



Plectrum Banjo Technique - Triads

by Ron Hinkle

In this continuing series of articles, I am attempting to make the subject of scales a bit more interesting and practical for plectrum banjoists. This is no small task! My best answer to the inevitable question of ‘why learn scales?’ is still ‘because they’re good for you!’ The important thing to realize though is that it’s not so much the ‘scales’ themselves that are important; it’s the simple fact that music as an overall ‘theory’ *would crumble without them*. Learning music theory in the ‘Mothership’ context of scales is the most correct and logical way to proceed; this is how the classic banjo composers - *being classically trained* - wrote. As they *wrote*, so shall we *play*!

Triads are an important off-shoot of scales, and the subject of this article. I will limit this discussion to the top three strings of the plectrum banjo. The majority of the music written for the classic banjo uses *three-string* chords almost exclusively. Most plectrum banjoists today use *four-string* chords *all of the time* (in the chord melody Vaudeville tradition)! Getting used to the three-string chords is one of the first steps to learning the classic style; learning the Triads is a shortcut to this, and a path to learning the simple music theory that goes into it.

So, a Triad is simply the 1-3-5 of a *chord* (or the 1st, 3rd, and 5th degrees of a *scale*. . .or the three notes that make up an *arpeggio*. Hmmmm. . .chords, scales, arpeggios. . .*one and the same things!*). There are only four Triads in our music (modern theory identifies a couple more, but we don’t use them, so I won’t mention them); all the rest of the chords we play are built from them. They are Major, Augmented, Minor, and Diminished. Think of C-E-G in a C Major Triad (1st 2nd and 3rd strings, barred at the fifth fret); to make a C Augmented, simply sharp the G (C-E-G#); to make a C Minor, flat the E (C-Eb-G); to make a C Diminished, flat the E *and* G (C-Eb-Gb).

Root Inversion				1st Inversion				2nd Inversion			
C	C ⁺	C _m	C ^o	C	C ⁺	C _m	C ^o	C	C ⁺	C _m	C ^o
5	6	5	4	10	10	10	10	14	14	13	13
5	5	4	4	8	9	8	7	13	13	13	13
5	5	5	5	9	9	8	8	12	13	12	11

Because there are three notes in a Triad, there are three inversions. Think of them as the same notes ‘stacked’ in three different ways: C-E-G (1-3-5, or Root Inversion), E-G-C (3-5-1, or First Inversion), and G-C-E (5-1-3, or Second Inversion). In plectrum tuning, the inversions are based on which note is on the third string, adding credence to the three-string chord concept. Because of the unique tuning of the top three strings (Major 3rd, Minor 3rd), simply strumming them *open* gives you a G Major Triad (G-B-D); how much simpler can this be? Notice that all inversions of the Augmented chord are the same chord shape; these are the fascinating little details that really turn me on to music theory!

Chord Melody theory names the chords by which note is on the *top* (melody) string: 1st Position = C (1) on the top string; 3rd Position = E (3) on top; 5th Position = G (5) on top. Please note that ‘inversion’ and ‘position’ - while *similar* - are two *very different* concepts; they both work, but only one is based on proper music theory (inversion). To avoid confusion between the two and gain a more correct understanding of music I recommend you sell your musical soul to the classical theory Gods.

Note that in a chord scale, only three of the Triads are used; the Augmented does not have a place in it. It *is* used in the *Harmonic Minor* chord scale however; this is a result of the sharpened 7 of the Harmonic Minor scale (G# in the key of A Minor). I include it here just to stretch your ear a bit and to hopefully pique your curiosity. A closely-related subject I want to cover is how to play three-string Dominant 7th chords. A 7th chord of course has *four* notes (a Triad and an ‘extension’). . .so why play only *three* when you have *four* strings available? Besides the fact that the classic composers rarely used four-string chords (ah, *tradition!*), I think you will find that they have more pleasant voicings, allow for more correct voice-leading in most musical situations, and are of course easier to play. An often-overlooked but important aspect is the physical precision and control required to consistently strum only three strings; a *disciplined* picking hand is a *strong* picking hand.

There are three main situations where you *would* use the 4th string in this genre: When the melody or root note is on the 4th string; where the chord is on the bottom two or three strings (like the last Am and B Diminished chords in the example above); or for dramatic contrast (the sound contrast between three and four-string chords is noticeable). These fine details really make the music!

Anyway, of the four notes in a Dominant 7 chord, only *two* are vital; the 3rd, and the 7th (which form a Tritone interval). The root *and/or* the 5th can go away, without losing the Dominant 7 Tritone *sound*. In the context of Triads, for each one there are two ways to form a 7th (giving you a total of 6 possible three-string 7th chords). You can either go *down* from the Root to the 7 (R>7), or you can go *up* from the 5 to the 7 (5<7). In the example shown, I use the D7 chord—the ‘dominant’ of the key of G.

Notice that the R>7 shapes are exactly the same as the Diminished chords of the Modal Chord Scales (7th degree of the scale); I point this out to show how closely related the two chords are, and to commiserate with your confusion! What truly separates the Dominant 7 chord and the Diminished chord is of course the fourth note, which we are not dealing with here.

So, what does all this *theory* have to do with *technique*? The development of good technique requires proper things to practice and get good at. If you practice the *wrong* things, you just get good at *them*. Why not practice the *correct* things (as simple as they may be), and *understand* them to boot? In the case of Triads, it couldn’t be simpler! Understanding why these simple chord shapes are what they are, and how they relate to the Mothership concept of scales is the key to a much deeper understanding of music in general.

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