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## TIP OF THE WEEK ARCHIVE

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### **Tip 1. Starting a tremolo**

I was asked by a player in my mandolin ensemble "How do I get a good start to a tremolo?" She said "Once I get going I'm fine but I can't get a smooth start".

I suggested she imagine she was already 'in the flow' of a good tremolo. Then imagining the hand was already moving, to drop the plectrum onto the string 'on the fly' as it were. So instead of starting with a stationary plectrum start with a moving plectrum, dropping in to the first down stroke as if it was the twenty first in a long tremolo.

A ragged start is often experienced because the player is 'thinking' of getting going instead of thinking as if they are already going. In other words start as if you are already straight into the flow.

To practice this start a tremolo and wait until it is flowing smoothly. What does this feel like? How are you achieving this regular motion? Is it now easy and relaxed? Now imagine this is how it will be right from the start. Now stop. One cause of a ragged start to a tremolo is an increase in tension due to anticipating the start. So relax and breath gently. Now hold the plectrum above the string, bring back to your consciousness what you felt when you were in the flow. Lift the wrist first then drop into the string with a light and relaxed flick. Continue practising this until you can go straight into the flow.

A week after I suggested this approach another of my ensemble players said he'd been practising this and it had made a huge difference, he was now getting a really smooth start.

Have fun practising.

## Tip 2. 4th Finger strength and stretch

Developing and using the fourth finger increases versatility and tonal range and tonal choices. The fourth finger in first position offers a choice between playing an open string D, A or E or playing the same notes on the G, D and A string at the seventh fret. Play an open A then play an A at the seventh fret with the fourth finger on the D string and listen to the difference in the sound. The open A is bright and rings and can even sound harsh. The A played with the fourth finger on the D string is softer and more mellow in tone.

Now play a D major scale from open D string to D 5th fret on the A string using open strings D and A. Now play the same scale without using 4th finger instead of the open strings, in other words starting in D 7th fret on the G string and playing A seventh fret on the D string. What difference do you notice in tone between the two?

As well as the tone choices, when you move out of first position the 4th finger becomes essential. If the fourth finger is weak the notes will often sound clipped, muffled or buzzing when the note cannot be sustained or the fourth finger can't quite stretch to be placed just behind the fret and is landing in the middle or even at the back of the fret.

Here is an exercise I developed from Ranieri's "L'art de la Mandoline" Book II. Starting with the A string play open A followed by E at the seventh fret with the fourth finger. Now play B 2nd fret 1st finger followed by E again. Leave the first finger on the 2nd fret and play C# 4th fret 2nd finger followed by E again. Now leaving the first and second fingers in position add the 3rd finger D 5th fret followed by E again 7th fret 4th finger. Now lift the 3rd finger to play C# again followed by E then lift the 2nd finger to play B again followed by E and finally returning to open A followed by E.

It is important while ascending from A to leave each finger in place so the muscles are stretched each time the fourth finger reaches for the E at the the fret. So the sequence is:

A E, B E, C# E, D E, C# E, B E, A E.

Play slowly and evenly using down strokes placing your attention on the 4th finger each time stretching it to play a clean note with a full tone at the 7th fret. Repeat 5 times, take a rest then play the same pattern on each of the other strings. You may notice the G string is more of a challenge.

After practising this sequence for a week change the C# to a C natural 2nd finger 3rd fret. Notice how this is more of a stretch. Again practice this sequence using the same finger pattern 5 times on each string. After a few weeks of daily practice you will notice the 4th finger gaining strength.

If you notice any strain or pain on the back of your left hand stop immediately and rest. Practice for short periods and regularly.

Have fun

### **Tip 3. Changing Strings**

This is a quick tip. I was asked about the best way to wind strings, either if a string breaks or when replacing with a new set. I usually change a pair of strings at a time unless the frets need a good clean. This keeps the instrument under tension. This is an easy reliable and time saving method. First attach the loop and of the string to the appropriate hook on the tail piece. Stretch the string over the bridge slot and then over the slot in the nut. Making sure the tension is maintained. Now, from the direction of inside to outside, wind the string twice around the tune peg BEFORE slotting the end through the hole. As you slot the string through the hole make sure you keep the tension. Now when you turn the machine head the string is secure. With the G strings you may only need to wind round once or one and a half before slotting through the hole. If you are tired of winding the machine head by hand you can buy a handy little machine head turner that speeds up the process while the string comes up to pitch.

When you have the string in tune gently pull the string outward for a final stretch and retune. Now you can trim the excess string with wire clippers.

Have fun

#### Tip 4. Expression loud and soft

How many different volumes can you achieve with one note? There are many expression markings for volume from ppp to ff and sfz. The full range would go something like ppp pp p mp mf f ff fff sfz. That's a staggering nine differences of volume. Can you achieve that by choosing one note say a B on the A string and achieving an audible difference for the listener of nine discernible changes in volume from your quietest whisper to your loudest down stroke? Can you then achieve the same thing with tremolo? If you find that difficult its not surprising because plucked string instruments are not renowned for their range of expression.

A good place to start is to take just four different volumes p mp mf and f. Start with playing your quietest p, then for your loudest f. Alternate between these two playing four notes of each. Can you be consistent are all the ps the same and are all the fs the same. When you have control of these then you are listening for two more divisions. One a bit louder than p and one a bit softer than f. Practice going from p to mp and back. Again four notes each. Do the same from f to mf. Now play through, four notes of each, from p to mp to mf and f and back again. Is there a difference between mp and mf? When you have practised this with down strokes then do the same with tremolo. Ask a friend, partner or fellow musician to listen to you play then sound them out to see see if they can tell you when have changed from one volume to another.

When you have achieved four you can experiment with ever more subtle variations in volume. Can you make your quietest even quieter and can you make your loudest even louder? Does it make a difference where you strike the string in relation to the sound hole or f hole?

If you want to spend some enjoyable practice time working on expression I highly recommend Alison Stephens' book 'Six Episodes' as a starting point. The first piece 'Reflections' demands a range from f to ppp. It looks deceptively simple on the page and its true value as are all the pieces in the book is to encourage a full range of expression and precision from the player. Her books can be bought from [www.astute-music.com](http://www.astute-music.com).

## **Tip 5. New Year Resolution**

At this time of year many people make resolutions to do or achieve new things. As a musician what do you want to achieve this year? Will you work towards the next grade, perform a new piece, develop your technique or maybe play in a new style or genre? A good way to think about this is to imagine you are now at the end of this new year looking back now at what you have achieved. How does it feel to have achieved your goal? As you look back over the year how did you achieve your new skill, your new piece or technique? How much practice did you put in, did you go for some lessons, did you join a group or go to a Summer School? As you look back and notice all the things that made it possible for you to advance your playing this will tell you now how to make your new year resolution effective and lasting. It will tell you how to plan and what time to dedicate to your playing. And you can do this with the thrill and excitement of having already imagined having the skill you are now setting out to achieve. Try this method with any of your other new year resolutions and see how much more achievable and real they become.

I wish you well in your new year and hope you have lots of fun playing your mandolin as you create all the time you need to practice and experience that great feeling of achieving something new that you haven't done before.

Happy New Year

## **Tip 6. Are You Sitting Comfortably?**

Well are you? I've watched players practising a new chord or negotiating a tricky passage and concentrating so much on getting their fingers in the right place they haven't noticed their body folding into wild contortions, as if it is their arms and legs that will make the difference rather than their left and right hand. Not surprisingly strain can occur as a result of poor posture. For both guitarists and mandolin players the traditional positions for playing used to be with one leg crossed over the other with the guitar or mandolin supported on the upper thigh. Although this feels natural because it places the instrument in a useful playing position it is in fact forcing the spine to curve and the pelvic girdle to twist. As a double bass player I used to lean into my bass and had painful back problems. When I finally got to see an Osteopath he took one look at my spine and asked "Are you a bass player? You have a classic bass players curve distortion in the spine". I changed my playing positions leaning the bass into my body so I could stand straight and shift my weight easily from foot to foot and my problems disappeared.

So finding a comfortable, and skeleton friendly playing position, is very important. Not only for health but also for your playing. Both feet on the ground is a good place to start. If you need to raise your lap then use a foot stool for both feet so both are raised. Check your shoulders are level and you are sitting straight and relaxed. Check for tension and practice releasing it in your arms, neck and shoulders. I experienced quite a lot of muscle pain in my thumb and back of hand from switching between bass and mandolin until I consulted a Feldenkrais practitioner who spotted a problem in my shoulders.

One good tip I was given was to practice in front of a mirror so you can see how you are sitting as you play and also where you are holding tension. Change your posture until you look at ease and balanced and notice how much easier your playing becomes when you do this.

If you are experiencing pain or discomfort as a result of playing then first of all STOP before any permanent damage occurs and seek some professional advice. A good place to start is with an Alexander Technique teacher.

Look after yourself.

## **Tip 7. Cheap music source**

Charity shops are a favourite hunting ground for me and they are a great source of cheap music if you are prepared to spend time going through the sheet music racks. Amnesty Bookshop and Oxfam Art and Music are very good, though Oxfam can be quite pricey its all for a good cause. Although there is a growing body of music for mandolin there is much to be gained from browsing through violin music, tutor and exam books. These turn up regularly in my local Amnesty book shop, where they have a very well organised music section, and are instantly adaptable for mandolin. You will need to replace bowing markings for appropriate plectrum strokes but apart from that there is a huge choice for the adaptable mandolin player.

I recently picked up a complete scales and arpeggios grades 1 - 5, a scale syllabus to grade 8, a very old, but fascinating, mandolin method which I hadn't seen before which had some useful exercises. A few weeks ago I found a Hummel mandolin sonata and there are often plenty of compendiums of popular tunes to expand your repertoire.

Its also worth looking at music for flute and recorders as these are also within the mandolin's range. I've found some great 4 part arrangements some of which I've adapted for my mandolin ensemble. Most shops charge about £1.00 per sheet or maybe £2.00 for a book, and if you buy several at once will usually give a discount. Its also great fun because you can find things to play you might not have considered if you were paying full price. This way if you don't like a piece when you get it home and play, it hasn't cost much and you've donated to a good cause so you can feel good any way. Its a win win.

Happy browsing.

## Tip 8. Having fun with scales

When I was learning the violin I used to think playing scales was really boring and I didn't pay them much attention. My teacher didn't explain to me why they were important and how they were the key to successful fingering patterns, versatility, tone production, accurate intonation and crucial for understanding, what I later understood to be, chord scale theory.

The seven notes of the major scale are the building blocks for both melody and harmony. They are the gateway to understanding western music. To have scales literally at your finger tips, and in your minds eye and ear, will generate confidence and flexibility along with the knowledge to support your understanding of musical structures.

With this in mind I'd like to offer some ways you can use scales that are fun and creative as well as developing your musicianship.

### 1. *The slow approach*

The unconscious mind learns through slow repetition. Use your scale practice to concentrate on tone with down strokes. Is each note clear and round? Does it have a clean attack and a good sustain? As you slowly play each note say its name out loud so you learn the notes in the scale and their position on the fingerboard.

### 2. *Tremolo*

Play scales using tremolo. Play very slowly giving four beats to each note as you really listen to how even your strokes are. This is great for developing an even tremolo. Use a metronome to check your timing. If you have the Ranieri books you will find most of the major and relative minor scales there with some excellent harmonised accompaniments.

### 3. *Ascending and Descending*

It is as important if not more important to play scales descending as well as ascending. Why? Because we are used to our alphabet starting on A. Saying and playing your notes in reverse means that your sight reading improves as well as feel as comfortable playing G F# E D C B A as A B C D E F# G.

**BIG EXTRA TIP** Practice saying your note alphabet A to G backwards G to A whenever you are at a loose end like sitting in a traffic queue or the dentists waiting room or even to get you to sleep at night. Start on any note to the octave above and back again. This is good brain gym.

### 4. *Be creative with scales*

As well as playing linear scales, mix up the note sequences into patterns. Here are a few to get you started then make up more of your own.

Up a third down a second e.g. in D major:

Ascending D F# E G F# A G B A C# B D C# E D

Descending D B C# A B G A F# G E F# D E C# D

As well as thinking using the notes of the scale you can also think of the notes purely as a pattern using the notes position in the scale. So the exercise above

would be :

1 3 2 4 3 5 4 6 5 7 6 8 7 9 8

Once you have this pattern it becomes transferable to any scale. However when you apply the pattern don't forget then to interpret the pattern back into the notes from each scale.

Here's another pattern:

Ascending 1 2 3 1 2 3 4 2 3 4 5 3 4 5 6 4 5 6 7 5 6 7 8  
 Descending 8 7 6 8 7 6 5 7 6 5 4 6 5 4 3 5 4 3 2 4 3 2 1

In the key of C this would be

Ascending C D E C D E F D E F G E F G A F G A B G A B C  
 Descending C B A C B A G B A G F A G F E G F E D F E D C

#### *5. Add Tempo and Rhythm variations*

Once you have these patterns working well at slow tempos then increase the tempo and experiment with rhythm changes. For example with alternate dotted quarter notes and 8th notes (dotted crotchets and quavers)

### **Tip 9. Leave your fingers down**

This weeks tip is something I find useful and which has made a big difference for my pupils. My constant cry is “leave you fingers down” when playing scales. I’m always amused at how much energy is spent putting a finger down to play a note then instantly lifting it off again as the next one goes down. If you are still on the same string and often if not how about just leaving it where it is until it is needed somewhere else? There are several benefits here. Each finger supports the next. The finger is still in position for when you return down the scale. What would it be like if you had a golden rule of “Leave each finger where it is unless you need it to play a note on another string.” As you develop this strategy you will notice that the finger you leave down can act as an anchor to orient your other fingers as you stretch for notes on other strings. It improves speed, accuracy and sustain. it also usually creates rich harmonic overtones.

### **Tip 10. Creating a good tone**

The mandolin is a beautiful instrument and there are many factors that contribute to achieving a good tone. Not least of course is the quality of the instrument itself. There are many reasonably priced instruments on the market that have a good sound. There are four things which are within your control that effect tone. The strings, the plectrum, your left hand fingering technique and your right hand plectrum technique (assuming you are right handed the revers of course if you are left handed).

### **Tip 11. More Confidence While Playing**

If there is a place in a solo where you commonly make a mistake, you probably tense up just before you get there, worried whether you'll make the same mistake yet again. This makes the mistake more likely. One of the problems with mistakes is that you lose your position and it takes some time to get back on course again. So don't practice how not to make the mistake, but practice how to escape from it. Work out the melody and harmony so that you can improvise a few notes which will sound OK after you've made the mistake. You'll find that the ability to escape gives you more confidence, and you're less likely to make the mistake anyway!

Julian Vincent

Organiser - Bath Banjo Festival at The Little Theatre and the American Museum

Next Bath Banjo Festival - June 27-29 2008

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## **Tip 12. Getting a Grip**

How do you prevent a plectrum from slipping in your fingers as you play? For some this is not a problem and for those who do experience this there are several solutions. Some players go for 'Dunlop' type plectra which have a moulded grip at the top. Unfortunately these tend to be made of soft plastic or nylon which, in my experience, creates a scratchy sound and poor tone. A couple of other solutions are

1. Sand the top part of a smooth plectrum to create a rough grip leaving the point smooth.
2. Wrap a piece of medical sticking plaster round the top of the plectrum to absorb moisture and provide a secure grip.
3. Drill a hole through the centre of the top of the plectrum. This really helped a student of mine recently and the problem was solved.
4. There are some plectrums I discovered in Germany and available, I think through through the Trekel web site [www.trekel.de](http://www.trekel.de) which are thick soft plastic with a grip and although I personally don't use them I know some players who really like. They come in blue and white according to hardness.

Any suggestions from readers will be gratefully received and passed on here.

**Tip 13. Play a ballad**

Playing a ballad, nice and slow, using only sustained notes (no tremolo) teaches you many things. First how to hold a clear and sustained note. Leaving your fingers down long after you have struck the string. Your mandolin can make beautiful sound, make sure you are doing it justice by holding each note for as long as possible. As you do this notice how clean your sound becomes. Listen for any buzzes. These can be due to lack of pressure from the left hand, positioning the left hand finger too far back on the fret or too far forward on the fret itself. Just behind the fret gives the greatest clarity and least pressure required. If you use too much pressure with the left hand you may find you are pulling the strings out of line or bending them causing them to go sharp. When you have checked your left hand position turn your attention to your right hand and the plectrum. Is your down stroke producing a good volume and clean attack. Are you angling the plectrum so you are striking both strings of the pair to maximise resonance and overtones? If your next note is on another string can you hold the one you are playing as you strike the next allowing two notes to sound in harmony together? Paying attention to each of these elements will improve your tone, intonation, clarity and quality of sound and sustain.

Two good ballads to play are 'Autumn Leaves' for a swing ballad or 'Black Orpheus' for a Latin ballad.

Have fun.

## **Tip 14. Virtual Practice**

If you find you are pushed for time to practice or you are away from home and can't take your instrument you might like to experiment with some virtual practice, or practising in your head.

To do this imagine yourself playing, seeing your fingers as if you were playing for real while hearing the scale, exercise or melody in your head. When you do this you fire the neurones in your brain that control your muscle responses because the brain can't tell the difference between real and imagined memory.

To prepare its useful to pay attention to the piece you planning to practice away from the instrument. First watch your fingers and take some internal movies as you play. Then notice the muscles you are using and the muscle patterns required to move the fingers. Now look up and see if you can reproduce what you have just played. Repeat until you can. Now do the same and this time as you look, simply mime the movements without the mandolin and hear the melody in your head or even sing it out loud. if yo are reading form music notation you can, in addition or instead, visualise the score. This works for people with photographic memories who can recall visual images in great detail. You might start with some scales and see how it works. Because its your brain that signals your finger to move, by practising in your head you can improve your playing by using virtual practice in any odd moments like waiting at traffic lights or stuck in a queue or just relaxing in a chair. When you practice like this it can be as beneficial as actual practice.

Have fun.

## Tip 15 Smooth quavers

When I was practising for a concert playing the Beethoven Mandolin Sonatas I was having difficulty playing a fast quaver passage evenly. This came up with one of my pupils last week and I remembered a very good tip I was given by the pianist I was rehearsing with and it was something that had helped him. He suggested I slow down and play the passage, placing emphasis on the weak beat, in other words the second quaver in each pair. When you do this it takes the pressure off the strong beat and creates space around the first quaver. Secondly it makes you pay attention to playing the second quaver and giving it more than equal importance. Amazing things happen when you do this. Your perspective of the melody changes, you notice the control required for the up stroke and how much control you gain over string crossing and finger placement. The natural lightness of the upstroke is replaced with a power and force turning the expected into the unusual. This reversing of flow and emphasis highlights the parts of the passage that require the most attention and solves quite a few problems along the way.

The power of this strategy is only noticed when you then play the passage at speed. Suddenly I discovered the quavers were flowing evenly and effortlessly because I was no longer throwing away the second quavers. Instead I was really playing them with equal importance and emphasis.

I now do this anytime I find a quaver passage not quite flowing as I would like it to.

Let me know if you find this useful and any other suggestions you might want to add.

Have fun.

## Tip 16. Plectrum Stroke Dilemmas

A pupil recently said he was confused by different advice he was getting for 6/8 plectrum stroke direction. Irish players seem to prefer Down Up Down Up Down Up while some tutor books and videos recommend Down Up Down Down Up Down. He wanted to decide on one and stick to it what would I suggest.

Methods for picking are as diverse as positions for holding the mandolin and left hand hold and position shifting. It's important to remember that different schools have evolved through players discovering a good method that worked for them then starting a school based on what they discovered for themselves and then calling it "The right way" or the "Correct way". It is in teachers' interests to have a consistent method to teach so your Irish tutor has his/her method which works for him or her so they don't confuse pupils. However, as you have discovered, different "right ways" often conflict which, when you learn under different tutors, causes confusion or dilemmas. So what to do?

The question I would ask is this: when you play, which plectrum stroke works best for you? Which feels the most natural? Which creates the best sound and flow for the beat of the piece. When listening to other players which style do you enjoy listening to most?

A teacher is there to nurture and provide support and inspiration for their pupils. It is the pupils' challenge to discover their own path.

One of the issues with plectrum stroke is that, if it works, it makes no difference when you are playing solo, but it does make a difference when you are playing with a group or another player because you will get a different feel and emphasis if you are not picking using the same strokes. This can lead to an uncomfortable or ragged sound for the listener.

When I am working with others we agree on how we are going to pick so the instruments sound together. This may be different to how I would normally do it myself. If you look at classical mandolin music there are often very diverse picking systems for string crossing for example and context is everything and it is not always consistent.

You have a choice as to whether you want to find a single method approach and stick to it no matter what or develop a flexible approach where you learn different methods and then apply them according to context. I tend to prefer the approach you mention taken by Chris Thile and use this more often and yet there are some tunes I will play DUDUDU.

As a general principle I teach to use down strokes for crotchets and for all notes of longer value than a crotchet. Quavers are played DUDU unless the time signature is 6/8 when I use DUD DUD. This gives pupils the skill of playing both DUDU in 4/4 and DUD DUD in 6/8. As they progress they will then meet exceptions to the rule and I introduce classical string crossing methods which you can find in the books by Ranieri and more recently in Alison Stephens' excellent book series available from [www.astute-music.com](http://www.astute-music.com).

If you have discovered that ALL Irish sessions use the DUDUDU method then don't fight it, go with it for all your Irish playing. When you are in other contexts play DUD DUD. For me 6/8 is about a 2 feel and I want to hear a strong beat on the 1st and 4th quaver which is best achieved with DUD DUD. Irish music has a continuous flow feel to it which can benefit from the DUDUDU.

So can you develop a dual approach and feel comfortable with both?

Have fun.

**Tip 17. Arpeggios and triads**

Do you know your arpeggios? An arpeggio is the notes of a chord (triad) played one after the other adding an octave above the root to complete, first rising then descending. So if I asked you to play a D major arpeggio would you know what notes to play? Here is an easy way to remember the chord tones which make up the arpeggio.

Because chords are made of three notes placed one above the other in thirds, all you have to do is visualise the staff with the key signature. The chord notes will either be on adjacent lines or spaces. For example place D on the space below the bottom line. The other chord tones will be in the two spaces above the D. The third in the space above the D which is F# and the 5th which is in the space above the F# which is A. Simple. How about a chord of G? The root G sits on the second line of the staff so the notes in the chord will be on the next two lines above the G, being B and D.

Simply visualising the staff with its lines and spaces instantly tells you what the chord notes are. Once you know the chord notes you can play the arpeggio playing the root followed by the 3rd followed by the 5th and finally to the octave above the root to complete the ascending arpeggio.

This is so useful for improvisation and really getting to know your chords.

Have fun.

### Tip 18. Developing a sense of pitch (Ear Training)

When I was learning how to improvise I realised I needed to develop my ear so I could easily hear chord changes and melody intervals. I bought tapes and CDs on ear training and spend hours at the piano keyboard trying to teach myself to recognise and sing intervals. I then discovered a very simple and easy way to remember and hear intervals. I already knew lots of songs and tunes so I used these to learn different intervals by using the first two notes of songs in which they occurred. For example the first interval change in the song “Happy birthday” is a major second. Sing it to yourself now. As soon as you start to sing the word birthday that note is a major second above the first two.

So all you need to do is find a song that you know for each interval. Get to know them well and sing them. Singing is very important for developing your ear. If you can sing an interval you’ll be able to hear one. I’ve learned that students who have a good sense of pitch can learn tunes easily. Those that haven’t usually find learning tunes difficult.

Here is my basic list to get started. Then you will need to go and find your own tunes and maybe learn some new ones for the less common intervals.

|             |                               |
|-------------|-------------------------------|
| minor 2nd   | Bye-bye blackbird             |
| Major 2nd   | Happy birthday                |
| minor 3rd   | Work song                     |
| Major 3rd   | Oh when the Saints            |
| perfect 4th | Auld lang syne                |
| Flat 5th    | Maria                         |
| perfect 5th | The last post                 |
| Flat 6th    | Mana de Carnival              |
| Major 6th   | My bonny lies over the ocean  |
| Flat 7th    | Somewhere [ West side story ] |
| Major 7th   | Ceora                         |
| Octave      | Somewhere over the rainbow    |

These are ascending intervals and you will need a similar list for descending intervals. I hope you enjoy searching for your favourites.

A very comprehensive list can be found in the Jamie Eabersold free handbook available on his web site.

<http://aebersold.com>

There are also plenty of ear training websites and free software to download to test your knowledge using your computer. Just type in “Ear training” into a search engine.

Have fun