





Clare Concertinas

Bernard O'Sullivan & Tommy McMahon

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The concertina is a mild-toned instrument not differing greatly in timbre or loudness from the uilleann pipe chanter. It was found to be well adapted for reproducing the characteristic phrasing and ornamentation of the pipes, and being small, light, relatively cheap and easier to manipulate than the pipes, it quickly gained favour. That is not to say it was an entirely satisfactory replacement for the pipes, which are capable of much greater shades of expression and richness of ornamentation. Nonetheless, many of the present traditional tunes would be forgotten but for our concertina players.

The Cree-Cooaclare district of Clare is a remarkable centre of traditional music and dancing. The instrument most commonly played is the concertina. Indeed, this area probably has more concertina players than any other district in Ireland. Up to thirty years ago almost every house in the parish had a concertina, usually kept in the chimney corner nook. One reason for the proliferation of concertinas was their cheapness - it used to be possible to buy a German-type concertina for as little as five shillings.

The concertina entered Irish music around the middle of the nineteenth century. It was invented by an Englishman, Charles Wheatstone, around the year 1829. It is said to have been popular in Clare as early as 1860. Clare at that time had an abundance of musicians, particularly pipers and fiddlers. With the decline of the pipes the concertina became popular, particularly for the new-style set dances. Generally it was the womenfolk who played the concertina up to 1940 or so. The pipes and fiddle remained exclusive to the men, with a few notable exceptions. After 1940 the concertina was played mostly by menfolk and today the best exponents of the concertina are men.

How did Clare come to be known as the home of the concertina? One theory is that it was introduced to Clare by sailors along the banks of the Shannon. Personally, I believe that as Clare had, in the last century as well as now, more musicians per head of population than any other county, it was only logical that a new instrument would find acceptance where the tradition was strongest.

Today Cree-Cooaclare is very much concertina country. Such names as Bernard O'Sullivan, Tommy McMahan, Solus Lillis, Tommy McCarthy, Sonny Murray, Michael Tubridy and Tom Carey are well known as concertina players from this area. This record concerns two of these players, Bernard O'Sullivan and Tommy McMahan. Both are farmers, living about two miles apart in the parish of Cooaclare. Both were reared with music. They grew up in an area where dancing was still an important part of the social life and music, accordingly, a respected and highly esteemed accomplishment. Bernard, the senior of the two, remembers playing at house dances nightly in his youth. His mother was a concertina player and he himself is very much indebted to Stack Ryan, a neighbour from Leitrim, Cree, for almost all his repertoire. Bernard says: 'These are the notes as Stack had them fifty years ago or more; I was only twenty when I heard them from him; my fingers were more supple then. I was twenty and he was sixty at the time I was picking up the tunes from him.' Stack had a very large and varied repertoire, obtained locally and from travelling players, and also later from the gramophone.

Tommy McMahon is twenty four years old, and at the age of four he played his first tune, which he learned from his Uncle Joe Mescall, himself a player. Tommy met Bernard at the age of twelve and invited him to his house. As a result much of Tommy's repertoire is from Bernard. However, Tommy travelled and widened his repertoire at Fleadhs and music sessions. Bernard says Tommy is the fastest he ever saw to pick up a tune. Despite his youth, Tommy was all-Ireland senior champion concertina player for three consecutive years, 1971, 1972 and 1973. He has now given up competitive playing. He is fortunate to reside in such a musical area, and he plays three or four nights a week for country dances, public house sessions and weddings. This record shows the variety in the repertoires of both players - reels, jigs, set dances, hornpipes, polkas and waltzes, and while many of the tunes are well known, the settings are often peculiar to Clare.

1 Polkas:

The Babes in the Wood / Cooraclare Polka / Clare Dragoons

(Bernard O'Sullivan / Tommy McMahon)

Here they play with the easy confidence of one who has a sound knowledge of the music and perfect command of an instrument. These polkas were picked up by Bernard from Stack Ryan who passed them onto Tommy. The tunes here are old long-established and very popular pieces. Here they have special West Clare traditional setting.

2 Jigs:

The Shady Groves of Piedmont / The Humours of Ennistymon

(Bernard O'Sullivan and Tommy McMahon)

The first jig is better known in West Clare as *George Whelan's Jig*. Whelan was a well known fiddler who travelled extensively in Clare, The playing reminds one of close-fingered playing on an uilleann pipe chanter. The second jig probably got its name from Martin Clancy, a famous fiddler who migrated to the States. The jig was in the repertory of Michael Coleman, Its original name was 'Coppers & Brass' but Coleman added the third part and rechristened 'The Humours of Ennistymon', doubtless in honour of Martin Clancy, who was a native of Ennistymon.

3 Reels:

The Old Torn Petticoat / Tommy People's Favourite

(Tommy McMahon)

These are old reels, important and popular in their class. The settings here are very fine and an excellent blend of close and opened fingering, calculated to warm the heart of the most critical listener.

4 Set dance:

Mount Fabus Hunt

(Bernard O'Sullivan and Tommy McMahon)

This seems to be distinctly and uniquely indigenous to West Clare. In O'Neill's *Dance Music of Ireland* it is classed among the long dances and set dances as 'The Hunt' and is number 976. The piece was played around Cooraclare for solo dancers. O'Neill's setting is excellent but if anything Bernard and Tommy's is better.

5 Reels:

Ollie Conway's Selection

(Tommy McMahan)

Tommy has introduced in these reels a distinctive form of ornamentation reminiscent of a fiddler's triplet or a 'gurr', of which the late Larry Redican was a noted exponent. It is easy to detect from the rhythm of Tommy's reel playing that he plays regularly for dancers, rather than merely 'for listening to'.

6 Reels:

Kilrush Races / The Clogher Reel / Burren Reel

(Tommy McMahan and Bernard O'Sullivan accompanied by Carmel, Bernard's daughter, on the guitar)

The two latter tunes were popularised originally by the Kilfenora Ceili Band. Francis O'Neill knew the first reel as *Winter Apples* or *The Shannon Breeze*. Stack Ryan heard it from a travelling player at Kilrush Races and so it got its Cree-Cooaclare name. These reels are strongly overlaid with the traditional Clare style.

7 Set dance:

Bonaparte's Retreat

(Tommy McMahan and Bernard O'Sullivan)

This set dance was extremely popular around Cree-Cooaclare. It was a great favourite of a travelling dancing teacher, Pat Barron. The modern step dancer would dance this in a much slower tempo with the long notes longer and the short notes shorter. The manner in which Tommy and Bernard play, approximating more to the hornpipe, would suit the discriminating set dancers of an older generation.

8 March:

Bonaparte's March

(Bernard O'Sullivan)

Bernard learned this march from Stack Ryan. Stack got it from the fife and drum band which was around Cree earlier in the century, trained by the father of a famous Cree fiddler, Patrick Kelly. The tune is one of a whole family of Napoleon-Bonaparte titles (*Bonaparte Crossing the Alps*, *Napoleon Crossing the Rhine*, etc.) all of them 'floating' tunes probably derived from a single melody but turning up in countless variant forms, some stately, some jaunty.

9 Jigs:

Barron's / Jackson's / The Miltown Jig

(Tommy McMahan)

Three well known, elegantly constructed tunes that have long stood the test of time. Tommy's phrasing, colouring and ornamentation leave nothing to be desired. As they appear these jigs are a fit handful for any Irish musician on any instrument.

10 Set dance:

Rodney's Glory

(Tommy McMahan and Bernard O'Sullivan)

This is a fine West Clare setting of a melody named after Admiral Rodney's victory over the French in 1782. Although not the standard setting, it is quite authentic and worthy of being perpetuated. It was probably brought to Clare a couple of generations ago by the famous fiddler George Whelan, a Kerryman who circulated around West Clare. Whelan's fame still lingers after the lapse of eighty years.

11 Reel:

Tommy McMahon's Reel

(Tommy McMahon)

This is an old reel, not very well known. Tommy is to be thanked for bringing it to the notice of a wider public.

12 Waltz:

Over the Waves

(Bernard O'Sullivan and Tommy McMahon)

A hundred years or so ago, when the waltz and the polkas swept Europe, many fine salon danse tunes caught the Irish ear and entered the repertoire of travelling musicians. The waltz 'Over the Waves' was a great favourite, particularly in West Clare. Waltzes are usually played as a relaxing dance between sets. The waltz gives the set dancer time to regain his vigour to begin another set.

13 Polkas:

Girl I Left Behind / Maggie in the Wood

(Bernard O'Sullivan)

Two perennial favourites. In spite of their humble and familiar aspect it was these and a few others of their kind that kept the music and the dancing going in times and places when musicians were in short supply. Polkas were usually played for the plain set in Clare. Now polkas are rarely played, unless in place of a hornpipe for the last figure of the Caledonian Set.

14 Jigs:

Martin Talty's / Thomas Friel's / Joe Cunnean's

(Tommy McMahon)

These jigs are fairly recent compositions, or at least have only recently come into prominence. Certainly the settings and tempo and phrasing leave nothing to be desired.

15 Hornpipes:

Sean Ryan's/Danganella hornpipe

(Tommy McMahon)

The first hornpipe is best known in its Connaught setting, titled *The Mullingar Races* (No. 834 in O'Neill's *Dance Music of Ireland*). Tommy here gives two interesting local Clare settings of these hornpipes. Hornpipes are usually played for the final figure of the set dance.

16 Set dance:

Job O Journeywork

(Tommy McMahon and Bernard O'Sullivan)

This set dance became well known all over Ireland as the theme tune to a popular radio programme presented by Ciaran MacMathuna. As well as the set dancing around Clare there was always great regard for the good solo dancer. One of the favourite dance pieces for set or solo was *Job O' Journeywork*. Again, it came into the repertoire of Bernard and Tommy through Stack Ryan.

17 Reels:

The Ash Plant / The Maid of Mount Cisco

(Bernard O'Sullivan and Tommy McMahon)

These two reels came into Clare through an old 78 r.p.m. recording. The performance allows the listener to visualise lively sets being danced in a country kitchen in which you can practically hear the feet of the dancers. Reels like these are ideal for the lively tempo of the Caledonian Set.

Muiris O Rócháin

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