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Book Reviews

Bacchanal! The Carnival Culture of Trinidad by Peter Mason. Philadelphia: Temple University Press and London: Latin American Bureau, 1998. 191 pp. $19.95 (sterling price not supplied).

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 Long after the colonial power has withdrawn the imprint of its institutions can still be clearly seen and felt.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

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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

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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

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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 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

Settling the Score: a Journey through the Music of the Twentieth Century edited by Michael Oliver. London: Faber and Faber, 1999. Paperback, 338 pp. £16.99.

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 *bêtes 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,

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