

INTRODUCTION

'I can play the tune, but now what?'

This is the phrase that inspired this book. Heard at many a workshop and masterclass over the years, I decided it was time to tackle the tricky business of getting started with those stylistic elements that make English folk music sound like English folk music.

There are plenty of tune books out there containing communal repertoire, tunes shared not only with other players on the scene but with past and future players – the *noun* or *thing* of folk music, if you will. Far fewer address the *process* or *verb* of folk music, that personal freedom to ornament and vary these tunes, responding to other musicians or to our own musical whims. I wanted to create a resource that looked at both the stylistic elements involved and the processes of experimentation and exploration that are involved in really *getting into* a tune and that constitute the *doing* of folk music.

This book also aims to provide a framework for players to put knowledge gained from workshops and classes into a wider context, exploring the new skills acquired and applying these skills to existing repertoire.

HOW IT WORKS

Learn to play the elements presented in the Musical Toolkit section – if you were to compare fiddle playing to learning a language then this would be the equivalent of learning vocabulary.

Apply these elements to the tunes in the Tune Book, or to tunes that you already know. There are written explanations and videos available to help with this. You are encouraged at each stage to apply the **Crucial Questions** (page 6) to make sure you understand the principles and musical effects of these ideas. This stage is the equivalent of learning some basic grammar. The first sections of the book will focus on learning and applying elements.

Combine different elements: this will allow you to discover how ideas can work together and how they affect each other. To continue the language analogy, this is the equivalent of developing your conversation skills. The sections later on in the book suggest ideas and approaches to combining elements.

Recombine the elements repeatedly. This is the musical equivalent of taking part in a public debate, writing a sonnet or appearing on Radio 4 panel show *Just a Minute*: consider it musical eloquence! Repeatedly recombining the elements will help to build a high level of fluency that will allow you to pick and choose musical ideas in the moment, responding to other musicians or to your own musical impulses. That said, it's also fine to plan ahead and have pre-arranged variations, especially when you're building experience.

Exploring the different ideas presented in this way requires a lot of repetition, which will ultimately help you to recall the tunes more easily and to play them by heart. Forgetting and relearning a tune is an inevitable part of learning it, but this creative and proactive repetition will really help the tunes to sink in.

Once you start to learn and master the ideas and elements in this book, you may begin to notice them in other people's playing, be it on your favourite fiddle player's new album or in a session. This kind of listening is arguably the most important skill you can develop – again, apply the **Crucial Questions** (page 6) here to help you understand what it is you're hearing and to apply the ideas you hear to your own playing.

MUSICAL TOOLKIT

Folk musicians across the British Isles and Ireland breathe life into the tunes they play by varying stylistic techniques such as ornamentation, bowing patterns, and subtle melodic and rhythmic variations. These are the areas we'll address in this section.

In English playing, the music tends to be less highly ornamented, but often uses more prominent rhythmic and melodic variation than is heard in Scottish or Irish music. Within this, there is a huge variation in style amongst players depending on things like tone, choice of repertoire, the different musical elements that any given player might favour and/or the specific ways in which they use those elements. So where to start?

I've laid out a small selection of skills here that will form the foundation of your stylistic playing. I've tried to be consistent in applying the ideas discussed but it's important to stress that these offer a starting point and that all suggestions should be considered guidelines and not hard-and-fast rules. The two halves of the tunes are referred to as A sections and B sections throughout and other terminology is explained as it crops up.

The tune 'The Dory Boat' is used throughout the Musical Toolkit section of the book as a 'demonstration' or 'model' tune. There is a blank copy opposite with some basic chords, and a walkthrough of the tune is available on the website. I recommend you start out by learning this tune.

LEARN THE SKILL: SIMPLE SLURS AND HOOKED BOWING

What: Simple slurs and hooked bowing/broken slurs.

How: Play two or more notes in one bow direction, either smoothly or with a slight stop in between.

Where: Single jig rhythms, with bow changes aligning with the main beats of the bar.

Why: To avoid running out of bow, and to create a satisfying and consistent rhythm in your bow arm.

Top Tips: The example opposite uses separate bows, simple slurs and hooked bowing – it's one possible version of the tune that you can create using these techniques. Try varying the amount of bow and the bow speed, and note the effect. Too little bow or too slow a movement and the sound may be scratchy, but use too much bow and the tune might sound more like classical music than folk. A gentler bow will make the slurs sound smooth whereas an energetic bow will give the tune drive – both effects can be useful, so try each. You can also experiment with starting on an up or a down bow and with playing in the different parts of the bow.

The Dory Boat

Trad.

The musical score for "The Dory Boat" is written in 6/8 time and consists of four staves. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The first staff contains four measures with chords D, G, A, and D. The second staff contains four measures with chords D, G, A, and a first/second ending bracket over the final two measures, both leading to a D chord. The third staff contains four measures with chords D, G, A, and D. The fourth staff contains four measures with chords Bm, Em, A, and a first/second ending bracket over the final two measures, both leading to a D chord. The notation includes eighth and quarter notes, some beamed together, and rests.