

## Paradigms in the compositional practice of Irish singer-songwriters

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### Abstract

The singer-songwriter has emerged as a significant figure in contemporary Irish culture. Ireland's *monumental history* in musical practice has cultivated some of the most internationally respected singer-songwriters of recent decades. While much research has been devoted to the songs of Irish artists at large, little attention has been allocated to demystifying their songwriting praxis. The present work critically examines the relationship between the Irish singer-songwriter and wider mediated discourses surrounding their artistry. Independent of genre it interrogates the compositional practices of performing songwriters by way of phenomenological study. Specifically, the *lived experience* of Irish singer-songwriters is explored and evaluated through in-depth interviews, and consideration of artefacts including song texts and recordings. Tracing the most important sources of their creativity it is evident that while some practitioners are largely influenced by indigenous Irish folk music many are predisposed to multicultural traditions. Whilst experiences are unique to individual singer-songwriters many share similar complexities in attempting to migrate from conventional praxis. It is evident that limitations frequently provide artistic definition, thereby safeguarding the practitioner's aesthetic. Accession of an individual *voice* presents an interesting conundrum for a twenty first century singer-songwriter as the emphasis of a traditional culture is by nature, not individually focused. It is concluded that while a grounded musical tradition may certainly be viewed as a privilege, much of the Irish singer-songwriter's labour involves conscious effort in re-encoding their work.

**Keywords:** singer-songwriter, Irish, practice, phenomenology, culture

### Introduction

The practices of Irish singer-songwriters are recurrently subsumed within the larger context of *Irish music* discourse or wide-ranging autobiographical publication. As observed by Negus and Astor (2015) it is important that songwriting practice becomes "more central" to popular music scholarship. While a number of the artists studied herein do not compose or perform what they would term *popular music* most have contributed to popular Irish culture at some level as collaborators or writers for other artists. Specifically, this study locates the *phenomenon* of the Irish performing songwriter in relation to its practitioners (*subjects*) and their artistic creations or songs (*objects*). In this case, the experiences of nine practitioners were critically evaluated through the course of in-depth interviews and reflection on original compositions. It represents an interdisciplinary study incorporating philosophical, sociological and musicological inquiry. According to Shuker (2001), it is important to consider any aspect of popular culture both as a "social phenomenon" and in terms of its "historical development". As confirmed by the

ethnographic studies of Mc Intyre (2011) songs are "generated from antecedent conditions provided by the inherited tradition". Mc Intyre's comprehensive study is however predicated on fieldwork in his native Australia. Naturally, songwriters tailor compositions in accordance with their ongoing musical evolution and abilities, therefore in order to truly interpret their practices it is important to unpack their diverse compositional narratives. This study is therefore inclusive of all Irish singer-songwriters, those closely connected to tradition and those impassioned by diverse aesthetics. As articulated by Irish singer-songwriter Glen Hansard (2003) "just because one singer sells more records than the other, does it really mean their song is any better, everything is valid or nothing is valid".

## Methods

As a methodological inquiry phenomenology measures human experience in terms of the natural occurrence of events. Founder of modern phenomenological practice Husserl expressed this broadly as *back to the things themselves*, arguing that it is only through reflection of an entire experience that one can truly evaluate its *essence*. In the present context it is used to understand how song composition is perceived relative to the *consciousness* (Husserl, 1927) and *subjective* experience of its composers. Reflecting on lived experiences in such a way reveals underlying structures and hence *paradigms* (Kuhn, 1962) in relation to multiple participants. An interpretivist approach is adopted, facilitating “a Gadamerian dialogue” between “pre-understandings”, and “newly emerging understandings of the participant’s world” (Smith et al. 2009).

Firstly, the author (researcher) wishes to make his own position transparent as a practicing Irish singer-songwriter. Consequently, the Husserlian approach of phenomenological reduction, *epoché* or *bracketing*, which advocates suspension of the researcher’s subjectivity is considered impracticable. The singer-songwriter (author and participants) represents a “double edged phenomenon” (Giddens, 1990) as both “writer (s) of songs” and “performer (s) of those same songs”. Being a practicing singer-songwriter facilitates a certain rapport between the researcher (author) and participants thereby safeguarding interpretation of particularities unique to the genre. Such approaches according to Taylor (2011) afford “deeper levels of understanding” being “at the centre of the cultural phenomenon”.

Firstly, participants were recruited with experience in the phenomenon of interest and in-depth interviews were conducted to the point of *saturation*. In order to reflect diverse perspectives, *maximum variation sampling* (Creswell, 2013) was chosen as the key selection strategy. Snowball sampling was also employed whereby participants suggested the value of contributions from other “information rich sources”. Interviews were conducted over a twelve-month period ending in April 2016. Of the nine artists studied one third reported strong links with traditional Irish music or folk song, a third had some degree of exposure in their

formative years and remaining practitioners claimed that it had little or no influence on their aesthetic. Duration of interviews varied from two to three hours each, depending on participant availability. Interviews were semi-structured, featuring open-ended questions such as: “How would you describe your experience with songwriting”? Interviews were recorded to a portable audio device and later transcribed for analysis. The author (researcher) was mostly engaged in listening and observing, anticipating supplementary questions within the *natural flow* of conversation. At interview stage participants were detached from their Husserlian *natural attitude* and in a mode of reflection on the *essence* of their experience.

To facilitate participant involvement, the study was briefly contextualised in advance of each interview. Where possible artists were visited within their natural environment. In the majority of cases interviews were conducted face-to-face in accordance with live performance dates, mostly in hotel lobbies or cafés. In a limited number of cases, interviews were conducted via videoconferencing to accommodate tour schedules. Both content and discourse analyses were employed to extract meaning from the data, hence in addition to what participants said, the manner in which they responded were appraised. This involved chronicling of non-verbal communication such as *tone of voice* and *gestures*. Transcription of data was carried out within as short a timeframe as possible after each interview. Following transcription, recordings were reviewed contemporaneously as audio and text and memos were recorded next to the data periodically. In preference to beginning with a hypothesis, an inductive approach was adopted thereby allowing themes to emerge directly from the data. As phenomenology is largely descriptive, direct quotations from participants were key to interpretation. Horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) was employed to extract “significant statements” from the data, illustrative of the songwriting experience for each participant. These were subsequently assembled into themes (open coded) to deduce how participants experienced the phenomenon. Computer application NVivo 11 was utilised to assist data analysis. Following several stages of constant comparison across all practitioners, principle themes were documented. Finally, through a hermeneutic lens the *essence* was

explicated, giving *others* a perspective on the phenomenon of the Irish singer-songwriter.

## Results

As anticipated many universal song themes emerged. While largely personal, narrative, romantic or political in nature, some songs focussed on “historic events”, “individuals” or “emigration”. The significance of personal memory was accentuated in many cases with one practitioner summarising their role as a carrier of “old news” contemporarily overlooked. While a third of participants featured compositions in both Irish Gaelic and English, one artist studied sang predominantly in *Sean Nós* (old way). Of those proficient in both languages some occasionally sang *macaronic songs* (songs containing both Irish and English text).

An overarching theme of artistic *labour* was evident in the early stages of investigation where *in vivo coding* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) established “work” as the most frequently used term by participants. Six principle themes emerged from the data and may be summarised as:

- Temporal Concerns
- Consciousness
- Artistic Discipline
- Writing Environment
- Artistic Challenges
- Musical Traditions

### *Temporal Concerns*

Firstly, the impetus to write songs was dependent on individual biographies. For those with a large repertoire of traditional material, motives were unequivocally “to have something new to sing”. These songs were principally narrative based and rich in imagery. As expected, total time dedicated to composing a new song varied across participants from *short burst* writing sessions to lengthy and elaborate reiterative processes. Works described by artists as “legacy songs” often required numerous revisions and in two cases successive collaboration with co-writers to realise their definitive structure. Further participants reputed spending extended periods re-writing the same song, up to ten-years in one case. Conversely, three artists described how their “most popular” or commercially

successful songs were those written inadvertently and within less than an hour.

### *Consciousness*

One artist explicated how several songs were written and discarded in advance of their most successful song, implicitly laying the groundwork for a *hit* recording. The same song was described by the participant as ceaselessly “going on in the subconscious”, finally taking “half an hour” to complete. Another artist recounted how what they perceived as “one of their best songs” was “written in three minutes” while performing other routine duties. The experience was affectionately described as if “someone had sent it to them in the post, or e-mailed it to their head”. The sense of bewilderment yet accomplishment was evident in the faces of both artists.

### *Artistic Discipline*

While the majority of participants approached songwriting in an unstructured fashion they reported distinct separation between the stimulation and actively creative stages. One artist articulated the process as “two-tier”, at first an inspirational phase, “removed from the world” followed by a focused restructuring phase where “songcrafting” materialised. In many cases a final review stage was employed to validate the song not only to oneself but also to “trusted” *others*. One advocate of artistic structure vowed how they “wouldn't work away from the desk”. Proximity to recording devices was endorsed in multiple instances with some losing potential songs “simply by failing to get to the recorder on time”. This was characteristic of self-taught practitioners or those from an inherited musical tradition.

### *Writing Environment*

Physical locations were deemed influential to songwriting practice. One artist remarked how the “cluttered lives” of modernity prompted “a conscious effort” to delineate songwriting *time and space*. Another described their songwriting space as one for “imagining, dreaming, and gestating”. Interestingly, many advocated the abolition of disruptive media such as *radio*. Concepts of the *ideal space*

varied however as driving a car, particularly “long distance driving” was viewed as most productive in generating song ideas in three instances. Five practitioners recounted having major compositions completed or partially completed in locations including France, Germany, Australia and USA with two artists reporting the success of collaborative efforts in Nashville, Tennessee.

### *Artistic Challenges*

The songwriting process was portrayed as arduous by a number of practitioners. One illuminated their hesitation to engage as “frequently making excuses not to write”. Certain findings proved surprising with songwriters openly admitting “I hate writing songs, “I don't know anybody who loves it, it's painful”. Although communicated with a smile, in this case it was evident that performing was preferred to writing. Of the artists who played an instrument, most were guitarists or pianists acknowledging that improvisation was often the starting point of a song. Two such artists remarked on the challenges in merging lyrical and melodic concepts that were composed separately. One artist commented that what they were trying to achieve musically was “quite possibly unattainable”, a sentiment intensified by a *furrowing of the brow*.

### *Musical Traditions*

Fusing lyric and melody was largely dependent on cultural backgrounds of individuals and stylistic practices. One traditionally grounded songwriter explained how songs might begin as prose or a poem which would potentially “become a song”. In several instances it was remarked how both the melody and lyric were synchronous or how the “the tune presented itself during the writing”. Reverence for the “dronal aspect” of music was highlighted in two cases. Interestingly, this was expressed independently by an artist closely associated with the tradition and one without any affiliation whatsoever. Many artists including those with strong traditional associations admitted to becoming musically hybridised as young adolescents, promoting more expansive musical aesthetics in adulthood. Genres underpinning the practices of artists studied were wide and varied comprising “Sean Nós”, “Irish folk music”,

“storytelling country”, “blues”, “rock” “popular music”, performance based “art music” and various hybrids.

### **Discussion**

At the heart of the current investigation is the independently produced song. Very often songs are judged simply by how they stand the test of time. While songs may be appraised for their lyrical richness, originality, melodies, harmonic structures or counterpoint, similar to other creative art forms what constitutes an exceptional song remains subjective. Since the turn of the twenty first century Ireland has witnessed a proliferation of acoustic performance spaces in the form of *songwriter sessions*, *folk clubs* and *open mics*. In addition to performing songs there is a growing tendency to contextualise the songwriting process for such audiences. While artists will often deconstruct a specific song they rarely examine the intricacies of *on the ground* practices.

Reviewing the *lived experiences* of Irish singer-songwriters it is evident that some artists are borrowing from traditional sources more explicitly than others. Indisputably, they draw inspiration from pan-temporal and multicultural sources supporting the hypothesis that “the dialectic of international/national haunts *Irish popular music*” (Smyth, 2005). Essentially, Irish artists demonstrate that the singer-songwriter engages in multiple representations of *self*. While it is evident that that the singer-songwriter's work often concerns itself with autobiographical investigation (Brackett 2008), many artists reviewed use it more as an extension of their socio-cultural heritage. Interest in musical drones is particularly inspiring as it appears to bridge the gap between *traditional* and experimental *art music*. This is due to its prominence in both ancient and avant-garde forms as well as indigenous Irish music.

Evidently, songwriters immersed in traditional practice from an early age felt some responsibility to honour such a privilege. Memories continue to pervade the themes of Irish song texts suggesting a longing not only to revisit the past but also to re-examine its relevance in contemporary society. Practitioners confirm the premise that memory is central to the actualisation of songs. One participant at some level demonstrated

continuation the *bardic tradition*. Findings indicate that the *oral tradition* prevails with many relying on recording devices to capture what Rubin (1995) terms the “evanescent property of sound”. In fact, results concur with Rubin’s comprehensive study of the oral tradition citing “meaning, imagery and sound” as its key “constraints”.

The songwriting processes investigated recall Wolterstoff’s (1987/2010) three stage representation of a creative work, namely, “inspiration”, “selection” and “evaluation”. The process outlines a “pre-conscious” stage (inspiration) followed by a “conscious” (selective) stage, culminating in a what Wolterstoff terms a “measure up to standards” or “evaluation”. This study depicts the Irish songwriter as a practitioner highly conscious of artistic causality, ultimately aware that a mere fraction of their *labour* results in a completed artefact. They are nonetheless rewarded when the cumulative efforts of their practice collide, albeit unexpectedly in many cases. Underpinned by a central theme of “work”, all participants studied exemplify the conceptualisation of a *muse* as “that for whom you long to labour” (Tharp, 2008).

It is apparent from the results that safeguarding a working environment was considered significant in all cases. Bargh and Morsella (2008) hypothesise that activities aforementioned such as driving a car although “intentional” are one of the “efficient procedures that can run off outside of consciousness”. Evidently, focussing on a routine act appears to promote aggregation of otherwise detached *song fragments* counteracting the “lack of concentration” substantiated by “diffused thinking” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

As expected, there are many aspects of songwriting practice which are not unique to Irish artists. Evidently, at the heart of the Irish singer-songwriter lies human characteristics including self-belief, self-motivation and resilience. It is equally apparent that songwriting often involves continuous re-evaluation in the search for utopian ideals.

The *essence* of the Irish singer-songwriter as composer may be summarised as a diligent practitioner, cognizant of their musical and socio-cultural history. Although writing unsystematically they largely embody continuity of the oral tradition or “uninterrupted chain of transmission” (UNESCO, 2006).

Although writing mostly in isolation the Irish artist is amenable to collaboration both nationally and internationally. The reality in which a song unfolds is perplexing and fascinating for practitioners in equal measure. Why popular songs tend to *quickly write themselves* is unresolved, nonetheless conceivably related to a series of tentative efforts beforehand. Evidently, those from a traditional Irish musical background or *Gaeltacht* region (primarily Irish Gaelic speaking) have an affirmed sense of *Irishness* which translates in their approach to songwriting and song interpretation. Hence, language and domestic themes remain distinguishing features of *Irish* singer-songwriter identity. Many artists, with the possible exception of those singing in regional dialects assume a universal western singer-songwriter aesthetic. Although artistic limitations go some way towards individualising an Irish singer-songwriter, conscious effort is required in re-encoding their work for contemporary audiences.

Suggestions for further work include examination of the songwriting process for specific songs and their performance aesthetics at close range. It is expected that melodic and rhythmic structural investigations would further illuminate the practices of Irish singer-songwriters thereby offering wide-ranging interpretation of the present study.

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