



Tips and Techniques on Irish Fiddling, Part One

by Tim McCarrick

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Where to begin?

How do you begin your adventure into Irish traditional fiddle playing? Assuming you have a fiddle and the desire to learn, the absolute best way to begin learning is to **go see and hear** traditional Irish music being played.

- a. The Session - There may be Irish pubs in your area that feature a traditional "Session". A traditional Irish session is unlike a jam session. In an Irish session, the participants, fiddlers, accordion players, flutes and whistle players get together and share the tunes they already know. These would consist mainly of reels, jigs, hornpipes, and to a lesser extent, slides, polkas, slip-jigs and more. The players will have these memorized. To show up and try to "fiddle along" or "fake it" is considered bad form. You should know some common tunes beforehand. On the other hand, once the beginner/learner is known to the group, he or she may be welcomed in to quietly start learning the tunes in the session, OR directed to a "slow session" for beginning to intermediate players. So, if you can find a traditional session, go to **watch and meet** the musicians. (Leave the fiddle at home or in the car for now) You will find many of them helpful and willing to share their knowledge and experience with you. They may point you in the direction of a beginner's session, or "slow session" or you may even find a fiddle teacher. You won't know until you try.
- b. Plan B - No Irish pubs with sessions in your area? Look around for Irish cultural centers that teach the dance, language, and music of Ireland. Follow these clues to seek out the real thing. Since Irish Dance competitions usually have strict rules requiring live players, the dance teachers can often point you towards the musicians.
- c. Still no luck? Don't give up, you can still learn from books, videos, DVDs and CDs and other technologies as long as you are **listening VERY carefully**. You'll really need your ear and your memory and will find both improving as time goes on.

Learn a tune!

Jim Ward's Jig

Traditional

The musical score for "Jim Ward's Jig" is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/8 time signature. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains measures 1 through 7. The second staff starts at measure 8 and includes first and second endings for measures 9-10. The third staff starts at measure 14 and also includes first and second endings for measures 15-16. The piece concludes with a final note in measure 16.

Ornaments and variations to make this tune your own.

Measure one could go from this:

The first measure of the original tune is shown in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/8 time signature. The notes are: a dotted quarter note on G4, followed by eighth notes on A4, B4, and C5.

to this:

The first measure is shown with an ornament. The notes are: a dotted quarter note on G4 with a mordent above it, followed by eighth notes on A4, B4, and C5. The bass line consists of a dotted quarter note on G3.

Just a simple drone to make a statement. It's like saying to the whistle and flute players - "I'm doing this, because I can!" (ha!)

Or, you could try this:



In Irish music, the symbol above represents a roll. It's basically described as follows:

1. the primary note,
2. "interrupted" with a grace note from above
3. the primary note again,
4. "interrupted" by a grace note from below,
5. the primary note again

It will sound approximately like this:



So it is five notes in the space of one beat. It's also done in one bow. (It's also another great reason to go see and hear an Irish fiddler up close.) The good news about jigs is that the roll we're using puts 5 notes into the space of 3 eighth notes. Some fiddlers might call that a "*long roll*". In reels you will be more rushed since in reels all 5 notes come in the space of one beat (2 eighth notes; a "*normal roll*")

Dos and Don'ts:

DO make the primary note more important than the interruptions

DON'T try to make all five notes sound clearly articulated and beautiful, it's not Mozart. It's first and foremost a rhythmic device.

DO practice this

DON'T sweat it in live situations, it takes time.

Final words of encouragement

Be patient. You won't sound like a seasoned Irish fiddler after an hour, a week, or a month. Keep listening and learning, and soon you may find yourself sounding a bit more authentic in your playing.

Be Yourself - It's common to pick a favorite fiddler and copy and strive to sound like that fiddler. That isn't a bad thing. Writers do it, painters do it, and you can learn a lot that way. BUT, remember there's only one of you. You have your own personality and style and after all the practice, imitation and hard work, in the end, your voice should come through in your playing!

Coming in Part Two:

- Ornaments for the second part of the jig
- Basic bowing patterns
- Ideas on tune variation
- How do you pick the next jig in the set?
- Recommended resources

About the author

Tim McCarrick made an early escape from piano lessons when he discovered stringed instruments. Since that time he has had as many diverse musical adventures as possible, from playing electric guitar, to bluegrass fiddle and mandolin; even getting a music degree and becoming a teacher. He currently evaluates educational music and music technology for JW Pepper & Sons, and is also the owner and writer of the Irish Fiddle website: (<http://www.irishfiddle.com>).