

THE TRIPLE HARP

by Julia Seager-Scott



The baroque triple harp was one answer to accommodate the expanding musical language that was emerging at the turn of the seventeenth century. Finding a way to make the harp a continuo instrument, capable of playing a figured bass line with accompanying chords in any key, was the main driver behind the drastic changes seen in the harps of this time.

The triple harp, first seen in Italy, flourished from approximately 1590 to 1750 and was so popular that it spread all over Europe.

It has an ingenious way of having all notes in all keys available at all times: It has three parallel rows of strings. The outer two rows are tuned to the same diatonic scale (think of the white keys on the piano), with the inner row tuned to the chromatic notes (the equivalent of the black keys on the piano). To make chords, you play a combination of some fingers on the outer rows and some fingers on the inner row, making 3-D shapes with your fingers.

This ability to play in all possible keys was a huge improvement over previous harps which, having one row of strings and no way to quickly and reliably alter the pitch of the strings, could only play in one or two keys at a time and had to be re-tuned either during or in between pieces to accommodate key changes.

Of course, having three parallel rows of strings makes the triple harp very difficult to play. Not many harpists enjoy tuning all 93 strings every day either! Perhaps that is why I am one of only two professional triple harpists in all of Canada. The glorious sound of the triple harp, zingy like the harpsichord and simultaneously bell-like, more than makes up for any hardships.

Considered old-fashioned by Handel's time, he nevertheless loved the sound of the triple harp too. He used it in *Esther*, *Saul*, *Giulio Cesare*, and he wrote a harp concerto for *Alexander's Feast*. Today, the Italian triple harp has settled firmly in to the Welsh culture, where its descendant flourishes as their national instrument.

