

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT "CELTIC MUSIC"

Celtic [KEL-tik or (in Boston area) SEL-tik], adj.

The term "Celtic" is often applied to forms of musical expression that sound almost Irish or almost Scots but are in actuality neither.

Music referred to as "Celtic" is commonly sweet and harmless; in listening to it, one has the impression of something diaphanous or shimmery, kind of musical Jello (green, without the fruit cocktail), easily digested and soon forgotten. Certain species of it may also be tinkly.

Celtic music is undemanding and inoffensive; it will never break up any families or keep anybody up for three days and nights playing it. It's soothing enough to play on an airliner just before take-off; it's an easy-listening programmer's dream around Saint Patrick's Day. It's something to wallow in, like a sunny mud-puddle to a hard-working pig; it's the great accompaniment to a warm bath surrounded by red candles. Colonoscopies go more smoothly with Celtic music in the background.

Celtic music wants to be loved by everybody; it pities the unshaven yahoos crouched in smelly dark pubs spilling drinks on themselves and shouting things like "upya-boya!" or "give it shtick!" at equally unappealing musicians whaling away at the jigs and reels.

In content Celtic music is often minor or mixolydian; harps and synths and heavy reverb are important to its sound; banjos are almost never used; uilleann pipes are okay if they can be miked to sound very far away and not particularly happy about it. If bodhráns are used, they are played as melody instruments; usually there are a lot of them. Theramins and glass harmonicas are not beyond the realm of possibility.

There are ways of identifying Celtic, as distinct from Irish, music.

Conjecture 1: If it kicks ass and makes you want to stuff the head-phones INSIDE your ears, it's probably not Celtic.

Conjecture 2: If you take a word-association test while listening to a piece of music and "meringue" or "pussy-willow" come to mind, it's Celtic. "Flame-thrower" or "avalanche", on the other hand, suggest Irish.

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Some important rules to keep in mind:

[1] True Celtic music must never be associated with identifiable melodies. You cannot possibly hum Celtic music. Dancing to it is recommended to young women only, since it involves a lot of waving arms, closed eyes, and billowing dresses. Anorexia is not an obstacle. Leotards are not unheard of. Young males are encouraged to watch but not to perform (there are exceptions to this rule that we won't go into here). Applause for performance is limited to a light but emotionally-charged tapping together of two fingers of each hand (finger-snapping is by and large passé but may still be heard in some venues in the Mid-West).

[2] If you're challenged to identify a piece of music, your first answer should be "Celtic" if it's being performed by (a) multiple beautiful women in slinky gowns (b) masses of stomping leaping young people (c) a harp - dulcimer duet.

[3] An Irish dance tune can be transformed into a Celtic tune, but the process is not pleasant to listen to and can cause serious trauma to those over the age of forty.

[4] If you hear it played under the following circumstances:

--- you're having a root-canal procedure or a prostate exam (males only)

--- they're stuffing your mother-in-law into a MRI machine

--- they're extracting your mother-in-law from an MRI machine

--- you're having your bad back manipulated

--- you're stocking up on house-brand toilet paper at the supermarket

--- you're waiting for Earl and the guys to finish up that rear-axle job on your old Corolla

... the chances are 97.4 to 1 that it's Celtic.

Excessive indulgence in Celtic music is likely to lead to loss of obscure but important brain cells. Recent real-time MRI research has captured images of large chunks of cerebellum being turned into an unwholesome mushy mess during the Celtic listening process. (At some facilities, undergraduate students with weak stomachs are actually not permitted to observe these MRIs.)

Some therapists claim that these negative effects of Celtic music are best neutralized by having two Paddies (whiskies, not humans) under one's belt

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prior to the listening experience, while others recommend corned beef and cabbage. A growing number - known as "the Harvard school" of therapists - recommend both the whiskey and the food, while the "South Boston school" - by far the most popular - recommends whiskey, food, and a couple pints of Guinness.

Note 1: while intentional contact with Celtic music should be strenuously avoided on most occasions, research indicates that it may be appropriate to listen to small doses of it when watching an astronomical event like a solstice or maybe an equinox. The listener should ideally be robed in bear-skins (scraped) to capture the plenitude of the experience. A goblet or two of mead doesn't hurt either. (Whiskey and/or Guinness may be substituted with the Priestess or Shaman's permission. Some "vegan" version of corned beef and cabbage may be appropriate at the post-event Feast.)

Note 2: Welsh, Manx, and Breton music are also considered part of "Celtic" music, but are fortunately not as readily available as the pseudo-Irish variety. However this should serve as sufficient warning to those intending to operate heavy machinery while listening to anything labelled "Celtic".

Note 3: The term "Celtic" is also extended to Galician music from northern Spain and Portugal (one senses an effort to expand a commercial market here). Furthermore, according to the ethnomusicological gossip mill, the phrase may soon be stretched to cover the musical endeavors of the mysterious Lost Celts of the Trans-Caucasus, who worship an obscure deity that resembles a Dollar Tree plastic leprechaun and are reported to disembowel any musician daring to play in 4/4 time. (The research continues.)

- 1998, updated 2014