

## The Enchanting World of Ireland's Uilleann Pipes

(Excerpts from Ireland's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage page

and Angel Romero, World Music Central, May 6, 2023)

Uilleann Piping is a musical practice which uses a particular type of bagpipe (known as the 'uilleann', 'Irish', or 'union' pipes) to play Irish music.

The Uilleann Pipes are a very highly developed type of bagpipe. Originating in the early 1700s, development continued through the 1800s in Ireland, and within Irish communities abroad, to become the modern instrument. It is a complex instrument, with aspects of its musical functionality found nowhere else.

For two centuries, the instrument has been identified with, and used almost exclusively, for the performance of Irish traditional music. Uilleann Piping is perceived within Ireland as an especially national form of musical practice, and is valued as an essentially Irish form of artistic achievement, both in terms of the performance of the national music, and the manufacture of instruments to a high level of craftsmanship.

The Uilleann pipes have a long and rich cultural history in Ireland. The instrument is thought to have evolved from an earlier form of bagpipes that were played in Ireland in the 17th and 18th centuries. The name "Uilleann" is derived from the Irish word "uille," which means "elbow," and refers to the way that the bellows are operated by the player's elbow. The pipes were once a popular instrument in Ireland and were used in many musical contexts, including as an accompaniment to dancing, as well as in religious and military contexts.

Despite their long history, the Uilleann pipes experienced a period of decline in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as traditional Irish music fell out of favor and was replaced by other musical forms. However, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in traditional Irish music and the Uilleann pipes, and the instrument is now played by a new generation of musicians who are preserving and promoting its cultural heritage.

The Uilleann Pipes are different from other types of bagpipes in several key ways, and they have a rich cultural history that is deeply intertwined with the music and heritage of Ireland. A major difference is that Uilleann pipers sit to play the instrument.



Full set of Uilleann Pipes attributed to Timothy Kenna, early 19th century  
– Photo by Ronan Browne © NPU, 2013

The Uilleann Pipes consist of a set of pipes that are played using bellows under one arm, that are strapped to the player's waist. The bellows push air across the piper's waist in an air tube that is connected to a bag under the other arm. The full bag then supplies the air for the pipes. The melody is played on a Chanter using both hands. Sitting across the lap are three drones - all tuned to a different octave of the base note "D". They can be switched on and off. Also on the lap are three regulators that have keys and can be played with the heel of the hand or the fingers of one hand. They can provide harmonic support and/or rhythmical support.

One of the key features of the Uilleann pipes is their versatility. The pipes can play a wide range of musical styles, from traditional Irish music to contemporary pieces. The pipes are capable of playing fast, energetic reels and jigs, as well as slow, haunting airs and ballads. This versatility is due in part to the large number of pipes and reeds that make up the instrument, as well as the intricate system of keys and regulators that allow the player to produce a wide range of different notes and sounds.



In 2017, the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity recognized the musical tradition of Uilleann piping, an art form that utilizes a specific type of bagpipe, known as the uilleann, Irish or union pipes, to perform Irish music. This practice is deeply rooted in tradition, with a lineage that extends back many generations. Practitioners of Uilleann piping are dispersed globally, with the greatest concentration residing in Ireland and Irish communities abroad.

Uilleann piping plays a crucial role in socialization and is an integral aspect of life events such as marriages and funerals, where it serves to imbue a sense of rootedness and a connection to the past. The primary method of transmission for this art form is through one-to-one, master-to-student instruction, although transmission also occurs through contemporary methods such as video and DVD tutorials and the internet.