

The Basics of Playing the Zither



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Table of contents

Table of contents.....	2
The Zither.....	3
The Zither Music.....	4
Plucking the Zither.....	5
Plucking Quavers	5
Plucking Crotchet	6
Plucking Semitone Value.....	7
Dotted Rhythm.....	8
Holding Down Notes.....	9
Tuning the Zither.....	10
The Application of Zither-string.....	11
Hungarian Folk Songs.....	13

The Zither

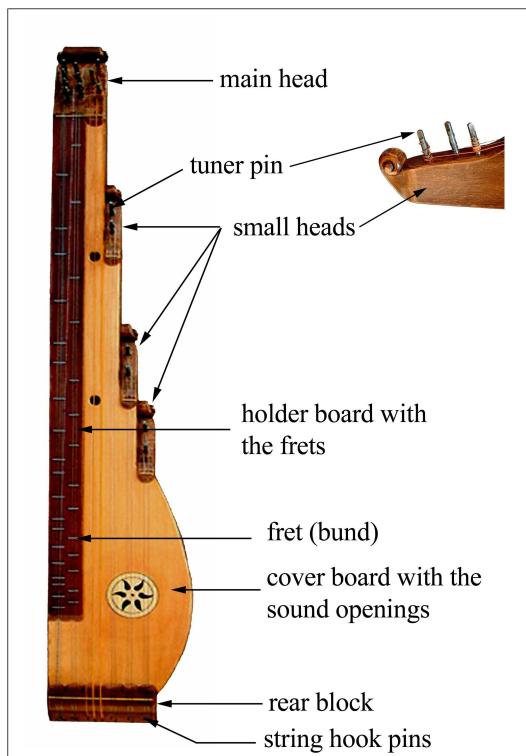
Instruments belonging to the family of zithers can be found almost all over the world. Although they differ to a great extent in shape and sound, there is an important common feature: the strings run along the instrument's body which has no neck.

The exact origin of the Hungarian zither is unknown. The name “zither” existed by the 16th century, but the first instrument, as well as its usable description, dates only from the second half of the 19th century. Hungarian zithers from before this are undescribed.

Today's Hungarian zither is closely related to the “Scheitholt,” which was formerly used as a folk instrument in German speaking regions, as well as the still used French “epinette”, the Norwegian “langleik”, the Danish “humle” and the Swedish “hummel”.

The Hungarian folk zither was much liked in the second half of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century. It has returned to popularity in the past 20 to 30 years.

In the past, as well as today, the Hungarian zither is characterised by an extraordinary diversity in shape. Since it was not a very complicated instrument, most zithers were home-made or supplied by skilful makers.



Parts of the zither

Older zithers were diatonic, while newer ones are augmented to be chromatic with a second fret-row.

Traditionally, the zitherist played alone, just like a flutist or piper. Communities used to sing, dance and party to zither music, which was loud enough to fill a room.

Zither groups, or bands, only began to form in the second half of the 20th century. Generally in such groups several zitherists play the same melody with zithers tuned to different octaves. Some zither groups are experimenting with the development of a polyphonic orchestra sound as well, similar to a gypsy or tambura band pattern.

Its popularity today is due to its interesting, nice sound and its simplicity. It is easy to learn to play it. After only a few weeks practice, even those without an exceptional talent for music, can play some songs well.

The Zither Music

The player plays the melody on the tune strings which stretch above the fret (bunds, cotas), while plucking the other strings (cue strings, guest strings) occasionally or continually in accompaniment. When playing quickly, one does not always pluck every cue string, but uses only those which are closer to the tune strings. The cue strings give a simple accompaniment (bordun) to the melody, and make the sound more colourful. Their rhythmic plucking – eventually holding down (toning down) – strengthens, enhances the rhythm and make it tenser.

The zitherist often plays standing, laying the instrument slantwise on the table in front of himself, in such a way that the plucked end is closer. The zither usually rests at an approximately thirty degree angle with the edge of the table. The table plays a role in enhancing the sound too, since most zithers are open at the bottom, not having a bottom panel. When playing in a sitting position, a little bit higher chair and a shorter table is needed.



Correct pose while playing the zither

Plucking the Zither

Formerly, the zither was plucked with goose or turkey feathers, or possibly with a horn platelet cloven from a bullhorn. Today we often use plastic plectrum. Its shape can be of a drop, triangle or square. Its material can be softer or harder according to preference. A guitar plectrum of medium hardness can be suitable.

The plectrum should be held by three fingers: between the right index, middle finger and the thumb. 5-10 mm of the tip of the plectrum can be seen from out of the fingers.

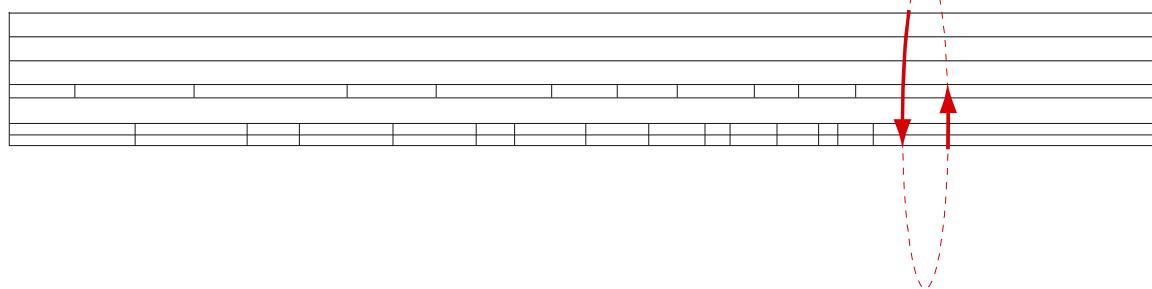
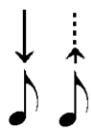
Plucking should be done with a loose shoulder, arm, elbow and wrist posture. The upper arm and the elbow hardly ever move, while the lower arm and the wrist make a swinging motion. The direction of plucking is arched, starting from the cue strings to oneself, so that the middle of the arch falls on the tune strings.

Plucking is done in rhythm to the played melody. The Hungarian zitherist always starts the plucking towards himself, beginning on the cue strings – this is the stressed version. On the way back he plucks the tune strings only. There and back is equal to two quavers, which is one crotchet. In the case of plucking crotchet, it is not obligatory to pluck the tune strings on the way back as well. The hand may return to the original position above the strings without plucking them. Longer than a crotchet or held sounds are usually trilled, that is, plucking the tune strings quickly and repeatedly (semi-quaver or even quarter quaver).

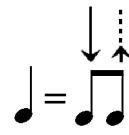
The zither is usually plucked above the holder board's end. If we pluck closer (3-5 cm) to the end of the zither, the sounding will be sharper and harder. If we pluck closer to the middle of the string, we will get a warmer, softer sound.

The basic means of plucking the different note values (quaver, crotchet, semitone) and the plectrum's movement are demonstrated in drawings below. The arrows indicate the direction of plucking, continuous lines show the position of plucking the strings, broken lines represent the motion if the plectrum does not touch the strings.

Plucking Quavers



Plucking Crotchet



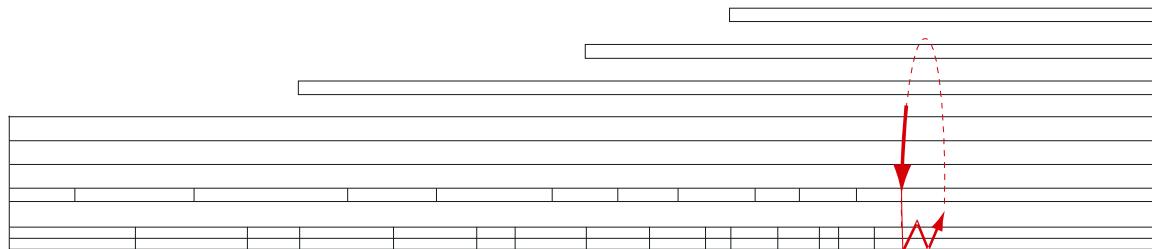
a. divided: we pluck two quavers (see above: plucking quavers)



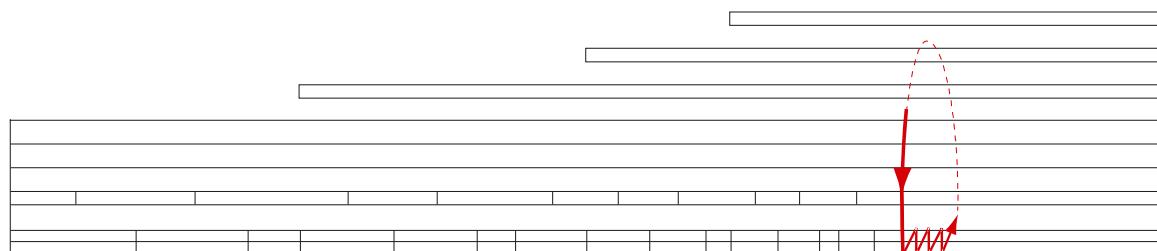
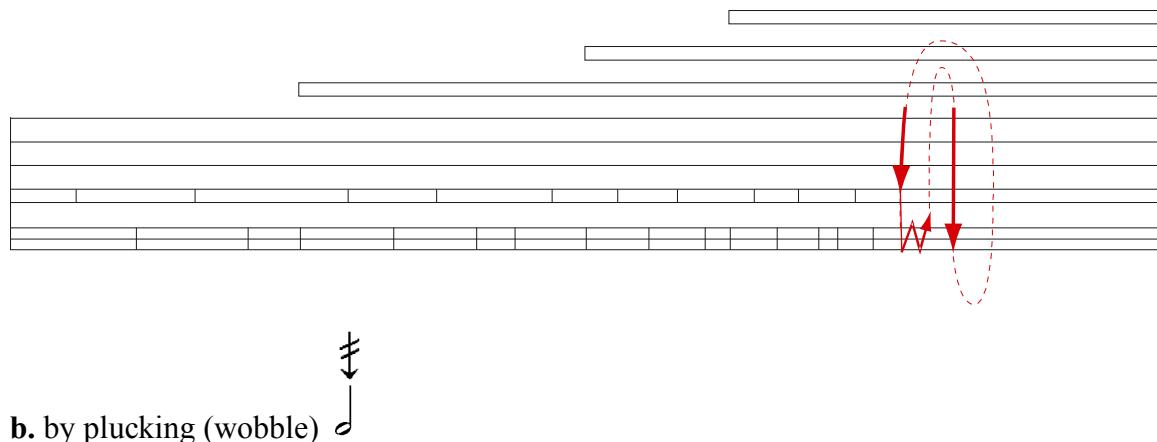
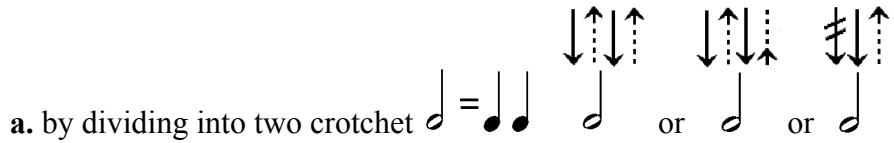
b. Plucking only towards oneselves



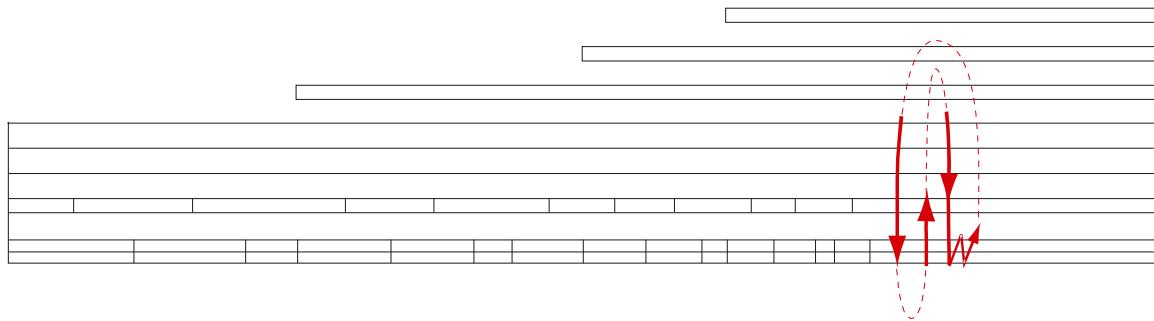
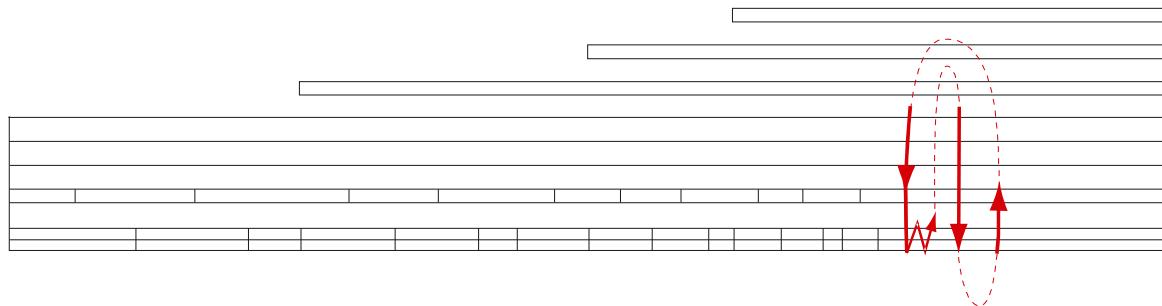
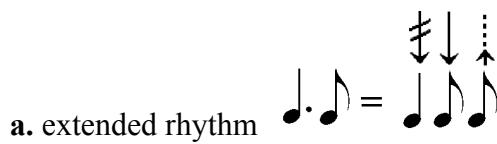
c. by plucking (wobble)



Plucking Semitone Value



Dotted Rhythm



Holding Down Notes



Using the thumb (1)

Formerly, on the diatonic zithers, the player held down notes by holding a presser (wooden stock or goose feather) in his left hand. Nowadays, on chromatic zithers, they play almost exclusively with fingers. When holding down the notes, the finger sequence is defined by practicality. It depends on, for example, how the melody continues. After learning the right finger sequence of a few songs, one will find out what finger sequence to apply in order to play songs practically. Most zitherists use only three fingers of the left hand: the thumb (1), the index (2) and the middle finger (3). More skilful players use four fingers, including their ring (4) finger.

While playing, the hand should look as if we wanted to grab an apple. The hand is slightly convex, the lower arm and the hand point in the same direction. Do not refract or bend the wrist! Press the strings with the fingers in front of the frets, (representing the note as close to the fret as possible), easily, yet strongly enough to make the given note sound clearly, and without a swish. Make sure that every string is pressed against the fret. Keep tune strings continuously pressed down during plucking.

The change of fingers (holding down another note) should take place when the plectrum does not touch the tune strings. In other words, at the end of the arch of plucking, or at one of the stand-offs.

We may use all three fingers for holding down the notes of the main scale ("full-tones"). However, for holding down the notes of the supplementary ("semitones") scale, use only the index finger!

To avoid crossing the fingers, two or more tones are held down by the same finger. In other words, lifting up the given finger for a moment, we slide it over to another tone. Strings are pressed down by the side of the thumb, from above by the other fingers with the end of the fingers (fingertips) in such a way that the finger points to the place of holding down. Press down the strings only at one place, the other fingers should be ready for the next expected position close to the strings.



Using the index finger (2)

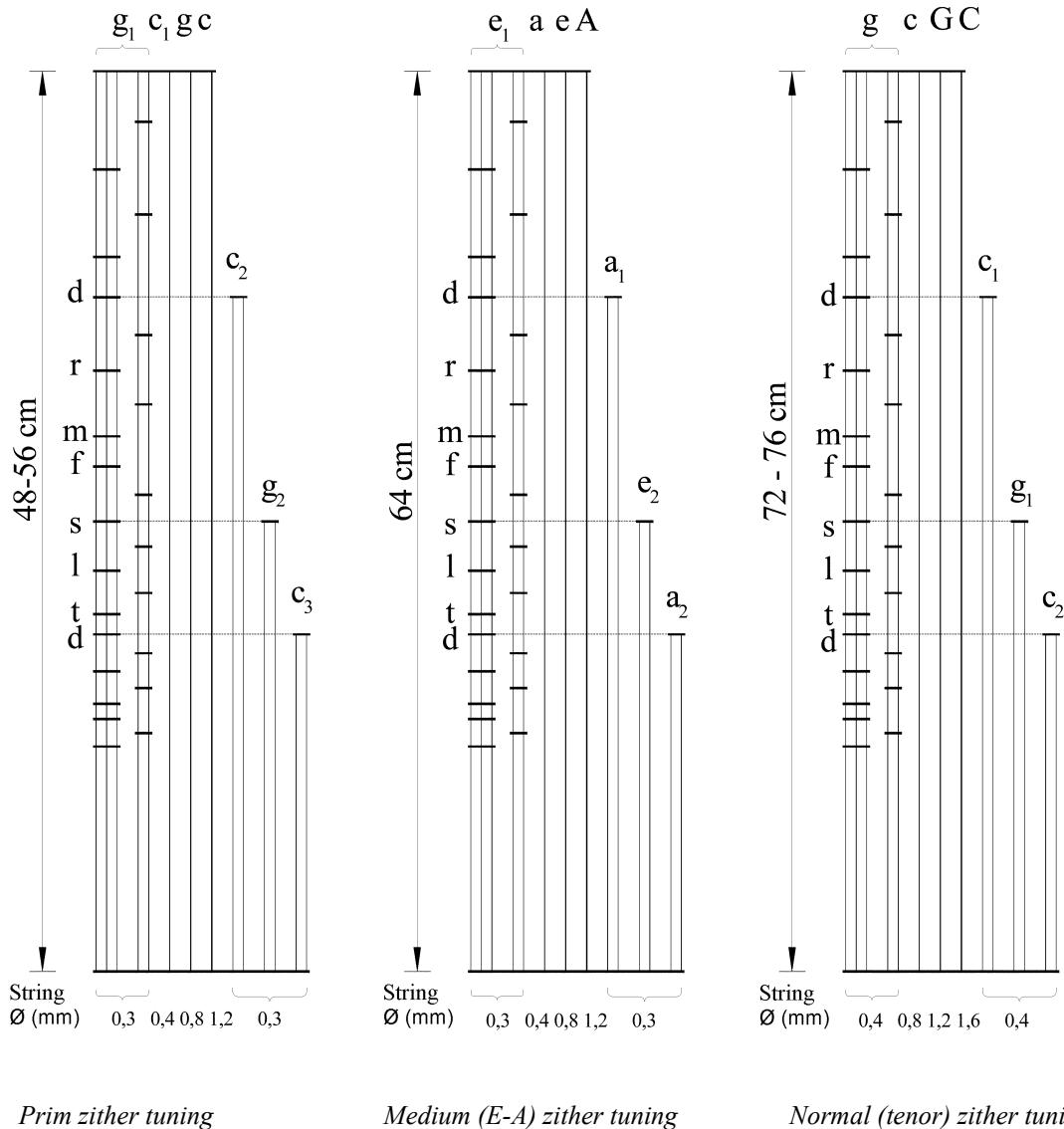


Using the middle finger (3)

Tuning the Zither

The pitch of zithers is defined by the length and thickness of strings as well as the optimal intentness belonging to them.

The tuning of the zithers is demonstrated by the attached pictures. Generally, besides the suggested tuning, it is possible to tune every string one note higher or lower even if the string diameters are the same. This possibility is increased by changing the strings.



The Application of Zither-string

Bend back one end of the string approximately 1,5 - 2 cm long.



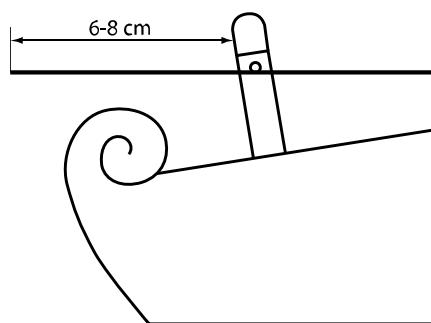
Spin round the bent-back part perpendicular to the string three to four times.



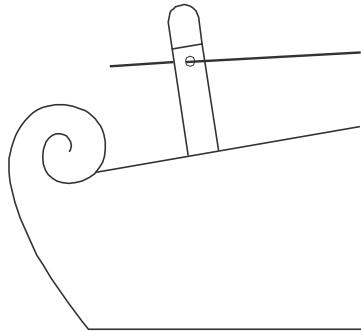
Hang up the prepared bow (sling) at the end of the zither to the string-hook pin,



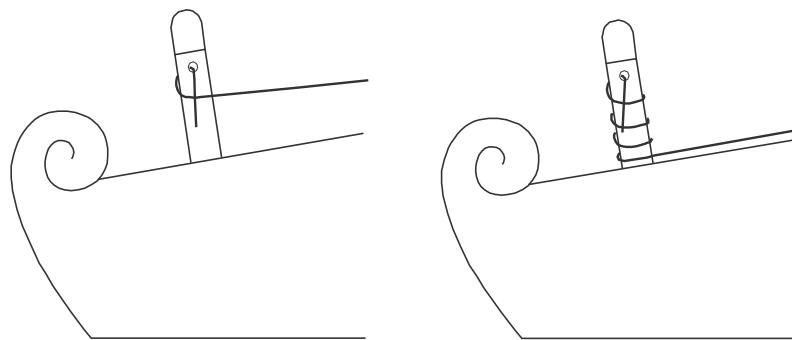
then cut it 6-8 cm longer at the tuner pin on the head of the zither.



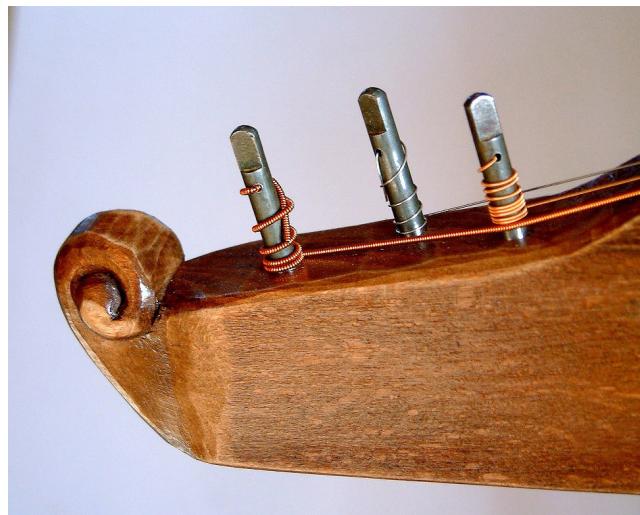
Stick the other end of the string through the bore of the tuning pin approximately 1,5 cm longer.



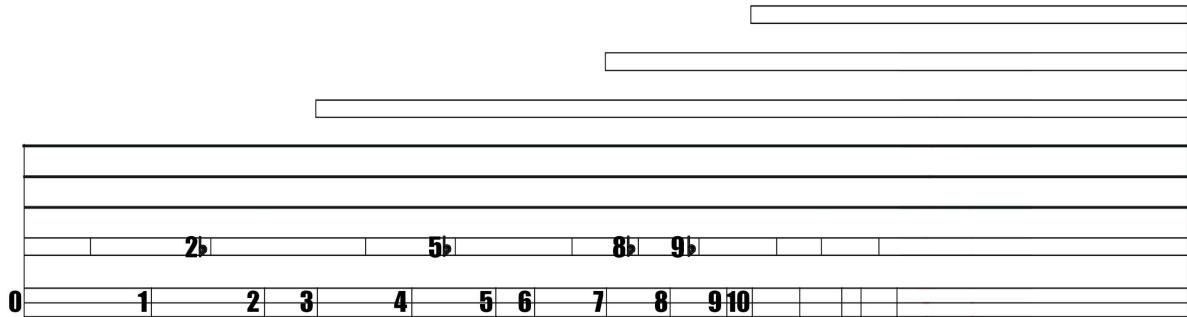
Spin up the string with the help of the tuning pin tightly in such away that the first round holds down the bent string end.



The last spin round should go possibly to the hilt of the tuning peg. Make sure that every string spins up the string stretcher pins in the same direction.



Hungarian Folk Songs



Gólya, gólya gilice

↓ ⏪ ↓ ⏪ ↓ ⏪ ↓ ⏪ ↑
 1 1 2 2 3 1 3
 Gó - lyá gó - lyá gi - li - ce Mi - től vé - res a lá - bad Tö - rök gye - rek el - vág - ta
 5 5 4 4 3 5 3 5 5 4 3 5 3 5 5 4 6 5 4

↓ ⏪ ↓ ⏪ ↓ ⏪ ↑
 1 1 2 1 1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2 1 1 2 2 3 3
 Ma - gyar gye - rek gyó - gyít - ja Síp - pal, dob - bal, ná - di he - ge - dü - vel
 5 5 4 5 6 5 4 5 4 5 4 5 5 4 4 3 3

Láttál-e már valaha

↓ ⏪ ↓ ⏪ ↓ ⏪ ↑
 3 3 2 1 2 3 2 3 3 2 1 1 1 1 2 1 1 2 3 2 3 2 1 2 3 3
 Láttál e már va - la - ha Csipke bokor ró - zsát Csipke bokor ró - zsa közt Két szál ma - jor - annát
 3 4 5 6 5 4 5 3 4 5 6 7 7 7 5 7 6 5 4 5 3 4 5 4 3 3

Megfogtam egy szúnyogot

Megfogtam egy szúnyogot na-gyobb voltegy ló-nál Kisü-töttem a zsíját több voltegy a - kónál
 3 4 5b 4 5b 4 3 3 4 5b 4 3 3 3 4 5b 4 5b 4 3 3 4 5b 4 3 3

A-ki ez-tet el-hi-szi sza-ma-rabb a ló-nál A-ki ez-tet el-hi-szi sza-ma-rabb a ló-nál
 7 6 5b 4 5b 4 3 3 4 5b 6 7 7 7 6 5b 4 5b 4 3 3 4 5b 4 3 3

A csikósok a gulyások

A csikósok, a gułyások kis laj-bi-ba járnak A-zok él-ik vi-lá-gu-kat a-kik ketten hálnak
 7 7 7 5b 7 7 7 5b 3 4 5b 4 3 3 7 7 7 5b 7 7 7 5b 3 4 5b 4 3 3

Lám én szegény szolga-legény csak e-gyedül há-lok A-kármer-re ta-po-ga-tok, csak fa-lat ta-lá-lok
 2b 2b 2b 2b 5b 5b b5 b5 6 6 5b 6 7 5b 7 7 7 5b 7 7 7 5b 3 4 5b 4 3 3

Kis kece lányom

Kis ke-ce lá-nyom fe - jér-be va-gyon Fe - jér-be ró - zsám, fe - jér-be va-gyon
 3 7 7 7 6 7 5b 5b 4 3 3 7 7 7 6 7 5b 5b 4 3

Mondon, mondon for dulj i-de mág-kám asszony Mondon, mondon for dulj i-de mág-kám asszony
 3 4 5b 5b 6 5b 4 5b 4 4 4 3 4 5b 5b 6 5b 4 5b 3 3 3 3

Farkas Julcsa bő szoknyája

Farkas Julcsa bő szoknyája Ij-ju, ju-ju, jú, jú Föl-a-kadt a csipke-fára Hoppo-dá-ré, hophophop
1 3 3 3 5 3 3 3 5 4 5 6 7 7 4 5 6 6 7 6 5 4 3 3 3 0 3 3 3

Nem a csipkefa fogta meg, Ijju, juju, jú, jú,
Marci Miska markolta meg, Hoppodáré, hop hop hop,

Ereszd Miska a szoknyámat, Ijju, ju ju, jú, jú,
Ne szomorítsd az anyámat, Hoppodáré, hop hop hop

Cickom, cickom

Cie-kom, cic-kom, va-gyon e szép lá-nyod Va-gyon, va-gyon, de mi hasz-na va-gyon
10 7 10 7 7 6 5 4 5 3 10 7 10 7 7 6 5 4 5 3

Add nekem azt, el-ka-pom azt, Szi-ta szi-ta péntek Szere-lem csü-tör-tök Dob szer-da
5 5 6 7 5 5 6 7 7 8 7 6 5 4 7 8 7 6 5 4 5 4 3

A le-gé-nyek re-gi-men-je i- gen cif-ra Ben-ne fo-rog Sán-dor Pan-ka i- gen nyal-ka
7 7 7 7 7 7 10 7 7 5 5 5 5 5 5 6 5 4 3

I - ce - ru - ca, Re - be - ka, de é - kes a de - re - ka, Ga - lam - bocs - ka
7 7 7 7 7 7 6 6 6 6 5 5 7 6 5 4 3

Úgy tetszik, hogy

Úgy tet-szik hogy jó he-lyen va - gyunk itt Úgy tet-szik hogy más-kor is vol - tung itt
10 7 7 8 7 6 5 6 7 7 10 7 7 8 7 6 5 4 3 3

Mu-las-sunk hát egy vagy két ó - rá - ig Vég-bú-csún-kat míg ki nem ad - ják itt
5 5 5 5 7 7 6 5 4 4 8 8 8 10 7 6 5 4 3 3

Végbúcsúnknak hamar vége lészen, Szegény legény akármerre mégyen
Akármerre fordítja kalapját, Szegény legény így éli világát

A tokaji szőlőhegyen

A to-ka-ji sző-lő-he-geyen két szál ves-sző Szél fűj-ja fűj-do-gál-ja har-mat haj-do - gál-ja
7 7 7 7 7 7 5 7 3 3 8 8 8 8 8 8 10 10 9 8 7 7

Hol a tyúknak a fi-a, ta-lán minden fel kapdossa Csűr i-de, csűr o-da, kass ki bárány kass o - da
7 7 7 7 7 8 7 7 7 7 8 7 7 5 3 7 5 3 5 4 5 6 5 4 3

Két szál pünkösdrózsa

Két szál pünkösdrózsa Ki-haj - lott az útra El a - kar her-vad-ni Nincs ki lesza-kit - sa
10 7 7 8 9b 7 10 7 7 8 9b 7 6 7 5b 5b 4 3 6 6 5b 4 3 3

Télen nagyon hideg van

Télen nagyon hideg van Nyáron nagyon meleg van So-hasincs jó i-dő Mindig e-sik az e-ső
10 10 7 8 9b 8 7 10 10 7 8 9b 8 7 5b 6 7 5b 6 7 7 6 5b 4 3 3 3

Komáromi kisleány, Vigyél által a Dunán
A Dunán, a Dunán, Vigyél által a Dunán

Szegény legény vagyok én

Sze-gény le-gény vagyok én Erdőn mezőn já-rok én Kraj-cárom sinesen Elszakadt az ingem
3 7 7 6 7 5b 3 3 7 7 6 7 5b 3 6 5b 4 3 4 5b 5b 4 4 3 3

Hej Dunáról fúj a szél

Hej Du-ná-ról fúj a szél, Sze-gény em-ber min-dig él Du-ná - ról fúj a szél,
10 10 9b 7 10 10 9b 10 10 9b 10 10 9b 10 7 6 7 7 7 7

Ha Du-ná-ról nem fúj-na, O-lyan hi-deg nem vol-na Du-ná - ról fúj a szél
6 6 5b 3 6 6 5b 6 6 5b 3 6 6 5b 6 3 2b 3 3 3

Hej Jancsika, Jancsika, Mért nem nőt-tél nagyobbra, Dunáról fúj a szél
Nőt-tél volna nagyobbra, Lettél volna katona, Dunáról fúj a szél

Házasodik a tücsök

Házasodik a tücsök, szúnyog lányát ké-ri Csiszeg-csoszog a te-tű, nász-nagy a-kar len-ni

10 9b 8b 7 6 7 5b 6 6 6 7 7 10 9b 8b 7 6 7 5b 3 3 3 2b 2b 3 3

O-da-ug-rik a bołha, vő-fély a-kar len-ni Min-den-fé-le csúf bogár vendég a-kar len-ni

2b 4 2b 4 5b 5b 5b 6 6 5b 6 7 7 10 9b 8b 7 6 7 5b 3 3 2b 2b 3 3

Éva szívem, Éva

É - va szí - vem, É - va most é - rik a szil - va

10 10 7 8 9b 7 10 10 7 6 5 3

Te - rit - ve az al - ja Fel - szed - jük haj - nal - ra

6 6 3 4 5b 6 7 6 3 2b 3 3

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