

Session dynamics

From **How to Start and Run an Irish Slow Session:**

An article by:

Dr Christopher Smith -- TTU School of Music  
christopher.smith@ttu.edu  
webpages.acs.ttu.edu/chrissemi  
www.geocities.com/coyotebanjo

A seisiún of Irish traditional music is a common phenomenon in both North America and the British Isles (especially in Irish expatriate communities) in which playing, listening and dancing to music are communal, participatory activities. Musicians playing instruments associated with the Irish tradition, including but not necessarily limited to flute, fiddle, bagpipes, pennywhistle, button accordion, mandolin, percussion (the bones and the frame drum called the bodhran), and sometimes guitar, harp, tenor banjo, bouzouki, and other instruments, play the jigs, reels, hornpipes, and other dance tunes, solo or in combination. Sometimes dancers or singers are involved, and sometimes not. A seisiún is neither a closed/private rehearsal or party, nor a public/formal performance. Rather, a seisiún is a fluid and flexible setting, in which participants can individually or collectively choose to play, dance, converse, eat, drink, and interact. It's one part of the social culture that grew out of rural Irish village life, and it's migrated around the world everywhere that Irish people have found themselves.

A seisiún can be a wonderful, exciting, creative, accessible community experience. It can also be an exercise in frustration or miscommunication. Generally speaking, problems in seisiúns arise when different participants have different goals, different backgrounds, or even different perceptions of what's actually happening. The overall goal is that everyone present participate in a mutually rewarding, musically-satisfying fashion. Certain kinds of behavior or expectations can get in the way of this goal. The aim of this essay is to identify some of the common problems so that you can learn to recognize them and address them in a constructive fashion which gets positive results.

Problems in seisiúns can range from players who "don't know what they don't know" that is, who play unconstructively or inappropriately but are either unaware that there's a problem, or without resources to fix the problem, to seisiún leaders who behave badly or in ways that drive people apart a very difficult call, as sometimes a seisiún leader has to use some "tough love" methods to keep the music on course, to players from outside the tradition who consciously or subconsciously pull the seisiún in the wrong direction most commonly into another kind of music, when the majority of participants are there to play Irish music.

### **1) People who don't know what they don't know**

These tend to be individuals who are ignorant of the tradition's style parameters, not competent on their instruments, or who playing their instruments in a fashion which is counterproductive of others' participation.

This can be a tough problem and a lot of seisiún leaders have a lot of different responses. In my own experience, people who act clueless usually don't know what they don't know, and make the mistake of presuming the music is "simple" when it's not. They're not being wilfully contrary; more often, they either don't know there's a problem, or don't have tools which enable fixing it.

So a first step can be to convey to them, verbally or by demonstration, "this ain't simple." A gentle way can be to say, "Hey, why don't you lay out on this one, while I play it (for melody players)/back it up (for accompanists), and you can hear what some of the possibilities are."

If you're dealing with someone too obtuse or too self-centered to respond to the gentle approach (which you can try first), you can say, "Okay, I'm gonna play this tune. Everybody else lay out, and we'll let try it out." If you make sure to play something which is likely to cause the problem person to crash and burn, not by speed but by complexity (something in an odd key, or an unusual setting, or something that changes keys between sections, or some such), then Mr Newbie's had a good object lesson.

If he/she is still unaware that there are problems, you can say "Okay, look. This music may seem simple, but it's really not; it's got some subtleties and complexities, and if you stomp all over the texture, other people wind up getting pissed off." If the person still plays problematically or cluelessly, I'll say "look, there's a slow seisiún that I teach which I think would really help you" (for melody players) or else "look, there's this book called Celtic Backup for All Instrumentalists" (for backup players) "and you really ought to check it/them out."

As leaders, there are people who like to make explicit rules or be the explicit boss, but in my observation those seisiúns are a little more uptight than what I prefer, or than I've observed in the hard-core traditional music community. I think part of what newbies to Irish music need to learn is to pay attention to subtle things, whether musical or social, and to figure things out on their own while simultaneously avoiding pissing off the stronger players.

### **1a) People who want to read music at the seisiún.**

At the slow seisiún I run, which is explicitly intended as a teaching seisiún, I actively encourage people not to use music at all (note that I avoid the term "discourage;" that's the antithesis of the vibe I want to project). I explain this by talking about the "good ear-training" which learning things by ear provides, how it seems to make for more effective memorization, how it's perfectly acceptable and indeed most constructive to sit out tunes that you don't know, that simply "listening actively" (and maybe fingering along silently) can help with eventual memorization tunes that are currently too fast to replicate, etc etc. The reason, and the implied subtext, for this is that folks who are using music in a tunes-playing setting are hurting their chances of improving both aural skills and tune retention. The use of notation in other situations where it is common (often because the required repertoire is very large or very specific) for Scottish country dance, for example is a different situation and not what I'm describing.

However, the corollary of this is that if a) you want folks to improve, b) you want to continue to expand the informed-listenership for the music, c) you want folks to have a positive experience and to learn proper musical consideration for one another, then someone has got to teach them. If you don't want to teach novices, that's fine, but then you need to find (preferably considerate and compassionate) ways of telling them, in essence, "go do your learning somewhere else, not here"

In my own case I put together a slow seisiún in direct response to a need in the local musical community: there are great players with vast repertoires and kind consideration for beginners in Bloomington (Grey Larsen, Erin Shrader, Tom Sparks, Sam Bartlett, Eric Merrill, Jamie Ganz, many others), but their "open" seisiúns can be intimidating to those novices who know enough to realize the demands of what's happening, or destroyed by novices who don't even know how they're messing things up. So a teaching situation seemed to be in order.

We play tunes slowly. We learn tunes, listening to then playing them back in unison, phrase by phrase. We take tunes known in common or by different combinations of players and build sets around them. We talk about rhythmic subtleties, about listening to one another, about knowing when and how to lay out, about accompaniment and its pitfalls. Attendance is not limited to novices or adults: kids and experts also show up regularly.

My own experience with novice players is that they are in no way searching for a "quick fix" (though I agree that can be endemic in our culture). I have more often seen novices floundering cluelessly in seisiúns because they've not had access to any kind of teaching, formal or informal, in how to play music together. As we know, it's different practicing while sitting on the edge of the bed at home, versus trying to make it fly in an ensemble situation.

This slow seisiún is not the same thing as a "seisiún" per se: it's formatted differently, the tempi (obviously) are different, the goals are different, the type of interaction is different. However, it does seem to be working out as an effective corollary in a community where the musical scene is very active, many people are interested in participatory arts, and where there are already strong traditional seisiúns. [I would suggest my opinion that a slow session should be offered as a correlary to other kinds of playing situations in the community, not as the sole event.

More to the point, in most vernacular music traditions where the primary emphasis is on aural learning and aural memory, notation is a bottleneck. Useful for preservation, nearly useless in a group-performance situation. Of course it's useful to be able to employ both ears and notation, but if your practice/development time is limited, and you want to play oral-tradition vernacular music, I'd say the time is better spent working on your ears.

## **2) Seisiún leaders or so-called "alpha" players who behave badly, in some persons' opinions.**

As somebody who leads a couple of different seisiúns, I'm no longer sure what's always the right or wrong way to handle this. I'm not even sure that a given strong player is acting badly just because someone else thinks so.

For example, individuals who show up and do the same musically- stupid stuff week after week, especially when they've had less-stupid alternatives suggested to them by leaders or teachers, are pretty frustrating to a senior player or leader. In my own case, if someone persists in playing too loud, playing the wrong chords, barging in to start tunes without leaving others the same option, playing too fast, or other common discourtesies, I find myself being patient, tolerant, and tactful about the first two times I tell them so. By the third repetition, my patience is wearing pretty thin. For the fourth reiteration or any thereafter, there are no guarantees that I won't land on someone verbally.

I think confrontational responses to dumb musical conduct are pretty counterproductive. Yelling at people is undesirable, but as a seisiún leader I understand where it might come from. If my temper wore so short I yelled at somebody which hasn't happened yet that person might conclude I was a "jerk." But part of being a seisiún leader entails also being a traffic cop.

People in a seisiún struggle to find constructive ways to convey to one another "I wish you'd do more of this or less of that." In the Irish seisiún setting, often times that conduct is pretty indirect. Sometimes the reasons for that indirection are pretty poor because individuals are just more comfortable hinting at things rather than addressing them openly but other times those reasons are pretty understandable.

Some people are very sensitive, especially in the area of avocational music, and hear any feedback as destructive criticism. Others have very well-defended minds, and can shut out most anything non-confrontational. Therefore, some tactful or indirect methods of offering feedback fail in the face of a given person's determined, recurrent, week-by-week, stubborn commitment in the face of all suggestions and assistance, to feel attacked, or to play like shit.

By the same token, there are high-powered, narrowly focused, hot seisiúns which are largely intolerant of (or incompatible with) intermediate players. These senior players are not intolerant for arbitrary or antisocial reasons, but because the demands of the music when played at that level don't really admit the participation people who are scuffling just to keep up. Irish music is not like, for example, old-timey music, where in one impromptu ensemble you can have burning players on some instruments (fiddle, banjo, perhaps) with quite rudimentary players on others (guitar, string bass, perhaps). In traditional Irish music, as it's played in hard-core seisiúns, pretty much everybody has to have equivalently strong chops. Or, failing that, everyone has to know how to extensively and wisely stay out of the way: to play little or not at all.

In some pub seisiún settings, there are senior players who act like jerks. But at least as often it's not got to do with "jerky" motives, but instead with demanding expectations. There is a spectrum of types of seisiúns; every seisiún is unique and distinctive due to distinct combinations of individuals and circumstances. Included in this spectrum is a sizable percentage of seisiúns which may to an outsider come across as overly demanding, exclusive, or intolerant of mid-level playing. But this isn't directed at the mid-level players; it's directed inward, toward the desired caliber of musical interaction. Particularly in Ireland or in Irish-American expatriate communities, the reality is that the strong players often are not interested in adapting what's being done to suit atypical instruments or goals or skills. Like it or not, the senior players in such

seisiúns don't see it as their job to provide a toehold for newbies, but to challenge themselves and one another and to play at the peak of their abilities.

It's a lot of fun, and quite a challenge, to sit down in a pub seisiún, sometimes with people you don't know, and hit the jackpot with some high-powered music making that you can't plan in advance. In this respect, the traditional pub seisiún has a lot of similarities with jazz jam seisiúns as they used to be run. They were partly a social event, but they were also learning environments. And, as the jazz players said, you could get "cut": that is, you might run into people who had a whole lot more together musically than you did, who were not tactful about demonstrating their superior knowledge or skills. And if you hung in there and paid attention, you'd learn a lot, really fast, even if it wasn't too comfortable an experience. If you were someone with a real commitment to learning the music as it is played in the core of the tradition, you learned to put up with the high level of stress in return for the accelerated volume of information you could derive.

The fact of the matter is that the heart of the tradition includes a fairly narrow, fairly hard-nosed, fairly virtuosic set of expectations. There are a lot of the "crusty old boys" (of any age or either gender) who really don't want to deal with stuff outside the narrow parameters of their definitions of traditional music. This can be exclusive of instruments---digeridus or tubas or concert flutes or piano accordians or guitars or tenor banjos or whatever, of stylistic influences---blues or jazz or rock or New Age or (my favorite) "Afro," or of attitudes---notably, the old boys really don't care about "fairness." Yet a lot of these types I've met are not really being hardnosed for personal or exclusive reasons. It's not that they want to exclude the individual; it's more (in my experience) that they just don't wanna deal with idiosyncrasies or limitations in the music.

Please note that I am not necessarily saying the above is good, desirable, or preferable. I'm just observing that it is and has been the reality of many many seisiúns, especially the ones run by people who've made a long-term commitment to playing hard-core traditional Irish music. Democracy is not a prime motivation in that environment; many strong players want to play at the tops of their games, and the hell with democracy. If we're smart, and we want to function and even thrive in the reality of the seisiún environment, then we have to develop strategies that at least let us deal with these kinds of attitudes.

To use a parallel example from here in Bloomington/USA, the slow seisiún I started in '97 was a response to the fact that there were a lot of entry-level players who wanted to play, but were either (a) intimidated to join Grey Larsen's high-level pub seisiún or (b) out of their depth, and a drag on the music, when they did join in.

The Bloomington slow seisiún was thus intended to both give these people a toe-hold in how to cut it in a real seisiún, and at least as importantly, to show other players how demanding the expectations of the traditional "real deal" were. [I should note that Grey Larsen is a prince about involving people with lesser skills...but nevertheless people with lesser skills, particularly when they don't realize their impact, can be a real drag. In running seisiúns, I try to emulate Grey's friendly example. But there's a difference between being friendly, and tolerating stuff that's gumming up the music. It's not easy to do, and there are times when you simply have to

acknowledge, in whatever is the most constructive way, that something someone is doing is not working.]

Irish music is hard to play. In the pub seisiún environment as it's traditionally functioned, in order to participate in a way that's not potentially gumming it up for others, you need to have good command of your instrument, quick ears, a solid knowledge of style parameters, and a good-sized repertoire, which may be specific to the specific seisiún or region and consist of anywhere between 200-1000 tunes. Otherwise, you're going to sit out a lot. Or worse, if you're not sensitive to what helps and what hinders the music, you'll play when you should be not playing but listening, and that can really tick off the senior players, because it gets in the way of their own musical function.

In such an environment, and in the absence of a senior player who might volunteer or be persuaded to lead a teaching-oriented slow seisiún, the answer is to organize house seisiúns: occasional or regularly-scheduled seisiúns which meet in individuals' homes. This is at least as traditional, probably more traditional, than the pub seisiún, and in so doing you can increase the odds of participants being players with whom you're compatible personally and in terms of chops. House seisiúns, 'specially if they're regularly scheduled, are sometimes the most fun of all. You can always invite visitors when/as you want new input. And in the meantime, you can get a lot of the pedagogical advantage of playing and learning together, without increasing the odds that some players will be frustrated and some will get left behind.

But there is a trade-off: it means that you can't allow for visitors who might just hear about the seisiún and wander in. One of the great joys of the pub seisiún is these unexpected meetings, and some of the most exciting and rewarding experiences just like the jazz jam seisiún is when people unfamiliar with one another's playing square off and really take the music to a high level.

If you want my own personal opinion, I think the best, and in the long term the most productive, attitude toward seisiún is to "get stuck in." Find your way in, be a fly on the wall in terms of observation and a sponge in terms of absorption. Don't assume that you have to be playing in order to be learning a lot. Pick up tunes. Ask questions (a few, and at the right times--that is, when there's a pause in the action or conversation). Watch how people interact. Listen to individuals' playing. Ask yourself what works, and what doesn't; what you understand, and what you don't. Try to figure out the stuff you don't understand.

The most important thing to do, as a newbie to a seisiún, is to suspend your ego. Realize that the welcome, or the rebuff, are not about you personally. Think of a seisiún as being like a conversation in a pub. Maybe the metaphor would be of a group of friends who get together once a week at the same time and pub in order to have a conversation on a particular topic: a "UNIX talbe" or a "French hour" or some such. If you were an outsider, who didn't know any of the participants, but you happened to overhear the conversation going on, you might want to join in. But even though the conversation is happening in a public place, you wouldn't assume that you could barge in, sit down, interrupt the conversation, and start your own discussion. Yet this is very similar to what some folks do when they don't understand seisiún dynamics. Just like a conversation in a pub, you can find your way in, if you're tactful, thoughtful, and have something to share. Seisiúns are complicated musically and interpersonally, and I think sometimes those of

us who come to Irish traditional music from outside the tradition get confused about why things happen the way they do, or don't. The pub conversation metaphor seems to help clarify things.

### **Dealing with the only game in town**

On the other hand, it can't be denied that there are containing senior players or would-be seniors who think that having something on the ball as players entitles them to act imperious, condescending, or inconsiderate. I actually think it might be that this conduct is more common in the U.S.A or other places outside of Ireland or the Irish emigrant community. Within the core communities of the tradition, bad behavior from senior players seems to be tolerated less, and in fact to occur less frequently. Why does it happen in the States?

I was speaking with one of my students one day about this, and we surmised that the reason might be that in places where more than one seisiún is available (and obviously therefore in Ireland or Irish-American communities), reasonable people can just write off the drunk or the meanie and move to a more friendly environment and a different seisiún. But when we/you are stuck in a location where the one seisiún is the only game in town, you can feel as if "well, I guess I have to put up with this abysmal behavior in order to play the music." Similarly, both advanced players and novice players in a "one-horse town" as regards seisiúns can sometimes conclude, "Well, shit, I guess I'll just have to forget playing in the seisiún because of this jerk."

It should be mentioned that this kind of conduct tends to be much less tolerated when the seisiún leader or leaders are strong personalities with clear and effective ways of exerting authority, whether to hold the music on track or to prevent bad behavior. In the absence of this, or if the party in question is too much of a jerk to respond to authority, it is actually possible to take other steps. You don't automatically have to conclude either "oh well, I guess we're stuck with this person" or "I'm not coming to the seisiún anymore."

In the absence of a leader who can say "right, the next time you do/say something like that, you're out," and make it stick, a group of concerned parties can think of it as being a bit like an intervention into somebody's substance abuse. Get together a bunch of the regulars away from the normal seisiún time, say something like "You know, I'm really having a hard time dealing with X's mean or drunken behavior, and I think it's really screwing up the seisiún. Is there anybody here who would be willing to join me in confronting him and saying 'Look, the next time you act badly to somebody in the seisiún, the whole seisiún is gonna get up and walk out?'" And, if you can get people to agree to it, and you feel as if they'll hang tough, then if the Meanie or Drunk acts out afterwards, actually follow through. If it's a Meanie, leave the seisiún, and delegate someone to contact the culprit in the intervening week, and say "Don't bother to show up if you're going to act badly." If it's a Drunk, go to the publican and say "look, we really like playing here, but we're going to end the seisiún for tonight because X is too loaded to act human. We'll be back next week, but we sure hope you don't serve him 'til he's drunk next time."

### **On whether to pay seisiún leaders, or "when does a seisiún become a gig?"**

In the States, and now in Ireland and elsewhere, it's become pretty common for a pub offering a regular seisiún to guarantee one or a couple of musicians a small fee (usually not a lucrative one) to be there and "anchor" the seisiún every week. Some folks think this changes the dynamic of the seisiún beyond repair, and think that alpha musicians who accept the fee, or refuse to play for free, are somehow "selling out." Well, I know a number of working musicians who've made the same decision. Not all of them are jerks. A lot of them are people who live in comparatively small communities, where the audience that will pay to go out to hear music is of a limited size, and where it's consequently a scuffle to make a living playing. A lot of these musicians are constantly asked to play for free, for fundraisers, public events, and so forth. They restrict the degree to which they agree to do that, because if the local audience is hearing them all the time for free, that audience won't cough up bread for the occasional paid gig.

Also, keep in mind that usually the people to whom such players say "I don't play for free" are bar owners. There are an awful lot of bar owners out there who love the idea of a weekly night of music, which draws a lot of Riverdance/Chieftains fans, for which the pub only has to pay out some free beer (if that). They can be exploitative, and some musicians don't want to give it away if the bar's making money.

For a pub seisiún to have any longevity, the odds are very good that it needs a leader or leaders, paid or unpaid. To do publicity. To attract strong players who will be willing to come and play for free. To make sure there's somebody to hold it together and be a traffic cop when there are few players or few strong ones. One way to treat the leader(s) fairly is to pay 'em a little money.

Also, keep in mind that if a musician commits to leading a seisiún once a week, then the odds are good that s/he at some point is going to be offered a gig on the same night that pays real money. At that point, you either have to bag on the seisiún, or get a substitute leader. It's only fair that the sub should make a little bread if it's not her/his regular gig. Is the regular leader supposed to pay out the bread him/herself? Having a small fee from the pub alleviates this problem.

**To cite my own experience:**

At a conservative estimate, counting two weekly seisiúns at which I play for free (not the 3rd, for which I'm paid a token leader's fee), I probably play 100-120 free gigs a year. What that means is that an awful lot of people in this area can hear me play for free. Why would they turn around and pay to do so, on the infrequent occasions during which I play for a fee locally? My medieval ensemble, which records and tours internationally, does not perform in my home town, because with 900-1000 performances a year (including IU School of Music), why would anybody local pay our ticket fee of \$8-\$15, at which nobody blinks elsewhere?

Myself, I have not made the decision "I don't play in public for free." Instead, I've concluded that I should not try to make a living from playing music in town. Therefore, to make bread I have to go on the road, which is time-consuming. I know other musicians in this town, far more skilled than I, who have family responsibilities to meet and bills to pay, who have made the de facto decision that they "don't play music in public for free" (with the occasional exception) because they CAN'T AFFORD TO. Some of those musicians turn down an awful lot of requests to play for free. Some them are wonderful, generous, ethical, considerate people. Not greedy jerks.



Most seisiúns need a leader. Maybe that leadership trades off; maybe people all know one another well enough to never have to articulate who's going to lead what when. Sometimes the leadership is good, sometimes less so. But it's a fallacy to think that the seisiún can just be a free-form jam sailing across the shipping lanes, and to expect it to actually stay on course.