

## From Session to CD: Recent Influences on Irish Traditional Dance Music in America

*Richard Gagné*

The debate about the proper direction for modern Irish ethnography rages on. Should scholars cling to the quaint rural native arts that were their staples a century ago—fiddle tunes, dances, ballads, folktales—or should they turn their attention to the gritty urban cosmopolitan scene? Common sense dictates that work should proceed on both fronts. And in fact, Irish social arts are not always easily divided into rural vs. urban, quaint vs. gritty, or even Irish vs. foreign. These two fronts are a sham, mere straw men waiting to be knocked down by scholars, or burnt to celebrate the turning of the seasons. Though some genres of modern Irish folklore are exclusively urban or rural, many are more widespread and have ancient roots as well as healthy modern branches that spread far beyond Ireland itself.

Irish dance tunes are a case in point. In the eighteenth century, itinerant dancing masters and musicians already knew large repertoires of tunes. In the nineteenth century, this music emigrated to the new world with thousands of Irish fiddlers, flute players, and pipers. In 1907, Francis O'Neill's great tune collection, *O'Neill's Music of Ireland*, was compiled not in rural Ireland but in downtown Chicago. In the twentieth century, the advent of radio, the continuing succession of recording media—cylinders, records, tapes, compact discs—and the proliferation of concert venues for traditional music have all combined to foster a class of professional Irish musicians who tour widely and release albums regularly. Their music is often a hybrid of Irish traditional music with western pop and folk. Furthermore, these professional players of Irish music are no longer all Irish by birth. They can be found all over North America and mainland Europe. The recent rage for all things "Celtic" has spread Irish music even further. Scholars seeking Irish music thus may find themselves following fiddlers to New York and Frankfurt.

There is no gulf between the fiddlers who tour abroad and those who play at local informal Irish music sessions—the same musicians can be found in both venues. Many a pastoral musician, it appears, has a gritty side. Here then are topics that both modernist and antediluvian ethnographers can pursue. How do performers of venerable Irish dance tunes adapt so readily to these highly varied musical events? How do relics of a quaint rural past become grist for the modern urban arts scene, and even for an international mass-market?

Such questions cannot be adequately answered by scholarly philosophizing and pontificating. Satisfying answers to these questions, and to any questions involving people and art, must be based upon concrete observation: observation of how the art is produced, what it is, and how it is appreciated. This observation is profitably guided by complementary theoretical approaches.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, I present here, as a case study, the musical experience and views of one man, Grey Larsen. By examining his music, we can begin to understand 1) the spectrum of music “from session to CD” (that is, from music played at informal gatherings to music at staged concerts and on high-tech recordings), and 2) the spectrum of conservative to eclectic playing of Irish music.

### **Grey Larsen’s Background**

Grey Larsen is not an Irishman; he is from county Hamilton, in Ohio. Though classically trained at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Grey’s musical education was extended at Irish music sessions in Cleveland and Cincinnati.<sup>2</sup> His main instrument was then and is now the wooden flute, but he also sings and plays pennywhistle, fiddle,<sup>3</sup> anglo concertina, guitar, and piano. He teamed up with Malcolm Dalglish in 1974, and the two went on to gain national prominence playing Irish and old-time American music. First as a duo and later as the core of the band *Metamora*, they released five albums before splitting apart in 1989. More recently, Larsen and guitarist/singer André Marchand released an album of Irish and French-Canadian music. Grey continues to earn his living through his music by performing, composing, and acting as a recording engineer and producer. His recordings and original compositions are respected by other players of Irish music. He also continues to play Irish dance tunes at informal sessions.

### **Irish Dance Tunes**

The tunes heard most often at these informal sessions are reels, jigs, hornpipes, and polkas.<sup>4</sup> These are all less than a minute long, and consist of short repeating lines played with a marked rhythm. The melodies are intricate

and are often played in unison by several instruments at once, with elaborate ornamentation and without harmony.

Melody instruments include fiddle, wooden flute, uilleann pipes (Irish bagpipes), button accordion, anglo concertina, pennywhistle, and tenor banjo. Chordal accompaniment is often played on guitar, bouzouki, or piano. Other rhythmic accompaniment is played on bodhrán (Irish drum), or bones. The ostensible function of these tunes is for use with dancing, and Irish dance is a fertile field for the scholar. But these dance tunes are played more often at sessions, without anyone dancing.

### Sessions

On both sides of the Atlantic, Irish sessions are informal gatherings of musicians who play Irish dance tunes. Sessions vary in size but often have half a dozen to a dozen players. They are usually held in the back rooms of pubs or in private houses, sometimes weekly, sometimes more sporadically. Sessions can last for hours, during which time different musicians come and go. Although there are often people at a session who do not play the music, the musicians ordinarily pay little attention to them. Session musicians are their own audience.

Sessions are social gatherings, and much of the communication takes the form of music. The tunes roll on and on with only occasional pauses for general chat, and there are few songs. (In Irish and British music, a “song” has words, and a “tune” does not.) A player will begin playing a tune, usually without announcing its name or providing other fanfare, expecting other players to quickly join in. After the company has played the tune several times through, the first player, or another, will lead the musicians directly into another tune.

The more expert players at a session start most of the tunes, and they try to pick tunes which other players will know. Less expert players sit slightly removed from the center of the knot of musicians, chiming in when they can contribute. Expert players often know hundreds of tunes. Since only about thirty tunes are played per hour at a session, a single session merely scratches the surface of an expert player’s repertoire.

New players sometimes take lessons to learn how to play their instruments. More often they start playing an instrument on their own and pick through a few tunes that they know by ear, or for which they have sheet music or a recording. When they get quicker and more confident, they venture out to a session, play along quietly, and learn more tunes. Sessions are the usual environment for musicians to learn to play with others and to build their repertoires.

Grey Larsen describes his early experiences playing at Irish music sessions:

I went to college at Oberlin, Ohio, and Cleveland is right nearby. There was an active community of older musicians who play the music. I would go up to Cleveland almost every weekend and play, especially with these two guys Tom Byrne and Tom McCaffrey, a flute player and a fiddle player from Sligo and Leitrim. I jumped in with both feet.

And there were great sessions up in Cincinnati with about eight or nine old guys. There was this guy in Cincinnati named Michael Kennedy who was born in Galway in 1900, he played the melodeon. I played with him every week, or twice a week, or more. All through the seventies, really, I had the good fortune of knowing a number of older Irish men who played music, and spent a lot of time playing with them.

When I was first learning, I really enjoyed big sessions. The big ones, ten or fifteen people, or more, have a real energy, an inspiring power. Then the better player I got to be, and the better I felt about my playing, the more satisfying the smaller sessions seemed. These days I think more than five or six is big. It does depend on the instrumentation. How many loud guitar players you have, or sometimes more than one fiddle player starts to blur everything.

But sessions have such different circumstances. I've been at festivals where the whole energy of the event is so high and electric, that you go to a session, and the air just buzzes. Tune after tune—five or six reels in a row go by, and that's not that unusual. At a real wild session, going from tune to tune is part of the escalation of the experience. But then again, there's many a session at someone's house, where the energy is much more calm, peaceful, contained; it's not as extroverted. And at sessions like that, it's not very often that you hear more than even one tune at a time.

Many Irish musicians, like Grey, at first prefer the anonymity and mass excitement of playing in a crowd at big sessions. Then later, when they develop a better appreciation for the individual contributions of others and learn to play more skillfully themselves, they prefer the clearer expression of smaller sessions where only one of each instrument is played.

Variety is one of the great charms of sessions. Since musicians attend and leave at their own pleasure, membership at even a regular session varies greatly from day to day. New faces appear, and old stalwarts play together in constantly shifting combinations. Some old chestnuts of tunes might be heard at every session; other tunes turn up once a year, if then; and new tunes are occasionally introduced. Amidst the swirling change, however, there are structures common to most sessions, which a careful examination of even one session reveals. These structures are important, not only because

they govern the expectations and actions of players at sessions, but because those players use the same structures when they arrange music for concerts or for recordings. To appreciate the music on a mass-market CD, we must understand the conduct of a session.

### Session at the Larsen House

On November 7, 1991, there was a session at Grey Larsen's house. There were seven main musicians:

Grey Larsen	wooden flute, anglo concertina
Randy Miller	fiddle
Jeremiah McClane	piano accordion
Linda Handelsman	piano
anonymous woman	fiddle
Tom Sparks	fiddle
Rick Gagné	tenor banjo, bouzouki, whistle

Randy, Jeremiah, and the woman fiddler were traveling through town, but the others lived in the area and had frequently played together. Several other people had brought instruments but played them little if at all. Children banged wooden spoons, and half a dozen other adults came for the party but not to play. The music lasted approximately three hours.

Perhaps there were more listeners than usual, the lack of a guitar was surprising, the children's spoon-banging was tolerated for an unusually long time, and there were more North American tunes than at most Irish sessions. Otherwise, this was a typical session in many respects including the number of musicians participating, the number of people on the fringes, the array of instruments, and the duration of the music.

The progress of the music, too, seemed fitting. The main structures of the music can be cogently described in diagram form. I provide two diagrams here, one of a representative segment from the middle of the session, and one from near the end.<sup>5</sup> In these diagrams, each line describes a successive unit of the session. I register each tune played (column 1), the duration of each tune (column 2), the type of tune (column 3), how many successive times it is played (column 4), which instrument starts each tune (column 5), which instruments join in later (column 6), and finally, how long the pauses

are between bouts<sup>6</sup> of tunes (columns 1 and 2). Names for instruments and types of tunes are abbreviated.<sup>7</sup>

This first session segment comes from the middle of the session when it was in full spate, heavy on fast and energetic reels. Two or more tunes are often played one after another, without pauses between them:

UNIT	DURATION	TYPE	TIMES	START	LATER INSTRUMENTS
tune 1	1:49	reel	3	fid	flu, pia, ban
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:23</b>				
tune 2	2:28	reel	4	flu	acc, fid, pia, ban
tune 3	1:34	_reel4*p	2	acc	ban, fid, fid, pia
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:32</b>				
tune 4	1:17	reel	2	fid	ban
tune 5	1:29	_reel	5	fid	ban, flu, pia, fid
tune 6	1:45	reel	3	ban	flu, fid, fid, acc
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:15</b>				
tune 7	2:20	jig3p	3	acc	fid
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:07</b>				
tune 8	1:45	reel	3	fid	acc, pia
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:53</b>				
tune 9	1:43	reel	3	fid	acc
tune 10	1:44	reel	3	fid	acc, fid, pia, ban, flu
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:03</b>				
tune 11	1:43	reel	3	flu	fid, fid, ban
tune 12	1:21	_reel3p	3	flu	acc, bouz, fid, fid
tune 13	1:46	reel	3	flu	fid, acc
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:22</b>				

The playing continued steadily at this session, with only short pauses. During the 90 minutes I recorded, bouts of music ranged from 57 seconds to 4:50 (this longest bout being tunes 11 to 13 above), with a median of 2:43. Pauses between bouts ranged from 3 seconds to 53 seconds, with a median of 19 seconds.

In the segment of the session illustrated in the diagram above, and during much of this session, the seven leading musicians participated continuously. It is clear that they were choosing tunes that they thought everyone would know. Six musicians play on 23% of the tunes, five on 28%, four on 21%, three on 15%, two on 10%, and only one on 3%. Randy

played over 80% of the tunes, Jeremiah 74%, Linda and Rick 72%, Grey 69%, and a second fiddler about 50%.

The next diagrammed segment is selected from near the end of the session. Many of the patterns evident in the first diagram apply here as well: steady music with only short pauses and full participation by the leading musicians. At the end of the session, however, there is a shift from fast to slow tunes:

UNIT	DURATION	TYPE	TIMES	START	LATER INSTRUMENTS
tune 27	2:07	jig	4	conc	fid, fid, ban, pia, acc
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:07</b>				
tune 28	1:53	reel	3	fid	acc, flu, fid, pia
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:40</b>				
tune 29	3:04	slow	2	fid	acc, fid, whi
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:18</b>				
tune 30	1:53	_reel3p	4	whi	fid, flu, pia, acc
tune 31	1:12	_reel	4	fid	acc, flu, pia, ban, fid
tune 32	1:13	reel	2	flu	acc, pia
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:18</b>				
tune 33	2:41	slow	2	fid	acc, conc, pia, whi, fid
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:18</b>				
tune 34	2:45	slow	2	conc	acc, fid, fid, pia, whi
<b>pause</b>	<b>0:30</b>				

During the session as a whole, 69% of the tunes played were reels, 10% were jigs, and 21% were slow, with most of these slow tunes near the end. Each tune was played from one to five times, before moving on to another: 5% of the tunes were played once, 25% twice, 54% three times, 13% four times, and 3% five times. Usually only one tune was played between pauses (67% of the time), sometimes two tunes (22%) or three tunes (11%).<sup>8</sup> The shortest length of time a single tune was played was 57 seconds and the longest was 3:20; the median 1:49. Tempo for the twenty-seven reels varied from 394 eighth notes per minute to 452, with a median of 420. Tempo for the four jigs varied little, from 360 eighth notes per minute up to 372.

This structural description of a session is full of precise, quantifiable information, but it is cold. The session musicians do not count on their fingers how many tunes they play in one bout, nor how many times they have played them. They do not refer to their watches to regulate their conversational pauses. Rather, they have a more direct visceral appreciation of a proper

session. Because they have played at many sessions, they feel comfortable playing each tune several times. They feel comfortable varying the number of tunes in each bout. They feel comfortable when, after a suitable amount of chat, one person starts a tune, and they can join in later. It is this comfort that is defined and measured with the above numbers and diagrams. This comfort carries over into Irish music played in concerts and on recordings.

### Concerts

Formal concerts of Irish dance music are based, to a large degree, on sessions, despite the different set of strictures that concerts impose on musicians. Grey contrasts concerts and sessions:

I love crafting musical arrangements with a group, which is basically composing music, creating performance pieces. I think it's a great pursuit. Inherent in that is that there be an audience, and you have energy going back and forth between the audience and the musicians. Taking something and molding it and polishing it, creating it, taking a lot of time and care crafting it into a beautiful piece: I get a great pleasure from that.

But playing in a session is just a totally different thing. It's spontaneous, and there's just no emphasis on form, except the form of the tune: A-part, B-part. That's all the form you need to worry about, and it's free-wheeling. Sometimes I think that the best playing I do is at sessions. The least impediments between me and the soul of music is when I've been playing in a session for like three hours, and there's this direct link between my fingers and my breath and God, or whatever, and that's really euphoric. Part of it is the physical set-up, too—when you're sitting in a circle with a few people, and you're right there, and you're not playing through microphones, don't have monitors or all this technical stuff to deal with. It's so direct and so pure.

When Grey says that sessions are completely spontaneous, with no emphasis on form, he speaks as a musician who thoroughly understands and accepts the tradition of Irish session playing. They seem less unstructured to a novice session player who learns for the first time that there are pitfalls and solecisms to avoid. But most fans of Irish music are not themselves musicians, have never attended sessions, and in fact have no notion of what sessions are. To them, Irish music is experienced at concerts and by listening to recordings.

Irish music concerts borrow part of their form from sessions. In both sessions and concerts, the same tunes are played, sometimes played singly and sometimes in sets of two to four. One or two musicians often start a given set of tunes, and other musicians join in later. Listeners know that



they may clap along with tunes, or sing along during song choruses. So far, this all feels comfortable to a session musician.

But the concert stage brings other elements to the music which are rarely seen at sessions. The musicians are on a stage and usually use microphones and a sound system. They sit not in an intimate knot, but in an exposed line, facing the audience. They begin their performance at a specified hour, or, more frequently, 15 minutes after the hour specified. They play for roughly 45 minutes, pause for an intermission of perhaps 20 minutes (during which recordings are sold), and return to the stage to play for 45 more minutes. They agree on their material beforehand, arrange it carefully, and codify it in set lists. They sometimes use keyboards, unusual percussion, or other instruments rarely found at sessions, as a nod to pop music. The sound engineer adjusts the relative volume of the various instruments in ways not possible acoustically, and alters it with electronic effects. Songs are quite common in between the sets of tunes. In between pieces of music, the performers usually announce the titles of their music and recount the origins of the tunes for about 90 seconds. Sometimes they explain the lyrics of songs or tell extended stories and jokes, extending the talking to as much as 5 minutes, while the piper or guitarist tunes. Just before starting to play, the musicians and audience are politely and expectantly quiet together for around 5 seconds. They pause for 1 second after the music stops, then clap for 10 seconds. They request at least one encore at the end of the concert with expedient applause until the musicians return to the stage. Sometimes the audience requests further encores, often through standing ovations.

These tight conventions are what Grey has in mind when he says that, in contrast to concerts, sessions are direct and pure. The strictures of this format, even for the audience, are surprisingly tight. If the audience waits for 2 seconds before clapping, instead of 1, then the performers on the stage feel stranded and ignored. If the applause starts briskly, lasting for 12 seconds instead of 10, then even if no one whistles, the performers will feel appreciated.

Concerts naturally place even more demands on the musicians than on the audience. Even the seemingly innocuous 5-second silence before the music begins is a crucial requirement: the musicians must observe it, and having observed it, they must begin to play. The Scottish fiddler Johnny Cunningham enjoys transgressing this unwritten law: he introduces a tune, waits for the hush, raises his bow to his fiddle . . . and then drops his bow and begins talking again. After he does this several times in a row, the audience finally begins to catch on and laugh, and he admits how much he loves that little silence.

But Grey loves concerts, too. They present live music to many people at once, which sessions cannot do. And they are an intermediate step between free-wheeling sessions and the still more heavily structured format of recorded music:

In a concert setting, the audience is coming to a theatrical event—of course it's musical, but it's also visual, and theatrical, and social. All of those things are critical parts of it. The personal relationship the audience has with the performer is the most important part of it for a lot of people, whether they know it or not. It's a communal experience, too, with the rest of the people in the audience. It wouldn't be the same if you were sitting at home and listening. There are so many levels to a performance.

In a recording, you strip away many of those levels—there's no visual, and especially, there's no social, with most recordings. And when you do take advantage of being freed from time and space, then it can have all the qualities and power of dream. And it can be completely non-verbal, if it's instrumental music. So to me, it's very, very different. It's a chance for a musician to be a painter: to stand back, and look at the canvas, and think about it for a week, then come back and do something else. Music happens in time, but recording is a process with which you can stop time.

And when you're performing, the other thing that's really important is, 'Am I in the right tuning?' and 'Can I play the instrument for three times in a row, so I can get warmed up on it?' Logistics of performance come into play here. But in recording, you don't have to worry about it.

### **Recordings**

Recordings, too, have an expected format in the world of Irish music, far more similar to concerts than to sessions. Vinyl discs are no longer made, and most albums are released in both CD and cassette formats. They are usually from 40 to 50 minutes long, with older albums shorter and newer albums longer. They generally have from ten to thirteen cuts—more cuts and shorter cuts than most pop albums. The spaces between cuts are not filled with chat and jokes, but are mere silent gaps of 5 seconds. (It seems like more than coincidence that this is the same period of silence observed by performers and audience before music begins on a concert stage.) Cut lengths usually last between 2 minutes, 15 seconds and 5 minutes—slightly shorter than music played live in concert. The repertoire of music played is similar in many respects to music performed live.

The method of production, however, results in substantial changes to the sound of the music. When Grey speaks of being freed from time and space on albums, he refers to the advantages of studio recording. In concert, the music is produced all at once, in real time. But in the studio, the cuts on an album are recorded not in rapid succession, but over a period of days or even weeks. Only afterward are they linked together into the order of the

finished album. This can be true too even of “live” albums which are pastiches of recordings from many live concerts. The creation of music in the studio is even more piecemeal. It is standard practice not to record each cut in real time: certain instruments or voices are recorded first, and others later, sometimes with many takes for each track, and other times with very short tracks dubbed in to correct infelicities. Individual musicians play more than one instrument on a given cut or sing more than one vocal line.<sup>9</sup> If the sound of a piece is still lacking in some way, guest musicians may be brought in after the initial recording. The equipment used, the choice and placement of microphones, and electronic manipulation of sound quality are all larger influences on recordings than they are on concerts.

Such complex and artificial production techniques carry the musician far from the “direct and pure” music of the session. The techniques are used not merely because the technology is available and affordable, but because musicians know that the experience of listening to a recording is very different from that of playing in a session or listening to a concert:

In live performance, you can get away with a lot more variety, and still have a cohesive concert, because there are so many unifying elements going on. You’re all there together, physically, and you have a relationship, verbal, spoken, and visual. There’s so much glue in that experience that you can do a wide variety of stuff that on a record would seem totally disjointed.

On a record, if you do the same thing, it might seem schizophrenic. With the record you have to create a unified whole, something like a novel that you would want to read all the way through. It would take you from some place to another place, and the journey would be really a journey. To do that is more challenging on a record than in a concert, because the people who are listening to a record are experiencing it in a totally different way. So when I’ve put together records of people, I’ve paid a lot more attention to texture, and key relationships, and tempo relationships, and mood relationships, and metric relationships.

All these things are really important. You can get really theoretical about them, but then, at some point, you just throw that out the window and just see how it feels. How does it feel to go from this thing to that, and what’s the first thing on the side, what’s the last thing?

Musicians are forced to think of the differences between concerts and recordings when they adapt the same piece of music for both formats. Usually, the music is first arranged for concerts, and only later for recordings. This is a comfortable progression for the musician. The musician receives audience feedback on the music and has the opportunity

to play it many times, trying different arrangements in succeeding concerts, before fixing the music in the studio's amber:

Usually on a record you have to pare things down—the number of times you play something through, and maybe even the number of tunes. There has to be more progression, growth, in an arrangement on a record for it to hold interest. Because in performance, it's fun to watch the interaction between the players, their eye-contact, their posture. They could play a tune through seven times almost the same way, their arrangement doesn't grow throughout the seven times, they're just crashing away, and it's great. As an audience member, you're part of it, you can see the little smile, the little tuck of the chin. That's not there, in a record. With *Metamora*, when we've adapted performance arrangements for recording, we've almost always tightened them up, or added other elements that we couldn't do in performance.

Despite the increasing prevalence of CD players with multiple disc changers that play tracks from several CDs in a random order, Grey likes to construct each of his albums so that it can be heard as a unified whole. The differing format of compact discs and cassette tapes adds one more wrinkle to decisions about recordings. CDs are one-sided, but cassettes have a front and a back side, each with its own beginning and end. Albums are simultaneously published in both formats with the same title, and they should have the same material so as not to confuse the consumer.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the formats sometimes lead to different artistic decisions:

I've done four CDs. We didn't just do them as CDs: they were also cassettes. And maybe you have different sequences for the two. In fact, we did that on one album: we had a different CD sequence from the cassette sequence. This complicates matters. Ideally, you might want your arrangements to be different, too.

Further technological changes will no doubt continue to affect Grey's artistic goals. If more and more people get cassette decks with quick-reverse mechanisms, perhaps the difference between CDs and cassettes will diminish. If more and more people play their CDs on multiple disc changers with a random play feature—playing the tracks from several CDs in a random order—then musicians may become less interested in crafting an album into a unified whole.

### Conservative vs. Eclectic Irish Music

Grey Larsen learned his Irish music at sessions, but he is willing to change his playing to suit other performance environments. He embraces the respective opportunities offered by sessions, concert venues, and recordings, while being aware of the limitations of each. His willingness to reshape Irish music extends to using electronic effects in making recordings and to accepting new instruments such as electric keyboards. In addition, he happily combines music from different traditions in the same concert or on the same recording. Besides Irish music, he often plays old-time American music and occasionally music from other countries as well. He sees the transformation of traditional musics as a fruitful endeavor, but not one to be undertaken casually. In his words:

I'm not a purist, as far as my musical tastes go. But I've done my homework, and I can tell who's done their homework—you can tell, when you listen to someone, whether they really know the soil from which their music springs. And if they don't, then I don't listen to them.

As far as what they do with it, I'm very open to that. I feel that one should have a reverence for the tradition, for the music itself and where it came from, and how it's survived all these years, and it's essential to do something responsible with all that. I have heard some people get all rocked out with Irish music, and I really liked it, like the group *Moving Hearts*. But then I've heard other people do it—have you heard *Boiled in Lead*? I'm sorry, I cannot stand it. They haven't done their homework.

So I can get just as much thrill from listening to a player like Josie McDermott—I don't know if you know him, he's a flute player from Sligo, I guess, an old guy—playing his flute, even though there's no innovation there, it's just all the music in it. I get just as much thrill and excitement and love out of it as I would listening to the *Bothy Band*, or *Moving Hearts*, or anywhere else on the spectrum.

When Grey uses the word innovation above, he means the self-conscious addition of new elements to the music. Josie McDermott plays strictly within the tradition. His ornamentation and expression conform to the technique of the older players of his district and are thus not innovative in the same way that the *Bothy Band's* electric keyboard is innovative.

Within Irish music circles, there are various terms for traditionalists and innovators. The traditionalists are sometimes called the “authenticity police.” Since the innovators often tend towards new age, heavy metal, or rock influences, their music is occasionally called “New Sod,” “Heavy Wood,” or “ShamRock and Roll.”

Grey notices conservative vs. eclectic treatment of Irish music immediately upon hearing a recording or attending a performance. However, he does not see this as a basis for judging the music good or bad. The more important judgment to make is to determine how well the musicians know the conservative tradition, and how tastefully they integrate new influences with old ones. This sort of integration is a part of Grey's own arrangement of traditional music for recording. He sees the process of preparing for a concert or producing a recording as a demanding artistic task. It absorbs most of his time, and it is his livelihood.

Irish musicians on both sides of the Atlantic continue to learn the music by playing with other musicians at informal gatherings. But while sessions are crucial to the musicians themselves, Irish music in America today generates more interest as a segment of the mass media than it does in local performance. Radio shows abound, recordings sell well, and bands make national tours. In this country, more people hear Irish music over the mass media than from local bands or informal sessions. This pattern of exposure places a great deal of importance on recordings. Performers, like Grey Larsen, who translate sessions to compact discs, shape the public view of Irish music.

To many, the workings of the recording industry and the mass media are inscrutable at best, and at worst grasping, manipulative, and soulless. The rows of sales figures in the music executive's credenza and even the CDs in the World Music rack seem a long way away from the fiddler and the flute player exchanging tunes in the back room of the pub. But the translation of the music from session to CD is anything but intangible. It is observable, not only over the course of a century of demographic, musical, and technological change, but in the playing of individuals.

The world is not neatly pre-packaged, divided into the public vs. the private, the mass media vs. the traditional artist. It is often to the scholar's advantage to divide the world up in this way for specific purposes—for example, to understand how some cultural elements are transmitted to millions of people at once, while others flourish only between individuals. But these divisions are only useful if we remember that they are not absolute. Many of the tunes learned in pub sessions have been disseminated partly through recordings, so this music can hardly be considered wholly private or belonging only to a local tradition. By contrast, television shows, movies, print media, and CDs do not spring fully formed from network committees any more than ballads spring fully formed from happy dancing throngs. They are made by individuals who learned their craft from other experts and by receiving feedback from their audiences. The study of the mass media, like the study of the ballad or the Irish dance tune, is best served by observing the development and practice of individual performers and the relation between

performer and audience. The study of a genre as seemingly quaint as Irish dance tunes should include the extension of that genre into the mass media.

Grey Larsen learned his craft from generous older musicians who themselves were born in Ireland and moved to Ohio. He composes a tune, a hornpipe, in the tradition that he absorbed. He plays the tune for the enjoyment of his friends, and then he collaborates with another musician and plays it in concert. His agent gets more gigs for him, he plays it at more concerts, and eventually he agrees to a recording deal. He records the tune in his home studio, acting as his own recording engineer, and his agent sends out demo copies. The album receives a good review in *Dirty Linen*, is praised as a "Hot Platter!" in the *Elderly Instruments* mail order catalog, and gets national airplay on Fiona Ritchie's "The Thistle and Shamrock." People on both sides of the Atlantic hear the tune, like it, and go looking for Grey, or for other musicians, from whom to learn.

### Notes

1 I should acknowledge my debt to several scholars and schools of thought. Francis O'Neill's great collection of Irish music (1907) and his biography volume of Irish musicians (1913) are early achievements; Breandán Breathnach (1971, 1976) brings them more up-to-date. For the production of art, I salute studies of individual artists by Edward Ives (1971) and by Ralph Rinzler and Robert Sayers (1980). For examining the art itself, I am inspired by Albert Lord (1960), Henry Glassie (1975), and structuralist approaches. For appreciation of art, I find reception theory useful. Focusing on performance weaves these three strands together; I am helped especially by Richard Bauman (1986), Ruth Stone (1988), and again Henry Glassie (1982).

2 I recorded one long interview with Grey Larsen in 1991, and have gleaned further information from many conversations since that time.

3 When playing fiddle, Grey usually plays old-time American or Scandinavian music. He rarely plays Irish music on fiddle.

4 Only a partial description of Irish dance music is available in published works such as Breandán Breathnach's *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland* (1971). Since I have learned more about this music from my own sixteen years of playing at Irish sessions and as a professional musician, I will not attribute my description of it to any other sources.

5 I recorded about half of the 3-hour session, in two 45-minute segments, one in the middle and one at the end.

6 "Bout," "set," "medley," "bunch," "rake:" Irish session players have no unambiguous word for a group of tunes played one after another. Such a group is

most often called a “set”; but “set” is also used for two distinct types of Irish dancing. Furthermore, “set” and “medley” are used for the more formal music played at concerts or on recordings, and it is useful to distinguish emergent groups of session tunes from these more deliberate arrangements. “Bout,” “bunch,” and “rake” are hardly technical musical terms, but their very informality is appropriate to session playing. I will use “bout” throughout.

7 Instrument abbreviations are as follows: flu = wooden flute, pia = piano, ban = tenor banjo, acc = piano accordion, fid = fiddle, whi = D pennywhistle, conc = D-A anglo concertina, and bouz = bouzouki.

Tune-type abbreviations are as follows: reel = a two-part reel with 8 measures of 8 eighth notes per part, and each part repeated twice, thus 32 measures in all, taking about 35 seconds to play. \_reel = half-length reel, also of two parts, but with only 4 measures per part, about 18 seconds long. jig = two-part double jig with 8 measures of six eighth notes per part, and each part repeated twice, thus 32 measures in all, taking about 32 seconds. jig3p = three-part double jig, about 48 seconds. \_reel3p = half-length reel with three parts, about 26 seconds. \_reel4\*p = anomalous reel with one full-length part and three half-length parts. slow = any of a number of less classifiable slower tunes.

8 At most sessions, the average number of tunes played between pauses is higher. Two tunes between pauses is usually the norm. Two factors skew my 90 minutes of data for this session: this particular session was very relaxed, and my recording of it includes the end of the session, with its preponderance of long, slow tunes played singly.

9 Irish music fans, and to a lesser extent musicians, often feel that having a musician record multiple tracks is undesirable or even morally repugnant. If the music on a recording cannot be played live in concert, some social contract appears to be broken. Jokes are made about any musician who “plays with himself” too much. Derek Bell, harp player for the Irish group “The Chieftains,” turned the joke good-naturedly back on himself by calling one of his solo albums *DEREK BELL PLAYS eight different instruments WITH HIMSELF*.

10 Green Linnet Records, the leading label of Irish and Scottish music in the United States, has recently rebelled against the practice of including the same music on CD and cassette versions of the same album. They sell two cassettes from the band Silly Wizard: #3036 *Live in America* and #3037 *Golden, Golden*. They now offer these two formerly discrete albums on a single CD: #3036/37 *Live Wizardry: includes Live in America and Golden, Golden*, with a caveat: “NOTE: The following tracks appear on the cassettes only...” (*Green Linnet*, 1996:17). This disparity between cassette and CD formats apparently has as its root the laudable desire to fit two short earlier albums onto a single CD, rather than the concerns



about the ordering of tracks discussed by Grey Larsen. It also reflects a trend to recycle material from older albums into new collections.

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