

# Introduction

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

These tunes were originally compiled in two collections, *150 Gems of Irish Music for Flute* and *150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle*. In these books the tunes were customized for flute and whistle players with suggestions for ornamentation, breathing and phrasing, and the accommodation of notes that are too low for standard flutes and whistles. For more information on these two collections, see “Two Companion Collections” on the next page.

In the present book, the tunes are presented in an unadorned and straightforward style in order to make them useful to players of all instruments, no matter what their level of experience may be. Nevertheless, *it is essential that newcomers to Irish music consult p. 3 and learn how to interpret dotted quarter notes and quarter notes as they are used in this book*. Much of the freedom and joy of this music lies in the rhythmic and melodic variety you can introduce in place of these notated dotted quarter and quarter notes.

Each of the melody instruments traditionally used in Irish music - among them fiddle, accordion, concertina, flute, tin whistle, uilleann pipes, harp, tenor banjo and other plectrum string instruments - has its own distinct but interlinked traditions of ornamentation and phrasing techniques. Players with knowledge of these techniques should feel free to apply them to these tunes as they wish.

We can also experience the beauty of this music using little or no ornamentation. However, even when playing without ornamentation, it is essential to exercise some degree of rhythmic and melodic freedom, as discussed on pp. 3 and 13-16. For some examples of how this can be done, see “A Closer Look at Quarter Notes, Dotted Quarter Notes and Bracketed Eighth Notes” on pp. 13-16.

Flute and tin whistle players will need to create their own breathing places when playing the tunes in this book. These players, as well as uilleann pipers, will also need to make creative adjustments when encountering notes that are too low for their instrument. Strategies for creating breathing spaces and for accommodating low notes are described in depth in *150 Gems of Irish Music for Flute* and *150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle*.

## 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 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

I am not presenting exact, literal documents of how these musicians played, but have tried 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.

## TRANSCRIPTIONS ARE ONLY SNAPSHOTS

For many of us, a tune neatly written on a musical staff carries an unspoken message: “*This* is the right way to play the tune.” That idea, 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 these transcriptions too much authority! There are many existing variants of these tunes, and others will continue to emerge.

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.

To learn these tunes in the fullest sense, you'll want to listen to a variety of good musicians playing them, each in their own way. The soul and nuance of Irish music cannot be deeply learned in any other way. Through such committed immersion we gradually absorb the knowledge and insight that enable us to extemporize in ways that are both culturally appropriate and expressive of our individuality.

#### RECORDINGS OF ALL 300 TUNES ARE AVAILABLE

You may purchase recordings of the 300 tunes in this book at [www.greylarsen.com](http://www.greylarsen.com), either as a set of four audio CDs or as a set of downloadable audio files.

251 of these 300 recordings are identical to those that come with *150 Gems of Irish Music for Flute* and *150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle* (see the next paragraph), played by me on Irish flute or tin whistle. The other 49 are tunes which include notes lower than the low D of the tin whistle and standard Irish flute. I recorded these on anglo concertina, keeping these lower notes in their original register. (On the recordings of these 49 tunes that come with *150 Gems of Irish Music for Flute* and *150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle*, such low notes, and sometimes other notes that surround them, are transposed up an octave, as is customary in the Irish flute and whistle traditions.)

If you wish to purchase only the 49 concertina recordings, you may do this as well at [www.greylarsen.com](http://www.greylarsen.com), either as one audio CD or a set of downloadable audio files.

#### TWO COMPANION COLLECTIONS

*150 Gems of Irish Music for Flute* and *150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle* can be thought of as companions to this collection. All 300 tunes in this book can also be found in one or the other of those two books, and in the recordings that come with them. On those recordings I play the tunes on Irish flute or tin whistle.

The transcriptions in these companion collections feature ornamentation suggestions that work well on flute, tin whistle and uilleann pipes, guidance for flute and whistle players on creating appropriate breathing places, and examples of how to accommodate notes that are too low for standard flutes, whistles and pipes. Players of instruments with a limited low register may find these suggestions, as well as the detailed explanatory material on these subjects, to be very useful.

Regarding such low notes, musicians customarily raise them as needed (and sometimes notes that come before and/or after them as well) by an octave. The *150 Gems* collections offer commentary on this subject, as well as many examples of how too-low notes can be accommodated in musically pleasing ways.

Players of non-wind instruments may also find these collections useful. While not all the ornamentation suggestions will transfer readily to their instrument, many will, and trying them out may help players explore their own approaches to ornamentation. And even though they do not need to create breathing spaces in a tune, players of non-wind instruments and uilleann pipers may enjoy considering the breathing suggestions as places where they too can omit or shorten notes, thereby discovering new approaches to phrasing. Great players of all instruments create occasional spaces in the music in this way.

#### *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>1</sup> in which I present several of the tunes found in this book and in the *150 Gems* collections. In the recordings that come with *Down the Back Lane*, each tune is played three times through. In the book, each recorded 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Grey Larsen, *Down the Back Lane: Variation in Traditional Irish Dance Music* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2013).

I hope the examples in *Down the Back Lane* 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 OTHER RESOURCES

If you wish to explore Irish flute or tin whistle playing in 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>2</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.

Many players of non-wind instruments have found this book very useful as well.

*The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox*<sup>3</sup> is a slimmer volume that takes the whistle player from the beginner through the intermediate stages of 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 view excerpts, please visit [www.greylarsen.com](http://www.greylarsen.com).

## INSTRUMENTS THAT ARE NOT FULLY CHROMATIC

Some tunes in this collection contain notes that fall outside the somewhat limited scales of instruments such as tin whistles, keyless Irish flutes, keyless uilleann pipes, harmonicas and melodeons (single-row button accordions). Tin whistle players, Irish flute players and uilleann pipers have, over the centuries, dealt with such limitations in a variety of ways, including through the use of whistles in keys other than D. *150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle* addresses this subject in depth, and shows how many of the tunes in the present collection can be played very well on non-D whistles. The same logic can be extended to other instruments that are not fully chromatic, such as harmonicas.

## PLAYING IRISH MUSIC ON “NON-CUSTOMARY” INSTRUMENTS

This book is, as the title states, intended for players of all instruments, for all people who are drawn to traditional Irish music and wish to learn to play it well.

The instruments that most Irish musicians currently recognize as customary for playing traditional Irish melodies include fiddle, flute, tin whistle, uilleann pipes, harp, button accordion, piano accordion, melodeon, concertina, harmonica, tenor banjo, mandolin, bouzouki, cittern, guitar and hammer dulcimer. This list has certainly expanded over the years. Tenor banjo and bouzouki are examples of instruments that were welcomed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while free reed instruments (accordions, concertinas and harmonicas) were embraced during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

If you play Irish music on an instrument that is not widely considered to be “customary,” your chances of being welcomed into Irish music circles depends mostly upon how well you play the music and how sensitive you are to the needs and desires of others in Irish session settings. Personally, I would much prefer to play tunes with an oboist who has studied the music deeply than with a fiddler who has not.

Still, if your instrument is not on the “approved” list you should be prepared to encounter some less than open-minded attitudes, at least until you have demonstrated that you are committed to learning about the music and contributing to the high quality of the session experience. Humility, curiosity, patience, sensitivity and a listening spirit are great assets for an Irish musician, regardless of her instrument.

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<sup>2</sup> Grey Larsen, *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2003).

<sup>3</sup> 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 this collection 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 shown in the “List of Tunes by Tune Type” on pp. 4-5 and in the “Index of Tunes by Title” on pp. 118-119.

## REPEATS

I use some common-practice repetition indications in the tune transcriptions. In case you are unfamiliar with them:

- “D.C.” stands for *da capo*, an Italian phrase meaning “from the beginning,” or literally “from the head.” This tells you to repeat from the beginning of the tune.
- “D.S.” stands for *dal segno*, an Italian phrase meaning “from the sign.” This tells you to repeat not from the beginning, but from a different location marked by a *segno* (i.e., “sign”). The *segno* looks like this:  $\text{S}$ .
- A thin-thick double barline preceded by two dots ( :|| ) is a left-facing repeat sign. It tells you to go back to an earlier right-facing repeat sign ( ||: ). If there is no right-facing repeat sign ( ||: ) *in that part* of the tune (e.g., the B, C or D-part), then return to the beginning of the tune.

Although tune parts (A-part, B-part, etc.) repeat in most cases, there are many exceptions.

## 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.

