

I have always collected members of the four-string banjo family: cello banjos, lead or piccolo banjos and any strange four-string instruments.

A cello banjo is just what the name implies. It's a large banjo tuned like a cello, which is one octave below a tenor banjo. In reality a tenor banjo is not a tenor at all. It is an alto or viola banjo. It is tuned like the viola which is a larger violin tuned to C G D A. Some say the tenor banjo is mislabeled because it is a corruption of the original name which was the tango banjo.

In Arthur Lang's wonderful 1921 arranging book he explains how the tango orchestras in New York City in the early 1900's loved this instrument. It could do three things: (1) play harmony, (2) play melody and (3) add percussion to the orchestra.

The lead or piccolo banjos are small four-string instruments. The lead banjos are similar to mandolin banjos except they only have four strings not eight. They are the size of a violin and were tuned in two tunings. One was as a violin G D A E and the other was pitched in B-flat an octave above the tango banjo.

James Reese Europe who said the banjo was the heartbeat of the orchestra used several in his musical groups. Among other things, Mr. Europe was the musical director for the Vernon and Irene Castle dance team. They were responsible for inventing ballroom dance in the early 1900s. If you look at pictures from that period you will see that their accompaniment was often piano, violin and four or five lead banjos. Other pictures of the time show many instruments at the feet of the orchestras. These were instruments used as doubles for the violin/viola players. Four-string instruments such as lead banjos, tango banjos and even four-string guitars (now called tenor guitars for the same reason and tuned C G D A) were used by string players as doubling instruments. This is the main reason they were invented. In reality they (as far as their use and style of playing) have nothing to do with the original banjo. The original banjo served a completely different musical purpose.

Later in the teens the tango banjo became the instrument of choice for the new jazz craze. When this craze turned to the six-string guitar the tango banjo gave way to the four-string instrument known as the plectrum banjo. This became the choice for solo or virtuoso banjo playing. Eventually this led to the sing-a-long banjo style of the 1950's.

The plectrum banjo is related to the original banjo in that its tuning is the C tuning of the five-string. The standard tuning of the five-string had been pitched in A. This means the fundamental or bass string of the instrument was A. There is also a C tuning meaning the fundamental is C.

The other tuning which is used mostly today for the bluegrass instrument (started in the 1940's) is known as G tuning. It is similar to the C tuning except the fundamental C is raised to D. This makes the open notes D G B D with a fifth drone string which is a high G. This produces a G chord.

If we go back to the C tuning which is C G B D with a high G and eliminate the high G and instead of finger picking you strum it with a pick (proper name plectrum) we have the banjo known as the plectrum banjo.

Back to the Banjo Ensemble – having collected the tango banjo family of instruments, I had dabbled in writing arrangements for them similar to string quartet arrangements. Enter Cynthia Sayer sitting on a cement block outside the George Washington Bridge Subway Station. I had gone there to meet for a ride to a job. As we became acquainted she showed interest in the banjo project. Thus The New York Banjo Ensemble was formed.

She became the propelling force for the project which led to me recording our first album, The New York Banjo Ensemble Performs Gershwin. We were joined by Joel Eckhaus and Bill Keller. Cynthia found representation and we toured for a while. Bill and Joel had other professions so Howard Alden and a young Frank Vignola were added and the second album was recorded, JASS.

On occasion the bassist/violinist Pete Compo or the guitarist Wayne Wright (from the Peggy Lee guitar team) joined us on piccolo banjo. By the way, the other guitarist in that guitar team was the great harmonica player Toots Thielemans. Eventually, we all pursued separate careers and the Ensemble faded away. I have released some of the Ensemble's recordings in CD form on New York Jazz Records.