

## **2.03 Rhythm & structure in Irish traditional dance music. Part 2.**

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Note. See this directory for associated sound and music manuscript files.

### **Introduction**

In the first part of this article (see Volume 1) I attempted to suggest that playing 'real' music involved total control of your chosen instrument so as to allow you to communicate with, or induce subjective responses in, your listeners. I also made clear my preference for strong rhythmic structures and clean phrasing, and suggested some methods for achieving these structures on the pipes. Hopefully, I also made it clear that my directions should not be slavishly followed by anyone who had a preference for structures other than those described. I did, however, suggest that mastering a range of structures would help towards that mastery of the instrument needed to make it literally transparent and permit the communication of music to the listener. In any case, while the continuous repetition of strong phrases may be suitable for group, and in fact necessary for good '*céilí*' or set, playing, the better musicians of my acquaintance tended to introduce a little more complexity for listening, or especially in the past, for solo dancing.

What exactly did they do? Well, they introduced ornaments; alternated crotchet-quaver and the 'standard' triple quaver beat; used various methods to stress the beat or the off-beat; introduced strong rhythmic figures to keep the beat from flagging; introduced syncopation; they varied the melody as well, but I will only draw attention to those melodic variations which seem to accentuate the rhythm.

None of these devices will work effectively without a good underlying basic structure. This said, I cannot recall ever hearing a good traditional musician play the basic structure and then begin to vary it as is sometimes done in, say, jazz. Some of the recordings made by Patsy Touhey would come closest to following this process, especially in those where he introduced a stream of spectacular ornaments towards the close of the tune. In most cases the basic structure is implicit, with what we might think of as variations on the basic structure being quite possibly introduced in some instances right from the first bar. As an example listen to the grace note on the second triplet of Willie Clancy's "Down the Back Lane" (recording included) where he uses it to accentuate the off beat.

### **Definitions / Assumptions**

This article was written in the first instance for piping practitioners. I will continue to assume that the reader has some familiarity with terms such as rolls, crans, tight triplets, hard bottom D and the likes. I will continue to use the symbols listed in part one of this article, most of which are now in common use. Where I make reference to the 'standard' way of playing a tune or sequence of notes, I am referring to the way they are frequently heard played and not to any cast-in-stone correct way to play the piece. Mention of the basic structure of a jig refers to two groups of three quavers (two triplets) within the bar, generally with a recurring accent on the first beat of each group.

The range of variation possible while still staying within the bounds of good Irish Traditional Music (ITM) practice is extensive – there are a great many ways to play or vary a tune 'correctly'. It is also possible to play the tune incorrectly. Those with an extensive listening background in ITM will immediately recognise the difference when they hear it. It would, however, be very difficult to describe. Some understanding of the way in which acceptable variation occurs is necessary. As a brief introduction to the subject I will draw attention to some of the changes or substitutions acceptable on the notes A and G.

Figure 1 (examples on A) and Figure 2 (examples on G) each start with a typical triplet of notes in a jig. The strong or 'beat' note is the first note of the triplet. This note is generally accepted to 'define' the pitch of the triplet. In a system devised in the first instance by Breandán Breathnach, the strong notes from the first two bars of the tune are used to 'define' or aid recognition of a tune or family of tunes. It is, however, quite acceptable to substitute a different (but suitable) note in the strong position as a variation during performance.

Some of the acceptable substitutions for the triplet might be to play the (strong) note for the duration of a dotted crotchet (a); play a dotted crotchet (long) roll on the note (b); divide the note into crotchet - quaver (c); use a note above rather than below for the middle note of the triplet (d) and (e); use hard bottom D for the middle note of the triplet (f). All of these substitutions continue to use the original strong note of the 'standard' triplet. (g) and (h) show instances where a different note is substituted for the original strong note. The quaver-short roll configuration in (h) will be dealt with in a little detail later in the text. It is interesting to note that in tunes where the figure DGG (Example 2 g) occurs as the 'standard' configuration, it will frequently be varied by substituting G, with or without ornamentation. In the same fashion, CAA (Example 1 g) or the similar configuration CAG will often be heard replaced with A.

### **Possibilities**

The range of possible rhythmic effects is extensive. To assist both my workload and the reader's understanding I will confine my discussion to brief comments under the headings below. I am in the process of recording examples of all the points under discussion. However, these recordings will not be ready in time for this issue of the journal. They will be included in part 3 of the article in the next issue of the journal.

Of my own personal acquaintance, Willie Clancy was, in my opinion, the piper who introduced the most subtle rhythmic variation into his playing. I will make use of two of his tunes to illustrate the points discussed below. Sound recordings and transcriptions of both tunes are included. Only the first time over the tune was transcribed, along with a few bars from a repeat of "*Bímís ag Ól*". There may well be errors in my transcription, since the recordings are old and not of the best quality. On top of that, there is always a level of subjectivity when transcribing. In "*Bímís ag Ól*" Willie appeared to separate two occurrences of G with a bottom hand closure. After extensive listening I could still hear a note and not a silence and decided to indicate this with a bottom D grace note. In

reality I suspect he was simply failing to fully close the chanter. In bar 14 of the same tune I suspect Willie was attempting to play two effects at once as can easily happen when your creative imagination is racing ahead of your fingers. I inserted F natural at this point. Short silences between notes, suggesting tight fingering, are indicated by commas. Locations where the silence appears more extensive are indicated with a rest. Please feel free to advise me of any errors or additions.

I would strongly urge you to listen closely to the subtle way Willie changes the emphasis from bar to bar. Don't copy – be inspired!

### **Note value combinations**

This is probably the most basic way in which rhythmic variation can be introduced. Simply changing the 'standard' triplet on a first or second repeat to a dotted crotchet or crotchet-quaver combination, with the chanter lifted off the knee and a good strong vibrato applied can sound wonderful – and even a relative beginner can manage this variation. Examples occur in bars 3 and 11 of "Down the Back Lane", bar 11 being the third bar of the first repeat of the first part of the tune. The CAA BCG of bar 3 becomes a gorgeous 'piper's C' crotchet, followed by a D<sup>1</sup> quaver, followed by the triplet BGG in bar 11. In bar 3 a strong rhythmic emphasis is given to the first triplet in the bar, CAA. In bar 11 the second triplet BGG gets the strong emphasis.

### **Adding ornaments**

At this time I will restrict the discussion to rolls. The use of triplets (or quadruplets, depending on the way the internal rhythm is stressed) is such a wide subject it deserves in-depth treatment. Hopefully this will be included in a future article.

Rolls, in the basic form, use the same notes as the 'Turn' of art music. See Figs 3 and 4. In my opinion, however, the Turn is, principally, a melodic variation while the Roll is mainly a rhythmic variation. There are, of course, overlaps with both – we must remember the close interaction between melodic and rhythmic changes. Interestingly, "Rolle" is a term used for the Turn in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany. I see the Roll as mainly rhythm related because in the first instance, a well played dotted crotchet (long) roll does, as the name implies, give a nice rolling effect to the rhythm in the bar in which it is introduced, no matter which notes are used to produce the roll. In fact, quite a range of notes and methods can be used to produce the roll effect – see Figs 5 & 6. Also, the standard long or short roll is played on the strong note of the triplet and, if my earlier assumptions regarding acceptable substitutions are correct, will tend not to stand out as a melodic change. If you listen closely you can hear the effect of 'tight' fingering (like Fig. 6) on the rolled F in bar 6 of "Down the Back Lane".

The long roll occurs during the full duration of the dotted crotchet. Willie Clancy made extensive use of the long roll and you can hear them throughout his music. See bars 8, 16 etc. of "Down the Back Lane". The short roll occurs at the start of the crotchet being ornamented – see Fig 7. Examples occur in bars 2, 6 etc. of the same tune.

Willie made frequent and effective use of a roll variant peculiar to West Clare and sometimes referred to as the 'Rising Roll' which is illustrated at Fig 7. Played like this the emphasis shifts to an 'off-beat' introducing a form of syncopation. Examples can be heard in bars 1, 5 etc. of "*Bímís ag Ól*".

### **Stressing the beat with strong or repeated rhythmic figure**

The easiest way to understand this feature is to listen to the example in "*Bímís ag Ól*". In bars 1 & 2 and 5 & 6 the sequence of notes is DGG, followed by a 'rising roll' on B, followed by CBC then D. In bars 9 & 10 of the first repeat (see Fig. 9) this changes to DGG, BGG, CAF, D giving a good strong stress on the beat just in case our attention was flagging!

### **Syncopation**

While the basic approach is to emphasise the beat (first note of the triplet) syncopation occurs when the emphasis is shifted to elsewhere in the bar.

### **Stressing 'off-beats' with grace notes**

Judicious use of a 'cut' on the second or third note of the triplet introduces a skipping effect into the music. Overuse of the effect lessens its impact and can become quite boring.

You can hear Willie use a cut on the second note in bar 1 of "Down the Back Lane" and bars 14 & 22 of "*Bímís ag Ól*". He cuts the second note of the first triplet in bar 9 of "Down the Back Lane" but here he also reverses the sequence of the two initial notes from CA to AC. This technique emphasises the syncopation.

An example of a cut on the third note of the triplet occurs in bar 4 of "*Bímís ag Ól*".

### **Reversing note values**

Popular with pipers on old recordings, I seldom hear this effect used today. The example in bar 22 of "Down the Back Lane" shows the initial C shortened and the following A lengthened to emphasise it. In other bars (18, 26, 30) the C is also quite short but is given emphasis by being played staccato. In these instances, also, the following A is not noticeably lengthened.

### **Holding notes across the bar line**

This effect produces a strong syncopation, especially when the note is held from the end of a part into the first bar of the next part. We can hear Willie introducing this effect into "*Bímís ag Ól*" going from bar 12 to bar 13.

### **'Apparent' syncopation**

Willie did some wonderful tricks that appeared to introduce syncopation – subjectively it was there, in reality it wasn't. Due to a number of house moves in the recent past I do not have an example to hand so this effect will have to wait until another issue.

On the subject of apparent syncopation, I would like to leave you with a question. Does playing a slide introduce syncopation? The starting point of the note is certainly 'fudged'. Does this make the slide a rhythmic as well as a melodic device?

My thanks to Jimmy O'Brien Moran for setting the tunes and examples. Any differences between the sound examples and the transcriptions can be ascribed to my ageing ears – Jimmy faithfully replicated everything I sent him.

The sound examples are from recordings given to me by Breandán Breathnach many years ago. He placed no restrictions on my use of the recordings. My apologies to the original owner if ownership did not rest with Breandán himself.