

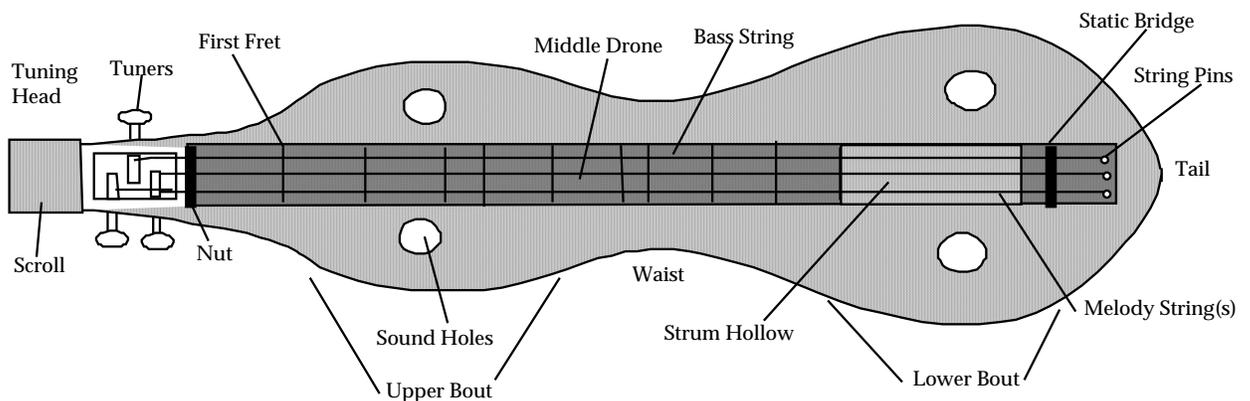
Learning To Play Mountain Dulcimer

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On Behalf of <http://www.EverythingDulcimer.com>

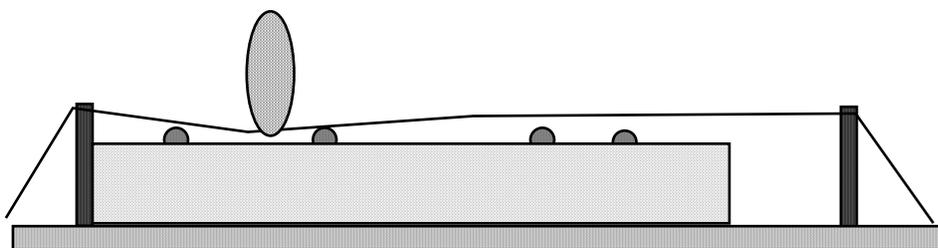
The mountain dulcimer is one of the easiest musical instruments to learn to play, because there is a straight “do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do” scale with a some notes above the high “do” and a few notes below the low “do”. If you can hum a song, you can easily pick out the notes and play it!

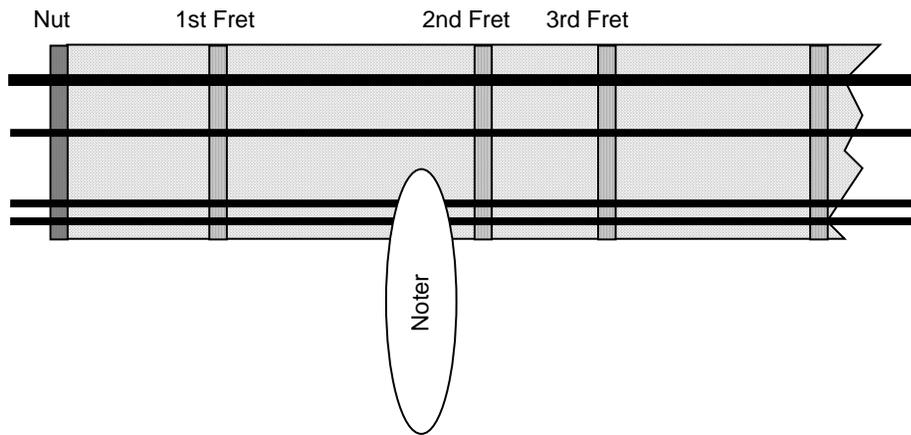
The dulcimer was developed by 18th and early 19th century settlers of the Appalachian mountains, based on memories of the sound and design of early folk instruments of northern and western Europe. Dulcimers can have 3, 4, 6 or more strings, and the size and shape of the body also depend on the whim of the builder. Dulcimers are built in rectangular, hourglass, teardrop, and diamond shapes, to name a few. The body is between 1-3” deep and 6-10” wide. Some dulcimers have two fretboards, and are called “courting” dulcimers, because young lovers could sit opposite each other and “make beautiful music together”. The name, ‘dulcimer’, means ‘sweet music’.



The dulcimer is played horizontally – in your lap, or on a table – with the tuning head to your left. Unlike a guitar, the notes of a song are played only on the string(s) closest to you. The other strings are “drones”, like the dronepipes on a bagpipe, and give the music a richer, fuller sound.

To play a note, press down on the melody string(s) just to the *left* of a fret, with a “noter” – a piece of hard wood held in the left hand. If you don’t have a noter, you can always use your index finger. The illustrations show the noter left of the second fret:





With the right hand strum all of the strings, near the sound hole - either away from you, or towards you. Strum with your bare thumb or finger, a flat pick, or a thumb pick. Traditionally a piece of “cane” or native bamboo was used for the noter, and a sharpened goose quill was used for the pick. Eventually you’ll strum in both directions. Don’t press down too hard on the noter, or your hand will get tired quickly...don’t press too softly either, or you’ll get weird “twangy” sounds...

Now move, or slide, the noter to the position for the next note, and strum again...

Your dulcimer is tuned to Ionian Mode (see below). The Melody and Middle strings are tuned a musical fifth above the Bass string, and the scale starts on the third fret. Start at the third fret and practice running up and down the scale a few times until you’re getting “good” notes at each fret.

Once you’ve mastered the scales (hurrah!) start with something simple like Frere Jacques, Mary Had A Little Lamb , , or some other easy tune. Pick out the notes, one by one. Write down the fret numbers that make up the tune (it helps the learning process). There are lots of versions of dulcimer “tabulature” - ways of remembering how to play a tune if you don’t read music. Create your own notation.

Unlike modern stringed instruments, the dulcimer uses a “diatonic” rather than “chromatic” scale – as if you could only play a song with the white keys on a piano. A dulcimer is tuned to one of seven traditional “modes”, such as Ionian, Aeolian, or Mixolydian. The dulcimer doesn’t need to be tuned to a particular note or key such as D or G or F, but if you have a pitch pipe or inexpensive electronic tuner it’s easier to tune the dulcimer to play along with other instruments.

Tuning

Below are the “relative tunings” for the three most popular and well-known modes. They’re called “relative tunings” because the actual Key note that the Bass string is tuned to doesn’t matter, the strings are tuned “relative” to each other. The only time the Key note really matters is when you are playing along with other instruments. Otherwise, you can just tune the Bass string to a note that sounds good with your voice, and tune the other strings relative to that one.

Ionian Mode

The Ionian Mode is the major mode for most European American folk and traditional music, and is a good mode to use when you are just learning the dulcimer. Most songs that you can whistle or hum can be played in Ionian Mode. The scale has no sharp or flat notes in it, just “do, re, mi...” To tune to Ionian Mode, loosen or tighten the bass string (farthest from you) to a note that “sounds good”. If you have a pitch pipe or electronic tuner, a good note to tune to is D above middle C (traditionally Ionian Mode is tuned to middle C). Now press the bass string down just to the left of the 4th fret, and sound that note. This is a musical fifth, and the note is A (G if the bass is tuned to C). Tune all the other strings to this note. This is called the D-A-A or C-G-G tuning. The scale (do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do) starts at the third fret.

Mixolydian Mode

Tune the bass and middle strings as for Ionian Mode. Then sound the bass at the 7th fret and tune the melody string(s) to that note. If tuned to D, this is called the D-A-D tuning. The scale starts with unfretted (open) strings or on the 7th fret. The seventh note of the scale - ti - sounds “flat”. This is the way it is supposed to sound. Traditionally Mixolydian Mode is tuned to G. Mixolydian mode sounds good with some Celtic music such as Irish jigs and other fiddle tunes.

Aeolian Mode

Aeolian Mode has a wild, minor sound that goes well with some folk songs such as Wayfaring Stranger or The Border Widow’s Lament. Tune the bass and middle strings as for Ionian Mode. Then sound the bass on the 6th fret and tune the melody string(s) to that note. The scale starts on the 1st or 8th fret, and there are three flats - mi, la and ti. Traditionally Aeolian Mode is tuned to A.