

Tuning Your Autoharp

There are many ways to tune an autoharp, with many types of tuning to use, such as 2/9 comma meantone, 1/4 comma meantone, just tuning, etc. Some folks have very elaborate methods of arriving at the special tunings which can be very satisfying.

To learn more about special tunings and methods, a session with Bryan Bowers, Bob Lewis, Homer Welty and others could be very informative.

For our purposes here, I want to help folks get their 'harps tuned in a straight-up no frills fashion, ready to join in a jam without invoking the wrath of fellow jammers.

First and foremost, be sure to have an electronic tuner. If you don't need an electronic tuner, you don't need my advice on tuning. The electronic tuner is one of the primary reasons that more and more folks are playing the autoharp. At one time players were forced to learn as much about tuning as about playing the autoharp, just to be able to do anything with it.

Let's assume you have just completed a string change. How do you find the beginning note on your 'harp, so that you know you are in the correct octave? The most reliable way is to find the note on another instrument. Another autoharp is the best. If both autoharps are standard chromatics, the first note in the bass is an F. On a piano keyboard, this F is the second F below middle C. If you are unsure that you can find the note, another good way to find it is to change just one string at a time. To get a new set of strings to settle into tuning, follow the instructions under "String Changing Tips".

Once you have the octave established, tune each string in succession. Some folks prefer to tune all the Fs, then all the Gs etc., in order to prevent the instrument from twisting, causing it to go back out of tune. If the 'harp is close to correct tuning, this is not necessary on a modern autoharp.

Use of an electronic tuner is highly recommended! Most have readout with a needle indicator. Most also will tell you what note you have plucked. If the note does not match the note designated on your autoharp, follow the directions above and raise or lower the pitch accordingly. With your tuning wrench, simply turn it clockwise to raise the pitch, and counterclockwise to lower the pitch. Once you are on the correct note, determine if it is sharp or flat. If the needle is left of "0", the string is flat, if the needle is to the right of "0", it is sharp. A flat note must be raised to proper pitch, a sharp note lowered. It is best to bring the pitch up to the correct tuning, rather than to tune it down to the correct tuning. (With fine tuners, small downward adjustments work fine). Simply turn the wrench slowly clockwise to tune from slightly flat to correct. If the tuning pin jumps a bit and the string becomes slightly sharp, try pushing down on the string to stretch it just a tiny bit, and bring it into the correct tuning.

Using Your Tuner

Tuners don't all work alike, but most are at least similar. Most have a built-in microphone for picking up the tone of a plucked string. Start by placing the tuner in close proximity to the strings, or even lay it on top of the strings. It is often necessary to move the tuner around to find the best placement to pick up a particular string. Pluck the string with a bare finger. If you use a pick, let the string ring for a second to settle the initial "attack". Plucking harder will not help in the overall tuning process, and will often hinder it. Let the string ring, being patient for a proper reading on the tuner.

The tuner should tell the note you are plucking, and may read that is sharp or flat. If the tuner does not indicate the proper note, but is a half step or full step away, tune up or down accordingly to find your note. Never start by tuning way up or way down; you are likely headed for the wrong octave.

NOTE: Standard tuning is based on tuning the A below middle C to 440 hertz (cycles per second). Many tuners are equipped to change this standard if desired. If you don't seem to be in tune with other instruments, check to be sure your electronic tuner has not been changed from the standard A-440 hertz.

The lowest notes are often the hardest to pick up. An inexpensive tuning clip will help pick these strings up. The clip plugs into the "in" port on the tuner, and clips onto a tuning pin or the tuning wrench. It is especially important not to use this clip with hard plucks. It picks up best after the string settles. You may have to move it around to find the best placement.

Sometimes the lower strings just don't want to be picked up by the tuner. In the case that you cannot get a reading, you will need to train your ear a bit. For instance, if you can't get a reading on the low F string, tune the next F, string 6 on an Oscar Schmidt. Once the #6 string is in tune, pluck both strings at once. Sound is carried by "waves" through the air. If the two strings are not in tune with each other, the waves will clash with each other, creating an audible disturbance in the sound. Tune the low F a little at a time, until the two waves line up with each other. The warbling effect of off-set waves will go away, producing a clear tone.

With a little practice, you will be spending way more time playing than tuning.