

## **HOW TO WRITE A “TRADITIONAL”TUNE**

There’s nothing, for a musician, quite so satisfying as writing and playing your own tune. As fiddle players, we have the advantage over classical musicians, that the standard unit of performance is not a concerto or sonata, but a simple 32 bar tune, probably in first position, and probably in an easy key.

This workshop will be equally valuable for someone who’s never written a tune before, or for an experienced writer who perhaps wants some new ideas to freshen up their approach. It will concentrate on Celtic type tunes, but most of the principles are equally applicable to many other genres, and I am happy to address any questions about different traditions.

I wrote my first tune at around the age of 15, and proudly presented it to my violin teacher. He listened politely and, despite probably having little knowledge of “fiddle” as opposed to violin music, pointed out that 17 bars was not a standard length for a tune, and that it might be a good idea to look at the form of what I was writing.

### **A fish with three eyes?**

This was indeed sound advice. The 6,000 or so Irish tunes currently being played may appear to represent an infinite variety of melodic ideas, but they are not random. In the natural world you do not see birds with one wing, fish with three eyes or horses with five legs. Most tunes follow a series of conventional patterns in their structure, phrasing, length, key and so on, and an understanding of this form is an essential part of tune writing, even if you later decide to break with these conventions.

I took my teacher’s advice, and over many years mastered the art of analysing and absorbing the different constituent parts of a traditional tune, allowing me to write authentic sounding tunes in a host of different styles. I have written numerous albums of TV production music which every year sees my English and Scottish folk, klezmer and gypsy tunes appear on hundreds of TV shows around the world. One of my first fiddle books was “Any Fool can write fiddle tunes” and, with a show of bravado, I demonstrated at workshops how I could write a tune in a style, time signature and key chosen by the audience in less than a minute. Oh, the arrogance of youth!

### **Quick, reliable and efficient!**

In this workshop we will look at an extremely quick, reliable and efficient way to get started with tune writing. You’ll come away with at least one tune of your own, and with the confidence to do it again and again.

Motivation is important, so I’ll start off by discussing SIX different practical reasons why you might want to start composing tunes.

We'll analyse the structure of two tunes- a polka and a jig, and use these to create a structural template into which you can fit one or two bar phrases- either ideas that come to you on the spot, or from a collection which I will supply.

When this is finished, we'll talk about ways to evaluate it. **IS IT ANY GOOD?** Can it be improved, and if so how?

We'll talk about the push and pull between predictability and blandness on the one side, surprise and unacceptable weirdness on the other. One of the keys to a good tune is to finely navigate the balance between the two.

### **What is it you like in a tune?**

I'll ask you to collect your five favourite traditional tunes, and have them in front of you at the workshop. I'll try and get you to discover what element it is in these tunes which attracts you, and suggest how you might incorporate this one idea into a tune of your own. It might be the key- major or minor? The scale or mode- is it pentatonic, mixolydian, dorian? Is there an unexpected note or chord? Does it fall easily under your fingers?

You may have heard and played these favourite tunes countless times, and never once thought to question what it is about them that you like.

Maybe before long one of those favourite tunes will be your own composition!

### **More about Chris Haigh**

To find more about Chris Haigh, see my website [www.fiddlingaround.co.uk](http://www.fiddlingaround.co.uk) and youtube channel "The Fiddle Channel".

Many of the ideas in this workshop are included in my book "Exploring Folk Fiddle", published by Schott. There are chapters on form, ornamentation, bowing, modes and scales, starting, finishing and linking tunes and much more.