



CONFERENCE REVIEW: Joint Plenary Conference of the Society of Musicology in Ireland and the Irish Chapter of the International Council for Traditional Music

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Abstract

Although forced online by the Covid-19 pandemic, the inaugural Joint Plenary Conference of the Society for Musicology in Ireland and the Irish Chapter of the International Council for Traditional Music, which took place in May 2021, was a bountiful and diverse affair. In addition to rejuvenating the relationship between musicology and ethnomusicology, the rich and wonderfully varied program offered plenty of intellectual nourishment.

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Organising a successful academic conference requires a Herculean effort at the best of times, but the task becomes even more fraught during a global pandemic, when it is beset by capricious public health guidance, convoluted travel restrictions, mercurial broadband connectivity, and the chronic unpredictability of technology. Thankfully, the organising committee of the inaugural Joint Plenary Conference of the Society of Musicology in Ireland (SMI) and the Irish Chapter of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM Ireland) triumphed over these adversities to unite international colleagues in a spirit of camaraderie, collaboration, and resolve, and rejuvenated the relationship between musicology and ethnomusicology.

Hosted by the Trinity College Dublin Department of Music over the last weekend in May 2021, the three-day conference embodied interdisciplinary ideals and exposed participants to a wide range of papers, panel discussions and perspectives, as well as vibrant, artistic performances by renowned Irish singers and musicians—Mia Cooper (violin), Niall Kinsella and Aoife O'Sullivan (piano), Rachel Croash (soprano), Raphaela Mangan (mezzosoprano), Gavin Ring (tenor), the Trinity Chapel Chamber Choir, and The Trinitones. More than 470 delegates from fifty-six institutions across four continents participated in this year's plenary conference, which featured in excess of one hundred papers from graduate, early-career, and established researchers in the fields of historical musicology, ethnomusicology, music theory and analysis, and performance-based research. The warmth of the three opening addresses by Dr Evangelia Rigaki (Trinity College Dublin), Professor Lorraine Byrne Bodley MRIA (SMI President) and Dr Adrian Scahill (ICTM Ireland Chair) set the tone for what proved to be a most collegial and scholarly event; one that certainly surpassed this reviewer's expectations.

The Plenary Keynote Lecture, *Ireland and the Musical Work*, was given by Professor Harry White (University College Dublin)—inaugural President of the Society for Musicology in Ireland between 2003 and 2006—and chaired by Professor Patrick Zuk (Durham University), who also responded to the keynote's arguments. White's erudition and reputation as a cultural historian is widely recognised, so it was unsurprising that his keynote should serve as a clarion call for historiographers to recognise the 'conceptual prowess' of the musical work as a 'fulcrum of Irish cultural history'. Until such time as the musical work is reclaimed and exemplified as an 'indispensable agent of Irish cultural discourse', the presence of music in Irish cultural history is likely to remain a 'hit-and-miss affair', he reasoned. To underpin this assertion, White offered compelling evidence, including a selection of 'Irish' musical works from a one-hundred-year period—from the premier of Handel's *Messiah* (1742) up to the first performances of Balfe's *Bohemian Girl* (1843)—that, though 'long familiar in an Irish musicological context', would be certainly absent from the 'current purview of Irish cultural history', except where they inhabited 'the shadowlands of Joyce's fiction'.

The IRC-SMI Harrison Medal for 2021 was awarded to Professor Michael Beckerman (Carroll and Milton Petrie Professor of Music, Collegiate Professor of Music, New York University), who also delivered the IRC-Harrison Lecture on the Saturday night. The highly engaging talk, *“I Have Loved the Lands of Ireland,” and Other Adventures in the Timeless Past(oral)*, was delivered with Beckerman’s inimitable panache. Using an eclectic mix of subdominant-infused musical examples—from Bohuslav Martinů’s *Opening of the Wells* to Seóirse Bodley’s Symphony No. 2 to the song *My Girl* by The Temptations—he explored how music links patterns of loss, longing and authenticity in a complex tangle of nostalgia, and the way in which melodic moments can ‘syntactically, symbolically and suggestively’ situate us, in part, in a kind of ‘plagal pastoral’.

Over and above the plethora of diverse papers on offer across the three days, other notable highlights from the conference included a plenary round table, *Hearing Struggle: Musical Responses to Times of Crisis in the Czech Lands*, which surveyed how the musical-cultural phenomena of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries offer insights into both musical history and cultural developments more generally. Inspired by Professor Michael Beckerman’s analysis of the different ways in which we hear struggle in music (*Czech Music and Infectious Disease*, May 2020) and united by the common thread of cultural identity, the panel’s contributions—while often thematically and methodologically distinct—were stimulating and thought-provoking. Two additional roundtable discussions separately addressed the ways in which traditional music reflects community life in Bengal, and the creative process involved in Christopher Coles *The Nine Lives Suite*, which honours the nine African-Americans who were shot and killed by a white supremacist at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 and seeks to inspire future artistic endeavours and societal change. Unfortunately, the presentation of ICTM Ireland’s inaugural Oirdhearchas Award to, and the associated keynote lecture by, Professor Thérèse Smith (University College Dublin) had to be postponed to the 17th Annual ICTM Ireland Conference at Dundalk Institute of Technology, on 25–26 February 2022. In his welcome address, Dr Adrian Scahill (Maynooth University) nevertheless took the opportunity to underscore the instrumental role played by Professor Smith in the foundation of ICTM Ireland, as well highlighting the ‘vision, energy, and industry’ that she brought to the organisation.

There was no trace of the combative atmosphere that can, on occasion, beset academic gatherings. The ambiance was constructive and munificent, with every session ending with helpful suggestions and comments—aided in no small way by the thirty-two separate session chairs whose sympathetic handling of the discussions meant that everyone came away with a renewed sense of camaraderie, enthusiasm, and belonging. The sessions were well spread-out, with due consideration given by the organisers to the essential coffee breaks and social activities. Sadly, repairing to the pub for collegial chatter and networking over a well-deserved tippie was not on the cards this year. Instead, the virtual milieu known as the ‘breakout room’ allowed interested parties to engage in academic—and non-academic—discourse, while imbibing their libation of choice in the comfort of their own homes.

Dr Simon Trezise’s (Trinity College Dublin) insightful welcome in the conference booklet observed that the ‘constraints dictated by circumstances have created a democratic freedom of access that must be enjoyed, even though we will all miss those valuable coffee breaks and meals in which so much is learned and shared’, and enjoyed it was. With 108

paper and panel presentations given over the duration of the event, it is safe to say that not only is interdisciplinary musicological and ethnomusicological research alive and well, but it is also thriving despite the pandemic and its associated archive and library closures.

