

Early Harps & Continuo

Andrew Lawrence-King

Research & Education

Introduction to Medieval harp

Medieval harps might seem small to modern eyes, but in the Middle Ages they were a high-status instrument associated with knights and royalty, especially King David the Psalmist. When William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066, the first blow at the battle of Hastings was struck by his faithful harpist, Taillefer.

Some medieval psalters show harpists playing whilst standing on leg, resting the instrument on an outstretched knee. This position requires the balance skills and muscle-conditioning of a dancer or swordsman. So if you are serious medieval harpist, learn some early dances and find your local historical swordsmanship class...

Since the instrument is played with two hands, it is ideal for medieval heterophony (different versions of the same basic tune, played simultaneously) as well as for pure monophonic melodies, song accompaniments and early polyphony. A good medieval harp should be delicate enough to play next to a lute, but strong enough to work with a shawm.

Posture

In period imagery we usually see the harpist seated, with the instrument resting against the shoulder in the conventional manner. Depending on the size and shape of harp and harpist, rest the instrument on or between your knees, or on a table - whatever gets the instrument to a convenient height for you.

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.

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, in the position a modern harpist would label 'pres de la table'. For medieval 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.

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.

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

We do not have detailed information about fingerings in this period, but the renaissance principle of Good and Bad notes works very effectively in medieval music too. 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)

Tuning

Most medieval music is structured around fifths: thirds are considered a dissonance. Pythagorean temperament with pure fifths is ideal.

But some English and Gaelic music is structured around thirds. A medieval tuning from Ireland suggests that one might tune as many pure thirds and pure fifths as possible, optimising for the particular mode of this piece.

Medieval sources mention that each harper tunes the harp their own way, usually with an extended tuning prelude. So it's very appropriate to develop particular tunings for different pieces.

Two hands

Although most of the repertoire is written as monophonic (single-line) melodies, most images show harpists using both hands, with the hands separated in distinct registers. The simplest option is for the left hand to play a drone, with the Final ("key-note") of the piece plus the fifth above.

Organum

Another option is to play in parallel between the two hands, at the fourth, fifth or octave. Watch out to avoid any unwanted tritones.

Heterophony

This is a very useful texture for solo music, consorts and song-accompaniments. Practise playing the same tune with a slightly different version in each hand. Typically the right-hand version will be more active, with added ornamentation; the left-hand version slow-moving and simpler. It's characteristic of this style to have occasional pungent discords between the two hands, even on accented beats.

Polyphony

Early polyphony tends to have the voices in the same register, and such frequent crossing of the parts can be difficult on a single-row harp. This is where a medieval double-harp, with two rows of diatonic strings, is ideal. But harp and lute, harp and voice, or two harps also sound very good. It always helps to practise each line alone, first.

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.

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

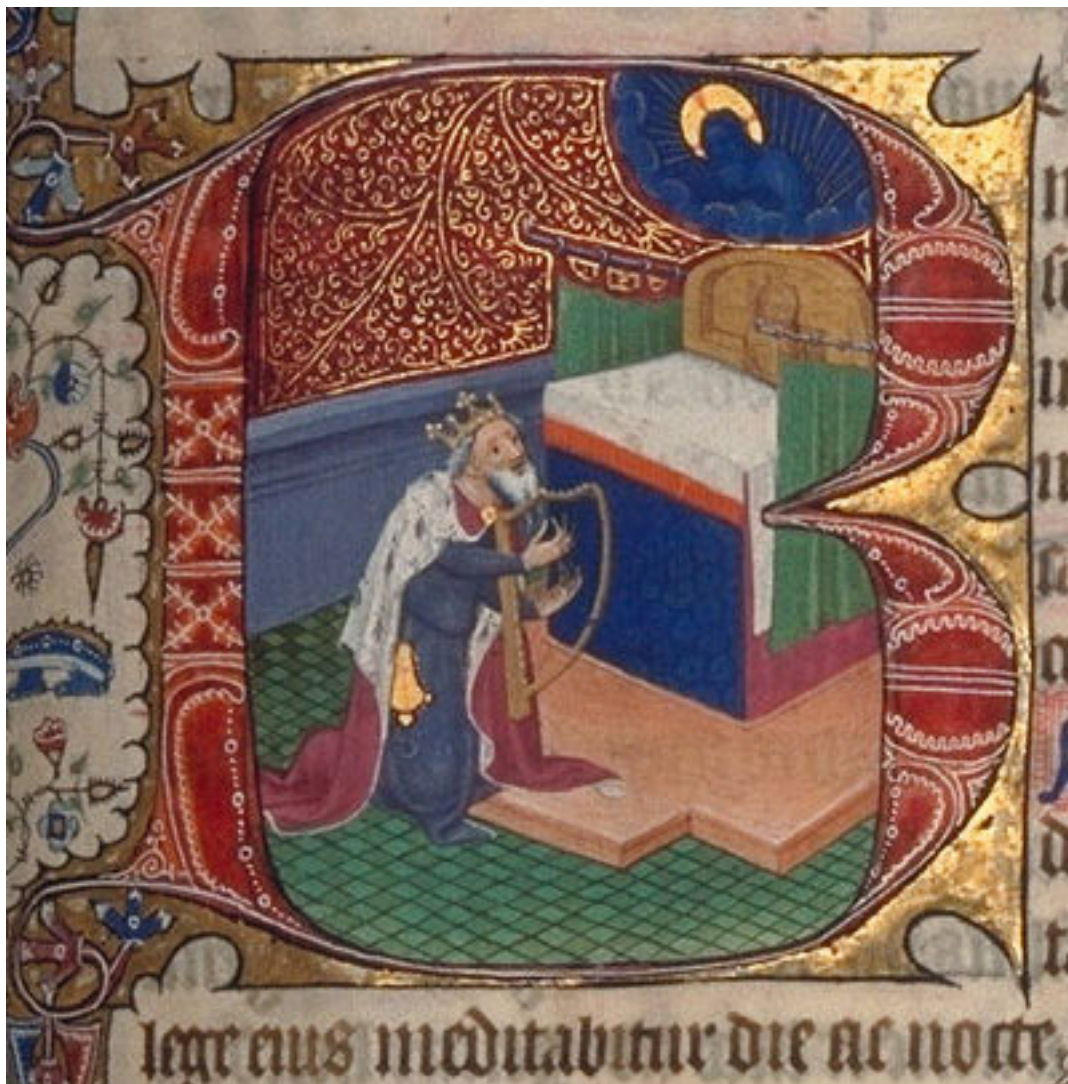


This angel is playing with two hands, each hand in a different register. Even if the music is 'monophonic' it is being realised in a complex manner with two or more notes heard simultaneously.



This image shows a medieval double harp, with two rows of strings. This kind of instrument is ideal for early polyphony, where the two voices tend to be in the same register, crossing each other all the time.

A high-status harpist showing the historical hand-position.





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Fingering

Harp

Quick notes & slow notes

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

Early Polyphony: both parts in the same register