

# A Primer on Harp Maintenance by Mike Lewis at HarpTech

*What knowledge should harpists have in order to maintain their instruments?*

If you're a pedal harpist, you should be able to:

1) replace strings; 2) replace a pedal rod; 3) replace pedal felts; and 4) replace and/or adjust a disc

If you're a lever harper/harpist you should be able to:

1) replace strings; 2) replace and/or adjust a lever

*Should I keep my harp away from direct heat and sun?*

Yes, you should always protect your harp from direct sources of heat. The glue used on your harp starts to become soft and melt at 115 degrees Fahrenheit. This will cause the wood to shift.

*Should I insure my harp, and if so, for how much?*

Harp is a large investment, so I would recommend insuring them at full replacement value.

## Strings & Regulations:

*How often should I have my harp regulated?*

My recommendation is every year, or less, for professional players, every 1-2 years for semi-professionals and every 2-4 years if you play for yourself.

*How often should I change the strings on my lever/pedal harp?*

False strings, strings that sound funny or seem to change their pitch after they are played, should always be changed regardless of their age. Dull sounding or pitted strings should also be changed.

*Should I put new strings on my lever/pedal harp before a regulation?*

Yes, I would highly recommend it. If you look closely at your strings where the cam or disks grip the string, you will see damage from pitting. Another area that gets damaged, but is more difficult to see, is around the area your fingers play. Over time, the string becomes thinned out due to the friction of your fingers.

Also, the bass wires become dull sounding over time, and won't give you those nice overtones that add depth to the sound of your harp. You'll be amazed at how good your harp sounds just by restringing your bass wires.

For the best bang for the buck, purchase a fresh set of strings and restring your harp within a few weeks of a regulation. This will allow enough time for the strings to stabilize in pitch, but not so much time that they become pitted from the levers or disks.

I understand how cost prohibitive new strings can be. At the very least, restring the top 3 octaves before a regulation.

*Can I use my old strings from 10 years ago? I've kept them stored in an airtight container and they look ok to me.*

That's a good question, but I would recommend using a fresh set of strings. See my articles on [Shelf Life](#) and [Strings](#).

*What are the best strings for my harp?*

I'd check with the manufacturer and use the strings they recommend. You can always experiment with different brands, but be aware that string diameter specs vary slightly between manufacturers and this could throw your harp's regulation off.

*Where do I begin when I need to replace all the strings on my harp?*

Well, I'd definitely begin this task when you're feeling calm, and at a time when you won't be disturbed for a while. Have all your tools ready to go: new strings, tuning key, tuner, string ties, wire cutters or something to cut off excess lengths of string, and a waste basket. I recommend that you do an octave at a

time, beginning at the top. Take the old strings off, replace them with new, fresh strings, bring them up to pitch, and then go on to the next octave. This technique is the least likely to destabilize your soundboard.

P.S. This would also be a good time to clean your disks of any lint or dust it might have accumulated. You can use a dry Q-tip, or canned air.

*How do you replace a wire string on a pedal harp?*

Please take a look at my article [How to Change Strings](#)! I have detailed instructions and illustrations to aid you in this task.

*How do you tie that knot for gut and nylon strings?*

Two different kinds of knots are used. I explain them in my article on changing strings. Figure 5 illustrates the knot to use for 4th and 5th octave strings. Figure 7 illustrates the knot for the top three octaves. See my article referenced above about How to Change Strings.

*Do you recommend keeping a string log?*

Yes, keeping a string log will let you know how old each string is and if a pattern emerges in regards to string breakage.

*Should I change my felts even though I'm not going to have a regulation?*

Felts should be changed if they become compacted and/or torn. I've seen harps that needed refelting every few months because of constant pedal changing. Not only do felts keep the noise down while you're pedaling, it affects the overall regulation of your harp.

Please see my article [Pedal Felts](#) for more information and illustrations on how to change them.

## **Broken Tuning Pin**

*I need your advice. A tuning pin broke off into my tuning key. After I remove the string, what do you recommend for removing the pin? I will of course pad the harp around the pin. Should I tap the pin directly with a small hammer? Should I use a rubber hammer or should I place a small, fat wooden dowel against the pin and hit the dowel with the hammer? Or maybe use the tuning key against the pin and tap the tuning key? I have a feeling the pin will be somewhat difficult to remove since it has been hard to turn in normal tuning.*

I recommend you use the technique you're most comfortable with, but most importantly, pound out the pin from the string side of the harp towards the tuning side of the harp. The pins are tapered, so they come out only one way. If you're not use to using a hammer, practice ahead of time so that your aim gets good.

I've used a regular 16 oz. hammer, and a smaller one too, pounding with the metal "striker". Be sure the "striker head" isn't so large that you hit other pins while going after that particular one. I've used all the methods you've mentioned to avoid marking the harp with varying success, but the best method I've come up with is to "hammer with feeling" which means "only use as much force as is needed (start with taps, but it may proceed to light pounding), and control your swing." Be aware that the pin could fly out of the hole; you'll want to catch it before it hits something. And it does get noisy (your harp/strings will echo/ring), but that is to be expected.

Please see my article on [Tuning Pins](#) for suggestions on how to keep your tuning pins (and you) happy and healthy.



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