

A GUIDE TO IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC

DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS

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‘Irish traditional music’ is best understood as a very broad term that includes many different types of singing and instrumental music, music of many periods, as performed by Irish people in Ireland or outside it, and occasionally, nowadays, by people of other nationalities.

The different types, however, do have in common an essentially ‘oral’ character, that is, they belong to a tradition of popular music, in which song and instrumental music are created and transmitted in performance and carried and preserved in the memory, a tradition which is essentially independent of writing and print. The necessity of being widely understood and appreciated and the nature of human memory, govern the structures of the music and its patterns of variation and repetition.

It is impossible to give a simple definition of the term. Different people use it to mean different things; the music shares characteristics with other popular and classical music; and, as traditional culture changes, traditional music changes also, showing varying features at varying times.

Irish traditional music does however have some generally agreed characteristics which help define it:

- It is music of a living popular tradition. While it incorporates a large body of material inherited from the past, this does not form a static repertory, but is constantly changing through the shedding of material, the reintroduction of neglected items, the composition of new material, and the creative altering in performance of the established repertory.
- It is nevertheless music which is conservative in tendency. Change only takes place slowly, and in accordance with generally accepted principles. Most new compositions are not accepted into the tradition, and only a relatively small amount of variation takes place. Elements of the repertory perceived as old are held in esteem.
- Being oral music, it is in a greater state of fluidity than notation-based music. Versions of songs and tunes proliferate, skilled performers introduce variations and ornaments as the mood takes them, and the same melody can be found in different metres.
- It is European music. In structure, rhythmic pattern, pitch arrangement, thematic content of songs, etc., it most closely resembles the traditional music of Western Europe.
- The bulk of it comes from the past, and is of

some antiquity. Much of the repertory is known to have been current in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some is earlier in origin, and it is likely that some very old melodies and lyrics survive, adapted to modern forms.

- It is handed down from one generation to the next, or passed from one performer to another, more by example than by formal teaching. The traditional learner normally acquires repertory and style through unconscious or conscious imitation of more experienced performers. But nowadays learning also takes place in groups organised for teaching, and occasionally within the formal education system. Printed and manuscripted song and music have had an influence on the tradition since at least the eighteenth century. Throughout this century, books, sound recordings, radio and television have played an important part in the transmission of the music, and there are always traditional performers with experience of popular and classical music.
- Although items of the repertory are initially produced by individual singers and musicians, they are changed as they pass from performer to performer, and they eventually become the produc-

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KEYS TO THE HIGHWAY



BY ROGER GOODMAN

In the last FolkWorks, I promised to take you on a journey—a journey to better understanding, appreciation and ability in music.

I’m going to start this journey at the piano keyboard because it is clearly laid out and there is only one choice about which key to strike to produce any particular note. Other instruments, including the guitar, can produce the same note from different placements.



Look at the piano keyboard. Notice that most of the white keys are separated by intervening black keys in a repeating pattern—two black keys, then three, then two, over and over.

This uneven but consistent distribution of the black keys among the white will prove to be an important concept to remember.

First, a couple of musical terms, namely, the “half-step” and the “whole-step.” The distance between any two adjacent keys is a half-step, whether it is from white-to-black, black-to-white or white-to-white. If you move this distance twice (two half-steps) the distance is (surprise!) a whole-step. So, adjacent keys = a half-step; two half-steps = a whole-step. Not too complicated, yet.

Beginning pianists initially learn to play in the key of “C” (C D E F G A B C) because it has no sharps or flats so only white keys are used. Let’s use the “C” scale to make some observations about scales in general. Look back at the key-

board. As you move to the right or up in pitch from C to D, you first encounter a black key (a half-step), before you get to the white key, D (another half-step). The distance from C to D, then, is two half-steps or one whole-step. I write this as “C—D” to show a whole-step. The next note in the scale takes us through adjacent keys twice, making another whole-step. I write this as “C—D—E”. Now, something different happens. There is no black key between the white keys of E and F because it is only a half-step. I write this as “C—D—E_F” to show a whole-step, a whole-step and a half-step. Proceeding along, we get our

duce the others. For example, major scales have a generalized numbering scheme. If we call C the first note or first degree of the scale and substitute numbers for letters, the scale looks like this:

C—D—E_F—G—A—B_C
1—2—3_4—5—6—7_1

Note that there is a whole-step between each degree of the scale except for the half-steps between 3 & 4 and 7 & 1. This is the rule. Now, test the rule in the key of G. First, write the formula for a major scale in numbers: 1—2—3_4—5—6—7_1. Then, put the letter names below the numbers starting with G under the 1. Look at the piano again. You will see that a whole-step from G gets you to A. A goes under the 2. Then a whole-step to 3 puts you at B. Now comes the first half-step which is the C. Since there is only a half-step between B and C, this works out just the way it’s supposed to. The C goes under 4, the D under 5 and E under 6. At this point we have

1—2—3_4—5—6
G—A—B_C—D—E

All is fine until we get to 7. There should be a whole-step (or two half-steps) between 6 and 7. Starting with E go the first half-step to F. The other required half-step leaves you on a black key, in this case, F-sharp (F#). It is still a major scale but includes a black (sharp or flat) key. It looks like this:

1—2—3_4—5—6—7_1
G—A—B_C—D—E—F#_G

This is a major scale in the key of G. The key of G is also referred to as the key of one sharp. Go ahead—try another key. Start on any note you want and “listen” to it work.

In my next installment I will show you how to generate all the scales in all the keys. And, I’ll even tell you how I knew to pick G as the second scale to get the key of one sharp. Stay tuned...



C scale: start with a C and progress by a whole-step to D, a whole-step to E, a half-step to F, a whole-step to G, a whole-step to A, a whole-step to B, and finally a half-step to C. Expressed in steps this is 1, 1, ?, 1, 1, 1, ?

It turns out that by examining the C Major Scale in particular, we have discovered something about major scales in general. The spacing of half-steps and whole-steps between successive degrees of the scale holds true for all major scales making it possible to generalize some rules that will pro-