

# chapter 16: cranns

In all of the preceding discussions on rolls I have told you that you cannot do a roll on D because there is no way to strike a D. Yet D is such a critically important note in this music. How can we use ornamentation to draw attention to it?

Enter the **crann**. The crann is an ornament that came to us from the uilleann piping tradition. It makes use only of cut notes, no strikes.

Cranns are traditionally played not only on D but on E as well, especially by pipers. They can be played on other notes too, but we rarely hear that with traditional flute and whistle players who seem to prefer rolls over cranns where rolls are possible. One reason for this preference may be that double-cut rolls sound very similar to cranns and are generally easier to play than cranns.

One notable example of cranning on notes other than D and E comes from the great tin whistle player Donncha Ó Briain (Denis O'Brien) (1960–1990). He played cranns on F-natural in his rendition of *The Flogging Reel*<sup>i</sup> (see my transcription of this performance on pp. 409–410 in Section 8). This is a very effective, creative, and challenging use of the cranning technique, considering that the F-natural itself is played by half-uncovering the B2 hole. But, precisely because of this half-holing, it is virtually impossible to do a strike (and therefore a roll) on F-natural on the whistle. Donncha Ó Briain could have chosen a number of easier options at this point in the tune. He was truly a master of the tin whistle and deserves more recognition than he has received. Others whom I have heard use cranns on notes other than D and E include Co. Limerick flute player Paddy Taylor and Co. Galway flutists Mike Rafferty and Jack Coen.

It seems that cranns have become widely used among flute and whistle players only since the 1970s, though they have been in use by pipers for a much longer time. One can hear different forms of D and E cranns in recordings of uilleann piper Patsy Touhey that were made between 1900 and 1919. Since it has been very common for uilleann pipers to also play tin whistle and/or flute, it is only natural that various piping techniques such as cranning have made their way into traditional flute and whistle playing. However, most flute and whistle players find cranns to be quite challenging. There are quite a few flute and whistle players who don't use them at all, especially the players of older generations.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Matt Molloy's brilliant use of cranns inspired many flute and whistle players to regard cranning as an essential element of their styles. But his were not the first Irish flute or tin whistle recordings in which cranns were used. The earliest recordings I have found of cranning by Irish flute or whistle players are John McKenna's 1925 recording of the reel *The Five Mile Chase*<sup>ii</sup> and Tom Morrison's 1927 recording of the schottische *Sweet Flowers of Milltown*, the second of which you will find transcribed in Section 8 (on pp. 368–371). These were surprising discoveries, since I had shared the commonly held supposition that flute and whistle players did not begin to use the crann until the 1970s. Hopefully further research will shed more light upon the early use of cranning by flute and whistle players.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, subsequent recordings of cranning by flute and whistle players don't seem to show up until the late 1960s. Finbar Furey, a noted uilleann piper, used cranns on the tin whistle in his 1968 and 1969 recordings on the Nonesuch label.<sup>iii</sup> You can hear Paddy Taylor using cranns on his 1970 recording, *Boy in the Gap*.<sup>iv</sup> Paddy Carty used them in his 1974 recording of the reel *Cottage Groves*.<sup>v</sup>

There are long cranns and short cranns. As with rolls, long cranns take up three eighth-note beats while short cranns take up two eighth-note beats.

Although cranning techniques can differ quite a bit from player to player, there seem to be certain characteristics of the crann that are held in common by all. For example, since the crann is made up of cut notes, the lowest covered hole almost always remains covered (i.e. B3 in the case of D and B2 in the case of E).

Note that the crann is not the only ornamental gesture you can apply to a D. We will discuss others later.