

Charts of Tin Whistle Keys and Scales

By Grey Larsen

One can play many melodies on the standard tin whistle in D, but some are quite difficult because they make prominent use of one or more of the D whistle's four non-primary notes: E \flat , F \sharp , G \sharp and B \flat . Half-holing these notes is certainly possible, and sometimes desirable. But when playing tunes at moderate or high speeds, it can be very difficult to half-hole with dependable accuracy.

However, there is good news regarding such tunes: we *can* play many of them on the tin whistle, with agility and without needing to half-hole. We do this by using whistles that are in keys other than D.

Tin whistles are made in all twelve keys. For traditional tunes in the various Celtic traditions, I find the most useful ones, after the D whistle, to be those in C, A and G. Beyond these, whistles in E and F are the next most useful. With whistles in these six keys, you can play in just about every modal scale encountered in Celtic musical traditions.

WHISTLE KEY	ACCESSIBLE SCALES (NO HALF-HOLING REQUIRED)	
E	A Ionian (major) 3 sharps E Mixolydian B Dorian F-sharp Aeolian (natural minor)	E Ionian (major) 4 sharps B Mixolydian F-sharp Dorian C-sharp Aeolian (natural minor)
A	D Ionian (major) 2 sharps A Mixolydian E Dorian B Aeolian (natural minor)	A Ionian (major) 3 sharps E Mixolydian B Dorian F-sharp Aeolian (natural minor)
D	G Ionian (major) 1 sharp D Mixolydian A Dorian E Aeolian (natural minor)	D Ionian (major) 2 sharps A Mixolydian E Dorian B Aeolian (natural minor)
G	C Ionian (major) no flats or sharps G Mixolydian D Dorian A Aeolian (natural minor)	G Ionian (major) 1 sharp D Mixolydian A Dorian E Aeolian (natural minor)
C	F Ionian (major) 1 flat C Mixolydian G Dorian D Aeolian (natural minor)	C Ionian (major) no flats or sharps G Mixolydian D Dorian A Aeolian (natural minor)
F	B-flat Ionian (major) 2 flats F Mixolydian C Dorian G Aeolian (natural minor)	F Ionian (major) 1 flat C Mixolydian G Dorian D Aeolian (natural minor)

This table represents whistles in E, A, D, G, C and F and the eight scales that are easily playable on each.

- The inner four rows of the table show the whistles that are most useful in Celtic musical traditions (A, D, G and C).
- Note that the left (unshaded) group of scales in each row is identical to the right (shaded) group of scales in the row below it. This shows that each scale can be played on two different whistles.
- Each group of four scales shares a single key or mode signature. The number of sharps or flats in that signature is shown in the upper right corner of the cell.
- The order of the rows in both charts follows the circle of fifths.

The following chart shows the scales that can easily be played on whistles in B \flat (or A \sharp), E \flat (or D \sharp), A \flat (or G \sharp), C \sharp (or D \flat), F \sharp (or G \flat) and B.

WHISTLE KEY	ACCESSIBLE SCALES (NO HALF-HOLING REQUIRED)	
B \flat	E-flat Ionian (major) <i>3 flats</i> B-flat Mixolydian F Dorian C Aeolian (natural minor)	B-flat Ionian (major) <i>2 flats</i> F Mixolydian C Dorian G Aeolian (natural minor)
E \flat	A-flat Ionian (major) <i>4 flats</i> E-flat Mixolydian B-flat Dorian F Aeolian (natural minor)	E-flat Ionian (major) <i>3 flats</i> B-flat Mixolydian F Dorian C Aeolian (natural minor)
A \flat	D-flat Ionian (major) <i>5 flats</i> A-flat Mixolydian E-flat Dorian B-flat Aeolian (natural minor)	A-flat Ionian (major) <i>4 flats</i> E-flat Mixolydian B-flat Dorian F Aeolian (natural minor)
C \sharp	F-sharp Ionian (major) <i>6 sharps</i> C-sharp Mixolydian G-sharp Dorian D-sharp Aeolian (natural minor)	C-sharp Ionian (major) <i>7 sharps</i> G-sharp Mixolydian D-sharp Dorian A-sharp Aeolian (natural minor)
F \sharp	B Ionian (major) <i>5 sharps</i> F-sharp Mixolydian C-sharp Dorian G-sharp Aeolian (natural minor)	F-sharp Ionian (major) <i>6 sharps</i> C-sharp Mixolydian G-sharp Dorian D-sharp Aeolian (natural minor)
B	E Ionian (major) <i>4 sharps</i> B Mixolydian F-sharp Dorian C-sharp Aeolian (natural minor)	B Ionian (major) <i>5 sharps</i> F-sharp Mixolydian C-sharp Dorian G-sharp Aeolian (natural minor)