

FEATURES OF IRISH DANCE MUSIC

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SUMMARY. The focus of this paper is to bring into light the traditional categories of Irish dance music, emphasizing the musical characteristics that differentiate them. Energetic and effervescent, Irish dance music is rarely analyzed, with Irish folklore lacking a school of dedicated musicologists. The topic of this article is important in the context of the tensions related to globalization, commodification, and transformations in Irish Traditional Music, that scholars are examining. The paper includes musical examples of the traditional Irish dance music categories, for a better view of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Irish music, dance music, ethnomusicology.

1. Introduction

Irish dance music is a tradition of both centuries-old and recently composed tunes, as new songs are being written and performed in the recent times². The focus of this paper is to bring into light the traditional categories of Irish dance music, emphasizing the musical characteristics that differentiate them. Energetic and effervescent, Irish dance music is rarely analyzed, with Irish folklore lacking a school of dedicated musicologists³.

The topic of this article is important in the light of the tensions related to globalization, commodification, and transformations in Irish Traditional Music, that scholars are examining⁴.

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² Andy Hillhouse, *Hooks and new tunes: contemporary Irish dance music in its transnational context*. Ethnomusicology Ireland 2/3, July, 2013, p. 38-39.

³ James R. Cowdery, *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland*. Kent State University Press, 1990, p. x.

⁴ Andy Hillhouse, op. cit., p. 38.

2. Short history

One of the most important folklorists of Irish music, Breandán Breathnach, talks about the first dances introduced on Irish territory by the Normans, most of them performed in a circle; one of these is carol, a dance of lovers associated with the rituals of May, which after the twelfth century becomes what we know today to be the term “carol” in English. This dance of the Middle Ages takes place in a circle, a verse being sung by a leader, the chorus being sung by the other dancers of the group, spinning and following the leader⁵.

Fintan O’Toole, an Irish journalist, manages to put into words the essence of folk-dance music - the basic shape is circular, repetitive, and predictable. It expresses a stable way of life, of a community in the core of which we can find everything that needs to be known and experienced in life. The pleasure of music has its place in the very improvisation and ornamentation of basic songs, which reflects the idea of the unpredictable⁶. The repertoire of dance songs consists of the reel, the jig, and the hornpipe, in recent years adding genres of other cultures - polka, mazurka, and others adapted to the instruments and sounds of traditional Irish music.

The term dance (*damhsa*) first appeared in Ireland in 1520, being a derivative of the French word *danse*. Other terms that are used today to define dances such as the reel and the jig are *coir* or *poirt*, which meant, in the past, pieces in a fast tempo performed on the harp, of small dimensions.

In the 17th century, the dance tended to be performed in groups, but from the 18th century onwards, solo or step dance appeared, which completely changed the values of the Irish tradition. This is considered by Sam Smyth to be the only major change in the Irish history of dance development⁷.

3. The Reel

Breandán Breathnach provides valuable information on the dance genres practiced in Ireland to this day; the most widespread Irish dance is the reel (a term derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *rulla*, meaning to whirl), which is performed in fast motion, found in both Scotland and Ireland, conceived in binary time signatures (2 / 2 or 4/4); the form usually consists

⁵ Breandán Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland*, Cork, The Mercier Press, 1971, p. 36.

⁶ Skinner Sawyers, *Celtic Music – A Complete Guide*, London, Aurum Press, 2000, p. 54.

⁷ Sam Smyth, *Riverdance*, Carlton Books Limited, 1997, p. 37.

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of two sections - A and B, each of 8 bars, which are repeated either as AABB, ABAB, or AABC structure, when ternary in form. These 8 bars can be divided into phrases of 4 bars each, with the exception of auld reel, which cannot be formally sectioned, presenting influences of Norwegian music. The rhythm is made up of eighth notes, the accents on the first and third beat being one of the characteristics of this dance⁸. The typical sequence of rhythm values of the reel is:

E.g. 1



The reel's rhythm

Many reels dating back to the 18th century are of Scottish origin, so their name has been changed: the name of a Scottish reel - The Duke of Gordon's Rant becomes Lord Gordon's Reel in Ireland, or The Perthshire Hunt becomes The Boyne Hunt. Some reels can be attributed to Scottish composers-instrumentalists, and one of them is Daniel Dow, a Perthshire fiddle performer who composed one of Bonnie Kate's most famous reels. Another Scottish composer is William Marshall, who composed the aforementioned reel - Lord Gordon's Reel.

Below you can see an example of reel, collected, and transcribed by Breandán Breathnach in *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland*, following the performance of Seán Keane on solo fiddle.

E.g. 2



⁸ Orfhlaith M. Ní Bhriain, *Irish Dance Music – For the Feet or for the Soul?*, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, 2009, p. 15-17.



Example of reel dance music⁹

4. The Jig

Another dance frequently performed in Ireland, representing the oldest dance that has survived in the Irish musical tradition, is called the double jig, characterized by a lively movement, in a 6/8 bar; the jig genre is originally written in binary bar/meter (2/4), inheriting the characteristics of the English dancing genre of the 16th century - “giga”. This dance is generally performed by a pair of two dancers. The term comes from the French verb “giguer” which can be translated to “jumping”. Another assumption is that the dance came from Italy and was borrowed from Italian harpists who landed in the lands of Ireland.

Later, this dance was performed and written in ternary metre, in 6/8 bar (in the case of double jig and single jig) and 9/8 bar (in the case of the slip jig variant); this dance genre can still be found today in both the English and the Scottish culture, in various forms: light jig, slip jig, single jig, tremble jig. The structure of the dance consists of two sections of 8 bars each, which are lined with other jig tunes, the dancers performing two distinct steps - one on the left leg and another on the right leg¹⁰.

The musical characteristics of this dance are evident in Garrett Barry’s Jig, performed on uilleann pipes by Jerry O’Sullivan, a famous Irish performer, with transcription belonging to the authors Dorothea E. Hast and Stanley Scott.

⁹ Breandán Breathnach, op. cit., p. 133.

¹⁰ Margaret Dean-Smith, *Jig* in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

E.g. 3



Example of jig dance music¹¹

The single jig is also written in 6/8 bar, but can also be found in 12/8 bar, and the specific rhythm formula is consisting of the repetition of a trochee formula:

E.g. 4.



The rhythm of the single jig

The Humors of Kilclogher is a single jig dance from the western part of the Clare region of Ireland, transcribed by Breandán Breathnach after John Kelly's fiddle performance:

¹¹ Dorothea E. Hast, Stanley Scott, *Music in Ireland*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 72.



The Humors of Kilclogher – single jig¹²

The light jig is a dance also in 6/8 bar, which is based on raising one leg in the air while the other does jumps as follows: jump twice on the left leg (the movement is called “hop”) while the right is in the air, the right foot then takes on the weight of the body, being placed behind the left. This chaining is called “hop, hop, back” and is followed by a hop on the right leg, and then follows a weight change between the two legs left - right - left - right, so the final formula is “ hop, hop, back, hop back 2-3-4 “. It is very interesting to see and hear the connection between the ternary accents in the music and the jumping movements of the body. Also, it should be noted the diversity of movements that are subject to the same ternary meter.

The slip jig is the ballet of Irish dance, because it involves movements made only on the tips of the toes; it is written in 9/8 bar. It's called the slip jig because the dancers execute a slight slip on the floor, suggesting floating in the air. This dance was originally performed by two pairs of dancers, each couple dancing independently. There are moments in this dance when couples walk around the room, having a specific jumping movement¹³.

An example of a slip jig is the traditional dance called The Butterfly:

¹² Breandán Breathnach, op. cit., p. 137.

¹³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20110710123434/http://mag.diddlyi.com/2009/11/%E2%80%99Cslippery%E2%80%9D-slip-jigs-what-are-they-and-why-do-they-seem-so-strange/>, accessed 10.09.2021

E.g. 6



The Butterfly – slip jig¹⁴

5. The Hornpipe

The hornpipe is a dance of English origin, conceived in binary meter - 2/4 or 4/4 bar, that resembles the reel, but has a performance in a more settled tempo, with much stronger accents, based on a punctuated rhythm:

E.g. 7



The Hornpipe rhythm

The term hornpipe refers to a dance encountered since the sixteenth century in the sailing vessels of the British Isles. It is assumed that this dance is introduced from 1760 on stage, performed between acts or scenes in plays. Also, during this period, the dance acquires a binary meter. This dance is performed by a single dancer, a man, rarely performed by a woman. The only place where women dance hornpipes is Cork.

There are two types of hornpipes, one consisting of equal note values, the other composed of dotted values of rhythm. This dance is also present in the United States of America, and this can be proved by the existence of such a dance in the American territory: President Garfield's Hornpipe. The term was often used to refer to dance songs in 9/4 or 9/8 bars, based on a syncopated rhythm, performed mainly in Ireland and Northumberland, but these are called slip jigs today¹⁵.

¹⁴ https://www.celticscores.com/type/Slip_jig/, accessed 05.09.2021.

¹⁵ http://chrisbrady.itgo.com/dance/stepdance/hornpipe_conference.htm, accessed 25.08.2021.

After listening to a hornpipe collage performed by the Dublin Metropolitan Garda Céili Band, I chose to insert a hornpipe transcribed by Bob Safranek, entitled Humors of Castle Bernard:

E.g. 8



Humors of Castle Bernard – hornpipe dance¹⁶

6. Sound systems in traditional Irish music

Regarding the folk music scales, the Irish folklorist Breandán Breathnach states that the most used one in Irish music is the Ionian. After researching a vast repertoire, he made the following remarks, that I organized in a table:

Scale	Frequency in vocal and dance songs
Ionian	60%
Mixolydian	15 %
Dorian	10 %
Aeolian	5 %

The rest of the vocal and dance songs have a mixed Mixolydian-Ionian structure, the first section of the song having a mixolydian structure, and the second being performed in Ionian scale. Breandán Breathnach also talks about the transposed scales: Ionian on G and D, Dorian on A and E,

¹⁶ <https://thesession.org/tunes/3823>, accessed 25.08.2021.

Mixolydian on D and A, Aeolian on E and B. In addition to these sound systems, the folklorist specifies others - the pentatonic scales and the hexatones¹⁷.

7. Conclusions

With a wide musical repertoire, traditional Irish dances are surprising because of the energy and diversity they show. Many of the Irish dance performances are easy to spot and culturally frame due to the specific solo movements performed. What is worth studying in-depth is the music and the musical characteristics of traditional dances.

As we noted in this article, they have small differences in form, rhythm, or sound structure, thus constituting distinct genres of music that accompanies Irish dance. As mentioned earlier, the creativity of choreographies that overlap with similar metrics, but use different accents or rhythmic series, is admirable. In a world of globalization, research on the authenticity and provenance of traditional music, as well as the analysis of the musical characteristics of traditional repertoires seems to us to be of great importance.

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¹⁷ Breandán Breathnach, op. cit., p. 159.

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