

# CHAPTER 24: on practice and “muscle memory”

## PRACTICE STYLES

The word *practice* has appeared many times throughout this book. Clearly practice is essential. What you mean by practice depends upon your reasons for playing this music and your goals. Some people enjoy a very relaxed approach and are content with slow or sporadic progress, others are driven to learn voraciously and progress quickly. Most of us find ourselves somewhere in between.

Whatever your learning style and your drive, no doubt you hope to continually improve your skills and deepen your insights. Since you have reached this point in the book, it's clear that Irish music has touched you deeply. I hope that your respect for its traditions inspires humility and the desire to join the tradition in the best ways that you can. That means “doing your homework,” attentively listening to the older players as well as the new, and honing your own skills so you can play in a conscious and ever-improving way. It also means venturing out of your practice space to play with other people so that you can partake of the entire experience of community music making, which is an essential part of the “practice” of Irish music.

For now let's turn our thoughts to private, at-home practice.

## ABOVE ALL, LISTEN

Though it may appear that practicing is a process of repeating the physical movements involved in playing, in fact, *effective* practice is at least 90% attention, mental focus, and listening. It may sound obvious, but listening, *truly attentive, inquisitive listening*, is the cornerstone of effective practice. Physical repetition will not do you much good if you are not listening well and paying attention to yourself. In fact, it may serve to reinforce bad habits instead.

Throughout this book, I've been hammering away at how important it is to immerse yourself in listening to the fine players of the past and present. Being in their physical presence is the best of all and you should seek out such opportunities as you are able.

Even if you cannot play very well yet, you *can* be a virtuoso listener. Soak up the sounds of great flute and whistle players. With the help of this book you can now understand what they are doing. Store their sounds in your mind's ear: Mary Bergin's short rolls, her use of tonguing, her lean, agile style; Matt Molloy's cranns and condensed rolls and his florid style full of dramatic tone color and dynamic changes; John McKenna's heavy breath pulsing; Paddy Carty's even, silky sound.

You can memorize the sounds of the well-played cut, strike, long roll, etc., and store these sounds in a memory bank of ideal sounds. Then, as you work on training your body to learn the needed skills, continually compare the sounds you are making to the ideal sounds in your memory and imagination. Hear yourself playing with the eloquence of Cathal McConnell or Josie McDermott. Without self-criticism or judgment, notice well the differences between the reality and the ideal. Those differences are like gold; they show you where you need to direct your efforts. With patience and self-compassion, keep striving to come closer to your ideals. Little by little you will get there.

## SLOW PRACTICE WILL GET YOU THERE SOONER

We all want to be able to play fast, but it is more important to play well and beautifully. What is the point of playing poorly at a fast pace? Having reached this point in the book, you know extremely well that Irish music is vastly more than a simple succession of notes. What you see in tune books are simply frozen skeletons of snapshots of settings of tunes, some a bit more fleshed out than others. Why race along flinging frozen skeletons to and fro when you could be sipping and savoring nectar at the banquet table?