

## Stylistic Elements of Scottish and Irish Violin Playing

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**Abstract:** *The Violin is perhaps one of the most versatile instruments, and is used in musical styles ranging from Western classical to Carnatic classical, to prominent folk styles including Scottish and Irish styles. The Scottish and Irish folk styles are quite unique, when compared to the other styles of violin playing – especially when it comes to the ornamentation used. This study highlights the important stylistic elements of these two genres, as well as some important violinists in that tradition that took the tradition further.*

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### I. Introduction

The Irish style of violin playing is one of the most and recognized styles of violin playing in the world today. It is widely known for its rhythmic, dance-like qualities and is primarily played for festive occasions. This is the underlying feature of Irish violin playing. A number of stylistic elements and specific techniques used in the Irish styles are used to bring out this rhythmic, dance element.

Having its origins in Ireland, it is one of the first styles of fiddle playing. The pre-violin version of the fiddle has been around for more than a thousand years. Carvings and drawings of the pre-violin fiddle, dating back to 900 AD can be in Europe. Bowed instruments also appear in several European carvings and illustrations, which also date back to 900 A.D. However, the interpretation of these carvings is difficult and the names given for the instruments differ and overlap in texts. The violin today has become an integral part of the music style, as the fiddle became arguably the most important Irish folk instrument. Over the past few centuries, the playing style has become well developed, with several important violinists contributing to this.

Music has always been a powerful tool to bring people together and Scottish music epitomizes this. Scottish folk music has been a way to propagate Scottish pride. The Scottish fiddle has been around for many centuries, but the Golden Age of the Scottish fiddle was said to have been during the time King Charles II, in the second half of the seventeenth century (Clarke & Collinson, 1969). A number of Scottish folk songs have lyrics about special feats of Scottish heroes. Lyrics in pieces like “Rousing The Nation”, “King Robert The Bruce”, “Well May Charlie Wear the Crown” border on history lessons, aimed to increase patriotic fervor. This study examines the various stylistic elements of the Scottish violin and examines the artists who made the music form what it is.

### II. Methodology

This study was conducted through qualitative research, analysing available reports, presenting different perspectives on violin playing methodology.

### III. Findings

#### Elements of Scottish Violin Playing

Scottish folk music is traditionally based on through the aural tradition. Till the seventeenth century there is little evidence of written material of folk songs. In the early eighteenth century Oswald James released “The Caledonian Pocket Companion”, which was one of the first collections of Scottish tunes ever released, as is of great value even today.

#### Scales Used

The scales used in almost all Irish Scottish playing are

- Major scale
- Aeolian mode or natural minor scale (which corresponds to raga Natabhairavi)
- Dorian mode (which corresponds to raga Kharaharapriya)
- Lydian mode (which corresponds to the raga Kalyani)

Accidentals are also not used much.

### **Time Signatures/ Rhythmic Cycles Used**

Traditional Scottish folk music typically uses only 3/4 and 4/4 – all the rhythms in the dances are simple and are not too complicated – all the music is either set to a three or four beat rhythm cycle. Rarely, 6/8 and 12/8 time signatures are also used.

### **Analysis of the Style**

All violinists were well-recognized composers and wrote their own tunes, normally passed down aurally.

- The style was created with the intention songs being played in big groups. Sometimes as many as a hundred fiddlers play unison together. Keeping that in mind, tunes are generally have simple structure and do not require too much virtuosity. There are fiddle clubs around Scotland, where fiddlers can play with large groups.
- There is limited left hand or fingered ornamentation. Most of the ornamentation comes from the right hand.
- The songs and tunes are fairly standardized when compared to other folk fiddle traditions. A big reason for this is most Scottish fiddlers can read notation, and standardization is important when large groups play together.
- There are a lot of double stops used by violinists, especially when it comes to using lower, open strings used as drones. Some of this could be used to simulate the sound of the bagpipes
- Another common type of double stops used is when violinists play in sixths. Typically, the melody is on top and the harmony a sixth below
- Ends of phrases are generally played with a flourish. Often, chords or triple stops are used for ends of phrases (playing three strings at the same time)
- Scotch Snap – This is a characteristic ornamentation where a violinist plays a short note, with a separation, followed by another note, both on the same bow
- The birl – This is another very important ornamentation in the Scottish style three of the same notes in quick succession, played normally near the tip of the bow.

### **Notable Artists**

#### **William Marshall (1748-1833)**

William Marshall is one of the most influential Scottish violinist/composers. He is credited in a large part to the rise of Scottish music. He was famous for his compositions; in particular, of his compositions of the dance form “Strathspey”. He was born in Fochabers, in the north east of Scotland, and became house steward and butler to the Duke of Gordon. Marshall set new standards of technical accomplishment and many of his tunes are still played today. (Collinson, 1966)

#### **James Scott Skinner (1843-1927)**

James Scott Skinner was a multi-talented musician as well as a prolific composer. In addition to be a prominent fiddler and composer, he was also a dance master.

His tunes make up a sizeable part of today’s repertoire. Some of his later work was recorded. In 1899, he made cylinder recordings.

In 1903, he wrote one of his most well-known tunes, Hector the Hero, written about the Scottish Major-General Hector MacDonal. In the period from 1906 to 1909 he lived a settled life in Monikie, but could not afford to publish his work. He sent manuscripts to friends, who copied them out and played them. Those sheets went on to create a new market for the music. Some of these scraps of paper, handbills and the backs of envelopes are now in museums.

#### **Aly Bain**

Aly Bain learnt the fiddle from the master fiddler Tom Anderson, and in 2006 was inducted into the Scots Traditional Music Hall of Fame. His playing style is unique, with a vibrant, tone. (Bain, 2015)

In 1999 Bain played at the first opening of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. He also has received five honorary Doctor of Music degrees - from Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Stirling University The University of St Andrews, The Open University and Edinburgh University. In addition to this, he was honored with a lifetime achievement award by the BBC Radio 2 Folk awards.

### **Elements of Irish Violin Playing**

The fiddle has always been an ideal instrument for traditional Irish music, especially for the dance tunes. With the capabilities of the violin, it has also broadened the horizons of traditional Irish music – especially when it comes to ornamentation with the left hand and right hand bowing “The characteristic features of Irish dance tunes make the fiddle a very suitable instrument. Cuts and rolls are easily executed, triplets can be bowed legato or singly to get the same effects as the pipes.” (Vallely 1999, pg 129)

### **The Tin Fiddle**

In the early twentieth century, to make a cheaper and more affordable fiddle, a fiddle was made of tin instead of more expensive wood. This tin fiddle became popular in Donegal, Ireland. Travelling tinsmiths made these tin fiddles. These instruments were cheap and easy to make. A skilled tinsmith could make these instruments in a couple of hours – compared to a couple of weeks for a regular violin. These instruments were also light and easy to repair, and also quieter and duller in tone than a normal fiddle, so were ideal for children and beginners. The neck and fingerboard were usually of wood, often salvaged from a broken fiddle.

### **Pub Sessions**

The “session” is perhaps one of the most important aspects of Irish traditional music. More perhaps than any other style of folk music, the “session” is the heart and soul of Irish traditional music. These sessions – that take place almost always in bars or pubs – bring together musicians of varying degrees of expertise together. What is fascinating about this is that very often beginners get to play with the biggest names of Irish fiddle, learning, picking up tricks and swapping tunes at these informal gatherings learning.

### **Scales Used**

The scales used in almost all Irish folk playing are

- Major scale
- Minor scale
- Mixolydian scale (which corresponds to the raga Harikambhoji)

Aro: S R2 G3 M1 P D2 N2 S

Ava: S N2 D2 P M1 G3 R2 S

There are not too many scales used in the Irish folk tradition. Almost all dances and songs use these scales – as the idea behind all the music is to primarily make happy/peppy dance numbers. Accidentals are also not used much.

### **Time Signatures/Rhythmic Cycles Used**

Traditional Irish folk typically used only 3/4 and 4/4 – all the rhythms in the dances are simple and are not too complicated – all the music is either set to a three or four beat rhythm cycle. Rarely, 6/8 and 12/8 is also used.

### **Analysis of the Style**

“Irish fiddle music has three variable elements - bowing, ornamentation and melody- and, by juggling them, the experienced player can generate countless variations within the parameters of the style. By committing the tunes to paper, there is an inherent danger of stultifying and homogenizing the music, making it a consumer item rather than a piece of continuous creativity.” (Larkin, 2009:115)

The idea of making one’s own version of each tune is very important in the Irish tradition. Each musician is encouraged to make his/her version of a tune, which is very different from the western classical tradition – where the job of the violinist/musician is not to make his/her version, but to play the piece, exactly the way the composer wanted, as accurately as possible.

Thus like Carnatic music or the jazz tradition, the song is only the skeleton – the player is expected to improvise and add his/her own ornamentation and embellishments.

While analyzing the Irish style of violin playing, it is also important to notice that Irish music uses predominately a lot of pipe instruments. Thus, when playing the Irish violin, those elements are used which in a sense imitate the pipe style of playing.

- Compared to western classical music, vibrato is used very sparingly. There are more swells with the right hand (also called right hand vibrato), which is similar to the baroque style of violin playing.
- They use two main things to give a rhythmic lift – they slur bowing into the beat to give a lift and they suddenly change the bow speed to give that extra rhythmic kick.

### **Characteristic Ornamentation**

The Irish style of fiddle playing has very characteristic ornamentation, played by either the left or right hand. When one hears any of the following ornamentation, if they are familiar with the Irish folk style of playing, it is instant recognizable.

- Cuts - Where two notes of the same pitch lie together in a tune, there is a grace note played in between them called a cut. The grace note is usually higher than the melody note (the cut note is normally two notes higher than the melody note, although it can also be one note higher). The grace note is a mere flick and very little pressure is applied, so the note is not heard clearly. In certain cases, double cuts are also used.

- Rolls – Instead of playing a straight note, violinists play rolls. Here they play five notes instead of the one – for example instead of playing a straight A, they would play ACAGA – normally with a stress on the first note.
- Slides used are almost exclusively slides leading up to a note – there are little to no slides coming down from a note or slides using a combination of the two
- Bowed triplet or treble – This is a right-hand bowing ornamentation, where a note is split into 3 very short, individually bowed notes. The effect is more of a stutter than three clearly discernable bows. It's usually bowed down up down.

### **Technical differences with western classical violin playing**

Compared to the western classical tradition, with which Irish fiddle playing has many aspect of technique similar, there are a few key technical differences.

- Left hand wrist is kept higher when compared to western classical violin player.
- Irish violin players play most of the concert or repertoire in first position. They very rarely shift positions and go higher in the E string. The normally play within a two to two and a half octave range.
- Almost all Irish violin players hold the bow slightly higher than western classical violin players. Although this can be technically limiting for a classical player, this is not an impediment in Irish music, as none of those techniques are used. However, this bow hold perhaps gives them greater ease to suddenly change bow speed as the place where they hold the bow is lighter.

These are some of the elements that are crucial to understand before attempting to play an Irish violin piece. As in Carnatic music, the music notation normally provides just a skeletal structure. The performer is expected to add a lot on his/her own. By understanding these stylistic elements, one will have a better grasp of how to do that.

### **Notable Artists**

#### **Edward Cronin (c. 1838 - c. 1918)**

Edward Cronin was a major influencer and had a large impact on Irish traditional fiddle playing. Born around 1838 in Limerick Junction, County Tipperary – he was a popular fiddle player even as a young boy – and started playing tunes and long dances for experienced dancers. A weaver by trade, he immigrated to Tory, New York where he was unable to find work. He later moved to Chicago.

Cronin soon became an important teacher of Irish music in Chicago, although O'Neill (a great collector and publisher of Irish music in the twentieth century) noted that Cronin's unique style of bowing and slurring was difficult to pass on to others. He also developed a reputation as a composer of dance tunes, especially hornpipes. He's known to have composed "Rogers O'Neill's" and "Caroline O'Neill's Hornpipe" for two of Francis O'Neill's children. (Cronin, 2017)

He was O'Neill's original musical editor of *Dance Music of Ireland*, but eventually was replaced by James O'Neill.

#### **John McFadden (c. 1847 - c. 1913)**

Another important fiddle player in the Francis O'Neill's Chicago Irish music circle, John McFadden was born in County Mayo around 1847. He learned the fiddle straight from his family. After moving to Chicago, along with James Early (a well-known Uilleann piper), he performed as a duo for concerts and dancing competitions. John McFadden also composed various tunes, including "Queen of the Fair."

#### **Martin Hayes (1961-)**

Arguably the most well known living Irish fiddler today, Martin Hayes is known for his soulful interpretations of traditional Irish music. His duo with guitarist Dennis Cahill has captured the imagination of audiences the world over for the past two decades, and has even visited India.

He has collaborated with extraordinary musicians in the folk, classical and contemporary music worlds including Ricky Skaggs, Brooklyn Rider, Bill Frisell, Jordi Savall, and the Irish Chamber Orchestra as well as many of the greatest Irish musicians.

He is the artistic director of the annual festival "Masters of Tradition", an annual festival and a curator at the Kilkenny Arts Festival. Martin won the "Musician of the Year" Irish language television TG4, as well as the "Man of the Year" by the Irish Arts Center and the American Irish Historical Society. (Hayes, 2013)

### **The Corrs**

The Corrs are a very well known Irish pop-rock band that combines contemporary sounds with Irish folk and traditional themes. They were an extremely popular band in the '90s and were, in many ways, vital to the spreading of Irish folk music to mainstream audiences around the world. They released numerous singles as well as seven studio albums, which went platinum and multi-platinum in many countries.

In their music, what differentiated them from other pop-rock band was their use of Irish folk music in their band. They would incorporate not only Irish fiddle playing and singing, but also traditional Irish folk instruments such as the tin whistle (a simple, flute-like, woodwind instrument). (Corrs, 2011)

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The Irish style of violin has its own unique history, stylistic features, and historical developments that moulded the style into what it is today. These are some of the elements that are crucial to understand before attempting to play an Irish violin piece. As in Karnātic music, the music notation normally provides just a skeletal structure. The performer is expected to add a lot on his/her own. By understanding these stylistic elements, one will have a better grasp of how to do that.

Although the popularity of Scottish folk music gradually declined in the early parts of the twentieth century, there has been a heavy revival in the last thirty years – particularly with help from the government. The National Party in Scotland has been credited to its revival. Over the last few decades, there have been several grand folk productions, which have caught the eye and imagination of the citizens of Scotland. The main aim of the music is to bring people together – as a result, the music is simple, written and standardized – to ensure that many people can come together and play the music.

Understanding these two beautiful musical styles can help violinists from different traditions play these styles and incorporate these musical elements into their own music.

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