



## Early Harps & Continuo *Andrew Lawrence-King* Research & Education

### **Introduction to Renaissance ('Gothic') harp**

One of the most successful and long-lived designs of harp in the history of Western music, the 'gothic' harp has an enormous repertoire of solo and consort music from *trecento* polyphony to 16<sup>th</sup>-century dances and even early continuo.

Two features characterise this harp: the special sound of the bray pins, and the need to re-tune frequently, in order to manage different tonalities, or pieces with chromatics. Renaissance writers associate the harp with the "pleasant buzzing" of the bray pins – so don't kill the instrument's unique character by switching them off! And period paintings frequently show harpists with tuning key in hand: get accustomed to re-tuning quickly and often.

#### **Posture**

In period imagery we see a great variety of postures, with the harp low or high, hands on the soundboard or near the neck. Whilst a low position of the harp has certain advantages for advanced players, I recommend beginners to start with the harp resting on the shoulder in the conventional manner.

Depending on the size and shape of harp and harpist, rest the instrument on your knees, between your knees or between your calves, on a table or a stool, whatever gets the instrument to a convenient height for you. Renaissance music is mostly below d', and hardly ever goes off the treble stave, so optimise your position for the mid-to-low register of the harp.

#### **Hand shape**

As for any early harp, your hand should be relaxed with the fingers gently curved. Make an O-shape with your thumb and index, the other fingers imitate the curve of the index. Now open out that O-shape, just enough that you can shake hands with yourself (gently). This gives you the basic starting position for your fingers.

Assuming you've opted for the conventional position of the harp, rest the 'heel' of your hands firmly on the soundboard, and relax your elbows so they hang naturally. This will position your fingers low down on the strings, fairly close to the soundboard, almost as far down as the position a modern harpist would label 'pres de la table'. For renaissance harp, this is the normal playing position, producing a clear, strong sound.

For a more intense sound (e.g. for dissonances) bring your fingers even closer to the soundboard. For a sweeter sound (e.g. for resolutions) move your fingers slightly away from the soundboard.

## Repertoire

Although there is a significant repertoire specially composed for harp, period sources are unanimous that harpists played the same repertoire as lute-family and keyboard-family instruments: ensemble music and song accompaniments, transcriptions of vocal music, dance-music, preludes and polyphonic fantasias. It is utterly appropriate to borrow music from any of these sources.

## More on hand and finger positions

When necessary, the thumb crosses under the fingers. (This is the opposite to modern playing, where the thumb crosses over the fingers.) A slow finger-stroke with steady pressure and maximum range of motion will give the best sound. A slow finger-stroke is especially important on low-tension strings and to get the best from the bray pins.

Don't lift the fingers high above the thumb: this is not necessary, and will make your hand tense. The starting point for the tip of the thumb is very close to the tip of the index finger. Thumb and finger strokes pass fairly close to one another, but in different directions. The thumb moves under the fingers and into the hand, the fingers wrap around the thumb.

Avoid also the opposite problem, where the thumb strikes directly onto the index finger: inhibiting the movement of the thumb in this way will ruin tone-production.

## Fingering

The basic principle is common to many renaissance instruments. Just as word-accentuation produces Good and Bad syllables, so renaissance music has Good and Bad notes, and a renaissance harpist has Good and Bad fingers. The invariable rule is to put a Good finger on a Good note, a Bad finger on a Bad note.

Thumb (1) and middle finger (3) are Good, index (2) is Bad. The patterns for scales alternate Good and Bad fingers to produce a "dooby-dooby-doo" effect.

Upwards scale: 3232321 (prepare two fingers at a time)  
Downwards scale: 1212123 (passing the thumb underneath the index)

## Set up

Be ready to spend some time setting up the bray pins for optimum, long-sustained buzz. Too much contact and the bray pin damps the string, too little and there is no buzz at all.

Sympathetic resonance of other strings enormously enhances the effect of the bray pins, so make sure your harp is well in tune, so that one octave resonates with another. Historical temperaments have many pure intervals, so they also add to the resonance and buzz, changing the sound of the instrument according to which intervals are pure.

For medieval and early renaissance music with many open fifths and for which thirds are considered a dissonance, Pythagorean temperament with pure fifths produces a clear, spicy effect.

For late renaissance music in which thirds are a consonance, Quarter-comma Meantone with pure thirds produces a rich, warm sound.

## **Chromatics**

In ascending order of difficulty, the options for dealing with chromatic accidentals are:

1. Ignore them
2. Change the music to avoid them
3. Tune sharps in one octave, flats in another and switch octaves as necessary
4. Tune more than 7 notes in the octave, perhaps having Bb and B natural etc
5. Make a temporary semitone by stopping the string.

You can stop the string at the neck using your left-hand thumb, or at the soundboard using a finger, thumb, finger-nail, or the tuning key. The effectiveness of these techniques varies from one instrument to another, but stopping at the neck has become the standard solution for most modern players.

Put your left hand over the top of the neck, so you can squeeze between thumb and fingers, and use your thumb-nail to make a sharp contact with the string. Time your maximum squeezing effort for the precise moment when you need the chromatic note.

You will need to play everything with right hand only, whilst the left hand is busy preparing for, making, and recovering from the chromatic note.

### **Set-up for chromatics**

You can adjust the width of the semitone by the way you wind the string on the tuning peg, closer to or further away from the wood of the neck.

You can also widen the semitone at the moment of playing by pushing the string sideways (up towards the treble end of the neck) with your thumbnail. Since at the moment of playing, you can widen the semitone but not narrow it, for your preparatory set-up, it's best to err on the side of setting the semitone a tiny bit too narrow.

### **Playing with bray pins**

Once you have the bray pins set up for a long, smooth buzz, you can develop your listening and playing skills to vary that buzz, note by note. Even more than other types of Early Harp, renaissance harps are very responsive to subtle changes in finger-strokes.

The technical secret is to use a small quick finger-motion for short notes, and a slow, full-range motion for long notes. Practise long notes with a finger or thumb stroke that is very smooth, very slow, and very prolonged (prolonged even after the note has sounded).

### **Polyphony**

Most of the repertoire is polyphonic, playing a single line (or two) in a consort, or playing an entire polyphonic texture. The clear sound of the instrument is ideal for polyphony, but it takes considerable practice to develop the mental, aural and physical skills to control two or more independent lines simultaneously. It always helps to practise each line alone, first.

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For more information and videos about Early Harps go to **TheHarpConsort.com**

Harp and lute is the most frequently seen pair of instruments in renaissance paintings.

Here the angel-musicians are probably playing three-voice polyphony, with one voice on the lute and the other two voices on the harp.



Even when they had wings, Renaissance harpists were not always angels!

This young man is the personification of Pleasure, reminding us of the association of the renaissance harp with love-songs and dance-music, as well as with high-style polyphony.



# Introduction to Renaissance harp

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## Renaissance Fingering

Harp

## Quick notes & slow notes

Harp

*Quick notes with small range of finger-movement*

*Long note with slow, smooth stroke and full range of movement*

*Just before playing the Good note, place all three fingers, to support the thumb and damp previously played strings.*

## Chromatics

Harp

3

*Early renaissance cadence, make a wide semitone to produce a high, "Pythagorean" F#*

Harp

4

*Late renaissance cadence, make a narrow semitone to produce a low, Meantone F#*