

BEGINNING HAMMER DULCIMER

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HOW TO LEARN A TUNE

The wood remembers. Thus part of a master violinist's duties is to educate a violin for future generations.

Diane Ackerman

INTRODUCTION

Scientists who study the human mind have found that people can manage only about seven inputs at one time. Nowhere does this show up more than when we try to learn a new tune. Let's say you want to master a new fiddle tune. It has the traditional form of an A part repeated once followed by a B part repeated once. The A part has eight measures in which the principle theme is repeated after a short connecting middle passage is played. After the principle theme is repeated, a turn-around phrase is played to bring the tune back to the beginning of the A part. The second time through A, the ending is different. That's four things you have to learn: the theme, the mid-A connecting phrase, the turn around phrase, and the ending phrase for A. Another four elements usually appear in the B part. Huh oh! That takes us up to eight things we have to manage all at once. We've passed the seven-thing system limit and we haven't even begun to talk about hammering decisions! No wonder it takes so long to learn a new tune.

This section is designed to give you the tools to master new tunes as quickly as possible. Some of the advice may sound pretty flaky. Not every technique will work for every player or every tune. Do with these techniques what you will. The only thing between you and mastering a new tune is eternity. I'd like to help you cut that down a bit.

TECHNIQUES FOR LEARNING TUNES

"You can't learn a tune until you know it." I can't recall which of my many teachers along the way provided this advice. It is true. Until you can accurately sing, whistle, or hum the melody of a tune you are trying to learn, you will not be able to learn it on the dulcimer. For most of us this means we have to listen to or read through the tune a number of times – as many times as it takes to “stick” with us. If the tune is not solidly in your mind, your hands and hammers will be tentative and uncertain. So, the first step is to learn the tune *before* you try to place it on the dulcimer.

The word **PERCEIVE** means, *“to take possession of”*. **TO HEAR** means *“to be made aware of by the ear”*. The business of learning a tune is about moving from the passivity of an audience member who hears music, to the activity of a performer who shares the music, she or he owns with an audience. Instead of just being aware of the melody, a musician must *take possession of the melody*.



Know the tune first before you step up to the instrument. Then, to learn the tune on the dulcimer, apply one or more of these techniques: decomposition, lyrical replacement, imagery, subconscious composting, and the tyranny of the clock.

Three techniques will be discussed: decomposition, lyrical replacement and use of imagery. These techniques will be demonstrated on four tunes to provide you with options for approaching a new tune. We'll examine in detail a waltz, a fiddle tune, a jig, and a Carolan piece. If you happen to know one or more of these tunes already, that's okay. Follow along in the discussion and apply the technique to tunes you want to add to your repertoire. The key in building your tool kit for learning new tunes is to work through each of these techniques to find out which works best for you and on which tunes a specific technique seem most successful. There is no single tool that works all the time. One or more of these will shorten the time it takes you to master a new tune.

Technique #1: Decomposition

This technique takes the tune apart so that you can understand its structure and learn manageable sized chunks. The proper musical terms that describe these chunks are *phrase*, *motif*, *riffs*, *germs* and *pick-up notes*.

Phrase – a unit of complete musical thought. A phrase has a clear beginning, middle and end.

Motif or Motive– a unit of musical thought that is smaller than phrases and is not complete. Motifs leave you feeling that there must be more to this. Motifs are often repeated in various places throughout a composition.

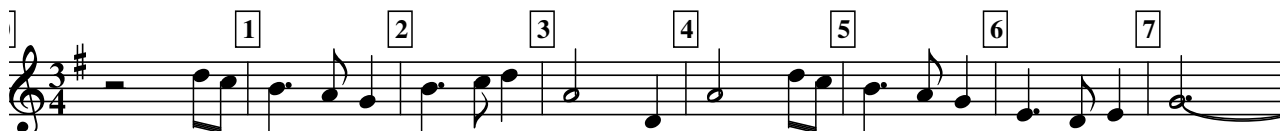
Germs or Riffs - the smallest logical part of a motif or phrase. These do not exhibit any melodic development.

Pick up notes - lead into a phrase. Often these are ignored in analysis. They tend to be clear when heard, but make an analysis hard to follow if we must account for them each time they appear.

SOUTH WIND – A WALTZ

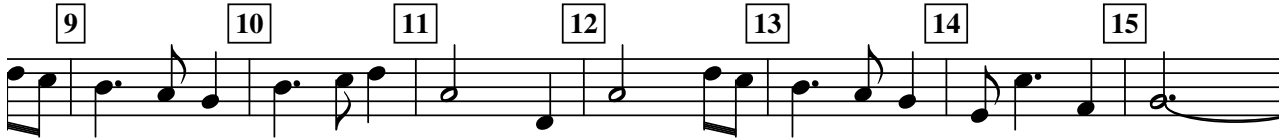
The structure of this waltz shows an “A” part running through measures 1 – 17 with two pick-up notes in measure 0. The entire “A” part is repeated. Measure 16 is the first ending. Measure 17 is the second ending. The “B” part runs from measure 18 through measure 34 and has the same repeated structure and pick-up note form as part A.

Look at measures 1 – 7. This is a musical phrase. Hearing it gives you the sense of completeness. It is a fully expressed thought.





Now look at measures 9 – 15. With the exception of measures 6 and 14, it is the same as the phrase in measures 1 - 8.



That's great news. If the phrase in measures 1 – 3 can be learned with two endings, one pass through part A will be mastered.

Part A

Now look at measures 1,2, 5, 6, 9, 10 and 13. These measures amount to seven of the sixteen measures that define part “A.” Each of these measures has a common rhythmic motif formed by a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note and a quarter note. This rhythmic motif dominates the entire part “A.” It sets the pulse or feeling of part “A.” If the flow of that little rhythmic motif can be mastered, the first part of the tune will almost be in your hands!



Measures 1, 5, 9 and 13



Measure 6



Measures 2, 10

Measures 13 – 15 give this tune its signature ending. The rhythmic germ that has been literally hammered home in the earlier measures now reverses to yield in measure 14 an eighth note followed by a dotted quarter note and quarter note. This rhythmic reversal gives the listener a sense of closure to the melody line.



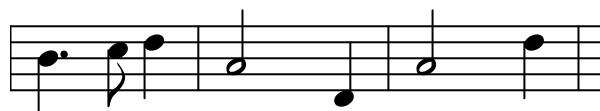
Part B

The second half of *South Wind* can be studied in the same way.

Phrase 1 is
measures 18 - 21 and
measures 27 – 29.



Phrase 2 is measures 22 – 25
Which, aside from the form of
the pick-up notes, is identical
to measures 2 – 4 and 10-12
of part A.





The signature ending of measures 13-15 appears again at the end of the “B” part in measures 30 – 32.



South Wind can be mastered as a set of connected phrases

Part A

- Phrase A1 (measures 1 – 4) with ending Ia (measures 3 and 4)
- Phrase A2 (measures 5 – 8) with ending Ib (measures 6 and 7)
- Phrase A1 (measures 9 – 12) with ending Ia (measures 11 and 12)
- Beginning Measure of Phrase A1 or A2 (measure 13) with the signature ending of the tune in measure 14

Part B

- Phrase B1 (measures 18 – 24) with ending Ia (measures 24 and 25)
- Repeat four measures of phrase B1 (measures 26 – 29)
- Signature ending (measures 30 – 32 same as measures 13 - 16)

You may think of Part A of *South Wind* as one phrase repeated four times with three different endings. Part B of *South Wind* is one phrase played twice with endings borrowed from part A.

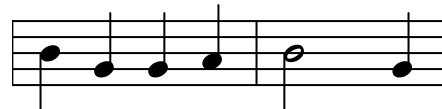
As you study the tune, practice each of these phrases until you master them. Then link the phrases together to form each part and finally link the A and B parts together to form the tune. If you have trouble with the hammering, practice the germ (measures 1, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10 and 13) until you are fluid with that pattern.

JAMIE ALLEN – A FIDDLE TUNE

This is a conventional fiddle tune with “A” and “B” parts. Decomposition reveals these characteristics.

Part A

Measures 1 - 2 establishes the first motif



Measure 3 - 4 repeat the rhythmic line of motif 1 but at a higher pitch and with the second measure broken up by some eighth notes



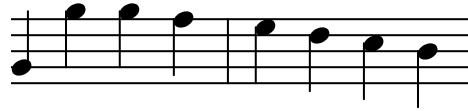
Measures 5 - 8 establish a phrase that is found elsewhere in the melody. See measures 13 – 16 in part “B”





Part B Of *Jamie Allen*

Measures 9 – 10 introduce the principal phrase of part B



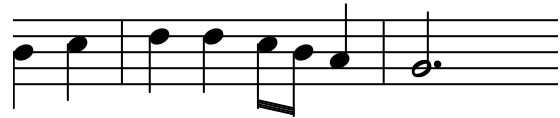
Measures 11 - 12 repeat the principal phrase at a higher pitch but with a rising end rather than a falling end



Measure 13 terminates the repeated principal phrase of Part B



Measures 14 – 16 are identical to the end of Part A in measures 6 - 8



The components of *Jamie Allen* now seem manageable. To learn it means mastering
The Part A Phrase played at two pitches
One Part A Ending
The Part B Phrase played at two pitches, and
The Part A ending repeated

THE KESH – A JIG

The technical definition of a jig describes the form as a six beat melody counted as a pair of triplet notes. That is, when three notes are played on a single beat and this happens within one measure, you've got a jig.

That's all quite correct. But, it misses the exuberance and fun of a well-played jig. As we analyze *The Kesh*, it is important to think about the surging two-beat pulse of the melody.

The Kesh is another two-part tune. Part A runs from measures 1 – 8. Part B runs from measures 10 – 18.

Part A

Measures 1 and 5

The signature motif is the quarter note followed by four eighth notes. The first eighth note gives the lilt to this structure. It serves as a pick-up note to the second beat of the measure. Remember that second beat is the next strongest beat of the measure. Putting the eighth note at the end of the duration of the first beat energizes the measure.





Measures 2 and 6

The signature motif is repeated, but now it is played a whole tone higher



Measures 3 and 7

These measures answer the two presentations of the signature motif



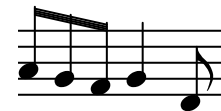
Measures 4 and 8

These measures provide the turnaround and leadout for Part A. Their job is to link phrases.



Measure 9

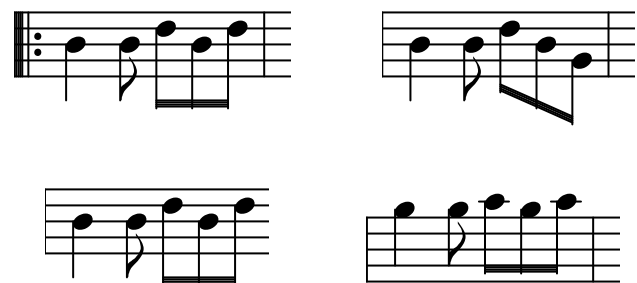
Concludes the A Part.



Part B

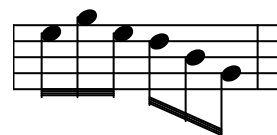
Measures 10, 12, 13, 14 and 16

These measures carry the signature motif at different pitches



Measures 11 and 15

These measures connect the presentations of the signature motif



Measures 17 and 18

These measures provide the turnaround and the end for Part B.





In *The Kesh*, nine of the eighteen measures (1, 2, 5, 6, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16) carry the significant motif of a quarter note followed by four eighth notes. So, if you can master those five notes, you have half of the tune.

SÍ BHEG SÍ MOR – A CAROLAN PIECE

Turlough O'Carolan's music is simply lovely. It's also more complex in its melodic lines and rhythms than most fiddle tunes. But his work can be analyzed in a methodical way, too.

Sí Bheg Sí Mor is a two-part tune. There are sixteen measures in the piece. Ten of those measure share the same rhythmic motif – a structure of a half note, quarter note, half note, quarter note (or the final quarter note replaced by two eighth notes). This means that, if you can master that motif and five unique measures, you will have the entire tune.

This analysis turns what may seem like a complex sounding piece into something that is manageable.

Part A

Measure 1 – think of the *South Wind* motif.

The dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note and a quarter note opens this tune. That was the same rhythmic structure of the opening of *South Wind*. The 6/4 time signature means that two of these motifs fit into a single measure.



Measure 2 – here is the first occurrence of the *Sí Bheg Sí Mor* motif



Measure 3 – a scale from A up to E



Measures 4, 5, 6, 7 – The *Sí Bheg Sí Mor* motif as in measure 2: a measure of one half note followed by a quarter note followed by a half note followed by a quarter note.





Measure 8 – This is the turn-around measure for part A. There is no rhythmic movement in this measure – hold the note

Part B

Measure 9 - the *South Wind* motif of a dotted quarter note, eighth note, quarter note followed by a scale from D up to A.



Measure 10 - *Sí Bheg Sí Mor* motif of one half note followed by a quarter note begins measure 10 and shows up in measures 11, 12 and 13.



Measure 11 – a half note and then the *South Wind* motif



Measures 12, 13 and 14 - The *Sí Bheg Sí Mor* motif



Measure 15 – a scale from B down to D

Measure 16 – Is like measure 8. It's the turn-around measure for Part B and doesn't have any rhythmic movement.

Technique #2: *Lyrical replacement*

It's hard to uncouple music and words. Many times words help us to recall the memory. The reverse is also true. Words and music are a good team. If you have trouble recalling either the melody or the rhythmic structure of a tune, try putting some nonsense words to the melody. I'm not talking about breathless poetry. Some goofy, silly words will do nicely - anything to help you remember the tune.

***SOUTH WIND* – WITH WORDS**

I loved *South Wind* from the very first time I heard it. But I struggled to remember where I was in the tune, which ending came next and when that signature ending was supposed to occur. I could play all the phrases, but I could not put them together consistently. To overcome the confusion, I turned the waltz into a conversation.



To do this with any tune, create a nonsense lyric that follows as precisely as possible the rhythmic pattern of the melody. It is not necessary to write a rhyming lyric. In fact, a set of goofy lines is probably much more effective than a lovely quatrain of poetry.

Here is *South Wind*, part A as a conversation.

Speaker 1 (measures 1 - 4): Do you think it will rain on this day, for sure?

Speaker 2 (measures 4 - 8): No, I think that the rain will hold off.

Speaker 1 (measures 1 - 4): Do you think it will rain on this day, for sure?

Speaker 2 (measures 4 - 8): No, it's not going to rain on this day!

This construction of the tune helped me to hear the music as a conversation: question, answer, repeated question, and emphatic answer. That emphatic answer is the signature ending that is so important to the character of this piece.

JAMIE ALLEN – WITH WORDS

Pick Up Measure Oh I

Measures 1 - 2 could be lean in London, Yes I

Measures 3 - 4 could be svelte in Sweden.

Measures 5 - 6 but I'm glad I'm not 'cause I love

Measures 7 - 8 those burgers and fries.

When you have trouble recalling how to fit all the motifs and phrases together, try putting nonsense words to the melody to aid your memory.

This should give you the idea of what to do. I'll leave *The Kesh* and *SÍ Bheg SÍ Mor* to your imagination ☺

Technique #3: Using Imagery to Learn Tunes

Once you have mastered a tune and you really perceive it, playing the melody becomes a really joyous experience. Your conscious mind can step back from the details of where your hammers are supposed to go next and enjoy the melody. For many of us, this means that the tunes become a musical score for a film we create in our minds.

Perhaps you can learn something about the tune, the dance that often accompanies it or the composer. More often than not, images come to you as you play the tune. Cease upon these as your personal property and link them with the tune. I have a favorite fiddle tune that is titled *A Boy's Lament for his Dragon*. I've never heard a band play the melody. But, I could not resist learning a tune with such a title. And images are really fun!

Here are some pointers about how to go about this technique of images.

SOUTH WIND – With Pictures



Along Ireland's southwest coast a warm sea breeze produces a climate that is sufficiently warm to support palm trees. No scholarship ties the title of this tune to that coast. But the tune is Irish and it's hard to make a case that the tune would be written about any other place in Ireland.

When I play *South Wind* I think about the beautiful area around Dingle Bay. I always think of those out-of-place, unexpected palm trees! The images help me to remember the tune and to play it with conviction.

JAMIE ALLEN – With Pictures

Whenever I hear *Jamie Allen* I can't help but see a cocky, young man on the way to a dance and actively trolling for a girl. The "A" part seems to set a quick, and anticipatory, pace to get him to the dance. Part B draws a picture of a light-footed guy who knows he's handsome, showing off on the dance floor.

KESH JIG – With Pictures

Most of us pronounce the name of this jig as it is spelled. But that's probably one of those many linguistic errors made when one language imports a word from another language. This is an Irish piece; of that there is no doubt. Looking back to Irish Gaelic one finds the word *cis* that has become *kish* in contemporary English. A kish is a large square wicker basket used in Ireland for carrying peat.

This provides a perfect image for the *Kesh Jig*. Now it's easy to imagine peat haulers laboring with their square wicker baskets to move the peat from the bog to the hearth. The tune makes a lot more sense when you understand the title.

Factoid

Tyrrany of the Metronome

Johann Maelzel invented the modern metronome in 1816. Immediately Antonio Saliari (music's aging rock star of the Classical era) put metronome markings on Mozart's work. Beethoven (the reigning rock star of the era) chucked out all those imprecise Italian tempo markings on his own music and replaced them with specific metronomic numbers. But, when he marked up a second copy of his great 9th Symphony he discovered that his first tempo decisions didn't agree at all with his new tempo decisions. So, Beethoven abandoned the metronome.

SI BHEG SI MOR – WITH PICTURES

The title should give you all you need for images. In Irish Gaelic, *Si* is a fairy mound. *Bheg* means small and *mor* means big. So the title translates rough to *Little Fairy Mound – Big*



Fairy Mound. Thoughts of the little people and what they are up to will drive the imagery for this tune.

Using Your Subconscious To Learn Tunes

Our brains need time to process new information. You should anticipate that after working diligently to learn a new tune, you might return the next day to find that much of it has been forgotten! That's the way it works. You put in a lot of new information and only a little bit sticks. You have to play a tune enough times to move it from short-term memory to long-term memory.

USING THE CLOCK TO LEARN TUNES

Once you have the choreography of hammering patterns in your hands, you will want to develop a fluid, accurate style at the right tempo for the tune. You will also want to explore ways to make the tune sound uniquely yours. The clock can be your friend.

Set a time for ten minutes. Pick a tempo at which you can accurately play the tune. Now play. Play for the entire ten minutes. It will seem like an eternity and your mind will wonder. You will probably make some mistakes along the way. Recover as quickly as you can and keep playing.

This exercise has several values. Too many dulcimer players go through a tune two or three times and that's it. In performance, a couple of passes through a tune on one instrument is enough. But this is practice. Playing it for ten minutes straight through builds muscle memory and endurance. The hammering patterns move into your subconscious mind and then you will find both harmonic and rhythmic innovations begin to happen. Not all of these will be welcome but some will bring wonderful expressive nuances to your playing. The more tunes you learn, the more chords you learn, the more options you have, and the more innovations will show up.

The clock exercise can build your stamina and endurance, stimulate creativity, improve your accuracy, embed useful hammering instincts in your mind, and free you to enjoy your playing.