

Tuning the Dulcimer

(Copyright © 2002 by Randy "Ardie" Davis. Excerpt from Chapter 15 in "A Dulcimer Builder's Do-It-Yourself Guidebook." Contains helpful information about tuning a 15/14 hammered dulcimer, the fifth-interval, etc. For more information, please visit <http://www.amazon.com/Dulcimer-Builders-Yourself-Guidebook-Woodworker/dp/1553950100>.)

Required Tools:

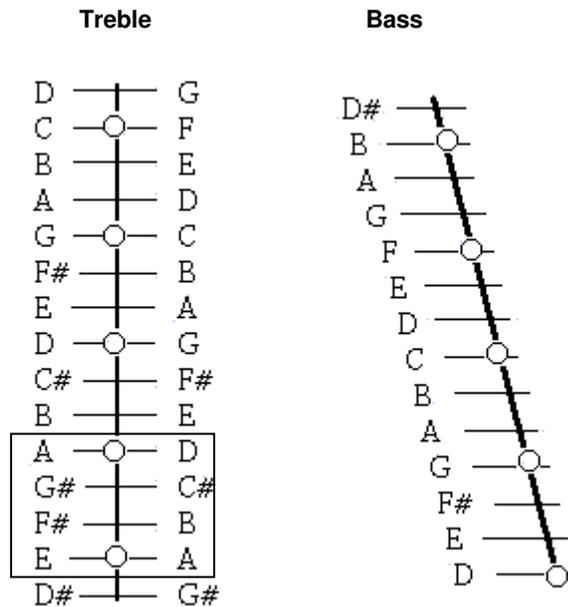
- Tuning Handle
- Electronic Tuner, or Pitch Pipe

Take a look at this tuning chart. It represents the Treble Bridge on the left, and the Bass Bridge on the right.

The circles represent scale markers.

For the Treble Bridge, it also illustrates the Fifth Interval tuning this dulcimer will have.

Additionally, it shows you how the scales are structured. For example, let's look at an 'A' scale. Locate the 'A' just above the G# on the bottom of the Treble bridge. That's where this particular 'A' scale starts. Progress upwards to the B, C# and D. Instead of continuing up, go back to the 'A' and find the 'E' on the left side of the Treble bridge just opposite the 'A.' Now go up from there: E - F# - G# - A. All I've just described is contained in the box on the graphic above.



Now notice the magic of the Fifth Interval of the various pairings. From the top of the box: D - A; C# - G#; B - F#; A - E. Each note of the pairing is at the fifth interval from the other. To see this, count for the A - E pairing: A-1, B-2, C#-3, D-4, E-5. This will work for all the note pairings on the right and left sides of the Treble Bridge (it also works across the Bass and Treble bridges).

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Knowing this will help you tune your instrument, and help you know whether you've properly placed the Treble Bridge at the required two-fifths ratio.

Tuning It

Maker's Hint

Pluck the higher strings while tuning. This will help them stretch and help prevent them from breaking so.

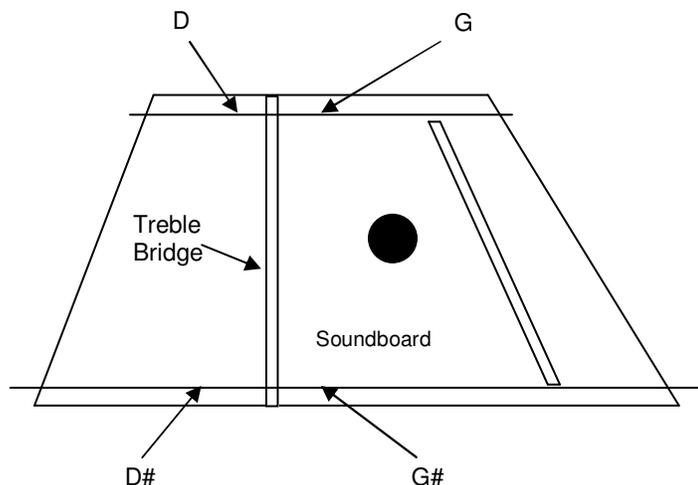
New instruments have to “settle” before they will hold a tuning to pitch more than a few days. For the first few weeks you can expect to tune the dulcimer to pitch several times. This is a good investment of your time because soon the instrument and strings will “normalize” and hold its tuning much longer.

Of course things like temperature changes and humidity will still do their work, and occasional tunings are still required on mature instruments.

Tuning is a multi-step process. Start with the Treble (left) bridge strings, then the Bass bridge (right) strings, then back to the Treble bridge to see if any tunings have changed. After tuning the right-side strings of the Treble Bridge, check the left side.

When stringing the instrument for the first time it is helpful to lay the top and bottom string on the Treble Bridge to position it exactly. By tuning the top and bottom string you will ensure that the Treble Bridge is placed according to the two-fifths ratio.

The bottom Treble string should be tuned to G# on the right side of the Treble Bridge, and D# on the left side. The top Treble string should be tuned to G on the right side, and D on the left side. Make sure these tunings are correct before proceeding with the rest of the tuning.



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Since you only need to tune the left side of the Bass Bridge, its placement is not as critical, but follow the one-fifth ratio for good measure.

The strings put tremendous stress on the instrument. During the first few weeks or months, you will find that after tuning the Treble strings, then the Bass strings, the Treble strings have gone a bit flat and require fine tuning. This is normal and will diminish over time.

An electronic tuner is very helpful while tuning a dulcimer, but a pitch pipe can get you started. Use the tuning chart at the beginning of this chapter.

Start on the top course of the Treble Bridge. Using the Tuning Lever, turn the tuning pin clockwise to increase (sharpen) the pitch of the string, and counterclockwise to decrease (flatten) the pitch. Minute adjustments are usually necessary, so do this carefully.

1. Tune the Treble courses.
2. Tune the Bass courses.
3. Check the Treble course to see if any strings have gone flat. Make any fine-tuning adjustments necessary.