

Mele Kakahiaka Study Notes

By Keola Beamer

Mele Kakahiaka means, “Morning Song”. It is in F Wahine tuning. F Wahine is also known as Leonard’s F, named after the great Hawaiian Slack Key Guitarist – Leonard Kwan. Because the tuning is called “Leonard’s F”, does not mean that he invented it, it simply means that Leonard did a significant amount of work in this tuning and it had come to be associated with him. Leonard was a kind and talented man. In the world of Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar, we remember those who went before us and we strive to honor them. If you are sitting around with a bunch of slack key guitar players and they ask you what tuning you are in, just nod and say, “Leonard’s F” and watch their eyes get big. You will have impressed them by honoring one of our *na kūpuna* (treasured ancestors).

The key to the musicality of “Mele Kakahiaka” lies in the smoothness of its execution. For it to sound and feel “*nahenahe*”, (soft, sweet, melodious) it must flow from the heart and the fingers.

How do we accomplish this?

First lets try to understand what we refer to as the “*mana’o*” of the music. *Mana’o* means “thought or idea” – the closest Western musical term would be “phrase” or “musical sentence.” Take a look at the tablature, bars 1 through 4. Play this section through once, slowly. It has a completeness to it, doesn’t it? This is the first “*mana’o*” or musical thought that the composer has expressed.

Play only the 1st and 2nd bars. Now play bars 1, 2, & 3. Neither of these individual sections feel like a completed phrase. Without the 4th bar, the *mana’o* is left hanging, it needs to resolve somewhere (in this case - the tonic F chord) to achieve a sense of completeness.

When learning a new piece, most guitarists just tear into it and stumble along unmercifully! I know you are tempted, because that’s the way I was too! But for now, hold off. Don’t play through the whole piece. Trust me, its going to be worth it. We are going to get you through this in the least frustrating way possible!

I'd like you to focus exclusively on Bars 1 through 4 and play this through until it begins to flow smoothly. Connect the LH position changes. Remember the idea of "economy of motion" that we discussed in the beginning realm. Keep your LH second finger down on the 3rd string and use it as a guide to slide up the neck (to the 5th fret), then back down. With your right hand, listen to the balance of the voices, the low notes, the middle and the treble. If the bass is overpowering, use a lighter touch with your thumb. If the treble can hardly be heard, get underneath that 1st string a little more with your RH.

This is very important. Don't forget the 2nd string open in this section of music. **It gives the *mana'o* continuity.** The middle voices in the Hawaiian slack key guitar sometimes surprise us with special *mana* (divine power, spiritual). Like the thread of a lei, it holds all the blossoms together. Listen to the way the open 2nd string sings in the middle of the bass and melody. This same continuity functions through the entire piece.

Remember that you are trying to achieve the silky smoothness and harmonic balance (*ho'okaulike*) that we prize. Understand and embrace these elements and your music will flow into the world.

Put your guitar down for awhile. Lets look in detail at the *mana'o* of this piece, expressed here in bar numbers or measures:

1st *Mana'o* – 1 through 4

2nd *Mana'o* – 5 through 8 (an elucidation or re-capitulation of the 1st)

3rd *Mana'o* – 9 through 17

4th *Mana'o* – 19 through 28 or (19 – 22) & (23 – 28)

You might want to take a moment and mark these sections on your tablature.

Now play and listen carefully to the 1st *mana'o*. Get it flowing smoothly, then proceed to the 2nd *mana'o*. Since this is a re-statement of the theme, how about making it a little different from the 1st one? Try (as I did in the mp3) and change the tone slightly by sliding your RH closer to the bridge of the guitar for the 2nd *mana'o* only. The contrast in tone, sets the two *mana'o* slightly apart. You might also want to try this idea in the repeat of the vamp at bar 17 & 18. Tonal contrast makes your performance more intriguing.

Now you have played smoothly through the 1st and 2nd *mana'o*. Isolate and play only the 3rd *mana'o*. Listen carefully to the way you sound. In bar 14, use your LH second finger on the 9 and extend your LH 4th finger out to play the 12th fret harmonics.

Continue in this manner, playing each *mana'o* and then join them together. Take it easy. Enjoy this process. Try to make learning fun. Chance 'um (old Hawaiian expression) try stuff, and play with aloha in your heart.

The structure of the piece is as follows; Play through to bar 28 then go to the beginning and play to bar 18. Jump to the coda at bar 29 and *ritard* (slow down). *Pau* means – the end.

Summation;

Consider the *mana'o* of your music and speak with your guitar in complete thoughts. Don't stutter or stammer. Play from your heart and release the *mana'o* of your music clearly into the universe.