Celtic Crossing

By William Coulter
# Celtic Crossing Guitar

By William Coulter

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Visit us on the Web at http://www.melbay.com — E-mail us at email@melbay.com
Hello and welcome to the music from *Celtic Crossing!* Thanks so much for your interest in these transcriptions and your desire to play these traditional melodies. This book is a collection of some of my favorite music. The arrangements are for solo steel-string guitar, and guitar with a melody instrument such as fiddle, flute, or uilleann pipes. Most of the tunes are played fingerstyle but I include a few jigs and reels in which I play accompaniment with a flatpick.

The world of traditional music is enormous and we are all part of that world. It is ever changing and evolving and your contribution to the traditional music process is vital, so play on!

**The Technique of Fingerstyle Guitar**

There are many great guitarists throughout the world who all play with their own unique technique. It would be ludicrous to claim that there is only one way to play fingerstyle guitar. Because the guitar is so versatile you find artists playing across many stylistic areas, from the contemporary classical sound of Ben Verdery, to the steel-string fusion of Pierre Bensusan, to the folk styles of the Madagascar guitarist D'Gary, to the acoustic-electric pyrotechnics of Adrian Legg, to the Celtic-Blues artistry of Martin Simpson – and the list goes on and on. I have learned from many different musicians and I encourage you to listen to and learn from as many different styles of music as you can.

My fingerstyle technique on the steel-string guitar is heavily influenced by many years of classical guitar training. Both right- and left-hand positions are similar to that of a classical guitarist. Some of the right-hand techniques that I have adapted from classical guitar are free stroke and rest stroke, arpeggios, planting, damping, staccato with the thumb, and artificial harmonics. Some of the left-hand techniques that I have adapted are slurs (hammer on and pull off), preparation, scales and arpeggios, natural harmonics, barres, ornamentation, and glissando (slides).

**Holding the Guitar**

Thinking about and developing a comfortable and efficient way to hold the guitar is critical to successful guitar playing. I have developed a sitting position in which I use a footstool as a classical guitarist does, but I place the footstool under my right foot. I always sit on the front edge of the chair and keep my left foot flat on the floor. This sitting position gives me complete visual and physical access to the instrument. This position also makes it easy to achieve the left- and right-hand positions that I want. Of course the size and shape of your guitar will effect how high to set the footstool. Experiment with different positions until you find one that is comfortable and efficient.
Right-Hand Position and Technique

A good right-hand position enables you to play with freedom, power, accuracy, and flexibility. To achieve this goal the right-hand wrist should be in a straight line with the forearm, and the wrist should be slightly arched.

I do not anchor my pinky finger on the top of the guitar. I often rest my ring, middle, and index fingers lightly on the first, second, and third strings when my thumb is playing on the lower strings. Or I may rest my thumb on the sixth string when my index, middle, and ring fingers are playing on the upper strings. This technique is called planting and it gives me a secure and relaxed reference point to the strings which keeps my hand in good position. To get a feel for this planting technique, place your thumb on the fifth string and your index, middle, and ring fingers on the third, second, and first strings. In my teaching I call this the “home position” as it is the basis for a good right-hand position. From this position practice playing open string arpeggios to work on tone, volume, and finger independence.

There is a specific spot on my right-hand fingertips which I use to play the string. I call it the “sweet spot.” Basically I use the nail only to strike the string, but before making the stroke the string does come into contact with flesh and nail simultaneously. If you are not happy with your tone or it is inconsistent, check and see if you are playing the string with all flesh or flesh and nail. Adjust the angle of your attack so that you are playing with just the nail and you will get a better sound. Your tone is also dependent on where you are playing in relationship to the sound hole. Explore different tone colors by playing with your hand over the sound hole and then moving closer to the bridge. Listen to the different tones and use the colors you find. This variation in tone color is one of the most beautiful things about the acoustic guitar, so use it! Of course all of these ideas about position and tone depend on the shape and length of your fingernails.

For many years I played with my natural nails only. I loved the sound of them but was frustrated with them wearing and breaking. I have recently been using, and am very happy with, acrylic nails. Acrylic nails are a serious matter. They work great but have a different feel and sound than the natural nail. They also may cause damage to the natural nail if used for a long time. If you have strong nails and can get away without acrylic, all the better. For me, however, the freedom of being able to play and practice as much as I want, without considerable wearing of the nails, has been a life-changing experience. In my case the advantages of acrylics far outweigh the disadvantages. If you do wish to try them find a nail specialist who has done nails for other guitarists. If this is impossible, talk to a guitarist who has them to get some feedback about them. It seems to me that more and more steel-string guitarists are using and really enjoying acrylic nails.
Left-Hand Position and Technique

My ideal left-hand position is one of balance. I use the thumb as a balance point to the fingers. The thumb is opposite my middle finger, approximately in the middle of the back of the neck. My guitar has wider neck than most steel strings so this position is very comfortable.

For me the two most important aspects of left-hand playing technique are position and pressure. I play with the very tips of my fingers, keeping them in a curved position and placing them as close to the fret as possible.

The amount of pressure which you use to press the string is also critical. I use only as much pressure on the string as necessary. Over-pressing is tiring and leads to tightness and a restricted tone. It can also lead to tendonitis! If you play on medium or heavy strings, or if your action is too high, you may be pressing too hard unnecessarily. I play exclusively on D'Addario phosphor bronze light gauge strings. From low to high they are .053, .042, .032, .026, .016, and .012.
Ideas on Accompanying Traditional Irish Music

I have been accompanying traditional dance music in many different situations since about 1980 and the best advice I can give is to open your ears and listen! All that I have learned about accompanying dance music with the guitar I have learned from other musicians, and not just guitarists. Listen to the uilleann pipes and explore how they use the regulators and the drones. Listen to pianists, guitarists, harpists, and accordion players for chord choices and rhythmic ideas. Listen to bodhrán players for rhythmic feel, stresses, tempos, and accents. And above all listen to the melody player and know the tune!

The most common dance types in traditional Irish music are reels, jigs, slip jigs, hornpipes, marches, polkas, and set dances. In this book we will look at jigs and reels. For accompanying dance tunes I use a flat pick and combine strumming of chords with picking of individual accompaniment lines and bass lines. On Celtic Crossing you will find the reel “The Lads of Laois” and the jigs “The Rose in the Heather”*/"Tom Billy’s Jig,” “The Lark in the Morning” and “Beidh Aonach Amaraich”*/"Connachtman’s Rambles.” I accompany all of these tunes in DADGAD.

There are many rhythm and strumming patterns for each dance type. Here are examples of basic strum patterns for reels and jigs. I want to stress that these are examples only. Everyone does it differently and these are only meant to get you started. Once you are comfortable with the basic pattern, experiment and make it your own.

Reels

Reels are in 4/4 and are generally played at a medium to fast tempo. This is the basic strum pattern for accompanying the reel “Lads Of Laois” (DADGAD capo II). The accent indicates a pick of a single note; the D and U refer to the direction of the strum. D means down towards the floor; U means up towards the ceiling:

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For this pattern, the first note of each measure is a single note (the open 4th string); the rest of the notes are strummed (the 3rd, 2nd, and 1st string). You can easily vary the pattern by choosing a different note for the first beat of each measure. For example, you could play the 6th string on the first beat of each measure, or alternate between the 6th string for the first beat of one measure, then the 4th string for the first beat of the next measure and so on.

Jigs

Jigs are in 6/8 and are also generally played moderate to fast. This is the basic strum pattern for accompanying the “Rose in the Heather” (DADGAD):

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You can make these patterns more interesting by varying which strings you pick and which you strum. Additional ways to make an accompaniment musical include choosing chords and chord substitutions which support the melody, playing moving lines, counter melodies and bass lines, cross-picking and droning, emphasizing rhythmic pulse and syncopation, and following the shape of the tunes with dynamics, tension, and resolution. Of course, this list can go on and on. Find out what style of accompaniment you like best, then listen and learn! My favorite accompanists include Micheál Ó Domnaill, who was originally with the Bothy band and now plays with the group Nightnoise, and Dennis Cahill, who plays with the great Clare fiddler Martin Hayes.

**Multi-Track Recording**

*Celtic Crossing* was recorded on 24 tracks of ADAT. The mics I like the best for steel-string guitar are small diaphragm condenser mics. I use a pair of Neumann km 140s. My favorite mic pre-amp is a solid state John Hardy. The other instruments were recorded with a variety of mics including AKG 414 TLII, Rode Classic tube mic, Neumann U87 and U67. All of these sound great through a Neve mic pre-amp. We mixed the album using a Tascam, M3700 automated mixing board. My favorite reverb is a Lexicon 200.

As you will hear on the recording, the arrangements range from solo guitar to multiple layers of instruments. The process and technique for this style of recording is very exciting and challenging. It is also a big topic and could be the subject for a book all on its own! Mixing layers of sound is great fun and can inspire musical ideas. Deep listening is required when mixing. For some practice in deep listening check out the tunes “La Rotta” and “O’Carolan’s Farewell to Music.” Listen very closely and you will hear the mysterious and haunting sound of the E-Bow. The E-Bow is a magnetic device designed for use with the electric guitar but it also works well with steel-string acoustic, especially on the first and second strings. It rests over the string and causes it to vibrate and sustain. It is a very cool little device!

There is so much more I would like to share with you about music and the guitar and recording. For now though let me just wish you good luck with this and all of the other music that you play. And if I ever meet you on the road somewhere, I hope that we can find time to play a few tunes together. Until then, all the best to you.
Notes to the Music

Éinmi, which means “little birds,” is a lullaby I learned from Irish language teacher Deirdre Ni Chaomhannaigh at Oideas Gael, a school in County Donegal. The lyrics sing the drov: sy child to sleep by naming the different birds. We learned the song to help us with our pronunciation of Irish. In this instrumental arrangement the flute plays the part of the singing of the little birds.

I learned The Ground Plan from Laurie Hart, a good friend and great fiddler from Ithaca, New York, and I thank her for giving me such a beautiful tune. La Rotta is a medieval Italian melody that I first heard played by John Renbourn. A few years later I heard Shelley Phillips play it on the harp and was inspired to make my own arrangement.

Kevin Burke and I met for the first time in the recording studio. We had a fine time playing together and experimenting with different tunes. The medley of The Rose in the Heather and Tom Billy’s Jig is one of the results of our session. For “Tom Billy’s Jig” I doubled the guitar part and panned the two parts far left and right in the stereo field. We also doubled the fiddle part on the last time through the tune.

I first heard Marble Halls sung by Enya, and later discovered that it is from the 19th-century opera The Bohemian Girl by William Balfe. The melody is probably based on a traditional air, but the chromatic notes give it a decidedly Victorian flavor.

Return to Fingal appears in the “Marches and Miscellaneous” section of O’Neill’s Music of Ireland, first published in 1903 by Captain Francis O’Neill, who was chief of the Chicago police department, and an avid collector of tunes. His anthology was reprinted in 1979, and is considered by many to be “the Bible” of traditional Irish dance music. I learned “Return to Fingal” from a recording by the great French guitarist Pierre Bensusan who was one of the first guitarists I heard playing in DADGAD.

Lagan Love is one of the most hauntingly beautiful airs I know. I first heard it sung by Van Morrison, and then in another version by Mary O’Hara, and couldn’t help making my own instrumental version. The song was collected by Herbert Hughes in the early 1900s. Hughes traced the tune back to about 1870, to a sapper of the Royal Engineers who was working in Donegal. The Lark in the Morning is a four-part jig which is a very popular session tune. On the recording, Todd plays the tune on his ‘pre-industrial revolution’ pipes. The pipes are in B flat, a major third lower than modern uilleann pipes. The lower pitch gives them a dark and very rich sound. For the transcription in this book, I give the tune in the more popular key of D Major.

Sí bheag Sí mhóir is probably Carolan’s most popular and most played melody. This arrangement is based on Pierre Bensusan’s arrangement, and I thank him for all that he has taught me about music and the guitar.

I first played the reel The Lads of Laois with Laurie Hart while I was living in Ithaca. It is a great and very popular tune.

I composed most of Stor Mo Chroí in the hospital room late on the night of my son’s birth. The title means “Treasure of My Heart” and it was the first music that he heard outside of the womb. His birth was the most miraculous event of my life, and I’m sure that he will inspire more compositions in the future.

Beidh Aonach Amarach translates as “There’s Going to be a Fair Tomorrow,” and is a children’s song I learned at Oideas Gael. This instrumental arrangement leaves the melody relatively intact, but stretches the rhythm and harmony. The Connachtmans Rambles is a jig I learned from Todd.

Ay Linda Amiga, My Lovely Friend, is an old Spanish song whose melody originated in Madrid. I learned it many years ago from a good friend and great singer named Merry Dennehy. Although not an Irish melody, its quality is reminiscent of the saddest of Gaelic love songs and it sits beautifully on the guitar.
**Banish Misfortune** was the first Irish jig that I ever heard. It was featured on an album of the same name by Malcolm Dalglish and Grey Larsen. I have accompanied the tune countless times since then and have always wanted to make a solo arrangement. **The Kesh Jig** is another of those great, ever-popular session tunes which I first heard on an album by the Bothy Band.

Sean Clarach MacDhomnaill composed the words and music to **Mo Ghille Mear** in the 18th century. It’s from a genre called “Jacobite Songs,” songs espousing the claim of the Stewarts (James and Charles) to the throne of the United Kingdom. Charles Stewart, also known as Bonnie Prince Charlie, was an important figure in the rebellion against English colonization. The text is of a political nature, but can also be interpreted as a love song. For this instrumental version, I endeavor to express the love-song side of “Mo Ghille Mear.”

The story is told that Carolan, the great Irish harper and bard, wrote his **Farewell to Music** on his death bed in the year 1733. Over 250 years later it still has tremendous power to stir emotions. This two-guitar arrangement blends the tonal qualities of the steel-string and nylon-string guitars.
Éiníní

Gently flowing

* Last time to Coda

The Ground Plan

DADGAD
Capo II

Slow and Steady

Trad Irish

La Rotta

DADGAD
Capo II

Fast

Medieval Italian
Round Dance

Lagan Love

DGDGBD Very Freely
Capo III
Molto Rubato

All rhythmic values are approximate. Play Freely.

English Horn

Let the chords ring as long as possible.

Guitar
The Lark in the Morning

Trad. Irish

Sí bheag Sí mhóir

Turlough O'Carolan

DADGAD

let all notes ring

The Lads of Laois

DADGAD  
Capo II

Em | Em/D | Em
-|-|-|-|-|-|-|-|-|
0 7 | 5 8 8 8 8 | 0 7 9 10 8 8 9

Fiddle

Stor Mo Chroí

DADGAD
Capo II

Calm and Peacefully

(*In measures 1-9, play all notes with stems down as melody.
All notes with stems up should be played lightly as accompaniment.)

even slower......

molto rit. -----------------------------
Beidh Aonach Amarach

Trad. Irish

Guitar
DADGAD

Flute

The Connachtman’s Rambles

D  G9/D

Guitar
DADGAD

A/D

G9/D

D

G9/D

The Kesh Jig
Mo Ghille Mear

DADGAD
Capo III

Molto Ritardando
Carolan's Farewell to Music

T. O'Carolan

DADGBE

Guitar Two  Slow and Mournful

*Tap lightly with thumb on strings near the bridge for percussive sound and pitches

Molto Ritardando
Artist Biography

William Coulter has been recording and performing traditional music in the San Francisco Bay area since 1981. He has been a member of many ensembles including Isle of Skye, Orison, and Gravity Hill. In 1995 he released his first solo recording on the Gourd music label called Celtic Crossing, and in 1997 he released a follow-up recording called Celtic Sessions. His recordings have been featured on three different Billboard top 10 collections of Celtic music on the Narada Music label. He has also recorded three critically acclaimed CDs of traditional Shaker melodies, Simple Gifts, Tree of Life, and Music on the Mountain, with cellist Barry Phillips. Since 1994 he has been touring the United States, performing at Shaker villages, festivals, and in concert with The Coulter-Phillips Ensemble. In 1998 he released a CD with the Irish singer Mary McLaughlin called Celtic Requiem, which was released on the Windham Hill label. William holds a master’s degree in guitar performance from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and a master’s degree in ethnomusicology from the University of California.

As well as rehearsing, touring, and recording, William works as a producer and recording engineer, and teaches classical guitar at the University of California–Santa Cruz. During the summer he teaches at music camps such as the National Guitar Summer Workshop and Alasdair Frasers Valley of the Moon Fiddle Camp. His four-year-old son, Evan, keeps him busy the rest of the time.

Special thanks are due to:

Bill Bay and Mel Bay Publications for the opportunity to put this music down on paper. To Neal Hellman and Gourd Music for the opportunity to record this music and for being a truly fine record label. To Pierre Bensusan for being a constant inspiration. To Barry and Shelley Phillips for being great musicians and great friends. To Justin Mayer at Bear Creek Studio for having such large ears. To Todd Denmar for sharing his knowledge of traditional Irish music with me. To the Santa Cruz Guitar Company and to guitar maker Jeff Traugott for building incredible guitars.

To my wife Susan and son Evan for putting up with so many hours in the studio and on the road and for constant love and support.

And finally to all of the musicians who have recorded and performed with me over the years. It is an honor and pleasure to work with each and every one of you.

William Coulter plays D’Addario Strings
Artist photos by Paul Schraub

For artist touring and recording information go to: www.gourd.com

To contact William Coulter directly, write:

William Coulter
C/o Gourd Music
PO Box 585
Felton, CA 95018

E-mail: billski@cats.ucsc.edu