

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 single printed source, the first part of OLD IRISH FOLK MUSIC AND SONGS by P.W. JOYCE, accessible to view online at the Irish Traditional Music Archive's website (www.itma.ie). In the present edition, most Airs are given in three forms. Firstly the melody is presented more or less as found in the printed source, with obvious textual errors corrected. Secondly the melody is given with possible embellishments and carefully harmonized with simple major or minor guitar chord indications. 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 not all ornaments need be played and that players of other instruments can adjust them to suit their particular instrument. Thirdly, the unornamented melody is given with the above mentioned guitar chords as well as the same chords notated in the most convenient inversion under the melodic note. Metronome speeds are suggestions only and indicate the maximum tempo. Tempi can be varied within a piece and should never be rigid.

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 second. 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 second version, so that first and second versions remain synchronised among players of different ability. Decorations should always be played lightly so that one hardly notices them.

J. S. Clark
Monassa
Ireland 2020

168. The Song Of The Blackbird (316)

The image displays a musical score for the piece "The Song Of The Blackbird" (numbered 168, measure 316). The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 78. The melody is presented on a single staff, while the guitar accompaniment is shown on a separate staff below, featuring chords and rhythmic patterns. The guitar part includes a variety of chords such as Am, Em, G, and C, and uses techniques like triplets and slurs. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

PATRICK WESTON JOYCE

Patrick Weston Joyce (1827 – 1914) belongs to the septet of great collectors of Irish music that stretches from the end of the eighteenth century till the earlier part of the twentieth century, beginning with Edward Bunting (1773 – 1843), George Petrie (1790 – 1866), William Forde (1795 – 1850), John Edward Pigot (1822 – 1871), James Goodman (1828 - 1896) and Francis O'Neill (1849 – 1936).

From his earliest years P.W. Joyce was immersed in the living tradition of Irish folk music and a good overview of his life and achievements can be found on the excellent Joyce microsite within the Irish Traditional Music Archive www.itma.ie/joyce printed below.

“One of a Catholic family of eight children, he was reared in the nearby townland of Glenosheen, Kilmallock, Co Limerick, and educated at first in local hedge schools. ‘Weston’ was a family name on his mother’s side. Joyce became a national-school teacher at 18, training in Marlborough St. Training College in Dublin. Later he was a model-school teacher in Clonmel and a teacher in west Co. Dublin, and in 1856 was one of a group of teachers chosen by the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland to improve the national system of primary schools. He graduated BA from Trinity College Dublin in 1861 and MA in 1863, and was awarded LL.D. in 1870. From 1874 to 1893 he was lecturer in and later an influential principal of the Commissioners’ Training College in Marlborough St., Dublin. He was married to Caroline Waters of Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow, and they had seven children. His active engagement in many cultural societies included membership of the Royal Irish Academy, a commissionership for the Publication of the Ancient Laws of Ireland, and the presidency of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. Joyce died 7 January 1914 at his home on Leinster Rd., Rathmines, Dublin, in his 87th year.”

Writing in 1912, * Joyce describes aspects of his early life thus: “I had spent the preceding part of my life in my native valley in the heart of the Ballyhoura mountains in Limerick, where people were passionately fond of dancing, singing, and music of all kinds. Their pastimes, occupations and daily life were mixed up with tunes and songs. The women sang at the spinning-wheel; ploughmen whistled their melancholy plough-tunes to soothe the horses; girls sang their gentle milking-songs, which the cows enjoyed, and kept quiet under their influence; parents and nurses put their children to sleep with their charming lullabies; labourers beguiled their work with songs of various kinds, to which their fellow-workmen listened with quiet enjoyment; and last of all, the friends of the dead gave vent to their sorrow in a heart-moving keen or lament. And besides our professional musicians we had amateur singers, fifers, fiddlers, pipers, everywhere.....I loved that graceful music from childhood, and I learned all the tunes – or, I should rather say, they clung to my memory almost without any effort of my own....”

With this in his background, when Joyce moved to Dublin as a young man and met the great antiquarian, George Petrie, who asked him to write down some of the tunes he knew, it awakened in him the idea of not only committing to paper the music he knew but also collecting the tunes of the people himself. “I always kept a bit of music paper in my pocket, and whenever an old air came up from the depths of memory.....out came paper and pencil, and down went the first bar. When my memory was becoming nigh exhausted, I went among the people during vacations, and took down their tunes, till a very large collection accumulated.”

Petrie mentions the young Joyce’s contribution to his own 1855 publication *The Ancient Music of Ireland Vol. 1*. “I have to express my very grateful acknowledgements to Mr Patrick Joyce, formerly of Glenasheen in the County of Limerick, but now of Dublin – one of the most zealous and judicious of the collectors of Irish music who have voluntarily given me their aid in the prosecution of this work.” The elderly Joyce refers to this in the essay from 1912 saying “Of all the contributors to his (Petrie’s) music I am oftenest mentioned in his book as I contributed most airs, which I am a bit proud of. Besides I believe I was the youngest contributor of all.”

Apart from his four publications of Irish music Joyce’s many interests and activities led to the publication of thirty volumes over a wide range of subjects: Irish language, Irish history, Irish place-names, to name a few. *Old Irish Folk Music And Song, A Collection of 842 Irish Airs And Songs* was published in 1909 when Joyce was in his eighties and was his final music publication, and it is from this that these Slow Airs have been selected.

* P.W. Joyce, ‘Some Reminiscences of a Collector of Irish Folk Music (a Communication to Mr. Alfred Perceval Graves by Dr. P.W. Joyce)’, *Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society*, vol. 11 (Jan.–June 1912)