

The Art of the Cadenza

A Hammer Dulcimer Workshop By

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Cadenza is an Italian word whose original Latin root means “*to fall*”. That is exactly what a good cadenza does. It makes listeners feel like they are literally falling into the next portion of the music.

A cadenza can be defined as an ornamental passage played by a soloist in a style that is without strict rhythm and meter and allows the performer to demonstrate virtuosic mastery of an instrument. It is a marvelous device for opening or closing a tune or modulating from one tune to another.

Tools of a Cadenza

Five tools need to be mastered in order to create a good cadenza.

- 1. Triadic chords:** know how to spell the basic chords on the diatonic scale.
- 2. Chord extensions:** know how to use chord extensions including add 9 chords, add 11 chords, add 13 chords, 7th chords, 6th chords, suspended chords, and augmented chords.
- 3. Root movement:** know what makes an interesting chord progression and how root movement can create tension or drive modulation.
- 4. Small pieces of scales:** know pentatonic, diatonic, chromatic, and other scales.
- 5. A sense of drama:** a cadenza is about being melodramatic, over the top, in your face. To make a good cadenza, loosen up, let go and get theatrical.

① Triadic Chords

Every diatonic key has seven, three-tone chords that naturally fit into its scale. From the *do* tone to *ti* tone of a diatonic scale, the triads run major, minor, minor, major, major, minor, diminished. Chords are spelled using these formulas:

- ✓ Major chords: root, major 3rd, perfect 5th
- ✓ Minor chords: root, minor 3rd, perfect 5th
- ✓ Diminished chords: root, minor 3rd, diminished 5th

To play a cadenza smoothly, you need to be able to play the chords on a diatonic scale throughout the range of the instrument.

② Chord Extensions

Chord extensions are the tones added to the basic triads of the diatonic scale. While there is much to say on this subject, this workshop will focus on several chord extensions that are most useful in forming good cadenzas. When a fourth tone is added to the basic triad, the result is called a “tetrachord.”

The “add” chords: A D7 chord is spelled D-F#-A-C. This chord becomes a D9 chord when the 9th interval above D is added: D-F#- A- C- E. A 9th is the same note name as a 2nd, but an octave higher. Ninth chords are common place in jazz and rare on a dulcimer. That is due in part to the fact that, when a ninth chord is played with all of its tones within a single octave, the result can sound very muddy. The mud is eliminated by taking out the 7th tone, C. This yields a Dadd9 chord. This tetrachord is merely a D triad PLUS a 9th interval: D-F#-A-E with the E an octave above the root. The result is airy and quite wonderful.

Add 11 and Add 13 chords are formulated in the same fashion. Build the basic chord and simply add the 11th or 13th interval. When rolling chord extensions throughout the range of the dulcimer, it is usually best to start with the basic triad in the low register and add chord extensions as the pattern moves into the higher ranges. Sometimes you will see this type of chord written with a plus sign: D+9, or D+11, or D+13.

Suspended chords: These are chords of high tension. Bach couldn't do without them. Folk guitarists can't do without them. Dulcimer players should not be without them either. There are two versions: the suspended 2nd and suspended 4th. The sound of these two tense chords is different, but the techniques for using them in developing cadenzas is identical. This workshop will focus on the suspended 4th.

A suspended 4th chord is formed by substituting the 3rd of a chord with the 4th of the scale. The usual formulation of a suspended chord is on the 7th chord. So, a D7sus4 chord is spelled D-G-A-C. An A7sus4 chord is spelled A-D-E-G. Both of these chords form very easy hammering patterns on the dulcimer. The suspended chords provide perfect endings to cadenzas. They leave the listener hanging, eager for resolution, waiting to “fall” into the next key. In the key of D use the A7sus4 chord A-D-E-G and resolve to the D triad. In the key of G use the D7sus4 D-G-A-C and resolve to the G triad.

③ Root movement

A successful cadenza imparts a feeling of movement. That sense of “falling” comes from the path the roots of the chords take. The familiar full or authentic cadence of I – IV – V chords is the best place to begin thinking of the root movement within a cadenza. But staying within this well-known structure is frankly quite dull. So, wander away from the expected and chart interesting root movements.

- If the cadenza begins a tune, end your passage at the beginning of the melody. Don't close the cadenza with the I chord.
- If the cadenza ends a tune, let the cadenza end with a colorful chord extension.
- If the cadenza is used to transition from one key to another, plot the root movement carefully. Decide what chord will end the cadenza and prepare the listener for the new tonic key. Then, back up to plot how the roots should move from the original tonic chord to the final chord of the cadenza.

The best resource to plot root movement is the Circle of 5^{ths}. This diagram gives a graphic representation of the relationships of the roots of chords within a key and shows pathways from one key to another. See the accompanying chord box derived from the Circle of 5^{ths}.

As an example, suppose we wanted to move from a tune in the key of G to a tune in the key of D. A blunt transition is always an option. But designing a cadenza to make the transition will make a much greater impact on the listener.

- The first tune ends on the tonic chord of G. But use chord extensions and slowly roll the tones all the way through the range of the dulcimer. Play a basic G chord in the lowest range.
- In the mid range play a Gadd9 chord and transition into a Gadd13.
- When you reach the top of the range, come back down on an Em7 chord to a Bm7 chord to an A7sus4.

Why these choices? Look at the Circle of 5^{ths} for the answer. G is the tonic chord. Em is the relative minor. B is the 5th from E so the relationship between the Em and Bm within the key of G is powerful. Then the stark transition to the A root allows the use of the A7sus4 chord. Now the listener is poised to fall into the key of D. Careful planning of the root movement is essential to the success of the cadenza.

④ Pieces of scales

These beautiful and powerful tetra chords need connective tissue between them to hold the cadenza together. Small scale segments provide the connective tissue. Just a few notes will do, perhaps three or four. Use only enough tones to move from one chord to another and use the parts of the particular scale that help to identify it. Set up the scales to make the maximum tension or tenderness as appropriate.

- **Use part of the pentatonic scale in the key of D (D-E-G-A-B)?** Make certain to sound the B and the D in order to ensure the character of the pentatonic scale is heard.
- **Use a diatonic scale in the key of B minor (B-C#-D-E-F#-G-A)?** End on the C# to get maximum tension. C# is the leading tone on the relative major scale (D) to B minor.
- **Use a G minor chord to lead back to a D chord?** Make use of the G pentatonic scale (G, A, B, D, E) and its E tone to reach an A. This sets up the resolution to the D chord.

Dozens of other scale possibilities exist and are waiting to be exploited. Start experimenting.

⑤ Drama

It's time to put all the tools together and build a cadenza. Here are a few examples.

Closing a tune in the Key of D.

- Roll a D triad on the bass bridge.
- On the right side of the treble bridge, roll a Dadd9 chord.
- On the left side, of the treble bridge continue the Dadd9 chord as far up as you can go.

- Use pieces of a pentatonic scale in D to come back down but only so far as D above middle C.
- Sound a firm G low on the bass bridge.
- Roll a G minor6 chord up the bass bridge. Then come down the chord members on the right side of the treble bridge. The tones going up would be G low D E G Bb - cross to the treble bridge - E D.
- Now the listener is set up to hear the final D chord. Roll this in any way you please. It could be a full chord. It could be a Dadd 9 chord. It could be a very simple, light D chord across the treble bridge in the high range.

Opening a tune in the Key of B minor

The root movement in this case will move from B to E to F#. The chords are Bm, Em and F#.

- Sound a firm B low on the bass bridge and follow this with a roll of the Bm chord up to the high range on the left side of the treble bridge.
- Use the diatonic scale in a back and forth manner to descend to the tone C#.
- Roll an E minor chord beginning with the lowest E on the bass bridge. Do this in the same fashion as the Bm chord with lots of flourish and varying tempo and time values of the tones. Again use a diatonic scale to get back to C#.
- Now finish the cadenza with a big roll of the F#m chord that descends on the diatonic scale to end of C#.

That's where the cadenza ends. The listener has now heard the C# tone three times. That leading tone in the key of D creates unbearable tension that is resolved the moment the opening B minor chord is played at the beginning of the melody.

Summary

Cadenzas are meant to sound very complicated and difficult. Their job is to impress the listener while they move the music from one place to another. The key to understanding, playing, improvising or writing a cadenza is the notion of *falling* from one place to another.

Step 1: Decide what the cadenza is expected to do.

- Open the tune – *the cadenza probably will end with an open cadence – no resolution.*
- End the tune - *the cadenza must resolve to the tonic.*
- Transition from one tune to another – *the cadenza will end on an open cadence; and, if modulation is involved, the final chord of the cadenza will probably be the V chord in the new key.*

Step 2: Select the chord extensions you will use.

Step 3: Design the root movement and length of the cadenza.

Step 4: Decide on what scale pieces you will use to tie together the chords that define the cadenza.

Step 5: Make the cadenza magic by hamming-up the tempos, dynamics, pauses and final tense tones of the effort.

Demonstration, Techniques and Tunes

Cadenza as the opener: Minor key *Harlem Nocturne* and Major key *Si Bheg Si Mhor*

Cadenza as meter transition: *Ashoken Farewell* to *St. Anne's Reel*

Cadenza as modulating transition: *Archibald MacDonald* to *Lochaber No More*

Cadenza as the closer: *Yesterday*

See Following Page for a Sample Cadenza Written in Standard Notation

Sample Closing Cadenza in D

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The musical score is written in treble clef, D major (two sharps), and 4/4 time. It consists of three staves of notation. The first staff begins with a whole note D4 on the bass line and a quarter rest on the treble line, labeled "Begin on Lowest D Tone". The second staff contains a D9 arpeggio (D, F#, A, C, E) labeled "D9 arpeggio", followed by a D pentatonic scale (D, E, F#, G, A) with a mordent on the final note, labeled "D pentatonic scale w/mordent". The third staff features an "Em-D-Em-Bm regression with Passing tones" consisting of four chords (Em, D, Em, Bm) with passing tones (F# and G) between them, each marked with a triplet bracket. This is followed by a "Roll a Dsus4 chord" (D, F#, A, C) and a "Gminor arpeggio" (G, Bb, D). The piece concludes with "Anticipate the D chord" (D, F#, A) and a final "Flam the D chord" (D, F#, A).