

# Music Collectors

As Irish traditional music was an oral tradition the music was never written down instead it was passed on through generations and learnt by ear. It was only in the late eighteenth century that collectors began to write Irish music down. Thousands of Irish traditional tunes that have survived to the present day may have been lost forever if it was not for music collectors who helped preserve the tunes for the future generations.

Edward Bunting was the first known collector and was employed to dictate the music at the Belfast Harp Festival where he collected 40 tunes at the festival including “Sí bheag Sí Mhór” “Eibhlí a Rún” “The Fairy Queen” and “Lord Mayo”. After the festival he went around Ulster and Connaught collecting more tunes. Bunting published almost 300 tunes in 3 volumes. In 1776 he published “A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music” which contains 66 tunes adapted for piano including “Carolan’s concerto”. In 1809 he published “A General Collection of the Ancient music of Ireland” which contains 77 tunes in romantic piano arrangements some with specially written songs in English. This volume includes “Planxty Irwin”. “The Ancient music of Ireland” from 1940 is the most important historical source of information on the old Gaelic harpers as he lists the fingering and damping techniques used. It contains just over 150 tunes arranged for piano such as “Tabhair dom do Lamh”. Bunting is important as he was the first collector to gather the tunes in an informative, systematic way and his work is invaluable although he was a classical musician and his publications are Irish tunes arranged for piano and he sometimes added in notes and features that are more suited to classical piano playing.

Francis O’Neill was an extremely important collector as he emigrated to Chicago and collected tunes there from other Irish immigrants that might have otherwise been lost. He published “The Music Of Ireland” in 1903 which has 1850 tunes including jigs, reels, hornpipes, marches, airs and O’Carolan tunes. He also published “The Dance Music Of Ireland” in 1907 which contains 1001 dance tunes and is referred to as “The Book”. These were the first collections that were aimed towards Irish musicians.

George Petrie helped to set up “The Society for the Preservation and Publication of the Melodies of Ireland”. He published his book “Ancient Music of Ireland” which contains nearly 200 melodies as well as song texts in Irish and English and also contains information about the sources of the songs. His daughter composed piano accompaniments for the melodies in the book. The book was republished in 2002 without the piano versions so the tunes were in their original format. One song he collected was the “Londonderry Air” which is also known as “Danny Boy”.