

## Programme 2 The South Donegal Fiddle

### Broadcast Dates

Programmes are broadcast on BBC 2 in Northern Ireland on Thursday mornings from 10.50-11.20am.

Programme	Title	Broadcast Date
1	The Song Tradition	11 <sup>th</sup> September
2	The South Donegal Fiddle	18 <sup>th</sup> September
3	The Lambeg Drum	2 <sup>nd</sup> October
4	The Flute	16 <sup>th</sup> October

### Programme 2 – The South Donegal Fiddle by Martin Dowling

#### Learning Objectives

At the end of the programme pupils will have:

- Developed an awareness of how the many strong ties between Donegal and Scotland have helped to form a unique musical tradition.
- Increased their appreciation of the many connections between the social life of rural communities and traditional music.
- Discovered what makes traditional music from Donegal distinctive from other places.
- Learned how the music changes from generation to generation.

#### About the Programme

This programme explores a unique and very special strand of traditional music in Ireland: the fiddle tradition of Donegal. It includes interviews with some of the most important and knowledgeable people involved in this tradition. These include Caomhin Mac Aoidh and Rab Cherry, co-founders of Cairdeas na bhFidléirí (Friends of the Fiddle) and organisers of an important meeting of fiddlers in the village of Glenties, County Donegal, and an annual summer school of Donegal fiddling in Glencolmcille, County Donegal. The programme also features interviews with and performances by some of the most influential practitioners of Donegal fiddling alive today, including James Byrne of Glencolmcille, the brothers Vincent and Jimmy Campbell of Glenties, Mairead Ní Mhaonaigh of the internationally famous group Altan, and Dermot McLaughlin from Derry. The attentive listener will also hear some very precious examples of Donegal fiddling, including rare footage of the master fiddler John Doherty playing a version of the reel “Miss Patterson’s Slipper.”

## Background

### *Traditional Music in Ireland and Scotland*

Traditional music as we know it today, and fiddle playing in particular, goes back to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There is a huge repertoire of airs taken from traditional songs in the Gaelic Irish and English languages and the music is set for dancing, marching, and indeed working to. The main instruments involved in the development of traditional music are the modern violin, invented and perfected in Italy, along with highland and uilleann pipes. It is common to distinguish a fiddle from a violin, but this refers to the music played and the techniques associated with it, rather than the instruments themselves, which have always been identical.

Though dozens of collections of traditional music have been published through the years, traditional music remains a predominantly oral tradition. The tunes and the style of playing them have been passed down for centuries without any need for formal training or even literacy. The programme alludes to this important but often under-appreciated mode of learning, and the type of lifestyle and personal outlook on life that has been associated with it in the past.

### *The Tunes*

The repertoire of tunes is organised by the types of dances, the most popular of which are the reel in 4/4 time and the jig in 6/8 time. These tunes are always constructed from eight-bar statements. Generally there are two statements: the tune and the turn of the tune, the latter being a development of the theme of the tune in a higher register. There are, however, many examples of tunes with three or more parts.

Jigs and reels are the oldest of the dance forms, and though the reel may have originated in Scotland and the jig in Ireland, there was a rapid and simultaneous development of these forms in the eighteenth century across both countries. There came to exist a wide variety of jig dances; the standard "double jig" which might be used for a dance or a march; the single jig and the slip jig, both associated with particular styles of solo dance; and the "slide", a jig with an extended melodic line in 12/8 time set for a dance found particularly in the southwest of Ireland. In the more modern and urban Victorian era of the nineteenth century, new dances and many new types of instruments became incorporated into this largely rural tradition, imported from Britain and the continent. Two important examples are the hornpipe and the polka, which now rival jigs and reels in popularity in some regions of Ireland. But there are many other unique and arcane types of tunes called by many names: one-steps, highlands, barn dances, set dances, flings, mazurkas, waltzes, Germans and marches. In terms of instruments, the Victorian marketplace offered for the first time new kinds of instruments of previously unsurpassed quality such as keyed wooden flutes, melodeons and accordions of various types, and concertinas.

### *Developments in Recent Decades*

By the end of the nineteenth century, traditional music was in its heyday, the main form of musical entertainment in rural areas, but also increasingly in the towns and cities of Ireland, Britain, and America. However, the first half of the last century saw a great reversal. The combined effects of rapid economic and social change, political revolution and two World Wars, and especially the rise of new forms of leisure and a greater variety of popular music and dance, posed a serious threat

to the survival of traditional music as an art and a popular entertainment.

In more recent decades, however, there has been a strong revival in interest in traditional music both at home in Ireland and Scotland and abroad. While it is true that the music declined in many regions and in the cities in the middle of the twentieth century, people began to discover that, especially in more isolated areas of the western seaboard, the tradition not only survived but continued to thrive and evolve in an unbroken stream of continuous development. Economic and social change is a very uneven process, and one of the bitter paradoxes of this process is that areas that are in some ways isolated and backward, with poor infrastructure and low investment, become precious repositories of culture, language, art, and unspoiled landscapes.

South Donegal is one of these areas. Its language and music are a rich cultural resource appreciated not only across Ireland but around the world.

### *Exploring the Donegal Tradition*

The two most distinguishing features of traditional music in Donegal are that the fiddle predominates in it over any other instrument and the influence of Scottish music is very strong. Indeed, these two features are closely linked because of the great popularity and high level of development of fiddle playing in Scotland. The programme explores these features in some detail, emphasising the importance over many decades of the movement of people back and forth from Donegal to Scotland to do agricultural labour and to settle more permanently in towns and cities like Glasgow.

But as soon as these two important points are made they must be qualified. The fiddle is by no means the only instrument used in Donegal, and in particular the accordion and melodeon have proved very adaptable to this regional style. As is mentioned by James Byrne in the programme, much of the repertoire and the style of the tunes was preserved by lilters who use no instrument but their own voice. While the Scottish influences are pronounced, it is terribly inaccurate to say that Donegal music is merely a version of Scottish music. Today, when Scottish fiddlers come to visit Donegal, they find that the style and repertoire is completely different from their own.

Fiddle players and lilters who came back from Scotland with new tunes had to adapt them to the needs of the local community. One very good example of this is the transformation of a uniquely Scottish type of tune, the Strathspey, into a type of tune unique to Donegal, the Highland. The Strathspey, a highly syncopated and highly embellished version of the more common hornpipe, is a type of tune meant to give the virtuoso fiddler a platform to display his technique for listeners. Donegal listeners of course also appreciated the intricacies of the Strathspey, but there was even greater demand for the tune to be set for two-hand house dances, known in other parts of Ireland as barn dances or flings, but called a "highland" in Donegal. The tune becomes slightly simplified in order adjust to the quicker pace for the dancers, but in the hands of a master fiddler the resulting tune can be just as elegant and appealing to the listener as the more ornate Strathspey.

**Resources:**

Today, there are more opportunities to experience and learn traditional music than ever in Ireland and Scotland. Here are some places to start:

- Archives

Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin

- Commercial Recordings

John Doherty, *The Floating Bow* (Claddagh Records)

Altan, *The Blue Idol* (Virgin Records)

*The Donegal Fiddle* (RTE)

*The Fiddle Music of Donegal*, volumes 1-4 (Cairdeas Recordings)

- Publications

Caoimhín MacAoidh, *Between the Jigs and the Reels: The Donegal Fiddle Tradition* (Drumlin Publications, 1994)

Allen Feldman and Eamonn O' Doherty, *The Northern Fiddler* (Blackstaff Press, 1979).

- Schools

The Frankie Kennedy Winter School, Gaoth Dobhair,  
Cairdeas na bhFidléirí, Fiddle Week, Oideas Gael, Glencolmcille

**Classroom Activities:**

*Compare and contrast different regional styles of fiddling*

Listen to examples of east Galway, Donegal, and Scottish fiddling. Compare and contrast the performances listening carefully to tempo, syncopation, ornamentation, and melodic variations.

*Explore musical and social connections between Scotland and Donegal*

Explore the history of the human relationships between Donegal and Scotland. Compare these to the ties between Scotland and other parts of the historic province of Ulster. How are these various strands of Scottish Ulster connection reflected in the music and culture of other parts of Ulster?

*Learn a tune*

Take a tune played on the programme

- Transcribe the tune
- Identify the structure of the tune: What key is it in? Play the arpeggio of that key on your instrument. What is the opening phrase in the tune? Sing or lilt this phrase. Where does the tune move next?
- Identify the points at which the fiddler adds embellishment to the tune.

*Change a Scottish tune to an Irish one.*

Listen to and study a number of examples of a Donegal highland.

Now examine an example of a Scottish strathspey. How would you alter it to fit the highland form?

**Questions For Discussion After the Programme:***Emotional Impact: How does the music make you feel?*

Mairead Ní Mhaonaigh says in the programme that when Altan perform in big cities, people feel the countryside in their music; they say that they feel an “escapism” listening to it. What associations does the programme evoke? After listening to the music, what is your own emotional reaction?

*Place: Where does the music come from?*

What sort of a place is Donegal? What are its relations to Northern Ireland? To the rest of Ireland? To Scotland? How do all these things affect the fiddle music and our perception of it?

*Character: What makes Donegal fiddle music distinctive?*

Consider how the various fiddlers in the programme describe Donegal Music. Jimmy Campbell calls it “wild and mountainy” music. Others use words like power, drive, sharpness, high pitch, and tension. What is it about the music that gives it these qualities?

*Technique: How do the fiddle players get the “Lilt”?*

James Byrne describes the importance of lilters, women in his area who lilted tunes for the house dances in his childhood, and how their phrasing and tempo had a strong influence on fiddle players. He describes the great challenge facing a fiddle player is “to get a nice tone and at the same time not lose this lilt.” Why is it so hard to get both at once? What technical problems are presented by the fiddle? Are there similar challenges for other instruments?