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**Abstract**

My doctoral research explores the intersection of music, literature and nationalism in nineteenth-century Ireland and how people intentionally use the past for particular goals in the present. Music, embedded in literature, can serve as a lens to allow us to rethink the ways in which people interpret their history in the present as well as how we write the history of the Irish nation and nationalism. I consider how descriptions of music and music-making, musical notations, and song texts were used in the 1800s within literature to promote nationalist—cultural and political—ends. I ask how Irish people today view their nineteenth-century past in light of music, literature and nationalism. Inherent in my project are issues of violence done to oral traditions and struggles of linguistic representation in the development of Hiberno-English. I address the role of the artist in political movements; gaps and closures between popular arts; efforts and perspectives of a literati class; and questions of gender in national representation. I contribute to ideas and methods of ethnomusicology as I engage in ethnography in the archive and in the field site of contemporary Ireland.

**Introduction**

…In all which concerns my national music, I speak with national enthusiasm; and much indeed do we stand indebted to the most charming of all the sciences for the eminence it has obtained for us; for in *music only* do you English allow us poor Irish any superiority[[1]](#footnote-1).

Glorvina, the heroine in Sydney Owenson’s 1806 national tale *The Wild Irish Girl*, invokes music as the one element of Irishness that is respected and acknowledged by the English. For Glorvina, Irish music is a marker of the nation and all Irish people are united through their appreciation and understanding of it. In this fictional epistolary novel, music mediates nearly every meeting between Horatio, the English protagonist, and the Irish inhabitants. Owenson uses these many musical encounters to show that the native Irish have a vibrant, beautiful culture and an identity and heritage that should be recognized and valued as distinctly Irish. *The Wild Irish Girl* offers a sample of the sorts of themes my doctoral research will address, specifically the intersection of music, literature and nationalism in nineteenth-century Ireland and how people make intentional use of the past for particular goals in the present.

At this time, precedent for the elevation of “folk” culture had been set throughout Europe by Herder’s two volumes, *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* and *Volkslieder* (published 1778/79) and his conceptualizations of folk music and national culture. Additionally, James Macpherson’s *Ossian* (published 1779) had captured the Enlightenment imagination and catapulted discussion of Celtic cultures onto the European stage. On the foundation of these ideas and in the context of British domination in Ireland, Irish and Anglo-Irish authors and musicians engaged with each other’s arts in order to construct a modern nationalistic Irish identity. This space of creative national identity building through musical and literary means is a key focal point of my research.

In nineteenth-century Europe, and specifically in Ireland, the intersection between literature and music formed an affective space, a crossroads, where ideas and sentiments of modern nationhood and national identity began to be developed. At the crossroads, ideas of the past were used strategically within music and literature to strengthen claims of national identity. By the beginning of this period, English had become the most prevalent language in Ireland due to intentional efforts by the British government to repress Irish Gaelic. This led to an ironic situation in the century prior to the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922 in which Irish authors such as Sydney Owenson, William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory, as well as musicians like Edward Bunting and Thomas Moore seem compelled to make their cases for nationalism in the language of the colonizer. Even so, authors used music to move beyond linguistic barriers and speak to the creation of nationalist ideas in this crucial time for the development of Irish identity and independence.

**The Project, Timeframe, Approaches and Theoretical Issues**

In my doctoral project, I begin at the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival, a key point in antiquarian engagement with Irish traditional music, and end with the founding of the Abbey Theatre in 1903 because this move toward drama signaled a turn in Celtic Revival. There are a number of overlapping trends and moments in music and literature, usually with some relation to the political situation, over the course of this slightly extended nineteenth-century. Tracing the trajectory of these intersections and overlaps over the long term has yet to be attempted in scholarship in either music or literature.There has been significant research on the political movements of nationalism, research on literary works as well as musical sources in nineteenth-century Ireland. However, there has been a very limited amount of scholarship that seeks to bring together the national, literary and musical approaches to this time period of Irish history, (Harry White’s *Music and the Irish Literary Imagination* (2008) being a notable exception). My research addresses this gap in scholarship. I will approach sources from a distinctly interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on music scholarship, historical ethnomusicological processes, as well as literary studies methodologies. I seek to bring together these divergent strands of historiography and original sources to weave them into something that will speak to our understanding of nationalism and national identity creation in a new way.

From literary studies, this project considers how descriptions of music and music-making, musical notations, and song texts were used in the 1800s within literature (i.e., fiction, poetry, oral traditions, children’s stories) to promote nationalist—cultural and/or political—ends. From the perspectives of historical ethnomusicology, I will also examine how music, such as songs and ballads, made use of English language texts, tropes and literary traditions for the same purposes. How did authors, musicians, nationalists and every combination of the three make use of their own artistic, historical, political, and cultural pasts in order to contribute to ideas of Irishness? Additionally, I ask how Irish people today view their nineteenth-century past, in light of music, literature and nationalism. I will look at how artists of the earlier time period strategically employed their histories compared with how twenty-first-century Irish people of various backgrounds, artists, and professionals view and engage with the nineteenth-century as their own past. Through this interdisciplinary approach, I hope to gain valuable insights into how individuals perceive, interact with, and use strategically narratives of earlier times. I will seek out this hitherto largely unexplored space formed at the crossroads of nationalism, music and literature. I am enthusiastic about the possibilities of this research and I am anxious to see how this train of pursuit will contribute to scholarship on nationalism, creation of identity, and strategic interpretations of the past.

I also hope to help break away from stereotypes of cultural and political nationalism as binaries. Nationalism as I examine it in this dissertation project wends its way along a curving path, ranging from the promotion of national identity and culture on one end toward a more political and action-oriented approach on the other. However, I believe that it is critical to recognize that this path twists and bends according to differing perspectives; divergent parties along it make use of the past, music, and literature for their own particular ends. My work complicates singular or binary approaches of the past and proposes alternative ways of approaching history and nationalism as multiple and intentionally constructed. Music, embedded in literature, can serve as a lens that will allow us to rethink the ways in which people interpret their history in the present as well as how we write the history of the Irish nation and nationalism itself.

There are at least three elephants in the room that must be discussed in the exploration of music, literature, and nationalism in nineteenth-century Ireland. The first is the changes to oral traditions that are collected and codified in written or print forms. Oral traditions, whether in terms of folklore, tales, songs, or instrumental music, are fluid and ever changing along with the performers, listeners and the context. When formerly flexible art forms become solidified in printed and written forms, numerous things happen: versions become either “right” and “wrong” based on their relation to the print version, the contexts for performance or participation change and often the audience also changes. For example, Moore’s *Melodies* were printed specifically for aristocratic consumers in cultural centers in England and Ireland.

Another issue is that of language. The nineteenth century saw English become increasingly the primary language of all social classes in Ireland. This had implications for collectors of music and folklore, many of whom did not have a functional use of the Irish language, if they had any Irish at all. Collectors of music made strategic choices in what to publish and in what language. Many translators of poetry from Irish to English used more or less interpretive license in their translations, in some cases the English versions barely reference the original Gaelic. Later, despite Douglas Hyde’s efforts to support and teach the Irish language through the Gaelic League towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Literary Revival turned to the English language to present ideas of Irishness and Irish culture. How did this gap between languages affect different forms of music in the nineteenth century? How was it addressed in literature? And how did nationalists reconcile the ideological need for a native language with the reality that English had largely supplanted that language?

Lastly, it is important to note the difference between the lives, priorities, and perspectives of literary, educated elites of nineteenth century Ireland who tended to produce much writing that has been preserved and the largely uneducated, often illiterate, poorer and peasant classes who have not left textual sources for us to study their lives. This ties into issues of power and voice. How did the common folk view the nationalisms developed and promoted by literati such as Owenson and Maturin and later the authors of the Literary Revival? Did music function the same way for people who encountered it, not through nationalist literature, but through sessions in the kitchen or at crossroad dances?

**Conclusion**

Through archival and ethnographic research I consider the ways that music, literature and nationalism intersected in the nineteenth-century in Ireland and how the past can be strategically imagined and employed. Inherent in my project are issues of violence done to oral traditions when they are transformed into written products and commodities, the struggles of linguistic representation of one language in that of another (i.e. the development of Hiberno-English), and linguistic competition between native language and the language of the dominant power and the politics of meaning in the use of each. My project also addresses the role of the artist (musician/composer/ author/poet) in political movements, the gaps and closures between popular arts and the efforts and perspectives of a literati class, and questions of gender in national representation.

In my broadly interdisciplinary dissertation research, I will make use of and contribute to several different disciplinary fields. As I engage in contemporary fieldwork and archival work in Ireland, I apply and question theoretical approaches and methods relevant in both anthropology and ethnomusicology. I approach music from a textual and historical angle, arguing that music is a powerful force for nationalism, particularly when joined with literature of various forms. In this I use historical musicology, literary approaches, and theories of nationalism. Lastly, as I consider strategic constructions and interpretations of the past, my project works towards a thoughtful interpretation of modern day culture and politics in Ireland. By bringing these diverse strands of scholarship together into a single project, my work opens up new horizons of scholarly inquiry into Ireland in the nineteenth century.

1. Owenson, Sydney, *The Wild Irish Girl*. Edited by Kathryn Kirkpatrick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)