

## On Buying a Harp

Buying a harp can be a complex process. In addition to the obvious issue of expense there are questions of longevity and reliability, stylistic preferences, weight and size considerations, and, to the musician, the overriding concerns of sound quality, projection, and responsiveness. For some musicians the choice of a new instrument is pragmatic - the harp is a musical tool used in making their living. For others it may be a complex mix of self-image, strong personal prejudice, sound preference, and “the harp my teacher plays”. This chapter offers a systematic approach to harp buying that should be useful to most harpists. The pragmatic musician will find it vastly more useful than will those for whom only a Wurlitzer DDX will do.

There is one basic fact affecting harp buying that needs to be understood:

The range of sound quality of production pedal harps is so great, even between harps of the same model and from the same maker, that to buy a harp without first playing it is foolhardy. The First and Greatest Commandment of harp buying is “When at all possible, play before you pay!” There are those who have been quite satisfied with their “mail order” harps, but the odds are no better than one would have in taking a mail-order spouse.

Choosing a harp is an extremely personal thing. No system of evaluation will make it an exact science. Personal tastes vary greatly. The harp that is responsive and pleasant to one will have “spaghetti strings” to another. One harpist’s warm, rich sound becomes another’s “harp that won’t project”, while another will hear a harp that projects well over an orchestra as overly bright and brittle sounding when heard close up.

A little homework will greatly increase the odds that the chosen instrument will be satisfactory. The following items may seem elementary to the experienced harpist, but they are all worth considering when choosing a new harp:

Size is the first consideration that comes to mind. Concert Grand or Semi-grand harps with 46 or 47 strings and extended soundboards are more or less standard today, but most manufacturers also offer smaller instruments and straight soundboard harps. These are well worth considering. Though the manufacturers often promote straight soundboard harps as student instruments, the harpist should not overlook the advantages of a smaller and lighter instrument. Many professional musicians keep a small “gig harp” in addition to their large instrument because the smaller harp is much easier to move. For the harpist who plays for her own pleasure, or who does not need the range of a concert grand harp, a small instrument may well be a better choice.

Though the 47-string concert grand harp has become the standard instrument for professional musicians, the semi-grand harp is often a better choice for someone who is of smaller stature. With properly designed soundboards, there is very little difference in projection or sound volume between a concert grand of 47 strings and the 46-string semi-grand. The differences in height and weight are, however significant.

Size is very important when acquiring an instrument for a young musician. To give a full size concert grand harp to a child whose frame is not fully developed is risky. The child is often too small to reach the pedals on a full size harp unless he sits on a low stool. This means that the harp will lean back enough to place significant weight on the child's shoulder and back, which is a recipe for injury. Though here are those who begin playing very early and who escape these problems, there are also those who have to stop playing entirely by the time they are in their 20's because of physical problems resulting from supporting an overly large harp while their bones were developing. It is routine to start a young violinist with a reduced size instrument and to move to a full-size violin as the musician grows. The same should be true for harpists. A conservative rule of thumb is that a young harpist should not be given a harp that is too large and heavy for him to move across the room unaided.

Tone quality should be a major consideration when purchasing a harp. Paradoxically the sound of a harp is both its single most important characteristic and the most difficult characteristic to control during production. This is why it is so important for the harpist to play the instruments being considered for purchase before making a decision.

When shopping for a harp it is wise to have another harpist to help. The sound the playing harpist hears is quite different from the sound a listener located a distance away from the instrument will hear. Usually the sound the listener hears is most important, but it is also essential that the playing harpist find the harp satisfying and enjoyable to play. Fortunately, a decent instrument is usually enjoyable for both the listener and the player, but this is not something to take for granted.

In general, a brighter sounding harp will project better than one with a warm sound. This is important if the harp will be used in an orchestra or in large rooms, such as auditoriums or large churches. However, harps can be built that are so bright and brittle sounding that they are unpleasant to play. Such instruments usually sound thin even in a large ensemble, and are particularly annoying to the poor harpist. Harpists usually enjoy harps with a warm sound, but if the instrument is too warm it can sound muddy, and both definition and projection suffer. Romantic music may sound lush and rich, but the harp will not have the clarity needed for baroque or contrapuntal music.

The ideal harp for most musicians has a medium-bright sound, good dynamic range, and even sound quality through the entire range of the harp. It should be responsive, and not require great effort to play. It should be light enough that the owner will be able to move it without assistance, and it should balance well when being played. Above all, it must satisfy the harpist and be a real pleasure to own and use.

The smart shopper will be prepared when trying out a harp. As noted above, take a competent harpist to help. Take a variety of music, including the normal repertoire and some music of different styles. Try to play the harp in a quiet place that is acoustically suitable. Neither an extremely live room nor a dead one is good.

A testing sequence that has proven efficient includes:

- Play something familiar on the harp to get an overall impression. Both harpists should do this, and perceptions from both the playing position and the audience position discussed.
- Check the instrument for even sound by playing each string in turn from bottom to top. Then play chords in the top, midrange, and bass to be certain that the sound is even. Neither the bass nor midrange should overbalance the rest of the harp. The highest treble notes should ring clear, without the unmusical “plick” that one sometimes hears. There should be no “wolf tones”, or notes that stand out as unusually loud. A single dead sounding note is usually a bad string or a regulation issue if the adjacent notes sound good, but this should be checked.
- Use an accurate tuner to re-tune the harp with all the pedals in flat position and then put all the pedals in sharp. It is usually possible to regulate the flat to natural interval accurately, so the test of a well designed harp is intonation in sharp. Check the intonation of the sharp notes through the range of the harp. Some early Wurlitzer and L&H harps are significantly sharp in the top two octaves. To get them to play in tune it is sometimes necessary to replace the neck with one designed to increase the active string length slightly. Some modern L&H harps have two or three notes in the second octave that will not regulate in sharp. For some harpists this makes the instrument unpleasant to play, but some become accustomed to the sound and ignore it.
- Play something like the Bach “Prelude #1 in C” to get a perception of the clarity of the sound. Individual notes should be well defined, without a trace of muddiness. Then play something with full arpeggiated chords. The harp should sound rich and satisfying.

- Play something loudly, then softly, and note the effort required and the perceived dynamic range. The greater the dynamic range and the less effort required to get a true Fortissimo the better, as long as the instrument is not flabby and muddy sounding when played loudly.
- Pick the harp up and move it a few feet. One needs to be reasonably comfortable when handling the instrument, even if an assistant is usually available.

This sequence will provide an excellent idea of the capabilities of a particular harp. Examining several instruments the same way will provide a valid understanding of the relative merits and weaknesses of the harps tested. If the harp under consideration is a new instrument or if it is one with a new soundboard, it will, to some degree, open up and become more responsive with time. However, time and playing will not turn a harp that sounds dead and unresponsive when new into an excellent instrument. If the harp does not offer good sustain and a very good sound when new, it will seldom improve enough to be more than a mediocre instrument.

If you are considering a used harp, there are several important items to check. The checklist (Figure 8-4) used in the Author's shop for evaluating harps arriving for repair may be a useful guide for evaluating the physical condition of any harp.

- Remember that a pedal harp sustains a static load of about one ton of string tension. Well-made harps will last over 30 years without major component replacement. Depending on how frequently they are moved and the care they receive, many last much longer. Eventually the wooden structure that supports this load will deform and fail. A careful inspection during the selection process will minimize the chances of an unexpected repair expense.
- Start by looking at the general appearance of the harp, paying attention to the condition of the finish, the gilding if it is a gold harp, and to the overall shape. Become attentive to details. Is the column straight? Are there any obvious repairs? Is the finish crazed? Has the gold been painted over?
- Examine the neck from behind the harp (Figure 8-1). If there is significant warping it is easy to see as one sights down the neck to the straight column. If there is obvious warping, put the “C” pedal in sharp and see how the 5<sup>th</sup> octave C# engages the string. There should be a minimum of 1/8 in between the string and the end of the disk pins. Less engagement results in regulation problems.
- Examine the back of the soundbox for evidence of glue failure at the top and bottom body blocks (Figure 8-2) on L&H style harps. Look for signs of de-lamination of the soundbox shell on all harps.

- Use a business card to check for glue failure where the soundboard attaches to the internal rails (Diagram 8-1). While glue failure along the edge of the soundboard is common, and is not necessarily indicative of imminent soundboard failure, it does indicate that the useful life of the soundboard is limited. The screw heads will imbed into the soft spruce soundboard, allowing a pronounced belly to develop. Eventually the belly will increase until the soundboard reaches its elastic limit and it will break.
- Check the area where the front of the soundbox meets the top of the base of the harp (Figure 8-3) to see if there is a gap resulting from base frame failure. If a triangular gap is present, look inside the soundbox with a flashlight and see if a visible line shows how much the base frame has moved with respect to the soundboard. Any movement over 1/8 inch indicates that the harp will need a base frame repair in the foreseeable future.
- Examine the base and feet carefully. The base, while not part of the load sustaining structure, does take a beating when the harp is moved. Look for signs of finish and wood damage, especially to the front feet. Check to see that all four feet are firmly attached to the base, and that there is no sign of glue failure or de-lamination from being wet.
- Check the mechanism for wear and noise by exercising the pedals. Listen closely for clicks or other noise as you move the pedals from flat to sharp and back to flat. Instruments used by jazz musicians often show more wear on the B-chain, other harps see the most wear on the F and C chains.

Once you have decided on a harp, take the time to explore the warranty. Manufacturers usually guarantee new harps for five (5) years from the date of purchase, but the guarantee may not cover everything that it should. This is not the time to be shy. If the salesperson has assured you that an intonation problem is simply a matter of regulation, have that added to the guarantee. If the seller is unwilling to make a written commitment of his assurances a heavy dose of skepticism is in order.

Even if you are purchasing a used harp from a private seller, insist on some sort of guarantee. It is easy to overlook some problem that becomes obvious once the instrument is home. One should insist on the right to return the instrument for a full refund if any structural or mechanical problem occurs within a reasonable time. A week should be enough time to get to know the harp and to discover anything important that may have been missed during the initial inspection. Most dealers in pedal harps are honest, and most harpists selling a used instrument are also, but these are complex instruments and it is easy for even a technically competent person to miss something.