

# A Field Guide to Irish Music

Rosanne Santucci

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## About This Book

I wrote this out of sympathy for anyone who's interested in playing Irish traditional music but has no idea where or how to start; in other words, someone like me as of a few years ago. I didn't know what a session was like, and I didn't understand why tunes sounded painfully lame when I played them verbatim off the page. One lazy summer day, I Googled "Boston Irish session" and found out about the early session at the Green Briar in Brighton. After mustering up my courage, I showed up and sat there, ears open and flute in my lap, every week for months until the tunes started to sink in and I saw what other players did to breathe life into them. Gradually I branched out to other sessions, picking up a few instruments along the way and learning a ton from the many fine musicians I have encountered.

This book is my way of "passing it forward" — I've tried to compile the tips I've found most useful while throwing in some great tunes commonly heard around town. Copies are available online at:

<http://web.mit.edu/~santucci/www/tunes/tunes.pdf>

(Free to all, just don't sell it or pass it off as your own.) Second edition, © 2018, Rosanne Santucci

## About Irish Music

Irish traditional music is part of the genre labelled “Celtic” — the folk music of Ireland, Scotland, Brittany (France), Galicia (Spain) and the Maritime provinces of Canada. It is a vibrant, living tradition that is both popular in its own right and influential on rock, punk, and other styles.

Irish traditional music falls into two broad categories: songs and tunes (mostly dance music), the latter of which is the focus of this book. The characteristic sound of an Irish tune comes from a combination of:

- Instruments: fiddle, flute, whistle, uilleann pipes, accordion, concertina, harp, bodhrán (hand drum), guitar, bouzouki
- Rhythms: jigs, reels, etc.; mostly quarter and eighth notes, not very complex
- Melody: often modal, usually not more than 1 1/2 octave span, not many accidentals. Everyone generally plays the tune in unison.
- Harmony: minimal; some melody instruments might add an occasional chord (e.g. double-stops on the fiddle). Guitar/bouzouki/piano backing is light and often open chords (leaving out the third, so it fits with major or minor).
- Ornamentation: the “twiddly bits” around the notes
- Phrasing: often slurs into the next bar
- Variation: the skeleton of the tune is always there, but slight variation is very common; phrases are often not played the same way twice

### Common dance rhythms

**Reels:** 4/4, cut time (“in 2”). Eighth notes can be swingy, straight, or somewhere in the middle depending on who you're playing with.

**Hornpipes:** 4/4, cut time, slower than a reel and with a swing feel in the eighth notes (DAH-dee-DAH-dee). More triplets (DEE-dle-dee) than you'd find in a reel.

**Jigs:** 6/8, in 2. The beat is typically the same tempo as a reel (jig dotted quarter = reel half note).

**Slip Jigs:** A jig with an extra beat in it. 9/8, in 3.

**Slides:** Faster than a jig, with fewer notes and longer phrases. 12/8 (in 4).

**Hop Jigs:** A slide with 3 beats. These can sound a lot like slip jigs if played slowly.

**Polkas:** 2/4, in 2. Moderately to very fast.

## Scales

Tunes most commonly have one or two sharps in the key signatures, probably due to the limitations of keyless flutes and whistles. Within these key signatures are a host of available major, minor, and modal scales:

- **One sharp:** G major, E minor, A dorian (A minor with an F sharp), D mixolydian (D major with a C natural)
- **Two sharps:** D major, B minor, E dorian, A mixolydian

You will also occasionally hear tunes with no sharps (C major, D dorian, G mixolydian) and three sharps (A major, F# minor).

## Notes for Classical Players

Coming from a classical background, here are the differences I have found most significant when playing Irish music:

	<b>Classical</b>	<b>Irish</b>
learning music	usually learn by reading music	usually learn by ear
performing music	read music, except when playing solo	always play from memory
sound	smooth, even, “pretty” — lots of time is spent perfecting one’s tone	can be more aggressive — lots of breath/bow accents, OK to really push it
vibrato	vibrato essential characteristic of sound on most wind/string instruments	little to no vibrato on fiddle; finger vibrato on wind instruments (rapid tapping of finger on open hole without significantly changing pitch of note)
articulation	varies, depending on composer and time period	slur into downbeat; phrases often go across the barline

	<b>Classical</b>	<b>Irish</b>
grace notes	on or before the beat, fast or slow depending on composer and time period	usually so quick that you don't hear a pitch; on (or before, but very close to) the beat
rolls	notes within the turn are usually even	certain notes in the roll are so quick, they're almost imperceptible
other ornaments	trills, mordents	cuts, strikes, double cuts, slides, cranns, occasionally trills
improvisation	not unless specified	fine as long as it maintains the basic skeleton of the tune, e.g. eighth-note triplet F-E-D instead of two eighths F-D
tempo	some degree of rubato (push and pull) is expected depending on the composer and time period	rock-steady and driving ahead — keep that flow going! Keeping good rhythm is probably the most important part of playing Irish music.

## Ornamentation

Ornamentation in Irish music can be very difficult to learn because it goes by so quickly it's hard to hear (and see) what players are doing. Here are the basic ornaments:

**Cut.** A very quick grace note starting from above. The “notes” of the cuts need not be fingered as real notes; as long as you lift a finger that produces a pitch higher than the written note, that will suffice. Happens almost simultaneously with the written note; sounds more percussive than pitched.

**Strike** (also called a tip, tap, or pat). Just like the cut, but it starts from below.

**Long roll.** The length of three eighth notes. Start on the written note, cut it, and strike it. Flute players often place the cut and strike on the 2nd and 3rd eighth notes, while fiddle players tend to save the cut and strike for the very end.

**Short roll.** The length of two eighth notes. Cut the written note, then strike it.

**Crann.** The written note, followed by two or three cuts. Very common on pipes, flute, whistle.

**Slide (upward).** A smooth slide achieved by pushing or sliding your finger off a hole or up the fingerboard to the written note from a half- or whole-step below it.

The best way to learn is by working with a teacher, but there are some really helpful books out there that come with CDs. For flute and whistle players:











































- An Fheadóg Mhór by Conal Ó Gráda, available from his website, <https://www.conalograda.com/store>
- The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle by Grey Larsen, available on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

And for fiddle players, try the Irish Fiddle Book by Matt Cranitch, available on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Note: There is no consistent notation for these ornaments; different people use different symbols.

# Guitar Chords

DADGAD tuning is probably the most frequently used tuning for Irish traditional music, though plenty of people use other tunings as well. The advantage of DADGAD is that the upper A and D strings provide a "drone" which fits very well with the music, but the disadvantage is that you need to move your capo more often. I won't go into guitar strumming patterns for Irish music here, but it's essential to get the right rhythmic feel; listen closely to the guitar backers I've listed on the next page.

Chord	EADGBE Standard Tuning	DADGBE Drop D	DADGAD great for tunes in D or G
D			
D/F#			
G			
A			
A7sus4			
C			
E min7			
A minor			
A min7			
G/B			
C sus2			
D7sus4			
B min7			
F			

## Where to Listen

### Recordings

Just a few of my personal favorites here... easily found on iTunes, YouTube, or Google. A few of them live locally or pass through frequently.

**flute:** Conal Ó Gráda, Paddy Carty, Louise Mulcahy, Catherine McEvoy, Matt Molloy, Shannon Heaton, Sean Gavin

**whistle:** Mary Bergin, Joanie Madden, Sean Ryan, Fintan Vallely

**fiddle:** Tommy Peoples, MacDara Ó Raghallaigh, Denis Murphy, Aidan Connolly, Alison Perkins, Nathan Gourley, Laura Feddersen, Fergal Scahill

**guitar/bouzouki:** Brian Miller, John Blake, Steve Cooney (with Seamus Begley), Patrick Doocey, Alec Finn, Eoin O'Neill, Donal Lunny, Mick Conneely

**bodhrán/drum set/spoons:** Johnny Ringo McDonagh, Josh Dukes (with The Yanks), Christy Barry

**banjo:** Pauline Conneely, Quentin Cooper, Angelina Carberry

**accordion/melodeon:** Billy McComiskey, John Gannon, Jackie Daly, Seamus Begley

**concertina:** Caitlín Nic Gabhann, Noel Hill, Mícheál Ó Raghallaigh

**uilleann pipes:** Willie Clancy, Benedict Koehler, Joey Abarta, Cillian Vallely, Mickey Dunne, Tiarnán Ó Duinnchinn

**singers:** Dolores Keane, Brian Ó hAirt (with Bua), Bridget Fitzgerald

**bands:** NicGaviskey, the Bothy Band, the Press Gang, Dervish, the Yanks, Kilfenora Ceili Band

### Nearby Irish Sessions (weekly unless otherwise indicated)

*Beginner-friendly sessions are marked with a \*. Sessions come and go, so it's a good idea to check with the venue first before venturing out.*

**Sundays:** The Burren, 247 Elm St. (Davis Sq.), Somerville, 3-6pm

**Mondays:** Green Briar, 304 Washington St., Brighton, intermediate session 7-9pm\*, fast session 9pm-12am; The Burren, 247 Elm St. (Davis Sq.), Somerville, 9pm-midnight

**Tuesdays:** The Druid, 1357 Cambridge St. (Inman Sq.), Cambridge, 9pm

**Wednesdays:** Emmets Pub, 6 Beacon St, Boston (9pm?)



**Thursdays:** Canadian American Club, 202 Arlington St., Watertown, 7-10pm\*; Somerville Irish Music Meetup Slow Practice Session, Clarendon Hill Presbyterian Church, 155 Powder House Blvd (Teele Sq.), Somerville, 7-9pm (meets monthly; see [meetup.com](http://meetup.com))\*

**Fridays:** The Burren, 247 Elm St. (Davis Sq.), Somerville, 9:30pm-1am (a gig, not an open session, but fun to listen to)

**Saturdays:** Brendan Behan Pub, 378 Centre St., Jamaica Plain, 5-8pm; The Druid, 1357 Cambridge St. (Inman Sq.), Cambridge, 4pm; Emmets Pub, 6 Beacon St, Boston (not sure of time)

## Session Etiquette

Not every session is an open session. Don't join a group of unfamiliar musicians without asking if it's open. If you're new, let the regulars sit up front.

If you don't know the tune very well, sit back and listen. If you only know parts of it, play only the parts you know. Otherwise, use the time to absorb the tune and silently work it out on your instrument. Ask the musicians if they'd mind if you recorded them so that you can learn their tunes for next time — very few will say no!

Try to play in tune and make sure you listen to the people around you.

Take your cue from the session leaders as to whether/when it's appropriate for you to start a tune. The leaders pick the tunes in some sessions, while people take turns in others. If you'd like to start a tune, ask the other musicians if they know it and would like to play it. Otherwise, you might find yourself unexpectedly — and awkwardly — playing solo.

If you've got a set of two or three tunes you'd like to play, practice the transitions so you don't draw a blank when it's time to switch tunes!

Generally speaking, only one bodhrán/guitar/bouzouki/whistle at a time.

If you're playing a backing instrument, be very sensitive to the melody players. It can be tough to hear each other in loud pubs, and when you add a guitar or bodhrán it can be that much harder — plus if you're playing with chords that are too busy or just plain wrong, dragging or rushing, etc., it will be extremely distracting to the other musicians. This music does not require accompaniment, and while it's fun to have a great backer, a poor one can really wreck a session.

## Where to Learn

### Lessons

Locally, the CCÉ Boston Music School ([bostonirishmusic.com](http://bostonirishmusic.com)) offers group lessons for children, teens, and adults in Irish traditional music on Saturdays in Brighton. It is sponsored by the Reynolds-Hanafin-Cooley Branch of Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Éireann (COAL-tas kyol-TOR-ee AIR-in), an international nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving traditional Irish music, song, dance, language, and culture. They have a first-class roster of teachers who are professional musicians living in the Boston area, and who have performed all over the world. They also have instruments available to rent.

Online, the Online Academy of Irish Music ([oaim.ie](http://oaim.ie)) is a wonderful resource and worth the membership fee. There are also many tutorials available on YouTube, of varying quality.

### Tune collections, discussion forums, audio, video

**Amazing Slow Downer**, <http://www.ronimusic.com/>: a must-have piece of software for learning by ear.

**Tunepal**, [tunepal.org](http://tunepal.org): Available as an app or desktop site. Record a tune into your microphone and it will tell you its name. Pro tip: The old desktop site, <http://tunepal.org/tunepal/index.php>, is still active; it requires Java and ABC notation input, but it's more accurate than the regular app.

**The Session**, <http://www.thesession.org/>: Tune repository and discussion forum for Irish traditional music.

**Chiff and Fipple**, [Chiffandfipple.com](http://Chiffandfipple.com): Another discussion form, especially good for players of whistle, flute, and uilleann pipes.

**ABC Notation Home Page**, <http://www.abcnotation.com/>: ABC notation is a text-based music notation system perfectly suited for traditional music. It comes in very handy when you want to write down how a tune goes, but don't have any manuscript paper handy. This site has a tutorial — very easy to learn.

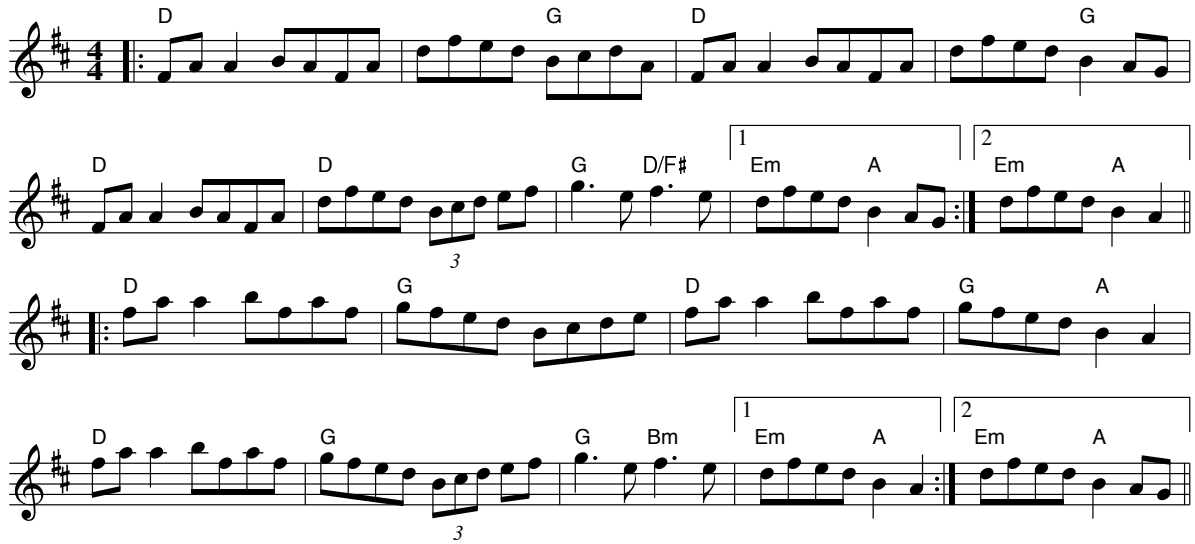
**ABC Converter**, <http://www.mandolintab.net/abcconverter.php>: Turn your ABC notation into staff notation that can be saved as PDF.

**Na Píobairí Uilleann**, <http://pipers.ie/source/>: Lots of great videos, plus piping tutorials. Follow **clarebannerman's channel** on YouTube or **Ciaran Kelly** on Facebook — loads of historic video clips.

# Tunes

## Reels

### Silver Spear



Musical score for the reel "Silver Spear" in D major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. The score consists of four staves. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and a key signature change to D major. Chords D, G, D, and G are indicated above the first four measures. The second staff continues the melody with chords D, D, G, and D/F#. It includes a first ending (1) with chords Em and A, and a second ending (2) with chords Em and A. The third staff features a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure, with chords D, G, D, G, and A indicated. The fourth staff also contains a triplet and concludes with a first ending (1) with chords Em and A, and a second ending (2) with chords Em and A.

### The Sligo Maid



Musical score for the reel "The Sligo Maid" in D major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. The score consists of four staves. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and a key signature change to D major. Chords Amin and G are indicated above the first and fifth measures. The second staff continues the melody with chords Amin and G, and includes a first ending (1) with chord G and a second ending (2) with chord G. The third staff features a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure, with chords Amin and G indicated. The fourth staff concludes with a triplet and chords Amin, G, Emin7, and Amin indicated above the measures.

## Hornpipes

### Harvest Home

Harvest Home

Chord labels: D, A

Triplets: 3

### The Rights Of Man

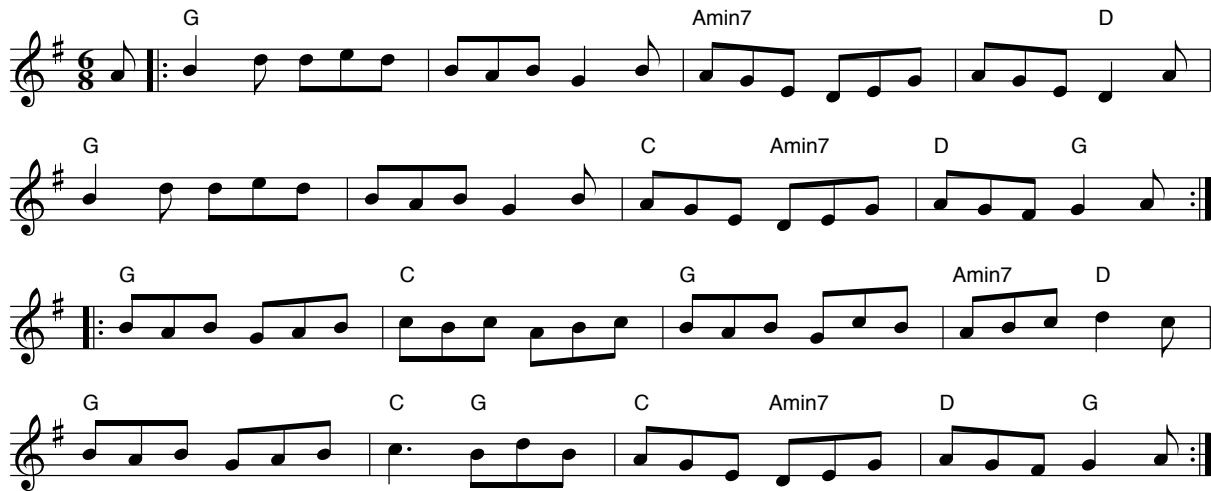
The Rights Of Man

Chord labels: Em, Am, D, G, Bm

Triplets: 3

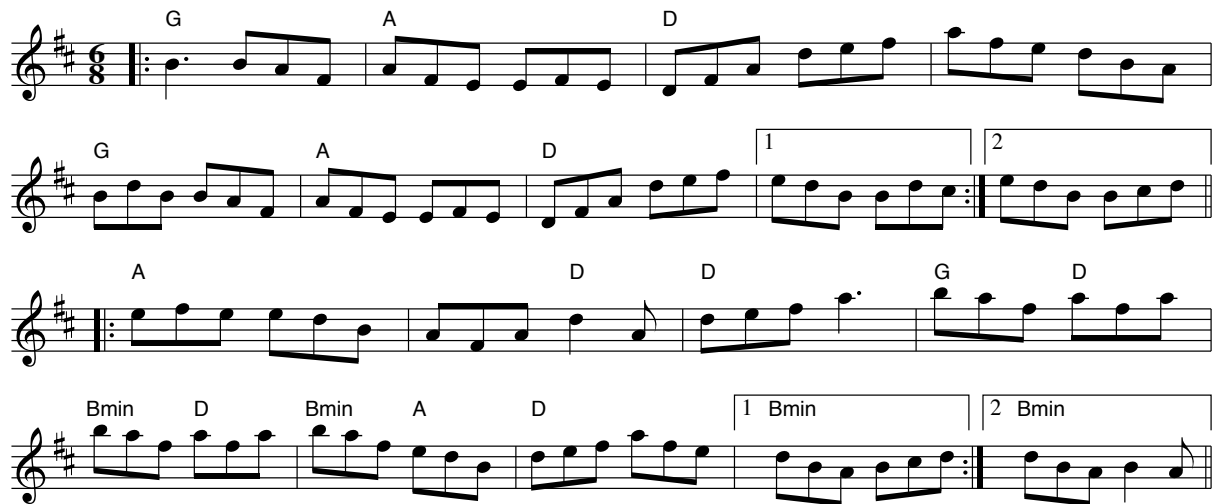
## Jigs

### John McHugh's



Musical score for John McHugh's Jig, written in treble clef, key of D major (one sharp), and 6/8 time. The score consists of four staves. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and a key signature change to D major. Chords G, Amin7, and D are indicated above the first three measures. The second staff continues the melody with chords G, C, Amin7, D, and G. The third staff has chords G, C, G, Amin7, and D. The fourth staff concludes with chords G, C, G, C, Amin7, D, and G. The piece ends with a double bar line.

### The Hag's Purse (a.k.a. Hardiman's Fancy, Joe Derrane's)



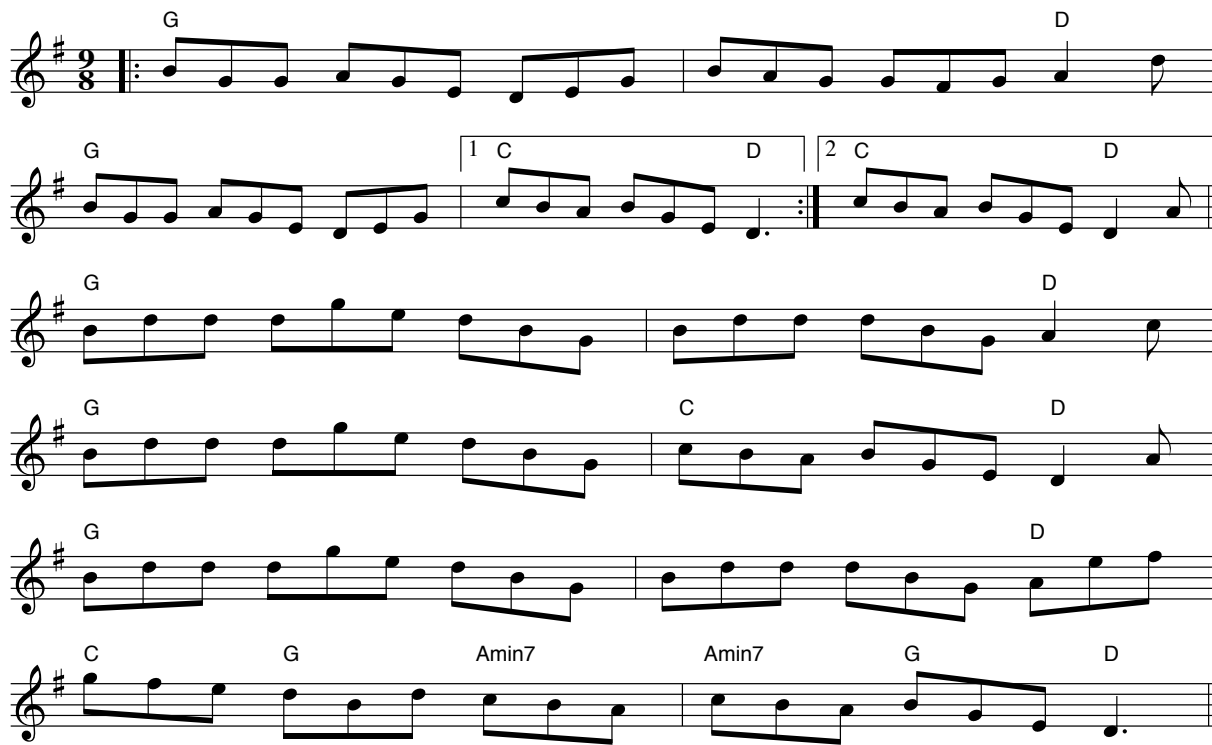
Musical score for The Hag's Purse (a.k.a. Hardiman's Fancy, Joe Derrane's), written in treble clef, key of D major (one sharp), and 6/8 time. The score consists of four staves. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and a key signature change to D major. Chords G, A, and D are indicated above the first three measures. The second staff continues the melody with chords G, A, and D, followed by a first ending bracket. The third staff has chords A, D, D, G, and D. The fourth staff concludes with chords Bmin, D, Bmin, A, D, and a second ending bracket. The piece ends with a double bar line.

## Slip Jigs

### Ryan's Slip Jig



### Swaggering Jig



## Slides

### Merrily Kiss the Quaker

G C G D G C G 1 D G 2 D G  
 G D G 1 D G 2 D G  
 G D C Bmin7 Emin7D 1 G D G 2 G D G

### Denis Murphy's

D G D E- A D 1 G A D 2 G A D  
 D G D G D A D G D 1 G A D 2 G A D

## Hop Jigs

### The Butterfly

Em D Em D Em D Bm

Am7 Am7 Am7 C D

Em Em D Em G D

The musical score for 'The Butterfly' is written in 3/8 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of three staves. The first staff contains the first six measures, with chords Em, D, Em, D, Em, and D above it, followed by a Bm chord in the seventh measure. The second staff contains measures 7 through 10, with chords Am7, Am7, Am7, C, and D above it. The third staff contains measures 11 through 14, with chords Em, Em, D, Em, G, and D above it. The piece ends with a double bar line.

### Boys of Ballisodare

G C G G Amin7 C

G C G G C D

G C G Amin7 C

G C G C D

The musical score for 'Boys of Ballisodare' is written in 3/8 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of four staves. The first staff contains measures 1 through 6, with chords G, C, G, G, Amin7, and C above it. The second staff contains measures 7 through 10, with chords G, C, G, G, C, and D above it. The third staff contains measures 11 through 14, with chords G, C, G, Amin7, and C above it. The fourth staff contains measures 15 through 18, with chords G, C, G, C, and D above it. The piece ends with a double bar line.



## Polkas

### Ballydesmond #2

Am G Am G Em7 Am Am G Em7 Am

### Glen Cottage Polka

A (no 3rd) G A A D G A G A G A