

Jos Koning: 'That old plaintive touch'

On the relation between tonality in Irish traditional dance-music and the left hand technique of fiddlers in east Co. Clare, Ireland.

As one of the very few countries in Western Europe that can still boast on the strong life of its traditional music, Ireland stands out for the multiplicity of social occasions in which traditional dance-music has been used, and still is being used. Even within the very small community of Feakle in east Co. Clare, where I did fieldwork in 1975, the dance-music of *jigs* and *reels* is used for solo stepdances, for various kinds of community dances, for musical competitions, for concerts and shows, and for quiet occasions of listening. It is fascinating to see how, in this small place differences in use are related to differences in musical structure.

In the present paper I will concentrate on the tonal structure of this music in relation to left hand technique of local Feakle fiddlers.

A main fieldwork technique which I used in Feakle was musical and social participant observation. Being already trained as a fiddler in Dutch and Irish traditional music, I was taught by the Feakle fiddlers, who made me participate in many of their musical activities and discussions.

Irish musicians class tunes as *jigs* or *reels* according to elements of 'time', 'tune' and formal structure. As may be seen in Fig. 2 and 5, both jigs and reels consist of at least two parts—called *tune* and *turn*—each of which is usually repeated, often with slight alterations towards the end of that part. Each part has a characteristic motive which appears two or four times (the final one often disappears in the 'run' or 'lift' at the end of the turn). Each dance-melody is played at least two times; this repetition usually does not appear in transcriptions. Since no repetition is an exact copy, transcriptions tend to disregard the many ornamentations and variations played by the individual player, according to his own taste and inventivity.

While most elements of 'tune' and formal structure are found as characteristics of both reels and jigs, there is a difference between the two classes where the element of 'time' is concerned. The main difference is to be found in the basic rhythm, which for jigs is transcribed in $\frac{6}{8}$ time, for reels in $\frac{2}{2}$.

As I have already indicated the individual player has a wide measure of freedom in his performances, which is related to ornamentation and variation techniques. Many tunes exist in various versions, which even broadens the scope for performance variety. Many of these versions have a regional flavour, or are typical for certain musical instruments. After some training one may be able to recognize transcribed tunes as e.g. fiddle tunes, pipe tunes etc. In east Clare the fiddle has been the most prominent instrument up to 1970, after which date its position gradually has been taken over by the accordeon and the tin-whistle.

Most east Clare players do not use transcriptions of tunes, and many do not read musical scores at all. Nevertheless they have their own musical 'jargon' which functions especially in teaching, but also in more general communication on tunes and playing techniques.

The musicians recognize the interval of the octave. They even tend to neglect the difference between two tones which are one octave apart. The tones used in Irish music are called *d—e—f—g—a—b—c*. These names do not indicate absolute pitches. The *d* is the bottom note of pipes, flutes and whistles, whatever its actual absolute pitch may be. In relation to this *d*, the term *f* indicates *f* and *f* sharp, and octave transpositions of these tones; similarly *c* indicates *c* and *c* sharp. This is not to say that the players do not hear the difference between e.g. *f* and *f* sharp; indeed they do. But they usually do not mind if one plays *f* or *f* sharp. In relation to this it may be important to notice that *f* and *c* hardly ever function as tonal centre of the tunes.

Scholars with a background in classical western music theory often classify Irish tunes according to 'modus'. For such a classification the final note, the finalis, is taken as starting point of the scale; the intervals between this note and the other notes used in the tune reveal the modus of that particular tune. The players themselves do not use such a theory. For them the first note has a more important

determination function than the last. As they say, a tune starting on c is 'in the key of c', regardless of the final note, and regardless of scale. Fiddlers often indicate the finger of the left hand which determines the first note, instead of referring to key. As I will explain, the key, or first left hand finger, chosen by a fiddler, is partly responsible for the scale which may be distilled from the resulting melody. This is caused by characteristics of left hand technique.

One who is being taught to play the violin in the classical way learns to use at least two different finger positions of each of the four left hand fingers. The resulting two tones are a semitone apart. In order to be able to move the fingers freely, the player has to support the instrument by resting it on his shoulder and subsequently resting his jaw on the instrument. In this way the left hand does not have to function as support for the instrument.

The east Clare fiddler usually supports his instrument with his left hand and arm, while his elbow rests on his hip. Often the whole neck of the instrument is in contact with the left hand. This position makes it difficult to move the fourth finger; indeed this finger is mainly used for the top note of many tunes (*b''*), and only occasionally for other notes. The position of the first and third finger is relatively fixed: on a whole tone and a fourth above the pitch of the open string. The second finger has more freedom. There is, however, a tendency among players to play most of their tunes with a fixed, favourite position of the second finger; for most Feakle fiddlers this position is low. Yet nearly all fiddlers are able to manipulate this finger position. The tendency to favour a particular position is heard most clearly within single tunes.




1 In the transcriptions presented here only the first performance of the tunes has been transcribed. Usually the whole tune is repeated with slight alterations.  has the same duration as ; the symbol  is used to indicate that the first note is slightly longer than the second.

Fig. 1 Fingerpositions on the four strings of the fiddle

c	0	f''	1	g''	2	g#''	3	a''	b''	b''
a'	0	b	b'	b'	c'	c#'	d''	d#''	e''	
d'	0	d#'	e'	f'	f#'	g'	g#'	a'		
g	0	g#	a	b ^b	b	c'	c#'	d'		8

open string, fixed 1st finger, fixed low and high 2nd finger positions, one of these tends to be fixed 3rd finger, fixed

Fig. 2. Martin Rochford: My love is in America (played two times, and finished with the first, unrepeated, part). Metronome speed: $\text{♩} = 106$. Instr.: fiddle¹



Fig. 3. Part 1 of My love is in America, in: Allen's Irish fiddler (standard version) compare with fig. 2

Fig. 4. Paddy Canny: Bunch of green rushes (played twice). Metronome speed: $\text{♩} = 108$. The second and third parts are based on a pattern in which only second and third fingers are used. Some bars are even complete transpositions of previous groups of bars on other strings.

Eight staves of musical notation in treble clef, key of D major (one sharp), and 4/4 time. The notation shows a sequence of eighth and sixteenth notes. The first staff has a common time signature 'C' and a repeat sign. The second staff has a sharp sign. The eighth staff ends with the word 'etc.' written above the final measure.

Most tunes can only be played by using at least three strings. Since the position of the first and third fingers are fixed, a fixed position of the second finger results in what I prefer to call chromatic opposition. With the help of Fig. 1 one may see that a high second finger may result in an opposition between g' and g'' sharp, while a low second finger may result in an opposition between f' and f'' sharp. Fig. 2 gives an example of the latter case. While the players do not think it necessary to discriminate between f and f sharp verbally, neither do they try to avoid the audible 'opposition' between these tones. Seen in this light the concept of chromatic opposition is an ethnocentric one, which is a point to be considered.

Another consequence of the use of a continually low second finger is the existence of such versions of tunes which, heard through the western classical ear, may be described as 'minor' variations on 'major' tunes. Fig. 3 illustrates this.

Another result of stereotyped fingering models is heard when a tune is played in two versions, the tonal centres of which are a whole tone apart. In a tune with a as centre, the third above the centre (c'') may be a minor one. With g as centre the same third will be major. Our conditioned ears will tell us that the tonality, or modality, has changed completely (even apart from their absolute pitches). I doubt whether this is also the fiddlers' own experience or not, since I have no proof at all. The fiddlers only comment on the difference in key (i.e. first note).

In parts of many tunes a certain pentatonic or hexatonic structure may be recognized. When a fiddler uses only two fingers on two strings (first and second, first and third or second and third on e.g. the d' and a' string) this may result in a pentatonic pattern. If the tune demands use of a third string as well (e.g. the e'' string) the use of the same two fingers may introduce tones which do not belong to this pentatonic pattern. Hence a stereotyped fingering model on all strings, which is very usual in east Clare, may cause both chromatic

Fig. 5A. Mist covered mountain, in: Treoir IV-3 (1972)



oppositions and departs from pentatonic patterns, depending on the number of fingers used. The latter case however, the depart from pentatonic structures, and the persevering of a two-finger-model on several strings, is usually restricted to smaller parts of tunes. Fig. 4 presents an example. Only the second and third fingers are used. As soon as the melody reaches the top string, the e'' takes the place of the f'' (or rather f'' sharp, which indeed appears in other versions of this reel).

Phenomena like the absence of discrimination between chromatic opposites, both in verbal and musical behaviour, could easily make one think that the players are just not aware of the opposition between f and f sharp, and the like. This is not the case. The stereotyped finger patterns may have a physiological basis (the way the fiddlers hold their instrument obstructs the free movements of various muscles), yet the audible results are appreciated musically. Indeed performances are not

rejected as incorrect if they feature the juxtaposition of e.g. f and f sharp, and when more players play together they do not interpret the simultaneous occurrence of these two tones as dissonant. Yet various observations have made me understand that on a certain musical level the players are completely aware of the chromatic opposition.

As I have pointed out, some players tend to use a stereotyped fingering pattern throughout most of their tunes. Musicians would recognize my performance of specific tunes as inspired by a particular local player, due to the fingering pattern which I used on that occasion. This would happen especially if the tune concerned is usually rendered with another pattern.

Sometimes the players mention a note called f natural or even f flat. With this term they indicate a slide with the first finger on the top string, moving from e'' upward, through f'' to f'' sharp. In this case the specified

Fig. 5B. Martin Rochford: Mist covered mountain (Played 3 times, Metronome speed: ♩ = 104). Instrument: fiddle

terminology is related to specified pitches. This *f* natural slide is used as a highly effective colouring element. The *reel* of Fig. 2 presents an example.

It seems to me that the individual freedom in performances, allowed to the player, enables him to manipulate according to his personal taste the musical results of physiological restrictions. The application of such personal freedom does not affect the identity of the tune, but it manifests the identity of the player. This may be the reason that no verbal concepts are used to discriminate between chromatic opposites. One may get an idea of this process of manipulation by comparing two versions of the jig 'Mist covered mountain' presented in Fig. 5 A. The first was published in the music magazine *Treoir*. Martin Rechford, who reads musical scores, started the practice of this tune during my fieldwork, although he said that he had heard the tune before. His performance features the *f*—*f* sharp opposition, moreover the *c*" seems to have taken the place of *b*'. On the *d*' and *a*' strings the player uses a fingering pattern with a low second finger, for which he has a strong preference. Martin discussed his performance with Paddy O'Brien from Tipperary, a famous accordionist who plays the tune according to the *Treoir* version. Both noticed that although the tune was the same there were audible differences. Martin's performance was characterized as having an old, plaintive touch. During the discussion the players noticed that Martin plays *f*' wherever Paddy plays *f*' sharp. They considered this difference to be at least partly responsible for the plaintive touch. When I continued the discussion and playing of the versions a few days later, Martin made it clear that he prefers the *c*" to the *b*'. The fact that the audible results of the fingering pattern used have an emotive quality reinforced my idea that phenomena like the *f*—*f* sharp opposition are indeed musically appreciated.

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