

Learning Fiddle By Ear – Ten Questions, Many Strategies

Dave Reiner

©2012-2020 D. Reiner

Class description: For those who may be used to reading music, and have limited (or no) experience learning fiddle by ear, it can really be a challenge to face a new way of learning and playing. This gets easier over time, but how do you get started? Does everyone else really pick up tunes after hearing them once? We'll cover a number of strategies and tricks for improved learning by ear, whether it's fiddle tunes or playing along with other musicians.

We'll apply these questions and strategies to three or four actual tunes in a hands-on way.

See my additional thoughts at <https://fiddlehell.org/info/playing-by-ear>

Discussion to get us started

- Why might you want to learn fiddle tunes by ear?
- Is there one "right" version of a fiddle tune?
- What's the difference between learning by ear and learning from written music?
- How did you learn to sing songs like Happy Birthday? [repetition, community, simplicity]
- What's the difference between mechanics and music? This will be an eye-opener!

Here are ten questions for learning a new fiddle tune (or song). You don't have to deal with them in this order, of course. Some players don't know *any* of the answers, even a tune name!

1. Basics?

- a. **Name** of the tune
- b. **Source?** Not essential, but nice to know.
- c. **Style:** Southern old-time, bluegrass, New England, Irish, Scottish, Cape Breton, French Canadian, blues, swing, gypsy, Cajun, Texas, Scandinavian, folk, classical...
- d. **Strategies:** Ask, listen. Become familiar with the styles that you like.

2. Key?

- a. A, G, D, C are common in fiddling.
- b. The key tells you the likely scale and notes.
- c. For a song, the singer usually picks the key.
- d. Major vs. minor feel... Modes: Mixolydian (b7), Dorian (b3, b7), Aeolian (b3, b6, b7)
- e. **Strategies:** Ask. Find the last note in the tune. Look at guitar chords and capo.

3. Speed and time signature?

- a. **Speed?** Slow, medium, fast.
- b. **How many beats (= foot taps) per measure?** Many fiddle tunes match up with dances, although some are just for listening.
- c. Two per measure: Reel (2/4), Jig (6/8)
- d. Three per measure: Waltz (3/4), Air, Pols, Hambo, Slip jig (9/8)
- e. Four per measure: March, Hornpipe, Strathspey, Air, ...
- f. **Strategies:** Have in mind a typical example of a reel, jig, waltz, etc.

4. Parts?

- a. Usually fiddle tune parts are **8 measures** long.
- b. AABB is common – the A and B parts are each repeated twice. Then start over.
- c. AABA matches some songs, swing tunes; the B part may be called the bridge.
- d. AB, AABCC, AABCBC
- e. AABCCDD – wait, maybe that's two tunes in a medley, not a four-part tune!
- f. Usually the parts are the same length as each other.
- g. Some tunes are "crooked;" with extra measures or extra notes. Not great for dancing!
- h. **Strategies:** Ask, count, observe, dance. Occasionally, look at a written version.

5. Melody?

- a. Often there's agreement about the basic melody of a tune, within a given style or region of the country. But versions differ across fiddlers, and from one time to the next by the same fiddler ("variations").
- b. You're hearing one version of many possible ones; want basics (bones) of the tune.
- c. In some styles, fiddlers gravitate toward the group version as they play together; in others they keep to their own versions and add their own variations.
- d. **Strategies:** Sing it to yourself. Record it. Look for patterns. Notes, groups, chunks, Find an anchor chunk (perhaps beginning or ending) and try to connect it with other parts. Focus: try to learn one additional note or beat or phrase each time through a tune. Can you get someone to slow it down for you?
- e. **Strategies:** Learn to play **the echo game**. Did the pitch of a note stay the same, go lower, or go higher? Learn to recognize intervals between successive notes (This Land is Your Land, Twinkle, Over the Rainbow). It gets easier with time and practice!

6. Rhythm, groove, lilt?

- a. It's not really enough to play the notes. You're looking to give them the right feel, to bring them alive.
- b. In Southern old-time fiddling, rhythm is more important than the exact melody.
- c. In Irish fiddling, there's a lilting feel; in Cape Breton, a boldness and verve; ...
- d. **Strategies:** Listen to recordings and to live fiddlers, play along, imitate, learn bow patterns, bow rocks, bow pulses, drone notes, cross-tunings, accents, and more.
- e. **Strategies:** Watch fiddlers' right hands to see loops and figure 8 patterns. What part of the bow is in use, and where's the point of contact with the strings?

7. Chord progression?

- a. A chord progression is a sequence of chords that harmonize with the tune and support it. (See Dave's [Anthology of Fiddle Styles](#)). Players don't always agree.
- b. Describe chord structure in numbers: 1 5 1. 1 4 5 1. 1 4 1 5 1 4 1/5 1.
- c. Major (1 5 1), minor (1m 5 1m), modal (1 7 1).
- d. **Strategies:** Learn typical progressions, ask others, listen for hints from other musicians: bass runs, 7th chords, chromatic movement. Learn to read guitar and other instrument chord positions ("Could you show me what a G chord looks like?")

8. Arrangement? For a song, what is the arrangement by a band?

- a. Ex: BI – V/C – M – V/C – F – C
- b. Intro? Breaks? Splits? Ending? On the fly?
- c. Who does the **backup** when? Complement the vocals (or lead instrument).
- d. Fiddles have all the fun! Use color notes, harmonies, chords, ...
- e. **Strategies:** Support, enhance, answer, embellish; don't double the vocals (or lead).

9. Fiddle break (bluegrass, country, folk, ...)?

- a. Feeling, approach? Intensity? Full speed ahead, or build up gradually.
- b. Melody (a good idea) vs. chords? What might you sing?
- c. Beginning? Ending? Keep playing at end?
- d. Classic licks? Hot licks? Blue notes? High lonesome sound? Slides?
- e. **Strategies:** Copy classic arrangement or break? The feel or the exact notes?

10. Feedback and analysis

- a. What techniques work for you, what don't?
- b. What needs practicing? Rhythm, intonation, double stops, bowing patterns, this key?
- c. Where are you in the "degrees of knowing"? Play alone, play with others, perform.
- d. **Strategies:** Figure out where your playing needs to be improved. What do you hear other fiddlers playing that you don't seem to be doing?