



The McTwist

by Michael Keyes

Back in the [August 2005](#) issue of BanjoSessions® I mentioned that if you used your fingers to perform a triplet, you were probably doing it wrong. While I still think that this is true, there is an important exception that I call the McTwist after Mick Moloney who showed it to me and to many others.

I first saw this when I took a class from Gerry O'Connor several years ago. He was admonishing us for anchoring our fingers on the head and using our thumbs and finger to try to produce a triplet. He was correct of course, the method we were using was slow and inefficient. He then showed us the wrist style that I advocate in the above mentioned article and told us to leave the thumb alone.

However, I noticed that every so often there would be a quick flick of the thumb while he was whipping through the triplets. I wish I had my video camera then, but I did have it for several other elite level players and I kept seeing this happen. Ken Fleming, who founded the North Texas Celtic Festival and is a friend of Mick's, showed me what was going on. Years ago Mick showed him the technique of twisting the pick while executing a wrist triplet that resulted in a quicker brrrrp sound than the usual triplet and was useful when you were trying to add an ornament on the fly. The differences were subtle, but the sound was clearly more percussive and drove the music a little more. At first I resisted trying it because it did not follow the strict guidelines I had set for myself, but once I incorporated the Mick Twist, it was a terrific way to make a triplet.

Later on, when I did the interview with Mick Moloney, I asked him about this style of triplet and he told me that it just came to him as a natural way to make a triplet. In retrospect, I had to agree because every good player I observed used it, even when they said they were not! I even have the video tapes to prove it. The problem I had with trying to produce a triplet with fingers alone was that I was trying to move both my thumb and first finger, sort of waving it around and across the strings while anchoring my hand on the head of the banjo. The result was a slow "triplet" that did not sound like the triplets I heard on the records and the action caused cramping after a while. I knew that this had to be wrong because I did not sound or look like my banjo heroes. After being shown how to do a wrist stroke, it occurred to me that the little thumb action I saw was not the same thing.

And indeed it is not. The McTwist is performed by pulling the pick with the first finger towards the palm while the thumb pushes and flexes a little. Then the finger is pushed back to the original position. It appears that the thumb is flexing and pushing the finger (and this may happen a little with some) but the primary movement is from the first finger. The result of this action is to rotate the tip of the pick slightly on the axis of the finger while pulling and pushing the finger (and the pick) in a slight arc. If this is done while moving the wrist, it has the result of speeding up the pick, freeing the tip from catching on the string, and producing a slightly louder and more staccato sound. It also means that you don't have to move the wrist quite as far and you can make a faster triplet as a result. These changes are not massive in scope, but are just enough to make a triplet a little faster. It is a lot easier to look at than to describe, but even looking at it doesn't tell you much since it is such a quick and efficient move.

McTwist, Slowly

Here is a slow version of the McTwist. It does not sound as good at this speed, but you can see what is happening.

McTwist Slowly

Download the Movie:

[McTwistSlowly.mov](#)

Peeler's Jacket

The Peeler's Jacket is a reel that can use the McTwist to set the pulse and to call attention to the tune. It is also a great session tune that you can use as part of a set.

Peeler's Jacket

Arranged by Michael J Keyes, MD



Rhythm: reel

Notes: Put a McTwist or a regular triplet where the tildes are

Here is a video of the McTwist being used in the first few bars of the Peeler's Jacket.

Peeler's Jacket

Download the Movie:

[PeelersJacket.mov](#)

An Phis Fiulch

An Phis Fiulch is a slip jig (9/8 time, a dance tune) associated with uilleann pipers. The Irish pipes are played without the use of breath and tongue (*the way the whistle is*) so the pipers have to delineate the notes by the use of percussive fingering. The McTwist imitates that for this tune. Note that the second and fifth parts are the same.

I will show you each part with the appropriate McTwists. These are my interpretations of the music, you can change them as much as you want.

An Phis Fiulch Part 1

Download the Movie:

[APFPart1.mov](#)

An Phis Fiulch Part 2

Download the Movie:

[APFPart2.mov](#)

An Phis Fiulch Part 3

Download the Movie:

[APFPart3.mov](#)

An Phis Fiulch Part 4

Download the Movie:

[APFPart4.mov](#)

An Phis Fliuch

The Choice Wife

Arranged by Michael Keyes, MD



Rhythm: slip jig

Notes: Use the McTwist on the triplets and anywhere else it feels right **Cuil Aodha Jig**

In the last installment, I showed John Carty playing a jig, but got the name wrong. Roger Landes, who has several columns on the Irish Mandolin and gives hints for variation.

John McGann has an essay on this at <http://www.johnmcgann.com/tab.html> that is worth reading.

If you have not been able to download and play the .mov files here, you can get a free copy of Apple's Quicktime at that will work on PCs and Macs at <http://www.apple.com/quicktime/download/>. There are Linux versions available at <http://heroinewarrior.com/quicktime.php3>

The North Texas Celtic Festival is in March of each year. The website is here: <http://www.ntif.org/> Ken Fleming is also associated with the O'Flaherty Irish Music Retreat in Midlothian, Texas. Their website is here: <http://www.irishtradmusic.org/oflaherty.htm> and John Carty and Roger Landes will be teaching there this year.

The translation for An Phis Fiulch can be found at Thesession.org <http://www.thesession.org/tunes/display/879>. Thesession.org is a great resource fortunes and ideas.

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 "Good Luck." He is an expert in sports performance and has written and 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, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O'Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin where he practices Psychiatry. You can email him at mikeyes@charter.net if you wish to discuss some aspect of the Irish tenor banjo.