

# Playing the Mountain Dulcimer

*A tour of simple strumming, picking out tunes and playing chords*

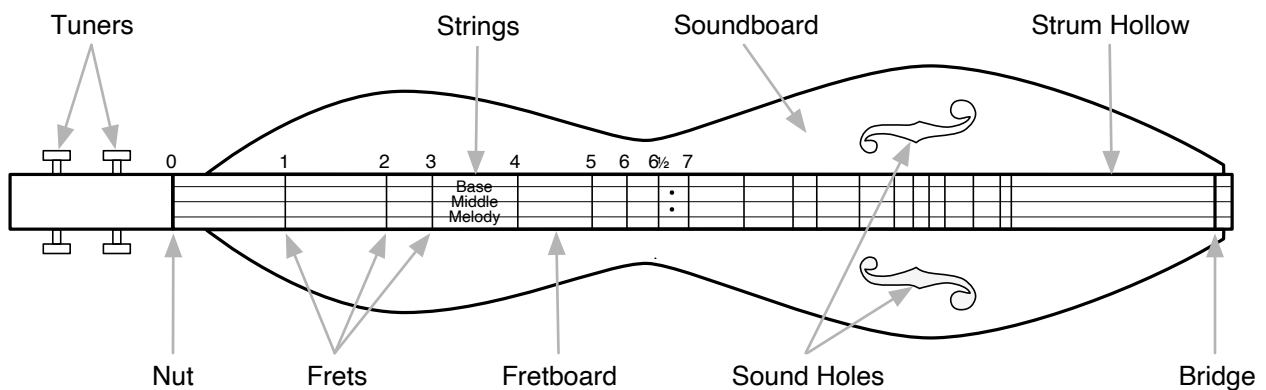
## History

On her website [www.erinmaemusic.com](http://www.erinmaemusic.com), Erin Mae Rogers (dulcimer player and teacher) describes the mountain/Appalachian/lap dulcimer as an 'obscure American folk instrument'. It's certainly not the most common instrument, and instruments very much like the one you're playing started appearing in the USA in the Appalachian Mountains at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (might have been earlier but we don't have the documentary evidence). However, the mountain dulcimer (dulcimer from here on) is very heavily based on several European instruments such as the Swedish hummel, the Norwegian langeleik, the German scheitholt and the French epinette des Vosges. It is an excellent instrument on which to play folk music, but you can play any genre of music you like. If you look up British musician Duncan Gibbs on YouTube, you can listen to him playing baroque music and rock.

A dulcimer is basically a wooden box with three or four strings in different gauges. It can be strummed, flat picked (picking individual notes with a plectrum) or fingerpicked (picking individual notes with your fingers). With most instruments you either play the tune or you play the rhythm. With a dulcimer you can do both! Dulcimers are beautiful instruments which are easy to play and sound good. They're not massively expensive either.

## Anatomy

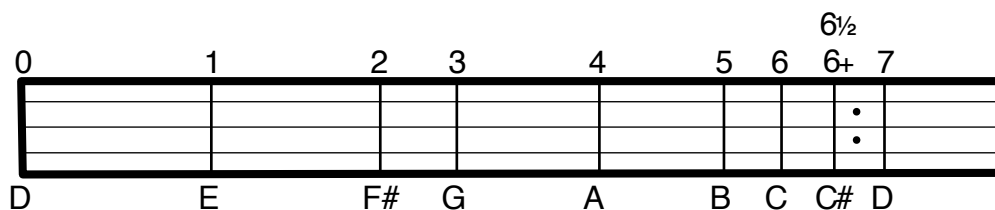
The names of the parts.



There are two basic shapes of dulcimer, hourglass and teardrop, although you can find dulcimers with one side of each shape called an hourdrop. Luthier Ron Ewing calls his hourdrop shape an Aorell.

## Fretboard

The dulcimer is a diatonic instrument – we don't have all the notes you'd find on a piano keyboard. This is what we do have on a standard dulcimer:

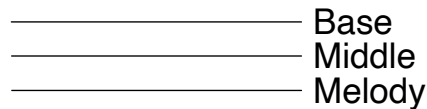


This diagram is just the first octave. If you look carefully at your dulcimer, you will probably have two octaves and a few extra notes above. Some dulcimers have a 1+ (or 1½) fret between the first and second frets (with or without a corresponding 8+ / 8½ fret in the second octave) to give an F natural. Chromatic

dulcimers which have all the notes, also exist. The fret numbers are important because they relate directly to the way music for the dulcimer is written (tab).

## Strings

Dulcimers usually have three strings, although some have four and occasionally more. A dulcimer with four strings can have the strings equidistant (good for fingerpicking) or with two melody strings close together. The melody string is nearest the player, the middle string is in the middle and the bass string furthest away:



The strings are different thicknesses with the bass string being the thickest. If you're left handed, you might want to restring the dulcimer by swapping the bass and melody strings over (the middle string is in the right place whichever way round you play).

## Tuning

The standard tuning for a dulcimer is DAD (D – bass string, A – middle string, D – melody string an octave above the base). Many folk tunes are in D or G (or their minor equivalents) so you can play loads of tunes without changing the tuning. Dulcimer players also use different tunings and a capo to play in different keys. DAC is useful for tunes in a minor key.

An electronic tuner or tuning app is very useful for tuning. Be gentle when tuning particularly if, like me, you can never remember which way to turn the tuning pegs to make the note higher or lower.

## Holding your instrument

You hold a mountain dulcimer across your lap with the strumming end tucked into your body a little and the tuning peg end pushed out over your knee. You need to sit with your legs far enough apart so that when you press down at either end of the fretboard, the dulcimer doesn't tip up. Some dulcimers have strap buttons so that you can attach a guitar strap. This then goes behind your back to keep the dulcimer securely on your lap. If the dulcimer doesn't have strap buttons, you can put nonslip mats on your knees to increase the chances of the instrument staying put.

## The Strumming/Picking Hand

Most people use their dominant hand for strumming and to keep the rhythm. The aim is to keep a continuous, even movement. Originally, dulcimers were strummed with a quill, but nowadays we use a pick/plectrum which you hold quite loosely between your thumb and first (or first two) fingers. Keep your upper arm reasonably still and move your lower arm in an arc as if it's a horizontal windscreen wiper.

You can also flatpick (pick out individual notes with the pick) or fingerpick (pick out individual notes with your fingers) with this hand.

## Strumming

The aim is to keep a continuous, even movement. You can strum out or in. You vary the strumming by not hitting every in and out strum.

Try these exercises:

Out out out out x 4

Out out out out/in x 4

Out out out/in out x 4

Out out/in out out x 4

Out/in out out out x 4

Or any rhythm you want – just keep your hand moving evenly back and forth, varying the rhythm by when you strike the strings.

### The Fretting Hand

Most people play the melody (and chords) with their non-dominant hand. You press down a string just behind a metal strip/fret. This is called fretting. It doesn't matter which fingers (or thumb) you use – there are no rules. You can fret notes on any of the strings, not just the melody string. You need to keep your nails short so that you can press the strings down with the tips of your fingers. It's possible to play just the melody string with your finger(s) flat but you'll need the fingertips for playing chords.

You can also slide a small dowel of wood up and down the melody string to pick out a tune. This style is called noter drone. It's how dulcimers were originally played. Noter drone style is good for playing fast.

Playing around with your dulcimer and picking out tunes is called noodling! Noodling is an extremely important musical skill, and the dulcimer is an ideal noodling instrument.

### First Tune

Hold down the melody string just behind the following frets and strum across all three strings:

0 0 4 4 5 5 4 3 3 2 2 1 1 0 4 4 3 3 2 2 1 4 4 3 3 2 2 1 0 0 4 4 5 5 4 3 3 2 2 1 1 0

Now try the same tune on the bass string and then the middle string.

Try picking out a tune you know.

### Tablature (Tab)

Music for the dulcimer is usually written with staff notation above and dulcimer tab below. Dulcimer tab is written on three horizontal lines representing the three strings. The top line refers to the bass string, the middle line is the middle string, and the bottom line is the melody string. The numbers represent where each string should be fretted. The tab for Sloop John B can be found on the last page (that's where it fitted). It's playing by numbers!

### Chords

You play chords on the dulcimer by holding down strings with your fretting hand, but you often need to hold down more than one string at the same time on different frets. You can also find the same chord in more than one place on the dulcimer. In dulcimer tab, you can usually identify a chord because there are three numbers written one above the other. If you look at the tab for Sloop John B, you can see that it is a mix of individual notes and chords. Chords often appear as three numbers one above the other, just like dulcimer tab but without the lines. Here are a few ways of playing some simple chords:

<b>D</b>	0	0	2	<b>A</b>	1	4	<b>G</b>	0	3
	0	0	3		0	0		1	3
	0	2	4		1	0		3	5

You can also barre chords. This means holding down all three strings at the same fret using three fingers at once:

<b>E</b>	1	<b>F#</b>	2	<b>G</b>	3	<b>A</b>	4	<b>B</b>	5	<b>C</b>	6	<b>D</b>	7
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7

There are no rules as to which finger holds down which string – do whatever is comfortable. It is worth practising using your thumb and little finger as well as your three middle fingers. They may well come in useful!

## What Next?

If you'd like to carry on playing the dulcimer, you might want to borrow/buy an instrument, play with other people, take more classes and find some resources. Here are some suggestions:

If you're not already a member, join the Nonsuch Dulcimer Club [www.dulcimer.org.uk](http://www.dulcimer.org.uk) which is for both hammered and mountain dulcimer players. It's the UK hub for all dulcimer players, although these days we have members from all over the world. Membership is only £10 per year. The club has loan instruments.

We are in the process of setting up a Beginners' section on the Nonsuch Dulcimer Club website which will include useful information and tips. A monthly Zoom session for beginners focussing on technique and a simple tune will be starting up soon. It may be possible to put you in touch with a UK tutor.

The Nova Scotia session (link in the Events section on the club website) is very good and takes place monthly online with occasional face to face sessions in Horfield, Bristol. If you sign up for the Nova Scotia online sessions, you'll be sent details of the face-to-face sessions.

The club organise two residential in person events a year, one at Halsway Manor in May and an Annual Weekend in October. Details are in the Events section on the Nonsuch website.

The club Directory (available to members) is useful to find out if there are any dulcimer players near you. We are developing our online resources. There's also a Facebook group 'Nonsuch Dulcimer Club' and we're in the process of setting up an Instagram account.

## Buying/loaning an instrument

If you want to buy a dulcimer, you must try it to see if you like the sound and to make sure that an instrument is suitable for you, particularly the size of your hands.

The go to place for dulcimers in the UK is Revels Music [www.revelsmusic.co.uk](http://www.revelsmusic.co.uk). Geoff Reeve-Black is a dulcimer player and teacher He's also the most prolific arranger of music for dulcimer in the UK. The website says that Geoff is 'the foremost retailer of used mountain dulcimers in the UK' and he's not wrong. Geoff also sells new Ron Ewing and New Harmony dulcimers and accessories such as tuners and picks. There's also lots of good advice and free music. Geoff also loans instruments.

Steve at Red Cow Music also sells dulcimers [www.redcowmusic.co.uk](http://www.redcowmusic.co.uk) He mainly sells new instruments including dulcimers made by McSpadden and Folkcraft. Steve also sells accessories.

Hobgoblin are a folk music retailer with a nine shops and a website [www.hobgoblin.com](http://www.hobgoblin.com). They sell new Blue Moon dulcimers which I believe are made in Romania and Stony Creek dulcimers which I believe are solid wood and are made in the US.

## Classes

Quarantunes [www.virtualdulcimerfest.com](http://www.virtualdulcimerfest.com) is a big American dulcimer festival that went online during the Covid pandemic and look as though they are continuing to do weekend online festivals twice a year. The cost of a one-hour real time session is very reasonable, and the tutors are some of the best dulcimer

players and teachers around. Geoff Reeve-Black and Duncan Gibbs from the UK both teach at Quarantunes. Classes cover a range of topics including technique and repertoire (learning specific tunes) and cater for all abilities from beginner to advanced (the level descriptions are very clear so you can work out where you are). Tutors I've had classes with and can recommend are:

Geoff Reeve-Black/Duncan Gibbs – good tunes well taught.; Erin Mae – very clear for music theory, technique and repertoire; Rob Brereton; Laurie Alsobrook; Carol Crocker; Aaron O'Rourke – amazing dulcimer player and now psychiatric nurse. Very good for technique; Stephen Seifert; Tull Glazener; Karen Mueller; Steve Eulberg; Nina Zinetti; Heidi Muller; Thomasina Levy; Bing Futch; Jessica Comeau – beautiful tunes. This list is by no means exhaustive. They're just teachers I've taken classes with. Most of them can be found on YouTube and many of them have come over to the UK to teach at a Nonsuch Dulcimer Club event at one time or another.

North Georgia Foothills Dulcimer Association run a similarly big and enjoyable online festival. You can find details on their website <https://www.ngfda.com/>

There are several recorded online lessons. Some can be found on YouTube and Dulcimer Crossing seems to be quite well organised [www.dulcimercrossing.com](http://www.dulcimercrossing.com). It's not something I've really tried so I can't recommend anything but go hunting if it might suit you.

### **Books**

The Dulcimer Book by Jean Ritchie – for the history and has some trad American tunes.

Method For Beginning Mountain Dulcimer by Bing Futch, Folkcraft Instruments – a tutor; I've got it, but I use it for reference rather than working my way through it.

Dulcimer Method for Mountain Dulcimer by Neal Hellman, Hal Leonard – a tutor; again, I've got a copy but haven't used it.

### **Music**

Joining the Nova Scotia session (see above) gives you access to lots of music arranged for dulcimer, presented in both staff notation and tabulature. Some dulcimer teachers also have free tabulature on their websites – Tull Glazener is one.

You can always arrange tunes yourself. You can write it down in any way that makes sense to you. If you want to produce tabulature, TablEdit (<https://tabledit.com/>) is a relatively inexpensive computer program which can help you to do this. It does come with a manual and there is a forum in which users can ask questions and have them answered either by the program's developers or other users. This is just as well as TablEdit takes an amount of studying to use it.

# Sloop John B

Trad. Bahamas Song

Arr. for dulcimer by Geoff Black

**Bouncily** ♩ = 117

Dulcimer

D G D D G

We come on the Sloop John B My grand-fath-er and

Dulcimer

D A D

0 0 2 2 2 2 3 2 0 0 0 1

4 D D D A

me A-round Nass-au town we did roam

Dulcimer

0 0 2 3 3 4 5 5 4 3 2 1

8 A7 D D7 G G

Drink-ing all night Got in-to a fight Well I

Dulcimer

0 1 2 0 0 0 1 2 3 4 3 0 3 3

13 D A D

feel so broke up I want to go home

Dulcimer

0 0 0 0 1 1 0 2 0 0 0 0