

Engaging Quests for Quintessential Traditional Music: An Irish Excursion

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Abstract: The Republic of Ireland has become a favourite tourist destination for leisure travelers from around the world. Drawn to the island's rich Celtic heritage, its rustic charms, verdant panoramas, and spirited cultural life, tourists provide a lucrative source of revenue for local economies. Among the services that entertain foreign expectations for Irish experiences are the social settings and sounds of traditional music. Through reflection on the author's own cultural encounters living as an exchange student in Belfast, the ways in which musical signs of Irishness are cultivated, interpreted, consumed and transformed in the tourist industry will be explored.

Prologue

St. Patrick's Day parade in Dublin. Even the Liffey was green. I watched as two Sea-Doos vigorously churned dark swirls of dye in their wake; they literally coloured the river as emerald as the Isle itself. On the north side of the O'Connell Bridge we waited. *The distant clamour of the parade drew nearer. Flooded by vivid displays of festivity my senses relished the experience. Indeed, what could be more authentic than celebrating St Patrick's Day in Dublin?* As a Canadian exchange student studying in Belfast at the time, I recall the thrill of anticipating signs of Irishness that had heretofore only indulged my imagination. And yet, my preconceived expectations were left unfulfilled. I wanted an "unpackaged" version of culture. I was in the wrong place. Despite a ubiquitous Irish presence, my memory preserves encounters with tourists more lucidly, as most interaction with Dubliners involved some form of patronage. The waitress who served us an Irish fry, the chap selling the tall hats plastered with shamrocks, the Celli dancers on the stage outside St Stephen's Green, the musicians playing in the pubs of the Temple Bar District, and the bartenders who poured our Guinness – *these are the local exchanges I remember best.* Still puzzled and troubled by these reflections, I invoke them here as a fitting departure for engaging quests for quintessential traditional music.

Based on the premise that leisure travel is driven in part by quests for alternative sensory experiences to the mundane routines of daily life, it is my contention that music is a profitable resource harnessed by host communities¹ to satisfy this end. Tourism is powered by socially informed expectations for certain forms of cultural experience which in turn generate local employment for musicians operating in the tourist industry. Some important issues emerge when the production

¹ Following the title, *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (1976), edited by Valene Smith, my use of the expression "host" communities refers to the local population that regularly interacts and engages in economic exchange with leisure travelers through their employment in the service branches of a tourist industry.

and interpretation of musical meaning is considered. Drawing from Thomas Turino's Piercian semiotic theory of emotion (Turino 1999) and recent literature from leisure studies (Urry 1995; Rojek 1997), I aim to problematize the socio-semiotic processes generating tourism and its intersection with traditional music practices in host communities. How does the production of meaning prior to contact with host communities inform touristic expectations for authentic musical experience? What are some implications for musical traditions? How are musical signs interpreted in touristic zones? And what makes Ireland an edifying case study for understanding the relationship between tourism and local musical culture?

Locating Tourism

Definitions of tourism have tended to emphasize the objects or categories of interest that presumably attract tourists to preferred destinations. Adjectives like "cultural," "historical," "ecological," and "recreational" have tended to catalogue tourists under narrowly defined types (Grabum 1976; Boniface & Fowler 1993; Nash 1996). Yet in reality, tourists explore any combination of the above in response to a wide range of motivations and preconceived expectations. Shifting the focus onto experience, Eric Cohen puts forth a more convincing typology in my view. His description of touristic modes demonstrates how desired depths of experience influence the anticipations for culture that visitors bring to their respective destinations (Cohen 1979). For example, "diversionary" tourists are generally less interested in local culture, while "experimental" tourists actively seek authentic cultural configurations, and "existential" tourists aim to be fully immersed in local communities. In any case, from the act of purchasing products like souvenirs to the myriad travel accounts, these souvenirs subsequently index through memory – some form of experience is consumed.

Musical Experience as Service

John Urry's *Consuming Culture* argues that services must be key to any focus on the commodification of experience (Urry 1995: 129). Created at all levels of local and intermediary involvement, ranging from marketing, to transportation, to the front lines of tourist destinations, services as well as goods fuel the industry. Tourist-related services aim to deliver the experiences that tourists are conditioned to expect prior to their departure. Even the material objects collected while on vacation come to embody the memories of past experiences. As the dominant form of interaction defining modern-day leisure travel, the consumption of services is also the patronage of experience. And irrespective of the touristic mode in question, these transactions are inherently social. Whether travelling alone or in a group, staying in a resort or living among local inhabitants, attending cultural events or buying regional products – "the consumption of tourist services cannot be separated off from the social relations within which they are embedded" (Urry, 129).

In a classic work on tourism, Dean MacCannell states that the production of a cultural experience is defined by the total labour, agents, mediums, representations, audiences and influences that frame the event. The value of local services is "a function of the quality and quantity of experience they promise" (MacCannell 1974:

23). Musical events, too, can be a service in the systematic contribution to sensory experience. Regula Qureshi recently outlined how music-making can be firmly embedded in relations of production. Rather than limiting her scope to conceptions of music as sonic objects, she proposes the application of an anthropological mode of production theory “based on value that can include food, pianos, and even music produced on pianos” (Qureshi 2000: 25). Accordingly, music-making services can be included in MacCannell’s production of meaningful experience. And more relevant to the topic at hand is the fact that these musical experiences are frequently received as markers for gaging the authenticity of local culture (Rees 1998; Sarkissian 1998; Le Menestrel 1999; DeWitt 1999). Maintaining expectations for “real” culture, expressive performances are typically found at the core of touristic encounters. This is especially evident in Ireland where interdependent economic relationships between musicians and pub entrepreneurs in touristic zones are common. Moya Kneafsey relays how these arrangements, in which music is accorded exchange value, sometimes generate conflict when musicians resent the loss of control incurred when their skills are no longer practised solely for use value. According to Kneafsey, “the music continues, but for a different reason” (Kneafsey 1994: 114). Clearly gulfs of meaning and value between external and internal points of view are negotiated in touristic zones.

Interpreting Sonic Signs

Here we arrive at a critical disjuncture – the production of internal (host community) and external (visiting tourists) meaning. Our understanding of the consumption of cultural forms is contingent on the meaningful way culture is socially constituted. As Roy D’Andrade notes, meanings have representational, constitutive, directive and evocative force (D’Andrade 1984: 96). Consider how this applies to meanings enveloped around music in the tourist industry. Enabling a closer examination of the operational power of meaning in musical traditions, Thomas Turino offers a compelling semiotic theory of emotion in music (Turino 1999). His work illustrates how D’Andrade’s four functions of meaning interact. Simply put, meaning is the effect of a sign on the interpreter (Turino, 223). Following from this axiom, Turino explores how signs operating outside the mediating influence of language elucidate the affective potential of music. Of the many signs he identifies, two kinds are of primary interest here: rhemes and dicents. Rhemes imply the possibility of an object (physical or conceptual). The creativity and imagination vital for artistic endeavours depends on the suggestive function of rhemes. Dicents, on the other hand, are signs that are interpreted as real representations of objects. Turino adds that perceptions of musical authenticity are usually the aftermath of dicent signs (Turino, 247-248). What is more, it is important to realize that these assessments are always subjective. The same musical sign may be interpreted as a possibility (rheme) by some listeners, and received as genuinely real (dicent) by others. Both signs have the unique capacity to accumulate multiple, even disparate, associations – a property Turino aptly describes as “semantic snowballing” (Turino, 235).

At this point I turn to perceptions of Irishness. But rather than proceed solely along my own reflexive paths, I invite the reader to consider how representations of

Irishness have informed its expectations for musical traditions. From what sources do our meanings emanate? I immediately think of travel brochures, promotional videos, academic and non-academic literature, movies, commercials, and successful Irish artists in the traditional music industry like the Chieftains, Altan, and Mary Black. By indulging in self-conscious reflections on our sources of musical meaning we are visiting the social and mental processes that Chris Rojek describes as dragging and indexing from fictional and factual files (Rojek 1997). While mainly conceived to illustrate how the media blurs the distinction between fiction and fact, his computer analogy can be reconfigured to underscore the ways in which tourists categorize the cultural signs they encounter prior to embarking on leisure travels. Fictional files contain the body of signs which suggest the possibility of an object, like when you watch a film that portrays musical events in a way that may appear contrived. Conversely, factual files contain those signs that are interpreted as genuine representations, for instance one might accumulate an inventory of signs in one's factual files through participation in an Irish culture society or an Irish dancing community. Interestingly, my extension of Rojek's metaphor suggests that factual files seem more likely to emerge out of active participation in a community, whereas fictional files stem from passive exposure to cultural forms portrayed in the media. Could this observation underscore a broader distinction? – namely, one between active and passive modes of receiving information about people and places. In any case, as a sonic sensory flow of information that engages the fantasies, myths, and imaginations that actively shape touristic expectations for experience, music is a powerful tool for stimulating interest in tourist destinations.

At first glance, the notion of files appears to elide nicely with Turino's concept of rhemes (fictional) and dicents (factual). But in fact Rojek is talking about signs that are mediated through language. While many of our perceptions of musical culture are formed as a result of speech about music, Turino reminds us that unmediated sonic signs also generate musical meanings. In the case of Irish traditional music many sounds come to mind when I reflect on the musical signs that signify authenticity for me. I think of timbres: the austere tone quality of the Irish language, the rolling rhythms of the bodhran, the billowy resonance of the Uilleann pipes, and the shrill brightness of the tin whistle. I hear styles: the driving momentum of triplets in a jig, the cursive lines of an air, the regional dialects of blended stops and slurs, or the shuffling guitar accompaniment to briskly rendered fiddle tunes. Ornamentation, texture, melodic design, rhythm, form – these are all examples of musical properties that might directly affect perceptions of musical meaning. So what causes certain musical signs to be privileged over others?

Consuming Traditional Music: Social Mobility or Escapism?

Maintaining an influential force in the tourist industry is an ideology described by Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy as "romantic anticapitalism" (Sayre and Löwy 1990). They argue that romanticism is manifested in paradigms of reaction to the debasing social impact of a capitalist economy. Travelling to idealized places in the present constitutes one means of recovering losses rooted in a pre-capitalist past (ibid.: 35). A similar romantic ideology is confronted by Ian McKay in his *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*

(McKay 1994). That the music of “The Folk” echoes a romantic ideology “worth travelling for” is the point to be gleaned here. Moreover, romanticism and consumerism are intimately bound in shaping perceptions of authenticity and stimulating a drive to accumulate cultural capital (Kneafsey 1994: 108). Motivated by unquenchable desires to emulate changing social climates, individuals consume culture as a way of re-imagining themselves (Slater 1997). All consumer choices have potential social ramifications; tourism is no exception. Don Slater compares touring with entertainment, clothing, and all acts of consumption that become markers of status (Slater 1997: 84). Encounters with authentically construed musical traditions are esteemed in part because they are valued socially. Further, experiences, then, and all the services, goods, agents, and sites required to appease them are partially engendered by media-driven quests for cultural capital.

Any discussion concerning the relationship between the media, tourism, and music cannot avoid the most basic underpinning of travel aspirations: the elaborate imaging of space as desirable places to experience. Though media channels tend to be dominated by visually received flows of information, places are carefully marketed in ways that appeal to all the senses. As mentioned earlier, Irish traditional music exemplifies how sound is channelled through the media in meaningful ways that render Ireland a compelling place to hear. Sound can even be referenced through visual depictions of instruments and music-making, as is commonly illustrated by travel brochures for Ireland and Scotland. But music is of course fused with other sensory channels that dare us to see, smell, and touch Irishness in our quest for experiences – grounded in pre-capitalist sentiments – that could potentially amass cultural capital. And because they are spatially conceived, memories are crucial to these processes (Urry 1995: 24-27). It is impossible to access our evolving fictional and factual files without retrieving images, sounds, and scents of places. The moment that memories of signs in our semiotic baggage are mentally reconfigured they begin to be embodied. They shape our behaviour by exercising constitutive, directive, and evocative force (D’Andrade 1984). The cycle begins with the circulation of cultural forms by the media, proceeds through the development of indexical files (memories of signs received as either fictional or factual), which informs the act of touring and consuming cultural products and services. The interpretative cycle unfolds in the successive social frames that animate interaction in touristic zones (Goffman 1974; Turino 1999). Knowing that tourists arrive at destinations with preconceived fictional and factual files, socially negotiated agendas, and a desire to consume experience, I venture the idea that the contextual framing of musical traditions provides further signification that is regularly assessed in valuations of authenticity. This will be illustrated by contrasting two of my engagements with traditional music in Ireland. Highlighting events in Galway and Belfast, in the following I will try and explain why an experience in Northern Ireland felt more genuine, more evocative, and more authentic.

Staging Irishness in Galway

Galway is among the most popular tourist destinations in the Republic of Ireland. Located in the lesser-developed Mid-west, the city and surrounding region have become highly dependent on the seasonal ebb and flow of the tourist industry

(Deegan and Dineen 1997). When I was visiting in April of 1997, the peak season had yet to begin and the streets were already swarming with an international presence. Americans, Germans, Spanish, and French – to name a few of the nationalities I encountered. As in the opening account of St. Patrick's Day in Dublin, most local activity entailed some form of employment. My experience with traditional music occurred in the customary Irish venue for music-making – the pub. In the establishment I visited, music was presented as a spectacle – an entertaining service that could be leisurely enjoyed for the price of a few pints. Along with performances on traditional instruments, two young girls in brightly embroidered dresses delivered a stunning display of the Irish dance style popularized by the Riverdance phenomenon. Because it felt like a show, Turino would argue that the musical signs *were operating as rhemes, which suggests that I was not perceiving the signs to be real* in the sense that they actually represented the traditional musical practices of the local inhabitants. But because signs are processed as mere possibilities does not automatically result in the preclusion of our emotional responses. The experience felt good. As Turino notes, people interpret rhemes at the theatre and still manage to be emotionally stirred (Turino 1999: 237-238). Yet having said that, I argue that signs believed to be real representations (dicents) of a tradition carry a more potent emotional charge. Moreover, these affects are intensified by the social frames circumscribing the signs. Being surrounded by fellow travellers combined with the explicit staging of music as a service clearly influenced my perception, based on the memories of signs gathered in the factual and fictional files of my semiotic baggage.

“The Liverpool” pub in Belfast

Political instability and sectarian violence have consistently thwarted attempts to promote tourism in Northern Ireland (Brett 19: 126). Despite a progressive peace initiative, tourists are a rare occurrence for the most part. Still, some pubs in Belfast are featured in tourist brochures. The Liverpool isn't one of them. Located in a working class area along the docks by the harbour, the pub maintains a low profile. After a precautionary screening for security purposes, foreigners appear welcome and one enters a dimly lit, warm, modest space. In one corner a table is reserved for musicians. The sessions – referring to informally organized events for playing mainly instrumental traditional music – seem to flow naturally. Bodhran, fiddles, flutes, guitars, whistles, accordions, and concertinas – the combination of instruments varies according to the musicians who choose to participate.² Yet despite the organization of performances according to tacit expectations and codes, there is a mood of spontaneity about the place. One of my most memorable experiences occurred when a man behind the bar announced he would sing a song. Lively chatter faded to a respectful level of whispering at once and his unaccompanied rendering of a ballad was utterly moving. The musical signs were interpreted as genuine in my mind. The social framing of the musical event enhanced the authenticity and depth of my affective experience in such a way that at no time did I sense the music was contrived for tourists. Further, there was no clear division between listeners and

² I am aware that playing in a session is by no means an option for everyone. See Martin Stokes (1994: 109-110) for a more detailed discussion of the social codes that regulate participation in Irish traditional music-making contexts.

performers, and from my perspective the man did not appear to be receiving any compensation for his musical contribution other than the pure physical and emotional pleasure of singing in the presence of an appreciative audience. My reminiscence reveals how crucial the social frame is in assessments of authenticity. These were predominantly catholic Irish customers enjoying Irish products and services in a locally demarcated Irish catholic space. Was this quintessential Irish traditional music? Or was it authentic Irish traditional music-making? Or maybe it was a quintessential Irish social frame.

Conclusion

Assessments of authenticity are frequently drawn from conclusions based exclusively on musical content. I have tried to show that the social, political and affective semiotic processes generating such claims are more intricate than is commonly acknowledged. Examining the intersection of tourism and musical culture forces us to confront issues of aestheticization point blank. Perhaps this is one reason why there have been relatively few ethnomusicological studies on the subject of tourism and musical traditions. And yet, musical forms undergo significant semiotic and formal transformations in response to pressures from outside expectations (Rees 1997; Sarkissian 1997; Le Menestrel 1999). Investigating these ruptures raises key issues concerning the representation of musical traditions. We all engage cultural forms through a valorizing lens; the problem is that our lens' are inherently unequal.

In closing, I present a mapping sentence by Eric Cohen. Designed in part to uncover discrepancies between internal and external perceptions of authenticity, he declares that we should always consider "who represents whom, for whom, how, in what medium, under which socio-historical circumstances ..., and under which prevailing socio-political relationships ..." (Cohen 1993: 39). Cohen's heuristic reminds us that the production and reception of authentic musical meanings must be problematized if we are to confront the practice of traditional music as a saleable service in tourist industries.

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