



FIDDLE

The Center for Irish Music at the St. Paul Conservatory

by Jode Dowling

The Center for Irish Music started offering Irish music lessons to students of all ages and levels on fiddle, flute, tin whistle, bodhran, guitar, piano and song in the fall of 2004. Operating as a program of The St. Paul Conservatory of Music, the Center offers private and group lessons many nights of the week including ensemble classes.

A family session is held once a month in lieu of classes on the first Tuesday of the month. Here students have an opportunity to play together and meet other musicians, including master guest artists. In the past, we have had guests such as Paddy O'Brien, Daithi Sproule, Larry Nugent, Patrick Orceau and John Williams. The monthly session is also a way for potential students to investigate the school and the music.

Aside from taking classes, students have performance opportunities at recitals and with ensembles. Students have performed at the Irish Music and Dance Association's St. Patrick's Day event, at the Minnesota Irish Fair, and at the Fitzgerald Theater, among other appearances. The Center's student base comes from the metro area and greater Minnesota — including Wabasha, Winona, Elk River, Austin, and Rochester Minnesota, as well as Hudson Wisconsin, to name a few.

The Center for Irish Music has three different fiddle instructors: Jode Dowling, Mag McDermott and John Winston. All three teachers have been playing traditional Irish music for over 20 years. They are leaders in the local Irish music community, performers, and recording artists. Each teacher uses their own approach to teaching, but focus on a common repertoire that supports group play / sessions. All teachers at the Center use the aural method for instruction, teaching music by ear, as this is how most of us learned the music.

Students have a variety of reactions to the idea of learning by ear. Some are not fazed in the least, others do not believe it

will work for them, and some are violently opposed to the idea! You can probably guess that it is more the adult learners that are the doubters. In any case, it is inspiring to take in a new student and teach them a tune by ear during their first lesson. They walk away with confidence and rarely look back.

For me, one of the big reasons for teaching or learning by ear comes from my own learning patterns. I did learn a portion of my repertoire from written music. Often, the learning of these tunes was supported by playing them with other people, so I was not learning in a vacuum. I found, over the years, that the tunes that I could recall were the tunes that I learned by ear. Consequently, I knew them better, played them more often, and made them my own.

It's not that we discourage the reading and writing of music. There are some valuable resources out there for learning Irish music, and if one cannot read music, one does not have as much access. Mind you, plenty of top-flight Irish musicians have more than gotten by without ever reading a note of music. We have found, through our own learning process, and in teaching past students, that teaching Irish music by ear is the best approach.

As a fiddle instructor, taking away sheet music has the added bonus of breaking new ground with a classically educated violin player. An Irish musician can hear a classically training violinist playing Irish music a mile away. This has to do with the way a tune is bowed, not necessarily the notes played, or the vibrato used. Use of vibrato, by the way, is very limited in Irish traditional music. Taking away sheet music forces some musicians to take a different approach to the music.

The fiddle instructors make use of specific tunes to work on bowing or ornamentation. With the given students, I try to select tunes that play against their strength. For example, if a certain phrase sounds

bad in one tune, I find another tune that highlights that type of phrase. I also borrow from my own strengths and weaknesses and give them tunes that I might find difficult to bow or ornament. Of course, it depends on the student and their experience level.

The Center for Irish Music is filling a need for instruction of traditional Irish music in the Twin Cities metro region as well as in greater Minnesota and western Wisconsin. Our program will grow as more people learn about our school. We are implementing new strategies for attracting additional students, both young and old, to the school. The Center has always found a great deal of support within the Irish community of Minneapolis and St. Paul. We are proud that we have begun to achieve and expand our mission and vision of passing on the music to *many* generations of musicians in our community for many years to come.

If you have any questions about our program or about the thoughts in this article, please write us at irish.music@comcast.net or check into our website at www.center-foririshmusic.org.

Jode Dowling was born in the U.S. of Irish parents and grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Due to the major Irish music festival there, he was exposed to some great musicians. He has spent a good deal of time in Ireland, both in Belfast and Cork, playing with and learning from many talented and generous musicians there. After moving to Minnesota in 1989, Jode played with many groups including the Clumsy Lovers (not related to the band that currently owns that name), Field Dan, and Corncrake, all influential groups in the Twin Cities. Jode and his wife, Kate, now play in the Doon Ceili Band and the Hi B's. Jode is a fiddle instructor at the Center for Irish Music, hosted by the Saint Paul Conservatory of Music. His wife, Kate, is the executive director. †