

Making Practice Fun

Introduction

How can you get better at the hammered dulcimer? It's simple; spend more time practicing. Here are some ideas about how to make practice time more fun and rewarding, and also help you find ways to get better while you do it. This is not a one size fits all formula, because only you know what works best for you. One of the keys to this approach is to continually rekindle the reason why you picked the hammered dulcimer to play; or did it pick you???

How Did You Get Here? (Or Hear?)

If you are like many people who play the hammered dulcimer (HD), there were one or more events that happened that made you realize the HD is YOUR instrument. Lets face, it just isn't logical. They are expensive, hard to tune, generally are not sold in local stores and they can be hard to deal with. The guitar, keyboards, mountain dulcimer and other instruments are WAY more accessible. So there must have been some magical moment that did it for you! It just sounds so good! **Try to relive that magic moment every time you play!** Remember why you choose to play the HD, and even when it's hard, be happy you have it in your life.

Leave it Set-Up, In-Sight and Accessible

Make sure you have a private place to practice that is free of all of life's distractions. No cell phones for one, or put it in airplane mode if you need apps for practice. Set your dulcimer up. **Keep it set up.** Play it for five minutes, if that is all the time you have today... An instrument that is in a case might as well be in a force field that is hard to break out of. Keep you HD on the stand and accessible, but cover it up when not in use. Keep it out of the sunlight and drafts. It will stay in tune longer if you have an excellent cover for it, such as a thick towel or a small quilt. In the winter avoid heat sources especially wood stoves.

Start with the Basics, No Matter Your Level - Warm-Up slowly

One of the frustrations that students often have is that something they played so easily yesterday just can't be played well today. Start your practice with basic exercises or tunes you know really well. Play slowly. Get warmed up. Don't reach for the hard pieces right away. All musicians have to get warmed up. In some ways it is like athletics. You are using your muscles, so the metaphor applies.

Scales are "Boring"; So Play Chords...

While you need to learn the scales, the fact is that playing scales over and can be a chore. Some teachers push their students to play more scales, but an alternative is to play arpeggios and chords. Some exercises will be presented in the workshop, but make up your own exercises!

A Few Arpeggios and Scales: The idea is to make music...

- Triad exercise: First try in G, then move it all around (This will be demonstrated)
- Single octave "shed" chord; Start on left in major key, like G or D
 - Try other chord patterns starting with right hand
- I-IV-V pattern using shed chord or other chord patterns
- Double octave chord patterns
- Double octave I-IV-V pattern
- Try playing the same patterns in minor keys (This will be demonstrated)

Make a Repertoire List

Do you have a “go-to” tune? The one that you can ALWAYS pull off and makes the instrument and you sound good. If you don’t then pick-one; and keep adding more tunes to that category. Play your favorite songs ever time you practice. Learn more favorite songs. Learn songs you already know.

Does Practice Make Perfect?

Gosh, that’s what we all learned in school, right? However others have suggested that doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result can lead to insanity... A better way to look at it is this: “perfect practice makes perfect”. Play it slower; make sure the sticking pattern works; make sure the timing is right! If you find yourself making the same mistake over and over, then it is time try a different approach. Divided and conquer. Break the tune down into small components. Work the hard parts! Set goals for yourself, and track your progress. Record yourself playing a tune. Do it again in two weeks. Did you get better? If not, why?

Paper Training

Reading music is a great skill to have. However it is very hard to sight read the HD. It can be done, but it is not advised. When you see great performers play any instrument or sing, are they reading music? In folk, rock and jazz the norm is to “know the tune”. This often leads to improvising. Memorize your tunes! You can do it! **Don’t fight it, just do-it.** Memorize your hammer patterns too. Be consistent with your left and right hands.

Play Every Day

Andre Previn said, “a day without music is a day lost forever”. You can always spare some time even in the busiest of days to play music. Ten or fifteen minutes a day is just fine as long as you mix in longer practices on other days. If you start your day with music, it is something nobody can take away from you. Get up a half hour early... And just quit those other hobbies, what is more important than the HD?

Keep it in Tune

Learn how to quick tune you HD, so it’s in “relative-tune” with itself (this will be demonstrated in the workshop.) When you play with other musicians, get there early and tune up.

Play With Other People!

Music is for sharing. Find a dulcimer group. Form one. Go to jams! Find like-minded people to play with. It’s among the most fun you can have. Be a listener! The HD is loud, so don’t drown out others, or dominate.

A Portal into a Magical Place – Just Play

Just play! Try new things. Play in a key you don’t ordinarily play in. Just try hitting some notes and making your own original patterns. The dulcimer sounds so good. Make it a portal into your own special place.

About The Author

Cliff Cole fell in love with the hammered dulcimer at the Philadelphia Folk Festival three decades ago, and he’s been hammering on ever since. He started off as a drummer playing rock, jazz, and blues, and then carried that musical experience and sense of rhythm over to the hammered dulcimer and folk music. Rounding out his musical expression, Cliff studies acoustic guitar, plays the blues harp, and enjoys singing. Over the years, Cliff produced six recordings with his family folk group DayBreak, including Lost Cave, which was recorded live inside Lost River Caverns in Hellertown, PA and two recordings with his daughter, accomplished vocalist and poet, Emily Rose Cole. <http://www.daybreakfolk.com/>

Cliff’s also plays in a musical duo, Tachyonmetry, where the interplay of the classical guitar and hammered dulcimer are breaking new ground. An EP called Sunset Waterfall has been released. <http://tachyonmetry.com>

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