

Ticking in a tea glass

The function of the short string of the five string banjo

Comparing to a bagpipe is too simple

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For this translation the author edited and revised the original essay of July 2014 and he left out and shortened a couple of lengthy speculations. He is not a native speaker of English nor a translator so he excuses for mistakes and errors. He hopes it will at least be possible for the reader to understand his argumentation.

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Part 1 Drone or rhythm

Bagpipe

Reading a series of articles about the history of Bluegrass in the Netherlands written by *Loes van Schaijk* on her website¹ caused me to visit the website of *CCC inc*², one of the described bands. Next to a lot of stories about the history of this group I found here the *history of the banjo* by Jaap van Beusekom, he is the banjo player of CCC inc. His argumentation is concise and correct and reading I came across these lines:

“Sweeney claimed to be the inventor of the fifth string, that starts halfway the neck and produces the drone tones that are so characteristic to the banjo.”

“Thus a drone tone arises, well known from for instance the bagpipe, that resounds always and which makes the sound of the 5 string banjo that unique.”

Next to the fact that it is nowadays common knowledge that Sweeney wasn't the inventor of the fifth string and that he didn't claim that either - others assigned it to him - the word *drone tone* annoys me. Long ago I used this term myself but as times went on I came to believe the fifth string isn't a drone string at all.

In the second quote Jaap adds something like : *it is a bit like a bagpipe*, and in this idea he is not alone, which appears in next quote from Art Rosenbaum in *Old-Time Mountain Banjo*³

Page 12 “ Many mountain musicians will still tell you that the thumb string was a substitute for the bagpipe drone. Surely the old British pipe and vocal musics were related, but a more important factor is that the banjo can be put into various tunings that do no violence at all to the modal songs or tunes they accompany or play.”

Next to Rosenbaum's confirmation that the bagpipe is often mentioned, it is important that he indicates that in his opinion something else is occurring: the fifth string facilitates to tune the banjo in such a way that modal music stays intact. It may be sure however that the fifth string takes an important part in modal tunings, it is not to the level that this string especially adds the modal tone to the tuning. In lots of cases it will be done by another string. So with the explanation of Rosenbaum things are not clear yet.

In a lot of concise papers about American music and the banjo and its weird short string it seems that one just copies from another uncritical and banal

¹ http://www.kunstendenkwerk.nl/Kunst_en_Denkwerk/Weblog/Weblog.html

² <http://www.cccinc.nl/ccc/?p=231>

³ [Rosenbaum, Art: Old Time Mountain Banjo, Oak, 1968](#)

the details about the bagpipe. However, well regarded one does so just to give an example of what a drone is. No one ever seemed to have researched or wants to constitute whether there may be a link between an instrument characterized by an air filled bag and the fifth string. A conjuncture like that would have been remarkable and more difficult to prove than the adding of the fifth string by Sweeney or the arrival of the banjo from Africa. The fifth string only has some similarity to a drone just as the one on a bagpipe. It is not that easy to find perfect an example of a drone for an explanation to people who are just superficially interested in the banjo.

However the idea has risen that the fifth string is a drone. Anyway, if it is not, what is it? It seems to me that for one who plays the banjo himself or who is interested a little more than average, it is of some importance, when it is not a drone, to know what this string is from musicological point of view. This might be of importance to comprehend different styles of playing or to define the five string banjo as more than an instrument with just five strings. Certainly when this short string makes the banjo so unique like all authors keep on stating. In case the fifth string turns out not to be a drone, may be this will make the fifth string even more unique.

Drone

This essay tries to investigate what the fifth string really is. To start with, some things more about the drone. The definition is : an uninterrupted tone that will be continued during the whole piece of music. In case of an instrument that is blown by means of an airbag, half mechanic (you even could use a motor pump) you easy can imagine something like that. On a stringed instrument this is more difficult, especially when it is not a bowed one like a violin. Stringed instruments on which a single drone tone is executed during the whole piece of music exist for sure, but the strings to produce the drone usually are hidden in a way that they cannot serve as an example: you will find *resonating* strings below the normal ones on a Swedish violin or inside a hurdy gurdy as well as inside the plucked instruments from India like the sitar. They hardly will work for a general explanation because those strings are passive and this is not so for the banjo.

When comparing with a bagpipe the resonance strings work but we also arrive in the mist of *bourdon* strings of which these last ones are supposed to be struck and the ones mentioned before are not. But anyway this learns us something about the banjo on which the fifth string at least is struck and thus it would be a bourdon string instead of a resonance string. But when looking further all of these seems to be just a game of words ; the bourdon is a tuned string. (Which opens the question : are resonance strings not tuned?)

It seems to be just matter of speech to call strings bourdons on certain instruments, like on banjo's sometimes is spoken of *chantarelles*, which means somethings like *little-sing-along*. It is a string that as well resonates as is struck and that produces a continuing high tone. This is no difference to what is told about the fifth string before. It turns out to be a bourdon, I guess, and is not of any help in tracing an explanation for what the fifth string may be more than that. So we cannot deny completely that the fifth string

partly is a drone, but considering what Rosenbaum states it seems that it must be something else with certain drone aspects.

Rhythm

What strikes me in the definitions so far is that in it there is no talk of rhythm whatsoever. There is *resonating* and *continuation of one tone during the whole piece*. This tone at least is hit once as a part of the general striking of all the strings. This while on the other hand in every banjo book and description *rhythm* is always mentioned. They insist on rhythm. It is frequently about dance music, sometimes about percussion, even *compulsive*, there is talk about rhythmic accents and contra rhythmic accents, syncopic accents, shifted accents, and all especially at the fifth string with emphasis on the rhythm of the thumb. The often mentioned American denominations for playing the banjo are significant too : banging, rapping, whamming, strumming, knocking, beating, framing, frailing and clawhammer. May it be more expressive that somewhere there is lingering a relationship to rhythm? In short : The banjo is definitely a rhythmic instrument and the fifth string seems to play a typical role in it. That' s what Jaap van Beusekom stated twice too. And he is in spotless company:

Pete Seeger writes in his, for the banjo not to be overlooked, instruction manual *How to play the 5-string banjo* ⁴ :

page 11 "The thing which gives this style of banjo playing its distinctive flavor is the unusual function of the 5th string. It's the 'ring' of "hear those banjos ringing". Like a triangle in an orchestra, it keeps on dinging away through a whole song, never changing in pitch."

So he calls the fifth *unusual* and it is *dinging away like a triangle* - this rather seems to be a percussion instrument.

Discontinue

In the dissertation of Cecelia Conway *African banjo echoes in Appalachia* ⁵ I may find some indications as to the direction to look for concerning the drone:

page 203 "Since in both families (the author did present before two families of playing styles, avt) the drone (so: the fifth string, avt) does not ordinarily carry the melody , African Americans seem likely to perceive this droning as having primarlily a rhythmic or percussive effect rather than a harmonic one."

⁴ [How to play the 5-string banjo, Pete Seeger; 1949 \(I use the third edition of 1962, avt\)](#)

⁵ [African Banjo Echoes In Appalachia, Cecelia Conway; Study Folk Traditions \(Publications of the American Folklore Society\) 1995](#)

In this quote the author qualifies the fifth string as *the drone* and continues to state thereafter that it does not carry the melody. This is wright, a drone does not carry a melody, it would be a contradiction, however is stated *ordinarily*. So it may occur, apparently. (?) From the rest of the quotation it may be clear that if the string doesn't carry the melody some are inclined to think it is not unlogical to consider it a rhythm gear more than a harmonic one.

In the next quote Conway in one breath calls the drone function and the rhythm function being two important aspects of the banjo:

"... critical aspects of the banjo as a folk object - the droning of the short string and its rhythmic use."

Even closer to my suppositions Conway gets when she quotes T. (Bobby) Thompson (banjo player in The Red Clay Ramblers) :

page 200 "This string (the fifth, avt) is sounded as a discontinuous drone - a high pitched, more or less syncopated accent on the second, third or fourth quarter of each beat."

The term *discontinuous* concisely and clearly indicates what is at stake regarding the drone: according to definitions a drone is a *continuous* (usually harmonious) tone. A *discontinuous* drone however is not a drone, it is something different. And the upper quotation marks that the players are more interested in the rhythmical than in the harmonic part of it, while in some cases a string with drone aspects might even be able to carry the melody.

About how the fifth string may bring those things together and contribute to the melody we find in John Burke's *Old Time Fiddle Tunes For Banjo* ⁶ where he discriminates between frailing and the clawhammerstyle:

page 83 " The (first) A-part is a true frailing arrangement with very little double thumbing { the thumb strikes more strings in variation avt} (used by frailers primarily for percussion). The steady methodical beat of the banjo is obvious and the 5th string is used as a drone, even on the D-chord where it is slightly dissonant. The (second) A¹-part is written in clawhammer style and double thumbing is used to make the melody line almost totally linear. The 5th string is not used as part of the D-chord, but as one note of a melodic run, which includes notes from the D-chord."

In the first part of the explanation, though there may be a *steady methodical beat* and mainly as percussion, the fifth string nevertheless is used as a drone, but in the second part with help of more double thumbing - the alternating use of the thumb at the fifth and one of the other strings - it becomes part of a melodic D loop.

⁶ Old Time Fiddle Tunes For Banjo, John Burke ; AmSCO Music Publishing Company, New York 1968

Percussion

The term *percussion* means rhythmic instruments and in my country it is often used to discriminate between big drum sections and the smaller hand hold ones. So this last form of percussion consists of the regularly shaking and rattling, clattering and ticking and the placement of tiny rhythmic accents by beating, hitting, tapping on in general small instruments and sticks.

Compulsive means obsessive. So on a banjo one beats obsessive, and one hits and hammers. You may say that it is not by accident that one of the most important banjo styles is called *clawhammer*. And all the while the small accents are ticked by the fifth string.

In descriptions of another dominant style too - three finger or Scruggs picking - from the first moment there was talk of playing *syncopes*: accents that within a bar division and a certain rhythm are delayed, postponed or shifted; they sound on other moments than you expect them. Syncopes are a distinct rhythmical aspect within the melodic line: melodic accents may be delayed rhythmically and that way utilized in a surprising manner.

This clearly rhythmic side of the fifth string doesn't relate to a drone at all. I think this last term is an in innocence chosen but wrong example or it is a superficial comparison which puts us on the wrong leg and which finally better might be forgotten. Whatever a drone might be it is not on a banjo really.

When it is about rhythm even churchbells seem to be a better example (more about which later): one note played during the whole piece of music and when you at least consider pulling clocks ropes to be *playing*, they are played in a steady rhythm. But it only lacks the possibility of bringing in a melody. May be it is allowed to call ringing of church bells simple music, hardly being a musical piece. Playing a banjo is something different though.

Part 2 Analysis of the fifth string

Plikaplونk!

In order to explain the systems of playing the banjo - even without paying attention to the fifth string - I intend to describe next example. Well known - at least in my country - is a childrens toy, a music box consisting of a tubular can painted in cheerful colours, out of the upperside of which comes a little turn crank. A general name for it may be *music box*, I guess, whether in diverse countries there are special names for it, I don't know. When you turn around the handle three thin tones in a row will ring out after eachother. The can functions as a resonance-box. It sounds like "*Plikaplونkplikaplونkplikaplونk...*" that is in case you turn around three strokes. (Watch the word *stroke* instead of *turn*.) Each stroke on its own gives one *plikaplونk*; so there must be three sound producing tongues in the box. (May be they are fixed to the spindle or to the side of the box.) For now I will call this instrument a *Plikaplونk*.

With the three tongued plikaplونk each turn of the spindle will ring out three tones. Playing along with a song you may fill each bar with one turn to fill up the bar. Each bar gets its own phrase of three notes. However in a piece of music in common meter you have four counts in each bar. So in fact in a turn of your plikaplونk you will miss one count. Thus you have to continue spinning a little to get one more count: the fourth one (but pay attention: it sounds the same as the first one!) When staying in time your turn has to be one-third longer and so the length of the turn has increased. The starting point of each bar of each four counts does not return to the seam of the can, but it moves up one-third until after fourth turns the fifth bar starts again at the seam of the can. Written down here this is quite uncomprehensible but the effect of it is that the phrase you will hear, let's say, 'walks through' four bars before it starts again at the same point.

This in fact is the system that the banjo player uses to transfer accents while keeping time - more explicit in one style than in the other. (This explanation works best for threefingerpicking.) In fact not the same phrase of four notes is played each time; depending on the starting note there are three different phrases each starting at the next tongue of the plikaplونk, staying within the same four beat rhythm. In words: plikaplونkpli - kaplonkplika - plونkplikaplونk and then it starts anew with plikaplونkpli ect. The three phrases together give for times 'plikaplونk'.

When hearing these phrases in repetition it is not difficult to imagine African music: Pete Seeger in *How to play the 5 string banjo*:

Page 68 "The American folk style of playing seems to me to be basically African. A subtle rhythmic - melodic pattern is set up which repeats itself with no changes in tempo, no matter what complex variations may be introduced."

The next quote from Art Rosenbaum about the music of the banjo fits the image we have of African music too:

Page 40 "It can give a song a simple rippling accompaniment or an intricate one, weaving complex figures among or between phrases sung by the voice; ... It can be highly percussive in character...."

Subtle rhythmic-melodic patterns and weaving complex figures indicate what happens in the plikaplunk : you're weaving complex phrases.

It seems that what arrived with the enslaved from Africa is a sort of music consisting of complex phrases, not of drones. These phrases found their home in the five string banjo on which by alternating the thumb takes the position of the spindle of the plikaplunk, the fifth string being the seam in the can. In repetition the same note is heard, not because of the drone, but for sake of the rhythmic effect: a stroke, not on a drum but on a string, percussive.

Example at the piano

The same principle used above to explain by the example of the plikaplunk, we may find in the next quote of Tony Trischka when in *Melodic Banjo*⁷ he describes the way Bobby Thompson (another one than mentioned before in the context of Cecelia Conway; this one played with Jim & Jesse) elucidated the three finger picking style of Scruggs:

"The important thing to notice is that he's playing four forward rolls in a row. These forward rolls repeat every three notes (T 1 2, T 1 2, and so on), and since the standard 2/4 measure has the beat falling once every four notes, the beginning of the forward roll and the downbeat will only coincide once every twelve notes. At all other times the thumb will pick the string at various places in between downbeats and syncopation will result."

In this quote it is not written down, however the speaker assumes the thumb keeping to the fifth string all the time. The phenomenon would be the same when the thumb would hit one of the other strings too, which might be suggested in the last line. However the point is made: the goal was to explain a rhythmic apparition.

Note of the author/translator

In this place the example of the piano is left out of translation for several reasons. First of all: I am not a piano player, so my argumentation here was not decisive. Second: it would be a third explanation of the same principle. Third: recently (november 2016) I wrote a more socially embedded account about the operation of the

⁷ Melodic Banjo, Tony Trischka; Oak Publications 1976

fifth string which will be more convincing: De Strijdkreet/ Battle Cry (résumé).

What I wanted to outline is: when playing small groups of three notes in common meter on the keys of a piano with a thimble on the thumb a row of clicks will sound in the line of notes that consist of syncopated accents.

As to the freedom of the thumb to chose *various places* or hit other strings in order to mix accents and melody notes there is one limitation: the *Rule of Thumb*. When the last stroke of the thumb comes at the last beat of the bar the banjo player is prone to start the next bar with his thumb again. The result will be two short thumb strokes directly behind each other. Guideline for banjo players is that this is never allowed. Only when you take a rest of a beat in between you 're allowed start with the thumb again. Generally two beats with the same finger directly after each other will not turn smoothly. I will come back later about the reason why. Offending of the rule of thumb will harm speed and steadiness. All these manners of creating patterns with aid of the fifth string aim to get rhythmical accents.

Modal music

The second part of the quote from Art Rosenbaum indicates an other possible direction next to rhythm:

“ but a more important factor is that the banjo (because of the fifth string, avt) can be put into various tunings that do no violence at all to the modal songs or tunes they accompany or play.”

With a lot of these *various tunings*, whether they are modal or not, it sometimes happens that you may find one that leads to the fifth string being struck only ones or twice in a complete song. Only at one specific moment the fifth string is necessary in a loop of which the tone cannot be left out. In such case a tone becomes part of the melody and the use of it doesn't affect the rhythm, but anyway here you cannot speak of a drone too. It sure is one tone but it is not continuing through the whole piece. (This is in fact comes close to the statement in which Burke explains double thumbing, page 6)

By *drop thumb* to another string, usually to the second, third or fourth one, sometimes a melody note is picked, sometimes the same one as the fifth, only one octave lower. Than the rhythm aspect of the fifth string stays intact, or better formulated: the rhythm aspect of the *thumb action* stays intact. When as a result of retuning the third or fourth string has no need to be fretted and rings as an open one this drop thumbing supports a sort of drone effect because it may repeat the sound of fifth string. I sometimes hear banjo players say: “ This way I use another string as a drone”. In my opinion however that way you may appoint every melody note and every rhythmic note of the same height as the fifth string a drone, even when noted on the fretboard. How often the first string isn't noted at the fifth fret?

Rosenbaum might be wright that the modal songs profitted from modal tunings, that seems self-evident I would say, and the fifth string is playing a role in those tunings indeed, but that doesn't mean that this string alone is responsible for the modal tunings. Other strings may define a modal tuning too. And other instruments play modal melodies too, without a modal tuning. I believe this opinion of Rosenbaum is mainly based on the fact that using a lot of tunings is inherent to the banjo and he, like a lot of banjo players, is adapted to use modal tunings a lot. So I think it cannot be maintained that a special function of the fifth string is to facilitate modal tunings, like Rosenbaum seems to suggest.

To make clear that tunings have even more influence and to bring up another aspect that pleas against the drone as an explanation or an example, I want to point at an African instrument : the *kissar*⁸. Though this instrument displays some similarities to the banjo we will never be able to tell if it could be a precursor of it anyway. Especially since in the last years the *Akontin* that looks like a (spike) banjo even more is generally seen as an instrument that after being transported to America could have led to the five string banjo. But first I have to explain something else to demonstrate the role of the *kissar* in relation to the fifth string.

⁸ <https://youtu.be/3KXBYDdP0Og>

Part 3 Historical speculation

Language

Always people take their language with them, even when they have no books or paper to carry it and when there is nothing else than their voices to produce it. Language is a part of ourselves. This also applies to songs. Songs our mother thought us or the ones we sung with our friends, hymns from church or funerals, we will remember those and we may sing them even when there is not an instrument to play the melody. We always can sing a song. We only can play the song however when we have an instrument. Songs and music lay in ourselves like language but to get the music out we need an instrument. Spanish people will not soon forget their characteristic and rhythmic pro and contra hand flapping for instance because they carry their instruments themselves.

When people emigrate, forced by catastrophes and wars and passing through impassable regions, they will lose the instruments that accompanied their songs. At least it must have been very simple or light to carry contraptions, that resisted the threat to be lost (that's why you will not find any church organs in the Sahara ;-)!). But since one retains speech it always stays possible to sing songs. In general it lasts a couple of generations before people will forget and lose their language. The cultural customs in which songs were sung, have been carried along even when the instruments got lost. Asian people accustomed to pentatonic songs that were probably developed in conjuncture with instruments built for pentatonic scales, continued to sing pentatonic songs in their new environment. And even more, when they started looking for instruments to accompany those songs, they did choose instruments with which pentatonic scales could be performed or they built one that supported this way of playing music.

The crossing to America by slavery has equally been traumatic an experience as catastrophes and wars, and it is plausible that instruments were not the things to carry along. Presumably the slave traders either didn't see any importance in bringing along primitive African folk instruments. So there is no reason to assume that a physical African instrument, let alone a banjo, ever reached America. Still it must have been possible to find one there, though it would be one that was build again. What was taken with them was stored in their memories: the ways of playing, the tunings, the scales all piled up in words and melodies of songs and ditties. We don't have to look in Africa for a physical banjo or a missing link, what came to America is an African music system that had to do with a piece or five tones, the idea of strings of unequal length, a definite kind of tunings that provide certain moods and scales that go down and up again, which could compose complex loops between the long lines of sung ballads.

Kissar

Some years ago we happened to meet with the kissar during our holidays in Egypt when sailing Lake Nasser. This country was called Nubia, it consisted of the north of Sudan and the southern part of Egypt. Nubia is originally the home of the black pharaohs of the Nubian dynasty and of the black population of Sudan, this last fact might be relevant to slavery in later times.

The musician makes his living by entertaining tourists playing his little lyre on the banks of the lake. The sound of his instrument struck me because at first I recognized the sound of a banjo. It might even sound more like a banjo than the akontin, I think, because of the steady use of chords as a base of small melodic loops arising from the metal bowl of the body. As stated before the akontin could have been the sort of instrument that fits in a musical system transported to America even though it doesn't have five strings. The first banjos didn't have five strings either.

But what about this tin bowl? Strung with a head, on which a bridge with five strings ringing rhythmic chords and simple loops, and of which the fifth string is tuned high! That is a banjo, were it not for a fact that is throwing a spanner in the works : it is played like a lyre! And consequently the form differs from a banjo.

Until the moment I saw this instrument I never knew how a lyre ought to be played. Nowadays nobody generally does know the functioning of the lyre either and it may be helpful to explain this first. Since ancient times this harp-like instrument exists in the Middle East, and in the eastern part of Africa it is still in use as kissar specially in countries like Sudan and Eritrea, where it is called the *krar*. There are five or six strings next to each other without a fretboard. To organize the strings in a row you need two necks that arise in an angle from the round bowl and that are connected by a crossbeam, a yoke, to which the strings are fastened. On the downside the strings pass the bridge over the head and are fastened at the ends of the necks that come through the bowl.

The musician places this last end of the instrument to his breast and puts his left hand, supported by a bandage between the necks, under the strings in such a way that above each finger lays one string. May that be the reason why five ones? With the other hand he rasps across all strings with a pick in a steady beat. With the fingers of the left hand pressed softly against the (backside of) the strings they dim and a dry *rasp* will be heard. Lifting one finger you will hear within the rasping sound one ringing tone. Lifting more fingers makes a chord ring together with the rasping sound. This is comparable to the chord system of an autoharp where felt-covered slats with cutouts, when pressed against the open strings, produce full chords.

When we look at modern filmclips of researchers of the reconstructed ancient lyre it often seems as if they did not understand the dimming system of the lyre too. They tend to play it like a harp, with both hands picking the strings. They usually perform in a solemn way presumably inspired by dead pharaohs, mythical pyramids and static hieroglyphs, I don't know. The living Egyptian however must have enjoyed the gay, rhythmic and vivid way of playing of the Nubian musician near Lake Nasser, like I did.

To come closer to the banjo I emphasize the tuning of the kissar which includes a high fifth string. Wondering why the fifth string is tuned high I assume that the use of re-entry scales and tunings - going from high to low and ending high again - might have been universal from ancient times using modal scales and open chords, more or less the way Art Rosenbaum suggested.

A more practical reason might be that the physical balance of the instrument is better when you always have one finger dimming a string and still keep the possibility of ringing the same tone, using the other one. When you would play all strings open, the instrument would slide down. In addition the anatomy of the human hand may make it easier to arrange combinations when you have as well a high note at your thumb as one at your little finger. Anyway the tuning in a chord with a high string almost effortlessly produces an African ringing loop, somewhat like Peter Seeger felt.

The strings of the kissar are fastened to the yoke, so they are of equal length and since there is no fretboard they are intended to be used open. Combined with the chords used for the open tunings these all look like elements of the banjo. Thinking about the drone here reveals something else. In principle all the strings may ring like drones, however they are intentionally dimmed to sound dry to emphasize the rhythm. There are open melody notes and dry rhythm notes; the high note of the fifth string in combination with other open strings is used to produce little rhythmic loops. Though you seem to hear a lot of drone sounds there are no real drones at all.

How much this instrument may expose banjo aspects still insoluble questions problems linger: how two necks could have been transmuted to one, where the fingerboard could have been introduced or who did arrange transportation from the east side of the Sahara to the west? However it seems plausible that a lot of characteristics of the kissar stored in memories and well known songs may have been secured in a new instrument in a new world.

This vision to the kissar also clarifies that the use of the fifth string on the banjo may be part of a much older music system intended to play rhythm in combination with small melodic loops that I gradually may call *rolls*.

Translating this paragraph the author abundantly edited the text and left out some surplus and lengthy speculations.

Part 4 Current playing technique

Chromatic tones

Experienced banjo players often tend to elaborate melodies in detail as far as possible. Long rows of short notes even containing accents are effectuated to compose loops, long scale-like series of notes up or down. These loops become true melodies in itself and they get more detail constantly: they are even filled up with chromatic notes. The fifth string offers the possibility of inserting quick notes in the row in exchange with another high string: when it is hard to get a certain note in the wright place or at the wright finger, a thumb at the fifth string comes in handy. Under pressure of accomplishing the complete melody the accents and syncopation will disappear in the end.

These banjo players, especially in Bluegrass but there exist a lot of melodic clawhammer players too, like to execute loops above the fifth fret, so above the place on the neck where the fifth string springs off. This enables to fret the fifth string too. In the first place with their thumb but when it comes out more convenient, their middle or forefinger too. Wherever the note fits and where this eases the order of fingers, or roll, playing the surrounding notes, they will chose for it. Whether you like this way of playing or not and if you fear to lose the essence of banjoplaying, percussion, by the dominance of the complete melody is of hardly any importance in this place: fretting the fifth fret doesn't have anything to do with a drone whatsoever.

Last years it came more and more in fashion to play complex classical music in Bluegrass (Puch and Krueger brothers). Not only on the banjo, there are mandolino concertos that challenge the virtuosos. In these cases you cannot speak of Bluegrass or banjo music anymore, it is music edited to a special instrument, like pianoconcertos to violin or vice versa. Their situation and pitch seem to make cellosonates (Bach) specially fit for banjo. In my opinion here is only practical use of the fifth string: the original score for the cello has to be transposed in the most efficient way to come to playable melody notes executed alternating on at least two strings to arrive similar to cello music. But this too cannot be seen in any relation to a drone.

It is striking that the more melancholic slow parts of cello music, the ones with the basso continuo drones, are never chosen to be transposed; it is always the staccato parts. Only certain banjo-like parts of classical music lend themselves to be edited to bluegrass. Here steadiness and speed play a role which I will try to explain in the next paragraph.

Stability

I promised to come back at the churchbells and I will do so in combination with the above mentioned assumption about the alternating use of the outside strings: about what is said about the left hand at the kissar. where it is easier to have a high note at your disposal, both above your thumb and your little finger. Because this is a sort of anatomic *balance grip*, it is the same with the other hand too: the stroke of a high note by the thumb in alternation with a high note by the forefinger in a *tang grip*.

To regulate ringing, the swing of the churchbells themselves is utilized by their own action. The pace of ringing bells is fixed and tight because it is arranged by a back and forth movement, the pendulum. In clocks that indicate time pendulums are build in. Watches rule time and pace by back and forth hooking anchors. A simple alarm clock has two bells because this is more efficient: with the same drive and movement of the lever you will have two bell strokes in the same time, back and forth. In addition the noise will double. The Spanish flamenco dancers I mentioned before, fill in the breaks of the first pair of flapping hands by a next pair, to double and fasten the tempo in a way a person on his own impossible would be able to perform.

The swing of a pendulum will make playing of music metrical and it is a vital tool when it has to be speedy and tight. You may try this for yourself by ticking with your teaspoon at the outside of you empty tea glass. Try to perform a regular row of ticks, keep it steady and try to speed up more and more until as fast as possible. Anyway, as you will notice, it will be easier, more regular, more tight and faster when you start ticking from the inside of the glass in a back and forth movement, alternating at the one and the other inner side of the glass. Like in a bell. You will even perform better when you loosen your grip a little bit and give the spoon swing. So gravity will help and it will diminish the hindrance of the weight of your hand. The effect finally is rhythm not melody.

This principle applies to the banjo when the thumb strikes the fifth string in alternation with the forefinger on the high first string, back and forth. In this continuous back and forth we recognize the above described rule of thumb too. The principle works very strong in threefingerpicking, a system that is specially famous to produce speedy and tight rhythmic patterns. By its very steadiness the use of shifting syncopes will be very bright and clear.

The up and down movement of the whole hand in down picking styles like clawhammer may, will bar the producing of threefinger syncopes but speed, steadiness and output will be advanced by the swing of the hand and arm.

In Bluegrass today we know these features too of the developed picking of mandolins and guitars (crosspicking): the application of the up and down movement of the pick and the rule of thumb: in this case: forbidding to hit the same string twice in the same direction. In the mandolin approach of Jesse

McReynolds (of Jim) and the approach of Tony Rice we distinctively see the influence of the percussive quality of the fifth string.

Conclusions

Finally we may ascertain that the five string banjo uses the fifth string in a rhythmic and percussive way. And this is exactly typical for the banjo just like the quoted writers and banjo players meant. This is so typical for the banjo that otherwise - not making use of the fifth string being a percussion string - it would hardly present *banjomusic* at all. Proper use of the fifth string even makes the banjo inappropriate for legato of slow pieces. When a drum is not beaten anymore but rubbed instead, it isn't qualified as a drum anymore. When playing banjo is done completely linear, it turns out not to be *banjoplaying* anymore even though the instrument may keep its characteristic sound. In this case there seems to exist any reason anymore to make use of a fifth string and it is no more than logical that in other styles in which the banjo got a new role, it always has been the fifth string that disappeared.

Like chicken and egg it always stays the question what was first: the tuning and the high short fifth string or the rhythmic way of playing. Like before indicated we only can guess about the historical reasons of the tuning and the length of the string, but the technique of playing exploited its possibilities very effectively. And the exploitation of the fifth string is embedded in rhythmical principles in the first place. That's why you may think of the name *percussion string*, however this will do no justice to the string completely because the melodic and harmonic qualities of the string stay underexposed. *May be melodic percussion string?*

The fifth string facilitates a high speed attired to a great rhythmical stability, it offers the possibility of inserting rhythmic and non-rhythmic accents and it gives the opportunity of weaving melodic, rhythmic repeating and alternating loops, rolls, that may be detailed to chromatic loops and complete melodies, moreover it seems to make possible the connection to the often appearing modal atmosphere by different practical modal tunings.

And OK, in between it is performing something drone-like. Being a banjo player you should not strive for that. Than you better play bagpipe : and its explanation is even easier!



2017 addition and sort of an excuse:

The quoted (and not-quoted) speakers and writers never really argued about the drone nor did they present any evidence. They only spent too easy an example. The intention of the essay never was not to blame them. The essay just emphasized the drone in order to clarify the more important feature of the fifth string: percussion.

