

PIANO  
(& GUITAR)  
ACCOMPANIMENT SECRETS  
FOR THE  
FIDDLE



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## FOREWORD

The information found here was originally intended for the intermediate and advanced player but over time several sections have been revised/added to accommodate the beginner as well. Since I am mainly an ear-player, you may find that the methods I teach do not exactly fall into the 'music textbook' category but I have had good success with these methods in the past. Most musicians know that there are several aspects of music, such as *style* and *dynamics* that are not conveyed very well using standard notation and at best are poorly explained in music books. I will attempt to shed some light on these and other less tangible aspects of music by using two important tools: analogies and simple mathematics.

I certainly do not consider myself to be a superior accompanist, but rather a person who sincerely loves to listen, learn, and play music. I hope you find this document useful. If you have any questions or comments, I'd love to hear from you:

*10<sup>th</sup> Revision*

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# ACCOMPANIMENT BASICS

## WHAT'S THE ACCOMPANIST'S GOAL

It's long been my belief that, when the fiddle is played as a lead instrument, the goal of the piano and/or guitar accompanist should be to provide a rhythmic and supportive background for the fiddler. Playing the main melody along with the fiddler should be reserved for tasteful moments, as otherwise, it usually detracts from the presence of the fiddle.

## ACCOMPANIMENT STYLE

In today's world of fiddle music there are probably as many accompaniment styles as there are fiddling styles. I like to think that a accompanist's choice in accompaniment is purely subjective, however, matching fiddle and accompanist styles generally produce the most pleasing result. Certainly it is wise for one to be open-minded to many styles and to strive to improve one's versatility. The following are just a few examples of fiddle and accompaniment styles worth checking out:

<i>Style</i>	<i>Accompanist</i>	<i>Fiddler</i>	<i>Album Title</i>
<b>Down-East</b>	Waldo Munro, piano	Don Messer	The Very Best Of Don Messer
<b>Cape Breton / Scottish</b>	Tracy Dares, piano	Natalie MacMaster	Fit As A Fiddle
<b>Irish</b>	Donna Long, piano	Brendan Mulvihill	The Morning Dew
<b>Ontario</b>	Denis Lanctot, piano	Robbie Dagenais	Ottawa Valley Fiddle
<b>West-Canadian / Métis</b>	Trent Bruner, piano	Calvin Vollrath	Live at Emma Lake
<b>Down-East / Ontario</b>	Les Boston, piano	Graham Townsend	35 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary Collection
<b>Down-East</b>	Vivian Hicks, piano	Ivan Hicks	Friendly Fiddling The Maritime Way
<b>Cape Breton / Scottish</b>	John Morris Rankin, piano	Howie MacDonald	Live And Lively
<b>Acadian</b>	Marie Arsenault, piano, and others	Eddy Arsenault, etc.	Party Acadien

## FUNDAMENTALS OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Regardless of accompaniment style there are common factors of good backup. On the piano, you'll find it best to chord with right hand and play the bass notes with the left. On the guitar, strong rhythm and percussive attack generally works best. The following summaries are the predominant factors I have learned:

### PLAY 'AROUND' THE FIDDLER

By this I mean: leave a musical 'window' open for the fiddler to play in. If the fiddler is playing in the higher pitches, as they usually do, don't clutter up that portion of the musical spectrum by playing chords up there. Stay down in the lower 2/3rds of the piano keyboard, or in the case of guitar, first position chords. If the fiddler is playing lower in pitch, such as the first half of "Big John MacNeil" reel, try chording slightly higher up the keyboard/fretboard. Chord inversions (see the next section) can greatly help you in this regard.

### PLAY A STRONG BASS

A 'heavy left hand' on the piano or accentuating the bass strings on the guitar, especially on faster tunes such as jigs and reels, is very important. Most fiddlers (and listeners) enjoy a good solid bass behind their playing as it helps to smooth out the timing of the tune. On the piano, I quite often I double up on the bass notes by playing octaves with my pinky finger and thumb.

### WATCH YOUR TIMING

Timing is probably the most important element of music. Fiddle music in particular has long been associated with dancing in various forms which demands precise timing. Therefore, it is essential that a smooth, even-paced time, is kept throughout a fiddle tune. Irregularities in timing, especially slowing down, can be a musical 'let-down' to the listener. A tape recorder and a metronome are two tools that you can use to recognize timing problems. Sometimes just listening to a playback of yourself can help you here timing issues...practising along with a metronome is a great way to help you iron them out.

### TEMPO

The speed of a tune should be observed within reason of the category of that particular tune (i.e. waltz, jig, reel, etc.). Tunes played too slowly are usually boring, and tunes played too fast are usually disastrous. I do, however, consider this aspect of music to be fairly subjective. I believe that as long as the musicians involved play the tune with lots of life and are comfortable with the speed, then that's what really matters. From an accompanist's point-of-view, I've maintained that it's best to maintain the speed that the fiddler first starts a tune with. Here's a rough guide for tempos of common fiddle tunes:

<b>TUNE TYPE</b>	<b>TIME SIG.</b>	<b>TEMPO (beats per minute)</b>
<b>Waltz</b>	3/4	40-50
<b>Jig</b>	6/8	80-110
<b>Reel</b>	2/2, 2/4 or 4/4	110-130

<b>Schottische, Clog</b>	2/4	100-120
<b>Polka, Two-Step</b>	2/4	120-140
<b>Hornpipe</b>	2/4	90-120

## BE DYNAMIC

The majority of fiddle tunes are comprised of two fundamental parts: an A part and a B part. The A part is generally constructed as the “build-up” for the B part. The B part is usually the highlight of the tune. Consider the roller-coaster analogy. The climb in anticipation to the top is the A part. The let-it-all-hang-out, down hill run is the B part. Now, I’m not suggesting that the A part is slower than the B, but rather the B part is generally played with a greater level of emphasis, energy, and volume.

## STAY IN THE GROOVE

Sometime ago I heard this term used before I really knew what it meant. Here's my attempt to explain it in words: When musicians play together and the tune they're playing really sounds good, I mean *really* sounds good, there is a dimension in their sound that becomes prevalent even though you may not be able to put your finger on it. That dimension is not perfect pitch, tempo, chords, notes, dynamics, or volume, but rather a 'pocket' or 'groove'. This 'groove' becomes prevalent when all musicians are neither behind nor ahead of the beat, but right *on* the beat. When this happens, the musicians find themselves in a very comfortable position within the music. They don't feel rushed or out-of-place. I believe the listener, whether a musician or not, subconsciously senses this and finds the music even more compelling.

## PHRASING

I once watched an instructional video in which Alasdair Fraser, a Scottish fiddler, explained how most fiddle tunes can be broken down into distinct segments of notes he called phrases. He likened these phases to a conversation between two people in which one person asks a question, the other responding with an answer. Again the first person asks the same question and the other responds with slightly different answer. This may sound confusing at first, but if one learns to pick out the 'phrases' in a tune, they will soon discover a whole new way at listening to music---one which allows them to readily identify their place in the tune without the aid of charts or notation. The following example demonstrates this *call and answer* analogy.

**Example 1:** Here's the first part of the 'Cock of the North' jig:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 6/8 time. The first staff is divided into two sections: 'Question' and '1st Answer'. The 'Question' section consists of two measures of eighth notes: G4-A4-B4, G4-A4-B4. The '1st Answer' section consists of two measures of eighth notes: B4-A4-G4, F4-E4-D4. The second staff is also divided into two sections: 'Same Question' and 'Different Answer'. The 'Same Question' section is identical to the first staff's 'Question' section. The 'Different Answer' section consists of two measures of eighth notes: B4-A4-G4, F4-E4-D4, followed by a whole note G4.

# CHORDS

## THE BASICS

Here is a chart of common chords used in fiddle music. Their makeup is portrayed in a numerical format based on a major scale in any key (the major scale being: do=1, ray=2, me=3, fa=4, etc...). For simplicity's sake the key of C is used and an '\*' indicates chord types most often used:

<i>CHORD TYPE</i>	<i>CONSTRUCTION</i>	<i>SYMBOL</i>
<b>Major*</b>	1 3 5	C
<b>Minor*</b>	1 3b 5	Cm or Cmin
<b>Diminished</b>	1 3b 5b	C° or Cdim
<b>Augmented</b>	1 3 5#	C+ or Caug
<b>Suspended</b>	1 4 5	Csus
<b>Sixth</b>	1 3 5 6	C6
<b>Minor Sixth</b>	1 3b 5 6	Cm6 or Cmin6
<b>Seventh*</b>	1 3 5 7b	C7
<b>Major Seventh</b>	1 3 5 7	Cmaj7
<b>Minor Seventh</b>	1 3b 5 7b	Cm7 or Cmin7
<b>Ninth</b>	1 3 5 7b 9	C9
<b>Minor Ninth</b>	1 3b 5 7b 9	Cm9 or Cmin9

## CHORD RECOGNITION

The more a person plays and listens to different chords the better they get at recognising the chord type. Each chord type has its own characteristic sound regardless of what key it's in. It is important that one continues to practice chord types until they learn to identify them by ear alone. Those who do so find they can improvise and play spontaneously under unrehearsed conditions such as fiddle contests and other one-time performances.

## INVERSIONS

Chord inversions serve two basic purposes. One, they give music an unlimited combination of notes and sound textures, and Two, they allow the pianist to switch from chord to chord very quickly with virtually no lateral shifting of the right hand. This greatly improves a player's smoothness and allows them to maintain a relaxed performance. Chord inversions should be practised on a regular basis. The inversions of a major chord are:

Root	1 3 5
First inversion	3 5 ↑1
Second inversion	5 ↑1 ↑3

Where 1 is the root note and ↑ means one octave higher than without the ↑.

Here are the inversions of a seventh chord:

Root	1 3 5 7 <sup>b</sup>
First inversion	3 5 7 <sup>b</sup> ↑1
Second inversion	5 7 <sup>b</sup> ↑1 ↑3
Third inversion	7 <sup>b</sup> ↑1 ↑3 ↑5

**Note:** The more notes in a chord, the more inversions there are.

## ALTERNATE CHORDS

Alternate chords are replacement chords played in stead of the regular or the "standard" chords of a tune. Backup musicians tend to use alternate chords to "spice up a tune".

**Example 2:** Alternate chords added to the first line of the "Smash The Windows" jig.

**Conventional:** D D D D G G A A



**Alternate:** D A Bm D G D Em A



## CHORDS PLAYED WITH UNUSUAL BASS NOTES

Musicians often play chords along with a complimenting bass note that isn't one of the notes that normally makes up that chord. Technically, the result is a new chord, however, it is often easier to display the chord in a fraction type format:

**Example 3:** An **A** chord played simultaneously with a **B** bass note would be written as:

**A/B**

This allows the reader to easily reproduce the sound intended without worrying about which note in the chord is the bass note (technically A9th). Although I have researched this topic I have failed to find the technical term for chords written in this manner. I am told it was derived from 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century "figured bass" music in which pedal tones were common. A *pedal tone* is a note, usually bass, which is continuously played with various chords or lead notes, such as the drones of bagpipes. More about pedal tones can be found in the next section.

**Example 4:** By adding complimenting bass notes to the alternate chords of Example 2, we have:

**D      A/C#      Bm      A      G      D/F#      Em      A**



**Note:** More about bass notes and 'bass runs' can be found in the next section.



## PEDAL TONES

This technique is heard often in Irish fiddle music. It can be neat and tasteful if employed occasionally. Try using these chords and bass notes for the first line of "Smash the Windows" instead of Example 2 & 8.

**Example 10:** Pedal tone for set of chords:

**right hand chord: .D..D..D..D..G..G..A..A**

**left hand bass note: D..D..D..D..D..D..D..D.**

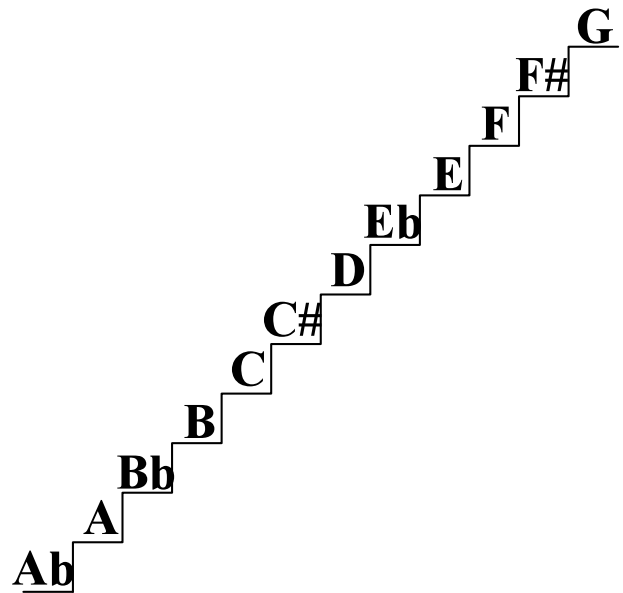
# BEGINNER TIPS

## MUSICAL TERMS & DEFINITIONS

**Note:** The sounding of a single tone in music. If you depress any one key on the piano you are playing a *note*.

### The Musical Alphabet:

A *progression* or *series* of 12 notes in a specific order, each one a degree higher than the last. This series of notes continuously repeats itself downward (lower in pitch) and upward (higher in pitch) infinitely. Shown at right in a set of 12 stairs, each one represents a note in the musical alphabet. If you compare this with the keys on a piano you'll find that as you go up the keyboard, the notes sound higher, (i.e. up the stairs)...and as you go down the keyboard, the notes sound lower, (down the stairs). In music we call each one of these stair treads *half steps*.



**Key:** In music a key is not just those white and black things on the piano, but a *reference point* upon which a musical melody or tune is played. Since a tune is simply a series of notes in a specific order or *pattern*, they can therefore be transposed to any key...and there are 12 of them...one for each note in the musical alphabet.

**Scale:** An arrangement of notes that form a specific *tonal setting* (not to be confused with the *Musical Alphabet*). This tonal setting is what tunes are based on. One might say it is the *backdrop* on which the musical melody or picture is *painted* on. There are 7 fundamental scales but we'll stick with the most common one: major. Here's the make-up:

We all remember "do, re, me, fa, so, la, ti, do" right? Well that's the major scale. And guess what...You can hum, sing, or play it in any key! Try it on the piano or guitar.

do	re	me	fa	so	la	ti	do
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

**Chord:** A combination of notes played all at once or *simultaneously*. There are many types of chords, but the simplest (using only 3 notes), and most common, is the *major* and *minor* chord. You'll notice that the "do, re, me..." above is numbered

from 1 to 8. You can use this major scale to form any chord you wish simply by knowing the chord's mathematical make-up. A *major* chord is made by sounding the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> note of the scale together...in any key. The 1<sup>st</sup> being the root note, signifying the key. For example, playing A, C#, and E together make up an A-major chord. A minor chord consists of the 1<sup>st</sup>, a flatted 3<sup>rd</sup>, and the 5<sup>th</sup>, all played together. Playing A, C, and E together make up the A-minor chord. Note that this number pattern works the same regardless of the key.

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

You now have enough information to try a hand at playing along with a fiddle tune. If you use your right hand to form the chord and your left hand to sound the bass note, see if you can follow this chord chart for the jig "Cock of the North":

**A A A E**  
**A A E A**

Each letter indicates what chord to play and represents 6 beats. Both halves of the tune can use this chord progression.

There are numerous music books available containing chord charts for fiddle tunes. Start with simple pieces until you get comfortable with the rhythms of the tunes.

## **ADDITIONAL TIPS**

### **PIANO INTRODUCTIONS**

It is quite common for the accompanist to play an 'intro' to a fiddle tune. Probably the most common and effective is to play the very last line of the tune. This works for waltzes, jigs, reels, etc, and can be played with the right hand in the upper 2/3rds portion of the keyboard.

### **SYNCOATING THE RIGHT AND LEFT HAND**

With practice, a pianist will learn to eliminate the dependency each hand's rhythm has on the other and play independent rhythms between each hand, as if one has two minds, each controlling it's own hand. This allows the player to create very complex chord/bass patterns and characteristic sounds.

### **WHILE THE FIDDLER IS TUNING UP...**

Of course we all know it's proper etiquette to remain quiet while another person is tuning their instrument, however, if an A is requested by the fiddler - play it, but also ask if they want A minor played (A 440Hz root chord). It is a proven fact that the human ear can most accurately tune to the root note of a minor chord than any other combination of notes.

### **PERSONAL APPEARANCE**

Smile, someone might be watching you play.

### **PRACTISING**

Personally, I do not believe anyone is a born expert. However, I do believe that some are gifted with the ability to catch on quicker than others. All must practice at some point to get good. The more you really want to play, the better you'll be. Remember: no pain - no gain.