

Ornamentation in Irish Tenor Banjo Playing

By: Alan Hopkins

Ornamentation in Irish music is a means of embellishment, varying and enhancing the tunes and can be a way of injecting emotion and feeling into the music. Different



instruments lend themselves to different types of ornamentation and even players of the same instrument will ornament the same tune differently.

Irish music on the tenor banjo is no different in this respect and the way one banjo player will play a tune may vary considerably from another player playing the same tune.

In my view ornamentation can be overdone and is more effective in bringing out the beauty of a tune when used sensitively and selectively. The playing should show off the music not the musician. It is not a good idea to blast away with all possible triplets etc. the first time through a tune, always leave yourself with 'somewhere to go'. Ornamenting a tune at every possible opportunity will create the 'machine gun' type of banjo playing which simply hides the melody. A possible exception to this may be when the first note of a tune can be played as a triplet and it is not the first tune in a set. The change from one tune into another can give considerable 'lift' to the music by starting the following tune with a triplet, particularly when playing for dancers in a ceili situation. Top class players vary the ornamentation as they repeat the tune so that the same bar may not be ornamented in the same way every time through a tune. This is because if the ornamentation is repeated exactly the ornamentation then

becomes, to you at least, part of the tune, which is not its purpose. For this reason it is useful to have a few alternative ideas for ornamentation.

There are many types of ornamentation available to the Irish tenor banjoist but in this article I will be concentrating on the use of the triplet in the tune 'Dinny O'Brien's Reel'.

The banjo tuning used in the following information is the commonly used E A D G. (high to low)

- **Triplet** – A group of three notes played in the space of two.

In this reel three different types of triplets are used.

The **same note** triplet is used in bars 2, 6 and 14 where in each case the D note is played three times in quick succession in the space of two notes.

The **downwards** triplet is used in bar 3 where a downwards run is played by playing the notes F# E and D in quick succession, again three notes in the space of two.

The **upwards** triplet is used in bars 4, 7 and 15 when an upwards run is played by playing notes E F# and G in quick succession. The three notes occupying the space of two.

It is essential that these triplets are practised if you are to be successful in playing three notes in the length of time normally occupied by two. If this is not accomplished accurately the tune will be pushed out of time which will be particularly noticeable when playing with other musicians. Learners often subconsciously stretch the time they allow for themselves to play the triplets and if they are not careful they will become set in this bad habit. To avoid this it is useful to practice by playing to a metronome which can be set to a fairly slow tempo as the intention is to keep the triplet playing correct in relation to the other notes in the tune. The speed of the tune is not an issue at this point.

The tablature below shows where these triplets are used and of course they can be used in other tunes when the opportunity arises. In addition the accompanying video demonstrates the playing of the tune including some of the triplets mentioned.

(as well as one or two not mentioned) With practice you'll begin to understand where in the tune you can add ornamentation of your own.

Good luck and enjoy!

Alan Hopkins

Dinny O'Briens's Reel Video

Download the video:

Dinny_O_Briens_Reel.mov from <http://BanjoSessions.com>

Dinny O'Brien's Reel

System 1: Treble clef, key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff shows the melody with triplet markings (3) over groups of notes. The second staff shows the guitar tablature with fret numbers (2, 5, 5, 5, 3, 0, 2) and triplet markings (3) over groups of notes.

System 2: Treble clef, key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff shows the melody with triplet markings (3) over groups of notes. The second staff shows the guitar tablature with fret numbers (2, 5, 5, 5, 3, 0, 2) and triplet markings (3) over groups of notes.

System 3: Treble clef, key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff shows the melody with triplet markings (3) over groups of notes. The second staff shows the guitar tablature with fret numbers (2, 5, 5, 4, 5, 0, 2, 3) and triplet markings (3) over groups of notes.

System 4: Treble clef, key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff shows the melody with triplet markings (3) over groups of notes. The second staff shows the guitar tablature with fret numbers (2, 5, 5, 0, 2, 3, 0) and triplet markings (3) over groups of notes.



About the Author

Alan Hopkins is an Irish Musician, Artist and Art Educator based in Bolton in the Northwest of England. He plays with Irish band 'Beer for Breakfast'. The band play as a four piece performing songs and tunes or as a five piece with a caller for ceilis.

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