

Néillidh Boyle: replacing traditional concepts of storytelling in exploration of the acoustic art

Katie Boyle

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Ón gCos go Cluas

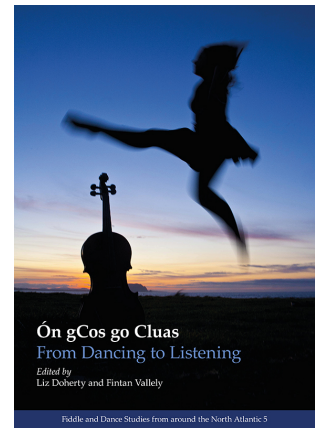
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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Néillidh Boyle: utilising traditional concepts of storytelling in exploration of the acoustic art

KATIE BOYLE

Néillidh Boyle (1889–1961) was an exceptional musician, performer, composer and folklorist. His music typifies that of a Master of the Art of Fiddle Playing, within both the Donegal Fiddle idiom to which he belongs and the wider Irish Traditional Music paradigm. He was born in Pennsylvania to emigrant parents from Donegal, but returned to Ireland at the age of ten where he pursued a long and successful career as a musician, spending his final year in Glasgow, Scotland. His music reflects the historical and geographical context of his life, and his perspective on traditional Irish music was conditioned by an underlying fear of its eventual disappearance. Néillidh made the unusual decision to voice these opinions, recording them along with his music, and providing an insight to the thoughts at the core of his playing.

Whilst his music contains many of the idiosyncrasies of the Donegal fiddle tradition, his style transcends that of the region, incorporating stylistic features from various alternative sources, including the lilting of his mother and grandfather; the Scottish fiddle idiom; contemporary classical musicians (in particular Yehudi Menuhin, Fritz Kreisler and Jan Kubelic); his natural surroundings; and, most famously, the music gifts bestowed upon him by ‘the fairies’. The release by *Cairdeas na bhFidiléirí* of Boyle’s recordings from 1937 to 1953 reveals an exceptional individual character – a purist as well as an adventurer – who displays an emotional creativity that captures the imagination and is indicative of a certain musical genius. This paper will examine the unique idiosyncrasies and influence of a musician who reinvented the fiddle idiom, taking it beyond the standard dance setting, transcending traditional concepts and displaying exceptional maturity with a continuous exploration of the acoustic parameters of the fiddle as an instrument in the art of storytelling.

In order to understand the music of Néillidh Boyle it is imperative to appreciate the historical and geographical contexts in which Néillidh lived. He was born in Easton, Pennsylvania in 1889. The family moved back to Ireland when Néillidh was 8, and in 1937 he was married to Annie Sweeney in Donegal. So he was 48 when he married. Of their six children, Paddy, the eldest, followed his father on the fiddle, and all of the children played traditional music in their family band. They moved to the Gorbals, Glasgow in 1960 where

Néillidh died the following year. He was brought home to be buried in Dungloe. By this time, Néillidh had had a long and successful career as a fiddle player, contributing to the elevation of the status of the Donegal tradition. He made several recordings which give us clear insight to the music that he played, and, at his own insistence, he also articulated his opinions on recordings made by Peter Kennedy for the BBC in the 1950s. These are central to the research presented here.¹

Boyle spent most of his Donegal years at Cronashallog where the family had a small farm. He worked at the fiddle each day from the age of eight, permitting him forty unimpeded years of musical development prior to his late marriage. Yet in his later life he was dedicated to his children, passing on to them his love and passion for music, which has now been passed on to later generations. Music, to Néillidh, was indeed a means of family communication, something he had learned from his maternal grandfather, Pádraig MacSweeney, who ‘rocked me in the cradle and from him I got my first experience of Irish music’. Pádraig had been a famous storyteller and singer in his day, a gift that he passed on to Néillidh’s mother, Nancy. She, in turn, was a lilter and singer who was held in high regard by Néillidh. She was, indeed, romanticised in the local press as being ‘the ideal Gaelic mother’ following her death. This clearly had a profound effect on Néillidh’s music:

She used to lilt for me and sing for me and many times she made me cry. I don’t hear any of our singers at the present time that can put the same blas [...] that has the same effect on me as she had in her singing.

Nature

Boyle found great inspiration in the people who surrounded him. But he also drew much from his natural surroundings, and one contemporary newspaper article describes his only tutors as ‘the winds, the waves, the birds and the murmuring of the brooks’; his playing of ‘The Blackbird’ and ‘The Fox Chase’ are excellent examples of this. Interviews with his daughter, Anna, establish that it would appear that Néillidh was the composer of a particular piece he called ‘The Fox Chase’ or ‘Hill of the Hunt’. There is no recording of Néillidh playing any such piece, but shades of it may remain in a piece played by Johnny Doherty which was popular with Micky and Francie Byrne (the Dears) and has since been played by younger musicians such as Aidan O’Donnell. It may well be that Boyle’s carefully nurtured composition may have inspired this piece. But it can certainly be said that he was innovative in his compositions and was a pioneer in using music to tell a story, something undoubtedly linked to his time spent touring as a musician for the silent cinema in which he brought stories to life with his ability to recreate sounds.

In his recording of the slow air, ‘The Blackbird’, Boyle mimics the sounds of birds. Imitations that are uncanny, not least for the fact that he played these two octaves above high E, a truly remarkable achievement on the fiddle. In order to perfect his bird representations, he cycled from Cronashallog to Dunlewy before dawn, Dunlewy being a forested area with more trees and birds than were in his hometown. There, he would listen in the darkness and train his ear to pick up the subtleties of birds. A hill behind the family farmhouse was the site of a fairy ring in which Néillidh reports making his first encounter with the fairy

folk and their music, which features frequently in the folklore traditions of Donegal.² In his recordings with Peter Kennedy, he tells of attending a fairy wedding where he heard ‘two of the greatest fiddlers in Ireland [...] But thanks be to God [...] they bestowed a lot of their knowledge on me, and I have practised since a lot of their styles and I have got that secret’.

My original reaction to this story was to view it in a historical context, as a vehicle through which Néillidh was attempting to capture the imagination of apathetic listeners as he was an avid story teller. But, it could be viewed as Néillidh attributing his talents to a higher order; viewed in this context one can see why the fiddle player may have been hesitant to record his music, and my understanding of this through discussions with his family, is that he was very superstitious and believed that his music had to be treated with particular respect because it was not entirely his own, but a gift bestowed upon him.

These anecdotes show that Néillidh Boyle was musically immersed in his surroundings. He breathed music every day of his life like the air that kept him alive, and he even used nature’s own acoustic creations to practice; for instance, he used to play in a small valley across from a ‘spink’ (a large rock formation) so that he could hear his own echo and so be able to critique his own playing. Passionately dedicated to his music, Néillidh aspired to reach his full potential through all available means. He was intrigued by his contemporaries from outside of Ireland and, in particular, those in Scotland. At the age of fifteen, while on a trip to Glasgow, Néillidh, had the opportunity of hearing one of those influences: the classically trained William McKenzie Murdoch, who earned the title ‘the Scottish Paganini’. Néillidh committed himself from a young age to mastering classical violin technique and it is evident in his playing that his technical ability became outstanding. He was captivated by such players as Yehudi Menuhin and Fritz Kreisler, as well as Jan Kubelic, who was actually invited to hear Néillidh play on his visit to Ireland. Highly regarded by his peers, Néillidh was known throughout Ireland through his broadcasts on Radio Éireann. Musically engaged to the highest level, he aspired to master the instrument in the same manner as the classical virtuosi of his time.

The 1930s brought jazz and Néillidh joined a local band called the Dungloe Quartet, which played regularly at dance halls where, in order to be heard without the use of amplification, Néillidh had to tune up to F and play in higher octaves. The use of scordatura became a hallmark of Néillidh’s playing and conditioned his brilliant tone and accuracy of pitching in high octaves. Yet, still, Boyle was immersed not only in his physical surroundings and influenced by world class musicians, but his playing was imbued with the typical idiosyncrasies of the Donegal fiddle tradition. To analyse his style within these symbolic boundaries, it is necessary first to summarise ‘the Donegal tradition’. As stated in *The Northern Fiddler*, ‘regional styles’ should be approached with caution: ‘One has to distinguish between what is a purely personal style of playing and what is a regional style – a fiddle aesthetic shared by several fiddlers in the same region’.³

The so-called ‘Donegal’ regional style is therefore set within certain parameters. Its overall general style is normally categorised as a system of complex bowing coupled with relatively un-ornamented finger work. Mairéad Ni Mhaonaigh offers some useful insights:

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The geography and vastness of the county has contributed to the wealth of different styles which can be found here today. Just as the peoples' accents can vary from townland to townland, so does the interpretation of music, which we call 'style'.⁴

Dermot McLaughlin also makes an interesting observation regarding the preservation of a particular style. He suggests that regional artistic integrity was, in fact, protected by the lack of interference from the media, and, indeed, the geographical location of Donegal meant there was little interference from other regions.⁵ Along with a few others, Boyle may have proved an exception, but, for the most part, the Donegal fiddle tradition was frequently dismissed by the wider traditional music community.

The isolation of this stylistic tradition within Ireland was not necessarily reflected in its relations with certain other fiddling traditions. For example, there is a very strong link between Donegal and Scottish fiddle traditions, and in particular between Donegal and Shetland. Néillidh Boyle drew influence from the playing of McKenzie Murdoch, and likewise the music and compositions of James Scott Skinner were part of his repertoire. But, it must be borne in mind, too, in this regard, that there has historically been an exchange between the two idioms rather than a transfer from one to the other, and so, 'Donegal' and 'Scotland' have each remained within their own boundaries or style. Mairéad Ni Mhaonaigh explains this relationship:

Those ties are evident in the amount of Scottish tunes heard in the average repertoire of a Donegal fiddle player. Highlands or flings, strathspeys and Scottish marches are played with the Irish repertoire of jigs, reels and hornpipes. But these tunes are not played exactly as they are in Scotland – they are changed and developed [...] people make the tunes their own.⁶

Néillidh Boyle geographically belongs to 'The Rosses' style which is typified by Johnny Doherty. It is a lively up beat style characterised by long drawn out single bows and less frequent ornamentation:

The use of one bow stroke per note. The up and down strokes of the bow are given the same rhythmic emphasis and there is an avoidance of rhythmic syncopation [...] the players of this style call it strict tempo [...] influenced by the staccato sound of the highland pipe [...] Finger ornamentation when used is based on the highland pipes.⁷

But while Boyle shows some of these idiosyncrasies, he is certainly not characterised by them: his style steps outside the geographical boundaries, more coloured by the external influences already mentioned. Danny O'Donnell, another master fiddler from the Rosses, believed that Néillidh's mother's influence was more evident in his playing than any other. Her lilting predated the melodies played by the majority of other fiddlers, thus Néillidh's music as learned from her emanated from a much older stylistic tradition: 'Néillidh Boyle . . . did have the lilt, with the decorations in his fingering on the fiddle. The rolls and the triplets he played all came from the lilting'.⁸ Néillidh discusses these decorations, the importance of

what he calls ‘embellishments’ of the music, and although he introduces rhythmic variation with the bow, he had also mastered left hand articulation, producing beautiful ornamentation.

‘Miss McLeod’s’

The influence of Boyle’s mother’s lilting manifested itself in complex finger work, which Néillidh emphasised as critically important to embellishing a tune with grace notes, a technique that he considered requires years of practice and was too often done inappropriately:

All our Irish music has to be embellished, we only get it in the music books very plainly, what I might call a skeleton, or the bones, no beef. You must put the beef on it. And the beef is the embellishments. There [are] different ways of embellishing Irish music. We have different kinds of grace notes and it takes years of practise to know how to handle these [...] Some [players] use them [inappropriately] and it would be far better to have left them alone as they are either too soon or too late for the principal tone.

The reel, ‘Miss McLeod’, was used by Boyle to demonstrate his approach to embellishments (see Figures 1). The first time round the tune he plays it simply, then he ‘puts the beef on it’.



Figure 1 The ‘bare bones’ of the B part of ‘Miss McLeod’. Embellishment applied, the second time round (B3).



Figure 2 Here, Néillidh’s use of the short roll on the A and C#, along with the use of grace notes, allow for melodic variation and a very precise articulation through ornamentation. Boyle’s use of embellishments is systemic in the rest of the tune, and he varies there use for further melodic variation. Thus, the phrase is played differently the third time round the tune (B5).



Figure 3 Further melodic variation on the B part of ‘Miss McLeod’.

What is important to be noted from these examples is that Boyle was trying to convey and explain within the structure of music that a grace note isn’t worth playing if it is put in the wrong place (see Figures 2 and 3). So, too, in his recording of ‘The Harvest Home’, he is teaching the listener about bowing (see Figure 4):



Figure 4 Boyle’s ‘Harvest Home’.

Here, Néillidh demonstrates his ability to use both ornamentation and bowing to articulate the phrasing, producing different rhythmic effects.

Articulation: bowing

In Dermot McLaughlin’s opinion: ‘The way the bow is used dictates the rhythm, pulse and drive.’⁹ Yet, for Néillidh Boyle, there is no transcription of his bowing possible, since there is no video footage of him playing. However, auditory analysis suggests that he was highly competent in his technique. In this instance he fitted comfortably within the Donegal single bowing aesthetic as well as being able to employ the use of slurring. With regard to his recording of the hornpipe, ‘Harvest Home’, his interview describes the tune as an excellent exercise for bowing technique:

There’s a lot of bow work in ‘The Harvest Home’ which is very good exercise for the right hand. There is no training for a pupil as good as our Irish reels. There’s plenty of bow work and there’s plenty of finger work and that’s what’s wanted. In my opinion, they are much better than any of the exercises in the books.

Single, fast bowing is used as a means of driving the rhythm forward. The variation in the bowing allows the player to demonstrate his competence and the flair of his right hand. While such playing is an example of the ‘strict tempo’ Donegal aesthetic, nevertheless, through listening to the recording, it is clear that he uses cross-string slurring, something that is typical of the greater ‘Irish Traditional’ idiom but not of the Donegal idiom. Boyle thus was able to exploit various techniques and was not bound by the single bow characteristic of his geographical location.

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Some of what Néillidh Boyle practised and spoke of is addressed elsewhere, notably by Arthur L. Salmon in ‘Emotion and Technique’:

The difference between technique and emotion is the difference between mechanism and life. It is the conjunction of the two that makes the rare performer, the player of genius [...] Technique is the letter, emotion is the spirit [...] Thoughts that lie too deep for tears, too deep for verbal articulation, may yet not lie too deep for music; that is music’s glory [...] It is the emotion that we want, in all art that speaks truly for the human soul.¹⁰

This is heard in Néillidh Boyle’s interpretation of traditional Irish music, heavily influenced by the tonal expressiveness of his mother’s lilting, which impelled perhaps his use of minor and modal keys, particularly in his playing of airs, in imitation of the *blas* that was instilled in him as a young child:

And I would like to cry and I would have to start to play the fiddle first for some sad Irish air. And once I would play a few notes, I would burst out crying. There is a lot of sadness, mostly all of our Irish music is composed with some sad event.

Today’s musicians may understand the idea of shaping music around emotion, but it is a difficult thing to describe in words, as it is a very personal experience. My understanding of Néillidh Boyle’s words is that music is a means of communication, it’s a means of expressing the soul. This is repeated by Tommy Peoples:

I agree totally with Néillidh Boyle when he said that Irish music’s ornamentation cannot be written or vice versa, played properly from the written notes. It has to be in the blood. The music expresses Joy, Terrible Loss, Hope, Love and Defiance. It has stayed with us when we had our people crushed by oppression, our language killed by force and intimidation.¹¹

Néillidh Boyle lived and breathed music in all forms it presented itself to him in: classical, jazz, as well as regional styles, non-local traditional influences, and, of course, underlain by the influence of his mother’s lilting. This incorporation of techniques from outside his native tradition might reinforce the idea that when Néillidh renounced modern popular music as ‘jungle music’ he was not necessarily rejecting all other types of music. That is why it is important to understand the historical context. He was a virtuoso player who demonstrated great command of his instrument and incorporated external influences. He used the mastering of his instrument’s potential to express his deepest passions and emotions, similar to how literary geniuses like Joyce or Yeats, through their understanding of language, became adept at conveying the most complex ideas, emotions, and images. Boyle was a master of the instrument and knew that by mastering techniques from other genres of music he could create a unique and indelible style: ‘The fiddle can take out everything that’s wanted. If the player has the power and the command to do so, the fiddle will respond to his aims’.

Notes

- ¹ Quotations below are from these recordings unless indicated otherwise. See Peter Kennedy Collection, British Library, <https://sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music/Peter-Kennedy-Collection/025M-C0604X1238XX-0001V0> [accessed 22 May 2015].
- ² Áine Ní Dhíoraí, *Na Cruacha Scéalta agus Seanchas* (Baile Atha Cliath: An Chlochomar, 1985).
- ³ Allen Feldman and Éamonn O'Doherty, *The Northern Fiddler: Music and Musicians of Donegal and Tyrone*, Appendix II, 'Fiddling Styles' (London, New York, Sydney, Cologne: Oak; Belfast: Blackstaff, 1979), pp. 248–250.
- ⁴ Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh, 'A Night of Donegal Fiddle Music', in *Earagail Arts Festival* [brochure] (15 July 2003).
- ⁵ Dermot McLaughlin [personal communication, 1991].
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Feldman and O'Doherty, p. 249.
- ⁸ Danny O'Donnell interview in Feldman and O'Doherty, pp. 145–149.
- ⁹ Dermot McLaughlin [personal communication, 1991].
- ¹⁰ *The Musical Times*, vol. 65, no. 972 (1 February 1924).
- ¹¹ Caoimhín Mac Aoidh, *Between the Jigs and Reels: The Donegal Fiddle Tradition* (Leitrim: Drumlin Publications, 1994), p. 13.