

THE MAKING OF IRISH MUSIC

"Modes", said the flute-player. "The scales of Irish music are called Modes. You play them on the piano, on the white notes, one after another."

"Keys", said the fiddler. "Irish music is written in three keys - two sharps, three sharps and one sharp. I've been playing them all my days."

"Tunes?", said the piper. "If you'd listen to a good man playing, and try to play like him, you'd know all you need to know about Irish Music. Tunes. That's all you want," said the piper. "Tunes".

"Rhythm", said the dancer. "The whole secret of dance music is in the rhythm. There's a beat in it," said he, rising and tapping his toes. "And here's thirty-two of them -

All along, all along, all along, all along

Lantherin Loo, Lantherin Loo

All along, all along, all along, all along

Lantherin Loo, Lantherin Loo!

Lantherin Loo, Lantherin Loo,

Andy goes there with his margadh too,

I'll houl't a crown with any of you,

There's ne'er a one there only thirty-two."

And the fluter put his flute to his lips, and the fiddler flaked away on the fiddle and the piper piped to the rhythm of the dancer's feet. And I got up and went away. Their talk had ended, and I saw no point in interrupting their music to re-open a futile discussion. I thought I'd be better engaged in writing down for their instruction some indisputable facts about Irish Music.

As a people we have always looked upon music in much the same way as the philosophers of Ancient Greece. Throughout the Middle Ages we shared with the rest of Europe certain Greek ideas: a conception of music as consisting essentially of pure, unencumbered melodic line; and the idea of melody intimately linked with words.

rhythm-by-length (including measured silences) and by these very characteristics reveal their intimate relation to the art of music. The writers of our popular poetry made their verses to the lie of popular melodies and dance tunes, but the composers of our Classical Verse~~s~~, who wrote for instrumental accompaniment in complicated rhythms, must have been a race of musician-poets. For, as W.P. Ker has remarked, "The art of music cannot be improvised and poets who write for music, like Pindar in Greece, have to learn the technicalities of music, with which the technicalities of metre are closely connected." So much for the relationship of Irish music to Gaelic poetry.

We shall now go on to consider the scales which music scholars, "by going through the process of mincing live melodies into dead notes", now accept as basic in Irish music. "Scales," says Curt Sachs, "align step by step the notes used in a certain mode at a certain pitch. In a narrower sense, they extend from the ground tone of a mode to its octave and include all fully qualified notes, but leave out those due to casual alteration or modulation." The scales of Irish music are the very same scales that served the whole of European music, even art-music, until the ^{beginning of the 17th} ~~sixteenth~~ century. They are modal scales which finally grew into our modern system of Major and Minor Keys. For very good historical reasons our traditional musicians were unable to play their part in the final evolution of that system. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, when music in Europe was feeling its way out of the scales which we now call "modes", Irish music was virtually outlawed because of the part taken by the musicians in the last upsurge of Gaelic Ireland against the English. In the punitive conditions which followed the defeat at Kinsale and persisted for over two centuries, Irish musicians continued to make music in the only way known to them, that is, in the modes, which in time began to sound "quaint" and "very ancient" to the "cultivated" ears of their English overlords. Irish traditional musicians still work in these modes and no man with Irish blood in his veins considers their melodies quaint. A great number of them are certainly not "very ancient".

The scales or "modes" are six in number and each of them contains eight notes,

one doubled at the octave. If we sing them downwards in the Irish style and name them, without any reference to pitch, by their Tonic-Solfa names, according to the sounds by which they begin and end, we get the following scales:

Modh Lá: Lá, só, fá, mí, ré, dó, tí, lá.

Modh Só: Só, fá, mí, ré, dó, tí, lá, só.

Modh Fá: Fá, mí, ré, dó, tí, lá, só, fá.

Modh Mí: Mí, ré, dó, tí, lá, só, fá, mí.

Modh Ré: Ré, dó, tí, lá, só, fá, mí, ré.

Modh Dó: Dó, tí, lá, só, fá, mí, ré, dó.

You will notice that the last scale corresponds to our modern Major Scale. You will also notice that I have underlined the semitones in all the scales. This I have done because their position in each scale alters with variation in the ground tone.

Now how should a fiddler set about learning these scales? Obviously, he should play them in such a way that he will never be required to sound any sharp note other than those which appear in his playing of traditional melodies - F^\sharp , C^\sharp and A^\sharp . The same remarks would of course apply to a flute-player or an uilleann piper, but for my purpose I shall address myself to the fiddler. The flute-player and the uilleann piper can play the notes indicated, and ignore my references to strings and fingering.

The fiddler should begin by playing the following four modes, each of which begins on the open first string and descends to the position of his first finger on the third string:

Modh Mí	E D <u>C</u> <u>B</u> A G <u>F</u> E
Modh Lá	E D <u>C</u> <u>B</u> A <u>G</u> <u>F</u> [#] E
Modh Ré	E D <u>C</u> [#] B A <u>G</u> <u>F</u> [#] E
Modh Só	E D <u>C</u> [#] B <u>A</u> <u>G</u> [#] <u>F</u> [#] E

For his next two modes, in order to continue using only F^\sharp , C^\sharp and G^\sharp he must behead Modh Só and ~~Modh Ré~~, and use the second note D in a scale descending to the third open

string:

Modh Fá:	<u>D</u> <u>C[#]</u> <u>B</u> <u>A</u> <u>G[#]</u> <u>F[#]</u> E D
Modh Dó:	<u>D</u> <u>C[#]</u> B A <u>G</u> <u>F[#]</u> E D

Having thus established a Doh Mode ending in D he can now play the six modes with successive "starters" from Modh Lá to Modh Dó - in traditional fingering, downwards, beginning with the fourth finger on the first string:

Modh Lá:	B A G F [#] E D C [#] B
Modh So:	A G F [#] E D C [#] B A
Modh Fá:	G F [#] E D C [#] B A G
Modh Mí:	F [#] E D C [#] B A G F [#]
Modh Ré:	E D C [#] B A G F [#] E
Modh Dó:	D C [#] B A G F [#] E D

Here he should recognize Modh Ré and Modh Dó as old friends.

At a different pitch and in different order of succession he can now play these modes again from the same starter:

Modh Mí:	B A G F [#] E D C B
Modh Ré:	A G F [#] E D C B A
Modh Dó:	G F [#] E D C B A G
Modh Lá:	E D C B A G F [#] E
Modh So:	D C B A G F [#] E D
Modh Fá:	C B A G F [#] E D C.

Here he should recognize an old friend in Modh Lá. The series proceeds through F[#] whereas the previous series proceeded through F[#] and C[#]. What modern musicians call key-signatures serve in Irish music to indicate the pitch of the mode.

The only other modes in practical but infrequent use nowadays are modes from A Doh and C Doh. Simey Doherty (go ndéanaidh Dia A mhaith air) once played his "Pigeon on the Gate" for me "on a flat" but he was merely demonstrating a very unusual kind of

transition.
of modal transcription.

Now; how are you to recognize what mode a tune is written in? If you are good at tonic-solfa you should recognize it, generally, by the sound of the last note in the tune - if the tune ends on Lá, the tune is in Modh Lá; if it ends on Ré, it is in Modh Ré and so on. If however you read only staff notation you should see from the scales outlined above the notes on which modal tunes end when they are played through either one sharp or two sharps.

Now here is a list of tune-titles available in "Ceol Rince na hEireann" (Breathnach) "Dance Music of Ireland" (O'Neill) and "Fuinn Fiadha Fuinidh" Pt. II (Hardebeck). Opposite each title the mode of the tune is indicated.

Modh Lá	Bailitheóir Longphoirt (Breathnach No. 184)
Modh Só	Swaggering Jig (O'Neill No. 261 413)
Modh Fá	Humours of Ayle House (O'Neill No. 261)
Modh Mí	Cailleach Mhór (Hardebeck)
Modh Ré	Port Sean tSheáin (Breathnach No. 22)
Modh Do	The Frieze Breeches (O'Neill No. 260).

Focal Scur: The next time I meet the merry company who appeared at the beginning of this essay, I ~~hope I shall find them better informed about the nature of our national~~ music. *I think I'll sit down and listen to their music.*

Seán O Boyle



