

Theory and Application



Common Tune Structures 1: major keys

In my opinion, a little understanding of common structures in traditional music can help with learning (and retaining) tunes. This is a lightning guide to some of these structures.

1. Tunes usually have two parts - the first half and the second half. In traditional music these are usually called the "A part" and the "B part".
2. The A part of a tune can be divided into **four roughly equal sections**. Same with the B part (although sometimes the B part is twice as long; if so it doesn't repeat. These equal sections are often called "phrases".
3. Nos 1 and 2 above describe about 99.9% of **all** traditional dance tunes.



Within the four-phrase structure described above, there are other structures which are worth exploring. The following is very common; it certainly doesn't apply to 100% of tunes, but what is surprising is **how many tunes** it does apply to.

THE OPENING PHRASE

The first phrase simply announces the tune. When you hear it, you know whether you're getting a slow tune or a fast tune, a happy tune or a sad tune, a jig or a reel or a waltz.

THE SECOND PHRASE

The 2nd phrase quite often begins the same as the first phrase, but then there is a **significant chord change**, which is reflected in the notes of the tune. While the chord will change to a V or a V7th, the melody will make a big thing about going to the 2nd note of the scale you're in. For example, if you're in the **key of D**, the

chord changes to an **A** or an **A7th**, while the melody will make a production of going to an **E note** (the E note is within the A chord).

THE THIRD PHRASE

The 3rd phrase is usually exactly the same as the first phrase. Sometimes it differs with a slight variation, but more often than not it's a simple repeat of the 1st phrase.

THE FOURTH PHRASE

The main purpose of the 4th phrase is resolution, in other words the tune ends with the root note of the key you're in (in the key of D, the tune will end on a D note). Likewise with the chords (in the key of D, you'll end on a D chord). Often the phrase will end on a "boom-boom-boom" sound to emphasise its finality.

Let's now look at a tune and how it breaks down into the four-phrase structure. Soldier's Joy is one of the most widely-known tunes in the world:

Soldier's Joy (traditional)

As I said above, not **every** tune fits in with this structure, but an extraordinary amount of tunes do. Here are some popular tunes which do:

The Duchess Tree; The Lovat Scouts; Rothesay Bay; The Auld Hoose; MacFarlane o' the Sprots; The White Cockade; My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean; Fairy Lullaby; Duke of Fife's

Welcome to Deeside; Mo Mhathair; The Hills of Lorne; Dark Lochnagar; Glasgow Highlanders; Barnyards o' Delgaty; Aitken Drum; I'll Gang Nae Mair Tae Yon Town; This Is No My Ain Lassie; Ye Banks & Braes; my Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose; The Bloody Fields of Flanders; Off She Goes; Roses of Prince Charlie; Roxburgh Castle; etc, etc...