

# **Ornamentation and Variation for the Folk Revival Singer**

A lecture given by Peggy Seeger on Saturday 5 March 1966, at the “Old Contemptibles”, Edmund Street, Birmingham. Recorded by members of the Kidderminster Audio and Tape Society, transcribed by members of the Birmingham and Midland Folk Centre, and edited by Pam Bishop, Susan Jones and Katharine Thomson.

## **Author’s Preface, first edition**

This lecture is a preliminary survey and rough guide for revival folk singers wishing to improve the decoration and variation in their singing. It is recognised in Britain now that the general styles of folk singing must be reconstructed, and often reconstructed by singers with no formal knowledge of music, whose background includes such a diversification of musical experience as to make it confusing for them when learning folk disciplines. This lecture is an attempt to dissect the basic elements of decoration, both for analysis of a country singer’s style, and for embellishment of melodies which the revival singer may find in the cold bare notation of books. The author begs leniency on the part of formal musicians for the liberties taken, not in the thesis, but in its explanation, in the stretching of classical definitions, and in the generalisations necessitated by lack of space and time.

## **Peggy Seeger, 1966**

### **Author’s preface, online edition**

On the premise that folk music is stylistically very different from pop or classical musics, I made this lecture in the 1960s to give singers an idea of what might be done with folk songs. Were I doing this now, I would probably borrow less from classical nomenclature and decorations, but back then I was new to the whole idea of training folksingers at all. If anything, this lecture probably helped singers to develop the subtleties of their voice and of the songs. It has to be taken with many a grain of salt. It can certainly do no harm and certainly did improve a number of singers. Please regard it as an ideas bank, an acknowledgement that folk music deserves an agile voice and a particular empathy that is very different from that of formal or popular music. The songs need more than a voice that just concentrates on words and melody. If nothing else, adding ornamentation will increase your vocal skill. It’s best not to over-use it.

## **Peggy Seeger, September 2021**

### **Editor’s note, online edition**

I would like to thank Peggy Seeger for the care she has taken to ensure I have accurately transcribed and edited this lecture, for putting it in today’s context, and for giving permission for it to be published online

## **Pam Bishop, September 2021**

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## INTRODUCTION

The subject of this lecture is ornamentation and variation as found in folk music, but because I am concerned more with the singer's approach to the subject than the academic approach, I shall not only describe what the different ornaments are and how they sound, but shall try to demonstrate how they are produced and when they may be used.

At the moment, there are very few books giving a performer's approach to folk music. Most of the literature on the subject is written for scholars, and deals mainly with the history of certain areas of music, such as ballads, love songs, work songs etc. But detailed study of the "right way" of performing folk song is very important, especially for people like us who are coming to the subject secondarily, and who have not been able to learn these techniques in the traditional way.

Because there is so little documentation of this aspect of folk music, most of my definitions have been taken from classical music, but I have enlarged upon them because the language of classical music is too narrow to describe the complex technique of folk music. As a start, here is a quotation from the Harvard Dictionary of Musical Terms:

*"Musical ornamentation arose as a spontaneous act on the part of the interpreter who in performing a traditional or written melody, enlivened it, expanded it, varied it through his technique of improvisation."*

Notice that this definition is a description of what the singer does. Ornamentation cannot exist apart from the performer; although certain melodic formulas can be identified independently, they are only a part of a total style or technique which is characteristic of a singer and his/her culture. It is unusual to find traditional singers who read music – they learn songs by ear and absorb a knowledge of the uses of ornamentation at the same time. Most strong folk cultures have their own distinctive forms of ornamentation which are common to the singers within that tradition.

I think a brief account of the historical background of this subject would be appropriate here. The first important divergence between folk and classical music occurred at about the end of the 10th century, when a usable system of notation was evolved. At this early stage it still allowed for a tremendous amount of spontaneity and individual creativity on the part of the singer, because the notation was primitive, giving just the bare melodic line, with no detailed or notated indication of how to decorate it. In fact ornaments were not written down in full until the 16th or 17th century. Even up to 1800 singers were still decorating songs freely, and the so-called classical musicians were expected to be able to improvise at certain points in the music. When writing a concerto, a composer would often indicate a place at the end of a movement where the soloist was to insert his/her own cadenza.

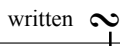

However this became less viable as styles of music changed and the cadenzas grew less suitable for the original concerto. And so gradually classical music became more tied to the page, and offered less scope to the creative urge of the performer. Notation became more important, improvisation became less important. Decorations were dictated by the composer.

Now it is just this spontaneity which is one of the strengths of folk music, one of the things which distinguishes it as an expression of cultural identity or of personal genius; and if the singer is well trained within his/her tradition, and comes from a rich culture, his/her individuality can rise to a very highly developed art. This is why it is worth studying ornamentation and variation, because this is a field where the performer has most opportunity for creating something individual out of a skeleton of a tune.

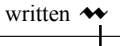
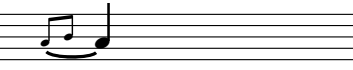
I have already said that I shall use classical terms where they exist; this is because they are a short and commonly accepted notation for elements of style. They take the form of symbols written over notes which indicate some short melodic formula. Here are some examples:

**EXAMPLE 1 - turn, mordant and trill**


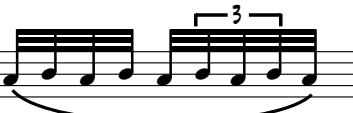
The turn

written  sung 

The mordant

written  sung 



The trill

written  sung 

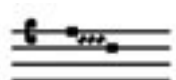

The first symbols for set melodic patterns such as these ornaments were the neumes, used from the 9th century onwards to represent the recurrent musical phrases of folk music, which became plainsong in the churches. These had Latin names:

**EXAMPLE 2 - porrectus and quilisma**

Porrectus

written  sung 

Quilisma (written between two notes of a minor third)

written  sung   
*p*

But whereas the notation used in classical music now can indicate variations of pitch only, the neumes represented differences of emphasis, tone and rhythm as well. At that time folk music and church music shared a common idiom, so that every type of ornamentation in folk music was also used in plainsong and could be expressed in neumatic notation. Now just as music is made up of melody, harmony, tone and rhythm, so the possible forms of ornamentation and variation in folk music may be melodic, harmonic, rhythmic or tonal. But our classical terminology will only deal with the melodic and harmonic ornaments; it has narrowed in range because the other forms of embellishment are no longer acceptable in classical music, and the symbols to represent them are not required. In order to describe these other ornaments, I shall use terminology derived from a physical description of how the sound is produced.

In fact at the moment the range of ornaments in English folk singing is very small; none of the English field singers I have ever heard has ever used anything more than the simplest melodic ornaments. In Ireland the situation is similar except that occasionally Gaelic singers may use the glottal or vanal (disappearing) sounds. In other cultures, the range is much wider; a piece of Syrian or Roumanian music, for instance, is very rich in ornaments.

It is a common assumption among revival singers that we must learn to sing like our field singers, since this is the only folk tradition we know. But cultures have high points in their development and low points in their decline. Our folk culture is at present at very low ebb, requiring little study or work in order to manifest average competence. There is little expertise or competition in the English and Lowland Scots singing styles. Therefore it is not enough to sing songs just as we have inherited them; we cannot leave our tradition in its present state of decline as far as pure singing style is concerned. If the singing styles transmitted to us are incapable of doing justice to the magnificent songs we have inherited, then we must change the singing style and we can do this by studying examples of the best ideas from other cultures where the folk tradition has remained unbroken. Our tradition is based chiefly on melody. There are other cultures also based on melody in their music. We have so much in common with these other, more complex, cultures in the way of actual ballad material, and in the way the voice is produced, that perhaps we could try to regain from them some of the wealth of ornamentation and singing style which we once had.

One can study ornamentation in two ways, by analysis or synthesis.

### **ANALYSIS – working backwards from a performance**

This involves listening to a melody and dissecting it, that is, comparing different styles of singing and trying to figure out what makes them up. Two contrasting examples which are used here are Texas Gladden [1] and Marie Kuhn [2]. Almost every singer uses some ornamentation. Texas Gladden was the plainest I could find, with a clean cutting edge very suitable for ballads. By contrast, Marie Kuhn, a Gaelic singer from the west of Ireland, has a highly decorative style. Unfortunately it is impossible to identify the ornaments in this song without knowing the original tune and because she sings in Gaelic I cannot see the relation of the ornaments to the words. I must stress at this point I am speaking only of ornaments on songs, not melodies without words, because it is mainly by hearing the words that we can judge melody and decoration. Another real obstacle to studying ornamentation by analysis is that for many singers the ornaments are learnt as, or become, an integral part of the basic tune. Paddy Tunney, for instance [3] found it almost impossible to isolate and sing the bare melody without any decoration.

### **SYNTHESIS – working forwards towards a performance**

This method of working on ornamentation is to take a simple tune and build it up by adding to it different types of decorations that we know, learning in a practical way how ornamentation may be used. This is the most sensible way for revival singers, who needs must learn a number of their songs from singers whose singing style is very basic; or who may learn their songs from books, for due to the limitations of conventional musical notation the tunes in books are only a skeleton compared to the song as it is heard by the notator. I shall use the song “Johnny Todd” throughout this lecture as an example of a simple tune to which decoration can be added. The simple tune is glorious, best left without ornamentation. The examples are added only as demonstrations.

#### **EXAMPLE 3**

1 2 3 4  
 John-ny Todd he took a no-tion for to cross the o-cean wide, and he  
 5 6 7 8  
 left his true love be-hind him wal-king by the Li-ver- pool tide.

I would like to begin by restating the purpose of ornamentation and describing the nature of the different ornaments, the reason for their use, and their position in the melody. Ornamentation is not a set part of the melody; it is what is added by the singer to embellish the melody, to make it more “beautiful”, more smooth or dramatic. Here again is the definition:

*“Musical ornamentation arose as a spontaneous act on the part of the interpreter who in performing a traditional or written melody, enlivened it, expanded it, varied it through his technique of improvisation.”*

There are a great number of ways of decorating a melody. From my own observation I have recognised and classified four main types of variation as applicable in the study of the revival folk singer.

1. Rhythmic variation
2. Structural or harmonic variation
3. External or melodic variation
4. Impulse or tonal variation

that is, rhythmic, harmonic, melodic and tonal variation.

## 1. RHYTHMIC VARIATION

The main reason for rhythmic variation is necessity. The rhythm of a tune when written down is usually made to suit the words of the first verse, and in successive verses where the rhythm of the words is not exactly the same, the rhythm of the melody must be changed to match.

EXAMPLE 4

1 2 3 4  
 5 6 7 8

For a week she wept full sore-ly, tore her hair and wrung her hands, Then she  
 met with an - oth-er sail - or wal-king by the Li-ver-pool sands.

There is one place here in the 6th bar where the rhythm of the melody has been changed to fit the rhythm of the words. Otherwise it would have been sung:

6 \*

an - oth - er sail - or

This may seem like pure common sense but many people do sing absolutely ridiculous formations of words because the rhythm already set up required it. So although it does sound very simple it is important, especially for people who are learning songs out of books. An infallible rule is to try and use the inflections of normal speech, that is, to sing ‘another’ as one speaks ‘another’. Often seasoned singers will purposely avoid conversational inflection to bring attention to a word or phrase and this in itself is a variation - as long as it is done on purpose.

## 2. STRUCTURAL VARIATION

Structural variation consists of actual changes in the structure of a melody, in its pitch. Every melody has certain “key” notes which define it; these usually occur

- 1) on heavy rhythmic beats
- 2) wherever the tune changes direction
- 3) at cadences

The “key” notes of Johnny Todd are underlined below:

EXAMPLE 6

Musical notation for Example 6, showing a melody in 4/4 time. The key notes are underlined and numbered 1 through 8. The melody consists of two lines of four bars each. The first line has a 6/4 time signature change in the second bar. The second line has a 6/4 time signature change in the second bar. The key notes are: 1 (quarter), 2 (quarter), 3 (quarter), 4 (quarter), 5 (quarter), 6 (quarter), 7 (quarter), 8 (quarter). There are minus signs (-) under the notes in bars 2, 4, 6, and 8.

If these “key” notes are altered the tune itself is changed, but even large variations of pitch on the other notes will not affect the basic structure of the tune if the “key” notes remain. Hence the following, where non-key notes are altered.

EXAMPLE 7

Musical notation for Example 7, showing a melody in 4/4 time. The key notes are underlined and numbered 1 through 8. The melody consists of two lines of four bars each. The first line has a 6/4 time signature change in the second bar. The second line has a 6/4 time signature change in the second bar. The key notes are: 1 (quarter), 2 (quarter), 3 (quarter), 4 (quarter), 5 (quarter), 6 (quarter), 7 (quarter), 8 (quarter). There are minus signs (-) under the notes in bars 2, 4, 6, and 8.

The “key” notes of rhythmic songs usually come at the beginning of each bar. Cadences occur at the ends of the lines since in rhythmic songs the melody follows the rhythmic structure of the text. This does not apply to free songs where there are no bars and cadences may come in the middle of a line of words. Here is the basic melody (example 8) of a free song with the “key” notes underlined. In example 9, following, is this same phrase with considerable structural variations inserted.

EXAMPLE 8

Musical notation for Example 8, showing a melody in 4/4 time. The key notes are underlined. The lyrics are: Love is tea - sing, love is pleas - ing.

EXAMPLE 9

Musical notation for Example 9, showing a melody in 4/4 time. The key notes are underlined. The lyrics are: Love is tea - sing, love is pleas - ing.

In example 9, the notes between the “key” notes have been changed radically; but as long as I keep the “key” notes the original tune is still there. It is still there even if the “key” notes are anticipated or delayed (as in bar 4 of example 7; or in examples 8 and 9 on the third “key” note, E).

This understanding of the existence and the function of “key” notes is vital to the revival singer wishing to use structural variation, because you cannot properly vary the structure unless you know what to keep and what to change. The “key” notes are the main beams of the musical edifice and if you pull them out the building will fall. When I first referred to ‘structural variation’, I gave it the sub-title of ‘harmonic variation’.

In formal music terminology these decorations are called non-harmonic tones, a concept of decoration which did not exist when formal music and folk music were closer together in their styles. In classical music, melodies are described in relation to the chords (harmonies) which accompany them. The chords change on “key” notes, therefore notes in between the “key” notes are often non-chord based, or non-harmonic. Folk music, however, (at least in our tradition) is not relegated to chords, and the term non-harmonic is somewhat clumsy. This is why I have forsaken the term non-harmonic and adopted the term structural. But the understanding of non-harmonic tones will help the revival singer to understand certain applications of decoration in structural variation. Below, example 10 is a chordal analysis of “Johnny Todd” in the classical manner.

EXAMPLE 10

Chords: C C C C F F C C C C C C F F G

In the first two bars, all the melody notes lie in the chord written below them. However the second note in the 4th bar does not lie within the chord of F. This is a non-harmonic tone. The note of E is not in the chord of F. In the same way, most melodies include some non-harmonic tones, but more can be added as structural variation. Here are some of the most common forms of non-harmonic tones. I will give them their classical terminology, which, although it may not be exact, is at least universal.

Please keep in mind an important feature of structural variation; that the notes which are added go at roughly the same pace as the melody. If they go noticeably faster than the pace of the melody, they then become external variation, as they do not noticeably alter the structure itself. Of course there will be borderline cases, but in all the following notations of structural additions, they will be notated in notes of the same value, or found in the metre of, the melody notes.

### A. Auxiliary notes

These are notes added between two consecutive notes of the same pitch.

EXAMPLE 11

John- ny Todd he took a no- tion for to cross the o- cean wide, etc

There are only three places in “Johnny Todd” where two consecutive notes of the same pitch occur. The extra note doesn’t have to be just the one above, although this is the limit of the definition as understood in formal music. It can be the one below (an inverted auxiliary), or it can be an interval above, or an interval below.

EXAMPLE 12

John- ny Todd he took a no- tion for to cross the o- cean wide, etc

Auxiliary notes added to a tune often sound contrived, but they are useful, often in conjunction with rhythmic variation where extra syllables found in non-notated verses necessitate adding notes. Auxiliary notes are especially effective in faster rhythmic songs.



## B. Appoggiatura

The classical definition is: a note which is a second away from a melody note, played before it. I can put an appoggiatura on every note in “Johnny Todd” according to that definition.

### EXAMPLE 13

Musical notation for Example 13, showing a melody in 4/4 time. The melody is: John - ny Todd he took a no - tion etc. The melody is decorated with appoggiaturas (marked with asterisks) on every note. The appoggiaturas are placed on the first note of each measure, and the main melody notes are placed on the second note of each measure. The appoggiaturas are marked with asterisks and the main melody notes are marked with numbers 1 and 2.

It sounds ridiculous in this particular constant usage, which is just an example. Furthermore, it completely changes the rhythm of the melody. This is because the appoggiatura comes on the beat and is accented. Often when appoggiaturas have been put in they have become part of a melody and so are not any longer a decoration as such. This is the least versatile of the non-harmonic tones.

## C. Anticipation

The term denotes the action. You close up the space between two notes by anticipating the second note. To do this, I sing a melody note, and then while I am on the same syllable, I sing the next note after it, slurring slightly to avoid a jerky transition.

### EXAMPLE 14

Musical notation for Example 14, showing a melody in 4/4 time. The melody is: John - ny Todd he took a no - tion for to cross the o - cean etc. The melody is decorated with anticipation (marked with asterisks) on every note. The anticipation is placed on the first note of each measure, and the main melody notes are placed on the second note of each measure. The anticipation is marked with asterisks and the main melody notes are marked with numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Many English folk singers use this decoration. When it is used all the time it makes a melody smoother and less four-square. For this reason it is very useful in songs with marked rhythms, like “Johnny Todd” in 4/4 time, or “Lord Lovel” in 3/4. Putting anticipation in here and there makes the rhythm less marked and the melody smoother.

### EXAMPLE 15

Musical notation for Example 15, showing a melody in 3/4 time. The melody is: Lord Lo - vel he stood at his cas - tle gate etc. The melody is decorated with anticipation (marked with asterisks) on every note. The anticipation is placed on the first note of each measure, and the main melody notes are placed on the second note of each measure. The anticipation is marked with asterisks and the main melody notes are marked with numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

There is a whole style of singing called “cradle” singing which uses the principle of anticipation consistently but also puts a small syllable on some of the anticipated notes.

### EXAMPLE 16

Musical notation for Example 16, showing a melody in 2/4 time. The melody is: O a shep-herd's a daugh-ter-a watch-ing sheep-a Young Will-iam ri-ding by etc. The melody is decorated with anticipation (marked with asterisks) on every note. The anticipation is placed on the first note of each measure, and the main melody notes are placed on the second note of each measure. The anticipation is marked with asterisks and the main melody notes are marked with numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Anticipation is best used to close up gaps and smooth tunes out. It can, like any other form of structural decoration, become hypnotic if used too often in one song.

### D. Échappé

The French for ‘escape’, this is another descriptive term. Most structural variations depend on the direction of the tune. Auxiliary depends on two notes of the same pitch following each other and anticipation always copies the pitch of the following note. Échappé escapes from the direction of the tune this way:-

EXAMPLE 17

Musical notation for Example 17. The melody is in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are: "John - ny Todd he took a no - tion for to cross the o - cean wide, etc". The melody consists of four measures. Measure 1: quarter notes G4, A4, B4. Measure 2: quarter notes B4, A4, G4, with an asterisk above the B4 note. Measure 3: quarter notes G4, F4, E4. Measure 4: quarter notes D4, C4, B3, with an asterisk above the D4 note. The time signature changes to 6/4 at the end of the fourth measure.

The direction of the tune on “a notion” is downwards. The decoration (starred) goes upward. This is échappé. In small doses, échappé can help to point up a simple tune like this. The difference between échappé and appoggiatura is determined by the words. If I sing appoggiatura instead of échappé at these points in “Johnny Todd” it would sound quite different. Échappé is unaccented; appoggiatura is on the heavy beat, or rather, creates a heavy beat.

EXAMPLE 18

Musical notation for Example 18. The melody is in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are: "John - ny Todd he took a no - tion for to cross the o - cean wide, etc". The melody consists of four measures. Measure 1: quarter notes G4, A4, B4. Measure 2: quarter notes B4, A4, G4, with an asterisk above the B4 note. Measure 3: quarter notes G4, F4, E4. Measure 4: quarter notes D4, C4, B3, with an asterisk above the D4 note. The time signature changes to 6/4 at the end of the fourth measure.

### E. Cambiata

This means change in English. It has the same function as échappé, but follows the direction of the melody.

EXAMPLE 19

Musical notation for Example 19. The melody is in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are: "And he left his true love be - hind him walk - ing by the Li - ver - pool tide." The melody consists of eight measures. Measure 5: quarter notes G4, A4, B4, with an asterisk above the B4 note. Measure 6: quarter notes B4, A4, G4. Measure 7: quarter notes F4, E4, D4. Measure 8: quarter notes C4, B3, A3, with an asterisk above the C4 note.

Once again, the words of the song distinguish cambiata from appoggiatura. Jean Ritchie uses cambiata in her version of the “Cherry Tree Carol”, and it sounds like a slow hook on the end of the line [4].

EXAMPLE 20

Musical notation for Example 20. The melody is in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are: "Jo - seph and Ma - ry out a - walk - ing one day". The melody consists of five measures. Measure 1: quarter notes G4, A4. Measure 2: quarter notes B4, A4. Measure 3: quarter notes G4, F4, E4. Measure 4: quarter notes D4, C4, B3. Measure 5: quarter notes A3, G3, F3, with an asterisk above the A3 note.

The two important notes are still there in bar 5, and she changes the cadence slightly by adding cambiata in between.

**F. Passing Notes**

Both échappé and cambiata lie outside the interval made by the two melody notes involved, whereas passing notes lie within this interval. They can often be used in the same way as anticipation, to smooth a melody and make it more fluid. The classical definition is: “a scale-wise motion between two melody notes”. The passing notes are starred in example 21.

**EXAMPLE 21**

1 \* \* 2 \* \* 3 \* \* 4  
 John- ny Todd he took a no - tion for to cross the o- cean wide, etc

I have expanded this definition to mean any notes whose pitch lies between that of the two melody notes.

**EXAMPLE 22**

Instead of it could be

It has the same effect because it still comes inside the interval.

**EXAMPLE 23**

5 \* 6 7 \* 8  
 and he left his true love be hind him wal king by the Li ver pool tide.

Seamus Ennis uses passing notes in [5]. Passing notes are usually used in small intervals and are often already built into a tune.

**G. Suspension**

This form of variation is chiefly of interest to those who accompany themselves. In classical terminology, suspension occurs when a note is held longer than written and there is a chord change underneath it.

**EXAMPLE 24**

Chords: C C C C C C C C G7 G7 -----

Here the sung note is held longer than usual and resolved into the new chord. This definition is only useful for people who accompany themselves, but suspension can be used as a term describing the extra length of the note. This is of no import to the unaccompanied singer; if he/she uses suspension it becomes a rhythmic decoration, as in example 25.

**EXAMPLE 25**

1 2 \*  
 John - ny Todd he took a no - tion, etc

Field singers often put an extra beat into a bar and this is sometimes regarded as a fault. But many songs in 5/4 time have been collected in this country, and in these songs suspension is not a decoration, but a feature of the tune. Suspension may, however, account for the many songs in irregular rhythm which occur, such as the “Bonny Bunch of Rushes Green” which has a different metre in every bar.

**EXAMPLE 26**

As I walked out one fair May morn to the green fields I took my way,

Suspension does not depend on the number of words or their rhythm – suspension is applied for emphasis to certain words (such as ‘fair’ and ‘fields’ in example 26). For this reason I have included it in structural rather than in rhythmic variation.

**H. Pitch Variations**

**(i) Quarter Tones**

Classical music is built on the idea of semitones as shown in the chromatic scale.

Many other cultures use the tones that are in between, that is, quarter tones. And folk singers in *this* country also use them. Some people criticise them for having no sense of pitch, but it is deliberate, since it always comes in exactly the same place for each verse. Phil Tanner does this in the Gower Wassail [6]

He’s not singing

a was-sail a was-sail                      or                      a was-sail a was-sail

If we define  $\frac{1}{2}\#$  as meaning “raise this note by a quarter tone” then Phil Tanner is singing this:

a was - sail, a was - sail

This occurs in exactly the same place for each verse. Appalachian singers use this a lot; blues singers use it all the time. This is a pitch variation and it can be used – judiciously.

**(ii) Cross Relations**

The classical major and minor scales differ from each other chiefly on the third note of the scale.

If I use both these notes, F and F# in one tune, it is called cross relation.

In other words, I’m using two modes at once, and setting one of these notes against the other.

In “We Poor Labouring Men” there is cross relation between two modes, or scales.

**EXAMPLE 27**



The song uses both these scales.

**EXAMPLE 28**



It uses them so close together that it is obviously playing on the difference as a pitch variation. A lot of singers use this, but it is very often notated out by classically trained collectors, who feel that a tune should be in one mode or scale only. If you find these pitch variations in notation it's best to stick to them, because they may have become part of the tune. They may also be characteristic of the particular singer. For instance, it is a characteristic Southern English form of decoration – Caroline Hughes uses it on nearly every song. It is practically a hallmark in East Anglia; Sam Larner and Harry Cox use it extensively.

There are two main points about cross relation. First of all, it need not be only major and minor scales where you cross the relations. It can be crossing of the mixolydian with the normal major (as in example 28) or crossing of the dorian with the aeolian. Secondly, be consistent. Pick a particular part of the tune that you wish to make your cross relation on, and stick to that particular part of the tune. You may find that this variation which you have added will become a part of the tune which you like, but be consistent.

***(iii) Slide***

This is also a pitch variation. Instead of singing an interval between two notes cleanly, sing or slide through all the intermediate pitches. This must be kept under control, and only used to point up particular tunes, as in “The Boatie Rows” [7].

Some singers depend on slides for their style (such as Jessie Murray of Banff), and a singer who constantly slides is said to be using ‘portamento’, which if used artfully is exquisite and if used badly can be grotesque.

**SUMMING UP – Uses of Structural Variation**

There are circumstances where structural changes are essential; that is, when there are whole phrases in one verse that are not in another verse, or when there is an extra line. Sometimes this can be handled by repeating part of the tune, or by changing the metre. But in a song which has a short line in one verse and a long line in another, determine which are the ‘key’ notes of the melody for that line, and put enough structural variations in between to fit the words of the second verse, matching the direction and pace of the melody.

Most successful structural variations are combinations of all the ones I have mentioned. Often a singer prefers one style, and uses it as a hallmark to distinguish his/her singing. But there is no reason why we should not learn all of them. However, it is important to know when they can be used. They have more effect on the character of the melody than other variations, so unless you

recognise in your mind the importance of the pace of the melody and the direction of its phrases, you can ruin it by using inappropriate structural changes.

### 3. EXTERNAL VARIATION

This is ornamentation in the strict classical sense, and so here classical terminology is most useful because the ornaments used by folk singers are exactly the same as the classical ones. It consists of the use of set melodic patterns which are superimposed on the main notes of a tune, but which do not change its structure. They are easier to use than structural variations because although they demand technical skill, they do not require an understanding of the shape of the melody. They must be sung quickly so as not to affect the rhythm, so they need a bit of practice. Many of them are merely structural variations which have been speeded up, which are no longer sung at the same pace as the melody. In the following examples I will demonstrate the principles of different types of external decoration – many will sound ridiculous, as “Johnny Todd” does not lend itself easily to external decor. They are but examples.

#### 4. Mordent (see also auxiliary note)

This has the same formation as the auxiliary note, but it is sung fast. It is not accented; it comes before a main melody note and is subjugated to the note.



You can put this on any note; you can sing every note in “Johnny Todd” with a mordent.

#### EXAMPLE 29



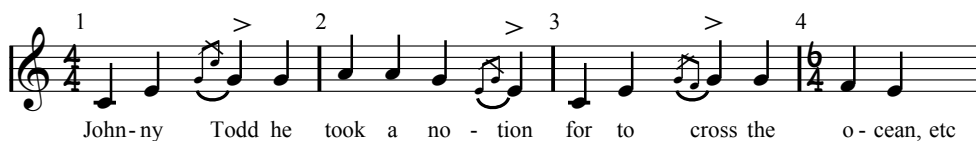
Listen to Colm Keane using a mordent in “Soldier, Soldier” in the following phrase on the word ‘small’ [8]

#### EXAMPLE 30



I can also make an inverted mordent by singing the melody note, a note below, and then the melody note again. I’ve expanded the term ‘mordent’ to mean not only the note above or below, but also any note away from the melody note. This makes the term more useful to us, as it describes a range of ornaments instead of just one.

#### EXAMPLE 31



Always remember that the melody note is accented and falls on the beat, NOT the mordent. It should be sung too fast to be accented.

## **B. External appoggiatura (see also structural appoggiatura)**

This is a very common ornament, and has the same formation as the structural appoggiatura except that it is sung fast. Classical musicians call this acciaccatura, but in this lecture, from now on, appoggiatura refers to external appoggiatura.



This is an unaccented ornament, unlike the structural appoggiatura which is often stressed, even if only by its rhythmic length. The external appoggiatura is short in duration, unaccented and easy to use, almost a flick of the voice. The small note doesn't have to be above the main note, it can be below, and it can be as much as an octave above or below, although if it is too far away from the main note it may be difficult to pitch the main note properly.

### **EXAMPLE 32**



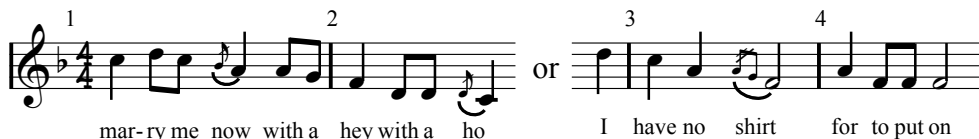
There are many names in classical music for different types of appoggiatura, but basically they follow the same idea; sing one, two or three short notes, unaccented, before coming to the melody note.

### **EXAMPLE 33**



In "Soldier, Soldier" [8] there are several appoggiaturas in the following phrases; on the words 'now' and 'ho', and a double appoggiatura on the word 'shirt'.

### **EXAMPLE 34**



The function of the appoggiatura is demonstrated here on the word 'ho'. Colme Kean uses it to lead to another note; it is a small flick downwards onto the melody note.

Double appoggiatura can also give the impression of harmony, when two small notes of a chord are used to lead up to the main melody note.



## **C. Nachschlag**

This is German for 'after beat' and is a small note coming after the main melody note. Nachschlag is also unaccented and sounds like this:



It can be used for anticipation, but is not as smooth as structural anticipation.

### **EXAMPLE 35**



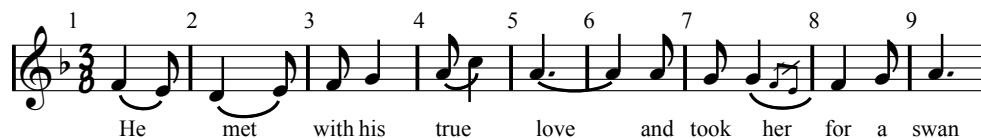
It is a very useful ornament to follow long held notes, just to let the voice rise or drop to another pitch for a split second. It is also effective in pointing up particular notes in mid-phrase.

Double or treble nachschlag means a flight of two or three notes after the main melody note.



Seamus Ennis uses double nachschlag in “Molly Bawn” [5] in the following phrase on the word ‘her’.

EXAMPLE 36



Compare the following phrases. The first uses nachschlag, the second is a mordent, but the actual written notes are the same. The relation of the notes to the words shows which ornament it is.

EXAMPLE 37

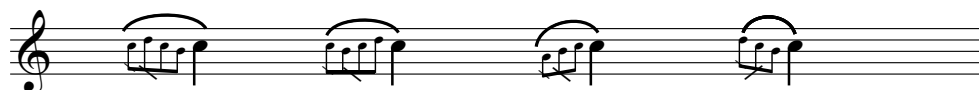


One of the secrets of successful nachschlag is to decrease the effort of the voice when beginning it. This gives the decoration that lightness it needs and gives the voice more agility in turning the melody in any desired direction.

### D. Turn

This is an ornament turning around the melody note. There are four main formations.

EXAMPLE 38



The first begins on the melody note and winds first up, then down, to rest on the melody note. The second begins on the melody note and winds first down, then up, then to rest. The third begins on the note below the melody note, runs up, then comes to rest. The fourth begins on the note above the melody note, runs down, then comes to rest. The turn is used a great deal by folk singers, especially in Ireland. Colm Keane uses it beautifully in [9]. Try listening to it at a slower speed as well as the correct speed if it is difficult to catch.

### E. Trill

This is produced by a note and the note above it being alternately repeated in quick succession.

EXAMPLE 39



It is quite unsuitable for our music if it is pitched. If a shake is added to it (see pulse decorations) it can be acceptable if it is not too long. But we need not dwell long on it. See also tremolo.



## **SUMMING UP – External Variation**

External variation is, in the final analysis, the most useful to Scots, English and Irish singers. The melodies are so well formed already that structural decorations can overload them – but external variation expertly done can highlight an already beautiful tune, or make a skeletal tune less severe.

External decorations, unless you are already a skilful singer, are best practised in vacuo. Spend a few weeks on mordents, a few weeks on turns, on all pitches with several differing types of efforts. Isolate them from the songs until, like our examples of “Johnny Todd”, you can put them wherever you like. Make your voice agile with this type of practice – then your decoration really CAN be spontaneous, not planned as certain revival singers do so that nothing is a surprise in the performance.

Remember also that as you become more adept at singing ornaments, your taste must keep up with your skill. It is easy to weigh a clear straight tune down with mordents, turns, nachschlags etc. Sing a tune straight first to see whether it NEEDS any additions.

## **4. PULSE, or TONAL VARIATIONS**

These are variations in sound or tone produced by controlling the breath in different ways. This is a way of ornamentation exclusive to the singing voice. It was originally represented in musical notation by the ‘liquescent neumes’; and this suggests that the voice, while staying on a pitch, was actually moving. Tonal variations can be used in conjunction with any other types of ornamentation.

### **A. Tremolo**

There is a whole range of decorations which are closely related to the trill except that there is not a variation in pitch. These all stem from the tremolo, which is defined as ‘a quick reiteration of the same pitch’. Many of these are not used in this country now, although they form an important part of folk music in some parts of the world, notably Syria [10].

However, we still have one important part of tremolo in our music – the vibrato. In classical music singing, the vibrato is almost indistinguishable from the trill, whereas in folk usage the two are not close at all. One is pitched and the other is not; one is a characteristic of the breath, the other is a characteristic of the melody.

### **B. Shake**

The shake is achieved by relaxing the throat, and pushing the air out over the vocal cords. It may be added to pitch decorations although on its own the shake has no pitch. In this example [4] the shake is used in conjunction with appoggiatura on ‘old’ and with cambiata on ‘he’.

#### **EXAMPLE 40**

When Jo - seph were an old man and an old man were he

### C. Cadential Variations

There are various ways of coming off a note which involve stopping the breath in some way. The usual way is simply to stop breathing and to stop singing at the same time. Another way, which is often used in Ireland, is to use a conversational cadence; that is, to change from a singing to a speaking tone. This is characteristic of blues singers [11]. A third way is to fade out on the note without changing its pitch, gradually decreasing the amount of breath. Unless carefully controlled, this can become a ‘swallowing’ of the tone, so that not only do you lose pitch, but it sounds as if you are being gently strangled. Listeners tend not to like this.

### D. Vanal or Disappearing Sound

This is a combination of the last two cadential variations above; a decrease in breath together with a lapse into speaking tone. Vanal sounds can be slow or fast; if they are fast they may need an extra impulse of breath as they tend to die out very quickly. Vanal sounds are often used in work songs where they give the tune the pulse of the work action itself, as the chorus does in shanties [12]. In Roumania, this decoration has evolved into a complete style of singing, of which the most famous exponent is Maria Litaresou [13].

### E. Glottal Stop

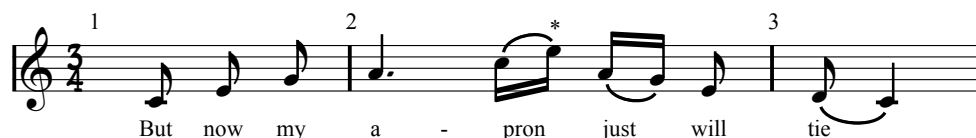
The effect of this is the opposite of the vanal sound, as if the voice is being cast upward. It is produced by stopping the breath with the glottis, which is at the back of the throat. This tends to raise the pitch of the final note slightly. As a cadential variation the glottal stop can be used at the ends of phrases, as Dillard Chandler does in the following example [14] on the word ‘die’.

EXAMPLE 41



Glottal stops can also be used in conjunction with structural decorations like *échappé* and *cambiata*, which depart significantly from the melody, and many singers use them this way, as in the next example [15] on the word ‘apron’

EXAMPLE 42



Certain singers develop a style of singing based on glottal stops and other glottal effects. I think it comes more easily to Gaelic singers, and some, like Paddy Tunney, have it as a complete vocal characteristic [16].

### F. Caesura

This means a ‘break’ and is a very emphatic open-throated casting up of the breath with a sharp impulse. It is often used in work songs.

### G. Implosive

Technically, this is a very difficult thing to do. It has been described as breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth at the same time, using the apex of the breath to terminate the note. I have never heard an English singer use this, but it occurs occasionally in Ireland [17].

## **SUMMING UP – Breath Control**

The use of pulse variations makes it unnecessary to use dynamics in the same way that formal singers do when they emphasise a note or word by swelling on it. Normally in folk music a change in tone, pronunciation or pulse is used instead.

In order to use pulse variations successfully, it is necessary to have excellent breath control, as the variations themselves usually occur at cadences, at the ends of lines, on high or low notes, and such places where the breath may run out. This can lead to a swallowed impulse should the sound continue on the intake of breath. On the other hand, a number of revival singers have a bad habit of forming diphthongs with extra air which they have left over, expelling it all at once and distorting the final words - that is, instead of 'bread' it is 'bread-uh' and instead of 'dear' it is 'dear-uh' – a most unpleasant sound and reminiscent of inexpert stage vocalising.

It is difficult to learn pulse variations by reading definitions. The best way is to listen and try to imitate. They are really the most awkward of musical activities as they necessitate using parts of the throat which you often don't even know you have until you try to activate them. To get them limbered up requires infinite patience on the part of yourself and those within hearing distance.

## **WHICH KIND OF DECORATION TO CHOOSE?**

The type of ornamentation you choose differs according to the type of tune. For purposes of simplification, let us assume that there are two basic types of melody, syllabic and melismatic.

**EXAMPLE 43, syllabic melody, or one melody note per syllable**



**EXAMPLE 44, melismatic melody with more than one melody note per syllable**



There is obviously more scope for external decoration in a melismatic melody. Apart from this, each song has a different requirement, according to speed, rhythm and subject matter. Each singer has to take into account his/her own interpretation of the song, with regard to tone effort and general style.

It is useful to develop a personal style by using certain ornaments consistently and many field singers have in fact done this. Be wary of imposing an unsuitable style of decoration on a song. Above all, be consistent within each song and don't throw all the decorations you know into the one piece.

I have described some of the ornaments which can be used. These are by no means all, since many others are formed by combinations of the basic ornaments. For singers it is necessary to have a practical, rather than theoretical knowledge, so it is important to practise ornamentations thoroughly, at first on their own at different pitches, then in short phrases, and finally in songs.

## **IMPORTANCE OF ORNAMENTATION**

I want to finish by restating the importance of learning and using ornamentation for someone who learns songs from print or from singers whose style has deteriorated. In most cases the received version is nothing but an outline; don't accept it as it stands without at least considering it as a possible vehicle for decoration.

I have shown that at one time the English tradition contained nearly all of the ornaments I have described. By listening to records of the more developed singing styles, such as that of Maria Litaesou, and trying to imitate the way ornamentation is used in other related traditions, we should be able to revitalise our own tradition.

## APPENDIX

Analysis of ornamentation used by Sean McDonagh in one verse of “Morrissey and the Russian Sailor” [18]

First, the words and the bare tune (arrived at by conjecture):



1 2 3 4 5  
Come all you gal-lant I-rish-men wher-ev-er you may be, I

6 7 8 9  
hope you'll pay at-ten-tion and lis-ten un-to me, I'll

10 11 12 13  
sing a-bout a bat-tle that took place the oth-er day, be-

14 15 16 17  
tween a Rus-sian sai-lor and gal-lant Mor-ris-sey.

The first ornament comes in bar 1 on ‘Come’. This can be described in two ways, depending on what is considered to be the bare melody.

If it is  then the decoration is just a mordent on the first note 

But if the melody is as written in bar 1 above, then the note A must be a passing note, and the whole ornament is a combination of a mordent and a passing note. This is an ornament very commonly used by Irish singers in a fall from a high note to a low note.



bar 2: on ‘-lant’ there is anticipation  
bar 3: on ‘-men’, a passing note

gal-lant I-rish-men wher

bar 4: ‘wherever’ – the bare tune is as above. Here he has anticipated the melody note and put an auxiliary note on ‘-er’ before coming to rest on the melody note on ‘you’.

wher-ev-er you may

bar 8: On ‘lis-’ there is anticipation. There is also an extra impulse of breath halfway through the syllable.

bar 9: on ‘me’ a turn

bar 10; on ‘-bout’ a mordent  
bar 12: on ‘place’ a mordent

bar 13: on ‘day’ a turn

day

bar 14: on 'be-' there is a decoration like the one on 'Come' in bar 1; a mordent combined with a passing note



also in bar 14: on '-sian', anticipation  
bar 15; on '-lor', appoggiatura combined with an extra impulse. Here the passing note must be regarded as part of the tune, since it is one of the 'key' notes, coming on a stress



bar 16: on 'gal-', a structural decoration as on 'ever' in bar 4; anticipation of the melody note and auxiliary on the next syllable



Finally, the words together with the tune and variations.

1  
Come all you gal-lant I-rish-men wher-ev-er you may be I

2  
3  
4  
5

6  
hope you'll pay at-ten-tion and lis-ten un-to me I'll

7  
8  
9

10  
sing a-bout a bat-tle that took place the oth-er day be -

11  
12  
13

14  
tween a Rus-sian sai-lor and gal-lant Mor-ris-sey.

15  
16  
17

## LIST OF REFERENCES

1. Texas Gladden, *The House Carpenter*
2. Marie Kuhn, see resource 4
3. Paddy Tunney, *It Being in Spring*, resource 9
4. Jean Ritchie, *The Cherry Tree Carol*, resource 7
5. Seamus Ennis, *Molly Bawn*, resource 4
6. Phil Tanner, *The Gower Wassail*, resource 10
7. Jessie Murray, *The Boatie Rows*, resource 5
8. Colm Keane, *Soldier, Soldier*, resource 4
9. Colm Keane
10. Syrian muesin singing, resource 3
11. Blues singing, resource 8
12. A L Lloyd and chorus, *Bring 'em down*, resource 2
13. Maria Litaresou, resource 1
14. Dillard Chandler, resource 6
15. Big Laurel, resource 6
16. Paddy Tunney lilting, resource 9
17. Elizabeth Cronin, *What would you do?* in resource 4
18. Sean McDonagh, *Morrissey and the Russian Sailor*, resource 4

## RESOURCES

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