

When settings and rhythm are more important than speed

Star of Munster (Reel in A Minor) & The Black-Haired Lass (Single Reel in A)

“The Star of Munster” is a lovely tune. I’ve heard sparser versions of it in a few session settings. And I’ve heard sensitive players, aware that something was missing from the tune, try to add interest by playing faster! In fact, with a pleasant version of a tune played with good rhythm, you should be able to play at slower speeds with no beauty lost.

Having a nice, balanced setting of a tune, with just a few basic ornaments, gives your rhythm something to dig into. A nice setting usually features a fluid melody line, not single notes that stick out without connection to a longer phrase.

Try this:

or this:



not this:



If you have trouble playing all the notes in the tune without stopping and starting, slow..... things..... down....., even if you are already practicing slowly.

Remember, you are working to play well. You can build speed later on, but it is quite difficult to focus on nice settings, style and stability at fast speeds. If you play these tunes at a pace you can comfortably manage, you’ll stay physically and mentally relaxed. This is how you want to feel when you play faster.

Playing tunes well at fast speeds should feel just as easy as playing them slowly. As you gradually increase your speed, maintain the same physical sensation you feel when you are playing well at slower tempos. You can “show” your body how this works by playing a tune once very slowly. At the very end of the tune, speed up a bit, and keep that new speed for the second time through the tune. Maintain the same relaxed feel you had when you were playing it slowly.

[Flute players: It can be helpful to plan plenty of breaths, so you’ll always have enough air to finish phrases. Consider breathing in some spots some of the time, and in others the rest of the time.]

Backers: If someone starts a reel at a nice moderate tempo, latch onto the center of the rhythm. Don’t push, instead *lift the rhythm*. If you feel like everyone is playing slower than you, you are playing too fast.

The A5 chord in the appendix (page 70) actually works in both Minor, for “The Star of Munster” and Major, for “The Blackhaired Lass,” though you may want to vary your chords for the second tune.