

The Irish Bodhrán in Context

Celebrating the Evolutions of a Modern Tradition

By Kyle Forsthoff and Andrew Kruspe

From private kitchens and the back rooms of pubs in the rural regions of the far west of Ireland to the stages of Carnegie Hall and Broadway, the bodhrán has become an icon of Irish culture and has been steadily growing in popularity the world over due to its versatile capabilities. While the instrument is quite old, playing the bodhrán has only been recognized as an art form for just over fifty years. It is a percussion instrument that is certainly well known in our community of percussion enthusiasts, but we feel that it is an instrument that is still not well known about.

In our PASIC 2013 clinic we will aim to educate the audience about the ever-changing abilities of this instrument to function in its original context as a part of the Irish music tradition. Over the years, the small number of bodhrán-related articles in *Percussive Notes* and the few previous PASIC presentations dedicated to the bodhrán have not presented the history, development, and context of the instrument within its own tradition as comprehensively as we intend to. While we

can't touch on every historical and performance aspect of the drum, by the end of our program you will understand the drum's history and see how its construction, method of accompaniment, and application have changed from approximately 1960 to the present. We will be focusing on the use of the bodhrán in commercial recordings by musical groups, as that is where the instrument has flourished and where the vast majority of accessible resources lie.

To illustrate the changing use of the drum in its traditional role as an accompaniment instrument for Irish traditional music, we will perform with the assistance of Mike Clem on guitar and banjo, John Skelton on flute, and Garrett Smith on fiddle. Each of these players is a well-respected member of the Irish traditional music community, and we are very grateful for their assistance in making our presentation possible.

The bodhrán is a member of the frame drum family, most often played in a seated position with the drum resting on the thigh. The drum is struck with a single short stick called a *cipín*

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JOHN SKELTON, GARRETT SMITH, MIKE CLEM
World Clinic/Performance
Saturday 3:00 P.M.

or tipper, but the hand itself can also be used. The basic technique for striking the drum involves a down-and-up motion that allows for the application of several additional techniques to provide ornamentation (more detail on basic playing technique can be found in O'Mahoney, 1999).

The drum is most commonly used to accompany melodic tunes used for social dancing. Like many folk instruments, the origins of the drum consist of a series of non-linear records and independent developments. There is not space here to cover all of the details, but what we do know is this: The bodhrán was used to accompany flutes and tin whistles during the "Wren Boys" festivities on December 26, the feast day of St. Stephen, where young men and boys would use these

instruments in processions around their villages. It is unclear how long this tradition has taken place. Bodhráns and bodhrán-like frame drums were known to have been made and used in the performance of Irish traditional music both in Ireland and in the United States. Liam Ó Bharáin's multi-part article in the journal *Treoir* states that drums were made and played in Ireland as early as 1917. In addition, bodhrán-like drums or large tambourines were used to accompany the flute



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in U.S.-produced recordings of Irish traditional music in the 1920s.

There are two main theories regarding the origins of this frame drum: migration and local development. The migration theory posits that the bodhrán as we know it made its way to Ireland from the Mediterranean basin over centuries of cultural exchange. Evidence to support this comes from the similarities in construction of frame drums from North Africa and the Middle East (tar, riq, bendir, etc.) and Southern Europe (tamburello and tamorra). The local development theory proposes that the bodhrán developed independently in Ireland as a frame drum or as a drum improvised from agrarian tools. The first part of this theory points to several paintings and old manuscripts that show or tell of a bodhrán-like drum used in the performance of folk music. The second part of this theory suggests that this drum was improvised for use as a musical instrument with skin-bottomed trays that were previously used for winnowing grain and/or washing and storing produce.

After 1960 the history of the bodhrán becomes clearer. We will use this date as a sort of fulcrum-point, dividing the period from 1960 to the present into four main eras of development and performance. In that year,

radio promoter and avant-garde composer Seán Ó Riada created the group Ceoltóirí Chualann as part of a multi-fronted effort by the government of the Republic of Ireland to revitalize interest in aspects of Irish culture across the nation, including the speaking of the Irish language and the playing of traditional music. In lieu of standard orchestral percussion instruments, Ó Riada promoted the bodhrán by playing one in the group, later handing playing duties off to Peadar Mercier. In 1963, several members of Ceoltóirí Chualann formed the Chieftains as a side project, with early albums featuring bodhrán playing by Dave Fallon and Peadar Mercier. Kevin Conneff joined the group in 1976 following Mercier's retirement and continues to play in the group to this day.

During this first era of modern bodhrán performance the drums tended to be large, almost always had crossbars or wire both for structural support and for holding, and were devoid of any sort of tuning systems. The skins on these early drums were thick goatskins that had typically undergone only rudimentary skin processing techniques. One craftsman who gained a reputation as a bodhrán maker at this time was Charlie Byrne, whose drums are still highly prized to this day for their deep, haunting sound. During this era bodhrán

players generally played straight time with little rhythmic variation, minimal tonal variety, and little consideration given to the specific melody.

Beginning in the mid-1970s and proceeding through the mid-1980s, we begin to see a shift in the sensibilities of the players and the capabilities of the instrument. Players such as Johnny "Ringo" McDonagh, Colm Murphy (both with the group De Dannan), and Tommy Hayes (Stockton's Wing) featured techniques where the hand holding the drum is used to apply pressure to the skin in different ways, thus achieving tonal variation. They also created accompaniments that deviated from the straight-time approach used earlier, breaking up the rhythms and using syncopations. The recent addition into the tradition of chordal and rhythmic accompaniment instruments such as the guitar and bouzouki also began to have an effect on playing styles. At this time makers began building drums without crossbars, both out of lack of necessity and to allow the players more freedom of movement with their tonal hand.

Skins generally remained of similar quality, although we do see the introduction of Lambeg skins around this time. Lambeg skins are very thin goatskins specially treated for use on the large Lambeg drums primarily used in Northern Ireland. Seamus O'Kane began

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making drums with used Lambeg skins in 1978 and is also credited with inventing the internal tuning system that is a common design element on nearly all modern bodhráns.

From the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s bodhrán playing and making continued to improve in large strides. Makers including Darius Bartlett and Brendan White developed more advanced skin processing techniques to achieve a wider tonal range, drum sizes generally began to decrease with 12- to 16-inch diameter drums becoming popular, tape was used on the outer edge of the skin to mute high overtones, and tooled internal tuning systems became prolific. While players such as Mel Mercier, Donnchadh Gough (Danú) and Frank Torpey (Nomos) were expanding the traditional roles and possibilities of bodhrán playing, players such as Paul Phillips and Junior Davey simultaneously developed an entirely new style of playing. This style, commonly referred to as Top-End, used only one end of the stick (as opposed to the more popular style using both ends of the beater) and took full advantage of the increased tonal capabilities of drums available at the time. Particular to this style of playing is the prominent use of long, thin tippers and the highest pitches available on the drum for rhythmic clarity, well-suited to the faster playing styles that flourished in urban areas.

Our final historical era will cover the advances that have been made from the mid-1990s to the present day. There are now more people playing the bodhrán than ever before, with just as many approaches to playing. Makers such as Albert Alfonso, Rob Forkner, and Christian Hedwitschak are producing drums that are functional works of art with tool-less tuning systems, advanced shell materials and shapes, and skins from multiple species. In addition, these makers are also experimenting with skin appliques inspired by the construction of the heads on Indian tabla drums. Smaller drums with more flexible heads have now become the standard rather than the exception. As a result of these advances in drum technology, players are able to coax ever-wider ranges of pitches and timbres from their drums while using alternative implements such as hot-rod-type sticks and developing techniques to utilize the drum as a substitute for the drumset. John Joe Kelly (Flook), Eamon Murray (Beoga) and Colm Phelan (Goitse) are three of the many players expanding the drum's ever-widening capabilities while Martin O'Neill, Cormac Byrne (Uiscedwr), Ronan O'Snodaigh (Kilá), and others are taking the bodhrán into genres beyond the realms of Irish traditional music.

In addition to the four main historical eras, we will discuss a few styles of bodhrán playing that exist parallel to our narrative including the long tradition of handstriking, tonal bass playing, and the use of the bodhrán outside

of the Irish music tradition. It is important to note that many of the players and makers we will discuss fit into more than one era and/or are fully capable of playing in more than one particular style.

We will be performing often during our presentation in order to demonstrate particular concepts and ideas so that you can get a sense of how the music sounds and how that sound has changed over time. To enhance our presentation, we have created two pdf documents that you are free to download from the following URL: <http://www.betterthanitsounds.com/pasic.html>.

For those who may not have much familiarity with Irish Traditional Music, the first document will give you a basic overview of Irish Traditional Music as a whole, including how the melodic aspects of the music are grouped and governed. Being familiar with some of these organizational basics will increase your understanding of our presentation as we put bodhrán playing into the context of the music. This is pertinent as the structure of the music obviously affects how the bodhrán player creates accompaniment.

The second document is a very thorough list of bodhrán resources. This handout includes information on many notable players and makers, a list of recommended recordings, instructional materials, and numerous other sources of information. Our contact information is included on both documents, and we encourage you to contact us at any time with questions or comments. The handout we will provide at PASIC will include an outline of our presentation and a shorter version of our resource list featuring our favorite players and makers, preferred instructional resources, a list of essential albums, and bibliographic information for the articles pertaining to the bodhrán that have appeared in previous issues of *Percussive Notes*.

It is a very exciting time to be a bodhrán player and we hope you will join us as we celebrate the growth of this vibrant percussive art!

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Kyle Forsthoff has given clinics and taught bodhrán workshops throughout the Midwest while performing with Liam's Fancy, John Skelton, and others. He lives in Rhode Island.

Andrew Kruspe performs and records on the bodhrán with several ensembles and performers throughout the southeastern United States. He is also a percussion instructor at the Randolph School and Sparkman High School in Huntsville, Alabama. PN

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