

## Favorite Keys for Scandinavian Fiddle Music, and Why

In responding to questions from a woodwind player about accompanying fiddles for traditional Scandinavian fiddle music, I found myself contemplating in detail why some keys are more difficult on the violin than others.

Classical violin technique addresses many of these issues, but most of us are not classical violinists; there is no onus on us to be able to perform as well in Db as in G. Many of us never use upper positions, nor do most tunes require them.

As I considered the question, it seemed to me that there are many things that make a key easier or more difficult for me to play. I have a set of “homework” tunes, many of which embody these problems.

What’s easy? In diminishing importance:

- Many of the open strings are in the triad (the more, the better)
- Familiar finger patterns (seems to be less important on the E-string)
- Many or all of the open strings are in the scale
- Scales (vs arpeggios) (precision of finger placement, fewer string-crossings)

What’s hard? In diminishing importance:

- Many or all of the open strings are not in the scale
- Requiring a finger to play out of its “normal” position (e.g., In E maj, the G string starts as G#-A with 1<sup>st</sup> finger on G# and 2<sup>nd</sup> finger on A; 2<sup>nd</sup> finger would not usually play the 1<sup>st</sup> half or whole step)
- Unfamiliar finger patterns (less important on the E string)
- Hand stretches such as 4<sup>th</sup> finger followed by first finger “low” (half step) in the scale (e.g., Eb on the A-string followed by F on the E-string)
- 4<sup>th</sup> finger (pinkie) involvement required (vs optional)

- Harmonics
- Arpeggios (vs scales) – string crossing and hand position (the more fingers required, or the more strings required, the harder)
- String crossing

I constructed a simple chart of all the keys (and some of the variants for minor modes and for scordatura) and added my subjective judgment of difficulty.

Some keys aren't as hard as they look because the difficult portions of them are avoided in the tune (e.g., for a tune in E major, the low G# may never be used). But, in general, the fewer open strings and the more the finger patterns shift to the right, the more difficult the key.

For the minor modes (minor: flat 3<sup>rd</sup>; Dorian: flat 3<sup>rd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>; Aeolian: flat 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>), tunes often mix the modality following the melodic minor principle: high intervals going up, low intervals descending, so the example of, say, D Dorian, may manifest in an actual tune as a "variable 7<sup>th</sup>" instead.

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*O = Open string    W = Whole step    H = Half-step    ( ) = optional fingering on lower string (vs going up a string) or rarely used lowest note  
 Strictly folk practice - ignoring classical "positions" and other sophistications.    Difficulty scale: 1 (easy) – 5 (hard)*

Key	G-string	D-string	A-string	E-string	Finger pattern 1: W-W-H	Finger pattern 2: W-H-W	Finger pattern 3: W-W-W	Finger pattern 4: H-W-W	Finger pattern 5: H-H-W or H-W-H	Hard?
G major	G-A-B-C-(D)	D-E-F#-G-(A)	A-B-C-D-(E)	E-F#-G-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W) O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-(W) O-W-H-W-W				1
G minor	G-A-Bb-C-(D)	D-E-F#-G-(A)	A-Bb-C-D-(E)	E-F#-G-A-Bb	O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-(W)		O-H-W-W-(W)		1
G Dorian	G-A-Bb-C-(D)	D-E-F-G-(A)	A-Bb-C-D-(E)	E-F-G-A-Bb		O-W-H-W-(W) O-W-H-W-(W)		O-H-W-W-(W) O-H-W-W-H		1
G Aeolian	G-A-Bb-C-(D)	D-Eb-F-G-(A)	A-Bb-C-D-Eb	F-G-A-Bb		O-W-H-W-(W)		O-H-W-W-(W) O-H-W-W-H H-W-W-(H)		2

D major	G-A-B-C#-(D)	D-E-F#-G-(A)	A-B-C#-D-(E)	E-F#-G-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W) O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-W	O-W-W-W-(H)			1
D major (tuned A-bas)	A-B-C#-(D) (E)	D-E-F#-G-(A)	A-B-C#-D-(E)	E-F#-G-A-B	O-W-W-(H) (W) O-W-W-H-(W) O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-W				1
D minor	G-A-B-C#-(D)	D-E-F-G-(A)	A-B-C#-D-(E)	E-F-G-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-(W)	O-W-W-W-(H)		O-H-W-W-W	1
D minor (tuned A-bas)	A-B-C#-(D) (E)	D-E-F-G-(A)	A-B-C#-D-(E)	E-F-G-A-B	O-W-W-(H) (W) O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-(W)			O-H-W-W-W	1
D Dorian	G-A-B-C-(D)	D-E-F-G-(A)	A-B-C-D-(E)	E-F-G-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-(W) O-W-H-W-(W)			O-H-W-W-W	1.
D Aeolian	G-A-Bb-C-(D)	D-E-F-G-(A)	A-Bb-C-D-(E)	E-F-G-A-Bb		O-W-H-W-(W) O-W-H-W-(W)			O-H-W-W-(W) O-H-W-W-H	1.

Key	G-string	D-string	A-string	E-string	Finger pattern 1: W-W-H	Finger pattern 2: W-H-W	Finger pattern 3: W-W-W	Finger pattern 4: H-W-W	Finger pattern 5: H-H-W or H-W-H	Hard?
A major	(G#)-A-B-C#-(D)	D-E-F#-G#-(A)	A-B-C#-D-(E)	E-F#-G#-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W) O-W-W-H-W		(H)-W-W-W-(H) O-W-W-W-(H)			1
A major (tuned A-bas)	A-B-C#-(D)	D-E-F#-G#-(A)	A-B-C#-D-(E)	E-F#-G#-A-B	O-W-W-(H) O-W-W-H-(W) O-W-W-H-W		O-W-W-W-(H)			1
A major (tuned AEAE)	A-B-C#-D (E)	E-F#-G#-(A)-(B)	A-B-C#-D-(E)	E-F#-G#-A-B	O-W-W-(H)-(W) O-W-W-(H)-(W) O-W-W-H-(W) O-W-W-H-W					1
A major (tuned AEAC#)	A-B-C#-D (E)	E-F#-G#-(A)-(B)	A-B-(C#)-(D)-(E)	C#-D-E-F#-G	O-W-W-(H)-(W) O-W-W-(H)-(W) O-W-(W)-(H)-(W)			O-H-W-W-W		1
A minor	(G#)-A-B-C-(D)	D-E-F#-G#-(A)	A-B-C-D-(E)	E-F#-G#-A-B	(H)-W-W-H-(W) O-W-W-H-W	O-W-H-W-(W)	O-W-W-W-(H)			1
A Dorian	(G)-A-B-C-(D)	D-E-F#-G-(A)	A-B-C-D-(E)	E-F#-G-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W) O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-(W) O-W-H-W-W				1
A Aeolian	(G)-A-B-C-(D)	D-E-F-G-(A)	A-B-C-D-(E)	E-F-G-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-(W) O-W-H-W-(W)			O-H-W-W-W	1

E major	G#-A-B-C# (D)	D-E-F#-G#-(A)	A-B-C#-D# (E)	E-F#-G#-A-B	O-W-W-H-W		O-W-W-W-(H) O-W-W-W-(H)		H-H-W-W-(H)	1.5
E minor	G-A-B-C#	D#-E-F#-G-(A)	A-B-C#-D#-(E)	E-F#-G-A-B		O-W-H-W-W	O-W-W-W O-W-W-W-(H)		H-H-W-H-(W)	1.5
E Dorian	G-A-B-C#-(D)	D-E-F#-G-(A)	A-B-C#-D-(E)	E-F#-G-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W) O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-W	O-W-W-W-(H)			1
E Aeolian	G-A-B-C-(D)	D-E-F#-G-(A)	A-B-C-D-(E)	E-F#-G-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W) O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-(W) O-W-H-W-W				1

Key	G-string	D-string	A-string	E-string	Finger pattern 1: W-W-H	Finger pattern 2: W-H-W	Finger pattern 3: W-W-W	Finger pattern 4: H-W-W	Finger pattern 5: H-H-W or H-W-H	Hard?
Bb major (A#)	G-A-Bb-C-(D)	D-Eb-F-G-(A)	A-Bb-C-D-Eb	F-G-A-Bb		O-W-H-W-(W)		O-H-W-W-(W) O-H-W-W-H H-W-W-H		2
Bb minor	G-A-Bb-C-Db	Eb-F-G-(A)	A-Bb-C-Db-Eb	F-G-A-Bb		O-W-H-W-H		H-W-W-(W) H-W-W-H	O-H-W-H-W	4

F major	G-A-Bb-C-(D)	D-E-F-G-(A)	A-Bb-C-D-(E)	E-F-G-A-Bb		O-W-H-W-(W) O-W-H-W-(W)		O-H-W-W-(W) O-H-W-W-(H)		1.5
F major (tuned F-bas)	F-G-A-Bb-C	D-E-F-G-(A)	A-Bb-C-D-(E)	E-F-G-A-Bb	O-W-W-H-W	O-W-H-W-(W)		O-H-W-W-(W) O-H-W-W-(H)		1.5
F minor	G-Ab-Bb-C-(D)	D-E-F-G-Ab	Bb-C-D-(E)	E-F-G-Ab-Bb		O-W-H-W-H		O-H-W-W-(W) H-W-W-(W)	O-H-W-H-W	3

C major	G-A-B-C-(D)	D-E-F-G-(A)	A-B-C-D-(E)	E-F-G-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-(W) O-W-H-W-(W)		O-H-W-W-W		1.5
C minor	G-A-B-C-(D)	D-Eb-F-G-(A)	A-B-C-D-Eb	F-G-A-B	O-W-W-H-(W)	O-W-H-W-H		O-H-W-W-(W) H-W-W-W		3

Eb major (D#)	G-Ab-Bb-C-(D)	D-Eb-F-G-Ab	Bb-C-D-Eb	F-G-Ab-Bb				O-H-W-W-(W) O-H-W-W-H H-W-W-H	H-W-H-W	3
Eb minor (D#)	Ab-Bb-C-(D)	D-Eb-F-Gb-Ab	Bb-C-D-Eb	F-Gb-Ab-Bb				H-W-W-(W) H-W-W-H	O-H-W-H-W H-H-W-W	5

Key	G-string	D-string	A-string	E-string	Finger pattern 1: W-W-H	Finger pattern 2: W-H-W	Finger pattern 3: W-W-W	Finger pattern 4: H-W-W	Finger pattern 5: H-H-W or H-W-H	Hard?
Ab major (G#)	Ab-Bb-C-Db	Eb-F-G-Ab	Bb-C-Db-Eb	F-G-Ab-Bb				H-W-W-H H-W-W-H	H-W-H-W H-W-H-W	5
Ab minor (G#)	Ab-Bb-B-Db	Eb-F-G-Ab	Bb-B-Db-Eb	F-G-Ab-Bb				H-W-W-H	H-W-H-W H-H-W-W H-W-H-W	5

Db major (C#)	Ab-Bb-C-Db	Eb-F-Gb-Ab	Bb-C-Db-Eb	F-Gb-Ab-Bb				H-W-W-H	H-W-H-W H-W-H-W H-H-W-W	5
Db minor (C#)	Ab-Bb-C-Db	Eb-E-Gb-Ab	Bb-C-Db-Eb-(E)	E-Gb-Ab-Bb			O-W-W-W	H-W-W-H	H-H-W-W H-W-H-W-(H)	5

Gb major (F#)	Ab-Bb-B-Db	Eb-F-G-Gb-Ab	Bb-B-Db-Eb	F-G-Gb-Ab-Bb				H-W-W-H-(W)	H-W-H-W H-H-W-W H-W-H-W-W	5
Gb minor	Ab-A-B-Db	Eb-F-Gb-Ab (A)	A-B-Db-Eb	F-Gb-Ab-A			O-W-W-W		H-H-W-W H-W-H-W-(H) H-H-W-H	5

B major	Ab-Bb-B-Db	Eb-E-Gb-Ab	Bb-B-Db-Eb-(E)	E-Gb-Ab-Bb			O-W-W-W		H-W-H-W H-H-W-W H-H-W-W-(H)	5
B minor	Ab-Bb-B-Db-(D)	D-E-Gb-Ab	Bb-B-Db-D-(E)	E-Gb-Ab-Bb			O-W-W-W O-W-W-W		H-W-H-W-(H) H-H-W-H-(W)	4