



Be different. **Play Kantele!**

The five-string Kantele as accompaniment instrument

An easy self-teaching method

## **Be different. Play Kantele!**

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# 1. Introduction

The kantele is a musical instrument with a long tradition in Finland and Karelia. In former times there used to be a kantele in almost every Finnish house. Usually it was carved out of one single piece of wood.

As a foreigner, I am not familiar with old Finnish folk songs or the old "runes" of the Kalevala. Most of the time, I play the kantele in chord style. That is big fun! You can learn to play the kantele at any age. Have you never played a musical instrument before? Have you been told that you are not musically talented? Give the kantele a try!

The five-string kantele is an easy-to-learn instrument. You can take it wherever you go. Whenever you like to sing with your own family, or if you work with children or elderly people in your job or as a volunteer – take a kantele in your hands to support or accompany your singing!

With this book you can learn the first chords. You'll be able to accompany many folk songs and even some contemporary songs. As the kantele is a diatonic instrument, there are some restrictions. If you want to make music with others, ask them to play in the key of D-major or D-minor.

With this book, you can learn playing the kantele just for yourself. But it's even more fun to meet once or twice a week with others and work through this course together in a relaxed atmosphere. You can learn from each other and have fun singing along!

All songs in this book are in the public domain. All music notation, chord suggestions, layout, illustrations and the chord chart are entirely my own work. I have put some time and effort into this book. You can copy and share it for free. But please, do not use it for commercial use, do not sell it in any way and do not pretend that it is yours or anybody else's work. As far as my own rights are concerned, I hereby put this book under CC 3.0 licence. If you like it and use it, I'd be happy to receive your feedback via email. Please don't put it online without getting in touch with me first! Be fair – enjoy!

I hope you are not annoyed by the theoretical parts on harmony etc. I tried to keep that as short as possible. On the other hand a little background knowledge can help you to play the kantele more intuitively later on! If they irritate you, just skip those paragraphs. Or come back later – you may understand what I mean after you've collected a little experience with the kantele.

I hope this book will help and encourage you to enjoy playing the five-string kantele. If you like it, I'd appreciate your feedback via email! Thank you!

Peter Widenmeyer, August 2015  
[www.finnischekantele.de](http://www.finnischekantele.de)



## 2. A (very brief) history of the kantele



According to the "Kalevala", the national epic of Finland and Karelia, the very first kantele was made by Väinämöinen out of a giant shark's jaw-bone.

In organology, the kantele is regarded as a zither instrument and – like the Estonian "kannel", Latvian "Kokles", Lithuanian "Kankles", Russian "Gusli" and others – as an example of the Baltic Psaltery family. Similar instruments have been played in that area more than thousand years ago.

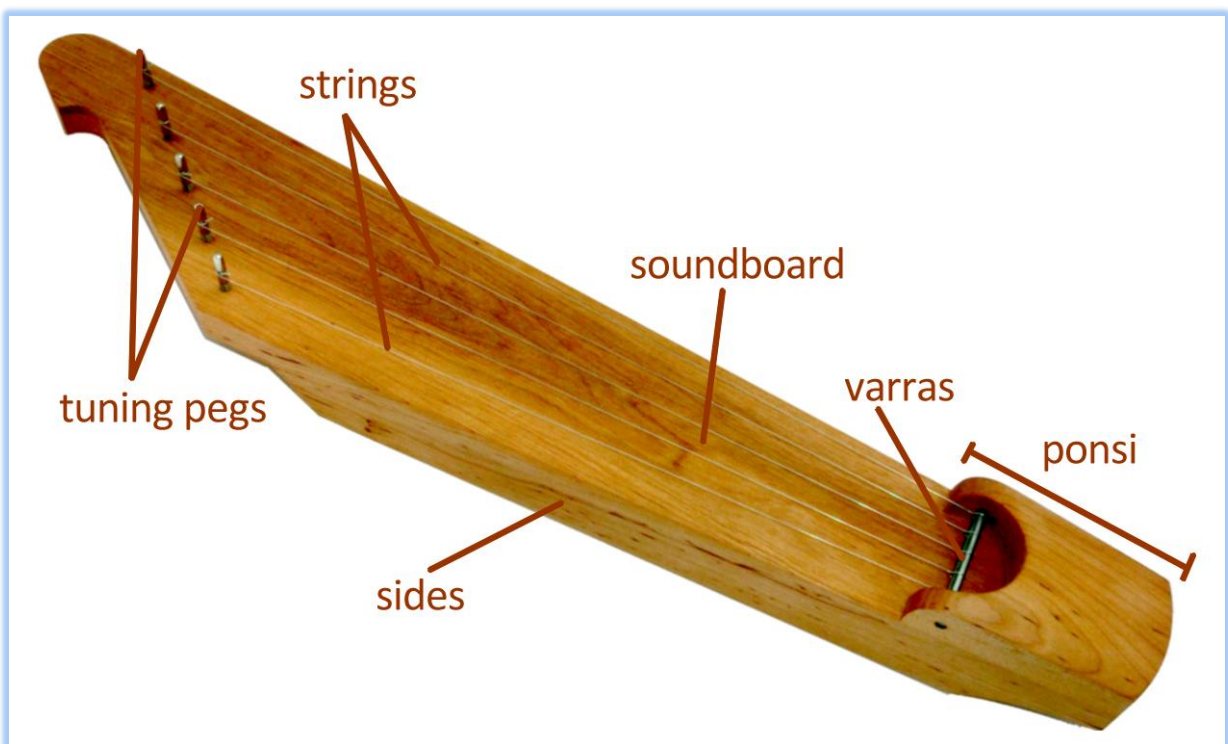
In former times, kanteles were usually carved out of one piece of wood. Strings were made of horse hair, which you can still find on the Jouhikko, a bowed instrument also typical in Finland and Karelia.

On the kantele, you can play single notes by plucking single strings with your fingers. For playing chords, you touch the strings you want to mute with your fingertips and then strum over all strings with your fingers or a plectrum.

## 3. Parts of the kantele

The kantele is a rather simple instrument: there are no frets, no bridge, no nut. Nowadays, the strings are usually attached to metal tuning pegs, but you can also find traditional instruments with carved wooden pegs, and also modern instruments with geared guitar tuners (which is not necessarily an advantage. They may be easier to tune – but if you put your instrument in a gig bag, those tuners get out of tune more easily than "zither pins" do.

Here's a contemporary kantele with a "traditional" shape:



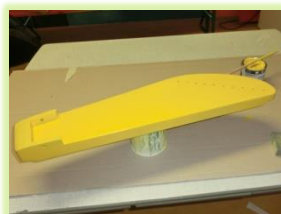
## 4. Where can I get a kantele?

Make sure to get a kantele with a total length of about 70 to 75 cm (28 to 30"). The shorter ones (about 50 cm resp. 20") are often made to be played in G major. That's also fine if you use this course just for yourself. You only have to be aware that all notes and chords are four steps higher on a G-kantele than on a D-kantele.

If you work through this course with others, I recommend that all of you use a kantele in D-tuning, as this book refers to the longer D-major models.

If you live in Finland it should be no problem to get hold of a kantele. Several makers produce well-made kanteles in series and ship to most locations in the world. Depending on how much you want to spend, you can look for instruments made by Koistinen, Lovikka or Melodia Soitin. But you can also find websites of other makers who run small businesses in Finland and other countries.

If you have wood-working skills, you could even build your own kantele! Here are some photos of a 10-string kantele I built in April 2014:



## 5. What else do I need to get started?

For a kantele with metal 'zither' pins, you also need a tuning wrench (usually provided with new instruments). They come in T- or L-shape and you can also use a fitting clock key.



I'd also recommend a chromatic electronic clip tuner. They are not too expensive – you can get one for less than 10 Euros. Make sure that you get a chromatic tuner – there are



tuners that are specially made for ukuleles, guitars etc. If you have a tuner with different modes, make sure that you choose the "chromatic" mode.

A strap is very useful as it helps to keep the instrument in place while you play it. You can even play your kantele when standing!

Last not least, it is a good idea to store your instrument in a case or gig bag.

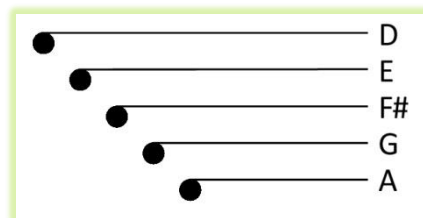


## 6. Tuning the five-string kantele

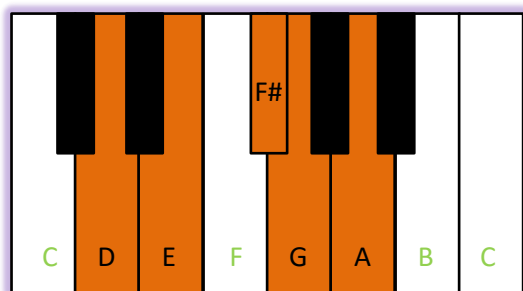
Depending on the technique and on the kind of songs you play, the kantele can be tuned to different keys and modes. For some of the old, traditional songs of Finland or for improvisation, the instrument is often tuned to a minor or a pentatonic scale.

As this book explains how to strum the kantele as an accompaniment instrument, we tune our kantele to D-major (later I'll explain D-minor as well).

For that we tune the five strings of the kantele to the following five notes (from longest string to shortest): D-E-F#-G-A.



On a piano, you find these notes above the "middle C":



Of course you can use other instruments or an electric tuner to get your kantele tuned. Make sure that you are in the right octave: otherwise the strings will be too loose or, if tuned to high, may break!

## 7. How to hold your kantele

You can put the kantele on a table, which is especially convenient when you pick single strings to play melodies or free improvisations.



For playing chords (and that's what this book is about) it is more comfortable to place the instrument on your lap – or, as said before, attach a strap and hold your kantele as if it were a guitar!

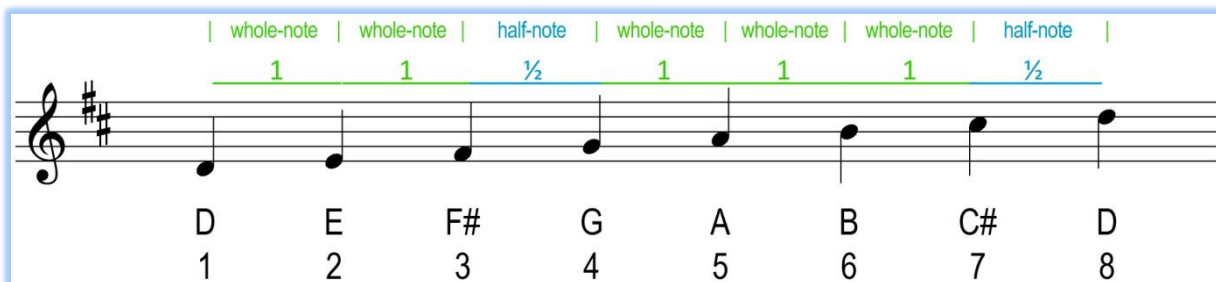


In all cases, let the tuning pegs be close to your left hand and the "Ponsi" on your right. In other words, keep the shortest string directly in front of you and the longest string furthest from you!



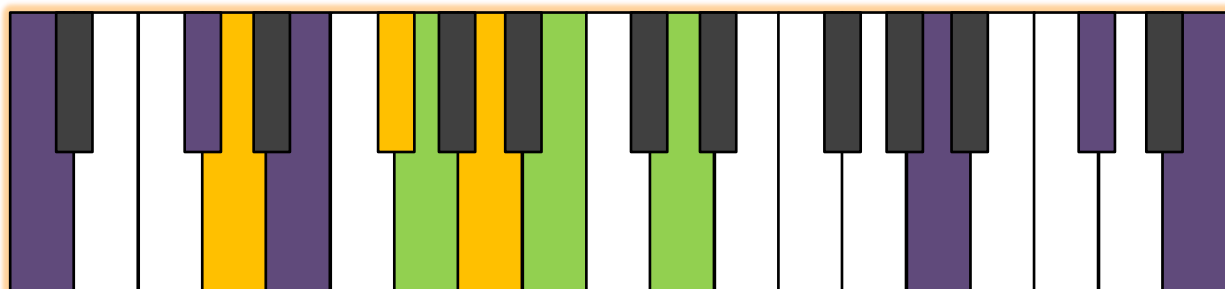
## 8. The first chord: D-major

A chord is built by three or more different notes played at the same time. A major chord usually consists of the root (also called keynote or tonic note) from which you count to the third and to the fifth note of the scale.



As our kantele is tuned in D, the tonic note is "D". Now for a D-major chord, we climb up two whole-tone steps on the scale to the third note (F#) and from there one and a half steps to the fifth (A). So the D-major chord consists of the three notes D-F#-A.

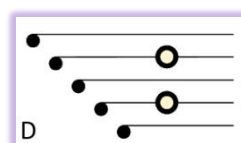
On a piano, you can build a **D-major chord** by playing the keys that are coloured in orange in the following picture. The keys that are coloured in green here build a **G-major chord**. And the purple keys show how to play an **A-major chord** on a piano. As you can see, you can play the chord in a lower or a higher register: it will always be the same chord.



Now, how can we transfer that to the five-string kantele? As we have the notes D-E-F#-G-A on a five-string kantele, we have to mute the notes E and G because they do not fit into the D-major chord.



With the index finger of our left hand, slightly touch the G-string, and with the middle finger or with the ring finger, slightly touch the E-string. We strum over all strings, but only the D-, F#- and A-string will actually sound, and voilà, that's our first chord: D-major.



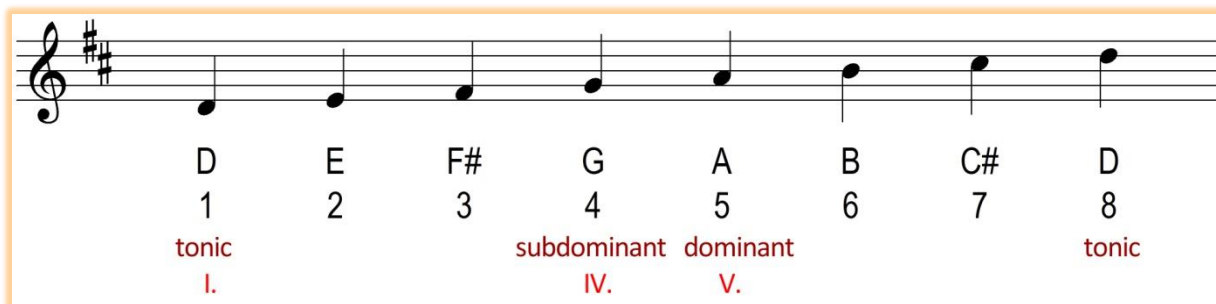
I prefer the ring finger solution (see photo on the right) because I think it is easier to change chords later on.

Try out both and decide what is best for you!

## 9. More chords: G, A and A7

Many folk songs can be accompanied with three basic chords: the tonic chord (often symbolized by the Roman number "I."), the subdominant ("IV.") and the dominant chord ("V.").

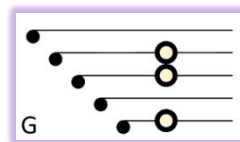
In the key of D, the tonic chord is D-major, of course. The subdominant chord is G-major, and the dominant chord is A-major or – as we will learn soon – the A7 chord.



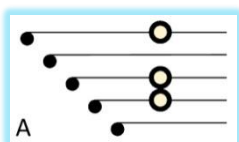
To build a G-major chord, we need the notes G-B-D (please note: in Germany and some other countries you write "H" instead of "B", so there you'd say: G-H-D. "B" in Germany usually stands for "Bb" in international music notation).



Now on a five-string kantele we have a "G" and a "D" string, but no "B" string. So we can't build a complete chord. We have to mute the E-, the F#- and the A-string. I usually use my thumb to mute the A-string, my middle finger to mute the F#- and my ring finger to mute the E-string.



So when we strum over all strings, only the G- and D-string will sound. Now if you use the kantele as an accompaniment instrument, you are adding your voice or a melody instrument. From time to time, luckily the "missing" note is in the melody of a song, and on these occasions the melody will "complete" the incomplete chord!



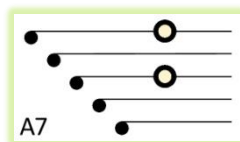
The third chord we need is the A and the A7 chord.

For an A chord, we need A-C#-E. But on a five string kantele, we don't have the C# note. So once again, we have an incomplete chord.

But when playing in the key of D, in most cases the chord "A7" sounds even more interesting than the chord "A".

Now in general, the affix "7" in a chord name means that the (minor) seventh note of the scale is added to the chord. For example, in D-major the 7<sup>th</sup> note is a C#. But for D7, we need the minor seventh – that is "C" instead of "C#". So for a complete D7 chord you'd need the notes D-F#-A-C.

But now we are talking about the "A7" chord! In the A-scale, the minor seventh is "G", so the complete A7 chord consists of the notes A-C#-E-G. As I said before, we don't have the C# on our five-string kantele.



But we do have a G-string! Therefore on most occasions when we play in the key of D and an A-major chord is required, we can play the A7 instead! And the good thing: The A7 chord is even easier to play than the A-major chord – since you only need two fingers instead of three!

On the photo you can see how I put my fingers on the strings that have to be muted. My ring finger is on the D-string, and my index finger is on the F#-string.



That's why I prefer the "ring finger solution" for the D-major chord: It is very easy to change from D to A7!



**Exercise 1:** Strum your kantele with your right hand. With the left hand, change between the chords "D" and "A7". Repeat that often!

**Exercise 2:** Play and sing the following song "He's got the whole world". You only need the chords "D" and "A7"!

He's got the whole world. in his hands, he's got the

whole world in his hands, he's got the whole world

in his hands, he's got the whole world in his hands.

**Exercise 3:** Play and sing the old Finnish folk song "Suutarin emännän kehtolaulu"! You only need the three chords D, G and A7!

Kei - tä te oot - te te nuo - ret po - jat, kun en mä tun - ne tei - tä,

piu - pa - li pau - pa - li, piu - pa - li pau - pa - li, kun en mä tun - ne tei - tä?



## 10. The right hand: Strumming

Now let's have a look at the right hand. To strum the kantele, you can use the index finger of your right hand. You can also use a plectrum, or put together the tips of thumb, index and middle finger (as you would hold a plectrum!) and play with your fingernails!

If you have never before played a string instrument, try to play "from outside in", i.e. from the longest to the shortest string. This is the traditional way and it makes sense to strum from the deepest to the highest string. We call that an up-stroke.

If you have played guitar or ukulele or something like that, you may find it easier to strum "from inside out", i.e. from the shortest to the longest string. This is called a down-stroke.

Many songs have a 4/4 time signature (sometimes indicated by the letter "C" instead of "4/4"). That means there are four beats in each bar. You can play it just with down-strokes like this:

1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		...
↓	↓	↓	↓		↓	↓	↓	↓		...

But after a time that becomes a bit boring. So you can add some up-strokes.

1	2	and	3	4	and		1	2	and	3	4	and		...
↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑		↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑		...

There are also songs in  $\frac{3}{4}$  or  $\frac{6}{8}$  time signature. You can change between up- and down-strokes like this:

1	2	3		1	2	3		...
↓	↑	↑		↓	↑	↑		...

Keep your right hand relaxed! You don't have to move your forearm up and down – it's better to move your hand up and down by a relaxed rotation of your wrist!

**Exercise 1:** Put your left hand over all five strings to mute them. Then concentrate on your right hand and try to strum the patterns as shown above. While you strum, say the numbers loudly:



- 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4 ...

- 1, 2 and, 3, 4 and, 1, 2 and, 3, 4 and ...

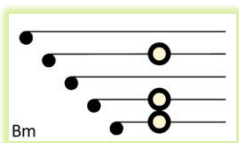
- 1,2,3,1,2,3) while you strum!

**Always play relaxed and with a loose wrist!**

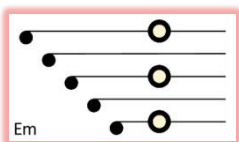


## 11. Some minor chords: Bm, Em, F#m

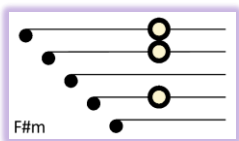
Now you have acquired the basic playing skills. With the following chords you can spice up your arrangements – and for some songs not limited to the standard tonic, subdominant and dominant chords, you need to be able to play the following minor chords:



Bm is the relative minor of the D-major chord. It should be B-D-F#. This chord is incomplete as we don't have a "B" string, so we can only play D-F#. As mentioned before, in some countries this chord is also called "Hm".



Em is the relative minor of the G-major chord. It should be E-G-B. This chord is incomplete as we don't have a "B" string, so we can only play E-G.



F#m is the relative minor of the A-major chord. It should be F#-A-C#. This chord is incomplete as we don't have a "C#" string, so we can only play F#-A.

**Exercise 1: Play the song "Oh, Freedom". There is a Bm and an Em chord in this song!**

**Just play every chord until the next chord is given.**

**Chords in parentheses such as "(G)" are optional and make the accompaniment more interesting. But if you're not so fast with changing chords yet, you can just ignore the chords in parentheses and just keep playing the chord given before!**



Oh, \_\_\_\_\_ free - dom, oh, \_\_\_\_\_ free - dom!

Oh, \_\_\_\_\_ free - dom o - ver me! \_\_\_\_\_ And be -

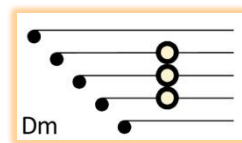
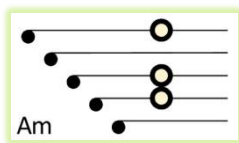
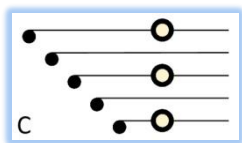
fore I'd be a slave, I'll be bu - ried in my grave and go

home to my Lord and be free! \_\_\_\_\_



## 12. More chords: C, Am, Dm, E7, Dsus4, Asus4, Dsus2

Now let's learn some more new chords! You already know some of them – since some chords are incomplete on the five-string kantele, they are ambiguous.

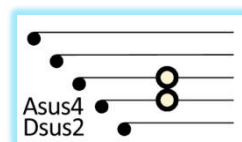
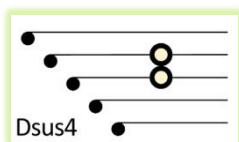
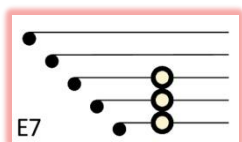


The C-major chord on the five-string kantele is identical with the Em chord: a C-major chord should consist of the notes C-E-G, an Em of the notes E-G-B. As there is neither a C-string nor a B-string on our instrument, only the notes E and G are left. So it is up to our singing or to a melody instrument to "complete" the chord!

The same is true for the Am chord: it is identical to the A-major chord, as there is no C- or C#-string that would make the chord unambiguous and clear. So there are only A and E.

For the Dm chord, just build a D-major chord and then additionally mute the F# string. Again, it is easier if you are used to the "ring finger solution" for the D-major chord, you can just lower your middle finger to build a Dm.

Now E7 is an interesting chord. In musical theory, the E7 chord is the dominant of A-major and also of Am. So in some songs you'll find a chord progression like " D-G-E7-A7-D", where E7 (the dominant of A) is placed before the A7 (which is the dominant of D). A complete E7 consists of E-G#-B-D, but as we don't have G# and B, only the E- and D-string are left!



The sus4 and sus2 chords (also just called "D2", "D4", "A4" etc.) are just small variations of the basic chord. For example, if you have to play the D-major chord for a longer time, you can just change to D2, then go back to D-major, then change to D4 and go back to D-major. That makes your accompaniment more interesting. Once again, D2 is identical to A4, as both chords are incomplete and therefore ambiguous.



**Exercise 1: Try to change quickly between the chords by playing chord sequences such as:**

- **D-D2-D-D4-D, then repeat from the beginning!**
- **D-G-D-A-D-G-E7-A7, then repeat from the beginning!**
- **Dm-C-Dm-C-Dm-A7-Dm, then repeat from the beginning!**

**Always play four beats for each chord! Don't forget: relaxed wrist!**



**Exercise 2: Play and sing "Go, Tell it to the Mountain"! There's an E7 chord in the last line!**

Go, tell it to the mount-tain, o-ver the hills and e-ve-ry-where.

Go, tell it to the moun-tain, that Je-sus Christ is born!

When I was a see-ker, I sought both night and day. I

asked my Lord to help me and he showed me the way!—

**Exercise 3: "My Lord, What a Morning" is a challenge! Play it slowly!**

My Lord, what a mor-ning, my Lord, what a mor-ning!

my\_ Lord, what a mor-ning, when the stars be-gin to fall, when the

stars be-gin to fall! You will hear the trum-pet sound to wake the

na-tions un-der - ground! Look-ing to my God's right hand, when the

stars be-gin to fall, when the stars be-gin to fall!



## 13. Transpose other keys to D-major

So far all song examples in this book have been in the key of D-major. You can easily tell that, because at the beginning of each line in the musical notation you can see two sharp notes: F# and C#.

But what if you take a songbook where the songs are arranged in different keys such as G-major, E-major etc.?

Well, as the kantele is a diatonic instrument, you can't play in all keys as you can with a guitar or piano. So in that case you have to transpose the chords to "D". That's not so difficult as it may look!

The following chart contains a list of the most prevalent keys. For example, if a song has four sharp notes (or if the first and / or last chord given is an E-major), then it is most likely in the key of E. Now just look for each chord given in the original key in the "E" column. When you have found them, move to the right in the same row until you are in the "D" column. Then replace the original chords with the chords you find in the "D" column.

So if the original chords for the song in "E" are "E, A, E, C#m, A, B7, E" you'll find that in the key of "D" you should use "D, G, D, Bm, G, A7, D". If the original key is one of those in the columns marked in blue, you have to move to the left.

So now you can transpose almost all chords to the key of "D" and sing and play your favourite songs!

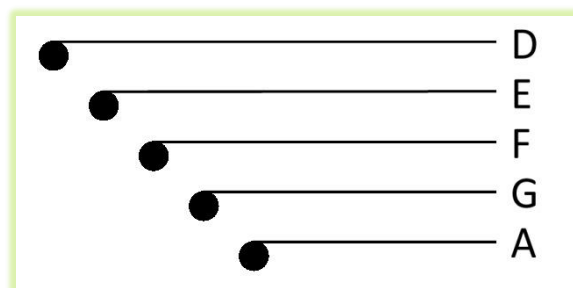
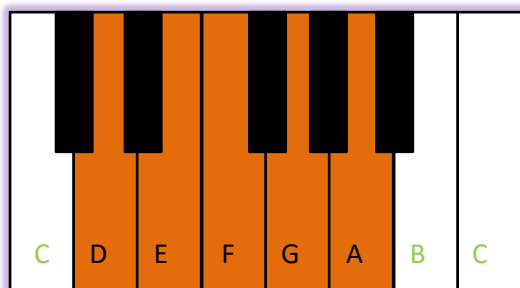
	→	→	↓	←	←	←	←	←	←
Key	E ####	A ###	D ##	G #	C	F <i>b</i>	Bb <i>bb</i>	Eb <i>bbb</i>	Ab <i>bbbb</i>
Tonic	E	A	D	G	C	F	Bb	Eb	Ab
Sub-dominant	A	D	G	C	F	Bb	Eb	Ab	Db
Dominant Dominant 7	B B7	E E7	A A7	D D7	G G7	C C7	F F7	Bb Bb7	Eb Eb7
Relative minor	C#m	F#m	Bm	Em	Am	Dm	Gm	Cm	Fm
Relative minor	F#m	Bm	Em	Am	Dm	Gm	Cm	Fm	Bbm
Relative minor	G#m	C#m	F#m	Bm	Em	Am	Dm	Gm	Cm
Other chords	D	G	C	F	Bb	Eb	Ab	Db	Gb
	→	→	↑	←	←	←	←	←	←



## 14. Variation: D-minor tuning

Maybe you have noticed that some songs are written in a key that produces a rather sad or melancholic mood. In that case, it is likely that the song is written in a minor key.

On the five-string kantele we can easily change from D-major to D-minor. The only thing you have to do is: tune the middle string from F# down to F! Some modern kanteles have a minor-major-lever, but you can also just use your tuning key!



Just for the experts: The natural D-minor scale looks like in the picture on the left, whereas the harmonic D-minor scale has a raised seventh as shown in the picture on the right. But that is not relevant for the five-string kantele, as it only has only the notes D-E-F-G-A anyway.



**Exercise 1:** Look up the chords for Dm, Gm and F in the chord chart for D-minor at the end of this book. Then try to play and sing "When Israel was in Egypt's Land":



When Is - rael was in E-gypt's land - Let my peo-ple go! -

op - pressed so hard they could not stand. - Let my peo-ple go! -

Go down, Mo - ses, way down in E-gypt's land.

Tell old Pha - ra - oh: Let my peo-ple go!



## 15. More Songs from Finland

1. On nei - dol - la pu - na - pau - la, kun tans - si - hin käy.

Käs - var - te - hen kul - tan - sa sol - mii hän sen, käs -

var - te - hen kul - tan - sa sol - mii hän sen!

*Traditional, 19<sup>th</sup> century*

Kas, kuu - sen lat - vas - sa ok - si - en al - la on

pe - sä pie - noi - nen o - - ra - val - la; sen

poi - ka - set sii - nä ne leik - ki - ä lyö ja

pik - - ku ham - pa - hin sie - men - tä syö. \_\_\_\_\_

*Lyrics: Immi Hellén (1861-1937)*  
*Music: Pekka Juhani Hannikainen (1854-1924)*



D A7 D A7 D, D G D

1. Jo jou - ti ar-mas ai - ka ja su - vi su - loi - nen.  
Kau - niis - ti jo - ka paik - kaa ko - ris - taa kuk - ka - nen.

G D A7 D G D A7

Nyt siu - na - us - taan suo - pi taas läm - pö au - rin - gon, se

D A7 B<sup>m</sup> A7 G D G A7 D

luon - non uu - deks luo - pi, sen kut - suu e - lo - hon.

Sweden 1697, Finnish lyrics 1701

Dm A7

1. Wai - na - moi - nen, an - cient min - strel,  
2. On the stone of song he sett - les,  
3. In his hands the harp of fish - bone,  
4. "Hi - ther come, ye North - land peo - ple,

Dm Gm A7 Dm

1. the e - ter - nal wis - dom sin - ger,  
2. on the mount of sil - ver clear - ness,  
3. with his knee the arch sup - por - ting,  
4. come and li - sten to my play - ing,

Dm Gm Dm A7

1. Laves his hands to sno - wy white - ness,  
2. on the sum - mit, gol - den co - loured,  
3. takes the harp - strings in his fin - gers,  
4. to the harp's en - tran - cing mea - sures,

Gm Dm A7 Dm

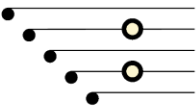
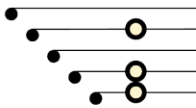
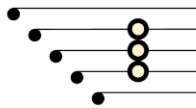
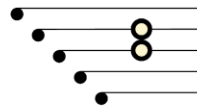
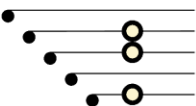
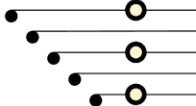
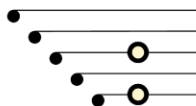
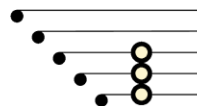
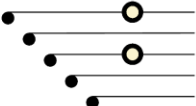
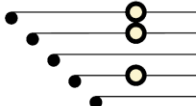
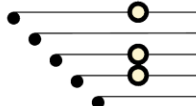

1. sits u - pon the rock of joy - ance.  
2. takes the harp by him cre - a - ted.  
3. speaks these words to those as - sem - bled.  
4. to my songs of joy and glad - ness."

Lyrics: Elias Lönnrot, Kalevala, Rune XLI. English translation by John Martin Crawford (1888). Music: Traditional from Karjala



## 16. Chord charts

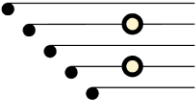
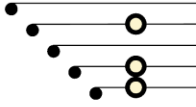
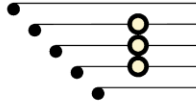
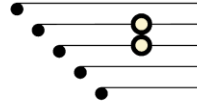
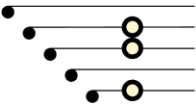

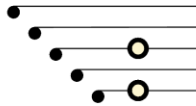
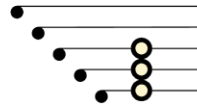
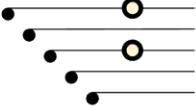
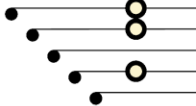

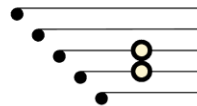
**Chord chart for 5 string kantele in D-Major**

 D	 Bm	 Dm	 Dsus4
 G	 Em ↔ C	 G6	 E7
 A7	 F#m	 A ↔ Am	 Asus4 ↔ Dsus2

Please note: To use this chart, tune your kantele to D-E-F#-G-A (from longest to shortest string)  
 „Dsus2“, „Dsus4“ are sometimes also called „D2“, „D4“ etc.  
 On the 5 string kantele some chords are incomplete and can therefore stand for different chords. This is indicated in this chart by the ↔ sign.

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**Chord chart for 5 string kantele in D-Minor**

 Dm	 B <sup>b</sup>	 D	 Dsus4
 Gm ↔ G	 Em ↔ C	 G6	 E7
 A7	 F	 A ↔ Am	 Asus4 ↔ Dsus2

Please note: To use this chart, tune your kantele to D-E-F-G-A (from longest to shortest string)  
 „Dsus2“, „Dsus4“ are sometimes also called „D2“, „D4“ etc.  
 On the 5 string kantele some chords are incomplete and can therefore stand for different chords. This is indicated in this chart by the ↔ sign.

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## 17. Epilogue

Congratulations! You've made it! I hope you enjoyed learning to play the five-string kantele. Share your music with others. Make something useful with your hands – make music!

And don't forget: Be different. **Play Kantele!**



Peter Widenmeyer  
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Many thanks to "Dusty Turtle" for revising this book!  
Visit his mountain dulcimer website at [www.rivercitydulcimers.com](http://www.rivercitydulcimers.com)!

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Gerry Henkel (US) has a long experience in building kanteles. If you like to know more about small kanteles, I recommend his free "Guide for Five and Ten String Kanteles"!

[www.michaeljking.com](http://www.michaeljking.com)

Michael builds different instruments and you can have your own, custom made kantele!



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