



Lessons in the key of traditional tunes

Is it possible to pick up a tin whistle and be playing tunes in little more than a week? With the right teacher, and the right attitude, it just might be, as **Arminta Wallace** discovers

IT'S NOT EVERY day you meet a woman with a whistle on Grafton Street.

But there she is, the PR liaison from **Tradfest**, standing on the corner with a Walton's bag and a huge smile.

"We got you a cool black one," she says. It's featherlight, and it has six unevenly spaced holes on the top. "It's in the key of D," she calls after me. Helpfully. Let the lessons begin.

DAY ONE

I call my tutor Mary Bergin, who's based in Galway. It will be a couple of days before we can meet up for a lesson: in the meantime, she suggests, some advance practice would be good. Did I get any kind of instruction sheet? I scabble around in the empty bag. Nothing.

So it's just me and this black whistle. I've never even held a tin whistle in my hand before, let alone tried to play one. I cover all the holes and blow. What emerges is a woolly, low-pitched hoot.

Following Bergin's advice, I retreat to the top three holes: the notes B, A and G in descending order, played with the index, middle and ring fingers of the left hand respectively. When I can produce a reasonably healthy sound on those, I tiptoe back down the scale: F sharp, E, D.

DAY TWO

I attempt to progress to tunes. I can't think of any. Then I remember the songs I was singing to my granddaughter over the summer. I have a repertoire! *Twinkle, Twinkle, Mary Had a Little Lamb, Row Your Boat* and *Frère Jacques*. It's twee-ville, but hey, it's better than nothing. I now also have two pressing questions for my tutor. One: how do you play top D? And two: what do you do about slobbers?

DAY THREE

My first lesson with Bergin is a revelation. She doesn't wince at my woolly hoots, but whoops with an almost tangible delight when I get anything – even the tiniest thing – right. Beginning with the tongue, which I've been doing wrong; hence the abundance of slobbers and lack of legato.

She also introduces lots of other stuff I hadn't even dreamed was possible. A whole new octave's worth of notes – high D and beyond – and phrasing, and something called a "cut note" which, when you do it right, lifts a tune into instant jauntiness. All this informa-

tion puts my brain into a delighted buzz, but ties my fingers into worried knots. However, when it goes according to plan, even for a single phrase, it's a joy. I love this instrument.

What, I want to know, gives Bergin the most joy as a musician? "Well, to me, in any form of music it's the rhythm that's the most important thing," she says. "When I look back on myself as a younger musician I would have sought out a lot of the older players. They mightn't have been technically brilliant, or had the most amazing ornamentation, but they had something special – and it's the rhythm. That's the thing that's going to get the foot tapping, get the body moving."

"In whistle playing, what I love is the combination of the notes and the breath. It's not just a matter of taking in air, but of using the breath to give the tune a push forward. Where other people like to use continuous flow in their playing, I like to build the phrases up with the breath – give the tune a 'hup' every now and again." We've come a long way from B, A, G.

DAY FOUR

So that I can practise on my own ahead of my final lesson, Bergin records some tunes on to my tape recorder. I recognise *Fáinne Geal An Lae*; the others, which I don't think I've ever heard before, are *Peigín Leitir Móir, The Kerry Polka, Britches Full Of Stitches, Have You Washed Your Father's Shirt, Cuil Aodha* and *The Boys of Blue Hill*.

Being classically trained, I've never in my life learned a tune by ear rather than by eye – and it strikes me as both great fun and an uncommonly musical way to proceed. It will be a while before I realise how carefully she has chosen this selection, bringing me from a simple melody based on a scale to tunes with considerably more bounce, offering a whole range of different rhythms and moods, and doing it in a gradual progression – the mark of a first-class teacher.

DAY FIVE

A first-class pupil is another thing altogether. It's the old story: practice, practice, practice. But not all in a big, grumpy, reluctant lump. Small, regular, careful and often is the business.

My progress is of the two steps forward, one step back variety. And like all beginners, I'm hung up on learning the notes and I want to be able to play fast and show off – a strategy

which, inevitably, results in sonic disaster. If Bergin were here she'd have other priorities. "Lightness in the blowing gives a sense of speed and musicality." Okay, let's go.

Once more, with feeling . . .

DAY SIX

In a fit of enthusiasm – and because I'm away from home for a few days, and therefore not imposing on my long-suffering semi-detached neighbours at the crack of dawn – I find myself playing *Fáinne Geal An Lae* as the sun comes up over the sea. The bright ring of the day, indeed. It's a magic moment and, I think, a turning-point. Also, for the first time, I get the hang of the tongue thing. A good day.

DAY SEVEN

A bad day. Tunes and fingers are getting tangled. Slides, how are you: I feel as if I'm sliding backwards down a slippery slope. I know why this is: I had hoped to have everything off just so, in time for the next lesson, with the aim of impressing Bergin. Then I have another "Aha!" moment. Who am I trying to impress? Myself, almost certainly.

There's no way Bergin is going to be impressed by reaming off stuff by rote. I consult the notes from last weekend's lesson.

"The other thing I value in music is, I suppose, something to do with soul," she tells me. "If the music is coming from your head – if you're trying too hard with your head – it only reaches the head, and then kind of cuts off. I need someone to be playing from other space that hits another part of me."

"And that goes for any kind of music. I love jazz. I love classical music. I play baroque music myself, with Dordán. But if someone is using their head to try and impress me with all sorts of techniques and stuff, I actually switch off very quickly – no matter how good they are."

Come on, black whistle. Let's be having you.

DAY EIGHT

Our final lesson for this assignment takes place by Skype. Bergin fine-tunes my phrasing and picks me up for slithering over notes. But she also makes me feel proud of what I've achieved. Conclusion: can you take up the tin whistle at any age, and learn a couple of tunes which will give you a real blast? Yes, you can. Can you keep it up – and keep improving? Ah, well. We'll have to see about that.



On tune: Mary Bergin, left, with Arminta Wallace during a tin whistle lesson. Photograph: Cyril Byrne

Tradfest

WHETHER you're a life-long devotee of traditional music or a complete beginner, there'll be something to tickle your fancy during Dublin's five-day **Temple Bar Tradfest**, which began last night and runs until Sunday.

Headline concerts in Christ Church Cathedral, two-hour workshops offering a crash course in dancing, sean-nós singing and the Irish language from *Gael Cultúr*, free outdoor gigs featuring the Furey Brothers, Mike Hanrahan and Eleanor Shanley on East Essex Street, children's events at The Ark, a Singers' Club in the **Temple Bar** Hotel, street theatre – you name it, it's probably happening, and with 200 free events it won't break the family bank either.

For full listings check out templebartrad.com

Meanwhile, here are some suggestions to be going on with:

■ Clannad celebrate 40 years in action with three nights of concerts featuring Pol Brennan along with the rest of the band, the first time they've played a full concert together in 20 years: Christ Church Cathedral, tonight, tomorrow and Saturday 29th

■ A double-bill of emerging performers on the trad scene: Beoga and Ciorras play The Button Factory, tonight

■ How others see us: a double-bill at the Irish Film Institute of a quirky German look at popular Irish traditional music of the 1960s, *Lieder für Tramer, Musik für Rebellen*, plus Philip Donnellan's 1978 documentary about a French-Canadian fiddler, *The Pilgrimage of Ti Jean*. (Sunday 30th at 1pm)

■ Last, but definitely not least, a great gathering of musicians on Friday night: Brendan Power and Tim Edey; Jackie Daly and Matt Cranitch; Dessie O'Halloran and the Cunningham Sean Nós Dancers and my own tutor Mary Bergin with the guitarist Paul de Græe. It's at The Button Factory tomorrow, and will be streamed live to the world on LiveTrad.com