The Balancing Act

Music is more than just a bunch of notes. It’s what you do with those notes that makes it musical. To make it interesting and enjoyable you need to balance several different elements.

Note: Some of these points are especially important for those writing arrangements.

1. Predictability and Surprise: There needs to be some predictability so the listener can follow what’s happening and even predict where you are going. Without some order and structure it is just random noise. But if it’s too predictable it will be boring and repetitive. So, there needs to be some surprise built in - an unexpected chord change, the melody takes an unexpected turn, or you modulate the key for repeated choruses.

2. Tension and Release: Tension creates movement. When you resolve the tension the listener feels comfort and satisfaction. A sus chord (4 to 3) resolved, 1/2 step harmony resolved, a V7 chord that goes back to the I, or a Plagal cadence (IV-I) that finally comes home make for satisfying listening.

3. Phrasing: We play music not measure by measure, but phrase by phrase. Usually a musical phrase will end on the first beat of the next measure. Sing it the way you want to hear it and then make the banjo sing it that way.

4. Accent: The "important" notes (melody) should sound out louder than the others. The melody is the song. Everything else is fill and embellishments.

5. Dynamics: If you have ever listened to a deadpan, monotonic speaker he probably put you to sleep. There needs to be dynamics in terms of loudness and quietness. If you start out as loud as you can play there is nowhere to
go dynamically. Build to important points with phrasing and loudness. Without being too graphic, there is such a thing as a climax musically.

6. Rubato: Of course your timing needs to be rock solid, but a very effective technique is to vary the tempo specifically where you want to create interest. Rubato means to "steal time" but I prefer to think of it as to "borrow time" because you are going to give it back. For a dramatic effect slow it down a bit to accent a musical point and even give it a fermata or pause before continuing.

7. Brightness and Mellowness (dolce or sweet sound) of tone: When you pick close to the bridge you get a bright sound. Picking closer to the fingerboard (or even over the fingerboard) will give a more mellow sound. This is a great technique especially for repeated phrases that you want to sound a little different.

8. Syncopation: Pushing notes ahead of the beat or accenting notes off the beat can be very effective for grabbing the listeners attention. Usually we push a melody note ahead of the beat by an 1/8th note. Use this sparingly. Too much syncopation can be as repetitive and boring as none at all.

9. Swing or Bounce: Especially for slower songs, a swing feel can sound great and get your listeners tapping their feet or even make them want to get up and dance! Think 'Chatt-a-noo-ga.'

10. Technique: One of the most important things you can do to make your playing sound musical is to develop a strong technique which includes strength (confidence), control and accuracy. People hear your technique and control every time you play. If you want your listeners to feel relaxed and comfortable build a strong technique!