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## Irish musical instruments: **The Bodhrán** and **Tin Whistle**



Cover image: Traditional music session with bodhrán, in Rouse's Bar, Ballina  
(Image courtesy of Fáilte Ireland)

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# The Bodhrán and Tin Whistle

As the Connacht Fleadh 2023 in Ballina comes to an end, we examine two notable traditional Irish instruments, the bodhrán and the tin whistle.

## The Bodhrán

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 lineup 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.



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*  
*Mcneelamusic.com*  
*Tradschool.com*

## The Tin Whistle

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 fadóg-stawn).

It takes its name from the material from which it was made. Traditionally a sheet of tin.



## A brief history of the

## CLARK / CLARKE SURNAME

**Ó Cleirigh:** O'Clery, O'Cleary, Clery, Cleary, Clarke, &c.; 'descendants of Cléireach' (Cleric, Clerk). This family derives its name and descent from an ancestor named Cléireach who flourished about the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and was the seventh in descent from the celebrated Guaire the Hospitable, King of Connacht. One branch of the family settled in Tirawley, Co Mayo, another in Co. Cavan, and a third in the neighbourhood of Kilkenny.<sup>1</sup>

**Clarke:** One of the twenty commonest surnames in Scotland and among the thirty commonest in England, Clark, spelt with and without a final e, is now among the forty commonest surnames in Ireland. This is due largely to the fact that it was brought over by settlers in large numbers, but also because some descendants of the Irish sept Ó Cleirigh adopted Clark as an anglicization of their name rather than Cleary.<sup>2</sup>

**Clarke:** Clarke is one of the commonest surnames throughout England, Ireland and Scotland, and has the same remote origin in all cases, the Latin *clericus*, originally meaning 'Clergyman' and later 'clerk' or 'scholar'. In Irish this became cléireach, the root of the surname Ó Cléireigh, which was anglicised in two ways, phonetically as 'Cleary', and by translation as 'Clerk' or 'Clarke'. Up to the beginning of this century, the two surnames were still regarded as interchangeable in some areas of the country. By far the largest number of Clarkes (with or without the final 'e') are to be found today in Ulster, a reflection of the great influx of Scottish settlers in the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Of the 345 Clarke births registered in Ireland in 1890 - 99 were in Leinster, 17 were in Munster, 176 occurred in Ulster, while 53 were in Connacht. The surname was principally found in counties Antrim, Dublin, Mayo, Cavan and Louth and generally distributed throughout the counties of Ulster.

<sup>1</sup> Extract taken from 'Irish Names and Surnames' by Rev. Patrick Woulfe

<sup>2</sup> Extract taken from 'Irish Family Names' by Brian De Breffny

<sup>3</sup> Extract taken from 'Clans and Families of Ireland' by John Grenham