

Practical Concerns

Breaking strings: I haven't broken a string while retuning, but it happens. Some people say you can avoid that by using tunings which change only the low strings, since they're more forgiving (cross-A). Others say you should use tunings which change only the high strings, since you'll be tuning them lower rather than higher, causing less stress (cross-G). Either way, it doesn't hurt keep a spare set of strings on hand, just in case. Make sure that your bridge and nut are lubricated with graphite by running a sharp pencil through the notches when replacing your strings.

What kind of strings? Steel-core strings are going to be more forgiving of retuning than synthetic or gut strings. Rayna Gellert suggests D'Addario Helicore (with a Kaplan non-whistling E string); Greg Canote suggests Pirastro Chromcor. I've heard Prim works well, too. Synthetic strings take longer to settle into a new tuning, especially going lower, and may be more prone to breakage. Newer types of synthetic string may work better; I've had good results with D'Addario Zyex. These should all be around \$40 for a set.

Bridge tilt: keep an eye on this generally, but with frequent retuning it can become an issue more quickly. You want to make sure your bridge is at 90 degrees to the body; if you leave it tilted, it can warp.

Reasons to cross-tune

The obvious reason is that you're trying to play a tune the way you've heard someone else play it, and they're playing in a different tuning. Why would they be doing it, though?

Some tunes are just easier to play in a particular tuning -- you might not have to use your pinkie as much (or at all), for example. Some tunes use left hand pizzicato on notes which would have to be fretted in standard tuning -- is that even possible? Some tunes repeat a phrase in high and low octaves, and if your high and low strings are tuned an octave apart, the fingering is the same.

Sympathetic resonance: even if you're not bowing a string, it will vibrate in resonance with notes played on its harmonics. This can be a subtle effect, but it does give the instrument a fuller sound -- check out recordings of the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle (hardingfele) for an excellent demonstration.

Tonal changes across the board -- I think my own fiddle just sounds better tuned a little lower. Even if I'm not playing in a cross tuning, it can sound nice to tune everything down a whole step and play D tunes in C. Or, if you're playing in an environment where you need your instrument to cut through noise, tuning it up can help it project more. Tunes in AEAE are often dance tunes for a reason.

Drone strings are built-in backup. If you're playing solo, being able to hit drone strings which go well with the key you're playing in can provide rhythmic accents that give you a fuller sound. It can almost sound like there are two fiddlers playing, at times.

Reasons not to cross-tune

If you're going to be playing medleys with key changes, as is typical in an Irish session, for example, you probably don't want to be in a tuning that only works well in one or two keys.

Retuning takes time. If you're performing and have a tight schedule, you might want to minimize downtime between tunes, and retuning won't help with that.

If you're playing with a lot of fiddles. I personally think some of the things that make cross-tuning fun get lost in a jam with a ton of fiddles. That's just my opinion, though.

AEAE (GDGD, FCFC, etc)

“Cross-A”, “high bass, high tenor”, good for A and A modal tunes, especially ones which repeat a part in high and low octaves. Louder (AEAE), so good for dance tunes if unamplified; lower (GDGD and below), good for exploring tonality changes.

Cripple Creek (David Bragger) - John Brown’s Dream (Tommy Jarrell or Uncle Earl) - Mike in the Wilderness (Porterbelly Stringband) - Last of Callahan (Luther Strong/Bruce Molsky) - Cold Frosty Morning (Melvin Wine) - Old Yeller Dog (Rayna/Dan, not normally a cross tune?)

AEAC# (GDGB)

“Calico”, “Black Mountain Rag”, “Drunken Hiccups”, “Open-A”, has a distinctive sound to it, possibly from the unison C# drone. Good left hand pizzicato opportunities. “Troll tuning” in Norwegian.

Drunken Hiccups (Tommy Jarrell) - Jenny Nettles (Canotes) - Calico (Marcus Martin via the Canotes)

ADAE (GCGD, etc)

“Old-timey D tuning”, “high bass”, good for third finger unison D, sympathetic resonance on low A. Mainly used for tunes in D, but some A modal tunes as well. Most common hardanger tuning. Most D tunes can be played in this, if they don’t go to the low G, and benefit from the resonance on the low A.

D: Rose in the Mountain (Salyer) - Sal’s Got Mud Between Her Toes (Hog-Eyed Man)
A modal: Fine Times At Our House (Edden Hammons via Rayna Gellert)

DDAD

“D-dad”, “dead man’s tuning”, “open D”. The G string tuned down to D can sound floppy, but the drone is amazing if done well.

Washington’s March (David Bragger) - Coleman’s March (Pete Sutherland) - Yell In The Shoats (Indian Creek Delta Boys)

GDAD

Mostly used for G tunes, but some people play Bonaparte’s Retreat in D out of GDAD.

Greasy Coat (Dan Gellert) - Citico (Marcus Martin) - Ora Lee (Bob Carlin/James Bryan, Brittany Haas) - Betty Baker (Melvin Wine)

Others

AEAD (Old Sledge), EDAE (Glory in the Meetinghouse), EEAE (Get Up in the Cool), a ton of Norwegian hardanger tunings.

Recommended Artists:

Rayna Gellert, Marcus Martin, Erynn Marshall, David Bragger, Greg Canote, Tommy Jarrell, Grace Forrest, Melvin Wine, Emily Schaad, Roger Netherton, Howard Rains, Tricia Spencer, Dan Gellert, Brittany Haas, Rafe Stefanini, Clelia Stefanini, Bruce Molsky, Brad Leftwich

Recommended Albums:

Rayna Gellert: Ways of the World, Starch & Iron (<http://www.raynagellert.com/albums/>)
David Bragger: Big Fancy (<http://oldtimetikiparlour.com/category/david-bragger-debut-cd/>)
The Canote Brothers: Calico Pie, Makes Its Own Gravy, Dogs in the Dishes (<http://canote.com/listen.php>)
Marcus Martin: When I Get My New House Done (<http://bit.ly/MarcusMartin-NewHouse>)
Hog-Eyed Man: 1, 2, 3 (<http://www.cdbaby.com/Artist/HogeyedMan>)
Erynn Marshall: Meet Me in the Music, Calico (<http://dittyville.com/store/>)
Jason & Pharis Romero: Back Up and Push (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/jpraf>)
Tommy Jarrell: Tommy and Fred (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0000012EC>)

Great book/CD instruction set:

Old-Time Fiddle Round Peak Style: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/0786690186>

Recording resources:

Slippery Hill: <https://www.slippery-hill.com/>
Canote Stringband Class recordings: <http://stringband.mossyroof.com/>

Old Yeller Dog Come Trottin' Through the Meetinghouse: <https://youtu.be/Q8ZSJRcdnGc>

Old Yeller Dog Come Trottin' Through the Meetinghouse
From Rayna Gellert, "Ways of the World" (where she plays cross-F, not G)

Transcription by Josh Larios, 2016

Musical notation for the first system, measures 1-4. The system consists of a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody begins with a repeat sign. The guitar accompaniment is shown on a six-string staff with a D-G-B-D-G-B tuning. The fret numbers for the guitar are: 0 0 2 0 3 3 | 1 2 2 1 2 1 0 3 | 1. 2 1 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 3 3 4 3 0 1 1.

Musical notation for the second system, measures 5-8. The system includes a first ending bracket over measures 7 and 8. The guitar accompaniment fret numbers are: 0 0 2 0 3 3 | 2 2 1 2 1 0 3 3 | 1 0 1 2 0 1 0 0 | 0. 3 3 3 1 0. 3 3 0.

Musical notation for the third system, measures 9-12. The system includes a measure rest for the first measure. The guitar accompaniment fret numbers are: 3 0 0 0 0 4. 0 0 1 2 2 2 1 2 1 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 0 1 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0.

Musical notation for the fourth system, measures 13-16. The system includes a first ending bracket over measures 15 and 16. The guitar accompaniment fret numbers are: 0. 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 2 1 0 | 0. 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 0. 0 0 3 3 3 3 1 0 0 0 0 0.