

## **You can do it too! The story of how a complete beginner taught himself to play the mountain dulcimer.**

**By Peter Robinson**

A bit more than six months ago, my wife and I realised that I had a serious medical problem. After months of what my grandfather would have called 'lumbago', I developed serious lower back and leg pain and I kept tripping on a weak and floppy foot. The conservative treatment option was take painkillers, walk a little each day, rest a lot and, in about six months, we would know how much function I had left. The alternative was to have back surgery, take painkillers, walk a little each day, rest a lot and, in about six months, we would know how much function I had left. Some choice. We were faced with the very real prospect that we would never finish our half-completed trip around this beautiful country of ours and I may never again be able to climb the ladder to my observatory and look at the stars. I needed a project that would enrich my life and help me through this time, however long that may turn out to be.

Finding an old book of folk songs collected by Pete Seeger I decided to make another attempt at learning to play music. I have always loved music but unfortunately I can't sing. Well, that's not quite true, my soul sings, but what comes out of my mouth is a painful croak. Understandably, a previous attempt to play chord/rhythm guitar had been far from satisfying. This time I had an advantage. I knew about the mountain dulcimer. What could be more suitable than an instrument that had evolved to play the old tunes? There was just one problem. I am an Australian and the number of regular mountain dulcimer players in Australia could perhaps be counted in tens rather than hundreds. And I didn't know any of them. So there was no prospect of the kind of face-to-face tuition that would have been so easy to arrange with the guitar. There was nothing else for it; I would have to teach myself. And why not? I had a rudimentary knowledge of how music works. There are dozens of how-to-play books available, many of them with CD's and *EverythingDulcimer* is a very rich resource. So I decided to give it my best shot. Here is the story of the first six months of my new journey. I hope it encourages any person in similar circumstances to give it a go too.

First, I needed an instrument. Because I was housebound and had no prospect of attending a folk festival to choose one for myself, I would have to buy one on the Internet. Initially I thought that exchange rates and postal costs would force me to get one in Australia but I was surprised to discover that I had no trouble finding what I wanted in the USA at a very competitive price. I set myself a few rules. I wanted a no-frills beginner's instrument with geared tuners. I wanted to buy from an actual photo, not a photo of a 'similar' instrument. I wanted some idea of the reliability of the seller's dulcimer knowledge, in particular I wanted to avoid any advertisement that began 'I don't know anything about this beautiful/stunning/enchanting instrument. I'm told it's a dulcimer'. Or anything classified as an 'estate find' or 'found in my grandmother's closet'. In the end I bought on Ebay (keeping in mind the pitfalls outlined by Ron Haynes in 'The Saga of the Ebay dulcimer') from a lady with a good feedback record and a plausible account of how she got the instrument. Ten days later, it arrived. I was lucky. It was beautiful and in perfect condition.

Next I needed to tune it. The teaching books (also ordered on Ebay) hadn't arrived but there was a guide to tuning in the bag with the dulcimer. One method used a piano or a chromatic tuner to set the correct pitch (essential if you wish to play with other instruments) and the other, called 'relative tuning', tuned one string against another. Without a piano or tuner to help me, I decided to use the second method. I sat down on a low stool with the dulcimer on my knee and plucked the bass string with my right thumb (to determine whether the string was at a 'reasonable' pitch). The dulcimer slid off my knees flat onto the floor. Oh dear. My beautiful dulcimer! I tried again, holding the dulcimer onto my knees with my left hand. Ah, much better. Then I pressed the fourth fret of the bass string with the index finger of my left hand and plucked first the bass and then the middle string with my right thumb. Ugh! What an ugly sound. The bass string was buzzing, the middle string was way out of tune and the dulcimer slewed around and fell flat onto the floor. OK, I would have to hold the dulcimer down with the fingers of my right hand. No, I would have to find some other way because the next instruction was to 'reach with your right hand over your left hand to the middle string tuning-knob and adjust the string tension'. I turned the knob too far, the middle string broke and, you've guessed it, the dulcimer fell flat onto the floor. If you haven't seen it yourself, I can assure you that there is nothing quite so forlorn as a dulcimer lying on the floor with a broken string. I had heard of three-string dulcimers and now I had one. Slightly unusual configuration, I grant you, but three strings nevertheless. I could call it the 'Aussie down-under gap tooth' configuration.

What to do? Well I put my poor dulcimer aside, ordered some replacement strings and a chromatic tuner and moped about feeling very grumpy while I waited once again for the post to arrive from the USA. Then it occurred to me that I could shift one of the pair of melody strings over into the middle slot on the nut and use the instrument in a traditional three-string configuration. It didn't solve the tuning problem but at least it looked like a dulcimer again. As we shall see, my untuned dulcimer with a single melody string started me off along a unique learning pathway.

The first teaching book arrived the next day. It was 'The best Dulcimer method yet' by Albert Gamsie. As I enviously looked at the music pieces, I saw they were single-line melodies (no chords) written in standard music notation with fret numbers for the melody string written above the notes. At that moment I took my first real step in understanding the mountain dulcimer. When we are tuning the dulcimer, setting the exact pitch of the strings is only important if we wish to play with other instruments. If we do not intend to play with other instruments at this stage yet we still intend to play chords, then the strings must be tuned relative to one another. However, if we start by not even attempting to play chords and concentrate on the melody alone, then the dulcimer need not be tuned at all. I could play the pieces in that book using only the melody string on an untuned dulcimer. And that is what I started to do, and continued to do even after the tuner arrived. I should make it clear that the pieces in Gamsie's book are all written in C Ionian (major key). But it is not important what key the piece is in, only that all of the melody notes can be played on the melody string. Any simple dulcimer tune can be played in this way, and that includes almost all of the pieces with DAA tuning (D Ionian) in the tab archives in the EverythingDulcimer site. (Some pieces are transcribed so that some of the melody notes 'dip down' and are played on the middle string. These pieces are not suited to this approach).

By first teaching myself to play tunes on the melody string and ignoring the other strings, I inevitably set myself along a track toward a particular personal playing style, postponing until later the consideration of important but quite complex concepts such as modes, chords and different tuning regimes. Instead of taking a style as a package from an experienced teacher, I was forced to build this style for myself. Choosing the sounds I liked and discarding the ones I didn't. Brick by brick as it were, by trial and error. It was (and still is) an organic process that will change again and again as each new piece I play places different demands on my skills. Anyone else going through this process would inevitably develop a different style, one that is personal to him or her. That is the strength of the mountain dulcimer. This was brought home to me when one of our sons, who has played the guitar for years, called over to see us. He picked up the dulcimer and immediately started jamming on the melody string and strumming by flicking the tips of his fingers across the strings in a great driving rhythm.

I found that there were three basic playing skills that I had to master if I was to make music on the melody string. Plucking, fretting and changing frets.

Plucking: At first I plucked by holding a pick firmly, plunging it below the string and sweeping my hand away from my body using my wrist and elbow. This resulted in a loud and rather harsh sound. However I noticed, as the sound died away the tone improved. This suggested to me that the plucking caused the harshness but the string itself had a natural, sweeter tone. One of my sons suggested that I should loosen my grip on the pick and I practiced coaxing the sound out of the string. At present I use a guitar thumb pick, holding my hand so the pick itself is almost horizontal. I stroke the string by moving my thumb closer to my forefinger. The pick slides across the string and then releases it in a controlled way. My hand, slightly cupped, stays still. In this way I am using the muscles of my thumb, over which we have fine control, rather than the muscles around my wrist and elbow, which are necessarily stronger and less finely controlled.

Fretting: I started with a noter but I soon changed to using my left thumb. As any beginner finds, if the string is not pressed firmly onto the fret it will buzz. There was nothing else to do but practice getting it right. I found that being decisive helped. If I focused on the target (just to the left of the fret) and placed my thumb down in one smooth motion, it seemed to work best.

Changing frets: This is when we make music. To be honest, it doesn't matter too much if the string twangs and buzzes a bit if the notes flow in a musical way. There are two basic ways to achieve this musical flow:

First, there is sliding. Sliding gives a magic 'dulcimer' sound to the music. Although it seems as though it would be easy, I found there is quite a skill in getting it right. Although I don't slide all my notes any more, I still sometimes slide during a phrase to emphasise the musical shape of the tune.

Second, there is fingering. This involves using all the fingers and the thumb of the left hand to fret the notes in sequence. It utilises the fretting skills I developed for my thumb and extends them to

the fingers as well. It also demands planning ahead. I must look at each musical phrase and plan the fingering before I try to play it. Many musical phrases found in folk tunes use only four or five notes and my hand doesn't have to move during the phrase. In other tunes I have to 'walk' my hand up or down the fretboard. To walk up, my left forefinger lifts over my thumb and frets the next note up. To walk down my thumb passes behind my forefinger and frets the next note down. If the step between notes is too big for this technique I must plan further ahead and walk up or down earlier in the phrase so I can utilise the full span of my hand (which is quite difficult). Alternatively I slide (if it suits the music), or smoothly lift my hand and start the sequence again.

I shouldn't finish this account until I mention how I practice. I have been very disappointed in how quickly I forget a phrase or a whole piece. My biggest 'downs' have come when yesterday's progress has simply blown away with the night wind. I'm nearly seventy years old now so I have had to just knuckle down and work at it to find the best way for me. It won't surprise you to hear that the answer is regular practice. Most folk tunes and hymns were written with words and music together. The music is written in a series of phrases that correspond to the lines in the poem that are being sung. If I work on one musical phase at a time (perhaps three or four measures) I have a sense of playing music while still practicing. Of course, I am actually practicing at making a phrase sound right. One other thing. Quite early on in my journey we converted our 'computer/storage room' into our 'computer/storage/music room'. When I am thrashing through a difficult bit, making the same mistake at the same place each time, I close the door. Then, when I have a complete phrase sounding OK, I open the door and I am often rewarded with "My, that sounds great. Is it time for a break? Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Where am I up to now? Physically, not too bad. I chose the neurosurgical option and my back is getting along very well. I walk a mile or two each day. I haven't climbed the ladder to the observatory yet but it won't be long. I have driven the motorhome a short distance. I can sit on the low stool and play my dulcimer with a straight back without getting too tired. Musically, I am very pleased. A wise person on a chat group advised me to drape anti-slip cloth over my knees and I no longer drop the dulcimer on the floor. After I tuned the instrument (to CGG) I heard something quite magical. The bass and middle strings quietly vibrate in sympathy with the melody string, even when they are not touched. I steadfastly refuse to use such an ugly word as 'drone' for such a beautiful sound. I have started to experiment with a kind of melody/chord style, playing a simple chord with the melody note on top, on the first beat in each measure. I noticed that for simple folk tunes in Ionian mode (major key), the first note of most measures falls on either the third, fifth or seventh fret. These can be played with a chord using open middle and bass strings. For other notes a simple fretted chord is needed. I find Merv Rowley's "An Approach to learning Chord-Melody Style" very useful. Of course making chords complicates the fingering and that is my main focus at the moment. Oh, and I have plenty of spare strings, just in case. Yes, I think I am hooked.

I am happy to discuss any points that I have raised in this article. Mail me at [peter\\_r@ozemail.com.au](mailto:peter_r@ozemail.com.au) and we can have a chat about it.