

playing in a variety of keys out of a DAd tuning

Dusty Thorburn

Questions are often raised about how to strum chords on a dulcimer the way guitarists do. How do you know what version of a chord to play? Can you play in a variety of keys or are you limited to the open tuning (usually D)?

Easy question first. **If you are strumming along with a song, how do you know which voicing of a chord to use?** After all, in DAd tuning you can play a D chord as 0-0-2, 2-3-4, 4-5-7, 7-7-9, 9-10-11, as well as the reversed versions of those (2-0-0, 4-3-2, etc.). Which one to choose? First, it doesn't really matter. Any of them will "work." But depending on the context, one or another might be preferable. Why? Here are a few possible scenarios. 1) If you are playing alone or at least trying to play the melody, you will want to choose the voicing of the chord that allows you to play the melody note. 2) If you are accompanying other instruments, you might want to add something a bit different. You might choose to stress the bass notes if playing with a mandolin or the treble notes if playing with a cello. 3) If you are playing music with fast chord changes, you will want to minimize the movement of your hand and fingers. So if you are playing a G chord half way up the fingerboard you will want to use a D chord in that vicinity as well. 4) You might simply prefer the sound of one voicing better than another. Neal Hellman, for example, often urges people to play A as 104 or 401 rather than 101 simply because he finds it to have a richer tone.

Now the harder stuff. **With a diatonic fretboard, can you strum chords in different keys the way guitars do?**

The short answer is no. The diatonic fretboard means, very simply, that certain notes cannot be found. If you are tuned DAd, there is no F, for example, on your fretboard. So any key that involves an F will not be possible. (There might be ways of faking songs by playing the other notes of a chord and leaving the F out, but that strategy deserves a separate discussion.)

The longer answer is yes, with some limitations. On a diatonic dulcimer tuned DAd, you can find the main chords for the keys of D, G, and A (as well as their relative minors, Bm, Em, and F#m). Gary Gallier, for example, has developed a style of play that he calls "cross key" in which he plays in A out of a DAd tuning. But playing in G and A will feel somewhat limited compared to playing in D since the dulcimer is tuned to an open D chord and is most versatile in that key. In addition, if you play in D and accidentally hit an open string, it will still sound OK. But that is not necessarily the case if you play in other keys out of that open D tuning.

Rather than trying to play in every key, I suggest concentrating on the most common ones. In most folk, old timey, and bluegrass jams, nearly all the songs will be in C, D, G or A. In a DAd tuning, you can obviously play in D, but if you use a capo at the 3rd fret, you will suddenly be in

G. And a capo at the 4th fret will put you in the key of A. You can also tune all your strings down one note to CGc and play in the key of C.

The advantage to using a capo and tuning down is that your left hand can continue using all the chords and all the licks that you learned in the key of D and they will work. Some small amount of transposition is all that is necessary.

On the dulcimer, I prefer to think of chords in terms of the scale position of their root rather than their absolute tone. That is, in the key of D, I think of the D chord as I. Then, if I am tuned CGc, I can play that I chord the same way I did before and it sounds great. Using Roman numerals leads us to indicate chords in this manner. Upper case numerals represent major chords and the lower case numerals represent minor chords. Here, the tonic, or I chord, corresponds to the key.

Roman numeral	Key of D	Key of G	Key of A	Key of C	name
I	D	G	A	C	tonic
ii	Em	Am	Bm	Dm	supertonic
iii	F#m	Bm	C#m	Em	mediant
IV	G	C	D	F	subdominant
V	A	D	E	G	dominant
vi	Bm	Em	F#m	Am	submediant

How can this chart help you? I will assume you are tuned DAd. Let's say the banjo player calls out a tune in the key of G. You slap on your capo on the third fret so that your dulcimer is now tuned to an open G chord. Whenever you need a G chord, you use the same fingering you are used to for a D chord. When the chord changes to C, you use the fingering you are used to for a G chord. When the chord is an Em, you use the fingering you are used to for Bm. If the fiddle player calls out a tune in the key of A, you move your capo to the 4th fret and do the same thing. If the guitarist calls out a tune in the key of C, tune all your strings down one whole note to CGc and follow the same pattern.

This might seem cumbersome if indeed you have to transpose and think in your head "OK, an F#m in the key of D is the iii chord, which is the same as C#m in the key of A." But you should quickly be able to just think in terms of the Roman numerals and skip all the transposition. And even all the chords are not as complicated as you think. In addition to the main chords, I, IV, and V, we have the relative minors of each of those. So rather than 6 chords to think about, you really have three, each of which has a major and minor version.

If this seems complicated, it is because you are thinking too much about it. Just play, baby, play! Play a song on your dulcimer. Now put the capo on the third fret and play the song again. You are playing the same song but in a different key. Pretty easy, huh?

Of course, some music contains chords and even notes that are less ordinary. In some ragtime tunes, for example, a II chord is often used. There are indeed ways to get some complicated chords on the dulcimer, but we almost always have to cheat. There are only three strings on the dulcimer, but a seventh chord, for example, has four notes. We simply have to skip one. And

dulcimer players often play "chords" that are not real chords. The open strings, in fact, DAd, are not really a D chord since there is no F# (the third scale position) involved. That "chord" that is made up of only the 1st and the 5th is often called a power chord. Because the difference between a major chord and a minor chord is the 3rd, by skipping that third, we are playing a chord that can play the role of a major or minor chord depending on the context. So that barre chord (000, 111, 222, 333, etc.) can be very useful. You can play 111 for an Em or an E. You can play 333 for a Gm or a G.

So where does all this leave us? You should pretty easily be able to play in the keys of C, D, G, and A out of a DAd tuning with the use of a capo and some quick retuning. Beyond that, some keys might be approachable with some faking and fudging involved, and some may just not be possible. But those keys are less common. And with some ingenuity, you could find ways using this method to play in those keys as well. Let's say a singer arrives and calls out a song in the key of *Ab*. "What?" You say! "I can't play in that key!" But then you think for a moment and realize that since you could play in A with a capo on your 4th fret, you could tune down a half step, and you'll be in *Ab*! So you tune down to C#G#c#, put the capo on the 4th fret, and voilá, you are in *Ab*. But most of the time, that kind of adjustment won't be necessary. As I mention above, the most common keys are C, D, G and A, and with a capo and a little retuning you can get all those keys and never have to learn new chords at all.