10 Tunes to Teach by Ear

For guitars – beginner to advanced

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

10 tunes to teach by ear

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 simple accompanying parts, which ensure that a range of abilities can participate. All or some of the accompanying parts can be used, depending on the size and nature of the group. The material can be used for individuals, and groups of all sizes including whole class. All tunes have chord symbols.

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 are for all instrumental families, and can be found on my website: musicwild.co.uk.

Videos (musicwild.co.uk)

For a whole range of activities, including teaching with notation and without, and improvisation, please see my book – 'Wild About Guitars'. This helps you to teach a comprehensive range of skills, whilst consolidating technique, from beginner level onwards. It is available from Amazon, and other online retailers.

Wild About Guitars: Inspiring, effective teaching resources. Easy level. : Wild, Ruth: Amazon.co.uk: Books

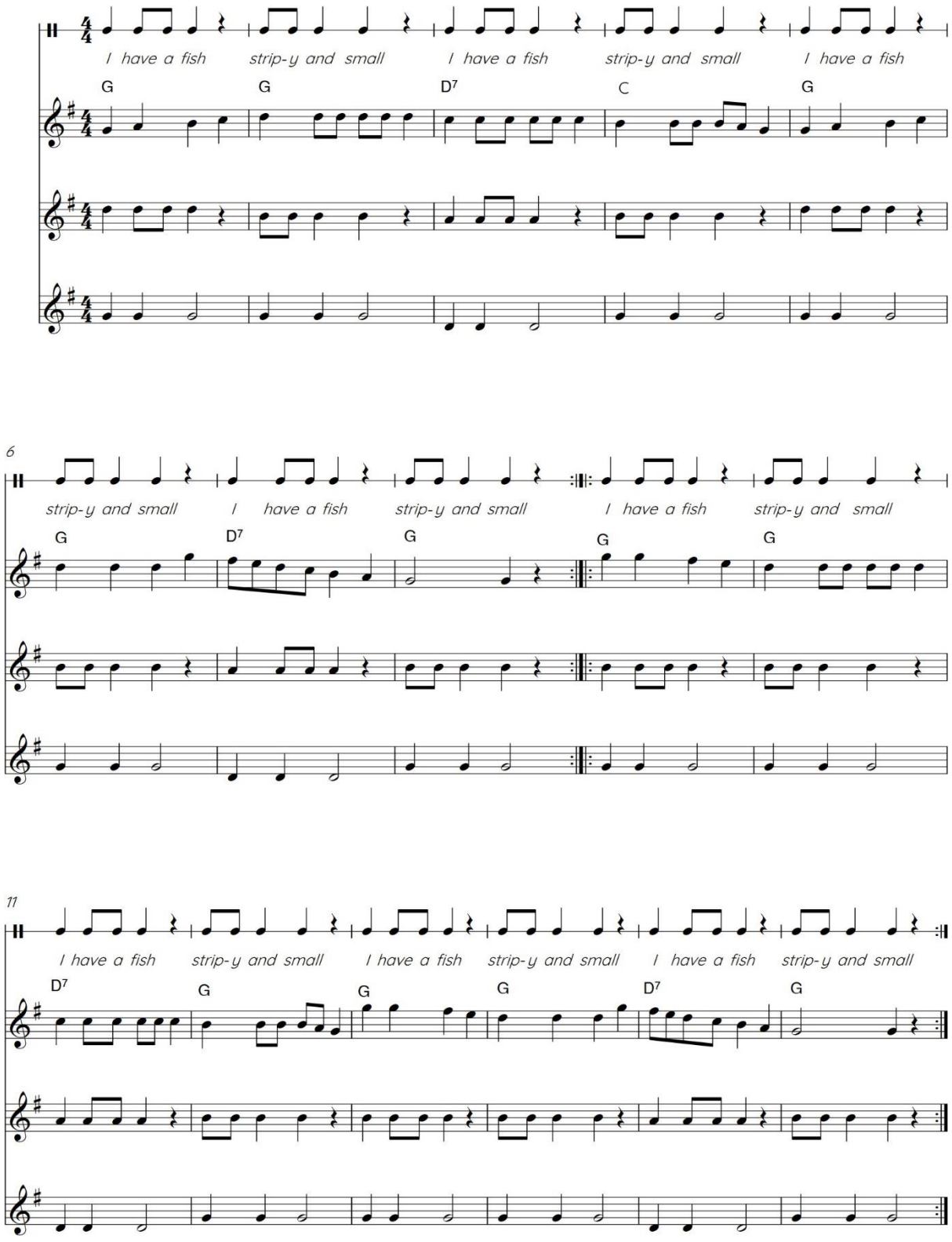
There are many tips included in ‘Ten Tunes to Teach by Ear’. Most of the tips apply to all the tunes.

I have left technical and musical details such as dynamics, articulation and phrasing to the teacher’s discretion, or the choice of the pupil.

More advanced material appears in the latter half of the resource, and additionally, the keys of all the tunes can be altered to increase the level of difficulty, as desired. More complex chords can be substituted for those suggested for added difficulty.

Uncle Bernard's Polka

Trad. English



Top tips

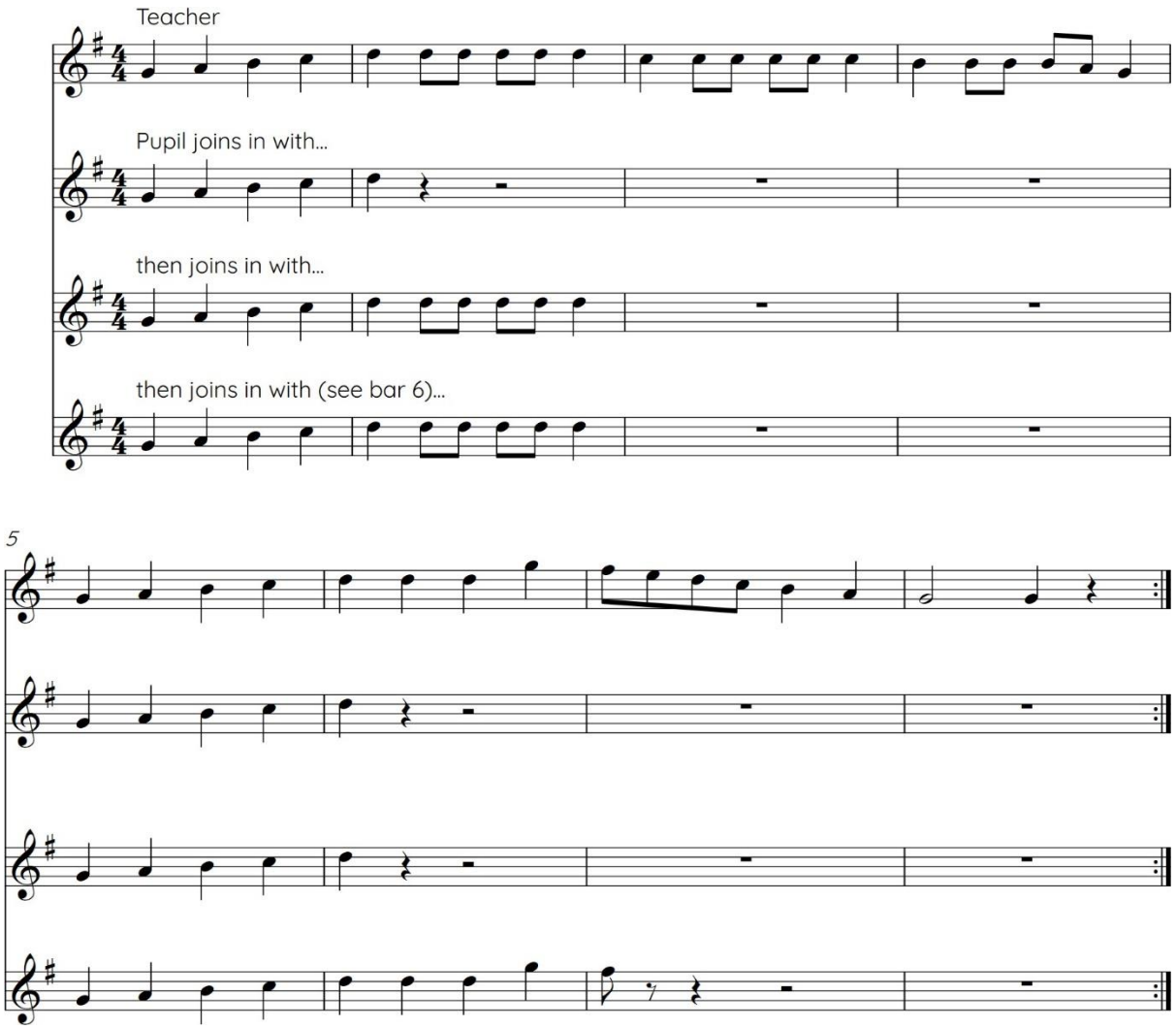
The percussive part can be played by clapping, or tapping on the instrument.

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

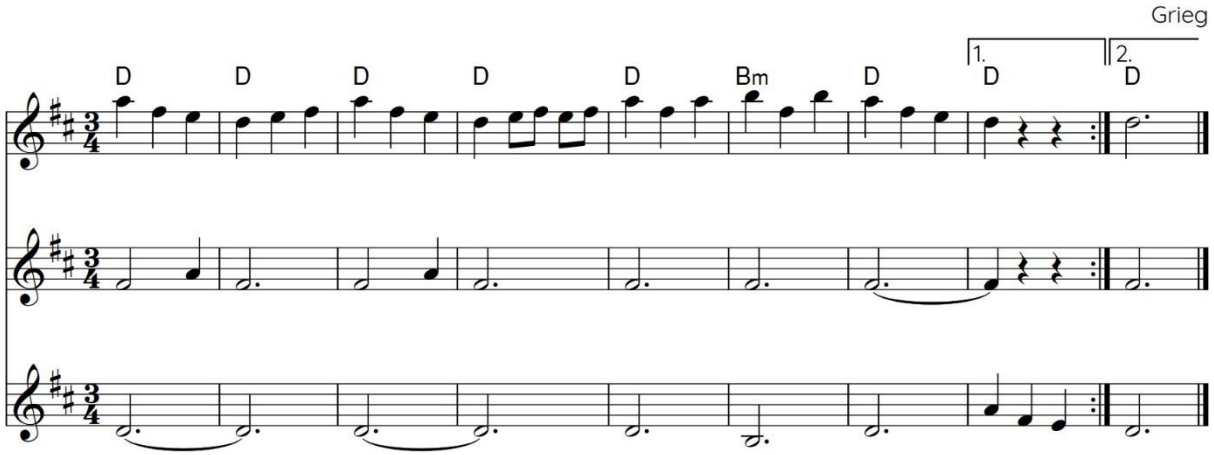
The melody can be taught in segments – a little bit more each time, whilst you play the tune – see example below and the second video on the website.

Ask pupils to spot if there are any repeated sections.

The key can be changed for added difficulty.



Morning from Peer Gynt



Top tips

Classical tunes can be taught by ear too.

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

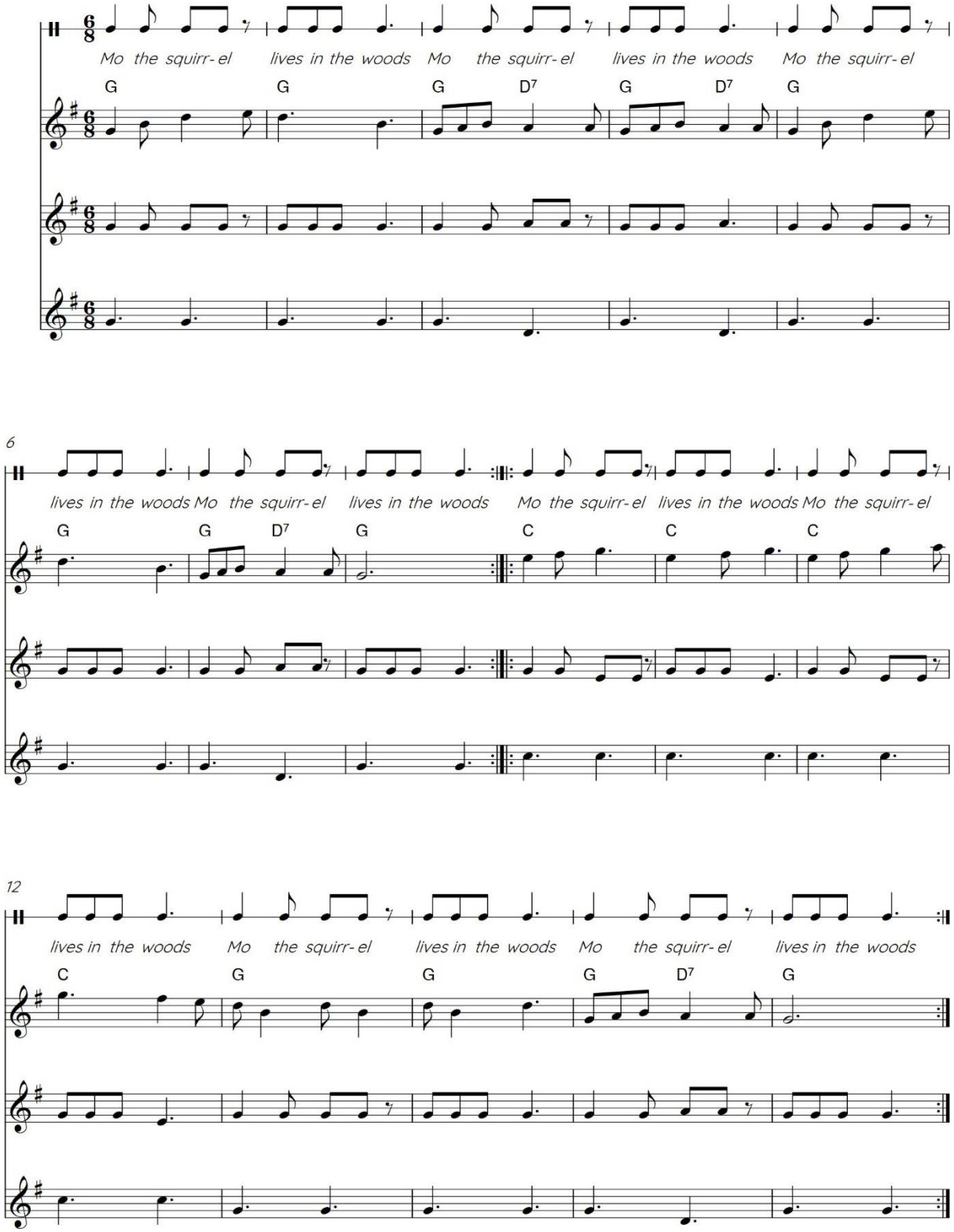
The tune falls nicely under the fingers if you start with the first finger on the 5th fret of the E string. Then there is no need to change hand position, so it's a good way of getting a student to work the tune out by ear across three strings.

Drones are a great way to include less experienced players: a single note D or a D chord could be played throughout, as long as one or more players plays a low B in bar 6.

For accompanying parts use body parts, as in Uncle Bernard's Polka.

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.

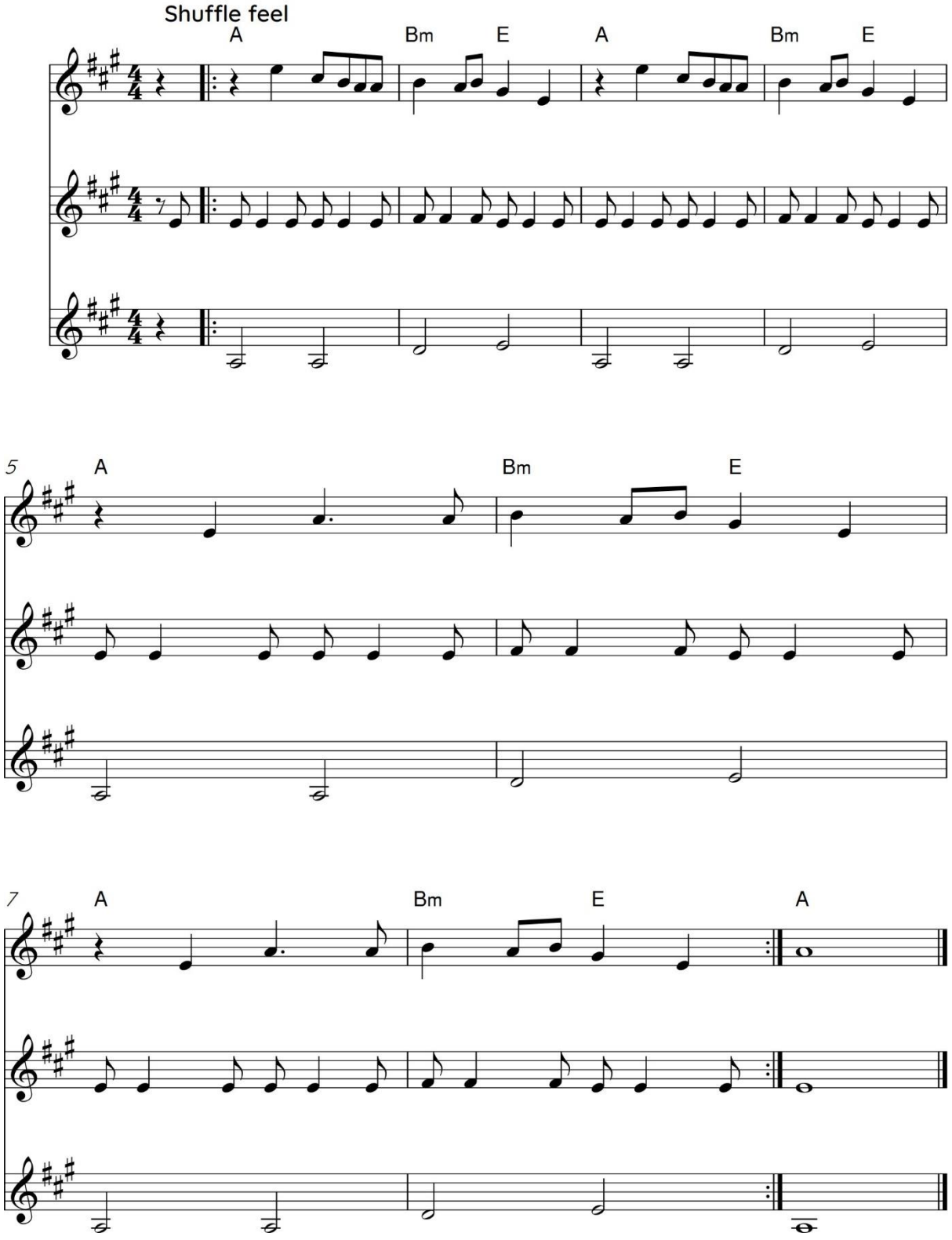
Use words to help pupils remember the percussion part or the riff (first and third staves). Pupils can make up their own words if the rhythm is played to them - see first video on musicwild.co.uk.

For pupils learning the bassline (fourth stave), play the tune with them 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 for the middle part! Pupils playing the third part could also play their notes on the 'groove' rhythm.

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.

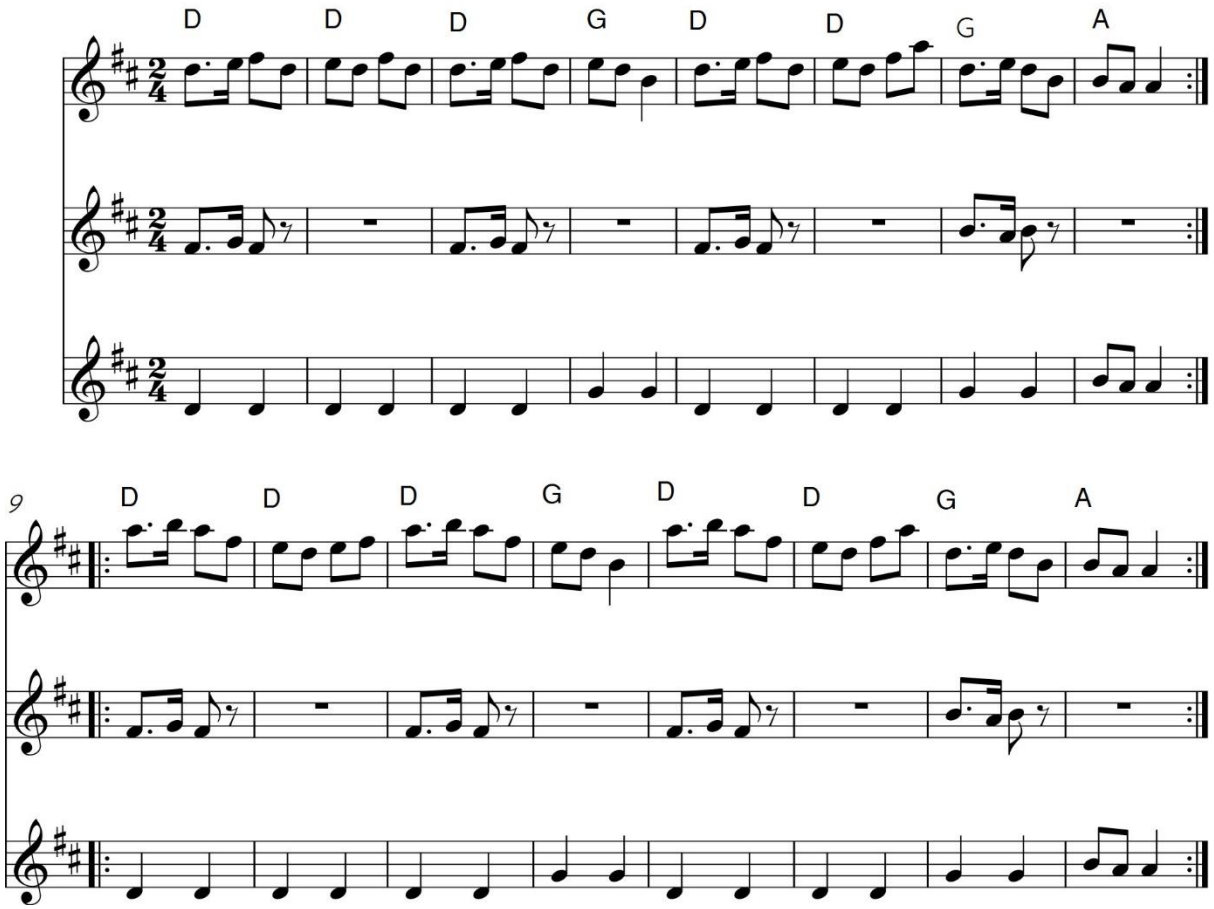
Not all parts need to play all the time – see the third video on musicwild.co.uk for ideas about arranging, and including pupils in musical decision making.

Choose whatever versions of the chords are most appropriate for the ability level of your pupil(s).

I learnt from a Zulu singing teacher that the song is about a child that keeps asking for something and keeps on being refused. However, other sources say the title means: 'The sun has already set and Mother is not returning'.

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 three notes of bar seven could be used, playing the figure on each note of the bottom half of a D major scale: D ED, E F#E etc. See more how this strategy works on the second video on musicwild.co.uk.

In the 'B' part – from bar 9 – the tune sits well under the fingers if the first finger is on the fifth fret of the E string.

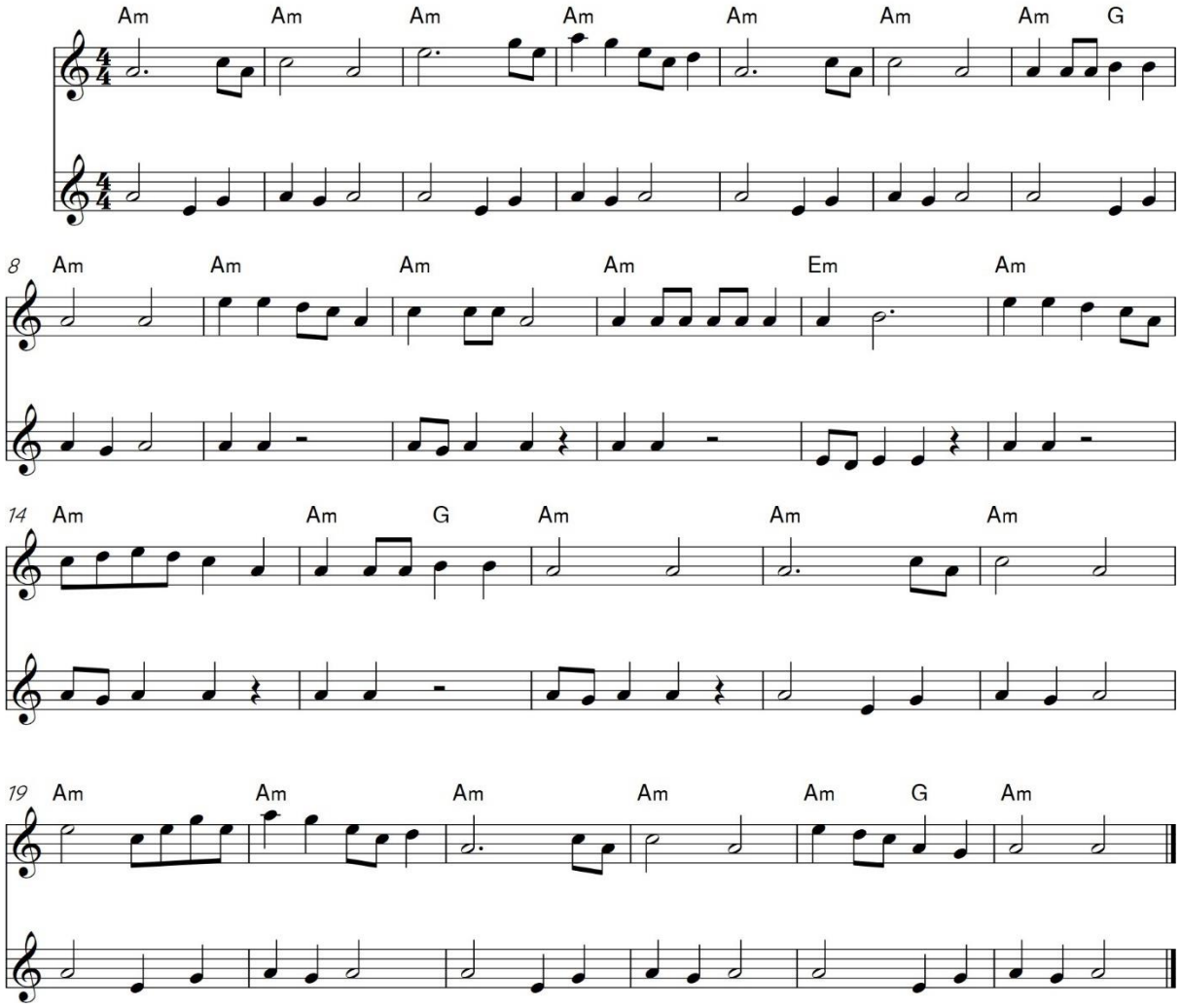
Folk/traditional tunes are useful for introducing pupils to learning music by ear, as they often contain repetition.

If bars 8 and 16 are too tricky in the easy part (third stave), a crotchet B and crotchet A can be played.

Don't forget that the key can be changed to suit the ability level of your pupils.

Wade in the Water

Spiritual



Top tips

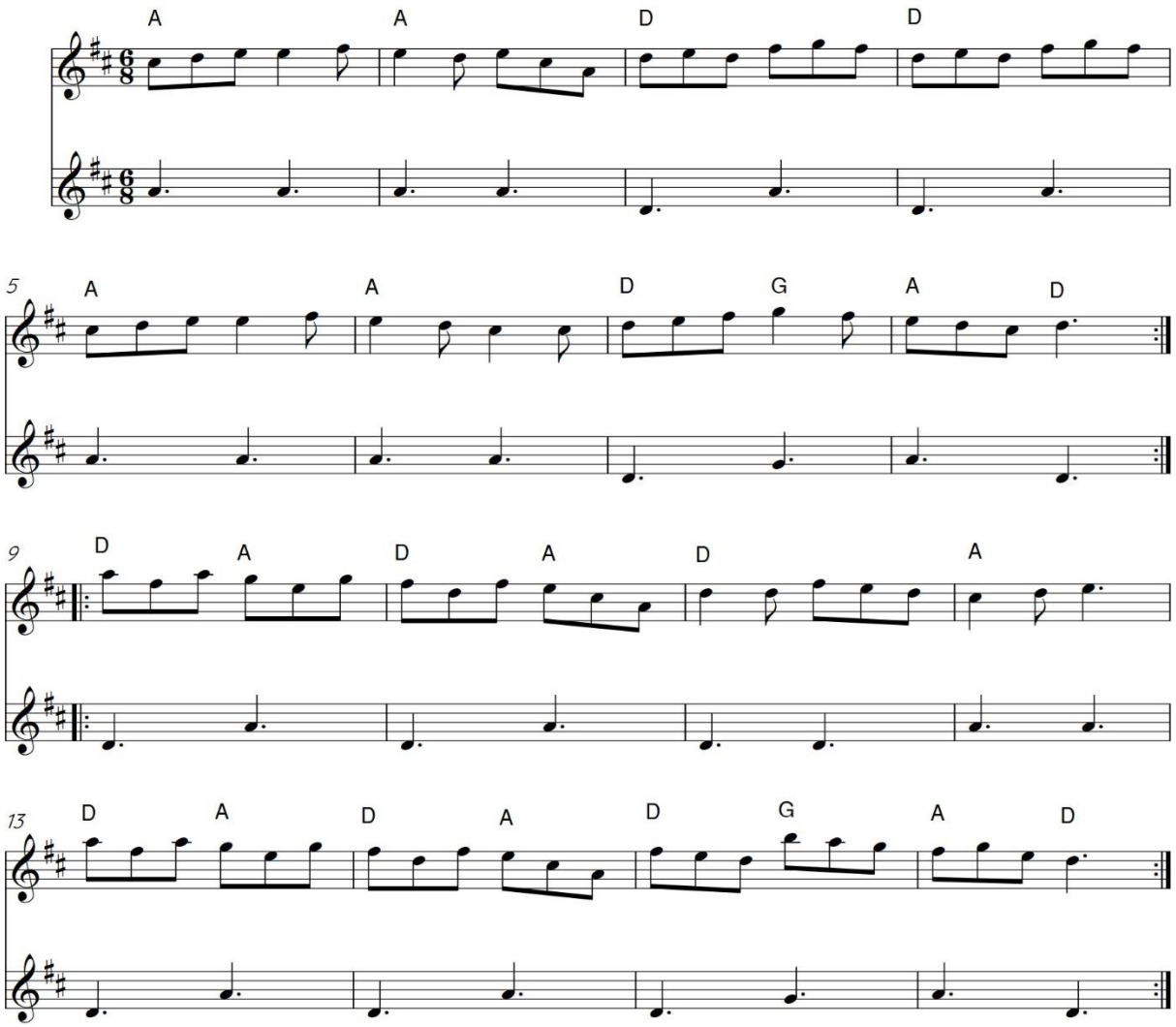
The tune has a call and response feel. In a group setting, split the group into two, and ask each group to play two bars each at a time. Then swop parts. This gives a satisfying feel, and helps the group to memorise the tune.

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. Therefore, it is very useful for even the more advanced players to learn the accompanying part and then play it whilst you play the tune.

Mopsi Don

Trad. Welsh

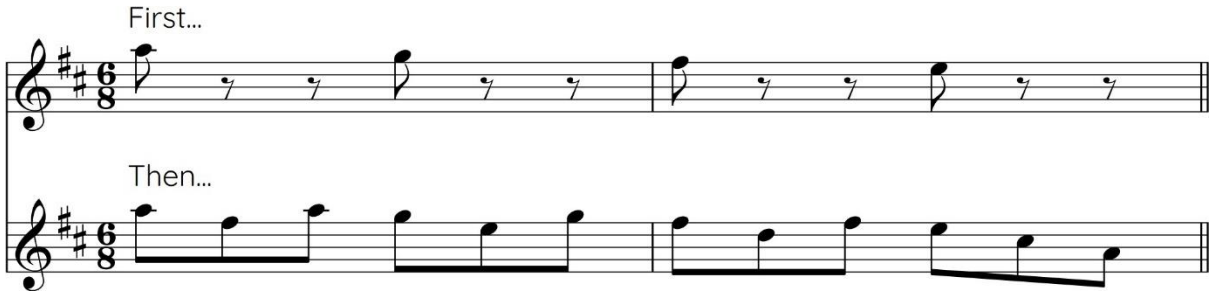


Top tips

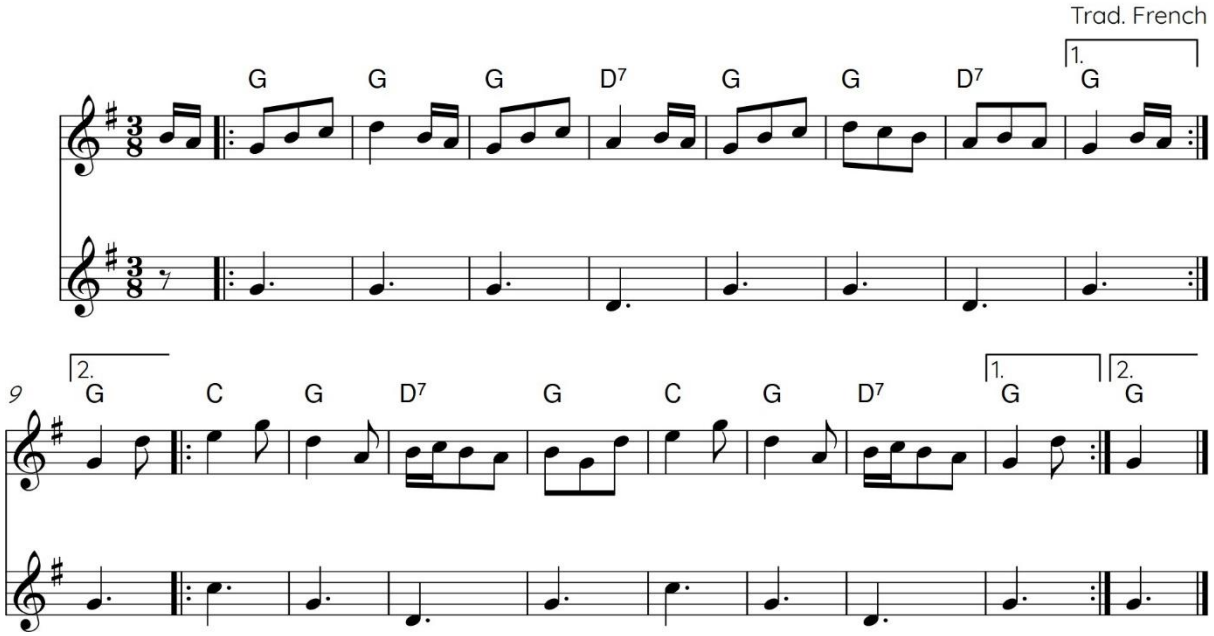
To help remember the sections and piece them together, it is useful and fun to associate them with something else. For example, bars 9, 10, 13 and 14 could be 'the waterfall bits'. Encourage ideas from your pupils.

Sometimes tunes, or parts of a tune, lend themselves to being taught as 'a skeleton' first (see example 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.

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



Bourrée



Top tips

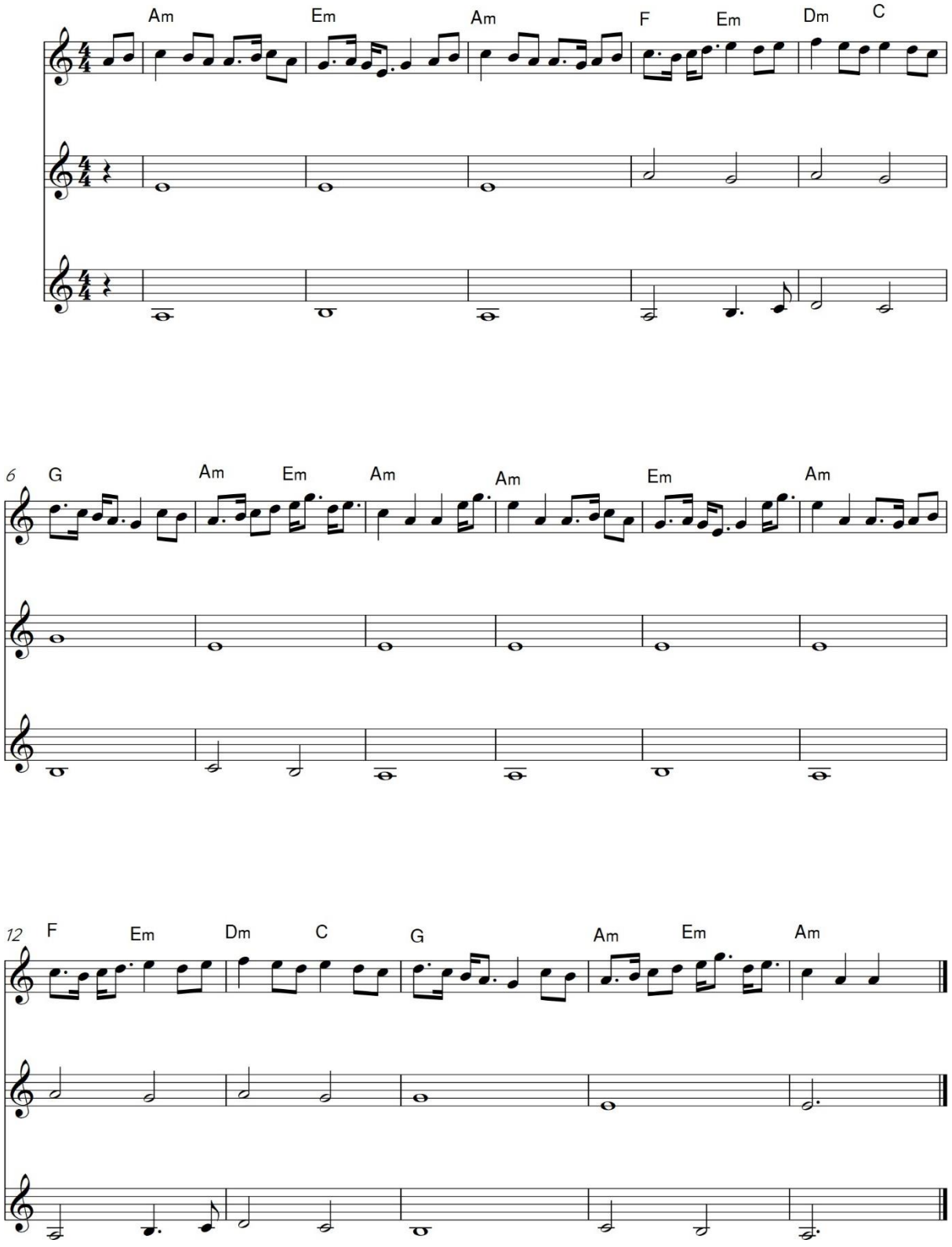
Teach segments at a time – smaller then larger, as in previous tunes, such as Uncle Bernard's Polka.

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.:
*D E **I**F

D E **I**F E D

D E **I**F E D**I**E D C…

***I** = barline

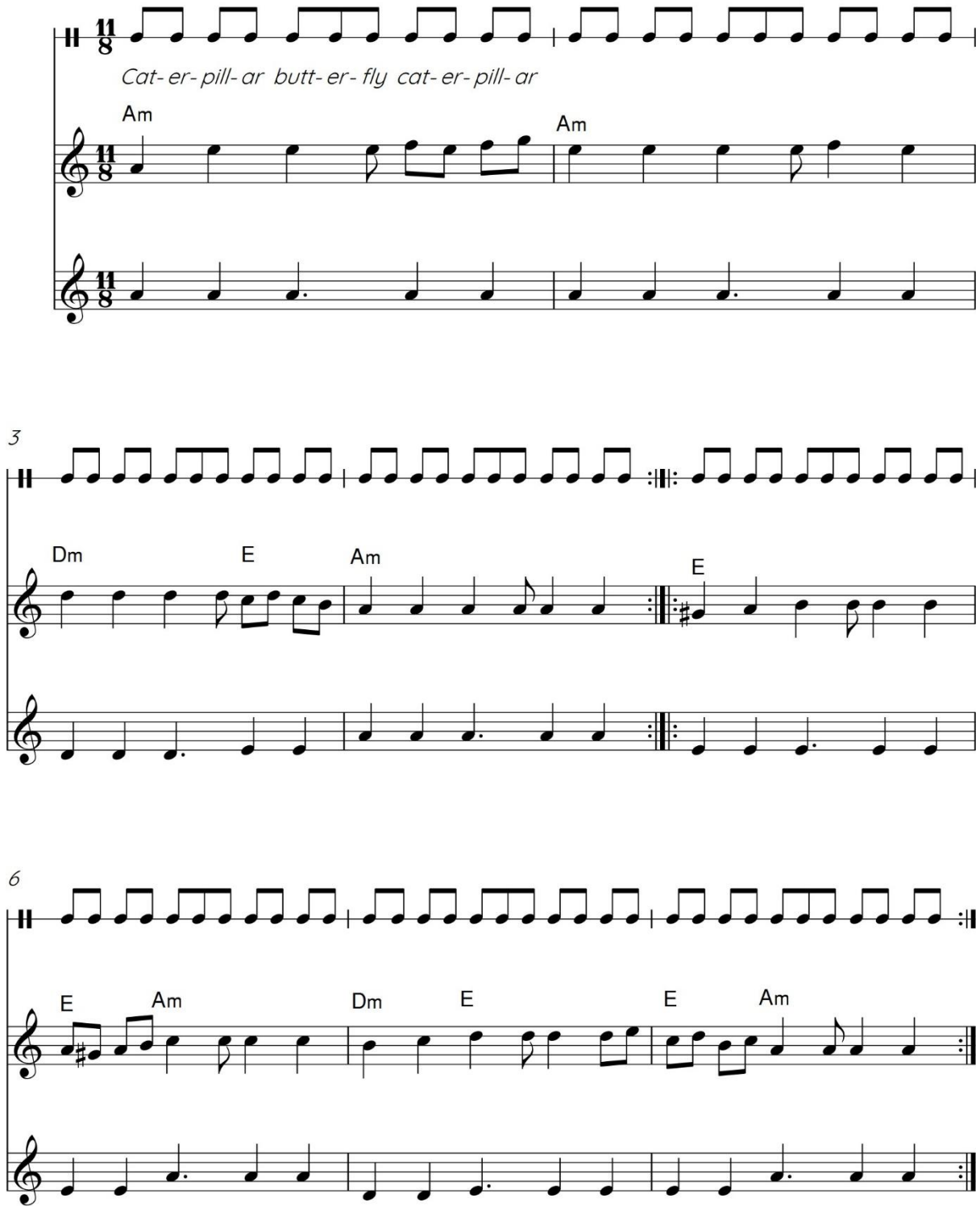
This is a bit like the memory game, where person a) says: 'I went to the shop to buy an orange'; person b) says: 'I went to the shops to buy an orange and a bag of sugar' and so on.

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.

You may wish to assign the middle part to your least experienced pupils.

Kopanitsa

Trad. Bulgarian



Top tips

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.

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

The version of the tune that I have used here is slightly simplified for ease of memorisation.

'Kopanitsa' is the word used to denote dances in 11/8.

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, and spirituals are a good place to start.

Learning by ear will develop aural and ensemble skills – great ends in themselves, but it's also important to integrate the learning with other skills. Use the material to consolidate technical learning. Tailor the tunes accordingly, for instance by changing the key 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. Chord sequences can be devised to create the appropriate level of demand.

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, as the learning can be easily continued at home. If this is not the case, 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* 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. They can be used for all instrumental families.

My book 'Wild About Guitars' 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:

Wild About Guitars: Inspiring, effective teaching resources. Easy level. : Wild, Ruth: Amazon.co.uk: Books