



## Western Music and Irish Tradition: An Applied Ethnomusicological Study of Musical Identity and Cultural Transformation in Ireland (19th–20th Century)

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**Abstract:** Reframing traditional Irish music through an interdisciplinary lens, this study investigates its function within the cultural and identity transformations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland. The research aims to elucidate how musical traditions contributed to the formation of cultural nationalism and the reconstruction of collective memory during a period marked by colonization, modernization, and globalization. The scope of the study extends beyond Ireland's borders to examine the role of diaspora communities and international festivals in transmitting and redefining Irish traditional music within global cultural networks. Methodologically, it employs qualitative, comparative, and content-based approaches, supported by institutional case studies such as Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, archival resources, and statistical migration data. The theoretical framework draws upon the ethnomusicological insights of John Blacking and Frank Harrison, emphasizing the socio-cultural construction of musical meaning. The findings reveal that Irish traditional music—far from being a static heritage—has functioned as a dynamic medium of resistance, identity expression, and cultural continuity. Moreover, its international dissemination demonstrates how vernacular musical traditions can adapt to global contexts while maintaining their indigenous roots. By integrating perspectives from musicology, anthropology, and cultural history, this article underscores the necessity of recognizing traditional Irish music as a vital site of cultural negotiation and interdisciplinary inquiry, urging broader engagement with non-Anglophone perspectives within ethnomusicological scholarship.

**Keywords:** Applied Ethnomusicology, Irish Folk Music, Musical Identity, Cultural Nationalism, Globalisation of Music Traditions

### 1. Introduction

Applied ethnomusicology is widely recognized as one of the foundational and influential branches within the broader field of ethnomusicology, and has consistently attracted sustained scholarly attention. Over the past centuries—and particularly throughout the twentieth century—systematic efforts have been made to preserve and revitalize traditional and indigenous musical traditions. Initiatives such as music festivals and cultural programs aimed at safeguarding the sonic heritage of diverse communities represent tangible manifestations of this approach (Aghamohseni, 2022, p. 101).

With the advent of the twenty-first century, applied ethnomusicology underwent a conceptual transformation, establishing itself as a practical tool for addressing social issues. Closely connected to lived human experiences, it has expanded into areas such as war, migration, the cultural rights of marginalized groups, and health and well-being. By integrating musicological and anthropological perspectives, this approach emphasizes music's role in social change, cultural identity, and quality of life, demonstrating its significance both theoretically and in terms of social practice (Aghamohseni, 2022, pp. 101–102).

Building upon this theoretical background, the present study focuses on the role of Irish traditional music in shaping and redefining Ireland's cultural identity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The purpose of the research is to explore how musical practices have functioned not merely as artistic expressions, but as agents of social transformation, national consciousness, and cultural resistance throughout Ireland's modern history.

The scope of this study extends beyond Ireland's geographical boundaries, encompassing the transnational dimensions of Irish traditional music within diasporic communities and international festivals. It examines how these global networks have facilitated the preservation, adaptation, and globalization of local musical traditions while maintaining their indigenous character.

From a methodological perspective, this study adopts an interdisciplinary and qualitative framework based on applied ethnomusicology, integrating approaches from musicology, anthropology, and cultural history. Rather than employing field-based or practice-led ethnographic methods, the study positions itself within the analytical and policy-oriented strand of applied ethnomusicology, focusing on how musical practices operate within institutional, cultural, and transnational frameworks. In this context, "application" is understood not as direct intervention or community-based fieldwork, but as the critical examination of how music functions in relation to cultural sustainability, identity formation, institutional mediation, and cultural policy.

The research design combines content analysis, comparative study, and case-based examination—particularly focusing on institutions such as Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann—as well as cultural and statistical data related to migration and music festivals. It should be noted that no fieldwork or primary data were conducted, and all examples and evidence presented were drawn from existing sources. This methodological choice is intentional and aims to demonstrate how applied ethnomusicology can also operate through secondary-source-based analysis that informs cultural understanding, policy reflection, and institutional practice.

This integrative approach aims to demonstrate how Irish traditional music operates as a dynamic space for identity formation, historical memory, and intercultural dialogue, thus contributing to a broader understanding of the intersections between music, culture, and globalization within contemporary ethnomusicological discourse.

## **2. Research Framework**

### **2.1. Research questions**

In this context, the present study, focusing on Western music and Irish tradition, conducts an applied ethnomusicological investigation into the dynamics of musical identity and cultural transformation in Ireland during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The central research question explores how traditional Irish music has contributed to the formation and redefinition of the country's cultural identity, and to what extent socio-cultural factors—such as migration and international music festivals—have shaped this process. In addressing these issues, the study further engages with several subsidiary questions: How has traditional Irish music reinforced discourses of cultural nationalism? What role have diasporic communities and festivals played in sustaining and globalizing this musical tradition? And finally, what research gaps remain in the cultural studies of non-Anglophone European contexts?

These research questions are addressed through a set of analytical propositions that guide the interpretive structure of the study rather than serving as hypotheses for empirical verification.

### **2.2. Research aims and objectives**

Based on these research questions, the principal objective of this study is to examine the role of traditional Irish music in the formation and redefinition of Ireland's cultural identity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, within the framework of applied ethnomusicology. Specifically, the study pursues several subsidiary aims: to critically analyze the contribution of traditional Irish music to the construction of cultural nationalism; to investigate the influence of diasporic communities and international music festivals on the promotion and revival of Irish musical traditions; and to identify and interrogate existing gaps in cultural studies relating to Irish music, particularly within non-

Anglophone European contexts. These objectives are pursued to enrich scholarly understanding and advance knowledge in the field.

### **2.3. Analytical propositions**

Accordingly, this study is structured around three core analytical propositions rather than empirically testable hypotheses. These propositions function as guiding conceptual assumptions that orient the analysis and are examined through historical, comparative, and interpretive discussion rather than through primary empirical testing. First, traditional Irish music, beyond functioning as an auditory heritage, operates as a discourse-shaping cultural practice that contributes to the formation of cultural nationalism and the ongoing redefinition of Ireland's national identity. Second, diasporic communities and international festivals constitute key institutional and social platforms through which Irish traditional music is sustained, revitalized, and globalized, while simultaneously negotiating questions of authenticity and adaptation. Third, within cultural and ethnomusicological scholarship—particularly in non-Anglophone European contexts—Irish traditional music remains comparatively underexamined, indicating persistent analytical and comparative research gaps that this study seeks to address.

### **2.4. Research methodology**

To examine and test these hypotheses, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach grounded in the framework of applied ethnomusicology, employing a combination of qualitative and historical methods. The research explicitly aligns with a conceptual-analytical model of applied ethnomusicology, which emphasizes reflective application, institutional analysis, and the relevance of cultural policy, rather than direct field-based intervention. It should be noted that this study does not involve any fieldwork or primary data. Specifically, no participant observation, interviews with musicians, community engagement, ethnographic field notes, or author-led applied projects were conducted. All examples presented are secondary in nature and drawn from existing sources.

Within this framework, the applied dimension of the study lies in its critical engagement with how Irish traditional music is mobilized within institutions, festivals, diasporic networks, and cultural policies, and how these structures shape musical meaning, identity, and sustainability. Content analysis was conducted on historical and cultural documents related to Irish traditional music, alongside comparative case studies focusing on festivals and institutions such as Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, which examined various aspects of the influence and reflection of this musical tradition. A comparative method was applied to analyze the trends and transformations of Irish music both within and beyond national boundaries.

By synthesizing secondary literature through an applied analytical lens, the study demonstrates how music scholarship can contribute to broader discussions of cultural continuity, heritage management, and identity negotiation—central concerns of applied ethnomusicology.

Furthermore, a qualitative semantic analysis of music within cultural and social contexts, relying on the theories of prominent scholars such as John Blacking and Frank Harrison, provided a deeper understanding of the meaning and function of this music. Finally, the use of official cultural data and statistics, as well as migration information from governmental and relevant institutional sources, enabled a comprehensive examination of the social and historical dimensions of Irish traditional music.

This multi-faceted approach allows for a precise and multi-dimensional analysis of the cultural processes and identity-related aspects associated with Irish music. Within this framework, a historical and comparative study of Western musical traditions is also necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the position of Irish traditional music within the broader context of global music.

In preparing this manuscript, limited assistance from the AI language model ChatGPT (GPT-5, developed by OpenAI) was employed solely for the purpose of improving the academic language, coherence, and

clarity of expression. The author independently conducted all research, analysis, and interpretation, and subsequently reviewed and approved the entire content. The full scientific and ethical responsibility for the work remains entirely with the author. No AI tools were utilized for data collection, data analysis, interpretation, or the generation of original research material.

### **3. Theoretical Foundations: Music, Culture, and Identity**

Culture can be understood as a dynamic system of practices, behaviors, and meaning-making processes in daily life, encompassing musical works, rituals, and other expressive forms that foster cultural connections. Although cultures may appear independent, scholars have emphasized their continual interaction through social movements, political changes, and historical transformations—processes that often lead to aesthetic hybridity and the emergence of new artistic forms. In this framework, music occupies a special position because of its transnational circulation and its capacity to mediate cultural interactions (Azadeh, 2020, pp. 5, 7–8).

Researchers in the social sciences and humanities do not view music merely as an autonomous art form, but as an expressive practice deeply rooted in social and political life. While in the past the politicization of music was sometimes approached cautiously, this perspective is now widely accepted, with music understood as a carrier of social meanings and a shaper of political dynamics (Berger, 2014, p. 315).

Importantly, the relationship between music and society is not limited to overt political expression. In some contexts, music may be suppressed or deprived of its public cultural function, such as the Taliban's prohibition of music in Afghanistan. These restrictions do not simply silence music; rather, they may give rise to alternative musical practices or new ideological responses. This phenomenon demonstrates that music can reflect the mindset and historical conditions of broader society. Particularly, folk music functions as a key medium through which collective memory, local values, and cultural identity are articulated and mediated, often facilitating intercultural dialogue through collaborative performances (Azadeh, 2020, pp. 9, 10–11).

Drawing on these perspectives, this study is based on the premise that music and society exist in a reciprocal and interactive relationship, in which each continuously reshapes the other. For example, in street demonstrations, hymns and songs often accompany and reflect the demands, aspirations, and collective identities of the protesters. The influential argument of Simon Frith, a social musicologist, that music actively constructs identity rather than merely reflecting it, highlights this point. In *Music and Identity* (1996), he considers music as a medium through which lifestyles, cultural capital, and the formation of the “mobile self” are negotiated, allowing individual and collective identities to be continuously redefined through lyrics, imagery, and stylistic conventions (Spencer-Espinosa, 2022, p. 62).

In sum, the connection between art, society, and culture is both intricate and profound, warranting thoughtful reflection and scholarly investigation (Azadeh, 2020, pp. 12–13). Building on these insights, this study argues that music should be regarded as an active agent in shaping cultural identity, particularly in contexts marked by historical struggles and social transformations. By examining the unique case of Ireland, whose musical traditions have been shaped by colonial experience, political resistance, and cultural revival, the article highlights how music mediates identity, memory, and historical consciousness. This analysis not only situates Irish musical heritage within a broader Western cultural and historical framework but also provides an integrated perspective that links music, cultural identity, and history, opening new interdisciplinary horizons for scholars in musicology and ethnomusicology.

#### **4. Irish Traditional Music Beyond Borders: European Dissemination and Diaspora Engagement**

Over the past decades, Irish traditional music has received limited attention in academic research, both in musicology and sociology. Nevertheless, it has played a key role in shaping national cultural identity and has spread beyond Ireland's borders. A 2015 Irish government report estimated that around 70 million people worldwide claim Irish ancestry, though verification is limited, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported in 2014 that about 17% of those born in Ireland live abroad. Western European countries, particularly Germany and France, were among the first to show serious interest, with festivals and cultural institutions playing a crucial role in promoting this music (Falc'her-Poyroux, 2022, pp. 100–102). This study highlights the significance of diasporic networks in the dissemination of Irish music.

Several historical events and institutions have played key roles in promoting Irish music in France. Notable examples include the 1974 Irish folk music festival in Karlsruhe, Germany, the establishment of the Shamrock music group in 1981, and the founding of the Ireland Music Centre and the Irish Association of Paris in 1982 and 1984. Local associations and seasonal schools, such as the 1991 summer school founded by Claude Fossaert and Philippe Giraud, have contributed to teaching and disseminating Irish music. Over the past three decades, festivals like the Irish Music Toucan Festival have attracted over 200 Irish musicians, strengthening cultural networks while maintaining educational quality comparable to programs in Ireland itself (Falc'her-Poyroux, 2022, pp. 102–103).

Motherway (2013) examines Irish traditional song performance as a site of mediation between local cultural traditions and expanding global processes. She demonstrates that globalization has acted as a catalyst for musical change by reshaping performance practices through technology, commodification, professionalization, and institutionalization. Within this framework, Irish traditional music is shown to adapt to global markets and diasporic contexts while continually renegotiating cultural identity. Rather than remaining fixed, tradition emerges as a dynamic and hybrid practice, reflecting ongoing exchanges between Irish musical heritage and transnational cultural flows (pp. 1–6).

Taken together, this study emphasizes that Irish traditional music should be regarded as a dynamic and hybrid tradition rather than a static inheritance. By integrating historical, institutional, and global perspectives, the analysis demonstrates that tradition emerges through continuous interaction among Irish musical heritage, diasporic communities, and transnational audiences. This approach highlights the role of Irish music both as a vehicle for cultural continuity and as a site of innovation, clearly revealing the author's contribution in demonstrating the interplay between local identity and global cultural circulation.

#### **5. Music Festivals as Agents of Revival: The Case of *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann***

One of the most important festivals of Irish traditional music is *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*, a cultural event founded in 1951 by the organization Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ), with the aim of reviving Irish traditional music, singing, and dance. This festival has played a prominent role in strengthening the revival of Ireland's musical traditions and has been held annually in various regions of the country ever since, with each host town usually selected for two or three consecutive years (Kearney & Burns, 2022, pp. 231–232).

By integrating historical data and contemporary participation, this study emphasizes that *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* functions not only as a site of cultural preservation but also as a dynamic space for cultural interaction, linking local musical practices to broader social and economic processes.

In 2018, for the first time, the town of Drogheda on the eastern coast of the Republic of Ireland hosted the festival. During the two years of the festival in Drogheda, the number of participants reached approximately 500,000 and 750,000, respectively, and it generated an economic impact of about €50 million for the host region. The festival usually lasts eight days and includes workshops on traditional

instruments, official events such as banquets and ceremonies honoring cultural practitioners, and spontaneous traditional music performances in pubs and public spaces, reflecting the vibrant dynamism of this musical culture (Kearney & Burns, 2022, pp. 231–232). This analysis highlights the festival’s dual role in cultural revival and economic stimulation, demonstrating how such events can contribute both to community engagement and the sustainability of cultural heritage.

In recent years, music festivals have experienced significant growth and have established themselves as central actors in the music industry, which continues to evolve rapidly and persistently. Beyond serving as major sources of revenue—for example, the top ten music festivals worldwide generated a combined income of US\$259 million in 2017—these events also play a vital and increasingly recognized role in the sustainable development of communities (Perron-Brault et al., 2020). By integrating prior research on the economic and cultural impact of festivals, this study underscores the importance of Fleadh Cheoil not merely as an annual event, but as a strategic actor in the preservation and innovation of Irish traditional music.

Overall, this analysis demonstrates that Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann functions not only as a cultural preservation initiative but also as an economic and social catalyst. The integration of historical data, participation metrics, and festival studies clearly highlights the author’s contribution in illustrating the interplay between local identity and global cultural circulation. The festival’s historical roots, extensive participation, and adaptability to contemporary festival economies show how traditional music can thrive within globalized cultural and commercial frameworks. This underscores that the vitality of Irish traditional music depends on its capacity to engage both local communities and international audiences, balancing heritage preservation with innovation and economic sustainability.

## **6. Why Study Irish Traditional Music? Cultural Urgency and Interdisciplinary Relevance**

Art music is a global and complex art form, with each period of its history offering rich potential for scientific, artistic, and philosophical inquiry. As an integral part of popular culture, it intersects with diverse scholarly fields such as literature, theater, history, anthropology, economics, gender studies, psychology, and philosophy. Accordingly, the study of music calls for an interdisciplinary approach rather than one limited to musicians or specialist listeners. In this framework, tradition—derived from the Latin *tradere*, meaning “to bequeath” or “to transmit”—plays a central role, and Irish traditional music, with its deep roots and inherent vitality, exemplifies cultural continuity through its capacity to adapt across time and varied contexts (Falc’her-Poyroux, 2022, p. 104).

Historically, Irish traditional music strengthened social bonds and fostered a sense of community, but from the eighteenth century onward, it underwent significant transformations, playing an important role in reinforcing nationalism and reconstructing cultural—and even economic—identity. Despite these changes, this music remains vibrant and dynamic, present in social activities and among amateur musicians. The role of Irish diaspora communities in preserving and re-creating it is also undeniable. A key question arises: how will the future of this music unfold, and how can non-Irish musicians, or those outside the diaspora community, contribute to the continuity, evolution, and even enhancement of Irish traditional music? (Falc’her-Poyroux, 2022, p. 104).

Building on these findings, this study argues that the resilience and adaptability of Irish traditional music can be better understood not only through historical analysis but also through the active role of contemporary researchers and musicians in interpreting, preserving, and promoting its practices. By analyzing both historical trajectories and contemporary participatory trends, the study highlights the researcher’s perspective on safeguarding tradition within both local and global contexts.

A striking reality is that, despite music’s fundamental role in understanding Ireland’s rich culture, its place in academic studies in France and other Continental European countries remains marginal. This raises key questions. Is the study of music still largely confined to musicologists? Does its pervasive

presence in everyday life complicate its analysis? Do its inherent complexities and abstract aspects create theoretical challenges? Furthermore, is the root of this situation a lack of effective interaction between academic institutions and Irish artists and researchers? Addressing these questions through a systematic examination of Irish music's position in contemporary scholarly discourse can help fill this cultural and research gap, while redefining the relationship between music and culture and opening new horizons in interdisciplinary research (Falc'her-Poyroux, 2022, pp. 104–105).

Building on the cultural significance of Irish traditional music, O'Shea (2007) highlights the social and participatory nature of traditional music sessions, where musicians gather to perform, converse, and negotiate social dynamics. Her fieldwork in East Clare shows that sessions, such as those at Pepper's Pub, function as social environments in which norms, behaviors, and informal hierarchies are continuously shaped. While often idealized as cohesive communities, these sessions involve tensions and interactions among local and visiting musicians. O'Shea's analysis demonstrates that musical participation is relational and context-dependent, and that Irish traditional music thrives through engagement in both local and diaspora communities (pp. 2–4). By integrating O'Shea's ethnographic insights with this study's analytical framework, the research shows that local and diasporic participation mutually reinforce the continuity and evolution of Irish musical practices. The researcher's contribution lies in combining micro-level observations with broader historical and cultural analyses to reveal the mechanisms by which Irish traditional music remains resilient and how identity is continuously constructed.

Taken together, these discussions underscore that Irish traditional music is not only a rich cultural artifact but also a dynamic social practice shaped by history, community, and transnational engagement. Its study requires an interdisciplinary lens to fully understand the intersections of tradition, identity, and participation. By integrating historical evidence and diaspora studies, this analysis presents a cohesive argument showing that sustaining and evolving Irish traditional music depends on active engagement and collaboration, and clearly highlights the researcher's contribution. While historical transformations and diaspora involvement demonstrate the music's resilience and adaptability, field observations, such as those conducted at Pepper's pub, reveal the nuanced realities of social negotiation, hierarchy, and interaction within musical communities. This underscores that sustaining and evolving Irish traditional music depends on active engagement, dialogue, and collaboration between local practitioners and wider global participants.

### **7. Gaps and Silences: The Marginalization of Irish Music in European Academic Discourse**

To this end, since 2020, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media of the Republic of Ireland has implemented a funding initiative entitled the Co-operation with Northern Ireland Scheme. The primary objective of this scheme is to provide financial support for projects that, within the framework of North–South cooperation, aim to enhance, commemorate, or celebrate the music, arts, cinema, culture, or heritage of the island of Ireland. Over the course of two funding rounds, a total of 25 distinct projects have received support, with allocations amounting to €134,095 in 2020 and €147,000 in 2021 (Hadley & Woodley, 2023, p. 53).

Despite these initiatives, in some countries, such as France, Irish music has remained relatively little studied. Nevertheless, this music has preserved Ireland's cultural heritage and at the same time has reached global recognition and become a symbol of national identity. Traditional music actively shapes cultural identity and social bonds, and its global dissemination since the 1960s reflects the continuous recreation and reinterpretation of musical traditions, although this process has sometimes been accompanied by emotional responses from artists and local communities, similar to the globalization experiences of genres such as blues, jazz, and rap. This indicates that musical traditions and cultural identities are dynamic and are constantly evolving through interaction with local communities and the wider world (Falc'her-Poyroux, 2022, pp. 105–106).

In this regard, exploring other domains of Ireland's cultural production—particularly literature—can offer a more nuanced understanding of the country's cultural dynamics. At its most ambitious, the project of comparative literary criticism constitutes an act of intellectual generosity: an effort to forge connections between literary traditions that have often been studied in isolation. This inclusive and dialogical approach is exemplified in Richard Alan Barlow's *Modern Irish and Scottish Literature*, wherein the author investigates the "connections" and "contrasts" between the literatures of Ireland and Scotland. Central to his analysis is the nations' shared Celtic cultural heritage, which he foregrounds within the framework of their respective literary revivals from the 1880s to the 1950s (Lyall, 2025, p. 406).

A foundational aspect of Irish-Scottish literary studies is the decentering of dominant models of literary production rooted in metropolitan power structures. Rather than aligning with hegemonic, Anglocentric cultural narratives, this approach seeks to re-read the literary histories of Ireland and Britain's archipelago in opposition to them, thereby reimagining the power relations embedded in the production of literature and cultural meaning (Lyall, 2025, p. 406). In a similar manner, Irish traditional music likewise requires an integrated and interdisciplinary perspective to fully apprehend the multidimensional nature of its cultural significance.

Irish traditional music is far beyond a mere auditory art; it is the embodiment of cultural identity, historical memory, and the lived experiences of the Irish people. Scholars emphasize its global reach and interdisciplinary significance: Erick Falc'her-Poyroux, a prominent French scholar and professor, stresses its role in understanding Irish history; Marion Sarrouy, a French ethnographer, attends to the cultural and social dimensions of pipe bands in Northern Ireland that transcend sectarian boundaries; and Michael Lydon, a musician and academic, highlights the significance of environmental sounds as signifiers of lived experience and cultural heritage. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that Irish traditional music is a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon extending beyond purely musical boundaries (Lecossois & Murlon, 2022, p. 11).

Building on these perspectives, the present study foregrounds the researcher's contribution through the development of an original analytical synthesis that integrates historical, ethnographic, and interdisciplinary sources. This synthesis highlights the ways in which Irish traditional music articulates cultural identity, historical memory, and lived experience, thereby extending analysis beyond a purely musicological framework. By analytically integrating the insights of Sarrouy, Falc'her-Poyroux, and Lydon, the study demonstrates how local participation, diasporic interaction, and environmental soundscapes collectively shape the multidimensional character of Irish musical practice.

This analysis further emphasizes the researcher's contribution by addressing structural gaps within European academic scholarship and by proposing a coherent framework for understanding the interdisciplinary significance of Irish music. Through the synthesis of evidence drawn from funding initiatives, literary studies, and ethnographic research, the study reveals that scholarly attention—or its absence—reflects broader academic hierarchies. At the same time, it offers a pathway toward more comprehensive and inclusive approaches to the study of Ireland's musical cultures.

Collectively, these discussions expose a paradox in the European academic treatment of Irish music: despite its global reach, cultural depth, and interdisciplinary relevance, it remains unevenly represented within scholarly discourse. This marginalization reflects not cultural deficiency, but structural silences shaped by dominant academic hierarchies and methodological preferences. Recognizing and addressing these gaps is essential for a more inclusive understanding of Europe's musical cultures.

## **8. From Memory to Modernity: Historical Evolution of Irish Traditional Music**

Irish traditional music is deeply rooted in history and culture, yet it remains vibrant through lively performances that sustain and evolve this enduring tradition. The image below depicts musicians

performing at Gus O'Connor's Pub in Doolin, Ireland—a renowned venue celebrated for its role in preserving traditional Irish music. Such spaces serve as crucial communal hubs where musical heritage is maintained, transmitted, and dynamically reinterpreted through the interaction between performers and audiences. This setting exemplifies the convergence of history, identity, and lived experience inherent in Irish traditional music (Figure 1).

The idea of preserving and documenting Irish traditional music dates back to the nineteenth century, a period marked by the Great Famine and widespread emigration, which raised urgent concerns about the potential loss of Ireland's oral cultural heritage. Collectors such as James Goodman, Patrick Ford, and John Edward Pigot undertook significant efforts to gather and transcribe traditional melodies. In 1851, George Petrie and his contemporaries founded the Society for the Preservation and Publication of the Melodies of Ireland, reflecting a broader cultural movement concerned with language, place, and national identity. In the late twentieth century, the RTÉ radio program *The Irish Phonograph* contributed to the revival of this legacy by broadcasting archival recordings from the early decades of the twentieth century (Russell, 2025, p. 83).

Nevertheless, efforts to preserve and document Irish traditional music cannot be fully understood without reference to their deeper historical context. The political and social transformations of the eighteenth century, which disrupted existing structures and deepened sectarian and class divisions, played a significant role in raising concerns over the preservation of cultural identity.

**Figure 1**

*Musicians at Gus O'Connor's Pub, Doolin, Ireland*



**Source:** Photo by Gtapp (2012). Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Ireland's political and social conditions, shaped by the consolidation of power under new rulers, raised fundamental questions about governance. After nearly two centuries of instability and conflict, the country underwent profound structural change. Centralized authority replaced long-standing decentralized systems, dismantling the traditional legal order. Indigenous power structures were forcibly removed and replaced by settlers. Attempts to enforce Protestant Reformation policies failed, creating a deep religious divide between a Catholic majority and

a Protestant ruling minority. Armed conflicts, organized violence, and massacres left lasting marks on Ireland's historical memory (Ruane, 2021, p. 118).

Within this historically charged context, the present study argues that music was not merely a by-product of social change, but functioned as an active medium through which political experience, collective memory, and resistance were articulated. In this framework, music—particularly in the form of popular songs and ballads—played a fundamental role in reflecting social transformations and shaping narratives of resistance.

Within this framework, music—particularly in the form of popular songs and ballads—has played a fundamental role in reflecting social transformations and shaping narratives of resistance. However, the conceptual distinction between terms such as "ballad" and "folksong" has long been a subject of scholarly debate, contributing to the inherent complexity in historical studies of popular music. This complexity largely stems from the diversity of sources, oral continuities, and historical ruptures involved in the documentation and transmission of these genres (Ó Cadhla, 2024, p. 205).

Some scholars trace the origins of this music to the period following the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169 and the subsequent medieval uprisings. Conversely, others, including Terry Moylan, locate a more significant point of departure within the political and cultural upheavals of the late nineteenth century (Ó Cadhla, 2024, p. 205).

Nonetheless, the nineteenth century can be regarded as a critical turning point in this trajectory. During this era, escalating political repression, the emergence of nascent identity discourses, and intensifying social divisions laid the groundwork for the production and reproduction of songs that not only embodied cultural resistance but also played a decisive role in the formation of collective identity (Ó Cadhla, 2024, p. 205).

Understanding this transformation requires moving beyond a purely descriptive account of musical repertoires toward an analysis of the structural foundations that enabled Irish folk music to maintain continuity while adapting to change. These foundations emerged over centuries through an interwoven process that linked musical form, social practice, and modes of transmission.

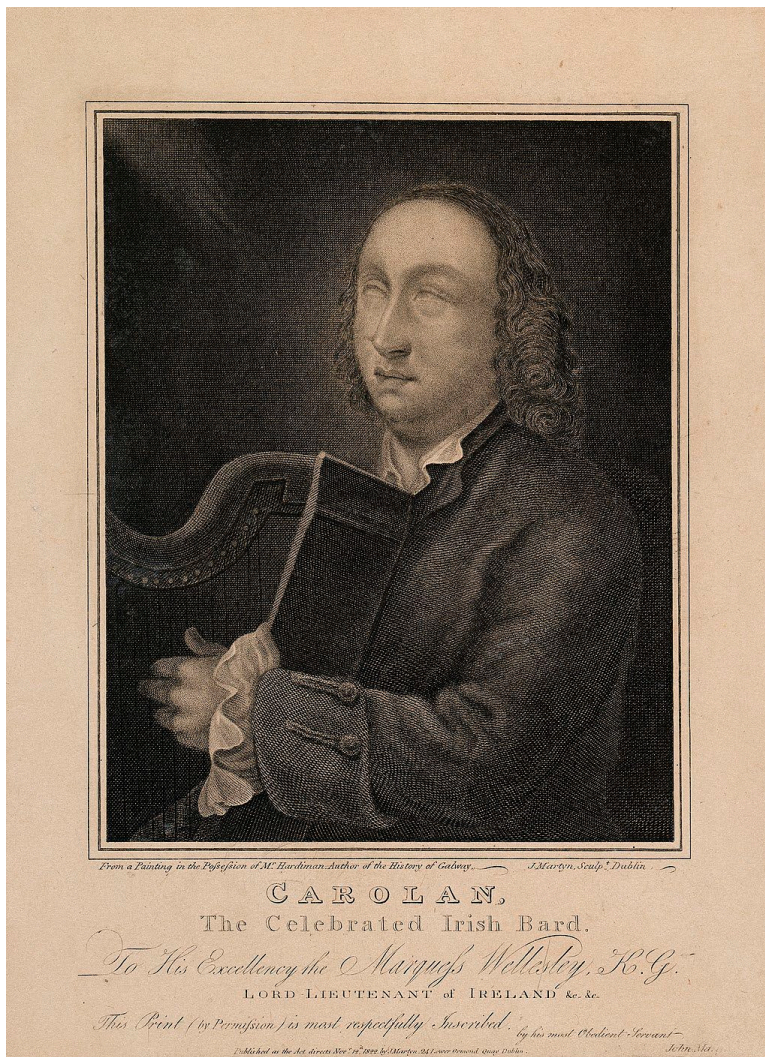
Irish folk music stems from two main sources that, despite structural differences, have gradually merged. The first is the harp tradition, rooted in the medieval bardic system and orally transmitted by itinerant harpers, preserving relatively fixed melodies. The second comprises rural, vernacular practices transmitted through singing and local fiddle playing, which shaped dance forms such as jigs (single, double, and slip), reels, hornpipes, and set dances. Oral transmission produced regional variations, yet Edward Bunting, a prominent collector of Irish music, observed that melodies preserved from older harpers rarely change, illustrating the dynamic interplay between oral and written traditions in Irish music (Patterson, 1920, p. 460).

By foregrounding modes of transmission rather than focusing solely on genre, this study demonstrates how oral circulation simultaneously generated regional diversity and preserved core melodic identities. Accordingly, Irish folk music may be understood as a historical and adaptive system through which social memory and cultural identity have been continuously renegotiated and redefined.

One of the most prominent figures of the Irish bardic harp tradition is Turlough O'Carolan, whose music epitomizes the intersection of aristocratic oral tradition and the evolving heritage of Irish folk music (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Carolan, the Celebrated Irish Bard*



**Source:** By John Martyn, after Francis Bindon (1822). National Gallery of Ireland. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

According to Sommers Smith (1998), Breandán Breathnach, an Irish musician and ethnomusicologist, defines Irish folk music in his seminal work *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland* (1971) as rooted in oral transmission and characterized as both "national and popular." While the oral aspect pertains to transmission, the notion of "national" is complex. Breathnach notes that Irish traditional music, alongside the creative contributions of individuals and local communities, has been shaped by intercultural borrowings. Framing this music as "national" can obscure individual agency beneath collective identity. Nationalist discourse links the tradition to peasant authenticity and cultural-political hegemony, yet overlooks historical connections with the landed gentry, simplifying the tradition's historical complexity (pp. 134–135).

In light of this history, Irish traditional music emerges not merely as a static cultural artifact but as a dynamic and evolving expression of collective memory, social identity, and creative agency. The interplay between oral and written traditions, the fusion of harp and vernacular practices, and the ongoing negotiation between local creativity and national discourse illustrate how this music embodies both continuity and change. Recognizing these layers highlights the resilience of Irish musical culture and its capacity to adapt while preserving a deeply rooted sense of heritage.

## 9. Sounding the Nation: Music and Cultural Nationalism in Ireland

Ireland's history as a formerly colonized nation has simultaneously nurtured local resistance to centralized authority and shaped the development of a cohesive national identity, framed in contrast to the English "other." This enduring tension between regional particularism and nationalist discourse offers insight into why cultural symbols—particularly traditional music—have often occupied contested spaces between localized expression and broader narratives of Irish identity (Fleming, 2004, pp. 229–230). However, it can be argued that nationalism should not be viewed as a uniform process; rather, this study considers Irish cultural identity as a field shaped by the ongoing interaction between regional musical practices and national discourse.

In the nineteenth century, Irish society experienced four transformative changes that reshaped its trajectory. The Great Famine of the 1840s devastated the agrarian potato-based system, causing nearly one million deaths, mass emigration, and a sharp population decline. Post-Famine land reforms created a class of Catholic smallholders, while the expansion of English-language education raised literacy but accelerated the decline of Irish. The "Devotional Revolution" strengthened a disciplined Catholic clergy, reshaping religious leadership. Movements like the Land League (1879–1882), led by Charles Stewart Parnell and Michael Davitt, intertwined national identity with Catholicism, rural life, and language, forging a lasting cultural and political foundation for Irish independence (Garvin, 2006, pp. 247–248). These transformations not only altered material conditions but also redefined symbolic resources through which music could articulate loss, continuity, and belonging, with the Land League creating conditions in which traditional music served both as cultural memory and as a medium for political expression.

Following significant social and cultural transformations, the political genesis of the Irish State can be traced to the unsuccessful Easter Rising of 1916 and the subsequent establishment of the inaugural Dáil Éireann on 21 January 1919. The ensuing War of Independence culminated in the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 6 December 1921, a landmark agreement that facilitated the establishment of the Irish Free State, granting it a status comparable to other self-governing Dominions such as Australia and Canada. While alternative dates such as 1916, 1919, 1937, and 1949 have been suggested, legal documents, political declarations, and media sources overwhelmingly recognize 6 December 1922 as the definitive date marking the state's establishment, solidifying its political legitimacy (Mohr, 2023, pp. 212–213). This study argues that music did not merely reflect these political transformations but actively contributed to the formation of the emotional and symbolic dimensions of national identity. While legal and political processes formalized the state, musical practices operated in parallel, sustaining collective identity prior to and beyond institutional definition.

However, in cultural policymaking, the construction of national and cultural identity in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland has followed a distinct path. Rather than formal documents, arts institutions and implicit strategies have driven cultural development. In Northern Ireland, the consolidation of governance structures and the removal of the terms "culture" and "arts" from ministerial titles reflect ambiguity toward cultural matters, with the Arts Council playing a central role despite lacking a formal mandate. In the Republic of Ireland, the Arts Council has similarly established "the arts" as a proxy for broader culture, supporting professional artists and expanding public access. Within this framework, the arts—especially traditional music—serve both as instruments of representation and as arenas for affirming national and cultural identity in the absence of explicit cultural policy (Durrer & Magan, 2017, p. 190).

By bringing these historical, political, and cultural processes together, it becomes clear that Irish traditional music functions as more than a mere artistic form; it operates as a living repository of collective memory, identity, and social experience. The interplay between local creativity and national discourse, shaped by periods of hardship, political struggle, and evolving cultural policy, demonstrates

how music has been employed both as a tool of cultural expression and as a means of managing belonging, continuity, and change.

In fact, Irish traditional music can be understood as a dynamic field in which historical experience, political transformations, and cultural policy converge. This perspective moves music beyond the status of a passive cultural artifact, emphasizing its active role in generating national meanings, reproducing identity, and managing change. By integrating historical research with cultural policy analysis, a cohesive framework emerges that illustrates how traditional music continuously participates in the reconstruction of Irish national identity, while revealing the resilience and adaptability of Irish musical traditions over time.

## **10. Contemporary Transformations and Identity Debates**

### **10.1. Modernization and musical plurality: Negotiating tradition and innovation**

Within the wider cultural context of twentieth-century Ireland, the landscape of Irish music experienced significant and multifaceted transformations. Processes such as modernization, migration, and cultural nationalism unfolded concurrently, fostering sustained interaction and fusion among musical traditions that had previously developed independently—most notably, the indigenous sean-nós vocal tradition, regional dance music, and European art music. Consequently, the notion of “Irish music” has become fluid and contested, with its meaning varying considerably across different cultural, political, and diasporic milieus (Ó Súilleabháin, 1981, pp. 84–85).

Traditionalist perspectives tend to privilege solo performances and the preservation of ancient Irish songs as the foundational core of an authentic Irish musical heritage. In contrast, newer Anglophone musical expressions and céilí bands often encounter skepticism or outright rejection from purist circles. A pivotal development in the evolution of traditional Irish music was the emergence of Ceoltóirí Chualann under Seán Ó Riada’s leadership during the 1960s, which innovatively merged native musical elements with classical frameworks, thereby offering a revitalized model for Irish traditional music (Ó Súilleabháin, 1981, p. 85). By situating these developments alongside broader social and diasporic transformations, this study demonstrates that innovation functions as a form of cultural continuity rather than a departure from tradition.

Furthermore, within the diasporic communities, periodicals such as *Irish Music Scene* have played a crucial role in shaping and expressing ethnic identity among Irish emigrants. Nonetheless, these representations sometimes encompass genres like Western and Country music under the expansive umbrella of “Irish music.” This plurality of interpretations not only fuels debate but also reflects deeper tensions related to authenticity, representation, and identity that continue to be central themes in contemporary ethnomusicological research on Ireland (Ó Súilleabháin, 1981, p. 85).

These contemporary developments show that Irish music is not a fixed phenomenon, but rather a dynamic domain negotiating between tradition and innovation. The ongoing interaction between local heritage, modern transformations, and diasporic representations demonstrates that Irish musical identity is continuously being redefined and reinterpreted. This perspective allows us to understand music not only as a historical legacy, but also as a tool for shaping and rethinking cultural identity, social representation, and collective connections in the present.

### **10.2. Revivals and institutions: Cultural resistance and organizational dynamics**

In the geographical context of Ireland, traditional music—like many other indigenous musical forms—experienced a decline in its former status as a result of sweeping social transformations. However, from the late nineteenth century and especially throughout the twentieth, it began to regain its social function through institutional support and the efforts of revivalist groups. This cultural resurgence was rooted in the erosion of rural traditions and emerged as an intellectual response to the process of Anglicization.

It became closely intertwined with movements such as Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League), which, through its emphasis on language, music, and other indigenous cultural elements, laid the foundations for a broader project of cultural nationalism in Ireland (Fairbairn, 1994, p. 578).

According to Morgenstern (2021), Irish traditional music emerged as a potent symbolic instrument of resistance against British colonialism, forging a vital role in legitimizing national identity through its association with the Gaelic bardic tradition. Intellectuals and folklore collectors recontextualized this music within the framework of cultural nationalism, deploying it as a tool for nation-building (pp. 347–348). Drawing on Morgenstern’s account, the eminent Irish musicologist Harry White argues that although this emphasis on traditional music contributed to the marginalization of art music, its significance in articulating identity and maintaining connections to the cultural past warrants sustained preservation and scholarly attention (as cited in Morgenstern, 2021, p. 348).

In this context, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, an international organization based in Ireland and established in 1951, has played a pivotal role in the preservation and promotion of this cultural heritage. The organization is dedicated to advancing Irish culture through language, traditional music, song, and dance. Employing a community-based branch structure, Comhaltas operates regional centers and maintains the National Folk Orchestra, while supporting performances by local groups and facilitating international tours, thereby significantly contributing to the reinforcement of Ireland’s musical identity (Kearney & Commins, 2023, p. 252).

These developments indicate that the revival of Irish traditional music is not merely a return to the past, but rather an active and purposeful process that, through institutions and revivalist groups, reinforces national identity and cultural resistance. Organizational support, including the pivotal role of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, demonstrates that traditional music, as a symbolic instrument, simultaneously preserves cultural heritage and, by redefining its social role, provides the basis for the dynamism and continuity of Ireland’s musical identity.

### **10.3. Countercultures and musical resistance: Reclaiming identity in the North**

Against the backdrop of political unrest in Northern Ireland during The Troubles, a critical reassessment of dominant conceptions of “Irish musical identity” began to take shape. Drawing inspiration from the British band The Clash and intentionally rejecting traditional Irish musical elements, the punk band Stiff Little Fingers crafted an alternative, politically charged sonic identity. Their self-consciously “non-native” sound stood in deliberate contrast to prevailing stereotypes of Irish music, offering a potent platform for expressing the social and political discontent of the Belfast community (Martinez, 2015, pp. 208–209).

In contrast to such modern and oppositional approaches, *Londonderry Air*, rooted in the traditional music of Northern Ireland, stands as an emblem of folkloric heritage and indigenous musical identity (Figure 3). Such examples of local music, deeply embedded in collective memory and the cultural fabric of the region, have played a significant role in the reconstruction of identity. Music plays a significant role in the representation of identity, not merely through individual compositions, but also as an integral element of larger cultural initiatives.

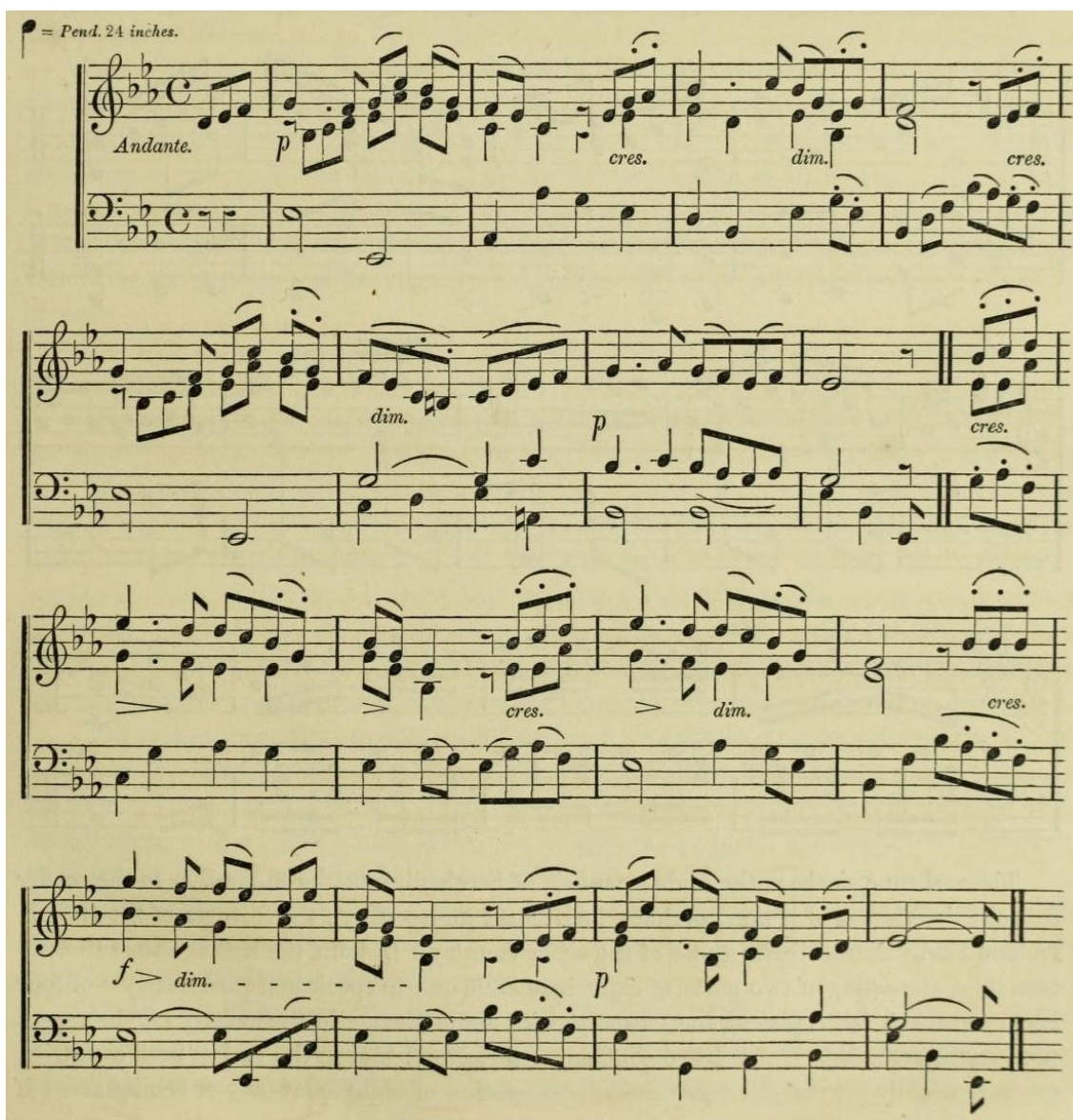
Rooted in a postcolonial framework, cultural nationalism during the Gaelic Revival deliberately shifted its focus from abstract domains such as science, philosophy, and theology toward literature, language, art, and indigenous customs. These culturally embedded fields were perceived as more effective in expressing local identity and fostering a collective sense of ethnicity. In particular, language and the arts—through their emphasis on folkloric motifs and vernacular traditions—played a central role in the revitalization of native musical practices and the reconstruction of historical consciousness (Duddy, 2003, pp. 14–15). These cultural transformations vividly exemplify the profound influence of social

contexts on musical expression—an insight that lies at the core of contemporary ethnomusicological theory.

Much like language, music functions not merely as a medium of expression but as a message in itself—a reflection of both individual and collective experiences shaped and mediated by specific social contexts. The renowned British ethnomusicologist John Blacking underscored the idea that musical change cannot be understood in isolation from its sociocultural environment. Extending this perspective, Irish musicologist and composer Frank Harrison emphasized the distinction between object-oriented approaches in musicology and the human-centered orientation of ethnomusicology. The latter regards music not as an autonomous aesthetic phenomenon, but as a socially and culturally embedded human practice, formed through dynamic interactions with history, culture, and systems of meaning (White, 1990, p. 39).

**Figure 3**

*Londonderry Air*



**Source:** Edited by George Petrie (1855). *The Petrie collection of the ancient music of Ireland: arranged for the piano-forte*, Dublin. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

## **11. Discussion: Irish Traditional Music as Cultural Memory, Identity, and Global Dialogue**

Building on this theoretical framework, the present study has examined the multilayered role of Irish traditional music in shaping and redefining the country's cultural identity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The findings indicate that this musical tradition, beyond being a sonic heritage, has functioned as an active force in processes of cultural resistance, symbolic representation, and transnational interaction. A key outcome of the research is the identification of music's vital contribution to constructing a discourse of cultural nationalism—one that has preserved historical memory, sustained the Irish language, and embodied resistance to British colonialism, notably through the support of institutions such as Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann.

Diasporic communities and international festivals—especially Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann—have played a significant role in promoting and globalizing this tradition, which now negotiates a delicate balance between authenticity, innovation, and commercialization. Furthermore, the research highlights the relative neglect of Irish music within non-Anglophone European cultural studies, revealing a significant interdisciplinary gap. Drawing on the perspectives of theorists such as John Blacking and Frank Harrison, Irish traditional music emerges as a living, meaning-making medium, deeply embedded in its sociohistorical context.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes the necessity of interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches that view Irish traditional music not merely as a carrier of the past, but as a dynamic space for cultural dialogue, historical continuity, and creative resistance to rootless globalization.

## **12. Conclusion: Continuity, Globalization, and the Future of Irish Musical Heritage**

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach within the framework of applied ethnomusicology, this study has examined the role of Irish traditional music amid the cultural, social, and historical transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The findings suggest that this musical tradition, far beyond being merely an auditory art form, may have functioned as a vehicle for historical memory, a medium of cultural resistance, and a catalyst for the reimagining of national identity, as evidenced by its documented presence in both local and diasporic communities and its role in cultural events. Confronted with the forces of globalization, migration, and modernity, Irish traditional music appears to have retained significant elements of its authenticity while simultaneously being redefined in innovative ways on a transnational scale, as indicated by contemporary practices and institutional initiatives.

Beyond its empirical scope, this study makes several distinct scholarly contributions to Irish music studies and applied ethnomusicology. First, it reconceptualizes Irish traditional music not simply as a preserved folk heritage, but as an active, socially embedded practice operating within networks of cultural policy, institutional mediation, and global circulation, suggested by patterns observed in Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann activities. By integrating applied ethnomusicology with historical and comparative analysis, the article potentially expands the methodological boundaries of Irish music scholarship beyond fieldwork-centered paradigms.

Second, the research contributes to applied ethnomusicology by demonstrating how secondary-source-based, institutionally focused analysis can help illuminate the practical social functions of music, particularly in contexts where direct ethnographic engagement is limited. Through the case studies mentioned above, the study illustrates the possible roles of music in cultural sustainability, identity negotiation, and community resilience across both local and diasporic contexts.

Third, by foregrounding non-Anglophone European scholarship and comparative cultural perspectives, this article addresses a notable gap in the existing literature and may challenge the Anglocentric tendencies of ethnomusicological discourse. In doing so, it positions Irish traditional music as a

potentially critical site for exploring how vernacular European traditions participate in global cultural dialogues without losing their indigenous foundations.

In this process, the contributions of cultural institutions, international festivals, and the active engagement of diasporic communities—particularly across Europe—seem to have played a significant role in the revival and dissemination of this unique tradition. Today, Irish music can be viewed as standing at the intersection of tradition and innovation, rootedness and cosmopolitanism. Accordingly, its study has become increasingly relevant within the broader landscape of the social sciences and humanities.

Nevertheless, a fundamental question remains for future generations of scholars: how can the continuity of this musical heritage be ensured in a rapidly changing digital world without severing its deep cultural roots, and how might applied ethnomusicology continue to evolve as a critical framework for addressing this challenge?

### Article Information Form

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