

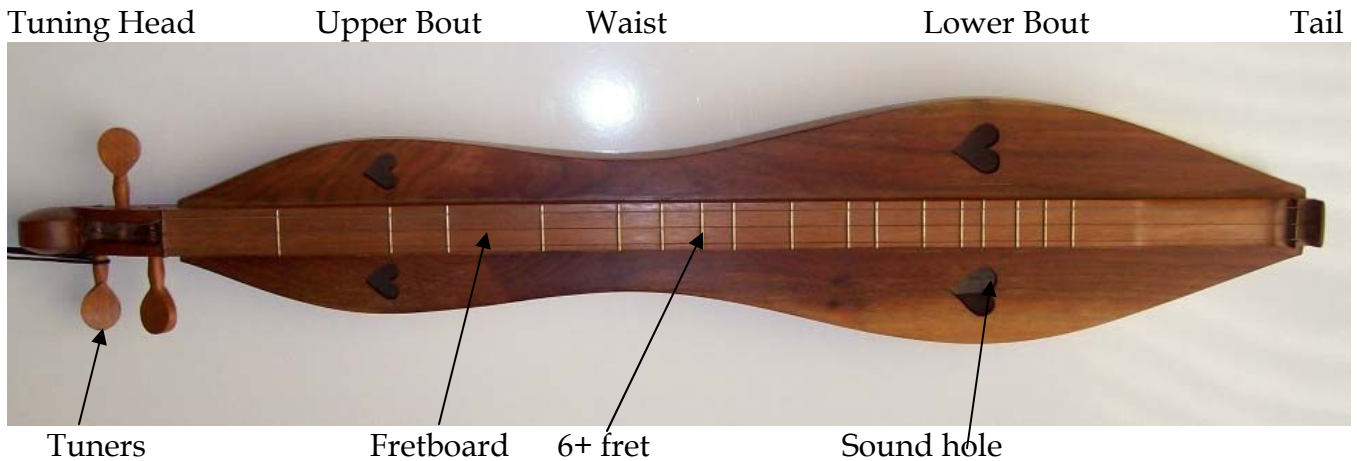
# I Just Got A Dulcimer, Now What?

-- A Beginner's Guide --

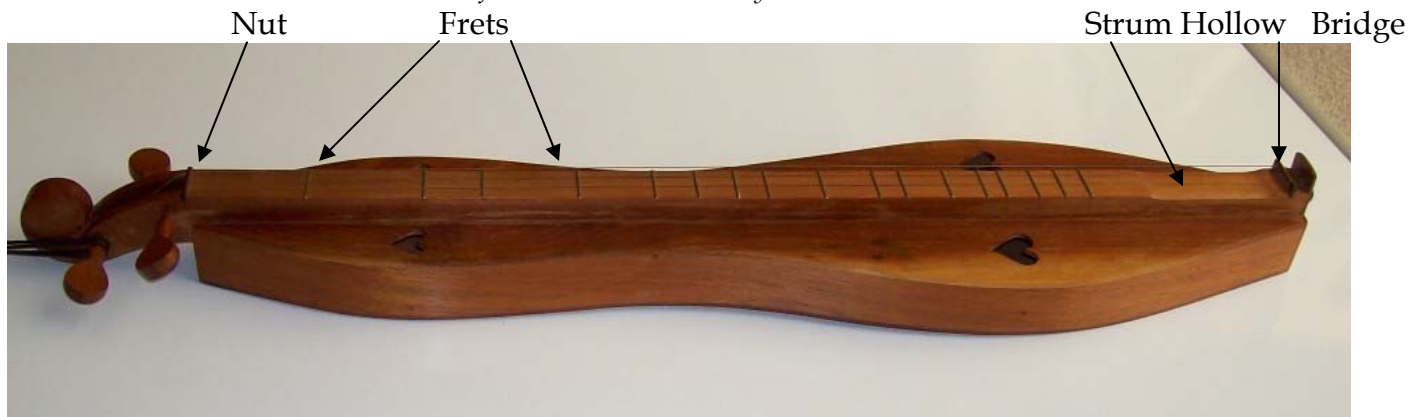
By  
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## Whatchacallit?

Like every other specialized thing in the universe, the dulcimer has its share of special nomenclature.



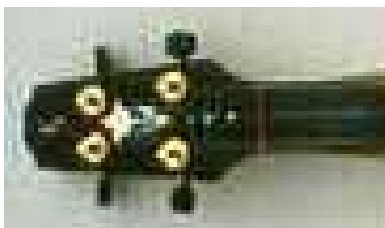
*Photos of Edd Presnell dulcimer by Bill Howard*



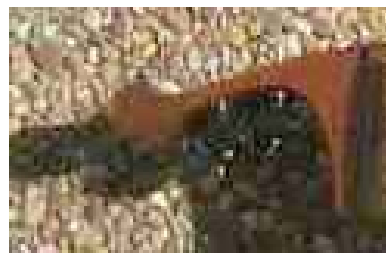
## Types of Tuning Heads



Scroll with wooden pegs



Guitar w/ geared tuners



Tongue with friction tuners

# Shapes



Zitter



Lute



Box



Hourglass



Violin



Trapezoid



Teardrop



Elliptical



Stick



Banjimer



Courting

# How Do I Know If I Have A 6+ Fret?

As you follow discussions on ED and elsewhere, you'll hear references to the 6+ or "six and a half" fret. How can you tell whether your dulcimer has one and what good is it?

Traditionally the dulcimer had a true diatonic fretboard that essentially represented only the white keys on a piano. In the 1960s and 70s, Mixolydian Mode became popular for playing Irish fiddle tunes. However, Mixolydian Mode has a "flatted 7<sup>th</sup>" note; meaning you don't get a complete 'do, re, mi...' scale as the next to last note is ti-flat, not ti. If however, a 6+ fret were added, the player would now have *both* ti-flat and ti when playing in Mixolydian Mode. Similarly, a 13+ fret is usually added higher up to give the same effect in the second octave.

Most dulcimers made in the last 20 years have the 6+ fret, but not all. The photos below show how you can determine whether your dulcimer has a 6+ fret.



This zitter style dulcimer by the author has the Traditional or True Diatonic fretboard without a 6+ fret. Notice the spacing of the frets after fret 5 - narrow, wide, wide, wide.



This Bill Berg dulcimer has a Modern Diatonic fretboard with the 6+ fret and 13+ fret. Notice the group of 4 narrow spaced frets after fret 5 and fret 12; this is the characteristic fret spacing pattern of a dulcimer with a 6+ and 13+ fret. The fret after fret 6 is not fret 7, it is fret 6+; then comes fret 7, 8....

*There is absolutely nothing wrong with a dulcimer that does not have a 6+ fret.* However, if you intend playing a lot of modern music, you may want to consider having a luthier add a 6+ and 13+ fret, or else buying another dulcimer that has those features. Dulcimers without a 6+ fret are prized by traditionalist players who don't mind re-tuning frequently. More modern players seem to relegate such instrument to the Ionian Modal tuning of DAA.

# Playing Styles

## Holding the Dulcimer

There are three basic ways to 'get a grip' on your dulcimer.

Most traditional is to hold the instrument balanced flat on your lap, with the tuning head to the left. Second is to place the dulcimer flat on a table or other stand (tuning head to the left) and step up to the instrument. Third is to hold the dulcimer "guitar style" - vertically - with or without a neck strap.

When holding the dulcimer traditionally, you need to have your knees as far apart as practical so that the dulcimer isn't acting like a teetertotter as you move up and down the fretboard. Tuck the tail end of the instrument towards your right hip, and put the 1<sup>st</sup> fret over your left knee.



Some people who don't have much lap, or who habitually wear 'slippery' clothing, have trouble keeping the dulcimer in place on their lap. This can be remedied by using a lap cloth of chamoix or the rubber/plastic open-weave shelf liner material. Others opt to have a strap installed on their dulcimer which goes around the player's waist or legs. A third option is to use a "possum board" - a sort of 'lap table' on which the dulcimer sits.

Playing the dulcimer on a table or stand has the advantage of allowing the back of the instrument to vibrate readily (instead of being muted in the players lap. This gives the dulcimer greater volume. By acquiring an adjustable stand such as those used with electronic keyboards or purpose built for dulcimers, you can choose to play standing or sitting.

Guitar style or vertical players either hold the instrument more or less vertically on their lap, or suspend it from a neck strap. Robert Force and Albert d'Ossche were the innovators of this playing style in the late 60s and 70s, and their landmark book *In Search of the Wild Dulcimer* although out of print, is still available on-line at [www.robertforce.com](http://www.robertforce.com) Copies of *In Search...* can also be found on Ebay and Amazon regularly. Although Albert has sadly passed away, Robert still appears as a teacher and performer at dulcimer festivals around the country.

## **Noter & Drone**

Noter & Drone is a playing style using a short length of wood, metal, plastic or glass to fret notes on the melody string(s) while the other two strings drone in accompaniment.. In Europe, on dulcimer predecessors such as the hummel, langeleik, or epinette des Vosges, the technique dates back well into the 1500s.

## **Finger Dancing**

A playing technique using two or more fingers to play the melody on the melody string(s) only, allowing the other two strings to drone as with Noter & Drone style. Sometimes called Melody-Drone style. When playing a quick tempo tune, the player's fingers seem to "dance" up and down the fretboard. Finger dancing is also a very traditional method of playing.

## **Chord-Melody**

A modern playing style using three fingers of the left hand to form chords for each note of the melody across two or all three courses of strings on the dulcimer. The technique can also be used to play 'accompaniment chords' when singing. The style was apparently developed by those who found the traditional dronal styles "limiting" or 'boring", began applying guitar/mandolin/banjo style chordal technique to the dulcimer.

As Ken Bloom, Everything Dulcimer contributor and musician extraordinaire once said:

"Playing with a noter is often touted as an "easy" way to play and thus, strictly for beginners. Au contraire! Whether you do it with fingers or a noter, playing the melody on a single string I think is quite a challenge. I think anyone checking out a langeleik tutor would be amazed at how complex and challenging one string playing can get."

"The next time someone gives you guff for being a noter player, look at them with a sad pitying look, gently shaking your head and know that they are people of limited vision. There is great beauty in simple things."

"In the end, it's the music that's important, not a technique, style, or personality. When all of the last three fade, the music will still be here." m



# Modes & Tuning

In the following discussion, *ignore the 6+ fret if you have one on your dulcimer* when playing a scale.

Modes are not the same as Modal Tunings. Modal Tunings are things like DAA, CGc, DAG, etc... that describe the relationships of the Bass and Middle drone strings to the melody string(s) which sound appropriate when using a particular Mode (scale) as the basis for a song.

Four truths about Modes:

1. Modes are the "Do, re, mi.. scales" found on any string of the dulcimer.
2. All modes are available all the time on any string.
3. Each mode scale starts on a different fret.
4. Each mode has a different number of flat notes.

## Mode Scales

*Ionian* - starts at the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> fret. Do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti do (no flats)

*Mixolydian* - starts at the Open or 7<sup>th</sup> fret - Do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti-flat, do (1 flat)

*Aeolian* - starts at 1<sup>st</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> fret - Do, re, mi-flat, fa, sol, la-flat, ti-flat, do. (3 flats)

*Dorian* - starts at 4<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> fret - Do, re, me-flat, fa, sol, la, ti-flat, do. (2 flats)

*Locrian* - starts at 2<sup>nd</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> fret - do, re-flat, mi-flat, fa, sol-flat, la-flat, ti-flat, do (5 flats)

*Phrygian* - starts at 5<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> fret - do, re-flat, mi-flat, fa, sol, la-flat, ti-flat do. (4 flats)

*Lydian* - starts at 6<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> fret - do, re, mi, fa-sharp, sol la, ti, do (no flats, 1 sharp)

Although the scales are note-independent -- the actual note (A-G) of do, re... or sol... depends on the note to which the open string of the dulcimer is tuned -- each Mode has a "traditional Keynote" (low 'do') associated with it:

*Aeolian*      A; traditional tuning AEG

*Locrian*      B; typical dulcimer tuning Bb F G

*Ionian*        C; traditional tuning CGG

*Dorian*       D; traditional tuning DAG

*Phrygian*    E; typical dulcimer tuning E Bb G

*Lydian*       F; typical dulcimer tuning F E Bb

*Mixolydian* G; traditional tuning GDg

## D-Tunings

Since D has become such a popular key, here are the key of D tunings for each mode.

Mode	Tuning	Scale Starts on
<i>Ionian</i>	DAA fret Bass on 4 to get the A	fret 3
<i>Locrian</i>	DAB fret Bass on 5 to get the B	fret 2
<i>Aeolian</i>	DAC fret Bass on 6 to get the C	fret 1
<i>Mixolydian</i>	DAd fret Bass on 7 to get the d	fret 0 (open)
<i>Lydian</i>	DAE fret Bass on 1 to get the E	fret 6
<i>Phrygian</i>	DAF fret Bass on 2 to get the F	fret 5
<i>Dorian</i>	DAG fret bass on 3 to get the G	fret 4

## Tuning Nomenclature

The multitude of tunings can be confusing at first. Start with one of the tunings and use it exclusively for six months or so; then add the others as you gain comfort and familiarity with your dulcimer.

### Which string is which?

When you start to look at dulcimer writing, you'll see a bunch of letters like DAA, Dad, DdAdd, even ddaAdD that refer to the tuning of the strings. You can pretty much guess that the middle couple of letters refer to the middle string(s), but which is the bass string and which is the melody string? If you try to tune a wound bass string too high, things are gonna pop!

Generally speaking we refer to the strings from the Bass Drone to the Middle Drone to the Melody. DAA, CGc. Of course there are those who refer to the strings just the opposite, so don't be confused if you see a tuning called AAD.

<u>Bass Drone</u>		<u>Melody</u>
<u>Middle Drone</u>	rather than	<u>Middle Drone</u>
<u>Melody</u>		<u>Bass Drone</u>

**You**

One further convention is that D is an octave lower in pitch than d. Likewise c is an octave higher than C. A tuning that reads Ebe means that e is 8 notes (or one octave) higher in pitch than E. That E (or C or D) is generally the note to which the bass string is tuned.

Some folks are either lazy or don't care how they write the letters of a tuning. Thus you'll see people write DAD when they really mean DAd, or CGC when they mean CGc. If you think about it; trying to tune a heavy wound bass string and a thin melody string to exactly the same note in the same octave just won't work. Thus CGc.

On some dulcimers where the courses are double strings - BB MM mm - people sometimes string the bass course with one fat wound string and a thin light string tuned an octave higher. This is often expressed at DdAd or maybe DdAAdd or some such combination.

## The Numbers Game

An arguably better system of nomenclature is the numbered tuning system, where the open Bass string is called 1 and the other strings reflect how many notes higher in pitch they are above 1.

Ionian Modal Tunings DAA, CGG, EBB, etc, can all be expressed at 1-5-5 tunings - The open bass string is 1; the middle and melody strings are tuned 5 notes higher. Similarly 1-5-8 expresses all variants of Mixolydian: DAd, CGc, Ebe. Dorian Modal Tunings are 1-5-4 tunings; and Aeolian tunings are 1-5-7.

This means all 1-5-5 tab works together; all 1-5-8 tab works together. You don't need different tab just because you play in C instead of D. Conversely, to 'transpose from C to D or vice versa, all you have to do is re-tune your dulcimer to the new key.

## Getting In Tune

When your dulcimer arrives, chances are it will not be tuned correctly. When shipping an instrument most luthiers 'de-tune' it to avoid stress caused by changing air pressure, humidity, etc.

### Which D is D?

FWIW, any standard Western pitch can be described using a pitch name (C, F#, or Bb for example) and an octave number (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.). Pitch notation usually (but not always) has middle C being called C4. Some people/places/paradigms make C3 middle C. Go figger!

1. The higher the number, the higher the octave. C5 is an octave above C4.
2. *The number changes at every C.*

The D which we use as the basis of all the D tunings, is D4 – one whole note above “middle C”. The A we use is A4 and the d we use is d5

C'3 D'3, E'3, F'3, G'3, A'3, B'3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, c5, d5, e5, f5, g5, a5, b5,...

So how do you know which D is D on your electronic tuner? Go to one of the online tuners or virtual pianos (listed below).

### Link To Online Tuner

<http://www.susantrump.com/dulcitune.html>

or

[http://www.harpkits.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Category\\_Code=Onlinetuner](http://www.harpkits.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Category_Code=Onlinetuner)

Do NOT use MusicMaker's recommended D3 tuning. That is one octave too low for a regular dulcimer. Use D4A4A4 or D4A4d5

Find middle C (C4) and play the D above (to the right) it. Then tune your bass string to that note, check it with your tuner, and you're good to go. Tuning the other notes relative to the bass string D is easy – see below.



- Always tune a vibrating string, so you can hear it go up or down in pitch; and with some geared tuners a little twist goes a LONG way.
- If you're trying to make two strings sound the same, pluck the one that's correct first; then while it's humming, pluck the other string and turn the tuner in the appropriate direction. Repeat until the two strings sound the same. Then check correctness of the sound with your tuner.
- An important thing to note here is that two dulcimers – one tuned DAA and the other tuned Dad – can play the same song at the same time. No, they will not play the same frets to get a particular note, but that is irrelevant. As long as the dulcimers are tuned to the same Keynote (D in this case) they will sound good together.

## Relative Tuning

If you have an electronic tuner or pitch pipe, great! If not, you can still tune your dulcimer. The exact Keynote (note the bass string is tuned to) 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.

Here's how to tune your dulcimer "relatively".

**Ionian** (called DAA 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 bass string of the dulcimer to D or a note that sounds good with your voice... not too low or too high.

Step 2. Press the bass string 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(s) to the same note as the un-fretted (open) middle string.

**Aeolian** (called DAC 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 well 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(s) to this note.

**Mixolydian** (called DAd 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 Ionian.

Step 3. Press the bass string down at the 7th fret and pluck it. The sound is an octave higher than the unfretted bass string. Tune the melody string(s) to this note.

**Dorian** ( called DAG 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 Ionian.

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

## Non-Modal Tunings

Here are several non-traditional tunings that are popular and very useful.

### Galax Tuning

Galax (pronounced 'gay-lax') tuning actually is a traditional tuning - in the area around Galax, Virginia. What makes it different is that you need a different set of strings to do it right. In Galax style *all* of the strings (even the bass string) are .09 gauge, and *all* are tuned to d (not D). This gives a unique 'bumblebee' drone sound to tunes being played. Instruments set up for Galax tuning are almost always played *Noter & Drone* style. Galax players often use a 'reverse capo' - a small stick underneath a string to act as a temporary nut and raise the pitch from d to g.

### Bagpipe Tuning

Bagpipe tuning is similar to Galax tuning. However you can tune to a Bagpipe tuning without having to change strings. All the strings are tuned to the same note (D for example), however the bass string is tune an octave lower than the others - Ddd. To get to this tuning from DAd, all you have to do is raise the sound of your middle string to equal that of the melody string.

### 1-3-5 Tuning

According to proponent Merv Rowley. "...dulcimer players have learned how to play far more than just folk music on their instruments ...The discovery of this "1-3-5" tuning system is perhaps the most significant event affecting dulcimer music in more than fifty years!"

"There are three important and unique features...1) Each fret (8 per octave counting the 6+) forms a major "barre" chord whose name is given by the note on the bass string. ***This is NOT a modal tuning; drones do not exist, and chord accompaniment is required.*** 2) We are not in a fixed tuning. We can play a scale on the treble string alone in the keys of B minor, D major or A major without either retuning or using a capo. 3) Among the three strings, we can locate and play the entire 12-note array of the chromatic scale! C - D - E - F - G - A - B plus C# - D# - F# - G# - A#. These features appear for any 1-3-5 tuning, regardless of key."

## **DGd Tuning**

DGd is often incorrectly called “Reverse Ionian”. The reality is that this tuning is not the “reverse” of anything, and does not sound remotely like an instrument tuned to Ionian Mode in the key of G. DGd really is a Mixolydian Modal style tuning (bass and melody strings an octave apart) with the middle drone string lowered in pitch from A to G.

What DGd tuning does is allow DAd players go to the key of G without having to retune *all* of their strings. By dropping *only* the middle string from A to G, and playing the Ionian Mode scale from fret 3-10 (g to g') you get a pleasant drone pair (D, G) while playing on the melody string(s). DGd tuning is very nice for both Fingerdance and Noter & Drone style players (see below).

## **DAdA**

This tuning is an interesting option for dulcimers with a doubled melody string. Tune one melody string to d as in DAd; tune the other melody string to A as in DAA. Play both melody strings together. The dA melody couplet yields a rich sounding melody line.

# Dulcimer Maintenance

Dulcimers, like fine furniture and good machinery, need a little TLC and preventative maintenance to keep them in top working condition.

## Polishing & Dusting

To keep that “new dulcimer shine”, you need to at least dust your instrument periodically. If you know your dulcimer has an oil finish – like Tung Oil - you can use a dab of that oil on a lint-free cloth to buff the shine. If your dulcimer has a polyurethane (Deft , Minwax, etc.) finish, you can use a little spritz of Pledge or other furniture polish on a rag. If your dulcimer has a lacquer or varnish finish, ask your luthier what products he/she recommends for cleaning the surface. Do not apply *any* these kinds of polishes to your fretboard!

Fretboards and strings should periodically (every couple months) be given a rub-down with lemon oil, orange, oil, or one of the commercial “string waxes” or bore oils. Dr. Duck’s Ax Wax™ , and Fast Fret™ are neither waxes nor limited to guitars. Your son or daughter’s clarinet “bore oil” also can be used to replenish your ebony fretboard overlay too.

## Replacing A String

Breaking a string seems to terrify people for some reason. It shouldn’t. Strings break. It’s not going to kill you or destroy your dulcimer. Get over it!

Changing strings seems to terrify people almost as much as breaking a string. Again, ‘get over it’! It’s not “rocket surgery”. It *is* easy and simple and only takes a few minutes.

Take off one string, replace it with a new one; then go on to the next string. Why? Some dulcimers do not have the bridge glued in place, and if the bridge moves, you can be in for a long drawn out process of getting it back in the correct location.

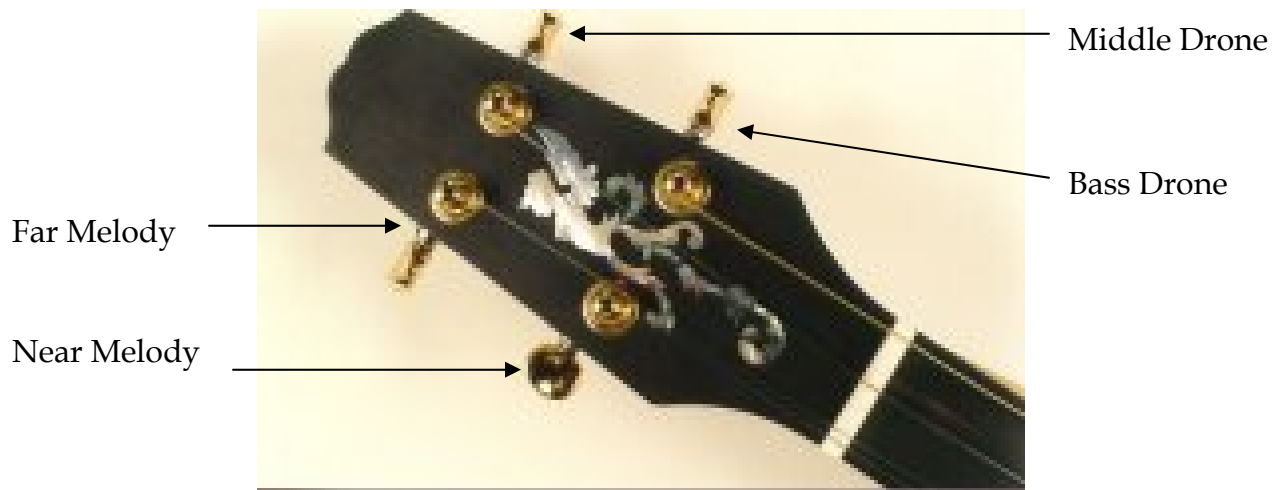
Hook the loop or ball end of the new string on the string pin at the tail of the dulcimer exactly the same way the other strings are connected. Pull the new string over the tail and through the appropriate bridge and nut notch. A piece of masking tape can help hold it in place. Wrap the string in the appropriate direction around the tuner shaft. Slide the end of the string through the hole in the shaft, then go around the shaft again and back through the hole. Turn the tuner knob to take up the slack, take off the tape you used to hold the string in place; then slowly bring the string into tune.

The first time you tune a new string, tune it a little bit sharp, as a new string takes a little while to stretch into shape, and as it stretches the tuning will go a bit flat..

How often should you replace your strings? As 20 people and get 25 answers. It depends on how often and how roughly you play, the corrosiveness of the atmosphere where you live (near the ocean vs on a mountain top in Colorado), how often you re-tune or capo, and a host of other factors.

**The general consensus is that you should change your strings at least 3-4 times a year.**

## Wrapping Strings on Flat or Guitar Style Tuning Heads



Flat or guitar style tuning heads have vertical string shafts (often called the 'peg'). This photo of a Keith Young guitar-head shows how the strings are wound around the tuning pegs - from the center around. You do not need to wrap the entire string onto the peg - one or two turns is sufficient. Then trim off the excess to neaten things up.

## Wrapping Strings on Scroll Style Tuning Heads



Here a Blue Lion scroll or violin style head shows how strings wind around the horizontal shafts of the tuners - over the top of the shaft and around.

# Adjusting Your Action

The height of the action is important for comfortable playing. If you have a dulcimer from one of the well recognized builders, chances are it is set to the correct height. Sometimes the action (especially on cheap 'offshore' dulcimers and instruments from less knowledgeable builders) can be too high, and that causes excessive finger pain!

Before you go adjusting the height of your dulcimer's action, have another, more experienced dulcimer player take a look and play of your instrument to see if they think the action needs lowering.

A good action height to start with is to have the thickness of a nickel between the top of the 7th fret and the strings; and at the same time if you lay a dime on the fretboard just to the left of the 1st fret, it should not quite touch the strings. Some people like a lower action than this; but this is a good "touchstone" for action height.

Slowly, gradually reducing the nut/bridge height is the key to success in setting the action. To lower the action, probably the best tool is a triangular "needle file". You can get a whole set of needle files for around \$15-20 at Ace or Home Depot.

Assuming the action height is OK at the nut, loosen one string enough to slip it out of the notch on the bridge. Simply file that notch 6-10 strokes, then re-tighten the string and check the gap. Repeat until that string is lowered to the correct height. Then repeat until all the other strings are lowered too. If the action is too high at the nut, start at the nut end, lowering the notches until the string is at a good height; repeat for all string at the nut end; then go on as described above and lower the bridge as needed .

If the nut and/or bridge are not glued down, you can optionally use a piece of fine sandpaper (100 grit) and sand off the bottom of the nut/bridge until they are the right height. Again, make a few gentle passes of the nut on the sandpaper, and test the fit; repeating until you are happy with the results.