

# preface

Since the mid 1970s, I have been forming and developing many of the ideas contained in this book. I became an eager student of traditional Irish music in 1973, having been captivated by its profound beauty and energy upon first hearing it as a teenager.

I am an American and did not grow up in an Irish community. But to my good fortune, I have been able to spend a great deal of time with a number of Irish musicians who emigrated to my home region. Three friends in particular had a tremendous impact on my musical world: Michael J. Kennedy (1900–1978), a melodeon player from Flaskagh, near Dunmore in northeast Co. Galway; Tom Byrne (1920–2001), a flute and whistle player from the townland of Carrowmore, parish of Geevagh, Co. Sligo; and Tom McCaffrey (born 1916), a fiddler from near Mohill in Co. Leitrim.



*Michael J. Kennedy with melodeon outside his home in Covington, Kentucky (just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, Ohio), 1975.*



*Tom McCaffrey and Tom Byrne in Cleveland, Ohio, 1975.*

To these three, I feel tremendous gratitude for all the learning that their friendships made possible for me. They taught me many great tunes, and much more about how they played the music and what it meant to them, both in their adopted homeland and in their younger years in Ireland. With open arms, they welcomed me into their homes, their lives, and their families, and offered me their whole-hearted encouragement and approval. They also connected me with musicians back in Ireland, such as Tom Byrne's former neighbor, Josie McDermott.



*Flute player, whistle player, singer, and composer Josie McDermott (1925–1992), playing a reel on the alto saxophone during my visit with him at his home near Ballyfarnan, Co. Roscommon, 1979.*

Tom Byrne gave me my first flute. Years later, I passed it back to his youngest child, in better repair and in a case of my own making. In the same spirit of humility and gratitude, I hope to pass on to you the insight and experience I have gained over more than a quarter century—through playing the flute and tin whistle; through the hospitality and generosity of scores of Irish people; through seeking out, listening to, and learning from the older and younger living players; through visiting Irish communities in Ireland and elsewhere; through research and study of recordings and written materials; through the probing questions of my students. I hope you will use this work in the same spirit, that it will spur you on to continually deepen your knowledge, to look to the older musicians as well as the current state of Irish music, and to pass your own insights on to others.

I am still, and ever, a student of this music. Having grown up outside of the rich culture that gave it birth, I have sometimes felt reluctant to claim the right to produce a work such as this. The sincere and enthusiastic encouragement I have received from Irish musicians whom I hold in the highest regard, as well as the urging of many students and other fellow musicians, gave me the confidence to articulate what I know of this art and to present my ideas on how to better understand and notate the music.

Irish traditional music is a highly sophisticated art form, possessing much greater depth of possibility in personal expression than is generally acknowledged. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines “fine art” as “art produced or intended primarily for beauty rather than utility,” and as “something requiring highly developed techniques and skills.”<sup>i</sup> Central to Irish music are its functions as accompaniment for dance and as a vehicle for social interactions of many kinds. However, this usefulness does not diminish it as a fine art. To fully pursue Irish music is to accept an invitation to a lifelong journey of discovery and personal expression, one that brings you into a joyful community of music makers and dancers and listeners, one that occurs within the context of a rich history and cultural heritage, which has its heart in past and present Ireland and which branches out to the rest of Europe, North America, Australia, and the other lands where Irish people have brought their music.

As time and technology march on, geographical considerations no longer restrict or define the spread of Irish traditional music. There are people all over the globe who hear it and are deeply touched by it. As those who live farther and farther away from Irish communities are moved to learn to play Irish music, it is more important than ever that resources become available that will not only give them good information, but will also steer their inquiry toward a deeper understanding of the cultural cradle of the music and the traditional modes of learning it, where so much of the soul of the music lies. As someone who has come to the music from the “outside,” I feel I am in a particularly good position to point the way for others like myself, few of whom, however, have had my good fortune of learning directly from elders in the tradition.

It is also my hope that musicians who have grown up in the embrace of Irish culture will find useful insight and information in this book. It can be the gift of the immigrant to shed new and different light upon the natives’ treasures. As an immigrant to Irish music, I have learned mostly in the traditional manner of aural immersion, but also in a more analytical fashion, mainly through reading, as a fledgling player, L. E. McCullough’s fine book *The Complete Tin Whistle Tutor*.<sup>ii</sup>

Upon being invited to teach Irish flute and tin whistle for intensive music workshops in America, I began a process of analyzing what I had learned to do. I had to find ways to convey the inner workings of the music to others who had not had my opportunities of traditional learning. The analytical tools that I had gained through academic musical training served me well, and I began developing my understandings and techniques of notating ornamentation quite early on. My intellectual examination of the music has continued for many years, fueled mainly by my teaching, and more recently through the culminating process of writing this book. There are new ideas here, ones that I hope will advance the understanding of traditional Irish music everywhere and motivate newcomers and veterans alike to listen to the music closely and extensively, especially to the playing of the older masters of the art, whether in person or on recordings.

You can learn a great deal by listening deeply to recordings. For many people outside of Ireland, this has been their only contact with masterful players, and, for most of us, it has been our only contact with the great ones who have passed on. In Ireland, too, players learn a great deal this way, and have ever since the early days when American-made 78-rpm recordings of Irish music made their way back to Ireland, as well as circulating throughout Irish communities in the United States. This, too, is learning by ear, by immersion, though the audio-only glimpse of the musical experience is quite limited.

This book is an analytical tool and it is chock full of detail. Irish music is very intricate, and one must pay attention to the details and gain competence with them. But take care not to get lost in them. In order to play the music with understanding and maturity, you must stand back and take in the bigger aspects of the music. While you are working with the nuts and bolts, continue to let the music wash over you and through you.

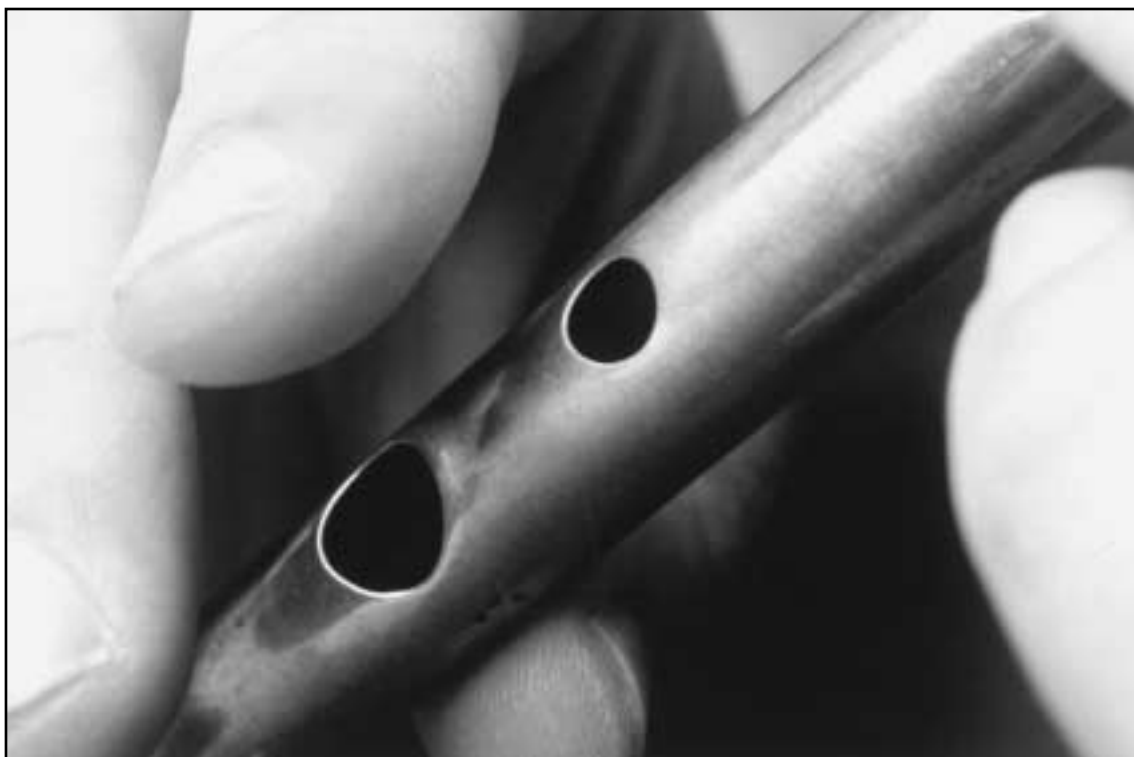
If you have been seized by the beauty and energy of traditional Irish music, I invite you to join those of us who have taken on its learning as a “delightful challenge.” I came across this phrase while reading an interview with famed Irish musician Donal Lunny in *The Irish Times*.<sup>iii</sup>

I thought I had invented the lefthanded guitar! I got the notion of reversing the strings spontaneously and worked away at it. I had to work out my own chords and found this a delightful challenge. I used to have a piece of wood under the desk with the strings and the frets on it and when I should have been listening to the history teacher I was researching chords under the desk!

Don't be daunted by the seeming enormity of the task of learning traditional Irish music, for is not a task but a process, and an ongoing joy. It will bring you into contact with many fine people who share your passions. This may actually be the best part of all.

Take inspiration from young students who cannot be held back from working on what is truly important to them, laboring surreptitiously under their desks to expand the world's artistic delights.

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<sup>i</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

<sup>ii</sup> L. E. McCullough, *The Complete Tin Whistle Tutor* (New York: Oak Publications, 1976).

<sup>iii</sup> John Kelly, “Following His Own Act,” *The Irish Times*, September 5, 1998.