

Despite such opposition the polka became firmly established in Ireland, most particularly in the *sliabh luachra* (“rushy glen”) region of Cork, Kerry and Limerick in the southwest corner of Ireland. Here, polkas, along with slides, greatly outnumber jigs and reels. Among the leading exponents of polkas were **Julia Clifford** and **Denis Murphy**, a brother and sister from county Kerry and more recently the fiddler **Matt Cranitch**. Matt has a band **Sliabh Notes** – a name which makes sense when you discover that *sliabh* is pronounced “sleeve”. Among the best known polkas in Ireland are ‘John Ryan’s Polka’,

‘Denis Murphy’s Polka’, ‘Oh! The Britches full of Stitches’, ‘Peg Ryan’s’, ‘Maggie in the Wood’, ‘Bally Desmond Polka’ and ‘Farewell to Whiskey’.

Polkas today are by no means restricted to Ireland, they remain popular throughout central Europe, where they are the staple fare of the “oom-pah” bands which grace such cultural extravaganzas as the Oktoberfest. Polish, Czech and German emigration to the US in the 19th century has also guaranteed that polkas are ubiquitous wherever lager, an accordion and nostalgia for the old country coincide.

Reels

Reels are the staple diet of Irish traditional sessions the world over, usually outnumbering all other tune types by a large margin. However, it is thought that they are not Irish in origin, but were introduced from Scotland towards the end of the 18th century. The reel is thought to have originally come to Scotland from France as early as the 16th century. A Scottish literary work mentions the ‘Alman Haye’ (Haye D’Almaine) – possibly the first reel danced and played in Britain. Published collections in Ireland before the 18th century have very few reels, whereas from the mid-18th century, reels with an obvious Scottish origin begin to appear in increasing numbers. ‘Bonnie Kate’, for example, is a tune much loved in Ireland particularly from the highly decorated recording by Irish American **Michael Coleman**. It began life as ‘The Bonnie Lass of Fisherrow’, written by Daniel Dow in Scotland and published around 1760. Other “Irish” reels of Scottish origin include ‘Lord Gordon’s Reel’, ‘The Fairy Reel’, ‘Rakish Paddy’, ‘Greig’s Pipes’ and the ‘Flogging Reel’.

Reels are so popular partly because they are fast and exciting to play, full of rhythmic drive but with room for plenty of ornamentation. I’m sure you’ll know what I mean when I quote the great Scottish fiddler **James Scott Skinner** “*The reel should be played crisp and birly like a weel-gaun wheelie.*” In Scotland the reel is a type of dance and a specific dance step (where three people trace a figure-of-eight on the floor).

The typical form of most reels is 32 bars, using an AABB form. There is some confusion as to the time signature. They are often written in 4/4 time, with 8 eighth notes to the bar. However, to the classical player, this implies a pulse of four beats to the bar, with possibly an accent on the first of each pair of eighth notes (see A below). However, the correct feel for a reel only comes when the pulse is on every four eighth notes. Strictly speaking it should be written in 2/2, but by convention 4/4 is used to make reels easier to read and the cut common time symbol is used (see B below).

Fig 1.1 Reel rhythm



Exploring Folk Fiddle

The second version is more accurate. In fact, as we will see in the bowing chapter, the accent can be on either the first or third of each group of four eighth

notes, but there is always a ‘two feel’ rather than a ‘four feel’. Think ‘**Black** and Decker, **Black** and Decker’. Here’s a typical 32-bar Irish reel:

The Sligo Maid

02



Traditional

© 2013 Schott Music Ltd, London

Most reels, when played for dancing were originally only 16 bars in length, the A and B sections played without repeats. This is known as a “single reel”.

Examples of two-part single reels include:

‘The Wind that Shakes the Barley’, the ‘Monaghan Twig’ and ‘Drowsy Maggie’. Here’s ‘The Wind that Shakes the Barley’:

The Wind that Shakes the Barley

03



Traditional

© 2013 Schott Music Ltd, London

3: Ornamentation

So far we've had a good look at the structure and rhythm of different types of tune. You'll have tried playing through them and more than likely been just a little bit disappointed that they didn't sound quite as good as you were hoping. How come? You read the tune, played the notes. How come you sounded nothing like **Kevin Burke** or **Frankie Gavin**?

One of the main reasons is that so far we've put in little ornamentation. Ornaments are tiny phrases, patterns of grace notes, minor embellishments or rhythmic variations which put the shine on traditional music. They add emphasis, emotion and articulation to the music. We've had the basic ingredients but ornamentation provides the seasoning,

flavouring and spice. Being one step removed from the basic tune, they are also an element which is endlessly variable. They are one of the things that differentiates Celtic music from Balkan, Scottish from Irish, Donegal from Clare, Martin Hayes from Paddy Canny. Any single player can have his own unique blend of ornamentation and even then, an individual player can give every performance of every tune a different treatment. This is why ornamentation is so fundamental to traditional music and, since it is rarely written down in tune collections, why it is so difficult to master. In this chapter we will describe some of the basic ornaments of Irish traditional fiddling and show different ways in which they can be applied. We'll also see how ornamentation compares across different folk traditions.

The Roll

The roll is the most characteristic and commonly used ornament in Irish music. If you are from a classical background, you may recognize this as being similar to a turn. It consists of the principal note, the note above, the principal note, the note below and finishes once again with

the principal note. You will sometimes hear the upper note referred to as the 'cut' and the lower as the 'tip'. We use the symbol of an **S** on its side above the principal note, the following bar shows the five notes to be played:

Fig 3.1 Notes of a roll



This however is far from the end of the story. The five notes are not given equal length, the first note is the longest, the last note is the next in terms of

length and the middle three are played much faster. This might be more accurate:

Fig 3.2 Notes of a roll (represented rhythmically)



Exploring Folk Fiddle

Whilst in a slow tune you might deliberately play all five notes so that they can be heard, it is much more common to play the middle notes as physically fast as possible, so that all you hear is a click or a pop. This makes it more of a rhythmic than a melodic ornament.

Fig 3.3 Third finger roll



For a second or third finger roll, the lower note is always a semitone below the principal note,

What we see above is a second finger roll, fingered 23212. The upper and lower notes in this case are the adjacent notes in the major scale. A third finger roll would be like this:

Fig 3.4 Third finger roll (on the A string)



Notice that you use the fourth finger for the upper note. You always slur all the notes together and never cross strings during a roll.

whatever the key. Thus, still in G major, a third-finger roll on the A string would be:

Fig 3.5 First finger roll (fingered two ways)



There are three steps to practicing rolls:

1. Play them slowly, so that you can hear all five notes.
2. Still play the phrase slowly, but play the middle three notes as fast as you can. You don't even have to

press the middle notes down fully, just flick them. Aim to hear the percussive effect, not the notes.

3. Gradually speed up the phrase, all the time maintaining the maximum speed on the middle notes. Here's an exercise that you can use:

Fig 3.6 Roll exercise





You'll notice that this scale doesn't roll on the open strings. Since the standard roll doesn't cross strings, it would be impossible. However, there is a special open string roll, often called a **cran**. This is a good example of an ornament which is clearly borrowed from another instrument, in this case the Uilleann

pipes. The pipes do not have any mechanism to stop the flow of air, so that if the piper wants to differentiate between consecutive notes of the same pitch, he has to play interrupting notes in between them. When transferred to the fiddle, the cran becomes something like this:

Fig 3.7 The cran



Here's a jig we can use to illustrate the use of rolls. It has first, second and third finger rolls.

Kerfunken Jig



Traditional



Jig Bowing

Rhythmically speaking, the jig is probably the simplest type of tune and a good place to start with bowing. Try this tune:

Jig Bowing – Tenpenny Bit



Traditional

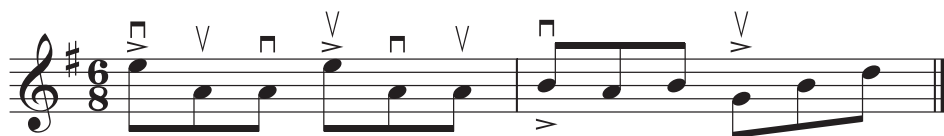


© 2013 Schott Music Ltd, London

With no clues at all, you would probably play six even bows to the bar, each about six inches long. Try it again, but this time add a strong pulse to the first

of each group of three eighth notes. These accented bows can be six inches long, but the others need to be much shorter, an inch or less.

Fig 4.1 Accents and short bows



Immediately the tune has more drive and structure. The speed of travel of the longer bows will be enough to provide the pulse and you can start to think of two bow-strokes to the bar rather than six: **down** (up down), **up** (down up), **down** (up down), **up** (down up). You'll notice that every bar starts with a down-bow and on the few bars where there is

a dotted quarter note (at the end of each 8-bar section) the pattern is still maintained. That being the case, we can easily slur three-note groups together, to provide variety. We can't do that on the first bar, because of the string crossing, but we can on the second and fourth bars.