

MUSIC LEARNING THROUGH TRADITION: COUNTY CLARE SINGING
SESSIONS AND POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF CLASSROOM ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT

The Irish singing session has provided a safe community where singers of all abilities are welcome to share with and learn from one another. Through British occupation and into independence, the Irish session has transformed tremendously from its original form. Still, the session carries on the Irish tradition of music learning and enculturation through oral transmission. Singing sessions provide a unique opportunity for the many songs of Irish history to be sung and learned; passed down from generation to generation! Singers learn new songs through listening to and watching other singers, imitating material, experimenting with new ideas, and discussing musical performances with others. Session leaders may attempt to create an encouraging and accepting environment where singers feel secure, resulting in the unbridled sharing of singers' deep connections with a song. Such methods, including personal choice and a safe environment, have been observed through field research and have shown to positively affect singers and communities related to singing sessions in County Clare, Ireland. In this study, I pose that the methods used in singing sessions may also be beneficial when adapted for use in the music classroom.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Irish singing has carried traditions of music and music learning through a turbulent political and social past (Dike, 2017). The singing session is the home of the songs and stories of old and new Ireland; it is where the song tradition “lives and breathes” (Foy, 2009, p. 14). Sessions are a fascinating combination of music making, listening, watching, imitating, experimenting, discussing, and understanding. With an accepting and encouraging community, session attendees encounter a safe and multifaceted music learning environment, where transmission and enjoyment take place simultaneously.

Session participants and leaders in County Clare shared how attending sessions impacted their knowledge of Irish song, their performance practices, and their decision to perform at pub sessions. This study aims to identify some of the methods used in the singing sessions I observed in County Clare, Ireland. I pose that these methods can be adapted for classroom use to benefit student learning and community building.

Throughout this thesis, I will explore four essential questions which have guided my research: 1) By what means do hosts and participants of the Irish singing session tradition create accepting and encouraging music communities? 2) In what ways are singing sessions beneficial to those who partake in them? 3) How can methods used in the singing sessions be adapted for use in the music classroom? 4) What are the potential benefits of student choice and an encouraging and accepting community in the

music classroom? These questions inform one another, and may contribute to an ongoing discussion about new ways to build community and lifelong learning in the music classroom.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Brief Background

Throughout the history of Irish traditional music, suppression of cultural heritage and Gaelic language, due to foreign invasion, have influenced the sound, presentation, and learning process of the genre. This literature review examines the *tradition of Irish singing sessions* and the history and cultural significance of *song, singing, and the singing session*.

For the music to be *traditional*, it must be connected and rooted to the past. It is not static nor unchanging, but is bound to its historical influence; to represent one (music) without the other (history) would be inaccurate and incomplete (Kaul, 2006; McCullough, 1977; Mule, 2014; Cox & Klein, 2004). While some purists hold that traditional music should never change from its original form in order to protect and preserve it, many researchers and singers of Irish song believe the opposite to be true (Kaul, 2005; Kaul, 2006; White 1984). Finding a line between innovation and “fidelity to the original” is necessary to keep the tradition relevant for musicians and singers, ensuring continued performance, practice, and transmission (Broughton, Ellingham, Muddyman, & Trillo, 1994, p.5; Dike, 2017; Henry, 1989).

While all parts of *Irish*¹ culture have been influenced by major historical events and, thus other cultural influences, much of what is the Irish song tradition is considered to have been passed down despite cultural oppression by invading forces (Dowling, 2014; Flood, 1913). Since the 1960's Celtic Revival, the people of Ireland have developed a cultural identity that distinguishes certain traditions and traits as specifically Irish.

In regard to music and song, Porter makes the distinction that *music* consists of tunes for instruments and *song* includes tunes for voice, usually containing words (1998). This study focuses specifically on song. While there are many instances of voice and instruments performing in tandem, it is uncharacteristic of *sean-nós*, the most common traditional Irish singing heard at singing sessions. Aspects of singing at instrumental sessions are mentioned later in this review, but, for the sake of relevance to my topic, only briefly. Further study and observation of the singer's role in the instrumental session would be necessary for an in-depth analysis.

The *session*, or *seisiún*, occurs when a group of musicians² and/or singers and/or dancers congregate within a common space, most often a pub. The pub session is primarily instrumental, with songs occurring between sets of music, usually lasting 3-5 tunes per set (Kaul, 2005). This study focuses primarily on the tradition of *singing sessions*; sessions where singing is constant with the occasional story or accompaniment

¹ In this text, *Irish* refers to anything created and transmitted by people native to the country of Ireland.

² The distinction between *singers* and *musicians* is controversial. In literature pertaining to the session tradition, as well as in conversations with vocal and instrumental musicians in Ireland, *musician* refers to one who plays an instrument and *singer* refers to one that sings.

to a voice. These singing sessions transmit a wealth of songs which might not be heard in a normal pub session, where only a few songs might be sung each night. I have chosen the Anglicized spelling for the word “session,” for the sake of consistency; much of the literature, as well as public postings for singing sessions throughout County Clare, Ireland, use this spelling.

History

History has not been kind to Irish cultural heritage. British occupancy of Ireland began in the early 12th century, following the Norman invasion less than a century prior. This would lead to over 800 years of British influence, causing the end of the reigning High Kings in Ireland, the redistribution of Irish lands to English settlers, the discrimination and murder of Irish people, and the villainization and attempted destruction of Irish music and culture (Flood, 1913).

Discrimination came in many forms under British rule. The 1295 statute of Edward I forbade Englishmen from growing their hair in *coolins*³. Shortly after, the Irish song “An Chúilfhionn - The Coolin” was composed. The song tells the story of a beautiful Irish maiden who prefers the man who holds onto his culture heritage and despises “the Anglo-Irish who conformed to the statute by cutting off their coolins” (Flood, 1913, p. 87-88). The 1360 ordinance by King Edward III stated that all Englishmen living in Ireland must learn and use the English language, forbidding them

³ In this text, *coolins* are a traditional Irish hair style consisting of long curls.

from speaking Irish Gaelic or having their children raised among the “wilde Irish” (Flood, 1913, p. 91). The English also brought the Protestant religion to Ireland, making many places such as Dublin University closed to the Irish Catholics and removing catholic priests from their parishes (Flood, 1913).

Flood documents numerous accounts of the imprisonment and murder of transmitters of Irish culture, with a significant increase in the 16th century. True to English suspicions, a number of Irish bards were spies, gathering and sending information to Irish Chiefs and, at times, to other Englishmen. They traveled throughout the country spreading songs of rebellion against the union and songs of hope for an independent Ireland (Flood, 1913). Irish bards and musicians were persecuted and silenced, so not to rouse a rebellion or disturb the peace (Neilands, 1991). Nearly each year, Flood documents the names of Irish musicians who were given pardons; the lucky few spared from imprisonment and execution.

On November 23, 1579 a proclamation stated “No idle person, vagabond, or masterless man, *bard*, *rhymers*, or other notorious malefactor remain within the district of North Wicklow on pain of whipping after 8 days and death after 20 days” (Flood, 1913, p. 118). The hanging song known, as “Fortune my Foe,” was one of the many laments written for outlawed families. The song is also known by other names, “Since Coelias my Foe,” and “Limerick’s Lamentation” (Flood, 1913, p. 172). “Fortune my Foe” is based on a 15th century tune and its lyrics were localized and personalized, as many Irish songs still are today. Ballads and laments for those imprisoned and executed under

British rule are still being written and added to the tradition; one of the most well-known is “Grace” written in 1987.

Martial law was imposed on County Munster on January 29, 1603, in order to “exterminate bards and harpers” (Flood, 1913, p. 186). Ten days later, Queen Elizabeth ordered their hanging and the destruction of their instruments. In 1604, The Charitable Music Society, Fishamble-street, Dublin (also known as the Bull’s Head Society) paid bail to release 1,735 prisoners from British prisons in Ireland (Flood, 1913).

The year 1626 marked the first printing of a broadside, “the largest sheet of paper used by a printer” on which ballad lyrics were printed (Neilands, 2009, p. 211).

Balladeers would sing the songs and sell the broadsides. The singers were not usually known to be musically talented and would often change their stance on a particular topic depending upon the political climate or their current audience. They would sing these altered lyrics and sell the broadsides to earn a profit. In 1832, a law banned singers from performing and selling their broadsides, since many of the songs were politically charged against Britain. Balladeers found a new strategy for spreading their songs despite the ban.

I will not sell my book, I cannot sell my book; I dare not sell my book, but I will sell my straw, and make a present of my book, and the price of my straw is one penny; it is not a wheaten straw, nor an oat-straw, nor a barley-straw, nor a rye-straw, but it is the rale [sic] Repale [sic] of the Union Straw. (Neilands, 1991, p. 212)

Unfortunately, this tactic did not always work in the balladeer's favor. It could result in the search of homes, seizure of belongings, and even arrest and execution of the balladeers (Neilands, 1991).

There is not much literature written on songs, singers, and singing under British rule. The Celtic Revival of the 1960s sparked interest in collecting and preserving Irish songs and singing traditions, but some were already dwindling or had completely disappeared.

Munnelly and Keating share information about the *pavee* people, traveling musicians and *tinkers* (tinsmiths). They were known for their exceptional musical memory, passing on their songs orally, using sheet music only as a reminder (Keating, 2013; Munnelly, 1975). Munnelly, a collector of songs for the Irish Department of Education, states: "...the songs, like the craft of the tinsmith lie dormant, remembered rather than utilised, incongruous in the ears of a populace who no longer have the ability to listen" (Munnelly, 1975, p. 29).

Flood briefly mentions the bardic sessions of Charleville, Whitechurch (1725-1775) as contributors to the creation of original Irish poetry and song (1913). Patrick Kennedy's work of fiction, "The Banks of the Boro," depicts "country-house dances," where locals gathered in one home to share stories, poems, jokes, music, and song (1867, p. 1). Cohane and Goldstein confirm this combination of arts and enjoyment in their description of "ballad sessions" (1996, p.425).

In 1995, Johnston published a descriptive review of Irish folk instruments. He traces their novel introduction, popular adoption, emergence as nationalist symbols, banning by decree, decline in public favor, rediscovery, renaissance, and adaptation to new musical roles and social functions (Johnston, 1995). The vocal instrument is in no way represented in Johnston's analysis and no such review exists with respect to Irish voice and song.

Although much of the past is lost, we are fortunate to have accounts which show us a glimpse and make further research possible. The scholarly information that is available draws clear connections between the past and current singing tradition. The house/ballad/bardic sessions have transformed into contemporary pub sessions, continuing the tradition of oral transmission (Broughton et al, 1994).

The Celtic Revival brought more than just an interest in the past. It began a trend of musical innovation to a genre which had long been oppressed and forgotten. Organizations such as the Gaelic League, *Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann*, the Irish Department of Education, and regional *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking district), worked to collect songs and create competitions, radio stations, and classes to promote Irish singing, particularly in the Gaelic language. The purpose was to preserve cultural artifacts and promote 'Irishness' (Crosson, 2008; Dike, 2017; Hobbs, 2011; O'Laoire, 2000).

Sean Ó Riada stands out in this era for galvanizing Irish culture in all art forms, but especially in instrumental music (White, 1999). Ó Riada is known to have been a major influence on the poet Thomas Kinsella, encouraging him to use traditional

literature to inform his own poetry (Crosson, 2008). He is also credited with assembling an ensemble of traditional and non-traditional instruments, later known as *Ceili Bands*, with which he performed traditional Irish melodies with a modern twist (Cawley, 2008; White, 1996). Influenced by big band music of the United States, the historically solo art form transformed into the group setting performed in concerts and pubs today (Kaul, 2005).

The Singing Session

In many cases, singing sessions provide an inclusive and welcoming environment for attendees (Dike, 2017). Combined with good songs, conversation, and laughter, an atmosphere referred to as the *craic*⁴ is created (Broughton et al, 1994; Foy, 2009). In a typical pub session, singing occurs infrequently, between sets of instrumental tunes. Singing sessions are extraordinary because singing is the primary source of entertainment, passing on many songs that might not be heard in a typical pub session. After living and studying in Ireland for a year, Dike found that, "...singing sessions are a response to the perceived need for safe and inclusive spaces to sing" (2017, p. 111).

Session leaders, "*Fear an Tí* (man of the house) or *Bean an Tí* (woman of the house)," are tasked with making the process of sharing and receiving traditional song possible and open to all in attendance (Dike, 2017, p. 137). Much of what and how a singer will share is directly based on the level of comfort they feel in the singing session.

⁴ In this text, *craic* refers to an atmosphere of fun, excitement, or good entertainment, resulting in a positive feeling.

For this reason, location, aesthetic, and atmosphere have a large impact on the flow of the session. Most singing sessions occur in pubs during the evening hours and late into the night (Broughton et al, 1994; Freeman, 1920). Chairs and tables may be set in a circle, allowing for all participants to see and hear the singer. Candlelight or refreshments may also be added to achieve a desired effect. The goal of most session hosts is to make the space as comfortable as possible for those in attendance (Dike, 2017; Freeman, 1920).

Once the physical space is set, session leaders choose a method for leading the session. This can be based on personal preference, the tradition of the particular session, or on the leader's knowledge of their audience and community. While every session is different, the literature documents three distinct methods for leading sessions: the "jump in method," "The Noble Call," and the sign-up list (Dike, 2017, p. 137-8).

Dike documents the jump in method used at An Goilin singing circle in Dublin. Singers wait for a song to conclude and then jump in with their own contribution. In the The Noble Call method, the current singer calls up the next singer to share (Dike, 2017). The sign-up list method occurs when the hosts walk around the pub, before the session and during breaks, asking attendees if they would like to share a song. The *Fear an Tí* or *Bean an Tí* then calls upon each singer one at a time (Dike, 2017).

There is a level of anxiety associated with each method. While the jump in method allows the singer to choose when they are ready to sing, they must have the courage to interject themselves. This may be intimidating, especially for someone who is

unfamiliar with the particular session community. For The Noble Call and sign-up list, the singer does not know when they will be called upon. Singers may have to wait quite a long time, or no time at all, before being asked to sing (Dike, 2017).

When it is time to share a song, it is important for singers to be aware of what is acceptable at sessions (Dike, 2017). Generally, the quality of the voice is far less important than the song being sung and the story being told (Dike, 2017). Within reason, most singers and songs are permitted at singing sessions, but respect for the tradition is expected.

Based on the locality or tradition of a particular session, there may be songs which are mostly commonly sung (Dike, 2017). The session may begin with the host singing, at which point they may or may not choose a song which is open to congregational singing. They may do the same at breaks or at the closing of a session. It may also be tradition for a particular song to follow the previous called, *Gan Ainm*, which means “The One that Follows It” (Foy, 2009, p. 28). In these situations, knowledge of community norms is important to avoid disrupting the flow of the singing session.

The most traditional form of singing in pub sessions is called *sean-nós* (shawn-*OSE*), directly translated to “old-style,” a solo, unaccompanied vocal genre. The term also refers to a form of improvised Irish dance (Henry, 1989; Dorchester, 2006; Broughton, Ellingham, Muddyman, Trillo, 1994). The style of *sean-nós* singing used today was developed during the Celtic Revival and has been described as an authentically Irish style of singing (Williams & Ó Laoire, 2011). Just as Sean Ó Riada did with

instrumental music, the Gaelic League worked to expand and develop the song tradition; collecting peasant songs from rural communities to inform new songs and cultivate the national tradition (Ó Laoire, 2000).

In a 2018 interview, Derek Warfield described the vocal characteristics of each *sean-nós* singer to be as varied as the many accents heard throughout Ireland (Derek Warfield Interview, April 2018). The most distinguishing feature between singers is the use of ornamentation, including “triplets, rolls, slides, and other flourishes” (Kaul, 2006, p. 92). The degree of ornamentation varies by region, with Connemara in the west having the most, “Kerry, Cork, and Waterford in the south being somewhat less so,” (Ó Laoire, p. 165) and Donegal in the north being noticeably simpler (Porter, 1998; Smith, 2012).

Ornamentation and rubato (free rhythm) are utilized as an emotive effect to impart empathy toward the character(s) of the story or to share the singer’s personal connection to and interpretation of the song and story (Carolan 2001; Cohane & Goldstein, 1996; Dike, 2017). The practice of giving the story authority over the tune is called *u’dar* and it is necessary for authentic performance of traditional song (Ó Laoire, 2000). Altering rhythms and extending words and phrases on nonsense syllables, known as *lilting*, adds another layer of personality to a song, ensuring that it will never be sung exactly the same twice (Broughton et. al, 1994; Foy, 2009; Freeman, 1920; Henry, 1989; Kaul, 2005).

The words are the beginning, middle, and end of a song. However minutely a song may be discussed, only the vaguest references to the tune

will be heard. The tune is an elusive essence, the mysterious soul of the words. (Freeman, 1920, p. xxiv)

Through imparting a story or message, singers have the opportunity to connect with their audience in an act called “telling a song” (Ó Laoire, 2000, p. 165). Audience members have the responsibility of interacting with the singer through head nods, statements of approval, and, when appropriate, joining in for the refrain (Crosson, 2008, Foy, 2009; Freeman, 1920). Smith (2012) and MacConnell (2012) site instances where the veil between performer and audience is broken through a practice called *windáil*. *Windáil* occurs when an audience member holds the hand of the singer, swinging it to the beat of the song in a rotating motion (MacConnell, 2012).

As session participants regularly attend singing sessions, they become familiar with the method and flow of the songs (Cohane & Goldstein, 1996; Dike, 2017). In order to uphold the community and make it so all participants are welcome, a certain level of etiquette and respect to unspoken rules is necessary (Broughton et al, 1994; Dike, 2017). Therefore, “sessions not only transmit musical knowledge, but also socio-cultural information about the accepted behaviours within the traditional community” (Cawley, 2008, p. 42).

Session goes defer to the leadership of the *Bean an Tí* or *Fear an Tí* and follow the rules customary to that particular establishment or singing circle. Knowledgeable sharing with respect to the song, encouragement, active listening, and a quiet space, are paramount to a singing session’s success. This is not to say that a session would be a

failure without one or all of these traits, however current qualitative data gathered through field research in singing sessions throughout Ireland support that these characteristics have a considerable impact on singing sessions (Dike, 2017; Foy, 2009; O'Shea, 2006-7).

Respect to the songs and the community may be shown through reciprocity. Singing and songs are gifts; if someone has shared their knowledge with you, it is customary that you would share your knowledge of song with them (Kaul, 2007; Koning, 1980). This shows a commitment to the transmission of songs and respect for the unspoken rules of the session. "It was not just a privilege to sing a song or two during the seisuns when we were asked, but more to the point, our responsibility as (albeit novice) musicians to reciprocate for being entertained by entertaining others" (Kaul, 2005, p. 90).

Singers are expected to sing as close to the full version of the song as possible. Many repetitions of verses and refrain allow for a deeper understanding of the tune and the story. This also gives the audience the chance to learn the refrain, so they may join in during the repetitions; some songs have nearly 20 verses and choruses (Foy, 2009). When an audience member participates in group singing, they also partake in a form of encouragement that makes the lead singer feel supported.

As stated earlier, the story being told and its personal connection with the singer are more important than the tune. "Respect without familiarity is a recipe for bad music, while familiarity without respect is a recipe for bad temper" (Foy, 2009, p. 68). For this

reason, it is important that singers are familiar with many versions of a song and are prepared to share their personal interpretations and knowledge with others.

When the song is finished, it is customary to demonstrate encouragement through cheering and positive comments (Foy, 2009). Whether the singer is advanced or novice, supporting one another supports the tradition. Negative comments about a singer or song are uncharacteristic in the session (Koning, 1980). Younger singers should appreciate the knowledge of older musicians, just as older musicians should give the novices opportunities to grow and succeed (Foy, 2009). This fosters a respectful, accepting, and encouraging tradition of etiquette which is passed down through the generations in singing sessions.

Quiet, active listening also demonstrates respect. While sessions are a social activity, there is a specific time allotted for attendees to speak to one another during breaks. “Arguably the most important unspoken rule is that spaces must be quiet” (Dike, 2017, p. 133). Even in typical music driven pub sessions, it is customary for the musicians to remain quiet during the song (Foy, 2009). This is similar to the respect given to classical singers and musicians in a concert; audience members only leave or enter a room between songs and do not speak or make noise during the performance (Dike, 2017).

Unfortunately, there are some sessions where a lack of etiquette or misunderstanding of the unspoken rules has led to discomfort among session attendees

(O'Shea 2006-7). O'Shea documents being pushed aside by local musicians during a music session in East Clare.

Singers in these sessions are too concerned with their presentation. They give an unnatural performance, distancing themselves from the song and their listeners, hoping instead to sound profound. Songs are what singers have termed 'precious,' treated as if they are not to be tampered, their integrity compromised by a performance from unsuitable singers. (Dike, 2017, p. 147)

This type of disrespect, as well as an unwillingness to share or a hierarchy that asserts dominance over novices and newcomers, can be damaging to the tradition, contributing to 'stilted' sessions; sessions where newcomers, new ideas, and/or new songs of the tradition are unwelcome (Dike, 2017, p. 146-147; O'Shea, 2006-7, Cawley, 2013).

Music Learning in the Session

Good etiquette, respect for the songs, and an encouraging, accepting community where the tradition can grow and thrive, create a safe space for singers to share and learn. While Irish singers have a number of opportunities to learn traditional song (e.g. video and audio recordings, festivals, competitions, and private lessons), the session provides a variety of modes for learning within a single context (Cawley, 2008; Williams, 2015). Each session creates its own learning atmosphere and each contributes differently to the needs of a specific learner (Cawley, 2008; Cawley, 2013). The identity of a session community is similar to the identity of a classroom environment. A number of factors

contribute to a student's ability to feel comfortable to learn, make mistakes, ask questions, and experiment with new ideas. "Sessions have certain musical, cultural, and social characteristics that create learning situations which establishes the session a successful context for the transmission of Irish music" (Cawley, 2008, p. 26). In the session, learning occurs via many avenues of conscious and subconscious enculturation through listening, watching, imitating, experimenting, and discussing (Cawley, 2013; Green, 2016).

The transmission of Irish song is an oral tradition where songs are passed down from singer to singer over generations (Broughton et. al, 1994). In order for this process to occur, session attendees must be willing to listen (Cawley, 2008). Green (2016) speaks to various levels of listening, however, in the session, there is a far higher level of attentive and purposeful listening, as opposed to distracted listening (Dike, 2017). Community members attend singing sessions for the purpose of sharing and learning songs, and one cannot learn new songs without listening to others.

When attendees listen actively during the session, they learn more about the songs and understand and interpret them more deeply. This allows for more knowledgeable transmission of the song in future sessions. The repetitive verses and choruses guide listeners to grasp aspects of the story and the tune, and relate that version to other iterations they have previously heard or sung themselves (Foy, 2009). Furthermore, a singer's description of a song can have an immense impact on the listeners' relationship with that song.

When singers talk about their songs in singing sessions, the same phenomenon occurs. Listeners hear how the singer connects with the song. They better understand the song's meaning to the singer. Listeners then can apply this personal context of song and singer to their own experience hearing the song. They, too, can develop a connection to the song based on the singer's experience, in a way empathizing with the singer. Through this empathy, singers connect more deeply with each other, and thus the song's value to the community is heightened. The interrelationship between song and performer forms a complicated connection between singer, message, and community" (Dike, 2017, p. 92)

Listening also contributes to the silence in the session, an integral part of singing session etiquette, which influences the comfort of the singer and the type of songs that will be sung in response to previous ones (Dike, 2017).

Visual observation shows attendees how the singer portrays a song and how community members respond to the performance through non-verbal cues. While most singers will not look into the audience and many attendees will listen with eyes closed, watching the singer and environment is especially useful to newcomers who are learning the mechanics and etiquette of a particular session. Singers' facial expressions and body language communicate an emotional connection to the song, which adds an additional layer of contextual transmission (Green, 2016). Watching, however, is mostly referred to in literature surrounding learning Irish music and dance. It is not often mentioned in sources pertaining to learning *sean-nós* singing specifically (Cawley, 2008; Cawley, 2013; Dike, 2017).

In the session, singers hear various iterations of a single song, through repetition or additional versions heard at other sessions. Over time the singer can learn to recognize

patterns and develop a structural understanding of the song. Singers can then imitate ideas they have heard and experiment by developing new ideas based on the traditional style (Cawley, 2008). The singer has the right and responsibility to interpret and personalize the song based on their experience with it. “Singing style seems dependent on the personality of the singer, the type of song, and the singing situation” (Cohane & Goldstein, 1996, p. 430).

Breaks during the session enable community members to interact and give feedback to singers regarding song performance and interpretation (Cawley, 2008). In this way, singers can learn through socialization by discussing musical ideas with one another. Older musicians give younger musicians advice, and family traditions, traits, and stories are passed on. Peers learn through sharing experiences with one another, and questions of historical and cultural connection to the song can be answered (Stevens, 2001).

The interview data suggests that these encounters motivate, introduce, and guide newcomers into the session circle and the community of practice. Second, learners can gain cultural understanding of contemporary Irish traditional music culture by discussing music events, issues, trends, new artists and albums with other session attendees. (Cawley, 2013, p. 134)

This quote continues to confirm that singing sessions pass on far more than just songs. Learning in the session through listening, watching, imitating, experimenting, and discussing, immerses the learners in a traditional environment, picking up musical and

cultural practices, resulting in enculturation (Cawley, 2008; Green, 2016). Learning occurs whether it is the purpose of attending the session or not (Cawley, 2008).

It is important at this point to acknowledge the other opportunities that Irish singers have to learn and perform traditional Irish song. The following review highlights the broadness and versatility of learning styles which occur within the session.

The *An tOireachtas* festival, established in 1897, and *fleadh cheoil*, established in 1951, hold events which promote the use of Irish language and traditional styles in Irish singing (Cohane & Goldstein, 1996; Smith, 2012). The *Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann* is the leading organization promoting Irish traditional song through *fleadhs* (competitions) and has strict audition guidelines pertaining to the genres and styles of song that are permitted. While acceptance of regional styles has become more diverse in recent years, the musical community has expressed concern in the CEE's promotion of a homogenized view of traditional song (Munnely, 1975; Porter, 1998). This stands in contrast to singing sessions, where all types, styles, versions, and iterations are generally accepted and encouraged.

With the accessibility of technology, more and more singers are learning from audio and video recordings. This method of practice is far more closely related to the oral tradition than the written word, but the social interaction of the session is missing (Hobbs, 2011). The singer does not have the opportunity to collaborate with other singers and the audience or discuss performances in real time.

This is similar to learning in private lessons. While singers may be able to discuss musical concepts and receive feedback from their teacher, they do not share or communicate with a community during the lesson. Singers also miss out on listening to and watching more advanced players, as they would in pub sessions.

Conclusion

“Sessions are by nature unpredictable, and a wide range of variables can make for unexpected results” (Foy, 2009, p. 16). It is this level of spontaneity, mixed with traditions of etiquette and various modes of musical and cultural learning that make the session stand out from all other learning opportunities in Ireland. The learning and communal benefits of the singing session are easy to recognize and can be adapted for use in various music learning contexts.

Tim Rogers documents the methods and benefits of the “Men Folk Sing” singing circle in Canada (2014). The method used is very closely related to those explained above in relation to singing sessions. Singers sit in a circle without anything to distract them; no sheet music or electronics. The focus is on connecting with and encouraging one another while interacting in the circle. Its unique benefits are captured by a participant:

For me, what makes Men Folk Singing sessions so special is the unusual confluence of five distinct factors including their informal nature (singing in a circle, no leader, no agenda), their focus on the fundamentals of

music-making (listening and singing), the wide range of voice quality and musical experience, the diversity of material brought forward by the participants (from traditional sea shanties to Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah"), and the simple yet profound nature of these gatherings - making music together and enjoying each other's company (David Ward, October 2013). (Rogers, 2014, p. 5)

Green documents that failure rates and disengagement in music classes may be directly affected by the lack of relationships built between students and the teacher, and the disparity between what is being taught and what is relevant to the lives of the students in the classroom (2016). It is evident that student choice leads to engagement and enjoyment, and that encouragement and acceptance of all forms of music, regardless of vocal quality, leads to more open participation, greater student achievement, and a safer classroom community (Foy, 2009). Incorporating methods of singing sessions into the music classroom may yield positive results for students and the community, as it has in pubs throughout Ireland.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

In the remainder of the paper, I use my study analysis to explore the ways in which the methods of singing sessions can be beneficial and adaptable for classroom use. The goal is to create environments where students can build relationships with their peers and teacher through music, as well as develop classroom traditions and norms which bond their community (Dike, 2017). This may result in students feeling that their music and personal expression is valued and valuable (Green, 2016), helping to foster a more accepting, encouraging, community of lifelong music makers.

Impetus

Teaching music in the Philadelphia region has shown me that there is a serious need for safe spaces where children can create and express themselves. A majority of my previous students and parents have viewed music education as second rate and lesser to their other academic requirements. Low funding and poor support for the arts in schools and communities has contributed to the notion that artistic learning is inessential. With limited classroom resources, I began searching for ways to engage my students and foster a lifelong love for music in a weekly 45-minute period. This necessity for innovation in my music classroom led me to attend conferences on curriculum development and music pedagogy, and eventually led to my graduate studies as well.

I always wondered what was missing from my teaching, the curriculum, my classroom environment, the community, and the society at large. What could I do to advocate for the importance of music learning through childhood into adulthood? How could I develop lifelong music makers in my classroom?

In the summer of 2017, my husband and I traveled to Ireland for the first time, for our honeymoon. In every town, we encountered music making, performed and enjoyed by people all ages. In Doolin, Ireland, we attended our first pub session at McGann's Pub. The pub session was an engaging space, packed to the brim with locals and tourists, young and old, all there to enjoy the company of others, food, drink, and, most of all, music! The skill of the musicians and singers was remarkable and I was intrigued to learn how they acquired their skills and how pub sessions may have contributed to their music learning. I wondered how I could recreate a similar level excitement and engagement for music in my music classroom.

Development

I chose to focus my graduate work on understanding how the Irish learn music and searched for distinguishing characteristics of learning and performance practices in Ireland. In my first research journal from August 2017, I posed the following questions:

Are performance and rehearsal practices of pub performers of traditional Irish music in Doolin, Ireland similar or different from the practices of

schools/organizations performing traditional Irish music in Doolin Ireland? Why? (DeSilva, Research Journal, August 2017)

The literature uncovered a disparity between music and song. There is significantly less research committed to the singing tradition in Ireland than there is literature pertaining to the instrumental tradition (Dike, 2017). Primarily a singer myself, I decided to invest my time in researching and supporting singing and song traditions.

During the Celtic Revival of the 1960's, musicians began traveling to Doolin to experience the most authentic music, otherwise known as the "pure drop" (Kaul 2005, p. 87). Doolin has remained a focal point of Irish traditional music ever since (Kaul, 2006, p. 52). With support from the literature, as well as my personal experience, I began planning a month-long visit to Doolin.

I traveled to Ireland June 23 to July 26, 2018. These dates were chosen to avoid conflicts with my master's courses and my teaching position.

Since I planned to travel to Ireland during the summer, I would be unable to attend and observe school music classes in Doolin. Community organizations and churches operate outside of Doolin town and I had not found any research committed to the learning methods used in these organizations, nor the impact they have had on student learning.

Fascinated by my experiences in Doolin pub sessions, I was pleased to find literature connecting music learning and the pub session tradition. Cawley's 2008 study

in Galway, Ireland, explored and analyzed the learning processes that occur in pub sessions from the perspective of Irish flute players.

In the same study, Cawley writes, "...it should be emphasised from the very beginning that this study in no way argues sessions are the primary, most effective or authentic means of transmission" (2008, p. 5). Cawley's 2013 ethnographic study expands upon this idea, examining a variety of influences on music learning and enculturation including peers, mentors, family members, sessions, technology, festivals, workshops, and competitions (Cawley, 2013). While I focused on gaining insight into singing at pub sessions, the literature presented the necessity to inquire about other forms of music learning as well.

Procedures

My master's study: Music learning and its impact on Doolin pub singers performing traditional Irish song, examined two questions: 1) To what extent have various forms of music learning affected musicians' knowledge of traditional Irish song, performance practices, and decision to perform? 2) To what degree is singing traditional Irish song important to the music community?

The study began in April 2018 with a pilot completed at two Irish pubs in the Philadelphia area, the Plough and the Stars and The Mermaid Inn. At each location I

observed the session and conducted interviews with singers. There were far fewer singers than instrumentalists at these sessions.

The pilot allowed me to practice a number of methods which would be insightful and useful for the study in Ireland (Froehlich and Frierson-Campbell, 2013). I tested out new video and audio recording equipment while attempting to be minimally disruptive to the natural flow of the session. In interviews, I worked on asking questions clearly without interjecting statements of bias. Finally, I practiced my role as an observer, which would shift to participant-observer; gaining information by being a part of the session rather than as an outsider looking in (Froelich et al, 2013).

With my methods adjusted, I reached out to a Doolin local who graciously referred me to five pub singers. I emailed each of them, but none replied. With the study approaching, I altered my approach for collecting participants, hoping to create relationships with singers during my time in Doolin instead. While this was a risk, I was supported by the authors who had implemented similar strategies for data collection to much success. Kaul (2007) worked in a pub in Doolin, meeting Irish musicians and locals daily. Cawley (2008) regularly attended sessions in Galway and interviewed those musicians who were willing to share their time and information.

I arrived in Doolin, Ireland June 23, 2018 and settled into the cottage where I had planned to live for the next month. A major dilemma came in the form of a spider infestation. After over a week of working with the hosts and exterminators, I had to make the difficult choice to leave the cottage and Doolin. With Doolin being a center for

traditional Irish music, most homes were booked up for the next few weeks, prolonging my return and forcing a change to my study.

Thus, began my semi-nomadic journey, traveling from town to town, Airbnb to Airbnb, following singing sessions. Leaving Doolin at first seemed like a failure. I had envisioned every aspect of this study for months, but was forced to change the location because of a few hundred spiders. In actuality, this unforeseen conflict had allowed me to be more flexible, opening opportunities to explore the singing session community more thoroughly throughout County Clare.

Data Collection

I observed and took field notes, primarily on the role of the singers, the location, and the method of each session. When I was asked to sing, I gave a short explanation of my intentions for observing and participating in the session. At breaks, I walked around, socialized with singers, and asked if any would be interested in an interview. Through this method I gained four respondents. Three more singers were referred to me by locals.

I called each of the singers or contacted them via Facebook to set up an interview in a time and place that was convenient for them. This is one of the ways that moving from city to city became beneficial. I could plan to stay in a certain city depending on the singing sessions and interviews that were occurring in the area.

My meeting with each singer began with a greeting and a brief reiteration of the intentions of the study. Singers read over the non-disclosure agreement and

electronically signed the form. Any questions about the interview process and the study were answered at this time. The questionnaire and interview questions followed directly after.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was meant to gather information about the types of learning activities that were influential to the singers. The full questionnaire distributed to singers is available in Appendix C. Table 1 was used to track responses to the questionnaire. Using a three-point Likert scale, respondents rated the impact that various forms of music learning had on their knowledge of Irish song, performance practices, and their decision to perform at sessions; 1 having little to no impact and 3 having the greatest impact.

Table 1
Questionnaire

	Pub Sessions	Competitions	Family Members	Private Lessons	School Music	Community Organizations	Church	Online Resources
Knowledge of Irish song								
Performance practices								
Decision to perform at sessions								

The forms of music engagement listed in the top column include those from the literature, as well as some that I have had personal experience with and found missing from the literature. The three prompts in the left row are probing questions that were meant to cause singers to acknowledge their past music learning experiences and evaluate the level at which certain activities contributed to their current musicality and performance.

The final portion of the questionnaire consisted of two prompts. The first asked singers to list any other music activities that they found missing from the chart. This was meant to uncover additional contributions to music learning in Ireland. The second prompt asked singers to rate the importance of singing in the music community in Ireland from 1 to 5; 5 meaning singing is of high importance and 1 meaning singing has very little to no importance. I wondered how the connotation of this question might be received. I expected responses and results might shine some light on the minimal presence of singing in a typical session and/or the limited research available on singing in sessions.

Interview

Immediately after completing the questionnaire I informed the respondents that I would continue with fourteen interview questions. The questions were meant to gather qualitative data on each singer's music and performance experience, especially in regard to pub sessions and traditional song. The intention was that responses would shed light on the who, what, when, where, and why of pub sessions and traditional singing. I had

also hoped the questions would reveal a singer's personal connection with singing, traditional song, and pub sessions. The full list of interview questions is available in Appendix D.

Further Data Collection

It is important to note that all session observations and interviews were recorded using audio and video equipment. The recordings captured statements that I might have otherwise missed in my field notes alone. I am currently editing audio/visual files and transcribing interviews for my blog 'ClareSingsTU.' The blog is meant to be a form of analysis of my study and experiences in Ireland. It will also make the raw data available for fellow teachers, students, and researchers. The blog will continue beyond the completion of my graduate studies at:

<<https://dominiquedesilva.wixsite.com/aworldofsong/blog>>.

Alterations to Data Collection

The initial time frame planned for questionnaires and NDAs to be completed via email by April 2018 and for interviews to be conducted 1-2 hours prior to observing the session. With my altered living situation and participant recruitment, the procedure for data collection was completely modified while I was in Ireland. Instead, I observed singers at sessions first, then we set up and completed their NDA, questionnaire, and

interview. This proved to be incredibly effective, since the singer and I had already met and interacted in the session prior to their disclosing personal musical information.

CHAPTER 3

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In total I observed three singing sessions, three typical pub sessions (mostly instrumental with some singing), two concerts, and countless spontaneous sessions, especially during Willie Clancy Week. An itinerary including the locations I traveled to and events I experienced is available in Appendix B. Each event was directly recommended by locals and interviewees. In order to remain focused on the singing session tradition, the following analysis will examine the results of singing session observations and interview responses which refer to singing, song, and the singing session.

Sessions Observations

I will examine each of the three singing sessions in an individual case study: Kilshanny House July 1, Spencil Hill July 6, and Spanish Point July 10. Since Kilshanny House was the first singing session I had ever attended, I only took short videos and photos on my cell phone. At the Spencil Hill and Spanish Point sessions, I audio/video recorded the majority of the evening.

I am especially grateful to a Doolin local who recommended I attend the Kilshanny singing session. This was my first experience with a session that was solely dedicated to singing; I would not be introduced to Dike's (2017) thesis study until I

returned to the states. The local's recommendation transformed this study, opening a window into the unknown world of singing sessions.

For each session, I will describe the location and aesthetic of the space, the evidence of encouragement and acceptance within the community, and the method used to run the session. I will also mention the connections I made with singers at each session.

Kilshanny House Singing Session

The Kilshanny House session, July 1, 2018, took place in the pub called Kilshanny House. Only a ten to fifteen-minute drive outside of Doolin, it was a beautiful, homey space with lots of large wooden tables, chairs, and bench seats. The benches had small metal signs with whimsical Irish sayings on them. The area was broken up into three sections by walls with large window-like openings in them. All singers and attendees focused their attention toward the centermost area of the pub during the session. Nóirin Lynch, the *Bean an Tí*, walked around the room during breaks, interacting with each person and asking if they would like to give a song. The lights were dim and there was a roar laughter and conversation all around the room.

Then, as Nóirin began her song, the room fell to complete silence as the attendees took their seats and entered the session that had suddenly begun. Singers joined the lead singer on the chorus and hushed the attendees that hadn't yet finished their conversations. From then on, Nóirin checked her list and called upon singer after singer to share a song.

Before sharing, attendees introduced themselves and their song or story, and sometimes acknowledged others in the crowd. Unless they were singing along or interacting to the song, the audience generally sat in silence during each presentation and applauded with loud cheers of encouragement at the end. If a singer forgot the words, there was always someone in the crowd who helped them remember, and the song continued from there.

Many of the songs were sung in the sean-nós style with the minority sung in Irish Gaelic. There were two guitar players who accompanied themselves, but everyone else sang a cappella. This is where I first met Deirbhile Ní Bhrolchain and heard her sing in Gaelic. At the break, the room was again in a roar of voices and clinking change at the bar. I was appreciative for the time to speak with other singers, especially Deirbhile and Nóirin, and was even more grateful when they agreed to an interview. Nervous to disrupt the flow of the session, I talked to a singer about choosing a song and was told, “there is no right or wrong song to sing” (July 1, 2018). This tradeoff, about forty-five minutes of song followed by a ten to fifteen-minute break, continued until the official end of the session. When the pub had “closed” and the door had been locked, there was still a crowd in the pub conversing and singing well past midnight.

Spancil Hill Singing Session

On July 6, 2018, Duggan’s Pub was the site of the Spancil Hill singing session, about a ten-minute drive outside of Ennis. I walked in at the scheduled time but the room was barely half-filled. Conversations occurred throughout the room and I was introduced

to the *Fear an Tí*, John Condon. I also saw a few singers I had met at Kilshanny House and felt fortunate to have an opportunity to speak with them as well! I was told there were usually more attendees in the session, but they were at another event in Ennis.

The pub was a small rectangular room with a long bar on the side opposite the entrance. The lighting was dark with heavy curtains on the windows and memorabilia hung on the walls. There were small wooden tables and stools set up along the wall and tall stools set up at the bar, leaving an open space in the center area of the pub. The small space made it easy for John to speak to the entire room from his center bar stool.

John announced the start of the session and began calling singers from his list to share. The list repeated in the same order three full times before the session ended. After an hour, the pub was entirely filled with attendees who had been at the previously mentioned event in Ennis.

I was surprised by the variety of songs and voices in this session. All qualities of voice were met with excitement at the onset and encouraging words with applause at the conclusion of the song. The array of songs included sean-nós songs, ballads, Broadway tunes, Scottish and English songs, new compositions in the traditional style, and even songs from Ed Sheeran's newest album. When I initially arrived at the session, I was hesitant to share since I had been feeling under the weather. When I experienced the level of encouragement and acceptance from the room, I knew I was safe to sing, even if I dropped a few pitches or coughed in the middle of the song. John mentioned he had

heard, from attendees of the Kilshanny session, that I “sang a mean Parting Glass,” so I made sure to share it (John Condon, July 6, 2018).

During the breaks, I walked around the tables, speaking to singers and asking if they would like to be interviewed for my study. I met Hilda McHugh, a primary school teacher and session singer, who agreed to an interview for the following week. I also spoke with other singers about the songs they had sung and received the most beautiful comments about the voice being a gift to be shared with others. It is as if not singing is a selfish act; keeping your voice to yourself instead of sharing it with others. The evening ended as each Spencil Hill singing session traditionally ends. The entire pub, from natives of County Clare and throughout the country of Ireland to blow-ins from England and America, sang the many verses and choruses of the song “Spencil Hill.” There was an incredible sense of community as everyone in attendance sang the ballad, loud and strong, with applause for one another ending the session.

Spanish Point Singing Session

During Willie Clancy Week in Miltown Malbay, the singing sessions were held at the Spanish Point Golf Club. Singing sessions were ongoing for a majority of the week but, since I had gotten sick, I only truly attended the evening session on July 10. I had stepped into two other sessions at Spanish Point, but left after only twenty to thirty minutes. I will not mention these observations further since I did not take field notes or audio/video recordings.

The room was a large hall with a bar at one side and windows covering the two long sides of the room. There were easily two hundred people in attendance. Most sat at long tables in chairs or shorts stools, but many had to stand around the outer edges of the room. There was no circle, since the room was filled to the brim, but the audience remained completely silent during each song or story and applauded loudly at the end of each one. There were a few people on cell phones, which was the first I had seen in a singing session.

A great variety of songs and stories were shared, as well as an assortment of personalities and voice types and qualities. Four young men sang as a quartet, while a majority of the room sang solo. I did not see any instruments, likely because the space was so packed full of attendees that a guitar would have been in the way (Foy, 2009).

For much of the time, I was unsure if there was a leader. I later realized that the *Fear an Tí* was standing near the bar, calling out singers to share. I was unable to make my way around the room to speak with him and did not sing at this session. I was also only able to greet familiar faces in the crowd with a smile or a wave.

At midnight the session changed gears. The entire room rose to their feet, sang a song dedicated to the singers they had lost the past year, and clinked their glasses. Then, the singers along the edges of the room began to sing one after the other, in a round-robin fashion. It was incredible to see that so many singers and storytellers had gathered from throughout Ireland and from all over the world, to hear songs and share with one another!

Session Observation Summary

The singing session is a unique space where songs take center stage. Of the sessions I observed, there was always a set structure for choosing which singer would sing next. Attendees showed respect for unspoken rules of etiquette by remaining quiet during the song. Encouragement and acceptance were exhibited by attendees joining in on a song and awarding singers with applause and kind words at its conclusion. I observed sessions of various sizes and locations, but all were led by a single host. Across the board, sessions were a safe environment where singers and storytellers from around the world, could share what they wished to the best of their ability; knowing they would be accepted and encouraged even if they made a mistake. For the singing session community, it was most important to come together and share the gifts we had with one another.

Questionnaire Results

Responses from questionnaires were compiled into a single data set, in order to compare the responses among all seven respondents. There is one chart for each of the main prompts: *Knowledge of Irish song* in Table 2, *Performance practices* in Table 3, and *Decision to perform at sessions* in Table 4. Responses are listed in columns and averaged in the bottom row.

It is important to identify the zeros that appear in a few boxes. Some singers felt so strongly that a particular activity had absolutely no impact on their music learning, that

they felt more comfortable rating it a zero, rather than a one. There are also instances where half points are given for a particular response. Again, singers felt very strongly about the numbers they gave, and I chose the responsibility of recording their truest expression, as opposed to forcing their response into a whole number. Just as a reminder, singers rated activities on a three-point Likert scale. Activities earning a 3 had the highest level of impact on the singer while earning a 1 meant an activity had little to no impact.

Table 2
Knowledge of Irish song questionnaire results

	Pub Sessions	Competitions	Family Members	Private Lessons	School Music	Community Organizations	Church	Online Resources
Participant 1	3	2	3	1	2	1	1	3
Participant 2	2	1	3	1	2	2	2	1
Participant 3	3	0/1	2	1	1	2	2	3
Participant 4	2	0	1	1/1.5	0	3	2	1
Participant 5	3	1	2	1	1	2	1	2
Participant 6	2	1	3	1	3	1	1	2
Participant 7	3	2	2	3	1	1	2	2
AVERAGE	2.57	1-1.14	2.29	1.29-1.36	1.43	1.71	1.57	2

Table 3
Performance practices questionnaire results

	Pub Sessions	Competitions	Family Members	Private Lessons	School Music	Community Organizations	Church	Online Resources
Participant 1	3	1	3	1	3	1	2	2
Participant 2	2	1	3	2	3	2	3	1
Participant 3	3	0	3	1/0	1/1.5	2	2	2
Participant 4	3	0	3	0	0	2	1	0
Participant 5	3	1	2	1	1	2	1	2
Participant 6	2	1	2	1	3	1	2	2
Participant 7	3	3	1	3	1	1	2	2
AVERAGE	2.7	1	2.43	1.14-1.29	1.57-1.64	1.57	1.86	1.57

Table 4
Decision to perform at sessions questionnaire results

	Pub Sessions	Competitions	Family Members	Private Lessons	School Music	Community Organizations	Church	Online Resources
Participant 1	3	1	3	1	3	1	2	2
Participant 2	3	1	3	1	3	3	3	1
Participant 3	3	0	1	0	1	2	3	2
Participant 4	3	0	3	0	0	2	1	0
Participant 5	3	2	3	1	1	3	1	2
Participant 6	3	1	2	1	2	1	2	2
Participant 7	3	2	3	2	1	1	1	1
AVERAGE	3	1	2.57	0.86	1.57	1.86	1.86	1.43

Table 5 is a condensed version of the previous three tables, showing only the averages for each musical activity in regard to the prompt. For each table, the columns which resulted in the highest average score are highlighted in yellow. In all tables, it is clearly apparent that *pub sessions* had had the greatest impact on the seven singers interviewed. Familial influences received the second highest rating; a result that is supported in the literature (Cawley, 2013).

These results show that singers are learning what songs to sing and how to sing in the traditional style at pub sessions, more than they are anywhere else. Singers are also being influenced and encouraged to continue performing traditional song in the pub session.

Table 5
Questionnaire result totals

	Pub Sessions	Competitions	Family Members	Private Lessons	School Music	Community Organizations	Church	Online Resources
Knowledge of Irish Song	18	7/8	16	9/9.5	10	12	11	14
Performance Practices	19	7	17	8/9	11/11.5	11	13	11
Decision to perform at sessions	21	7	18	6	11	13	13	10
AVERAGE	2.76	1	2.43	1.10-1.12	1.52-1.55	1.71	1.76	1.67

The following chart, Table 6, records the responses to the prompt: the *importance of singing in the Irish music community*. Respondents were asked to rate the importance

from 1 to 5, with 5 having great importance and 1 having little to no importance. I have also included comments made by singers that give further context to their response. I have again chosen to record and report each singer's truest expression in regard to the prompt.

Table 6
Importance of singing in the Irish music community

	Importance of singing in the Irish music community
Participant 1	4
Participant 2	4
Participant 3	3/4 Clare, 5 Nationally, 1 in Pub
Participant 4	4
Participant 5	3 - learning the instrument takes a lot more work
Participant 6	5
Participant 7	5
AVERAGE	3.57-3.71 in Clare, 3.86 Nationally, 3.29 in the pub

From the results, it is evident that singing is seen as moderately important. From the comments, it seems that instrumental music is seen as more important in the Irish music community than singing, especially in the pub. These results may be directly related to the limited number of songs sung in a typical session, as well as the limited amount of research committed to the singing tradition. A larger group of respondents will be necessary to determine if this trend is reflected throughout singers in County Clare.

Interview Inferences

Throughout the study I had the great privilege to interview seven singers! Four had agreed to meet with me for an interview following my attendance at the Kilshanny House and Spencil Hill singing sessions, and three were referred to me by my Airbnb hosts and locals. The singers shared their views of Irish song, singing, and singing sessions, based on their years of experience as professional performers, session leaders, and/or school teachers.

Interview responses were evaluated and marked for their contributions to this study. Question numbers examined are placed parenthetically before the interview data for clarity. Full interview questions can be found in Appendix D.

In the following section, I will summarize responses in the categories of music experience, the session, songs, and community. The following results draw connections between sessions and traditional song, answering why people participate and how it makes them feel.

Music Experience

(Question 1) Singers shared an extensive musical past, learning from a variety of musical activities. Each respondent's experiences were unique, dependent upon family history, travel abroad, and schooling. All had encountered music in schools, but 2 of 7 were discouraged from singing due to a perceived poor vocal quality. (Question 2) While all participants note music within their household or community, 4 of 7 said they had not

chosen to sing in the traditional style until the last 10 to 20 years. The other 3 respondents stated that they had sung this style for their entire lives.

(Question 4) All singers reported singing in sessions at least once a week, with a rough average of nine per month. Ted McCormack shared that he sings at sessions five days a week! (Question 5) Each of the singers stated they rarely just observe a session. Since they are known in the community, they will often be recognized and asked to sing. Nóirine mentioned, the difference between performing and singing at sessions. She does not believe singing in the session is performing at all. In the session, she shares with the community, but in a performance a curtain and stage separate the audience from the performance.

The Session

(Question 12) Each respondent stated that pub sessions were the most popular venue for holding sessions. Other performance spaces include concerts, community centers, festivals, and some houses, especially during fleadh and holidays (John Condon, July 17, 2018).

(Question 10) The role of the singer in the session is described differently among the singers, but most say it depends on the session. In a typical session, the singer may need to be patient, listening to and appreciating the whole session, understanding they may not always sing (Peter Casey, July 17, 2018). Songs may break up the session, giving the instrumentalists and the audience a break from the music (Deirbhile Ní

Bhrolchain, July 4, 2018). “There is nothing like a song to connect the audience to the musicians” (Therese McInerney, July 23, 2018). In this way, the singer provides a different level of engagement for the audience that allows them to also better connect with the music and musicians. All respondents stated that it is most important, in all sessions, that attendees listen actively and remain quiet during a performance. “There could be a hundred people inside in a room and everyone’s dead silent just listening to that person perform, but it’s really powerful and everyone listens and everyone’s so into it” (Therese McInerney, July 23, 2018).

Songs

(Questions 6 and 7) The song is highly respected in the session. It is more important than the person singing it, but through the singer the song is “given its own life” (John Condon, July 17, 2018). Hilda McHugh describes songs as “music with stories” (July 13, 2018).

Traditional Irish song is described similarly among most of the singers. They explained that Irish song could be in Irish Gaelic or English, but that the songs closest to the tradition are in Irish. It was also stated that sean-nós is the most traditional style and is traditionally performed a cappella.

Ted McCormack stands out, describing traditional songs as ballads that are more than just a “three chord trick;” more than just three chords in the whole song. He says that ballads are songs with verses and choruses that everyone can join in on.

In both styles, the characteristics of authentic singing are similar. Authenticity lies in displaying personal musical choices that express the story being told. Clear diction shows respect to the story and allows it to be more easily understood by the audience. The use of freely moving rhythm and rubato is commonly used to portray emotions; singers develop their own stylistic choices through years of listening and singing. Even new songs with modern lyrics, written in the traditional style, may be accepted into the tradition! Nóirine states that the traditional music is folk music, “...music of the people...It does not have to be 14 families old,” as long as it carries some of the story of Irish people (July 13, 2018).

Community

(Question 3, 13, and 14) Sharing connections with the song allows singers to connect with their community. When Deirbhile sings, she feels a connection with the audience and with those that have past (July 4, 2018). She also acknowledges that the feeling lasts well into her drive home. Sessions draw participants through a variety of means, but what keeps singers attending year after year is a sense of community. The singers explained that sessions are a social event where everyone is welcome.

At first, I felt maybe a bit intimidated thinking, would I be good enough to participate in these, will it be very formal, will there be a very high standard. After going to one of them, yes, I knew this was for me. (John Condon, July 17, 2018)

The singers explained the stories of sessions they had attended as children and later in life. Some were brought by friends and family, while others discovered they enjoyed sessions only in the last 20 years. In general, the singers agree that they continue to attend sessions because of the friendship and comradery that are built there (Deirbhile, July 4, 2018). Singers in the session attend to hear songs and to be part of the community, rather than to perform (Hilda McHugh, July 13, 2018). They attend for the feeling of being able to quiet a room without really trying (Peter Casey, July 17, 2018) and the immediate reaction from the crowd that Ted McCormack calls the “buzz.” Finally, a love for listening to and learning songs is added to an inclusive community to create a great craic.

Omission of Data

Throughout this analysis, questions or prompts which did not contribute to a deeper understanding of the study topic were omitted. Further analysis of additional data will be available on my website <<https://dominiquedesilva.wixsite.com/aworldofsong>>.

The prompt for singers to list additional music activities that were not included in Table 2 was not included in this analysis. While these responses are beneficial to the continued research on how people in Ireland learn and transmit song, the results are not pertinent to this study on music learning in the session.

The responses to interview questions 8, 9, and 11, have proven useful in my personal exploration of Irish songs, singers, and genres, and I will continue to learn about

them beyond this study. Question 14 was analyzed thoroughly enough in the questionnaire analysis and, therefore, a further analysis here was not necessary.

Finally, I have not shared my observations of concerts and instrumental sessions. The role of singing in the session is explained thoroughly through various responses in the interview analysis. I did not uncover any information about the typical session that was not already abundantly available in previous literature.

Data Analysis Conclusion

The data exhibits evidence of the encouraging and accepting learning community that exists within the singing sessions I observed. Session leaders put great effort into creating an environment where everyone felt comfortable to share. Each session was entirely different depending on the location, session host, and the people in attendance. Attendees understood the importance of the songs and respectfully listened, actively working to understand each story and each singer's interpretation. Regardless of voice quality or repertoire choice, each song was met with encouraging remarks and applause. The singing session is an ideal environment for singers to share songs they love and continue to learn new songs, without the fear of being judged.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION - CLASSROOM ADAPTATION

After my return from Ireland, I drafted a proposal for an after-school program that would use the methods I observed at singing sessions in Ireland. The ‘Session After School Program’ began in October 2018. The contract, which students signed and returned, outlined my inspirations and aspirations for the program and set ground rules. Every so often, stipulations were added in order to encourage the students to think and share more deeply.

At the start of every circle, as soon as we are all seated, we review the following rules: 1) We encourage one another to share. 2) We accept what is being shared without judgement. 3) We do not speak or play during a performance. Once the rules are clear, we open the circle by singing the chorus to “The Call and the Answer” as a group. There are many iterations of this song, but we use the De Dannan version recommended to me by Ted McCormack. Next, someone volunteers to begin sharing. Once they are done, that student decides which direction around the circle we will continue to move. Students are encouraged to clap for one another after a performance and may ask questions about what was shared. Once the circle is completed and everyone has had a turn, we either go back around the circle, if time allows, or close the circle by singing the chorus to “The Call and the Answer” again. The lyrics to the chorus are:

You are the call
I am the answer
You are the wish and I am the way
You the music
I the dancer
You are the night and I am the day
You are the night and I am the day

When the Session After School Program began there were only three students for the first three weeks. The small size of the group was inconsequential, as students showed a growth in confidence and comfortability with one another throughout these early weeks. Many students had one or two items prepared, but by the time the circle went around for the third or fourth time, they had to think on their feet; learning to share regardless of performance quality. Even in these unrefined performances, encouragement and acceptance were overruling. A student could sight read four measures, get nervous, stop playing, and we would all clap for them and say, “good try,” “keep practicing,” or “thank you for sharing!” The group has grown to include eight students who attend regularly.

One morning, as I was preparing for my intermediate and advanced concert band rehearsals, I stopped and decided to forget the plan. The students had been performing averagely but they did not need another woodshedding rehearsal. They needed a community that would encourage them to practice and try their best. I decided, on a whim, that we were going to have a circle in every ensemble. At this point, I found a fun stretching video and renamed the program a ‘Sharing Circle.’ The students came in that morning and I told them not to take their instruments out and to sit in a circle. The

confused group did as I asked. Then I broke the news that we were going to follow a 5-minute stretching video and that they had that 5 minutes to decide on something to share with the class. The students gasped; perplexed about what was expected from them. I explained that every student would need to find something to share, but that it could be anything they choose.

We completed our stretch, sat down, reviewed the rules, and began. I sang “The Call and the Answer” and taught them the chorus by rote. We then made our way around the circle and every single student shared! The performances ranged from Fortnite dances to Broadway songs to memes to self-made animations and more. This group was learning about one another and looked the happiest I had seen them all year.

The next block, with the advanced ensemble, proved just as fruitful. With more mature personalities, a smaller class size, and more advanced musical ability, each presentation of a song, poem, self-written rap, or playing of an instrument, was encouraged and accepted with, what seemed like, an understanding for the community being built before their eyes.

At the time, I was unaware of just how profound the effects of the Sharing Circle would be on rehearsal, community, student driven practice, and efficacy of student leadership. Almost suddenly, everyone knew each other better. Students showed greater respect for their section leaders and for myself. When students knew the next sharing circle would occur two weeks later, they began to come up to the band room more

frequently to practice. In coming up to practice they had additional time to work on their band music and even pick up secondary instruments!

Throughout the course of two months, I added three stipulations to the performances that could be shared, one at a time. The first restriction was, “no quotes.” This was implemented because, in previous circles, half the class could pick a short quote and participate without putting any real effort into what they were sharing. Many of the students who had originally resorted to sharing tiny quotes, transitioned to playing their main instrument in later circles. Some began to share longer poems or sing excerpts. The next addition was, “no videos unless you are performing in them.” This was supposed to force them, again, to put more thought and effort into creating art to share with the class. It was also meant to encourage students to create a video at home, if they were too nervous to perform live. Following this stipulation, I observed an increase in the number of small groups sharing in the circle. The third stipulation placed parameters on time, stating, “all performances must last between 40-120 seconds.” This was meant to encourage students to prepare something more substantial while ensuring there would be enough time for every student to share.

On Monday, December 17, these three stipulations presented themselves in the most fulfilling Sharing Circle yet. Students were relatively well prepared and gave a real sense of what they were capable of. A group of six wind players arranged and performed a version of, “Lose Yourself,” by Eminem on marimba, vibraphone, snare drum, and bass drum. Three brass players performed, “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” on baritone

saxophones. A seventh grader created and shared a four-episode digitally designed animated series!

These are just a few of the dozens of performances shared. They show evidence of learning through student driven choice, practice, and performance in an encouraging and accepting community. In order to collect more measurable data, I sent students a survey to complete as a reflection assignment. A transcription of the Google form used to collect responses is available in Appendix E.

Out of 60 students, 100% responded accurately when asked about the rules of the circle. When responding to the question, “In the circle, how do we develop community?” 59 of 60 responded positively to the question. One student wrote: “We develop a community by learning to support each other through the presentations. If someone were to make a mistake, a bond is built so that person don’t have to face it alone.”

The most important question to my analysis was, “What have you learned by taking part in the Sharing Circle.” Out of 60 students, 59 responded that they had learned something either about themselves or their peers in the circle. Some responses include: “I learned to definitely listen more to my classmates,” “I learned to not judge,” “I have learned that everyone in the band is interesting and different. I have learned that by taking part in the circle we can get to know about each other more,” and “I learned to be more accepting towards others thoughts and feelings.”

My goal is to continue these circles weekly after school and monthly in the band rehearsals through the end of the school year. I also hope to make the program more

visible to other students and staff throughout the school, in order to build a larger more diverse community for the students. I believe this type of activity may bring the same benefits to a general music classroom and I will be further developing these ideas in the future.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Singing sessions utilize methods that have shown to be effective in building musical communities. Singers are free to choose and interpret their songs based on their personal connection to them, knowing they will be accepted by their community. When a mistake is made, the community is there to encourage the singer to continue sharing by helping them find the missing words. These communities carry songs over generations, strengthening and supporting the singing tradition.

The students who have participated in the Sharing Circle program have benefited significantly from this forum's ability to foster hard work, encouragement, acceptance, confidence, and respect. At the end of each circle, I ask the students if they had fun, and the class always erupts into a "YES!"

I will continue to study the effects that the "Sharing Circle" has on my students. I also intend to try other singing session methods I have not used yet. Students need and deserve a space where they can decide what represents themselves and share it without being judged. I believe that teaching our students to encourage and accept all forms of art and all types of people may directly contribute to building tolerant and welcoming communities in the classroom, the school, and throughout society.

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APPENDIX A

Glossary of Irish Terms

Term	Page	Definition
<i>Sean-nós</i>	3	a traditional style of a cappella Irish song often heard in sessions
<i>Seisiún</i>	3	the Irish term referring to session; an informal gathering of musicians and/or singers and/or dancers often held at a pub
<i>Coolins</i>	4	a traditional Irish hair style consisting of long curls
<i>Pavee</i>	7	traveling musicians, often tinkers who work with metal
<i>Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann</i>	8	(CEE) a society of musicians in Ireland dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Irish culture
<i>Gaeltach</i>	8	an area of Ireland where the Irish language is spoken, taught, and promoted
<i>Fear an Tí</i>	10	a male leader of a session
<i>Bean an Tí</i>	10	a female leader of a session
<i>Gan Ainm</i>	11	the song known to commonly follow the previous song
<i>U'dar</i>	12	authority; referring to a singer giving the words and story of a song authority over the tune
<i>Lilting</i>	12	altering rhythms and extending words and phrases of a song on nonsense syllables
<i>An t'Oireachtas</i>	20	referred to as the Republic of Ireland; promoter of Irish culture and language
<i>Fleadh Cheoil</i>	20	music festival consisting of performances and competitions used to promote Irish music, song, and dance

APPENDIX B

Itinerary

Date	Location/Event
June 22	Flight arrived in Shannon, County Clare Stayed in Doolin Co. Clare Fitzpatrick's Pub
June 23	County May trip
June 24	O'Connor's Pub
June 25	County Galway trip
June 28	County Cork trip
June 29	McDermott's Pub
July 1	Kilshanny House Singing Session at Kilshanny House
July 2	Checked out of Doolin Stayed in Salthill, County Galway
July 4	Interview with Deirbhile Ní Bhrolchain
July 5	Checked out of Salthill Stayed in Lahinch, County Clare
July 6	Checked out of Lahinch Foraging trip from Kilshanny House Stayed in Ennis, County Clare Spencil Hill Singing Session at Duugan's Pub
July 8	Checked out of Ennis Lahinch day Stayed in Miltown Malbay, County Clare

- July 10 Spanish Point Singing Session at Spanish Point Golf Club
- July 13 Traveled to Ennis
Interview with Hilda McHugh
Traveled to Miltown Malbay
3PM Trad Singing Recital Willie Clancy Week
Interview with Nóirin Lynch
- July 14 Checked out of Miltown Malbay
Stayed in Lahinch, County Clare
Ennistymon Farmer's Market
- July 15 Interview with Ted McCormack
Pub Session at McGann's Pub
- July 16 Session at O'Connor's Pub
Session at Fitzpatrick's Pub
- July 17 Traveled to Ennis; Interview with Peter Casey
Day trip to Limerick
Interview with John Condon
- July 18 Dublin day trip
Visit family in the Netherlands
- July 22 Traveled to Ennis
Kilfenora Ceili Band Concert at Glór
Stayed in Ennis
- July 23 Interview with Therese McInerney
Checked out of Ennis
Stayed in Doolin, County Clare
Pub Session at Fitzpatrick's Pub;
Pub Session at McDermott's Pub
- July 24 Lisdoonvarna trip
Burren history tour

July 25 Concert in Galway, County Galway
 Kilfenora music history tour
 Pub Session at O'Connor's Pub

July 26 Checked out of Doolin
 Flight Home

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire

Directions: Indicate to what extent the following forms music learning have affected your knowledge of Irish music, your performance practices, and your decision to become a performer? Please use a rating scale from 1-3 with 1 indicating little or no effect, 2 indicating a moderate effect, and 3 indicating a very high effect.

Example: If I mainly learned music from my cousins, then I would rate Family Members with a 3. If I have never been to a competition before, then I would rate Competitions with a 1.

	Pub Sessions	Competitions	Family Members	Private Lessons	School Music	Community Organizations	Church	Online Resources
Knowledge of Irish songs.								
Performance practices.								
Decision to become a performer.								

Directions: Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

If a music activity which you engaged in is not named in the chart above, please name it and briefly describe it below.

How important is singing in the Irish music community? Please rate from 1-5 with 1 meaning, not at all important, and 5 meaning of incredibly high importance.

Not Important 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 Highly Important

APPENEDIX D

Interview Questions

1. Would you briefly describe your past music experience?
2. How long have you been singing this style of song?
3. What influenced you to begin performing in pub sessions?
4. How often do you attend pub sessions as a performer (x per week/month)?
5. How often do you attend pub sessions as an observer (x per week/month)?
6. In your opinion, what is Irish traditional song? Describe.
7. Would you please describe some main characteristics of authentic singing?
8. What are the songs that every singer of traditional Irish song needs to know?
9. Are there other singers which you attempt to emulate?
10. What is the role of the singer during the session?
11. What other styles do you sing?
12. What are the most common venues for traditional Irish music/song to be performed?
13. What draws you to perform in pub sessions?
14. Is Irish song considered important in the Irish musical community?

APPENDIX E

Sharing Circle Reflection Survey

The red asterisk (*) refers to questions that students were required to answer in order to submit the form.

1. Band (Pick 1) *
 - General Band
 - Concert Band
 - Beginning Band
2. What have you learned by taking part in the sharing circle? (2 sentences) *
3. What are the rules of the circle? *
4. In the circle, how do we develop community? *
5. List three things you enjoy about the circle. *
6. List three things that could be improved about the Sharing Circle. *
7. What are your feelings about the Sharing Circle in general (at least 2 sentences). *
8. What does “encouragement” mean to you personally? *
9. What does “acceptance” mean to you personally? *
10. Rate the Sharing Circle activity from 1-3 (1 being terrible and 3 being fantastic). *

Terrible	1	2	3	Fantastic
	○	○	○	