

# NEWSLETTER

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*Feature article*

## **The bodhrán and tin whistle**



*Cover images:  
Bodhrán (image from musicianwave.com),  
tin whistle (image from irishroadtrip.com),  
Bodhrán and whistle players featured on stamp c.1980 (image from stamps-for-sale.com)*

## Irish musical instruments – the bodhrán and the tin whistle

**T**he bodhrán is an ancient Celtic drum originating from Ireland. Even though it is not the most well-known instrument, it has its niche and can be used in different music genres. The tin whistle is also closely associated with Irish traditional music and Celtic music. Other names for the instrument are the flageolet, English flageolet, Scottish penny whistle, tin flageolet, or Irish whistle (also Irish: *feadóg stáin* or *feadóg*).

The bodhrán, pronounced bough-rawn, and also called a dallán in Irish is a traditional Irish musical instrument.

It consists of a hoop of flexible wood forming a shallow cylinder one end of which is covered with white leather, usually sheep or goat skin. The wood of the rim is overlapped and fastened with nails whilst the skin is attached by a row of tacks.

It is difficult to uncover an accurate history of this iconic drum. Many believe the bodhrán may have originated in the farming sector as a winnowing tool, (the process by which chaff is separated from grain) or that it was used for wool dyeing. Others claim it to be an ancient shamanic drum, predating Christianity.

To play the instrument the musician usually rests the bodhrán on their knee and holding the cross-piece on the open back of the bodhrán with one hand, they strike the skin with a short double ended stick known as a tipper or a bone. When the tipper or bone is struck on the bodhrán skin a thudding sound is produced.

The name bodhrán may be derived from the Irish word bodhar meaning 'deaf' and 'dull-sounding'.

Today the bodhrán is often described as the 'heartbeat of Irish music' and its rapid shift in popularity is largely owed to the renowned Irish musician and composer Seán Ó Riada.

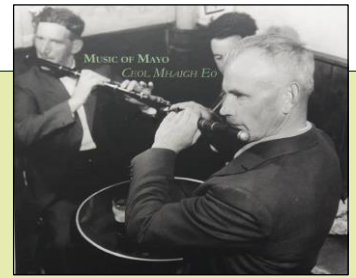
In the early 1960s Ó Riada added the bodhrán to the line-up of his iconic Ceoltóirí Chualann, an Irish traditional band. He not only elevated the status of the lowly Irish drum but of traditional Irish music itself. The humble bodhrán now became worthy of theatres and concert halls where it had once only been found in sessions in pubs or kitchens.

The whistle was first used in traditional music in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, although similar instruments have been found to have been used much earlier, as bone flutes were discovered on the site of the old Viking settlement in Dublin. The tin whistle is a fipple style flute which is known by a number of names including the penny whistle, Irish whistle, Celtic whistle and feadóg stáin (the Irish term pronounced fadoge-stawn).

It takes its name from the material from which it was made. Traditionally a sheet of tin. A type of flageolet (woodwind instrument), similar to the recorder, the Irish whistle is a simple six holed woodwind instrument, played by blowing air through a mouthpiece or fipple. A note is produced by covering or uncovering the tone holes using a particular fingering system. The earliest tin-plate whistles were made in Britain from 1825. It was Clarke Whistles, one of the most famous tin whistle makers in the world who changed the fate of this instrument when they began mass producing their whistles in 1843.

These mass production methods made the whistle an affordable and accessible instrument for all. The tradition of the tin whistle still continues today with many National Schools providing tuition to their pupils.

Sources:  
*National Museum of Ireland*  
*mceelamusic.com*  
*tradschool.com*



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