

Mikael Carstanjen Courting Dulcimer: Past, Present, Future



The photo above shows the dulcimer as received. As received, the dulcimer had terrible intonation issues on both fret boards. This was primarily due to the fixed bridges being too close to the tail pieces. This was corrected by filling the bridge slots with pieces of black walnut and installing floating bridges also made of black walnut. This helped a lot but some remaining issue was apparent.

Some calculations revealed the nut location was slightly too close to the fret board. This was corrected by installing knife-edged nuts that set the beginning of the VSL about a millimeter closer to the peg-box. The bridge then had to be readjusted to compensate for slight increase in VSL – no problem with a floating bridge! The improvements in intonation were remarkable. Not perfect, but very close. As it is unknown what affect these modifications would have on collector value, all changes have been deliberately made reversible so that the dulcimer can be returned to its “as found” state – of course doing so would render it an unplayable “wall hanger” again!

The next two photos show detail of the peg box and bridge before and after modification. The current nut fits are tight enough that no glue is required to hold them in place. The walnut nuts and bridges may be replicated in the future with bone.



One significant problem does remain with this dulcimer. It appears that there is a glue bonding issue with internal cross braces that apparently run across the bottom side of the sound board in the vicinity of the outside sound holes. This causes “body rattle” unless you confine your strumming to the strum hollow area. The small size of the sound holes would seem to make any attempt to repair this impossible without providing some means of better access to apply glue and clamps.

I’ve contemplated removing the back, which I believe would be the conventional plan of attack. However, the size of the dulcimer, its compound curves and those decorative under hanging shelves below the scroll-heads have me petrified of attempting it.

I’m considering cutting a guitar-sized hole around the center cluster of sound holes to provide access. When repairs are completed the center sound-hole cluster would be put back in place using a decorative strip of walnut binding to fill the gap that was made by the cutting required for removal. I think the result is actually more attractive than the current state, but the question remains whether or not this irreversible modification for the sake of playability justifies any detrimental effect it might have on collector value.

Well, here's the "now" and (the proposed) "after". What do you think? Is back removal a better option, in spite of the risks?

