

Clogging - Music and Practice

Diane Silver – www.diane-silver.com

If you want to be serious about mastering basic clogging/flatfooting, you need to build muscle memory, so the mechanics become automatic. This means a little bit of drilling (maybe just 10 minutes per day), just like learning to play an instrument.

This will be more fun (and you'll be more likely to do it), if you have some great music to practice to, at a tempo appropriate for your level. So, I highly recommend that you build yourself a playlist for clogging practice.

A) **FINDING GOOD MUSIC TRACKS:** Many CDs of old-time or contra dance music contain one or two tracks that will be good for practice. Very often, musicians play differently for recording than for dancing. The consistency needed for dancing can be a tad boring for just listening, so they add bridges, breaks, and other musical tricks to spice up the recording. This makes a track frustrating when you're trying to drill a step repetitively, because the musical phrasing might not be square. But often there are one or two tracks that work well.

Talk to the band and explain that you're looking for music not only for listening in the car or at home, but also for clogging practice. ASK them which tracks are meticulously square and meticulously steady in tempo as you decide which one(s) to buy, and be aware that many of the tracks will be great to listen to but difficult for practice.

While I encourage supporting trad musicians by buying their CDs, there are also lots of slow-speed tracks available online, as discussed next:

B) **ADJUSTING TEMPO:** Recorded music is probably too fast for your initial practice. As you learned in the workshop, it is important to practice the mechanics excruciatingly slowly, in order to practice with accuracy. Otherwise, you're building wrong muscle memory, rather than learning to do it right.

1) Look for recordings of tunes played slowly, intended for beginning musicians to learn new tunes. These are not usually available commercially, but rather through the community networks of trad musicians.

Here are a few initial suggestions:

- Website from the Charlotte (NC) Folk Society with slow mp3s: <http://www.folksociety.org/slowjam.shtml>
- Website from the Seattle area with more slow mp3s: <http://stringband.mossyroof.com/>
- Mary Gordon and Hilary Dirlam (from NC) have a series of tune books with accompanying slow recordings. <http://www.hilarydirlam.com/store>. Contact Hilary at silvervajra@gmail.com. (She might sell you just the CD and not the book; I'm not sure).

2) Use computer software to slow down the tempo of a music file (such as from a CD) without affecting the pitch. There are a number of music editing apps out there that can do this. One popular one is called "The Amazing Slow-Downer." <https://www.ronimusic.com/>. This is not free, but it's a relatively small investment if you're serious about becoming a clogger or flatfooter. For Android users, there is also the "Music Speed Changer" from Single Minded Productions (Free on the Google Play Store) for your Smart Phone or Tablet. (Note: I have no business or organizational relationship with Roni Music or Single Minded Productions).

3) **DANCE AT HALF OR QUARTER SPEED:** Another option is to keep the music at full speed, as recorded, and adjust your dancing. Here's how I do it: *(over)* →

HOW TO DANCE AT HALF OR QUARTER SPEED

- A) Start by “bouncing” to the music, as we did in the workshop (just bending and straightening your knees):
down on the “number”, up on the “and”:

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
DOWN UP, DOWN UP, DOWN UP, DOWN UP,

Notice that in 4 beats you go “down-up” 4 times. This is full speed with the music.

(The physical spacing on this page represents the amount of time between counts – equal space (time) between each “number” and each “and”).

- B) Stay “down” or “up” on the “and”, even while continuing to count in your head at the same tempo:

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
DOWN UP DOWN UP

(The physical spacing on this page of the count (1-&-2-&) is exactly the same as in step A, representing that you are counting in your head at the same tempo).

Notice that in 4 beats, you now go “down-up” only TWO times. This is ½-speed with the music.

- C) Change your counting in your head so that you count slower, matching what you’re now doing with your knees. Return to saying the “number” as you go down and saying “and” as you go up. The two “down-ups” from step B above would now be counted like this:

DOWN UP DOWN UP
1 & 2 &

(The physical spacing on this page of the “down” s and “up” s is exactly the same as in step B, representing that your knees are going at the same tempo).

Notice that now we now have 2 (rather than 4) “down-ups”, and we are only counting 2 beats, rather than 4. The “number” and the “and” once again match the “down” and the “up”.

You are now counting and bouncing at ½ speed. Now you can add “3-&, 4-&” at this tempo.

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
DOWN UP DOWN UP DOWN UP DOWN UP

(The physical spacing on this page of both the count (1-&-2-&) and the “down” s and “up” s is about twice the distance as in step A, representing that both the count in your head and your knees are going ½ as fast (twice the space between counts).

REPEAT this whole process if needed to cut down to 1/4 speed.

Now you can play regular speed tracks from your favorite dance CDs, but practice at the necessary slow tempos to make each movement clean and precise. This is the muscle memory you want to build.

To practice the Tennessee Walking Step, add the “ee”s and the “uh”s in the count, like this:

1 ee & uh 2 ee & uh 3 ee & uh 4 ee & uh
Step Heel Chug Toe Step Heel Chug Toe Step Heel Chug Toe Step Heel Chug Toe