Abc Notation for Fiddle Tunes
Compiled by Paul Tyler, November 2011

Musicians, including those who play by ear, often use a shorthand writing method as a memory aid. In the early days of the internet, a few fans of traditional music standardized a set of conventions for writing down the notes of a tune using a plain text editor so that they could easily share tunes using email or the web. They gave us Abc notation, a powerful tool that is easy to learn. A number of shareware or freeware programs exist that read the Abs and 1) play them on your computer, 2) display and print standard music notation, or 3) convert them into MIDI files that can be used in other music and notation programs. Abs are very handy for both accomplished fiddlers and those just learning to play. Also, a wealth of music on the internet can be found in Abs. Here, I introduce you to the notation, and how it can help you learn the fiddle.

We’ll start with naming the notes you’ll learn to finger on the fiddle. I start my Fiddle 1 classes out with tunes that can be played on the middle two strings: the A (or 2nd) string and D (or 3rd) string. After a couple of weeks, we’ll venture up to the e (or 1st) string. With one exception, we ignore the G, (or 4th) string until Fiddle 2. Here are the Abc names for all the notes you can play in the key of D.

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Open string          1st finger    /   2nd finger   /   3rd finger / 4th finger
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The first 3 notes on the G string are in the lowest octave, indicated by the comma after the note name. The notes starting with the 3rd finger on the G string up through the 1st finger on the A string are in the middle octave, indicated by upper case letters. The high octave notes, from the 2nd finger on the A string on up through the pinky on the e string, are indicated by lower case letters. The notes in the next higher octave are indicated by a lower case letter followed by a single quote, e.g., c’. But we can’t reach them in first position, so they aren’t shown above.

In the key of D, two notes are always sharp: the Fs and Cs, in whatever octave. In Abc notation, you don’t have to write out sharp signs (that is why they are in parentheses in the diagram), because sharps and flats are understood by a line in the tune header that specifies K:D (i.e., key is D). The header is a set of lines, each of which supplies information for a standard field. The notes of the tune always begin right after the key line (K:).
The **Abc** community has standardized the fields, so that **Abc** files are databases. For beginning fiddle, all you need are the bare essentials. X: is for an identifying number (just start with 1), T: for the title, M: for the meter or time signature, and K: for the key. Most fiddle tunes that beginners learn are in duple meter. That means two beats (foot taps) for each bar or measure. I prefer to write them out in the meter known as cut time—indicated by C|. Others prefer to use 2/4 meter. Cut time (also known as 2/2) and 2/4 are equivalent. Here’s your first tune:

X:1
T:Shortenin’ Bread
M:C|
L:1/4
K:D
DB AB | DB AB | DB AB | FE D2 :||:
dB AB | dB AB | dB AB | FE D2 :||

The first beat of a measure comes right after a vertical bar, or |. A colon is used as the double dot to signify a repeat. :: means jump back to the beginning or a forward repeat sign. :: is a forward repeat sign, which means start the repeat from here. A double bar line signifies the end of a part, or the end of the tune (the double dots can serve as the first of the two bar lines, but some web applications turn ‘::’ into a smiley face emoticon). Groupings of notes belong to each beat (or foot tap). The spaces around the bar lines are only there to make the notes and beats easier to read. The same is mostly true for line breaks. In the example above, the A part and B parts are on separate lines.

**Abc** notation is a simple, but very flexible system. The good thing is, you don’t have to master all of it to use it. Just focus on the note names and finger them according to the fingerboard chart given at the beginning. It tells you which string and finger. You’ll notice also that in a couple of cases you have to lower your 2\(^{nd}\) finger (low 2) or raise your 3\(^{rd}\) finger (high 3). The chart is complete for the key of D in first position. You could play in first position your entire fiddling career and never run out of tunes.

X:2
T:Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star
M:C|
L:1/4
K:D
DD AA | BB A2 | GG FF | EE D2 |
AA GG | FF E2 | AA GG | FF E2 |
DD AA | BB A2 | GG FF | EE D2 |
In time, you will learn a few more keys: A, G and C. Each key brings a change to our fingering chart—one more or one less sharp note—that will show up in two or three places on the fingerboard. That’s for Fiddle 2 and beyond.

Playing tunes, however, is more than just fingering a sequence of notes with your left hand. Rhythm is just as, or even more important. Rhythm combines two crucial aspects, the beat (or pulse) and phrasing (this is connected to meter). Rhythm coordinates the bowing executed with your right arm with the fingering of notes by the left hand. At the beginning of your fiddle career, I urge you to work on tapping your foot along with the tune when you listen to it, and work on being able to tap your foot while you play. The tunes given above are in duple meter, 2 beats per measure. Notice when you play *Shortenin’ Bread* and *Twinkle, Twinkle* that all the notes are held the same length of time, except those that end a phrase. They are held longer; twice as long, in fact. That is what D2 means in the *Abc* notation. The last long note in the phrase should be held the same amount of time as it took to play two of the previous short notes.

We start out with simple versions of tunes using just two notes per beat. For example, here’s our simple beginner’s version of *Oh Susanna*. Tap your foot along as you sing it or listen to it, and you’ll notice that some of the phrases begin before the downbeat (that’s the beat or toe tap right after a bar line). Those lead-in notes are called pick ups.

```
X:3
T:Oh Susanna
M:C|
L:1/4
K:D
DE | FA AB | AF DE | FF ED | E2
DE | FA AB | AF DE | FF EE | D2 :
|: G2 G2 | BG2 B| AA FD | E2
DE | FA AB | AF DE | FF EE | D2 :
```

Ready for a complication? The B (or second) part doesn’t have pick-up notes. So we have to wait a beat longer before starting the B part than in repeating the A part (z indicates a wait, called a ‘rest’). We make the opposite adjustment when playing the B part. Such adjustments are called first and second endings, marked in *Abc* notation by a number that comes right after the bar line, before any note is named. |1 means play this measure the first time through, but skip to |2 the second time through. Here’s the *Abc* notes for *Oh Susanna* again, with the endings properly marked.

```
DE | FA AB | AF DE | FF ED | E2
DE | FA AB | AF DE | FF EE |1 D2 :|2 D2 z2
|: G2 G2 | BB2 B| AA FD | E2
DE | FA AB | AF DE | FF EE |1 D2 z2 :|2 D2||
As you get better at noting and bowing tunes, you’ll be ready for more complex and faster rhythms. Let’s start with faster rhythms. The first task is try to play more notes per beat, without changing the speed or tempo of your foot tapping. In *Freres Jacques*, we encountered a phrase that had four quick notes in a beat, instead of two short (or normal) notes.

```
X:4
T:Freres Jacques
M:C|
L:1/8
K:D
D2E2 F2D2 | D2E2 F2D2 |
F2G2 A4 | F2G2 A4 |
ABAG F2D2 | ABAG F2D2 |
D2A,2 D4 | D2A,2 D4 ||
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The tune also has long notes at the end of some phrases. Here’s a good way to think about it: 4 quick notes = 2 short notes = 1 long note. (Sometimes I might say 4 shorts = 2 longs = 1 extra long.) *Abc* notation uses these proportions in a very flexible way. In the header below I changed the note length or L: field to read 1/8, whereas in the previous tunes, it read 1/4. That means I am setting the normal note length to an eighth note, rather than a quarter note. Equivalence holds, for two eighth notes equal one quarter note, just as two quarter notes equal a half note.

The deeper you get into fiddling, the more tunes you will learn that use four notes per beat. The four could be a combination of 1 short and 2 quicks. In fact, that is a very common rhythmic combination we call the shuffle (say “bum-ditty, bum-ditty”). The beat could also start with 2 quicks followed by a short (say “buma-dit”). As you master some of the subtleties, you’ll understand the importance of feeling a phrase as starting with 2 quick pick ups (say “ditty|bum-ditty, bum-ditty|bum”). *Boil Them Cabbage Down* is a great tune for getting a feel for the shuffle. It’s in key of A, which means we add a sharp (G# instead of G natural). But you can still use the same fingering chart, because the melody of *Boil Them Cabbage* skips over the G#.

```
X:5
T:Boil Them Cabbage Down
M:C|
L:1/8
K:A
AB | c2cc c2cc | d2dd d2dd | c2cc c2cc | B2BB B2
AB | c2cc c2cc | d2dd d2dd | c2cc B2BB | A2AA A2 :|
```

That’s just the A part of the tune. You’ll learn the B part in Fiddle 1Rep or Fiddle 2. Here it is.
Play around with rhythmic combinations and recognize you can easily substitute one held note for two quick ones and vice versa. And what’s even cooler is to substitute a lick of different quick notes for a stream of longer ones. I encourage my students to try quick licks and slower licks in different combinations in *Black-Eyed Susie*. What follows is three separate ways of playing the A part. You can mix and match measures and licks from each version.

X:6
T:Black-Eyed Susie
M:C|
L:1/8
K:D
a2a2 a2f2 | g2g2 g2e2 | f2f2 f2d2 | e2d2 B2A2 :|
|: d4 d3e | f2d2 B2A2 | d4 d3A | B2A2 F2A2 :|
version 2 of the A part
a2ab a2f2 | g2ga g2e2 | f2fg f2d2 | efed B2A2 :|
version 3
a2ab a2fa | gega g2e2 | f2fa fed2 | efed B2A2 :|

*Black-Eyed Susie* shows that rhythmic combinations can be even more complex. For example, in the B part, you hold a short note a bit longer to make it equal in length to three quick ones. Then you have time for only more quick note to fill out that beat. It gives a kind of jerky feel, that you’ll learn in the A part of *Angeline the Baker*. Plus I introduce here another one in measure six of the B part that I often play in class, but don’t point out when I teach the tune.

X:7
T:Angeline the Baker
M:C|
L:1/8
K:D
A2B2 d4 | f2e2 d4 | f2e2 d2B2 | A4 A4 :|
a2f2 e2d2 | f2e2 d4 | a2f2 e2d2 | B4 B4 |
a2f2 e2d2 | f2e2 d3e | f2e2 d2B2 | A4 A4 :|
You have license to play around and find more variations like this yourself. **Abc** notation can help you visualize and understand what you do. You have now been introduced to practically everything you need to know about **Abc** to use it to help you learn fiddle.

One more example. I’ve written out *Oh Susanna* again to reflect how it sounds when we sing. The rhythm is a bit more complex than the simple version we learn early in Fiddle 1.

```
X:8  
T:Oh Susanna  
M:C|  
L:1/8  
K:D  
DE | F2A2 A3B | A2F2 D3E | F2F2 E2D2 | E4 z2  
DE | F2A2 A3B | A2F2 D3E | F2F2 E2E2 |1 D4 z2 :|2 D4 z4 |  
|: G4 G4 | B2G4 zB| A2A2 F2D2 | E4 z2  
DE | F2A2 A3B | A2F2 D3E | F2F2 E2E2 |1 D4 z4 ;|2 D4 z2 |  
```

Here at the very end, I want to stress what I say at the very beginning of Fiddle 1. The most important things you should focus on to learn the fiddle are your ear and your foot. You need to learn a tune by hearing it. That means listen to a tune enough times that you can hear it in your head, or so that you can whistle, hum or diddle the melody. If you can do that, you know the tune and all you have to do is figure it out with your fingers and bowing arm. The other important part is to feel the pulse. Tap your foot along with the tune as you listen to it and play it. These are the most important steps to learning to play the fiddle.

**Abc** notation is a good written reference aid. It can help you visualize patterns of notes and the form of a tune. It can help jog your memory. But I recommend that you don’t try to read the tunes off of the notation. Memorizing a stream of written notes is hard. Neither is it the same thing as playing a tune by ear. Use the **Abcs** to help you find your place. Then trust your knowledge. You’ve listened to the tune. You’ve worked out different phrases in class. You know the tune. You’ll come to know it better as you stitch the pieces together and play it over and over. Pretty soon, you won’t be able to stop tapping your foot.

Here is the address for the best website with more information about **Abc** notation and software you can download to play the tunes on your computer, or to turn them into standard notation which can be printed out. [http://abcnotation.com/](http://abcnotation.com/) has a tutorial, links to software programs, and the most resources for finding tunes in **Abc** on the web (there are thousands and thousands of them). If you have one of the basic notation programs—I like **Abc Navigator** the best, but I’m a Windows guy—cut and paste all the notations from this file into a single file and save it as a plain text file (ANSI or ASCII) with a suffix of .abc.txt. Some **Abc** software programs will find .txt files. Others search only for the .abc suffix. You might have to manually remove the .txt suffix.