

New Settings, Old Sources

by Elizabeth Sweeney

The *Séamus Connolly Collection of Irish Music* is a product of Connolly's six decades of engagement with Irish traditional music in Ireland and beyond. Within this digital collection are tunes and songs old and new, performed by musicians of all ages. More than fifteen types of tunes are played on a multitude of instruments associated with Irish music. A number of regions and styles are highlighted, offering a glimpse of the vitality within Irish traditional music today.

While the audio in the digital collection consists mainly of new performances by contemporary musicians, it is the traditional music of earlier generations that inspired Connolly to undertake this project. Much of the collection is drawn from older Irish repertoire, tunes carefully selected from source recordings that were compiled by Connolly over five decades. He listened to these source recordings with an artistic ear, selecting tunes that continued to be particularly meaningful to him and that are perhaps not often heard today. When a tune captured his imagination, ideas for new instrumentation often came to mind. He then invited specific musicians to reinterpret these tunes, using the source recordings as a starting point. Many subtle and exciting changes can be heard in their new versions of older repertoire.

Presented below are a few brief audio clips of older source recordings. Each source clip is paired with a new clip of the same tune from the digital collection.

Examples 1 & 2: Mrs. Galvin's Barndance

Mrs. Galvin's Barndance is one of four tunes in the collection for which Mrs. Galvin is the source performer.

1. "Mrs. Galvin's Barndance," played by Mrs. Ellen Galvin of Co. Clare on fiddle, likely early 1960s
2. "Mrs. Galvin's Barndance," played by Séamus Connolly, Kevin McElroy and Barbara MacDonald Magone

Examples 3 & 4: Dunboyne Straw Plaiters

Dunboyne Straw Plaiters is one of five tunes in this collection for which Dan Sullivan's Shamrock Band is the source performer.

3. "Dunboyne Straw Plaiters," reel played by Dan Sullivan's Shamrock Band, circa 1926
4. "Dunboyne Straw Plaiters," reel played by Jerry O'Sullivan on uilleann pipes

Examples 5 & 6: Jack O'Hanley's

5. "Jack O'Hanley's," reel played by Jack O'Hanley of Weymouth Massachusetts on fiddle, 1984
6. "Jack O'Hanley's," reel played by John Daly, fiddle

Examples 7 & 8: Mordaunt's Fancy

7. "Mordaunt's Fancy," jig played by Terry Lane, button accordion
8. "Mordaunt's Fancy," jig played by Séamus Connolly and Geraldine Cotter

To complement each audio track in the digital collection, Connolly has provided a story that seeks to acknowledge the tune's earlier source. He has also provided a transcription where the notation leans toward capturing the source recording, enabling comparison with the new setting. When a tune's title was not readily available, Connolly often named the tune for the source musician. Taken together with the audio, the transcriptions and the stories offer ways to appreciate both old and new interpretations of traditional melodies and songs.

It is worth noting that most of the tracks in *The Séamus Connolly Collection of Irish Music* contain a single tune, rather than sets of tunes, mirroring Connolly's selection process. More than half of the audio tracks in the digital collection are new interpretations of older

tunes, with contemporary compositions representing another significant component of the collection. The collection also includes a few previously-released tracks, and a handful of “source recordings” by performers of previous generations, such as Julia Clifford, Charlie Mulvihill, and Larry Redican.

With modern performances that convey deep understanding of tradition, *The Séamus Connolly Collection of Irish Music* pays tribute to earlier generations and today’s master musicians. At the same time, the collection looks toward the future, in anticipation of these tunes being put into wider circulation.

For further exploration

The Séamus Connolly Collection of Irish Music is a digital collection produced and published by the [Boston College Libraries](#). Many of the source performances can be located in the [Séamus Connolly Papers](#) at the Irish Music Archives of the John J. Burns Library at Boston College. [Field recordings](#) and annotations in Connolly’s papers are digitized and available for listening at the Library.

Elizabeth Sweeney, Irish Music Librarian at Boston College, worked closely with other members of the Boston College Libraries' project team and with Séamus Connolly during the full three years (2013-2016) of the Libraries' collaboration on this project.