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Theory and Application



Common Tune Structures 2: minor 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.

A part:

1st phrase

2nd phrase

3rd phrase

4th phrase

Within the four-phrase structure described above, there are other structures which are worth exploring. The following is a very common structure for tunes in a

minor key (including tunes in the dorian mode); it applies to most of these tunes. We'll use a tune in E dorian called Johnny's Wedding as an example.

Johnnie's Wedding (traditional)

THE 1ST PHRASE

As always, the opening phrase 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. Because we're in a minor key, the notes will reflect this: you'll get lots of Es, Gs and Bs - the notes of the E minor chord.

THE 2ND PHRASE

In minor key tunes the chord will change to next lowest major chord. For example, if you're in the key of E dorian, or E minor, the chord changes to a **D major**. Again, the melody will reflect this: lots of Ds, F#s and As (the 3 notes which make the D major chord).

THE 3RD PHRASE

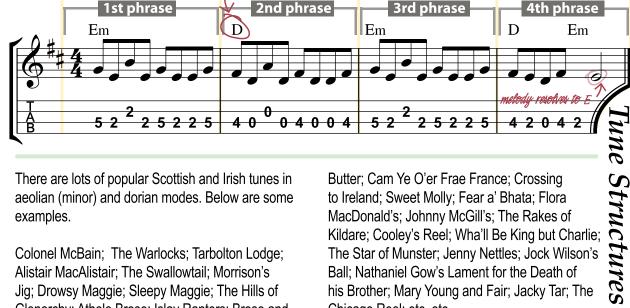
The 3rd phrase is usually exactly the same as the first phrase. Sometimes it differs with a slight variation, but more often than not it's a simple repeat of the 1st phrase.

THE 4TH PHRASE

The main purpose of the 4th phrase is resolution, (if you're in (in the key of E dorian or E minor. the tune will end on a E note and an E minor chord). Often the chords in the 4th phrase go **D** - **Em**, or Em - D - Em.

chord changes to D (here I am!)

(same as the 1st)



There are lots of popular Scottish and Irish tunes in aeolian (minor) and dorian modes. Below are some examples.

Colonel McBain; The Warlocks; Tarbolton Lodge; Alistair MacAlistair; The Swallowtail; Morrison's Jig; Drowsy Maggie; Sleepy Maggie; The Hills of Glenorchy; Athole Brose; Islay Ranters; Brose and

Butter; Cam Ye O'er Frae France; Crossing to Ireland; Sweet Molly; Fear a' Bhata; Flora MacDonald's; Johnny McGill's; The Rakes of Kildare; Cooley's Reel; Wha'll Be King but Charlie; The Star of Munster; Jenny Nettles; Jock Wilson's Ball; Nathaniel Gow's Lament for the Death of his Brother; Mary Young and Fair; Jacky Tar; The Chicago Reel; etc, etc...