

Some Essentials for the Hammered Dulcimer

By: Cliff Cole

Introduction

The goal of this workshop is to give an overview of the essentials you need to learn about as a new or novice HD player. Topics covered are tuning, standing or sitting, stands, hammers, practicing, broken strings and more. In this workshop, your questions and participation are very important.

Tuning

The saying goes: *“dulcimer players spend half their time tuning and the other half playing out of tune”*. Invest in a good electronic tuner that uses a transducer rather than a microphone. Clip on ones made for guitars need to be of the higher quality. The cheap ones do not work on high and low notes. I personally am a fan of Korg tuners. Sabine are also good. For the actual tuning wrench, I prefer the “T” variety, but other people like the “L” type better. (They are wrong ;-). At the music store, they are “harpsichord tuners”.

ALWAYS BE IN TUNE! It’s hard to keep that rule, but make that your goal. Tune ALL of the Notes! The instrument just doesn’t sound good when some or all the notes are out of tune. The sound we all fell in love with, comes from the sympathetic vibration of the other strings.

All dulcimers lose their tune, usually with change of weather and atmospheric conditions. Some stay in tune better than others. Don’t believe anybody who says their dulcimer never goes out of tune... These instruments are made out of wood; they absorb moisture or they dry out. Come early to the jam or gig and tune it up.

Cliff likes to tune from the bottom of the treble course and up to the top, and then go down the bass course from top to bottom. On the treble course there are two notes, one on each side of the bridge. First tune the lower notes and then tune the higher ones as a fine tune. Occasionally you can’t get them both in tune. Do the best you can. If there is a real issue you may need a repair or a workaround. (Or get a better instrument)

Always tune up to a note. Don’t tune down to a note. If you go sharp, take it flat and try again. Listen to fiddlers. It’s all about the tension on the string. Fiddlers are usually very picky about tuning; they ALWAYS tune up to the note.

KEEP YOUR INSTRUMENT COVERED, when not in use. A towel works. Or get creative and make a quilt or something. If it is in a room where the sun comes in through a window, make sure the sun cannot get directly onto the instrument. An environmentally controlled room might be ideal, but sooner or later you have to go out into the elements...

Dulcimers stay in tune better in their case; but I DON’T suggesting keeping any instrument in a case if you want to practice on it. A case is like a force field... If your instrument is easily available it will get played more; trust me on this.

Stands: To Stand or to Sit, What about the Angle of the instrument?

Cliff likes to sit. I am a drummer. It feels more natural to me. I used to stand; I changed. Using a damper pedal is way more natural sitting down. There are stands made that allow you to do both. Experiment; try out other peoples setup. There is not right or wrong here. Do what is comfortable for you, but error toward comfort and ergonomics.

The angle: When I first started playing in 1985, it was very common to see angles up to 45 degrees. But there were always players like Walt Michael who played it flat. Try different positions, but its whatever works for you, but keep ergonomics in mind. Nuff-said...

Hammers

There are many types of hammers that one can use to percuss the hammered dulcimer. The hammers that you decide to use is a very personal choice. As a trained percussionist, I personally like hammers that have some amount of mass, and are more balanced then the lighter flimsy hammers that I see many other people using. Good drum sticks and mallets used for percussion generally have these traits; they are well balanced and have some mass. More mass allows gravity to act on the hammer and assist in the percussion process. Cliff uses the “drop-and-bounce” method; it will be demonstrated.

Practicing

Just do it! Any practice time of any interval of time is good. If you only have five or ten minutes, then its 100% better than not practicing at all that day. I advocate making a consistent time to practice. Like early in the morning before you go to work (or whatever.) Sometimes those fifteen minutes that you allotted for practicing, turns into thirty minutes. Then when you have time spend a few hours practicing. Doing it every day is what makes improvements really happen.

Two things:

Andre Previn said “*A day without music is a day lost forever*”; Live by that rule.

Practice makes perfect is not exactly true; *perfect practice makes perfect*; **be your own task master...**

Lessons

Instructional videos, “free” You-Tube videos, and books and CDs are all wonderful tools. There is now more material out there than ever. But if you want real honest feedback and training, find a teacher who you can work with. A teacher can give you real-time feedback. Some teachers offer lessons over Skype and other online services. That might work for you, but I prefer the personal one to one contact, both as a teacher and as a student. Cliff is self-taught, however I had 10-years of percussion training behind me before I discover the dulcimer for myself. Group lesson at festivals are good to learn new concepts, but it can sometimes be hard to get exactly what you need in a group lesson.

Broken Strings

Sooner or later it's going to happen; a string will break. It's almost always a surprise when they break. I have had string break when I hardly touch the string. When they are ready to go, they go. I have had some be very dangerous when they snapped. One time a high-tension string snapped and nearly hit somebody. Occupational hazard? Yes. I play a lot. I probably break 3 or 4 strings a year. But I also might go a whole year without breaking one...

Make sure you have spares. Learn how to fix broken strings yourself. It's like changing a tire; you might be stuck somewhere where help is far away... These days there are You-Tube videos that help that have instructions. If you purchased your instrument from a shop, ask for their help to show you how to do it.

I like Dusty Strings replacement strings. I get my wound strings from James Jones. (They don't break very often:

Elderly Instruments sells dulcimer strings:

<https://www.elderly.com/hammered-dulcimer-strings-for-d10hd.htm>

<https://www.elderly.com/hammered-dulcimer-strings-for-d35hd.htm>

A helpful Link from Dusty Strings:

<https://manufacturing.dustystings.com/hammered-dulcimers/strings>

I keep a kit of everything I need in my dulcimer case. It's also a good idea to have a spare tuning wrench, and wire clipper. A small screwdriver to hold down the string is also good to have in your kit.

Right Hand - Left Hand Independence

One of the main goals a mastering a percussion instrument is to become independent with your right and left hand. The dulcimer is no different than any other percussion instrument; attaining independence between your right and left hands is a big advantage. Some HD instructors like to teach a concept called "left hand lead." That's ok, but there is also nothing wrong with "right hand lead" either.

If you find that when you are playing the hammered dulcimer, that you tend to use one hand dominating over the other, (usually the right hand) you might want to work on bringing your non-dominant hand "up to speed".

Sticking (or hammering) Patterns

To learn a tune well is to learn the "sticking" pattern of the tune. My rule of thumb is this: Always alternate your hammers, "*except when you don't*"... What this means is that "most of the time" you will use an alternating sticking pattern, except when it is advantages not to. It takes time and practice to figure out the right patterns for the tunes that you learn.

Some Basic Hammering Concepts

Alternate right and left hand

Counting the beat out loud – "one and two and three and four and"

Use a metronome!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Keep it even

Playing a basic single stroke roll – R L R L R L R L

Playing a double stroke roll – R R L L R R L L

The concept of "doubling"

Paradiddle: R L R R L R L L

Percussive Arts Society forty essential rudiments

<http://www.pas.org/Learn/Rudiments.aspx>

About The Author

Cliff Cole purchased his first hammered dulcimer in 1985, from Sam Rizzetta. At the time he was playing drums in a blues band. Prior to taking up the dulcimer, he studied drums and percussion for ten years. Since the age of fifteen Cliff has played in numerous rock, blues, jazz, zydeco and folk ensembles. Folk instruments are where the heart is.

Cliff plays the hammered dulcimer in the family folk group "DayBreak," which has been together since 1989. They have made several recordings, including "Lost Cave" which was recorded live inside of Lost River Caverns in Hellertown, PA, "Little Steps", and "Autumn Calling," which features many of Cliff's original tunes. They also have produced two Christmas CD's one named "Unity; Unique Music for Christmas" and a live Holiday concert recorded in December of 2002. Cliff also helped produce a wonderful CD with his daughter Emily Rose Cole, called "I Wanna Know" That was released in 2012. DayBreak's music is available on CD-Baby, iTunes and many other digital download stores found on the web.

Cliff is very active in the folk scene. He is on the board of Perkasio Patchwork Coffeehouse, where he often works the soundboard. He also sometimes does sound at Godfrey Daniel's a folk club in Bethlehem, PA. Cliff is also a founding member of the Quakertown Area Dulcimer and Autoharp Society ([QUADAS](#).) James Jones made Cliff's hammered dulcimer. The full sized 2/16/18/7 instrument covers four octaves and has dampening pedal. For more information about James Jones instruments go to his web site: <http://www.jamesjonesinstruments.com>

Cliff lives with his lovely wife, Pamela, in Quakertown, Pennsylvania. He works as a computer hardware test engineer for the Intel Corporation, in an office located in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

Contact Cliff at:

Cliff Cole

2440 Schukraft Road

Quakertown, PA 18951

215-453-1722

<http://www.daybreakfolk.com/>

This document can be downloaded from: <http://www.daybreakfolk.com/CliffCole.htm>