

Power Banjo

By: Michael Keyes



Irish music had been around a long time when the tenor banjo was introduced. There is no way you could argue that it is a traditional instrument but it is established and is beginning to define its place.

Musicians are starting to explore the full variety of musical qualities that the banjo brings to Irish traditional music (ITM.) If you listen to top level musicians playing the older instruments such as the uilleann pipes, you will here them testing the limits and developing new ways to present the music. Recently such musicians as John Carty, Gerry O'Connor, and Angelina Carberry have been doing The same on the banjo.

ITM limits the players in many ways. It has always been a dance music and only recently a stage style of music. As a result melody and rhythm are foremost and originally there were no backup instruments. You don't improvise ITM the way you would in jazz by keeping within the chordal structure while experimenting with the notes. (In fact, some people will say that if there is any improvisation in ITM, it is within the chord structure.) Instead what Irish musicians do is explore the individual characteristics of their instrument and use the melody to broadcast these differences while subtly pushing the rhythm.

So what are these characteristics that make the banjo unique? First, of course, is the timbre. Nothing sounds like a banjo. It can be heard above almost every instrument without being too obnoxiously loud. The tonal characteristic of banjos is usually described as treble in nature, but in the GDAE tuning there is a component of bass that has

been mostly unexplored until recently.

Second is the dynamic range. Most people think LOUD when we talk about dynamic range, but banjos have a broad dynamic range in the hands of an expert. John Carty is especially good at taking advantage of this element.

Third is a certain amount of sustain. While you may think that the banjo has no sustain (Bluegrass banjo players try to avoid it), the banjo can be setup for sustain and this is a positive quality in an Irish banjo. The sustain is short compared to many of the other instruments in the genera and you won't find a banjo player exploiting it the way a piper or fiddler does, but it adds to the overall sound and can be used for left hand ornamentation in a way that makes the banjo more interesting.

These three characteristics are important in learning to play the Irish tenor banjo. I am going to give a few examples of how they can be used and how the power of the banjo can make the the music more complex and varied without going beyond the boundaries that make the music traditional.

Low End Playing

If you listen to banjo players like John Carty will begin to notice that they often play tunes in keys that are not considered traditional. "Traditional" in this case usually means the keys of D, Em, G, and Am – the keys that a tin whistle plays in.

I mention the tin whistle because virtually every child in Ireland is taught to play this simple instrument (which probably accounts for the fact that so many people in Ireland don't play it any more) and as a result tunes are usually not only in the keys of this instrument, but in the range of the tin whistle too.

This means that the G string of an Irish banjo is rarely used. A quarter of all notes and about half of the really powerful notes are not used as a result.

Banjo players have remedied this by either incorporating the G string into the tunes anyway by using double stops and two string chords or by changing the tuning.

Here is an example. I took the wonderful tune “Cooley’s” and changed the key from Em to Am.

By doing so I take full advantage of the drone effect of the G string (on the second fret it is an A note) and add the power of the lower register of the banjo. “Cooley’s” sounds good in Em on the banjo, but it sounds great in Am.

Cooley's

Joe Mills

Cooley's

Joe Mills

Cooley's in Am MP3

Listen to the MP3:

Cooley's in Am Video

View the video:

Left Hand Ornamentation

Most of us think of the triplet as the only ornamentation that the banjo can use, but there are a host of left hand ornamentations that are available. Included are cuts and hammer ons and string

bending which sounds great on certain tunes.

Here is a repeat from the April 2007 banjosections article teaching cuts and hammer-ons.

Cuts and Hammer-ons Video

View the video

The Monaghan



Rhythm: jig

Notes: This is the third part only, bend the strings at the ~ sign

Monaghan Bend MP3

Listen to the MP3:

The Monaghan Jig Arranged by Michael Keyes

Musical notation for 'The Monaghan Jig' in treble clef, key of D major, and 6/8 time. The piece consists of seven staves of music. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and contains a melody. The second staff continues the melody. The third staff continues the melody. The fourth staff continues the melody. The fifth staff continues the melody and includes notes marked with a tilde (~) above them, indicating string bends. The sixth staff continues the melody and includes notes marked with a tilde (~) above them, indicating string bends. The seventh staff continues the melody and ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Rhythm: jig

Notes: ~ means a bend

This is a short video on using string bending using the “Monaghan Jig” as an example. While bending strings might sound “bluesy”, it really imitates some

of the sounds the uilleann pipes make.

Monaghan Jig Video

View the video:

Banjoes have a lot to offer ITM and there is a lot more to explore before we realize the full potential of the instrument. I hope this is a start for many of you.

Resources

My Youtube source name michaelkeyes12 <http://www.youtube.com/user/michaelkeyes12>, check it out for other videos from Mel Bay Banjosessions.

If you don't have Quicktime for the videos in the archived lessons, you can get it here: <http://www.apple.com/quicktime/>

Check out <http://www.youtube.com/user/MelBayPublications>, Mel Bay on Youtube for more videos from Mel Bay

About the Author

Mike Keyes, a native of Franklin, Tennessee, has played tenor banjo since 1957 and over the years has learned to play five string banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He earned his way through college and medical school playing in bluegrass and dixieland bands and currently plays in the Irish band "Maggie's Misfortune." He is an expert in sports performance and has written a book and over 200 articles on the subject.

His interest in Irish music started a number of years ago when effort to learn more about his musical roots led him to the discovery of session playing. Since then he has been to Ireland to learn more about the music and has taken classes and interviewed such banjo greats as John Carty, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O'Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin where he practices Psychiatry. You can email him at mikeyes@charter.net if you wish to discuss some aspect of the Irish tenor banjo or go to his web site at www.mikekeyes.com.