

I Just Got A Dulcimer, Now What???

-- A Beginner's Guide --

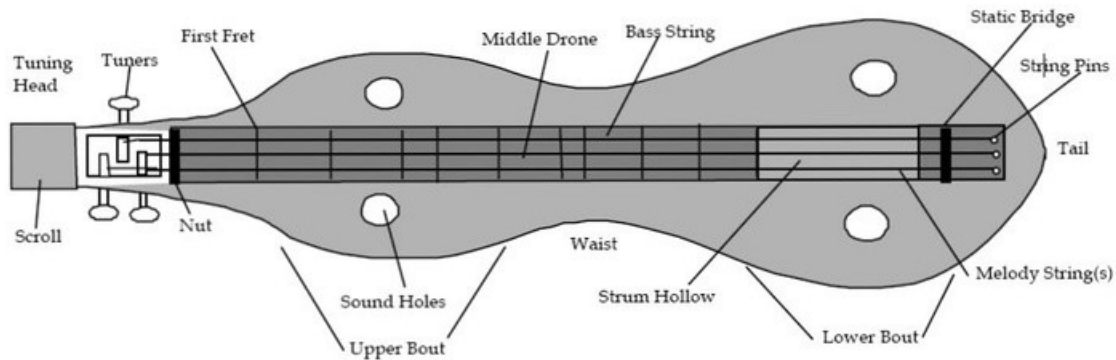
by
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General Definition

The mountain or Appalachian dulcimer is a stringed instrument of the chordophone family having strings running parallel to the sound box, as do the zither, lyre and psaltery (harp strings project away from the sound box). The dulcimer has no neck projecting beyond the body as do the guitar, uke, mandolin and other members of the Lute sub-family. Rather it has a central raised fretboard which may or may not be topped by a separate fingerboard.

Whatchacallit?

Like every other specialized thing in the universe, the dulcimer has its share of special nomenclature.



Types of Tuning Heads



Scroll Head with wooden pegs..... Guitar Head w/ geared tuners



Solid Block Head (shaped like a scroll) with Autoharp Tuning Pins

Body Shapes



Zitter..... Lute



BoxHourglass



Violin or Fiddle SidedTrapezoid



Teardrop..... Elliptical



StickBanjimer



Courting.....Hourdrop or Aorelle

Three Strings or Four?

As new dulcimer buyers many people are torn between buying/playing a dulcimer with three strings vs four strings (doubled melody). For the average beginner there is little difference between the skills needed to press down two strings close together compared to pressing down just one string. A great many dulcimers today are made with doubled melody strings.

Don't buy or not-buy a dulcimer based on the number of strings. Buy it for its sound and looks. If you get a four-string and only want to play 3 strings, it's easy as pie to remove one of the two melody strings.

Dulcimers have generally three courses of strings - Bass, Middle and Melody. Any or all courses can be doubled (or even tripled although it's rare). So the common arrangements you find are:

3 string

4 string (double melody)

5 string (double melody and bass usually)

6 string (every course doubled).

Doubling a string provides more volume for the notes sounded on that string compared to the notes on the other courses.

Another string arrangement seen among more advanced players is 4-string equidistant, which is played more like a guitar -- often finger picked. There are four strings but they are equally spaced rather than having two strings close together and two farther apart.

How Do I Know If I Have A 6+ Fret?

As you follow discussions on FOTMD, ED and elsewhere, you'll see references to the 6+, 6.5 or "six and a half" fret. How can you tell whether your dulcimer has one and what good is it?

Traditionally the dulcimer had a true diatonic fretboard that essentially represented only the white keys on a piano. In the 1960s and 70s, Mixolydian Mode became popular for playing Irish fiddle tunes. However, Mixolydian Mode has a "flatted 7th" note; meaning you don't get a complete 'do, re, mi...' scale as the next to last note is ti-flat, not ti. If however, a 6+ fret were added, the player would now have both ti-flat and ti when playing in Mixolydian Mode. Similarly, a 13+ fret is usually added higher up to give the same effect in the second octave.

Most dulcimers made in the last 20 years have the 6+ fret, but not all. The photos below show how you can tell whether your dulcimer has the 6+ fret.



This zitter style dulcimer by the author has the Traditional or True Diatonic fretboard without a 6+ fret. Notice the spacing of the frets after fret 5 – narrow, wide, wide, wide.



This Bill Berg dulcimer has a Modern Diatonic fretboard with the 6+ fret and 13+ fret. Notice the group of 4 narrow spaced frets after fret 5 and fret 12; this is the characteristic fret spacing pattern of a dulcimer with a 6+ and 13+ fret. The fret after fret 6 is not fret 7, it is fret 6+; then comes fret 7, 8....

There is absolutely nothing wrong with a dulcimer that does not have a 6+ fret. However, if you intend playing a lot of modern music, you may want to consider having a luthier add a 6+ and 13+ fret, or else buying another dulcimer that has those features. Dulcimers without a 6+ fret are prized by traditionalist players who don't mind re-tuning frequently. Modern players seem to relegate such instruments to the Ionian Modal tuning of DAA.

Holding the Dulcimer

There are three basic ways to 'get a grip' on your dulcimer. Most traditional is to hold the instrument balanced flat on your lap, with the tuning head to the left (if you're right handed). This is dulcimer legend Jean Ritchie holding and playing her dulcimer in the traditional manner:



The second way to "get a grip" is to hold the dulcimer "guitar style" – vertically - with or without a neck strap. Here you see another dulcimer legend, Robert Force, who pioneered this 'stand up' style of playing:



The third way to play is to place the dulcimer flat on a table or other stand and step up to the instrument. Here is John Stockard, dulcimer builder/player and designer and builder of adjustable dulcimer stands:



Keeping Your Grip

When holding the dulcimer traditionally, you want to have your knees as far apart as practical so that the dulcimer isn't acting like a teeter-totter as you move up and down the fretboard. Tuck the tail end of the instrument towards your right hip, and put the 1st fret over your left knee.

Some people who don't have much lap, or who habitually wear 'slippery' clothing, have trouble keeping the dulcimer in place on their lap. This can be remedied by using a lap cloth of chamoix or the rubber/plastic open-weave shelf liner material. Others opt to have a strap installed on their dulcimer which goes around the player's waist or legs. A third option is to use a "possum board" – a sort of 'lap table' on which the dulcimer sits.

Guitar style or vertical players either hold the instrument more or less vertically on their lap, or suspend it from a neck strap. Robert Force and Albert d'Ossche were the innovators of this playing style in the late 60s and 70s, and their landmark book *In Search of the Wild Dulcimer*. Although out of print, the book is still available, free, on-line at www.robertforce.com. Copies of *In Search...* can also be found on Ebay and Amazon regularly. Although Albert has sadly passed away, Robert still appears as a teacher and performer at dulcimer festivals around the country.

Playing the dulcimer on a table or stand has the advantage of allowing the back of the instrument to vibrate readily (instead of being muted in the player's lap). Traditional dulcimers often were built with three small 'feet' on the bottom, to raise the dulcimer up when played on a table. This gives the dulcimer greater volume. You can add simple peg feet to your dulcimer using double-sided tape. By acquiring an adjustable stand such as those used with electronic keyboards or purpose built for dulcimers, you can choose to play standing or sitting.

Possum Board

A possum board combines the best of two worlds -- playing on your lap, and playing on a table. Basically it's a 6-10" wide board with a couple of spacers that holds the dulcimer's back away from the table, allowing it to vibrate. Why is it a 'possum board'? Old Tymers thought the board reminded them of the board to which possum hides were tacked for drying. Here's the possum board which McSpadden sells.



A Galax style dulcimer comes with a built-in possum board called a Double Back. The two backs are separated by about 1/4" to 3/8". Here's a Galax dulcimer being played with a noter and goose quill plectrum.



Left and Right Hand Playing Techniques

Noter & Drone Style (left hand)

Noter & Drone style uses a short length of wood, metal, plastic or glass to fret notes on the melody string(s) while the other two strings drone in accompaniment. In Europe, on dulcimer predecessors such as the hummel, langeleik, or epinette des Vosges, the technique dates back well into the 1500s.

Galax style playing is a sub-set of Noter & Drone which combines a unique dulcimer shape and setup [double backed instrument with all strings the same gauge tuned to the same high note (d not D) and a fast whipping style of strumming, with a noter in the left hand].

As Ken Bloom, luthier and musician extraordinaire once said:

“Playing with a noter is often touted as an "easy" way to play and thus, strictly for beginners. Au contraire! Whether you do it with fingers or a noter, playing the melody on a single string I think is quite a challenge. I think anyone checking out a langeleik tutor would be amazed at how complex and challenging one string playing can get.”

“The next time someone gives you guff for being a noter player, look at them with a sad pitying look, gently shaking your head and know that they are people of limited vision. There is great beauty in simple things.”

Finger Dancing Style (left hand)

A playing technique using two or more fingers to play the melody on the melody string(s) only, allowing the other two strings to drone as with Noter & Drone style. Sometimes called Melody-Drone style. When playing a quick tempo tune, the player's fingers seem to “dance” up and down the fretboard. Finger dancing is also a very traditional method of playing.

Chord-Melody Style (left hand)

A modern playing style using three fingers of the left hand to form chords for each note of the melody, across two or all three courses of strings on the dulcimer. The technique can also be used to play ‘accompaniment chords’ when singing. The style was apparently developed by those who found the traditional dronal styles "limiting" or "boring", and began applying guitar/mandolin/banjo style chordal technique to the dulcimer.

Bowing (right hand)

Although most often the dulcimer being bowed is a special purpose-built instrument, any dulcimer can be played using a fiddle bow or something similar while the left hand frets the strings. The bridge of a conventional dulcimer being bowed is usually replaced with a raised center or arch topped bridge that more readily allows the strings to be bowed. Usually the dulcimer is held upright between the knees, similar to a cello, but it can also be bowed while on a table or stand. Ken Bloom, mentioned above, is the major proponent of Bowed Dulcimer, and hosts an annual Festival dedicated to this unique skill and instrument.

Strumming (right hand)

The right hand makes your dulcimer sing by sliding back and forth across the strings to make them vibrate. You can use bare fingers; a flat pick or plectrum of wood metal, plastic or even a feather.

Normally when strumming all, or nearly all, of the strings are sounded at the same time. However as you strum up the fretboard, especially above the 8th fret, the sound of the melody string against the drones (when Finger Dancing or using a Noter) can become discordant. In that case it is perfectly acceptable to change the angle of your strum to avoid sounding the middle and bass drones.

Thumb Strum (right hand)

This is a very old technique which Jean Ritchie was often seen to use, where the right hand is more or less anchored so that thumb is the only digit stroking the strings, usually in an outward motion. To get more volume from the technique, you can use a thumb pick such as the Herco Flat-Thumb™ pick.

Fingerpicking (right hand)

Using bare fingers or special finger picks, the strings are plucked individually in some particular pattern to create a melodious, harmonious sequence of sounds around each note of a melody. Many people who come to dulcimer from the guitar, mandolin or banjo worlds find it easy to transfer fingerpicking techniques to the dulcimer.

“In the end, it's the music that's important, not a technique, style, or personality. When all of the last three fade, the music will still be here.” -- Ken Bloom

Modes & Tunings

In the following discussion, ignore the 6+ fret if you have one on your dulcimer when playing a scale. Modes are not the same as Modal Tunings. Modal Tunings are things like DAA, CGc, DAG, etc... that describe the relationships of the Bass and Middle drone strings to the Melody string(s) which sound appropriate when using a particular Mode (scale) as the basis for a song.

Four truths about Modes:

1. Modes are the Do, re, mi... scales found on any string of the dulcimer.
2. All modes are available all the time on any string.
3. Each mode scale starts on a different fret.
4. Each mode has a different number of flatted or sharped notes (notes that are flatter or sharper than the expected note).

Mode Scales

Ionian Mode starts at the 3rd or 10th fret.

Do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti do (no flats)

Mixolydian Mode starts at the Open or 7th fret

Do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti-flat, do (1 flat)

Aeolian Mode starts at the 1st or 8th fret

Do, re, mi-flat, fa, sol, la-flat, ti-flat, do. (3 flats)

Dorian Mode starts at the 4th or 11th fret

Do, re, me-flat, fa, sol, la, ti-flat, do. (2 flats)

Locrian Mode starts at the 2nd or 9th fret
Do, re-flat, mi-flat, fa, sol-flat, la-flat, ti-flat, do (5 flats)

Phrygian Mode starts at the 5th or 12th fret
Do, re-flat, mi-flat, fa, sol, la-flat, ti-flat do. (4 flats)

Lydian Mode starts at the 6th or 13th fret
Do, re, mi, fa-sharp, sol la, ti, do (no flats, 1 sharp)

Although the scales are note-independent -- the actual note (A-G) of do, re... or sol... depends on the note to which the open string being played is tuned -- each Mode has a "traditional Keynote" (low 'do') associated with it:

Aeolian A	traditional tuning AEG
Locrian B	typical dulcimer tuning Bb F G
Ionian C	traditional tuning CGG
Dorian D	traditional tuning DAG
Phrygian E	typical dulcimer tuning E Bb G
Lydian F	typical dulcimer tuning F E Bb
Mixolydian G	traditional tuning GDg

Tuning Nomenclature --- Name That Tuning

The multitude of tunings and their respective names can be confusing at first. My suggestion is to start with one of the tunings and use it exclusively for six months or so; then add the others as you gain comfort and familiarity with your dulcimer.

Which string is which?

When you start to look at dulcimer writings, you'll see a bunch of letters like DAA, daD, DdAdd, even ddaAdD that refer to the tuning of the strings. You can pretty much guess that the middle couple of letters refer to the middle string(s), but which is the bass string and which is the melody string? If you try to tune a wound bass string too high, things are gonna pop!

Generally speaking these days, we refer to the strings from the Bass Drone to the Middle Drone to the Melody. DAA, CGc. Older writings often refer to the strings just the opposite, so don't be confused if you see a tuning called AAD.

In naming tunings, it is generally accepted that D is an octave lower in pitch than d. Likewise c is an octave higher than C. A tuning which reads Ebe means that e is 8 notes (or one octave) higher in pitch than E.

That E (or C or D) is generally the note to which the bass string is tuned. Writing DAD or CCC can be very confusing. Some folks are either lazy or don't care how they write the letters of a tuning. Thus you'll see people write DAD when they really mean DAd, or CGC when they mean CGc. If you think about it; trying to tune a heavy wound bass string and a thin melody string to exactly the same note in the same octave just won't work. SNAP!! Thus CGc.

One further convention is that it is *not* necessary to list every note of every string of the dulcimer! There is no need to write DAAA or DAdd for an instrument with doubled melody strings, or CCGGcc for a six-string instrument. The three letter designation of a tuning is adequate.

On some dulcimers, where the courses are double strings - BB MM mm - players sometimes string the bass course with one fat wound string and a thin light string tuned an octave higher. This is often expressed as DdAd or maybe DdAAdd or some such combination. This is the only case where more than three letters are handy in describing a tuning.

The Numbers Game

An arguably better system of nomenclature is the numbered tuning system, where the open bass string is called 1 and the other strings reflect how many notes higher in pitch they are above 1.

Ionian Modal Tunings DAA, CGG, EBB, etc, can all be expressed as 1-5-5 tunings - The open bass string is 1; the middle and melody strings are tuned 5 notes higher.

Similarly 1-5-8 expresses all variants of Mixolydian: DAd, CGc, Ebe. Dorian Modal Tunings are 1-5-4 tunings; and Aeolian tunings are 1-5-7.

This means all 1-5-5 tab works together; all 1-5-8 tab works together, etc. You don't need different tab just because you play in C or G instead of D. Conversely, to 'transpose' from C to D or vice versa, all you have to do is re-tune your dulcimer to the new key.

Getting In Tune

When your dulcimer arrives, chances are it will not be tuned correctly. When shipping an instrument most luthiers 'de-tune' it to avoid stress caused by changing air pressure, humidity, etc.

Which D is D?

FWIW, any standard Western pitch can be described using a pitch name (C, F#, or Bb for example) and an octave number (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.). Pitch notation usually (but not always) has middle C being called C4.

- The higher the number, the higher the octave. C5 is an octave above C4.
- The number changes at every C.

C4 is 'middle C' on the piano. The low D which we use as the basis of all the D tunings, is D3 – one whole note below middle C. The middle drone string A we use is A3 and the melody string high d we use is d4.

So how do you know which D is D on your electronic tuner? Some tuners actually show you which D is D. If your tuner doesn't, you can go to one of the online tuners or virtual pianos (listed below).

Links To Online Tuners

<http://www.susantrump.com/dulcitone.html>

or

<http://www.harokit.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Categ...>

or

http://youtu.be/Q_ldu0UuowI

or

http://dulcimer-noter-drone.blogspot.com_tuning

Tuning Tips

- Always tune a vibrating string, so you can hear it go up or down in pitch
- With some geared tuners a little twist goes a LONG way.
- If you're trying to make two strings sound the same, pluck the one that's correct first; then while it's humming, pluck the other string and turn the tuner in the appropriate direction. Repeat until the two strings sound the same. Then check correctness of the sound with your tuner.
- An important thing to note here is that two dulcimers – one tuned DAA and the other tuned DAd – can play the same song at the same time. No, they will not play the same frets to get a particular note, but that is irrelevant. As long as the dulcimers are tuned to the same Keynote (D in this case) they will sound good together.

Relative Tuning

If you have an electronic tuner or pitch pipe, great! If not, you can still tune your dulcimer. The exact Keynote (note the bass string is tuned to) is only important if you are going to play along with other instruments. To play with other dulcimers, make sure your un-fretted bass string sounds the same as that of other players. If you are playing by and for yourself, it doesn't matter what the Keynote is.

Here's how to tune your dulcimer "relatively". The following is borrowed from dulcimer player/builder Jerry Rockwell:

Ionian Mode (called DAA if the Keynote is D)

Ionian is called the "natural major" mode. Many traditional American songs you can sing or hum are 'natural major' tunes.

1. Tune the bass string of the dulcimer to D or a note that sounds good with your voice... not too low or too high.
2. Press the bass string just to the left of the 4th fret and pluck the string. Tune the middle string so it exactly matches this note.
3. Tune the melody string(s) to the same note as the un-fretted (open) middle string.

Aeolian Mode (called DAC if the Keynote is D)

Aeolian is called the "natural minor" mode. Many traditional Scottish and Irish tunes sound good in this 'weeping and wailing' mode. *Wayfaring Stranger*, *Good King Wenceslas*, and *Shady Grove/Mattie Groves* are well known Aeolian songs.

Steps 1 and 2 are the same as for Ionian.

3. Press the bass string at the 6th fret and pluck it. Tune the melody string(s) to this note.

Mixolydian Mode (called DAd if the Keynote is D)

Mixolydian is only "slightly minor", and is used extensively for neo-Celtic music, Irish fiddle tunes, and the masterpieces of Turlough O'Carolan.

Steps 1 and 2 are the same as for Ionian.

3. Press the bass string down at the 7th fret and pluck it. The sound is an octave higher than the unfretted bass string. Tune the melody string(s) to this note.

Dorian Mode (called DAG if the Keynote is D)

Dorian is not so minor sounding as Aeolian mode, but more so than Mixolydian. *Barbara Allen*, *Scarborough Fair*, and *Greensleeves* are well known Dorian tunes.

Steps 1 and 2 are the same as for Ionian.

3. Press the bass string at the 3rd fret and pluck this note. Tune the melody string to this note.

Non-Modal Tunings

Here are several additional tunings that are popular and very useful.

Galax Tuning

Galax (pronounced 'gay-lax') tuning actually is a traditional tuning – in the area around Galax, Virginia. What makes it different is that you need a different set of strings to do it right. In Galax style all of the strings (even the bass string) are .09 or .010 gauge, and all are tuned to d (not D). This gives a unique 'bumblebee' drone sound to tunes being played. Instruments set up for Galax tuning are almost always played *Noter & Drone* style. Galax players often use a 'reverse capo' - a small stick underneath a string to act as a temporary nut and raise the pitch from d to g.

Bagpipe Tuning

Bagpipe tuning is similar to Galax tuning. However you can tune to a Bagpipe tuning without having to change strings from your usual DAA or DAd string set. All the strings are tuned to the same note (D for example), however the bass string is tune an octave lower than the others – Ddd. Another name for this tuning is *Octave tuning*. To get to this tuning from DAd, all you have to do is raise the sound of your middle string to equal that of the melody string.

Bagpipe tuning – for dulcimers that do not have a 6+ fret – works somewhat like a dulcimer with a 6+ fret tuned DAd. That is, Bagpipe tuning lets you play both Ionian and Mixolydian tunes without re-tuning. And you can often 'cheat' songs tuned Dorian or Aeolian as well. The author was a dedicated Ionian Mode player for over 30 years, and only recently has come to appreciate the unique nature of Bagpipe tuning.

1-3-5 Tuning

According to proponent Merv Rowley. "...dulcimer players have learned how to play far more than just folk music on their instruments ... The discovery of this "1-3-5" tuning system is perhaps the most significant event affecting dulcimer music in more than fifty years! Merv says there are three

important and unique features...

1. Each fret (8 per octave counting the 6+) forms a major “barre” chord whose name is given by the note on the bass string. This is NOT a modal tuning; drones do not exist, and chord accompaniment is required.
2. You are not in a fixed tuning. You can play a scale on the treble string alone in the keys of B minor, D major or A major without either retuning or using a capo.
3. Among the three strings, you can locate and play the entire 12-note array of the chromatic scale! C - D - E - F - G - A - B plus C# - D# - F# - G# - A#.

These features appear for any 1-3-5 tuning, regardless of key.

DGd Tuning

DGd is often called “Reverse Ionian”. In this authors' opinion, this tuning is not the “reverse” of anything, and only sounds vaguely like an instrument tuned to Ionian Mode in the key of G (Gdd). DGd -- in my opinion-- is a Mixolydian Modal style tuning (bass and melody strings an octave apart) with the middle drone string lowered in pitch from A to G.

What DGd tuning *does* is allow DAd players go to the nominal key of G without having to retune all of their strings and perhaps changing the bass string to a G-compatible gauge. By dropping only the middle string from A to G, and playing the Ionian Mode scale from fret 3-10 (g to g') you get a pleasant drone pair (D, G) while playing on the melody string(s). DGd tuning is very nice for both Fingerdance and Noter & Drone style players.

DAdA or DAAd

This tuning is an interesting option for dulcimers with a doubled melody string. Tune one melody string to d as in DAd; tune the other melody string to A as in DAA. Play both melody strings together. The dA melody couplet yields a rich sounding melody line.

Dulcimer Maintenance

Dulcimers, like fine furniture and good machinery, need a little TLC and preventative maintenance to keep them in top working condition.

Polishing & Dusting

To keep that “new dulcimer shine”, you need to at least dust your instrument periodically. If you know your dulcimer has an oil finish – like Tung Oil - you can use a dab of that oil on a lint-free cloth to buff the shine. If your dulcimer has a polyurethane (Deft , Minwax, etc.) finish, you can use a little spritz of furniture polish on a rag. If your dulcimer has a lacquer or varnish finish, ask your luthier what products he/she recommends for cleaning the surface. Do not apply any these kinds of polishes to your fretboard!

Fretboards and strings should periodically (every couple months) be given a rub-down with lemon oil, orange, oil, or one of the commercial “string waxes” or bore oils. Dr. Duck’s Ax Wax™, and Fast Fret™ are neither waxes nor limited to guitars, and work just fine on your dulcimer. Clarinet “bore oil”

can also be used to replenish your ebony fretboard overlay.

Replacing A Broken or Wornout String

Breaking a string seems to terrify people for some reason.

It shouldn't. Strings break. It's not going to kill you or destroy your dulcimer! They aren't made of gold and don't cost thousands of dollars each! Get over it! The wise dulcimer player buys at least one additional set of strings that go where the dulcimer goes. If a string on the dulcimer breaks, replace it and go on. Then buy another spare set of strings.

Changing strings seems to terrify people almost as much as breaking a string. Again, 'get over it'! It's not "rocket surgery". It is easy and simple and only takes a few minutes.

Do not take off all the strings at once! Take off one string, replace it with a new one; then go on to the next string. Why? Some dulcimers do not have the bridge glued in place, and if the bridge moves, you can be in for a long drawn out process of getting it back in the correct location.

Hook the loop or ball end of the new string on the string pin at the tail of the dulcimer exactly the same way the other strings are connected. Pull the new string over the tail and through the appropriate bridge and nut notch. A piece of masking tape can help hold it in place.

Wrap the string in the appropriate direction around the tuner shaft (see below). Slide the end of the string through the hole in the shaft, then go around the shaft again and back through the hole. No need to wrap two extra feet of string around and around the tuner shaft! Trim off the extra. Turn the tuner knob to take up the slack, take off the tape you used to hold the string in place; then slowly bring the string into tune.

The first time you tune a new string, tune it a little bit sharp, as a new string takes a little while to stretch into shape, and as it stretches the tuning will go a bit flat.

How often should you replace your strings? Ask 20 people and get 25 answers! It depends on how often and how roughly you play, the corrosiveness of the atmosphere where you live (on a boat on the ocean vs on a mountain top in Colorado), how often you re-tune or capo, and a host of other factors. The general consensus is that you should change your strings at least 3-4 times a year.

Wrapping Strings on Flat or Guitar Style Tuning Heads

Flat or guitar style tuning heads have vertical string shafts (often called the ‘pegs’). This Folkcraft photo shows how the strings are wound around the tuning pegs – from the center around each peg. You do not need to wrap the entire string onto the peg – one or two turns is sufficient. Then trim off the excess to neaten things up.



Wrapping Strings on Scroll Style Tuning Heads

Here a scroll or violin style head shows how strings wind around the horizontal shafts of the tuners – over the top of the shaft and around.



Adjusting Your Action

The height of the action is important for comfortable playing. If you have a dulcimer from one of the well recognized builders, chances are it is set to the correct height. Sometimes the action (especially on cheap ‘offshore’ dulcimers and instruments from less knowledgeable builders) can be too high, and that can cause excessive finger pain!

Before you go adjusting the height of your dulcimer’s action, have another, more experienced dulcimer player take a look and play of your instrument to see if they think the action needs lowering.

A good action height to start with is to have the thickness of a nickel between the top of the 7th fret and the strings; and at the same time if you lay a dime on the fretboard just to the left of the 1st fret, it should not quite touch the strings. Some people like a lower action than this; but this is a good "touchstone" for action height.

Slowly, gradually reducing the nut/bridge height is the key to success in setting the action. To lower the action, probably the best tool is a triangular "needle file". You can get a whole set of needle files for

around \$15-20 at Ace or Home Depot.

Assuming the action height is OK at the nut, loosen one string enough to slip it out of the notch on the bridge. Simply file that notch 6-10 strokes, then re-tighten the string and check the gap. Repeat until that string is lowered to the correct height. Then repeat until all the other strings are lowered too. If the action is too high at the nut, start at the nut end, lowering the notches until the string is at a good height; repeat for all string at the nut end; then go on as described above and lower the bridge as needed. If the nut and/or bridge are not glued down, you can optionally use a piece of fine sandpaper (100 grit) and sand off the bottom of the nut/bridge until they are the right height. Again, make a few gentle passes of the nut on the sandpaper, and test the fit; repeating until you are happy with the results.

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As J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote, “The Road Goes Ever On...”. This is just the beginning of your Dulcimer Journey. Enjoy the ride!