

FIVE TAKEAWAYS FROM MEITHEAL

Past Meitheal student Aidan Quigney tells us how Meitheal Summer School is a transformative experience for students lucky enough to attend.

Aidan Quigney



Photos : Melissa Mannion

I am now nineteen. I am fortunate to have been rooted in music since childhood. My mom, Tara is from a musical family in Dundalk and plays flute. My dad, Anthony comes from Clooney and plays piano and flute with the Kilfenora. In spite of such fertile ground, it still took a lot of work for me to become a musician. Countless hours practising, going to classes, playing at family events and in competitions with Crusheen CCE all went into the mix. Despite all that time invested though, I could easily have gradually let the music slip, as so many do during the teenage years. Sports commitments or the Leaving Cert make us lose our way!

However, the spark to ignite a passion is sometimes generated by a single random profound experience and that is how it was for me.

Calling Meitheal a Summer School doesn't do it justice.

It is so much more than that. I can comfortably say that Meitheal was the musical experience that had the greatest impact on me as a person, and as a musician. When I began jotting down these thoughts, a billion happy memories flooded back to me, an uncountable number of life lessons.



Photos : Melissa Mannion

Geantraí

Firstly, a bit of context. I attended Meitheal 3 times (2016 to 2018). I am a concertina player from Clare, and my parents introduced me to Meitheal when I was 13. It was genuinely a very special time in my life, where I learned a lot and made many new friends. I was delighted when my younger sister Eimear said she would be going to Meitheal with me in 2018, as I knew she would enjoy it just as much as I did. We often exchange yarns of our experiences there, looking back fondly at this important time in our musical and personal development. I hope one day when the pandemic is in our rear-view mirror, my youngest sister Doireann can go to Meitheal and get to experience the same craic as her older siblings.

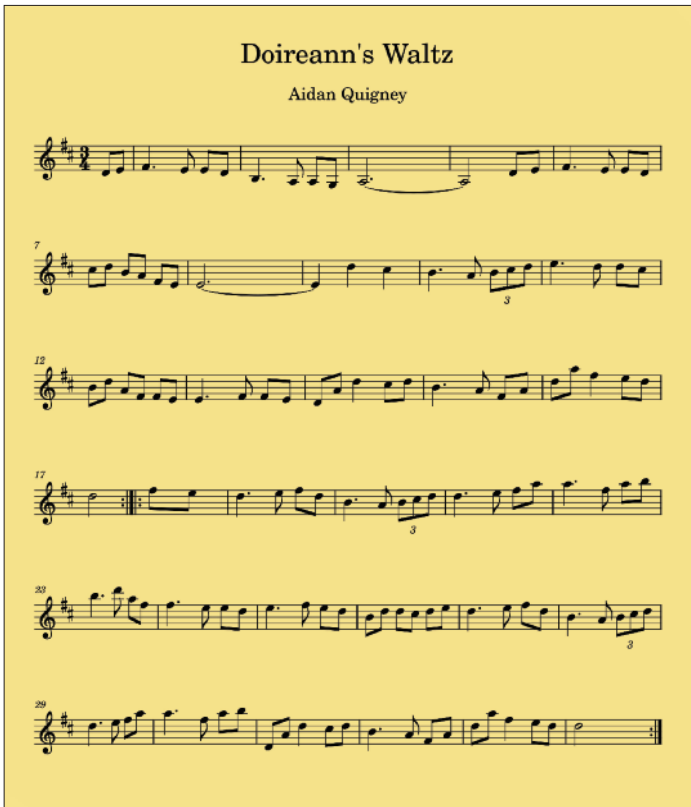
HERE ARE 5 WAYS IN WHICH MEITHEAL HELPED ME:

Independence

The world is a scary place when you are 13. You make the big leap to secondary school and are forced to make new friends and adapt quickly. It is often hard to tell where you stand. Therefore, it is not unusual to be nervous before something like Meitheal. I know I was! Spending a week away from home at that age is unnerving and daunting. I still remember the knots in my stomach as we pulled up to Villier's Boarding School in Limerick, the venue of Meitheal 2016. However, the butterflies in my belly weren't long moving on as I learned how the week was going to go.

In the space of a few minutes, the conversations were flowing as people started to get to know each other. It is very easy to talk to people with whom you share this grá for music. Album recommendations and upcoming concerts were common talking points. Snapchat usernames and phone numbers were traded as new bonds were formed. In those moments I met people who are now some of my closest friends.

Meitheal is the first step towards independence for many young musicians. You stay in a dorm, away from home, which is not a walk in the park. I chose to live out of my suitcase, which got messy...fast (don't do this). Trying to close the suitcase at the end of the week was unbelievably difficult and made me question how I ever managed to pack the damn thing in the first place.



Living with others is also a challenge. Between late-evening (or early morning) chatters, and ear-drum-bursting snorers, a good night's sleep is not always guaranteed. However, soon I got used to these noises (noise-cancelling headphones are your friend!), and I learned the proper etiquette for sharing a room with others.

Meitheal had such an effect on my musical independence. With

Friendship

Having a hundred or so young people who all share the same passion under one roof is bound to foster friendship, and it does. I am still in daily contact with people who I went to Meitheal with almost 4 years ago. It must sound crazy to say that you could make so many lifelong friends in the space of a week, but somehow, it's true.

To see the effect Meitheal has on friendships you need not look further than the group "Geantraí" that I was a member of. We all met at Meitheal in 2016. It wasn't long after Meitheal had ended that Eoin Turner contacted me about starting a group to compete at Siansa Gael-Linn and I was delighted to accept. To get to spend more time with these people with whom I shared this unique bond was an offer that I couldn't refuse. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Siansa final was called off, but getting to play and rehearse with that fine bunch of lads and lassies that I met at Meitheal softened the blow.

At the Fleadh, or Ennis Trad Fest, or any other music festival for that matter, you really see the effect of having made such a large network of friends when it comes to finding sessions. I would hazard a guess that the majority of sessions that I have gone to over the past 4 or 5 years have had at least one person that I knew from Meitheal at them.

The craic we had in Meitheal is something that I will never forget. The "Anything Goes" nights were always a highlight, where "bodhrán-battles", storytelling and broom dancing filled the place with glee. The memories I have of those times in the orchestra with the eccentric Simon Thoumire and at the trad disco will forever live rent-free in my memory. It was genuinely one of the best times in my life. I wouldn't trade those memories for the world.

"Meitheal was the musical experience that had the greatest impact on me as a person, and as a musician"

classes and workshops that encourage creativity and thinking outside the box, you begin to feel as though your voice matters. No other music festival gives young musicians a chance to explore their musicality quite like Meitheal. When I went home, I began writing my own tunes using some of the techniques that we talked about in the composition class. If I hadn't been there, I may never have gone on to write a single tune.

At Meitheal you are responsible for being in the right room at the right time for your classes. I remember a few instances where I was late for orchestra practice, after walking all the way to the other side of the campus by accident and then tried to trickle into the correct practice room unnoticed. Although the staff are very helpful, you aren't coddled by any means, which is very important for young teenagers. You have to get up on time in the morning, get to the showers early (and hope the fire drill doesn't happen mid-shower) and be on time for all of your meals. Now that I am in College, I appreciate the advantage of such experience at a young age.

Ensemble playing

Meitheal is a great place for people to explore the dynamic world of traditional ensemble music. In the orchestra, the entire summer school comes together to play a suite that has been written by a famous musician. Over the years we had different composers with different styles who composed completely contrasting suites of music. The orchestra taught me so much about playing with a large group. You have to be prepared, especially if you aren't so good at reading sheet music. I can still remember being quite nervous during my first year, so I wrote the ABC notes under the staff. You have to always be listening to the other lines and watching the conductor to make sure you keep time (counterpoint melodies and other quirky ideas make staying in time a bit of a hassle sometimes). You have to play at the correct volume not to drown out other lines. It's no easy task, but it teaches you a lot (it teaches some the art of "faking it until you make it"). The finished product always exceeds your initial expectations and looking back on YouTube clips of past orchestras leaves me wondering how we ever managed to do so much in such little time.

The Finale concert was always amazing fun. The concert was divided into 3 sections; the groups, the tutors and the orchestra. I remember the backstage banter that we would have, all the while making sure not to raise the volume level so loud as to attract the attention of the amazing Ernestine Healy doing her best to keep us rascals quiet. The tutors always gave such amazing performances at the concert, making it difficult for the orchestra which was supposed to be

| | 09:00 | 10:00 | 11:00 | 12:00 | 13:00 | 14:00 | 15:00 | 16:00 | 17:00 | 18:00 | 19:00 | 20:00 | 21:00 | 22:00 |
|-----------|-----------|-------|-------------|-------|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Intro | Orchestra | Break | Arrangement | Lunch | Masterclass | Workshop | Workshop | Masterclass | Dinner | Composition | Meet the Tutors | Orchestra | Solo Heats | Table Quiz |
| Orchestra | Orchestra | Break | Arrangement | Lunch | Masterclass | Workshop | Workshop | Masterclass | Dinner | Composition | Orchestra | Solo Final | Session | |
| Orchestra | Orchestra | Break | Arrangement | Lunch | Masterclass | Call | Workshop | Masterclass | Dinner | Composition | Arrangement Recital | Orchestra | Group Contest | Anything Goes |
| Orchestra | Orchestra | Break | Arrangement | Lunch | Masterclass | Competition | Workshop | Masterclass | Dinner | Composition recital | Orchestra | Masterclass recital | Trad Disco | Party |
| Orchestra | Orchestra | Break | Arrangement | Lunch | A Soundcheck | B Rehearse | A Rehearse | Dinner | Orchestra Soundcheck | Orchestra Soundcheck | Orchestra Soundcheck | Finale concert | | |

Timetable

Meitheal Orchestra



Photos : Key

the showstopper! Lining up backstage and filled with nerves, we would all get into our identical Meitheal t-shirts. The performance was always a little terrifying (knowing that if you missed a cue, the world and their mother would see and hear). However, it invariably went swimmingly, and we were always intoxicated by the applause at the end of the show. What a sound to end the week on!

As for the Arrangement Groups, at the start of the week, all the musicians were divided into a number of small groups (roughly 7-10 members). It was a very daunting process because usually, you would up with complete strangers. This meant getting to know people fast. We had to figure out what instruments people played and what were people's strengths and weaknesses in order to come up with a complex 4-minute arrangement. By the end of the week, it was always so interesting to see what people had managed to do. This process of pressured creativity where you are working to a deadline is such a buzz, and the arrangement groups were always great craic with plenty of musical disagreement. It taught me a lot about the art of compromise!

I developed so much over the three years. The clearest example of this was a growing assertiveness. In 2016, I was shy and nervous, and surrounded by musicians far older than myself, however by 2018, I was more confident and was far more involved in the creative process. I can definitely thank Meitheal at least in part for my confidence in ensemble settings.

Confidence

We all know of the issues with young people's mental health in this country. I think a lot of this could be due to feelings of inadequacy as teenagers. Confidence is not something that can be taught in a book,

TED talk or YouTube video; it's something that you gain by immersing yourself in new and challenging situations.

Meitheal gives you a lot of confidence in your ability to be creative. There is no other environment where young musicians are so free to discover their creativity. In the arrangement and composition classes, there is no such thing as a bad idea, and this gives everyone the confidence to speak up. Young people are encouraged to be outspoken and brave. The number of current touring groups that met for the first time at Meitheal is a testament to this fostering of creative thinking.

I personally struggled with my own self-confidence in the past. There were times in my life where I questioned whether music was for me. I was often left feeling quite dejected, especially after competitions that didn't go my way. Until my first year under-18, I had never been placed in a Clare Fleadh, the concertina competition being a fiercely competitive environment. In fact, the only place where I ever won any awards was at Meitheal, which at the time meant so much to me. I believe my All-Ireland concertina Fleadh win in 2018 is due at least in part to the confidence that Meitheal gave me. I can't help but feel that it is not entirely coincidental that the year that I was awarded a half scholarship and a week's tuition at the UL World Academy of Music was the same year that I won the All-Ireland. It is all about confidence.

Meitheal gives you confidence in your musical ability. However, this newfound confidence is not something that is confined only to music. I found benefit in other aspects of my life. For example, in school, I was more likely to speak up in class. In social circles, I was more outspoken and this led to better relationships with my friends. When you are mixing with your musical idols, it has that effect. It sounds absurd that one week a year could have such an impact but this is the reality. I know loads of people who arrived at Meitheal as timid teenagers and left ready to face the world. I am one of them.

Solo musicianship

With the orchestra and arrangement groups, you would be forgiven for assuming that Meitheal is a place where you work only on your ensemble music skills, however, this is not the case. There is equal weight put on development as a solo player. There are masterclasses with accomplished musicians. I found it refreshing to be introduced to so many new styles over the years. Meitheal has had some of the most amazing musicians as tutors. I, as a concertina player, was lucky enough to be taught by the likes of Sinéad Mulqueen, Paul Clesham and Mohsen Amini.. I would love to go to Meitheal one day as a tutor, as the people that tutored me had such a big impact on my musicality, and I would love to pass this on. Not only did I learn new tunes, but I



St. Flannan's College

was influenced by different styles and even different ways of thinking about the concertina as an instrument. I remember a workshop we had with Simon Thoumire, where he asked us to consider the different ways in which we could make percussive sounds with the concertina. We came up with everything from using the air button, to rolling the concertina! The masterclass recital at the end of the week was always fun, with each of the tutors trying to outdo one another.

Meitheal is well known for awarding performances opportunities at other festivals such as NYAH, Fleadh Nua and Consairtín. These opportunities are an excellent way for young musicians to experience professional-level public performance. I remember being a young lad at Meitheal and being scared out of my wits the first time I competed for one of these awards. However, after a few years, I found that I no longer got as nervous. Seeing the reaction on Facebook to the clip of the solo competition after my first year at Meitheal was awesome. The video was commented on by lots of musicians, including Sharon Shannon.

“I often find myself looking back longingly at that time in my life”

Lastly, the Composition classes. I learned so much about composition over the years. In 2018 our class was taught by Winifred Horan, and I am still hoping that one day Solas might record one of the tunes we wrote with her. We were given so many clever tricks to come up with creative tunes, including rolling dice to get random notes for the first bar, and then writing a tune based on those notes. Composition was always one of the highlights of the week for me. It was so exciting to see who would win the scholarships for next year, and who would win the informal (and unrecognised) “best tune title”. I think that Ademar O Connor’s *The Real Slim Sheedy* named after Dermot Sheedy of Hermitage Green might have been my favourite.

Meitheal challenges you musically, emotionally and even physically. By the end of it you feel transformed. Some of my friends who haven’t been think it’s some sort of cult!

I often find myself looking back longingly at that time in my life. I find great comfort in the fact that although I will never go to Meitheal again, I have gained so much from it. I learned to be more independent. I made so many excellent friends. My solo music improved and adapted as I was exposed to so many different styles. I made big strides in my ensemble playing and my maturity and self-confidence quadrupled!

Let’s hope that all trad music activity can get back to normal this year and festivals and summer schools can resume for the sake of all the young musicians who stand to benefit.

If you are considering going to Meitheal (or considering sending your child), I couldn’t recommend it more. I mean that from the bottom of my heart.

I see that their 2022 tutors have already been assembled and that they are back in St. Flannan’s College, Ennis this year. All over the country, there’s pent-up expectation. Musicians are starved for action after two years parked up!

Oh, to be young again!!!

by Aidan Quigney.

The Meitheal site www.tradweek.com is open for applications.

WHO WILL TUTOR AT MEITHEAL 2022?



Sylvain Barou from Brittany is an exponent of Irish and Breton music on flute and pipes, Sylvain has played with leading bands and musicians such as Liz Carroll, Máirtín O’Connor, Guidewires, Altan and countless others. He travels the world with his own line-up and a new trio with Irish legendary musicians Donal Lunny and Padraig Rynne.

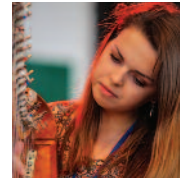
Dylan Carlos is the current All-Ireland Senior Fiddle champion, and part of the group "Carlos Sweeney McCartin" who brought out their debut album last year to critical acclaim. Dylan plays and teaches regularly at festivals around Ireland and abroad and occasionally performs with the group "Gatehouse".



Brid Harper from Donegal is one of Ireland’s finest exponents of traditional fiddling. She is in much demand as a performer and teacher in Ireland and abroad. Dermot Byrne, Steve Cooney Tony O’Connell, John Doyle and Sylvain Barou are just some of her collaborators. She is a member of newly formed group UAINÉ who recently released their highly rated album *The Dimming of the Day*.



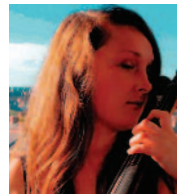
Aisling Lyons holds 8 All-Ireland harp titles from Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann and is much sought after as a performer and teacher in Ireland & abroad. Aisling has taught and performed in Australia, Norway, the U.K, U.S.A, Canada & mainland Europe.



Cathal O Curráin (fiddle) hails from Gaoth Dobhair, Co. Donegal. He has a degree in Music and Irish from the University of Limerick. He has recently recorded with The High Seas and The Conifers and has guested on The Friel Sisters’ album *Before the Sun* and Aoife Scott’s *Homebird* album with Ron Block.



Sharon Howley (fiddle & cello) was born into music. Though from Kilfenora in the heart of trad territory, she is also highly regarded as a master of other genres and has carved out a role for cello in trad music. A leading member of the Kilfenora, she was the 2020 TG4 Young musician of the Year.



Gavin Strappe (banjo) hails from County Tipperary. He has played music professionally since 2013. He has toured extensively in Europe, China and South America. He is a member of Irish-Bluegrass-Americana band, Jiglam, and spends the majority of the year touring the United States.



Jos Kelly (accordion). Also a composer, arranger & keyboard player, Jos has toured the world with Moxie, including a performance for Michael D Higgins in Hanoi Opera house, Vietnam. He has also performed recently with Moxie & The National Symphony Orchestra in the National Concert hall.



Pádraig Rynne is a concertina player, composer and producer. With his bands, he has pioneered a new sound in Irish folk and re-contextualised tradition forms with experimental, improvised, jazz, and electronic music. His latest album *NASC* with Tara Breen won best traditional album in the 2022 American Celtic listener supported radio awards.



For updates and further information on Meitheal 2022 visit www.tradweek.com

