Book Reviews

Bacchanal! The Carnival Culture of Trinidad

Passing It On: The Transmission of Music in Irish Culture
by Marie McCarthy. Cork University Press, 1999. viii + 311 pp. £45.00 hardback, £15.95 paperback.

On the surface these books seem entirely different. The one is the work of a journalist who gives a rich descriptive account of the Trinidad Carnival and its related musical and artistic activities. The other is an analytical and historical account of music education in Ireland which, as the historian G. R. Elton might have said, still has the eggshell of the Ph.D. upon it.

Yet the books share themes in common. They are both in various ways about the effects of colonialism on music-making and musical institutions. They both view music as an aspect of social process, deeply enmeshed with changing cultural, ideological and religious attitudes and values. They share a profound interest in vernacular forms of music-making. They both point to forms of competition as a stimulus to musical participation and achievement. They both tell us something about different ways of musical learning and about why music is important to people.

Colonialism has profound effects on peoples. Long after the colonial power has withdrawn the imprint of its institutions can still be clearly seen and felt. We can argue about which were the better or worse colonial powers, and read about the decency of some colonial administrators, but none of this gets away from the fact that colonialism is a rotten system, always ultimately to do with control and exploitation. At the rather dilapidated and now defunct grammar school at which I wasted six years of my life there were a few teachers I found really wonderful. One was the music teacher (of course) the other was a shambling history teacher with an amazing retentive memory, popularly known as ‘Trog’. He strode round in a chalky, torn gown and seemed to be able to deliver a totally unprepared but enthralling lesson on almost any topic. He taught by lecturing and asking questions and his question on colonialism was simple: would you rather be run well by someone else or badly by yourself? The point seemed simple to me, if you did not run yourself you could never learn to do it well (although there was no guarantee that you would – the same point applies to schools).

Trinidad is a product of colonialism. Conquered by the Spanish, who brought slaves from Africa, influxed by French (who brought Carnival to the island) it was captured by the British during the Napoleonic Wars. After the abolition of slavery a wide variety of peoples were attracted to Trinidad including Americans, Madeirans, English, Scots, Irish, French, Germans, Swiss, and even free West Africans in the 1840s. A persistent labour shortage led to the importation of some Chinese but mostly Indian indentured labourers. Almost 150,000 Indians came between the late 1840s and 1917 and the majority settled on the island.

In musical terms this was a melting pot indeed and musical activity found its focus in Carnival. Out of Carnival Trinidad has given the world two remarkable musical phenomena, a musical genre and a musical ensemble: the calypso and the steel band.

Mason gives a richly drawn and well-written account of Carnival, its events and institutions, of the calypso tents and the panyards, of the processions and the contests, of the arguments and tensions that surround these activities. He suggests calypso arose out of the praise and derision songs of West Africa modified, mixed and adapted to a new land.
and a complex multi-racial society. Calypso stars share with jazz musicians a liking for aristocratic names such as Lord Kitchener and Lord Shorty, others show a penchant for powerful nomenclature such as Mighty Sparrow, Atilla the Hun and, my favourite, Black Stalin. Calypso stars are intensely competitive, battling for a number of annual titles, the most important of which is the Calypso Monarch.

Steel bands also compete for the championship at the aptly named Panorama, having practised for weeks at their open-air rehearsal places. Pieces are learnt by rote and ear and endlessly practised – in public. Before there were steel bands (the pan was only invented in the late 1930s – part of the rubbish of the island's oil industry put to a productive purpose, junk turned into art) there were tamboo bamboo: procession bands that struck long pieces of bamboo to make polyphonic percussion parade music. But the tamboo bamboo only came into popular usage because the British rulers banned skin drums in 1883 in the interests of good colonial order (although this act did actually cause some riots!). This fits the National Curriculum's 'identify how and why musical styles and traditions change over time' rather well, does it not?

Rivalry and conflict between bands has a long history. Steel bands and their predecessors tended to be associated with particular neighbourhoods and were often willing to engage in street battles with rivals. In teaching about the context of musical styles I often feel we ignore the darker aspects. I suppose thinking that if children knew about such things they might emulate them. I think we should be honest and deal with the darker side. Mason's book is a good read, it gives a wealth of information on the Trinidad Carnival and its music, and although it contains no musical analysis as such, is strongly recommended. It sent me scurrying to my well-provisioned local record library to hear some of the music I was reading about. Given the popularity of steel bands in this country a book which so engagingly describes their development and original context of performance should be widely read.

Street parades, with their attendant bands and occasional street violence bring us neatly to Ireland. What is the 12th July but a sort of Protestant Carnival? Marie McCarthy has written a book which is about music education in its widest sense, about different ways of 'passing it on'. It is also about the way music, culture, politics and history inter-relate. It is a rich and interesting book, and although it has some annoying features, it has many insights and not a few blind spots. The great strength of the book is that it tries to look at music in one country as a totality, different styles and different methods of learning.

The central chapters of McCarthy’s book constitute a sort of history of music in Ireland concentrating particularly on the way music was taught and learnt and the pressures and determinants on the form that teaching and learning would take. Chapter 2, ‘Foundations of Music in Irish Culture and Education’, covers a great deal of ground in a relatively small space. History and mythology rub shoulders easily here. We should not be too critical of this for myths of a people can be immensely powerful in determining what they do – this is a sort of collective version of the idea that expectations are important in teaching. (After all, the myth that England was ‘the land without music’ had some powerful effects which are still not yet played out.) Dublin, in that it was a great centre of eighteenth-century music (remember Messiah was first performed there), was a sort of transplanted London. Beyond the Pale, there was the traditional music of the peasantry (equated by the refined with ignorance) and the vestiges of a once flourishing minstrel class who travelled the great houses of the countryside, best represented by the work of the blind harper Turlogh O’Carolan. The 1792 Belfast Harp
Festival was organised by Edward Bunting to record the last scraps of the harpers’ tradition. Thomas Moore set words to many of these melodies, establishing a tradition of a safe and wistful romantic nationalism that has fed aspects of the Irish song tradition (and classroom music) virtually ever since.

McCarthy’s Chapter 3 gives a mid-nineteenth-century perspective on music, schooling and Irish culture. Ireland, on the fringe of Europe and with a highly distinctive musical culture – some of which seemed to retain the echoes of a once great civilisation – found herself caught between the movements for mass music education, established for England, a fast industrialising and urbanising country, exemplified by the work of John Hullah, and a native musical tradition with which it did not seem to fit at all. All the ills of the English school system and its effects on music education, including payment by results and the dominance of Victorian cultural and musical values, were transplanted to Ireland.

Yet the distinctiveness of Irish music was a strong card for Irish Nationalists to play. The romantics of the Gaelic League felt that in traditional music there was something essentially Irish (much at the same time and in the same way as Sharp and Vaughan Williams felt that there was something essentially English about the material they were collecting). The 1890s saw the introduction of the Feis Ceoil, a music festival modelled on the Eisteddfod with the aim of preserving and promoting all Irish music. Some noticed the conflict of styles at the Feis. Based on classical values, the Feis did not really accommodate traditional music. This tension is present throughout the following period and there is a particular irony in the fact that although the majority of traditional musicians were Catholics, the Catholic Church as a body tended to espouse high cultural values, thus further contributing to the ambiguous status of traditional music.

With the coming of independence for the South of Ireland it might have been hoped that the rhetoric of the nationalists about native Irish music would turn into a reality. Irish-language songs became the staple of primary classrooms and some schools established tin whistle bands. In the secondary schools and the academies the high culture models, inherited from the English, remained. Ireland tended to become insular, and although traditional music got (and retains) significant air time on radio, equally characteristic of the period was the campaign in the 1930s to ban jazz from the airwaves; this campaign proved successful in the 1940s. (One thinks immediately of the countries of Hitler and Stalin where similar bans were put in place.) Yet lack of funds, lack of understanding, perhaps lack of will led to a failure of the nurturing of rural traditions by nationalists. In fact a lot of Irish traditional music, solo and monodic in nature, does not easily lend itself to use in schools – unlike the steel band or the tin whistle band! Between the 1920s and the 1960s there developed a sense of inferiority about things indigenous and rural in Ireland and an ambivalent attitude towards traditional music.

How things have changed! Now the roar of the Celtic Tiger can be heard worldwide and Irish music is everywhere. The Chieftains and Riverdance, U2 and Bono tour the world. James Galway, who started playing as a fifer in an Orange band, can be packaged as a ‘Celtic Minstrel’. Yet this success rests on an uncertain foundation; music education in the Republic’s schools has profound weaknesses which still wait to be addressed. The Irish experience is an interesting one and is particular to that nation and its attempt to overcome its colonial past. Yet this English reader is struck by both the different experience of the Irish but also some very clear parallels between what happened in England and Ireland.

Marie McCarthy has written an interesting and stimulating book which has significant strengths. It is not without its problems. There is
a degree of repetition of ideas in the summarisation and re-summarisation at the end of the book. There is no mention of the influence of the Irish Diaspora on musical practice in Ireland. Michael Coleman, the highly influential fiddler player of the first half of the twentieth century, lived and recorded in the USA; the great collection of Irish instrumental music, the one instrumentalists actually use, was compiled by Captain Francis O’Neill of the Chicago Police; we profit from the fact that Marie McCarthy herself would seem to be one of those transatlantic scholars who has a desire to investigate the culture of the land of her forebears.

There are other problems. McCarthy seems to think that Hullah’s system is fundamentally different from tonic sol-fa. Hullah’s system was a flawed sol-fa system with a fixed doh. John Curwen’s system improved on Hullah’s and other people’s work by making it possible to accommodate modulation through a movable doh. McCarthy seems to accept the myth of Protestants as non-music makers. Some Protestants did preach against secular music, but many excellent Protestant traditional musicians have been recorded over the years. I have other gripes, but on balance the book is a very worthwhile piece of work.

As someone who takes a particular interest in the study of vernacular musics (basically the types of music people make for themselves), I sometimes think that they flourish best outside formal channels of learning and teaching. Formal music education seems to do little for the Carnival musicians of Trinidad and seems to have contributed little to the recent success of Irish music and musicians. On the other hand I recently heard Paddy Maloney, leader of the Chieftans, on the radio, rattling off a reel in tonic sol-fa (which he learnt from school) the only form in which he is able to write and communicate his music. Then I judged a music contest with some great young musicians playing all sorts of music. So I decided in some cases my thoughts are ill-founded, although I never feel it hurts to engage in radical doubt.

VIC GAMMON

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**Settling the Score: a Journey through the Music of the Twentieth Century**

As Michael Oliver notes in his introduction to chapter 8 of this thought-provoking volume, ‘Composers at the end of the twentieth century are writing music that not only sounds radically different from that written a hundred years earlier; the language of music and the raw materials from which it is made have themselves changed’ (p. 110). Elsewhere, Oliver is more explicit in identifying the particular *bétes noires* of most music lovers: ‘[the] harmonic language [of some twentieth-century music] bears little or no perceptible relationship to that of preceding centuries’ (p. 125); worse still, ‘Almost the commonest accusation . . . is that it is tuneless’ (p. 139). That such views are perceived as wrongs needing to be avenged is made clear by the punning title of the book (and of the Radio 3 series on which it is based). I imagine that all those involved in the creation of and commentary on contemporary music will welcome this brave attempt ‘to tell [its] story . . . by using the words of those who have made [its] music’ (pp. x–xi), though whether they will feel equally happy to be associated with its cover image, depicting bedlam, is another matter entirely.

*Settling the Score* is arranged as a kind of club sandwich: the substantial filling consists of eighteen chapters on a plethora of coterminous topics; the bread comprises the contextualising first and last chapters – ‘1900’ and ‘2000’ – and various other items, including Nicholas Kenyon’s ‘Foreword’, Oliver’s ‘Preface’, an index, lists of contributors, sources quoted,
illustrations, and so on. (Oddly, the contents page also announces a ‘Chronology’ on p. xxiii, which seems not to be present. More serious in its omission is the surely obligatory bibliography which could otherwise have directed readers to further, more detailed, understanding of the many fascinating issues raised in the book’s narrative.) For reasons alliterative, millennial, or possibly confectionary, all but four of the ‘filler’ chapters have titles turning on a double M – ‘Music’s makers’, ‘Music and mammon’, ‘Music and the movies’, ‘Music and the mind’. Most of these are appropriate to their topics, though a few feel distinctly contrived: ‘Music and the marvellous’ is hardly an adequate heading for a chapter dealing with the relationship between Western and non-Western musics, while ‘Music and Motown’ would be fine if Motown was one of the popular musics actually discussed in its fourteen pages.

Three of the four exceptions to the MM rule (the other being ‘The Rite’s century’, a salutary exploration of a seminal work) are chapters 8–10, each of which deals with some aspect of ‘The language of music’, whether rhythmic, harmonic or melodic. It is here that some of the most helpful comments appear, whether from Aristoxenus (who in the fourth century BC concluded that ‘Rhythm is concerned with time lengths and the perception of them’ (p. 115)) or Thomas Ades (who evocatively defines melody as ‘A line that begins to breathe at the start of the piece and stops breathing at the end of it’ (p. 141)). Elsewhere, we find useful (albeit somewhat gnomic) advice from Morton Feldman – ‘You have to end effectively; you’re as good as your ending. Most people, they don’t remember too far behind the ending’ (p. 146) – and Harrison Birtwistle – ‘There’s [sic] two things that music can do: it can start and it can stop’ (p. 124).

Chapter 10 also includes an unusually reflective remark by Pierre Boulez, which reminds us all of the dramatic changes that have occurred in music since World War II: ‘If you had asked me fifty years ago where music would be in 1998 I would have told you maybe a nonsense: “Everything will be organized, serialized and so on” – and it wasn’t the case. At least experience makes you modest’ (p. 148).

If the volume has two (probably inevitable) flaws, these are its basis in English experience and – when discussing art music – its privileging of Eurocentric modernism. The former, for instance, manifests itself in the otherwise excellent chapter on ‘Music and the media’, where the impact of radio, scholarship and journalism is discussed through purely English examples (the Third Programme, Grove’s Dictionary, The Times). Detailed comparison with the situations in both American and continental Europe might have been illuminating. The privileging of Eurocentric modernism, meanwhile, is clear from the tendency to marginalise influential experimentalists such as John Cage (whom the historically insignificant Charles Wuorinen describes on page 136 as ‘a very minor figure’) while celebrating those (including Elliott Carter, Pierre Boulez, and Karlheinz Stockhausen) who have benefited from such experimentation. However, this should not detract from the many positive qualities of Settling the Score, not least its willingness to examine not only ‘the raw materials of music’ but also ‘the many functions of music, the way that the musical profession and the musical public have changed, and the effect on both of them of politics, technology, the media and a growing awareness that the history of music is not just the history of Western concert music’ (p. xi).

In many respects, then, Settling the Score is an extremely successful and eminently useful publication: readable and intelligent, it is at once a voluminous source of fascinating and provocative soundbites concerning the nature of twentieth-century music and music-making; a potentially valuable text for anyone – either within education or outside it – trying to make sense of the ‘bewilderingly varied plethora of
new music’ (p. x) that surrounds us; and a very welcome antidote to much of the nonsense written about contemporary composition. But in its failure to provide either a bibliography or proper citation of its sources (especially important given its heavy reliance on anecdotal evidence), it has missed a major opportunity to act as an educational catalyst to further exploration of the many important issues it raises.

DAVID NICHOLLS


Creating Ensemble, ‘An interactive multimedia package for self-paced learning about ensemble playing’ is built around a recorded performance of five contemporary compositions, on Australian themes, for recorder quartet. Its stated aim is ‘to challenge ideas that students might have about what music really is, by presenting a variety of viewpoints about music and its performance’.

When reviewing any teaching package the first essential is to establish the identity of the intended audience. The target audience here, however, is unclear, as neither age, level, Key Stage or pre-requisite skills are identified. Various clues do however emerge which suggest both GCSE and ‘A’ level applications would be appropriate in the UK.

The initial teacher guidance, which appears in the ‘Workbook’, is relevant but superficial, and similarly lacks details of both audience and application. It briefly discusses the processes that contribute to the preparation of a work for performance, before proposing a starting point for the project, e.g. watch the video, follow the score and attend to the questions focused on ensemble performance and interpretation. The ‘Workbook’ finally introduces the issues of ‘Group preparation’, ‘Individual preparation’, ‘Tuning tips’, ‘Experiments with rhythm’, and ‘Representing musical meaning’. The scores then constitute the remaining three-quarters of the workbook, but are printed in a different order to the performance on video. This lack of detailed guidance poses the question of how this package is to be used and where one should start. Watching the video with the score was the obvious place, but again few clues on integration and application were offered. Instead, more questions concerning the level of the intended audience emerged.

The video is a recording of a performance of the five contrasting works, with no commentary. The quality of the performances is very good but unfortunately the soundtrack on my particular copy was distorted. As the focus of the package is ‘creating ensemble’, it is unfortunate that footage of rehearsals was not included. This was a particular disappointment with the final piece ‘Disjointed Quartet’, which involved the interpretation of a graphic score, non-standard use of the recorder and an element of ‘music theatre’. A valuable opportunity was lost here, for pupils could have learned a great deal from observing the development of such a performance. The video, however, could also provide the teacher with an attractive anthology of contemporary compositions to be used at GCSE and/or ‘A’ level as a composition stimulus.

The compositions are varied in style and mood and provide a stimulating and thought-provoking environment for the development of ideas; one is notated graphically, another includes opportunities for improvisation, whilst a third incorporates elements of ‘music theatre’. My initial impression of the first piece ‘Doves Around’ was, that although the parts were exposed, the material would suit a Key Stage 3 or 4 recorder group. I noted however, that the
score (and parts) omitted dynamics and breath marks, thus creating problems of performance and interpretation, or was this intentional? The subsequent pieces increase in challenge, both musically and technically, so that, although this recorder ensemble material has potential for school performance, it requires a high level of practitioner skill. Any student who has attained the technical and musical level required to play these pieces may then find the content and tone of the workbook patronising. This, once again, raises the issue of the level of attainment of the pupils who might use the material.

As no further steps were offered to guide the teacher, with regard to audience and application, I accessed the CD-ROM, with its ‘interactive’ promise. The CD-ROM was easily installed, was user friendly and proved to be the most exciting resource in the package. The opening page identifies the five compositions. Four smaller icons offer ‘Library’ – factual information about the composers, performers, production team etc.; ‘Glossary’ – a dictionary of musical terms; ‘Teaching’ – useful ideas for using the CD-ROM; and ‘Reading’ – a bibliography. At last the teacher is given some guidelines on how the package could be used and makes realistic suggestions for classroom application. However, these activities are not integral to the CD-ROM presentation. To have impact they need to be central to the package and should be reproduced in the ‘Workbook’ to supplement the scant guidance there.

When a composition is selected from the menu four icons are offered. Within ‘Performers’, feelings are expressed about the musical challenges of preparing the performance, e.g. the descant recorder player describes ‘Beebopaloobpawopbam boom’ as ‘a mess at the beginning and the end, when we play our independent lines over and over again. But it sounds like a three-dimensional mess with very smooth bent notes that are stretched out over the solid backing rhythm that comes from the bass.’ Such honest and accessible comments by professional musicians are sure to stimulate valuable discussion.

The ‘Composer’ section provides a valuable insight into the thought processes behind the compositions and issues to be addressed when rehearsing. It thus provides an interesting stimulus for young composers and performers alike. As the composer is speaking, a summary appears on the screen and key points are listed. These issues are developed in ‘Learning’, which highlights the key teaching points for each work. This section is relevant but unfortunately does not involve the user in ‘interactive’ discourse. Its value might therefore be limited unless developed by the teacher in a practical context.

The final option is ‘Play’. Selecting this offers a busy and enticing screen. The music is displayed in score alongside an audio-video performance, all controlled by standard symbols, allowing the user to listen/watch the performance and to follow the score simultaneously. Similarly, by clicking on marked sections of the score, further information is offered. This facility is particular useful with the graphically notated ‘Disjointed Quartet’, and enables the user to gain more information on how to interpret the score. One disadvantage, however, is that, even on a reasonably large computer screen, the definition is poor and consequently some of the detail is difficult to see.

The dearth of good software for computer-based music technology for schools suggests that a package such as this should be welcome. It has the potential to fulfil two broad aims: to raise issues about ‘what music really is’, and to provide a stimulus for composition. Preparing students to rehearse, play in and direct ensembles in thoughtful and musical ways can often be a challenge, particularly when groups of pupils are small. Equally, the opportunity to experience a broad range of styles, notations and imaginative use of limited instrumental resources, to listen to comments by composers...
and performers, and to rehearse the compositions (some of which could be played on other instruments), could provide much material for discussion, and offers valuable learning opportunities.

Does this package fulfil its aim? Well yes, but with the proviso that it has potential to be a valuable teaching resource only if it is imaginatively and thoughtfully used and well integrated into a broader programme of study. This is not a package that can be given to pupils to follow on their own, but then would we want this anyway? I think not.

CAROL GARTRELL


Readers of this book might be forgiven for concluding at first sight of its title, that it could hardly do justice to the extremely broad subject matter of speech, music and sound in a single volume of 231 pages. However, such a conclusion rather misses the overall objective of the work, which is to explore the common ground between speech, music and other sounds and how they have and can become integrated. In particular, van Leeuwen engages the principles of semiotics throughout the book although, as he notes, he has not used the term in the title, choosing to use the introduction to describe the idea of semiotic resources used in communication in terms of what one can ‘say and sound’ and how one can interpret things others ‘say with sound’.

The book explores how sound has perspective in terms of a foreground, middle ground and background as well as social distance ranging from formal to intimate with the listener. It then looks at the role played by time and how Western music as well as speech have become dominated by measured time, unlike polyrhythmic music where each player follows his or her own internal clock. The origin of the clock itself is recalled for calling monks to prayer as decreed by Pope Sabinianus, and that much later time ordered the lives of factory labourers whilst now almost all human activities are time regulated.

The interaction of sounds in speech and music are discussed, noting the role of linguists who conduct conversation analysis, looking into how those communicating take their turns and how this is controlled in dramatic scripts. Van Leeuwen continues with an exploration of musical turn-taking, or antiphony, from its roots in the responsorial psalms of the early Christian Church to its use in today’s advertising jingles. The notions of sequential and simultaneous interaction are explored in detail. The role of melody is a topic which begins to fuse music and speech more closely, in terms of the semiotics of the musical intervals used: sounds are actions and can only represent the actions of people, places and things . . . Sound messages only have verbs . . . The nouns are inferred, not stated.’

In the discussion of voice quality and timbre, their key dimensions are surveyed with special reference to features that are common to speech, music and other sounds. Sound quality is described as a combination of many
different features that each contribute towards meaning based perhaps on how the sounds are produced, or the connotations they produce for the listener. In speech these could relate to the way in which the speech is produced in terms of the underlying setting of the jaw and/or lips.

The notion of modality is the final topic which, to a linguist, is the concept of ‘degrees of truth’, to a logician, the likelihood of a proposition being true or false, and to a social semiotician, the truth as seen by speakers. It is suggested that modality judgements in sound in terms of the degree of truth assigned to a given sound event, are ‘cued’ by the degree to which a number of different parameters are used in the articulation of the sound.

This book is clearly laid out, the writing is fluid and the flow through the subject matter is well constructed. The topic area is clearly presented and new ideas are presented in a logical manner. Each chapter includes a worked example of a sound situation which is analysed in relation to the terms presented in that chapter using the author’s scheme, outlined in an appendix. In addition, exercises and discussion points are provided in support of each chapter for follow-up activities. The last chapter is an afterword which explores further the place of these ideas in the sonic world. It is noted that we desire more immersion than detachment, more interaction rather than solitary enjoyments and dynamic experiences rather than fixed meanings associated with objects. In noting that, ‘sound is . . . often treated as little more than a kind of optional extra, there is every chance that it will have a much increased role to play in the very near future’, van Leeuwen places his work in a twenty-first-century context for creative audio activity in music and media technology. This is essential reading for all wishing to contribute in these areas.

DAVID M. HOWARD