

More On the Left Hand

By: Michael Keyes

The left hand is not as important as the right hand in Irish tenor banjo, but it does have a lot to say about how you develop style. The right hand drives the music, gives it the lilt, and sets the most important ornament, the treble or triplet. On the other hand (pun intended) the left hand makes the endeavor more musical while doing a little ornamentation on the side. In the hands of masters, the combination wonderful. We have already talked about the basics of how to use your left hand (<http://www.banjosessions.com/jun05/woodchoppers.html>) but this time I want to develop a few ornaments and devices to make the tunes more musical. Most of the ideas are familiar - , hammer-ons and pull-offs – but are used in a way to make the tune Irish. Many of the ornaments that are used in the various instruments found in Irish music were originally heard on the uilleann pipes (uilleann means “elbow” in Irish) which is a type of bagpipe developed over the centuries and used widely in Ireland. Since you cannot articulate notes on a bagpipe by breathing, grace notes are used both for musical and rhythmic purposes. There are a number of these grace note ornaments: crans, rolls, cuts, etc. but because the banjo has little sustain, we can only attempt to sound like them. We will never succeed, but the effort is usually enough to sound alike.

I am going to use a hornpipe, Kitty’s Wedding, and a reel, The Wise Maid, to illustrate some of these

ornaments. All you really need is just a few to get by, but you should incorporate them into your music as you develop a style and develop new ornaments as you improve.

The Cut

A cut is a very quick note that precedes a note that is part of the tune. It consists of just touching a note higher than the note you want heard. You don’t really even have to make that note clear, just so it fits in the rhythm and complements the note. You can pick any note, but some sound better than others especially if it is in the scale that you are playing. The action is a quick hammer-on/pull-off that sounds like DA-YINK when played. It is important to get the rhythm right.

Hammer-on.

The next ornament is the hammer-on, a basic technique that most of us have used in the past. There will be times when we can’t play the note with the right hand and need to use another device (or not play the note, which is OK, too) such as the hammer-on.

Both are illustrated in this video.

Kitty’s Wedding

Download the Movie:

KittysWedding.mov from <http://BanjoSessions.com>

Rhythm: hornpipe

Notes: Used to demonstrate hammer-on and cut

Kitty’s Wedding

Arranged by Michael J. Keyes, MD

The image displays four staves of musical notation for the tune 'Kitty's Wedding'. The notation is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The first staff contains four measures, with the first measure featuring a 'Cut' ornament above the first note, and the second and fourth measures also featuring 'Cut' ornaments. The second staff contains four measures, with the second measure featuring a 'Cut' ornament and the third measure featuring a 'Hammer-on' ornament. The third and fourth staves each contain four measures of continuous eighth-note patterns, with the fourth staff ending with a double bar line and repeat dots. The ornaments are clearly labeled above the notes they apply to.

The Lead Note

If you listen to John Carty, you will be struck by how much he uses this device to great advantage. It is sort of a slow hammer-on that almost sounds like a slide (sliding into a note is more of an North American convention, but used more and more in Irish banjo music) but it is a rhythmic device to emphasize a note.

You play a leading note and then hammer on into the main note which gives a feeling of anticipation and resolution.

Wise Maid

Download the Movie:

WiseMaid.mov from <http://BanjoSessions.com>

The Wise Maid

Arranged by Michael Keyes, MD

Lead Note

Lead Note

Lead Note

1 Lead Note

2 Lead Note

Lead Note

cut

Hammer-on

1

2

Rhythm: Reel

Notes: Used to demonstrate the Lead Note (and also cuts and hammer-ons)

The key to using these devices is listening to a lot of Irish music, especially the fiddle and uilleann pipes. With just these three tools, you can develop a pleasant style that fits in the music and if you add on slides and pull-offs you will have a terrific set of tools to play the music.

References

If you really want to know a lot of other ornaments, go to our sister site, [MandolinSessions](http://MandolinSessions.com), and read Roger

Landes' article on "Celtic Mandolin" (<http://www.mandolinsessions.com/feb05/celtic.html>). Roger has studied Irish ornamentation for years and is able to translate them to the mandolin. He is also an accomplished banjo player and a terrific teacher. You can learn more at his site <http://www.rogerlandes.com/> Check out the various videos of Mick Moloney and John Carty in the archives of [BanjoSessions](http://BanjoSessions.com) and see how these masters combine left and right hand ornamentation.



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 “Good Luck.” 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.