

The Music of R.L. O'Mealy

A Tune on the regulators, almost!

Another map of piping terrain! This tune was recorded by the BBC on the 28th August 1943. By this time the piper, Richard Lewis O'Mealy (1875 - 1946) was not a young man, nor was the music very popular. The great collector, Francis O'Neill, was dead only seven years and it must have seemed that his gloomy predictions about the demise of Irish music were likely to come true.

O'Neill gives a glowing account of O'Mealy in *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (p.164). The commentary on his piping from 'one correspondent' is interesting -

'... as to dance tunes - jigs, reels and hornpipes - he can turn them off with the greatest rhythmic point and humour. . . . His playing of the reels is full of that ineffable, buoyant flow that only the best pipers know the secret of. His finger technique is as complete as any I've known, and his use of the regulators, the expressive ringing tones of his tremolo (or, more correctly, his vibrato) are wonderful.'

The first thing I noticed about the piping here was the hopping or skipping rhythm, but equally striking was the regulator accompaniment. As I began to transcribe it I realised that the notes being played were not in the regular gamut of the normal set. If one looks at any photo of O'Mealy it is immediately obvious that the regulators are not the usual ones but the baritone, bass and double-bass. O'Mealy was much influenced by the design of the Taylor brothers and the likely range of the regulators is the usual for baritone and bass and for the double-bass; D3, E, F, G, A, B and C, all below the range of the chanter. For the most part what O'Mealy does is to follow the tune on the regulators and certainly to play on the accented notes. The chanter work is tight, not in the sense of staccato triplets, but in the clipping-short of notes. NPU Patron Andy Conroy (no stranger to the odd staccato note) had a story, as I remember, that O'Mealy was once asked as to the future of piping. In reference to the playing of Br Gildas (Patrick O'Shea) he said that if one were to climb to the crow's nest to look around one could just about see Gildas's head on the horizon, suggesting that he might eventually prove to be tight enough.

There is little in the way of variation, in this performance, in both the chanter and regulator work. In this instance he plays the tune three times and repeats the first part with a little flourish on the regulators at the end. I have only transcribed the first two 'rounds' of the tune and the repeat of the first part - to get the ending.

continued on page 16.

Drops of Brandy

Recorded by the BBC (in 1943?).

Transcribed by James O'Brien-Moran from the piping of R.L. O'Mealy

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Drops of Brandy". The score is written in G major and 8/8 time, consisting of eight systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The melody in the treble clef is characterized by a series of eighth-note patterns, often with grace notes, and includes a prominent triplet in the final system. The bass clef accompaniment provides a steady, rhythmic foundation with a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often using block chords. The piece concludes with a final cadence in the treble clef.

Drops of Brandy (contd)

from page 14

A number of tunes were recorded at this session and I recall hearing that O'Mealy was not that pleased with the recording session.

A few of his tunes were published in the *Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society* in the early part of this century, and these may be re-published in this newsletter at some future date. To judge from photographs, O'Mealy was something of a slave to the ideals or at least ideas of the Gaelic League. He is often pictured wearing someone's notion of the Irish piper's costume. No doubt he overcame any difficulties arising from his garb with his highly effective piping.

Transcriptions are like maps. They are a poor substitute for the real thing. Try to get a listen to this unusual piper.

James O'Brien-Moran, Co. Waterford

Ed. note -*The O'Mealy recordings can be heard at the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum, Co. Down or the Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin. It is not possible to obtain copies from either of these institutions as copyright rests with the BBC.*