

## Review

O'Flynn, John. 2009. *The Irishness of Irish Music*. Hampshire: Ashgate. ISBN 978-0-7546-5714-9 (hbk). 256 pp.

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John O'Flynn's book is primarily a study of the reception of music in Ireland, and listeners' perceptions of 'Irishness' in music. It is based on his doctoral research and uses the interview material he collected from attendees at classical, traditional and popular Irish music concerts. By focusing on these three broad categories of music, O'Flynn overlooks the vibrant Irish jazz scene and the hugely popular country music scene. Nevertheless, the analysis of his chosen material is insightful, and is theoretically grounded in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Middleton and Theodor Adorno, among others.

O'Flynn's aims are to investigate the interplay between structural, cultural and experiential levels of identity and meaning, and to articulate both dominant and alternative understandings of the relationship between Irishness and music. His fieldwork involved small-group interviews with a total of 67 audience members, which took place in pubs after each of twelve performance events. Here O'Flynn found that informants overwhelmingly associated the Irishness in Irish music with the so-called 'traditional' repertoire, despite his apparent expectation of finding listeners who define Irish music 'without the "baggage" of traditionalism' (114), or the assumption that the Irishness of music may be accounted for by a composer's or performer's Irish nationality. This book, therefore, demonstrates the continuing symbolic importance of Irish traditional music in defining the national culture, even in the early twenty-first century when 10 per cent of the population are officially designated 'non-Irish nationals' (Ireland: Central Statistics Office 2007, 24).

The book also provides an overview of the recent history of Irish music and, in doing so, examines data on the national production/consumption of music. The author's definition of musical production includes record production, distribution and broadcasting, whereas musical consumption primarily concerns audiences listening to live performances. Missing almost entirely from this are the views of government, NGO and industry actors, and most significantly, the musicians themselves. It was disappointing not to hear first-hand from the performers at

the concerts he attended, or from those who make programming and marketing decisions in relation to producing a musical Irishness. Secondary sources in which these voices are heard—for example, an interview with U2's Bono, and the comments of two traditional musicians on the single occasion when the author does speak with musicians—suggest a rich but unexplored vein of data.

How Irishness is perceived in sound and in musical structure is another of O'Flynn's interesting pursuits. The musical elements that listeners identify as sounding Irish again reference the traditional repertoire—these elements include rhythm, repetition, melody. An Irish performance style is also important: for example, when classical musicians sing traditional Irish songs in *bel canto* style, this is not considered 'Irish sounding'. Many informants also discriminate (although not consistently) between music that sounds Irish and music that feels Irish. Further complicating the matter is the perceived distinctions between authentic Irish sounds and those that sound merely 'Irishy' (such as when the girl group B\*witched perform traditional melodies in a pop setting).

At the end of the book, O'Flynn discards the scaffolding of the PhD thesis and concludes with an extended essay on authenticities in Irish music. This essay reveals the subtlety and clarity of his analysis of secondary material, and his vigorous engagement with arguments about the influence of nationalist ideology and economic policy on the production and reception of music in Ireland. This perceptive writing outshines the raw doctoral material that comprises the majority of *The Irishness of Irish Music*—it is a pity that it was not reworked for the purpose of the book. Although his many chapters painstakingly elaborate on the useful fieldwork data, they ultimately delay the final essay and its astute interpretations which turn out to be the book's greatest achievements.

There is one key question that arises from O'Flynn's fieldwork: 'given its ideological and material transformation from an era of nation building towards a seemingly more open, materially wealthy and technologically advanced society, why then do traditional markers of Irish culture appear to have acquired greater significance than ever before?' (130). While O'Flynn does not provide a clear answer, it is his consideration of *why* essentialist conceptions of Irish music (and of Irishness) have such resilience that will reward readers, as will the excellent bibliography and user-friendly index.

## Reference

Ireland: Central Statistics Office. 2007. *Census 2006: Volume 5—Ethnic or Cultural Background*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.