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**Hanging the Harp on the Willow Tree:**  
**Music and National Identity in Postcolonial Ireland**

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## Introduction

***“We can fill our minds with Gaelic ideas, and our lives with Gaelic customs, until there is no room for any other.” - Michael Collins<sup>1</sup>***

In 1929, the first “talkie,” *The Jazz Singer*, hit Irish cinemas. The film featured American singer Al Jolson, whose character turns his back on his cantor father and the songs of his Jewish heritage to pursue a Broadway career as a jazz singer. Torn between two musical worlds, the singer eventually responds to “the call of [his] race” and leaves the premier of his Broadway show to sing the Kol Nidre at his father's deathbed, reconciled that he can remain a jazz singer while still respecting the traditions of his people. In 1931, another Hollywood jazz talkie, the wildly extravagant *King of Jazz*, graced Ireland's cinema houses and was hailed by Irish critics as a “costly and brilliant film,” with “striking originality and dazzling splendour.”<sup>2</sup> The musical revue, in addition to being an extended advertisement for orchestral jazz conductor Paul Whiteman, sported musical acts by Jeanette Loff, Laura La Plante, Kathryn Crawford, John Boles and the Rhythm Brothers, among others. The film was a dizzying celebration of modern music and cosmopolitanism, celebrating jazz as both the primitive “beating of the voodoo drum” and as music befitting an elegant ballroom. In the closing number, caricatured Spaniards, Russians, Scots and other immigrant groups perform brief bits of native music before consolidating in a jazz number before a giant melting pot symbolic of the American musical experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Collins *The Path to Freedom* (Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1968), 100-101.

<sup>2</sup> “Motion Picture Topics.” Sunday Independent, August 3, 1930, 2.

<sup>2</sup> “Motion Picture Topics.” Sunday Independent, August 3, 1930, 2.

Several years later, a very different type of film earned critical and popular acclaim in Ireland. In a debut attended by Prime Minister Eamon de Valera and other heads of state, *Man of Aran* premiered at a Dublin cinema in May 1934. Directed by Irish American filmmaker Robert Flaherty, “Man of Aran” was one of Ireland’s earliest and proudest cinematic achievements. Upon its release, the film broke cinematic records in Dublin, and cinema house managers told reporters that the movie brought in atypical filmgoers, those who had been previously unimpressed with Hollywood fluff.<sup>3</sup> *Man of Aran* is largely absent of plot, relying instead on “realistic” depictions of life on Aran, marked by barren soil, crashing waves and a meager material existence. The camera dwells on scenes of survival; a man, his wife and son carrying barrels of seaweed on their backs from the sea to transform an otherwise rocky landscape into a garden and fisherman fighting waves and giant sharks for subsistence.

As subsequent historians have shown, Flaherty’s romantic depictions of life in Aran—particularly the shark battles and use of seaweed to grow gardens on barren rock—were anachronistic, and assuredly no longer part of islanders’ existence in Aran at the time of the film’s release. Yet the public received “Man of Aran” not only as a true depiction of islanders’ hard-fought existence but as a shining example of what Irish community should be. An Irish sailor wrote to the *Irish Press* after viewing the film that despite traveling the world, he had in his experience “never seen such a happy and contented community as in Aran—making a living out of barren rock and raging seas.”<sup>4</sup> Viewers echoed those sentiments in numerous rave reviews.

In the islanders’ lack of material comforts and distance from all that was modern,

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<sup>3</sup> “Man of Aran.” *Irish Press* 28 May 1934, 14.

<sup>4</sup> “Readers Views: Man of Aran.” *Irish Press* 9 May 1934, 6.

viewers saw in “Man of Aran” the true key to freedom. The film’s producers left little room for interpretation, captioning the film with the declaration that the Man of Aran “fights for his existence, bare though it may be” because “his independence is the most precious privilege he can win from life.” While in London promoting the film, the movie’s protagonist and actual native Aran islander Coleman “Tiger” King dismissed modern achievements like the city’s subway, saying that his people, while perhaps primitive and left behind by the “march of progress,” were their own masters, enslaved only by the tides.<sup>5</sup> In many ways, the Irish reception to the stoic independence of the islanders in the film is representative of how many in the nation chose to see Ireland—as an island that sacrificed a place in the march of modernization for the sake of cultural autonomy and preservation of tradition.

The primitive and pastoral beauty of *Man of Aran*, so close on the heels of films like the *Jazz Singer* or the *King of Jazz*, productions which had enthusiastically celebrated cosmopolitanism, modernity and material luxury, was in some ways the Irish answer to the lure of a faster, mechanized and modern way of life. In the words of Irish cultural historian Martin McLoone, *Man of Aran* simultaneously put forth “a romantic rural sense of Irish identity,” while rejecting “not only the imperial definition of urban, industrial modernity but also the very notion of modernity itself.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, that the *King of Jazz* and *Man of Aran* both achieved success on Ireland's movie screens also suggests a new nation torn between two alternatives—one of an Ireland seeking a return to a romanticized Gaelic past, and one of a new nation willing to join in the innovations and uncertainties of the postwar, modern world. It was in the cultural realm, and the musical sphere in

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<sup>5</sup> “Man of Aran: Exclusive Interview.” *Irish Press* 2 Feb. 1934, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Martin McLoone, *Irish Film* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 37.

particular, that the tensions between these two alternatives played out as actors within Ireland negotiated the cultural terms of building an independent nation.

### **Agents of Conservatism: The Catholic Church and Gaelic Cultural Movement**

Though the prospect of an industrialized, cosmopolitan Ireland willing to share in the cultural experiments of the 1920s may have appealed to some, two powerful institutions, the Catholic Church and the Gaelic League, pursued a more moralistic, essentialist vision. Just as they had sought to reject the Anglican language, religion and culture from colonial Ireland, clergyman and Gaelic cultural nationalists in postcolonial Ireland struggled to dampen the modern and foreign influences that new forms of media—film, radio and the phonograph—would bring.

As many historians have already recognized, the strength of the social and cultural conservatism that characterized Irish society before and after independence was derived at least in part from the close relationship between the Church and the Irish people and, after the establishment of the Free State, between the Church and the newly independent government. Throughout its colonization of Ireland, England had attempted to sever the tie between the clergyman and his flock through systematic penalization of priests and all Catholics. Over time, however, the persecution meant to dismantle the Catholic framework of Irish society merely strengthened it by solidifying the relationship between laity and clergy with an adhesive of subterfuge and political alliance. While the Irish Catholic Church remained above all spiritually loyal to the Vatican, it lent Irish republicans support for the nationalist movement for Home Rule and, later, in the struggle for full independence.

After independence, the Church, now unencumbered by the colonialist prejudice that had long removed Catholics from official positions of political influence, reaped the reward for its support of Irish nationalism by building a close and influential relationship with the new government. This relationship was strong and enduring. When Eamon de Valera's Fianna Fail government redrafted the Irish Constitution in 1937, it inserted an article recognizing "the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens," a clause which lasted until 1972. Though the Church had long possessed far-flung authority over Irish society, its new unencumbered position of political influence strengthened its role as a powerful protector of Catholic morality. Other historians have well chronicled the social conservatism the Church effected throughout the twentieth century, for example through the lasting bans on contraception and divorce, but the Church also had widespread influence in the arts, reflected in a series of censorship laws designed to weed out what it saw as filth in the novels, magazines and films entering Ireland.

In 1923, the Irish Free State passed the Censorship of Films Act, supplemented by an investigation into "evil literature" three years later and then by the Censorship of Publications Act in 1929. These acts, modified and strengthened through various measures over the next few decades, established a powerful and enduring censorship arm through which the Irish state attempted to govern what images graced Dublin's cinema houses, what words were read on the pages of novels and, of course, what sounds reached the sensitive Irish ear. The conservative protectors of Irish and Catholic morality sought to guard Irish culture from the libertinism and modernism then sweeping Continental Europe in the form of new dances, music halls and pulp magazines. Cinema houses could

not show films unless they received approval from film censors, who often simply cut out entire portions considered obscene in an effort to minimize the influence of Hollywood hedonism in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> The result, in the words of McLoone, was a “rarely challenged” censorship regime that created “a complacent and conservative society that drifted out of mainstream European culture for nearly four decades.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet the Church was not the only institution that felt that the new modernist trends in film, music and literature threatened something sacred in Ireland. Clergy's efforts to protect innocence in Ireland intersected with Irish cultural nationalist efforts to resurrect Gaelic culture and the Irish language, and aggressively to evict residual Anglicization from Irish society as violently as revolutionaries had evicted the Anglican colonizer. In the decades preceding Ireland's final political revolt, Irish nationalists often spoke of an infection or poisoning of the national character that had occurred under English rule; Irish revolutionary leader Michael Collins wrote that the Irish had become “degraded and feeble imitators of” their English “tyrants.”<sup>9</sup> Gaelic League founder Douglas Hyde warned against the infiltration of foreign cultural infiltration in the form of British penny dreadfuls and urged every Irish household to obtain a copy of Moore's *Melodies*, the quintessential collection of traditional Irish music, as a defense against Anglicization. Following the formation of organizations like the Gaelic League, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Folk Song Society in the late nineteenth century, moderate and radical political parties adopted the language of what became known as the Irish Ireland movement, incorporating an agenda of cultural reconstruction into the political fight for independence.

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<sup>7</sup> F.S.L. Lyons *Ireland Since the Famine* (Suffolk: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 688.

<sup>8</sup> McLoone, *Irish Film*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Collins, *Path to Freedom*, 50.

Just a few decades before Ireland's final split from England, Hyde warned the Irish people that a cultural victory would be even harder to obtain than home rule. "Just at the moment when the Celtic race is presumably about to largely recover possession of its own country," he wrote, "it finds itself deprived and stripped of its Celtic characteristics, cut off from the past, yet scarcely in touch with the present."<sup>10</sup> The political connection to England had been all but severed, but a creeping cultural tie remained, and cultural nationalists in colonial and post-colonial Ireland saw a multi-pronged Gaelic revival as the cure to residual Anglicization.

After wrenching political concessions from the British empire in the Anglo-Irish War, Ireland immediately descended into a civil war waged between a faction that supported signing Ireland's hard-won treaty with England, led by Collins, and those who wanted still more concessions, led by the de Valera. After Collins was killed in an ambush, W.T. Cosgrave succeeded him as head of the provisional government, and when anti-treaty forces surrendered the following year, Cosgrave oversaw the founding of the first uncontested Free State Dail. When at last a government formed, it is no wonder that it was largely preoccupied with the most immediate of goals—namely creating a functioning legislature, civil society and economy. But Ireland's new leaders also sought to incorporate the sentiments of the Irish Ireland movement into the founding of the Free State through its cultural policies.

As a result, a more inclusionary nationalism, like that exercised by colonial Irish MPs such as John Edward Redmond in the British House of Commons, gave way after partition to a more fundamentalist Gaelicism. Removed from the British political system

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas Hyde, "On the De-Anglicization of Ireland." *The Revival of Irish Literature* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894).

and severed from Ulster, Irish leaders of an overwhelmingly Catholic nation no longer needed to cater to the sentiments of the Pale. Indeed, the cultural conservatism of the newfound government was in some ways simply an extension of a nationalist tradition that had complemented its Anglophobia with a simultaneous exaltation of all that could be deemed properly Catholic and properly Irish—an ideology governing the Gaelic Athletic Association, for example, which not only resurrected Gaelic hurling and other traditional Irish sports but forbade its members to partake in English games.

In the *Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm refers to “the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes.”<sup>11</sup> For centuries Irish nationalists had used ultramontist Catholicism, folktales, the Irish language, songs and Gaelic traditions as a way to preserve a distinct Irish identity under the colonial hand. Once Ireland obtained independence, nationalists wrangled those tools for a novel purpose, that of building an Irish nation and cultivating an Irish identity no longer just as an opposite to the Anglo conqueror, but as a positive, self-sufficient force capable of obtaining international recognition as a unique and capable nation. The Free State thus sought to consolidate Ireland as a Catholic, Irish land and, in the same breath, minimize the influence of the Pale on the national spirit. To what extent cultural protectionism throughout the early decades of the Free State was fundamentally religious sectarianism in another garb is a question for another study, but the exclusion of much that was urban, modern, Protestant and European no doubt contributed to the ultimately narrow definition of Irish identity promoted by both the Church and Gaelic cultural revivalists.

## **Music and Politics in Ireland's History**

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 6.

The intersection of the protectionist efforts of Irish cultural nationalists with the campaigns of a Church intent on using its new foothold on power to cleanse Irish society of impious influences had the potential to, and in many circumstances succeeded in, stifling the creativity and experimentation with new cultural paradigms that could be seen throughout 1920s Europe in places like London, Paris and Berlin. In his analysis of Irish film, McLoone has identified six “ingrained preferences and prejudices” of Irish cultural nationalism: that “Irish identity was unique, historic, Gaelic, rural, Catholic and self-sufficient.” In its oversight of Irish cinema and literature, censors sought to reinforce these values, while erasing others.

But how did the Church, the Free State and cultural nationalist groups like the Gaelic League attempt to exert that value system on music, an art form much less literal and localized, more elusive and thus less governable than film or literature? Like its paternalistic and prudish policies toward film and social policies in general, an essentialist and conservative Catholic approach toward nation building dictated the Free State's policies toward music in the twentieth century, but with perhaps less uniform results.

To understand the role Irish traditional music and other genres played in the years after independence, it is necessary to look back on the role of music in colonial Ireland. Many historians and musicologists have rightly treated the history of Irish traditional music as a fundamentally political one. The nineteenth century folk song collections of Edward Bunting, particularly his publication of the *Ancient Music of Ireland*, and Thomas Moore's *Melodies*, a song collection that gained lasting popularity on both sides of the Irish Sea, have been particularly popular subjects of study. Though neither Bunting

nor Moore were particularly revolutionary in their politics, the popular appeal and reception of their works—the publication of which trailed the failed revolt of 1798 and coincided with the movement toward republicanism and the agitation of the United Irishmen—could not have been wholly divorced from the politics of the time. Indeed, according to Harry White, Ireland's preeminent musicologist and historian of Irish traditional music, such collections were inherently political. In his analysis of Moore in an essay on “Music, Politics and the Irish Imagination,” White argues that the poet’s “radical interpretation of Gaelic musical culture insisted on an intimate connection between Irish music and politics.”<sup>12</sup> White notes that the author was “intimately connected with those who promoted revolutionary politics in Ireland,” and argues that the imprisonment and execution of United Irishmen close to Moore “deeply informed his understanding of Irish music.”<sup>13</sup> Moore did indeed portray Ireland’s powerful musical repertory as the artistic outpouring of a civilization constantly under attack. By using the musical laments of Ireland’s past oppression as a soundtrack to its contemporary political burdens, White argues, Moore left his collection susceptible to politicization.<sup>14</sup> The appropriation of traditional song as revolutionary fodder lasted so long, in White’s eyes, that more than a century later “the emergent Free State was incapable of responding to music other than as a potent signifier (or agent) of nationalist culture” and the politicization of the repertory would “predominate in all considerations of music as a modern art form in Ireland,” stunting Ireland’s musical development in other genres.<sup>15</sup>

Thus to White, the insertion of music into a deeply sectarian political landscape

<sup>12</sup> White, “Music, Politics and the Irish Imagination,” *Music in Ireland 1848-1998*, ed. Richard Pine (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1998), 27.

<sup>13</sup> White, *The Keeper’s Recital*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 45.

<sup>14</sup> White, *Keeper’s Recital*, 50.

<sup>15</sup> White, *Keeper’s Recital*, 52.

embedded the cultural in the political to such an extent as to cripple the development of the art form itself, freezing it in an artificial stasis of antiquity rather than permitting it to evolve in response to foreign and modern influences. “The Celtic revival of the 1890s,” White writes in the *Keeper’s Recital*, “accommodated not music *per se* but music as a symbol of renascent Irish culture, “reifying the sublime as a mere sign of pro-Celt and anticolonial allegiances.”<sup>16</sup> By burdening the musical repertory of Ireland’s past with political significance, White argues, Irish antiquarians and the revolutionaries who drew on their folk collections to deepen the divide between Irish Ireland and the Pale prevented music from moving forward, a stasis that White maintains has accompanied Ireland’s musical culture, education and institutions into the twenty-first century.

Other historians have echoed White’s concern about the temporal repercussions of resurrecting Ireland’s musical past in the service of its political present. Irish historian and conductor Joseph Ryan, for example, has noted that when Irish cultural nationalists like Hyde idolized the Gael’s past achievements, they described “a priceless but fossilised treasure rather than a living culture...There was an argument that Irish culture was already fully developed, an innately conservative and untenable standpoint that wished to only see more of the same.”<sup>17</sup>

White and Ryan are correct in arguing that Irish revolutionaries appropriated Irish musical traditions for political gain. Throughout Ireland’s colonial history, the Irish extended their music as proof of civilization in a population long cast by foreigners as wild and barbaric. Irish activists for independence and for Catholic emancipation exhibited Ireland’s musical repertory as evidence of a *cultural* worth that made the Irish a

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<sup>16</sup> Harry White, *Keeper’s Recital*, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Ryan, “Music and the Institutions,” In *Music in Ireland*, ed. Richard Pine, (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1998), 99.

people worthy of *political* respect. Under the moral and aesthetic logic of a British empire that justified its dominion over other lands largely by claiming the inferiority of colonized peoples, a territory of high culture deserved the right to govern its own affairs. As White notes, treatments of “the native tradition” often sought to “symbolise the prior existence of an ancient civilisation in direct contrast to the degraded condition of Ireland under English rule.”<sup>18</sup> Advancing Irish music was more than merely asserting Irish over an Anglo or European identity and culture, it was also a means of saying there was an Irish civilization to begin with, one far superior than that produced by the “civilizing” hand of British imperialism. But White’s view of music as dependent on politics fails to account for the broader context of an international market where cultural heritage and artifacts were subject to trade, foreign influence and compromise like any other cultural commodity, a reality that became even more important in the postcolonial age of mass media.

In *Music, Postcolonialism and Gender*, historian Leith Davis takes a more shrewd look at the relationship between music and politics in Ireland by treating Bunting and Moore’s works as commercial ventures, carefully considering the economic incentives of the print market on both sides of the Irish channel and acknowledging the effect the purchasing power of England’s reading public had on the production of collections of Irish music. Davis suggests that, through the commodification of Ireland’s cultural heritage, England at least partially negated the rebellious implications of musical collections of traditional Irish song. Bunting, for example, advanced his collections as authentic embodiments of Ireland’s un-Anglicized musical past while compromising them musically for an English public, bending musical authenticity to the supply and demand

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<sup>18</sup> White, *Keeper’s Recital*, 13.

of print culture's economy and translating Ireland's music repertory "into the terms of Anglo-Irish and English consumption."<sup>19</sup> Specifically, Davis notes that Bunting designed melodic changes to appeal "to his audience's sense of harmony," thereby projecting contemporary European "aesthetics back onto Irish music."<sup>20</sup> Such modifications undermined Bunting's assertions that Ireland's bards were the fathers of civilized music and the creators of a repertory that heavily informed Europe's own musical development, not the other way around.

Davis' recognition that the English market had an undeniable influence on the production of Irish folk music collections complicates White's presumption that such works were thoroughly allied with the anti-Anglican cultural and political interests of Irish nationalists. Though United Irishmen may have read collections of traditional music as proof of Ireland's cultural superiority and evidence for her capability for independent rule, colonizers across the channel also read and enjoyed such works—a fact that their authors were keenly aware of. With this dual purpose in mind, the collections seem more ambivalent in their politics—powerful assertions of Ireland's cultural worth, but assertions which carried in them no real challenge to the colonizer's relationship with the colonized. The concept of Ireland as a uniquely musical land—an image promoted by both Bunting and Moore's works—was a point of pride for the colonized, but also served as a form of entertainment for paternalistic consumers across the water who could afford to acknowledge the greatness of Ireland's ancient bards because mere musical artifacts posed no real threat to the present colonial relationship. In Ireland, works like Moore's *Melodies* may have served as inspiration for an anticolonial cultural nationalism, but they

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<sup>19</sup> Leith Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism and Gender: The Construction of Irish National Identity 1724-1874* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism and Gender*, 99.

also served as leisure material for English readers for whom home rule for the colony was a ludicrous proposal.

Davis' awareness of music as an international commodity capable of crossing borders and signifying different things to different listeners is particularly applicable to music in Ireland in the age of the radio and the phonograph. To White, the association between politics and music formed in colonial Ireland thereafter deemed "new music" as "strictly incidental or irrelevant to the Irish mind." But in the time of mass media technologies, other genres were anything but "incidental" to Irish listeners on both sides of the cultural divide. The importance placed on Irish traditional music as an essential aspect of Irish identity automatically elevated foreign musical genres as existential threats, but those threats were unavoidable in the relentless cross-border cultural exchanges of the modern technological age. Though debates over music in postcolonial Ireland remained burdened with political weight, the central role traditional music held in Irish musical life was no longer a certainty.

### **Music and Nation-Building in Postcolonial Ireland**

The wedding of domestic folk song and nation building is of course not unique to Ireland, but the colonial context in which Ireland's folklore resurrection took place added additional dimensions and urgency. The political significance assigned to music throughout Ireland's colonial period had clear repercussions for sectarianism in Ireland, helping perpetuate the perception of Ireland as the site of a battle of two civilizations—the Anglicized, protestant culture of the Pale and that of Catholic, Gaelic Ireland. After independence, attitudes toward music continued to reflect this clash of civilizations, but

they also mirrored new dichotomies—that between modernity and conservatism, urbanization and rural living and the creation of a culturally insular Irish Ireland versus one which would interact with and reflect Continental Europe's rapidly changing way of life.

This thesis will argue that actors in culturally nationalist organizations like the Gaelic League, politicians within the Free State and clergymen within the Catholic Church viewed the period after independence as a decisive moment in shaping the cultural future of Ireland, and they sought to use music as one tool in crafting a Gaelic, Catholic, agrarian conservative state. While elements within the Free State and cultural nationalist organizations sought to elevate Irish traditional music as the appropriate expression of a family-centered, traditionalist, agrarian, Catholic society, they also sought to demonize and defend against foreign and modern musical elements that in their view had the potential to distort the Irish spirit.

Though “modern” musical forces like jazz menaced traditionalists and conservatives throughout Europe, in Ireland they posed the unique threat of undermining de-Anglicization efforts at the precise time that supporters of an “Irish Ireland” could have expected great success. In a country where music had been so intrinsically tied to national identity, an influx of foreign musical forces represented nothing less than a new imperialism. While the state pursued a pastoral vision of an Ireland untouched and unfettered by the commercialism and materialism of modernity, the influence and popularity of records, cinema and broadcasting eroded Ireland’s cultural borders.

Secondly, it is the overall contention of this paper that writers, politicians, listeners and musicians viewed music in Ireland as a tool in constructing Ireland's

postcolonial identity. Here too it is useful to apply McLoone's recognition that cultural leaders of the Free State sought to realize and enforce a rather narrow definition of Irish identity and appropriated cultural tools to do so. Divergences of opinion toward musical genres from traditional song to jazz to the classical traditions of the Continent represented divergent opinions on the role the newly independent Ireland would play in the world. Would the new state revert to an inward-looking agrarian Gaelic past reminiscent of an idealized pre-colonial Ireland, or would Ireland reinvent its identity by opening up to modern, European influences and shedding religious and cultural sectarianism as dead weight of the past?

Lastly, the paper will attempt to show that efforts to harness music to reshape Ireland in the Gaelic, agrarian, insular conservative mold did not go unchallenged. To erase the conflicts and uncertainties inherent in founding a state over the clamor of warring sub-groups (the anti-treaty Republicans, Protestants and Unionists over whose protests the independent nation was founded), supporters of an “Irish Ireland” sought to seize on Irish Independence to compose a narrative of Ireland as a unified, homogenous Gaelic and Catholic nation. In an unhappy accident for cultural nationalists, however, those efforts coincided with technological developments that eroded cultural borders and new art forms that challenged traditional authorities and upset prevailing social and moral views throughout 1920s Europe. Efforts to build a strong Gaelic Ireland after independence not only faced the challenge of de-Anglicization and the resurrection of long fading customs, but also struggled to stand ground against the modernization, mechanization and the cultural upsets that pervaded Europe after the Great War. The revelations of the 1920s were not to be kept out of Ireland completely.

While it is true that, largely through the alliance of church and state and a widely religious and generally acquiescent people, the Free State was able to establish an unusually successful censorship regime and implement social policies that were aggressively conservative by most European measures, that mindset did not go wholly unchallenged. A closer look through the cultural lens of music offers a glimpse of Irish singers, dancers and listeners-in cautiously deviating from the traditional course. While powerful forces including the state, the Church and the Gaelic League idealized Irish music almost to the exclusion of all others, jazz enthusiasts challenged reigning rhetoric through all night dances, and musicians in Dublin openly admired the musical creations of the Continent, including those of their former English oppressor. Those who expressed enthusiasm for Paul Whiteman or Johannes Brahms risked placing themselves outside the narrow paradigm of Irish identity being formed by influential conservatives in the Church, government, and Gaelic League, but they did so anyway.

Thus while White's vision of traditional music monopolizing the musical sphere in Ireland may have rung true in the highly polarized political context of nineteenth century republicanism and unionism, the reality of the diverse and persistent musical influences brought by modern tools of mass media complicate that narrative after independence. Innovations like the cinema, radio and phonograph perpetuated the tension between the simple, agrarian vision of Ireland and the reality of an independent state that was vulnerable to the economic and cultural changes of continental Europe in an increasingly modern age. In an era when mass media created fans and consumers of new popular music and challenged the dominance of traditional song in the public sphere, Davis's emphasis on the economic realities of commercialism when treating music as a historical

artifact and McLoone's recognition that censors and moralists in Ireland fought an uphill battle against the European and American trends are more suitable than White's vision of music in Ireland as a homogenous and tightly controlled cultural force. Also applicable is McLoone's recognition of the tension between an image of Ireland as a romantic, rural place—a perception replicated not only by Ireland's images of itself but by films made in the U.S. and England—and the possibility of Ireland as a forward thinking, urban, and mindfully modern nation.

To understand fully how music factored into these competing visions of Ireland, it is necessary to examine the importance the concept of the musical peasant held in the movement to create an Irish Ireland. Folk music in Ireland, like elsewhere in Europe, has an inherent notional tie to the peasant. Political movements throughout Europe sought to strengthen nationalism by basing it on some form of rural authenticity through the use of folk music. In Ireland, however, the exaltation of the music of Ireland's peasants was also a form of cultural rebellion against the colonizer and representative of a wish to return to an antiquated rural way of life as it was before Ireland's colonization. After independence, the nationalist literature of the new state continued to idolize the Irish farmer and offer up his music as the true expression of the Irish spirit, but that discourse ignored the reality of devastating levels of emigration which threatened to erase the cultural memory of the countryside. The populations of Gaelic-speaking provinces like Connacht and Munster contributed disproportionately to Ireland's waves of emigrants, losing their language, games and traditions in the process.<sup>21</sup> Such high rates of emigration contributed to a social vacuum filled at times by the importation of English entertainment

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<sup>21</sup> Timothy McMahon, *Grand Opportunity: The Gaelic Revival and Irish Society, 1893-1910* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 16.

and pastimes. As examined in chapter one, the Gaelic League attempted to combat this infiltration of foreign culture by sponsoring dances and music competitions centered on traditional music. Nevertheless, high rates of emigration, a struggling agrarian economy, the allure of foreign cultural influences like music halls and jazz and a growing generational gap frustrated efforts to institute a Gaelic cultural revival in the countryside.

As discussed in chapter two, Dublin presented its own challenges to the campaign to revive Irish traditional music and construct Irish identity in an essentialist Gaelic mold. As the most thoroughly Anglicized enclave of the Pale, Dublin was a cultural hub aware and responsive to the musical developments of the Continent. Composers and fans of classical music formed clubs and held events to encourage enthusiasm for art music among Dublin's population, but a lack of a dedicated listening public often made classical concert series impossible. Irish musicians were forced to look abroad for better professional opportunities, a dispersal which even further crippled the classical music scene. Above all, the new government's lack of focused policy for the musical education of the Irish people or steady sponsorship of the fine arts frustrated Dublin's cultural elite, which viewed the government and clubs like the Gaelic League as embracing Irish traditional music to the exclusion of all other genres. Indeed, a state formed by revolutionaries who had so invested in the songs of the peasant as icons of nationalistic culture could not easily turn and, upon independence, support the urban, classical (and often Protestant) musical institutions inherently connected to the former English colonizer. As Irish historian Terence Brown has noted, "Orchestral music by the turn of the century had little purchase on the country's social and political life beyond" Ireland's urban centers, at least partially because "it tended to be identified with the worlds of

Ascendancy pretension and Anglicized social activity.”<sup>22</sup> As a result of those connotations, postcolonial Dublin saw a culture divide between those who sought to invigorate the city's high art culture, and thus elevate Dublin as a city equal to its Continental brethren, and those who sought to use Dublin's musical resources for the advancement of Irish music, essentially closing its doors to outside musical influence.

But by the 1920s, foreign musical influence had new pathways of entering Ireland, particularly through the radio, and Irish listeners tuned in to stations from throughout Europe to hear classical, jazz and ragtime music from London, Berlin and Paris. Through the founding of an Irish state radio, as discussed in chapter three, the Free State attempted to bring its own cultural program to Irish listeners through programming heavy with Irish traditional music and lessons in the Irish language. Yet here too foreign influence broke through. With insufficient funds to produce a program schedule full enough to entice listeners away from the BBC, Radio Eireann opened the waves to sponsored programs put together by advertisers who were far more likely to play Paul Whiteman and Bing Crosby than Irish reels or ballads.

That jazz, whether over the radio, in the music hall, or at dances was gaining a foothold among Ireland's listeners, represented perhaps the most formidable challenge to the Gaelic League's efforts to reinvigorate the craft of Irish music and the Catholic Church's campaigns to create an Ireland pure and impervious to modern indulgences from abroad. As chapter four will examine, the clergy and conservatives within the Gaelic League used jazz as a catchall scapegoat for the failure of postcolonial Ireland to eject the cultural influences of the U.S. and Europe and reshape itself as a Gaelic haven.

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<sup>22</sup> Terence Brown, “Music: The Cultural Issue.” *Music in Ireland 1848-1998*, ed. Richard Pine (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1998), 43.

To its enemies, jazz was not only immoral, primitive and overly sensual—as conservatives in many other countries viewed it—it also threatened to undermine the campaign to build an Irish Ireland.

Thus through various venues—in the countryside of Ireland, in the concert halls and music festivals of Dublin and over the waves of the radio—Ireland's politicians, clergymen, musicians, composers and listeners negotiated which musical forms were acceptable in the newly independent state. The debates over music were reflective of a larger debate over Irish identity. Would Ireland de-Anglicize itself and build an Irish-speaking Gaelic, Catholic and rural nation, as leaders such as Douglas Hyde and Michael Collins had envisioned, or would it use its newfound independence to open its borders and join Europe economically and culturally, risking losing Gaelic customs in the cross-border cosmopolitanism that was bound to occur?

These chapters will only begin to touch on the relationship between music and nation building in postcolonial Ireland. Like language and religion, music had long been complicit in both establishing and challenging the borders of Ireland's sectarian society. After independence, the stakes of defining what was and was not Irish were high, as Ireland, now free from the yoke of colonialism, had a chance to prove to its foreign colonizer and the rest of Europe what it could become. For a people who had long defined music as an essential and unique aspect of their national character, reinvigorating the fading art of Irish traditional music was as much about rekindling cultural worth and building a national identity as it was rescuing cultural artifacts. Contemporaries who expressed the fear that those who enjoyed jazz were renouncing their cultural heritage in favor of a shinier, modern alternative were countered by those who thought a blind

allegiance to Irish folk music prevented the country from building on its cultural inheritance to become something more fitting of the new modern age. In this way music had the potential to signify, challenge and redefine the lines of national identity, and the intangible art form held the potential to enact real results for the cultural and economic future of the new country.

## Chapter One

### ***“An Afternoon in The Old World”: Musical Life in the Countryside***

By the time Ireland became a free state in the early 1920s, widespread emigration had been severely depleting the countryside's population for decades. Economic struggles and lack of opportunity had fed the Irish diaspora since the early nineteenth century, and Irishmen abroad had established the social networks that would be able to assist and absorb the larger waves of Irish who would come to join them in the years after the Great Famine.<sup>1</sup> In the century following the potato blight of the 1840s, Ireland's population almost halved from its demographic height of eight million before the famine, losing people to starvation, disease and, in the most enduring demographic consequence of the blight, dramatically increased levels of emigration.

In the years after the famine, a new agrarian system emerged, marked by a consolidation of agricultural holdings that only further fueled mass emigration. Farmers found it more advantageous to keep plots together by bequeathing them to a sole heir rather than dividing them among children, and siblings ruled out as heirs were left with few choices—to remain at home and labor under the supervision of a relative or emigrate in search of other opportunities. Emigrants continued to leave Ireland in great numbers throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, often abandoning agricultural work to labor in factories in London and the U.S. By 1937 the *Connaught Telegraph* was

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball *Family and Community in Ireland* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 95.

bemoaning that Ireland's "chief export to Britain" was no longer foodstuffs, but labour.<sup>2</sup>

The famine also exacerbated a trend that had become apparent before the potato blight struck—a dramatically low rate of marriage. The Irish not only married less than other populations throughout Europe, but tended to marry much later in life as well<sup>3</sup>, contributing to the restlessness of the younger generation who looked abroad for economic and social opportunities.

Ireland's economy had long been largely based on the export of agricultural products to England, and the country had little industrial activity with the exception of Ulster's linen trade—profits lost to the Free State after partition. The prosperity and productivity of the farming class was essential to the economic health of independent Ireland. Yet the government that took power after Ireland gained independence did little to stem rural emigration. Despite the dependence of Ireland's economy on the farming class, the Free State refrained from instituting the social welfare policies that might have kept some Irish farmers at home. As complete as the political revolution had been, ideas of social revolution had always been muted in nationalist circles, and frankly considered untoward for a political philosophy that celebrated continuity above all else in most cultural and social arenas.

After losing the Irish Civil War, de Valera and the rest of the anti-treaty faction removed themselves from the new government, leaving Cumann na nGaedheal, a party that had emerged from the pro-treaty wing of Sinn Fein, to essentially rule the Free State as a one-party government. Leaders in the Dail attempted to reconcile the new fiscal scarcities that independence had brought by minimizing unemployment and pension

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<sup>2</sup> "A Visitor's Views." *Connaught Telegraph* 29 May 1937, 8.

<sup>3</sup> F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (Suffolk: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 49-52.

benefits, and through a strict adherence to free market principles and a wholesale rejection of welfare schemes ultimately failed to relieve dire rural poverty. As several historians have noted, the Church threw its influence behind this fiscal conservatism by contesting any health or welfare proposals that threatened to put the state in a role historically occupied by the Church.<sup>4</sup>

In 1927, de Valera capitulated in his protest of the Dail and, over the objections of militants in Sinn Fein who opposed any cooperation with pro-treaty elements, formed Fianna Fail, a new political party. One of Sinn Fein's main objections to Ireland's peace treaty with the United Kingdom was the Free State's dominion status, which required all members of Ireland's new government to swear allegiance to the British Commonwealth. But, after winning forty seats in that year's election, de Valera and his Fianna Fail colleagues agreed to take the oath, and settled into the Dail. Unlike Cumann na nGaedheal, which had largely accepted Ireland's economic role as a source of foodstuffs for the British empire, Fianna Fail sought to redirect Ireland's agricultural resources for domestic use while industrializing Ireland.<sup>5</sup> By 1932, after Fianna Fail had become the majority in the Dail and de Valera assumed the position of President of the Executive Council, the party had a political platform from which to implement economic reform.

By then, the international economic struggles of the 1930s had worsened the plight of farmers who had remained in Ireland. According to one estimate, agricultural income fell more than 12 percent in the years after the U.S. stock market crash, and declined at even quicker rates after 1931.<sup>6</sup> In addition to erecting the bulwark of cultural

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<sup>4</sup> R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 520.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Orridge, "The Blueshirts and the 'Economic War': A Study of Ireland in the Context of Dependency Theory." *Political Studies*, Vol. XXXI, 1983, 355.

<sup>6</sup> Orridge, "The Blueshirts," p 359.

protectionism that characterized his government's approach to building an Irish Ireland, de Valera pursued a series of nationalist and economically protectionist measures, prompting the British government to implement retaliatory duties on Irish imports to Britain and spurring an economic war which worsened the effects of the depression in Ireland. Fianna Fail's agricultural policies, which sought to increase the production of wheat at the expense of cattle trade, did not succeed in increasing employment opportunities for agricultural laborers as had been hoped.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the drive to erect small-scale native industry posed problems as well as rewards. Encouraging industrialization could potentially stem emigration while elevating Ireland's economy to a stage of development more closely mirroring Northern Ireland and its European counterparts, but industrialization also threatened to disrupt rural life.

Leaders in the Dail were not wholly ignorant to the impoverished conditions of the farming class, but to many in the early decades of the Free State, economic concerns were secondary to the immediate objective of the restoration of the native language and Gaelic customs in Ireland's countryside.<sup>8</sup> In a cultural paradigm that elevated the primitive existence of peasants like those in *Man of Aran* as examples to be admired and emulated, the image of a poor rural farmer in the present was not likely to spur a rush of revolutionary economic initiatives. Instead, politicians within the Free State and the cultural nationalists of Gaelic League saw rural Ireland as a bed of opportunity for rekindling enthusiasm for the Irish language, Gaelic games and music. They were also fiercely aware that it was the Irish-speaking regions of the country—those populations most precious to the revivalists of the Gaelic League—which were disproportionately

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<sup>7</sup> R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 541.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy McMahon *The Grand Opportunity: The Gaelic Revival and Irish Society* (New York: Syracuse University press, 2008), digital edition.

contributing to the waves of emigrants leaving Ireland.<sup>9</sup> If those populations continued to decline, cultural nationalists feared, the Irish language and Gaelic music would die out.

To understand the fervor with which Gaelic Leaguers sought to resurrect Gaelic language and customs in Ireland's rural provinces it is necessary to look back on the enduring role the Irish countryside had played in Irish nationalist discourse. Several years before the final war for independence, Michael Collins penned an essay exalting Irish pastoral life. He wrote:

*It is only in the remote corners of Ireland...that any trace of the old Irish civilization is met with now. To those places the social side of Anglicization was never able very easily to penetrate. Today it is only in those places that any native beauty and grace in Irish life survive...In the island of Achill, impoverished as the people are, hard as their lives are, difficult as the struggle for existence is, the outward aspect is a pageant. One may see processions of young women riding down on the island ponies to collect sand from the seashore, or gathering in the turf, dressed in their shawls and in their brilliantly colored skirts made of material spun, woven, and dyed, by themselves, as it has been spun, woven, and dyed, for over a thousand years...It is only in such places that one gets a glimpse of what Ireland may become again.<sup>10</sup>*

Decades later, in a St. Patrick's Day radio address in 1943, President de Valera, who had faced off with Collins in the Irish Civil War, gave his version of an ideal Ireland:

*The Ireland that we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> McMahon, *Grand Opportunity*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Collins, *Path to Freedom* (Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1968), 99.

<sup>11</sup> Eamon de Valera "The Ireland That We Dreamed of." 2RN 17 March, 1943.

Valera and Collins' strikingly similar visions of an ideal Ireland consisted of small agricultural communities happily sacrificing material comfort for the sake of preserving an ancient, simpler and more spiritual manner of life. The Irish countryside was viewed nostalgically as the guardian of remnants of the Irish past—in the forms of song and language that had survived the tide of Anglicization with a resilience impossible inside the Pale.

Ireland's nationalist literature had long touted the Irish peasant as the stoic hero of ancient Ireland's grandest days, an era before colonization when Ireland's monks and scholars were erudite and internationally influential. As Ireland's political independence came closer to becoming a reality, however, Ireland's nationalists recognized the harm Anglicization, exploitation and impoverishment had visited on the once rich culture of the Irish countryside. In an essay on the Anglicization of Ireland, Gaelic League founder Douglas Hyde recalled an ancient Irish peasantry who were "cultured men" consisting of "scholars and poets. What have we now left of all that? Scarcely a trace. Many of them read newspapers indeed, but who reads, much less recites an epic poem, or chants an elegiac or even a hymn."<sup>12</sup>

Despite that recognition of cultural degeneration, cultural nationalists before and after independence painted rural Ireland as the hope for the nation's future. The most undeveloped, yet most idealized rural areas, particularly in the far west of the island, were also the regions where the native language had survived most intact, presenting regional flickers of hope for the Gaelic League's efforts to revitalize native language and customs among the country's primarily English-speaking population. With the support of the new government, the League launched a coordinated effort to revive the native

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas Hyde "On the De-Anglicization of Ireland." (London: T.Fisher Unwin, 1894).

language in the countryside by sponsoring literary festivals, sending Irish teachers to rural schools and establishing provincial branches throughout the western region of the country. Politicians of the Free State joined the Gaelic League in its mission, requiring a compulsory education in Irish in all primary schools and offering monetary incentives for more teachers to learn Irish. The guiding principle behind the language revival was that Ireland could not effectively conjure its ancient glory while still using the language of its former colonizers.

But while the language revival has received the most attention in historical treatments of rural policy under the Free State, it is clear music played a similarly essential role. Just as English threatened to destroy remnants of the Irish language, so too did the lure of music halls and cinemas threaten the preservation of Irish traditional music in the countryside. The Gaelic League viewed traditional music not only as an ally in reviving the Irish language, but also as an essential characteristic of Irish rural life and a potential defense against foreign cultural influences. Unfortunately for the cultural purists of the League, however, popular and classical traditions were also invading the countryside through radio, cinema and records. The Irish countryside became one of the primary venues in the struggle between traditional and foreign music, a struggle heavily implicated in the larger battle over independent Ireland's national identity.

### **Musical Claims on the Countryside**

Mindful of the urgency of preserving Gaelic musical customs in a rural Ireland fast emptying of people, the Gaelic League launched a campaign of traditional Gaelic

entertainment in an attempt to fend off other forces from filling what it saw as cultural vacancy in the countryside. A 1931 statement issued by the County Longford chapter of the League declared, “The present condition of rural life is appalling, and dullness and apathy reign, from which jazz and drinks are the only relief.” The solution, the committee declared, was for the “Gaels to [take] over this country in earnest.”<sup>13</sup> With the specter of cinemas and English dance halls populating rural Ireland in the forefront of their minds, the Gaelic League instead occupied the countryside with lecture series, classes, language competitions and *ceilidhes*.

Music was an essential tool in this campaign. The cultural degeneration Hyde and other nationalists saw in the Irish west extended to music, and after independence revivalists struggled to insulate the countryside from foreign imports like jazz while resurrecting traditional Irish dance and song. The Gaelic League worried that, as more and more Irish escaped the material scarcities of country life for Boston, New York or London, the repository of folk-lore and traditional music that was the collective mind of the Irish countryside would gradually empty and dull around the edges. In 1936, Irish writer and politician Daniel Corkery, author of the romantic favorite *Hidden Ireland*, worried aloud that since the Famine the “mind of the countryside” had grown “dormant,” losing its communal traditions of folklore and singing. Now, he said, one could spend weeks in Ireland’s country “without hearing one note of music. When music ceased in a people’s life, civilisation was almost run down.”<sup>14</sup> Irish folk were expected to preserve a simple, almost ascetic way of life free from the normal material trappings of civilization, yet also retain one of the supposed hallmarks of civilized culture, music.

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<sup>13</sup> “Dullness of Rural Life.” *Irish Independent* 9 Oct. 1931, 3.

<sup>14</sup> “Countryside’s Dormant Mind.” *Irish Press* 29 Feb. 1936, 9.

The Gaelic League used songs, dances and lessons on Irish instruments to complement its language programs, and provincial branches of the League held weekly or monthly dances designed to attract new members and sponsor an affinity for traditional songs in the process. Also essential to the Gaelic League's musical colonization of the countryside was the festival. In 1896, the Gaelic League had founded the Feis Ceoil, an Irish music society modeled after the Welsh Eisteddfod, which sponsored musical competitions for singers, dancers, harpers and pipers. After independence, the Gaelic League hoped Feis competitions would provide a demand for traditional music and a stage for singers and instrumentalists who might otherwise use their musical talents to perform foreign tunes in music halls or in the cinema.

Motivating musical efforts to enliven the countryside was an often-repeated belief that modern rural life had become dull. Newspapers, politicians and intellectuals blamed boredom among rural dwellers for everything from vices like alcoholism to worsening trends of emigration. Like many of his contemporaries, Irish poet George William Russell attributed the human tide of Irish from the countryside to a “sterility of human interests” in Ireland’s western provinces.<sup>15</sup> This refrain echoed in various forms throughout the period—the concept that Irish life in the country was so void of entertainment, so unbelievably dull, in fact, that people were packing up and leaving from sheer boredom. Of course, when sources of entertainment like rural dance halls or cinemas sprung up in the countryside, and incidentally did quite well, they weathered a storm of invective from both the Gaelic League and the Catholic Church. Those institutions desired the countryside have entertainment, but entertainment of a very narrow type.

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<sup>15</sup> “The Cradle of the Nation.” Irish Press 16 Feb. 1935, 3.

But, unfortunately for the cultural purists of the Gaelic League, the ongoing national concern over the alleged dullness of rural life prompted activism from other corners of Irish society. Entrepreneurs and cultural patrons outside the League spearheaded efforts to “brighten” rural life through the erection of village halls and the organization of town dances, where entertainment did not always fall within strict Gaelic confines. For example, Dublin musical institutions launched rural tours of chamber ensembles and orchestras to visit the towns and villages which were, in the eyes of the musical elite, “starved of music.”<sup>16</sup> Sir Hamilton Harty, an Irish composer and church organist, urged every village in Ireland to host classical orchestral concerts. If towns lacked a public hall, which many did, they were to use churches.<sup>17</sup> Fans of choral or classical music urged the creation of institutions which would refine rural culture while keeping the Irish at home. They encouraged singing instructors to tour the countryside teaching the musical skills that would restore “spontaneous, expressive life amongst the rural community.”<sup>18</sup> Dublin's cultural elite wanted a musical revival in the countryside to be organic and spontaneous, but also capable of exerting a “civilizing influence on the community” through a cultural awakening to the musical traditions of continental Europe

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Also competing for the attention of rural listeners were the jazz dances, phonographs and movies screens outside the control of the Gaelic League. When American anthropologists Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball launched a study of Irish

<sup>16</sup> Aloys Fleischman, “The Organization of the Profession.” *Music in Ireland*, ed. Aloys Fleischmann, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1952), 84.

<sup>17</sup> “Jazz Denounced: Sir Harty's Plan for Counterstroke.” *Irish Independent* 1 Sept. 1926, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Donnchadh UA Braoin, “Music in the Primary Schools.” *Music in Ireland* ed. Aloys Fleischmann, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1952), 40.

<sup>19</sup> Fleischmann, “The Organization of the Profession,” *Music in Ireland*, 90.

society and community in Western Ireland in the 1930s, they found a quite lively social and cultural scene, a far cry from the extreme boredom many had claimed was spurring emigration. Amid the decline of other forms of artisan trades in rural Ireland, anthropologists found the countryside still had skilled fiddlers, storytellers, poets and singers.<sup>20</sup> They came upon dances, *ceilidhthe*, raffles and gramophones, “belying the impression of a gray monotony of rural life too easily gathered by town bred minds.”<sup>21</sup> But the anthropologists also saw evidence of a growing generational gap aggravated by the technological developments of film and mechanized music. Ireland was “an old person’s country,” a demographic state aggravated by the departure of many young people in combination with a longer-than-average life expectancy.<sup>22</sup> While the eldest generation in Irish villages were honored and held the power in local social and political negotiations, they also seemed to stir some resentment among younger men, who could remain in country vernacular “boys” through their forties and fifties if they had not yet inherited a farm or married. Young people differentiated themselves from the older generation and claimed social territory of their own, drifting toward the dances, films and sporting events in town centers, and drawing life away from traditional rural festivities, as Gaelic Leaguers had feared.<sup>23</sup>

Gaelic League efforts to enliven the countryside and preserve Gaelic culture resonated in the cultural policies of the Irish government. In 1935, the Free State founded the Irish Folklore Commission, meant to collect the folk tales and songs of the Irish people from the storytellers and musicians of the Gaeltacht. While civilian-formed groups

<sup>20</sup> Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball *Family and Community in Ireland* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968) 250.

<sup>21</sup> Arensberg, *Family and Community*, 173.

<sup>22</sup> Arensberg, *Family and Community*, 161.

<sup>23</sup> Arensberg, *Family and Community*, 313.

like the Irish Folk Song Society had engaged in collection and preservation efforts since before the turn of the century, the Folklore Commission was coordinated on a state level, under the leadership of de Valera's Fianna Fail administration. The commission's efforts were in many ways a fight against time, as Irish emigration continued and the number of native speakers dwindled despite the ongoing language campaign. As Foster has noted in his survey of Irish history, "The influential folklore commission was founded at the very moment when the society it celebrated was entering its final stage."<sup>24</sup>

In 1942, Seamus Ennis, a twenty-three year old piper working at a musical publishing shop, took a job with the Irish Folklore Commission as a full-time collector of song. As a collector for the commission, Ennis traveled the Irish countryside on his bike, battling incessant rain and disintegrating shoes to collect folk tunes while the rest of Europe was embroiled in the Second World War. Ennis privately had a sharp eye for musical frauds and a definite taste for the faithful execution of folk songs, hunting only for the oldest, most native and unknown airs in his travels. To limit his transcriptions to the purest and rarest Irish folk songs, Ennis avoided transcribing from fiddlers and pipers who had learned their repertory from material already printed.<sup>25</sup> While the older residents of the villages he visited often knew unpublished tunes, Ennis had reached them at an age where their voices were gone and mechanical dexterity shot, and he often found himself unable to make out the notes and words of the songs with which elders struggled to serenade him.

Although Ennis largely took a practical, almost scientific approach to his task, he also at times subscribed to the notion of the musical peasant as an almost mystical remnant of

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<sup>24</sup> R.F. Foster *Modern Ireland*, 536.

<sup>25</sup> Seamus Ennis *Going to the Well for Water: The Seamus Ennis Field Diary 1942-1946*. Trans. Ríonach Úig Ógain (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), 137.

old Ireland. Describing an experience transcribing from a peasant woman singing in a church, Ennis wrote:

*[S]he began to sing, slowly, deliberately, clearly, with every accent pronounced; her voice was not too sweet, but it was strong and was a little broken from old age. But there was not a syllable or a note or a word she sang that I didn't understand. She worked her way through all the verses while she sat there like a saint-like image of the olden days. She came to Jesus' name in the middle of the song and she bowed her head and raised it suddenly again, beating her breast at the same time, and she folded her hands over each other on her knees as they had been before she made the sign of the cross...It had been dark for a considerable time, and we were both late for tea. But if we were, we had spent the afternoon in the old world, among people such as our ancestors, and in the spirit of devotion and culture shown by past generations of Gaels that earned Ireland the name 'Island of Saints and Scholars.'*<sup>26</sup>

Ennis imagined himself time traveling through his listening experience, and his mystical description of the singing peasant woman was a common refrain in the mission intended to resurrect Ireland's past musical glory. Though the use of music to revive Gaelic customs took place in the new and unique framework of independence, efforts by both the Gaelic League and the Free State drew on a long tradition of closely identifying Irish folk music with the simplicities of rural life and the spirit of the Irish peasant. Examining that tradition and Ireland's literary perception of the country's peasants sheds some light on why the Gaelic League saw the reclaiming of the Irish countryside for traditional music as an almost spiritual necessity in building an Irish Ireland.

### **Music and the Peasant in Nationalist Literature**

Irish writers, intellectuals and leaders of the Gaelic revival perceived remote rural villages as the birthplace of Irish song and Irish peasants as the natural guardians of

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<sup>26</sup> Ennis, *Going to the Well for Water*, 127-128.

traditional music. For centuries, Irish traditional music antiquarians had turned to the country to collect and preserve Ireland's musical traditions. In the 1850s, Irish artist and folk song collector George Petrie and his colleagues established their headquarters in the far-off trinity of the Aran Islands to assist in his collections. Music professors and composers like Carl Hardebeck sought to build an art music in Ireland by mining from Irish musical traditions, and encouraged composers to immerse themselves among Irish peasants and soak up their musical dialect as inspiration.<sup>27</sup>

A refrain that country dwellers possessed an almost mystical innate musical skill also ran through Irish literature. W.B. Yeats, for example, wrote that the folk-tales of the Irish peasant “are full of simplicity and musical occurrences, for they are the literature of a class for whom every incident in the old rut of birth, love, pain, and death has cropped up unchanged for centuries: who have steeped everything in the heart: to whom everything is a symbol.” As opposed to the rapid turnovers of city life, these Irish folk “have few events. They can turn over the incidents of a long life as they sit by the fire. With us nothing has time to gather meaning, and too many things are occurring for even a big heart to hold.”<sup>28</sup> With the Irish peasant, he implied, a simple song was deserving of time and meaning those who lived their lives rapidly could never grant it.

The writings of Irish playwright J.M. Synge echo the refrain that the Irish peasant was uniquely, almost mystically, musical. In 1907, Synge published *The Aran Islands*, a firsthand account of several summers he had spent in the remote region. The people of Synge’s islands still told time only vaguely by the direction of the wind and the position of the sun and spoke in hushed tones of fairies and the spells they have casted. But the

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<sup>27</sup> “Old Irish Music: Dr. Carl Hardebeck.” *Irish Times* 27 May 1931, 4.

<sup>28</sup> W.B. Yeats *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (New York: Walter Scott Publishing, 2010), introduction.

islands of Synge's account are also territories of transition, still relatively isolated from the mainland, let alone broader Europe, but also responsive to the increased communication with the mainland brought by the growing stream of steamboats and newspapers and books sent from Dublin.

Synge's descriptions of Aran inhabitants is unnervingly animalistic. While he recognized that the inhabitants of Aran "have the same emotions that I have," he could not converse with them any "more than to the dog that whines beside me in a mountain fog."<sup>29</sup> But he also painted that supposed primitiveness in a light of redemption, as a natural predecessor and more hopeful alternative to the individualism and profit searching of the city. The Aran Islands in Synge's depiction is a place of persecution, and he admires the martyrdom of those hanging on to isolation and a way of life "in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas."<sup>30</sup> Just as the city in modern thought is a place of progress but also spiritual emptiness, the country of *Aran Islands* was a place of romantic beauty but also base and primal struggle.

A fatal foreboding permeates *The Aran Islands*, a dreary sense of premonition Synge made explicit when he envisioned his own death on the islands, unremarked and unknown by his associates on the mainland. His companions were also tainted by death; "I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who were under a judgment of death," Synge wrote, "I knew that every one of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks or would die in his own cottage."<sup>31</sup> In descriptions of burials and mourning he painted a picture of a people who voiced their

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<sup>29</sup> J.M. Synge, *Aran Islands*, Kindle Edition lines 895-96.

<sup>30</sup> Synge, *Aran Islands*, 405-8.

<sup>31</sup> Synge, *Aran Islands*, 1565-68.

grief primitively and musically, with “pagan cries”<sup>32</sup> and “inarticulate chant[s]” sung by aged women rocking in the same rhythm.<sup>33</sup> He described a burial:

*While the grave was being opened the women sat down among the flat tombstones, bordered with a pale fringe of early bracken, and began the wild keen, or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the leading recitative, seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs.*<sup>34</sup>

While the music of mourning was savagely alive, the music of the living of Synge’s Aran islands was withering; friends gather dressed finely in expectations of dancing, only to find that the aging piper of the village could not be induced to come. Synge himself attempted to entertain the islanders by playing a French melody on his violin, only to find his bow checked by fish skins hanging from the rafters and the fiddle’s sound dulled by the earth floor and thatch roof. But when he played an Irish jig, the “Black Rogue,” things came alive. “In a moment,” he wrote, “a tall man bounded out from his stool under the chimney and began flying round the kitchen with a peculiarly sure and graceful bravado.”<sup>35</sup>

Though at times Synge finds islanders’ expression in song crude and their execution primitive, it is in their musical expression that he saw both the naked grief and the vigorous joy of the islanders. Though their memory of their ancestor’s songs was uncertain and fading,<sup>36</sup> it still lurked in the native spirit of the island, ready to infiltrate the consciousness of visitors. He dreamed:

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<sup>32</sup> Synge, *Aran Islands*, 409-11.

<sup>33</sup> Synge, *Aran Islands*, 399-401.

<sup>34</sup> Synge, *Aran Islands*, 396-99.

<sup>35</sup> Synge, *Aran Islands*, 1435-48.

<sup>36</sup> Synge, *Aran Islands*, 1686-87.

*I heard a faint rhythm of music beginning far away on some stringed instrument. It came closer to me, gradually increasing in quickness and volume with an irresistibly definite progression. When it was quite near the sound began to move in my nerves and blood, and to urge me to dance with them. I knew that if I yielded I would be carried away to some moment of terrible agony, so I struggled to remain quiet, holding my knees together with my hands. The music increased continually, sounding like the strings of harps, tuned to a forgotten scale, and having a resonance as searching as the strings of the cello. Then the luring excitement became more powerful than my will, and my limbs moved in spite of me. In a moment I was swept away in a whirlwind of notes. My breath and my thoughts and every impulse of my body, became a form of the dance, till I could not distinguish between the instruments and the rhythm and my own person or consciousness. For a while it seemed an excitement that was filled with joy, then it grew into an ecstasy where all existence was lost in a vortex of movement. I could not think there had ever been a life beyond the whirling of the dance. Then with a shock the ecstasy turned to an agony and rage. I struggled to free myself, but seemed only to increase the passion of the steps I moved to. When I shrieked I could only echo the notes of the rhythm. At last with a moment of uncontrollable frenzy I broke back to consciousness and awoke.*<sup>37</sup>

On the surface, Synge's *Aran Islands* were a place of death and fading memory, but underneath, fueled by the very primitivism that made the playwright feel so distant from Aran's inhabitants, was a musical spirit waiting to physically and spiritually possess intruders, violently breaking their urban composure and willing them to join in a primitive dance. In Synge's conflicted account of music and life on the Aran islands was the essential paradox of Ireland's view of its own countryside; at once it was an embodiment of the glory of ancient Ireland and possessed the most powerful potential for a Gaelic resurgence, but it was also a place of constant departure, death, failure and backwardness.

Nevertheless, writers like Yeats and Synge elevated what they saw as the backward simplicity of the Irish peasant as an example to be emulated. How similar their

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<sup>37</sup> Synge, *Aran Islands*, 743-54.

descriptions were to the tenor of paternalistic condescension which had arisen whenever the foreign eye gazed on the Irish countryside. Take royal clerk Gerald de Barri's observations on the Irish people during his 12<sup>th</sup> century travels for King Henry II:

*The Irish are a rude people, subsisting on the produce of their cattle only—a people that has not yet departed from the primitive habits of pastoral life. In the common course of things, progress is made from the forest to the field, from the field to the town, and to the social condition of citizens; but this nation...little coveting the wealth of towns, as well as being exceedingly averse to civil institutions—lead the same life their fathers did in the woods and open pastures neither willing to abandon old habits or learn anything new.*

Yet even de Barri, so critical of Ireland's immature civilization, was enthusiastic over the musical skill of the Irish, calling Ireland's musicians more talented and able than any other land's. It is likely that centuries of colonial descriptions which painted the Irish peasant as noble and musically gifted, but also rude, backward and irrational and, from their rural perch outside the polis, forever opposed to the progress of civilization, informed the perception of writers like Synge much later in Ireland's history.

This two-minded colonial gaze on the Irish countryside continued after independence. Indeed, the tendency of Gaelic revivalists to describe the Irish as an intrinsically musical people contains echoes of the colonialist string of thought that, centuries earlier, had linked the behavior of a people to the climate of their land. The same environmental determinism that led European conquerors to believe that tropical climates breed savagery and laziness and cold climates breed intensity of spirit can be found in postcolonial Irish writings on the Irish farmer. And just as, it was thought, the environment shaped the Irish countryman, so it shaped his music. Like racial ideas based on hypotheses of climate, the Irish conception of its own countryside fundamentally tied

the people's music to the landscape itself, making a preservation of traditional rural life essential to the preservation of traditional music.

## Conclusion

The literary trope of the musical Irish peasant helps at least partially to explain why the Free State and Gaelic League, so eager to preserve the music, language and games of the countryside, failed to implement the material changes which could have relieved the Irish farmer and perhaps slowed emigration. Literary treatments of the Irish peasant had attributed his musical ability to the primitive conditions in which he lived—if those were changed, so would his music. Such a paradigm, which required continuity of a way of life in order to preserve an art form, informed the attitudes of the Free State government and Gaelic League toward the countryside, whose efforts sought not to advance the living conditions of Ireland's rural inhabitants through welfare or innovative economic schemes, but only to preserve an idealized agrarian culture which would serve to distinguish Irish identity in an increasingly urban, cosmopolitan Europe.

The literature of the Irish countryside—from Synge's colonial era writings to the gaze of Ennis and the Gaelic League after independence—unveils a faith in the musical capability and perseverance of the Irish countryside, but it also reveals a complex set of demands that cultural nationalists in the Gaelic League and in the cultural arms of the Free State placed on Ireland's rural dwellers. In the nationalist paradigm, Irish peasants were to serve as guardians of what had long been held as a sign of advanced civilization—an appreciation and skill for music—in an atmosphere devoid of any other signs of progress. The Irish countryside was viewed as a regenerative, spiritual and

musical alternative to the mechanical soundscape of urban life, yet it was the intellectuals and cultural elite in the Dail and in the Gaelic League who sought to educate the Irish peasant in his own cultural heritage.

Mass media and demographic trends had clearly complicated the hope that the countryside would prove an enduring repository of Gaelic music untouched by outside influences. Nevertheless, through an insistent campaign of Gaelic inspired rural entertainment, cultural nationalists worked to keep an emigrating people on the land and revitalize a musical spirit they imagined as somehow intrinsically attached to that land. While the Gaelic League and Fianna Fail fretted over the musical future of the Irish countryside, another debate over musical identity was occurring, in the eastern, perhaps most Anglicized and enthusiastically European-leaning enclave of the Pale, Dublin. If supporters of a traditional music revival faced challenges in the countryside, the temptations of other genres were even stronger in Dublin.

## Chapter Two

### ***“Death by Slow Starvation”: The Musical Life of Postcolonial Dublin***

Though early twentieth century Ireland was still a predominantly rural nation compared to most other Western European countries, the percentage of the population living in Irish towns and cities had doubled in the time between the famine and World War I. But Dublin's undeveloped economy and infrastructure of the city were insufficient to support the urban population. With the exception of Belfast, Ireland's cities were unable to compete with British industry, leaving Dublin's industrial work force with little work and little pay. As a result, the city's population lived in what R.F. Foster has described as a “pre-industrial profile of life in the lower depths” characterized by “spectacularly destitute living conditions.” The capital's adult population suffered the highest mortality rate in the British isles.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the sectarian religious and social lines that divided the rest of Ireland were also apparent in Dublin. What industry there was in the city was primarily Protestant and unionist owned, and there was a visible gap between the primarily Catholic workers' slums and the estates of Dublin's bourgeois neighborhoods. An overarching emphasis on political campaigning for independence from England, however, tended to crowd out union organization or relief efforts for the city's poor.<sup>2</sup> In Foster's words, Irish nationalists focused on “the iniquity of British rule rather than the shortcomings of social organization in the city (the latter being rather vaguely seen, when

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<sup>1</sup> R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 436.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Coohill, *Ireland: A Short History* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 115.

it was thought about at all, as a function of the former).<sup>3</sup> Like the rest of Ireland, the primary cause of agitation was the nature of Ireland's relationship with Britain.<sup>4</sup>

Culturally, Dublin's elite had historically leaned toward the art, music and literature of continental Europe. Starting most conspicuously in the mid-eighteenth century, Protestants within Dublin strove to create a civic culture marked by charitable events, classical concerts and the pursuit of cultural achievements that would put Dublin in a cultural league with other European cities. The Ascendancy's cultural efforts did produce some lasting legacies, particularly in Dublin's architectural landscape, but with the notable exception of Handel's premier of *Messiah* in 1742 and an enduring affinity toward opera, Dublin failed to achieve much that was remarkable in the musical sphere.

By the early twentieth century, the city was recrafting its cultural reputation through widely recognized literary achievements. While the Gaelic League advanced the cause of the native language and the Gaelic Athletic Association sponsored the revival of Irish games, an Irish literary renaissance took hold of Dublin society. Irish writers like Yeats, George Russell ("AE") and George Bernard Shaw drew on Irish folklore to compose novels, poetry and plays which would achieve success on the stage of Dublin's Abbey Theatre, founded in 1904. English composer Sir Arnold Bax once recalled his time in early twentieth century Dublin as an era when the "casual stroller" could "reasonably expect to collide with a poet or dramatist around every street corner." "In my early Dublin days," he wrote, "I moved in an almost wholly literary circle. There was no talk of music whatever; indeed A.E. never tired of relating...how I had lived in the city

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<sup>3</sup> Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 437.

<sup>4</sup> The exception to that rule were the agitations of Irish republican and socialist James Connolly, who led Dublin workers in a series of labor disputes and strikes in the years before the Easter Rising and framed the question of independence as also an economic, Marxist question.

for two or three winters before he discovered that I was a musician at all. Both A.E. And W.B. Yeats were tone deaf.”<sup>5</sup> While remaining the unchallenged cultural center of Ireland, Dublin had long claimed its fame in the verbal arts rather than in the musical sphere.

What music culture there was in colonial Dublin largely revolved around three institutions—Trinity College, Christ Church and St. Patrick’s Cathedral. The Abbey Theatre, which enlisted an orchestra to play alongside the stage creations of Irish writers, also contributed to Dublin’s musical scene. The end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth also saw the founding and growth of the Dublin Orchestral Society, which introduced Dublin’s public to symphonies and operas from Brahms, Wagner and Dvorak, and the inauguration of the Royal Dublin Society, which sponsored series of chamber music recitals. The coming of the twentieth century also saw the infiltration of European classical standards previously unperformed in Dublin. Bax recalled the 1912 visit of Thomas Quinlan’s British operatic company and the performance of Richard Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Walkure*, writing, “It seemed strange indeed that a capital city had never before heard these world-famous and almost hoary masterpieces.”<sup>6</sup> European works also made their way into Ireland over continental broadcasts crossing the border to serenade listeners with, for them, new and inspiring classical performances. Irish journalist John O’Donovan remembers feeling privileged to belong to the “first generation in Ireland which was enabled to hear, while still in its early teens, more and better performances of the standard repertoire form Mozart and Beethoven to Wagner and

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold Bax “Foreword,” *Music in Ireland* ed. Alois Fleischmann (Cork: Cork University Press, 1952), iv.

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Bax “Foreword,” *Music in Ireland*, iv.

Brahms than our grandfathers had been able to hear in their whole lives.”<sup>7</sup>

The events of the World War I, the Easter Rising and the Anglo-Irish War, however, unsettled the city’s art music scene, for example displacing the Royal Dublin Society when the Free State legislature occupied its lecture theater as a temporary parliament.<sup>8</sup> The establishment of a new government and a long-awaited peace presented an opportunity for Dublin to again strive for cultural prominence, but the city's musicians, composers, politicians and listeners disagreed on what type of culture the city would exemplify. While the Gaelic League and other cultural nationalists sought to build an urban scene centered around traditional music, thus claiming Dublin as an urban hub of the Irish Ireland movement, Dublin's cultural elite sought to recast the city in a more cosmopolitan, European mode by erecting an art music culture worthy of continental attention.

### **Competing Claims on Dublin's Culture**

When peace was restored and the cultural reconstruction of Dublin began, supporters of an Irish Ireland sought to claim a primary spot for traditional music on the city's stages. Traditional music preservationists were eager to see Irish folk music embraced en masse, rather than just by a few dedicated collectors. Despite the revolution, cultural nationalists feared that Anglicization had penetrated the public's musical consciousness so deeply and for so long as to generate an indifference of the public toward their ancestors' Gaelic musical traditions. Traditional music enthusiasts looked to

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<sup>7</sup> Louis McRedmond, *Written on the Wind: Personal Memories of Irish Radio* (Dublin: Radio Telefis Eireann, 1976), 141.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert South, “Royal Dublin Society Chamber Music Recitals.” *Music in Ireland*, ed. Fleischmann, 287.

the competitions of the Feis Ceoil to keep musical interest and talent among Dublin's public alive, spur interest in Irish music and restore Ireland's reputation as a musical nation by cultivating native skill. In addition to contests for singers and instrumentalists, the Feis sponsored lectures on music, folk song collection efforts and exhibitions of ancient Irish instruments and transcriptions of Irish folk songs. A sister festival run by the Gaelic League, the An tOireachtas, incorporated Irish writing contests in addition to songs sung in the native tongue in a more blatantly political and exclusive revivalist effort.

The Feis functioned not only to preserve traditional songs, but also to encourage the composition of new, distinctly Irish music. But some saw the quality and content of musical competitions indicative of a failing musical spirit in Ireland. Sir Hamilton Harty, sitting in as a judge of musical compositions submitted for a Feis in 1924, found himself confronted with songs that mimicked the musical traditions of other lands, and, dispirited, complained that one would not know that the entries had come from Irish songwriters.<sup>9</sup>

To the further chagrin of cultural purists within the Gaelic League, some in Dublin sought to appropriate the Feis Ceoil as an opportunity for cultural inclusion and a chance to demonstrate the cosmopolitanism fitting of a capital city. Indeed, competitors in one of the Feis Ceoil's most popular competitions in Dublin, the Plunket Greene Cup for best singer, sang traditional Irish songs, but also incorporated Brahms, Schubert, Debussy and Rachmaninoff in their performances.<sup>10</sup> The *Irish Times*, a historically unionist paper which looked with some disdain on the scrambling of cultural nationalists, described the Feis as a valuable institution which had flourished despite civil war, partition and

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<sup>9</sup> "Derry Feis." *Irish Times* 31 Mar. 1924, 7.

<sup>10</sup> "Feis Ceoil in Dublin." *Irish Times* 17 May 1924, 7.

fundamental uncertainty, and elevated the “friendly rivalry” between the musicians of the Feis Ceoil as a “reproach to all who are trying to make discord for political purposes.”<sup>11</sup>

In a somewhat backward logic, the newspaper also insisted that only through exposure to Mozart and Beethoven could competitors and audiences of the Feis truly understand and appreciate traditional Irish music. “If the syllabus of the Feis Ceoil were confined to Irish music,” the newspaper declared, “It would be useless.”<sup>12</sup>

The conflicting claims on the Feis Ceoil—whether as a vanguard of pure Irish music or an opportunity to mix Irish talent with classical prestige—were representative of a broader tension between two musical worlds in Dublin, classical and traditional music. Dublin’s cultural elite shared attitudes toward class and music prevalent at the time, namely that the classical tradition was the natural musical domain for the educated, wealthy, self-possessed elite while folk was the cruder, wilder expression of the lower classes. The pull between folk and classical traditions is evident in Irish composer and playwright Bryan MacMahon’s description of his music lessons as a child in early twentieth century Dublin:

*Through a succession of music teachers, four to be exact, all very dignified citizens of our town, I made no secret of the fact that I scorned musical meringue and craved the raw musical meat of the people who thronged our streets on fair-day and market-day. Seated on the piano-stool, the music teacher watching me sternly, I would stop in mid-scale to listen to the blood-pounding rhythm of 'Ballintown Brae' emerging from Maggie Carroll's or Robbie Danaher's pub on the edge of the square—this as a horse-fair moved towards its close. I now realise that I then was at the mercy of an aesthetic dilemma: the dutiful pull of what authority told me was good and the excitement generated in me on hearing a bodhran-accompanied ballad. Meanwhile, as I repeated the words 'semibreve, minim, chrotchet, quaver' I asked myself again and again what possible connection this recital could bear to life as I had chosen to interpret it.<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> “Music in Ireland.” *Irish Times* 15 May 1924, 6.

<sup>12</sup> “Music in Ireland.” *Irish Times* 14 May 1924, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Bryan MacMahon, “Ballads and Balladmaking.” *Written on the Wind*, 107.

Just as MacMahon's interpretation of what Irish life should be was a rebellion against his music instructor's inferred exaltation of classical music as the proper expression of an elite artistic life in Dublin, the city's cultural actors disagreed over whether the Dublin's musical scene should reflect Irish artistic sensibility as purist and Gaelic or as a progressive urban hub receptive to the musical trends of Europe and capable of contributing new material to the Western musical repertory. While folk enthusiasts fiercely believed that traditional Irish music expressed the national mind and soul in a way that a German or English composer never could, the composers and social elite of Dublin pleaded to direct Irish musical talent toward the development of art music in Ireland so that the country could culturally compete with the rest of Europe in the world of high art. Exacerbating that tension, classical music enthusiasts at times viewed the prominence of Irish folk music in the national discourse as a direct attack on the art music tradition. Present in MacMahons' description of his musical upbringing and in Dublin's broader musical discourse was the creeping sense that Irish folk music presented a hostile challenge to Dublin's art music development, and that the two genres could not peacefully coexist. In a lecture on the state of music in Ireland to an audience in Cork, music professor Aloys Fleischmann claimed that the listening public in Ireland had directed an "attitude of derision, even of hostility, towards music in the real sense such as would be inconceivable in any Continental country."<sup>14</sup>

There was a sense among fans of the classical traditions of Continental Europe that the political emphasis placed on Irish folk music as a national tradition had, by painting the classical sphere as highbrow and Anglican, crowded out any real possibility

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<sup>14</sup> "If Made Into Literature: Music Professor's Comments." Irish Press 14 May 1936, 6.

for orchestras and symphonies in Irish public life. In 1935, the *Irish Press* lamented that “there is no Irish music apart from folk music,”<sup>15</sup> and musical critics after the revolution wondered that the political revolution that had visited Ireland had not inspired a musical revolution. Instead, they said, a musical complacency had settled, leaving only the same hackneyed Irish jigs to entertain the newly independent nation. In one contemporary musical critic’s view, the new state’s talent had “failed to turn out anything of even third-rate genius. If asked for an apology, we gloat over Moore’s melodies, standing complacently on the shoulders of our ancestors.”<sup>16</sup>

In response to the recognition that Irish traditional music had taken an preeminent and symbolic importance in Irish musical life, Dublin’s art music leaders at times resorted to appropriating it in attempts to forge an uneasy alliance between the reel and the symphony. While Dublin’s classical sympathizers and composers sensed a fundamental separation and even antagonism between the folk and classical spheres of Dublin’s musical world, there was also an eagerness to harvest folk traditions for Irish idioms in the hope that an injection of indigenous musical spirit could inspire Ireland’s art music creations. In 1935, a music lecturer at the University College of Cork predicted that there would not be a developed, influential Irish art music tradition “until Gaelic music is as inevitable and spontaneous here as German music is in Germany or Czech music in Czechoslovakia.”<sup>17</sup> Building on native musical traditions, many said, would inspire Irish composers to create compositions capable of matching the art music creations of the Continent. Composers like Charles Villiers Stanford and Charles Wood incorporated traditional Irish music strains into their compositions, and exported those traditions

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<sup>15</sup> “A Plea for Irish Orchestral Music.” *Irish Press* 6 Mar. 1935, 8.

<sup>16</sup> “The Need for New Irish Music.” *Sunday Independent* 4 Nov. 1928, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Sean Neeson, “Sung on our Streets.” *Irish Press* 12 April 1935, 8.

abroad when they took prestigious positions at English universities. While some musicologists treated the relationship between folk and art music traditions as a zero-sum game, others—most notably Sean O’Riada—eventually achieved international recognition through the wedding of the two.

But for many fans of Europe's classical achievements in the early decades of Ireland's independence, an unbridgeable chasm between the native music of the Gaeltacht and the European musical traditions of the Pale had grown in the centuries before independence, and the two traditions were never properly wedded after political questions were resolved. Efforts to introduce native idioms into classical compositions at times provoked an unsettled response in the listener. George Bernard Shaw, for example, once called Stanford’s Irish Symphony a “record of fearful conflict between the aboriginal Celt and the professor.”<sup>18</sup> Irish cultural historian Richard Pine has observed, similarly, that Irish orchestras “are constrained by the idea of striving to reach something which is not by nature theirs.”<sup>19</sup> To those hopeful of building an art music scene in Dublin, the concept of innate musical skill among the Irish people was a self-limiting legend, for it only applied when the Irish musician played Irish music—making the wedding of folk and classical traditions an unnatural union. If art music was to play a role in Ireland’s musical development, it would have to grow to outshine and overshadow traditional music in Ireland’s cultural capital.

Thus to fight for a respected space for art music in Dublin's culture, Dublin's bourgeois of postcolonial Ireland, like the protestant Ascendancy of eighteenth century Dublin, again sought to build a high society along Europe's cultural lines. But efforts to

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Pine *Music in Ireland 1848-1998* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1998), 22.

<sup>19</sup> Pine, *Music in Ireland*, 21.

create a thriving classical music culture in the city were repeatedly frustrated by a lack of public enthusiasm, disregard from purist groups like the Gaelic League who placed Irish traditional music above all other genres, and, in a more immediate problem, a lack of proper musical venues. Arts councils pleaded for funding to build concert halls large enough to host orchestras and musical competitions. Sir Stanley Cochrane, a baronet of Woodbrook, attempted singlehandedly to solve the dilemma by building a concert hall on his estate twelve miles outside Dublin. A series of orchestral concerts there, however, failed to draw enough concertgoers outside the city limits to become a regular venue.<sup>20</sup>

Struggling to find reasons for the failure to gather support for a concert hall and for the overall lackluster performance of art music in Dublin, the musical elite pointed their fingers at what they saw as an apathetic and uncultured listening public. In 1924, a production of three Irish operas were staged alongside a revival of ancient Gaelic games then held in the city. Joseph O'Neill, a Dublin singer, was cast in one opera, but missed his opening lead as the curtain was drawn, too surprised at the fact that musicians in the orchestra outnumbered people in the audience.<sup>21</sup> O'Neill, who later became a music critic for the *Irish Independent* in the 1950s, passed a sad verdict on his homeland when he wrote, “There can be no doubt about the fact that the love of music is not very deep-rooted in the Irish people. By this I do not mean that music does not attract them. They have a superficial love of music and an emotional reaction to it, but the music must be both simple and familiar.”<sup>22</sup>

Musical reformers in Dublin understood that the success of a musical culture in the city would depend not only on “highbrows” already devoted to the classical form, but

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph O'Neill, “Music in Dublin.” *Music in Ireland*, ed. Fleischmann, 253.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph O'Neill “Music in Dublin” *Music in Ireland*, ed. Fleischmann, 255.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph O'Neill “Music in Dublin” *Music in Ireland*, ed. Fleischmann, 260.

also on the conversion of new listeners. Supporters of art music felt a sense of betrayal that the Dublin public did not offer the arts the patronage they needed to thrive. Many believed that if Dublin's music scene could only wean the working class listener from endlessly played Irish reels and expose him to Chopin and Brahms, a magnificent musical culture would emerge in the city. Some took steps to encourage a listening culture among Dublin's laborers. In 1927, for example, conductor Vincent O'Brien held a symphony concert in Dublin; the first performance was open only to the working class, who paid one shilling each while the more financially fortunate could buy more expensive tickets for a later showing.<sup>23</sup> But such efforts to augment public attendance at highbrow musical events did not seem to stick, and composers and conductors bemoaned that Dublin was not a musical city, for its public did not seem disposed to lend the time, money and enthusiasm necessary to create a musical city.

A strain of cultural jealousy and the nagging sense that Ireland was being left behind in Europe's cultural development was visible in the campaign to rebuild Dublin's as a musical center worthy of European attention. The *Irish Times* noticed that even the people of Belfast, a city considered aesthetically and intellectually inferior to Dublin, had an excellent concert hall and hosted performances admired by British papers. Contemporaries viewed the construction of a proper concert hall and the sponsorship of classical performances in Dublin as not only a logistical solution to bolster Dublin's under-supported art music scene and rekindle musical enthusiasm, but as a way to help Dublin take a place alongside Vienna, Paris and other cities of Continental Europe, boosting civic pride and strengthening Dublin's social and moral fabric. Thus to contemporaries the failure to build a robust art music culture in Dublin was indicative of

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<sup>23</sup> Maurice Gorham *Forty Years in Irish Broadcasting* (Dublin: Radio Telefis Eireann, 1967), 44.

the failure of independent Ireland to join Europe as a cultural equal, doomed to remain the wilder, backward Western cousin.

To avoid this fate, composers and patrons of art music turned to the government for help in rebuilding Dublin's culture in a European musical mold. In particular, Dublin's musical elite urged the government to construct a musical educational system of higher quality and dedicate funds to sponsor the fine arts. But to develop musically as a nation would require skilled musicians willing to stay in Ireland and become teachers who would develop the next generation of skilled musicians. And too often this was not the case.

### **The Musician in Dublin**

Few full-time positions were available for musicians in postcolonial Ireland, even in Dublin, driving many of Ireland's professional singers, instrumentalists and composers abroad. As late as the 1950s, concert pianist Charles Lynch claimed that the only “whole-time positions which a pianist in Ireland can fill is that of accompanist at either of the two radio stations” in Dublin or Belfast.<sup>24</sup> The station often engaged pianists for short bursts of playing, fifteen-minute intervals to fill the time.<sup>25</sup> And even then musicians lacked adequate accommodations—a lack of soundproofing in the studio prevented pianists from familiarizing themselves with the station piano and warming up before a performance. Those musicians who were engaged by the radio, particularly traditional musicians from the Gaeltacht, at times found that their traveling expenses outweighed the fees they received after performing for broadcast.

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Lynch, “The Concert Pianist in Ireland” *Music in Ireland*, ed. Fleischmann, 177.

<sup>25</sup> Lynch, “The Concert Pianist in Ireland,” *Music in Ireland*, 178.

Nevertheless, those who sought to keep musicians in Ireland and develop an art music culture in Dublin in part placed their faith in the Radio Eireann Orchestra, one of the few lasting art music institutions in the city which offered employment to professional musicians. Even those players, however, faced the “indifference of the general public to any music but that imported through their wireless sets,” when they attempted to bring the orchestra to listeners through live performances, according to Terry O’Connor, who conducted the Radio Eireann Orchestra from 1926 to 1945.<sup>26</sup> In 1929, for example, the Radio Eireann Orchestra organized a series of concerts for the public, but low attendance ended the series the following year.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, there was a meager supply of conductors capable of directing the station orchestra, and station musicians persevered in less than affluent conditions. When recalling the Radio Eireann Symphony Orchestra in the 1930s, Irish author John O’Donovan remembers proud and stoic instrumentalists wearing “eerie garments from another age with vast poplin lapels and cloth-covered buttons...An impression lingers of thick grey woolen socks, sturdy brown shoes and flannel shirts imperfectly disguised by a butterfly collar...In other words, music-making in those days wasn’t a well-paid profession.”<sup>28</sup>

Observers also blamed the plight of the Irish musician on the mechanization of music. In response to pressure in the Dail to increase employment opportunities for Irish musicians, Michael Heffernan, the Secretary for the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs assured his fellow politicians that, while gramophone records could not be excluded entirely from radio programming because they provided too much valuable material, the

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<sup>26</sup> Terry O'Connor, “The String Player in Ireland.” *Music in Ireland*, ed. Aloys Fleischmann, 189.

<sup>27</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years in Irish Broadcasting*, 106.

<sup>28</sup> John O'Donovan "Music on the Air." *Written on the Wind*, 140.

department would limit their use to improve opportunities for native musicians.<sup>29</sup>

Musicians also turned to the music hall and cinema for employment, to the distress of traditional music enthusiasts. But after the “talkies” entered Dublin and the countryside in the early 1930s, hundreds of musicians found themselves out of work.<sup>30</sup> Even before the introduction of film with sound, some cinemas had turned to “canned” music, or pre-recorded compositions to save money that would otherwise go to live players’ wages.<sup>31</sup>

Like professional musicians, Irish composers often went abroad to complete their work, as the careers of figures like Charles Stanford or Sir Hamilton Harty demonstrate. Reflecting a widely-held sentiment, Irish composer Frederick May once wrote that a composer who attempted “to make a living in Ireland would be inviting death by slow, or perhaps not so slow, starvation.”<sup>32</sup> Ensuring employment for musicians was not merely an economic concern, but a national and cultural one, for people worried that if musicians had no prospects to earn a livelihood, parents would not educate their children musically and the hope for a more prestigious Irish future, whether in traditional or art music, would die. Though different groups within postcolonial Ireland differed over what musical identity the new nation would adopt, the necessity of living up to the characterization of Ireland as a uniquely musical nation was the impulse behind both the movement to revitalize traditional music in Dublin and to create an art music scene for the capital city. Dublin, for many observers, was the location where those musical revolutions could attract the attention of continental Europe and earn credit for Ireland’s musical achievements.

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<sup>29</sup> Dail Debates 8 July 1931.

<sup>30</sup> Dail Debates 13 May 1931, lines 1132-1133.

<sup>31</sup> Dail Debates 9 April 1930, lines 634.

<sup>32</sup> Frederick May, “The Composer in Ireland.” *Music in Ireland*, ed. Aloys Fleischmann, 168.

## Conclusion

The movement to develop Dublin into a musical center worthy of Europe's attention was split. While cultural purists sought to gain recognition by advancing Ireland's traditional songs on Dublin's stages, the city's bourgeoisie sought to gain entrance to Europe's cultural arena through imitation, by cultivating a vibrant art music scene that would inspire future Irish composers of classical works. To traditional music enthusiasts in Dublin especially, the failure of Ireland to foster a musical scene worthy of international export was the embarrassment of a bluff called upon—for centuries Ireland had bolstered national pride with boasts of innate musical talent and complaints that political oppression had smothered and scattered its bards, but after independence a long-anticipated music revival struggled to merely get off the ground. The multiple worries that plagued the musically minded in Dublin—the lack of an art music scene to rival those of the Continent, a scarcity of opportunities for native musicians and the supposed apathy of a listening public—were further strained by the popularity of “vulgar” musical trends like jazz and the growing influence of the radio and the record. Music critics worried that “the jazz craze has rendered the general public insensible to the influences of good music” and that the radio and the gramophone had left the concert hall expendable for all but the most devoted listeners.<sup>33</sup> The radio, like Dublin's music scene, would become another venue of negotiation over Ireland's musical future.

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<sup>33</sup> H.R.W. “The Music Tangle.” Sunday Independent 8 Jan. 1928, 9.

## Chapter Three

### ***“The Cold She Caught From the Wireless:” The Founding of Irish Radio***

After World War I, the spread of broadcasting revolutionized how people listened to music, and the experience of being serenaded through a speaker masking a tangle of electrical wires excited and unnerved “listeners in” throughout the world. Irish poet Anthony Cronin once recalled the first time his family experienced listening in when his schoolteacher brought a wireless set over to Cronin's house. Cronin remembered his parents and siblings listening in darkness after their guest had appropriated the sole light socket to run a wire. “Mr. Heffernan began to twiddle with the knobs, but at first nothing happened except that the machine began to emit a curious sort of bird-call. ‘Whee—whee-whee. Whoo-whoo-whoo’...During this hiatus our expectant faces were illuminated only by a ghastly glow from the dial, and it became very cold...it must have been while we were waiting that my mother caught the chill which she declared she never shook off and used to refer to in after-years as the cold she caught from the wireless. But then suddenly in the darkness a voice spoke.”<sup>1</sup>

In the early years of broadcasting few people, particularly in rural towns and villages, possessed wireless sets. With no one to discuss last night’s program with, listening-in could be for some small town listeners an eerie and isolating experience. Indeed, not every Irishman’s first encounter with the wireless was a pleasant one, and the experience

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Cronin, “Many a Long Night: The Box with the Lighted Dial.” *Written on the Wind: Personal Memories of Irish Radio*, ed. Louis McRedmond, (Dublin: Radio Telefis Eireann, 1976), 63.

of hearing man-made sounds through a mechanical apparatus had the ability to unsettle the virgin listener. Some of this unease with the mechanization of music is apparent in other Irish memoirs of listening in. Dublin conductor Eimear O'Broin recalled his first experience hearing a broadcast: "I remember, as a small boy, being afraid of the experience of hearing a man's voice speaking as if in the radio itself, without being able to see anyone there, or behind it."<sup>2</sup> Others saw the occult in self-playing machines. Irish piper Michael Sullivan, a blind and deeply religious musician, recorded his best songs into an Edison phonograph but upon hearing them played back beat the box with his cane, convinced the technology was the work of the Devil.<sup>3</sup>

Profound anxiety surrounding the mechanization of sound and the new musical age heralded by the coming of the radio, phonograph and record coursed through Europe in the 1920s and 30s. German philosopher Theodor Adorno deemed recorded music to be but an insufficient replication of the original creation, and agonized over what the commodification of music would do to the art form. He dismissed the suggestion that new recording technology could be used to educate the listening public, contending that subjecting listeners to market-based productions of operas or symphonies merely dominated and oppressed listeners further through the perpetual cheapening of the art form. To Adorno, the easy repetition made possible by the mechanization of music degraded its content and led to a horrifying cycle of artistic repetition, stunting creativity and discouraging critical listening. He wrote that just like "a model of a cathedral in table size is something totally different from the actual cathedral," a recording of a song is "not only quantitatively but qualitatively" different than its original, "sacrificing its third

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<sup>2</sup> Eimear O'Broin, "Music and Broadcasting." *Music in Ireland 1848-1998*, ed. Richard Pine (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1998), 109.

<sup>3</sup> Francis O'Neill, *Minstrels and Musicians* (Chicago: Regan Printing House, 1913), 267.

dimension: its height and its abyss.”<sup>4</sup> German composer and critic Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt raised a similar concern about mechanized sound, writing of a mechanical piano which reproduces prearranged compositions: “The type of movement is dictated by the spirit of the pianist. At the moment, however, that the movement is decided upon, it ceases to be spirit and soul. It is now mechanical. Controllable. Concrete.”<sup>5</sup>

Like Adorno and Stuckenschmidt, German intellectual Walter Benjamin saw a decline in the sacred, or “cult” value of an artistic representation the farther it was removed from its original, but for Benjamin the ability to reproduce art, and the removal of a work of art from its original context, liberated it from what he termed “its parasitical dependence on ritual,” allowing art to leave the realm of the sublime and enter the realm of politics. Just as Benjamin argued that film took the image of the actor without replicating his aura, so did radio extract musicians’ art, disengaging and depersonalizing the performance from the performer.

Furthermore, the era of mechanization and the newfound ease with which music was replicated and reproduced brought with it concern over the prevalence of noise. In her study *Mechanical Sound*, Karin Bijsterveld chronicles the rising concern over the unwanted noise of the urban, industrial landscape. Beginning in the late 1800s, she writes, anti-noise leagues arose and complaints over unwanted sounds “increasingly focused on new technologies: on the sounds of factories, trains, steam tramways,

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<sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno, “The Radio Symphony.” *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002), 278.

<sup>5</sup> H.H. Stuckenschmidt, “Mechanical Music.” *Weimar Republic Source Book* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1994), 599.

automobiles, and gramophones.”<sup>6</sup> With the proliferation of radios and gramophones the ability to secure your own auditory privacy and control the noise around you declined, and some perceived the sounds of modernity as intrusive, hostile and the antitheses to the serene pastoral quietness imagined by anti-noise leagues. Some of the anxiety surrounding this alteration of the soundscape was present in Ireland. Newspaper columnists and composers wrote of the impossibility of escaping the music trickling out of wireless sets and gramophones, on the street, in private residences, and even at mealtime.

But concerns over broadcasting and the mechanization of music in Ireland went beyond bemoaning the mere annoyances caused by a louder, less compartmentalized soundscape and the philosophical critiques of mechanically reproduced sound. In Ireland, broadcasting from Europe and the founding of the Irish state radio offered another venue in which Ireland’s national identity could be negotiated through musical representation. In the 1920s and 1930s, decades during which broadcasting became more widespread and popular in Ireland through the launch and growth of the state broadcasting channel 2RN, the nation’s listeners, politicians and cultural nationalists debated what kind of music deserved to be broadcast over the waves of Irish radio. While the Gaelic League saw the wireless as a potential new venue for resurrecting the ancient language, customs and songs of Ireland, more forward-looking listeners saw radio as an opportunity to inaugurate Ireland into the modern world of international media, opening the country’s cultural borders to influences from Europe and the U.S. As one reader of the *Irish Independent* wrote in, “[T]here is no country in the world which needs wireless reception so much as Ireland does....We have always been cut off from the stream of European

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<sup>6</sup> Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound* (London: MIT Press, 2008), 1.

progress. Hence arises much of our backwardness, social, industrial, intellectual—a backwardness so painfully apparent to anyone who has lived out of Ireland.”<sup>7</sup>

Just as importantly, both of these groups saw broadcasting as a way to advertise their new independent state to the outside world. In that outlook they were no doubt influenced and spurred on by Britain’s own attitude toward broadcasting, which saw the B.B.C as a “ubiquitous voice” which would one day broadcast England’s finest cultural achievements to arctic eskimos and regions deep in central Africa.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, radio was the new tool of imperialism, and Ireland’s response was to erect a defense in the form of its own state broadcasting system, using the wireless to announce the Free State to Europe.

For cultural nationalists, radio would be an opportunity to showcase Gaelic achievements, particularly Irish traditional music, to Europe. The *Irish Press* gushed that Irish broadcasting stations would “transmit Irish music and Irish voices, not only to Ireland, but to England and to every country west of the Ural mountains.”<sup>9</sup> The *Irish Independent* celebrated that Ireland could now speak “in her own music to countries near and far” bringing “joy to the hearts of exiles” and “impress[ing] the foreigner.”<sup>10</sup> The *Irish Times* urged radio programmers to use broadcasts to invite foreigners to Ireland, boosting the tourism industry, and legislators in the Dail fretted over whether broadcasts were bringing credit to Ireland abroad.

To those who sought to push Ireland into a more modern, cosmopolitan framework, radio would be a way of bringing continental progress to the island and then inducting

<sup>7</sup> “Opinions of Readers on Import Duty.” *Irish Independent*, December 4, 1926, 8.

<sup>8</sup> “The Eskimo Jazz.” *Irish Times* 17 Oct. 1924, 2.

<sup>9</sup> “Irish Broadcasting Its Own.” *Irish Press* 15 Dec. 1932, 5.

<sup>10</sup> “Ireland ‘on the Air’: International Broadcast Europe Listens.” *Irish Independent* November 8, 1932, p 7.

Ireland into the continental community on equal terms. In reality, listeners in Ireland strained to gather suitable reception in Irish broadcasting's early years, and it is doubtful 2RN's broadcasts reached listeners in Berlin, Vienna, Stockholm or New York, as newspapers sometimes boasted. Nevertheless, the debates over the programs broadcast by 2RN were conversations about Irish identity when the state was still young, still forming itself in its own eyes and in the eyes of Europe. In some sense, the endless quarrels of what musical genres and other programming should grace Irish radio's sound waves were arguments over what kind of country independent Ireland should be.

### **Early Years of Irish Radio**

On Easter Monday, 1916, Irish revolutionaries seized control of Dublin's School of Wireless Telegraphy, erecting an aerial on its roof and, under fire from British troops, used its transmitter to proclaim rebel control of the city and the launch of the Irish Republic. They hoped that the bulletins would reach the U.S. after being picked up by passing ships, but by midweek, the structure had undergone so much artillery fire as to make further broadcasting impossible.

Ireland did not obtain independence until five years after the Easter Rising, at the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. Five years after that, before all structures in Dublin had been rebuilt from the conflicts of the previous decade, another broadcast occurred. From a studio erected near the General Post Office in Dublin (still burnt-out from the Easter Uprising and undergoing repairs to serve as the new government's Posts and Telegraphs headquarters), the 2RN, Ireland's state radio, sent out its first bulletin

over the wireless waves.<sup>11</sup> At 7:45 p.m. on January 1, 1926, Douglas Hyde inaugurated the 2RN with an ode to Gaelic revivalism:

*Our enterprise today marks the beginning not only of the New Year, but of a new era—an era in which our nation will take its place among the other nations of the world. A nation has never been made by Act of Parliament. A nation cannot be made by Act of Parliament; no, not even by a Treaty. A nation is made from inside itself; it is made first of all by its language, if it has one; by its music, songs, games, and customs...So, while not forgetting what is best in what other countries have to offer us, we desire to especially emphasize what we have derived from our Gaelic ancestor...This much I have said in English for any strangers who may be listening-in. Now I address my own countrymen.<sup>12</sup>*

From there, Hyde continued his address in Irish. Along with the rest of Europe, Hyde and the Gaelic League in Ireland shared a growing awareness of the power and potential of technological developments in media that allowed for mass communication. With the coming of the radio and the gramophone, musical tastes were no longer strictly cultivated under the watchful eye of the public square but also in living rooms and kitchens. As Irish listeners tuned in to the BBC and the recordings of Paul Whiteman and Bing Crosby made their way onto Irish gramophones, cultural nationalists in the Gaelic League and the Dail were profoundly aware of the threats of further Anglicization and Americanization these new forms of media posed. But—as made clear in Hyde's inaugural broadcast—they were also aware of the potential to turn those technological developments into tools in their own campaign to build an Irish Ireland.

Before the Free State launched its own broadcasting system, those few Irishmen with their own wireless sets could listen in to broadcasts from London, Birmingham, Bournemouth, Manchester and even Paris. There was a sense of embarrassment among

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<sup>11</sup> Maurice Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting* (Dublin: Radio Telefis Eireann, 1967), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 24.

radio enthusiasts that broadcasting had not picked up in Ireland at a time when England, France, China and Japan had all jumped into the wireless game with relative enthusiasm.<sup>13</sup> Wireless hobbyists did not wait for the formation of Irish radio to listen in, but tuned in to broadcasts from the Continent.

Those wireless enthusiasts engineering-minded enough to build their own sets did so, with guidance from clubs and wireless columns in the newspapers, and some even attempted their own broadcasts. *Irish Times* columnist William le Queux described his own attempts at broadcasting, which largely consisted of reading sentences from a book on etiquette: "I was the first to broadcast under my call sign '2 A.Z.' one of the first issued, and was heard from Plymouth to Aberdeen. But in those days—as old-time receivers will agree—my speech was very bad, and my old wheezy gramophone was horribly distorted. Now and then I played upon the pianola, but even then my solid-back microphone was a poor instrument. Yet it got over space."<sup>14</sup>

In March 1924, a committee appointed by the Dail to examine the issue of broadcasting issued its final report containing suggestions for the launch of a state broadcasting system. The committee proposed state control of radio, arguing that the government could use programming for educational purposes, covering subjects from lessons in Irish to hygiene tips or guidance on productive topics like gardening or bee-keeping.<sup>15</sup> After the report was issued, Irish politicians reviewed and debated its recommendations, including the question of state control over broadcasting. The Dail had to choose whether to follow the example of British broadcasting and fund radio through the government, void of advertising and instead dependent on licensing fees, or to follow

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<sup>13</sup> "World of Wireless." *Irish Times* 3 May 1924, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Le Queux, William. "The World of Wireless." *Irish Times*, 7 June 1924, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 14.

their American brethren, and let private advertising and enterprise produce broadcasting's content without burdening listeners with license taxes. Ireland chose a middle road, building a system under state control and partially dependent on license fees but also open to accepting revenues from an occasional advertisement or sponsored program.

Some worried at the consequences of state control, particularly the repercussions of granting censorship powers to the Free State's Postmaster General. Bryan Cooper, a Dail representative for Dublin County, warned that the Postmaster General, then cultural nationalist and conservative James Walsh, might be "a little too virtuous for the ordinary man," denying everybody else their "cakes and ale."<sup>16</sup> While Walsh warned of the "music hall dope and propaganda" brought to Ireland over Britain's broadcasting air waves, Cooper fretted that Walsh's vision of a properly nationalist radio would "consist of 'Danny Boy' four times a week, camouflaged occasionally as the 'Londonderry Air,' and followed, perhaps, by the Postmaster-General's speeches on the Tailteann Games."<sup>17</sup>

Others in the Dail echoed Cooper's concern, arguing that a state minister should not be the judge of listeners' tastes, and predicted that entertainment produced under state control would fail to capture the attention of the people. Yet the reigning, and ultimately victorious, vein of thought in the debate over state control of broadcasting was that the new government had a definite interest in advancing Irish language, literature, music and culture, and only the state could be trusted to keep these interests in the foreground of broadcasting content.<sup>18</sup>

In 1926, the government passed the Wireless Telegraphy Act. The legislation placed authority over state broadcasting in the hands of the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs,

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<sup>16</sup> Dail Debates 3 April 1924, lines 2884-2886

<sup>17</sup> "Dail Discusses Broadcasting." *Irish Times*, 23 Feb. 1924, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Dail Debates 3 April 1924, lines 2864-2866.

and its budget under the control of the Department of Finance. After the Dail decided on a path forward for broadcasting, a location was chosen on Henry Street in Dublin. The new station's staff draped a room with heavy curtains to improve acoustics and erected a microphone—dubbed by regulars as “Mike”—on wooden legs. The area surrounding the studio was heavily reminiscent of recent bloodshed. Irish journalist Benedict Kiely remembers his first visit to the 2RN station, walking down what he described as the longest corridor he had ever encountered to reach the studio. “Perhaps my thoughts as I walked along it,” he wrote later, “were on the shouting and burning and destruction of 1916 and the possibility that there might still be a few ghosts there.”<sup>19</sup> The station stood at a crossroads of Ireland’s past and future. Kiely describes recording into a microphone which then appeared to him as a “perforated saucepan” and then leaving the seemingly uninhabited building, unsure if anyone anywhere had actually heard his words.

Shortly after its founding, a barrage of criticism fell on the young station. Memoirs and histories show that any shortcomings in 2RN's early programming were not from lack of effort from Seamus Clandillon, the station's first director. The Free State's finance department kept Clandillon on a fairly short leash, and he faced endless paperwork for a request as simple as obtaining a studio piano and had to account for every use of station funds to authorities in the Posts and Telegraphs department. In the station's first year, he worked with a clerical staff of five and a part-time announcer and musical director. Lacking an adequate news gathering or announcing team, the early programming of 2RN was heavily musical.<sup>20</sup> Clandillon, also a recognized singer in the Gaelic League concert circuit, was an avowed Irish folk music enthusiast and collector

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<sup>19</sup> Benedict Kiely “In the Corridors of Radio Eireann.” *Written on the Wind: Personal Memories of Irish Radio* (Dublin: Radio Telefis Eireann, 1976), 74.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Pine, *2RN and the Origins of Irish Radio* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 8.

who was defensive of the national treasure—according to radio legend he once threatened to fight the conductor of Dublin’s Army Band after the Colonel spoke dismissively of traditional Irish music. On the musical side of radio programming, Clandillon worked with a modest starting orchestra of four players, consisting just of a piano, violin, viola and cello.<sup>21</sup> In later years the orchestra grew alongside Radio Eireann, increasing to seven players by the end of the first year and growing to 28 over the next decade.<sup>22</sup>

Among the major criticisms of 2RN programming in its early years was that its content was quite tedious. Listeners complained that the same instrumental Irish airs were played ad nauseum, and urged the station director to relay opera broadcasts from the Continent or host bands from Dublin’s cinemas to vary the program from the daily Irish grind. Others demanded more traditional music, just of a better quality. Listeners said the most interesting broadcasts came too early in the day for a working person to hear them; Others said they came too late for a working person to enjoy. Some wanted jazz to dance to, others were offended by it. While cultural nationalists raged against popular music on the wireless, others protested the “glut of Bach, Brahms and Liszt” and highbrow music forced on listeners who would “prefer a light programme to while away a few hours after a day’s toil.”<sup>23</sup> In the political arena, members of the opposing party argued that de Valera’s Fianna Fail government used broadcasting to shape public opinion for its own electoral benefit.<sup>24</sup>

Others suggested that artists featured by the 2RN were unremarkable and accused

<sup>21</sup> Seumas O Braonain, “Music in the Broadcasting Service.” *Music in Ireland*, ed. Aloys Fleischmann (Cork: Cork University Press, 1952), 197.

<sup>22</sup> Braonain, “Music in the Broadcasting Service.” *Music in Ireland*, ed. Fleischmann, 198.

<sup>23</sup> “2RN Programmes Criticised.” *Irish Independent* 1 Jan. 1928, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 99.

station directors of favoritism in their recruitment of talent.<sup>25</sup> In reality though, it seems the lack of exceptional talent on the radio merely reflected a lack of exceptional talent in Dublin, or at least a lack of talented artists willing to subject themselves to the broadcasting experience for the meager fees the station offered. Former director of broadcasting Charles Kelly once described the trials of gathering enough talent to fill a broadcast program, characterizing the Irish people “as the world’s worst chauvinists: according to us we are brilliantly clever, deeply musical and unfailingly humorous and, of course, the best talkers in the world. A period spent in the chair of the Director of Broadcasting would soon prove disillusioning.”<sup>26</sup> Finding talent was also an obstacle to expanding the station’s orchestra, as many musicians of classical training tended to leave Ireland for more certain and stable employment abroad. Clandillon and his musical director at times resorted to extracting personal favors from friends and family to gather enough musical talent to fill the broadcasting hours.<sup>27</sup>

Journalists and politicians also incessantly compared Irish radio to its British counterpart, despite the differences in funding and personnel which were all too clear to the meager staff of the 2RN. While BBC actors performed their lines undistracted as producers did sound effects for them, actors at the 2RN rattled their own teacups to recreate party scenes, clomped coal in cigar boxes to mimic footsteps, and hired men off the street to shovel coal near the microphone for background ambiance. In his memoir and history of Irish broadcasting, former station director Maurice Gorham observed, “The BBC has not only been a yardstick for Irish radio; it has been a stick to beat Irish radio with.”

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<sup>25</sup> Dail Debates 16 May 1930, lines 2085-2086.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Kelly “Look Back in Pleasure.” *Written on the Wind*, ed. Louise McRedmond, 21-22.

<sup>27</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 25.

Criticisms that the quality and variety of 2RN programming were lacking reached the ears of the Dail, where legislators made endless suggestions for radio programming, but were reluctant to deliver the funds that could have enacted a real change in the quality of state broadcasting. In a rare voice of reason, Daniel Morrissey, a Cumann na nGaedheal representative from County Tipperary, suggested the Dail should either properly finance the station or “scrap it,” for “if broadcasting is a national service it should be a national service worthy of this country, a service of which we should be proud.”<sup>28</sup> Others recognized that filling 365 nights of programming was no small task and suggested the government approve an increase in staff to accommodate that need.

But in the early years of the Free State, government funding was scarce. The Dail at least partially financed the 2RN through fees collected through wireless licenses. In 1929 the state issued 25,733 licenses for wireless receiving sets, a number which grew to nearly 60,000 by 1934 and to 148,811 by 1938.<sup>29</sup> There were likely several listeners for each license issued. Although broadcasting infrastructure eventually expanded through the erection of stations outside Dublin, about 40 percent of licenses issued were in the Dublin area as late as 1939.<sup>30</sup> Wireless users often dodged fees, although the government half-heartedly issued some fines under the Wireless Telegraphy Act.

By 1936, the station was able to record programs on discs, which enabled them to prepare at least some broadcasts ahead of time,<sup>31</sup> eliminating some of the on-air missteps that characterized live broadcasting. The scope of Irish radio also expanded as stations in Cork and Athlone followed Dublin. In 1927, the Post Office transformed an abandoned

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<sup>28</sup> Dail Debates 15 May 1935, lines 1022-1023.

<sup>29</sup> Dail Debates 9 Feb. 1939, lines 246-247.

<sup>30</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 115.

<sup>31</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 104.

female jail to host the Cork station, requiring engineers to pass by rows of cells (some of which had imprisoned their compatriots over the last decade of fighting) to reach the studio.<sup>32</sup> Cork's inauguration may have been a less prestigious affair than in Dublin (Cork's first transmitted broadcast consisted of the sound of a milk churn overturned by a pony outside the station's main gate<sup>33</sup>), but the station's location offered an opportunity for many provincial artists who could not justify the expense of the trip to Dublin to instead perform for Cork's wireless audience. Nevertheless, the Post Office shut the Cork station down in 1930, saying the additional programming did not justify the expense of running a separate station.<sup>34</sup>

After the de Valera administration and the ruling Fianna Fail party replaced the Free State constitution and changed the land's name from the Irish Free State to Eire, or Ireland, the 2RN became known as Radio Eireann. In 1932, the Vatican held the 31<sup>st</sup> international Eucharist Congress in Dublin. An estimated million people gathered in Dublin's Phoenix Park for the concluding Mass service, marked also by a performance of "Panis Angelicus" by Irish tenor John McCormack and his former singing instructor, Irish organist and composer Vincent O'Brien,<sup>35</sup> who also served as Radio Eireann's musical director. In addition to functioning as a celebration of Catholic identity in Ireland, the Eucharist Congress also served as an inaugural broadcast for Irish radio's Athlone station. Historians have credited Athlone broadcasts for bringing the wireless experience to a wider geographic range of listeners, beyond those who were able to get

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<sup>32</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 73.

<sup>33</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 73.

<sup>34</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 75.

<sup>35</sup> John McCormack and Padraic O'Hara, *The Greatest Irish Tenor* (Ireland, 2008), 89.

clear reception from the Dublin and Cork stations.<sup>36</sup>

The growth of Radio Eireann helped establish broadcasting as an important cultural arm of the state, but as its reach grew, the debate over what voice the radio should take intensified. While listeners demanded a variety of songs for their pleasure, the Gaelic League attempted to wrestle radio into a voice for the Irish Ireland movement. But the commercial realities of running a successful broadcasting system often frustrated efforts at cultural purism.

### **The Gaelic League and Radio Eireann**

As broadcasting in Ireland grew, Radio Eireann looked for more efficient ways to fill programming hours and generate revenue. The use of sponsored programs—allowing advertisers to rent out blocks of on-air time and create content interspersed with notices for their products—was one result of the fiscal realities of low funding. Private sponsors were often able to spend more liberally on content production than the radio itself could do.<sup>37</sup> But while station directors likely would have spent extra funds to harness talent like John McCormack or fund a larger orchestra, advertisers tended to use their resources to incorporate popular jazz and “crooner” music into their programs, hoping to catch the ears of larger audiences for their advertisements.<sup>38</sup>

Private sponsors’ proclivity toward jazz offended the purists of the Gaelic League, who were sympathetic to cultural protectionism, and their tendency to advertise foreign-made products offended the economic protectionists of the de Valera administration. Legislators in the Dail called for station directors to play a greater part in arranging the

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<sup>36</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 91.

<sup>37</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 65.

<sup>38</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 114.

content of sponsored programmes and veto any objectionable programming. The Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association also spoke out against the broadcasting of jazz and advertisements for foreign-made products, butting heads with Radio Eireann repeatedly and at times barring it from announcing their sporting events, to the detriment of the listening public.<sup>39</sup> Cultural nationalists fretted that the outside world would hear a false version of Ireland through sponsored programs, which they feared painted a picture of a nation “selling cheap goods in a cheap way.”<sup>40</sup> Sean Og O Ceallaigh, secretary for the Gaelic League, accused the Free State’s finance department for selling out cultural nationalist efforts, saying that Ireland’s “minister for finance has a soul buried in jazz and is selling the musical soul of the nation for the dividends of sponsored jazz programmes. He is jazzing every night in the week.”<sup>41</sup> The league called on the 2RN to increase programming involving Gaelic music, Gaelic drama and native language instruction, and push out foreign music and advertisements.

To some extent the state responded to these concerns. In 1934, Posts and Telegraphs Minister Gerald Boland took steps to curtail jazz broadcasts from Athlone, substituting them with orchestral and military music.<sup>42</sup> But despite objections from cultural nationalists, there was little serious consideration of precluding sponsored programs altogether, for the station could not have afforded it. Instead, Radio Eireann attempted to do its part for the cultural nationalist movement through its own programming, broadcasting lessons and programs in the native tongue, though with limited success and a lackluster audience response. Irish poet Roibeard O Farachain, who later directed radio

<sup>39</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 100.

<sup>40</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 90.

<sup>41</sup> “Dr. Hyde’s Support.” *Irish Press* 2 Jan. 1934, 7.

<sup>42</sup> “Minister’s Plans for Less Jazz.” *Irish Press* 6 Jan. 1934, 1.

programs in the 1960s, remembers broadcasts in Irish as “prosy, repetitive talks about the folklore of Christmas, Christmas customs in the Gaeltacht (which, in my experience, scarcely differ at all from those in Dublin), Halloween customs, the language movement itself, and so on.” They “were not adaptations of an old language to a new medium,” and as a result fell flat for some listeners.<sup>43</sup> Traditional music enthusiasts were also vividly aware of the educational potential of recorded music to expose the population to the songs of the land, and the station broadcast musical appreciation programs intended to inform and refine musical taste among Irish schoolchildren.<sup>44</sup>

The Gaelic League and cultural nationalists within the Dail were particularly eager to harness the radio to help in the campaign to enliven the countryside and resurrect Gaelic song and customs among the rural Irish. Dail members and newspapers repeated over and over the refrain that rural life was dull and that the radio would be a savior for bored farmers and their kin. This supposed lethargy was not only a practical concern to contemporaries, but a moral one. As one representative in the halls of the Dail said, “One of the greatest curses in rural life is the useless way in which people spend their spare time. They really do nothing, and from the ethical point of view that, of course, is very bad.”<sup>45</sup> Another legislator claimed rural amusement consisted largely of “standing up against walls, playing pitch-and-toss, playing cards, or visiting public houses.” Wireless, it was hoped, would help lure them away from drinking, gambling and other “vicious amusements.”<sup>46</sup> Legislators proposed broadcasting not only as a means of entertaining the farming class, but of keeping people in rural districts at home, away from all-night jazz

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<sup>43</sup> Roibeard O Farachain, “Some Early Days in Radio.” *Written on the Wind*, ed. Louise McRedmond, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 109.

<sup>45</sup> Dail Debates 3 April, 1924, lines 2865-2870.

<sup>46</sup> Dail Debates 3 April 1924.

dances and town cinema houses and off the emigrant ships. With the radio they also sought to bring the native music of Ireland to city dwellers, by broadcasting performances by traditional fiddlers found in the country.

Dublin's politicians and newspapers harped on the educational potential radio had for Ireland's Gaeltacht. One Irish Independent humorist satired the omnipresent emphasis on the instructive benefits of broadcasting for a rural audience, aptly pointing out through hyperbole the perhaps overly paternal attitude exhibited toward rural listeners.

*Special emphasis is laid on the instruction, as is only proper. Think of the good it will do for my uncle William down on the farm. With the loud speaker attached and the receiving set placed on a stool in the haggard he can pulp mangels while Tetrazzini sings to him; or milk his cows to the music of a fiddle played in London. The proposed lectures on hygiene should do him a most astonishing amount of good...[I]t will be helpful to hear Professor Scapsudski lecturing on the art of washing behind one's ears. The bed-time stories, too relayed from America should give William's barn-door fowl a new interest in life.*

In the urban imagination, farmers in rural Ireland were fiercely desperate for any form of entertainment, more than any other form of sustenance, and radio was one way of equalizing cultural opportunities for town and rural dwellers and making the countryside “as smart and pleasant as it is wholesome.”<sup>47</sup> Referring to ongoing efforts to electrify the countryside through power generated by the River Shannon, one Dail member supposed, “[T]he farmer, if he were asked to choose between an electric bulb in exchange for his candle or lamp or a crystal set to receive some little entertainment during dark winter nights, he would choose the crystal set...Even if some of these people are not going to get light from the Shannon scheme, at least they should get that little bit of brightness in

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<sup>47</sup> “Broadcasting and Rural Life.” Freemans Journal 8 Feb. 1923, 4.

their homes.”<sup>48</sup> In a kind of internal colonization, the paternal Irish urban elite sought to bring the “brightness” of city life to the country through the mechanisms of the radio. But it was not to fundamentally reshape country life to mirror the city, but rather to preserve the rural way of life by keeping Irish people on the land, an increasingly challenging goal in an era of unceasing emigration.

## Conclusion

Ireland’s leaders thus sought to use a tool of modernity—the radio—to preserve the pastoral vision of Ireland’s past and ensure the country’s future as a haven for pastoral Gaelic ideals. In rural Ireland, where the population had thinned dramatically since the Famine, the radio was a unifier, an electronic social bond, joining people through the novelty of hearing tunes—even those heard many times before—over the new medium. Take one Irishman’s first experience listening in:

*Last night I listened-in for the first time: a delightful though rather uncanny experience. You snuggle down in your host's cosiest chair. Light up (if you're a smoker), and put your feet on the mantelpiece...[T]he fun begins. You hear, afar off and yet seemingly beside you, a very courteous young gentleman explaining the night's programme. His enunciation is a lesson in beautiful speech, and his homely "Good Evening, everybody," makes you feel as if you were at a party with the entire population of the broadcasting area.<sup>49</sup>*

It was this sense of an imagined community that advocates on both side of the radio debate sought to capture. What content was to be broadcast over Radio Eireann was so sharply and hotly contested at least in part because of the belief that programming would unite listeners under one cultural framework and reflect Ireland as a whole to listeners abroad. Under this way of thinking, the musical

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<sup>48</sup> Dail Debates, 16 May 1929, lines 2169-2171.

<sup>49</sup> “Reflections After Listening In.” Irish Independent 26 Sept. 1923, 4.

compositions sent over radio waves became tools of nation-building and of self-representation.

The Gaelic League sought to build a tight-knit insular wireless community fed on Irish poems and Irish song, while others saw radio as a method of melding Ireland with the community of continental Europe. Present in all sides of Ireland's debate over broadcasting was the distinct recognition that, for better or worse, broadcasting and the record trade accelerated and intensified the cross-border cultural exchanges that at once threatened Ireland's cultural purity and allowed a new nation a chance at self-promotion on the national stage. The tension between Ireland's relationship with its purely Gaelic past and the potential for the independent state to join the European community on its own terms spilled over into and intensified the debate over radio programming. And no type of radio program exacerbated this tension quite so much as the broadcasting of jazz.

## Chapter Four

### ***Driving out the Jazz Germ***

In the years after World War I, American jazz took hold of Europe's cities and captured the attention of a war-weary population, pulsing in Berlin's nightclubs, through gramophones in Montparnasse and over the radio waves of the BBC. American solo musicians and jazz orchestras toured the continent exposing European audiences to ragtime, Dixie jazz and early swing, prompting European musicians to form their own versions of jazz based on American musical memes. Though Ireland—with a comparatively small population, lack of suitable concert halls and a government less than friendly to artistic imports—was largely left out of the tour circuit, jazz nevertheless crept in through foreign radio broadcasts, imported records and films like the *Jazz Singer* and *King of Jazz*.

Just as in the rest of Europe, jazz in Ireland inspired fascination in some and revulsion in others. In the aesthetic arena, music critics saw jazz as flirting dangerously with crossing the border between music and noise, a genre obsessed with syncopation and rhythmical play rather than the more symmetrical and nuanced harmonies of traditional and classical compositions. In a typical diagnosis of the genre, one adjudicator at a musical festival in Derry defined jazz as inartistic syncopation consisting of “words that meant nothing to tunes that meant less.”<sup>1</sup> English composer Julius Harrison labeled the art

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<sup>1</sup> “Jazz Inartistic.” Irish Press 2 Mar. 1934, 11.

form a mere “series of tricks.”<sup>2</sup> Aesthetic critics of jazz saw the genre as the vulgar consequence of commercialism invading the artistic sphere, a popular music which served only as an idle and mindless distraction for the masses, marking the regular destruction of finer, more skillful compositions through its easy rhythms. Critics bristled at jazzy renditions of classical works and labeled jazz artists mere merchants of music who interpreted others' work too boldly and distorted it for vulgar commercial ends.

Psychologically, the most offended critics saw jazz as a severe and contagious form of mass hysteria which had taken root in a war weary generation willing to embrace the musical version of shell shock convulsions. European intellectuals skeptical of jazz saw the genre as delirium in musical form—an erratic pulsing aural abnormality which could only be appreciated by an unsettled mind. Critics even went so far as to claim that the sounds of jazz were so unsettling and unnatural that they caused physical maladies, adversely affecting respiration, circulation and digestion, and even distorting a man's moral and mental outlook. As one Irish judge explained, the violence of the preceding decade had made many particularly susceptible to emotional disturbances, resulting in a prevalence of disturbed jazz fans. “Jazz addicts,” he said, “have lost control of themselves...In fact, you will see them on the streets, in the railway carriages, and on the tramway cars, and they cannot keep quiet. Their bodies are being moved about and are swaying to some imaginary jazz rhythm.”<sup>3</sup>

Jazz throughout Europe was also unabatedly racially coded. In his analysis of jazz in interbellum Paris, historian Jeffrey Jackson observes that the French portrayed the genre “in racialized terms from the moment of its arrival... Nearly any music called jazz

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<sup>2</sup> “Why Jazz Must Die.” Irish Times 31 March 1928, 7.

<sup>3</sup> “Many Addicts of Jazz Abnormal.” Irish Independent 8 Feb. 1931, 2.

was also believed to be black in origin, and the term quickly came to encompass almost any music performed by black musicians.”<sup>4</sup> In France, the skin color of performers also doubled as a mark of authenticity, ensuring the audience that what they were hearing was truly *real jazz*, not white imitation. In England, critics like Dr. Lewis R. Farnell, the Rector of Exeter College and Vice Chancellor of Oxford, labeled jazz “Nigger music” which “comes from the devil.” (A comment to which Sir Hugh Allen, an organist and president of Exeter’s summer school, replied that he “had always been under the impression that God made the niggers.”)<sup>5</sup> In a 1934 published study of jazz, English organist Sir Richard Terry racially associated the genre with voodooism and the occult.<sup>6</sup> Similar attitudes were to be found in Ireland, although the presence of foreigners of different cultures and skin colors, and the contact the Irish had with the cultural Other, was on a much smaller scale than in Paris or London.

Throughout Europe, critics and fans of jazz alike also received the genre as distinctly modern and American. To many European listeners, including the Irish, jazz was the embodiment of both modernity and the American soul, and as a result stirred profound anxiety and nostalgia. Jazz seemed a suitable soundtrack to the mechanized, faster and noisier pace of modern life which Europe identified with the American spirit. As a writer for the *Irish Independent* remarked in 1916, “[T]he two great original contributions of America to the world of art have been ‘jazz’ music...and the skyscraper.”<sup>7</sup> And the Irish—and much of the rest of Europe—were deeply ambivalent toward the new age symbolized by both.

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Jackson *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 25.

<sup>5</sup> “Nail in Coffin of Civilisation.” *Irish Times* 6 Aug. 1927, 7.

<sup>6</sup> “Voodism in Music.” *Irish Press* 31 Dec. 1934, 3.

<sup>7</sup> “The Cult of the Skyscraper.” *Irish Independent* 9 Aug. 1926, 6.

But whereas in countries like Germany, England and France, jazz was a broad and vague cultural threat—a shape shifting force fluid enough to reflect the threatened listeners' worst fears, be they modernity, primitivism, Americanization, paganism, commercialization, sexual vice, disintegrating artistic standards or innate immorality, in Ireland it was a concrete challenge to the movement to rebuild Ireland as a Catholic, Gaelic, self-sufficient and insular state. In Ireland, the campaign against jazz was a response to all of those fears in addition to the specter of a cultural homogenization with the rest of the modern West, and conservatives received jazz as a musical invasion which would roll back the advances of the Irish Ireland movement and erase the country's Gaelic traces at the precise moment revivalists sought to use political independence to create a truly Irish nation.

Before the revolution, Michael Collins had warned against an invisible threat that Gaels must unite against. “[T]he spiritual machine which has been mutilating us, destroying our customs, and our independent life, is not so easy to discern,” he wrote, “We have to seek it out with the eyes of our mind. We have to put against it the whole weight of our united spiritual strength. And it has become so familiar, how are we to recognise it?”<sup>8</sup> After the revolution, cultural nationalists continued to stand guard against creeping modernity, commercialism and outright Anglicization, and in jazz recognized the machine Collins had so forebodingly described.

Although aesthetic reactionaries throughout Europe also attempted to beat back Americanization and the revolutionary cultural vogues of the 1920s, the campaign against jazz in Ireland had the fortune of dovetailing with Irish nationalist efforts to reverse a centuries-long tide of Anglicization and cultivate and preserve a distinct Gaelic identity.

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Collins *The Path to Freedom* (Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1968), 100.

Distrust of jazz in Ireland continued into an era when the genre had become an accepted mainstay in most other European countries. In 1943, the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, then Fianna Fail representative Patrick Little, banned jazz from Radio Eireann, an embargo which lasted until the end of his term in 1948. In the mindset of defensive cultural nationalists of a young Irish state, jazz was not merely an auditory obscenity, but a calculated campaign from abroad attempting to dilute Irish culture by eroding Ireland's borders.

A sense of violently defensive persecution (perhaps the logical result of 800 years of colonization and cultural transformation by its conqueror) had long characterized Irish political rhetoric, and it was perhaps not a surprise that shades of cultural paranoia crept into the cultural sphere even after independence had been achieved. One reader of the *Tuam Herald* directly shifted the blame for jazz to invisible overseas forces, writing, "God knows that all our enemies, foreign and domestic, are trying to crush Irish Nationhood, and there is no reason why any defense should be forwarded in defense of any amusement organisers, who favour English filth, Saxon rottenness, foreign dances, vile practices or any shady importation."<sup>9</sup> To many, Ireland was an island besieged, if no longer by British troops, by their music, language and loose morals. Nevertheless, jazz thrived in dance halls, cinema, on the private gramophone and even appeared through the largely state controlled medium of Irish radio, continually upsetting efforts to remake Ireland as an exclusively Gaelic state.

### **The Church, the Gaelic League, and Jazz**

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<sup>9</sup> "Objection to Jazz." Connaught Telegraph 16 Mar. 1935, 2.

Though their motives diverged, the Gaelic League and the clergy shared an alliance against jazz in Ireland. The clergy pursued jazz as a force capable of eroding public morality and, with it, clerical influence on parishioner's private lives. The Gaelic League saw jazz as a modern, commercial and distinctly un-Irish force representative of the foreign-bred cosmopolitanism and libertinism capable of unraveling the advances the Irish Ireland movement had made in resurrecting Gaelic culture. The League saw the long fought for and hard won independence of the isle as an opportunity to resurrect the cultural achievements of their Celtic ancestors and exhibit them with pride for the rest of the world to see. Jazz, undoubtedly, was not one of these achievements, but rather a modern, popular and, even more detrimentally, *foreign* import. Like the cultural guards of other nations, the Catholic Church saw the controversy over jazz as primarily an aesthetic and moral debate, but the Gaelic League saw it as a nationalist one as well. As the twenties rolled into the thirties and jazz for many critics in continental Europe had become more of a bothersome nuisance than a fundamentally threatening force, two of the most powerful institutions in post-colonial Irish life—the Church and the Gaelic League—kept the fire burning on the anti-jazz torch. Their anti-jazz agitations had influence in communities, courtrooms and even the Dail, but ultimately their campaign was unsuccessful.

Among the clergy, perhaps the loudest and most persistent Irish cleric who condemned jazz was Reverend P. Conefry, who claimed that a gang of anti-god Bolsheviks had created jazz in Central Africa and conspiratorially exported it as a way to demolish morality and religion throughout the world.<sup>10</sup> Conefry was indiscriminating in his campaign against jazz, which he pegged vaguely as any music which offended

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<sup>10</sup> "Campaign Against Jazz Dances." Irish Press 14 Nov. 1934, 1.

Christian decency and threatened public morality.<sup>11</sup> He directed his wrath at Irish politicians and officials whom he accused of tolerating, or even liking, the devilish music, and he called on the Irish state to enforce regulations on dance halls.<sup>12</sup> He accused the Free State of desecrating the memory of Ireland's martyrs by broadcasting jazz over Irish radio while traditional Irish music fell into ruin. He censured the de Valera administration for condoning all-night “pagan” jazz dances among the Civic Guards, the Free State’s fledgling police force, calling the servants of the state among the greatest offenders in the ongoing culture war.<sup>13</sup> He condemned fellow clergy for winking at jazz dancing among their congregations, thereby failing to act as true shepherds of their flock.<sup>14</sup>

But in the Gaelic League Conefry recognized an ally against the pagan music which he claimed posed one of the greatest threats in Irish history. Speaking to a Gaelic League committee in Longford, a small country northwest of Dublin, Conefry called on his audience of dedicated cultural nationalists to stage an uprising against the music. The committee must have identified with Conefry's hyperbole—following his address, it passed a resolution condemning jazz's infiltration of Ireland as a “national scandal” and appealed to Church and State to work together to “remedy these evils.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1933, the League formally launched a public campaign against jazz. Its call for a nationalistic defense against the music reverberated through county council meetings and town hall gatherings. At a typical town hall meeting in Dublin presided over by Irish folklorist Peadar MacFhionnlaoich, then the acting president of the League, attendants despaired that jazz dancing, jazz in the cinema and “jazz junketing” had come to define

<sup>11</sup> “What is Jazz: Priest Replies.” Irish Press 2 Feb. 1934, 8.

<sup>12</sup> “Dr. Hyde's Support.” Irish Press 2 Jan. 1934, 7.

<sup>13</sup> “Jazz Dancing: Leitrim Priest and Civic Guard Offenders.” Southern Star 17 Feb. 1934, 2.

<sup>14</sup> “Clergy and Jazz.” Irish Independent 11 Nov. 1934, 11.

<sup>15</sup> “National Protests Urged.” Irish Press 29 Nov. 1933, 16.

the decade. Ultranationalism, they said, was the only way to defend Ireland not only against jazz, but against the “internationalism” then taking over Continental Europe.<sup>16</sup> The League used the language of a cultural quarantine when discussing jazz, vowing to “drive out jazz germ” so that Irish children of the countryside could grow “in a national atmosphere” from their infancy.<sup>17</sup> If organizations like the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association did not take steps to guard their events from the infiltration of imported fox trots, it was warned, the Irish people “might as well hang their harp on the willow tree.”<sup>18</sup>

To Gaelic Leaguers jazz, the quintessential musical expression of cosmopolitanism, was not only *not* Irish, but it had the potential to debase and dilute what *was* Irish. In one representative offense, particularly sensitive listeners saw characteristics of the genre sneaking into the Free State’s national anthem. Peadar Kearney’s “The Soldier’s Song” had first been sung at political rallies and Gaelic athletic events early in the twentieth century. The Irish Volunteers, the Fenian counterpart to Ulster Volunteer loyalists, adopted the composition in the years preceding the Easter Rising, and after the rebellion of 1916 the song took its place as the anthem of the independence movement.<sup>19</sup> After the Irish Free State launched its state broadcasting system in 1926, the 2RN station orchestra played the anthem to close the evening program at 11 p.m. every night. But the orchestra was too small to play the anthem well, so station managers soon resorted to broadcasting a version recorded by New York’s Fighting 69<sup>th</sup> Irish Brigade. Listeners criticized the record for diluting the anthem with an American, jazz time feel. Such

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<sup>16</sup> “The Anti-Jazz Campaign.” *Connaught Telegraph* 20 Jan. 1934, 2.

<sup>17</sup> “New Movement Launched.” *Irish Press* 13 Nov. 1933, 2.

<sup>18</sup> “Gaels Press Ban on Imported Dances.” *Irish Press* 19 Dec. 1931, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Maurice Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting* (Dublin: Radio Telefis Eireann, 1967), 128.

criticisms were even echoed in the Dail, Ireland's parliament. Dail member Richard Corish, a labour party representative from Wexford, objected to “the ridicule into which” he said the Dublin station subjected the national anthem to night after night by playing it “through the medium of tin-can music” at a tempo which “is something like that of jazz music.”<sup>20</sup> At a Gaelic Athletic Association meeting in Ulster, outraged observers reported that jazz bands playing all night at dance halls lured patrons of nearby Gaelic events into dance halls, and then closed their sets with 5 a.m. renditions of the “Soldier's Song.” The infiltration of the national anthem by jazz rhythms was symbolic of a foreign attack on Irish nationalism.

But what in jazz provoked Gaelic Leaguers to frame the music as a nationalist threat and instinctively withdraw into a protective cocoon of ultranationalism? Above all the other characteristics ascribed to jazz by its critics—that it was mechanical, primitive, infuriating noise—the Gaelic League most immediately saw the genre as foreign. Through its complex (and to some sinister and mysterious) origins and convoluted passage to Ireland, jazz had acquired just enough cosmopolitanism as to be threatening. Irish writer Edward Plunkett, or Lord Dunsany, spoke of jazz as the ultimate other in a 1937 radio broadcast, saying, “Jazz I should hope to be able to avoid, because I should give preference to all the old Irish tunes over any crude tune of foreign origin. When we want simple music, why go to foreign sources when we have our own folk songs? Not only is jazz foreign, being African in origin, but it comes to us debased by Trans-Atlantic cities.”<sup>21</sup> For others, listening to jazz betrayed aspirations toward a more British or Continental lifestyle, a mindset that one observer termed as “the West British shoneen

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<sup>20</sup> Dail Debates 15 May 1935, lines 1031-1032.

<sup>21</sup> “American Music 'Debased': Lord Dunsany on Jazz.” Sunday Independent 17 Jan. 1937, 2.

mentality.”<sup>22</sup> Under the ultranationalist framework advanced by the Gaelic League, a jazz enthusiast was not just someone with poor aesthetic judgment—as critics of jazz throughout Europe supposed—but a traitor to Ireland’s cultural heritage. For jazz fans, presumably, the music’s un-Irishness was part of the fun. But for those who wanted to turn Ireland’s culture inward, jazz had picked up diverse musical influences on an international journey and threatened to dump all of them in a convoluted heap of alien inspiration on Ireland’s listening public.

### The Jazz Dance

Both the Gaelic League and the Church fixated on one particular expression of jazz—dancing. For both institutions, the confluence of young people at social dances offered both threats and opportunities. For the Church, the unsupervised community dance and the dance hall were hotbeds of opportunity for promiscuity and drinking, but they were also a venue where clergy could serve as chaperones, extending their authority outside the church by volunteering to keep a watchful eye on the restless young. For the Gaelic League, dances held by the organization were one of the key methods of attracting new, primarily young, members to become involved in the group and interested in their Gaelic heritage. To both institutions, then, the unsupervised jazz dance had the potential to undermine their authority. But despite their campaigns against the genre, jazz dancing took a firm hold in Ireland after the Great War and its popularity was lasting over the next decade.<sup>23</sup>

In response to the all-night jazz dances they saw as a national disgrace to the Irish

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<sup>22</sup> “Lecturer Defines Jazz.” *Irish Press* 20 Jan. 1934, 7.

<sup>23</sup> “Swan Song of Modern America.” *Irish Independent* 25 July 1924, 6.

people and a threat to Irish cultural nationalism, committed members of the Gaelic League proposed fighting fire with fire. Only with a fierce revival of Irish traditional dance, they said, would young people and jazz fiends be persuaded to leave the music hall for the *ceilidhe*. The League's campaign against jazz dancing resonated with others who sympathized with the Gaelic music revival—music festivals hosted Irish stepdancing contests and educational reformers attempted to strengthen traditional dance instruction in the school system by sending out dance instructors to tour the schools. The Irish Dancing Commission took the step of banning non-Irish dances from their events, even though its intolerance was a boon to other dancing competitions which welcomed the popularity jazz dances brought with them.<sup>24</sup> In 1934, the Irish Dancing Teachers' Association, a professional offshoot of the Irish Dancing Commission, voted to condemn jazz dancing, and vowed to adopt the teaching of Irish dancing as “the most practical method of ostracising jazz.”<sup>25</sup> Proponents of traditional dance claimed that jazz dancing had reached such heights of popularity not because of musical merit or technical skill, but because it was easy to learn. Enabling dancers to master the steps of traditional Irish dance, they said, would empty their minds of jazz nonsense.<sup>26</sup>

The Church and Gaelic League's war on jazz dancing was two pronged. While enlisting the help of music festivals, dance instructors and dance associations to advance the popularity of traditional music and dancing through one campaign, they sought to demonize profiteers of jazz with another. In particular, clerics and Gaelic Leaguers reproached dance hall owners for profiting off what they saw as the demoralization of the people and infection of the national spirit. As opposed to elsewhere in continental Europe

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<sup>24</sup> “Dancing Contests at Father Mathew Feis.” Irish Press 24 April 1935, 2.

<sup>25</sup> “Teachers and Jazz.” Irish Press 8 Jan. 1934, 8.

<sup>26</sup> “Jazz Dancing: How to Combat it Successfully.” Irish Independent 13 June 1932, 9.

where dance halls were frowned upon with little substantive methods of getting rid of them, in Ireland, where the new state was so indebted to both the Catholic Church and the Gaelic revival movement, the campaign against jazz found legislative support. Eamon de Valera, who replaced W.T. Cosgrave in 1932 as president of the executive council and set about entrenching and reinforcing Ireland's already conservative policies toward divorce, contraception, and literary, cinematic and musical entertainment, lent the Dail's power to the campaign against jazz with the Public Dance Hall Act of 1935. Under the legislation, anyone seeking to hold a dance had to make their intention clear through a public advertisement, often in the newspapers, and petition a judge who could grant or refuse licenses for dancing, as well as decide how late dances were allowed to go.<sup>27</sup> Judges based their decisions on wide and fluctuating criteria, including whether the dance would be supervised by a clergymen, what type of music was to be played, the personal character of the license applicant, the suitability of the venue, the prevalence of other dances in the same area, whether the surrounding area had suitable coverage by police, and the likely age of patrons. The act aimed to curb the proliferation of the dance halls which the church feared as centers of scandal and the Gaelic League viewed as entry points of cultural infestation.

In the next few years after the law was implemented, the flaws of the act became abundantly clear to a wide variety of groups affected by the legislation, including musicians, dance sponsors, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League itself. Empirically, the legislation had failed to curb the growth of dance halls throughout the country. Since the Dance Halls Act put licensing of dances at the mercy of the prejudices of individual judges, some districts were completely devoid of dances of any type while

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<sup>27</sup> “Dance Ban Appeal” Irish Press October 2, 1935, 7.

others were liberally spotted by dance halls. The Irish Federation of Dance Musicians pleaded with judges to apply a more standard criteria of granting licenses, instead of acting according to their own caprice.<sup>28</sup> Even the Gaelic League found fault with the law through an unexpected consequence—since many judges made it a condition of granting a dance license that no one under eighteen should be admitted, the League found itself deprived of a critical tool to reach the younger population through its own *ceilidhthe*.<sup>29</sup>

Most critically for those interested in preserving Gaelic music as an organic, communal phenomenon, the law had the unfortunate consequence of further commercializing music in the public sphere. Because legally hosting a dance now required the trouble of applying for a license, hosts of dances were now more likely to hold dances primarily to turn a profit. Traditionally, rural dances had been free of admission, with a hat passed around for the benefit of musicians, but now, according to the *Connaught Telegraph*, “the man who went to the expense of securing a license for a hall was out to make the most of it.”<sup>30</sup> A law at least partially intended to protect rural musical culture from the invasion of dance halls had instead turned organic communal dances into vested commercial interests. Furthermore, the uneven distribution of dance halls throughout the countryside encouraged Irish youth to flee to towns and districts more likely to have amusement, contributing to the deterioration of rural communal life.<sup>31</sup>

## Jazz Lives

Despite the alliance of the Gaelic League with church and state to stop the spread

<sup>28</sup> “The Law on Public Dancing: Musicians' Viewpoint.” *Irish Independent* October 28, 1938, p 12.

<sup>29</sup> “Dance Halls Act Condemned.” *Irish Press* 28, October, 1935, p 5.

<sup>30</sup> “The Dance Halls: Justice's Remarks.” *Connaught Telegraph* 15, January 1938, p 8.

<sup>31</sup> “Dance Halls Act Termed Failure.” *Irish Press* 20 Nov. 1939, 3.

of jazz, the music continued to seep out of dance halls, radios and gramophones and irrevocably lay a claim in Irish culture. As early as 1932, the *Irish Times* had proclaimed, “After many false alarms, the reign of ‘jazz’ seems positively to be drawing to an end. Nobody will shed tears. The generation—in this sense a generation of dancers—that saw it born has wearied of it, and the new generation appears to lack the pathological condition that is needed for its understanding.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, a reader of the *Irish Independent*, complaining of jazz broadcast on the radio, claimed that the music had already “lost most of its vogue” in Continental Europe and that Irish jigs and reels would long outlast jazz’s fleeting popularity.<sup>33</sup> The *Irish Independent* itself hailed the death of jazz as “the beginning of a greater dignity throughout our national life.”<sup>34</sup>

Yet the popularity of jazz belied critics' eagerness to ring its death knell, and despite the best efforts of opponents like the Gaelic League and Father Conefry, jazz thrived. Music instructors bemoaned that jazz records were the first to leave the shelves at music depots,<sup>35</sup> and music aficionados fantasized at the prospect of erecting a cinema house which played refined music rather than jazz, despite recognizing such a theater's dire prospects of turning a profit.<sup>36</sup> Even Dublin newspaper music critic H.R. White, who devoted great portions of his columns to detailing the aesthetic deficiencies of jazz, admitted after being spotted by a friend listening to a jazz record in a music shop, “The truth is, I can enjoy jazz when I am in a jazz humour.”<sup>37</sup>

Jazz even infiltrated the very dances and gatherings intended to shape a new Irish

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<sup>32</sup> “Dance Music.” *Irish Times* 18 Feb. 1932, 6.

<sup>33</sup> “Jazz or Jigs?” *Irish Independent* 26 May 1928, 13.

<sup>34</sup> “The Dance War.” *Irish Independent* 20 Oct. 1925, 8.

<sup>35</sup> “Lecture on Music.” *Munster Express* 7 Nov. 1930, 6.

<sup>36</sup> H.R.W. “The Music Tangle.” *Sunday Independent* 8 Jan. 1928, 9.

<sup>37</sup> H.R.W. “Hypocrisy in Music.” *Sunday Independent* 13 Feb. 1927, 5.

citizenry in a properly Irish mold. Members of the Gaelic Athletic Association, which predated the Gaelic League but mimicked its cultural nationalism, were among those guilty of succumbing to the seduction of the new music. Its more hard-line members appealed to the organization to “cut out the Jazz or Bunny Hugs” at G.A.A. dances and enforce the statute in its rule book which stated that “any council or club organising any entertainment where foreign dances are allowed will be suspended for four weeks.”<sup>38</sup> The G.A.A.’s dances, it seemed, had strayed from the Irish Ireland line, ironically for an association which threatened to expel any members who so much as attended a foreign sporting event. At one Gaelic League meeting in Manorhamilton in Leitrim County, Gaelic League members accused the G.A.A. of being “among the greatest exponents of jazz dancing” by holding dances where “not one Irish item appeared on the programme.”<sup>39</sup> Jazz, it seemed, was threatening to tear the Irish Ireland movement in two, sparking a finger pointing war between the two largest cultural nationalist associations in the country and between those nationalists and politicians whom they accused of tolerating jazz.

Undoubtedly, one source of jazz's resilience was the evasive broadness of its label. As any war must have an identifiable enemy, imagined or otherwise, opponents of jazz struggled to define the genre they found so odious. Those who opposed the efforts of the Gaelic League and the clergy to drive jazz out of Ireland challenged the crusaders to define precisely what it was they were crusading against. As one Dublin resident wrote to the *Irish Press*, “If the Gaelic Culture exponents can: 1) define jazz and 2) show that it

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<sup>38</sup> “The G.A.A. and Irish Dancing.” *Meath Chronicle* 5 Dec. 1931, 6.

<sup>39</sup> “G.A.A. and Jazz: Criticism at Gaelic League Meeting.” *Irish Press* 20 Feb. 1934, 5.

has a harmful effect on the national character, they will have justified themselves.”<sup>40</sup> But defining jazz was a struggle. After the Gaelic League passed a resolution condemning jazz broadcasts from Radio Eireann’s Athlone station, local officials ventured possible definitions of the genre. One member of the Board of Health for Sligo County defined jazz as “a combination of sounds supposed to be an agreeable noise to which there is neither head nor tail.” A member of the Wexford County Council suggested that jazz was “dancing gone Bolshevik.”<sup>41</sup> Some said they simply did not know.<sup>42</sup>

The uncertainty with which its enemies attempted to identify jazz was a source of resilience for the music. Aloys Fleischmann, a music lecturer and Cork art music staple throughout the 1930s and 1940s, once suggested that “If jazz were turned into literature I do not think a page of it would be allowed by the Censorship Board.”<sup>43</sup> Drawing a line between the obscene and the appropriate in music was a difficult endeavor. Jazz was not entirely verbal or visual, and censors could not strike out an improvised horn line as surely as they could cut a sensual scene from a film or novel.

But the broader and more important reason for the ultimate failure of the campaign against jazz was the fact that the hold religion and cultural nationalism held on the Irish and their society was incomplete and constantly challenged by influences from abroad. Irish cultural historian Martin McLoone has eloquently described the gulf between Ireland’s official Catholic and Gaelic rhetoric and the leisure preferences of its population. Despite censorship efforts and the hard-line prudery of the state, he writes, “[T]he Irish people still attended the cinema in great numbers, the young still listened to

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<sup>40</sup> “Jazz Controversy.” Irish Press 18 Jan. 1934, 6.

<sup>41</sup> “Support for Gaelic League: Public Bodies and Jazz.” Irish Independent 25 Jan. 1934, 10.

<sup>42</sup> “What is Jazz?” Connacht Tribune 10 Feb. 1934, 7.

<sup>43</sup> “If Made Into Literature: A Music Professor’s Comments.” Irish Press 14 May 1936, 6.

popular dance music on the radio and went to dance halls...They did so in the face of continuous clerical and other official disapproval. Herein lies one of the conundrums of Irish-Ireland culture. There was often a great disparity between the image and the reality of Catholic Ireland—a popular hypocrisy at the heart of a seemingly solid consensus.”<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, while music critics ranted against jazz, Gaelic leaguers condemned it and Dail members wrung their hands, it is clear the dance continued. Not only does the persistence of jazz illuminate, as McLoone notes, a gulf between Ireland’s reigning national rhetoric and the practices of its people, but it provides further proof of the transgressions of a fiercely Catholic people against their confessors and the affinity a population most often depicted as culturally homogenous, complaisant and reactionary showed toward the cosmopolitanism and modernity changing continental Europe. It is true that both the Church and the Gaelic League leveraged their pre-revolutionary influence into concrete claims on the cultural policymaking of the Free State. But while historians have over and over again emphasized the exceptional conservatism of postcolonial Ireland, history has paid less attention to the ultimate failure of the Church, the Gaelic League and governmental influence of the Censorship Board or the Dance Halls Act to keep 20th century European culture out of Ireland. As long as radio waves, films, books and records crossed Ireland's borders, the country was bound to join the rest of Europe in adopting an increasingly modern, cosmopolitan and ultimately Americanized culture.

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<sup>44</sup> Martin McLoone, *Irish Film* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 30.

## Conclusion

In his cultural survey of post-colonial Ireland, Irish historian Terence Brown described the first decades of the Irish Free State as a bastion of cultural protectionism that, desperate to revive the Gaelic language and traditions while preventing the corrupting influence of Anglicization, precipitated a “tendency to venerate national life at the expense of individual expression,” resulting in an artistically smothering and “highly prescriptive sense of Irish identity.”<sup>1</sup> Brown makes it clear in his analysis of Irish cultural history that very few voices, with the exception of Yeats and other Anglo-Irish intellectuals, protested against a climate that denounced all literary and cinematic topics not properly concerned with Catholicism, Gaelic nationalism and the Irish landscape as un-Irish, and thus not worth the attention of Ireland’s population.

The social and cultural conservatism of the Irish Free State has become a commonplace adage of Irish history, yet a look at the musical history of the 1920s and 1930s demonstrates that Ireland was not the immovably reactionary cultural island it has often been portrayed as. The economic, cultural and social conservatism that characterized the Irish Free State in its early years faltered as the modernization of the twentieth century seeped through the cracks of the state’s protectionist bulwarks. Radio, records and film fueled a growing affinity toward Europe and American musical trends that contributed to the opening of Ireland to the consumerism of the international marketplace, allowing diverse and un-Irish influences to contribute to independent

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<sup>1</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: Fontana Press, 1985) 63.

Ireland's cultural making.

Under a cultural framework that idolized a narrow prescription of Irish identity, modernism could not only represent the obscene, but the unpatriotic. Yet, as the preceding chapters demonstrated, the Irish people repeatedly availed themselves of musical entertainment outside the traditional Irish mode. It may be a reach to conclude that the Irish men and women who preferred to dance to jazz or listen in to the BBC were engaging in active rebellion against the Gaelic League's efforts to shape Ireland in an essentialist Gaelic mold, but at the very least such musical phenomenon demonstrate that significant portions of the population did not wholeheartedly subscribe to Gaelic cultural revivalists vision of what constituted a proper national identity for independent Ireland.

Furthermore, examining musical movements in the early decades of the Irish Free State and how those trends interacted with the unique historical problems of a newly independent state sheds some light on the relationship between music and nation building. Because historical actors like the Gaelic League attempted to use music as one of several tools to form an imagined community, the examination of the reception of certain genres and the rejection of others can help reveal the value system of that particular historical moment. Societies and nations have used cultural objects like music to better define themselves through the praise of cultural movements that most mirror their values and the rejection of those which threaten to distort them. The historical study of music can offer the historian multiple and at times conflicting entry points into various approaches to constructing the imagined cultural communities of a new nation.

By intertwining Irish traditional music so fully in their vision of an independent Ireland, supporters of an Irish Ireland received foreign musical invasions as attacks on the

nation itself. The failure of traditionalists to protect Irish listeners from the foreign popular tunes of interbellum Europe and America was a failure to seize the opportunity of political independence to secure cultural isolationism. And, conversely, the willingness of Irish listeners to continue their jazz dances in the face of stern disapproval can be read as a willingness to expose Ireland to the global cultural market. Further complicating efforts to build an Irish Ireland was the fact that the pastoral Gaelic rural community Irish Irelanders sought to resurrect had long succumbed to emigration and Anglicization, and the revival of cultural artifacts absent their authentic historical contexts made efforts to revive that community artificial and ultimately unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, the appropriation of music in competing visions of Ireland—that of a self-sufficient, pastoral, Catholic and Gaelic nation and that of a modern European one willing to partake in the cultural exchange of the international marketplace—sheds light on how the cultural arena became an essential battleground in the formation of national identities. Particularly as technological developments like broadcasting and the phonograph radically reshaped how people encountered and listened to music, listeners in newly independent Ireland were forced to repeatedly reexamine themselves and Irish culture in comparison to the onslaught of films, songs and fashions from abroad.

In 1959, Sean Lemass replaced de Valera as Ireland's prime minister, and through economic reform more liberally opened Ireland to investment and trade. Ireland's rapid economic development, population growth, and the resulting emergence of the "Celtic tiger" at the end of the twentieth century was at least in part due to an aggressive commodification of Irish heritage as an export and the successful marketing of Ireland's landscape as a tourist beacon. Ireland's tourist industry, built on commercialized but

heartfelt presentations of Irish heritage, created a space where historical memory and popular culture, including music, collided.

While to critics the heritage industry cheapened Ireland's history and landscape, it also helped move the country into a period of economic robustness and modernity. This rise of commercialization of Celtic heritage—including a disastrous run at a 200-acre Great Famine themed park in Limerick—also interestingly coincided with a period of rapprochement in which the Irish, in R.F. Foster's words, “were groping towards some sort of accommodation with each other.”<sup>2</sup> While simplistic in its representations of the past, the heritage industry has for some observers contributed to a tentative reconciliation in a historically sectarian culture, perhaps by creating arenas for shared, mutual commiseration.

Music, particularly the resurrection of traditional song in a variety of popular forms, played an indispensable part in this revival. Fueling Ireland's newfound momentum on the international stage were generations of Irish musicians who had both commercial and critical success in Ireland and abroad—first the Dubliners, Chieftains, Wolfe Tones, Planxty and the Both Band, all who reinvigorated interest in Irish folk music among Irish youth, and then Van Morrison, U2, Sinead O'Connor, the Cranberries, Stiff Little Fingers and the Pogues, who blended Irish musical idioms with the language of rock, punk, blues and jazz. Like the heritage industry, this renaissance of Irish musical talent created shared nonsectarian spaces, particularly in Belfast, where Protestant and Catholic rivalries had sustained an immediate level of hate and violence that had long receded to the background in the South.<sup>3</sup> Just as the same Irish air likely meant much different things to

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<sup>2</sup> R.F. Foster *The Irish Story* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> i.e. see May McCann's study on “The Folk Revival in Belfast” and Martin McLoone's analysis of

a Gaelic Leaguer in the countryside or a Feis competitor in postcolonial Dublin than to the members of the Dubliners performing it on Radio Telefis Eireann half a century later, those tunes also likely shed sectarian weight as time progressed.

As McLoone and other historians have noted, Ireland's increasing economic interdependence with the U.S. and Europe is a far cry from the "notion of 'frugal self-sufficiency'" that drove the de Valera administration's economic and cultural policies.<sup>4</sup> Ireland's cultural revival of the 1960s and beyond was perhaps a much more commercial and culturally fluid phenomenon than that hoped for by pre-independence Gaelic revivalists, but it was also the logical conclusion for a country which had assertively and adaptively defined itself to the outside world through its musical traditions. The Irish people—the musicians and their fans at home and throughout the diaspora—played the decisive role in Ireland's musical revival, not the state, contributing to the gradual erosion of monolithic conservatism that had defined the independent Irish state for most of its existence. The international cultural framework which at once encompassed the ballads of Tommy Makem and the insubordinate anthems of Jake Burns was at best a compromised vision of nationalists' hopes for an insular and untarnished Irish Ireland, but it also substantiated what was to many the long-held but at times hollow claim to exceptional musical talent among the Irish people.

As Ireland exported its culture in exchange for inward investment, it opened itself up to more than just economic or political alliances within the newfound European community. With this growth came cultural mediums harder to contain. Radio Eireann bred Radio Telefis Eireann, a transformation that Irish theater critic Gabriel Fallon

<sup>4</sup> "Punk Music in Northern Ireland: The Political Power of 'What Might Have Been.'"

Martin McLoone *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 184.

likened to “a canal boat” suddenly turning “into some huge atomic battleship.”<sup>5</sup> In the place of the long-held fear of Anglicization was now Americanization, which had planted seedlings of cultural invasion with jazz but now had the force of an increasingly Americanized postwar Western hemisphere behind it. But like Al Jolson in the *Jazz Singer*, the next generation of Irish was able to reconcile their musical heritage with a love for modern American music, turning what the Gaelic League had perceived as a dangerous dichotomy into a lucrative hybrid of sound.

The two decades after the establishment of the Free State served as a crucial time of negotiation over Ireland's national identity, and set up the dichotomy between insular conservatism and outward-looking cosmopolitanism that would frame nearly every cultural debate in Ireland over the next century. Through each phase of globalization and modernization Ireland's writers and politicians renewed the same debate that had haunted the Free State after the Great War, repeatedly negotiating what it meant to be Irish and what Ireland would stand for in an era where national boundaries meant less and let more in. Irish society in the 21st century has found itself struggling to retain a unique Irish identity while simultaneously seeking validation in an increasingly Americanized world, just as it had when the jazz germ infected the Irish ear nearly a century before. Through each stage of postcolonial Ireland's cultural development, music has served as an essential tool in those debates.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Pine *2RN and the Origins of Irish Radio* (Dublin: Radio Telefis Eireann, 2002), 5.

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