Experiencing the Moment in Song: An Analysis of the Irish Traditional Singing Session

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I would like to start by playing an example of the kind of music I will be discussing today. This song was recorded at an Irish singing session in Dublin in April 2011 and posted on YouTube (Audio 1). While you listen I would encourage you to close your eyes or look at the floor because typically listeners don't look at the performer and singers do not look at the audience in a session setting. I ask that you do this because removing the visual interactions of performance may allow listening and sound to come to the foreground in your experience of the song. This will be a key theme throughout my paper. I also ask that you listen for the discrepancies in pitch, tempo, and inflection when group singing occurs.

Audio 1: "The Queen's Bed," sung by Tim Quan. Recorded at An Góilín Traditional Singing Club on April 29, 2011. [Posted on YouTube [1] by thetwangman on May 17, 2011].

This is an example of a song and performance style that can be found at the An Góilín Traditional Singing Club on Friday nights between 9pm-1am in Dublin, Ireland. For the last 33 years, Irish traditional singers have been meeting regularly to sing and listen to songs at An Góilín. The weekly gathering, called a singing session, usually attracts 30–50 people. This group includes mostly Irish singers with musical backgrounds in English and Irish language song, who vary in age, occupation, and knowledge of the Irish language. In these ways the group is representative of the diversity of the Dublin traditional singing scene.

During my MA fieldwork at An Góilín in 2008, my attention was continually drawn to how singers and listeners would interact and communicate in performance. In the club, it is common for songs to be sung from a seated position, with the singer's eyes closed or looking down. Likewise, listeners are seated, with eyes downcast or closed. This de-emphasizing of the visual aspects of performance places greater emphasis on the experience of sound and the expression of lyrical content for singers and listeners alike. A common response emerged when I asked singers about performing songs in this way. Singers told me they were not performing songs; rather, they were sharing them. Elaborating on their understanding of sharing, singers said they were not singing *at* an audience, but *to* or *with* a group of friends, acquaintances, and strangers that share a similar interest in Irish song. Removing the visual aspects of performance from the lived perception of the song contributes to the informality of sharing.

In this paper I will conduct a phenomenological examination of how this sharing and communicative interaction occurs in moments when group singing happens during solo song. Specifically, I want to look at these moments, which feature intentional participatory discrepancies, as examples of Alfred Schutz's "mutual tuning-in" (Schutz 1951) relationship between musicians and audiences. First, I will present a brief overview of Schutz's philosophy and the concept of participatory discrepancies, which inform my analysis of these moments.

Schutz's phenomenology of music was largely based on an examination of communicative awareness and interaction in musical performance. This interaction occurs through "the reciprocal sharing of the other's flux of experiences in inner time," which he called "mutual tuning-in" (Schutz 1951:96). For Schutz, mutual tuning-in takes place in a musical context where musicians and audiences engage with each other through face-to-face interactions. Tuning-in is the process through which a "We" relationship is formed between musicians and audiences as they share and live through a connected inner and outer time experience of the music. This shared experience enables musicians to work together in sync to produce the music that the composer wants to be communicated to the audience.

Although there are issues with Schutz's analysis, which focuses on Western art music, the concept of mutual tuning-in as a means of looking at musical performance interaction and communication has been useful for several anthropological and ethnomusicological studies of performance (see Downey 2002; Porcello 1998; Shannon 2003; Stone 1982). Thomas Porcello (1998), in particular, challenges Schutz's emphasis on only examining mutual tuning-in through face-to-face relationships. Porcello suggests that the mutual tuning-in relationship becomes complicated and more complex when considering recorded musical events, which alter the temporal framework in which a musical experience takes place. Like Porcello, I take issue with Schutz's understanding of face-to-face intersubjective encounters because Schutz's theory relies on visual-intensive interaction through facial expression and gesture to create experiential togetherness.

Instead, it is my contention that the experience of sound can be explored further through participatory discrepancies. Charles Keil's (1987) theory of participatory discrepancies argues that complete synchronization between participants does not happen in musical practice; therefore discrepancies must contribute to how music is made meaningful in experience because discrepancies are embedded within performance interactions. Keil describes two kinds of participatory discrepancies: processual discrepancies (or discrepancies in timing) and textural discrepancies (or discrepancies in tuning). Participatory discrepancies acknowledge the "micro-details" (Stone 2008:171) of musical interaction and the negotiations that take place between musicians, and between performers and audiences. Therefore participatory discrepancies should be integral to an analysis of Schutz's tuning-in relationship. By focusing on these discrepancies we are able to gain a more detailed perspective of how social interactions are experienced in musical practice.

"Tuning-in" at An Góilín

So how does "mutual tuning-in" occur in An Góilín? Mutual tuning-in is complex in this setting because of the variety of social relationships that are created and sustained in various moments of musical interaction during the time frame of a single night, and continually over an extended time period, in some cases years and decades. Because the majority of singers at An Góilín have been regular attendees for many years, friendships and acquaintanceships have been able to develop around the practice of Irish song. These social relationships inform the ways in which listening to singers takes place. These singers come to know each other socially and musically, and thus have specific knowledge of each other's singing style, standard song repertoire, and based on previous experiences, have expectations about the kind of interactions that will occur when certain songs are sung or certain singers are singing.

Knowing each other develops not only from interacting socially in the club setting but also from interacting musically. These musical interactions occur through listening, solo singing, and singing together. The club website emphasizes the importance of this: "We set a very high standard in listening. The rule of the club is: if someone is singing, reciting or performing in any way, total attention is given to the performance" (www.goilin.com [2]). While listening is given primary importance in the club's rules, performing is also given equal importance in practice. For example, during my first evening at the club I only listened to other singers and sparingly socialized with those around me. Though I felt welcome, I didn't feel like people took much interest in me. However, after singing a song during my second visit to the club, I found that people took an active interest in complimenting me on my song and talking to me about music. A shared interest in songs and singing brings people to the club and informs their interactions with one another in this setting. The emphasis on participation in the club leads me to believe that mutual tuning-in through song takes precedence over the establishment of relationships through conversation. This is demonstrated in my example: singers in the club needed to tune-in with me through song before they were willing to accept me into the social life of the club.

Although most singing is done independently, there are two moments of combined singing that take place throughout the course of most Friday-evening sessions. The first is when multiple singers begin singing different

songs at the same time and briefly compete for the right to sing. This usually happens after an extended break from singing, when talking begins to overshadow the purpose of the evening, which is singing. This is done, to my knowledge, without any social, visual, or sonic cues. Again, this is based on knowing about the dynamics of the club and the expectations people have for the order of the evening. When singing is absent for too long multiple people feel the need to break through the numerous conversations with song.

The second moment of combined singing takes place during some songs, though definitely not all songs, when solo singing becomes group singing. This moment, which can range from the singing of a few words at the end of a verse to a slightly longer chorus verse of a few lines, blurs the boundaries between singer and listener, and performer and audience. This is heard in the example I played when the solo singing voice blends into the group. These performance boundaries, which have seemingly defined parameters in the beginning of a song, are crossed over by singers and listeners as they both become singing-listeners. I propose that the blurring of these boundaries during song is a kind of tuning-in experience that makes obvious the already present intersubjective interactions that are occurring between singer and listeners before these thresholds are crossed.

These moments represent two kinds of mutual tuning-in at the club. In the first case, two or more singers have a shared awareness of expectations in this musical environment; they expect that singing and listening should occur in the place of conversation. When more than one singer takes the initiative to start singing and everyone else almost immediately stops talking to listen, the moment signals a shift between how people experience different modes of communication (i.e. talking, singing). When conversation stops in order to listen, people begin tuning-in together through music.

In the case of group singing, tuning-in occurs when the threshold between singer and listener is crossed. Listeners begin singing and the solo singer blends into the group by foregrounding listening in her lived experience of the moment. What is interesting about this moment is that the intentional and highly audible participatory discrepancies in the group singing 1) reflect the value placed on non-standardized voices and listening and 2) affect the phenomenological experience of time-consciousness during performance.

A more detailed description of these participatory discrepancies will be useful first. Keil describes participatory discrepancies as both processual and textural (1987:275). In other words, for a song to “be personally involving and socially valuable” it must be both “out of time” and “out of tune” (Keil 1987:275). I consider these moments of group singing to be full of participatory discrepancies because when listeners become singers there is little attempt to standardize the singing of the song beyond using the same words. Instead, such moments of group singing intentionally feature different pitches, vocal timbres, spoken accents, largely improvised attempts at harmonizing with the soloist, and discrepant speeds of singing. These discrepancies are heard in the example played at the beginning. Because of inconsistencies in attendance and due to the diversity of songs performed, standardization of group singing is not feasible or desired. Instead, participatory discrepancies allow individual voices to be distinguished from others, while still creating a shared group aesthetic. Therefore, I assert that tuning-in is actively achieved through participatory discrepancy, because discrepant singing is a meaningful mode of communication in this context.

Time-consciousness During Performance at An Góilín

I will now discuss how the mutual tuning-in moment of group singing affects the experience of time-consciousness during performance for the singing-listeners. First, I want to acknowledge that this singing practice takes place in a bar. Although my research did not address the effects of alcohol on the experience of singing and time in the club, it is a factor that should be considered in future research on the experience of singing, listening, and performative time-consciousness.

The use of participatory discrepancies remains an important aspect of the shared inner time experience that Schutz relates to mutual tuning-in. Much of Schutz’s analysis of the face-to-face relationship relies on visual interaction between musicians and audiences, who share “not only a section of time but also a sector of space” (1951:95). However, Schutz’s reliance on visual perception through facial expressions and gestures is not as relevant in this setting where most participants sing and listen with their eyes closed. When these visual interactions are removed, other factors, such as the participatory discrepancies described in this paper, must be considered in order to account for the creation of a shared inner time experience between performers and audience. Although the singers share a physical “sector of space,” musical communication and interaction is primarily located in the acoustic space of the club.

Schutz describes shared inner time flux as the intersubjective experience of duration, which is different from outer, objective time that can be measured by a clock. Because music exists across time, that is, musical ideas and meanings are built upon a succession of notes that must be grasped, retained and related back in order, it is experienced in both inner, subjective time and outer, objective time.

At An Góilín, a shared inner time flux, or in other words, a shared experience of duration, is accomplished through listening and the musical discrepancies of participation. The song begins as a solo, which establishes the tune, tempo and vocal timbre in a shared experience of the song for listeners. However, when group singing occurs, the interaction of different voices through discrepant speeds of singing affects the shared experience of the song because it reflects how individual singers feel the duration of the phrase should be sung in that moment. For example, some singers will sing slower, while others will sing at the speed established by the soloist. This means that the sound produced in these moments of group singing reflects the variety of voices in the club and the diversity of their experiences of duration.

However, the diversity of these discrepancies does not mean that tuning-in or a shared experience of duration is not occurring. Rather, the discrepancies are engaged in an active process of creating togetherness. Mutual tuning-in at An Góilín is primarily located in the experience of sound. This is best observed when group singing transforms subjective experiences of song into intersubjective communication and sharing.

Conclusion

While many of the ideas in this paper require additional exploration in practice, which will be undertaken during my upcoming doctoral fieldwork, this paper has introduced some of the phenomenological approaches to interaction and time perception that have been largely unexplored in relation to Irish traditional singing practices. By taking a phenomenological approach to Irish traditional singing, we can move toward deeper understandings of communication and interaction in performance practice. The example of how participatory discrepancies contribute to the mutual tuning-in relationship in this Irish singing session provides one avenue through which such understandings can be achieved.

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[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3A4P0pjF984
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