

Picking jigs

Making the rhythmic feel of jigs work on a plectrum instrument.

An article by:

Dr Christopher Smith -- TTU School of Music
(o) 806/742-2270 x249 (h) 806/749-9569
christopher.smith@ttu.edu
webpages.acs.ttu.edu/chrissemi
www.geocities.com/coyotebanjo

Think about the plectrum and control of same being as important in playing tunes as the bow is for a fiddle player. Fiddlers in various styles spend years working on bowing, because each style and sub-style has its own idiosyncratic subtleties and variations which are essential to getting the right rhythmic feel. Even various regional fiddle dialects in Ireland have quite distinct and distinctive bowing approaches. This is because the music in traditional settings was unaccompanied (and often solo): that meant that the fiddler (or piper or flute- or whistle-player) had to build all the necessary rhythmic drive for dancing into the unaccompanied line.

Okay: if you're playing single line melodies (whether on tunes, or in playing counterpoint), the plectrum and how it impacts the strings are a key factor in getting various kinds of rhythmic feels. Playing DOWN-up-down DOWN-up-down in triple feels puts the emphasis on the downbeats, which is where the dancers want it (nb: this does not mean that fiddle players bow DOWN-up-down, etc; I'm just using them as a comparative example).

I've heard an awful lot of CBOM players who pick triplet feels with straight alternate picking (did it for years myself), and many, many of them have a sort of anemic rhythmic feel; they don't really capture the jig rhythm the way it's played idiomatically. That's fine; maybe they don't want to. But I think if you want it to swing and drive the way a fiddler or piper does, and/or the way the Dervish boys do, the DOWN-up-down DOWN-up-down picking pattern will help, big time. Whether you're trying to get the melody of a tune to really punch out there and in balance with the fiddles/flutes/pipes, or you're playing a counter-melody that you want to cut through underneath the melody, picking this way is good.

Exercises:

(1)

W/out fingering anything in the left hand, play D-u-d D-u-d on each single string; eg:

G string: D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d etc

D string: D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d

A string: D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d

D string: D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d D-u-d

(2)

W/out fingering in left hand, play D-u-d on pairs of strings; eg: (version a)

G-----D-----D-----D-----D-----etc-----
D-----u-d---u-d---u-d---u-d-----
A-----
D-----

Then move to next adjacent pair; eg:

G-----
D-----D-----D-----D-----D-----
A-----u-d---u-d---u-d---u-d-----
D-----

Continue to next adjacent pair (in above example, A and high-D trings)

Then permute the pattern (version b)

G-----D-u---D-u---D-u-----etc-----
D-----d-----d-----d-----
A-----
D-----

Do the above on all adjacent pairs

Then permutate the pattern again

G-----D---d---D---d---D---d---etc-----
D-----u-----u-----u-----
A-----
D-----

Do the above on all adjacent pairs

(3)

Do the above patterns on groups of strings; eg:

G--D-----D-----etc-----
D--D-u-d--D-u-d-----
A---u-d---u-d-----
D-----

(this will help you shift from picking single strings to strumming controlled chords)

Do all various patterns on all available groups of adjacent strings

(4)

Now, holding all the various chords you typically use, as well as chords which combine fretted and unfretted notes, to the above exercises (1) thru (3), using combinations of both single strings and groups of strings, striving to bring out the individual notes and let them ring over one another. You can get lots of different textures this way.

(5)

Then play scales 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-1 (ascending and descending, using all 4 modes used in Celtic music and in the common Celtic keys) in triplet time using D-u-d

(6)

Then play scales 1-2-3, 2-3-4, 3-4-5 in triplet feel using D-u-d (asc and desc, all 4 modes, all key areas)

(7)

Now play jigs you know using this D-u-d pattern

NB: If you're accustomed to another picking pattern for jigs, here's a suggestion for changing over to the D-u-d pattern on tunes you know:

Go through items 1-6 above, spending a roughly equivalent amount of time on each stage, before you go to (7) (playing tunes). You'll find that the warmup makes it much easier to begin to incorporate the new pattern into the actual tunes--this is much easier than attempting to start right in on the tunes w/out warmup.