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Passing It On: The Transmission of Music in Irish Culture
(review)

Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin

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Reviews: Léirmheasanna

Passing It On: The Transmission of Music in Irish Culture, by Marie McCarthy, 311 pp. Cork: Cork University Press, 1999. \$60 (cloth); \$22.50 (paper). Distributed by Stylus Books, VA.

Long consigned to the periphery of pedagogical planning in colonial and independent Ireland, music has now become one of the defining attributes of Ireland's contribution to world culture. In his seminal opus *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali posited that "every code of music is rooted in the ideologies and technologies of its age and at the same time produces them." This aphorism is particularly apt for researchers exploring the tangled historiography of music in Irish society. The 1990s witnessed a boom in the fledgling lyceum of Irish music history, sociology, and ethnomusicology, but few of its offspring have taken Attali's credo to heart like Marie McCarthy. Her book *Passing It On: The Transmission of Music in Irish Culture* has finally taken the history of music education into the inner sanctum of Irish cultural discourse.

The paradigm "passing it on" is associated primarily with the oral transmission of Irish traditional music. Set in the context of a broader discourse of Irish culture and identity, it is used here to explore the multifaceted relationship between musical, educational, and cultural development in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland. Besides highlighting such elementary issues as how music is passed on, what is passed on, by who, to whom, and for what purpose, music transmission also acted as a conduit for a formidable corpus of political, artistic, and religious beliefs.

In tracing the pedagogical journey of music in modern and postmodern Ireland, McCarthy is careful to avoid the intellectual shortcomings of her predecessors. Because of Ireland's colonial history, the concept of "multiple musical narratives" is of vital significance to the history of cultural production on the island. Despite this, the tendency in the past has been to "approach music in Irish culture as a dualism and to equate classical music with colonial, Anglo-Irish society and traditional music with Gaelic, Irish-Ireland." In contrast to this

myopic dualism, McCarthy is keenly aware that the quintessence of Irish society lies in the heterogeneity of its subcultures, and that understanding informs her hypothesis throughout this impressive volume.

In an effort to create “thematic links between various historical periods of the last two centuries,” the author chooses four interrelated concepts to achieve unity and continuity: music as culture (a foundation and motivation for transmission), music as canon (a content and set of values that is transmitted), music as community (a context of transmission), and music as communication (a system of methods, media and technologies used in transmission). Inherent in this conceptual nexus is the premise that musical culture is created within communities; efforts by communities to pass on their traditions from generation to generation result in canons of practice, repertoire, and pedagogy. The transmission of music is facilitated by a diversity of communication media and technologies which themselves become canonic over time. The opening chapter explores the theoretical framework of the book from each of these thematic perspectives, with particular reference to the Irish context: the changing concept of culture in Ireland and its impact on music education and practice; the role of music education in the construction of identity—local, national, European, and global; the shifting canon of music education, as prescribed by religious, linguistic, and nationalist ideologies; and, finally, the communication of music through methods and media that reflect changing technologies and imported philosophies and ideas.

In the following chapter, McCarthy investigates Ireland’s culturally diverse musical history, from the origin myths of early Irish society to the tapestry of musical subcultures and transmissional contexts of the early nineteenth century. Hence, the political, cultural and educational stage is set for the main opus to unfurl. Chapter three focuses on the economic, social and political upheavals of nineteenth-century Ireland and their impact on educational and musical development. Music education is explored in a diversity of institutional and community settings: parochial national schools, model schools, such as denominational institutes as convents and Christian Brothers’ schools, the Royal Irish Academy of Music, temperance societies, and the Young Ireland movement.

Cultural nationalists in the 1890s regarded music as a pivotal medium in the construction of Irish identity. Chapter four concentrates on this period; in particular, it considers the manner in which Irish music was redefined by Gaelic League intellectuals, and how music education served to advance ideologies that were rooted in Irish nationalism. The rise in status and respectability of native music making was of particular importance in this romantic milieu; not least, the era witnessed the transfer of musical practices and priorities from an oral-based, rural setting to a literate urban one. From the

1890s on, Irish traditional music entered “new cultural spaces and mainstream musical discourse.” In consequence, it was shaped irrevocably by the academic uniformity of musical literacy, new classically trained trustees, and the rise of competitions, which brought “a norm of classical, capitalist society to bear on traditional practices founded on cooperative rather than competitive values.” Replenished by the liturgical revolution in postfamine Ireland, the Catholic church enjoyed a dominant role as a musical pedagogue by the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Often complementing the intellectual credos of cultural nationalism, Catholic clergy showed an “ever-increasing interest in school music,” plain chant, choral societies, and liturgical festivals, the latter which were to become popular events in provincial towns during the early decades of the new century.

Chapter five examines the role of music in the construction of national identity in the Irish Free State and later in the Republic of Ireland. Here McCarthy distinguishes between two distinct phases. The first lasted until the late 1940s and was “characterized by a parochial, essentialist view of Irish culture,” which drew on the nationalist arsenal of Gaelic Ireland. This gave way to a broader vision of Irishness by the 1950s in which the two intrinsic hallmarks of Irish culture—the Irish language and Roman Catholicism—provided “direction for establishing national identity and also shaped music education in the Irish Free State.” In this era of transition between insular independent Ireland and the emergence of industrial Ireland in the 1960s, music education acted as a political as well as a religious socializer. However, other factors came into play in the transmission of music in Ireland during the same period. Among the most salient were the steady proliferation of mass media, the growth of school music festivals, and the development of intellectual discourse on music which, ironically, was counterpointed by the conspicuous neglect of music education in Irish national policy making.

The period from the early 1960s to the late 1990s witnessed an innovative expansion in Irish cultural consciousness. “Cultural purism and national insularity” gave way to “cultural pluralism and global consciousness.” Chapter six considers the impact of this expansion on the nature, role, and transmission of music, and devotes particular attention to the changing social contexts of Irish music, the leadership of the Arts Council, and efforts to develop Irish traditional music pedagogy in state schools and Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann classes. It also critiques the impact of the Music Association of Ireland, the Contemporary Music Center, the Irish Folk Music Society and the Music Network, all of which have enjoyed prominence as custodians of Irish music in recent decades.

Passing It On concludes by revisiting the four themes outlined in its opening chapter—music as culture, as canon, as community, and as communica-

tion—and synthesizes the primary source evidence presented in the body of the text. In its final reappraisal of the relationship between musical, educational and cultural change in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland, it reiterates, yet again, the timeworn interface of political, religious, and cultural forces in the transmission of music in Irish society. Similarly, it reaffirms the inextricable links between the transmission of music and the formation of Irish identity, from vain efforts in the nineteenth century to bolster a common identity with Britain, to the formation of Irish national identity later on in the century, to the eventual expansion of Irish cultural consciousness in the context of a European and global community a century afterwards.

While one may have wished for the inclusion of music transcriptions, song lyrics, facsimiles of teaching tools—Hullah and tonic sol-fa charts, for example—and ethnographic interview extracts, their absence is more than compensated for by McCarthy's copious endnotes, references and bibliography, which comprise the last hundred pages of her volume. Cork University Press is to be complimented for publishing this compelling survey. It has established a benchmark for future generations of Irish musicians, historians, and ethnomusicologists, and fills a conspicuous lacuna in the literature of Irish music.

☞ GEARÓID Ó HALLMHURÁIN