

3.03 Piping Style and Notes on the Tunes

Ronan Browne (with intro transcriptions by Jimmy O'Brien Moran)

Introduction

R. L. O'Mealy's piping holds the same fascination today as it did in the 1970s when I first heard him with such excitement and glee. In writing this article about his style and general musical approach, I experienced Richard's music anew; I went through the tunes with a fine tooth comb, writing explicitly about each tune, and about his style in general. Inevitably I heard things differently, coming across new elements of his playing and gaining a new understanding of what he was doing.

In these recordings¹ we are treated to just a glimpse of the extraordinary musician that was Richard Lewis O'Mealy. We have but a handful of individual pieces of music - ten tunes, mostly played twice through, the longest just over one and a half minutes long; we are left aching to hear more of what must have been a substantial body of music. Written transcriptions exist of other tunes used when teaching his piping pupils and we have tune lists from his BBC broadcasts. These indicate a huge repertoire, of which these ten tunes are the very smallest part but we are very lucky to have even this small glimpse - there could so easily be nothing at all, given his apparent reluctance to be recorded.²

General Style

O'Mealy's music is as much about performance as it is about the tunes themselves. Every element is worked through beforehand, perhaps not too analytically, more probably organically over sixty years of playing before these musical snapshots were taken. This is mature playing, yet there is a sense of freshness missing from much music; it exudes confidence and is very much at ease with itself; while there is great technique, nothing is forced or laboured. It's not easy to play intricate music with complex regulator accompaniment; this is generally successful only when the piper is relaxed and the instrument is in very good playing order. Richard does sound relaxed here - he is playing a large, complex instrument to its fullest extent, but never does he appear at odds with it. To the best of my knowledge there is only one mistake, if I can even call it that, throughout the ten pieces of music.³

There is typically a strong swing to his music, yet there are times where O'Mealy sounds to me to be quite stilted and appears to follow each beat of the tune. This is evident in his playing of both "The Wheels of The World" and "The Drops of Brandy".

¹ These recordings were made on the 28th of August 1943, reputedly by taking a line to the disc cutter hidden from O'Mealy while he was broadcasting as he refused to be recorded.

² O'Mealy's nephew George Farrar told his daughter Violet that the reason O'Mealy was reluctant to be recorded was that he felt that if his public had access to recordings of him, they would be less likely to come out to see him in concert.

³ See No. 10 below, "The Donegal Reel"

O'Mealy typically plays each tune twice only, often with a single restatement of the first part before finishing. There is great drama in his playing. Each tune starts with an introduction on drones, chanter and regulators, and many finish with his signature regulator flourish of GBD'G.

Chanter

O'Mealy often uses simple staccato or tight fingering in his playing; notes are played to their full length which when combined with tight staccato transitions between the notes, gives the feeling of perfection with every note being of exactly the right length and articulation. He appears to have total control, although in common with other pipers who display this ability, it is not so much about control but that he plays flawlessly without thinking. Notes pour out fluidly. Perfectly executed runs of notes happen without effort and every section sits beautifully into the whole of the performance. He often emphasises notes on the chanter by venting them off the knee, or by holding them a little longer.

Regulators⁴

Like his chanter-work, O'Mealy's regulator playing is never monotonous or predictable even though quite formulaic. His accompaniment is neither shy nor unassuming; it is as important as the melody and often plays in unison with the melody for whole phrases. Sometimes he uses the regulators to build up to key sections of tunes; other times he uses them as a counterpoint to the shape of the melody; they punctuate transitions between parts of tunes and he very often shows a great sense of fun - all these elements frequently happening in the one tune lasting little over a minute! He regularly marks particular important notes or sections in a tune by playing longer notes on the regulators, often using the extended bass regulator in the middle of a run of notes or chords on the higher sections of the regulators. While he most often vamps on the beat with just the odd longer chord, Richard also jumps from the low to the high regulators and from high to low whilst retaining that steady on-the-beat vamp.

While listening to these recordings I find myself wishing I could see how Richard played those regulators. Much is happening here which no other piper ever did and the layout of the instrument is different from the classic 3 regulators.

I imagine that he would look quite elegant and there would be nothing of the classic "octopus wrestling" associated with pipers of lesser ability who refuse to remain on the practice slopes. From what we know about O'Mealy, I think he must have looked stately, never flustered and with no facial tics.

I'd love to know how much of his regulator playing was done with both hands on the chanter; I'd love to know how he sat, how he moved - just a glimpse would suffice and I would be satisfied forever...

⁴ Many pipes of O'Mealy's own manufacture have a baritone and a bass regulator plus a contrabass which plays the notes F#, E & D one octave below the bottom D of the chanter. To make room for this extra regulator, these full sets never have a tenor regulator yet the sound is so full that one doesn't notice its absence.

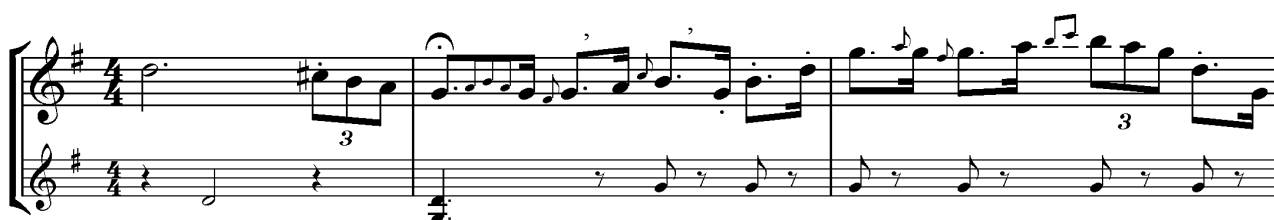
The Tunes⁵

The tune titles and denomination are taken from Ken McLeod's original cassette made by the BBC in London in the 1970s. It is almost certain that this information was copied directly from the covers of ¼ inch tape copies of the original acetates and that we are directly linked to Richard's own titles and tune descriptions. I suggest that you play the MP3s of O'Mealy⁶ whilst reading the notes below.

The introductory flourishes have all been transcribed by Jimmy O'Brien Moran. We decided to only transcribe the opening few bars and I must stress once once more that to really hear what O'Mealy is doing, one must listen closely, again and again, to the original recordings.

1. O'Mealy's Hornpipe (*O'Mealy's Jig*) – Hornpipe

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/01_O'Mealy's_Hornpipe.mp3



This hornpipe is said to have been one of O'Mealy's many compositions.

Intro:

- Lots of nice tight chanter work here with crisp ACA & BCB triplets, lovely high C' cuts of the high A' and perfect tight F'D'AD' repeated runs in between BCD' triplets in the second part.
- In this tune, O'Mealy plays every beat on the regulators with the odd longer chord lasting one bar. He plays a two-beat-long chord from time to time on the third beat of the bar.
- As he proceeds from any one part into the next, he plays two closing hits of the regulator chords and leaves the next beat out - like most of O'Mealy's techniques, it is very simple but hugely effective.
- In the repeat of the second part he plays 7 repeated A notes on the regulator.

⁵ A word about copyright is necessary here: copyright in the physical recordings rests with the BBC and copyright in the music rests with the estate of R. L. O'Mealy. At the time of writing, they are *not* in the public domain and permission must be sought from the copyright holders if a third party wishes to use them. Thanks are due to the estate of O'Mealy and the BBC for allowing us to use the recordings.

⁶ See associated files folder for MP3s of the original acetates.

- At the end of the tune, after an extra single restatement of the first part, instead of just finishing on the G, he plays another DG and during that final G he plays his signature GBD'G on the bass and baritone regulator.

2. **The Cork Hornpipe** (*The Harvest Home*) – Hornpipe

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/02_Cork_Hornpipe.mp3



Intro:

- Incredible precision here and an extremely fast pace, yet Richard is clearly relaxed, lending an easy-going air to this most difficult tune.
- His articulation is reminiscent of a whistle or flute player taking what almost appear to be “breaths” at the end of each part.
- In the second part of the tune he emphasises the low A rolls each time by playing a unison A on the regulators.
- He plays an interesting run of notes at the end of the first part, and on the second time round the tune, ending the first statement of the second part: | E'D'F'D' G'D'F'D' | (3)E'G'E' CE'D'!
- Lovely flourish up to the high B' and back down to finish on the back D' at the end of the tune with no extra first part or regulator flourish.

3. **The Wheels of the World** (*The Rambling Pitchfork*) – Jig

[http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/03_Wheels_of_The_World_\(Pitchfork\).mp3](http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/03_Wheels_of_The_World_(Pitchfork).mp3)



Intro:

- The manner in which O'Mealy plays the first part of this tune reminds me of a musician of lesser ability and experience yet this must have been a deliberate

decision on his part. It is as if he were playing every note as it might have been written but with no changes to alleviate the tedium of the written notes.

- The second part flows better compared to the overly-even playing of the previous part.
- The longer regulator octave unison notes on the A and G notes particularly in the second part are worthy of note.
- He finishes the tune with an extra first part but no regulator flourish.

4. The Blackbird – Air & Set Dance

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/04_The_Blackbird.mp3



Intro:

- Preceding this set dance we have the nearest thing to an example of O’Mealy’s slow air playing. He was said to have been a very moving air player and it is a great loss that we have no other example. While this fragment is very short, a lot happens here. We hear some rare examples of vibrato (lovely understated vibrato it is too) on the first stressed B of the tune, on the back D’ and on the C Natural. Interestingly, he doesn’t add any vibrato to the long A note.
- There is some great unison regulator accompaniment in the run of notes up to the vibratoed C Natural.
- If the melody could be imagined as that moving dot over the lyrics on a Karaoke screen, you can almost see the dot rolling back down after that C Natural, finishing off with three bounces on the Bottom D and low D regulator!
- Next, we are into the tune proper. O’Mealy inserts some interesting gaps at various points in the tune, sometimes on the chanter or the regulators, sometimes on both but again reminiscent of taking a breath.
- At various points in this set dance, parts or phrases end with three bottom D notes in succession. Where most musicians would articulate the notes on the chanter with cuts, RL plays one long D and articulates it with the regulators. He does the same with the long back Ds but he plays each D separately along with the regulators.
- There is a satisfying combination of legato playing and tight notes and runs.

- Good ostentatious ornamentation in the high octave with double and triple cuts on the high A. He seems to be cutting the A with B, C and B cuts.
- While the regulators vamp on the beat throughout much of the second part, O’Mealy stops them just before he plays a wild open vibratoed high A, then dropping down an octave to an equally stressed low A matched with another A an octave lower again on the regulators!
- He finishes off again with a single statement of the first part but with no regulator flourish, just finishing with one long bass D.

5. The Mountains of Pomeroy – Reel

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/05_The_Mountains_of_Pomeroy.mp3



Intro:

- The regulators are mostly played in unison with the melody with much use made of the Low Bass E
- There are some enjoyable quintuplet hits of the low A and B regulator notes to emphasise long notes.
- RL slows down nicely at the junction of the first and second time round the tune, reminiscent of his tune endings and plays two big back Ds with low bass D on the regulators, before launching into the tune again.
- He finishes off the first part with three straight G notes accompanied by BBG-- on the bass regulator.
- There is no first part repeat at the end but we are treated to the trademark GBD’G yet once again.

6. The Maids of Mounshore – Air

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/06_The_Maid_at_Mourneshore.mp3

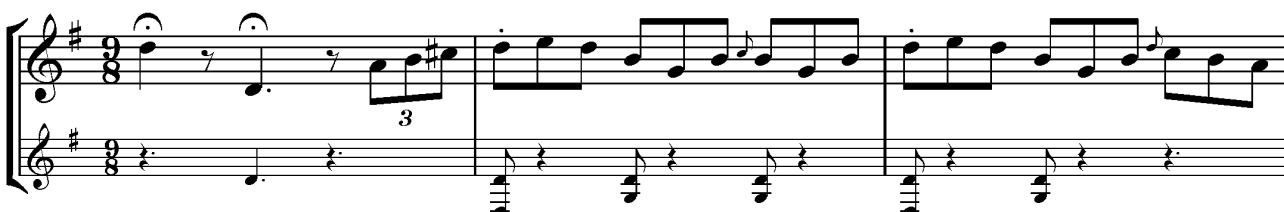


Intro:

- There is a sadness to this tune which I don't feel in the other pieces.
- More examples of vibrato on the C Natural and Back D, beautifully executed.
- The regulator accompaniment in the first few bars anticipates the melody by playing F!D which is immediately echoed by the chanter playing G'D' in unison with the regs.
- The notes in the second part are all held to their full extent while the regulator notes are heavily clipped adding to the tentative, soothing feel of the tune.

7. The Drops of Brandy – Slip Jig⁷

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/07_The_Drops_of_Brandy.mp3



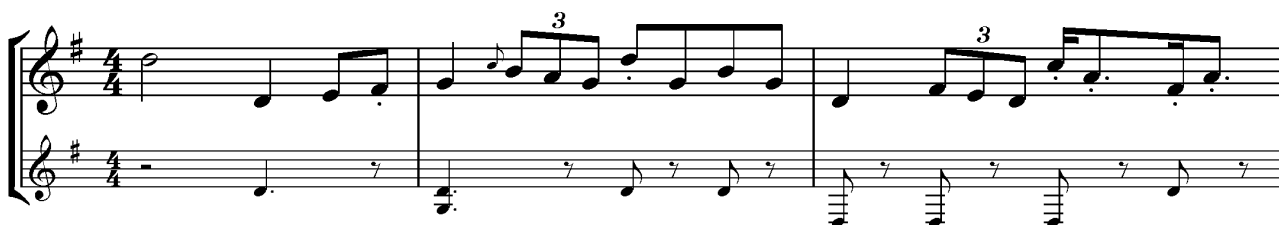
Intro:

- Like The Wheels of the World, the playing here is very straight, on the beat, with nothing left to the imagination compared to his other tunes. All notes are played equally rather than lengthening some and shortening others to compensate. Nonetheless, it is still highly inventive and enjoyable playing.
- There is an interesting repeated regulator motif at the beginning of each first part where the notes D'E'D' BGB are countered with DGG DGG on the extended bass regulator. This is one of those wonderful musical tricks where a motif is repeated at

⁷ Jimmy O'Brien Moran published a transcription of this tune in *An Piobaire* Vol 3, No. 32
<http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.A/A%20Tune%20on%20the%20regulators,%20almost!.pdf>

the same place, each time the melody plays a particular phrase and it becomes something that the listener anticipates and is hopefully rewarded by hearing!

- The tune ends with the full double first part, he holds the last stressed A, tumbles through to the last note in a syncopated run (all done on purpose) and finishes with his signature regulator GBD’G—flourish.



8. The Sligo Lassies – Reel

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/08_The_Sligo_Lasses.mp3

Intro:

- This reel is played very fast almost to the point where the listener might think that the recording was playing back at too high a speed. This is incredible playing for a man just short of 70 years of age.
- The little breaks reminiscent of breaths are here again and there are many of them. They add to the great sense of urgency throughout this tune. They happen often, much as they might for an overly excited flute player who is desperately trying to keep up with himself!
- Lovely unusual way of finishing the first part each time using F up to G: F’D’CA BFG!
- The regulators, particularly in the second part, rather than following the melody, appear to pre-empt it, changing to the next chord just ahead of the melody. This again adds to that sense of urgency displayed throughout this tune.
- The reel finishes with the usual held note at the end, with the GBD’G on the regulators but this time played with an almost forced holding back and slowing down of the notes.



9. **Smash the Windows – Jig**

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/09_Smash_the_Windows.mp3

Intro:

- There is a lovely bouncy rhythm to the playing of this tune.
- On the second time round of the first part there is a long low E on the chanter with a matching bass E on the extended. This device is used each time except for the end of the tune where RL plays a double rather than the usual single first part. On the first one he plays the long E as if he is going to finish but then carries on to play it another time, again with that long E.
- There is a lovely answering triplet in the second part which lends an air of fun to the melody. These two triplets are nicely balanced by emphasised, on the beat, descending notes at the end of that second part.



10. **The Donegal Reel – Reel**

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.03/10_The_Donegal_Reel.mp3

Intro:

- Nice changes here from D to E notes on the regulators. Richard plays straight repeated D on the first part and when he moves up one note to the E it is a very strong effect.

- Changing to the second part, the last note of the first part is a low D, moving on to a linking A and then on to the first high D' of the second part. As soon as he leaves that low D, O'Mealy plays the same note on the baritone regulator under the link A and this adds a great sense of suspense and movement to the tune.
- There is once again huge power in his stressed vibratoed High A notes at the end of the second part but this time there are three in a row making it even more momentous.
- The regulators follow the rising melody in the second part very nicely.
- In this tune we have what appears to be the closest thing to a mistake made by our Master: in the second part, the second time round the whole tune, one of the regulators plays G# instead of A. This works musically but it is unintended by O'Mealy and it seems that it took him by surprise - he immediately tumbles into a speed-wobble as he registers what he just did. I'm sure he thought it was horrible but I like to think that if he was to hear it now, he might let it go with a smile; he lost the rhythm for a split second and played a high B twice instead of once - something that I often notice in beginner pipers whose brain and fingers haven't reached that wonderful symbiotic relationship we all seek to attain. I feel that this could only have happened because Richard's attention was caught by the flattened regulator note which, although musically successful, was not what he intended. To further support this, a G# regulator note appears nowhere else in the recordings.
- The tune finishes with a long held low E with no flourish but with a long bass E followed by the finishing D and bass D.