

# CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION TO TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSIC ON THE FLUTE AND TIN WHISTLE

## SEEK OUT THE OLDER PLAYERS

As you embark upon the path of learning Irish music, you should realize that you are preparing to become a participant in a story that has been unfolding for centuries. In order to intelligently take part, you need to start developing a view of the big picture.

*In this art, the key to all insight is listening.* This is a theme that will surface again and again throughout these pages.

As you are learning your craft, it is inspiring to listen to the latest performers and their recordings. But it is even more important to seek out the older players who may not come into your view so readily. The soul of the tradition rests in them, the ones who have lived the music for 50, 60, 70 years. They may be highly accomplished or they may play roughly and slow, but they are the keepers of the deepest wisdom and eloquence that you can experience through the music.

In an interview in *Fiddler Magazine*<sup>1</sup>, the great fiddler Martin Hayes tells about such a musician:

One of my own favorites is a whistle player called Joe Bane. I have a tune on the album called “The Britches” [This refers to Martin Hayes’ first album on Green Linnet Records, “*Martin Hayes*”. See Discography.] It’s very simple. Anybody could play it. Any beginner could play every note I play. It’s not technically difficult. And it wasn’t technically difficult the way he played it. But when he played it, it would bring a tear to my eye. He’d look forward to playing the tune all night at a session, and when the opportunity would arise, he’d go, “Ah, sure, we’ll play ‘The Britches.’” He’d be waiting to do this. He loved it. It was like a lullaby—there was sweetness in it, there was humility in it, there was joy and love, everything in it, and it was the climax of his day, of his week, to do this tune. He had no chops, he had no knowledge, no theoretical anything, but his space was magic. He didn’t need to know any more technical anything. The only thing that was amiss around him was a world that didn’t understand what was going on.

If you do not live in Ireland, you may be able to seek out Irish communities or Irish people nearby, attend concerts, festivals, music camps, summer schools, take part in dances, workshops, sessions. Hopefully, you will be able to travel to Ireland. There are a great many resources for broadening your knowledge.

## READING MUSIC, AND “WHAT IS A TUNE?”

If you do not read music, you are in good company. Many traditional Irish musicians don’t. But a surprisingly large number do to some extent. I encourage everyone to learn this skill.

In Irish music, when we use music notation it should be only as a supplement and a convenience, a shorthand guide or reminder to memory. When used in these ways, it is very useful indeed. However, the most deeply vital aspects of this music cannot be written down and can only be learned through extensive, active listening.

If you have become dependent upon written music, the time has come to begin to wean yourself from it. Below I offer some insights that I hope will help you do this.

The full embodiment of a traditional Irish tune cannot be written down. One of the reasons for this is that improvisation and variation are intrinsic elements of Irish music. There is no such thing as the definitive version of a traditional Irish tune. Often a particular setting will become established among certain comrade players, among players of a certain instrument, or in a certain region, but even that setting is a vehicle for personal interpretation. In truth, a transcription of a tune is no more than a frozen skeleton of a snapshot of a setting of a tune.

A tune is something very expansive and alive. Infusing each tune is an essence that makes it immediately recognizable, beautiful, and whole. Each tune also carries rich personal associations for the player. With musical maturity and experience, one comes to intuitively grasp the spirit of a tune and shape it in one’s own way.