HUP! 1

The Presence of Virtuosity in Irish Traditional Music

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ABSTRACT
In April 2013, I designed a research project to explore connections between classical flute playing and Irish traditional music. I hoped to discover if learning traditional flute and understanding its surrounding musical culture could positively affect my classical flute studies. The information I collected provided the basis for this paper, in which several parameters for the term “virtuosity” are defined and analyzed in relation to Irish traditional instrumental music. These parameters were chosen using articles from scholarly journals that examine characteristics of virtuosity beyond exceptional technical facility. Such characteristics include a performer’s emotional impact, musical creativity, and the ability to think critically about his or her music. Additional aspects of virtuosity that were considered were: recognition from others in the field of Irish traditional music; the presence of competition; the dedication necessary to be considered an authority capable of expanding the musical style; and the performance longevity as an individual or group to influence the genre for an extended period of time.

Virtuosity was first defined toward the end of the seventeenth century as an excess of natural proficiency that sets one apart from others in his or her field. A standard definition today is “great ability or skill shown by a musician, performer, etc.” This explanation implies dazzling mastery of one’s instrument and thrilling spontaneity in performance. A commonly held belief is that technical prowess is the only factor taken into account. Some elements of Irish music fit the narrow confines of this idea, while others demonstrate consistency, stability, and resilience of a musical genre or performer over time. Such traits might be viewed as contradictory to virtuosity, if one acknowledges only the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition, but virtuosity has been analyzed through many lenses. Upon deeper investigation, it becomes evident that Irish music possesses not only the “pyrotechnics” suggested by the basic definition, but also other characteristics that are essential to a multilayered understanding of the concept of virtuosity.

Examining diverse aspects of music and performance will help to construct a more holistic view of virtuosity. For example, the basic description above may be expanded to

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1 “Hup” is often used to indicate an upcoming transition from the current tune into another. Other players either are familiar with the new tune and join in after the first few notes, or don’t, and wait for the next tune or set.
2 Marc Pincherle. “Virtuosity,”
include personal style and “meaning-making.” Vernon A. Howard presents the idea that virtuosic performances are interpretive realizations. They do not merely reproduce previous renditions of a work but require individual creativity and convey emotion. He asserts that a performer must have the ability to think critically about music. The performer should understand the background and tradition within the genre, and should be able to explain how and why he or she produces music in a particular manner. Howard also establishes that to be considered a virtuoso, a performer or group needs recognition from an audience “comprised not only of…spectators, but also critics, colleagues, and institutions that judge the quality of performances and performers in the relevant domain.”

Like Howard, author Marc Pincherle considers competition and virtuosity to be natural companions. He also poses the idea that virtuosì are influential to the musical tradition in which they perform, stating, “Music is indebted to virtuosì and improvisation.” He believes that the title “virtuoso” carries a responsibility to advance and expand a musical genre, requiring that the musician so titled be considered an authority in his or her field. This position is attained with dedication and time. Piano virtuoso Jeremy Denk addresses the need for both when he discusses attention to detail and commitment in players who are considered virtuosì. Classical voice professor Louise Toppin names “staying power” as a necessary characteristic of virtuosity. She defines this as a career of a performer or group with consistent performing engagements over an extended period of time. Each of these criteria for virtuosity will be assessed to determine its relationship to Irish traditional instrumental music, also referred to as “ITM” or “trad.”

Before exploring ITM in relation to the parameters for virtuosity outlined above, it would be beneficial to have some insight into its essential components. For example, ITM and Irish dance are closely linked. This means that steady rhythm is crucial.

Having good dancers to play for was vital for the band’s lift and rhythm… ‘We looked out for one good group of set dancers…and we played to [them] all evening…As long as they kept dancing, we kept playing.’

Another indispensible element is ornamentation.

The traditional tune itself operates only as a melodic outline…it is incomplete. The degree of variation and ornamentation that occurs in…performance is its defining characteristic. The execution…is heavily dependent on the skill and…imagination of the player…In this way each time a player plays a tune…it will differ very subtly from the last time.

As a mere framework for an individual performer’s interpretation, a tune would be unornamented only when played by a beginner. It is much simpler to learn the basic melody and add variations as the player improves than to try to include such elements immediately.

There are several ways to incorporate ornamentations in trad. Triplets may replace a quarter note or eighth notes, trills may be added, or a dotted quarter note may be interrupted with triple tonguing. Other variations involve slight melodic alterations, such as playing in thirds to the other musicians or using quintessentially Irish ornaments: the cut, tap, roll, and cran. A cut starts on the main melody note, goes up a step, then quickly returns to the main note. A tap is the opposite of a cut; starting on the main note, it quickly goes down a step before returning. A roll
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is cut-then-tap in quick succession. A cran
warbles, varying the quality of the main note.
Technically, it is a series of 2 or 3 cuts that
result in 5- or 7-note crans, respectively. It
takes practice to incorporate these ornaments
organically, and their use is a mark of a ca-
pable trad musician. The number and type
selected for any given tune is an indication of
the musician’s individual style.

Some critics of virtuosity cling to the idea
that it refers solely to technique, and that mu-
 sic performed by a virtuoso will be subjected
entirely to his or her whim. They argue that
the mark of a true musician lies in allowing
the composer’s essence to speak,15 rather
than impressing an audience with technical
fireworks or presenting an individual in-
terpretation. In trad, however, the common
tunes originate predominantly from dance
music and airs of seventeenth and eighteenth
century Ireland.16 Therefore, many tunes
are not associated with a specific composer.
Perhaps in such cases, a critic of virtuosity
could accept true musicianship as the ability
to allow the music’s essence to speak. Irish
traditional music has a freedom that resonates
with the desire to feel all-encompassing joy,17
but the airs possess an achingly compelling
depth that speaks to the human capacity for
longing, heartbeat, and loss.18 Trad music-
cians convey these contrasting emotions ev-
ery time they play. To apply Howard’s term,
they are “meaning-makers”19 with the ability
to evoke a response, both from an audience
and from their musical collaborators.

Trad music has a circuit of fleadhanna,
which is Irish for festivals (singular: fleadh).
These are competitions set up by Comhaltas
Ceoltóirí Éireann, an organization founded to
preserve and promote Irish culture.20 Players
and groups perform for Comhaltas-certified
judges and an audience comprised of family
members, peers, and spectators. During my
independent research project in summer
2013, I attended the County Limerick fleadh
to observe an event for solo flute players be-
tween the ages of 12 and 15. After each had
played a set,21 the two judges discussed pri-
vately to choose first, second, and third place.
They explained the criteria for placement to
the players and the audience before announc-
ing the winners. The requirement that stood
out most to me was the development of in-
dividual style. The judges stated that by age
12, a competing musician should have an
emergent personal flair that is evident to a
seasoned listener. The presence of individual
creativity in a competitive context adheres to
two of Howard’s requirements for virtuosity.

Each winner would receive a medal and
proceed to compete at the provincial level
in the Munster Fleadh. The final competition
of the year is the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann
(All-Ireland Music Festival).22 The winner
of this competition is awarded a trophy, but
more significantly, he or she gains recogni-
tion within the ITM community. Until re-
cently, anonymity was an established and ac-
cepted characteristic of Irish music, resulting
from its history as an aural tradition passed
down through generations of amateur instru-
mentalists. Performer anonymity has dimin-
ished, however, with the rise of competitive
fleadhanna, as well as the increased move-
ment of players towards professionalism.
This began around 1959 with a group called
Ceoltóiri Chualann. Established by Sean Ó
Riada, this group brought together profes-
sional trad players to perform in a semi-for-
mal context for attentive listeners.23 This
differed from trad’s previous function as mu-
sic for céili, or social dances at individuals’
homes, where the focus was predominantly
on the activity of dancing. (See Images 1 and

15  Apthorp, “The Virtuoso and the Public.”
16  O’Connor, Bringing It All Back Home: The Influence of Irish
Music, 5.
17  Grianán, The Maid of Eirin, Track 1 – Beechgrove/Silver Spear/
Hand Me Down the Tackle.
18  Eileen Ivers, Crossing the Bridge, Track 11 – The Dear Irish Boy.
19  Howard, “Virtuosity as a Performance Concept.”
20  For more information about Comhaltas, visit its website at http://
comhaltas.ie/about/
21  (Usually) three tunes played as a group, seguing directly from one
to the next.
22  For more information on the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, visit the
23  O’Connor, Bringing It All Back Home: The Influence of Irish
Music, 28.
2 for participants at a céilí and a céilí band in action.)

Ceoltóirí Chualann redefined trad to a certain extent by presenting the music as the central focus point. Ó Riada loved ITM for its sparkling vitality and the creativity of the musicians, and wanted audiences to recognize its value as an important aspect of Irish cultural heritage. His love for the spontaneity of live trad’s ornamentations, however, meant that he had no reverence for the music of the céilí bands. Although they had played an important part in keeping old repertoire of tunes alive, Ó Riada once referred to them as an “abomination...[abandoning] the whole idea of variation...of personal utterance...”24

Admittedly, a professional musician playing in a céilí band does not add variations as freely as he or she might during a session. A session is an unrehearsed, informal meeting of ITM players,25 usually in a pub or other relaxed setting. Non-participating visitors to the venue can listen closely or not at all, as they choose, because the musicians are playing for the craic: the sheer love of the music and the powerful sense of community it forges. (See Images 3 and 4 for sessions in action.) By contrast, céilí band members spend hours in rehearsal, much like orchestra members in Western classical music. They carefully plan tune sets and arrangements to determine which instruments will provide melody, drone, or rhythmic accompaniment at which times. The aim is to give those dancing the best possible experience. The resulting music is less spontaneous, less impressive from a pyrotechnical or interpretive standpoint. However, this paper aims to examine less conventional standards for virtuosity. One such characteristic, as stated in a lecture by professor Louise Toppin, is the presence of “staying power” throughout the career of a performer or group.

Céilí bands align neatly with this requirement. They have provided music for over one hundred years, and some individual groups have even been in existence for that span of time. The Kilfenora Céili Band, for example, was founded in 1907 and still plays for dances today,26 though its membership has admittedly altered. The immense appeal and endurance of such an ensemble is easily understandable. The music exudes an energy that “gives your feet a jolt,”27 even during a listening-only performance.28 I attended one such performance: a stage show (See Image 5)? similar to Ó Riada’s Ceoltóirí Chualann and the “supergroups” it inspired in the 1960s and 70s, such as the Chieftains, Planxty, and the Bothy Band.30 Although professional dancers did share the stage for some sets, exhibiting the close relationship between dance and ITM, the Kilfenora’s ability to captivate an audience demonstrates that Irish traditional music can also stand alone.

The willingness of the Kilfenora Céili Band and the “supergroups” to expand into a realm of performance beyond their established niche in ITM adheres to Pincherle’s requirement for a virtuosic player or group to contribute to a musical style in a way that advances the genre. The members of the group Planxty were notably adept at such contributions. They integrated instruments that had not previously been used in trad, such as bouzouki, mandolin, and guitar. They also incorporated asymmetric rhythms native to the Balkans region of Europe.31 Similar contributions are evident in the work of contemporary fiddler Eileen Ivers. This Irish-American fiddler player with a background in trad released a CD in 1999 called Crossing the Bridge. The musical collaboration interfaced trad tunes with music from other cultures. The new influences brought in by both Planxty and Eileen Ivers expanded Irish music.

24 Ibid, 60.
25 Players at sessions may be professional, amateur, or absolute beginners to the tradition. If a player knows even one tune, she or he will be persistently encouraged to join in.
26 Curtis, Notes from the Heart: A Celebration of Traditional Irish Music, 118.
28 Kilfenora Céili Band, 2013, Track 11 - Feargal O’Gara’s/ O’Rourke’s/Lucky In Love.
29 This is not the Kilfenora Céili Band, as photos were not permitted at that performance, but a summer show by the group in residence at the Bré Ború branch of Comhaltas in Cashel, Co. Tipperary.
30 O’Flynn, The Irishness of Irish Music, 35.
31 Ibid, 34.
32 Eileen Ivers, Crossing the Bridge, Tracks 4 and 5 – Whiskey & Sangria; Crossing the Bridge.
33 Jeremy Denk, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7qTqIWwZL8.
34 Curtis, Notes from the Heart: A Celebration of Traditional Irish Music, 112.
while allowing it to maintain its “Irishness.” Additionally, the career longevity or “staying power,” and authoritative position of these respected musicians meant that their new ideas were accepted and propagated by other players. Enrichment of a musical genre to this extent requires an understanding of the existing tradition, as well as a certain technical aptitude. These may be developed through commitment to one’s music.

Jeremy Denk, who is widely recognized as a virtuoso in the field of Western classical music, has stated that practicing is the single activity to which he devotes the majority of his time. Though Denk is endowed with natural talent, his dedication to practicing demonstrates his challenge to himself to improve. This drive requires an ability to focus and conscious attention to detail during practice sessions that, combined with a deep understanding of his music, are marks of a true virtuoso. Such qualities are similarly embodied in trad accordion player Sharon Shannon. An early teacher of hers said,

Every time I rang the Shannon house, this kid in the background was playing the accordion. If it was nine in the morning, or nine in the evening the accordion was going...that was Sharon, who was maybe ten...at the time.34

This self-motivated approach and dedication to the tradition was also evident in my personal encounters with Irish traditional musicians. With the fellowship funding my research proposal received, I had the opportunity to take trad flute lessons with talented, recognized players to gain a foundation for my overall understanding of Irish traditional music. These players, Brian and Aoife, exemplify many characteristics of virtuosity addressed thus far.

Brian, my first trad flute35 teacher, began learning tin whistle36 when he was young and later picked up the flute, which he played competitively at fleadhanna. He studied Irish language and geography at University and now has a full-time non-musical job. Though he is not a professional flute player, he teaches flute on the weekends and plays frequently “for the craic”37 at sessions with family, friends, and other members of the community. When I conversed with people in the area and mentioned that I was taking Irish flute lessons from him, musicians and non-musicians alike knew his name and nodded their approval at his skill.

My second teacher, Aoife, has been recognized by Conal Ó Gráda38 as one of a handful of flutists in the Irish tradition whose playing is influential in contemporary performance.39 She is a professional musician who teaches flute at university and performs regularly in both formal and informal settings. She has a PhD in Ethnomusicology, contributes articles to research publications, and presents her research both nationally and internationally. She is also the recipient of three All-Ireland titles at the previously mentioned Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.40

It was fascinating to reflect on my lessons with both teachers, especially since many things I needed to learn were basic elements of trad that would not have required explanation for an Irish student. For example, the difference between a jig41 and a reel42 would be ingrained knowledge resulting from the environment surrounding a student’s upbringing. For me, as a classically trained flute performance major, even the liberty of not playing “exact to the notes” (written music)43 was surprising. Brian easily articulated these concepts, and explained the execution of trad ornamentations and their effective inclusion in a tune. He also altered his own North

35 The Irish traditional flute is made from wood and can be made and played without keys. By contrast, the Western classical flute is made from silver and always has keys. (See Image 6)
36 A small instrument made from metal, with six finger holes and a mouthpiece similar to a recorder. The fingerings are the same as those on keyless Irish flute. For a photo, visit http://infantasia.blogspot.com/2011/03/silver-fluvit.html
37 The love of the music and the sense of community it creates.
38 “Conal Ó Gráda has long been at the forefront of traditional Irish flute-playing and truly has one of its most distinctive sounds. A multiple All Ireland winner in his youth, Conal’s début recording “The Top of Coom” in 1990 is still regarded as a seminal recording of flute-playing.” http://www.copperplatemailorder.com/rbc%20001.html (accessed August 2, 2014).
40 Ibid.
41 A jig is in a 6/8 time signature, with six beats to the bar (measure) and the eighth note getting the beat.
42 A reel is in a 4/4 time signature, with four beats per bar and the quarter note getting the beat.
43 In trad, most players learn by ear instead of using written music. Many players don’t read music at all, so tunes are memorized to be played in sessions or competitions.
Clare style ("good rhythm and drive to it") to demonstrate other types of playing, including "East Clay-ur: kind of 'sleepy' music" and a slide, a tune type that "ye’re neher going to hear in Clay-ur; we just don’t play ‘em."

Aoife laughingly seconded Brian’s statement in one of our lessons, saying "It’s true, they really can’t play them at all…and you can quote me on that! They’re really a Kerry, Cork thing… good players, like Brian, they’d be well able to do them but it isn’t very natural, they’d have to really work at it.” These statements demonstrate both teachers’ knowledge of trad’s history, such as the regionalization of tune styles. The influence of the céilí bands and the types of dances people wanted to participate in resulted in regional preferences for tune types that are now associated with specific areas of Ireland.

Another trad musician with an exceptional grasp of ITM’s background is Louise Mulcahy. I met her and heard her perform in May 2014 when she launched her debut solo recording Tuning the Road, on which she plays flute, whistles, and the uilleann pipe. Louise introduced each set at the CD launch by explaining how she had encountered the individual tunes. Some she "absorbed" from her family members, which reinforces ITM’s history as an aural culture. In other cases, she discovered versions of tunes through specific research, such as listening to archival recordings at culture centers maintained by Comhaltas.

The sleeve notes of Tuning the Road are also a wealth of information. For each track, Louise outlines historic and contemporary musicians who influenced her style, the relevant personal history of those musicians, and background information about the tunes with which they are now associated. The notes also include ringing praise from trad flute greats Matt Molloy and Fintan Vallely. Vallely writes of Louise’s skillful technique and emotional effect as a player, as well as her "considered choice" in musical selections and the organization and grouping of the tracks on the CD. He continues with,

Such close attention to stylistic nuance as well as technique is...everywhere in [Louise’s] playing...there is...a substantial feel generated by her conscious 'sound' – by her decisions regarding repertoire, technique and accompaniment...And there is nothing random or gratuitous in these choices, as the ample sleeve notes attest.

Without ever using “virtuosity” or “virtuoso” to describe Louise, Vallely has touched upon several aspects outlined in this paper.

Listening to Brian, Aoife, and Louise in sessions, lessons, and performance, makes it clear that each has developed a personal style of ornamentation and variation that is evident in any setting. Each also possesses an individual creativity and emotional impact as a performer within the Irish tradition, connecting to Howard’s idea that virtuosic performances are interpretive realizations and the musicians themselves are meaning-makers. Brian, Aoife, and Louise have honed their skills for years in competitions and performances in a variety of settings, which adheres to Pincherle’s view that virtuosity and competition are intertwined. Their talents are recognized by other members of the relevant community, meeting another of Howard’s standards for virtuosity. Also, each musician has an extensive understanding of both the practical execution and the history of ITM, and capably explains these elements. This demonstrates the ability to think critically about trad music, as well as the conscious attention to detail that Jeremy Denk emphasizes as a key element of virtuosity. The example of trad accordion player Sharon Shannon is a similar demonstration of this focus and commitment.

The dedication of all of these musicians to trad is evident through their teaching and their participation in sessions. Such involvement moves trad forward by spreading it to new and eager audiences, expanding and influencing the genre as Pincherle believes virtuosi have an obligation to do.
Kilfenora Céili Band, Planxty, and Eileen Ivers also influenced Irish traditional music with their innovative ideas, which were acknowledged and integrated into trad because of the authority and career endurance of each performer/group.

The roots of Irish instrumental dance tunes and airs may lie in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but the musical tradition is by no means stagnant. Its openness to new influences, inherent element of competition, and technical challenges to interpreters and performers embrace one conception of virtuosity, while its longevity and loyalty to its background reflect another. This is music that is meant to breathe and dance and live, music that embraces the extremes of emotion in its deceptively simple sets of notes. The virtuosity of a tradition that so distinctly embodies both the importance of change and the value of fidelity to heritage would be difficult to deny.

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44 A type of jig in a 12/8 time signature, with twelve beats to the measure, and the eighth note getting the beat. As Aoife explained to me, they have a lot more space in them (between notes) than a normal jig in 6/8 time. They originate from the Sliabh Luachra region of southwestern Ireland, encompassing counties Kerry, Limerick, and Cork. Like the jig and the reel, the slide is a type of dance, done to the specific style of tune.

45 A type of bagpipe with air supplied by a bellows held under and worked by the elbow. The melody is played on a chanter that has a two-octave range and uses fingerings that are mostly the same as those for keyless flute. Regulators and drones are also part of the instrument, and can be used to accompany the melody.


47 “Fintan Vallely is a musician, writer, lecturer and researcher on Traditional music. He has taught flute at the Willie Clancy summer school in Co. Clare since 1986... A commentator on Traditional music, he has been writing about it since 1990, and lecturing on it at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, University of Ulster, Trinity College Dublin, Dundalk Institute of Technology and in the USA. He studied ethnomusicology at Queens University Belfast. For further information, visit http://imusic.ie/

48 Fintan Vallely on Louise Mulcahy on the sleeve notes of her CD: Louise Mulcahy, Tuning the Road.

49 Howard, “Virtuosity as a Performance Concept,” 43.

50 Pincherle, “Virtuosity.”

51 Howard, “Virtuosity as a Performance Concept,” 49.


53 Curtis, Notes from the Heart: A Celebration of Traditional Irish Music, 112.

54 Pincherle, “Virtuosity.”

55 O’Connor, Bringing It All Back Home: The Influence of Irish Music, 5.
Image 1: A céilí in progress at the cultural center Cois na hAbhna in Ennis, Co. Clare. Image by author. Participants’ names unknown.

Image 2: The céilí band plays for the dancers at Cois na hAbhna. Image by author. Band members unknown.

Image 3: A traditional Irish session at the Rowan Tree Café in Ennis, Co. Clare. Image by author. Musicians unknown.
Image 4: Musicians at an Irish traditional session. Image by Holger von Rüden, with permission (original in color). Center musicians Siobhan Peoples and Murty Ryan (fiddle, left; and accordion, right), with permission. Bouzouki player at far left and accordion player at far right, unknown.

Image 5: A stage show by the summer 2013 group in residence at the Brú Ború branch of Comhaltas in Cashel, Co. Tipperary. Image by author. Dancers and musicians unknown.

Image 6: A silver Western classical flute, top, and Irish traditional flute, made from African blackwood, below. Image by author.
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References


