

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.

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|----------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 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**.

The musical notation is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It is divided into four phrases:

- 1st phrase:** Chord Em. Fret numbers: 5 2 2 2 5 2 2 5.
- 2nd phrase:** Chord D. Fret numbers: 4 0 0 4 0 0 4. A red circle highlights the 'D' chord label.
- 3rd phrase:** Chord Em. Fret numbers: 5 2 2 2 5 2 2 5. A red note indicates it is the same as the 1st phrase.
- 4th phrase:** Chords D and Em. Fret numbers: 4 2 0 4 2. A red note indicates the melody resolves to E.

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...