10 Tunes to Teach By Ear

For strings – beginner to advanced

- **Attractive tunes in a variety of genres**
- **Many top tips to help you teach without the dots**
- **Opportunities to develop aural and ensemble skills**

10 tunes to teach by ear

Introduction

This resource will help you to teach tunes by ear. It will significantly develop your pupils' aural and ensemble skills, whilst consolidating technique.

The tunes are varied in terms of genre and background, and appear with accompanying parts, which ensure that a range of abilities can participate. The material can be used for individuals and groups of all sizes including whole class.

The resource is particularly aimed at helping you teach pupils tunes they don't already know – as opposed to helping them work out tunes they already know.

There are multiple top tips to help you teach the tunes, no matter what your previous experience is of playing/teaching by ear. Please don't forget that my videos will explain further the various methods of teaching by ear. These videos can be found on my website: musicwild.co.uk.

Videos (musicwild.co.uk)

To understand how to integrate these methods into a holistic approach, including playing from notation, developing creativity and consolidating technique, please see my book – 'Wild About Strings' which is available from Amazon, and other online retailers.

Wild About Strings: Inspiring effective teaching resources : Wild, Ruth: Amazon.co.uk: Books

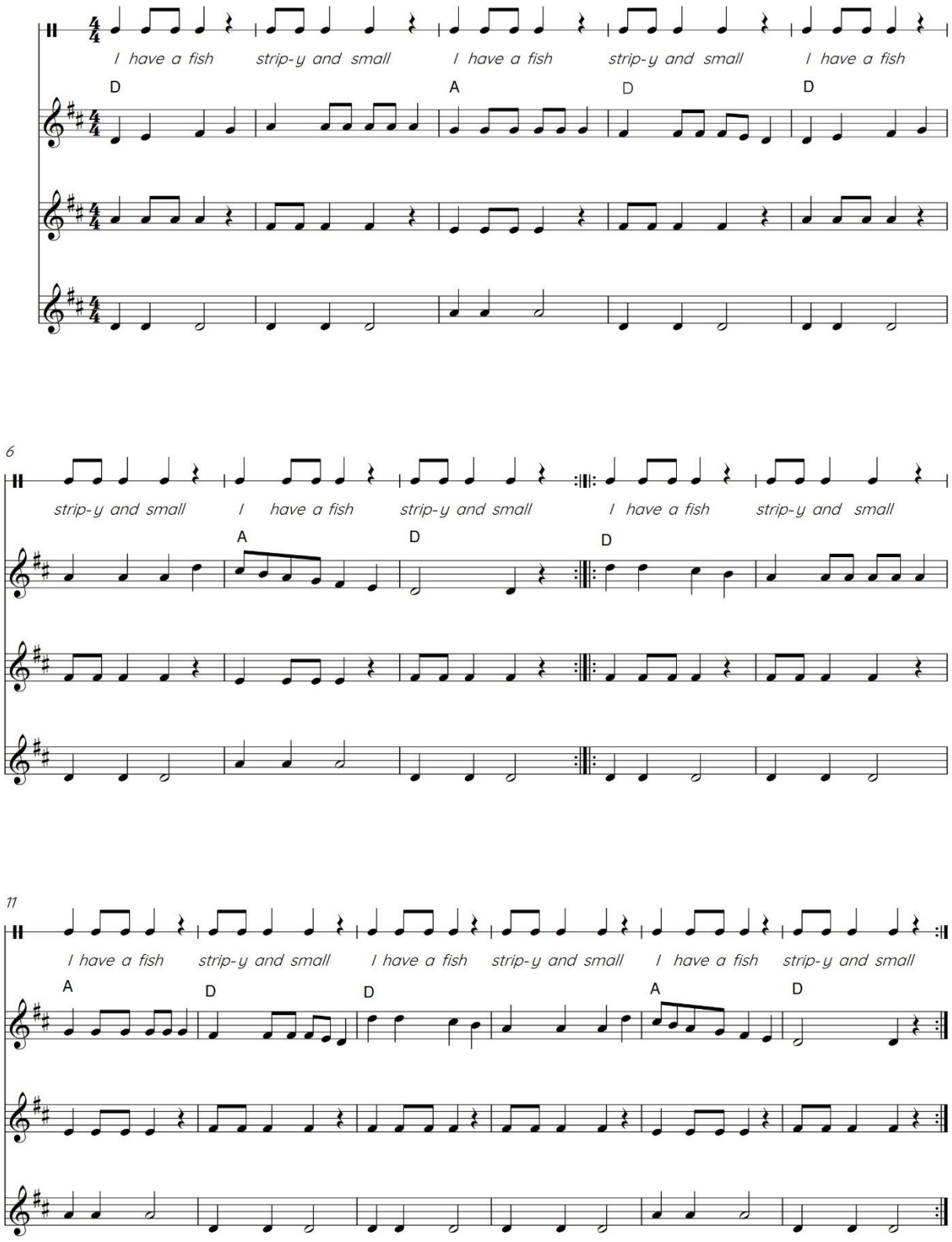
There are many tips included in this resource. Most of the tips apply to all the tunes.

I have left technical details such as bowing and fingering to the teacher's discretion, or the choice of the pupil.

This resource is for all strings. Don't forget that the tunes are taught by ear, so the clef (e.g. for viola) is not an issue. For cello and double bass, the octave can be altered as appropriate. Keys and register can be altered for additional challenge in the case of advanced pupils.

Uncle Bernard's Polka

Trad. English



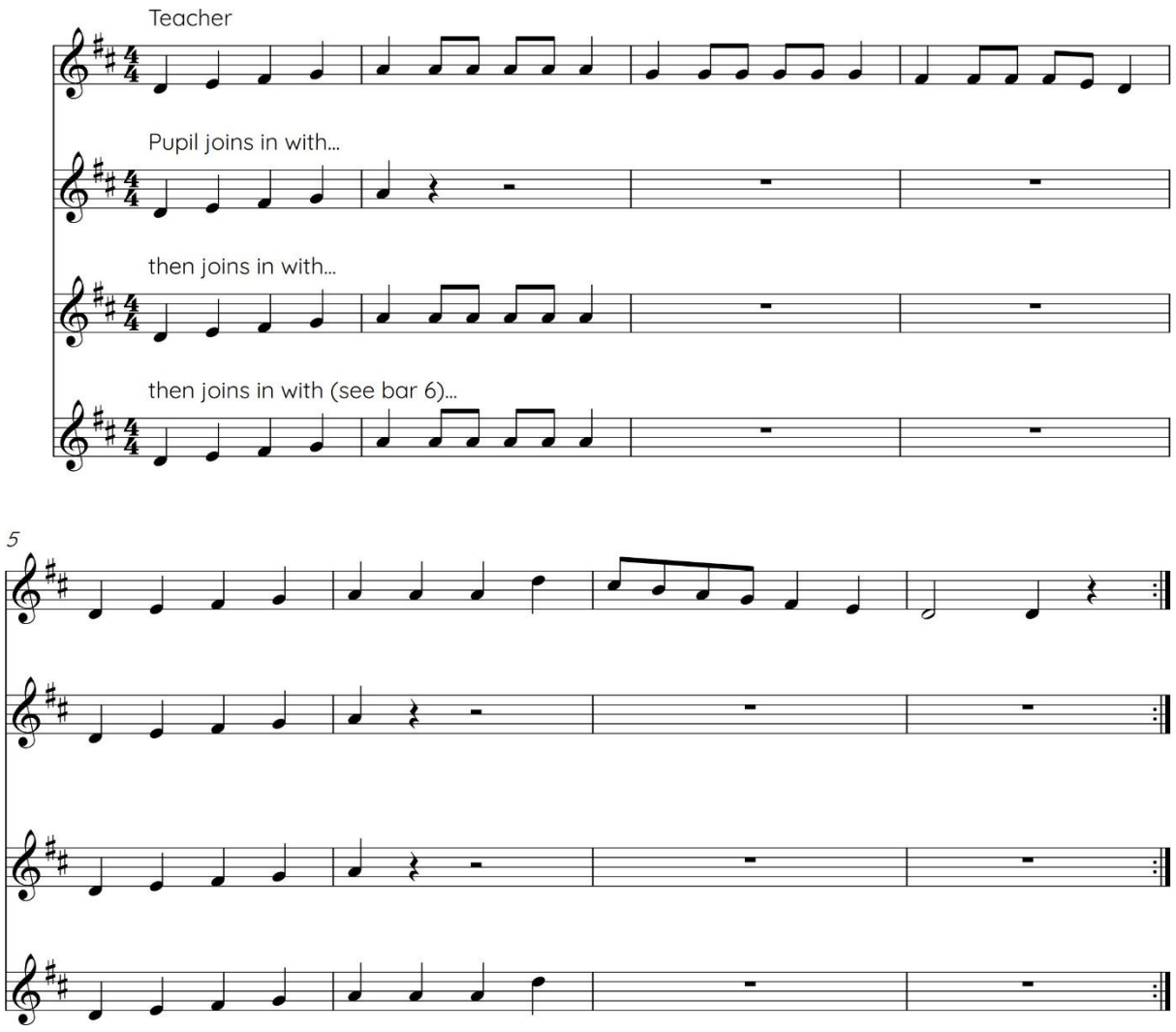
Top tips

The percussive part can be played by clapping or tapping on the instrument.

The accompanying parts can be taught by using body parts – see the first video on musicwild.co.uk.

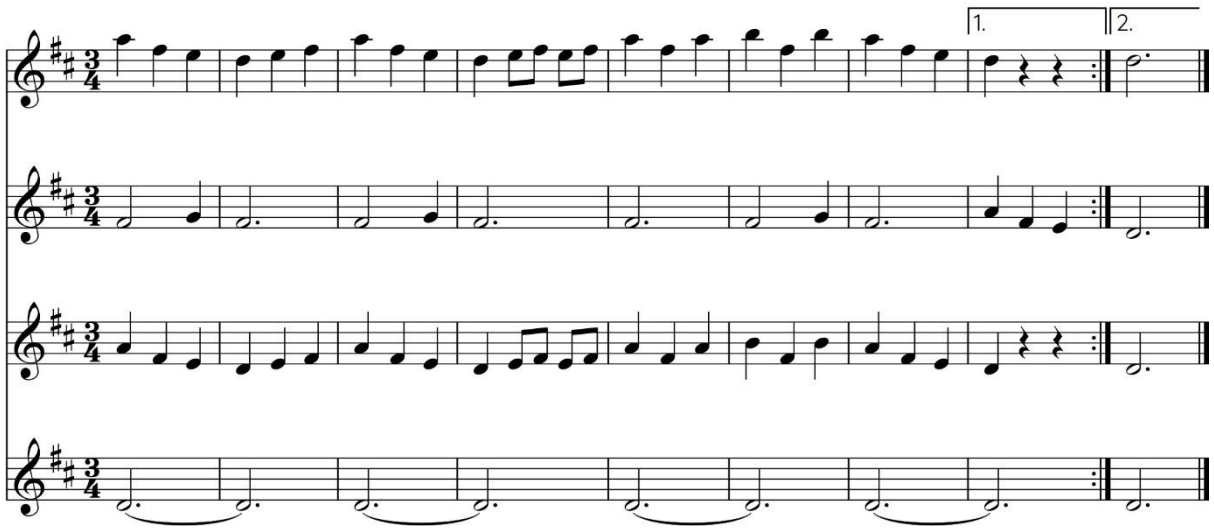
The melody can be taught in segments – a little bit more each time, whilst you play the tune – see below and the second video on the website.

Ask pupils to spot if there are any repeated sections.



Morning from Peer Gynt

Grieg



Top tips

Classical tunes can be taught by ear too.

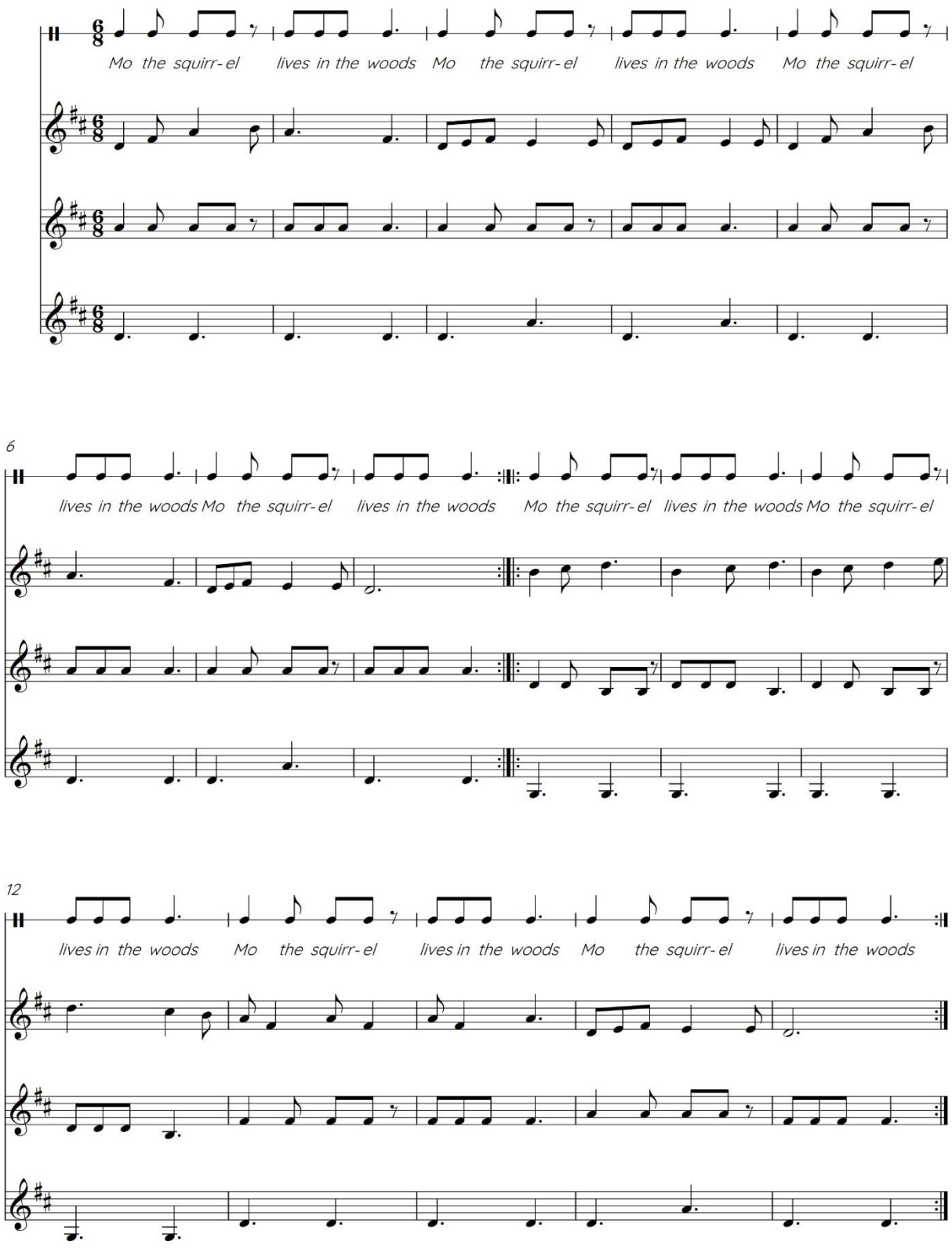
Drones are a great way to include less experienced players.

As the tune is based on a simple pentatonic scale, it is not difficult to play at the lower octave. For more advanced pupils, play at the higher octave.

To help teach the tune, first do some echo playing including intervals from the tune, such as A to F# and B to F#.

Hunt the Squirrel/Hela'r Wiwer

Trad. English/Irish/Welsh?



Top tips

Use tunes taught by ear to help teach or reinforce arpeggios or scales.

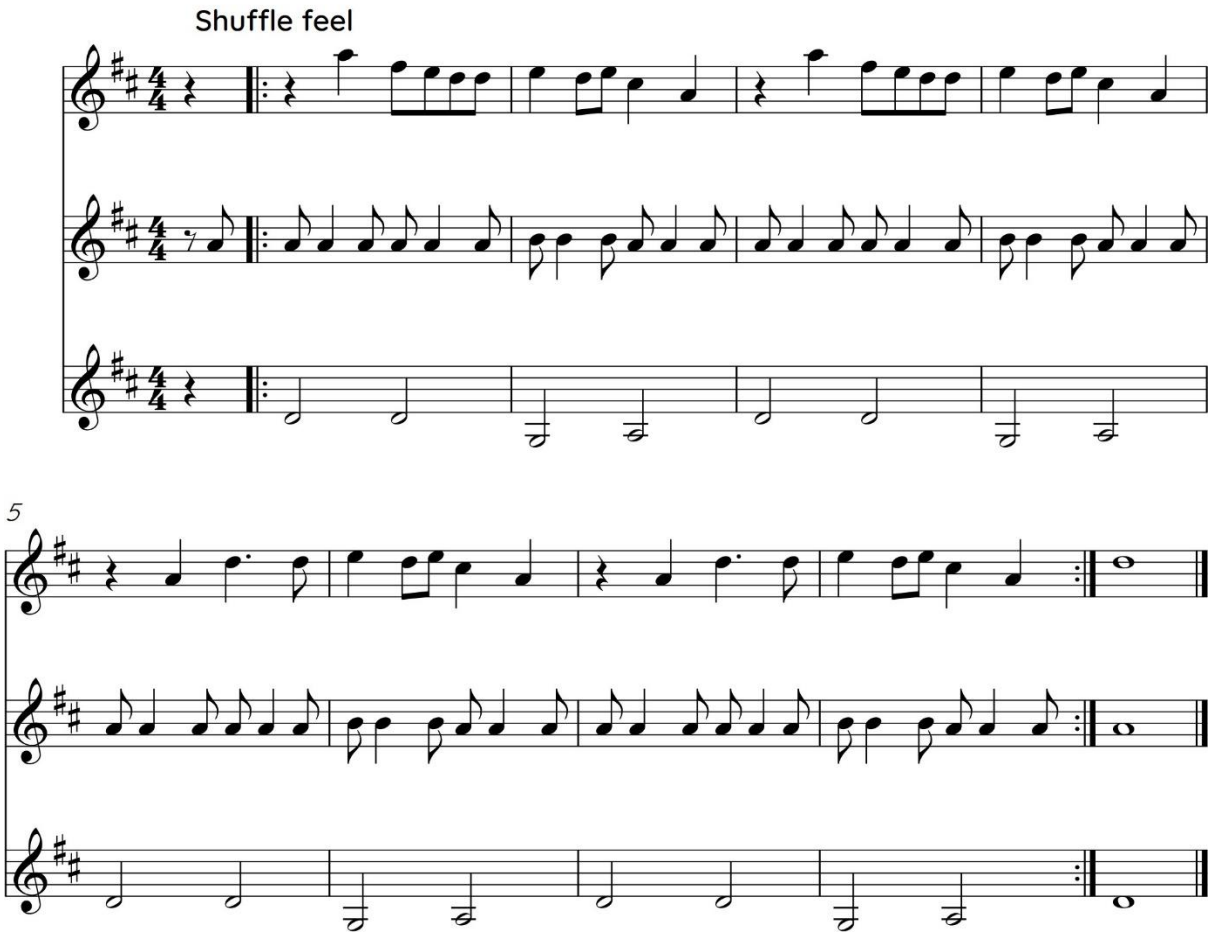
Use words to help pupils remember the percussion part or the riff (first and third staves). Pupils can make up their own words if the rhythm is played to them - see first video on musicwild.co.uk.

Play the tune with pupils learning the bassline (fourth stave) as soon as possible, and they will 'feel' where to change note.

Folk tunes are often well-known in different geographical areas, and nobody can be completely certain from where they originate.

Lashon' ilang' uMam' akabuyi!

Trad. Zulu



Top tips

It's essential to get the right swung 'feel' for this, both in the melody and the middle part. I suggest listening to the beginning of 'Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes' (Paul Simon and Ladysmith Black Mambazo) with your pupils. Also repeating 'banana' can help!

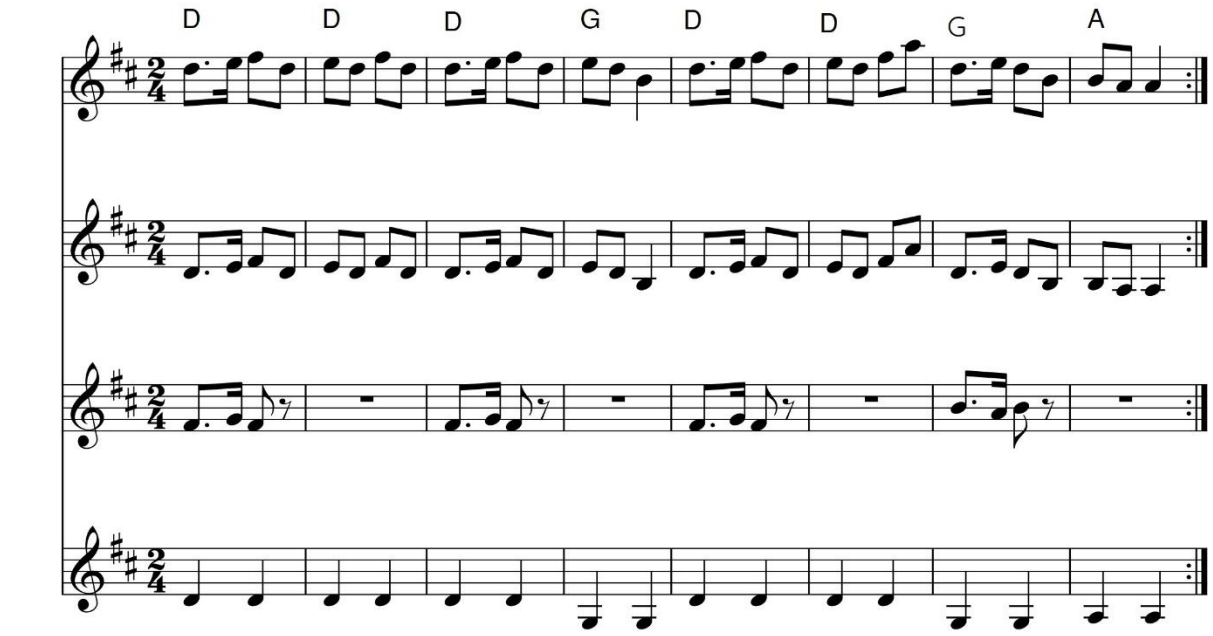
The tune is like a conversation – first two phrases (to end of bar 4) person a), second two phrases person b). Drawing attention to this can help memorise the tune.

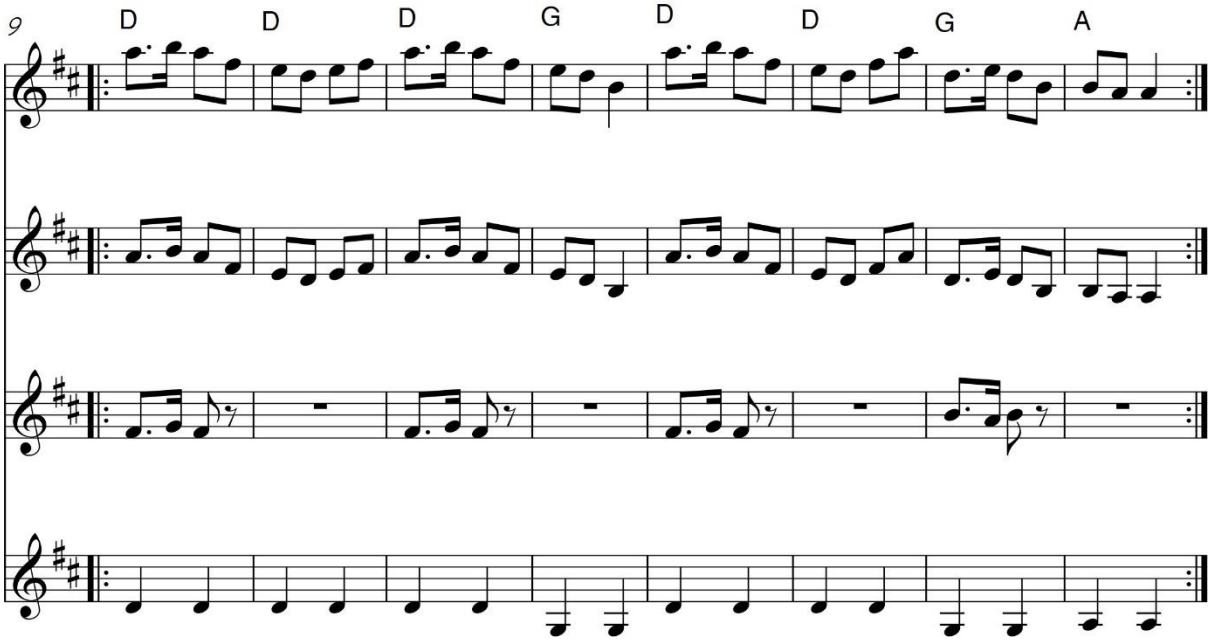
Pupils learning the tune can learn the other parts too. It will help give them the feel of the groove, and of the harmonic structure.

Not all parts need to play all the time – see the third video on musicwild.co.uk for ideas about including pupils in musical decision making.

Oh Them Britches Full of Stitches

Trad. American/Irish





Top tips

Familiarise pupils with the notes/rhythms from the tune by playing a relevant scale with a rhythm or melodic figure taken from the melody. For instance, the first bar could be used, starting on each note in turn, of the major pentatonic scale starting on D: D EF#D, E F#GE etc. – see second video on musicwild.co.uk.

Folk/traditional tunes are useful for introducing pupils to learning music by ear, as they often contain repetition.

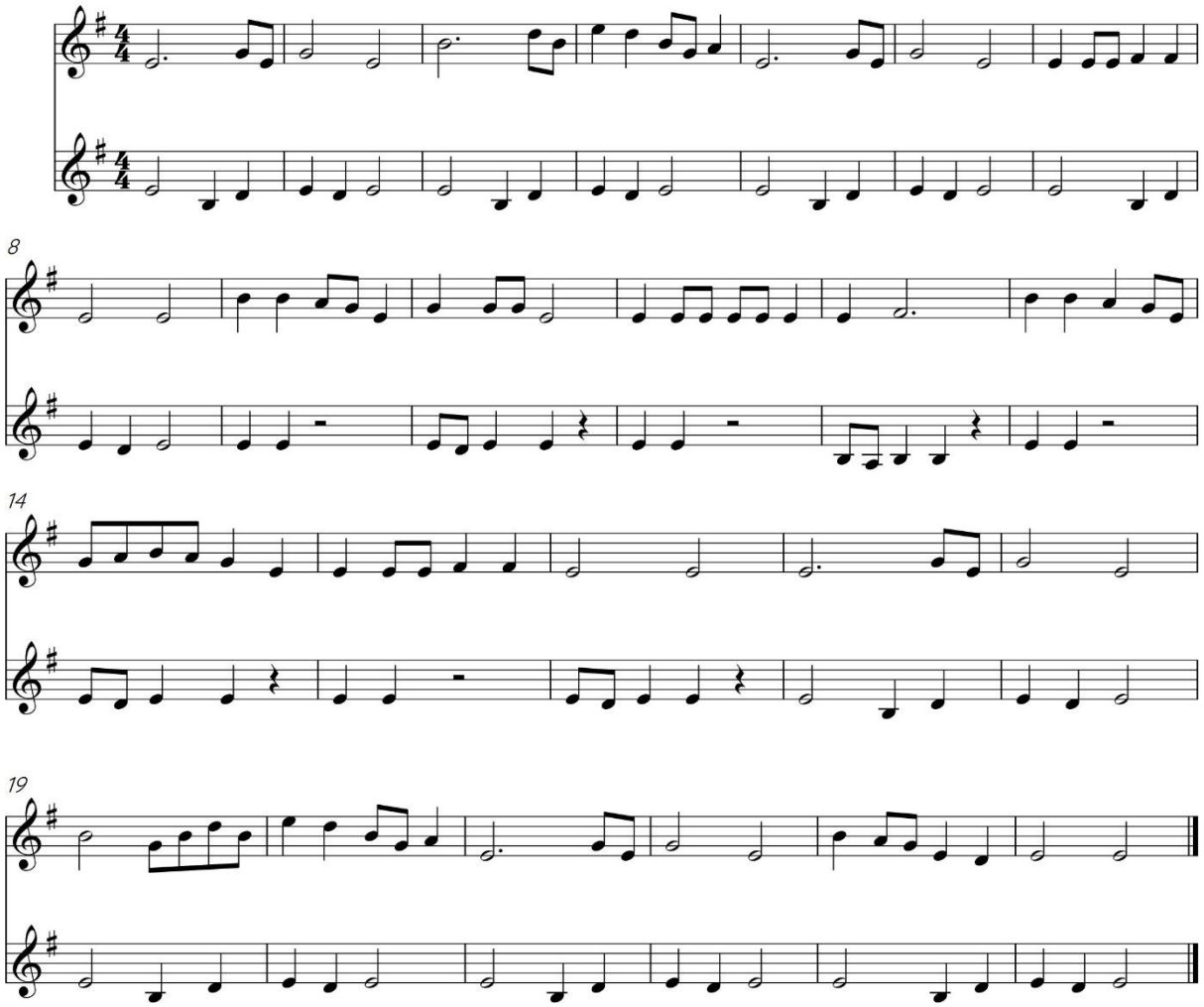
By choosing the right key, basslines can often be played by using open strings only, or open strings and first finger. Pentatonic tunes, of which there are quite a few in American and Scottish traditional music, can be played with just open strings, first and second finger.

With sharp keys, such as D or G, pupils learning the bassline can use double stops if technique allows.

The tune can be played at either octave.

Wade in the Water

Spiritual



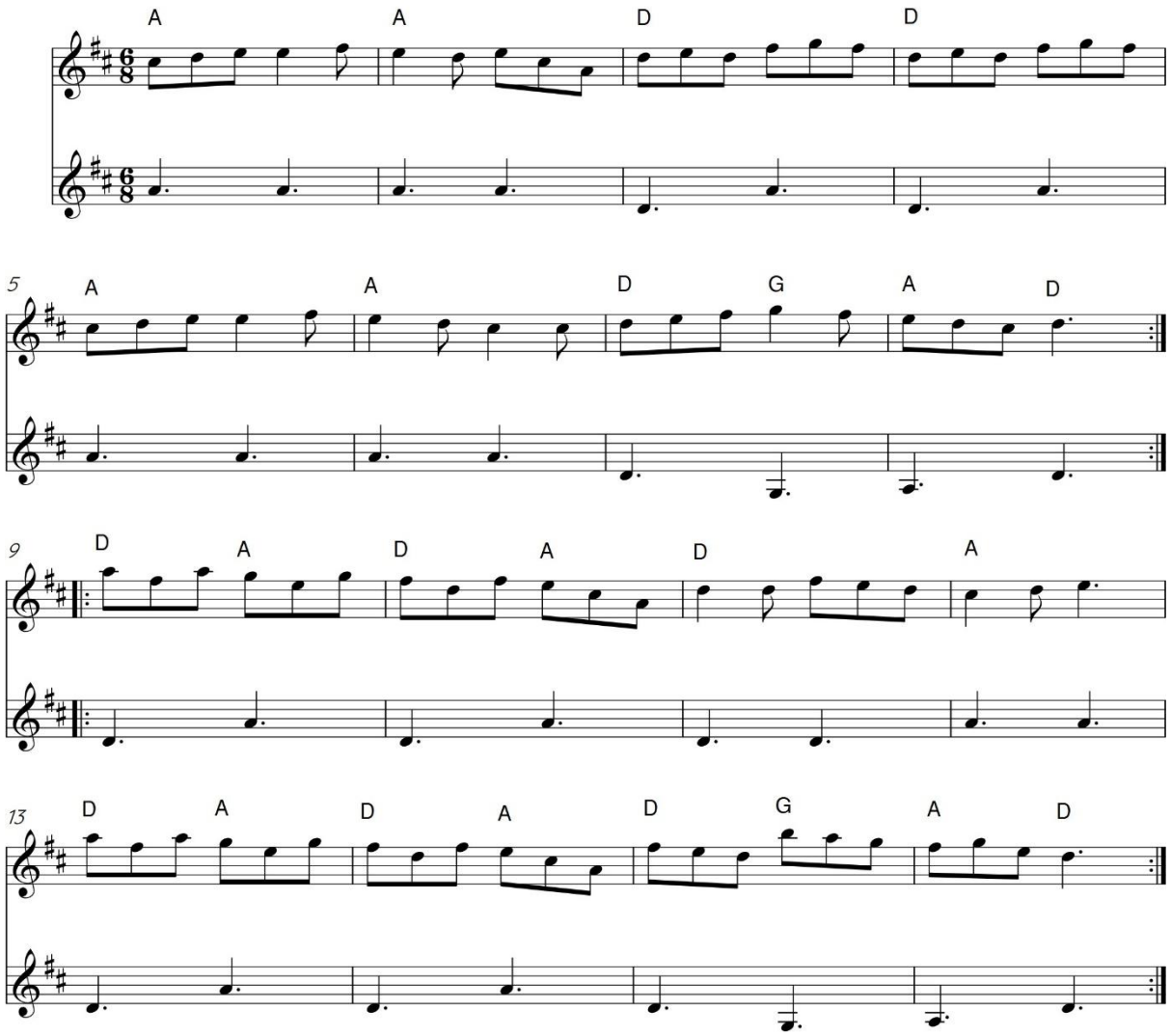
Top tips

This tune has a call and response feel. Split your group into two, and ask each group to play two bars each at a time. Then swop parts. This gives a satisfying feel, and helps the group to memorise the tune.

You can make accompanying parts as difficult as you like, but always ensure that they are memorable, and quick to learn. Whilst playing the accompanying parts and simultaneously listening to you play the melody, pupils have the opportunity to internalise the melody, whilst being musically involved.

Mopsi Don

Trad. Welsh

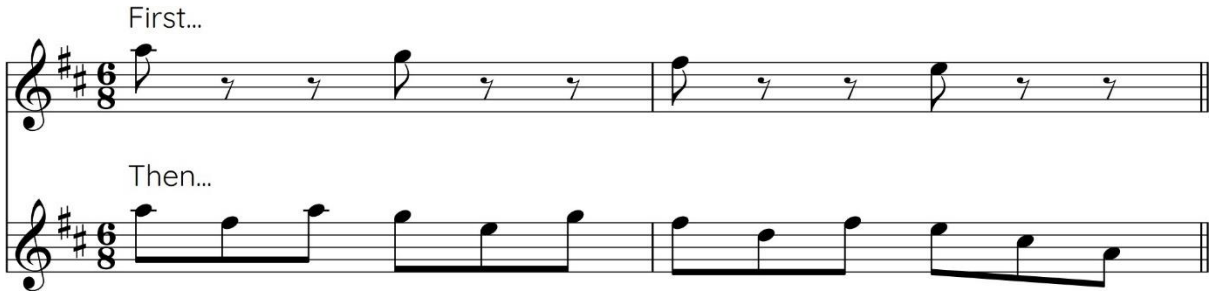


Top tips

For performances it is helpful to add accompaniments played by experienced musicians. This could be piano, and perhaps bass and drums.

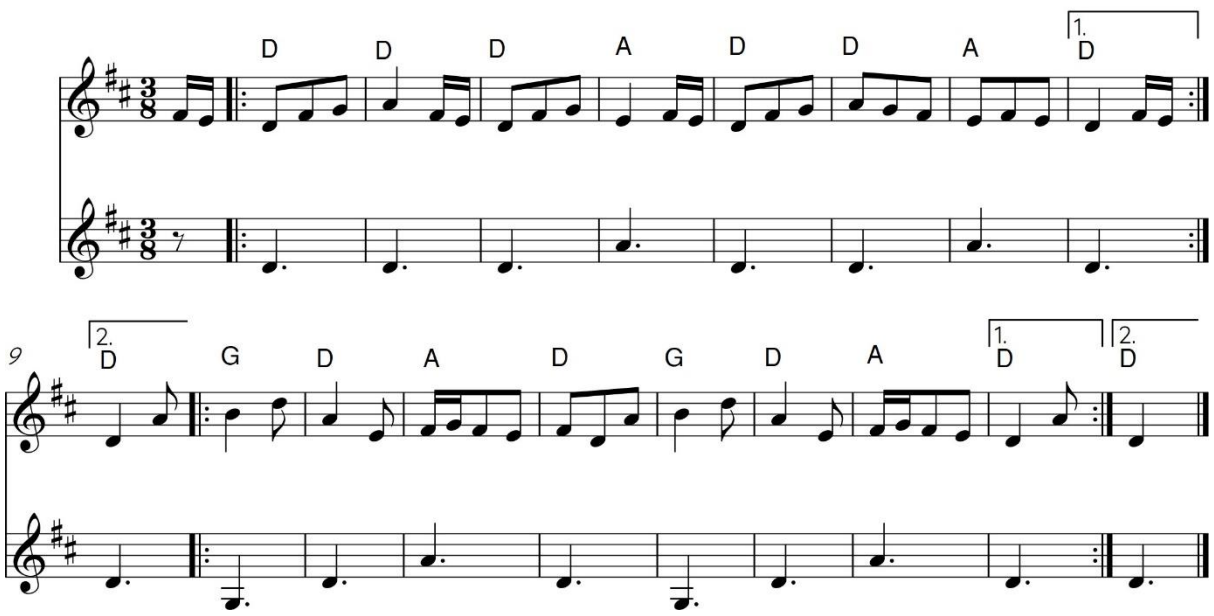
To help remember the sections and piece them together, it useful and fun to associate them with something else. For example, bars 9, 10, 13 and 14 could be 'the waterfall bits'. Encourage ideas from your pupils.

Sometimes tunes, or parts of a tune, lend themselves to being taught as 'a skeleton' first (see below). It is important to note that all of the strategies in this resource help pupils to recognise where they are in a piece. This helps them to learn it, and to get an understanding of structure.



Bourrée in G

Trad. French



Top tips

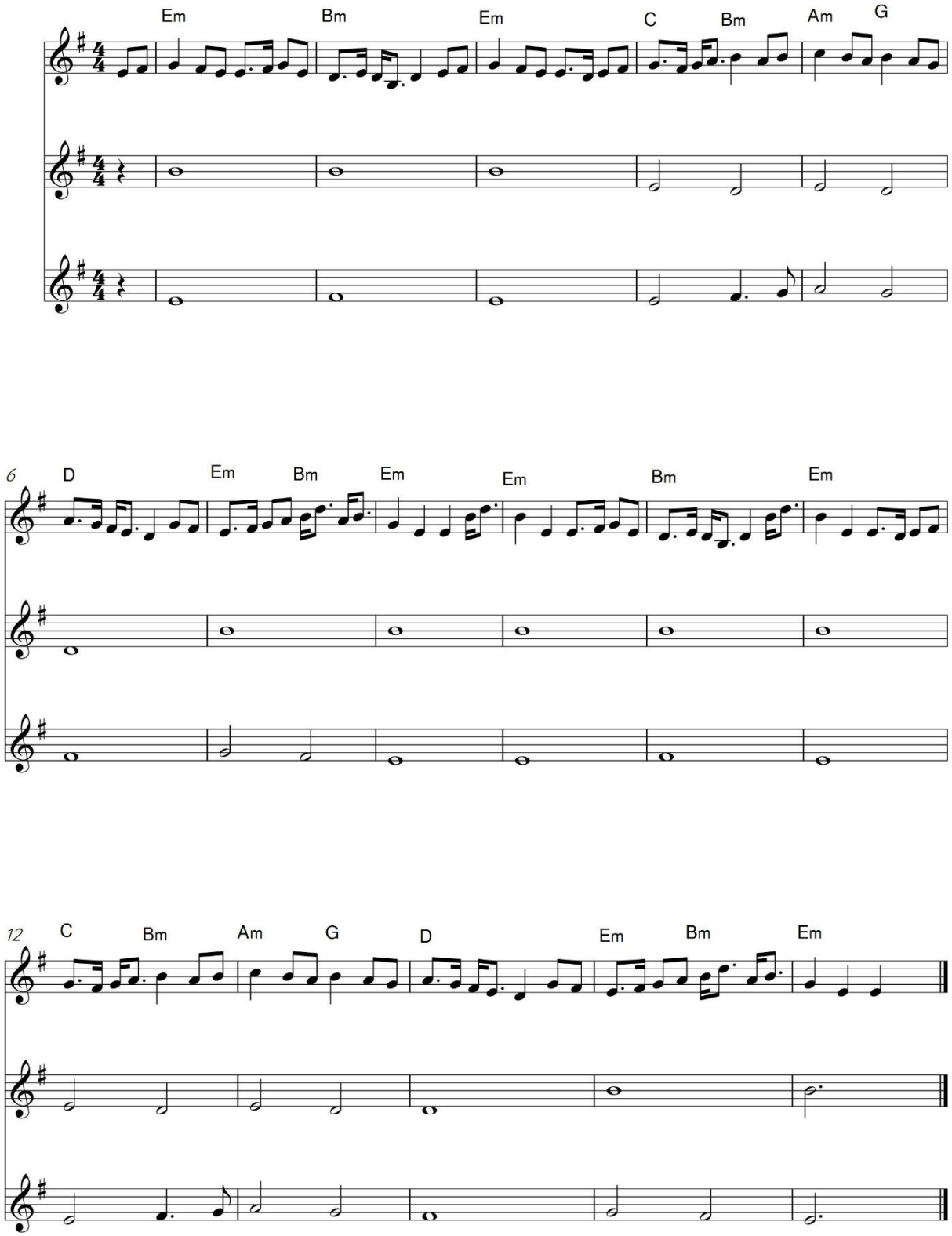
Teach segments at a time – smaller then larger, as in previous tunes, such as Uncle Bernard's Polka.

You can teach each segment by singing it and asking pupils to copy back on their instruments. (Singing ensures that pupils use their ears, and don't just copy your fingers.) Then play the segment repeatedly – on a loop – to really internalise it.

When pupils play only their segments whilst you perform the tune in its entirety, they may need help to know precisely when to play. You can sing the intervening bits, 'ghost' them in (play quietly), or make a gesture with your body to indicate where pupils join in again. (See second video on musicwild.co.uk.)

Logan Water

Trad. Scottish



Top tips

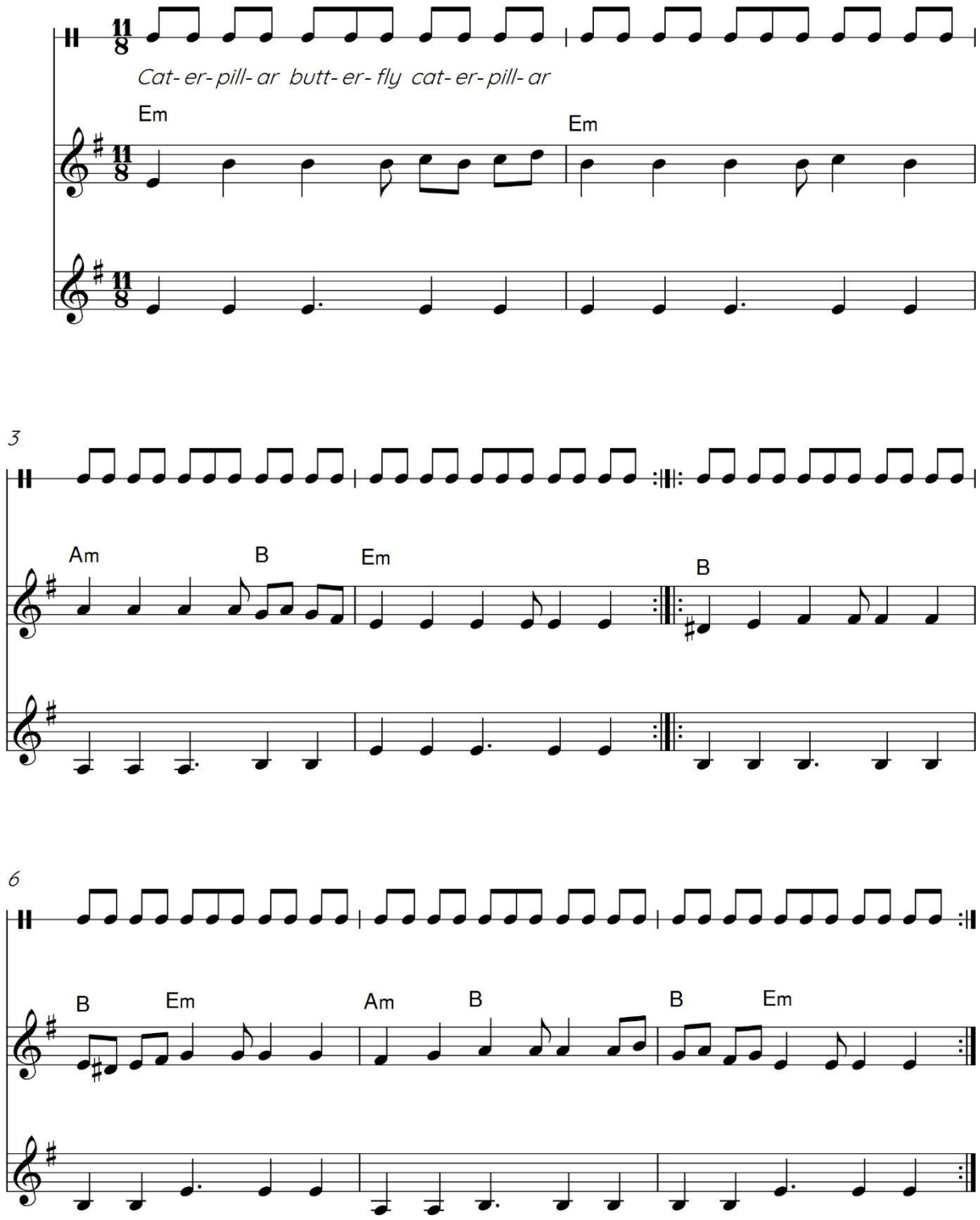
If part of the melody alternates with different material you can relate the piece to a sandwich, with the recurring tune being bread, and the other material being fillings – for instance, from the last beat of bar 8 to the dotted quaver in bar 9 and from the last beat of bar 10 to the dotted quaver in bar 11 could be slices of bread, whilst the semiquaver in bar 9 to the third beat (inclusive) in bar 10 and the semiquaver in bar 11 to the third beat (inclusive) in bar 12 could be a sandwich filling and a sandwich topping respectively.

From the last beat of bar 4 to the end of that section - the third beat of bar 8 inclusively – there is not much repetition, so the method suggested in, for instance, Uncle Bernard's Polka doesn't work so well. Instead, teach the first three notes of that section, then the first five then, the first eight etc. – ABIC, ABIC BA, ABIC BAIB AG… This is a bit like the memory game, where person a) says: 'I went to the shop to buy an orange'; person b) says: 'I went to the shops to buy an orange and bag of sugar' and so on.

Advanced pupils can experiment with ornamentation. Listening to versions of the tune on YouTube can give them ideas. See the third video on musicwild.co.uk regarding musical decision making for more advanced students.

Kopanitsa

Trad. Bulgarian



Top tips

The time signature of this tune makes it ideal to use for advanced students.

As in earlier tunes, words can help to feel the rhythm, and it is useful to teach the percussion part and harmony part first.

To find the first two notes in the tune, you can include the interval in a copying back exercise, or play/sing each note and ask pupils to match the pitch on their instrument. Be careful when giving starting notes as a letter (i.e. 'we start on an E') when teaching a group of mixed instruments – some may not be learning the letter names of the notes they play.

In the 'A' part start by learning the first three notes of the tune in each bar then the first five.

Going forward

You will probably want to source some tunes yourself now. Those featuring stepwise movement, some repetition, and a simple harmonic structure are best to start off with. English, Welsh, French and American Old Time folk tunes are a good place to start.

It's important to tailor tunes to consolidate the technical points pupils are currently working on, for instance by changing the key or the octave for advanced pupils, or devising easy parts for beginners. For easy parts it's helpful to think in terms of basslines and riffs or ostinati.

There are many strategies described above, and you will find that some suit one tune, and some another. Always keep learning rhythmic and try to help students maintain an idea of where they are in the tune – a feeling of navigating it.

If the tune or accompanying part has been internalised, *or* the pupil has a recording at home (this could be, for instance, you or YouTube), a whole lesson may be spent on it. If not spend part of the lesson working on the material, and return to it the following week. This way you will be able to ensure that enough time is spent on the things pupils can, and need to practise at home.

Remember that full explanations of these methods are demonstrated on musicwild.co.uk:

Videos (musicwild.co.uk) – the first one for accompaniments, the second for melodies, and the third one for creativity - musical decision making.

My book 'Wild About Strings' will help you to integrate learning new music without notation into a holistic curriculum, which includes learning from notation too. This is available from online retailers such as Amazon:

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