

My Experiments with the Chord Zither / The Revised Tuning

My first acquaintance with zithers took place when I was a child of six. My parents had bought me a toy zither on which I used to compose simple tunes.

My family emigrated from France when I was eighteen, and it is in Adelaide that I came across a full size chord zither, which was lent to me for a few days. Many hours were spent trying it out and playing to my heart's content. I consequently decided to look for an instrument of my own and placed an ad in "the Advertiser". An elderly man replied by letter.

Upon my arrival he pulled out a box from under his wardrobe and there it was! a beautifully kept "Mandolin Guitar" which I still play today. The year was 1973.

With the help of a background in classical guitar, which I had been playing since the age of eleven, I devised ways to adapt this old-fashioned instrument to contemporary times and ears. From the guitar, I borrowed various techniques, such as angling the plectrum to improve the tone, playing in different spots along the strings, using harmonics, and finding new ways of strumming the chords.

After much experimentation, I arrived at the following tuning which consists basically in adding minor chords, changing the order of the chords and extending the range of the melody section by eliminating unnecessary sharps.

Original tuning:

Melody section:



Chords: **A D F G C** (all major)

The Revised Tuning:

Melody section:



Chords: **G Dm F Am C** (m = minor)

Why the 5-chord zither?

About 80% of my repertoire is played on the 5-chord zither. I also have a 6-chord instrument, which I use mostly for pieces in the melodic minor key. Here are some thoughts about the different types of zithers one can play.

Chord zithers come in many sizes:

The "Zippy Zither", a Japanese import from the 60's and 70's had melody strings only. Zithers with 2 and 3 chords were popular as children's instruments.

Earlier in the 20th century, there were many American 4-chord zithers.

Five-chord zithers are the most commonly found instruments and are usually German made.

Occasionally, you will find a 6-chord zither. A 9- chord zither can be purchased from Hopf – Germany.

With so many different sizes available, why is the 5-chord zither preferable, say, to a 6 or 9 chord instrument?

"Zippy Zithers" and instruments with 2 or 3 chords are for children and best played using melody cards. Bigger zithers can also be played with melody cards, but the serious musician will want to play by ear. I found 4

chords to be restricting. Not only is it missing a chord but also a range of only 2 octaves with no sharps and flats is a constant limitation.

I believe that the 5-chord zither is the best instrument to learn for the following reasons:

- It is easier to play than an instrument with more chords, with more sharps and flats to skip over. Fast passages and double notes are easier to play.
- It has fewer strings to keep in tune than larger instruments.
- The revised tuning allows simple modulations not possible with simply a C major scale, which smaller zithers use.

To sum up, the 5-chord zither stands in the middle of the range with the right balance between musical potential and simplicity. Once familiar with the 5-chord zither, you can acquire a 6-chord instrument (still using your 5-chord zither as the main one).

Single versus double melody strings

Single string instruments have 41 strings and are preferable for beginners because they are easier to keep in tune. Double string instruments, with 62 strings, take longer to tune but produce more volume and are therefore more suited to performing. Both are played exactly the same way.

The new Revised Tuning

Melody Section (21 single or double strings on the right hand side)

The melody section consists of 2 octaves of C major with b flats added, plus 2 notes below and 2 notes above. The notes below the first octave are numbered 0; the notes of the 1st octave are numbered 1, the notes of the 2nd octave are numbered 2, and the notes from and including top C are numbered 3.

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef. The notes are: a₀, b₀, c₁, d₁, e₁, f₁, g₁, a₁, b₁ (flat), b₁ (natural), c₂, d₂, e₂, f₂, g₂, a₂, b₂ (flat), b₂ (natural), c₃, d₃, e₃. Brackets below the staff indicate the 1st octave (from c₁ to b₂) and the 2nd octave (from c₂ to e₃).

Chord Section (20 strings grouped into 5 chords of 4 strings each)

The 5 chords are numbered from right to left. Number 1, 3 and 5 are the most useful chords in the key of C major: C, F and G major. They are called **primary chords** (underlined).

A minor is the minor counterpart of C major and D minor that of F major. These are called **related chords**.

5 **G major** 4 **D minor** 3 **F major** 2 **A minor** 1 **C major**

g₁ d₁ b₀ gbass f₁ d₁ a₀ dbass f₁ C₁ a₀ fbass e₁ C₁ a₀ abass e₁ C₁ g₀* Cbass

On old zithers, the 2 middle notes of G major chord (shown in dashed box) are inverted. The chord is then: g₁ b₀ d₁ g_{bass}. You can tell if they are inverted or not by looking at the size of the strings:



g₀*: 2nd string from right in the C major chord; it is often used as a melody note. This g precedes a₀ – the 1st melody string.