

Buying an Autoharp in the UK

(article by Nadine Stah White - reprinted from 'Autoharp Notes')

A frequent query is: *I am interested in buying an autoharp. Can you give me any information on this subject, the prices of the instruments, the best type for beginners, where to buy them?*

This is not an *entirely* straightforward process, but I can take you through the various options. Please don't let the length of this article put you off, I'm just trying to cover the range of possibilities.

Before I start out, one warning: the reality is that there is a significant variation between the tone of individual instruments - even when they are the same make and model. So, though I will generalise about different makes and models, please understand that specific instruments may differ from my generalisations.

Firstly: OSCAR SCHMIDT autoharps - the industry standard.

Imported from the USA, these instruments will attract shipping charges, Import Duty, handling charges and VAT. Altogether, these will add more than 25% to the list prices you see on the Oscar Schmidt US Website.

The options for 'beginners' in this country are much more limited than in the USA, where there are many dealers of Oscar Schmidt brand autoharps (now a division of Washburn Instruments). Over there, many music stores stock one or two models of these autoharps and they will also do special orders of other models - ranging from an 'entry level' 'harp to more expensive instruments (the additional expense is mostly because of 'prettier' woods and finishes, although one useful extra which comes on the 'top end' models is a set of fine tuners).

Oscar Schmidt autoharps are pretty much the industry standard, because they make a robust instrument that will have a reasonable chord bar action that won't hurt your hands and will produce a good clear tone.

The three-row button set-up allows you to arrange the chord bars in a way that makes for very easy transposition between different playing keys - by simply moving your hand one or two places up or down the row, so **I would recommend a three-row, 21-bar instrument for a beginner.**

You can look up the Oscar Schmidt models on the Oscar Schmidt Website. Of the current Oscar Schmidt models, their cheapest 'base of line' autoharp actually can have a very nice tone - possibly because it doesn't have a heavy varnish coating on it, but instead has what I can only describe as a kind of wood-stain (more matte effect) in a 'sunburst' effect.

If you don't need or want to see natural wood on your 'harp, I would highly recommend the slightly more expensive all-black '73 reissue' autoharp. This instrument has a kind of 'retro' look, to resemble the old black A-model autoharp Oscar Schmidt autoharp. However, the '73 reissue' has modern technology and is far more robust than the older 'harps. The examples of this instrument I've seen have an especially nice tone, indeed... and it also happens to be one of their cheapest models.

The Oscar Schmidt 21-bar models have a **very useful 'closed chord bar' set-up**, with a cover over the bars. Under the cover, each chord button sits in a channel in the bar. Unlike most autoharps, this closed chord bar set-up makes it very easy for players to customise their instrument by changing the order and arrangement of chord bars on the 'harp - making improvements to the basic 'from the factory' lay-out. Improving the chord-bar layout in this way is something that many players want to do. It's possible to do this on other instruments, but only by re-felting a chord bar or two.

Oscar Schmidt no longer has dealerships in UK music shops (several years ago, a few music shops used to be OS dealers, which means that second-hand instruments will occasionally become available). However, there are **now two private individuals who act as Oscar Schmidt dealers, Chris Younger and Mike Fenton**, contact details later in this article.

There are probably good and bad sides to the fact that no UK music shops currently sell Oscar Schmidt autoharps. In the past, most of the music stores probably did nothing what-so-ever to set up the autoharps that they sold into a playable condition, so there will almost certainly have been little glitches in action, etc. (No reputable music store would sell a guitar without ensuring that it was set-up properly. Unfortunately, the similar need to set-up autoharps before sale has never been widely recognised by music stores).

The good news is that the two individuals in the UK who are acting as Oscar Schmidt dealers and importing instruments from the States will also look the new instruments over and do any 'set up' that is needed to make sure that they are in playable condition before they supply them.

Contact details for these two Oscar Schmidt suppliers are:

1) Mike Fenton - the most experienced player, teacher and performer on the autoharp in the UK. Mike has imported OS instruments for many years.

Mike Fenton: The Haven Farm, Fladbury, Pershore, Worcs. WR10 2QD tel.

(01386) 860259 e-mail: fen.highpark@virgin.net

2) Chris Younger - has newly become an additional dealer (mostly because Mike Fenton now spends considerable amounts of time in the USA). Chris Younger - 32 Hodge Close, Astcote, nr Towcester, Northants (see separate information page)

NN12 8NR (01327) 830476 e-mail: <chrisyounger@amserve.com>

Either Mike or Chris can also provide replacement strings, felts, etc. for Oscar Schmidt instruments as well as sundry supplies for some other makes of autoharp.

Secondly: THE SONATA (available by mail order from THE MUSIC ROOM, from the three Music Room stores, or from their stalls at festivals). The 21 bar version of this autoharp costs just under £200.00 (check out the Music Room Website). The Music Room has a stall in the vendors area of the large folk festivals in the summer.

These instruments sound quite sweet and make a very reasonable beginner's instrument... however they are not checked out or set up in any way by the vendor. Also, they lack Oscar Schmidt's closed cover arrangement for the 3-row 21-bar 'harps. This means that adjusting the chord bar layout will invariably involve re-felting bars.

Thirdly: HOBGOBLIN's own branded instrument. (Again check their Website for details - similar to The Music Room, Hobgoblin also has stalls at festivals as well as selling mail order). I've not managed to lay my hands on one of the Hobgoblin instruments, and so have no first-hand information. Have heard via e-mail of one 'satisfied customer'.

Fourthly: Second-hand Autoharps – a very mixed bag!

Unfortunately, there are not a lot of good-quality second hand autoharps available in the UK.

From time-to-time good quality used 'harps are sold at UK Autoharp Days – so a query through the Website *may* provide additional information. Occasional 'used autoharps for sale' may also be posted on this site (we know of none at present).

Although some second-hand autoharps turn up quite frequently at flea markets and antique fairs (where they often are given very unrealistic high prices), most of these are small, light, thin-bodied German 'harps from the early-to-middle years of the 20th Century.

See the separate article on 'Rosen' autoharps for more information on these.

For a number of reasons, these old German instruments are *not* going to be truly playable, and not usually a good choice. They are most definitely NOT a beginner's instrument!

Very occasionally, you may come across a second hand Oscar Schmidt autoharp which has been traded in to a music store or is in a second-hand store. These instruments are a much more likely prospect as a beginner's autoharp - again, provided that they don't display any body-separation, cracks in the body or serious warping of the sounding board (under the strings). Numbers of ChromAharp autoharps were also retailed into the UK during the 1970s, and occasionally turn up for sale second-hand. These instruments are very similar in quality to the 'Sonata' currently being sold new by the Music Room – with the same strengths and limitations.

Replacement strings and felts for recent autoharps (i.e. manufactured from the 1970s onwards) are much more readily available - either through the two people in the UK who have direct dealings with the manufacturer or via mail-order from the States.

The lure of eBay – possibilities *are* out there, but it's 'buyer beware'.

If you're of the gambling/bargain hunter persuasion, I know of a one or two folks in the UK who have bid on Oscar Schmidt autoharps on eBay, the big US Internet-based auction.

Second-hand Oscar Schmidt instruments are much more common in the States (and they tend to be much cheaper over there). Of course if you bid on one of these instruments, it's a case of trusting the vendor. Keep in mind that the attractive 'cheaper' price is not what you will pay by the time the 'harp arrives in the UK - **you will still attract Import Duty, handling charges, shipping charges and VAT if you acquire one of these instruments on eBay from one of the vendors who is prepared to ship overseas.** *Important warning: many vendors are not prepared to ship to buyers outside the USA– check with the vendor before bidding, because you want them to be VERY thorough about how they will pack the autoharp up for shipping.* Be prepared that once your eBay bargain arrives over here, you may still need to have someone over here look it over, replace a few felts or strings, etc. as needed.

I've looked at eBay's listings. It's clear that some of the vendors don't have a clue about the instruments they are selling, and may not be able to identify 'problems' with the 'harp they are offering. On the other hand, some vendors appear to be knowledgeable and able to include the right kind of information and photos to reassure their potential buyers that the instrument is in OK shape.

Again, **I'd strongly recommend a 21-bar closed-cover OS set-up for a beginner's 'harp** if you were bidding on E-Bay, rather than one of the older models with 15 or fewer buttons.

Questions to ask the eBay vendor: have the vendor to confirm that there are no splits or cracks in the wood, no separation of the joints and no 'dishing' of the top of the autoharp (seen by looking across the top from the side to ensure that the top of the autoharp doesn't dip down into the soundhole – or, a less common flaw – bulge upwards).

If an eBay autoharp has any of the above flaws – DON'T BID ON IT!

Less serious questions: Ask if a tuning wrench (T-shape or L-shape) is included and whether any strings are missing. (Replacements for these can be bought in the UK.)

Once you've acquired your autoharp *what next?* Invest in a *chromatic* digital tuner to tune the autoharp. These are available at very reasonable prices. It's a good idea to bring the autoharp into the music shop and try out several models. The lowest 'wound' bass strings are always hardest for any tuner to pick up, because of overtones they generate.

It's very helpful to get together with more experienced players, who can give you a few tips about tuning, playing position, etc. This kind of help will make starting off much more pitfall-free.

You can e-mail UK Autoharps for information about any players in your area.

And do check the Website for information about upcoming events (**UK Autoharp Days** always offer a lot of support for beginning players).