



Cleaning and Preserving the Beauty of Your Harp's Finish

by Karen Gottlieb

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THERE are three things that harpists can do to clean and preserve the finish on their harps: **Prevention, Attention and Lubrication** (the cleaning of high contact areas). Following are some detailed suggestions of how and what to do, as well as what not to do.

PREVENTION

1. Wash your hands before you play. Dry them well. Do not use hand cream or lotion immediately before playing. The moisture in the cream is not good for the strings. Remove jewelry or watches that can scratch the finish, especially on your right arm. Buttons and sequins can also do damage, so be mindful about what you wear.
2. Dust the harp regularly with a soft flannel cloth (Handi-Wipes work well, too), wherever dust can collect, such as the sounding board, base, crown, and neck.
3. Dust disks and outside action areas with a semi-stiff stencil brush or a soft bristle brush. That will keep the dust from collecting on the disks. The brush is also great for cleaning areas that are hard to get into, such as between the carvings, and where the base and board meet at the bottom of the column.

ATTENTION (OR CLEANING)

4. Remove dirt and oily grime. Dirt and grime can build up on the sounding board, along the edge where hands touch or rest, and where bare knees contact the harp. Dust these areas with a soft cloth after playing. Note that over many years, fabric dyes can leave a mark where your knee contacts the back of the harp. The use of polish may help to remove or lessen the discoloration, but the oils from our skin contact can slowly erode the finish. Tips #5 and #6 should help to prevent this.
5. For the buildup of grease, dirt and oils (especially on the rims or edges of the sounding board, or wherever the hands rest, or a bare knee contacts the harp), use a soft damp cloth. Wet the cloth with warm water and wring out any excess water, so it does not drip. Gently rub off the dirt. Then buff with a soft dry cloth.

For really stubborn dirt, you can add a very small amount of mild dish soap to the water to rub off the dirt. Follow with a clean damp cloth to remove any soap residue, then a dry cloth so the harp is completely dry. This method works best on modern harps and not the older harps with the French-style polish/finish. If the area turns dark and grey, the finish may already be worn through. It is best to contact a professional at this point.

LUBRICATION

6. The best way to clean and prevent dirt and grime from building up over time is to **POLISH THE WOOD** of your harp occasionally (yearly

is fine), avoiding the strings, brass plate and the gold or gilded areas. Apply a small amount (about the size of a dime) of polish to a soft cloth. (Handi-Wipes or micro-fiber clothes are also recommended.) Rub a smallish area of about one-by-two feet in size. Repeat over all wood parts of the harp and non-gilded areas. The polish will dry a bit. Then go over it with a fresh soft cloth, removing any polish and rubbing for a lustrous shine. To clean any gilded areas, dust only—no rubbing!

THE DOS AND DON'TS:

DO USE: Harp polishes specifically made by harp builders. For example, the Lyon & Healy Polish works for all L&H harps, both new and older styles as well as for Salvi Harps. The active cleaning agent in L&H polish is mineral spirits, used in most high quality furniture polishes. For Salvi harps with polyurethane finishes, use Penthouse Polish in a pump-spray bottle. When using this, spray the polish on the dry cloth first, then use the cloth on the harp. NEVER spray polish (or anything else) directly on the harp. Another preferred lubricant for the finish is Johnson Paste Wax. Weinman's Lemon Oil can also be used for glossy finished harps.

NEVER USE: lemon oil on matte or satin finished harps. Do NOT use lemon wax, Pledge or other cleaners that can destroy the finish. It's always better to be safe than sorry! Do NOT try and polish the brass/metal action plate. It will only destroy its finish. If any dirt does NOT wipe off with a dry cloth, forget it!

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS:

7. Keep your harp out of direct sunlight, away from air-conditioning or heating vents. Your harp will be much happier if the temperature is as constant as possible. If you live in a very humid area, consider running a dehumidifier in the summer and a humidifier in the winter.
8. Do not leave your harp in a hot car. Too much heat is not good for the finish and the glue joints can start to fail, and then you have a BIG problem. If you must leave your harp in the car, park

in the shade with the windows cracked. A covered garage is your best bet and well worth the cost to keep your harp safe.

9. Likewise, do not leave your harp in a freezing car or building unless you specifically want and like the "crackle finish" look. Freezing temperatures make the wood shrink and as a result the glue and the finish on the harp will crack. It is usually not a problem if the harp stays above temperatures of 40°F.
10. Many live in earthquake country. Back up that harp! When not playing your instrument, it is best to keep the back of the harp near and facing the wall or with the bench behind it. Should a tremor occur or the harp is bumped, the bench and wall will help hinder a bad fall and mitigate scratches, dents, and cracks.

For an informative video on basic-general harp care by technician Steve Moss, see www.mossharpservice.com/videos.php.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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