

Are You Missing Something? (A Closer Look at 1-3-5 Tunings)

by Merv Rowley

About two years ago we first introduced here the idea of using 1-3-5 tunings, in an article entitled *How to Get More Music From Your Dulcimer*. In case you didn't read it, you may first want to review that article as a general introduction to the subject. In August, 2004 we started a new website on this topic, and there you can find a great deal of basic, updated information about the tuning itself (string selection, note locations and extensive chord charts). You will also find answers to frequently asked questions and numerous Learning Aids for self-study. Most importantly, we have posted monthly arrangements of music/tab and lyrics for selections ranging from folk to classic, including hymns and all varieties of pop music in public domain. Sound files are also provided to enable readers to become familiar with the melody, chord accompaniment and tempo.

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Some folks seem to feel that all tunings are pretty much alike, except for changing keys. Today we find that most tablature is arranged for, and most players are using DAA, DAd or DGd tunings. Actually, *every tuning has its limits*, one way or another, and can't be expected to handle *every* piece of music. Let's review some basic facts about dulcimer tunings and see why this is so. Below are listed the diagrams for three different dulcimer tunings. Each represents a three-string dulcimer having a 6 1/2 fret. *Notice that each string produces the seven notes (per octave) for the key to which the string is tuned, plus the "flatted-seventh" note on the sixth fret.*

DAA

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6+	7
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	

DAd

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6+	7
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	

DF#A

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6+	7
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	
F#	G#	A#	B	C#	D#	E	F	F#	
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	

When we examine these three fretboard layouts, we notice the following:

The only difference between the “D” and the “A” strings is the fact that the latter has a G# note, but lacks the C-natural. Thus, the total number of *different* notes on the *pair* of strings is nine. For both the DAA and DAd tunings, the third string duplicates one of the first two, and contributes nothing new.

In the case of the DF#A tuning, however, the F# string contributes an additional A#, D# and an F-natural, for a total of *twelve different notes for the three strings*. These are the twelve notes that comprise the chromatic scale:

D D# E F F# G G# A A# B C C#

This explains the distinction of the DF#A tuning from the others, and is a characteristic of any 1-3-5 tuning, regardless of key. The disadvantage of a 1-3-5 tuning is the fact that it is not a modal tuning, and cannot be used to play drone accompaniment. Its unique advantage is the fact that it contains all the notes of the chromatic scale, and can be used to arrange and play music that requires these extra notes. Also, it can be used to play *in different keys without either retuning or use of a capo*. To illustrate this point we have selected an old favorite of many, written in 1908 but now in public domain... *Shine On, Harvest Moon*.

The following is a music notation arrangement of the melody for the chorus to this song. Below each line of music are listed the tablature numbers for each of the three tunings already discussed. Problems arise in measures 2 and 3 (and again in measures 10 and 11), where we encounter “accidentals” D# and G# for the tune being played in the key of D. In this case, the G# is an octave below that found on the A string! The only solution to allow us to play these portions of music in DAA or DAd would be to add either a temporary or permanent 3½ fret, as shown in the tablature. The DF#A tuning allows us to play these notes with no difficulty.

The music arrangement for "Shine On, Harvest Moon" - in DF#A tuning with full chord accompaniment - is posted in E.D.'s tablature section under "S". PDF, MIDI and TablEdit files are provided. In D, several of the chords also require D# and G# notes (not shown in the notation, just in the tab).

We found that in this same tuning, we could also arrange and play the music in the keys of A and E, with no retuning or capo. Copies of the A and E arrangements are posted here too. (PDF files only).

The DF#A team:

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Shine On, Harvest Moon

Melody/Tab vs. Tuning

D-A-A

D-A-d

D-F#-A

(1908)

Music: Nora Bayes

Lyrics: Jack Norworth

Arr: Merv Rowley 2006

Musical notation for the first system, including melody and guitar tabs for D-A-A, D-A-d, and D-F#-A tunings. The lyrics are: Shine on, shine on har - vest moon _____ up in the sky.

Musical notation for the second system, including melody and guitar tabs for D-A-A, D-A-d, and D-F#-A tunings. The lyrics are: I ain't had no lov - in' since A - pr - il, Jan - u - ar - y, June or Ju - ly. _____

Musical notation for the third system, including melody and guitar tabs for D-A-A, D-A-d, and D-F#-A tunings. The lyrics are: Snow time ain't no time to stay _____ out - doors and spoon, so

Musical notation for the fourth system, including melody and guitar tabs for D-A-A, D-A-d, and D-F#-A tunings. The lyrics are: Shine on, Shine on Har - vest Moon, for me and my gal.