

Everything You Want to Know About the Irish Flute

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The Irish flute, the tin whistle (or Pennywhistle), and the Uilleann pipes are the predominant woodwinds in traditional Irish music. It is particularly helpful to think of the Irish flute and the tin whistle in the same discussion because Irish players will often play both, depending upon the given tune or group of instruments. Like the tin whistle, [the Irish flute has a 6-finger hole diatonic design](#). Unlike tin whistles, [Irish flutes are “transverse flutes,”](#) meaning they are held horizontally and blown into from the side. Irish flutes are also generally built to a D major scale and made of wood.

The tin whistle is in some ways easier to play than the Irish flute because, like a recorder, you simply blow into the mouthpiece on the end. There is no need for an embouchure, which is the mouth position required to properly play a wind instrument. In fact, many Irish flute teachers recommend learning tunes on a tin whistle before picking up the Irish flute due to the time and practice required to develop a comfortable embouchure.

The history of Simple-system flutes

Despite the name, [the Irish flute is not specifically Irish](#). The term just refers to Simple-system (tone holes that are engaged with the fingers, rather than with keys), conical-bored flutes that are often made of wood and have been used by many cultures. It is very [likely the transverse wooden flute did not come to Ireland until the 1700s and wasn't widely used until the early 19th century](#).

Simple system flutes were largely replaced when [Theobald Boehm invented the Boehm system flutes around 1847](#), which used a cylindrical bore, rather than conical, a unique key system, and metal materials to enhance volume and projection. These metal, Boehm system flutes would become the dominant style of the flute played throughout most western musical styles. As the popularity of Boehm system flutes grew toward the end of the 19th century, [simple system flutes were increasingly embraced by folk musicians throughout Ireland, Scotland, Brittany, and Cuba](#).



Photo by [Aswin Thekkoot](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Now, on to the role of the Irish flute itself.

The sound of the Irish flute

Irish flutists opt for the instrument because of its reedy growl in the lower registers, which neither the tin whistle nor the Boehm style metal flutes possess. The breathy warmth of this instrument gives Irish jigs and reels an organic, human feel, and Irish airs a sort of soul-rending emotional quality. The human breath moving through this type of woodwind brings its melodies closer to the human voice and ultimately, to human emotion.

In many Irish tunes, particularly faster jigs, slips, and reels, the playing of the Irish flute is heavily ornamented with finger techniques such as cuts, strikes, and rolls which give the playing a dynamic rhythmic, as well as melodic, presence. Players can also use specific, rhythmic breathing techniques to further ornamentation. However, there is not a single “Irish style” of playing the flute. Rather, there are [distinctive regional styles throughout Ireland, especially in the northwestern counties of Clare, Donegal, Sligo, Roscommon, Galway, Leitrim, and Fermanagh](#).

Some Irish flutists perform solo, but often you can hear them in smaller, informal musical groups in pubs, kitchens, and various events. Irish traditional music relies heavily upon guitars, fiddles, flutes (and whistles), harps, and traditional drums like the Bodhran.

Notable musicians who helped the Irish flute go global

There are too many noteworthy Irish flutists to provide an exhaustive list, but John McKenna, Tom Morrison, James Galway, Peter Horan, Peig (McGrath) Needham, Matt Molloy of The Chieftans, Seamus Egan of Solas, and Seamus Taney are some of the most globally well-known players throughout the last century.

The sounds of Irish folk music (and the Irish flute) experienced [a revival in the late 1960s](#) as many types of traditional folk music were being revisited throughout the Western world. As such, certain traditional Irish groups brought their sound to much larger audiences in the latter part of the 20th century. [The Dubliners](#), the Chieftans, and Altan stand out here.



Photo of Altan "FiS_2012_Fr_933" by rs-foto is licensed under CC BY 2.0 (no changes made)

The Dubliners won many awards and were celebrated by such mainstream artists as Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan at the time. The Chieftans collaborated with such notable acts as [Roger Daltrey, Van Morrison, and The Rolling Stones](#). Their music was also featured on the [soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick's 1975 academy award-winning film Barry Lyndon](#). Altan was the first Irish traditional group to be signed to a major label, [signing with Virgin Records in 1994](#). They brought their specific Donegal-style, Irish traditional music to the world by [playing with artists outside their traditional genre--such as Dolly Parton, Alison Krauss, and Bonnie Raitt](#).

There are also more contemporary groups that have utilized the foundation of Irish traditional music and the sounds of the Irish flute while expanding the scope of their music by adding elements of other musical styles. Clannad, Solas, and Lunasa jump readily to mind.

Clannad, though steeped in traditional Irish music, transitioned into what could be called "Celtic" or "New Age" music by the early 1980s, particularly with the brief addition of Enya Brennan, who would go on to dominate the New Age genre as a solo artist. Continuing in a similar Irish-new age fusion style, Clannad was nominated for three Grammys through the 1990s in the New Age category.

Solas and Lunasa, both formed in the late 90's, yet again brought the Irish traditional sound (and the Irish flute) into contemporary musical formulations by incorporating elements of rock, jazz, and New Age.

While there are more examples of the tin whistle being used in mainstream recordings outside of Irish traditional music, such as on Celine Dion's "My Heart Will go On," from the *Titanic* soundtrack, and on The Lord of The Rings Soundtrack "Concerning Hobbits," the Irish flute can also be found outside of Irish traditional recordings.

Van Morrison worked extensively with The Chieftans on his album *Irish Heartbeat*, and you can hear Matt Molloy's work throughout. The contemporary pop artist Ed Sheeran utilized the Irish flute on his 2017 record "Galway Girl," in a song that brings traditional Irish instrumentation squarely into a present-day, mainstream context.

The future of the Irish flute

As for the future of the Irish flute, one can imagine that with the recent viral TikTok trend embracing sea shanties there might also be other possibilities for traditional music, and perhaps the Irish flute itself. In fact, as of this writing, I found a woodwind student at Berkeley College and TikToker ([@collinvodicka](#)) who sometimes plays the Irish flute to recreate popular theme songs from film, television, video games, and pop culture. [His cover of the How To Train Your Dragon theme](#) has 16k likes and [his cover of the Star Wars: The Mandalorian theme](#) has over 4k likes. Though he plays various woodwinds for his 140k followers, he frequently utilizes the Irish flute.

This example presents an interesting possibility. It suggests that younger generations may rediscover a love for this instrument, for its own sake--[regardless of whether or not it is bound to traditional Irish musical forms](#). Outside of the Irish traditional context, [many Irish musicians who play wind instruments seem to opt for Boehm style concert flutes for most applications](#). However, if younger musicians take up the Irish flute simply because it stirs human emotions, we can expect to see the use of this instrument continue. It seems [humans have been playing simple system flutes since the Paleolithic era](#), and the fact that young people continue to play the Irish flute on contemporary social media platforms gives hope that the sounds of the Irish flute will both endure and evolve.