

TSDL1505

Bernard O'Sullivan, Tommy McMahon Play Irish Traditional Music of County Clare

BERNARD O'SULLIVAN, TOMMY MCMAHON PLAY IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF COUNTY CLARE



This is the second Topic LP of the music of Tommy McMahon and Bernard O'Sullivan. Like the first record it illustrates the richness, depth and variety of Clare concertina music. The selection here is very varied and includes reels, jigs, hornpipes, set dances, polkas and waltzes. Anyone in search of good concertina music may find it in West Clare. This is really concertina country. Every village has a traditional musician and, in many cases it is a concertina player. The concertina as a traditional instrument has been in Clare for well over a hundred years. With the decline of the pipe and tiddle the concertina was a practical replacement. It was ideal for playing the newly composed sets of the last century. Though it was not capable of the embellishments or expressiveness of the pipe it was

sometimes an excellent little reed instrument for playing for country dances.

Bernard O'Sullivan, the senior of the two players, learned much of his music from Stack Ryan, a neighbour from Clare. Lately, Stack Ryan's music is in the repertoire of many a musician around Cree Corcoran in the present day. Bernard says of him: "When they

would be set dancing at a house, or a party being held, Stack would be sent for and he'd play during the night for them. I was still at school when I first met him and wouldn't be allowed out at night that time as it wasn't until I left school that I would walk from our house to his. I'd spend the night then learning a few tunes from him." Bernard was very little influenced by musicians apart from Stack, and his tunes in the record are as he heard them from Stack Ryan over 40 years ago. Stack Ryan picked up much of his music from travelling musicians such as George Whelan from Kerry. Moreover, he had a gramophone and a collection of 78 rpm records, and thus he learnt many of the early recorded tunes.

Tommy McMahon, the other concertina player on this record, is only 24 years of age but has won three senior All Ireland concertina championships. He is probably the most successful young concertina player in Ireland. While Bernard O'Sullivan is indebted to Stack Ryan for much of his repertoire, Tommy is not deemed a large part of his selection from Bernard. Tommy also went outside his own area to learn tunes. He travelled to Rosetta in west Galway all over Ireland and exchanged tunes with other skilled musicians. As a result Tommy's repertoire is vast and varied. It is obvious from this record that both these players play regularly for set dancers. The playing is delicate but with all the vitality of a living art. To this day Cree Corcoran has many traditional musicians, and folk music is very much part of the life style of the area. Notably the concertina has worked as a strong link between the generations in this part of County Clare. The kind of music made by Tommy McMahon and Bernard O'Sullivan exemplifies the tradition that continues here a very vigorous, healthy and lively and continuous.

Muiris O'Riordan



Farmland of Co. Clare, the home country of Bernard O'Sullivan (above, left) and Tommy McMahon (right).

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Bernard O'Sullivan, the senior of the two players, learned much of his music from Stack Ryan, a neighbour from Cree, Leitrim. Stack Ryan's music is in the repertoire of many a musician around Cree Cooraclare to the present day. Bernard says of him: 'When they would be set dancing at a house, or a party being held, Stack would be sent for and he'd play during the night for them. I was still at school

when I first met him and wouldn't be allowed out at night that time so it wasn't until I left school that I would walk from our house to his. I'd spend the night then learning a few tunes from him.' Bernard was very little influenced by musicians apart from Stack, and his tunes on the record are as he heard them from Stack Ryan over 40 years ago. Stack Ryan picked up much of his music from travelling musicians such as George Whelan from Kerry. Moreover, he had a gramophone and a collection of 78rpm records, and thus he learnt many of the early recorded tunes.

Tommy McMahon, the only other concertina player on this record, is only 24 years of age but has won three senior All Ireland concertina championships. He is probably the most versatile young concertina player in Ireland. While Bernard O'Sullivan is indebted to Stack Ryan for much of his repertoire, Tommy in turn learned a large part of his selection from Bernard. Tommy also went outside his own area to learn tunes. He travelled to *fleadhs* (music gatherings) all over Ireland and exchanged tunes with other skilled musicians. As a result Tommy's repertoire is vast and varied.

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Cree Cooraclare has many traditional musicians, and folk music is very much part of the life style of the area. Notably the concertina has worked as a strong link between the generations in this part of County Clare. The kind of music made by Tommy McMahon and Bernard O'Sullivan exemplifies the tradition that sustains here a very vigorous, healthy and tightly knit community.

Muiris O Rochain

- 1 Polkas: **I Have a Bonnet Trimmed with Blue, The Rakes of Mallow**
Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan
- 2 Reels: **Farmer Moroney's and Mulvihill's reel**
Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan
- 3 Reels: **Maud Millar's and Morrison's**
Tommy McMahon
- 4 Reel: **The Bucks of Oranmore**
Bernard O'Sullivan
- 5 Waltzes: **My Heart's in the Highlands and The Dewdrop**
Bernard O'Sullivan
- 6 Jigs: **The Blooming Meadows, Mullagh Jig, Ballinakill Jig**
Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan

- 7 Reels: **The Merry Sisters, Quilty Reel**
Tommy McMahon
- 8 Hornpipes: **The Cliff, The Derry Hornpipe**
Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan
- 9 Jigs: **The Rose in the Heather** selection
Tommy McMahon
- 10 Reels: **Flowery Mountains, Kiss the Maid Behind the Barrel, The Milliner's Daughter**
Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan
- 11 Reel: **A Trip to Durrow**
Tommy McMahon
- 12 Polka: **Stack Ryan's Polka**
Bernard O'Sullivan
- 13 Set Dance: **The Garden of Daisies**
Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan
- 14 Jigs: **Andy Keone's, Saddle the Pony, Tulla Jig**
Tommy McMahon
- 15 Set Dance: **The Three Sea Captains**
Tommy McMahon
- 16 Reels: **The Boys of Ballysadare, The Five Mile Chase**
Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan

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1 **Polkas: I Have a Bonnet Trimmed with Blue, The Rakes of Mallow**

Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan

The polka is an interesting example of a folk dance becoming stylized as a ballroom dance in the cities and then becoming refolklorized in rather different form on its return to country tradition. The polka began as a Czech folk dance. It entered the ballrooms and salons of Prague about 1835, and by 1840 it was established in fashionable Vienna and Paris. From London and Dublin it spread in the Irish countryside in the 1860s. Our two examples belong to a type of tune which was especially designed to provide a well-marked fast tempo for noisy lively dancers in a crowded kitchen or hall. These are excellently constructed tunes of enduring quality that have stood the test of years and here the two musicians do them full justice and exemplify the unique quality of these old favourites.

2 **Reels: Farmer Moroney's and Mulvihill's reel**

Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan

The time and rhythm of an Irish reel is beautifully played here with the ornamentation including double rolls as they would be played by a skillful fiddler. Most of the reel tunes were invented from the 1770s on

on through the 19th century. These two tunes are oldish favourites but the players contrive through the medium of their versatile little instrument to throw fresh light on them, to show them in new colours.

3 **Reels: Maud Millar's and Morrison's**

Tommy McMahon

After the double-jig, the reel is the most popular Irish step dance. These two examples were picked up by Tommy in the course of one of the many musical sessions he took part in during a *fleadh*. They're well constructed pieces and ideal for the Caledonian set dances.

4 **Reel: The Bucks of Oranmore**

Bernard O'Sullivan

This is one of the 'big reels', celebrated as a piper's test piece. Francis O'Neill includes a set composed in four parts in his *Music of Ireland* (No. 1199). However, both published and current settings vary, and Bernard's version here is an authentic and distinctive West Clare variant, passed on by the late Stack Ryan, that has served many generations of West Clare dancers. Bernard's musical thinking has not been impaired by the impact of the better known standard settings, and he offers a fresh view of this pervasive and powerful tune.

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5 **Waltzes: My Heart's in the Highlands and The Dewdrop**

Bernard O'Sullivan

Like the polka, the waltz began as a folk dance, took on polite and polished forms in the fashionable ballrooms, and then reacquired some of its rustic vigour as it returned to the countryside. Since time immemorial, the South German villages revelled in close-turning jumping dances, mostly in triple time. Then in the latter half of the eighteenth century a version of these dances, made smoother and more gliding, appeared in the fashionable ballrooms of Central Europe and spread quickly, sweeping all before it. In some parts of Germany and Switzerland it was banned as being too lascivious, but not till the 1830s did its absolute supremacy as a couple dance fade. In the countryside it lingered on quite vigorously and particularly in Ireland the dance was fitted to a number of traditional-sounding tunes. Our two examples are fairly modern compositions composed within the last hundred years, that have passed into local repertoires and been modified by the passage of time. These waltzes are played to provide cooling off interludes in the set dancing sessions.

6 **Jigs: The Blooming Meadows, Mullagh Jig, Ballinakill Jig**

Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan

The jig is the oldest form of dance music still popular in Ireland, and documents show it has been on the scene for at least three hundred years. While many Irish reel tunes seem to have originated in Scotland, this is certainly not the case with the jigs. Of our tunes here, the first and third are very closely associated with the old Ballinakill Ceili Band who popularized them on radio and in a series of 78rpm records made as far back as 1933.

7 **Reels: The Merry Sisters, Quilty Reel**

Tommy McMahon

These two well known reels have for years been favourite tunes, mostly with ceili bands. They are seldom heard on the concertina and Tommy here demonstrates how he can make them sparkle on his little instrument. He uses standard settings (*The Merry Sisters* is No.1267 in O'Neill's *Music of Ireland*) and he makes excellent use of them.

8 **Hornpipes: The Cliff, The Derry Hornpipe**

Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan

The first hornpipe is also known as *Higgins' Hornpipe* and is No. 914 in O'Neill's *Dance Music of Ireland*: the second tune (No. 925 in O'Neill's book) is one of the

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great hornpipes and it has been recorded by some of the finest performers, notably the late Tom Ennis, the outstanding Chicago piper, in a duet with the fiddler James Morrison. There are six parts to O'Neill's No. 925, and each part is a gem but only the first two are in common use. The players here play in a lively style which would be more pleasing to traditional step dancers than to the modern dancers who require an extremely slow tempo.

9 Jigs: The Rose in the Heather selection
Tommy McMahon

Every instrument has tunes for which it is especially suited and each instrument has its own distinctive system of grace notes and the concertina is no exception. Some of Tommy's embellishment may at first hearing not satisfy listeners who have become accustomed to the accordion, pipes and fiddle, but this unease can be only temporary, and the full beauty of Tommy's arrangements will quickly become apparent.

10 Reels: Flowery Mountains, Kiss the Maid Behind the Barrel, The Milliner's Daughter
Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan

We owe the perpetuation of all these three reels to the tireless tune collector, the Chicago police chief Francis O'Neill. In his *Music of Ireland, Flowery*

Mountains appears as No. 1244 under the title of *The Mountain Lark No. 2*. The reel is also known as *The Steam Packet* but O'Neill thought this was a misnomer because 'the composition bears internal evidence of a far greater antiquity than the invention of steam navigation'. He prints *Kiss the Maid Behind the Barrel* as No.1308. He had the tune from an outstanding fiddler, James Kennedy, who in turn had it from his father, 'the daddy of all fiddlers' around Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim. *The Milliner's Daughter* (No. 1180) was the favourite reel of the Chicago fireman Johnny Doyle, who kept open house for Irish musicians, and who introduced O'Neill to some of his best informants, including Barney Delaney, the great piper from Tullamore, Offaly, from whom O'Neill obtained this tune.

11 Reel: A Trip to Durrow
Tommy McMahon

Tommy plays this tune at a slower tempo than the preceding reels, because it is a player's reel rather than a dancer's, and played slowly its beauty may be more fully savoured. Unfortunately from being a favourite among a select number of discerning musicians it suddenly became widely known through the radio and came into general use by ceili bands who speeded it up and degraded it from its true

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status. It takes players like Tommy McMahon to restore it to its true beauty and dignity.

12 **Polka: Stack Ryan's Polka**

Bernard O'Sullivan

Polkas were an important part of the repertoire of West Clare musicians, particularly when the plain set was danced in the country houses. George Whelan, a Kerry musician, was responsible for bringing many of them to West Clare. This polka definitely came from Kerry and possibly was introduced there by George Whelan. It is very little known outside Clare and Kerry.

13 **Set Dance: The Garden of Daisies**

Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan

There are many settings of this famous and popular set dance. This setting is certainly not the standard setting and while interesting, it is doubtful if it should be copied by young musicians, as it is somewhat unorthodox. The time is fine and lively. The rhythm is that of the true set dance as distinct from the hornpipe.

14 **Jigs: Andy Keone's, Saddle the Pony, Tulla Jig**

Tommy McMahon

In these three jigs Tommy gives the standard or

almost standard settings. These jigs are well known and are played here expertly by Tommy. They shine out under the nimble and skilful fingers of this musician.

15 **Set Dance: The Three Sea Captains**

Tommy McMahon

The set dances are based on the quadrille, a square-formation dance enormously popular in French ballrooms at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. They seem to have evolved in Ireland c.1840. This is one of the great set dances and this version is a standard one. Here it is played in the proper slow steady tempo, with graceful embellishments. It was a great favourite for the older generation of solo dancers. This is well exemplified in the playing here.

16 **Reels: The Boys of Ballysadare, The Five Mile Chase**

Tommy McMahon & Bernard O'Sullivan

Two very popular old reels. The fact that each part is traditionally played but once is an indication of their antiquity. All the old reels were originally constructed so. It was to facilitate stepdances that the parts were doubled, generally to the detriment of the tune. There is a regrettable tendency among present-day musicians to double tunes that strictly should remain in their single form. Tommy and Bernard give us

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these two typical old reels with a sparkling traditional performance.

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Tommy McMahon (Left) Bernard O'Sullivan (Right)



Stack Ryan

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