

Seven-string Banjos, Past and Present

Michael Nix

Section 1: Nineteenth Century Seven-String Banjos.

Banjos with varying numbers of strings have been present throughout the history of the banjo. In the Nineteenth century, the number of strings settled into the five-string format, codified by the playing styles of the popular minstrel musicians, the tutors that were produced for publication, and the mass marketing of manufactured banjos to a public with increasing disposable income in the United State and England. As tastes in the music played on the banjo changed and expanded for various reasons, changes in technique allowed for facile access to bass strings (or multiple short thumb strings). More strings were added, either to facilitate key changes without re-tuning, or to allow for lower bass notes.

Players in England seemed more taken with the idea of expanded range and strings, with several more makers and players active in the late 1800's than in the United States, where there was less manufacturing and marketing activity around the instrument.

Six and Seven-string banjos, although not as popular as the five-string were patented and manufactured as the banjo moved from a home grown, hand made minstrel instrument, to an instrument manufactured for a growing mass market in the mid to late 19th century.

Some seeds for the seven-string banjo were sown by the application of European classical notation to codify African American banjo styles by the authors of some of the early banjo tutors, among them Phil Rice (1858) and James Buckley (1860).¹

Close on the heels of the publication of these tutors, makers began thinking about guitar-banjo hybrids. Gura and Bollman mention two. A patent in 1859 by Stephan F. Van Hagen for a "Dolce Compara Guitar-Banjo"², and one by Levi Brown of Baltimore in the Fall of 1865 for a Guitar-Banjo that could be played either as a guitar or a banjo.³

In 1865 Frank Converse published his tutor *Banjo Instructor without a Master* in New York, introducing another important European influence on banjo playing, and further setting the stage for extended range instruments. Converse advocates "up picking" or "guitar-style" playing. Rather than striking the strings with the back of the fingers with a stroke toward the floor as is done in the Afrocentric playing of the early minstrels, Converse asks that the strings be plucked with the pads of the

¹ Phillip F. Gura & James F. Bollman, *America's Instrument, The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 81.

² Ibid, 82-32.

³ Ibid, 88.

fingers moving upward toward the palm of the hand as in finger plucked style of guitarists. He also advocated softening the sound of the instrument by playing without nails “near the rim” (*sul tasto*).⁴

Converse was one of many players and manufacturers in the United States who was concerned with moving the banjo from its African roots and “elevating” the instrument so that it would be acceptable to play in the parlors, schools, and concert halls of the middle class and elite.⁵ If the banjo were suitable for young elite women and men to play, the instrument could be successfully marketed to wide range of people.

By the 1870’s the Dobson Brothers were actively promoting the banjo beyond its African roots. Henry Dobson imagined the instrument active in the classical music world performing “Operatic Music” and having an expansive repertoire as the pianists and violinists of the time.⁶ Henry started playing the banjo in stroke-style, and later switched to “guitar-style” in order to achieve his goal of performing European style music. In an article on Henry, a journalist mentions that he is the inventor of the seven-string banjo.⁷

Henry’s brother George C Dobson, author of five-string banjo tutors, manufactured fretless seven-string banjos under his “Victor” label in Boston, MA (280 Shawmut Ave.) by c. 1877 (?).

The 1880’s were a golden age for fretless seven-string banjo manufacture in England with such makers as Leon E. Clerc, T.W. Bacon Endell, and George P. Matthews actively producing instruments. The instrument was so popular that many English style instruments were manufactured without manufacturing marks or attribution.

Influential British classic banjo virtuoso and composer Joe Morley learned banjo at the age of twelve. He mentions in an 1896 interview that he “Began Banjo in 1879 on a seven-string, smooth-arm (fretless)” which he played until 1894. When asked to join a professional banjo troupe, he adopted a six-string with one bass tuned to D and the other to C.⁸

⁴ Laurent Dubois, *The Banjo, America’s African Instrument* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2016), 217

⁵ Ibid, 218.

⁶ Ibid, 222.

⁷ Gura & Bollman, *America’s Instrument*, 110.

⁸ Clifford Essex and Alfred Cammeyer, *The Banjo World* magazine (1896), 23-24.

Morley would eventually adopt the fretted five-string as his professional instrument and preferred instrument for published compositions.

Prolific English composer, editor of banjo music and tutors Herbert J. Ellis issued his *Thorough School for the Six or Seven String Banjo* (c. 1890-early 1900's?) published by John Alvey Turner (London) on the heels of his 1898 *Thorough School for the Five String String Banjo*. In this volume Ellis codifies English seven-string banjo practice, offers advice on both finger style and "thimble" style playing, exercises, solos with 2nd banjo accompaniment, song for voice and banjo, and banjo solos with piano accompaniment. He conceived of the seven-string (and six-string) banjo as an extended range instrument as capable of playing solos, duets and accompaniment, like the five-string banjo, which was in wider use at the time.

Ellis' tutor represents a window into period seven-string banjo practice. The volume was aimed at the amateur player, with repertoire ranging from a Juba setting, a waltz, several polkas, a number of jigs, popular songs of the day (two Foster songs) and an Operatic Aria setting.

The Nineteenth Century banjo, in its fretless form, never achieved the popular virtuosic vehicle for performance or composition that the fretted five-string would enjoy.

Section 2: The Herbert J Ellis: *Thorough School for the Six or Seven String Banjo*

Herbert J. Ellis presents a clear explanation of seven-string banjo musical practice in the Golden age of classic banjo between the late 1870's and early 1900's. The introduction explains tunings for the six and seven-string instrument, and Ellis' preferred techniques for playing.

Strings:

The specifications for English seven string banjo strings note that sets of standardized strings were manufactured for the instrument.

"The first should be very fine gut string, the second slightly thicker, the third thicker than the second, and the fourth thicker than the third. The fifth should be a fine wire covered silk string, and the sixth a wire covered silk string thicker than the fifth. The short string is of the same thickness as the first."⁹

Tuning:

Ellis states the tuning for the English string as follows:


G⁴ G² C³ D³ G³ B³ D⁴

Like the modern five-string, the seven-string is a transposing instrument, and so is notated an octave higher than it sounds (Ex. 1)

Ex. 1:

TUNING.

The Seven-Stringed Banjo is tuned and written as follows:—

BANJO. 

The Banjo being an instrument of sixteen feet tone, the actual sounds of the open strings on the Piano-forte are appended.

The six-string instrument of the period omits the fifth string (C³), and Ellis states that player may retune the fourth a whole step lower to facilitate playing in keys that require the lower note.

⁹ Herbert J. Ellis, *Thorough School for the Six or Seven String Banjo* (Turner, London late 1880's-1900?), 12.

Right hand playing styles:

Ellis firmly places himself in the school of “elevated” banjo playing. He advocates “Guitar style” playing without resting the fingers on the head for stability. He also urges the use of the third, or ring finger of the right hand in chords.

“The strings are pulled with the tips of the right hand fingers, the hand being held perfectly still, the movement being made from the finger joints. The first string is pulled with the second finger, the second string with the first finger, and the others with the thumb. Occasionally the third finger is used in playing chords of more than three notes. In playing, the little finger should be keep (sic) off the vellum, notwithstanding advice to the contrary. This manner of playing is the Guitar style, and the old Guitar masters distinctly recommend that the fingers should not rest on the instrument.”¹⁰

Later in the introduction, while discussing stylistic string techniques such as slurs, slides, and rolls (his term for arpeggios!) and tremolo, Ellis advocates “Thimble Playing” for raucous tunes such as Marches and Galops, or when playing with an ensemble.

“Thimble playing or striking, as it is sometimes called is very effective in playing Marches, Galops &c: especially when accompanied by a Piano or orchestra.... although it is much more suitable to the five-stringed Banjo....

A specially made thimble is placed over the fingernail of the first finger of the right hand, the strings must not be pulled up but struck down. Only the first finger and thumb are usedthe first finger and thumb music come down at the same time in striking the first note, the thumb pulling the short string immediately after.”¹¹

Ellis presents some exercises for single strings, chords, and drag-through arpeggios in “thimble” style. One exercise calls for simultaneously making the down stroke with the chords, and striking the seventh or short string.

Ellis did not discuss whether he might consider combining the techniques by using a down stroke to punctuate chords in a predominantly Guitar style piece. Without a thimble, the texture would be softer, but might have proved effective for the excitement value.

Repertoire:

¹⁰ Ibid, 13.

¹¹ Ibid, 37.

Ellis provides the student with three types of repertoire: Eleven instrumentals for 1st and 2nd banjo, nine songs for voice and banjo, and seven instrumentals for banjo with piano accompaniment.

The banjo duets present a clear case for solo playing (or 1st banjo) using a seven-string banjo. Ellis' repertoire ranges from fairly simple student settings to pieces of intermediate difficulty. A high level of virtuosity may have been limited by the fact that the seven-strings of the period were fretless.

Ex. 2:

JUBA BREAKDOWN.

The musical score for "Juba Breakdown" is written for two banjos. The first system is labeled "1st BANJO." and "2nd BANJO." with a "1." below. The second system ends with "Fine." The third system ends with "D.C." (Da Capo). The fourth system also ends with "D.C.".

Juba Breakdown (Ex. 2), the first of the banjo duos, shows Ellis using the extended bass range in the key of G. He scores G₂, the sixth string for the low tonic, and D₃ for the low Dominant. In measure 11 Ellis requires a barre to play A₂ on the sixth

string alternating to the A7 the V7/V in the 2nd Banjo part. This fingering of the sixth string and barre are not easy for a beginner.

Ex. 3:

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BELL WALTZ.

1st BANJO. 4.

2nd BANJO.

Har: 12

Har: 12

Har: 12.....Har: 7.....

Har: 12.....Har: 7.....

The Bell Waltz (Ex. 3) shows increasing virtuosity to the intermediate level. Ellis runs the G major arpeggio up the neck to a B4 on the first string. He makes use of harmonics at the 12th and 7th frets. In measure 1 and 5 there are four note chords, in which Ellis would incorporate the right hand third finger. The chord would be played index on the first string, middle on the second, ring on the third, and thumb on the seventh (or short) string.

Although Ellis does not explicitly state what technique to use for any of his settings, the notation of The Swallow Polka (Ex. 4) seems to suggest a thimble or stroke style texture.

The chords in measure 1 and 2 are notated with wavy line arpeggio symbol implying a quick thimble roll from bottom to top. The setting of the melody, and the slur in m2 are idiomatic to the stroke style. Arpeggios in m12 and 16 are also idiomatic to the stroke style.

Ex. 4:

SWALLOW POLKA.

The most complex song setting is “Love Not” with words by the Hon. Mrs. Norton and music by John Blockley (Ex. 5).

The song opens with a Symphony, the song’s melodic thematic material to be used as an introduction to the song, and played as interludes between the verses in 19th parlor song settings.

Arpeggios (rolls) in the first six measures would be played with thumb, index, middle, and ring fingers of the right hand.

In the last half of m3 the G4 of A7 chord should be fingered on the first string while the barre is held so that the thumb is ready to play the bass of the following chord.

The figure in m7 with the recurring A on the 3rd string appears to be fingered with ring on the 1st string, middle on the second to sound the interval of the third, with the index playing the A on the third string to facilitate the playing of the chord on the 3rd beat where the high G4 should be articulated with the thumb on the short string.

Note the succession of four-note chord m9-11 that would incorporate three fingers and the thumb to articulate.

On a fretless instrument the chords of m11 would require some practice to move smoothly and in tune.

The setting goes on with the bass and three 16th note chord texture, which could be played either three fingers, or in the four-finger style of the right hand.

Ex. 5:

56

LOVE NOT.

WORDS BY THE HON: MRS NORTON. MUSIC BY JOHN BLOCKLEY.
ARRANGED BY HERBERT J. ELLIS.

SYM:

VOICE:

BANJO:

None of the settings for solo seven-string banjo and piano incorporate low bass notes. Ellis probably thought that the low notes would be swallowed by the overpowering piano.

The first of the banjo-piano duets “The “Cadet” Grand March” (Ex. 6) is clearly set for thimble style playing. Simple single line melody alternates with three note chords.

In measure 6 Ellis calls for the high G to be played in the C major chord. While he calls for a position shift for a chord later in the piece (m9-10) there is no position

marker indicating a position shift for the C major chord. In the introduction Ellis writes an exercise for the thumb to strike the seventh or short string while the index plays a down stroke chord, and I believe that is what is intended at this point.

It is worth noting that since the banjo is a transposing instrument, the range of the banjo in this setting is the same range as the piano, so separation of instruments and voices would be muddled. Ellis is perhaps relying on the power of the thimble and the brightness of the banjo to cut through the texture.

Ex 6:

66

THE "CADET"

GRAND MARCH.

HERBERT J. ELLIS.

BANJO.

PIANO.

The examination of the Ellis volume leads to the conclusion that the extend range instruments with six or seven strings were used in the same manner as the more popular five-string banjos of the time, suitable for solos, duets, and song accompaniment.

Sinclair's Self Instructor for 6 String Banjo was published in 1873 providing an insight into repertoire for that particular instrument.

Further research is needed into other published period repertoire for the seven-string banjo.

Banjar Michael Nix and the Modern Seven-String Banjo

Banjo Concerts:

In the summer of 2002 I developed a concert program surveying banjo styles for Stowe Performing Arts in Vermont, and for the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association concerts in Deerfield, MA. Tony Creamer, of Fretted Instrument Workshop in Amherst, MA, lent me a 1935 Bacon Professional Model with an interior resonator, strung with gut strings. I wrote a variations set on "Spanish Fandango", the famous pedagogical classical banjo melody for the instrument.

My Ideas for the Seven String Classical Banjo:

After working on the concert I concluded that I wanted to develop a banjo that could maintain a constant bass line like the lute or guitar, have a dark, rich powerful, sustaining tone, and use the high-tension strings of the classical guitar.

A little research revealed seven string banjos were in the United States and more popularly in England in the late 1800's. It seemed like some modern materials and design could be applied to the concept.

I took in an exhibit of the banjo collection of James F. Bollman at The Museum of Our Natural Heritage in Lexington, MA, seeking design ideas, and soaking up banjo making history.

The open back banjo produced a rounder, less "singular" sound than the resonator. There seemed to be a greater control and diversity of timbre.

A number of different head materials were considered. Natural materials such as calf or goat skin lost tension in humidity, drastically altering the tuning on summer days. White plastic head produced a too sharp a tone for my ear, and the Fiberskyn heads were a little too dull. The Renaissance head material was chosen for its round tone, ringing and sustaining qualities.

Design and Manufacture:

I sketched out the design for the instrument, and approached Tony Creamer for his input, and for help in finding a banjo maker. Tony recommended Bart Reiter, and Michael Ramsey, both fine makers of historical open back banjos. After playing instruments of both makers, I chose Ramsey for the richness of tone that he brought to his instruments. Ramsey completed the instrument in March of 2004.



Tony Creamer and Michael Nix, Fretted Instrument Workshop, Amherst, MA

Bridge Design:

I was unhappy with the sound of a traditional banjo bridge. The footed bridge gave the instrument a lot of cross vibration between strings, which obscured the individual voices so necessary for the polyphonic classical style. I asked Ivon Schmuckler of the Leeds Guitarmaker's School to work with me to design a bridge that would give some of the sustain in the bass and tone of the classical guitar, and retain the sweet openness of the banjo. We came up with solid bridge with cut outs in various places, sustaining the bass, and opening up the treble.



Ivon Schmuckler

Banjar, The Name:

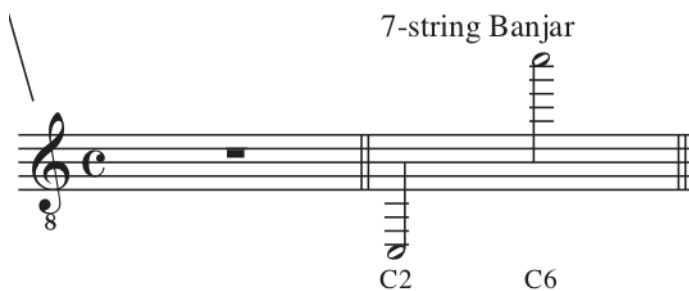
The name of this instrument, the Banjar, reflects both the reference to the historical name of the banjo, and to the hybrid nature, a cross between the banjo and guitar...a Banjar!

Range:

My instrument has 22 frets. The range is from C2 to C6. The notation is transposed down the octave, as is the practice with five-string banjo and guitar (Ex. 7)

Ex. 7:

Tenor G Clef

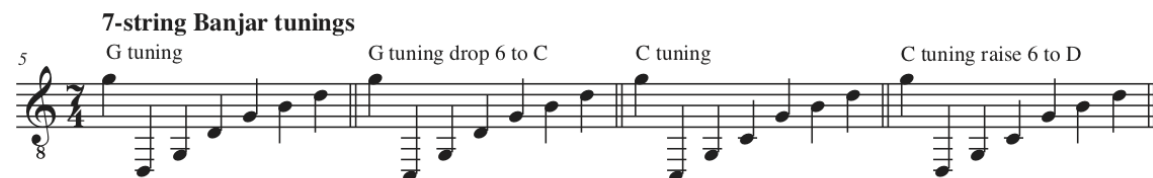


Tunings:

I predominantly use four banjo tunings (Ex. 8):

G4 D2 G2 D3 G3 B3 D4 (G tuning)	Range: D2-C6
G4 D2 G2 C3 G3 B3 D4 (G tuning, drop 4 C)	Range: D2-C6
G4 C2 G2 C3 G3 B3 D4 (Drop C tuning)	Range: C2-C6
G4 D2 G2 C3 G3 B3 D4 (Drop C tuning, raised D)	Range: D2-C6

Ex. 8:



Because I have played and composed for guitar, lute, and instruments tuned in 5ths, I will not hesitate to use other scordatura applied to the instrument (Ex. 9).

G4 E2 A2 D3 G3 B3 E4 (Guitar tuning)	Range: E2-D6
G4 D2 A2 D3 G3 B3 E4 (Guitar drop D)	Range: D2-D6
G4 E2 A2 D3 F#3 B3 E4 (Lute tuning)	Range: E2-D6
G4 D2 A2 D3 F#3 B3 E4 (Lute drop D)	Range: D2-D6
G4 C2 G2 D3 G3 A3 E4 (Open 5ths tuning)	Range: C2-D6

In the open 5ths tuning by ignoring the third string, or incorporating it into the fingering, I can play music composed for instruments in 5th tuning either with C as a low note or G.

Ex. 9:



These tunings allow me, as a modern composer and arranger, and wide latitude of creativity and interpretation.

Playing Techniques:

As a modern classical guitarist and composer I bring all of the techniques available to the 21st century player to the seven-string banjo including, but not exclusively:

Incorporation of all aspects of banjo playing including:

- Finger style (with or without picks) using nails, or the pads of the fingers
- Stroke styles
- Use of plectrum
- Classical guitar styles including: various types of tremolo, chords, harmonics, (natural & artificial), dampening of strings, pizzicato, tapping, bends, slurs, prepared strings, etc.
- Percussive techniques such as tapping on the head, or on the rim.
- Use of amplification, electronic filtering and sound modification

Repertoire Examples:

G Tuning:

The Banjo, L.M. Gottschalk (Ex. 10).

My concept for the arrangement was to retain the low sound of the gourd banjo Gottschalk was emulating on the piano. Later in the piece I will use the short 7th string for idiomatic banjo effects, especially in the finale.

Ex. 10:
The Banjo, L.M. Gottschalk, arr. Michael Nix

Introduzione.
Ardito Tutta la forza!



Tres Rythmé.
Con Spirito



C Tuning:

Prelude and Fugue, BWV 995, J.S. Bach.

Bach composed this work as the 5th Cello Suite, and later made an arrangement for the Lute, or the Lautenwerke, a lute-stopped harpsichord, adding bass lines. I chose to set the lute version in C minor to take advantage of the low C2 for depth and power (Ex. 11).

Ex. 11:
Prelude, BWV 995, J.S. Bach, arr. Nix



This excerpt from the fugue demonstrates the two-part texture that I am able to maintain on the seven-string banjo (Ex. 12).

Ex. 12:

Fugue, BWV 995, J.S. Bach, arr. Nix



Guitar Tuning:

My 2009 composition Barton Cove (Ex. 13) uses the idea of a classical guitar style arpeggio combined with the short seventh string. The open G4 becomes a different chord tone or tension as the harmony changes. I use the + notation to denote the short string.

Ex. 13

Barton Cove, 2009 Michael Nix

Barton Cove
for solo Banjar

Michael Nix

Banjar

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Modern techniques for Classic Banjo:

Ex. 14:

Koromanti, 2018, Michael Nix

Koromanti

7 String Banjar
Tuning: G4, C2, G2, C3, G3, B3, D4

Michael Nix

PART 1
Frailing style

$\text{♩} = 108$

pp Play sul tasto, slowly moving toward the bridge. -----

Ont.

Bar 2

mf *f*

ff *mp* *p* *Fingerstyle*

Golpe: Tap head with side of thumb as 7th string is played.

mp *mf* *f* *Plumenco Style*

(Strum up with back of the thumb.)

mf *f* *Fingerstyle*

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My setting of Koromanti, (Ex. 14) is based on transcriptions found in “A Voyage to the Island of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica” published in

1707 by Hans Sloan. Rather than make an exact transcription, I use the material to make new music for the seven-string banjo, honoring the spirit of the original music, but adding a modern twist.

I use the C tuning to get very low notes, emulating the low sound of the original banjos.

The first section begins in stroke or frailing style, alternating low notes with the high seventh string to set up an evocative 6+4 dance rhythm. The first iteration of the original melody enters in m9 played stroke style. At m13, I ask the player to tap the head with the thumb as the down -stroke is played setting the thumb up for the seventh-string pluck.

I evoke the Portuguese and Spanish influence in early Afro-Caribbean music making with the introduction of Flamenco style strumming of chords in m20. The original melody makes a re-appearance an octave higher plucked finger-style at m24. Other techniques such as artificial harmonics make their way into the piece as unfolds.

In Conclusion:

With the design and tuning of my Banjar version of the seven-string banjo, I feel that I have made a contribution toward modernizing the classic banjo by developing an instrument of extended range and capable of performance in a 21st century musical setting. The number of tunings and range of the instrument allows a great deal of flexibility for composition, arranging, and for a wide range of stylistic applications.

I have performed on the instrument in solo settings, in chamber settings, and with voice in concert halls, churches, and festivals. I have performed classical music, folk music, jazz, and genre-bending hybrid music.

While maintaining a kinship and unbroken lineage to banjoists such as Converse, The Dobson Brothers, Morley and Ellis, I seek to honor the African roots of the banjo through study and application of African-American techniques in arrangements and compositions. By the same token, I look to experiment, looking for new sounds, textures, and applications of technique through experimentation, and studying the plucked string music of other cultures to see what might successfully translate to the banjo.