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# A Comparison of Irish Flute and Classical Flute Training

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A COMPARISON OF IRISH FLUTE AND CLASSICAL FLUTE TRAINING

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
Graduation with Honors from the  
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## THESIS SUMMARY

For my Senior Thesis Project, I learned to play the traditional Irish flute while I was in Ireland for a semester. I initially thought that there would be no better time or place to learn a new instrument than if I was surrounded by its culture for four months. I went in to the project already knowing how to play the classical silver flute, but knew that the traditional Irish flute was different. I found that the biggest differences were between the instruments themselves and how the two final performance goals of each affected the training in almost every step of learning and practicing. In classical flute playing, performers strive to play the music as the composer intended for it to sound and they traditionally perform in settings where they are able to read printed music and where there is a clear divide between audience and performer(s). In Irish flute playing, performers aim to have the traditional feel of Irish music come out of their playing. They also perform in groups most commonly at a pub or a bar where the audience are fellow pub-goers drinking a pint and not worrying about talking during the music. Musicians from both groups learn their instruments and music differently based on these two performance styles, which can be seen in the following paper.

## INTRODUCTION

### EXPECTATIONS

When I first began to study the traditional Irish flute, I had some assumptions about what learning this new type of flute would entail. First, I expected to learn the flute in a group setting, as I had researched and found that most traditional Irish instruments are taught in this type of setting. From my research, I learned that Irish music is typically improvised on the structure of well-known folk tunes. I also expected that most of my training would be done aurally, at least in comparison to my training as a classical flutist in the U.S., which has focused almost entirely on playing written music. To what extent, I did not know, but I did expect to learn more by ear than I had in my ten years of learning to play the classical flute in the U.S.

### INSTRUMENTS

When looking at a classical silver flute, commonly referred to as a Boehm system flute, a word that usually does not come to mind is “simple.” The instrument is complex, with its thirteen-plus keys, sixteen tone-holes, and ability to play all semi-tones that are recognized in the Western idea of tonicism from B3 to D6. The complexity allows us the opportunity to play in all twenty-four major and minor keys with relative ease. The Irish flute, on the other hand, typically comes in three versions, a six-keyed flute, an eight-keyed flute, and a simple keyless flute. I learned on the simplest of these systems, the keyless transverse flute: a cylinder of wood with six holes along its length that I held out to my right side identically to the classical flute. This means that I was only really able to play comfortably in three keys: D major, G major, and E minor. Any other keys would mean I had to use strange fingerings to play the chromatic notes. Because the

flute, as most other Irish instruments, is not complex, the music is simple and is able to be played on the instruments. In order to enable the Irish flutes to play more complex music, flute makers have added six or eight keys to the simple design. The keys are located on the sides and at the end of the flutes, so there are still six holes the flute player covers with their fingers in the tube of wood like in the simplest flute, and the keys add to the flexibility by adding the ability to play chromatic notes.

## INITIAL PRACTICING

The semester prior to my arrival in Ireland to learn this new instrument, I studied a piece by Hamilton Harty<sup>1</sup> (1879-1941) titled *In Ireland*<sup>2</sup> with my flute professor in the U.S. We chose this piece in order to begin to understand the feel of Irish music in a setting that was made for a classical silver flute. After preparing this piece, I began to study tunes found on the Irish music website The Session<sup>3</sup> on my own keyless Irish flute. These tunes helped me learn the fingerings by reading sheet music of Irish tunes, the way that I am most comfortable with playing music but something actual Irish players would not do. I found that these tunes were hard to play in an authentic-sounding way by just reading the notes and rhythms off of from a five-line staff. The combination of studying the new fingerings and new music was too much to do in a short amount of time. This would be the first of many realizations that Irish music can't be captured on a piece of paper and lives in the minds and fingers of traditional Irish musicians.

## THESIS

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<sup>1</sup> Harty was an Irish composer who was influenced by Italian composer, Michele Esposito, at the Royal Academy of Irish Music and later conducted and composed in London<sup>1</sup>. His Irish roots influenced his work for flute and orchestra, but also had compositional influences of other parts of Europe that made the piece playable by a full classical orchestra with modern instruments.

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton Harty, *In Ireland: for flute and piano*, Boca Raton, Fla: Masters Music Publications, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Keith, "The Session," *The Session*, <https://thesession.org/> (accessed 26 June 2015).

When learning how to play the Irish flute, the less formal structure of the training can be traced from the informal nature of the performance goals of the Irish flute. The differences I noticed through my personal experiences with learning from Sean O'Brien at Maynooth University can be broken down into four categories which will be analyzed in separate sections below. Those categories are: "Letter of the Law" versus "Spirit of the Law," formal versus informal, visual versus aural, and complex versus simple.

## “LETTER OF THE LAW” VERSUS “SPIRIT OF THE LAW”

### PERFORMANCE GOALS

The performance goals of the two types of flute significantly influence the pedagogy. The goals would embody the ideas of "Letter of the Law" and "Spirit of the Law." An important difference to note between classical flute music and Irish music is that classical flute music is most often considered to be "art music" while Irish music is folk/traditional music. In art music, performers strive to emulate what the composer wanted when he or she composed the work. Art music often follows certain rules that have been set out for different types of music or music from different periods. For instance, a player would play trills and other ornaments differently based on the composer or era in which the piece was written. All of this would be simplified as following the "letter of the law." Contrastingly, the Irish flute playing performance goals could be simplified as providing an atmosphere or spirit, exemplified by the idea of the "spirit of the law." Classical flute players are urged to be able to play every note exactly as it is written on the page, while adding expression to fully interpret the music, and they practice in order to achieve this goal. If there is a tricky passage that has difficult intervals or is at a fast tempo, I have been taught a medley of techniques to help get these passages to be comfortable under my fingers. In my Irish

flute learning, it was very easy to play all of the notes correctly because the tunes are simple and catchy. Instead of focusing on correct notes or playing exactly the correct rhythm, the emphasis is on staying in tempo (since a group performance is the end goal) and getting the overall feel, or “lilt” as it is commonly referred to in Irish music, to come through in my playing. Irish musicians are essentially bringing the spirit of the Irish language to life through Irish music.

## INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE

During my time in Ireland, it was hard not to notice the remnants of the old Irish language everywhere. In the 1940s, there was a revival of Irish culture and bringing back the Irish language into everyday life was a large part of that movement. Since that movement, there have been groups that push the Irish government to include the Irish translations on any and all signs/publications they put out.<sup>4</sup> The most noticeable Irish words were on road signs and buses. The upcoming stop would show up on the LED board in English then would switch to Irish, and when the voice said what stop was coming next, she would say it in English then in Irish. The language is an important part of the Irish culture and has been especially important in recent years (the past 70 or so) as the Irish strive to revitalize the traditional Irish culture. In today’s primary school system in Ireland, students must learn the Irish language even though it is rarely spoken in normal conversation. According to the 2011 Irish census,<sup>5</sup> 31.3% of people in Ireland over the age of 3 can speak the Irish language but only 1.8% of all the people in Ireland speak the language regularly outside of school. There is a significant jump in the percentage of people who are able to speak Irish in the age group of 5-24, which shows that the Department of Arts,

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<sup>4</sup> I took a course that taught the Irish-Gaelic language and we learned about this cultural revitalization in that course.

<sup>5</sup> “This is Ireland-Highlights from Census 2011, Part 1,” *Raidió Teilifís Éireann*, [http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/cso\\_census.pdf](http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/cso_census.pdf) (accessed 8 April 2016).



Heritage, and the Gaeltacht's 20-year strategy<sup>6</sup> to develop the Irish language has been successful.<sup>7</sup>

Towards the end of my semester with Sean, he began emphasizing the importance of the Irish language to really good Irish musicians. He told me that that is where the traditional "lilt" comes from, the rhythm of the traditional Irish language. He mentioned that the best Irish flute players were those who were able to speak the language fluently. Sean said that foreigners or even Irish players who are not able to speak Irish fluently usually lack that charm that makes Irish music so essentially Irish.

## TONE AND TECHNIQUE

In my classical flute lessons and practicing throughout my ten years of playing the flute, many hours have been spent focusing on achieving the "perfect" tone for each piece of music. For instance, a flute player might use a different tone for a piece such as Katherine Hoover's *Kokopeli* than they would for a French or German flute composition. I have practiced and learned many exercises to work on my tone and even have read and practiced entire books such as Marcel Moyse's *De La Sonorite* that focus solely on creating a beautiful and even tone throughout the entire range. I received quite a shock when Sean began talking about tone production in our lessons. He very clearly stated that good tone is not focused on in traditional Irish flute learning. When I heard him play, he had what classical flutists would consider an "airy" tone. He said the only instruction he received on creating a tone was to keep the flute

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<sup>6</sup> "20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language," *Department of Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht*, <http://www.ahg.gov.ie/app/uploads/2015/07/20-Year-Strategy-English-version.pdf> (accessed 8 April 2016)

<sup>7</sup> They started this 20-year initiative in 2010 so the jump in speaking ability in those aged 5-24 comes from the fact that they began teaching Irish in schools in 2010, a time when all of those aged people were in school, or they started school after that initiative began. People over the age of 24 were not in school when they required students to learn it, so they use the language less.

filled with air. In regards to technique, so much time is spent on good technique in classical flute playing that on average, my hour long lessons have consisted of over half the time spent on technique exercises such as etudes, scale exercises to work on flexibility, and other activities that finesse tonguing technique, intonation, dynamic range, and articulation. One of the first technical things that I learned as a classical flute player was how to tongue. Sean said that in his group lessons, tonguing or any other kind of technique was never brought up and that tonguing is almost never used when playing Irish music. Irish flute playing is definitely more about the spirit of playing and capturing the Irish essence in playing than following the rules, if indeed there are rules to follow.

## FORMAL VERSUS INFORMAL

### PERFORMANCE VENUE

The differences between performance venues of traditional Irish flute players and classical U.S. flute players are vast. Classical flute players typically perform on a stage or in a concert hall where the audience's attention is fully on them or the group they are performing with. There is a definite sense of what some call the "fourth wall"<sup>8</sup> at the edge of the stage that separates the audience and performers. The audience is often told to make sure they are respectful to the performers by not speaking during the performance, to not use any technological devices, and to wait to leave or enter until breaks between songs<sup>9</sup>. By contrast, Irish players typically perform in a pub with a group of other musicians. The audience will likely be relaxing after a hard day at

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<sup>8</sup> Nathaniel Davis, "'Not a Soul in Sight!': Beckett's Fourth Wall," *Journal of Modern Literature* 38, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 86.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that many classical musicians today are striving to perform in less traditional venues such as bars and public spaces to engage a wider and more various audience.

work, drinking their pints of Guinness, and conversing with those around them, sometimes even with the musicians themselves.

## INSTRUCTIONAL SETTING

In my ten years of playing the classical flute, I have taken approximately 350 one-on-one flute lessons.<sup>10</sup> This is the standard method for serious flute players in the U.S. The lessons are structured and formal, where I am given parts of certain etude books, repertoire, and other technique books to prepare for each lesson. The attention of my teacher is solely on me and my playing. Anything that I do wrong is commented on and hopefully fixed, or at least brought to my attention so I can work on it on my own. In Sean's case, when he was a child learning to play the tin whistle and later Irish flute he learned in a group of ten to twelve other adolescents. When asked about some of the disadvantages of this method, Sean mentioned that if a student makes a mistake in a group setting, the teacher is significantly less likely to notice it and the student often continues making that mistake until it becomes a habit. Because the lessons have a fair number of students taking part, the skill level of each and every student is not always the same. Sean said that often the older students would stay longer than the more inexperienced students as the teacher moved on to more advanced tunes. Lessons are often taught to multiple students at once because the performance setting of Irish music is in a group setting so learning the music in a group facilitates the skills needed to play with other musicians more than learning one-on-one with an instructor. This is something that is not focused on as much in classical flute playing as it is in Irish flute playing.

## PRACTICING

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<sup>10</sup> Lessons were typically only during the school year so figuring 35 lessons during each year times 10 years.

When I first arrived at the University of South Carolina to start studying the flute in college, my professor told me that for my degree, I was expected to practice between fourteen and twenty-one hours each week. Given the amount of material I was supposed to prepare for each lesson, it is very easy to complete these hours during the week. In my practice sessions, I have a structured order that I practice my material in. I usually start by practicing breathing for a few minutes while I unpack and set up my flute. After that, I play long tones to warm up my face and lungs further. Then I play through various interval exercises to stretch and warm up my lips and get them used to playing what I want. After that, I typically do technical warm ups such as scales to prepare my fingers and hands for practicing and to keep those skills ready. Then I usually move on to technical studies, such as etudes, or books like Wilfred Kujala's *The Flutist's Vade Mecum of Scales, Arpeggios, Trills, and Fingering Technique*.<sup>11</sup> After going through those exercises, I move on to my repertoire and spend as much time as I need to prepare that for any performance or lesson I have coming up. When I was practicing the Irish flute for lessons with Sean, he would simply give me some flute players to listen to each week and then we would play through a tune in our lesson and he would write the notes down so I could practice it on my own. To warm up, I would play a version of long tones. Since the flute I was playing on was keyless, chromatics were not feasible, so I played the D Major scale up and down the flute. After that, I would usually start playing the tune assigned for that week. Once I had it memorized, I would go through it and tunes from previous lessons to keep those up. By the end of my semester learning Irish flute, Sean had taught me five tunes that I could play both on my Irish flute and my silver classical flute.<sup>12</sup> Most of the at-home-practicing Sean assigned me involved listening to Irish

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<sup>11</sup> Walfrid Kujala, *The Flutist's Vade Mecum of Scales, Arpeggios, Trills, and Fingering Technique*, Evanston, Ill: Progress Press, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> If I had trouble with the different fingerings of notes in a new tune, I would play it through a couple of times on my silver flute so I could get the tune in my head then move back to the Irish

flute players who played in certain styles he wanted me to understand. The time I spent in a practice room was much less structured than when I practice classical flute and this relates to the feeling of the lessons as well.

## VISUAL VERSUS AURAL

### INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS

A noticeable difference between learning the Irish flute and learning the classical flute is the lack of printed music in Irish pedagogy. As mentioned previously, when learning music on my classical flute, I read it from a piece of paper with staves and notes printed on it. That is how my brain has been trained to tell my fingers and mouth what to do to play each note or group of notes. I quickly learned that I did not have the skills needed to eliminate written music entirely and go to a wholly aural system of learning. I learned this very quickly in my second lesson with Sean. Sean would begin teaching me a new tune by playing the tune in its entirety so I could hear what we were working towards. After that, he would play a short section of notes, in a rhythm that is a slowed-down version of what the first run-through of the song sounded like. Then I was expected to repeat back what Sean had just played. However, he had not given me anything to go off of, no starting pitch, no this-is-how-many-notes-you-will-play, nothing. I was able to watch his hands and catch some of the notes he fingered, but other than that, it was all up to my ear and brain to translate what I heard and play it back to him. As Sean had only ever learned music in this way, he expected me to be able to play it back quickly and mostly accurately after one time listening. This was not going to happen easily for me. It was at this point that we both learned

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flute and work out the fingering differences while knowing what the tune sounded like. I found if I tried to learn new notes to a new tune and learn new fingerings all at the same time, I had trouble getting the whole tune in my head enough to learn what I was supposed to be playing so this helped tremendously.

that I needed a bit more guidance and a couple of tries at messing it up before I could get what he played to come out exactly right on my flute.

At the end of my first lesson learning a tune, I asked Sean if he could write it down for me in my notebook so I could practice it at home. I did not trust my memory to retain everything that had happened in the forty-five-minute lesson. Sean's response was "Well I can write the note names but I can't write it on the lines, I hope that's okay," meaning that he can't read music on a staff very well. Just as I had loads of trouble learning the way Sean had always learned, Sean had trouble learning the way I had always learned. The major differences in learning methods are directly correlated with the way each flute is performed. In classical flute performances, the flutist almost always reads off of printed music. Emphasis on memorizing music is not something that happens until a player absolutely has to because we know we can rely on printed music in performances. In Irish flute performances no one reads music. They play tunes they've heard throughout their life and have memorized a set of standard tunes. Most of these tunes are based on folk tunes that have been and are popular in Irish culture. The variety of music is much less than in classical flute playing, as most Irish musicians know the same tunes and they all, for the most part, have the same structure, similar keys, and simple rhythms, making them easier to remember. The variety that a classical flutist in the U.S. plays is astounding. In my four years of college, I have played French music, Irish music, English music, American music, Baroque music, Classical music, Asian music, and so much more. All of these styles are different and ask different things of the performer. It would take a lot of time to memorize all of these styles of music just for one or two performances. Classical music is much more harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically complex as well, which is another reason as to why it is harder to

memorize classical music than Irish music. After considering these points, it is customary for classical flutists to read printed music.

## CONCLUSION

### WHAT CLASSICAL FLUTISTS CAN TAKE AWAY FROM IRISH FLUTE

Based on my semester learning this new instrument, I believe that American classical flutists can take away two important skills to incorporate in their teaching and learning techniques. While the classical teaching technique is more structured than the typical Irish flute training technique, the Irish training system is difficult for those who are not used to it. After having learned music in a completely aural environment, I feel that classical flutists often lack strong aural skills. The way we are taught, almost exclusively by reading music from a piece of paper or book, does not foster the pathways between our ears to our brains to our fingers as well as the Irish style of learning does. If we were to incorporate listening and reproducing those intervals and notes (without seeing them on a piece of paper) into our daily practice routine or even weekly teaching routine, this could help us to learn music more quickly. Along these same lines, I believe American flutists are learning to memorize music in a way that is not as efficient as it could be. The few times I have tried to memorize music, I simply read large sections of music on the page enough times until I can remember what the different notes look like on the page. The Irish memorize music by becoming so familiar with it through repeatedly listening to it and working through small sections then adding the smaller sections into a larger section until they have the entire tune memorized. Classical flutists can utilize this method of memorization to enhance their own traditional ways of memorizing a work of music. By listening to recordings of the work or playing it until we are comfortable enough to sing it back while away from the printed music

before beginning memorization, we would be more successful in replaying memorized music. Musicians will be better equipped to play music from an aural source by focusing on and enhancing their aural training. This can translate to memorizing music because if a musician can hear music and know what notes are being played, they will be able to replay it on their own instrument and facilitate easier memorization.



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