

Theoretically Speaking: *Learning Tunes By Ear (Part 2)*

Timothy Cummings for *Piping Today* magazine

Part 2

I'm going to make the possibly dangerous assumption that the majority of *Piping Today* readers are Highland pipers who learn most of their tunes from sheet music; and so, following on the heels of my recent discussion on the merits of learning by ear (*Piping Today* issue #93), I'd like to challenge you to spend more time learning aurally, and offer some tips for doing so. What I want, for those who aren't yet able, is for you to nurture and enjoy the ability to learn tunes straight from another piper, from recordings, and from other instruments (perhaps in your local session), and to be able to play anything that you are hearing within your own head (such as for improvisation and other forms of composing).

To help you get started, there are numerous steps and suggestions for learning by ear listed below. There are probably far more than can be digested initially or even employed in one tune-learning session; so before you look at them, please note that as you develop this skill, many of these steps can eventually be combined and automated, or even skipped altogether. I believe you will soon find you can learn new tunes with surprisingly little effort and in a relatively short amount of time. You may even find, as many of my colleagues and students have, that tunes learned by ear have a tendency to 'stick' better in the long run.

I'm sure you've all heard the only-slightly-exaggerated tales of freak pipers who can catch and flawlessly regurgitate a new tune upon a single hearing. But for those of you totally new to this approach, and for other normal humans, here are some recommendations that may help you get close to achieving that level of freakhood:

1. Be not afraid.

2. Listen to the new tune once or twice without trying to achieve anything else. Just relax, listen, and absorb freely without fear, without pressuring yourself, without judgment, and without analysing the music. Just listen.

3. Listen once again, and if the tune has a regular pulse, try tapping your foot to the beat. If it is a fast tune from a recording, you may want to find some way of slowing down the track. Eventually you may not need to slow tunes down to learn them, but if you are new to learning by ear, this will probably be a crucial step. (If you are an app user, consider Anytune, which has pitch and repeating loop settings, and which can save your speed settings for your next session.)

4. Listen to the tune another time, and start singing (or humming or whistling) along with it, ideally while continuing to tap the beat. Singing a new tune is one of my favourite tactics, one learned in workshops with Gary West. The sooner you can sing or otherwise reproduce the melody from your own brain, the sooner and more deeply the tune will plant itself in your head, and the sooner you'll be able to learn and memorise it. (It doesn't matter one bit if you don't think your voice is on par with Beyoncé's or even Bob Dylan's.)

5. Once you can sing the tune pretty successfully, start analysing the music, ideally from your singing of it, or, if necessary, from the original source. Ask yourself any of these

questions to help create a mental map of the tune:

- What is the likely metre (or time signature)? In other words, what type of tune is it—a jig, reel, waltz, etc.?
- Are there any pick-up notes? Does the tune start before the downbeat of the first full bar (or measure)?
- How many parts are there, and do they repeat and have second endings?
- What key do you think it's in? What's the *tonic* or 'home base' note? Identifying this will help give you a melodic anchor of sorts.
- Are there any specific notes that aren't ever heard, that you can immediately rule out as options? (For example, D-pentatonic tunes like *The Ramnee Ceilidh* won't have any Cs or Gs in the melody.)

6. Listen to and sing the tune once or twice more, and begin to identify the larger puzzle pieces, starting with the first downbeat and the last note (which are often, but not always, clues to the key of the tune). Then try to pick out other prominent notes:

- What are the highest and lowest notes of the tune?
- Are there any notes that are significantly longer than others, that stand out a bit more and are easier to identify?

7. Listen to and sing the tune yet again, and now make a mental note of any readily identifiable melodic patterns. Ask yourself:

- What is the shape of the tune, if any? (e.g. an arc, a bowl, lots of jumpy intervals, etc.)
- Are there any scale-like passages? (If so, what notes do they start and end on?)
- Are there any arpeggios? (ditto above)
- Are there any repeated phrases?
- Are there any sections, small or large, that remind you of another tune you already know?

8. Now that you have the tune in your head, the starting and ending notes figured out, and other larger puzzle pieces in place, **try playing it through slowly a few times.** You will probably find you can play a good chunk of the tune from memory, but that there are still a handful of notes and tricky intervals yet to be identified. This would be a good time to begin relying on both your ear and intuition for making some good guesses. Stay relaxed, and keep trying to match what your fingers are producing to what you're hearing in your head until fingers, head, and ears all agree with each other. Expect that you'll make some mistakes, and that's not only okay, but completely normal.

9. Take a short break to let the tune settle and marinate for a moment. Get up and walk around and find something else to think about for a minute or two, preferably something not involving a glowing screen (seductive though they be).

10. As the tune begins to fall into place—which it will, I promise— **go back to your source and listen yet again for subtleties** like articulation (specific gracings), phrasing, and the general groove. Try applying these to your own playing of the tune, but also keep a door open to any personal variations you may ultimately want to inject into the tune to make it your own.

By now you will have heard the tune from its original source and/or from your own singing of it at

least seven times, probably more, and it will likely have imprinted itself on your brain more significantly than you may realise at first.

A quick aside: if you're learning a tune in person from a real, live instructor, consider bringing a device to record your instructor playing it. An iPad, smartphone, or other portable recording device will do just fine. If they're willing, have your instructor play the tune once through slowly, and then again, closer to full speed to record the proper groove. (Be sure to ask permission before you record, of course.)

Ward MacDonald, a talented fiddler and instructor from P.E.I., Canada, once told me that he believes the very best way to learn a new tune is to do so subconsciously. He described something I suspect many of us have experienced at one time or another: unwittingly learning a tune simply because you happened to hear it in the background a bunch of times. For example, most of us have several recordings that we have obsessed over, having replayed them countless times while doing other tasks like exercising, commuting to work, seasoning a pipe bag, dutifully ironing a band shirt, succumbing to clickbait while your eggs overcook, etc. Assuming that's true for you, have you ever found yourself playing one of those tunes without ever having made any dedicated, focused effort to figuring it out, and without ever having seen the music for it—it just magically seeped into your brain and fingers somehow? If this hasn't yet happened for you, repeat the above steps for a handful of new tunes, and before you know it, you'll be able to relate to this phenomenon. And then you may find yourself agreeing with a fiddler for once.

Speaking of Ward, while I was working on this article I emailed him and a few other colleagues who have heaps of experience both teaching and learning tunes by ear. They were happy to respond with some excellent additional nuggets of wisdom, here edited a wee bit for clarity.

First, this from Ward:

- **Forgetting is part of learning by ear.** You may not remember the tune the next day, or even an hour later, but that's part of the natural process, so don't get discouraged. Tackle it again, and when you 're-learn' it the second time, you'll find it happens very fast. This can be very satisfying. Soon you will be waking up with the tune in your head!
- **Consider writing the tune out** as an exercise before you go searching for the sheet music to verify what you've picked up by ear. This will help with memorization. We've all been taught to read and write language in school, but when it comes to music, we're almost never encouraged to write it out ourselves. Engage those brain centers!
- **Slow the tune down** if you need to in order to hear all the notes and ornaments. **But sometimes repetition is more useful** than slowing it down. With regular ear practice, you may find yourself learning tunes at, or close to, full speed sooner than you imagined.
- **Learn some tunes for the fun of learning them** without putting any pressure on yourself to get them stage-ready. You may learn some tunes and forget them before you ever perform them and that's okay. Learning for the sake of learning is great for expanding your mind and skill set.

And then from Fin Moore (pipemaker, performer, and instructor from Edinburgh, Scotland):

- For the first few attempts at learning a new tune by ear, **pick a tune from an album that you have listened to for a couple of years.** This will give you a head start as you will have already heard it numerous times.

- Keep in mind you couldn't sightread written music the first time you looked at it; but over the years, and **the more you've done it, the better you've become.** It's the same with learning by ear.

And finally from Bob Mitchell (piper and instructor from West Virginia, U.S.A.):

- I have been trying to learn tunes phrase by phrase, kind of like what is often done in certain classes and group workshops. But I found I could never quite get the tune until I went over the notes visually. I've since come to realize **the tune is already in my head, and now try to make the fingers play what I hear in my mind.**

And that, my fellow pipers, may be the crux of what I am trying to get you to do: to be able to instantly convert the music you hear in your head to the corresponding fingering patterns that produce the same music from your chanter. This is a skill jazz musicians must develop to the extreme in order to improvise—to instantly perform what they are composing in their heads in the moment. It is also an extremely valuable and sometimes necessary skill for all other musicians.

Upon reflection of the above steps and suggestions, you may already be concluding there are many good ideas for learning music aurally—too many for an individual to take in all at once. (We are reminded, thus, of the individual way each of us experiences music.) So please keep these suggestions nearby for your next learning-by-ear session, and focus on the approaches that turn out to be the most effective and helpful for you.

I guarantee that if you can hear music with your ears, you can learn it that way, too. And I can also guarantee that the more you practice this skill, the better and quicker you will be at it. The process will become considerably less intimidating, as well. You may even find yourself preferring to learn tunes by ear; and if that becomes the case, don't completely diss the sheet music—it has significant benefits, too. (So says the proprietor of a music publishing enterprise.)