

# An Approach to Learning Chord-Melody Style

by Merv Rowley

The transition from "drone" accompaniment (strumming the open middle & bass strings) to playing chords is difficult for many players. I'm talking here about using chords for self-accompaniment, together with playing melody notes – the style commonly referred to as the Chord-Melody style of playing.

There is indeed a logic behind selecting particular chords for this purpose, and I have found a system for learning to chord that has worked for many of my students and many others on the dulcimer-list. The following discussion pertains only to 1-5-5 tunings (such as DAA, CGG, Ionian Mode). A similar table could be prepared for 1-5-8 tunings (DAd, etc.), but that's another matter.

Everyone learns to play the dulcimer by memorizing the location of notes on the melody string(s). This way, by name or number, each new tune becomes a string of finger placements, right? In effect, we first learn where the scale is on the melody string, so we don't have to stop and think about it.

What if we could do the same thing with chords? What I mean is, what if we could learn a "scale" of chords, so that it could be memorized once and for all. Then, when we wanted to substitute a chord for a melody note it would be there in our memory bank waiting to be called for.

Such "chord scales" are available! In fact, I have taught my students two different chord scales, one for major notes and one for minor notes. Yep, you have to learn at least fourteen (14) different chords by heart, but then you've got things under control. Any song you have learned to play as a melody with drone accompaniment, you can almost instantly play with chords, in the Chord-Melody style.

In Chord-Melody style, the idea is to embellish the melody of the song by the occasional substitution of a harmonious chord for a melody note - without disrupting the continuity of the melody line or the tempo. There are certain restrictions as to what chords can, and may be used in this way. Assuming that a chord can indeed be played, and is harmonious, it is also essential that it have a certain tonality characteristic; one that I first saw elegantly and clearly described as (emphasis mine):

"Our brains...hear any melody as if it were moving forward on the support of changing chords, or even integers of such chords. In much of the most familiar music, in fact, the tones of the...melody are simply the highest tones of such a succession of chords." N. H. Weinstock, *What Music Is, Doubleday & Co.*

What this means is that we cannot substitute a chord without disrupting the melody line unless the highest-pitched note of the chord matches the pitch of the melody note being replaced.

In terms of chord accessibility, there are three main chord "finger patterns" which are most comfortable and practical for most players. I personally use the thumb and index fingers, respectively, on the melody and bass strings and any other fingers to reach the middle string. Let's take a look at the Finger Pattern Tables to see what chords meet these requirements when using a three-string (or doubled melody string) dulcimer with the 1-5-5 tuning of DAA.

## Chord Finger Patterns for DAA Tuning

### Finger Pattern #1

Fret Numbers Pressed

Bass	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Mid	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Melody	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Chord	A	Bm	A7	D	Em	D7	G	A	Bm

### Finger Pattern #2

Bass	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Mid	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Melody	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Chord	D	Em	F#m	G	Am	Bm	A7	D	

### Finger Pattern #3

Bass	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Mid	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Melody	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Chord	F#m	G	A	Bm	C	D	Em	F#m	G

Some instruction books call these finger patterns "movable chords", meaning that the finger position can be moved up and down the fretboard. Doing so, as shown above, results in predictable, but somewhat bizarre sequences of major, minor, and other chords. This linear admixture of major and minor chords is inconsistent with the harmony to which our ears are accustomed.

In fact, no single finger-pattern will produce a sequence of chords which bears any resemblance to the sequential sounds we hear when we play the D-Ionian Mode scale from the 3rd to the 10th fret or the D-Aeolian Mode scale from fret 1 to 8. Yes, we can play such a scale (Aeolian/Minor) even tuned DAA! It works because we use chords to accompany the melody line. Notice our Minor scale extends from fret 1 through 8 and then repeats.

Since all of the chords above do contain a note on the melody string which we wish to replace, and since that melody note is the highest-pitched note of each chord, all of the above are eligible to be substituted someplace. All we have to do is sort out and regroup the chords to select ones that give us the harmonious consistency we want. The simplest way is to build what may be called "Chord Scales", one for the Major scale, and one for the Minor scale.

## Chord Scales for the 1-5-5 Tuning

### Major/Ionian Chord "Scale" in DAA Tuning

Bass	2	3	1	2	4	4	5	7	7	8	9
Mid	0	1	0	0	2	3	3	5	6	7	7
Melody	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Chord	D	G	A	D	A	D	G	D	G	A	D

### Minor/Aeolian Chord "Scale" in DAA Tuning

Bass	2	2	2	3	5	5	6	8	9	9
Mid	1	0	1	1	3	4	4	6	7	8
Melody	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Chord	Bm	F#m	Bm	Em	Bm	Em	Am	Em	F#m	Bm

These "Chord Scales" teach us where on the fretboard the major and minor chords are found. If we memorize and learn to play these scales, we have an arsenal of chords which can be substituted for melody notes in folk tunes we which we have already learned to play on the melody string with drones. Note that these scales hold true for any 1-5-5 tuning (not just DAA). However, the actual chords sounded will be related to the keynote.

### Chord-Melody Style and Mood - Getting Creative

Which chords should you substitute when? This is where you, the player, get to be creative and begin composing your own rendition of a song. Remember, you have two 'pallets' of chords - major and minor - that can be used to make a song your song. To start, look at sheet music that has both guitar chords and dulcimer tab. This gives you some idea of where chords can be inserted in place of melody string notes. D usually (but not always) at the first note of a measure; and usually (but not always) the chord that matches the note being replace.

Many "major" tunes often use minor chords here and there to add tension, remorse, or other emotion to a song. Try this with Go Tell Aunt Rhodie, for example by adding minor chord versions of notes in the refrain "...the old gray goose is dead." Very few "minor key" tunes use all minor chords (much too depressing). Play Greensleeves and you'll see where major chords are inserted.

Here's another creative experiment. Try playing You Are My Sunshine, or another 'major' tune using all minor chords. Likewise try playing Shady Grove or Old Joe Clark totally with all 'major' chords.

The 'leftover' chords from the Finger Pattern Tables can also be used to further change the mood of the music when and if desired:

## Major Dominant Seventh

Bass	3	6	5	6+	10	3	3	3	7	6	8
Mid	1	4	4	4	8	0	2	2	4	5	6
Melody	3	6	6+	7	10	2	4	6	6+	7	9
Chord	G	C	E	A	G	A7	A7	A7	E7	D7	A7

## Minor

Bass	4	7
Mid	2	5
Melody	5	8
Chord	F#m	Bm