

## **On time and technique for plucked strings in Irish traditional music**

### **How to make your hands do what you want them to do in optimum fashion**

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To play any dance music properly, with the right feel and technical execution, it is essential to get the groove in your body. Tapping one's foot is good, and can become a very useful tool, but it may take practice before it becomes something that helps you, that you can lean on.

But if you can't tap solidly, don't do it at all. Instead, practice with a metronome until you can. Ideally, the tapping foot or other bodily articulation of the beat provides a steadying and grounding influence on the groove. This may require practice. Tapping is not an afterthought, but a learned ability to make the groove physical so that you can play it better.

#### **FIRST PRIORITY**

**Use a metronome.** Any time you are not playing along with a recording or other people---that is any time you are playing solo---you should use a metronome.

Practice both with the metronome set on the predominant pulse (e.g., where the foot taps), but also it set on subdivisions of that pulse (e.g., on the level of smaller/quicker notes).

Do this especially for reels and other dance types in even-numbered meters: practice with the metronome set on "1" and "3" of the bar (where the foot normally taps) but also try doubling the numerical value and thus the speed of the metronome, to where it's sounding on "1" "2" "3" and "4."

The goal here is to develop the ability to control the fractional subdivisions of the pulse that each pair of 8th notes represents. This does not mean that you're always going to play those groups of four 8th notes which fall into 1 pulse entirely squarely (e.g., with each 8th note of identical duration to every other), but you do want to have the capacity to do so. In turn, it lets you control internal give-and-take within phrases; you can then be selective and intentional about lengthening or shortening eighth notes within the pulse.

Also, this practice with the metronome set to subdivisions can help you clean up recurrent problems. One can often isolate technical problems by realizing, for example, that one always rushes or drags a certain 8th note within a 4-note group. Playing with the metronome on the subdivision helps to isolate such recurrent problems.

## SECOND PRIORITY

**Relaxation is key.** You should **never** attempt to play with muscular tension whenever it is possible to correct that tension. There are warmups and cooldowns you can do before and after, and you should always be aware of tension, making sure to stop what you're doing and find ways to relax that tension. This may require modifications of technique or the unlearning of unhelpful habits. Most importantly, **never** "play through tension." If something is making you tense (just as if something is causing you physical pain) you should always stop and correct for it, through relaxation exercises, a brief pause, or other correctives.

### A few more suggestions:

Work on specific tunes: in the Irish repertoires, individual tunes present individual problems. Most players develop their techniques by problem-solving as they learn each new tune.

1) In working on polishing or learning a tune, consider playing the melody with various proportional rhythmic groupings. E.g., play the melody, but change the rhythmic values of each pair of notes thus:

1st time) dotted 8th plus 16th; sounds like "DAAH-dit, DAAH-dit, DAAH-dit" like an exaggerated hornpipe

2nd time) 16th plus dotted 8th; sounds like "DIT-daah, DIT-daah, DIT-daah," etc., like an exaggerated strathspey

3rd time) even 8th plus even 8th (e.g., "normally"); sounds like "DAH-dih DAH-dih," etc.

4th time) "swing 8ths": each pair of notes like a triplet with the first two notes tied a la jazz feels.

1) Play through the whole tune using each of the above rhythmic permutations (1,2,3,4). Then change the sequence (perhaps 2,4,1,3) several times.

What this does is force you to play each note-to-note transition as slow-note + fast-note and as fast-note + slow-note. In turn, by the time you've played thru all the permutations, you've got into your hands the experience of playing every note-to-note transition as a 16th note. In this way, you're actually practicing those transitions at double speed, every pairing as 16th notes, as if you're playing the tune twice as fast. But the underlying tempo stays the same and lets you stay relaxed and precise.

2) Play thru the notes of the melody in cyclical patterns. Remove rhythmic values of the specific tune. Then, imagining the notes of the melody as a linear sequence, play 1-2-3, 2-3-4, 3-4-5, etc.

Say you have a melody that begins:

A AB AF#ED|B BA Bc#dB| etc (Wind that Shakes the Barley)

You'd play :

1 2 3 2 3 4 4 5 6 5 6 7 7 8 9 10 11 12

A-A-B, A-B-A, B-A-F#, A-F#-E, E-D-B, D-B-B

This makes you practice each pitch-to-pitch transition in isolation, and without getting carried away by trying to "make music" or play the tune w/out stopping.

Now try playing similar cyclical patterns starting at the end of the tune, and working backwards (both playing the tune in reverse sequence, and playing forward-motion patterns which start near the end).

3) Isolate problem phrases and work on them. The temptation when a mucky spot comes up in a tune is to blunder through and get on to the next phrase that sounds better. Resist this. Stop at the mucky phrase. Play the phrase itself, perhaps putting it through the permutations described in 3-4 above.

Now back up 1 or 2 notes before the mucky phrase starts, and practice getting into the phrase, and through the mucky bit.

Now practice starting at the beginning of the phrase, and playing 1 or 2 notes after the phrase ends, practicing getting out of it.

Now play the whole phrase down, starting 1-2 notes before it begins and continuing 1 or 2 notes after it ends.

4) Permutate mucky phrases. Play them backwards. Play them with strict alternate picking starting on a downstroke; then with alternating picking starting on an upstroke.

5) Practice transitions between phrases. When we're practicing, we have a tendency when isolating phrases to start at the logical beginning of a phrase and end at the logical end. This means that transitions between phrases get neglected. Figure out where in the given tune the transition spots are located--the bridge material between phrases--and practice that bridge material. E.g.,

Start with the last 3 notes of phrase A, and play thru the first 3 notes of phrase B.

Start with the last 2, play thru the first 2.

Start with the last note of A, play thru first note of B.

Permutate.

**NB:** All of the above can be practiced at various speeds. Slow-but-solid tempi are good, but so are dead slow tempi (with a metronome). A good lesson I learned from piper Jerry O'Sullivan was to playing learning a new tune dead slow, maybe quarter note = 60. This means you're playing so slowly that you have to build your ornaments and articulations in right from the beginning, and are playing them so slowly that you have no excuse for not playing them perfectly.

Force yourself to go through a whole repetition of the tune this way. Then ramp up in 10 bpm increments. By the time you get the tune up to a "respectable" speed around quarter-note = 200--and if you don't bag out of the incremental steps in between--you will know the tune in your ear and under your fingers far better.

There are a lot of right-hand exercises elsewhere on [irishmusic.com](http://irishmusic.com) under my name; look for them.

Final thought: I don't really dig playing a given tune 300 times at a fast clip to get it learned, accurate, and swinging. I'd rather play it 50 times at slow tempi, and going through the above permutations. The process itself moves at a much slower pace, but the overall learning time (including getting up to speed) is a lot less.