

BEGINNING HAMMER DULCIMER

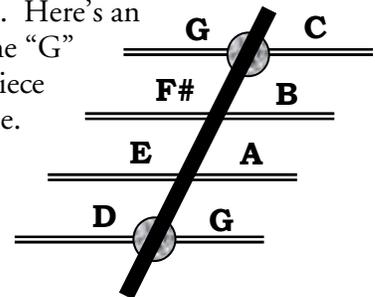
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ORIENTATION

Look at the layout diagram of the hammer dulcimer and find on your instrument the section bounded by the dotted line box. It is located on the bridge to your left as you face the instrument – that’s the treble bridge. On a 12/11 this grouping of string courses begins at the second marker from the bottom. On a 16/15 instrument, it begins at the third marker. This diagram shows the section on which we will focus.

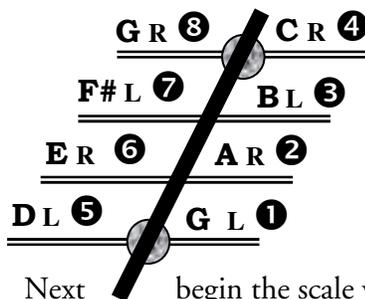
When you first look at the dulcimer it can seem hopelessly complicated. Here’s an easy aid to help you located where you are on the instrument. Inside the “G” box shown on the right of this page, find the “A”. Now place a small piece of masking tape on the right side of the treble bridge to mark this course. If you want to be really tidy about this, use a hole punch to shape the sticker. I played for two years with a white marker punched out of a stick-on label. This little landmark will help you to locate where you are on the instrument.



Too much of a good thing is NOT a good thing. I strongly recommend against using paper strips that identify every course on the instrument. Students who use these seem to learn the paper strips more than their dulcimers. Get to know your instrument not a list of letters.

These four courses form a diatonic scale in the key of “G”. The bottom right course is the tone “G”. The top left course is “G” an octave higher. If you follow the sequence from the low right “G”, you will see the diatonic scale with G-A-B-C on the right side of the treble bridge and D-E-F# on the left.

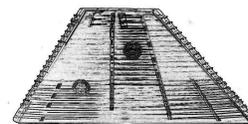
Play this one octave scale in “G” beginning with the LEFT hammer. Alternate the hammers: L R L R. That will take you to “C”. Now cross the bridge and play “D” with the LEFT hammer. Finish the scale all the way to “G”. You will end there on the right hammer.



Here’s how that will look on the dulcimer. The letters G to G represent the tones. The L and R symbols represent Left and Right hammers. The numbers tell you the sequence of play.

Take care to be as accurate as possible in the hammer strikes. Run the scale up and down at a slow pace until your timing is uniform and your accuracy is high.

Next begin the scale with a RIGHT hand lead. Doing this forces the pattern one course higher in order to cross the bridge without crossing the wrists. Now the pattern becomes R L R L R.

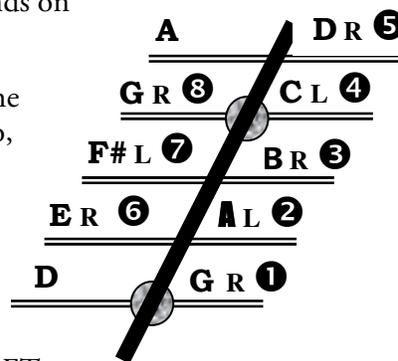


This takes the scale up to “D” on the right side of the treble bridge. Cross the bridge to continue on “E” with the LEFT hammer and alternate the hammers up to “G”. Note that the “D” on the left side of the bridge is NOT played in this scale.

This relationship between the bridge markers is the same everywhere on the instrument. Diagonal markers on the bridge always bound a scale and a key. This works even between the bass and treble bridges. A two-octave scale in “G” begins on the bass bridge and ends on the left side of the treble bridge.

The first octave of the G scale is played with a LEFT-hand lead. The second octave of the G scale is played with a RIGHT-hand lead. So, it’s very important that you work on strengthening and improving the coordination of your weak hand – left or right. You will need both of them to play the instrument well.

Note that when the lead is in the right hand, the cross point from the bass to treble bridge goes up to “D”. Step two on the diagram starts on “E.” And, just like before, the final G scale begins on a LEFT hand lead.



Practice the diatonic scale in G, up and down, until you can play it smoothly, accurately and at a good tempo. If you have a 16/15 instrument, repeat this practice using the D scale that begins at the lowest marker on the bass bridge.

PRACTICE

The following exercises provide several variations on scales. Each one is meant to improve your accuracy. Try them all and use them frequently in your practice sessions.

DIATONIC SCALES

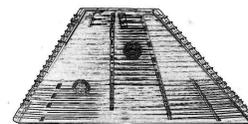
These scales are the ones you know as *do re me fa so la ti do*. Play these scales using both left and right hand leads. Play them in the keys of G, D, C and F. 16/15 instruments should also play the scale in A. Finding these keys on the dulcimer is easy. Just look for the marker with the course that names the key.

ROLLING SCALES

The rolling scale can be quite vexing at first. It is a great discipline and useful because the pattern appears in so many fiddle tunes. It may be hard to hear the scale at first. I think of the nursery rhyme tune *Are You Sleeping Brother John?* Each successive tone of the scale can be sung to the phrase of this tune “*are you sleeping?*” Also, emphasizing each successive scale tone is helpful. Let the rolling part of the scale stay in the background. This means each time “*are*” is sung, the tone played is emphasized. It also makes the scale exercise more interesting. Play the rolling scales up and down with both right and left hand leads.

OCTAVE SCALES

Octave scales help to develop accuracy across the entire instrument. Play these slowly enough to be absolutely accurate. Begin on the bass bridge with the lowest tone of the scale, the tone that names the key. And play the scale by repeating each scale tone in each possible octave.



Here's how it works in the key of "D"

D bass bridge with the RIGHT hammer
D right side of the treble bridge with the left hammer
Same D right side of the treble bridge with the RIGHT hammer
D left side of the treble bridge with the left hammer

E bass bridge with the RIGHT hammer
E right side of the treble bridge with the left hammer
Same E right side of the treble bridge with the RIGHT hammer
E left side of the treble bridge with the left hammer

F# bass bridge with the RIGHT hammer
F# right side of the treble bridge with the left hammer
Same F# right side of the treble bridge with the RIGHT hammer
F# left side of the treble bridge with the left hammer

And so forth as far as the triple octave scale can go.

ARPEGGIATED CHORDS

The Italian word *arpeggio* comes from *arpegiare*. That means to play on the harp. When used in music the word arpeggio tells the player to produce the tones of a chord in succession rather than simultaneously as they are usually played. On the dulcimer one of the happy features of the layout of the strings is that if you play every other string course, you always get an interval of a 3rd. Sometimes major and sometimes minor. When you play every other course over at least three courses, you play a chord on the dulcimer.

Try the following arpeggio on a D Chord. When you have mastered this, find the same pattern for the G chord. Begin on the lowest bass bridge G and build the arpeggios in the same way as we did for the D Chord.

D bass bridge right hammer
F# bass bridge left hammer
A bass bridge right hammer

D right side treble bridge left hammer
F# right side treble bridge right hammer
A right side treble bridge left hammer

D right side treble bridge right hammer
F# Left side treble bridge left hammer
A left side treble bridge right hammer