

A Field Guide to Irish Music

Rosanne Santucci

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Ornamentation	5
Guitar Chords	6
Guitar Rhythms	7
Where to Listen.....	8
Online Resources.....	9
Tunes	10

INTRODUCTION

Irish traditional music is part of the genre labelled “Celtic” — the folk music of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Brittany (France), Galicia (Spain) and the eastern provinces of Canada. It is a vibrant, living tradition that is both popular in its own right and influential on rock, punk, and other styles.

Irish traditional music falls into two broad categories: songs and tunes (dance music), the latter of which is the focus of this book. The characteristic sound of an Irish tune comes from a combination of:

- Instruments: fiddle, flute, whistle, uilleann pipes, accordion, concertina, harp, bodhrán (hand drum), guitar, bouzouki
- Rhythms: jigs, reels, etc.; mostly quarter and eighth notes, not very complex
- Melody: fairly simple, often modal, usually not more than 1 1/2 octave span, not many accidentals. Everyone generally plays the tune in unison, except accompanying instruments which play chords (often open chords, with no third so can be major or minor)
- Ornamentation: the “twiddly bits” around the notes

Common dance rhythms

Reels: 4/4, cut time (“in 2”). Usually played straight, with little or no swing in the eighth notes.



Hornpipes: 4/4, slower than a reel and with a swing feel in the eighth notes (DAH-dee-DAH-dee).



Jigs: 6/8, in 2. The beat is typically the same tempo as a reel.



Slip Jigs: A jig with an extra beat in it. 9/8, in 3.



Slides: Faster than a jig, and phrases tend to be longer. 12/8 (in 4).



Polkas: 2/4, in 2. Very fast.



Scales

Tunes typically have one or two sharps in the key signatures, probably due to the limitations of keyless flutes and whistles. Within these key signatures are a host of available major, minor, and modal scales:

One sharp: G major, E minor, A dorian (A minor with an F sharp), D mixolydian (D major with a C natural)

Two sharps: D major, B minor, E dorian, A mixolydian

Fiddlers often play tunes in A major and E major, while accordion/concertina players use lots of C major.

Notes for Classical Players

Coming from a classical background, here are the differences I have found most significant when playing Irish music:

	Classical	Irish
learning music	usually learn by reading music	usually learn by ear
performing music	read music, except when playing solo	always play from memory
sound	smooth, even, “pretty” — lots of time is spent perfecting one’s tone	more aggressive — lots of breath/bow accents, OK to really push it
vibrato	vibrato essential characteristic of sound on most wind/string instruments	little to no vibrato on fiddle; finger vibrato on wind instruments (rapid tapping of finger on open hole without significantly changing pitch of note)
articulation	varies, depending on composer and time period	slur into downbeat; phrases often go across the barline
grace notes	on or before the beat, fast or slow depending on composer and time period	very very quick, and on (or before, but very close to) the beat
rolls	notes within the turn are usually even	certain notes in the roll are so quick, they’re almost imperceptible
other ornaments	trills, mordents	cuts, slides, cranns, trills
improvisation	not unless specified	fine as long as it maintains the basic skeleton of the tune, e.g. eighth-note triplet F-E-D instead of two eighths F-D
tempo	some degree of rubato (push and pull) is expected depending on the composer and time period	rock-steady and driving ahead — keep that flow going!

Ornamentation

Ornamentation in Irish music can be very difficult to learn because it goes by so quickly it's hard to hear (and see) what players are doing. However, it's important to understand how it works. For wind players, a book called *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* by Grey Larsen, available on amazon.com, is a great introduction. In it, he describes in detail the difference between the various ornaments and has lots of exercises for practicing them, plus he includes a CD to demonstrate. He also developed a system of notation for Irish ornamentation which I've found valuable so I'm including some excerpts here.

A Few of Grey Larsen's Ornamentation Symbols

ˊ = cut. A very quick grace note starting from above. Happens almost simultaneously with the written note; sounds more percussive than pitched.

v = strike (also called a tip). Just like the cut, but it starts from below.

∩ = long roll. The length of three eighth notes. Start on the written note and hold it for an eighth; cut and hold for an eighth; strike and hold for an eighth. The effect is three eighth notes, chopped up — NOT five notes! (Fiddle players: you might want to take this advice with a grain of salt. I usually hear more even rolls when played on fiddle.)

⌘ = short roll. The length of two eighth notes. Cut and hold for an eighth; strike and hold for an eighth.

c = crann. The written note, followed by two or three cuts. The “notes” of the cuts need not be fingered as real notes; as long as you lift a finger that produces a pitch higher than the written note, that will suffice.

↗ = slide (upward). A smooth slide achieved by pushing or sliding your finger off a hole or up the fingerboard to the written note from a half- or whole-step below it.

Patsy Geary's



Guitar Chords

Chord	EADGBE Standard Tuning	DADGBE Drop D	DADGAD great for tunes in D or G
D			
D/F#			
G			
A			
A7sus4			
C			
E min7			
A minor			
A min7			
G/B			
C sus2			
D7sus4			
B min7			
F			

Guitar Rhythms

When guitar is used to back Irish music, its function is as much rhythmic as chordal. Particularly in an unamplified session, sometimes all you can hear is the attack of striking the strings, rather than the actual string pitches. Here are a few basic rhythm patterns to get started. D=downstroke, U=upstroke. (Use a pick if you don't want to rip your cuticles off!)

Jigs, slides:

D D U D U D U D D U D



Reels:

D U D U D U D U D U D D U D U D D



Hornpipes, slides:

D D U D D



Polkas:

D U D U



For more guitar-related information

Check out the following for more detail on chords, chord progressions, and rhythms:

Han Speek's Irish Music homepage, with resources for DADGAD guitar and bouzouki:
<http://www.xs4all.nl/~hspeek/>

Michael Eskin's Drop D and DADGAD patterns:
<http://members.cox.net/eskin/>

John Doyle's instructional DVD "Irish Rhythm Guitar: Accompanying Celtic Tunes", available on Amazon.com.

Where to Listen

Recordings

Just a few of my personal favorites here... easily found on iTunes and/or YouTube.

groups: Bothy Band, Lunasa, Solas, Dervish

flute: Matt Molloy, Conal O'Grada, Shannon Heaton

whistle: Mary Bergin, Joanie Madden

fiddle: Kevin Burke, Martin Hayes

guitar/bouzouki: John Doyle, Arty McGlynn, Dennis Cahill, Donal Lunny, Alec Finn

accordion/concertina: Noel Hill, Tony McMahon

uilleann pipes: Paddy Keenan, Liam O'Flynn, Mickey Dunne

singers: Dolores Keane, Seán Keane

Sessions in Boston and Cambridge

Green Briar, 304 Washington St., Brighton (slow session Mon 7-9, uptempo session 9-1): The Green Briar's slow session is a great place for beginners —very welcoming, lots of people.

Other local sessions include:

Tommy Doyle's, 96 Winthrop St. (Harvard Sq.), Cambridge (Mon 7-9, Wed 6-8, Thurs 6:30-9:30)

The Burren, 247 Elm St. (Davis Sq.), Somerville (Sat 10-12:30, Sun 3-6)

The Druid, 1357 Cambridge St. (Inman Sq.), Cambridge (Tue 9, Fri 7)

Brendan Behan, 378 Centre St., Jamaica Plain (Sat 4-7)

Littlest Bar, 102 Broad St., Boston (Sat 6-9)

Session Etiquette

Don't join a group of unfamiliar musicians without asking, or without being invited. If you're new, let the regulars sit up front.

If you don't really know the tune, sit back and listen. If you only know parts of it, play only the parts you know. Otherwise, use the time to absorb the tune and silently finger your instrument.

Try to play in tune and not too loudly.

Generally speaking, only one bodhrán/guitar/bouzouki/whistle at a time.

If you'd like to start a tune, ask the other musicians if they'd like to play it. Otherwise, you might find yourself unexpectedly — and awkwardly — playing solo.

If you've got a set of two or three tunes you'd like to play, practice the transitions so you don't draw a blank!

Online Resources

Tune collections, discussion forums, audio, video

Folk Tune Finder, [Folktunefinder.com](http://folktunefinder.com)

ABC Notation Home Page, www.abcnotation.com *

Concertina.net Tune-O-Tron, <http://www.concertina.net/tunes.html>

The Session, www.thesession.com

Comhaltas, comhaltas.ie

Chiff and Fipple, Chiffandfipple.com

Na Píobairí Uilleann, source.pipers.ie

Online radio stations

Clare FM Trad Archive, www.clare.fm/music/ClareFM%20trad%20archive

LiveIreland Radio, <http://my.liveireland.com/page/radio-1>

Amazing Slow Downer — a must-have piece of software for learning by ear

Amazing Slow Downer, <http://www.ronimusic.com/>

* ABC notation is a text-based music notation system perfectly suited for traditional music. It comes in very handy when you want to write down how a tune goes, but don't have any manuscript paper handy.

Here are the first few bars of George White's Favorite, in staff notation:



And in ABC notation:

Bd | eBB2 eBdB | AGAB GEDE | GB (3BAB GABd | eBdB A2Bd

Tunes

There is no “right” version of a tune; they vary by player and region. Feel free to come up with your own ornamentation, melodic variation, and backing chords.

Jigs

Patsy Geary's	11
Coleman's Cross	11
Mist Covered Mountain	11
The Banks of Lough Gowna	12
Willie Coleman's	12
The Humours of Drinagh	12
The Connaughtman's Rambles	13
The Humours of Ballyloughlin	13
The Humours of Glendart	14
Kesh	14
Behind the Haystack	14
I Buried My Wife And Danced On Top Of Her	15
Banish Misfortune	15
Tatter Jack Walsh	15
Langstrom's Pony	16
Lark in the Morning	16

Hornpipes

Home Ruler	17
Kitty's Wedding	17
Peacock's Feather	18
Chief O'Neill's	18

Polkas

Ballydesmond Polka #1	19
Ballydesmond Polka #2	19
Ballydesmond Polka #3	19
Tom Sullivan's	20
Britches Full of Stitches	20
Little Diamond Polka	20

Waltzes

Si Bheag Si Mhor	21
Tabhair Dom Do Lamh	21

Slip Jigs

An Phis Fhliuch	22
Highway to Kilkenny	22
The Swaggering Jig	23
The Kid On The Mountain	23

Slides

Brosna Slide	24
Jenny Mickey's	24
Merrily Kiss The Quaker	24
O'Keefe's	25
The Cat Rambles To The Child's Saucepan	25
Dingle Regatta	25

Reels

Jenny's Wedding	26
The Virginia Reel	26
The Boys Of Portaferry	26
The Silver Spear	27
Sally Gardens	27
The Limerick Lasses	27
The Maid Behind The Bar	28
The Wise Maid	28
Skylark	28
The Maids Of Mt. Kisco	29
Sligo Maid	29
The Bucks Of Oranmore	30
George White's Favorite	31
Lady Anne Montgomery	31
Maud Millar	31
The Otter's Holt	32
Bird In The Bush	32
Miss Monaghan	32
Easter Sunday	33
The Old Bush	33
Rakish Paddy	33

JICS

Patsy Geary's



Coleman's Cross



Mist Covered Mountain



The Banks Of Lough Gowna



Willie Coleman's



The Humours Of Drinagh



The Connaughtman's Rambles



The Humours Of Ballyloughlin



The Humours Of Glendart



Kesh



Behind The Haystack



I Buried My Wife And Danced On Top Of Her



Banish Misfortune



Tatter Jack Walsh



Langstrom's Pony



Lark In The Morning



hornpipes

Home Ruler



Kitty's Wedding



Peacock's Feather



Chief O'Neill's

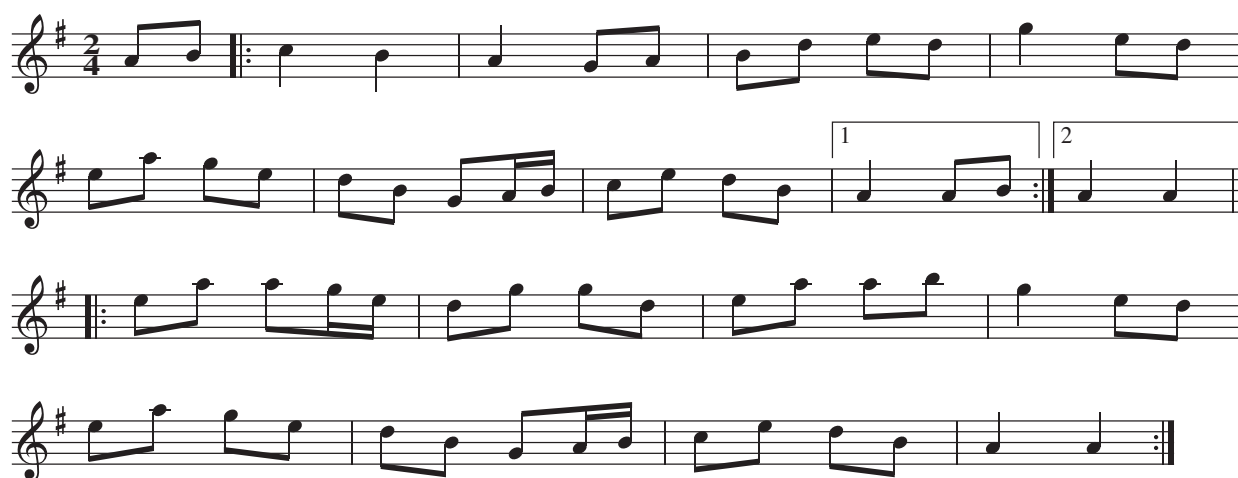


polkas

Ballydesmond Polka #1



Ballydesmond Polka #2



Ballydesmond Polka #3



Tom Sullivan's



Britches Full Of Stitches



Little Diamond Polka



WALTZES

Si Bheag Si Mhor



Tabhair Dom Do Lamh (Give Me Your Hand)



SLIP JIGS

An Phis Fhliuch



Highway To Kilkenny



The Swaggering Jig



The Kid On The Mountain



SLIDES

Brosna Slide



Jenny Mickey's



Merrily Kiss The Quaker



O'Keefe's



The Cat Rambles To The Child's Saucepan



Dingle Regatta



reels

Jenny's Wedding



The Virginia Reel



The Boys Of Portaferry



The Silver Spear



Sally Gardens



The Limerick Lasses



The Maid Behind The Bar



The Wise Maid



Skylark



The Maids Of Mt. Kisco



Sligo Maid



The Bucks Of Oranmore



George White's Favorite



Lady Anne Montgomery



Maud Millar



The Otter's Holt

Musical score for 'The Otter's Holt' in 4/4 time, key of D major. The score consists of six staves. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and a key signature change to D major. It features eighth and sixteenth note patterns with a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure. The second staff continues the melody with similar rhythmic patterns and a triplet. The third staff includes first and second endings, marked with '1' and '2' above the staff. The fourth staff continues the melody. The fifth staff features a triplet of eighth notes. The sixth staff concludes with a triplet of eighth notes and a repeat sign.

The Bird In The Bush

Musical score for 'The Bird In The Bush' in 4/4 time, key of D major. The score consists of four staves. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and a key signature change to D major. It features eighth and sixteenth note patterns. The second staff continues the melody. The third staff includes a repeat sign and a key signature change to D major. The fourth staff concludes the piece with a repeat sign.

Miss Monaghan

Musical score for 'Miss Monaghan' in 4/4 time, key of D major. The score consists of four staves. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and a key signature change to D major. It features eighth and sixteenth note patterns with a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure. The second staff continues the melody with similar rhythmic patterns and a triplet. The third staff includes a repeat sign and a key signature change to D major. The fourth staff concludes the piece with a repeat sign.

Easter Sunday



The Old Bush



Rakish Paddy

