

Learning the Mountain Dulcimer

by Merv Rowley

How I Learned to Play

When I first discovered the Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer over twenty years ago, it seemed like no one else in my entire area had ever even heard of one. I was fortunate in having found a copy of *The Dulcimer Book* by Jean Ritchie, without which my dulcimer would probably still be hanging, unused, on a wall. I had a little musical background from earlier days, and Jean's book taught me how to tune and to find notes on the dulcimer for particular songs (each note was represented by a fret position number). In no time, I was banging out music with drone accompaniment like so many beginners do.

In her book, Jean describes how she herself learned to play. She had listened to her Dad, Balis Ritchie, playing many times, and finally had the courage to "borrow" the family dulcimer and work things out from memory of what she had seen and heard. When she finally asked her Dad outright if she could try to play, he handed it to her with the remark, "Here, if you can play, you can play; if you can't, you can't". That suggested to me the idea that no one can teach another how to play the dulcimer; you must figure it out for yourself!

I proceeded to do just that, believing that I would never meet someone who could teach others to play a dulcimer! At that point in time, there were no books of "tablature" that I was aware of. So, I started out playing familiar, simple tunes by ear, and soon I had memorized quite a list.

Well, that's my personal story. Maybe not everyone could have learned that way. On the other hand, maybe a lot of you COULD do it that way if you tried. I've never heard a good explanation of why some people can just hear a tune in their heads and then pick it out on a musical instrument. It's what we call "playing by ear". It doesn't mean someone can do that instantly, with no mistakes. It does mean they can locate the correct notes in the right order, remember where they were, and finally play them in the right sequence and tempo to make the music sound right.

How Do We Learn Music?

As a player and teacher for many years, I've had many students. No two have been quite alike. Some learn quickly, some struggle along before they begin to see things working out. Each one must discover how to choose and find the right notes, in the right sequence and timing at particular locations on the fretboard, so as to make recognizable music. This involves the brain, the ears, the hands and often the eyes, working together.

Much of this is mechanical (finger placement, strumming, picking or other finger techniques) that must be practiced until they can be done automatically when the brain sends the signal. This part is like learning to drive a car. There is also a mental effort required of the student...which note is to be played, where is it located, how quickly or slowly should it be played? This is part of the challenge of "information recall", either from visual directions (musical notation or tablature) or from one's memory banks. The mental requirements for playing music are common to all instruments, while the mechanical requirements vary for each instrument.

So, someone told you that the mountain dulcimer is easy to play, perhaps the easiest of all the stringed instruments! You may also have been told that you never had to learn to read music. After all, anyone can learn something that's a "no-brainer". Well, the dulcimer CAN be quite simple to play (how about one finger on each hand?) Also you DON'T have to be able to read music, so long as someone will tell

you how to find the right notes to play (tablature, perhaps). But what about that thing called tempo"? How do you know how slowly or quickly the notes are played if you don't have some symbols to indicate that to you? Or are you going to rely on remembering that kind of information?

The point of this discussion is that the ease of playing depends a lot on how simple the music must be. Also, learning quickly and easily how to play music you've never heard before means that life will be easier if you learn how to read simple music notation, like quarter notes, eighth notes, etc. No one has ever discovered a simpler way to present that information than with the musical symbols that are used worldwide.

How Should You Learn to Play?

This is a decision everyone must make for him/herself. No two of us have identical abilities and skills. I believe that success depends first and foremost on three things. (1) Decide, if you can, the kinds of music YOU would like to be able to play (not what your teacher says you must learn); Kids get turned off forever by teachers who insist they play certain kinds of music. (2) If you can, find a good teacher who will work with you, preferably on a private lesson basis. Only in this way can your individual needs be recognized. Don't hesitate to change teachers as you see a need. If you cannot locate a teacher, try to select a good instruction book by talking to other players. There are several available, complete with companion audio tape or CD. (3) Make up your mind that learning may not necessarily be easy, and that you are willing to dedicate yourself to practice and study in a timely manner, lesson by lesson. No teacher, however skilled, can force you to learn anything; they can only show you how it is done, and how you can do it.

Summary

One of the easiest ways to learn new music, after basic skills are developed, is with tablature. Use it for what it is, a simple way to read music and to play it according to someone else's interpretation. Meanwhile, learn the basics of musical notation. If you use tablature (and many skilled players do), consider it only as a learning tool. The arrangement will never be really yours until you have memorized it, and can discard the tablature.