

“Unsealing the Lips of Old Country Folk: An Analysis of John Doherty’s ‘The Four Posts of the Bed’”

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John Doherty (1900-1980) is one of the most important and influential fiddle players in the history of Irish music. His recordings have impacted upon the way that we view Irish music today, not only through the sheer virtuosity of his technique and style, but also through the significant contribution he made to Irish music through the organic assimilation of Scottish dance music into his repertoire. His fluent interpretation of Irish and Scottish piping music (he was descended from *An Píobaire Mór*, the great Turloch Mac Sweeney (c.1831-1916), from the parish of Gweedore, Co.Donegal), coupled with an insatiable appetite for the music of the celebrated Scottish violinist James Scott Skinner (1843-1927) pushed fiddle playing in a new and exciting direction.¹ Doherty was well versed in the music of Michael Coleman (1891-1945), Paddy Killoran (1904-1965) and other notable recording Irish musicians of the era, ably demonstrating all of Coleman’s intricate variations in the canonical reel “Bonny Kate” on several different recordings.² Doherty’s style was unique, although firmly rooted in his family’s mould as borne out by his brothers Mickey and Simon, who were both recorded by collectors. At the heart of a vast repertoire was a stable diet of

¹ The Doherty family tree is traced by Alan Feldman and Eamon O’Doherty in *The Northern Fiddler*. (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1979). The book also contains numerous transcriptions of Doherty’s music (and that of many other fiddlers from Tyrone and Donegal), as well as extensive biographical material.

² See: Conor Caldwell “Banished to the Shed: John Doherty and Bonnie Kate” in Ulster Folklife. Forthcoming 2011.

local tunes (including highlands, barndances, lancers, and a smattering of polkas), all played with an intricate knowledge of the dance tradition.³

The following is an updated extract from my recently completed MA, “Style and Form in the Music of John Doherty: Volume 1” awarded by Queen’s University in November 2009, under the supervision of Dr Martin Dowling. This section of the first chapter, dealing with the Doherty family repertoire, examines the tune “The Four Posts of the Bed”, and also discusses some of the difficulties that have faced folk music collectors in the twentieth century. Two complete transcriptions of Doherty playing the tune are included as well as an extract of Mickey Doherty’s version.

“The Four Posts of the Bed”

“The Four Posts of the Bed” is a relatively common tune in Donegal, and is still widely played, usually by a solo performer.⁴ Both John and Mickey Doherty recorded the tune for collectors, with John’s versions collected by Peter Kennedy (*The Pedlar’s Pack*. Folktrax – 074, 1952) and by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (*John Doherty*. CCÉ, 1974), and Mickey by the Irish Folklore Commission (*The Gravel Walks*. IFC, 1949). The tune is unique in the repertoire for its percussive use of the fiddle and bow, coupled with the employment of left hand *pizzicato*. A lengthy narrative is attached to the tune, although its validity (like most such stories) can be questioned, but not totally discounted. The first recording of John’s version of the story was made by Peter Kennedy on *Folktrax 074 - The Pedlar’s Pack*:

³ For more information see: [Damhsaí Cúplaí Thír Chonail DVD](#) Dir. Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde. Prod. Ciaran O’Maonaigh. Cairdeas na bhFidiléirí, 2007.

⁴ Peter Campbell of Glenties and Martin McGinley of Raphoe are two players in particular who have made this tune their own in recent years. Generally speaking, in sessions, an older player or listener will request that one of the younger players in the group performs the tune, but occasionally communal performances occur.

“[Did you hear the story] about the poor aul travelling fiddler that was going about one time? And he came to a house, and ... he asked about stopping to the morning or somehow like that. And the woman, there was a spare bed in the house, and it was...an aul fashioned kind of a bed, and it was made, in the first time, too high. But they put this poor aul fiddler into the bed...and he tumbled over too far out and he came across the bedstock (bedframe) and fell, and he got some of the limbs hurted (sic) - I think it was a knee he got hurted – but he had to be laid up for some days, and he took down the fiddle and he composed this tune, and he called it the four posts of the bed. And you’ll hear throughout the tune the tippin’ of the heel of the bow on the fiddle that...shows you that each tip that I give on the fiddle means a post of the bed”.

This version describes an un-named fiddle player composing the tune to pass the time while laid-up with injury in bed; however, the story metamorphoses in a later version recorded by CCÉ:

“There was an old fiddle player in the olden days, ah, I suppose it was away back, I suppose, in the eighteenth century or there about. His name was Anthony Helferty. And he was going to play at a party and it came on a wild stormy evening, and he had a mountainous road to go. And there was only the one house on the roadside...on the journey he was going. So, the poor soul, the storm came this rapid, that he had to retreat and go into this house on the roadside. Well, there was a large family there and there wasn’t a big lot of accommodation...there in them days. So, the eldest boy of the family was very anxious to play the fiddle, and he knew that Anthony was a very good fiddler. So the boy...insisted that Anthony would remain

over-night and that he might have the opportunity of learning a new tune. 'Ah but dear', the mother says, 'sure, you know, all beds are filled up, you know we've a large family; where will we put him?'. 'Ah well', the boy says, 'leave that to me, now I'll see about that'. The boy begin (sic) to make a makeshift kind of a bed. As the boy was making the bed, Anthony was making the tune. So, when the bed was finished, the tune was made. So Anthony says, 'Young boy...here's a tune now that you'll have, that no other boy in this area will have but yourself, and the name we're going to call it now is "The Four Posts of the Bed", and here goes the tune"'.

The difference between the two stories is interesting, with the narrative appearing much more embellished over the 22 years between recordings. Of course the difference between the stories could be due to the different conditions under which they were recorded: the rather formal nature of the original recording, contrasted with the more jovial atmosphere at the CCE session. Indeed, people can be heard to shout out encouragement to Doherty on the latter recording and at least three other voices can be heard in the background, demonstrating a more relaxed atmosphere in the session. Paddy Tunney humorously recorded the initial pursuit through the wilds of south west Donegal's mountainous terrain, on the occasion when Peter Kennedy made his recordings later issued on the Folktrax label.⁵ After several days of chasing to no avail, Tunney's party eventually cornered its quarry and recorded a wealth of airs, dance tunes and songs from Doherty. Kennedy's recordings were a much more professional affair, taking place in the drawing room of the local school-master's house. Doherty's unfamiliarity with his documenters in Kennedy's case, may also

⁵ Paddy Tunney *The Stone Fiddle* Belfast, Appletree Publications: 1992. pp. 140- 151.

have led to a more stifled version of “The Four Posts of the Bed” narrative.⁶ Despite Tunney’s description of Doherty as, “...being in his element...”, Doherty was more pre-disposed to open up musically in recording sessions with those whom he knew well.⁷ Evidence for this claim is found in the extremely varied and deliberate repertoire recorded for Alun Evans and Dr Malachy McCloskey over an extended period of time from the late 1960s until Doherty’s death in 1980.

Casual collectors of folk music should be recognized for their astuteness in an era when western art music still held a lofty superiority over its colloquial relative. Some were already recognizing the importance of the proper contextualization of folk music in the British Isles, more than fifty years before the pre-eminent ethnomusicologist John Blacking argued for an anthropological approach to the study of music.⁸ In 1907 Cecil J. Sharp noted that “...unsealing the lips of old country folk”, was essential in gathering the music he desired.⁹ The sort of “...jealous care...” with which the musicians of the countryside guarded their tradition was not exclusive to his geographical area of research in south England.¹⁰ Irish people too guarded their tradition with fierce determination throughout the twentieth

⁶ Alun Evans recalls that Doherty was generally uneasy with tape recorders. (Alun Evans, Personal Communication, September 2009).

⁷ Paddy Tunney *The Stone Fiddle* Belfast, Appletree Publications: 1992. pp. 142.

Doherty was known for his opposition to comfort, particularly in his younger years. Ciaran O’Maonaigh relates the of Doherty’s hosts arriving entering his room one night to find that he had refused the bed set aside for him and had instead snuck out of the house to gather straw, from which he made a ‘bed’ for himself on the floor (Ciaran O’Maoniagh. Personal Interview. January 2010).

⁸ Blacking’s arguments are outlined in his seminal text, *How Musical is Man?* University of Washington Press, Seattle, U.S.A, 1973. Blacking is a crucial figure in the history of Irish musicology and his role in developing the discipline of ethnomusicology is described by Harry White among others (see: Harry White. “Musicology in Ireland”, in *Acta Musicologica*. Vol. 60, fasc. 3, Sept-Dec, 1988. pp.290-303.).

⁹ Cecil J. Sharp. “Folk-Song Collecting”, in *The Musical Times*. Vol. 48, No.767 (Jan. 1 1907), pp. 16-18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 16.

century, and a number of significant musicians in recent years have refused to cooperate with collectors, lest their music be disseminated in a way of which they do not approve.¹¹

The similarities between Sharp and Tunney's accounts of their expeditions are striking. Both men comment upon or implied a state of innate shyness in the performers until drawn into a comfort zone: once this zone is entered into (often with the aid of a few alcoholic beverages), the best material often follows. Each account also describes a welcoming and hospitable rural people, but a people that are keen to test the patience of the collector, making him work for his material. One might draw a comparison between the manners in which people guarded their marketable materials (considering that Doherty was an itinerant tin smith above all else, and Sharp's subjects were market farmers): people are rarely going to give up their commodities on the market for less than the commodity's true value. Since music was a way of life for the rural community of this time (rather than just a hobby, albeit a serious hobby for the collectors), it makes sense that they would equally refuse to give up such a commodity to any stranger without some form of recompense.¹² In Sharp's case this was as simple as purchasing a glass of cider for one potential singer, but for Doherty enthusiasts, the canvas was much more delicately interwoven. For Doherty 'the chase' was sometimes enough fun in itself - the first tune that he played for the collectors on this occasion was "The Fox Chase" – a wry nod to their relentless pursuit through the mountains no doubt.¹³ This is supported by an analysis of the extant catalogue of Doherty recordings.

In the case of the Kennedy recordings, Doherty refrained from delving too deeply into his

¹¹ Martin Dowling. "Confusing Culture and Politics: Ulster Scots Culture and Music", in New Hibernia Review. 11.3, 2007. pp. 51-80.

¹² This is consistent with psychological research on the stability of personality. It is expected that one's personality is stable and constant, and that values that you develop will be implemented across the board in one's approach to life. See: Antonio Terracciano, et al. "Intra-individual Change in Personality Stability and Age" in Journal of Research in Personality. No.44, 2010. pp. 31-37.

¹³ Alun Evans. Personal Communication, September, 2009.

impressive catalogue of James Scott Skinner compositions, or indeed his vast bagpipe repertoire that he would later reveal for the aforementioned Evans, McCloskey, Feldman, and O'Doherty.

The latter, more embellished version of Doherty's "The Four Posts of the Bed" narrative is the one that survives today and is told by Peter Campbell among others. The melody is also well known in Scotland and was published by James S Kerr in the celebrated *Kerr's Merry Melodies: Volume 3*, raising doubts as to the validity of either story.¹⁴ It seems quite unlikely that the tune could have passed from Donegal to Scotland and become well known as a country-dance. Given the 'classical' techniques required to perform the tune (left-hand *pizzicato* being the most precocious of these) it is more likely that the tune originated in Scotland, where a much greater interconnectivity between art music and folk music already existed.¹⁵ It most likely then spread to Ireland with migrant workers like so many other dance tunes at this time.

As Doherty described, "The Four Posts of the Bed" is a programmatic piece, with the performer tapping the four corners of the fiddle with the 'nut' of the bow to indicate each of the bed's four posts. It is known for some performers to tap the body of the fiddle with a finger rather than the hard surface of the bow, so as to avoid damaging the instrument. Each tap is alternated with a left hand *pizzicato* chord, the notes of which vary from player to player. John plucked the open A and E strings, while Mickey plucked the D, A, and E strings in his recording. The written version in *Kerr's* collection indicates that only the E

¹⁴ *Kerr's Merry Melodies for Violin: Volume 2*. (Publisher Unknown), c.1875. pp. 46

¹⁵ Nathaniel Gow (1766-1831), the renowned country dance master and fiddler player was also appointed one of the King's Trumpeters for Scotland, showing extremely early integration of the two musical traditions (see: David Johnson. *Scottish Fiddle Music in the 18th Century: A Music Collection and Historical Study*. Edinburgh: John Donald, 1984). James Scott Skinner (1843-1927) furthered this interconnectivity with hundreds of technically challenging dance tune compositions during a glittering career as a performer (see: University of Aberdeen's online repository, "The Music of James Scott Skinner" <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/scottskinner>).

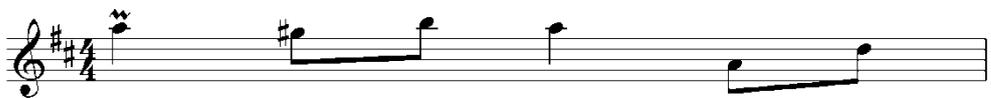
should be sounded.

The image shows a musical score for three different versions of a tune: J Doherty (CCE), M Doherty (bar 18), and Kerr's Merry Melodies. The score is written in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first three staves are for the three versions, and the bottom three staves are for Violin (Vln.) parts. The J Doherty version has a melody with a tapping sequence in the third bar. The M Doherty version has a melody with a tapping sequence in the first bar. The Kerr's Merry Melodies version has a melody with a tapping sequence in the first bar. The Violin parts are marked 'arco' and include fingerings (5, 4) and accents.

The first part is melodically simple, with the tapping and *pizzicati* the most noticeable features. A slight discrepancy can be seen in the phrase lengths between the different versions. *Kerr's Melodies* and John Doherty both begin the tapping sequence on the beat: John sounds his first tap on the third beat of the third bar, while *Kerr's Melodies* instructs the player to sound the tap on the first beat of the bar. This means that Mickey and John could never have played the tune together if they were always true to the versions they passed-on to collectors. John's version contains three uneven phrases in the first part; the first has two bars, the second has two and a half bars, and the closing phrase is made up of three bars. An anacrusis (two crotchets) is developed on the repeat of the first part. Meanwhile, Mickey's version divides the melody into two phrases of two bars and a final phrase of three and a half bars.

The ornamentation, on John's earlier recording is sparse. There is some double-stopping at the start of the first part when he doubles the open E string by using a fourth finger on the A

string. Some cuts are evident, mostly to land on the high G (second finger on the E string), and this is definitely a recurrent characteristic of his music. The later recording for CCE demonstrates some more ornate playing, especially in the second part. For example, in the fourth bar of the second part, he introduces a mordent-type ornament on the top A (third finger on the E string), and this gives the performance a much more legato feel when compared to the 1950s recording.

J Doherty (CCE: bar 20) 

While he quite timidly demonstrates an alternative bowed phrase to the tapping/*pizzicati* motif in the earlier recording (including a false-harmonic mistake), the later recording is actually dominated by this figure. The figure also demonstrates his affinity with a 'piping style' of fiddle playing, and it contrasts with the other phrases by the fact that he uses slurred bowing. Again this could be due to the more relaxed atmosphere of the session, when compared to the more intimidating earlier recording. The A-G cut is also seen a great deal more in the later recording:

J Doherty (CCE: bars 1-9) 

In many ways, John's recordings of "The Four Posts of the Bed" allow us to characterize his fiddle style quite succinctly. Firstly, the bowing style is predominantly single strokes, but the tune never sounds 'staccato' as at least one writer has suggested.¹⁶ Secondly, the influence of the piping tradition is never too far from the surface and generally reveals itself through a short passage of slurred bowing and piping ornaments. Thirdly, he is never afraid to use the fourth finger un-like many players of his generation, and despite the 'collapsed wrist' position of his hand, he is always able to double the open string by using his fourth finger on the note below. This effect is again related to droning on the pipes. Fourthly, his ability to improvise new lines of music (such as the bowed alternative to the tapping theme) means that his performances are always different; there is always something new for the listener. Lastly the versions of tunes that he plays are very much his own, and are not necessarily intended for duets. This analysis of "The Four Posts of the Bed" is only an example of what is revealed through the transcription process. We can uncover much by carefully listening not just to 'what' our greatest musicians actually played, but 'how' they played their repertoire. While access to new repertoire is at an all time high for today's musicians, understanding style is essential for the continued evolution of our tradition in the twenty first century.

¹⁶ Mac Aoidh describes John as having adopted a "dramatic staccato" style (*Between the Jigs and the Reels*. Drumlin, 1994. pp.236). It should be noted that several tunes, particular from the piping repertoire, demonstrate the use of slurred bowing (King George IV [The Floating Bow]).

Peter Kennedy

The Four Posts of the Bed

Folktrax 074 - The Pedlar's Pack

7

14

20

26

31

37

43

50

55

61

67

The Four Posts of the Bed

4

7

13

19

25

30

36

42

48

54

59

65

69

Mickey Doherty's Four Poster Bed (excerpt)

Irish Folklore Commission

The Gravel Walks

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of six staves of music. The first staff begins with a quarter rest followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The second staff continues the melodic line. The third staff features a fermata over a half note and a triplet of eighth notes. The fourth staff includes pizzicato markings (pizz. +) and bow strokes (↓) over a series of chords, followed by an arco section. The fifth staff contains a triplet of eighth notes and another pizzicato marking. The sixth staff concludes with an arco section and a final double bar line.

Notes

pizz + Performer used left-hand pizzicato

↓ Performer struck the instrument with the frog of his bow.

4 Performer used his fourth finger.

' Indicates a breath in the phrasing

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