

## **SUPER BASS - more info**

Early American hammer dulcimers generally had only a single treble bridge or a treble bridge and a partial bass bridge with a few low courses. The bass bridge notes were usually an octave below the adjacent right side treble notes. In the 1960s, Howie Mitchell made dulcimers with the bass notes a fifth below instead of an octave, and I adopted that for being able to double melodies an octave lower when playing for dances.

In the mid 1970s, I added a third bridge to American hammer dulcimers in order to extend the range without having to make dulcimers bigger. That led to the Dusty Strings D300 and D500 as well as my larger Standard and Extended Range models. I called the third bridge a Super Bass bridge to distinguish it from the traditional treble and bass bridges. If you look at the tuning charts for my dulcimers, and for the Dusty Strings D570 and D670, it will give you some idea of how this extends the musical range without increasing a dulcimer's size.

Here are some pros and cons for having a dulcimer with Super Bass bridges.

Pros:

- More notes are available without making the dulcimer larger or making the notes difficult to reach.
- The bass range can be extended lower, sometimes much lower.
- More exciting musical arrangements are possible.

Cons:

- There are more strings to tune.
- Weight, complexity, and cost are greater. It is a little heavier to carry.
- The dulcimer is more complex; set up and adjustment require precision.
- Players who do not use all the extra notes, or don't use them much, will still incur a penalty in carrying weight and tuning chores.

If portability is highly important and you also anticipate rough use, then it is nice to have a relatively simple 16-15, or smaller, for traveling and tuning quickly at sessions and workshops. It might be best to forego things like Super Bass bridges, and especially dampers, for a convenient and tougher knock around dulcimer. For performing, and more exciting arrangements, the extra bass and dampers permit greater variety and interesting tonalities.

Players often ask me whether the Super Bass bridge should be on the left or on the right. Originally, I designed Super Bass to be on the left, for structural, tonal, and playability reasons. Some players wanted SB on the right so notes could be set up with each bridge a fifth interval higher as you move left. That is a simplistic

approach, but it is understandable why someone would think it's a good idea. After building and playing a huge variety of Super Bass instruments since 1976, I feel it is much more important to have some strong low notes to support certain chords and harmonies rather than impose a fifth interval pattern.

As for the left versus right issue, the truth is that some musical arrangements are easier with SB on left and some are easier with SB on right (depending on the SB notes you have). Both have advantages. When you are playing in the lower treble area, SB on the left is handier. When you are playing on the bass bridge, SB on the right is handier. Ultimately, I designed Super Bass courses with playing bridges on **both the left and the right**. The same strings, and same notes, can be played on **either** side. Whichever you prefer, you are covered. You can play more arrangements and get twice as much use out of those SB courses. So, that is the arrangement all players should have and the only configuration I make. That feature is also available on the Dusty Strings D570 and D670 hammer dulcimers.

How many Super Bass courses are needed? The more strings you have, the more stress it puts on the dulcimer. Or lighter strings must be used. So, you must compromise in tone, or weight, or durability, or some balance between them. At one time, I liked including a number of extra chromatic notes plus as many low bass notes as would fit and still sound good. See the charts for the D570 and D670. They have 8 and 9 SB courses respectively, and that is about max.

Today, I prefer lighter weight dulcimers, and 4 to 6 Super Bass notes, tuned extra low, are enough for me. Plus, they can be retuned for special arrangements. See charts for my Compact, Standard, and ER models. I still make some dulcimers with more low courses, and special custom arrangements are possible.

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