

Why a Session? Philosophies and Practice of an Irish Slow Session

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The following has its origin as a series of responses to folklorist Dr. Nancy Cassell McIntire (Indiana State University) for a paper she wrote which was presented at the 1998 National Meetings of the Society for Ethnomusicology in Bloomington, Indiana. Thanks to Nan for providing the questions which precipitated these answers.

Irish slow sessions seem to be a factor in those community music scenes in major cities like Milwaukee, Boston, Chicago, etc., in which there is an existing Irish music community, strong individual players/leaders, and (usually) existing sessions. My sense is that the slow sessions are often a response to a perceived need for novice players who attend but have trouble participating in, for various reasons, the "full-speed" session.

In many situations, slow sessions are either a) private (in somebody's home, intended for providing skills to players who wish to join the full speed sessions) or else b) precede the full speed sessions. In this latter case, on a given evening, the session in a pub, church hall, or private home starts out with a first hour or two for "beginners," and then ratchets up the speed and requisite expertise later in the evening. My guess is that this model comes from contra- or folk-dance meetings, in which the first hour is often given over to providing new attendees with basic instruction, so that they may then participate.

However, in the USA, where it can be difficult to find access to a community of strong players within the Irish tradition, the slow session can by default become the "only game in town," founded a group of interested individuals who want to learn the music try to get something going in what is previously a vacuum. The sort of situation carries certain requirements, discussed below.

My own initial motivation in starting a slow session was in response to a perceived need; because Bloomington enjoys the very unusual situation (for a small Midwestern/USA town) of being the home for a large number of literally world-class Irish musicians, there is a very active community Irish music scene, with several regular sessions. An unlooked-for result is that local sessions such as Grey Larsen's tend to be populated with very strong players, so much so that the expertise required to participate exceeds that of most novices even to "gain a toehold." Or, even worse, there were certain players who "didn't know what they didn't know," and would participate in an uninformed way that really hurt the musical results.

I repeatedly met folks at these sessions who I knew played, but who when asked would say "Oh, no, I couldn't play; these guys are way too good for me." So my goal, which I then shared with the other senior players in town, was to create a complementary, explicitly learning-oriented slow session which would provide novice players the opportunity to develop the necessary skills to move into the full-tilt sessions. My sense is that this is a common motivation for the creation of complementary slow sessions.

The slow sessions described above are quite different than what I'm doing. Any slow session is likely to contain some teaching component, whether implicit (for example, conveying "this is how to play your instrument to fit into this ensemble sound"), or explicit (e.g., saying "this is how this tune goes"). But my sense is that slow sessions elsewhere are more implicit than explicit, more interested in playing through tunes that people have learned elsewhere and practicing ensemble skills, and therefore less interested in actually teaching the tune content from scratch. Many of these slow sessions make learning repertoire an at-home, from-notation process, creating self-published books of "local tunes" in standard notation.

I prefer to making "learning the tunes" the specific, focal activity of the slow session, believing that this is an area in which most participants have most difficulty on their own. While I maintain such a book, I find that very few of my players actually wish to make use of it. They prefer instead to use the session itself as a means of learning tunes, supplementing the memory with the use of small portable tape recorders (Mark Frisch's fantastic article in the journal *Ethnomusicology* on learning old-time music, which I encountered well after the slow session began, is a marvelous explication of the psychology of oral learning for those unaccustomed to such methods, and includes commentary on the "psychology of the tape recorder." It's well worth seeking out). As a teacher, I've mostly observed that students learning an oral tradition have much better retention, in addition to improving skills, if they learn tunes person-to-person, rather than through the medium of notation.

Regarding repertoire: How to choose which tunes to learn and teach

My repertoire, like that of every Irish musician, is shaped and limited by the specific playing environments and history I've experienced. Others' experience and thus repertoires are thus different from mine. Session "warhorses" also seem to be geographically-specific: the tunes played commonly in sessions in New England are different than those played in the Pacific Northwest, and those in the USA different than those in Ireland, and so on. And, of course, these repertoires, while regionally-specific, also mutate over time.

I do make a point of collecting, noting, learning, and incorporating into the slow session repertoire as many session warhorses from as many different regional repertoires as possible, because I feel a strong set of responsibilities in selecting the repertoire to be taught/learned. I want participants to learn as many of the warhorses from as many sources as possible, not just the limitations of my individual repertoire.

1) My overall goal for the session is to provide participants with both necessary expertise and adequate repertoire in order for them to participate in other sessions across the country. The shared tune repertoire of Irish music, and the practice of playing melodies together in unison, means that in order for a player to be able to participate in a session in a new place, in order to be able to use the music as a "way in" to a social grouping, s/he must know a) how to behave musically and b) enough tunes to be able to participate in the playing. So I want to teach tunes that players will find being played in other sessions elsewhere.

2) The exigencies of teaching exclusively by ear in the slow session mean that certain tunes, and tune types, are more readily learned than others. Subject to the requirements of 1) above, I tend to aim for tunes whose melodic structure is clear, symmetrical, economical (e.g., using repetition more than contrasting melodic material to complete the typical AABB form), in common keys, and so on. An experienced Irish musician may know anywhere between 1000-5000 tunes (though my repertoire is highly deficient in this area); however, only a percentage of these will fit the above parameters. It is interesting to note that the tunes that become session warhorses also often seem to fit those parameters, which makes sense; as the simpler tunes, they are more readily learned by a larger pool of session participants. I do urge participants to learn those other, beautifully- idiosyncratic tunes, but I don't tend to take slow session time to teach them.

Teaching in the Slow Session

In most teaching situations I am thinking (insofar as these procedures represent conscious thought, rather than acquired, consistent intuition) of two priorities:

1) To understand, put myself in the place of, and to address the concerns of the particular participants present at a particular session.

Due to my own playing history, I know what it is like to have little or no prior experience of playing community music by ear, and how daunting that task can seem. I tend therefore to assume little or no experience from participants in any kind of "aural music-making," and to teach from and to that experience. I try to pace things, say things, select tunes, and change tasks according to my understanding of what the particular set of participants present are experiencing.

As someone who grew up in an essentially non-musical environment, in a social culture in which family or community music-making was largely absent, I tend to "see myself" in those who attend the slow session. Many are highly educated, but largely accustomed to learning paradigms in which data is presented in linear, systematic fashion, verbally and through the medium of text. Few are accustomed to the "surrender" necessary to accept being a novice; few have much experience at learning via demonstration- imitation-critique; finally, most have at least some desire to force the learning environment toward the more familiar, more formal, verbal and linear paradigms in which they feel more skillful. Part of my job as I conceive it is to maintain the experiential, engaged, participatory dynamic of a traditional session, and the sense of "surrender" that effective learning in that environment demands, in the face of individuals' disorientation and potential resistance.

At the same time (and despite the behavior of some American-born musicians who seem anxious to behave in an "Irisher-than-thou" fashion), it is not desirable, in my opinion, simply to run a session in the way they happen in rural Ireland. In community music culture, the withholding of musical information (either passively, via inattention, or actively, via refusal to answer) is a common, and contemptible, tool of retaining social power. That it is common, and unfortunately part of the tradition, does not make it any less opportunistic, cowardly, and anti-creative. The people who attend my session --educated, middle- to upper- class, predominately Caucasian-- do not have the benefit of having grown up in Ireland with the music, of hearing the music from childhood in the corner pub (where children are welcome), of hearing fathers and mothers and siblings and aunts and uncles playing and singing the music. It would be arrogant, and an imitation of the worst, most exclusive aspects of rural village culture, for me to take a callous attitude of "they either sink or swim."

So I compromise: I verbalize ideas and techniques, break tunes down, speak analytically, reiterate points using consistent language, consciously speak as positively and constructively as possible. All these procedures are largely absent in the traditional setting, but are, in my opinion, essential to effective teaching of the people who I am dealing with. I try to invoke the sense of "surrender", and to ride the wave of participants' shared, active interest: keeping things moving rhythmically, changing pace to avoid tedium, choosing activities (especially learning tunes phrase-by-phrase by ear) which tend to "level the field" between more and less advanced players.

I watch body language: those who are leaning forward, watching and listening, and playing what they can find, are clearly engaged in a different way than those who lean back, take their hands off their instruments, look at others' responses, or avoid eye contact. I try to "manage" group interactions and dynamics: if someone seems to want to ask a lot of analytical or disquisition-oriented questions, I tend to lead the process back toward playing rather than talking.

I try to keep the act of learning a tune itself a rhythmic, dynamic process, wherein players alternate between listening, imitating on the instrument or with the voice, hearing critique, and so on, all to a steady, foot-tapped underlying rhythm which continues under my talking and into which I can drop for demonstrating new material (my intuitive experience is that more participants are more able to surrender and follow the flow of the session if that foot-tapping continues; if there is not constant breaking/replacing/alteration of the underlying "heartbeat rhythm"). I signal authority: if attention is wandering or individuals begin talking, I introduce a new task, emphasize the role of the instruments whose players are digressing, ask for quiet, or elicit response from those more engaged or whose skills are more rudimentary.

Humor helps; so does improvisatory flexibility (a comfortable dynamic for me as a professional jazz musician); so does sensitivity to group attention, and to the degree to which the individuals are either becoming bored or becoming overly- intimidated. Change of pace, a combination of different sorts of activities (learning a new tune by breaking it down phrase by phrase, playing known tunes together, listening to individuals playing new tunes, anecdotes about the music's founders and tradition-bearers), is also useful.

I use all of these "cushioning" methods in order to maintain participants' willing engagement, their constructive "surrender" to an unfamiliar but, I believe, profoundly rewarding participatory experience.

2) To pass on the tradition in the manner in which it has been learned and taught traditionally.

It is, in my opinion, a balefully false construct to presume that an oral tradition can or should be taught using notation/writing-oriented means, simply because those means give the (in my opinion faulty) impression of being more "efficient." Musical traditions, in my experience, evolve over time mechanisms and environments for passing on the tradition which are perfectly suited to inculcate those parameters which the tradition itself feels to be important. The corollary is that if the traditional teaching/ learning setting de-emphasizes certain parameters, it is probably safe to assume the tradition does not regard those parameters to be important.

Therefore, I try very hard not to impose alien musical learning methods, even if those learning methods (principally notation, but also linear explication, data in/out modes, and so on) are more familiar to participants, or seem more efficient. What I am passing on to participants is not just data: it is an entire musical/social mindset which, while unfamiliar, is profoundly valuable, and essential to passing on the tradition undistorted. Importing alien methods of transmission incorporates psychological and pedagogical presumptions I don't want.

The traditional Irish session is a very effective environment for enhancing skills at melodic recognition, melodic memory, and rhythmic/ensemble sensitivity; these are by the same token essential musical skills for those who wish to become strong players in the tradition. Therefore, in leading the session, I try hard to preserve focus on development of these skills through acquisition of the repertoire via relatively traditional (e.g., oral/aural) means.

I also feel a strong responsibility to a) enact the situational parameters in a way that facilitates participants' willing engagement, while b) maintaining rigor in those areas in which participants will need rigorous skills elsewhere. The most obvious example of this rigor is that, while I will speak positively, answer questions, break things down analytically, and so on (as compromises to my participants' contrasted prior experience), I am adamantly opposed to use of notation in the session. In my opinion, use of notation by participants so that they may participate in more tunes than just those they have memorized is very counter-productive:

1) It means that sight-reading participants tend to have their noses, and their attentions, buried in the notation, and to disengage with the aurally-oriented ensemble process. Usually, their ensemble cohesion and rhythmic accuracy suffer as a result;

2) It means that sight-reading participants are psychologically and perceptually separating themselves from the experience of those who are not reading. There is no way to maintain group attention on the shared process if attention is so tangibly split between those who are reading and those are not;

3) Most crucially, it is a profound violation of the way the tradition has traditionally been passed on, and as a result (see above), hinders developing skills (memory, melodic recognition, and ensemble coordination) in exactly those areas which are most crucial.

In the slow session, therefore, by my lights sight-reading is, whether the person in question knows it or not, a rejection of ensemble cohesion, an implicit withholding of willingness to surrender to a new way of learning, and an essentially selfish act. My job is to lead participants to trust, and then experience, the exhilarating sense of cohesion, surrender, and "self-less-ness" which ensemble music-making can provide, and which in my opinion models highly desirable social attributes.

Planning the format and space of the Slow Session

Most of my desired parameters for the slow session, when it was in the planning stages, were intuitive. I knew what I wanted and didn't want, but had not necessarily articulated why. Since the session has begun and succeeded, I've managed to articulate a lot of these intuitions, and have included them as part of a document called "How to Start and Run an Irish Slow Session." I am informed that the document has become a "bible" at several new slow sessions across the country.

In addition to more tangible parameters like economy, parking, availability, etc., I wanted a space that was:

- 1) Public. I wanted the space to be one in which anyone, whether a longtime participant, a first-time visitor, or a passerby who stumbled across it by chance, would feel "permitted" to remain and return. This ruled out private homes, and some public environments (churches, etc).
- 2) Open to a wide target range of participants. That meant one in which there was no age restriction (hence, though I love pub sessions, ruling out a bar), in which parents would feel comfortable leaving or bringing children, and in which individuals would feel comfortable with a multi-gendered and intergenerational mix (hence ruling out the youth-oriented environment of a school or university).
- 3) Physically modest in terms of its appointments. I didn't want a large, cavernous space, as such a space can make a small group feel lost or alone. I didn't want an opulent space, because I wanted participants to have the experience of making something modest "feel like home" and of realizing the range of environments which the music could enrich and to which it could adapt.
- 4) Consistently available. I wanted a space that could be used at a consistent day and time throughout the year; I wanted participants to be able to "trust" that the session would be there week after week, so that attendance at the session became a matter-of-fact part of participants' regular schedule, like eating, sleeping or worship.

All the above physical parameters were desirable because of the type of responses certain environments invoke in participants. I tried to select for those parameters so as to maximize positive responses.

Similarly, I wanted to shape the economic realities of the session in order to invoke certain perceptions from participants and sponsors. While I view my contribution to the session as valuable and unique, I wanted the dynamic between participants and myself not to be complicated by introducing the element of direct fiscal exchange. In certain cultures, cultural specialists (I'm thinking here especially of religious professionals) are supported by donations from community members, whose contributions recognize the valuable work "on behalf of all" being done by those specialists. In sad contrast, In our North American culture, it is more common that introducing the paying- out of money tends to invoke a "goods for service" paradigm, in which participants are likely to feel subconsciously "Okay, I've paid out my money, now give me the service I've paid for." This can occur in almost any social exchange, even one as "philanthropic" as the slow session.

My (contrasted) model here is that of Oriental teachers, some of the most expert of whom will not accept direct financial recompense, believing that the tradition should be passed on for its inherent importance in human culture, not its fiscal value. My experience has been that, in this North American culture, if individuals participate in something they value deeply for free, then paradoxically they actually value that participation more; perhaps this is a function of the degree to which Americans are taught that everything of value may be purchased, and that nothing of value results from effort divorced from the profit motive. My sense therefore is that, if participants attending the session were to pay two dollars for each session, there would be some implication that what was being received in return could be subjected to a specific, quantifiable value. And in fact I believe that what participants receive is beyond price.

Experience has confirmed the validity of this intuition: participants are in my opinion far more conscientious about attendance, promotion, and interpersonal support precisely because "money can't buy", or replace, what the slow session uniquely provides.

At the same time, the fiscal realities mean that some sort of sponsorship is necessary, if only to pay room rent. I initially and intentionally sought 3rd-party donors (public radio stations, local businesses, local arts funders, etc.), and presented the slow session rather in the manner of the religious professionals cited above: as a community activity which enriched local quality of life in ways which were neither limited to the actual participants nor strictly quantifiable, and which therefore was deserving of ongoing community support.

I learned many years ago, through involvement with volunteer community arts organizations (coffeehouses and the like), that the true measure of an organization's or cultural event's longevity is whether it can survive turnover among principal personnel. If a coffeehouse or festival, for example, can get through its startup period, and can weather the departure of its founding members by finding interested parties to step into key roles, then the organization's longevity is much more likely. Similarly my role in the slow session: while it could not have happened as it did in my absence, I have been delighted recently, on those occasions when I was forced to be absent, to see other individuals stepping forward (sometimes with my

encouragement and sometimes on their own) to take on and/or share the leadership role. I hope that in the wake of my departure other individuals will feel inspired and equipped to take over the role of session leader.

Motives and rewards in running a slow session

The most profound emotional and spiritual experiences of my life have come through playing ensemble music. But I had to discover that; the experience was not available to or inculcated in me in my family, childhood, or social context. Hence I feel tremendous compassion and empathy for anyone, anywhere, who feels a yearning toward artistic expression but is without environments in which to pursue such.

I've recently completed a book which teaches novice players how to accompany Irish music; my impetus for writing that book was witnessing, over and over again, lone guitarists sitting in Irish sessions, struggling to contribute, and making hash due to lack of the right musical tools. My heart goes out to such people because I have been those people: I've been that kid, sitting on the edge of the circle, struggling to find at least one guitar chord that fits, wishing that even one participant had the compassion, the sensitivity, or the awareness to tell me the tune's key, to give me a nod when I hit "the right chord," or even to make eye contact. The book was written for every kid who sat at home on the edge of the bed trying to discover how to make music part of her or his life.

Similarly, the slow session is for every person who yearns to be part of community music making but lacks the background, experience, community, or necessary tools. If I had my way, I would make sure that no one, ever, anywhere, again would have the experience of feeling shut out of or unwelcome in the creative process. Because I know what that feels like, remembering it helps me know what participants need.

My ultimate goal is to create, and thus pass on, a love of music making as a way to ground ourselves and to connect with others: locally, at far distances, and wherever we find ourselves. The slow session provides a workshop in which I can better learn, and practice, passing on the participatory musical tradition.

I think in terms of the old Civil Rights organizing phrase: "Each one teach one." I want to give individuals the tools, the motivation, and the inspiration to in turn go out and teach others. Like Johnny Appleseed, I want to plant seeds. Not all will germinate, not all will grow in the ways I expect or hope. My goal is just to plant enough seeds so as to improve the odds that the cycle will continue.

Community music making, the experience of making improvisational music with others for the love of the music and the social community it creates, is for me a way to contribute to positive force in the world. In Buddhist terms, it's my part of turning the wheel of the Dharma.