

Dance Music of Ireland | Sample answer

2013 Q5(B)(iii) Give an account of Irish traditional dance music.

From the 1700s onwards, Irish music developed to accompany dances. There were three main types of dance - jigs, reels and hornpipes, and dance music developed around this. Each dance has its own form, sound, meter, structure and history dating from this time.

In the 17th and 18th century, Irish dancing was a very popular activity.

Round/group dances were common and when James II visited Kinsale in 1689 he described how “along the road the country came to meet his majesty... The young rural maids weaving dances before him as he travelled.” The primary function for musicians at this time was to provide music for dancing as this was an integral part of Irish society.

From the 17th Century onwards, the Catholic church began campaigns against dancing “on moral grounds. The dance tradition was kept alive at dance houses and crossroad dances. By the 1930s the government and church denounced dancing from press, pulpit school, and political platforms. The government passed the Public Dance Hall Act in 1935, which banned country house dances and jazzing in unlicensed halls. Illegal assemblies had to answer to a trinity of clergy. This made crossroad dances harder to take place. It was said by Junior Crehan, a fiddler, that “the dance hall cat had closed our school of tradition and left us a poorer people.

The first ceili took place in London in 1897, when the Gaelic League laid down rules for dancing and initiated unprecedented practice of music and singing competitions. Before this ceili dancing represented an informal tradition of

dance, where dances were structured as sword, round and line. In the 20th century the Gaelic League tried to revive old dances, but many were lost and new ones codified. The new rules involved hands at the sides, costume, dancing on toes and quick movements.

Set dancing has seen major revival in recent decades. A national forum was created in 1971 when the GAA incorporated set dancing into SCOR competition. Troupes of set dancers competed against each other at local pub contests and parish festivals. In the 1980s there was another revival in urban Ireland, when pub sessions gave way to set dancers, fast music, set dance classes and clubs developed among a whole new generation of urban. Millions of sets still exist today, among them “the Clare Set” and “the Kerry Set”.

Each dance contains its own history, form, sound, tempo, metre and structure.

Reel:

The reel is played in 4/4 time, lively and fast, and consists mainly of quavers. There is usually an accent on the 1st and 3rd beats of the bar, and most reels follow the AABB pattern. The reel was brought to Ireland from Scotland at the end of the 18th century. It is most commonly danced by dancers wearing soft shoes. The reel has a fast flowing style. An example of a reel is “Reel around the Sun” from Riverdance and “The Spirits of Wine” as played by The Bothy Band.

Jigs:

There are four main types of jig; single jig, double jig, slip jig, and slide.

Single Jig:

This is a soft shoe solo dance. It is in 6/8 time and its predominant rhythmic pattern consists of a crotchet followed by a quaver. This dance is lively and fast, and it is half of the length of the other two jigs with a form of AB (binary form.) An example of a single jig is “Bill Hart’s Favourite”.

Double Jig:

The double jig is also in 6/8 time but has a different predominant rhythm to the single jig. The main rhythm used is two sets of three quavers. “Heavy jigs” which only exist to Irish dancers are danced to double jig tunes which are slightly amended to fit the dance. The lively tempo is reduced to accommodate the complicated footwork of the dancers. The name jig comes from the Italian word “jiga”. Most double jigs date from the 18th and 19th Century. An example of a double jig is “The Cat in the Corner.”

Slip Jig:

Slip jigs, also known as hop jigs, are written with a 9/8 time signature. They are danced only by female dancers wearing light shoes. Slip jigs are played with two 8 bar parts which are not repeated, and they are graceful and flowing. An example of a slip jig is “The Butterfly” as played by The Bothy Band.

Slide:

A slide is played in 12/8 or 6/8 time and has a fast, broken rhythm as it is technically a fast single jig. Examples are “The Star above the Garter” and “O’Keeffe’s Slide” played by Stan Scott on the mandolin.

Hornpipe:

A hornpipe is played in 4/4 time and characterised by a tempo which is somewhat slower than that of a reel as well as the use of dotted rhythms. There is a

strong accent on beats 1 and 3, and it usually ends on 3 emphatic crotchets to finish the phrase. Hornpipes are in AABB form. They were adapted by dancing masters as a showpiece and are usually danced in hard shoes. An example of a hornpipe is “The Cork Hornpipe.”

Polka:

Polkas are in 2/4 time and the emphasis is put on the off beat. Polkas originated as a folk dance in Bohemia and were introduced to Ireland in the 1800s. They are mainly associated with the Sliabh Luacra area. They contain bouncy rhythms and are often played at set dances. An example of a polka is “Britches Full of Stitches” as played by The Chieftains on the album “Britches Full of Stitches.”

It is as a result of these elements that Irish dance music has developed over the years to what it is today.