

A Solid Foundation

From Tuning and Maintenance to Basic Playing Techniques. A Workshop for the Very Beginning Autoharp Player.

Maintenance

A proper case

A well-fitting case, either soft- or hard-sided, is a must to protect your investment.

Keep your 'harp dust-free

Avoid oils and waxes, which will dull the sound. Use a plain, soft cloth or soft-bristle brush to deal with dust.

Clicks, Clacks and Clunks

If your chordbars are noisy, quiet them down with a layer of felt underneath the chordbar holders.

Buzz, Buzz, Buzz!!

A buzzing string is usually the result of poor contact at one of the bridges or bridge pins. Loosen the string, inspect the contact point and fix any burrs or grooves. Retighten the string, and the problem (usually) is solved.

Strings and Felts

Change strings at least once every two years, and change felts as needed.

Tune, tune, TUNE!

At least weekly, and ALWAYS before playing with others! Keep your electronic tuner (and an extra battery!) with your 'harp at all times.

The Autoharp Owner's Manual

An essential volume compiled by the late Mary Lou Orthey. No autoharp player should be without it. (Available from Mary Ann Johnston at www.autoharpquarterly.com)

Care and Feeding

In a nutshell

Autoharps are pretty easy to please, for the most part. A proper case and avoidance of temperature and humidity extremes will keep your instrument sounding great and playing easily for years.

You will find that your autoharp will respond to changes in the seasons much as any other stringed instrument. The wood will swell with the spring and summer humidity, causing the tuning to go sharp. In the fall and winter, the dryer indoor climate causes the wood to shrink, and the tuning goes flat. This is a normal occurrence and no cause for alarm.

Strings should be replaced no less than once every two years if the 'harp is played regularly, and once a year if played aggressively and/or daily.

Damping issues should be addressed immediately, and worn or damaged felt replaced as necessary. A good rule of thumb is to replace the felt on the most-used chordbars when the strings are changed.

Tune your autoharp no less than once a week, and you will be rewarded with a sweet-sounding instrument that's a pleasure to pick up and play.

Autoharp Tool Kit

Good things to have on-hand

An extra set of strings, along with a pair of needle-nose pliers and wire cutters, are highly recommended. Although it's hard to justify the expense, you'll be thanking your lucky stars that you're prepared if you ever break a string. A couple of strips of felt are also a good idea to keep on hand, just in case.

Picks

Metal or plastic?

There is no right answer. The correct choice is what works best for you.

How many?

A thumbpick on your thumb and a fingerpick on the index, middle, and ring finger. Not everyone uses the ring finger, but it's best to start out with one.

Right-y Tight-y.

How tight? If your fingertips turn blue, that's too tight. If they fly off, when you play, they're too loose. Find a happy medium.

Owww! My cuticles!

If your fingerpicks are digging into your cuticles, you need to adjust the fit. Another use for those needle-nose pliers mentioned earlier!

It's impolite to point.

The plectrum of the fingerpick should follow the curve of the fingertip. If they stick straight out like artificial nails, you won't get the best sound, and your accuracy will suffer.

Tuning (again!)

Just Do It.

Putting it off just makes it worse. The more out of tune you let it get, the harder it will be to keep it in tune once you get it there.

Wrenches

A T-handled tuning wrench with either a square or star-shaped hole is your best friend. Throw away the tuning wrench that is standard issue with most factory-shipped auto-harps.

Plug it in, plug it in!

Investing in a tuner pickup (either the alligator-clip type or suction-cup type) will allow you to tune your autoharp in noisy environments. You'll wonder how you ever got along without one.

Let's Get Picky

Choose your weapon

Deciding what kind of fingerpicks to use (or if you will use them at all!) will depend largely on what kind of sound you're looking for. Plastic picks will have a softer sound, while metal will be brighter.



Finding the combination of picks that works best for you is an ongoing process. Don't be afraid to experiment. The best picks for you might be a combination of brands and materials.



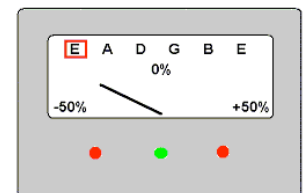
Thumbpicks are generally made of plastic rather than metal, and are available in varying degrees of thickness. Thin, soft thumbpicks can give a softer string sound, but tend to be prone to clicking noise. Harder, thicker thumbpicks have less self-noise, but can sound harsh on the strings if not used with care.

A comfortable fit when it comes to fingerpicks will allow you to play longer and with less discomfort. Take the time to fit your fingerpicks properly. You'll be glad you did.

A Word About Electronic Tuners

A Modern-Day Miracle

The availability of accurate, reasonably-priced electronic tuners has revolutionized the music world. No longer is there ANY excuse for showing up with an out-of-tune instrument.



When shopping for an electronic tuner, be sure that you choose a *chromatic* tuner, one that will identify every note of the scale.

Most tuners will have, at the very least, some sort of red or green indicator light (or series of lights) that tells when a string is sharp or flat. Some of the newer, clip-on types use an LED display with a series of arrows (nice, but hard to get to fit on the tuning pins). Some tuners have a needle display, and some list the actual number of cents sharp or flat. Some have a backlit display (handy at festivals) and still others have auto-shutoff.

If possible, try several tuners before making your final decision. An easy-to-use tuner that works the way you want it to will make tuning much less of a chore.

Straps

Straight or CrissCross?

Once again, the choice is up to you. The CrissCross type of strap distributes the weight of the instrument evenly across both shoulders, but some find them difficult to adjust.

A snug fit

Adjust the strap so that the autoharp rests snugly against your body.

Button, Button

Make sure the buttonholes on the strap are in good shape and have not become worn or stretched.

It's not supposed to hurt!

If wearing a strap causes you discomfort, find out why. Most of the time, it simply means the strap isn't adjusted to fit you properly.

Support

A good-fitting strap

The use of a properly installed and properly worn autoharp strap is highly recommended.

Strap buttons, if your autoharp doesn't already have them, can be ordered from and installed by your favorite autoharp luthier.



Regardless of which style strap you choose, take the time to adjust it so that it fits you well and supports the instrument in the proper playing position.

You will find that using a strap, even when seated, can make your practice sessions more comfortable.

Good Posture

Sit up straight

Yes, Mom was right.

High and Mighty

Keep the top edge of the 'harp at eye level or higher.

Au natural

If you find your wrists are in an unnatural position while playing, you're asking for trouble. Adjust the *instrument* to fit *you*, not the other way around.

No holding allowed

Don't use your forearms to support the autoharp. Your arm muscles will suffer and so will your playing. Either use a strap or sit down. Or both.

Relax!

Make a conscious effort to stay loose. Get comfortable *before* you pick up your instrument.

Flat Foot Floozy

Balance your weight on both feet when standing, and keep both feet flat on the floor when sitting. Your lower back will thank you.

Proper Playing Positions

Avoid developing bad habits.

One of the biggest mistakes new players make is to hold the autoharp at an improper angle. Although cradling our "babies" in our arms is a nice thought, it's a setup for injuries like tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome.

Whether seated or standing, keep the autoharp as close to a vertical position as you can. The straight edge of the instrument should just clear the jaw and be as parallel to the left side of the face as possible.

When standing, balance your weight on both feet and keep your spine straight. When seated, keep both feet flat on the floor and your shoulders back.

If you find yourself hunching over your autoharp, then the instrument is sitting too low. Raise it up by adjusting your strap so that it sits higher on your torso. If you are seated and playing without a strap, a rolled up towel placed under the anchor end of the autoharp will bring it up into a more user-friendly position.



Les Gustafson-Zook demonstrating good playing position.

Hand and Arm Positions

Left Hand

The fingers of the left hand should be parallel with the chordbars, not perpendicular to them.

Left Arm

The left arm should come around the front of the autoharp so that the elbow is clearly visible to onlookers. Don't keep the elbow tucked in against your side.

Left Wrist

The left wrist should be smooth, flat and supple, with NO lateral or medial movement. Having your wrist in a cocked position is tempting fate.

Right Hand

The fingers of the right hand should be well curled-under. If I can see your picks, your fingers aren't curled enough.

Right Arm

The right arm should be well forward so that the elbow is clearly visible. See "Left Arm".

Right Wrist

Keep that wrist straight! See the description for "Left Wrist".

Playing Melody

The Pinch

Just like it sounds. The thumb and the index or middle finger come toward each other, and strings get caught in the middle. The goal is to have the finger hit the melody note.

The Pluck

The thumb takes a vacation on this one. This technique uses a single finger to hit a single (we hope the right one!) note.

Strum and Stop

Use the thumb to strum up to the melody note, and stop before going beyond it.

Variety is the Spice of Life

Mix it up and use a variety of techniques to add interest to your music.

Basic Strumming

Start with the thumb

Although the strum sounds rather simple, it provides the foundation sound upon which your autoharp music will be built and should not be taken lightly.

Begin by strumming from the bottom-most string, all the way to the top. Listen to how it sounds. Vary the dynamics of your strum. Strum loudly, then softly. Try changing the angle of attack and listen to how the sound changes.

Vary the width of your strums. Try strumming only on the bottom third of the string bed. Then in the middle. Then on the top third. By simply varying the dynamic range and length of your strums, you can add a great deal of interest to your music.

Do not allow your fingers to splay outwards when using the thumb to strum. Keep them loosely curled under.



Chord Changes

Let your ear be your guide

The easiest way to get started playing is to find some guitar tab for a simple, three-chord tune you know well (the internet is a bountiful resource for this kind of thing). Sing the tune and strum the chords, changing chords where indicated.

Once you are familiar with the chord positions and when the changes occur, try putting the written music away and let your ear tell you when to change chords. This is one of the best ways to familiarize yourself with the chord arrangement on your particular autoharp. It also trains your ear to listen for those chord changes so you'll be more able to tell your left hand where to go when you hear a change coming. And, whatever you do, don't forget to. . .



HAVE FUN!!!

Get out there and play! Seek out other musicians and share your music at every opportunity.