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## INSTRUCTION

## Tony McManus Lesson

The Celtic guitar master on using ornamentation. **With video.**

By Scott Nygaard

The guitar was a late arrival on the traditional Irish music scene. Early recordings by Irish fiddle legends Michael Coleman and James Morrison, for example, often featured slightly confused New York studio pianists, and the guitar didn't become a regular member of the Irish *seisiún* band, either in the old world or the new, until the 1970s, when guitarists like Paul Brady, Arty McGlynn, and Micheál O'Domhnaill proved the value of six-string accompaniment. Even then, however, the guitar was primarily a backing instrument. A guitarist with the kind of virtuosity and fluency with the subtleties of the Irish tradition displayed by the best fiddlers, flutists, and pipers wouldn't appear until the mid-'90s. That guitarist is Tony McManus, who, since the release of his eponymous album in 1996, has shown that traditional Celtic music can form the basis for an original and masterful solo-guitar style that transcends genre.

A fingerstyle guitarist whose lush, complex arrangements leave open-jawed guitarists shaking their heads, McManus is just as adroit with a flatpick. But his music has to some extent moved beyond technique. To play fiddle and bagpipe music idiomatically on the guitar, he often combines and even invents techniques. For example, he uses his thumbnail as a flatpick to play triplets on the lower strings of the guitar, playing both down- and upstrokes with his thumb.

Born in Scotland to an Irish family, McManus became immersed in the Celtic music renaissance of the 1970s while still in his early teens, teaching himself to play the guitar and developing an abiding ardor for the instrument. He has a particular passion for the work of contemporary luthiers, which he showcased on his most recently recorded solo album (due out in late 2008 on Compass Records), playing a different luthier-built guitar on each track [See "[Guitar Dreams](#)"].

In addition to solo recordings and performances, McManus is an avid collaborator, often working in duos, as both accompanist and full partner, with such renowned fiddlers as Alasdair Fraser, Maevie Donnelly, and Bruce Molsky or as a member of the four-guitar supergroup Men of Steel (with Dan Crary, Beppe Gambetta, and Don Ross). I recently caught up with McManus during a tour with Donnelly, and we spent a morning talking about the evolution of his guitar style, his favorite tunings, and the signature techniques he's developed to bring a previously unheard-of power and authenticity to traditional Celtic guitar music.

**Was guitar your first instrument?**

**McMANUS** No, I started on violin lessons in school. I was atrocious. I still am. I'm left-handed, so it was actually a great thing that I started on violin because I wasn't given the choice of which way to play. I got used to fingering with my left hand and doing all the other stuff with my right, but I just couldn't handle the bow. I was also interested in playing more than one note at a time. I would be sent up to my room to practice and my parents would be at the foot of the stairs not hearing anything. I would be sitting with the fiddle on my lap, strumming chords, thinking, "This is great. It's not very loud, but it's great" [*laughs*].



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So my dad got me a mandolin when I was eight or nine and then a guitar when I was ten, but the guitar was the thing I always wanted. I thought it was one of the most beautiful things in the world. How could anyone not want to play this gorgeous instrument? I just beavered away—locked myself in a little room and got on with it. It's all self-taught.

**Were you playing traditional music?**

**McMANUS** Yeah, at that time there was an explosion of interest in traditional Irish music. The mid-'70s is kind of written off as the pinnacle of naff. But in 1975, the first Bothy Band album came out; the Chieftains were touring these huge venues and getting a lot of publicity; the Boys of the Lough were up and running; and the folk club scene was thriving. My family is very much Irish in background, so all of that stuff was in the house. Combined with being fascinated with the guitar, I developed these two obsessions in parallel, and my career ever since has been trying to make the two of them work together.

No one pointed out to me that you don't really play traditional melodies on the guitar, either with a pick or fingerstyle—it's a backing instrument. No one told me, and it didn't dawn on me at the time, so I just got on with flatpicking—jigs and reels.

**You started with flatpicking?**

**McMANUS** Yeah, because I was using a pick with the mandolin, and I had the fingering from playing fiddle. And I could actually make the pick work, somehow or other. There were a few kids in school strumming chords and things, so they showed me the first half dozen cowboy chords [on guitar.] I would use the fingers as well and play slow airs, just figure different things out.

**Were you learning tunes from seisiúns?**

**McMANUS** Well, a few from *seisiúns*, but I didn't get to play out all that much, because I was too young. Most of the *seisiúns* happened in "licensed premises," and Scotland wasn't the enlightened European country it is now, so they very rarely allowed women in, let alone children [*laughs*]. I didn't get to go to many *seisiúns*, but the ones I did, I picked up a few tunes. Mostly it was from recordings.

**Do you remember any of the first tunes you really worked on?**


**McMANUS** The first major goal for me was "O'Carolan's Concerto," which was on an album by the Johnstons. They were a ballad band, but two of the musicians were Mick Moloney and Paul Brady, and they did this instrumental track that was just two guitars playing "O'Carolan's Concerto." I thought it was the most incredible thing I'd ever heard. Here was my favorite instrument playing a melody you'd normally associate with fiddles and harps and flutes [**Example 1: "O'Carolan's Concerto"**]. That's just the first part.

**Example 1**

**Video**

What was bubbling under my thought processes was that they were playing this music idiomatically. It wasn't bluegrass flatpick guitar; it was traditional Irish music played on guitar. I wasn't aware of that whole aspect of it, but what I absorbed is how they would ornament the thing the way a fiddler would, with triplets and cuts and rolls and grace notes, things like that. Through listening to fiddles, flutes, accordions, pipes, I absorbed all of that stuff, and a lot of it comes out in the way I play still.

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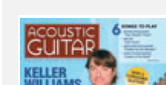
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