Workshop: Irish Music and the Ukulele

Session Tunes with Irish Music Friends

Presented by Jesse Owsley
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Although this may be presented in a single session, the scope of the material is such that it is suitable for presenting over multiple sessions. The material provided will set up the learner for further examination of chord voicings, characteristic rhythms, articulation and ornamentation in advanced sessions. Regardless of how far we get through the material, this should provide a launching point and roadmap to progress into advanced understanding and playing.

Introduction: Welcome to the world of Traditional Irish dance music! This is energetic dance music played in homes and pubs and on stages across the world. Although the music may be melodically complex and intricately ornamented, it is bold and driving. Be tasteful and sensitive, and be FEARLESS!

Caveats:

- **This workshop approaches the subject primarily from the perspective of a Folk/Irish Musician rather than the perspective of an Ukulelist.**
- **Audio/Visual recording and note-taking are encouraged.**

Objectives:

Have **FUN** playing Irish tunes in an instrumental ensemble
Learn what Irish session tunes are, their structures and characteristics
Understand your role as an accompanist or tune player
Develop the knowledge and language to play ukulele with Irish musicians

The workshop is intended to allow attendees to play the melodies of tunes or accompaniment, or both. Materials will be presented in standard C tuning, with tablature suitable for either high or low G tuning. Tunes are presented in standard notation and tablature with suggested chords.. Please know that Irish music is primarily an *aural* tradition and there is no 'right' set of notes. Traditionally tunes were learned and passed along by ear. Additionally, the introduction of harmonic accompaniment with a piano, or guitar, or Irish bouzouki, (or an ukulele!) is a recent addition to the tradition. There is no one *right* set of chords for any tune.

Ukulele Tunings for Irish Music: I will demonstrate with a standard high G concert ukulele and anticipate most participants will primarily play this tuning. However, there are worlds of possibilities for exploring tunings beyond standard **gCEA** which is a fertile subject for another complete session! I am hereby officially giving you encouragement and permission to acquire more ukuleles to accommodate alternate tunings. When you do get into alternate tunings, https://chords.cc is your friend.

- **Low G (GCEA) tuning** has certain advantages over High G because it extends the melodic range of the instrument and allows for more full chords in this context.

- **D (aDF#B) tuning** was standard tuning in the 1920's and 1930's and may be better suited for playing in the keys Irish musicians will play in, and it can make a soprano ukulele sing! From standard, tune each string up one whole step.
- **Standard Baritone (DGBE) tuning** works well because the voicing is below and complimentary to the melody line.
- **Baritone (DGAD) tuning** is a 'sleeper' tuning in the opinion of this author, and lends itself well to melodic fingerstyle and accompaniment and has the advantages of DADGAD guitar for Irish music and beyond. The major second interval between the G and A string lends itself naturally to Campanella style playing in common Irish key signatures. I tune my baritone to DGAD almost exclusively and encourage others to give it a try.
- **Fifths (GDAE or CGDA) tuning** cannot be beat for melodic playing. Aquila, and possibly other string makers offer GDAE sets for soprano scale and CGDA for concert scale ukulele. These are natural tunings for violinists or fiddlers playing ukulele.

Rhythm/Strum Patterns: It is important to note that the rhythm patterns are not meant to be rigid but should accommodate and help drive the rhythm of the tune. Listen to the way an Irish bodhran (drum) player supports and drives melodies. Think of your right hand (or left for southpaws) as playing a drum.

Chord Voicings: Chord voicings presented in the attached notation are simple open position voicings. The Irish ukulelist will find closed chord forms and moveable forms along with drone strings, and will add much to their palette.

Ornamentation and Articulation are defining characteristics of Irish music and we will just touch on these during the workshop. A more full exploration is worth further study.

Note about key signatures: Irish session tunes are almost never in the key of C. Typically, tunes are in D, A, G, Am, Bm, Dm, Em. Many tunes are *modal* and do not follow a major or minor scale. Dorian and Mixolydian modes are common, but tunes are not required to stick to any particular mode. It is possible to adapt Irish tunes to keys ukulele players are more familiar with, however, this will not allow the ukulelist to play with *Trad (traditional) Irish* players. We'll look at tunes in their traditional keys.

Common Tune Structure: Here is a brief description of some standard tune types taken from Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCE), a widely recognized authority on Irish music.

1. The Reel

The most popular and prolific tune type in Irish music. It is played in **4/4 time** and is characterized by a fast, driving energy.

- **Structure:** Usually two parts (A and B), with 8 bars each.
- **Feel:** Think of it as a steady "one-two-three-four."
- **Examples:** *Miss McLeod's*, *Red Haired Boy*.

2. The (Double) Jig

Jigs are the second most common tune type, defined by their "triplet" feel. They are written in compound time, most often **6/8**.

- **Double Jig:** The standard jig. The rhythm sounds like the phrase "Rash-er-of-ba-con" or "Jig-it-y-jig-it-y."
- **Examples:** *The Swallowtail, The Kesh.*

3. The Hornpipe

Hornpipes are played in **4/4 time**, similar to reels, but usually at a slower tempo with a distinct "swing" or "dotted" rhythm.

- **The "Lift":** Musicians emphasize the first and third beats, giving it a bouncy, jaunty feel.
- **Ending:** Hornpipes almost always end with three characteristic heavy beats (da-da-da).
- **Examples:** *Harvest Home*, *Murphy's.*

4. The Polka

Particularly popular in the Sliabh Luachra region (Cork/Kerry), polkas are fast, energetic tunes in **2/4 time**.

- **Feel:** Very rhythmic and "punchy," often used for set dancing.
- **Examples:** *Muirshin Durkin*, *John Ryan's* Polka.

Recommended Resources:

- **Krassen, Miles.** *O'Neill's Music of Ireland (Revised Edition).* Oak Publications.
  A foundational collection of over 1,000 traditional tunes, essential for any student of the genre. (Yes, I'm suggesting Krassen's book over the original!)
- **Sarek, Ondrej.** *Irish Tunes for All Ukulele: For C, D, and G (Baritone) Tuning.* Mel Bay Publications.
- **Foy, Barry.** *Field Guide to the Irish Music Session.* Roberts Rinehart Publishers.
  An indispensable guide to the etiquette, history, and social dynamics of the traditional session.
- **Carson, Ciaran.** *Last Night's Fun: A Book About Irish Traditional Music.* North Point Press, 1998.
  A celebrated prose exploration of the spirit, timing, and atmosphere of Irish music.

Useful Websites

- **https://thesession.org** *An exhaustive and authoritative list of Irish session tunes*
- **https://chords.cc** *Generate chords for any tuning*
- **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sem7dM9_Jy0** *A fun session etiquette video*
- **https://irishukulele.org** *My workshop content is shared here*

A Final Word: You are very welcome to reach me at jesse@irishukulele.org for questions, comments, or to share the craic! Thank you very kindly for your presence and your participation. Now, find an Irish music friend and get crackin'! **Sláinte & Aloha!**

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Rhythm Ideas for Accompanying Irish Tunes on Ukulele - The Mandolin 'Chop'

The ukulele is a unique instrument and it can borrow some guitar technique for accompanying tunes, but there is as much for the ukulelist to borrow from the bouzouki, the mandolin, and the traditional Irish frame drum, or Irish bodhrán.

A great place to start learning to accompanying Irish tunes is to borrow the mandolin 'chop'. The chop is widely attributed to Bill Monroe, the father of Bluegrass music, and while Irish music and Bluegrass music are completely different animals (let me count the ways!), the chop technique is applicable to many different musical contexts, including bluegrass, old time, and fiddle tunes in general. The chop has application for accompanying songs as well, and generally when the ukulele is playing with other instruments, as with session tunes!

The chop is a rhythmic, percussive technique played on the off-beats, (the two and the four in 4/4 time). The instrument is essentially acting as the snare drum for a band.

- A chop is is performed using closed chord shapes - a shape where all strings are fretted (no open strings)

- There is a sharp 'bark' sound as the fretting fingers press down on the strings with the left hand as the right hand executes a sharp downstroke, producing a woody 'bark'

- The sound is quickly muted by lifting up the fingers of the fretting hand after the downstroke, resulting in a short articulation of the sound

- The goal is to have a short, very percussive sound that does not ring, and allows sonic space for the tune and other instruments

- The rhythm is more important than the harmonic complexity of the chords used. As such, the chop can be performed with a minimum of chord forms that emphasize the root and fifth of the chord. See accompanying exercise on the next page

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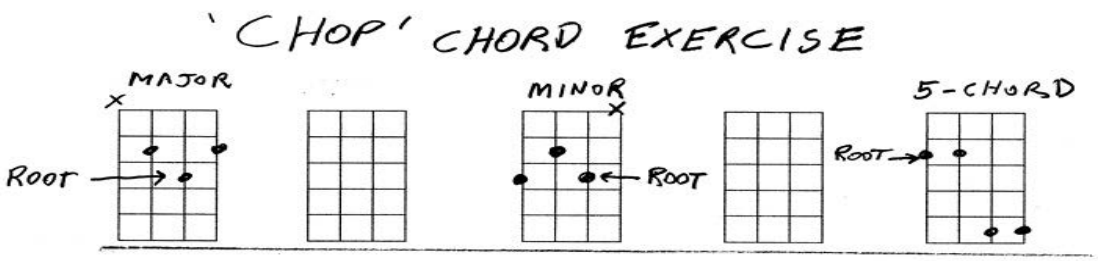

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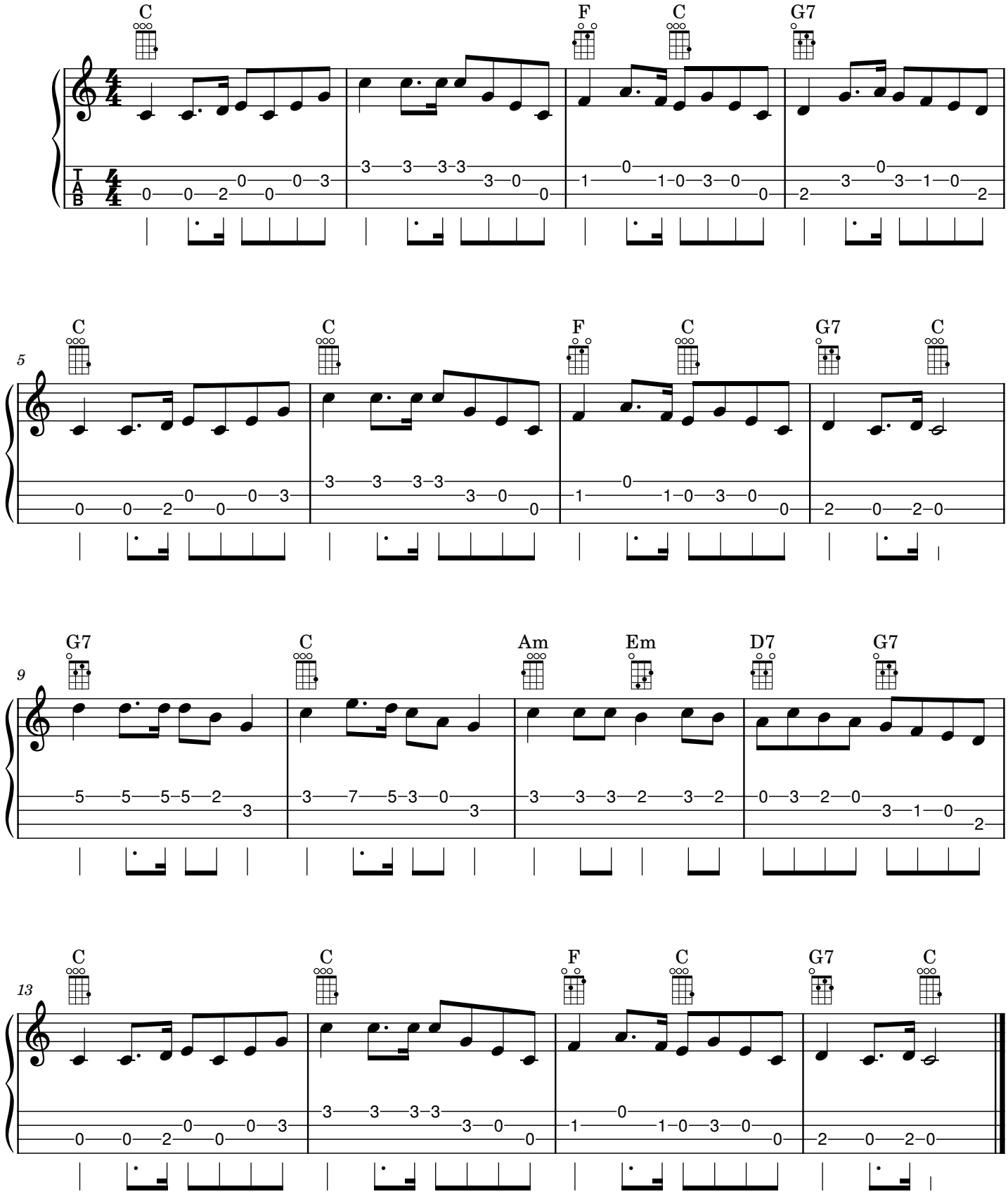
Scotland the Brave

March

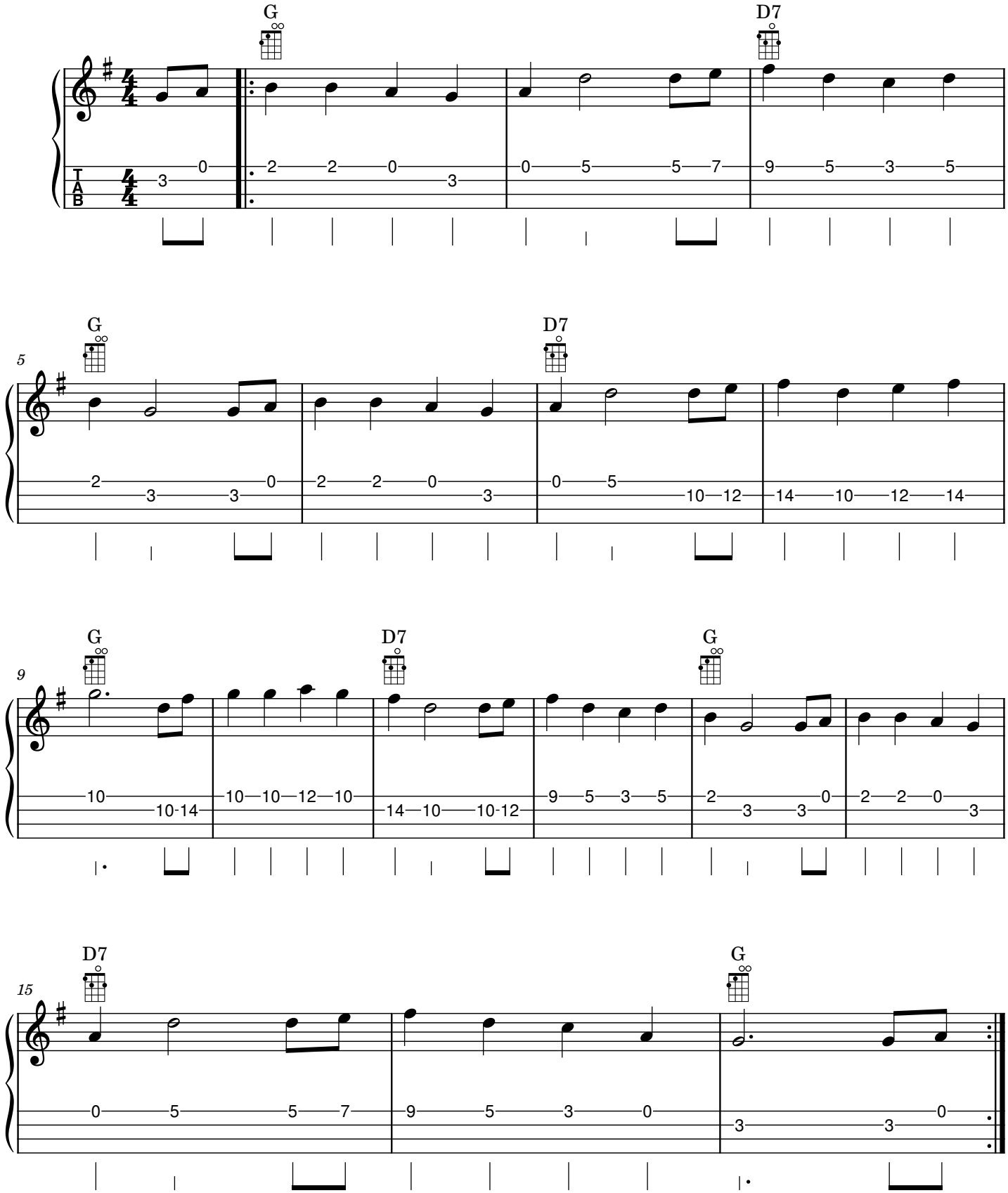
Traditional



Muirshin Durkin

Polka

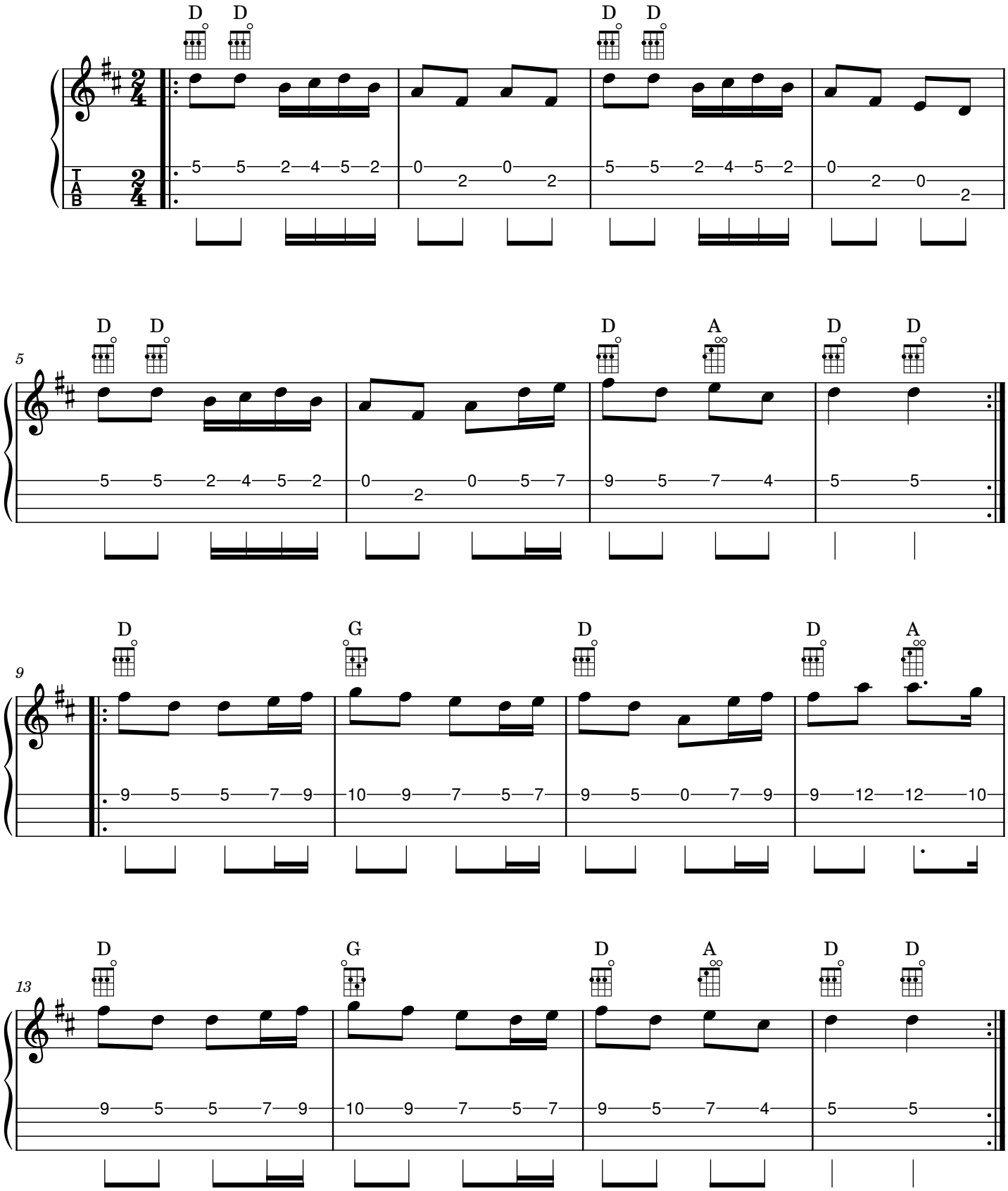
Traditional



John Ryan's Polka

Polka

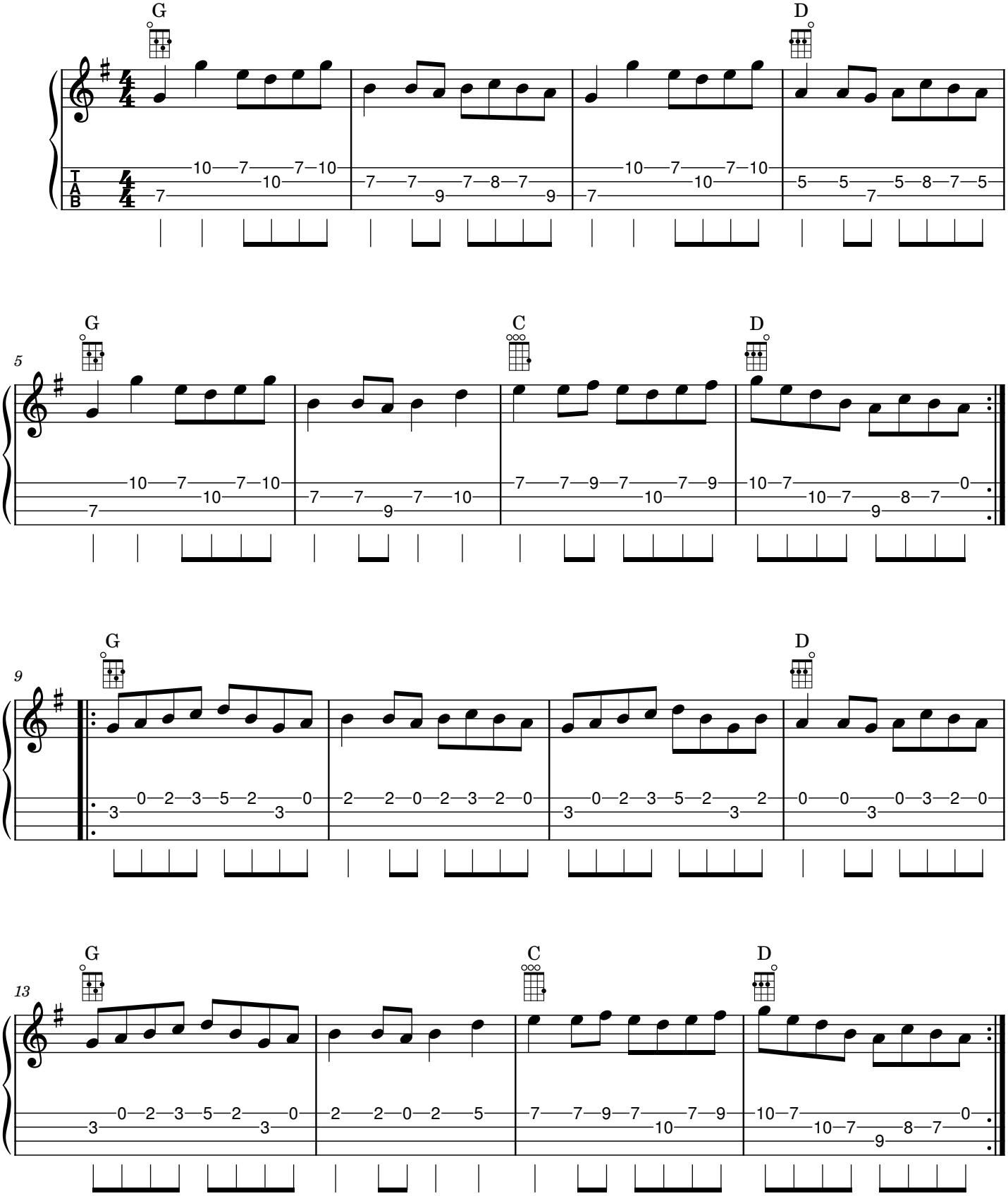
Traditional



Miss McLeod's

Reel

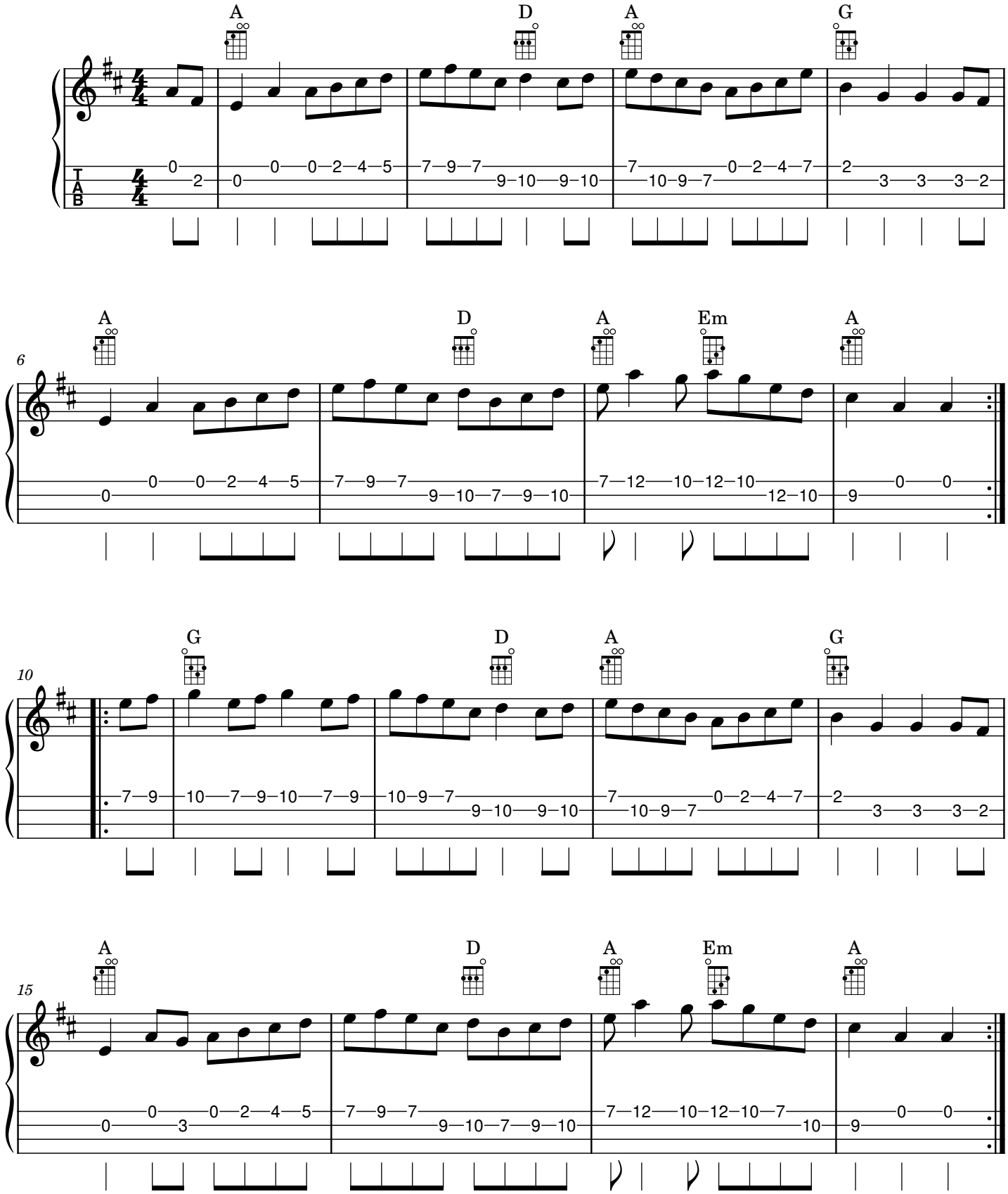
Traditional



Red Haired Boy

Reel

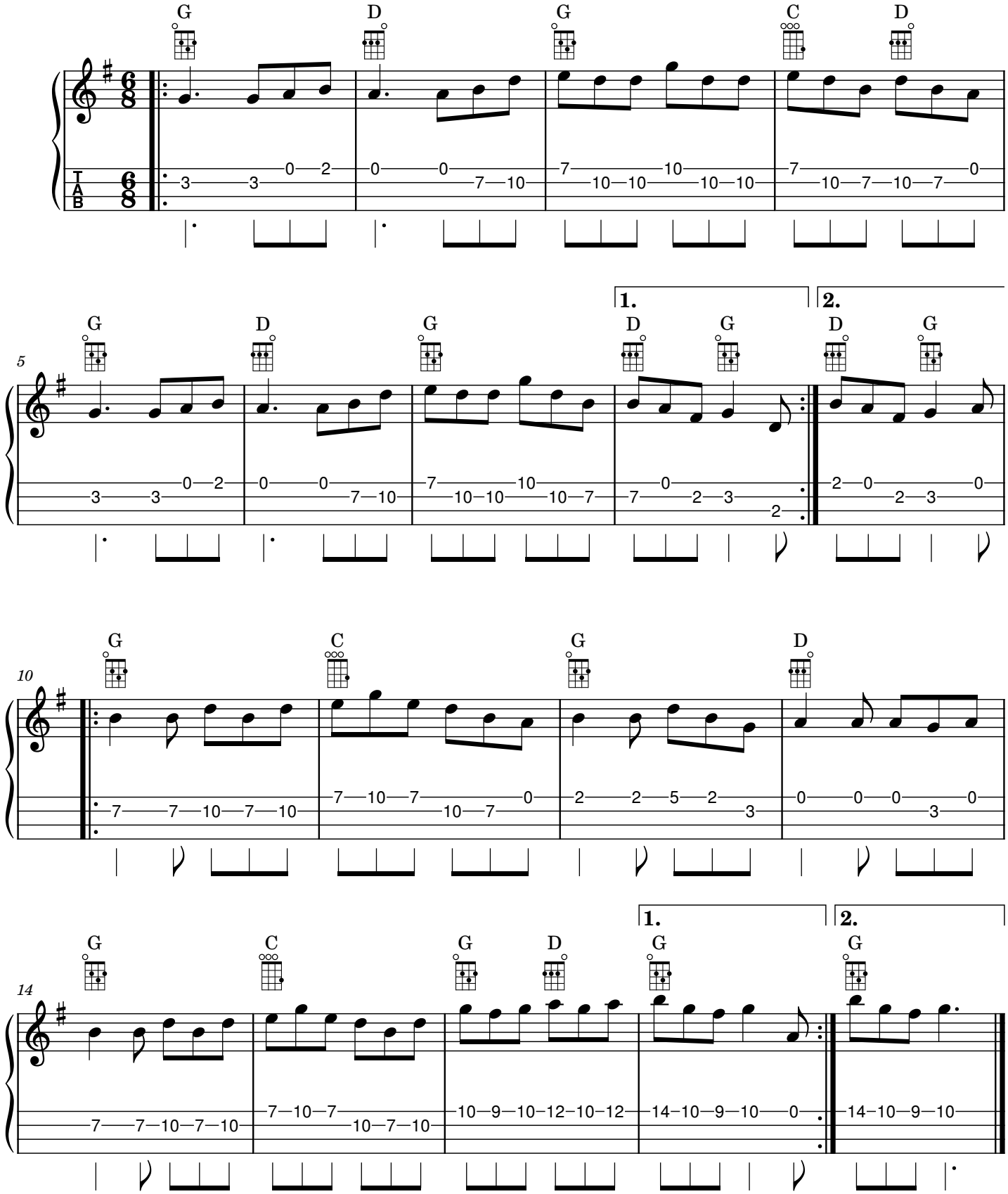
Traditional



The Kesh

Jig

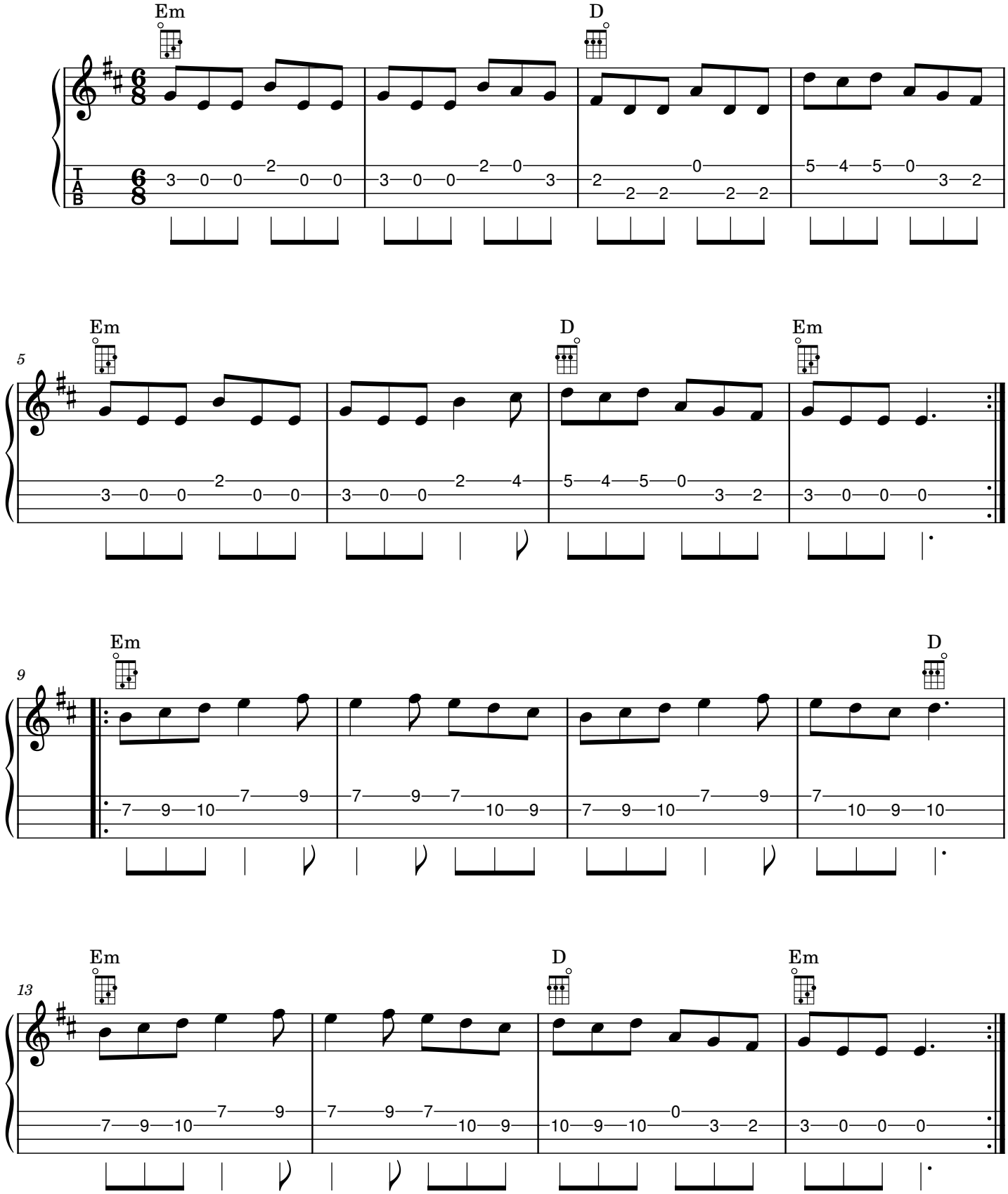
Traditional



The Swallowtail

Jig

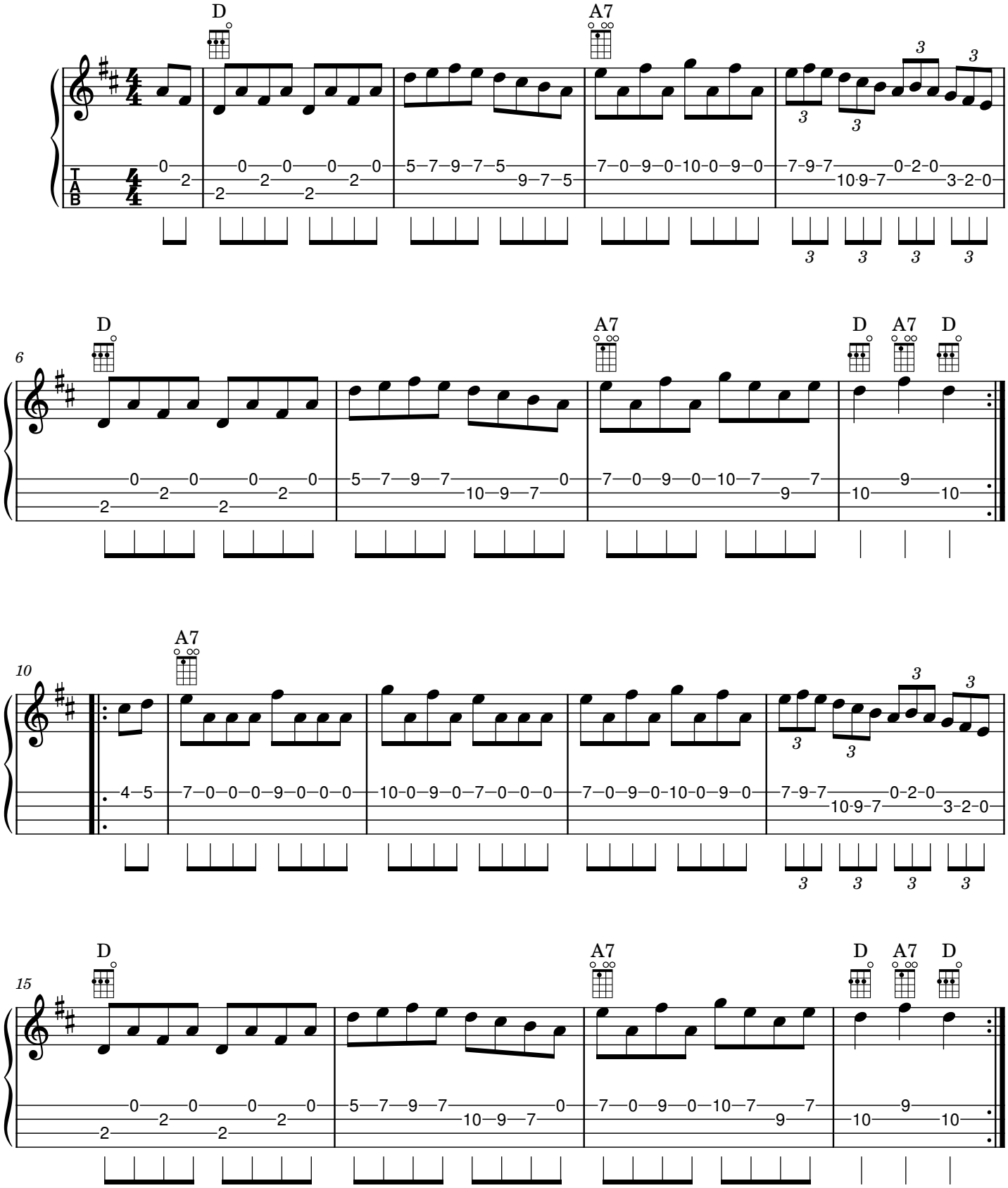
Traditional



The Harvest Home

Hornpipe

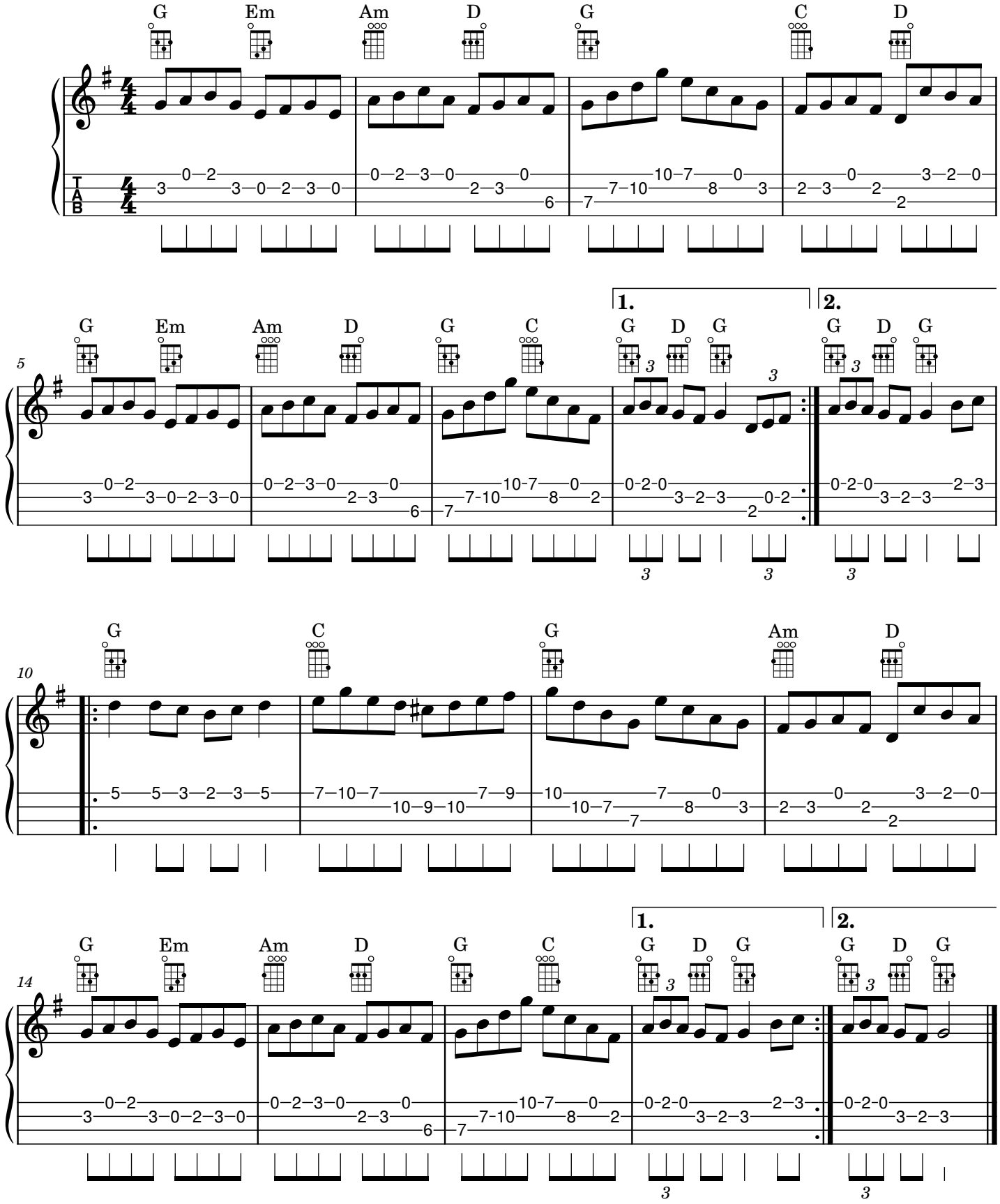
Traditional



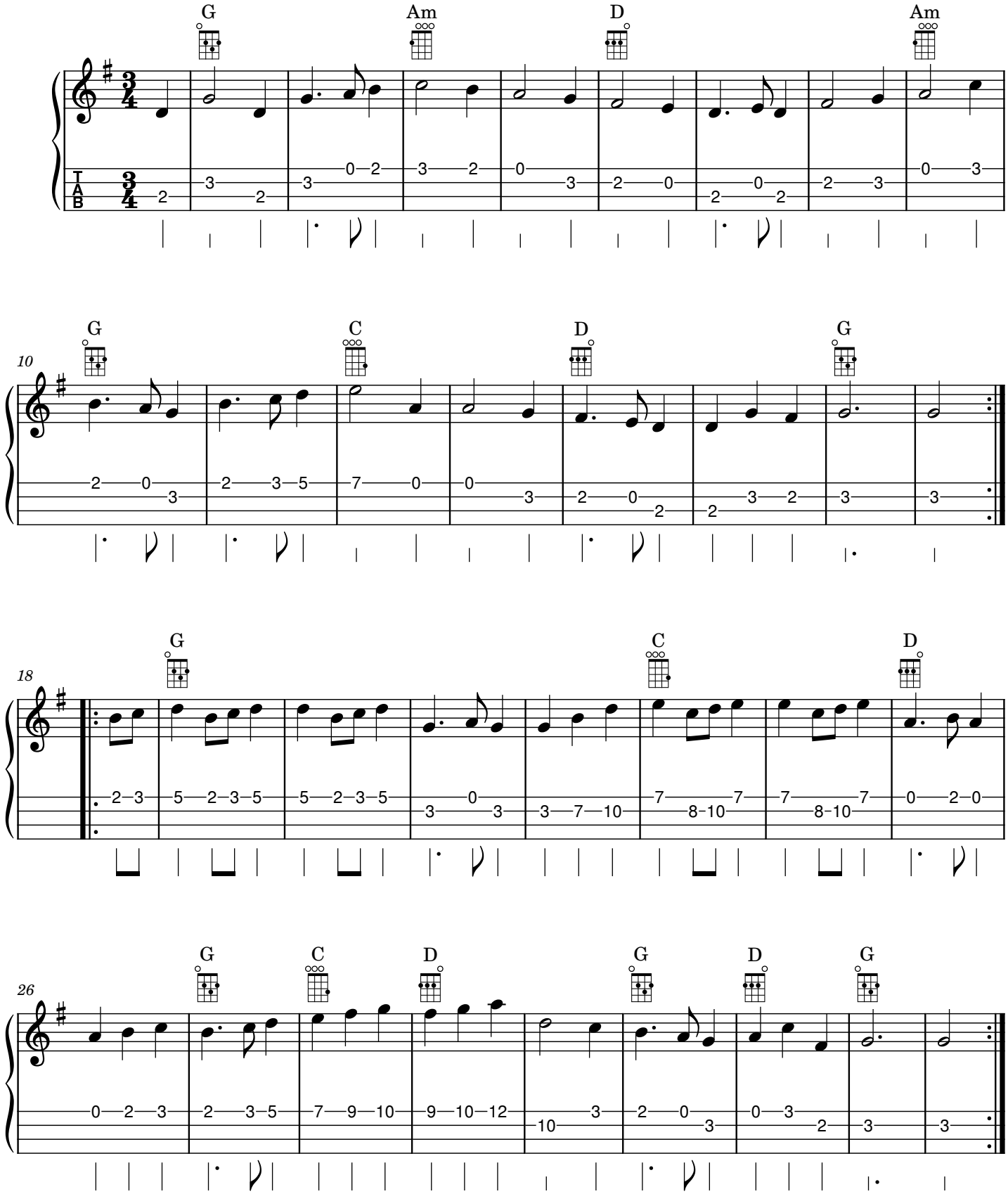
Murphy's Hornpipe

Hornpipe

Traditional



Planxty Fanny Power

Waltz

Turlough O'Carolan / Owsley