

## Third Space Ensemble and the Bucks of Bangalore: An Ethnography of Irish-Indian Music Pedagogy



(Third Space Ensemble performance, Irish World Academy. Photo by Maurice Gunning.)

“Whether we were playing Indian music or anything approaching Indian music, I don't know. We were playing something different actually weren't we? We made something else together.”

(An ensemble student from the post-performance interview)

In 2012, the director of the BA in Irish traditional performance program at the Irish World Academy at the University of Limerick, Dr. Niall Keegan, had given me my first 'gig' as an ensemble pedagogue. I was invited to teach thirty first year undergraduates how to take an Irish traditional tune and use Indian classical techniques on it. To quote Dr. Keegan, “Mess with it'...improve it...Indian-ify it.”

While I had been playing Indian Classical music for over a decade and collaborated with many musicians around the globe, this was my first experience working with Irish traditional musicians. I still remember that first class, sitting cross legged on a rug on the floor with my *sarode*<sup>1</sup> surrounded by students in chairs. It must have been as strange an experience for the students as it was for me. I'd never been in a classroom with so many different instruments and also so many different emotional temperaments ranging from concertina (*curiosity*) to banjo (*bemusement*), accordion (*apathy*), fiddle (*flaked out*), and whistle (*wondering what the hell I'm doing here!*).

In that first lesson, I gave them a crash course on my understanding of the basics of Indian classical music, such as the cyclical nature of rhythms (*tala*), the modal nature of the music, the

predominance of the drone, as well as basic theory of raga, such as the ascending/descending patterns (*araoh/avaroh*). The students learnt a 16 beat (*teental*) composition from *Rag Bhimpalashi* (in Dorian mode).<sup>2</sup> It was all a bit weird for them, but they tolerated the experience. At least I wasn't telling them how to play their 'tunes.' Then, the next lesson we launched into the "The Bucks of Oranmore."<sup>3</sup> After we played the tune through a few times, I asked them the ten thousand dollar question, "How could you apply Indian principles of this tune?" I was met with stony awkward silence and glazed stares. The only audible sound was the humming of the room's central heating system.

Indian classical music has had significant exposure in the Western world since the 1960s and there is a substantial body of foreign students who have engaged with serious study of the music.<sup>4</sup> It is also increasingly becoming part of several third level music education programs,<sup>5</sup> moving away from the traditional *guru-shishya* model.<sup>6</sup> However, Ireland has had not much sustained contact with Indian classical music. While there have been touring musicians running workshops throughout the years and fledgling modules in other institutions, my experience does not have much precedence.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, when Indian music has been taught here, it has been in more of a "multicultural" fashion, attempting to preserve a 'pure' Indian culture amongst the backdrop of its host.<sup>8</sup>

However, I was not interested in teaching the students how to play Indian music and they certainly didn't need me to teach them Irish music. I wondered was it possible for the students to take something, either tangible or intangible, from my own musical experience, which, it must be said, was neither 'pure,' nor completely traditional Indian, and relate that to their own practice?<sup>9</sup>

Also, I realized that there was significant learning in this process for me. Through this experience I hoped to discover something deeper about my understanding of Indian music and my performance practice in general. I was particularly informed by Schippers' idea that, "[w]hen a musical form travels and takes root outside of its culture of origin, it is partially defined by its relation to its new cultural context."<sup>10</sup> I wanted to know how these students might define Indian classical music in relation to their own context of Irish traditional music performance.

After that 'tumbleweed' moment of the second ensemble workshop, things started to change. I began breaking them up into small groups and would send them off to different rooms to experiment and improvise, hoping that some of the awkwardness will dissipate outside of the more formal classroom space. I would give them an hour and suggest that we would come back and share at the end. I began wandering around the corridors of the academy listening at the door while the students tried, stumbled, tried again and eventually began to make some really wonderful music.



(*Third Space Ensemble* performance, Irish World Academy. Photo by Maurice Gunning.)

They experimented using their instruments for making drones, mimicking the *tambura* of Indian music. There was one group who always would sequester themselves in a cavernous concrete stairwell, using fiddles, concertina and flute to make continuous drones while the other instruments took turns 'messaging' with the tune. It was honestly some of the most beautiful music I have ever heard. For their end of year performance, the groups took “The Bucks of Oranmore” and did all sorts of wonderful things with it. They changed the tune into minor keys, they experimented with different time signatures, they stretched the possibilities of their instruments and most importantly they improvised. That group from the stairwell lovingly renamed their version of the tune “The Bucks of Bangalore.”



(*Third Space Ensemble* performance, Irish World Academy. Photo by Maurice Gunning.)

From this experience, a seed had been sown and it continued to grow over the course of the next few years. From this initial large class, a group of five students were selected to work in a more focused way as part of their final year's work. The line up consisted of Irish traditional instrumentation of concertina, harp, bouzouki, low whistle, penny whistle, fiddle, and guitar, as well as the Indian sarode and tambura. This ensemble became entitled the *Third Space Ensemble*.<sup>11</sup>

In October 2013 and April 2014, I facilitated two performances with this ensemble in the Tower Theatre in the academy.<sup>12</sup> These performances were a culmination of over four years of interactions between Irish traditional and Indian classical musical forms, both in the formal classroom environment and informal social connections outside of the academy.

As for Irish-Indian musical sympathies, the students generally agreed that “[m]usically, they're just completely different.”<sup>13</sup> However, despite these differences, as an ensemble the group felt we still managed to find a sympathetic “space.”<sup>14</sup> This word emerged from our post performance discussions and it came to represent an embodied or somatic process within and through the musical experience itself. The eldest member of the group, a bouzouki and whistle player who had some experience of Indian music and culture, suggested that while musically they were worlds apart, “the sympathies are... just trying to find the space, using the more subtle side of things.”<sup>15</sup> The music creates this space at the same time as the performer enters it. The students described that there was a process of letting go and surrendering preconceptions, getting comfortable, “let yourself go into that kind of space thing.”<sup>16</sup>



(*Third Space Ensemble* performance, Irish World Academy. Photo by Maurice Gunning.)

These were quite ‘intangible’ outcomes from the experience, yet the students were also able to identify ‘tangible’ musical learning. The ensemble generally felt that by using an Indian drone and improvisation process that they could enter into “that same [Indian] space with trad tunes.”<sup>17</sup>

Using principles improvisational principles such as identifying strong and weak notes in a melody and also the ascending/descending pattern of a scale, we found ways to move away from the repetition of melody and construct meaningful structured yet spontaneous passage. Our harp player described how she felt she could, “could really pull the tunes apart. Then I think when it came to performing it made such a difference because you really felt like you kind knew of the tune....not like as a tune but as kind of an idea...it made a deeper understanding of it.”<sup>18</sup>

This process, despite not being central to the Irish tradition was something which the students felt that they could apply to their own practice in some way. Much more akin to Indian Classical philosophy, the musicians described the idea of “taking the audience on a journey” through the use of improvisation.<sup>19</sup> While the melodic structure and repertoire of the performances were mostly Irish, the *process* most foregrounded was akin to Indian Classical improvisation. Despite obvious musical differences and also a significant ‘frisson of difference’ in the application of lengthy contemplative improvisations, it would be fair to posit that there are possible sympathies *in the practice* of applying Indian classical processes to the playing of Irish traditional melodies.

It cannot be understated that the whole experience was somewhat challenging for the students and extremely different from a traditional Irish performance. Yet the students demonstrated that they had acquired, not just new musical knowledge, but also a new affective paradigm. While much ‘world music’ in third level education seems to focus on acquisition of the technical and cultural, my experience is that it is the emotional and spiritual dimensions of music which have the longest lasting impact on students.

This impact should be not measured on levels of musicianship or even the ability to theorize about new musical forms, but by how students *feel* about themselves and the possible efficacy of their music making process. From working with this ensemble I also have learnt a great deal which extends beyond Irish traditional or Indian classical music. In between our quests for new approaches to melodic repertoire, rhythmic structures, and improvisatory forms exists that ever evolving ‘*third space*’ which is the internal world of the performer. I am indebted to the students for their gracious explanations, interpretations and willingness to experiment.

---

<sup>1</sup> A 25 stringed North Indian lute.

<sup>2</sup> For a much more thorough overview of Indian Classical music theory, see: George E. Ruckert, *Music in North India: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy, *The Rāgs of North Indian Music: Their Structure and Evolution* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1995); Martin Clayton, *Time in Indian Music: Rhythm, Metre, and Form in North Indian Rag Performance* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> A well known three part reel in traditional Irish dance music.

<sup>4</sup> Although it should be noted that there has not been a significant study of this phenomenon, general exceptions include

---

Gerry Farrell *Indian music and the West* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Peter Lavezzoli *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West* (A&C Black, 2006); and my own research, Matthew Noone "NORTH INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC AND THE KOLKATA EXPERIENCE: ALCHEMICAL SCHISMOGENESIS AND BEING-IN-THE-WORLD IN A MUSICAL WAY," *Ethnomusicology Ireland* 2/3 (2013): 22-37. Likewise, for a postcolonial critique of foreigners learning Indian music see: M. Korpela "A postcolonial imagination? Westerners searching for authenticity in India," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36 (2010): 1299-1315.

<sup>5</sup> These include Rotterdam University in the Netherlands, Cal Arts, UCLA, Berkley. Ali Akbar Khan College, San Rafael. See Gregory D. Booth. "THE TEACHING OF NORTH INDIAN MUSIC: THREE CASE STUDIES," *Contributions to Music Education*, 10 (1983): 1-7.

<sup>6</sup> Please see Daniel M. Neuman. *The life of music in North India: The organization of an artistic tradition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Notable exceptions are the work of sitarist Dara O' Brien in University of Cork and Jaime Jones in University College Dublin.

<sup>8</sup> Huib Schippers. "The guru recontextualized? Perspectives on learning North Indian classical music in shifting environments for professional training," *Asian music* 38 (2007): 123-138.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-130

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>11</sup> The name was a slight tongue in cheek reference to Homi Bhabha's 'third space' conception of hybridity. See: Homi K. Bhabha *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> For an audio example of this concert please see: <https://soundcloud.com/welcometothemongrel/drowsy-maggies-looking-glass>

<sup>13</sup> All student quotes taken from post performance interview, Irish World Academy, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*