



**REVIEW:**

*Communities of Musical Practice* (Ailbhe Kenny: Routledge, 2016)

FRAN GARRY

*Communities of Musical Practice* by Ailbhe Kenny provides an in-depth and invaluable insight into 'situated' collaborative music-making practices on the ground in Ireland. The central research question – 'how are 'communities of musical practice' developed and sustained in practice?' (p. 1) – is addressed through qualitative case study research in Ireland's mid-west region and situated within a broader sociocultural theoretical and contextual framework concerning music education. The author analyses and interprets complex practices using a Community of Musical Practice (CoMP) framework, adapted from Lave and Wenger's Community of Practice (CoP) model, in addition to drawing on the sociocultural theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu, Becker and de Certeau. CoMPs are examined within their sociocultural, political, geographical and economic contexts (p. 29) with individual and collective voices of experience emerging within this theoretical frame. The three case studies include the Limerick Jazz Workshop (LJW), the County Limerick Youth Choir (CLYC) and the Online Academy of Irish Music (OAIM). Given the current focus on metrics, economic impact and return for investment in the arts, it is refreshing to read a book that focuses on actual practice and actual people, and includes the voices of participants, tutors and facilitators in an exploration of musical learning spanning multiple genres, contexts and age groups. By focusing on musical learning, inseparable from its social context, this study provides a deeper layer of understanding of the social aspects of musical engagement from individual and collective perspectives than is currently evident in much arts and cultural policy literature in Ireland and internationally, thus addressing a widely acknowledged research gap (Arts Council England, 2014; Belfiore, 2002; Belfiore and Bennett, 2009, 2010; Byrne, 2013; Gilmore, 2014; Hawkes 2001; Kaszynska, 2014, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2001; Tomka 2013).

The real value in this study is in its in-depth look beyond the pervasive, primarily quantitative research emphases on the economic value of the arts to society, in terms of supply and demand, regeneration of communities, and tourism. While this much-needed study focuses primarily on educational policy, it has implications for arts and cultural policy in general by incorporating first-hand experiential data relating to meaningful arts experiences, and social relationships unconfined by broader social agenda terminology or intrinsic/instrumental debates. Moreover, this book offers fresh perspectives on how, why, and where musical learning takes place within communities, particularly in terms of meaningful sociocultural engagement in lifelong musical endeavours in formal, non-formal, and informal settings.

Kenny's study addresses an information gap that exists on the practices within music and broader arts communities, particularly in terms of research outside of formal institutions. She suggests that the book presents an important 'window' into the connection between community and music with key questions and concepts of 'community', 'identity', 'practice' and 'meaning' underpinning the study. She prefaces the study by providing an insight into her research

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perspective, grounded in personal experience of long-term engagement in musical practice, at amateur and professional level and, ultimately, an academic career specialising in music education and research, choral direction, cross-disciplinary arts performance and management. In the first part of the book, Kenny provides a comprehensive outline of the Irish music education landscape, highlighting a long history of debate and outlining the tensions that exist in all forms of all arts education; the existing dichotomy between two separate departments for the arts and education; the lack of a cohesive national plan; and the pressure of funding cuts to music education in Ireland in recent years. She also provides a very useful overview of the various funding initiatives and music partnerships that exist in Ireland, particularly highlighting supports that are in place outside of central government. An underlying theme throughout the book is the recognition of the existence of many other avenues of musical engagement such as ensembles, bands, choirs, stage schools, online platforms and peer groups, some led through arts organisations (p. 4), but, significantly, not all of them. By examining actual musical and community practices as they occurred within the CoMPs, the author captures, analyses, and interprets valuable experiential data by exploring themes such as participation, collaboration, musical identity and creativity. The central idea is that 'individuals participate within music communities to construct their own social realities and identities through musical and social interaction' (p. 29).

One of the book's great strengths lies in the author's analysis, within a qualitative case study approach, which highlights the importance of engaging in research not to measure, but to 'capture' the complexities of multiple viewpoints in different contexts and genres. Multiple viewpoints and identities ultimately emerge from real life experiences. Qualitative research methods included video recording, observations, interviews, participant logs and online forums over a nine-month period. Kenny argues persuasively that the selected 'cases' helped to illuminate the CoP model in practice and relate it to the 'real world' (p. 31) by illustrating common relationships, issues and themes across all three communities. She highlights the power of CoMPs as a rich music education resource and sustainable model for musical participation, ultimately furnishing specific recommendations to value and promote these insights in policy and practice.

The author's arguments are bolstered by a comprehensive ongoing analysis of contextual literature in the field, drawing on, for example, Ruth Finnegan's extensive study (2007) of the 'musical worlds' of Milton Keynes in the 1980s, which highlighted the too often 'taken for granted' roles of schools, churches and many community groups in music education, omissions Kenny addresses in her work. Kenny persuasively argues that there is a need to expand the view of music education to take account of these multiple and overlapping CoMPs that occur in local communities, cyberspace, and across society. This could be further developed and applied to arts and cultural research in general, with a view to expanding the methodological approach to include experiential data utilising arts based methods and artist/researcher/participant perspectives. Another strength of the study is its recognition and acknowledgement of multiple sources of learning, for example, current technology in the form of YouTube videos, recording and playback equipment and online forums alongside the learning that occurs in tutor/facilitator/participant and peer-to-peer relationships. Ultimately, the insights from the study enable her to persuasively argue that, in terms of policy making, it is imperative to balance bottom-up approaches informed by local practices, with top-down approaches informed by international, national and local policies.

Finally, here is a comprehensive volume that explores the social and musical processes of arts engagement and values the deep commitment involved in individual and collective musical participation. It provides the reader with clearly defined and substantiated insider perspec-

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tives on motivation for initial and sustained participation; multiple ways of learning through shared experiences; the processes of identity building; social relationships; the importance of laughter and friendly banter and feelings of belonging; and the importance of best practice in nurturing and maintaining a friendly and happy environment to facilitate learning and sustainability within Communities of Musical Practice. All of these crucial points help to illuminate the need for more qualitative research approaches in order to excavate a deeper layer of understanding of the complexities involved in sociocultural musical and arts experiences in general and, ultimately, the importance of including these voices of experience in educational and arts policy discussions. This study makes a valuable contribution to the field of music education, community music and ongoing debates regarding the social impact and value of arts and culture in our society.

*Fran Garry is a PhD Arts Practice research candidate and guest lecturer at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick. Her research project, Lived Experiences in Community Arts in Ireland, is a practice-based exploration of lived experiences in the performing arts in educational and community settings in Ireland. Fran is a singer, songwriter, musician and community music educator. She is a graduate of the M.A. Community Music programme at the Irish World Academy.*

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