

Thinking Good Tone Part 2

Using the picking hand to *start* Good Tone.

By Ted Eschliman



What we think...

In our last visit we went pretty broad, looking into various aspects of tone creation, particularly common errors in execution, but also some deep thoughts on the philosophical side. We were privileged with the contributions of some of the great mandolinists of today. If you haven't taken time to read this, it would be a great idea to do so now: **Thinking Good Tone Part 1**

<http://www.mandolinsessions.com/apr07/Eschliman.html>

We looked at five areas, including 1.) Maximizing the sweet spots with the fretting hand, 2.) Right Hand/Left Hand coordination, 3.) Connecting notes together, 4.) Maintaining phrase intensity, and 5.) Healthy pick strokes. It was a quick survey, and one we hoped got you started really focusing in on aspects of your own tone creation. As we mentioned, tone is a vital characteristic of playing and not often a priority for many players. We can't stress enough that if you are serious about good tone, you need to devote time to it.

Strike one

We want to go a little deeper into the 5th issue of healthy picking here. We can refer to the similarities in certain sports in understanding the profound significance of a good strike. Think for a moment about a soccer or polo player caressing a ball from one end of the field toward the goal. The opportunity is there to move faster, slow down, twist or turn, and perpetually manipulate, but in contrast, these benefits are not endowed to a golfer, tennis or baseball player. One strike is all they get, unable to continuously manipulate once the ball leaves the racket or bat. "Smack," and it's gone, dependent on aim and power behind the thrust. If contact is good, vigor sufficient, and follow-through smooth, it's all the difference in the world, but again, no second chance after the strike.

Wind instrumentalists have privileges similar to the soccer star, plenty of opportunity to manipulate with breath rather than foot. A violinist can also draw sound out with the bow through a phrase, but a vibraphonist or plectrum player gets one stab at starting good tone with the mallet or pick. No matter how secure the fretting fingers squeeze the mandolin or how long they sustain, if that initial smack isn't robust, consistent, and confident, it's all downhill from there. **Jamie Masefield** pointed this out in the previous article when he mentioned the left hand is often blamed for the sins of the right. **Emory Lester** demanded

to throw your sound to the other side of the room. Make it as loud as you can without breaking up and impeccable control:

Alternating strokes, Down Up Down Up:

The musical notation shows a treble clef staff with a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. Above the staff, pick directions are indicated: down (V), up (v), down (V), up (v), down (V), up (v), down (V), up (v). The bass staff shows fret numbers: 5-5-7-7, 9-9-3-3, 5-5-7-7, 9-9-3-3. The instruction 'Same tempo!' is written below the first two measures. To the right, the text 'continue up 2nd octave, & descend...' is written.

Double or nothing

Observe, when you start crossing strings, you're adding a level of complication. You want to keep this elementary, adding only these slight challenges, so keep it slow, but we will now double the tempo to **8th notes**, continuing with the same feel, and, like climbing up a hill, we'll take a mental breather on the 3rd and 4th beat of every other measure by playing a half note. Again, keep the same level of intensity in both short and long notes. This has to be clean, robust, and regimentally consistent. Use the long note for the opportunity for very close listening.

Alternating strokes double time:

The musical notation shows a treble clef staff with a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. Above the staff, pick directions are indicated: down (V), up (v), down (V), up (v), down (V), up (v), down (V), up (v). The bass staff shows fret numbers: 5-5-5-5-7-7-7-7, 9-9-9-9-3, 5-5-5-5-7-7-7-7, 9-9-9-9-3. The instruction 'Same tempo!' is written below the first two measures. To the right, the text 'continue up 2nd octave, & descend...' is written.

Short long

Now we'll move the short notes to the beginning of the pair of measures. Again, keep the "rest" part of your stroke in the front of your mind as you examine where the pick ends until it becomes intuitive. Eventually, you should be closing your eyes and letting your ears tell you if your pick is "projecting" the proper amount of tone. If it isn't, you'll hear it, and hopefully your fingers and hands will adjust and unconsciously compensate

Alternating strokes, long/short:

The musical notation shows a treble clef staff with a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. Above the staff, pick directions are indicated: down (V), up (v), down (V), up (v), down (V), up (v), down (V), up (v). The bass staff shows fret numbers: 5-7-7-7-7, 9-9-9-9-3-3-3-3, 5-7-7-7-7, 9-9-9-9-3-3-3-3. The instruction 'Don't rush tempo!' is written below the first two measures. To the right, the text 'continue up 2nd octave, & descend...' is written.

Quarter Master

Now instead of half notes, we'll divide these further into quarter notes. Note we are still going to alternate, rather than using all down strokes on the quarter. The idea is to match the downstroke in tone with a hale and hearty upstroke.

Alternating strokes, short/long quarter:

continue up 2nd octave, & descend...

Mixing it up

Again, string crossings are an ensnaring trap for diluted intensity, and we don't want that. Be sure you kept your notes long while crossing strings, no discernable drop in tone. (*It ain't easy, is it?!*) Just to test you, we'll alternate quarter notes at the beginning of every two measures in this version:

Alternating strokes, long quarter short:

continue up 2nd octave, & descend...

And there we begin

The preceding is a glorious opportunity to get your pick started right each and every day. We have a PDF of the entire exercise here called "Sweeping for Tone":

Link to complete exercise:

<http://jazzmando.com/Sweep.pdf>

The time you spend cleaning up your picking and developing an aural sensitivity in this exercise will reward you greatly in every other aspect of your playing. Like we said earlier, you can't go anywhere with good tone on a mandolin if you don't start the sound properly.

A few pointers in getting the most out of "Sweeping for Tone"

Grip the pick with just enough strength to keep control. Don't tense up any harder, and try to keep fingers and wrist relaxed.

Don't lift the Left (fretting) Hand too far off the fingerboard between notes. These must be "at the ready" for the next notes. (*Don't let them go out for coffee, meantime...*)

Make as much sound as you can with the pick. Strive for volume without sacrificing clear, bell-like tone. Throw the tone to the other end of the room.

Aim for articulation "evenness." Each and every attack must be at the same healthy dynamic level.

Don't rush! Play as slowly as you need to get the maximum richness out of the string.

This version uses the 2nd FFcP fingering. Try a full, two-octave version of this starting in the keys of **Bb** and **B** using the 1st FFcP fingering. See <http://www.jazzmando.com/ffcp.shtml>

Keep the string crossings clean. This will take some concentration, especially moving from 4th finger to 1st, but keep the notes connected, blending into each subsequent attack with intent

and fluidity.

Don't move on to the next section until you can play it perfectly. Allow yourself no clams, fracks, half-fretted notes, gaps, or anything less than beautiful tone.

As we already recommended, use this as a warm-up routine everyday! The pick starts the note; you can't get anywhere with good tone until this is working properly. What you do to prepare your picking hand will determine the quality of your tone the entire duration of your playing time. It is this critical!

The time you spend cleaning up your picking and developing an aural sensitivity in this exercise will reward you greatly in every other aspect of your playing.



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