

The CONCEPT OF "SESSION"

Bill Black

In Irish traditional music circles, the concept of the "session" is crucial. For those who may not be familiar with it, I thought a brief explanation might be helpful.

The term "session" - the Gaelic version "séisiún" is sometimes seen, rarely correctly spelled - simply means a get-together of traditional musicians for the purpose of playing tunes, primarily for their own enjoyment. It shares a common ancestry with the "jams" and "jam sessions" of jazz, bluegrass, old-time, and other musical genres.

Singing may be involved in a traditional session but if present at all is likely to play a secondary role. The main focus of a traditional session is the dance music - the "JRH" (jigs, reels, and hornpipes) that form the backbone of the Irish traditional repertoire.

Pub sessions are a relatively recent arrival on the traditional scene, replacing the house sessions and "kitchen rackets" of days past. The pub session seems to date back to the late 60's and early 70's here in the Northeast, and probably to about the same time in Chicago.

The idea rapidly gained in popularity as the number of younger musicians interested in the Irish traditional genre soared, and it's probably not too far wrong to say that there are currently very few towns or cities of any size that don't have some kind of regular get-together of musicians playing Irish traditional music.

Cities like Boston and New York have multiple sessions every night of the week. Sessions come and go, as interest waxes and wanes and pub owners change their entertainment policies from trad to sports bar to karaoke and

The CONCEPT OF "SESSION"

Bill Black

back to trad ... it's all part of the "scene", and musicians are used to the evanescent quality of much of it. It's rare to see a session with the longevity of the one held on Mondays at the Greenbriar in Boston's Brighton neighborhood, which is closing in on its 30th year (!) (I was at the first one.)

Our longest-running regular session down here on the Cape dates back to the middle 90's or so, but the trad scene down here has expanded considerably as the result of an influx of new musicians and the increased attention being paid to Irish trad by musicians who have lived here for a while.

As mentioned above, an Irish traditional session is really not much different from the "jam session" in which jazz musicians participate, or the "jam" for bluegrass and old-time musicians. It's basically an open gathering of musicians who play together utilizing as a basis tunes that are known to all (or most) of the musicians present.

In the Irish traditional repertoire, there are roughly fifty dance tunes of various types that could be considered a basic "tune vocabulary" in the sense that anyone aspiring to be an Irish traditional musician would expect to be acquainted with them. This "basic tune vocabulary" forms the nucleus from which the session develops; in the course of any session, most of the tunes in that basic vocabulary will be played.

I have put together a list of what I consider such a basic repertoire of tunes. The list can be found in the Reference Library section of my website (URL on last page below).

But most sessions consist of musicians who play together regularly, and in that context it is expected that as their playing skills and familiarity with the genre increase, they will share a knowledge of tunes that are outside the basic list.

The CONCEPT OF "SESSION"

Bill Black

In addition to the "chestnuts" that everybody knows, most sessions have an additional number of tunes that all the participants play, tunes that musicians in the next county or town may not play or even have heard of. When a Chicago musician visits Dublin, or a Cork musician visits Hyannis, it's unlikely that even the most experienced player will know all the tunes at the visited session. But he or she need not feel neglected if the folks at the home session are willing to revert to the "basic vocabulary" mentioned, which the visitor will undoubtedly know.

A traditional session can be "open" or "closed", depending on the degree of welcome an outside musician can count on receiving. There are subtleties and nuances to all of this, e.g. a session may advertise itself as "open" but in reality not make an effort to accommodate musicians who are not in regular attendance.

A session may be "closed" by its organizers in an attempt to limit the number of musicians in attendance, or to control the instrumentation in some way, so that ten drummers or guitar players don't all show up at the same time. It might be closed to make sure that the "regulars" maintain control of what tunes are played, in effect minimizing the chances that they'll be exposed to a lot of material with which they are unfamiliar.

Over the years I've invented a formula for determining how "open" a session is: if it's miked, and there are X number of microphones for X number of "regulars", then it's a gig and not a session! One mike to ensure the music can be heard in a noisy pub is okay, but not a battery of them (at least not to my way of thinking).

Whatever the rationale behind them, I don't run any closed sessions myself. I perceive them as alien to what I consider the community spirit for which a session exists. As far as I'm concerned, the more musicians the better, and I

The CONCEPT OF "SESSION"

Bill Black

rely on their own sense of good taste to make their musical endeavors conform to what the rest of us are doing. If we're playing a tune they should know, they're always welcome to participate. If it's one that's unfamiliar to them, they can listen and maybe try to play along the last time through (we play most tunes three times - not sure why, but we're not the only ones who do that). If there are three drummers, they can play together at a reduced sound level, or somebody can drop out for a bit and let the others play.

Most of the time, this "laissez faire" attitude works, but if it doesn't, I'll intervene as graciously as circumstances permit!

Sessions are for socializing among musicians, for entertaining an audience, and perhaps most important, for putting into effect the "traditional" aspect of traditional music, i.e. a passing along of the musical experience from older to younger players. It's the way that all traditional musicians have learned their craft. In former days it involved actually being in the presence of older musicians willing to pass on the gift; these days it's more likely to begin with exposure to recordings and broadcasts (and YouTube videos).

If a younger musician is fortunate enough to have willing older musicians nearby, nothing substitutes for the experience of "live learning" - after all, anyone with a small amount of musical skill can learn to play notes or sing words. It's the process of getting *behind* the notes or the song words that separates a really dedicated musician from someone who is merely imitating what he or she hears, without any recognition of his role - and responsibility - as the receiver of a great gift that has been handed down by many generations.

The session then serves a double purpose for most of the musicians who are involved: the sharing of one's own musical abilities and respect for the efforts of the musicians of past generations who have preceded us in passing along this wonderfully rich art form.

The CONCEPT OF "SESSION"

Bill Black

Today's Irish traditional musicians are indeed standing the shoulders of giants, and every session participant must keep that in mind as she fiddles away on the reels, jigs, and hornpipes that we all love (and will in our turn pass along to those who follow us).

The last point I would like to make concerns session tempos, i.e. the speed at which tunes are played. (These remarks are directed at what might be termed "standard-speed" sessions, in contrast to the slower speeds usually expected at so-called "learners' sessions).

In my experience it should be up to the session alpha to make sure that tunes are being performed at rates of speed that are most comfortable for the greatest number of attendees. This will usually involve slowing down the gang who confuses breathless tempos with great competence as a traditional player (an idea that seems most prevalent among players who aren't fortunate enough to have learned their music from a live source). Often it's a function of nerves - we've all been through the scenario where we've been called upon to begin a tune and soon discover to our shock and horror that we're trying to play it at least 657% faster than we ever would at home.

This impediment usually clears up once the player in question becomes more comfortable with his or her surroundings. If it doesn't, a gentle (private) hint from the session leader or another trusted musician should be the order of the day.

A session is after all a group endeavor, and if my attempt to set speed records is making everyone else uncomfortable, then it's up to me to tone things down (or move on to another session, where the same situation will probably repeat itself).

Conversely, if I'm just learning the music and tend naturally to play everything at a much more leisurely pace than everyone else, I shouldn't really expect everyone to reduce their speeds to conform with mine. At any session that I run, each musician gets a chance to play on their own, maybe as a lead-in to a set of tunes that everyone

The CONCEPT OF "SESSION"

Bill Black

else known. Learners are as welcome as everyone else to contribute in this way, and most older musicians that I know - perhaps recalling their own novice days - will treat a newer slower musician with respect while he's doing his utmost to get through his party piece.

But there are limits to this tolerance, and the newbie should be sensitive enough to the spirit of the session to realize that she really doesn't have to play that quarter-speed version of "Boys of Blue Hill" that she's been working on any more than once. Sometimes the "less is more" dictum works as well in session playing as it does in many other facets of life!

To summarize: the ideal session exists to make as many musicians (and audience) as happy as possible. If my idea of happy is playing the Coleman Reel Set at a brisk tempo, fine. If your idea of happy is playing the "Ballydesmond Set" more like a slow march than a polka, also fine. A good session will have room for both of us!

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Here's the URL for that list of session tunes:

www.capeirish.com/ref_lib/session_tunes0419.pdf