

Traditional Irish Accompaniment on the Irish Bouzouki

This is a series of notes that are meant to go with your videos. You will find them most useful after watching a couple of lessons. They should help to explain some of the more technical ideas to do with chords, keys and the other theoretical concepts.

Tuning

On the Irish Bouzouki, you have four pairs of strings. For the sake of clarity, I like to treat both strings in the pair as one, so when I say first string, I mean first *pair* of strings. The way I tune the bouzouki is, starting with the thickest pair, **GDAD**. Some people tune them other ways, but I will be teaching chords for this tuning. I find it the most suitable for trad accompaniment. In this guide, I will show you images of the fretboard upside down, because this is how it will appear to you when you're playing.



*This picture has an image of a typical fretboard.
The strings are tuned, from bottom to top, GDAD.*

Chords 1

First, we'll start off with chords. A chord is two or more notes, played in unison. We will be learning a lot of chords as the course progresses, but most are easy enough to pick up. In order to teach how to play chords, I use a number system. Say we want to play a D chord. A handy one is made up of the notes ADAD. If your bouzouki is tuned the way I described above, it will be GDAD. The way to make it sound the chord we want is to hold down the first string on the second fret. This will bring the G up to an A, and we end up with ADAD, just like we wanted.

The first string is held on the second fret, and the others are open. I use the following formula to describe this:

First string is held at the second fret, so I give it a number 2.
The other strings are open, so they get a number 0.
Therefore, the chord of ADAD is given the number 2000.



D Chord – ADAD - 2000

We can describe other chords this way.

One version of the chord of G is made up of the notes GDBD.

Again, the open strings are GDAD, so we need to get the A up to a B to get the chord we want. We do this by holding the third string on the second fret.

First string is open, it has a value of 0.

Second string is open, it has a value of 0.

Third string is held on second fret, it has a value of 2.

Fourth string is open, it has a value of 0.

Therefore, we can describe the G chord as 0020.



G Chord - GDBD - 0020

This is the system I use to teach the shapes of the chords on the fretboard, and there are many to learn, but you will find that there are a relatively small number that will come up over and over again. Some of the most common chords include:

- A- 2202
- B- 4424
- C- 0232
- D- 2000
- E- 4222
- F#- 4464
- G-0020

Many, though not all, of these chords are modal, which means they can be played for major or minor keys. I will explain the difference between major, minor and modal chords later. Right now, it is just important to become familiar with them.

Chords 2

So now we know *how* to play chords, all we need to know now is *which* ones to play. There's a lot of theory to do with chords, but I want to keep it simple, so we'll look at the basics. To find the right chords to play, we need to know what **Key** the tune is in. The key is, at its most basic, what series of notes are used in this tune.

If the key is D major, the notes are going to be:

D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D

These make up the scale, or the 'doh, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, doh' of the key of D major.

If you know the key, you can figure out what chords are likely to be useful to back the tune. In trad, the chords you need tend to follow a pattern. The way to find the pattern is as follows. If the key is major, the main chords are usually the first, the fourth and the fifth. What does that mean?

If we take the list of notes in D:

D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D

We notice that the first note is D, the fourth is G, and the fifth is A.
So the chords we need are D, G and A.

So a useful pattern for backing a lot of tunes in D is as follows

1st, 4th, 1st, 5th / 1st, 4th, 1st, 5th /

This gives us the chords
D, G, D, A / D, G, D, A /

We can do the same for the Key of G.
The notes in G are:

G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G

Again, this is the 'doh, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, doh' of the Key of G.

The first is G, the fourth is C and the fifth is D.
The chords are G, C and D.

Again, pattern for backing a lot of tunes in G is as follows

1st, 4th, 1st, 5th / 1st, 4th, 1st, 5th./

This gives us the chords
G, C, G, D / G, C, G, D /

This pattern is useful for all the Major keys of trad.

If playing in A, the chords fitting the pattern will be:

1st=A
4th=D
5th=E

If playing in C, the chords fitting the pattern will be:

1st=C
4th=F
5th=G

The same applies to all the different keys. Using this knowledge, you can work out the chords for any key on your own.

N.B. *It is advised that you practice and become familiar with the above patterns before you move on to section 3 below.*

Chords 3

There is one more part I would like to introduce to you concerning chords and patterns. Up to now, we have dealt with the first, fourth and fifth chord as part of normal major key accompaniment. There is one more chord that can be used in this sequence, the **sixth**. The sixth is a minor chord, and gives colour and variety to your backing. I often introduce the sixth in the second part of the tune, to give it a bit of a change. The way we find the sixth is the same way we find other chords. Let's take the list of notes in D major again:

D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D

We can see that the sixth note is B, so we know the chord we're looking for is B. But not just any B, we need a B minor. We use B minor because for almost all tunes in trad, if it's in a major key, the sixth will be minor. We don't need to know why just yet, we only need to know the rule. So our desired chord is B minor, or as it's written normally, Bm.

We form B minor by playing **4424**. There are other ways of playing it too, but 4424 is a good start.

Now we know *how* to play it, *when* do we play it? We'll go back to the sequence we learned above:

1st, 4th, 1st, 5th / 1st, 4th, 1st, 5th /

D, G, D, A / D, G, D, A /

and we add a second part:

6th, 5th, 4th, 5th / 6th, 5th, 4th, 5th

Bm, A, G, A / Bm, A, G, A

Adding them together gives us one long sequence:

1st, 4th, 1st, 5th / 1st, 4th, 1st, 5th // 6th, 5th, 4th, 5th / 6th, 5th, 4th, 5th

D, G, D, A / D, G, D, A // Bm, A, G, A / Bm, A, G, A

This may look difficult on paper, but when you play it, it will become easy.

If we were to apply the same formula to the key of G, we would get:

1st, 4th, 1st, 5th / 1st, 4th, 1st, 5th // 6th, 5th, 4th, 5th / 6th, 5th, 4th, 5th

G, C, G, D / G, C, G, D // Em, D, C, D / Em, D, C, D

The **6minor** chord for other major keys are as follows:

Key of A = F#m

Key of C = Am

Key of F = Dm

So now you know a lot of chords, and some of the theory that lies behind them. All you have to do is practice.

Best of luck!

