

Learning by ear

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In my opinion, it is almost always better, when possible, to learn an Irish traditional tune from an audio recording or from a live player, not inserting visual notation at any point in the process. The following is written to cover those situations in which for some reason the only available source is written notation.

This presumes that you've already established that you can't or don't want to learn the tune from a recording or a live player, and that the notated version you've got is a credible one (90% of the time the notated version will not be comparable with the version you heard that made you want to play the tune; this can be a problem).

- 1) With a metronome running at a slow-but-regular tempo, and the sheet music in front of you, play the tune down several times slowly (as slowly as you need to in order to get through it; if you can't sight-read well enough to do this, then phrase-by-phrase figure out the notes without trying to memorize them; just find where they are).
- 2) Having played through the tune several times from the notation, turn the sheet music over so you can't see it. Now try to play the tune down, singing the phrases you can't play and leaving blank spots of the appropriate duration for the phrases you can't remember enough to sing.
- 3) Turn the sheet over, and play through the tune again, glancing away from the notation as much as possible. When you're looking at the sheet (as infrequently as possible), sing the phrases as you play them; when not looking at the sheet, look at your fingers on the instrument.
- 4) Go back and sight-read through the first phrase of the tune. Turn the sheet over so you can't glance at it. Play the first phrase of the tune; where there are mystery notes, go very slowly, and try by experiment to figure out the correct solutions. You'll probably solve some of the mystery notes, and be stumped by others.
- 5) Look at the notation again. Sing (don't play) the phrase, paying particular attention to the mystery notes.
- 6) Turn the sheet over so you can't glance at it. Play through the phrase, trying to get the mystery notes correctly. Sing while you're playing.

Continue this process until you've got the first phrase accurately.

Now go to the second phrase and repeat. Alternate playing-and-looking-and-playing-and-not looking with both the 2nd phrase by itself, and the two phrases stitched together.

Continue to the third phrase. You'll probably find by this point that certain parts of phrases are recurring (it is common in Irish tunes for melodic ideas to recur several times in a given tune), and that if you hear them in the 1st phrase and then in the 3rd phrase "in your mind's ear," they are easier to play and remember.

A Few Axioms:

*** Avoid notation, but DO use visual resources other than notation**

In a session situation, learn to keep your eyes open! One needs to concentrate, not so much on one's own fingers, but on the physical body language of the person playing. There's a lot to be learned about rhythm, phrasing, and dynamics (not to mention technique on specific instruments) from kinesthetics. (Keeping your eyes open also lowers the possibility that you'll miss crucial signals.)

*** Juxtapose similar tunes in practicing to force oneself to note subtle differences.**

Both. Tunes less familiar to you but which share common phrases should be kept apart--you want to be able to concentrate clearly on learning the tune without being distracted by its similarities to another tune. On the other hand, tunes more familiar to you which share common phrases can be juxtaposed, as this forces concentration on more subtle contrasts.

*** Beware of learning from mechanical sources**

Think TWICE (or maybe three times) about learning tunes from an ABC player (software that plays back simple computer files as single-line melodies). ABC is a wonderful tool, and an even better archival method, but even though I've used it a lot for printing/sending music, I DON'T believe that ABC gives you the most crucial stuff to be learned in getting the tunes "right." Just as there's an awful lot that can't be captured in notation, there's also an awful lot that cannot be played back by a computer. In re/ the tune-learning methods I describe above, I would counsel against using an ABC player. Others may find it useful; I see major problems.