

Irish Dance Music

From the 1700s onwards, Irish dance music became a big part of Irish culture. Dance masters would travel through villages teaching dances, often accompanied by a fiddler or a piper. In the past, dance music was always played for dancing. However, now it is often played solely for listening. Most tunes come from the 18th and 19th centuries and were influenced by similar European dance forms. The main types of Irish dances include jigs, reels, hornpipes and polkas. Each dance has its own history, form, metre, tempo, structure and rhythm.

The reel is played in 4/4 time, lively and fast, and consists mainly of quavers. There is usually an accent on the 1st and 3rd beats of the bar, and most reels follow the AABB pattern. The A part is called the tune and is eight bars long which is then repeated. The B part which usually moves into a higher register is called the turn and it too is repeated. The 32-bar round is usually played twice or three times before another reel is played. The reel was brought to Ireland from Scotland at the end of the 18th century. It is most commonly danced by dancers wearing soft shoes. The reel has a fast flowing style. An example of a reel is "Reel around the Sun" from Riverdance and "The Spirits of Wine" as played by The Bothy Band.

The jig has been in Ireland since the 17th century and may have come to Ireland from Italy through the harpers. Like reels and hornpipes, jigs often have 32 bars in AABB form. They are danced with soft shoes. There are four main types of jig: single jigs, double jigs, slip jigs and slides. The single jig is in 6/8 time and its predominant rhythmic pattern consists of a crotchet followed by a quaver. This dance is lively and fast, and it is half of the length of the other two jigs with a form of AB. An example of a single jig is "Bill Hart's Favourite".

The double jig is also in 6/8 time but has a different predominant rhythm to the single jig. The main rhythm used is two sets of three quavers. The lively tempo is reduced to accommodate the complicated footwork of the dancers. Most double jigs date from the 18th and 19th century. An example of a double jig is "The Cat in the Corner".

Slip jigs, also known as hopjigs, are written with a 9/8 signature. They are danced only by female dancers wearing light shoes. Slip jigs are played with two 8 bar parts which are not repeated, and they are graceful and flowing. An example of a slip jig is "The Butterfly" as played by The Bothy Band.

A slide is played in 12/8 or 6/8 time and has a fast, broken rhythm as it is technically a fast single jig. Examples are "The Star above the Garter" and "O'Keeffe's Slide" played by Stan Scott on the mandolin.

The hornpipe also dates back to the end of the 18th century and may have come from England. The dancing masters adopted it as a showpiece. The dancer wears hard shoes and performs intricate steps. It is a slow dance in 4/4 time. It begins on an anacrusis and has a dotted rhythm with some triplets. There is a strong accent on beats 1 and 3, and it usually ends on three emphatic crotchets to finish the phrase. Hornpipes are in AABB form. An example of a hornpipe is "The Cork Hornpipe".

Polkas originated as a folk dance in Bohemia and arrived in Ireland, via England at the end of the 19th century. They are associated with the Slieve Luachra region. They are in 2/4 time and the emphasis is put on the offbeat. They contain bouncy rhythms and are often played at set dances. An example of a polka is "Britches Full of Stitches" as played by The Chieftains. Other less well known dances are the mazurka, barn dance and fling.

It is as a result of these elements that Irish dance music has developed over the years to what it is today.

Sean-Nos Singing

Sean Nos means old style. Old style traditional singing is unique to Ireland. It is a highly skilled solo art form that dates back many centuries. The origins of sean-nos are obscure, but this style may have come from the middle ages, when singers tried to vary a tune containing many verses. Themes and stories of the songs are usually about human-life, birth, death, love, suffering, and immigration. For example, in the song *Roisín Dubh*, the singer is expressing the depression of Ireland during the political struggles.

The main features of sean nos singing are: usually sung solo and in Irish, unaccompanied, singer is emotionally involved in the song, words and music are equally important, no dynamics or dramatic effects, use of free rhythm, modal tonality, nasal tone, use of glottal stop (interruption of the flow of air through the windpipe), use of sliding and use of ornamentation depending on the region and the singer's own individual style

Ornamentation is a common feature of sean-nos singing. Melodic ornamentation can be 'melismatic' where a note is replaced or decorated by a group of adjacent notes. It can also be 'intervallic' in which additional notes are used to fill in an interval between two notes of the tune. Rhythmic variation involves the lengthening or shortening of notes.

The singer may also use a nasal tone quality. Some singers use only their head voice while others prefer their chest voice. Some females pitch their voices too high and so give the impression of sounding strained.

Glottal stops are heard when the singer interrupts the flow of air through the windpipe. A drone effect can be created by accentuating the consonants l,m,n and r. Some singers end a phrase with the consonant m,n or ng. Other singers slow down at the end of a song while others speak the final line.

The three regions associated with sean-nos singing are Donegal, Connemara, and Munster. These are Gaeltacht areas and each has its own distinctive spoken dialect. Saílí Gallagher and Mairead Ní Mhaonaigh are performers of the Donegal style which was influenced by the Scots Gaelic song. The rhythm tends to be regular and the melodic ornamentation is sparse and restrained.

In Connemara, the songs themselves tend to have a narrow range and the ornamentation used by singers is very florid and melismatic. There is often a nasal tone quality. I could hear these features when I listened to Sarah Ghriallais singing "Eleanóir na Rún".

The Munster style is closest to 'Classical' singing with many singers using vibrato. The range of the songs is wide and so there is more intervallic variation. When I listened to Iarla O' Lionaird singing "Táimse im Chodladh", I heard a lot of ornamentation and nasalisation.

These three regions of sean-nos singing are the only recognised styles but sean-nos are sung outside of these areas with the styles largely blended together.

Irish Song Tradition

The Irish song tradition is the voice of the Irish people over hundreds of years. Ireland has a very strong, important song tradition. A folk song is a song of the people passed down orally from generation to generation. As a result, the origins are often unknown and many different versions of the same song may appear in different parts of the country. There is a wide variety of songs in the Irish tradition including ballads, laments, macaronic songs, love songs, patriotic songs, humorous songs and religious songs. In the Irish tradition, many of these songs are also played as instrumentals (slow airs).

Love songs such as “Úna Bhán” are expressive and most often sad. There are more love songs than any other class of song in the Irish tradition. Many of these songs are about grief at the loss of a lover or the bitter realisation of betrayal. A lament is a sad song, often sung as part of a wake. They are usually about loss, death, emigration or eviction. They describe a tragic event such as “Anach Chuain” which tells of a boating tragedy off the coast of Connemara, or pine for better times.

Working songs such as “Amhráin na Cuiginne ” were sung during repetitive tasks in a forge, kitchen or a field where a strong beat and a steady rhythm were needed. Drinking songs are celebratory and lively, and usually have a chorus for everyone to join in. “Preab san Ól” is an example of a drinking song.

Lullabies such as “Déirin Dé ” have a gentle, steady rocking rhythm while Dandling such as “Beidh Aonach Amárach ” were for bouncing a child on the mother’s lap. Humorous songs are light-hearted songs with a lively rhythm and nonsense words where the listener may join the refrain. “An Poc ar Buile” is a well known humorous song.

Patriotic Songs such as “Róisín Dubh” are songs about nationalist pride. Old traditional patriotic songs are rare, being more of a 20th century phenomenon, performed by groups like the Dubliners or the Wolfe Tones. An Aisling is a dream song about a beautiful woman representing Ireland. The woman is a sign of hope for Ireland and an example is “Táimse im Chodladh”.

Famine songs describe the abuse that Irish people suffered from the system of land tenure and absentee landlords and rebel songs such as “Boolavogue” encouraged people to fight for Ireland. A ballad is a song with several verses that tells a story. The same music is repeated for each verse of the song. Themes include rebellion and love. Some examples are “The foggy Dew” and “The Fields of Athenry”. Macaronic songs mix both the English and Irish language, some of which carry embedded patriotic messages in the Irish verses. I listened to Iarla O’ Lionaird singing “Siúil a Rún” and heard verses sung in both Irish and English.

Céilí Bands

The term 'céilí' means 'a gathering of people for dance'. The function of céilí bands is to provide music for dancers. It must be rhythmic and loud enough to be heard by a crowd of dancers in a large hall.

The first céilí dance was organised by the Gaelic League in London in 1897. The music included jigs, quadrille sets and waltzes. Long rows of dancers faced each other, a practice that continues to this day. The Tara Céilí Band inspired the present day line-up when they played in London in 1918. Fr. Tom Larkin set up the Ballinakill Céilí Band in 1926 at a time when the clergy wished to rid Ireland of jazz music. After the 'Dance Hall Act' of 1935 banned the tradition of house dancing and dancing at the crossroads, new village halls sprang up and many céilí bands were formed, including the Tulla and the Kilfenora in Co. Clare. In the 1930s and 1940s céilí music was broadcast on Irish radio. In the 1950s it was kept popular by the Fleadh Cheoil and by Irish-made recordings.

A typical céilí band had around 10 instruments including accordion, fiddle, flute, concertina, harmonica, uilleann pipes, banjo, mandolin, tin whistle, drums and piano. More players were needed so the music could be heard by everyone in a large hall over the noise from dancing feet, especially in large venues. All the melody instruments play the tune in unison. Drums are used to provide a backbeat and keep time. A vamping piano adds a bass line and harmony and keeps an even tempo. The position of instruments on stage is crucial for an ideal balance. Fiddles and flutes are at the front, the banjo is a little behind them and the concertina and accordion are further back because of their louder volume. The piano and drums are furthest away from the dancers. An example of a successful band are the kilfenora céilí band which was formed in Clare and is still active today. They won the "All-Ireland Fleadh Cheoil" titles in a row, in 1954, 1955, and 1956, and in the 1960s. When listening to their album, "Now is the Hour", I noticed that they use a more contemporary sound with the use of a viola, cello and double bass.

Séan Ó Riada

One of the most important Irish composers was Séan O Riada. He not only kept traditional music alive but helped it to evolve in new directions. Ó Riada was born in Cork in 1931. As a young man he played piano in jazz and dance bands. He also played the fiddle and received a music degree in 1952. He was a performer and arranger of Irish traditional music, a composer of European art music, an educator and a broadcaster.

“Mise Eire” is an orchestral score composed by O’Riada in 1959 for a documentary film about the foundation of the Irish Free State. This work is a great example of how O’Riada fused Irish traditional music with classical music. It uses the slow air Róisín Dubh which is performed by a classical orchestra. It opens with the horn playing the Irish melody accompanied by tremolo strings which creates some tension. The work continues with dynamic changes and instruments joining in, dropping out throughout. At times the trumpet takes the melody, and then strings take over before once again returning to the horn. Ó’Riada’s evocative use of traditional airs and patriotic tunes in his orchestral scores reinforced the nation’s pride in its cultural identity. It is this work that brought Ó’Riada national acclaim and allowed him to start a series of programmes on Irish radio called “Our Musical Heritage”, as well as founding Ceoiltoirí Chualann.

Ó’Riada was quite critical of Céilí bands and so in 1960, he formed the ‘folk orchestra’, Ceoiltoirí Chualann. This was a group of hand picked musicians who played arrangements of Irish tunes. They wore dress suits and gave Irish music a new image. The inclusion of the bodhrán in their ensemble meant that a formerly primitive rhythm instrument became typical in many traditional Irish groups. Ó’Riada also played the harpsichord in an attempt to replicate the sound of the wire string harp. Ceoiltoirí Chualann’s arrangement of Carolan’s Concerto is a good example of Ó’Riada’s use of the harpsichord and his wish to revive 18th Century harp music. When Ceoiltoirí Chualann broke up, many of the musicians joined The Chieftains, whose style was greatly influenced by Ó’Riada.

As well as using traditional tunes as the basis for hundreds of arrangements, Ó’Riada wrote a number of liturgical works from the inspiration of Celtic and Indian music. The well-known hymn “Ag Críost an síol” was originally a poem, the words set to music by Séan Ó’Riada as the offertory hymn in his 1968 setting of the mass “Ceol an Aifrinn”. It was written in a traditional Irish style for classical orchestra and voice. Instruments include flute, oboe, harpsichord and strings. There are homophonic and traditional features such as ornamentation and flattened 7th in the melody.

Through his incorporation of modern and traditional techniques Séan Ó’Riada became the single most influential figure in the revival of Irish traditional music during the 1960’s.

Irish Collectors

Discuss the role of the collector in the context of Irish traditional music. In your answer, refer to collectors and publications.

Irish music was traditionally passed through generations without being written down. They began, in the 18th century, to note down what they heard in order to preserve the tunes for future generations. The role of the collector during this period was to travel around the country and notate the music, poetry, styles and performing techniques of the many players that they listened to.

The most well-known collector of Irish music was Edward Bunting. Bunting was born in Armagh in 1773. He was employed to dictate all of the tunes played by the harpers at the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792. Here, he collected over 40 tunes, including “Sí Bheag Sí Mhór”, “The Fairy Queen” and “Lord Mayo”. He then set out to collect as much Irish music as possible, as he realised that it was on the brink of extinction. He was the first collector that we know of who visited musicians in their own area. Bunting published almost 300 tunes in three volumes. In 1796 he published “A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music”, which contains 66 tunes adapted for the piano, one of which is Carolan’s Concerto. In 1809 he published “A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland”, containing 77 tunes in romantic piano arrangements and some with specially written songs in English. He also describes how the harp had developed and this volume includes “Planxty Irwin”. “The Ancient Music of Ireland” was published in 1840 and it is the most important historical source for the techniques used by the old Gaelicharpers. Despite some inaccuracies in his transcriptions, Bunting is important as he was the first collector to collate tunes in a systematic and informative way. The material which he collected is unique and has been the basis for other composers’ works.

Another well-known collector is George Petrie. He knew Bunting and in 1851 he helped set up “The Society for the Preservation and Publication of the Melodies of Ireland”. Petrie’s “Ancient Music of Ireland” was published in 1855 and contains nearly 200 melodies as well as song texts in Irish and English and detailed notes about the source of the songs and pieces. It included songs such as “Londonderry Air” which is also known as “Danny Boy”.

Francis O’Neill is considered by traditional musicians to be the most important collector of dance music. He is extremely significant as he emigrated to Chicago and collected Irish immigrant’s tunes that may otherwise have been lost forever. “O’Neill’s Music of Ireland” has 1850 tunes including jigs, reels, hornpipes, marches, airs and O’Carolan tunes. His publication “The Dance Music of Ireland” contains 1001 dance tunes and is referred to as “The Book”. These were the first collections compiled by and aired at Irish music performers and they are an invaluable source for musicians.

It is these composers who are responsible for keeping Irish music alive and preserving it in order to prevent its extinction.

Irish Harping Tradition

Discuss the Irish harping tradition. In your answer refer to performers and music as appropriate.

The harping tradition in Ireland flourished from Mediaeval times until the 17th century. Harpers were well-respected members of society. They were employed along with poets and orators to provide entertainment for powerful and wealthy Irish and Anglo-Irish families. As the families acted as patrons to the harpers, they would often have solo pieces, known as planxties, written in their honour by their harper. "Planxty Irwin" is an example that I listened to in class. The occupation of a harper was a prestigious one. The harping tradition was passed on, father to son, for many years. However, after 1600, as the great families went into decline, there was a loss of patronage and harpers were left unemployed. The harping tradition then became a nomadic one, as harpers would travel from county to county playing for money and food. It was commonplace for people who became blind to take harping lessons in order to earn their living as entertainers.

There were two styles of harp: the Ancient Irish Harp and the Neo-Irish Harp. The ancient harp was very small and held on the knee leaning against the left shoulder. It had 30-45 wire strings which were more resonant and gave a bell-like sound. The strings were plucked with the fingernails and it was played mainly by working class men. The Neo-Irish harp was larger with 34 nylon strings which were plucked with the fleshy part of the fingertips and this in turn produced a more mellow tone. The pitch of each string could be changed using levers and it was more commonly played by middle class women.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Irish harpers were influenced by Baroque music. Turlough O'Carolan, Ireland's most famous blind, travelling harper, was greatly influenced by his Italian contemporaries Vivaldi and Geminiani. This is evident in pieces such as "O'Carolan's Concerto" and "Cardan's Farewell to Music" in which we can hear many Baroque features such as sequences and clearly defined cadence points.

Due to the introduction of the penal laws, the Irish harping tradition began to die out. Many efforts were made to revive the tradition such as the organisation of the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792. Its aim was to note the music, poetry and oral traditions of Ireland which were in danger of being lost in the memory of very few harpers. In total, eleven harpers ranging in age from 15-97, six of whom were blind, came to perform. Denis Hempson, aged 97, was the oldest player and the only harper who played in the old style, using long fingernails. Edward Bunting was commissioned by the Belfast Harp Society to notate the music, poetry, styles and performing techniques that he observed to preserve them for future generations. He collected over forty tunes at the festivals including "Sí Bheag Sí Mhór" composed by Turlough O'Carolan. Despite this, the old style of playing was not revived. The harp was no longer fashionable and the piano became very popular in the 19th Century.

Fusion of Irish Music

Discuss the use of fusion in Irish traditional music.

Fusion involves combining two genres of music to create a unique sound. Over the past 50 years, Irish music has been combined with many other genres, such as jazz, classical, popular and rock.

The growth of pop and rock music during the 20th Century had a significant implication to Irish traditional music. A band who incorporated both Irish and rock music in their sound was "Horslips". The name is a combination of the hornpipe and the slipjig. Through their music they inspired an entirely new sub category - celtic rock. Horslips were committed in an Irish cultural dimension and eschewed the American and British rock clone models. They wanted a sound that would clearly be Irish but also successful popular music. Well known songs of theirs were "King of the Faines" and "An Dearg Doom". The instruments they used included electric and acoustic guitars, fiddles, bodhrán, keyboards, flute, mandolin and concertina. In their music they used Irish dance tunes, old harp music, airs and marches, songs in Irish and English, and folk music of other countries. Their last jig was in 1980 but they left a lasting impression on the future of Irish music.

Another kind of fusion was Irish and classical music. An extremely prominent example of this is "Mise Éire", written by Séan Ó Riada for a film in 1960. At the time Ireland had no established film industry and the Irish people were immensely proud. The status of Irish music was raised amongst a section of society who had never taken an interest before. This combines Irish traditional tunes and sean-nós songs with orchestral accompaniment. "Mise Éire" was originally conceived as the first of a trilogy of films. This last film commission in 1963 was the music for a screen adaption of Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World".

Another example of this type of fusion is "The Brendan Voyage" by Shaun Davey. This was Davey's first major orchestral suite, composed for uilleann pipes played by Liam O'Flynn. This piece depicts Tim Severin's adventure in reconstructing Brendan's 6th Century Atlantic crossing to America.

Irish traditional music has also been fused with jazz. An example of this is Michael O'Suilleabhain's piano arrangements of Irish dance tunes in a three-way fusion of traditional, classical and jazz. Also in this type is Sharon Shannon's "Cavan Potholes". This piece features jazz style riffs. A scene in Bill Whelan's Riverdance "Trading Taps" incorporates jazz, combines Irish music with alto jazz saxophone.

Irish traditional music has also been fused with popular music. An example of this type is De Danann's recording of the Beatles' "Hey Jude" transported into a set of dance tunes. Another example is Sinead O'Connor with "Nothing Compares 2 U". This song incorporates synthesised strings, keyboards and drums using a rock beat, fiddle and Irish fiddle style.

It is these types which fusion of Irish music has developed into over the 20th and 21st Century.