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TRADITIONAL IRISH SONG AND STORYTELLING:

An Artistic Approach of Performing Traditional Irish Song and Storytelling to a Modern Audience Outside of Ireland

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ABSTRACT

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Irish oral tradition is an ancient artform that has an active global presence. Due to this global appeal, performing musicians and storytellers could experience challenges with modern audiences that are not familiar with the Irish oral tradition artform.

My goal as a grassroots level Irish traditional musician and storyteller was to explore artistic approaches of performing to a modern audience outside of Ireland for a better understanding of the art form and apply those suitable aspects to my own artistic approach to be a better artist.

Qualitative data was collected through interviewing top Irish professionals with vast backgrounds and experiences of Irish oral tradition to gain a deep understanding of the art form and apply that knowledge to my artistic approach.

The results of this research produced three main themes, which were 1). Placing value on the origins of each song or story in Irish oral tradition, 2). The importance of artistic expression by the performer and 3). The performer's attention to artistic approach in their performances to all audiences. These themes were the focus of each of the professionals in this research in relation to the foundation and integrity of the artform.

These main themes are similar throughout my artistic journey into the Irish oral tradition of song and storytelling and the manner to which I currently perform them to modern audiences outside of Ireland.

I present my interpretation of these artistic themes in Tales & Tunes, my original solo performance of sean nós songs and storytelling demonstrating the artistic approach to a modern audience outside of Ireland.

Keywords: Traditional Irish Song, Irish Storytelling, Gaelic Culture, Sean nós singing, Performance, Artistic Expression, Irish oral tradition

TIIVISTELMÄ

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Irlantilainen suullisen kerronnan perinne on vanha, edelleen maailmanlaajuisesti toimiva taidemuoto. Esiintyvät muusikot ja tarinankertojat voivat suosiesta huolimatta kohdata nyky-yleisöjen edessä haasteita, koska yleisöt eivät taidemuotona tunne perinteistä irlantilaista suullista kerrontaa.

Tavoitteeni ruohonjuuritason irlantilaisen perinteen muusikkona ja tarinankertojana oli tutkia taiteellisia lähestymistapoja esiintymiseen nyky-yleisölle Irlannin ulkopuolella, ymmärtää taidemuotoa paremmin ja kehittyä taiteilijana soveltaen tietoa omaan taiteilijuuteeni.

Kvalitatiivinen tieto kerättiin haastatellen irlantilaisen musiikin ja suullisen kerronnan huippuosajia tavoitteena syventää taidemuodon ymmärrystä ja soveltaa tietoa.

Tutkimuksen tulokset jakautuvat kolmeen teemaan, jotka olivat 1) Jokaisen laulun ja tarinan alkuperän arvostaminen, 2) Taiteellisen ilmaisun tärkeys ja 3) Esiintyjän panostaminen yksityiskohtiin ja taiteilijuuteen. Teemat suhteessa taidemuodon perustaan ja muotoon olivat tutkimuksen ja jokaisen haastateltavan keskiössä.

Pääteemat vastaavat taiteilijan matkaani kohti irlantilaisen suullisen perinteen musiikkia ja tarinankerrontaa, samalla tavoin kuin esitän niitä eri yleisöille Irlannin ulkopuolella.

Johtopäätöksen taiteellisista teemoista demonstroin Tales & Tunes -sooloesityksessä sean nós -laulujen ja tarinankerronnan kautta taiteellista lähestymistapaa Irlannin ulkopuolelle nyky-yleisöille.

Avainsanat: irlantilainen perinnelaulu, irlantilainen tarinankerronta, kelttiläinen kulttuuri, Sean nós -laulu, esitys, taiteellinen ilmaisu, irlantilainen suullinen perinne

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	6
2	A GLIMPSE INTO IRISH ORAL TRADITION	7
3	BRIEF EVOLUTION OF THE ART FORM.....	12
	3.1 Societal Role and Purpose	12
	3.2 The Traditional Style.....	14
	3.3 Contemporary Style for a More Global Appeal	15
	3.4 Traditional Irish Music and Storytelling Today.....	16
4	ARTISTIC BACKGROUND	18
	4.1 Oral Tradition Beginnings.....	18
	4.2 Entering the Tradition	19
	4.3 The Irish Festival of Oulu	22
	4.4 Performance Background	24
5	AIM OF THE STUDY	27
6	RESEARCH METHOD	29
	6.1 Interview Experts	30
	6.2 Interview Questions.....	33
	6.3 Ethical Issues	34
7	RESULTS	35
	7.1 Three Main Themes.....	35
	7.2 Origins and Reflection	36
	7.3 Artistic Expression	37
	7.4 Artistic Approach.....	38
8	CONCLUSION	41
	8.1 My Artistic Approach.....	43
	8.2 Tales & Tunes Final Performance.....	46
	REFERENCES.....	50

1 INTRODUCTION

Traditional Irish music and storytelling are ancient art forms of oral tradition that have existed in Ireland for 2,000 years since the time of the Celts (Mulraney 2020). Irish oral tradition are remnants of early Celtic culture and still play an active and significant role as a living tradition in modern Irish society today.

Globally, traditional Irish music and storytelling currently have an active presence. The Irish diaspora have taken their cultural heritage with them and because of this, Irish traditional music, song, dance, language, GAA sport, storytelling, poetry etc. are celebrated all over the world. Irish pubs, Irish festivals, Irish culture centres and clusters of Irish music and culture enthusiasts are celebrated and found everywhere, even in Oulu, Finland, home to the northernmost Irish festival in the world, The Irish Festival of Oulu. Certain humorous or edgy content of Irish oral tradition may not always be fully comprehended by a modern audience outside of Ireland, especially an audience that may have little or no exposure to authentic Irish culture.

I have professionally worked and actively participated in Irish Oral tradition since 2004 as a grassroots level traditional Irish musician and storyteller and as founder and Artistic Director of The Irish Festival of Oulu. I will go into more detail about my professional experience in Chapter 4.

The aim of my thesis research is to identify alternative artistic approaches of performing traditional Irish song and storytelling to a modern audience outside of Ireland and apply significant elements to my own artistic approach. I aim to use qualitative research by interviewing seven professionals of Irish oral tradition for a deeper understanding of the art form and apply that knowledge and experience to my own artistic approach. This thesis will be intertwined with Tales & Tunes, my original solo performance of sean nós (old traditional style) songs and storytelling to demonstrate my artistic approach to a largely Finnish audience.

2 A GLIMPSE INTO IRISH ORAL TRADITION

Traditional Irish music is one of the most popular forms of folk music played around the world today. It is a traditional art form of oral tradition, meaning tunes, songs and stories are primarily learnt by ear and passed down from one generation to the next. This is a characteristic representative of a living tradition.

“Irish traditional music began as an oral tradition, passed on from generation to generation by listening, learning by ear, and without formally writing the tunes on paper.” (Mulraney 2020)

In Irish Gaelic, traditional Irish storytelling is known as Scéalaíocht. Ó Dónaill’s Irish-English Dictionary defines seanchaí as *“a custodian of tradition, a historian, reciter of ancient lore; a traditional storyteller.”*

“Storytelling is an intimate and interactive art. A storyteller tells from memory rather than reading from a book. A tale is not just the spoken equivalent of a literary short story. It has no set text but is endlessly re-created in the telling. The listener is an essential part of the storytelling process. For stories to live, they need the hearts, minds and ears of listeners. Without the listener there is no story” (Storytellers of Ireland Organisation 2022).

Through my experiences, traditional Irish music, song and storytelling represents the rich, colourful heritage of Irish culture and society that has been woven into the social fabric by generations of musicians, singers and storytellers.

Traditional Irish music, to say the least, has been a way of life in Ireland and a major aspect of a social society in many a village or city for many years. Only with a visit to a pub in the rural Irish countryside or an old pub in any Irish city will one find a lively session of Irish music, song or storytelling. It is one of the beautiful cultural attractions of Ireland alongside the Irish people and the beautiful Irish landscapes and it serves as a leading cultural export to the world. As well, to demonstrate the value of Ireland’s traditional music to its society, *“Ireland is the only nation to have a musical instrument as a national emblem.” (O’Donnell 2013)*

To experience a lively Irish music session in Ireland as a listener or as a fellow musician is an authentic cultural experience. One can witness the liveliness and synergy amongst musicians of a set of fast reels or jigs, the joy and fun when everyone in the pub sings a favourite such as “Wild Rover” or often but not always, the silence that befalls when a traditional singer sings a ballad or traditional song in sean nós style (the traditional style of unaccompanied singing in Gaelic). There is etiquette, understanding and passion amongst the musicians for the tradition. The performers are from all walks of life ranging from policemen, teachers, postmen, mechanics, politicians, lawyers, engineers, students and youngsters as well as professional musicians and the love of the tradition is what they all commonly share.

Traditional Irish music, song and storytelling in Ireland varies from county to county, village to village, north to south and east to west, from one region to another. The various styles of playing the music, playing the instrument, ornamentation, singing or storytelling represent the regional diversity, beauty, uniqueness and originality of this ancient art form and the artistic expression and individuality of musicians, singers and storytellers contribute very much to the tradition. There are far too many legendary musicians, singers and storytellers through the generations to name, who have embraced the tradition with respect and passion while subtly putting their own influence on it.

Presently, the Irish culture genre has an active and successful global presence for which there are countless contributing factors. These key factors stand out and include the global population of Irish diaspora, Irish tourism, Riverdance, U2, the overall appealing attraction of Irish music, dance and culture, Irish festivals, global tours of dance and music, folk radio, television, social media and the legendary Irish pub experience.

As of 2017, there were 7,193 Irish pubs in Ireland (Foley 2017) and in 2014 an estimated 7,000 plus Irish themed pubs outside of Ireland in over 53 countries (Kelly 2014), including St. Michael’s Irish pub, the only Irish Pub in Oulu, Finland.

According to the Department of Irish Foreign Affairs Irish Abroad unit, in 2017 there were:

- 70 million people claim Irish roots worldwide
- 36 million claim Irish roots in the USA
- 4,9 million people live in the Republic of Ireland
- 3,601 million Irish citizens estimated live outside of Ireland

“Our diaspora is one of Ireland’s greatest resources: through the contribution our people make to the nations they migrate to; through the bonds they forge with the peoples of those countries, our migrants have allowed Ireland to have global connections far beyond our size.” (Higgins 2014)

Irish tourism also plays a major role and in 2019, there were 11,3 million tourists to Ireland which was an increase of 100,000 tourists from 2018. (Tourism Ireland 2020)

Additionally, there are thousands of Irish festivals and thousands of Irish musicians around the world. The Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, or The All Ireland Fleadh (Festival) organised by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, attracts around 400,000 people annually and is the largest Irish festival in the world. Other significant festivals for Irish music and culture are Milwaukie Irish Fest in the USA, Celtic Connections in Scotland, Festival Interceltique de Lorient in France, numerous Irish festivals in the United Kingdom and Australia and as well The Irish Festival of Oulu in Finland which is the northernmost Irish festival in the world.

“Comhaltas is a cultural movement concerned with the promotion and preservation of the music, dance and language of Ireland. As the world grows more complex, it seems to us more important than ever that we take a strong stand in maintaining a living folk tradition” (Comhaltas 2022).

Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann must also be mentioned as the primary organisation responsible for the global promotion and preservation of traditional Irish music, song, dance and Irish Gaelic language. Founded in 1951, there are Comhaltas Branches in every county in Ireland as well as numerous branches throughout the world. The world’s northernmost Comhaltas Branch is The Irish Music Society of Oulu located in Oulu, Finland.

Simply put, Irish music and culture can be found everywhere in the world where Irish pubs and Irish people can be found as well as where there is a presence of former visitors to Ireland or people who have experienced Irish culture in one way or another.

Irish immigration along with the lively and colourful appeal of Irish music and culture have largely contributed to the global attraction of Irish music and culture. I believe the credit should go to the artists and performers for the global fascination for it is they who have thrilled and entertained audiences by showcasing Irish traditional music, song and storytelling respectively. While some successful Irish festivals are located inside areas of large Irish populations, there are also many like The Copenhagen Irish Festival (Denmark), The Irish Festival of Oulu (Finland) or The Abruzzo Irish Festival (Italy) that have very little Irish population and are successful because of the popularity and enjoyment of Irish music and culture. Of course, these events are all led by organisers and volunteers who have an endless passion for Irish music and culture.

Riverdance has also played a major role spreading and taking Irish music and traditional dance successfully to all corners of the globe for 28 years since performing during the seven-minute interval at Eurovision back in 1994. Riverdance, for example, in Finland is one of the most well-known aspects of Irish culture and has deeply inspired the active Irish dance scene as well as the traditional Irish music scene.

Legendary bands such as six-time Grammy award winners The Chieftains, led by the late great Paddy Moloney, have served as global ambassadors of the tradition by transcending traditional Irish music from the kitchens, parlours and pubs of Ireland to performances in some of the most prestigious concert venues on the planet to a global audience. This includes a performance for Pope John Paul II before an audience of one million people at Phoenix Park in Dublin in 1979 to a 2011 concert attended by former Irish President Mary McAleese and Queen Elizabeth II during her first ever official visit to Ireland as well as countless sold-out concert performances and collaborations with the likes of The Rolling Stones, Sting, Sinéad O'Connor, Dolly Parton and Luciano Pavarotti to name a few. They

even recorded music in outer space, but that's another story altogether. In 2015, The Chieftains performed to a lively sold-out audience in Oulu's prestigious Oulu Music Centre at the 10th Anniversary Irish Festival of Oulu.

Other bands like The Dubliners, Lúnasa, Usher's Island with John Doyle, Michael Mc Goldrick, Andy Irvine, Paddy Glackin and Dónal Lunny, Altan, Dervish, Clannad, Enya, The Bothy Band, Planxty, Sweeney's Men, Danú, Martin Hayes and Dennis Cahill and many, many more have performed and taken their own regional styles of music, song and stories to top festivals and concert venues worldwide such as Carnegie Hall, Albert Hall, Hollywood Bowl, Oulu City theatre and Oulu Music Centre in Oulu, Finland.

3 BRIEF EVOLUTION OF THE ART FORM

Briefly explaining the evolution of the Irish traditional music or storytelling tradition is impossible because of its ancient heritage. I will, however, briefly introduce a few relevant aspects that I find interesting and significant based on my knowledge and experience of traditional Irish music and culture as an experienced, grass-roots Irish musician, time spent immersed and learning about the Gaelic tradition in the music rich southwest Donegal Gaeltacht as well as my 17 years of experience as founder and Artistic Director of The Irish Festival of Oulu.

3.1 Societal Role and Purpose

Irish traditional music and storytelling have played a significant role in shaping the culture heritage of Ireland and both form a unique richness of oral tradition in Ireland, perhaps among one of the richest folklore traditions in the world. Both musicians and storytellers were held in high regard in ancient Irish society.

“In ancient Celtic society, bards held a position of esteem, second only to kings. Bards memorized vast amounts of poetry which they performed live, and their poems and songs were often the only historical record available. Some may consider them to be historians. Bards evolved into storytellers called "seanchaí" who wandered from town to town. In this informal way, an ancient oral literary tradition continued into modern times” (Donachie 2021).

One must understand the context and purpose of Irish traditional music and storytelling through time and its role in everyday society. One must consider how can we ever fully understand that aspect being that we only know what we experience from our own cultural heritage and social experiences. We read about oral traditions, past times and earlier life or have glimpses of the past through grandparents or an older generation telling us about past life and culture, but how much can we fully experience first-hand in such a modern, technologically advanced society with smartphones, electric bicycles and thousands of channels to choose from on the television. Most of us cannot imagine walking 10 miles barefoot in the

miles barefoot in the snow both ways to school or life without running water, electricity or livestock sharing space in the old homestead.

Just 100 - 300 years ago, traditional Irish music, song and storytelling was a form of social interaction between people of rural and urban communities. Traditional Irish music was played at social gatherings and was similar to Finnish traditional music in that the purpose was for social dancing. Both genres are social dance music and both Ireland and Finland have very rich dancing cultures. At fairs, which were both social gatherings and an event to buy, sell or trade various items, traditional Irish music and song could be heard.

It's also important to understand that the music and culture evolved alongside life and society. As society developed, the traditional music, songs and stories evolved to reflect life. Nowadays in modern society with development away from an agricultural rural society and with considerably less social interaction due to smart phones, social media, Netflix and a plethora of free time opportunities to choose from, people do not naturally or regularly gather at the market, neighbour's house, local pub or in the field to play music or tell stories. So, the development of modern culture has affected the purpose and role Irish traditional music, song and storytelling have in our society today. This development is so great, that many people in their perspective countries are not interested nor even care about their own oral traditional art forms.

Today the Irish festival, Irish pub, band tours, cultural or artistic events are some of the main opportunities and reasons to experience traditional Irish music, song, dance, storytelling and all aspects of Irish culture. Its purpose and its role have changed to be more of a form of entertainment that includes a global fan base and audience. For many, like myself fortunately, its role can be a lifestyle or livelihood for professional and grassroots musicians. People travel specifically to the Irish culture events and musicians seek other musicians and events for the purpose to join in music sessions. They are happy to play a small part of the age-old tradition. Irish music and culture enthusiasts will travel great distances across borders for the experience and such evidence has occurred annually even in Oulu with visitors coming from throughout Finland, Europe and even as far away as

Australia. Picture 1 demonstrates the beauty of traditional Irish music with numerous musicians from all walks of life enjoying the tunes and craic (*fun* in Irish Gaelic) of a large traditional Irish music session at The Irish Festival of Oulu. Dancers can be seen on the backstage, too.



PICTURE 1. Traditional Irish music sessions are at the heart of Irish oral tradition and a successful part of The Irish Festival of Oulu. Photo courtesy of The Irish Festival of Oulu, 2013.

3.2 The Traditional Style

Let's also briefly introduce the style of the genre. Traditional Irish music and song further evolved outside of Ireland due to greater exposure to radio, recording, television, funding for folklore, awareness and the collection of music not to mention the numerous established Irish music and culture centres spread around the globe.

“It wasn't until 1762 that tunes were officially written down for the first time and collectors began to travel the country compiling music that can still be viewed today. The Traditional Music Archive in Dublin holds the largest collection of traditional and folk music in the world” (Mulraney 2020).

Since the 1960's, there have been many bands and musicians performing pure drop traditional Irish music with no compromise. There have been sean nós Gaelic language singers who sing in the old style with little or no compromise such as the legendary Bothy Band. These musicians are very much respected and many people, including myself, prefer traditional Irish music, song and story-telling as traditional and as pure as possible.

An aspect worth noting about the tradition is that there are numerous stories, tunes and songs in Irish traditional music in Gaelic or English that may have up to 25 verses. Some date back up to 1,000 years ago, some never written down and many lost forever. Some of these songs were never recorded or rarely heard outside of the communities or regions where they originate and were performed. The traditional style of singing was unaccompanied without music, traditionally sang in Irish Gaelic known as sean nós. It was also common that a renowned storyteller could tell one story that lasted for numerous evenings while gathered around the fire (Sherlock 2021).

3.3 Contemporary Style for a More Global Appeal

There have also been Irish bands and musicians who have the trad style as the backbone of their music but have combined modern, contemporary, pop, jazz, folk punk or rock influences to reach a broader global audience. They have had great success and fair play to them in reaching a global audience who may then seek out more traditional Irish music or even travel to, for example, the rural Gaeltacht regions of Donegal, Ireland from where those styles of music originate. Such examples are represented in the music from bands like Skara Brae, Altan, Clannad, Enya and Clann Mac Ruairí respectively and just to name a few.

Gael Linn's chief executive, Antoine Ó Coileáin, had this to say about Skara Brae's solo debut album released in 1971 (Long 2021):

"The album is considered one of the most important albums in its genre. Skara Brae brought the influence of pop and folk music to bear on traditional Irish songs, with arrangements influenced by the Beatles, Pentangle and Joni Mitchell. It's notable for its vocal harmonisation of songs in Irish, especially so in the singing of Maighread and Tríona."

Maighread Ni Domhnaill stated:

“Some people saw it as a total desecration of the old songs...” “Our father was telling us to take these songs and make our own of them. Our father had this fear that the songs would die, and that people were losing interest in them, and this was a way to seducing young people into listening to them again.”

I find it valuable and important to understand and listen to the very traditional style of traditional Irish music or singing as well as contemporary styles to experience diverse versions of the music and songs to form one’s own preference.

An example on YouTube displays three significant examples representing the traditional and contemporary styles of singing a traditional Irish Gaelic song “Óró Sé Do Bheatha ‘Bhaile”. Example 1 sang in the traditional sean nós style by Darrach Ó Catháin on April 1st, 1980 (Vaple21 2006.). Example 2 sang in Reggae style by Sinead O’Connor (Lokiloclays 2011.). Example 3 sang in a vocal harmonizing modern pop style with traditional and modern instruments by Celtic Woman (Celtic Woman Official 2020.).

Also worth noting is the amount of mainstream pop and rock performers such as Ed Sheeran, Sting, Sinead O’Connor, The Rolling Stones, Thin Lizzy, Bob Dillon and Metallica who have performed or recorded Traditional Irish songs which in turn has also attracted mainstream audiences to the world of Irish traditional music.

3.4 Traditional Irish Music and Storytelling Today

Today, very few people want to sit and listen quietly to a 25 versed ballad or Gaelic sean nós song about adventurous rambling in the wee countryside while they are out at the pub on their one free night of the month or listen to a story that lasts for 5 evenings by the fire. Who would be interested let alone have the time to sit and listen to such folklore when “Ozark” or “Breaking Bad” is on Netflix? There are too many other new forms of entertainment, distractions or things to do.

I would say very few people, only the hard-core purists of the tradition who are mad for trad like myself, would enjoy experiencing it in person, on a recording or CD. This is the true reality. Those people seek it, too, by seeking out and travelling to Irish festivals, events, pubs or even the rural Gaeltacht areas where it is still possible to experience. I base this observation on active personal experiences travelling to not-so-easy-to-reach rural places with other enthusiasts, musicians and participants.

Many musicians and professionals, including myself, would agree that traditional Irish music and song are the backbone of the genre and will always be the backbone because it is a clear starting point of where to begin one's musical journey. When one begins to learn traditional Irish music or song in Ireland or, like in mine and other's case outside of Ireland, they learn traditional tunes or songs on traditional instruments. As well, 100% of all the Irish music sessions I have experienced or played along with in sessions have been solely traditional. Yes, that means no spoons or djembes.

There are enough musicians in Ireland and abroad who passionately enjoy the music and will therefore continue to keep it alive while inspiring and passing on the tradition onwards to youngsters and newcomers. The same I will say about storytelling.

The evolution and purpose of traditional Irish music, song and storytelling has simply changed with the development and advancement of life and society. It still plays an important role to many people's lives today, especially to those who make a living by performing, managing or organising Irish music and culture events. Many people the world over still enjoy it too, proof being in the global number of successful Irish festivals and the people who attend them as well as numerous legendary Irish pubs offering live traditional music with the televisions turned off. Technology platforms and social media, love it or hate it, has also made it much more accessible and easier to perform virtually, teach or learn especially during the time of the Covid pandemic 2020-2022.

4 ARTISTIC BACKGROUND

Many Irish musicians, singers and storytellers are born into the tradition, inspired by family members or someone in the community or hail from one of numerous music rich areas in Ireland where the tradition is at their fingertips. Many are born into a musical pedigree of families, households and communities that are keepers of the oral tradition where music, song and storytelling remain an everyday part of life and are passed down from generation to generation. So fortunate are these people to live immersed in or near the great resource of the tradition.

Like many musicians, my interest is inspired solely by the tradition and my Irish roots. My journey has been a gradual organic journey into traditional Irish music, song, storytelling and the Gaelic language that began as a young boy through unconventional Irish connections passed down through my family and community in rural North Carolina, USA. My passion for Irish oral tradition is who I am, my purpose in life and makes up my artistic and human existence. It has been a natural calling to return to my Gaelic roots with everything falling into place naturally.

I live and breathe Irish oral tradition on the daily basis. I am fortunate to play a micro part of the global and ancient oral tradition as a professional Artistic Director of an Irish festival and as grass roots musician and storyteller.

4.1 Oral Tradition Beginnings

My journey into Irish oral tradition was born out of a respect and passionate interest from my family's Irish genealogy and ancestors to answer the questions; where did I come from, from whom and from what cultural roots?

I grew up in rural North Carolina in the Oak Grove Community nearby the town of Mocksville. My Grandpa, James Emmit "Red" Cassidy owned and ran a country store known locally as Cassidy's Grocery. My youth was spent at the store

with my dad, brother and the many local patrons who frequented daily for gossip, local news and telling stories. These gatherings of the community gentlemen were known as “The Liar’s Club”, respectively. Why, even our distant Irish cousin Nuala who visited in 2007 commented on these gatherings to the amazing familiarity and similarity of an older Irish cultural tradition of gathering for song, music and storytelling.

These “storytellers” shaped my imagination and sense of adventure. As a young boy, it was amazing to be in their company every day and hear their stories and learn of the world outside of our community. It was there where I first heard of our family’s Irish roots and Ireland. The spark and passion for Ireland was planted at an early age and later the pull returned me to Ireland. The rest is history as they say.

4.2 Entering the Tradition

Since 2000, I have spent months upon months annually immersing and learning about oral tradition in the Gaeltacht region of south and northwest Donegal. I attended immersion Gaelic language and sean nós singing courses at Oideas Gael Irish Language and Culture Centre in Glencolmcille until reaching fluency. I also lived fully immersed with a Gaelic speaking family in the rural Gaeltacht village Gleann Fhinne for two weeks speaking only Gaelic, playing hurling and singing sean nós songs. I have read countless books and spent countless hours researching Cassidy history and genealogy in Ireland resulting in a published book in 2004 telling the story of my Cassidy lineage, history and heritage in Ireland and subsequent immigration to America and what became of us.

During this time, I had the honour of direct interaction with many brilliant folklorists, regular folk and singers, musicians and storytellers and heard Gaelic language being spoken naturally in the countryside. Too many talented and great people to name, but it was Eddie Keenan who inspired me to speak Irish Gaelic language fluently and to begin singing in the Irish Gaelic language. The first three songs he taught me were “An Cailín Àlainn”, “Báidín Fheilimí”, and “Óro Sé Do

Bheatha Bhaile”, songs I still sing today. Picture 2 displays the first time Eddie and I sang live in duet together at the 2006 inaugural Irish Festival of Oulu. Eddie was a Gaeilgeoir (Irish language speaker), a background artist and a seanchaí, which is an Irish word for a storyteller, reciter and most of all a singer, all of which were an ancient, valued form of passing on the knowledge and traditions of Ireland before the time of Patrick (Keenan 2022). His son and my dear friend, Eamonn Keenan, a background artist and storyteller also encouraged me to continue as an Irish musician and mentored me as a storyteller.



PICTURE 2. Singing in duet “Báidín Fheilimí” with my first Gaelic singing mentor and inspiration, Eddie Keenan, at the 2006 Irish Festival of Oulu. Photo courtesy of The Irish Festival of Oulu.

I learned to play the bodhrán, sean nós traditional Gaelic singing and storytelling in the traditional way directly from the rich source of musicians, singers and storytellers while being immersed in the culture and the landscape of the Gaeltacht regions of Donegal. To me, this was the vital and necessary way to learn in the same standards as the masters of the tradition. Regional and local songs from rural Donegal were taught to me by singers such as Doimnic Mac Giolla Bhríde, Maighréad Ní Dhomhnaill and Gearóidín Breathnach all who grew up in the tradition and to whom the songs were shared to them by previous generations in the oral tradition. The first time I sang a sean nós song in Ireland was at a great local

session at The Rusty Mackerel (formerly Cúl A Dún owned by legendary Irish band Altan) at the foot of Sliabh Liag sea cliffs in Teelin, County Donegal. I was a bit nervous because Cítí Sheáin Uí Chuinneagáin, a local legendary singer and culture icon was present. Afterwards, she asked me “*where I had learned to sing like that because it was lovely*” and then I knew all was ok to continue singing in the tradition.

I learned to play the bodhrán from master players such as Junior Davey, Colm Phelan, Eamonn Murray and Robbie Walsh. Then, I joined, listened and learned deeper by attending and participating in countless sessions and fleadh (festivals) throughout Ireland. Picture 3 displays a performance with my former band Droichead where I sing a song called “An tSeanbhean Bhocht” accompanied with the bodhrán at Haapavesi Folk Festival.



PICTURE 3. Performance with my former band Droichead at 2017 Haapavesi Folk Festival, Finland. Photo taken by Ari Karjalainen.

This is how I became involved artistically and naturally in Irish oral tradition and is the reason the passion still burns bright in me to this day.

4.3 The Irish Festival of Oulu

In 2004, I wanted to experience, play and perform more traditional Irish music in Oulu. In 2006, I founded The Irish Music Society of Oulu and The Irish Festival of Oulu with a small group of trusted musicians, dancers and friends that shared the same values of promoting traditional Irish music and culture. Since 2006, I have worked as Artistic Director and the driving force behind the festival. We formed a passionate, enthusiastic and highly skilled creative team that form a festival committee, managers and volunteers who diligently work annually to create, organise and manage a successful festival.

The festival is recognised internationally for its versatile, inclusive programme of world class traditional Irish music and high-quality culture events. The unique aspect of the festival is the ability to unite people in an intimate atmosphere celebrating Irish music & culture while delivering memorable and authentic cultural experiences.

The festival is the world's northernmost Irish festival and was titled "the Irish culture mecca of Finland" in 2013 by Finland's largest subscription newspaper Helsingin Sanomat. It is regarded as the premier Irish culture festival in the Nordics that has attracted 95,000 people from all over Finland and Europe annually. During the 2020 lockdown, the four-day virtual festival reached 80,000 people worldwide with 14 performances of top-class Irish music and storytelling including what has unfortunately now become the last performance ever of the legendary Paddy Moloney.

"The Irish Festival of Oulu covers the entire spectrum of the culture field better than any other festival in Finland." (Kauhanen 2015)

Top professional Irish performers are a major part of the festival because they bring authentic cultural awareness to general citizens as well as to local musicians & cultural enthusiasts who gain great opportunity for professional cultural exchange. From Grammy Award winning bands, Pulitzer Prize winning poets, Herald Archangel Award Winning theatre actors, award winning storytellers and

Cannes' Official Selection films, numerous internationally renowned bands, musicians, poets, actors, theatre performances, film makers, storytellers, dancers, chefs, dignitaries, artists, photographers and much more have performed Irish music and culture at the event.

The festival has successfully connected broader audiences to world class Irish music, including six-time Grammy winners and legendary Irish band The Chieftains shown in Picture 4. These opportunities in Finland are rare yet have immensely enhanced the ability of musicians and artists to continue to learn, perform and teach others at the highest levels. Finnish musicians also create opportunities for themselves in the future to go to Ireland to perform, learn more and further network.

In June 2021, the Irish Government recognised the Irish Festival of Oulu as the best example of cultural engagement in the Nordic Countries in their new Nordic Strategy 2025.



PICTURE 4. Six-time Grammy award winning band The Chieftains performed at the 10th anniversary Irish Festival of Oulu in 2015 at the Oulu Music Centre. Photo by Kari Arontie, courtesy of The Irish Festival of Oulu.

4.4 Performance Background

Since 2004, I have been a grassroots level Irish American musician and storyteller primarily performing, playing and teaching locally and nationally in Finland or at smaller events outside of Ireland. I am actively involved in the organising, performance, participation and active promotion and development of the Irish music scene in Oulu and Finland.

Picture 5 was from a performance where uilleann piper Samppa Saarinen and I performed a set of tunes that were featured in Keep It REEL, a documentary film about the history of Irish dance culture in Finland.



PICTURE 5. Performance with uilleann piper Samppa Saarinen at the 2018 Irish Festival of Oulu. Photo courtesy of The Irish Festival of Oulu.

My entry into storytelling began with the early encounters at my grandpa's country store alongside my grandpa, dad and daily group of storytellers that significantly shaped my natural path and passion into the artform. I have been fortunate to partake in professional mentorship by Irish storytellers such as Eamonn Keenan

and Órla Mc Govern and combine that with my personal interest in the rich oral folklore from both North Carolina and Ireland respectively. Currently, I am collecting stories as well as researching, writing and telling my own stories in the folklore tradition.

Artistically, I identify as a non-native Gaeilgeoir (Irish speaker) and grassroots level storyteller and musician playing the bodhrán and singing in the sean nós traditional Gaelic style. Albeit at the grassroots level, I have many interesting performance highlights spanning over 17 years.

“Brent is a sean nós singing aficionado.” (McMillen 2017)

I have performed solo and in some of the top Irish bands in Finland including The Soap Pig and Droichead, in which our debut album *The Banks of Tuira* received great acclaim in March 2017, co-produced with Antti Järvelä. I performed bodhrán on Irish musician Dave FitzGerald's CD *Hertta's Chortle*, which was published October 2018.

I have performed throughout Finland, Ireland and Italy respectively including performances with musicians such as Paddy Keenan, Alan Burke and Alan Doherty and performed with my bands alongside award winning bands Kíla, Dervish and Martin O' Connor Trio at The Irish Festival of Oulu. Additionally, I performed solo at the Divulge Dancers' Film Festival Awards Ceremony in Hollywood, USA in October 2017.

In 2016, I performed as lead Irish bodhrán player with Oulu Symphony Orchestra and top Irish conductor David Brophy in Bill Whelan's *Riverdance: A Symphonic Suite* at The Irish Festival of Oulu. I was the first professional traditional Irish bodhrán player and non-classically trained musician to ever share the stage with the Oulu Symphony Orchestra.

In 2021, I produced and performed *Tales & Tunes*, which were interactive virtual solo performances of storytelling and song that I produced and performed. This

was a leap of faith into the storytelling artform for which I experienced great reviews after 80 solo performances throughout Finland. The highlight was writing and telling two of my own stories, “The Port Seal” and “Folk Tale” while developing my artistic voice and style in the storytelling genre, all of which come naturally to me thanks to time spent listening to the adventurous stories, local news, farming secrets and gossip up at the daily storytelling at my grandpa’s store.

5 AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of my thesis research is to identify alternative artistic approaches of performing traditional Irish song and storytelling to a modern audience outside of Ireland and apply significant elements to my own artistic approach.

I will apply the thesis conclusions to my own artistic approach and display this knowledge in my original solo performance called Tales & Tunes, showcasing artistic approach and interpretation of the way I want to artistically present traditional Irish song and storytelling.

During 18 years of performing traditional Irish music, song and storytelling primarily to a non-English speaking audience in Finland, respectively, I have experienced some moments where the artistic content has been misunderstood. Various reactions have occurred, even after explaining the background of these songs or stories and their purpose in early Irish society. Most audience reactions have been very positive, but this question of artistic approach intrigues my passion to further develop my artistic skills. I want to evaluate this topic in the traditional Irish music and storytelling realm and apply it to my own artistic approach to have better artistic methods of performing.

As an artist, my goals are to learn from the expertise of professional Irish musicians and storytellers for:

1. Better understanding of myself as an artist and how to better facilitate artistic expression in my work.
2. Better understanding of the art form and how to present and perform it.
3. Artistic insight to be a better performer.

As an artist, I want to sing songs and tell stories traditionally as they have been through the years in oral Irish tradition. I want to perform them as they have been shared with me orally by various singers and storytellers in my own voice and

artistic expression without changing anything from the original piece. My goal is to be able to perform in my own way, present and represent each song or story to modern audiences outside of Ireland so that they get a proper glimpse in to ancient Irish oral tradition.

I believe that the qualitative data collected will agree with my concept of artistic approach of performing traditional Irish song and storytelling because of the high standard to which it is shared, taught and learnt by all entering the tradition.

6 RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative research method through interviews was used to collect in-depth information for a deeper understanding of the topic and to identify a variety of insight and perspectives relating to the research question. The survey questions were open ended to allow the interviewee time and space to think and answer freely in their own words from their own background and experience. A selection of seven top professionals in the global Irish music and culture field were chosen based on their professional achievements, artistic experience and cultural expertise in Irish oral tradition. Each are highly respected in the professional traditional scene both in Ireland and globally. It should be noted that there are many qualified experts and professionals living or working in the oral tradition, but these seven professionals offer life-long experience, contributions, dedication, heritage, passion and knowledge in the Irish traditional genre.

They represent only a small survey sample, however, their responses, experiences and opinions in the Irish oral tradition offer a deep, authentic and expert cultural value representative of the overall artform to answer the research question. I highly value each of them respectively as professionals, experts and keepers of the tradition and strongly believe they offer extremely important insight into how Irish oral tradition should be presented to a modern audience. Their experiences can be applied to my own artistic understanding and development in continuance with the principles of oral tradition and the way I have learned thus far. They will no doubt hold this research, the results and myself accountable, to which I take great responsibility. Therefore, the results from the data of each interviewee will be analysed with extreme high quality.

As with the nature of the oral traditional Irish culture genre, I believe the best way to examine artistic approaches of performing was to go directly to the artistic sources from the tradition and learn from their knowledge and experiences as they too have learnt by traditional means passed down from generation to generation.

6.1 Interview Experts

These professionals were purposely selected due to their knowledge, artistic, cultural and professional backgrounds, expertise and experiences in Ireland and globally in Irish music and storytelling. All are extremely knowledgeable and deeply rooted in Irish oral tradition on a scholarly, artistic and professional level with a deep passion and understanding of ancient Irish culture. Some are from the Gaeltacht Irish speaking rural areas while others are from urban areas such as Dublin, Belfast and Galway. Each are keepers of the tradition and highly respected in their own communities, the global artistic community and global professional Irish culture communities. I know all of them respectively on both a professional and artistic level, therefore know their responses are accurate and articulate.

1. **Tom Sherlock:** Tom is a highly respected artist manager with 40 years of professional experience. He began his career with the leading Irish traditional music label Claddagh Records, helping to establish Claddagh as one of the world's largest distributors of traditional music. Tom has worked with some of the top performers in the world including six-time Grammy winners The Chieftains, Altan, Riverdance, Lankum, Liam O'Flynn, Lúnasa, Karan Casey and Usher's Island. He has also worked with Arts Festivals all over the world among them Sydney Arts Festival, Festival Interceltique de Lorient, Hollywood Bowl International Series (Los Angeles), The Irish Festival of Oulu (Finland) and many more. Tom is from Dublin.
2. **Eamonn Keenan:** Eamonn is a storyteller with over 25 years of experience. He has developed a respectable repertoire of stories for adults and children inspired by his passion of the oral storytelling tradition, the myths, legends and folk lore of Ireland. Eamonn has travelled extensively and learned stories from other cultures and from his own experiences. Since 1996, he has been passing on the bright knowledge, telling stories to peo-

ple at home in Ireland, England, Finland, Australia, The Kingdom of Morocco and the USA. He is a member of Storytellers of Ireland. Eamonn is from Belfast.

3. **Gráinne Holland:** Gráinne is a highly acclaimed, award winning singer and songwriter as well as a media producer, director and editor (TG4, BBC and RTÉ). She was brought up with the Irish language and attended the first Irish language medium school in the north of Ireland. Her father had a great interest in music of all genres which inspired her own interest. She has published three albums to date and a highly acclaimed children's book of nursery rhymes, original songs and poems. Gráinne is from Belfast.
4. **Órla Mc Govern:** Órla is an award-winning storyteller, improviser, performer and writer based in the west of Ireland. She tells stories, performs and teaches at venues small and large around the world. In Ireland she runs Moth & Butterfly, an innovative arts collective that combines the art forms of Storytelling & Improvisation. Her stage plays have been produced globally and she has written two books of stories 'Dublin Folk Tales For Children' & 'Wild Waves & Wishing Wells' (The History Press). She also works as an actor for stage and screen and has appeared as a clown doctor, and a voice talent. She is a member of the collectives Theatre 57, Interface Inagh, Ohana, and a committee member of Storytellers of Ireland. Órla lives in Galway.
5. **Lorcán Mac Mathúna:** Lorcán is a singer, writer, and arranger whose work confounds categorisation. He has worked extensively in the realm of improvised music, with many stylistic inspirations derived of sean nós vocal techniques and musical philosophy. His work has included arrangements based on airs in the oral vocal tradition; contemporary music composition; writing collaborations; improvisational and electronic music: and compositional theory development. His accomplishments have included four commissioned compositions, four albums and counting, the feature track on a Number 1 album, numerous tours and a winning song in the International Song Contest 2012. He was born into a family with a passion

for traditional music and singing. His father, Séamus, is known in traditional music circles for his flute playing and singing, and a lifetime of work passing on the music to new generations. He was born in Cork but lives in Dublin.

6. **Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh:** Mairéad is a multiple award-winning musician hailing from the Gaeltacht region of Gaoth Dobhair in Northwest Donegal, an area rich in oral tradition. With over 40 years performing all over the world and many accolades to her name, she is best recognised as an Irish fiddler and lead vocalist of the legendary multi award winning band Altan, which she co-founded with her late husband and flautist Frankie Kennedy. She has published 49 albums, namely with Altan and has also recorded solo or appeared as guest on numerous albums to the likes of Dolly Parton, Mary Black and other artists, respectively. She is recognised as a leading exponent of the Donegal fiddle style and considered one of the top singers in the Irish language, which is her mother tongue. Her home was a magnet for musicians, writers, poets and actors. Her father Francie Mooney and his friends used to exchange old Gaelic poetry and discuss archaic words which had long left the colloquial language. Her father wrote songs for them and for the local drama group, Aisteoirí Ghaoth Dobhair, and was also a well-known fiddle player and fife player highly respected in the area.

7. **Aodh Mac Ruairí:** Aodh is a musician and singer from one of the larger remaining Gaeltacht areas of Northwest Donegal in the small village of Rann na Feirste, which is well renowned for its writers, singers and storytellers. Aodh was exposed at an early age to storytelling and singing in the sean nós style although both practices were in decline at the time. This was due to the growing popularity of radio and television which were detrimental to the practice of the 'Oíche Áirneáil', Irish Gaelic meaning an Evening of Oral tradition. Aodh currently works for the Irish language government organisation Foras na Gaeilge who promote the Irish language at many levels. Aodh prefers singing with the accompaniment of the guitar. He has released one solo CD and one with Clann Mhic Ruairí, a highly

acclaimed band made up of him and his family. Aodh sings purely for the love of singing and although not a fulltime professional musician, Clann Mhic Ruairí perform regularly in Ireland and abroad. The old songs of Rann na Feirste hold a particular interest for Aodh among others and his greatest pleasure is singing them for those who like to hear them and who have an appreciation for them.

6.2 Interview Questions

Each interviewee was asked to introduce themselves and then to answer the questions freely. Below are the interview questions asked to each professional respondent:

1. Regarding to the often humorous, rambling and tragic subjects of Irish stories and songs, what were the traditional origins to creating these stories and songs many, many years ago? Were they based on real events, myths or just artistic expression of that time?
2. Do you think artists must modernise and alter traditional Irish songs or stories to fit into a modern and more politically correct equal society for people to appreciate OR keep to the original traditional aspects of the original piece?
3. What in your opinion can be learned by maintaining the original storylines or lyrics to songs?
4. How in your opinion must we present these stories or songs to a modern audience so that these traditional Irish cultural aspects are better understood and the culture preserved?
5. Have you ever had to explain in more detail or faced ridicule, confusion from public audiences in or outside of Ireland for performing certain stories or songs whereas they may not be understood by a non-Irish nor Irish fan base audience.
6. What is in your opinion the beauty or magic of traditional Irish storytelling and song?

7. Where does your inspiration and passion for traditional Irish music, song or storytelling come from?
8. Would you like to add anything else?

6.3 Ethical Issues

The main ethical issue I wanted to present was honesty in the answers of the interview respondents while stating my clear artistic purpose for doing this research. My goal was to gain insight and to learn from what I consider some of the top professionals in the genre who represent a variety of artistic, professional and authentic backgrounds and experiences in the Irish tradition, respectively. As well, I wanted to be true, in line with the utmost respect I have for the oral Irish tradition and people who partake on a professional level or the grassroots community level of living the tradition.

After forming the idea and research question of this thesis, I then formed the interview questions necessary to formulate and analyse the results. The questions were formed based on my own artistic and performance experiences in Irish oral tradition primarily in Finland.

Then, I contacted the interview participants via email and informed them clearly of my master's thesis research question, background and purpose. Each were supplied with the questions, given adequate time of six weeks to answer and encouraged to answer freely and honestly. It helped that I know each of the respondents on a professional and artistic level to maintain trust and respect for this research. Each person was informed that the master's thesis would be published, and each would be supplied a copy of the final report.

7 RESULTS

Traditional Irish music and storytelling has had global appeal outside of Ireland for many years, which could be at times challenging for artists performing to audiences not entirely or fully comprehensive of the Irish oral traditional content.

The focus and purpose of this thesis was to gain depth and insight from professional expertise to offer substance to my own artistic approach performing traditional Irish storytelling and song to a modern audience outside of Ireland.

Seven professionals with a variety of experiences and backgrounds were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of Irish oral tradition using a qualitative research approach. The interviewees consisted of one Irish Artist manager, one who was a musician and storyteller, two storytellers and three musicians. Each of the interviewees whole heartedly replied to the questions based on their experiences and expertise spanning over decades. I believed that the qualitative data collected by these professionals would agree with my artistic approach of respecting the tradition by presenting and performing traditional Irish music, song and storytelling with passion, respect and artistic expression.

7.1 Three Main Themes

The results found in this research focused on three main themes which were 1). Placing value of the origins of each song or story 2). The importance of artistic expression by the artist and 3). The artistic approach of the performer to each audience they perform to. The responses of all interviewees included similar themes I anticipated while answering the research question.

Each of the interviewees had a deep respect, passion and understanding of Irish oral tradition developed from early ages as children. Most experienced this from their grandparents or directly inside their home from their parents or their com-

munity, while one discovered it organically from their own surroundings and interest. All were inspired by the beauty, magic, spirituality and connection to the past of Irish oral tradition.

They were all highly respectful of the tradition, the artists and poets who transcribed the songs, stories and music throughout time. Each believed strongly in artistic expression and artistic integrity in presenting the artform in either traditional or contemporary styles.

7.2 Origins and Reflection

Each of the interviewees placed a deep understanding and value of the origins of Irish stories and songs because they represented an innate reflection of the human condition at various moments in time. The enduring appeal and strength of narrative and a combination of real events, myth and artistic expression by the authors were contributing factors of the tradition and evolution of the tradition for what it is today.

Lorcán Mac Mathúna stated, *“In my experience representing the tradition, even very ancient material to a modern audience, the things that are appreciated most is the humanity of the story. The context of struggle, imaginative expansion all tie back to the human condition and these stories are a help to people struggling in the modern world”*.

Each of the interviewees commented that the oral tradition survived because they were good quality stories. Many songs and stories were written from the personal experiences of the authors and reflected on numerous themes of that moment in time which can also still be relevant today such as immigration, harsh times, life and death, rambling, war, sport, love and a yearning for the past.

Gráinne Holland stated, *“The songs I have learned over the years have been based on a mixture of real events, myths or artistic expression at that time. Love*

is the subject of many of these songs – unrequited love, heartbreak and loss. Some of the most beautiful traditional songs are love songs. My favourite is An Droighneán Donn. Arranged marriages is another subject which inspired many songs, An Seandúine Dóite is a great example.”

7.3 Artistic Expression

There were various opinions presented regarding the modernisation of the art form and maintaining the original content, but overall, the consensus focused on the importance of the artist fully understanding the oral tradition and particular context of the individual pieces to perform with artistic expression, artistic integrity and respect of the tradition and the original compositions. Each of the interviewees supported artists who performed traditional music in contemporary styles for more appeal to younger audiences as well as global audiences. Although there is a traditional standard and etiquette for Irish oral tradition, the interviewees supported artists who performed traditional Irish song or stories in their own voice and style to keep the tradition alive and interesting.

Tom Sherlock stated, *“Tradition is never static. Change is inevitable. How that change manifests itself is up to the people who engage in what we might regard (or have regarded) as a traditional practice.”*

Aodh Mac Ruairí stated, *“As a singer/musician I do not feel the need, nor do I think it appropriate to do something the same way in which it has been done for hundreds of years.”*

The interviewees shared the similar beliefs while the traditional foundation and lyrics of the songs should remain as they were written, the artist’s expression of how to perform them in one’s own style, traditional versus contemporary and artistic interpretation was encouraged and supported for the survival of the oral living tradition.

Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh stated, *“To maintain and to remain as true to the original script, story or song keeps the piece authentic but it becomes interesting when the performer changes the piece unknown to themselves. This is when the magic happens, and it becomes a part of the oral tradition.”*

Regarding storytelling, the replies to these aspects were similar but also emphasized the importance of allowing the story to move, breath and live while interpreting the original content and meaning of the story and when it was told and for what purpose, such as was it for entertainment or political propaganda? Both storytellers responded of the importance to honouring who shared it with you, the artistic interpretation of the storyteller in telling the story how it connects to them and including the audience in the journey.

Eamonn Keenan stated, *“It requires the storyteller to both respect and interpret the stories for audiences whilst keeping to their core and meaning.”*

Órla Mc Govern replied, *“Stories can be propaganda and power. I think there is absolutely a place for honouring the tradition of a story, particularly where one heard or got it, but if we try to replicate every part exactly, it ceases to be oral telling and becomes recitation.”*

7.4 Artistic Approach

Each of the interviewees replied to the importance of the artist to fully learn about the original pieces to understand its *“cultural and historical context and perspectives”* (Mac Mathúna) and present them with integrity, passion and in one’s own style to add their own artistic expression to the tradition.

All interviewees agreed of the importance and artistic value for the artist to deeply learn from the oral tradition, develop one’s own style and perform that piece with a heartfelt connection as one’s own artistic expression of the world around them.

Out of seven interviewees, only one had ever experienced ridicule from an audience and attributed that to their own style or delivery. They also stated it could have been because of the American audience having preconceived ideas or expectations of what Irish oral tradition was and lacking stereotypical aspects of “*Top of the Mornings, begorraghs or shillelaghs*” in the performance.

One interviewee had not experienced ridicule but had witnessed “*intolerance or lack of interest by Irish people in Ireland when someone sang a song*”. This person had also witnessed where “*particular party songs had caused offence or the potential to cause offence to some listeners.*”

The other performers shared the similar comment of never facing ridicule because it had been their experience that the concert audiences had either bought a ticket or attended because they wanted to attend and experience the Irish tradition.

Each of the interviewees stated the importance to explain the background and meaning of the song or story and pay respect to where they had learned it, especially if it is in Gaelic language so that the performer can further engage with the audience.

Three of the performers who sing in Gaelic shared that they had found non-Gaelic speaking audiences very interested and appreciative of the music and that audiences have enjoyed the feeling of receiving authentic Irish culture experiences.

Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh stated, “*I feel that a modern audience enjoy artists that show integrity even though they may not understand everything, but they can sense that what they are getting is authentic.*”

8 CONCLUSION

The interview questions were designed to allow thoughtful answers with space and time to allow the interviewee to provide deep, honest responses reflecting their own opinions. The themes in the data from the interviewees' responses agreed with my own artistic approach of Irish oral tradition. The insights, experiences and data of the repeating themes have been similar through my own journey of discovering, learning and immersing deeper into the Irish oral tradition of storytelling and song in Ireland. Simply put, the spoken and unspoken immersion is a similar process to everyone because the standard of the tradition and respect for it has existed for 2,000 years. I could identify clearly with the data because of my passionate experiences of learning the tradition from the sources in Ireland.

The qualitative data collected by these professionals agrees with my original artistic approach of presenting and performing traditional Irish music, song and storytelling because of the respect and understanding of traditional Irish oral tradition and the high standard of how it is passed down through the generations. It is agreeably the standard to how it has been taught and learnt by all entering the genre. Respect and integrity are main parts of the tradition and attributes of its survival and success. A high value still existing today has been placed on the passing on of knowledge in Irish oral tradition from one generation to the next.

I agree with all the interviewees and believe the results would be similar and very much the same if the survey group would have consisted of a larger survey group of professionals in the Irish oral tradition because these are the standards, ways and origins of this ancient Irish oral tradition and how it has survived. Serious professionals or enthusiasts passionately partake in the immersion of the culture to fully understand the context and heritage of the tradition.

The following opinions stood out to me most in correlation to the research question and my own philosophy of artistic approach for performing traditional song and storytelling:

“They (audiences) like to have the background and the stories of the songs explained to them so they can engage with the songs and connect with them.” (Holland)

“The stories and songs are complimentary to the topography of the countryside, the weather and the people. The emotions that are explored are real, sadness, joy, celebration, pride, love, etc. Some of the older stories are very violent for the modern pallet but we must remember these stories, songs were their movies and escapism. Heroes, lovers, giants, otherworld people, magic and gore” (Ní Mhaonaigh).

“Tradition is not a static state, and it is constantly changing with each generation remoulding and reinterpreting the material that is part of their heritage.” (Mac Ruairí)

“I have made the point that a tradition is a living thing and part of its character is the living embodied entity (person or practitioner) from whom it emerges. Those who are practicing and are deeply engaged in it, in general, recognise this and are respectful that the tradition extends beyond them into the past and future” (Mac Mathúna).

“Modern audiences can be as open to the story of ‘Barbara Allen’ or ‘Lord Baker’ as audiences were two hundred years ago. Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’ was based on a folktale the playwright heard... West Side Story as conceived by a great songwriter like Stephen Sondheim tells the same tale. Spielberg, like Shakespeare limes and knows a good story when he hears it” (Sherlock).

I agree with each of these opinions because they represent my own personal values and respect for oral Irish tradition and how I believe it should be learnt, portrayed, presented and performed to a modern audience which is openly, honestly, respectfully and with passion. These opinions are inspirational to me as a practitioner and enthusiast and are what I value in my artistic approach.

Artistically, I find these are the most important themes presented in this thesis:

1. Presenting the origins of each song and story. That is, it is a vital artistic approach to introduce the piece, its background, where I learnt it and from whom to the audience and then perform the piece through my own voice and interpretation of the song or story.

2. Presenting the respected background of each piece to the audience, including who taught it to me and where I learned it. It is important to pay respect to the tradition, authors and performers who have laid the foundation of the tradition. It also connects the artist and tradition to the present times. Audience engagement is a complimentary ideal to each performance and part of the overall experience of Irish tradition I believe is important to share with each audience participant. They are there for a reason, which is because they want to experience Irish oral tradition.

3. Artistic Expression by performing the song or story in my own voice and own style. I will sing songs inspirational to me in the traditional sean nós style as I have been taught but will sing in my own voice and style. I will tell the stories in a free speaking style representative of my humble personality without over exaggeration thus allowing the audience to use their imagination to envision the stories.

8.1 My Artistic Approach

The responses were all intriguing and inspiring to me, causing me to think about and examine my artistic journey from early beginnings to now. Artistic reflection is a positive experience that can be used to fine tune my skills, knowledge and expertise to be a better artist. Artistically, I have thought more and will continue to think more about the overall purpose of my artistic approach that I want to present to audiences in the future and how best to achieve those approaches while respecting the Irish oral tradition.

As a grassroots musician in Oulu, Finland, I want to perform old songs particularly from the Gaeltacht of northwest Donegal in the traditional unaccompanied sean nós style. It is an ancient artform, raw, powerful and composed in beautiful, sometimes ancient Gaelic words, imagery and poetry offering a glimpse into the ancient Ireland where my ancestors descend. It is my connection to the past and my expression to the world I live in. I like contemporary traditional music and

agree that it is important to evolve and appeal to global or younger audiences, however, I prefer the traditional style.

As a storyteller, I aim to continue to learn more about the art form, but my interest lies in telling ancient stories of myth, magic and ancient Pagan Ireland while also writing my own stories inspired from the tradition.

“I think storytelling is a living, breathing and growing art. To censor or denigrate experimentation is dangerous.” (Mc Govern)

I am fond of the ancient Irish traditional stories that have survived and are still being told today. There are countless brilliant stories appealing to me with a vivid glance and connection with the past. I will learn and tell these types of stories, like “Will O’ the Wisp”, in my own voice and artistic interpretation. However, I am also inspired and very much agree with Mc Govern’s comment and aim to use imagination to create my own totally new oral stories inspired from Irish oral tradition.

“My style or way of telling stories is to be true to the traditional oral telling of Ireland by having my own style that I hope is engaging, gentle, dramatic, fun, bawdy, emotive and filled with the values of love, humour and wonder.” (Keenan)

Keenan’s statement on artistic expression is inspiring to me as a creative storyteller. I too aim to pay respect to the oral tradition of Ireland by continuing the tradition in my own style and voice. It is my goal to tell stories that appeal to me and perform them in a natural everyday style that is enriching, enlightening, entertaining while forming a connection with the audience. Each of these storytelling values that I experienced and learnt as a young boy are reflected in my style and approach and each time I tell a story, I envision those moments as a listener at “The Liar’s Club” at Cassidy’s Grocery. This experience is one of the greatest values as a storyteller that I can pass on to an audience. It is genuine.

“It (referring to traditional Irish music, song and storytelling) has filtered down through our ancestors and given to us so generously and like that, our work is to pass it generously to the next generation. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí” (Ní Mhaonaigh).

Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí means praise the young and they will flourish and Ní Mhaonaigh's statement is reflective very much of my own journey into the tradition from early family and community inspirations from the storytellers of my childhood to later in life returning wholeheartedly to the valuable sources in Ireland to learn songs and stories from storytellers and singers in the traditional way. It has been a pleasure and I feel fortunate to have had these experiences and thankful for the knowledge that has been shared and people met along the way. For that, I take the responsibility to perform them with respect, as well as to share and pass them on to worthy persons.

I am constantly interpreting and learning more songs and stories to further delve into Irish oral tradition. It is an ancient traditional artform of which I am fortunate to play a micro part, albeit an important part in northern Finland. It is my passion and the way I can express myself artistically. For this aspect, I very much relate to each of the interviewees' responses, and I expected this to happen.

The Irish oral tradition is an ancient artform, one of the oldest artforms of oral tradition in the world. This artform reflects the moments in time for which we live and represent a key aspect of society. I have gained valuable artistic insight and inspiration from the interviewees which makes me think more of my artistic value, responsibility, role and approach to the artform. It makes me proud yet involves an artistic thought process that is more developed than prior to this research.

"The essence of any artistic endeavour is to present your own interpretation of the world around you. There can be no restraints" (Mac Ruairí).

I totally agree with Mac Ruairí regarding artistic originality and aim to be original and unique in my artistic approach to Irish oral tradition by performing in my own voice and style. Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson stated in an open discussion about artistic individuality, *"When a person decides to be themselves, they offer something no one else can be"* (JimmyNikricket 2014.). This is very true to all styles of art and music and when I heard this statement, it re-emphasised the value of

originality and direction in my own artistic approach. Being yourself is unique because there is only one you in this world, which is unique. Musicians, singers and storytellers who perform in their own style keep the Irish oral tradition thriving presently and into the future.

As an artist, I bring a colourful background and heritage to the artform as an Irish American, Irish Gaelic and Finnish speaking artist living in northern Finland not far from the Arctic Circle. My Irish roots hail from County Fermanagh and south-west Donegal, yet I was born and raised in rural North Carolina before departing for Oulu, Finland to live permanently in 1999. I have learned and been inspired through this research to embrace these cultural aspects and originality as part of my artistic identity to contribute to the enrichment of Irish oral tradition performed to modern audiences outside of Ireland.

8.2 Tales & Tunes Final Performance

Tales & Tunes is an original solo performance consisting of three traditional Irish songs and three stories. This performance represents the end results of my artistic interpretation of the thesis and demonstrates how I implement the themes artistically.

The stories and the songs complement each other and represents a glimpse into Irish oral tradition representing aspects of myth, adventure, life, mischief, entertainment, love, loss and humour. My artistic goal of the performance is to present my own artistic expression and demonstrate my artistic approach of performing traditional Irish storytelling and music to a modern audience outside of Ireland as presented in this thesis. The stories and songs were chosen because I wanted to represent a variety of themes found in the traditional and original pieces to best represent my artistic interpretation, expression and passionate journey into Irish oral tradition up to this moment in time.

“Will O’ the Wisp” is a story from the oral tradition and folklore found in many cultures around the world to exclaim a natural phenomenon of unexplainable

lights appearing at night in rural areas especially around bogs, marshes or swamps. I first heard “Will O’ the Wisp” in County Fermanagh in Northern Ireland by a local storyteller and it very much appealed to me due to the mischief, mystery and folklore of interactions and deals made at the crossroads with the Devil. In Finland, the story is known as “Virvatuli”.

“The Port Seal” is my own story inspired by the traditional stories of the Selkie, a mystical sea creature common around the coasts of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and even in the Nordic countries. It is a story of friendship, love and loss. At the time, I was looking for a story that appealed to me with myth and legend, any story, but couldn’t find one. Then, as I was snorkelling in the crystal-clear Adriatic Sea on a sunny day looking up from below as the sun beams shined brightly through to the sea floor at me, the story came to me clearly. I remember looking up at the sun beams from beneath the sea as if I were a seal. It was beautiful. This was the exact moment when my entire thinking went to the Selkie story.

I began searching for a Selkie story that appealed to me but was unable to find a story where the relationship between the female and male characters was free, unconditional love. Most stories I found told of a single or lonely fisherman who caught a beautiful mermaid or maiden in his nets, then took her to shore mysteriously to be wed. For me, it seemed too harsh and against the will of the female.

So, I decided to write my own original narrative while still maintaining a few traditional elements from the Selkie tradition namely the discovery of the seal coat by the children. The core of the relationship between the man and woman are more loving, equal and appropriate in the modern politically correct world yet while maintaining artistic expression in the traditional narrative.

“Folk Tale” is also my own story inspired by three people I’ve met in my life journey who have positively shaped the direction of my life. It is a story of finding oneself in life and learning from those we meet along the way. I composed it based on the elements of stories relating to journey, adventure and self-discovery after being unable to source an appealing story related to the adventure of journey. The elements and characters of the journey are fictional but inspired by the

storytellers and experiences of my life. There are some fictional truths in the story which artistically connect me to the story and allow for greater artistic expression. As well, the messages of the story can be interpreted differently according to one's own imagination and life experiences.

The Stories:

1. Will O' the Wisp: A traditional story found all over the world about a blacksmith and his deal with the Devil. It is known as Virvatuli in Finnish. (Gaelic Culture Productions 2022.).
2. The Port Seal: My own composed story of friendship, love and loss inspired by the Selkie folklore. (Gaelic Culture Productions 2021.).
3. Folk Tale: My own composed story of a boy's journey to find his own story. He discovers some important life lessons from the people he meets along the way and learns how the journey, not the destination, shapes one's own life. (Gaelic Culture Productions 2022.).

The Gaelic songs were chosen because they were favourites in my song repertoire shared with me by singers in the Gaelic tradition. "An Mhaighdean Mhara" was chosen because of its connection to mermaid myth and the seascape of northwest Donegal but also because it was a perfect song for "The Port Seal" as it is a mermaid song dealing with love and loss. Plus, it is truly a beautiful song. "SÍ do mhaimeo í" was chosen because it is a funny love song, but more so because of the rhythm in 6/8 jig speed, perfect with the bodhrán accompaniment to create a groovy, raw traditional soundscape. "Máire Mhór" was chosen because of its harsh love story, humour and rhythm. I learned it during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 from the highly respected singer Síle Denvir. Each of these songs are lyrically beautiful representative of a rich Gaelic culture from time past.

The Songs:

1. 'SÍ do mhaimeo í: An Irish Gaelic love song telling of a young man in love with and marrying a wealthy woman who is old enough to be his Granny. His friends give him a hard time about this issue, but love has no boundaries or age restrictions. (Gaelic Culture Productions 2021.).

2. An Mhaighdean Mhara: An Irish Gaelic traditional love song telling of a mermaid, Mary Chinidh, leaving her two children behind as she must return to the sea after they found her crown. This is a common story relating to Selkie and Mermaids in Celtic Folklore, too. This song is very popular along the coast of County Donegal, which is where I learnt it from a local singer. This song is found at the end of the story, The Port Seal. (Gaelic Culture Productions 2021.).
3. Máire Mhór: This a well-known Irish Gaelic love song sung by a confident male suitor professing his interest and love for Mary. He tells her if she doesn't meet him by the shore as she promises, may she be drowned on the seashore as a result which is meant as a bit of bad luck humour. (Gaelic Culture Productions 2021.).

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