



LEARNING, TEACHING, AND TRANSMISSION IN THE LIVES OF TWO IRISH MUSICIANS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

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The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to discover the manner in which two Irish musicians, Loretto Reid and Brian Taheny, taught/and or transmitted traditional music at the Celtic College Summer School in Goderich, Ontario. Two central questions, each followed by several sub-questions, served to focus the study: “How did you learn Irish traditional music?” and “How do you teach Irish traditional music to adults?” Several themes emerged from the analysis of the central and sub-questions, including, a supportive family environment, listening and observing as key elements to musical learning, teaching holistically, and music notation used as a memory aid and not as the primary learning tool. Information gleaned from this study is potentially valuable to public school music programs.

Introduction

“Bi-musicality” refers to a musician schooled in two different musical cultures, one of the two usually being Western European art music. Green (2002) modified this definition by extending it to include those who have learned music through informal as well as formal means. “Bimusicality” was the catalyst that enabled me to become meaningfully engaged in the topic of this study. I identify myself as a “bi-musical” person in both definitions of the word because I am a formally trained Western European art musician and an informally trained Irish performer. I learned Irish traditional music informally as an adult, after many years of formal Western classical training. Learning Irish traditional music in an informal setting has had profoundly positive effects on my musicianship and my life as a music educator. My interest in conducting a study on this topic stems from insights gained through learning traditional music in a supportive community and my experience as a music educator.

The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to discover the manner in which two Irish traditional musicians, Loretto Reid and Brian Taheny, learned and transmitted traditional music to adult learners at the Celtic College Summer School in Goderich, Ontario, Canada. The focus on Irish traditional music reflects the fact that traditional musics from other Celtic cultures are also present and transmitted/taught at the Celtic College. Two central research questions, each followed by several sub-questions, served to focus the study. The first question, “How did you learn Irish traditional music?” generated these sub-questions: “When did you start? What instrument did you start on? Do you play other instruments? Did you grow up in a musically supportive culture? What was your motivation to learn Irish traditional music?” The second question, “How do you teach Irish traditional music?” generated these questions: “Do you teach differently than you learned? How do you teach Irish traditional music to North American adults who were not enculturated in Irish traditional music as children? In what settings do you teach? Have your teaching strategies at the College changed over the years?”

Background

The Celtic College Summer School is an annual, weekly event that takes place in the town of Goderich, Ontario, Canada every August and is held in conjunction with the Celtic Roots Festival immediately following the College. The school, aimed at adults, provides musical instruction on various instruments and types of Celtic music. Different musical traditions taught at the school include those musics from Ireland, Newfoundland, Cape Breton, Quebec, Ontario, Brittany, England, Scotland, and Wales. Instrumental instruction is available on Irish flute, tin whistle, bagpipes (several types), anglo and English concertina, button accordion, fiddle, mandolin, banjo, bouzouki, guitar, piano, and *bodhran* (a traditional Irish drum). There are traditional arts, crafts, and cooking classes offered as well, as the underlying philosophy of the week is to create a “mini-culture/community” for the students and the staff (www.celticfestival.ca). This model of “summer school” is based on the Willie Clancy Summer School week in Ireland, which focuses on the instruction of Irish traditional music to adults (Sky, 1996).

The Celtic College, a nonprofit institution, was founded in 1995 by Warren and Eleanor Robinson, two public secondary school educators living in Goderich who have a strong interest in Celtic music and art. The first summer of the school's founding, there were 17 instructors and 83 students. By the ninth year of the school's existence (2003), 55 staff were employed to instruct 350 students. Because this study is only concerned with the transmission of traditional Irish music at the College, and no other traditional musics or crafts that are taught there, it will be limited to interviews and observations of two of the original Irish traditional music teachers on the Celtic College staff. The two participants, Loretto Reid and Brian Taheny, were chosen based on their personal musical background and because they have taught consecutively for the nine years of the College's existence.

Loretto Reid and Brian Taheny are a married couple who emigrated from the Republic of Ireland in 1988 and are currently living in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Both are multi-instrumentalists, originally from County Sligo, Ireland. Reid is a renowned performer on the tin whistle, Irish flute, button accordion and concertina. Taheny, equally well known for his musical skills, plays the mandolin, guitar, banjo, Dobro, bouzouki and fiddle. In addition to being a married couple, they have performed together as a duo since 1977. I have known both of them since 1991, and it was through Reid that I was hired as a member of the Celtic College's staff in 1996 as a beginning tin whistle and Irish flute instructor. In August 2003, I co-taught a Celtic Band class at the College with Taheny. Because there are interpretive aspects to this study it is important that any potential for bias on my part be recognized by the reader.

Irish Traditional Music: An Overview

Interpreted broadly, Irish traditional music is defined as music from Ireland that is traditional in any way, i. e., origin, idiom, or in the transmission or performance style (Vallely, 1999). The adjective "traditional" implies that, "something in the music is being passed from one generation of performers to the next" (O'Canainn, 1978, p. 1). While there are different styles and genres of music within Ireland, the bulk of Irish traditional

music is categorized as “songs, dance tunes, or tunes meant for listening,” (Veblen, 1991, p. 234) and it has developed over the last 300 years from native sources and outside influences (Hamilton, 1994). The music as it exists today is remarkably similar to its original 18th century form (McCullough, 1978) and historically it was “passed on” from one performer to another either through oral (by way of mouth, as in song transmission), or aural (by ear) transmission (Vallely, 1999). Categories of songs include those songs in English and those sung in Irish, also known as *sean nos*. Songs sung in English are a relatively recent development and include ballads and lighter songs which can vary in tempo (Veblen, 1991). *Sean nos*, or “old style” singing, is an older way of singing in Gaelic that is found mainly in the southwestern part of Ireland. It is unaccompanied, highly ornamented and sung in a rubato style (O’Cannain, 1978).

The bulk of instrumental music is comprised of dance forms such as jigs, reels, marches, slip jigs, polkas, marches, mazurkas, and set dances. Also included in this genre are slow airs and planxties, which comprise a smaller category of instrumental music that is intended for listening only (Veblen, 1991). The dance forms usually consist of two 8-bar phrases, with the occasional three or more 8-bar phrase seen (Hamilton, 1994). Common time signatures are 2/2, 4/4, or 2/4 for reels, marches, and hornpipes, and 6/8 for jigs, 9/8 for slip jigs, and 3/4 for waltzes and mazurkas. Historically, instruments that performed these Irish dance forms were, and continue to be, the fiddle, flute, tin whistle, melodeon, concertina, accordion, uilleann pipes, and bodhran (Veblen, 1991). Later, other instruments were added to the tradition, those being the banjo, piano, guitar, harmonica, bouzouki, and mandolin, respectively (Veblen, 1991).

Musical interest is generated by each individual musician’s creativity, thus a player may never play a given tune twice in the same way, and two players will rarely play a tune identically (Vallely, 1999). In this way, musical practices associated with Irish traditional music could be perceived as somewhat analogous to musical practices in jazz.

Ornamentation plays a prominent role; the player is free to choose from a common stock of ornaments (cranns, rolls, cuts, and triplets), which, for reasons of economy, will not be discussed here.

“Nonliterate” Performance Practice and Informal Learning Practices

Musicologist and social critic Christopher Small (1998) asserts that the complete dependence upon written notation by performers of Western art music is a unique practice among global musical cultures. Notation enables yet is simultaneously limiting. Compositions from earlier centuries are preserved; the written notation also enables modern performers to learn music efficiently. What musicians can perform, however, is restricted by the parameters of the printed page. The player’s power of “self-directed performance is liable to atrophy, especially when, as in the modern Western concert tradition, “nonliterate” (Small’s term) performance is judged in some way to be inferior to literate” (p. 110). Small defines “nonliterate” performance practice as “performers inventing some or all of their own material,” and he contends that this practice no longer has a place in Western concert performances (p. 110). To European musicians of an earlier period this attitude towards nonliterate performance would have seemed absurd, as the inability to perform music outside of the confines of the written page was an unknown concept.

The primary function of a score was to disseminate a performance and not to preserve the written text.

Further, Small contends that none of the “Great Composers” were completely text dependent, either for performance or compositional purposes. Because they were fluent in “nonliterate” and literate musical practices, they could move freely between both.

According to Small:

[Their] frequent nonliterate performances were, to judge from wildly enthusiastic contemporary accounts, more exciting and moving, even inspired, than any performance could be of those notated works of theirs which have come down to

us and which today we treasure. (p. 110)

Hopkins (2000) suggests the same. She maintains that, at the time, it was an expectation that musicians add improvisation to their performances of both sacred and secular music. As an example, Hopkins cites contemporaries critical of J. S. Bach, because he included so much in his music notation that little or no room was left for improvisation to be added by the performer. Small contends that this aural/oral improvisatory practice described by himself and Hopkins has completely disappeared in contemporary concert music practice. No performance takes place without a score, either before the performance if it was memorized, or during the performance if it was not.

According to music education philosopher David Elliott, music literacy, or the knowledge of notation and how to decode it, is not a significant part of many global music practices. It is not the same as musicianship, being only one part of formal learning practice (1995). In many parts of the world, aural/oral transmission is the primary way in which instrumental music is learned, and it is sometimes augmented by vocal and/or visual elements or cues. By vocalizing, often with nonsense syllables, instrumental music is re-created, learned, and transmitted from one musician to another. There is a visual component to aural/oral learning as well. Student instrumentalists often watch their teachers' hands and fingers, looking for repeated finger patterns (Hopkins, 2000, p. 105).

Irish musicologist Andrew Robinson (in Vallely, 1999) discusses aural/oral learning from an Irish traditional perspective. He maintains that, while staff notation serves a useful purpose, it has limits as to how it can portray certain subtle rhythmic and phrasing elements that constitute the "living communication of music" (p. 396). Thus, he compares reading staff notation in music to painting by numbers in art. Although all music is learned aurally, Robinson contends that some music teachers still use the phrase "playing by ear" in a detrimental manner, the implication being that one is not educated as a musician.

In the Irish dance tradition, the availability of written notated music, along with the

ability to read it, has facilitated the passing on of that music to those whom it would otherwise be inaccessible. However, in the case of traditional music, this can only indicate the notes to be played; it cannot communicate rhythmic subtleties or stylistic elements. Nor can notated music accurately document the ornamentation expected of Irish players. As mentioned earlier, creating interest in Irish traditional music depends solely upon the individual creativity of each musician.

Many of the aural/oral informal music learning practices typical of other cultures are similar to those employed by Western popular musicians. In her study of how popular musicians learn, Green (2002) explains that along with, or as a replacement for formal music education practice (of which one aspect is the ability to decode written notation), every society has developed other ways of passing on and acquiring musical skills and knowledge, and this includes Western culture. Green defines these skills as informal learning practices, in which musical skills and knowledge are “picked up” from family, friends and peers. Formal music education, shares few, if any, of the characteristics of these “informal learning practices” (p. 5).

Through the medium of Scottish traditional fiddle music, Cope and Smith (1997), examined and compared the characteristics of Western formal school music instruction and informal non-school music learning. The authors maintain that the following elements are typical characteristics of a Western formal school music education:

- 1) A written culture, the primary emphasis being on reading written music
- 2) The musically gifted student
- 3) A mostly classical repertoire
- 4) The gradation of exercises and technique
- 5) Comprehension of music theory
- 6) A tacit assumption that becoming a concert player is the goal (Cope & Smith, 1997, p. 285).

The ability to read notated music and understand theoretical music knowledge are

valuable skills in the Western classical curriculum, however, Cope and Smith contend that both are often stressed over the development of contextual aural learning. Elaborating further, they contend that learners should experience music intuitively, in the real life context of music making, before being introduced to formal theory and/or written notation.

Music cultures that exist outside of the school environment reveal a different approach to learning than that which exists in the formal sphere. Cope and Smith, through their examination of traditional Scottish fiddling practice, discovered the following attributes that characterize an informal and contextual approach to music learning:

- 1) A traditional repertoire
- 2) A musically competent participant
- 3) Learning in a holistic manner by learning tunes
- 4) The traditional/folk range of instruments
- 5) Learning by ear
- 6) Music theory unexplicated
- 7) The competent amateur player as goal (Cope & Smith, 1997, p. 286).

The authors contend that the above characteristics are applicable to a number of musical subcultures, and not just traditional Scottish fiddle music.

Context and Transmission in Community

Significantly, the most prominent feature of the approach articulated by Cope and Smith (1997) is that it is context dependent, meaning that musicians learn to play within the cultural context of their performance idiom. While practicing may occur in a solitary setting, learning also occurs interactively in the informal group setting. This group setting serves to function as a social activity as well, since tunes are learned through transmission from one group member to another. This group setting constitutes what Elliott (1995) refers to as a “specific community of practice” (p. 67). That is, students

become inducted into the practice or culture that they “intend to learn,” and the resulting musicianship is, therefore, context-dependent (p. 67).

In Ireland, this contextual musical induction occurs in the *sessiun ceoil* (or session). Musicians gather together in an informal setting to play music together and this gathering can occur in a church, parking lot, public house, or any agreed upon public or private space. It is not, however, considered to be a public performance, even though there could be members of the general public in attendance. The session exists for the enjoyment of the players, some of whom attend the session to test their own abilities against that of other musicians, while others come to learn new tunes and techniques. No formal teaching, however, takes place (Cowdery, 1990).

Veblen (1991), in her examination of Irish traditional music transmission, explored the nature of stability and change through the role of the traditional music teacher. Veblen determined that Irish traditional music was, and is still, taught primarily through aural/oral transmission in community, with written music used as a memory aid. Music was/is taught sequentially and incrementally, and each teacher had a distinctive teaching repertoire, the contents of which varied depending on preferred style, region, instrument, and perceived learner level.

Methodology

I travelled to Toronto, in October 2003, to interview the participants, Loretto Reid and Brian Taheny at their home over the course of one weekend. Approximately 50 pages of raw data were collected, transcribed, analysed and coded. Follow-up telephone conversations and e-mail correspondence served to clarify any questions arising from the collected data. Data were then verified and triangulated by member checking, cross checking the participants’ interview transcripts, cross checking with the Celtic College 2002 CD, researcher personal experience and by observing a video tape of Taheny’s group playing class from the Celtic College. The participants’ accounts were then profiled and summarized separately as I felt it was important to preserve their

independence as part of the paper's structure. This format allowed me to frame the participants' comments in the context of their own learning and teaching histories.

Two meta-themes, learning and teaching, emerged from the two central research questions. Five themes related to learning were common to both accounts, and three themes emerged which were common to teaching. Some themes revealed two or more sub-themes, and one theme emerged (composing) that was unique to Reid. Common themes related to learning were 1) a supportive family environment 2) procedural musical knowledge gained through listening and observing 3) the presence of encouraging mentors (as opposed to "teachers") 4) learning in context, and 5) the importance of performing venues. The participants shared three themes regarding teaching. These were 1) that both learned to teach through the act of teaching 2) that they both teach differently then they learned and 3) that they both teach in a "holistic" manner. One unique theme, raised by Taheny, was the understanding that written notation and performed music are not the same thing. Further, he explained his frustration with teaching students whose expectations for his class, because of their limited exposure to Irish traditional music, were based on formal Western ideas of what music is, and by extension, what music teaching should be. Thus, tensions arose as a result of misunderstandings between the dichotomies of informal and formal music learning practices. Taheny also discussed the community atmosphere generated at the College, and he surmised this was an important factor that contributed to the high student retention rate at the College.

Loretto Reid-Learning and Teaching Irish Music

Reid described family as her primary influence, both in acquiring instruments, and in encouraging and facilitating her musical development. The youngest of five daughters, her siblings' musical activities greatly affected her. Because they were learning tin whistle at school, Reid's older sisters often brought their whistles home to practice. This was Reid's first exposure to the tin whistle, and she soon started playing and learning it as a toddler. One sister also owned an accordion, of which Reid said, she (meaning herself) "twiddled on at the age of four" along with the whistle.

Neither of Reid's parents were musicians, but her maternal grandfather, Mick Carr, was a renowned fiddler, as were three uncles who played fiddle and accordion. Her parents were, however, supportive of the girls' musical endeavors, taking the sisters to *feishes*, *fleadghs* (Irish dance and music competitions), and concerts to perform and also escorting them to the local pub to participate in *sessions*. While not active performers themselves, Reid's parents understood the behavior expected of Irish musicians in *sessions* and at *fleadhs*, and re-enforced it at the family's many musical outings. Because good manners in an Irish session are equally as important as musical competence, awareness of proper *session* etiquette is necessary if one is to become an accepted *session* participant (Vallely, 1999). For example, Reid told me that her parents had instructed her "not to start a tune" at a session, because it was considered impolite and an indication of "bad manners." She was emphatic, stating that, "Well, as children, it would be that, you would be invited to join in and play, but, you would be invited, depending who'd be there, to start a tune, because that was considered to be good manners."

Although she would have "loved" to study music formally, Reid received no formal music instruction, and does not read standard musical notation. Learning music, for her, was a holistic, "osmotic," event that occurred by listening to and observing the fingers of other musicians. At the age four, Reid remembers just "[being able] to play a tune [on the whistle]." Her sisters, as members of the elementary school band (which was an Irish *ceili* band, comprised of Irish traditional instruments), often practiced the traditional tunes at home that they had learned aurally at school, and Reid recalled hearing them play common Irish marches and hornpipes. Listening was integral to learning, and of it she said:

You just learned by ear. . . and really, we had the best musicians to [listen to]. . . it was more osmosis, things weren't said, you just listened and listened.

Pattern recognition was also important and related to listening. Reid elaborated:

I can [just hear it,] and because it's the training, you've built up so many patterns. It's all patterns. . . and calculations, and you begin to get the patterns. Some are harder because they're out of pattern.

Observing other musicians playing also figured prominently in Reid's account. The physical actions required for execution "fascinated" her, especially in the case of the accordion. Reid would "watch anybody playing," because, she believed that if "you could move your fingers like that, and move them all over the place, then something's going to happen." By doing so, she learned her first tune on the accordion (a tune her mother told her was called "The Old Cow That Died"). She was four and a half. Reid also recalled, at the age of four, observing her most influential mentor, fiddler Joe O'Dowd:

I'd be closer and closer, almost down to his fingers, and my parents would call me back, and Joe would go, "She's all right, she's all right!" And I thought, well, he says it's all right, so I'd keep going and watching. I really wanted to play the fiddle actually, too. Loved to have played the fiddle. But we didn't have a fiddle, so that was OK. I played it on the whistle.

Mentors, as opposed to teachers (in the Western formal sense of the word) served to guide Reid as she learned. She emphatically stated that they were not "teachers." Instead, they shared tunes and provided encouragement for her at the many *sessions* they all attended and played at. The aforementioned Joe O' Dowd was the most influential of Reid's mentors because of his musical ability and his "lovely, pleasant aura" (Reid described him as being "just a wonderful man"). Other prominent musical mentors included well known Sligo style Irish flute players Peter Horan and Josie McDermott.

Interacting with these and other musicians at *sessions* throughout Sligo provided Reid the opportunity to learn Irish traditional music in context. As mentioned above, no formal teaching takes place at *sessions*. Particularly influential were the weekly sessions at the Trades Club in Sligo Town, because this was where she interacted with O'Dowd, Horan and McDermott, and it was there where she also met Taheny. Also significant for

learning in context were *fliedghs*, *feishes*, festivals and concerts because it was at those events that she met and played with other musicians. At the age of 16, Reid joined with mentor Joe O’Dowd to perform at a major folk festival in front of 7000 people. By that time she was already a seasoned performer, having played concerts with her sisters since the age of six.

Composing tunes was a theme unique to Reid. She began doing so at a young age for two reasons, the first being to accommodate her playing style on the accordion. Physically small at the age of six, Reid was challenged by the instrument because her accordion (which was the one the family owned), was a large, three row button affair. The second reason she started composing was her lack of access to “more” tunes; with no record player in the house, she “got bored easily” with her existing repertoire. Reid told no one that she was composing or playing her own compositions for fear of reprisal. She said:

I didn’t tell anyone, because you didn’t do that [compose]. And the reason I think I gave up the accordion at the age of 12, because it was quite traumatizing and a very bad thing to do, but I went to the All Ireland and played my own tunes secretly in the competition.

Reid received third place and the adjudicator was unaware she had performed tunes of her own composition. Not until she met Taheny did she admit to composing her own tunes. She stated, “He [Taheny] said, “you know, you made that up!” Well, [I had] got so used to hiding it, because it was just not the ‘done’ thing.”

At the Celtic College, Reid teaches tin whistle, Irish flute, button accordion and concertina, and also teaches weekly tin whistle and flute lessons to private students in Toronto. She did not learn “how to teach music” until beginning to do so, and she says, “I had to learn what I was doing, and break it down.” She also teaches differently from the way she learned, because Reid allows students to use written notation if they were formally trained. Although she encourages students to “play by ear,” Reid says that, in her experience, most students have difficulty learning by ear because “they haven’t been

relying on their ears, so it doesn't come as easily." However, she feels that written music is a useful teaching tool for more advanced concepts of ornamentation and variation, because students can mark both into their music for later practice. Reid does teach tunes "holistically" (that is, in "bits" and "pieces," which are then gradually strung together), and she has favorite "teaching" tunes chosen specifically for their technical features.

Although Reid does not read standard written musical notation, she and Taheny are both fluent in ABC notation, a simple system which uses alphabetic letters to represent note names and which functions as a memory aid, and/or to teach the basic notes of a tune (Vallely, 1999). Most Irish musicians can read ABC notation, and Reid and Taheny mentioned independently that when they saw ABC notation on blackboards at the Celtic College, they "knew" that an Irish person was the class instructor.

Brian Taheny-Learning and Teaching Irish Music

Taheny, like Reid, was a younger sibling from a large family, being the fifth child of six. As in Reid's case, his parents encouraged his musical activities, but were not active musicians themselves. His older brother, interested in rock and popular music, also played rock guitar, and had "tons" of popular music records that Taheny listened to as a youngster. As a young man, Taheny's father had been a violinist (as opposed to a fiddler) and mandolin player but had stopped playing long before Taheny was born. However, two of Taheny's uncles, Barry Ward and Jackie Connell, were active musicians. Barry Ward was an "enormous" (meaning a superlative) musician, who visited America many times in the mid-70s to perform at various bluegrass festivals. Bringing with him many recordings of famous bluegrass musicians upon his return to Ireland, Ward exposed Taheny to bluegrass for the first time, and Taheny found the music "fascinating." Ward also provided Taheny with his first fiddle. Another influential uncle, Jackie Connell was "the best flute player as well." Of him, Taheny says, "I remember him teaching me the "Sailor on the Rock." He'd [be] playing the tin whistle and [I'd be] playing the mandolin, out in some field in south Sligo. That's where I got my first bit of ear training!"

Motivated to learn his first instrument (guitar), at the age of 12, because he wanted to learn “riffs,” Taheny purchased an electric one and began to practice it by himself. His mother then suggested, why not try the mandolin? He subsequently bought one and began spending two to three hours a day practicing, of his own volition, Irish folk rock music. While he did use books to learn “the tunes” on the mandolin, he did not read standard written notation, instead using a tablature system taught to him by his father. Taheny began by drawing the “tab” symbols above the written notes in the staff before trying to learn the tunes. Although he was aware that written music was “just the bare bones thing, and that it sometimes didn’t bear any relation to the real [performed] music,” he says that having written music “helped,” because “my ear wasn’t, and is still not the greatest” (Although from my personal experience of playing with him, I find the latter statement difficult to believe).

Like Reid, learning to play in context was crucial to Taheny’s musical development. At the age of 15, a family friend advised him to attend the weekly Irish music sessions held at the Trades Club in Sligo because that would be a good place to hear, play, and learn traditional music. The Trades Club was an historic and famous venue for traditional music, and it was there that Taheny met and interacted with many well-known, older Irish musicians such as the aforementioned Joe O’Dowd, Josie McDermott, Peter Horan and Packie Duigman. It was also at the Trades Club that he met Reid. Of his first visit there, Taheny says:

I’ll never forget it, about ten minutes into it, it just dawned on me, that this is the heart of music, that this is actually what the whole thing is about, it’s not rock music, and playing flashy solos or anything like that. Here you’ve got older people who are able to communicate on a totally different level, it’s not verbal, it’s purely musical, and you could see the beat that they used to get going in the Trades Club, [it] was pretty heavy. . . and it’s still the same, the older players, once the beat gets going, it really grooves. And I was fascinated with that and fascinated with the whole interaction and everything. So the next week I came down with my mandolin, and I’ve been there ever since. This Irishness,

everything really, it was quite a revelation.

Besides playing in a community context, aesthetic surroundings were important to Taheny, especially when it came to his learning to play the fiddle. At the age of 30, he decided to “relearn the fiddle” by listening to recordings of famous Sligo fiddler Michael Coleman and others. After “absorbing” those sounds, Taheny re-enforced them by practicing outdoors in his native Sligo. He said:

I decided that I’ll listen to these records, get them into my brain, go outside and just learn the fiddle again. And that’s what I did, I just played the fiddle like crazy. In the middle of nowhere. I thought, if I’m going to learn the fiddle, it’s got to be out in the natural elements out in Sligo, sitting on a rock, just the way every other fiddler learned. And I did, I definitely learned more of what the Sligo thing was, by doing that.

By the age of 18, he and Reid had formed a duo and together they performed at festivals and concert venues throughout Ireland. Performing figured prominently in Taheny’s account. For him, the most valuable aspect of playing professionally was the connections that he and Reid made with other Irish musicians. Both Reid and Taheny identified “The Boys of Ballisadare Festival” as seminal in their development because it exposed them both to a large audience (40,000 people) and highly respected musicians with whom they interacted. At the various festivals and concert venues, Taheny and Reid met and played formally and informally with: Clannad, The Boys of the Lough, The Bothy Band, DeDannan, Planxty, Donal Lunny, Tommy Peoples, Paddy Keenan, Seamus O’Dowd (Joe’s son), the Fury brothers, Kevin Burke, Mairead Ni Mnaonaigh, and Frankie Kennedy (who were to become Altan), among others.

At the Celtic College, Taheny has taught fiddle, mandolin, banjo, guitar, sound production, and Celtic Band. As he does read music to some extent, the manner in which he teaches is slightly different from Reid’s. One unique theme mentioned by Taheny was the misunderstanding, on the part of students, that written notation and the music it

represents are not necessarily the same thing. Further, he discussed the high student retention rate at the College, which he attributed to the spiritual and community feelings generated during the week.

Before teaching at the College, Taheny's experience as a music teacher was limited to a small number of banjo students in Ireland. Because of his limited experience, Taheny explained that, when he began teaching at the College, he was forced to learn how to teach "on the fly" through the act of teaching. Taheny's first College class was comprised of 35 fiddle students of various levels, and few, if any of the students understood that learning Irish traditional music with written notation was an inauthentic way in which to learn (or play) that music. Further, they did not realize that printed sheet music was just a written representation of "the tunes", and not the music itself. He said:

They just wanted to learn tunes. However, they'd be able to read music so their idea of playing tunes would be, slap the music in front of them and just play it. And I'd say, well you can do that at home any time.

He did understand the students' feelings that they must have sheet music in front of them when learning tunes, because he as a learner had also used a written notation system. The difference was that, at the time he learned (at the age of 14, as mentioned above), he was aware that written notation and the actual sounds the written notation represented were not the same thing. As a result, Taheny strongly encourages students to play aurally and does so by teaching tunes in phrases. This also serves to show how the tune is structured and how the "whole tune is tied together."

Insisting that students at least attempt to play by ear, Taheny has met resistance from students who "were very stubborn and expressed that never, ever, will there be anyway that they could learn that way." However, Taheny does accommodate those unwilling to learn by ear, allowing those students to use sheet music if they so insist. Although he distributes "loads of tunes" for the students to take home, his classes usually work on two tunes for the duration of the Celtic College. Those tunes are then "gone through like

crazy.” By this, he means that the tunes are played repeatedly with special attention paid to ornamentation, phrasing and rhythmic feel. Taheny teaches first by demonstrating the tunes and then playing them using a “call and response” technique with the students. In this manner, he tries to make students understand that written notation and the music it represents are separate entities.

Taheny and I co-taught one of two Celtic Band Classes (a mixed instrumental ensemble) at the Goderich school this past year, and he said that, in his nine years at the College, it was the class he most enjoyed teaching. Asking him why he felt this way, he replied:

Well, it was definitely the people enjoying themselves. I mean, they were telling me immediately afterwards, ‘Wow, that was fun!’ ‘Oh, did you hear the way this worked and the way that worked?’ It was sort of like opening up another stage to people. . . like opening up the blinds on something else that they had never thought about. Maybe a corner at the side, a window at the side, but something they’d never thought about. And they didn’t have to be great players or anything. . . but [it was] just the [feeling of] accomplishment that they received from being 15 people together at a time. Within a couple of hours of being together, they were making a decent bash at being a group. It was fun, it was fun.

Taheny also felt the playing level of the students had improved over the nine years of the College’s existence, adding that the students in general were more knowledgeable about Irish traditional music. Seventy percent of students are returnees from previous years and Taheny attributed this to the spiritual and community feelings generated during the College week. Commenting on the retention rate of students at the College, he said:

A lot of these people have come back. At least half of them have come back. And the first time or two, there’s this trepidation there, they don’t know what’s this [is] going to be. They are obviously thinking about other camps that they have been at, which bear no relation to Goderich, because Goderich is a different type of experience, and this year in particular, I came home with a definitely spiritual

feeling from the whole thing, because it was very much a community thing. [And this] did not hit me as hard as this before. It was obvious though, that from a couple of years ago, that this was different. It was a great thing.

Continuing to discuss the importance and the positive impact supportive community can have on music learning, Taheny compared the Goderich experience to “those great festivals in Ireland in the 70s, which were remarkable.”

Your friends were everywhere, and nobody had any egos, you know. You were free to do something. . . It was great fun, great fun. And it’s as much fun, yes, Goderich can be as much fun, that’s why I think it was a spiritual thing this year. It was neat. Dervish [a band comprised of Sligo musicians whom Reid and Taheny knew well in Ireland] was there, so it was like having Sligo back for a week. When Peter Horan was there, it was quite like that too.

Interpretations/Conclusions

Due to the small sample size and unique characteristics, this ethnographic case study will have limited generalizability to other communities where Irish traditional music is taught and learned. For the same reasons, any implications that this study might have regarding formal school music instruction are limited as well. What can be concluded from the analysis of the data, however, is that the themes present in the data are consistent with the related literature.

Small’s and Robinson’s contention, that the prescriptive nature of notated music itself necessarily limits what is possible in a performance, was mirrored by Taheny several times regarding learning and teaching Irish traditional music. The informal music practices identified by Green in her research regarding how popular musicians learn, are consistent with the informal learning practices of the study’s participants. The importance of community and context to the participants’ learning was consistent with the literature of Elliott and Veblen. Characteristics of contextualized learning, as articulated by Cope

and Smith, are present throughout the data. Both participants emphasized that they became Irish musicians by learning traditional tunes holistically and by ear within the surroundings of an aural/oral culture. Both Reid and Taheny possess large traditional repertoires that they perform on a variety of folk instruments. Many of their mentors were musically competent amateur players who were respected within the Irish traditional music community both for their playing abilities and their leadership qualities.

To conclude, my intentions were to give the reader a glimpse of the Irish traditional music learning experience as it occurs at the Celtic College. Providing insights into one particular musical playing and learning tradition that lay outside of the Western European art music experience can allow us to examine our own assumptions regarding music teaching and learning. Not only is this knowledge valuable for its own sake but it also enables us to examine and update our own practices in the classroom and beyond.

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