



"By **aiding ear and memory** it will help the already proficient piper to add with ease to his repertoire."

Think about that. First you spend time hearing and absorbing **music**, played by a **musician**, before you engage your mind with symbols on paper which are supposed to offer some technique-related information about that piece of music. Otherwise your result will be quite unmusical.

Never learn a tune from notation alone, especially if you are not already an excellent Irish musician. You may not learn tunes fast enough to satisfy your otherwise healthy eagerness, but you will learn them **right**. And learning tunes by ear is the direct path towards **becoming** an excellent Irish musician. This is the **only** way to learn the "nyah," the "draoicht," "lift," "swing," or whatever you want to call beauty. Many Irish music teachers can hear a student (even when the student is a "professional" musician) and instantly pick out every single tune that the student learned from paper or in some other short-cut manner. How do they do it and what was the student missing? – See the next tips.

The next three tips are like the first laws of real estate: "location, location, location."

### *Tip 2: Rhythm*

... is so complex and detailed in Irish music that even its most important, absolutely essential aspects cannot be notated using traditional classical notation. Instead it can only be learned and recognized after intensive and lovingly careful listening. For **every** tune, even if it's your five-hundredth tune.

### *Tip 3: Rhythm*

... is the primary distinguishing characteristic between music that sounds Irish and music that does not sound Irish.

### *Tip 4: Rhythm*

... is vastly more important than notes, pitches, and ornaments in Irish traditional music. Don't forget that reels, jigs, hornpipes, polkas, slides, mazurkas, etc. are dance music.

*But They Play So Fast!*

To learn to play well at a fast tempo, practice slowly but with a very microscopically accurate rhythm. If you can develop the mental and physical skills to execute perfect rhythm and lift (aka "pulse") at a **slow** tempo, then playing fast will be easy and lively.

When I was a classical violinist, the same concept was explained by a conductor once coaching us to make a very slow movement intense and gripping. You need to be internally feeling the tiniest subdivisions of the beat, so that when something happens, it happens at **exactly** the right millisecond. My favorite metaphor is imagining the tiniest gears inside a clock or watch, spinning fast to make that slow minute hand still deadly accurate across months of time.

A practical way to do that for us trad musicians is to learn and practice from half-speed (or slower!) recordings of great trad musicians. Develop the ability to hear whether you are matching that half-speed performance **exactly**, and then you will be able to work on sounding as if you are one instrument with that recording – and eventually, with anyone else you ever play with.

## *Tip 5: Articulation*

All that talk about rhythm and no practical advice? Well, to get the rhythm right, after you've done lots of careful listening, you need to figure out the particular physical tricks on your instrument that give you all the same kinds of articulation that you're hearing. For the following instruments, this means your first priority is going to be to learn the following skills (it helps to think about what other instruments do, too):

### **Instrument**

### **Techniques for Articulation**

Uilleann Pipes	Closed vs. open fingering, or a mix between the two, and the exact timing of releasing or placing the fingers over the holes. Your articulative art comes in how you measure those milliseconds between the notes. This includes the techniques of popping, cranning, cuts, and rolls.
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Pipers, by the way, seem to have to concentrate the least on other aspects of rhythm, since their instrument, as the dominant defining instrument of Irish traditional music, can hardly be played other than in an Irish manner. Or is it just that pipers, as generally well-mannered people, have the most respect for their musical elders, and thus have listened with the most open and receptive mind to the "genuine players?" I think it may also be proof of Breathnach's contention that you will progress much more easily if you learn Irish music on an instrument upon which you have never played any other kind of music. Who learns the uilleann pipes for anything but Irish music, after all?

## Instrument

## Techniques for Articulation

Whistle / Flute  
Tonguing. This means above all **not** tonguing. **Too much** tonguing is the single most common and fundamental error made by players coming to Irish music from other kinds of music. But you must also learn how to dose and pulse your breath within notes and within a phrase. Too much tonguing totally destroys that multi-note breath, so getting rid of the tonguing is your first task.

Then you can proceed to listen to your role models and gradually learn to use a pulsing breath to give rhythmic life to your individual notes and note-groups. Meanwhile, you can also be working on the secondary task of learning how to use your fingers to get much more subtle and artful breaks and bubbles between and during notes than the gross method of tonguing could ever allow you to get.

Fiddle (and other bowed instruments)  
Bowling. It's **all** in the bow. Forget all the left-hand distractions from the real thing. Ignore what so many commercial tutorials and teachers get away with as substitutes for teaching rhythm. You need to listen closely to your role models and figure out two very subtle skills: 1) how to get a pulsing "breath" (see whistle/flute above) within your notes and note-groups, and 2) bow direction-change ("slur") patterns.

Tip for 1): concentrate on your millisecond-level control of bow **pressure**, not bow speed. Tip for 2): practice all the various slur patterns you hear, especially the ones slurring across the beat. Tip for combining both skills: you need to keep the pulsing breath going regardless of your slurs and direction changes. Your bowing may quite often be "off-beat" but your pulse must still deliver the solid, on-the-beat lift that makes Irish music Irish. Finally, a tip for the left hand: your various cuts and rolls are there to give you much more subtle ways of articulating rhythm than bow changes offer you – see whistle/flute "breaks and bubbles" above. They are **not** there as pretty little melodic diversions *à la* Walt Disney.

## *Tip 6: Select Your Own "Genuine Players" to Study*

"Genuine players," as Breathnach calls them in the quotation at the top of this page, are those who are defining figures of the tradition. They have studied the past of the tradition with great respect and care, they participate in the current tradition to general praise from other traditional musicians, and they are helping to shape the future of the tradition.

There is, of course, – and fortunately – much room for personal variation within the Irish tradition. Every player, as they learn how to play, gradually develops a taste for particular role models or styles. Besides your personal

fancy for the styles of certain players, such decisions usually also revolve around your particular musical community (also known as "regional style" or "local style"):

- Musicians with whom you are related.
- Musicians with whom you play regularly, such as friends, neighbors, and bandmates.
- Musicians who are (or were) the role models of the musicians with whom you play regularly.
- Musicians with whom you have played on some occasion, such as while traveling, or otherwise irregularly.
- Musicians who have strongly influenced how Irish traditional music is played on your particular instrument.
- Musicians who have strongly influenced how Irish traditional music is played generally. Examples include historical figures such as Michael Coleman (fiddle) or John J. Kimmel (accordion).

In order to help you locate published recordings of genuine players playing the tune you want to learn, I publish [irishtune.info - Irish Traditional Music Tune Index](http://irishtune.info) on the Web. That site also contains a large [discography](#) and a list of the [most-cited albums](#). Enjoy!

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## *Practice*

**Caveat (regarding Breathnach's phrase "by practice"):** All of the above tips presume that you have already achieved a basic physical and mental facility with your instrument. To gain a basic facility, you will first need either a face-to-face teacher or to devote considerable time and concentration to fundamental skills. For example, teaching yourself to play scales cleanly, in tune, in even tempo, and from memory will take you a very long way.

In my own experience teaching fiddle to adults, I find that the most common stumbling block for students is not their dexterity or their ear or their instrument, but simply how often — and well — they practice. I can recommend two different resources about how to practice music:

- Burton Kaplan, [Practicing for Artistic Success: The Musician's Guide to Self-Empowerment](#), Perception Development Techniques: New York, 2004.
  - [How to practice with minimal frustration](#) by John Blasquez.
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## *Transcribing*

If you face the necessity of learning by ear with fear and/or self-doubt, as many people do (and as I did, too, when I dove into playing Irish traditional music), here's a handy tip to overcome that fear: Make your own transcriptions! First, use all of the above tips to select and study a recording of the tune you want to learn, but add one extra step for yourself: Write down what you hear in that recording, using either standard music notation or [abc code](#), as you prefer.

Why does learning from your own transcription work, but not when you learn from someone else's transcription? The **process** of understanding what you're **hearing** enough to be able to write it down is the key. The hands-on task of making your transcription ends up being a much less daunting and even an enjoyable and fascinating task, too, compared to going directly from ear to fingers, for anyone still new to the latter skill.

Darrin Koltow wrote an excellent article titled "[Transcription: The Hows and Whys](#)" which I encourage everyone to read, even though it's about music in general, not Irish music.

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## *Listen*

"Listen" is another word from the Breathnach quotation at the top of this page, worth considering in its full weight, and as a counterweight to the mechanical aspect of the "practice" message. To listen is not merely a necessity in order to learn a particular tune. It is also a necessity in order to enter at all into the Irish musical culture, into its essence, nature, beauty, and language. If you do not naturally listen to this music out of the pure joy of listening to it, then you have no chance of ever being able to play it.

Dig down a little further into this truth: If your goal is to play this music on your instrument, on your own, in a way you enjoy, how can you get there if you do not enjoy listening to great masters of this music play it on their own — without any accompaniment and without anyone else covering the details of their sound? And how can one possibly make progress in the direction of such masters without first having spent hours and hours of your life listening to them regularly — just because you like to?

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## *Other Opinions*

"Remember that all traditional musicians learn and play 'by ear': the sooner you can do that, the better!" - [Matt Cranitch, \*The Irish Fiddle Book. The Art of Traditional Fiddle-playing, 1993\*](#), p. 59.

Larry Sanger teaches Irish fiddle in Ohio, and I agree in general with his [Guide to Learning Irish Fiddle](#), but not with some of the fiddle-specific technical advice he gives there. Note especially his practical tips about modern

technology to use for learning tunes from recordings. Given my own lack of local Irish master teachers, I also depend on high-technology tools to learn the fine details from recordings.

University of Vermont music professor Michael Hopkins explains: "Composition is about sound, not dots on paper. Many students are confused about this concept." Read more of his very readable thoughts in his [String Pedagogy Notebook](#).

I was pleased to discover that there is an entire body of solid research on how humans learn music and how to teach music which supports my opinions, presented very nicely by the [Gordon Institute for Music Learning](#).

Finally, have a look at the [lengthy debate](#) a large number of whistle players and learners got into back into 2001 when someone gave them an excerpt from "Tip 1" of this page. I'm happy to report that those who objected to that excerpt clearly haven't read this page in its entirety.

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