

Why Stewart Marked The Tenth

By Thomas Armstrong

Pearl dots, circles, stars and other designs on the fingerboard, are the guides which pilot the young student's fingers up and down the long banjo arm. We call them position marks. They not only designate certain positions, but they also form a definite picture, as it were, for the banjoist to study and become familiar with.

As these position marks are permanent fixtures, it seems unfortunate that no uniform system has been followed in placing them. We are inflicted with two different methods; one style containing marks at the 9th, 14th and 20th frets, while the other places them at the 10th, 15th and 19th frets. One of these forms must be wrong, even though prolonged usage of brings familiarity of the fingerboard to the player. If a whimsical banjoist employed an instrument with marks at the 4th, 6th and 8th frets, he might still become a virtuoso, notwithstanding such markings conflict with the instrument's tuning and the manner of taking positions.

A perfect system is one which marks the important intervals and, at the same time, secures a happy alliance with the instrument's technical requirements. It was this plan of reasoning that caused Stewart, the great banjo maker, to place a dot at the 10th fret. He saw that this fret contained a keynote of the banjo's natural scale; he saw that this fret produced the sub-dominant triad, of that key, across the first, second and third strings; and, best of all, he saw that this fret marked the minor seventh of every open string except the fifth. The minor seventh furnishes one of the most forcible intervals in modulation, for it reveals the characteristic note of the new key about to be entered. That is the very reason why mandolins, guitars and frequently violoncellos have a mark at the 10th fret. By a lucky coincidence the marking of this useful interval, agrees with the second octave of the banjo bass, when the first string is closed at the 10th fret. It seems hardly necessary to add, that when a banjo fingerboard contains a dot or symbol at this fret, it is musically correct in both theory and technic.

At the American Guild convention in Washington, a resolution was passed requesting our banjo makers to mark their fingerboards similar to the chart given below.

It will be observed that this chart gives a mark at the 10th fret, but none at the 9th; and that the upper half of each string is marked similar to the lower half. Position notes on the first string are given, in order that the system will be understood, but it must be remembered that the position marks are for use on all strings, and the intervals on those strings are governed like the first string.

The minor thirds are noted in small type and the major thirds in large type. Nearly a;; the perfect fourths and fifths are shown, and all the

octaves up to the 22nd fret. If the 24th fret had been given, it would have a mark similar to the 12th fret for that octave.

Without going into tedious details, it can readily be seen why this method of placing position markers is of immense advantage to the banjoist. Playing "in positions" is more frequent in a banjo than any other instrument, because its manner of tuning in thirds, requires a larger number of skips than an instrument tuned in fourths or fifths. If these shifts in position are guided by signs well adjusted to suit numerous keys, left hand fingering becomes more intelligible and inviting. The method here shown accomplishes this, owing to the fact that no augmented or diminished intervals are marked. How fortunate it is, then, when we place a dot at the 10th fret, all symmetry of this congenial union is blotted, for every string will show an augmented fourth between the 3rd and 9th frets, and every string will also have a diminished fifth between the 9th and 15th frets.

In addition to this grievous fault, a mark at the 9th fret restricts the player's recognition of the minor seventh interval. Instruments like the tenor mandola, mando-cello and mando-bass have a sign at the 10th fret, because a conspicuous mark here, indicates the turning point in modulation.

For these reasons Stewart was right when he held fast to the rules governing other instruments, and their labels fit the banjo fingerboard. During his business career he fought for three things. They were: "the smooth fingerboard," - "A Notation," and - "the 10th fret." He acknowledged his mistake of the smooth fingerboard; and if he were living today he would be publishing music for the "Banjo in C"; but his theory of position markers still holds good, and the credit for its ultimate victory cannot be taken from him.

