

Creating a Banjo Arrangement from Piano Music using TablEdit

Note: These ideas can work with other music software programs, but I like TablEdit.

I am often asked to write a solo banjo arrangement based on a piano score. Let me tell you they are way different but it can be done.

Here are some things to consider:

1. Where's the melody?
2. The musical range of the piano is vastly wider than the banjo.
3. Piano music isn't always written in the key of G.
4. The types of licks, fills and embellishments that we use on the banjo are rarely found in piano music.
5. Get the idea? OK, let's get started.

Let's say you want to write a banjo arrangement and you have the SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) piano score (or even just a folk music songbook with melody and chords). How do you proceed? You'd think it would be easy because you already have "the music" but there's a lot more to it. We all know that the piano has notes that don't even exist on the banjo, the piano score probably has both the bass and treble clef, you can make chords on a piano that you can't on a banjo because of the interval spacing between strings, number of strings, etc. So how do you begin?

Here's the method I use:

1. Start with the given key signature. Don't even try to change it just yet. If you use a program like TablEdit you can always transpose it later – either a whole octave up to put it on the banjo, or some other interval to put it in the key you want (usually the key of G for standard banjo tuning).
2. Start with the melody. The melody line is typically found in the soprano (top) part. Enter all the notes with correct timing. With TablEdit you can

enter these notes on the staff just like you see them in the piano score. TablEdit will assign banjo string and fret positions automatically (many times not what you want), but you can adjust them later as you start working it out on the banjo (that's the fun part!). Also, we may end up leaving out some melody notes because of the specific rolls and licks we want to use to avoid too many repeated notes. Also, we may want to push some notes around to create interesting syncopations. But, start with the melody as written for now. It's always best to know you have the melody right to start, then you can start to vary things. After all, the melody is the song - all the rest is just to flesh out the arrangement!

3. Work out the chord progression (if it's not already given in the music).

4. Now the fun starts! Grab your banjo and start working measure-by-measure through the song. At this point I start working with the tab instead of the standard music notation. You can have the computer play what you have written so far and hear what it sounds like.

- ✓ Choose chord forms in the area of the neck where you want to play. You typically want the melody on top with most of the chord below it, so choose inversions that give you easy access to melody notes.
- ✓ Sing the song and back it up with those chords by just strumming, vamping, or a simple pattern pick.

5. Find the melody

- ✓ While holding the chords find melody notes.
- ✓ Some will be chord tones - some won't. So, for some important melody notes you may have to move a finger out of chord position.
- ✓ At this point I like to start highlighting melody notes in blue and start putting the words below the tab.

6. Play your chord/melody "arrangement." It may sound like:

- ✓ chord
- ✓ some melody notes
- ✓ chord
- ✓ some melody notes, etc.

7. Play the melody and start messing around with some filler rolls and licks.

- ✓ Make sure important melody notes appear where they should be OR where you want them.
- ✓ Avoid too many repeated notes.
- ✓ Mix up the rolls. Don't keep playing the same roll over and over again (OK, I know we all love the forward roll, but work in some other stuff too).
- ✓ Experiment to find what seems to work. Remember, "If it sounds like music it is music."

8. Variety is the name of the game.

- ✓ Add pinches
- ✓ Use harmonized scales to break up the monotony of repeated rolls.
- ✓ Listen and try different things until it sounds right.
- ✓ Don't be afraid to throw out your favorite lick if it isn't working (It may be your favorite lick, but if it isn't working, it isn't working - get rid of it! Seem harsh? Just do it.) You may have started the whole process using your favorite lick, but if it isn't working just get rid of it.
- ✓ You don't have to fill in every bit of space with eighth notes. Open it up sometimes with quarter notes and pinches.
- ✓ For an "up the neck" arrangement you don't need to stay up the neck all the time. Filler licks down the neck and open strings work fine and add variety.

9. Add embellishments

- ✓ [S], [H], [P], [B], [R], etc.
- ✓ Add turnarounds, bass and treble runs, harmonized scales, etc.

10. Phrasing and feel. You should be pretty far down the road by now. So it's time to start polishing things up.

- ✓ Accent the melody

- ✓ Syncopate the melody by pushing it forward a half beat now and then (an 1/8th note in 4/4 time).
- ✓ Try some interesting chords - sus4, dim, 6th, dom7th
- ✓ Rubato
- ✓ Fermata
- ✓ Add in something unexpected – an unexpected chord change, a rest, half step harmony for tension, and then resolve it.

11. Go back and listen to your arrangement.

- ✓ Anything sound out of place?
- ✓ Anything not working the way you want?
- ✓ You may go back through several times making revisions before you get it the way you want.
- ✓ If you get stuck, put it away for a few days.

12. Try this to make the arrangement more interesting and compelling:

- ✓ If the lyric is asking a question, use a sus4 version of the chord. This gives an unresolved feeling.
- ✓ If the answer is positive, use a strong major chord.
- ✓ If the answer is sad or disappointing, use a minor version of the chord.

OK, so that's a brief introduction to transcribing piano music for the banjo. As you can see, the possibilities are endless, but:

Start with the melody