

BEGINNING HAMMER DULCIMER

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Hammer Control Touch and Accuracy

My own belief is that all music has an expressive power, some more and some less, but that all music has a certain meaning behind the notes and that the meaning behind the notes constitutes, after all, what the piece is saying, what the piece is about. This whole problem can be stated quite simply by asking, "Is there a meaning to music?" My answer to that would be "Yes," and "Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?" My answer to that would be, "No." Therein lies the difficulty.

Aaron Copland

INTRODUCTION

It's a drum. No kidding. The hammer dulcimer is a percussion instrument. To make the sound you strike the instrument with a stick. That's a drum. Oh, I know that's hard to accept. Here you are hoping to play these wonderfully soft and lovely Irish Aires or those charming Carolan pieces or your favorite hymn. And here I am harping at you with "*it's a drum.*"

There is a curious thing about the hammer dulcimer and audiences. Listeners know instinctively that the hammer dulcimer is a drum while most players approach the dulcimer as a melody instrument. Listeners tend to be very forgiving about melodic lines. A missed note here and there doesn't seem to be critical to most listeners. BUT, if you botch the rhythm the performance is wrecked. Listeners do not forgive and do not forget mistakes in rhythm. Curiously, most dulcimer players focus the majority of their effort on getting the melodic lines absolutely correct and then, as an afterthought worry about rhythm. To become a good player you must develop accuracy AND rhythmic expression. Both of these skills are based upon controlling the hammers.

HOLDING HAMMERS

Too bad we call them hammers. That congers up images of a tight grip on a very heavy object as it plummets downward to drive a nail into a board. Carpentry is like that. Music is not. Dulcimer hammers are best held between the thumb and index finger with a *light* grip.

As a beginning player you will likely be happy with somewhat heavy hammers. Weight will help you to maintain awareness of where the hammer is at all times. After you gain experience and better control, you will likely do better with lighter hammers. In all cases, hammers should ***not*** be balanced. The center of gravity of a hammer should lie toward the head. This weight distribution will help you bounce, flam and attack notes properly. There are real weight limits to hammers. If they are too heavy, you will find it hard to move them rapidly. Also, heavy hammers tend to move sideways as you play. Accuracy and speed are diminished with heavy hammers.



A light grip is essential for good hammer control. You will find that your grip will change from very light to firm as you develop finesse in your playing. The varying hold on the hammers allows for greater musical expression. Here's a benchmark. If you never drop a hammer while playing, chances are your grip is too tight. Be relaxed with your hammers. A death grip will insure you never lose a hammer, but it will kill your music.

The western grip places the hammer between the thumb and index finger. Much hammer control is executed by squeezing or relaxing this grip. Most hammering is done by movements of the wrist and the grip. Little, VERY little, hammering is done by moving the forearm. The forearm positions the hammers. The wrists and fingers initiate the strike.

STRENGTHENING YOUR WEAK HAND

Most of us have a preference called "handedness." We tend to be either left handed or right handed. Playing the hammer dulcimer requires that both hands do the work more-or-less in equal amounts. So, we've got to spend time strengthening our weak hand. If you are left handed, well, the hammer dulcimer just might be your revenge on the right-handed world!!! A strong left hand is essential in expressive playing. In fact, many tunes benefit greatly when they are played using a left-hand lead. So, all of you right-handers, buckle-up, we're going to do some drills.

When we begin to play the dulcimer our teachers insist that we alternate our hammers. It is the right thing to do because it makes our playing more fluid and more accurate. The downside is that this approach insures that our weak hand will remain weak. The weak hand never gets any special attention and that means it sort of snoozes through the music. The weak hand cannot do its work in a stupor. All it has to do is remember "I'm next." So our playing never gets over the heaviness of the weak hand.

The Hammer Control exercises are modified drills for snare drummers. The drills are designed so that you can hear what each hand is playing. Left hammer on the left side of the treble bridge. Right hammer on the right side of treble bridge. Any course will do. I suggest you try this in the middle of the instrument. Say left hammer on D and right hammer on G.

Here is the basic drill. Now alternate your hammers at a medium pace maintaining a medium volume. Slow down the pace; keep the volume the same. Speed up the pace, but do not increase the volume. All of us have a tendency to play louder as the pace increases and play softer as the pace decreases. Try this alternating pattern as fast as you can and soft as you can. Do not bounce your hammers! Keep full control of every strike. That fast, but low-volume, exercise demands a high level of concentration for most of us. It is essential that you stay relaxed but in full control of the hammers. If you are doing this properly, most likely you will feel the muscles in your forearm get tight. That is because these control your hammer strikes, and they are getting a serious workout!

Once you have this alternating pattern and volume control down, explore the hammer control exercises in the appendix. Exercises force you to abandon the strict rule of alternating hammers.



They also require both left and right hand leads. Work faithfully with these for *BRIEF* periods and your playing will improve dramatically.

THE HAMMER STRIKE

You just smack it. Right? No. Absolutely not!!! The nature of your hammer strike is terribly important to the quality of the sound you make. Here are the critical things to consider.

Do not initiate the hammer strike with your forearm. Don't play the instrument from your elbow. The proper strike is almost entirely a movement of the wrist. Nuances come from the thumb and index finger. You cannot gain control of volume or accuracy if you play from the elbow. Playing from the arm will also dramatically increase the tension in your wrist, shoulders and neck. Don't get confused when you watch a really good player. It's true their elbows and their forearms are in constant motion. But the elbow and forearm move the hammer to the location of the course to be struck. The actual strike is a joint effort of the wrist and thumb and index finger. The forearm plays a very small role in the actual hammer strike.

Keep your elbows by your side. One of the bad side effects of heavy concentration for many players is rising elbows. Don't allow your elbows to drift out and up. When this happens your hammers also shift position. They begin to point *AT* one another. They should be parallel to one another. If the hammers aren't parallel you will find that accuracy, speed, and tone quality will all suffer. In the worst case, the hammer heads will get tangled up and then all hope is lost – probably one of the hammers will go flying into space. Stay relaxed. Don't raise your elbows. The key word is *RELAXED*. You can't play the dulcimer while standing at military attention. **Wrists Must Stay Relaxed.** There should be absolutely no, I mean *ZERO*, tension in your wrists. If your wrists lock-up, you will not easily initiate the hammer strike with your index-finger-and-thumb grip. Tense wrists force the forearm to initiate the hammer strike. That's very bad. Control of hammer strikes is 99% in the wrists and gripping fingers. Don't lock your wrists.

Be certain you still have a neck. One of the human phenomena dulcimer teachers notice is that, when difficult passages come up in class, many students exhibit the "vanishing neck syndrome". As players get tense, their shoulders rise and their necks disappear. This posture is extremely tiring. You will exhaust yourself in no time if you lock into this pose. And your playing will suffer because all the muscles you need for that tiny little hammer strike are locked into a pose of defense and terror. *RELAX*. Tell yourself that you are a good person and that world peace is not dependent upon the quality of your dulcimer playing. Drop your shoulders. Breathe deeply. Think of the beach or the mountains or your kitty or what ever makes you happy. But *RELAX*. If you don't, chances are you're going to play very poorly and have only a hellish backache for your trouble.

Arriving is Important but Leaving is More Important. When classical percussionists are taught to play drums, they are told not to hit the drum. They are told to lift the sound out of the drumhead. They are taught to move the drumstick below the drumhead and pull out the sound. The same is true for hand drummers. Watch a good conga or djembe player and see their hands get off the drumhead as quickly as possible. This attack-and-leave method is true for the



dulcimer. Strike the string and get your hammer up and away. Lift out the sound. If you linger on the string, you will muffle the sound or create an unintended and muddled bounce. The secondary advantage in the fast exit is that your playing will become lighter. Now don't exaggerate this. You shouldn't look like the dulcimer was a hot griddle and you are hopping around it trying to avoid getting burned. Just get your hammers up and off the strings after the strike. One way to help achieve this rapid departure is to think of your hands as dancers. Good dancers don't stomp around the dance floor – they lift – they defy gravity. Let your hands be good dancers – let them lift.

Snap Softly. The hammer strike is a soft snapping of your wrist. Think about cracking a whip. The essence of that maneuver is in a quick, violent snap of the wrist. When you strike the dulcimer, the action is similar, but slower and not nearly so violent. The wrist moves the hammer down to the string and as soon as contact is made, the wrist snaps back, pulling the hammer away. If the volume is to be very low, this same motion can be imitated in the thumb and index finger.

FORMS OF ACCURACY

Accuracy on the dulcimer takes on six basic forms:

Scalar Accuracy: *reliable production of common-place scales*

In the exercises you will find diatonic scales, rolling scales, octave-stutter scales, switched lead scales and pentatonic scales. When the patterns get to be second nature, spend time working with the concept of the beat window. Make the scales expressive. There are many passages in all music that are pieces of the musical scale. Nowhere is scale more likely to appear than a fiddle tune.

Vertical Accuracy: *reliable production of distant tones up and down the bridges*

Melodic lines often jump around. They aren't sequential or scalar. Many times we have to jump a large interval to get the tone we need. The exercises will help you develop the accuracy you need for those big melodic jumps.

Cross Bridge Accuracy: *reliable production of sequential tones that lie on different sides of the bridges*

Melodies or supporting tones often must be reached across the bridge. The exercises provide scales with anchor tones to help you develop this skill.

Bass Bridge Accuracy: *reliable production of bass tones in the midst of a musical passage*

Blind Accuracy: *reliable production of musical passages without looking at the instrument*

Separate Hands Accuracy: *Reliable production of separate melodies in the left and right hands*