

# How To Tune Your Mountain Dulcimer

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There are many ways (called modes) to tune the mountain dulcimer, including the seven "traditional " ones - Ionian, Aeolian, Mixolydian, Dorian, Lydian, Phrygian, and Locrian. Modal music underlies almost all Western folk and traditional music. Depending on the mode, the Tonic Note, or first note of the octave scale will begin on a different fret. In addition to a mode, your dulcimer will be tuned to a Keynote - the tone of the un-fretted bass string.

If you have an electronic tuner or pitch pipe, great! If not, you can still tune your dulcimer. The exact Keynote is only important if you are going to play along with other instruments. To play with other dulcimers, make sure your un-fretted bass strings sound the same. If you are playing by and for yourself, it doesn't matter what the Keynote is.

In the traditional modes, the tune is played only on the melody string (or strings if the melody is doubled). The other strings drone accompaniment to give you that unique dulcimer sound. Skip the 6+ fret.

Here's how to tune your dulcimer to the four most common and popular modes.

**Ionian (called D-A-A if the Keynote is D)**

Ionian Mode is called the "natural major" mode. Many traditional American songs you can sing or hum are 'natural major' tunes.

Step 1. Tune the 3rd or bass string of the dulcimer to the D below Middle C (this is the same note as the open 4th string of the guitar). If you don't have a guitar or pitch pipe handy, pick a note that sounds good with your voice... not too low or too high.

Step 2. Press the bass string (farthest from you) just to the left of the 4th fret and pluck the string. Tune the middle string so it exactly matches this note.

Step 3. Tune the melody string (closest to you) to the same note as the un-fretted (open) middle string.

The Ionian mode scale begins on the third fret and runs to the tenth fret. Additional notes are available above and below this octave.

**Aeolian (called D-A-C if the Keynote is D)**

Aeolian mode is called the "natural minor" mode. Many traditional Scottish and Irish tunes sound good in this 'weeping and wailing' mode. Wayfaring Stranger, Good King Wenceslas, and Shady Grove/Mattie Groves are the best known Aeolian songs.

Steps 1 and 2 are the same as for Ionian.

Step 3. Press the bass string at the 6th fret and pluck it. Tune the melody string to this note.

Aeolian mode runs from frets 1 to 8. There is only one note below the octave, but many above.

**Mixolydian (called D-A-d if the Keynote is D)**

Mixolydian mode is only "slightly minor", and is used extensively for neo-celtic music, Irish fiddle tunes, and the masterpieces of Turlough O'Carolan.

Steps 1 and 2 are the same as for D Ionian.

Step 3. Press the middle string down at the 3rd fret and pluck it. It is an octave higher than the unfretted bass string. Tune the melody string to this note.

Mixolydian mode runs from the Zero Fret (open melody string) to fret 7 and back. There are no notes below the octave, but there may be an entire octave available above the first.

**Dorian ( called D-A-G if the Keynote is D)**

Dorian mode is not so minor sounding as Aeolian mode, but more so than Mixolydian. Barbara Allen, Scarborough Fair, and Greensleeves are well known Dorian tunes.

Steps 1 and 2 are the same as for D Ionian.

Step 3. Press the bass string at the 3rd fret and pluck this note. Tune the melody string to exactly match this note.

Dorian mode goes from the 4th fret to 11th.