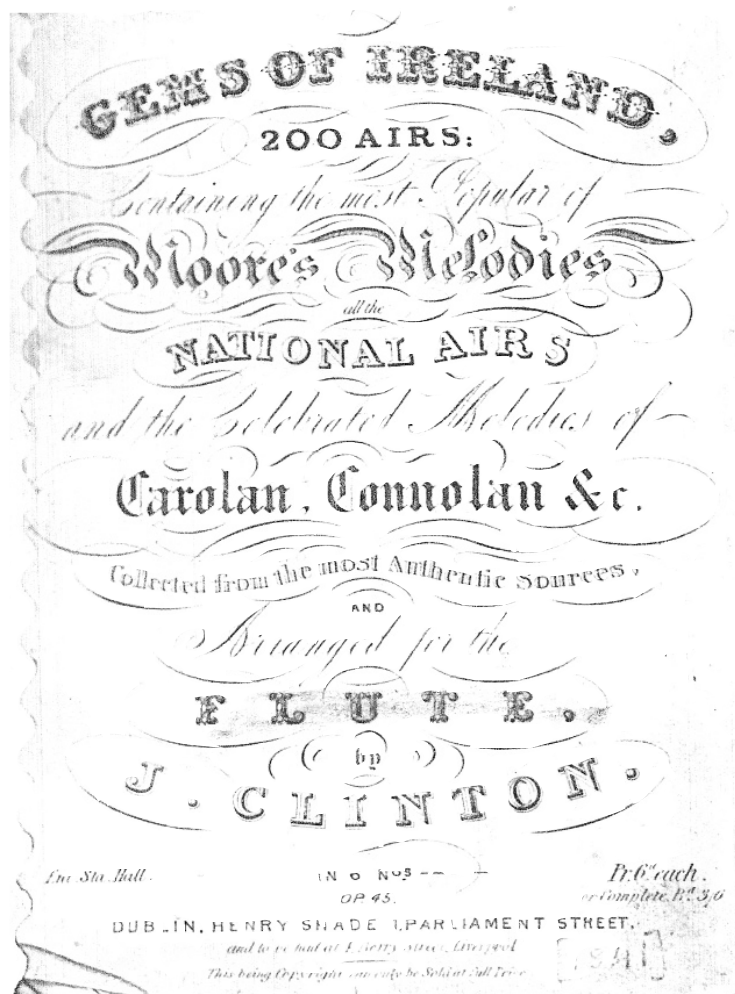


CHAPTER 2



The Flute in Ireland

THE IRISH FLUTE PLAYER'S HANDBOOK

Overleaf: frontispiece from a collection of Irish tunes published by J. Clinton. Born in Ireland in 1810, Clinton spent most of his life in London as a professional flautist and flutemaker in the classical world. His association with this publication may indicate the general amateur interest in the flute in Ireland at this date [1841].

THE FLUTE IN IRELAND

Given that Irish traditional music has possibly the largest repertoire of any world-wide folk tradition, it comes as a surprise to learn that it is played on a relatively small group of instruments, the majority of which are recent borrowings.

Historically, it will also surprise most people to realise that the fiddle most likely predates the uilleann pipes as a traditional instrument, and that the other instruments that we now think of as 'Irish traditional' are imports dating either from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, or from the folk revival period of the 60s and 70s.

By the time that traditional dance music as we would now recognise it became established in Ireland, which we can loosely date to the mid-18th century, it would seem that only two instruments were to the fore. The first is the fiddle, and the second is the uilleann pipes, which appears somewhat later. The wire strung Irish harp, which can confidently be claimed as an uniquely Irish development had gone into a serious decline about a century earlier, and at any rate was never a factor in the dance music tradition.

This remained the case until well into the 19th century, when other instruments such as the free reed concertina and accordion, the banjo, guitar, and piano, began to appear. Most of these instruments really only begin to have an impact with the move away from solo to ensemble playing which is strongly associated with expatriate communities and the development of the ethnic recording industry in the US from c.1900 on. It is very difficult to say to what extent these 'new' instruments were played in rural Ireland, before the turn of the century. With typical irony, the bodhrán, often derided as an innovation of the 1960s revival, has in fact a verifiably older presence as a traditional instrument than most of the introductions (see Illustration pps. 36, 37).

The flute falls somewhere in between the older pipes and fiddle, and the more modern introductions, but I think it is safe to say that it can be argued that its consolidation as an accepted traditional instrument, despite its long presence in the country, is again a late 19th C. phenomenon. In the case of the flute we at least have a starting point, in that the type of instrument we are concerned with - the cone bore simple system flute - makes a definitive appearance in continental Europe at the end of the seventeenth century, and so its appearance in Ireland before the beginning of the eighteenth century is unlikely.

It is important at this point to understand something of the social context of traditional music in Ireland in the eighteenth century. The general widespread pattern was one of professional travelling musicians, who were often also dancing masters, or at least associated with them. They moved around within a well defined area, playing almost exclusively for dancers, and always playing solo. Their instruments of choice were the fiddle or uilleann pipes, the only melody instruments in use at the time. No accounts from this period mention the flute, and no pictorial sources show it either. At the same time, we know that the use of the flute among the Anglo-Irish ascendancy was identical to that in similar contexts throughout Europe.

Jumping forward, we know by the late nineteenth century that the flute was a common instrument in many parts of Ireland. Somehow, in the interim period flutes became available in Ireland to ordinary people, and became a widely used instrument in traditional music. Two mechanisms for this process have been put forward, but I think it is important to see

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these against the economic and social context of the time, and to remember that this context changed, at times quite radically.

The first method of introduction proposed is essentially that of the 'hand me down'.

This postulates that flutes which would have originally been in the hands of comparatively wealthy amateurs, would, when discarded, have found their way into the hands of traditional players who would not have been able to afford to buy them at source. Linked to, but distinct from this, is the possibility that the original owners of these instruments may themselves have played traditional music, perhaps creating a model of musical behaviour for others to copy. There is plenty of evidence from the eighteenth century, in particular with respect to the uilleann pipes, to show that 'the gentry' were in many cases involved in the dance music tradition.

Arthur O'Neill, one of the harpers who played at the early Harping revival events, recorded in his journal a musical evening at the home of one Mr. James Irvine, of Streamstown, Co. Roscommon. He gives a list of musicians present which gives a fascinating glimpse into the musical interaction between the Big House and the people at this period (late eighteenth century).

Three Misses Irvine at the piano	3
Arthur O'Neill at the harp	1
Gentlemen flutes	6
Gentlemen violincellos	2
Common pipers	10
Gentlemen fiddlers	20
Gentlemen clarionets	4

This point of view argues for an early date (eighteenth century) for the establishment of the flute as a traditional instrument, but I would suggest that it is dangerous to overemphasise the significance of such events as the Streamstown 'session'. It is very likely, for example, that very little or any, of what we would think of as traditional dance music was played at this gathering, and this would be backed up by comments that O'Neill himself made in his biography, where he derides dance music as the music of cooks and and servants.

The second approach proposes that the major source of exposure to the flute as an instrument was via its military use.

Ireland, particularly after the Act of Union (1801), had many garrison towns, and many regiments had fife and drum bands which would have played regularly in public.

In some contexts, including that of the early Orange Order, the Temperance and later Land League bands, the idea was directly copied, and perhaps as a continuation of this, many villages and towns in Ireland boasted a fife band as late as the 1950s. There is little or no direct evidence to suggest whether or not the fife was used as a solo instrument in the dance music tradition, but those who would argue that its pitch (nominally B flat) mitigated against this should remember that until ensemble playing began to appear in the early twentieth century, there was no standard or common pitch for Irish traditional dance music. Later on, traditional musicians acquired flutes from those who had emigrated to America or England. In this case we begin to have some hard evidence in the form of accounts from those involved, and we know that some flute players would actively seek out those going



A painting by MacLise, 'Snap-apple night'. A gathering in Cork, circa 1837. Note the flute player just beneath the window. This is the earliest known illustration of the use of flute & bodhrán in traditional music. [Phillips Auctioneers]