

*Contributions to this opinion page are welcomed from all.
This month's Back Page is by Jean Mills.*

The Back Page

When I first saw a mountain dulcimer it was love at first sight. I was a student in an evening course taught by Kitchener folk music guru Merrick Jarrett, and after a few weeks of introductory ballads and musical history, this particular evening was “meet the instruments” night. Merrick and his daughter Kate played a duet, perhaps a lullaby, on these delicate fretted instruments and I was hooked, immediately and intensely.

Fifteen years have passed, and I am still hooked, perhaps more than ever. I reach for my dulcimer during spare moments of the day, while waiting for the potatoes to boil, or when the kids are finishing their last-minute preparations for school. I have sat in the dark and played for twenty minutes, waiting for a late-night load of laundry to finish spinning so that I can put it all in the dryer and go to bed. My dulcimer fits onto my lap and under my fingers like a child, at home.

My love for this instrument has led to me to all sorts of adventures. I purchased my first dulcimer at the Halifax Folklore Centre. My husband and I took my new toy to the beautiful municipal gardens just down the road and sat there among the flowers and tourists trying to figure out exactly what I was supposed to do with it. There's a picture in our album of me sitting on a park bench, dulcimer perched unsteadily on my lap (I was wearing a short skirt, not quite right for dulcimers or cellos) staring intently at my left hand as I picked out “I Know Where I'm Going.”

Years later I would be sitting on the front porch of our little cottage on the Northumberland Strait, working on an arrangement of “Bonny Portmore”. Around the corner of the cottage stepped a deer and her twin fawns strolling to within metres of me, stopping to look and listen before wandering off down the lane towards the shore. If I had reached for the camera they would have been gone in seconds; instead I kept playing – perhaps it was my music that drew them near in the first place – and that image is mine forever.

A few years ago, when Paddy Tutty gave a dulcimer workshop for an interested group in Kitchener, I decided that there were enough of us around southern Ontario that we could possibly form a group. After much querying and organizing of peoples' schedules, the Grand River Dulcimer Club finally met, in November 1999, and we've continued to meet ever since. There are about seven of us, with a few members who keep in touch by email (one “member” is 12 hours away in Timmins!), and we meet at a friendly guitar shop in Guelph, Folkway Music. Marg drives in

from Toronto, Angie from Tavistock, Robin from north of Waterloo, Diane and Pauline from Hamilton, Jack from Kitchener, Brian from Cambridge. We are the only mountain dulcimer club in Canada, as far as we know. We've been on a local folk music radio show and played outside at Guelph's Streetfest festival, once being drowned out by a saxophone quintet across the street, and the second year bringing amplifiers that helped us draw crowds of up to thirty interested spectators. We had an end-of-year gathering at Angie's farm, playing tunes on a warm June afternoon under the apple tree. It was magic.

This instrument is a part of my landscape. It sustains and enriches me, and very often it comforts me. I've played it a lot lately. My fingers always seems to return to the same tunes, the sweet lullabies that I once played to my young children in darkened rooms when they needed soothing before sleep. A dulcimer played in the dark is one of life's treasures.

Jean Mills is a dulcimer player who lives in Guelph, Ontario.



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