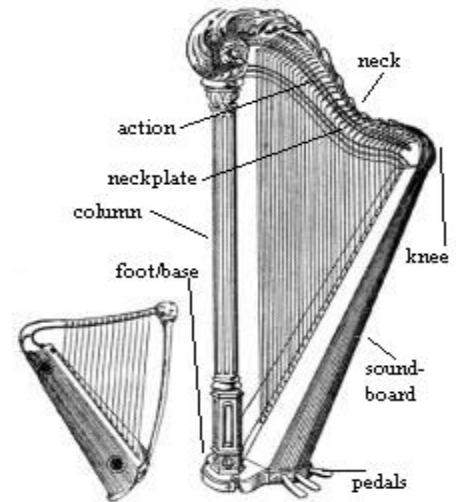


About Harps

What is a harp?

The harp is a chordophone whose strings are positioned perpendicular to the soundboard. All harps have a neck, resonator and strings (see the drawing at right). Some, known as frame harps, also have a fore pillar (as in the larger harp in the image below). Those lacking the fore pillar are referred to as open harps. Concert harps (like Lydia's) need the fore pillar to prevent the tension in the strings from pulling the neck into the soundboard. Harp strings can be of nylon (sometimes copper-wound), gut, or wire. The larger harp in the drawing at right is a concert harp; the smaller one is a folk harp. Lydia plays a concert harp.



Who invented the harp? What is its history?

The harp's origins may lie in the sound of a hunter's plucked bow string. The oldest documented references to the harp are from 3000 BC in Mesopotamia and Egypt. It is mentioned in the Bible - - King David was a harpist -- and ancient epics, and even appears in Egyptian wall paintings. This kind of harp, now known as the folk harp, continued to evolve in many different cultures all over the world. It may have developed independently in some places.

Eventually, people added levers to their harps to enable key changes while playing. Later, in the 1700s, larger, more complex harps, known as concert harps, began to be engineered. For her performances, Lydia uses a concert harp, which stands over six feet tall and replaces levers with a complex pedal system.

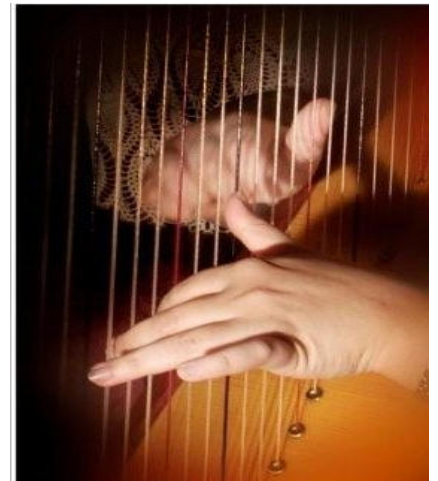


Photo by Gino Galea

How does one play the harp?

The harp is nothing like a piano, guitar, or any other instrument. Most European-derived harps (including Lydia's) have a single row of strings. Each string corresponds with one of the white keys on a piano; the black keys are omitted. Harpists can tell which strings

they are playing because all F strings are black or blue/black and all C strings are red or orange. The instrument rests between the knees of the harpist and along the right shoulder. The first four fingers of each hand are used to pluck the strings; the pinky fingers are too short and cannot reach the correct position without distorting the position of the other fingers. Plucking with varying degrees of force creates dynamics (volume). Depending on finger position, different tones can be produced: a fleshy pluck (near the middle of the first finger joint) will make a warm tone, while a pluck near the end of the finger will make a loud, bright sound.

Foot pedals allow harpists to play in keys other than C; in other words, changing a foot pedal allows a harpist to play what would be a black key on a piano. Lowering the first pedal raises *all* the harp's "F" strings to an F-sharp. Raising the same pedal lowers every "F" to an F-flat (or "E"). In this manner, skilled harpists can use their feet to change keys while plucking strings with their hands. As you can imagine, this gets complex quickly, especially in a piece with many accidentals. Some harpists joke that the German inventors of the pedal system had a bit too much to drink before they designed it.

How do harps produce their sound?

Harp strings run vertically. At the top, they attach to a tuning knob. At the bottom, they attach to a long, hollow sound board. The fine wood in this area resonates with the strings, amplifying their sound and projecting it forward. This sound board serves the same purpose as the hollow part of an acoustic guitar, the long tubing in a trombone, or the large body of a grand piano.

How much does a new harp cost?

Professional-grade concert harps can cost as much as a car, ranging from Euro 20.000 to Euro 55.000+ depending on the gold gilding and manufacturer . You could expect to pay a similar amount for a quality grand piano. Students often start by renting a harp or purchasing a used one. Folk and lever harps cost significantly less than a concert harp.