

Introduction

A traditional Irish tune, played by a fiddler or flute player in a kitchen or pub, quivers the air in all directions ... the music lives, moves and breathes; it is ephemeral, unbelievably rich in nuance, subtle in rhythm and flow, never the same when repeated. The people present and their relationships, the setting, the time of year, the warmth of the air, the mingling sounds, the aromas – all of these things and more combine to create the experience of live, social music. The fullness of it cannot be caught, only encoded, selectively and incompletely, into our memories.

An audio recording captures a rich and vivid slice of this experience, but it omits at least as much as it includes. Blindfolded, it strips away context and imposes a beginning and end.

A brief transcription of the tune is a rough and static artifact, a few measures in black ink on white paper. A recording is an artifact too, though a much richer one than the notes on paper.

Tune books typically present us with skeletal fragments, partial, symbolic sketches of living music. Despite their limitations, many of us allow these transcriptions too much authority. It's tempting to believe that these written notes display an accurate map of the tune. Quite the opposite is true - the notation is only a token. With it, you can board a train, embarking on a broader journey of listening and learning.

Music notation strongly engages the analytic and reductive mind, the mind that loves to set boundaries, find pattern, simplify, paraphrase, filter, impose order. This front part of the mind is immensely useful, as well as comforting. It heartens us to find order. But in playing and learning traditional music, we need to let the front of the mind know that while it is a valued observer and advisor, it is not in charge.

The intuitive, expansive, dreaming, playful mind, the mind that welcomes uncertainty and paradox, that is the true home of music: the place where music lives, breathes, unfolds and changes, where spontaneous variation is born.

It may seem ironic, then, that this book and its companion CD use the artifacts of music notation and audio recording to explore that more mysterious and fluid mind, to wander with it down the back lane.

THE RECORDINGS

The eight recordings on this book's CD are the heart of *Down the Back Lane*. On each track I play one tune three times through. While recording I did not look at notation or follow a plan. I did my best to not "think" at all, but simply to live inside the tune and allow it to change as it carried me along.

While six of the tunes are played without accompaniment, two are taken from the recording *Dark of the Moon*¹ and feature Paddy League on guitar and bodhrán.

THE TRANSCRIPTIONS

The transcriptions in this book contain a wealth of information about the ways, both apparent and subtle, in which I interpret these eight tunes. Even so, the recordings, by nature, contain far more.

I did my best to notate the pitches, rhythms, ornamentation, phrasing, breathing, slurring, tonguing, glottal articulations, staccato notes, fingered pitch slides and the use of vibrato. I show a few examples of the variation of loudness (dynamics) and give a rough idea of the speed at which I played. But still, the constraints of the notational system forced me to filter, simplify, compromise and omit.

The recordings are full of subtle swing and lilt. The eighth notes are not of equal weight or duration, despite what the notation implies. There is a vast spectrum of tonal variety that is not shown at all on paper. The loudness of notes, especially in the flute recordings, is almost constantly in a state of flux. I tried to illustrate a few of these moments using dynamic markings, but even these attempts merely hint at the complex shadings that are actually occurring. The pitches have a variety of flavors as well - this is not equal-tempered music. (There was no pitch correction done to the recordings, so all pitches are unaltered.) I have shown where I used finger and breath vibrato, but each instance differs in depth, speed and character, and the qualities of the vibrato often change during the course of the note. Most of the fingered pitch slides are microtonal, and occur at differing speeds. I simply show that a slide is present, and that it either goes up or down. The forcefulness or gentleness of individual tongue articulations is not conveyed. Staccato markings do not show "how staccato" the note is. And so on ...

¹ Grey Larsen and Paddy League, *Dark of the Moon*, Sleepy Creek Music SCM103, 2003, compact disc.

However, the notation does have a special strength. Since it is a method of visual representation that freezes music in time, you can examine the notation without being constrained by the flow of real, linear time. You can examine one phrase as long as you wish; you can skip backward or forward. You can easily compare a phrase from the third time through a tune with the same phrase from the first and second times, observing the many ways in which they differ. You can compare one transcription with another.

With these kinds of observations, you can begin to form hypotheses about how the language of Irish music operates, about the kinds of variations that are consistent with it and the kinds that may not be.

The three repetitions of each tune are presented on separate staves, stacked one above the other for ease of comparison. At first glance it may appear to some that they are looking at a score for three instruments which play simultaneously. This is not the case. Each staff shows a solo melody, and the staves are labeled “First time,” “Second time” and “Third time.”

A fourth staff, labeled “Reference,” shows a “bare bones” version of the tune. For more on this, see “The Choice of Tunes,” below.

Down the Back Lane shows only how one player creates variations. You may also wish to seek out information about how other musicians interpret the music. Recordings by 22 players are transcribed in detail in my book *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*,² in the section called “Great Performances Transcribed (Transcriptions of Commercial Recordings from Twenty-Two Important Flute and Tin Whistle Players, 1925 – 2001).” You may view an excerpt at www.greylarsen.com.

THE FRUITS OF COMMITTED IMMERSION

You may have heard experienced Irish musicians state one of the great truths about the mastery of this art: that they never play a tune the same way twice. They have gained enough fluency in the language of the music that they are set free to extemporize spontaneously within it, just as we all do when we speak in our native tongue.

How do you gain that level of fluency? There is no shortcut. It takes years of committed immersion in the music, listening to fine players. Being in their presence is best by far, but listening to recordings is also of great value.

Reading music need not play any part in learning this musical language.

VARIATION IN SOLO AND ENSEMBLE PLAYING

Melody is king in traditional Irish music, and a solo, unaccompanied rendition of a tune is complete in and of itself. Playing solo allows the musician a great degree of freedom to vary the melody.

When a melody player is joined by an accompanist, the chemistry between them can have a great effect on how both musicians vary the music. You can hear examples of such back and forth interplay on CD tracks 1 and 7.

When we join with other melody players, the tune becomes communal and conversational. While not striving for strict unison, the players ideally endeavor to listen and respond to one another with a high degree of sensitivity, thereby creating a group melodic voice. While a modest level of melodic variation can and does still happen, it cannot be as free and wide-ranging as when one is the sole melody player. Ideally, the participants tailor their playing to each other such that they bring forth a unified musical entity that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is the ideal music session, a transcendent experience that Irish musicians live for.

THE CHOICE OF TUNES

Down the Back Lane includes two jigs, two reels, two hornpipes, one slide and one slip jig. I recorded half of the tunes on Irish flute and the other half on tin whistle.

These eight dance tunes were selected from my collection *300 Gems of Irish Music for All Instruments*.³ In that book the tunes are notated, just once through, in a straightforward, rudimentary and unadorned form designed to make them accessible to players of all levels of experience. Intentionally, these transcriptions contain very little information – only pitches and rhythms – and serve simply as blank slates or points of departure, much like those found in most other tune books.

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

³ Grey Larsen, *300 Gems of Irish Music for All Instruments* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2013).

These rudimentary versions appear on the bottom staff (labeled “Reference”) of each of this book’s transcriptions.

OTHER RESOURCES

Each of these tunes also appears in either *150 Gems of Irish Music for Flute*⁴ or *150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle*,⁵ two book/CD collections designed for wind players. These versions include suggestions for ornamentation and breathing places, but no more than that. If you are trying to play the full-blown transcriptions in *Down the Back Lane* but find them to be too complex, you may find that the versions in the *150 Gems* collections meet your needs better.

INSIGHT FOR NON-WIND PLAYERS

This collection will of course be of particular interest to flute and whistle players, but I hope that players of uilleann pipes and non-wind instruments also discover a wealth of useful information here.

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.

Most of the ornamentation notated in these pages is directly applicable, with some adaptation, to non-wind instruments. For more on my approach to notating ornamentation, see “Chapter Two: Ornamentation” on pp. 11-20.

Flute and whistle players must create breathing places in the music by omitting or shortening notes. Even though uilleann pipers and non-wind players do not need to do this, great players of all instruments create occasional spaces in the music in a similar way.

Seeing and hearing how a flute or whistle player uses breathing to delineate phrases may be of value to non-wind players. Within these phrases, flute and whistle players shape the music in more subtle ways by using various techniques including tongue and glottal articulations and variations in the flow of air. To see how I notate phrasing techniques, see “Chapter Three: Phrasing” on pp. 22-26. I hope that players of non-wind instruments will find parallels between these wind instrument techniques and those of their own instrument, such as fiddle bowing and bellows work on accordion and concertina.

A FEW OBSERVATIONS

It is not my intention to give detailed analyses of the variations heard in the recordings. I do, however, offer a few brief comments at the end of each transcription.

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.

⁴ Grey Larsen, *150 Gems of Irish Music for Flute* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2013).

⁵ Grey Larsen, *150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2013).