

8

(Be)Longing: Irish Musicking and Place- Making in Oslo, Norway

Aine Mangaoang

In this chapter, I highlight issues of identity, belonging and place-making posed by individuals in Oslo's Irish music night scenes. I draw from narratives and stories told through semi-structured interviews and conversations with seven musicians, each of whom plays Irish music¹ of various forms, styles and genres in Oslo (see [Table 8.1](#)), along with participant observations at different musical events in the city and other ethnographic and archival methods since late 2018. Additionally, the chapter is informed by my own experiences as an Irish migrant navigating a new city through music, as I became involved in Oslo's live music scene soon after my arrival to Norway. Such stories are not representative in any statistical sense, but rather they provide useful points of departure for investigating specific sonic entanglements and social encounters between different people who call Oslo home.

The chapter aims to illustrate the ways in which migrants interact with Irish music alongside local kinds of music and musicians, and by doing so, contributes to a wider discourse on contemporary migrant experiences. I survey how various forms of musicking² are used in Oslo by this small community made up of Irish immigrants, migrants from other countries as well as local Norwegians, in the production of a range of complex Irish cultural identities set against ongoing theorizations of multi-culturalism in contemporary Norway.³ I discuss the multi-faceted Nordic staging of Irishness in Oslo's nightlife and seek to give voice to a range of more 'hidden' (Finnegan 1989) experiences of Irishness in Oslo that show it to be multiple and nuanced, not least since the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed almost all formalized night-time activity between March 2020 and up to the time of writing in April 2021. This

TABLE 8.1: Overview of interlocutors interviewed in Spring 2020.

Name	Sex	Nationality/ citizenship	Age	Years in Oslo	Main instrument(s)
Anders	M	Norwegian	34	5.5	Piano accordion
Brendan	M	Irish	60	1	Uilleann pipes, flute, guitar, bouzouki
Kaja	F	Polish	31	6	Guitar, tin whistle, bodhrán
Liz	F	Irish	62	26	Voice
Michael	M	American	27	2	Fiddle
Patrick	M	German/ Irish	33	8	Guitar, banjo, voice
Snorre	M	Norwegian	45	45	Fiddle, concertina

focus on Irish music scenes in Oslo is both distinct in terms of its place within the urban landscape and given particular social etiquette surrounding Oslo's nightlife, yet in many respects, it may be scarcely unlike Irish music practices in other capital cities world over. Before turning to some thematic findings, to set the scene the following section briefly describes Irish music as defined in

a Norwegian context by my interlocutors and gives an overview of the Irish music scenes in Oslo as they have come to be today.

Irish music in contemporary Oslo

Music is a very important part of growing up in Ireland. You absorb Irish music tradition through the breastmilk, and most of us also take it with us into adolescence and adulthood. Maybe that's why Irish rock bands usually sing more from their heart than their English counterparts?

(Gjerstad 1988: n.pag, trans. by author)

Locally and internationally, there has been a long and symbolic association between Ireland and music that often attributes to Irish people ‘an inherent, if not generalized, talent in and appreciation for unspecified genres of music’ (Mangaoang et al. 2020: 10). Such ‘recurring myths’ about the Irish and their ‘natural proclivity for music and song’ can be traced back to twelfth-century anthropological–colonial discourse and constructions of Irishness (McLoughlin and McLoone 2000: 181), and are perhaps bolstered by Ireland’s adoption of a symbolic musical instrument – the Irish harp – as a cultural, political and financial emblem of Ireland since the early twentieth century (Mangaoang 2019). Indeed, the assumed musicality of Irish people has permeated even into Scandinavian cultural discourse. Take the above quotation from a Norwegian newspaper by Leif Gjerstad, awkwardly entitled *Morsmelk-musikk fra Irland* (‘Breastmilk music from Ireland’), which takes the Norwegian metaphor of being introduced to something from birth (*å få det inn med morsmelken* [‘absorbed through the breastmilk’]) and applies it, however ineptly, to Irish people and their apparent genetic predisposition towards music and musicality. Nevertheless, notions of Irishness and a supposed ‘inherent musicality continue to be endorsed, both implicitly and explicitly’ (O’Flynn 2009: 22) across a range of platforms today.

Any contemporary definition of Irish music can and will include as many musical styles and genres as we have different countries that we call home, since such an umbrella term might include everything from radio-friendly pop and underground hip-hop that is produced in Ireland to contemporary Irish chamber ensembles and *sean-nós* (solo, ornamental, unaccompanied) singing. For my musician-interlocutors in Oslo, Irish music holds just as many meanings, definitions and connotations. For example, uilleann piper, Brendan, described his understanding of Irish music in broad, quasi-abstract terms: ‘Irish music is history, it is a way of life basically [...] the whole thing about Irish music is a sharing, is a cultural thing’. For Brendan, Irish music encapsulates a romanticized multitude of styles and genres that, for him, are rooted in history and a culture of sharing.

To others, Irish music conjures up a slightly narrower definition. For guitarist, Patrick, any mention of Irish music primarily calls to mind the social interaction of sessions and the musical genres of trad and folk music.

There's the traditional music that's defined by the tunes, the themes, and the lyrics often, and the sound of it, acoustic instruments and so on. Sessions [...] I guess there's the trad track and there's the pop track, really. [But] when someone says Irish music, I think of trad mainly. Trad and folk.

Patrick's remarks chime in with the observations of numerous scholars, where rather essentialist 'notions equating "Irish traditional music" with "Irish music" appear to prevail', and suggests that while many people acknowledge such a view as being 'culturally embedded, it is not uncritically received' (O'Flynn 2009: 21).

Irish traditional music has enthusiasts around the world, in Ireland and within the many well-established diasporic Irish communities across the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as among people and places who may have little to no relationship to Ireland whatsoever. The international popularity of folk-trad groups like The Dubliners and The Chieftains in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by the global success of Irish dance shows like Riverdance (1994) and its spin-offs, gave rise to new generations of Irish music fans around the world, including Norway. Norwegian piano accordion player, Anders, who specializes in Irish traditional music, describes the problematic encounters with Irish music definitions he faces in getting gig requests as an Irish trad musician:

One of the challenges with playing Irish music, I guess, especially outside of Ireland, [is that] compared to Norwegian music, Irish music is much more widely known. People have more an idea, or *think* they have an idea about what Irish music is and what it sounds like. What most people hear in their head when you talk about Irish music is that whole pub song, drinking song thing, with like The Dubliners. I don't have anything against that music, but that's not what I enjoy doing. I do get a few requests of: 'We are having an Irish pub night somewhere, can you come and play'. I know that they want someone to come and sing 'Seven Drunken Nights' and 'Whiskey in the Jar'. That's not what I do! There are some challenges with communication with those kinds of gigs.

While it appears that a thirst for Irish music continues within Oslo nightlife, the paid gigs tend to be the more Irish pub song acts who can deliver the well-known Irish hits like 'Whiskey in the Jar', rather than those well-versed in polkas, reels and slip-jigs from the West of Ireland. Patrick, who plays in an Irish folk-rock band

inspired by The Pogues and Dropkick Murphy's, explains that the largely Norwegian audiences at his gigs come up to the band to say how much they are enjoying the music – that his band's high-energy pub gigs provide an often-welcome contrast to the typically restrained conventions of Norwegian nightlife, where cover bands like his are more of an anomaly than in Ireland, at least.

Aside from pub gigs, some interlocutors consider that the overall status of Irish folk music in Norway has waned in recent years. Anders gives his perspective on the rise and subsequent fall of Irish music in a Scandinavian context:

Irish music isn't that popular in Norway now. I think it was very popular back in the '90s with Riverdance and all that stuff, but these days it's not super popular in the folk scene. Many festivals have a couple of Celtic acts on, but [...] Irish music just isn't super popular in the folk scene in Scandinavia, or at least not in Norway, at the moment.

Nonetheless for a beta⁴ city of its size and population, with limited well-established migrant communities, and an apparent decrease in popularity of Irish folk in comparison to Norwegian and Scandinavian folk music, Oslo has a remarkable quantity and variable quality of performances of Irish culture spread across the calendar year. These range from the more spectacular annual festivities around St. Patrick's Day, Oslo Bloomsday Society festival with public readings and music inspired by James Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Nollaig na mBan* ('Women's Christmas') gatherings respite with sing-songs, to the more every day – or more accurately, every *night* – events that punctuate the working-week such as the trad *seisiún* (hereafter session) in the city's Irish pub every Tuesday and Saturday nights, the Irish community choir rehearsals on Thursday evenings, and the Irish troubadour singing cover songs at the sports bar on a Friday night. The latter three regular activities are of particular interest for this chapter, summarized as follows.

Weekly trad sessions at the Dubliner

The session is at the heart of the Irish traditional music community globally. Historically, sessions took place in the home. The pub session is a relatively recent development in the history of Irish music, having developed in the early twentieth century and popularized by Irish emigrants in London during the 1940s and 1950s (Leonard 2005; Williams 2020). As such, one of the most symbolic features of Irish music was created by Irish migrants away from 'home'. Since then, pub sessions have varied considerably in size, standard, instruments and etiquette. In that regard, Oslo is no different. Sessions are an informal gathering of trad

musicians for the purpose of playing tunes and singing songs, with an occasional poem or story should any patrons feel so inclined. Dancing might also ensue, often spontaneously. While the Oslo trad sessions are informal, and there is no (paid) leader, there is a clear founder of these sessions – Northern Irish fiddler David ‘Davy’ Patterson Dick. Davy Dick is credited with being a crucial player in Oslo’s music scene since the 1960s, for being an informal teacher and mentor for scores of aspiring Norwegian trad musicians, and for establishing the first Tuesday night trad sessions in Oslo over 35 years ago, which moved around to various locations from the 1980s until settling at its current location, The Dubliner Folk Pub. Since 1994, The Dubliner has been the centre of gravity of Oslo’s Irish trad scene. Though owned by a Norwegian businessman, the bar is primarily staffed by migrant workers, especially Irish emigrants, which is noted by many patrons as adding to its ‘authentic feel’. With old church pews aligning the front bar, its handmade stained-glass windows and large cosy fireplaces, the bar became a hub for Irish traditional music sessions within a year of opening and have continued to today.⁵ The bar hosts trad sessions on Tuesday and Saturday evenings, and live bands – frequently flown over from Ireland – on the bar’s modest stage most weekends.

Session musicians in Oslo receive no payment, though all players can avail of staff discounts on their beers, which with the price of alcohol in Oslo, is considered a rather fair incentive. Like Irish sessions the world over, musicians gather in an informal circle towards each other, for Irish trad is performed for the players’ enjoyment first and foremost, rather than any audience who may or may not have gathered to listen in. Oslo’s two sessions have gone through various changes over the years with an assortment of instruments and quality to be had. Two distinctly diverse sessions are now in existence, with a small handful of players consistently participating in their session of choice. The Tuesday night sessions (Figure 8.1), located in a quiet, dark corner tucked away at the back of the bar, are considered to be the more tune-focused session, instrumental rather than singing, and since the majority of regulars to these weeknight sessions are Norwegian or Scandinavian-speaking, the working language of these sessions tends to be Norwegian.⁶ In contrast, the Saturday sessions (Figure 8.2) take place in the front bar, right next to the main entrance, and welcome a wide array of songs and session styles alongside Irish traditional music. Here, the working language is primarily English, with smatterings of Norwegian here and there, reflecting a more international – or more recently arrived – mix of migrant musicians from Ireland and beyond. Despite sharing the same venue albeit on different nights, these two musical contexts reveal how migrants experience Oslo’s nightly music scenes in different ways and temporalities.



FIGURE 8.1: A Tuesday night tunes session in the back bar of the Dubliner, August 2019. Source: The Dubliner Facebook page.

FIGURE 8.2: A guitar-heavy Saturday night session in full flow in the front bar of The Dubliner Folk Pub, Rådhusgata 28, Oslo, October 2020. © Linn Schjerven.

Weekend Irish cover bands and troubadour gigs

The Dubliner is also one of the main employers of bands playing Irish folk-rock styles, with live music programmed on stage in their pub, most Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. These musical acts include local bands with a mix of nationalities including Irish and Norwegian; more frequently, bands are invited over from Ireland and the wider Irish diaspora. International bands would usually be contracted to play a minimum of three gigs from Thursday to Saturday, or sometimes a residency of six or seven gigs over a ten-day period during particularly busy periods in Oslo's nightlife such as *Julebord* season.⁷ The format of these sets would be three 45-minute sets starting from 9:30 p.m. on weekday nights, and 10:30 p.m. at the weekends, often with the tacit expectation that bands will continue playing for as long as the bar is still serving. Interlocutor Patrick, who has played at the Dubliner regularly both as a solo troubadour and as part of his band, Kearney's Dog, comments that from the bar's point of view 'they think "we sell more beer when there's music here!"' While international bands have their airfare covered, and are adequately paid with accommodation provided, the economics of such tours may not always be particularly lucrative for touring bands given the extortionate cost of living in Oslo, as well as the expense of alcohol and other aspects of the city's nightlife. One former barman at The Dubliner joked that some touring bands would end up owing more money to the pub for drinks consumed during a residency than what they were paid for the gigs themselves.

In addition to The Dubliner, a Danish-owned, international chain of Irish bars opened in nine pubs first with the name Mulligan's Irish Pub and subsequently under the name The Old Irish Pub in Norway since 2018, with three branches in Oslo (Figure 8.3). In contrast to their name, The Old Irish Pubs in Oslo operate under a rather different aesthetic to The Dubliner's snug, old-world feel, with high ceilings, neon lights and murals of leprechauns and shamrocks painted on the walls. Yet they are a key player in keeping musicians employed and entertaining local audiences. The Old Irish Pubs pride themselves in offering live music every week, stating on their website that 'Every weekend we fly in musicians from Ireland, among other places, to give you authentic musical experiences' (The Old Irish Pub 2021: n.pag., trans. by author). Conflating the importation of musicians directly 'from Ireland' with notions of authenticity through publicly signalling a link between ethnicity and citizenship, even though musicians 'from Ireland' may well encompass many ethnicities and nationalities, the bar chain also advertised for musicians from within Norway to perform at their branches in Oslo and Stavanger, with no restrictions on the musician's ethnicity. Instead, the advertisement emphasizes that they seek 'high energy solo performers, who can entertain in an Irish pub-style', as well as 'Party Bands – 80s, 90s Pop/Rock, solo, Irish-style pub entertainers, acoustic guitar and



FIGURE 8.3: The logo for ‘The Old Irish Pub’ chain of bars, with ‘Est. 1873’ embedded in the logo underneath the name; written to the side in Danish and Norwegian: ‘Vi ses!’ (‘see you!’). Source: The Old Irish Pub website. © Linn Schjerven.

vocal, Irish style pub duos/trios all who must have at least five years’ experience’ (Brophy Booking 2019: n.pag.). While both pubs claim to deliver ‘authentic’ experiences of Irishness to Norwegian nightlife, especially through their highly visible use of Irish music and of hiring musicians from Ireland, the bars perform their version of Irishness in decidedly different ways. Of course, both pubs’ claims to authenticity are highly disputable, instead raising questions about whether their perceived Irishness is more ‘genuine’ or whether it can be viewed as staged, manufactured or ‘plastic’.

The Mná na hÉireann choir

The Mná na hÉireann (‘Women of Ireland’) choir, known as the Mná Singers by members, is a community choir of about 20 women with an Irish background. They specialize in learning Irish repertoire – broadly conceived as any songs produced in Ireland, by Irish people, or songs popularized by Irish artists – including a range of macaronic songs sung in Irish, English and Norwegian. An intergenerational group, the youngest member is 17, while several older members are in their 70s. Many are Irish-born women who initially migrated to Norway for love to marry Norwegian spouses several decades ago, while most of the younger members in their 20s and 30s migrated to study and/or work,

having secured skilled jobs in Oslo.⁸ The group emerged from an existing *Mná na hÉireann* network of Irish emigrants in Oslo who meet annually at *Nollaig na mBan* gatherings and other intervals including St. Patrick's Day and summer get-togethers. Interlocutor Liz founded the choir in 2016 with the explicit aim of connecting with the Irish community in Oslo, having found few opportunities to connect with other members of the Irish diaspora, stressing that the choir is informal – there are no auditions, no requirements to read musical notation – and is open to all women in the Irish community and affinity diaspora in Norway. The larger *Mná* network in Oslo has an active Facebook group, where they advertise choir practices and recruit new choir members, which is how I was invited to join soon after I arrived in Oslo. Initially, evening choir rehearsals were generously accommodated at the Irish Embassy offices in downtown Oslo after the diplomatic staff had finished work, aided a great deal by the fact that one of the choir members was the spouse of the then-Irish Ambassador to Norway. More recently, the choir meet for rehearsals at various venues around Oslo, depending on availability, funding and other variable factors, including in pre-booked rooms at the new Deichman Public Library, rehearsal rooms at Øvingshotellet,⁹ and at times in members' homes and gardens. With a repertoire that includes Irish lullabies and nonsense songs to singles by Sinéad O'Connor and The Cranberries, the choir have performed at different public and private events within the Irish community (Figure 8.4). They also conduct outreach into



FIGURE 8.4: Members of the *Mná na hÉireann* choir perform with The Chieftains at Cosmopolite Scene, May 2018. Courtesy of the author.

the civic community through annual performances at cancer centres and carol singing in different Oslo neighbourhoods at Christmastime.¹⁰

Themes

The themes discussed here are taken from one-to-one interviews with interlocutors, five of which were held over videoconferencing, one in-person, and one written correspondence, during Spring 2021. Five interlocutors responded to an open call for participants that I posted to the Irish Sessions at The Dubliner Facebook page, followed by an additional two recruited through snowball sampling (see [Table 8.1](#)). Five men and two women were interviewed, ranging in age from 27 to 62 years old. All interlocutors self-identified as musicians and singers who performed Irish music, and all but one currently lived in Oslo – one having recently relocated from Oslo to the Norwegian countryside. With their consent, interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed and read multiple times to identify and code the main recurring themes.

The narratives of my interlocutors suggest that Irish musicking plays an important role in social integration at night and that such acts of cultural immersion are a two-way street. The following two key themes emerged from their narratives: ‘(Be)Longing: Irish music as social and cultural integration at night’ and ‘Rifts and ruptures: Musicking, tension and cultural difference’.

(Be)Longing: Irish music as ‘home’ and social integration at night

‘Home’ is a challenging concept to unravel, and becomes even more complex against wider discussions of globalization, transnationalism and hyper-mobility. In the context of the many migrants who participate in Irish musicking in Oslo, the concept of ‘home’ becomes extremely powerful for those physically distanced from it, and if we listen, this longing seems particularly potent at night. Scholars have long asserted that music is central to the affective realm of this diasporic experience and provides a sonic anchor ‘linking homeland and here-land with an intricate network of sound’ (Slobin 1994: 243). It is no surprise, then, that Irish music has special meaning for Irish emigrants in Oslo, who use an array of multi-sensorial, kinesthetic language to describe the feeling of listening to and performing Irish music away from the homeland. Liz depicts her response to singing Irish music at night-time sessions and rehearsals in Oslo as an evocative, emotional experience:

It makes me feel like I’m home. Wherever I am in the whole world, and I hear Irish music, then it brings me a little bit home. It is like a smell. The sound really grounds

me [...] You can close your eyes and you can be in that place [...] For me, even though I am born and raised in Limerick, I spend a lot of time in Clare, and I have a place in Clare. I mentioned The Kilfenora Céili Band earlier, and for me I can almost smell the sea when I listen to The Kilfenora Céili Band. Though I am sure they would rarely play on the beach in Kilkee!

While Liz acknowledges the at once incongruous reaction to her musical homesickness, this kind of response to music as providing an embodied sense of place is also well documented in research among Americans with Irish heritage (Dillane 2013). For an American fiddler, Michael, whose father's family moved to the United States from Ireland in the 1910s, a move to Oslo gave him the opportunity to learn a musical style that for him, felt like a connection with his Irish ancestors.

I had been playing and discovering new types of fiddle music throughout my 20s and after moving to Oslo I took the opportunity to start learning Irish tunes and trying them out at the session.

Michael's desire to use Irish culture through Oslo's night-time trad sessions to connect with his Irish heritage mirrors that of many Americans who claim Irish ancestry (Williams 2020). He feels a certain responsibility towards at least trying out an aspect of Irishness through learning fiddle tunes, both as a homage to his Irish ancestors and in honour of his Irish names, having been named after deceased Irish family members. Meanwhile, Liz's response to listening to *céili* music at home at night, however paradoxical and knowing, and Michael's connection to playing Irish fiddle tunes at nocturnal sessions resonates with previous scholarship on notions of 'home' in the diasporic imagination, where it becomes an almost mythic place of desire (Brah 1996: 192), coupled with these occurrences happening at night, where 'things supposedly missing are keenly felt' (Dunn 2016: 14).

More surprising, perhaps, are narratives of Irish music feeling like home for more than those with Irish ancestry, however many generations ago it may be. Take, for example, the following quotations from Polish guitarist, Kaja and Norwegian concertina player, Snorre, neither of whom have any Irish heritage connection but who feel strong, emotive responses of feeling at 'home' when playing Irish music during nocturnal sessions at The Dubliner.

I think that The Dubliner is my second home [...] it's *our place* [...] I'm sure I'm not the only one thinking of The Dubliner as a second home. This is our place where we play music and we know the staff and we know the place, and we know each other.
(Kaja)

The Dubliner has a reputation outside of Oslo, so there is a lot of people going if they are here for a conference or for some other thing [...] They come in and clap and dance, shout out a lot and do all the things they think they are supposed to do, and then they ask if anyone can sing ‘Whiskey in the Jar’ and we tell them to fuck off in a nice way. This is *our house*, not theirs, you know!

(Snorre)

Kaja’s feeling of being at once part of a collective when playing Irish music in ‘our place’ and its association with being a ‘second home’ for the musicians, chimes with Snorre’s sense of ownership over the space when the musicians are in full flow of a session and abruptly interrupted by an innocent reveller. For Snorre, the connection between Irish music and home is further complex, as he describes his 30+ year bond with Irish music. He explains the emotional dichotomy involved when trying to reconcile his lifelong experiences of travelling to Ireland to play music, the relationships formed through music-making, yet the feeling of alienation of being *not* Irish. Snorre says:

[T]o actually be able to put into words my relationship with Irish music and Irish culture is [...] when I go to Ireland, I feel very much at home, and I feel very much like a stranger. It’s a strong duality ... I’m definitely a part of the affinity diaspora.

Both Kaja and Snorre’s observations of feeling ‘home’ in connection to nocturnal music sessions at the Dubliner echo what music scholar Sean Williams’ describes as Ireland’s exceptional status as ‘a kind of fictive homeland for people with no heritage connection, but who are profoundly attracted by its music’ (2020: 5).

Each interlocutor further remarked on the highly social aspects of Irish musicking as being distinctly positive qualities that endeared them to the form, a theme which echoes previous scholarship on music’s distinctly social qualities and abilities to create ‘communities of musical practice’ (Kenny 2016). In Oslo, Irish musicking facilitates intergenerational social interaction between the Irish diasporic community and those from other backgrounds. For American fiddler, Michael, Polish guitarist, Kaja and Irish uilleann piper, Brendan, the night-time sessions at the Dubliner were a crucial part of developing a social network soon after they first moved to Norway, to create friendships that extended far beyond Tuesday or Saturday nights. For Norwegian musician Snorre, the significance of playing Irish music lies not only in the tunes but in the complex social interactions offered through the session, where locals can learn more than just the music from migrant musicians. As Snorre explains, the nocturnal session is fertile ground for Norwegians like him to leave behind the constraints of the day and learn the

specific social subtleties of slagging and other forms of banter that are the lifeblood of many Irish sessions.

Being in sessions in Ireland will automatically start the immersion project because you are there with Irish people doing Irish stuff. I had that from Norway, because when I joined the session, Davy Dick and other expats in the session – the language was English – and I learned about slagging in Norway from expats. It is a different tone, you know! I am a socially outgoing person, but I noticed players in sessions in Norway, Norwegians who don't grasp the social dynamics.

The art of slagging – a 'jovial or artful teasing' – is recognized as a 'favourite conversational pastime of many Irish people', of which musicians are thought to be 'particularly adept' (Williams 2020: 12). Snorre continues, stressing the vital role of Irish music as a collaborative, performative form.

Music to me is a very social thing [...] Two musicians can always make better music than one! All my best musical moments I have had with other people, with creating a common groove. When you hit the sweet spot of rhythm and style, you know, that's it! You think in the same ways and [...] the sort of community feeling, that's very important in music.

This 'community feeling' of Irish sessions at night – that is perceived as unique for many musicians from other musical cultures – is what gives Irish music its value for the musicians who play it, who experience it as valuable both as an aesthetic and collaborative practice. These kinds of musical–social interactions offer novel ways for migrants, Irish and others, to integrate into Norwegian society by supporting the creation of local spaces of belonging that are largely led by members of migrant communities, and crucially, are offered *on their terms*.

Rifts and ruptures: Musicking, tension and cultural difference

Scholars have noted how the performance of Irish traditional music provided a path for Irish emigrants to connect with others and express their perceived cultural difference (Leonard 2005). For interlocutors of different nationalities, the public performance of Irish music in bars, concert venues or public spaces serves as a relaxed entry point for culturally curious locals to learn more about Irish culture and heritage. Snorre admits that to receive any outward reaction or recognition from local pub patrons during their night-time sessions is to be considered remarkable for the more reserved Norwegians.

Because [sessions] are not a common thing in Norwegian culture as such – where people play informally – we are more used to formal music, a band or a piano-player or something like that; it has an organic feel to it as well, that you never know the dynamics and how powerful it's going to be. Some nights are quiet, and some are not. That is contagious as well [...] If it was a good night for music, people stick their head in and say thanks for the music, which is a fair step for Norwegians to take!

Some interlocutors express surprise, disappointment and even frustration at the stereotypically refined and private reactions from Norwegian audiences to hearing Irish music in informal, hidden settings, especially in contrast to clichéd connections or romanticized responses from Irish audiences. From Liz's perspective,

Norwegians are extremely polite; they are extremely private, and they are extremely loyal and good people [...] But they are not very open, and they control their curiosity as well I think, which is unfortunate. A Norwegian is unlikely to tap you on your shoulder and say: 'I hear you. Where are you from and what are you singing?' In Ireland they would be asking you straight away your life history, and that is very different. Sometimes I appreciate that in Norwegian society, people just leave me alone and I can do my own thing [...] They are *tilbakeholden* ['restrained']. It's a resistance in many ways to connect with other people.

Other clashes emerge because of the musical format of the session, where despite the outward appearance of being an open, democratic, and even utopian space, the session is filled with a host of unwritten rules governing the proceedings. Anders describes how possible points of tension arise during the session that requires careful navigation so as not to upset the evening's flow:

When people show up with the expectation of this jam session thing being something it's not. Like say, you show up with an instrument that isn't suited, or you think you can show up and play pop tunes. In some sessions maybe you can, you just have to use your social intelligence, but I can see a few people feeling that they maybe are being rejected [...] There are definitely no rules, so of course you could have a session where you play country songs and also pop tunes and Norwegian and Swedish folk [...] It's up to the people that shows up, but if 90 percent of the group wants to do one thing and then some people show up and insist on doing something else, that's where the tension arise, I think. There is a lot going on under the surface!

Anders reiterates the 'no rules' at sessions mantra, though for many newcomers to the sessions, it is rarely experienced as a complete free-for-all. Navigating the

session's unspoken code can lead to feelings of inclusion and exclusion by interlocutors.

Reflecting on her experiences of founding a choir exclusively for Irish women, Liz questions if the social dynamics within the choir would be more balanced if the choir was open to all genders:

The fact that we don't have any men, and a lot of woman and strong characters as well [...] maybe, had we had some men as well it would even out the tone a little bit [...] There have been times where there have been some conflicts. Women can be a little bit too direct with each other, and maybe had we had male members we might not have had that. But there is also this camaraderie, this element of like, we are all women in this together, that is also very beautiful. I think that we have appreciated this as well.

Inclusion in Oslo's Irish music scenes may not necessarily be as open or all-encompassing as its members might think. One's status, gender, age, nationality and other identity politics may work for or against one in any social setting, and Oslo's night-time Irish music scene is scarcely different in that regard (cf. Slominski 2020). Indeed, tensions, hierarchies and clashing personalities are to be found in Oslo's Irish music scene, as they may be in sessions and scenes the world over (see Kenny 2016).

*Discussion: From night to day – Irish musicking in
Oslo during the COVID-19 pandemic*

Conducting these conversations with interlocutors during a global pandemic – when international travel to the homeland is curtailed and the city's nightlife has grounded to an abrupt halt – has coloured every aspect of this research, for better or worse. For many Irish emigrants, Irish music has come to fill the void in new ways during such unprecedented times. As Patrick remarked, Irish music comes to mean so much more during the COVID-19 pandemic as 'everyone's a little more homesick'. Listening to and playing more Irish music at home was one of the most notable changes for the musicians I spoke with. While nightly pub sessions represented an important, collective public space for the performance of Irish music, the pandemic moved these sessions to the home, and for those fortunate enough to share a home with other musicians, it remained a collective, yet more private practice. Brendan, who lives with two other musicians, describes the lockdown period as the most musically fruitful time in his life, as he got to experience in-person sessions at home on a near-nightly basis.

I've been very fortunate in that both the two ladies that I'm living with here, we would sit on a regular basis, on a nightly basis even, and just play tunes together. Because over the years I've learned and collected so many reels, jigs, hornpipes, slip jigs, just tunes of Ireland, and songs, [so] the three of us just have a regular session ... If we're allowed more than two, three people, the weekly Saturday session people would come over to the house and during the week we would have a few tunes, nice glass of wine, have the craic and enjoy it. It's been the best time, literally, the best time of my life!

For musicians like Brendan, the pandemic has not curtailed his nightlife as much as it has blossomed. Thus, for some, the shift in sites of Irish musicking allows for more flexibility or even musical experimentation than in a pub setting, while also paying homage to the very origins of Irish sessions as being the preserve of the private home, where Irish musicking was a sit down in ones' own house.

The fleeting weeks wherein the pandemic eased in Norway and bars were allowed to re-open led to the resumption of reduced live musicking opportunities, affecting Oslo-based musicians in different ways. For Patrick, who received bookings for some Saturday-night slots at The Dubliner:

It was different already because people weren't allowed dance, weren't allowed come up and talk to you [...] it was quite funny seeing the bar staff, because the later it was getting, they were just more and more like babysitters, like 'don't stand up, sit back down!' Basically! 'Don't go and talk to others!' [laughs] And also then quite depressing to play, because you had this huge empty space in front of you where there used to be people interacting [...] I always thought it was nice when people came up and shook your hand or came up and shouted something in your ear and say 'Great!' or 'Can you do the "Wild Rover?!"' But all those things are just ... [trails off].

Indeed, for musicians like Patrick, it was a strange, surreal, and at times, rather sad experience performing to audiences who were not allowed to leave their seats, as per government guidelines at the time. The weekly trad sessions at The Dubliner also resumed briefly, albeit with the new regulations insisting on one-metre distance between musicians, and a formal list of participants in advance of the sessions – negating the possibility of anyone dropping in as was once the case, along with ubiquitous hand sanitisers. But for Snorre and other musicians, even with the new restrictions the session still worked; there was no outbreaks or incidents, and the opportunity to play tunes together, even while seated a metre apart, was a substantial improvement from playing alone in one's apartment.

For all my interlocutors, the rare occasions when face-to-face musicking recommenced were treasured even more than usual, such as an impromptu Mná performance a few days before Christmas 2020. Remembering this ‘pop up’ event that took place after dark on the grounds of the Norwegian Royal Palace in downtown Oslo, Liz recalled:

It was certainly very atmospheric [...] We all turned up and it was a good bunch of us [...] What I remember very vividly about that evening, I had an American friend with me, and she was FaceTiming with her mother in the States, and her mother is in her 90s. We were singing some Irish Christmas carols, some Norwegian, and she was listening in and crying and saying how beautiful it was. Here we are, and we are not just reaching out to Norway ... There were a lot of young soldiers outside guarding the palace, and they were listening to us, so we could see that they were quite enjoying it. We were entertaining them on their rather boring rounds. So, we were reaching out to the local community, and we were reaching out to the community in America [...] I think we were all thrilled to connect with each other through our music, during a period which has been tough for everybody, especially my community and immigrant communities as well, when they can’t go home to Ireland. To be able to do this meant so much and was very special.

Under the cover of Oslo after-dark, the nocturnal urban space was transformed into an atmospheric stage, where the women felt comfortable singing nostalgic carols to a handful of strangers on the street (and to a technologically mediated audience in the United States). This low-key, somewhat hidden event on a cold winter night, empowered members of the Irish community to support each other through song – a special solidarity found in an all-female, safe space at night – during what had been an exceptionally difficult year for many.

As we have heard, depending on musicians’ living situations, some have enjoyed more creative and musically engaged periods than ever during lockdowns, while others have had their entire musical world upended overnight, with sessions and gigs tours cancelled and no clear guidelines on when they can ever resume. Musicians must constantly operate within the constraints of Oslo’s ever-changing pandemic guidelines that fluctuated in severity between complete lockdown and subsequent ‘red level’ restrictions, which saw all but essential services closed and regulated social contact to a maximum of two visitors to a private household and up to ten in public, outdoor spaces. For migrant interlocutors Brendan, Kaja, and Liz, Oslo’s red-level status presented novel challenges for their musicking as they moved sessions and choir rehearsals into public parks whenever conditions allowed. Since Oslo’s more severe lockdowns coincided with the colder months, and the Nordic climate after-dark is not conducive

to prolonged, open-air musicking, such transitions meant that former night-time events were largely, albeit temporarily, relocated to the day; trad sessions and singing circles moved from night-time indoor venues to afternoon open-air happenings. The shift in Oslo's Irish music scene from indoors to out, and from night to day was assisted by the overwhelmingly acoustic nature of trad sessions and choirs. Yet in this transference from night to day, certain qualities of Oslo's night-time musicking were lost as daytime distractions interfered. In the bright light of day, against a backdrop of noisy traffic, general concerns of the day seem to weigh more heavily than perhaps they do at night. But the resilience of these musicians to take to the often-freezing temperatures to make music together speaks to the essential need for live, face-to-face musical communication against whatever challenging situations.

Conclusion: Integration is a sonic process

Drawing from the narratives of these seven musicians, we hear how Irish music continues to sustain and enlighten these musicians and their fellow residents of Oslo today. Their accounts express how Irish music in Oslo is 'developing into an international language for people from all over the world who know how to play and sing it' (Williams 2020: 4). It's clear that the future of Irish music – in all its guises – looks to be built around a 'shared love of sounds we will probably always call "Irish", but without the limitations of static, essentialized identity' (Slominski 2020: 174). Migrant musicians, and their local collaborators, contribute to the artistic life of Oslo through their unfailing work and creative practice. While large-scale musical presentations during the main diasporic events may draw the largest audiences, the abundance of low-key, hidden performances at civic and community events and through outreach in public parks, nursing homes and cancer centres reveal the multiple ways these musical practices engage with fellow urban residents and shape theirs and others' experiences of place. If, as Tom Western asserts, 'migration is a sonic process' (2020: 294), according to these migrant musicians in Oslo, integration is, too, a continuous sonic process – if only we care to listen.

Acknowledgements

Grateful appreciation to all the musicians who participated in this research. Additional thanks to Aileen Dillane, Marian Mangaoang, Victoria Nybråten, Linn Schjerven and David Toms for their assistance and expertise during this project.

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of David (Davy) Patterson Dick (1939–2022), the heart of Oslo’s trad sessions for the past fifty years.

NOTES

1. The term ‘Irish music’ suggests a multitude of possible meanings, as touched upon in the second section of this chapter. However, for the purposes of this chapter, Irish music is defined here as any music composed, produced and/or performed in Ireland or by Irish people (whether they are in Ireland or in any other part of the world). This includes but is not limited to Irish traditional music (hereafter ‘trad’), folk, rock, pop and a great many other musical genres produced in Ireland or by Irish people.
2. Coined as a verb by Christopher Small (1998), ‘musicking’ refers to any activity related to musical performance, thus places an emphasis on music as a process, rather than a product.
3. Cultural identity is understood, in this case, after Stuart Hall ‘as a “production”, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation’ (1990: 222).
4. Oslo is categorized as a beta world city according to the Globalization and World Cities Research Network (2020), that is a city that is not as globally connected as alpha cities such as like London, New York, Hong Kong and Tokyo. Oslo shares its beta level with other moderate economic cities such as Barcelona, Bogotá, Cape Town and Perth.
5. These sessions have continued every week until the present, corona-pandemic notwithstanding.
6. That said, all are welcome to these sessions and non-Norwegian speakers are easily accommodated, since many Norwegians – especially most of those on the trad circuit – speak English to a high degree of fluency.
7. *Julebord* is Norway’s rather raucous ‘Christmas party’ tradition that fills the city’s bars from the end of November until New Year.
8. It is worth addressing the significant shift in the Irish community in Oslo post-2008. Up until then, and still primarily, the Irish who move to Norway tend to be highly skilled, highly educated middle-class professionals, and, until 2008, were disproportionately women. However, the economic downturn following 2008 has changed this, as more agent-hired men in construction and adjacent work began moving to Oslo.
9. Øvingshotellet is a ‘hotel’ not for sleeping but for music rehearsing, run by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in Oslo.
10. The Mná developed a new initiative called the Singing Circle in October 2019, based on the model of an Irish traditional singing session. This monthly singer’s club was hosted at the Dubliner pub, free of charge and open to any interested folk and traditional singers from all backgrounds, not only men and women from the Irish diaspora. While these sessions were gaining momentum, and attracted singers and folk music enthusiasts from

Catalonia, France, the Netherlands and Norway to join, the pandemic put an abrupt end to these sessions in March 2020.

REFERENCES

- Brah, Avtar (1996), *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, London: Routledge.
- Brophy Bookings: The Leading Solo Agency (Official Website) (2019), 'Old Irish Pub Music Booking', <http://www.brophybookings.com/index.php/en/contact/job-application/old-irish-pub>. Accessed 20 December 2021 (no longer available).
- Dillane, Aileen (2013), 'Nostalgic songlines and the performance of Irish identity', *Béaloideas*, 81, pp. 19–36.
- Dunn, Nick (2016), *Dark Matters: A Manifesto for the Nocturnal City*, Winchester: Zero Books.
- Finnegan, Ruth (1989), *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gjerstad, Leif (1988), 'Morsmelk-musikk fra Irland' ('Breastmilk music from Ireland'), *Bergens Tidende*, 20 November 1988, n. pag.
- Hall, Stuart (1990), 'Cultural identity and diaspora', in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 222–37.
- Kenny, Ailbhe (2016), *Communities of Musical Practice*, New York: Routledge.
- Leonard, Marion (2005), 'Performing identities: Music and dance in the Irish communities of Coventry and Liverpool', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6:4, pp. 515–29.
- Mangaoang, Áine (2019), 'Music and tourism: Mapping popular music from St. Patrick's College', in J. Buckley and J. O'Flynn (eds), *Ceol Phádraig: Music at St Patrick's College Drumcondra, 1875–2016*, Oxford: Peter Lang, pp. 205–21.
- Mangaoang, Áine, O'Flynn, John and Ó Briain, Lonán (eds) (2020), *Made in Ireland: Studies in Popular Music*, New York: Routledge.
- McLoughlin, Noel and McLoone, Martin (2000), 'Hybridity and national musics: The case of Irish rock music', *Popular Music*, 19:2, pp. 181–99.
- O'Flynn, John (2009), *The Irishness of Irish Music*, Farnham: Ashgate.
- Slobin, Mark (1994), 'Music in diaspora: The view from Euro-America', *Diaspora*, 3:1, pp. 243–52.
- Slomonski, Tes (2020), *Trad Nation: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Irish Traditional Music*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Small, Christopher (1998), *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Hanover: University Press of New England.
- The Old Irish Pub (Official Website) (2021), 'Om Puben' ('About the Pub'), <https://oldirishpub.no/pub/oslo/>. Accessed 20 December 2019.
- Western, Tom (2020), 'Listening with displacement: Sound, citizenship, and disruptive representations of migration', *Migration & Society: Advances in Research*, 3, pp. 294–309.
- Williams, Sean (2020), *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 2nd ed., New York: Routledge.