

Slowhand Irish Banjo

By Michael Keyes



Several years ago I took a workshop from John Carty who lamented the fact that few banjo players liked to play slow tunes. He thought that the banjo had a lot of potential in that direction and that it should be explored more. I was pleased to hear Mick Moloney say the same thing at the 2008 O'Flaherty Retreat where he taught tenor banjo. Mick had just cut his latest CD, "Green Fields of America" which contains several slower tunes, all beautifully done. One of them is Planxty Miss Maxwell, an O'Carolan tune that sounds good on almost any instrument but has a special feel on the banjo. Mick thought that the "harp on a stick" could play a lot of tunes slowly and he spent three days convincing us that he was correct.

Here is a video of Mick teaching us the tune:

http://www.youtube.com/v/svr-qrg_98o&hl=en&fs=1

Planxty Miss Maxwell

Furlough O'Carolan



Rhythm: Ait

Notes: Attanged by Michael Keyes

The whole secret to playing slowly is control. Mick uses down strokes exclusively in this piece with the exception of triplets. The reason for this is two fold: you have better control over both volume and the tone with down strokes. In slow tunes the dynamics are very important and they can make or break the tune.

Down strokes also take advantage of the inherent qualities of the banjo. You can get much better sustain with a down stroke and you can play double or even triple stops easily. With a down stroke the lower note is played a fraction before the higher melody note which gives the tune a lot of flavor. Playing the banjo slowly is not an easy task. For one thing it requires a sense of musicality,

something that not all banjo players have but can be developed. For another you have to hit each note to its fullest value. You can't just gloss over the note the way you can if you are playing a fast reel. In addition you have to add as much as you can to the tune. Playing just the notes is boring, but if you add double stops, ornamentation and some imagination, the tune will come to life.

One other thing that playing slowly does is allow you to play more efficiently. Every stroke and every note has a positive place in the tune. You have to play each note as if you really mean it. After a while this becomes second nature and it will show up in your playing as stylistic features unique to you. In addition playing will become automatic so that the tune goes from your head to your fingers without having to be interpreted by other parts of your brain.

Ironically the end result is that you play more smoothly but perceive it as being able to play faster. So Slowhand leads to playing faster.

The reason for this is simple. As you learn to play a tune slowly, you become much more involved in the tune both intellectually and emotionally. With this kind of bond to the tune comes a natural relaxation. You will find that when you are in a more stressful situation such as a session or on the stage that the tunes you have integrated like this are much easier to play. Tension is the cause of not being able to play fast (because both flexor and extensor muscles are firing off at the same time in a tense situation slowing you down) and if you are one with the tune, you should be able to play relaxed it in any environment.

Here is another well known tune, Maid Behind the Bar, played slowly by Mick.

The Maid Behind the Bar MP3

Download the MP3: <http://banjosessions.com/feb09/TheMaidBehindTheBar.mp3>

The Maid Behind the Bar

Arranged by Michael Keyes



The musical notation is presented in four staves. The first staff begins with a D chord and contains a series of eighth notes. The second staff includes a first ending with A7 and D chords, and a second ending with A7 and D chords. The third staff features a G chord and an Em chord. The fourth staff contains an Em, Bm, A7, and D chord. The music is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#).

You will notice that there is a lot more music than what is shown in the notation. Listen closely to Mick's playing and see if you can glean some more ideas from him. I've included that chords that go well with this tune to help you work out suitable double and triple stops.

Reference

Mick Moloney teaches at NYU and is often on the road with his various musical projects. His web site is at <http://www.mickmoloney.com/>. If you ever get a chance to see him or go to a workshop do so.

His latest album is The Green Fields of America which you can get here:

http://www.ossianusa.com/Merchant2/merchant.mv?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=ossian&Product_Code=01710-CD

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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 "Drowsy Maggie." 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, Angelina Carberry, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O'Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. 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 <http://www.mikekeyes.com>.