

# INSTRUMENT OF KNOWLEDGE

by Brian Byrnes

For Burlington musician Brian Perkins, passing his knowledge of traditional Irish music on seems like the natural thing to do. So with a little perseverance and help from his friends he started the Celtic College, a once-a-week instructional workshop, that teaches the dos, don'ts and why nots of traditional Irish music.

"The Celtic College is an attempt to make Irish session music accessible to musicians who want to play it," says Perkins, who has been playing mandolin, tenor banjo and the Bouzouki, an instrument he describes as a "really big mandolin," for the past six years.

People often confuse traditional Irish session music with bluegrass or jazz. What distinguishes it from the others is the painstaking emphasis on precision and synchronization. In contrast to jazz or bluegrass, which features a series of solos and jams around a common melody, Irish music stays on course at all times. "It's about making music together," stresses Perkins, who also plays in the Last Elm String Band and Atlantic Crossing.

During the first meeting of the six-week workshop, participants discuss the distinction between New England traditional and Irish traditional music, noting how regional variations can take a

song and change it significantly. "Cultures develop their own style," says Perkins, "that's why people cherish regional variations so much."

Bess Oland of Burlington, who has been playing flute for ten years and guitar for five, recognizes the importance of distinct regional variations. "In Vermont, or anywhere, you learn the tune first and then change it so it's yours ... then there are a thousand different versions."

The traditional Irish way of playing is more ornamented and places less of an emphasis on beat. The New England style devotes more energy toward movement, especially in Contra dance settings. It is at these Contra dance performances that many Vermonters have honed their skills. Vermont has always had a large tradition of Irish fiddlers, who have been playing in New England since the 1850s, when settlers first began to pass on their native music.

These Irish music sessions are not new to Burlington. The Dockside on Battery Street has been hosting a weekly session for 15 years and the Last Elm Cafe, which closed its doors last week, had one for the last seven years.

It was at the Dockside that Barbara Wright first got involved with playing Irish session music

four years ago. Prior to that she had never played music. "I always wanted to play the fiddle," says Wright. But when her elderly neighbor gave her a mandolin she started to play. "It had been sitting in her attic for 40 years collecting dust."

*Brian Perkins  
passes on  
tradition  
at the  
Celtic College*

Participants also share stories and ideas on how they learn to play songs when sheet music isn't available. The most common method is to listen in at sessions and play along softly until they are confident enough to join in. Others often bring a tape recorder with them and later

return and listen to the song over and over until it is captured in their heads. After an hour long learning session and Q & A, the group then spends the rest of the evening playing a variety of tunes in an all-out Irish session.

One of the most important

people around you are playing, just go with the flow."

And what about those who encounter Irish purists who refuse to sway from the melody? Perkins offers this advice: "You should give people the understanding that there are varieties and they

should be sensitive to that."

For many musicians who play traditional Irish music, sticking to the exact notes and chords as they are handed down from generations past is of the utmost importance. For others, adding their own flavor to these sometimes static compositions is what makes it all worthwhile. For those involved with the Celtic College, finding the right mix between old and new is all part of the learning process. ▀

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lessons to be learned is the etiquette that is upheld during a session. While someone may think a song is not being played the "right" way, there are always others who are in sync with the melody. One participant added, "There is really no right way to play one tune, except the way the

*The Celtic College will continue for the next three Tuesdays, July 15, 22 and 29 at the College Street Congregational Church on the corner of College and Union streets. The session begins at 7:30 p.m. and is free, but participants are asked to make a small donation to help cover the cost of the room.*