

Anthology 61. Niall Keegan Tom McElvogue's (jig) and New Irish Barndance (reel)

Background information and performance circumstances

As with Folk Music the world over, the history of Irish Folk Music is an oral, performance-based tradition, rather than being dependent on notation. Whilst it relies on the rich inheritance of past repertoire it is also ever-changing both through the constant reinvention of material and the introduction of new compositions. Much of the repertoire is passed on from generation to generation through both conscious and unconscious imitation.

Tom McElvogue's (jig) and New Irish Barndance (reel) are an ideal demonstration of this, being based on two traditional dances but with the former piece a recent creation in traditional style and the latter an old piece from the established repertory. The composer of the Jig, Tom McElvogue, was born in 1968 in Newcastle upon Tyne, but of Irish lineage, he is now based in Dublin and continues to compose, perform, and record CDs.

The performer on the Edexcel recording is Niall Keegan. Originally from London, he relocated to Ireland and is Associate Director of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance based at the University of Limerick.

As the recording demonstrates, this particular performance is live, in front of an audience who clearly show their appreciation at various points, especially in the latter stages.

For historical reasons, the Irish Folk Tradition principally happened indoors (most commonly in public houses or in the home) rather than outdoors.

Although Jigs and Reels were originally pieces designed to accompany dancing, this performance, whilst recognising and adhering to the structures and characteristics of each dance, has no such aims and is purely intended to be listened to by the audience in the context of a "concert performance", albeit in an informal setting. Solo performance, such as this, is at the very heart of the Irish Folk tradition.

Performing forces and their handling

The origins of Irish flute lie in the early 19th Century, as a predecessor to the modern Boehm system flute. It is thought that, as professional players moved to the more advanced Boehm system instruments, amateur musicians took advantage of the low cost and easy availability of these predecessors. In comparison to the Boehm flute, as well as being made of wood rather than metal, other differences include fewer or no keys, and conical bore instead of cylindrical. These differences have an impact upon the tone quality and technical capacity of the instrument. The timbre is noticeably darker and mellower with a breathy quality, especially on lower notes. This is not just as a result of the instrument; it is, in fact, the quality of sound which players deliberately strive to achieve.

There are other aspects of the recording which ideally demonstrate common features of Irish flute playing:

- Although not immediately obvious because of the pace of the music, vibrato is rarely utilised and if it does appear it is produced by fingers rather than breath alteration. The effect is most audible during longer notes at the start of the Reel.
- Articulation is very different from classical flute technique, with less reliance on tonguing and use, instead, of breath (glottal stop) and fingerings to give clarity and definition to notes.
- Breathing creates idiomatic effects including pulsing of long notes and guttural distortions. Placement of breaths is also not naturally matched to phrases and, in the accompanying recording, unusual surges occur when long notes are cut short for a breath and the ensuing note has an accent.

Tonality

- Both pieces are in G major and do not modulate.
- Modality is also present, particularly in the Jig through incorporation of F naturals which give a flavour of Mixolydian Mode.
- Tonality is, to some extent, defined by the instrument and the limited range of keys which an Irish flute can comfortably achieve.

Harmony

- The use of a solo flute means that no actual chordal harmony is present.
- However, there are clear harmonic implications in the melodic line, especially when it is triadic.
- These harmonic implications are mostly functional in nature because of:
 - outlining of chords I, IV and V7;
 - regular cadential points.
- Modal rather than tonal influences are occasionally present, especially the occurrence of a triad build on the flattened 7th of the scale (e.g., Bar 15).

Melody

- Both dances are almost exclusively diatonic with the following exceptions:
 - In the Jig there is some alternation between F sharp and F natural which causes fluctuation between G major and G Mixolydian. There is one sole chromatic moment (the A flat in Bar 57);
 - The Reel contains more chromatic decorations (e.g., lower chromatic auxiliary notes such as the A sharp in Bar 66).
- The Jig has a range of an 13th from D to B.
- The Reel extends this range to two octaves by extending the upper range to high D from Bar 116 onwards; the brief appearance of low C sharp in Bar 75 adds an extra semitone to the overall range.
- Both dances have a combination of steps and leaps but the later sections of the Reel make a particular feature of octave leaps.
- Ornamentation and melodic decoration play a vital part in the performance and are at the very heart of the idiom. The following types of decoration feature in the written score:
 - Slide (e.g., Bar 9)
 - Mordent (e.g., Bar 34)
 - Acciaccatura (e.g., Bar 66)
 - Treble (e.g., Bar 66)

- Trill (e.g., Bar 81)
- Unwritten decoration features throughout the performance, usually taking the form of cuts, strikes and rolls which are a ubiquitous facet of all Irish folk melody performance.
- Phrase structure is regular, reflecting the inherent structures of the two dances; there are 8 bar phrases in the Jig and 4 bar phrases in the Reel. However, it is rare for the same phrase to reappear without some melodic alteration.

Rhythm and metre

- The metre of each dance conforms to traditional expectations (the Jig in compound duple and the Reel in simple quadruple, although reels can also be written in duple time).
- Apart from the change of metre from dance to dance there are other bars which, in the written score, change briefly to a different metre (3/8 in Bar 64 and 3/4 in Bar 96). However, these changes are not hugely significant as they only represent the transcriber's attempt to notate the moments of irregularity as the performer moves into a new section.
- The Jig mainly features running quavers with some use of dotted rhythms. This style of Jig in which bars are usually made up of two groups of three quavers is known as a double Jig.
- The Reel is more varied in rhythm and there is also a general increase in rhythmic activity as the dance progresses, with demisemiquaver patterns (including dotted rhythms) becoming more predominant.
- Some unusual rhythmic features of the reel include:
 - Triplets or trebles (e.g., Bar 66)
 - Syncopation (e.g., Bar 70)
 - Bar 121 contains an irregular and unusual additive rhythm.
- The later sections of the Reel increase in tempo.

Texture

- Monophonic throughout
- Foot-tapping on the main beats, which can either be considered as adding to the texture of the performance (a rhythmic accompaniment) or as an extraneous feature.

Structure

- The Jig has eight bar phrases and the overall form is AABB repeated.
- Looking beyond the ubiquitous variations and decorations of the Jig, these eight bar phrases can on occasion be broken down further into two bar units in an ABAC grouping.
- The four bar phrases of the Reel follow an identical structure to the Jig up until Bar 97.
- Thereafter the structure still has mostly clear four bar phrasing but there is much more freedom in terms of internal phrase structure.
- A persistent high G appears at the start of most of these later bars.
- Whilst clearly relating to previous material, there is an improvisational feeling to this concluding section as the speed accelerates and the range and virtuosity also increase to bring the whole performance to a rousing conclusion.