

Interview with hammered dulcimer player Phil Passen

Q: *What is that strange instrument and where did it come from?*

A: The short answer is that it's a hammered dulcimer and it either came into Europe from Persia between 900 and 1200 with the Moors, the Roma people, and returning Crusaders; or it developed independently in Europe in the early fifteenth century. The hammered dulcimer is the direct ancestor of the piano. Look at a dulcimer and you're looking at the inside of a piano.

Q: *Isn't there another kind of dulcimer?*

A: Yes, in this country there are two kinds of dulcimers. The hammered dulcimer is a trapezoidal instrument with 40 to 100 strings which are struck with hammers. It originated 500 to 1000 years ago. The lap, or Appalachian, dulcimer is a long and narrow strummed or plucked instrument with 4 strings. It originated about 150 years ago in the Appalachians. The two have nothing in common except their names and that they are both usually classified as part of the zither family.

Q: *How much does that thing weigh?*

A: It weighs about thirty pounds in its case with hammers, tuner, and a few supplies.

Q: *How often do you have to tune all those strings and how long does it take?*

A: The dulcimer I play most often has 97 strings and takes from 20 minutes to an hour to tune. I tune several times a week. Any significant temperature or humidity change will shrink or expand the wood and drive the dulcimer out of tune. A well-made instrument like mine will stay in tune with itself, so if I'm just practicing at home and the dulcimer is a little sharp or flat, I won't retune. I always tune before I perform or play with other people.

Q: *What got you interested in playing the dulcimer?*

A: I love music and I've listened to all kinds of music all my life, but my only experience playing an instrument was taking cornet lessons for a few months in grammar school. As an adult, I really wanted to play the drums, but my wife couldn't stand the thought of a drum set in our 1000 sq. ft apartment. I had heard

the dulcimer and loved the sound of it, but never considered playing it until one night at a John McCutcheon concert at the Old Town School of Folk Music when I thought, "That's for me!"

Q: *How did you learn to play?*

A: I took lessons at the Old Town School of Folk Music from 1994 until 1996. For several years I attended workshops at folk and dulcimer festivals and took week-long classes at the John C Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina.

Q: *What kind of music do you play?*

A: I play primarily old-time music, which is music that developed mainly in the Appalachians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and has roots in the music of Ireland, Scotland and Africa. It is primarily social music – played and sung in noncommercial venues by people making music for themselves and their friends, relatives and neighbors. I play a lot of old-time dance music – mainly fiddle tunes traditionally played for barn dances. Old-time music is the root of bluegrass.

I also play traditional and contemporary American folk music, Irish music, a little jazz, a little rock, and some blues. When I started taking lessons I asked my teacher if could play Hawaiian slack key guitar music on the dulcimer and she said, "Sure. If it's music, you can play it."

Q: *Where do you play?*

A: I play at coffee shops, private parties, receptions and benefits of all kinds, store openings, teas, club meetings, weddings, holiday events, libraries, farmers markets, and the airport. Chicago's department of tourism sponsors music at O'Hare and Midway during busy travel times, and those are among my favorite gigs, because weary travelers are so appreciative of our music. One afternoon, a sociologist who had been listening for four hours to me and the guitarist playing with me told us that he had observed all the people passing by and that they were 70 percent more likely to be smiling when we were playing than when we weren't. I also especially like doing library programs because the audiences enjoy both the music and the information about the music so much.