

Syncopation of Fingerstyle Chord-Melody

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The chord-melody style (where the melody note is played as the highest note of the strummed chord) is one of two main styles of flatpicked 4-string banjo. While the fingerpicking 5-string banjo world is dominated by bluegrass rolls, TIM fingers can also pinch the chords with the melody on top of them. This article discusses how to utilize familiar 5-string banjo vamping patterns for adding some syncopation into the fingerstyle chord-melody arrangements.

In chord-melody setting with three right hand fingers in use, the melody is picked by middle finger (M), while thumb (T) and index finger (I) play the chord notes below the melody. For chord-melody playing it is necessary to memorize sufficient amount of left hand voicings which enable to play chordal notes as well as non chordal notes above particular chord. But this is not the subject of this article. The question here is - what to do with right hand fingers?

1) Quarter note pinches

First obvious option is to pinch quarter notes with TIM fingers. Please note that I do not specify the tuning in the examples so it is up to you to find actual voicings - 5-string banjo players may start with three-note voicings derived from F-shape, D-shape and barre-shape of major chords. (And I put the 5th string into the parentheses to indicate that you can do the same TIM pinches on tenor/plectrum banjo too.) Anyway - you can clearly see the rhythm and the distribution of the right hand fingers on the strings.

First two measures of Example 1 show how to pick the melody on first and on second string respectively. Third measure shows the situation when the melody drops down to the third strings - here it is picked by index finger. The fourth measure shows again the melody on the first string, but in the situation when the particular chord voicing dictates different distribution of picking fingers. In the following examples only the first measure with narrow pinch will be used for the demonstration of syncopation but the goal is to practice the other right hand positions too.

Example 1 - TIM pinch

M	---	M	---	M	---	M	---		-----		-----		-----		M	---	M	---	M	---	M	---		
I	---	I	---	I	---	I	---		M	---	M	---	M	---	M	---		-----		I	---	I	---	
T	---	T	---	T	---	T	---		I	---	I	---	I	---	I	---		-----		I	---	I	---	
	-----		-----		-----		-----		T	---	T	---	T	---	T	---		-----		T	---	T	---	
(-----		-----		-----		-----		-----		-----		-----		-----		-----		-----		-----)	

You can control the length of the sound of the pinch by releasing the pressure of the left hand fingers or by dampening the strings with available left hand finger - but that is also not the subject of this article. The core information is the involvement of two vamping patterns for the chord-melody purpose as described in following parts.

2) TI(TM) vamping pattern for longer notes

If the melody does not contain four quarter notes per 4/4 measure but there is some half note instead, one can simply omit the quarter-note pinch as shown in the 1st measure of Example 2. Another option, which would keep the pace, is the use of vamping pattern used in Scruggs style backup. You can find it at page 19 of Janet Davis' book Back-Up Banjo (Mel Bay Publications) as part of the vamping pattern #3; I call it TI(TM). Look at the 2nd measure of Example 2 - you can see that the rhythm of the melody (played by middle finger) is the same as in measure 1 but there is no

pause. The following pairs of measures at the first and second line of Example 2 show the use of TI(TM) vamping pattern in another places of the measure. The third line shows the use of repeated vamping pattern for playing the half notes. You can see that the repeated measures do not start with the full TIM pinch but with TM pinch only, which is the end of the preceding vamping pattern TI(TM) - the same applies for the very end of the second line. The fourth line shows again the half notes, but they are now on different strings - here is demonstrated that the right hand fingers should start the pattern on those strings, where the pattern ends depending on the location of melody note on the 1st or 2nd string. This pattern does not work for melody on the 3rd string when only thumb and index finger are used (as shown in the 3rd measure of Example 1) - in that case the (TI)-(TI) pinches would morph maybe to T-(TI) pattern.

Example 2 - TI(TM) vamping pattern

instead of		try this		instead of		try this	
M-----M---M--	M-----M---M--	M---M-----M--	M---M-----M--	M---M-----M--	M---M-----M--	M---M-----M--	M---M-----M--
I-----I---I--	I-----I---I--	I---I-----I--	I---I-----I--	I---I-----I--	I---I-----I--	I---I-----I--	I---I-----I--
T-----T---T--	T-----T---T--	T---T-----T--	T---T-----T--	T---T-----T--	T---T-----T--	T---T-----T--	T---T-----T--
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)

instead of		try this		instead of		try this	
---M---M---M--	---M---M---M--	M---M---M-----	M---M---M-----	M---M---M-----	M---M---M-----	M---M---M-----	M---M---M-----
---I---I---I--	---I---I---I--	I---I---I-----	I---I---I-----	I---I---I-----	I---I---I-----	I---I---I-----	I---I---I-----
---T---T---T--	---T---T---T--	T---T---T-----	T---T---T-----	T---T---T-----	T---T---T-----	T---T---T-----	T---T---T-----
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)

instead of		try this		instead of		try this	
M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----
I-----I-----	I-----I-----	I-----I-----	I-----I-----	I-----I-----	I-----I-----	I-----I-----	I-----I-----
T-----T-----	T-----T-----	T-----T-----	T-----T-----	T-----T-----	T-----T-----	T-----T-----	T-----T-----
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)

instead of		try this		instead of		try this	
M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----	M-----M-----
I-----M-----	I-----M-----	I-----M-----	I-----M-----	I-----M-----	I-----M-----	I-----M-----	I-----M-----
T-----I-----	T-----I-----	T-----I-----	T-----I-----	T-----I-----	T-----I-----	T-----I-----	T-----I-----
-----T-----	-----T-----	-----T-----	-----T-----	-----T-----	-----T-----	-----T-----	-----T-----
(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)	(-----)

3) T(IM)T vamping pattern for off-beat melody

When there is the need of playing the melody off the beat, there is another vamping pattern very handy - you can find it as the vamping pattern #6 at page 19 of above mentioned Back-Up Banjo book - I call it T(IM)T. In the Example 3 you can see that this pattern shifts the melody note ahead or behind its original position. First four lines demonstrate the use of one pattern in the measure; the

Example 3 - T(IM)T vamping pattern

[illegible]

While the index finger sticks with the middle finger in the T(IM)T pattern, thumb stays on the beats. This regular beat of thumb can resemble Travis picking (see my Banjo Sessions article at <http://banjosessions.com/?p=30>), but in the chord-melody mode we do not intend to play some "bass" note - instead, the thumb just picks the lowest note of the three-note chord voicing whenever it is held on the neck.

4) Combination of three elements

You can stack these three building blocks - TIM pinch and two vamping patterns TI(TM) and T(IM)T - in various combinations/phrases. I have intentionally limited the building elements just to these three ones to make things simple for me, but you may of course add other vamping or rolling patterns to your vocabulary of chord-melody picking. Just make sure there are more pinches than rolls if you want to stay in the chord-melody mode.

Example 4 shows some of these combinations; each line is separate exercise. First two lines show the two-measure phrases repeated twice. The third line shows four times repetition of the one-measure phrase - similarly to Example 2 above, the repeated measures do not start with the full TIM pinch but with TM pinch only, which is the end of the preceding vamping pattern TI(TM). The fourth line of Example 4 shows the repetition of the three-beats long phrase, which goes over the bar lines of 4/4 measure when repeated; it repeats four times in three measures.

Example 4 - combinations

```
| M-----M-----M-- | --M-----M--M-- | M-----M-----M-- | --M-----M--M-- |
| I-----I---I----- | --I---I-----I-- | I-----I---I----- | --I---I-----I-- |
| T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- |
| ----- | ----- | ----- | ----- |
| (----- | ----- | ----- | ----- )
|      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
```

```
| M-----M-----M | --M-----M--M-- | M-----M-----M | --M-----M--M-- |
| I-----I-----I | --I---I-----I-- | I-----I-----I | --I---I-----I-- |
| T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- |
| ----- | ----- | ----- | ----- |
| (----- | ----- | ----- | ----- )
|      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
```

```
| M---M-----M----- | M---M-----M----- | M---M-----M----- | M---M-----M----- | M
| I---I-----I---I | ---I-----I---I | ---I-----I---I | ---I-----I---I | -
| T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- | T
| ----- | ----- | ----- | ----- | -
| (----- | ----- | ----- | ----- | - )
|      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
```

```
| --M-----M-----M | ---M-----M----- | M-----M-----M-- |
| --I---I-----I | --I-----I---I | -----I---I----- |
| T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- | T---T---T---T--- |
| ----- | ----- | ----- |
| (----- | ----- | ----- )
|      |      |      |      |      |      |
```

The lines in Example 4 are written here for practice purposes, in real chord-melody picking there will be bigger share of plain four-to-the-bar pinches as in example 1. Or maybe not - it is up to you. Below is the example of the traditional ballad Captain Kidd, arranged for fingerstyle DGdg tenor banjo. The upper tab is straight four-to-the-bar version; the lower tab shows one of possible syncopations. 5-string banjo players are requested to use their own three-note chord voicings and to syncopate them in the suggested (or any other) way. Enjoy!

YouTube Video of examples: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNFPwckh0S8>

Captain Kidd chord melody

DGdq tenor banjo
www.mirekpatek.com

G D G D

syncopated version

G D G C D

G C D

C D G