

Introduction

Most people reading this book will be familiar with the basic form of Irish Step Dancing, even if it goes no further than seeing Riverdance, or Lord of the Dance, on stage or on television. Irish step dancing has changed considerably during the past 60 or 70 years. Three of the basic changes which have developed for one reason or another are, firstly; the practice of “high kicking” as compared with “dancing close to the floor”; secondly, making use of all the available floor space, as compared with “dancing on a plate”; and thirdly, the controversial practice of innovation. The form of the dance which incorporates these changes is often referred to as Modern Irish Step Dancing.

In contrast, the steps in this book come from the era preceding those changes, coming as they do from people who learned their dancing in the old school, in the early part of the century, and this form is generally described as Traditional Irish Step Dancing. It is a form of dancing which is not really competition orientated, even though the odd competition is held, so there is no need for a stiff body posture. The arms may hang loosely by the side, the body be held in its natural upright position, and the legs should always be bent slightly at the knees, to give a bounce or spring or easy style to the step. It is meant to be a fun, and self-satisfying form of the art, and can give the performer a great sense of satisfaction at being able to beat out a rhythm on the floor, or get up and “dance a step” at a Céilí or party or friend’s wedding, - not to mention its tremendous value as a very fulfilling form of healthy exercise.

As anybody who has followed the revival of the Set, or Quadrille dancing, is very aware that the standard of dancing has improved enormously over the years, and now many of these set dancers are looking for new ground, and feel that the next logical move is into the field of the old style, or traditional, step dancing.

In 1994 I first began to work out how best to write down some of the old steps, and when Connie Ryan organised a step dancing class in 1996, at which my wife Céline was persuaded by Connie to do the teaching, I handed out some of these sheets, and was encouraged by the favourable comments I received. Some time later, I was asked by Terry Moylan to commit these steps formally to print. As I began to work on them, I quickly realised that my first effort needed a lot of refinement to make the system more intelligible, which is what I hope I have now achieved. No doubt, further improvements can be made, but for now it must suffice.

Ideally, I would have liked to wed the rhyme of the dance to an actual tune, but found that the system did not really lend itself easily to that approach, another line of information would be required, and I felt that this would look too cumbersome. However, I have written out the rhyme of Saint Patrick’s Day underneath the tune, to show the relationship between the words and the musical notes. These transcriptions should be regarded as an aid to the memory, rather than be used as a vehicle for somebody unfamiliar with the dance form to

try to learn from. In the same way that it is not possible to learn a foreign language properly from a book, without also hearing it spoken, it is essential for the person who proposes to use this book to know the basics of the dance. But, for a person familiar with the dance, and having learned the system, it should be possible to learn a new dance using this notation.

This compilation is a transcription, to the best of my ability, of some of the dances learned from Dan Furey (1910 - 1994) and James Keane (born 1917), both of whom lived their lives in the Labasheeda area of South West Clare. Some of the steps I learned directly from Dan starting in 1988, and all the others were learned by Céline from both Dan and James.

In the past, when Dan was teaching his dancing class, he always carried his fiddle with him, and emphasised the importance of dancing to the music, rather than first learning the steps and then trying to wed them to the music. He would even use the bow to maintain discipline in the class! Like Dan, many of the older dancers and dancing masters also played music, and understood the relationship between the music and dance, a practice which is not so common nowadays. These traditional dances are based on the music and its rhythm, and the dance and music closely compliment each other, and consequently the traditional musician finds it very satisfying to play for them.

Dancing tempo is very much an individual thing, and depends on the ability and preference of the dancer, and maybe even to some extent on the musician! I have indicated what would generally be regarded as comfortable tempos for the various dances, but of course these can be varied if desired.

A very important consideration for the dancer is the type of shoe which is needed. Generally, an ordinary pair of comfortable, every-day shoes with leather soles, is best, especially in a group or class situation. If one is taking part in a concert or such like, where a solo performance is needed, than the dancer may feel happier with more modern type hard soled dancing shoes. Wearing comfortable shoes and practising your steps in a relaxed fashion for maybe a half-hour every day, will give you great enjoyment, and do wonders for your general well being, without the risk of damaging your feet.

I would like to thank all those who showed an interest in, and offered comments on the system, or provided encouragement to me in my efforts.

Michael Tubridy, Dublin, July 1998