Dulcimers in Music Education:

Backyard Music  November, 1991

Why use dulcimers?

"the answer to fifth grade music"
  - Annette Rhoads, CT

"This has been the most successful junior high class I have taught—and the most fun."
  - Sandie Reynolds

“The lap dulcimer is the most complete single classroom instrument. It is melodically simple and relatively easy as a chordal instrument. It affords instant success using the most simple playing techniques and yet the advanced styles of performing on the instrument can keep one interested for a lifetime”.
  - Rick Bunting, NY

Dulcimers are interesting, motivating, effective, versatile, and fun.

Dulcimers provide instant musical success. Beginners make sweet sounds right away; mistakes don’t sound bad. Students play tunes- with harmony- in their first class.

Dulcimers motivate older students who may be reluctant to sing and dance.

Dulcimers promote singing. They are pitched in the range where children sing, and they leave the mouth free.

Dulcimers are versatile. They play melody and harmony. They can be used for solo, ensemble, and whole class playing.

Dulcimers are diatonic, and therefore lend themselves to playing by ear and to teaching scales, modes, and solfege.

Dulcimers are a relatively quiet instrument. An entire class of students can play dulcimers without disturbing neighboring classes or drowning out their own voices.

Dulcimers are a folk instrument played by adults and performers as well as students. Students can play dulcimer throughout their lives.

Dulcimers are inexpensive. An entire classroom set costs less than $1,500.

Dulcimers are easy for students to build, and dulcimer building increases motivation.
The lap or fretted dulcimer is a simple stringed instrument. It is played lying flat on the lap, or on a table. Traditional dulcimers have three strings. In the simple and traditional way of playing, melodies are played on one string only, while the other strings are also strummed to provide a drone harmony.

There are frets on the dulcimer which make chords easy to play. The fret pattern is diatonic, i.e., it plays a “white key” scale.

Dulcimers are a distinctly American instrument that developed in the Appalachian mountains in the early and mid 1800s. They have experienced a modest revival starting in the 1950s, when Jean Ritchie brought her dulcimer to New York City. There are now dulcimer performers, recordings, books, clubs, and a newsletter, the *Dulcimer Players News*. Dulcimers found their way into music classrooms in the 1970s and 1980s.

Several features make dulcimers easy to play. Frets pitch each note accurately so that exact finger placement is not important. The scale is diatonic, so that familiar melodies are easily played by ear, and mistakes are obvious but do not sound unpleasant.

The dulcimer is played flat on the lap or table, so students can see their hands, and there is no awkward twisting of wrists. While there are strings to tune, and this does present an obstacle for some students, there are only three strings to tune, and in most cases two strings are tuned in unison.

In most classrooms, dulcimers are tuned in Ionian Major, with the thick bass string tuned to D below middle C and the two thin strings tuned in unison to A below middle C. This tuning can be lowered to C major or raised to the key of E. For songs in a minor and Mixolydian mode, one string is re-tuned and the relationship among the strings changes.

In the simple and traditional way of playing, there are two drone strings. The bass drone is tuned an octave below the ending note of the song on melody. The middle string is tuned a fifth above the bass. In major tuning this yields a do-so drone.
To accompany beginning recorder players, a G major tuning can be used with the middle string tuned to G below middle C, the thick base tuned to D below middle C, and the melody string tuned to D above middle C.

Students learn to play quicker than they learn to tune. For this reason some teachers start with only one or two strings on recently built dulcimers, and add strings as students gain tuning skills. Others rely on students who play stringed instruments to help with tuning.

Backyard Music began making cardboard-soundbox dulcimers in 1980. Dulcimers have a full–length wooden fretboard which fully supports the tension of the strings. This feature means the soundbox can be made of any acoustically satisfactory material. Cardboard is easy to pre-cut, paint, fold, and glue. It also has an excellent tone (it has been used in the cones of stereo speakers), and is acoustically far superior to plywood.

Cardboard soundboxes are quite durable, but they may also be easily and inexpensively replaced to refurbish instruments.

Good wooden dulcimers cost over $250. Purchased in quantities of 12 or more, cardboard-soundbox dulcimer kits cost $36 each, and finished instruments cost $50 each. If you build dulcimers with your students, a set of 25 dulcimers costs $900, less than six autoharps. A classroom set of 25 ready–made dulcimers costs roughly $1,300.

Some teachers obtain funds for dulcimers from PTAs, from mini-grants, or from the budget for gifted and talented students. In other schools students buy their own instruments. Dulcimer building workshops can be sponsored by the PTA as a parent-child activity. To reduce the costs of making many dulcimers for a district, industrial arts classes can make fretboards or finished dulcimers.

Although most of our dulcimers are used in grades 4 to 6, the dulcimer has been used from kindergarten to college. The youngest children can strum or tap rhythms on the open strings. Third graders can play tunes easily. Some schools make dulcimers a special project for gifted and talented programs; others emphasize their use with special education students.
In Junior High and High School dulcimers give a hands-on instrumental playing experience to general music students. At the college level, dulcimers have been used to teach music theory, American music history, and music methods for elementary education majors. Dulcimers are also used in adult education, senior recreation, and music therapy.

Dulcimers can be used to teach or reinforce many skills and concepts. Strumming nurtures rhythm skills. The diatonic scale is readily visible with its whole and half steps, and is well suited to teach scale theory, modes, solfège, harmony, and melodic improvisation.

Dulcimers can be played in small ensembles, with each student playing at their own level. Some can play simple melody with drone, others can play chords or a counter melody, while advanced players can fingerpick more ornate arrangements of a song.

Of course, students are also learning to play the dulcimer, a full sized adult instrument well suited for individual or family use over the years. For many students, dulcimer is their one best chance to experience themselves as someone who can play a musical instrument. And dulcimer is an ideal instrument for teaching American folk music from the Appalachian region.

Some teachers use dulcimers in a unit, where each child has an instrument and dulcimer is the main focus of instruction. Others use a few dulcimers at a time, to accompany singing and dancing. The sound of dulcimers complements xylophones, recorders, autoharps, and handbells, and teachers have used dulcimers in combination with all these instruments.
What About Building Dulcimers?

Are you building dulcimers for the first time?

Ask Backyard Music to call you to discuss logistics and pass on tips from other builders.

“We are just completing 12 dulcimers with our 3-5th grade students. The children are completely captivated by the project, have worked with incredible intensity and with great care. This has been a simply wonderful project for them and for the teachers working with them. My compliments to whoever desinged the kit”

Susan Talor-Howell, VA

“I showed up with your kit in school and kids immediately took to it. As interest grew, I offered to help them make their own.”

Bob Doolittle, N.Y.

By furnishing pre-cut kits, Backyard Music makes it safe and easy for students to build dulcimers in the classroom. Building reduces costs and increases motivation from a dulcimer project.

To complete a set of dulcimers it takes about seven 40-minute work periods, or a single 3-4 hour building workshop. Dulcimers can be built by one class of students working over several weeks, or by several classes each of which completes one step in the process.

Backyard Music kits are entirely pre-cut, and are accompanied by photo-illustrated instructions. You provide semi-gloss latex paint, fine sandpaper, white Elmer’s glue, hammers, Phillips head screwdrivers, and pliers or wire cutters. For an extra charge, Backyard Music can prepaint soundboxes, which is a convenience for one-session building workshops where time is limited.

The steps to build a Backyard Music Dulcimers are:

1. Paint soundboxes (both sides); sand and wax fretboards;
2. Make starting holes and screw in tuning gears
3. Hammer in three little nails;
4. Put in pre-cut bridge and string separator;
5. Fold up soundbox and glue to fretboard (use buddies);
6. Put on strings.

In many schools shop or art teachers help with instrument building. Some art teachers help students create stencils to decorate the soundboxes of their dulcimers. Sometimes the dulcimer project is also integrated with the American history curriculum.

Ready-made dulcimers are also available from Backyard Music, for teachers who cannot build instruments.
How do I teach dulcimer?

While there are many tips in the books listed below, here are a few suggestions.

• Start students playing with their hands only; save picks and noter sticks for later.

• Focus on one hand at a time. To start, have students merely strum (right hand) without fingering notes. Or have students finger notes (left hand) on one string only, while they pluck that string with one finger of the right hand. Once one hand has mastered its motion, switch to focus on the other hand. When working with rhythm patterns, have students park their melody noting finger on one note through the drill.

• When students learn a new song, have them pluck only the melody string while they find and practice the melody. Add strumming when the melody is established. Then have some children invent countermelodies while others continue to play melody.

• If possible, avoid lap-playing in elementary grades. Have students place dulcimers on desks and stand (grades 4-6), or on chairs and kneel (grade 2-3).

Browse through Meet the Friendly Dulcimer, a 28-page booklet that comes with your BYM dulcimer. This is all you need to start playing and assess the dulcimer for use in your school. Or use Larkin's Dulcimer Book, the best adult instruction book.

Orff Clinician Pat Brown’s The Mountain Dulcimer is an excellent resource book of theory, songs, playing and teaching techniques for teachers using dulcimers in the elementary music classroom. The Classroom Dulcimer, by dulcimer performer Lois Hornbostel has classroom-tested tips and humorous songs with an Appalachian flavor which should appeal to students in grades 5 and older.

Some teachers have students compile their own dulcimer songbooks by figuring out songs by ear and notating them. Elementary school teachers that want student texts can use The Classroom Dulcimer and/or Easy as 123, a booklet of 50 large print songs by number that is automatically shipped with Backyard Music kits ordered for school use.

For middle school and high school students, teachers could use as student books The Classroom Dulcimer, and/or:
• Rick Bunting uses a layered approach in his *The Dulcimer in the Classroom*, a 213 page student book for high school general music classes using dulcimers in ensembles. This book has a separate teacher’s guide, and Bunting has also written a more general *Teaching Traditional Music and Instruments – A Classroom Approach*.

You can order these books on approval, select those you want, and return the rest.

First, find yourself a dulcimer. Buy or borrow a dulcimer from Backyard Music, or dust off the dulcimer you found in the closet.

Then, settle down for an hour with *Meet the Friendly Dulcimer* or *Larkin's Dulcimer Book*. Try a few tunes, then a few simple chords. Sing a simple song and try a countermelody. In an hour, you’ll have taught yourself enough to glimpse a year’s worth of dulcimer possibilities for your students.

There are several next steps you might take. One is to call Backyard Music. Describe your situation and we’ll pass on tips and help you plan your unit.

Another next step is to start sharing your dulcimer with students. If you’d like to try out dulcimers with an entire class (and possibly persuade the PTA to buy a set), you can arrange to lease a classroom set of dulcimers for a month.

In many states, artists in residence can visit your school with a set of dulcimers to demonstrate and lead playing workshops for students. Some teachers then lease dulcimers for follow-up work.

If you would like to pursue your dulcimer interests further, the *Dulcimer Players News* lists dulcimer clubs and festivals across the country. And there are several locations where dulcimer is part of music education summer workshops.