

Evading National Identity: On Translocal Irish Folk Music in Austria

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Abstract

This article assesses how translocal Irish folk-music practices and their consumption in Austria elide the traumatic legacy of extreme nationalism in modern European history. Furthermore, it teases out the degree to which the affinity of Austrian performers and audiences with Irish folk music might provide an alternative sphere of cultural identification to indigenous Austrian folk-music practices. Combining ethnographic and historical inquiry, the article unravels how various nostalgically sustained imaginaries of Irishness find complex refractions in the Austrian present, while also interrogating the stakes of an emerging insistence upon the primacy of “the music itself” in ethnographic voices.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel ergründet, inwiefern die translokale Praxis und Rezeption von irischer Folkmusik in Österreich das Erbe des extremen Nationalismus in der modernen europäischen Geschichte umgeht. Des Weiteren wird hinterfragt, in welchem Ausmaß die Affinität von österreichischen Künstler*innen und deren Publikum mit irischer Folkmusik eine alternative kulturelle Identität zu einheimischen österreichischen Volksmusiktraditionen bietet. Auf der Grundlage ethnographischer und historischer Untersuchungen werden zudem nostalgisch-geprägte Vorstellungen von irischer Identität und deren Widerspiegelung in der österreichischen Gegenwart genauer betrachtet. Abschließend wird der in ethnographischen Interviews mit österreichischen Musiker*innen thematisierte Fokus auf „die Musik an sich“ untersucht.

ENCOUNTERING IRISH FOLK MUSIC IN AUSTRIA

While there has long been recognition of Irish folk-music practices and venues transnationally, existing ethnomusicological accounts of these phenomena have tended to

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Figure 1. Boxy during their annual Saint-Patrick's-Day-concert in Graz on 17 March 2022. From right: Sepp Tieber (hurdy-gurdy, guitar, mandolin, vocals), Eamonn Donnelly (vocals, whistles, bodhrán), Michi Merkus (bass, guitar, mandolin, vocals). Not pictured: Sigi Ritter (drums) and Dieter Reinisch (bass, percussion). Photo by author, 17 March 2022.

foreground the music's reception in Anglophone diasporic sites (Moran 2012; Hall 2016; Kjeldsen 2020), and have only relatively recently begun to consider large nondiasporic Irish folk-music scenes (Williams 2006; Santos 2020), including those currently found in the German-speaking regions of Central Europe (Morgenstern 2020; Behrendt 2021).¹ Located in that cultural landscape, Austria has not only for several decades provided Irish artists such as celebrated tin-whistle player Micho Russell (1915–94) with a lucrative touring circuit (Ó hAllmhuráin 2016:205), but has indeed also witnessed the emergence of its own thriving community of Irish folk-music practitioners, most of whom are non-Irish nationals without diasporic ties to Ireland. Many of them play in local bands such as the Graz-based group “Boxy” (Figure 1) and attend sessions in the urban centres of Vienna, Graz, or Salzburg.² Some avail of instrumental tuition by visiting Irish musicians

1. A note on terminology is required from the outset. Throughout this article, I employ the term “Irish folk music” in deliberate distinction from the now more widely used nomenclature “Irish traditional music” to include popular song-material with guitar accompaniment (Carson 1986:5) alongside instrumental dance-music and solo singing (Breathnach 1971:1–2).

2. Sessions, now the primary participatory (Turino 2008) context for Irish folk-music making transnationally, are informal gatherings of practitioners who meet in pubs (or elsewhere) to perform an often unpredetermined selection of dance-music pieces (Williams 2020:17–19).

at events such as the Trad-Music Workshop at Lockenhaus Castle in the eastern region of Burgenland, while others regularly move between their musical home communities and the music's place of origin, travelling to the many folk-music festivals annually on offer in the west of Ireland to expand upon their expertise *in situ*. Upon returning from such visits, their newly acquired cultural knowledge and sets of embodied practices form a powerful aura of authenticity and social distinction (Bourdieu 1984:113–15) that clings to these musicians, earning them recognition by those who have opted to stay back home (O'Shea 2008:98).³ In this article, I adapt Bourdieu's theory of symbolic, cultural capital "as an investment in the self and as an indicator of social power" (ibid:103) to account for the primary motivation underpinning my Austrian interlocutors' travels to Ireland.

This article emerges out of the wider context of my current research project on translocal Irish folk-music practices in Austria. When addressing its overarching concern, I deliberately borrow my usage of "Austrian-Irish intercultural musical transactions" from Slobin's spatial framework of "affinity intercultural," which refers to the manner in which musics call out to audiences across nation-state lines even when they are not part of a heritage (1993:68). Importantly, I invoke intercultural "transactions" in lieu of Slobin's "affinities" to account for a more fundamental paywall of class privilege, economic wealth and cultural capital that enables many of my middle-class interlocutors to freely "play with other identities, sounds, and instruments" (Taylor 1997:202). However, issues of class and symbolic capital notwithstanding, I still suggest that these primary parameters of belonging fail to provide all answers because folk music's nationalist implications in the context of modern European history still emerge in ethnographic responses. For instance, when performing Irish rebel songs, in which the long history of Irish resistance against the hegemonic power of the British state is inscribed (Millar 2020:1), Austrian interlocutors encounter, occasionally adopt, and negotiate the boundaries of, Irish-Republican leanings that carry "culturally-intimate" (Herzfeld 1997) implications.⁴

Drawing upon fieldwork carried out in 2022, the task of this article is to illustrate, on the backdrop of folk music's place in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Austrian history, how many of my interlocutors from this mostly white, male-dominated and strikingly middle-class community of practice (Wenger 1999) have insisted on the primacy of the technical, social, and affectively engaging aspects of "the music itself" (Slominski 2020) when it comes to claiming this degree of cultural insiderness and social distinction within the Austrian Irish folk-music scene. This emerging, vehement insistence upon musical prowess, I insist, manifests in Austrian Irish folk-music practitioners' negotiation of a high-level technical command over Irish performance styles (Keegan

3. In *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*, ethnomusicologist and fiddle player Helen O'Shea follows the trails of Australian Irish folk-music practitioners, who visit annual music festivals in Ireland in search of musical enlightenment and a more "authentic" style of performing (O'Shea 2008:3).

4. By "cultural intimacy," anthropologist Michael Herzfeld means "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of a common sociality ... in the face of a more formal or official morality and sometimes, of official disapproval too" (1997:3).

2010) and credentials of authentication, conferred upon the claimant in relation to the music's point of origin (Claviez 2020:46). Although foregrounding the question of high-level technical ability in "the music itself," as indicated in ethnographic voices, the second half of the article still necessarily sheds light on the manner in which *longue-durée* romantic and politicised imaginaries, as well as performative "avatars" of Irishness (Dillane 2014),⁵ are circulated by popular culture and thus find complex refractions in the ethnographic present. As a suitable theoretical scaffold for understanding how these ideas resurface and are sustained in the Austrian present, I add a new understanding to Svetlana Boym's (2001:12) model of "sideways nostalgia," which constitutes a longing for the experiences of social actors situated in other places and times. I conclude that interlocutors' in-depth engagement with essentialist-Irish narratives of style and locale that are circulated by popular culture, refracts the often-disrupted and vehemently contested liaison between folk music and nationalism in an Austrian context back onto "the music itself." Ultimately, focusing on one example of translocal folk-music practices, this article deepens an understanding of nationalism's capacity to "build its path into music from just about any angle, as long as there are artists and audiences willing to mobilise cultural movement from those angles" (Bohlman 2011:5), and to accomplish this at a time when rising xenophobia and enclosing right-wing extremism appear particularly imminent in a European framework. To approach the complexity of this process of identity construction and negotiation in a translocal context, the task of the next section is to illustrate how my interlocutors distance themselves from the problematic liaison historically fashioned between folk music and extreme Austrian nationalism, in favour of a vehement insistence upon the primacy of high-level technical prowess concerning Irish-music performance.

ELIDING THE LIAISON BETWEEN FOLK MUSIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

When asked to what degree the issue of their Austrian nationality mattered in terms of their engagement with a different European folk-music tradition in a translocal performance context, my interlocutors, by and large, ruptured the question of national identity and insisted instead upon the importance of "the music itself." As Tes Slominski (2020:139) points out in her work *Trad Nation*, invoking and claiming the primacy of the music itself signals, in traditional-music circles, one's ability to perform legibly as a traditional player. Borrowing from psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990:53), Slominski frames the ultimate goal among participants in traditional sessions, a combination of shared, optimal musical experience, enjoyable concentration, and a good match between one's preexisting musical prowess and the challenges of the given performance environment, as a state of "trad flow" (ibid.:141). Fiddle player Nike Bielau from Graz,

5. Ethnomusicologist Aileen Dillane (2014:22) discusses registers of identity performed through Irish folk music among artists in the Anglo-American diasporic cultural sphere as shifting "avatars" of Irishness. I adapt her usage of "avatars" here as a fitting terminology to account for the various meanings of Irishness for practitioners in the non-diasporic, Austrian, context under examination in this piece.



Figure 2. A session in progress at the Dublin Road Irish Pub, Graz. Photo by author, 6 July 2022.

who now studies Irish folk-music performance at Limerick University in Ireland,⁶ sums up her perspective on the matter, describing the optimal experience of trad flow in terms of the production of what she calls an “effortless” sound:

My Austrian nationality doesn’t matter at all. The music is enjoyable and invigorates me. That’s why I think it doesn’t matter where you come from. If anything, [a diversity of nationalities] makes the music more interesting, because more variation and different influences can develop.... But a lot of pieces are technically demanding and they should still sound effortless, even at a fast pace. (Interview, 4 July 2022)

Like Nike, *uilleann* piper Christoph Gößl is a regular attendee at Graz’ weekly Irish session at the Dublin Road Irish Pub in the city centre (Figure 2).⁷ Echoing Nike’s statement regarding the fading significance of nationality in a translocal folk-music community,

6. The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick was founded in 1994 as the Irish World Music Centre by the university’s first Chair of Music, Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin (1950–2018). The institution has been particularly recognised as a centre of excellence for the study of Irish folk music and dance at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Valley 2011:713).

7. The *uilleann* (Irish-Gaelic: “elbow”) pipes is the distinctly Irish variant of the bagpipes, which was developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The air required to play this instrument is stored in a bag and supplied by bellows that are strapped to the elbow of the sitting player. A full set of *uilleann* pipes consists of a bag, seven reeds, a chanter with a tonal range of two chromatic octaves, three drones, and three regulators. The regulator-pipes are equipped with keys that can be operated with the piper’s wrist and allow for simple harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment of the main melody (Breathnach 1971:73–83).

Christoph insists instead upon the importance of continuous practice and the development of strong performance capabilities on his chosen instrument:

Music doesn't belong to a particular place. This might sound ridiculous, especially, when considering our own [Austrian] folk music. I don't care about that. Music can be played anywhere.... But of course, one has to practice and continuously work on getting better.... I often practice the pieces slowly at first, using a metronome. (Interview, 8 October 2022)

Writing an earlier version of this article in my office in Graz, I confronted my interlocutors' vehement insistence upon the primacy of the technical aspects of Irish-music performance as Austria approached its national holiday on 26 October. It is a day remembering the Declaration of Austrian Neutrality in 1955, which was accompanied by a guaranteed withdrawal of the Allied forces that had occupied Austria since the end of World War II in 1945 (Lamb-Faffelberger 2003:293). In light of the emerging elision of national identity in ethnographic voices, which stands in stark tension with Austrian folk music's historical significance as an important agent of Austrian cultural nationalism in the nineteenth century, and in relation to the extreme nationalisms pursued throughout Europe during the twentieth century, it is worth shedding some light on this larger historical backdrop in the next section.

FOLK MUSIC AND AUSTRIAN NATIONALISM

Inspired by German Enlightenment-philosopher, theologian and polymath Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) theses on folk song as the people's pivotal expression of cultural distinctiveness (Herder and Bohlman 2017:21),⁸ Austrian encyclopaedic endeavours emerged in the nineteenth century (Brenner 2016:18), including the twenty-four volumes of *Die österreichisch-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild* ("The Austro-Hungarian Empire in Word and Picture") of 1886, mapping and seeking to accommodate cultural differences within the German-speaking centre and multilingual provinces at the fringes of Austria-Hungary (Bohlman 2011:142). To clarify, Austria-Hungary (1867–1915) was a dual monarchy ruled by the house of Habsburg. The territory's supranational makeup meant that it was split along the lines of different cultural identities, languages, and mentalities. As Eva Maria Hois (1999:130) suggests, while Austria-Hungary was not united politically and constitutionally, its unity was defined as a cultural one, meaning, in terms of the diversity of a multiethnic state. Between 1904 and 1918, the Austro-Hungarian Ministry for Culture and Education initiated *Das Volkslied in Österreich* ("Austrian Folk Song"), an extensive, state-funded collection project intended to document folk music and dance among all ethnic groups within the Danube monarchy. The

8. Bohlman provides English translations of excerpts from Herder's influential volumes, including *Volkslieder* ("Folk Songs") and *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* ("Voices of the People in Songs") (Herder 1778–79).

project was led by a team of expert collectors from each of the crown lands, whose efforts were united by a common objective (ibid.:133). In sum, *Das Volkslied in Österreich* encompassed thirty German-language volumes, twenty volumes in Slavic, and ten in Romance languages (Deutsch and Hois 2004:9). When the question emerged, whether this multilingual volume would be led by an introduction in German, nationalism took the shape of a debate around the politics of representation and the equal treatment of the interests pursued by individual crownlands such as Moravia and Silesia, Slovenia, and Serbo-Croatia.

Within this debate, Josef Pommer (1845–1918), a leading figure of Austrian folk-music research (Mochar-Kircher 2004:13), took a chauvinist and folkish, German-speaking stance by seeking to map fin-de-siècle Central Europe as an exclusive, as opposed to inclusive, cultural landscape (Morgenstern 2015:14). Pommer’s journal *Das deutsche Volkslied* (“The German Folk Song”), initiated in 1899, as well as his other Austrian folk-music projects, such as the 1905 *Liederbuch für die Deutschen in Österreich* (“Song-Book for the Germans in Austria”), focused on a discourse of authenticity that was primarily language-based, thus defining Austrian folk song on the basis of its common linguistic denominator of German (Bohlman 2011:144). This chauvinist discourse intensified in the twentieth century, particularly so, when the First Republic of Austria (1919–33) was also the first nation to be annexed (the so-called Anschluss) by the Third Reich in 1938 (Neuhäuser 2020:2). Ultimately, this led to a powerful narrative of victimisation and a concomitant repression of Austro-fascist history (Lamb-Faffelberger 2003:291), one that, I suggest, enabled the Austrian reclamation of *Heimat* (“homeland”) in an arguably robust folk-music culture that persists to the present. Moreover, I suggest that this narrative appears to simultaneously enable contemporary practitioners in the translocal folk-music scene that is the subject of this article to elide the historical liaison between folk music and Austrian cultural nationalism in favour of the technical aspects and “trad flow” of the music.

The issue of extreme Austrian nationalism remains a problematic one, particularly so, in light of the far-right populist and Eurosceptic FPÖ’s (Freedom Party of Austria) recent emergence as the second-strongest force in the Salzburg state election in April 2023. This northwestern Austrian result followed the formation of other right-wing populist and Eurosceptic parties, such as the Sweden Democrats and Germany’s AfD (Alternative for Germany). In 2016, the AfD’s former leader, Frauke Petry, had heavily criticised German ex-chancellor Angela Merkel’s *Willkommenskultur* (“welcome culture”) during the so-called refugee crisis for bypassing a long-overdue confrontation of Germany’s own cultural identity crisis and the ongoing tabooing of national pride, as inextricably linked to the crimes of the Nazi past (Schiller 2020:262). In the case of Austria’s FPÖ, the party’s antiestablishment rhetoric is directed against the elites and, in light of increased migration, also against immigrants and ethnic minorities (Doehring and Ginkel 2022:355). Interestingly, although most songs performed at FPÖ campaign events convey no obvious political message, the most frequently occurring embedding of folksy schlager music and nostalgic songs about a *Heimat* tethered to the Alpine regions does create particular

“situational arrangements” out of which political right-wing ideas can potentially emerge (ibid.:366). Following this brief sketch concerning past and present iterations of extreme Austrian nationalism, I turn to assessing the extent to which the practical and discursive affinity of Austrian artists—and their audiences—with Irish folk music does indeed appear to offer these agents an alternative sphere of cultural identification alongside indigenous Austrian folk-music practices.⁹

LONGUE-DURÉE IMAGINARIES OF IRISHNESS IN THE AUSTRIAN PRESENT

Taking Svetlana Boym’s work *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001:12) as my theoretical linchpin for this next section, I suggest that the perspective of practitioners who were operational during the Austrian folk-revival of the 1970s and 1980s offers insights into the pivotal role of a Boymian “sideways-nostalgic” yearning—a longing for the experiences of individuals situated in other places and times—when it comes to fuelling the emerging Austrian alignment with a proximal European musical sibling tradition. My second task in this section is to unfold how historical *longue-durée* discursive imaginaries, as well as dominant performative iterations of Irishness as avatars of musical exceptionalism and anticolonial solidarity, shape the way Austrian music-makers and audiences experience this music. Josef Seewald, former front man, bagpiper, guitarist, and singer of the Styrian folk-band “Brehons,”¹⁰ sums up his enthusiasm for Irish folk music as follows:

I enjoy playing Irish folk music. I have never felt the same excitement in relation to Austrian folk music.... I have built up some resistance to Austrian folk music, because it doesn’t seem as lively to me.... To me, Irish folk music triggers a certain longing for a different home. It’s about that lovely, intricate and virtuosic music. The music’s enormous intricacy appealed to me. That’s absent in a lot of Austrian folk music. (Interview, 28 March 2022)

Interestingly, what emerges in Josef’s response is the significance of a longing, not for the past, but for a musical home situated elsewhere. As such, I propose theorising it here in terms of Svetlana Boym’s (2001:12) concept of “sideways nostalgia,” as a yearning for the

9. Most Austrian folk music, song, and dance is broadly considered Alpine music, in particular, Ländler and yodel. To clarify, the many regional variants of Austrian Ländler are pieces of instrumental dance music in $\frac{3}{4}$ meter. Yodeling is another key marker of Austrian traditional music. It “is a form of singing which involves repeated and rapid changes of pitch between the low-pitch chest register ... and the high-pitch head register” (Hemetek 2019:274). Gstanzln, mocking songs in dialect, consist of four lines and may be performed at particular dances. These pieces are widespread in the Austrian-Bavarian regions. Typical instruments on which Austrian folk music is performed include the Styrian harmonica, a diatonic button accordion, the fiddle, the harp, and the hammered dulcimer, among others (Deutsch 1984:19–21). For further reading on regional styles of Austrian folk music, consult Wimmer et al. (2017) and Nußbaumer (2008).

10. The Styrian band Brehons was active between 1979 and 1985, performing Irish and Scottish folk music. Members of the group included Susanne Zellinger (vocals, fiddle), Wolfgang Schauersberger (fiddle, bagpipes, tin-whistle, vocals), Wolfgang Heigl (mandolin, guitar, tin-whistle, vocals) and Josef Seewald (guitar, bagpipes, tin-whistle, vocals) (Safer 1999:116).

experiences of social actors situated in *other* places and times. A longing for musical continuity located elsewhere also finds complex refractions in other ethnographic responses, such as the following comment by Rob Hirsch, leader of the Graz-based group “Molly and the Men:”¹¹

Austrian instrumental music is less prominent here, somehow. It’s not widespread. House music in families is quite a niche and there are few events or public displays of the music. Austrian radio stations also rarely play folk music and in Ireland, all of it seems much more closely intertwined. (Interview, 21 February 2022)

Josef’s and Rob’s shared loyalty toward Irish folk music as a “familiar Other” notwithstanding, it is worth acknowledging that other interlocutors have described actively performing Austrian folk music as well. Nike Bielau, who was inspired by her mother’s enthusiasm for folk music, recounts her early encounters as follows:

I have also engaged with Austrian folk music. I attended workshops with Herrmann Härtel in Vorarlberg and Innsbruck, where he taught me Austrian pieces. This music is quite similar in comparison to Irish folk music. It’s dance music. I’d love to learn more Austrian folk music in the future. (Interview, 4 July 2022)

On several leisured musical travels to Ireland, a place in reference to which much music-making in translocal Irish-music communities in Central Europe and elsewhere is validated and authenticated (O’Shea 2008:98), Josef Seewald also witnessed displays of musical prowess among the locals, recalling:

I experienced spontaneous music-making in pubs with those driving jigs and reels as particularly authentic. When I was in Clifden, some musicians met up in a pub, suddenly started playing their fiddles, whistles and *bodhráns*¹² and created gorgeous music.... I once attended an *uilleann*-piping competition in Ennis. The atmosphere was totally quiet and people were really attentive. Then I thought: Excellent, they’re all godlike players [*laughs*]! (Interview, 28 March 2022)

Strikingly, Josef Seewald’s observations correspond to much earlier accounts of a special endowment for music among the Irish, such as the writings of Cambro-Norman cleric Giraldus Cambrensis (1146–1223) and the nineteenth-century Irish nationalist writer-

11. The Irish folk-band “Molly and the Men” formed in 2014 and now primarily performs in different parts of Styria in southeastern Austria. The current lineup includes Rob Hirsch (vocals, guitar), Romana Rabic (fiddle, vocals), and Marc O’Cribin (accordion, vocals). On occasion, the group also features guest musicians Anna Riepl (fiddle) and Philip Daniel (banjo, mandolin).

12. The *bodhrán*, a circular frame drum commonly headed with a skin of goat-hide, is undoubtedly the most widespread type of percussive instrument employed in Irish traditional music. Its skin can be struck either by the hand or with a wooden stick, while the other hand dampens or applies pressure to the inside of the skin to create overtones and effect subtle pitch changes that further enhance the player’s rhythmic accompaniment of the melodic contours of a tune (Harte 2020).



Figure 3. The Shenanigans performing at Zirkus Prattes, Graz. From left: Igmar Jenner (fiddle), Karin Silldorff (whistles, flute, headless tambourine), Annette Casey (vocals), Rob Cheese (guitar, vocals) Tom Wilding (bass), Uwe Schmidt (accordion, keys, vocals). Not pictured: Michael Willmann (drums), Kolja Radenkovic (guitar, trumpet). Photo by author, 9 July 2022.

activist Thomas Davis (1814–45).¹³ While Cambrensis had once proclaimed the Irish “to be incomparably more skilled in these [musical instruments] than any other people” he had seen before (Cambrensis and O’Meara 1982:103), Davis much later praised music as the “first faculty of the Irish” (Davis 1845:vi), thus promoting a register of Irish musical exceptionalism that foregrounded the reclamation of a lost cultural identity by a colonised people seeking to push the British coloniser out of Ireland’s preestablished boundaries (White 1998:60). Josef later also rejected other transnationally popular (albeit stereotypical and commercialised) performances of Irishness including “drinking green beer” on St. Patrick’s Day (Cullen 2015:148), while also carefully distancing himself, like Rob Hirsch (interview, 21 February 2022), from the singing of Irish rebel songs, in the absence of nuanced insider knowledge about Ireland’s colonial history. Josef states:

I’m not interested in those St. Patrick’s-Day celebrations with green beer. To me, that has nothing to do with the music itself... With Brehons, we never dealt with rebel songs, because we didn’t know much about them. (Interview, 28 March 2022)

This recurrent insistence upon the primacy of “the music itself” among artists like Josef Seewald notwithstanding, it is precisely these particular avatars of Irishness that Austrian audiences expect to encounter when attending concerts by celebrated groups such as the “Shenanigans” (Figure 3), who have been playing to enthusiastic crowds of up to

13. Davis was the leader of the Young Ireland literary and political movement in the 1840s. Primarily through the medium of its periodical *The Nation*, the movement radically echoed, among other things, demands for a repeal of the 1801 Acts of Union between Britain and Ireland (Hutchinson 1987:95).

600 people in Graz' Dom-im-Berg-venue for several years on St. Patrick's Day. According to the band's former singer Synnøva O'Gorman from Dublin:

You're playing to people out on the lash on St. Patrick's Day, right?... It's about what people still associate with Irish [folk] music, you know, The Dubliners and the kind of stuff that was marketed as Irish music abroad. (Interview, 17 February 2022)

The band's current singer Annette Casey from Wexford, Ireland adds:

Our repertoire is still quite song-based and there is kind of a rock-tone to a lot of it. Sometimes you might throw out the odd instrumental piece ... but it's really about what goes down well with the audience at gigs. Still very much pub-oriented, I think ... I'm the token Irishwoman in the band.... Because I'm the only Irish person still in the line-up, Rob would invariably point out that I'm from Wexford at some point in the gig. I mean, so "she" legitimizes "us all" somehow. (Interview, 17 February 2022)

Other performative avatars of Irishness that popular culture circulates to Austrian audiences through the affectively immediate expressive channels of music and song, as opposed to top-down intellectual discourse, are politicised in that they are tethered to Ireland's colonial history. Interestingly, while Austrian Irish folk-music practitioners interviewed during my fieldwork continuously insist upon "the music itself," as decoupled from such nationalist implications, for Irish artists Annette and Synnøva, the performance of rebel songs, dealing with the long history of Irish resistance against British colonial rule (Millar 2020:12), still evokes the kind of embarrassment and rueful self-recognition that Michael Herzfeld (1997:3) has termed "cultural intimacy." Herzfeld distinguishes between officially sanctioned representations of the nation and the often-stereotypical "social poetics" of self-representation that structure the lived experience of individuals in the private sphere of nationhood.¹⁴ However, rather than encouraging the often-facile appropriation of (violent) Irish-Republican leanings (Chapman 1992:254) through the expressive medium of song, by audiences beyond the island of Ireland and outside of "the close confines of working-class Republicanism" (Millar 2020:198) in which many pieces are embedded, Annette Casey and Synnøva O'Gorman deliberately dissociate themselves from the performance of popular rebel songs like "Come Out Ye Black and Tans." As Synnøva puts it:

When it comes to the Shenanigans, Richard and Rob Cheese were dependent on me to bring in songs.... But it definitely was a situation where Annette and I would decide what to do with the songs. Like, can we not do "Come Out Ye Black and

14. Herzfeld's model has also found application in ethnomusicological scholarship, including Martin Stokes's *The Republic of Love* (2010), an ethnography of Turkish popular music and the expression of affection in a climate of political authoritarianism.

Tans?”¹⁵ Because, you know, we’d have a bit of an understanding of the political or historical nuances of the songs, whereas they might be reading it on a surface level. (Interview, 17 February 2022)

As I approach this article’s concluding section, I once again deliberately move beyond this politicised narrative, to illustrate how essentialist-Irish discourses of style and locale, themselves historically integral to the Irish cultural-nationalist enterprise (O’Shea 2008:7), appear to still shape the engagement of Austrian Irish folk-music practitioners with “the music itself.”

THE AUTHENTICATING CENTRE AND “THE MUSIC ITSELF”

A significant aspect that emerges in ethnographic voices is the importance that interlocutors assign to regular travels to the music’s “point of origin” (Claviez 2020:45–46) and to engagements with authenticating agents vested with the power of legitimation in relation to it. In so doing, they avail of the relative geographical proximity of their Austrian musical home communities to the Irish authenticating centre (a flight from Vienna to Dublin takes about two-and-a-half hours), of course, always on the proviso of having sufficient economic capital at their disposal to embark upon these visits. Thus, while offering the caveat that sideways-nostalgic gazes upon Ireland appear to be rather widespread across the Irish diaspora in America (Dillane 2013), Australia (O’Shea 2013), and South Africa (McCracken 1992), where Irish-music practitioners might not have the opportunity to easily relocate physically to the music’s place of origin, my (predominantly middle-class) Austrian interlocutors frequently avail of their geographical proximity to repositories of Irishness and cultural capital. As fiddle player Nike Bielau explains:

At workshops in Austria, I focus on learning ornamentation.... A lot of instrumental pieces are technically demanding, but at fast tempo, they should still sound effortless.... Part of the reason why I’m now studying Irish traditional music at the University of Limerick is the urge to visit the source of this music that I have been playing my whole life. (Interview, 4 July 2022)

The preceding statement by Nike elevates another recurrent theme emerging over the course of my ethnographic work with Austrian Irish-music practitioners, to wit, the high value accorded to musical prowess. For Nike and uilleann piper Christoph this manifests in their stive for performing Irish instrumental music at full speed and with all technical parameters, such as ornamentation, in place (Keegan 2010:67). Their intention to reach

15. “Come Out Ye Black and Tans,” written by playwright Dominic Behan (1928–89), is arguably one of the most well-known pieces of the Irish rebel-song repertoire, popularised by groups such as The Wolfe Tones. The song refers to the Black and Tans, which were British reserve forces recruited to support the Royal Irish Constabulary police forces in an effort to counter Irish Republican Army attacks during the Irish War of Independence (1919–21) (Millar 2020:76).

below the surface might be perhaps best described in terms of the paradigm of the “pure drop” in Irish traditional-music circles. To clarify, while also the title of an eponymous television programme by Irish accordionist Tony MacMahon (1939–2021), which aired from 1989 to 1995, the “pure drop” refers to a “euphemism for uncut whiskey..., so implying ‘undiluted’ and ‘unpolluted’” (Valley 2011:555). According to Slominski (2020:27–28), invoking “the pure drop” suggests that “the music of the past is clear and untainted as long as it is protected from the contaminations of the present and the foreign.” Its problematic and essentialist-Irish connotations notwithstanding, I suggest here that this trope should perhaps not yet be fully discarded, as it resurfaces in the lived experience and ethnographic voices of my Austrian interlocutors. It does so, not as the discourse of “the pure drop,” but in the guise of related phrases such as “the real stuff” and in Rob Hirsch’s aim to “experience the music properly” (interview, 21 February 2022). Echoing fiddle player Nike’s aforementioned draw to the music’s place of origin, Rob of “Molly and the Men” referred to his band’s trip to the annual festivities at the traditional-music event *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* (“Music Festival of Ireland”) in Ireland, recounting:¹⁶

I have been to Ireland, 3 times already. 3 years ago, we visited the fleadh with “Molly and the Men.” We also played in sessions, but we noticed that only Marc was able to properly access those. We got an insight into the “real stuff” and also took photos for our second CD. It wasn’t a holiday as such, but it was about actually being there. (Interview, 21 February 2022)

This visit, Rob hoped, would offer more than a type of leisured consumption of Irish culture akin to the typical coach tourist’s “gaze” (Urry and Larsen 2011) upon local residents and artists, as described in Kaul’s (2009:78) ethnography of tourism and Irish folk-music consumption in the western Irish coastal village of Doolin. Although photographs were taken to evidence the band’s temporal proximity to the authenticating centre (Claviez 2020:46), Rob felt that only Molly and the Men’s Dublin-born accordionist, Marc O’Cribin, was in a position to reach closest to “the pure drop” by immersing himself in, and gaining access to, the performance spaces of the *fleadh*’s many traditional-music sessions.

CONCLUSION: EVASIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

In sum, notwithstanding Austrian interlocutors’ recurrent insistence upon the decoupling of their translocal Irish folk-music practice from the historical liaison between folk music and cultural nationalism in modern European history, they still subscribe to essentialist-Irish

16. *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* refers to the annual festivities held each summer by the state-sponsored Irish-music organisation *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* (Association of Musicians of Ireland). The event, which has grown to attract a large international audience since the foundation of Comhaltas in 1951, features a programme of sessions, concerts, and music competitions (Fleming 2004:233).

discourses of style and locale that map the significance of the authenticating centre back onto the ability to claim high-level technical prowess on a musical instrument and access to “trad flow” within “the music itself.” In insisting upon the primacy of musical ability and one’s proximity to “the pure drop” in Ireland, the middle-class musicians presented in the foregoing—some of which have notably also previously engaged with Austrian folk music—evade the more problematic connection between folk music and extreme Austrian nationalism past and present. Moreover, foregrounding the acquisition of cultural capital and social distinction (Bourdieu 1984) in the form of gatekeepers such as musical skill, flow, and the possibility of visiting Ireland relatively easily and frequently, in turn enables these interlocutors to fashion sanitised performance spaces (Dillane 2014:18), in which they also bypass a critical process of conversation *about* these points of evasion.

In light of these conversational absences, and based on my ethnographic work thus far, a particular complexity in the case of Austrian-Irish intercultural musical transactions unfolds when artists and their audiences negotiate this in-depth engagement with musical prowess in relation to overarching *longue-durée* discourses and performative iterations of Irishness. The latter include remarkably persistent imaginaries of Irish musical exceptionalism and a sense of solidarity with the former colonised underdog rebelling against a colonial master. As I posit, these performative iterations are sideways-nostalgically circulated through popular culture, that is, in the Boymian sense of a proximal musical Other informing the native Austrian imaginary (2001:12). Furthermore, I suggest that these Austrian imaginaries of Irishness attain added currency because artists and audiences frequently encounter them through the affectively immediate expressive channels of music and song, as opposed to top-down intellectual discourse. Finally, in the current Austrian moment of far-right FPÖ campaign events, at which overt political statements are evaded, yet somehow embedded in a sonic scaffold of nostalgic, folksy schlager music (Doehring and Ginkel 2022), it is this crucial intersection between musical practice and discourse that also accomplishes something else. In keeping with Bohlman (2011:5), this recursive relationship between practice and imaginaries among Austrian folk-music practitioners and their audiences renders audible music’s extraordinary capacity to sound the nation from multiple angles, whether in past, present, or sideways guises.

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