

Academia: The 5-string Banjo

The banjo is a stringed instrument and popularly thought to have been developed by and adapted from several African instruments. The name “banjo” through recent research suggests that it may come from a Senegambian term for the bamboo stick used for the instrument's neck.

Today’s five-string banjo is credited to Joel Walker Sweeney, an American minstrel performer from Appomattox Court House, Virginia. Sweeney wanted an instrument similar to the banjar played by African Americans in the American South, but at the same time, wanted to implement some modern ideas and was playing it by the 1830s.

The banjo can be played in several styles and is used in various forms of music. The five-string banjo has been used in classical music since the turn of the century. American old-time music typically uses the five-string open back banjo. It is played in a number of different styles, the most common of which are called claw-hammer or frailing, and usually without the use of fingerpicks.

Bluegrass music, which uses the five-string resonator banjo almost exclusively, is played in several common styles. These include Scruggs style, named after Earl Scruggs; melodic, or Keith style; and three-finger style with single string work, also called Reno style after Don Reno. In these styles the emphasis is on arpeggiated figures played in a continuous eighth-note rhythm. All of these styles are typically played with fingerpicks.

Many tunings are used for the five-string banjo, the most common, particularly in bluegrass, is the open G tuning (gDGBd). In earlier times, the tuning gCGBd was commonly used instead. Other tunings common in old-time music include double C (gCGcd), sawmill or mountain minor (gDGcd) also called Modal or Mountain Modal, old-time D (aDAde) a step up from double C, often played with a violin accompaniment, and open D (f#DF#Ad). These tunings are often taken up a tone, either by tuning up or using a capo.

The fifth (drone) string is a unique feature of the 5-string. It is shorter so, unlike many string instruments, the strings on a five string banjo do not go in order from lowest to highest from one side of the neck to the other. Instead, in order from low to high the strings are the fourth, third, second, first, and then fifth.

The short fifth string presents special problems for using a capo to change the pitch of the instrument. For small changes (going up or down one or two semitones, for example) it is possible simply to re-tune the fifth string. Otherwise various devices, known as fifth string capos, are available effectively to shorten the string. Many banjo players favor the use of model railroad spikes or titanium spikes (usually installed at the seventh fret and sometimes at others), under which the string can be hooked to keep it pressed down on the fret.