

# 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 Flute*.

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 whistle. While many are well-known, others, as far as I know, have not been widely played in recent years.

This collection seeks to serve several purposes:

- To provide 94 tunes that fit the tin whistle 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 tin whistle'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 fit beautifully on whistles in keys other than D (Section Three). By using whistles in C, A, G, F and E (as well as D) we can play in nearly every scale encountered in traditional Irish music.
- To illuminate the tune transcriptions with suggested ornamentation and breathing places.
- To provide informative chapters 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 they contain many facets of the music that cannot be written down.

## SECTION ONE: WHISTLE-FRIENDLY TUNES

These 94 tunes are utterly natural to the tin whistle. They fall within its comfortable octave-plus-a-sixth range and contain only the notes that are easily played by completely covering and uncovering its six finger holes: D, E, F#, G, A, B, C# and C#. The notes that most naturally invite ornamentation in these tunes are the ones that whistle players can embellish with variety and ease.

For more on what makes a tune whistle-friendly, see “Whistle-Friendly Tunes” on p. 45.

## 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 whistle and require the player to make creative adjustments. Some include sequences of notes that may be more natural to a fiddle or accordion than they are to a whistle. Some invite ornamentation on C and C#, notes which are not as readily ornamented on the whistle as on other instruments, notes which invite the whistle player to employ finger and breath vibrato, shadings of pitch and tone, and melodic variation. Yet these tunes, like those in Section One, contain only the notes that are easily played by covering and uncovering the whistle's six finger holes: D, E, F#, G, A, B, C# and C#.

For more about this class of tunes, see “Tunes of Non-Wind Origin” on p. 83.

## SECTION THREE: TUNES FOR NON-D WHISTLES

The remaining 28 tunes fall into two groups.

The first (and larger) group consists of dance tunes that cannot readily be played on a D whistle because they employ one or more of the pitches – E<sup>b</sup>, F<sup>#</sup>, G<sup>#</sup> and B<sup>b</sup> – that fall outside its natural scale. The half-hole<sup>1</sup> fingerings

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<sup>1</sup> “Half-holing” refers to the practice of partially covering a tone hole in order to play a pitch that falls in between the pitches produced by fully covering and uncovering the hole.

often required to play these notes can make it difficult to play up to speed with dependable accuracy, and they can severely limit the ornamentation options.

When these tunes come up in sessions, I see many whistle players sitting them out while fiddlers, accordion players and others play on. However, whistle players can join in on these tunes by using whistles in C, A, G, F or E. Using an appropriate non-D whistle eliminates the need for half-hole fingerings and allows us a fuller range of ornamentation options. You'll find instructions for how to play such tunes on non-D whistles in Section Three.

The second group consists of tunes which can be played on a D whistle, but which I feel sound as good or better when played on a whistle in a lower key, especially a low A or G. (I often bring low A and G whistles to sessions and enjoy discovering tunes that work well on them.) When playing on a lower whistle, you can often bring part or all of a tune down an octave, into a register that blends better with other instruments. This can provide a useful alternative to playing in what is sometimes a loud and shrill register on the high D whistle. Playing on a lower whistle may offer better ornamentation options as well.

This particular use of lower non-D whistles has not, to the best of my knowledge, been explored in previous books or tune collections. Section Three includes a number of these tunes, along with instructions on how to play them.

For more information, including a table showing all the accessible scales for whistles in D, C, A, G, F and E, see "Tunes for Non-D Whistles" on p. 99.

## THE TIN WHISTLE

The fingering system of the tin whistle is identical to that of the keyless Irish flute and is very closely related to that of the uilleann pipes, the bellows-blown bagpipe of Ireland. Since all three are simple-system<sup>2</sup> instruments, their fingering and ornamentation techniques are readily adaptable to one another. Many musicians play more than one of these three instruments.

There is a wide range of tin whistles available today, from very inexpensive, mass-produced ones to beautiful handmade instruments.



*Figure 1. A whistle in high D, in African blackwood and sterling silver, made by Chris Abell.*

There are several important things to consider when selecting a whistle. Here are a few:

- It is wise to find one with a headjoint or mouthpiece that is separate from the body and movable. This makes fine tuning of the instrument possible.
- Even though a tin whistle player has only limited control over loudness, I find that, in general, the handmade instruments allow a greater degree of volume and tonal control.
- Quick response to finger articulations is a valuable asset.
- It is helpful to have the ability to play an in-tune C $\sharp$  in the low register with the cross-fingering<sup>3</sup> produced by covering only the second and third holes downstream from the mouthpiece. This makes for more economical fingering sequences in tunes that use C $\sharp$ .

<sup>2</sup> Simple-system whistles and flutes 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 D whistle yields a low D note. Uncovering them one by one, from low to high, results in an ascending scale in the D Ionian mode, also known as the D major scale.

<sup>3</sup> John Smith and Joe Wolfe, in the International Congress on Acoustics, Rome, Session 8.09, pp. 14-15, describe cross-fingering in this way: "Opening successive tone holes in woodwind instruments shortens the standing wave in the bore. However, the standing wave propagates past the first open hole, so its frequency can be affected by closing other tone holes further downstream. This is called cross fingering, and in some instruments is used to produce the 'sharps and flats' missing from their natural scales."

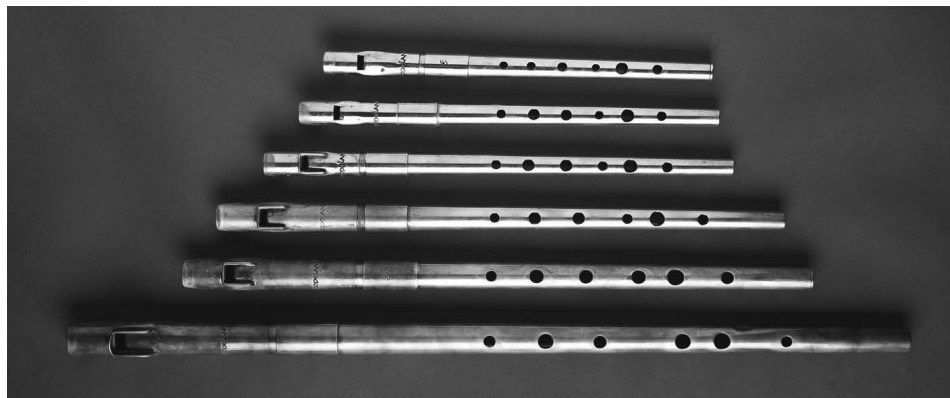


Figure 2. Six whistles made by Michael Copeland, in high E, D and C, and low A, G and D (top to bottom).

There is much more information on the tin whistle, and tin whistle playing, in *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* and *The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox*. (See “Two Additional Resources” on p. 10.)

### 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. 11-24 and “Chapter Three: Breathing and Phrasing” on pp. 30-41.

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. 9.

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. 9.

### TRANSCRIPTIONS ARE ONLY SNAPSHOTS

For many of us, a tune neatly written on a staff 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, whistle players), but have adapted their versions to the whistle 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 CD location.

On these CDs I play all 150 tunes on tin whistle one time through, with ornamentation as notated. When I take a breath, it is in accord with each tune's notated breathing suggestions. Tunes 1 through 94 (the Whistle-Friendly Tunes) are on CD #1, tunes 95 through 150 on CD #2. Recordings of some of the musical examples from pp. 15-40 are found after the tunes on CD #2. See pp. 134-135 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 on 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 FLUTE*

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

Although customized for flute players, almost all of its tunes are easily played on the tin whistle in D. Many of the remaining tunes can be played on tin whistles in keys other than D.

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 for non-D whistles) the flute book features 28 tunes for the D flute which require the use of metal keys for playing notes such as E $\flat$ , F $\sharp$ , G $\sharp$  and B $\flat$ . Most of these tunes are in modes such as D Dorian and Aeolian, G Dorian and Aeolian, C, F and A Ionian. (For an exploration of modes, see "Chapter Two: Modes and Other Notation Matters" on pp. 25-29.) Some of the tunes are in the more common flute and whistle modes, but include an occasional accidental (a note that falls outside the expected scale of the tune as reflected in its mode signature).

## 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 these collections 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*<sup>4</sup> combines into one volume such "blank slate" versions of the tunes from both *150 Gems* collections.

These tune settings leave low notes (below the whistle'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*,<sup>5</sup> 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.

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<sup>4</sup> Grey Larsen, *300 Gems of Irish Music for All Instruments* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Grey Larsen, *Down the Back Lane: Variation in Traditional Irish Dance Music* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2013).

## TWO ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you wish to explore 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*<sup>6</sup>. 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.

*The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox*<sup>7</sup> 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/store/books.php](http://www.greylarsen.com/store/books.php).

## 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. 134-135 and in the indices on pp. 136-137.

## 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.



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<sup>6</sup> Grey Larsen, *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Grey Larsen, *The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2004).