



Fiddle Styles:

Famous Fiddlers, General Knowledge and Where to Get It Part Three

by Tim McCarrick

These are subjects you have to learn about if you play the fiddle. Yes, you could have chosen the pipes, the accordion, or whistle, and NEVER would have to answer the question, "What regional style do you prefer?" But where's the fun in that?

Here's a crash course in SOME of those things and the resources to find out more.

Fiddling Styles and Famous Players

An entire book could be written on "Regional Styles" in Irish fiddle playing and the famous fiddlers, both living and dead, who have been exponents of these styles. Since this is an introductory crash course, we'll keep it brief:

There ARE regional styles in Irish fiddling. You don't hear about this in accordion playing or flute playing, or even pipe playing; just fiddling. Sometimes there are windy and wordy discussions, or complaints about how the styles are dying out now because the widespread availability of CD's, the growth of a very plain "session style" of play, etc. The answer to all this is to learn what you can, and imitate the players you like. Here, in no particular order, are the major styles of fiddling.

Sligo Style: In the early 20th century, three fiddling greats from County Sligo made recordings in NYC: Michael Coleman (1891-1945), Paddy Killoran (1904-1965), and James Morrison (1893-1947). Not only did their 78's get played in America by the Irish immigrant population, those same records made their way back to Ireland and influenced generations of fiddlers there. The style as we know it today is based almost entirely on the recordings of those three men. This style was propagated even further when the "Sligo Champion" Michael Gorman (1895-1970) settled in London and played there. Prominent features of this style include brisk tempo, a "bounce" or "lift" to the playing; frequent use of rolls in the left and hand a smooth use of long bows. Current players of the Sligo Style include John Carty, Brian Conway, Kevin Burke. The band Dervish is known for their "Sligo Sound."

Donegal Style: Long overlooked, this style from County Donegal has become well known in recent years thanks, in part to the hard working band "Altan." The Donegal style has a definite Scottish influence which is evident in both tune types, Highlands/flings and a few fancy tunes from Scottish fiddler James Scott Skinner, as well as in the keys: You'll find a lot more Donegal tunes in the key of A. The style is well-known for its fast tempos, more single-stroke bowing (as opposed to slurs), and more bowed triplets as opposed to left-hand rolls. Famous names in the Donegal style include the famous Johnny Doherty (1895-1980), James Byrne, the Glackin brothers, and the two fiddlers of Altan, Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh (Mare-eed Nih Mooney) and Ciarán Tourish (Keeran Too-rish).

Clare Style: The Clare style is one where the tempo is more relaxed to let more of the beauty of the tune shine through. If you've heard fiddler Martin Hayes, you've heard a good example of this. Rolls in the left hand and long bows with ample slurring in the left are often used. So what separates this from the Sligo style? Tune selection for one thing, tempo for another. You'll hear people describe tunes such as, "oh, that's a Clare tune" or, "oh, that's one of Coleman's (meaning, a Sligo tune). Fiddlers known to play in the Clare style would be Martin Hayes, his father, P. Joe Hayes, Junior Crehan (1909-1998) and the legendary Bobby Casey (1926-2000)

Sliabh Luchra Style (pronounced *Sleeve Lookra*): Often called the "Cork-Kerry" style, this type of playing is exemplified by the tune choices: Polkas and Slides, at a fast tempo, custom made for dancing. Famous players of this style include: Padraig O'Keefe (Pad-reg O'Keefe) (1887-1963), Denis Murphy

(1910-1974) and Julia Clifford (1914-1997). Currently an expert in this style is Matt Cranitch, University teacher and author of "The Irish Fiddle" book, an excellent book for beginners to advanced fiddlers.

Learn more at:

www.irishfiddle.com There are over 100 fiddlers profiled there and many articles, interviews, and sound clips for listening and learning. There is also a page on regional styles with articles and links to follow.

Fiddle Session of [June 2006](#) included Brendan Taaffe's great article on Sliabh Luchra playing and players.

OK, here's that jig again. The bowing remains in the first part. Hopefully you've come up with your own bowing in the second part. (Lots of separate bows won't hurt this tune) And I've tossed in a few simple "cuts" or grace notes to spice it up. If you forget what that symbol is in bar three, check out the Tips article part one at: [June 2006](#)

The image displays the musical notation for 'Jim Ward's Jig'. It consists of four staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The first staff starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The music is written in a single melodic line. Bowing marks (V) are placed above several notes. Grace notes (cuts) are indicated by small 'x' marks above notes in bars 3, 7, 11, and 15. The piece is divided into two main sections: the first section ends at bar 10, and the second section starts at bar 14. The second section includes first and second endings, marked with '1.' and '2.' above the notes. The piece concludes with a final note in bar 18.

Musical Example 6 - Jim Ward's Jig

Incidentally, since I brought up the subject of styles, this version here is more or less a generic sort of version you might hear at a session. It's based on a version I heard of fiddle, pipes, accordion, guitar and more from performers from the Aran Islands off the west Coast of Ireland. The album title is Ragus.

I hope this has helped your playing!

In part 4 we'll explore:

- Other types of tunes: Reels, Hornpipes, Polkas, Slides and more. Is there really an Irish Mazurka?
- The bowed Triplet: how do you get that "Sticky triplet sound?"
- Opportunities to play - Solo? Duos? Sessions? What's best for you?
- Using technology to learn an old tradition - gadgets can help

About the author

Coming from a musical home, Tim McCarrick made an early escape from piano lessons when he discovered stringed instruments. Since that time he has had as many diverse musical adventures as possible, from playing electric guitar, to bluegrass fiddle and mandolin; even getting a music degree and becoming a teacher. He currently evaluates educational music and music technology for JW Pepper & Sons, and is also the owner and writer of the Irish Fiddle website: (<http://www.irishfiddle.com>).