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Tuning the Harp by Ear

Everyone should know how to tune by ear even though now there are some wonderful electronic tuners. Even if you carry a set of fresh batteries and/or an extension cord, sometimes the tuner itself can have a malfunction that is unfixable. Also, sometimes tuners can get “confused” and we have to be able to recognize when the tuner is leading us astray with wrong readings. It is also important to be able to recognize when the orchestra is playing at a sharper or flatter A than the one to which you have tuned. It is always good to check the pitch of the A with the oboist when you are playing with an unfamiliar orchestra, or check with the leader if it is a band or combo.

Always have a tuning fork in your bag of strings and accessories that accompanies you to every gig. You should have one in whatever pitch your orchestra tunes in, i.e. A 441, and one for A 440 as well. Hit it on your knee, then place the bottom of the fork on your sound board so that the vibrating tines of the fork are loud enough to hear well.

We tune almost all the time in a tempered scale, in which each semitone matches in size. Rarely, there are pieces in weird tuning systems, and good electronic tuners have these options on the menu. Other instruments routinely alter some semitones to be sharper or flatter, depending on where they are in the chord or the scale. We cannot do that.

Start by matching the A natural above middle C to your tuning fork. Note: tune the strings in flat position and then check them in natural. If you tune a string with the natural disc engaged, then the pitch will not stay accurate when you release it. Now release the disc to A flat. (Alternately, you can buy a C tuning fork and start there.) Tune the E flat above it by playing the A flat and the E flat at the same time, slightly flattening the fifth. This takes practice! Check it with your tuner, which is tempered, so your flattened fifth should match up exactly. Next, tune the octave E flats, playing them simultaneously, and also broken in upwards and downwards directions. In some cases, the pitch may be slightly different depending on whether you play the note with the thumb or another finger.

Follow the “cycle of fifths”: A flat, E flat, E flat, B flat, B flat, F, F, C, C, G, G, D, D. This should bring you back to A natural. Make sure you complete the entire cycle of fifths, wherever you choose to start. This could also be done as: A, E, E, B. B, then go back to A, then D, D, G, G, C, C, F, F. This should all be done as flats, checking in natural position, since the regulation will affect the tuning.

Check the tuning by playing a scale, a series of cadences such as I, IV, V, then set your pedals into different chord patterns with enharmonic settings, and finger these glissando patterns as you would play scales.

The tuning may not have come out right. This could be because your fifths were “perfect” and not flattened enough. If they are perfect, then the result is the “Pythagorean comma”. This simply means that the semitones did not come out exactly the same and you have not achieved a tempered scale. It’s all right; if you practice tuning by ear and checking with your tuner, then this trains your ear to recognize what a tempered fifth sounds like.

This can be a more time-consuming process than using an electronic tuner, so always get to your gig early. An hour is usually enough; this gives you time to unload your harp, tune and warm up. With experience, you get to know your own time line.