

Getting the Most out of a Slow Session

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Some rules of thumb for learning Irish music, particularly in the context of a slow session. See also **How to Run an Irish Music Slow Session**.

1) In the session

We avoid using music notation, either for playing or for recording tunes, for several reasons:

- a) Oral tradition: this is primarily an oral tradition, one that's always been passed on primarily by ear through direct contact between players. There are aspects of this music (especially ornamentation and rhythmic phrasing) which simply cannot be notated but must be heard. So our slow session is an opportunity for us to immerse ourselves in the actual sound of the music.
- b) Aural skills: because forcing ourselves to learn tunes by ear --perhaps by breaking them down phrase-by-phrase, or playing them very slowly-- we are increasing our ability to hear tunes accurately as they go by. This in turn improves our chances of picking up a new tune, or remembering one half-learned, in a full-speed session.
- c) Memory and recognition: it seems to be the case that tunes learned purely by ear are much better memorized; they seem to "stick" more accurately. Also, we are much more likely to recognize phrases learned in one tune when they recur (as often happens in Irish music) in another tune in the same key/mode.

2) Learning by ear

Things you can do to facilitate learning and remembering tunes by ear

- a) Use a tape machine in the session. This lets you remember, and work on learning, a tune away from the session. Suggestion: do NOT simply tape the whole session, but don't get obsessive about capturing every little thing, either. If you're spending all of your time tending to your tape machine, then you're probably distracting yourself from concentrating on playing.

b) If you do find or wish to learn a tune in standard notation, do not simply sit and sight-read the tune over and over again from the music. Instead, play through the tune once or twice, to get the sound in your ear. Then do the following, working 1 phrase at a time

1) Play the first phrase. Turn the paper over, so that you cannot see the notation. Get that phrase under your fingers and in your ear.

2) Turn the paper right side up and play the next phrase once or twice, then turn the paper over again. Play the two phrases together as they appear in the tune.

3) Continue this process, referring to the notation only enough to get each subsequent phrase accurately.

Make the process of memorizing the tune, and working it up to speed under the fingers, an oral process, with the notation not visible.

c) Work on a few tunes at a time, but not too many. It can be useful to juxtapose groups of like tunes: tunes which are related by key area/mode or by rhythm, for example. For example, play all the reels, or all the tunes in D Ionian, that you're currently working on back-to-back with each other. This way, you'll start to recognize the melodic and rhythmic consistencies within related tunes. This also actually helps you be precise about distinguishing between one similar tune and another.

d) Play each tune you are working on once or twice when you first get up in the morning, and once or twice just before you go to sleep. When you've just awakened, you can "set" the tune in your head by playing it first thing, and then it will run in your subconscious ear through the day. Conversely, playing a tune last thing before you go to sleep, when you're not going to get any more sonic input, can help "set" it in your subconscious ear overnight.

e) Make sampler tapes which consist only of tunes you are currently preparing. If you're dubbing from a CD player, consider setting up additional repeats of tunes, so that you hear them a great number of times. Play this sampler tape at work, in the car, while exercising, etc. Even if you don't have the instrument in your hands, listening intensely in this fashion will help you get both the 'melodies' and the idiomatic ornamentation and rhythm, in your ear.

3) Ensemble considerations

Never forget that this is an ensemble-oriented dance music. Take every opportunity to play with others and for dancers, whether they are of equivalent, higher or lower skill level. The only way to work ensemble skills effectively is to actually play with other people; neither a metronome or a computer can give you the response and human interaction of live players.

Also, learn to play your own instrument in such a fashion that you can hear what others are doing clearly: you can learn a lot simply by hearing how another person or instrument approaches a tune you're in the midst of playing.

However, do also work with a metronome set on the idiomatic pulse of the dance rhythm: 2 beats per measure for reels, 2 for jigs, 3 for slip-jigs, 4 for hornpipes, etc.

4) Learn by teaching

One of the best ways to really get to know a tune, or a whole musical idiom, is to spend time teaching it to others. Even if you only know a few tunes well yourself, by teaching them to someone else you will gain valuable insights into how the tunes are put together, and into how to articulate what you feel are the most essential elements of the musical style.

5) Learn tunes in multiple ways

You can gain much greater insight into the tunes in your repertoire by employing the following techniques:

a) Learn tunes on more than one melody instrument. Even if you specialize in or focus on one particular instrument (fiddle, flute, whistle, mandolin, guitar, etc) it can be very useful, and very good for the memory, to spend a bit of time learning a few tune in your repertoire on a second instrument. There is a level of understanding that comes with knowing a tune irrespective of the kinesthetics of one instrument which is very valuable. Also, this gives you an alternative if you go to a session and find too many players on your primary instrument; you can take the opportunity to work on playing your secondary instrument in a session setting.

b) Learn to both play and accompany tunes. If you're primarily a melody-instrument player (fiddle, flute, pipes, whistle, etc), learn how to accompany tunes in your repertoire on a chordal or percussion instrument. It will give you a much better understanding of the harmonic and rhythmic aspects of the tunes. Conversely, if you're primarily a chordal player, learn to play the melodies as well. It will give you a much better understanding of the harmonic possibilities implied in the tunes. Both experiences will make you a much better and more sympathetic ensemble musician.

6) Master musicians:

Recognize that this is an oral tradition. It is essential to spend time listening to, and ideally playing with and studying with, master musicians. This is especially important in the area of instrumental technique; there are many elements of how this music is played on fiddle, whistle,

flute, pipes, mandolin etc which can only be conveyed accurately by an accomplished player of that instrument. It is true that the tunes are the same no matter what instrument or combination of instruments play them, but there are idiomatic elements of technique and (especially) ornamentation that are essential to making the music sound right, and to playing in a fashion that doesn't do you physical harm.