

Caoimhín Mac Aoidh on Regional Irish Fiddle Styles

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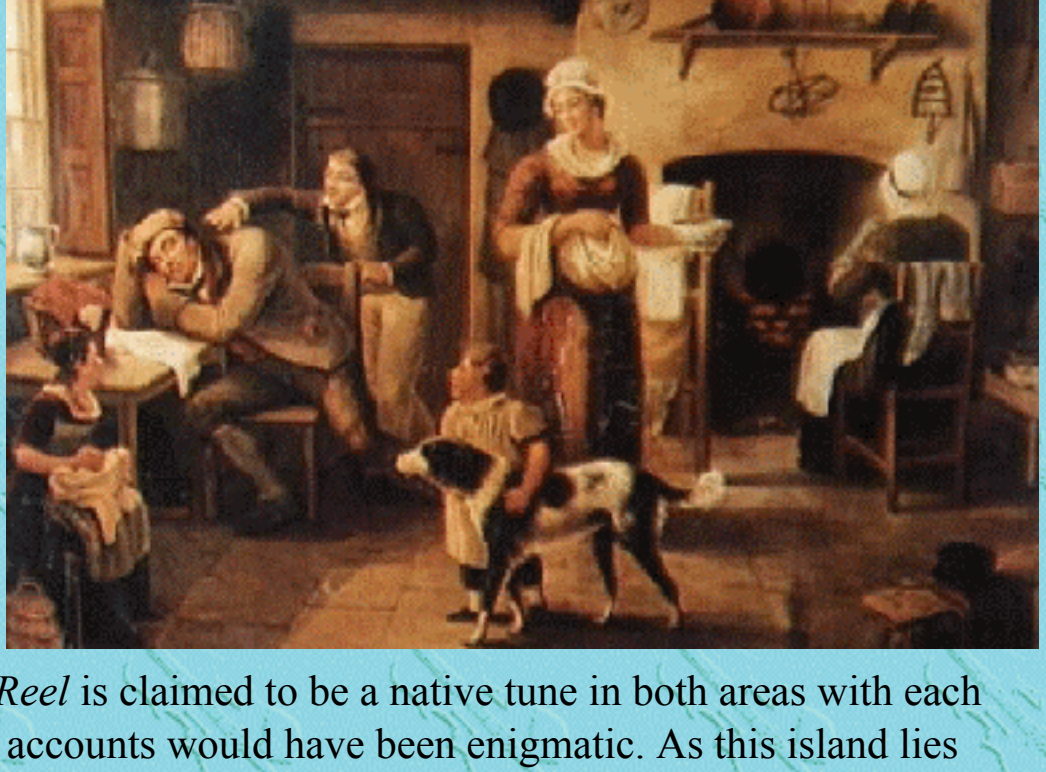
Part 1

Approximately 90 years ago the Irish language was spoken without break along the entire southern western and northern coastline and as far inland as County Roscommon (*Irish Language Survey of 1891*). At this time the Irish of these areas, dialectically speaking, gradually flowed into one another, thus making distinct dialects along a continuous transverse section almost undetectable.

A language can be simply defined as a highly organised series of sounds and it is important to note that music, and in this case traditional Irish dance music, also fits well with this definition.

I feel that both language and music are reflective of their practitioners or creators. Northerners to me generally are straightforward people in their humour and speech. Their music is usually straightforward as well; their song, ornamentally, is also. The Ulster dialect of Irish is often referred to as bland or flat. The music of the more southern counties, as regards their sound, and Irish dialects are significantly lighter in nature. A link between the music and the language is herein implied.

I would like to speculate that prior to the drop-off in the acceptance and playing of traditional music as well as the speaking of the Irish language, dance music, like the language, existed in a continuous gradual blending of styles between areas. These gradations, however, most likely suffered some breaks in the face of insurmountable natural barriers such as the River Shannon and various mountain ranges which limited communication between regions. Postdating the decline in both the acceptance of both traditional dance music and Irish, it was exactly these barriers which helped to maintain the now remote, isolated pockets which held on to their traditions. By the turn of the century the blending of musical styles was defunct, with distinct styles, like Irish dialects, being recognisable only within isolated areas.



To support this idea, one can easily see the River Shannon acting as a natural barrier between County Clare, a musical province where the reel is a heavily emphasised rhythm, and Counties Kerry and Limerick, where a generation ago slides and polkas predominated. (The author acknowledges the presence of turf boats which, at the time in question did somewhat link these areas. It is significant to point out that *The Foxhunter's Reel* is claimed to be a native tune in both areas with each side claiming transportation to the other district to turf boats). Scattery Island, by all local accounts would have been enigmatic. As this island lies comfortably tucked in a harbour by the mouth of Poulmasherry Bay near Kiltrush, it would be thought that the music of the island would be more representative of the Clare area, yet highly credible sources without exception maintain that the music of this island was more like that appreciated on the southern bank of the Shannon. These informants also tell me, however, that the islanders, although forced by geographical division to call themselves Claremen, preferred to consider themselves as separate "islanders". Another excellent example of geographic barriers separating musical and linguistic provinces are the Bluestack and Sperrin Mountains of Counties Donegal and west Derry which isolate the latter from the flat basalt plain of east County Derry and County Antrim. The mountains of Connemara act similarly separating Connemara from the east County Galway plain.

Rapid mass transportation for the general population in Ireland has become a reality within approximately the last fifteen years. Essentially, what this means, in terms of traditional music, is that prior to the arrival of the motorcar, buses, etc. the country population (musicians included) were restricted to small localised areas. The boundaries of most of these areas were commonly dictated by natural geographic barriers such as rivers, mountains, watersheds, etc. This exposed the musicians within them to a local sphere of influence, thus promoting the continuance of local styles, as outside influences such as travelling musicians still remained minimal. (Some such as Johnny Doran, in recent years however, had a dynamic effect on the local style within certain areas).

As regards the mass media and recordings, I feel it can be truthfully stated that it will be these which deal the killer blow to localised fiddle styles. At present anyone can readily obtain a recording of nearly any type of fiddle style, thus I feel eventually contributing to the rise of homogenous fiddle styles based on heterogenous influences. The late Patrick Kelly of Cree, Co. Clare best summed up the evil side of recordings when he stated that "the worst thing that ever happened to the West Clare style of fiddling was the appearance of Micheal Coleman's records". I needn't go further to illustrate the gargantuan impact which the recordings of the late Sligo fiddle master had on the entire musical population.

I posted part 1 of the promised article on regional styles. In relation to this, I wish to point out that it was written back in the late 1970s and published in the early 1980s (I suspect about 1980), based on a reference to Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh as having been already married. At that time it was the only article published which directly addressed regional styles. Few if any, other than Philippe's, have been published, indicating the dearth of investigative initiatives directed at one of the most interesting and important subjects in the music.

I should point out also that while I still stand over the article, my views have changed a wee bit. I would also write it today with a more tempered view such as substituting a different word for "evil" as appearing in part one. Again, this is an indicator of where things stood then in the 1970s, where the "national" style was booming and there was a virtual intolerance of anything local.

Part 2

The words "fiddle style" are ones which have been seriously, and unfortunately, ambiguously thrown about, especially in light of recent academic studies into the subject. If one were to search for references to any kind of attempt at defining or delineating the boundaries of different and varying styles one would be confronted by a marked paucity of ideas and descriptive work. Those which do exist are more often than not contradictory. The bulk of the latter type writing are confined to a few broad references in books whose main aim is to deal with a much wider subject, as well as the all too often uninformed jottings accompanying recordings. Stylistic descriptions most probably have been best described to date in Breandan Breathnach's fine work *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland*.



If one were to comb literary and oral sources for a definition of the characteristics of an Ulster fiddle style, I think it would be found that opinions seem to vary from: music created by long single strokes of the bow, to music created by short single strokes of the bow. The contradiction in these two opinions is obvious, yet there is an agreement that an Ulster style demands a staccato type of bowing.

If one were to research written and oral sources for a definition of a Clare style of fiddling, a type of example might be: music created with the use of long, fluid strokes of the bow with several notes per bow.

To compare players from parts of Ulster and Clare some problems in the definitions recorded become apparent. This difficulty being that the players from these regions whose styles we have attempted to define do not fit into the pigeon holes created by them. For example, a player such as Vincey McLaughlin from Ballymaquigan, County Derry, a typical Bannside fiddler would certainly bow in the manner as set out defining the Clare style, yet his music *sounds* (N.B. the most important aspect of the music) very much like a typical mid-Ulster player. On the other hand, take the likes of Paddy Killhoury of Doolin, Co. Clare. His bowing would be more than comfortably fit within the standard staccato definition of the Ulster style, yet again, his music *sounds* typically Clare in the end.

Other attempts at defining fiddle styles have been based on the type of ornamentation employed with the major embellishments being rolls and triplets. It is commonly agreed that in Ulster fiddling style triplets are abundant and rolls are virtually non-existent, whilst in Clare triplets are used only when needed and very "broad" or "open" rolls are commonly employed. If one were to listen to the music of such Ulster players as the late Neillie Boyle of Donegal or for that matter, any of the Bannside fiddlers, they do in fact employ rolls and sometimes quite profusely. Again, this is in direct conflict with the classic definition for this type style. Indeed, it is a terrible pity that attempts at defining fiddle styles, especially in the case of Ulster styles, that the characteristics have been largely based on the playing of one individual (for further comment, see Breandan Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland*).

It should be clear now that attempts to define styles either on the basis of bowing or the employment of ornamentation have largely led to erroneous and misleading results. I feel that if styles, or "systems" as they are referred to in east Ulster, were referred to by the *sound* or *feeling* the player produces, there would be a much closer correspondence between such "definitions" of style and the actual music as well as taking into account variance due to the individual's style within the local style. After all, it is very possible that two players can be very similar in their bowing, yet sound completely different! Conversely two players can produce very similar sounds, moods, feelings, etc. in their music while using radically different bowing styles.

To re-evaluate in depth the styles of bowing which have been recorded as well as those which are still extent would be a herculean task and is unfortunately both beyond the scope of this article and the musical capabilities of its author. Below however, I note some observations on some styles I have encountered. These observations are based on the stylistic framework that I have proposed above with the major emphasis being on the general sound or mood created by local players.

Part 3

North Donegal / West Tyrone / Northwest Tyrone

I find the music of this general area can be summarised in one word—aggressive. It is basically fast paced music where even the lighter sounding melodies come out with a very hard punch. There is a sense of urgency and power greatly involved within it. Players as diverse in personal style as Neil Boyle and the Dohertys still exhibit the common link of being consistent players of a very attacking type of music. Some players I associate with this style are Felix Kearney of Tyrone, the Dearg Brothers, Danny Meehan, Tommy Peoples, Proinsias Ó Maonaigh and his daughter Mairéad Bean Uí Chinneaide as well as Vincent and Columba Campbell of Donegal. Dermot McLaughlin from Derry is also a magnificent player.

East Derry / Antrim/ Southwest Tyrone

Compared to the above mentioned style, this type region has fiddlers who tend to play a slower (though not much) type of music which is not as aggressive as the latter and more highly ornate. While the Highlands are not as popular in this region as they are in the western part of Derry and Tyrone as well as Donegal the Scottish influence is very well represented in the number of strathspeys played. Excellent examples of typical players in this style are John Loughran and Bobby Martin of Tyrone, Vincey McLaughlin and Paddy Kelly of Derry and Willie McKendry of Antrim.

South Donegal / Fermanagh / North Leitrim

I see this region as a link between the areas of aggressive, powerful musical provinces of Ulster and the more rhythmic, bouncy musical districts of Sligo. This is shows a change from the more northerly styles in that the mood and rhythm of the tunes become slightly lighter and bouncier in contrast to the "full steam ahead" type of playing in Donegal, yet the power of the northern music is still retained in this area. In many ways the players in this style exhibit the best and most magnificent traits of two worlds. Some very good examples from this region are Ben, Maurice and Charlie Lennon, Leitrim, the late John Gallagher, Leitrim, Tom Mulligan of Leitrim, now living in Dublin, Mick Hoey, Seamus Quinn, Tommy and Ben Gunn of Fermanagh, the late Patrick Kelly and Terry McIntyre of South Donegal.

Sligo

The music of this area is probably better documented than all other regions as a result of emigration. The players of this county filled the dance halls of New York and paid tribute to their native country by sending back some of the most magnificent recordings of Irish music to date. Players such as Paddy Killoran, Michael Coleman, James Morrison, Paddy Sweeney, Michael Gorman, John Frank Vesey, Martin Wynne, Seamus and Manus McGuire, Fred Finn, Peter Moran and Joe O'Dowd are amongst several of the excellent exponents of the light and bouncy style of this county. The music is characteristically fast and the overall mood favoured is a light one with the rhythm being as stated above, bouncy or with great "lift".

East Galway

The music of this district differs greatly from that of Sligo. The pace of the music is greatly reduced which allows the player to concentrate more on the mood of the music. The tunes in this area are often highly ornate but the overall impression always seems to be one of wistfulness. A great contributing factor towards this often eerie feeling is the common occurrence of playing tunes in keys such as E flat and B flat which lend themselves to this type of sound. Excellent exponents of this style are Paddy Fahey, Paddy Kelly, Mairtín Byrnes, Connor Tully and Liam Lewis.

Clare

In the early part of this article I tried to impress that a link exists between local fiddle styles and the former use of dialectical Irish. I think this proposed connection is best demonstrated taking a tour down from east Galway through east Clare and further down into west Clare. On such a journey one can hear the present day English slowly flow into a local dialect from one area into another. Linguistic experts tell us that the Irish of these areas died not so long ago. I suspect that the music of these districts can offer indirect supporting clues to the latter. If you were to listen to the wistful music of Paddy Fahey and then travel a short distance to Scariff in County Clare I do not think you would find a drastic difference when you would hear Martin Rochford. As you move further westwards in Clare the music still retains the slow pace of the Galway style, yet gradually relinquishes the eeriness in the music, taking on a more lighter aspect to the melody. There are, in fact, innumerable representatives of all the traditional styles from this district. Among them are Paddy Kelly, late of Cree, Bobby Casey, Joe Ryan, Mick and Tom Eustace, Junior Crehan, John Kelly, Paddy Canny, P.J. Hayes and Martin Hayes as well as Tony Linnane.

Sliabh Luachra

This districtagart and Boggeragh Counties Kerry, Limerick and north Cork, which lie on an elevated plain north of the Macgillycuddy Reeks, Derrynasaggart in Poppingeragh Mountain chain. The music of the district shows a return to a faster pace of music which has an incredible range of musical emotion. There is tremendous life and joy in the fast moving light melodies yet at the same time many of the older players such as Con Curtin of Brosna are able to play magnificent lonely tunes at the drop of a hat. Probably the great distinguishing trademark of this area is the dominance of the slide and polka. These rhythms which appreciated such great popularity up until a generation ago would seem to be suffering a setback in the area most likely due to the impact of recordings of fiddlers from outside the area. Several players from this district are nearly household names. they include Pádraig Ó Caoimh, Denis "The Weaver" Murphy and his sister Julia, Paddy O'Connell, Donal O'Connell, Jerry McCarthy, Paddy and Johnny Cronin, both in the U.S.A., Pat Fitzgerald and Buddy Furey.

Summary

The existence of distinct styles are correlated with the existence of dialectical Irish, and the premise that these styles are, in part, due to and related to natural geographic barriers is postulated. The recent negative effects which mass transportation, the various mass media and recordings have had on the preservation of fiddle styles are noted. The suggestion that fiddle styles be evaluated by a series of several interacting criteria producing a unique resultant sound or mood, as opposed to bowing and ornamentation techniques, is forwarded.

The above third-posting finished the original article. The portion below did not appear in the original article but may be of some help in understanding the some of the unique history and influences in the east Galway style.

Paddy Fahey often told me that during the end of the last century and the first decade or two of this century the local fiddlers of east Galway were always very anxious to play with the famed uilleann piper Dinny Delaney. Dinny's chanter was pitched in B flat. Rather than tune the fiddles down to the chanter, the players regularly re-learned the tunes in flat keys to play with him without tuning down. As such, the local players became highly conversant in playing flat keys. When they started to compose themselves or re-arrange tunes in more common keys, they would often opt for playing them in flat keys as after only a few years, the "wistful flat key sound" was very much the aim of players.

 Larry Sanger is putting together what he intends to be the definitive website on [Donegal fiddling](#).

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