



Ceoltóirí na Éireann – Songs of Ireland

Irish Heritage Through Music

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History in Every Note

“The older the fiddle, the sweeter the tune” (old Irish saying).

Behind every polka, every hornpipe, every march, jig or reel, there is a story. Irish traditional music springs from the people and the land, the deep history and the deeper myth of the land in a way that is vibrant and unique. It is a music of place and time, of name and nature. It is a music of humour and of suffering, of faith and fantasy. Airs trace their history back long into the past. Tunes that we may know only as instrumental favourites may well have words and a story that speaks of distant fears and hopes going back generations. Irish traditional music runs deep and is old. Even modern tunes may have a back story whose genesis is buried the distant memory. Irish music is a music that has reached out and informs the traditions of other lands.

We hope you enjoy this glimpse of Irish heritage as recounted through a selection of music played by the Emerald Centre's resident Comhaltas group. There is a glimpse of Irish history in every note.

1.MAGGIE (Polka)



'Maggie,' also known as 'Maggie in the Woods,' is an ever popular two part polka. The tune is very similar to 'The Scartaglen Polka,' though it is unclear which tune came first. The Chieftans, among others, have recorded the tune with lyrics that leave little to the imagination.

'If I had Maggie in the woods,
I'd do her all the good I could,
If I had Maggie in the woods,
I'd keep her there 'till morning.'

BALLYDESMOND (Polka)



'Baile Deasumhan' lies beside the Blackwater River, County Cork in the Province of Munster. The word 'baile' in Irish means town. Until the 1830s the village of 'Ballydesmond' was named 'Tooreenkeogh.' The name was changed to 'King Williamstown' after King William 1V. Some sources suggest the village did not become 'Ballydesmond' until as late as 1951. The name refers to Gerald Fitzgerald the 15th Earl of Desmond who was cornered by the forces of Queen Elizabeth 1 in hills close to the village and killed in November 1583.

2. OFF TO CALIFORNIA (Hornpipe)



Off to California is a hornpipe with a number of alternative titles, such as 'Humours of California,' 'The Fireman's Reel,' and 'The Juggler.' The tune seems to have originated in the 19th century, found popularity in America and has since found its way back to Ireland. If the title does originate in Ireland, then it hints strongly at memories of the great migration to America following the famine in the 1840s. Many refer to the famine as an Gorta Mór (The Great Hunger), a defining moment in Irish history during 1845 – 1952. It is estimated that 1.5 million people died from starvation or disease. A further million emigrated mainly to the UK, the USA or Canada. The famine set in train a narrative that Ireland was a country to leave. The country has never recovered from the famine years. 'Off to California' evokes echoes of the past as it speaks of the emotional complexities associated with emigration. Leaving Ireland, traversing great distances and the hope of a new life abroad all suggest a hero narrative. But for many, the loss of one's home and the more emotionally charged 'homeland' accentuated the vulnerability felt when emigrating to pastures new.

This is a hornpipe with strong links across the Atlantic and shows how intertwined Irish traditional music and the folk music of America have become over the decades since the first wave of migration triggered by the famine era. It is a manifestation of sociocultural identity exemplified through music.

BOYS OF BLUE HILL (Hornpipe)

The deep connection to America returns in 'The Boys of Blue Hill.' This hornpipe seems to have come down from itinerant musician George West in Chicago. However, the origin of the tune is unknown though there are, of course, a number of places known as Blue Hill in Ireland. Some think its origins lie in Scotland. Whatever the root, the tune is once again deeply redolent of place and, with its connection to musicians living in penury. The tune's universality evokes the widespread nature of the Irish diaspora, therefore a unifying melody which unites the Irish over space, place and time.

3. PADDY IN LONDON (Jig)

The roots of Paddy in London are difficult elusive. It can be found in Luke O'Malley's collection of Irish music and has alternative titles. Such as 'Mug of Brown Ale.' What is clear is that it evokes a search for pastures new as many Irish men and women made the English capital their first port of call when leaving Ireland. The importance of the famine years in defining Ireland as a country people elected to leave has been noted earlier. Significantly, the famine era coincided with industrial revolution when additional workers were needed to England's drive as a world class manufacturing base. The second main wave of migration from Ireland occurred after the Second World War, particularly late 1940s and 1950s, when restrictions on immigration from Ireland to England were lifted to allow the flow of cheap labour from Ireland and other countries to England.

KESH (Jig)

This jig was featured on the 'Bothy Bands' eponymous 1975 album and was a standard for a long time before falling into disfavour among session players. The root of the tune is obscure, a fate often befalls well known tunes. The Irish word 'ceis' means long strip of land in a field, often near a river. There is also a village in County Fermanagh called 'Kesh.' Those familiar with the history of Northern Ireland will have heard of 'Long Kesh', the prison in which prisoners associated with the terrorist activities of the Irish Republican Army and other terrorist groups were interned.

4. FATHER KELLY'S (Reel)

This tune is named after Father P J Kelly. It is also known as 'The Rossmore Jetty,' referring to a pier on the River Shannon close to the Fathers home town. Rossmore is a beautiful area and the reels are full of the spirit of the place. The tune is not particularly old, but shows clearly that tunes connected to place do not necessarily have to be merely historic.

MISS Mc CLOUD (Reel)

Much more ancient is 'Miss McClouds reel' which was certainly well known as far back as the late 18th century and may originate considerably earlier. One story of its origin holds that the Miss McCloud of the title refers to one or other of the McCloud of Raasays sisters, sending the tune over the Irish Sea to Edinburgh. However, it also appears in a collection of Irish dance tunes in 1858, clouding its origin somewhat though not taking away from the loveliness of the reel.

5. SEAN SOUTH (March)

Much more up to date is the Sean South march. Sean South was a member of the Pearse column of the IRA and was tragically killed during the attack of Brookeborough barracks in 1957. Played to the older tune of 'Roddy McCorley,' the words popularly linked to the march were written by Seamus O'DuFaigh. Relatively modern and self evidently political, Sean South never-the-less sits within a deeper history of songs to the martyrs of the struggle against occupation that trace their history back many hundreds of years.

FOGGY DEW (March)

In the same vein, Father O'Neill wrote this well known tribute to the men who were killed by the English during the Easter rising in Dublin in 1916. Foggy Dew has become one of the most celebrated marches in Irish traditional music, recognisable even to those not well versed in the music. The lyrics that accompany the march, written by Father O'Neill, are a durable reminder of the sacrifice of those that gave their lives during the rising:

'Right proudly high in Dublin Town,
They flung out the flag of war
Twas better to die 'neath an Irish sky
Than at Suvia or Dud El Bar
And from the plains of Royal Meath
Strong men came hurrying through
While Britannia's huns with their great big guns
Sailed in through the foggy dew

O the night fell black and the rifles' crack
Made "Perfidious Abion reel.
Mid the leaden rail, seven tongues in flame
Did shine o' er the lines of steel;
By each shining blade, a prayer was said
That to Ireland her sons be true
And when morning broke still the war flag shook
Out its fold in the foggy dew.

'Twas England bade our wild geese go
that small nations might be free
But their lonely graves are by Suvia's waves
Or the fringe of the Great North Sea
O had they died by Pearse's side,
Or had fought with Cathal Brugha
Their names we'd keep where the Fenians sleep,
'Neath the shroud of the foggy dew.

But the bravest fell, and the requiem bell
Rang mournfully and clear
For those who died at Eastertide
In the springtime of the year
While the world did gaze, with deep amaze,
Who bore the fight that freedom's light
Might shine through the foggy dew.

Ah, back through the glen I rode again,
And my heart with grief was sore
For I parted then with valiant men
Whom I never shall see more
But to and fro in my dreams I go
And I'd kneel and pray for you
For slavery fled, o' glorious dead,
When you fell in the foggy dew.'

6. HOMES OF DONEGAL (Old Time Waltz)

The air to the waltz that is known as 'The Homes of Donegal' is at least 150 years old, the closest melody probably being 'The Faughan Side.' The lyrics were written by Sean McBride in 1955 and has been made famous by Paul Brady. Sean McBride was a school teacher in Donegal and the ballad he made out of this beautiful waltz time tune are evocative of County Donegal thus very much in the tradition of tunes that focus on place.

GALWAY SHAWL (Old Time Waltz)

The origin of 'The Galway shawl' has been lost to history. Though the lyric accompanying the air is clearly a later addition with its reference to 'The Foggy Dew.' It was first collected by Sam Henry in 1936 and has since been recorded by the Dubliners among many others. Essentially a tale of courtship and lost love, the tune conforms to a traditional framework of loss and longing that is one of the roots of the tradition.

7. AR EIREANN NI NEOSFAIN CE HI (Slow Air)

This beautiful tune is attributed to John Barry Oge from County Kerry and was probably originally written in Gaelic before being translated into English. The Wolftones recorded the tune and its sentiments and sense of longing speak for themselves.

Last eve as I wandered quiet, near
To the borders' of my little farm
A beautiful maiden appeared
Whose lovely-ness caused my hearts' harm
By her darling and love smitten sour
And the words from her sweet lips that came
To meet her I raced the field o're
But for Ireland I'd not tell her name

If this beauty but my words would heed
The words that I speak would be true
I'd help her in every need,
And indeed all her work I would do,
To win fond kiss from my love,
I'd read her romances of fame
Her champion daily would prove,
But for Ireland I'd not tell her name

There's a beautiful stately young maid
At the nearing of my little farm
She's welcoming kind unafraid
Her smile is both childlike and warm
Her gold hair in masses that grows
Like amber and sheen is that same
And the bloom in her cheeks like the rose
But for Ireland, I'd not tell her name.

COME BY THE HILLS BUACHAILL ON EIRE

There are several differing lyric settings for the traditional air 'Buchal ab Eire.' One such setting by Scottish Television producer Gordon Smith deftly captures the sense of mysticism and freedom that permeate such melodies. 'Come by the Hills' is full of longing for the land and for the wild places.

8. DINGLE REGATTA

Also known as 'Slattery's Grove,' or 'Tom Billy's favourite,' 'Dingle Regatta' has been recorded often on such albums as 'Fertile Rock' by Chris Droney. It has also featured in a production of 'The playboy of the Western World.' However, perhaps the best remembered version is by 'The Chieftans.' Although the historical root of the tune is obscure, it is a firm session favourite.

O KEEF'S SLIDE

Padraig O'Keefe (1887-1963) has many slides attributed to him, though it is not thought that he actually composed this particular tune. O'Keefe, who had at one time been a school teacher, became a truly influential fiddle player over the course of a forty year career. There is now a traditional music festival held annually in Castleisland in Kerry that bears his name.

9. SPANCILL HILL

The original name of Spancill Hill in County Clare was Cnoc Fhuan Choille (Cold wood hill) which was misinterpreted as Cnoc Urchail (Spancill Hill) The beautiful area around the village is home to Irelands oldest horse fair. The lyrics to this tune were written by Michael Considine and continues the great tradition of the migrant song, in this case immigration to the east coast of America and onward to California. Considine, who was born around 1850, himself emigrated to America and wrote the poem as he lay dying in memory of the lost love he left behind in Ireland.

BOOLAVOGUE

Boolavogue celebrates the 1798 rising and particularly the campaign of Father John Murphy in Wexford. The tune was actually written in 1898, the centenary of the rising, by Patrick McCall. Father John Murphy's campaign against the Camolin cavalry and later against the British at Oulart hill and at Enniscorthy, was successful until the battle of Vinegar hill where, defeated, the leaders of the campaign, including Father Murphy, were executed. 'Boolavogue' has gone on to become, practically, an anthem for the County of Wexford and a landmark in the struggle for independence. The original title of the tune was, 'Fr Murphy of the County of Wexford,' only much later did it become accepted as simply, 'Boolavogue.'

10. THE STACK OF BARELY

A very widely known hornpipe, added to 309 tune books, 'The stack of Barley' is also known as 'An Staicin Eorna,' or 'The devil in the garden,' among many others. It has often been recorded alongside 'Bantry Bay.' Planxty also played this tune and it has appeared on numerous recordings. Little is known about its origin, though it seems to have an aged root and is steeped in the country and the harvest.

SOME SAY THE DEVIL IS DEAD

'Some Say the Devil Is Dead,' seems to have first come to light in Scotland, appearing in David Herds (1732-1810) collection of tunes from 1776 and published as 'David Herds manuscripts,' by Hans Hecht, though whether the tune had previously travelled across the Irish sea and become incorporated in Scottish folk traditions is unknown. The tune has been recorded by 'The Wolfstones,' 'The Killkennys' and 'Pint of Stout.' The accompanying lyric which contains the lines, 'Some say the devil is dead and is buried in Killarney, more say he rose again and joined the British army,' hints at an origin in conflict with the British, possibly back as far as the early 18th century.

11. SALMON TAILS-POLKAS

'Salmon Tails' is also possibly Scottish in origin. Also known as 'Salmon tails in the water,' or 'The banks of Inverness.' There is a suggestion that it is closely related to 'The siege of Ennis.' The tune is well known in tune books, having appeared in 163 in total. There is a conflicting suggestion that 'Salmon tails,' might even hail from Northumbria. It is reputed to have been composed by one James Allan at the beginning of the 18th century. James Allan seems to have ended his days being arrested for sheep stealing and was either hanged or died in prison in Durham.

THE RATTLIN' BOG

'The Rattlin' Bog' is a fascinating tune with a deep history. The accompanying lyrics resemble a memory exercise, such as 'The twelve days of Christmas,' possibly for children. The tune is definitely of Irish origin, although there is a Welsh tune, 'The tree on the hill,' to which it is similar in many aspects. 'Rattlin' here, of course means splendid. In some versions of the song the tempo increases as the lyrics describe the tree in all its aspects.

Comhaltas: Helping to Unite Discourses of Past and Present

The Comhaltas musicians at the Emerald Centre play tunes that span the nation and the history of Ireland. These are melodies that many will know within folk memory even if they are not familiar with the tradition. As migration from Ireland has occurred so the music has travelled too and so the tradition becomes enhanced and changes with time. Though the origins of many tunes are obscure, what binds them all together is a deeper Celtic history. There are songs in the Comhaltas collection that appear to come from Scotland or even further south. But the root of the melody can only come from Ireland. Pervading many of the tunes is a yearning for a landscape that may have disappeared or been appropriated. There is also a memory of struggle that impinges upon even the gentlest of air.

Irish traditional music has a distinct voice that foregrounds important events which shape Irish consciousness. In this way, the music of Ireland serves to unite individual and collective memories. The net result is a vibrant and engaging medium through which past and present discourses pertaining to Irish heritage may be explored by all.

Go raibh míle maith agat, Comhaltas. Thank you very much, Comhaltas.

