

The Hammered Dulcimer Approached as a Percussion Instrument

By: Cliff Cole

Introduction:

Since the hammered dulcimer is a percussion instrument, it makes a lot of sense to approach it as such. In this workshop we will discuss the hammers that we use to percuss the instrument; the concept of “drop-and-bounce;” right and left hand independence and some basic drumming rudiments including paradiddles and flams. We will also encourage counting out measures.

Hammers

There are many types of hammers that one can use to percuss the hammered dulcimer. The hammers that you decide to use is a very personal choice. As a trained percussionist, I personally like hammers that have some amount of mass, and are more balanced than the hammers that I see most other people using. Good drum sticks and mallets used for percussion generally have these traits; they are well balanced and have some mass. More mass allows gravity to act on the hammer and assist in the percussion process. This will be explained in the next section, “drop-and-bounce”.

Drop and Bounce

You can visualize the concept of drop-and-bounce if you think of a basketball player “dribbling” a ball. The ball bounces on the floor and comes back to the player’s hand. Minimal energy and a simple hand movement is all that is required to keep ball in motion and under complete control. Physicists call this kind of process “simple harmonic motion”.

Percussion using a drumstick or a dulcimer hammer is actually very similar to the basketball example. Gravity will cause the hammer to “drop” onto the string and then “bounce” back up to the starting position. Your fingers, hands, wrist, arms and shoulder are all working together to make this process smooth. When done correctly the player can keep the sticks in constant motion with precise control.

The concept of drop-and-bounce will be demonstrated in the workshop. The hammers should both start at about six inches above the strings.

Right Hand Left hand Independence

One of the main goals in mastering percussion is to become independent with your right and left hand. The dulcimer is no different than any other percussion instrument; attaining independence between your right and left hands is a big advantage. Some HD instructors like to teach a concept called “left hand lead.” That’s ok, but there is also nothing wrong with “right hand lead” either.

If you find that when you are playing the hammered dulcimer, that you tend to use one hand dominating over the other, (usually the right hand) you might want to work on bringing your non-dominant hand “up to speed”. The percussion exercises presented in this workshop will help with this.

Sticking (or hammering) Patterns

To learn a tune well is to learn the “sticking” pattern of the tune. My rule of thumb is this: Always alternate your hammers, except when you don’t... What this means is that “most of the time” you will use an alternating sticking pattern, except when it is advantages not to. It takes time and practice to figure out the right patterns for the tunes that you learn.

Some Basic Rudiments and Percussion Concepts

Percussive Arts Society forty essential rudiments

<http://www.pas.org/Learn/Rudiments.aspx>

Alternate right and left hand

Counting the beat out loud – “one and two and three and four and”

Use a metronome!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Keep it even

Playing a basic single stroke roll – R L R L R L R L

Playing a double stroke roll – R R L L R R L L

The concept of “doubling”

Playing a controlled multi-bounce roll

Paradiddle – “down up tap tap down up tap tap” - R L R R L R L L

Hints: Play evenly; the rhythm is in the accents

Double Paradiddle - R L R L R R L R L R L L

Flams - L R R L L R R L L R R L L R R L

Flam and tap – L R R R L L L R R R L L

More Advanced:

Swiss Army triplets

Start right – L R R L | L R R L

Start left - R L L R | R L L R

Alternating Base - Right hand left hand independence

About The Author

Cliff Cole purchased his first hammered dulcimer in 1985, from Sam Rizzetta. At the time he was playing drums in a blues band. Prior to taking up the dulcimer, he studied drums and percussion for ten years. Since the age of fifteen Cliff has played in numerous rock, blues, jazz, zydeco and folk ensembles. Folk instruments are where the heart is. Cliff plays the hammered dulcimer in the family folk group “DayBreak,” which has been together since 1989. They have made several recordings, including “Lost Cave” which was recorded live inside of Lost River Caverns in Hellertown, PA, “Little Steps”, and “Autumn Calling,” which features many of Cliff’s original tunes. They also have produced two Christmas CD’s one named “Unity; Unique Music for Christmas” and a live Holiday concert recorded in December of 2002. Cliff also helped produced a wonderful CD with his daughter Emily Rose Cole, called “I Wanna Know” That was released in 2012.

DayBreak’s music is available on CD-Baby, iTunes and many other digital download stores found on the web.

Cliff is very active in the folk scene. He is on he board of Perkasio Patchwork Coffeehouse, where he often works the sound board. He also sometimes does sound at Godfrey Daniel’s a folk club in Bethlehem, PA. Cliff is also a founding member of the Quakertown Area Dulcimer and Autoharp Society ([QUADAS](http://www.quadas.com).) James Jones made Cliff’s hammered dulcimer. The full sized 2/16/18/7 instrument covers four octaves and has dampening pedal. For more information about James Jones instruments go to his web site: <http://www.jamesjonesinstruments.com>

Cliff lives with his lovely wife, Pamela, in Quakertown, Pennsylvania. He works as a computer hardware test engineer for the Intel Corporation, in an office located in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania.

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