

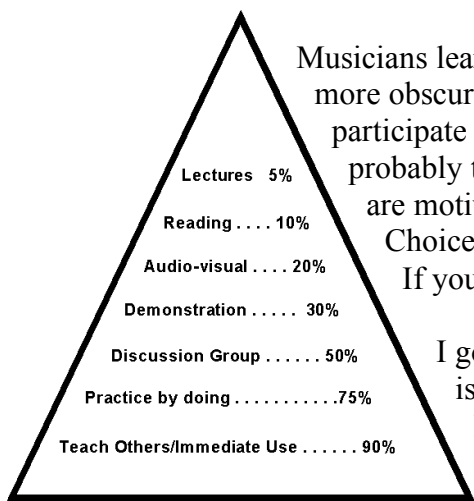
Learning Tunes

By Michael Keyes

When I was a medical student at Charity Hospital. New Orleans, we used to joke that the way we learned in that intense environment was “see one, do one, teach one.” As it turns out, the immediate and practical application of knowledge is the best way to learn, at least according to educational psychologists (<http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/journal/vol3/beej-3-5.aspx>).

I've always been struck on how old fashioned learning a tune phrase by phrase was whenever I encountered that method in workshops. Angelina Carberry, Ken Fleming, John Carty, and Gerry O'Connor all taught this way and I assumed it was because they learned tunes that way when they were young and had never really learned how to teach. Boy was I wrong!

It turns out that the least efficient way to learn new tunes (or anything else) is to be lectured on the subject much like I am doing here. According to the Learning Pyramid, a graph explaining research into how much people retain information, lectures, videos and demonstrations only have a maximum of thirty percent retention. The best way to retain information is to teach the subject to someone else. The second most efficient way is to practice what you learn as soon as you learn it. If possible, you should try to play that new tune in a session or for someone else. The reason for playing in a more public situation is that you become emotionally bonded to a tune that has to be learned in a variety of stress situations. Teaching the tune works best because you are constantly reviewing the tune and finding nuances in it that you did not realize it had. In addition, the student will often teach you a new way to look at it.



Musicians learn tunes for a variety of reasons. There is the oneupsmanship of knowing more obscure tunes than the others in your session, knowing common tunes so you can participate in a session or group or just because you like the tune. The latter is probably the best reason to learn a tune, it lets you enjoy what you are doing and you are motivated to overcome the challenges that may be presented by the music. Choice of tune often makes the difference between learning it and not learning it. If you like a tune, you will find its essence eventually.

I go to a lot of workshops but only retain a few tunes. I suspect that part of this is my learning style. I have to digest a tune before I try to learn it. I will listen to it again and again until I can sing the tune or it just plays in my head. Once that happens, I can play it. A lot of musicians have this learning style and the frantic tune after tune type of workshop is not as fruitful for me unless I record the tunes and try to learn them afterwards. For this reason I advocate a good recording system as part of your workshop kit.

On the other hand, there are some tunes that just strike me. When Ken Fleming taught us The Log Cabin (<http://www.banjosessions.com/feb08/Keyes.html>) I loved the tune. I was not sure if I could play it, but after he went over the tune and had us practice it phrase by phrase, it stuck with me. Now it is one of the first tunes that automatically come to my fingers when I pick up the banjo.

So how does this apply to the average banjo player? Easy, “hear one, do one, teach one.” The best way to learn tunes is to hear them first and make a decision about whether or not you want to learn it. Once that decision is made you should either get an mp3 of the tune or have someone show it to you. Practice, practice, practice and then try it in a public venue, even if you don't think you are ready. Messing up a tune is one of the best ways to be motivated to learn it well, believe me.

Gander in the Pratie Hole

So in the spirit of learning a good tune, I offer Gander in the Pratie Hole, a jig that is well known in many circles and one that seems to go with anything. It is a fairly easy tune in Dmix and striking when done well. This is a pipe tune and if you listen to a piper play it, you will see that the banjo has a lot of drone opportunities available to it. If you can, find a number of renditions and then try to make it your own.

Gander in the Pratie Hole MP3

Download the MP3: <http://banjosessions.com/dec08/GanderInThePratieHole.mp3>

Gander In the Pratie Hole

Arranged by Michael J. Keyes



Rhythm: Jig

Resources

Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>) is a free software that allows you to edit sound files and to slow them down without changing the tuning. It is a wonderful way to deal with all sorts of sound files. Once you get them in your computer, you can break the tune into sections until you are able to know the tune.

I like to use a digital recorder like the Zoom H2 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoom_H2_Handy_Recorder) I have the older H4 model and it is the best field recorder that I have ever used. You can record your playing or that of others and come up with a quality product. And it is easy to use since it records on an SD card which can be directly plugged into your computer if you have the adapter.

About the Author



Mike Keyes, a native of Franklin, Tennessee, has played tenor banjo since 1957 and over the years has learned to play five string banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He earned his way through college and medical school playing in bluegrass and dixieland bands and currently plays in the Irish band "Drowsy Maggie." He is an expert in sports performance and has written a book and over 200 articles on the subject.

His interest in Irish music started a number of years ago when effort to learn more about his musical roots led him to the discovery of session playing. Since then he has been to Ireland to learn more about the music and has taken classes and interviewed such banjo greats as John Carty, Angelina Carberry, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O'Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. You can email him at mikeyes@charter.net if you wish to discuss some aspect of the Irish tenor banjo or go to his web site at www.mikekeyes.com.