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# Irish and Bretonic Music

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There are many languages spoken around the world, making it sometimes difficult for us to understand each other. Yet, there is one near-universal way of communicating – through music and dance. Where the music's rhythm is merry and upbeat, its audience can be instantly uplifted, likewise, where the music is more pensive and mellow, its audience may become so too. This was why we were especially happy when two of our Erasmus students, with whom we prepared this interview to celebrate the occasion of the Erasmus program's 25th anniversary, decided to approach the children in four partner primary schools of the Faculty of Arts' Europe Meets School programme in this universal communicative style.

Móna Corrigan, a student of St. Patrick's College, Dublin who stayed in Prague during the summer semester of 2010/11, and Celestine Doedens, of the University of Rennes who studied in Charles University in the 2011/12 summer semester, share not only a mutual love for music and dance – but were also both hosted by Charles' Faculty of Education and hail from Celtic speaking countries. Móna is Irish, whilst Celestine is originally from Brittany (Bretagne)

Móna, Celestine, ...

**... do you speak Irish or Breton yourselves? How frequently used are these language today? Do children in Ireland or Brittany learn them at schools?**

Móna: Yes, I speak Irish. It's not my first language and I am not completely fluent, however I am able to use it quite competently. As part of my Bachelor of Education course to become a primary school teacher, we have classes in Irish each year and also have the option of choosing it as our Academic Arts subject which is worth half your degree.

In Ireland it has become slightly fashionable to speak Irish, with 'gaelscoileanna' (schools where all subjects are taught through Irish) popping up around the country. It is however more a novelty than an actual everyday language in the majority of the country. The language is compulsorily taught to children from age four, when they start primary school, up until when they leave secondary school. Though few use/learn Gaelige after that.

Teachers and Police officers (called „Gardaí“) must speak Gaelige to get a job. In the west of Ireland it is spoken a great deal more, and is often used as people's first language. These areas where the language is more alive are called 'Gaeltacht' areas and receive Government grants to encourage people to use Gaelige more and keep it alive.

Celestine: I do speak Breton. This is not the first language which is used in everyday life in Brittany, as it has been strictly forbidden to speak it at school for many years, so there is a whole generation with very few Breton speakers. Thus it is usually spoken by older people, or young people (who learn it at school), but not typically by the middle-aged generation. I've been in a school where all classes are taught through Breton, so I speak it fluently. We have several different systems in respect of teaching languages in schools. The school may offer all subjects in French, which is the most common. In such a school you can – if you want – learn Breton the same way you would learn a foreign language starting at the age of eleven. Aside from that, two different systems of bilingual schools exists – one with half of the classes in Breton and half in French, and another one where everything is taught in Breton, which you use in everyday life as well.

**While the Celtic languages are not widely popular these days, the traditions of both your countries are for many people an important reason to visit the regions. Both the Irish and Breton dances and music are taught and practiced all around Europe. Are there many folklore groups in Ireland and Brittany and do you (or your families) belong to any of them?**

Móna: With regard to traditional stories and legends, these are taught to younger pupils as part of history. Storytelling is a very traditional aspect of Irish culture and is primarily done by older generations and hasn't really caught on in modern days. In the West of Ireland, it would be more prevalent however.

Traditional song and dance is an aspect of Irish culture which has spanned across the country. Irish musicians often use traditional instruments to give a unique sound to their music which makes it recognisable across the world. I don't belong to any folklore group now, however when I was younger I learnt how to play the tin whistle and attended Irish dancing lessons. Irish dancing is also sometimes taught in schools as part of physical education class.

When I visited Gaeltacht regions in the past, I would have taken part in 'céilís' Irish group dancing. These Irish dancing parties are organised around the country as well, most often in pubs and my mother often goes to them in our local area.

Celestine: In Brittany there are some folklore groups, which are called "cercles celtiques" that teach folk Breton music and dances, and wear traditional clothes when they perform dance shows. But folk music and dances are in fact very popular, and not used only in these groups.

You can learn traditional music in any music school, and it is a very dynamic field with a lot of different bands which are varied and quite popular. A lot of different kinds of people listen to Breton music and dance traditional dances - not only those are interested in tradition. Every weekend, and almost every day during the holiday season, you can find a "fest-noz" or "fest-deiz" in the area where you live. This is basically a party with Breton dances and live music, to go out, meet people and dance. I often go there to dance with my friends and meet people, and sometimes I play music there.

**In the Czech Republic, folklore music and dance groups are usually most active in the traditional regions such as South Moravia, Šumava or Beskydy Mountains. Young people in other regions usually learn rather a small number of Classical and Latine dances while visiting a dance school when they are about 16 years of age. Is this also the case of your home regions – or is the traditional folklore dance and music more popular?**

Móna: Yes, traditional music, dance and language are most popular in the west of Ireland such as County Galway and in the Gaeltacht regions. Irish dancing classes are however taught throughout the country. Children, from as young as four or five, often learn the basic "1-2-3" step in and outside of school. Traditional dance competitions called 'Feis' or 'Féile' are held regularly also. Children also learn traditional instruments such as the fiddle violin, accordion and the tin whistle in and outside school. Modern popular dance classes are also taught around the country.

Celestine: I do not think many young people attend classes to learn Breton dances. They usually learn it straight away in the parties where we dance - the fest-noz - because most of our dances are not so difficult to learn, and your neighbor in the dance circle can explain you the steps while dancing, or you always find someone to teach you there.

It's usually adult people who go to special dance courses where they typically learn more uncommon dances and more specific steps. Younger people who would like to be very good Breton dancers also may attend, but it is really not necessary to go to a course to be a good dancer. Of course some people follow classes of Latin-American dances, or rock or modern jazz dance too, but dance it in a different style.

**How did you yourself start to dance or/and play music? Are you member of any dance group back at home – or do you just like to dance and perform the music for yourself?**

Móna: I started doing Irish dancing when I was about four or five outside school and learnt the tin whistle in third class (when I was about 8 or 9). I lost interest in both when I went into secondary school but have been reintroduced to them again in recent years. When I visited one of the Galway Gaeltacht regions in 2009 as part of my college course we were listening to traditional music and going to céilís (= Irish dancing parties) regularly.

I'm not part of any traditional music or dance groups. However there are clubs and societies dedicated to such things in college. I do have a tin whistle at home which I can play, but I don't perform. Often at weddings or clubs when music comes on that sounds in anyway Celtic a lot of people have a tendency to revert back to their childhood and begin doing Irish dancing, like the '1-2-3' step!

Celestine: I'm not member of any dance group. I learned how to dance just by going to fest-noz by watching people dance and imitating them. I never had to take classes; I grew up listening to the music and running between the dancers. When I wanted to dance as well, I copied the steps that my neighbor was doing and that is how I learned, and how many people learn. I also saw musicians playing quite often, in the fest-noz as well, and it seemed magical to me that they could produce such great sounds while moving their fingers so fast - I thought I would never be able to do it.

I soon heard other children playing music, who were still learning. I first wanted to play the piano, like my grandmother, and then the flute because you can take it with you everywhere you go. I also had a friend who played the harp, the small one that people call celtic harp, not the classical one. This instrument is nowadays quite popular and common in Brittany, at least more than in other parts of France, and you can learn it in any music school.

When I went to enroll in a music school at age of twelve, the flute teacher was not here, but the harp teacher was here. So I thought "why not?" and so I started to learn the harp. Now I play a bit of flute too, but as I started later I still have a lot of work to get better.

**Celestine, you study Music – would you like to work in this field as well?**

Celestine: I have no concrete idea concerning my future work yet. I have to admit that I don't want to even think about it (yet)!! Maybe I will give some harp lessons... I do not think I want to be a professional musician because this is a very hard work, and you have to find places to play and sometimes play what people like but not necessarily what you do. Getting a job also depends a lot on your social relations and contacts – it is not just about talent, so I don't really know if I want to attempt that and have that kind of job. But what I'm sure about is that music will always have a very important place in my life even if it's not my profession.

**What do you like the best about music?**

Móna: My favourite thing about music would be its universality. No matter what country you are in - even if you don't understand the language - you can enjoy the music and immerse yourself in the sound(s) of the country.

Celestine: Music is music. I do not think I can explain it differently. Music can express what you cannot say in words. To answer this question verbally I would need words and I don't have them.

**You both prepared a nice dance and music program for two of the partner schools of the Europe Meets School programme (Móna visited Třebízského Primary School in Kralupy nad Vltavou and U Řičanského lesa Primary School in Říčany; Celestine prepared her project for the Professor Patočka High School in Prague 1 and Strančice Primary School in Strančice). Could you say a few words about your projects?**

Móna: My Project was entitled „Irish Music, Dance and Folklore“. I told the children a few general facts about Ireland and taught them a 'cúpla focail' (a few Irish words). I also read them a traditional Irish legend 'Tír na Nóg' (meaning Land of the Young) and stories about Leprechauns.

I then showed them clips of different traditional and modern musicians and told them about the traditional instruments used in Ireland. I taught the children the basic Irish “1-2-3” dance step and played some traditional music. To finish off my presentation, we had a small céilí (Irish dancing party).

Celestine: I started with a short presentation about Brittany, so that the children were able to locate my region on the map (actually in the Primary school, the children were so young that they even didn't know where France is, so I had shown it to them as well!), and so that they would have an idea about its history, culture and how its landscapes looks. Then I taught them a song “J'ai cinq ? six moutons” which you can dance to, with lyrics half in Breton and half in French, and they learned it very quickly – I was surprised how quick they picked it up! After that we learned how to dance to this melody, and I showed them another type of Breton dance. I then played harp so that they could rest a bit, in Strančice they filled in a crossword about my region in the meantime, and then we danced and sang again.

At the end I played some more songs and then let the children try the harp. In Professor Patočka High School, I held the project in French because the children there were learning this language; in Strančice Primary School I spoke in English and held the project with the help of Lenka Žehrová, a Czech student who was in Rennes on Erasmus and learned Breton dances. Lenka translated my explanations to the children in Czech. It was good to have her with me as a teaching aide, especially since she could help me to teach the dances too.

**How was the cooperation with the Czech children (and teachers) for you? Did the schools differ? Are there any differences between Czech children and children in your home countries?**

Móna: The children participated with great energy and enthusiasm. They were really interested, asked plenty of questions and they all joined in the céilí at the end. The teachers in both schools were also very co-operative and helpful, they enthusiastically showed me around their schools and pointed out some of the students' artwork. The teacher in Říčany was even my translator on the day!

The school buildings themselves differed greatly, Říčany's school was brand new and was thus very modern. Both schools had a great atmosphere, Kralupy was very small and had felt very much like a small, tightly-knit community whereas Říčany was a lot bigger and seemed like a very interesting exciting school to work in. Overall I didn't see any major differences between the Czech children I worked with and those in my home country - kids are kids, they are all different!

Celestine: It was very nice! I think children were happy to dance rather than to sit all day; they learned very well and told me they enjoyed it. I was happy to share this experience with them too.

I think the children were not very different from the children in my country but it's hard to tell after such short visits (note of the redaction: in each case Celestine spent 2 hours with the children). I did a similar project in some schools at home and it worked about the same. Maybe the children here, talked more, asked more questions, and were a bit more active than those at home – though perhaps this was because learning about Breton dance and music was an entirely new experience/topic for them!

**Have you enjoyed teaching? Would you like to work as a teacher – or for example join the Comenius programme – in the future?**

Móna: I really enjoyed teaching, it was great getting to experience working in a classroom in a different country. I am presently training to be a Primary school teacher in Ireland and would love the opportunity to work abroad when I have finished my studies.

Celestine: I really enjoyed teaching, especially since it was more of an exchange and not just me speaking to a passive group of people absorbing my knowledge. I enjoyed it because the children were happy to dance, to sing, to listen to me playing the harp (and to try it for themselves), and to have something unusual happening in their school day. I am happy I had made this exchange possible when joining the Europe Meets School programme.

I think I would enjoy teaching in this way for a while. I actually give French lessons in Prague, and I try to make it this informal and interactive way as well. Teaching in a traditional way could be interesting as an experience too but I think I wouldn't want to do it for all my life. But well, you never know...

Thank you for the interview.