

What Is Traditional Music?

Applicants to the Festival are often asking, “what do you mean by ‘traditional music’?” I’ve not come across a better or more compact description of traditional music than this (slightly edited) extract from the Introduction to Georóid Ó Hallmhuráin’s *A Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*. It sums up for me in a nutshell the essence of the fluid nature of tradition, easier always to describe than to define:

There is no iron-clad definition of ... traditional music. It is best understood as a broad-based system which accommodates a complex process of musical convergence, coalescence and innovation over time. It involves different types of singing, dancing and instrumental music developed ... over the course of several centuries. ... (T)raditional music is essentially oral in character, and is transmitted from one generation to the next through a process of performance. Experienced musicians are capable of memorizing up to five hundred pieces of music, some of which they play regularly, while others may lie dormant for years. While traditional music has developed largely beyond the literate process, much of it has been written down. Some performers learn formally from written sources, as well as informally from experienced players. Others learn from radio, television and sound recordings. Although its repertoire may seem conservative in form, the oral base of ... traditional music allows it to be more fluid than written music.

Although some musicians and singers are folk composers in their own right, not all new compositions are accepted as part of the living tradition. When they are, the original composer is often forgotten and the tune absorbs the influence of different dialects, instruments and musicians. Hence, the multiplicity of versions of well-known tunes and songs which is commonplace in Irish music. Within the bounds of the established tradition, experienced performers use improvisation in their interpretation of tunes, songs and dances. This involves ornamenting and varying the basic melodic structures in dance music, as well as in traditional songs. Most musicians refer to their music as ‘traditional music’ or ‘Irish music’. The term “folk music” is only used on occasion, while labels like Celtic Music, World Music and the recent misnomer Afro-Celtic Music are marketing terms, which hold little or no merit among traditional performers.

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