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**The Art of Popular Culture: From
'The Meeting of the Waters' to
*Riverdance***

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Globalising Irish Music

One of the duties an author, performer or composer undertakes when travelling around the world in advance or in the wake of a production is to face the media. Such has been my experience with *Riverdance*. Sitting in stuffed rooms in Sydney or Seattle or stretched on soft settees in say, Stockholm, I have been asked an amazing array of questions. Over the thirteen years of the life of this show I have been rendered mute by questions such as (in London): 'how many pairs of tights does Riverdance go through in an evening?'. That one gave me some pause for thought, but not as much as the question I was asked in Tokyo when we first went there. Through an interpreter a Japanese journalist probingly inquired if I felt that the album *Ó Riada sa Gaiety* was an important influence in changing the course of Irish traditional music. These kinds of questions have demonstrated to me over the years the variety of responses that people have to what was actually the *same* musical or theatrical experience. To progress a bit further on the theme of artistic intent versus audience response—in France I recall a press conference where a few journalists were pushing me to interpret *Riverdance* as an Irish Nationalistic cultural response to years of British domination. And bizarrely in Florida a rich Irish-American threw a massive party where he showed a video of *Riverdance* on a large screen to the hundreds of guests—though he had taken care ahead of time to edit out all the Black, Spanish and 'non-Irish elements' of the show. Another equally unexpected response: during the early days after the Good Friday agreement, I sat beside Garry McMichael, then head of the Ulster Democratic Party at a dinner in New York, who, confessing to me that he had seen *Riverdance*, did nothing to disguise the surprise in his voice when he said 'I really liked it!'. There is nothing new in all of this—people tend to see what they want to see and music, being fundamentally non-linguistic, is particularly open to ambiguous and free interpretation. Why, for example, have the supporters of Munster Rugby passionately adopted 'The Fields of Athenry' (a Connaught song written by a Dubliner) as an anthem? And regarding our National Anthem, why do we refuse to take our medicine despite the spoonful of sugar, as we mumble ventriloquistically through gritted teeth 'Ireland's Call'? The answer is, I expect, that 'The Fields' is a good tune—as indeed is 'Amhrán na bhFiann' despite the somewhat graphic and anachronistic encouragements of Peadar Carney's lyrics.

Of all the questions that I have been asked through these global encounters with the media, there is one which returns and returns with clockwork reliability. It is odd because on the face of it the answer would seem to be very obvious, to me at least. However it has featured in nearly every interview I have done. The journalists who have *not* asked it are remarkable, if simply for their rarity. The question is roughly this: 'did you, when writing *Riverdance*, know it was going to be such a global success?'. This question appeared so often that, I was mischievously tempted from time to time to answer: 'of course I did—I just put off doing it until I reached the age of 45'.

Nonetheless I must confess that the question returned with such regularity that I was forced to consider it more seriously. *Riverdance* has become a global phenomenon, way beyond the anticipations of its original intent, and there is a natural curiosity to discover what kind of creative thrust could launch this upon the world. There is also an expectation that such an effect *must* have been caused by a *strategy* that was carefully planned and executed with steadfast determination. The truth is nowhere close to this, and many years after it all

began, I can still be taken by surprise at some individual response from some unexpected part of the globe. I can also put my hand on my heart when I assert that at the outset of the process none of us had a clue that it was going to turn into what it became.

And so, I find myself here today, in a series of lectures entitled 'The Art of Popular Culture', approaching a topic, which PJ Mathews innocently nudged towards me— 'Globalising Irish Music'. And, I will ask you to accept that what you are hearing from me is not the result of academic inquiry, but the personal reflections of a composer and musician who has lived through a period when Ireland has become what R.F. Foster refers to as 'the most globalised country that ever yet was seen'.^{T1} I presume that Professor Foster's clever use of this phrase is meant to draw our attention to the lyrics of the 1798 song 'The Wearing of the Green' where dear old Ireland is described as the 'most distressful country that ever yet was seen'. How much have times really changed?

As always, when asked to speak to a subject like this, one is careful to circle around the title first, watching for snares or even for likely points of entry. All three words in this particular topic seem to be clearly marked with bright red warning signs. 'Globalising'. 'Irish'. 'Music'. 'Irish Music'. 'The Globalising Irish'. No matter where you look there are rocks and sandbanks, but I propose to sail on, navigating each one as best I can.

I am going to make certain assumptions. I assume that we will take the meaning of 'Globalisation' from the received and continually emerging understanding of that word which began in the 1960s with Marshall McLuhan's identification of the 'global village'. This shrinking world where we can all experience events simultaneously has become smaller and smaller, though, with the arrival of the Internet, faster and faster and, somewhat paradoxically, bigger and bigger! This relatively innocent and neutral use of the word 'Globalisation' as a means of simply describing the effects of mass communication, is infused with weightier and more sinister nuance when cultural questions come into play. Immediately one asks, who is doing the globalising? In which direction is the preponderance of globalised traffic? In or out?

In fact, the amount of information available to us nowadays has *revisited* us with a familiar *old* problem—navigation—though the geography has changed from terrestrial to cybernetic. There is now so much available to us at the click of a mouse that it has become almost impossible to sift through the babel and clamour for our attention.

We must, I believe, look at 'globalising' in both the active and passive forms of the verb—if there is such a verb! Has Irish Music globalised (colonised by *diffusion*, shall we say) some parts of the world, or has it also *been* globalised (been colonised by *infusion* of foreign influences)? Or has some Irish music, globalised itself—in other words, dressed itself up to make itself attractive to a multi-cultural audience. All three interpretations are relevant and it does not take too long to find examples of each. What may be interesting is to look at is when, how much, and to what effect this internationalisation of the Art of Popular Culture in Irish music took place.

So let us begin the journey. When I started working as a musician in Dublin, having exited the halls of UCD with a law degree in 1973, Irish music, its creation and its business was essentially a local affair. Unlike our written word, whatever music was made in Ireland, stayed in Ireland and access to foreign markets was reserved for the unfaithful departed—those who had flown the coop. The local industry was still in the grip, albeit weakening, of the dance bands. This

phenomenon began in the 1950s with the touring dance orchestras which later morphed into the now-celebrated 'showbands' gradually growing into a very successful industry, financially. That industry produced almost no 'new' music and was essentially there to serve the dancing and socialising appetites of the country. Performers copied the repertoire of international artists, mostly in the American Country and Western style. In fact the wholesale adoption of this foreign culture—from modes of dress to language idioms—is in itself a fascinating study of pre-Internet globalisation. The ease with which Irish rural and, to a lesser extent, urban life became fetishistically enthralled with the exotica of Texas and Tennessee is a matter of no small wonder. In actual fact it represented a kind of re-importation of a music which had gone out from these islands a century before and had been transformed by the addition of guitars, drums, American cowboy culture and other influences. It must be noted however, that the showbands also presented emerging Irish musicians with an unprecedented opportunity to learn their craft and to earn a living. Many fine musicians who ultimately moved into jazz, rock, traditional, classical and other forms began their journey in the back of a Ford Transit headed for Kinnegad and all points North, South and West of it.

Interestingly, this interplay with country music was to lead to a home-grown variety which became known as 'Country and Irish'. In any look at globalising popular Irish music, Daniel O'Donnell's spectacular success with this localised take on American country music must be wondered at. He can fill halls from Nottingham to Nashville despite the fact that the lyric content his music is distinguished by its total lack of the political or social commentary, which is far more visible in the folk or rock music of his contemporaries.

The appearance of rock bands and groups in the '60s was largely an urban activity, and most of those involved in this would have had their sights set on gaining an international audience. I will return later to the tidal change that was to appear here in the 1980s, but for the moment it is true to say most of *these* kinds of Irish musicians had their eyes on the exit nearest to them. Writing original material was considered somewhat of an affectation, and really Irish audiences wanted to hear what had already become popular hits in the USA or the UK. In fact, Irish artists like Van Morrison or Thin Lizzy, had to achieve the benediction of international acclaim before gaining any wide acceptance at home.

'Folk' music as distinct from traditional—the pure drop—had also had a certain level of success on the global markets. Again, it required emigration, but no look at the development of Irish music could ignore the early impact of the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem and their influence in the United States and elsewhere. This led to a fertilisation of the whole so-called ballad-boom back in Ireland in the 1960s. The image of expanded bawneened Irish chests, heads thrown back, eyes closed and fists clenched is burned into our folk memory as the balladeers proudly declaimed the glories of our past victories, the shame of our defeats and the bohemian global wanderings of our Irish Rovers. All of this led on to the arrival later of the Dubliners, the Fureys, Johnny McEvoy, Danny Doyle, Paddy Reilly and a host of successful folk artists who are still working away today, both at home and abroad.

Important to mention at this stage, though, is what was happening in authentic traditional music. Over the years this culture was kept alive in the rural homes of Ireland. It was also kept alive in North America and elsewhere by the great musicians who had emigrated and became archivists and collectors and performers and teachers. After Ireland became an independent state, there began a gradual process of re-engagement with the traditional forms of music and culture at the level of the State and its government. The formation of

Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 1951 and the introduction of the Fleadh Ceoil were central to the propagation, continuance and maintenance of a high standard in traditional music. This process received an enormous burst of energy in the 1960s with the formation of Gael Linn and the work of the composer, academic and musician Seán Ó Ríada. Suddenly, with the release of George Morrison's film *Mise Éire*, there was an extraordinary whiff of a new kind of national identity in the air—as exemplified by Ó Ríada's score for the film. What Ó Ríada did was take old Irish melodies, and re-orchestrate them in a way that made sense to the ears of his contemporaries. They recognised that this was *their* music, but in a way they had not heard it before. This eloquent call was heard by many young musicians in Ireland who began to understand the elemental power of their own culture—particularly when presented in a way that resonated with more contemporary tastes. So following the adventurous route charted by Ó Ríada, we began to see the addition of other instruments—guitars, bouzoukis, mandolins— instruments creeping in from 'folk' music as opposed to the more melodically linear pipes, fiddles and whistles which had previously characterised 'traditional' music. The air bristled with a new kind of creativity, there was a heady sense of rediscovery, and by the end of the 1960s we saw the emergence of a number of artists and groups that were to influence the course of Irish music for the next forty years.

If I may pause the general thrust of this talk briefly, allow me to take you to the more personal events that were shaping my own life as a musician in Ireland in the 1970s. I had left UCD in 1973, academically geared for a career in law, but with no interest or ambition to don the wig and gown that might have awaited me at King's Inns. I was addictively consumed with music, and had already written some songs which were arousing interest at Polygram records. They gave me money to make some demos, and this found me at the door of Trend Studios where I was introduced to the burgeoning session music scene that had grown around the showband business. Soon I was getting session work as a pianist, and I still recall the feeling of proud achievement when I got my first session cheque—£9 for three hours work plus £2 extra for portorage—although I certainly didn't carry in the piano... Long live the unions!

Gradually, I found myself being increasingly employed as a keyboard player on recordings, television and radio shows and in the theatre. Back in those days, RTÉ made many home-produced music and entertainment programmes and there was plenty of employment for freelance players like myself. I also picked up a variety of skills on the way, and I began to concentrate more and more on arranging and orchestration, beginning as a music copyist, and then writing for small ensembles and gradually for the full orchestra. I was in a kind of working university where the tutors were my more experienced colleagues and the exams were on a daily assessment basis—if you did well, you were rewarded with further employment. This led invariably to the field of record production and, skipping over many many late hours spent in recording studios, by the start of the 1980s I had arranged, orchestrated and produced a number of successful records, including a UK No.1—Johnny Logan singing Shay Healy's Eurovision winning, 'What's Another Year'.

By the late 1970s, I had also met and began to work with Dónal Lunny and Andy Irvine. Both of these men were very important to me. I think all three of us shared a common musical excitement and curiosity, but what *they* did that was most significant for *me* was to metaphorically usher me quietly into the back of the hall of traditional music. I loved the work that both of them were doing, felt a strong sense of personal connection to it, but was somewhat intimidated by the feeling that I was on the outside looking in, and needed an invitation and encouragement to pull up close to the fire. This encouragement came in spades,

and I will always remember with great fondness the early days of my induction into the Planxty family. Even now, when working on my own music, I recall the care and attention that was paid to the accompaniment of tunes, the shape of an arrangement, the dynamics surrounding the narrative of a song, and all of this underpinned by a glorious commitment to the joys of music-making and of course, to the craic!

At around this time, the most significant structural change of all occurred—a change that opened the global gates to Irish music. It took place in the somewhat unromantic environment of Dublin docks. The history of U2 has been rather well covered, so I don't propose to deal with it here, but rather to look at the extraordinary birth of Windmill Lane and the resulting shift in wind direction that was to change our perceptions of ourselves as musicians and our possibilities on the world stage.

Windmill Lane was the creation of three working film editors and a very busy sound engineer. James Morris, Russ Russell and Meirt Avis (the editors) and Brian Masterson (the engineer) pooled their energies and their vision and built a film and video-editing complex that also housed a state-of-the-art recording studio. But it wasn't just the building or facilities that made the difference. What began to emerge was a sense of a creative excitement that came out of a community of film-makers, editors, producers performers and musicians, all connected by some shared commitment to excellence and a suspicion that, if we really put our minds to it, there wasn't all that much that stood between us and a real chance to shine a global light on Irish talent. It is important to realise that that this spirit was truly alive at least fifteen years before the unfortunate expression the 'Celtic Tiger' was first coined in 1994.

And then there was U2 itself: 1980 saw the release of U2's first album *Boy*. The significance of this and the subsequent growth of U2's international fame had enormous impact at home. Firstly, it was recorded at Windmill Lane Studios. Secondly, and most importantly, U2 kept their entire operation at home in Ireland— in fact in the Windmill Lane complex. You will recall that I referred earlier to the habitual emigration that had afflicted many rock artists in Ireland. As soon as an artist got a chance, they decamped to the UK or elsewhere, and sourced all their management and career support from abroad. U2 reversed that tide. Paul McGuinness kept most of his management activities in Dublin, recruited and trained many young talented Irish people—a high percentage of whom were women—to run the band's career and found most of the tour support from a strong team of Irish (mostly Cork) sound engineers and tour technicians. This, at the time, was truly ground-breaking and the effect on the confidence of the Irish music industry was immeasurable.

Going back to my own journey, I have no doubt that this new confidence laid the groundwork for what was to emerge a decade later in Riverdance. To many people this explosive event seemed to happen on one night in 1994 at the Point Theatre in Dublin. To those of us involved in it, however, it represented a landmark along a road that we had been traveling for many years. I know that Michael Flatley and Jean Butler had been immersed in the Irish dance tradition of North America for years before Riverdance occurred and they brought the flair and confidence and skill to their performance that was essential to its success. For my own part, my work with Planxty; with theatre and dance at the Abbey's Yeat's Festival and elsewhere; with Bulgarian Music and Andy Irvine in the recording of *East Wind*; with flamenco in my orchestral work, *The Seville Suite*; with choral music in *The Spirit of Mayo*; all led to what was to become Riverdance. I even called it Riverdance to make the connection with *Timedance*, a piece I wrote with Dónal Lunny for RTÉ's 1981 Eurovision presentation.

I should say that despite all this confidence, I still had some difficulty raising the money to make the *Riverdance* record. The truth of the matter is that despite all the column inches that have been written about the finances of *Riverdance*, its primary intent was never commercial. When I first recorded the music prior to the original Eurovision presentation, I really wanted to release a single to mark the event and keep it alive. RTÉ weren't interested in the idea, so I approached several record companies but nobody would put up the money required to press and distribute the record. They said that at seven minutes it was too long, and anyway, instrumental music would never sell in any quantity. So I approached Church and General Insurance Company for whom I had done some music in the past (I was desperate). What I told them was that I needed £10,000 to put out a record and I asked if they would sponsor it.

And so, I found myself in the rather bizarre position of sending an early mix of *Riverdance* over to an insurance company so that they could listen to it and decide whether or not to give me the money. I will never forget the phonecall when it came—yes—they had heard it, they liked it, and were very happy to sponsor it. They were going to give me the money.

Now the significance of this was considerable. Nobody had expected the incredible reaction to the seven-minute dance piece on the night, presented simply as an interval piece in the Eurovision television presentation. The only thing we had to keep that moment alive was the record. Suddenly, it was being played off the air. Within a week it was a No.1 in the charts in Ireland and it remained at No.1 for eighteen weeks. A few weeks later it entered the British Top Ten, thanks to massive airplay in the UK led by Terry Wogan. I stress that none of this would have happened had we not got the record out in time for that first public performance. And none of that would have happened had Church and General not decided to take a short break from the risky world of insurance and briefly enter the far safer environment of the record industry!

So how does this all connect with the real subject of this talk—the globalisation of Irish music? To answer that I must return to something extra-musical, namely the cultural sea-change that occurred thanks to our new-found self confidence.

As in all events of this scale, the causes are often multi-factoral. The raw materials—U2 and other's creative and performance ability was undeniable. Undoubtedly the key players—U2 themselves, Paul McGuinness, the people at Windmill Lane—were all very inclined to make a bold statement out of an act of faith in their ability to compete with the best on the international music scene from a base in Ireland. And there was certainly a third factor, for which we have to look at a piece of legislation in the Section 195 of the Taxes Consolidation Act of 1977. In this piece of legislation the creator of 'a work or works generally recognised as having cultural or artistic merit', shall 'be entitled to have the profits or gains arising to him or her ... disregarded for the purposes of the Income Tax Acts'. This extraordinary measure had a number of effects. For the artists whose royalty cheques were often paltry sums it made a massive difference. And, artists who had achieved a measure of success abroad, were now encouraged to stay at home in Ireland. It was a simple measure. You didn't have to listen to complicated schemes by creative accountants whereby you could halve your tax liability if you bought a house in Guernsey, rented it to a Jersey company while living in Geneva. In effect it simply said, if you are an artist in Ireland you live tax-free. It was visionary in its intent: to nurture the emerging artists and encourage the successful ones to stay at home, and there is no doubt that it had this effect.

It also said something about how the arts were now viewed in this country and in what esteem they were held. In the post-Charlie Haughey Ireland, those of a certain class can chatter about what it *really* meant and what it *actually* achieved, but there is no denying that, far from keeping money from the Irish public purse, it served ultimately to create a lot of direct and indirect employment at home, to attract many visitors to the country and to inject a new energy and confidence into a music industry that, with few exceptions, was simply struggling to survive.

And so began the uplift that was to put some real energy into globalising Irish music. Over the following twenty years or so we were to witness the phenomenal success of U2, Enya, the Cranberries, the Chieftains, the Corrs, Sinead O'Connor, Daniel O'Donnell, *Riverdance*, Paul Brady, the Dubliners, Damien Rice, Damien Dempsey, Hothouse Flowers, Eleanor McEvoy, Christy Moore, Altan, Lúnasa, Lord, Spirit and Rhythm of the Dance as well as all the shows beginning with the word 'Celtic' – including the Tenors.

When I look back today both as a participant in and observer of this explosive appearance of Irish music on the world stage, I must admit that much of it was just as it might have appeared—exciting, gratifying to have been in the midst of it, sometimes depressing, sometimes uplifting but ultimately transforming. There is no doubt the picture is unrecognisable from what it was in the 1970s. I recall at that time trying to bring my songs to the attention of music publishers in London. I trudged around Soho, sitting in outer offices with my reel of tape in my hand, awaiting the pleasure of some now forgotten publisher. I contrast this grim scene with the post U2 world, when the Dublin pubs pulsed with hungry A&R men, trawling for the next Bono, and in the words of Joni Mitchell, 'stoking the star-maker machinery behind the popular song'.

I said at the top of this lecture that I would try to look at when, by how much, and to what effect this globalisation of Irish music occurred. And so I am inevitably led now to pose the question: what do we really mean by Irish Music? Or, to put it another way, what is it that characterises Irish music within a globalising or globalised world?

Roy Foster has a considerable reputation as a modern historian and as a noted biographer of W.B. Yeats. He has also taken on the role of a cultural commentator to judge by his most recent work, *Luck and the Irish*. While attempting to swat away the irritant midges of superciliousness that infest his writing, I have tried to reach to the core of what he is saying when he approaches the question of *music* in current popular culture. Of course I soon realised that he never approaches the question of music at all, so his perspective is purely as a socio-economic historical commentator who displays little insight about what actually goes on in either the creation or performance of music.

His real concern appears to be with the social phenomena that surround music, rather than the thing itself. To begin with, he asserts that music and the musical revolution in Ireland 'are inseparably linked with the marketing of Irishness'.² Then, believe it or not, he adds to this assertion with the bizarre claim that 'Bob Geldof dominates, as the late-twentieth-century icon who achieved global status by using his formidable abilities and influence to attack global issues'. So it would seem that the political or social posture of the performer is central to Professor Foster's appreciation of their musical worth. Elsewhere in his tendentious tone, he does give a slight nod to the impact of traditional music in defining Irish culture when he notes that :

Planxty and their imitators had established modes whereby Irish music could be defined for a new era, a period that also saw the infusion of a political element (usually Republicanism Lite).

Among many others, he neglects to mention artists like The Chieftains completely, and manages by some linguistic legerdemain to link *Riverdance* and the Pogues together as performers who purvey another 'mode' to 'repel modernity, divide consciousness (or suspend disbelief) in their listeners and conquer'. Nach fíor é sin?

So we can assume from the derisive (and indeed divisive) tone that infuses his writing about most Irish music of the late twentieth century, that when a performer's social or political analysis harmonises with his own *modes*, then Prof. Foster is happy enough with the music that accompanies it. I would be surprised if he had spent any time around traditional music or its more recent re-inventions and extrapolations, and I suspect that even if he has *listened* to some of it, he hasn't *heard* very much.

Far more illuminating and instructive is the Irish musician and academic folklorist, Prof Mick Moloney of New York University. In his essay 'Re-Imagining Irish Music and Dance', he asks the questions that I feel all of us are grappling with in some form or another:

What is really Irish about the disparate approaches to Irish music that are emerging in Ireland and in the Diaspora? What is Irish, for example, about music in the western classical style that is written in Ireland by Irish-born composers? ... What is Irish about the music of U2, for example, beyond the obvious fact that the band members are Irish-born? Have jazz or experimental music played in Ireland any real claim to being 'Irish'?³

Professor Moloney then goes on to question the meaning of 'Celtic'. He suggests it may have little resonance in the countries described as Celtic, even though it has potency in the US, where it has become 'synonymous with the mass marketing of cultural symbols, particularly Celtic music, as commodities to be bought and sold'.⁴

Then, he lands a fine punch to the solar plexus of those who like to engage in a form of cultural ageism in reverse, when he points out that:

There are many pervasive myths about Irish traditional music—the biggest of all being that it is very old ... the form, structure and style of the traditional music played today in fact comes from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of the repertoire is in fact post-Famine.⁵

He then puts the heart across many a bogus Irish-pub owner in Prague, Buenos Aires or Marbella when he writes that 'the pub session is of very recent origin, dating back probably no earlier than the early 1950s, beginning in London and New York'.⁶ In short, much of what is considered to be rooted in ancient antiquity is more properly viewed as fairly modern history. Thus, in this time of rapid cultural change, we would do well to exercise caution before imagining that we have any inside track or a definitive understanding of Irishness.

Like, I am sure, many of my fellow musicians, it has made me feel good as an Irishman when somebody approaches me after a performance of *Riverdance* and says that it made them proud to be Irish. It also pains me, I must admit, when some smart commentator lumps it together with its imitators and dismisses it—often without ever having sat through a show. Whether *Riverdance* is praised or panned, experience has shown me time and again, that the identification of any

piece of Art or Cultural Expression with any given perceived national characteristic or mood is fraught with all kinds of dangers. Rarely is it the intention of a composer or performer to evoke the responses that sometimes are attached to their work. Yes, the inclusion of instruments and forms associated with the Irish tradition will definitely put a strong Gaelic/Celtic stamp on the music. But then, in my own compositions, I have also incorporated other elements—principally because they excite my imagination and attract me as a musician—but also because I am living in a country and in a world where my formative influences ranged from jazz to rock to trad to classical, and ‘many’s the house besides’. In addition, my neighbours are these days as likely to be from Cracow or from Rio as they are from Cong or Cúl Aodh.

Speaking of Cúl Aodh, that great Irish musician and cultural catalyst, Seán Ó Riada, in his broadcasts on RTÉ for the 1962 radio series *Our Musical Heritage* said..

What of our traditions do, in fact, survive? Our way of life, and our customs, are being thrown out in favour of an alien materialism. Our hospitality, at least in the urban areas, is long-forgotten, a joke. Our language is made the excuse for cynical hypocrisy. Our literature is given over mainly to aping foreign models. Our nation, that was bought with blood, is being sold, spiritually, as well as physically, before our own eyes, by our own people. This is a great evil, a great madness. The strongest surviving tradition we have is our music. We must not let it go. And it is up to ourselves to keep it. We have too long been looking for help from elsewhere.⁷

I re-read that piece recently and felt like a man standing at a crossroads. Ahead of me, the unknown world of strange new idioms, and mixed cultural marriages, along with loss of identity, unfamiliar sounds and movements. I was nearly overwhelmed with the panic of artistic agoraphobia. There was a cold chill of truth about much of what Ó Riada wrote, and I wondered how Seán would feel today standing as we are on an island where the ballast of old certainties have been heaved overboard. We have somehow grown prosperous. There are now several significant new communities living among us. No sooner had Seán himself presented us with a musical idiom that seemed to honour our Gaelic past and settle us into the comfy chair of our nationhood, than we were being asked to stand up again and choose between being Bostonians or Berliners. And then the long-ailing Hound of Ulster was suddenly becalmed and began to nuzzle up against our newly domesticated Celtic Tiger. More problems of identity ahead. Flann O’Brien would have had ... a Field Day.

Ó Riada might be accused of favouritism when measuring music against the other arts, but he was right about our music tradition. We must not let it go. Not that there are any signs that it is immediately threatened, for despite (or because of) our globalising, there has never been such a strong interest in learning Irish music and dance, at home and abroad. The work of Comhaltas, the Irish Traditional Music Archive, and events like the Willie Clancy School at home and the many festivals in the US and elsewhere are essential to keeping our musicians linked to the core of the tradition. For my own part, despite the fact that I have never moved too far up the hall after my initial induction from Lunny and Irvine, I am content with my ‘liminality’ and my ‘narthecality’—the words Paul Muldoon uses to describe being somewhere near the edges. As the playwright Tom McIntyre says: ‘you can see more with a glimpse’.

So, as we all stand at the Global Crossroads, facing the uncertainty of a future that will resemble the past only insofar as *it* was very different from *it's* past, let us take heart from the absurd optimism of our great globalised pessimist, Samuel Beckett when he says: 'you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on'.⁸

NOTES

¹ RF Foster, *Luck and the Irish* (London: Allen Lane, 2007) pp

² Foster, pp

³ Mick Moloney, 'Re-Imagining Irish Music and Dance' in Andrew Higgins Wyndham (ed.) *Re-imagining Ireland* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2006) 124.

⁴ Moloney, 125.

⁵ Moloney, 126.

⁶ Moloney, 126.

⁷ Seán Ó Ríada, *Our Musical Heritage*, (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1982) 80.

⁸ Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Picador, 1979) 382.