by Don Skoog

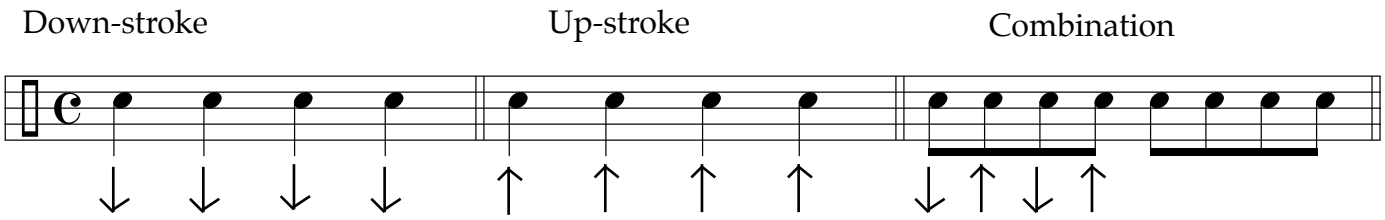
Introduction to the Bodhrán

The Irish *bodhrán* (prounouced bow-rón) is the only frame drum in Northern Europe. A frame drum is any drum whose head is larger than the frame. This type of drum is found all over the world, but how it got to Ireland is a matter of some contention. One theory is that it developed from a grain winnow called a *wecht*, which is a piece of sheepskin stretched over a circular wooden frame. It is believed that this sieve was just impressed into service as an instrument and that it evolved over time into the modern drum. The other theory is that the drum was brought to the island either by Spanish, Moorish, or Arab traders. The similarities between the bodhrán and the Arabic *tar* are quite remarkable, so it is easy to see why people see a connection with the two. The problem with this theory is that, despite centuries of trade between Ireland and the Mediterranean world, there just isn't any hard evidence that the drum was brought to the Island.

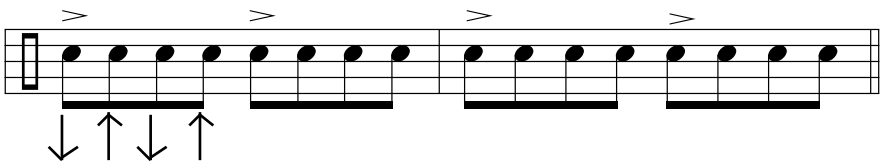
However it got there, the bodhrán is now very popular, and the most important of the two Irish percussion instruments (the other being the bones). There is a great deal of variation among the different types of drums: some have cross pieces, some are tunable, some have artificial drum heads. There are also many different tippers (the drumstick) and playing techniques. And, of course each style - and only that style - is the correct one.

Despite the disagreements about how to play this or that rhythm the basics are actually fairly simple. There is a down-stroke and an up-stroke that are combined to play the two basic Irish musical styles, the *reel* and the *jig*. Here are some basic stroke exercises and combinations. Remember, playing the bodhrán requires a certain knack that takes time to develop, so be patient.

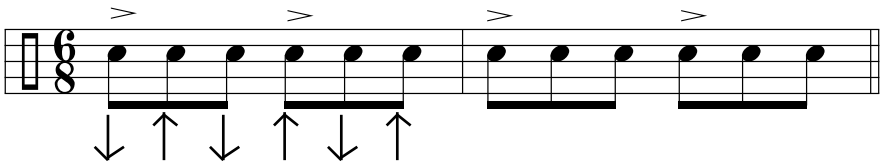
Basic Stroke Exercises



Preparation for the Reel



Preparation for the Jig



Practice these exercises very slowly at first, bringing the tempo up a little at a time. Don't sacrifice the sound or feel of the rhythm to get speed. Be patient.

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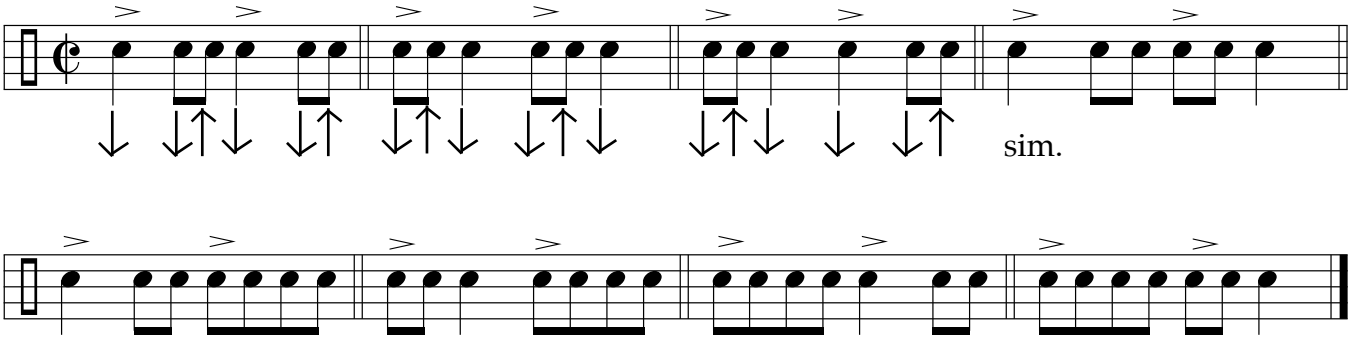
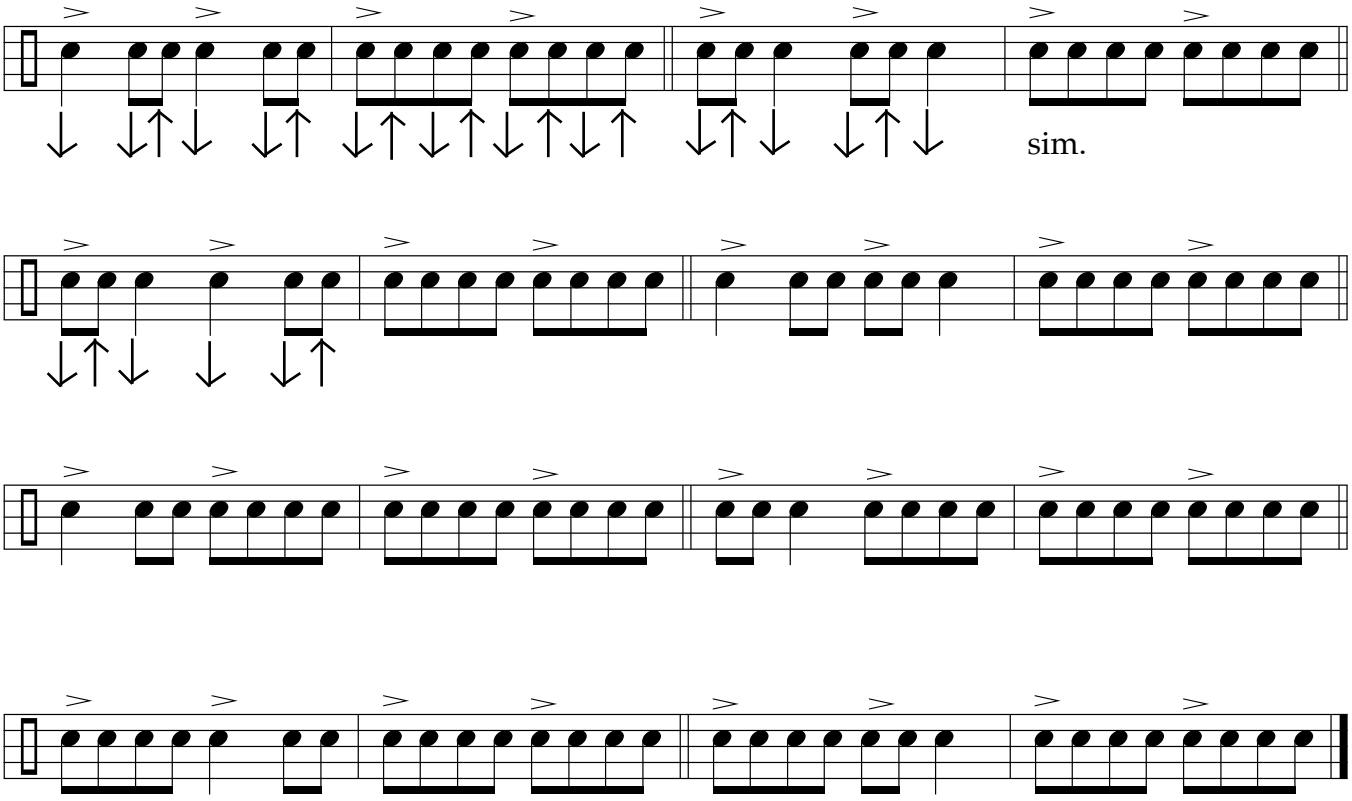
The Reel

The reel is the most common of all Irish dance rhythms. It is in '2' and can be moderate to very fast in tempo. The rhythmic variations are produced by dropping notes (lifting the tipper off the head) while still keeping the basic arm motion going. Here are eight basic patterns. Practice each one separately and master them before going to the next section.



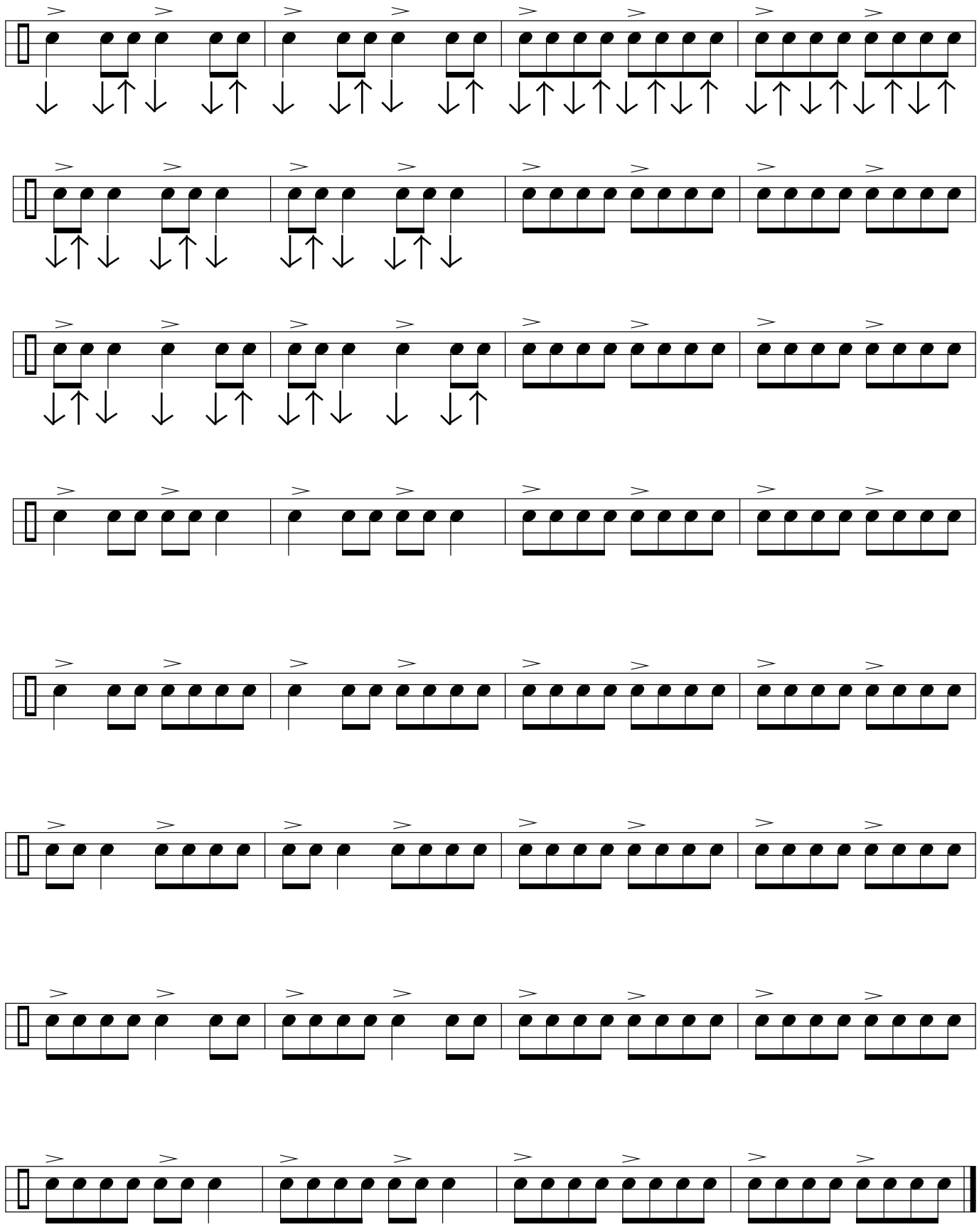
Two Bar Exercises

Practice each exercise separately before playing them one time each without stopping.



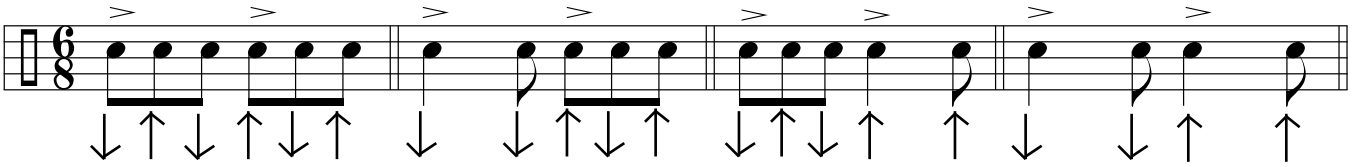
Four Bar Exercises

Practice each line separately then play the page down as one exercise



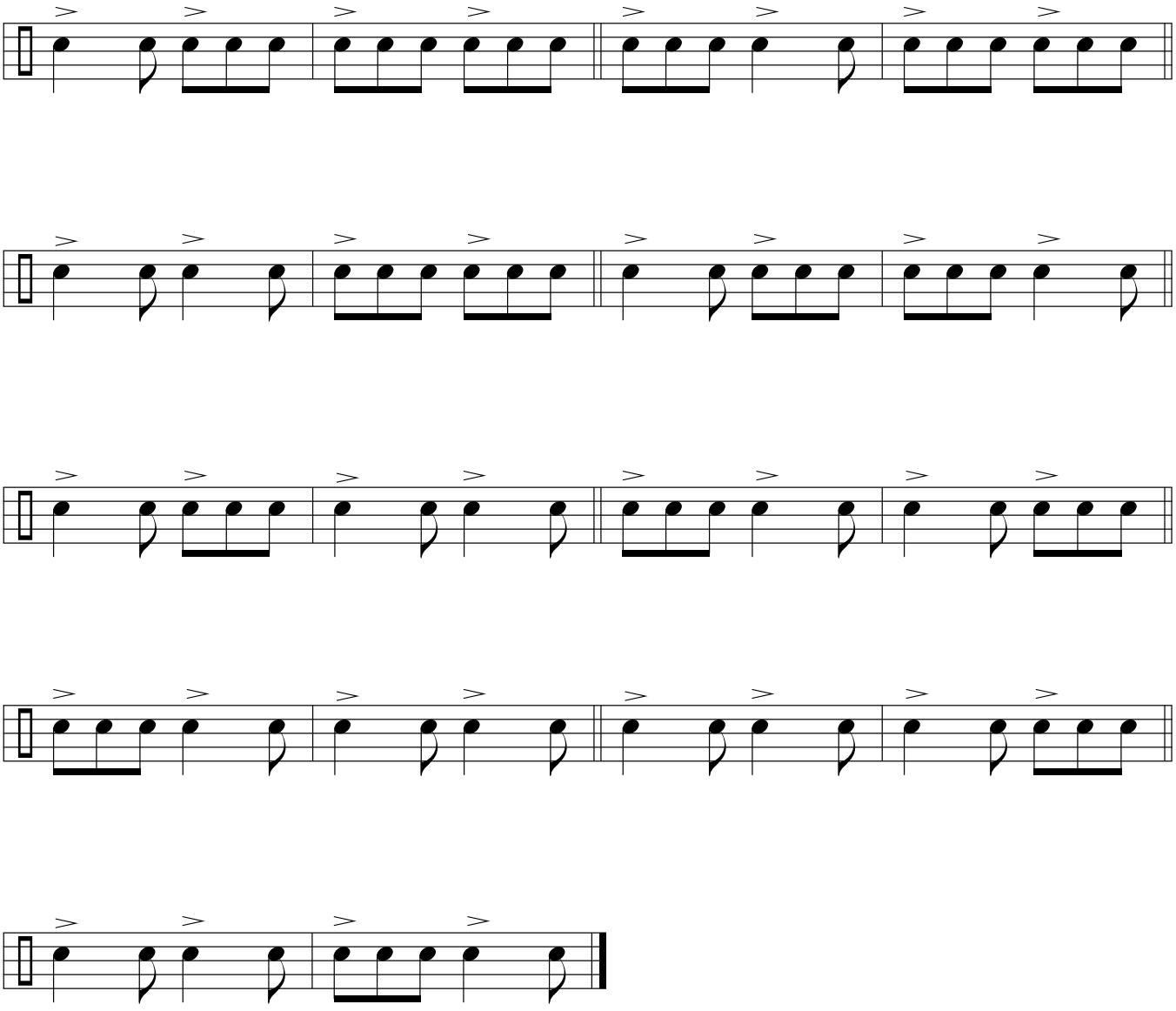
The Jig

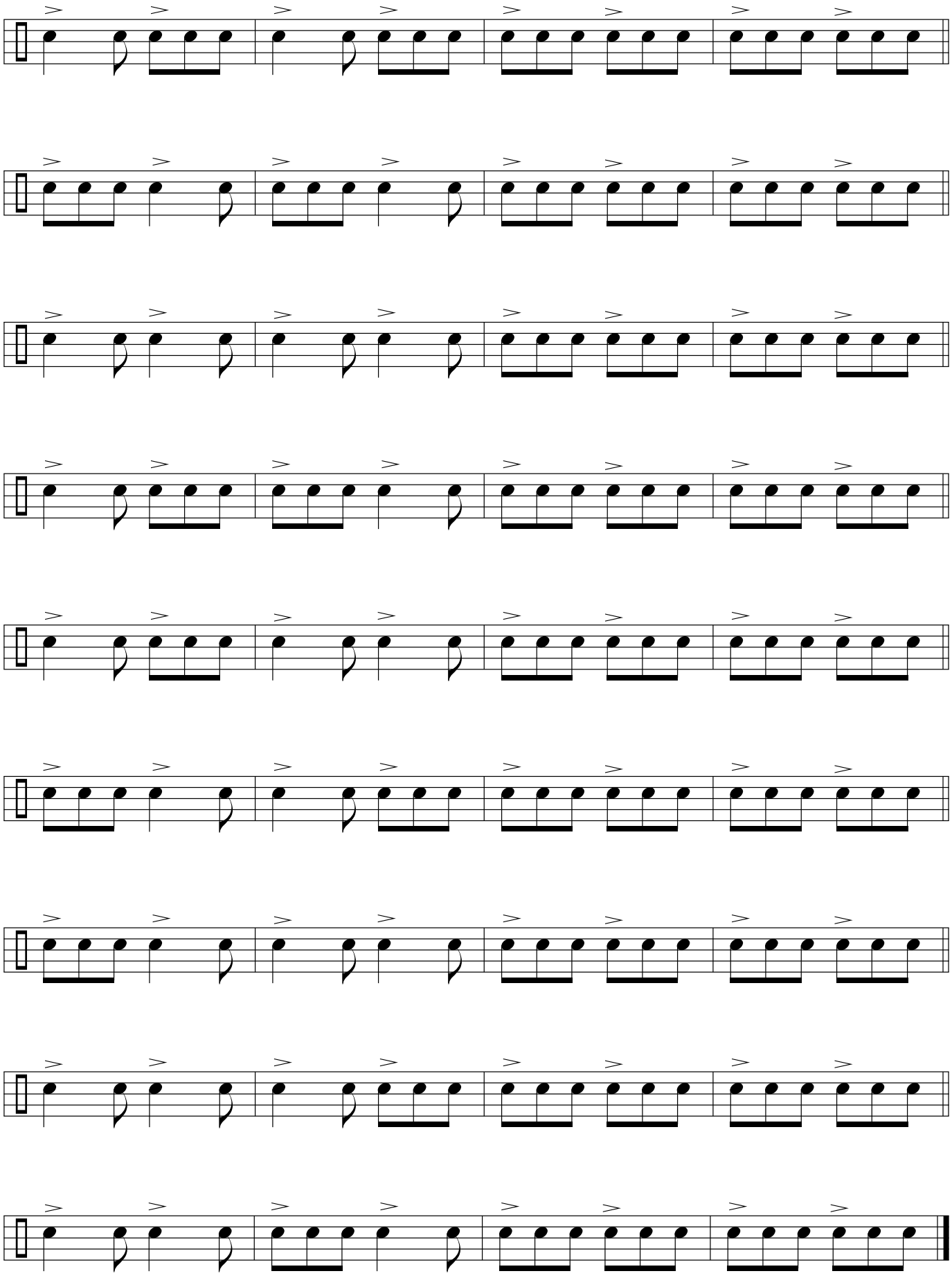
The jig is the next most common Irish rhythm. It is written in six/eight but, though generally slower than the reel, is fast enough to feel in '2'. Again, the rhythmic variations are produced by dropping notes. Here are four basic patterns. Master each one before going on to the next set.



Two Bar Exercises

Practice each exercise separately before playing them one time each without stopping.



Four Bar Exercises

Practice each line separately then play the page straight through.