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ethnomusicology

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Source: *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 433-463

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#) on behalf of [Society for Ethnomusicology](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/852759>

Accessed: 01/03/2011 09:43

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Modern-Style Irish Accordion Playing: History, Biography and Class

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Irish traditional dance music is a thriving popular-music genre in Ireland and throughout the world based on well-established stylistic and musical precedents and sanctioned by national cultural ideologies.¹ The music involves a small professional and commercial infrastructure and a broad mass of amateur players and aficionados. Through tours and recordings, internationally known groups such as The Chieftains and De Danaan have made Irish styles of playing jigs and reels on fiddle, flute, pipes, and other instruments familiar to many outside Ireland.² Since the eighteenth century, as this genre of functional dance music has developed it has incorporated new instruments with relative ease, from the Scottish-influenced fiddle in the late eighteenth century, to the minstrel show banjo in the late nineteenth century, to a whole range of plucked bouzoukis, mandolas, and the like in the past twenty years. Players' inventive ways of imitating and extending a generalized style have directed musical change and development. This article will examine the interaction between players and musical change in the use of single-action accordions in the genre, both through a general historical account and through the musical expression of two Irish immigrant accordionists now living in Melbourne, Australia. It will move between social and biographical interpretations of stylistic change, testing the limits of each approach.

I will argue that the process of stylistic modification and change in accordion playing style established relationships between the musical act and the social experience of players. At a general historical level, the post-war "modern" accordion playing style was linked in its social meaning to the way emigration and an attendant incorporation into the industrial working class had been interpreted and understood by the post-war generation of players. For individual players such as those described in the last

section of this article, this system of meaning has supported the coherent patterns of their own musical choices, approaches, and playing styles.

Playing style is the most important category for informed listening of players and aficionados of Irish dance music. It can incorporate the audible results of instrumental technique, regional differences of repertoire and technique, as well as personal, idiosyncratic, and expressive musical approaches. Style also sets the limits of the genre, for it represents what is an acceptable and convincing rendering of a common repertoire (see McCullough 1975a). Most importantly, it becomes a place for connotative social meanings to gather and take form. During the twentieth century accordion playing has moved between domestic rural entertainment and public urban contexts, many players have moved from small farms to industrial employment, and Irish dance music itself has been defined in relation both to national cultural ideologies and to the expressive needs of players. This article will argue that stylistic choice has become part of the way in which players define and think about these social changes and their place within them.

The interpretations which are offered here are based on research undertaken during the 1980s. This research had a personal as well as an academic significance. As a young folk revival performer in the early 1970s I started to hear Irish dance music played by Irish emigrants in Melbourne. Like many others at the time, I was thrilled by their playing skill and repertoire. Yet when I attempted to play this music on the button accordion, both the musical and the social distance which I had to travel to emulate the sound became apparent. Not only were these Irish players inhabiting a different social world, but they brought to their music a set of aesthetic norms quite different from those of the folk music revival. I lived in England for some time in the mid 1970s, and again found social and musical differences between the English folk scene and Irish community players which were differently inflected, but just as palpable. Returning to Melbourne, I continued to play Irish dance music on the accordion, and when I began research into accordion playing style I was attempting to understand not just how Irish players produced their music, but why they chose to produce it in this way, and why their patterns of choice often seemed slightly alien to me. I became acquainted with the two Melbourne players discussed in this article—as co-players in informal sessions, on concert stages, and in bands. The musical examples and evidence were collected in formal interviews and field recordings, but also in the observation, conversation, and musical interactions that take place between players who share a music, even if they are separated by differing levels of skill and personal histories.

Irish Accordion Playing Styles: A History

The single-action diatonic accordion is a child of nineteenth-century capitalism and Western tonality. As such, it was a product of the expanding capitalism and modernization which transformed traditional societies and brought the ascendance of new economic and class relations and massively increased material production. Accordions transformed the musical world of many groups, creating new relations between musicians and audiences, displacing other instruments, and becoming the sound of the new metropolis (Giannatassio 1979, Peña 1985).

The diatonic accordion has a rectangular bellows which links two wooden ends, in each of which are set metal free reeds which can be sounded via valves opened by buttons. As a European-style free reed will only speak when air passes through it in a particular direction, different sets of reeds are required to sound on the press and draw of the bellows. In single-action instruments, these reeds are tuned to different pitches, and so in general each pitch requires a unique combination of button and bellows movement. Double-action instruments, such as the familiar piano accordion and various “continental style” button accordions, have equally-tuned reed pairs so that bellows direction has no influence on the pitch produced.

There are a number of single-action free reed instruments, and these generally preserve the system of arrangement of pitches presented on the “Akkordion” patented by the Austrian instrument maker Cyril Demian in 1829. On present-day single-action accordions, the right-hand end of the instrument has one or more rows of ten or eleven buttons, which produce two and a half octaves of a single major scale, arrayed on the press and draw of the bellows like the pitches in a mouth organ. A row is thus said to be in a particular key, and multi-row accordions may be referred to as B/C, D/D#, and so on, according to the tuning of the rows. In the single-action system a wide range of pitches can be spanned in any hand position, and diatonic melodies are easily played on a single row, as the ear quickly becomes attuned to the distinction between the press and draw pitches. The left-hand end of the instrument can be either single action or double action. The ten-key melodeon has two single-action bass buttons which play the root and triad of the tonic on the press, and on the draw play those of the dominant. Larger instruments may have a slightly expanded repertoire of chords similarly arranged to coincide with the harmonies which might be demanded by notes chosen from the right-hand end. More sophisticated instruments have a double action left-hand end, with a full chromatic range of chords and roots laid out according to the pattern used in piano accordions.

This instrument was conceived for a mass market of amateur musicians, with its deliberate diatonic limitation of melodic pitches, and these coupled with rudimentary harmonic accompaniments. It makes no concessions to subtleties of pitch variation such as may exist in some other musical systems. In spite of such limitations, the various commercially available and essentially similar forms of the instrument were enthusiastically adopted by musicians in many musical cultures.³

Button accordions began to be used by Irish musicians towards the end of the nineteenth century to play the dance music with which they were familiar. Initially the single-row ten-key melodeon was used, and some players gained enough virtuosity on this instrument to play fast reels and jigs, and to develop ways of imitating the stylistic nuances heard when these tunes are played on other instruments. Despite a certain amount of individual variation between players, a common style is evident in recordings of players such as John Kimmel, Peter Conlon, Frank Quinn, and Joseph Flanagan dating from the beginning of this century to around 1930.⁴ Their distinctive style of playing developed from the interaction of the existing musical system and the restrictions and capabilities of the melodeon. Two features of the instrument were particularly important in the development of this musical style: the limited set of pitches available and the bellows actions required to produce them. These two factors have a great effect on the rendering of melodic structure, ornamentation, phrasing, and rhythmic nuance on which stylistic variation in Irish dance music is based.

Much of Irish dance music uses a gamut of notes from D to B' in the scales of D and G major, though with several possible finals. In the past, slight variation of some of the pitches of these scales, though a rich source of individual musical expression, was not generally held by performers to be structurally important (Koning 1979). Such tolerance could embrace the melodic modifications and compromises which are often deemed necessary when a tune is to be played on the melodeon, and C-natural is avoided or replaced by a C#. But such choices made by players created a characteristic melodic style, an approach to the genre which was distinctive but permissible.

Many of the ornamental patterns used on the established instruments of Irish music, especially legato "rolls" and the fiddler's bowed "triplets," cannot be copied exactly on the melodeon. In their place melodeon players generally substituted single and double grace-note ornaments using an adjacent button on the instrument (see Example 1).

As would be expected of a dance music, great emphasis is placed upon the rhythmic feel, achieved through a combination of phrasing, inequality, articulation, and accentuation. These factors are affected by the single-action nature of the instrument. A true legato connectedness is only possible

Short Roll (fiddle or flute) Bowed Triplet (fiddle)

melodeon ornaments Double Grace Note or Single Grace Note

Example 1. Ornamentation on a single row accordion compared with other instruments

if consecutive notes are played in the same bellows action, and as stepwise runs generally require an alternation of press and draw, the general sound of melodeon playing is separate and articulated rather than flowing and connected. In summary, the melodic restrictions of the single diatonic scale, the ornament repertoire, and the separate nature of the articulation create the sound of the pre-war melodeon style.

By the 1930s players had begun to use two-row instruments, and the additional pitches on these instruments rendered some of the melodic modifications of melodeon style unnecessary. The simplest way to use these instruments is to use one row to produce a nominal D major scale, and to use the second row merely to provide pitches not found on the first. This can be called extended melodeon style.

However, chromatic two-row instruments can play in any key, and some players began to use B/C accordions to play in the standard pitch sets of D major and G major, giving rise to a chromatic style. In this way of using the instrument, more complex ornaments using the outside B row are possible. Also, importantly, the characteristic style of note connection and phrasing generated on the single action melodeon is altered; in general, stepwise runs on these instruments do not require an alternation of press and draw, the commonly-used scale now being produced with little bellows alternation (see Example 2). However, the first players of the B/C accordion in the 1930s did not exploit these features, and tended to imitate the established melodeon sound (Hall 1973:3).

By the early 1950s some players were altering this reference to the melodeon sound. The most important of these players was Paddy O'Brien (1922-1991), who made three 78 rpm recordings in 1954 which were to inspire a new style of playing, subsequently described here as the modern style (Hitchner 1993). The modern style employs to the full the features which differentiate chromatic style from melodeon style. The melody is

(a.)

D P D P D

(b.)

P D P D P D P D P D P D

P = Press
D = Draw

Example 2. Bellows and button articulation of the basic D major scale as played on (a) B/C accordion (b) single row melodeon in D

smoothly flowing and richly ornamented with the rolls, melodic triplets and chromatic lower grace notes which the second row had made available. The bass end of the instrument is also used continuously, providing a conventional harmonic accompaniment within the restrictions of the instrument.⁵

Though many of these features were attempts to imitate the stylistic features of other instruments, they were viewed as a total reversal of melodeon style. The old style became known as playing “on the press,” while the modern style was playing “on the draw.” Of course, playing in either style required both types of bellows movements, but press notes, being associated with the frequently-accented notes of the D major triad, tend to be more prominent in melodeon style. Conversely, chromatic style allocates D, A, B, C# pitches to draw, and only the E, F# and G pitches to press (see Example 2). By making this technical polarity the password of style, players were asserting the revolutionary and inverting nature of the modern style. It was not only different, it was the antithesis of what had preceded it.

The Paolo Soprani “Elite” model was the characteristic instrument of this new style. Available after the Second World War, these two-row chromatic accordions were produced in a number of keys; the B/C model had basses and chords arranged to provide accompaniment to melodies in D and G and their relative minors. Their smooth, “fat,” powerful tone, and fast reed response, coupled with their eye-catching streamlined design, made them the overwhelmingly preferred model of accordion (see Figure 1).

The primary models of this style were the recordings issued by Paddy O’Brien in 1953. Reg Hall has commented that in the late 1950s the Irish pubs in London bristled with young lads playing “The Yellow Tinker” and “The Sally Gardens” learned from O’Brien’s most famous recording (Hall 1973:2). O’Brien emigrated to the United States in 1954 and remained there



Figure 1. The Paolo Soprani “Elite” model

till he returned to Ireland in 1962. In his absence from Ireland, and through the 1960s, the modern style developed and gained its own stylistic integrity. In particular, it became more regular and even, and its capacity to transcend the instrumental limitations exemplified by the melodeon style was stressed by these developments.

In this way, a musical development came to be regarded as a stylistic revolution. Some players regarded the new style with reserve, but most became enthralled by its sound and the musical potential inherent within it.⁶ The musical changes proceeded in spite of the considerable difficulties of learning the fingering patterns of the modern style. The arrangement of the scale on a single row quickly forms an almost natural link with the ear, and the fingering and bellows patterns of a D major scale played on a B/C accordion are totally different. Brendan Mulkere, one accomplished player in chromatic style pointed out that learning to play in chromatic style after diatonic playing “requires a brain transplant.” Yet the status of the new style was such that by the 1960s all players were identified as “push” or “pull” players, and the preference for the latter style was almost universal (Mulkere 1983).

Since about 1980 some players have begun to reject the sound of the modern style, and to look back to the historical sound of the melodeon and extended melodeon styles. This new development is based upon new assessments of musical history, traditionalism and conservatism, and the place of Irish dance music within these.⁷ I will not examine these later developments in detail here, although they will be briefly considered in my conclusion.

In Ireland, as in many musical cultures, the adoption of the accordion has been accompanied by intense criticism; the development of the modern style brought this to a head. Seán Ó Riada, a composer who inspired much of the public reassessment of Irish traditional music in the 1960s, accused the modern-style accordion of being an unworthy instrument for the rich melodic traditions of his country, and saw its characteristic melodic techniques as fundamentally alien to his conception of Irish dance music (1982:69). Breandán Breathnach identified the modern style of accordion playing with “young players coming to the music for the first time . . . not inhibited by any respect for tradition” (1971:97), and did not stint in his pejorative reaction. These comments seemed to have little effect upon players of the time, and one prominent player, Sonny Brogan, rejected Ó Riada’s commentary with a balanced judgement of why younger players are drawn to the modern style. Even though he had some reservations about the style, he pointed out the attractiveness of the “bright musical tone,” which was drawing a new generation of highly skilled players to the instrument (Brogan 1963).

Breathnach’s interpretation of the generational nature of the style change is a common enough way to understand musical change. But as Karl Mannheim has argued, the phenomenon of a “generation” is a sociological, not a biological category, and only arises under the circumstances of the interactions of life stages with social change (1952:304–12). What then was the social basis of the generation of players of the 1950s and 1960s, and how was this manifested musically? What were the circumstances in which this group came to maturity, and the social categories within which they understood these circumstances?

Emigration and Irish Dance Music

For these players, emigration was ever-present not just as an option taken by a large proportion of themselves and their peers, but as a focus for understanding and organizing social experience.

Until the mid 1960s emigration from Ireland had maintained itself at consistently high levels since the disastrous famines of the mid-nineteenth century. Because of the proximity of Ireland to the great labor markets of

Britain and America, the process was essentially a rural-urban migration that crossed national boundaries. It maintained small family farms intact through the export of excess sons and daughters, and it drew the population of rural Ireland into the orbit of the transatlantic economy and culture, as a source of unskilled labor for the great metropolitan centers of Britain and the East Coast of the United States. Through its omnipresence emigration not only touched the lives of almost all Irish people, but also set the terms of much public political understanding.

The 1950s saw a great increase in the rate of emigration, but because emigration had been well-established for the past century the new rush abroad was not seen as unusual and, although thought of as socially corrosive, was not disruptive in any obvious sense. Around 1960 it was suggested that for the Irish migrant "the inevitability of migration has been part of his whole background, part of the air he breathes. The institutionalization of emigration in Irish life has led to its establishment as part of the *rites de passage*" (Jackson 1962:10). Emigration was observed in this period to be implicated in a deep-rooted contradiction in Irish society: it was thought of as a national problem and cause of weakness in the social fabric, yet it was almost universally sought by those to whom it was a practical possibility (see Meenan 1954:129; Lee 1989:375-78).

Emigration took this generation, as it had earlier ones, from the conservative society of rural Ireland into the working class of the industrial world. With relatively little urban industrialization and an overwhelmingly rural population, class-based politics did not become dominant in post-independence Ireland. Essentially nationalist and consensual ideologies dominated national political culture, with the politics of class stratification displaced to a global economic structure (Lee 1989:181-83, 578).

In Australia in the 1960s and 1970s, as in the major destinations of Britain and the U.S., the emigrant worlds of the social and geographical ghetto provided a subculture which for males was frequently associated with manual labor, particularly in the building and construction industries. This social world, with its social and sporting clubs, networks of friends, pubs, and employers, was the world to which most active Irish accordion players gravitated. Most of the active players in Melbourne in the mid-1980s had come from small farming families in Ireland and worked in the building and construction industries.

Irish emigration was profoundly contradictory, but music could provide a means to explore the complexity of the experience. Irish emigrants have always been anxious to use music nostalgically to preserve a sense of origins, but the music of emigrants has also been significant to those who stayed in Ireland, not merely as evidence of the loyalty of the exiled to their home, but as a demonstration of ways of reconciling emigration, national-

ity and one's place in a global political economy. The music of Irish emigrants has not been merely the product of the ultimately-doomed efforts of expatriots to hang on to symbols of the past, but has been read in Ireland and abroad as a demonstration of how a rural and essentially conservative music can be continued in a modern world.

This modernity has been that of the urban working class. Reg Hall has shown how the institutions of the working-class London Irish in the post-war period had far-reaching effects on the public development of Irish music, in the emergence of the pub session as the most important site for performance (1994:313–22). Similarly, the adulation awarded to the Irish-Americans Francis O'Neill (collector and commentator) and Michael Coleman (fiddler) can be read as part of the construction of emigration as site for the validation of Irish music.⁸

The accordion was ready-made to accommodate similar socially-constructed meanings. It proclaims its origins in the factories of light-metal engineering, and its musical rigidity, noted above, sets it apart from the older, more flexible instruments such as the fiddle and traditional aerophones. Breathnach has noted that a household melodeon was often a gift from a relative in America, and though an item of domestic furniture, it could continually speak its origins even as it played the music of home (1971:84).

When the larger accordions became popular, the social placing of these instruments as products of the world of emigration could be extended. Multi-row accordions were expensive, durably constructed, and necessary for a young man aiming to move beyond a purely casual domestic approach to music-making. Often there was little hope of getting such an instrument from the cash accumulated on a small farm; such an instrument was only affordable with independent employment, which for many ultimately meant emigration.

If the accordion was an instrument with a bright and lively sound, bursting with the ethos of the modern and progressive, then emigrant fiddle players provided many of the musical models on which the modern style was built. Besides being exemplars of virtuosic playing, they demonstrated how Irish music could sound when it moved beyond the limitations of the domestic and the rural.

The ever-present image of vitality which Irish music in America and Britain presented from the 1930s to the 1960s is the key to understanding the drive to the modern style of accordion-playing. The new style—fast, flexible and richly ornamented—drew its initial inspiration from the playing of the Sligo fiddle players, presented through their American recordings. Playing on the draw, an accordionist could imitate several of the most prominent features of Sligo fiddle style. The first of these was the flexible

and rhythmically varied phrasing of the Sligo fiddlers. This flexibility derived from a combination of bowing techniques, which often utilized the disposition of pitches on the strings of the instrument in first position: players tended to take melodic runs on the same string in a single bow stroke, and to change bow direction when changing strings. This technical consideration was the basis of the creative variation of articulation and phrasing (for examples, see Lyle 1981 and Smith 1982). These characteristic features of Sligo fiddle style could be imitated with the techniques of modern-style accordion playing. Through the similarity between the articulation of the D scale on the B/C accordion and the notes on the strings of the violin in first position, Sligo-like phrasing effects which the press-draw articulation of melodeon playing characteristically prohibits could emerge in playing on the draw.

Secondly, in Sligo fiddling the characteristic ornaments of the roll played in a single bow stroke and its staccato partner, the bowed triplet, dominate the ornamentation. In modern-style accordion playing, these are emulated with ornaments which use the outside row to provide a lower grace note. The accordion's rolls and triplets so produced, shown in Example 3, were one of the main focuses of the outrage of musical purists at the modern style, who bridled at the implied chromaticism which disturbed their 'modalist' reading of Irish melodic style. Players, by contrast, saw these techniques as a way of raising the accordion to a higher level of virtuosic and expressive playing, above its association with rural domestic entertainment. This influence is clearly shown in one of the seminal modern-style recordings of Paddy O'Brien, with its debt to a 1930s recording of fiddle player Hugh Gillespie (see Appendix 1). O'Brien's version follows Gillespie's model in many details of phrasing, ornamentation and particularly in the exploitation of idiomatic note groupings on the accordion to emulate fiddle patterns.

Though Breathnach saw the modern players as having no respect for tradition, players such as Sonny Brogan, cited above, would vehemently disagree. Edward O. Henry has documented how by the 1950s and 1960s Irish dance music was overtly linked by cultural nationalist ideologies with conservative attitudes toward social and musical change (1989:69ff). But for players, personally implicated in social change, the challenge of mod-



Example 3. Rolls and Triplets on the B/C accordion

ern society to rural existence could not be disregarded. The modern style represented a reassessment of these cultural conflicts. It showed that a detente between the rural and the urban, the traditional and modern, sedentary and emigrant, was possible. In the modern style the social understanding of emigration found a musical expression.

The Industrial Working Class and Irish Dance Music

We can also link the drive to the modern style to the class transitions effected by emigration. In an article on a different accordion-based genre, "Slovenian Style in Milwaukee," Charles Keil extends his observations on American polka music to suggest that proletarian musics can experience a common trajectory of development referred to as *perfecting*. In this the more exuberant, uncontrolled, idiosyncratic and perhaps imaginative features of the musical sound are modified in favour of a what is identified as a smoother, controlled sound.

For Keil, this process is seen as based in an expressive reaction of musicians and audiences to the material conditions of their existence. The working class will seek control in its music as a consequence to its powerlessness in the working week:

the further and faster people loose control of their daily lives and working conditions (moving from farm to factory, from craft work to assembly line), the more they want to hear and feel control in their music (1982:47)

Keil's reading of these musical genres within a generalizing class-based interpretation has been questioned by Slobin, and Keil's polemic intensity is clearly part of his ongoing critique of attitudes of puristic archaism in approaches to sectional musical genres (Slobin 1992:27-29).⁹ Yet the changes in the genres that Keil lists, such as Greek *rembetica*, Yoruba *Jùjú*, and African American blues do seem to suggest a global experience linked to the historical projects of the twentieth century, even if the dynamics of the historical constructions of class stratifications in these cultures have varied widely. Pierre Bourdieu's magisterial *Distinction* demonstrates that what he terms the habitus of a social class or group generates practices, attitudes, and tastes within the whole social field of economic and social relations in which that class group is situated. Even though his depiction of the aesthetic and cultural choices of the French working class, characterized by a rejection of the restraint of the high bourgeoisie, would seem to be significantly different from Keil's image of control in relation to social powerlessness, Bourdieu's analysis demonstrates the ways in which classes in their economic and political relationships create distinctive social aesthetics (1984: 193-208).

The development of the modern style displays, at least superficially, the features of “proletarian perfecting,” particularly in the trend to smoothness and control. The style developed from the emulation of emigrant musical models, arguably linked to proletarian sensibilities. But are we justified in asserting a connection here? Keil suggests a compensatory class reaction, but we need not look for single mechanical social causes, acting uniformly on a group. Rather, we can map out a network of histories and musical styles which show their relationships in the ways meanings are produced by convergences of symbolic structures. I shall demonstrate this by examining the playing of two Irish accordion players now living in Melbourne, analyzing what we might call the “structure of feeling” of playing style in the lives of its users (see Williams 1977:1128–32, 1980:38).

Paddy and Joe Fitzgerald

The two brothers Paddy and Joe Fitzgerald were born in East Clare, near Feakle, in 1941 and 1944. For the past twenty years, both of these men have been active and important players in Melbourne. Having played together throughout much of their lives, they also share most of each other’s repertoire, and play identical settings of many tunes. But despite the many shared characteristics in their playing, there are important differences, which illustrate how the modern style was formed by the musical and life choices made by individuals.

The area in which they grew up has had a long-standing awareness of Irish dance music, and it is renowned for the musicians it has produced. Their mother could play a little on the melodeon, but her brother Stephen, who lived some twenty miles away, provided a model for emulation. Their mother’s cousin had been a member of the famous Ballinakill Traditional Players, one of the first groups of rural musicians to be commercially recorded in the 1920s.

In 1950 the two boys were given a ten-key melodeon, and they began to learn to play, receiving initial guidance from their mother, but eventually learning by listening to and emulating surrounding players. Around 1957 Paddy and Joe joined with several other local boys to form the Bodyke Ceili band. Paddy was then sixteen, and beginning to feel the pressures towards emigration. He commented that it was playing with the band which induced him to stay in Ireland for the last couple of years. In 1959 he decided to emigrate to Australia. About a year later, at the age of fifteen, Joe left Ireland to live with his aunt in England. He later followed Paddy to Australia, and during the 1960s spent periods in Australia, Ireland, and Britain.

When Paddy reached Australia, like many of the unskilled male immigrants of the period, he worked on the Snowy Mountains scheme, a gigan-

tic hydroelectric construction project which began in the late 1940s and lasted until the 1960s. He became experienced in the building and construction industry, and eventually became an independent earth-moving contractor.

Paddy defers to Joe in accordion playing. In his adolescence Joe had won several county championships at music festivals organized by Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann; but the differences in skill are not as prominent as the differences in musical approach.

Both started playing on the same single-row melodeon, and as they increased in ability, moved on to D/D# accordions, on which one could play in an extended melodeon style. However, until recently Joe has played on a Paolo Soprani B/C accordion in characteristically modern style, whereas Paddy divides his playing between two Paolo Soprani accordions: one in C#/D on which he plays in extended melodeon style, and a B/C accordion on which he plays in modern style.

Joe took up the modern style on his return from Australia to England and Ireland in the late 1960s. Here he saw the virtuosic players of the modern style at first hand, and set about mastering the techniques involved to imitate the sound. He returned to Australia with a new sound. Several years later, in the 1970s, Paddy returned to Ireland, and found that his playing sounded rather old fashioned. Although not willing to give up the sound and technique which he associated with his musical heritage, he clearly felt he should master the modern chromatic technique, and he bought a B/C accordion. Since then, he has divided his playing between the two instruments with their distinctive styles.

We can see the distinctive difference between these two players by comparing their performances of a single tune, "Bonny Kate." The modern style raised the status of the accordion as a solo instrument (Mac Mathuna 1976:11), and it would be difficult to find a tune which evokes the role of the virtuosic player in Irish dance music more eloquently than does the reel "Bonny Kate," through the association of this tune with the Sligo fiddler Michael Coleman.

"Bonny Kate" was originally a Scottish tune of mid-eighteenth century origin. In an early published form, it is a simply-structured tune with two-bar phrases balancing each other in contour (Example 4).

These sections are separated by a clear caesura. This is probably the way in which the tune was played by most performers until the renowned fiddler Michael Coleman recorded it in New York in 1930.¹⁰ Coleman took the simple tune and made it the basis for a set of variations; as was characteristic of much of Coleman's playing, these variations sounded entirely improvised and spontaneous. This recorded version was emulated by many players in different ways. Some made their own sets of variations follow-



Example 4 “Bonny Kate.” From *Breathnach* 1963:68.

ing the inspiration of Coleman’s playing, and maintaining the same overall structure. Others, entranced by his style, copied his version precisely. Any performer who plays the tune today makes implicit reference to its history, and a player’s version can be seen as commenting on the status of virtuosic individual expression in Irish dance music and the balance between innovation and stability in the genre (see Appendix 2a).

Coleman’s version contains much that is highly idiomatic for the fiddle, and to imitate some of his figures on other instruments requires great virtuosity. In his phrasing the four-bar sections are less abruptly divided. Coleman’s variations are based on substituting a number of melodic phrases for the first two bars, and maintaining the phrase given in bars three and four as a stable point of melodic reference. His phrases flow into each other and are not simply heard as two-bar blocks. The variations are not related to the original melody in any one consistent way, but are “conjoined” stereotypic melodic moves (see Cowdery 1990:109ff). Some preserve melodic shape, others harmonic structure, while others take basic pitches and give them greater emphasis through ornamentation. In the performances of the first, or A part, Coleman introduces three variant forms.

The B part or turn is given in two variations, both of which are less striking and less melodically extravagant than those of the A part. The melodic shape of the usual form of the turn is replaced by a fairly stereotypical figure, and this concentrates the musical interest on the A part and allows the turn to be a period of relaxation before the next significant variation.

The tune entered the active repertoire of most present-day accordion players through the version played by Joe Burke on his LP *Traditional*

Music of Ireland (Burke 1973). Burke played the tune in C on a B/C accordion, rather than in the original key of D, which previous instrumentalists had used. Though this might be described as playing on the press, Burke still used all the stylistic resources of the modern chromatic style. The unusual key makes group playing unlikely, as does the complexity of the variations. The tune as played is emphatically not a "session tune" for social group playing, but a virtuosic item for musical display (See Appendix 2b).

The accordion version of Joe Burke follows the principles of Coleman's variations. From the first the B part is reduced to the rocking pedal figure. Joe Fitzgerald follows Joe Burke's approach quite closely, and although he does not slavishly imitate all his variations he reproduces much of Burke's style in his use of ornamentation (see Appendix 2c). We will look at these two versions together. (The performances of Joe and Paddy Fitzgerald here transcribed were recorded by the author in 1982 and 1983 respectively.)

The dominant variation used by Joe Fitzgerald consists of a series of rolls substituted for a more flowing melodic section, which solidify the melodic motion onto a particular pitch and embellish the sound at that point. Some of his melodic variants substitute a note an octave above or below the expected pitch, a relatively easy maneuver on the accordion. Much more difficult is the high point of the variations in bars 65ff, (Fitzgerald) and bars 73ff (Burke), where Coleman's descent of about an octave through a series of melodic triplets is imitated. Joe Burke devised a playable series of triplets which satisfactorily emulates Coleman's phrase; Joe Fitzgerald attempts a less ambitious series which uses quavers instead, though it still suggests some of the excitement of Coleman's reckless tumbling strain.

Paddy Fitzgerald's "Bonny Kate" contrasts completely with that of his brother Joe. Instead of using the reel as a virtuosic piece, Paddy plays it as an ensemble tune in his family band. His musical model is not Coleman's set of variations, or any later glosses on these such as Joe Burke's version, though he is quite familiar with them. Rather it is the tune in its "basic" form as it existed before Coleman's recording (see Appendix 2d).

Even before unleashing his sets of variations, Coleman had introduced a continuous flow into the melody which contrasts with earlier versions, both printed and recorded, where the tune is phrased in two bar segments, often with crotchets at the end of phrase sections. The greater melodic continuity of Coleman's version is based on a relatively uninterrupted stream of quavers phrased in his characteristic style. Paddy's tune, on the other hand, consists of short blocks, usually of two-bar melodic segments, the flow pausing regularly on crotchets or dotted crotchets.

Paddy does not use any of the variations which the Coleman perfor-

mance introduced into the tradition of playing this tune. Even the smaller touches of melodic alteration, such as the descent to the A in the fiddle version in bar 2, are not used. Paddy's ornamental triplet run from E' to C' in the turn (bar 29) is a deliberate use of the outside row for a draw E' note, which neither Burke nor his brother Joe exploit. It is significant that this ornament from E' to C' is impossible to play in Irish fiddle style which is the model for the other versions (on the fiddle it would be F#' to D', and involve slurring across strings in the middle of an ornament, which is seldom attempted). However, it imitates in sound and bellows action the major ornamental triplet run used in melodeon style, C#'-B-A. The cadential phrases of bars 12-13 and 15-16 are modified to emphasise an ascending series of thirds G-E, A-F, B-G. This pattern is played press, draw, press-draw and displays the rhythmic bellows alternation. This sort of melodic execution is idiomatic for the melodeon, and in general it is one of the features which chromatic style attempts to neutralize.

When Joe Burke or his admirers like Joe Fitzgerald play this tune in C, "on the press," it does not signify a reversion to melodeon style. In their hands the unusual key is exploited to create modern-style musical effects and microphrasings, and it also ensures that the tune will be a solo piece. Few other instrumentalists would be eager to play the tune in the key of C. It is significant, then, that Paddy has taught his family band to play it in this key, and so has reincorporated the tune into a tradition of social playing. In Paddy's case, the key of the tune is linked not to virtuosic solo playing, but to melodeon style. By rejecting the fiddle-based variations, emphasizing segmentation and tertial melodic movement, and playing a simplified version, the family and melodeon-based styles are united in one musical moment which arises out of Paddy's musical history.

But the differences between the two players are more deep-seated than superficial technical features. They result from aesthetic choices which relate to the different ways in which Paddy Fitzgerald and Joe Fitzgerald encountered the modern style, and to the social uses they make of their playing. For Joe, the modern style gives him not only his technique, and his favored repertoire, but also his attitude to social performance. His approach to playing is highly virtuosic, driven not by a need for display, but for technical mastery and control. Paddy regards himself as a less technically-competent player than his brother, but the differences in their musical output are as much the result of the way in which they place their performances socially as the result of different degrees of skill. Joe spent a longer period of personal independence in the late 1960s and 1970s, during which he became fully committed to the modern style. During the equivalent period of his musical life, Paddy was training his family and others to play Irish dance music. Paddy took up modern-style playing only after

this period of powerful consolidation of the communitarian role for Irish dance music. He has attempted in his music to create a communalist and familial world, through the creation of his ceili band and through his activities in Comhaltas Ceoltoírí Éireann. This activity has led him to value, particularly strongly, images of community and traditionality in his playing, and has to some degree limited the urge towards the smoothness of perfection. Joe, on the other hand, has constructed a more individual musical world, where his intense dedication to accuracy and precision seem closely linked to an attempt to maintain personal autonomy.

These reactions are individual and personal, but the circumstances within which they were made were not created by Paddy or Joe. In the consolidation of its musical meaning, for players of the post-war generation the modern style has been part of making musical sense of a historical and economic situation. The modern style can be seen as proletarian in its emergence within emigrant sounds and sensibilities. Glimpses of the link between this situation and the urge to control appear both in the general structure of the style and in its specific use by players like Joe Fitzgerald, as well as in Paddy's more guarded negotiations of its meanings.

Conclusion: The Modern Style as a Perfected Proletarian Music

To call the modern style a perfected proletarian music is a judgement of aesthetic affinity as well as causation. For players such as Paddy and Joe musical and social aesthetics are closely linked to aspects of individuality and control. Style can be a source of musical meaning because it has a social history.

Another feature of the modern style which illustrates the importance of class in its meaning is the differing reactions of commentators and players. For even if the urge to smoothness might not simply be identified as a proletarian trait, those who were most vocal in attacking it were clearly from an urban middle class.

Commentators such as Breathnach and Ó Riada, discussed above, were members of the Dublin middle-class: Breathnach in his position in the Civil Service, and Ó Riada in his public role as bohemian avant-guard composer, from which he launched his championship of traditional music. The differences between their attitudes and those of players, however, may not rest so much on differing economic roles as on the fundamental differences in the understandings of the role and meaning of Irish traditional dance music. Is it primarily a social or national emblem, to be seen historically as a folk music, or is it a recreational entertainment, a personal skill, and an expressive medium? Are the deepest meanings it carries those of the na-

tion and the people, or are they those of the individual players making a sound which is of their own life, not that of some imagined community?

But even these poles of folkloric national authenticity and the lived experience of modernity are overturned and reshaped by historical change. When the folk movement of the 1970s championed the new melodeon style of Jackie Daly and his followers, they were working from a "folk" ideology which despite its avowed plebeianism found contemporary lower class tastes as exemplified in the modern style and the ceili band difficult to accept. If this was a middle class movement, it was also forming new connections between class and generation (see Moloney 1992:115-22). Though it was a broadly-based movement its participants were the confident young urban or urban-oriented Irish of the 1970s, who had much to reject socially in the conservative, parochial, and limited post-war generation. The musical judgments based on folkloristic interpretations of Irish traditional dance music were a useful part of this social distancing. In bringing Irish dance music into mass-mediated popular entertainment, the Irish folk revival did not use the opposition between folk authenticity and popular entertainment emphasized by scholars, but took the image of "folk" and made it an ingredient of popular entertainment. This resulted in pushing the modern style towards the margins of Irish traditional music, and set up new debates over the social meaning of accordion styles. The climax of this process has been the remarkable success of the young accordionist Sharon Shannon whose first solo CD *Sharon Shannon* is the most successful traditional music album ever released (Curtis 1994:114). Her lively press and draw style is matched with rock sensibilities and an eclectic repertoire. Almost every aspect of her performance and social image is opposite to that of the male post-war modern-style players. Her popular elevation has completed the process started by Jackie Daly in the mid-1970s.

In the modern style as a musical expression of the experience of the post-war period, stylistic differences were a powerful and useful musical language. Subsequent developments sketched out here show that meanings generated by the history of accordion playing in the first half of the twentieth century have continued to change. The period of the kind of modernity which rested on the recruitment of new wage laborers from the hinterland to the metropolis seems to be over in the West, and the "great proletarian musics" must assemble new audiences or diminish. Given the current strength of Irish traditional dance music playing, and of both the new melodeon style and modern-style accordion playing, it is likely that players and audiences will continue to map style onto reorganized fields of musical behavior and social life. The meanings which the post-war generation of players developed and manipulated will be part of that process.

Appendix 1. "O'Dowd's favourite": (a) Hugh Gillespie, fiddle, (b) Paddy O'Brien, accordion. Transcribed from Gillespie 1978 (Hall [ed.] 1973)

The image displays a musical score for the piece "O'Dowd's favourite". It consists of 12 staves of music, all written in a single treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, as well as rests. The score is organized into two main parts: the first six staves (labeled 'a') represent the fiddle part by Hugh Gillespie, and the final six staves (labeled 'b') represent the accordion part by Paddy O'Brien. The music features a mix of melodic lines and rhythmic patterns, with some staves showing complex sixteenth-note passages. A small downward-pointing arrow is visible above the eighth staff, indicating a specific rhythmic or melodic detail.

The image displays a page of musical notation for a modern-style Irish accordion piece. The music is written in G major, indicated by a single sharp (F#) on the treble clef. The piece consists of 12 staves of music, each containing a single melodic line. The notation is characterized by a fast, rhythmic feel, typical of modern Irish accordion playing. The first four staves feature a series of eighth-note patterns, often with beamed eighth notes and sixteenth notes, creating a driving, energetic feel. The fifth staff introduces a change in the melodic line, with more sustained notes and a slight shift in the rhythmic pattern. The sixth and seventh staves continue this more melodic line, with some chromatic movement. The eighth staff returns to a more rhythmic, eighth-note pattern, similar to the first four staves. The ninth and tenth staves feature a mix of rhythmic patterns, including some triplet-like figures. The eleventh and twelfth staves conclude the piece with a final melodic flourish and a strong ending. The overall style is characterized by its rhythmic complexity and melodic clarity.

Appendix 2a "Bonny Kate," Michael Coleman, fiddle (Coleman 1979).

The musical score is written for a fiddle in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It consists of 12 staves of music. The first staff is marked with a box 'A'. The second staff has a '3' under a triplet. The fifth staff is marked with a box 'B'. The eighth staff is marked with a box 'A1'. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplet figures and a final flourish.

B1

A2

A3

Appendix 2b "Bonny Kate," Joe Burke, B/C accordion (Burke 1973)

A

B

A₁

B₁

A₂

B₂

Appendix 2c "Bonny Kate," Joe Fitzgerald, B/C accordion (Fitzgerald, J 1983)

The musical score is written for a B/C accordion and consists of 12 staves of music. The first section, labeled 'A', spans the first four staves. The second section, labeled 'B', spans the next five staves. The third section, labeled 'A1', spans the final three staves. The music is written in a single melodic line on a treble clef staff. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The score includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are also some dynamic markings and phrasing slurs.

B₁

A₂

B₂

Appendix 2d "Bonny Kate," Paddy Fitzgerald, B/C accordion (Fitzgerald, P 1982)

The musical score for "Bonny Kate" is presented in seven staves of treble clef notation. The first staff starts with a boxed letter 'A' above the first measure. The music consists of a single melodic line with various rhythmic patterns and ornaments. The second staff has a boxed letter 'B' below the first measure. The score concludes with a final note on the seventh staff.

Notes

1. I wish to acknowledge the help of Paddy Fitzgerald and Joe Fitzgerald whose ideas and playing, along with those of many other Irish musicians in Melbourne, shaped the ideas presented here. I would also like to thank Dr. Reis Flora of the Monash University Music Department, who supervised my Ph.D. thesis in this area, and fellow musicians and scholars Helen O'Shea and Peter Parkhill, who provided invaluable commentary and support.

2. For a comprehensive survey of current Irish popular music genres, with the role that traditional dance music plays within them, see O'Connor 1991.

3. Southern Italy, rural Australia, Estonia, French-speaking Louisiana, Angola, Yoruba urban Nigeria, South-West Sumatra, the Bahia region of Brazil, Ireland, Britain, Poland, Mexican Texas, French-speaking Canada, and Colombia are some of the regions in the world where distinctive traditions of use of the single-action accordion have developed (see Romani and Beynon 1984:6).

4. These players recorded extensively in the pre-war 78 rpm era. Reissues of some of their records are Kimmel 1978 and Flanagan 1979. Few of the recordings of Conlon and Quinn have been reissued. Hall 1977, 1978, Moloney 1979 provide biographical information on these performers.

5. These influential recordings have recently been reissued on O'Brien and Connolly 1993, together with informative biographical information. Twenty-four tunes composed by Paddy O'Brien are collected in O'Brien 1992.

6. Sonny Brogan of Dublin was one of the first Irish players to play on B/C accordion in chromatic style in the 1930s, and his 1963 article in the folk music journal *Ceol* outlines his assessment of older melodeon style players and of those adopting the current modern style. In it he is uneasy at the new modern style, but he distances himself from the intolerance of purist commentators such as Seán Ó Riada. On the 1958 recording "Echos of Erin" by the renowned Tulla Ceili Band, the solos by accordionist Martin Mulhare illustrate the penetration of Paddy O'Brien's innovations (Tulla Ceili Band 1958; Brogan 1963).

7. This development, which might be called the new melodeon style, can be closely related to the career of Jackie Daly and the growth of the new folk bands in Irish music, of which the leading exponents have been De Danaan, Patrick Street, and a number of similar groups. Daly stood out against the prevailing modern style in the late 1970s with his use of single-row style, and his referral to a local repertoire from the Kerry-Cork region of *Shiabh Luacbra*. This playing style gained popularity partly through its explicit rejection of the modern style, with its powerful association with a somewhat older and musically-conservative rural generation. Throughout the 1980s the new melodeon style became more widely practiced, with many new virtuosic players emerging. Although some players of the earlier post-war generation are now beginning to be strongly affected by its sound, it is beyond the scope of this article to document the social placement of the new melodeon style in detail.

8. For a more detailed exposition on the role of emigration in Irish dance music see Smith 1994.

9. Keil's concepts of perfecting with the related ideas of hegemony can be found in Keil 1982 and 1985. His critiques of bourgeois "takeover" of lower class genres through attitudes to purism and "the folk," are in 1978 and 1966. Slobin's objections are based in a modest empiricism, but writers with semi-Marxist perspectives also raise warnings. Peter Manuel suggests a lumpenproletariat association may often be more accurate (1988:18-19), for which see also Holst 1975:13-14, 29-41, and Keil 1985:127. Richard Middleton warns against the "heroics" of asserting an independent proletarian subculture, and the simplistic approaches of "structural resonances" (1985:7).

10. See, for example, accordion player John Kimmel's recording of 1916 (Kimmel 1978). See also Hall 1995, which argues that Coleman's variations were based on a local South Sligo tradition.

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