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Abstract

This paper seeks to provide a foundation for understanding lilting, a traditional type of vocal music found in Ireland that involves improvising non-lexical vocables to dance tunes, in order to help preserve this genre in its traditional form as well as encourage its transformation and incorporation into modern music. Through a case study, this research paper demonstrates certain features and patterns that may characterize traditional lilting. A recording of Seamus Fay's performance of the traditional folk jig, "Humours of Ballyloughlin," has been transcribed for analysis and examined for possible relationships of vocables or vowels to music and vocables to other vocables. Characteristics suggested by the transcription include the importance of [d], the extent of the vocable vocabulary used throughout the piece, the typical arrangement of vocables in relation to one another, and the connection between vocables to metric accents and vowels to agogic accents.

Keywords

Lilting, vocables, Irish, nonsense, dance, traditional music, vocal music

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Blah, Blah, Blah: Making Sense of Nonsense in Irish Vocal Music

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Lilting is a traditional type of vocal music found in Ireland and Scotland that involves improvising non-lexical vocables to dance tunes.¹ Although still performed today, this Celtic scat singing, as it may be deemed, has received insufficient attention by researchers.² Perhaps the reason for this oversight is due to the difficulties inherent in analyzing a genre that is orally transmitted and involves nonsensical, improvisational lyrics. Indeed, in vocal music with translatable texts, there tends to be a special connection between words and music that makes such works especially amenable to analysis; the music clarifies and strengthens the meaning and emotions of the text through melody, harmony, and other aspects of musical style, and the text is likewise often crucial to fully understanding and analyzing the music to which it is set. Nevertheless, despite the lack of meaning in lilting, an intimate relationship between lyrics and music may still exist in this genre, only on rather more technical terms. Instead of relating text to such aspects of music as harmony, nonsense lyrics require relating phonetic sounds to such aspects of music as metric accent. Therefore, the purpose of this research paper is not only to examine the vocables used in lilting, but also to explore the relationship of vocables to melodic contour and musical accents in order to demonstrate, through a case study, which features and patterns may characterize traditional lilting.

¹Francis Collinson and Peter Cooke, "Lilt," *Grove Music Online*, (Oxford University Press, 2013.) "Lilting" is the Irish name for the practice; in Scotland it is termed "diddling." My paper focuses on lilting in its Irish form.

²Similarity between lilting and scat singing is implied in Heather Sparling, "'Music is Language and Language is Music': Language Attitudes and Musical Choices in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia," in *Ethnologies* 25, no. 2 (2003), 159.

Motivation

A study of the relationship of vocables to music and vocables to other vocables provides a foundation for understanding lilting that can help preserve it in its traditional form as well as encourage its transformation and incorporation into modern music. The possibilities of incorporating aspects of lilting into modern compositions and performances are enormous, but only if the genre is known and understood. For composers who have not grown up with exposure to lilting, this analysis may assist in gaining such an understanding.³

A foundation for analyzing lilting is found in the works of David Hughes, whose research on the use of non-lexical vocables in music from Japan and Korea gives precedence for a technical approach to relating “nonsense” vocables to musical features. In his article, “No Nonsense: The Logic and Power of Acoustic-Iconic Mnemonic Systems,” Hughes attempts to demonstrate that “certain acoustic-phonetic features of vowels and consonants lead to similar systems of mnemonics existing independently in widely separated cultures.”⁴ Because “certain phonetic features of the syllables—both vowels and consonants—are in an iconic relation to the musical sounds they represent,” he believes in a certain universality of systems of nonsense vocables, enabling musicians from broadly divergent cultures to understand each other’s systems.⁵ If such qualities may indeed unite music systems from such linguistically different countries as Japan and Uganda, as Hughes suggests, it can be expected that they ought to be found common to Celtic music as well.⁶

In his analysis of the Korean oral mnemonic system, *yukpo*, Hughes notes a correlation between relative pitch (as determined by relative melodic movement) and vowel timbre—a phenomenon consistent with his observations of oral mnemonic systems in Japan, Indonesia, India,

³ For an example of a successful transformation of lilting into a modern composition, see *Afro-Celtic Diddle* by Michael Coolen. In this case, the composer’s knowledge came solely from childhood exposure to lilting.

⁴ David W. Hughes, “No Nonsense: The Logic and Power of Acoustic-Iconic Mnemonic Systems,” in *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 9, no. 2 (2000), 93.

⁵ Hughes, “No Nonsense,” 93-94.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

and Scotland.⁷ In order to explain this common pattern, he proposes that it results from the “Intrinsic Pitch” of the vowels. Intrinsic Pitch of vowels corresponds to the frequency of the second formant resonating chamber, which is the oral cavity. Because different vowels demand the mouth to take on different shapes, the frequency of this chamber changes accordingly.⁸ While Hughes does not consider the principle of Intrinsic Pitch to be particularly determinative in lilting, he suggests that other intrinsic qualities of vowels might be reflected in the vocables:

In lilting or ‘diddling’...Intrinsic Intensity and Duration play an important role. In a phrase in a 6/8 jig...the relatively strong backbeat tends to be represented by syllables with “heavier” vowels, such as “ah,” “um” or “i” (here pronounced [ay]), whereas the weaker or shorter notes tend to use the sounds [ɪ] or [i].⁹

If this observation is true, there should be a relationship between vowels and metric and agogic accents.¹⁰

Methods

For the purpose of this research paper, the recordings of Seamus Fay, born 1932, an accomplished lilter from Ireland whose skills were shaped by his mother and grandmother, are given primary consideration.¹¹ In particular, his performance of the traditional folk jig, “Humours of Ballyloughlin,” has been transcribed for analysis.

⁷ David Hughes, “Oral Mnemonics in Korean Music: Data, Interpretation, and a Musicological Application,” in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 54, no. 2 (1991), 308, 310-311, 320.

⁸ Hughes, “No Nonsense,” 98-99.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰ The strength of a metric accent is determined according to where a note falls within a measure. A note that falls on the first beat of a measure will have the strongest metric accent. Notes that fall on subsequent beats are somewhat weaker, while those that fall between beats are weaker still. The strength of an agogic accent is determined by the relative duration of a pitch. A note with a strong agogic accent is held longer than other notes.

¹¹ Yasmin Maassarani, “Cavan Lilter, Seamus Fay’s Birthday Concert,” *Cavan Living*, December 19, 2012,

In order to understand the nature and limitations of the transcription, the approaches used in its creation must be discussed before its analysis. The task of transcription bears with it a number of complications, both in regard to notating music and indicating vocable pronunciation. The amount of specific performance detail that may be considered for notation is immense. According to George List of Indiana University, “No method of transcription yet devised, whether accomplished by means of the human ear or by electronic apparatus, mirrors the musical event with exactitude.”¹² Furthermore, Béla Bartók pointed out that folk music is full of variation because it does not bind performers to notated music.¹³ While my transcription attempts to recognize some level of variation within the folk tune performed, it does not attempt to incorporate “all elements of the music and its performance,” as would be characteristic of an analytical transcription.¹⁴ Rather, it is a simple melodic transcription, accomplished by means of the human ear. Notation of artistic nuance is not considered in it because it is unnecessary for understanding the relationship of vocables to such aspects of music as metric accent and relative pitch.

In regard to transcription of vocables, several methods are possible. Orthographic transcription, the least precise approach, is limited to the letters of the alphabet. While this may be the easiest transcription to create because it deals with familiar symbols, it is insufficient because it fails to adequately record pronunciation. According to Leslie De’Ath, “in hybrid languages that have undergone significant sound pattern changes over the centuries, such as English, there is a frequent lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation.”¹⁵ For example,

<http://www.cavanliving.ie/index.php/2012/12/19/lilter-seamus-fays-birthday-concert-cavan/>.

¹² George List, “The Musical Significance of Transcription: (Comments on Hood, ‘Musical Significance’),” in *Ethnomusicology* 7, no. 3, (Sep., 1963), 194.

¹³ Béla Bartók and Albert Bates Lord, *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs: Texts and Transcriptions of Seventy-Five Folk Songs from the Milman Parry Collection and a Morphology of Serbo-Croatian Folk Melodies*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 19-20.

¹⁴ Avigdor Herzog, “Transcription and Transnotation in Ethnomusicology,” in *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 16 (1964), 100.

¹⁵ Leslie De’Ath, “Phonemics and Lyric Diction,” in *Journal of Singing: The Official Journal Of the National Association Of Teachers Of Singing* 62, no. 5 (May-June 2006), 552.

one letter may have multiple pronunciations and one pronunciation may have multiple spellings.¹⁶ Due to the ambiguity inherent in orthographic transcription, an alternative system is needed. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a broad phonetic transcription has been applied to the lilting vocables.

Results and Discussion

The transcription of Fay's performance of the jig "Humours of Ballyloughlin" demonstrates several patterns. First, the variety of consonants, simple vowels (monothongs), and complex vowels (diphthongs) used was very limited (see Figure 1).¹⁷

Figure 1: Consonants and Vowels in "Humours of Ballyloughlin"

¹⁶ Vedrana Mihalicek and Christin Wilson, *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 39-40.

¹⁷ A chart can be found in Appendix A to assist in understanding the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols used in the transcription.

It is significant that [d] occurs much more frequently than any other consonant or vowel. This is one of the ‘stop’ consonants that, according to Hughes, “generally mark the sharp attack of a plucked string or struck membranophone or idiophone.”¹⁸ Given the fact that liltling involves Celtic dance tunes in which rhythm is of great importance, the harshness of this consonant may be interpreted as reflecting the beat of the Bodhran (Celtic drum) or perhaps even the grace note cuts of the bagpipe.

This transcription also indicates that the vocabulary of vocables Fay used in liltling this particular jig was fairly limited. A list of all vocables used in “Humours of Ballyloughlin,” along with the number of times they appeared in the performance, can be found in Table 1. While most vocables were repeated a number of times, a few showed up only once or twice. However, these did not necessarily stand out starkly. Some of these vocables may be variations of other, more commonly occurring vocables. For example, the vocables [jəm] and [ləm] appear to be variations of [dəm]. These vocables not only sound similar, but also appear in the same metric positions (see Table 1) and are the only vocables that precede a vocable starting with [p] (see Appendix C).

The transcription of “Humours of Ballyloughlin” indicates a melodic form of |:A:|:B:|:C:|:D:|:A:|:B:|:C:|:D:|. While repetitions of the melody are accomplished with negligible levels of deviation, there is always some amount of variation in the corresponding vocables. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the lilter may theoretically sing any vocable he or she pleases at any point in the tune, Fay establishes a general pattern of vocables for each portion of music, and he is remarkably consistent. When a section of melody is repeated, the corresponding vocables are similar. The excerpt of the transcription in Figure 2 presents an example of this pattern. In order to facilitate comparison, sections of similar melodic material have been organized vertically in the transcription.¹⁹ The first section of melody appears in the top section; its immediate repeat is found in the second system. When these nearly identical sections of melody are compared, it becomes apparent that the order and type of vocables used in each version are identical in all but eight instances. Furthermore, in those instances in which the vocables of the repeated melody are not identical to the original, they are frequently similar. For example, in Figure 2 the

¹⁸ Hughes, “No Nonsense,” 97.

¹⁹ See Appendix B.

initial consonants of the second vocable in A1 and A2 are different, but the vowels are the same. Additional instances of this may be found in Appendix B, which features the complete transcription of Fay's "Humours of Ballyloughlin." As in the example below, sections of repeated melodic material have been vertically oriented.

Figure 2: "Humours of Ballyloughlin"—Transcription of First Sections of Melody

The fact that this tune was intended for dance may provide an explanation for the similarities found in vocables in repeated sections of melody. Because of the regular, repetitious nature of dancing, there must be some amount of consistency and repetition in dance music. This is apparently reflected not only in the melodies lilted, but also in the vocables.

Similar vocable arrangement can also be found, to some extent, across sections of dissimilar melodic material. By grouping together vocables falling within a single beat, one finds a number of groups that show up throughout the piece. Certain vocable groups, such as [dī-dæl-i-dæl], appear in each of the four sections of melody.²⁰ The chart in Appendix C, which contains observations such as which vocables usually precede or follow a given vocable, further demonstrates a common arrangement of vocables throughout the jig. These similar vocable patterns unify the distinct melodic sections.

²⁰ See Appendix D for a list of the vocable groups observed in "Humours of Ballyloughlin." The groups have been organized alphabetically in order to show that, despite the fact that there are many different vocable groups, many of them are very similar.

Although perhaps less remarkable, some patterns may also be observed in the order of vowels in “Humours of Ballyloughlin.” Many vowels never occur consecutively. For example, a vocable containing [a] never precedes a vocable containing [aɪ]. On the other hand, some vowels frequently follow each other. Such is the case with [oʊ], which is all but once preceded by [æ]. The result is yet more patterns that unify the jig as a whole.²¹

The transcription also indicates some level of correspondence between vocables and metric or agogic accents. In order to visualize the relative metric strength of each vocable, their “average strength” has been calculated (see Table 1). For each time the vocable was observed on the down beat, second beat, or off beat, it would receive a score of 1, 0, or -1, respectively. The total score of the vocable was then divided by its total number of occurrences to determine its “average strength.” Therefore, scores closer to 1 indicate a generally strong metric position, while scores approaching -1 indicate a generally weak metric position. Vocables are organized in terms of descending order of calculated strength. Under the columns labeled “Strong,” “Medium,” and “Weak,” the first number indicates how many times a particular vocable appears in one of those metric positions, while the number within parentheses indicates what percentage of the vocable’s occurrences fall in each position.

²¹ Although created for a different purpose, the chart in Appendix E details which particular vowels precede other vowels, and how frequently.

Table 1: *Vocables and Metric Accent*

Vocables	Occurrences	Strong (first beat)	Medium (second beat)	Weak (between beats)	Strength
ja	1	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1
jaɪ	1	1(100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1
daɪ	29	28 (97%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	.97
da	24	23 (96%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	.96
dɪ	53	32 (60%)	21 (40%)	0 (0%)	.60
ləɪ	11	4 (36%)	7 (64%)	0 (0%)	.36
deɪ	15	4 (27%)	11 (73%)	0 (0%)	.27
dəm	22	5 (23%)	17 (77%)	0 (0%)	.23
jeɪ	44	9 (20%)	35 (80%)	0 (0%)	.2
jaʊ	9	0 (0%)	9 (100%)	0 (0%)	0
leɪ	7	0 (0%)	7 (100%)	0 (0%)	0
dou	5	0 (0%)	5 (100%)	0 (0%)	0
daʊ	2	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	0
ləm	2	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	0
jəm	1	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0
lɪ	1	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0
dəl	11	5 (45%)	0 (0%)	6 (55%)	-.09
dæl	88	12 (14%)	0 (0%)	76 (86%)	-.73
ɪ	6	0 (0%)	1 (17%)	5 (83%)	-.83
də	53	0 (0%)	5 (9%)	48 (91%)	-.91
dəl*	151	4 (3%)	2 (1%)	145 (96%)	-.93
dɪ	74	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	74 (100%)	-1
i	60	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	60 (100%)	-1
du	16	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	16 (100%)	-1
jə	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	14 (100%)	-1
əɪ**	13	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	13 (100%)	-1
tə	11	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	11 (100%)	-1
pəl	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (100%)	-1
ha	9	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	9 (100%)	-1
pɪ	9	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	9 (100%)	-1
pə	7	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)	-1
dul	5	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (100%)	-1
a	3	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	-1
ə	2	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	-1
gə	2	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	-1
ɪə	1	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	-1
ti	1	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	-1

* Sometimes shortened to syllabic consonant: [dɪ]

** Sometimes shortened to syllabic consonant: [ɪ]

For the most part, each vocable has a characteristic metric position in which it appears. Most strikingly, only five vocables appear both on a beat and between beats. Of those, only the most frequently occurring vocable, [dəl], can be found on the first beat, second beat, and between beats.²²

Table 2 explores to what extent this pattern may be ascribed to the vowel within the vocable. The chart demonstrates a relationship between vowel and metric accent, though it is not nearly as consistent as the relationship between vocables and metric accent. Unlike the vocables, half of the vowels appear both on a beat and between beats. Nevertheless, there is a remarkably regular relationship between metric accent and the diphthongs (complex vowels). All vocables involving a diphthong always land on a beat.

Table 2: *Vowels and Metric Accent*

Vowels	Occurrences	Strong (down- beat)	Medium (second beat)	Weak (not on beat)	Average strength
ai	30	29 (97%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	.97
i	63	32 (51%)	22 (35%)	9 (14%)	.37
a	48	29 (60%)	1 (2%)	18 (38%)	.23
ei	66	13 (20%)	53 (80%)	0 (0%)	.17
ao	11	0 (0%)	11 (100%)	0 (0%)	0
oo	5	0 (0%)	5 (100%)	0 (0%)	0
dəɫ	88	12 (14%)	0 (0%)	76 (86%)	-.73
ə	297	13 (4%)	34 (11%)	250 (84%)	-.80
i	141	0 (0%)	2 (1%)	139 (99%)	-.99
u	21	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	21 (100%)	-1

While agogic accents occur very infrequently in the jig, a relationship between these accents and vocables is nevertheless apparent. Most of the agogic accents appear at the end of melodic sections, where only three different vocables are ever heard—[dou], [dau], and [jau]. Fay seems to have selected these three to be his special terminating vocables, for they can be found nowhere else in the jig. In contrast,

²² Further connection in placement can be seen in Appendix C, which observes where the weak vocables usually fall in terms of specific location of the off beat. There is consistency here as well.

agogically accented vocables ending in [a] or [eɪ] fall within sections of melody.

Table 3: *Vocables and Agogic Accent*

quarter note		dotted quarter	
vocable	occurrences	vocable	occurrences
da	3	jaʊ	9
doʊ	2	doʊ	3
deɪ	1	daʊ	2
ha	1		
ja	1		

An additional chart is unnecessary to illustrate the relationship between vowels and agogic accents, as Fay selects only one monothong and three diphthongs to fill these positions. There is a clear connection between the diphthongs [aʊ] and [oʊ] and this type of accent, for they are never used in agogically unaccented positions. The use of [a] in agogically-accented positions seems to reflect the influence of Intrinsic Duration, for, as Hughes noted, “[a] has the greatest intrinsic duration and intensity.”²³

It is also remarkable that the vocables [dɪ] and [dəl] are the only ones that ever appear with sixteenth notes, which represent the shortest value of note duration within the piece. The shortness of [dɪ] is consistent with Hughes’s observations of a lilted jig, in which he stated that “shorter notes tend to use the [sound] [ɪ].”²⁴ This supports his hypothesis that the Intrinsic Duration of vowels affects the vocables sung in lilting.

While so far we have considered the relationship of vocables to accent, at this point we will look at the relationship of vowels to pitch. In order to study this, the number of times each particular vowel sung was preceded by a higher pitch, the same pitch, or a lower pitch has been determined.²⁵ Figure 3 shows, according to percentage, how each vowel was typically approached. As [ɪ] is generally preceded by a lower pitch, it therefore has a high relative pitch. On the other hand, [i] and [u] are generally preceded by higher pitches, and their relative

²³ Hughes, “Oral Mnemonics in Korean Music,” 312.

²⁴ Hughes, “No Nonsense,” 112.

²⁵ A complete chart detailing how each vowel was approached by other vowels can be found in Appendix E.

pitch is therefore low. [ə] falls somewhere in between, as it is preceded with similar frequency by higher, lower, and identical pitches. While the low relative pitch of [i], a vowel of high Intrinsic Pitch, supports Hughes's "impression...that Intrinsic Pitch plays little or no role in lilting," the low relative pitch of [u], a vowel of low Intrinsic Pitch, suggests that there may yet be some amount of relationship between the relative pitch of vowels and Intrinsic Pitch in lilting.²⁶ However, further transcription and research of lilting is necessary to establish whether or not this relationship plays a role in vowel choice.

Figure 3: *Vowel and Melodic Motion*

Comparison with Other Lilting Performances

The patterns observed in "Humours of Ballyloughlin" are not unique to that particular jig. While relationships between vowels and relative pitch are difficult to accomplish without creating additional transcriptions, a preliminary, aural comparison is sufficient to demonstrate that many of the characteristics outlined above can be heard in Fay's other performances of jigs in his album, *Cavan's Lilter*. For example, there is a clear similarity in regard to the vowels and consonants used. In particular, the frequent use of [d] is common to all the jigs. Nevertheless, there may be an amount of variation in terms of which consonants are chosen. In particular, [l] seems to occur more

²⁶ Hughes, "No Nonsense," 99, 112.

frequently in “Woods of Old Limerick” than it does in some of the other jigs. This somewhat softens the sound of the lilting. Also, as in “Humours of Ballyloughlin,” there is much repetition of vocables. As before, where melodic material is repeated, the corresponding vocables tend to be similar.

The most striking similarity between the jigs is the recurrence of certain vocable groups, for common groups observed within “Humours of Ballyloughlin” can also be heard in other jigs.²⁷ For example, [jer-du-dæl], a vocable group that occurred over a half-dozen times in “Humours of Ballyloughlin” can be heard recurring a number of times in “Pat Burke’s.”²⁸ At times, Fay’s different lilted jigs sound like the same song set to different tunes. While the jigs may vary in their emphasis of particular groups, there nevertheless appears to be a common vocable vocabulary from which they are drawn. For example, the jig “Richard Dwyers” makes particularly frequent use of the vocable group [dar-ər-i]. This is a vocable group which, though perhaps less prominent, appeared a number of times within “Humours of Ballyloughlin.”

The fact that the vocable groups are similar from jig to jig within Fay’s performances helps make apparent the relationship between accent and vocable that is in these jigs. Since the first vocable in each group always falls on the beat while all those that follow do not, shared groupings of vocables from jig to jig mean that particular vocables are falling regularly on or off the beat. By way of explanation, in the vocable group [dar-ər-i], common to both “Humours of Ballyloughlin” and “Richard Dwyer’s,” the first vocable [dar] falls on the beat while [ər] and [i] do not. This pattern is the case for all groups. Therefore, the fact that many of the same vocable groups can be found in multiple jigs suggests that the relationship between metric accent and vocables in these works is comparable.

There also appears to be a common correspondence amongst the jigs between agogic accent and vowel. In almost every case, any jig that featured a pause at the end of a section of melody also featured a vocable with the complex vowel [aʊ] or [oʊ]. In a few cases, these

²⁷ Vocable groups include all vocables that fall within the same beat. See Appendix D for a list of groups found in “Humours of Ballyloughlin.”

²⁸ Dashes are used as a convenience to separate vocables within the same group.

complex vowels occurred in places within a section of melody. This contrasts with “Humours of Ballyloughlin,” in which [aʊ] and [oo] were only used in the termination of a section of melodic material. However, there remains consistency in the fact that these two particular complex vowels only occur in agogically-accented positions within Fay’s lilted jigs. It is also notable that a few jigs, such as “Richard Dwyer’s,” feature other vocables such as [da] for the closing of melodic material.

The patterns found through the transcription of “Humours of Ballyloughlin” are not only found in other lilted jigs by Fay, but can also be seen to some extent in other types of lilted dances. In order to illustrate this point, we will look specifically at recordings of Fay lilting reels, another type of fast Irish dance.

One of the first consistencies observed between Fay’s jigs and reels is, once again, the constant use of [d]. In his reels, almost every vocable that lands on a beat starts with a [d], though an occasional [j] or [l] might appear at the beginning of metrically strong vocables.

There is also some contrast between the jigs and reels in terms of vowels. Most noticeably, [u] appears frequently in metrically accented vocables. In the jig transcription, this vowel never appears in vocables that land on a beat. This discrepancy would seem to contradict the idea that the relationship observed between metric accent and vowel or vocable in the jig transcription indicates a broader principle or pattern. However, two explanations present themselves for this observation. First, since the transcription of “Humours of Ballyloughlin” shows that some vocables of predominantly weak metric accent, such as [dəl], occasionally fall on beats, there is precedence for the idea that predominantly weak vocables may occasionally appear in other metric positions. Second, it may be that the vocable and metric accent relationship found in the jig transcription simply does not fully apply to the lilting practice for reels. Perhaps there is a different pattern applied when reels are lilted, or perhaps reels are simply less strict in regard to which vowels may fall on the beat.

Another remarkable characteristic of the vocables used in Fay’s reels is the use of syllabic consonants, particularly [l], within vocables in weak

metric positions.²⁹ This creates a closed, less resonant sound that results in a greater contrast between the strong, metrically-accented vocables and the weak ones.

The connection between agogic accent and the complex vowels [oo] and [ao] remains remarkably consistent throughout both Fay's reels and jigs. However, the fast nature of the reel means that notes which would be agogically accented on an instrument are cut short by the need to breathe in lilting. Therefore, the duration of [oo] and [ao] is significantly shortened.

The fact that jigs are always in compound meter and reels are always in simple renders it difficult to observe similarities in vocable groups between the two dances, for, in accordance with their respective meters, the first frequently features three vocables in a single beat, while the second only two. Nevertheless, the vocable groups found in Fay's reels often sound like abbreviated versions of the vocable groups found in his jigs. Instead of jig groupings such as [dæl-də-di] and [jer-du-dæl], one hears groups such as [dæl-də] and [jer-du].

Broader Application and Further Research

It is difficult to assess to what extent the characteristics of Fay's performances reflect those of the broader body of Irish lilting because there is a limited number of lilting recordings available for comparison. Two lilted reels by different artists appear on Fay's album, but these artists claimed to be influenced by Fay.³⁰ Therefore, the similarities that exist amongst them may be ascribed to Fay's influence rather than to some broader lilting principle.³¹ Further research into Irish lilting with

²⁹ Syllabic consonants, which are voiced like vowels, do appear within the "Humours of Ballyloughlin," but as abbreviations of other vocables (and hence are not distinguished within my transcription).

³⁰ According to album description; "Seamus Fay: Cavan's Lilter," *Celtic Grooves*, accessed Dec. 5, 2013,

http://celticgrooves.homestead.com/CG_Fay_Seamus.html.

³¹ There are actually some interesting differences between Fay's lilting and the lilting examples of Aoif Murry and Catriona Cullivan featured on his album. Rather than [oo] or [ao] for agogic accents and ends of melodic sections, Murry seems to prefer [dəm]. Furthermore, she does not limit herself to Fay's vocable vocabulary, but rather has a few of her own vocables that she uses with some frequency. By contrast, Cullivan's lilting vocabulary seems to be rather more limited than that of Fay or Murry. The syllabic consonant [l] seems to be used for almost every metrically unaccented vocable. The variety

the intention of comparing the lilting of various artists would provide a better understanding of the “big picture” of lilting; this research project is an admittedly limited case study, intended as a model or starting point for further examination of the topic. Beyond Ireland, it would be interesting to compare lilting as it occurs in various countries, such as Scotland and the parts of Canada under strong Celtic influence.

A comparison may also be drawn between lilting and other forms of Celtic music involving nonsense syllables. In *canntaireachd* (“humming a tune”), found in Scotland, vocables are used to train bagpipers.³² The vocables indicate not only which pitches are to be played, but also which grace notes are to be performed.³³ Also found in Scotland, the *waulking*-song bears some resemblance to *canntaireachd*. Originally used to keep time while women worked on woven fabrics, these songs feature refrains containing non-lexical vocables.³⁴ As in *canntaireachd*, there appears to be a system to the nonsense, even though the vocables in *waulking*-songs cannot be considered a form of notation.³⁵ Nevertheless, they do have “their own rules of construction; only certain consonants and vowels are used, and these only in selected combinations.”³⁶ Furthermore, “though the same refrain syllables recur throughout the labour songs, a sequence of syllables constituting a complete musical phrase is almost never duplicated in different songs.”³⁷ According to Francis Collinson, the pattern of long and short vowels used in the refrain vocables is directly related to the rhythm, such that “in print, if the long vowels of the *waulking*-song are properly indicated by accent marks, grave or acute, it is often possible to read roughly the rhythm of a refrain from the long and short vowels in this way without the musical notation.”³⁸ Further research may involve looking for *canntaireachd* and *waulking*-song vocables in lilting or

in her performance is in the vocables she chooses to sing in the metrically strong positions. Furthermore, her lilting, unlike that of Murry and Fay, features occasional rolled r’s,

³² Kenneth Elliot, et al., “Scotland,” in *Grove Music Online*, (Oxford University Press, 2013), 16.

³³ J. P. Grant 1925. “Canntaireachd: the Old Pipers’ Notation for Pibroch Music,” in *Music and Letters* 6, no. 1 (1925), 54; Elliot, 16.

³⁴ Elliot, 13.

³⁵ Francis Collinson, “Scottish Folkmusic: An Historical Survey,” in *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council* 3 (1971), 39.

³⁶ Elliot, 13.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Collinson, “Scottish Folkmusic,” 39.

looking at a possible connection between the vowel-rhythm relationship in *waulking* song refrains and the vowel-rhythm relationship in lilting.

Lilting may also be better understood if studied alongside other forms of “nonsense” music of other cultures, such as scat singing and Indian *konnakol*. There may be some similar characteristics, despite the varied cultural background.

Finally, further analysis may be made of the transcription of “Humours of Ballyloughlin.” In particular, more attention may be given to the relationship of consonants to music, especially in regard to the onsets. It would be interesting to discover if any connection exists between metric or agogic accent and types of onsets, whether voiced, unvoiced, or absent.

Conclusion

Although lilting is improvisational and nonsensical, it is evident that it is hardly a random activity. Rather, the transcription and analysis of “Humours of Ballyloughlin” suggests that there are patterns within lilting that can help explain and distinguish this genre of music. Not only are the same (or similar) vocables repeated with frequency, but they also often appear in similar organizations throughout the work, as demonstrated most clearly by the parallelism between segments of repeated material. The attempt to relate vowels to relative pitch yielded uncertain evidence for a possible connection with Intrinsic Pitch, but a direct relationship between vocables and music is apparent in the often consistent relationship to metrical and agogic accents.

That said, there is yet much research to be done on the subject of lilting, and the extent to which the observations of Fay’s “Humours of Ballyloughlin” may be true of the broader genre of lilting is therefore currently unknown. However, even if characteristics found within this example eventually prove not to be universally true of its genre, the present analysis still highlights some features that can certainly be included within the category of traditional lilting. For example, the analysis includes a compilation of viable lilting vocables with, in a sense, rough instructions for how they may be appropriately organized within music. In this respect, it has value not only for future comparisons and analyses, but also for present compositions.

Appendix A: Pronunciation Key for Phonetic Symbols Used in Liling Transcription³⁹

	Examples
[a]	<u>p</u> ot, f <u>a</u> ther, s <u>e</u> rgeant, h <u>o</u> nor, h <u>o</u> spital
[æ]	<u>b</u> at, l <u>a</u> ugh, <u>a</u> nger, <u>b</u> ang, com <u>r</u> ade, r <u>a</u> lly, h <u>a</u> nd
[aɪ]	I, b <u>i</u> te, S <u>te</u> in, <u>a</u> isle, ch <u>oi</u> r, <u>i</u> sland, f <u>i</u> ne
[aʊ]	<u>b</u> out, br <u>o</u> wn, d <u>o</u> ubt, fl <u>o</u> wer, l <u>o</u> ud
[d]	<u>d</u> ip, c <u>a</u> rd, <u>d</u> rop, lov <u>e</u> d, batt <u>e</u> d
[ə]	am <u>o</u> ng, As <u>i</u> a, en <u>o</u> ugh, fam <u>o</u> us, harm <u>o</u> ny
[eɪ]	b <u>a</u> it, r <u>e</u> ign, gr <u>e</u> at, th <u>e</u> y, g <u>a</u> uge, ag <u>e</u>
[g]	g <u>u</u> ard, b <u>a</u> g, f <u>i</u> nger, design <u>a</u> te, Pittsb <u>u</u> rg <u>h</u>
[h]	<u>w</u> ho, <u>h</u> at, reh <u>a</u> sh, <u>h</u> ole, <u>w</u> hole
[i]	b <u>e</u> at, w <u>e</u> , b <u>e</u> lie <u>v</u> e, p <u>e</u> ople, m <u>o</u> ney, d <u>e</u> an
[ɪ]	<u>b</u> it, consist, <u>i</u> njury, mal <u>i</u> gnant, g <u>y</u> m,
[j]	<u>y</u> ou, b <u>e</u> autiful, f <u>e</u> ud, <u>u</u> se, <u>y</u> ell
[l]	<u>l</u> ea <u>f</u> , f <u>e</u> el, L <u>l</u> oyd, m <u>i</u> ld, appl <u>a</u> ud
[m]	<u>m</u> oose, l <u>a</u> mb, sm <u>a</u> ck, am <u>n</u> esty, am <u>p</u> le
[oo]	<u>o</u> h, b <u>o</u> at, b <u>e</u> au, gr <u>o</u> w, th <u>o</u> ugh, <u>o</u> ver
[p]	<u>p</u> it, t <u>i</u> p, sp <u>i</u> t, hicc <u>o</u> ugh, app <u>e</u> ar
[ɪ]	r <u>e</u> ef, f <u>e</u> ar, Harr <u>i</u> s, pr <u>u</u> ne, car <u>p</u>
[t]	<u>t</u> ag, pat, <u>s</u> t <u>i</u> ck, p <u>t</u> erodactyl, stuff <u>e</u> d
[u]	b <u>o</u> ot, w <u>h</u> o, s <u>e</u> wer, d <u>u</u> ty, thr <u>o</u> ugh, d <u>u</u> ne

* Apostrophes are used to denote breaths that seem to interfere with vocables.

³⁹ Mihalicek, 737.

Appendix B: Transcription of “Humours of Ballyloughlin”⁴⁰

The musical score is arranged in four systems of four staves each. The first system (A 1-4) and the second system (A1-A4) use treble clefs with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The third system (b1-b4) and the fourth system (b1-b4) use bass clefs with the same key signature. The lyrics are written in Irish Gaelic below each staff.

System 1 (A 1-4):

- A 1: dæl dæ di jer dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæ di dæl æi i jer dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæ di
- A 2: dæl gæ di jer dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæ di dæl æi i jer dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl læl dæl di
- A 3: dæl gæ di jer du dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæ di dæ æi a lei dul dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæ di
- A 4: dæl æi i jer dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæ di dæ ha æi lei dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl lei dæ dæl

System 2 (A1-A4):

- (A1): dæ ha di jer dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl dæi tæ dæl dæl dæ di jer dæl dæl dæl dæ di jæu
- (A2): dæ di jer dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl dæi tæ dæl dæl dæ di jer dæl dæl dæl dæ di jæu
- (A3): dæ ha di jer du dæl dī dæl i dæl dæi tæ dæl dæl dæ di jer dæl dæl dæl dæ di jæu
- (A4): dæ ha æi jer dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl dæi tæ dæl dæ ha æi jer dæl dæl dæl dæ di jæu

System 3 (b1-b4):

- b1: dæl æi i jer dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæ di dæ ha æi jer du dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæl di
- b2: dæl æi i jer dæl dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæl di dæ ha æi jer du dæl dæl dæl di
- b3: dæl æi i jer du dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæ di dæ ha æi jer du dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæl di
- b4: dæl æi i jer dul dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæ di dæ ha æi jer dul dæl dī dæl i dæl dæm pæl di

System 4 (b1-b4):

- (b1): dæ dal dī dæl i dæl dæi dæ dæl dæ di dæl dæ di jer dæ dæl dæl dæ di jæu
- (b2): dæm dæl dī dæl i dæl dæi dæ læl dæ di dæl dæ di jer dæ dæl dæl dæ di jæu
- (b3): dæ di jer du dæl dī dæl i dæl læl dæ di jer dæ dæl læl dæ di jer dæl dæl dæu
- (b4): dæ dæl dī dæl i dæl dæi tæ dæl læl dæ di dæl dæ dæl læl dæ di dæi dæ dæl dæu

⁴⁰ Seamus Fay, *Cavan's Lilter*, sound recording, Dublin: Martin Donohoe NYAH, 2009. Transcription my own.

C1

C2

C3

C4

daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | dæm pi di | jɛr du dæl | di dæl i dæl | di dæ dæl |

daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | ləl dæ di | jɛr dæl dæl | di dæl i dæl | dæ tæ dæl |

daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | dæm pi di | jɛr du dæl | di dæl i dæl | dæ dæ dæl |

daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | dæm pi di | dæi dæl dæl | di dæl i dæl | dæ tæ dæl |

(C1)

(C2)

(C3)

(C4)

daɪ ' dæl di dæl i dæl | daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | ləl dæ di | dæ tæ di | jɛr du dæl | dou |

daɪ ' dæl di dæl i dæl | daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | ləl dæ di | dæ tæ di | jɛr du dæl | dou | di |

daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | daɪ ' dæl di dæl i dæl | ləl dæ di | dæm pi di | jɛr du dæl | dou |

daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | daɪ ' di | jɛr dul dæl | di dæl i dæl | dæm pi di | jɛr du dæl | dou | di |

d1

d2

d3

d4

ja | dæl der | dæl da æ | a | lɛr dæl dæl | dæi dæl i | dæl læm pi di | jɛr du dæl | dæm pæl di |

daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | da æ | a | lɛr dæ dæl | da æ | æ | lɛr dæ dæl | di dæl i dæl | dæm pæl di |

jæl | dæl da | di | jɛr æ | i | dɛr dæ dæl | dæl di dæl | ləl dæ di | dæi dæl dæl | læm pæl di |

daɪ jo dæl di dæl i dæl | da æ | æ | lɛr dæl dæl | di dæl i dæl | ləl | di dæl | dæm pi di | jæm pæl di |

(d1)

(d2)

(d3)

(d4)

da ' di | jɛr du dæl | di dæl i dæl | dɛr tæ dæl | dæl dæ di | jɛr dæl dæl | dæl dæ di | jæu |

da ' di | jɛr dæl dæl | di dæl i dæl | dɛr tæ dæl | dæl dæ di | jɛr dæl dæl | dæl dæ di | jæu |

da ' di | jɛr dul dæl | di dæl i dæl | dɛr dæ dæl | dæl dæ di | jɛr dæl dæl | dæl dæ di | jæu |

da ' di | jɛr du dæl | di dæl i dæl | dɛr dæ dæl | dæl dæ di | jɛr dæl dæl | dæl dæ di | dou |

Appendix C: Observations Regarding Vocables⁴¹

Vocable	Observations
ja	Unusual-occurs once
jaɪ	Unusual-occurs once; shows up in the same place in the melody as [ja,] only in the repeated version
daɪ	Precedes [jə] and [əɪ] frequently; breath (‘), [gə,] [dəl,] and [də] rarely
da	Precedes [ha] and [əɪ] frequently, breath (‘), [di,] and [dæl] rarely
dɪ	Precedes [dəl] frequently and [də] rarely; generally short duration (16 th note all but once)
ləl	Precedes [də] frequently and [dəl] rarely; always on beat, but usually downbeat
deɪ	Precedes [də] and [tə] frequently; [dəl] and [du] rarely
dəm	Always preceding [p], except in one instance where singer takes breath; precedes [pə,] [pə,] and [pɪ] will similar frequency
jeɪ	Precedes [dəl] and [du] frequently; [də] and [du] rarely
leɪ	Usually preceded by [ə] or [a]; usually precedes [də] or [dəl]
jaʊ	Always at end of section of melody; preceded by [dal də di,] [dæl də di,] or [dəl də di,] always precedes [daɪ]
doʊ	Always at end of section of melody; usually preceded by [jeɪ-du-dæl,] precedes [daɪ] or [di]
daʊ	Unusual; always at end of section of melody; preceded by [jeɪ-də-dəl] or [deɪ-də-dəl,] always precedes [daɪ]
ləm	Unusual; possible variation of [dəm]; precedes vocable starting with [p]
jəm	Unusual; variation of [dəm]; precedes vocable starting with [p]
lɪl	Unusual
dal	When occurring on the beat, precedes [də] frequently and breath rarely; when occurring off the beat, preceded by [i]; when occurring off the beat, always the last eighth note
dæl	Precedes and is preceded by variety of vocables; when occurring off the beat, always the last eighth note

⁴¹ In general, if the vocable lands on a beat, the only observation made is concerning which vocable it usually precedes. The vocables above are ordered according to their relative strength, as determined in Table 1.

i	Always preceded by [ha]; always precedes [jei]; when occurring off the beat, always the last eighth note; on the one occasion this occurs on the beat, it is slurred such this single vocable appear to cover 3 notes—very unusual, difficult to transcribe
də	Preceded by variety of vocables; precedes vocables with vowels [ə] and [ɪ]; when occurring off the beat, never the last eighth note
dəl	When preceded by [dɪ,] always of short duration (16 th note) and followed by [i]; preceded by variety; may occur in any position
di	Always last eighth of a beat; sounds like pick-up note
i	Precedes [dəl,] [dal,] or [dæl]; when penultimate eighth note within a beat, preceded by [dəl]; when ultimate eighth note within a beat, preceded by [əɪ]
du	Always on penultimate eighth note within a beat; preceded by [jei]; precedes [dəl] once but [dæl] frequently
jə	Always on penultimate eighth note within first beat; preceded by [daɪ]; highly fixed position in terms of both vocables and meter
əɪ	Always on penultimate eighth note within first beat; usually preceded by [daɪ] or [da]; usually precedes [i]
tə	Always on penultimate eighth note within beat; hard to distinguish from [də]; usually preceded by [deɪ]; usually precedes [dəl]
pəl	Always on penultimate eighth within second beat of measure; preceded with vocable involving [əm]; precedes [di]
ha	Always on penultimate eighth note within first beat; preceded by [da]; usually precedes [ɪ]
pɪ	Always on penultimate eighth note within beat; usually preceded by [dəm]; usually precedes [di]
pə	Always on penultimate eighth within second beat of measure; preceded by [dəm]; precedes [di]
dul	Always on penultimate eighth within second beat of measure; only appears in repeated version of melody; usually preceded by [jəɪ]; precedes [dæl]
a	Always on last eighth of first beat of measure; preceded by [əɪ]; precedes [leɪ]

ə	Always on last eighth of first beat of measure; preceded by [əɪ]; precedes [leɪ]
gə	Unusual; always on penultimate eighth note within first beat; preceded by [daɪ]; precedes [di]
ɪə	Unusual-occurs once
ti	Unusual-occurs once

Appendix D: Non-Lexical Vocabable Groups⁴²

1.	da-‘-dal	30.	dəm-pə-di
2.	da---dæl	31.	dəm-pəl-di
3.	da---di	32.	dəm-pi-di
4.	da-‘-di	33.	di-də-dəl
5.	da-əɪ-a	34.	dɪ- dəl -i-dal
6.	da-əɪ-ə	35.	dɪ- dəl -i-dæl
7.	da-ha--	36.	dɪ-dəl-i-dəl
8.	da-ha-di	37.	daʊ
9.	da-ha-ɪi	38.	dou
10.	da-ha-ɪə	39.	dou---di
11.	dal-də-di	40.	ja---dæl
12.	dai-‘-dæl	41.	jai---dæl
13.	dai-də-dəl	42.	jaʊ
14.	dai-dəl-dəl	43.	jeɪ-də-dəl
15.	dai-gə-di	44.	jeɪ-dəl-dəl
16.	dai-əɪ-i	45.	jeɪ-dəl-dəl
17.	dai-jə-dæl	46.	jeɪ-du-dæl
18.	dæl-də-di	47.	jeɪ-dul-dæl
19.	də-də-dəl	48.	jeɪ-əɪ-i
20.	də-tə-dəl	49.	jəm-pəl-di
21.	də-tə-di	50.	leɪ-də-dəl
22.	deɪ-də-dəl	51.	leɪ-dəl-dæl
23.	deɪ---dəl	52.	leɪ-dəl-dəl
24.	deɪ-tə-də	53.	ləl-də-di
25.	deɪ-tə-dəl	54.	ləl-dəl-di
26.	dəl-də-di	55.	ləm-pəl-di
27.	dəl-dəl-di	56.	ləm-pi-di
28.	dəl-di-dəl	57.	lɪl-di-dəl
29.	dəm-‘-dæl	58.	ɪi

⁴² A group includes all vocabables that fall within a single beat. Dashes are used for convenience to distinguish vocabables within a group. Three dashes between two vocabables indicate that the first vocabable is held twice as long as the second. Apostrophes denote a breath taken in a position that seemed to replace a vocabable.

Appendix E: Vowels and Melodic Motion

The numbers indicate how many times one of the vowels in the left column preceded one of the vowels in the top row. The symbols to the right of the numbers indicate the direction the pitch moved, whether up (+), down (-), or whether it remained the same (=).⁴³

	a	aɪ	æ	aʊ	ə	eɪ	i	ɪ	oʊ	u
a	8+ 1-		1-		4+ 9= 3-	2+ 1=	5= 11-	1+		
aɪ			4-		5+ 20= 1=					
æ	2+ 2-	3+	2-		16+ 2= 4-	6+		32+ 7= 8-	2+ 2=	
aʊ		11+								
ə	3+ 3= 7-	8+ 2-	9+ 31-	2=	44+ 12= 40-	6+ 2= 1-	25+ 22= 66-	12+ 1=		
eɪ					12+ 3= 30-					4+ 17-
i	16+ 6-	4+ 2-	6+ 2= 11-	9=	7+ 5= 24-	10+ 28= 9-			1+	
ɪ					52= 1-		4+ 6-			
oʊ		2+					2-			
u		3+ 2= 14-		2-						
Total	29+ 3= 16-	31+ 2= 18-	15+ 2= 49-	11= 2-	88+ 103= 103-	24+ 31= 10-	29+ 27= 85-	45+ 8= 9-	3+ 2=	4+ 17-

⁴³ This chart is based off a model found in Hughes, “Oral Mnemonics in Korean Music,” 309. Breaths that seemed to interfere with vocables were ignored in the creation of this chart.

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