

## FINDING A HARP TEACHER

by Joyce Rice

Harp players are everywhere, aren't they? Was it seeing and hearing one that got you interested in playing the harp? Was it at a classical concert?



*Harpist Patti Warden and the Federal Way (WA) Chorus*

In a hospital, or  
at an Irish or  
Scottish festival?



*Scottish Games in Kalamazoo, MI  
Thanks to MLive/Kalamazoo Gazette*

A jazz concert?

*Park Stickney and Rüdiger Oppermann*

At an airport or a Renaissance Faire?



*Harper Tasche*

A fancy brunch or a show?



*Deborah Henson-Conant and workshoping cast of her "In the Wings"*

A wedding?



*Courtesy of harpist Christine McPhail*

A coffee shop or a church?



*Casey Pinckney*



A castle, a pub, or on a street corner?

*Monica Schley and guitarist David Milford*

On a ferry, on  
YouTube, or  
at a Latino  
restaurant?



*Madeleine and Abel of Correo Aereo*



*Margaret Shelton in Spain toting self-made harp*

In the U.S. and around the world, there has been an explosion of harps and harp players in the last 50 years. They play concert harps, Celtic harps, Paraguayan harps, harps with two or three parallel ranks of strings or two ranks that cross, harps with 17 strings or 47, that fit in backpacks (*see left*) or need a station wagon, SUV or van to be hauled.

Are you ready to play?

Did you notice all the different sizes and styles of harps in the photos above? There are concert pedal harps, folk harps, a Paraguayan harp, lap harps, a Renaissance harp. Not pictured are yet more such as wire-strung, cross-strung, double-strung or triple-strung harps.

So what is your harp dream? Do you see yourself busking across Europe, your harp on your back? Playing in a local orchestra or even a grander one? Joining others in an Irish session?

[If you know that you want someone to help you learn to play wire-strung harps like the Gaelic harpers of long ago, or you've seen Harper Tasche play a Bach prelude on the cross-strung harp, or Judy Kadar a 14<sup>th</sup> century tune on her Gothic harp, or Alfredo Rolando Ortiz some music from Venezuela, and you must play like one of them, too, see

further on in this article. They all require special techniques that many harp teachers are not familiar with.]

But...if you just want to play a little harp for your own enjoyment, why should you need a teacher at all? Harps are not hard to pick out tunes on, and if you already play piano, you can find your way around them pretty quickly. However, the shape of your hands and fingers playing harp is different from that when playing piano, guitar or other stringed instruments. It makes sense to find a teacher who will show you a technique that will use your fingers, hands, arms, shoulders and the rest of your body efficiently and comfortably and allow you to produce the best tone and use your harp to the best advantage.

Mary Radspinner Of Melody's Traditional Music and Harp Shoppe says, *"I feel that knowing good harp technique is important. I have seen many folk harpers playing with technique that shows a lack of knowledge about tone and phrasing. Since the folk harp has a voice of its own, knowing how to bring that out is important. Playing with poor hand position can sometimes bypass the importance of tone and phrasing, and to play without that is to me, to play without spirit and life. I believe that every student benefits when taught to prepare, or place, in advance for the next phrase or group of notes."*

Or if you're already playing harp, perhaps you have more specific goals, as suggested by Karen Peterson at <http://www.enjoytheharp.com>

- Verify the **technique** that you've already taught yourself
- Motivate** you with the deadline of a lesson
- Move you off a music **plateau**
- Teach you a new technique or **genre** you can't teach yourself
- Give you more ways to have **fun** and play better in general
- Teach new skills like playing by ear, memorizing, improvising, preparing for auditions, how to play in an orchestra.

To play a concert harp well requires a certain technique that classically trained teachers can teach you, because the harps are strung at a high tension and require strength to pull the strings hard enough to get a full tone. This is especially important if you're playing in an orchestra and trying to be heard. Many folk harps, however, are more lightly strung and need less pulling to get a beautiful tone – in fact, they are easy to overplay and one can get nasty noises from a lighter–strung lever harp when using the classical technique. For that reason, if you play a lever harp with a lighter tension it might be a good idea for you to bring that harp to your lessons so your instructor can modify her teaching.

If you are planning to stay on a lever harp, it is a good idea to try to find a teacher who is familiar with its repertoire and slightly different technique, and who is not solely interested in producing another pedal harpist. Ask potential teachers how they feel about this.

Performer, composer and recording artist Kim Robertson says: *For my part, my classical training on pedal harp gave me an advantage as a folk harpist, mainly because I developed finger strength and coordination playing with more string tension and learning more complex music. But then it might be considered a disadvantage,*

too, because I CANNOT play those triple-stop, one-finger Celtic (or Paraguayan) ornaments or even play at the break-neck speed of some of today's folk harp performers.

So, where can you look for teachers? Here are some ideas:



*Laurie Rasmussen helps a new young student with his hand position.*

1. The Sylvia Woods Harp Center at <http://www.harpcenter.com/category/harp-faqs>.

Sylvia has been in business for many years selling lever and pedal harps and music, and has a vast list of harpers and harpists. She says, "We have lists of harp teachers throughout the country (and in some foreign countries) that are compiled by various harp societies. We'll be happy to help you find a teacher in your area. In general, harp teachers will not travel to you, you'll go to their house or studio for your lesson. Remember, harp teachers are not nearly as numerous as piano teachers, so you may have to travel a distance. But harp lessons are very important, and it is generally worth the drive. A normal schedule is to have a lesson every week, or every other week. However, if you live far away from your teacher, even just having periodic lessons every month or two can be extremely helpful."

2. Tanah Haney at <http://www.celticharper.com/teachers> says: First of all, there are the usual **non-internet** means of searching. Many music teachers advertise in the yellow pages and/or in local publications. They may also be affiliated with a music school in your area (music schools, in turn, may be affiliated with other educational institutions like universities or colleges, or with a local music store). You can sometimes track down pedal harpists by talking to someone from a local orchestra (if you have one), and resorts usually have lists of people who will play for special events (which may include harpists for weddings). You could also see if there is a chapter of a harp-related organization near you.

When **searching on the internet**, try to be as specific as possible (include your province or state in your search, as well as the type of music you're interested in). Be warned that just looking for "harp" can lead you to some pretty odd pages, including ones about harmonicas and harp seals. Some sites dedicated to particular types of music (e.g. Celtic) have lists of instruments and teachers on their sites. Also, more and more teachers are starting to advertise on the net, either via their own home page or in affiliation with an educational institution, musical group, organization or music store.

You can also try posting a question to one of the **harp mailing lists** hosted by Yahoo (lists formerly on egroups/onelist). It's the best way I've found of reaching a large number of harp folks at once. You have to subscribe to a list to post to it, but it's very easy to unsubscribe afterwards if you wish (the "harplist" mailing list will reach the largest number of harpists, while some of the other lists are more specific). You could also try any of the number of music-related **newsgroups** that exist (these are constantly changing, so just search for "harp" or by style of music).



*Marina Roznitovskiy  
with a student at  
an outreach school  
presentation for USA  
IHC. Photo by Monty  
Howell.*

3. The teachers' directory in the American Harp Society's listing at <http://www.harpsociety.org/Resources/TeachersDirectory.asp>. However, these are paid listings and do not in any way represent all the teachers available.
4. Wm. Rees says: The Folk Harp Journal has a listing of teachers and we have also developed a listing of harp teachers across the United States. We will be happy to send out the list for you area upon request.  
<http://www.folkharpociety.org/pages/journal.html>
5. Jazz harp? Try the site for the International Jazz Harp Foundation at <http://www.jazzharp.org/pagina.php?id=128>
6. Wire-strung harp? Expert players and teachers are much more rare, In the U.S. contact Cynthia Cathcart, Ann Heymann or Bonnie Shaljean. See if your city has a chapter of a Scottish or Irish music harpers. Also, Bill Taylor, Mary MacMaster and Alison Kinnaird in Scotland.
7. Historical harp? There are many players for you to Google, including, in the U.S., Cheryl Ann Fulton, Maxine Eilander, Paul Knoke, Becky Baxter, Ellen Tepper, Bill McJohn, Ron Cook. In Europe, for starters, Judy Kadar (Germany), Mara Galassi (Italy), Hannelore DeVaere (Belgium), Andrew Lawrence-King.
8. Find a U.S. Suzuki harp teacher: <http://suzukiharpinfo.com/suzuki-harp-teacher-locator/>
9. Harpist Laura Hoffman at <http://www.phrl.org/HARP/Lessons.htm> says: Once you've found a harpist in your general vicinity, I recommend contacting the president of the nearest Chapter of the American Harp Society to see if the name you are inquiring about is known to other harpists in the area."  
<https://www.harpsociety.org/Chapters/Index.asp>

10. **The Harp Connection National Harp Teacher Directory:** Here you will find a nation-wide directory of harp professionals who can help you develop your skills as a harpist. <http://www.harpconnection.com/TeacherDirectory.html>

11. There is a long list of U.S. teachers at <http://us.harp.com/teachers-us.htm>



*A private lesson with Jordy  
at Harp Adventures*

12. Another list of U.S. teachers is at <http://www.salviharpsinc.com/HarpTeacherDirectory.htm>

13. A list of Canadian, U. S. and international Celtic harp teachers is at <http://www.celticharper.com/teachers.html>

14. Finding a teacher in the UK, US, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Ireland: <http://www.firsttutors.com/uk/music/instrument/harp-teachers.php>

15. Finding a U.K. teacher: <http://www.affairsoftheharp.com/teacher.asp>

16. Consider long-distance teaching through Skype or other video-conferencing methods. In this photo, *Mark Andersen of Seattle* is playing in front of his computer and his student far away can see and hear him, and then play to his or her computer so Mark can watch and listen. It's not hands-on teaching but the next best thing. See Harp Spectrum's article on long-distance teaching at <http://www.harpspectrum.org/harpworks/LongDistanceLessons.shtml>





17. And of course, you want a teacher who makes lessons enjoyable. If, after a few lessons, you are not enjoying yourself, try to find another teacher. Personalities do not always mesh, whether in music or elsewhere, and most of us start learning an instrument. Advice from the International School of Music in Bethesda, MD, says it well:

- It is important that you agree and feel comfortable with your teacher's teaching philosophy, and know what his/her expectations are. One [adult student or] parent may prefer a strict and demanding teacher who produces winners in musical competitions; another may be more comfortable with a teacher who uses a nurturing, gentle approach to makes lessons fun; a third may choose a teacher who emphasizes improvisation and creativity over classical technique. What style do you and/or your child prefer?
- Ideally, you want to take lessons [from someone who] is committed to matching every student with a teacher according to that student's learning style, level, goals, and interests. Prospective students should discuss with a teacher their practice expectations, placement level, the course of study and their goals.
- Besides finding a teacher with a passion for teaching, it is also important to find a teacher with the expertise that you and/or your child need. Some teachers specialize in working with a specific age group, or with advanced students, or with a specific style of music, such as jazz improvisation. Find someone who resonates with you and who can help you on your unique musical journey.
- Students should have the option to try different teachers in order to find a teacher whose personality they like, and whose judgment they trust, so they can follow his/her instructions and recommendations. This will increase the opportunities for a long-lasting and healthy student/teacher relationship.

18. For advanced students: if you've already studied for a while you may be ready to move to the next level. Here's what young up-and-coming harpist Sam Karlinski has to say:

- There are separate considerations for those looking for a teacher for the highest level of harp study. If you have reached that point, you are likely well aware of your strengths and weaknesses. Taking these into account when choosing your teacher is crucial.
- In essence, you should choose a teacher whose students sound like you want to sound. For instance, if you feel your ability to express emotion in your music is lacking, then find a teacher whose students seem to pour their hearts out. Likewise, if your technique is a little off, you'd be best off choosing a teacher whose students have impeccable fingers.
- Even beyond this, you may want to study with a teacher based on his or her specific expertise, experience, or training. For instance, you may want to study with a teacher who himself studied with a famous harpist, or you may want to study with a teacher with special expertise in a certain period of music or a specific composer.
- Lastly, this may be a point where you need to find a teacher whose personal opinions of harp pedagogy match with your own. For instance, if you feel that you will grow most by pursuing lots of competitions, it's important that you find a teacher who can successfully guide you through that process. In the same way, if you would really like to be an orchestral harpist, you should probably find an active and renowned orchestral harpist who will have in depth knowledge of all of the important repertoire.

- One final consideration at the university level is the accompanying music program. Are you willing to go to a sub-par music school to study with the teacher you love?  
(<http://theharpwriter.wordpress.com/2012/01/29/which-harp-teacher/>).

Good luck in your teacher search! I hope this has been helpful.

(All photos are either taken by Joyce Rice or are courtesy of and with permission of Harp Adventures or the harpists portrayed.)