



THE ULTIMATE HARP BUYING GUIDE

How to choose the harp that is best for YOU!





INTRODUCTION

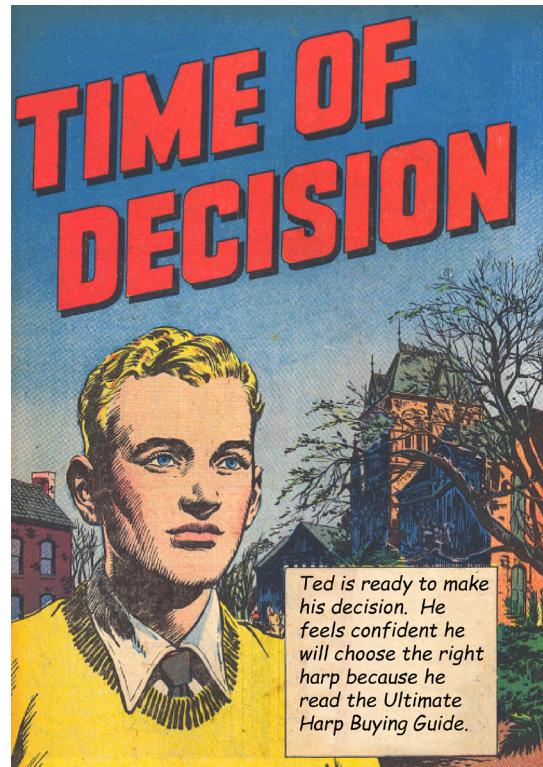
THERE IS NO PERFECT HARP JUST A HARP THAT IS PERFECT FOR YOU.

Buying a harp is exciting but choosing which harp to buy can be a difficult decision.

This guide is meant to help you understand the different elements that make each harp unique.

With this understanding you will:

1. Know what to look for in a harp.
2. Know what important questions to ask.
3. Be able to confidently evaluate and compare different harps, and make the best decision for you.



This guide is meant for people looking for **Lever Harps**. Lever harps are also commonly called Celtic Harps or Folk Harps. These harps use sharpening levers to change keys which makes them different from Orchestral or Pedal Harps that use pedals to change keys.

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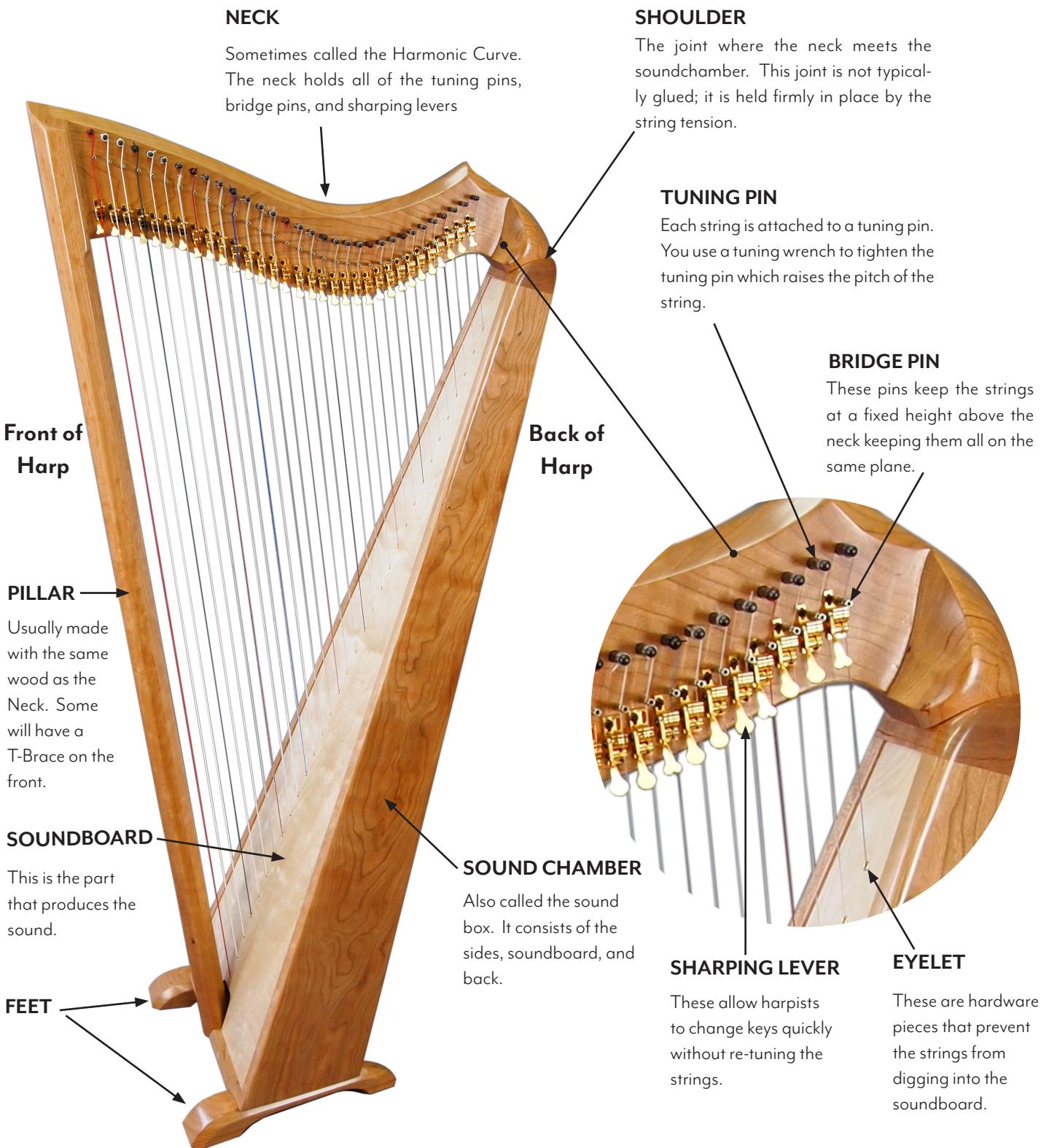
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PARTS OF THE HARP

Here is a diagram that labels the parts of a harp. Knowing this vocabulary will help you better understand harp makers when they discuss the various features of their harps. Using the proper terminology will also help you more clearly communicate any questions you might have.





STRINGS

Before we discuss strings we need to define the difference between the two types of lever harps -

Floor Harps and Lap Harps

Floor Harps sit on the floor. To play the harp, you sit on a stool or chair and tilt the harp back so that it rests on your right shoulder. The harp should be balanced so that you hardly feel any weight on your shoulder at all. You might have to adjust the height of your stool to fit different size harps.

Floor Harps usually have between 29 and 36 strings. Many teachers recommend 36 strings because this gives you 5 full octaves.

The number of strings has an effect on the size so, in general, a floor harp with 29 strings is going to be lighter weight and more portable than a 36 string harp.

33 OR 34 STRINGS HITS A SWEET SPOT PROVIDING PLENTY OF RANGE WHILE KEEPING THE HARP AT A MANAGEABLE WEIGHT AND SIZE.



Lap Harps sit on... yep, your lap. Although lap harps are much smaller, this does not mean they are good harps for young students. It can be quite a challenge for a small person to hold the harp on their lap and learn how to play at the same time! Lap harps are more commonly used by harpists who already have a floor harp but need something extremely portable.

Lap Harps usually have between 22 and 26 strings.

Lap harps intentionally limit the number of strings to make the harp more portable.



RANGE

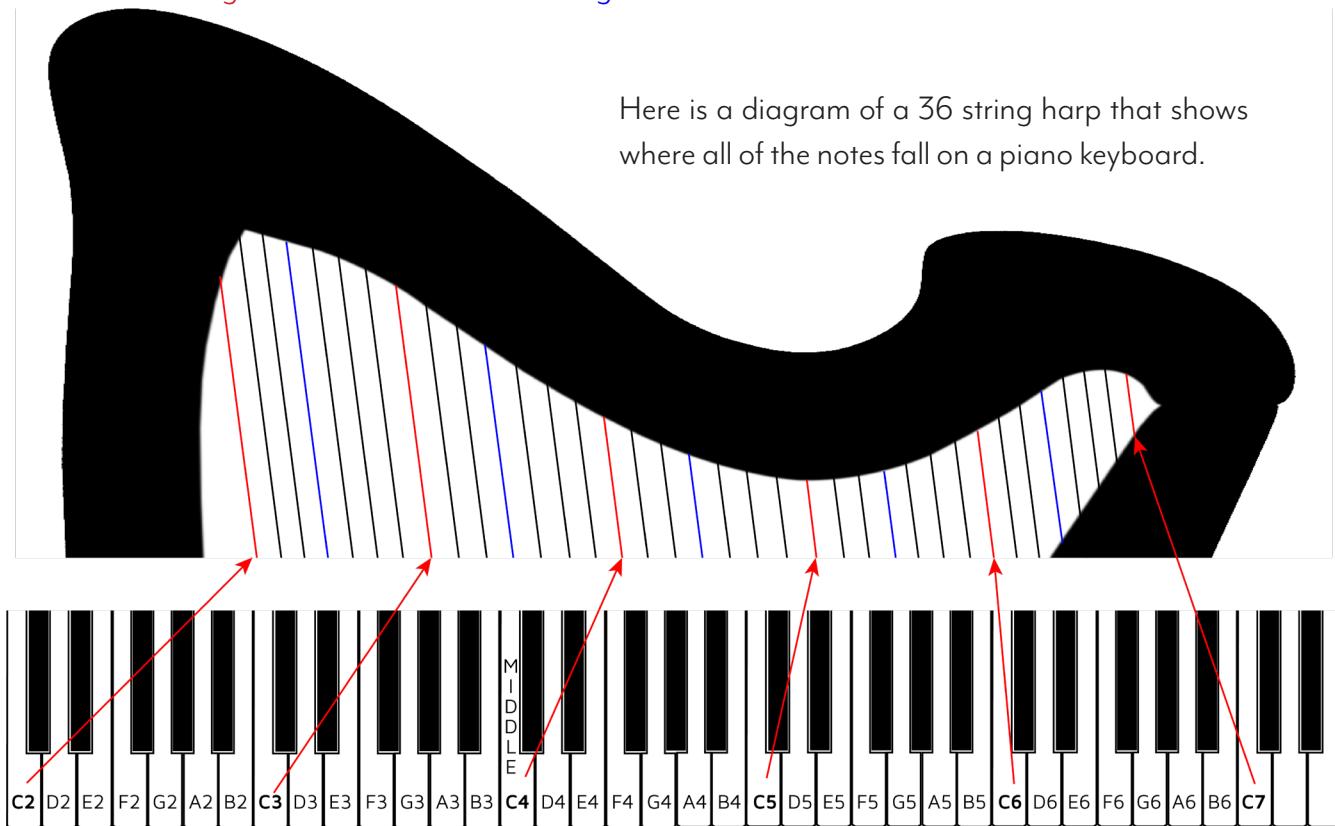
Let's talk a little bit about **Scientific Pitch Notation** (SPN). It's exciting stuff! Really, it is.

If I ask you to go play a C on the piano, you have several options. How do you know which C I mean? SPN is a way to identify a specific musical pitch using the musical note name and a number which identifies the pitch's octave. In this system, Middle C on a piano is C4. The number, or octave, changes on the C notes. So the C one octave above middle C would be C5 and so on. A440 = A4

Now that we've got that out of the way, let's look at the range you'll find on Lever Harps.

Lever harps are diatonic and the strings correspond to the white keys of a piano.

C strings are colored Red and F strings are colored Blue



Here is a diagram of a 36 string harp that shows where all of the notes fall on a piano keyboard.

C2 (sometimes called Low C by harpists) is a common bottom note on a harp.

Here are some common ranges:

C2 to C7 (36 strings)

C2 to A6 (34 strings)

C2 to G6 (33 strings)

C2 to D5 (30 strings)

G2 to G5 (29 strings)

C3 to C7 (29 strings)

**THE VAST MAJORITY OF MUSIC WRITTEN FOR LEVER HARP
WILL FIT IN THE RANGE OF A 30 STRING HARP.**



STRING SPACING

WHAT IT IS

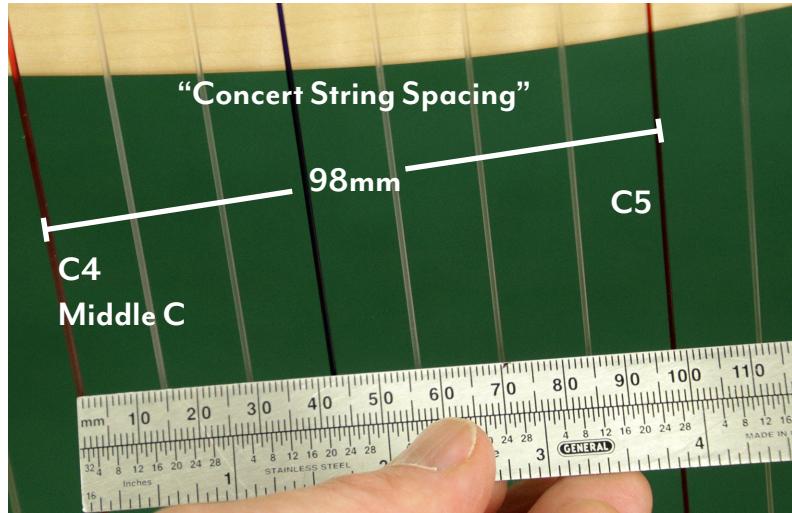
String Spacing refers to how close the strings are to each other.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

As a beginning harpist, it really isn't that important. You'll get used to the string spacing on the harp you play the most. You may struggle a bit if you try to play a new harp with string spacing that is different. But don't worry, it isn't all that hard to adapt.

As you begin your research on harps, you'll come across the term "concert spacing", which generally means string spacing similar to what you would find on a concert, or pedal harp. We have measured string spacing on a wide variety of folk harps from several different makers all claiming to be using concert string spacing and it turns out that there is no agreed upon standard for what concert spacing actually is. To complicate matters

further, string spacing changes across the span of the harp being wider in the bass and narrower in the treble to accommodate the different thicknesses of those strings. We took an average of all the measurements we found and called that "Concert String Spacing" in our book Folk Harp Design and Construction. (www.harpkit.com/folk-harp-design)



As a reference - I'll use the spacing of strings C4 to C5. This is the span of one octave starting at Middle C. Pretty much every harp you see will have these strings.

Concert String Spacing will put this span from C4 to C5 at 98mm wide.

We use this as a guide to label our harps.

Sonnet	Narrow	95mm
Ballad	Medium	98mm
Jolie	Medium	100mm
Cheyenne	Wide	105mm

Narrower Spacing - Often found on "Irish" and Paraguayan harps. Makes it easier to play fast and is easier on smaller hands.

"Concert" Spacing - This string spacing is closest to what you would find on a Pedal Harp.



STRING TENSION

WHAT IT IS

String Tension has two meanings.

1. It refers to the total amount of tension the strings exert on the frame of the harp (measured in pounds).
2. It also indicates how loose or tight the strings feel to the player (measured subjectively).

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

As you try out harps, you need only be concerned with how loose or tight the strings feel as you play. You want to find a harp with a tension that feels nice to you and is suitable to your playing style.

SOME GENERAL GUIDELINES

High Tension Harps are well suited for performers and harpists that use an aggressive playing style. Higher tension harps allow you to pull harder on the strings without distorting the pitch. They are also harder on your fingers and require greater hand strength to play. Most pedal harps are considered high tension.

Low Tension Harps produce a more mellow tone that makes them popular with music therapists. They are also easier on your fingers and great for beginners or anybody with frail hands. It is also easier to play fast on low tension strings.





WOODS

WHAT IT IS

When the wood of a harp is listed - it is usually referring to the wood on the sides, back, neck and pillar. The wood used for the soundboard, if listed, would be called out separately.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

The species of wood used effects both the tone and the look of the harp.

Here are three woods commonly used for harp frames.



Maple



Walnut



Cherry

The tonal differences produced by the different frame woods are both subtle and subjective. It takes a practiced ear to note the difference and a creative vocabulary to articulate what you hear. **It is perfectly acceptable to choose your harp based on which woods look nice to you!**

The preferred **Soundboard Material** for many modern harps is aircraft birch, a specialty laminate that is just 3mm thick but consists of 6 layers of laminated birch. It is strong enough to withstand the string tension and thin enough to vibrate well and produce a full, rich tone.

Traditionally, solid spruce was used for soundboards and it offers a good tone, but spruce soundboards are much more susceptible to cracking under tension and from changes in humidity.

If you want to dive deep into this topic - [check out this article](#) from the book Folk Harp Design and Construction.



SHARPING LEVERS

WHAT ARE THEY

Sharpening Levers are devices that raise the pitch of a string by one half step.

WHY THEY ARE IMPORTANT

Sharpening levers allow you to quickly change keys without re-tuning your harp. Strictly speaking, you don't need levers on your harp, especially if you are a beginner. Much of the beginning lever harp repertoire is in the key of C. But at some point in your journey as a harpist, you will definitely want levers on your harp.

HOW DO THEY WORK

Sharpening Levers work by changing the vibrating length of the strings. Specifically, they shorten the vibrating length. This raises the pitch in the same way that putting your finger on the first fret of a guitar shortens the vibrating length of that string and raises the pitch. You might be wondering how you get flats if you can only raise the pitch. You do this by tuning the open string flat. You engage the lever when you want the natural note and disengage the lever when you need the flat note.

If you would like to explore this concept further - check out our interactive Virtual Harp.

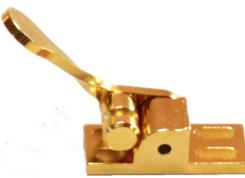
www.harpkit.com/virtual-harp



Loveland



Universal



Truitt



Camac

The majority of harps you see today will be levered with one of these four brands of lever.

All of these sharpening levers are perfectly suitable for your harp. It's ok to make your decision based on looks alone.

If you get a chance to go to a harp festival, here is a good exercise to try out the different levers -

Sit down with several harps and look at them from the players perspective. Flip up the levers on all the C and F strings. Note how they feel and pay attention to how easy it is to find those levers. You may find that one style of lever is much easier for you to find and flip quickly.



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT

Harps, by their very nature, tend to be larger instruments and challenging to lug around. Consequently, the weight and size of a harp are features that buyers consider to be very important.

EVERY HARP IS A COMPROMISE.

For example, if you want a harp with a wonderfully rich bass sound that can fill a room, you need a harp that is tall, has a large resonating chamber, and a string tension that is on the high end. This all means that this harp will be rather heavy.

But if you want a harp that weighs less than ten pounds, is easy to maneuver, and can be played standing up with a strap, you are going to have an instrument that is limited in range and volume and you are going to lose the lowest octave.

Great advances have been made in recent years with the adaption of carbon fiber as a building material. There are some excellent ultra-light, full size harps on the market. But that, too, is a compromise. Carbon fiber harps lack the warmth of natural wood harps in both look and tone. This is not meant as a disparagement; these harps are a life saver for many people that need a full-size 36 string harp but no longer have the ability to lug around a 30 pound harp. It just illustrates once more, that every harp is a compromise.

Musicmakers has developed a carbon fiber/wood hybrid harp to meet the continued demand for full size harps that are very light weight but maintain the warmth of real wood. But this, of course, is also a compromise - our hybrid harp costs significantly more than the all-wood version of the same model.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

The first thing I want to mention is that you can fit pretty much any harp in any car. You may not be able to carry passengers but I have yet to see someone fail to fit a harp in their car. If you lay the front passenger seat back, you can fit 98% of all harps in the front of your car.

Beyond that, consider if you will be taking your harp out a lot (to lessons, harp circles, hospitals, gigs, etc.). So clearly something on the lighter side (less than 25 pounds) is going to be a good choice.

If you plan to keep your harp at home for the majority of its life, then maybe you don't need to consider weight and size at all...



PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

We've covered a lot of information already. Let's try to put it in context and see how these factors come together in actual harps. Here are the specs from a few Musicmakers harps. Look them over and see if everything is clicking into place for you. Do our descriptions of each harp make sense based on what you now know about the specs?

Sonnet

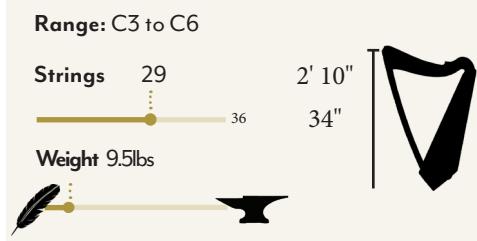
The most comfortable lap harp we have ever played. Four octave range starts on C below Middle C.

Tension: Medium

String Spacing: Narrow

Frame Wood: Cherry

Soundboard: Aircraft Birch



Jolie

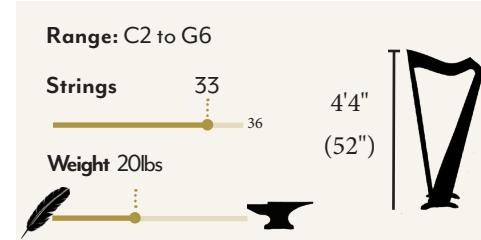
Small enough to be portable but high tension strings and a clear tone make this harp great for performance.

Tension: High

String Spacing: Medium

Frame Wood: Cherry

Soundboard: Aircraft Birch



Ballad

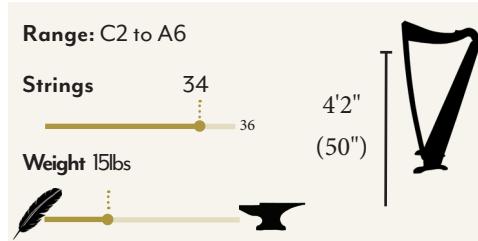
The ideal beginner harp. 34 strings, light tension, light weight, big sound.

Tension: Low

String Spacing: Medium

Frame Wood: Maple

Soundboard: Aircraft Birch



Cheyenne

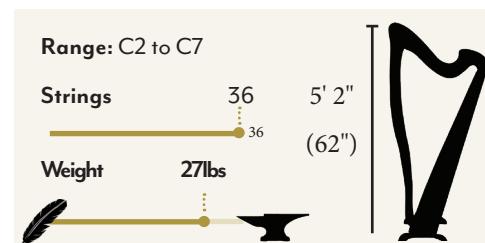
The ultimate in performance quality sound in five full octaves. A tone that is lush and lovely and big enough to fill a small hall.

Tension: High

String Spacing: Wide

Frame Wood: Cherry

Soundboard: Aircraft Birch





OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Here are some thoughts and some friendly suggestions regarding a few other things you'll want to consider when you are shopping for harps.

STYLE

Harps have a strong and distinct visual appeal. The look of a harp is an important feature for many harpists as they decide which harp they want to buy.

Keeping in mind that every harp is a compromise, you have to ask yourself how strongly style and look will factor in your decision. Are you willing to choose a harp that has a slightly better tone or range even though the style isn't perfect for you?

There is no wrong answer. If the look and style of the harp is the most important factor, own that and make your decision accordingly.

WARRANTY/CUSTOMER SERVICE

Buying a harp is a significant investment. It's worth taking a little time to find out how a company or harp maker treats their customers. Here's a few questions to consider:

Does the maker of your harp stand behind their work with a warranty? Have they been making harps for a while or are they brand new? Have you talked to other people about their experiences with this builder? Does the maker offer a return policy?

Contact your potential harp builder by email or phone with a question you have about their harps. Are they responsive, helpful, and pleasant to deal with?

TONE

Tone is very difficult to describe and is perceived differently by different people. You'll hear words like *bright, warm, round, smooth, even, bold, light, playful*, and more to describe the tone of harps.

Evaluating the tone of different harps can be a challenge for aspiring harpists. There aren't many stores that stock several models of harps for you to compare. And you can't rely too heavily on sound samples you hear online because so many things can effect the tone of that recording - the harpist, the room, the microphones, compressing the files, and the quality of your computer speakers.

The best way to evaluate tone is to attend a harp tasting at a harp festival. Harps from many makers are played behind a curtain. The same musical piece is played on the same harp by the same harpist. You take notes about what you hear without knowing the brand of harp you are hearing. Then all the harps are revealed and you match up your notes to the harps.

It's easy to get lost obsessing over which harp has the perfect tone. I've seen so many people agonize over harps that sound so similar. What they don't realize is that, when you get your harp home, you aren't going to be comparing it to several other harps and picking apart the tone. You'll soon forget what the other harps sounded like. And the more time you spend with your harp, the more you'll grow to know and love its tone.



STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT COST

I want to start by making a distinction between American Made harps and the inexpensive, imported harps you can find on eBay and other bargain sites. The saying that “You get what you pay for.” applies here. Please understand that I am not suggesting you shouldn’t buy a cheap, imported harp. If you really aren’t sure that you want to play harp and you can’t find one to rent or borrow, getting one of these harps offers a low risk way to try it out. Just know that these harps are not known for longevity and often have a tone that no one is drooling over.



Most American made harps, on the other hand, are usually well worth their asking price. There are several reputable American harp makers working today and, as a whole, the industry is producing better harps than ever before.

So what goes into the cost of a harp?

Labor contributes the most to the cost of a harp. American made harps are all hand made and require careful fitting of parts, LOTS of sanding, and great attention to detail. That is just the assembly process. Then several coats of finish are applied, the hardware and strings must be installed, the harp must be tuned several times, and finally, the levers get installed and regulated. A lot of time, labor, and love goes into making a harp.

Next consider the materials. Most American harps are made using high quality hardwood that continues to go up in price. String sets are custom designed for each harp and often use specialty made, wound strings. Levers are also specialty items that aren’t manufactured in enough quantity to make them inexpensive. The cost of the strings and the levers can account for 20-25% of the total cost of the harp!! And don’t forget the gig bag which is custom made to fit your harp, and for Musicmakers, made in America.

Finally, consider the customer service and support. American harp makers spend a lot of time talking to customers about harps, educating customers to help them make a good choice, and travelling to harp conferences so people can play their harps in person. And most of us provide a warranty and continued service and support after the sale. If you have a question or an issue with a harp you bought from us, you can call or email us and we will take care of you right away. You won’t get any of this service buying an inexpensive import.



Now for the big question. Is it worth it?

Up to this point, I haven't volunteered any opinions but I'm going to break with that tradition now.

YES - I believe that it is absolutely worth it.

If you have downloaded this guide and read this far, then clearly you are wanting to play the harp. How long have you been wanting to do this? 6 months? 2 years? since you were a little kid? What are you waiting for? You absolutely don't want to find yourself near the end of life and still wondering what it would have been like to play the harp.

So what is stopping you?

Is it the cost? Rent a harp. Buy a used or inexpensive, imported harp. Ask harp makers if they will finance your purchase over time. Many will and it never hurts to ask. Buy a harp kit. You can save a lot of money building a harp yourself.

Are you worried you won't like playing the harp? Rent one. Borrow a friend's harp. Buy a cheap, import. Attend a harp conference. Do whatever you have to get your hands on a harp. I'm willing to bet you will like it.

Worried you can't learn how to play? I'll tell you right now that *you absolutely can learn how to play the harp*. Learning how to play is simply a function of time and desire. Do you have the desire to learn how to play? Do you have 10 minutes a day to spend with your harp? If you play your harp for 10 minutes a day, five days a week I promise you that, after a year, you will proudly call yourself a harpist. Will you get frustrated on your journey? Probably. Will it be worth it? Assuredly. Don't forget that harps sound heavenly even when you have no idea what you are doing.

As far as value goes - I don't know how to measure the value of music in dollars. Personally, music has added more joy, beauty, and meaning to my life than any ten other endeavors combined. I find creating infinitely more rewarding than consuming and every act of music making is an act of creation. Making music is an inexhaustible well of inspiration and love and it is available to you right now. Don't dream about it. Do it.





HARP COMPARISON WORKSHEET

Here is a worksheet for you to help you compare different harp models.

Harp Model	Price	Shipping Charge	# of Strings/ Range	Weight	Levers	Notes/Impressions (use this column to note things important to you such as string tension, looks, warranty, etc)
Musicmakers Ballad	\$	Free	34 C2 to A6	15 pounds	Camacs	Low Tension and medium string spacing. Light color wood (maple)

HARP COMPARISON WORKSHEET

Here is a worksheet for you to help you compare different harp models.

You can customize this worksheet using your own columns with the features that are most important to you.