



Resource Guide for Educators and Students Grades 4–12

What is traditional music? It's music that's passed on from one person to another, music that arises from one or more cultures, from their history and geography. It's music that can tell a story or evoke emotions ranging from celebratory joy to quiet reflection. Traditional music is usually played live in community settings such as dances, people's houses and small halls.

In each 30-minute episode of Carry On™, musical explorer and TikTok sensation Hal Walker interviews a musician who plays traditional music. Episodes air live, allowing students to pose questions. Programs are then archived so you can listen to them any time from your classroom or home. Visit Carry On's [YouTube channel](#) for live shows and archived episodes.

[Episode 22, Brian Bigley](#)

Brian Bigley first heard the uilleann pipes in his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. He began playing at age 8 and is now a full-time instrument maker and performer. Brian has toured extensively as a piper, flute and whistle player, and Irish step dancer.

The uilleann pipes are related to the Scottish highland pipes. There are some differences: instead of the pipes held over the shoulder, pointing up, the Irish pipes lie across the lap. And rather than blowing into the pipes, the musician uses a bellows to supply the air.

The player holds and squeezes the bellows under the right elbow—in fact, uilleann (pronounced ILL-en) is the Irish word for "elbow." Brian explains [HERE](#) how the air from the bellows goes through a bag, which is squeezed by the left elbow to generate sound from three drone pipes (with fixed pitch), three regulators (keyed drone pipes that play different pitches to make simple chords and supply rhythm and accompaniment), and the chanter, a type of upright flute that plays the melody.

Unlike a flute, the chanter has a set of double reeds like an oboe. The reeds must be perfectly shaped to allow the air to vibrate the reeds. At 16, Brian learned to make his own reeds for both the chanter and the regulators. Then he apprenticed with a master pipe maker and flute maker to learn to make his own instruments. He has a year's waiting list of people who want to buy full, partial and practice sets of pipes.

The uilleann pipes began developing in the early 1700s. By the late 1700s they were quieter and sweeter sounding than the Scottish bagpipes and Irish war pipes used on battlefields. Uilleann pipes were usually played indoors, often as a substitute for a church organ. Brian mentions that when England ruled Ireland, Irish culture was restricted and the pipes were used for secret Catholic church services. Those original pipes were quiet enough to escape detection. Now, modern uilleann pipes sound much brighter and louder.

In our episode, [Brian plays two Irish jigs](#). The first is the "Kesh Jig," composed as a "session" jig in 1975 for the Bothy Band; listen to them play the tune [HERE](#). The second jig is called "Lark in the Morning." [CLICK HERE](#) to listen it played by a solo fiddle. Brian also plays a reel called "[The Thrush in the Storm](#)."

Irish music is known for fast jigs and reels, tunes originally used for dancing. The difference is in how many fast notes are between each main beat. If you can tap out three quick notes between beats, it's a jig, often in 6/8 time or a variation of 6/8. If you can tap out two quick notes between beats, it's a reel, often in 4/4. On the flute, Brian also [plays a polka](#) in 2/4.

Uilleann pipes can be used as a solo instrument or played with other musicians in a band. Instruments typically used in traditional Irish music include fiddle, [bodhrán](#) (drum), [concertina or accordion](#), uilleann pipes, [flute](#), [tin whistle](#), [Celtic harp](#), [bouzouki](#) and guitar.

Brian has played with many other musicians, including orchestras; see Resources below for some of his collaborations. In our episode, he performs with the group [Journey Work](#). He has also toured in North America and Europe as a musician and Irish step dancer.

Vocabulary

Accompaniment, or Accompany – Supporting a lead musician or melody with your playing. Backup singers sing harmony behind the lead singer's melody, and backup musicians play in the background to complement lead instruments or singers. On a single instrument, the accompaniment is secondary to the melody.

Drone – A sustained sound of a single pitch that continues throughout all or most of a musical piece. "Drone" also refers to pipes that produce and sustain the sound.

Fiddle and violin – Two names for the same instrument, a portable 4-string instrument made of wood with pegs for tuning the strings. The main difference between fiddle and violin is the style of music played on the instrument—it's a fiddle if you play traditional or folk-based music; it's a violin if you play classical music on it.

Melody – The tune; the single most noticeable line, usually the one you end up singing along with.

Pub – A "public house" that serves food and drink, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic. In Ireland, the atmosphere is friendly and often includes live music.

Session – A gathering of musicians at a pub, someone's home or even on the street to play Irish tunes.

Step dancing – A type of dance from Ireland, performed solo or in groups. The upper body is held upright, arms still, and the feet move with fast, precise, rhythmic steps.

Time signature (or meter) – The division of music into patterns of repeated rhythm, or beats. A 2/4 meter indicates two beats repeated over and over in units called measures, or bars. The bottom number (4) means that the quarter note gets one beat. You can usually identify the meter by tapping along and noticing how often the strong beats occur.

Whistle and flute – The Irish whistle—often called a tin whistle—is a simple flute capped with a mouthpiece that looks like a whistle; it's played held straight down from the mouth. The Irish flute is a wooden flute held sideways; the player blows across a hole near the top to split the air column to make the sound.

Activities and Questions for Students

Before you watch the episode—Locate the following places on [Google Maps](#) or a printed map.

Countries: Ireland; Northern Ireland, Scotland and England (parts of the United Kingdom).

US: Cleveland, Ohio (Brian's home); New York state and Virginia (where he apprenticed with instrument makers).

After you watch the episode—Complete assigned activities and questions from this list, which progresses from simpler to more complex.

1. Does anyone you know play an instrument? When did they start? How much and how often do they practice?
2. Did your ancestors come from another country or a specific culture? What was it? Did any play an instrument? Which one, and did they play in a specific musical tradition?
3. To play the pipes, Brian uses the insides of both elbows, his fingers and his right wrist. Watch him play "[Kesh Jig](#)" and pretend to play the uilleann pipes along with Brian. Try to mimic every movement. How easy or hard is it to play your imaginary set of pipes?
4. Brian was an apprentice to two instrument makers. An apprentice is someone who learns from a master teacher over a period of time.
 - a. If you could be an apprentice to anyone, who would it be? What would you want to learn? If you could learn to build any instrument, what would it be?
 - b. If you could learn to build anything else you wanted, what would it be?
 - c. If an apprentice were assigned to you, what would you teach them?
5. [Watch Brian](#) do some Irish step dancing. Now you try! [This video breaks down a basic move](#) for beginners. How easy or hard is it to learn?
6. Brian says that the regulator pipes sound like car horns. If you were going to use car horns to write a piece of music, what would your piece be like? Slow or fast? Rhythmic or random? Short or long? Describe your piece!
7. What would you choose to write a piece of music if you couldn't use musical instruments? Some examples are sounds from nature or a factory, or using pots and pans. You can use any combination of sounds to make a piece of music—what would you choose?

8. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write a review (and illustrate it, if you like) of Brian's episode, what he talked about, and the music you heard. Describe the music, your favorite things about it, and what more you wish you could see or know about. Be sure to give your article a descriptive title!
9. [The Society of Irish Pipers](#) says that in 1968 there were only 100 players of the uilleann pipes. Today, Brian says there are players and enthusiasts as far away as Russia and Japan. What could be behind the instrument 1) almost dying out, and 2) experiencing a rise in popularity? Your opinion, please—there is no wrong answer!
10. The US Department of State [categorizes languages](#) according to how difficult they are to learn for English speakers. They list four categories, Category 4 being the most difficult. If you were to rate instruments according to how easy or difficult they are to learn:
 - a. How would you rate the uilleann pipes?
 - b. How would you rate the tin whistle?
 - c. How would you rate the Irish flute?
 - d. If you play an instrument, how would you rate yours?
 - e. What is the easiest instrument you can think of to learn, and what do you think is the hardest?
11. Read the description above of Irish jigs and reels. Listen to Brian play "[The Lark in the Morning](#)." What time signature is it in?
12. Analyze the structure of the jig "[The Lark in the Morning](#)." Use different letters—A, B, etc.—for sections that are substantially different (don't be thrown by variations). Use the same letters for sections that are identical. (Hint: Each section has 4 bars, or measures.) What structure do you come up with? Now compare your results with a version of the tune [played by a fiddler](#)—what does the fiddler do to vary the structure?

Additional Resources

Brian Bigley

[Brian's website](#), with [videos](#) of the uilleann pipes he makes.

[Audio tracks](#) of Brian's solos and collaborations with other musicians.

[KBB Production Company](#), the company Brian founded to share Celtic music through recordings, live shows and in-person and online lessons. Live shows include [Rambling House](#) and [A Celtic Christmas](#).

[Brian dancing with Apollo's Fire](#).

Promotional video of Brian performing with the [Omaha Symphony's Celtic Journey](#).

The Uilleann Pipes and Irish Music

[Documentary on Leo Rowsome](#), a famous uilleann pipe maker who helped start the revival of pipe playing.

[Duet performance of uilleann pipes and bagpipes](#)—note the similarities and differences!

Facebook page for [The West Side Irish American Club](#) in Cleveland, Ohio – This is where Brian first heard the uilleann pipes.

[TheSession.org](#) – A community website dedicated to Irish traditional music. For a donation, "you can find tunes to play [in sheet music], find sessions to play them in, and join in discussions about the music. You can also find events (like concerts and festivals), or explore the track listings of recordings."

[Irish music](#) – A short article on the basics—history, styles and instruments.

[Irish tunes](#) – "A Comprehensive Guide to Irish Tune Types."

[Irish music with step dancers](#) at Augusta Heritage Center's Irish Week in West Virginia.

[Riverdance](#) – An excerpt from the wildly popular touring show of Irish music and dance. A virtuoso solo dance begins [HERE](#).

Tell us what you think!

We want to make Carry On™ even more useful and enjoyable for students and educators across the country. [Send us your feedback!](#) Tell us what you liked and what we could do better. And please... tell other educators and schools about the show. Help us all carry on!

With the help of generous donors, [Carry On](#)™ is produced by the nonprofit [Northeast Ohio Musical Heritage Association](#) (NEOMHA). The show is programmed by [Laura Lewis](#), artistic director of NEOMHA's [Lake Erie Folk Fest](#). Carry On's resource guides are the work of writer and musician [Rita Lewis](#).

© 2020 Northeast Ohio Musical Association, all rights reserved