

## Redefining Tradition in Irish Music Through Innovation in The Blue Room

Willow Dalehite

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In this excerpt, Willow develops a rich and multilayered **motive** for writing about the Martin Hayes Quartet’s album *The Blue Room*. She begins with a **hook** that **orients** the reader to the album and prefigures her **motive**. She then establishes an explicit **personal motive**, which is interwoven with her **primary source motive**. Having made her question clear, she deftly answers it in her **thesis** and later **analysis**.*

### *Excerpt*

Out of the silence, there is a quiet wavering octave—two Es. The ear strains to listen. Suddenly, the quiet gives way to a new sound—a rich, velvet melody floating unmeasured above the faint tonal notes. It rises and falls in a major pentatonic scale, a gracefully ornamented melodic line that is free in both meter and expression. It speeds through some notes and lingers on others, presenting its sound, range, and musical ability, telling me—this is the bass clarinet. It’s an introduction, like meeting a friend for the first time—one that’s new and exciting but that I know I’ll get along with. The tonal octave gives way to gentle arpeggios between the two Es on the Hardanger d’Amore, the velvety sound of the bass clarinet begins its final descent, and a few plucked notes on the guitar begin to fill in the musical space. Then comes the sound we were waiting for, one we know well—the fiddle—and the Martin Hayes Quartet is complete.

Listening to the first track on the album *The Blue Room* by the Martin Hayes Quartet was like waking up to a world where everything is the same but in different colors. I’ve been learning, playing, and listening to traditional Irish music for ten years, the fiddle my instrument. In the process, I have learned from various experienced traditional Irish fiddle players, including Martin Hayes; in doing so, I was exposed to a particular musical context for what is considered “traditional” in the Irish music community. *The Blue Room* took a significant step away from that context. It still very much contained that iconic style of fiddle playing that I had come to associate with Martin Hayes, but it was surrounded by new and different sounds. It was a refreshing way to experience what I had come to regard as familiar; the album placed the familiar into an unfamiliar context. The newness of the overall sound forced me to listen to the traditional melodies in contrast with non-traditional ones. It led me to wonder: what about

traditional Irish music makes it traditional? The album itself is an album of traditional Irish music at its heart, but I no longer had such a sure understanding of what that meant. Sometimes in order to discover what something is, it is important to understand what it is not, or in this case, doesn't have to be. The innovative nature of this album, in this sense, provides a framework for rethinking and redefining what it means to be "traditional" in Irish music....

When asked to describe *The Blue Room* in three words, Martin Hayes said, "melody, freedom, feeling" (O'Reilly 2018).... The other artists on the album—Doug Weiselman, Liz Knowles, and Dennis Cahill—work together to provide depth for Hayes' melody without overpowering it, as well as to confer a richer and more complex sound that is outside of the usual realm of what is typically heard on a "traditional" album....

Doug Weiselman's playing of the bass clarinet throughout the album is mainly focused on providing a resonant droning of notes and rhythmic baseline that help establish the foundation of the tunes' melodic structure. However, there are several moments when the bass clarinet is allowed to show a range of its true colors—the most memorable of which is at the beginning of the album, in "The Boy in the Gap". The melody established here serves to introduce the bass clarinet into the world of traditional Irish music, establishing the intent of the album to deviate from a more conventional traditional sound. This had to be carefully done—not just any melody would have been appropriate for that introductory role in the album. The use of the pentatonic major scale reflects many of the musical patterns familiar in the tradition; the lack of meter and combination of lingering notes and speedy runs is very reminiscent of one of the most important aspects of traditional music—Sean nós. This traditional style of Irish singing contains many of these same qualities, and the similarity between the richness of the human voice and the velvet sound of the bass clarinet, when combined with these shared features, gives a new voice to a very old musical idea in the tradition. It serves to begin the album with the spirit of tradition conveyed through a non-traditional medium....

In this way, the addition of non-traditional instrumentation and melodic structure is able to complement the traditional tunes Martin Hayes is delivering, but in a way that serves the tunes and gives them a new flavor, rather than detracting from them. So what does this tell us about tradition? It is clear that the incorporation of a traditional melody is essential for the music to be considered traditional, but it is also clear that including other less traditional complementary melodies doesn't necessarily detract from the traditional nature of the music. In fact, the innovations in terms of melody and instrumentation developed here contribute to an important part of traditional music—the creative expression of the performing artists. If, for

example, “Paddy Fahy’s Reel” was played exactly as Paddy Fahy would have played it, this inherent and essential part of the tradition is, somewhat ironically, lost. In addition, it is clear that traditional melodies can be successfully played on non-traditional instruments, as shown in “Mo Mhúirnín Bán”, when Weiselman plays the traditional slow air on the bass clarinet, complete with traditional ornamentation. However, amidst all the additional dialogue and different musical flavors, it is necessary that the tune remain easily discernible and recognizably Irish, in accordance with the musical patterns that have been established over generations.

## *Author Commentary*

Willow Dalehite

When *The Blue Room* was released in 2018 and the Martin Hayes Quartet went on tour, I was a freshman at Princeton. I was in the audience when they played fifteen minutes away from campus in Hopewell, New Jersey. What I was able to bring to this paper, written in 2019 for *Seminar in Ethnomusicology*, was a personal experience of playing traditional Irish music, on a traditional instrument (the fiddle), and having played with and learned from experienced musicians in the tradition, including Martin Hayes. Studies of a musical culture often require a level of immersion in both playing music and listening to it, to understand how sounds are made and what they contribute to the cultural experience of the music. I was able to interview Liz Knowles, another of my former teachers and a member of the quartet, as well as analyze musical decisions present within the album to paint a picture of how *The Blue Room* eased the tension between two seemingly opposing forces: innovation and tradition.

In studying the sources explaining the elements of what makes Irish traditional, I experienced the odd phenomenon of academicizing something I had always considered intuitive, imposing rules on something I once considered fluid. I knew what traditional Irish music was, but I couldn't explain it. So when I encountered an album of traditional Irish music that dared to include a bass clarinet and hardanger d'amore, I was confronted with the question: is this music really traditional? Rather than argue that the addition of nontraditional instruments meant it wasn't, or that the playing of traditional tunes meant it was, my research led me to an element of Irish tradition that makes it truly remarkable—that to be truly traditional, it had to be transformed by the people who played it. It had to *change*.

This motive, that innovation and tradition are not necessarily mutually exclusive, guided my analysis of the album. Through listening to the album countless times, I identified new musical ideas the musicians brought to the tradition, and explained how they added to traditional music without divorcing from it. In turn, I used *The Blue Room* as an example of a responsible, sensitive, and effective selection of innovations that breathe new life into a music that builds on hundreds of years of an ever-changing tradition. I was then able to argue that Irish music is traditional because it is innovative. By implementing detailed musical analysis, academic research, and my previous experience with Irish music, I was in a unique position to contribute to the discourse of what makes Irish music traditional, from both an academic and

participatory lens. I think this perspective contributed to the strength of my motive, as well as the thesis I was able to craft out of it.

*Editor Commentary*

Natalia Zorrilla

Coming from philosophy, a discipline notorious for its bare-bones prose, I have often found that I undervalue the importance of an essay's opening **hook**. I itch to jump to the meat of the introduction; I worry that I will become distracted from the true point of the paper. Willow's paper helped to remind me what a good hook can look like. Her opening paragraph is a paradigm example of a hook: it creates an immersive, almost entrancing image of listening to her source album, *The Blue Room* by the Martin Hayes Quartet.

But Willow's hook is more than just an intriguing way to open her essay. It also does a tremendous amount of work for her paper as a whole. By describing the opening seconds of *The Blue Room*, the paragraph subtly **orients** the reader to the album's instrumentation and melodic qualities. Beyond that, though, it prefigures the essay's **motive**: the seeming tension between tradition ("the sound... we know well") and innovation (the "new and exciting" sound) in Irish music. This motive carries throughout her essay, manifesting first as a **personal motive** and then transitioning into a **primary source motive**.

Often, **personal motive**, or one's personal reason for writing their essay, remains implicit in a paper. Willow's second paragraph makes this motive explicit, referencing her extensive Irish music background and her surprise upon listening to *The Blue Room*: "the album placed the familiar into an unfamiliar context." This decision helps to raise the stakes of the paper. By positioning her as an experienced member of the Irish music community before highlighting her reaction to the album, the paper shows why her analysis matters not just to her but to the community.

This personal motive is interwoven with Willow's **primary source motive**, or the "puzzle" that she finds in *The Blue Room*. This, of course, is the tension she finds between the album's "traditional" status and its clear innovation, a tension that she extends to Irish music as a whole. Although introduced quite early in her paper, her primary source motive continues to figure prominently in her **analysis**. Her examination of Doug Weiselman's contribution to the album, for instance, acknowledges (and begins to reconcile) the traditional and innovative aspects of his bass clarinet.

With this strong grounding in motive, Willow's **thesis**—that part of what makes Irish music traditional *is* its capacity for innovation—feels both natural and necessary. Because her paper has established such a clear question, the reader is left hoping for the answer. Willow's

writing furnishes that answer, and furnishes it well. In doing so, it reminds the reader just how valuable a multilayered **motive** can be.

*Professor Commentary*

Gavin Steingo, Department of Music

Like much of the best ethnomusicological writing, Willow's essay begins with an insight generated through embodied, or somatic knowledge. After many years of active performance and involvement in the musical culture, Willow knew—or, at least, *thought* she knew—what traditional Irish music was. Or, to put a finer point on it, she hadn't ever really considered what she did or did not know. Like many musicians around the world, Willow's was a knowledge based on know-how rather than know-that. (I borrow the distinction from philosopher Gilbert Ryle.) She certainly knew and knows how to perform traditional Irish music, but she had not explicitly examined what it is. Interestingly, her moment of reckoning seemed to come from two places at once: the formal setting of a college ethnomusicology course, and the challenge made to her by "The Boy in the Gap," a tune by the Martin Hayes Quartet. I love the fact that music itself seemed to pose the question that prompted Willow's essay. "The Boy in the Gap" was meant to be traditional, and yet, to someone who knows about traditional Irish music, it seemed not to fit the mold. From this friction (and what reads in the essay as a kind of frisson), Willow embarked upon an analysis of tradition in the context of Irish music. The result of her inquiry is a sophisticated theorization of tradition as something negotiated, fluid, and always-on-the-move.

I am struck by two other aspects of Willow's essay. The first is her careful attention to the minutiae of the music. Through her ears, we experience expectation and surprise, we hear instruments variously "float," "give way," "sink," and "slip." The second aspect that struck me while reading the essay is its humility. Yes, Willow is challenging a taken-for-granted aspect of musical performance practice, namely, that some music is "traditional" or "authentic" and that other music is not. The essay shows, however, that challenging a paradigm often succeeds better without excessive jargon or bombastic claims. To better understand a crucial concept such as tradition, what one requires is slow and steady research. What one needs, perhaps above all else, is the capacity to listen.



## Works Cited

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**Bios**

**Willow Dalehite '22** is a senior in the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology department, with a certificate in Latin American Studies. She primarily studies the vocal and breeding behavior of birds, but also has interests in music, creative writing, and ceramics. Willow recently spent two months studying ecology in Kenya, where she enjoyed birdwatching and looking for fossils. She wrote this paper as a sophomore.

**Natalia Zorrilla '23** is a Philosophy major from San Diego, California, receiving certificates in Latin American Studies and Values and Public Life. In addition to being a Head Fellow in the Writing Center, she serves as the Financial Vice-President of the Princeton Debate Panel and the President Emeritus of the Princeton College Democrats. She loves crosswords, bad reality TV, and (perhaps most geekily) Dungeons and Dragons. She wrote this as a junior.