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Introduction

Irish traditional music is part of the genre labelled “Celtic” — the folk music of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Brittany (France), Galicia (Spain) and the eastern provinces of Canada. It is a vibrant, living tradition that is both popular in its own right and influential on rock, punk, and other styles.

Irish traditional music falls into two broad categories: songs and tunes (dance music), the latter of which is the focus of this book. The characteristic sound of an Irish tune comes from a combination of:

- Instruments: fiddle, flute, whistle, uilleann pipes, accordion, concertina, harp, bodhrán (hand drum), guitar, bouzouki

- Rhythms: jigs, reels, etc.; mostly quarter and eighth notes, not very complex

- Melody: fairly simple, often modal, usually not more than 1 1/2 octave span, not many accidentals. Everyone generally plays the tune in unison, except accompanying instruments which play chords (often open chords, with no third so can be major or minor)

- Ornamentation: the “twiddly bits” around the notes

Common dance rhythms

Reels: 4/4, cut time (“in 2”). Usually played straight, with little or no swing in the eighth notes.

Hornpipes: 4/4, slower than a reel and with a swing feel in the eighth notes (DAH-dee-DAH-dee).

Jigs: 6/8, in 2. The beat is typically the same tempo as a reel.

Slip Jigs: A jig with an extra beat in it. 9/8, in 3.

Slides: Faster than a jig, and phrases tend to be longer. 12/8 (in 4).

Scales

Tunes typically have one or two sharps in the key signatures, probably due to the limitations of keyless flutes and whistles. Within these key signatures are a host of available major, minor, and modal scales:

One sharp: G major, E minor, A dorian (A minor with an F sharp), D mixolydian (D major with a C natural)

Two sharps: D major, B minor, E dorian, A mixolydian

Fiddlers often play tunes in A major and E major, while accordion/concertina players use lots of C major.

Notes for Classical Players

Coming from a classical background, here are the differences I have found most significant when playing Irish music:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Classical</th>
<th>Irish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>learning music</td>
<td>usually learn by reading music</td>
<td>usually learn by ear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>performing music</td>
<td>read music, except when playing</td>
<td>always play from memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>solo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sound</td>
<td>smooth, even, “pretty” — lots of</td>
<td>more aggressive — lots of breath/bow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>time is spent perfecting one’s tone</td>
<td>accents, OK to really push it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vibrato</td>
<td>vibrato essential characteristic</td>
<td>little to no vibrato on fiddle; finger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of sound on most wind/string</td>
<td>vibrato on wind instruments (rapid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>instruments</td>
<td>tapping of finger on open hole without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>significantly changing pitch of note)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>articulation</td>
<td>varies, depending on composer and</td>
<td>slur into downbeat; phrases often go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>time period</td>
<td>across the barline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grace notes</td>
<td>on or before the beat, fast or slow</td>
<td>very very quick, and on (or before, but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>depending on composer and time</td>
<td>very close to) the beat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>period</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rolls</td>
<td>notes within the turn are usually</td>
<td>certain notes in the roll are so quick,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>even</td>
<td>they’re almost imperceptible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other ornaments</td>
<td>trills, mordents</td>
<td>cuts, slides, crans, trills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improvisation</td>
<td>not unless specified</td>
<td>fine as long as it maintains the basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>skeleton of the tune, e.g. eighth-note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>triplet F-E-D instead of two eighths F-D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tempo</td>
<td>some degree of rubato (push and</td>
<td>rock-steady and driving ahead — keep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pull) is expected depending on the</td>
<td>that flow going!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>composer and time period</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ornamentation in Irish music can be very difficult to learn because it goes by so quickly it’s hard to hear (and see) what players are doing. However, it’s important to understand how it works. For wind players, a book called The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle by Grey Larsen, available on amazon.com, is a great introduction. In it, he describes in detail the difference between the various ornaments and has lots of exercises for practicing them, plus he includes a CD to demonstrate. He also developed a system of notation for Irish ornamentation which I’ve found valuable so I’m including some excerpts here.

A Few of Grey Larsen’s Ornamentation Symbols

\(r\) = cut. A very quick grace note starting from above. Happens almost simultaneously with the written note; sounds more percussive than pitched.

\(v\) = strike (also called a tip). Just like the cut, but it starts from below.

\(\wedge\) = long roll. The length of three eighth notes. Start on the written note and hold it for an eighth; cut and hold for an eighth; strike and hold for an eighth. The effect is three eighth notes, chopped up — NOT five notes! (Fiddle players: you might want to take this advice with a grain of salt. I usually hear more even rolls when played on fiddle.)

\(\wedge\) = short roll. The length of two eighth notes. Cut and hold for an eighth; strike and hold for an eighth.

\(c\) = crann. The written note, followed by two or three cuts. The “notes” of the cuts need not be fingered as real notes; as long as you lift a finger that produces a pitch higher than the written note, that will suffice.

\(s\) = slide (upward). A smooth slide achieved by pushing or sliding your finger off a hole or up the fingerboard to the written note from a half- or whole-step below it.

Patsy Geary’s
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chord</th>
<th>EADGBE Standard Tuning</th>
<th>DADGEB Drop D</th>
<th>DADGAD great for tunes in D or G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="D chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="D chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="D chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D/F#</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="D/F# chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="D/F# chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="D/F# chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="G chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="G chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="G chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7sus4</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A7sus4 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A7sus4 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A7sus4 chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="C chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="C chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="C chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E min7</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="E min7 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="E min7 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="E min7 chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A minor</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A minor chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A minor chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A minor chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A min7</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A min7 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A min7 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="A min7 chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G/B</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="G/B chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="G/B chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="G/B chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C sus2</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="C sus2 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="C sus2 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="C sus2 chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D7sus4</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="D7sus4 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="D7sus4 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="D7sus4 chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B min7</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="B min7 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="B min7 chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="B min7 chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="F chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="F chord diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="F chord diagram" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guitar Rhythms

When guitar is used to back Irish music, its function is as much rhythmic as chordal. Particularly in an unamplified session, sometimes all you can hear is the attack of striking the strings, rather than the actual string pitches. Here are a few basic rhythm patterns to get started. D=downstroke, U=upstroke. (Use a pick if you don’t want to rip your cuticles off!)

Jigs, slides:

\[
\begin{align*}
& D \quad D \quad U \quad D \quad U \\
& \text{or} \quad \text{eeeeee}
\end{align*}
\]

Reels:

\[
\begin{align*}
& D \quad U \quad D \quad U \quad D \quad U \\
& \text{or} \quad \text{eeeeeeee}
\end{align*}
\]

Hornpipes, slides:

\[
\begin{align*}
& D \quad D \quad U \quad D \quad D \\
& \text{or} \quad \text{q .} \quad \text{e} \quad \text{x} \quad \text{q} \quad \text{q}
\end{align*}
\]

Polkas:

\[
\begin{align*}
& D \quad U \quad D \quad U \\
& \text{or} \quad \text{e} \quad \text{x} \quad \text{e} \quad \text{e}
\end{align*}
\]

For more guitar-related information

Check out the following for more detail on chords, chord progressions, and rhythms:

Han Speek’s Irish Music homepage, with resources for DADGAD guitar and bouzouki:
http://www.xs4all.nl/~hspeek/

Michael Eskin’s Drop D and DADGAD patterns:
http://members.cox.net/eskin/

Where to Listen

Recordings
Just a few of my personal favorites here... easily found on iTunes and/or YouTube.

**groups:** Bothy Band, Lunasa, Solas, Dervish

**flute:** Matt Molloy, Conal O’Grada, Shannon Heaton

**whistle:** Mary Bergin, Joanie Madden

**fiddle:** Kevin Burke, Martin Hayes

**guitar/bouzouki:** John Doyle, Arty McGlynn, Dennis Cahill, Donal Lunny, Alec Finn

**accordion/concertina:** Noel Hill, Tony McMahon

**uilleann pipes:** Paddy Keenan, Liam O’Flynn, Mickey Dunne

**singers:** Dolores Keane, Seán Keane

Sessions in Boston and Cambridge

**Green Briar,** 304 Washington St., Brighton (slow session Mon 7-9, uptempo session 9-1): The Green Briar’s slow session is a great place for beginners —very welcoming, lots of people.

Other local sessions include:

**Tommy Doyle’s,** 96 Winthrop St. (Harvard Sq.), Cambridge (Mon 7-9, Wed 6-8, Thurs 6:30-9:30)

**The Burren,** 247 Elm St. (Davis Sq.), Somerville (Sat 10-12:30, Sun 3-6)

**The Druid,** 1357 Cambridge St. (Inman Sq.), Cambridge (Tue 9, Fri 7)

**Brendan Behan,** 378 Centre St., Jamaica Plain (Sat 4-7)

**Littlest Bar,** 102 Broad St., Boston (Sat 6-9)

Session Etiquette

Don’t join a group of unfamiliar musicians without asking, or without being invited. If you’re new, let the regulars sit up front.

If you don’t really know the tune, sit back and listen. If you only know parts of it, play only the parts you know. Otherwise, use the time to absorb the tune and silently finger your instrument.

Try to play in tune and not too loudly.

Generally speaking, only one bodhrán/guitar/bouzouki/whistle at a time.

If you’d like to start a tune, ask the other musicians if they’d like to play it. Otherwise, you might find yourself unexpectedly — and awkwardly — playing solo.

If you’ve got a set of two or three tunes you’d like to play, practice the transitions so you don’t draw a blank!
Online Resources

Tune collections, discussion forums, audio, video

Folk Tune Finder, FolkTunefinder.com

ABC Notation Home Page, www.abcnotation.com *


The Session, www.thesession.com

Comhaltas, comhaltas.ie

Chiff and Fipple, Chiffandfipple.com

Na Piobairí Uilleann, source.pipers.ie

Online radio stations

Clare FM Trad Archive, www.clare.fm/music/ClareFM%20trad%20archive


Amazing Slow Downer — a must-have piece of software for learning by ear


* ABC notation is a text-based music notation system perfectly suited for traditional music. It comes in very handy when you want to write down how a tune goes, but don’t have any manuscript paper handy.

Here are the first few bars of George White’s Favorite, in staff notation:

And in ABC notation:

Bd | eBB2 eBdB | AGAB GEDE | GB (3BAB GABd | eBdB A2Bd
There is no “right” version of a tune; they vary by player and region. Feel free to come up with your own ornamentation, melodic variation, and backing chords.

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JIGS

Patsy Geary’s

Coleman’s Cross

Mist Covered Mountain
The Connaughtman’s Rambles

The Humours Of Ballyloughlin
The Humours Of Glendart

Kesh

Behind The Haystack
I Buried My Wife And Danced On Top Of Her

Banish Misfortune

Tatter Jack Walsh
Langstrom’s Pony

Lark In The Morning
Polkas

Ballydesmond Polka #1

Ballydesmond Polka #2

Ballydesmond Polka #3
waltzes

Si Bheag Si Mhor

Tabhair Dom Do Lamh (Give Me Your Hand)
reels

Jenny’s Wedding

The Virginia Reel

The Boys Of Portaferry
The Maid Behind The Bar

The Wise Maid

Skylark
The Maids Of Mt. Kisco

Sligo Maid
The Bucks Of Oranmore