



## **Alternate Fiddle Tunings in Irish Fiddling**

### **Part 1**

Tim McCarrick

Whether you call it “Cross-tuning” “retuning” “out-of-tuning “ or “scordatura”, changing the tuning of your fiddle can open up new possibilities in how you play, and how your instrument sounds. To be clear, we’re talking about raising or lowering the pitch, by tightening or loosening the strings, beyond the standard G-D-A-E. (I’ll always list the strings from lowest pitch to highest) So therefore, a warning is in order: don’t try this on your best fiddle. Especially one that you need to play often and whose strings are all settled just right and stay in tune. It’s best to experiment on a less important fiddle.

There’s basically two ways to go. The first would be all strings are tightened or loosened equally, (such as G-D-A-E goes up a half-step to Ab-Eb-Bb-F, or down a couple of steps to E-B-F#-C# ) and the second way can be just changing one or more of the strings so that the tuning of the fiddle is no longer in fifths. (such as G-D-A-E becomes G-D-G-D) Obviously, the benefit to the first way is that your fiddle sounds different, but all

fingerings remain the same. The benefit to the second way is a wealth of different sounds, but more time getting the hang of the fingering.

Let's first look at the first case of changing all strings equally. One of my favorites sounds is when a fiddle tunes down to match the pitch of the older "low pipes" in Irish music. Depending on the pipes, the fiddler must tune down from G-D-A-E to E-B-F#-C# or even slightly lower down to Eb-Bb-F-C.

#### **Example 1 Fiddle and Low Pipes:**

##### **Fiddler Caoimhin O Raghallaigh (Kevin O'Reilly) with Piper Mick O'Brien**

In this video example, it is the lower of those two tunings Eb-Bb-F-C (more or less!)

With an added bonus: For some reason, he's using a Hardanger fiddle!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNhkRQB6rwg>

#### **Example 2 Fiddle and Low Pipes:**

##### **Fiddler Peadar O'Loughlan and piper Ronan Browne (joined by guest fiddler Willie Kelly)**

In this video it is the higher of the "low" tunings: E-B-F#-C#

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ze86SgDES8Y>

The other way of tuning all strings equally would be to go up. This can be done by simply cranking up a half step from G-D-A-E to Ab-Eb-Bb-F, (or, if you like: G#-D#-A#-E#) This is something commonly done in the West of Ireland; and it brings out a brighter sound. It also adds tension and strain on your instrument so be careful!

Two famous Irish groups known for playing in this tuning are the now legendary band DeDannan and the current kings of the hill, Dervish.

#### **EXAMPLE 3 –Dervish (fiddle tuned up half step )**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7\\_Klkz3p7A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7_Klkz3p7A)

In case you're wondering how the other instruments handle this, in most cases, the flutes and whistles are made in various keys, so they use an E Flat whistle instead of a D whistle. The fretted strings can either retune or use a capo, and the accordion is ready to handle different keys.

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The second type of retuning, where the strings are no longer tuned in fifths, offers a wealth of new possibilities and will be introduced briefly here and covered in more depth in part two.

Retuning the fiddle so that it is no longer in fifths means there will be new finger patterns to learn, so we'll look at one that's easy to visualize and easy on your fiddle if you want to try it. Changing from G-D-A-E to G-D-G-D. This is probably one of the safest tunings to experiment with since you are only loosening two strings and only one whole step. I think of this tuning as "symmetrical" because anything you do on your bottom two strings, you can do exactly the same thing on the top two strings with the same exact

fingerings. The other common form of this is changing from G-D-A-E to A-E-A-E. Again, it is symmetrical and fingerings are the same, it's now a matter of which you prefer: In the G-D-G-D tuning, you have mellowed out your two highest-pitched strings, and in the A-E-A-E tuning, you have tightened up and "brightened" your two lowest-pitched strings.

**Example 4 – Fiddler Maeve Donnelly with Tony MacManus (fiddle tuned G-D-G-D) Maeve talks about "out of tuning" and plays two reels.**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEGW7NHsqUo>

Next time: some more details and examples to keep you going.

Happy fiddling!

Tim McCarrick

### BIO

Coming from a musical home, Tim McCarrick made an early escape from piano lessons when he discovered stringed instruments. Since that time he has had as many diverse musical adventures as possible, from playing electric guitar, to bluegrass fiddle and mandolin; even getting a music degree and becoming a teacher. He currently evaluates educational music and music technology for JW Pepper & Sons, and is also the owner and writer of the Irish Fiddle website: ([www.irishfiddle.com](http://www.irishfiddle.com)).