

## The Bodhrán - A Long Journey

'The bodhrán has come a long way from its early beginnings as a ritual instrument through to its ongoing transformation into a musical one' writes bodhrán player Rolf Wagels.

The bodhrán was one of the latecomers to the Irish Music Tradition together with the guitar and bouzouki. However, in contrast to its peers it played a role in rural Irish life before the sixties.

The bodhrán is a framed drum and such drums are played worldwide, its uniqueness is in how it is played, which is either with the hand or a stick. The origin of what many regard as the 'Drum of Ireland' is unclear. One theory is that traders from other countries may have brought frame drums or tambourines to Ireland, which may be the reason why the bodhrán was until recent times still referred to as a tambourine in some parts of the country. On the other hand, it was common for Irish farmers to use a sieve, or skin tray, for winnowing, a procedure which separated grain from the chaff. This device, which was called a dallán, wecht or wight depending on which part of Ireland you came from, was in fact a very basic drum.

What we know for certain is that the use of the bodhrán was very limited before the folk revival of the sixties. Up to this point it was mainly used in ritual performances, for instance by the Wren Boys on Saint Stephen's Day, or the Mummers to celebrate the harvest, we do however have a few sound recordings where the bodhrán was used outside of this ritual context. One such example is a recording from 1927 which features the flute playing of Tom Morrison together with John Reynolds on the drum – or is it the tambourine? – as apparently the drum is played by the hand and has jingles around its rim. There is also a picture dating back to 1947 that depicts a small boy holding a bodhrán along with a huge stick.

In the fifties, there were a number of occurrences which together heightened the popularity of the bodhrán. According to Eamon de Buítléar, the bodhrán was already being played in parts of Kerry and that following its use in the production of playwright John B Keane's 'Sive' in Dublin's Abbey Theatre, more people began to take up the instrument. Of course Seán Ó Riada and Ceoltóirí Chualann brought about the debut of the bodhrán on the stage in 1959. Seán claimed that "the bodhrán was the national drum" and he himself played the instrument. His style was simple and although he used almost no tonal changes as the modern day musicians do, it was both effective and powerful.

Thereafter followed the folk revival and with it came the explosion of the bodhrán to the scene, leaving many substantial changes in its wake. Peadar Mercier played it with The Chieftains and it was here that the bodhrán was first made an integral part of a musical arrangement. On "The Chieftains 2" album, the bodhrán is played on an intro to the set "Drowsey Maggie", this was an innovation at the time and that was in 1969!

Johnny McDonagh, who is regarded as one of Ireland's best bodhrán players, was the instigator of creating tonal changes by placing pressure with the hand on the inner side of the skin which alters the sound. This was not only a revolutionary step at the time, but also a logical one. By this time the drum was now primarily used indoors or on stage and no longer required the raw loud sound needed during its ritual use, instead more subtlety and musicianship was desired. For the same reason, almost no bodhráns have jingles nowadays as they tend to be loud and can detract from the music.

So the way the drum is played has changed a lot, with the help of players like Johnny McDonagh, Tommy Hayes, Jim Sutherland (Scotland), Colm Murphy and many others. Each player has his own style, but they all have one thing in common, they raised the drum to a musical instrument. This development is still going on and no way it is finished yet.

There are many new ideas with regard to bodhrán playing, one of the more recent additions being the 'top end' style introduced by such musicians as Mossie Griffin, Junior Davey and John Joe Kelly. This style earned its name due to the predominant use of the top end of the skin to produce the main beat. To create the higher sounds, you must play with the stick on the small area of skin that remains between the rim and the top part of the inner side hand. Eamon Murray's playing with his band 'Beoga' is a perfect example.

Now we have two major playing styles, the earlier one providing a compulsive earthy beat and the newer top end style that includes more treble notes. Many players, myself included, tend to mix elements of both styles creating their own sound.

It would be fair to say that many a bodhrán player over the years has been the recipient of a dirty look at sessions, but why has this been the case? Unfortunately the fact that a bodhrán could and still can be acquired cheaply and easy, resulted in many people who knew nothing about the music plonking themselves into sessions with their instrument, banging away with little to the result of their actions.

There are other factors that contributed to this situation in earlier times: firstly, there were fewer opportunities to learn to play the bodhrán as unlike other instruments it was not generally included on the prospectus of summer schools or indeed in private tuition. I remember an article that impressed me greatly written by Tommy Hayes for the Irish Music magazine in its early days. The article was titled 'They should be taken seriously' and in it he argued that it is unfair to complain about the lack of playing ability of bodhrán players and yet provide no learning facilities to improve the situation. These circumstances have seen radical changes since then, and there are now many bodhrán courses and classes available both in Ireland and abroad. In fact, there is now a 'bodhrán only' event that takes place in the form of a summer school week on the beautiful island of Inis Oirr called 'Craiceann'. Craiceann has become a major date on the bodhrán players' calendar worldwide with people attending from all corners of the globe and I had the honour of teaching there myself this year. Other teachers over the years have included all the big names in the world of bodhrán playing, from legends like Johnny McDonagh and Tommy Hayes to more modern players like Frank Torpey, Mel Mercier; Jimmy Higgins, Junior Davey and Eamon Murray.

Secondly, it was hard to get a proper instrument, and many of the drums you could get just sounded awful. But with all the development and exploration in bodhran playing in the last 50 years, things have also vastly changed in bodhran making. From dry hides to great sounding skins, from non-tuneable bodhrans through simple tuning mechanisms to the well designed tool less tuning systems of today.

This development is reflected in my own musical journey with the bodhrán. When I first began to play in 1993, there was nobody teaching the bodhrán in Germany. My only option was to watch and listen to bodhrán players either on my trips to Ireland or when they gigged in Germany. Now there are courses and classes available throughout Germany with myself and at least four other German teachers.

My first drum was a tunable instrument made by Brendan White who was, and still is, one of the most sought after bodhrán makers. Then I changed to the deeper rim and lambeg skins of Séamus O'Kane, who is probably the best and most respected maker in Ireland. I now play a bodhrán that I recently developed together with Christian Hedwitschak, a drum maker from Bavaria. In the RWE (Rolf Wagens Edition) we have combined the brilliant sound of a lambeg skin and the dimensions a Séamus O'Kane drum with a tool less tuning system, resulting in no more searching for Allen keys or screwdrivers in dark pub corners or whilst on the stage.

My playing has always been the result of the love and respect I have for traditional Irish music. The first time I met Johnny McDonagh we talked the whole night through about music and the pulse. This was a turning point in my musical journey. Another big influence was Séamus O'Kane, who is not only a brilliant maker and one of the most gentle people I know, but also a great player and lover of Irish music. A lot of people in Germany have helped me along the way, such as my musical friends in Hanover where I am based, in particular the Möllers brothers, Claus Steinort and Klaus Gehrmann. Of course there are many others who have influenced my journey, but too many to include here.

One of my newer projects, the band 'Cara' is now providing me with the chance to perform in many European countries and we are currently looking forward to our first gig in Ireland at the Tradfestival in Ennis in November.

The bodhrán has brought me many hours of joy, I have met a many interesting people and formed great friendships both in Germany and Ireland through the instrument, and it has greatly deepened my love for traditional Irish music. One thing I will never forget are the words of Johnny McDonagh at the first Craiceann Bodhrán Summer School; "The most important thing is the pulse!"

Craiceann – bodhrán summer school  
Séamus O'Kane – bodhrán maker

<http://craiceann.com>  
<http://tradcentre.com/seamus>

Christian Hedwitschak – bodhrán maker  
Beoga – Eamonn Murray's band  
Cara – the author's band  
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<http://.bodhranmaker.de>  
<http://.beogamusic.com>  
<http://.cara-music.com>  
<http://.bodhran-info.com>