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Performance and Music in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson

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Ciaran Carson has established a reputation as one of Ireland's most important poetic voices. However, Carson is also an accomplished musician whose work reflects that liminal borderland that has always existed between Irish music and Irish literature. As Sean O'Boyle in his book *The Irish Song Tradition* notes '[a]s far back as our national records go, music and poetry have always been associated'.[1] Music is a prominent theme throughout Carson's work, with songs and musical allusions frequently a feature of his poems. While music has influenced Carson's work thematically, it has played a formative role in one of the most distinctive features of his poetry until recently – that is his use of the long line. This paper will argue that it is even possible in some of his poems to find comparable metres with those found in forms of traditional Irish music. Carson's use of the long line is part of his attempt to recreate what he has called the urgency of traditional Irish music in his work through an audience aware poetic that attempts to recreate the immediacy of the live sessions Carson has partaken of as a musician. For Carson, the crucial moments of communication and understanding are those shared between the performer and the audience, an audience that can sometimes include fellow performers. However, this conviction is reflected in understandings of musical events one finds in ethnomusicology, an audience-orientated approach increasingly shared by literary theorists.

'Songs', Ciarán Carson writes in *Last Night's Fun*, 'demand a context of being sung, of having listeners and other singers around you [....] Songs are nothing if there is no audience'.[2] According to ethnomusicologist John Blacking, in his book *How Musical is Man*, '[i]n order to find out what music is and how musical man is, we need to ask who listens and who plays and sings in any given society, and why'.[3] Carson's and Blacking's apparent promotion of the listener above those who create music, in appreciations of music, is reflected in the growing prominence of reader centred criticism in literary theory. Terry Eagleton has mapped the development of literary theory in three stages, moving from 'a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a

marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years'.[4] Peter J. Rabinowitz has developed this point arguing that

> it is now hard to find serious literary theorists who do not, in one way or another, feel the need to account for the activities of the reader. From Wolfgang Iser (who sees literature as a set of directions for the reader to follow) to Roland Barthes (who, in his later years, saw the best texts as unlimited opportunities for orgasmic free play), from narratologists like Gerald Prince to subjectivists like David Bleich, a wide range of contemporary critics ground their arguments in the reader as a perceiving subject rather than in the text as an autonomous object.[5]

Rabinowitz also argues that reader-response criticism could 'more broadly but more accurately be called, audience-orientated criticism'.[6] Barry Laga has described this development in literary theory as a movement 'against [the] text centred-criticism of formalism, claiming that literature is not an object, but an experience, a text always in the making'.[7]

This understanding of literature as an experience and one very dependent on the reader, or audience, is analogous to John Blacking's claim that '[t]he chief function of music is to involve people in shared experiences within the framework of their cultural experience'.[8] For Blacking

> the creation and performance of most music is generated first and foremost by the human capacity to discover patterns of sounds and to identify them on subsequent occasions. Without biological processes of aural perception, and without cultural agreement among at least some human beings on what is perceived, there can be neither music nor musical communication [. . .] Creative listening is [. . .] as fundamental to music as it is to language.[9]

Blacking also stresses that one of the central beliefs in ethnomusicology is that no musical style has 'its own terms'. Rather 'its terms are the terms of its society and culture and of the bodies of the human beings who listen to it, and create and perform it'[10] :

> Ethnomusicology's claim to be a new method of analysing music and music history must rest on an assumption [. . .] that because music is humanly organised sound, there ought to be a relationship

between the patterns of human organisation and the patterns of sound produced as a result of human interaction.[11]

The poet Ciaran Carson has emphasised in an interview in 2001 the importance of human interaction, especially in the traditional Irish music and song sessions he has partaken of as a musician, to the form of his poetry, particularly since his 1987 collection *The Irish For No*. While he published his first collection of poetry, *The New Estate,* in 1976, it would be eleven years before his second collection, *The Irish for No*, appeared. Carson spent the intervening years collecting Irish stories, songs and tunes in the rural areas and backrooms of pubs across the North, and developing his art as a musician while working as Traditional Arts Officer with The Northern Ireland Arts Council. He has admitted to being disillusioned with poetry in the years before the publication of *The Irish for No* because it lacked 'the urgency of traditional music'.[12] Indeed, during this period Carson wrote a short introduction to *Irish Traditional Music*[13] and in an interview in 199l he remarked that this book 'was a kind of blue print for the shape and structure of *The Irish for No*'.[14] He has given an account of this period in an interview describing 'the ethos' of that 'whole area of music in rural areas, the stuff that happened in [these] back rooms' as 'very much about talk, conversation and the craic that went around the music'[15]:

> I do feel that because of [what] that environment of the back room seemed to give you, [it] seemed to offer a world in which art was happening right now, that it was of the split second, of the here and now, of the conversation as you spoke, as you played without putting it forward as a thing on the page which was to be excluded from the world of now and to be mulled over and read on one's own; that sense of art seemed to me to be somehow too aesthetic an idea about the world. [16]

Through these experiences Carson came to appreciate the centrality of this interaction between musicians, and between musicians and audience to the understandings of music itself. In *Last Night's Fun*, for example, he has noted how each session is a new opportunity for communication, where tunes can themselves become 'a conversation piece'.[17]

When Carson returned to writing in the mid 1980s, he tried to recapture in his poetry some of the spirit of those occasions he partook of in public houses, to explore 'the possibility of getting some orality into the poetry'.[18] This exploration would lead him to create work that would

'veer between poetry and prose maybe, veer between music and haphardness, between conversation and form'.[19] This would be reflected in the sound-scapes that characterise Carson's poetry, often featuring conversation, music and song. However, Carson's poetry would also reveal how it is the audience that determines meaning in the text. His work emphasises over and over again the provisionality and subjectiveness of meaning particularly within a contested landscape such as Northern Ireland. In *The Irish for No*, for example, even 'the independent eye of the chameleon' in the poem 'Serial', 'sees blue as green'.[20] In the poem 'Hairline Crack' from *Belfast Confetti,* the narrator tells us that 'It could have been or might have been. Everything Provisional / [. . .] The right hand wouldn't even know it was the right hand; some / would claim it / As the left'.[21] The sequence, 'Letters from the Alphabet', from the collection *Opera Et Cetera*, explores this theme through looking at different interpretations of letters and words. Where the narrator's daughter, in the poem 'Q', sees this letter as part of the picture of either a cat or a bat,[22] the poet-persona tells us that 'the prison that we call Long Kesh / is to the Powers-that-Be *The Maze*' in the poem 'H'.[23]

Sean O'Riada, a figure of major importance within the revival of Irish traditional music since the 1960s, has highlighted what he regards as the distinctive form of Irish traditional music. O'Riada suggests the symbol of the serpent with its tail in its mouth as representative of Irish traditional music. 'It is', he asserts 'essentially a cyclic form'.[24] Ciaran Carson has himself, in his book inspired by traditional Irish music, *Last Night's Fun,* described traditional musicians as been 'engaged with constant repetition and renewal'.[25] Equally, Carson has described the Belfast he grew up in during the 1950s as an 'island within an island. The home circle',[26] a circle he has also described in *Last Night's Fun* as 'a piece of music'.[27] It is this circle of Belfast city that dominates much of his poetic and prose work. Frequently in Carson's work, there is this sense of returning, a sense of a circular motion that often brings the reader back almost to the point from which they began, or where beginnings are but a returning to, or remembering of points left previously. Poem's end with lines such as 'Let me begin again',[28] 'This is not the End',[29] or 'the end is never nigh',[30] and begin with 'a feeling I'd been there before',[31] 'Back again',[32] or 'At last, I remember [. . .]'.[33] Equally, themes and motifs from earlier poems are often returned to in later work, while a poem from a previous collection, 'Belfast Confetti', reappears as the title of a subsequent collection. Indeed, this collection (*Belfast Confetti*), as Christina Hunt Mahony notes, is

characterized by reiteration or echoing. This technique might involve a recurring image, like that of confetti, found literally or figuratively, and often in unlikely places, or it might simply take the form of a repeated word.[34]

As Shane Murphy contends 'Carson's poetry insists on repetition and circularity within the 'narrow ground' of Ulster geography and history'.[35] One such poem is 'Asylum' from his collection *The Irish for No*. The cycle of this poem takes the reader from his Uncle John's apparent mental illness in the first verse to the onset of a similar illness in his Uncle Pat in the fourth – as Carson writes 'it does repeat itself' and is reflected in the apparent repetition of the day he begins the poem with :

> [. . .] as he lifted off the white cloud of
> his cap, it sparked off
> The authoritative onset of this other, needle-in-the-haystack
> day that I
> Began with.[36]

This extract itself includes another characteristic of Carson's poetry influenced by traditional Irish music: his use of enjambment which Carson has admitted mimics the movement in traditional Irish music 'from the end of one unit to the next' where 'the beat may be withheld, or extended'.[37]

'Asylum' includes repetitions of various events in the poem such as the 'yellow bakery van', 'a car backfired' and on both days everything appeared to be 'getting faster'. The sense the poet has in the poem of understanding, or trying to understand, what is going on is described as 'having heard it all / before for real, / What is going on, like that climactic moment of a rounded, / oratorical / Gesture, [. . .]'.[38] The poem also features the repetition of family traits where Uncle John has 'His father's eyes, his mother's nose; and I myself, according to / my mother, / Had his mouth [. . .]'[39]. This last extract also relates to how each repetition is subtly different to its predecessor which, as Carson himself notes in his guide to *Irish Traditional Music*, is another important characteristic of this tradition. 'Variation' Carson writes 'is a principle of traditional music. The same tune is never the same tune twice. A traditional tune printed in a book is not *the* tune; it is a description of one of its many possible shapes'.[40] Variation within Irish traditional music itself is characterised by one of the most distinctive features of the art – the roll. Carson has described the roll as 'a five step rhythmical cluster: you play the note to be rolled, then a note above the anchor note (the 'cut'), then the note, then a note below the note (the 'tip'), and finally the note

again',[41] in other words, a cyclical motif added by musicians at their discretion to add variety to a tune.

The collection from which 'Asylum' is taken, *The Irish For No*, is dedicated to storyteller John Campbell of Mullaghbawn, whose storytelling, according to the acknowledgements in the book, 'suggested some of the narrative procedures of some of these poems'.[42] Neil Corcoran has described *The Irish For No* as 'playing the oral against the literary', arguing that 'the long lines of his poems have something of the sustained, improvisatory panache of the Irish storyteller or *seanchaí*, always aping the movement of the speaking voice in self-involved but audience-aware address, repetitive, self-corrective, elliptical'.[43] Sean Lucy has argued in his paper on 'Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse' that the Irish have 'the aesthetic sensibility of an oral tradition',[44] enjoying the way things are said. In Irish or in English, they compose, Lucy claims, 'in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome', borrowing Ezra Pound's famous expression. Ciaran Carson has himself admitted that while he writes in English 'the ghost of Irish hovers behind it'.[45] The Irish language, for Sean Lucy, is musically organised:

> Typical forms of Hiberno-English have a nature that derives directly from … accented Gaelic mouth-music. The "musical phrases" are made up of a number of well-defined stresses linked by well controlled "runs" of unaccented syllables.[46]

The first powerful and formative influence of Gaelic on verse in English, according to Lucy, was that of Gaelic song and music at the end of the eighteenth century. [47]

Lucy argues that it was in the writings of Thomas Moore (a writer whom Carson has referred to on a number of occasions in his work including the poem 'Dresden' which opens *The Irish For No*[48]) that the force of the Gaelic metric was first felt. When Moore began to write, the dominant foot in English from Chaucer on had been the iambic. The trisyllabic foot was confined primarily to songs for music. With the onset of the Romantic age, and a 'preoccupation with the past, with the nation, and with the countryside, including its speech and music', this 'brought under the eyes of the new writers rhythms of poetry, song and ballad which were to give the models for the new freedom'.[49] Lucy argues that

> Moore's contribution to the reform of practice in substitution [of trisyllabic feet] is considerable [. . . .] At the centre of his achievement is [. . .] the reintroduction of trisyllabic metres to the

serious lyric. It was Scottish and Irish melody which brought the trisyllabic rhythms into the work of [. . .] Moore.[50]

Lucy contends that there is to be found in Gaelic song a spectrum extending from a freedom in the use of the unstressed or decorative syllables, at one end, to an extreme regularity of metrical feet, at the other. However, 'to the ear trained in Irish music and song,' Lucy continues, 'the following metrical effects are usual and natural':

1. A very flexible stressed line often tending towards trisyllabic patterning;
2. Very free substitution in more clearly metrical arrangements, including much trisyllabic substitution in essentially disyllabic lines;
3. The use of essentially trisyllabic metres not only for fast 'light' effects but also for slow deep 'serious' poetic effect.[51]

If we examine Carson's 'Asylum', we can find aspects of these effects, particularly the first and second, in the poem. While the poem follows primarily a disyllabic pattern, there is frequent substitution of trisyllabic feet. The use of the trisyllabic, according to Lucy, allows poetry to approach 'the freedom of natural speech',[52] a characteristic that would be in tune with Carson's stated wish to 'reinstate speech into poetry',[53] and appropriate for a poem concerning a character who 'didn't read' as '…[s]pinning yarns was more his line'.[54] I have included the first two lines of this poem below to illustrate Carson's use of trisyllabic feet. While the first line includes the use of several anapaestic feet, the second includes the substitution of a dactylic foot with the word 'opening'.

   ^   _   ^ ^ _ ^   ^   _ ^ _ ^ _ ^   _   _ ^ ^
The first indication was this repeated tic, the latch jigging and
  _   ^
clicking
  ^ _ ^ _   ^ _ ^ _ ^ _ ^ _ ^ ^ ^ _ ^ ^   _   ^
As he rehearsed the possibility of entering, or opening. Maybe


^ = unstressed
_ = stressed

Another effect, according to Lucy, often found in Irish song is also evident in these lines. This effect Lucy calls 'spreading the stress', which

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means that the voice holds the emphasis or accent over two or even more related syllables. In the first line of 'Asylum' this occurs with the words 'latch jigging' and is a feature that recurs throughout Carson's poetry.

A further aspect of Irish traditional music which Carson has sought to reproduce in his work was, in his own words, 'an idea of the line which [goes] a bit like a reel [. . .] that the line was about that length, four bars of a reel.'[55] A reel is usually divided into two halves, each half of which is eight bars, occasionally with an intro. After each group of four bars, there is usually a return to the initial motif of the first bar, with some variation, before the entire section is repeated at the end of the eighth bar, before moving to the next section, a movement commonly referred to as 'the turn'. Indeed, it is not uncommon for tunes to be repeated several times: as Carson notes in *Last Night's Fun* '[s]uch is the bent of Irish traditional music that tunes repeat: they are played at least twice, or maybe three, four or more times'.[56] It is this repetitive, cyclic nature of Irish traditional music that O'Riada referred to and which Carson's poetry reflects. Within each bar of a tune, there are usually two groups of four notes each, adding up to an eight-note bar. However, despite the fact that reels are normally notated in 4/4 time,[57] a more 'accurate reflection of the traditional sense of rhythm in a reel', according to traditional musician Alan Ng, would be 2/2 timing as within each group there are two heavy-light pairs of notes.[58] James R. Cowdery has also noted the 'feeling of two beats per bar' in a reel and how most 'musicians conceive of reels as duple'[59] while Frank Whelan also notates reels with 2 beats to the bar in his work on Irish dance.[60] With such duple timing, then, in four bars of a reel one would expect to find 8 strong beats.

I have included below a copy of the reel 'Dowd's No. 9' which Carson refers to in his book *Last Night's Fun*, in which the features I have just mentioned are apparent. Indeed, Carson remarks in *Last Night's Fun* on the 'funny, repetitive, circular structure of "Dowd's No. 9"'.[61] Although the tune is notated below in 4/4 timing, I believe 2/2 timing would give a more accurate reflection of the sense of rhythm for musicians in the reel.[62]

'Dowd's No. 9'
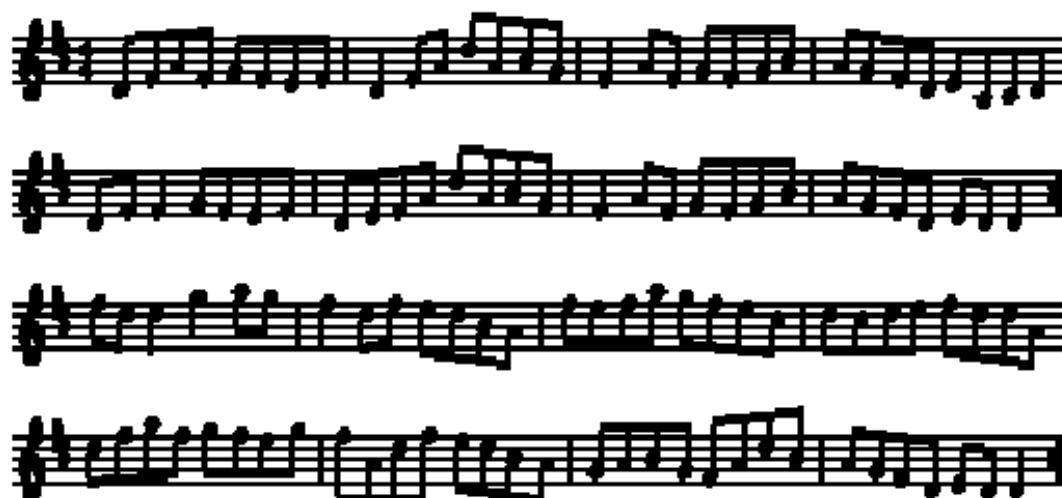
Fred Lerdahl of the Department of Music at Columbia University has recognised similarities between the grouping structures of music and those developed for language by phonologists: 'Grouping Structure, a fundamental component of music theory', Lerdahl writes 'segments a musical surface hierarchically into motives, phrases, and sections. Phonologists have developed the comparable concept of the prosodic hierarchy'.[63] Within this hierarchy, Lerdahl considers 'poetic and musical meter [as] [. . .] formally and cognitively equivalent [. . . .] A poetic or musical meter exists when the perceiver infers conceptually regular levels of beats from the signal'.[64] An examination of the first two lines of Carson's 'Asylum' (above) reveals a comparable number of linguistic stresses to beats in four bars of a reel.

While ethnomusicologists, and increasingly literary theorists, see the interaction between the performer and audience, or text and reader, as crucial to meaning and understanding, this belief is also shared by poet Ciaran Carson. While he has admitted that songs are nothing without an audience, his attempts in his own poetry to recreate the urgency of those moments of communication between performer and audience in traditional Irish sessions equally attests to his belief in the centrality of this interaction to meaning. His poetry also indicates how, within the contested landscape of Northern Ireland, meaning is both provisional and subjective. Carson's poetry also includes characteristics, such as repetition and circularity, associated with traditional Irish music. Indeed, on occasion one can find in Carson's work metres comparable to those found in some forms of traditional Irish music.

Notes and References

[1] Sean O'Boyle, *The Irish Song Tradition* (Dublin: Gilbert Dalton, 1976) 19.

[2] Ciaran Carson, *Last Night's Fun* (New York: North Point P, 1996) 161.

[3] John Blacking, *How Musical is Man* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1973) 32.

[4] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) 74.

[5] Peter J. Rabinowitz, 'Whirl without End: Audience Orientated Criticism', *Contemporary Literary Theory*, eds. G. Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow (Amhurst: U of Massachusetts P, 1989) 81.

[6] Rabinowitz 81.

[7] Barry Laga, *Reading with an eye on reading: An Introduction to Reader-Response* <http://mesastate.edu/~blaga/reader/readerresponsx.html>

[8] Blacking 48.

[9] Blacking 9-10.

[10] Blacking 25.

[11] Blacking 26.

[12] Frank Ormsby, 'Interview with Ciaran Carson', *Linen Hall Review* 8.1 (April 1991) 7.

[13] Ciaran Carson, *Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast: Appletree, 1985) [reprint 1999].

[14] Ormsby 7.

[15] Radio Netherlands, *Aural Tapestry*, Programme on Ciaran Carson from May 16 2001. Available at <http://www.rnw.nl/culture/html/carson010514.html>

[16] Radio Netherlands, *Aural Tapestry*.

[17] Carson, *Last Night's Fun* 90. Incidentally, Carson is talking about the tune 'Dowd's No. 9' which is discussed at more length below.

[18] Ormsby 7.

[19] Radio Netherlands, *Aural Tapestry*.

[20] Ciaran Carson, *The Irish For No* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1988) 53.

[21] Ciaran Carson, *Belfast Confetti* (Wake Forest: Wake Forest UP, 1989) 50.

[22] Ciaran Carson, *Opera Et Ceter* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1996) 27.

[23] Carson, *Opera Et Cetera* 18.

[24] Sean O'Riada, *Our Musical Heritage* (Portlaoise: Fundúireact an Riadaigh I gcomhar le Dolmen, 1982) 21.

[25] Carson, *Last Night's Fun* 15.

[26] John Brown, *Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon, 2002) 142.

[27] Carson, *Last Night's Fun* 33.

[28] Ciaran Carson, 'Fear', *The Twelfth of Never*, (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1998) 65.

[29] Carson, 'Army', *The Irish For No* 38.

[30] Carson, 'Mountain Dew', *The Twelfth of Never* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1998) 42.

[31] Carson, 'Serial', *The Irish For No* 51.

[32] Carson, 'Slate Street School', *The Irish For No* 46.

[33] Carson, 'Zulu', *Opera Et Cetera* 92.

[34] Christina Hunt Mahony, *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1998) 83.

[35] Shane Murphy, 'Sonnets, Centos, and Long Lines: Muldoon, Paulin, McGuckian and Carson', *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 204.

[36] Carson, *The Irish for No* 57.

[37] Rand Brandes, 'Interview with Ciaran Carson', *Irish Review* 8 (Spring 1990): 82-83.

[38] Carson, *The Irish for No* 55.

[39] Carson, *The Irish for No* 54.

[40] Carson, *Irish Traditional Music* 7-8.

[41] Carson, *Last Night's Fun* 54.

[42] Carson, *The Irish for No* 6.

[43] Neil Corcoran, '"One Step Forward, Two Steps Back": Ciaran Carson's *The Irish for No*', *The Chosen Ground*, ed. Corcoran (Bridgend: Seren, 1992) 217.

[44] Sean Lucy, 'Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse', *Irish University Review* 8. 2 (1978): 159. Lucy's study develops previous work in this area by Thomas MacDonagh and P.C. Power.

[45] Ciaran Carson, 'The Other', *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, eds. W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2000) 235.

[46] Lucy 159.

[47] Lucy 153.

[48] Carson, *The Irish for No* 13. Other allusions to Moore in Carson's work include the poem 'Let Erin Remember' (the title of one of 'Moore's Melodies') in the collection *The Twelfth of Never* (36).

[49] Lucy 155.

[50] Lucy 156.

[51] Lucy 157.

[52] Lucy 160.

[53] Ormsby 6.

[54] Carson, *The Irish for No* 56.

[55] Radio Netherlands, *Aural Tapestry*.

[56] Carson, *Last Night's Fun* 29.

[57] I am very aware that traditional Irish music is not restricted by the parameters of classical notation, and indeed, traditional music being primarily an art passed on in performance and orally, musical literacy was not widespread among musicians. As Timothy Rice has noted of Bulgarian traditional music "The verbal knowledge about music captured in music terminology, theory and notation allows the corresponding categories to be actively taught in a particular way. However, in aurally transmitted traditions without such terminology and theory, music knowledge and categories are acquired in a different way." [Timothy Rice, May it fill your soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 66.] Nonetheless, for purposes of a comparative study of literature and traditional

music, I believe classical notation is useful (though admittedly limited) in indicating textually the primary stresses found in a piece of traditional music.

[58] Alan Ng, 'Frequently Asked Questions: Rhythm Definitions', *Irish Traditional Music Tune Index. Alan Ng's Tunography,* http://www.irishtune.info/rhythm/. Ng, as well as being a traditional Irish musician, teaches at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and is the author of their online course in Celtic Music <http://www.dcs.wisc.edu/lsa/online/celtic.htm>

[59] James R. Cowdery, *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland* (Kent: Kent State UP, 1990) 18.

[60] Frank Whelan, *The Complete Guide to Irish Dance*

[61] Carson, *Last Night's Fun* 88.

[62] Indeed, in Martin Hayes and Denis Cahill's live version of 'Dowd's No. 9', it is possible to hear Hayes beating this 2/2 timing with his foot while playing this tune. Martin Hayes and Dennis Cahill, *Live in Seattle* (Danbury: Green Linnet Records, 1999): Track 5.

[63] Fred Lerdahl. 'Sounds of Poetry Viewed as Music', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences: Part VI Music and Related Cognitive Abilities* (2001) 930: 337.

[64] Lerdahl 340-341.