

HARP TUNING BY EAR

By Leucum merch Ouein
©2001 Myra Hope Bobbitt

The method described here will result in the standard tuning of a small Folk harp for voice accompaniment. This text, less a few clarifications, was used as a class handout in the 2001 Harpers Retreat, Barony of Stonemarche, East.

TUNE EVERY DAY

Why?

- a harp in tune resonates with power and poetic energy -- it will literally hum with resonance when plucked
- tuning every day teaches your harp what it ought to sound like, and teaches you what it ought to sound like
- depending on the quality of wood used to make your harp, the soundboard could take anywhere from 2-4 YEARS to remember its tuning; daily attention will shorten that span considerably
- a harp out-of-tune sounds really, really, bad

THE BUSINESS OF TUNING

~Off we go!

Find the first note for the key you're tuning in; if your tuning fork is A-440, then tune the A string.

Once you have the A (or your first note, whatever that is) tune the A one octave below. In doing so, you create your harp's Temperament: the active middle.

Next, tune the 5ths and 4ths within the Temperament.

From there, work downwards tuning by octave. Each time you find an octave, check the 5ths and 4ths in between. When you reach the lowest string, tune up from the Temperament by octave.

Check 5ths and 4ths through the entire range of the instrument.

As the notes ascend, they will sound a wee bit sharper than true. That is entirely appropriate for a folk harp, and in fact sounds better than a true tuning. Try it both ways and see...

~The Zen of Tuning

This part truly is the Business of Tuning. There is a resonance associated with each plucked interval which will help you fine-tune strings. As soon as you can, find an experienced harper who can play you “interval resonance”. Once you hear it, you will know it forever.

~Finding 4ths and 5ths

If you haven't taken a singing or music class where intervals were taught, just remember the song Here Comes the Bride. There are 4ths and 5ths all over that song. Listen:

Here comes the bride... (the interval between “here” and “comes” is a 4th.)
All dressed in white... (the interval between “all” and “dressed” is a 5th.)

It's that easy.

KEEP CHECKING

If you find yourself playing more than two songs in a row, it's possible the harp will stray out of tune while you're playing it. Between songs, check the tuning with a few octaves and 5ths. As you play, the harp temperature will change and the strings closest to your body will go sharp. Take the time to check -- you owe it to yourself and the audience can tell.

The harp is especially vulnerable to changes in the weather. on hot, dry days, the harp will sound sharp. In the cold and damp, it will go flat.

Start each practice session with rote drills, even though they're boring; they will help your hands warm up and help you hear whether you're in tune.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR HARP

Keep dust off of the body, and especially from between the strings. This is an aesthetic choice, but also one which shows the amount of respect you have for your art.

The harp will dry out over time, a condition which shortens its lifespan; my teacher once told me that her teacher, a traditional Celtic harper, would keep an apple in the soundbox of his harp; over time the harp would stay hydrated by absorbing the moisture from the apple. I keep a wet sponge in a ziplock bag that has lots of pinprick holes in it, and I re-wet it every month. It works just as well and doesn't smell like old cider...

Check for stress cracks occasionally. The forward end of the arch, where it meets the pillar, is especially vulnerable. All of the strings are torquing the arch downward towards the soundbox. If you notice any stress fracturing, don't panic, but do bring your harp to a professional luthier. An imploding harp is no joke -- it sounds like a cannon.

REFERENCE

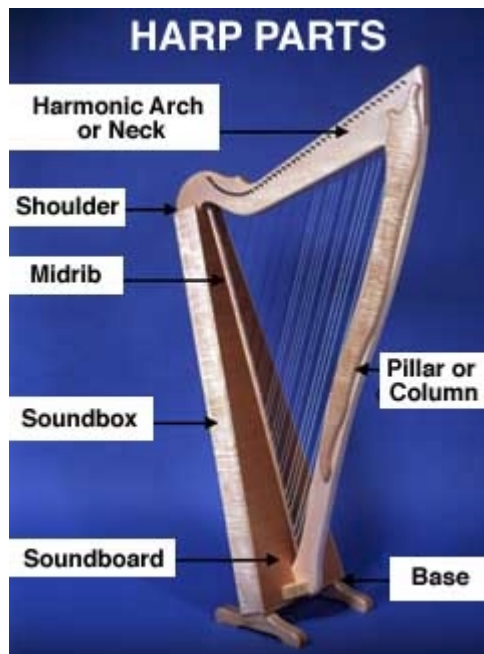


Diagram of Harp Parts from the web site:

<http://traditionalharps.com/HarpsGeneralParts.html>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This information was collected from my teacher, Kathryn Mannyng [www.mannyngharp.com], and from two of the excellent harpers who attended my first

teaching of the Harp Tuning by Ear class: Baroness Megan of Stonemarche and Lord Artos of Malagentia. I am endebedted to all of them for their assistance.

This work, except for attributed quotes, is ©2001 by Myra Hope Bobbitt. Do not excerpt, reprint, photocopy, or distribute this document without the permission of the author.

©2001 Myra Hope Bobbitt. This is not an official SCA web site. Any opinions &c expressed in the text of these pages are mine alone. Please drop me a line if you're interested in further discussion.