

How to Tell SCD Tempos Apart – A Beginner’s Guide for the Non- Musician

Scottish country dancing has three primary types of dance tempo: Reels, Jigs and Strathspeys. But how do you tell them apart when listening to the music or dancing, and why does it matter? This guide gives an introduction. This guide does not discuss Waltzes, Polkas or Hornpipes, which are sometimes used for Ceilidh and other accompanying dances in SCD programmes.

The tunes mentioned in the text below are given as examples, although of course they are not the only examples. However, they are easily found on Spotify, Youtube, the Scottish Dance Database (<https://my.strathspey.org/dd/index/> - as 15 second snippets) and RSCDS CDs. The best thing to do is to listen to the tunes and see what you notice yourself. Like anything, practice makes perfect.

Disclaimer: I am not a musician and can’t read music, but I am a Scottish Country dancer and dance teacher. This guide is aimed at dancers like me who have struggled for years before it clicked, and for beginners. Musicians and dancers with a musical ear will need a different level of detail than I am able to give.

Why do we need to hear the tempo?

1. Strathspeys use a very different type of dance step to Jigs and Reels, best not to get confused!
2. Although Jigs and Reels use the same steps, they differ slightly in the rhythm. Each foot placement in a Reel is made on each of the four even beats. This gives a “calmer” looking step. For Jigs, the first foot placement of the step is on the first note of the bar. The third foot placement is on the fourth note. The gap between the second and third foot movements are closer together than between the first and second. The fourth foot movement must not be forgotten, or fall outside of the bar.

As an example, consider skip-change. The four foot placings are “hop-step-close-step”. In Reel time, these are evenly spaced on beats 1-2-3-4. In Jig time, they are unevenly spaced, on beats 1-3-4-6. Effectively, beats 2 and 5 are “silent” as far as your feet are concerned.

3. Being able to hear the tempo will keep yourself in time with the rest of the set (group) you are dancing with. It will help introduce light and shade, long and short steps into your dancing and makes it easier to complete individual figures, bearing in mind some have complicated transitions to the next figure. It is a skill to be “just in time” completing a figure – never too early or too late, and understanding the music is key.

Strathspeys

Strathspeys are the easiest tempo to identify. They are the slowest of the three dance types, at about half the speed of a Reel or Jig. Sheet music for strathspeys are written in $\frac{4}{4}$ time –there are four beats to the bar, and four “quarter notes”, or something that adds up to four “quarter notes” to the bar. This is fine for musicians to know, but not helpful for dancers.

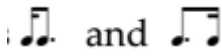
It is more helpful for dancers to know that the underlying beats to the music are evenly spaced, with around 58 – 62 beats per minute. Try clapping your hands along to the ticking of a clock. This is about strathspey time. Try tapping your foot instead, or try the strathspey travelling or setting steps along to this timing. Completion of one travelling or setting step takes four ticks of the clock – i.e. four beats, and nicely, there are 4 components to the step – “step, close, step, hop”.

At this speed, once through a 32-bar strathspey dance takes approximately 1 minute. A whole 8 x 32 bar dance, plus the two chords will take around 8 minutes 30 seconds. Which is why we all get bored if we are 3rd or 4th couple with very little to do.

There are two basic types of Strathspeys, song tunes and “traditional” tunes. The tempo is the same for both but the sound and feel of the music is quite different.

“Traditional” Strathspeys make use of a musical device called the “scotch snap”. Musically, this is a very short note followed by a much longer one, with the longer note “dotted” as shown in the figure

below (or vice versa). This has the effect of making the music stutter, with a clear “da-da!” sound easiest listened to than described. However, the underlying rhythm is still even. “Braes of Breadalbane” and “Sugar Candy” are examples of a traditional type tune.

 - The scotch snap in sheet music notation

Some song tunes are simple and quite easy to hear the beat. However, in other tunes, the notes blend into one another more and as a result are much more difficult to dance to. Although not a song tune, the music to “City of Belfast” would also fall into this category to the untrained ear.

Reels

Now try clapping your hands twice as fast as for the strathspey, keeping an even rhythm. At 2 beats every second (120 beats a minute), this is quite a fast pace for a reel time (and your hands get sore). Slowing slightly to 110 – 114 beats per minute, keeping an even rhythm might take practice when you can't pace yourself against a clock, but this is where you will find Reel time tunes. Again, try marching it out with your feet. Listen to the music and march it out again, without the complexity of the step to confuse you.

Sheet music for Reels are written in $\frac{4}{4}$ time – that is, there are four beats to the bar, and four “quarter notes”, or something that adds up to four “quarter notes” to the bar. You will notice that this is the same written time signature as for Strathspeys. In theory, this means that any $\frac{4}{4}$ time tune can be played as either a Strathspey or a Reel, you just need to speed up or slow down the tune. In practice, this works for some tunes but not others due to the level of embellishment and feel of the music. Therefore, Reels generally tend to have their own set of tunes and not share with Strathspeys.

32 bars of a Reel-time tune takes about 35 seconds, with an 8 x 32 bar dance lasting around 4 minutes 35 seconds.

“White Cockade”, “Marie’s Wedding”, and “De’il Amang the Tailors” are some very different sounding examples of Reel time tunes. The more observant of you will notice that Reel tunes are often used for “pas-de-bas” step practice, particularly when teaching beginners.

Jigs

Now for the complicated one. The skill of telling a Jig from a Reel is once which some intermediate and most advanced dancers are expected to master – although it will take much time and practice outside of lessons. However, you can learn this on your daily commute to work if you have some way of listening to the music.

Sheet music for Jigs are written in $\frac{6}{8}$ time. There are now 6 beats to the bar, and something that adds up to six “eighth notes” (Quavers) in each bar. This is known as “compound time” and results in an uneven rhythm which can be difficult for dancers to grasp.

Don't try clapping 6 even beats. It won't work. However, as for the Reel, you still need between 110 and 114 beats per minute. They just aren't even anymore. Nor are they randomly uneven, there is still a distinct pattern. 32 bars of a Jig tune takes about 35 seconds, with an 8 x 32 bar dance lasting around 4 minutes 35 seconds.

“The New Rigged Ship” and “A Capital Jig” are good examples to try and find the basic rhythm. Note that the rhythm isn't equally obvious in all jig tunes, depending on the ornaments applied in the tune. This is what makes it hard to tell some jigs from some reels without a lot of practice. Try listening to the tunes “Miss Barbara Hay’s Favourite” and “Dance De Chez Nous” – both are used for the same dance (Best Set in the Hall – a Jig), but sound very different.

Due to the compound structure of the tunes, Jigs played in the Scottish style often feel slower than Reels (although they are not), and less embellished, although there are always exceptions to that rule.

Various strategies for getting the rhythm of Jig time are out there. I discuss these below. Different techniques may work for different people.

“Carrots and Cabbages, Carrots and Cabbages, Carrots and Cabbages”

Try saying that at a speed of roughly 112 syllables per minute (2 per second) with an emphasis on the “Ca” syllable and you have a good attempt at Jig time. However, whilst you can hear this in some Jig tunes, it isn't always very obvious in others.

JIG-i-ty, JIG-i-ty JIG-i-ty, JIG-i-ty

This is less easy to say to a rhythm but once you get the hang of it is more obvious across a wider range of Jig tunes. Keep it at 112 syllables per minute (slightly less than 2 per second) and emphasise the “JIG”. Listen to some tunes as you chant along.

“Hop-Step-Close-Step”

I am sure we are all familiar with our dance teachers shouting out this phrase as we practice skip-change and try not to fall over our own feet to remember the foot positions? Did you know that skip-change (at least at beginner/intermediate level) is normally taught in Jig time? Or that the rhythm the teacher shouts “hop-step-close-step” is (or should be) in line with the Jig rhythm? Try sounding it out to yourself whilst listening to music – but without trying to achieve the step itself. Does that work for you?

123-456-123-456

Counting to six in two groups of three. Keep it at 112 syllables per minute and emphasise the “One” and Four”.

Chugg-a-da-Chugg-a-da Chugg-a-da-Chugg-a-da

This is a new one for me, but is briefly mentioned in one of the youtube examples at the bottom of this article. Supposedly the rhythm of a “straight” (Irish) Jig sounds a little like a steam train chugging its way along.

Slip-Jigs

Slip Jigs are rare in SCD music, but are more common in Irish music and Ceilidh dances. Like Jigs they are in “compound time”, being written in $\frac{9}{8}$ time. I.e. 8 beats to the bar but 9 eighth-notes to the bar. To count this, try 123-456-789, at 112 syllables a minute, with the emphasis on every third one. The only example of this I can find in Scottish dancing is “Strip the Willow”.

Summary

RHYTHM	METRONOME	DANCE TIME (without chord)	APPROXIMATE TIME FOR 32 BARS
Jig	♩. = 110	8 x 32 bars takes 4' 39"	32 bars takes 35 secs
	♩. = 112	8 x 32 bars takes 4' 34"	32 bars takes 34¼ secs
	♩. = 114	8 x 32 bars takes 4' 29"	32 bars takes 33½ secs
Reel	♩ = 110	8 x 32 bars takes 4' 39"	32 bars takes 35 secs
	♩ = 112	8 x 32 bars takes 4' 34"	32 bars takes 34¼ secs
	♩ = 114	8 x 32 bars takes 4' 29"	32 bars takes 33½ secs
Strathspey	♩ = 58	8 x 32 bars takes 8' 48"	32 bars takes 1 min 6"
	♩ = 60	8 x 32 bars takes 8' 32"	32 bars takes 1 min 4"
	♩ = 62	8 x 32 bars takes 8' 16"	32 bars takes 1 min 2"

Column 3 in the table above is the most helpful to teachers using recorded music.

Figure 1: Scottish Country Dance Tempos – Taken from the RSCDS Manual of Scottish Dancing

Exercises and Further Reading

Most online tutorials seem to either focus on Irish Jigs and Reels (which are essentially the same, but stylistically sound different to Scottish Jigs and Reels), or assume you are a musician able to read music. However, the below exercises are useful.

The best thing to do is collect a playlist of some Jigs and Reels on Spotify (All the tunes for the RSCDS books 1 - 51 are on there), or wherever you get your music, and listen alternating between Reels and Jigs until you go insane trying. Then try on shuffle-play. Bear in mind that each dance is often made up of several tunes of the same tempo, so the musicians don't get bored playing the same 32 bars on loop. This change of tune can sometimes be distracting when trying to hear the rhythm, so perhaps try only listening to the first 30 seconds of each track before moving to the next one.

The Scottish Country Dance Database (SCDDB) has a "Jig or Reel" guessing game which can be fun (and frustrating) to play: <https://my.strathspey.org/dd/games/jig-or-reel/>

The Session has an alternative attempt at an explanation on its discussion forum: <https://thesession.org/discussions/24314>

The following are all in the Irish style, but will give you a similar introduction:

- This Youtube video notes the rhythmic differences between Scottish and Irish style Jigs and Reels as played on the tin whistle: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5XG2iol508>
- A lengthy article for the more musically minded – including near the bottom the differences between barn dances, polka, waltz and other tunes: <https://www.irishtune.info/rhythm/>
- An entertaining dance-off between and Irish-step and Scottish-Highland-Step dancer to Scottish Pipes. The tune is a Jig and you can hear the Jig rhythm in the Irish step dancer's feet taps: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ijk4Yox4r0>
- A Jig and 3 Reels. The reels are played in the Irish style and much slower than you would hear in the SCD dances of the same name. You can hear the difference though: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hlliv_k35GY

- Another Irish-style attempt at an explanation. I'm not convinced, and the tunes are Irish style not Scottish but see what you think: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eo_AJQBxZ3c