

# A Closer Look at Quarter Notes, Dotted Quarter Notes and Bracketed Eighth Notes

## DOTTED QUARTER NOTES

As mentioned on p. 3, most of the dotted quarter notes in this book are not meant to be played as written. Instead, they commonly stand for one of various musical figures, seven of which are shown below. Each of these figures occupy the same amount of time as a dotted quarter note but are rhythmically more active.



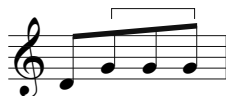
When experienced Irish players see a dotted quarter note in a transcription of an Irish tune, they will usually play an ornament called a “roll,” a “crann” or a “treble” (also called a “triplet”), use one of the options shown above, or employ still other melodic variations. If you do not yet know how to play rolls, cranns or trebles, you should play one of these seven figures in place of most of the dotted quarter notes you encounter in this book.

Numbers four and five are, in fact, two forms of what Irish players often call trebles or triplets. (Musicians from other traditions might not consider these to be triplets at all. It’s just a different use of terminology.)

Numbers six and seven are examples of how you might choose to play a higher or lower note of a tune’s scale that departs from, and then returns to the principal note. These are among the most common and useful gestures of melodic variation used in Irish music. You could choose other pitches for the middle, departing note, but the neighboring tones shown above (notes that are either one step up or down the scale from the principal note) are the ones most commonly used.

## BRACKETED EIGHTH NOTES IN REELS AND HORNPIPES

When playing most of the reels in this collection (and four of the hornpipes), you will encounter groups of three eighth notes of the same pitch enclosed within a bracket, as shown below.



The first of these three bracketed notes *always* falls on a weak or unaccented beat.

If you play a plucked string instrument, such as tenor banjo, mandolin or harp, you may wish to play these three notes just as they are notated. With most other instruments, however, I feel it’s more stylistically appropriate to replace the bracketed group with figures like #3, 4, 6 or 7 above, or a long roll, crann or treble. (Players of plucked string instruments may also choose from among these options.) In pursuing a traditional Irish style, I feel it’s best to not emphasize the first, unaccented note of these eighth-note groups. Therefore I wouldn’t use figures #2 or 5, or play a dotted quarter note, as all of these would produce an unwanted emphasis on the first note of the bracketed group.

On the following page is an excerpt from the reel *The Abbey*. (See p. 56 for the complete tune.) The top staff shows mm. 5 and 6 of its B-part. The first of these measures includes two sets of bracketed eighth notes. The four lower staves show several ways that these bracketed eighth-note groups may be interpreted. (The second bar is identical in each of the examples. It is included only to lend context to the musical variations.) The symbols for various rolls, seen on the next page, are fully explained in my book, *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*.

The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> measures of the B-part of the reel *The Abbey*. Note the two bracketed groups of eighth notes in the first measure.

*Variation 1.* The 1<sup>st</sup> group is played as written. The 2<sup>nd</sup> is altered by using a lower neighbor tone.

*Variation 2.* The 1<sup>st</sup> group is replaced by a treble. The 2<sup>nd</sup> is altered by using a neighbor tone that is lower than the one used in Variation 1, above.

*Variation 3.* The 1<sup>st</sup> group is replaced by a long roll. The 2<sup>nd</sup> is replaced by an eighth note followed by a short roll.

*Variation 4.* The 1<sup>st</sup> group is replaced by an eighth note followed by a condensed long roll (see footnote below). A melodic variation similar to a treble replaces the 2<sup>nd</sup> group.

## QUARTER NOTES

When encountering a quarter note, an experienced Irish musician will either play it as written, use one of the figures shown below, or use an ornament called a “short roll,” a “condensed long roll,”<sup>1</sup> a “short crann” or a shorter form of treble or triplet. (Note that these are not the only ways to interpret quarter notes.)

Numbers two and three above are short forms of the treble or triplet. Number four is another commonly-employed device of melodic variation. Comparing it to number one, you will see that in both cases the quarter note is subdivided into two eighth notes. In number four, the pitch of the first of those eighth notes is lowered by one step of the scale in use at the time.

**Reels warrant special consideration.** In reels, *most* quarter notes are replaced by one of the figures above, or by a type of roll, crann or treble.

Since quarter notes carry less weight than dotted quarter notes, they are more often played as written (i.e., without being subdivided into notes of shorter duration) than are dotted quarter notes.

When quarter notes come at the beginning or end of a musical phrase, and especially when they come at the end of an entire part of a tune (A-part, B-part, etc.), experienced Irish musicians will often play them as written, i.e., without subdividing them. This is true even in reels.

<sup>1</sup> The term “condensed long roll” is not widely used at the time of this writing. I introduced it in 2003 in *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*.

## TO SUMMARIZE: THINK OF QUARTER NOTES AND DOTTED QUARTER NOTES AS MARKERS

In this book, when you see a dotted quarter note, think of it as marking a region, three eighth notes in total duration, in which you will *most likely* play a more active rhythmic figure (see p. 13) or an ornament such as a long roll, crann or treble.

When you see a quarter note, think of it as marking a region, two eighth notes in total duration, where you *may*, if you wish, play a more active rhythmic figure (see p. 14) or an ornament such as a short roll, crann or treble. Experienced Irish musicians do this more in reels than in other types of tunes.

### INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

As you can see, Irish music has certain freedoms built into it. You are not expected to play exactly what is shown on the page, or to play a tune the same way every time. The more you listen to excellent players the more you will come to understand how you may exercise these freedoms. As your experience grows, you might take the transcriptions in this book less literally and use them more as guides, as reminders of tunes you might have heard before, or as reference points from which to depart.

### WHEN SHOULD YOU PLAY DOTTED QUARTER NOTES (AND LONGER NOTES) AS WRITTEN?

When dotted quarter notes, or longer notes, come at the beginning or end of a musical phrase, and especially when they come at the end of an entire part of a tune (A-part, B-part, etc.), experienced Irish musicians will often play them as written, i.e., without subdividing them into notes of shorter duration. (This is also the case with quarter notes.) Depending upon the context, this either allows for a moment of repose, or gives the player a way to impart weight or lift to the music.

Here are some examples of tunes in which it can be very pleasing to play a dotted quarter note (or longer note) as written at the end of an entire part:

- Jig: *Fraher's Jig*, p. 30, A-part, second ending; B-part, first ending
- Reel: *I'm Waiting for You*, p. 83, A-part, first ending
- Hornpipe: *The Humours of Ballyconnell*, p. 93, B-part, first ending
- Slip Jig: *I'm the Boy for Bewitching Them*, p. 102, A-part, second ending
- Hop Jig: *Top It Off*, p. 103, A-part, second ending; B-part, both endings, in which dotted quarter notes are tied to quarter notes
- Polka: *Blackwater Polka #2*, p. 104, A-part, first ending; B-part, second ending
- Slide: *Get Up Old Woman and Shake Yourself*, p. 106, last measure of the B-part
- Set Dance: *O'Connell's Farewell to Dublin*, p. 108, all endings
- Harp Piece: *Lord Inchiquin*, p. 112, half notes in all endings
- Air: *Down the Hill*, p. 114, A-part, half note in both endings; B-part, half note in first ending; C-part, half note in second ending

Here are some examples of tunes in which it can be pleasing to play a dotted quarter note as written at the beginning or end of a phrase which does *not* come at the end of an entire part of the tune:

- Jig: *Old Tipperary*, p. 29, A-part, the high G in m. 6 (not counting the pick-up measure)
- Jig: *The Legacy*, p. 32, the first note of the B-part
- Jig: *Bill Harte's*, p. 39, A-part, the A in m. 5
- Reel: *The Big Reel of Ballynacally*, p. 52, B-part, the E in m. 6
- Reel: *The Chicago Reel*, p. 55, B-part, the F# in the second to last measure
- Reel: *The Maids of Mitchellstown*, p. 70, B-part, the Fs in mm. 3 and 7
- Hornpipe: *An Trí is a Rian (The Three and Their Impact)*, p. 93, the first note of the B-part
- Hornpipe: *Poll Ha'penny* (setting 2), p. 94, both A-part and B-part, m. 5, the F#s or Es in these measures
- Hornpipe: *Jackie Tar*, p. 95, B-part, the G in m. 5
- Slip Jig: *The Humours of Derrycrosane*, p. 101, first note of the second B-part

- Slide: *Baile an tSamhraidh (Summer Town)*, p. 106, B-part, the D in m. 4
- Slide: *Jack Regan's*, p. 107, A-part, the A in m. 2
- March: *The Return From Fingal*, p. 110, A-part, the Es in mm. 2 and 6; B-part, the Ds in mm. 2 and 6
- Harp Piece: *Hewlett*, p. 111, A-part, the D in m. 4 (not counting the pick-up measure); B-part, the Ds in mm. 8 and 12
- Air: *Down the Hill*, p. 114, many places, such as in the B-part, the Gs in mm. 2 (half note) and 10 (dotted quarter note) and the F in m. 6 (half note)

#### INSTRUMENT-SPECIFIC FACTORS

Sometimes a musician's inclination to play a dotted quarter note as written (i.e., without subdividing it) relates to a quality or limitation of her instrument. For example, since players of tin whistle, Irish flute and uilleann pipes cannot ornament the notes C, C# and D as easily as they can other notes, they tend to hold out dotted quarter notes on these pitches more than other instrumentalists would. For similar reasons, fiddlers sometimes hold out dotted quarter notes when playing them on their open strings.

Players of tenor banjo, and other plectrum string instruments whose notes do not sustain for very long, may be less inclined to hold out a dotted quarter note and more inclined to subdivide it using one of the figures shown on p. 13.

Flute and whistle players often use a sustained quarter or dotted quarter note as a place to create a breathing opportunity. By truncating the end of the note (ideally subtracting one eighth note's duration from it), they create a space for a breath.

#### IF YOU ARE A NOVICE TO IRISH MUSIC, MORE FUN AWAITS YOU

The experience of playing traditional Irish music is greatly enriched when you learn the techniques of ornamentation and phrasing that are idiomatic to your instrument.

You may find useful information on ornamentation, phrasing and other subjects in the following books,<sup>2</sup> even if you are not a flute or tin whistle player.

The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle  
 The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox  
 150 Gems of Irish Music for Flute  
 150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle  
 Down the Back Lane: Variation in Traditional Irish Music

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<sup>2</sup> All by Grey Larsen and published by Mel Bay Publications.