

BEGINNING HAMMER DULCIMER

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EMBELLISHMENTS

It's useful to remember that a century ago we would have been fortunate to hear, even once or twice in our lives, the quality of performance now instantly available at any hour on any home sound system. Because we hear virtuosity so often, it has come to seem normal to many of us. We have several opportunities a day to realize that we will probably never sound like that. Most likely, we're right. But it's no disgrace to fall short of virtuosity.

Stephanie Judy

AMATEUR - French from Latin *AMATOR* meaning lover from *AMARE*, meaning to love.

Embellishments are techniques used to make your playing more interesting. Embellishments fall into three general classes: those based on chords, those based on some physical act and those based upon rhythm.

THE ANTICIPATION

Often dulcimer players will add an extra tone at the beginning of a phrase. This is called an "anticipation." The purpose is to lead the listener into the established melody line. Most often the anticipation tone is played as though it was a pick-up note - just *before* the melody tone. Sometimes players will add anticipation tones to existing pick-up notes.

Usually the anticipation tone is *below* the melody tone. Typically, the anticipation tone is a 5th or 3rd, or octave below. On occasion, you will hear anticipation tones that are a 2nd below the melody or in unison with the melody. Less often you will hear the anticipation tone played *above* the melody tone. Again, the order of preference is 5th, 3rd and 2nd.

When you use an anticipation tone your hammering pattern may change. For many of us a right-hand lead is a natural start. But the anticipation tone often falls most naturally in the right hammer. That means you will need to rethink the hammering patterns for the entire tune. A right-hand anticipation means a left-hand lead for the tune.

DAMPING

Using your hand. This technique was really popular among rock and roll guitarists of the 50's and 60's. It showed up frequently in ballads and calypso music. It's a great effect on the dulcimer and simple to do. Before you strike the course of strings, lightly rest your left index finger, thumb or side of your hand on the string just to the right of the bridge cap. The exact position will vary from instrument to instrument. You'll have to experiment to find the right place. As soon as you strike the string, lift your finger away. The result will be a quiet, muted, ethereal sound. The effect is haunting.

Some players use their thumb and others use the heel of their hand to dampen the strings. Whatever is comfortable for you is the right thing to do. The trouble comes when the melody line jumps across the bridge. Generally, while damping, you must keep the melody on one side of the bridge. That means damping with your hand is generally limited to diatonic melodies of not much



more than an octave. It also means that your playing will be vertical - up and down the instrument - not horizontal - across the instrument.

Damping is a wonderful technique for opening a tune, for closing a tune, or for pulling down the emotions before your big finish.

Using Tape. On occasion, you may want to play an entire melody or backup line using the damping technique. To do this, cut some masking tape or surgical tape to the length of your bridge or at least the length of the region of the bridge where the melody lies. You will have to experiment to find the best position for the tape on your instrument. Some players find that about a half-inch away from the bridge cap is best. Others find that about a half-inch away from the side rail is best. Try it and determine what is best for you.

NEVER use tape with an extremely tacky surface. I'm thinking mostly about a silver tape generally called "heat duct tape". The resinous material will stick to your strings and goop up everything. Use a tape with light tack - masking, drafting or surgical tape is fine. Stay away from heat duct and clear plastic or cellophane tapes.

Permanent Dampers. Some dulcimers come with permanent mechanical dampers attached. They are operated by pressing a pedal on the floor. These work just like the pedals on a piano - only backward. When you press down on a dulcimer pedal, you dampen the strings. When you press down on a piano pedal, you release the strings. Permanent dampers can be lots of fun and a great help for playing backup lines in an ensemble. A damper assembly can cost as much as \$1,000 to put on an instrument. So, don't rush out to put dampers on your instrument until you know what you are going to do with them

PMAD

Yes, pmad is damp spelled backward. That's what we are going to do. Play a tone with your right hammer and stop the tone immediately with your left index finger or thumb or heel of hand. Pmad gives a kind of punctuated, aggressive sound that calls attention to itself. Don't get aggressive with the damping. There should be no thumping or percussive sound as you pmad the strings. Just choke off the sound.

It is likely you will find this more difficult than damping. It takes a bit more concentration. But it's worth learning the technique. It can be startling to hear and fun to play. I must say that I'm not at all certain that pmadging *The Funeral March of Brian Boru* is the correct aesthetic choice. It may be too aggressive for this somber tune. But that's your call. Like strong seasoning, a tiny bit of Pmad goes a very long way.

BOUNCES

The bounce is the first embellishment most of us learn. Usually we discover it by mistake. By itself, the bounce often sounds vacant or as though the player is just trying to force it into a tune. However, the technique of the bounce can become the stinger, and that is a useful technique when used *SPARINGLY*.



The bounce is done by a single hammer. After striking the course, allow the hammer to simply bounce evenly up and down. The bouncing will continually sound the tone. You may find that, to get a uniform sound, you need to gradually increase the pressure on your hammer. You can bounce with the right hammer and, as it loses momentum, continue the tone by bouncing the left hammer. This combination of left and right hammers is nearly identical to the motion of a snare drummer doing a drum roll. Although it can be done, the esthetics are not always pleasing. It is a very coarse way to sustain a tone. When practicing bounces, use hammers with bare wood or stiff leather faces. Felt or soft leather absorbs all the energy of the bounce.

Some players like to use the bounce at the end of a phrase as a means to sustain a tone. It is a popular technique in some playing styles. For what it's worth, my view is that this does not help the music. It seems to drag the tempo and clog the feeling. If you decide to bounce on whole notes at the end of phrases, listen critically to how the piece sounds before you get too attached to the technique.

STINGERS

Stingers are the snappy final tone often played by a marching band at the end of a march. They were popular in the dance-band music of the twenties and thirties as ending features. Stingers on the dulcimer are usually lead-in or pick-up features added to emphasize a beginning melody tone. Stingers employ both the left and right hammers. Usually, the right hammer bounces and the left hammer provides the end or "stinger" to the sound of the bounce. The right hammer sounds the tone six or eight times while the left hammer sounds its tone only once. Of course, the left hammer can bounce and the right provide the stinger. In either case, the bounce should be followed immediately by a tone struck by the hammer not doing the bouncing. Think of the bounce as a lead-in or pick-up to this second tone. The second tone becomes a kind of punctuation mark for the bounce. Without that second tone, the bounce hangs in the air and seems unfinished. Stylistically, the hands must move very smoothly to get this right.

The second tone can be the same tone on which the bounce is occurring or it may be a different tone. More often than not the second tone is the lead melody tone, and the bounce occurs a fifth below or an octave below.

THE DRAG

Drags are pick-up techniques borrowed from Celtic instrumental technique. They were originally created for the pipes. Bagpipes have no way to conveniently stop the airflow across their reeds. That means that they cannot easily start and stop tones. Consecutive tones are joined or slurred together. In order to give the appearance of starting tones, pipers have developed an elaborate set of embellishments to begin, stop, or decorate sustained tones. These techniques began with the pipes but became part of the standard playing technique for fiddlers, flute and whistle players. Dulcimer players can borrow some of the techniques, too.

The drag is an embellishment used as a pick-up sequence to a fiddle tune. It is almost always used for fast or moderately paced tunes. In written form, it appears as a triplet. In hearing, it sounds like a short, rapid waterfall of sound. On the dulcimer, drags usually go down the scale in consecutive tones. A single hammer strikes the highest tone and is dragged down to the lowest



tone. Usually three or four tones are involved. It is possible to drag up the scale. But, it's much harder to do and the chance of getting stuck in the strings is very high.

THE TURN

The turn shows up in both classical and Celtic music. It is an ornament often heard in harpsichord music. The turn begins with a three-tone drag and extends the embellishment to five tones. After the three-tone drag, the other hammer strikes the next lower tone and the original drag hammer completes the turn by striking the last tone of the drag. The turn is an embellishment consisting of four consecutive tones down followed by one tone up from the fourth tone in the sequence.

BLUES OR CHINESE BENDS

Just like a hot blues guitar player, you can bend the tones on a dulcimer. You can bend up and you can bend down. To bend up, strike the tone. Immediately push down on that course of strings on the other side of the bridge. This will raise the pitch and slurred fashion. That constitutes a bend. This can't be done on the high tones because the string tension is so great.

You can also bend down by reversing the action. First push down on the string to raise the pitch. Then strike the course. Now release the pressure. The string will slur back to its original tone. Well, more or less.

You will hear blues bends in Chinese music written for their hammer dulcimer – the Yang Quin.

There are several problems with this technique. First, you cannot perform it with much speed. Second, it can really knock the instrument out of tune. Third, it makes you very vulnerable to dropping a hammer. Fourth, the effectiveness of this technique varies greatly from instrument to instrument. Largely it depends on how long the strings are and how much tension there is on the strings.

PLUCKING

Put your hammers down and pretend you are a guitar player. Pluck the strings instead of hammering them. This technique is good as an introduction to a tune or during the middle of a tune when you want to soften the mood. Obviously there are serious speed limitations. You probably can't pluck the melody to a fiddle tune at a dance tempo. BUT, you can pluck sustained harmony tones as a back-up to the melody. This is particularly useful in airs, waltzes, ballads and hymns with a dulcimer duet. One player takes the lead and the other plucks a harmony tone or tones on the first beat of every measure. Although the technique is simple, it can be extremely powerful.

POLYRHYTHM

All music is dependent on manipulating melody, harmony and rhythm to create and relieve tension. The creation and release of tension may be as dramatic as Canio's lovely aria at the end of the first act of Leoncavallo's opera *I Pagliacci* or it may be a subtle and simple as Part C of the fiddle tune *Rag Time Annie*. The point is that music develops tension and then releases it.



Western music relies on melodic and harmonic tools to create and release tension. Generally western music - especially western popular music - is not very creative when it comes to rhythm. George Gershwin wrote "*I've got rhythm*"; but the truth is, he didn't have much and many westerners don't have any. Rhythm is the province of Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia and Latin America. In the cultures of these regions, rhythm has developed to a highly expressive, complex art form. We can borrow some of their ideas and use them in our playing.

Polyrhythm is the simultaneous playing of two or more different rhythms. Sounds impossible, but it really does work. On the dulcimer, polyrhythm works when the left and right hands play different rhythms. The most common polyrhythm occurs with one hand playing a two-beat rhythm and the other hand playing a three-beat rhythm.

The intellectual problem of putting the two lines together may seem overwhelming. It may help you to say the phrase "hot cup of tea". If you were sending this as a Morse-code kind of beat, it would sound like DA DIT DIT DA. The HOT and TEA are long sounds. CUP OF are short sounds. The table below shows how your hands work together to create a three-against-two polyrhythm.

A good way to practice this and build your coordination is to sit down and slap your thighs to this rhythm while repeating the phrase "Hot Cup Of Tea."

Once you have the coordination down, try it on the dulcimer. The right hand takes the three-beat part and the left hand takes the two-beat part. The right hand will stay on one tone or move between two tones while the left hand will play a scale.

The value of this charming rhythm variant is that it can fit nicely into familiar tunes. Try it in the fiddle tune *Liberty* with a three-against-two polyrhythm inserted into the A part. It also fits nicely into the B part of *Shenandoah Falls*.

Polyrhythms work best at the transition and turning points in a tune. Usually you will find them best in a dance tune. They don't work very well at a slow pace.

Three-Against-Two Polyrhythm

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Beat | 1 | and | 2 | and | 3 | and |
| Pulse | DA | | DIT | DIT | DA | |
| Words | Hot | | Cup | Of | Tea | |
| Right Hand | X | | X | | X | |
| Left Hand | X | | | X | | |



CHORD ROLLS

The limitation of two hammers means that we are limited to playing duets on the hammer dulcimer. That is one melody tone and one harmony tone to accompany it. The way to break up the monotony of this style of playing is to play each tone of the accompanying chord very quickly just as a guitar player would do a single strum of a chord. Generally, this *roll* of the chord starts at the lowest tone and moves up and across the dulcimer to the highest tone of the chord. As a practical matter in fast pieces of music, it's realistic to use between three and five tones in a chord roll. The chord roll can be a beautiful technique when applied to slow tunes and songs.

Many players find it helpful to think of chord roll patterns as shapes of H or L or a triangle. Use whatever memory aid is helpful to you. Nothing beats repetitive practice. Practice the chord rolls until they are consistent, accurate and smooth. Apply the chord rolls as one movement running from low to high pitch. Generally, chord rolls occur on the strong beats of measures.

When you work out a piece with chords start by assuming that the melody tone will be at the end or top of the roll. It doesn't matter so much which tone of the chord is the lowest. From strongest to weakest low tone, the chord members run: root, 5th and 3rd. But the inversion of the chord is less important than putting the melody tone at the end of the roll.

ARPEGGIOS

A chord arpeggio is much like a chord roll in that it breaks up a chord into individual tones, but the arpeggio goes both up and down the chord tones. The sound of an arpeggio will be instantly recognizable as soon as you begin to practice arpeggios on the dulcimer. Arpeggios are wonderful accompaniments to use behind a vocalist.

One of the great exercises for learning chord positions is to play pivot chords. You can do pivot chord exercises by linking successive chord roll exercises together. For example, start a four-note roll of a G chord beginning on "G". When that pattern is comfortable, drop the low "G" and add the next highest member of the chord - B. Now the arpeggio runs from B to B'. When that pattern is comfortable, drop the low B and add the next highest member of the chord - D. Now the arpeggio runs from D to D'. You will see that this drill moves your hands up and across the instrument in a kind of crab-like motion. It's a great drill.

One more application of arpeggios is within a progression called *Walking Chords*. These chords use passing tones at the end of each roll or arpeggio to help guide the ear to the next chord. As an example, consider a D chord. The last tones at the end of each D arpeggio can form a descending scale pattern: D-C#-B-A. The same is true for the G arpeggio. Here, the descending scale pattern becomes G- F#- E- D. If you put all of these walking chords together in a progression, you will get a very nice accompaniment to a song. Try this chord pattern using the walking chord exercises: D, Bm, G, A, D.

CHORD FILLS

Chord fills take many forms. Once you know the chord patterns and have a sense of rhythm, you'll make up your own patterns.



Banjo Lines. The pattern of chord fills are similar to a Blue Grass banjo line – hence the name. A good drill is to play *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* using chord fills. The point is to demonstrate that a single arpeggio can be applied to fill the gap between melody tones at the end of, or between, phrases.

WIDs and WAEFs. These are lifesavers. Get to know them. At some time in your playing career, you will need them. WID stands for “**W**hen **I**n **D**oubt.” WAEF stands for “**W**hen **A**ll **E**lse **F**ails”. That should make the point for you. A WID or WAEF is nothing more than a chord roll with the 3rd of the chord eliminated. A WID on D contains only D and A. That is the root and 5th of the D chord. A WID on Bm contains only B and F#. That is the root and the 5th of the Bm chord. There is no finer example of WIDs than Walt Michael’s tune *Snowblind*. His recordings are widely available. Buy one and listen to his creative use of the WID in this wonderful tune.

Chord Falls. What happens when you finish a chord roll and are left at the top of your instrument? Well, what goes up does indeed come down. In this case, it falls down. You play chord falls. The technique uses the treble bridge to separate the left and right hands as they alternate playing members of the appropriate chord going from high to low on the instrument. The pattern on a D chord is:

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|----|----|-----|---|----|----|---|---|----|----|---|
| Left Hand: | A' | | F#' | | D' | | A | | F# | | A |
| Right Hand: | | D' | | A | | F# | | D | | F# | A |

A chord fall can be done employing either a left or right hand lead.

THE FLAM

Flam is a term the dulcimer community borrowed from snare drummers. Actually, a flam on a hammer dulcimer is nothing at all like a flam on a snare drum. But, the technique is extremely useful.

A flam on a hammer dulcimer is the nearly simultaneous sounding of two tones. Unless your instrument has a third bridge on the left side of the treble bridge, you will produce flams with your right hammer.

Take a close look at the region of your instrument between the bass and treble bridges. You will see a point at which a kind of valley is formed by the strings of the two bridges. This is the region where the flam takes place. Here is how it is done:

- ✓ Using the right-hand, strike a course of strings on the RIGHT side of the treble bridge. Choose a strike point much farther to the right than you normally play. You’ll need to strike close to the point at which the bass and treble courses seem to intersect. That’s often called “the valley”.
- ✓ Allow the hammer to bounce up after striking the treble course.
- ✓ As the hammer bounces up, move your wrist to the right.



✓ Now allow the hammer to fall on the BASS course immediately above or below the treble course you hit initially. This is NOT a separate striking of the bass course. Let the hammer do all the work.

That's a flam. Smooth movement of the wrist is key. As you try this, think of the motion of wiping a mirror or window. Allow your wrist to continue moving through the flam motion. Don't try to stop the movement at the bass tone. That will make the flam sound choppy and uneven. The motion of the flam will be awkward at first. With practice, it becomes second nature.

Flams tend to be most successful in the mid to high range of the instrument. Bass flams are just too muddy. Practice with hard faced hammers. Once the technique is mastered, you can do this with felt or soft leather hammers, but when you are learning to do a flam, you need the bounce a hard surface provides.

SEPARATE HANDS

No doubt you will remember the separate hands exercise on *Are Your Sleeping, Brother John*. Suppose the piece you are playing is not a round or a canon, and you want to create a separate hands accompaniment. How do you do that? A good beginning is to work out the left-hand lead chord rolls, then eliminate the middle tone. This will produce a piece that has the melody in the left hand and a harmony in the right hand. Generally this means that your left hand will do a lot more work than your right hand. It will take a good bit of discipline to maintain the separate roles of each hand.