

9. **Josie McDermott** (flute)—Reel: *The Pigeon on the Gate*. This is from his 1976 release, *Darby's Farewell*, Ossian CD 20, first issued as Topic Records 12TS325. It is the second in a medley of two reels, the first one being *The Kerry Man*. Mode: E Dorian.

Josie McDermott (1925–1992) is revered as a great traditional flute player, whistle player, and singer. He spent his life in the musically rich area where Counties Sligo, Roscommon, and Leitrim meet, living just outside of the Roscommon town of Ballyfarnan. While traditional Irish music was the first music he heard and played, his musical interests were very wide-ranging. He played the trumpet, as well as the alto and tenor saxophones, in a wide variety of local bands, and is quoted as saying, “If you put a good ceili band, a good traditional jazz band, a good country and western band, and a small orchestra in four halls, I’d find it very hard to know which of them I’d go to hear. I’d want to hear all four of them!”^{xiii} I had the very good fortune of visiting Josie McDermott in his home in 1979.

McDermott was playing tin whistle and trump (Jew’s harp) by the age of six.^{xiv} His mother sang and played the concertina. The home of his neighbors, the Butlers, was a ceili house and he spent a great deal of time there immersed in traditional music and dance. At age fourteen, he was singing in a local jazz dance band. He remained very active in both traditional music and more modern forms, the onset of blindness from eczema in 1962 hardly slowing him down at all.

McDermott made virtually no use of tonguing on the flute but used it with great virtuosity on the whistle. (This is shown in the transcription of his tin whistle performance of *The Keadue Polka* which follows this transcription.) Through his use of throating and breath pulsing, he makes his flute music very rhythmic, yet beautifully lyrical at the same time. He often uses a gentle kind of breath pulsing in such a way that it sounds like he is both slurring and articulating notes. You can hear this particularly clearly when he plays repeated notes without interrupting the flow of air. For example, see m. 17, first time, where he plays four E notes in a row without breaking the airstream. One could describe this technique as a kind of very rhythmic, distinct breath vibrato. Another instance of this can be heard in m. 31–32, first time. Here the slurred notes are played in one continuous breath but they almost sound articulated. Sometimes it is very hard to tell whether he is using this kind of breath pulsing or a subtle kind of throating. When he plays slow airs, he uses breath and finger vibrato, as well as a wide variety of tone colors and dynamics.

His use of ornamentation is fairly spare and economical, which lends clean, clear, and agile qualities to his playing. He seems to prefer short rolls over condensed long rolls, though he does use the latter in m. 13, third time. In m. 28, first time, he plays a kind of short crann on A, one without a cut on the first note. Note the mid-note cut on the B eighth note in m. 2, second time.

Another beautiful and fascinating aspect of his music is his use of the “piping C”. I have indicated his use of this note with asterisks.

McDermott’s melodic variations reflect a fresh and highly creative mind. The most dramatic variation occurs in m. 30 of the second time through and m. 2 of the third time. In other instances small changes send out large ripples, such as in m. 26, second time, where he leaves out the B sixteenth-note and turns what is usually a passing C-sharp into a principal melody note. He returns to this variation in m. 18 and 22 of the third time through. He uses register changing in very effective ways in m. 7, third time; m. 8, second time; and m. 12, third time.



Josie McDermott posing by a portrait of Turlough O'Carolan, 1978.