

Notes for Irish accompaniment and DADGAD tuning on Guitar

By Kent Dougherty and Stu James

Accompanying Irish music on guitar can be a lot of fun and offers many rewarding challenges. While very popular in Irish music today, guitar is not actually a traditional Irish instrument as it is a relatively new addition to the Irish scene, introduced in the 1960s. However, guitar has been welcomed into Irish music and adds a fabulous dimension to sessions, if played keeping certain perspectives in mind.

We hope these notes will provide a brief introduction and point of reference. We'll cover some of the issues during class, but just as they come up in the normal course of events. This way we can hopefully spend more time in class playing. Please take some time to read through these notes as it will give all students common background information that we can build on in class.

If possible, please bring a capo, a guitar pick, and a recording device to class. You also may find it helpful to have a way to jot down a couple of notes.

Please feel free to ask any questions during class or between classes. Stu's email is stu@interpretive.com. Stu also has a blog dedicated to traditional Irish music that you may find interesting at stujames.wordpress.com which has some recordings and pictures from our summer trip to Ireland as well. After each class, Stu will post some notes or recordings that you can review on your own during the week. Also, in case you miss a class, you can at least see some of what was covered.

Role of the guitar in Irish music (applicable to most Celtic traditions):

While the guitar can certainly be used to play melody, here we are most interested in its use as a rhythm instrument, supporting and augmenting the melody instruments such as fiddle, flute, whistle, tenor banjo or pipes.

The guitar serves two purposes: One is to be the backbone of the rhythm – to give the players a percussive beat to keep the tune on track (a bodhran, the Irish drum, also serves this same purpose). The other purpose it serves is to use chording to “fill out” the tune and give it richness, depth, and character. That being said, the guitar is by no means the only way to accomplish this – piano, harp, bouzouki and melody instruments may also serve this role. But the guitar can often add a unique dimension to a tune. Guitarists, of course, think it's indispensable!

One of the great things about accompanying Irish music is that there is not just one way to play along – there are multiples ways of playing along with most any Irish tune, and each player will choose what sounds best to them. In fact, some players may never play a tune through the same way twice, especially within a set. While this may sound a little daunting, it is this freedom to explore and experiment that makes Irish accompaniment so much fun.

While there is significant freedom, it is essential to be using the appropriate rhythm, to recognize the right key, and use chords appropriate to that key. But that still leaves a lot of room for variety of chords, timing of chord

changes, and even strum-patterns within those rules. Because of this open style, the guitar has the ability to “move” a tune in a certain direction by the choice of chords and rhythmic emphasis. A minor chord or a 7th chord can significantly change the feel of a tune. This is exactly the reason some hard-core traditionalists do not approve of the guitar in Irish music – they feel the tune should stand on its own without the help of a guitar. Each tune certainly can stand alone, so don’t feel that you must play along on every tune. But most tunes will benefit from a thoughtfully played guitar.

It’s important to keep in mind that, while a lot of us come from folk/rock backgrounds, where guitar is king, that’s not the case here – the melody instruments are the main attraction, and in terms of guitar, less can often be more. Players and listeners alike will appreciate a sensitive approach – there will times you need to lighten your touch and other times to bang away with gusto.

Sessions - Only one guitar at a time, please! You will find yourself in many different settings and it is important to be sensitive to each one. In session playing, troubles can arise – a lot of people play guitar and it is not unusual to come to a session to find one or two other guitar players. The problem with this is that – unlike other types of music – with Irish tunes, it is very difficult for more than one guitar player to play at a time.

As mentioned above, there is a lot of variation in Irish accompaniment. Thus, if two, or even three (yikes!) guitar players played together at the same time in a session, they probably will be playing the tune three different ways. While none would be “wrong” on its own, playing them simultaneously will almost always sound HORRIBLE and is a nightmare for the other melody players. This dis“chord” can be a problem with other accompaniment instruments in the session as well, such as piano or bouzouki.

The easy answer to this is to take a sharp knife and discreetly cut the strings of the other players, or, if there are too many people around to do this, simply take turns playing and respectfully ask if you can play the next one, or suggest a tune you like and take the lead. If someone continues to play along with you despite your hints, they are likely not very experienced in Irish accompaniment. They should be able to hear that it doesn’t work. Definitely cut their strings (j/k!)

Actually, if someone else is playing along with the tune and you are sitting out, that is a great time to softly follow along in your own style. Usually the sessions are loud enough that this will not bother anyone and you still get in some good practice. It’s also a great chance to watch other players to pick up different chords and voicings. Just don’t do too much watching!

One other approach that Stu highly recommends is to learn melody either on guitar or another instrument. Learning the melody a) is fun, b) keeps knife wielding guitar players at bay, and c) improves your understanding of the structure and sound of tunes.

DADGAD Tuning

DADGAD is an open tuning in the key of D with the DADGAD referring to how each string is tuned (from lowest to highest pitch). DADGAD is one of many alternate tunings, and is not used only for Irish music. Musicians from Led Zeppelin to Ani DiFranco and Dave Matthews have used DADGAD, the most prolific musician being Pierre Bensusan, the master of DADGAD. Most people, who play folk or rock guitar, play in what is commonly referred to as standard tuning, or using string tunings, EADGBE. So to change your guitar from standard tuning to DADGAD, you would lower three strings one full step (note) down - the two high strings and the lowest string. Each tuning has its own unique qualities that offer advantages and disadvantages depending on the situation. Generally, the goal is to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages.

The DADGAD style of open tuning has two important qualities to recognize. First, you'll notice that there are three D strings in this tuning, which gives a very strong D tonal quality. The two A strings also reinforce the D key as A is the 5th note above a D, and one of the notes of a D chord. The second thing you might notice if you happen to know any music theory is that there are no 3rds (which would be an F# in a D major scale or an F natural in a D minor scale). That means that if you strum the open chord, the D-ish chord that is played is neutral – without the 3rd note in the scale defined, the chord is neither major nor minor, but has a more neutral quality. So, the two important things to note about this particular tuning is that it strongly suggests a particular key (without a capo, the key of D) and the tuning is silent about whether it is major or minor.

The reason that DADGAD sounds so “right” with Irish tunes is that originally in Irish music, pipes would provide a drone note that provided the underlying key or root to a tune. So when people refer to a D tune or a G tune, they are referring to both that underlying drone note and to the key of the tune. This does not mean one has to only use DADGAD when playing along with Irish. John Doyle plays “drop D” tuning, and Pat Egan actually plays in standard tuning – it is important to note, however, that Both John and Pat will use many open style chords within their respective tunings that allow the drone note to ring so the overall effect is much the same.

So if the advantage of DADGAD is the strong underlying drone quality and the neutrality of the major / minor, what are its limitations? Probably the biggest issue is overcoming that strong drone quality of D. Though D is a very common key for Irish tunes, there are many other keys used: G, A, Em, Bm, and Am. So, to play in another key, many DADGAD players will slide a capo on to the neck of the guitar and play, for example, a G tune using D finger patterns, but with the capo placed on the 5th fret to make the guitar (in effect) GDGCDG. Regardless of these drawbacks, it remains a very appropriate tuning for playing along with Irish tunes, is very forgiving, and offers a wide range of alternative fingerings so that accompaniment is challenging and fun.