

The simple-system flute in Irish traditional music

By Samuel Colin Hamilton

As one of the foremost forms of European folk music, Irish traditional instrumental music is unusual in that, with a few notable exceptions, the instruments used are borrowed from other European traditions, themselves traditional, popular and classical. Thus apart from the ostensibly native harp, uilleann pipes, and bodhrán, the common instruments heard are the fiddle, the accordion, concertina, tin whistle, simple system flute, and more recently such stringed instruments as the banjo, mandolin, guitar, and bouzouki.

It is the flute and its introduction and subsequent history in Ireland that interests me, both as an instrument maker and music historian, for in many ways it serves as a vehicle for the interpretation of the history of Irish traditional music in a more general way, both in the pre- and post-revival eras.

The reader should be aware of two factors which are of importance in research in this area. Firstly, as in some other areas of Irish social history, inquiries are hampered by the almost total lack of documentary and physical evidence. Secondly, the area where one might otherwise hope to find some relevant information, the participants and musicians themselves, is also badly compromised by commonly-held misconceptions. These can be summed up in the confusion between the traditional and the old which has existed since the late eighteenth century, and which persists today in the views of many traditional musicians with regard to the age of the music itself and its social context.

In some ways both of these factors relate to the role of cultural nationalism in the history of music in Ireland, which, you'll probably be glad to hear, is beyond the scope of this article.

The widely-held, if poorly-articulated, view is that the music which today enjoys an almost global popularity owes its origins to the Gaelic (pre-seventeenth century) past, and that apart from instruments which are obviously modern adoptions, (and even here, opinions differ) the use of the 'classical' instruments such as the uilleann pipes, the fiddle, the flute, the bodhrán, stretches back into the clichéd mists of time.

The name currently used for the Irish bagpipe, the uilleann pipes, serves rather neatly, I think, to illustrate this whole area. The Gaelic word *uilleann*, simply means elbow, and as such is an excellent descriptive name of the bellows blown bagpipes.¹ The fact that a word in Gaelic forms part of the name for this instrument leads many to the conclusion that the instrument is an ancient one, whereas in fact incontrovertible evidence dates it to the end of the eighteenth century, when it was universally known as the union pipes.¹ The term uilleann pipes came into common

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Detail of a painting of about 1842 showing the interior of a shebeen in Listowel, County Kerry. The fluteplayer is playing what is obviously a full-sized flute, and appears to be wearing a military style cap. The other musician is playing the bodhran, the Irish frame drum. This is the first depiction of either instrument in an Irish traditional context.

use only in the second half of the twentieth century, stemming originally, I believe, from the notoriously unreliable *A History of Irish Music* by W.H. Grattan Flood.

In the case of the flute we at least have a starting point, in that the type of instrument we are concerned with, the conical-bore simple-system flute, makes a definitive appearance in continental Europe at the end of the seventeenth century, and so its appearance in Ireland before the beginning of the eighteenth century is unlikely.

It is important at this point to understand something of the social context of traditional music in Ireland in the eighteenth century. The general widespread pattern was one of professional travelling musicians, who were often also dancing masters, or at least associated with them. They moved around within a well defined area, playing almost exclusively for dancers, and always playing solo. Their instruments of choice were the fiddle or uilleann pipes, and very probably these were the only melody instruments in use at the time. No accounts from this period mention the flute, and no pictorial sources show it either. At the same time, we know that the use of the flute among the Anglo-Irish ascendancy was identical to that in similar contexts throughout Europe.

Finally, we know that by the late nineteenth century, the flute was a common instrument in many parts of Ireland. Somehow, in the interim period flutes became available in Ireland to ordinary people, and became a widely used instrument in traditional music.

Two mechanisms for this process have been put forward, but I think it is important to see these against the economic and social context of the time, and to remember that this context changed, at times quite radically.

The first method of introduction proposed is essentially that of the 'hand-me-down'. This postulates that flutes which would have originally been in the hands of comparatively wealthy amateurs, would, when discarded, have found their way into the hands of traditional players, who would not have been able to afford to buy them in the first place. Linked to, but distinct from this, is the possibility that the original owners of these instruments may themselves have played traditional music, perhaps creating a model of musical behaviour for others to copy. There is plenty of evidence from the eighteenth century, in particular with respect to the uilleann pipes, to show that 'the gentry' were in many cases involved in the dance music tradition. Arthur O'Neill, one of the harpers who played at the early Harping revival events in the late eighteenth century, recorded in his journal a musical evening at the home of one Mr. James Irvine, of Streamstown, Co. Roscommon.² He provides a list of musicians present which gives a fascinating glimpse into the musical interaction between the 'Big House' and the people at this period:

Three Misses Irvine at the piano	3
Arthur O'Neill at the harp	1
Gentlemen flutes	6
Gentlemen violoncellos	2
Common pipers	10
Gentlemen fiddlers	20
Gentlemen clarionets	4

This point of view argues for an early date (eighteenth century) for the establishment of the flute as a traditional instrument, but I would suggest that it is dangerous to overemphasise the significance of such events as the Streamstown 'session'.

The second approach proposes that the major source of exposure to the flute as an instrument was via its military use. Ireland, particularly after the Act of Union of 1801, had many garrison towns, and many regiments had fife and drum bands which would have played regularly in public.

In some contexts, including that of the early Orange Order, the Temperance and later Land League bands, the idea was directly copied, and perhaps as a continuation of this, many villages and towns in Ireland boasted a fife band as late as the 1950s.³ There is little or no direct evidence to suggest that the fife was used as a solo instrument in the dance music tradition, but those who would argue that its pitch (nominally B flat) mitigated against this should remember that until ensemble playing began to appear in the early twentieth century, there was no standard or common pitch for Irish traditional dance music.

Later on, traditional musicians acquired flutes from those who had emigrated to America or England. In this case we begin to have some hard evidence in the form of accounts from those involved, and we know that some flute players would actively seek out those going abroad for this purpose. I think it is clear that this implies that the flute had already something of a profile as a traditional instrument in Ireland, as does the idea of flutes being purchased directly by those in Ireland. In this sense it is not so much a means of introducing the flute to Ireland as a source of instruments once the tradition had been established.

There is no consensus, scholarly or otherwise, about their relative significance of these ideas. There is the possibility that some or all of these means of introduction operated together, and no suggestion that they are mutually exclusive.

Let's look at some of the arguments for and against of each, beginning with the origin of the traditional flute as a hand me down from the classical tradition.

In favour of this theory is the well-documented popularity of the flute as an amateur instrument from the mid-eighteenth century almost until the end of the nineteenth. We also know that in Ireland, the type of people who might well have been amateur flute players were in some cases also involved in the dance music tradition, although, it has to be said, they overwhelmingly chose the uilleann pipes as their instrument. Again we know that the flute was being made in Dublin at least from the 1740s onwards, and that in a rare incidence of verbal evidence we know that Francis O'Neill, the famous collector, was taught the flute by a 'gentleman farmer' in West Cork around 1850. Finally, although probably a minor point, several flutes and fifes exist, made by the pipemaker Coyne, (century 1850) although of course we cannot know what music they were intended for at this remove.

There is a strong possibility that some traditional tunes may have been played on the flute by 'gentlemen' performers from the mid-eighteenth century, but this is quite a distinct social context from that of the traditional player playing exclusively for dancers.

On the other side of the argument, we have no documentary or pictorial evidence to support such a scenario. There are no surviving instruments from before 1800 in the hands of traditional players which have a proven provenance from

this period. Although the survival of a few instruments made by pipemakers mentioned above might indicate some traditional interest in the flute, I think it is more likely, given that pipemakers were more than capable of producing top-class flutes, the fact that they made so few is more an indication of the lack of interest in the instrument by traditional players.

Finally, an introduction at this early period, would argue against the peculiarly skewed geographical distribution of traditional flute playing in Ireland, which sees it very strongly centred in the mid-western counties.

Arguing for the use of the flute in the military context as a likely means of introduction is that it would account for the widespread exposure of potential players to the instrument. There were simply many more players of the military fife and flute, and they were to be found in situations where they would have had more access to traditional musicians, who may well have had more opportunities of getting their hands on the instruments. An interesting linguistic point supporting this theory is the widespread use of the term 'fife' to mean the full-sized flute in many parts of rural Ireland.

Running contrary to all of this is the fact that it is the full-sized, concert pitch flute that has always been the instrument of choice of traditional players, and not the fife, even though in the era of solo playing for dance music, one would have imagined that its volume and strength of tone would have made the fife particularly suitable.

Also worthy of note are several continental flute traditions that can be demonstrably traced to military origins, for example the *requinta* of Northern Spain.

In one context, the fife was used to play traditional dance tunes with the accompaniment of what has often been forgotten to be the only truly Irish musical instrument, the lambeeg drum. Its role here has been pushed into the background by the increasing dominance of the drum in the duet, to the extent that the form now almost wholly consists of drumming competitions with no fife involved at all.

The strong association of this activity with the Orange Order, and Loyalist politics in the North of Ireland have very effectively stopped it being understood as in any way associated with Irish traditional music, but Gary Hastings excellent study, *With Fife and Drum*, has established its importance in the Irish tradition in general.

The widespread nature of these 'secondary' fife and drum bands means that a very large group of people became familiar with the fife as an instrument, and had some basic familiarity with its playing technique. The instruments were cheap to acquire, and in many instances, certainly well documented in the North, were made by the very simple expedient of making the bore with an auger, and whittling, rather than turning the outside to shape, and burning the embouchure and finger holes out with a hot iron—technology open to almost anyone.

I believe that in fact neither flutes handed down from the 'big house' nor direct exposure to military bands resulted in the foundation of a flute playing tradition in Ireland. What both did, and I would suggest that the military band had the vastly more important role, was to familiarise Irish society with the flute as an instrument, so that by the time the conical-bore simple-system flute had become obsolete as an orchestral or professional instrument, and thus became much more obtainable to ordinary players, it was an easy and obvious move to make for many who already played fife or other small flute to fill the role of players for traditional

dancing, which was now becoming much more of an amateur affair rather than a professional one as at the end of the previous century.

Thus the flutes which were sent and brought back, firstly from America and then from England, were acquired to satisfy a demand in Ireland from players who had already seen the flute being played in the traditional dance music tradition. We know from the accounts of traditional players that they would on occasion seek out friends or relatives who were going abroad and ask them to try and find a flute to send or bring back home. By the time we have evidence of this happening, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there would have been large numbers of simple-system flutes available for several reasons. The simple-system flute had at this stage been abandoned for art music, certainly by professional players and very largely also by amateurs. Since the late nineteenth century, large numbers of simple-system flutes, mainly made in factories in Saxony, but also in America, became widely available at prices that the working emigrant could afford. These are the flutes known to the traditional player as German flutes, and they provide both the first material evidence (in terms of instruments still in the hands of traditional players), and photographic evidence of the type of flutes used by the traditional player in Ireland.⁴

It seems that the large-holed English flute, now so strongly associated with Irish traditional flute playing, did not arrive on the scene until the focus of Irish emigration changed from the USA to England.

However much evidence we have for this means of providing flutes for traditional players, I think we have to be careful to make a clear distinction between this and the first two proposals which are argued as a possible means of introducing the simple-system flute to Ireland, and I think we must rather see it as evidence of the pre-existence of a demand for flutes which was partly satisfied by this means. In other words, although we cannot be at all sure how the flute was first introduced into the Irish tradition, the fact that emigrants sought them out and sent them home simply means that a flute-playing tradition was already established at that stage.

As with many areas of social history, the actual mechanisms by which traditions develop are obscure or unknown. Individuals can have a massive role, but in a rural society only educated to a basic level, the influence they had can so easily go unrecorded. In the area of traditional fiddle playing, it is well documented how certain influential players were responsible for the foundation of local



John McKenna, one of the most influential of Irish traditional fluteplayers, largely due to the recordings he made in New York in the 1920s. He is shown holding a German-style flute, typical for players of this period.

traditions which lasted for generations, and no doubt the flute tradition benefited from similar developments.

So it seems that the flute tradition in Ireland only crystallises into a recognisable and sustainable form approaching the end of the nineteenth century. Although other instruments were beginning to appear in the hands of traditional musicians around the same time, a much higher status was associated with the older fiddle and pipes. This meant that there is little documentary or iconic evidence relating to the time when the flute, among other instruments, was becoming firmly established in Ireland.

By the 1920s, when the burgeoning ethnic recording industry in America began to give us the first aural evidence of the Irish flute, it appears as an accepted traditional instrument, with many of the recordings becoming flute standards and the players still celebrated today.

Ensemble playing, as distinct from the older solo social contexts, also developed in the early years of the twentieth century. Distinct from the Irish-American bands which essentially did not survive the collapse of the ethnic recording industry at the end of the 1920s, the *céili* band became, from the 1930s to the 1970s, the standard form of ensemble in Ireland. As such it was an important bastion for the flute, since at least one, and sometimes up to three, were found in every band, contributing to their very typical soundscape.

Since the folk revival of the 1960s, the flute has increased yet again in popularity and status within Ireland, and with the great diaspora of Irish traditional music that has occurred since the 1970s, the instrument now widely known as the Irish flute is now played in almost every corner of the world.

Notes

1. In Ireland, the term Irish is universally used to mean the Gaelic language spoken here. But since in this article, Irish is used with other definitions in mind. I have used the more pedantic term, Gaelic, to imply both the language and its culture.
2. In the late eighteenth century several antiquarians tried to engender a revival of the old harping tradition by inviting all known harpers to competitive meetings. These began in Granard in 1781, and culminated in the great and well-documented Belfast meeting in 1792.
3. The Orange Order was founded in 1795. The Temperance movement began in 1838 by Father Matthew as an attempt to curb the use of alcohol, and became very widespread in Ireland and abroad. Seven million people took the pledge under his influence. The Land League was a political movement which agitated for the reform of tenant rights, beginning in 1879.
4. To my knowledge, every single existing photograph showing players from the early years of the twentieth century, shows them with German flutes.

References

- W.H. Grattan Flood. *A History of Irish Music*. Browne & Nolan, Dublin, 1905
- Gary Hastings. *With Fife and Drum: Music, memories, and Customs of an Irish Tradition*. Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 2003.

