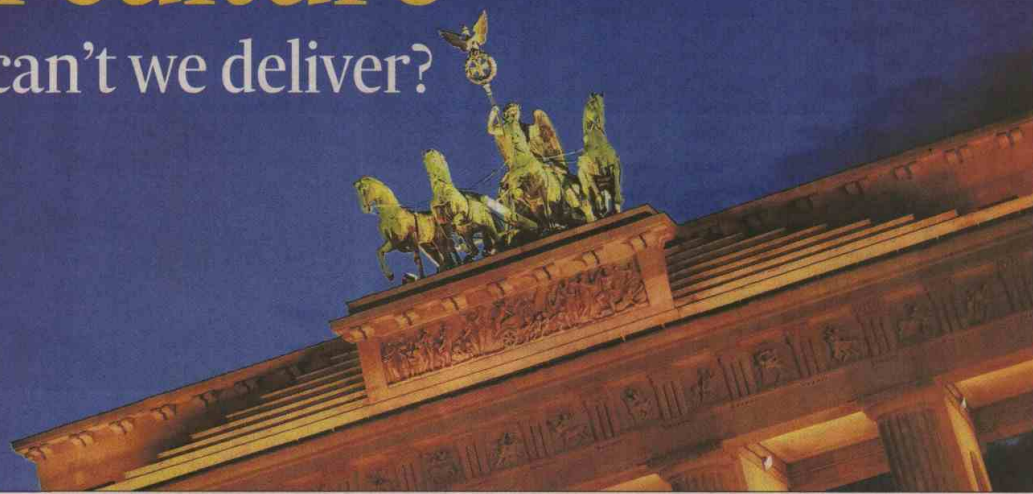




Germany wants more Irish culture Why can't we deliver?



Irish traditional arts are hugely popular in many regions of Europe, yet somehow we don't seem able to make the most of our unique cultural selling point, writes **Derek Scally** in Berlin

IF THE bust of Felix Mendelssohn had feet they would have been tapping along with the music echoing through the vaulted hall below the Irish Embassy in Berlin. In the old home of the Mendelssohn Bank, the new traditional Irish music group Cirrus give it their all and soon even the German junior minister in row two is jiggling his foot in time with the music.

The evening is a welcome distraction from the doom and gloom about Ireland in the German media, but it's not quite what it seems. The Irish Embassy has provided the venue and Tourism Ireland some funding, but this evening's event is to promote the sixth annual **TradFest** in **Temple Bar** next January, a private initiative with minimal public funding. "It's interesting that it's taken a group of hoteliers, publicans and restaurateurs to put their heads together for this," says Martin Harte, managing director of **Temple Bar Traders**. "Rather than just talking about it, they've all put their hands in their pocket to put this on."

This is a common story. Government agencies do tremendous work promoting Ireland abroad but, looking in from outside, there appears to be a worrying gap between the reality and the lip service the State pays to promoting what makes Ireland uniquely Irish.

Efforts to promote traditional Irish arts abroad – surely a unique selling point in the crowded tourism market – are disorganised and largely reliant on volunteer work.

Take Germany, where the hunger for Irish culture is almost insatiable, as Moya Brennan

knows well. She has been coming here for 30 years, first with Clannad and now with her solo programme. In Berlin to help push the **TradFest**, she says the enthusiasm she always feels in Germany for traditional Irish arts is in stark contrast to an apathy she feels at home.

"We need more things like **Tradfest** so people who come to Ireland looking for traditional music don't go home disappointed, which happens all the time," she says. "When others are so enthusiastic about your culture, though, it's very easy to become complacent."

A 2009 Tourism Ireland survey showed that Irish culture and history is the third most cited reason visitors come to Ireland, after the people and the scenery. But more than one-third of respondents "agreed strongly" that Ireland is a "unique holiday destination", offering things they cannot experience anywhere else.

So either Ireland has nothing unique to offer two-thirds of its visitors, which is unlikely to be the case, or Ireland could do more to push what makes it unique, such as the traditional arts.

For a German with an interest in Irish culture, planning a holiday to the island is a daunting business. The official Irish tourism website offers a good overview of popular haunts but is no help in making detailed plans.

Thankfully there are diligent Germans prepared to fill in the gaps. For nearly 30 years Christian Ludwig has sent more than 20,000 German tourists to Ireland annually through his travel agency. Since 1990 he has

published the quarterly *Irland Journal*, a glossy magazine filled with political, cultural and historical articles about the island.

He sees the hundreds of traditional Irish music gigs around Germany each year as a potential stepping stone to an Ireland visit, so each edition of his magazine contains nine pages of listings of dozens of Irish music dates in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Despite some successful collaborations with Irish State agencies, many of his applications for financial support from Dublin for his projects have been turned down over the years.

When he printed 40,000 brochures containing Irish music listings for Germany, he couldn't keep up with demand. A request for funding to help finance a second print run was refused by Dublin, he says, with the explanation: "We don't support brochures." With friends he has put together a website called Celtic Music Net as a kind of traditional-music Wikipedia, allowing bands, promoters and fans to upload biographical information, gig news and CD release dates.

He says his application for funding to translate and develop the German-language website in English was rebuffed with the words: "We don't support websites." Three State agencies have a role in promoting traditional music, so what do they do abroad? Culture Ireland says it has identified traditional arts and music as a priority area for "strategic, proactive promotion". Besides providing grants to musicians, Culture Ireland connects musicians with programmers of Celtic music festivals and

brings Irish performers to international arts events. But Madeline Boughton, Culture Ireland's director of projects and promotions, agrees that there are gaps in the chain promoting traditional music. "One thing that's missing, for instance, is an independent organisation to promote, develop and push the case for traditional arts, to galvanise and unite the community," she says, citing Dance Ireland in comparison. "People probably feel they are on their own and have to sell themselves. If there was a more united front from the community we couldn't but be pleased. They would make their case and Culture Ireland and the Arts Council would have to respond."

Culture Ireland also publishes listings of upcoming events around the world that are happening with its support. It hopes to overhaul its website soon to make it more user-friendly.

Tourism Ireland in Germany says it wants to promote Irish music more as part of its marketing strategy. "In 2011 we'll be putting traditional music in the foreground as research shows it is a trigger for German tourists," says Barbara Wood, Tourism Ireland's manager for central Europe.

And what about Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann? On its website it claims to "promote

traditional Irish music and culture around the world", but the reality is sobering. The organisation is dependent on the initiative of volunteers to set up local branches and do the promotion. In Europe the organisation has branches in France, Finland, Luxembourg and Italy. As for Germany, the organisation's Bernard O'Sullivan says there was a Munich branch but it is no longer active. "We don't have the resources to go on the ground," he says. "The interest has to come from the region itself."

That interest can be dampened when it becomes clear that Comhaltas is not able to provide financial assistance yet would like volunteers who set up branches to pay a €16 membership fee.

In addition to State agencies, *Riverdance* has acted as a useful surrogate for satisfying interest in traditional Irish music in recent years. And many Irish embassies have cultural attachés performing good work with limited resources. But, more often than not, long-term promotion abroad falls to Irish and non-Irish volunteers, driven by their passion for Ireland.

In Germany, Christian Ludwig makes the case for a website like Celtic Music Net, with user-generated content as a one-stop resource for all Irish traditional music bands

and fans. Equally important, he argues, is a steering group in Ireland to co-ordinate the existing efforts of Culture Ireland, Comhaltas, Tourism Ireland and the Arts Council. "When you talk to people in these organisations individually they're always very open to ideas, but you can never get them together."

In Berlin, members of Cirrus, the band recently formed live on the TG4 series, *Lorg Lunny*, are enjoying a drink after their set. They are now dealing with the challenges that face all new bands: selling their first CD and getting bookings and attention. But they are getting little assistance. "People in Ireland think of traditional music in pubs as something that's always there and always free, like tap water," says fiddle player Tara Breehi.

Moya Brennan, one of our best cultural ambassadors for the last 30 years, wants a change in official thinking: away from subsidies for companies that come and go and towards long-term financial support for young traditional bands such as Cirrus.

"We have a bank in Ireland called culture, so rich that other countries would dearly love to be able to draw on it," says Brennan. "It's a treasure chest that hasn't been opened yet."

Open to the Irish invasion: Berlin's Brandenburg Gate and inset below, Moya Brennan. Photographs: Johannes Eisele/AFP, Gus Stewart/Redferns



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