



Camp Prep for Novice Fiddle Players

Fiddle

Bluegrass fiddle grew out of the Appalachian tradition – from where it gets the ‘high lonesome’ wails, blues – the ‘blue notes’, and jazz and Western Swing – the fast improvisations and ‘spicy’ notes. Examples of bluegrass style are:

- sliding up to a note
- playing the same note on two strings (an open string, and with your little finger on the string below)
- and playing two strings at once generally (‘double-stopping’) – sometimes just playing an open string next to the string you are playing the tune on, as long as it fits with the harmony at the time.

Bluegrass fiddlers use lots of bowing patterns for different effects:

- Saw-stroke – change bow direction for every note
- Nashville Shuffle – long bow followed by two short bows
- Georgia Bow – three notes played up with one down: obviously the down-bow must be played ‘harder’ so that you don’t end up at the bottom of the bow all the time; to make a point of this the down-bow is on the off-beat of the music, giving a nice rhythmic effect.
- Orange Blossom Special shuffle – like the banjo, this is a syncopated rhythm to give a really exciting feel to this ‘train-tune’. Each quaver note can be played with a separate bow or some run together for extra rhythmic madness. This kind of shuffle is used in other tunes and breaks too.

The image displays three musical examples in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C).
1. **Nashville Shuffle**: A single melodic line with notes on the first and second strings. Bowing directions are indicated by arrows below the notes: down, up, down, up, down, up.
2. **Georgia Bow**: A single melodic line with notes on the first and second strings. Bowing directions are indicated by arrows below the notes: up, down, up, down, up, down, up, down.
3. **Orange Blossom Special**: A single melodic line with notes on the first and second strings, featuring a syncopated rhythm. Bowing directions are indicated by arrows below the notes: down, up, down, up, down, up, down, up.

As you get more experienced and confident, you’ll find that you develop your own bowing style, running notes together as seems right on the occasion, to suit your music.

You notice that there are no tablature files for fiddle on this CD – all the other instrument tablatures contain standard notation for the tunes anyway, so use any of them. The mandolin is tuned just like the fiddle, so this may help if you are happy to translate fret numbers to the fiddle neck.

Some often asked questions:

I am being taught to play fiddle as a lead instrument and I don't understand about chords on the fiddle.

This is typical, if that's any comfort. We teach a lot of fiddlers the rhythm basics.

I thought arpeggios were just extended chords broken up into single notes the fiddle can play, and a way to beat into the brain just which notes are acceptable choices when everyone else is playing a certain chord.

That's exactly right. A chord means any two or more notes which harmonise together. If you are playing arpeggios of the "acceptable notes in a chord", then any one or more of those same notes can be used. If you're playing two at the same time, that can be called "a chord", but one is sufficient to be passable. The notes in a chord are: the FIRST, THIRD, and FIFTH note of the scale the chord is based on. Example: for a C chord, use the 1st, 3rd, and 5th notes of the C scale. Those are: C, E, and G.*

To follow chords in bluegrass, you mainly need to know what notes are "acceptable" choices behind each of the chords. The choices change as the chords change.

On our Slow Jam DVD, we start out with a bunch of two chord songs. They use G and D chords. For those two chords, the acceptable notes are (for G:) G, B, or D, and (for D:) D, F#, A. So, for instance, as the song changed from the part backed by a G chord, to D chord, on the fiddle you could note a G and then an A. Or a G and then a D. Or a D and then a D!

When you look at it that way, the technical end is pretty simple, but you do have to keep the "acceptable" choices in mind, and as you follow the chord changes, make sure to "stay legal".

This kind of thing gets much easier the more you do it, to where after a while you can almost stop thinking about it, while still doing it correctly. That's why I strongly recommend our Slow Jam DVD. The chord changes are shown right on screen, and as the songs go by, you just follow along. The DVD has 17 standards, all played slowly, and the entire chord vocabulary is G, C, D, and A. Play along enough with that DVD, and you'll be able to fit right in at the camp, and set your sights on more than just the basics of "being legal".

Are there suggested ways to improve learning chords?

Pick two chords that are commonly played in the same song, and practice switching between them. At first, once you've made the chord, pick the strings one by one to make sure they're all clear. Then change the chord and do the same. Then back and forth, and in time, more quickly. With practice, you will definitely get it.

Camp Prep for Novice Mandolin Players

In bluegrass music, mandolins provide the back beat or off-beat. This is done with the mandolin “chop.” It’s not hard. You make a chord - say G - and then strum it but just as it starts to ring you let your fingers up just a little on the strings, dampening them and the sound. You get a nice snare drum chop sound.

That’s your job: to keep the band in rhythm with your chop. The bass player will play ON the beat, and you will play the OFF beat. Boom-chick, boom-chick, boom-chick. You’re the chick. Guitars do both the Boom and the chick. Fiddles, banjos, resonator guitars sometimes hit the chick, but the mandolin virtually always does.

Playing on the off beat is a little different. It is very easy to roll over to the on beat and it requires some practice to stay on the off beats. If you can’t do it you should work on this relentlessly until you can. This is the single most important preparation you can do so you need to work on this until you can do it. I’m not kidding. You’ve got to be able to chop on the off beats. Get a metronome and set it at a slow tempo. Hold a chord. Beep - Strum the CHOP - Beep - Strum the CHOP. If you can’t chop in between the beeps slow it down till you can. Then work on it until you can do it faster.

If you can’t do it you may want to try playing the G string (furthest from the floor on your mandolin) ON the beat and then chopping. This helps a lot of mandolin players. They play G string, then CHOP. In effect, they are playing boom-chick, boom-chick - playing “both parts”, as the guitar does. Work on this. This is what the mandolin does when playing rhythm in bluegrass.

You also should work on changing chords as you chop. You need to be able to smoothly and quickly change from G, C, and D chords. Get the song sheet and use it. Play boom-chick, boom-chick, boom- chick as you sing the words in your head and then smoothly, without breaking tempo, shift to the next chord and keep right on boom-chicking in rhythm. The better you are at this the better you’ll do at Jam Camp. Don’t worry about anything else. Don’t work on fiddle tunes or solos. Just work on your chop chords.

By the way, I knew some two-finger mandolin chords and thought I’d just use those. Wrong! You can’t make that nice mandolin “bark” with only two strings chorded. You need to use the full chords that fret all the strings if you want to be a bluegrass mandolin player. [However, if you can switch quickly between the 2-finger chords, it’s acceptable to use those. But practicing the full chords is worth the effort.]

If you can chord chop your way through the songs in our Jam Camp Songbook. (like 80 bpm) then you’re ready for our Jam Camp.

If you can’t chop and chord and you aren’t getting it on your own then order Pete’s Slow Jam DVD. It contains a ton of songs and gives you plenty of slow songs to work on your chop. I bought one at the Camp and it is a huge help. Get one before Camp and you’ll be just that much better before the Camp starts.

Bluegrass mandolin is an exciting combination of rhythm and melody – more ‘traditional’ players, copying Bill Monroe’s own style, tend to like syncopated rhythms while the more ‘modern’ players (for example Adam Steffey and Jimmy Gaudreau) go for melodic interest. When not taking breaks the mandolin often emphasises the off-beat with a cut-off ‘chop’ chord.

One of the basics is that the right hand always picks downwards on the quaver-notes 1,3,5 and 7 of a bar and upwards on notes 2,4,6 and 8 [example 1 below]. However there is a style invented by Jesse McReynolds, known as ‘cross-picking’ which imitates bluegrass banjo syncopation [see 2 below]; Jesse McReynolds and most other players pick this style as shown – ‘down-up-up’ – but other players still stick to regular ‘down-up-down-up’.

[3] below shows the standard chord shape – this is for ‘G’, but you can move it around to get other chords – up two frets for A, across to the bottom three strings for C etc.. You only play the strings you are actually fretting with your left hand. A lot of classic bluegrass mandolin licks are based around this shape – for instance [4].

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

Most bluegrass mandolin decoration is, as for the fiddle, filling out the spaces in the tune – try runs up and down the scale or up and down the arpeggio (the notes of the backing chord at the time you are playing); you can be as creative as you like.

Tremolo – useful for slow tunes, and occasionally for fast ones too. It does take practice: I have found it really helped to try and relax my right wrist as much as possible. You don’t have to keep to the rhythm of the piece – in fact it’s rather nice if the tremolo is ‘against’ the time of the other instruments. Try it first on just one string, then on two. You may even want sometimes to use even three or four strings for special effects.