



# Smithsonian Folkways

**An Irish Tune for Strings**  
**A Smithsonian Folkways**  
**Lesson** Designed by: Anne  
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## **Summary:**

Orchestral students can experience traditional Irish culture through their involvement in song analysis, improvisation, and instrument demonstrations. The listening activities will allow students to practice ‘meter detection’ and instrument identification. The students will participate in discussions about traditional Irish dance music, the Potato Famine, Irish immigration to the United States, and Irish cultural elements that have been integrated into North American culture. They will practice playing an Irish reel, playing it rhythmically straight and then in a swung style. Students will be offered an opportunity to improvise ornamentation, and then work together to devise the ornamentation for the whole ensemble.

**Suggested Grade Level:** 9-12

**Country:** Ireland

**Region:** Northern  
Europe **Culture**

**Group:** Irish **Genre:**  
Dance

**Instruments:** String Orchestra

**Language:** Gaelic

**Co-curricular Areas:** Social Studies

**National Standards:** 2, 3, 5, 6, 9

**Prerequisites:** None

## **Objectives:**

Experience traditional Irish culture through their involvement in song analysis, improvisation, and instrument demonstration

Participate in discussions about traditional Irish dance music, the Potato Famine, Irish immigration to the United States, and Irish cultural elements that have been integrated into North American culture

Practice playing an Irish reel with an opportunity for improvisation

## **Materials:**

“The Morningstar” by Tom Byrne from *Irish Music from Cleveland, Vol. 3: The Continuing Tradition*.

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/irish-music-from-cleveland-vol-3-the-continuing-tradition/celtic-world/album/smithsonian>

“The Greenfields of Rossbae” by Jimmy Noonan and Mike Francis from *Irish Music from Cleveland, Vol. 3: The Continuing Tradition*.

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/irish-music-from-cleveland-vol-3-the-continuing-tradition/celtic-world/album/smithsonian>

Reels: The Blackberry Blossom/The Silver Spire/ The Dawn (medley) by Brian Conway from *First Through the Gate*.

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/brian-conway/first-through-the-gate/american-folk-celtic-old-time/music/album/smithsonian>

Blackberry Blossom score, string parts, melody without ornamentation markings  
Bodhran, Irish whistle, Irish flute, maps of Ireland and the U.S.

Lamb, H. H. (1982) *Climate, History, and the Modern World*. New York.

Routledge. Larsen, Grey. (2003) *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*. Missouri. Mel Bay Publications Inc.

McNevin, Paul. (1998) *A Complete Guide to Learning the Irish Fiddle*. Dublin, Walton Manufacturing Ltd.

McCullough, Lawrence E. (1977) *Style in Traditional Irish Music*, from *Ethnomusicology*

Vol. 21 number 1. Illinois, University of Illinois Press.

Ochs, Bill. (2000) *The Clark Tin Whistle*. New York. The Pennywhistler’s

Press. O’Hara, Megan. (2002) *Irish Immigrants 1840-1920*. Minnesota,

Capstone Press. Wade, Bonnie C. (2008) *Thinking Musically, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. USA. Oxford University Press.

### Lesson Segments:

1. **The Greenfields of Rossbae** (National Standards 6, 8, 9)
2. **The Morningstar** (National Standards 2, 6, 8, 9)
3. **Blackberry Blossom: Listening** (National Standards 2, 5, 6, 9)
4. **Blackberry Blossom: Fiddlin’ Away** (National Standards 2, 3, 5, 6, 9)

#### 1. The Greenfields of Rossbae

- a. Listen to The Greenfields of Rossbae.
- b. Before Listening ask students to think about these questions as they listen.
  - i. What instruments do you hear? (pennywhistle)
  - ii. Can you identify what part of the world these instruments come from? (Ireland)
  - iii. What do you think the audience would be doing during this music? Watching a play or ballet, listening in a concert hall, telling a story, dancing? (dancing)
- c. Listen to the recording again, asking students to softly clap the beat along with the music.
- d. Discuss with the students the pennywhistle, using *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*, and *The Clark Tin Whistle*. If you have a pennywhistle pass it around at this point.
  - i. The pennywhistle rose in popularity because of the affordability of the instrument. It was sold for varying prices, from a half penny to a little

over a penny, but the most well know price gave it the name, the pennywhistle. The penny is in reference to the British penny or half penny, so in the American dollar a penny would be about 1.6 cents

- ii. Some musicians even made their own penny whistles out of reeds and straws.
- iii. The low price meant many whistles were produced and its popularity grew. It was seen as a toy and was not widely regarded as a serious instrument until the 1960s.
- e. In this recording the pennywhistle is played in the “Sligo” style.
- f. Point to County Sligo on a map.
  - i. Discuss the Sligo music tradition with the students. Referencing, *Style in Traditional Irish Music*.
- g. Explain the counties of Ireland, their similarities and differences to states in the United States.
  - i. Point out other well known counties, Dublin, Cork, Tipperary on the map of Ireland.
- h. Listen to the song again listening for what type of music this is.
- i. Discuss the different types of Irish Dance music.
  - i. Reel – There are many forms of reels, identified by the number of dancers, such as the ‘threesome’, ‘foursome’, ‘sixsome’ and ‘eightsome’. The reel has two basic dance elements, a setting step danced on the spot and a ‘traveling’ figure. The reel originated in Scotland but gained popularity in Ireland, and is known for its brisk tempo. In North America the reel is the staple for square-dances, and is known by the name *Breakdown* or *Hoedown*. – *Oxford Music Online*
  - ii. Jigs – derived from the Old French verb *ginger* (‘to leap’) it is characterized by lively jumping steps. It is danced solo or by a couple to the accompaniment of the pipe and fiddle and usually in compound duple time – where there are four beats to the measure but the pulse is felt in two. *Oxford Music Online*
  - iii. Slip Jigs – danced in the same style as the jig, but written in compound triple time – nine beats to a measure with the pulse felt in three.
  - iv. Hornpipe – a dance written in 3/2, 2/4, or 4/4 this style of dance was very popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was generally a solo dance, and was accompanied by bagpipes and fiddles. Many composers adapted this musical form and composed hornpipes to go into their dance suites. Some of the more well known examples of hornpipes are Handel’s Water Music, no. 9 and 12, and the College or ‘The Sailor’s’ Hornpipe. – *Oxford Music Online*

### **Assessment:**

The students will listen and identify the instruments in the recordings, tap the pulse of the piece, and participate in discussions of the pennywhistle, Sligo music tradition, and Irish dance forms.

## 2. Morningstar

- a. Listen to The Morning Star.
  - i. Before listening prompt students to think of these questions.
    1. What instruments are playing? (fiddle, Bodhran, and flute)
    2. How are they different from the instruments in Greenfields of Rossbae? (Instead of the pennywhistle in the Greenfields of Rossbae, the Morningstar has the Irish flute and the addition of percussion – the Bodhran.)
    3. How many musicians are there in the recording? (there are two)
- b. If you have a Bodhran and Irish flute, pass them around or show pictures of them.
  - i. Discuss with the students the differences and similarities of the instruments in a traditional orchestra. (The Bodhran is a handheld drum, played with a small stick called a tipper. The tipper has two knobs on both ends, is held loosely in one hand and is used to beat out patterns. It is similar to the percussion instruments played with mallets, like the timpani but the tipper is just wood and so creates a sound more similar to drums played with sticks like the snare drum. The Irish flute is typically made from wood unlike the symphonic metal flute. – *Oxford Music Online*)
- c. Listen to the piece again. Ask students to tap the beat that the Bodhran is playing at the beginning, and then the pulse. Switch back and forth between the pulse and subdivision.
- d. Reveal to the students that this piece is played by Irish-Americans from Cleveland.
- e. Discuss the Potato Famine and Immigration into the United States using *Climate, History, and the Modern World*, and *Irish Immigrants 1840-1920*.
  - i. One of the main reasons for immigration was the potato crop failure, due to the potato blight fungus brought by trade ships. Multiple years of crop failures devastated the Irish markets, as potatoes were the staple crop of the country.
  - ii. As the famine continued many Irish youths immigrated to the United States to make money to send back to their families. As they went through the immigration offices in cities like New York they faced new cultures, and prejudices. These factors caused many Irish immigrants to live close to each other, making small neighborhoods that had restaurants, stores, and pubs that reminded them of the traditions in Ireland. See Additional Experiences for a recipe for making Irish Soda Bread, and how to grow potatoes in a pot.
- f. On a map point out U.S. cities that large numbers of Irish immigrants settled in.
  - i. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and New Orleans
- g. Brainstorm all of the different Irish traditions, foods, and cultural experiences have become popular in the United States.

- i. Riverdance, St. Patrick's Day, Shamrocks, Leprechauns, Corned Beef and  
Cabbage,  
Potatoes.

**Extension:**

- a. Learn the basic steps to a reel. How to videos, and information are widely available on the web.
- b. Play the Bodhran part on the string instruments using pizzicato technique.
- c. Using your finger as an imaginary marker, draw the phrases in the air.
- d. In the following book find information on how to grow a potato in a pot, and for a recipe to make Irish Soda Bread. O'Hara, Megan. (2002) *Irish Immigrants 1840-1920*. Minnesota, Capstone Press.

**Assessment:** Students will be able to identify, through active listening, the instruments of the Greenfields of Rossbae, and The Morningstar, comparing them to modern orchestral instruments, discuss the Irish Potato Famine, and identify Irish cultural elements common in the United States brought by Irish immigrants.

**3. Blackberry Blossom: Listening**

- a. Listen to the recording of Blackberry Blossom on Smithsonian Folkways.
- b. Play through the parts included in the lesson.
- c. Listen to the recording again, asking students to read their parts and compare the rhythms of the piece.
  - i. Explain the idea of swinging the rhythm, by putting an emphasis on beats 1 & 3. In the reel, the eighth notes are also swung, with more emphasis placed on the first eighth note in groups of two. The resulting rhythm will sound more like a dotted eighth sixteenth pattern.
  - ii. Ask the students to clap the rhythm straight, and then try to clap it with  
the emphasis on beats 1 & 3, and the swung eighth notes.
- d. Play the Blackberry Blossom again, with the new swung rhythms that the students have practiced clapping.
- e. Tell the students about the Donegal Fiddle Style that is characterized by:
  - i. Fast aggressive bows
  - ii. No slurs
  - iii. Fast triplet ornamentation
  - iv. Demonstrate these techniques, if possible, on a violin playing the melodic line from the Blackberry Blossom. Reference *A Complete Guide to Learning the Irish Fiddle*
- f. Ask the students who is playing the melodic part played by the fiddle in the recording, and who is playing the guitar chords. (melody is played by the violins and violas, while the cellos and stringed bass play the guitar chords)
- g. When the low strings are playing ask them to think of themselves as guitarists  
instead of cellists.

- i. To help get the style help the students feel the separation between notes, and the overall lightness.
  - ii. Direct the students to imagine they are strumming as they bow.
- h. Listen to the recording of Blackberry Blossom again, and ask the students to count how many times each section is played. (The A section is played 6 times, and the B section is played 6 times with a slight variation when it leads back into the A section.)

### **Extensio**

- n:**
- a. Find an Irish Fiddler in the community who can demonstrate for the class.
  - b. Bring in an Irish dancer who can teach the class a few basic steps, and dance while they perform Blackberry Blossom

**Assessment:** The students will be able to play the piece, both alone and with the group. Students will be able to sing the rhythm and read the notation. Students will be able to correctly identify the form of the piece.

### **4. Blackberry Blossom: Fiddlin' Away**

- a. Hand out copies of the melody line of Blackberry Blossom to the orchestra.
- b. Lead the students in play through the melody.
  - i. When playing through the melodic line ask the students to remember the techniques they used in playing the arrangement. Recall the swung rhythms, beat emphasis, bowing techniques, and style they learned in the previous lesson.
  - ii. Demonstrate the melody on the violin, or ask one of the students who played the melody previously to demonstrate.
- c. Listen to the recording of the Blackberry Blossom from Smithsonian Folkways, listening for the ornamentation.
  - i. With the students reading along in the music while the music is playing ask them to mark where the violin adds ornamentation. Have them circle the measure that contains ornamentation, and then in another listening have them circle the individual note that is ornamented.
- d. Explain improvisation to the class and its tradition in Irish music.
  - i. The traditional staples of an Irish musician's repertoire all have the same basic structure. The melodies of individual songs are played the same by different musicians, but the performance of each piece is slightly different. The performance of these pieces will change slightly from one night to the next and from one musician to the next. Each musician takes the piece and plays their own interpretation, adding their own ornamentation. – *Thinking Musically*, sections on Tar Road to Sligo

- e. Give the students time to write their own ornamentation for the notes they marked. Let them play the melody, and try adding grace notes, appoggiaturas, and short runs.
  - i. The ornamentation changes from county to county in Ireland, so for a challenge ask students to try creating ornaments in the Donegal style.
    - 1. The Donegal ornamentation played in the recording features a fast run circling around the main note.
- f. Lead the students in playing their interpretation of the melody with ornamentation for the class.
  - i. Ask the class to anonymously vote on their top 3 favorite ornaments, and then have those students teach their ornaments to the class.

### **Extensio**

- n:**
- a. Listen to the recording of Blackberry Blossom on Smithsonian Folkways, asking the students to listen to the guitar rhythms under the melody.
    - i. Demonstrate different rhythmic patterns that can be played under the melody. (swung eighth notes, half notes, dotted half note eighth note, sixteenth notes)
    - ii. Once the students see the different possibilities for the rhythms let them experiment with rhythmic patterns on the D string.
  - b. Listen to the recording of Blackberry Blossom on Smithsonian Folkways, asking the students to listen to the guitar rhythms under the melody.
    - i. Ask the students to clap the rhythm along with the recording.
    - ii. Demonstrate different rhythmic patterns, as in the above example.
    - iii. Let the students experiment with clapping their own rhythmic pattern, and then ask for volunteers to show the class their patterns.

**Assessment:** Students will be able to improvise on the melody, and notate their ornamentations. They will be able to play their improvisation for the group, and teach the ensemble their own individual ornamentations.

# The Blackberry Blossom

Traditional Irish Reel

The image displays a musical score for the traditional Irish reel "The Blackberry Blossom". The score is arranged for a string quartet, consisting of Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Contrabass. The music is written in the key of D major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The score is divided into three systems, with measures 6, 12, and 18 marked at the beginning of each system. The Violin I and II parts feature melodic lines with various ornaments, including grace notes and slurs. The Viola part provides a harmonic accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern. The Cello and Contrabass parts play a consistent bass line, primarily using eighth notes and chords. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots at the end of the first system.



17

I

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

The image shows a musical score for five string instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabasso. The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). Measure 17 begins with a first violin part featuring a melodic line with a fermata over the final note. A green 'rit.' marking is placed above the second violin part in measure 17. The second violin part plays a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The viola, cello, and contrabasso parts provide a steady bass line of eighth notes. Measures 18 and 19 continue the patterns established in measure 17, with the first violin part concluding with a fermata.

Blackberry Blossom  
Violin 1

Musical score for Violin 1 of "Blackberry Blossom". The score consists of four staves of music in G major and 6/8 time. The first staff (measures 1-5) features a melodic line with a fermata over the final measure. The second staff (measures 6-11) contains a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with a fermata at the end. The third staff (measures 12-16) includes two triplet markings and a fermata. The fourth staff (measures 17) begins with a *rit.* marking and ends with a double bar line.

Blackberry Blossom  
Violin 2

Musical score for Violin 2 of "Blackberry Blossom". The score consists of four staves of music in G major and 6/8 time. The first staff (measures 1-5) features a melodic line with a fermata over the final measure. The second staff (measures 6-11) contains a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with a fermata at the end. The third staff (measures 12-16) includes a fermata and a *rit.* marking. The fourth staff (measures 17) begins with a *rit.* marking and ends with a double bar line.

Blackberry Blossom  
Viola

Viola

2

rit.

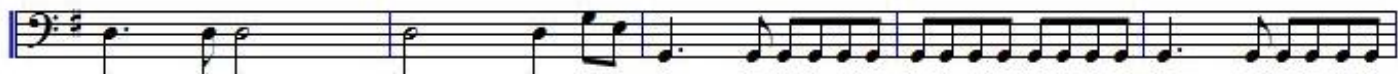
Blackberry Blossom  
Cello

Cello

rit.

Blackberry Blossom  
Stringed Bass

Contrabass



Blackberry Blossom Melody  
Violin



Violin score for Blackberry Blossom Melody. The music is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). It consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains the first four measures. The second staff contains measures 5 through 10, with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 9 and another triplet in measure 10. The third staff contains the final two measures of the piece.

Blackberry Blossom Melody  
Viola



Viola score for Blackberry Blossom Melody. The music is written in alto clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). It consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains the first four measures. The second staff contains measures 5 through 10, with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 9 and another triplet in measure 10. The third staff contains the final two measures of the piece.

Blackberry Blossom Melody  
Cellos and Stringed Bases



Cello and Stringed Bases score for Blackberry Blossom Melody. The music is written in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). It consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains the first four measures. The second staff contains measures 5 through 10, with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 9 and another triplet in measure 10. The third staff contains the final two measures of the piece.