

Drones & Ostinato
The power of persistence
A Hammer Dulcimer workshop by
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This workshop addresses the techniques and use of persistent tones and repetitive motives.

What is a drone?

Probably the first thing that comes to mind when someone says “drone” is the sound of bagpipes. The three vertical pipes that rest on a player’s shoulder never change pitch. They just *drone* all the while the chanter of the pipes is playing. The tones never change no matter what the melody is doing or what the chords supporting the melody may be. There is no clearer example of a drone than this.

To be precise, a drone in music is a persistent tone or chord that is played throughout all or most of a piece. The effect of a drone is to establish the tonality of a piece and constantly call the ear back to the original key of the melody. A drone adds tension to music because it will inevitably be in conflict with a chord change. That tension is automatically relieved when the chord returns to the tonic.

Single Note Drones

Old time music played on the hammer dulcimer requires the judicious use of drones to establish the rhythmic feel of the music. The best starting point in selecting a drone tone is to use the tone that names the key. If the tune is *Soldier’s Joy* in the key of D, the drone tone would be D.

This is the basic melody of the first phrase in *Soldier’s Joy*.



The same melody with a drone on the high D is shown below. Note that the chord changes to A7 in the last measure. Now the drone tone changes to A A.



Harmonic Drones

Drones can also be in the form of arpeggiated chords. Here is the basic melody of *Ode to Joy*.



The first step in creating a harmonic drone is to add the single tone drone. Once again we use the D tone.



The final step is to add another chord member. The first choice for this tone would be the 5th above the original tone. That relationship is identical to the bagpipe drones. The root tone and the 5th above it give a powerful anchor to the melody. Now the phrase becomes:



The drone pattern has now added three additional notes between each melody tone. So, the patterns must be played faster in order to have the melody fit into four measures.

The notation makes this appear terribly complex. But it is not intricate, nor is it hard to play. The LEFT hammer always plays the D tone on the left side of the treble bridge. The RIGHT hammer always plays the melody tone on the left side of the treble bridge and the drone A on the right side of the treble bridge. Alternate your hammers, leading with the right hammer. *Ode to Joy* with a harmonic drone will simply fly out!

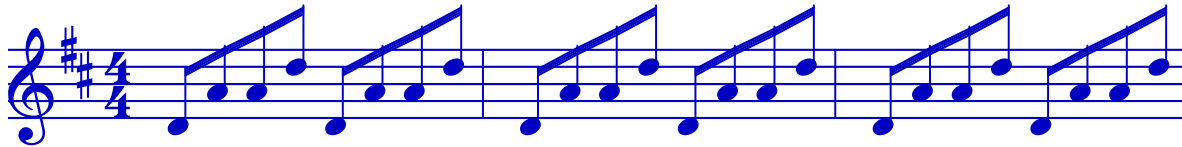
Rhythmic Drones – *Ostinato*

It is also possible to create drones that are rhythmic in their nature. Often these have a conjunct phrase associated with them. *Ostinato* is an Italian word meaning “stubborn”. In music an ostinato is a short phrase or motive that is persistently repeated in the same voice through a piece.

On the hammer dulcimer one of the most valuable *ostinato* techniques is created by using only the root and the 5th of a chord. A D chord will serve as an example. Play the pattern below in a repetitive way.

- ▶ D, right hammer bass bridge
- ▶ A left hammer right side of the treble bridge
- ▶ A right hammer right side of the treble bridge
- ▶ D, left hammer left side of the treble bridge

The pattern in standard notation looks like this.



This *ostinato* works extremely well as a back-up technique to fiddle tunes. During a jam session if you don't know the tune, but can follow the chord changes, this *ostinato* pattern will keep you playing and adding something useful to the musicality of the jam.

Below you'll find a very good exercise piece that puts this *ostinato* pattern inside the familiar nursery rhyme, *Are You Sleeping, Brother John*. The *ostinato* pattern on a G chord is: D bass bridge – G right side treble bridge – G right side treble bridge – D left side treble bridge.

Phrase 1: *Are you sleeping:*



Repeat Phrase 1: *Are you sleeping:*

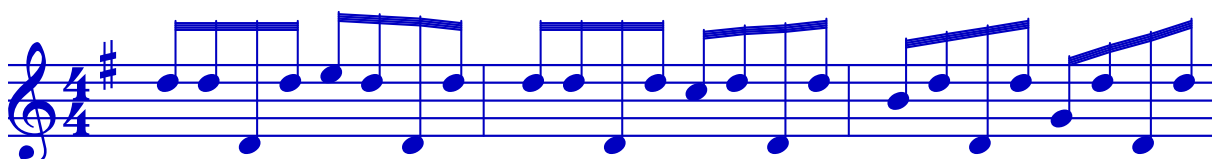
Phrase 2: *Brother John?*



Repeat Phrase 2: *Brother John?*

Third Phrase: *Morning bells are ringing.*

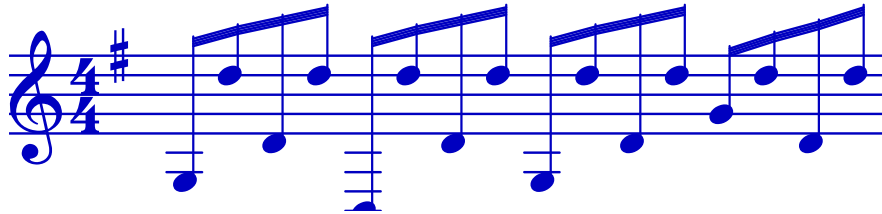
The phrase in the basic melody is a pattern of eighth notes. In order for the ostinato to work well and not sound like the piece suddenly sped up, this phrase should be played at half speed. That is, instead of eighth notes, the melody is played as though it was written in quarter notes.



Repeat Third Phrase: *Morning bells are ringing.*

Fourth Phrase: *Ding dang dong*

Play this back up to normal speed. And note that the Ding dang dong is played on the bass bridge an octave below where the melody has been. This is a big leap, but worth the effect.



Try this exercise with *Three Blind Mice* and *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. For a practical application of the technique, listen to Walt Michael's tune *Snowblind*. The tune is a simple pentatonic melody on the bass bridge that is embedded within the *ostinato* in G just as we used for *Are you Sleeping Brother John*.

Pedal Point

Another drone technique is called "pedal point". It is difficult to do on a hammer dulcimer because the instrument has limited sustain. Pedal points can work well with slow tunes and airs. The technique requires that a bass tone be played and sustained while a dissonant harmony is played. The term comes from the pedal keyboard of the organ. To understand the use of pedal point requires a discussion about root movement and harmony. That's the subject of another workshop.

Demonstration Techniques and Tunes

Ode to Joy – harmonic drones

Soldiers Joy – single note drones

Dark Island – metronomic drones

Snowblind – ostinato