

The Fiddle in Irish Traditional Music:

Notes for SCT Students at Mulroy Bay Music School Milford County Donegal. Published 2019

The Fiddle

The Fiddle was already well established in Ireland by the late 17th century. The standard violin as we know it today is said to have been introduced to Ireland by Ulster Scots planters.

As the Harp declined the fiddle became more popular. It was cheap and fairly easy to play and was widely used by the ordinary people of rural Ireland. Through the 18th 19th and early 20th centuries the fiddle has been used for dances, weddings, fairs and funerals. Fiddle teachers travelled from place to place bringing entertainment and passing on the skill of fiddle playing to the next generation.

Regional Fiddle Styles often developed from the playing style of talented musicians who left their mark on their communities, their style of playing and repertoire absorbed and continued by the generation that followed. *However over the past century due to audio recordings, mobility of people and changes in musical tastes many local styles have disappeared.*

The Early 20th Century

The fiddle was still the most popular instrument and keeper of the tradition. The Irish concert flute was popular especially in Leitrim, Sligo and Clare. The concertina was popular particularly in Co. Clare. Melodeons and Accordions were widely used and the banjo was growing in popularity. Set dancing was popular throughout the country especially in rural areas. Dance houses were commonplace and dances were also organised at crossroads during the summer. Sunday afternoon dancing, patterns, music at weddings and funerals were also commonplace much to the disapproval of the church in Ireland. Ceili dancing was actively promoted by Conradh Na Gaelige. The Kilfenora Ceili Band was formed in 1910 and is still in existence today

Gramophone Recordings and Irish Music

Irish music was thriving amongst the Irish immigrants to New York, Boston and other large cities in America. Audio Recording Technology and radio broadcasting was on the rise.

One of the first Irish fiddlers playing Irish music to be recorded was the New York based Michael Coleman. He was born Killavil, Co. Sligo in 1891 and was one of our most influential fiddle players of the 20th century. He was a gifted musician in the South Sligo fiddle style. His music was full of ornamentation and variations and seemed spontaneous and varied as the tune was repeated. The recorded tunes were fast and lively and with piano accompaniment. This new slick arrangement sounded very attractive and a departure from the familiar solo performances of a single tune played at a slower pace and repeated several times to display variations. These recordings along with later 1920's recordings of fellow Sligo fiddlers James Morrison and Paddy Kiloran popularised the Sligo fiddle style throughout the country.

As access to audio recordings and radio broadcasting grew local *regional styles became diluted* in favour of what was considered the more attractive sound of studio produced music.

Traditional music continued to gain popularity supported by radio broadcasts and gramophone records.

Characteristics of a Fiddle Style

A combination of bowing technique with the use of ornamentation, cuts, double cuts, long and short rolls, triplets, double stopping, on and off beat emphasis, speed and subtle melodic variation.

Distinct Regional Styles

Clare Style:

- The rhythm is pronounced with a mixture of single bowing and slurring. Slower tempo than Sligo/Donegal giving a relaxed feel to the tunes. East Clare repertoire contains many tunes in lower keys (C and F) and in minor keys (Dm and Gm).

Sligo Style:

- The rhythm is not as pronounced as the Clare style, more slurring in the bowing technique and more ornamentation. Sometimes described as “bouncy” and “Full of Lift”.

Donegal Style:

- Very even rhythm due to lots of single bow strokes.
- Tone tends to be louder and even.
- Use of droning by holding down a string when playing the melody.
- Playing in low octave in group playing.

Also the Donegal repertoire included Mazurkas, Marches, Slip Jigs, Barndances and Highlands to suit the local popular dances.

Some Keepers of the Regional Styles

Sligo Style:

In the Past: Paddy Killoran (Died 1965), Lad O’Beirne (Died 1980) Andy Mc Gann (New York died 2004) Fred Finn (Died 1986)

Present Day: Oisín Mac Diarmada, Declan Folan and Philip Duffy.

Clare Style:

In the Past: John Kelly (Died 1989), Junior Crehan, PJ Hayes and Paddy Canny (Died 2008).

Present Day: Martin Hayes, Tony Linnane and Caoimhín O’Rahallagh.

Donegal Style:

Southwest and Northwest

In the Past: John Doherty from Ardara (Died 1980), Con Cassidy from Teelin (Died 1984), James Byrne from Glencolmcille (Died 2004), Francie Mooney Gaoth Dobhar (Died 2006) and Vincent Campbell from Glenties (Died 2018)

Present Day:

Mairead Mooney, Tara Conaghan, Ciaran O'Maoinigh, Aidan O'Donnell, and Martin Mc Ginley.

East and Inishowen:

In the Past: Tommy Peoples from St. Johnston (Died 2018) and member of the famous Bothy Band. Seamus Grant from Clonmany (Died 2005)

Present Day:

Dinny Mc Laughlin Buncrana, Seamus Gibson and Roisin Mc Grory.

To Do

- **Explore the Donegal style further.**
- **Listen to John Doherty playing the reel “The Black Mare of Fanad” available on Youtube.**
- **Look at website *donegalfiddle.ie* and check out the Lessons Section and tutors.**
- **Explore Sligo Fiddle Style discussions on Youtube**
- **Listen to Paddy Canny play the reel Sean sa Cheo on Youtube.**
- **Listen to East Clare fiddler Martin Hayes .**