



# Exploring Syncretic Approaches to Improvisatory Practices in Irish Bluegrass

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## At a Glance

Improvisation as creative practice is an important part of many forms of music making. This research explores improvisation as creative practice among ‘Irish Bluegrass’ musicians situated within international bluegrass culture. I document how ‘Irish Bluegrass’ musicians triangulate their relationship with American bluegrass and Irish traditional music in instrumental improvisation. The term ‘Irish Bluegrass’ is used by community members to signify a specialised musical trend unfolding in Ireland featuring a high concentration of musicians that play both Irish traditional music and bluegrass. These musicians see themselves as part of both traditions working within a third space that incorporates elements of both genres.

*Keywords: Bluegrass, Improvisation, Irish traditional music, Creative practice*

## Situating Bluegrass and Irish Traditional Music

Irish traditional music and bluegrass are broad terms that encompasses several categorisations of music. While Irish traditional music is native to Ireland, bluegrass originated in the United States and was codified as a genre in the 1940s. Both musics work from a communal knowledge of repertoire and have historically been sustained through aural/oral transmission. It is very common for performers of both styles to play “by ear”, meaning that reading music notation is not required in order to learn or play new music. Both bluegrass and instrumental dance music in Irish traditional music utilise group-based community practice, meaning that musicians play together informally and not always in a “band” or “ensemble” scenario where material is rehearsed. There are elements of shared repertoire between Irish traditional music and bluegrass, which highlight a connection between the two traditions while much of bluegrass performance practice draws on musical styles of blues and jazz, which originated from African-American creativity. Because bluegrass originated in the United States as a result of African-American

and European influences, there are significant implications of race and power dynamics in addition to issues of representation that are inextricably linked to the history and performance of the genre. I examine how these are exported and engaged within international communities.

Scholarship on bluegrass music has largely remained a domestic activity in the United States, the bulk of which lies in the fields of Folklore and Appalachian studies.<sup>1-4</sup> An even smaller subset of researchers have investigated international bluegrass communities such as Bidgood,<sup>5-7</sup> Finch,<sup>8</sup> and Luchtan.<sup>9</sup> However, these studies represent just a small proportion of the total amount of bluegrass scholarship, and my research will be the first exploration of the bluegrass community in Ireland. While there is a significant amount of scholarship engaging various elements of Irish traditional music, the topic of improvisation is underexplored and rarely addressed outside of anecdotal discussions of personal style.

## What is Improvisation?

Improvisation in music is often times framed as the middle ground between composition (a creation process that occurs before performing) and performance (the physical act of producing sound). There are endless ways that the nuances between these categorisations could be parsed, but the concept of spontaneity is central to most interpretations. In this case, spontaneity refers to a response to a stimuli that results in co-creation with one's environment. This does not necessarily mean that when musicians improvise they spontaneously create musical structures that have never existed before or that they have never played before. In each style, there are elements of the music that are more or less likely to be modified to varying degrees. These areas of flexibility are where musicians exercise their spontaneity, freedom and personality. I focus on exploring the convergence and divergence between improvisation in instrumental dance music, a sub-category in Irish traditional music, and instrumental improvisation in bluegrass.

## Improvisational Models in Irish Traditional Music, Bluegrass and Irish Bluegrass

To further contextualise both Irish traditional music and bluegrass' relationship with creative practice as improvisation, I draw on George Lewis' theory of Afrological and Eurological modes of improvisation as laid out in his 2002 essay, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives".<sup>10</sup> I categorise bluegrass as functioning within the Afrological mode while Irish traditional music functions within the Eurological mode.

Irish traditional music engages the parameters set by the Eurological mode through the improvisatory practice of ornamentation and variation in melodic content and defined regulations for normative deployment. Bluegrass employs the Afrological mode of improvisation through transformative, referential improvisation governed by harmonic continuity rather than melodic contour. This is due in large part to the structural replication of musics rooted in Black creativity that have been since repackaged as white traditions in this context. Both models engage

Lewis' criteria of spontaneity, musical freedom and personality; however, the relationship to these characteristics of improvisation is very different in each mode. These divergent styles of improvisation reveal the practicing musician's conceptualisation of musical structure and form on several levels. The practice of 'Irish Bluegrass' blends elements from the Eurological model and the Afrological model into a singular approach to improvisation.

## What is the Conceptual Integration Network in 'Irish Bluegrass'?

To show the integration of these two models in 'Irish Bluegrass', I draw on Lawrence Zbikowski's theory of the Conceptual Integration Network (CIN) as defined in his 2002 book, *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory and Analysis*.<sup>11</sup> This model draws on the knowledge that human brains are referential processors and Zbikowski notes that the model is "a collection of interlinked nodes" that rely on "conceptual domains". The CIN is a visual tool that shows levels of interaction between the internal grouping and recognition processes in our brain. This model employs four distinct conceptual categories in dialogue with one another: generic space, input 1, input 2, and blended space. This dynamic interaction is exemplified in Figure 1 below. The solid line between the input 1 and input 2 emphasise this dynamic blending relationship central to the definition of this model. The dotted lines represent the interconnectedness of the inputs and all four of the distinct regions.

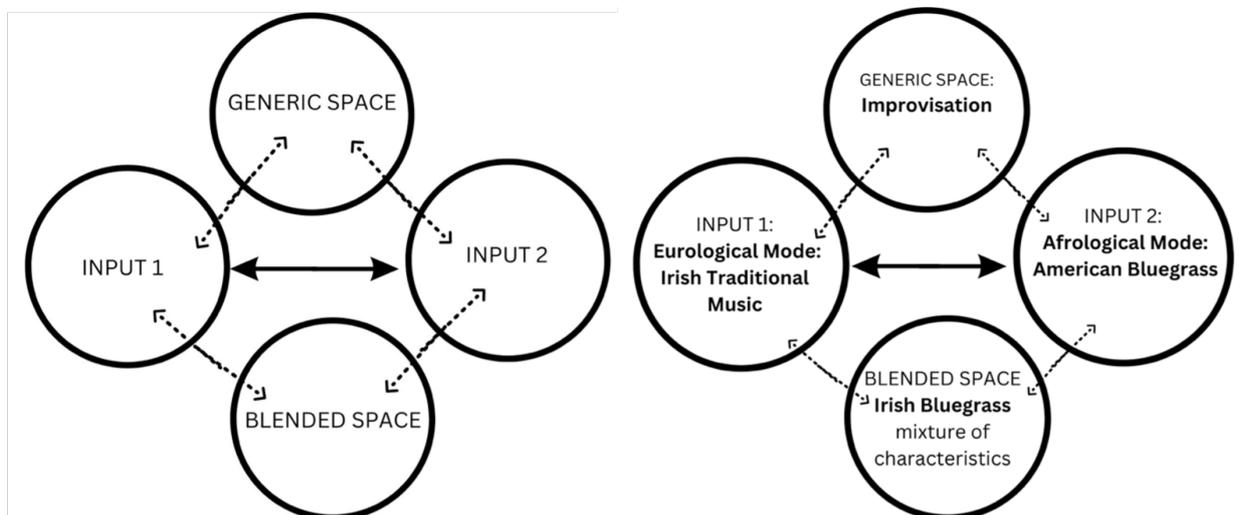


Figure 1: The Conceptual Integration Network.

It is this process that will provide the framing for analysis that shows the synthesis of both the Afrological style typical of American bluegrass and the Eurological style indicative of Irish traditional music to be expressed cohesively in Irish Bluegrass. Conceptually, we can hold both narratives in our mind to form a new "domain" of understanding. Zbikowski's framework facilitates the physical representation of the invisible processes by which musicians blend musical ideas and practices. These processes are what I refer to as syncretic approaches as every

musician may have a slightly different pathway of navigating, evaluating and engaging musical material. In Figure 2, I use the CIN to represent the integrated embodiment of multiple musical identities in broad terms as applied to melodic variation. In Irish traditional music (ITM), one of the ways musicians engage melodic variation is through ornamentation. Regarding the practice of ornamentation in Irish traditional music, Niall Keegan states that:

*“A working definition could be the addition of extra tones to (or the division of) a main tone which is regarded as being embellished. Central to the idea of ornament is that a note is being ornamented and as such no ornament has any life beyond the context of the ‘main tone’”.*<sup>12</sup>

Such ornaments typically have specific names that characterise a particular small-scale figure or technique, which suggests a common understanding of these ornaments amongst practitioners. In bluegrass, the general approach to melodic variation deploys harmonically-rooted “licks” or “runs” with no obligation to resemble the original melody. These musical cells tend to be larger in scale than the previously discussed ornaments and are not intended to embellish a focal point in the melody, but instead designed to facilitate movement between one harmony to another. It would be irregular for a bluegrass practitioner to systematically utilise triplets and other ornamentation techniques that are characteristic of Irish traditional music practice as a dominant approach to melodic variation or embellishment. It would also be outside of the generally accepted conventions for an instrumental practitioner of Irish traditional music to abandon melodic continuity by consistently using “runs” as a primary approach to melodic variation. However, analysis of ‘Irish Bluegrass’, performance practice shows that instrumentalists habitually integrate these dual modes of melodic variation as is illustrated by Figure 2.

The integrated embodiment of this syncretic process is characterised by a distinct aural soundscape, which is understood to be a novel approach by both bluegrass music consumers and practitioners alike.

## Future Opportunities and Impact

By understanding the nuances of creative practice in a variety of environments we can expand our understanding of how musicians engage musical improvisation. Because the ways in which Irish traditional music and bluegrass diverge in their deployment of improvisation as a creative practice, my research looks at how musicians navigate the parameters of each style independently and how they are consciously blended in ‘Irish Bluegrass’. This will contribute a theory of improvisation for scholars and performers in Irish traditional music to name their practice without resulting in comparisons with other improvisatory traditions. It will also further illuminate the fundamental role of African-American creativity in bluegrass performance practice, which has been historically underemphasised at best. Diversifying the models and ways we examine ethos and stylistically appropriate aesthetic choices made by musicians will provide

the platform to examine different musical manifestations of the same internal motivations of spontaneity, personality and freedom rather than comparing the musical content itself.

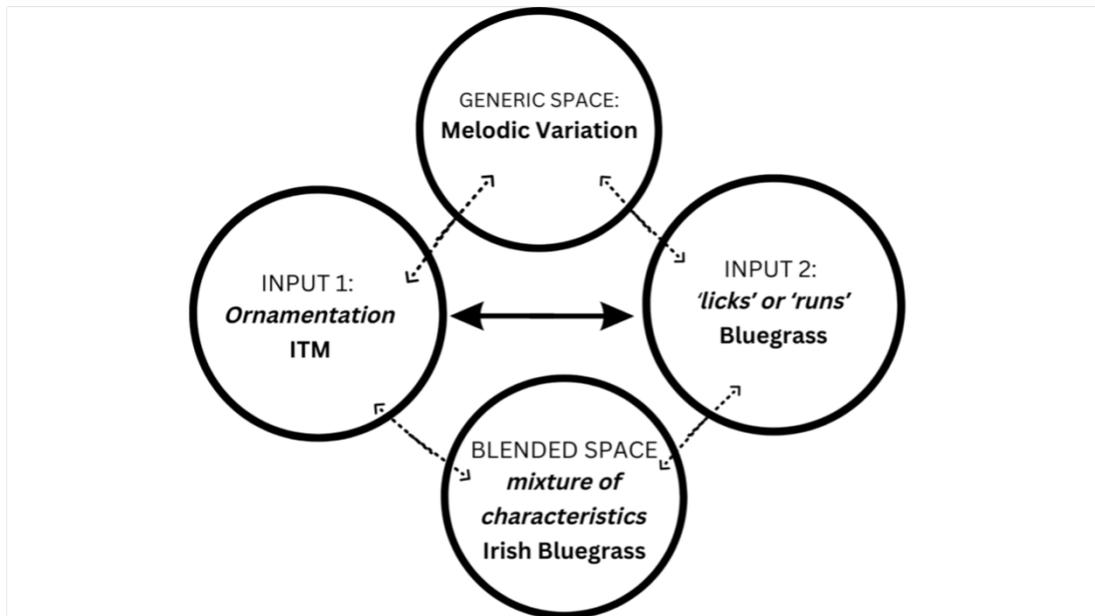


Figure 2: CIN Applied to Melodic Variation.

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## Declaration of Interests

None. This publication has emanated from research conducted with no outside funding support. All ethical guidelines relating to the research and publication process were adhered to throughout this study.

## Author Bio

Kathleen is a second year PhD student in Musicology under the supervision of Dr. Jack Talty and Dr. Alex Khalil. Her doctoral research focuses on uncovering how multiple musical identities impact Irish bluegrass musicians' relationship with embodied performance through ethnographic fieldwork. She is based in the Department of Music in the School of Film, Music and Theatre at UCC and enjoys playing both bluegrass and Irish traditional music. She continues to engage academic and non-academic audiences in the ongoing dissemination of her research.

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