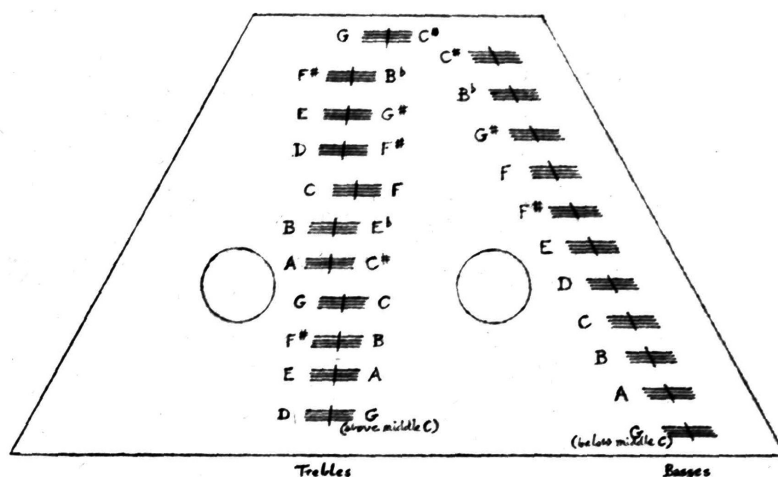


Chromatic Tuning for Dulcimer

as used by traditional players in Norfolk

By Russell Wortley



Over the past few years I have received a number of enquiries concerning dulcimer tunings from prospective players and builders of these instruments, several asking specifically for information on the tuning used by traditional players in East Anglia.

There is much truth in David Kettlewell's statement that "in the living traditions there are almost as many tunings as there are players."¹ At the same time there is sound evidence of a commonly accepted system in fairly general use in the Norwich area, around 1900 and later. In 1962 I visited a small music shop, Messrs E. Woods & Sons, in Dove Street, Norwich, where dulcimer players used to buy the piano wire for stringing their instruments. Here I was shown a large diagram entitled "Chromatic Scale for G Dulcimer" which had been drawn up by the late Mr A. Woods, founder of the business. Subsequently the shop was closed on the retirement of the two brothers Woods and the diagram appears to have been lost or destroyed. The Mr Woods I spoke to told me they once had some printed leaflets, but these were "incorrect" and therefore discarded: his father's diagram showed the "correct" tuning.

The diagram above² has been constructed from the note sequences which I took down from this original diagram in 1962. I was interested to find that the late Billy Cooper of Hingham³ (whose father also played the chromatic dulcimer), was using virtually the same tuning and

¹ Kettlewell, D. "All the Tunes that Ever there Were" (Spout Books, 1975), p.23

² This diagram supersedes that published in my article "The English Dulcimer" (*Making Music*, no. 47, Autumn 1961 pp 10-11)

³ Wortley, R. "The Traditional English Dulcimer" *Folk Review* 5, no. 1, November 1975, pp 13-15.

that the dulcimer used by the late Mr S. Shemming of Ipswich was tuned identically except for the reversal of F natural and F sharp in the bass row.

The dulcimer tuned basically in the key of G (as illustrated) is the smaller of the two sizes commonly used in East Anglia, having four strings to each course and two sound-holes as indicated in the diagram. The larger instrument, tuned a fourth lower throughout (basically in the key of D) has five strings to each course and usually four sound-holes. The overall maximum dulcimer is approximately 32 inches, that of a D instrument about 9 inches wider; and it is usual for East Anglian dulcimers to be fitted with a hinged support screwed to the base-board, so that the instrument can be tilted towards the player when seated at a table.

The wire gauges should be graduated: music wire gauge No. 9, for the longest courses, No. 8, for the middle courses, and No. 7 for the shortest. For an attractive appearance, brass wire may be used on the bass series, alternating with the normal steel wire on the trebles. To prevent the taut strings from cutting into the wooden bridges, it is essential to top them with a metal strip: guitar fret wire was recommended by Messrs. Woods, but I have heard of short pieces of bicycle spoke being used for the purpose.

As the diagram shows, the chromatic dulcimer requires separate stud bridges, not the strip bridges characteristic of the 18th century instruments. This is to allow for the necessary off-setting of some bridges in the treble row (see Ref. 3). Not all instruments have the full 22 bridges and 22 courses of strings: 20 courses is a frequent number, omitting the top C sharp (bass) and G (treble).

With this chromatic tuning it is comparatively easy to play in four different keys: G, C, D and F on the G dulcimer; D, G, A and C on the D dulcimer. Other keys are possible, but the further you get from the basic key, the more "dodging about" is necessary to find your scale!

The best of luck to all dulcimer players and dulcimer makers!

Originally published in *English Dance & Song*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 2, 1977. Transcribed by Katie Howson March 2025, and uploaded to www.eastangliandulcimers.org.uk