



Beginning Irish Mandolin

by Michael B. Gregory

You're very welcome to the first issue of this new column on beginning Irish mandolin. Our goal will be to develop a reasonable collection of (mostly) easy-to-play Irish session tunes with a heavy emphasis on the often overlooked slides and polkas of the Sliabh Luachra (*schleeve lewkra*) region of Counties Cork and Kerry, in the southwest of Ireland. We will, of course, include reels, jigs and hornpipes from time-to-time as well. As with any form of traditional music, you should listen carefully to the way the outstanding players of this regional style articulate their music. You cannot go wrong with any of accordionist Jackie Daly's albums. In particular, his cd titled "Music of Sliabh Luachra" is still in print and is highly recommended. Other possibilities include the outstanding albums by the group called Sliabh Notes, led by fiddler Matt Cranitch. This group has produced three CDs and each one features several tracks in the Sliabh Luachra tradition.

Let's get started with the first tune of one of the most cherished slide sets in this style. The set of three is usually referred to as the Brosna set, but the names of the individual tunes are not generally agreed upon. In fact, names for polkas and slides are not at all important to most players from Sliabh Luachra. As Paul deGrae has said - 'the musicians there don't care about NAMES for their tunes, they just want to PLAY them'. Generally speaking, Irish traditional session tunes often have many names - sometimes a dozen or more. One name can even be used for several different tunes. This can all be quite disturbing to those of us who like to keep our houses in order, so to speak. But I think you will be able to overlook this as soon as you hear some of the wonderfully simple and beautiful Sliabh Luachra melodies. We've titled the first tune "The Lonesome Road to Dingle" but I have seen/heard others refer to it as "Trip to the Jacks" and "The Brosna Slide." You may find the suggested pick directions in the tab a bit unconventional. I urge you to at least try them out for a good while before abandoning them. You'll probably find that as you increase your speed, these pickstrokes will be to your advantage. As you listen to the [mp3](#), you will be able to hear the strong beats, which are always played with a downstroke.

I will have more to say about speed in future columns. In the meantime, play slowly (one of Padraig O'Keeffe's "golden rules" for beginners) but steadily until you have it memorized and then gradually increase your speed over a period of weeks. Besides being session tunes, slides and polkas are commonly used for set dancing in Ireland. Therefore, a proper tempo for slides can be quite brisk. In the next issue, we'll continue with the second Brosna slide.

The Lonesome Road To Dingle

Traditional

The sheet music is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a mandolin staff with fret numbers, a guitar chord chart, and a treble clef staff with a melodic line. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. The first system covers measures 1-3, the second system covers measures 4-6, and the third system covers measures 7-9. The mandolin staff includes fingering diagrams (V for vibrato) and fret numbers (0-5). The guitar chord chart shows chords G, D, and C. The treble clef staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes.

Any comments or questions are welcomed. Please email me (michael.gregory@und.edu) or Joe Carr at Mandolin Sessions.

About the author

Michael B. Gregory is a recently retired mathematics professor who lives in Grand Forks, ND. He has been playing mandolin as a hobby since 1976. His current instruments are Laplant mandolins, both A-models, made by Lloyd & Bill Laplant (father and son) of Grand Rapids, MN. He has played bluegrass, old-time and (since 1990) Irish mandolin. In 2002, in order to be better heard in Irish music sessions, he decided to take up the C#/D Irish button accordion. Since then, he has been pursuing the Sliabh Luachra regional style of Irish music. This is the traditional dance music of the southwestern Irish counties of Kerry and Cork, characterized by the polka and slide rhythms. The best known names in this form of traditional music have been Matt Cranitch (fiddle), Jackie Daly (accordion) and Johnny O'Leary (accordion). His contributions to the mandolin session will come mainly from the repertoire of these figures but will occasionally include reels, hornpipes & jigs from other parts of Ireland.