
Analysis of the Characteristics of Traditional Celtic Music

Characteristics of traditional Celtic music with particular reference to how accompaniment can be added in ways that enhance the melodies aurally passed down.

Intro

The lineage of Celtic music is as varied and different as the people from which it originates. Such musical traditions are not static or rigidly conservative. Instead opting to inspire a medium that is highly responsive to changes in the social and cultural environment. Each song being passed from generation to generation throughout ages morphing and adapting to player and fashion. As a result one song can be played very differently from one town to the next. This Aural tradition focuses on melodies as the instruments that were traditionally used by the Celtic people were not harmonically inclined so there are no set accompaniments or chord progressions passed down. Instead each player interprets, individualises and arranges the songs themselves.

Celtic musicians categorised songs by their purpose and intended effect. There are three common categories: Goltraí, Geantraí and Suantraí. Goltraí being laments intended to provoke emotion and sympathy. Geantraí being dance music, lively tunes that celebrate and create a happy and optimistic mood. Finally the Suantraí which are lullabies and various kinds of slow airs which calm the emotions and promote relaxation. Each of these have their own conventions and common features despite the mutability of Celtic music.

Goltraí pg

Lamenting Goltraí are categorised by their free meter and storytelling nature that follows the natural intonation of the lyrics. They are heavily ornamented by the player in their own individual style. Any accompaniment added to the basic tune will be widely varied by the performer. No two people will have the same interpretation however the most common approaches are to use arpeggiated chords, heavy use of ornamentation, octaves and pauses. Ornamentation is a very varied part of the Celtic tradition. The Cut, the Tap, the Casadh, the Short Roll and the Long Roll.

These 5 ornaments are the more common ones. However that is not to say they are the only ones. Glyssandos and Bisbigliandos are very common but mostly on Harps as they are not suited for playing on fiddles or pipe instruments. Scoops and Pitch Bends are much better suited expressive techniques for other traditional Celtic instruments.

Celtic music tends to be modal - Ionian and Aeolian (major and minor) are the most prevalent but Myxolydian and Dorian are also very common. This modal playing is most often explored in Goltraí, but to a lesser extent Suantraí songs. Exploration of Myxolydian and Dorian modes leads to more opportunities for using discordant harmonies in order to create tension and release - lending itself to the more mysterious nature of storytelling and some more haunting lullabies.

Geantraí pg

The lively Geantraí were used for dances and other festivities. There are many different sub categories of dances: Jigs, Reels and Hornpipes being the main three. Reels are the most common type of dance tune played in the Celtic tradition. They are in simple quadruple with emphasis put on the first and third beat. Usually it consists of two or more 8 bar melodies that are usually played twice each.

The second most common is the jig (or double jig. Like the reel, the tune usually consists of two motifs once again made up of eight bars, but are categorised by their compound triple metre with the emphasis on the first and fourth beats.

Hornpipes are the third most common type of dance. These do vary more in structure and feel much more than Jigs and Reels. The most common type of hornpipe is similar to the reel in terms of time signature ((4/4 – Simple Quadruple most commonly) but can also be in 3/2, 9/8 or 6/8) but instead of counting four even beats per bar there is an emphasis on the first and third beats, which give the tune a kind of ‘swing’ or ‘bouncing’ feel that is often additionally syncopated.

Due to the fast and rhythmic nature of such songs it is usual for accompaniment to be simple and rhythmic. For example walking down chords using inversions and slap bass are some of the more common techniques. It is usual for the harmonic accompaniment to be comprised of a simple I, IV, V progressions. When arranging a dance tune it is usual for a musician to prepare several different variations on a simple accompaniment. These variations would be changed every repeat of the tune. They may invert measures, add glissandos and other ornamentations (for reference see Goltraí above) and varying syncopation.

Suantraí pg

The Suantraí lullabies and various kinds of slow airs which calm the emotions and promote relaxation are categorised by a slow but rhythmic simple quadruple pulse used in conjunction with smoothly moving melodies and simple rhythms. These are most often sung and can be ornamented but not as much as Geantraí.

Due to their calming nature most commonly any chordal or additional accompaniment used to fill out such songs is usually kept very simple. The chords would usually be kept in fifths or triads. These would then be varied by augmenting the melody and arpeggiating the chords with much use of silence or even a simple drone in the bass.

Conclusion

Vocal music is the most common form of expressing music in the Celtic tradition. This is because of the ease of teaching aurally as is the custom in peasant villages lacking the time and money to afford to make and learn to play instruments. The unifying features of Celtic music are..... Blah blah conclude essay.