



**The Breeze From Erin**  
*Irish Folk Music on Wind Instruments*

TOPIC

Willie Clancy/Festy Conlan/Eddie Corcoran/Tim Lyons/Tony McMahon/Seamus Tansey



# THE BREEZE FROM ERIN

## Irish Folk Music on Wind Instruments

Willie Clancy *Bagpipes and Whistle*  
Festy Conlan *Whistle*  
Eddie Corcoran *Whistle*  
Tim Lyons *Accordion*  
Tony McMahon *Accordion*  
Seamus Tansey *Flute, Whistle and Tambourine*  
with Reg Hall *Piano*

- 1 **The Choice Wife (slip jig)** Clancy, *bagpipes*
- 2 **Banish Misfortune (jig)** Conlan, *whistle*
- 3 **The Bag of Potatoes: Sligo Maid (reels)** Conlan, *whistle*, Lyons, *accordion*
- 4 **Róisín Dubh (air)** Tansey, *flute*: **Dublin Reel: The Steampacket (reels)** Tansey, *flute*, Hall, *piano*
- 5 **Boil the Breakfast Early (reel)** Tansey and Corcoran, *whistles*
- 6 **Bean Dubh an Ghleanna (air) : The Ewe (reel)** McMahon, *accordion*
- 7 **The Morning Dew: The Woman of the House (reels)** Clancy, *whistle*
- 8 **The Queen of the Rushes (jig)** Conlan, *whistle*, Lyons, *accordion*
- 9 **Paddy Ryan's Dream: Mamma's Pet (reels)** Tansey, *flute*, Hall, *piano*
- 10 **An Raibh Tú Ar an gCarraig (air)** Conlan, *whistle*
- 11 **The First House in Connacht: Miss McLeod (reels)** Conlan, *whistle*
- 12 **Bonny Kate: Jenny's Chickens (reels)** Corcoran, *whistle*, Tansey, *tambourine*
- 13 **Taimse im Chodladh (air)** Clancy, *bagpipes*

First issued by Topic Records 1969

Recorded by Bill Leader 1967

Notes by Breandán Breathnach and A. L. Lloyd

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### Our Cover Illustration

The earliest bagpipes in Ireland - testified to in the fifth century Brehon Laws - were mouth-blown. In Tudor times, as a peasant instrument, they resembled Fig. 1. During the seventeenth century, the musette-type of bellows-blown pipes became increasingly fashionable among upper and lower classes alike, notably in France and Ireland (Fig. 2). By the early eighteenth century the somewhat improved "Union" pipes (Fig. 3) were replacing the harp as the preferred instrument for most kinds of Irish music. During the latter half of the eighteenth century, the introduction of the keyed chanter, the regulators, and other refinements by such makers as Egan of Dublin (Fig. 4) led to the emergence of what is perhaps the most sophisticated form of bagpipes in the world.

The nineteenth century print of "The Piper without Patronage" is reproduced from Francis O'Neill's *Irish Folk Music* (Chicago, 1910).

### INTRODUCTION

*Píopaí cuisle cheoil* and *feadán*, bagpipes, musical tube and whistle are among the instruments mentioned as being in use in ancient Ireland. An amusing representation in a fourteenth century manuscript shows a pig gravely performing on the pipes. In this drawing - it is the initial letter of one of the chapters - the blow-pipe, chanter and two drones illustrate an instrument similar to the bagpipe that is still played in Scotland.

The pipes played on this record are called union or *uilleann* pipes, though the latter term - meaning 'elbow' - is historically incorrect. These pipes were developed about the beginning of the eighteenth century and assumed their present form at the beginning of the last century. At first they consisted simply of chanter, bag and bellows; drones were added somewhat later. Around 1800 one regulator (providing a harmony accompaniment to the chanter) was added, and between

then and 1820 the instrument developed into what we now call a full set, having three drones and three regulators, with a two-octave compass ranging from the open D of the fiddle. Here the instrument is represented by the playing of Willie Clancy, whose previous Topic record, *The Minstrel from Clare*, (TSDL175) should be possessed by all who wish to have genuine examples of this traditional music played in an authentic manner. From folklore sources it seems that pipers were the first in the field to meet the needs of the dancers. In the eighteenth century, according to the testimony of an author of the time, every village had a piper.

Flutes and whistles appeared later on the scene, and only became really popular towards the end of the nineteenth century. The whistle, flageolet or "tin-whistle" is enjoying a tremendous vogue at the moment, doubtless on account of the sweet and lonesome notes that performers such as Festy Conlan are able to produce on this very humble instrument. The accordion is the most recent addition to these "traditional" instruments. It has completely ousted the earlier melodeon and has now restricted the concertina to a few pockets of the West of Ireland, in East Galway and Clare. Not possessing the flexibility of the old instruments, it cannot reproduce the melodic ornamentation which is a feature of the dance music, but played as it is here with taste and restraint it can express the dance rhythms in a broader if less developed fashion.

#### 1. The Choice Wife (slip jig)

The slip or hop jig was so popular in Ireland that some authorities mistakenly believed it to be peculiar to that country, and the steps performed to it in the ballroom were always described as "Irish steps", as, for example, in Wilson's "Companion to the Ballroom", published around 1818. Clancy's tune appears as No. 1084 in Stanford's edition of the Petrie collection under an untranslatable Irish title. O'Farrell

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also published it in his “Collection of National Irish Music for the Union pipes”, published around 1800 in London. The title in that collection is O’Farrell’s *Welcome to Waterford*.

## 2. Banish Misfortune (jig)

This has been an ever-popular three-part jig among traditional players. Versions appear in the Petrie, Joyce and O’Neill collections. The tune itself has attracted a number of different names, including *The Little Bag of Meal*, *The Humours of Mullinafauna* and *Nancy Hynes*.

## 3. The Bag of Potatoes: The Sligo Maid (reels)

In these two reels the discreet and restrained playing of the accordion helps to emphasise the rhythm of the dance music, while the whistle lends a keen edge. The playing of reels appears to meet some inward demand of traditional players, who will go on performing and listening to this form of music throughout the night. *The Bag of Potatoes* is also known as *The Sligo Dandy* - an apt companion for *The Sligo Maid*, perhaps. Settings of both reels appear in Breathnach’s “Ceol Rince na hEireann”.

## 4. Róisín Dubh (air): The Dublin Reel: The Steampacket (reels)

*Róisín dubh* (The little dark rose) was almost certainly a love song, but now, by popular acclamation it has become accepted as a patriotic song and has given the most beautiful allegoric name for Ireland. The old air is played with great feeling by Seamus Tansey (flute). Clarence Mangan’s impassioned rendering into English, *Dark Rosaleen*, derives from the words of the Irish song, but is sung to an air specially composed for it. It is a common practice throughout Europe for folk musicians to follow the performance of a slow air with a brief lively bit of dance music, to ease the tension (a forerunner of the classical suite, where the slow movement is followed by a gigue, minuet or allegro). Both the reels played here are

in the O’Neill Collections. Of *The Steampacket*, O’Neill has remarked: “The title seems chronologically improbable, as the composition bears internal evidence of a far greater antiquity than the invention of steam navigation”.

## 5. Boil the Breakfast Early (reel)

The lift and urgency of Irish reels are exemplified in Tansey and Corcoran’s rendering of this dance tune. O’Neill supplies two other names, *Court Her Along the Road* and *The Wild Irishman*. It is also known as *The Blue Breeks*, a title suggesting that this, like many other popular reels, may ultimately derive from a Scottish source.

## 6. Bean Dubh an Ghleanna (air) : The Ewe (reel)

Only an acknowledged expert on the accordion like Tony McMahon could get away with playing a traditional air on that instrument. *Bean dubh an Ghleanna* (the dark woman of the glen) is a love song with depths not yet fully analysed. Allusions in the text suggest that the song belongs to the first half of the eighteenth century. The reel called *The Ewe* is undoubtedly a borrowing from Scotland. *The Ewe with the Crooked Horn* and *The Little Girl in Danger* are among the dozen or so names testifying to the wide popularity of the tune in Ireland.

## 7. The Morning Dew: The Woman of the House (reels)

The techniques introduced from piping immensely enhanced the performances on the whistle and have resulted in a standard of playing which continues to amaze the listeners. Settings of both these reels are found in Breathnach’s “Ceol Rince na hEireann”.

## 8. The Queen of the Rushes (jig)

This three-part double jig is a favourite among pipers. It also is found in more or less its present setting in “Ceol Rince na hEireann”. A variant appears in Stanford’s “Complete Petrie

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Collection” No. 936, under the title: *The Ladies’ March to the Ballroom*.

**9. Paddy Ryan’s Dream: Mamma’s Pet** (reels)

Two further reels played in typical Sligo style, suggesting an urgency and impetuosity in the playing. Reference to popular collections will illustrate how very different the versions current among good players are from the skeleton settings found in most printed sources.

**10. An Raibh Tu Ar an gCarraig** (air)

The tone produced by Festy Conlan’s playing of slow airs on the whistle has been justly acclaimed for its clarity and sweetness. This air, *An Raibh Tu Ar an gCarraig* (Were you at Carrick - or perhaps the title means: Were you at the rock) has been fancifully associated with the “Mass rock”, Co. Clare, tradition referring to the old days when the Catholic Church was outlawed, and priests were obliged to celebrate Mass in hidden places. Elsewhere it seems to be regarded simply as one of the many love songs of Munster wedded to beautiful airs.

**11. The First House in Connacht: Miss McLeod** (reels)

For some strange reason, *Mrs. McLeod of Raasay’s reel* (its correct title in Scotland under which it appeared more than two hundred years ago) is invariably referred to in Ireland as *Miss McLeod*. It is, of course, a version in reel time of the well-known *The Campbells are Coming*, which appears in English publications of the eighteenth century under the name of *Hob or Nob*. To this air is also sung the well-known Irish song *An Seandúine Dóite* (The Burnt Out Old Man) relating to a young girl’s complaint at having been married to an old bag of bones (a version is in Donal O’Sullivan’s “Songs of the Irish”, published in 1960).

**12. Bonny Kate: Jenny’s Chickens** (reels)

These are in the versions popularised by the great Sligo fiddler Michael Coleman. The playing here illustrates the potentiality of the modest whistle in the hands of a master. In this case the accompaniment is provided by Seamus Tansey on the bodhrán (pronounced “bowrawn”), a kind of tambourine consisting of a circular rim of wood over which a cured sheepskin has been stretched.

**13. Taimse im Chodladh** (air)

The English title of this song is *I am asleep*. It is a patriotic or political piece made in eighteenth century Munster, of the *aisling* or “vision” type, in which a beautiful lady (personifying Ireland) appears to the poet in a vision, to encourage resistance and hold out hope of victory against the English invader.

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