

Things My Kantele Taught Me



9 Kantele Techniques

by Lani K Thompson

A Word From the Author

I've heard it said that the traditional way to learn the kantele is from a teacher, and I've also heard it said that self-teaching is the traditional way to learn. I think either way is valid. I, myself, am self-taught.

Teachers can be hard to find. When I wrote my book, *My Kantele Is My Teacher*, my goal was to provide a book that could serve as a guide for anyone who didn't have someone else to show them how to play.

In addition to basic fingering techniques and information on how to care for your kantele, I included some advanced techniques that others showed me, or which I discovered on my own.

I started writing *My Kantele Is My Teacher* more than 20 years ago. This year, it goes out of print, mainly because the audio files I included in it have slowly decayed and no longer look good. In addition, much of the information included in that book appears in some of my other books, such as *My First Kantele*.

However, the advanced techniques I demonstrate in that book do not appear anywhere else, and I hate to see that information lost, which is why I am giving this small booklet away for free. I hope you enjoy it!

Don't be afraid to make mistakes or sound bad, and soon you will discover that your kantele will teach you, too...but you have to listen closely

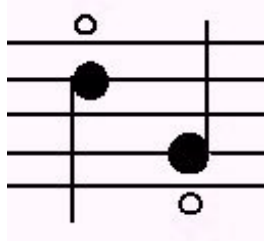
© 2024 by Lani K. Thompson

Photos © 2024 by Jeffrey A. Thompson

All rights reserved.

Email the author at
lanik@kantelemusic.com

How To Play the Harmonic



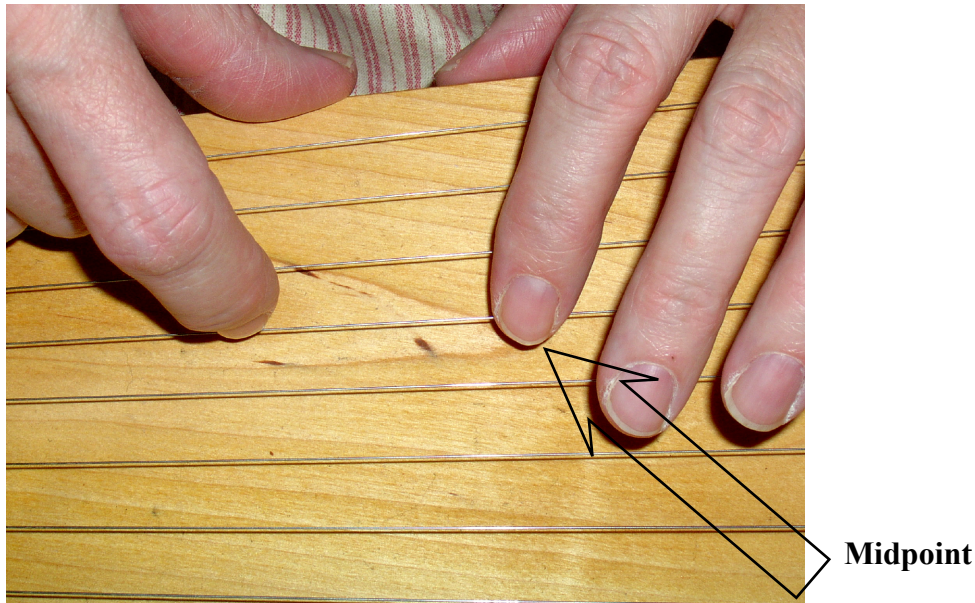
The small circle that appears above or below a note in a song means the harmonic should be plucked (one octave up).



You can make your kantele string play a note that's one octave higher than the note it's actually tuned to. To do this, you first need to find the middle of the string you want to play.

Place the pad of your left "pointer" finger down lightly on a string, starting at the far left hand side of your kantele. Use your right hand to pluck towards you while you slowly slide your left hand from left to right, down the length of the string.

You won't hear any note when you start plucking but, as you slide your finger down the string, a note will start to sound. At first it won't be very clear, but that will change as soon as you reach the middle point of the string.



Stop when you think you've found it. Now you're ready to try the actual technique!

Place the pad of your left "pointer" finger exactly on the middle of the string. Now, simultaneously lift your left finger straight up off the string while you pluck the string with your right hand finger. You should hear a note exactly one octave higher.

Repeat with another string.

How Do You Remember Where the Middle Of The String Is?

If you want, you can use a pencil to draw a small "x" on the wood under the string to help you remember where the middle point is. If - like me - you don't like to mark your kantele, you can easily memorize the middle point by studying your instrument's grain of wood.

I noticed that my instrument has whorls, slight differences in color, and other small, natural markings in the grain. No matter where I look on my kantele, there is something unique about any given spot! Look at the wood under the middle of the string you're working with. What do you see?

If you train yourself to remember the unique markings of your instrument, you can use those markings to guide you when you're playing. It may take a little longer to learn this technique but, in the end, you will have a more intimate relationship with your kantele.

How To Use A Bow: 3 techniques

Basic Technique

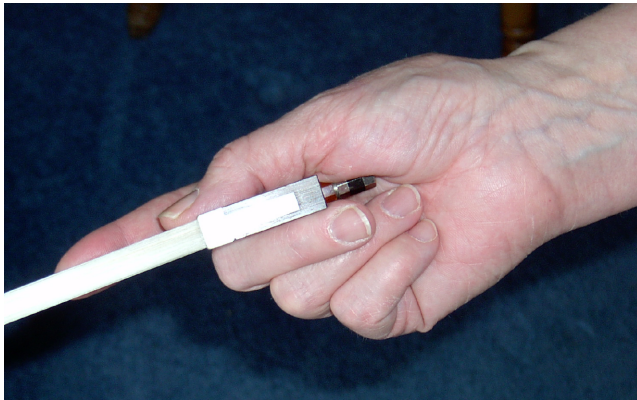
Kantele maker Michael King introduced me to the idea that you can play the kantele with a bow. I love the way it sounds!

Bows come in different sizes. I use a 3/4 size bow. The full size bow is awkward to handle, and the child's bow is too short and tends to "snag" on the strings.

Use the screw at the end of the bow to tighten or loosen the bowstrings. The strings need to be tight -- but not too tight. You'll recognize how much you need to tighten them with practice. To begin with, tighten them just enough to produce a good sound. If you loosen the bowstrings before you put your bow away, it will last longer.

Before you start to play, you need to rub the bow strings with rosin so they'll stick enough to produce a sound. I tighten my bow and draw it over the rosin 7-8 times.

As you play, the rosin rubs off on the strings. This means, when you go back to plucking, your fingers will stick to the strings, too, making it difficult to play! I use a guitar string lubricant when I'm through with the bow. The spray removes the rosin; my fingers don't stick; and it extends the life of my kantele strings.



This is how I hold my bow.



Another way to minimize this problem is to use the bow on the parts of the kantele you don't tend to finger. I place my bow as close as I can to the end of the instrument that's opposite the tuning pins. There are many ways to hold the bow, and each way will produce a different sound. For basic playing, I hold the bow lightly, using my forefinger to "steady" it. Then, using light pressure, I draw it evenly and smoothly across the strings while playing the chords with my left hand. Unpleasant squeaks are normal when you're learning, but with a little practice you'll soon be able to add this technique to your repertoire of sounds.

The Bouncing Bow



Begin by holding your bow as for the Basic Bow technique -- but position the bow in the middle of the soundboard instead of at the end.

Use your left hand to dampen the strings you don't want to sound as you play different chords. Hold your bow, loosely, in your right hand. It should be slightly tilted from side to side.

Take short strokes, lifting your arm up so that the bow comes completely off the strings at the end of the forward stroke. Lower your arm slightly as you draw the bow back towards you, again lifting your arm up at the end of the backwards stroke. There is a lot of motion in the Bouncing Bow, but don't worry -- it's not as complicated as it sounds.

When done properly, the bow will literally bounce off the strings.

Bowed Drone

The Bowed Drone reminds me of humpback whales. I like the sound!

Set your kantele down on a table or other surface. You need to stand up in order to draw the bow properly for this technique. Check that your instrument's at a comfortable height so you can play without having to stoop over it. I think it's easier to stand just to the left of the kantele.

I usually use the two lowest strings for the best drone effect, but I will add another string, occasionally, for interest.



Click on the video with the hand tool to see this technique. When it starts to play, click again to open in a bigger window.



To duplicate the sound, position your bow between two of the tuning pins. Place the fingers of your left hand lightly on the bow to help steady and guide it as you draw it towards you. You can also point the tip of the bow upwards at an angle of 30-35 degrees, gradually lowering the tip as you draw the bow, so that it's perpendicular to the string when you're through. Push the bow away from you, gradually raising the tip toward the ceiling as you stroke it across the string in the other direction.



Don't worry if you sound bad. Remember -- you can't find good sounds without finding a lot of bad ones, too! Those terrible squeaks and squawks are showing you where the good sounds lie. Listen to them!

The Slide

You can make your kantele sound like a steel guitar.

Place the side of your tuning hammer on a string, then slide it down the length of the string while you pluck it. You may use a spoon, if you prefer.



Push/Pull Technique

Pluck a string on your kantele. What do you hear? Most people will say they hear the note being plucked. If you pluck the string tuned to "D", you hear "D". However, this isn't completely true. Now place your left hand against the side of the kantele while you pluck a string with your right hand. Do you feel the different vibrations? Listen. What do you hear? When you pluck a string, you never hear just the note being plucked. If you did, it would sound boring. You hear the note - but you also hear the 5th to the note, the note one octave up, and many others, all mixed together.



By pushing and pulling a string at the same time, you can add "texture" to the note being played. Use your right thumb to push against a string. Use your left pointer finger to pluck the same string towards you. Exert an equal amount of pressure in each direction. This sharp attack makes the fundamental note (the note the string is actually tuned to) quieter and enhances the overtones of that note. The sound is slightly distorted. I like it! The sound is affected by where you place your fingers on the string. I usually position my fingers about two inches apart. Try different positions to discover which one you like.

Using a Pick

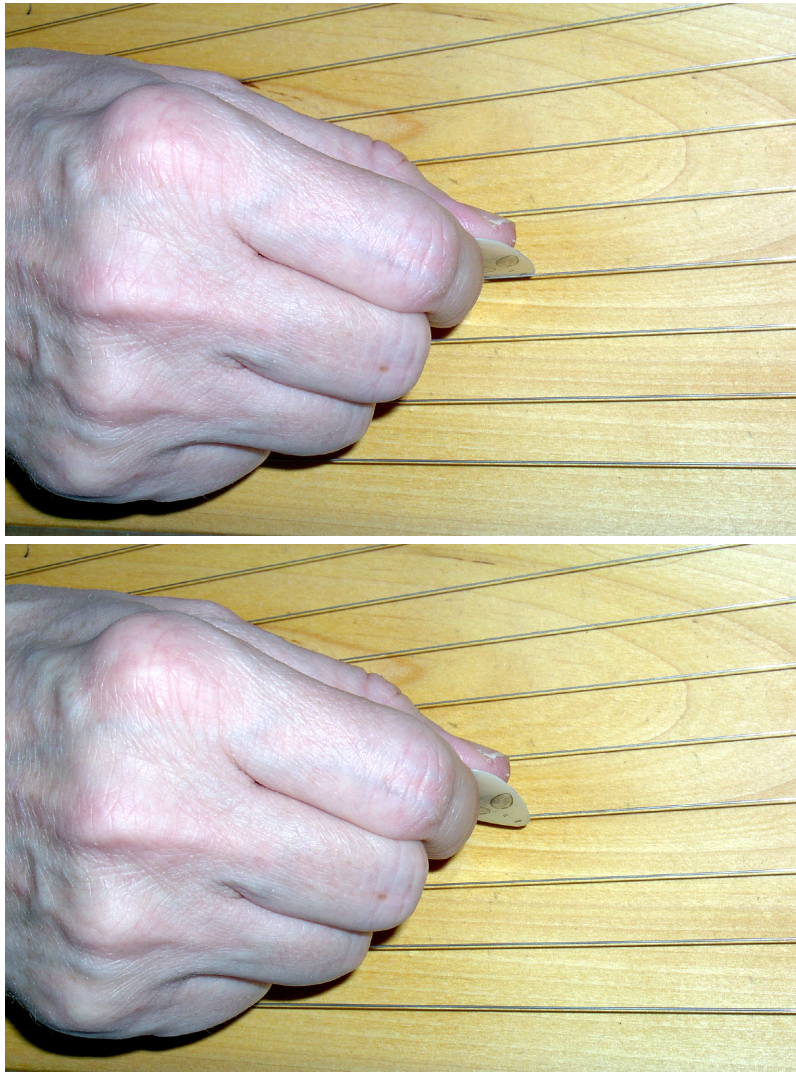
Picks are fun to play with. You can make a pick from a plastic milk bottle, or you can buy a guitar pick at your local music store.

The sound you achieve will be colored by the shape of the pick you're using, as well as how much the pick bends. (Some picks are soft; some hard.) Experiment with different ways of holding your pick. If you hold it with two fingers and your thumb, you can bend it, thus changing its relative hardness on different strokes.

Experiment with different objects. I've used a feather to pick at the strings, and sometimes I just use my fingernail.

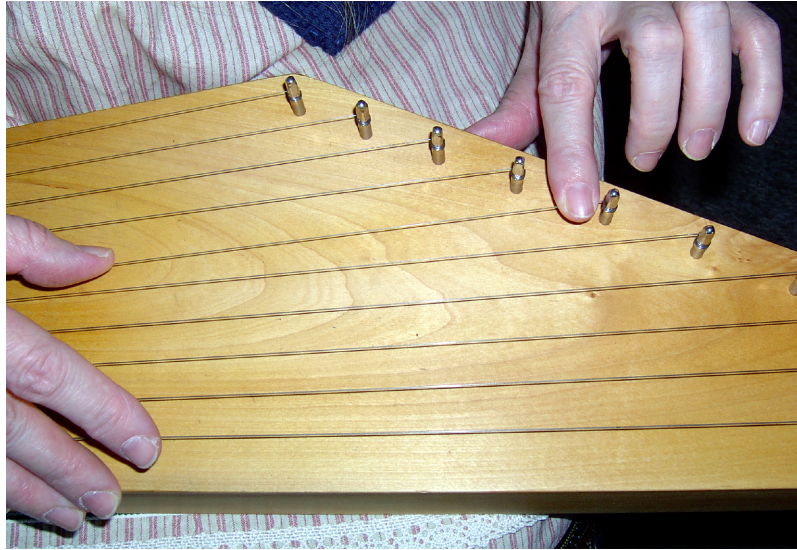
To make your kantele sound like a balalaika, hold your pick with your finger and thumb. Place the tip against the string so that the bottom side of the pick is touching the string. Push away from you. Now pull the pick towards you, plucking the string with the top side of the pick as you do so. Repeat several times. When I'm playing my kantele this way, I usually pick the string three times (away-towards-away-towards-away-towards) in rapid succession.

Even when you use a pick, you probably won't want to play every single note of a song this way. I usually use this technique on longer notes.



String Dampening Techniques

In order to strum chords, a kantele player dampens the strings with his or her left hand while strumming with the right -- but you can also dampen strings you pluck.

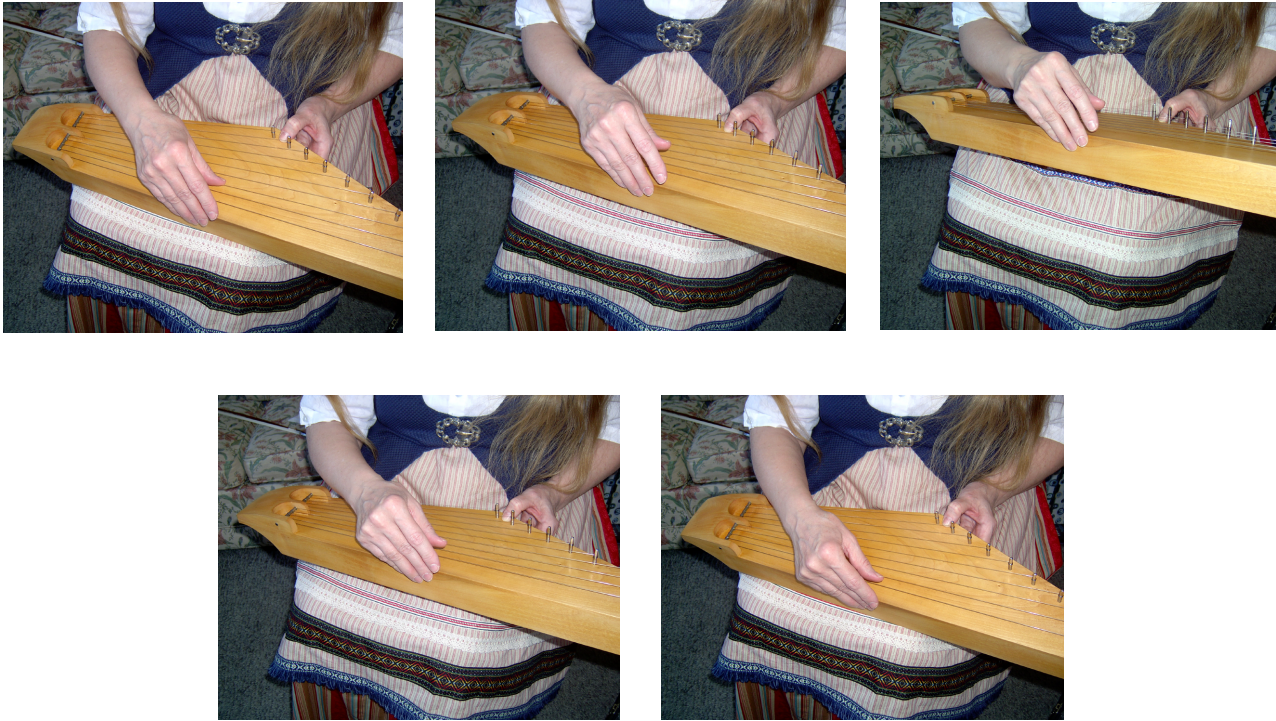


One way to do this is to place your left pointer finger on top of the string near the tuning pin. Use your left hand to dampen the string while you pluck it with your right hand. I pluck with my thumb and use my other fingers to help balance the kantele in my lap.



An easier way to achieve a similar sound is to press the fleshy part of your left thumb against the string where it winds around the tuning pin. Rest the tips of your second and third fingers on the edge of the kantele for balance. Now, dampen the string with your thumb while plucking with your right hand. I push the string away from me with my right hand thumb, and use the second and third fingers of my right hand for additional balance.

The Tremolo



Creating a tremolo effect is one of the harder techniques to master because you have to learn to move - even shake - your kantele while you are playing it but, once you hear the undulating tone, you will be eager to use it.

There are two ways to create this sound.

The easier way is to hold your kantele in your lap. Grasp the part of the kantele that's closest to you in your left hand. As you pluck the strings with your right hand, use your left hand to raise and lower the kantele off your lap. Your sound will be colored by how far - and how fast - you raise and lower your instrument.

An even better sound can be achieved by playing the kantele in an upright position. Again, play the strings with your right hand. Use your left hand to grasp your kantele and swing it back and forth - as if you are swinging a door open and shut.

I love the beautiful, weird sounds of tremolo.

(Author's Note: The kantele is a deceptively simple instrument because a new player can start playing almost from the beginning. Yet, to play well takes years of practice and really listening to your instrument.

When your kantele teaches you something new, I hope you will email me. You can send your questions or descriptions of your own favorite techniques to lani@kantelemusic.com. I'd love to hear from you!)