

THE LEGACY OF IRISH BAGPIPING

The Irish bagpiping tradition has played a seminal role in the development of the playing styles of all other melodic instruments used in traditional Irish music today, especially in the areas of articulation and ornamentation. Being wind instruments, the flute and the tin whistle bear a more direct relationship to the pipes than do the string or free reed instruments. By gaining some knowledge of the nature, history, and evolution of piping in Ireland, you will gain crucial insight into the aesthetics of traditional Irish flute and tin whistle playing.

The modern Irish pipes are referred to as the *uilleann pipes*, the *union pipes*, or simply the *Irish pipes*. *Uilleann*, apparently a form of an old Irish word for “elbow,” makes reference to the right arm’s pumping of a bellows which fills a bag, held under the left arm, which in turn provides a continuous supply of air to the instrument. The melody pipe is called the *chanter*. Three *drone* pipes supply a constant accompaniment by sounding a note that is in unison with the low note of the chanter, usually D, as well as notes one octave and two octaves below this pitch. The *regulators* are specialized, keyed chanters that make possible the occasional additions of one, two, or three harmony notes in addition to the melody and drones. The keys of the regulators are usually played with the heel or wrist of the lower hand.



Figure 1-16. Declan Masterson playing the uilleann pipes at the 1991 Willie Clancy Summer School, Milltown Malbay, Co. Clare. The seated listener is Drew Hillman.

The origin of the name *union pipes* is not known. “Union” may refer to the joining of the regulator pipes to the chanter and drones, or it may be a corruption of *uilleann*.^{xiv}

According to *Na Piobairí Uilleann*, an association of uilleann pipers based in Ireland,

The history of piping in Ireland extends over a span of thirteen centuries. The earliest references are in the ancient law tracts and annals. Some high crosses have carved depictions of early pipes (10th century) and from the 15th century onwards references become more frequent. All of these pipes were mouth-blown instruments.

The distinctively Irish form of bagpipe, the union or uilleann pipes, is believed to have originated about the beginning of the 18th century. . . The present form, with three drones and three regulators, came into being at the beginning of the 19th century.

Piping was at its height in pre-famine Ireland (pre-1847) and was not confined to any social stratum. Social changes in the second half of the 19th century led to the decline in piping and by the beginning of the 20th century the last of the old pipers were mostly destitute, finding refuge in workhouses.^{xv}

THE PASTORAL BAGPIPE

The history of the uilleann pipes is a developing field of study. At the time of this writing, research indicates that the uilleann pipes’ closest ancestor was probably the *pastoral bagpipe*. Brian E. McCandless, in his article *The Pastoral Bagpipe*,^{xvi} writes:

In the early eighteenth century, in Ireland, the British Isles, and the Colonies, there existed a bagpipe that shared characteristics of the modern Irish, or uilleann, bagpipe and of Scottish bellows-blown bagpipes. Very little is known about this bagpipe, its makers, or its players; knowledge of it, and its traditions died out by about 1900. . . Basic questions remain surrounding its invention, use, and nation of origin. A tutor and tunebook first published in London in 1746 by an Irishman, John Geoghegan, for this instrument referred to it as the Pastoral or New Bagpipe. It has been recently suggested that Mr. Geoghegan was the same piper Geoghegan (or Gahagan) known to have performed in Dublin's taverns and theaters at the end of the eighteenth century. Whoever he was, he gave us the earliest documentation about a pipe that was, at the very least, an early form of the uilleann bagpipe.

The pastoral pipes had a chanter much like that of the uilleann pipes, but it had an added footjoint which gave it a range that extended one whole step lower than that of the uilleann pipes. This added footjoint had holes in its sides in addition to the hole at the bottom formed by the end of the bore. Unlike the uilleann piper, the player of the pastoral pipes could not create momentary interruptions of the flow of air through the chanter, because, due to the side holes of the footjoint, there was no way to completely stop air from flowing through the chanter, even when the bottom of the bore was closed on the leg. Thus the melody was a constant, unbroken stream of sound. All articulation, by necessity, was created *solely* by movements of the fingers.



Figure 1-17. A modern set of pastoral pipes by Hugh Robertson. The bellows are from an original set. The pastoral pipes had two drones, one regulator pipe, bellows, and bag. Note especially the chanter, at the top of the photo, with the foot joint extension.



Figure 1-18. Three pipe chanters. From top to bottom: 1. Chanter from a set of pastoral pipes by Robertson with the foot joint detached, 2. Chanter from a set of uilleann pipes in C-sharp by Coyne. 3. Chanter from a set of uilleann pipes in D by Taylor (with foot valve detached).

THE *PÍOB MÓR*

Before such research, it was widely thought that the uilleann pipes had evolved from the *píob mór*, an early Irish form of mouth-blown bagpipe that closely resembled the current Scottish highland pipes. Just how the uilleann pipes had supposedly evolved from the very different *píob mór* was unknown. Discoveries regarding the pastoral pipes have largely supplanted this hypothesis.

The demise of the *píob mór* and the ascendance of the uilleann pipes were however closely related, according to L. E. McCullough:

At some unverifiable point in the late 17th or early 18th century, the mouth-blown bagpipe of Ireland (*píob mór*) began to be supplanted in the country's musical life by a new type of bagpipe operated by a bellows (*píob uilleann*). Some commentators have explained the demise of the *píob mór* as resulting from a Penal Law proscription that classified it as a military instrument of war. The bellows-blown bagpipe, it is said, was quieter and could be played indoors where it would not be heard as easily by hostile authorities. Also, it had to be played sitting down and could not very well be used as a marching instrument. However, the *píob mór* was used at non-military occasions, such as weddings, wakes, dances, and sporting events, and continued to appear sporadically in public performances during the first few decades of the 1700s. Thus its progressive disappearance during the 18th century was more likely due to the fact that a more versatile bagpipe with a Western European tonality and scale system had to be developed to cope with the demands of the newly-emerging idiom of dance music being created and performed by Irish musicians on fiddles and flutes.^{xvii}

The *píob mór*, like the pastoral bagpipe, had no capacity for momentary interruptions of the flow of air. Thus, their melodies were constant, unbroken streams of sound. Any articulations, by necessity, were created *solely* by movements of the fingers.



Figure 1-19. A piper playing the píob mór at the Glens Feis, probably at Ballycastle, Co. Antrim, ca. 1904 – 1906. The costume was designed by F. J. Biggar (died 1927), a member of the Gaelic League, as his interpretation of traditional Irish dress. The kilt may have been saffron colored.

The implications of this can be understood most clearly when imagining the player of such a bagpipe playing two consecutive melody notes of the same pitch. Since the flow of air cannot be interrupted, you can see that the second note can only be produced by *articulating* it with a fingering technique. The varied use of these fingered articulations became an integral and sophisticated element of Irish bagpipe music.

Irish flute and whistle players quite easily and directly adopted the pipers' finger articulations as their own, even though they *do* have the ability to interrupt the flow of air by using their tongue, glottis, and abdominal muscles. These finger articulations go by various names, but are most commonly referred to as *cuts* and *strikes* by players of the flute, whistle, and uilleann pipes. I address cuts and strikes in depth in Chapters 7 and 8.

THE UILLEANN PIPES' ABILITY TO INTERRUPT THE AIR FLOW

The developing uilleann pipes dispensed with the added footjoint of the pastoral pipes, giving its chanter a low note of D. When the player placed the bottom of the chanter on the leg *and* covered all of the finger holes, air could not flow through the chanter and it fell silent. Thus was born the distinctive ability of the uilleann pipes to play separated notes as well as connected notes: *staccato* as well as *legato*. (For definitions of these terms see Chapter 20, pp. 274-275.) This gave the instrument expressive possibilities that many believe made its music the most highly developed form of piping in the world.

AN INHERITED LEGATO AESTHETIC

Still, uilleann piping was deeply affected by the pastoral bagpipe and *piob mór* traditions. It inherited a fundamental and deeply held aesthetic from these ancestral bagpipe traditions, and combined it with its staccato capability to create a new synthesis, one that is also shared by the Irish flute and tin whistle: **The music, in all its variety, springs forth from an underlying foundation of legato playing. The appropriate use of staccato playing exists in relation to that foundation, and takes on its meaning in contrast to it.**

This legato aesthetic is essentially different from that of modern classical music. The classical wind player is taught that all notes are to be tongued unless there is an indication in the notated music, such as a slur, to do otherwise. Most Irish players use tonguing and throating intuitively as an expressive device *against a general backdrop of slurring*. Classically trained musicians who wish to learn to play traditional Irish music must come to understand this critical distinction.

Tonguing in fact is used extensively in both classical and Irish traditions, but in each it is thought of in a completely different way. Much of the tonguing and throating used in Irish flute and tin whistle playing goes unnoticed, because on the whole traditional players use a very connected kind of tonguing and throating that does not take the music away from its fundamentally legato nature.

It seems to me that the traditional Irish musician has much more variety of articulation available to her than does the classical wind player. In classical wind instrument playing, notes are *either* articulated *or* slurred. In Irish traditional music notes can be both articulated *and* slurred, because of its fingered articulations: the cut and the strike. Classical wind players do not have a common practice of fingered articulations.

I explore these subjects in depth in Chapter 20, *Tonguing, Multiple Tonguing, and Throating*.

WHERE DO YOU BREATHE?

The flute and whistle are the only instruments of traditional Irish music that are not suited to non-stop playing. They share a vast repertoire of tunes with the fiddle, pipes, accordion, banjo, concertina, etc., and the tunes have no built-in breathing places. We must create our own by leaving out notes or shortening longer notes. I address this subject in depth in Chapter 21, *Musical Breathing*.

LILT, OR SWING

Irish dance music is rarely if ever played in an absolutely even rhythmic fashion, i.e. with all eighth notes being exactly identical in duration. This is true of many varieties of folk, ethnic, and popular musics. Classical players, who are generally used to playing fairly straight, tend to notice this uneven quality right away. Musicians who are used to playing unevenly sometimes are not aware that they are not playing straight.

This pattern of variance is often referred to as the *lilt* or *swing* (or sometimes *sway*) in a player's style. Each player has her own quality and degree of lilt and it varies with the speed of playing, mood, who she is playing with, whether or not she is playing for dancers, and many other factors.

Classically trained musicians who are new to traditional Irish music often find the lilt of Irish music to be very elusive. Lilt is an aspect of the music that cannot be learned in an analytical, self-conscious fashion. It cannot be written down. It can only be internalized by immersion, by ear, just as an accent in speech is picked up unconsciously. It helps to feel these rhythms in your body, so if you have an opportunity to learn to dance to Irish music it will no doubt be very helpful.

Lilt is an element of musical personality and it naturally differs from player to player. If you do a lot of listening, it will emerge in your playing over time.

Variance of Stress or Weight

Lilt involves not only the variance of duration, but also the variance of the stress or weight that is given to certain notes. The notes that are given more stress and longer duration are the notes that fall on more important subdivisions of the beat. To make this more clear, let's look at reels and jigs.

Reels are usually notated in 2/2 time, with each half-note pulse subdivided into four eighth notes. If you say the word *generator* over and over you will notice that you do not give each syllable absolutely the same weight and duration. There is a lilt inherent in the delivery of the word. The first syllable gets the most weight and duration. The third gets a bit less, but still more than the second and fourth which are roughly equal to each other. This pattern of varying duration and stress could be represented thus: **GEN-er-at-or**, **GEN-er-at-or**, **GEN-er-at-or**, **GEN-er-at-or**. The use of boldface and capitalization indicates added stress and duration. This resembles the lilt of reels.

Jigs are notated in 6/8 time. The measure contains two dotted-quarter-note pulses which are each subdivided into three eighth notes. Now say the word *energy* over and over and notice the lilt inherent in that word: **EN-er-gy**, **EN-er-gy**, **EN-er-gy**, **EN-er-gy**. The first syllable gets the most stress and duration. It borrows some time from the second, which gets the least amount of stress and duration (notice its smaller type size). The third syllable is stronger and longer than the second, getting approximately its normal one-third share of the available time. Musically, it functions as a *pick-up note* that leads you into the next pulse. This scheme resembles the lilt of jigs.

Playing “on the Front of the Beat”

Lilt is heard in the uneven subdivision of the pulse and the variance of stress. It is also heard in another way. If you listen carefully, you will notice that traditional Irish musicians tend to play “on the front of the beat.” That is, they tend to place on-pulse notes a very slight bit early. This lends the music a feeling of “leaning forward,” of forward motion and momentum. Some Irish musicians speak of a feeling of “lift” on the downbeat.

By contrast, blues musicians, to give one example, often do the opposite. They tend to play on the back of the beat, placing on-pulse notes a very slight bit late. This creates a “laid-back” feeling.

Sometimes you may notice that an Irish player who is tapping her foot seems to be playing a little ahead of the beat that her foot is setting. This is probably not evidence of sloppy foot tapping, but instead shows how she is playing on the front of the beat.

In an ensemble setting, different players may not always swing to the same degree and in the same ways. If they are very experienced playing together, they will intuitively find a way to fit their “swings” together to create a group lilt that gives great cohesion and energy to their sound.

“Even” Playing is Rarely Really Even

Throughout this book I notate jigs, reels, and the like in even eighth notes and I often recommend playing the notes in an “even” fashion when you are learning the basic physical motions and coordination of a new technique. In these situations I believe it is best to practice slowly in a truly even rhythm, along with a metronome. Once you are comfortable with a technique, it is fine to use it in accordance with whatever lilt you may normally employ.

The faster an Irish player plays the more even her playing tends to become. If this didn't happen, then fast playing would sound too stilted.

TUNES WITH AN OVERTLY UNEVEN SUBDIVISION OF THE BEAT

Then there are tunes that are played in an overtly uneven fashion, such as hornpipes, mazurkas, schottisches, flings, barn dances, and germans. These tunes are normally played much more unevenly than reels, jigs, etc. There is no consensus on how to notate them. I prefer to notate them with even eighth notes and occasional triplets, a notational style which does not reflect the reality of their sound, but which I believe is the best compromise. I elaborate upon the reasons for this opinion in Chapter 14.

NATURE, AND MUSIC, SEEK A BALANCE

As you begin to pay attention to the lilt of good players, you will notice that it is changeable and flexible. There are some times when a heavier swing is called for and others when a more even delivery is appropriate. Even within a single tune there is such variance. If you adopt a "signature lilt" and adhere to it at all times, your playing will seem rigid and contracted, instead of flexible and expansive. Aim to be supple and let your lilt adjust itself to the nature of the moment. Let the music breathe.

As you can see, lilt is a complex and elusive thing, comprised of many interactive elements. It is not hard to hear it, but it is difficult to describe it in words.

AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF PERSONAL AND REGIONAL STYLES

Lilt is clearly an important element of personal style. It is sometimes an identifiable element of regional styles as well. For example, Galway players, such as Paddy Carty, tend to play more evenly than Sligo players, such as Seamus Tansey. However, such generalizations are of limited use because they tend to break apart as you listen closely to individual players, especially in modern times as the definitions of regional styles are blurring due to decreasing isolation.

ⁱ Mary Larsen, "Martin Hayes, A Lilt All His Own," *Fiddler Magazine*, Spring 1994: p. 9.

ⁱⁱ Robert Jourdain, *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy* (New York: Avon Books, 1997), p. 281–2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willi Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, (1944; 20th printing, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968), p. 640.

^{iv} Willi Apel, p. 452.

^v Breandán Breathnach, *Folk Music & Dances of Ireland*, (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1971), p. 14.

^{vi} John Smith and Joe Wolfe, in the International Congress on Acoustics, Rome, Session 8.09, pp. 14–15, describe cross fingering in this way: "Opening successive tone holes in woodwind instruments shortens the standing wave in the bore. However, the standing wave propagates past the first open hole, so its frequency can be affected by closing other tone holes further downstream. This is called cross fingering, and in some instruments is used to produce the 'sharps and flats' missing from their natural scales." In the case of C-natural, the most commonly used cross-fingering on the flute and tin whistle has T2 and T3 covering their holes and all other holes open.

^{vii} "Half-holing" refers to the practice of only partially covering a tone hole in order to play a pitch that is in between the pitches produced by fully covering the tone hole in question and fully uncovering that tone hole.

^{viii} Willi Apel, p. 756.

^{ix} Breandán Breathnach, p. 35.

^x Breandán Breathnach, *Folk Music & Dances of Ireland*, (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1971).

^{xi} Caoimhin Mac Aoidh, *Between the Jigs and Reels - The Donegal Fiddle Tradition*, (Nure, Ireland: Drumlin Publications, 1994).

^{xii} This is from an interview with Matt Molloy by Sean McCutcheon, a flute player from Montréal, that took place on September 26, 1997. I found it on Brad Hurley's website, "A Guide to the Irish Flute", <<http://www.firescribble.net/flute/molloy.html>>.

^{xiii} L. E. McCullough, *The Complete Tin Whistle Tutor* (New York: Oak Publications, 1976), p. 4.

^{xiv} L. E. McCullough, from his "Historical Notes" in Patrick Sky's *A Manual for the Irish Uilleann Pipes*, (Pittsburgh: Silver Spear Publications, 1980), p. 5.

^{xv} Na Píobairí Uilleann, <<http://www.iol.ie/npuhome.htm>> (5 September, 1998).

^{xvi} Brian E. McCandless, "The Pastoral Bagpipe," *Iris na bPíobairí (The Pipers' Review)* 17 (Spring 1998), 2: p. 19–28.

^{xvii} L. E. McCullough, from his "Historical Notes" in Patrick Sky's *A Manual for the Irish Uilleann Pipes*, (Pittsburgh: Silver Spear Publications, 1980), p. 5.