

Irish Music 2

Irish tunes are self-contained little musical gems, which on the banjo can vary from the simple to the very difficult. Mostly though, they have fixed structures and recognisable patterns. Often they have a lot of repetition, making them easier to learn.

Most tunes you learn early on are in D and G, Am and Em. Once you know where your notes are on the fretboard, it's straightforward to learn them. Listening and more listening, plus humming along, will get them into your head quickly. The next stage is putting two or three tunes together so that you have a 'set'.

Sets

In sessions, a tune is usually played two or three times around, and then followed without a break by another one or two tunes also played two or three times. Usually (though not always) they will be the same type of tune. Two or more tunes played together is called a 'set'. Often the tunes will be in different keys, to mark the changes and add interest or effect. There are very well-known sets, a bit like the Irish music equivalent of jazz standards. Musicians also invent their own sets, and pick up other people's from sessions, recordings etc.

Changing from one tune to another

People not used to Irish music are constantly amazed at the way musicians in a session all seem to know when to change, all at the same time and all into the same tune and all apparently without even looking up - it seems like magic. In reality it's just maths and loads of practise!

Making a smooth transition from one tune into another is something that many people find very hard to do. Usually people who lead sessions have worked out and practised these changes in advance. Since sets are usually of the same type of tune, it's really just a matter of counting. We're going to have a look at how it's done with tunes in 4/4 time. I recommend you read through this before you try it out.

In reels, hornpipes, flings and other tunes in 4/4 time, each bar is counted 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4. Sometimes we're lucky and both tunes will seamlessly finish and start 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4. But more often, thanks to intro bars, life is usually not that simple.

Lots of tunes have a short intro bar of one or two notes or a triplet. These notes have to be counted in as well, and the way that's done when changing tunes is by including them in the last bar of the previous tune.

Here's the end of one reel and the start of another:

