

## “Fusions and Confusions”: Reflections on Intercultural Collaboration, Musical Hybridity, and the Intersubjective Nature of Reality

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*Abstract: Beginning with a curiosity about what “multiculturalism” might mean to me as a mono-musical performer, this paper describes a collaborative project undertaken with the intent of creating a musical hybrid. Casting myself in the roles of performer and facilitator, I recruited a classically trained composer and an Irish traditional musician to work toward the production of a performance that united elements of both musical worlds. Combining commentary from collaborators and commentators with personal observations, I consider the asymmetries and assumptions that marked our created “contact zone” and reflect upon what the hybridizing project reveals about the subjectivity of experience.*

*Résumé : En partant de la curiosité que j'éprouvais pour ce que pouvait signifier pour moi, en tant que praticienne d'un unique type de musique, le « multiculturalisme », cet article décrit un projet réalisé en collaboration dans l'intention de créer un hybride musical. Endossant moi-même les rôles d'interprète et d'animatrice, j'ai engagé un compositeur de formation classique et un musicien traditionnel irlandais pour travailler à la production d'une performance unissant des éléments des deux mondes musicaux. En combinant les commentaires des collaborateurs et des commentateurs avec des observations personnelles, j'examine les asymétries et les hypothèses qui ont marqué la « zone de contact » que nous avons créée et je propose des réflexions sur ce que ce projet de métissage révèle de la subjectivité de l'expérience.*

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Indeed, I cannot exist in everyday life without continually interacting and communicating with others. I know that my natural attitude to this world corresponds to the natural attitude of others, that they also comprehend the objectifications by which this world is ordered, that they also organize this world

around the “here and now” of their being in it and have projects for working in it. I also know, of course, that the others have a perspective on this common world that is not identical with mine. My “here” is their “there.” My “now” does not fully overlap with theirs. My projects differ from and may even conflict with theirs. All the same, I know that I live with them in a common world. (Berger and Luckmann 1966:23)

As an undergraduate student, I often felt that I was leading a double life: Academically I was pursuing studies in music education, but as one of the University’s only oboe players my focus was frequently on performing. In one life I was concerned with the implications of multicultural policy for music curriculum and pedagogy; in the other, with learning concertos and winning orchestral auditions. As time passed and I entered graduate school, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the apparent gulf in my understandings of musical and educational priorities. In an attempt to better comprehend the divide I was attempting to bridge, I sought out definitions of multiculturalism, but was confounded by the range of perspectives on the issue: it is an ideal praised for promoting tolerance and diversity; a set of policies adopted by certain multi-ethnic nations; and, as some critics note, a neo-liberal construct used to outline acceptable differences rather than challenge Western hegemony (e.g., Appiah 2006; Bannerji 2000; Bhabha 2007 [1994]; Butler 2008; Mackey 1999). I was even more confused when I considered that Canadians often toss off references to multiculturalism as if the word somehow defines our national consciousness. As a *Canadian* musician, then, shouldn’t I be as concerned about the implications of multiculturalism while learning to be an oboist and exploring curriculum documents? Reconciling my understandings of music and multiculturalism required action.

I decided to design a collaborative project that would cross cultural boundaries and bring me into musical and interpersonal dialogue with other traditions – something that my conservatory-style education had so far failed to do. To what extent are musical conventions able to adapt when forced to interact? Are collaborators satisfied that their traditions are respected throughout a process of creation and production? Can creative outcomes from a collaborative project respectfully represent multiple traditions? These were the formative questions that shaped my thinking and led me to conceptualize a study in which musicians from different traditions were brought together to create an intercultural performance. This project drew on my own experiences as a musician; personnel and resources from the Irish and classical music scenes in London, Ontario; and critical feedback from a group of four

individuals specializing in one or both of the musical traditions implicated in the collaboration.

When I first started thinking about this study, my focus was on the product – that is, the musical work to be produced – and how to evaluate outcomes objectively through the voices of experts. Ideally I was to be a facilitator and observer – not an influential actor. As the project progressed, the impossibility of my position rankled, but it was not until I began to write and reflect on my experiences that I realized that the story I wanted to tell was not about outcomes of an experiment, but about the discoveries and assumptions that shaped my approach to being a musician, commissioning agent, and naïve scholar. This paper, then, tells the story of my collaboration with a Western-style composer, Meghan Bunce, an Irish musician, Amy O’Neill, our performance of a recital, and my attempts to interpret outcomes in the aftermath of the project.

## Setting the Stage

In September 2007, I arrived at a trendy student coffee shop located along the main drag of Waterloo, Ontario. I was there to meet Meghan Bunce, a young composer just finishing her formal studies in composition, to discuss the possibility of recruiting her for my experiment in intercultural collaboration. At that time, Meghan was a stranger to me (a trusted friend and colleague had given Meghan the highest possible recommendation when she heard that I was looking to commission a piece of music). I was asking Meghan, as a composer who had been trained in the conservatory-style traditions of Western art music, to work with a colleague from London, Ontario, whose specialty was Irish traditional music. The purpose of this partnering was the creation of a composition for oboe and piano that was to be a dialogue between Western and Irish traditions – that is, music with the capacity to speak to both sides. As a specialist in both Irish and classical flute traditions and, at the time, a central figure in London’s music and teaching scene, Amy O’Neill was cast as Meghan’s foil in the project (I had met Amy the previous year at a gig, and it was with her guidance that I first approached learning about London’s Irish music scene). I played a mediating role, functioning as specialist when it came to matters specific to the oboe, but also drawing on my experiences of Western musical traditions, the Irish musical community in London where I’d been conducting fieldwork since September 2006, and fieldwork in Ireland commencing in 2008.

Conceptually, this project was not particularly innovative; other

musicians and composers have experimented with combining sounds from disparate origins with varying degrees of success (e.g., Avery 2010; Ouano 2006; Reilly 2011), and scholars from a range of disciplinary perspectives have analyzed “musical crossings” with considerable regularity (e.g., Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000; Brinner 2009; Diamond 2011; Fellezs 2011; Meintjes 1990; Stokes 1994; Taylor 1997, 2007). But using an old model served a purpose: it highlighted questions of process and emphasized the need for a space of contact in which cultural vulnerabilities could be broached. From that first coffee-tinged conversation with Meghan, I emphasized that this was more than a simple commission: this was to be a collaboration in which questions about creativity, communication, representation, and musicality could be explored with musicians who were open to discussing their motivations and concerns.

In narrating this first encounter between collaborators, the illusion and impossibility of my objectivity – the idea that I could act simply as a facilitator of conversations – becomes obvious. Anthropologist Ruth Behar identifies her role in fieldwork as that of a “vulnerable observer”: an ethnographer whose ways of knowing are informed by the “ineffable moments of intuition and epiphany” that arise from the overlap of her subjectivity with those of her informants (2003:23; see also Behar 1996). In describing her development as an anthropologist and ethnographer, she writes:

I wanted to keep searching for ways to evoke how intersubjectivity unfolds as a fundamental part of the representation of social reality. I wanted, most importantly, to discover the deep conjunctures that inform any effort to know the world beyond the self. For it was these conjunctures that could most fully reveal the process by which ethnographic knowledge is attained in the highly charged moments of our fieldwork encounters. (2003:23-24)

The positionality of the ethnographer, in other words, is central to the story I’m telling – the social reality being described. The influence of my position on our “contact zone” was constantly reinscribed by the ways in which I inserted my subjectivity as both researcher *and* performer into the collaborative mix (Pratt 2008 [1992]). In commissioning and eventually performing the piece of music that was the nexus of my study, I was doing more than simply delivering the music impartially to our audience; I was enmeshed among the series of signs that “contribute to” and “constitute” the meanings of the performance (Robinson 2010:10; see also Small 1998). My subjectivity, in other words, was part of the social reality being performed. This epiphanic realization of

intersubjective overlaps, to paraphrase Behar, enabled recognition of the naïveté that saw intercultural encounter as a simple process to stage and interpret.

I initially conceived of creating a musical hybrid – i.e., the product of previously separate genres, styles, and/or musical systems coming together – as a relatively straight-forward project in which elements of a “multicultural curriculum” could be incorporated into my training as a Western musician. The problem of hybridity, I soon discovered, is the multiplicity of meanings it codes and the baggage that it carries. The term’s original scientific usage – i.e., the unique outcome of the combination of distinct elements – is tied to nineteenth-century discourses on race and evolution, leading some commentators to question whether attempts to rehabilitate “hybrid” in recent linguistic and cultural theory (e.g., Bakhtin 1981; Bhabha 2007 [1994]) are effective or even desirable. In other words, are assumptions about racial and gendered hierarchies simply being recoded in discourses on culture without examining fundamental assumptions (Young 1994)? Despite this possibility, there is no doubt that these recent theorizations of cultural hybridity have been influential in their attempts to engage postmodern conditions and speak to the circumstances of postcolonial and subaltern subjects. Within the disciplines of musicology, ethnomusicology, popular music studies, and folklore, for example, hybridity has been the focus of extended debates on the nature of cultural production in postmodern and globalized contexts (e.g., Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000; Diamond 2007; Kapchan and Strong 1999; Slobin 2000 [1993]). The possibility of the hybrid utterance makes clear the doubleness of meanings available to varied subjects, and the “third spaces” that emerge from conditions of migration and transnationality emphasize the fluidity with which subjects construct their realities (Bakhtin 1981; Bhabha 2007 [1994]; Pietropaolo 2011; Young 1994).

While I am somewhat ambivalent about use of the “hybrid” label and its potentially racial implications,<sup>1</sup> the intentionality with which this project was staged makes its application unavoidable. For the purposes of this article, a musical hybrid should be understood as something in which traces of the originals persist, allowing the individual voices of artists and audiences to colour understandings of creative outcomes. Evaluation of the process through which such products arise, then, requires recognition of the unique negotiations, locations, and power dynamics at play throughout the collaboration. To this end, Mary Louise Pratt’s work on “contact zones” (2008 [1992]) and Marcia Herndon’s theorization of potential for change within music cultures (1987) provide useful tools for conceptualizing the variety of forces at work in situations of intercultural collaboration.

Contact zones – for my purposes, the meetings, rehearsals, and performances that were the contexts for our collaboration – are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt 2008 [1992]:7). And while these may be situations of cultural dynamism, the nature of traditions – that is, the ideologies that are at stake – function to make musics more or less resistant to change and/or hybridization (Herndon 1987). Asymmetries of power and ideologies interact creating possibilities for emergent hybrid utterances, or, more commonly, products that include elements of the combined traditions but that clearly remain within the commonly accepted parameters of existing styles.

### Hybridizing in Progress?

After our initial consultation, Meghan, Amy, and I embarked on our own hybridizing project. We spent the next several months at work: meeting to discuss possible directions for the composition, circulating scores and sound samples, and playing through preliminary versions of the work in progress. In early November 2006, for example, Meghan and Amy encountered each other face-to-face for the first time when we met to review some early sketches of the commissioned composition. We listened to midi files, played through early versions of the tunes Meghan had created, and attempted to balance Meghan and Amy’s ideas about the fundamental nature of the traditions we sought to represent. In the course of our negotiations, Amy commented that the work had the potential to sound Irish or classical depending on how the performer chose to mediate between the demands of Western and Irish performance practices.

Our discussion of ornamentation was particularly revealing of collaborative dynamics: Meghan suggested that ornaments should be fully notated as the average performer was unlikely to have the necessary knowledge of Irish idioms to improvise appropriately. Amy was inclined to think that this approach might be too limiting and instead suggested approaching the problem much as Telemann approached his *Methodical Sonatas*: providing the performer with a skeletal melody as well as a version that includes examples of ornamentation. In subsequent consultations, Western ideals dominated: while open to suggestions about anything from formal structures to rhythm, melody, ornamentation, orchestration, and texture, Meghan’s values as a trained Western composer revealed a desire to manage performance through precise notation.

The values that constitute a given music culture – i.e., how boundaries are policed and the qualities that are perceived to be essential to the integrity of a given tradition maintained – need to be taken into account in assessing the ways in which collaborators interact. Herndon suggests that the potential for change within music cultures relates to the status of improvisation within the culture (1987). In traditions in which there is emphasis on maintenance of recognizable patterns, as in the case of Western art music and Irish traditional music, “retention of particular sound combinations through time will be more emphasized than the process of producing patterned sound” (466). In other words, entrenched ideas about how the music should sound function to resist the capacity for exchange and mutability, and the cultural allegiances of the individual with authorial control have the potential to dominate the contact zone. In our case, Meghan was reluctant to surrender that control, reflecting her ideals as a composer working in the Western art music tradition.

The ways in which traditions deal with their musical Others influence negotiations of authorial control and maintenance of perceived musical integrity. John Corbett (2000), writing on orientalism in experimental composition, states:

It is assumed that the discoverer-composer, out on the open seas of aural possibility, surely will bring back ideas and practices from distant lands, perhaps ones that can enhance the quality of Western musical life. Musical experimentation becomes metaphorical microcolonialism. (166)

It’s perhaps an oversimplification to state that in the case of our collaboration Irish music became source material for a colonizing venture; Irish music culture has its own ideals and areas of resistance that influenced exchanges between the project collaborators and affected the potential for hybridization. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the medium in which the project was commissioned (i.e., notated music intended for performance on instruments that are not equally characteristic of both traditions) is a significant factor working against the possibility of any sort of equality in exchange.<sup>2</sup> In notating the music of a tradition with a prominent aural element – though, notably, another “non-improvisational system” in the sense described by Herndon (1987) – for performance by twenty-first-century classically trained musicians, the music of that tradition became fixed within the framework of Western “museum” culture, functionally resisting the mutability and micro-variation that are markers of the effective performance and transmission of Irish traditional music (Goehr 2007).

That's not to say that Irish traditional music or Western art music should be considered as simply either aural or literate: the reality is constant interaction and feedback between elements of the aural and literate throughout the process of transmission and maintenance of repertoires. Within the Irish tradition, for example, printed notation provides a fruitful means of preserving and transmitting repertoires of tunes. In the past, published collections of tunes provided common points of reference for musicians seeking to share and identify tunes. In more recent years, development of the "Tunepal" app for smartphones is indicative of the complexity of the relationship between the aural and the literate within Irish music culture, providing musicians with the means to instantly identify aurally received tunes and a notated version to aid transmission (Duggan [n.d.]). Realization of the tunes from these print/electronic versions requires extensive aural knowledge of the tradition so that ornamentation and other stylistic features omitted from notated collections may be appropriately incorporated. Amy's suggestion that Telemann's *Methodical Sonatas* be used as a model for our project acknowledges the complexity of the relationship between the aural and literate, and is perhaps suggestive of an attempt to find common ground between the implicated traditions and shift the balance of authorial control to be held jointly between composer and performer. While conceptually our project aspired to find this common ground, by separating the composer and performer roles I reinscribed the hierarchies of only one of the represented traditions in our created contact zone. Amy's suggested provision of a skeletal melody and accompanying freedoms for the performer carried less weight because she lacked a prescribed authorial role.

### Rehearsing Resistance?

By the time spring of 2008 rolled around, we were ready to take the next step in our collaboration: planning and rehearsing for a public performance. While our interactions to this point were revealing of the biases that performing resources pose to collaborative dynamics, the necessity of recruiting musicians and rehearsing served to further highlight the imbalances built into our project. Plans for the recital emphasized provision of a performative representation of our process and response to my questions about multiculturalism's implications for Western performing practices. The performance program was conceptualized in three parts: a classical set, an Irish set, and a hybrid set (i.e., Meghan's composition) (see Figure 1). Recruiting musicians for the first two parts of the performance was relatively straightforward: I regularly



<i>Program</i>	
Sonata for Oboe and Piano I. <i>Élégie</i> II. <i>Scherzo</i> III. <i>Déploration</i>	Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)
Celtic Set <i>Air: Si Beag, Si Mor</i>	Turlough O'Carolan (1670-1738)
<i>Jig: Scully Casey's</i>	John "Scully" Casey (d. 1921?)
<i>Reels: Paddy Fahey's #15</i>	Paddy Fahey (b. 1926)
<i>Maggie's Pancakes</i>	Stuart Morrison
Irish Inspired Suite for Oboe and Piano* I. <i>Single and Slip</i> II. <i>Air</i> III. <i>Reel</i> IV. <i>Finale</i>	Meghan Bunce (b. 1985)

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\* Premiere Performance

Figure 1: Fusions and Confusions Recital Program. The pieces selected for performance on the recital were intended to provide a performative expression of the collaborative process through inclusion of a standard Western sonata, an Irish tune set, and Meghan's "hybrid" sonata.

worked with a collaborative pianist in London and Amy was part of a trad band. The hybrid set, however, proved problematic.

The same classically trained pianist who worked with me to prepare a canonic work from the Western tradition also accompanied me for the performance of Meghan's piece. I recruited this pianist even though he lacked familiarity with Irish traditions because the technical demands of Meghan's score, combined with the fact that it was notated, meant that finding a pianist with knowledge of both Irish and Western art music conventions from within London's music community was an impossibility.<sup>3</sup> As an oboist, my problem was different in nature. While I have logged countless hours listening to concerts, sessions, dances, and other less formal articulations of Irish music in addition to having a rudimentary knowledge of Irish accordion playing, the oboe as an instrument is "resistant" to the idioms of the Irish style (Brinner 2009:220).<sup>4</sup> The mono-musicality of performers and the nature of the instruments involved, in other words, limited the potential for negotiating between the demands of Irish and Western performance practices.

Rehearsals, moreover, further emphasized problems with the division of authority between collaborators. Instead of being performers with knowledge of traditions and the authority to simultaneously interpret and compose, we were imperfect translators. Bi-musicality – the capacity to perform according to the conventions of both traditions – arises in relation to performer/composer authority in Micheál Ó Súilleabháin's work on hybrid moments in the history of traditional music. He states:

By mediation, I mean that middle voice which opens up a channel of communication between separate energies. In the case of music, I am referring to musicians who, through a mix of artistic talent, temperamental disposition and what some would call historical accident, find themselves in a position where their national accent speaks to opposite sides. Such figures are frequently involved in a musical fusion which can quickly become a musical confusion if things start to go wrong. (1998:17)

This statement pertains to, among others, the subject of Ó Súilleabháin's (1987) dissertation: Tommie Potts, an Irish fiddler who, depending on the commentator, was either a genius or a crackpot. These strong reactions are responses to Potts's integration of disparate influences into his performances of traditional repertoire. While the Western classical world tends to draw clear distinctions between composer and performer, such divisions are less strictly policed in other traditions, offering musicians the potential to draw

extemporaneously upon multiple traditions in a very fluid and naturalized way. In other words, musician identity – that is, mono- or bi-musical, performer and/or composer – has important implications for the ability of the created music to speak fluently and with doubleness.

### Performing Interculturally?

On a Sunday afternoon in May 2009 we presented our ideas, music, and interactions to an audience of friends and colleagues drawn from London's classical and Irish music scenes. The performance began with Francis Poulenc's *Sonata for Oboe and Piano* (1962), which was selected to represent Western traditions. Dedicated to the memory of Sergei Prokofieff and laden with quotations from such composers as Alban Berg, Igor Stravinsky, and Poulenc himself, Poulenc's *Sonata* is part of the core repertoire for oboe and piano, and brings together many recognizable elements of the art music tradition through manipulation of formal conventions and its large-scale structural coherence. After the *Sonata*, there was a quick switch of staging and musicians for the performance of a set of traditional tunes played on flute, fiddle, and guitar. The trio began with *Sí Beag, Sí Mór*, a well-known Irish air attributed to the eighteenth-century blind harper, Turlough Carolan.<sup>5</sup> The air was followed by *Scully Casey's Jig*, *Frank's Reel* and *Maggie's Pancakes*. Generally speaking, a typical Irish set of tunes consists of three tunes all of the same type (i.e., a set of jigs, a set of reels, a set of polkas, etc.). In cases in which tune types are combined the set tends to begin with a solo air followed by a dance tune – usually a jig or a reel. While the atypical progression of tunes performed for the recital did follow this latter convention to a degree – beginning with a slow air and ending with a fast-paced reel – the decision to progress from air to jig to reel was somewhat unusual. I had asked the musicians to feature some of the different forms that were incorporated into Meghan's piece as a means of introducing audience members to the general stylistic features of Irish music; this extended set was their solution to that request.

The concert culminated with the premiere of Meghan's *Irish Inspired Suite for Oboe and Piano* (2008). Meghan's piece was written in four movements: a jig (fast 6/8), an air (free metre), a reel (fast quadruple), and a finale that combined elements of hornpipe (quadruple metre with "swung" eighths) and jig forms. In the program notes for the recital, Meghan described how she attempted to balance and mediate the demands of Irish and Western traditions:

When approaching the composition, I felt it was very important to maintain use of traditional modes and rhythm patterns common to each form. The element most distinctly associated with Western concert music was structure and development. For a concert-going audience, which would remain seated, I wanted to convey a concert music tradition by ensuring enough variety in the musical material to maintain the audience's attention. Some of the forms I have used are traditionally used to accompany dance. Here in the concert hall, the music's journey becomes the focus.

I expanded the harmonic language a bit. However, I was careful to remain in a diatonic world. Some wonderful sonorities occur that we are not accustomed to hearing in concert music. These different colours at times liken the suite to jazz. The lowered seventh of the mixolydian mode along with the swung feel of quarter eighth combinations found in jigs caused the first movement to feel very jazz-like at times. The chords used in the *Air* are very rich, extended chords that do not behave as a Western classical tradition might dictate, but represent the colours of the mode. (Bunce 2008)

The compositional process, in other words, involved creating stylized dance movements ordered according to classical conventions (i.e., in Irish practices the *air* would be the first piece performed) that exploited the range and textural possibilities of the instruments and the potential for harmonic and large-scale structural expansion and variation available to composers trained in Western traditions.

Meghan's commentary highlights a major distinction between the focus of Western and Irish performance and compositional practices. I asked Jackie Small, a button accordion player who has qualifications as an ethnomusicologist and who works as an archivist for the Irish Traditional Music Archive in Dublin, Ireland, to provide feedback on a recording of the recital. His comments drew attention to the "macro" versus "micro" approach to variation embraced by the implicated traditions; "micro-elements," in his definition, are specifically associated with the Irish tradition and the counterpart to the macro-scale variations (e.g., large-scale formal and harmonic expansion) that occur in classical forms:

Instrumental music in the Irish tradition usually has rigid forms based on dance forms or on the structure of traditional song. Thus,

in traditional music, listeners do not have to think about forms – the standard forms are predictable and taken for granted. The interest of a performance, then, lies not in interesting variations on forms or structures but in micro-elements [i.e. rhythmic and/or melodic variation; “ornamentation” in traditional style; variations in tone colour (though this is rare, and is to be found only in the very best players); and so on]. (Personal communication, 30 September 2008)

Meghan’s composition relies almost exclusively on variation at the macro level; rather than repetition with the purpose of exploring the colouristic possibilities of a simple form, the traditional dances most emblematic of Irish instrumental music are replaced with classical structures.

The focus on micro- and macro-scale variation, Jackie went on to suggest, is related to performance context (a point Meghan raised in her program notes). He commented that the structure of Meghan’s composition – that is, created for silent and contemplative listening that enables audiences to have some level of awareness of the variations that occur over an extended temporal period – relates to expectations for performance context. Those expectations, in his view, are the strongest indicator of the piece’s resistance to hybridization:

This piece is consciously designed to be performed before a silent, attentive, and respectful audience whose aesthetic is that of classical music. This places the music in a formal context and atmosphere that is vastly different from the informal settings (e.g., dancing events, pub sessions, etc.) that traditional music often takes place in. This setting has the advantage that music is validated and valued as being suited to a listening audience. (Personal communication, 30 September 2008)

Jackie’s point is made particularly clear if we compare concert settings for Western art and Irish traditional music performances. Classical concerts tend to take place in closed performance halls with signs on the doors requesting that cell phones and pagers be turned off and that audience members avoid entering while the music is in progress. If refreshments are available, they are purchased when the music is not being performed (e.g., at intermission) and audiences are frequently forbidden from taking food or drink into the performance hall. While concerts of traditional music (which are not to be confused with pub sessions or other less formal performance settings) can be

found in the formal setting of a major concert hall, often smaller and more intimate venues such as community centres and pubs are preferred. And while there certainly are ritualized customs governing performance etiquette, these tend to place less emphasis on absolute silence and contemplative listening. In other words, the approach to listening and performance prefers micro-variation of predictable structures to large-scale formal expansion.

Set in a classroom that doubles as a performing space at the Don Wright Faculty of Music, the performance venue for our recital was less formal than might be found in a concert hall but nevertheless maintained the traditional Western convention of a seated audience facing a central performing space. Efforts were made through lighting (mid-afternoon sunlight available through the bank of windows that runs along the side of the classroom avoided the division of space that would have otherwise been suggested by spotlighting the performers and leaving the audience in darkness), conversation with the audience, and positioning of performers within the room to minimize perceptions of a “fourth wall” division between participants in the event. Despite lacking the formality of a concert hall, our venue nevertheless supported assumptions about performance practices that implicated musical structure and understandings of musical ownership.

### Critical Reception

After the recital ended, audience members milled about chatting to performers and offering opinions about what they heard. As I was occupied with the technicalities of staging the performance and concerned about how my role as a performer would influence the ways in which listeners stated their opinions, a friend circulated in the crowd polling reactions to the performance. While audience members were positive about the recital and Meghan’s piece as a whole, some were inclined to suggest that certain parts of her composition were more successful than others in approaching the hybrid goal. One of the founding members of the London Irish Folk Club, for example, commented that the second movement of the suite (the Air), had the “kind of haunting feeling to it that you get in a lot of the Irish” (Rosella Cox interviewed by K. Veblen, 24 May 2008).

After reviewing the results of this initial polling, I discovered that many of the non-specialists in the audience were reluctant to provide any sort of critical commentary. As I was concerned about the nature of my role in this experiment and its assessment, I decided I needed the assistance of additional opinions. To this end I sought out individuals of varied expertise who were

willing and able to speak critically about musical processes. I thought carefully about how to create balance in my sampling and eventually contacted four individuals for their feedback: Jackie Small, Amy O'Neill, Mary Ashton, and Ian Franklin. Ranging in age from approximately 30 to 60 years, my sample included two crossover musicians and two specialists; two men and two women; and a balanced representation of individuals who were present for the actual performance with those who bore witness via recordings. All four have training as musicians, teachers, and/or musicologists. And all of the informants reported that they enjoyed both classical and Celtic<sup>6</sup> genres though did not necessarily have a working knowledge of both traditions. I specifically avoided informants who professed a strong preference or a dislike of either genre as I wanted feedback from individuals open to the idea of intercultural communication and creation, rather than respondents who were more interested – whether consciously or not – in symbolic boundary maintenance.

Mary Ashton, a classically trained violinist and music teacher who crossed over to become a Celtic and Middle-Eastern fiddler/violinist, picked up on the sentiment that some parts of the performance were more successful in approaching the hybrid goal than others. She stated, “The Air I thought came closest when Beckie was playing solo; I don’t know if the piano has a hard time crossing [over]” (interviewed by K. Veblen, 24 May 2008). Despite this moment of mixed “success,” she, like Jackie, identified resistance to hybridization in the performance. The primary challenge, in her opinion, was ability of individual performers to cross between styles – that is, to “feel” the music (interview, 26 June 2008). In fact, the common theme that ran through commentary provided by Jackie, Mary, Amy, and Ian was resistance to hybridization. Though there was clarity in the attempt to cross between and speak to both sides, on a musical level the basic conclusion was that Meghan’s composition, ultimately, was “definitely [a] ‘classical’” piece (Jackie Small, personal communication, 30 September 2008).

One possible explanation for this asymmetry is provided by Timothy Taylor (2007). In his study of systems of Western domination and representation of cultural Others, Taylor hypothesizes the establishment of tonality as a response to colonialism. As European explorers began crossing oceans and “discovering” new lands and people, a drastic re-imagining of space became necessary. Cartography was transformed from symbolic representations suitable only for philosophical contemplation to a practical endeavour that attempted the realistic depiction of spatial relationships between Europe (i.e., the centre) and the rest of the world (i.e., the margins). Europeans increasingly came to identify selfhood in terms of these relationships; instead of simply being, selfhood was determined in relation to the non-Western Others who

occupied the margins. Tonality, as a system that relies on the establishment of a central key area through which related key areas may be explored, “facilitated a concept of spatialization in music that provided for centers and margins, both geographically and psychologically” (26), and was thus an ideal system for symbolically representing changing conceptions of “selfhood against nonwestern Others” (17).

If the basis of Western musical systems is an identification of the self against the Other, then it follows that attempts to cross boundaries are apt to be riddled with challenges. Incorporation of the Other into Western art music, instead of the creation of something novel, simply results in an expansion of musical language within an indisputably Western context. Ian Franklin, the principal oboist for Orchestra London Canada and a lecturer at the University of Western Ontario, emphasized this point in his comments about use of folk idioms in Western art music:

There are so many examples within Western classical music where it’s not pure absolute music. It is drawing on cultural references and some of those are folk idioms. For example...it seems to me the music of Mozart is quite nationalistic in a way, if you listen to it in a certain way. It’s extremely Austrian sounding, but I think it has become kind of like the basis of what we think of as classical music. There’s a tendency to listen to Mozart and not realize exactly how Austrian it is. It draws on the Ländler for example, and there are so many other examples in classical music that are so much more obvious. Brahms was imitating Hungarian music and Dvořák of course was going to his own Czechoslovakian roots, and countless other examples, I mean Beethoven, Sibelius...So that even in the music that we tend not to think of as being eclectic, it all is really. And with the Poulenc Sonata, which you chose for your recital, you acknowledged the fact that he quotes from Stravinsky for example and from himself, but another interesting aspect of that music is that you can hear the influence of French cabaret music in it. So is any music really pure in the sense of being absolutely abstract? Probably not. (Interview, 1 October 2008)

Based on these comments it’s possible to conclude that if Western art music constantly adopts Other idioms into a Western structural framework – Corbett’s “metaphorical microcolonialism” (2000) – potential for equitable exchange and creation of new musical meanings is unlikely.



This, of course, is only part of the story. Irish traditional music, in its own way, is equally resistant to hybridization – particularly in relation to Western art music traditions. Western traditions innovate by absorbing diverse influences, effectively recontextualizing Other sounds into a legitimized framework. Similarly, while Irish traditional music may have emerged from the confluence of diverse indigenous and continental influences, the integrity of Irish traditional music in the present is policed through active discourses on the nature of tradition and what properly belongs. Ideology, regardless of formal articulation, is central to performance practice. Jackie Small points out that “classical” music has had definite class associations in Ireland that continue to this day. It is considered the music of the “propertied and professional classes” whereas traditional music, until relatively recently, was considered an inferior, low-brow form of entertainment (personal communication, 30 September 2008). “Ownership” of musical genres is of extreme significance – particularly when one considers the long history of colonial occupation and sectarian violence in Ireland. Traditional music is perceived as possessing ties to the Republican cause and the creation of national identity in modern Irish history (Moore 2003; White 1998). Resistance to exchange, in this context, potentially signals reluctance to be subsumed into a musical language associated with an historic oppressor.

This articulation of potential for resistance within Irish music culture is perhaps a tangential (and overly simplistic) element of my story, particularly given the imbalances that privileged Western performing contexts throughout the collaboration. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the dynamism of the contact zone cannot be fully understood in terms of a colonizing relationship. Varied points of resistance, the voices of the individuals who choose to converse through their respective musics, the nuances of negotiation that occur in intercultural contexts, and the possibility of doubleness in hybrid statements are all factors that need to be taken into account.

## Reflections

From an initial naïve impression that creating a musical hybrid would provide a straightforward means for exploring my questions about the relevance of multicultural policy to my experiences as a classically trained Western performer, I have come to better appreciate the complexity of the issues at stake when disparate musics and musicians are brought into contact. Contact zones are dynamic and laden with asymmetrical relations of power, and, as Herndon’s model for musical change suggests (1987), certain musical

traditions may be more resistant to change (and hybridization) than others. The ideologies and assumptions that shape musics and subjectivities become points of resistance – and even outright obstacles – to hybridization.

In my role as commissioning agent for this project, my assumptions about the nature of music, composition, and performance created significant obstacles to the goals I initially outlined to my collaborators: I chose the instruments – oboe and piano – for which the suite was written without considering that both instruments are more closely tied to Western traditions than to Irish. Two instruments from a single tradition precluded the opportunity for a musical working out of differences that inclusion of an Irish instrument (and musician) with its idiomatic musical language might have afforded. This choice similarly limited the potential for musicians to be bi-musical and thus have the ability to balance the demands of each tradition – to speak to both sides. Performance context, though informal, was still indisputably Western, which in turn influenced decisions about which formal conventions should be followed. Finally, my bias as a classically trained Western musician resulted in a division of roles between collaborators that privileged Western traditions: performer and composer were cast as separate characters and the Irish voice was marginalized.

So what is the point of all this reflection on points of resistance and the challenge of subjectivity? Why should we, as musicians and scholars, concern ourselves with hybridity, intercultural processes, multiculturalism, or any other concept relating to cultural plurality if our assumptions have the potential to sabotage intentions? Appiah (2006) suggests a possible response:

I am urging that we should learn about people in other places, take an interest in their civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that will bring us to agreement, but because it will help us get used to one another. If that is the aim, then the fact that we have all these opportunities for disagreement about values need not put us off. Understanding one another may be hard; it can certainly be interesting. But it doesn't require that we come to agreement. (78)

In reading this statement I am once again reminded of Berger and Luckmann's (1966) description of the intersubjective nature of reality: "My 'here' is their 'there.' My 'now' does not fully overlap with theirs. My projects differ from and may even conflict with theirs. All the same, I know that I live with them in a common world" (23). I brought many assumptions to this project about how musical systems are structured, and intensive contact inspired me to interrogate

them. I became more aware of the subjective nature of my knowledge – that my priorities were different from those of my collaborators. And that, perhaps, is the point: it is the processes, the conversations, the compromises, the mistakes, and the accommodations that are happening between people, between cultures, and within contact zones that have the potential to reveal the importance, the meanings, and the power of the hybridizing process. 🍀

## Notes

This project was supported through funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1. In my more recent work on radio broadcasts of intercultural music-making, I've been inclined to emphasize terms such as "fusion," "collaboration," and "mixture," as they seem to be more meaningful for musicians and producers than "hybrid." In his analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian music scene, Brinner (2009) makes a similar observation. He opts for the term "fusion," in spite of its apparent commercial connotations for many musicians, because of its apparent resonance for the subjects of his study. "Fusion," as well, emphasizes the dynamism of encounter in a way that "hybridity" may omit (215-16).

2. Alterations to the scales used by and tuning practices of traditional musicians, methods of transmission, and even the development of a graded conservatory system of study for students may be attributable, at least in part, to the influence of Western art music on Irish traditions. Because the scope of this study is a specific experiment that was, ultimately, rooted in Western performance contexts, these long term "hybridizations" in the performance practices and dissemination of Irish traditional music cannot be addressed here.

3. My inability to find a pianist with knowledge of both musical traditions within the local community is a detail that in itself is telling of the disparities between musical worlds. Musical conventions differ to the degree that the way in which individuals are able to learn a piece of music has the potential to affect a performance. More simply, notation, or its absence, is a big deal.

4. As an oboist with a deep interest in and love of Irish music, I've often contemplated this resistance. Though there are notable similarities between the uilleann pipes and baroque/classical versions of the oboe, the modern oboe has a lack of flexibility in pitching, and its incisiveness in tone and projection puts it at odds with the wind instruments of the Irish tradition. These issues relate, at least in part, to the extensive key work, an almost complete lack of open holes, and the nature of the undercutting of tone holes on the modern oboe.

5. Carolan likely adapted an earlier song melody to suit the lyrics that he wrote for *Sí Beag, Sí Mór*.

6. While more a marketing term than specific genre, the term "Celtic" is

useful in the context of the diasporic community centred in London, Ontario. The musical practices of the group are not purely Irish or Scottish or Breton. Rather, “Celtic” music in this context comprises Irish, Scottish, Breton, French Canadian, Ottawa Valley, East Coast, and even, at times, Bluegrass and Old Time influences. Moreover, performers in the local community (who provided much of the necessary background for this study) will often describe the genre of music that they perform as “Celtic” while applying a more specific label (i.e., Irish, etc.) to certain tunes.

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