

INTRODUCTION

IRISH SLOW AIRS

In contrast to the many thousands of lively traditional Irish tunes which have roots in instrumental dance music, the Slow Air comes largely from the vocal tradition of songs in Irish. Many Slow Airs are rhythmically complex or eccentric, perhaps modulating between two modes in an unpredictable way.

Slow Airs are performed with many virtuosic embellishments whether sung or played, and mostly as unaccompanied solos. The virtuosic embellishments, left as they are to the taste and skill of the performer, can have the effect of creating a new version of an existing tune or perhaps even rendering it almost unrecognisable. This, in turn, compels the rapt attention of the listener towards the performance in which listener/performer divisions fall away and for a few moments, both inhabit the same space, creating a kind of “musical communion”.

In recent years solo unaccompanied and unharmonized performance is generally regarded as the most acceptable way to render a traditional tune, freeing it from the distractions of piano or guitar accompaniment, distancing it from earlier sentimental approaches or settings that attempt to europeanise, modernise or popularise the pure melody. It is true that much fault can be found in notated or recorded performances harmonized in an awkward or clumsy way. On the other hand, it can be pointed out that all Western musical traditions are rooted in tonal frameworks and out of the perception of shifting tonality within a melody, harmony arises. This conscious or unconscious tendency toward harmony, is so universal in Western music and amongst Western peoples, that schools of musical composition arose in the early twentieth century which attempted to break free from tonal frameworks. To imagine that an Irish singer is somehow set apart from other Western peoples and does not have an awareness of shifting tonalities within a melody, borders on racism, especially when one considers the richness and complexity of Irish music. The harmonic possibilities of both harp and uilleann pipes, twin pinnacles of Irish music, underpin the argument for simple harmonic accompaniment of these melodies.

Some Irish Slow Airs are very well known and are often performed by musicians working not only within traditional music but also classical, jazz and popular. Most of these dozen or so well-known tunes have been, at some point in their history, harmonically rendered in a recording or printed setting by a great artist or arranger so successfully that the harmonic framework may be playing itself out unconsciously in the head of the performer even when there is no accompaniment. It might be argued that the dozen or so tunes are so popular because they are the best, the most beautiful, and that most other Slow Airs pale by comparison. It is the opinion of this writer that this is not the case, and that many of the less well-known Airs are as beautiful, but have not yet received an appropriate harmonic setting. This harmonic gestalt can become a cup into which the wine of melody is poured.

The Slow Airs contained here are drawn from a variety of printed sources, many still published and available at the time of writing (see list on the last page) or accessible to view online at the Irish Traditional Music Archive's website (www.itma.ie). In this edition, each Air is given in three forms. Firstly the melody is presented more or less as found in its printed source, though sometimes transposed, and with obvious textual errors corrected. Secondly, they are carefully harmonized with simple major or minor guitar chords as well as the same chords notated in the most convenient inversion under the melodic note. Thirdly, the melody is given with possible embellishments. These ornamentations have been arranged with the modern Lyre in mind so that they lie easily under the fingers and I have tried to vary which note is decorated when part of the tune is repeated. In this way I hope to encourage instrumentalists to find their own way to embellish and decorate. It is a matter of course that players of other instruments can adjust them to suit their particular instrument.

Each of the three versions could stand alone in performance. When there is more than one performer, the different versions can be combined. Players of melody instruments could start with the first version and later graduate to the third. Players of plucked strings or keyboard could play any of the three versions. Players of bass instruments could join others in providing the roots of the chords and so on. Harmonies could be added gradually starting with open octaves or fifths and only later filling in with thirds as the tune is repeated again and again. Repetition signs *should* be obeyed and where there is a simple double barline the tune *can* be repeated. If there is more than one player, the notes of the basic tune should always fall on the same beat when playing the decorations in the third version, so that first and third versions remain synchronised among players of different ability. Decorations should always be played lightly so that one hardly notices them.

J. S. Clark
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19. An Londubh is an Chéirseach *The Blackbird and the Thrush*

$\text{♩} = 50$

Musical score for 'An Londubh is an Chéirseach' in G major, 4/4 time. The score consists of nine staves. The first staff is the melody with a tempo marking of quarter note = 50. The second staff is a vocal line with triplets. The third staff is the guitar accompaniment with chords: G, Bm, D, Am, D, D, G, G, Bm. The fourth staff continues the guitar accompaniment with chords: D, Am, D, D, C, 3 G, G, Dm, Am, C. The fifth staff continues with chords: G, C, G, 3 D, G, Bm, D, D, D, C, 3 G. The sixth staff continues with chords: G, Bm, D, Am, D, D, C, 3 D, G, Bm. The seventh staff continues with chords: D, Am, D, D, C, 3 G, G, Dm, Am, C. The eighth staff continues with chords: G, C, G, 3 D, Bm, D, Am, D, D, C, 3 G. The ninth staff continues with chords: G, Bm, D, Am, D, D, C, 3 D, G, Bm.

20. An Mhaighdean Mhara *Maiden*

$\text{♩} = 60$

Musical score for 'An Mhaighdean Mhara' in G major, 3/4 time. The score consists of five staves. The first staff is the melody with a tempo marking of quarter note = 60. The second staff is a vocal line. The third staff is the guitar accompaniment with chords: Bm, G, A, D. The fourth staff continues with chords: F#m, Bm, G, D, G.

Chords: Bm, D, F#m, Bm, G, A, D, D, Bm, G, A, D, F#m, Bm, G, D, G, Bm, D, F#m, Bm, G, A, D

21. An Raibh Tú ar an gCarraig? *Were You At the Rock?*

Tempo: $\text{♩} = 60$

Chords: Em, C, Bm, Em, Em, Bm, Em, Bm, Em, D, G, Bm, C, D, Em, Em, C, Em, Bm, Em, Em, Bm, Em, D, G, Bm, C, D, Em

22. An Saol Meallta *This Perverse World*

$\text{♩} = 108$

The image displays a musical score for the piece "An Saol Meallta" (This Perverse World). The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/8 time signature. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 108. The score consists of ten staves of music. The first four staves are the main melody. The fifth through tenth staves provide guitar accompaniment, with chords written above the notes. The chords used are G, D, Am, Em, C, Bm, and D. A large, semi-transparent watermark with the word "Piano" in a stylized font is oriented diagonally across the page, from the bottom-left to the top-right.

23. Banks of Sullane *Bainc an tSullain*

$\text{♩} = 68$

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Banks of Sullane' (Bainc an tSullain). The score is written in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature and a tempo marking of quarter note = 68. It consists of ten staves of music. The first four staves show the melody line. The last six staves show the guitar accompaniment, with chords indicated by letters above the notes. The chords used are C, Em, Am, and A. A large, semi-transparent watermark with the word 'PREVIEW' in a stylized font is oriented diagonally across the entire page, from the bottom-left to the top-right.