

CHAPTER 23: the language analogy

revisited

Now that we have thoroughly explored ornamentation, variation, blowing, phrasing, articulation, the use of the breath, and the playing of slow airs, you can see that the depth of Irish flute and tin whistle playing is comparable to the richness of your own native language. The possibilities for expression are truly endless.

We have seen how spoken language and flute and whistle playing exhibit many parallels in the areas of breath, articulation, phrasing, punctuation, intonation, and inflection; how both embody variation, improvisation, embellishment, and the interpretation of large, complex structures.

REACHING FLUENCY

If you have not grown up immersed in traditional Irish music, then you can also see that learning it is something akin to learning a foreign language. In the early stages you have to give most of your attention to the details and mechanics of the language and the techniques of producing the proper sounds. As your mastery grows, these small scale characteristics become more and more second nature and you are able to continually shift your focus to the larger aspects of the language, eventually achieving fluency: the ability to express yourself readily and effortlessly, to think and “speak” in the new language without internal, mental translation. As you progress in this way, your view of the new world that this language makes possible becomes ever wider and wiser.

As you have worked your way through this book, you have been progressing toward fluency in the language of Irish music. Continued playing, listening, and practice will take you ever further down that road. If you are not there yet, you can look forward to a time when you will no longer need to think about the individual elements of rolls and cranns, about where and how to ornament, about where and how to breathe, about when or how to slide into or out of a note. You will no longer have to think about whether or how to use vibrato, single or multiple tonguing, staccato notes, dynamics. All of these tools and techniques will simply be at your fingertips, ready to be called upon by your intuition.

With fluency you can stay in the intuitive, emotional, playful, and interactive part of your mind and spirit. You no longer have to be analytical, though you may choose to be. As your technical prowess and confidence grow, you will continue to relegate technique to *muscle memory*, freeing the conscious layers of your mind to be more creative, expressive, and interactive. We'll look more at muscle memory in the next chapter.

FROM MONOLOGUE TO CONVERSATION TO COMMUNION

With fluency comes the ability to communicate with others on the highest levels.

Unlike spoken conversation, in music we “converse” by playing all at the same time. This is not workable in speech. The closest thing to it I can imagine would be a group of people reciting or chanting a poem together, each interpreting it and improvising on it harmoniously while keeping to the meter—or a group of singers improvising together on a song, but then we have left speech and entered back into music.

With instrumental music, becoming fully “conversational” means that you are able to listen so expansively that you are completely aware of what and how you are playing, and, at the same time, you are listening beautifully to the other musicians around you. (Just as you can play beautifully, you can listen with a quality of beauty.) Each musician hears and understands the expressions of the others and all simultaneously tailor their playing such that they bring forth a musical entity that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is the ideal music session, the transcendent experience that Irish musicians live for.