

Notes for “Rorie Dall’s Sister’s Lament”

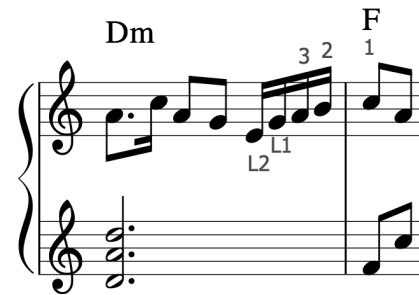
This tune was published by Daniel Dow in the 1770s and was probably composed by Roderick Morison (~1656-1713). My double-strung harp arrangement in the dorian mode has rolled, echoed chords, highlighting the depth of sound we can get from having two sets of strings. The accompaniment hand traverses the entire range of the harp, often overlapping the melody hand.

Double-strung finger placement notation

What do the R and L mean? My notation generally keeps the accompaniment in the bottom staff and the melody in the top staff. This does not always correspond to which hands are used. When the RH helps with the accompaniment, I indicate this with “R” or “R#” in the bottom staff. When the LH helps with the melody, it gets an “L” or “L#” in the top staff.

In this example, place LH fingers 2 and 1 and RH fingers 3, 2, and 1 to avoid a cross-over.

You do not have to play it with both hands like this. But since you have both sets of strings, why not give it a try?



Analysis

Seeing the patterns helps with learning and memorization. The song might not be as long as you think.

m1-4: Introduction. The overlapping, octave-jumping accompaniment is established. The short-long rhythm here will recur throughout the piece.

m5-16: A part. The melody suggests short phrases, some of which I emphasize with fermatas. The song is catching its breath, stopping itself from giving in. Repeat this part without the fermatas as a transition to the single phrase of the B part.

m17-32 (all of page 2): B part. Much of the accompaniment here starts with a rest: the song has given in to weeping, and the rests are the intake before the sobs. I stay in the highest register. It’s not hysterical—we take a breath in the middle at m22—but it’s building up to some strong feelings.

m33-48 (all of page 3): B part again. The accompaniment returns to the downbeat, like the intro. The range moves from the upper to the middle to the lower register, solidifying the depth of grief. The drama peaks in m44, so let’s take a breath with the fermata in m45.

m49-60 (all of page 4): Back to the A part, but in 4/4 time. The song has successfully regained control by employing an additional beat per measure. There are no more fermatas: play this last page with unwavering tempo.

The line breaks of the same sections are the same: Page 1 and page 4 have the same line breaks. Page 2 and page 3 have the same line breaks. Compare the measures to find differences in range or rhythm.

The same four bars appear at the end of every part...almost: The F, Am, F, C/E, Dm pattern ends each part with small differences. Although much of the *accompaniment* is on beats 1 and 2, notice that the last measure of this phrase has the *melody* on beats 1 and 3. It is almost as if the last note is a pickup to the next phrase, but it feels to me like a “STOP” in the middle of a telegram. Since you would never use “STOP” at the end of a telegram—and to diminish the pickup feeling—I’ve chosen to have the final appearance of this phrase (m60) end on beat 2.

Background

This tune was collected by Daniel Dow, a Scot, in the 1770s. He published it in *A collection of ancient Scots music for the violin, harpsichord or German-flute*. [See pictures of the sheet music](#).

The tune is first listed “Cumh Peathar Ruari.” *Cumb* or *cumb’* or *cumba* is Scots Gaelic for lament ([the a is barely pronounced](#)). *Peathar* means sister. *Ruari* is Rory, which is short for Roderick. Then the title is clarified as “Rorie Dall’s fifter’s Lament.” *Dall* means blind.

There were two blind harpers named Rory around this time, the slightly ancient Scottish Roderick Morison (1656?-1713?) and the more ancient Irish Rory O’Cahan (~1580-~1653) who played in Scotland. [Read Simon Chadwick’s detailed comparison of the two Rory Dalls](#). There are several spelling variants for both of these names, and there are also doubts that the Irish Rory really existed. [Read Keith Sanger’s addendum](#).

On top of this, there is a similar tune collected in a manuscript that is almost 150 years more ancient than Dow’s simply labeled “A Port,” which some folks argue might be the original version. [Read Cynthia Cathcart’s delightful analysis of the Port versus the Lament](#).

So we don’t really know who wrote it, when it was written, or if it is original. We don’t even know if Rory is lamenting his sister or if his sister just asked him to write it. Where does this leave us?

Well, something drew Daniel Dow to include this tune amongst his 41 “never before printed...ports, salutations, marches or pibrachs &c.” When you play it, you are harkening back to a deep sadness expressed by someone who was considered ancient at the time of the American Revolution.

Performance notes

- Eliminate fermatas when you take the repeat.
- Roll all three- and four-note chords without brackets.
- When the accompaniment is in the same range as the melody, keep the emphasis on the melody. Be careful not to let the accompaniment become as loud as or louder than the melody.
- Play the accompaniment downbeat a subtle instant prior to the melody downbeat (this technique can add drama and emotion to any tune). Make sure you do this even when the accompaniment is at the same range or higher than the melody.

What I changed

See the score from Dow's collection [on the second page of this file](#). This is what I did differently:

- **From mixolydian to dorian.** Dow's score starts and ends on a G chord. With F naturals present instead of F sharps, this puts the tune in the mixolydian mode. I first encountered this tune without accompaniment. Since the melody starts and ends on D, with F naturals and C naturals, I assumed it was in dorian, and I arranged it thus. Even after discovering Dow's chords, I find the dorian mode elicits a deeper sadness, so I have kept it dorian.
- **Completely different accompaniment.** Dow's score uses almost all quarter notes in the accompaniment, none of them chords.
- **No ornaments.** Dow's score has an ornament (turned shake) on the half notes that end each part. I have enough beautiful embellishments with the double-strung's overlapping notes.
- **Ending in a different meter.** Dow's score is 3/4 throughout, in the form AA BB.
- **Slight tweaks to rhythm.** There are several areas where I have altered the timing on the notes that end a measure, such as using two sixteenth notes and an eighth note instead of a triplet.

Suggestions for your own changes

Dow's score might not even be exactly what Blind Rory originally played. Why not keep changing it?

- **Ornaments.** You can start by bringing Dow's ornaments back. What else?
- **Rhythm.** We're used to listening to songs established as the "official version" recorded by the artist. But it's a lament. Grieve it in your own way. You can really ramp up on rubato, or you can alter the note values relatively so you can keep in tempo.
- **Add lower notes.** If your harp has lower strings than are used in my arrangement, see if it sounds appropriate to utilize them.

- **Customize your finger placements.** The reason I don't include brackets is to allow you to more easily change any placements you disagree with. All my markings are suggestions. Once you settle on your placements, draw the brackets in.
- [Play from Dow's score.](#) Scrap my arrangement, and try making a whole new arrangement from this source. (Can you find the mistake in his accompaniment?)

Or just make it a little easier

- If you don't have the high E, then play the arpeggio in m20 as 1-3-5 instead of 1-5-8.
- You can quickly shorten this tune by eliminating the repeat, choosing to play either page 2 or page 3 but not both, and/or eliminating page 4.
- When I play this tune therapeutically:
 - I don't do extreme overlaps in the accompaniment.
 - I always play the LH on the downbeat (rather than sometimes starting the accompaniment with a rest).
 - I play the entire tune in the same meter, either all 3/4 or all 4/4.
- Eliminate the LH cross-unders. Playing the entire tune with 1-5-8 chords is beautiful.
- In any measure that is *almost the same* as another measure, it's okay to just pick one way and play them both the same.
- If any run has too many notes for your current abilities, drop some notes. Choose which to eliminate, and mark the score so you don't have to remember your choices.
- The chord symbols are provided so that you can ignore the bottom staff and use the top as a lead sheet.
- The section above that breaks down the arrangement is provided to help you memorize. A little bit of time spent up front on analysis can make things easier in the long run.
- [Refer back to my recording](#) any time to hear and see how I do it.

If you like this piece...

- Look for tunes in your repertoire that could benefit from a similar accompaniment.
- Experiment with [the rest of the tunes in Daniel Dow's Collection of ancient Scots music for the violin, harpsichord or German-flute.](#) ("The Terror of Death," anyone?)
- Record yourself, and post on YouTube and Facebook, especially the groups for [Double Strung Harp](#), [Celtic Harp](#), and the [Virtual Harp Venue](#).
- [Leave a review](#) on SheetMusicPlus, [like and comment](#) on YouTube, and tell others about my arrangement. Enjoy!