

The Bass Dulcimer – A Layman's Approach

You have scrimped. You have saved. The moment has now arrived. You have taken delivery of that long awaited bass dulcimer. After admiring its esthetic qualities, you place it on your lap and very thoughtfully think –“ Now what do I do with it?”

You have searched your dulcimer tab books. You have done numerous Internet searches looking for written documentation as to how to play the bass dulcimer. You have become frustrated in not finding much, if any, of the information that you seek. If you are fortunate enough to attend a bass dulcimer class given by Janita Baker, Elaine Conger, Jim Miller, or others, you will be well on your way to playing your new instrument. Barring that, I would suggest purchasing Jim Miller's or Elaine Conger's bass dulcimer book. These are the only books that I found that are devoted entirely to the bass dulcimer. There may be others. Jim's book is theory oriented, while Elaine's book is song oriented. I would purchase both books.

What follows, will perhaps, give you some insight on how to approach playing your bass dulcimer. Before sitting down and actually playing, I would recommend that if you do not have some rather stiff/rigid guitar picks, you should get some. Many of us dulcimer players use Herdim picks and I find them too soft to play a bass dulcimer. Due to the increased thickness of your bass dulcimer strings, you will experience many sore fingers as you practice and play. What works for me is using soft plastic or rubber sewing thimbles. These can be purchased at a sewing store. The only problem I encountered with the thimbles is that I could not find one large enough for my thumb. I then bought the largest thimble they had and split it on both sides and then taped it up so as to fit my thumb.

The bass dulcimer is basically an ensemble instrument. It is also a nice addition to a dulcimer group, although, played too loudly, it can be overwhelming. Within limits, you can play solos and be the lead player in your dulcimer group with your bass dulcimer. Certain songs lend themselves to be played on the bass dulcimer; bluesy songs, such as “House of the Rising Sun, St. James Infirmary.” There are many songs in the Blues genre that would sound great with your playing lead. Slow songs that are normally played on the lower register of your dulcimer will all be candidates for inclusion in your bass dulcimer repertoire. I have also found that many hymns lend themselves to a bass dulcimer lead.

One important thing that I have learned in playing the bass dulcimer is that **LESS IS MORE**. Should you play every melody note? Probably not, unless you are playing lead or a solo within a song, Your instrument is for harmony and backup with as few notes as you can play and still enhance the song by your playing. As in most harmony and backup playing, whatever sounds good to your ears (and hopefully other ears), should be OK.

I would begin by taking some of your already memorized songs or use a printed tab sheet that has the chords already provided for you. Let us assume that the song is in 4/4 time. Play the first and the third notes of a measure or phrase. Play these notes on your bass/and or middle string. If this feels and sounds OK, you might want to add the second and fourth notes of that same measure. Your ears will tell you if playing all four notes is pleasing to the ear.

An easy, basic approach to playing your bass dulcimer would be to start by playing the chord tonic note (first note of the chord) followed by playing a fifth. Count five from D=A. In Example 1, I have tabbed out the chords in the key of D. You can reverse the order of play for sound variation. The same would be applicable in any other key.

(Example 1)

Using the method in Example 1, there will be a minimum of fretting. I try to keep the majority of my bass backup playing on the bass and middle strings, in that order. If you want harmony, move up and play a third (i.e. D to F#) or a fifth (D to A). To move up a third, count three from your melody note. To move up a fifth, count five from your melody note.

I try to stay away from playing full chords most of the time. They can sound “muddy”. Your ears will tell you when to include strumming a full chord. Some harmony sounds better as a third and other times a fifth will sound better. Your ears will tell you what to play. Songs that have a lot of open space (one note or chord per measure) really lend themselves to have you fill the measure with bass notes. Try playing the first note of the measure and arpeggiate the rest of the chord – Assuming you are playing in 4/4 time, you would play first note of the chord) for the first beat, starting your chord on the bass string and then play the rest of the chord, middle – treble – middle (or middle – treble - bass) to complete the measure. If a measure is open as in the preceding example, inserting a walking bass line up to or down to the next melody note or chord sounds really good. Try to keep your bass notes/chords lower than your melody notes/chords. I said, “try”. This is not always possible.

(Example 2)

Another approach would be to play the first note of the chord on the bass string and then the second and third notes of the chord, together, on the middle and treble strings as your second note; repeat the first note again on your bass string as your third note and finally repeat the second and third notes of the chord on the middle and treble strings as your fourth note.

(Example 3)

It is helpful to have another dulcimer player (s) to play the melody while you play your bass/and or harmony. If you cannot find another dulcimer player, you might try playing your backup using the melodies provided in MIDI or TEF format files found in the **Tablature** section of **Everything Dulcimer**. A good substitute would be either your own *Tabledit* or *Finale* sound files to play the melody while you play bass/harmony. There are also, thousands of sound files on the ABC Notation website.

Hopefully, these few hints on playing the bass dulcimer will be of some help to you. What I have presented here has worked for me, perhaps they will work for you. If you do not have a bass dulcimer, the good news is that these techniques can be applied to your standard lap dulcimer. Is there any one correct way to play the bass dulcimer? I would say not. My advice is that: If it sounds good, play it!