‘A Journey of Found and Lost’: the Concept of East Galway Regional Style in Irish Traditional Music

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This work considers how the practice of Irish traditional music is much more developed than the discourse that surrounds it. It traces the gradual recognition and acquisition of elements of a particular regional style by a second-generation Irish musician, and the ensuing engagement with the discourse to enable a verbal definition of this musical knowledge. After ‘finding’ this new epistemology, a journey of exploration and analysis of the concept of East Galway regional style results in its subsequent ‘loss’. The reasons for its loss are accounted for through an examination of music practice in East Galway. The development and perception of the term ‘regional style’ within the tradition and its expediency as a discursive label is discussed. As all musical traditions grapple with global influences, it would appear that regional style is an increasingly attractive but inexact descriptor within the discourse on Irish traditional music.

Introduction and Methodology

We can use language to describe musical processes or effect, but we usually find that propositional statements about music are clumsy compared to the efficiency of the music itself. (Walser 1993: 39)

As a second-generation Irish musician, born in England, I was fortunate in that an emigrant Irish musician had set up a branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in Coventry and thereby pass on his musical knowledge. His traditional style of button accordion playing was passed on orally in an informal group setting, and without developing an in-depth vocabulary to describe what I was playing, I simply took Irish music as an ontological given. This engagement with traditional Irish music began at a very young age. As I grew older, and during my teenage years in particular, I found the contexts available to me in which I could ‘practise’ traditional Irish music increasingly narrow and irrelevant and it became a more peripheral part of my life. On graduating from University, and after a hiatus of several years from playing, I experienced a personal cultural and musical revival, brought about by efforts to fathom my own self-identity and no doubt encouraged by the presence of a very healthy and animated Irish traditional music scene in Leeds. As a result, my own playing was revitalized through a re-engagement with ‘the tradition’: I began attending Irish music sessions and actively learning tunes from other musicians and from commercially and non-commercially recorded sources, on a regular basis.

It was during this period that I was particularly drawn to the playing of a musician from North Galway who had moved near to where I was living in Leeds at the time. At this point, I still had no concept of the term ‘regional style’ nor did it form part of my discourse on Irish traditional music. I derived great aesthetic pleasure from listening to and playing with this musician and my own music-making was greatly influenced as a result. However, whilst it was easy to pin-point repertoire as an obvious signifier of difference, I was unable to vocalize satisfactorily the other ‘elements’ within her music which were both attractive and different (nor did I have any desire to do so at the time – I was too caught up in the process of learning and in the enjoyment of performance!). I therefore remained in complete ignorance of the concept of ‘East Galway style’ or indeed any particular regional style. The subsequent realisation of my own synchronic and subconscious acquisition (of some elements) of a style that was not just the music of one other musician but the product of a distinct musical tradition was quite a revelation.

It is difficult to date precisely when I first became aware of the concept of regional style, or realised that (in the words of another English-born musician – Niall Keegan) my own music was ‘of no particular style’ (Keegan 1997: 117), or when the term ‘East Galway style’ entered my own ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1977). Moving to Ireland and subsequently partaking full-time in the performance practice of traditional Irish music, I encountered a wide variety of musicians and styles and participated more fully in the musical discourse of the tradition. My initial engagement was aesthetic: it was only after I began to develop the necessary analytical tools that it became perceptual, at which point I attempted to identify and listen to the influences present within my own music practice. Because of this subsequent ability to reflect meaningfully on my own musical experiences, I found myself ‘transformed and reconfigured in the act of understanding one’s own or another culture’ (Rice 1994: 17).
This transformation from unknowingness to cognizance and the subsequent desire to tidy this new element of my terminology ‘East Galway style’ into a neatly-boxed, black and white definition provided the impetus for embarking on this piece of work. However, my initial optimism rapidly vanished when in style-searching, I discovered that my own perception of East Galway style was, in reality, one of many. This led me into Spradley’s ethnographic research cycle, following the path of his ‘explorer,’ as he tries to ‘describe’ something rather than actually ‘find’ it. I discovered I would never ‘find’ ‘East Galway style’ and could only hope to uncover the wide variety of meanings it held for those who chose to engage with it (Spradley 1980: 26). As a result, this research explores the incidence of the label ‘regional style’ and the divergence between the role of this expression and its musical reality. It begins by examining the intrastylar differences and possibilities located within the region, isolating elements that contextualise East Galway style through a musical exploration of the region. The arrival of the term regional style into the Irish traditional music discourse is then deconstructed and resituated within the tradition.

East Galway – A Concept of Style

The chief exponent who for many epitomises the musical style of East Galway is fiddle player Paddy Fahey. Born in Kilconnel in 1926 where he has lived all his life, his background is music-rich; his parents were musicians and house sessions were a regular occurrence. ‘Although he would soon become aware of musical styles outside of his native region and be enriched by the Irish musical tradition at large, Paddy Fahey’s immediate musical heritage was truly the music of his family and local community’ (Holohan 1995: 48). Whilst Fahey never recorded commercially (although recordings of informal sessions are extant), his compositions figure greatly in the recorded corpus of traditional Irish tunes and, according to Small (1996), Fahey’s tunes ‘have brought a new delicacy and emotionality to the range of expression in Irish dance tunes’. It is difficult to describe succinctly what is so special about Fahey’s compositions. Both his repertoire and compositions favour minor keys over major ones (the Aeolian over the Ionian mode): this is a significant factor in a tradition where 65% of the repertoire is in a major key (Small VC EA2/98). The minor keys that are favoured by Fahey tend to be the more unusual keys of G and D minor and the major keys favour C, F and B major, which are not as bright and certainly not as commonly utilised as the keys of D or G major. The adjectives ‘plaintive’ and ‘lonesome’ are common descriptors of the perception of East Galway style influenced by the music of Paddy Fahey and would stem from the mood created by these ‘darker’ keys. There is often a degree of ambiguity as to whether some of his tunes are in a major or minor key. This is the result of a modulation between the sharpened and flattened third as it appears in different parts of the tune. As Fahey has never written down any of his tunes, this ambiguity has accompanied the tunes into the traditional repertoire. They are generally intricate and technically demanding to play and are melodically rather than rhythmically situated.4

Because of the private nature of his lifestyle and his deliberate avoidance of the public eye, an aura of mystery and intrigue surrounds Fahey, further enhanced by the fact that his tunes have no names and that (despite musical literacy) he has never published any of them. Compare this to his contemporary (and fellow East Galwegian) Vincent Broderick, who is also a prolific composer. Broderick assigns his compositions very descriptive names, many associated with his own rural locale and indeed he cites examples of where the particular activity in which he was engaged provided the inspiration for a tune, offering us a context in which to locate both the man and his musical creativity.5 Fahey affords us no such insights into either his everyday life, or his creative process. The number of his compositions is unknown; Holohan transcribed 32 (29 reels and 3 jigs) in her thesis and listed some of those which appear on commercial recordings (Holohan 1995: Appendix 1 & 2), but many more have permeated the tradition since then and appear on innumerable recorded media. Several of his tunes were documented by Breathnach and appear in three of the ‘Ceol Rince na hEireann’ collections (Breathnach 1976, 1985 and 1999).

While Fahey would have been exposed to far fewer musical influences than musicians today, an investigation of potential influences on his music is informative. He joined the Aughirmore Slopes Céilí Band in the early 1940s and fellow band member,
Paddy Kelly (another fiddler and composer born in nearby Aughrim in 1906) speaks of how he himself was greatly influenced by the music of Frank O’Higgins – a mainstay broadcaster with 2RN (Ireland’s then newly-formed radio station, now RTÉ) during an interview in 1977 (Moylan, 1977). Frank O’Higgins was acquainted with the Donegal fiddler Neillidh Boyle, and Mac Aoidh (1994: 124) suggests that Frank O’Higgins was very impressed by the music of Boyle, who in turn had been influenced by jazz and popular music. Holohan in her study of Fahey also reveals that Paddy Kelly had an interest in modern dance music, especially one-steps and fox-trots. He liked light classical music and had a special regard for the violinist Fritz Kreisler. This admiration was obviously shared by Fahey: during one of Holohan’s visits to Fahey he played her a Kreisler waltz (Holohan 1995: 56).

In order to locate Fahey both musically and geographically, it is useful to trace a history of music-making in East Galway. In a different East Galway locale, at a slightly earlier time (1926) the Ballinakill Traditional Players were assembled to play the first Irish traditional music to be broadcast live and commercially recorded in Ireland. In the preceding years, blind piper Dinnie Delaney born in Ballinasloe in the mid-nineteenth century, was one of the first East Galway musicians of whom cylinder recordings survive and piper Patsy Touhey was the first East Galway musician to be commercially recorded outside of Ireland. The recording took place in America, where he had been living since the age of four. Another musical giant, Paddy Carty, born in 1929 close to Loughrea was also a member of the Aughrim Slopes Ceilí Band and progressed from a normal eight-key concert flute with open holes, to a keyed-system flute, which essentially enabled him to play the accidentals common in the compositions and repertoire of Fahey. A number of prolific button accordion players, with Joe Burke to the fore also stem from this region of Galway. The accordion is commonly seen as the successor to the pipes in Galway and indeed accordion players are ubiquitous: among the most noteworthy are Joe Cooley from Peterswell; Raymond Roland from Castledaly; Kevin Keegan from Kilforre and John Joe Forde from Loughrea. However, despite the strong accordion tradition in the region, the accordion does not fit well with the plaintive and lonesome perception of East Galway style. The hegemonic grip of Fahey and Carty on the widely-held

perception of East Galway style has lead to the omission of the stylistic contribution of many other music-makers from this area, yet it is impossible to discuss the music of the region without acknowledging the wide-ranging musical contribution of these players.

The Concept of Regional Style

The use of the term ‘regional style’ in Irish traditional music has resulted in styles being privileged as texts thereby giving the traditional music fraternity a possible framework within which music can be discussed. The labels: ‘Sligo,’ ‘Slieve Luachra’ or ‘East Galway’ style apply a musical aesthetic, and carry a host of different meanings within the context of social practice and ideology. Their use as post-event, descriptive adjectives rather than prescriptive formulas organises, systematises and explains an already established performance practice (Bailey 1988).

The label ‘regional style’ conjures up the image of a stable musical region, with a fixed boundary created by impenetrable geographical obstacles, in which communities of musicians developed in isolation, inhaling the same air, exhaling the same style. It is commonly held that the encroaching powers of modernity; modern communications and the mass media disrupted this splendid isolation, destroying the very music to which the words ‘regional style’ gave expression, by empowering some styles and undermining others. However, the notion of a pre-modern, homogeneous cluster of regional styles is fanciful. A quick listen to two style-colonisers; Michael Coleman and James Morrison, both champions of and even architects of what we now call ‘Sligo style’, reveals two somewhat different styles of fiddling.

There is an assumption within the tradition that regional styles are an inner-cultural resource handed down in the form of tablets of stone, the shared experience of a continuous past. In the construction of its music history the loss of continuity created by endless civil distraction in Ireland is frequently avoided and ignored. The early collectors of traditional music omitted details of stylistic variation and decoration in their bid to preserve the ‘correct version’ of the tune. O’Neill hints at style continuity when he suggests that: ‘pupils picked up the peculiarities of their teachers as naturally as they
picked up the local accent and idiom [...]’ (O’Neill 1913: 410). Turning to Breathnach’s standard ‘Folk Music and Dances of Ireland’, there is no reference to the term regional style as it is used today. He describes instrumental style, but his only geographical intimation relates to piping which he distinguishes at a provincial level when talking about loss of regional distinctiveness (Breathnach 1971: 90). He makes several references to local style and proposes that as a result of broadcasting ‘[...] local tunes and styles began to be abandoned’ (ibid.: 124). Writing in the late seventies, Ó Canainn alludes to ‘those common features of performance which distinguish the majority of performers from a particular area’ but like Breathnach, he does not use the term regional style itself (Ó Canainn 1978: 40). Nor does he elaborate on these common distinguishing features, but talks generally about ‘traditional style’, the role of the performer in the presentation of a tune and the potential damage to an ‘individual’s style’ caused by playing in a group instead.

The central problem created by the term regional style is its arbitrary, artificial sense of identity and unity, which completely ignores differences and individuality. As a cultural construct it uses both acknowledges and ignores the history that informs it. On the one hand it pays respect to a line of tradition but, at the same time, this representation of history inevitably privileges certain musicians at the expense of others. In many cases, one seminal figure has dominated the consensus of perception for each region: Paddy Fahey in East Galway, Johnny Doherty in Donegal, Pádraig O’Keeffe in Sliabh Luachra with their personalities extending into and beyond the music they play. The reclusive nature of Fahey, the reckless brilliance of Pádraig O’Keeffe and the tales of Doherty’s encounters with the spirit world are the factors that situate the lifestyles of these characters into their own regional landscapes. In this sense the term regional actually describes a local or even individual phenomenon. The dilemma created by this tendency to have one musician come to represent an entire region, is the subsequent disenfranchisement of all the remaining musicians from that area, who may or may not play in that style. In reality, this one musician might represent only a small area within the region — in the case of Fahey, his highly individualised style is representative only of himself.

The synergistic effect of the events of Ireland’s history (invasion, famine, emigration, the establishment of the nation state) has bestowed a high value on the concept of identity and place (Gibbons 1996 and Ó Drisceoil 1993). The concept of a region implies the interaction between human culture and environment over time. The adjective ‘regional’ suggests endogenous authenticity, and encompasses a sense of scale and attachment arising from within a community’s own sense of its shared identity and tradition. Music informs our sense of place, but there is something in the expression ‘regional style’ which implies more than music. Sliabh Luachra is a particularly illustrative example of this. The placename Sliabh Luachra embodies a great literary, cultural and mystical history of which music is only one element. Hence, reference to regional style in the traditional Irish music discourse means much more than just a way of playing: it suggests a more organic and continuous process, with qualities that can not be acquired academically, but only through a thorough immersion in the culture.

**Regional Styles – The Current Discourse**

As a post-event cultural representation, the term regional style not only reflects an experience, it embalms it with aesthetic form. It helps to shape the way we make sense of Irish traditional music. In the current context of the increasing globalization of music and culture, it offers a prescriptive approach to authenticity for all learners of Irish traditional music regardless of their geographical location in the world, as Stokes explains ‘[...] social experience which is not tied to locality becomes difficult to grasp [...]’ (Stokes 1994: 98).

References to and research on the subject of regional style are growing in the theoretical domain of Irish traditional music; with academic theses on stylistic change in Irish music (McAuley 1989); flute styles (Keegan 1992); Paddy Fahey (Holohan 1995) and the Clare concertina (O hAllmhuráin 1997); publications on Donegal fiddling (Mac Aoidh 1994, Feldman and O’Doherty 1979) and Sliabh Luachra accordion music (Moylan 1994); a conference on the ‘Local Accent in Traditional Irish Music’ with papers by Corcoran, Keegan and Valley on regional styles and concepts of regionalism (University of Limerick 1997); and an encyclopaedia of Irish traditional music with a major entry on regional style as well as individual regional styles (Valley 1999). However, the
metadiscursive act of debating definitions and concepts rather than analysing actual music and musical activities has left us with a theoretical manual of terms hegemonically applied to the tradition, for reasons often far from musical. Regional style is a particularly confusing dichotomy: imposed, top-down from sources outside the tradition, it has, however, been embraced internally and flourishes today as an authentic, bottom-up organic utterance.

**Conclusion**

The development of Irish traditional music did not occur in the isolated conditions in which regional styles are imagined to have developed. The gramophone opened up a new musical world of sound, only a small part of which included Irish traditional music, and Stokes reminds us that ‘Musicians in many parts of the world have a magpie attitude towards genres, picked up, transformed and reinterpreted in their own terms’ (Stokes 1994: 16). This ravel of influences produced, in East Galway, a region brimming with individual styles. The music of the Ballinakill Traditional Players became a repository of historically encoded practices for musicians everywhere and due to regular broadcasts on national radio the region of East Galway became synonymous with a high standard of music. It attracted collectors and broadcasters such as Breathnach, perpetuating this association between East Galway and music. However, the music collected from musicians such as Paddy Fahey and Paddy Carty, whilst containing obvious musical nuances from the Ballinakill Traditional Players, has moved on, creating another sonic layer of style. A further dimension is added when emigration is taken into consideration: for example the accordion players Joe Burke and Raymond Roland emigrated in the 1950s to America and England respectively, taking their own individual music and style with them. Each individual played their own music and due to their geographical background and the existence of such a label in the discourse, their music was perceived to be representative of East Galway style. This leaves a situation in which a plurality of styles now resonates with the label ‘East Galway style’. In reality, East Galway style is a conglomerate of many individual styles, yet the term regional style will continue to be used due to the vital role music has to play in allowing us to (re)locate ourselves. Through the popularity of his compositions, Paddy Fahey has become a ‘star’, a cultural icon responsible for taking on the entire musical identity of East Galway. However, the fact that Fahey fails to represent a vast number of musicians who originate in East Galway demonstrates just how inappropriate the label regional style really is.

**Notes**

3. Various theories abound in relation to the ‘mood’ exhibited by certain keys. Writing on tonality in 1928, Tovey dismisses the notion that keys have characters as completely subjective (Tovey 1928:343). However George (1970: 31), postulates that major keys are brighter than minor keys and that sharper keys are brighter than flatter keys (F major and B♭ major are ‘flat’ keys in this context). In addition, many violin/fiddle-players anecdotally ascribe ‘brightness’ to the additional resonance achieved when playing tunes in the keys of the open strings of their instrument (GDÆ).
4. The majority of tune types in Irish traditional music are ‘dance tunes’ in which rhythm would be equal to, if not more important than, melody.
5. For example, ‘The fox on the prowl’ which can be found in his collection of tunes ‘The Turin Stone’.
6. Regarded by many as the first ‘céilí band’, due to their unison phrasing and tight ensemble playing, which was to become the standard for all céilí bands. The original line-up comprised two flute-players, two fiddle-players and a piano, producing a very melodic and sweet sound. They recorded nine 78s during the 1930s, toured Ireland, England and America, disbanding only in 1943.
7. These two fiddle-players emigrated to America as young men in the 1910s. The 78s of the music they recorded in America in the 1920s and 1930s have become the primary reference point for what is now commonly called ‘Sligo style’. This music has a distinctive pulse and swing with a very complex use of ornamentation and variation within a tune. Its widespread accessibility arguably influenced traditional musicians throughout the whole country at the time. Whilst both players have a strong sense of rhythm and drive, Coleman can be heard using a long sweeping bow, his performances are very expressive and dotted with seemingly effortless embellishments and variations. Morrison’s bowing is much more intricate and he makes greater use of the upper part of the bow, also his command of the instrument enables him to play difficult and unusual keys that would be avoided by many Irish fiddlers.
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