

Keynote: Peter Browne, *Tuning the radio*

Abstract

Irish state radio broadcasting began with the creation of the station 2RN and its first evening's programming broadcast from Dublin on Jan 1st 1926 - 90 years ago this year.

From a simple 3 hour programme on that first night in 1926, comprised entirely of music (to all intents and purposes a broadcast concert), there has been an ongoing relationship between traditional Irish music/song and radio broadcasting; each could undoubtedly have had its own amply fulfilled existence without the other and each has experienced ever-present change and development over the years in their own separate spheres of activity. Yet there are many connections and influences and the purpose of the paper is to trace and attempt to enumerate and assess at least some of these.

There were determining factors on both sides of the relationship: on the radio side, technical issues such as transmission, staffing, audience reach, sound quality and also questions of awareness and judgement by the 2RN (later Raidió Éireann and RTÉ Radio) authorities of what might constitute good taste or competence in the playing and appreciation of traditional music and indeed this at times extended as far as knowing what would or would not be included in a definition of traditional music and song. On the traditional music side, there was a lack of engagement for various reasons, geographical, cultural and even class-based and the absence of a widespread language of criticism. Traditional music had (and continues to have) different forms such as solo instrumental expression, singing in both Irish and English, ensemble and orchestral playing and debates about authenticity have never been far away.

Among the historical points of interest considered here are: the early years of 2RN with only live broadcasting, auditions, the coming of the céilí band, orchestration, outside broadcasts and the M.R.U. (Mobile Recording Unit), Seán Ó Riada and Ceoltóirí Chualann, the pre- and post-television era, The Long Note, The Brendan Voyage, the change from RTÉ Radio as a sole player to a proliferation of radio stations and finally the present day and the era of literally instant worldwide digital access.

The presentation will include references from published sources, unpublished written archive material, transmitted radio programmes and other illustrative music audio as well as some personal communications and unedited interviews.