

# CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION TO TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSIC ON THE FLUTE AND TIN WHISTLE

## SEEK OUT THE OLDER PLAYERS

As you embark upon the path of learning Irish music, you should realize that you are preparing to become a participant in a story that has been unfolding for centuries. In order to intelligently take part, you need to start developing a view of the big picture.

*In this art, the key to all insight is listening.* This is a theme that will surface again and again throughout these pages.

As you are learning your craft, it is inspiring to listen to the latest performers and their recordings. But it is even more important to seek out the older players who may not come into your view so readily. The soul of the tradition rests in them, the ones who have lived the music for 50, 60, 70 years. They may be highly accomplished or they may play roughly and slow, but they are the keepers of the deepest wisdom and eloquence that you can experience through the music.

In an interview in *Fiddler Magazine*<sup>1</sup>, the great fiddler Martin Hayes tells about such a musician:

One of my own favorites is a whistle player called Joe Bane. I have a tune on the album called “The Britches” [This refers to Martin Hayes’ first album on Green Linnet Records, “*Martin Hayes*”. See Discography.] It’s very simple. Anybody could play it. Any beginner could play every note I play. It’s not technically difficult. And it wasn’t technically difficult the way he played it. But when he played it, it would bring a tear to my eye. He’d look forward to playing the tune all night at a session, and when the opportunity would arise, he’d go, “Ah, sure, we’ll play ‘The Britches.’” He’d be waiting to do this. He loved it. It was like a lullaby—there was sweetness in it, there was humility in it, there was joy and love, everything in it, and it was the climax of his day, of his week, to do this tune. He had no chops, he had no knowledge, no theoretical anything, but his space was magic. He didn’t need to know any more technical anything. The only thing that was amiss around him was a world that didn’t understand what was going on.

If you do not live in Ireland, you may be able to seek out Irish communities or Irish people nearby, attend concerts, festivals, music camps, take part in dances, workshops, sessions. Hopefully, you will be able to travel to Ireland. There are a great many resources for broadening your knowledge.

## READING MUSIC, AND “WHAT IS A TUNE?”

If you do not read music, you are in good company. Many traditional Irish musicians don’t. But a surprisingly large number do to some extent. I encourage everyone to learn this skill.

In Irish music, when we use music notation it should be only as a supplement and a convenience, a shorthand guide or reminder to memory. When used in these ways, it is very useful indeed. However, the most deeply vital aspects of this music cannot be written down and can only be learned through extensive, active listening.

If you have become dependent upon written music, the time has come to begin to wean yourself from it. Below I offer some insights that I hope will help you do this.

The full embodiment of a traditional Irish tune cannot be written down. One of the reasons for this is that improvisation and variation are intrinsic elements of Irish music. There is no such thing as the definitive version of a traditional Irish tune. Often a particular setting will become established among certain comrade players, among players of a certain instrument, or in a certain region, but even that setting is a vehicle for personal interpretation. In truth, a transcription of a tune is no more than a frozen skeleton of a snapshot of a setting of a tune.

A tune is something very expansive and alive. Infusing each tune is an essence that makes it immediately recognizable, beautiful, and whole. Each tune also carries rich personal associations for the player. With musical maturity and experience, one comes to intuitively grasp the spirit of a tune and shape it in one’s own way.

## THE HABIT OF INTERNALIZATION

When you begin learning a tune, with or without the aid of music notation, you should immediately begin to commit it to memory, to internalize it, as a part of the act of learning itself. If you are using music notation, immediately start to let go of it. This may not be so easy at first if you are used to hanging your musical awareness on a visual representation and storing it there.

A natural and effortless way to learn a tune is to simply hear it many times, over a long period of time. Without making a conscious effort to learn it, the tune seeps into you. One day you may find yourself liltng or humming it. By then, you know it. Now it is just a matter of transferring it onto your instrument. Attending a regular session is one good way to give yourself this opportunity.

For those times when you *are* actively learning a tune in a conscious way, here are some ideas that I hope will help you.

## FINDING THE TONAL CENTER

A good first step to reclaiming, internalizing, and developing your musical awareness is to find and hold onto the *tonal center* of a tune. The tonal center is the “home pitch,” what some people call the *key* of the tune. (Below I’ll explain why *mode* is a more appropriate term than *key* for Irish music.) If you were going to add a drone to a tune, the pitch of the tonal center would be the most natural choice for the drone’s pitch. Many tunes end on the pitch of the tonal center, or at least come to rest upon it at the ends of some important phrases. When you land on the pitch of the tonal center you feel more resolved, at rest, at home, than with any other pitch. If you have trouble recognizing this feeling, then you need to tune in more to how the different pitches of a tune make you feel inside your body.

Occasionally you will run across a tune for which a tonal center is not obvious, or seems to shift. In other tunes the tonal center is clear, but changes with different parts of the tune. An example of this is the polka *Maids of Ardagh*, which appears on p. 356. Its tonal center is D in the A part, but changes to A for the B part.

For the vast majority of tunes, the tonal center is clear and unchanging. After learning about modes later in this chapter you will have more information about finding the tonal center.

## THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF MELODY

Here is a powerful and helpful insight from Robert Jourdain:

. . . a melody’s notes are largely perceived as offsets not from each other, but from an underlying tonal center. Melody is a harmonic phenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

I would amend Jourdain’s statement by substituting the word “pitches” for “notes.” A *note* has pitch *and* duration. For the moment let’s look at the pitch aspect alone.

The apparent contradiction of Jourdain’s statement, that melody is a *harmonic* phenomenon, holds true because as we *retain* the pitch of the tonal center, we compare the pitch of the present melody note to it, and “hear” or sense the resulting internal harmony, or “vertical” interval, created by these two pitches. (An *interval* is simply the distance in pitch between two notes.) At the same time, we track the “horizontal” intervals that occur sequentially in time, that is the distance in pitch between one melody note and the one that precedes or follows it.

So, the process of memorizing melodies, which seems daunting to so many, begins with the simple task of internalizing and retaining only *one* pitch, that of the tonal center. From there, it becomes a two-dimensional process of hearing or sensing vertical and horizontal intervals, instead of a one-dimensional procedure of memorizing a long sequence of discrete, unrelated pitches. The two-dimensional picture reveals the connections and relationships between the pitches, and allows musical meaning to emerge.

Your ability to internalize melodies will improve even more as you learn to recognize the sound and “flavor” of each of the twelve musical intervals and learn their names. The smallest interval is known by several names: a semitone, a half-step, or a minor second. Each of the larger intervals can be measured by how many semitones it contains. The minor second of course contains only one semitone, the major second contains two semitones, the minor third contains three, the major third four, the perfect fourth five, the tritone six, the perfect fifth seven, the minor sixth eight,

the major sixth nine, the minor seventh ten, the major seventh eleven, and the octave twelve. You can see and hear these intervals and their constituent semitones clearly by studying and experimenting with the fretboards of guitars or other fretted instruments, all of which have twelve frets to the octave.

It's not necessary that you mentally count the number of semitones in each interval you hear. But just as it is a carpenter's business to be able to look at a board and know whether it is two inches wide, or four, or eight, it is your business as a musician to gradually gain the ability to hear an interval and know whether it is a minor second, a major third, or a perfect fifth, etc., in other words to mentally "measure" it, to and know or feel what the distance is between the two pitches. Knowing what intervals are, knowing their sizes and names, and knowing that there is a sensible and proportional system to their relationships will enhance your ability to learn by ear, an ability that everyone has.

Enter now the third dimension: pulse and rhythm.

Aside from some slow airs, all Irish tunes have a *pulse*, a steady recurrent beat. When we tap our feet we tap out the pulse. The pulse is subdivided into either two, three, or four units of duration which most transcribers of Irish music represent as eighth notes, sometimes as sixteenth notes.

As stated above, a note has both pitch and duration. A melody then, or a tune, is formed by a succession of notes (pitches and durations).

Rhythm is hard to define succinctly. In *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, Willi Apel attempts this by stating that "rhythm is everything pertaining to the temporal quality (duration) of the musical sound."<sup>iii</sup>

This broad definition will work for our present purpose, which is to integrate the *rhythms* of the notes with the two-dimensional *interval* "map" of the melody. This sounds complex, but it needn't be experienced that way. What we are doing is stretching our powers of attention so that as we learn a tune, we create an on-going, three-dimensional melody in our mind's ear.

Music is a profoundly physical experience. It is made up of air compression waves that affect our bodies and make them vibrate. Over-dependence upon music notation dulls our perceptions of the physical sensations of music and causes us to externalize and conceptualize music, to remove ourselves from it in a very real sense. Learning to learn by ear again, for we all did so as children, brings us back into full contact with music.

So, as you are learning a tune, immediately bring your focus to the physical nature of the sound: the relationship of each note to the tonal center; the sizes and feelings of these vertical intervals, as well as those of the horizontal intervals between the successive notes of the tune; the shapes and phrases in the melody; the pulse of the tune and the rhythms that overlay it; the patterns of your finger movements; and your own physical experience of the music. Store this awareness *inside* of yourself instead of externalizing it, relegating it to written music. If you enjoy computer metaphors, store the tune on your huge internal hard drive, not on a removable disk that you put away in some desk drawer. The more you cultivate this internalizing mode of learning, the more natural and sophisticated it will become.

## OTHER AIDS TO MEMORY

Each tune has a name, or several names, which belongs with the tune for a reason. Often the reason is unknown or obscure to us, and many people seem to have trouble maintaining the connections between tunes and their names. Make an effort to establish this connection early on, even if its meaning is mysterious to you. You may remember the tune better by connecting it to an image, a person, even to an uncertainty or a curiosity; and to the larger world of the tradition. Connect the tune also to the time, place, people, and circumstances that surrounded you as you first heard it or began to learn it.

Notice these things about the tune: its tonal center, its mode, its first few notes, its meter, its dance tune type. Link all of these things to the name of the tune. Later, remembering or hearing the first few notes will bring the entire tune back to you in a flash.

Luckily, the structural aspects of Irish tunes, compared with those of classical music, are quite simple and even formulaic in some respects, and therefore easy to remember. Understanding these structures will aid your learning a great deal. It's what happens within and through these simple structures that is so endlessly various and beautiful.

Despite my observations and caveats about music notation, I make very extensive use of it in this book. The combination of music notation, the audio CDs, and these words on paper are the next best thing to personal contact. Thankfully, these three modes of demonstration, when used together, actually do convey a great deal of useful information.

## SOME NOTATION CONVENTIONS

There are many good books that teach the rudiments of reading music. I am not going to duplicate their content here. However, I would like to explore a few aspects of music notation that are particularly relevant to this book.

## THE MODAL NATURE OF IRISH MUSIC

In today's common practice of western classical and popular music, almost all tonal music is considered to be in either a major or minor *key*; that is, based upon the central use of certain major or minor scales. The major and natural minor scales have early historical roots and are only two of seven *modes* that came to form the tonal basis for Gregorian chant and the rest of western medieval and renaissance music. These modes, and others, are also found in many ethnic musical traditions.

The word *mode* has a number of meanings, but in this case we use it to refer to "the selection of tones, arranged in a scale, which form the basic tonal substance of a composition."<sup>iv</sup> There are many more than seven modes in world musical traditions, but for the moment we need only be concerned with the seven so-called *church modes* of western European music.

The vast majority of traditional Irish music makes use of only four of these modes: the Ionian (which we commonly call the *major* scale), the Dorian, the Mixolydian, and the Aeolian (which we commonly call the *natural minor* scale). In fact, the first three of these account for most of traditional Irish melody.

Each of the seven modes, shown on the next page, contains a unique sequence of five whole steps (major seconds) and two half steps (minor seconds) that occur as you ascend through its scale. The half steps in the following figures are indicated by slurs.

The simplest way to listen to and get to know these modes is to play ascending scales on only the white keys of a piano. Starting on C and playing in this manner, you hear the notes of the Ionian mode. Starting on D, you hear the Dorian mode, and so on. Note well the locations of the half steps in each mode.

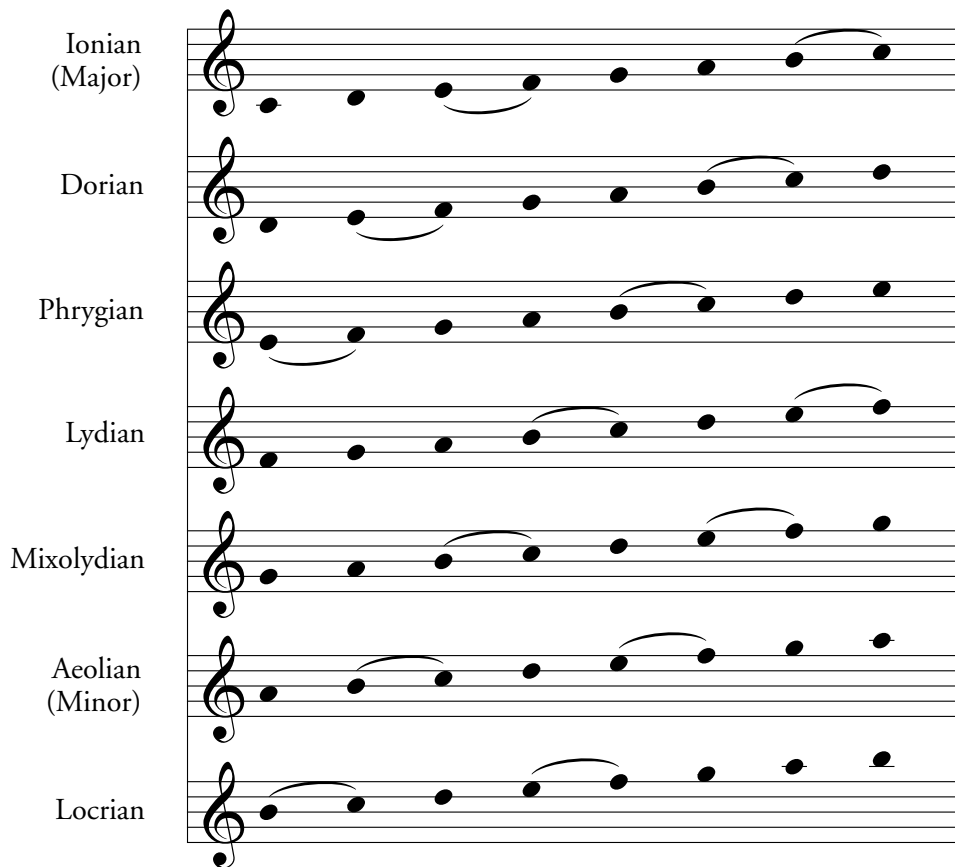


Figure 1-1. The seven so-called church modes, as played on the white keys of the piano.



Track 1

## THE TONAL CENTER OF THE MODE

Each mode has a tonal center, which is the first, lowest, note of its scale. In Irish music this tonal center can reside on any one of various pitches, most commonly D, E, G, A, or B. We often say that a tune in the Mixolydian mode with a tonal center of D is “in D Mixolydian.” Similarly, a tune in the Dorian mode that has a tonal center of E is “in E Dorian.” The tune will usually come to rest on that pitch at various points, especially at the ends of some of its important phrases.

As mentioned above, it is very important to sense, identify, and retain this tonal center. The notes of the tune gain “meaning” in their relation to it. Keeping track of the tonal center and each note’s intervallic relationship to it will greatly enhance your ability to learn, internalize, and remember tunes.

Those who are familiar with the major and minor modes (i.e. the Ionian and Aeolian), many find it helpful to understand the Dorian and Mixolydian modes in terms of how they differ from the Ionian and Aeolian. The Mixolydian mode is like the Ionian (major) with a flatted or lowered seventh note. The Dorian mode is like the Aeolian (natural minor) with a raised sixth note.

These comparisons are shown on the next page. Play through them on an instrument or sing them. Note how only the position of the second half step differs in each comparison.

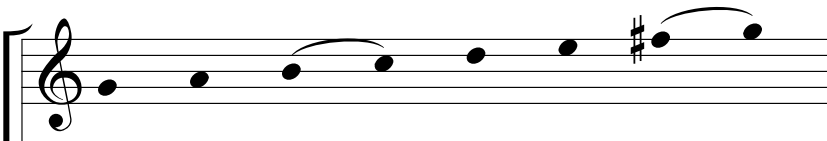
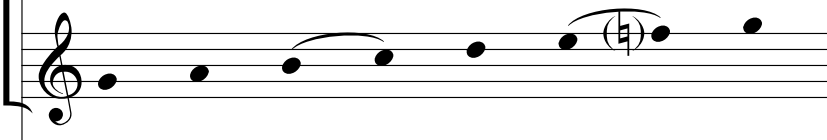
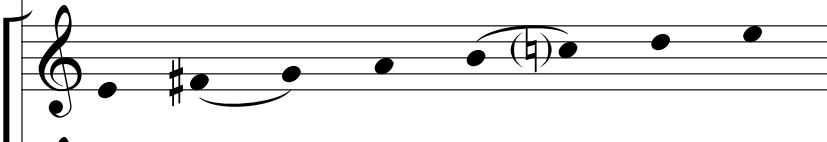
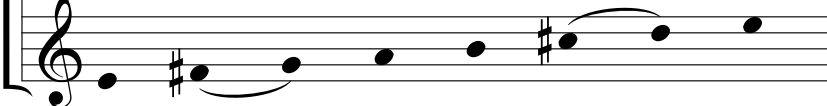
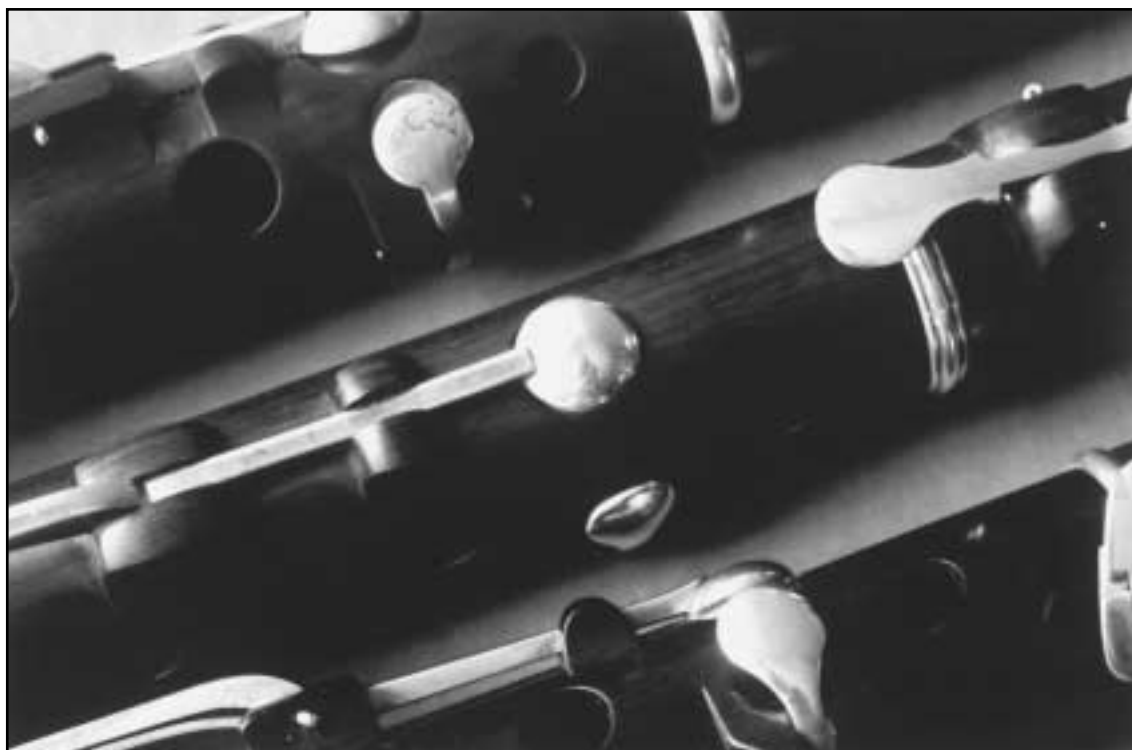
G Ionian (Major)	
G Mixolydian	
E Aeolian (natural minor)	
E Dorian	

Figure 1-2. Comparisons between the Ionian and Mixolydian modes, and the Aeolian and Dorian modes.



The combinations of mode and tonal center most commonly encountered in Irish flute, tin whistle, and uilleann pipe music are shown below in Figure 1-3. The ones containing G-sharps (i.e. A Ionian and B Dorian) are encountered less often than the others.

D Ionian

G Ionian

A Ionian

D Mixolydian

G Mixolydian

A Mixolydian

E Dorian

A Dorian

B Dorian

E Aeolian

A Aeolian

B Aeolian

Figure 1-3. The modes most commonly encountered in Irish flute, tin whistle, and uilleann pipe music. Note well the mode signatures.

#### “MODE SIGNATURES” INSTEAD OF KEY SIGNATURES

Note that in Figure 1-3, I have used the appropriate “mode signatures” for each mode, instead of using accidentals. *Take special note of these mode signatures.* Musicians who are used to operating on the assumption that every signature indicates a major key or its relative minor key will have to expand their thinking somewhat.

You may have noticed that there are no flats in these mode signatures. Modal scales that include flats, such as G Dorian, D Aeolian, and F Ionian are encountered in the special repertoires of the fiddle, banjo, and accordion. Players of keyed flutes and pipes can play in these modes as well, but traditionally they rarely do.

*Throughout this book I will be using such mode signatures.* Therefore, when you see a signature of two sharps, for example, don't assume that the tune is in D major (Ionian) or B minor (Aeolian). It could just as easily be in E Dorian or A Mixolydian. There is a growing trend toward using these mode signatures, as they result in fewer accidentals and they reflect the true modal nature of Irish music.

## PENTATONIC MODES

Some tunes use fewer than seven notes, such as tunes that are in a five-note, or *pentatonic* mode. There are two such pentatonic modes common in Irish music. The first is formed by omitting the fourth and seventh notes of the Ionian mode. In the tonality of D this yields a scale of D, E, F-sharp, A, and B. We could call this the "Ionian Pentatonic" mode. The second is formed by omitting the third and sixth notes of the Dorian mode. In the tonality of E this yields a scale of E, F-sharp, A, B, and D. We could call this the "Dorian Pentatonic" mode. Note that these two examples, which are shown below, contain the same pitches and therefore share the same mode signature, though they have different tonal centers.

Even though neither of these pentatonic modes contains a C-sharp, the C-sharp is included in their mode signatures. If a player were to use a C as a passing tone or in her variation of a tune in one of these modes, it would properly be a C-sharp, not a C-natural.

In practice there are few Irish tunes that adhere strictly and totally to either of these pentatonic modes. Most of them include at least one instance of one or both of the missing scale degrees. Many tunes have one part that is in a pentatonic mode while its other parts are not.

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled "D Ionian Pentatonic" and the bottom staff is labeled "E Dorian Pentatonic". Both staves are in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The D Ionian Pentatonic scale is represented by five notes: D (first line), E (first space), F# (second line), A (second space), and B (third line). The E Dorian Pentatonic scale is represented by five notes: E (first space), F# (second line), A (second space), B (third line), and D (third space). The notes are placed on a five-line staff with a brace on the left side.



*Figure 1-4. Examples of the two pentatonic modes found in Irish music, the Ionian Pentatonic and the Dorian Pentatonic.*

The Ionian Pentatonic mode is commonly encountered with a tonal center of either D or G. An example of a tune in this mode is the three-part reel, *Christmas Eve*. The second and third parts of the tune contain a few passing notes that fall outside the pentatonic mode. The first part of the reel *The Banshee* is also in this mode.

The Dorian Pentatonic mode can be found with a tonal center of D, E, G, A, or B. An example of a tune in this mode is *Tom Billy's Jig*. (Complete versions of these three tunes appear in Section 7 on p. 347, 348, and 338, respectively.) The reel *Peter Flanagan's* is also in the Dorian Pentatonic mode. A transcription of flutist Cathal McConnell's recording of this tune appears in Section 8, p. 400.

## OUTSIDE THE MODAL BOUNDARIES

There are many Irish tunes that don't fit neatly into the profile of any of these modes. Some use both major and minor thirds and/or sixths. Some employ notes that fall in between the half steps. This happens in particular in the area of C-natural to C-sharp and F-natural to F-sharp on the flute, whistle, and uilleann pipes.

C-natural is an especially variable note on the uilleann pipes which, according to Breandán Breathnach, possesses “. . . several colors . . . which are exploited to the full by the skillful performer. It lies approximately halfway between B and D. . .”<sup>v</sup>, in other words, approximately halfway between the equal tempered C-natural and C-sharp. In fact, at least half the time C-natural is played according to our modern intonation expectations, but often, especially in tunes with a tonal center of G or D, the sharper “piping C” is used by traditional flute and whistle players. The pitch of C-natural can change even during the course of a single note.

On the flute and whistle, you can finger C-natural by using a cross fingering<sup>vi</sup> or by half-holing.<sup>vii</sup> On a keyed flute you may also have the option of using a C-natural key. You can also play this “piping C” by using special fingerings that we will explore later. All of these fingering options produce Cs with differing tone and pitch colors, and these relate quite directly to the tradition of uilleann piping. All of this will become more clear as you work your way through the book.

One more observation about C-natural and C-sharp: When playing C as a quick passing note between B and D, Irish flute and whistle players will almost always play the note as a C-sharp, even if C-sharp is not in the mode of the tune. This may be in large part because playing B—C-sharp—D makes for an easier fingering sequence. The C-sharp goes by quickly enough that its altered pitch does not seem all that apparent. But this use of C-sharp is an important element of style, not just a fingering convenience. If you play such notes as C-naturals, they often just sound “wrong” to someone with an ear that is finely tuned to traditional Irish music. On the Boehm-system flute, fingering C-natural in such situations is no harder than fingering C-sharp—in fact sometimes it is easier. Therefore, Boehm-system flute players may forget to alter C in this way, since it has no particular fingering benefit for them.

For examples of this use of C-sharp, see *The Battering Ram* on p. 335, *The Cliffs of Moher* on p. 337, and *Hardiman the Fiddler* on p. 346.

Note that if you use the *tight triplet* technique (described on pp. 256-257 in Chapter 18) in these B—C—D sequences, then you will be playing C-natural instead of C-sharp.

## MOST WHISTLES SOUND ONE OCTAVE HIGHER THAN WRITTEN

The most common and useful tin whistle is the small one in D. This instrument plays one octave higher than the flute, fiddle, pipes, etc. When reading tune transcriptions, this whistle sounds one octave higher than the notated music.

The much larger low D whistle, which plays one octave lower than the small D whistle (i.e. at the same pitch as the flute) is becoming increasingly popular. When reading music notation, this whistle plays the notes as written.

Whistles come in a variety of other keys. For the purpose of music notation, these “non-D” whistles are considered to be *transposing* instruments, that is “instruments for which the music is written in another key or octave than that of their actual sound.”<sup>viii</sup> (By this definition, the small D whistle is technically a transposing instrument.) All the whistles are treated as if they were D whistles even though they produce music that is either higher or lower in pitch level than that of the small D whistle.

For example, the C whistle is one whole step lower in pitch than the small D whistle. The lowest note of a C whistle is, naturally, a C, and is played with all six tone holes covered, the fingering that produces D on a D whistle. For the purpose of music notation, this lowest note of *any* whistle is considered to be a D. Therefore, when reading a tune you would use the exact same fingerings, no matter what key of whistle you choose to play it on. Let's say you are playing a tune that is in D Ionian. If you play it on a C whistle, you use the same fingerings that you would use to play it on a D whistle, but the music comes out in C Ionian.