

8. Instrument selection

The harp has undergone dramatic changes over the past millennium. The Baroque era in particular featured the use of several emergent forms of the harp. Below is a brief introduction to the Celtic harp, various multi-row harps, and the Hook harp. Understanding the function of each of these instruments in their specific musical setting will help you to choose the best harp for you and your performance setting.

The Celtic harp

The Celtic style harp has been used in the British Isles from Medieval times to the present. This harp is related to the small harps depicted in medieval art and remained primarily in the British Isles and Brittany until recently. A variety of terms are currently used in reference to this style of harp. These terms include Irish harp, the Irish terms *crúit* and *clairsech* or *clarseach* or *clairseach*, the Scottish term *clarsach*, the general term Celtic harp, and more recent terms such as folk harp and neo-Celtic harp. The exact definition of each of these terms has morphed over time. Therefore, the general term Celtic harp will be used here in reference to any harp that can be included in the following description.

Celtic harps are a fairly common instrument measuring about four feet high and featuring 30 – 36 strings in a single diatonic row. Chromatics were executed in various ways, including retuning individual strings, semi-extra rows and, more recently, levers resembling the Hook harp. The string material is generally metal in Ireland, and these harps are played on the left shoulder. String material is generally gut in Scotland and Brittany, and these harps are typically played on the right shoulder. All are played while

sitting, and both the fleshy tip of the finger and nails were used.⁷⁵ Celtic harps have been extremely fashionable for centuries and are a source of national pride in the British Isles. These harps are commonly used as solo and accompanying instruments in both folk and classical traditions, and of course for the music of Turlough Carolan (1670-1738). Francis Bacon indicates in his *Sylva Sylvarum* (London, 1627) that the Irish wire-strung harp was commonly used in consort music, and that it was the preferred harp for accompanying the viol.⁷⁶ Note however that Carolan's music, although often written in the style of Italian Baroque music, was not accompanied by standard continuo:

A single-line bass accompanies the melodies, and there is an absence of conventional harmony. On only one or two occasions in the entire book are more than two notes sounded together. But the most unusual feature is the way the bass moves all the time, sometimes in octaves with the treble and often either anticipating or echoing the melody line.⁷⁷

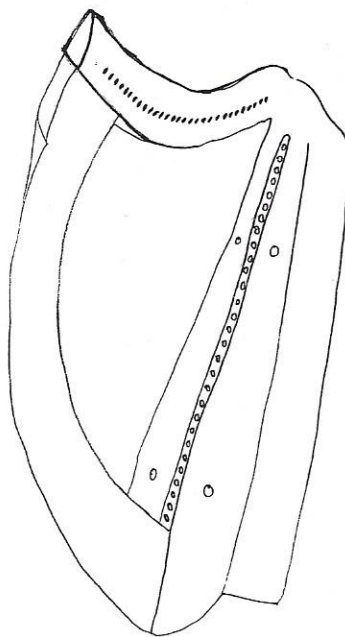


Figure 59. Celtic harp

⁷⁵ Edward Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1840), 73.

⁷⁶ Francis Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum* (London: 1627), 61.

⁷⁷ Gráinne Yeats, introduction to *The Complete Works of O'Carolan* (Cork: Ossian Publications, 1989), 4.

Multi-row harps: Spanish, Italian and Welsh

Multi-row harps flourished from roughly 1550–1750 and are the most common instrument used in European Baroque music. The date and location of the “first” multi-row harp is quite controversial. The concept of two ranks of strings was introduced quite early in Spain; extant fourteenth century correspondence mentions *una arpa doble* as early as 1378.⁷⁸ This *arpa doble* was probably an instrument with two rows of diatonic strings⁷⁹ that lost popularity around 1400.⁸⁰ A triple harp is mentioned in the papers of Alfonso V (1396-1458) of Aragon as early as c. 1424: *arpa gran doble a III tires*. But the double strung concept took precedence over the triple strung harp in Spain and was later developed into the seventeenth century chromatic cross-strung harp.⁸¹ Despite the early mention of the triple harp in Spain, it is generally accepted that the triple harp was invented in Italy, traveled to France, and then to the United Kingdom. Marin Mersenne (1588-1648) states in his *Harmonie universelle* (1637) that the triple harp (also called *arpa a tre ordini* or *arpa a tre registri*) was invented c. 1600 by Luc Antoine Eustache of Naples.⁸² Various authors confirm the triple harp’s migration from the continent to the United Kingdom, claiming that it is “documented by extant records of the King’s Musick”⁸³ in England. However Johannes Cochlaeus (1479-1552) states in his *Tetrachordum Musices* that the triple harp was

⁷⁸ Roslyn Rensch, *Harps & Harpists* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 103.

⁷⁹ Rudolf Frick, “Descrubimiento del arpa espanol,” in *Harpa*, No. 2 (2/1991), 12.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸¹ Rensch, 103.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

being played in England as early as 1511.⁸⁴ Regardless of its confusing geographical path, “experiments with multiple rows of strings began as early as the fourteenth century.”⁸⁵

The triple harp features three parallel rows of strings, which provides an almost unlimited chromatic potential and a large range, about four and a half octaves. The two outer rows of strings are tuned diatonically while the inner row, which is accessed by reaching a finger through either outer row, is tuned chromatically. Triple harps measure approximately six feet high and feature 75-90 gut strings. The strings are divided fairly equally between the three rows. Two styles of triple harp coexisted in the Baroque era: European triple harps, commonly known as Italian triple harps, and Welsh triple harps. Although Italian triple harps share some common physical characteristics with Welsh triple harps, the instruments undertook different musical roles because of subtle differences in their tone quality. Italian triple harps were constructed in such a way as to produce a rich and powerful bass sound. These instruments are ideal for use in continuo playing. In contrast Welsh triple harps are high-headed, creating a delicate, bell-like tone in the treble range and a light bass sound. These instruments are ideal for solo playing. Italian triple harps are traditionally played on the right shoulder, with the right hand playing the treble line and the left hand playing the bass line. Welsh players place the harp on the left shoulder, with the left hand playing the treble line and the right hand playing the bass.

⁸⁴ Lowri Sprung, “Abstracts from Two Papers on the Triple Harp,” in *Historical Harp Society Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter, 1990), 10.

⁸⁵ Cheryl Ann Fulton, “The Arpa Doppia in Seventeenth Century Naples: An Introduction,” *American Harp Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Summer, 1986), 36.

The strings for both Italian and Welsh triple harps were probably of gut, although lower class harpists used horsehair. These harpists were encouraged to upgrade strings in order to become a “fully qualified performer.”⁸⁶ The Italian harpist Bartolomeo Jovernardi describes reinforced strings in his *Tratado de la Mussica*,⁸⁷ and another Italian source mentions strings of gold.⁸⁸ Italian triple harps were unfortunately plagued by a string breakage problem not found with the Welsh instruments. This problem may have been due to the specifics of the Italian triple harp’s harmonic curve, which was alleviated by the Welsh triple harp’s high-headed structure. However, string material is the more likely culprit. In Jovernardi’s *Tratado de la Mussica*: “Giobenordi [sic] said that the top strings were so refined and delicate that he had to replace 15 to 20 strings after one hour of playing.”⁸⁹ The Italian technique of occasionally playing with nails for special effect⁹⁰ may also have simply shredded the thin strings in the upper register of the instrument.

⁸⁶ Hortense Panum, *The Stringed Instruments of the Middle Ages* (London: W. Reeves, 1939?), 138.

⁸⁷ Galassi, 65.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Sprung, 11.

⁹⁰ Galassi, 65.

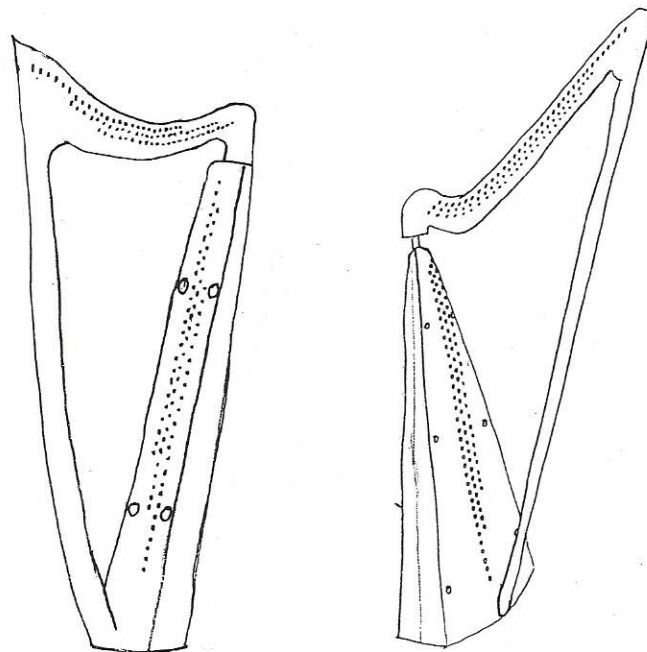


Figure 60. Italian (L) and Welsh (R) triple harps

Spanish multi-row harps, typically chromatic cross-strung harps, are slightly smaller in size than triple harps, measuring about four or five feet high. Two parallel rows of strings are tuned with one row completely diatonic, and the other with the missing chromatics. The strings cross so that the player reaches up for the diatonic strings and down for the chromatic strings in one hand, vice versa in the other hand. Spanish cross-strung harps feature a four-octave range, are strung with gut, and are played while standing or sitting. These harps are still played today in Spanish-influenced cultures. The instruments are suitable for music from about 1400 to the present, for playing both classical and folk repertoire. The instrument flourished from 1550-1700, falling out of favor about one hundred years before the Italian triple harp.

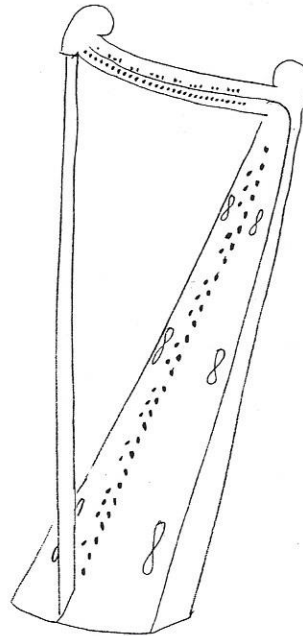


Figure 61. Spanish cross-strung harp

The Lawes controversy

Music historians and historically informed performers have articulated two points of view regarding the harp selection for William Lawes' *Harpe Consorts* (see Lawes: What would my music have looked like?). One theory presumes that the French triple harpist, John le Felle (born c. 1600), was the harpist for whom the consorts were written, and that the instrument of choice was therefore a European style, gut-strung triple harp. Information supporting this theory includes archival records indicating that the two musicians served King Charles I (reign 1625-1649) at the same time. Le Felle began serving the King as “musition [sic] for the harp in ordinary” on October 11, 1629,⁹¹ and Lawes entered the King's service on April 30, 1635. On June 11, 1635, the royal records

⁹¹ Henry Cart de LaFontaine, *The King's Musick* (London: Novello and Company Limited, 1909), 70.

mention a consort headed by le Felle.⁹² It could be assumed that this consort consisted of a harp (le Felle), lute (the topic of the record entry), and viols (by definition of a consort): the instrumentation for Lawes' *Harpe Consorts*. This assumption might indicate that Lawes was familiar with the combination of instruments, and that he intended his *Harpe Consorts* for this group. However it is possible that le Felle, who also played the lute, acquired the lute mentioned in the entry for his own practice. Therefore, one could conclude that the harp and lute were not played in the consort together. In 1641, a list of all of the musicians serving in the court of King Charles I includes both le Felle and Lawes.⁹³ This confirms that the two were indeed colleagues. Note that Le Felle is the only harpist listed in the King's service at this time.

The information is compelling, but it relies strictly on archival records to connect Lawes with le Felle, and thus to the European style, gut-strung triple harp. Opponents of this theory argue first that le Felle was a "musician[sic] for the harp in ordinary," not a musician in ordinary for the harp. Le Felle's harp was therefore not a triple harp, but an ordinary, single row instrument. Second, Lawes and le Felle served the King in different ensembles and probably rarely conversed. Third, the triple harp was reputedly not commonly used in consort.⁹⁴

The alternate theory as to what instrument was used for performing Lawes' *Harpe Consorts* proposes a chromatically tuned, multi-row, wire-strung harp. An extant instrument known as the Dalway or Fitzgerald harp, dated 1621, features a second row of seven tuning

⁹² Ibid., 91.

⁹³ Ibid., 111.

⁹⁴ Joan Rimmer, "James Talbot's Manuscript," *The Galpin Society Journal* 16 (May 1963), 69.

pins on the neck of a traditionally shaped Irish harp. A wide range of theories concerning the usage of this extra row of strings has developed. The Dalway harp may indeed present the remains of an early, partially chromatic Irish harp. The lower range of the instrument, which has wide spacing, may have been tuned diatonically, while the upper register, which is narrowly spaced, may have been tuned chromatically.⁹⁵ Unison string tuning is another possibility. Or perhaps the strings were added for sympathetic vibrations.⁹⁶ Regardless, the existence of the Dalway harp proves that a multi-row Irish harp did exist, but it is difficult to prove that Lawes was familiar with the instrument or that his consorts were written for it. Francis Bacon indicates in his *Sylva Sylvarum* that the Irish wire-strung harp was commonly used in English consort music, and that it was the preferred harp for accompanying the viol.⁹⁷

The Hook harp

The Hook harp flourished in Austria and Germany during the eighteenth century, and ultimately influenced the development of the modern day pedal and Celtic harps. The Hook harp most likely developed from the European Gothic harp and spread from Austria to Germany and the Netherlands, France and the British Isles. It measures about four to five and a half feet in height and features 30-36 gut strings in a single, diatonic row. Brass hooks were placed along the left side of the neck between the C/D, F/G, and A/B,

⁹⁵ Michael Billange and Bonnie Shaljean, "The Dalway or Fitzgerald Harp (1621)," *Early Music* Vol. 15, No. 2 (May 1987), 178.

⁹⁶ Joan Rimmer, *The Irish Harp* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1969), 49.

⁹⁷ Bacon, 61.

assuming the instrument is tuned in F major.⁹⁸ (*Eb* was another tuning option.)

These hooks were large and could be swung in either direction to engage either string. Engaging the hook raises the string approximately one half step. The harp rests on the right shoulder, and the right hand plays the treble line while the left hand plays the bass line and engages the hooks.

The Hook harp was far more practical than any of the multi-row harps in terms of size, stringing and technique. And the concept of the hook later developed into the modern manual levers found on Celtic harps and the foot-operated disc mechanisms found on single- and double-action pedal harps. Even after pedal harps became the predominate harp in Western music, Hook harps remained a practical, less expensive option. However without the chromatic options of either the multi-row or pedal harps, the Hook harp was restricted to providing simple chord accompaniments in ensemble settings. The virtuosity of the bass line was also limited by the left hand's dual role of both plucking and engaging hooks. Despite these limitations, a fair amount of extant solo and chamber music repertoire exists for the Hook harp. And with some creativity, the Hook harp can certainly provide a fine continuo accompaniment.

⁹⁸ Rensch, 134.

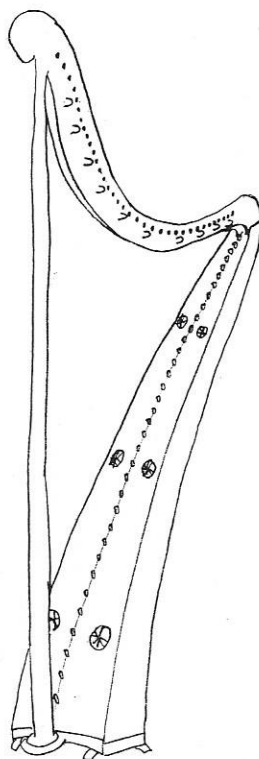


Figure 62. The Hook harp

Choosing a harp for you

All of this is immensely interesting, but it doesn't change the fact that you've been asked to play Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* in three weeks and you have a pedal harp sitting in your living room. Or perhaps you will be playing Händel on your lever harp. Begin with what you have. If you develop an interest in early music, you will purchase an historical replica suitable for the music that you enjoy. But do not avoid the music because your current harp doesn't fit the time and place. Only by playing the music will you come to understand the pros and cons of each instrument. And only then will you be able to make an educated decision about your harp needs. Do, however, assess the type of harp that was used for your piece and make your best effort to accommodate the timbre and volume level on the instrument at hand.

Designing a continuo band

The scoring for most continuo work was not fixed; specific instrument indications are exceptional throughout the late Renaissance and early Baroque eras. Although Monteverdi may have preferred the harpsichord or chitarrone, Caccini the theorbo, and Viadana the organ, other instruments are also acceptable. The lute, harp, lirone, guitar and bass viol were commonly used. Continuo is often performed by at least two players; one on a bowed instrument and the other playing a chordal instrument that can realize the harmonies. Agostino Agazzari (1578-1640), in his *Del sonare sopra il basso* (Siena, 1607), divides the instruments available into foundation (or harmony) instruments, like the organ and harpsichord, and ornamentation (or melody) instruments, like the cithern, spinet, chitarrino, violin and pandora. The lute, theorbo, harp and lirone fit into both categories. Perhaps this is because they are able to provide the foundation for a small ensemble and a special timbre for larger ensembles. Agazzari also discusses instruments that provide perfect harmony, like the organ, harpsichord, lute and arpa doppia; imperfect harmony, the cithern, lirone and chitarrino; and those that are not able to provide harmony, the viol, violin and pandora.

Using Agazzari's approach, select one instrument from the foundation category and one from the ornamentation category. The instruments that fit into both categories can accompany a singer or soloist alone. Indeed, the practice of always doubling the continuo line with a bowed instrument, such as the bass viol, is uncertain. "The tradition of a continuo combination of melody bass instrument together with a plucked or keyboard instrument stems from the late baroque practice, i.e. c. 1680-1750, but the nature of the

music before this rarely needs two instruments.”⁹⁹ Also, the variety of instruments used to accompany a soloist in the seventeenth century was much more varied than in the eighteenth century, which relied heavily on the harpsichord.

Suggested Readings:

Billange, Michael and Bonnie Shaljean. “The Dalway or Fitzgerald Harp (1621).” *Early Music* 15, 2 (May 1987): 175-187.

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Ellis, Osian. *The Story of the Harp in Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991.

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Holman, Peter. “The Harp in Stuart England: New Light on William Lawes’s Harp Consorts.” *Early Music* 15, 2 (May 1987): 188-203.

Rimmer, Joan. *The Irish Harp*. Cork: The Mercier Press, 1969.

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_____. “The Morphology of the Triple Harp II: Addendum on a Late Italian Example.” *The Galpin Society Journal* 19 (n.a., 1966): 61-64.

Rosenzweig, Heidrun. *Historical Harps*. Dornach, Switzerland: Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, 1991.

⁹⁹ North, 63.