



## Medieval

In the middle ages, the harp was a **high-status** instrument, capable of **polyphony** and associated with kings.

Medieval illuminations often show the harp placed above other instruments and played by a crowned figure, perhaps **King David** himself.



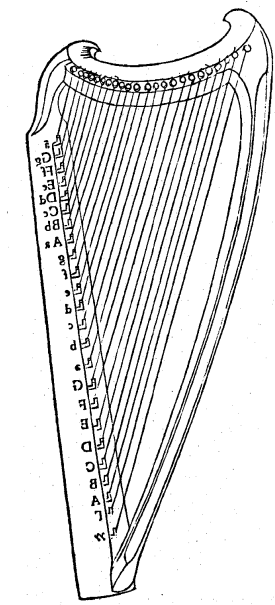
Many images show harps with a dozen strings or less, suggesting a range of around one octave (similar to the range of most chant, troubadour and trouvère melodies). But some 13th-century psalters show 21 strings and more.

There are also medieval harps with **two rows** of strings - probably tuned in unison pairs - ideal for playing early polyphony with two parts in the same range.

Chant, Troubadour & Trouvère melodies  
**Ludus Danielis**  
*Lamento di Tristano*



## Renaissance



From the mid-14th century, many harps have **about 24 strings**, and show the elegant 'gothic' shape familiar from period architecture. The gut strings are held in place by harpions or '**bray pins**', wooden pegs that are carefully shaped to touch the vibrating strings and create a characteristic **buzzing** sound.



The harp (held here by the composer, Binchois) is associated with **secular love-songs**, the organ (next to Dufay) with sacred polyphony.

This form of harp was highly successful. Examples are still seen in the mid-17th century, a design-life of 300 years!



The combination of harp & lute is seen very frequently in this period. Not only does this duo sound good, but it also symbolises **Love**: in most European languages the words for harp and lute are opposite genders.

The basic tuning is diatonic, but **semitones** can be created by clever re-tuning, or by stopping the strings at the neck.

*Early polyphony, Landini, Machaut*  
*Ars Subtilior*  
**renaissance dances**  
Luduvico

William the Conqueror's harpist, Taillefer, strikes the first blow at the Battle of Hastings.

In the Play of Daniel, harpers lead the army that overthrows King Belshazzar.

Machaut's *Le Dit de la Harpe* mentions 25 strings

Senleches *La Harpe de Melodie*

'Wartburg' harp. Binchois  
'Queen Mary' & 'Trinity' Irish Harps.

Josquin Henry VIII

Luduvico Bermudo Henestrosa

'Este' 1589 *Intermedi*

Cavaliere Peri Caccini

Monteverdi *Orfeo* 1607 Zampieri

Hidalgo Celos 1660

Ribayaz *Luz y norte Carolan* 1677

Torrejón *Púrpura* 1701 Single Huete Action 1720

Handel *Concerto Saul* 1736 1739 Quantz 1752 CPE Bach 1753 L. Mozart 1756

CPE Bach 1778 Cousineau 1784 Genlis 1802

1066

1200

1350

1400

1450

1500

1550

1600

1650

1700

1750

1810

## Early Harps

The harp has a long, rich and noble history before the invention of its modern form.

For more than six centuries before Erard's 1810 patent (#3332) of the double-action pedal mechanism, **harps are at the centre of cultural life**, at the cutting edge of musical activity, and associated with the finest composers.

Each historical harp-type is **optimised** for its own repertoire and playing technique, and for the musical and decorative aesthetics of its region and period. Like a medieval cathedral, a renaissance painting, a Shakespeare play or a Bach fugue, Early Harps are not 'primitive', but they are **different**.

## Chromatic

During the 16th century, harps are built with a second row of strings, for chromatic notes. These 'double-harps' are first invented in Spain, and come to Italy via Naples.



Late renaissance **Spanish harps** are typically wide and deep at the bass end, narrow and shallow at the treble end. This shape of the soundboard allows the second row of strings to be aligned at an angle to the main row, in the way that your fingers interlace when you clasp your hands.

**Italian harps** of the same period are too narrow for X-strung chromatics: instead the two rows are **parallel**. The late 16th-century 'Este' harp is chromatic, but preserves the earlier 'gothic' shape.



Andrew Lawrence-King with Spanish X-strung harp by Rainer Thureau (2013).

*Henestrosa (1557)*  
**Ribayaz Luz y Norte**  
*Huete Compendium*  
*Golden Age polyphony*  
**Hidalgo operas**  
*Spanish songs*  
*South American dances*



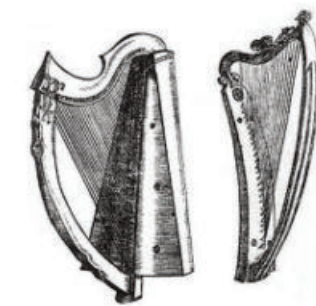
'Este' harp c1580

**Monteverdi Orfeo**  
*Italian continuo*  
*French dances*  
*English masques*  
*German polyphony*

Harp-maker & painter Domenico Zampieri's King David with *arpa doppia* (1619)



In Ripa's 1603 *Iconologia*, a harp played by a young man is the emblem of **Pleasure**.



Praetorius (1619) compares the '**pleasant buzz**' of the typical renaissance harp to the '**melting and prolonged**' resonance of the brass-strung Irish harp.

Landi  
Marrazoli  
Rossi  
Le Flesle  
Lawes  
Consorts

Hidalgo Celos 1660

Ribayaz *Luz y norte Carolan* 1677

Torrejón *Púrpura* 1701 Single Huete Action 1720

Handel *Concerto Saul* 1736 1739 Quantz 1752 CPE Bach 1753 L. Mozart 1756

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## Baroque

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Australian Research Council  
Centre for the History of Emotions

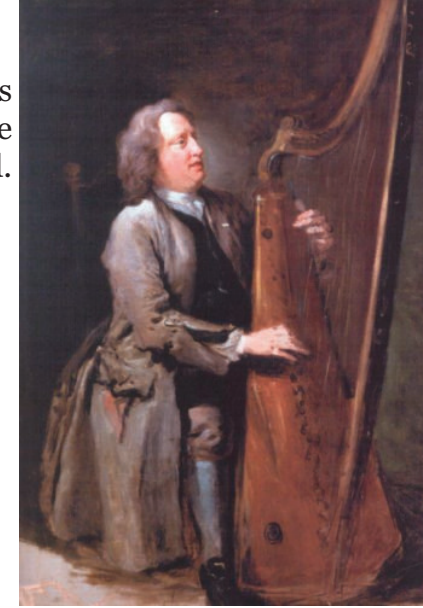
What is a Baroque harp? Around the year 1700, chromatic X-strung harps are played in Spain, Portugal & South America; large Italian triple harps in Italy, Germany & England; the *Davidsharfe* (with two parallel rows) and the *Arpanetta* (a large psaltery) in Germany. But many harpists played single-strung, diatonic instruments.



Single-strung harp by Antonio Stradivari (c1700)

Solimena's "St Cecilia" plays **single-strung** harp (early 18th cent.)

The 18th-century **Welsh triple harp** combines chromatic tuning in three rows with the '**high head**' shape of the period.



A **single-action pedal harp** from 1720 survives in Vienna, and from **1760** this type comes to great prominence in **France**.

Its delicate construction, light stringing and low pitch (a tone or more below A440) make it highly responsive to historical technique, detailed in many **Methods** from this period.

## Irish

The Irish harp, built strongly to withstand the tension of thick brass (or precious metal) strings, is a separate instrument with **its own history, repertoires & techniques**.

The **medieval 'low head'** shape can be seen in two surviving Gaelic instruments: the Trinity College harp in Dublin, and the Scottish 'Queen Mary' harp in Edinburgh. Such harps were still in use in **Carolan's** time.



In 1622 **Darby Scott** plays in consort with flute, lute & bass viol at the court of Christian IV in Denmark.

The line-up is very similar to William Lawes' music **For the Harp Consort**. But is Darby's large, low-headed Irish harp **chromatic**?

The typical 18th-century shape is 'high-headed'. This is the type of harp **Turlough O'Carolan** would have played around 1700. In 1796 **Denis Hempson** plays at the Belfast Harpers Assembly, using the ancient fingernail technique. But Carolan's *Planxties* are too 'modern' for his taste: he prefers variation sets by **Cornelius Lyons**.



Mozart

*Concerto*

1778

Cousineau

1784

Genlis

1802