

The Celtic Identity and the Significance of Music

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By

Tegan Stoddart

Mathematics Major

SUNY Brockport

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Thesis Director: Scott Horsington, Music

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Introduction

Music is an important part of life; it is a way for individuals or groups to express themselves, and an inspiration for people to participate in cultural activities of their heritage. This helps create a sense of identity within a culture. One genre that is popular is Celtic Music; however, this warrants the question: what is Celtic Music or what makes Celtic Music “Celtic?” According to Romero, “[w]hat we know as Celtic music today is in reality [that] traditional music developed relatively recently in several western European Atlantic regions that may have been inhabited by Celtic peoples about 2,000 years ago” (Romero). It has a “feel” to it that most people can recognize; however, to understand the genre fully, the history and general theory must be explored.

Who Were the Celts?

Determining the definition of “Celtic” is more complicated than defining a geographical region that the music originates from. The term has also changed a fair amount since it originated. One defining factor that seems consistent is that it centers mainly around the language of certain groups. The word “Celt” itself was initially a term used to define barbarian tribes. When the word “Celt” was created, it was used to reference “the Gauls, Belgae, Celtiberians, Lusitanians, and Galatians, and the ancient Britons and Irish” (Haywood 5). Greek authors had used the term “...about 2,500 years ago to describe the barbarian tribes that lived inland from the Greek colony of Massalia” and as time went on it grew to include other barbarian tribes such as “...the barbarian peoples of Europe north of the Alps, including some, like the Franks, who are not now considered to be Celts” (Haywood 5).

This is not what the term Celtic refers to now. The two most common cultures that are associated with the term Celtic would be Irish and Scottish. Not only has the term Celtic changed so much since the origin of the word, but it also has what some may call a paradoxical element to it. In most cases not everyone who would traditionally fit into the category of “Celtic” would use that term (Haywood 6). In the origination of the term, “[t]he ancient Irish ... did not even have a common identity for themselves until the early Middle Ages” (Haywood 6).

This creates a challenge when officially defining the term Celtic. The best way to define Celtic is to turn to the International Celtic Congress, founded in the 20th century. The official statement of the organization states “the Celtic Congress promotes the knowledge, use, and appreciation of the languages and cultures of the six Celtic countries” (“Home – Celtic Congress”). These six Celtic countries are Alba (Scotland), Breizh (Brittany), Cymru (Wales), Eire (Ireland), Kernow (Cornwall), and Mannin (Isle of Man). Although “[t]he Celtic Congress first met in 1917...there were gatherings of Celts at the very beginning of the century” (Ellis) and “...are located in Western Europe and the North Atlantic” (White). Initial meetings included delegates from five out of these six nations, excluding Cornwall (Ellis). This was likely decided in part by the current attendance of Gorsedd of Bards, which is an association based around the contribution of the Welsh culture and arts (“What is the Gorsedd?”). Cornwall was not invited until much later; likely due to no one in the congress speaking the Cornish language.

These Celtic Nations were also important in Europe’s history beyond just being a part of the geographical region. “The early Celts created a trading centre of their own near the source of the Danube river in 625BC” (“10 Interesting Facts about the Celts”). This eventually led to them creating the Tin Road even before the Romans used roads.

Moving forward, it is important to remember that this is a modern definition of Celtic. The definition described above was created by people outside of these nations to give identity to them, and now it is used by all kinds of descendants to connect to their heritage. These defining countries will be the focus of the rest of this paper, with special emphasis on Ireland and Scotland.

Shared Musical Elements

The musical elements of Celtic Music are easily as diverse as the definition of the groups of people that make up its culture. However, there are some generalizations that can provide a sufficient overview of the genre itself. One important factor for defining a genre is the context of performances. Celtic music is heavily known for its dancing tunes and ballads (“History of Celtic Music”). The commonly known rigs and reels of Irish music are designed for dancing at weddings and festivals and “... is generally played in ensembles, with the melody instruments playing in unison (or octaves), not in harmony” (Sliotar). Unison is the use of “two notes of the same pitch” whereas octaves are “the same notes as the unison but of different pitches” meaning the same letter name without being the same note (“Unison and Octave Intervals”). Also, the pieces played are typically short tunes, repeated multiple times. In order to keep it interesting for both the audience and the musicians, ornamentations may be added to change the music as it progresses. Ornamentations are additions musicians make to music by changing rhythms or adding notes without drastically changing the melody, keeping it simple but constantly changing for dancing and entertainment. “One of the distinguishing features is the fact that this music type typically has few rests” (Sliotar). This is ideal for dancing and works well for the string instruments such as the fiddle; however, this leaves more of a challenge for wind instruments

such as the flute because it leaves little time to breathe. This is worth clarifying since both are used frequently in Celtic Music.

Music-theory-related elements are also a good category to form some generalizations. First, Celtic Music uses Mixolydian and Dorian modes, along with the pentatonic scale(Sliotar). These are essentially specific ways of ordering notes. “The Dorian mode is very similar to the modern natural minor scale. The only difference is in the sixth note, which is a major sixth above the first note, rather than a minor sixth” (“Modes: What are they and how do I use them?”) The Dorian mode has an incredibly sad feeling to it whereas the Mixolydian mode is used in pop and jazz music with a bit of a lighter feeling to it. The Mixolydian mode is like the major scale; however, “[t]he single tone that differentiates this scale from the major scale is its seventh note, which is a flattened seventh rather than a major seventh” (“Modes: What are they and how do I use them?”). Another noticeable musical element the microtonal bend(Sliotar). The official definition microtonality is “the use of intervals smaller than the usual whole-tones and semitones of the best-known Western European compositional traditions” (Schulter). A simpler way of describing this is that a microtonal bend is when the music sounds like it “slides” into a tone.

Another important factor when defining this genre is instrumentation. To begin with there are some well-known instruments such as the fiddle, flute, bagpipes, tin whistle, harp, mandolin, guitar, and banjo. The fiddle, harp, mandolin, guitar, and banjo are all considered chordophones; instruments with vibrating strings. The flute, bagpipe, and tin whistle are considered aerophones; instruments that use vibrating air to produce sound. Although these are most common, there are also some less well-known instruments that are important to the genre. One is the *bodhrán*. This instrument is “a goatskin drum used widely in Irish music and also becoming popular in other celtic areas” (“The Instruments of Celtic Music”). This instrument is

classified as a membranophone; an instrument that uses a stretched membrane. Another aerophone is the *bombarde*. This instrument is defined as “a small oboe-like *shawm* with a penetrating sound, used widely in Breton music” (“The Instruments of Celtic Music”). A shawm is a “double-reed wind instrument of Middle Eastern origin, a precursor of the oboe. Like the oboe, it is conically bored; but its bore, bell, and finger holes are wider, and it has a wooden disk (called a pirouette, on European shawms) that supports the lips and, on Asian instruments, holds them away from the reed” (“Shawm”). Lastly, there is a chordophone known as the hammered dulcimer, “a trapezoidal board with pairs of strings stretched over it, played with light hammers” (“The Instruments of Celtic Music”). Many specific pieces include other instrumentation, but these are some of the common instruments that should be noted.

These generalizations give us a good starting point when understanding the genre as a whole. However, each region has specific aspects of their music that can differentiate them from each other.

Ireland

Ireland is one of the more well-known Celtic nations. As with a lot of traditional music it is shared through social gatherings such as “at dances, pub sessions or informal playing occasions, as well as through a network of competitions and schools” (Stokes and Bohlman 101) or “weddings, saint’s days or other observances” (“Music of Ireland”). Numerous sources consistently associate the music with dancing. “Traditional dances and tunes include reels, hornpipes, jigs and slip jigs, as well as imported mazurkas” (“Music of Ireland”) which are Polish folk dances “in triple time with a usually moderate tempo, containing a heavy accent on

the third or second beat” (“Mazurka”). A lot of the tunes, or songs without words, are played twice as two eight-bar segments, making a 32-bar whole (“Music of Ireland”). The music for dancing follows isometric rhythm to make it “danceable.” “Isometric” means “the groups of beats or measures are equal, with the first beat usually accented” (“Rhythm”). This creates a steady rhythm with a strong first beat evenly spaced during the song. A great example of this is “Drunken Sailor” with each phrase being four measures of two beats each, the first beat being emphasized. “Structural units are symmetrical and include decorations, in many cases imaginative and elaborate, of the rhythm, text, melody and phrasing, though not usually of dynamics” (Celtic Life). This implies that the ornamentations are small additions that do not change the music so much that dancers would not be able to recognize the melody. This means that throughout most Irish music, “[t]he importance [is] placed on the melody ... harmony [is] kept simple ... and instruments are played in strict unison, always following the leading player” (Celtic Life). This ties back to one of the commonalities of Celtic music mentioned earlier: the fact that the melody is written simply and is the primary focus, but performers add ornamentations to keep the piece entertaining. It is important to note that modern songs are English, the rest are in Irish (“Music of Ireland”).

Some of the unique primary instruments in Ireland are the *Uilleann pipes* (a form of bagpipes), the banjo, and the bodhran. The Uilleann pipes are played by keeping air pressure in the bag steady under the elbow of the musician. “A set of pipes contains seven reeds, four of which are double reeds, these are the chanter and regulator reeds. The remaining three reeds are single reeds and go in the drones” (O’Hagan). A drone is a long note that creates a harmony by typically providing a low tone. The banjo used in Irish music is based off the American banjo, but with one less string. “The banjo most used in Irish music is a 4-string tenor banjo, with the

standard strings replaced by heavier ones, tuned to GDAE” (“The Instruments of Celtic Music”). As mentioned earlier, the bodhran “...is a drum made using a goatskin drumhead” (“The Instruments of Celtic Music”).

Scotland

Another well-known Celtic nation is Scotland. “Many outsiders associate Scottish folk music almost entirely with bagpipes, which has indeed long played an important part of Scottish music. It is however not unique or indigenous to Scotland” (Celtic Life). Nonetheless, the “*pìob mòr*, or Highland Bagpipe, is the most distinctively Scottish form of the instrument” (Celtic Life). To understand the bagpipes’ full connection to the music, we must look at the context with respect to the culture. The Highland Bagpipe is often used by clan members for marching and military purposes (Celtic Life). Clans were “...a close-knit group of relatives” that usually included not only family, but also many others who pledged allegiance to the name associated with the clan (“Scottish Clans and Families”). These clans were built like communities, which holds significance because it meant that the clan chiefs had authority over people. Some examples of piping clans included “the MacArthurs, MacDonalds, McKays and, especially the MacCrimmons, who were hereditary pipers to the Clan MacLeod” (Celtic Life). “The most traditional form of Highland bagpipe music is called pibroch, which consists of a theme (*urlar*) which is repeated, growing increasingly complex each time. The last, and most complex variation (*cruunluath*), gives way to a sudden and unadorned rendition of the theme” (Celtic Life). Culturally similar to Ireland, some Scottish music was designed to be “played across Scotland at dances or *ceilidhs*” (Celtic Life). A ceilidh, pronounce kay-lee, means gathering or party in Gaelic, and is where traditional styled dancing can be witnessed (Ron). “Group dances such as jigs, *strathspeys*, waltzes and reels, are performed to music provided by an ensemble, or

dance band, which can include fiddle (violin), bagpipe, accordion, and percussion” (Celtic Life). Although this is obviously very similar to Ireland, the research on Scottish music examines other types of songs as well. “There are ballads and laments, generally sung by a lone singer with backing or played on traditional instruments such as harp, fiddle, accordion or bagpipes” (Celtic Life). Their folk songs are typically “...melodic, haunting or rousing” which is very different from the music made for the military pipes and drums (Celtic Life). The Highland Bagpipes consist of a “sizable air bag, three trusty drones, tuneful chanter and long mouthpiece” (Chalmers) Regiments in Scotland play marches, quicksteps, reels and laments using bagpipes and drum bands in an attempt to preserve this style of music (Celtic Life).

Brittany

Brittany is one of the lesser-known Celtic nations; however, there is a good amount of research on their music. Located “in the extreme north-west of France” (White), their music is also quite diverse and “includes a variety of vocal and instrumental styles” (Celtic Life). One style of vocal music from Brittany is known as “*Kan ha diskan*.” This is a call and response style of music and is used to accompany dance, and is very common in Brittany (“Music of Brittany”). The lead singer is known as the “*kaner*” and the second singer is known as the “*diskaner*.” “The kaner sings a phrase, and the diskaner sings the last few lines with the kaner, then repeats it alone until the same last few lines, when the kaner again joins in” while changing the repetition each time (“Music of Brittany”). This style of vocal music “...has become perhaps the most integral part of the Breton roots revival, and was the first genre of Breton music to gain some mainstream success, both in Brittany and abroad” (“Music of Brittany”). A roots revival is where younger generations practice the more traditional music of their heritage in order to

connect to their culture and popularize the genre (“Roots Revival”). This shows how important music is in terms of culture for younger generations; it is a great way for parents to teach their children about their heritage. Another style of music is the “*kantik*.” This is a “...religious hymn that is vocal but includes accompaniment from a variety of instruments” (“Music of Brittany”). Such instruments can include “the harp, pipes, and organ” (“Music of Brittany”). There is also the “[g]werziou and sonioù” which “are the two primary classifications of Breton unaccompanied folk song” (“Music of Brittany”). The “gwerz is characterized by a very gloomy, morbid tone, and the lyrics typically describe tragic murders and deaths, or lost love” (“Music of Brittany”). Lastly, there are the “*chants de marins*,” which sailing music commonly referred to as shanties (Music of Brittany”). These ballads were typically about “...shipwrecks, sailing and loss” and were “...accompanied by instruments like the fiddle and accordion” (“Music of Brittany”). This begs the question; are sea shanties considered Celtic? The Irish Examiner says, “there’s a good reason to believe they are heavily influenced by Irish musical tradition” (O’Byrne). Take the piece “Drunken Sailor” for example; it is considered an Irish piece. However, “while the Irish influence is clear, because of the internationalism of sea-fairing folk, it’s a little harder to pick out specifically Irish shanties” (O’Byrne). This means that many sea shanties could be categorized as Celtic; however, not all of them will fit the category. Mentioned earlier, the bombarde is an important instrument in Brittany, a double-reed instrument similar to the oboe. Another important instrument in Brittany is the *binou*. Listed with the other types of bagpipes, the binou “has [a] seven-holed chanter and a single drone” (“The Instruments of Celtic Music”).

Cornwall, Wales, and Isle of Man

When thinking of the term “Celtic,” Cornwall, Wales, and the Isle of Man are probably not the first thing that comes to mind. However, they are officially included in the congress and thus, their music fits into this genre. “Cornish musicians have used a variety of traditional Celtic instruments, as well as imported mandolins, banjos, and accordions. The bodhrán (*crowdy crawn* in Cornish) has remained especially popular for years” (Celtic Life). Like other Celtic nations Cornish music can be seen often with dancing. “Cornish dance music is especially known for the cushion dance from the 19th century, which was based on an old tune adapted for French court dances” (Celtic Life). The cushion dance was “an old English round dance in which a dancer and the partner of his choice knelt and kissed on a cushion that he placed before her” (“Cushion Dance”). One event that was common were the ...”music festivals called *troyl*.” (Celtic Life). The word troyl often appears to be interchangeable with the word ceilidhs (“Troyls – Cornish Celebrations”). Eventually, later in the 20th century choral music was also introduced (Celtic Life).

The Isle of Man is probably one of the least well-known Celtic nations. It is “one of the British Isles, located in the Irish Sea off the northwest coast of England” (“Isle of Man”). Outside of the commonalities it shares with other Celtic music, the Isle of Man does not have all that much information available about its music. However, unique to Isle of Man, their “...music has been strongly affected by English folk song as well as British popular music” (Celtic Life). Like Brittany, there has been a roots revival of the Manx folk music along with a revival of the language and culture in general during the 20th century (Celtic Life).

The traditional music of Wales is closely “related to the Celtic music of countries such as Ireland and Scotland” (Celtic Life). However, “Welsh folk music has distinctive instrumentation

and song types” (Celtic Life). This includes the fiddles as “an integral part” (Celtic Life). Although the fiddle is important, “[t]he most traditional of Welsh instruments is the harp. The triple harp (*telyn deires*, ‘three-row harp’) is a particularly distinctive tradition: it has three rows of strings, with every semitone separately represented” (Celtic Life). Similar to all the other countries, Welsh music holds importance to dancing. Folk music “is often heard at a *twmpath* (folk dance session), *gŵyl werin* (folk festival) or *noson lawen* (traditional party or ceilidh)” (Celtic Life).

Performance

The flute is an instrument that is common in Celtic Music. As a flute player myself, this made a recital a good medium to demonstrate the Celtic style. I was heavily motivated by my Scottish and Celtic heritage along with the opportunity to perform some of my favorite music in a professional level. This paper and the performance were extremely important to me. As mentioned earlier, music can be a great way to connect generations. I grew up with Celtic Music being played on road trips or around the house, so getting this opportunity to share my heritage and take part in it publicly meant a lot to me.

Both the program and the paper were structured the same way. The first piece performed was titled “Morag’s Reel” as played by the contemporary band Wolfstone. The band Wolfstone was chosen because I had listened to some of their pieces growing up. They “...are a Scottish folk rock institution. Between 1989 and the present day, they’ve toured the world, recorded and released numerous albums, over the years gathering a huge following and mainstream success” (“Wolfstone”). Following this piece, the next segment was eleven traditional tunes split up by

area of origin. First were the Irish pieces consisting of “The Galway Hornpipe”, “The Gaelic Club”, “Dúlamán”, and probably the most well-known, “Drunken Sailor.” The next section consisted of the traditional Breton tune “Toutouic,” the traditional English tune “Sir Roger de Coverley,” and the traditional Welsh tune “Men of Harlech.” Then the Scottish section included “The Sky Boat Song”, “Shaun Truish Willichan”, “Loch Lomond”, and “Scotland the Brave.” After the area-based sections, a ballad was performed known as “Glenglass” by the band Wolfstone. Finally, the last piece performed was a longer Celtic Woman piece titled “The Coast of Galicia.” Overall, the performance ran around twenty minutes.

When preparing for the performance, I had a lot of different factors to think about. Searching for repertoire I decided to mix pieces that are strictly traditional with some that had been performed by contemporary groups. It soon became clear that the traditional pieces were short and meant to be repeated. This gave me room to add more ornamentations and sometimes change tempo as I continued to add pieces to the performance. This fits what I discovered about Celtic Music as I was researching; the music was designed to be repetitive for dancing and embellished as time went on. When organizing the performance, I decided the best way to do it was to organize the shorter pieces together by area. I also decided for the beginning and ending pieces they should be longer; to catch the audiences’ attention in the beginning, and to leave them with a sense of wonder at the end. I had one longer piece left that was more of a ballad that I decided to put before the final piece in order to slow down my playing and calm the mood before I ended with a more challenging, and faster piece. Some of the pieces I chose I had already heard ahead of time which meant that they might be known by some of the audience. This decision was made because it meant that these pieces could also help catch the audiences’ attention and it displayed a general style of music to start off. By starting with a contemporary

example, followed by traditional music, it gave a sense of traveling back to the origins of the music; the first piece being a “gateway” to the older pieces. Then ending with the last two contemporary pieces brought the audience back to present day with pieces they could listen to on their own.

One thing that I found interesting after researching further was the lack of rests in the piece. As I was preparing for the performance, I learned it was exceedingly difficult finding places to breath. I did not give it a second thought until my research proved that there was an obvious reason for that. Earlier I mentioned “...that this music type typically has few rests” (Sliotar). This is the reason it is hard to find breathing points; any point I decided to breathe put a break in the music where it was not designed to have one. As much as this was difficult, it was also a good challenge, and I am glad my research validated that idea. I also found the accenting of evenly spaced beats to be very natural. One extremely strong example is “The Drunken Sailor.” A lot of the pieces that are in 6/8 time also demonstrate this concept wonderfully. This means there are six, eighth notes grouped together in a measure. This makes it easier to keep time as the instrumentalist.

Conclusion

Evidently, Celtic Music is influenced by the Celtic Identity. Whether you look at Scotland, Ireland, Brittany, or one of the other six nations, there are many similarities tying the music together. When learning about a genre of music, it is important to learn the history, culture, and context paired with the music. It is especially important to understand these different factors of music in order to fully appreciate the genre and even take part in the culture itself.

This helped me connect to my personal heritage and gave me a chance to perform some of the music I grew up listening to. Learning to see the culture behind the music, along with some of the deliberate musical choices, was a great experience for me. I feel closer to my history than I ever did before. Music is overall a great way to connect to one's culture, which is what I hope to inspire in the future.

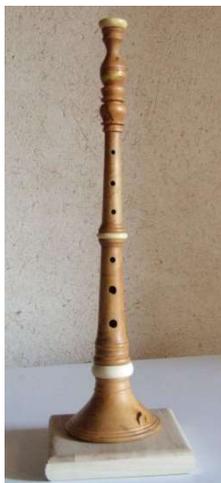
Instrument Index

Bodhrán



(Brown)

Bombarde



(“Bombarde”)

Shawm



(“Shawm”)

Hammered Dulcimer



(“Dulcimer”)

Scottish Highland Bagpipe



(Johnson)

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