

Playing with the Relaxed Hand – Enda Scahill

By Michael Keyes

The 2009 O'Flaherty Retreat in Midlothian, TX was a special treat for me because the banjo class was taught by Enda Scahill, someone I consider to be one of the top players in the world and also one of the best teachers. Enda's skill and musicality are undeniable (see videos below) but what you notice most about his playing is how relaxed he is. In fact, Enda gave a general topics class on relaxation at the retreat and he encouraged us to relax in class.

“One of the main problems musicians have when they play difficult parts” Enda stated, “is the they don't breathe.” When you don't breathe, you can't relax because it takes a lot of energy and muscle power to hold your breath.

We all get nervous at times when we play and there are several things you can do to combat this tendency. The most important thing is to realize that you are tense and holding your breath is one of the easiest ways to tell.

But why relax? The main physiological reason for relaxation is that it makes you more efficient if you are only using those muscles that are needed and the rest are not interfering with whatever performance action you are doing. Tense muscles not only slow down your hand, but they put you in an less advantageous posture and you tire out easily which makes your music less precise - i.e. you get sloppy.

The other reason is more neuropsychological. It is much harder to get involved in the music if you are tense. How many times have you had the experience that you are struggling to play tunes that you know very well? At these times you are most likely very tense for some reason (reasons include performance anxiety, outside concerns, etc.) and you are not able to get into that groove that is so satisfying when you play music.

If you survey the tension in your shoulders, back and hand as you play, you can teach yourself to let go and relax. With relaxation comes better music.

For an Irish tenor banjo player (and a whole lot of others) a relaxed right hand is the goal. Enda has some very specific ideas about the right hand. He likes the “natural grip” in which you extend your arm parallel to the ground and relax your hand. Your thumb should be resting on your first finger at about the first joint. Put the pick in between the thumb and finger and you have (basically) the “natural grip.” A little adjustment might be needed but you will get the idea when you watch the video. Another aspect of his right hand is that the grip on the pick is very light tightening up only momentarily in the fast passages and then not very much. The purpose of the light grip is to keep the hand muscles as relaxed as possible. A very tight grip tends to tighten up the rest of the arm and interferes with the wrist stroke.

Enda likes the wrist stroke. Look at the video of his hand and you will see that he keeps the same angle of attack and the same stroke on all four strings. In addition he is moving the hand as a unit from the wrist with the center of gravity between the knuckles and the wrist, not at the pick. If you use the pick as the center of gravity, you will find that you are using an arm stroke in addition to the wrist stroke. His hand to banjo angle is ideal for the stroke and takes a little experimentation to achieve. If the neck of your banjo is near your ear or your knee, it is probably wrong.

He also uses the McTwist at times during fast passages. I don't think he even noticed this until I pointed it out. It is subtle but it is there. Personally I think that it is a natural movement that all banjo players use to some extent.

Enda talks about relaxation in this video.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69F6P-bUdzk&feature=player_embedded

Here is a video of his hand playing a series of difficult passages from one of his showpieces.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTCu6WZvLcY&feature=player_embedded

While what he plays on the last video is pretty advanced, he keeps the same relaxed hand throughout. He is driving through the strings with triplets and fast string changes and is doing so because he is not tense.

Here is Enda at the instructor concert at the O'Flaherty Retreat playing a schottische and a reel, Colonel Fraser. Note how relaxed he is.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qe5Kp8fsxc&feature=player_embedded

Colonel Fraser

The musical score for "Colonel Fraser" is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of ten staves of music. The melody is characterized by frequent triplet patterns, indicated by a '3' above the notes. The piece begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The first staff contains a triplet of eighth notes. The second staff features a triplet of eighth notes and a triplet of quarter notes. The third staff has a triplet of eighth notes. The fourth staff contains a triplet of eighth notes. The fifth staff has a triplet of eighth notes. The sixth staff features a triplet of eighth notes and a triplet of quarter notes. The seventh staff contains a triplet of eighth notes and a triplet of quarter notes. The eighth staff has a triplet of eighth notes and a triplet of quarter notes. The ninth staff features a triplet of eighth notes and a triplet of quarter notes. The tenth staff contains a triplet of eighth notes and a triplet of quarter notes. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

Rhythm: Reel

I am including the ABCs for you to use with the Concertina.net Convert-a-tron
(http://www.concertina.net/tunes_convert.html)

X: 1

T: Colonel Fraser

C:

R:Reel

Q: 232

K:G

M:4/4

L:1/8

dc|BGAF DG ((3GFG)IAFcF dFcFIBGAF DGGglfdcA d2cAI
BGAF DG ((3GFG)IAFcF dFcFIBGAF DGGgl((3fed) cA BGG2I
dggf g2bg|fdcB ABcAI Gggf gbag|afcA BGG2I
gfge d2dcl((3Bcd) BG ABcAIGBAC ((3Bcd) eglfdcA BGG2I
Bd ((3ddd) BGdGIAFcF ((3ABc) AFIBc ((3ddd) BGdGlcAFG AGG2I
Bd ((3ddd) BGdGIAFcF ((3ABc) AF|((3GAB) ((3ABc) ((3Bcd) eglfdcA BGG2I
((3BcB) GB ((3BdB) GBI((3ABA) FA ((3AcA) FAI((3BcB) GB ((3BdB) GBIcA FG AG G2I
((3BcB) GB GBGBI((3ABA) FA FAFAlGBAc ((3Bcd) eglfdcA d2cAI
BGAF DG ((3GFG)IAFcF dFcFIBGAF DGGglfdcA d2cAI
BGAF DG ((3GFG)IAFcF dFcFIBGAF DGGgl((3fed) cA BGG2I

References

Enda Scahill can be found on the web at

http://www.endascahill.com/Enda_Scahill/Enda_Scahill_Home.html. If you get a chance to hear him or take a lesson, I urge you do to so. He is also in the BrockMcGuire band

<http://www.brockmcguireband.com/>. Enda a multiple All Ireland champion in banjo and mandolin.

He tunes his G string to A for those of you who are interested in those sorts of things. It puts an interesting twist on the sound of instrument. Check out his brand new Claren Setanta banjo while you are on his site.

The next O'Flaherty Retreat is October 29-31 so sign up early to get the best rooms.

<http://www.oflahertyretreat.org>

About the Author



Mike Keyes, a native of Franklin, Tennessee, has played tenor banjo since 1957 and over the years has learned to play five string banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He earned his way through college and medical school playing in bluegrass and dixieland bands and currently plays in the Irish band "Drowsy Maggie." He is an expert in sports performance and has written a book and over 200 articles on the subject.

His interest in Irish music started a number of years ago when effort to learn more about his musical roots led him to the discovery of session playing. Since then he has been to Ireland to learn more about the music and has taken classes and interviewed such banjo greats as John Carty, Angelina Carberry, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O'Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. You can email him at mikeyes@charter.net if you wish to discuss some aspect of the Irish tenor banjo or go to his web site at www.mikekeyes.com.