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UNDERSTANDING MUSIC — A PATH TO FOLLOW

By Dr. Tim Lake

Once we have established the understanding of how music works as the foundation of our musical experience, then our efforts will be continually reinforced by factual knowledge that will allow us to undertake all styles of music. As banjo players, once Scruggs style technique is embedded in musical understanding, we will be able to sit down with our friends and play anything from *Cripple Creek* to *Dear Old Dixie*. Not only are we now able to perform very impressive instrumental solos but through our understanding we can play "back up" to songs that come from musical styles other than bluegrass such as country, folk and rock 'n roll music.

It is essential to play with others in order to develop ability and, more importantly, confidence. We will most definitely increase our chances of meeting people to play with if we can accompany others on songs that fall outside the genre of bluegrass music. In other words, finding a guitar player to play with who knows John Prine's *Paradise* (a.k.a., *Muhlenberg County*) will be much easier than finding one who knows *Ground Speed*. When I began playing the banjo at age seventeen, I was the only one in my group of friends that even liked bluegrass music. Therefore, I would spend many valuable hours gaining experience playing a 'little banjo' on *Paradise*. Eventually, I found a group of bluegrass pickers to jam with every Wednesday night. Even though we came from very different backgrounds, they were nice enough to allow me to play with them and learn the traditional songs that are part of bluegrass music. We are now ready to continue our growth by learning to play fiddle tunes in what we commonly call the melodic style.

I have always found it somewhat ironic that we banjo players can be considered good musicians by being able to execute the Scruggs repertoire and never be required to play a single major scale. When studying most instruments, one of the first things we ever do is learn how to play scales. Traditionally, banjo players never need to deal with scales until we try to play fiddle tunes 'note-for-note' with the fiddle. Fiddle tunes require a melodic approach or one that is based on the understanding of scales. My first encounter with melodic playing occurred when I heard Bill Keith's work on the Muleskinner record and with Bobby Thompson's introduction to the popular television show *Hee Haw*. Bobby Thompson does a wonderful major descending line in thirds (I believe G major), while the section that really impressed me on the Muleskinner record was Bill Keith's introduction to David Grisman's *Opus 57 in G Minor* where he does a descending G minor scale in thirds. At the time, the mid 1970's, I was a virtual beginner, and I had my 'hands full' trying to play basic banjo, so quite frankly, these recordings sounded much too advanced for a fledgling player like me to ever attempt. I did attempt them however, and was stymied by my lack of musical knowledge.

When I started, I did not know how to read or understand music and subsequently did not have the tools to even begin to learn a descending G minor scale in thirds. I assembled my knowledge by 'trial and error' in a piecemeal fashion over many years. Believe it or not, I would try to sort through music's mathematical relationships even while I slept. My

successes where rewarded by being awakened from a sound sleep after things finally 'dawned on me,' and being afraid to go back to sleep for fear that what had finally become so clear would disappear by morning light through the guise of sweet dreams. I wish that someone had laid out a strategy or 'path to follow' as I am attempting to do in these articles. It is now time to examine minor scales and their relation to how music works.

How Music Works

The easiest way to create the notes that comprise a 'natural minor' scale (there are two other minor scales; melodic minor and harmonic minor) is by referring to the major scale chart from my "Learning Music To Make Music" article in the October issue of Acoustic Musician. Remember that there are 24 key centers in the way we arrange music theory; 12 major keys and 12 minor keys. A natural minor scale serves as the basis for our minor keys, and it is created when we alter the major scale by flattening the third, sixth, and seventh scale degrees. Remember the concept of flattening a note occurs when we go back by half-step. In other words, you take the rule 1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7 8 and plug it in to a major scale to create its natural minor. For example, the notes that it takes to create an A major scale are 1-A, 2-B, 3-C#, 4-D, 5-E, 6-F#, 7-G#, and 8-A. When we plug the natural minor scale rule into this scale, we achieve 1-A, 2-B, b3-C, 4-D, 5-E, b6-F, b7-G, and 8-A. By flattening the third, sixth, and seventh scale degrees we will sometimes achieve a double flat (bb). In other words, in the key of Db, the sixth scale degree is Bb. When we flat Bb, we get Bbb. Because we can not write double flats in a key signature, double flats negate that written minor key in the same way double sharps negate certain major keys.

Diagram 1:

Minor Scales

1	2	b3	4	5	b6	b7	8
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	A
A#	B#	C#	D#	E#	F#	G#	A#
Bb	C	Db	Eb	F	Gb	Ab	Bb
B	C#	D	E	F#	G	A	B
C	D	Eb	F	G	Ab	Bb	C
C#	D#	E	F#	G#	A	B	C#
Db	Eb	Fb	Gb	Ab	Bbb	Cb	Db
D	E	F	G	A	Bb	C	D
D#	E#	F#	G#	A#	B	C#	D#
Eb	F	Gb	Ab	Bb	Cb	Db	Eb

E F# G A B C D E
 F G Ab Bb C Db Eb F
 F# G# A B C# D E F#
 Gb Ab Bbb Cb Db Ebb Fb Gb
 G A Bb C D Eb F G
 G# A# B C# D# E F# G#
 Ab Bb Cb Db Eb Fb Gb Ab

When we start to play melodic banjo, it is essential to begin by undertaking a step-by-step approach that will lead you in the development of technique and the understanding of major and minor scales. Since scales are the basis for fiddle tunes, I have found it desirable to teach a certain scale and then learn a fiddle tune that will incorporate its use. For example, we should begin with a G scale since our banjo is tuned to G, and then play a melodic version of Cripple Creek. More tunes in the key of G should follow such as *Eighth Of January*, *Turkey In The Straw*, and so on. I make sure that the song sequence and the examination of keys builds in difficulty while at the same time increasing the students confidence with the achievement of each new scale, key, and song.

When practicing scales and keys, it is extremely helpful to understand the Relative Major/Relative Minor relationship. We say that the key of G major and the key of E minor have a Relative Major/Relative Minor relationship. Both scales are comprised of the same notes. For example, a G major scale is comprised of 1-G, 2-A, 3-B, 4-C, 5-D, 6-E, 7-F#, and 8-G. E minor is comprised of 1-E, 2-F#, b3-G, 4-A, 5-B, b6-C, b7-D, and 8-E. Hence, we can play an E minor scale by beginning on the 6th degree of a G major scale and playing from E to E. In the same manner, we can play a G major scale by beginning on the 3rd degree of an E minor scale and playing from G to G. The key signatures for G major and E minor are the same stipulating that all F's are sharped. Therefore, once you have learned a G major scale, you can also play an E minor scale. Accordingly, you can now learn fiddle tunes in minor keys provided that you can execute its relative major scale. On my *I Can Play The Banjo* recording, I created a medley with the Irish tune *Morrison's Jig* in E minor which easily segued into the Scottish hornpipe *The Flowers Of Edinburgh* in G major.

Once we are able to interpret fiddle tunes melodically, the entire field of music opens up before our eyes. The scalar activity required to play Blackberry Blossom will eventually lead us to the ability to play *J.S. Bach's Minuet* in G (see Tim Lake's version on his *Only In The Movies* recording, Padraig Records PAD 35437). Once we develop the ability to execute F scales and perhaps an Irish fiddle tune like Paddy Wack, the door is open to Charlie Parker's be-bop classic *Au Privave* in the key of F. Bill Keith's version of *Opus 57 in G Minor* can lead us to Ludwig van Beethoven's *Fur Elise* in A minor (see Tim Lake's version on his recording *An American Concerto For 5-String Banjo And Orchestra*, Padraig Records PAD 35438). Now our limitations are created only by the extent of our imaginations and, of course, our willingness to work hard.

In conclusion, the pathways to all genres of music are open to us if we want them to be, but I think it is important to remember that we students can stop to rest and even become

complacent anywhere along the journey. While I feel that it is very important to be able to play melodically on any instrument, I also understand that many players might not be interested in trying to play classical music on a banjo.

If you decide that certain styles of music are enough for your own satisfaction then I say fine, as long as you have learned to understand music. We want to make conscience choices about what we want to play based on understanding. We should not create barriers to our advancement based on lack of knowledge and ignorance. If you do not want to play classical music now, at least make sure that your knowledge and understanding will allow you to do so later on in life if you change your mind. I was required to study Spanish in college and, at the time, could not foresee any practical application in my future. When I was invited to perform in Ecuador for the Festival de Frutas y Flores, my Spanish background came in quite handy. I would enthusiastically encourage you to journey into all genres of music. If you decide not to do so it is entirely fine, but if you decide to undertake the challenge, there is no doubt in my mind that you will reap rewards that go far beyond the field of music by embracing the entire world and its wondrous diversity.