

It's All The *Buzz*

One of the most common questions we get in the repair shop is “How do I get rid of that buzz?”

Any autoharp, regardless of make and model is susceptible to developing a nasty and annoying buzz, and sometimes trying to find it and get rid of it becomes a problem of equally annoying magnitude.

We'll break the problem down here and offer a method to identify the noisy nasties. Once identified, the cure becomes apparent and it is usually very easy to resolve the trouble.

A buzzing comes from one of three source areas. The first and most common source area is a single string, with the cause found somewhere between bridge points. To find which string is giving trouble, hold your 'harp as you play it, and pluck each string individually until the buzz is apparent. Having identified the string, take a quick visual look at the string along its length, from bridge to bridge. Often you will find the source of the buzz easily, by finding something which is contacting the string which should not be. Is there a felt dangling too close to the string? Is some part, or even something foreign contacting the string as it vibrates? Remember that the large, long wound strings move much further than the non-wound and shorter strings. They can make contact with a felt which is too close, or contact a part such as a bar holder or an installed pickup. Players these days like a very close action, and sometimes the action can be too close. If you find that the string is making contact where it shouldn't, the solution is simply to give the string more room to move. Fix the felt, raise the action a bit, do what is needed to keep the string from vibrating against anything along its length.

If nothing is touching the string as it vibrates, look next at the bridge at both ends of the string.



By far, the most common cause of a buzz on an 'A' model autoharp (older Oscar Schmidt 'harps, most custom 'harps etc.) is the string riding up on the guide pin at the bridge. Push the string down, just to the tuning pin side of the bridge, so that it makes complete contact with the bridge. Often that is all it takes. If the buzz persists, with a flat-head screwdriver, put pressure on the string directly at the point at which it makes contact with either bridge or the bridge pin ('B' model). Be careful with this, its easy to slip and put a dent in the top of your instrument. I use both hands to steady the screw driver, holding it in such a manner that if I slip, the driver will not travel far enough to do damage. Now pluck the string (using your third hand of course). Is the buzz gone? If so, you've found the problem area. If the bridge is

a bridge pin, usually removing the string from the bridge pin and shining it up with a fine grit finger-nail file, sand paper or emery cloth will remove a slit burr, and remove the buzz. The

same can often be found with bridge rod, and can be fixed the same way. It can help all the strings to rotate the bridge rod so that a new surface is provided for contact with the strings. Next, check the angle of the string between the bridge and its anchor point. Too much angle up or down from a bridge pin to the tuning pin can be trouble. Too little angle from bridge rod to the anchor point can prevent the string from making positive contact with the bridge rod. Another spot which can also be problematic is a fine tuner cam which is the bridge on many 'harps. Sometimes the angle of the cam can be such that the string crosses too much of the surface of the cam loosely, causing the string to buzz on the cam. To fix this, the fine tuner must be raised or lowered until the initial contact is strong enough to prevent the buzz. If the string is making good contact with no obstructions at the bridges or between bridges, it will ring clearly, provided the string itself is intact. A wound string has another possible problem area, which is the winding. If the winding is loose on the string, it can buzz or just sound dead. The best cure for this problem is simply to replace the string. Other than this problem, if you still hear a buzz, there is a good chance that the problem stems from the next source area I will describe.

The second possible source area involves something which is loose external to an individual string, and is vibrating somewhere on your instrument. If you play on the table top, this could be anything. Move the 'harp to another location and see if the buzz persists. If you play with the 'harp against your chest, check to be sure a zipper or a pen in the pocket is not the cause. Next, check all the parts of your 'harp.

A loose strap button, a loose end cap, a loose string anchor cover; anything loose can cause a heck of a racket. Remember that your instrument is designed to take relatively quiet vibrations and amplify them.

If you need to, begin disassembling your chord bar system. Anything here left to rattle can be the trouble. Bars can even rattle against each other. If you have a pickup, check it at both ends to make sure it is tight. If loose, small pieces of felt inserted under the tabs of the pickup can be a quick and permanent fix. If the pickup is touching in the center of the 'harp, it can cause a very loud buzz. Bending the tabs down slightly so as to lift the pickup, or bending the pickup into a slight bow (be careful) can fix it. I prefer to bend the tabs slightly. A small piece of felt inserted under the pickup in the center can fix the trouble too, and will not noticeably change the sound of the 'harp.

It is possible that something inside your 'harp is the cause. Most often this would be a lost pick. On very rare occasion it could be a loose piece of bracing, though I believe I've only seen this once.

The third (rare) possible source area is directly related to the second, in that it can be external to the string which seems to cause the buzz. Sometimes plucking one string will cause another to vibrate sympathetically, and this sympathetically vibrating string could be the one causing the buzz.

Almost always you will find that if you track down a buzz using a systematic search, the offending part will be found in short order, and you can fix it and get on with the music!
Pete Daigle