

Diddling & Fiddling:

The Importance Of Vocalising European Dance Music

"...you had bad rhythm then, and I'll bet you have bad rhythm yet." – *The Boys (& Girl) from County Clare*

Growing up surrounded by Irish music, one quickly learns that when a traditional musician talks about "rhythm", as in the parodic quote above, they're not referring to the metric pattern of notes in a tune, or even to the tempo which all musicians must struggle to keep *steady*, but instead to something more akin to what jazz musicians would call "groove". This has been described as "an unspecifiable but ordered sense of something that is sustained in a distinctive, regular and attractive way, working to draw the listener in."^[1] This ambiguous terminology is partly to blame for the number of classically trained players who wonder what they're missing when they reproduce a jig or reel from notation. (Of course, there are many limits to modern musical notation but that's a matter for another time.)

For example: each note in the bar of a jig has an imperceptibly different stress – this is plain if you try to sing a jig using only the syllable 'dum' (this is like a fiddler keeping a constant pressure on their bow and changing direction every note). You'll point out that 6/8 is compound duple time and so has two stresses: beats 1 & 4. So try using 'dum' for stressed beats and 'di' for unstressed beats. This binary mapping of stress is reminiscent of qualitative poetic metre and will probably still sound fairly expressionless, so we'll need a few more syllable variations so that each note can have its natural stress...

...which is where liling comes in; singing melodies on improvised nonsense syllables, often in an attempt to imitate an instrumental sound.

You may have come across other vocal styles that use non-lexical vocables, for example: the Austro-Bavarian yodel, Sami joik, Jewish nigun, Swedish kulning, etc. but these all have their own unique function and structure. Jazz scat singing is a little closer to liling, as the singers sometimes try to mimic the tone of certain instruments, but it is mostly improvised and doesn't fulfil the same socio-musical function.

Because of these differences, I will focus only on similar singing styles that are implicit in traditional dance musics, for liling is not peculiar to Ireland. In Scotland/England it's known as *diddling*, in Norway/Sweden it's *tralling/trallning* respectively, and each naturally has its own repertoire of tunes. What is absolutely fascinating is how the playing style of each tradition comes out when translated into meaningless syllables used to produce the melody. While English/Irish liling generally uses more 'd' sounds (di-dl-ee-die), Norwegian tralling tends to use consonants like 't' (tra-la-tu-å-di) and 'l' (la-li-lulli-lideli), whilst Swedes sing to 'jam-di-dej-då', but there are no hard and fast rules and it's a very individual and improvisatory art.

With this in mind, listen to a recording of a fiddle tune and try liling along using a range of syllables – you will find certain vowel/consonant combinations more natural than others. Try to hear nuances in the playing, as if the fiddle were using words. Can you hear long vowels like 'ahhh,' 'ay,' 'ee,' 'oh,' and 'oo' on the held notes? When the bow changes, can you hear a soft 's/l' or maybe a percussive 'd/t' sound? When singing in groups or with an instrument, it is advantageous to plan syllables ahead of time to achieve a unified sound. Soloists, on the other hand, have more license to improvise and change syllables at will.

Legend has it that Irish liltling (*portaireacht bhéil*, lit. ‘mouth-music’) originated around the time of the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland (1649-53) when it was ordered that all harps and organs across the country must be destroyed. The oppressed masses took to illegal hedge schools to pass on Irish culture and language, and the lack of instruments meant that musicians had to pass on the old music by singing. This was obviously a long time before the dance tunes we play today, but some of the old airs and harp music survived and it’s not too fanciful to think they were lilted on in the oral tradition.

Leaping forward to the turn of the 20th century, we see the practice of liltling flourish as house dances and crossroad dances become popular across the country. At large gatherings, several dances would have taken place simultaneously and, if there weren’t enough musicians available, willing lilters would be called upon to supply the music. At that time, it seems that it was mainly a female-dominated discipline – the women having absorbed the tunes from years of hosting house dances and looking after the male instrumentalists. A relation of my grandfather, Pat Piggott (a sheep farmer from the Iveragh Peninsula, Co Kerry), had a store of melodeon tunes that he had learnt as a young lad. He said he had them from a local lady who didn’t play an instrument, but *had the music in her head*: she lilted them to him anytime he wished to learn a tune. The great fiddler Jimmy Power likewise grew up listening to his grandmother liltling tunes as she busied herself around the house; Statia Donnelly, a familiar name to many Irish musicians, had been a long-time housekeeper to a Wexford piper and had many of his tunes off pat – down to every cran...

Internal consonants like ‘l’ (di-dl-di) and ‘n’ (da-dn-di) are often used to sustain notes in the middle of triplets, on the second note of a group of two, or at the end of a phrase. When you phonate on a consonant, it helps to bring out the subtle colour changes of the melodic line, as notes sustained on consonants sound softer and more muted than notes sustained on open vowels (partly why they crop up so much in sean-nós singing). Try liltling the same tune as before, being mindful of ornaments and grace notes in the melody that might be worthy of being sustained by a consonant (l, n, and m particularly). If you are *tralling* a Scandinavian tune, you might also use ‘r’ to add a percussive sound to the beginning of notes, ‘t’ to create a sharp stopping sound, or ‘y’ to provide a smooth gliding sound.

Since the mid 20th century, performance liltling has mainly become a recital form, correlating with the decline of house and crossroad dances (largely due to rural depopulation and pressure from the Catholic church which resulted in the Public Dance Halls Act of 1935, restricting all dancing to licensed establishments). Needless to say, the availability of cheap instruments and the advent of musical recordings meant that singers were no longer required for the organised céilí dancing that then took over.

The sub-culture of recital liltling seen at the Fleadh Cheoil and at CCE branches the world over is treated by some as “a high-novelty performance”, but many modern lilters have perfected their mimicry of particular instruments: the banjo ‘dinka-di-denka-li’, the bodhrán ‘row-de-dow-dow-di-ly’, or even the flute in slower tunes – some using only vowel sounds. It is worth mentioning here that the articulation that a flautist/whistler achieves with their breath, fingers, etc. can be analysed in the same way as the nuances of a fiddler’s bowstroke with regards to liltling. In fact, the tonguing patterns used by many modern whistlers could correspond directly to the consonant-vowel combinations of the lilter.

Aside from this performance trend in Ireland, liltling/diddling/tralling continues to play an important role in passing on the music and as a memory aid. You’ll often hear musicians turn to one another in a session and lilt a few phrases of a tune to summarise the set they’re about to play, or softly lilt

along to passages of a tune they haven't quite got yet. Some teachers and pedagogues suggest that you should *always* be able to lilt a melody before attempting to play it. Martin Hayes is one such proponent, actively encouraging workshop-goers to sing the tunes as they learn them, and saying that when he plays the fiddle he is “feeling the music inside and kind of singing it out”^[2].

One issue that may become apparent when singing tunes written by/for instrumentalists is disparity in *range*. When liling, you may have to transpose high passages down to a lower octave for ease of singing, perhaps losing contrast in the melody. However, to create a contrast of a different sort, some lilters employ brighter *tongue vowels* to bring out high overtones and darker *lip vowels* to bring out lower tones. Hence one might sing the same passage at the same pitch, but make it sound remarkably different by virtue of different vowel choices...

The reason why different vowels give different stresses to a note is that each resonates with its own set of harmonic partials (notes in the overtone series). An easy way to hear this is to quickly whisper “ee-eh-ah-oh-oo”. Did you notice how the pitch of each vowel was lower than the last? Of course nobody intellectually decides which to use when liling, it just happens that the vowels that people subconsciously choose are those that ring to the octaves/pure fifths of the harmonic series and are therefore the easiest to hear and tune. Find the vowels that feel natural and be consistent!

I've included below a transcription of Josie McDermott liling *Collier's Reel* and would encourage you to try copying him – after all, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and there's much to be learnt from those who do it well.

Collier's Reel

after Josie McDermott

Tee-ow-dle di-dl-dee dum die-dle i-dl-i die-dle ee-dl-um dow-dle i-ther-y dum die-dle

i-dl-ee die-dle i-dl-ee-dl die-dle di-dl-dee dum dee how-dl ee-dl i-dl-dee dum

dow-dle i-ther-y dow-dl-ee-dl ee-dl-ee-tha dum

Di-dl-dee die-dle i-tha dee-dle dow-dle di-ther-y dow-dl-i-dle di-dl-dee i-dl-ee-dl-i-dl

di-dl-dee i-dee dum dow-dle i-ther-y oo-dl-i-dle i-dl-ee die-dl-ee-dl um

dow-dle i-ther-y di-dl-ee i-dle ee-di-dee-dl-um...

I hope this piece encourages you to try singing the tunes you play if you don't already do so, and to draw parallels between your playing and lilting. Whether used for dancing, as a memory aid, a teaching technique, or a recital form, I think you'll agree that lilting is an intrinsic part of the music that mustn't be allowed to fade away...

No article concerning practical music-making would be complete without a list of recommended listening so, for those interested in Irish lilting, I would prescribe a good dose of Paddy Tunney, Tim Lyons, Bobby Gardiner, Elizabeth Cronin, Micho Russell, Paddy & Mike Rafferty, Seamus Ennis, Katherine Burke, Len Graham and Seamus Fay. English diddling is undergoing a bit of a renaissance, so there are less recorded older musicians, but look out for groups such as Lady Maisery who are popularising diddling in harmony. As for Norwegian tralling, Gunnlaug Lien Myhr, Talleiv Røysland and Ola Fausko each have individual styles, though my favourite Norwegian singer has to be Arve Moen Bergset of Bukkene Bruse. I've long been a disciple of Swedish traditional music, but only recently discovered the practice of tralling in Jämtland, passed on by Måns Olsson and Erik Axel Näsström.

For those looking for academic analyses of lilting and the like, I would recommend *Blah, Blah, Blah: Making Sense of Nonsense in Irish Vocal Music* by Catherine E. Mullins; *Lilting: The Tacit Knowledge in Irish Traditional Music* by Svend Kjeldsen; and *No Nonsense: The Logic and Power of Acoustic-Iconic Mnemonic Systems* by David Hughes (giving an interesting dissection of Japanese and Korean non-lexical syllabic singing).

[1] Kernfeld, Barry. "Groove (i)" *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 2nd ed.

[2] Gilmartin, Geraldine. in *The Irish Post*, January 29th 2014

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