

REPLACING HARPSTRINGS

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This handout was presented at the 2004 Harper's Retreat in Stonemarche, East. It details the care and feeding of nylon harpstrings.

DO I NEED TO REPLACE A STRING?

Take a listen... How does it sound? When you play scales are there some octaves that won't gel? Does your favorite chord suddenly have a wobbly accidental? Is there one string that just doesn't sound right no matter how carefully you tune it?

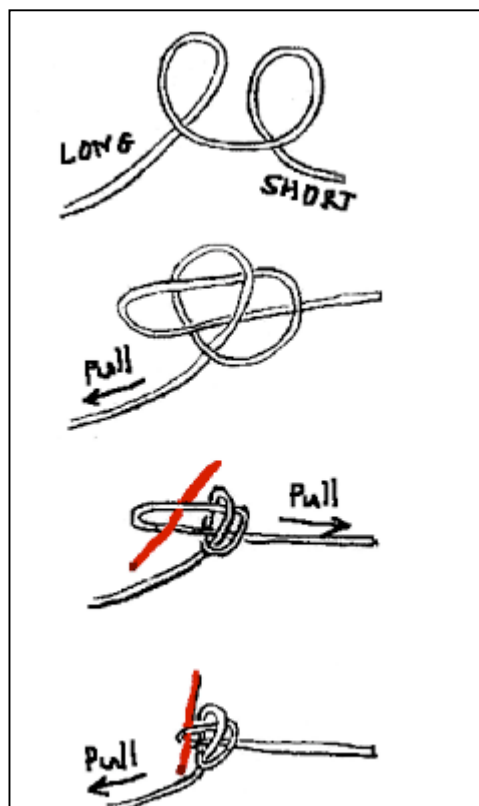
Tune your harp. Still a problem? Okay...

Take a good look at the string. Does it look pale or dusty, even when it's clean? Does it feel scratchy? Old or well-worn strings will begin to sound "flubby" or out-of-tune over time, even when you've tuned them as close as you can to true. That is because the nylon has stretched beyond its capacity to resonate properly.

REPLACE A STRING

1. Remove the old string
2. Knot the new one
3. Feed the string through the hole in the sound box from the inside
4. Pull it up to the tuning peg
5. Insert the end into the peg opening, and turn the peg until the string begins to sound like it's in tune
6. Keep tuning the string until it settles into its tuning

TIE A STRING KNOT



WHAT'S INVOLVED?

~Tuning Pegs

These are the tapered metal rods that attach your strings to the harp's arch. Pegs work by screwing in to the wood and friction, the tightness of the seat, holds them fast. As you remove the old string take care to unwind its tuning peg several turns. This step is critical to the life of your harp; if you don't reverse the peg it will keep screwing into the arch of your harp, widening the opening, and may eventually crack it.

If you discover that as peg is too loose to tune properly, tap the end with a hammer to "reseat" the screw.

If the peg is still loose after that -- if the string tension still turns the peg, or if after your hammer-taps it is more than 1cm closer to the neck than the other pegs -- take the following steps:

1. unstring the peg
2. using pliers, gently turn the peg out of the wood
3. hold a spare length of harpstring across the opening
4. re-insert the peg so that it drags the string into the opening with it.
5. tighten the string as usual
6. snip off the loose ends of the string

~ Strings

Nylon strings are generally white, with red C strings and blue F strings. Healthy strings are smooth to the touch and translucent. They should have no nicks or scratches. When they break, it isn't with a satisfying (and dangerous) twang but with a snap; a string broken at the tuning peg will bend at the soundboard and fall from the harp like a felled tree.

I try to keep a full set of replacement strings in my harp case. Depending on the retailer, they may be cheaper in bulk: a set costs me \$30 at Wood & Strings in Arlington, MA.

Call ahead to your favorite music store to see if they sell replacement harpstrings. Strings tend to run \$1-2 depending on the thickness. (Lower note strings, because they are longer and wider, cost more.) Strings are sold by harp model and string number, highest note being #1, on *that specific harp*. That's important to remember. String 1 on my harp is a C. String 1 on a Robert Hart is an A. These strings have different thicknesses, lengths, and color. If you can buy strings directly from your harpmaker, it is simpler to do so.

If you can't... Bring the string you're replacing with you to the store. Once there, take a look at the strings and pick replacements that are as close to the correct size and length as possible.

~Soundboard

The soundboard will probably have a metal ring or reinforcement board on the inside. That reinforcer is the point of tension at the other end of the string from the harp neck.

PREVENT STRING WEAR AND TEAR

Use common sense; the strings are made of nylon. When looking for something to drape over your harp for protection, or when lifting and carrying it, take care not to brush the strings against abrasive objects or surfaces. That weakens them.

Many kinds of wood change character in the weather. In the heat, a harp body expands; that tightens the strings. In the cold, the harp contracts; that loosens the strings. To be sure, all that activity stresses the harp first, but in the short term you'll probably notice its effect on your strings. If you anticipate big

weather changes, or if you are going to travel between climates (say, to Pennsic) it's a good idea to loosen the strings a full turn for the journey. Take the time now and your strings will appreciate it in the long run.

RESOURCES

Sites explaining nylon harpstring ties:

- Thormahlsen Harps - excellent descriptions of string-tying and new string care:
http://www.thorharp.com/pages/string_tying.htm
- Margot Krimmel, harper:
<http://www.krimmel.net/margot/careofharp.html>
- Vanderbilt Music Company:
<http://www.vanderbiltmusic.com/tying.html>