

# A Staff-Based Tablature System for Tin Whistle and Irish Flute

By Grey Larsen

## What is Tablature?

Tablature is an instrument-specific notation system that graphically illustrates a fingering for each musical note. Tablature systems exist for many instruments, and have been in use at least since the 1300s.

Tin whistles and Irish flutes share identical fingerings, so tablature for one works for both.

Since most tablature systems do not convey precise rhythmic information, they are often shown in conjunction with standard music notation, as seen in Figures 1 through 3 below.

## Existing Picture-Based Systems

One can find many examples of picture-based tin whistle tablature on the internet. Here is an example of such a system, showing the beginning of the traditional Irish tune, “Hewlett.”

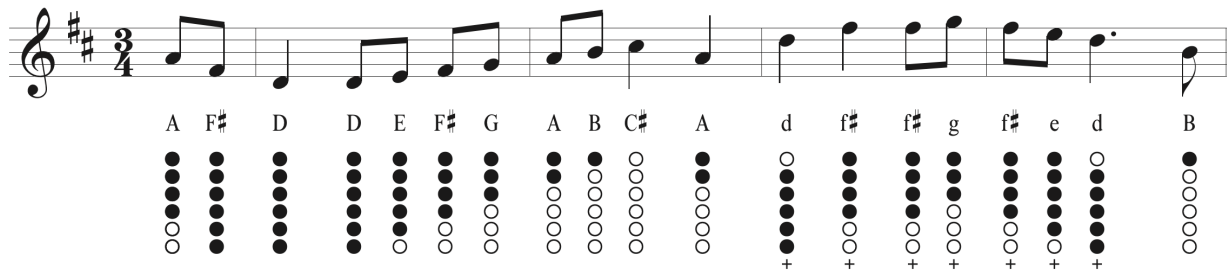


FIGURE 1: AN EXAMPLE OF PICTURE-BASED TIN WHISTLE TABLATURE

In Figure 1, above, tablature picture symbols appear below each note in the music notation staff and each note’s letter name. (Many thanks to Blaine Chastain for the Tin Whistle Tab font.)

Each picture symbol depicts the six finger holes of a tin whistle, with the top circle corresponding to the finger hole nearest the whistle’s mouthpiece. Solid black circles indicate closed holes, while open circles indicate open holes. The + sign, seen below some of the tablature symbols, indicates that the note in question is to be played in the second octave. (For more on this, see “Indicating the Octave Register of Notes” on the next page.)

## A Staff-Based System

I have devised a staff-based approach to tin whistle and Irish flute tablature. Below is the same excerpt from “Hewlett,” notated in this staff-based system.

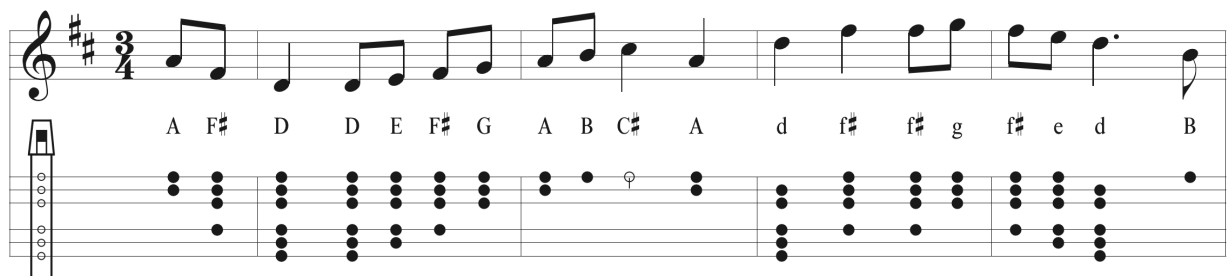


FIGURE 2: AN EXAMPLE OF STAFF-BASED TIN WHISTLE TABLATURE

This system features five elements:

**1. A tin whistle or Irish flute icon, or clef,** at the left edge of the tablature staff. Its six small circles represent the six finger holes of the instrument. The presence of this clef identifies the staff as a tin whistle or Irish flute tablature staff. (A tin whistle clef is shown above. An example using an Irish flute clef is shown below in Figure 3).

**2. Six horizontal, parallel staff lines** extending to the right from the clef. Notice that each staff line goes through one of the clef's finger hole circles. Each staff line therefore represents one of the six finger holes of the whistle or Irish flute. The top group of three staff lines corresponds to the top hand finger holes (the hand nearest the mouthpiece of the whistle or the embouchure hole of the flute), while the bottom group of three lines corresponds to the bottom hand finger holes.

**3. Solid black dots.** For each note (with the exception of C#) you will see one or more solid black circles, or dots, centered upon the staff lines and vertically aligned with each other. (These dots are never placed between, above or below the staff lines.) Each dot indicates a closed finger hole. For example, the tune's seventh note, G, has dots upon each of the top three staff lines. This shows that you finger G by closing the top three holes and leaving the bottom three open.

**4. A special fingering symbol —  $\varphi$  — for the note C#.** Since we finger C# by opening all six finger holes, I use this symbol for that note, and that note only. You can see this symbol above, in the third measure of the tablature staff. Its open circle suggests an open finger hole, while its small descending line suggests that open holes extend all the way down the whistle.

**5. Barlines.** These are vertical lines that cut through the six-line tablature staff (as well as a music notation staff, when present) and divide the music, as it flows from left to right, into time segments, typically of equal duration. These segments of time are referred to as measures or bars.

When tablature is not paired with music notation, barlines are particularly helpful in displaying the metric structure of the music.

### Indicating the Octave Register of Notes

In Figure 1, on the previous page, the + sign is used to indicate notes that are to be played in the second octave or register. For notes played in the third octave, a ++ sign can be used.

When tablature is paired with a music notation staff, one may want to omit such register indications in the tablature (as has been done in Figure 2 on the previous page). Music notation already conveys this note-register information.

If one wants to use + signs in staff-based tablature, I recommend placing them just above the top line of the tablature staff, as shown below in Figure 3.

Note the Irish flute tablature clef used in this example.

FIGURE 3: AN EXAMPLE OF IRISH FLUTE TABLATURE AND SECOND OCTAVE INDICATIONS

One can also convey register information using letter names for the notes. The uppercase letters in Figures 1 and 2 indicate that these notes are in the low register of the whistle or Irish

flute. Lowercase letters signify second-octave notes. This manner of using upper and lowercase letters is a feature of *abc notation*, a music notation system widely used on the internet at the time of this printing.

### Advantages of the Staff-Based System

1. Since the top three tablature staff lines (top hand) are separated from the bottom three (bottom hand), we can grasp and comprehend fingerings more easily and quickly.
2. Increased simplicity and clarity: there is no need for open circles on the tablature staff, reducing visual clutter.
3. With this system, it's much easier to write out tablature by hand. Drawing dots on the staff lines insures horizontal alignment. Not having to draw open circles saves time and effort.
4. When no music staff is present, barlines clarify the metric structure of the music, as seen in Figure 4 below.

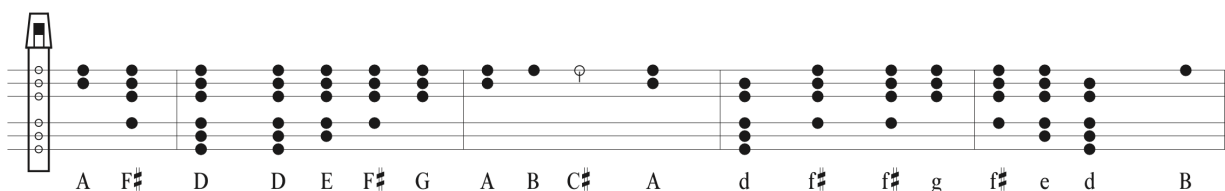


FIGURE 4: STAFF-BASED TABLATURE WITHOUT A MUSIC NOTATION STAFF

### Free Tablature Templates Available

You may download free blank tablature templates (as PDF files) at [greylarsen.com/tw](http://greylarsen.com/tw). These are available 1) with either a tin whistle or Irish flute clef, 2) with tablature and music notation staves linked together, and 3) with the tablature staff alone (without a music notation staff).

In a pinch, you can use guitar tablature paper, which has a six-line staff. However, there is no gap between the top three tablature staff lines and the bottom three.

### Three Books That Feature Staff-Based Tin Whistle and Irish Flute Tablature

I have written three books that make use of this staff-based tablature system:

- *First Lessons Tin Whistle*
- *Easy Favorites for Tin Whistle and Irish Flute*
- *Easy Christmas Favorites for Tin Whistle and Irish Flute*

Free excerpts are available at [greylarsen.com/tw](http://greylarsen.com/tw).

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