

# introduction

## WHAT IS THIS BOOK?

This is a book about learning to play traditional Irish music on the tin whistle. It is a book for the beginner and novice, but also for the intermediate player who may have already been playing for some years. The book starts with the beginner's first approach to the instrument and proceeds, step by step, to provide a wealth of information and guidance, examples and exercises, mapping out a route to genuine competence as a player of traditional Irish music. The journey includes very thorough instruction in the Irish ornamentation techniques known as cuts, strikes, slides, long rolls, and short rolls.

The book also offers a brief look into the history and development of the tin whistle in Ireland and a thorough orientation to traditional Irish music for tin whistle players. It does not cover the rudiments of music notation or ear training.

Section 1 features an orientation to traditional Irish music, briefly visits the history and development of the tin whistle in Ireland, explores everything having to do with holding, fingering, and sounding the instrument, supplies guidance and encouragement in practicing, and takes the first of two looks at the parallels between music and spoken language.

In Section 2 I share my insights into ornamentation. These ideas have led me to invent new ways to explain and notate ornamentation that are far more simple and clear than other approaches in use at the time of this writing.

Section 3 addresses tonguing, phrasing, and breathing.

In Section 4 I look into "muscle memory," revisit the subject of practice, and look again at the analogy between music and spoken language.

The book contains numerous musical examples and exercises. Many of them are excerpts from traditional Irish tunes. Transcriptions and recordings of these tunes, in their full form, are available online at <[www.greylarsen.com/extras/toolbox](http://www.greylarsen.com/extras/toolbox)>.

This book draws upon another of my books, *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*. The scope of that book is far broader. Once you have worked your way through this book you may well want to move on to that one, for several reasons. You may be ready to delve into more advanced techniques of ornamentation (condensed long rolls, condensed short rolls, double-cut rolls, cranns, and others). You may be interested in playing Irish music on the flute – the Irish flute, or the modern, Boehm-system flute. You may want to study the playing of great whistle and flute players of the past and present. *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*, along with its two companion CDs, explores all of this in great depth, and includes meticulous transcriptions of the playing of John McKenna, Tom Morrison, William Cummins, Séamus Ennis, Willie Clancy, Paddy Taylor, Paddy Carty, Josie McDermott, Matt Molloy, Cathal McConnell, Mary Bergin, Donncha Ó Briain, Desi Wilkinson, Breda Smyth, Seán Ryan, Conal Ó Gráda, Micho Russell, Joanie Madden, Kevin Crawford, Catherine McEvoy, Seamus Egan, and myself.

## THE COMPANION CD

The companion CD contains most of the figures and exercises that appear throughout the book. A CD symbol paired with a track number shows where to find the recording.

Some CD tracks contain more than one musical example. In such cases, I give an index number for each example contained in that track, as shown here:



These recordings are provided for the benefit of every reader, not just those who do not read music. Even though the figures and exercises are notated in a detailed fashion, there are many elements of traditional Irish music that cannot be written down. Using both notated representations and recordings will help all readers to better understand the music.

#### COMPLEMENTARY TUNE COLLECTIONS

This book is complemented by my tunebook and CD packages, *Celtic Encyclopedia for Tin Whistle* and *Celtic Encyclopedia for Flute*, two volumes in Mel Bay's Celtic Encyclopedia series. These works, which present traditional tunes that are particularly well suited to the whistle and flute, respectively, contain the first large collections of transcriptions that make use of my notation techniques. (By the way, tunes that are well-suited to the flute are usually well-suited to the whistle, and vice versa.)

#### MORE TUNES AT <[WWW.GREYLARSEN.COM](http://WWW.GREYLARSEN.COM)>

There are additional tunes, in both audio and transcription form, at my website, <[www.greylarsen.com](http://www.greylarsen.com)>. Please visit the site for more information on this and other items related to my Mel Bay books, and for information about my recordings, workshops, and performances.

#### WHY IS THIS BOOK NEEDED?

There are numerous other books about Irish tin whistle playing. Unfortunately, many of them are at times superficial, confusing, or lacking in clear and complete explanation.

It is impossible to be good at playing tin whistle without basing one's learning on a foundation of extensive and continual listening. This book is intended to encourage and be a companion to such listening. But it also provides a wealth of information that for many is very difficult to obtain through listening alone, without regular, personal contact with experienced players.

This book also provides teachers of Irish tin whistle a solid pedagogical basis for their work.

#### READING MUSIC

There is a great deal of music notation in this book. As mentioned above, if you do not read music you can still use the book quite well, because I play most of the notated exercises and figures on the companion CD.

I encourage everyone to learn to read music. It is an extremely useful skill, even for the traditional musician. However, it is very important to avoid becoming dependent upon written music. If you already are, then you need to begin to wean yourself. As you learn tunes, you should immediately start to internalize them. For much more on this subject, see Chapter 1.

The companion CD can be very useful in that regard. You can learn to play a musical example solely by listening to it over and over on the CD. Once you have learned it, you may check yourself with the music notation in the book.

#### ANALYTICAL LEARNING AND IMMERSION LEARNING

You certainly do not need to use this or any book in order to learn to play Irish tin whistle. This tradition has thrived and evolved for centuries with very little help from books. In Ireland, and in Irish communities outside Ireland, many musicians learn their music largely through immersion, the way that we all master our native languages. Most musicians who learn this way are not very self-examining about how they do what they do.

Analytical resources like this book can and should never supplant aural learning, but they can supplement it in important ways. This book supplies much needed information for people who live far away from a thriving Irish music community. Even those who live in such communities will find plenty of new ideas, insights, and opinions here. I believe it is a very good thing for a musician to become aware of aspects of her playing that she may have been unconscious of for years. So, I hope this will be a valuable book for all players, regardless of their background and learning experiences.

Although traditional musicians, on the whole, tend to learn intuitively, it is interesting to note that music reading is more prevalent in the Irish music tradition than it is in many others. Instruction books and tune collections have played a part in the propagation of traditional Irish music since the 18th century. In our time, the tune collections of Captain Francis O'Neill<sup>i</sup>, Breandán Breathnach<sup>ii</sup>, and others can be found on the bookshelves of many traditional Irish musicians.

#### MANY WAYS TO REGARD A TREASURE

This book represents my own perceptions, opinions, and experience regarding traditional Irish music. As with any art form, there is room for a wide variety of viewpoints. Each one provides yet another way to illuminate a shared treasure, which, though deeply rooted in many generations of Irish culture, is alive and constantly evolving.

#### 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. This way I can do my small part in helping to correct the imbalance caused by centuries of books that have used only masculine forms.

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<sup>i</sup> Two of the tune collections of Capt. Francis O'Neill are particularly widespread. *O'Neill's Music of Ireland* was originally published in 1903 and contains 1850 tunes. *1001 Gems, The Dance Music of Ireland* followed in 1907. Both were published in Chicago where O'Neill served as Chief of Police. Both books have gone through several editions and are at the time of this writing published by Mel Bay Publications.

<sup>ii</sup> Breandán Breathnach, *Ceol Rince na hÉireann*, 5 vols. (Dublin: An Gúm). Years of first publication: vol. 1: 1963, vol. 2: 1976, vol. 3: 1985, vol. 4: 1996, vol.5: 1999.

