



Regional Fiddle Styles in Ireland

Part One: Sliabh Luachra

by Brendan Taaffe

In discussions about Irish music, especially in recent years, much is made of the stylistic differences between the different regions of the country, particularly along the western coast. People generally talk about four main styles, moving from south to north: Sliabh Luachra, Clare, Sligo and Donegal. In a series of articles, I'll sketch an outline of the traditions in those places, giving both the characteristics usually ascribed to the playing there and a picture of the people who have helped shape the music. This system of classification has been the target of many criticisms, and certainly each region has notable individual exceptions to anything that could be said here. As well, some have suggested that the categories are too broad and that even within the small confines of County Clare, you would need to talk about four different styles to have any degree of accuracy. Those caveats made, I do think that breaking down the music into regions can help people get a grasp on the nuances of the tradition and learn about some of its luminaries.

Sliabh Luachra (The Mountain of Rushes) is an area of undefined borders (expanding with its growing popularity): its heart lies on the Cork/ Kerry border along the upper reaches of the river Blackwater (in the southwest of the country) and includes towns like Ballydesmond, Brosna, Boherbui, Knocknagree and Gneevgullia. Sliabh Luachra is known for a rhythmic, dance-oriented approach to music, a wildness, and a specific repertoire not common in the rest of the country-polkas and slides. House dances were a vital part of rural life throughout the country, but older Sliabh Luachra musicians invariably refer to the dances as the source of their inspiration and style. That had led to great lift and swing in the music, particularly noticeable in the polkas, where there's a backbeat (coming from a pulse in the bow) not found elsewhere. Sliabh Luachra was also well known for its Gaelic literary tradition and its Gaelic language poets. Airs are an important part of a fiddler's repertoire, played with great expression.

Padraig O'Keefe (1887-1963) was one of the major figures of Sliabh Luachra music. Throughout our discussion of regional styles, we'll come across major personalities like O'Keefe who are taken to define the characteristics of the style. O'Keefe was a brilliant player and an active teacher, so his influence was strong throughout the region. To be sure, there were others: Tom Billy Murphy, a blind fiddler, was ten years O'Keefe's senior, was reputed to be a fantastic fiddler and taught a lot-many tunes still bear his name. A crucial difference is that O'Keefe was recorded, so we know what he sounded like. Tom Billy missed that technology, so we'll always wonder just how (and what) he played. O'Keefe had been a school teacher from 1915-1920, but was unsuccessful hewing to such a regular schedule and spent the rest of his life walking the countryside, teaching the fiddle. He was said to have been "an inveterate walker," and would cover 10 to 20 miles a day. He taught both fiddle and melodeon, and developed a system of numeric notation for each that he used with his students. As well as teaching the melodies, O'Keefe had a specific system of bowings that he would teach, also written down in the notation. The story I've heard for "The Bank of Turf," a lovely little jig, is that O'Keefe was out in the bogs and lilted the tune for a friend of his who was cutting turf. To make sure the fellow would remember, O'Keefe cut the notation for the tune into the turf itself.

O'Keefe's most famous pupils were **Denis "The Waiver" Murphy** (1912-1974) and **Julia Clifford**, brother and sister from Lisheen, in the parish of Gneevgullia. After World War Two, Denis and his wife Mary emigrated to New York, where Denis became involved in the thriving musical scene there. In 1963 they returned to their native Lisheen, where Denis made numerous radio broadcasts and played with the other legends of the day. Julia emigrated to London at 18, where she married John Clifford, a box player from Sliabh Luachra also living in 'the big smoke'. She returned home periodically, and it was while she was back in Lisheen in '67 and '68 that she and Denis recorded *The Star Above the Garter* for Claddagh Records. It's on this gem that you can hear Sliabh Luachra music at her finest: polkas and slides with great lift, the melodies often doubled an octave lower by one of the fiddles, expressive airs, and arresting jigs and reels. Easily one of the finest albums ever recorded in the tradition, it remains revered by musicians throughout Ireland.

Other notable musicians from the area include brothers **Paddy** and **Johnny Cronin**, both excellent fiddlers, box player **Johnny O'Leary** and, more recently, **Jackie Daly**. Currently, the popularity of Sliabh Luachra music has seen a great upsurge, with a number of young players digging into those old tunes. Given the importance of polkas and slides in the region, the tune here, *The Top of Maol*, is the first polka on the *Kerry Fiddles* album, featuring O'Keefe, Murphy and Clifford. Some suggested bowings are given, but know that where Sliabh Luachra players typically slur the two eighth notes of the beat together, as in m. 2, they pulse the bow on the backbeat, giving a great lift to the tune. To do this, pull a long bow across the two notes but bear down with extra pressure in the middle of the stroke, where the note changes, to get a 'wah'. It should sound a little wild, and-done right-will bring the tune to life. Don't overemphasize the nuance. Bear in mind, also, that bowing can be thought of as a means of variation: keeping the notes the same but bowing them in a different way will bring a different feel to the tune, and few musicians would play the tune exactly the same on multiple repetitions. This music is deceptively simple: looking at the written notes you would think it's a child's play of a tune. But there is great deceptiveness in simplicity: seek out the recording for a sense of what magic there is in the music.

Top of Maol



In part two, I'll talk about the music of West Clare, across the Shannon estuary from Kerry.

About the author

Brendan Taaffe is based in Vermont, where he plays fiddle and guitar for dances and concerts. Holding a M.A. in Irish Music from the University of Limerick, Brendan has toured and taught in Europe and throughout the U.S with groups. You can find out more at <http://www.brendantaaffe.com>.