

Styles & Genres

Tune Types: Polkas

THE POLKA was originally a Czech dance from the 1830s, and was introduced into the ballrooms of France and England in 1843. The name comes from the Bohemian word *pulka* which means half, and refers to the little half step that is characteristic of the dance. Scottish dance bands tend to play an older form of polka tune, in three parts and with changing keys. The polkas played in pub sessions, however, are Irish: much simpler two-part tunes with no key change. In the Sliabh Luachra area in the south-west of Ireland, the polka is the predominant dance tune, unlike the rest of Ireland where the reel reigns supreme.



Rhythm and Pick Direction

The rhythm of the Irish polka is a driving 2/4 rhythm, not unlike a Scottish bagpipe march.

In 4/4 tunes eighth notes (quavers) would call for alternate picking: *down-up-down-up*. However, tunes in 2/4 tend to have mostly eighth notes, and you use mostly downstrokes throughout. The exceptions would be the note after a dotted note, and the second of a pair of sixteenth notes (semiquavers) - see Example 1.

Another way of thinking about it is to imagine the notes double in value, and then apply the normal pick direction rules (Example 2).

Ex.1

d	u	d	d	d	u	d	u	d	d
2	0	4	0	2	4	2	0	4	0

Ex.2

d	u	d	d	d	u	d	u	d	d
2	0	4	0	2	4	2	0	4	0

John Brosnan's Polka (traditional)

polka

Polkas