

Notes with Janet Harbison's Workshop - “From Bones to Beautiful: The Old Leitrim Jig”

Developing traditional Irish dance music

Traditional Irish music is a creative performer's art!

Right from the very beginning, we are invited 'to learn the tunes, join the community of players ('in the session'), and 'make the music our own'. 'Making the music your own' is a core characteristic of traditional musicianship – and the greatest pleasure for us musicians is in social playing ('in the session') where all participants are playing their own interpretations of tunes from a core repertoire of known traditional tunes. This individual contribution to the music is 'ornamentation and variation' with the melody (for all instruments), and chords, base-lines, other notes, 'voices' and countermelodies – maybe even descants for all instruments with a potential for accompanying! This creative potential is exciting and always adds challenge and interest to music playing. For us harpers, this is our great adventure!

The idea of a session with everyone 'doing their own thing' might seem 'disorganised' to the uninitiated! Because everyone adheres to the 'bones' (basic notes) of the tune, the overall sound is always clear and energetic while the detail of individual players is brilliant and decorative. The aspect of what the left hand does is also grown from the 'bones' of the harmony.

Every tune has its 'natural harmony' (it's own chord plan that is shaped by the tune itself – a very 'Irish' characteristic) and, when there are a number of accompaniment-potential-instruments (harps, keyboards, guitars, bazoukis etc) participating in a session, of course there is the potential for a mess if everyone pushes forward with their own ideas of accompaniment schemes. Hopefully, participating harpers (at least!) can be forever flexible and can 'pare back' their arrangements to 'the bones' of the natural harmony and then give each other a free run with a tune on repeats of it. This is "Session etiquette" and for harp, guitars, pianos, accordions etc this is an important subject to perfect. But, as always, common sense (an politeness!!) should prevail and everyone's enjoyment and input is valued and given the opportunity to shine. So, being flexible and respectful to others is as much part of the unspoken social code of session practise as putting your clothes on every day (no naked shoppers please!).

This is how it has been done for hundreds of years – with our music evolving orally (taught by mouth) and learned 'by ear' (aurally) – like speech – that makes sense and belongs to its community; has its own logic, values system and criteria of excellence; its own social etiquette, standard practises and behaviours; and celebrates its heroes and achievers. And, we harpers have always been special as we have the epic and patron music in our repertoires. This is for another day – now we are focusing on a regular dance tune with the idea of exploring it and having fun in the process. (Did anyone ever tell you that practising should be fun? Actually, I do all my practise 'in the session' – so, of course, it's fun!).

The role of ‘accompaniment’ or ‘left-hand arrangement’

Instruments such as the pipes, the fiddle, the melodeon, accordion and concertina, banjo and mandolin, can also sound more than one note at a time. The pipes have a ‘drone’ sounding a bass tone under their playing (this can be switched on or off) and comprises up to 3 notes, from D to D-A-D. They also have ‘regulators’ that play chords. A fiddle can ‘double-stop’ – meaning it can strike more than one string at a time and the extra notes can imitate a drone or provide hints of chords. The melodeon and accordion both have ‘chord buttons’ for the left hands on the left hand side of their instruments – offering up to 8 chord and base-note options. And, the concertina, while it doesn’t have chord buttons, can sound more than one note by pressing a few buttons at the same time on the push or pull of the bellows. All of these harmonisation possibilities are used only sporadically to enhance the tune with a particular effect – quite differently to other forms of music (classical, rock or pop for instance). This is another characteristic of traditional music.

This presents the extraordinary range of choices we harpers can make – where can we start!

Many players will start with arrangements already fixed for them! Of course, this is a choice that all players can make, but wouldn’t it be fun to give your creative powers an outing?

Since the 1970s, a great deal of arranged music has been printed. Up to this – and remember that we have been playing harps in Ireland for at least 1500 years - there was almost nothing for Irish harp players in print. This underlines the historical orality of the tradition and the performer’s freedom ‘to make the music their own’.

So, today, we have the choice

– to play traditionally on a given melody, interpreting ‘the melody with their own choice of ornamentation and variation, and accompaniment parts,

- or to play a pre-prepared arrangement by another player that can be learned by rote (imitation by ear) or by note (from a printed script).

This lesson here is designed to help you to explore your own ‘arrangement’ of traditional Irish music – to bring it from ‘Bones’ to ‘Beautiful’ as a traditional piece and creative player in the tradition.

10 steps

There are a number of clear steps to the process of building your music.

Firstly, look to the character of your chosen tune – every tune has something of a unique character! This is what you will aim to enhance – as your arrangement should always ‘complement’ the tune! What you find as ‘character’ can be anything from a nice sequence of notes or harmony that you particularly like - to a quirky turn in the melody, or an unusual rhythmic lilt.

Next, get more familiar with the tune so you can hum it (or ‘diddle’ it) through from start to finish of each part at least. (A ‘part’ of a tune is a complete section, usually 16 bars (or ‘measures’ long) ending with a double-bar-line (often repeated) and equates to a ‘verse of a song’). This is about ‘getting the tune on your ear’ so it will be easier to voice it on your instrument.

Now, you are ready to physically work out ‘the bones of the tune’.

Depending on where you have found the tune – from another player, from a recording or from a book of notes, you will start with this – and bear in mind that there are predictable aspects of form and structure that you can draw on to help the learning and memorising process.

Making life and memorising tunes really easy, there are predictables...

Some of these predictables are:

The 4 x 4 structure of the music. Like almost all folk songs, nursery rhymes or church hymns, the melodies will present in 4 phrases, each with 4 strong beats (totalling 16 beats) in every 'part'. (A part of a tune is a clear section of music defined by double bar lines (and probably repeat marks), like a verse of a song.

Patterns of repetition. In all tunes, there are patterns of repetition that give structure and cohesion to the music. Look out for these, and it makes memorising very easy!

Repeating phrases. In dance music, there is a consistent pattern of repeating phrases in that the first and third phrases in a part are 90% of the time the same; and the last (4th) phrase is usually the same between the parts. If a tune doesn't follow the predictable patterns, this makes this tune special. Here in The Old Leitrim jig, there is an enhancement in the first notes of the 4th phrase in the 2nd part....

Harmony patterns. Like melody, harmony also behaves in patterns – 90% of the time, the 2nd phrase ends in a chord of 5 (built on the 5th note of the scale of the tune), and in the final (4th) phrase, there will be a 5 – 1 sequence of chords to complete the part. This will be on the 2nd and 3rd beats of the phrase, or the 3rd and 4th.

By recognising the form and structure of repeated elements in a tune makes it very easy to learn!

The Old Leitrim or Leitrim's Choice

First part of the tune:



Second part of the tune:



The next step is to 'learn the tune'. Now you need to find sensible fingering....

Always use the simplest fingering and fit it to each shape in the melody and within the phrase. Don't try to make good-fingering-sense of long sequences of notes across the phrases –

Use simple fingering for simple shapes – as, later on, all this will change when you start getting creative.

Step 1 Learn the bones of the tune with easy fingering...

2 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 1 2 1 2 1 2 3 1 1 2 3

2 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 1 2 1 4 3 2 1 2 3 1 1 2 3 4

4/1 3 2 1 2 1 2 3 1 2 3 4 3 2 1 2 3 1 1 2 3 4

1 3 2 1 2 1 2 3 1 3 2 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 1 2 3 4

Step 2 Add a drone...

When you are comfortable with the tune and can play it through without hesitation or mistake – and with your eyes closed, you are now ready to add a drone....

The drone is a single note, D4, played throughout the piece.

Step 3a Identify the chords of the natural harmony

Here, use your ears to 'find the chords that fit' and play them on the strongest beats...

Four systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. Each system consists of a treble staff and a bass staff. The treble staff contains a melody of eighth and quarter notes. The bass staff contains chords, represented by vertical lines and dots, indicating the natural harmony. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8.

Step 3b And, on all the beats - This to complete the chord plan...

This exercise is to identify the chord plan. Chords can be played in so many ways, shapes and patterns...

Four systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment, identical to the ones in Step 3a. Each system consists of a treble staff and a bass staff. The treble staff contains the same melody of eighth and quarter notes. The bass staff contains chords, represented by vertical lines and dots, indicating the chord plan. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8.

Step 4 Explore the melody!

Just focusing on the first phrase, here are some of the ornamentation samples from the video.

There are 8 different options here using 'cuts', triplet runs to quad runs from above and below...

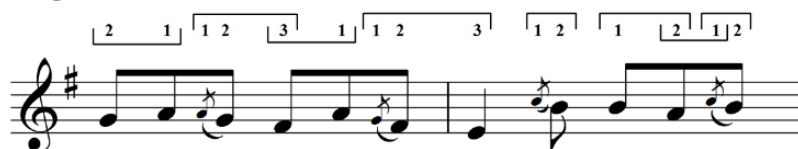
'Cuts' on the strong beats



'Cuts' on the 1st weak beats



'Cuts' on the 2nd weak beats



Easy 'triplet runs'



A bigger run...



And an even bigger option...



'Running' with the chord from below

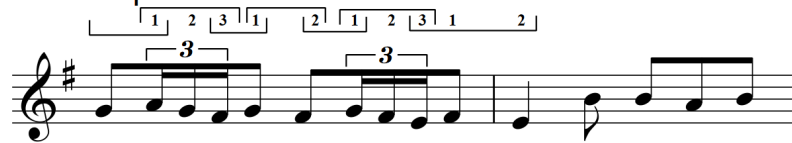


'Running' 4-note chords from below



And then there are rolls...

A 5-note triplet roll



A 5-note 'cut and tip' roll



And trebles...

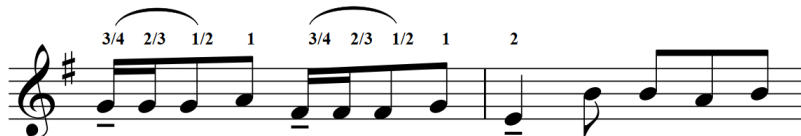
Treble to the beat



4-3-2 fingering



Treble on the beat



There are a few more ornamentations offered on the video – and this is just a taste of the options open to you. And, this is just looking at what options you might use for the first phrase of this jig.

The idea is that you explore and play the tune differently every time as you fancy it. You would never consider to tell the same piece of gossip the same way twice!

For a more encompassing study, I recommend my tutor books for Level 3 (higher intermediate) and Level 4 (advanced) where you may learn a great deal more.

Next we consider the left hand arrangement.

Step 5 Arranging the left hand: Drones and Doubles

Your first step is to apply 'Drones and Doubles' and this can be your 'default' to the most basic arrangement of a traditional dance tune. It should be very easy to pare back to this version if you are ever in a session with a lot of accompanying players who may not be very wise or sensitive to collaborating with other accompanying players.....

Drones and doubles



Step 6 Push and pull -

Once you are comfortable with the Drones and Doubles, you will want to add interest – and your first stop is to play with the rhythm and placement of the doubles. This is a very old strategy and the evidence is clear even from Carolan's time where the base-line of the music is a single line of melody – following the melody, anticipating and delaying the doubled notes of the beats...



Etcetera!

Step 7 Exploring more with chords

Chords can be broken up and played so many ways. Here are a few ideas to play with....



Adding a little more list and interest...



Step 8 Exploring a simple mix

Using doubles and varying them to other notes in the harmony of the moment; and instead of 3-note chords, just 2..



Taking this a step further, we will return to chording and use octaves instead of the chord – and then explore ‘walking’ the base line..... in octaves and / or 10ths,

Step 9 Supporting the harmony with octaves and 10ths

Instead of using the chord of Em, just use the octave, or perhaps a 10th. This keeps the music from getting too heavy and cluttered with notes – leaving the tune to float through unhindered. This is an excellent strategy and is most popular among young players today.



Extend the octaves to 10ths and explore some more!



Step 10 Over to you!

Enjoy the adventure and be adventurous! Don't be afraid to experiment and go beyond the ordinary. When you are playing with friends in a session, you can still explore but the music won't stop for you to consider a different move, or an alternative chord, or to correct a mistake.

I hope you have enjoyed this little adventure with our Old Leitrim jig. If you enjoyed the workshop, do connect with me. I would love your feed-back and also, I offer lots of training options including tutor books, online lessons, workshops and courses. I look forward to hearing from you!

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