

Bridges and Beyond – An Open Discussion

Background

My first dulcimer was a 13/ 12 “Augusta Chromatic” dulcimer built by Sam Rizzetta in 1985. Sam added a few “chromatic” notes in the upper register to the standard diatonic tuning, to make the instrument more chromatic. The term “chromatic” is an exaggeration in this case because it is not fully chromatic. It is true that the extra notes allow one to play some tunes that require certain sharps and flats without having the need to retune any strings. The “necessity” for “extra” notes is clearly noted with this “chromatic” offering.

As my playing progressed, I wanted a bigger dulcimer, especially one with more bass notes. I met Jem Moore, who was a workshop leader at the Zelenople dulcimer festival in July of 1991. He was playing a James Jones hammered dulcimer that had extra bass notes. Jem told me about James’s idea of adding an extra bass bridge on the RIGHT side of the dulcimer. This seemed very logical to me, so I ordered one of the first instruments that James built with this feature. This is clearly my bias. I like having the extra bridge on the right side, especially with notes that follow the standard diatonic tuning. This allows me to play the notes in the lower octave without having to re-think or change the basic sticking pattern that I use in the upper (or middle) octave range.

Different tunings for hammered dulcimer like instruments are far from new. In fact the standard diatonic tuning that we commonly use is far from the oldest tuning method invented. The santoor, cimbalom and the hachbret all predate the instrument we call the hammered dulcimer. Now the situation has become cloudier. Dulcimer players can completely forgo the diatonic tuning and purchase a Liner Chromatic™ or a “piano dulcimer”. These two instruments stray well away from the standard diatonic tuning used on the hammered dulcimer. For the purpose of this discussion, let us concentrate on “standard” hammered dulcimers tuned predominantly with diatonic scales. This discussion is about adding bridges and notes that are outside of a “standard” two bridge hammered dulcimer tuned with diatonic scales.

Some History of the Diatonic Tuning

German born composer Pantaleon Hebenstreit (1667-1750) invented an instrument that was called the “pantaleon.” It was a huge contraption that is considered to be the predecessor to the pianoforte. This instrument used the diatonic tuning that we now associate with the hammered dulcimer. He replicated the tuning configuration onto many bridges, using a combination of metal and gut strings. It had to be difficult to play, hard to keep in tune and cumbersome to move around. However, even with all of those problems, he was very successful in his day. He played his music in the court of King Louis XIV, who named the instrument the “pantaleon”. You can read more about Pantaleon Hebenstreit’s history at this link.

<http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/acc/pantaleo.html>

If Pantaleon Hebenstreit did not invent the tuning that we know of as the standard diatonic tuning, he certainly popularized it. It is clear to me that the “hammered dulcimer” is a simplified version of the pantaleon.

The Questions for this Workshop

These are the questions we will discuss in this workshop (there are no wrong or right answers):

1. Do you play an instrument with extra notes outside of the traditional diatonic tuning?
 - a. Why or why not?
2. If you could have an extra bass bridge, where should it be?
 - a. On the right side on the left side or does it not matter?
3. If you could have an extra treble bridge, where should it be?
 - a. On the right side on the left side or does it not matter?
4. What is the most important aspect of these extra notes?
 - a. For instance: tonal quality, ease of use etc.
5. If you were to purchase a new hammered dulcimer, would it have extra bridges on it?
 - a. Why or why not?

Cliff's Totally Biased Answers

1. Yes. I play a Jones Jones's 2/16/18/7. I really like the extra bass bridge on right side.
2. Bass bridge on the right side of course
 - a. I like to reach for bass notes with my right hand
 - b. I sometimes play using an alternating bass style. (RH bass notes, LH melody)
3. Treble on the left side. I wish I had good sounding high octave notes on my current HD
4. Ease of use, and tonal quality, even sound throughout the whole range of the instrument.
5. I would purchase a James Jones's: 3/16/18/9

Some Other Players Opinions (that I have come into contact with lately)

Maggie Sansone:

- Plays a Nick Blanton HD; Her new HD has extra bass notes on the left side
- Tonal quality is very important
- Extra bass notes sound better on the left hand side

Walt Michael

- His current HD does NOT have any extra notes or bridges
- Keep it simple - Extra notes can go anywhere they fit.
- The right hand side makes sense for bass notes but the left side is okay too
- Dynamics on an instrument are extremely important. All notes should sound just as good when they are played softly as when they are played louder

Sam Edelston

- Plays an M. Lee Spears Jr. 5/19/21 with extra bass notes on the left side
- Chromatic notes are really important for most of the music he plays
- Sees the advantage of having the bass notes on the right side
- Bright sounding bass notes are important
- His next dulcimer will definitely have more extra bass notes, especially ones that add chromatic possibilities

Rick Thum (dulcimer maker and player)

- Does not make instruments with extra bridges. "They are not necessary" for the music he plays.
- His Professional 16/16 has some extra chromatic bass notes. All other models do not.

Marcy Prochaska

- Plays a Jerry Reed Smith with bass bridges on the left and right side.
- She likes both extra chromatic notes and extra patterns that stay inside the diatonic tuning