

The fifth string being a battle cry

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For this translation the author edited and revised the original essay of November 2016. 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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For advanced and interested banjo players a couple of years ago I wrote an essay with the title *Rammelen in een theeglas*, translation *Ticking in a teaglass*. In it I described that the function of the fifth string on a banjo was not the ringing of a drone but that there is another more important function. This essay was rather long. Since my thoughts on this subject didn't stop, I recently wrote this article to show from another point of view the function of the fifth string.

Drone

I argued that the fifth string on a banjo is not a drone. Everytime I hear banjo players or banjo experts ¹ mention the fifth string indeed is a drone, in my mind a new series of thoughts and arguments to the subject starts to come up why this is incorrect or at least only partially true. Admitted, for a good deal the fifth string may function as a drone and when it is desirable to explain an only half interested audience something about the peculiar short string, the bagpipe may be a handsome example, though at the same moment a much more important function of the fifth string will be neglected.

Bagpipe

Often the Scottish bagpipe is mentioned as an example. There is no discussion that attached to a bagpipe you will find drones; the only possibility to change the tone of a dronepipe at this instrument is, when changing of a musical piece, to retune the pipe. However this action being performed the tone will stay the same again, without any intervention or play of the musician. Repeatedly mentioning the example of the bagpipe might raise as a side issue the idea that there is a historical interrelation between the bagpipe and the banjo. Which could be something like : Scotsmen bringing along their bagpipe and leaving behind the idea of a drone to incorporate in the banjo.

As far as I know something like that never happened. I don't even know whether there exist any investigations concerning such an idea. Any more than banjo historical research looked for a possible contribution of the native Indians either, which could have been well-fitting because some seem to be inclined to proof the banjo is native American. Undoubtedly there has been written a lot about Indians, and about Scots and Irish too : these did bring their (modal) songs, their dances and their fiddles. But those things I never met with in banjo research which the last decades unequivocally indicates in the direction of the plantage system, slavery and Afrika.

Mentioning the bagpipe just may explain what a drone is; it only partially will tell something about the fifth string, namely alone as far as the fifth string has a drone function.

¹ I confine to this indication of this group. In the essay *Ticking in a teaglass* you may find reasoned examples.

Yell

As a starting point to argue once more what exactly is the function of the fifth string, I mention the *yell* or *battle cry*. Short time ago there occurred a coup in Turkey and I heard chants of the Dutch Turkish supporters of president Erdogan yelling as a battle cry: cheering his name thus: Re - cep - Tay - Yup - Erdogan, RecepTayyupErdogan.²

The two times the name had been cheered, they had a different rhythm. When I was young we did this the same at the campfire. I'm sorry I don't have any English examples here, but you may think of baseball cheerleaders to get the idea.

The function of the yell and the battlecry is to scream it massive and in order to receive this effect the yell is supplied with a rhythmic fundament. This rhythm will empower the strength of the separate words. It underlines to the people who are screaming the well-known significance of a row of some words or of a name like in this case of Erdogan. The repetition of phrases as such gives rise to a rhythm. Speeding up halfway empowers the rhythm, loud accents (hand flapping) or silent ones (breaks) emphasize the rhythm more.

In the case of Erdogan it is going like this: At first the two forenames are spoken in four long notes with inbetween small breaks, then in the surname it speeds up. Those three notes last as half as long and are followed by a sloppy break to fill up four counts, after which the whole name is repeated in hurried half notes without breaks.

Cheering

With reference to the content of this article it is an important characteristic of the yell and the battle cry that they are both performed in one pitch. This makes them drones. Because during the whole piece of music - finally a yell or battlecry is a short song with endless repetitions - the tone will stay the same. However more characteristics of the drone are hardly present. The demonstration of the screamers doesn't look in the slightest to the feature of automatic steering; the feature that the musicians are not active in producing a drone. And there is no talk of any continuity of tone of the drone either. Though instead the yell features strong rhythmic interruptions.

This cheering is a rhythmic distribution of accents and breaks (short silences) based upon the content, name or the series of words and it will be adapted by repetition when it is appropriate. In the foundation of it there seem to be simple rhythmic sequences. There is a well-known example of an international yell which gets its own version in every country and every language and it shows such a structure better than the one about Recep.

² In this article this yell is used just to discuss its form, not any political preference is articulated here.

This is the begin we continue the fight

I come up with this translation in English. I don't know which words are generally in use in America. Every new demonstrator will lightning fast recognize the underlying structure of the irritating little hop: one-two, one-two-three, one-two-three-four, one-two.

Here are sixteen beats that in alternation are connected to or spaced from each other. There are four groups of four beats: it starts with two times two connected beats, so two long notes. Then three beats and a break of one beat; next four counts and finally four of which the first one and the last one are rests. This way the distribution of four groups of four beats to sixteen beats results in an irregular row of rests in an inbetween distribution. The first two of the rests are the lengthenings of the two long notes; then the third rest appears as the fourth beat of the second group at count eight; then after four beats again a rest appears at the first of the last group of four beats at count thirteen, and finally, virtually at the end, comes a last rest at count sixteen. This last one is not ringing but it is necessary to start all together again at the wright moment.

In figures this will be clearer:

1 2 3 4 / 5 6 7 8 / 9 10 11 12 / 13 14 15 16

This-e ls - e the be gin we con ti nue the fight
One - Two - One two three - One two three four - one two -

The little silences (2, 4, 8, 13 and 16) act like accents, forming a kind of counterparts of the accents in the text. This is remarkable because in a row of sixteen beats you would expect the accents would appear regularly at the same of each four counts (1, 5, 9, and 13), like metrical feet in a poem. Normally in common meter the accents appear at the first of each bar (group of four beats) like I underlined.

In case you would just pronounce the yell at sixteen equal counts, it would result in powerless long line of words, finished with a long rest at the end. That is however discordant with the content of the text and the accents of language and so it would not serve for battle cries. You might accentuate the words at the first of each bar too, but is will only result in a sort of song with the exchanged words of anotherone. These forms are difficult to cheer in a group: everybody seems to be inclined to choose his own hidden rests and accents. It is the cumulation of cheering: 'one two, one to three, one two three four' that gives the yell its compelling power.

Repetition

This unregular row of accents, spread over the four groups of four counts, will repeat, everytime the yell will be cheered. So it will be less irregular than appeared at first sight. The irregularity of accents even will be a contribution to stenghten the rhythm of the whole.

To clarify this i will present next example. From Caribbean and Mexican music we know the *Claves*. These two wooden sticks, beaten at each other, produce notes at one high pitch during the whole music piece. So they would

be a drone, though no one would get the idea to label them so. Their function is clearly rhythmic. Like before explained concerning the yell, they act as amplifiers of the rhythm by means of repeating patterns of accents above longer parts of pieces of music.

Timing in music exists of repeated regular bars of an established number of counts. Rhythm is established by accentuating the first count of each bar. The rhythm will be amplified by applying patterns of rests and accents spread over groups of bars. This last is the part of percussion that is performed in general with usually small high instruments.

Percussion

This exactly is what the fifth string does at the banjo: at a high pitch amplifying rhythm by means of regularly irregular accent patterns. One of the most striking characteristics of the banjo in regard to other instruments is its capacity to play both rhythm and melody at the same time. The banjo owes this characteristic to the fifth string. This string rings a pattern like the fat printed rests above. For the fun of it you might try to replace those rests by a hand flapping and you will experience how complicated the percussion system of the fifth string counts, while the banjo is ringing the melody all the time. Even the straight forwarded to and to hand flapping of the Spanish flamenco, a same feature as the fifth string, turns out not to be easy. It however stimulates the drive for sure.

Reversed

From a reverse direction there are more signals to support the idea of the percussion string. For instance the disappearing of the fifth string at banjos that are deployed in music where the production of melody and rhythm together is not an item anymore. Like the tenorbanjo in Jazz music that only supports the melodic instruments rhythmically. Or the plectrum banjo who rings the melody in complex chords and in melodic rows and arpeggio's where the peg of the (even sometimes dissonant) fifth string halfway the neck is just an obstacle. And finally the Irish banjo playing the strict melody line parallel to the fiddle and accordion, leaving the rhythm the way it is, just as a result of the melody.

Dissonant

Incidentally from the sometimes happening dissonance of the fifth string stems another indication: the musician accepts some loss of harmony in exchange for the amplification of the rhythm. In other words just as with the claves, the pitch sometimes clashes with the chord modulation of the melody. The only choice to prevent clashing is to interrupt the row of notes, which by the way is in conflict with the definition of the drone again.

Increasingly in modern styles like *melodic bluegrass* and *melodic droptthumb* you may notice another solution: the fifth string is fretted yet in cases that it would clash or that a melody note comes in handy. Especially where it might

facilitate fingering or a special roll. This of course is all in conflict with the idea of a drone.

Open strings

Instead of the bagpipe as an example you may mention the Indian *sitar* having another system of employing kind of unreachable open strings: resonance strings. Equally the open fifth string just resonates too.

Deployment of open strings for its own sake however is not a characteristic of the drone either. Actually at the piano and harp we exclusively see open strings. No one will ever think of a drone or a comparison to it here. In the percussion feature of the fifth string, it is not the resonating tone but the rhythmic accent patterns that count. Those patterns for the most part are created and automated by the manner of operating the instrument. Especially by the way in which the attack of the fifth string will be approached. However the strokes will be chosen deliberately. It is the musician who chooses and studies them, their fingerings and their rolls. Such an active way of operating is never the case as to the automatic steering of the drone.

The active choice of the accent patterns comes out specially clear in melodic DropThumb frailing when a musician brings his thumb over from the fifth string to the middle strings to ring there an extra rhythmic accent or a melody note. Nowadays it seems even to be fashion to a certain extent to characterize the middle strings in these cases as drones too. However, by which one only can mean, that they are ringing as open strings. The strong emphasizing which is the result of the drop of the thumb has nothing to do with the drone.

Literature

In recent scientific banjo literature, 2016 *The Banjo* from Laurent Dubois, the origins of the banjo is silhouetted against the background of slavery and the rise of the New World. The banjo is portrayed as the new instrument that was supposed to bring the different peoples in America under one denominator and was composed at the fundament of the miscellaneous memories of Africa. An instrument that ought be able to accompany all different descendants to unite them in a new national solidarity. The banjo moulded the rituals, music and communality and gave comfort when desired, it forged the solidarity needed to fight for a position in the new surroundings. Maybe the fifth string represented the built-in battle cry of the banjo.

Means of combat

At the end of this argumentation I think it may be proper to spent a look which might be the function of the drone of the bagpipe. In my opinion the main function was turmoil. The noise that one man with a blowpipe could provoke would be trippled when you add two more pipes. The Scottish bagpipe is loud. There was a reason for that. The bagpipes had to command big armies to the battle field. There they had to encourage the troops and to mark by

sound the own positions in the scrimmage. So: volume as a means of combat.

Different from the banjo however, in which it was not the enlargement of the volume that played a role for the fifth string, but the accentuation of the rhythm that had to ensure that different and encreasing groups reached eachother and that their sense of a joint battle took shape.

