

Classically-trained musicians who are new to traditional Irish music often find the lilt of Irish music to be very elusive. Lilt is an aspect of the music that cannot be learned in an analytical, self-conscious fashion. It cannot be written down. It can only be internalized by immersion, by ear, just as an accent in speech is picked up unconsciously. It helps to feel these rhythms in your body, so if you have an opportunity to learn to dance to Irish music it will no doubt be very helpful.

Lilt is an element of musical personality and it naturally differs from player to player. If you do a lot of listening, it will emerge in your playing over time.

Variance of Stress or Weight

Lilt involves not only the variance of duration, but also the variance of the stress or weight that is given to certain notes. The notes that are given more stress and longer duration are the notes that fall on more important subdivisions of the beat. To make this more clear, let's look at reels and jigs.

Reels are usually notated in 2/2 time, with each half-note pulse subdivided into four eighth notes. If you say the word *generator* over and over you will notice that you do not give each syllable absolutely the same weight and duration. There is a lilt inherent in the delivery of the word. The first syllable gets the most weight and duration. The third gets a bit less, but still more than the second and fourth which are roughly equal to each other. This pattern of varying duration and stress could be represented thus: **GEN-er-a-tor**, **GEN-er-a-tor**, **GEN-er-a-tor**, **GEN-er-a-tor**. The use of boldface and capitalization indicates added stress and duration. This resembles the lilt of reels.

Jigs are notated in 6/8 time. The measure contains two dotted-quarter-note pulses which are each subdivided into three eighth notes. Now say the word *energy* over and over and notice the lilt inherent in that word: **EN-er-gy**, **EN-er-gy**, **EN-er-gy**, **EN-er-gy**. The first syllable gets the most stress and duration. It borrows some time from the second, which gets the least amount of stress and duration (notice its smaller type size). The third syllable is stronger and longer than the second, getting approximately its normal one-third share of the available time. Musically, it functions as a *pick-up note* that leads you into the next pulse. This scheme resembles the lilt of jigs.

Playing “on the Front of the Beat”

Lilt is heard in the uneven subdivision of the pulse and the variance of stress. It is also heard in another way. If you listen carefully, you will notice that traditional Irish musicians tend to play “on the front of the beat.” That is, they tend to place on-pulse notes a very slight bit early. This lends the music a feeling of “leaning forward,” of forward motion and momentum. Some Irish musicians speak of a feeling of “lift” on the downbeat.

By contrast, blues musicians, to give one example, often do the opposite. They tend to play on the back of the beat, placing on-pulse notes a very slight bit late. This creates a “laid-back” feeling.

Sometimes you may notice that an Irish player who is tapping her foot seems to be playing a little ahead of the beat that her foot is setting. This is probably not evidence of sloppy foot tapping, but instead shows how she is playing on the front of the beat.

In an ensemble setting, different players may not always swing to the same degree and in the same ways. If they are very experienced playing together, they will intuitively find a way to fit their “swings” together to create a group lilt that gives great cohesion and energy to their sound.

“Even” Playing is Rarely Really Even

Throughout this book I notate jigs, reels, and the like in even eighth notes and I often recommend playing the notes in an “even” fashion when you are learning the basic physical motions and coordination of a new technique. In these situations I believe it is best to practice slowly in a truly even rhythm, along with a metronome. Once you are comfortable with a technique, it is fine to use it in accordance with whatever lilt you may normally employ.