



The Burren (Co. Claire, Ireland; photo © S. Hendrickson, 2004)

Irish Slow Airs into Song **By Stewart Hendrickson**

When I've had too much of fast jigs and reels and need some soothing contemplative music I turn to slow airs. Many times we need to slow down in our musical lives. With its haunting and lyrical character this music is ideally suited for contemplation. Slow airs are considered the most beautiful music of the Irish tradition.

Most slow airs have come to us through the tradition of [sean nos](#) or old style Irish singing (for example – [Eleanór a rún](#), sung by Roisin Elsafty). Others have come from ancient melodies about which we know very little (for example – [Limerick's Lamentation, played by me on fiddle](#)). Common characteristics of this type of music are a free meter and melodic ornamentation. The melodies occur in phrases which move in their own characteristic way with pauses separating the phrases.

Many slow airs are instrumental versions of songs (for example - [Ned of the Hill, sung and played on fiddle](#) by me). Sometimes they are highly embellished but they still should be recognized as the songs from which they are derived along with the appropriate phrasing. The ornamentation should be a sort of lubrication between notes of the melody and should not be overdone such that they hide the original melody.

Other slow airs seem to have originated simply as melodies and have later been used as the melodic basis of songs. (for example – [Carrigdhoun, sung by me](#), uses a melody also used by Thomas Moore (1779-1852) for his song [Bendemeers Stream](#), and later used by Percy French (1854-1920) in his song [Mountains of Mourne](#)). Slow airs thus serve as a vast reservoir of melodies for song writers.

They are often recycled into many different songs and the melodies are subtly changed in the process.

Song writers would do well to immerse themselves in this traditional music as source material for their songs. The melody is just as important as the lyrics. It should convey the mood or feeling of the lyrics and be a recognizable part of the song.

A good source of traditional Irish slow airs is the book "[Traditional Slow Airs of Ireland](#)" by [Tomás Ó Canainn](#) (Ossian Publications, Cork, Ireland, 1995). It contains 118 airs and is accompanied by a double CD set in which each of the tunes is played on a variety of instruments.

*Airs carried on air:
Melody that lingers
Unfold, decorate.
Breathing bellows an elbow
Continues to pump: swelling
Lung that forces a chanter
To speak.
(From 'Melos' by Tomás Ó Canainn)*

Because of the free meter it is impossible to notate the tune as it is actually played; different players will have different interpretations. In learning slow airs some acquaintance with the song is very useful in order to understand the phrasing and emphasis of notes.

It is best to hear the song sung or hear a recording of someone playing the tune. But keep in mind that each player might have a different interpretation. The next best thing to hearing the song sung or the tune played is to try to sing the notes as if in a song. A good singer will have a sense of phrasing that should help. Then it is up to you to develop your own interpretation of the tune. Do not overdo the ornamentation, but let it simply enhance the melody.

Slow airs don't have to be old and traditional. Some beautiful new tunes continue to be written in the tradition of slow airs. For example *Women of Ireland (Mna Na HEireann)* was written by [Seán Ó Riada](#) (1931–1971) for the film version of John Millington Synge's "*Playboy of the Western World*" ([played by me on fiddle, and Linda Khandro](#), harp).

Last May I performed a set of Irish slow airs and songs at the Northwest Folklife Festival in Seattle, accompanied by Linda Khandro on harp. I will perform a similar set at the Traditional Music Festival in Princeton, B.C., Canada on August 19. Some of the tunes and songs I played are [here](#).

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