

Celtic Bells: *The Irish In Boston* Educational Guide, Grades K-8



About the Performance

With fiddle, bodhran (Irish drum), banjo, flute, guitar, and bagpipes, Nancy and Calum Bell tell the story of Irish immigrants in Boston, weaving in their songs and poems of work, humor, protest, longing for home, and longing to feel at home in the New World. In addition to providing a rich connection to history curriculum, this program serves as a starting point for meaningful discussions on culture, race, prejudice, and immigration.



About the Artists

The Celtic Bells are the mother and son duo of musician, storyteller and fiber artist Nancy Bell and multi-instrumentalist Calum Bell. Together they perform traditional Irish and Scottish music at sessions and festivals throughout Massachusetts.

Nancy Bell has been delighting audiences in New England schools, libraries, and festivals for more than twenty years with her fun, hands-on, Historical “Edutainment.” She is a gifted storyteller who weaves music and history together in engaging ways with her songs, fiddle, guitar, and the bodhran (Irish frame drum).

Calum Bell has been part of the Celtic Music Scene in Boston since birth. As part of the Bell Family Band, he has been touring and performing since the age of 7. Calum is accomplished on the Irish Flute, Scottish Fiddle, on bagpipes of all kinds, and on guitar and tenor banjo. He performs regularly in the Boston area and teaches.

Program Learning Goals

1. To understand how the Great Hunger led to mass immigration of the Irish in the 1840's
2. To examine what cultural and communal strengths enabled the Irish to overcome their hardships in their new home
3. To experience authentic modern Irish music and culture beyond the “St. Patrick’s Day associations

Essential Questions

1. Why might the Irish have come to America, instead of someplace else?
2. Can you think of times when you felt misunderstood, homesick, or not fitting in?
3. What are some of the hardships that a group of immigrants faces as it tries to establish a new home in a foreign land?

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A Letter from the Artists

Dear Teachers,

When people hear the term “Boston Irish,” they think of happy people wearing green on St. Patrick’s Day celebrating joyously with music, a big parade, step dance, shamrocks and leprechauns. They don’t think of poverty, famine, starvation, and violence. Many people are not aware of the rich Irish Culture or the dark struggle the Irish have faced to become Americans. Their story is full of rich and troubling ethical questions that remain relevant today. Our aim is to bring these issues and this history to life beyond mere facts.

Few groups have influenced the cultural identity of Boston quite like the Irish. Today, nearly twenty-three percent of Boston’s population claims Irish ancestry. They form the largest single ethnic group in Boston. Their arrival transformed Boston from a largely white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant city into one that is progressively becoming more diverse. Between 1820 and 1860, the Irish constituted one third of all of the immigrants to the United States. In the 1840’s (due to the Great Hunger in Ireland) they comprised nearly half of all immigrants to this nation. According to data from the US census bureau, Massachusetts is officially the most Irish state in America. As reported in The Boston Globe, roughly 21.6 percent of Massachusetts residents claim Irish ancestry, the highest in the nation. Irish immigrants have left their mark on the region in a number of ways, not the least of which is the name of the basketball team the Boston Celtics.

Their story is both painful and hopeful, and ultimately enduring. When they first came to America, the Irish were ostracized and feared due to their religious as well as their social customs. Boston, like most of America, was still largely Protestant in the mid-19th century. Most of the poor immigrants from Ireland were Catholic. (In Colonial times, Catholicism was outlawed in Boston. Those Irish immigrants who came here during Colonial times had to convert or hide their religious beliefs.) In the 1800’s, gangs of militant Protestants roamed the streets of Irish neighborhoods, damaging property and even destroying several houses.

The Irish overcame the social forces that starved and uprooted them in their homeland, then sought to make life difficult for them in their new country, not unlike the many other immigrant groups past and present that continue to shape this nation’s identity. The same forces that once worked against the Irish continue to make life difficult for other groups trying to assimilate today. There is much we can learn from this story. Thank you for exploring it with us.

Sincerely, The Celtic Bells

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A (Rough) Timeline of the Irish Experience in Boston

- 1700s** ● Catholicism is outlawed in Boston. Irish who immigrate have to conceal their faith or convert to Protestantism.
- 1837** ● **The Broad Street Riot**
Some local firemen, on their way home from a fire, came across an Irish Catholic funeral procession. They all got into a brawl which grew to include 800 people hitting each other with sticks and bricks and stones. A crowd of 10,000 grew to watch the melee. Eventually, the mayor had to call in the state militia to stop the riot. Thankfully, no one was killed but the only ones arrested and jailed were Irish.
- 1846-1849** ● The Potato blight in Ireland causes nearly one million Irish to immigrate to America
- 1847** ● **"Black 47":** 1847 was the nickname of the worst year of the famine.
- 1849** ● A cholera epidemic sweeps Boston and hits the poor Irish neighborhoods very hard. More than 500 Irish people die from living in unsanitary conditions.
- 1854** ● The "Know Nothing" party, with its nativist and anti-Catholic agenda, takes control of the Massachusetts legislature and passes laws barring Catholics from being buried in public cemeteries, and requiring children in public schools to read from the Protestant bible. They raid catholic schools and convents on trumped up pretexts and deny church officials any control over church property.
- 1860s** ● By now, over two thirds of female domestic servants in Boston are Irish. The men work as laborers in construction. They help build the townhouses on Beacon Hill, clear the land for North Station, and build then business district behind Faneuil Hall.
- 1861-1865** ● The American Civil War: As most Irish Americans had settled in the Northern cities like Boston and New York, they were called to serve in the Union Army. Many Irish Americans formed their own regiments which embraced Irish customs like Catholic Mass and priests. These units became known for their valor and bravery and earned the respect of their fellow Americans who had formerly disdained them. More than 150,000 Irishmen, many of whom were not yet citizens, joined the Union Army out of loyalty to their new home. Their bravery and acts of patriotism caused the other Americans to start thinking of them differently and soften the rampant anti-Irish discrimination going on in the country.
- 1884** ● Hugh O'Brian becomes the first Irish Catholic Mayor of Boston
- 1960** ● John F. Kennedy, the first American president of Irish Catholic descent, is elected.
- 1998** ● The Boston Irish Famine Memorial is erected at the corner of Washington and School streets on the Freedom Trail.

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Vocabulary

Famine

an extreme shortage of food. "Famine caused the people to starve."

Immigrate

to come to live permanently in a foreign country. "The Irish immigrated to Boston in the 1840's."

Emigrate

to leave one's own country in order to settle permanently in another. "Nora's grandparents emigrated from County Clare."

Refugee

a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster. "Tens of thousands of refugees fled their homes."

Nativism

the policy of protecting the interests of native-born or established inhabitants against those of immigrants.

Xenophobia

dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries. "Boston had a deep vein of xenophobia and nativism."

Prejudice

preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience. Hating ideas or people before you even really know them. "Prejudice against people from different backgrounds"

Assimilation

become absorbed and integrated into a society or culture.

Culture

the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group.

Racism

prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.

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The Irish Come to America

In just three years, from 1846-1849, nearly a million Irish immigrants came to America to escape starvation as a potato blight killed their crops. Although the blight receded in 1850, the effects of the famine continued to spur Irish emigration into the 20th century. Still facing poverty and disease, many Irish set out for America where they reunited with relatives who had fled at the height of the famine.



An Irish immigrant, having suffered an arduous voyage to get to this country, arrived and found that life in America was complicated by prejudice, poverty, and disease. Despite all this, they worked hard, loved America, and helped each other. They collaborated politically to gain a voice in government.

Irish Music

Newly arrived Irish immigrants found American customs difficult to understand. They had trouble assimilating at first. As their neighborhoods grew, they began to blend their own old traditions from their home country with new American ones, forming a distinctly Irish-American culture. Music played a big part in this. brought with them the fiddle, the flute, and the bodhran (Irish drum).

How do you think playing music may have helped Irish immigrants facing poverty and discrimination?



Bodhran and Fiddle



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Extension Activities: Music, Culture, Traditions, and History

Writing and Discussion Prompts

Choose one or more of the prompts below and write about it or discuss with a partner:

- Calum and Nancy play all of their music “by ear.” This means that they were not formally trained to read music. They learned to play by watching and listening to other members of their community play music, who then helped them to learn. This is called “The Oral Tradition,” in which things are handed down from person to person. What other things can family members “hand down” to one another? How are recipes, stories, traditions, or music handed down in your family?
- The Irish celebrate St. Patrick’s day on March 17th. Celebrations include music, dancing, eating traditional foods and beverages, and telling stories. Four-leaf clovers, leprechauns, rainbows, pots of gold are all Irish symbols brought into American culture, generally shown on St. Patrick’s Day to indicated good luck, wealth, and prosperity. Does your family celebrate a certain traditional holiday? What traditions, foods, games, stories, or music make the holiday unique?
- How many generations of your family have lived in America? When did your family come here? Where did they come from? What made them leave? Why did they choose America?

Creative Writing

Pretend you are an Irish person who has just come to America in the 1850’s. Write a letter home to your brother or sister and describe the opportunities here. What is good about America? What is unpleasant?

Teach a Song

Remember that traditional music was handed down for hundreds of years, long before cell phones and CDs. Listen to a favorite song over and over until you know all the words and can sing it by yourself without the recording. Now teach it to someone else who has never heard it without the recording. How can you help them learn the song?

Interview

Interview a relative, neighbor, or friend who has immigrated to America. Ask them what has been the most fun for them? What has been the hardest? What has surprised them the most? What do they miss most about their home? Is there anything they wish could be different? What would make their life a little easier?

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Post-Performance Discussion Questions

1. Why was it important for the Irish to work together politically to get their own representatives elected? How do you think humor in the song “Charlie on the MTA” may have helped candidate O’Brian get elected?
2. What are some of the ways the Irish people helped each other to assimilate? Did they have to give up any important aspects of their culture?
3. What do you think made Americans more welcoming to the Irish over time?

Further Reading

- The Irish Dresser: A story of Hope During the Great Hunger by Cynthia G. Neale
- The Disaster of the Irish Potato Famine: Irish Immigrants Arrive in America (1845-1850) by Sean O'donoghue
- Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1850 by Susan Campbell Bartoletti
- Irish Immigrants in America: An Interactive History Adventure by Elizabeth Raum

Curricular Connections

Music PreK-8:

Responding:

7. Perceive and analyze artistic work. Analyze how cultures are reflected in a diverse range of musical work. **(.M.R.07)**
8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. Explain how a musical work is connected to the particular cultural and historical context where it was created. **(M.R.08)**

Connecting:

10. Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art. Make connections between personal experience and a musical work. **(M.Co.10)**
11. Relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical contexts to deepen understanding. Identify how musical ideas and traditions migrate with the people who originated them to affect other cultures, historical periods, and musical genres and styles (e.g., immigrant European folk music). **(7-8.M.Co.11)**

History/Social Science 1:Topic 3. History: unity and diversity in the United States [1.T3]; Gr. 2. Topic 2. Geography and its effects on people [2.T2]; Topic 3. History: migrations and cultures [2.T3]; Gr. 3Topic 1: Massachusetts cities and towns today and in history [3.T1] ;Topic 6. Massachusetts in the 18th century through the American Revolution [3.T6]; TGr. 4 Topic 4. The expansion of the United States over time and its regions today 28 [4.T4]; The Northeast [4.T4a]; Gr. 7 T4: Physical and political geography of Europe [7.T4a]