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Use and Function as an Analytical Tool in Traditional Music Research

In common with those attempting to study other oral, non-literate traditions, students of Irish traditional music are faced with the dilemma that they must rely on the accounts of those who were, for the most part, non-participant in that tradition in any attempt to piece together any coherent history or ethnology.

In other writings I have suggested that it might be useful to characterise the type of involvement of the groups of people that I will discuss here as “secondary users”.

In essence this is an attempt to separate them from primary users, who in the case of Ireland are essentially the musicians singers and dancers, from those who collect, publish, and comment on, that music song and dance...the secondary users.

As usual, of course, it's not quite as simple as that, and there have been many examples of those who have been simultaneously or sequentially both primary and secondary users. This last state of affairs has become much more common...almost to the stage of normality in recent years (just look around

you at this conference!) but in fact was also in evidence in the earliest phase of secondary usage.

It is tempting to try to put all this in an historical perspective, and in fact it can be a useful framework on which to hang the facts/observations, but one interesting trend that emerged during this research was that there is not a coherent evolution of types of secondary usage in an historical sense.

One of the factors that made this last point more evident was the way in which an analysis of use and function showed up the similarities and differences between the two groups.

I'm assuming here that my listeners are familiar with the concepts of use and function as proposed by Merriam, but its probably useful to recap the basics here.

Merriam proposed that a helpful way of looking at music in society was to examine its use, by which he meant the occasions at which music was played, and its function, by which he meant the reasons why the music was played.

USE and FUNCTION

LIVE PERFORMANCE

IN PUBLIC SPACE-CONCERTS,
FESTIVALS

IN PRIVATE SPACE-SOCIAL
GATHERINGS

IN RITUAL SPACE-WORSHIP

RECORDED PERFORMANCE

ON HARD COPY-CDS, DMPS

ON-LINE

PUBLIC PERFORMANCE OF
RECORDED MUSIC-CLUBS, DISCOS

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT

ENTERTAINMENT

COMMUNICATION

SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

PHYSICAL RESPONSE

ENFORCING CONFORMITY TO SOCIAL
NORMS

VALIDATION OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS
AND RELIGIOUS RITUALS

CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONTINUITY AND
STABILITY OF SOCIETY

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATION OF
SOCIETY

The uses on the left hand side, are ones which might commonly apply to all music in our contemporary society, but the functions, on the right, are the ten main ones that Merriam himself listed as being more generally applicable to music world wide. There are not definitive lists of use and function, and I hope to point out that several important ones in the Irish context are missing from this list.

The secondary users that I'm going to look at are essentially those people who , if you like "took an interest in" Irish music, while at the same time not being part of the core group of performers. Or since there is no such thing as a

definitive statement in this field of research, rarely being part of this core group...or primary users as I'm calling them here.

To begin, I'm going to use the historical framework as a way of introducing the different groups of secondary users. When sketching out this paper, I had originally thought of four groups, and had put tentative dates on them, but I eventually added a fifth and sixth, and would be open to including more if necessary. I also realised that attempting to date them was possibly a foolish and deceptive move, largely due to the degree of overlap between them. The five groups are, and I must stress that these are my definitions;

1/ The Antiquarians

2/ The Collectors

3/ The Cultural Nationalists

4/ The Revivalists

5/ The Educationalists

6/ The Academics

I intend to look at these groups, and as I go on it will become obvious that the boundaries between them are extremely blurred. It is my intention to use the application of use and function as a means of re-establishing a focus.

I should also add here that probably the most important and definitive difference between these groups of secondary users and the primary users that

they involve themselves with is that although they are dealing with an oral non-literate tradition, they are without exception literate and musically literate themselves.

The Antiquarians...are part of a European wide movement which began in the 18th century to take an interest in the non-literate culture of their own societies. As such they were essentially interested in what they saw as ancient aspects of that culture.

Of overriding importance in initiating this interest was the publication in 1760 by the Scot, McPherson, of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* which purported to be the work of the mythical figure Ossian, but in fact were largely his own work which drew heavily on the texts of gaelic *laoithe* or *lays* from the oral tradition common to Ireland and Scotland. In the Irish context important people in this group include Charlotte Brooke, Joseph Cooper Walker, and of course Edward Bunting. This group, although they overlap with others, most obviously the Collectors, are distinguished by their almost total lack of interest in what we now consider to be the core of our studies...the dance music tradition.

The Collectors, on the other hand are characterised by their interest in the dance music tradition, and, from the historical perspective are widely spread. If we include the Neal publication of 1724, then this activity continues from then

to the present with important collections being made constantly throughout the period. Seminal figures to consider in this group are, O'Farrel, Jackson, Clinton, Joyce, Petrie, Goodman, O'Neill, most of them published, and the possibly greater body of work from which many of them drew, the work of the many largely unpublished collectors such as Pigot and Forde. It could be argued that collection was the core activity of the whole body of secondary users. What distinguishes them is the use to which they put, or hoped to put their collections.

The Cultural nationalists...are possibly the most clearly defined group here discussed. Their motivation was purely political, attempting to reinforce a particular political viewpoint by association with elements of traditional music. In this instance, lyrics were more obviously important, but they used traditional airs, and others composed in the same manner as a means of associating their ideas with popular culture. The most important people in this group are those associated with the Young Irelander movement which was founded in 1842. Two publications associated with them are of significance, "The Nation" which was the movement's newspaper, and the song book "The Spirit of the Nation" first published in 1845.

Thomas Davis is probably the best known figure.

The Revivalists...this group are fairly clearly divided on an historical basis into those associated with the gaelic revival of the late nineteenth century, and a later group associated with the folk revival of the mid 20th century. What unites them is that one of their main aims was to prevent what they saw as a serious decline in the music song and dance tradition.

The Educationalists...are a very diverse group, both historically and in that they overlap with almost all the other groups in some way. We must include here all parties who had a didactic element in their activities. Among published works again we find two periods of activity. Charles Egan's Harp Primer of 1729 is by far the earliest example. Other early examples are all concerned with the uilleann pipes, though not necessarily under that name, and include Geoghegan, in 1745, O'Farrel in 1804, and Colclough c1810. There is a large gap then until the host of publications associated with the 20th century revival period which continue unabated until the present.

It would be mistake however in this instance to rely purely on published works as an indication of didactic activity associated with the tradition. The seminal importance of the dancing master in establishing the dance music tradition as the core of Irish traditional music is all too easily overlooked.

The Academics...are rather more easily defined although seeming initially to be in the same group as educationalists. It is their involvement with an institution which sets them apart, but even more characteristic is their tertiary position, (my terminology) in that in many instances their focus of attention is the group of secondary users . In simpler terms, they are studying the students.

I'm suggesting in this paper that one of the ways we can begin to make sense of this complex area is to examine it in light of the anthropological terms, use and function.

I've already given an outline of these terms and their use, but I want to recap at this stage before I proceed to see what can be learned from the use of this tool.

In Merriam's words :

*"Use" then refers to the situation in which music is employed in human action;
"function" concerns the reason for its employment and particularly the broader purpose which it serves.*

Lets look again at use and function with more direct application to Irish traditional music.

USE and FUNCTION

OUTDOOR DANCING

INDOOR DANCING

DANCING CLASSES

PRIVATE SOCIAL USES

LULLABIES

WORK SONGS

RAMBLING/CEILIDHING

PERFORMANCE UNDER

PATRONAGE

PUBLIC SOCIAL USES

WEDDINGS

WAKES/FUNERALS

PATTERNS

FAIRS

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT

ENTERTAINMENT

COMMUNICATION

SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

PHYSICAL RESPONSE

ENFORCING CONFORMITY TO

SOCIAL NORMS

VALIDATION OF SOCIAL

INSTITUTIONS AND RELIGIOUS

RITUALS

CONTRIBUTION TO THE

CONTINUITY AND STABILITY OF

SOCIETY

INTEGRATION OF SOCIETY

ECONOMIC

EDUCATIONAL

POLITICAL

In this case I've listed uses which, although many of them will be familiar as being contemporary, are proposed as those which pertained before the advent of secondary use.

I've also added a few functions to the original ten which I think are relevant to Irish traditional music.

Using the same type of analysis, how does this listing of use and function now appear when applied to the secondary users?

USE and FUNCTION

COLLECTION
ANALYSIS
MUSIC/DANCING CLASSES
CONCERT
COMPETITION
CEILIDH DANCES

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION
AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT
ENTERTAINMENT
COMMUNICATION
SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION
PHYSICAL RESPONSE
ENFORCING CONFORMITY TO SOCIAL
NORMS
VALIDATION OF SOCIAL
INSTITUTIONS AND RELIGIOUS
RITUALS
CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONTINUITY
AND STABILITY OF SOCIETY
INTEGRATION OF SOCIETY
ECONOMIC
EDUCATIONAL
POLITICAL

Taking the secondary users as a whole, the most immediate contrast can be drawn under use. It is immediately obvious that many, and in some cases all, of the original uses disappear. But what are they replaced with? To be a user there must be a use.

What seems to be the case is that uses appear where music sound is not actually present. Thus for many of the secondary users, publication, and collection and analysis of published material form their core use. One of the few overlaps I can see is the use of dancing tuition which was a use shared by both the old dancing masters and the 19th and twentieth century revivalists.

Functions on the other hand tend to be a broader church and many are shared by both primary and secondary users.

Splitting the secondary users into the tentative groups that I've proposed we can see some of the contrasts that are made apparent.

Note that not all uses and functions are listed in each case, and I accept that arguments could be made for inclusion or exclusion in all cases.

ANTIQUARIAN USE and FUNCTION

COLLECTION

FROM MANUSCRIPT

FROM SOURCE

PUBLICATION

COMMUNICATION

CONTRIBUTION TO CONTINUITY
AND STABILITY OF SOCIETY

CONTRIBUTION TO INTEGRATION
OF SOCIETY

The most notable aspect of antiquarian use and function is the appearance, even at that early stage, of uses where music sound is not evident.

COLLECTORS USE and FUNCTION

COLLECTION
PUBLICATION

COMMUNICATION
ECONOMIC
EDUCATIONAL

NATIONALISTS USE and FUNCTION

PUBLICATION
COMPOSITION
PRIVATE PERFORMANCE
IN WHAT CONTEXT?

POLITICAL

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION
CONTRIBUTION TO THE
INTEGRATION OF SOCIETY

REVIVALIST USE and FUNCTION

COMPETITION
CLASSES
CONCERTS
CEILIDH DANCES
SET DANCE CEILIDH

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION
AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT
ENTERTAINMENT
COMMUNICATION
SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION
PHYSICAL RESPONSE
CONTRIBUTION TO THE
CONTINUITY AND STABILITY OF
SOCIETY
INTEGRATION OF SOCIETY
EDUCATIONAL
POLITICAL

EDUCATIONAL USE and FUNCTION

TUTORS
CLASSES
COMPETITION

COMMUNICATION
CONTRIBUTION TO THE
CONTINUITY AND STABILITY OF
SOCIETY
EDUCATION
ECONOMIC

ACADEMIC USE and FUNCTION

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In conclusion, I hope I have made a case for using Merriam's use and function as a tool to help in our understanding of how Irish traditional music has evolved under influences both from within and from outside the tradition, and how these influences have contributed to its continuing evolution. I also hope that I have shown that the historical context, while useful in an initial laying out of the material, can be deceptive in the final analysis, which shows that essentially identical activities have occurred at the very beginning, and re-occurred at the very end of the period in question.

