

INTRODUCTION TO ORNAMENTATION

Traditional Irish music is a living aural tradition, one that is continually evolving. Styles and techniques of ornamentation among Irish whistle players are very diverse. It would be a mistake to think that anyone can reduce them to a uniform catalog of rules.

In your exploration and study of ornamentation, and during the development of your own ornamentation style, it is essential that you do a great deal of listening to excellent players, in person when possible. Establish this habit early. This book will allow you to better understand what you hear and see in their playing.

I find that the closer I look at the details of ornamentation in my own playing, and in the playing of people who have styles different from mine, the more I realize that there are subtle differences of approach in many aspects of ornamentation and articulation that happily coexist within the living tradition. This stylistic diversity is part of what makes Irish music so vital. Yet there is a common ground amid the diversity, and that is where one should start one's study. A full understanding of the art of ornamentation, and the development of one's own ornamentation style, requires years of playing and attentive listening.

Since beginning to play the whistle in the early 1970s I have formed some clear opinions on how best to think of and execute the building blocks of whistle ornamentation, as well as its more complex structures. In this book I take quite a bit of time and care to present these building blocks and two of these complex structures (i.e. the long roll and short roll), as clearly and comprehensively as I can, for this is an area where the available teaching materials have proven inadequate and where there is a great need for completeness and clarity.

YOU WILL FIND MUCH MORE ON ADVANCED ORNAMENTATION TECHNIQUES IN *THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO IRISH FLUTE AND TIN WHISTLE*

If you wish to explore ornamentation further, my book *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* continues that study where this book leaves off, exploring the rest of the complex ornamentation structures in seven more chapters: *Condensed Long Rolls*, *Condensed Short Rolls*, *Double-Cut Rolls*, *Cranns*, *Rolls in Tunes with Overtly Uneven Subdivisions of the Beat*, *Other Multi-Note Ornaments*, and *Ornamentation through Melodic Variation*.

Many styles and approaches to ornamentation are documented and discussed in Section 8 of *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*, where I present in-depth transcriptions of 27 commercial recordings of flute and tin whistle performances dating from 1926 to 2001. The twenty-two players included, representing a wide variety of playing styles and approaches to ornamentation, are: John McKenna, Tom Morrison, William Cummins, Séamus Ennis, Willie Clancy, Paddy Taylor, Paddy Carty, Josie McDermott, Matt Molloy, Cathal McConnell, Mary Bergin, Donncha Ó Briain, Desi Wilkinson, Breda Smyth, Seán Ryan, Conal Ó Gráda, Micho Russell, Joanie Madden, Kevin Crawford, Catherine McEvoy, Seamus Egan, and myself.

WHISTLE AND FLUTE ORNAMENTATION ARE THE SAME

You should know that Irish tin whistle and Irish flute ornamentation are the same, and both are very similar to, and derived from, uilleann pipes ornamentation. How whistle and flute players use ornaments may differ slightly, and adapting this ornamentation to the modern, Boehm-system flute requires modification of some fingerings and techniques.

You can transfer the ornamentation techniques you learn on the tin whistle directly to the simple-system, Irish flute. The whistle and the simple-system flute share the same fingering system.

ABOVE ALL, AN AURAL TRADITION

Traditional Irish music has always been passed along and learned by ear. It is therefore understandable that no clear consensus has emerged on how to conceptualize ornamentation techniques so that they can be clearly conveyed in words and in music notation. I hope that my innovations with the concepts and notation of these techniques will bring us closer to such a consensus.

But amid all of this ink on paper, let us never forget the central and critical importance of learning and passing along this music by ear. Music notation is an excellent servant, a very elegant box of tools, and I encourage everyone to learn to use it. But it was never meant to become our master. Beware of becoming dependent upon music notation. (For more on this see Chapter 1.)

TOO MUCH BORROWING FROM CLASSICAL MUSIC

Most writers who have attempted to describe traditional Irish whistle playing have borrowed concepts and notation practices from classical music. This works fairly well in some areas, and not well at all in others.

Ornamentation is an area where this borrowing has not served us well. In many years of teaching, I have encountered a great many players who are mystified by ornamentation techniques. Most of them have not had personal access to good players. Struck by the beauty of what they hear on recordings but missing important knowledge, they often turn to books in their search for insight. The more or less foggy and incomplete explanations that these books provide offer some help, but unfortunately many of them also create and perpetuate misunderstandings about Irish whistle ornamentation.

Most of this confusion has arisen from the vague and liberal use in these books of the *grace note*, as a term, as a concept, and as a notation practice. I feel that such use of grace notes has limited our thinking and is the single biggest factor in constraining many people's understanding of ornamentation to what I feel is a fairly primitive level. In the following chapters, I bring to light the confusions that this has caused and lay out a new and accurate way to understand and notate Irish whistle ornamentation. The concept of the *articulation* is the key that lets us venture much further.

WHAT IS ORNAMENTATION?

When I speak of ornamentation in traditional Irish music I am referring to ways of altering or embellishing small pieces or cells of a melody that are between one and three eighth-note beats long. These alterations and embellishments are created mainly through the use of special fingered articulations and inflections, not through the addition of extra, ornamental or grace notes.

The modern classical musician's view of ornamentation is quite different. *Ornamentation, A Question & Answer Manual*, a book written to help classical musicians understand ornamentation from the baroque era through the present, offers this definition: "Ornamentation is the practice of adding notes to a melody to allow music to be more expressive."¹

Classical musicians naturally tend to carry this kind of thinking with them as newcomers to traditional Irish music. However, as long as they overlay the "added note" concept onto Irish ornamentation, they will be unable to gain fluency in the language of Irish music.

MORE THAN "ORNAMENTAL"

The word ornament implies a musical element that could just as well be left out, leaving the essence of the music perfectly intact. Many ornaments used in Irish music do fit that description, but there are others that do not, that are essential or intrinsic to the life of the tune. Stated another way, there are places in many tunes that do not sound "right" without the use of ornamentation.

Ornaments are among the tools we use in the larger pursuits of variation and interpretation. Returning to the language analogy I introduced in Chapter 6, *ornamentation* corresponds to the many ways you can enunciate, pronounce, and deliver individual syllables and words. *Variation* corresponds to the particular ways that you choose to combine words into phrases and use idioms and slang. *Interpretation* corresponds to how you combine phrases into sentences and paragraphs, how you reveal and express your personality, your soul, and your view of the world through your command of language.

Ornamentation techniques join together with the air-management techniques of tonguing, slurring, and breath control to give the player a vast variety of tools for musical expression.

HATS OFF TO THE PIPES

As stated in Chapter 1, Irish tin whistle ornamentation techniques have their origins in the tradition of the uilleann pipes, the current bellows-blown bagpipe of Ireland, whose music developed out of the older pastoral bagpipe and *piob mór* traditions. The nature of the playing capabilities of these antecedent bagpipes sheds important light upon why many uilleann pipe, tin whistle, and Irish flute techniques have evolved as they have. With these older bagpipes, in order to articulate or separate notes of the same pitch it was necessary to use fingered articulations. These articulations have come down to us in the form of the *cut*, the *strike*, and the multi-note ornaments that make use of cuts and strikes.

Of course Irish flute and tin whistle traditions have also developed independently of piping, so the differences between the uilleann pipes and our mouth-blown flutes and whistles are very important as well.

ARTICULATION OR ORNAMENTATION?

Many Irish flute players, but very few whistle players, use glottal and diaphragm techniques in place of tonguing. From here forward, for simplicity's sake, I will group these glottal and diaphragm techniques together under the term *throating*.

Tonguing and throating are usually grouped under the moniker of **articulation**. For our purposes I identify an articulation as *that extremely brief sound component of a note that defines its beginning or attack*.

So far, I have been freely using the term articulation as if it were a part of a vocabulary that is commonly accepted for describing Irish music. But in fact, this has not been so. I hope that will change.

Cuts and strikes, the fingered articulations referred to above, are referred to by nearly all Irish musicians as “ornaments”. I acknowledge that common practice. But I feel it is more accurate to describe cuts and strikes as articulations. They are very brief sounds that define the attacks of notes. Since cuts and strikes are so central to tin whistle ornamentation, the ramifications of choosing to look upon them as articulations are quite far-reaching.

Cuts and strikes are special articulations that have their own pitch element. One could accurately call them *pitched articulations*. They sound ornamental to our ear because of their pitch element. Other articulations that do not have a pitch element, such as tonguing and throating, do not sound ornamental to our ears.

ORNAMENT CATEGORIES

I divide ornaments into two groups: *single-note ornaments* and *multi-note ornaments*.

The single-note ornaments are the pitched articulations (the cut and the strike) and the pitch inflections called *slides*.

Multi-note ornaments include *rolls*, *cranns*, *trills*, *finger vibrato*, and a few others. There are many varieties of rolls and cranns. In this book we will work with short and long rolls, but not with other kinds of rolls and not with cranns. As stated above, these are advanced techniques that I explore in depth in my book *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*.

I strongly recommend that you progress sequentially through the five chapters in this section of the book, for the information in later chapters is built upon that of the earlier ones.

FIRST WE WILL EXPLORE SINGLE-NOTE ORNAMENTS

The single-note ornaments are **cuts**, **strikes**, and **slides**. Cuts and strikes are *pitched articulations* while tonguing and throating are *non-pitched articulations*. The slide is an *inflection*. It has too long a duration to be considered an articulation in my view, though you can certainly play very quick and subtle slides.

Single-note ornaments and articulations can be utilized alone, and some can be combined and played simultaneously, or “stacked,” in a variety of ways to give the player a very wide palette of ways to express a single note.

ⁱ Valery Lloyd and Carol L. Bigler, *Ornamentation, A Question & Answer Manual*, (Van Nuys, California: Alfred Publishing Co., 1995) p.8.