

Group Playing and the Practice of Irish Traditional Music

SCT Notes for students at Mulroy Bay Music 2019

The Practice of Traditional Irish Music

- Traditional music consists of a single melody line without accompaniment.
- The playing and singing is primarily a **solo art form** that allows the musician freedom of interpretation.
- The melody is decorated by the musician through subtle ornamentation of the notes and rhythmic variation. This is done at will by the musician and each journey through the melody is different.
- The art is in allowing the expressive nature of the music to affect the performer and listener in a positive way rather than to focus on the ability of the performer to deliver a prescribed melody.

Audio Recordings of Irish Traditional Music

In the 1920's the first audio recordings for the mass market were made in New York. The first traditional Fiddle Player was Michael Coleman from Gurteen Co. Sligo. Michael Coleman was a wonderful player but in these recordings did not play a single tune repeated to display his abilities but played two tunes connected and also used piano backing. This approach was new and attractive for listeners and before long most musicians were playing several tunes connected and group playing was becoming popular.

Group Playing – Ceili Bands.

- Ceili Bands started in the early 20th century to cater for the growing demand of ceili dances and the establishment of Dance Halls throughout the country.
- Early Ceili bands such as the Kilfonora and Ballinakill Ceili Bands comprised of melody instruments such as fiddles and flutes and accordion.
- Several tunes connected were played in unison by the musicians to coincide with the length of the dance. As only a constant rhythm was required, ornamentation and variation was lost in the overall sound..
- As demand increased more Ceili Bands were formed and copied the Jazz Bands of the day by adding non traditional instruments such as piano, drums, bass, banjo and sometimes saxophone.
- This new formation abandoned the traditional approach to the music but despite this Ceili Bands are still very popular and admired for their musical ability and speed.

Group Playing – Sean O’Riada

Sean O’Riada was a composer and arranger of Irish Traditional Music and was very influential in the revival of traditional music during the 1960's.

He was the founder member of the music group **Ceoltoiri Chulann**. The instrument line-up consisted of traditional melody instruments, fiddle, pipes, whistle, accordion and bodhran. Sean O’Riada played harpsichord, an instrument he considered to be close to the traditional wire strung harp.

His idea was to create a compromise between the solo tradition and that of group playing thus allowing ornamentation and variation to flourish.

Instead of all members playing the tunes together he would take a single tune or combine a group of tunes and first time around the group would play the basic melody. Then the various instruments would take part of the melody as a solo performance thus demonstrating the ornamentation and variation proper to the instrument and returning to group playing during and at the end of the performance. The group also included traditional singer Sean O’Shea.

Sean O’Riada also arranged music for orchestras, composed music for films and stage shows as well as music for the Catholic Mass in Irish.

The Chieftains

The Chieftains were formed in 1963 by uilleann piper Paddy Moloney and whistle player Sean Potts. fiddle player, Martin Fay and Peadar Mercier on bodhran. They were later joined by Derek Bell on harp and Sean Keane on fiddle. They specialised in instrumental music slow airs, clan marches and dance music. The pieces were arranged in much the same way as Ceoltoiri Chulann arrangements. During more than 50 years on the road they have performed all over the world and have collaborated with traditional musicians in China non traditional musicians such as the Rolling Stones and Van Morrison.

The Bothy Band

The Bothy Band was formed in 1975 by bouzouki player Donal Lunny. Paddy Keenan played uilleann pipes, Kevin Burke played fiddle along with Tríona Ní Dhomhnaill, harpsichord and singer and Micheal O’ Domhnaill singer and guitar. They published several albums and were highly influential and popular in the commercial world of Irish music.

Altan

Altan was formed by fiddle player and singer, Mairead Ní Mhaonaigh from Gweedore and her late husband, flute player Frankie Kennedy from Belfast. Other members of the group were Paul O’Shaughnessy on fiddle and Daithi Sproule on guitar. They were later joined by Dermot Byrne button accordion player. Altan performed Donegal style music and songs and enjoyed huge commercial success worldwide.

CCE Grupai Cheoil

Grupai Cheoil competitions comprise of up to 20 musicians performing for 8 minutes. Unlike a Ceili Band where all musicians are playing a group of similar tunes in unison the Group can vary the music throughout the performance. Any combination of tunes are put together and during the performance are played on a solo instrument or a combination of multiple instruments playing simultaneously. The use of non traditional accompaniment also occurs.

An Example:

- Start the performance with all playing in unison for part of a Dance Tune or March followed by solo instruments or duets etc. And finishing with all playing together.

- Follow the dance tune with a tune of different Time Signature: Example: A Double Jig in 6/8 directly into a Slow Air in 4/4 played by a soloist and then going directly into a Slip Jig in 9/8 time and so on.
- Sometimes the connection between tunes will be direct and sometimes by means of a Chord Sequence played on guitar, piano etc. (non traditional instruments) or Bodhran Solo etc.
- The overall goal is to entertain the audience with a variety of Traditional of Dance Tunes, Airs and Songs in a way that displays musical ability and examples of the traditional variation possible on particular instruments.

Things to Do:

- Listen to recordings of the **Ballinakill Ceili Band** on Youtube and ITMA site. Notice only traditional instruments, Fiddles and Flutes and no accompaniment or percussion.
- Listen to **Gallowglass Ceili Band** on Youtube and notice the use of non traditional instruments.
- Listen to **Ceoltori Chulann and Sean O’Riada** on Youtube (Markus Tullberg upload). On this recording they play “The Big Reel Of Caligahoun”. Notice how they start together and then each instrument does a solo and returning then to group playing.
- Listen to the **Chieftains** play “Morning Dew” on Youtube. Note the arrangement throughout. The use of Bodhran and Bones. Two whistles playing in harmony. Different instruments taking over and the use of counter melody.
- Listen on Youtube to the **Chieftains** playing “O’Carolan – Medley”. Note the changing instruments and how they handle changes in Time Signatures throughout the performance.
- Listen to the **Bothy Band, Altan and De Dannan**
- Listen on Youtube to **Solas** “Coconut Dog and Morning Dew”. Notice how the music depends very much on the use of non traditional methods for effect.

Simple Arrangements on Two Instruments

- Listen to Youtube Video of **Derek Hickey** (accordion) playing O’Mahoney’s hornpipe. “Box and Bodhran”. Notice how you can hear the variations and ornamentation.
 - Listen to Youtube Video of **Jackie Daly** (accordion) and **Alec Finn** on bouzouki playing the O’Carolan tune **Mr O’Connor**. Notice how the bouzouki complements the the playing rather than interfering with it.
 - Also, Youtube Video of **Martin Hayes and Denis Cahill** fiddle and guitar.
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