

In this example, the letter “t” (for *tongue* or *throat*) appears below each note that is articulated. Notice that only the first note of each slurred group is articulated. (These “t”s do not normally appear in written music. They are placed in this example only to help clarify the meaning of slur notation.)

## THE CLASSIFICATION OF INSTRUMENTAL IRISH MUSIC

Broadly speaking, instrumental Irish music can be divided into two categories: *dance music* and *non-dance music*.

### Non-Dance Music

*Non-dance music* includes slow airs, marches, planxties (tribute pieces) and the other compositions of O’Carolan and other harpers which have found a home in the repertoires of traditional musicians, as well as a handful of tunes that are simply called “pieces.” Breandán Breathnach writes that “pieces”

. . . are derived from double or single jigs. These pieces were devised simply by filling in intervals in the original tunes with elaborate runs and embellishments. They were played rather deliberately, somewhat at waltz tempo, for which dance, in fact, they could quite easily be adapted. Settings of these pieces are quite commonly met with in the Munster manuscripts of a century or more ago. They are usually associated with the parent tune, the one described as ‘the jig way,’ the other as ‘the piece way.’ Pipers played some long descriptive pieces, the most well known being *Máirseáil Alasdruim* which commemorated the battle fought at Cnoc na nDós in 1647, and *The Battle of Augrim*, commemorating the defeat of the Jacobite forces in 1691. In these pieces, the assembly of the troops and the march into battle, the noise and frenzy of the fight, and the cries of women lamenting over the slain are imitated. In another of these pieces, *Fiach an Mhada Rua* or *The Fox Chase*, the sounds of the hounds, horns, and horses are imitated.<sup>ix</sup>

### Dance Music

The bulk of instrumental Irish music played today is dance music. Most of this music is made up of the three most common dance tune types: *reels*, *double jigs*, and *hornpipes*. Other tune types which may be common, depending on the particular region, are *slip jigs*, *single jigs*, *slides*, and *polkas*, as well as *set dances*, *flings*, *highlands*, *schottisches*, *germans*, *barn dances*, *mazurkas*, *varsoviennes*, *strathspeys*, and *waltzes*. Of course, Irish music is widely played outside of Ireland as well, and local preferences for tune types no doubt vary considerably.

Many of the Irish dance tunes commonly played today originated during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There certainly are many older tunes, but they do not form quite as large a part of the common repertoire as we might imagine.

Dance tunes typically have two sections, or *parts*, of eight measures each, though many tunes have more than two parts. Most players label these parts the “A part,” the “B part,” etc. An older convention is to call the A and B parts the *tune* and the *turn*, respectively. Typically each part is played twice before moving on to the next one, though there are many exceptions to this. Tunes are called *single* when the parts are played only once, i.e. ABAB, etc., as opposed to *double*, i.e. AABBAABB. When tunes are played single it is typically due to the fact that the first four bars of each part are either exactly the same or only minimally different from the second four bars.

Breandán Breathnach’s *Folk Music & Dances of Ireland*<sup>x</sup> includes extensive information on the history of some of these dance tune types, as well as the dances that go with them, and I recommend the book highly. The following information on jigs, reels, hornpipes, and set dances is based largely on information found in this book. For information on the rest of the tune types, I consulted with Caoimhin Mac Aoidh, a fiddler and fiddle teacher from Co. Donegal and the author of the fine book *Between the Jigs and Reels—The Donegal Fiddle Tradition*.<sup>xi</sup>

The *jig*, in its various forms, seems to be the oldest of the current Irish dance tunes. There is limited evidence suggesting that some jigs derive from ancient clan marches and songs, while others may have been adapted from older dance tunes. Many of today’s jigs appear to have been composed by pipers and fiddlers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It is widely agreed that the *reel* developed in Scotland around the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and from there made its way into Ireland. Many older Irish reels are Scottish in origin.