

Kitty and Tommy Linnane were recalling some years ago
Tommy's first appearance at a concert in Kilfenora
People had heard about this young fiddle player from Donegal
who had this strange and wonderful style
slurring and skidding, doing unlikely things with the fiddle and bow
And whose music was so unusual and intricate and other worldly

And when came out on the stage, people leaned forward in their seats
And as he started to play, the collectors at the doors abandoned their posts
And people who were having a cup of tea behind the stage left the table
and crowded out to the door
And one man standing on the stairs leaned over too far
and fell off the back of the stage into the darkness below
And nobody stirred.
They left him there until the music was finished, forgetting Christian charity
If he's down there today, I hope he's recovered from his fall
and don't blame the people of Kilfenora, blame Tommy Peoples and his music

Tommy was a bright boy and won a scholarship to St. Eunan's Letterkenny
And in 1961, when I was starting in St. Flannan's, Tommy was starting in St. Eunan's
But when I was tucked into bed, Tommy was off over the wall
to the owner of the corner shop to play a few tunes.
And he got away with it for a year and a half

He had been given his first lessons by his cousin Joe Cassidy
Who had been taught by his grandfather, James Peoples
And another more unlikely influence was Sam Nesbitt, a Scottish Presbyterian,
Who arranged for Tommy to attend formal music classes in Derry
And learn musical notation
Which was not common among traditional musicians at the time

I don't know when it was that people started to talk about Tommy
But I suppose special people were always special
The wonderful Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, praises
'all things counter, original, spare, strange',
And I think that describes his playing,
Counter, original, spare, strange

In the ancient tradition their prowess at the Goltraí, the Geantraí, the Suantraí
Music to draw tears, music to raise the spirits, music to soothe
Were the measure of the musician.
And we know that Tommy could do all that –
As a player, as a composer
And when playing became too difficult, he was still compsing
His mind teeming with music and with ideas.

If he played a cheap fiddle made in Hong Kong
It didn't sound like a cheap fiddle any more
And the humble ballad which his mother sang around the house,
'My Granny's Highland Hame'
Was elevated to a place of honour beside Scott Skinner's 'Our Highland Queen'

Tommy People's name became known all over Ireland, all over the world,
but not to everyone
A couple of young lads in St. Flannan's, Kevin and Alphie,
Had expressed an interest in learning the fiddle
And Maria will remember Tommy gave them their first lessons in his house in Toonagh
I asked Kevin on the way back the first day had he ever heard of Tommy Peoples
And he thought for a little while and said
'I heard of Tommy but I never heard of Peoples'.

Tommy was a humble and unassuming man.
He told me recently that he wanted to be buried in Drumcliff
And mentioned a few humble characters that he thought would be good company
That he would enjoy being near.
He was also a proud man
He knew who he was
He loved his county and his adopted county
He loved his country, the history and the language
His religious beliefs and customs and traditions
And this humble man knew that he had been given a precious gift
And he didn't neglect it – he spent hours practising, imagining, writing

The first time I met Tommy, it was at concert in Clarecastle
Organised by his good friend Seán Keane
Seán had persuaded me to be Fear a' Tí
And I was very nervous about the idea
But not half as nervous as Tommy
As he waited to come on stage
In recent years, I think he had become more relaxed
Didn't feel so much under scrutiny
It was great to hear him telling stories to the audience
And singing – because he loved songs and singing

Tommy has left a rich legacy to his family
And to us all
Not just for what he achieved
Not just for his music
But for who he was
The music an expression of his spirit.
I think Tommy always had an inclination to believe in other worlds
And it is hard to imagine that such a spirit
Will not live on and come to fulfilment
In a strange world that none of us has yet experienced
But where we hope to meet again, transformed and renewed

Ar dheis láimh Dé go raibh sé