



Presentation to the Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

Music in Ireland Today

23 Bealtaine, 2018

Dia Dhaoibh go léir. My name is Orla McDonagh. My background in music is that I trained as a concert pianist in the Julliard School for the Performing Arts in New York and completed post graduate studies at Indiana University in Bloomington. I spent 18 years performing and lecturing in the United States before returning to Ireland where I am now Head of the DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama. Since 2011 I have been involved in Music Evaluation in the EU with the Association of European Conservatoires and the European Quality Assurance agency MusiQuE. As a result of this experience I have a huge interest in Music Education which is where I will begin my talk today. I will then speak about music education legislation, orchestral provision, funding and tax legislation and leave you with some recommendations for your consideration.

Music Education in Ireland

Everyone of us in life is exposed to music, whether it is rock, pop, classical, traditional or jazz. No matter what socio-economic group we come from, an education in music is the one aspect of education – allied to literacy – that can add value to the whole of our lives.

Research in recent decades has shown the vital connection between music and the brain. Everybody is entitled to an education in music.

In 1998, at its World Conference on Cultural Policy in Stockholm, UNESCO adopted an action plan, the focal point of which is “the right of all persons to education, art and culture”. For the first time, the development of a cultural identity was granted the status of a human right. Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child agrees to respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and to encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for creative and artistic activity.

I reference this because in Ireland, most children are not literate in music when they leave primary school. This has a knock-on effect in post-primary schools where the standard of music education must begin with the assumption that students have no background in music and all progress is hampered by this reality. Furthermore, Irish university music departments and performing arts conservatories have recognized for some time that a large number of incoming music students possess a remedial standard of fundamental music education as they begin their third level studies.

It is critical that all primary school children in Ireland are exposed to the diversity of musical traditions in this country and that they finish primary school with a basic standard of literacy in music. There are some schools where this is done well, where pupils are lucky enough to benefit from the expertise of teachers who are particularly interested in music, but as a

general rule, this is not the experience for the majority of pupils. This was not always the case in Ireland but it has been so for some time. The 1985 Deaf Ears report described the situation in these terms:

“...the overall situation is little short of appalling (...). The majority of Irish primary school children leave school musically illiterate, with little vocal or aural training and with a repertoire of songs that is usually learned by rote.” – Deaf Ears (1985)

Intervention at primary school level, by either supporting our primary teachers in order to reach this goal or by employing specialist music teachers with pedagogy training in the schools, is the most important move that we can make to correct this educational failure in our country.

To make up for this parents are paying for private music lessons and in some cases traveling long distances every week to ensure their children receive a quality music education. If a family does not have the socioeconomic means to pay for lessons and to buy an instrument, or lives in an area of the country without access to music education, it often means that a quality music education is simply not available to that child.

Another serious issue that needs to be addressed is that a large portion of music education is delivered in Ireland without regulation of any kind. It is important to say that there is a long history of private music teaching throughout the country and there are many dedicated and excellent teachers who do phenomenal work in this area. However, there is no quality assurance or regulation of the profession. This means that parents often have little idea whether or not the education they are paying for (and that their child is spending hours practising on) is of an appropriate standard. Unlike the teachers in primary or post-primary education, a private music teacher in Ireland is not required to have any qualification.

Apart from the challenges this presents to Ireland in terms of music education for all children, we also run the risk of missing the opportunity to support our most gifted young people, who could have a future as professional musicians, by identifying them early and providing pathways for them towards the type of specialist education needed to reach their highest goals.

Additional Benefits of a quality music education

A quality music education provides many benefits beyond simply the love of music alone. Recent research has proved that movement and rhythm enrich language and motor development (Brewer & Campbell, 1991) and that physically playing music activates both hemispheres of the brain which is thought to make the brain more conducive to learning.

Music instruction demonstrates improved spatial-temporal skills in children over time. These skills are especially important in solving multistep problems encountered in architecture, engineering, maths, art, gaming and particularly working with computers.

Research from the University of Kansas in 2007 revealed that students in US primary schools with superior music education programmes scored approximately 22% higher in English and 20% higher in maths on standardized tests compared to schools with low-quality music programmes, regardless of socioeconomic differences between schools.

In a study by Columbia University, it was revealed that students who participate in the arts are often more cooperative with teachers and peers, have more self-confidence, and are better able to express themselves (Judson).

Benchmarking Ireland: Music Education Legislation and Orchestral Provision

The European Music Union's 2010 report on Music Schools in Europe provides statistics on music education provision throughout Europe. The report titles its entry on Ireland as "*Music education for the privileged*" and goes on to say that "*in Ireland, a country with an ancient (folk) music tradition, the State pays very little attention to something which many consider to be dear to the Irish heart...there is no national legislation to regulate music education, nor are there generally applicable curricula.*"

The 2010 report indicates that music education legislation exists in 17 out of the 27 European countries. EMU states that to be able to fulfill a public educational mandate a binding syllabus or curriculum is necessary, which can be found in all of the countries with this legislation. It also placed Ireland 25th out of 27 countries in terms of the numbers of students receiving instrumental/vocal training, ranking just above Lichtenstein and the Faroe Islands. This is shocking for a country that prides itself on having a great musical culture.

Regarding orchestral provision, a 2016 Mediatique report places Ireland 27th out of 27 European countries with populations above 2 million in terms of symphony orchestra provision.

The recently released RTE orchestral report cites World Bank data noting that the countries with the most extensive orchestral provisioning (Switzerland, Finland, Norway) rank highly in terms of overall cultural participation within Europe.

It is clear that Ireland is not doing well in benchmarking exercises concerning music education legislation and orchestral provision.

Public/Private Funding vs. Tax Law

One of the challenges we have in Ireland is the lack of sustainable and diverse funding streams for our arts organisations. Too many organisations rely on year-to-year funding from the state, a situation which makes it difficult to plan far ahead and forces arts organisations to exist in a constant state of stress about their ability to survive. Irish tax law does not encourage private citizens to donate monies to music organizations by virtue of the fact that there is no tax incentive for the individual to do so. Countries that do this (e.g. the U.S.A.) encourage an additional funding stream for interested citizens to become engaged in supporting their favourite arts organisations. At the same time this encourages the arts organisations to develop a strong relationship with their audience, further developing their impact and relevance to the communities they serve. I believe if Ireland had different tax legislation in this regard it would provide much needed support to the music organizations in this country.

Past, Present and Future

For the last 70 years, multiple reports have been commissioned by various government and arts entities to evaluate the state of music in Ireland. Despite this, remarkably little has been actioned.

The Place of the Arts in Irish Education report (Benson, 1979) stated "*the arts have been neglected in Irish education...This judgement was based on experience, but also reflected the conclusions of relevant reports over the last thirty years.*" The thirty years in question takes us back to 1949.

The 1996 PIANO Report reads “*anything we propose must be overshadowed by the lack of action on the recommendations made in the Benson Report of 1979 [The Place of the Arts in Irish Education] and the ‘Deaf Ears?’ report of 1985. We would request that every person interested in the future of music in Ireland ... should re-read these reports and consider their comments*”.

Indeed the main recommendation of the most recent report commissioned by RTE on the orchestras mirrors that of the PIANO report from over 20 years ago. In Finland there are 29 state funded orchestras. In Ireland, a country of similar population size, there are moves to reduce the two to one. The RTE report states that the closure of either or both orchestras would leave a significant gap in Irish cultural life and place Ireland out of step with almost every other European nation.

Recommendations

In closing I wish to make the following four recommendations:

1. That immediate steps are taken to ensure that all children in Ireland are musically literate by the time they leave primary school.
2. That Ireland moves to amend tax legislation to allow tax benefits for private citizens who donate to arts organizations.
3. That Ireland moves to establish Music Education legislation which would ensure:
 - that all children would receive a quality music education regardless of their socioeconomic background or the part of the country in which they grow up.
 - that the music education industry is regulated in order to ensure standards and equity of provision for all who study music in the country.
4. That we do not wait to resolve some of the long-term issues facing Music in Ireland. Positive action, taken now, will improve the lives of the next generations of Irish citizens in eminently measurable ways, as evidenced in the available research and multiple examples provided in other countries.

Go raibh maith agaibh.