

ABSTRACT

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AFFINITY IN WASHINGTON, DC IRISH
SESSIONS

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The Washington, DC metropolitan area hosts a vibrant Irish music scene. Like those in many Irish sessions found throughout the world, the District's network of musicians plays traditional dance tunes at local Irish pubs. This research, centered on ten weekly Irish sessions, explores how DC participants navigate authenticity and develop their skills within a social community. Musicians of varying skill levels perform together and include both those of Irish descent and those with no Irish heritage. Issues such as degrees of strictness with regard to tunes played, instruments permitted, and session etiquette demonstrate each session's unique characteristics. This thesis discusses the influence of participatory music making and affinity, since Irish session musicians perform primarily for themselves. Based on field research through participant-observation and interviews, and expanding upon recent discussions of tradition and imagination in sessions worldwide, I analyze Irish sessions in DC in terms of participatory music making and socializing.

PARTICIPATORY MUSIC MAKING AND AFFINITY IN
WASHINGTON, DC IRISH SESSIONS

By

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Dedication

To Linda, Tim, David, Lauren, and Kevin for their endless patience, support, and love.

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Dozens of musicians contributed to the experiences I had at Irish sessions in Washington, DC. In particular, I owe Rebecca, Bob E., Mike, Steve, Maureen, Jacob, Bob S., Phil, and Deirdre a great deal of gratitude for their generosity, enthusiasm, and the *craic* as I became a better fiddler with their encouragement. This project could not have been completed without the guidance and support of Dr. Larry Witzleben, Dr. Robert Provine, and Dr. Fernando Rios. Finally, many thanks to Bill, Craig, Eric, and Betsy for introducing me to the world of Irish music over a decade ago, and for all the great music we shared.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Joining the Session

If you step into an Irish pub in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, chances are you will encounter a large restaurant bedecked with Irish paraphernalia, sports memorabilia, and phrases in Gaelic, with customers consuming burgers, shepherd's pie, and pints of Guinness. Most such places will be crowded with college students and adults seated at the substantial bar, huddling around enormous high-definition televisions that feature non-stop sports, especially on Sundays and Monday nights during NFL football season. On most weekday evenings, you can be entertained by DJs, pub trivia games, or even a charming "Drunkie-Okie" karaoke night, perhaps with live rock music on weekends.

At a select group of Irish pubs in DC, usually those not associated with chain restaurants, you may come across a small group of musicians in a corner or side room of the pub, sitting around a table cluttered with pints of beer and musical instruments. Half of them may have their backs to you, since they are sitting around the table facing one another. They will completely ignore the other restaurant patrons as they play Irish music and converse with each other throughout the evening, unless they narrow their eyes at the oblivious sports fans screaming too loudly at the televisions. Occasionally the musicians will switch instruments, borrowing someone else's and discussing the make, design, and sound of the instrument. Listening carefully, you can tell that they repeat a tune several times, and that they often go right into the next

tune with no pause or visible cue to tell them what to do. Only half the time do they mention the names of tunes, so you are curious as to how they all know what to play.

If you return the following week, you will see the same group of musicians, give or take a few, probably sitting in the same seats as the previous week. This group of musicians is not a band, and they are not hired by the management to play for the drunken sports fans; they call themselves an “Irish session.” Bring your fiddle, whistle, flute, or mandolin, along with a few Irish tunes you have memorized, sit and listen attentively for a while, and they might even invite you to pull up a chair and join the session.



Figure 1: Session musicians at Nanny O'Brien's in Cleveland Park, Washington, DC. From left to right, Deirdre (bodhrán), Maureen (guitar), Mike (whistle), and Bob (fiddle).



Figure 2: The Nanny O'Brien's session in Cleveland Park, Washington, DC. From left to right, Mike (whistle), Bob (fiddle), and Jacob (banjo). Another musician, Steve, is playing flute on the right.

I joined the session scene beginning in September of 2010, and this thesis documents my experiences with the network of Irish session musicians in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The musicians who play at DC Irish sessions are brought together not because of their ethnicity, but because of their passion for performing Irish music with other people. At Irish sessions in DC, musicians from a variety of backgrounds socialize through music making while imitating and renegotiating behaviors specific to Irish sessions in Ireland and throughout the world.

Methodology

Research for this project consisted of fieldwork at Washington, DC-area Irish sessions to collect ethnographic data, combined with a literature review of related work. Participant observation was the primary method by which I conducted my field research. I have played Irish music for ten years, although I had not studied the style in depth or attended many sessions prior to carrying out this research. I play fiddle and *bodhrán*, the Irish frame drum, and I have familiarity with Irish whistles, mandolin, and guitar. I also play the hammered dulcimer, which is occasionally seen at sessions, although I never brought my dulcimer to play during my research. Because of my previous experience with Irish music, however basic it may have been, participant observation was the best way I could gather data. Irish session musicians typically interact only with each other during a session, so it was imperative that I become part of the session in order to speak with them and understand their thoughts and behaviors from an insider's perspective.

Fieldwork is an essential aspect of contemporary ethnomusicological research. More researchers are opting to study music closer to "home," meaning a place where they grew up or a place where they live or work. Jonathan Stock and Chou Chiener elaborate on their different fieldwork experiences "at home": Stock began studying English folk music sessions because they were close to the University of Sheffield where he taught, while Chou studied a group of *nanguan* musicians in Taiwan where she had lived and with whom she had previously played.¹ My connection with DC's

¹ Jonathan J. P. Stock and Chou Chiener, "Fieldwork at Home: European and Asian Perspectives," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in*

Irish session scene is a combination of Stock's and Chou's experiences. Like Stock, I lived and worked in the DC metropolitan area, so studying local Irish sessions was financially feasible and relatively convenient for traveling. Like Chou, I had not grown up playing Irish music but I had begun playing it before I considered it as a subject for academic research. My previous knowledge of Irish music helped me "know how to visit,"² so that I could enter into the sessions and participate as a musician.

Although participant observation by joining the session was my most valuable means of field research, I also observed a few sessions from a nearby seat in the restaurant, as a patron. This perspective was valuable because the session musicians ignored me and I could observe their behaviors without interfering. Unlike Jos Koning's experiences in Ireland in the mid-1970s, the DC session musicians played at sessions regardless of whether or not I played, so I was merely an additional musician and not a leader or initiator of a session.³ Once the session musicians knew that I played, however, I could no longer appear at a session simply to listen: they expected me to bring my fiddle and join the session and would chide me if I did not.

Ethnomusicology, ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 111.

² Jeff Todd Titon, "Knowing Fieldwork," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 38.

³ Jos Koning, "The Fieldworker as Performer: Fieldwork Objectives and Social Roles in County Clare, Ireland," *Ethnomusicology* 24, no. 3 (1980): 426. Koning's fieldwork in east Clare revealed that most pub sessions in the area only occurred when young, urban musicians visited east Clare to learn, emulate, and preserve the playing style of east Clare musicians. Koning affirmed this effect by participating in sessions himself that he, as a visiting musician, unintentionally initiated.

Over the course of a year and a half, I spoke with and interviewed dozens of musicians, most of whom were aware that I was genuinely interested in playing Irish music and was working on a Master's thesis about DC's Irish session scene. Some musicians came from Irish or Irish American backgrounds, but most were Americans who had no ethnic link to the music or the culture. I chose one American session musician to interview in depth, and her insight provided me with an invaluable perspective on DC Irish sessions. I talked with the other musicians in between playing sets of tunes at the session, but I avoided conducting formal interviews during the session because, as Jonathan Stock says with regard to his research with English folk music sessions, I did not want to transform the session into something else.⁴ I wished to study the weekly progression of events at the session and become part of these events myself.

At first I was hesitant to tell the musicians that I was studying Irish sessions, because I was worried that my academic pursuits would turn them away from me. Everyone I encountered, however, was eager to provide me with answers to my questions and suggest ideas for other venues or musicians to research. Some of them, especially the musicians at Nanny O'Brien's, encouraged me as a musician, praising and critiquing my playing as I strove to improve my sense of style and build my repertoire of tunes. I suspect that because I was genuinely interested in contributing to the social scene and growing as a player, the musicians were willing and eager to include me.

⁴ Stock and Chou, "Fieldwork at Home," 121.

In this thesis, I examine several interactions that arise between musicians in session culture, and I attempt to do so without offending or embarrassing anyone. First-name pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the musicians I interviewed. For well-known musicians who are easily identifiable by their musical accomplishments or bands in which they perform, I have used their true first and last names. Several other musicians requested that their first names be used instead of pseudonyms, and I have done so according to their wishes.

Field recordings and field notes were a major aspect of my research. I brought a notebook to most of my sessions along with my Edirol R-09HR audio recorder. The Edirol records in WAV and MP3 format, and since MP3 format was an adequate quality for my needs, I chose this format for the convenience of a smaller file size. During the session, I jotted down field notes and names of tunes when possible. It was impossible for me to acquire complete lists of session tunes, since musicians do not always remember the names of the tunes they play, and I was not experienced enough to recognize all or most of the tunes by name. Furthermore, constantly asking for tune names would have interrupted the flow of the session. In the earlier months of my field research, I described in detail the musicians and their behaviors. As I continued to attend sessions and become part of the session scene, I focused my notes on new behaviors or unusual events that I had not seen in previous sessions, as well as recordings or concerts that the musicians suggested for me. The portable Edirol recorder was unobtrusive to the musicians since many of them also record parts of the sessions as a way to learn tunes at home.

Visual documentation of sessions was more difficult but fortunately not as necessary for this study. Most of the sessions took place in low-lit pubs where cameras and video equipment would not only be difficult to use in the low lighting, but would also be out-of-place and obtrusive. Once the musicians at Nanny O'Brien's grew to know me and feel comfortable around me, they allowed me to take pictures of them, although I did so briefly so as not to disturb the atmosphere of the session.

Literature Review

Definitions of Irish Music

Irish music is one of the most easily recognized types of music in the United States, yet one of the hardest to succinctly define. To understand the place of Irish sessions in the larger category of "Irish music," it is important to understand how today's mass media and popular culture have commercialized certain terms such as "Celtic" and "Irish." With concepts such as "traditional Irish music," "Irish traditional music," "Irish trad," "Celtic music," "Celtic fusion," and "New Age," the differences between styles of Irish music become even more mystifying. This confusion may be due in part to the capitalist-based process of globalization that appropriates the meanings of such words. Irish music is considered by mass media to be under the enormous "world music" umbrella, and certain aesthetics of Irish musical style have come to signify to listeners that the music is, in some respect, "Irish" or "Celtic."

Session musicians in Washington, DC and Irish sessions worldwide call the music they play "Irish traditional music." The meaning of "tradition" can differ, sometimes greatly, depending on the context in which it is used or the personal

preferences of the user. The late Scott Reiss, a musician and specialist in early music and traditional musics, explains “traditional” in reference to Irish music:

My use of the expression *traditional music*... broadly reflects usage among musicians in Ireland and elsewhere in North Western Europe to describe the predominantly instrumental common-practice dance music (jigs, slides, reels, polkas, hornpipes, highly ornamented free-rhythm slow airs and solo songs) performed in informal settings across the region. [emphasis in original]⁵

Reiss describes how Irish musicians themselves frequently refer to Irish traditional music today, but he omits those in the Irish diaspora and elsewhere who perform these same dance tunes. He also does not consider traditional music in more formal concert settings. Lawrence McCullough gives a similar definition but adds a time period while removing some of the geographical information from Reiss’s definition. Unlike most Irish musicians, he reverses the order of the words “Irish” and “traditional” in the phrase:

Traditional Irish music is the name used by its practitioners to describe an idiom of instrumental music that consists of dance tunes and song airs. The generic forms and structural characteristics of the music were established in the middle and late 18th century and have remained remarkably constant since that time.⁶

A third definition, by Sally Sommers Smith of Boston University, refers to traditional music as “a body of tunes held in common by members of a national group, or by those with an affinity for the music if not necessarily ties of

⁵ Scott Reiss, “Tradition and Imaginary: Irish Traditional Music and the Celtic Phenomenon,” in *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe*, ed. Martin Stokes and Philip V. Bohlman (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 167.

⁶ Laurence E. McCullough, “Style in Traditional Irish Music,” *Ethnomusicology* 21, no. 1 (2001): 85.

nationality.”⁷ Her definition speaks to the music of the Irish diaspora, including England, the United States, and Australia. Many musicians of Irish descent perform the music of their cultural heritage, and others who have little or no Irish heritage may enter the Irish music scene because they feel an inner connection to the music. It is this affinity for the music that is key for session musicians in Washington, DC.

Historically, traditional Irish music has been viewed as one of the two main musical forces in eighteenth-century Ireland, the other being the colonial, Anglo-Irish presence associated with classical music. Leith Davis notes that this dualism falsely homogenizes the two groups and ignores the interaction that occurred between them.⁸ Edward Bunting’s collections of Irish tunes from the late eighteenth century are a product of the interaction between elite society and Irish harpers.⁹ Bunting’s compilations include the word “ancient” in their titles, a misleading term that nevertheless remains in the titles of these seminal works. “Ancient” implies a static music, unchanged since an indistinct point in the past. According to Reiss, “It conjures the image of a ‘Golden Age’ of Irish culture, a pure and ideal past, and the subsequent struggle to assert or preserve Irish cultural identity.”¹⁰ The belief that the source of all traditional Irish music today comes from an indefinite period of antiquity is a common problem in the conception (or misconception) of Irish cultural history, for both insiders of and outsiders to the culture. On the contrary, performers compose

⁷ Sally K. Sommers Smith, “Irish Traditional Music in a Modern World,” *New Hibernia Review* 5, no. 2 (2001): 111.

⁸ Leith Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender: The Construction of Irish National Identity, 1724-1874* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 24-25.

⁹ As a nineteen-year-old church organist born in Ireland, Edward Bunting notated and collected the tunes of the last of the Irish harpers at the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival.

¹⁰ Reiss, “Tradition and Imaginary,” 149.

new tunes regularly, and to have one's composition integrated into Irish session repertoire is considered a great achievement.

It is also important to remember that “traditional” is not necessarily an inherent part of Irish music. According to John O’Flynn, Irish music is music produced by people in Ireland. In his book *The Irishness of Irish Music*, O’Flynn identifies specific performances of music by people in Ireland and determines “three major style categories for Irish music”: traditional, popular, and classical, as well as various sub-styles for each category.¹¹ Throughout his study, he shows that Irish music is not just the typical “traditional” music marketed worldwide: it also includes the vibrant popular and classical music scenes present in the country. For the sake of simplicity, I use the term “Irish music” in my research to indicate the traditional style with an understanding that it is not the sole type of Irish music, nor is it “ancient” and unchanging. The people making the “Irish music” in Washington, DC are not producing it in Ireland. Because they associate the music and the session with Ireland, I continue to call it Irish music. Similarly, because the musicians play Irish music, I call them Irish musicians, but they are not necessarily ethnically Irish.

Just as traditional style is one type of Irish music, pub sessions are one type of venue for Irish traditional music. Simply put, a session is “a gathering of musicians for the purpose of playing Irish instrumental music.”¹² In Ireland, sessions frequently take place at private homes and might include stories, poetry, jokes, and the ever-

¹¹ John O’Flynn, *The Irishness of Irish Music* (Surrey, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 5.

¹² Sean Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, Focus on World Music Series (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 239.

present conversation in between tunes and songs.¹³ These house sessions occurred many decades before pub sessions. Only during the Folk Revival of the 1950s and 1960s did pub sessions become popular across the world. Most sessions have a certain standard of rules one is expected to follow, called “session etiquette.” These rules will be discussed in the next chapter.

Commodifying “Celtic”

Labels like “Celtic” homogenize the multiple musics they describe, and the marketing industry uses this to its advantage. Mark Slobin’s *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* explores the global flows of music that parallel capitalism, and the commodification of Celtic and Irish music is a fitting example. The New Age phenomenon during the 1990s drew upon Celtic mythology and invented “Celtic” sounds from synthesizers and ethereal female voices to create a mystical, otherworldly genre of music. New Age music and *Riverdance* are prime examples of Slobin’s “industrial interculture,” in which mass-media productions of supposedly Irish culture are marketed on a global scale.¹⁴ To put it simply, “Celtic music only exists after it is produced and marketed; it has no existence outside its commodity form... The community in which Celtic music resides is the virtual community.”¹⁵ The dispersion of Irish music around the globe was once fueled solely by Irish immigration, with face-to-face contact as the only means of transmitting the music. Global economic flows and technology have transformed “the diasporic movement...

¹³ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 21.

¹⁴ Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 61.

¹⁵ Reiss, “Tradition and Imaginary,” 158.

into a movement of disembodied participants by medium and label.”¹⁶ Traditional Irish musicians often resent the use of such overarching labels, particularly when the terms “Irish” and “Celtic” are used interchangeably.

Martin Stokes and Philip Bohlman’s volume *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe* addresses the controversial issues surrounding the globalization and commodification of Irish music, or more broadly, “Celtic” music.¹⁷ It includes articles by scholars studying modern-day Celtic popular culture in the Irish and Scottish diaspora, including Canada and Australia. Scott Reiss contributes a particularly insightful article titled “Tradition and Imaginary: Irish Traditional Music and the Celtic Phenomenon.” He explains, “Many critics contest the use of the term *Celtic* because it erases the boundaries between Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and Breton traditional musics.”¹⁸ Like so many of the other excellent articles in *Celtic Modern*, Reiss breaks apart the illusions of Celtic music created by mass media and redefines Irish traditional music in a modern context.

Returning to the commodification of Irish music, a 2006 compilation of papers titled *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture* reveals some ways in which Irish culture, both real and invented, has infiltrated many aspects of life in the capitalist world. Editor Diane Negra explains what she calls “commodified Irishness” by pointing out the irony that Irish culture is associated with “antimaterialism and whimsy” in an effort by marketers to commodify and sell

¹⁶ Ibid., 162.

¹⁷ Martin Stokes and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Reiss, “Tradition and Imaginary,” 145.

Irishness.¹⁹ From endless Irish-themed shopping to elaborate upper-middle-class Irish-themed weddings, Irishness is marketed to appeal to a range of people, but especially white U.S. consumers. In the realm of music and consumerism, a chapter on Van Morrison explains how he has used his ties to Northern Ireland to market himself with notions of blackness, linking R&B and blues music that began his career with his Irish roots and music that he explored in the second half of his career.²⁰ Similarly, Smyth's book *Music in Irish Cultural History* includes chapters on the use of Irish and Celtic associations in film music such as James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) and John Carney's *Once* (2007).²¹ Creating broad, often essentialized connections between large groups of people across the globe is a key feature of global marketing.

In 1998, at the peak of the infatuation with all things Celtic, Martin Melhuish published *Celtic Tides: Traditional Music in a New Age*.²² This book documents "the story of this Celtic invasion," meaning the rise in popularity of so-called Celtic music, dance, and history during the end of the twentieth century. Beginning with Celtic history and mythology over 2500 years old, the book attempts to link ancient Celtic peoples with modern-day performing artists. Regardless of the validity of such a connection, Melhuish explains the prominence of artists such as The Chieftains, Enya, and Loreena McKennitt and the cultural events that led to their popularity.

¹⁹ Diane Negra, ed., *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

²⁰ Lauren Onkey, "Ray Charles on Hyndford Street: Van Morrison's Caledonian Soul," in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 162-164.

²¹ Gerry Smyth, *Music in Irish Cultural History* (Dublin and Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 158-171.

²² Martin Melhuish, *Celtic Tides: Traditional Music in a New Age* (Kingston, Ontario: Quarry Press, 1998).

With mass media encouraging such a romanticized link between ancient Celts and modern-day popular culture, Irishness has become a commodity to be marketed and distorted in meaning.

By extension, Ireland's tourism industry promotes the idea of the country's charming, undiluted lifestyle in order to attract visitors. In doing so, they use pub sessions to encourage the "colonial view of the Irish as primitives who dwell in a living past."²³ Pubs in some areas of Ireland might pay lead musicians to give the impression to tourists that they are having a spontaneous session. In contrast, tourists in Washington, DC do not flock to DC pubs to hear authentic Irish or Irish American music. The session musicians in DC work to maintain the existence of their sessions by encouraging people to buy drinks, befriend the bartenders, and support the pub.

Irish Traditional Music and Sessions

Academic research in Irish traditional music has grown in recent decades as scholars seek to analyze and differentiate the interpretations of Irish music. James Cowdery's 1990 book, *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland*, describes Irish traditional music with an emphasis on musical analysis. In addition to discussing the historical background of the Gaels who inhabited Ireland and the Celtic branch of Indo-European languages, he acknowledges that very little is known of the music of the Gaels, certainly not enough to make direct links to modern-day Irish traditional

²³ Helen O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2008), 79.

music.²⁴ He explains, “Most traditional musicians feel that their music comes from times even more distant [than the last two centuries.]”²⁵ In 2011, however, I found most serious Irish musicians at sessions and concerts to be well-informed about their music, understanding that their playing styles and techniques were not hundreds of years old. It is the general public that may still believe today’s Irish music is from ancient times. Irish traditional music consists of dance tunes played on melody instruments such as the fiddle, uilleann pipes, and whistles, and embellished with melodic ornamentation indicative of different regional styles in Ireland. Irish songs in *sean-nos* or “old-style” are also part of Irish traditional music, but most of the music performed at sessions in Washington, DC is instrumental.

Many people are unaware that Irish sessions also developed rather recently; they are commonly thought to have a longer history than is actually the case.²⁶ Until the beginning of the twentieth century, Irish music was played in domestic spaces like kitchens. Social and political climates led the Irish to immigrate to large cities such as New York, Boston, Glasgow, Liverpool, and Manchester, and the music of these immigrants later returned to urban areas in Ireland such as Dublin and Cork.²⁷ Irish sessions in pubs and restaurants sprang up during the revival movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and today sessions are an implicit aspect of Irish pubs in countries all over the world.

²⁴ James R. Cowdery, *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland*, (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), 6-7.

²⁵ Cowdery, *Melodic Tradition of Ireland*, 4.

²⁶ Frances Morton, “Performing Ethnography: Irish Traditional Music Sessions and New Methodological Spaces,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 6, no. 5 (2005): 666.

²⁷ Morton, “Performing Ethnography,” 666.

In Ireland, today's sessions attract thousands of tourists seeking an "authentic" Irish cultural experience, either as musicians themselves or as listeners. Perspectives and analyses of Irish sessions have changed in the two decades since Cowdery's 1990 book on Irish traditional music; however, Cowdery describes a session in a way that is still generally accepted by most Irish musicians:

...an informal gathering of musicians for the purpose of playing music together. It may occur in a kitchen, parlor, public house, or parking lot, but it is never considered to be a public performance. Although sessions might be witnessed by the public, they are for the musicians who face each other and interact mainly with each other. The players are there for the fun of playing together and for the opportunity to test their own abilities and assess those of other musicians.²⁸

Helen O'Shea's *The Making of Irish Traditional Music* notes that academic and other literary descriptions often depict sessions as "homogenous" and "harmonious," with everyone getting along and having the same goals. O'Shea's experiences are quite different. She discusses the noisy "punters" at the bar, inhibiting the music, as well as the seating hierarchy of the musicians that excludes outsiders who wanted to play.²⁹ Romanticized notions of intimate sessions may be the ideal, but they are not the only interpretation.

Participatory Performance and Affinity

Although sessions may differ greatly all over the world, most Irish musicians agree that the session exists for the enjoyment of the musicians themselves, and not for a separate audience. The interaction of music and socialization in Irish sessions is an example of participatory music making as described in Thomas Turino's *Music as*

²⁸ Cowdery, *Melodic Tradition of Ireland*, 13.

²⁹ O'Shea, *Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 122.

Social Life: The Politics of Participation. Turino explains that there is no boundary between performers and audience in a participatory performance: “Deeply participatory events are founded on an ethos that holds that everyone present can, and in fact should, participate in the sound and motion of the performance.”³⁰ Turino bases his description of participatory performance on community groups in the United States, Peru, and Zimbabwe. Participatory music making also fuels Irish sessions in the Washington, DC area.

Sessions in DC exist within what Turino would call the “broader cultural values of the capitalist-cosmopolitan formation,” where competition, hierarchy, and profit making are highly valued.³¹ Although hierarchy is prevalent in Irish sessions, competition and profit-making are contrary to session goals. Because participatory music making at Irish sessions is “in opposition to the broader cultural formation,” Turino would consider sessions to be a cultural cohort, or a type of special interest group based, in this case, on the musicians’ enthusiasm for Irish traditional music.³²

In Washington, DC, most musicians who play Irish music are not ethnically Irish. Their cultural cohort exists because they are strongly attracted to the music and the social life surrounding the sessions. In *Subcultural Sounds*, Mark Slobin explains Euro-American global economic flows in terms of dominant, majority forces (superculture) and smaller forces that go against the norm (subculture). Irish sessions are examples of affinity groups, or “charmed circles of like-minded music-makers

³⁰ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29.

³¹ Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 35.

³² *Ibid.*, 36.

drawn magnetically to a certain genre that creates strong expressive bonding.”³³ In Washington, DC, these affinity groups exist as a type of subculture within the majority superculture. In addition, Irish sessions in different countries across the world can be understood as Slobin’s “affinity interculture.” He explains, “Musics seem to call out to audiences across nation-state lines even when they are not part of a heritage or a commodified, disembodied network, and particularly when the transmission is of the old-fashioned variety—face to face, mouth to ear.”³⁴ Although diaspora partly explains the spread of Irish sessions in the world (see the next section), many of the musicians who participate are not Irish and have no connection to Irish culture. Instead, they are drawn to the sound of the music, and they choose to participate in it.

Research on communities like affinity groups has been conducted since before the phrase was in use. J. Lawrence Witzleben’s work with *Jiangnan sizhu* amateur performance clubs in Shanghai reveals striking similarities to Irish sessions in Washington, DC. The clubs meet in public (and sometimes private) spaces just as Irish sessions do. Members are professional and amateur musicians, some of whom are regular attendees and others who visit the clubs when they are able. Witzleben was able to play music, take notes, make recordings, and interact with musicians through participant-observation. As with Irish sessions, Witzleben explains that in *Jiangnan sizhu* clubs, “the process of interacting in the musical group is widely

³³ Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds*, 98.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

viewed as a prerequisite to understanding the music.”³⁵ The music and the social interaction between musicians are key in *Jiangnan sizhu*, as they are with Irish sessions.

Diaspora

The current interest in diasporic musics has moved far beyond the model of the original Diaspora of the Jewish people, who were forcibly expelled from their homeland. The term is constantly changing, however hard we attempt to pin it down. As James Clifford explains, “The discourse of diaspora will necessarily be modified as it is translated and adopted.”³⁶ Don Yoder, Professor Emeritus of Folklife Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, recently used the phrase “Pennsylvania Dutch diaspora” to refer to the movement of southeastern Pennsylvania settlers of German and Swiss ancestry with an established “Pennsylvania Dutch” culture, who moved to the southern and midwestern United States and to Ontario and New Brunswick in Canada.³⁷ Of William Safran’s six possible characteristics of diaspora,³⁸ several

³⁵ J. Lawrence Witzleben, *“Silk and Bamboo” Music in Shanghai: The Jiangnan Sizhu Instrumental Ensemble Tradition* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1995), xi.

³⁶ James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 306.

³⁷ Don Yoder, “The Two Worlds of the Pennsylvania Dutch” (lecture, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, May 5, 2011).

³⁸ William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora* 1, no. 2 (1991): 83. Safran’s six characteristics of members of a diaspora are: “1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original ‘center’ to two or more ‘peripheral,’ or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland... 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return... 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity;

pertain to the Irish diaspora as it exists today in the United States. First, the Irish dispersed from an original “center” to multiple outside regions. Irish immigrants and their descendents are found all across the world, but especially in the United States, Canada, England, Scotland, Australia, and New Zealand. Second, since the 1950s, the Irish government has promoted nationalism through Irish culture, which coincides with Safran’s fifth characteristic regarding the “maintenance or restoration of their original homeland.”³⁹ Finally, due to the cultural events promoted by Irish nationalism projects, many Irish and their descendents “continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.”⁴⁰ In Chapters 3 and 4, we will see how Irish musicians feel secure in their interpretations of Irish music because of their ethnicity. Non-Irish musicians strive to imitate Irish session etiquette in order to preserve authenticity, and traveling to Ireland to play at sessions is one of the most exciting endeavors for many non-Irish musicians who play Irish music.

Irish music, and more recently Irish sessions, have been brought to probably every place in the world where Irish musicians have migrated, and each session will have different rules and levels of strictness. Musician and scholar Sean Williams describes typical sessions in the United States as “rigid, with despotic session leaders, instrumental (and personnel) hierarchies, a limited number of tunes, tune lists, and

and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (83-84).

³⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 84.

other elements with the potential to get in the way of *craic* (fun times).⁴¹ One musician who played at sessions in Austin, Texas explains, “I sometimes felt like the Irish session was dominated by people who didn’t like each other but were stuck with each other because they were in love with Irish music, so you have this real dysfunctional family.”⁴² Williams contrasts her description of U.S. sessions with the Irish session scene in Canada, “where the rigidity is replaced by a distinctly local interpretation of Irish music. Waltzes are common, solo airs are rare, and a single tune set can draw easily from American, Irish, Scottish, French, and Canadian sources.”⁴³ Williams’s experiences seem to indicate that because U.S. musicians try so hard to stay true to their concept of what sessions in Ireland are or should be, they become more strict and unyielding. In Canada, where Irish music is adapted to the local scene, sessions are much more flexible.

Examining sessions closer to Ireland, an article by Marion Leonard reveals how Irish immigrant communities in Liverpool and Coventry use music to maintain their own sense of Irishness and their separateness from the English people around them. She explains, “The performance of traditional music has provided a way for Irish emigrants to connect with one another and to express cultural difference.”⁴⁴ While Irish immigrants might now feel welcomed in the United States, the “cultural difference” between Ireland and England remains antagonistic. In these communities in England, Irish sessions are a place and time for families to come together to listen

⁴¹ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 125.

⁴² Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁴ Marion Leonard, “Performing Identities: Music and Dance in the Irish Communities of Coventry and Liverpool,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 6, no. 4 (2005): 521.

and play music. Members of these immigrant communities point out that the pub session, which has become a symbol of “authentic” Irish music in Ireland today, was actually made popular in London during the 1940s (and in the United States during the Folk Revival, as previously mentioned). Such pride reveals that this Irish diaspora, now multiple generations removed from Ireland, feels connected to the growth and popularization of Irish traditional music.

Irish music in Latin America is a different outcome, as an article on Irish immigration by Edmundo Murray explains. Because of numerous potato blights and famines, Irish immigrants had migrated to parts of Latin America before the 1880s, specifically Argentina and Uruguay via the Río de la Plata. While the wealthy tended to assimilate into mainstream bourgeoisie culture, the middle classes clung to their Irish national identity, including a preference for Irish traditional music heavily influenced by the Irish music in the United States.⁴⁵ After the 1880s, however, Irish immigrants had a more difficult time settling in Latin America due to restrictions on land ownership, and many returned to Ireland or moved elsewhere without having a lasting musical impact on Irish music in Latin American. Aside from a few Irish-Argentinean ballads collected from the pampas, Irish music does not seem to have had a strong presence in this region.⁴⁶ A century later, when “Irishness” began to be marketed globally as a romanticized commodity, pubs and St. Patrick’s Day celebrations became more common in Latin America. Andean music scholar Fernando Rios adds that in terms of a “Celtic” presence, the Galician influence in

⁴⁵ Edmundo Murray, “*Una poca de gracia*: Irish Music in Latin America,” *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* 7, no. 2 (2009): 240.

⁴⁶ Murray, “*Una poca de gracia*,” 244.

Latin America is much stronger than the Irish influence because of Latin America's connection to Spain.⁴⁷

Yet Irish sessions have gained popularity in some surprising places. Sean Williams writes about the liveliness of the subculture of Irish music in Japan, in which "Japanese people are deeply drawn toward Irish music, culture, and notions of identity."⁴⁸ Japan has numerous Irish pubs featuring Japanese musicians playing in weekly sessions, as well as harp festivals, Irish traditional music camps, set dancing classes, poetry readings and Irish plays in Japanese and English, and even a 250-seat Irish bar in Universal Studios Japan. While Williams was in Japan in 2003, *Riverdance* was touring in Japan's major cities. She notes that the most remarkable aspect of Japanese musicians performing Irish music was the sense of nostalgia generated from the music: "People who recognized the tunes as Irish exclaimed frequently (and sometimes tearfully) that Irish music reminded them of their childhoods, or their home, or their mother's singing."⁴⁹ In Japanese Irish sessions, authenticity and imitation guide the players' behaviors. Instead of simply being influenced by recordings of Irish music and allowing some flexibility, Japanese musicians in pub sessions perform direct copies of the music.⁵⁰ The musicians also imitate session behavior in Ireland, as they ignore the restaurant patrons and play for their own small circle. This study shows that musicians who play Irish music in such

⁴⁷ Personal communication, November 29, 2011.

⁴⁸ Sean Williams, "Irish Music and the Experience of Nostalgia in Japan," *Asian Music* 37, no. 1 (2006): 101.

⁴⁹ Williams, "Irish Music," 102.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

an affinity group do not necessarily need any Irish heritage to feel a sense of belonging and enthusiasm for the scene.

Finally, two sessions studied by Donna Thurston in Wellington, New Zealand reveal yet another part of the diaspora for Irish music and musicians with its own unique set of characteristics. Although many Irish immigrants have been moving to New Zealand since the nineteenth century, only in the late 1980s and early 1990s did the pub session scene become popular in the country, thanks to the folk festivals and first-generation migrants from Ireland and Scotland.⁵¹ The two sessions in Wellington both occur on Monday nights with different groups of musicians, and each session has its own character depending on the musicians who attend. For example, one session is known for playing many of the same tunes each week, or what one person described as “a stagnant repertoire,” while the other session varies the tunes more frequently.⁵² The atmosphere at the first session may be interpreted as more open, diverse, and welcoming to newcomers, based on the attitudes of the musicians and the higher number of free reed instruments and guitars. According to Thurston, the second session could be considered more advanced and closer to a session in Ireland, based on the strict guidelines for the appropriate combination of instruments and proper session etiquette. Interestingly, Thurston uses the term “punters” to describe the non-musician pub patrons, just as session musicians in Ireland use the word.⁵³ The

⁵¹ Donna Thurston, *Irish Music in Wellington: A Study of a Local Music Community*, M.A. Thesis (Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University of Wellington, 2010), 20-21.

⁵² Thurston, *Irish Music in Wellington*, 22.

⁵³ Thurston, *Irish Music in Wellington*, 34; Helen O’Shea, “Getting to the Heart of the Music: Idealizing Musical Community and Irish Traditional Music Sessions,” *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland* 2 (2006-7): 4.

similarities between Wellington and Ireland-based sessions are probably a direct result of the numerous Irish immigrants who play at Wellington sessions, as opposed to U.S. sessions where fewer first-generation Irish immigrants are regular participants.

Learning about sessions in other parts of the world and discovering what motivates musicians to play at sessions leads to a better understanding of how and why the motivations of DC session musicians are similar to or different from session musicians elsewhere. Although Irish sessions may have initially spread due to emigration from Ireland, the contemporary music culture of Irish sessions is no longer explained by diaspora alone, since it incorporates many non-Irish musicians who have a strong affinity for the music and the social gathering.

Goals and Significance

Collectors, preservationists, and scholars have researched Irish traditional music since Edward Bunting notated the music of the last Irish harpers at the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival.⁵⁴ My research is the first to study the vibrant Irish music scene in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Most musicians who play Irish music at weekly sessions in DC are not Irish themselves. Several are Irish-American, but many more are simply drawn to the music through affinity. My main goal was to discover who these Irish session musicians are and what motivations they have for playing Irish music. I also wanted to learn the ways in which they perceive the Irish music they play today and the historical knowledge they have of Irish music. Do they think

⁵⁴ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 59.

the music is hundreds of years old, preserved exactly the way musicians had always played it? Or are they informed about the playing styles and derivations of tunes?

From reading about sessions in Ireland and other places around the world, I knew that I should be aware of session etiquette: the often strict rules of behavior that govern typical Irish sessions. I was curious to discover whether musicians at sessions in Washington, DC expected the same rules of session etiquette and why. What instruments would be acceptable to bring to sessions in DC? What tunes would they play that I already knew, and what other tunes do they like to play? How do musicians manipulate leadership roles and hierarchy within a session? I was especially anxious, though intrigued, to see if the musicians would accept me at their sessions, and to understand how they would perceive me, a classically-trained violinist and multi-instrumentalist attempting to learn Irish fiddle.

Because this study is the first of its kind in the Washington, DC area, it focuses on the details that distinguish Irish sessions in DC from those in Ireland. In Chapter 1, I discussed the methodology for this project, the relevant literature about Irish and Celtic music, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 summarizes the instruments, repertoire, and social etiquette that make up session culture. I was fortunate to meet several musicians who have played at sessions all over the world and could give me a comparative analysis of how they viewed DC sessions. In order to show that not all sessions in DC are identical, Chapter 3 provides an overview of each session, as well as discussing several other venues that are directly linked to the musicians and the music at sessions. Chapter 4 focuses in greater detail on one particular session, Nanny O'Brien's, that became my regular session. In Chapter 5, I

analyze DC Irish musicians' social interactions through their music, the affinity that they have for the music, and the behavior of the musicians with reference to concepts of authenticity. The final chapter, Chapter 6, summarizes the research findings and examines areas for further study.

Chapter 2: Irish Sessions

Instruments

Harp

The harp is the national emblem of Ireland, having been played by the Irish bards who were the storytellers, genealogists, musicians, political advisors, and general sources of information from twelfth- to seventeenth-century Gaelic Ireland. Some of the earliest records of bards and their stories come from the writings of Christian monks.⁵⁵ Bards who played the harp were called “harpers,” distinguished today from “harpists” who play Western classical music. Harpers enjoyed immense success and importance in Ireland from the thirteenth to the early seventeenth centuries, when wealthy families would become their patrons. In 1603, however, when England was colonizing Ireland, Queen Elizabeth I issued a proclamation giving the order to “hang all harpers where found and burn the instruments.”⁵⁶ The English government obliterated much of Irish language and culture during the seventeenth century, and only a few harpers remained by the end of the eighteenth century. Turlough O’Carolan was one of the last and most well-known harpers. Completely blind by the age of eighteen, he made his living performing and composing for Ireland’s wealthy classes. Although little is known about the Irish

⁵⁵ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 48.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 53.

harpers' playing styles, many of O'Carolan's compositions remain due to the efforts of collectors like Edward Bunting.⁵⁷

Today, the harp still has strong associations with Ireland. The modern Irish harp has nylon strings plucked with the pads of the fingers, not the metal strings played with long fingernails.⁵⁸ Although not typically played at Washington, DC sessions, perhaps due to the harp's long resonance and large size, the instrument has close ties to Ireland, and musicians perform Irish music on the harp either solo, with other instruments, or in groups composed entirely of harps.

Fiddle

As a violinist who also plays Irish music, I am frequently asked, "What is the difference between a violin and a fiddle?" I usually respond with, "It depends what kind of music you are playing!" Today's fiddle and violin are the same instrument, but session musicians always refer to it as the fiddle in the context of Irish music. Session fiddlers might hold the fiddle against the shoulder, neck, or chest, whereas classical violinists always hold the violin against the neck with a shoulder rest attached for support. The right hand holds the bow, and some fiddlers use a classical-style bowhold, while others prefer to move the hand slightly higher on the stick of the bow to get a specific tone or sound out of the instrument. An Irish fiddle book used by one of the session leaders at Nanny O'Brien's gives "guidelines" to hold the violin and bow, explaining that there is no "one correct way" and the guidelines are "not to

⁵⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁸ Cowdery, *Melodic Tradition of Ireland*, 20.

be taken as absolutely right.”⁵⁹ The book diagrams violin posture as almost exactly the same as classical violin posture, with the exception that the right hand pinky “spends more time off than on the stick.”⁶⁰

The fiddle is one of the most popular instruments for sessions, probably because of its easy portability. Fiddlers composed many session tunes heard today, so the tunes are easier to play on the fiddle than on some other instruments. Regional differences in playing styles are a major topic in Irish fiddling. Styles are still named after counties and regions of Ireland where they may have once been isolated. For example, the East Clare style features characteristic reels, long bow strokes containing many notes, and slightly lowered 3rd and 7th scale degrees. Fiddler Tom says that Donegal style is “the best,” influenced by Scottish music and characterized by single bow strokes, bowed triplets, and exciting rhythmic drones. Bob also loves Donegal style, and he is arranging for a group of fiddlers to play Donegal tunes at the 2012 Takoma Park Folk Festival, reading from notated music with detailed bowings and ornaments that characterize the style.

Uilleann Pipes

Marching pipes have been associated with Ireland and Scotland since at least the eleventh century,⁶¹ but the smaller uilleann pipes are now a distinguishing feature of Irish traditional dance music and a frequently accepted session instrument. In contrast to the easy portability and maintenance of the fiddle, someone who plays

⁵⁹ Matt Cranitch, *The Irish Fiddle Book: The Art of Traditional Fiddle-playing* (Cork, Ireland: Mercier Press, 1996), 26.

⁶⁰ Cranitch, *Irish Fiddle Book*, 27.

⁶¹ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 132.

uilleann pipes must have the knowledge and patience to play this more complicated instrument. “Uilleann” means “elbow,” since the piper pumps a bellows under his or her right elbow for air pressure that creates the sound. A set of uilleann pipes has three major components that create the sound. First, the double-reed chanter has a two-octave range, ideal for most Irish melodies. Three octaves of drones can sound throughout an entire piece, unless the player turns them off with the stop key. Finally, a set of three keyed pipes called regulators adds to the rhythmic, percussive, and harmonic accompaniment. The regulators have double reeds inside them just as the chanter does, and a player turns the regulators on and off with the right hand wrist. Regulators were first added in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and they are now a necessary aspect of the instrument.⁶² The uilleann pipe tradition almost died out by the early twentieth century, but it was revived along with Irish traditional music during the Folk Revival of the 1960s.

Flute and Whistle

The Irish flute is a transverse flute made of wood. Silver flutes played by classical musicians are acceptable in Irish traditional music, but the timbre of wood is a more desired aesthetic in Irish sessions. Instruments may be keyless or have up to eight keys. Flutes entered Irish traditional music in the seventeenth century from the Western classical tradition, becoming popular in Irish music in the eighteenth century.⁶³ Like the uilleann pipes, the flute enjoyed a revival during the 1960s. Due to increasing demand for the instrument in the 1970s, flute makers began producing

⁶² Ibid., 132.

⁶³ Ibid., 138.

flutes in Ireland based on English models from the nineteenth century.⁶⁴ Compared with the plentiful number of early fiddle and uilleann pipe recordings, a lack of early Irish flute recordings indicates that the flute did not initially have the same high reputation. Flutes are quite common as a “traditional” Irish instrument today, but they are rarely the most numerous instruments at sessions.

The whistle is often called the “tin whistle” or “pennywhistle.” It is an end-blown flute with six finger holes, and like the fiddle, it is easily portable and a common entry-level instrument in Irish music. In addition to inexpensive, mass-produced, but often good-quality plastic or metal whistles, one can spend hundreds of dollars on expensive handmade whistles made from diverse materials that create drastically different tones; common materials include aluminum, copper, brass, nickel, sterling silver, stainless steel, PVC, a variety of woods, high-quality plastic, and composite wood fiber/resin. Copper produces a very sweet tone, while brass yields a harsher, brighter tone. Whistles come in many keys and octaves, the most popular and versatile being a high D whistle. Each whistle can comfortably play in the key that it is pitched in, as well as the key a perfect fourth above it. Other keys require alternate fingerings and half-hole fingerings to play notes out of the diatonic scale. Serious whistle players will acquire dozens of different whistles in varying keys and made of different materials. Over the past two to three decades, a large internet community of whistle enthusiasts has joined Chiff & Fipple,⁶⁵ which features information and discussion about anything related to whistles.

⁶⁴ Dorothea E. Hast and Stanley Scott, *Music In Ireland*, Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 80.

⁶⁵ The website and message board are located at www.chiffandfipple.com.

Button Accordion and Concertina

Free reed instruments have a loud, full sound well-suited to dance music, and they did not become part of Irish traditional music until the nineteenth century. A player uses the right hand for melody notes and the left hand for bass notes, and the instruments are able to use their bass notes as an accompaniment for Irish dancing.⁶⁶ The piano accordion has a small piano keyboard on the side, and the musician pushes and pulls the bellows to create the sound. Its particularly loud volume allowed it to be heard over the sound of the dancers' feet, but it is not a particularly common instrument at Irish sessions in Washington, DC. Likewise, the full-sounding melodeon is not usually part of DC sessions. This instrument is a one-row, ten-button accordion that was popularized in the United States before traveling to Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁷ Pushing and pulling the instrument in a squeezing motion creates different sounds.

The button or "box" accordion and the concertina, however, are found at some DC sessions. As the button accordion began to replace the melodeon, Irish musicians adapted it to Irish music beginning in the 1920s,⁶⁸ and it has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the last decade of the twentieth century.⁶⁹ It has two rows of buttons instead of piano keys, and unlike the melodeon, it can produce a chromatic scale. The concertina has been called "sweeter, subtler, and more versatile" than the other three

⁶⁶ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 136, 138.

⁶⁷ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 137.

⁶⁸ June Skinner Sawyers, *Celtic Music: A Complete Guide* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 82.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 137.

free reed instruments because it only has one reed per note.⁷⁰ The most popular concertina in Irish music is the Anglo concertina, whose name came from mass-produced English instruments modeled on the German designs of the 1850s.⁷¹ Interestingly, the concertina became known as a woman's instrument because women could buy them at local hardware stores. Musician and scholar Mick Moloney recalls that some homes in County Clare, Ireland had small niches carved into the walls specifically to hold a concertina.⁷² The softer sound of the concertina makes it welcome in Irish sessions where it will not overpower softer string instruments or flutes.

Guitar, Bouzouki, Mandolin, and Banjo

Like the fiddle, plucked string instruments have the facility to play multiple genres of music, whereas inherently Irish instruments like the uilleann pipes and whistle do not. Musicians who play plucked string instruments like the acoustic guitar, mandolin, and banjo are likely to “cross over” from other styles of playing and be familiar with multiple playing styles. The acoustic guitar is mainly an accompanying instrument in Irish traditional music, and it is occasionally used as a melody instrument as well. In the twentieth century, guitars appeared on early recordings of Irish music to accompany melody instruments, adding a new harmonic aspect to the melodies.⁷³ Standard guitar tuning is acceptable in Irish music, but since the 1960s, guitarists Davey Graham and Martin Carthy popularized the DADGAD

⁷⁰ Cowdery, *Melodic Tradition of Ireland*, 23.

⁷¹ Hast and Scott, *Music in Ireland*, 78.

⁷² Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 138.

⁷³ O'Shea, *Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 30.

tuning.⁷⁴ This tuning allows for more open fifths and drones, creating an aesthetic that does not force the tunes into major or minor chords. At the Nanny O'Brien's session in Washington, DC, one guitarist uses standard tuning and the other uses DADGAD.

The bouzouki heard in Irish music is a flat-backed version of the long-necked Greek lute and has been unquestioningly accepted in Irish traditional music since the 1970s.⁷⁵ It has four courses of two strings each, with the ability to play both melodies and percussive harmonic accompaniment. The strings of the bouzouki are tuned GDAD from lowest to highest, allowing for the fifths and drones heard with the DADGAD tuning of the guitar.

Another instrument to become initiated into Irish music during the Folk Revival is the mandolin. Like the bouzouki, the mandolin has four two-string courses, and it is tuned like a fiddle. Although the mandolin can produce chords, session musicians use it primarily as a melody instrument. The banjo is another instrument capable of harmonic accompaniment but usually played as a melodic instrument at sessions. The renowned Tommy Makem of the Clancy Brothers played the five-string banjo in a fingerpicking style, similar to that of American folksinger Pete Seeger.⁷⁶ The four-string tenor banjo, invented in 1915, is tuned one octave below the fiddle and was popularized in Irish music in the early 1960s by Barney McKenna of the Dubliners.⁷⁷ Musicians who play the guitar, bouzouki, mandolin, or banjo often frequent Irish sessions in Washington, DC.

⁷⁴ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 141.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 141.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 141.

⁷⁷ Hast and Scott, *Music in Ireland*, 80.

Piano and Hammered Dulcimer

Like the guitar, the piano was featured as an instrument for accompanying melody instruments on early recordings of Irish music, and in the 1920s the piano appeared on almost all recordings of Irish instrumental music. This opened a small door to more women, or at least those who had access to a piano, since they were still only encouraged to play softer instruments, specifically the concertina.⁷⁸ Most sessions in Washington, DC do not have a piano available at the restaurant, with the exception of P. Brennan's in Arlington, which highlights the piano at a weekly Sunday brunch session.

Most scholarly research on Irish traditional music ignores the hammered dulcimer, a trapezoidal zither with strings struck with two wooden sticks. The Washington, DC area features some well-known American hammered dulcimer players who play Irish music, including Maggie Sansone and Karen Ashbrook, and it would be amiss to exclude the instrument from this discussion. Karen, who frequents McGinty's in Silver Spring, said she does not bring her dulcimer to sessions anymore because it is too difficult to hear; instead, she brings her whistle. Only once during my research, at the Royal Mile Pub in Wheaton, Maryland, did I see a session musician playing dulcimer. Several other session musicians I spoke with play the instrument, but they prefer to bring a more portable, smaller instrument to sessions. Bob from Nanny O'Brien's suggested that the long resonance of the dulcimer might interfere with the unison melodies of Irish tunes. Nevertheless, he suggested to me that some week we both bring our dulcimers to the session at Nanny O'Brien's.

⁷⁸ O'Shea, *Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 30.

Bodhrán and Bones

In Irish dance music, percussion used to come from the movement of the dancers' feet, but today's sessions often lack dancers and have a bodhrán player present. The bodhrán is a frame drum with a goatskin drumhead, played with the fingers or with a wooden stick known as a beater or tipper. Its status as an older "traditional" instrument is highly contested. It may have been a cooking or farming implement used to carry peat from the fields, which led to the joke that "Pete" must have been quite small.⁷⁹ As a musical instrument, it was probably used only for ceremonial and ritual occasions like the seasonal mummer's plays.⁸⁰ The bodhrán was only popularized when Seán Ó Riada played it in the 1960s with his radio ensemble Ceoltóirí Chualann, the group that became the Chieftains. The pitch-changing style of playing, produced by using the left hand to change the tension of the drum skin, developed over a mere decade, and bodhrán players become virtuosos and soloists.⁸¹ By the 1970s, the bodhrán's presence on recordings of Irish music, and its acceptance by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, made it an Irish instrument whose validity was rarely questioned.

With the innovation of bodhráns made from different woods and drum skin materials, played with new types of beaters and with ornate decorative features, bodhrán makers and musicians have taken the instrument to a virtuosic level. German maker Christian Hedwitschak's Art Bodhran is an example of a high-end instrument with the option of synthetic skins, and several players in the Washington, DC area

⁷⁹ Craig Zumbrun, personal communication, June 5, 2011.

⁸⁰ Hast and Scott, 81.

⁸¹ David C. Such, "The Bodhrán: The Black Sheep in the Family of Traditional Irish Musical Instruments," *The Galpin Society Journal* 38 (April 1985): 17.

own Hedwitschak bodhráns. John Joe Kelly of the internationally touring band Flook is known for his innovative bodhrán playing style where he bends the pitch of the drum to create melodic lines and new rhythms. In a session, the attentive bodhrán player will listen carefully to the melody instruments and outline the form of the tune with the bodhrán, allowing the other instruments to control the tempo and feel of the tune. Perhaps because an inexperienced and overenthusiastic bodhrán player is the downfall of many a session, many degrading jokes developed around the bodhrán.

The bones are another percussion instrument found in Irish music, although they are not usually seen at Washington, DC sessions. Although formal concerts might include a bones player, they are not often heard at sessions. Musician and writer Barry Foy jokes that “bones and spoons are occasionally permissible for the sake of quaintness and charm, but the combined number of pairs of either must never exceed one.”⁸² The bones consist of two slightly curved wooden sticks (originally cow, sheep, or goat ribs) held in one hand, and played so as to create high-pitched rhythmic clicks.⁸³ The introduction of the bones into Irish music is also attributed to Ó Riada and the Chieftains, who felt that the bones’ “strident clacking sound contrasts well with the bodhrán.”⁸⁴ One can also purchase bones made of plastic, metal, diverse woods, slate, and natural bone. In today’s world, Irish technique uses

⁸² Barry Foy, *Field Guide to the Irish Music Session* (Seattle: Frogchart Press, 2009), 19.

⁸³ Cowdery, *Melodic Tradition of Ireland*, 24; Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 144.

⁸⁴ Seán Ó Riada, quoted in Cowdery, *Melodic Tradition of Ireland*, 24.

only one set of bones in one hand, while minstrel technique involves a pair in each hand, often with flashier movements.⁸⁵

Repertoire

Instrumental Dance Tunes

Irish sessions all over the world feature sets of dance tunes on the accepted Irish instruments discussed above. Each session includes different tunes depending on the musicians who are present on a given day. When sessions lack dancers, as is so often the case today, the instrumentalists have free reign over the way they play the tunes, and the focus shifts from accompanying dancers to creating a social environment based on collective music-making. At sessions in the Washington, DC area, certain tunes like “Kesh Jig” and “The Butterfly” are standards that even the most elementary players know. According to fiddler Heather, these are:

...dead common tunes that people know that are almost like nursery rhymes... So whenever you have a new Irish session, certainly, they start out with the chestnuts and the nursery rhymes, which is a slightly derogatory term, but I’m just using it to say simple tunes that people know, like “John Ryan’s Polka” or whatever, which everybody learns at the beginning and then everybody gets sick of and quits playing.⁸⁶

Most musicians prefer to mix these standards with more obscure tunes, perhaps from favorite recordings of their favorite musicians or bands. Heather explains, “There’s a bit of a word-of-mouth structure. It tends to start out with the Chieftains or Bothy Band recordings, or lately, Dervish, Danú, those sorts of things.

⁸⁵ Bone Dry Musical Instrument Company, “Bones FAQ,” <http://www.bonedrymusic.com/Musical-Rhythm-Bones-Guide-and-FAQs-s/162.htm> (accessed November 1, 2011).

⁸⁶ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

Everyone has their pet records.”⁸⁷ Still others feel they are above certain beginner tunes and desire to play only advanced tunes. According to Heather, “A lot of people will sit there and say... ‘It’s not cool to only play these old chestnuts,’ or ‘We play these tunes because we’re advanced connoisseurs of traditional music,’ or ‘We’re really doing ‘pure drop’ stuff, we’re not just playing these clichés.’”⁸⁸ Session players in DC tend to migrate to the sessions where they play the types of tunes they prefer, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Most Irish dance tunes are in binary form and both parts are repeated, so the form of the tune is AABB. Session musicians themselves often refer to the “A part” or the “A section” of a tune. Some tunes, like “Banish Misfortune,” have a third section, making the form AABBC. A few tunes might even have a fourth section, while other tunes have sections that are not repeated. Each type of tune also refers to the name of the dance that would be performed. Although sessions do not necessarily include dancers, newly composed Irish session tunes take the form of one of these dances.

The most common Irish dance tune category in Ireland and the Irish diaspora is the reel,⁸⁹ notated in 4/4 time but felt in a fast duple meter. Many reels played at Irish sessions, like “Miss McLeod’s Reel,” originally came from Scotland but are popular at sessions elsewhere, including those in Washington, DC.⁹⁰ The figures below show a popular reel in the Washington, DC area called “The Peeler’s Jacket,”

⁸⁷ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

⁸⁸ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

⁸⁹ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 145.

⁹⁰ Hast and Scott, *Music in Ireland*, 66.

first as the skeletal form, followed by an ornamented form.⁹¹ The slurs in the second version indicate where a fiddler might change bow direction, and the fiddler's bowing would create syncopation. "The Peeler's Jacket" is often played in a set with "The Torn Jacket," and musicians refer to this set as the "Jacket Set."



Figure 3: Skeletal melody of a reel titled "The Peeler's Jacket."

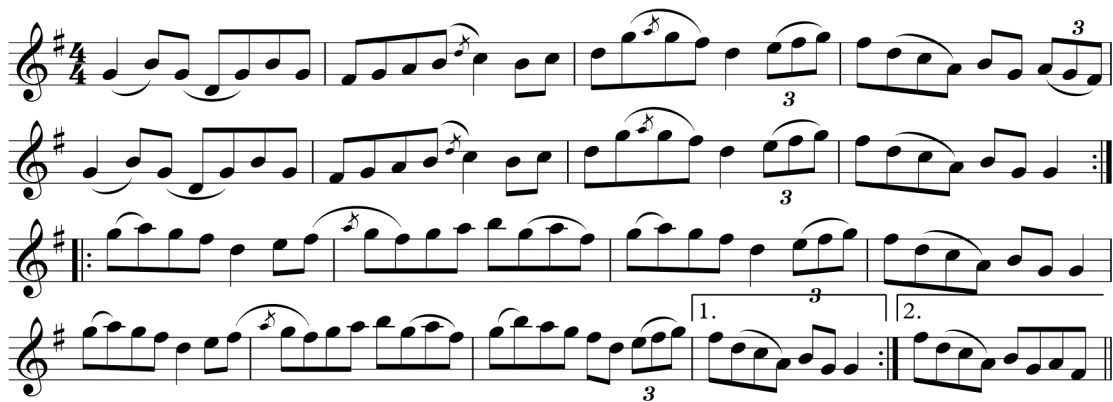


Figure 4: Ornamented version of "The Peeler's Jacket."

⁹¹ The skeletal version of "The Peeler's Jacket" comes from TheSession.org (<http://www.thesession.org/tunes/display/1343>) and is the approximate skeletal version used by the musicians at Nanny O'Brien's. The ornamented version is my transcription of the recording of a fiddler from Nanny O'Brien's on August 29, 2011.

The jig, of which there are three types, is another popular form, felt in a compound meter. Single jigs and double jigs are notated in 6/8 time. Single jigs tend to have more groupings of a quarter note followed by an eighth note, creating a different triple meter feel, while double jigs have more groups of three eighth notes. The third type of jig, a slip jig, is notated in 9/8 time, with three groups of three eighth notes to a measure. The figures below show a skeletal version and an ornamented version of a double jig known as “Whelan’s.”⁹² The ornamented version includes not only grace notes, but altered pitches as well, such as the D# in measures 9 and 13 and the intervals in measure 15.



Figure 5: Skeletal melody of a double jig titled "Whelan's."

⁹² The skeletal version of “Whelan’s” is the version available at TheSession.org but with the ornaments on the dotted quarter notes deleted (<http://www.thesession.org/tunes/display/1447>). The ornamented version is my transcription of a recording of a button accordion player at Nanny O’Brien’s on November 7, 2011.



Figure 6: Ornamented version of "Whelan's."

Along with these three types of jigs, the slide is a type of dance tune that has a similar feel to a single jig, but it is based on a specific dance and has a different feel because of the dancer's movements.⁹³ Because of this difference, slides are notated in 12/8 time, with four groups of three eighth notes to a measure. Slides are associated with the southwest Sliabh Luachra region of County Kerry along with polkas.⁹⁴ The polka developed in Europe in the early 1800s and spread to Ireland by the late 1800s. It is a fast couples dance in 2/4 time. Musicians achieve the feel of the polka by slightly accenting the second eighth note in each pair, to create an off-beat feel.⁹⁵

Another popular tune form, the hornpipe, is a dance in duple meter that has a slower tempo than a reel and is associated with dotted rhythms, giving it a "long-short" swung feel. Historically, the hornpipe was associated with sailors, and the heavy stepping in hornpipes was only appropriate for men.⁹⁶ Although the notation for most hornpipes uses groupings of a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth

⁹³ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 148.

⁹⁴ Hast and Scott, *Music in Ireland*, 66.

⁹⁵ Cranitch, *Irish Fiddle Book*, 66; Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 149.

⁹⁶ Hast and Scott, *Music in Ireland*, 68.

note, the actual duration of the values feels more like triplets and is played as such.

The figures below show the skeletal and ornamented versions of a popular hornpipe called “The Boys of Bluehill.”⁹⁷ Musicians add grace notes to select pitches in the skeletal melody, and they often include additional triplets as well.



Figure 7: Skeletal melody of a hornpipe titled "The Boys of Bluehill."



Figure 8: Ornamented version of "The Boys of Bluehill."

⁹⁷ The skeletal version of “The Boys of Bluehill” is based on the version available at TheSession.org (<http://www.thesession.org/tunes/display/651>) but notated using the frequently-seen pattern of dotted eighth note and sixteenth note rhythms. The ornamented version is my transcription of the recording of a flute player from the Auld Shebeen on September 11, 2010.

Toward the end of a session, if the players are in the mood for a slower dance tune, they might suggest a waltz. These waltzes derive from the nineteenth-century European waltzes, and some of O'Carolan's tunes that are in 3/4 time are reinterpreted as waltzes.⁹⁸ Another dance in a moderate 3/4 time is the mazurka from Poland, and players emphasize the second beat of each measure to match the dance movements. There are very few mazurkas in Irish music, but they are especially popular in Donegal.⁹⁹

Several other forms of dance tunes are part of Irish music but almost as rare as the mazurka: marches, barndances, and highlands. Marches can be easily confused with jigs, reels, polkas, or barndances, since the idea of marching to the two strong beats per measure is what makes it a march. The best way to identify a march is if it has "march" in the title, such as "March of the Kings of Laois."¹⁰⁰ A barndance is similar to a fast hornpipe but is associated once again with Donegal, to the north near Scotland. Barndances are often described as "Scottish sounding."¹⁰¹ A highland is yet another dance form in 4/4 time associated with Scotland. In addition to the dotted eighth note–sixteenth note pattern found in barndances, the highland includes the opposite pattern: a sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth.¹⁰² This rhythm gives the highland its characteristic Scottish "snap."

⁹⁸ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 151.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 151.

Songs

The singing style associated with Irish music comes from the *gaeltacht* regions of Ireland where the Irish language has survived, especially Connemara, and it is called *sean-nós*, or “old-style” singing.¹⁰³ *Sean-nós* singing is solo, unaccompanied singing in Gaelic, with free meter and rhythm and highly ornamented melodies. The *gaeltacht* regions of Ireland have their own *sean-nós* singing styles, named after the regions of Connemara, Donegal, and Munster,¹⁰⁴ but musicians at DC sessions rarely discuss *sean-nós*.

Although the majority of music performed at Irish sessions is instrumental, occasionally someone will sing a song or be invited to sing one. Singers might accompany themselves on the guitar or bouzouki, be accompanied by another player, or sing unaccompanied. At sessions in DC, singers accompanying themselves might nod to a musician with a melody instrument to take a solo in between verses. Other musicians might join in if they know the chorus of the song, or even add harmonies with their voice or an instrument during a verse or chorus. Most musicians at DC-area sessions sing in English, not in *sean-nós* style, with an occasional chorus in Gaelic. Brian Gaffney, who often comes to DC-area sessions with Brendan Mulvihill, sings and accompanies himself on guitar.

¹⁰³ Hast and Scott, *Music in Ireland*, 84.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 164.

Aesthetics and Etiquette

The Session Musician

Knowing a substantial number of tunes and playing them in a stylistically correct way are two characteristics of an ideal session musician. The more tunes a musician knows, the more he or she will be able to participate in the music making at the session. Fiddler Heather states, “Your ability to succeed in Irish music sessions is a direct proportion of how many tunes you can play at a socially acceptable level of musicality with other people.”¹⁰⁵ Even if an American travels to sessions in Texas, Japan, or France, if they know a large quantity of tunes, they will be able to play in any Irish session in the world. When serious session musicians travel, they often seek out the nearest session to meet new people, exchange ideas, and play tunes.

Some musicians who are just entering into Irish music, even excellent musicians from another genre of music, make the mistake of learning only a few tunes that they like. The musician may play them superbly, but if no one else knows the tunes, the musician will be playing by his or herself. Continuous solo playing at a session is contrary to the very nature of participatory music-making at an Irish session. The goal is to include as many musicians as possible. According to a DC-area session musician, a professional violist took up the fiddle for fun and learned from Brendan Mulvihill, perhaps the premier fiddler in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The violist already had superb technique, so he learned Brendan’s fiddle style, replicating his playing almost exactly. This musician had approximately twenty pieces that he knew perfectly and played at sessions, but no one could play

¹⁰⁵ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

with him because they did not know his tunes. One DC musician explained, “He didn’t want to play badly, he was really obsessed with sounding good and playing interestingly. And then he got bored. And now he plays with everybody.”¹⁰⁶ The new fiddler learned that he would have a much more enjoyable time if he could play music with the other session musicians instead of just by himself.

Session musicians tend to come from a variety of backgrounds. While some are professional, full-time musicians who perform in public and teach music lessons, others might be semi-professional musicians with a steady day job. Still others are crossing over from another genre, particularly if they play instruments such as the fiddle, guitar, or banjo. Another group of musicians might only play at sessions. Williams explains, “The insiders are often the ones playing for enjoyment instead of in competition with the others. They might start tunes a little more slowly and then warm up in speed, or they might offer more variation in the tune forms they choose.”¹⁰⁷ Some Irish musicians choose not to attend sessions at all. The concept of a session revolves around the idea that everyone who plays Irish music should be able to play together, regardless of his or her musical ability. Whether this actually occurs is a result of the individuals who make up each session and the complex session etiquette they follow.

The Session Sound

A session might feel chaotic to listeners before they understand how the musicians are interacting to make the music, but even session musicians say this

¹⁰⁶ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

¹⁰⁷ William, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 19.

chaos is part of the session, making it more relaxed and spontaneous than a formal concert. Musicians play two to five tunes strung together in a set, without a pause in between tunes. A single tune is usually under forty-five seconds in length, and each tune might be repeated two to five times depending on the length of the tune and the whims of the musicians, with three or four times being the norm in Washington, DC. Therefore, a whole set of several tunes might last five to seven minutes. Sessions in Washington, DC do not typically go beyond five tunes in a set, and I have never seen a musician stop playing because a set was too long. Rebecca, who has traveled to sessions in many different parts of the world, explains that in some regions, musicians try to continue the set for as long as possible:

When somebody starts a set, general etiquette is to let them finish it, whether they want to play one tune, two tunes, three tunes, or four tunes. At six or seven tunes, you can peel off. And if you go to Ireland or Boston or Texas... it's a thing to see who can keep the balloon going.¹⁰⁸

Toward the end of each tune, the person who started the set uses one of several possible methods to indicate when the next tune will begin; eye contact, a small foot pop, a percussive call of “hup,” a nod of the head, a shout of the next tune title, or calling out the next chord to the guitar player are some of the methods of conveying the change to a new tune. The goal is to maintain the tempo and rhythm while changing tunes without dropping a beat, adding a beat, or hesitating. Well-crafted sets incorporate tunes that do not feel exactly the same to the player; each might be in a different key or mode, or at least have a new rhythmic feel. Recordings of famous musicians lead to the standardization of some sets of tunes, such as famed

¹⁰⁸ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

fiddler Michael Coleman's set "Tarbolton"/"The Longford Collector"/"The Sailor's Bonnet."¹⁰⁹ Musicians also learn an individual's favorite sets after playing them week after week.

Ornamentation of melodies gives Irish music its distinctive sound. The ways in which a musician decorates the basic "skeletal" melody with ornaments might dictate the regional style or the technical level of the player. The phrase "grace notes," borrowed from Western classical music, describes the ornaments used on all the melodic instruments, although Irish musicians agree that aural learning is a much more accurate way than notation to acquire the proper style of playing ornamentation. Some ornaments originated on specific instruments, such as the *cran* for the uilleann pipes, in which a repeated note is quickly separated by several higher grace notes.¹¹⁰ The fiddle can imitate the *cran* or add double stops to emulate the drones of the pipes. Because each melody instrument is completely different, certain ornaments on one instrument might be more difficult than on another instrument. A fiddler, for example, will not move the left hand to shift positions as a classical violinist would do to facilitate a series of notes. Instead, a fiddle player would alter the ornament or simply leave it out.

At most sessions, every musician plays each tune with slightly different ornamentation, creating an identifiable but varied outline of the tune. Thomas Turino refers to this type of sound found in participatory music making as "dense texture."¹¹¹ Because of melodic variations and differences in ornamentation, melodic parts merge

¹⁰⁹ Foy, *Field Guide*, 31.

¹¹⁰ Hast and Scott, *Music in Ireland*, 64.

¹¹¹ Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 45.

together to create a sound in which not all the individual parts are clearly distinguishable. The fact that not every part will be heard clearly is a common sound feature for participatory music throughout the world.¹¹² Turino explains that dense texture acts as a “cloaking function” to encourage musicians to participate so that they do not worry about other people hearing any mistakes they might make.¹¹³

Except for when a single musician begins a tune, multiple musicians are always playing together at the same time. The melody instruments control the tempo of the music, while the harmony and rhythm instruments are expected to adjust if a tune speeds up. Irish enthusiasts like to remind accompanying instruments that the music was a solo instrumental tradition first: “Irish music was in fine shape before it began to be swaddled in lush, melodramatic harmonies, and it would be in equally fine shape if all chord-playing instruments (including accordionists’ left hands) were to disappear tomorrow.”¹¹⁴ In between each set, musicians take the time to enjoy the *craic*, pronounced “crack”—camaraderie—before someone moves on to the next set of tunes.

Etiquette

Newcomers to a session must learn a variety of behavioral implications that are inherent in session culture. Sean Williams explains that, “like any social gathering, the participants follow an array of unwritten rules... Every one of these

¹¹² Ibid., 46.

¹¹³ Ibid., 46.

¹¹⁴ Foy, *Field Guide*, 44.

rules is heavily contested, affirmed, denied, debated, proven, and disproven.”¹¹⁵

When attending a session for the first time, the generally understood rule is that one should sit slightly away from the circle of musicians and listen until invited to play. At laid-back sessions, one might be invited to play immediately, whereas participants in an exclusive or advanced session might not invite anyone they do not know or recognize. A new musician should not start their own set, however, until they are invited to do so, or until they have been playing with the group at least two or three hours.¹¹⁶

The *Field Guide to the Irish Music Session* by Barry Foy explains the pitfalls of negotiating an Irish session in a way that is comical yet often quite true. Foy recommends that a musician “learn twenty tunes that everyone knows and then one that nobody knows—this will make you both an interesting player and a valuable source of tunes.”¹¹⁷ The best session musicians know many familiar tunes that everyone can play, but they seek to keep the session innovative and fresh by constantly bringing new tunes to share with the other musicians. It is common courtesy to allow the musician who started the set to lead the changes into each new tune and finish the set when they are ready, but occasionally the group as a whole will end the set.

The instrument one plays also affects participation in the session. Melody instruments are generally welcomed all the time, particularly if musicians play them well. Fewer rhythm and percussion instruments are needed. One guitar and one

¹¹⁵ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 18.

¹¹⁶ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

¹¹⁷ Foy, *Field Guide*, 50.

bodhrán per session is enough. If multiple musicians play these instruments, they will take turns on different tunes, usually deferring to the more experienced or senior musician. At relaxed sessions like Nanny O'Brien's, two guitarists often play together with no conflict, but only one bodhrán player at a time should play.

During a session, the leader or leaders have the responsibility of maintaining the flow of the session. They often arrive first and might be paid by the restaurant in money or in food and drink, to keep the session going and growing. The leaders invite different people to begin sets of tunes ("have a tune") so that musicians take turns starting sets. The leader also brings new tunes to the session to keep the repertoire from becoming stagnant every week. If new musicians arrive, the leader is often the one to dictate whether this person will be invited to join the session. In Helen O'Shea's experience at Pepper's in County Clare, new musicians would sometimes wait all night and not be invited to join.¹¹⁸ A session leader usually has his or her favorite spot to sit, usually a place where he or she can hear and see everything that is going on in the session. Other musicians tend to congregate around the session leader because that is where the strongest playing will come from. Sometimes a beginning musician will be invited to the place of honor next to the session leader, as a sign of encouragement, while other sessions relegate this person to the outskirts of the session. Week by week, session musicians tend to assume their usual arrangement of seats, a trend that reinforces the hierarchy within the group.

¹¹⁸ O'Shea, *Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 123.

As strict as session etiquette might be, musicians are rarely overly concerned with punctuality.¹¹⁹ A session advertised to start at 7:00 in the evening might not actually start for another hour or more. Sessions in parts of Ireland and New York City might last until the early hours of the morning, with some musicians not even arriving until after midnight. In places with a smaller population of Irish musicians, sessions tend to end before midnight except on special occasions, like a session following a concert or festival.

¹¹⁹ Foy, *Field Guide*, 55.

Chapter 3: Sessions in Washington, D.C.

The Session Scene

Overview

As with most major U.S. cities, and many international cities as well, Washington, DC is home to numerous Irish or Scottish restaurants often called pubs. Of the countless Irish- and Scottish-themed pubs in the DC metropolitan area, approximately ten of them host regular open sessions where musicians gather to play music and socialize. Each session has its own characteristics, reputation, regular players, and favorite tunes so that a traditional Irish or Scottish musician at any level might find a session that suits his or her playing ability and musical preferences. DC is home to professional, semi-professional, hobbyist, amateur, beginning, and crossover musicians who play Irish music. Although not all of them choose to play at weekly pub sessions, those who do play tend to find the sessions they like the best and frequent those the most.

Below is a map of the DC-area Irish sessions that were part of this research. The ten markers without a central dot indicate weekly sessions that occurred on a regular basis, and the two markers with central dots show sessions that occurred for special occasions or less frequently than the weekly sessions. Note that the uppermost markers are two separate markers, since these pubs are across the street. Except for the two sessions in Wheaton, Maryland and one in Fairfax, Virginia, all of the other

[illegible]

Beginner Sessions

Ireland's Four Provinces is a pub in Falls Church, Virginia. Until 2005, a different pub in the Cleveland Park area of DC had the name Ireland's Four

Provinces, retaining the nickname “Four P’s” by those who frequent it. The session at the current Four P’s in Falls Church is unusual because the players read from sheet music, typically taboo at other sessions. Many of the players had their own books of Irish tunes, including Mel Bay publications: *100 Essential Irish Session Tunes* (called the “green book” by musicians), *100 Enduring Irish Session Tunes* (called the “blue book”), and *100 Vital Irish Session Tunes* (no nickname). These books outlined the “skeleton” of the tune, or the basic notes that make up the foundation of the melody, excluding ornamentation. The session leader, Alan, had many extra copies and gave me some to borrow for the session. I also met a female classical violinist who, like me, was attending the session for the first time.

When I go to a session, I often sit at a nearby table with a drink and listen until I am invited over to play. Typical Irish session etiquette dictates that a visiting musician should wait patiently until being invited to play, and sometimes the musician might end up waiting all evening. On the contrary, Alan saw me with my fiddle and immediately pulled up a chair and waved me over. He was born and raised in Ireland – having a leader who is actually Irish is yet another unique quality of this session. He plays whistles and bodhrán and performs in a traditional Irish band called the Dirty Pints with two other members of the session, a fiddler and a guitarist. This particular session on a Monday evening in September 2010 included ten players in addition to me. They played typical instruments such as fiddle, bodhrán, guitar, whistle, concertina, and octave mandolin. Most surprisingly, an electric bass player sat comfortably at the corner of the table near the wall, playing along with the group, despite the fact that electric bass is not generally accepted in Irish music. The

musicians seemed confident in the sets of tunes they would play together. They would often play a set of three tunes on the same page, and occasionally they would play a set spread across multiple pages. While I was there, they almost always played each tune three times, occasionally only twice. Alan said I should feel free to suggest any tunes I wanted to play at any time during the session. As the session moved along, Alan took turns asking different people in turn to start tunes, or they would simply start them on their own.

Interestingly, this session at Ireland's Four Provinces was the only weekly session in DC led by a person from Ireland, yet the leader encouraged the players to disregard some of the most basic rules of session etiquette. He allowed the musicians to read from sheet music, which is almost never seen at Irish sessions, and he permitted instruments like the electric bass that are not "accepted" Irish instruments. Instead of upholding rigid rules of behavior that might have been expected to come from someone who was Irish, Alan wanted the musicians to focus on the enjoyment of playing Irish music together and socializing with one other.

The Auld Shebeen

The Auld Shebeen, an Irish pub in Fairfax, Virginia, hosts a session that is sponsored by Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann (CCÉ). This session is unusual because it is held not on a weeknight, but from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Saturday afternoons. Led by Eric, this session is home to beginners and musicians who do not mind playing with beginners. A website set up for regularly scheduled Irish music sessions gives the following description of the session: "In general, the Auld Shebeen is for

intermediate players, but on the third Saturday of the month we make a special effort to accommodate beginners. Playing from sheet music is not allowed at the Auld Shebeen sessions.” I had emailed Eric about attending the session, and he said that judging from my personal music website, “we might be a bit tame for you.”¹²⁰ He welcomed me to come by any time, suggesting that Nanny O’Brien’s and Ri-Ra had some of the best musicians.

At this particular session, the group is used to playing certain sets of tunes together. Scott has a list of tunes that they like to play together, which can be found on the website (novasession.org). He also encourages members to stay linked through a Yahoo group and email list for announcements. While sheet music is available on the website for learning new tunes, they discourage musicians from reading from sheet music while they play, which is consistent with the founding principles of the CCÉ. Unique to this session is a tune teaching session held at Green Acres School on the first Saturday of every month except during the summer. At this tune-teaching session, more experienced players teach tunes to interested beginner or intermediate musicians.

Eric is an organized promoter of Irish music, but the way he leads a session is different from that of more forceful session leaders seen elsewhere. Eric knows many tunes, but he does not necessarily play assertively or in a controlling manner. Mike, on uilleann pipes and whistles, is considered another leader of this session. He knows a seemingly endless number of tunes, as well as multiple names for many of the tunes. Mike’s instruments are naturally loud, but he is not a controlling and forceful

¹²⁰ E-mail to author, August 30, 2010.

leader. Not everyone at the session was as relaxed as Eric and Mike, however. A woman with a baby and a stroller sat nearby, and the woman had a bodhrán in a shopping bag with the words SUPERMODEL in large font. She let her baby hit the drum rather loudly, and the female bodhrán player who was part of the session shot exasperated looks at the other male musicians across from her. As the session continued, the bodhrán player grew more and more frustrated. The mother did not seem to realize that her baby's drumming was aggravating, and that the rhythms were out of sync, because she was sitting so close to the musicians. She occasionally played the drum herself, but she was not very coordinated in her movements, and her down and up strokes did not always coincide with the rhythm of the tunes being played. The bodhrán is often the brunt of instrument jokes, partly because a poor bodhrán player can destroy the session for the rest of the musicians. Sean Williams warns visiting bodhrán players: "Enough beginning bodhrán players have spoiled sessions by pounding away too loudly (or using inappropriate rhythms, or messing with the tempo) that you may receive glares instead of welcoming smiles."¹²¹ Maintaining appropriate rhythms is essential for a bodhrán player because disruptions in the rhythm negatively affect the rest of the session. This event at the Auld Shebeen reveals that even beginning sessions, held for the purposes of learning tunes and encouraging newcomers, can have unspoken rules regarding behavior.

¹²¹ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 18.

Principles Behind Beginner Sessions

Most researchers on Irish music sessions do not discuss beginner sessions and the ways in which they are similar to and different from intermediate or advanced sessions. The two sessions mentioned above, the Four P's and the Auld Shebeen, are generally open and friendly toward musicians who might be learning a new Irish instrument or are crossing over from another genre of music, and they advertise themselves as such. While the Four P's session is run by an Irishman, allows sheet music, and is open to non-traditional instruments, the Auld Shebeen session is sponsored by the CCÉ and led by Americans who may or may not have Irish heritage. The CCÉ session encourages beginners but insists on certain forms of etiquette, such as not reading from sheet music.

Intermediate Sessions

Nanny O'Brien's Irish Pub

I will use the phrase “intermediate session” to indicate a session that welcomes beginning players but may have higher expectations for etiquette at the session, and whose players focus more on socializing through music than on individual virtuosity while at the session. Session musicians themselves do not typically use this phrase. They might instead call it a “friendly session,” meaning new players are always welcome to join as long as they play Irish music on an accepted Irish instrument.

Nanny O'Brien's is the longest-running session in the Washington, DC area, despite the restaurant having changed owners several times. Since at least the 1980s,

the pub session has had a positive reputation among Irish musicians as the session to attend when visiting DC. In September 2011, a banjo player from North Carolina came to Nanny's because he had heard of its reputation. Several accomplished musicians in the DC Irish music scene have mentioned that they now prefer to play elsewhere, at places like McGinty's in Silver Spring, Ri-Ra, and P. Brennan's. The virtuosity of the musicians at Nanny O'Brien's may not always be its strongest feature, but the musicians are friendly, know many tunes, and enjoy socializing and discussing the music to improve their own knowledge. Chapter 4 is devoted to a detailed study of the session at Nanny O'Brien's, which became my "home" session since I frequented it the most.

The Royal Mile Pub

This Scottish pub in Wheaton, Maryland hosts both Irish and Scottish sessions on different Sundays in a given month. Instead of playing in the back room as at Nanny O'Brien's, this session is at the main entrance to the pub near the window, where patrons in the whole restaurant can see and hear the musicians. On some weeks, fiddler Mitch Fanning leads a session for children, but it would be a mistake to think that these children are amateurs. On the day I attended, the session was comprised of three adult fiddlers, five younger fiddlers between the ages of seven and eighteen, one man playing guitar, one man playing hammered dulcimer, and one teenage girl playing bodhrán who also step danced in the center of the circle for one tune. They seemed to know an endless number of tunes and had well-developed concepts of style that showed in their playing. They often did not need to make eye

contact with each other, usually staring into space or looking at their instruments, but they continued smoothly on to the next tune in the set. I suspected that they were used to playing certain sets, so they knew what to expect.

After an hour or so, Mitch, the leader, got ready to leave and apologized to the group for leaving early. The oldest of the young fiddlers, a teenage boy, started a tune and led a set, seemingly taking up the position of leader. He stumbled over a transition between tunes but scoffed at himself and continued to play. At this point, five children and one older man were playing, and the children had a much more focused tone, consistent intonation, and steadier rhythm than the older man. When the older man started a set, it was difficult for me to decipher a rhythm and melody, but the children must have been familiar enough with the tunes because they followed along. This session was one of the few where I saw children playing. The bar atmosphere of some pub sessions might restrict people under the age of 21 from attending, due to U.S. liquor laws.

McGinty's Public House – Silver Spring

I had spoken to Karen Ashbrook about why she attends McGinty's in Silver Spring instead of Nanny O'Brien's, where she used to play. One reason had been that it is easier for her to drive to and park at McGinty's, which I noticed immediately because of the free garage nearby. I arrived on a Tuesday in January 2011 to observe the session from the nearby bar. The bartender asked if I had come to watch the State of the Union address, and I replied that no, I had come to hear the music. He told me that the leader of the session was Dennis Botzer (who I later learned goes by "Doc")

and that Doc also plays at P. Brennan's, which is owned by the same people who own McGinty's.

Five men, all around the age of 40 or older, sat around a table with glasses of beer in the small room in the back. They played fiddle/whistle, guitar/bouzouki, uilleann pipes/whistle, flute/whistle, and banjo. All of the musicians seemed to be competent and experienced players, although they did not all play on every tune. They chatted in between tunes, but the duration of their chatter was shorter than that often heard at Nanny O'Brien's. One couple was watching the musicians from a nearby table in the main seating area, removed from the group in their little room, but able to hear and see clearly. The rest of the patrons at the bar were talking and ignoring the music.

Doc noticed that I was listening and watching, and he took a break to come chat with me while the others kept playing. We talked about the local players we both knew, including Karen Ashbrook, who usually comes to this session, and he gave me a flier for the new P. Brennan's session that was starting in February on Sundays for brunch. He called it a "piano session" because it would include a pianist playing in the accepted Irish style. I told him that I would love to play, but that I was still learning the style and building a repertoire of tunes. Doc did not seem to mind, and he encouraged me to play at McGinty's or P. Brennan's anytime.

P. Brennan's Irish Pub and Restaurant

The session at P. Brennan's in Arlington, Virginia is a brunch session on Sundays from noon to about 3:00 p.m. I attended the session in June of 2011, having

first heard about it through Doc from McGinty's in Silver Spring. He mentioned that they move the session to someone's house during football season, because the pub needs the extra space for Sunday football fans who come to watch the games and drink beer. The flier Doc had given me at McGinty's explained that the P. Brennan's session "will be hosted by either Doc or Marc on a lovely Everett studio piano and a rotating lead musician."¹²² The strong sound of the piano keeping the beat created a completely different feeling from the strings, flutes, and pipes that I was used to from other sessions. I recognized several people, including flutist Tina Eck and banjo player Keith Carr from McGinty's in Arlington, and fiddler Orion from The Limerick Pub. Since Orion was closest to the entrance, I walked over to her and asked if I could play. She invited me to sit down.

The man next to me helped clear some space for me, and I learned that he was Jesse Winch. He is involved with the local branch of the CCÉ, the O'Neill-Malcom branch. Jesse gave me his card and offered to put me on the email list, and I soon discovered that he is usually the one who send out emails on the CCÉ listserv. He plays bodhrán and percussion, and is one of only a few musicians I encountered in DC who specialize in Irish drumming. Most other musicians play bodhrán as an additional instrument. Jesse asked if I knew about MAD Week, the traditional Irish music instruction being offered from July 18 to 22, 2011. This unique Irish event will be discussed in the next section.

Doc and Marc Glickman are the organizers of this session. Marc is a luthier, and he also gave me his card in case I wanted to take my violin to him. Tina, Keith,

¹²² Doc Botzer, "Sunday Brunch Irish Session w/ Piano," flier, April/May 2011.

Doc, and Marc were especially strong leaders at the session, beginning tunes and inviting others to do so. I recognized several of the tunes and played along quietly. Tina played some tunes from the band Flook's recording *Haven*, which features virtuosic flute and whistle playing and recently composed tunes as opposed to "standard" session tunes. These modern tunes still fall under one of the dance categories of Irish tunes, such as jigs and reels, but they may be more complex melodically and harmonically. Because of this added complexity, they are more difficult to pick up aurally at a session. Older session tunes often have many repeated sections within the melody that make the tune easier to learn quickly. Newer tunes often stray from the melodic repetition of the older tunes and move in new directions. While I am often able to play along with older tunes that have many repeated phrases, I am sometimes incapable of catching on to any part of newer, less repetitious tunes.

The session was relatively large, with about ten to fifteen musicians. Steve and Maureen from Nanny O'Brien's had told me they usually attend this session since they live nearby, but they were not there the week I played. A woman sat next to Tina, knitting throughout the session. She sang occasionally, but as Heather from Nanny O'Brien's had once mentioned, singers do not get to sing very often. Most of the session is focused on instrumental tunes. Yet when this woman did sing, she set her knitting on her lap and became the center of attention.

The session concluded around 3:00 p.m. In addition to chatting in between sets, I spoke at length with many of the musicians afterwards, including Jesse Winch of the CCE and the co-leader of the session, Marc Glickman. Although the session consisted of some of the best players in Washington, DC, they did not exclude me,

and I expect they would welcome players who wanted to learn and improve as long as they did not disrupt the flow of the session. The musicians invited me back and encouraged me to attend MAD Week, an Irish traditional music week in DC, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

Advanced Sessions

McGinty's Public House – Arlington

The first session I attended in the DC area with the intention of playing the session was at McGinty's in Arlington, Virginia, down the street from my house in Alexandria. Having played at several sessions in Pennsylvania and Delaware, I knew a bit about what to expect, but I also realized I did not have much of a repertoire of tunes and I was not experienced in playing sets. Since the session had been advertised as starting at 7:00 p.m., I arrived fifteen minutes earlier and got a beer at the bar. I asked the bartender where the session musicians played, and he directed me to a back area with a stage and a cleared dancing area surrounded by a few tables. By 7:05 p.m., no musicians had appeared. Shortly later, I met Keith who was eating dinner at the bar. Keith was one of the session leaders, along with Tina, a flute and whistle player, who was running late and would show up later. He told me that he plays bouzouki, banjo, mandolin, and sometimes bodhrán. He also ran a Sunday evening session at P. Brennan's at the time, in September 2010.

After Keith had eaten, I moved to the back area while Keith and Tina set up a folding table in the back area for their instruments, along with their beers and cell phones. They tuned to a tuning application on Tina's iPhone. I sat at the nearest table

to the raised stage area where they played. Keith got up to tell the management to turn off the recorded music, and on his way back I asked him what the second tune in the previous set had been. Keith responded, “I don’t even know!” and hurried back to the table.

They ignored me as I sat listening, and they chatted in between sets about how tunes went. This seemed to be a practice session for them. Around 8:00 p.m., a man named James, who played guitar and bodhrán, arrived. With James playing harmonic and rhythmic backup on guitar, Keith’s banjo playing switched from rhythmic backup (for Tina) to melodic unison with Tina. A mandolin player named Evan arrived and brought out a notebook. At this point, Keith invited me up to play a tune. I began with “Swallowtail Jig,” a very familiar tune I had first learned on the hammered dulcimer. While we were playing, Tina asked Keith to ask me if I knew “Kesh Jig,” another popular Irish tune and a standard for beginners. I said that yes, I knew it and could play it if Tina started it.

Another set I played was “Drowsy Maggie” and “Miss McLeod’s Reel,” but I knew different versions and felt awkward and out-of-place, unable to make my melodies fit with what everyone else was playing. I asked them if they had a list of favorite tunes that they often played here. At this question, Tina and Keith chuckled and said they were “beyond the list” but that the Auld Shebeen session has a list with a lot of well-known basic tunes. It seemed that this session was far beyond “basic.” I did not recognize most of the tunes, but most of the other musicians seemed to. While changing tunes, they looked up and made eye contact, but not usually with much extraneous movement. They played each tune in a set about three to five times each

before moving on to the next tune. I learned that occasionally Irish step dancers, brought here by their teacher, come to dance to the music at this session. I also discovered that James plays bass for contradances in the area, and that Evan also plays for contradances, stating that one tune that Keith and Tina played, “Paddy Ryan’s Dream,” was a “good contradance tune.” Evan also passed around a flyer for a bluegrass concert he was playing in Cheverly, Maryland. The musicians seem to play, or at least be familiar with, lots of folk music styles in the area.

Around 8:45, Martin, a flute and whistle player, showed up. He said he was new to the area, having been in Arlington about a year, and he had been to Nanny O’Brien’s. Martin, who was closest to my age, seemed to be the friendliest toward me and the most willing to talk with me. He plays only flute and whistle now, but he had played some trumpet in high school. As we chatted throughout the session, I asked for advice as to how I should improve my playing. He suggested I take some fiddle lessons, since that is “the best way to learn style,” and offered to email me some recordings of tunes performed by Jessica Zigler, a fiddler in Chicago who converted from classical violin. He also suggested that I watch a session at J. Patrick’s in Baltimore, led by Brendan Mulvihill. Martin said I could try to take lessons with Mitch, who was a student of Mulvihill’s, since lessons with Brendan are more difficult to get. He also said I could go to the Auld Shebeen session on Saturdays at noon, calling it a “friendly” session for beginners, but, like Keith, he thought the session did not have a “strong leader,” implying that the lack of a strong leader took away from his enjoyment of the session.

The technology used at this session was particularly interesting. Keith had a Tascam recorder, and I mentioned that I owned an Edirol digital audio recorder. Several of the players had iPhones out and used them to record occasionally. Tina joked about the lack of technology on the younger side of the table, where Martin and I sat with our notebooks and pens, compared to the other side of the table with Keith, Tina, Evan, and James with their iPhones and recorders.

Later in the evening, an inebriated restaurant patron wandered over to the session and asked if we were “jamming.” Keith replied, “We call it a session.” When the patron had left, Evan made a joke during the next tune that we were “jamming.” While I heard session musicians at other sessions occasionally refer to their playing as a “jam,” suggesting that it was a fun, interactive, music-making experience, this word seemed to be derogatory in the minds of the session musicians at McGinty’s in Arlington. Foy’s *Field Guide to the Irish Music Session* states, “There is no ‘jamming’ in Irish traditional music... You either know how to play this music or you don’t; you’ve either listened to lots of it or you haven’t.”¹²³ Most of the musicians at McGinty’s would agree with Foy’s explanation.

The following week, I attended McGinty’s in Arlington again. Tina had gotten her wisdom teeth out, so Keith was the main leader tonight. Keith commented on my Edirol digital recorder, which I had brought this time, and I mentioned that my fiancé and I had purchased it because we are both musicians. Keith learned that my fiancé, Kevin, was a jazz bass player, and he wondered if they knew some of the same jazz musicians. Martin, the flute player who had sent me recordings, mentioned that it was

¹²³ Foy, *Field Guide*, 13.

“not purist but...” Kevin could play Irish music on his upright bass. Keith laughed but quickly stated, “The only bass player allowed at this session is Trevor Hutchinson,” the bass player for one of the most famous Irish bands today, Lúnasa. Keith’s strictness about acceptable instruments reveals that he is a “purist” when it comes to Irish traditional music. Irish musicians are known to be strict with the instruments they allow at sessions. This incident resembles a less violent version of the event described in Martin Stokes’s introduction to *Ethnicity, Identity and Music*, in which masked men attacked a guitarist the day after he had refused to leave a session in Ireland.¹²⁴ In this case, the guitar had not been an acceptable instrument at that session to the point that people fought to defend the purity and authenticity of Irish music. While I doubt Washington, DC musicians would physically fight over an unwanted instrument at the session, they might ask the person to leave.

An hour and a half into the session, Keith invited me to play a tune. I played “The White Petticoat” that I had learned by ear from a recording by the Irish-American band Solas. Keith was the only one who recognized the tune and joined in with me, while everyone else listened quietly. After playing the tune several times through, I looked at Keith and he took us into “Glass of Beer,” which I did not know but the other musicians did. After we had finished, Keith gave me a smile and noted that “The White Petticoat” was a “great tune and a great recording.” Although I did not know many tunes, Keith and musicians like him value obscure, lesser-known tunes, and people at other sessions began to associate me with “The White Petticoat.”

¹²⁴ Martin Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 1997), 9-10.

Ri-Ra

The Ri-Ra session, led by French-born Irish fiddler Philippe Varlet, is recognized as one of the more advanced sessions in the DC area. The CCÉ Potomac website explains, “While the seisiúns are open to all players, the majority of players frequenting the seisiún at this time are advanced.”¹²⁵ This disclaimer is a friendly word of advice to Irish musicians who may not be considered “advanced,” indicating that they might feel out-of-place or unwelcome at this session. If they were not sufficiently advanced, they would be encouraged to sit and listen instead of trying to play along.

Several other musicians have told me that I would “know Philippe when [I] saw him.” They indicated that Philippe had strong opinions about how Irish music should be performed, and one was wise to do things his way at a session, including playing certain accidentals in a tune that others might not agree with. Born and raised in France, Philippe came from a musical family but fell in love with Irish music during the continuing folk revival of the 1970s.¹²⁶ He moved to Washington, DC with his father in the mid-70s and discovered the area’s Irish music scene. His playing is so precise and strict that has been called a “scary fiddle god” and “a mighty force.” Although he has performed at the White House, the Smithsonian, and many prestigious festivals and events, Philippe prefers the flexibility and spontaneity of session playing. According to an article in *Bethesda Magazine*, Philippe loves “the

¹²⁵ Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann O’Neill-Malcom Branch, “Philippe Varlet and Rob Greenway,” <http://www.ccepotomac.org/www/BandsSessions.htm#PVRG> (accessed September 30, 2011).

¹²⁶ Virginia Myers, “Almost Famous,” *Bethesda Magazine* (September/October 2009): 136.

musical tension among the players... the dynamic nature of the music within the familiar framework of a traditional tune.” In his own words, “A session is a bit chaotic musically... but that’s part of it.”¹²⁷

Two session musicians told me that Philippe had written a dissertation on Irish music in Chicago around the same time as Mick Moloney’s dissertation, and that Philippe had some complications getting it completed. Philippe does have a Master’s degree in composition,¹²⁸ revealing that although he plays in a traditional style, he has the ability to read music and does not attempt to hide that ability from others. Philippe leads the session at Ri-Ra as well as another session every other week at The Limerick Pub, alternating weeks with fiddler Mitch Fanning.

Daniel O’Connell’s Bar and Restaurant

This pub in Alexandria, Virginia has begun hosting an occasional Monday evening session led by the well-known fiddler Brendan Mulvihill. Instead of being held every week, the session is announced through networking resources like the CCÉ listserv. I first heard of the pub one night in April 2011 before the semi-regular session had started, when I was on my way to Nanny O’Brien’s on a Monday evening. I sent a text message to Rebecca wondering if she was going to be there, and she said not tonight because she was exhausted, but there was a session with “Mulvihill et al” at O’Connell’s in Alexandria. I changed course and arrived at O’Connell’s between 9:30 and 10:00 p.m. Brendan Mulvihill was there, along with guitarist Brian Gaffney. I recognized Doc, who leads the sessions at P. Brennan’s and

¹²⁷ Myers, “Almost Famous,” 136.

¹²⁸ Myers, “Almost Famous,” 136.

at McGinty's in Silver Spring, as well as Tom, who had been so encouraging toward me at Nanny O'Brien's.

The bar was noisy because most patrons were there for the basketball game being shown on the TVs. A few, however, were occasionally or even constantly watching the musicians. Tom encouraged me to play some tunes even though I was feeling intimidated by Brendan in front of me. After I finished "John Bowe's Favorite," Brian gave me a fist pound to show his appreciation. He had also accompanied me on guitar, but no one else played along.

As the session came to a close and the musicians packed up, I met another man, Bill, and found out he that lives in the same neighborhood of Alexandria as I do. He suggested that I contact Cindy and Thomas, who live on my street, and another musician named Sean. They organize the Irish Breakfast Band, and Bill said they would be glad to have me. He chided me for not joining them sooner, since I did know about them and had taught violin to one of the young boys who plays with them.

The Irish Breakfast Band consists of a dozen or more musicians and some young girls who are also Irish step dancers. They perform in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, frequently with a different arrangement of band members depending on who is available. On Saturday mornings, they can often be heard in a local home or on the roof of a local business in Del Ray. The Irish Breakfast Band has been called "emblematic of the grassroots resurgence of the popularity of all things

Irish in the United States.”¹²⁹ They encourage children who are learning violin or another Irish instrument to play with them, and they have a notebook of sheet music that they give to children to learn. When I taught my student who was in the band, his music consisted entirely of “standards” of Irish music that can be heard at sessions, such as “The Butterfly” (a slip jig), “Peg Ryan’s” (a polka), and “St. Anne’s Reel.” The Irish Breakfast Band encourages the continuation of Irish music by helping young beginning musicians get interested in playing in a group.

O’Sullivan’s Irish Pub

The session I attended at O’Sullivan’s in February of 2011 was advanced in the sense that many well-known and experienced players performed, but it was not exclusive and closed off to beginners such as myself. I got myself a Guinness from the bar and then moved to a table closer to the musicians. Multiple tables had been pushed together on the right side of the pub, surrounded by about ten musicians with several small groups of patrons watching from nearby tables or from the bar. Heather and Tom from Nanny O’Brien’s saw me, smiled, and waved. Tom had been playing banjo when I had met him for the first time at Nanny O’Brien’s, but today he was back to fiddle. Maureen (guitar/bodhrán) and her husband Steve (flute) were there, as was piper Mike. Doc from McGinty’s in Silver Spring saw me and also waved. He immediately came over to chat with me and invited me to his Sunday session at P. Brennan’s, which was just starting up at the time. He said Brendan Mulvihill is

¹²⁹ Brian Thomsen, quoted in The Irish Breakfast Band, “The Irish Breakfast Band in the Top Ten?”, <http://www.irishbreakfastband.com/No10.htm> (accessed September 30, 2011).

“great” and he would never pass up a chance to play with him. “Brendan has only ever played fiddle,” he said, “he doesn’t drive a car – he just plays fiddle.” He explained that Brendan knew so much about playing Irish fiddle that he was “like Buddha.”¹³⁰ Brian Gaffney, the guitarist and vocalist, drives Brendan and often performs with him. Other musicians I recognized included James (flute) and Keith (banjo) from McGinty’s in Arlington, and a woman playing bodhrán whom I didn’t recognize, although I did recognize that the drum she played was made by Christian Hedwitschak of Germany, the same maker as my bodhrán.

As with all the sessions I have attended, the musicians talked to each other in between tunes, often in two separate groups: Rebecca’s group from Nanny O’Brien’s and the group closer to Brendan. Unlike some session leaders who can be controlling, Brendan did not start every set or tell people to begin tunes all the time. A group of four elderly people sat closest to the musicians, and Brendan invited a man in a red sweater to sing. When the man sang, the group at the nearby tables and even the crowd at the bar listened silently. While he sang, the man faced Brendan and the musicians, not the patrons in the rest of the bar. He captivated the entire room, and they called for him to keep playing: “Sing another!” After the man had finished, Doc introduced me to another man named Brian, who was an Irish music enthusiast. Brian explained that the man who had sung was a priest named Father Gerry Creedon, and Brian knew him from going to the parish a few times. This priest had given Ted Kennedy’s eulogy and used to be at the parish across the street from O’Sullivan’s.

¹³⁰ Interview with the author, February 7, 2011.

A little later, I waved to Maureen, and she came over to talk with me, having recognized me from Nanny's before I was a regular musician there. She asked why I did not bring my fiddle – a question I seemed to get asked whenever I appeared at a session without it, once the other musicians knew I played. Heather and Tom tried to get me to play, but I laughed and shook my head, explaining quickly that I felt this session was way out of my league. Heather still called me over to sit with them, which I did, and she conveniently had me hold her fiddle while she got up to wander off somewhere else. Eventually, when Brendan and Brian had gotten up to chat in with other people, Tom told me to “play the tune you know!” meaning “The White Petticoat,” a jig that had been one of my first non-standard Irish tunes. Tom said he did not know it but he would pick it up as I played. When I started the tune, Keith picked up his banjo and started playing along, smiling slightly since he probably remembered “The White Petticoat” from my first evening at McGinty's in Arlington.

Toward midnight, the session crowd started to drift away and head out. I spoke to Mike and Heather about Father Creedon, and Mike told me he had done a lot of work with the Hispanic community in the area, and that he was a generous and kind person with a good personality. Mike knew Father Creedon when he came from Ireland in the 1970s. Furthermore, he told me that Father Creedon is the nephew of Seán Ó Riada, one of the most influential figures in the rejuvenation of Irish music in the 1960s, who almost single-handedly introduced the bodhrán to the Irish ensemble in which it is played today.

Although the session at O'Sullivan's never turned into a weekly session, it was one of the most exciting sessions I attended in a year and a half. The quality of

the musicians and tunes, the encouragement and acceptance I received from so many players, and the allure created by the presence of Brendan Mulvihill and Father Creedon turned this event into a unique session experience perhaps reminiscent of a truly Irish session.

Closed Sessions and House Sessions

A Closed Session at The Limerick Pub

A closed session is one that is only open to other players upon invitation. One reason a session may be closed is because of logistical space within the restaurant in which the sessions is being held. Andrew, a Scottish fiddler who also plays Irish music, started playing at The Limerick Pub in Wheaton, Maryland in the summer of 2011. He explained that he and another musician organized the session as an open session, but because they started taking up too many tables and interfering with the dinner rush, the restaurant owner requested that they make the session smaller, and so they opted to make it a closed session. Currently, open sessions occur some Sunday and Wednesday nights at The Limerick Pub, and these sessions are led by rotating musicians, some of whom lead sessions at other pubs on different nights.

Interestingly, The Limerick Pub is located just down the street from the Royal Mile Pub, which hosts Scottish sessions on Sunday evenings and an Irish session usually once a month. The close proximity of these sessions reveals that Irish music thrives in Washington, DC even at restaurants so close together.

Like many of the pubs in DC that host sessions, The Limerick Pub and the Royal Mile are owned by Irish or Scottish immigrants or descendents of immigrants

who are proud of their heritage and seek to promote music that represents their culture and suits their establishment. Neil Foley, the owner of The Limerick Pub, is also a musician and sometimes performs at his pub. The Music page of his pub's website not only draws customers to accept the authenticity of the music being performed there, but it also shows the importance of music to Neil:

Traditional Irish music is the lifeblood of its people. Born from a deep sense of community and companionship, the beauty of the Irish landscape, the spirit of travel and adventure, and a joyful celebration of life – Irish music has to be experienced live to be really appreciated.

If you've ever been to Ireland and want to relive the experience for an evening—or if you've never been—drop by The Limerick Pub to hear Neil Foley and friends perform.

Well known on the Irish Pub circuit, Neil's musical repertoire is rich and varied – from tender ballads and soft airs, to lively renditions of Irish jigs, reels, hornpipes, set dances and rousing sing-alongs. Played and presented with a liberal dose of genteel Irish wit, the music will carry you back to the foot of O'Connell Street in Limerick City, to the banks of the Shannon River, to the Galtee Mountains, and beyond...

Come and join us for an evening. Our music will move you!¹³¹

A Closed Session at The Irish Inn

Occasionally, certain musicians want to play a "session" yet only want certain musicians to be able to play with them. They might not want beginners to intrude or they might want to play specific tunes that they like. One example of a closed session of this kind occurs at the Irish Inn in Glen Echo, Maryland. Four musicians who often play at other sessions like P. Brennan's and the former McGinty's in Arlington perform here. As one session musician explains, "'closed session' ... is a

¹³¹ The Limerick Pub, "Music," www.thelimerickpub.net/entertainment/music (accessed October 3, 2011).

contradiction of terms. It's basically their little concert."¹³² Instead of using the term "closed session," the listing for this event on the CCÉ Potomac website explains that it is "an informal performance of Irish dance tunes and ballads, heard weekly in the pub."¹³³ If a musician were to approach the session and ask to play, the musicians at the closed session might simply say, "This is a closed session." Closed sessions of this nature often evolve because of professional players who want to perform in a public environment under their control.

House Sessions and House Concerts

When Irish musicians gather at one person's private home, either spontaneously or organized ahead of time, they may call it a house session. House sessions differ from public sessions in restaurants because they are by invitation only. They are different from closed sessions because the number of people who attend turn the event into a party. If a musician becomes part of the local Irish music scene, he or she may become close enough with other musicians to be invited to private house sessions, regardless of musical ability. House sessions sometimes occur after a public event earlier that day, such as a significant concert, and they may last long into the night after all public restaurants would have been closed. House sessions might also exist to replace public sessions that no longer exist. At P. Brennan's Sunday brunch session in DC, one of the leaders explained to me that the session moves to someone's house during football season because the restaurant needs the space for

¹³² Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

¹³³ Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann O'Neill-Malcom Branch, "Lilt," <http://www.ccepotomac.org/www/BandsSessions.htm#Lilt> (accessed October 3, 2011).

football patrons. I later learned that they are holding the session earlier, from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., before the crowds take over for football games. Likewise, Heather used to go to a session at a pub called O'Regan's when she visited Montreal. Now, "the bar doesn't exist, the session doesn't exist, but there's a house session, so I go to that."¹³⁴ House sessions could also occur simply because people want to keep playing but the restaurant is closing for the night. According to John, a mandolin and fiddle player who has been in the DC Irish music scene for over thirty years, the first DC Irish pub session he remembers was called Ellen's, and they would often go to a house session afterwards to continue the music and social time.¹³⁵ At house sessions, the divide between musicians and audience members is permeable and the roles are blurred. Musicians might take a break to stand up and talk to others while the music continues. There is no set schedule for the music. House sessions are rarely mentioned in studies of Irish sessions, perhaps because they are closed to the public. This study focuses mainly on public sessions because of the years it would take to become involved enough with the Irish music scene to be invited to house sessions.

House concerts, however, are concerts held at private homes, and they are open to the public as long as one verifies in advance that one plans to attend. Attendees do not expect to play, since the focus is on a specific group of musicians performing a concert. Organizers might bring their own lawn chairs, potluck food, or donation for the band depending on the details of the house concert. On Saturday, August 6, 2011, Baltimore-based pianist Donna Long and fiddler Jesse Smith performed a house concert at a patron's home in Baltimore, Maryland. According to

¹³⁴ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

¹³⁵ Interview with the author, April 26, 2011.

the flyer sent by email on the NOVA CCÉ listserv, the doors opened at 7:00 p.m. “for pre-concert social gathering” and the concert started at 8:00 p.m.¹³⁶ A \$15 donation was requested, with all proceeds going to the performers, and attendees were encouraged to bring hors d’oeuvres, desserts, or drinks to share. Holding a concert in a private home not only allows a unique intimacy with those present, but it cuts down on the hassle and expense of a musician performing in a concert hall or rented venue. Sue Richards, a local Celtic harpist, also performed a benefit house concert on August 6 at her daughter’s home in Darnestown, Maryland. Refreshments were provided, and the requested donation of \$13 went to Project Create, which provides at-risk children in DC with exposure to the arts.¹³⁷ House concerts are an important venue for Irish traditional music in a slightly more formal and controlled setting than sessions. The line between musician and audience is much more distinct at house concerts than at sessions.

Céili, Festivals, and Concerts

Céili

Although the following are venues outside the specific realm of Irish pub sessions, they are places where music heard at Irish sessions can also be heard. A *céili* (pronounced “*kay-lee*”) is the general term for a music and dance party.¹³⁸ It derives from the nineteenth-century phenomenon of people in Ireland visiting friends and family in their homes and where each person would offer performances of tunes,

¹³⁶ Jesse Winch, e-mail to CCÉ Potomac listserv, July 18, 2011.

¹³⁷ Sue Richards, e-mail to CCÉ Potomac listserv, July 26, 2011.

¹³⁸ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 237.

songs, poems, or stories, and spontaneous dancing would occur.¹³⁹ Céili bands developed when dances moved to public dance halls in need of a regular band to provide the dance music.

Several Washington, DC groups specialize in céili band music and sponsoring céili. I have learned of these events after receiving emails from the local CCÉ listserv. The New Century American Irish-Arts Company sponsored a concert followed by a céili on Saturday, August 13, 2011 at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Silver Spring, Maryland. According to the July 25, 2011 email, the concert and céili featured music and dance by several well-known musicians and dancers, although none that I had met personally. The charge was \$15 for adults and \$8 for children, and the event featured beer, wine, and snacks.¹⁴⁰ The New Century is a relatively new performance company in the DC area, promoting Irish traditional music and dance. Their website states, “The New Century’s mission is to engage local, college-age and professional performers in challenging collaborations that expand their involvement in the artistically-diverse Irish community of the Capital Region. In so doing, the New Century aims to increase over time the number of local performers, the quality of local artistry, and the cultural footprint of the Irish tradition in the Mid-Atlantic region.”¹⁴¹

The CCÉ O’Neill Malcom branch sponsors monthly céili in the DC area. In the email announcing the October 8, 2011 céili, held at the Great Falls Grange, the

¹³⁹ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 17.

¹⁴⁰ Larry Frank, e-mail to CCÉ Potomac listserv, July 25, 2011.

¹⁴¹ The New Century American Irish-Arts Company, “About The New Century,” http://www.newcenturyirisharts.com/About_The_New_Century.html (accessed October 6, 2011).

céili was described as a “family friendly” event to which people were invited to dance or bring instruments.¹⁴² The Bog Wanderers Ceili Band performed the music, although other musicians were invited to join, and Marilyn Moore called the dances. A “beginner class” was held at 7:00 p.m., with the céili itself to be held from 7:30 to 11:00 p.m. The O’Neill Malcom branch also holds céili and set dance lessons on Saturday mornings. This CCÉ céili shows the group’s dedication to educating and encouraging the continuation of the performance of Irish traditional music and dance.

MAD for Trad Week and CCÉ Irish Folk Festival

The 6th annual CCÉ Musical Arts and Dance (MAD for Trad) Week was held from July 18 to 22, 2011. Directed by fiddler Mitch Fanning, who teaches and leads sessions in the area, the events took place at the Washington Waldorf School in Bethesda, Maryland. Students could sign up for all five days for \$395, to participate in group classes, a private lesson, Irish sessions, and the concluding céili and concert. Fiddlers Martin Hayes and Patrick Ourceau, flutist Kevin Crawford from the band Lúnasa, and uilleann piper Jerry O’Sullivan were some of the high-profile names. Those I recognized from DC-area sessions included Tom, Josh Dukes, Jesse Winch, and Keith Carr, all of whom participated in the Faculty Concert Finale with at least twenty musicians and more dancers from the Greater Washington Ceili Club (GWCC). Other musicians from Baltimore sessions also participated, including fiddler/pianist Donna Long from the band Cherish the Ladies and Laura Byrne on flute and whistle.

¹⁴² Jesse Winch, e-mail to CCÉ Potomac listserv, October 7, 2011.

The O'Neill Malcom branch website explains that "instrumentalists will be taught traditionally—in group classes, arranged according to ability and experience with traditional Irish music."¹⁴³ Classes include fiddle, flute, whistle, uilleann pipes, guitar, tenor banjo, bodhrán, sean-nos singing, and set dancing. Students are taught aurally, which is part of the "traditional" aspect of learning. "Tradition," in this instance, indicates learning music by ear, which has been occurring for hundreds of years in Irish music. This workshop setup with structured classes, however, is a much more recent concept of "tradition" stemming from the Folk Revival and the CCÉ's efforts to revive Irish music and culture during this time. The exact definition of "tradition" is not significant to most of these musicians. What matters to them is the revival of Irish music and culture and instilling interest in young people who will carry on the music.

In addition to MAD Week, the local O'Neill Malcom branch also sponsored the CCÉ Irish Folk Festival on September 24, 2011, held at Sherwood Community Center at Van Dyck Park and the Auld Shebeen Irish Pub in Fairfax, Virginia. Brendan Mulvihill, Lilt, Doc Botzer, Steve and Maureen from Nanny's, Brendan Bell, the Irish Breakfast Band, the Boyle School of Irish Dance from Manassas, Virginia, and many other local musicians and dancers performed on three separate stages. As one of the leaders of the local CCÉ branch, Jesse Winch from P. Brennan's helped organize and lead the festival. The headliner was the band Teada from County Sligo, Ireland. Local musicians also held workshops for instruments or other parts of

¹⁴³ Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann O'Neill-Malcom Branch, "CCE Musical Arts & Dance Week," <http://www.ccepotomac.org/www/MADWeek.html> (accessed October 18, 2011).

Irish culture, including Karen Ashbrook's tin whistle workshop and Mike Schaeffer¹⁴⁴ and Beth Benedetto's Irish language workshop. The festival lasted for six and a half hours, from noon to 6:30 p.m., and a free céili followed the festival from 6:30 to 8:30 at the Sherwood Center. From the pictures posted on the CCÉ O'Neill Malcom branch website, children were a large portion of the performers, workshop participants, dancers, and audience members. Encouraging young people to perform Irish music and dance is one of the goals of the CCÉ, and they certainly succeeded at the 2011 Irish Folk Festival in Northern Virginia.

Concerts and Competitions

Concerts featuring local and world-renowned Irish musicians occur frequently in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Irish legend Andy Irvine, of Planxty fame in the 1970s, performed in Rockville, Maryland at a concert organized by the Institute of Music Traditions on October 17, 2011. Local musicians perform concerts as fundraisers or to promote their latest recordings. On October 23, Tina Eck and Keith Carr performed as their duo Lilt to release their newest CD titled *Onward*. Described as a "concert/party/session," the event featured guest artists from the CD plus a guest dancer. The session followed the concert, and the event was held at Glen Echo Park. Lilt donated portions of their CD sales to the MAD week scholarship fund.

Music competitions in the area feature predominantly school-age students and those who are learning Irish music. Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann is the original CCÉ-sponsored music competition in Ireland and one of the most significant means

¹⁴⁴ Mike Schaeffer is the uilleann pipe and whistle player from the sessions at Nanny O'Brien's and the Auld Shebeen.

through which the CCÉ revived interest in Irish music since the early 1950s.¹⁴⁵ A competition is divided into categories by age, instrument, and ensemble types such as céili bands. The four age levels are under twelve, twelve to fifteen, fifteen to eighteen, and over eighteen (senior). Solo instrument categories include fiddle, two-row button accordion, flute, tin whistle, concertina, piano accordion, uilleann pipes, harp, mouth organ, banjo, bodhrán, whistling, lilting (singing dance tunes using vocables), and traditional singing in Irish and English.¹⁴⁶ A DC-area competition at the Maryland Irish Festival on November 13 was run “in a similar fashion to the All-Ireland Fleadh with the same age and instrument categories.”¹⁴⁷ Brian Conway, an Irish-American fiddler and All-Ireland winner, judged the competition and held a workshop and concert afterwards.

Another competition that came through the O’Neill Malcom branch listserv announces an annual Irish language Christmas card competition that promotes the use of Irish language abroad. Entrants must reside outside of Ireland, and the card must include original artwork and text in the Irish language. Although not directly related to Irish music, the fact that the competition came through the local Northern Virginia listserv for Irish music shows that musicians who play Irish music in the DC area may be immersed in the culture to the extent that they actually speak Irish, either as part of their cultural background or as a hobby. One local musician who speaks Irish is piper Mike Schaeffer, who frequents numerous sessions including Nanny O’Brien’s. He recently translated two articles from the journal *Treoir*, published by CCÉ, from Irish

¹⁴⁵ Hast and Scott, *Music in Ireland*, 49.

¹⁴⁶ Hast and Scott, *Music in Ireland*, 49-50.

¹⁴⁷ Jesse Winch, e-mail to CCÉ Potomac listserv, October 5, 2011.

to English.¹⁴⁸ Mike's enthusiasm for Irish music and his passion for research extend to his interest in speaking the Irish language.

¹⁴⁸ Jesse Winch, e-mail to CCÉ Potomac listserv, September 29, 2011.

Chapter 4: Case Study of Nanny O'Brien's Session

The History of Nanny O'Brien's Session

After attending ten different sessions in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, I chose to be a regular session musician at Nanny O'Brien's in the Cleveland Park neighborhood of the district. Several factors influenced my decision: the convenience of a Monday night session to fit with my schedule, the relatively brief thirty-minute commute from my home, and the friendliness of the musicians combined with their session etiquette. I also wanted to play at a session that did not use sheet music, since most sessions in the world stand by this rule. Session musicians affirm that Nanny O'Brien's is the longest-running pub session in the DC area, having begun in the 1980s and continued even through several changes of the restaurant's ownership. The in-laws of Brian Gaffney, the celebrated guitarist and singer who plays with Brendan Mulvihill, had been two of the previous owners. The session has always been on Monday nights, and there is no official leader.

Nanny O'Brien's has the reputation of being a reliable session where someone will always be playing each week. During my months at the pub, musicians from other states or countries would often stop in at Nanny O'Brien's because they had heard from other people that it was a good session in DC. Fiddler and singer Heather recalls that in past years, professional, full-time performers of Irish music frequented the session, making it the best in the area. In earlier years, beginning musicians would play for a couple hours until they would "naturally leave because they'd have jobs in the morning. The professionals would show up after their gig, and we would play

until one or two in the morning.”¹⁴⁹ Even though Heather, who has a full-time day job, did not have the fiddle skills of the professional musicians, she liked playing with them late into the night because she would learn from them and they encouraged her. “It helped me get a lot better,” she said, “playing with people who were so much better than I was and who had such a great attitude.”

Rebecca Christie, who has played at sessions all over the world, attended Nanny O’Brien’s from 2000 until she moved to Europe in mid-2011. Rebecca is an example of a musician who is not Irish American but loves playing Irish music. She played violin for a few years as a child, but as an adult focused on singing jazz and classical music. In the late 1990s, she became interested in Irish fiddling while living in Texas, frequenting the small but ongoing Irish music scene in Austin. She sang at sessions too, but because the majority of the music at sessions is instrumental, she quickly grew bored with singing only once or twice during a session. Fiddling is her way of participating in both music making and socializing.

During the eleven years that Rebecca played at Nanny O’Brien’s, attendance at the session sometimes dwindled and threatened to dissolve. Rebecca and her fiddler friend Tom kept the session going by attending every Monday and encouraging people to keep playing, drinking beer, and tipping the bartender. She explains, “Part of why I went was because everybody knew I was there. I’ve had people that I haven’t seen for years come to Nanny’s looking for me on a Monday night. It was the place where I was.” Although she admitted that traveling to the session every week was often exhausting, she felt responsible for the success of the

¹⁴⁹ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

session, and she enjoyed knowing that other musicians and friends looked forward to seeing her there consistently.

During the first few times I attended the session, Rebecca and Tom welcomed me to the group and encouraged me to play. Tom is a professional violinist with a baroque chamber orchestra in Philadelphia. He has also toured the world playing jazz, classical, Irish, and other styles of music on his violin. On the first night I met Tom, he had a banjo with him instead of his fiddle because he was using the session to improve his banjo playing. When he asked to borrow my fiddle later that evening, I noticed not only his expert classical playing technique, but also that the tunes he played seemed to have a buoyant, rhythmic drive with lots of double stops, and he used the whole bow instead of only the upper half of the bow. He explained that this was Donegal fiddling style, his favorite Irish fiddle playing style. Although Tom no longer plays at Nanny O'Brien's, he leads a session at The Limerick Pub and frequently performs Irish music with professional bands.

As of late 2011, the regular session musicians at Nanny O'Brien's were Bob (fiddle), Steve (flute), Maureen (guitar, banjo, and bodhrán), Mike Schaeffer (uilleann pipes and whistles), Jacob (guitar, banjo, and whistle), Phil (whistle and fiddle), and me (fiddle and bodhrán). The main dining room has a bar with televisions featuring sports, and the musicians play in the back room around several tables. They sit in a circle, with some of the musicians' backs to people in nearby booths. The tables provide room for pints of beer and instruments that are not being played at the moment. Bob, Steve, Maureen, Mike, and Jacob usually arrive around 8:30 or 9:00 p.m. I tend to come at 9:30, and Phil wanders in later. Not everyone attends every

week, but these core musicians usually do. A few visiting musicians or other local musicians often play with us as well. While Jacob is in his 30s, Bob, Steve, Maureen, Mike, and Phil are in their 50s or older. Most of them have full-time jobs that do not involve music, but they all participate in local Irish music events or even travel to other countries to play Irish music to improve their playing and for their own enjoyment. As mentioned earlier, Mike can translate scholarly articles in Irish Gaelic into English, but the others know little to no Gaelic, and he has corrected my pronunciation of the names of the Irish bands “Lunasa” and “Solas.”



Figure 10: The session at Nanny O'Brien's Pub in the Cleveland Park area of Washington, DC.

Each musician possesses knowledge of the music he or she plays, and much of the session chatter in between sets revolves around tune names, local Irish music

events, and favorite recordings. For example, I played a jig called “Calliope House” that I had learned aurally from a recording by Scottish fiddler Alasdair Fraser. I was hesitant to play this tune at an Irish session because I assumed it was Scottish, and Bob and Steve had previously told me that only Irish tunes should be played at an Irish session, but my assumptions about “Calliope House” were incorrect. Mike, Bob, and Steve told me that “Calliope House” was the name of an Irish pub and session in Pittsburgh where a fiddler had composed the tune and named it after the pub. It became popular in Irish and Scottish music circles so that even Scottish fiddlers performed it. The jig is normally played in the key of E Major, which fiddlers like because of the ringing sound of the opening E string, but performers at some sessions play it in D Major to make it more feasible for other melody instruments. Bob suggested that I play it in E Major that evening because he and I, as fiddle players, liked it better in that key.

Bob, Steve, and Mike take turns starting most of the sets. Jacob usually plays guitar but sometimes starts sets on whistle or banjo. Maureen tends to play guitar or bodhrán, but she is learning banjo and likes to try out some of the tunes she has learned at least once each session. While playing, the musicians tend to stare at their instruments or fingers, at the table, or at nowhere in particular, as if they focus their concentration on listening carefully and not on visual elements. They often use eye contact to show when the next tune is coming, but they also know that after three times through a tune, they should be prepared to switch to the next tune or end the set. One time when I led a set, Steve asked me to play a tune a fourth time so that he could practice it with the group, since he knew I would probably have played it only

three times. Although the musicians tend to stay seated throughout the two and a half to three hour session, they might stand up to order another beer at the bar, eat some food, or use the restroom. If the session is particularly crowded, a musician might stand up to chat with a non-musician friend at the nearby booth, allowing someone else to take his or her seat.

Methods of Transmission

The musicians at Nanny O'Brien's build their repertoire in several ways. Recordings allow musicians to learn tunes aurally at their convenience. While CDs are a popular medium, musicians might use cassettes and LPs as well. Tom recommended that I listen to recordings of solo fiddle players instead of ensembles. He found it easier to hear the ornamentation and style in solo fiddling, where other instruments do not cover up the details of the fiddle playing. Some musicians might use a digital audio recorder to record other session musicians playing, so that they can learn the tunes at home from their recording. At least two musicians at Nanny O'Brien's use a computer program called "The Amazing Slow Downer." This program slows down recordings without altering the pitch of the music, enabling a person to learn the music at a slower tempo and still play along with the recording. Other musicians do not play along with their recordings; Rebecca says, "I put [my CDs] in the car, maybe I sing along with them... I just sort of try to absorb them and then I wait for it to come out."¹⁵⁰ I learned several tunes in the way Rebecca described, but the methods of learning music vary from musician to musician.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

One tune I learned from listening to a CD was a jig called “The White Petticoat” from the band Solas’s self-titled album. I played this tune whenever I was new at a session and did not want to be stereotyped as someone who exclusively played “beginner” tunes. I eventually realized that it was obscure in Washington, DC, because very few musicians had heard it, and even fewer had learned to play it. In September 2010, the tune received praise from the “purist” musicians at McGinty’s in Arlington, and once I started playing it at Nanny O’Brien’s in 2011, it became known as “Erin’s tune.” After hearing me play it, Bob at Nanny O’Brien’s emailed me and suggested we learn the whole set from the Solas recording, which included two more jigs, “Stan Chapman’s” and “The Miller’s Maggot.” We learned the set, and as the weeks progressed, the other musicians learned the set as well. It has become a favorite of the musicians at Nanny O’Brien’s. Several of them mentioned to me that “The White Petticoat,” once so obscure in the Washington, DC area, is now being played more frequently around the local session scene.

When musicians attend a session week after week, they hear that particular session’s favorite tunes and absorb some of the tunes aurally from the weekly repetition. The musicians at Nanny O’Brien’s do not play the same tunes every week, but everyone has his or her favorite sets. They do not mind if I play along quietly to a tune I am trying to learn, picking up a few phrases here and there, because they also play along to new tunes they are trying to learn.

In contrast, a musician at a different session in DC once chided a Nanny O’Brien’s musician by stating, “A session is no place to learn tunes.” He explains:

It was by somebody who fancies himself a really big-deal expert in all things Irish, not an actual Irish person, but somebody who considers

himself an honest-to-God Irish expert. I guess my response to that has always been, “If you’re really good, sell tickets. If you don’t want me to play along with you, sell tickets. I’ll come and I’ll show up and I’ll clap.” If you want to have that casual vibe, part of that casual vibe is chaos. Not necessarily beginners, not necessarily sounding bad... but a certain amount of chaos and a certain amount of “you can’t control it” goes with the territory. And it’s fun!¹⁵¹

He has learned almost all of the tunes in his repertoire by listening and playing along at sessions over the years, acquiring the tunes week by week. The musicians at Nanny O’Brien’s want to encourage each other and welcome new players, with the hopes of building the session and having an enjoyable time. Maureen has told me to play along even if I played some wrong notes, and Steve added that I could play all the wrong notes as long as I kept the beat and the rhythm.¹⁵² Similarly, when another musician at Nanny O’Brien’s played a set and stumbled over the transition between tunes, he laughed and said, “Philippe would say that was the worst sin. But we’re with a bunch of friends here, so it shouldn’t matter. It’s fun.”¹⁵³ Fiddler Tom explained the same phenomenon to me from a classically trained musician’s point of view. According to him, classical musicians are taught that if they do not know a piece of music well, they should not play it, but Tom encouraged me to let go of my self-consciousness because most of the musicians do not mind if I make a mistake. The musicians at Nanny O’Brien’s play for the joy of making music and socializing, not for competition. Reading from notation at a Nanny O’Brien’s session, however, is not permitted.

¹⁵¹ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

¹⁵² Interview with the author, May 2, 2011.

¹⁵³ Interview with the author, October 3, 2011.

Another method of transmission is written notation, which is not generally accepted as a “traditional” method to learn the aural tradition of Irish music. Most musicians who use written notation read from the skeletal melody, or the basic melody without ornamentation, and they add appropriate ornamentation while playing to give the tune its Irish character. The website known as TheSession.org lists thousands of skeletal melodies, many of which include long discussion board forums with musicians affirming the “origins” of tunes and arguing over the accuracy of the notated melodies. This website also includes another form of notation called ABC, which developed before computers had the complex notation software available today. ABC notation uses a series of lower- and upper-case letters to indicate pitches, with occasional numbers to show a note’s duration. Some musicians even have the ABC notation converter to change music from ABC to written notation or vice versa, although it is not always an accurate conversion. Local musicians, and probably most Irish musicians who use notation, prefer to read the skeletal melody so that detailed written ornamentation does not overwhelm the reader, and furthermore, musicians would vary the ornamentation instead of playing it identically each time.

The Session >> Tunes >> Back >> Banish Misfortune (jig)

Details ABC Sheetmusic Comments

X: 1
T: Banish Misfortune
M: 6/8
L: 1/8
R: jig
K: Dmix
fed cAG| A2d cAG| F2D DED| FEF GFG| AGA cAG| AGA cde|
fed cAG| Ad^c d3:|f2d d^cd| f2g agf| e2c cBc|e2f gfe|
f2g agf| e2f gfe|fed cAG|Ad^c d3:|f2g e2f| d2e c2d|
ABA GAG| F2F GED| c3 cAG| AGA cde| fed cAG| Ad^c d3:|

Figure 11: One version of "Banish Misfortune" in ABC notation as viewed on TheSession.org.



Figure 12: Skeletal melody of "Banish Misfortune" as it would appear converted from the ABC notation above.

Irish tunes are not standardized, and a musician might learn a different version of a tune from someone else. Heather tells the story of when she learned the jig “Banish Misfortune” using “JC’s ABC Tune Finder,” a free internet resource that offers basic melodies in various file formats, including ABC, PDF, GIF, and MIDI. The Tune Finder had about thirty different versions of “Banish Misfortune,” and when I checked the website, I found not thirty but 145 posted versions of the tune. When Heather picked one version and played it at a session years ago for the first time, other people denied it was the same tune until someone realized her version used C sharps, while the more accepted version used C naturals. Figures 11 and 12 above show “Banish Misfortune” in ABC notation and standard notation. A similar situation occurred when I first played at McGinty’s in Arlington. I nervously started a reel called “Drowsy Maggie” that I had learned when a musician in Pennsylvania had given me sheet music for it seven years earlier. To my surprise, the musicians knew the tune with the A and B sections reversed, so I was playing the sections completely opposite until I realized what was happening. An accepted version of an Irish tune does not mean that it is standardized across the globe.

I had few encounters with musicians who disparaged written notation as a way to learn Irish music. I had heard about a few session leaders in the area who teased musicians playing with them who could read music. A few might not admit being able to read music even if they could. At The Limerick Pub, I played a reel called “John Bowe’s Favorite” that no one had recognized. The flute player asked if it referred to John Bowe, the famous concertina player from the early 1900s, and I replied that I was not sure because I did not have a recording of it. The leader,

Philippe Varlet, seemed confused when he asked me, “Then where did you get it?” and I explained that someone had given me a piece of sheet music.¹⁵⁴ That conversation ended because they did not pursue the subject further, and I did not ask them how they felt about learning from sheet music, but it would be safe to assume that they prefer aural transmission to reading from notation. Philippe has a degree in music composition, so he can read music, but he probably learns his Irish tunes aurally.

Private Music Lessons

Even musicians who play the same regional style do not play tunes with identical ornamentation or, in the case of fiddlers, with the same bowing. A popular trend with some DC-area musicians is to take music lessons from an accomplished player. Martin, the flute player from McGinty’s in Arlington, had suggested that I could try to take lessons with Brendan Mulvihill’s student Mitch Fanning, because lessons with Brendan himself are difficult to acquire. Martin explained that lessons were the best way to learn a specific style of playing. Another flute player from Ireland’s Four Provinces had mentioned that she was taking flute lessons from Tina Eck. The local CCÉ MAD for Trad Week includes time slots for private lessons with the instructors. In contrast, even though Tom teaches many styles of violin lessons, he has told me that I do not need to learn from a teacher or from notation, but that I should learn aurally by listening to Irish music and playing what I like.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with the author, June 8, 2011.

One Monday evening in July 2011, I arrived at Nanny O'Brien's to play with all the usual players, excluding Jacob. I also met two visiting men: an older fiddler I did not recognize and a 5-string banjo player. Around 10:45 p.m., Bob apologized that he had to leave early because he had some commitments early the next morning. At 11:00 p.m., fiddler Mitch Fanning arrived with one of his younger students. I have heard other musicians call Mitch a great teacher, and people respect the way he encourages young players of Irish music. Soon after they began playing with us, a crowd of at least nine young fiddlers and a boy playing guitar flooded the small back room. They looked to be in their teens or early twenties. Along with them came two flute players, one I recognized from The Limerick Pub, and another who doubled on bodhrán, both of whom were teachers at the MAD for Trad Week along with Mitch. I later learned that the flute and bodhrán teacher also played Irish guitar, and he had won the All-Ireland Competition in 2009 for guitar. The regular musicians from Nanny O'Brien's made room for all of the newcomers, squeezing together around the tables.

I asked the flute player from The Limerick Pub if the new group had all arrived from another location. At first he joked that they had all come from yoga, but he explained they had been at MAD Week and had been asked to leave another location where they had been playing a session. He told me he hoped they were not intruding on our session, and I told him not to worry. He asked if the bodhrán player could borrow my instrument, and I agreed. I noticed that the bodhrán player used much more complex, pitched, and intricate bodhrán technique than I have seen at any session, since the bodhrán is typically supposed to be subtle and unobtrusive.

Meanwhile, Maureen was watching the young guitarist's movements closely, but he had syncopated rhythms and different chord shapes that she could not recognize quickly enough.

The young fiddlers now dominated the session, starting many of the tunes, and playing loudly and perfectly in unison. Almost all of them used the same or very similar bowings, and I noticed that Mitch used these bowings as well. Their tunes had a different feel from those I was used to playing at Nanny O'Brien's. While I thought I had developed the ability to listen closely and pick up a few phrases of each tune as it was repeated, I was at a loss to follow along with these players. The melodies had few repeated phrases and moved in ways I could not predict. Steve also attempted to play along with the flute players, but they played many tunes he did not recognize or had not learned.

Although the energy and the talent of these young students and their teachers was inspiring, the regular musicians at Nanny O'Brien's appeared to have been left behind. Like competitions, private music lessons standardize styles of playing because the students attempt to imitate the teacher, and the teacher provides feedback to correct the student. While listening to recordings and imitating them might be assumed to produce the same standardization effect, musicians have the option of listening to several different recordings of the same tune, allowing them to play the tune differently depending on their interpretation. Learning from a teacher includes the visual element and the feedback of the teacher, leading to a closer degree of imitation. Furthermore, these student musicians knew all of the same tunes, unintentionally excluding the Nanny O'Brien's musicians who did not know them.

The students may have had performance experience in concert settings, but they did not act as though they knew a great deal about session etiquette. While the students were excited about the opportunity to play their tunes at a real session, they seemed to enjoy showcasing what they could play instead of socializing with the other musicians through music.

Chapter 5: Analysis

Participatory Music Making and Affinity Groups

In Washington, DC, Irish sessions exist because a group of people who share a passion for Irish traditional music want to play music together and socialize.

Turino's concept of participatory music making describes the goals, behaviors, and roles of musicians in an Irish session. A participatory performance is "founded on an ethos that holds that everyone present can, and in fact should, participate in the sound and motion of the performance."¹⁵⁵ At an Irish session, musicians face each other in a circle, usually around a table, showing that they perform for themselves and not for a separate audience. Everyone who brings an instrument and plays Irish traditional music is encouraged, and even expected, to participate in the music making and socializing. Once the musicians at DC's Irish sessions knew I played Irish music, they expected me to play when I appeared at a session. Turino explains that "during participatory music and dance occasions there is a subtle and sometimes not so subtle pressure to participate."¹⁵⁶ If I did not bring my fiddle, the musicians amiably had me borrow someone else's for a few sets, even when I did not ask them to do so. Furthermore, conversing and socializing with other musicians occurs primarily when one brings an instrument and joins the session.

At an Irish session, the musicians' musical abilities determine their roles and hierarchy within the group. At participatory music making events, musicians might

¹⁵⁵ Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 29.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

have a range of performance abilities, but they are all able to play together because of the different roles within the ensemble. Turino explains, “The inclusion of people with a wide range of musical investment and abilities within the same performance creates a unique dynamic as well as a series of constraints on what can or should be done musically.”¹⁵⁷ Irish sessions in DC attract professional Irish musicians, intermediate hobbyist musicians, beginning musicians, and those of every ability level in between. While not all musicians in the world of Irish music enjoy playing at sessions, many of them do because of the spontaneity and “chaos” that makes session playing enjoyable. Sessions mix well-known beginner tunes with more advanced, style-specific tunes, giving people of all playing levels the chance to participate. Playing music with people above one’s level of ability also inspires musicians to improve their own playing.

Although many musicians at Washington, DC sessions follow with these principles of participatory music making, some individuals feel the need to be competitive or showcase their own virtuosity at the expense of excluding others in the group. It is quite common and accepted for a musician at a session to play a tune that the others do not know. A conversation about the name of the tune and its style, origin, or sound will typically follow the playing of a lesser-known tune. Musicians, however, are expected to play familiar tunes more often than unfamiliar tunes in order to maximize the number of musicians who can play at once. Turino calls this idea of inclusion a “responsibility” and a “participatory value.”¹⁵⁸ The combination of fresh,

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 33.

new tunes and familiar favorites allows musicians of varying abilities to be able to participate in the music making.

Conversely, although newcomers or less-experienced musicians are encouraged to join Irish sessions, they might not be welcome for long if their inabilities impede the feeling of the session. Turino gives the example of experienced contradancers who feel impatient if too many new dancers crowd the dance floor.¹⁵⁹ In the same way, a new player might disrupt the feel of the session if they are not familiar with some of the important principles of session etiquette. Furthermore, individual session leaders have different standards for the kind of “new” musicians they will accept. At Ireland’s Four Provinces, the session leader, who was ethnically Irish, encouraged the players to read from music so they could all participate, and he allowed unorthodox instruments like the electric bass. The session at Ireland’s Four Provinces would be the exception rather than the norm in the Washington, DC Irish session scene. All of the other sessions do not permit playing from written music, and the musicians must play an accepted Irish instrument in an Irish style.

Irish sessions are an example of participatory music making because of the form and repetition of the repertoire. According to Turino, “The forms used in participatory music are typically short... but the entire form is repeated over and over.”¹⁶⁰ Irish dance tunes performed at sessions are typically less than one minute length, but they are repeated two to five times, after which performers move on

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 38.

without pause to the next tune in the set.¹⁶¹ The AABB form of many dance tunes emphasizes repetition and assists memory, and even within an A or a B section, certain melodic phrases might repeat two or more times because the tune was composed that way. Turino calls this “the heightened repetition of musical material—at the levels of motives, phrases, sections, and the entire form.”¹⁶² Repetition helps musicians learn the music aurally and retain it so that there is some sense of order amidst the so-called “chaos” of the session, allowing musicians to make music together.

Participatory music making describes the values, interactions, and behaviors of the musicians at an Irish session. In Washington, DC, where most people are not ethnically Irish, affinity explains the passion these musicians have for the Irish music they play. While some session musicians in DC might have a little Irish heritage, most of them did not grow up in an Irish or Irish American culture. As Slobin explains, “In the conditions of modern diversity, we may have to assume, rather than prove, affinity, since evidence may be hard to come by.”¹⁶³ He explains that contradance participants often take part in multiple styles of dance in addition to contradance. Similarly, Irish musicians might also perform bluegrass, contradance, or old-time music, and others “cross over” from jazz or classical music. Their affinity

¹⁶¹ Musicians at the Nanny O’Brien’s session tend to repeat each tune three or four times.

¹⁶² Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 38. Unless a set is particularly well-known and standardized, each tune tends to begin with what Turino calls a “feathered” beginning, meaning that one or two people play while the others listen to the tune to determine what it is before they join the players.

¹⁶³ Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds*, 56.

for Irish music might arise from any number of reasons, but they share a passion for Irish traditional music and for the social community that develops.

Affinity leads to a sense of “belonging” within a subcultural group. Slobin asks, “How deep does it go—casual participant, part-time organizer, professional musician?”¹⁶⁴ Participants at Irish sessions might display any of these levels of belonging to the group, and all are considered contributors to the session. An Irish session is only one kind of group to which a person might belong, since a musician is simultaneously part of multiple groups in the workplace, at home, and from other parts of their lives. Rebecca attended Nanny O’Brien’s session for several years, and even her non-musician friends came to expect her to be there every Monday night. “The Nanny’s session is a session that is particularly near and dear to my heart,” she explains. After I played at Nanny O’Brien’s for several months, I felt that the musicians counted on me to be there, and I discovered that my affinity for Irish music had turned into a sense of belonging with my friends at this particular session. I also understood Jeff Todd Titon’s experience of fieldwork as “a reflexive opportunity and an ongoing dialogue with my friends which, among other things, continually reworks my ‘work’ as ‘our’ work.”¹⁶⁵ Titon specifically mentions *craic*, or “good talk,” as being vital for good fieldwork.¹⁶⁶ I feel fortunate to have enjoyed lots of *craic* with the musicians at Nanny O’Brien’s during my fieldwork.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹⁶⁵ Titon, “Knowing Fieldwork,” 32.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 39.

Notions of Authenticity

Musicians who play at Irish sessions in Washington, DC create a social scene that offsets their conceptions of “authentic” sessions in Ireland with the reality of the DC location and the American musicians. These musicians speak of authenticity in varying ways when they discuss the music they play and session etiquette. Edward Bruner outlines four ways in which museum officials negotiate authenticity in relation to a reproduction of Abraham Lincoln’s boyhood village of New Salem, Illinois.¹⁶⁷ Authenticity can indicate a copy that is convincing to the general public, or it can refer to a “complete and immaculate simulation” that people who experienced the original would confirm as being accurate. A third use of authenticity is that the subject is the original and not a copy. Finally, verification and certification by a person or group with authority in the matter might also signify authenticity. Irish session musicians in DC move between the first, second, and fourth definitions in their interpretations of authenticity, as explored below.¹⁶⁸

I estimate that the majority of musicians who play Irish music in the Washington, DC metropolitan area were not born in Ireland. Some are second-generation Irish Americans who grew up in an Irish American culture, while others have little or no ethnic or cultural connection to Ireland and instead have an affinity for the music. Slobin discusses whites in the United States who desire to feel that they

¹⁶⁷ Edward M. Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism,” *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 2 (1994): 399-400.

¹⁶⁸ The third definition, that the performance is the original, identical version played in Ireland currently or in the past, is not assumed by DC’s session musicians because they know they are performing in a different country with different musicians.

belong to an ethnicity “when common sense sees no reason for it.”¹⁶⁹ Listing the Irish, Slovenians, and Italians as examples, he explains that fewer immigrants of these ethnicities have come to the United States in recent decades, and with high rates of intermarriage, people of these ethnicities assimilate into American culture. Perhaps by participating in Irish sessions, some white Americans feel that they have a connection to an ethnicity, a welcomed differentiation from the vague, homogeneous, white American society. At DC sessions, musicians feel separated and distinct from the restaurant patrons and listeners. This sense of belonging to a constructed ethnicity exemplifies Bruner’s first definition of authenticity,¹⁷⁰ in which the session convinces the general public that it is credible.

Several of the most well-known Irish musicians in the region have no Irish cultural background, including All-Ireland winner Joshua Dukes, who is an African American guitar, flute, and bodhrán player; French-born fiddler Philippe Varlet; and German-born flutist Tina Eck. In contrast, Irish-born Brendan Mulvihill, son of National Heritage Fellow Martin Mulvihill, frequents DC’s Irish session scene, and his ethnicity and musical accomplishments provide him with a level of authenticity that even the best local musicians revere. The first time I met Brendan was the second time I had attended Nanny O’Brien’s, as a listener. The musicians noticed that Brendan was sitting at the bar with a fiddler friend, listening through the entranceway and drinking a beer. They had stopped playing because they were nervous but excited that Brendan had arrived. Rebecca whispered to the group, “Play so famous people

¹⁶⁹ Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds*, 52.

¹⁷⁰ Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln,” 399.

will come play with us!”¹⁷¹ Tom invited Brendan and his friend to join the session, and Brendan started a few sets. In between sets, Brendan commented that “it’s so quiet!” since the musicians seemed to be in awe of him. Brendan’s Irish ethnicity and his playing enthralled the musicians at Nanny O’Brien’s that evening. Their interpretation of him as an authentic representation of Irish session musicianship demonstrates Bruner’s second definition of authenticity:¹⁷² Brendan’s presence at the session transformed it into an event that, assumedly, even Irish musicians from Ireland would recognize as authentic. The fact that Brendan’s Irish ethnicity is such a determining factor of his authenticity as a session musician may be a legacy of the folk revivalist mentality, in which authentic musical performance is strongly linked to race and ethnicity.¹⁷³

A musician’s authenticity also hinges on the assessments of that particular musician’s musical competence by other musicians and experts in the realm of Irish traditional music, exemplifying Bruner’s fourth definition of authenticity based on notions of authority.¹⁷⁴ Benjamin Brinner describes musical competence as:

...individual mastery of the array of interrelated skills and knowledge that is *required* of musicians within a particular tradition or musical community and is *acquired* and developed in response to and in accordance with the demands and possibilities of general and specific cultural, social, and musical conditions. [emphasis in original]¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Session at Nanny O’Brien’s, September 20, 2010.

¹⁷² Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln,” 399.

¹⁷³ Jennifer Ryan, “Beale Street Blues? Tourism, Musical Labor, and the Fetishization of Poverty in Blues Discourse,” *Ethnomusicology* 55, no. 3 (2011): 486.

¹⁷⁴ Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln,” 400.

¹⁷⁵ Benjamin Brinner, *Knowing Music, Making Music: Javanese Gamelan and the Theory of Musical Competence and Interaction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 28.

Musicians evaluate other musicians who play Irish traditional music at sessions based on their skills and knowledge, which they learn from interacting, making music, and socializing at the session. A competent session musician in Washington, DC plays a hundred or more Irish tunes with Irish stylistic technique, follows basic session etiquette (to varying degrees), encourages others to improve their playing and continue to learn, and has a basic knowledge of Western classical intonation.

Authenticity manifests itself in the tunes played at sessions in Washington, DC. A good session musician will know hundreds of tunes and be able to play them with proper Irish ornamentation and style. Yet even Irish traditional music, which still retains recognized regional playing styles such as Donegal and Sligo styles, becomes pan-Irish with the use of recordings and notation. Slobin's "industrial interculture"¹⁷⁶ demonstrates that session musicians and other Irish musicians have unlimited access to thousands of recordings of Irish music and even internet-based notation systems. When a well-known band records a set of tunes, including older, more obscure tunes like Solas's "The White Petticoat," the set can become standardized among other musicians. Because recordings and written notation are two significant ways in which musicians learn Irish music in DC, the musicians tend to develop a pan-Irish regional style. Whereas in Ireland, certain tunes might be associated with a specific region and not always played elsewhere, musicians in Washington, DC tend to learn tunes because they like them, not because of a regional association. Several fiddlers in the area, however, consider the Donegal fiddle style to be their favorite.

¹⁷⁶ Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds*, 61.

The Washington, DC area hosts Irish competitions and festivals sponsored by the O'Neill Malcom Branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ). Competitions are a way to assess a musician's competence within a standard of accepted Irish traditional musical style. Benjamin Brinner notes that classification systems help assess the competency of a musician as determined by other musicians in the scene.¹⁷⁷ In the case of Irish traditional music, All-Ireland competitions held regionally, nationally, and internationally in many parts of the world evaluate and rank musicians based on how closely they adhere to Irish traditional playing styles, with the pinnacle achievement being the All-Ireland competition held in Ireland. O'Shea explains that nationalism trends in Ireland, including competitions, classes, and group performances, also lead to the homogenization of regional styles:

Throughout the past two hundred years, bourgeois nationalists have defined Irish music narrowly in the interests of uniting the nation and encouraging people to feel that they belong to it. Their claim that the iconic harp repertoire and the dance music both express and represent a unique and homogeneous Irish people gainsays the hybrid nature of musical practice in Ireland as well as the diversity of the island's population.¹⁷⁸

Events that promote Irish culture in Washington, DC, like MAD for Trad Week and the CCÉ Irish Folk Festival, not only encourage new audiences to appreciate the music, but they uphold the principles of Irish nationalism by uniting a group of people through Irish music and culture. Irish pub sessions also bring together a group of people, uniting them with their affinity for Irish music.

In the Washington, DC metropolitan area, Irish musicians, Irish American musicians, and non-Irish musicians strive to replicate Irish musical behaviors,

¹⁷⁷ Brinner, *Knowing Music, Making Music*, 127-128.

¹⁷⁸ O'Shea, *Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 141.

coexisting with those who are more relaxed in their interpretation of session etiquette. Some session etiquette depends on the individual session's concept of authenticity in comparison with sessions in Ireland. In areas of the world not known for Irish or Irish American musicians—Texas, for example—people strive to copy Irish session behavior and culture so that they feel they are authentically participating in and representing the culture. Heather suspects that in certain regional areas like Texas:

People have much smaller communities of people to play with, and they're much more concerned with sounding good because they have fewer opportunities. And when you have a smaller community, often you can become more defensive about it. They want to prove that they are as good as anybody in a city, and they want to sound good all the time. They're very insecure about sounding bad, and they're also insecure about losing their gig if it doesn't sound good.¹⁷⁹

Some session musicians in Washington, DC, particularly several who are not Irish or Irish American, display these behaviors, ostensibly because they feel the need to account for their lack of Irish ethnicity. The few ethnically Irish musicians in the area, like the session leader from Ireland's Four Provinces, are much more relaxed with rules governing session behavior because they do not feel the need to prove their authenticity.

Session musicians in the DC area are hesitant to take requests from non-musicians at the pubs, since such listeners usually request tunes that are not considered part of the session repertoire. The musicians are there to play Irish music and to socialize with the other musicians, not to provide music for restaurant patrons. At Nanny O'Brien's, I once played some Scottish tunes that I particularly liked, and the musicians kindly but sternly encouraged me to play Irish tunes since it was an

¹⁷⁹ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

Irish session. At several other locations in DC, the musicians might not have been so kind. Another time, a man with a heavy southern accent politely asked if we knew any Appalachian tunes. The other musicians hesitated, but I told him I knew one, and I played “Blackberry Blossom” for him. The Nanny O’Brien’s musicians did not criticize me for playing the tune, but they steered us back to Irish music. Likewise, Williams recommends that singers at a session sing an “actual Irish song” instead of an Irish American hit.¹⁸⁰ Session culture dictates that “actual Irish songs” are more authentic than Irish American hits known by the general public. Some singers in DC demonstrate their authenticity by performing Irish songs with an Irish accent, even if they are American.

In addition to having a vast repertoire, the ideal advanced session musician is generous with his or her time and encouraging toward musicians who want to learn. According to one DC musician, the fiddler Brendan Mulvihill is always willing to give a few minutes of his time to play tunes with someone who asks him.¹⁸¹ In stark contrast, another well-known DC-area musician was asked by visiting musicians from Ireland to “have a tune” with them, but this person said no and left because he was too tired, which came as an affront to the visiting musicians. Although advanced musicians are by no means obligated to accept requests to play with lesser musicians, those who do so are admired for their generosity and encouragement.

Having knowledge of standardized Western classical intonation is also important at sessions. Although some regional styles of Irish music dictate that certain notes are flatter in pitch than their Western classical equivalents, musicians in

¹⁸⁰ Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 18.

¹⁸¹ Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

Washington, DC rarely play in such a specific style at a session, with the exception of uilleann pipes that are constructed to play outside of equal temperament. A musician should “have good but flexible tuning,” meaning that they will be able to adjust their instrument to be in tune with the group.¹⁸² Those who tune to an electronic tuner are in tune with themselves but not necessarily with fixed-pitch instruments like accordions and pianos. Uilleann pipes are tunable within a very narrow range. Musicians who play adjustable tuning instruments such as string instruments, the flute, and certain whistles should tune to the fixed-pitch instruments and adjust accordingly as the evening continues.

Irish session musicians in Washington, DC determine the authenticity and competency of other musicians and themselves with a combination of factors, including ethnicity, musical ability, and session behavior. Each session has a different way of proving its authenticity, based on the musicians who attend. Although sessions in general are often romanticized as harmonious musical communities, each session has a different level of strictness with regard to session etiquette. The multiple sessions in the Washington, DC metropolitan area offer a variety of opportunities for Irish musicians to participate in making music and socializing.

¹⁸² Interview with the author, May 13, 2011.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Despite the commodification of Irish culture by mass media, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century with productions such as *Riverdance* and New Age music, Irish traditional music continues to flourish. Musicians who play Irish traditional music perform at concerts, festivals, *céili*, music camps, and Irish sessions, among other places. Irish traditional music has also become a commodity in the form of concerts, recordings, and instruments. Musicians play in Irish sessions at local restaurants and pubs around the world, including Ireland, Scotland, most other European countries, Canada, all over the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Japan. The sessions exist primarily in the Irish diaspora, where large numbers of Irish immigrants have migrated in the past several hundred years, but this is only a starting point. Musicians in Japan and many parts of the United States and Europe, for example, have little to no ethnic connection to Irish music but share an intense passion for the music and the culture associated with it.

Slobin's idea of affinity explains why the musicians who are not Irish are drawn to the music, while Turino's concept of participatory music making describes the interaction of music and social life that occurs during Irish sessions. Washington, DC sessions primarily feature musicians who play Irish music but did not grow up in an Irish culture. They are drawn to the music by affinity, and they stay because they feel a sense of belonging in the group. In participatory music making, musicians at many different playing levels can play together because of the varying roles and challenges within the group. At a session, stronger players tend to lead more sets and

keep the group moving, and less advanced players enjoy learning from the stronger players. The goal is to have all of the musicians playing together at least most of the time. The structure of the music itself allows for participatory music making because of its sectional form, which is often binary form (AABB), and the many repetitions of a tune that are played. The more tunes a musician knows, the more he or she can participate in the music making and socializing.

Perhaps because of the participatory nature of the music, a musician who plays Irish music strives to learn as many tunes as possible, and this value is one of the characteristics of a good Irish musician. Musicians at a session should play an accepted Irish instrument in a style that encompasses the ornamentation and “lilt” (feel) of Irish music. The best compliment I received during my field research was from Mike, the uilleann piper at Nanny O’Brien’s who also speaks and reads Irish Gaelic. After I had been playing at local sessions for a year, Mike told me, “Thanks for playing White Petticoat like a jig” as opposed to playing it like a classical piece.¹⁸³ Technical skills often learned in Western classical music, such as a rich tone, a steady beat, and precise rhythm, are often prized in Irish music, but Irish tunes should have the feel of a dance. Playing a tune as a dance usually indicates that beats 1 and 3 are emphasized in reels (ONE and two and THREE and four and), while beats 1 and 4 are stressed in jigs (ONE two three FOUR five six).

Even within the year of this field research, evidence of a changing tradition has surfaced. I began playing a jig called “The White Petticoat” that I had learned from a popular recording by Solas. When I started playing the jig in September of

¹⁸³ Interview with the author, October 3, 2011.

2010, only one musician knew how to play the tune. By the following year, musicians said the tune was being heard more frequently in the area, and my session at Nanny O'Brien's played the tune with its entire set from the Solas recording. The influence of recordings and individual musicians, including myself, causes the culture to evolve.

Technology has also caused session playing to change and evolve. Musicians frequently bring hand-held digital audio recorders or iPhones to record new tunes that they will learn at home. The internet is home to communities of Irish music enthusiasts such as TheSession.org and more specialized groups like the Irish whistle message board, Chiff and Fipple. Musicians acquire much of their knowledge of the music from these sources, as well as independent research using collections such as *O'Neill's Music of Ireland*.¹⁸⁴ Although written notation is common, learning music aurally remains extremely important to musicians who play Irish music. Learning tunes aurally, either during the session or from a recording, often determines people's perception of a musician's authenticity, because the tradition of learning aurally existed long before that of notation.

Session etiquette varies at each individual session in Washington, DC, but most sessions do not permit reading from music during a session, and most allow only the accepted Irish instruments to be played. Following these rules allows the mostly non-Irish musicians in Washington, DC to feel that they are authentically portraying Irish sessions. If a musician playing an instrument like the electric bass wanted to join a session, the session musicians would refuse because it would disrupt

¹⁸⁴ Francis O'Neill, *O'Neill's Music of Ireland* (Chicago: Lyon and Healy, 1903).

their concept of how the music should sound. In addition, even at some of the more advanced sessions, socializing through music is more important than individuality and competition, whether or not the session actually functions in this harmonious manner. The musicians value collectivity, so that most musicians are able to play and socialize during the session. Occasionally, as with the group of young Irish musicians who took private lessons visiting Nanny O'Brien's, this value may be stretched. The young musicians dominated the session by playing tunes that they all knew, leaving out the regular Nanny O'Brien's musicians. Had they played at more sessions, as opposed to private lesson and competitions, they might have known the value of collective music making at a session.

Many additional questions arose from this study of Irish sessions in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, suggesting areas for future research. DC's local Irish music scene is made up of Irish, Irish American, and non-Irish musicians, dancers, and enthusiasts. While this research project studied mostly non-Irish Americans in DC who had an affinity for Irish music, a study of Irish Americans in the area would reveal their concepts of authenticity and their cultural ties to the music. Several Irish American musicians are involved with the local branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, an organization that promotes Irish culture in Ireland and throughout the world.

Gender associations in Irish music are another area for further study. While women made music at private homes in Ireland, they were not permitted to enter pubs to play music. Women rarely played accompanying instruments, and they were only encouraged to sing or to play softer, more "feminine" instruments like the concertina.

Helen O'Shea devotes a chapter in her book to past and present gender issues in Irish music, particularly at sessions.¹⁸⁵ Even today, female session musicians are rare, and male musicians tend to dominate in the professional music world: "In the long cavalcade of groups formed since the 1960s, the vast majority are exclusively male, with a handful of all-women bands."¹⁸⁶ At sessions in Washington, DC, women are almost always present, and many of them are considered excellent musicians, but they are rarely session leaders. An in-depth study of gender concepts and interviews with female musicians would provide insight into whether gender biases still exist in DC's Irish session scene.

The diverse population of Washington, DC provides opportunities for many smaller musical communities, such as the Irish session scene, to flourish. A study of other specialized musical communities would be informative to understand how they function and who participates in them. Bluegrass, old time music, and contradance events would be especially pertinent to study alongside the Irish session scene, since many Irish musicians also participate in these local music networks. Irish sessions in Washington, DC and the musicians who participate in them will continue to change and evolve as more Americans who are not Irish continue the tradition and join the session.

¹⁸⁵ O'Shea, *Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 105-118.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

Appendix

Select List of Irish Tunes Played at Washington, DC-Area Irish Sessions

Below are the tunes that I was able to identify or that were announced during the sessions I attended. This list encompasses only a small fraction of the tunes being played at sessions in Washington, DC. See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Methodology. Titles followed by another title in parenthesis show multiple names that musicians mentioned for the same tune. Italicized notes in parenthesis that follow titles (see Jigs) show the specific type of dance tune, such as slip jig or slide.

Reels

Banish Misfortune	O'Connell's Trip to Parliament
The Belles of Tipperary	The Old Pigeon on the Gate
Brenda Stubbert's	Ormond Sound
Bunch of Keys	Paddy Fahy's (multiple tunes by the same name)
The Cameronian	Paddy Ryan's Dream
The Congress	The Peeler's Jacket
Connaght Man's Rambles	The Providence Reel
Cooley's Reel	Rakish Paddy
The Cup of Tea	Rattigan's (Redigan's)
Dowd's	The Red-Haired Boy
Drowsy Maggie	The Red-Haired Lass
The Dunmore Lasses	Rolling in the Ryegrass
Frank's Reel	The Rolling Wave
Fred Finn's	Roslyn Castle
The Glass of Beer	Sheehan's
Gravel Walks	Ships are Sailing
The Humours of Tulla	Sligo Creek
John Bowe's Favorite	The Sligo Maid
The Jolly Tinker	The Silver Spear
Kitty Gone A-Milking	The Skylark
Lady Anne Montgomery	St. Anne's Reel
The Maid Behind the Bar	Swinging on a Gate
The Maids of Mitchelstown	The Torn Jacket
Martin Wynne's No. 1, 2, 3, and 4	Toss the Feathers
Master Crowley's	The Traveler
Mayor Harrison's Fedora	Tuttle's
McFarley's (The Maids of Castlebar)	The Virginian
Miss McLeod's Reel	The Wedding (McLeod's Farewell)
The Mossy Banks	The Wind That Shakes the Barley
The Musical Priest	

Jigs

Anderson's
The Black Rogue
The Blackthorn Stick
The Butterfly (*slip jig*)
Calliope House
The Chicken that Made the Soup
The Cliffs of Moher
Denis Murphy's (*slide*)
Devanny's Goat
Doctor O'Neill's
Donnybrook Fair (The Joy of My Life)
Flowers of Spring (Tom Billy's No. 2)
Gallagher's Frolics
Give us a Drink of Water (*slip jig*)
The Handsome Young Maidens
The Humours of Whiskey (*slip jig*)
Jim Ward's
Kesh Jig
The Leitrim Fancy
The Liltin' Banshee
Maguire's Kick (Clan March)
Man of the House
Matt People's
Merrily Kissed the Quaker (*slide*)
The Miller's Maggot
The Monaghan
Morrison's Jig
The Mouse in the Mug
Out on the Ocean
Palm Sunday
The Pigtown Fling
The Rakes of Kildare
Rambling Pitchfork
The Road to Lisdoonvarna
The Roaring Barmaid
The Rolling Waves
The Rose in the Heather
Scatter the Mud
Sheanamhac Tube Station
Sheila's Jig
The Snowy Path (*slip jig*)
The Spinning Wheel (The Hag at the
 Spinning Wheel)
Stan Chapman's

The Swaggering Jig (*slip jig*)
Swallowtail Jig
The Tar Road to Sligo
Tater Jack Walsh (Father Jack Walsh)
Tom Billy's (multiple)
The Trip to Sligo
Whelan's
The Whistler at the Wake
The White Petticoat
Woman of the House

Hornpipes

Bonaparte Crossing the Rhine
The Boys of Bluehill
Harvest Home
Madame Bonaparte
Off to California
The Rights of Man
Sean Ryan's
The Wicklow (Sonny Murray's)

Polkas

Dennis Murphy's
John Ryan's
The Kerry Cow
Lakes of Sligo
Peg Ryan's

Waltzes and Airs

Crested Hens
Give Me Your Hand
Planxty Fanny Po'er
Planxty Irwin
The Pretty Girl Milking Her Cow
Sheebeg and Sheemore

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