

The fantastic concertina player, Caitlín Nic Gabhann was asked recently, “how do you become a great musician?” We think her response was fantastic.

Listen as much as you can to Irish traditional music; in the car, while you’re walking, at home ... I can’t stress this enough. This is a vital part of learning and understanding traditional Irish music. You need to be able to feel it; the swing, the phrasing, the flow, the style. None of these can be notated properly. So, listen as much as you can. Listen to Irish trad music CDs, vinyls, downloads, online archives, whatever you enjoy listening to. Listen to a variety of instruments and styles and from different eras of traditional Irish music if you can. Listen to Irish trad & folk music from 50 years ago. Who did your musical idols learn from? Who did they listen to growing up? Find recordings of these people and listen to them. Go back to the source. Listen to a variety of traditional Irish instruments. Growing up, I listened to Irish concertina recordings, but I probably listened more to accordion, flute and fiddle CDs. The more the music gets into your head, the better the music will be that comes out through your fingers. This music is for feeling, not for reading from a page. The more you have this music in your head and your heart, the more it will naturally flow out.

Sing it!

This is a good place to start when learning a new traditional Irish tune. Can you sing the tune in your head? My advice is to know the melody in your head before attempting it on your instrument. Sometimes I get my concertina beginner classes to first listen to the melody a few times before trying to sing along with it. When done in this way, it’s easier to understand the phrasing, which then makes it easier to learn the melody once you lift your instrument. If you can hum the tune in your head before you start playing it on your instrument, you’re off to a good start. So, back to listening! Listen to the recording of the tune over and over until you can sing along with it. Once you can more or less hum the tune, then start it on your instrument.

Repetition

Once you start to learn the melody notes of a traditional Irish tune on your instrument, my advice is to repeat, repeat, repeat. Through repetition, you’ll get more comfortable with the notes and this is how you’ll get a relaxed, steady flow into the melody. Even if you pick up a tune very quickly, it’s the time you spend after this initial learning that counts. It may only take you 6 minutes to learn the notes of some traditional tunes, but it could take 6 months to actually learn how to play it. This comes through repetition, practice and finding your own way and flow with the tune, and of course, plenty of listening.

Some Exercises

Play a tune over and over. Play it slowly. Try tapping your foot along with the tune. Try it without tapping your foot. Focus on the ‘on the beat’ notes and put more emphasis on them. Focus on the ‘off beat’ notes and put the emphasis on them. Play it without adding any ornamentation. Put in a long note here and there. Use these exercises and more to find your way around the tune, and to ultimately find your own personal internal rhythm, swing and flow within a tune.

Keep it Steady

As I mentioned above, it might take you 6 minutes to learn a melody. And that's great! But it will probably take 6 weeks or longer to learn how to play it. There is a lot to understand and grasp in a tune; for example, the internal swing and the internal rhythm. However, you're learning, play at a speed that is comfortable for you. Please don't try to play faster than is comfortable for you. If you try to rush ahead, you will likely lose your flow and rhythm. This is what happens once speed comes into it before you're ready for it. This is a common mistake amongst learners and beginners in traditional Irish music. Getting good flow is much more important than getting speed.

Relax

It's important to be relaxed in your music-making. If you're trying to play faster just for the sake of it, you may be sounding rushed. It's much more important to stay in time (consistent tempo) and to focus on your phrasing, flow and rhythm, rather than your speed. The people who are playing fast have been at it for years and years. Some trad Irish musicians play very fast, but they're so accomplished, the music doesn't sound fast or rushed. This is because they're able for it and have been doing it for years. So, keep it steady. Lean into the notes. Where are you putting the emphasis? Where is the rhythm? Work on your phrasing. All this takes time and effort and can't be learned overnight, even though you might already know the melody. Once you know the melody, it's the music that then needs the work.

Leave the notes behind

Try to only use notation as a backup when you need it. Look at it as a crutch. Try to go on your own. I guarantee that if you put in the extra work at the start and learn a tune by ear, this effort will pay off. The tunes you learn by ear tend to stay in your head much longer than the tunes you learn from a page. I've seen this happen many times.

When you're used to learning traditional Irish music using notation, it can be very hard to switch to starting to learn by ear. It can be very hard to identify the intervals between notes. But try. It gets easier. And it's worth it! This way, you also get to absorb the feeling in the music, which cannot be notated, only felt. Again, this music is for feeling, not for reading from a page.

Give notes their full value

Try not to cut notes short in order to get to the next note in time. I see this happening a lot amongst beginners on your instrument, and it can sound choppy and rushed. Give each note its full value. Fill out the space. Try not to leave gaps between the notes, unless intentionally. As one student described it back to me, 'lean in'. Play out the notes fully. It's an easy change to make in your playing but it makes a big difference.