme commercial success of today’s Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann, international Comhaltas tours, and related media begs the question of where Comhaltas’ concern for the commercial exploitation of its members has gone. Early fleadhanna—plural for fleadh—served the purpose of providing a meeting place for traditional musicians where Irish traditional music could be appreciated (O’Cearuil, p. 3). Today’s Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann is an entirely different scene. According to The Anglo-Celt newspaper, the 2011 Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann brought more than 250,000
musicians and spectators to the small town of Cavan and generated between €40 million and €100 million in revenue and benefits for the local economy over the course of just 10 days (p.1). The festival costs €750,000 to put on, €400,000 of which comes from donations and the remainder of which is more than covered by ticket prices (The Anglo-Celt, p.1). The modern Fleadh is riddled with souvenir stands selling Comhaltas memorabilia and temporary signage hanging over storefronts that have been rented by Comhaltas and converted into burger huts or other snack stands. Most of the desirable events at the Fleadh are ticketed, making a week at the Fleadh an expensive endeavor, even for those who are lucky enough to book a reasonably priced room months in advance. Because of this incredible economic benefit for the host town, politics come into play during the selection process, which is no longer driven by the desire to stimulate musical interest in a certain area of Ireland, but to exploit Fleadh-goers, many of whom are young competitors and their families, for the purpose of maximizing revenue.

A comparison between a 1967 Irish-language documentary about the Clare county fleadh and a modern Comhaltas video production about the 2007 Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann demonstrates the increase in commercialization and stereotypical imagery that has occurred at Comhaltas fleadhanna in recent years. The 1967 film, entitled Flea Ceoil, was directed by well-known, Cork-born documentarist Louis Marcus and won several film awards across Europe. It captures the revival of Irish traditional music that was taking place in Ireland in the 1960s, stating, “The music is getting a new lease, like old wine in a new bottle” (Flea Ceoil). Flea Ceoil focuses on the wide variety of people who have come to Kilrush from all over Ireland to play and hear traditional Irish music
and share in the festive atmosphere. The film is based around the idea that, “It’s the music that brings the crowds together,” and music, rather than Comhaltas is the focus of the film (*Flea Ceoil*).

The sociability that is at the core of Irish traditional music shines through in *Flea Ceoil*. No stages are shown in the film and the musicians and spectators are constantly interacting, whether the music is a session on the street, a song being sung by a lone woman in a pub, or a pipe band in a parade. Scenes include an old man dancing with canes to a street session made up of young musicians, a man lilting at the bar of a pub, couples dancing, and the tapping of coins on the bar to the rhythm of a reel. The film positions Irish traditional music as a unifying force and paints the fleadh atmosphere as a “hearty musical setting” that can be both fun and romantic, “just what the young people are after” (*Flea Ceoil*).

Surprisingly, the film makes no mention of Comhaltas. Comhaltas was no doubt the sponsor of the fleadh, but the film does not to detract from its focus on the music by dwelling on the organization. The film is about ordinary people enjoying the music that they are playing and hearing. The formal competitions that occur in today’s Comhaltas fleadhanna detract from that sociability. As the film states, “This is the people’s festival” (*Flea Ceoil*). *Flea Ceoil* gets the point of revival across without characterizing Irish music as a thing of the past. The film uses effective camera techniques and focuses on the small details of the musical atmosphere to capture the music as a living tradition and a cause for celebration. The fact that the film is in Irish positions the subject matter, Irish traditional music, as a cultural unifier for the people of Ireland.
The 2007 Comhaltas film *Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann* puts the Tullamore All-Ireland Fleadh and Irish traditional music in a much different light. The emphasis is on the organization rather than the music, and the social interaction that highlighted the 1967 film *Flea Ceoil* is not nearly as prominent. The first people featured in the film are Comhaltas officials and every musician in the film is measured by his or her success in the Fleadh by the narrator. The film indicates that Irish musicians are no longer concerned with the music and the joy it can bring, but merely with awards and recognition from Comhaltas.

The majority of the musical performances depicted in the film occur on a stage. Even the scene that most resembles a traditional session is obstructed by dangling microphones and bright lights. The musicians in the scene, which occurs about 10 minutes into the film, are facing the camera instead of each other and are not interacting with the crowd. The crowd, too, seems out of place. The ordinary, yet diverse, men and women in the 1967 film have been replaced by middle-aged men in ties and jackets and women wearing dresses and pearls in the 2007 Comhaltas production. This brings up the confused duality that has come to dominate Comhaltas media productions. Through its constructed image of Irish identity, Comhaltas attempts to both raise Irish traditional music to a state of high culture and simultaneously emphasize the rural, humble, mystical origins of the music.

Comhaltas’ image of the traditional Irish musician as someone with ties to rural life and ancient mysticism is evident in the 2007 film as well. The signs that line the stages in the film are covered with stereotypical silhouettes of female harpists with
flowing hair and old men in flat caps. The film notes state that Comhaltas “brought Irish traditional music from a fireside setting to a world stage,” but Comhaltas refuses to let the image of the Irish musician progress beyond that stereotypical “fireside setting” (*Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann: 2007*).

The most startling scene in the film features a man dancing with a broom on stage while a group of musicians play a traditional tune in the background. The man is wearing a goofy brimmed hat with strings and pom-poms hanging from its brim and his dance is far from traditional. The crowd laughs as he kicks his legs into the air and swings the broom around in a foolish manner reminiscent of the stereotypical Irish stage Paddy.

There is one scene in the 2007 Comhaltas film that appears to genuinely place the music at the forefront, as a unifying presence, but it is quickly undercut by a shameless Comhaltas endorsement. The scene consists of thousands of musicians gathered in the town center to participate in a giant street session. What appears to be evidence that the modern Fleadh is still a festival for the people, however, quickly transitions to commentary on the event by the Director General of Comhaltas. He says, “Thousands of musicians, young and old, all collected here in the spirit of Comhaltas. It’s an event that we must thank the Fleadh Cheoil committee for” (*Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann: 2007*). The message here is that Comhaltas, not the music, brings the people together. What was once the spirit of the music is now “the spirit of Comhaltas.”

An analysis of Comhaltas album covers from 1973 and 2007 reveals the connection between rural life, ancient customs, and traditional Irish music that Comhaltas emphasizes. The 1973 album that coincided with Comhaltas’ concert tour of America is
entitled “From the homes of Ireland.” The black and white album cover features a photograph of a single thatch-roofed cottage in the midst of a maze of the loose stone walls that are characteristic of Ireland’s rural west. The image blatantly ties Irish music to a simple, rural way of life. More than 30 years later, however, Comhaltas’ image of the Irish musician seems to have regressed even further. The 2007 Comhaltas concert tour of North America album is entitled “Echoes of Erin” and features a much different cover. On the album’s cover, the 17 touring musicians are pictured posing in front of the remains of an old castle, and the women are dressed in mystical, flowing purple garb that harkens back to the time of the druids.

The 2011 Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann, which was held in the town of Cavan, was the most successful Fleadh to date in terms of attendance and revenue. The festivals success, however, occurred in an atmosphere of extreme commercialization and amidst widespread stereotypical imagery. In honor of the Fleadh, artwork of grinning leprechauns playing fiddles, fair-haired goddesses holding pints of stout, shamrocks emanating musical notes, *Super Mario Bros.* character Luigi dancing on a piano, and cheeseburgers holding guitars lined the main street of the small town. See Appendix A for an example. The image pictures two caricatures of Irish musicians, whose features are grossly and stereotypically exaggerated.

The first official Comhaltas event of the 2011 Fleadh was the “opening session,” which was held in the bar of the Farnham Arms Hotel. *Live Trad* filmed the event, which was led by Comhaltas’ Martin Donohoe and Fintan McManus, for television and online streaming. In the video, the musicians are sitting side-by-side and facing the cameras.
Microphones and bright lights surround them. The area between the musicians and the video cameras is off limits to spectators, who line the hotel bar and watch from a distance. Comhaltas merchandise dots the crowd.

At the session, the Comhaltas musicians read from a pre-determined set list, which is uncharacteristic of a traditional Irish session, and stopped several times mid-tune to allow for camera adjustments, which is unheard of. It was clearly the appearance of Comhaltas, not the integrity of the music, that was most important in producing the video. After a few disjointed tunes, young female dancers join the musicians, wearing Americanized outfits of bright-green dresses covered in sequins.

This presentation of the quintessential Irish session by the most powerful Irish traditional music organization in the world creates an incredibly harmful public misconception of Irish music and Irish musicians. The session that Comhaltas used to open its largest musical event, the All-Ireland Fleadh, was artificially staged and refined for television. There was little “traditional” about it, yet Comhaltas presented it as the epitome of Irish culture and musical tradition. The sociability of the music was completely disregarded, which is an example of one major danger of turning a live, first-hand, social and oral tradition into a media production. The focus is placed upon producing a perfect video, embedded with messages that serve the organization being presented. As a result, the uniqueness of the performance loses its value because it has been taken out of time and preserved through media. Also, because of the intrusiveness of the video equipment, the live audience becomes disconnected from the music.
Comhaltas’ most recent media initiative is the *ComhaltasLive* project. According to Comhaltas’ website, *ComhaltasLive* is a weekly Internet video program that began a few years ago with the aim of documenting the best performances of Irish traditional music and provide the best chance to experience the energy of Irish music and dance, short of seeing it live in close quarters. The most recent *ComhaltasLive* broadcast, number 365, features highlights from the 2011 Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann. Consistent with other Comhaltas media productions, this *ComhaltasLive* program features only Comhaltas members and Fleadh winners, and the performances are staged for recording and surprisingly detached for a program that claims intimacy. The segment that is labeled a “session” consists of a redheaded girl playing a tune alone on a button accordion (*ComhaltasLive*). Her facial expression is unchanging, her manner is subdued, and the energy of the music is missing.

Seven recent *ComhaltasLive* videos feature only Comhaltas musicians and Fleadh winners. The fact that the stated mission of *ComhaltasLive* is to record “the greatest performances of traditional music,” makes the inclusion of only musicians who are associated with Comhaltas a far from humble statement by the organization (*ComhaltasLive*). It is further proof of Comhaltas’ exclusionary and self-important stance on Irish traditional music.

The harmful impact of Comhaltas media productions on the public image of Irish musical identity can best be understood through the theoretical framework of the critical approach to analyzing media and popular culture. Before applying the critical approach to the world of Irish traditional music, it must be noted that this is a small-scale analysis
using relative proportions of power and domination. The critical approach is generally applied to large mass media corporations. The paradigm “provides a top-down model of popular culture as a form of domination” and states, “The ascendance of certain kinds of pop culture can be explained primarily in terms of their ability to reflect and reinforce the enormous economic and cultural power of the mass media industry” (Grazian, p. 21). In the world of Irish traditional music, Comhaltas is the relative dominating force of economic, cultural, and political power, making the critical approach applicable to the organization. The success of Irish traditional music as defined by Comhaltas is largely due to the organization’s power. Thus, the popularity of Irish music is limited to music that reflects Comhaltas’ ideals and agenda.

According to the critical paradigm, standardization and homogeneity are the side effects of commercial popular culture (Grazian, p. 48). These effects, which limit the possibility for varied expression, are just as evident in the realm of Irish traditional music as they are in the American popular music industry. Irish music that Comhaltas deems “non-traditional” is squashed by the commercial success of Comhaltas. As a result, Irish traditional music is becoming standardized and homogenized, as is the image of the Irish musician.

The critical approach also emphasizes that media produced by a culture’s dominating force “disarms and immobilizes its audience by engineering popular consensus through the power of persuasion” (Grazian, p. 48). This form of dominance is called “cultural hegemony,” and it is central to the critical approach to analyzing media and popular culture (Grazian, p. 48). Comhaltas is, comparatively, not a huge producer
of media, but because it is the dominant producer of media related to Irish traditional music, it is able to instill its image of Irish musical identity in popular culture.

The effects of Comhaltas’ hegemonic dominance of the Irish traditional music industry are certainly less offensive than some other culture industries’ offenses, such as sweatshop labor, but that does not mean that they should be overlooked. The critical approach asserts that the popularity of various aspects of culture serves to increase profits of powerful corporations (Grazian, p. 56). The increasing popularity of Irish traditional music and the accompanying commercialization has certainly increased the profits of Comhaltas as the most powerful Irish music organization, but it has done so at the cost of creativity, innovation, and free expression. In the process of commercialization, Irish traditional music has come under the threat of standardization and Irish musicians have become marginalized. The critical approach, when applied to Comhaltas and Irish traditional music takes much of the blame off of the musicians themselves for complying with Comhaltas system of media production, and rightfully so. Today’s Irish traditional musician is given the choice of joining Comhaltas and benefitting from the organization’s widespread influence or going it alone, and as Comhaltas’ success grows, so does the distance between the organization and its would-be competitors (Grazian, p. 56).

The perpetuation of harmful images and stereotypes is also central to the critical approach paradigm. The critical approach asserts that popular culture conventions, such as portraying African American men as street thugs in hip-hop videos, lead to typecasting in the cultural industries and the perpetuation of images that have become established and successful (Grazian, p. 58). Unfortunately for Irish traditional musicians, the established
image of Irish musical identity is based around stereotypical features such as red or
flowing hair, a thick brogue, and mystical dress. The popularity of this image is perhaps
most evident in Riverdance, the tremendous international commercial success that
emerged in the 1990s. Because of the success of this image and the international
association that was created between it and “authentic” Irish music, it has become the
most commercially safe choice as the face of Irish culture organizations like Comhaltas.

A more optimistic analysis of the state of Irish traditional music can be
demonstrated using the functionalist approach to analyzing popular culture, which
“emphasizes how the symbols, rituals, and practices surrounding its production and
consumption can bring people together by generating a shared sense of social solidarity”
(Grazian, p. 27). This shared feeling of identity in which the members of a group
experience a sense of unity is known as “collective effervescence” (Durkheim, as cited in
Grazian, p. 26). Collective effervescence is at the core of traditional Irish music, as
musicians connect with each other and their audience in a social scene that is based
around the music as a uniting force. When understood within the critical approach
paradigm, however, this functionalist view of Irish traditional music is less promising.
The introduction of commercially dominant organizations like today’s Comhaltas into the
world of Irish traditional music results in a lack of personal expression and variety in the
creative process. Collective effervescence can still occur, but the production and
consumption of Irish music that has been a uniting force exists under the guidelines of
Comhaltas. In other words, the agency of Irish traditional musicians in creating
collective effervescence is diminished.
Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann has been extremely successful in reviving and preserving Irish traditional music since the organization’s humble beginning in 1951. The argument that Irish traditional music would not be nearly as popular today if it were not for Comhaltas is certainly a valid one. Comhaltas’ rapidly increasing commercial success, however, has led to a shift in focus from the music to the organization. As demonstrated by the critical approach to cultural analysis, Comhaltas’ emergence as the only economically and politically powerful authority on Irish traditional music has a homogenizing effect on the music and leads to the perpetuation of stereotypical images.

Comhaltas media productions, including films, magazines, and online video programs have damaging effects on the image of Irish musicians and on Irish traditional music itself. Comhaltas’ preservationist mentality and authoritarian approach to defining tradition shine through in its media and result in the standardization of a musical tradition that is rooted in sociability and personal expression.

Comhaltas has become more powerful than its founders likely imagined was possible and because of this international presence, its media productions need to be examined. Comhaltas has brought Irish traditional music to a world stage, but the image of Irish musical identity that is constructed by Comhaltas media and events is one that creates a public misconception of Irish traditional music and musicians. Under the heading, “Foresight,” a 1968 publication of Comhaltas’ Treoir states, “There are those, perhaps, who might think that expansion is not a good thing but we must also accept the expansion which has taken place since that small group of people first met in Mullingar in 1951. That expansion must be maintained and nurtured” (Treoir, p. 1). The expansion
that has occurred over the more than forty years since this publication dwarfs that which took place in Comhaltas’ first years of existence. The recent expansion of Comhaltas has been more expedited than nurtured, and it could only do the Irish traditional music community good for Comhaltas to pause, re-evaluate its goals, and examine the influence that it is having on the music and musicians it was founded to protect.
CHAPTER FIVE:

IRISH MUSIC, AMERICAN TELEVISION, AND RIVERDANCE

The last two decades have brought an incredible increase in the images, allusions, and representations of Ireland in American media and popular culture (Casey, p. 9). This increase is evidence that middle-class American citizens, who in many cases have several cultural identity options available to them, have chosen “Irish-American” as the most desirable identity (Casey, p. 9). Americans with the most distant connection to Ireland will sport “Kiss Me, I’m Irish” pins on St. Patrick’s Day and buy Notre Dame “Fightin’ Irish” T-shirts. This increasing diaspora of Irish-American consumers has led to a flooded market of Irish goods and media productions, or more accurately, goods and media productions that evoke a sense of “Irishness.” Irish-themed films, made-for-television movies, dance and theater productions, music festivals, and theme pubs are some examples of the popular culture inventory that Americans crave (Casey, p. 9). An Innisfree Perfume, “The Essence of Ireland,” complete with lavender oil from the fields of County Wicklow and quotes from Yeats on the bottle, promises to deliver consumers back to their ancestral homeland (Casey, p. 9). The commercial success of the increasing representation of Irish identity in American media has come with a price—the simplification of Irish identity geared toward cultural tourism. At the center of the Irish-American media craze has been Irish music and dance. In this chapter, two particular appearances of Irish musicians on American primetime television in the second half of the 20th century—the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem on The Ed Sullivan Show and The Chieftains on Saturday Night Live—will be examined for early signs of simplified
and stereotyped Irish identity packaged for Irish-American cultural tourists. Then, *Riverdance*, the music and dance phenomenon that emerged in 1994 and is the most commercially successful and widespread example of an inaccurate representation of Irish musical identity by global media will be discussed.

The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem first appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* on March 12, 1961 in front of a television audience of 80 million people. Their 16-minute performance earned them a $100,000 contract from Columbia Records and catapulted them into American popular culture. Their songs of nostalgia wooed American audiences, but it was their white wool Aran sweaters that became their trademark. Although not a traditional stereotypical image of Irish identity at the time, the woolen sweaters of the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem are early examples of a simplified Irish identity promoted by global media. The Aran sweaters evoked a sense of Irishness that was rural, quaint, simple, and consistent with the sentiment of the songs that were sung by the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem. Even more important is the fact that the sweaters, as opposed to the music, played such a critical role in the popularity of the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem. This is a prime example of American audiences being more concerned with a sentimental idea of Irish culture rather than the content of Irish culture.

Another key appearance of Irish musicians on primetime American television is The Chieftains on *Saturday Night Live* on March 17, 1979. Like the Clancy Brothers on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, The Chieftains’ appearance was centered as much on visual imagery as it was on music. Rather than clothing, however, it was the setting that evoked
a simplified sense of Irish cultural identity. Throughout their performance, the seven musicians are seated on bails of hay and, presumably fake, rocks and are surrounded by a rural setting. A white cottage is painted in the distance on the backdrop and a wooden well is stationed in front of them. Several small trees dot the stage behind them. The musicians are made to look as if they just finished a hard day’s work on the farm and have settled down for some good old-fashioned entertainment, void of any modern luxury.

*Riverdance* began with a six-minute performance at the 1994 Eurovision song contest in Dublin. The performance was put together by Irish-American dancers Jean Butler and Michael Flatley, and included a troupe of musicians, singers, and step-dancers. The worldwide television audiences totaled over 300 million viewers. By 1996, *Riverdance* had evolved into a ninety-minute production that was enormously successful at first in Ireland, and then in London and around the world. The show’s United States opening in 1996 was followed by incredible success and media attention. *Riverdance* appeared at the 1996 Kennedy Center Honors event and the 1997 Grammy Awards ceremony at Madison Square Garden, where it won best musical show album.

Few critics recognized the show’s lack of a true cultural identity. *The New York Times* called the show, “a plotless amalgam of Irish dance and other dances of Celtic origin,” and, “a mishmash of a variety show with a one-world theme” (Casey, p. 11). This criticism of the show’s varying level of Irishness, however, was over-shadowed by the majority of the press, which lauded the show, which resided permanently at the Broadway Gershwin Theater in New York, and the general American public, who
gobbled up tickets and merchandise. In 1997, Michael Flatley, who separated from
Riverdance to create his own rival show, Lord of the Dance, was named one of the “50
Most Beautiful People in the World” by People magazine (Casey, p. 11). The show was
available through videos, CDs, and constant PBS airings.

Riverdance took advantage of a white Irish America that was eager to embrace an
alternative popular image in the mid-1990s (Casey, p. 12). Moya Doherty, the producer
of Riverdance, said, “I was tired of cliché images of Ireland…I wanted to show the
Ireland I know and love, that is modern and in step” (Casey, p. 12). Riverdance was
publicly received as “a new respectable Irishness, neoteric and traditional, spiritual rather
than religious, sanitized—devoid of both political signifiers and, as the New York Times
observed, free of stage leprechauns” (Casey, p. 12). The key word in Natasha Casey’s
description of the popular acceptance of the Irish identity perpetuated by Riverdance is
“sanitized.” Riverdance may have been void of obvious stereotypical imagery and
nationalist tales of English oppression that appeared in earlier media surrounding Irish
music, like that of the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, but its cultural vagueness is
merely a mask for its misrepresentation of Irish cultural and musical identity. The show
relies heavily on the connection between Irishness and mysticism, a stereotype that
harkens back to the time of the Druids. Riverdance certainly provided an alternative
depiction of Irish identity from American television shows like The Magical Legend of
the Leprechaun, which aired in the late 1990s, but its alternative depiction was more
different than improved.
A primary component of *Riverdance* is the incorporation of African-American gospel singers, which occurs about two-thirds of the way into the show. By preceding their appearance with the depiction of two Irish dancers emigrating from Ireland to America, then emphasizing the African-American quest for freedom with songs like “When Will Our Freedom Come?,” an obvious parallel between Irish immigrants and African-Americans is drawn (Casey, p. 17). As Irish musicians perform harmoniously with African-American gospel singers, the audience is meant to feel that both cultural groups were denied the same liberties upon entrance into America, and that they shared and supported each other in the struggle. The historical reality is quite different, however. “Irish immigrants in the United States failed to establish alliances with African-American groups in the nineteenth century and little has altered since” (Casey, p. 17). The gospel-singing element of the show was scarcely acknowledged by the media, but its inclusion in the show successfully consoled Irish-American audiences by assuring them of their equal past (Casey, p. 17).

Another major element of *Riverdance*’s success is its correlation of Irish identity with the notion of “folk” (Casey, p. 18). According to structuralist theorist Jonathan Culler, “one of the characteristics of modernity is the belief that authenticity has been lost and exists only in the past” (Casey, p. 19). Johann Gottfried von Herder was an 18th century German philosopher and literary critic who wrote about cultural productions and notions of the folk. Von Herder characterized the folk as, “wild and lacking social organization…closer to nature” and folk music and poetry as, “the language of the soul or the heart…the cultural core before society complicated it” (Casey, p. 19). The emphasis
on the notion of folk in *Riverdance* is problematic because although the connection to an idealized past when life was less complicated is appealing to audiences, the “folk” are inherently uncivilized (Casey, p. 19). Defining the Irish as “folk,” then, ignores the modern cultural identity of Ireland and disregards any cultural progress that has occurred in Ireland since it was “complicated” by social organization. The performers in *Riverdance* may not be huddled around pots of gold, but their appeal is rooted in stereotypical primitiveness. In an attempt to explain the appeal of Irish music in the United States, Peter Applebome of the *New York Times* pointed to Irish culture’s roots in “visceral pantheism” and “the idea of the world as a magical place” (Casey, p. 22). This is further evidence of the insistent connection made between Irish culture and some sort of mystic, magical, ancient, and spiritual way of life that is made by American media and highlighted by *Riverdance*. This stereotypical connection ignores the increasing globalization and international economy of Ireland. As writer Gemma Tipton stated as a reaction to the dissipation of “a sense of Ireland” that is accompanying the country’s globalization and modernization, “It might not be so easy to market, but nobody wants to live in *Riverdance*” (Tipton, p. 33).
CHAPTER SIX:

CONCLUSION

The late Breandan Breathnach gave “one compelling reason” why Irish people should know their own music: “Because it’s our own” (Carolan “Because” p. 6). As demonstrated by this paper, global media’s presentation of Irish music has diluted the ownership of Irish music by packaging an often-stereotypical version of the tradition for global audiences and cultural tourists.

The question of whether or not a cultural tradition can become globally and commercially successful and maintain its integrity is a difficult one. Criticizing global media for ignoring the progression of Irish culture and Irish music and simultaneously arguing for the maintenance of the tradition’s integrity may seem contradictory. Irish music certainly has the right, as does any cultural tradition, to go global, and many Irish musicians are more than worthy of global media coverage. As Ireland changes and diversifies, so does its music. The argument for a pure, “authentic” Irish music, unadulterated by outside influences is backward-looking, but mistaking stereotypical imagery and the simplification and reduction of a culture for progress is equally misguided.

As Jimmy Noonan said, “Good music is good music. The common tunes are the backbone of the music. New tunes are new, but the other ones have survived for a long time for a reason. We’re not playing the old ones just to keep them alive; they move you” (Noonan Interview). The quality of the music is the driving force that
should keep it alive, rather than the political and monetary agendas of global media and state-sponsored organizations like Comhaltas.

It is important to examine the image of Irish musical identity that is being constructed by global media and identify whose purposes that image serves. In the case of early Irish radio, Irish traditional music was adapted to please radio officials and “refined” for the public. In the case of American television and Riverdance, stereotypical imagery was, and is, used for the purpose of commercial success in the growing Irish-American consumer market. Comhaltas, who claim to be the keepers of Ireland’s musical tradition, is just as guilty as big media of packaging a simplified cultural identity for the purpose of cultural tourism. Stereotypical imagery, commercial promotion, and antiquated ideologies dominate Comhaltas media and festivals.

It would be a mistake, however, to overlook the positive potential of modern global media and castigate all media as some sort of corporate villain. New and social media, such as YouTube and Facebook, allow for Irish musicians all over the world to share their music and connect with fellow musicians. Ireland’s recently emerging film industry has also made immense progress in the presentation of a realistic Irish identity. Films such as Adam and Paul, Mickybo and Me, The Tiger’s Tail, and The Liberties confront issues of contemporary Irish cultural identity, including the struggle with modernism and commercialization, The Troubles, and the liberalization of a previously conservative society. These films challenge the traditional Irish stereotypes that appear in other media and take steps toward Irish cultural understanding.
Through the examination of early Irish radio, Comhaltas media productions, the appearances of Irish musicians on American television, and Riverdance, there is ample evidence that: *Global media's presentation of Irish music fails to accurately portray the reality of Irish musical identity.*
APPENDIX

An example of the artwork that lined the streets of Cavan during the 2011 Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann. (Photo by Logan Macomber)
NOTES


Carolan, N. ‘Because it’s Our Own’: Breandan Breathnach 1912-85.


Carolan, N. Recent Publications in Irish Traditional Music.


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*Note*: Discussion of the 2011 Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann is based partially on the ethnographic research that I conducted at the festival during the month of August 2011.
Further Reading


