

## *Hy Brazil, Celtic Land? A Brief Overview of the Brazilian Irish-Celtic Musical Scene with a Focus on the Rio de Janeiro Case*

*Hy Brasil, terra celta? Um breve panorama da cena musical  
irlandês-celta brasileira com foco no Rio de Janeiro*

Caetano Maschio Santos

**Abstract:** *The present article charts the appearance and development of an Irish-Celtic (O’Flynn 2014) musical scene in Brazil, a small but tightly knit community of Brazilian amateur and professional musicians and music groups which constitutes a good example of what Mark Slobin named “affinity intercultures” (Slobin 1987). From an ethnomusicological perspective, it seeks to provide a portrait of such social and musical phenomenon based on a tripartite approach: 1) the discussion of international literature on the globalization of Irish traditional music as Celtic music around the turn of the Celtic Tiger period (Williams 2010) and the impacts of such process on Brazil; 2) the presentation and analysis of the results of an online survey conducted in the main Facebook community connected to the scene in order to characterize its main sociodemographic and musical characteristics; 3) the ethnographic description of the Rio de Janeiro chapter of such music scene based on its main musical event, the monthly session known as “Irish Session Rio.”*

**Keywords:** *Irish music; Celtic music; Ethnomusicology; Brazil; Ireland.*

**Resumo:** *O presente artigo mapeia o surgimento e desenvolvimento de uma cena musical Celta-Irlandesa no Brasil, uma comunidade pequena mas coesa de músicos brasileiros amadores e profissionais e seus respectivos grupos musicais que constitui um bom exemplo do que Mark Slobin denominou de ‘interculturais de afinidade’ (Slobin 1987). A partir de uma perspectiva etnomusicológica, busco fornecer um retrato de tal fenômeno social e musical baseado no seguinte tripé: 1) uma discussão da literatura internacional sobre a globalização da música tradicional irlandesa como música celta no período do ‘Tigre Celta’ (Williams 2010) e os impactos de tal processo no Brasil; 2) a apresentação e análise dos resultados de um questionário online conduzido na principal comunidade da cena na rede social Facebook como forma de caracterizá-la em termos sociodemográficos*

*e musicais; 3) a descrição etnográfica da seção carioca de tal cena através de seu principal evento musical, a “session” mensal conhecida como “Irish Session Rio”.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Música irlandesa, Música celta; Etnomusicologia; Brasil; Irlanda.*

## **Introduction**

The following article consists of a brief presentation of the main subjects discussed in my undergraduate thesis to obtain a Bachelor degree in Popular Music at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) in the year of 2016. While debating and exploring subjects that may, with some caution, be extended to the Brazilian context, the main focus addressed will be that of the Irish-Celtic musical scene of Rio de Janeiro, one of the most longstanding and liveliest in Brazil. This study aligns itself with the academic field known as Ethnomusicology and draws its conclusions from three main epistemological sources: observant participation with Brazilian enthusiasts of Irish traditional music (henceforth ITM) and/or Celtic music; my experience as a Brazilian musician specialized in ITM since 2011; and online research (netnographic observation and online survey).

To begin with, I wish to clarify three concepts that serve as a guideline to this discussion. By musical scene, I mean to address the sociomusical phenomenon that the Peruvian ethnomusicologist Julio Mendivil describes as the “productive fields of self-management, in which participants build their own frameworks of action as an answer to the adverse conditions offered by the immediate environment: the city, the state or the market” (25).

Considering the modest historical and cultural ties between Ireland and Brazil and its representativeness within the wide range of Brazil’s musical cultures, one can easily fit this musical scene as a subcultural sound in the Brazilian soundscape. In an effort to apply ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin’s typology of musical subcultures, the Brazilian Irish-Celtic musical scene meets the requirements of “affinity interculture”. This variety of music-centered gatherings commonly presents itself as “charmed circles of like-minded music-makers drawn magnetically to a certain genre that creates strong expressive bonding” (98). The concept’s relevance to this discussion lies in the fact that these affinity-based groupings are commonly centered on a national musical tradition with little or inexistent historical or heritage connection with its participants (Ibid. 68) – certainly the pattern found between Brazilians and ITM. But what do we mean by Irish-Celtic?

Celtic music constitutes a popular music niche within the World Music market (Symon 192). Based on the traditional music of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Brittany, Galicia and other countries and regions of Western Europe sometimes referred to as “Celtic nations” or the “Celtic fringe”, what is today known as Celtic music is characterized as a hybrid, permeable and commodified musical category (Williams 124; O’Connor 156-157). Most of its scholars, however, consider that the main source of inspiration and musical material is drawn from ITM (Symon 196; McCoy 184). In agreement with such an analysis, I draw on Irish ethnomusicologist John O’Flynn’s argument about the different musical practices that exist under the Celtic label, of which the great majority is constituted by fusions between ITM and different popular musical styles:

I would argue that the idea of Irish-Celtic music, however fanciful it might appear, merits serious consideration as music inasmuch as a belief in this category has resulted in specific genres and practices across a range of music styles produced in Ireland. Thus, in contemporary contexts, we can say that irrespective of the moment and arbitrariness of its ‘invention’, there are instances where the Celtic label describes relatively distinct sets of musical elements and practices that nonetheless have continuities with, or in large part are based on, international styles. (O’Flynn 242)

Most appropriately, the Brazilian case hereafter described fits accordingly with the idea of Irish-Celtic music in two ways. Firstly, among Brazilian musical groups focused on ITM there is wide usage of the Celtic music tag as musical descriptor (with further cultural implications), especially for gig sale and promotion. Finally, it covers the wide span of musical elements and practices developed within this particular musical scene, which goes from a traditional approach (“trad” fans, with great concerns regarding the authenticity of the music) to more hybridized forms.

### **Describing the Brazilian Irish-Celtic Musical Scene Through an Online Survey**

My personal interest in the Irish-Celtic music scene in Brazil began after my participation in the Facebook group called “Música irlandesa no Brasil” (Irish music in Brazil), a gathering of (mainly) Brazilian amateur and professional musicians and aficionados devoted to the studying, playing and appreciating of ITM.<sup>1</sup> Currently with almost one thousand members, its description, written by Irish-American musician resident in São Paulo Danny Litwin (one of the few diasporic musicians participating in the national scene), translates as follows:

A place where people with interests on Irish music, dance and culture may meet. You may share news, doubts and videos as well as opinions and jokes. Music is the best thing in life, let's share and have fun!<sup>2</sup>

Numerous other similar Portuguese-language communities exist on *Facebook*:<sup>3</sup> “*Músicas Celtas*” (Celtic songs) [11.798], “*Cultura e Música Celta*” (Celtic Music and Culture) [27.538], “*Música New Age, Celta, Instrumental...*” (New Age, Celtic and Instrumental music...) [11.929], “*Eu amo gaita-de-fole*” (I love bagpipes) [701]. This rise of a Brazilian section of the great Celtic-cyber diaspora (McCoy, 2014) is suggestive of a growing popularity of what is generally perceived as Celtic music and culture among Brazilians. Miles away from the shores of Erin, these online communities have been an important space for the development of the Brazilian Irish-Celtic musical scene. They help Brazilian enthusiasts in sharing resources, learning to play, forming bands, searching gigs, and also hosting discussions about Irish-Celtic music – frequently a movement from the virtual space towards the actual space of social gatherings and events.

A small-scale online survey conducted in April 2015 with members of “*Música Irlandesa no Brasil*” disclosed a general profile of the online Brazilian Irish-Celtic community that had significant compatibility with my prior experience as a musician participating in the scene. Results indicated that this group is mainly male (73%), with ages between fifteen and thirty-five (75%), educated (50% completed undergraduate studies) and dwelled mainly in the states of São Paulo (40%) and Rio de Janeiro (29%) – within the economically developed southeast region of the country. Nearly half the interviewees were familiar with Irish-Celtic music for more than ten years (43%), and had found it mostly via record stores (42%), indicating a considerable non-virtual dissemination of the genre in Brazil. Significantly, twenty percent (20%) declared having first heard the genre through live performance, the same amount that discovered it online, a fact which implies the importance of Brazilian-made Irish-Celtic music from the beginning. Seventy percent (70%) declared to be currently studying Irish-Celtic music (most being autodidacts and very few having had the opportunity to study abroad or with foreign teachers) and almost half (49%) claimed to develop some kind of professional activity within the genre. The survey also accounted for thirty-three musical groups, in a profusion of different subgenres: Scottish pipe bands, Celtic rock, folk metal, “trad”, new age, medieval, etc.

This rather heterogeneous assemblage of formations and musical practices was normally presented as a coherent whole under the Celtic conceptual umbrella, and conveys

the fact that, music wise, an eclectic and open view of celtitude thrives in Brazil. As pointed out by Slobin's analysis of the diverse and volatile meaning of Celtic music in the XXI century:

The imaginary Celts occupy a much larger territory in the mind of millions of people who enjoy and reshape music they think comes from an ancient heritage. 'Celtitude', with its ever-changing content and forms of music-making, keeps thriving and evolving for all kinds of reasons. (Slobin 89)

Regarding its social composition, the results of the online survey conducted with members of "*Música irlandesa no Brasil*" have suggested that this peripheral Irish-Celtic musical scene is a mainly white, male and middle-class phenomenon of autodidact musicians. Soundwise, the variety of subgenres practiced in the Brazilian scenario serve fittingly as an example of the manifold character of Irish-Celtic music, where multiple and ever-changing components of an Irish or Celtic heritage (music, culture, history) are mobilized through diverse forms of music-making.

### **The Celtic Boom in the Land of Carnival: Cultural Relations and Music Between Ireland and Brazil**

As many authors recall, the years close to the turn of the millennium saw an unprecedented rise in the popularity of both Celtic and ITM, a phenomenon related to the period of economic prosperity that earned Ireland the well-known epithet of "Celtic Tiger" (Williams 124; Wilson & Hastings 91-94; Motherway 6-7). In Brazil the main centres of this Irish cultural expansion were a significant surge in the number of Irish pubs, the ever-growing St. Patrick's Day celebrations and the growing role of Ireland as a travel and/or study destination for young Brazilians.

It is safe to affirm that every medium to large city in Brazil has now at least one so-called Irish pub, a fact that one easily associates with the well-known spread of Irish pubs worldwide. This industrial reproduction of what is generally seen as an authentic asset of Irish culture (in a process described by Irish musician and scholar Fintan Vallely as the "pub in a box" phenomenon) is summed up by O'Connor, who points the obvious presence of music in its environment:

Themed 'Irish pubs' proliferate outside the country from Beijing to Zurich, complete with 'authentic' Irish decór, staff, and, of course, music. These are places where the customer is a kind of virtual tourist and where an 'image' of

Ireland and ‘Irishness’ is presented out of which a market for Irish culture is cultivated, a brand is born. (O’Connor 156)

While many in the Brazilian Irish-Celtic musical scene complain about the dominance of rock music as live entertainment in local Irish pubs, this type of venue is still an important setting for this community.

The last two decades St. Patrick’s Day celebrations in Brazil have been steadily growing in importance and scale. Crowded pubs and bars, street parades and open-air music festivals have been constantly employing, in an increasing rate, live Irish-Celtic music produced by Brazilian groups and artists, with the occasional diasporic Irish, Irish American or foreign musician also being a common occurrence. In 2013, a worldwide St. Patrick’s Day celebration action coordinated by Ireland’s Foreign Affairs Ministry used green light to illuminate several of the world’s greatest monuments, an act that was accompanied by diplomatic meetings; in Brazil, a green Christ the Redeemer was the main sight during a state visit by Northern Ireland’s Deputy Prime Minister Martin McGuinness. At the reception, ITM was the soundtrack: I had the chance to be one of the band members of a small group chosen by Brazilian *uilleann* piper<sup>5</sup> Alex Navar, one of the few *uilleann* pipers in the country<sup>6</sup> and a leading figure in the national Irish-Celtic musical scene.

As for Ireland’s growing popularity as a destination for tourists and young Brazilian students, evidence abound: the country’s 2011 census shows an increase from 1,087 Brazilians living in Ireland in 2002 to 8,704 in 2011.<sup>7</sup> A recent news article in the *Irish Times* further confirms the continuing expansion of these student interchange policies settled by both nations in the beginning of the twenty first century.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Mary McAleese’s 2004 state visit to Brazil, accompanied by high profile traditional musicians such as Martin O’Connor, Tommy Hayes and Cathall Hayden, (providing a central place for ITM at official occasions) confirmed O’Flynn’s remarks regarding the importance of the state as a cultural broker and the role of ITM in the presentation of the nation worldwide (O’Flynn 37).

### **Irish Session Rio: A Brazilian Irish Session**

In this section, I will try to convey a more vivid image of the Irish-Celtic musical scene in Brazil based mainly on observant participation conducted in Rio de Janeiro at “Irish Session Rio” (ISR), a monthly session that has been occurring since 2012. Although I will only refer to the RJ session, it is worth noticing that cities such as São Paulo and Curitiba also have an active Irish-Celtic musical scene.

The carioca Irish-Celtic scene dates back to the year of 2007, in an Irish pub called *Paddy Fla* in the neighborhood of Ipanema, which was run by an Irish publican called Padhraig Flavin. It was formed around an initial handful of enthusiasts who came from somewhat different musical backgrounds (among which I would underscore the importance of folk metal fans) and would later form different musical groups, of which the still existing *Café Irlanda* is one of the most relevant. It had at its center the Brazilian *uilleann* piper Alex Navar. Alex lived in Ireland in the year 2000, mostly at the Flavin family household in Cork, having studied the pipes at the Cork Pipers Club, the oldest pipers club in Ireland. Such an experience was the result of an epiphany of self-discovery, a life changing moment according to his own testimony. Being a spiritist, Alex felt a profound spiritual connection with the hitherto unknown sound of the *uilleann* pipes while listening to the Irish piper Dave Spillane’s “Midnight Walker”. Such was the power of the sound of the pipes (which for him seemed then to symbolize ancient Celtic culture, something he deemed eminently spiritual) that he quit his job and decided to study the pipes in Ireland. Years later, the small gathering of unpretentious Irish-Celtic enthusiasts at *Paddy Fla* for the first sessions gave Alex and others opportunities to share what may seem as an alien musical culture, but resulted in deep expressive and social bonding through music.



Irish Session Rio at “Sarrefufa” pool bar: Alex Navar, Thadeu Farias, Fernando Oliveira, Kevin Shortall, Hugo Pansini, Ian Palatnik (left to right).

Source: Photograph by the author.

A decade later, having moved between various locations and undergoing periods of inactivity, this *carioca* Irish session has grown to accommodate an average of ten to fifteen musicians and an audience of two to three dozen people that actively participate dancing, singing, drinking and socializing. Notwithstanding the continuous importance of Navar, the role of session host in ISR, is currently handled by Kevin Shortall, an Irish-Brazilian

multi-instrumentalist. When interviewed, Kevin was keen on calling the attention to the inclusive nature of the event, due to the unavoidable estrangement in the process of learning a foreign musical culture. It must have, in his opinion, a Brazilian nature - a “flexible” session open for beginners, with the purpose introducing the music and creating a friendly environment of encouragement and propagation of Irish-Celtic music and its perceived values and practices as a social activity.

A common instrumental line-up at ISR includes *uilleann* pipes, Irish flutes, tin whistles, fiddles, mandolins, bouzouki, bodhrán and spoons, as well as multiple singers and guitars. Many of the tunes and songs played derive from well-known bands of the Irish folk revival of the 1960s, (such as The Dubliners, Planxty and The Bothy Band) or from the Celtic music and Irish punk upsurge of the 1980s and 1990s (Flogging Molly, Dropkick Murphy’s, The Pogues, The Corrs, Riverdance, Lúnasa).<sup>9</sup> In an example of the variety of content under the Celtic music epithet, the repertoire of the session has included, on occasion, traditional music from Galicia – region of Spain recently included in the group of Celtic Nations (Slobin 89) – Brittany and Scotland.

Aiming to facilitate Irish-Celtic music learning on a friendly environment, with no expectations of virtuosity or authenticity, it is common to begin the event with a slow session, a slowed down musical performance where simple tunes are played and, eventually, taught to beginners by more experienced players. New tunes and ideas are suggested and shared on a specific Facebook group, aiming to expand participant’s repertoires. In these ways, ISR allows for easier connections with what is regarded by many participants as part of Celtic culture:

‘Celtic’ music is thus always potentially easy, participatory, and crosses national borders. Consequently it allows people access to – in their own terms – a domain of ‘Celtidom’ denied to them by the complexities of, for example, a Celtic language, or the theoretical and practical difficulties of maintaining a coherent political identity. (Stokes 6)

Another final consideration of great importance to provide a picture of the people that in Rio de Janeiro’s Irish-Celtic musical scene regards the growing importance of Celtic and medieval reenactment. Defined as a form of recreation of historical experiences concerned “with personal experience, social relations and everyday life, and with conjectural and provisional interpretations of the past” (AGNEW, 2007, p. 300), it has many supporters within the ISR, especially the members of band Tailten. This group is responsible for the Celtic reenactment event known as *Oenach na Tailtiu*, which takes place annually at the

city of Magé (RJ). Described as a “Celtic-themed festivity with the intention of reenact old manners and the famous fairs of Lughnasadh in Ireland”,<sup>10</sup> it constitutes but one of the many Celtic and medieval reenactment events which have the direct involvement of members of the Brazilian Irish-Celtic musical scene throughout the country.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This introduction to the Brazilian Irish-Celtic musical scene centered on the example of ISR aimed to contextualize a recent sociomusical phenomenon which has been slowly but steadily growing since the turn of the millennium. It paints a rough sketch of its main features and the historical and cultural processes involved, bringing insights of the local echoes of a globalized soundscape. Perhaps the most important feature of the phenomenon is its grassroots dimension – from the internet to individuals and then to the creation of affinity groups, communities and social events dedicated to the nourishing of a non-native musical culture, which inevitably is recreated in a different manner and results in something ultimately new. However dependent of communication technology and international cultural flows, the real events and the sociability therein created are what motivates, gathers, and makes grow the Brazilian Irish-Celtic musical scene.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/musicairlandesnobrasil/?ref=bookmarks>>, access in: 15/01/2018.
- <sup>2</sup> Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/musicairlandesnobrasil/about/>>, access in: 08/04/2018.
- <sup>3</sup> The corresponding membership is indicated in brackets.
- <sup>4</sup> Available at: <<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-21732901>>, access in: 15/01/2018.
- <sup>5</sup> The *uilleann* (Irish gaelic for elbow) pipes are a form of bellows-blown bagpipes developed in Ireland in the eighteenth century, which has become intrinsically associated with irish traditional music and it’s cultural identity.
- <sup>6</sup> One of my main research collaborators, in his personal website Navar describes himself as (and most likely is) “the first brazilian to study irish music in Ireland” (<https://www.alexnavar.com.br/>).
- <sup>7</sup> Available at: <<http://www.cso.ie/en/census/census2011reports/>>, access in: 15/01/2018.
- <sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/>

brazil-tops-league-of-non-eu-students-in-ireland-1.2981494>, access in: 15/01/2018

<sup>9</sup> A short video recording of the ISR in the year of 2015 can be seen at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCtYK1XPjC>>, access in: 10/04/2018.

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <<http://www.cenamedieval.com.br/2016/07/resenha-da-oenach-na-tailtiu-2016.html>> , access: 12/10/2016.

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