

# Chord Patterns on the Hammered Dulcimer

Beginner/Advanced Beginner Level

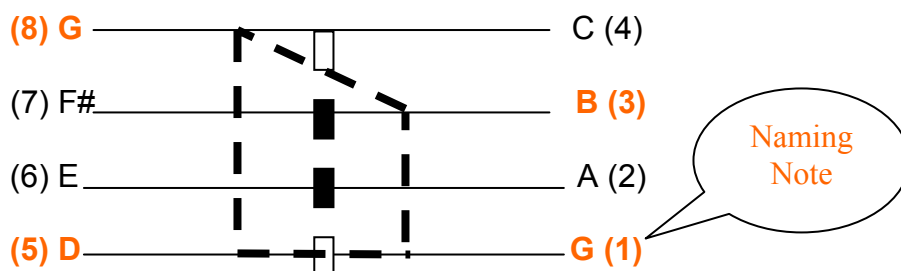
By Susan Vinson Sherlock

[Download](#) this Article. 

When I first began playing the hammered dulcimer in 1995 I had no idea what a chord was or how to find harmony on the dulcimer. After a time of trial and error, I began to see a variety of repeating geometric shapes and patterns on the instrument. I played harmony and embellishments based on these shapes to make the sounds I needed. However, over the years I have learned that these patterns represent chords and triads and I now use them to arrange and write tunes. Having a basic understanding of these patterns as a beginner would have greatly shortened the learning curve for me! So I now teach this to all my beginner students. I read music but I play primarily by ear, and believe this method of learning chords is useful for music readers as well as ear players.

## Chord Patterns on the Hammered Dulcimer

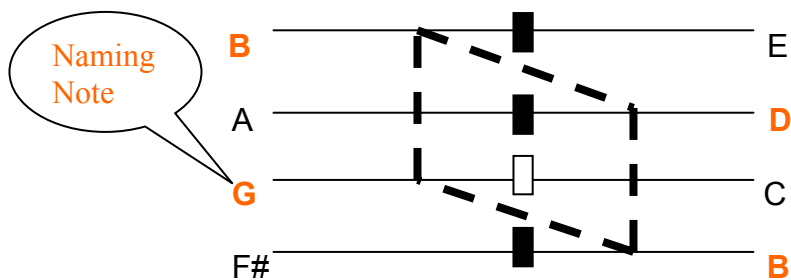
A major chord is played by striking the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> notes of a major scale. When a chord is played in this 1, 3, 5 (and sometimes 8) order it is referred to as a *root position chord* or *arpeggio*. This simply means that the “naming” note of the chord is played first. For example: a root position G major chord would be played 1-3-5-8 or GBDG.



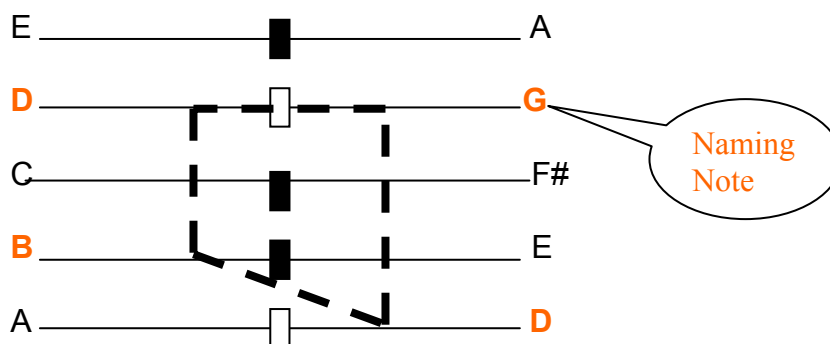
If our melody note is G, then our choices for harmony notes are the remaining two notes in the chord: B and D. In general, harmony notes sound more pleasing if they are lower in pitch than the melody note. So, as long as the *melody* note is the 8<sup>th</sup> note in the scale, in this case a G, this works out great. Because the other notes in the chord, the potential harmony notes B and D, are lower in pitch than the melody note - G.

However, still using G major as our example, if the melody note is a B, to maximize our choices for harmony notes, it becomes necessary to rearrange the chord so the B comes out on top, or **BDGB**. Same three notes, just rearranged. This is the same G major chord, but now it is played so that the harmony notes are lower in pitch than the new melody note - B. In music theory this is called *inverting* the chord. The beginning note of the chord has been moved up one position – from the G to the B (GBD) - it is called the *first inversion* of the chord.

On the hammered dulcimer it looks like this:



But what if, in our G chord, the melody note is a D? You guessed it! We must rearrange the chord so that the D is on top, or **DGBD**. The beginning note of the chord has been moved to the third note of the GBD chord– this form of the chord is called the *second inversion*.



In our examples we have been using a G major chord. However, keep in mind that this pattern repeats for lots of other chords! You may want to try it with a D major chord. Play the same patterns, only now the 1-3-5-8 is DF#AD, the first inversion is F#ADF#, and second inversion is ADF#A.

Now try to play *Amazing Grace* using 3 note chords based on the inversions. Remember, if the melody note on the ONE count is a G, try a root position chord. If the melody note is a B try a first inversion, and if it is a D try a second inversion.

Good luck and have fun!

# Amazing Grace

Susan Vinson Sherlock

December 2003

1 D 2 G B G 3 B A 4 G E 5 D D 6 G B G

7 G(1) G(2) G(2) G(1) C(2)  
B A B D 9 D B 10 D B D B 11 G D 12 E G G E

13 G(2) G B G G(1) A G G G  
D D 14 G B G 15 B A G 16 G 17 G

The numbers in parentheses following the chords are suggested inversions of the chord... a chord with no number represents root position, (1) first inversion (BDG) , (2) second inversion (DBG). Try dropping out melody notes if necessary.

---

## Author Bio



Susan Sherlock saw her first hammered dulcimer in the spring of 1995 while vacationing in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. Unable to forget what she saw, she acquired her own dulcimer a few months later and began learning to play by imitating what she heard on recordings of traditional American and Celtic music. Over the years her passion for the instrument and traditional music has led her on a rich journey of performing and teaching.

Although the dulcimer is Susan's first instrument, she is no stranger to music. The daughter of a mandolin player with a family history rich in traditional music, her childhood was filled with sounds of “Tennessee Waltz” and “Red River Valley” on a daily basis. Frequent family gatherings with her father's eleven brothers and sisters consisted of jam sessions that included fiddles, guitars, banjos, drums...and lots of singing!

Susan has been invited to teach and perform at numerous festivals including the Cork Dulcimer Festival in Ireland, South West Dulcimer Festival in Dewey, AZ, Queen City Dulcimer Festival in Charlotte, NC, Bay Path Dulcimer Festival in Northborough, MA, Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering, Binghamton, NY, and the Winston-Salem Dulcimer Festival in Winston-Salem NC. She is

also very active the local music community where she performs, teaches lessons, and conducts workshops.

Susan is the founder of the Yorkville Music Weekend. This new music gathering emerged from Susan's desire to bring musicians together, to provide space for them to share their talents with each other and to perpetuate the tradition of folk music in her hometown of York, SC. The event began with hammered dulcimers, but has expanded to include multi-instrument workshops and jams.

Susan's solo recording, "Wateree," was released June 2001 and features traditional American, international folk and original tunes, accompanied by Albert Dulin (fiddles, mandolin), Ken Kolodner (fiddle, hammered dulcimer), Dan Bright (fiddle), and Fred McKinney (guitar). Her playing has been described as creative, expressive, versatile and "...so purely beautiful it will give you chills." Kerry Anderson, Gila Mountain Dulcimers. Susan's original tune "Garden Café Waltz" was featured in the February 2002 *Dulcimer Player News* and was chosen to be re-released (August 2002) on an Oasis CD "Acoustic Sampler" recording and distributed to over 500 radio stations nationwide.

Susan has been selected to serve on the Arts and Science Council Talent Bureau 2004. She is also a performing member of "Indiegrrl." "Indiegrrl" criterion for being chosen is simple: "the music must be exceptional, no matter where in your career you are." She is a recipient of a Regional Artist Grant from the North Carolina Arts and Science Council, a member of the Fiddle and Bow Society, World Folk Music Association, the Triangle Folk Society, the Baltimore Folk Society and served on the Charlotte Folk Society Board of Directors.

During the summer months Susan is a full-time musician and spends much of her time teaching and performing. However, during the remainder of the year, she is also a full-time faculty member in Engineering Technology at York Technical College in Rock Hill, SC, where she has taught since 1986.

Susan Sherlock can be reached through her website, [www.SusanSherlock.com](http://www.SusanSherlock.com)