

When you begin learning a tune, with or without the aid of music notation, you should immediately begin to commit it to memory, to internalize it, as a part of the act of learning itself. If you are using music notation, immediately start to let go of it. This may not be so easy at first if you are used to hanging your musical awareness on a visual representation and storing it there.

A natural way to learn a tune is to simply hear it many times, over a long period of time. Without making a conscious effort to learn it, the tune seeps into you. One day you may find yourself liting or humming it. By then, you know it. Now it is just a matter of transferring it onto your instrument. Attending a regular session is one good way to give yourself this opportunity.

For those times when you *are* actively learning a tune in a conscious way, here are some ideas that I hope will help you.

FINDING THE TONAL CENTER

A good first step to reclaiming, internalizing, and developing your musical awareness is to find and hold onto the *tonal center* of a tune. The tonal center is the “home pitch,” what some people call the *key* of the tune. (Below I’ll explain why *mode* is a more appropriate term than *key* for Irish music.) If you were going to add a drone to a tune, the pitch of the tonal center would be the most natural choice for the drone’s pitch. Many tunes end on the pitch of the tonal center, or at least come to rest upon it at the ends of some important phrases. When you land on the pitch of the tonal center you feel more resolved, at rest, at home, than with any other pitch. If you have trouble recognizing this feeling, then you need to tune in more to how the different pitches of a tune make you feel inside your body.

Occasionally you will run across a tune for which a tonal center is not obvious, or seems to shift. In other tunes the tonal center is clear, but changes with different parts of the tune. An example of this is the polka *Maids of Ardagh*, which appears on p. 356. Its tonal center is D in the A part, but changes to A for the B part.

For the vast majority of tunes, the tonal center is clear and unchanging. After learning about modes later in this chapter you will have more information about finding the tonal center.

THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF MELODY

Here is a powerful and helpful insight from Robert Jourdain:

. . . a melody’s notes are largely perceived as offsets not from each other, but from an underlying tonal center. Melody is a harmonic phenomenon.¹¹

I would amend Jourdain’s statement by substituting the word “pitches” for “notes.” A *note* has pitch *and* duration. For the moment let’s look at the pitch aspect alone.

The apparent contradiction of Jourdain’s statement, that melody is a *harmonic* phenomenon, holds true because as we *retain* the pitch of the tonal center, we compare the pitch of the present melody note to it, and “hear” or sense the resulting harmony, or “vertical” interval, created by these two pitches. (An *interval* is simply the distance in pitch between two notes.) At the same time, we track the “horizontal” intervals that occur sequentially in time, that is the distance in pitch between one melody note and the one that precedes or follows it.

So, the process of memorizing melodies, which seems daunting to so many, begins with the simple task of internalizing and retaining only *one* pitch, that of the tonal center. From there, it becomes a two-dimensional process of hearing or sensing vertical and horizontal intervals, instead of a one-dimensional procedure of memorizing a long sequence of discrete, unrelated pitches. The two-dimensional picture reveals the connections and relationships between the pitches, and allows musical meaning to emerge.

Your ability to internalize melodies will improve even more as you learn to recognize the sound and “flavor” of each of the twelve musical intervals and learn their names. The smallest interval is known by several names: a semitone, a half-step, or a minor second. Each of the larger intervals can be measured by how many semitones it contains. The minor second of course contains only one semitone, the major second contains two semitones, the minor third contains three, the major third four, the perfect fourth five, the tritone six, the perfect fifth seven, the minor sixth eight,