

'Rammelen in een theeglas'

Ticking in a tea glass

Résumé in English

The fifth string on the banjo is a peculiar thing which calls for a lot of explanation. When asked about this strange little string since decades almost every banjo player raises the *drone* as its function. Also in written introductions about banjo, folk and bluegrass music continuously is referred to the short fifth string as being a drone. It appears as if everyone just echoes one another without any research or theory.

This increasingly amazes because there seems to be only one aspect of the drone that fits the fifth string: the use of one tone. Other parts of the definition of the musical drone, like *not interrupted, not intentional playing* are not applicable to the fifth string. This essay intends to find and describe some more precise aspects of the fifth string.

In general music theory a drone is a continuous harmonious ground tone sounding throughout the whole piece of music. Almost always the example of Scottish bagpipes is used to explain the role and function of the fifth string as being such a drone and this relation seems rather convincing because a historic link between Scottish-English-Irish folk music, bluegrass and banjo music is assumed, though not any further argumentation is presented.

However, as explained in this essay the fifth string should rather be regarded differently. When you take a teaspoon in an empty tea glass and oscillate it between thumb and forefinger from the one side to the other '*ticking*' you will hear the sound of a bell, like a two bell alarmclock. When you try to do the same from outside the glass, it is more difficult to get the same steadiness and the same speed. The side to side movement (back and forth, up and down) divides time like in a watch the ancre divides time in regular pieces, seconds. The side to side movement also doubles the amount of notes with the same effort. Two flamenco dancers clap their hands in equal pace but they do it the one between the other, thus doubling the amount of notes, creating speed, drive and stability.

This is exactly what the fifth string does on the banjo and first of all it is clear that it does not play just one note; it may sound only one *tone*, the so called drone is however constantly interrupted. In fact the fifth string answers the first string, side by side, like the Spanish clapping hands. And it even is struck intentionally when once in a while a melody note comes in handy or a note is left out deliberately when 'clashing' (not being in harmony) too much. The fifth string, as an opposite high string to the high (melody) first string, played with two different alternating fingers, thumb and forefinger (in tang grip) facilitates speed, steadiness, and drive: this makes the banjo ring.

Arguing this point the essay analyses the structure of three finger picking by means of a music toy and by presenting an East African banjo/harplike

instrument, the kissar, that is played like a lyre, the five or six open strings dimmed from the backside with the left hand producing chords like an autoharp. The instrument is tuned in a scale that, like a banjo, consists of four strings going down followed by a fifth one that is up again. The fifth string of this re-entrant scale is not used as a drone since all strings are always open. Instead in alternation the outer strings are dimmed from the backside to produce stability and speed in the ever repeating melodic phrases.

This instrument might be an indication that the emigrants while not being able to bring in real instruments must have remembered music systems to produce the songs and music of their native country. Systems they may have added to the new instrument to develop.

The essay suggests that even the lack of frets and the open tunings of the early banjos are reminiscences to this kind of instrument, using this same sort of systems.

Conclusions

In almost every style of banjo playing nowadays the fifth string is used and serves to accentuate speed and rhythmic patterns, while the effect of a drone seems to be just an additional phenomenon. The only similarity with the drone is that in general (but not even always!) the fifth string is not noted on the fretboard, so it produces only one tone (but a lot of separate notes): it is too often interrupted to be called a drone.

The banjo has a rhythmic device on board : the fifth string with its unusual high tuning is a percussion string.

This intern rhythm tool is the secret why the before mentioned experts not only talk about a drone but also speak of the banjo as an instrument that plays rhythm and melody at the same time.

This essay presents historical, theoretical and musical arguments to forget the explanation of the drone in favour of the awareness over the string as a percussion tool, an awareness which will lead to better comprehension of the weird little string and makes it of more effective use for the banjo player.

This résumé left out very many quotes and examples of mentioning the drone and of references to rhythm, because it was necessary to be concise and to avoid a lot of language controversy. The point I wanted to make is that the 'drone' is too easy an example that only partly fits whereas the better description of a 'percussion' string is undiscovered or it is at least not mentioned. So you may argue that the writer is wrong and insist that the fifth string indeed is a drone. You might be wright, but you only accentuate the insignificant part of it. A harp is not a drone instrument while it only has open strings.