

Basics of Irish Traditional Music- Instrumental

Irish music is basically a **melodically-based music**.

The oldest instrumental music in Ireland is from the **Harp**. In the time of the kings, Harpers served as both court musicians and historians/bards, creating music not only to glorify the kings, but also to help remember the family histories.

Once the conquest by England was complete, the kings were deposed, and harping became a disreputable profession. By the 18th Century, many harpers (and indeed, other musicians and dancing masters) were blind or otherwise crippled, as this was one profession that allowed them to be productive members of society despite their handicap. One of the last of the blind itinerant harpers was Turlough O'Carolan (1670-1738), who composed a great many pieces that, despite being written in fashionable Continental European styles of the time, remain very popular in the modern repertoire. At this time the Irish harp was strung with metal strings, giving it a bright tone compared to more modern harp designs. [*Maire Dhall (Blind Mary)*]

Another very important musical tradition is the singing of songs in the **Sean Nos** style. Sean Nos literally means "old style", and these songs were in Irish, with very free rhythm/meter, often with long narratives (many verses). The emphasis of this singing style is on relaying the story, not showing off the prowess of the singer. [*Casadh an tSugain*]

The melody of a Sean Nos song is called an **Air**, and airs are also able to be played on instruments, primarily the Uilleann Pipes, fiddle, flute or tin whistle, and box (accordions of various types). [*Youtube- Cillian Vallely playing Port na bPucaí, audio of same also on playlist*]

Dance Music

When we think of "Irish Music", what we usually mean is the playing of tunes used to accompany dancing. This kind of music is only a couple hundred years old. There are three main kinds of dance:

Sean Nos (not related to singing, but still means "old style") dancing- primarily a solo dance, upper body is NOT kept rigid [*YouTube- Clare man for the dance*]

Step Dancing- what we normally think of when we think of Irish dance- upper body is kept rigid to highlight rhythms of the feet (and, apocryphally, to fool passers-by, particularly clergy, into thinking that dancing wasn't going on)- primarily a solo or duet dance, but definitely not like Riverdance in its traditional form [*YouTube-Irish Set Dancing*]

Set/Ceili dancing- social group dances danced in "sets" of 4 couples. Most dances are based on continental European dances popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. Western Square Dancing in the US is a descendent cousin of this type of dancing. [*YouTube- Clare Set Dancing*]

Dancing served not only as recreation after long hours working in the fields, but also a means of social interaction and courtship. In the rural west of Ireland, a particular house might be designated as the local "ceili house" or else dances took place at a common crossroads, so-called "crossroads dances".

In these situations, dancing was often accompanied by one or a small number of melody players playing tunes, usually without accompaniment. The most common instruments were the fiddle, flute, tin whistle, or Uilleann Pipes. [*Kitty's Gone A'Milkin...*]

If there was no instrumental player to be had however, the tunes could be sung with nonsense rhythmic syllables, called **Lilting**. [*The Hunter's Purse*]

However, in 1935, the government of Ireland passed the **Public Dance Halls Act**, which forbade house and crossroads dancing. Dances were now required to be held in licensed dance halls, so that admission could be charged, taxes levied, and the (conservative Catholic) clergy could monitor social interactions among the population. With these larger venues and the general popularity of the dance band genre, louder instrumental forces were required, and we see the rise of the Ceili Band, which usually consisted of flutes and fiddles but added louder instruments such as the box (later, also banjo) and accompaniment in the form of piano and drumset. [*Reels: Heather Breeze/Pigeon on the Gate*]

In immigrant communities, especially in London and the US (particularly Boston), Ceili dancing was a very important part of the immigrant social/cultural experience throughout the 20th Century.

A quick examination of common instruments through the piece [*Drowsy Maggie*], played by The Chieftains:

This particular performance is atypical in that it is basically a vehicle to showcase all the different instruments and give each a solo turn; this is an arrangement and NOT how the music would typically be played (more on that later).

Full Ensemble plays the *reel* **Drowsy Maggie** twice through (more on tunes below)- notice accompaniment by the bodhrán (traditional Irish drum). Texture is heterophonic, meter and subdivision are duple-simple.

Solo 1- Uilleann Pipes- bellows blown, played seated, Chanter and 3 drones plus three Regulators to play harmony parts. Most varied and flexible options for ornamentation.

Full Ensemble 1 time through Drowsy Maggie again

Solo 2- Flute: The Irish flute is made of wood, giving it a very warm tone. Can be simple system (no keys) or have keys. In this case the player is playing a *slip jig*- 9/8 time- 3 groups of 3- triple-compound.

Full Ensemble again

Solo 3- fiddle- a different slip jig

Full Ensemble- note change from bodhrán to bones

Solo 4- Tin Whistle: the smallest and highest pitch instrument used in Irish music.

Full Ensemble

Solo 5- fiddle again: playing a tune called a *slide*.

Full Ensemble 2 times through to finish- accompaniment back to bodhrán.

[side note: the recurring use of the Drowsy Maggie tune DEFINITELY qualifies it as a **THEME!!!!**]

Other instruments

With the rise of ceili bands, accordions of various types came into vogue, and continue to be quite popular in the SW corner of Ireland [*Tom Sullivan's...*]

Beginning in the 60s, Banjo became popular. Brought over FROM America. [*Ships in Full Sail...*]

In the 1980s, whistle and flute makers developed the idea of the Low Whistle, which is built the same way as a tin whistle, but is larger, to make the pitch the same as the flute (instead of the usual octave higher) [*Aibreann*]

There are MANY additional instruments used to play and accompany Irish music today, but the instruments we've covered are the primary *melodic* instruments.

Percussion accompaniment in the music is usually handled by the drum called bodhrán, or else by bones or spoons playing (both imported from US). In the ceili band setting, drumset (Snare drum, bass drum, woodblock) is used.

Tunes

Most dance tunes are **two-part** tunes, meaning they are made of two different musical phrases, which are known colloquially as the A part and the B part. Traditionally, each part is played twice, so one time "through the tune" would be to play **AABB**. The B part is usually in a higher register than the A. You can think of tune phrases as a question and answer statement, the A part asks the question, the B part responds. In the most common tune types (Reels, Jigs, hornpipes, polkas), each phrase has 8 bars, so a "whole tune" comprised 32 bars.

There are MANY tunes with more than two parts (3-6 parts), but they are definitely the exception rather than the rule. Also, there are certain jigs and reels that are *Singled*, meaning each phrase is only played once and the tune only has 16 bars. If you listen to [*Drowsy Maggie*] again, you will find that the main tune is an example of a singled reel. Other tune types that are singled as a rule are slips jigs and slides.

There are thought to be about 10,000 tunes in the repertoire of Irish music worldwide, but nobody knows them all. Many are limited to specific regional repertoires and many more have been lost to time. Keeping the names of tunes straight is a huge headache. There is a joke among Irish musicians- "Irish Music. 10,000 tunes, 30,000 names." The names of Irish tunes almost never carry any direct musical associations, but are instead used primarily as mnemonics, otherwise we'd have to refer to every tune as "the one that goes like this...". If a tune has someone's name in it, it is likely that they either wrote it or their playing made it famous (ie- *John Doherty's*). Many tunes refer to specific places or just to everyday occurrences (ie- *The Cliffs of Moher* or *The Pigeon on the Gate*). Many have to do with farming (*Shoe the Donkey, The Rambling Pitchforks*, etc), and many have titles riddled with innuendo (*The Bird in the Bush, Behind the Haystack*, etc).

Tune types originate in a variety of places, some from Ireland, some from Scotland or England, some from mainland Europe. However, the TUNES themselves are usually Irish or Scottish.

Primary tune types (you WILL NOT have to memorize these, this is just for your information)

Reel- Most common tune type, Scottish origin, 2/2 or Cut time meter, duple (2)-simple time. [*The Earl's Chair*]

Jig- second most common tune type, possibly Italian in origin, 6/8 time- Duple (2)-compound. [*Lilting Banshee*]

Hornpipe- very swung, lots of triplets, English origin, duple (4)-compound time. [*Off to California*]

Polka- fastest tune type (and the fastest dance), dance is continental European in origin although the tunes that go with it are Irish and do not much resemble the traditional Czech/Polish polka. Very popular in the SW. 2/4 time- Duple-simple [*Maids of Ardagh*]

Slide- another tune type very common in the southwest of Ireland. Feels like a jig but faster. 12/8 time-duple (4)-compound. [*O'Keefe's*]

Slip Jig- another tune type common in the SW (and my personal favorite). Feels like a jig, but with three pulses instead of two. 9/8 meter-3 groups of 3- Triple-compound. [*Drops of Brandy* and *YouTube-Irish Set Dancing*]

Marches- the oldest tune types, indigenous to Ireland or Scotland, usually based off the old clan marches. There are no dances to these tunes, but they are still played in certain settings. Can be in 2/4 or 6/8 time [*Marchlua Ui Neill's (March of the O'Neill's)*].

There are a number of additional tune types, but these are the main varieties.

Melodic Variation

We've discussed the **Heterophonic texture** of Irish melodic material (talking ONLY about the melodies, not any accompaniment). What this means is that "the tune" is something of an abstraction, and that each musician is expected to play the tune with their own variations and personal touches. In a small ensemble setting of just a couple of players, this is very effective. However, in a larger group setting, playing is usually somewhat standardized to keep the melody clear. Solo playing logically affords the most opportunity for personalization, and of all the instruments, the Uilleann Pipes are the most flexible in this regard. Playing the a tune in a certain way is known as its **setting**, so a single tune can have an almost infinite number of settings. Compare a typical large-ensemble ceili band setting of the tune *The Kid on the Mountain* (a slip jig in 5 parts) [*Ceoltoiri Culturlainne- Kid on the Mountain*] with Seamus Ennis' solo piping rendition, complete with drone, melody, and cool regulator harmonies [*Seamus Ennis-The Kid on the Mountain*].

Accompaniment

Irish dance music is primarily melodic, which means the tunes can function perfectly well without any accompaniment whatsoever and the music can be considered "complete". However, over time, a number of instruments have become standard to accompany the melodies in band/ensemble settings. We discussed the piano and drumset in conjunction with the ceili band, but in other settings, the most popular instruments for harmonic accompaniment are the guitar, harp, and a stringed instrument

originally from Greece called the Bouzouki. Any percussion duties are handled by Bodhran, Bones, and occasionally the Spoons. (more on that in the upcoming drum lecture)

Modern Performance practice

Outside of playing for dancers, when musicians get together to play, the gathering is usually in the form of a **session**. This is not the same as a “jam session” where musicians would largely improvise the music they will play, often in jazz or blues styles. The Irish session is derived from the Irish word *seisun* which has a number of additional implications. The gathering is usually regularly occurring and informal. In the past, sessions would have been held at houses, but eventually they have largely moved to local pubs that agree to host the session in return for the hope of increased business. (In Ireland, this usually takes the form of increased TOURIST business...). Usually a small core of folks in the local session will be paid to ensure their attendance and some modicum of musical quality, but this is not universal. What IS universal is that a session is NOT a performance. It is an informal gathering; here is where the tradition is largely passed on from older players to younger, tunes are traded, pints are consumed, general merriment is had. When a number of musicians are paid and the group is mic-ed to increase the ambience of the “Irish pub experience”, then the session ceases to be a true session and becomes something like a “performance of a session”, even if the musicians still operate as if it is a normal session. *[YouTube- Irish Music Sessions in Southwest London]*

The other large scale modern performance practice is that of the **touring band**. This is a relatively recent phenomenon in Irish music, existing really only since the early 70s (Although a few groups, most notably The Chieftains, were operating in the 60s). In these cases, the bands feature well-rehearsed and worked-out arrangements, often a wide variety of different instruments, and frequently compose their own tunes in order to create their own unique repertoire or “brand.” It is in this arena that accompaniment instruments of all types have made the most headway and contribution to the tradition. *[Flook-The Tortoise and the Hare and YouTube-Nomos play a set of Reels]*

In all of these cases, including as far back as the Ceili bands and probably farther, tunes are often performed in groupings called **Sets**. A typical set consists of three tunes of the same type, each played through two or three times. There are a large number of possible variations, but the basic idea of the set may derive from a typical amount of music required for set dancers to play a single dance figure. *[Reels: Kilmaley...]*

A few words about Music in Diaspora

The single MOST IMPORTANT thing to know about Irish Traditional Music is that it is one of the prime examples of **Diasporic music** in the world (African-based musics being the other). A **Diaspora** is defined as “a scattering, a dispersion” of people from a relatively small geographic area over a larger area. In the case of Ireland, emigration in the mid 1700s and then from 1840-1920 because of the Great Famine and other factors scattered millions of Irish across the world, from England to Germany and the US, Canada, and Australia. These people all brought their local traditions, culture, and MUSIC with them to their new homes. As a result, Irish music and dance, particularly in the wake of popularity following Riverdance, which continues to this day, is an example of a **WORLDWIDE MUSICAL CULTURE**. I played in my first Irish music session in a pub in Beijing. I know players from Brazil, Russia, and Japan. And because the music repertoire is relatively fixed and known but transmitted orally, if I know 100 of the most common tunes, I can walk into ANY session in the world and be able to play with the locals. Our settings may be

different, and they will have their own local repertoire of popular tunes, but we can play some of the same tunes together.

Irish Vocal Music

We've already discussed the **Sean Nos** style- listen to [*Casadh an tSugain*] again. However, a number of additional singing styles have developed to create the plethora of contemporary styles that make up Irish vocal music.

The most common and popular is probably the **Ballad Style**, which features some sort of narrative and usually is performed by a singer or singers with accompaniment by stringed instruments such as the guitar, mandolin, and bouzouki. This trend began in America in the 1950s in the midst of the folk boom occurring here with our own folk music, but has since been adopted by the Irish to great effect. The themes of such songs are highly varied, but many include themes of love, war/conflict, discrimination, emigration, the longing for home/return to Ireland, songs that deal with traveling/vocations [*Good Ship Kangaroo*], and of course, drinking....

There is also a repertoire of overly political songs dealing with the conflict in Northern Ireland. Songs may be either pro-Nationalist or pro-Unionist, depending on location and origin. The performance of such songs can be highly controversial in certain contexts.

Songs can be sung unaccompanied [*The May Morning Dew*] or lightly accompanied by Bodhran. Text can either be in Irish or English. [*Bean Phaidin*]

In both Scotland and Ireland, there is a small body of music that falls under the heading of **Mouth Music**. The music is highly rhythmic but has no discernible text, using nonsense syllables [*Fionnghuala's Bothy*].

Music of Other Celtic Nations

When we say something is "Celtic", we are talking about a people who long predate any current national or ethnic identities. The Celts were a tribe that once populated much of pre-Roman western Europe, but today we primarily associate them with Scottish and Irish cultural tropes because their cultures were able to endure for long periods of time in those places since those locations were never conquered by the Romans. However, there are a number of other peoples who claim Celtic heritage:

Wales, The Isle of Man, and Cornwall

The Isle of Man is a small island in the Irish Sea between Ireland and England. Cornwall is the region at the far southwestern tip of Great Britain. Wales is also in Great Britain. All three of these areas are part of the United Kingdom. Each has a local variant of Gaelic that is spoken in that area, and musical traditions that are currently in resurgence.

Scottish

We've already heard some Scottish music in the form of the highland bagpipes. [*Raithmore... from the instrument lecture*] However, Scotland also has a very robust fiddling tradition as well as a huge repertory of songs and singing styles in both English and in Scots Gaelic. Much of the song culture has made its way to both Ireland and the US. [*Heathery Hills of Yarrow*] from the texture lecture is a Scottish song played by an Irish band. In Ireland, fiddle and flute playing from Ulster is especially similar to Scottish fiddle styles, obviously as a result of the Scottish that were brought in to settle the area in the

1500s-1700s. In addition to the Scottish fiddling tradition playing a seminal part in American old-time fiddling from Appalachia, it also continues to thrive in the areas of Canada where the Scottish settled, primarily in....

Cape Breton

Cape Breton is a small island in the province of Nova Scotia (translates to New Scotland, imagine that...). The fiddle style is highly syncopated, with lots of use of ornamentation and drone strings, and often accompanied by very complicated piano accompaniment. Cape Breton music is also often accompanied by a complex pattern of foot tapping performed by the musicians themselves. [*Ceilidh Trail School Concert- Reels*]

Brittany

This area of Northwest France gives its name to the Britons, who were among the earliest people to settle the island of Great Britain. Breton music tends to be considered more “minor”, darker in tone, and more “circular” in character than Irish or Scottish music. Breton dance tunes are often accompanied by flute or a bagpipe called the Bombarde. Breton music also plays a part in the musical heritage of the people from Quebec, Canada. [*Kornog- 1*]

Galicia

Galicia is the region in the NW corner of Spain, directly north of Portugal. They have a long and proud Celtic heritage and are very supportive of their unique ethnic history, language, and music. Galician music is played predominantly on a bagpipe called the Gaita, and accompanied either by a snare drum-like instrument or a tambourine called the Pandeireta. In this example, you will hear two Muineiras, which are like Galician jigs. [*Setting Sail/Muineira de Frexido*]