

# The Harp

Harps have existed for around five thousand years. There are paintings of harps in tombs in Ancient Egypt. It's an instrument used in many cultures around the world.

Every harp shares some similar characteristics. Each one has a hollow section called a sound box. A branch or piece of wood sticks out of the sound box. This piece is called the string arm. The string arm and sound box make an angle like the letter V.

Strings are stretched from the sound box to the string arm. Imagine that letter V. The strings near the point are shorter than the strings going across the wide opening. The shorter strings have a higher pitch. Longer strings sound lower. To play, the harpist plucks the strings with their fingers.

Thousands of years ago, harps were small and simple. They could be carried easily. In the Middle Ages, musicians wanted more strings on their harps. They also wanted a louder sound. For these changes to work, the harp needed a new part.

Think of that V again. Now turn it on its side. A piece of wood was attached across the opening. It was called the pillar. The pillar made the harp string very strong. It kept the harp from breaking from all those strings pulling on it. So the boxes became larger, too. The larger sound gave the harp louder volume.

Another big change happened in the eighteenth century. Harpists in Europe wanted a bigger choice of notes to play. It was not possible to add more strings. Instead, harp makers added seven pedals. The harpist pressed the pedals with their feet. Pressing a pedal changed the pitch of some of the strings. They called this the single-action harp.

But harpists wanted more! In 1810, Sebastian Erard invented the double-action harp. He attached two small discs at the top of each string. The pedals turned the discs. This changed the length of the strings. Each string had three possible lengths.

A double-action harp can play any note in any key. This is the kind of harp used in symphony orchestras. But some harpists prefer the older, simpler harps, depending on which type of music they want to play.