

Music Basics

Excerpt from "Irish Step Dancing: A Brief History"

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The four types of Irish music and associated dances are the jig, reel, hornpipe, and the set dances. First, some basic music definitions are needed. The "time" of a tune is shown at the beginning of the music; for example, a jig is in 6/8 time. The second number is the basic unit for a beat (4 for quarter note, 8 for eighth note), and the first number is the number of beats per "measure" or "bar." The "tempo" of the music determines the speed of the beat. In a fast tempo, beats occur rapidly. The hornpipe may have a slow or fast tempo. Beginning dancers at a feis may be asked whether they want the music to be slow or fast, often confusing them.

Metronomes measure tempos precisely; thus you can observe advanced dancers requesting their set dance in a particular tempo (e.g., Planxty Drury at 68). Slower tempos allow dancers to "pack" more movements into a particular dance. During the age of the dance masters, some would refuse to compete at a feis if the musician insisted on playing a tune at too fast of a tempo.

[A note on metronomes: it is jokingly reported that, in the past, musicians when asked to play faster, just played louder and when asked to play more slowly, just played more softly, never changing the tempo. With the coming of the portable electronic metronome, dancers now are comforted that the tempo is correct. However, rumor has it that musicians' solution is to secretly turn off the metronome and substitute their own ticking sound into the microphone, adding an occasional ping for effect!]

Instruments

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A variety of instruments are played at a feis including fiddles, accordions, and flutes. A traditional instrument rarely seen at a feis is the Irish uilleann pipe. It is a complicated bellows-blown instrument that differs from the more often seen Scottish Highlands pipes. The sound has been described as being more appropriate for playing an Irish air in the parlor rather than the stirring sound of the Scottish bagpipe. The number of Irish pipers has grown recently; one was spotted at a historical reenactment of a 19th Century trade fair at New Boston, Ohio in 1995. Irish pipers were predominant in the traditional culture for 200 years (the gentry sometimes kept one in-house), but the suppression by the English led to their decline.

Jigs

Variations of the jig are performed including the single (or soft), double, treble, and slip jig

There are references to the jig in ancient Ireland. A number of variations of the jig are performed including the single (or soft), double, treble, and slip jig. The music is 6/8 time (the emphasis on beats in a jig is: ONE-two-three four-five-six). Slip jigs are in 9/8 time (ONE-two-three four-five-six seven-eight-nine). Dancers perform single or soft jigs in soft shoes. Solo competitions only occur at the level of beginners, advanced beginners, and at some feisianna, Open. Competitions at all levels also occur in the treble jig which has a slower tempo, but dancers triple beats in hard shoes. The slip jig (soft shoes) is the most graceful.

Reel

The music is 4/4 time and it is danced at a relatively fast tempo

The reel originated around 1750 in Scotland and the Irish dance masters brought it to full development. The music is 4/4 time and it is danced at a relatively fast tempo (ONE-two-three-four). Both men and women dance the reel. For women, it is a light, rapid soft shoe dance that allows for plenty of leaping and demands an energetic performance from the dancer. Men often dance the reel in hard shoes.

Often a feis will include a special competition in the treble reel. Here, dancers in a single line have two chances to display their best efforts in a competition matching boys and girls from multiple age groups. Usually, audiences are extremely enthusiastic in their appreciation for this exciting performance.

Hornpipe

The ladies of Cork were the first to brazenly perform the hornpipe in the male style

The hornpipe began around 1760, evolving from English stage acts. It was originally danced exclusively by males in hard shoes, but now, both men and women compete. It is reported that the ladies of Cork were the first to brazenly perform the hornpipe in the male style. The hornpipe is in 4/4 time, reminiscent of a slow reel with accents on the first and third beat (ONE-and-a two-and-a three-and-a four-and-a). A notable feature is the frequent use of a rocking motion with the ankles.

Set Dances

Regular jigs and hornpipes follow a particular structure of the number of measures per tune, but sets vary

A set dance is performed to a specific tune which has remained set over time (at least during the 20th Century). Both males and females dance sets in hard shoes. Competitions begin at the level of "Open" because of the difficulty of the dances. Because the tune is always the same and the dancer knows the tune, adjudicators expect greater interpretation of the music. (In the jig, reel, and hornpipe competitions, the particular tune may vary depending on the musician.)

The dances can be either in jig or hornpipe time. In one case, "Is the Big Man Within?" the time changes mid-tune. Regular jigs and hornpipes follow a particular structure of the number of measures per tune, but sets vary. Sets contain two parts, the first is the "lead around" (from 8 to 16 measures), the second is the "set" (12 to 16 measures). Some tunes are more than 250 years old, but most of the dances are of more recent origin, developed by dance masters. Also, some of the tunes have accompanying words.

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Competitively danced sets come from an approved list of dances. Some are the "planxties" such as Planxty Drury and Planxty Davis. These tunes are over 200 years old, many composed by a blind harpist, Turlough O'Carolan (1670-1738). He composed the music to honor a hospitable friend, the friend's name listed last (e.g., Drury or Davis). The word planxty probably means "good health." Another group of set dances is related to Napoleon (Downfall of Paris, Bonaparte's Retreat, Madame Bonaparte). One reason for this may have been that the Irish looked to the French for help in overthrowing English rule around Napoleon's time.

The list of set dances is long including The Hunt, Rub the Bag, The Humours of Bandon (a humour appears to have been a drinking party at a particular place), The Piper through the Meadow Straying, Kilkenny Races, The Ace and Deuce of Piping, The Three Sea Captains, King of the Fairies, Blackthorn Stick, The Drunken Gauger, and Hurry the Jug. Fairly often, a tune is known by more than one name. Tempos vary from the 60s to more than 100 beats per minute.

Another group of sets, including St. Patrick's Day, The Blackbird, Garden of Daisies, and Job of Journeywork, are considered to be traditional dances. These are all very old tunes and were part of early Irish dance history. The title The Blackbird is actually "code" for Bonnie Prince Charles who tried to overthrow the English with a group of Scotsmen. Garden of Daisies should be the Garden of Deise, an area in County Waterford. They traditionally perform this group of dances at a fast tempo without high jumps or lifts.

Another type of dance is the "group set dance." They are danced in reel, hornpipe, or jig time and are derived from French quadrilles. These group dances differ from ceili dances in that they are less sophisticated.

Source: [Irish Step Dancing: A Brief History](#) By Don Haurin & Ann Richens

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