

Constructing Sets of Dance Tunes

Some considerations and rules-of-thumb for putting together interesting combinations of traditional tunes in "sets"

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Playing different dance rhythms one-into-another within one set (e.g., slide-jig-reels or some such) is a relatively recent innovation in Irish playing: mostly a phenomenon of the late '60s/early '70s "arranger's bands" like the Chieftains, Bothy Band, to a lesser extent Planxty. Scots musicians, especially in Cape Breton, have been playing sets for step dance that sequentially combine tune types (air-march-jig-reel is a favorite) for decades, but in Irish playing, where the focus was primarily on providing music for set dance, there's been a preference for medleys that stay within 1 dance rhythm. Otherwise the set dances, for example, tend not to work out.

In session playing, or concert presentations, of course you can do anything you want. There are a couple of different available organizing parameters, and a range of "radicalism" in manipulating them. These parameters include:

1) Dance rhythm:

Least radical: You can put together sets of tunes all in the same dance rhythms (sets of jigs, sets of reels, sets of hornpipes, etc). In Irish repertoires, this is the most dance-oriented and dance-friendly approach. **More "progressive":** You can do interesting and beautiful things by combining tunes in sets that use the same subdivision of the basic pulse: jigs and slip-jigs both subdivide the basic pulse in groupings of 3, so you can segue a jig into a slip-jig with considerable subtlety, so much so that it provides a nice "surprise" for the listener to realize that the feel has shifted from 6/8 to 9/8. Any accompanists need to know or hear that this is happening, as otherwise you can get VERY disjointed from one another. **Most radical:** People like the Bothy Band --real avatars here-- developed the idea of playing sets that segued from one dance rhythm to another; jigs into reels was a favorite. There's a beautiful example of the expressive range that such a set can encompass in the Bothies' version of "The Blackbird," where they play it as an air, a set-dance, and a reel. Again, Scots musicians have done this much more: march-strathspey-reel is another favorite progression.

2) Key area or tonal center:

Irish players will occasionally group tunes that share the same key area or tonal center: a set of tunes based on E, or D, or G. Irish players tend not to care whether tunes in this kind of set all are in the same mode (1st tune might be Dorian/minor, 2nd tune Mixolydian, 3rd Ionian, etc), and it's not all that common to do this. Scots players, on the other hand, prefer to keep tune sets all in one key area.

More often, tune sets in Irish repertoire tend to move around to shifting tonal centers: 1 tune based on D, another on G, another on E, etc. Because the music tends to be centered on the key areas C,G,D,A,E you usually find that any possible transition is in some kind of more-or-less logical "modulation (key-change) pattern": C-G is movement up a 5th, D-G is movement up a 4th, D-E is movement up a whole step. These modulation patterns tend to strike a Western listener as fairly "logical" and "orderly," because so much Western music of all types tends to use them. Key area motion (modulation) up or down by 4th, 5th, or whole-step usually works out sounding very smooth to Westerners.

In addition, some of the favored key areas/modes (E Dorian, D Ionian, A Mixolydian, A Aeolian, C Ionian) etc are actually based on identical collections of pitches: C Ionian uses C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C, as does A Aeolian A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A, so that segueing two tunes together in this fashion means no notes change. Instead, the ear's focus is shifted, which can be a very interesting and tasteful effect. Same relationship between E Dorian and D Ionian, D Ionian and A Mixolydian, etc.

The result is that, given the limited number of key areas (C,G,D,A,E) and common modes (Ionian, Mixolydian, Dorian, Aeolian), you really don't have to think too consciously about whether one tune "goes into" another; mostly, for the above reasons, they work fine.

3) Tonality or modality.

This is a simple one: it can be very effective to play 2 or more tunes on the same tonal center but in contrasting modalities: a tune in A minor segueing to a tune in A major, for example. Makes a nice, very audible contrast, but the ear still has that shared tonal center as a point of reference. Hindusthani music uses this kind of thing at a very complex and sophisticated level.

4) Melodic relationships.

This is probably the most sophisticated, and the most artful players I've worked with tend to prioritize this factor. Many tunes, as you know, share melodic ideas or phrases: the B section of 1 tune will somehow be "like" the A section of another, and so on. It's especially nice to segue together tunes which are melodically related; really shows the integration of the music's melodic idiom.

Provisos:

* Make sure that tunes in a set together can each individually be played at their optimal best speed; it can be unmusical to play a tune faster or slower than it "wants to be played", just because of where it falls in a set.

* Watch out for segues that demand a shift in the subdivision of the basic pulse: this is why moving from a jig to a reel is tough--because the ear is hearing the basic pulse subdivided as "1-2-3, 1-2-3/1-2-3, 1-2-3" and you're asking it to jump, in the new tune, very abruptly to "1-e-and-a, 2-e-and-a" etc. You'll notice that when the Bothies, for example, do this, very often there'll be a momentary pause or ritardando at the end of one tune, before the new rhythm starts, so that the ear has a moment to adjust to the different subdivision.

* Don't get too "picky" about constructing sets; flow is much much more important than having everything "fit the rules."

All of the above provide worthwhile experiments. In the slow session that I run, I often put together sets on the fly: have people suggest tunes they know and can lead, and then figure out the sequence of how one tune can go into another, tell them the order, and then all play the set. I tend to wind up using the following criteria:

* Have the big-ensemble tunes that everybody knows and plays on come at the END of a set: build to them with solos, duos, etc. Bothy Band used this "adding layers of instruments" idea extensively.

* Contrast tonalities and modal qualities: alternate minor-sounding tunes with major-sounding ones; use shifting key areas. If you have 2 tunes in D and one in G, consider playing them D-G-D for the sake of more contrast.

* Use interesting modulations: in the course of a set's shifting keys, move up by whole steps (G-A, C-D), up by 4ths (G-C, D-G) or up by 5ths (G-D, A-E). Shifting down by whole step (A-G, D-C, etc) does not tend to work so well, as there is a slight "flattening" effect from the descent of the tonic note.

* Juxtapose tunes that are melodically related (try "Morrison's jig" in E Dorian with the "Swallowtail", also in E Dorian).