



Plectrum Banjo Technique

The Importance of Scales to Music - Part 2

by Ron Hinkle

Imagine this: While listening to an unaccompanied melody, being able to ‘hear’ the chords that go along with it. The common belief is that “*you either have it or you don’t.*” I was apparently ‘born’ with the ability; as a teacher—because I take it for granted—I struggle with how to teach it to those who weren’t so blessed. I like to think that I may be on to something here though; I believe it *can* be taught, and that scales are the ‘key’!

In my last article (BMG, Autumn 2016), I introduced the idea of the ‘chord-function’ approach to scale study. In summary, every note of a scale should be heard in the context of an implied chord (Tonic, Dominant, or Sub-Dominant—or simply ‘T-D-S’ for the purposes of this essay); again, *I believe this can be learned.* The same can be said for melodies, which are nothing but elaborated scales/arpeggios (reason enough to *learn your scales and arpeggios!*). These implied chords give structure and direction to the music, and allow the perceptive musician to ‘predict’ which chord is coming next, based on the melody. Spend enough time practicing and listening to scales and well-written melodies, and you will begin to hear this connection. My intent here is to ‘put a bug in your ear,’ and perhaps give you a shortcut to this aural understanding.

Eddie Peabody taught the T-D-S approach in relation to his chord melody technique; here is the illustration from his method book. As you can see, he played a chord with each scale note, and they were all T-D-S chords (C, G7, C, F, C, F, G7, C). The only difference between this and what I wrote in the last article is the chord for the G (fifth chord from the left); that *note* by itself is *the Dominant*, and should thus be represented by a Dominant 7th chord (G7).

C SCALE IN CHORDS

C Scale Melody

However; it sounds fine as a Tonic chord, because it (the G) is played together with the two Tonic notes (C and E). Take away the C and E however, and the G becomes a very un-stable note. To illustrate this, play both of these chord-scales; A is of course exactly the same as above (in one octave), while B uses the Dominant 7 chord in place of the Tonic. Hesitate on that fifth chord in each example and *listen* (technically, the other G chords should be 7th chords as well, but I wanted to keep this simple):

They are both ‘correct’ in context; you should learn to hear that note as a Tonic *and/or* a Dominant note, depending on where the music is going. This process will exercise your ear and allow you to decide which to use, depending on the situation. Practice this series of chords, keeping that all-important scale note (the highest note in this example) in your ear for each one; obviously, the more you play them, the better you’ll hear it! And remember, hearing scale notes in T-D-S context is the whole point of this.

The plectrum banjo chord melody technique is based on playing chords that have the melody on the highest string, but what would happen if we put the melody (in this case, the scale) on another string? In this next example, I have moved the scale to the 4th string, with the T-D-S chords on the other three. In this inversion, the Tonic C chord (in place of the circled Dominant chord) would sound out of place (try it!), and thus **wrong**.

Try this with simple melodies; play just the melody without the accompanying chords, and try to ‘hear’ the chord that would ‘naturally’ be there. Alternate between playing the melody with and without chords, and see if you can begin to make this aural connection. For an interesting experiment, play a *wrong* chord occasionally (with the correct melody note). Being able to hear (and identify) what’s obviously ‘wrong’ is a strong step toward hearing what’s ‘right!’ Once you have trained yourself to predict the *correct* chords, then it’s simply a matter of learning a few standard, *predictable* ‘chord progressions’ (a subject for another article, perhaps?). This is the very definition of playing by ear!

Part 3 will cover another distinct ‘way of thinking’ about this; the more-difficult ‘Modal’ chord-scale approach. This way is more pure musically, and is based on playing two, three, or four unique *scales* together to form a series of ‘Diatonic’ (as opposed to T-D-S) *chords*. This comes from Classical music theory, and is thus how music for the pre-Jazz Age ‘classic’ banjo (Grimshaw, Cammeyer, etc.) was written; it is also the standard approach for modern jazz. Both approaches apply to the banjo—in different contexts—and are thus both important to learn.

I hope this adds fuel to the scale-learning fire; there simply is *no getting around* them, *if you want to truly learn about music!*

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