

How NOT to Ship an Autoharp!

A Cautionary Tale

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Many individuals who succumb to the lure of buying a pre-owned autoharp on eBay will know the feeling of waiting with anticipation for the instrument that they have 'won' to arrive at their doorstep. Imagine your dismay when you open the parcel to discover it's been damaged en-route: your Prize has just become a Problem.

This recently happened to me, although I had done everything I could think of to avoid problems in shipping. The process of recouping my losses has been a painful learning process. I'm sharing my story in hopes that it may help some other autoharppers to avoid the problems I encountered. Because hindsight is always a form of 20-20 vision, I have included my *important learning points in italics* throughout this article.

It's important to ask detailed questions of the seller before you bid. *Don't be afraid of asking too many questions – use more than one eBay e-mail form, if necessary.*

Many people who are selling second-hand autoharps don't have any understanding of what they are selling. They may believe that an autoharp is in good condition because the varnished finish looks OK, when actually there are structural problems such as worn, loose or missing felts, cracked or warped tops, separating body parts, loose or stuck tuning pins. These kinds of problems will mean that the 'harp will require some tinkering in order to be playable, and in extreme cases they may indicate that the 'harp can not be put into a playable condition.

The autoharp that had caught my attention on eBayUK was a US-made 21-bar Oscar Schmidt Appalachian. This was unusual to find on this side of the Atlantic, where OS instruments were never very common. It was being sold without a case or tuning wrench.

E-mails exchanges with the seller quickly established that he knew nothing about autoharps. ***N.B. Always be aware that your seller may have less knowledge of autoharps than you do. If they say they know nothing about autoharps, keep this in your mind at all times. It is your job to do everything you can to be sure that the seller understands your questions.***

The seller e-mailed back to say that he could find no cracks or frame separation on the instrument. It was missing three chord bars and had 'some minor flaking' to the varnished edges which suggested to me that this was an instrument, which had, been played and modified. The seller was confident in his description of the condition of the 'harp and added it to the eBay listing, a good sign as this would mean I would be able to get a refund if the autoharp turned out to be not-as-described. ***Later, I wished I had thought to ask about any signs of rust.***

I 'won' the auction, paying close to my top bid price because there were other interested parties.

Having done so, made two requests of the seller.

- I asked that he delay shipping the instrument for 10 days so that it would arrive after we were back from a short vacation away from home.

- I asked him to pack it securely according to my detailed instructions so that it would not be damaged in transit. I warned him that autoharps were easily damaged in shipping and needed careful packing. ***I made my biggest mistake here. I should have picked up clues in the seller's earlier e-mail style which was very brief and full of misspellings. I later came to realise that he was not a very confident reader or writer.***

The seller e-mailed back to confirm what I wanted about the delayed shipping time, and then sent a message back saying (punctuation and spacing are his) 'No worries, ill get it sorted & marked to post for that time. cheers. chris'

No worries... I only wish!

The seller later admitted that he had not understood all the information in my list of packing instructions. I now realise that as well as listing instructions in separate sentences, it's important to use simple short words wherever possible! I include my revised my 'packing instructions' information below – although I still can't guarantee that someone with problems reading would be able to follow them.

Packing an Autoharp

Autoharps can be seriously damaged in the post.

Unless you pack an autoharp properly, it may be so badly damaged in shipping that it can not be repaired.

Careful packing can protect an autoharp from moisture damage and helps to keep it safe from knocks and bumps:

- Slide a sheet of thin card or heavy paper on top of the strings under the chord bars to protect the felts.
- Wrap the entire autoharp in several layers of bubble-wrap to cushion the autoharp against knocks and bumps.
- Place the bubble-wrapped bundle inside a strong plastic garbage bag, and use plastic parcel tape to secure all openings in the bag, to keep moisture away from the autoharp if the carton is left out in the rain.
- Place this bundle inside a strong larger carton, padding it in place so it will not move about by using balled up newspaper or similar.
- Tape shut all seams of the cardboard carton with plastic parcel tape.
- Clearly label destination and sender.
- Clearly mark the carton with 'FRAGILE'.
- Always insure any parcel containing a musical instrument.

Thankfully, the seller of my eBay autoharp did insure it! He also used a very robust carton (reused from a hi-fi set), and used pieces of cut up styrofoam and cardboard to keep the autoharp from moving about too much in the carton.

But sadly, that's about all he got right.

- The 'harp had not been wrapped in any padding material and there was no sheet of paper under the felts.
- It had been wedged in the carton at an angle, with pieces of cardboard and styrofoam taped to the body of the 'harp to hold it in position (the carton was only just big enough in one of its dimensions).

- There was no return address, and the 'Fragile' instruction had been scrawled on in barely legible red marker pen.
- The carton had been held closed with a number of strips of cellophane tape rather than parcel tape, which were pulling away and left the box gaping at one edge when it arrived, but thankfully the contents had not escaped.
- Worst of all, THERE WAS NO PLASTIC BAG FOR PROTECTION AGAINST MOISTURE.

The carton felt slightly damp to the touch. My heart sank as I lifted out the autoharp and saw evidence on the bottom of the parcel that a pool of water had soaked through the carton somewhere on its four-day journey.

The first sign of moisture damage was when small flakes of edge varnish peeled away as I removed the taped-on pieces of foam and cardboard packing. The tuning pegs, guide posts and other metal parts showed a thin bloom of rust. And worst of all, the top of the autoharp was lifting off from the sides (most noticeably at the narrowest end and the string anchor end). This instrument had suffered serious structural damage due to damp.

The best advice I can give when you discover an instrument that's been damaged in packing is not to panic.

I posted a question on the Cyberpluckers newsgroup, asking for information on this type of damage. The helpful and experienced answers I received quickly confirmed that the 'harp had sustained serious damage which might not be repairable. The cost of time and repairs (if they worked) would be far more than the price I'd paid for this autoharp: as far as insurance value goes, this instrument was a write-off.

I took detailed digital photos of the damage and of the water damage on the parcel and contacted the seller. He was adamant that the 'harp had not left his hands in this condition, so we proceeded to pursue an insurance claim with Royal Mail.

The use of 'we' above is deliberate: the seller initiated the claim, and I followed it up. This meant phone calls and e-mails, and a letter with documentation and photos to Royal Mail, all stressing the damage caused by damp while the parcel was in their hands. I carefully omitted any mention of the seller's packing skills, other than stating that he had secured the 'harp within a robust carton (true). Two months later, after I had made a trip to the local Post Office sorting office for them to inspect the damaged instrument, the insurance paid me the amount I had paid for the autoharp – minus the charge for shipping I'd paid to the seller.

The seller declined to refund me that additional £12.00 – but I figure that I've gained something for my time and money:

- I'll never make these mistakes again when buying or shipping an autoharp.
- The experience provided subject material for this article, which may help others to avoid my mistakes,
- Last, but not least, I gained a slightly-used cheese knife, which I found loose in the bottom of the carton where it had been mislaid by the seller after he cut up the packing materials. It had must have been rattling around inside that parcel for the entire journey!

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