

Negotiating Genre, Style, and Contemporality in an Intergenerational Irish Music Ensemble

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Abstract

This article examines intergenerational collaboration and community negotiations of genre and style in a contemporary Irish music ensemble at Florida State University, where university students participated alongside longstanding community members through a state-funded senior education program. Throughout this process, participants navigated differences between established local Irish music traditions and newer, student-directed formats, especially in terms of genre crossover, repertoire, contemporality, performance speed, and arrangement. Both generations, despite differences, articulated a commitment to “keep the scene going” and establish community longevity while navigating an evolving genre topography. These complex negotiations led to ongoing practices of mutual support and eventually transformed both practical and sonic aspects of community sessions, changing scene norms. Through an autoethnographic lens and supported by interviews with students and community members, this case study highlights the fostering of intergenerational musical relationships and contributes to existing research on intergenerational ensemble practices, genre negotiation, and aging identity.

KEYWORDS: Irish music, intergenerational, community, genre, ensembles, contemporality

When you are young you have a great intensity and sense of adventure. You want to do everything (...) Old age offers the opportunity to integrate and bring together the multiplicity of directions that you have travelled. It is a time when you can bring the circle of your life together to where your longing can be awakened and new possibilities can come alive for you. (O'Donohue 1997: 165).

Introduction

This article examines negotiations of genre, style, learning, and identity between multiple generations of musicians within a contemporary Irish music ensemble in a university setting. Through a case study approach which draws heavily on participative ethnography, autoethnographic reflections, and community conversation, I reflect on close experiences with the Florida State University (FSU) Irish music ensemble and surrounding Irish music community. This article primarily references the events that took place during my tenure as the ensemble's instructor, which spanned an approximately five-year period from 2016 to 2020. In my discussions of the ensemble over this time frame, I look closely at the *intergenerational* interactions between ensemble members and the ways age and identity impacted negotiations of style, practice, genre, and contemporality through music-making and performance.

The FSU Irish Ensemble was primarily populated by two very different age demographics: undergraduate or graduate college-aged students, and community members enrolled in the ensemble through a state program open to Florida residents aged sixty or older. Among these two age-disparate groups of musicians, musical backgrounds, abilities, and levels of training varied widely; still, via participation in the ensemble and related local events, members of both groups formed deep musical and personal relationships and built integral community relationships. My areas of inquiry for this article focus around two primary research questions: first, *if* and *how* age and aging impacted members' participation in the ensemble and surrounding Irish music community; second, what factors impacted intergenerational relationships within the ensemble and negotiations of musical style and practice between two different age demographics of ensemble members.

The methodology informing this article primarily takes the format of autoethnographic reflection (Bartleet and Ellis 2009) and 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of musical and social practice, as I discuss these phenomena from my own observational and participative practices. Most of the themes and events relayed in this article were regularly discussed in the ensemble and community settings; to further iterate this, I include interview transcriptions from recorded conversations with multiple ensemble members. The voices of Brennan and Veronica, two senior-aged ensemble participants and long-standing Irish music community members, Rachel, a bodhrán player and musicology graduate student during her time in the ensemble, and Grace, a guitarist and undergraduate classics major in the ensemble, all provide deep insight and examples to the ways ensemble experiences shaped their perspectives and negotiations of music, age, and community. (1)

Shifting Topographies: Irish Music and Identity

Many works have been written about Irish diasporic musical communities in the United States, including several that centre the importance of identity in Irish or Celtic diasporic musical practice (Nicholsen 2009; O'Shea 2007; Xuan and Ling 2022). One key component of this identity formation includes a complex negotiation between the roles and importance of different individuals within Irish

musical communities. Hast and Scott note a “balance between the celebration of individuality (the central regard for key individuals, especially senior musicians) and the strength and sociability of the community” in Irish music (2004, p. 18). The idea of seniority or hierarchy has been noted in several works on Irish traditional music, notably Helen O’Shea’s articles on idealizing musical community and hierarchical gender dynamics in Irish trad sessions (2007: 8-9; 2008: 55-56).

These notions of hierarchy and seniority in Irish music are also shaped by ideas of *authenticity*, specifically relating to tune transmission, format, and learning. Contemporary scholars (Erraught 2020; Spencer 2009; Waldron 2008; Xuan and Ling 2022) note that these concepts of authenticity are changing in a 21st-century context, specifically as the demographic makeup of who participates in these musical communities continues to change, and as technology shifts impact the ways this music is able to be transmitted and received. The “shifting topography” of popular and traditional genre practice in the 21st century (Shuker 2001: 6) poses many potentials for change as the generations who practice Irish music globally slowly shift.

Traditional and “World” Music Ensembles in University Settings: Intersections with Community

Especially in recent decades, music educators and ethnomusicologists have explored the connections between their two fields, specifically in the realms of incorporating broad global perspectives in music education (Howard et al. 2010; Schippers 2010) and in conducting musicology “at home” (Nettl 2005: 186) that is more directly informed by practices happening within the researcher’s residential university and community settings. One primary output of this work has been the study and practice of traditional, folk, or world music ensembles in university settings, which most often follow the administrative or structural format (e.g. course listing and credit) of long-established university ensembles with a topical and musical focus on place or genre-specific music styles (Solis 2004).

Though standard practice across these ensembles varies, one common occurrence is that many of these ensembles, though primarily structured as a credit-earning experience for enrolled university students, are also populated by ‘community members’ or ‘community musicians’ who are not full-time college or university students. These participants may be university faculty or staff, senior residents enrolled through free or reduced-tuition programs, or local musicians of varying ages and backgrounds participating in the ensemble through a variety of formal and informal structures. Dissertations by Johnston (2013), Dillon (2018), and Carrico (2019) have all explored the ideas of informal learning structures within these types of ensembles.

While many authors who discuss these university groups have noted the influence of these community members on the overall practice and character of the ensembles (Riley 2017; Solis 2004; Stimeling and Enriquez 2019), less attention overall has been given to the frequent age and generational differences between the typical college student ensemble enrollee and the common community member age demographic. By contrast, research grounded in the field of music education has specifically addressed intergenerational participation in music ensembles and

community music making in older adults. In an article by Conway and Hodgman (2008) about a collaborative intergenerational performance project, the authors noted that this process was initially met with apprehension by both older adults and college students, and ultimately led to some discomfort regarding unfamiliarity with placement of singers in the ensemble. A similar study on an intergenerational university choir (Jang 2020) suggested that this process led ultimately to social bonding, feelings of accomplishment, and enjoyment by both age demographics in the intergenerational ensemble. Other authors (De Vries 2012; Newman and Hatton-Yeo 2008) have discussed the concept of “reciprocity of learning” in intergenerational ensembles, suggesting that mixed age demographics learn valuable information from their varied experiences and contributions. This case study seeks to build on this existing research by examining a university ensemble from a perspective of intergenerational interaction, discussing specifically how age and aging play into the negotiation of music style and practice.

Ensemble Background and Practices

The Florida State University “Irish Music and Fiddling” course, colloquially called the “FSU Irish Ensemble” by virtually all of its audience and participants, was first founded at Florida State University in 2000 by Denise Peterson as one of its World Music Ensembles housed in the Musicology area in the School of Music. (2) In the decades that followed, it was led by either community members paid through adjunct funding or music graduate students as part of their graduate assistantship teaching load. The ensemble typically met twice per week for an hour and a half, and performed concerts in university spaces once or twice per semester, often sharing the program with other World Music Ensembles. Enrolment, additional performances, and general format of the ensemble varied by instructor.

For the purposes of this case study, I explore the community and intergenerational involvement of the FSU Irish Ensemble from 2016 to 2020, where, as a graduate student in ethnomusicology, I led or co-led the ensemble as instructor of record through my graduate assistantship. (3) I had significant experience playing traditional and popular American fiddle styles before my time as instructor, but primarily learned how to play Irish and Celtic musics through my interactions with the ensemble and local mentors. In learning to lead the ensemble, I “took my cues from the community” (Nazareth 1999: 18), seeking out advice from community musicians and former instructors of the ensemble, and participating actively in local sessions and other Irish music events to learn the repertoire and style of Irish music; from my perspective, this significantly impacted the reciprocal community involvement and reception of the ensemble.

Through a Senior Citizen Audit program, Florida residents over age sixty who could take one class per semester with free tuition and a modest recording fee. Many of the participants in the Irish Ensemble had taken other similar ensembles in years past, such as the Old-Time Ensemble or Balinese Gamelan. Since at least the 1990s, Tallahassee had been home to a prolific Irish session scene that included local public and private sessions, house concerts, lessons, and community events, as well as a longstanding ‘sister city’ partnership with Sligo, Ireland. The Tallahassee Irish Society was a formal organizational home for many of these individuals, but community happenings generally were transmitted via email in smaller groups.

Many community members also formed smaller local bands, which played in local venues and for community events such as the annual Tallahassee Irish Festival.

Here and throughout this article, I refer to two primary age demographics of musicians: “younger” or “newer” members: college or graduate student-aged musicians, almost always enrolled in degree-seeking programs, usually ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-six, and “older” or “community members” of the ensemble and/or local music scene, who varied more widely in age but typically were in their fifties, sixties, or seventies at the time of our interactions. Despite some individual variances in these age demographics, this representation was typical of the vast majority of our ensemble membership and most of the surrounding community for all five years of my tenure as its director.

Our repertoire mostly consisted of Irish traditional (often called “trad”) dance tunes: jigs, reels, hornpipes, and similar instrumental formats, most of which were common among contemporary session musicians in Tallahassee and globally. Ensemble members of all ages were generally expected to learn the melodies by ear, usually either via recordings or instructor demonstration. We also played Irish/Celtic singing songs and ballads, slower airs and waltzes, and a few contemporary/crossover style tunes. Tunes were either learned in ‘large group format’ with all members of the ensemble present, or in small groups that broke off to do a more focused learning and performance of selected songs. Outside of our regular large ensemble performances at the university and in surrounding community venues, we frequently held a standing bi-monthly gig at the local Irish pub that was populated by a selected three to five members of the Irish Ensemble and myself at any given time.

“Keep the Scene Going”: Placement, Encouragement, and Hierarchy in Session Activities

One major theme consistently articulated by community members in the ensemble was a desire to preserve the longevity and sustainability of the local Irish music scene. Given the older average age of many of the scene’s core members, the presence of college-aged musicians at local sessions generally prompted positive comments on the potential to sustain ongoing events and practices. At ensemble rehearsals, community members would frequently remind college-aged ensemble members of the dates for local sessions and encourage them to attend.

This attitude was often apparent in the affairs of local sessions, where seniority and ability were frequently performed through seating placement. At “open sessions”, which occurred most often at a local Irish pub (Finnegan’s Wake) in the midtown area of Tallahassee, the musicians would set up in the centre of the bar around several tables pushed together. The session leader(s) would sit at the head of the table with their backs against a high bar booth, and session players would take their seats in one or two concentric circles around the table.

This seating arrangement had been in place for many years and was deeply tied to community identity and, to a lesser extent, hierarchy. Many of the long-standing attendees had informally assigned (or implied) places within the circle; they would show up early to “claim their spot”, and musicians who intentionally or inadvertently took a regular’s place around the table would be met with confused

or gently disapproving looks or perhaps quietly asked to move. (4) Musicians who were less talented or present in the scene, as well as newcomers or late arrivals, were expected to take a seat on the outer edges of the circle when they arrived, rather than playing in the “inner circle” of established session musicians.

When college-aged ensemble participants became more present in the local scene and began regularly or semi-regularly attending sessions, this practice shifted; the college students were often invited into this inner circle of session seating by older musicians, who would shift to make space for them upon their arrival. In rare cases, they would even invite the younger students to take their seat. Most often, this was done by the community member ensemble members who had encouraged the younger students to attend the sessions. This practice clearly demonstrated the welcoming attitude the older musicians had towards the younger ones, as well as the desire to have the younger musicians return to the sessions. As ethnomusicologist Colin Hamilton puts it, the “status” of musicians in Irish music communities is tied to a number of factors including age and longevity; negotiated through seating arrangements, this is a critical factor in the community identity and practice of local sessions across Irish music scenes (1999: 345-346).

Another common demonstrator of session hierarchy was the choosing or “calling” of tune sets over the course of any given session. The standard practice for this was to go around the circle, with each musician in turn given their chance to call a set of tunes. Musicians could choose to skip or decline the opportunity to call a set, or cede their turn to someone else. As college-aged students became more present in the scene, many of the established older musicians would occasionally cede their turn to call tunes to the younger newcomers, often encouraging them to play the tunes they had been learning in ensemble class meetings. Again, this demonstrated the older musicians’ positive attitude towards younger students’ attendance at the sessions and outlook that this attendance would have a net positive impact on the scene’s trajectory.

My ensemble co-director from 2016 to 2017, Alex Carrico, also noted the welcoming of younger ensemble members in the community sessions with “great enthusiasm” (2019: 6). After attending their first open sessions, college students would often comment on their surprise at the overall friendliness and welcoming attitude of community members at the sessions. (5) Occasionally, former ensemble members who had since moved away from Tallahassee would attend local sessions when visiting town; they, too, were met with great enthusiasm and a warm welcome.

Repertoire and Practice—Sessions

At a majority of Irish sessions and performances, the usual repertoire of traditional dance tunes (often jigs, reels, hornpipes, and other similar variants) is played in sets: two or three individual tunes of the same format and meter played two to three times each, in direct succession. The content of these sets can vary, but each scene or community tends to have standard practices for the content and arrangement of these sets or which tunes ‘go together’ (O’Shea 2007; Scott 2011; Spencer 2009). In the Tallahassee scene, this was an embedded community practice; community musicians had often been playing the same sets together for years or even decades,

and had set expectations for which tunes belonged in the same set and what order they should be played in.

Most of the repertoire that the college-age students knew consisted of tunes they learned in the ensemble setting. In ensemble rehearsals, we often put together sets that differed from the standard sets played at community sessions, which meant that college-age students would end up calling sets at sessions that were different from what the community session players usually played. At least in the early years of my leading the ensemble, this occasionally led to confusion, or even tension, as younger players “disrupted” the usual organization of sets in the ensemble. These new tunes were sometimes met with apprehension, but the older ensemble members often vouched for these new sets and convinced local regulars to learn them. Years later, I asked Brennan, one of the older ensemble members, what he thought of the repertoire the ensemble members brought to the local sessions:

Brennan: I play those tunes all the time. Some of my favourite sets come right out of the Irish Ensemble (...) I loved it. But ask me if I can get anybody to play those tunes with me today. [shakes head] “They’re too fast!”—Blah blah blah.

As the college students became more regular fixtures of the local sessions over time, however, this shifted. “Irish Ensemble Sets,” as they were sometimes called, became regular occurrences in the session repertoire; community members would often learn the new ensemble tunes and recommend or “call” them during the sessions. As I discuss in the following section, these tunes sometimes differed in style, speed, and format; though there were moments of negotiation or disagreement whether these tunes and their arrangements were net disruptive or constructive to the sessions, they often “settled in” to the regular session occurrences regardless of any initial tensions.

Brennan later suggested that the sessions were overall benefited by not just the musical content, but the overall energy of the ensemble:

Brennan: You know, the music that came out of the Irish ensemble was good—it wasn’t put together at the last minute. It was good. And the students had a joyous celebration. It wasn’t a showing off; they were truly celebrating the music when they played it. And that was very inspiring for me, just to see that type of energy come into the music. I think the local sessions needed that burst of joy.

Negotiating Contemporality

A number of factors set the playing styles and repertoire of the younger college students apart from their older community counterparts, both within and outside of the ensemble. Through interviews and my own participation, I identified three major categories that often emerged in terms of difference: technical ability and speed, popular or contemporary stylings, and an importance of hierarchy and heritage in tune transmission. I discuss these three categories in detail as a way of examining negotiations of *contemporality* within the ensemble, specifically in intergenerational differences between older and younger ensemble members. I speak about this reflexively, especially as my own agency and experience

influenced these phenomena; as both a younger-generation musician and the primary instructor of the ensemble in the case study period, my direction in song choice and arrangement heavily impacted the ways ensemble members of both generations played and experienced material.

Speed and Technical Ability

The combination of my agency and ultimate intergenerational difference within the ensemble was perhaps most readily obvious in terms of speed. Especially in my first years teaching the ensemble, I drew heavily on a bluegrass-informed ‘faster is better’ mentality and tended to start tunes at unusually high tempos compared to my older-generation counterparts. (6) This tendency towards fast playing was jokingly referred to as “Holly Speed” by several members of the ensemble, and was eventually used to denote *any* musician who played at a tempo deemed faster than normal (or “reasonable,” for that matter.)

Brennan: [college student] was at the session, and he said, “let’s play this set”, and there are probably five or six of us [from the ensemble] there, and there might have been another ten of the regular people at the session. It was a big session. So we played it, and because [student] was leading it, we played it at “Holly Speed”. And so the next guy to call a set, he said, “Oh, I’m not following that now.”

The question of speed became a regular topic of discussion in the ensemble, especially as members became more familiar with me and with each other over time. This discussion was often veered towards matters of technical ability and training; older ensemble members, lamenting that they “couldn’t play that fast”, would continue by reflecting on the formal “classical training” held by younger members of the ensemble in comparison to their own experiences. Sometimes, the older members would push themselves to keep up by practising the fast tunes extensively and attempting to increase their own technical ability over time; other times, they would simply reduce their playing or stop entirely during fast tunes.

While this divide in speed ability was most present as a generational difference, it also presented itself to a lesser extent between music majors and non-majors in the ensemble; however, this appeared to be more of a perception issue than anything else. Many of the music major ensemble participants with high degrees of formal training—such as master’s students pursuing performance degrees on their instrument—struggled just as much, if not more, than anyone else.

Rachel: I felt like I was doing the best I could, and it felt like it was the mentality of the group that we all knew we were doing the best we could. Still, I feel like there was a lot of really interesting negotiation there (...) I think that depended on people’s own personal anxiety levels, too, though.

Especially, again, the younger students, who were maybe on the performance track, or had that really strong training on one instrument that they were used to being really good at. Making that leap, and realizing that you didn’t have to be really good right away—I think that was difficult for some people, and I think those people a lot of the time lasted one or two semesters and didn’t come back.

Grace also noted that technical ability and classical or formal training was less important to quickly learning the ensemble material by ear than having prior experience learning and playing Irish music.

Grace: I think even with technical ability, like even if people were music majors, because of the way Irish music is taught where we didn't have sheet music [or tabs] with us, probably even with a classically trained person, it was still reframing what you knew or reframing how you learned.

Tune Transmission and Learning Hierarchy

One common theme identified in studies of American traditional or diasporic music performance in folk styles, broadly, is the high regard held for the origin and history of from *where* or *whom* a tune was first learned. This was deeply present within the Tallahassee Irish music scene, at least within its older and more long-standing members. By far the most frequent question I was asked when I introduced or played a new tune—or a new variant/arrangement of a well-known tune—was regarding the recording or artist where I had learned it. “What recording is that off?”; “Oh, whose version is that?”; “Who did you learn that tune from?” were all frequent iterations of this question. When community members introduced new tunes at sessions or via email, they gave significant attention to the specific artist, recording, tune book, session, workshop, or event where they learned the specific version of the song, often devoting more verbal time to a description of where they learned the tune than the logistics of the term itself.

This question was also sometimes a way to negotiate “correct” playing of the tune, and an entry point into gentle implied correction of what might be considered to be wrong notes or phrasing. “Oh, I first learned that tune off a Kevin Burke record, and he plays it like this,” someone might say in response to my version, followed by a real-time demonstration of what was implied to be the correct notes or phrasing of what I had attempted.

By contrast, younger ensemble members, who were also new entrants to the scene, posed overall less curiosity towards the exact origins of the tune and its history of players, and would usually only demonstrate any sort of questioning or resistance if I played a version that differed from either the “example recordings” I recommended and/or the sheet music found online on websites such as The Session. Without the background of years or decades of experience in Irish and Celtic music, an implied hierarchy of what recording was the “correct” version for learning from was far less present.

The idea of an orally transmitted and regionally variant tune’s “correctness” (and, by association, possible “incorrectness”) is common across Irish trad scenes. This was also demonstrated directly in the Tallahassee scene through a “Tallahassee Irish Tune Book” (Scott 2011) compiled by local musician and teacher Jane Wells Scott, one of the primary local session leaders and a former instructor of the FSU Irish Ensemble; in it, she noted extensively the many tunes she had learned from Sligo fiddler Ed Keeney, and spoke of this relationship’s importance on the overall stylings of Tallahassee session players. These versions, as notated and transmitted by Jane, were commonly considered to be the ‘correct’ versions at local sessions.

Popularity, Style, and Arrangement

A final area of generational difference in the FSU Irish Ensemble related to style and arrangement, notably through a blurring of the boundaries between Irish traditional or “trad” musics and more contemporary, crossover, popular, or cross-genre-influenced styles. Without this ingrained implied hierarchy of “correct” recordings, younger and newer students were free to play or suggest any tunes that they liked without self-imposed restriction. Younger students were quick to suggest tunes by crossover bands, pop or globally-influenced songs, and generally play in a more contemporary manner influenced by a variety of genres—for example, in guitar chord substitution and/or syncopated style of playing. They were also likely to regularly recall and suggest tunes that were highly common in the Irish Trad repertoire (such as “Drowsy Maggie”) that were considered almost too overplayed to be regular facets of the local sessions.

We discussed these preferences during ensemble rehearsals, especially as they related to session etiquette. Sometimes I would suggest to the younger or newer students that certain tunes and arrangements were unlikely to “go over well” at sessions, or that they wouldn’t fit within the standard tune repertoire typically played. I’d often ask the community member in their ensemble for their input on this during the discussion; older members would sometimes reiterate my thoughts, but other times express a desire for the new tunes to be played at the sessions and assure the students that they would help the rest of the community members learn the new tunes or arrangements.

Rachel: I feel like [older community members in the ensemble] all sort of had a very old school style in terms of their own personal sounds that they liked. It felt like they wanted to be *The Chieftains*, you know. And I think with the younger generation that was definitely not the case.

And so I think there was a bit of a generational divide, stylistically in terms of the songs and the tunes they were bringing to the table. Like, for instance, Grace bringing in *The Gloaming* and I remember listening to *The Gloaming* for the first time and being like, “Oh my God, this is so cool! This is like, what I think we should be doing too” and I think a lot of the younger people were in that similar sort of camp, whereas again the old people were like, I don’t know, thinking of *Mary Black* and *The Chieftains*.

Stylistically, I think that there was a divide. But I think that for the most part people were respectful, depending on who brought the tune to the table. So if [older ensemble member] brought in a tune and a specific recording, and he’s like “this is the way I really like it played”, I think that people mostly went along with that. Whereas if one of the younger students brought in a particular recording, we would play the tune in the style of that recording, and draw from the cool musical stuff that we were doing from that newer sort of style.

So yeah, definitely a divide.

It was interesting that Rachel associated the band *The Gloaming* with contemporality, because when I later asked Grace about her bringing that material to the group, she took a slightly different perspective towards contemporality and

hierarchy, noting the respect that older members in the ensemble had for Martin Hayes, the band's fiddle player:

Grace: I mean, The Gloaming has Martin Hayes in it, and I know a lot of the community members love Martin Hayes. I remember reactions or comments on his playing, because he is such a well-known player, and I even know [older ensemble member] took a masterclass with him. I'll never forget her saying that and me being like, "What, that's amazing!"

I wonder if that was the connector, where it was like, maybe this is contemporary, but this is such a well-known fiddle player in this band, and I know that several of [the older community members] had respect for Martin Hayes, and so I do remember that connection being made. I think maybe it boils down to, instead of "Should we be playing contemporary?", like, "Is this good?" It's more like the respect for the players or the respect for the sound, because there are some very talented people in that band.

I also remember just feeling really happy to share it. It was my first introduction into Irish music. I listened to The Gloaming in high school, and so I appreciated the space to share that with the group. That kind of made me feel more connected to everyone because it was something that I really cared about.

Mentoring, Friendship, Reciprocity

While musical style and practice were important factors of the intergenerational negotiations within the ensemble, perhaps the most important and encouraging practice that emerged through this time was the growing relationships between the older community members and younger college students. Older members began attending the gigs, recitals, and other public events of younger students; they encouraged them and celebrated their growth over the period of years. When college students graduated and/or moved away, both groups expressed their sadness at leaving not only a peer group of colleagues but the wider community of mentors and musical counterparts of all ages.

The idea of *mentorship* here, importantly, did not only take place on a one-way street from older to younger musicians. One of the most frequent sentiments expressed to me from the older generation of ensemble members was their appreciation for learning *from* the younger cohort. They also expressed a sense of happiness towards their interactions with the students, and their developing friendships within the ensemble.

Veronica: For me, having an organized program where we interacted with other musicians of different ages was important for me. I like the idea of the openness between the current students and their interaction with us older members. I was surprised how quickly they embraced us, and looked to us for some things, and taught us things as well. There was a beautiful interaction, which is why we kept coming back (...) it was very uplifting to have that level of acceptance. I didn't expect it.

When we first came into the program, I thought the older musicians would be over to the side, or we might be in a second or third row or circle, or something. And it wasn't that way at all. Students were just great to us.

Brennan and Veronica continued in more detail about the friendships and mentoring relationships they developed with students:

Brennan: The way that the younger students treated us was just amazing, it really was. We got to be friends with some of them, you know. We still see people around, and when they see us they don't avoid us! They'll come up and say hello. So that was really good. You know about all the articles about music and aging and your brain, and I believe that, I really do.

Veronica: I believe it as well, but the extension of the interactions made it happen even more, where your brain's excited and grows. Socially, I was glad to be there to help students as well. Sometimes they borrowed musical instruments from us when they needed them—

Brennan: Sometime they returned them on time! [laughs]

Veronica: [laughs] Some of the younger members, when we would go play at a bar, they would ask us to drive them home (...) there was a very nice stewardship that they embraced us into as well, which I thought was very important for them, and made us feel good too.

“Showing Up”: Longevity and Future Considerations

The FSU Irish Ensemble met an unexpected end of an era with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Spring of 2020, which also marked the final semester of my graduate assistantship and my final term as the ensemble's instructor. We spent the remainder of the semester on Zoom, and then ended the course that May. Though other FSU ensembles began resuming in the 2020-2021 academic year, the end of funding for my graduate assistantship meant that I was no longer able to serve as the ensemble's instructor. I still kept in contact with many members of the ensemble, taught some online and in-person lessons to my current private students, attended sessions when they happened, and hosted occasional socially distanced sessions in my front yard until I moved to Montana for a new position in July 2021. To date, the ensemble has not resumed at FSU, officially for “lack of a qualified instructor” (Donnelly 2021).

Grace spoke specifically about how two of the community members she was closest to were disappointed at the ensemble's end:

Grace: Students are coming and going four years or so at a time, with the exception of people in their PhDs, who are there longer. But the community members are the ones who are going to be there past all of us. I think they all had this as a source of playing multiple times a week, and having all these opportunities for gigs (...) I don't know how the rest of [the ensemble members] feel, but I definitely know those two in particular. It's just disappointing.

Veronica and Brennan both echoed this sentiment, specifically in their disappointment at the lack of a replacement instructor and at how the quality of the Tallahassee Irish scene was lacking due to the ensemble's conclusion:

Brennan: The Irish ensemble was a huge part of the Irish community here in Tallahassee. And it went away, allegedly, allegedly, because the third largest School of Music in the United States could not find a qualified instructor to teach it. And I'm having a hard time with that. As a result, I don't think the quality of the sessions is the same as it was. (7)

Especially in a contemporary higher education climate where college and university courses are taught by higher-than-ever rates of part-time and contingent faculty (AAUP 2021), the consideration of longevity within popular, world, and traditional ensembles remains critical. No data that I know of currently exists regarding the percentage of contingent faculty leading these ensembles; this perhaps remains an important lacuna in the scholarship on non-Western applied music in higher education and a potentially critical factor in establishing sustainability within these systems, and remains important to the revisiting of education models as lifelong learning processes (Meyers 2008).

This consideration of age and longevity *has* been discussed in research on traditional music communities; the importance of "tradition-bearers" in American vernacular and diasporic musical communities (Blanton et al 2014; Waldron 2008) brings with it an (implied or direct) association of age-related seniority. This leads to a set of priorities that may initially appear in competition. To preserve tradition, communities need long-standing members who are deeply knowledgeable about the history of their own musical practice; to preserve *longevity*, however, maintaining a younger cohort is also critical. This dual set of needs is precisely what makes intergenerational collaboration so vital within music communities, and so worth pursuing.

Towards the end of our conversation, Grace discussed how her experiences in the ensemble impacted her post-college, specifically in how she approached entering into new communities and making new connections upon moving to a small town in Alaska after graduation.

Grace: It's kind of understanding this nuance between showing up for yourself and having a confidence to integrate yourself into new places, and respecting the order that already exists. Especially in this small town, it can be hard for many people to figure out how to become a community member here (...) I think I took the same approach of just, you start talking to people, and you start asking them about their lives or what they're doing here, or "Why are you in this space?" or "What is it you like?" And they appreciate that. And they start asking you [too] and you just know, if you click, you click.

I just recently got into a music group. These two people who play, I learned quickly what type of music they like and it was similar to mine, and I just showed up. I showed up, and I played, and we all got along so well, and now I'm a regular with them, and I go every weekend to play with them and have a beer, and it's just about showing up. Really. If you show up enough times, they remember who you are, and if you show interest in them they'll show interest

in you—that’s typically how it works, I found—and recognizing the nuance in different spaces. What’s the order? Who’s been there the longest, or what’s their attitude? And do I want to be a part of this or not? And so I try to do that here in different spaces, and it works. It’s helped me get my face out there. People know who I am, and I know who they are...

I do think I’m gonna say this: older people appreciate when younger people show interest in what they’re doing. Because there is that divide where they think “Oh, young kids don’t know the type of music I like, or the type of movies I like” (...) there’s that cultural divide. But if you show interest in it (...) they think it’s some phenomenon or anomaly, and it’s not. They get hooked on it because they’re like “Oh my gosh! You like that, too!” and they get excited. That tends to happen if you show interest in what they’re doing.

For Grace and others, the primary long-term impact of the Irish ensemble was beyond negotiations of style and contemporality, and instead centred the process of making community connections outside of a set peer group. While musical factors such as genre, speed, and tune transmission were critical negotiations within ensemble rehearsals and performances throughout our tenure, it is essentially within these negotiations that our values of intergenerational connection were realized, and our skill sets of connecting across generations and backgrounds were developed. Even without institutional permanency structures for the ensemble, these values persisted; the spirit of craic and community carried on.

The expanding literature on contemporary/popular music and age, reflected particularly in this special issue, demonstrates a desire to go beyond “lifelong learning” (Mantle 2012) and create systems both within and beyond educational institutions that offer opportunity to make music within different age groups. In future work on this area, I intend to unpack more specifically the institutional structures that support intergenerational ensembles and recommendations for longevity and community collaboration within them; for now, this case study on navigating an intergenerational ensemble in a changing topography of Irish traditional and contemporary music serves as an entry point to considering its importance and long-lasting impacts.

Endnotes

(1) Interviews were conducted in January 2023. Last names are intentionally redacted, but first names and other information are shared with permission.

(2) Though Peterson was technically the first instructor of the FSU Irish Ensemble, its most long-standing initial director was Jane Wells Scott, who led the ensemble from 2000 to 2007.

(3) For the 2016-2017 academic year, I served as co-instructor of the ensemble with my fellow ethnomusicology grad student, Alex Carrico, whose doctoral dissertation on neurodiversity acceptance in traditional Irish music was also informed by our time leading and participating in the ensemble (Carrico 2019). From the Fall 2017 through Spring 2020 semesters, I was the sole instructor of the ensemble.

(4) One example of this was the seat placed directly to the right of the session leaders, which was most often occupied by the scene’s long-standing guitarist. If you went to sessions often, you knew better than to take “Fred’s chair”.

(5) In the interest of transparency, it is worth noting that there were plenty of session dynamics over the years that were far from the positive *modus operandi* described here; especially among the long-standing community members, I heard plenty of complaints surrounding what I might gently call a “non-welcoming attitude”. College students, especially, tended to self-select, and those who continued to attend the sessions (or for that matter, re-enrol in the ensemble) were most likely the ones having the most positive experiences. However, the attitude from the session players towards the students—at least what was observed by and described to me in virtually every instance—was overwhelmingly positive and welcoming.

(6) Though classically trained from a young age, I first learned to play fiddle styles in family bluegrass bands in central North Carolina. For a more in-depth discussion on this fascinating concept of young bluegrass musicians and speed, see Bartenstein and Ellison (2021).

(7) I am not certain of the accuracy of Florida State being the “third largest music school in the U.S.,” as Brennan put it; Wikipedia lists it as such, but there is no citation.

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