

Introduction

It was a delightful challenge to craft this book and its recordings, a journey of several years. Simultaneously, I put together its companion, *150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle*.

I culled tunes from many sources, consulting notated collections, old and new, and listening to hundreds of recordings of revered musicians, both living and passed on. I learned many of these tunes directly from friends in Ireland and the US, and from the elders who graciously mentored me into traditional Irish music during my teens and twenties. Some of the tunes have soaked their way into me over the course of thousands of informal music sessions, without a conscious attempt on my part to learn them. Others are newfound favorites.

To me they are all gems, tunes that I love to play on the flute. While many are well-known, others, as far as I know, have not been widely played in recent years.

The standard, wooden Irish flute is in the key of D. Everything in this collection is presented with that flute, and the modern Boehm-system flute, in mind. All references to flutes refer to these standard-pitched flutes unless stated otherwise. An exception to this is found in the Appendix, which addresses the issue of how to play certain tunes on Irish flutes built in keys other than D.

While most flute players who devote themselves to Irish traditional music prefer to play the wooden Irish flute, some prefer the Boehm-system instrument and become highly accomplished in playing Irish music upon it. For more, see “The Irish Flute and the Modern Flute” on p. 7.

This collection seeks to serve several purposes:

- To provide 94 tunes that fit the flute like a glove, that match its range, that favor its natural capabilities and steer clear of its limitations (Section One).
- To provide 28 tunes of non-wind origin (Section Two). These tunes keep to the Irish flute’s natural scale but challenge players to accommodate certain characteristics of the non-wind instruments, such as their broader range and their versatility in the embellishment of C and C#.
- To provide 28 tunes that require the use of keys on the Irish flute (Section Three). These tunes use one or more of the four pitches not found in the tunes of the two categories above: E \flat , F \sharp , G \sharp and B \flat .
- To illuminate the tune transcriptions with suggested ornamentation and breathing places.
- To provide information on ornamentation, breathing, phrasing, modes and notation.
- To encourage learning by ear. The recordings of each tune make the suggested ornamentation and breathing options audible, and contain many facets of the music that cannot be written down.
- To introduce the idea of playing some Irish tunes, in their customary pitch and scale, on flutes that are made in keys other than D. Eight examples are given in the Appendix.

SECTION ONE: FLUTE-FRIENDLY TUNES

These 94 tunes are utterly natural to the flute. They fall within the comfortable octave-plus-a-sixth range of the Irish flute and contain only the notes that are easily played by completely covering and uncovering its six finger holes: D, E, F \sharp , G, A, B, C \sharp and C#. The notes that most naturally invite ornamentation in these tunes are the ones that Irish flute players can embellish with variety and ease. For more on what makes a tune flute-friendly, see “Flute-Friendly Tunes” on p. 47.

SECTION TWO: TUNES OF NON-WIND ORIGIN

I believe these 28 tunes originated with players of non-wind instruments such as fiddle, accordion, concertina, tenor banjo and harp. Most have notes that fall below the range of the standard Irish flute and require the player to make creative adjustments to the melody. Some include sequences of notes that may be more natural to a fiddle or accordion than they are to a flute. Some invite ornamentation on C and C#, notes which are not as readily ornamented on the flute as on other instruments, notes which invite the flute player to employ finger and breath vibrato, shadings of pitch, tone and loudness, and melodic variation. Yet these tunes, like those in Section One, contain only the notes that are easily played by completely covering and uncovering the Irish flute’s six finger holes: D, E, F \sharp , G, A, B, C \sharp and C#. For more about this class of tunes, see “Tunes of Non-Wind Origin” on p. 83.

SECTION THREE: TUNES REQUIRING THE USE OF KEYS

The remaining 28 tunes employ one or more of the four pitches that fall outside the natural scale of the Irish, or simple-system wooden flute: E \flat , F \sharp , G \sharp and B \flat .

For players of wooden Irish flutes, these tunes call for the use of one or more metal keys. When these tunes come up in sessions, I see many flute players sitting them out while the fiddlers, accordion players, and others play on. If you have a keyed flute, why not use your instrument's chromatic capabilities, learn these tunes, and join in the fun? I hope this collection will encourage many players to do exactly that. For more information on this class of tunes, see "Tunes Requiring the Use of Keys" on p. 99.

Some of these tunes can also be played on keyless flutes that are built in keys other than D. For more on this, see the next two paragraphs.

APPENDIX: PLAYING TUNES ON NON-D FLUTES

Some tin whistle players keep a C whistle handy for playing tunes that contain F \sharp and/or B \flat , and many players collect whistles in other keys as well. Players of keyless Irish flutes, however, don't usually carry extra flutes around with them. More often they look forward to a time when they can upgrade to a keyed D instrument in order to play tunes that venture beyond the eight flute-friendly pitches (i.e., D, E, F \sharp , G, A, B, C \sharp and C \flat).

Nevertheless, you may enjoy exploring the various uses of non-D flutes. In the Appendix (pp. 112-123) I present eight tunes that can be played very well, at their *standard* pitch level, on keyless flutes in C, A and G. These same eight tunes are presented for D flute in earlier sections of this book. Playing such tunes on a non-D flute can result in very different tonal colors, unexpected ornamentation options, and the ability to play notes, in their customary register, that fall below the range of the D flute. On CD #2, you may compare the sounds of these eight tunes being played both on a D flute and on a flute in low C, low A or high G.



THE IRISH FLUTE AND THE MODERN FLUTE

The wooden Irish flute (keyless or keyed) uses a basic “simple-system”¹ fingering that is identical to that of the tin whistle and is very closely related to that of the uilleann pipes, the bellows-blown bagpipe of Ireland. No doubt this has helped make the simple-system flute a natural choice for traditional Irish musicians. Since all three are simple-system instruments, their fingering and ornamentation techniques are readily adaptable to one another. There is a great deal of overlap among players of these three instruments.

While the six primary holes of the simple-system flute are covered only by fingers, many of these flutes have supplementary metal keys to open and close additional holes and make it more practical to play the notes E \flat , F \sharp , G \sharp and B \flat . These keys (there are typically one, four, six, or eight of them) may also extend the range of the instrument down to low C \sharp , C \natural or B.



Figure 1. An eight-key wooden flute in cocuswood and silver by Rudall and Rose, serial # 4973, made in London in 1844. English flutes of this period have been highly prized by players of Irish flute music. Today's makers of Irish flutes often base their designs on such 19th century instruments.

While the wooden Irish flute is favored by nearly all Irish flute players, it is possible to play Irish music very well on modern flutes, as evidenced by such great recent and contemporary players as Paddy Carty of Co. Galway, Paddy Taylor of Co. Limerick, Noel Rice of Co. Tipperary, and Irish-American flutist Joanie Madden of New York, a member of the group *Cherish the Ladies*.



Figure 2. A silver Boehm-system flute made in 1978 by the William Haynes Company of Boston, serial # 44166.

There is much more information on flutes and the history of flute playing in Ireland in *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*. (See “Two Additional Resources” on p. 10.)

¹ Simple-system flutes (and whistles) have six primary tone holes that are covered and uncovered solely by the fingers, with no mechanical keywork intervening between the fingers and these holes. Covering all six of these holes on a simple-system flute in the key of D yields a low D note. Uncovering them one by one, from low to high, results in an ascending scale in the D Ionian mode (i.e., the D major scale).

ORNAMENTATION AND BREATHING SUGGESTIONS

The tune transcriptions in this collection include my suggestions for ornamentation and creating appropriate breathing spaces. For those of you not yet fluent in traditional Irish music, these suggestions may help you achieve the experience of playing in a fully-realized traditional manner, and provide a reference point in the evolution of your own personal style. Experienced players may find fresh ornamentation and phrasing ideas in these transcriptions as well.

To make the best use of the transcriptions you'll need to understand the ornamentation and breathing symbols I use, and how I use them. For this and much more, see "Chapter One: Ornamentation and Its Notation" on pp. 12-26 and "Chapter Three: Breathing and Phrasing" on pp. 33-44.

My ornamentation style, and hence my suggestions, tend more toward the spare and lean than the dense and florid. I hope this relative frugality will help make the music accessible and leave room for your own exploration. If you wish to have the transcriptions without suggested ornamentation and breathing places, see "'Blank Slate' Transcriptions - 300 Gems of Irish Music for All Instruments" on p. 10.

Due to the space limitations of this collection I can offer only one example of how one might ornament and phrase each tune. The book/CD set *Down the Back Lane: Variation in Traditional Irish Dance Music* provides transcriptions and recordings of tunes being varied over the course of three repetitions. For more information, see p. 10.

TRANSCRIPTIONS ARE ONLY SNAPSHOTS

For many of us, a tune neatly written in music notation carries an unspoken message: "*This* is the way to play the tune." That presumption, whatever its source, is wrong and needs to be discarded.

There is no such thing as a definitive version, or setting, of a traditional Irish tune. The music is by nature personal, and variable through small-scale improvisation. So please do *not* give my transcriptions too much authority! There are many variants of these tunes, and many right ways to ornament and phrase them.

I invite you to regard all Irish tune transcriptions merely as snapshots of moving, living, changing entities. Like a photograph, a transcription captures only a slice of time and represents only one of many possible points of view. When you hear these tunes played by others, you will notice many differences between their versions and the ones in this collection. That diversity is a cherished part of the tradition.

How does one learn to spontaneously vary a tune in appropriate ways? By listening to the playing of experienced musicians over a long period of time. Through such committed immersion in the music we gradually absorb the knowledge and insight that enable us to extemporize in ways that are both culturally appropriate and expressive of our individuality.

TUNE SOURCES

At the upper right of many of the transcriptions you will find information about the source upon which I based my version. Some of these tunes I learned from my earliest mentors: Co. Galway melodeon player Michael J. Kennedy (1900-1978), Co. Sligo flute player Tom Byrne (1920-2001) and Co. Leitrim fiddler Tom McCaffrey (1916-2006). Other tunes I learned from commercial or field recordings of great players made in the 20th and early 21st centuries.

I am not presenting exact, literal documents of how these musicians played (most of them are not, or were not, flute players), but have adapted their versions to the flute while trying to remain faithful to the essence of their interpretations. In some cases, I have altered a few of their notes in order to bring a tune setting a little closer to how I hear the tune being played in sessions and on contemporary recordings.

When no source information is shown, it is most often because I have learned the tune from a variety of musicians and have evolved my own version over the years.

THE COMPANION CDS

Despite the fact that these transcriptions include ornamentation and breathing suggestions, music notation can never fully convey the richness of traditional music. The companion CDs are therefore an essential component of this collection. Below each tune transcription you'll find a reference to its corresponding CD location.

On these CDs I play all 150 tunes, one time through, on Irish flute. When I take a breath, it is in accord with each tune's notated breathing suggestions. The ornamentation shown in the transcriptions is accurately reflected in the recordings for the first time through each part of the tune. During the repetition of any part, the ornamentation heard may vary in small ways from what is written.

Tunes 1 through 94 (the flute-friendly tunes) appear on CD #1. Tunes 95 through 150, as well as the tunes from the Appendix, appear on CD #2. Recordings of some of the musical examples from pp. 16-43 are also found on CD #2, just before the tunes from the Appendix. See pp. 124-125 for a list of the contents of the two discs.

When learning tunes from the recordings, you may find it helpful to slow them down. You can do so with various software programs and hardware devices.

LET YOUR EAR LEAD THE WAY

Before you start to play from a tune transcription, I encourage you first to listen repeatedly to its recording and learn it by ear, or at least to become familiar with the melody that way, learning to hum or sing it as best you can. The notation is best used as a supplement to learning these tunes by ear, or as a reminder of tunes you have already begun to learn. You will find that there are subtle aspects of the music that cannot be written down and can only be experienced through listening.

I believe that everyone can learn by ear. We all did so when, as young children, we learned the common songs that we heard all around us. Though many of us have grown more or less distant from the natural aural learning of our childhoods, I am convinced that the ability to learn by ear is still in us, ready to be reinvigorated. The more you come to trust and rely upon your ear again, the more direct, visceral, and satisfying your experience of music will become. This may take time and patience, but both the process and the results are very rewarding.

If you believe that you must use written music to learn tunes, I invite you to gently set that belief aside – you can always have it back – and allow yourself to start reclaiming a more natural mode of learning Irish music. Try starting small by working with just one short phrase at a time. Please be patient. Allow yourself time to explore and make mistakes abundantly. Mistakes are not bad things! Quite the contrary. They are essential steps in the process of feeling your way around inside a tune. Pay attention to the guidance that so-called mistakes provide you, and have faith that, given time, patience and trust, your musical ear will increasingly rise to the occasion.

For more discussion of learning by ear, see *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* or *The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox*. (For details on these two books, see “Two Additional Resources” on p. 10.)

MUSIC READING SKILLS

If you are learning to read music or wish to improve your music reading skills, this book and its recordings might well be helpful. The meaning of the music notation will likely become more apparent if you first learn a tune by ear and then examine its transcription.

A COMPANION COLLECTION: 150 GEMS OF IRISH MUSIC FOR TIN WHISTLE

150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle is a companion to this collection. As with the present book, its tunes include ornamentation and breathing suggestions.

Although customized for tin whistle players, almost all of its tunes are easily played on the keyless Irish flute. All of its tunes can be played on the keyed Irish flute and the modern flute.

These two books share no common tunes, but they have a similar structure.

Here's the main difference between them: in place of this book's third section (which contains 28 tunes that require the use of keys) the whistle book features 28 tunes that are best played on non-D whistles, along with instructions on how to finger them. If players have whistles in C, A, G, E and F, in addition to a D, they can play a great many tunes in Irish sessions that they could not otherwise play on whistle, including tunes in modes such as D Dorian and Aeolian, G Dorian and Aeolian, and C, F and A Ionian. (For an exploration of modes, see “Chapter Two: Modes and Other Notation Matters” on pp. 27-32.)

There are also quite a few tunes which, while they can be played on a D whistle, sound as good or better, I feel, when played on a lower-pitched whistle, especially a low A or G. (I often bring these two whistles to sessions and enjoy discovering tunes that work well on them.) *150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle* includes a selection of such tunes, along with instructions on how to finger them. This represents a use of low A, G and F whistles that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been explored before in tune collections.

BOTH COLLECTIONS ARE SUITABLE FOR OTHER MELODIC INSTRUMENTS

Most of the 300 tunes in these two collections are quite well-suited to all three wind instruments of the Irish tradition: flute, tin whistle and uilleann pipes. The suggestions for ornamentation work equally well for all three, and the breathing suggestions are appropriate for both flute and tin whistle.

Even though pipers do not need to create breathing spaces in a tune, they may enjoy considering the breathing suggestions as places where they too can omit or shorten notes, thereby perhaps discovering some new approaches to phrasing. Players of fiddle, accordion, concertina, tenor banjo, mandolin, harp, and other melody instruments might enjoy using this collection in a similar way.

While not all the ornamentation suggestions transfer easily to string and free reed instruments, many of them do, and trying them out may help players of non-wind instruments explore their own approaches to ornamentation.

“BLANK SLATE” TRANSCRIPTIONS - *300 GEMS OF IRISH MUSIC FOR ALL INSTRUMENTS*

For those who wish to have copies of these tunes *without* ornamentation and breathing suggestions, the book *300 Gems of Irish Music for All Instruments*² combines into one volume such “blank slate” versions of the tunes from both of the *150 Gems* collections.

These tune settings leave low notes (below the flute’s low D) in their original register, making the transcriptions more useful to players whose instruments have such low notes. This also makes it easier for wind players to make their own decisions about how to accommodate notes that fall below their instrument’s range.

DOWN THE BACK LANE: VARIATION IN TRADITIONAL IRISH DANCE MUSIC

Since the suggestions shown in the *150 Gems* books represent only one out of many ways a player might spontaneously ornament and phrase a tune, I have made a supplementary collection of tune transcriptions and recordings, entitled *Down the Back Lane: Variation in Traditional Irish Dance Music*,³ in which I present transcriptions and recordings of several of the tunes found in the *150 Gems* collections. In *Down the Back Lane*, each tune is played three times through (instead of once). Each repetition of a tune is notated independently, showing complete details of how one repetition differs from the others with respect to ornamentation, breathing, slurring and tonguing, vibrato and melodic variation.

I hope these examples will reinforce the fact that traditional Irish tunes are always changing and that there is no such thing as a definitive setting of a tune.

TWO ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you wish to explore Irish flute and tin whistle playing in more depth, you’ll find a wealth of information in my 480-page book and two-CD package, *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*⁴. At the time of this writing, it is the most comprehensive work of its kind. Written for beginning to advanced players, it includes a thorough orientation to traditional Irish music, guidance on holding and blowing the instruments, in-depth examinations of ornamentation, breathing, phrasing and melodic variation, systematic exercises for the practice of ornamentation, and 27 meticulously-detailed transcriptions of recordings from great whistle and flute players dating from 1925 to 2001.

Players of the modern, Boehm-system flute may wish to consult its Appendix B for information and advice on fingering choices and adapting traditional ornamentation techniques to their instrument.

*The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox*⁵ is a slimmer volume that takes the player from the beginner through the intermediate stage of Irish tin whistle playing. Based upon material presented in *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*, the smaller book includes a chapter for beginning whistle players not found in the larger one.

For information on all my books, and to download free excerpts, please visit www.greylarsen.com.

² Grey Larsen, *300 Gems of Irish Music for All Instruments* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2013).

³ Grey Larsen, *Down the Back Lane: Variation in Traditional Irish Dance Music* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2013).

⁴ Grey Larsen, *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2003).

⁵ Grey Larsen, *The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2004).

ALTERNATE TUNE TITLES

Many traditional Irish tunes have multiple names. In all of these collections I have listed only one title per tune, but an online search will often yield quite a few alternates.

While most tunes are widely known by English titles, some are more commonly known by titles in the Irish language. In these cases, I give the Irish title first, followed by an English translation. Titles in both languages are then listed in “Contents of the Companion CDs” on pp. 124-125 and in the indices on pp. 126-127.

GENDER CONVENTION

In this book I have decided to avoid the cumbersome use of both genders for the personal pronoun. Instead of writing *he or she*, *his or her*, etc., I use the feminine gender. In this way I can contribute to correcting the imbalance caused by centuries of books which contain only masculine forms.

AN APOLOGY FOR SOME CONFUSION

When this book and its companion volume were first envisioned, they were given the working titles *Celtic Encyclopedia for Tin Whistle* and *Celtic Encyclopedia for Flute*. Unfortunately, these titles were mentioned in several printings of *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* and *The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox*. I apologize for any confusion this may have caused.

