

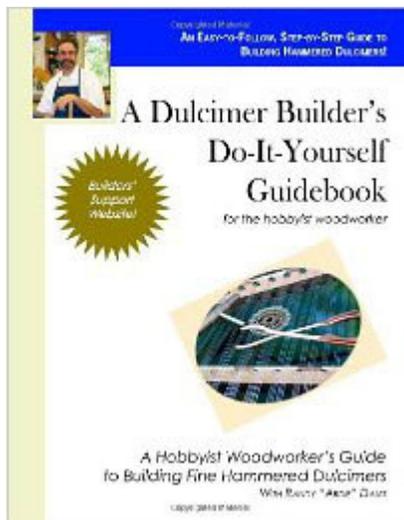
**This article is Part One of a four part series on the intricacies of constructing a hammered dulcimer. Articles will be coming about once per week for the next month or so!**

**If you are interested in building a hammered dulcimer, Ardie has written an outstanding, detailed book on the subject. Check it out at: <http://www.amazon.com/Dulcimer-Builders-Yourself-Guidebook-Woodworker/dp/1553950100>**

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## Introduction

(Copyright © 2002 by Randy "Ardie" Davis. Excerpt from the Introduction to "A Dulcimer Builder's Do-It-Yourself Guidebook." Contains helpful information about Dulcimer Design, Dulcimers, and Dulcimer Players. For more information, please visit <http://www.amazon.com/Dulcimer-Builders-Yourself-Guidebook-Woodworker/dp/1553950100>.)



I wrote this book because people asked me to help them build their own dulcimers, and I didn't have an easy way of doing so. They asked me because they could not find adequate instructions or plans to do so.

I can only hope these instructions and plans are adequate for their - and your - needs.

I have written for the hobbyist woodworker, that breed of man (or woman) who needs to work with his hands, enjoys the intrigue and challenges of wood, and has access to tools. I hope I have written a thinking man's book. That is, although I explain in detail how I build dulcimers, I leave a lot of room for variations in the use of woods, materials, and tools.

### A Little About Dulcimer Design

This book describes the way I build dulcimers; it does not pretend to be the way to build dulcimers. If you know anything at all about the history of the dulcimer, you know that they take many shapes and sizes, are built along a variety of designs, and produce sometimes dramatically different sounds. Although the string pattern is typically trapezoidal, the shape of the box has ranged from rectangular to trapezoidal.

Some dulcimers have a single Treble bridge; others have a Treble and Bass bridge, and others have additional, smaller bridges to provide more chromatic notes.

Some dulcimers have floating soundboards and some have fixed (attached) soundboards.

Dulcimers have from 1 to 8 or more strings per course, although the more popular dulcimers today have 2 or 3 strings per course (a course is a string or set of strings tuned to a particular note on the scale. For example, a 15/14 dulcimer has 15 Treble courses, and 14 Bass courses).

The number of courses is quite varied, also. You can find 9/8, 10/9, 11/10, 12/11, 13/12, 14/13, 15/14, 15/15, 16/15 dulcimers and so on.

As a general rule, a 15/14 will give you three full octaves; a 12/11 provides two-and-a-half octaves; and a 9/8 provides two octaves.

Regarding design, there is really only one somewhat hard and somewhat fast rule, and that's the rule of two-fifths. Most dulcimers built in the United States today are fifth interval dulcimers. That simply means that notes played on any particular string, when plucked or struck on opposite sides of the Treble Bridge, are five notes apart, inclusive, on the Diatonic scale. For example, if the note on the right side of the Treble Bridge is a D, then, when properly tuned, the note on the left side of the Treble Bridge for the same string is automatically an A (D-E-F-G-A). To accomplish this in the design of the dulcimer, the distance between side bridges is measured, and the Treble Bridge is placed exactly two-fifths of that measurement from the Left Side Bridge. This will become clear in my discussion of placing the bridges on the soundboard and the bridge braces underneath the soundboard.

The purpose of this brief discussion is to convince you that there is no perfectly right way to build a dulcimer, and that you have a lot of leeway in your design and implementation. Just don't forget the rule of two-fifths.

I must hasten to say that the design I employ in building my dulcimers is not my own - it has been borrowed from the centuries. Master dulcimer builders or designers like David Lindsey, Bill Spence, and Dana Hamilton employed key elements of the design long before I came along.

### **A Little About Dulcimers**

Describing the hammered dulcimer, John McCutcheon is said to have quoted the following poetic phrase:

At once the flutter of Angel's wings and the crashing of symbols.

Indeed, the hammered dulcimer is a curious and ungainly combination of subtlety and brashness, of the outrageous and the sublime, of beautiful lines and an awkward shape. Yet, as a solo instrument, its emotive range is such that a dulcimer was played in celebration at my wedding and in sorrow at my father's funeral. It revels in the square dance and is somber in the dirge. Like its younger cousin, the piano, it can find a place in a choir-filled sanctuary or in the small, quiet parlor of a home. In short, as a musical instrument it is delightfully flexible and interestingly complex.

The dulcimer can also be played in a variety of ways: it can be gently plucked with the fingers, crudely dampened with duct tape, played with hammers that ring brightly or that soften the blow in bell-like tones.

### **A Little About Dulcimer Players**

Dulcimer players themselves are an odd lot. As the world chases the newest fad in music, and pushes to the next extreme, dulcimer players look over their shoulders. They look for the value in a rich and deep tradition of a music that always tells a story - often with outrageous humor and a twinkle in the eye. In a sense, theirs is a path, in the words of Aileen and Elkin Thomas, for those who can't walk straight, else why would they veer into a retro-culture of a century and more ago.

The dulcimer player is almost always a communal person because the dulcimer is such a communal instrument. And because the dulcimer is not (usually) amplified, it draws people unto itself, into a close circle of raucous and entertaining melody.

The dulcimer player celebrates that time in our American history, and in our world, when, from here at least, things looked simpler and happier and slower. While the dulcimer plays, things are even so.

The act of building a dulcimer is a solid, experiential link to a time when people made their own, well, just about everything. The dulcimer enjoyed a good part of its history not as a factory instrument, but as an instrument crafted by the musician. The hands that played it made it.