

OUT OF TUNE WITH REALITY : MUSIC AND THE
SCHOOL IN IRELAND

Micheál Ó Súilleabháin

In boarding schools in Victorian Britain, musicianship in a young gentleman was regarded as dangerous, freakish, effeminate and conducive to immorality.¹ Such beliefs die hard, and my own experience during an Irish provincial town schooling certainly bears this out. I created local history not only by breaking through the block of silence which the school imposed on all creative sound through my discovery that music, of all things, was actually an examination subject in the Leaving Certificate: but also by insisting on entering this examination with the help of an outside teacher. That was in 1969, and I was the first in the school's history to have sat an official music examination.

Having graduated from University College Cork in 1973, I returned to that same town as a music teacher within the vocational education system. The first indication I got that the idea upon which school music is based was "out of tune" came during the final class which I gave to first-year girls. It was the end of my first year as a music teacher, and having spent that year introducing Mozart and Stravinsky, along with the usual dose of music notation to my reluctant students, I had decided that this class should be turned back on itself in the form of invitations to entertain with song and story. Things were proceeding as expected until a set of twins in the first row were eagerly called upon to sing by their classmates. I might mention in passing that their surname was Fortune and that they were affectionately known to all as The Miss Fortunes! But their singing was neither misfortunate nor unfortunate.

I immediately recognised the vocal timbre as that of a certain form of contemporary pop music: what in musicological terms I was later to discover was called 'Afro-American'. The clean-cut impeccably performed ornamentation would, I knew, be beyond the capability of an average-schooled classical musician. There was a sensitivity to intonation which showed itself in the use of microtones and glissandi. My own feeling of being let down can only have been matched by the feeling of alienation which these students must have experienced in the face of my doctrinaire patronising approach. Since then I have increasingly come to the realisation that no child enters school without already possessing a music (often latent) of his or her own to a greater or lesser extent; that music is essentially acquired in the same way as language; that the function of the school in the area of music should be to allow the student to express himself creatively within his own mode of music and, most importantly, to introduce the student to at least one music mode other than the one he naturally espouses.

From a musical point of view, the prime concern in education would seem to be the acquisition of competence in one's own music, the tradition inherited, cultivated, and transmitted by the members of the socio-cultural continuum into which one has been born, just as, from a linguistic point of view, the prime concern is acquisition of competence in one's own language. 2

But there are two factors which must be taken into consideration here: firstly, that one mode of music more than any other has historical associations with the concept of school as we know it in the Western world (I am speaking of the place of European art music within the school, and the traditional belief that it is the only music really worthy of study); and secondly, I strongly believe that our knowledge of the nature of music itself,

in the widest sense, is over a century behind that of our understanding of language and its processes. We in Ireland suffer more than any other Western European nation from this lack of knowledge because of our dual inheritance of a thriving native musical tradition as well as of a European one. On top of all that, the exciting but complex issue of popular music in its many forms appears to make an already challenging position impossible. The challenge facing Ireland in the field of music education is such that if we succeed in reconciling the opposing forces in our musical life, we will have hit upon a formula which may well prove to have an international significance.

In musical terms, contemporary Ireland is the envy of Europe. Our hesitancy in contributing to the wider European musical art tradition is more than compensated for by our thriving traditional music. Yet, for many of us this is not enough. Our imperial/eurocentric music educational system propagates the view that Ireland is musically uncivilised as evidenced by our lack of a composers' gallery of the past. The fact that the few provincial names that we call on come from Anglo-Irish ranks only serves as a further embarrassment. The second level student opens his music-history book (often the Irish schoolbook industry's rehash of an outdated British colonial educational viewpoint) to be confronted with French, German, Italian, British and even Anglo-Irish names, but the great embarrassed silence is observed on the question of the musicality of the Gael. While the courts of Europe were patronising music of a most literate kind, the native Gaelic courts (with their rural base) were patronising musicians who were "illiterate" (sic). And here we come face to face with the myth of musical literacy, where the validity of non-literacy is neither explained nor understood. Why is this? Because in Ireland to be universal can mean to aspire to a wider British viewpoint. Those who

recognise this as provincialism aspire towards a European context, and linguistically this is more than sufficient. But musically, we must go further to embrace the globe if we are to spark the necessary fire of self-knowledge. To Irish ears, a first meeting with Javanese Gamelan, Japanese Gagaku, Gambian Kora or Hindustani Raga can be like a shower of cold water, or like the completion of an electrical circuit. Everything, including Mozart, falls into place relative to an Irish perspective - or to put it another way, Ireland finds its place in a world musical cosmology.

But apart from this tripartite British/European/global approach, there is a fourth possible musico-cultural ideology - that of the introspective inward journey which comes unstuck and results in the putting of nation before human creativity. This is provincialism of a different kind. Now the time is ripe in Irish musical education for co-operation of an unprecedented nature: for a casting-aside of a restrictive nationalistic approach on the one hand, and of a dated elitist musical ideology based on a worthless myth of high culture on the other.

Let me put it in plain terms: how many advocates of traditional music will stand up for the right of a young Irish student to specialise in, for example, Italian baroque music, or the music of the Spanish renaissance? In such a way do we betray our provincialism. Or how many advocates of European art music in Ireland will defend the right of an Irish student to specialise in uilleann piping for its own sake - not just because it is clean Irish entertainment, even if it is not real music. In such a way do we betray our cultural self-contempt.

There have been many indications over the past decade that music within the school was in trouble - perhaps the earliest one which dealt with the matter effectively

was Robert W. Witkin's book The Intelligence of Feeling published in 1974. It is an extensive study of some thirty-six secondary schools in London, Bristol, Cambridge and the south-west of England in which English, drama, art and music were looked at; music was identified as being the subject in the greatest difficulties.

Of all the arts that we have looked at in schools, music is apparently in the greatest difficulties. Despite a long and in places, impressive tradition, it repeatedly fails to obtain a general hold on the musical development of the majority of pupils and is considered by many pupils to be irrelevant to anything that really concerns them. Achievements with choirs and orchestras made up of the "musical minority" brighten the scene here and there, providing sustenance and balm for the class-weary teacher. However, this gratification is relatively short-lived, and the teacher must sooner or later face the fact that in all probability he has not found the secret of making music a fulfilling experience for other than the "musically inclined" minority of the pupils. Everything seems to conspire to make the situation of the music teacher as difficult as it can be. He is balked by prejudice on the part of both staff and pupils alike. He is inadequately resourced and must continually listen to complaints about noise but, perhaps most serious of all, his training does not usually equip him to deal with music for classes in an effective way nor does it encourage him to exploit the wide variety of possibilities for music making already developed in avant-garde centres, for use in schools. The music teacher is often condemned to work out his existence in the secondary school as the martinet on the other side of the music stand, hiding his own sensitivity to protect it from further abuse and thrusting the rudiments down reluctant throats. He does his duty grimly like a soldier in an unpopular war, "the unwilling doing the unnecessary for the ungrateful". Often he loves music too much to be happy about it. 3

So much for the teacher's position; what of the pupils? Some five thousand pupils of all ages in six of the secondary schools selected by the researchers for intensive study were asked to construct their own

hypothetical curriculum in a controlled test. Music turns out at the bottom of the pile. An average of 78% of the pupils do not devote even one of their school periods to it, while drama, art and English turn up somewhere in the middle of the list:

Music is on the whole rejected by the majority of pupils in secondary schools and is in any case poorly provided for within the curriculum. The pupils' evaluations reveal it to be in a very poor position in relation to Art and Drama. It is not that they regard it as an academic subject but rather as one which, in their terms, is a failed art subject. They feel on the whole that it encourages participation and self-expression strictly on its own terms and of a kind which does not engage them. 4

There were two notable exceptions to the other schools in Witkin's survey. The music departments in these appeared to adopt what on the surface seemed to be opposite approaches - in the one case what might be termed a modern, free, creative approach; and in the other, an approach more traditional in style but with the difference that the teacher had found a balance between her own strong ideas about music and her complete tolerance of the right of the pupils to different musical tastes, if such were the case. Both approaches are, of course, strongly pupil-centred: the latter approach succeeded in raising music from the bottom choice to the third from the top in the pupils' chosen curriculum, following only vocational crafts and physical education.

If the answer then lies in the ability of the music teacher to link his/her educational policy to the reality of the pupils' socio-musical life, what kind of a challenge is to be faced? My own interest in the diversity of contemporary musical expression in Ireland led me to attempt a socio-historical analysis of music in Ireland over the past three to four hundred years. The study is

in the nature of an overview, and the results are available in the forthcoming issue of the United Kingdom Journal of the International Council for Traditional Music. Entitled "Music in Ireland since 1600 : a Typological Model", it makes use of some diagrams to illustrate the points being made, and these are reproduced here⁵ (Figures 1 - 4).

For all of this complexity, however, the overall situation can be seen to revert to the three main headings of European art music, Irish traditional music and popular music in its many forms (including, as already shown, popular forms of both the European art tradition, as well as of the Irish native tradition).

The art-music establishment, of course, still organises its affairs in such a way as to betray its continuing belief that popular music is sub-human while traditional/folk music is sub-literary. A German musicologist, Peter Wicke, quotes one current view as stating:

. . . the continual background noise of pop and beat music around us . . . (is) neither able nor willing to enhance and enrich human relationships, the common life or the enjoyment of the individual.

Wicke goes on to comment on this statement:

The reasons for such scepticism lie in conservative attitudes and an idealist concept of culture. Against the background of a generalised concept of music based solely on what has traditionally . . . been identified as "art" or "serious" music . . . large parts of musical reality are necessarily seen as marginal in significance: as commercial deformations of art, on the one hand, and as folkloric forms anticipatory of art, on the other. 6

Now where does the "Music and Musicianship Curriculum" for Irish schools stand in the face of all of this? In

FIGURE 1 Music in Ireland since 1600 - basic version showing Model 1 (17th/18th centuries); Model 2 (18th/19th centuries); Model 3 (20th century)

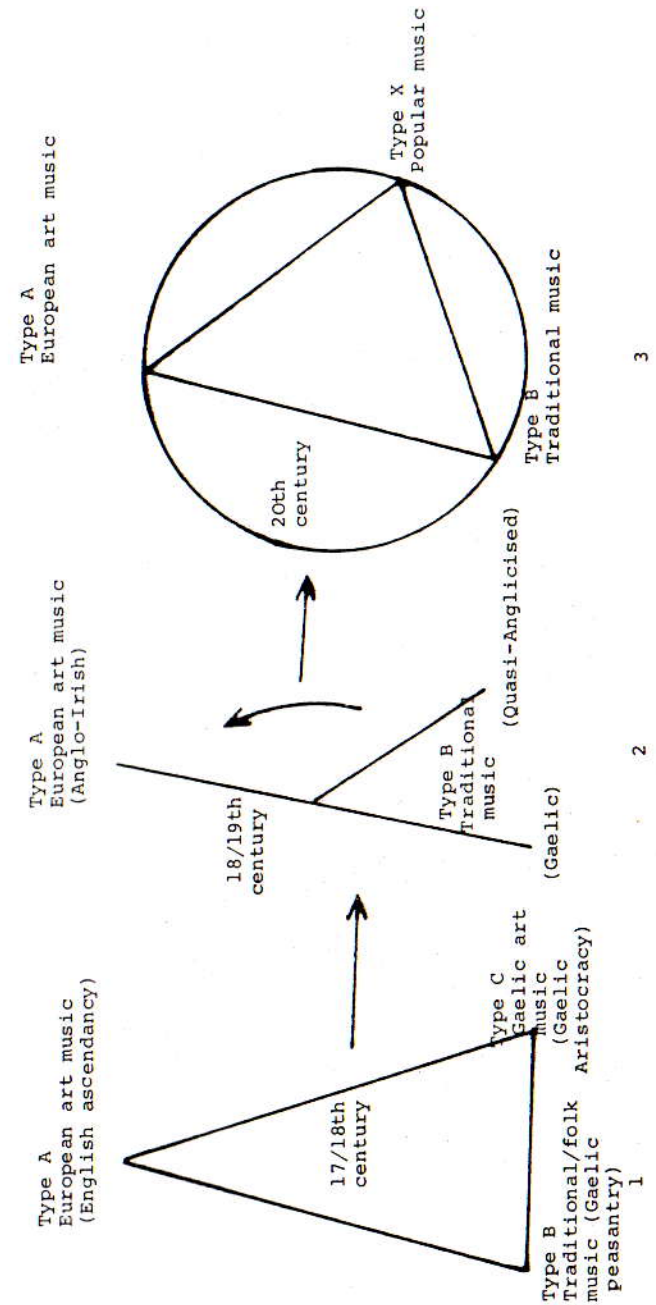


FIGURE 2 Some music varieties in 20th century Ireland - Model 1A

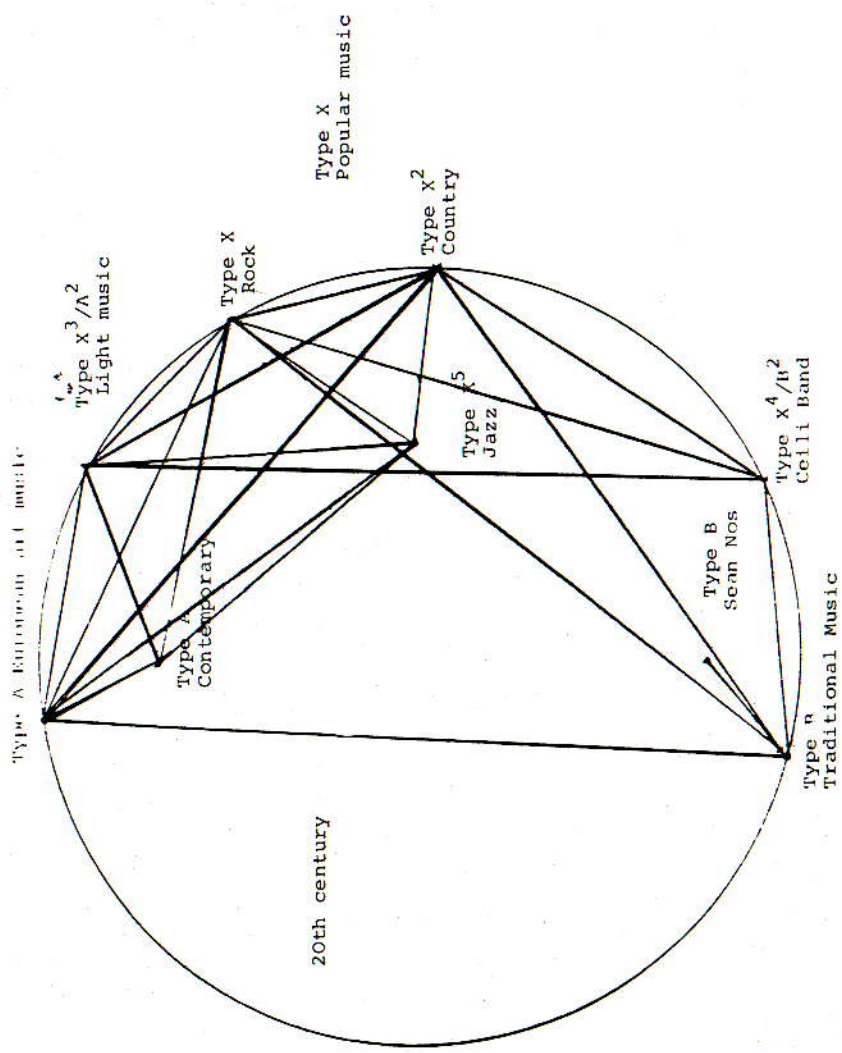


FIGURE 3 The concept of musical centre 1 - 20th century, Model 3B

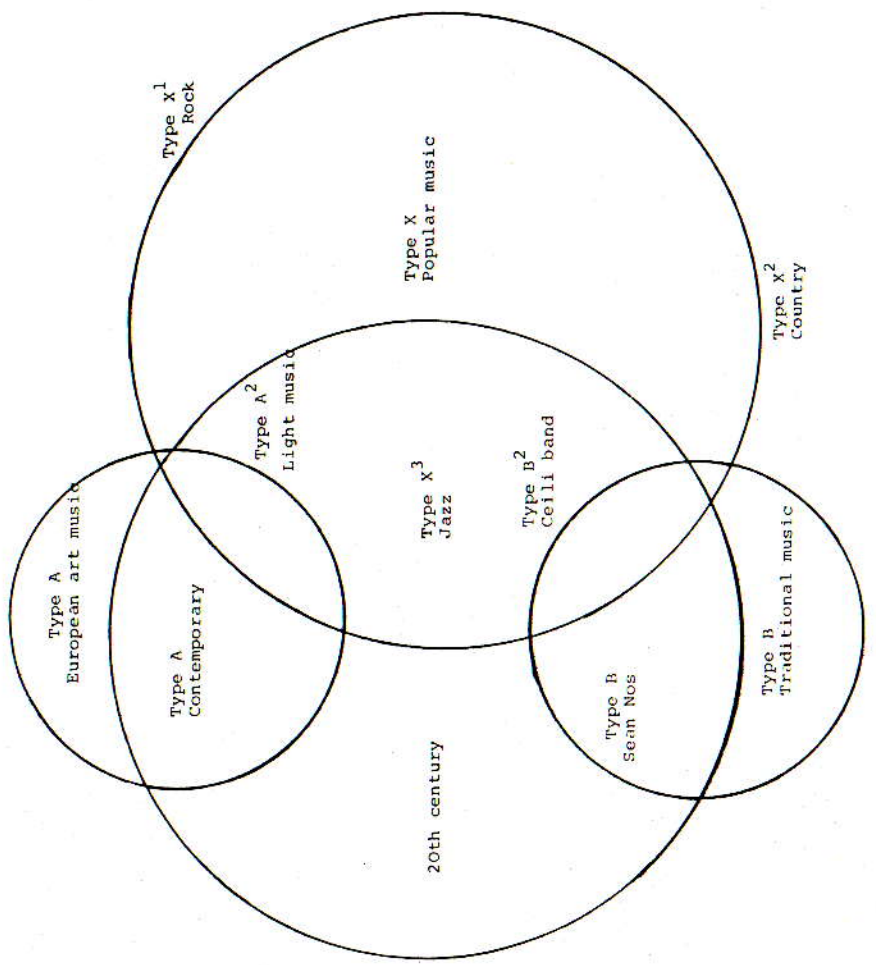
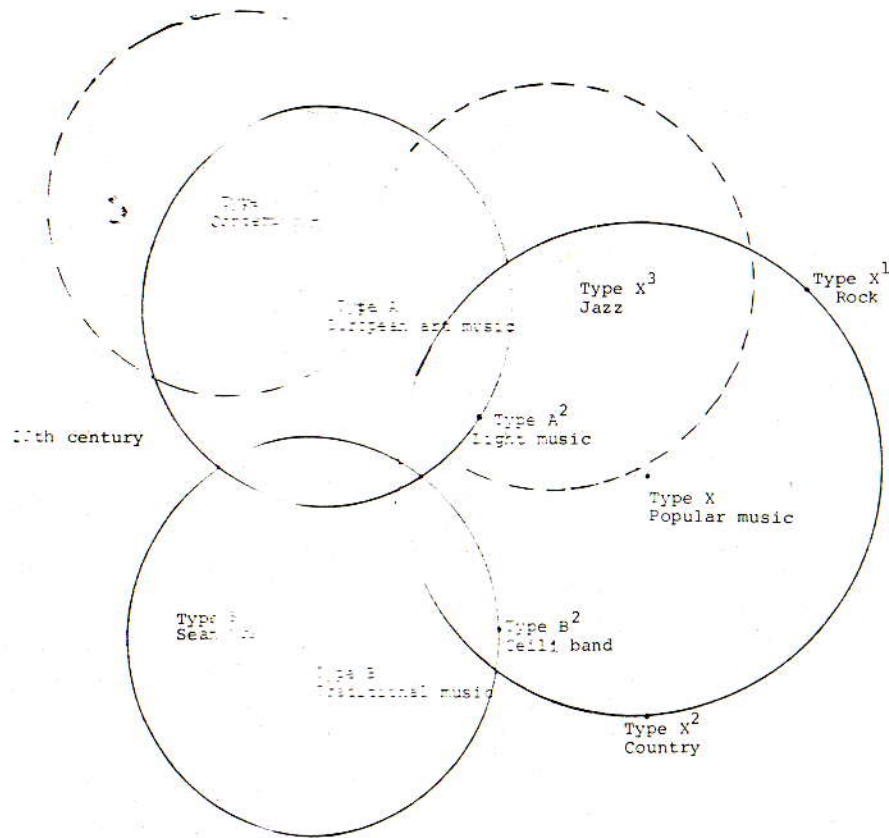


FIGURE 4 The Curriculum Model Centre 2 - 20th century Model 3C



attempting to give my perspective on music and in the curriculum, I have found it necessary to tackle the overall context of our musical life. I have avoided any detailed comments on the curriculum as it now stands, not because I believe it is beyond improvement or beneath contempt, but because I believe that we must find a way of "changing course" without sinking the ship. While it would be futile and arrogant to attempt a restructuring of the curriculum in this article, I would like to conclude by suggesting what I feel may be the key to any worthwhile future growth. I am speaking of that aspect of the science of musicology which has over the past few decades contributed most dramatically to our knowledge of world music - namely, the study of ethnomusicology with its emphasis on traditional music forms around the world.⁷ It is no longer feasible to confine the music curriculum to the art and/or folk/traditional musics of Europe. To continue to do so would be to create as unbalanced an attitude in the student's mind as a geography class would which ignored 90% of the earth's surface. Again, such an element in an Irish curriculum has an added significance in that, of all European nations, Ireland stands most to gain culturally and intellectually through a linking of its own experience in traditional music with a knowledge of how other traditional musics operate. There is, of course, the necessity of finding a balance between knowing a lot about one music and a little about all music, but this could be achieved with the aid of a specialisation programme which allowed for a realistic pupil-centred development of musical skills and understanding in the area of most concern to him/her. Furthermore, our curriculum planners have more to learn than they may realise by an examination of how some non-western nations have approached the problem of integrating their traditional musics within the school system. India, for instance, is a good example of another post-colonial nation which has

successfully integrated its aural-tradition classical music with the school at all levels:

One of the chief benefits of a familiarity, even if rather scanty, with other musics is that it leads to a better understanding . . . of one's own music. Indeed, if one is honest with oneself, one may discover for the first time what is one's own music through listening to other musics - just as one can arrive at an understanding of a word through its definition by other words in the dictionary.⁸

In my opinion, the responsibility for the present ~~deficit~~ in music education does not lie with the politicians, the government Department of Finance, the Arts Council, the government Department of Education, nor least of all does it lie with the music teacher who has perhaps the most unenviable task in today's second-level school - but instead it rests firmly in the court of the third-level institutions, and in this case, in our university music departments. It is here that the system regenerates itself and the unreal cycle begins again.⁹ But even if this is a logical follow-on from what has been said it moves outside our present discussion and any elaboration of this theme must await another opportunity.

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- 3 Robert W. Witkin, The Intelligence of Feeling (London, 1974), p. 118.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 149-150.
- 5 Micheal O Suilleabhain, "Music in Ireland since 1600 : A Typological Model", in Studies in Traditional Music and Dance 3, proceedings of the 1982 conference of the International Council for Traditional Music (U.K. Chapter) in press.
- 6 Peter Wicke, "Rock Music : A musical-aesthetic study", Popular Music 2 (ed.) Middleton and Horn (Cambridge, 1982), p. 219.
- 7 See, for example, Alan P. Merriam, The Anthropology of Music (Evanston, 1964); John Blacking, How Musical is Man? (London, 1973).
- 8 Seeger, "World Music in American Schools", p. 92.
- 9 See Micheal O Suilleabhain, "The Irish Traditional Musician and University Music Courses", an explanatory leaflet published by Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann (Dublin, 1984).