## Accidentals on a lever-free harp

## by Cynthia Cathcart

Many wire harps have no levers or blades. Unfortunately most wire harpers, when reviewing a prospective addition to their repertoire, reject any arrangement that has accidentals without a second thought.

But what if it is a tune you really want to learn? Or perhaps it is a melody you must learn, for any of a variety of reasons. How can you handle an accidental in a melody on a lever-free harp?

One approach is to simply ignore the accidental. For example, let us consider the traditional melody Lachlann Dubh, (Lachlann with the jet black hair) found in the Simon Fraser Collection. There is an occasional D-sharp present in the melody. The first phrase of the tune is as follows:



At first glance, you might think this tune is unplayable, unless you re-tune the D to D-sharp. However, if you look at the whole tune and not just the example printed here, you would see that you also will need the D-Natural. Do you move on to the next tune? No, indeed. Just ignore the D-sharp. It sounds just fine.



In this particular tune the D-sharp is probably a "correction." Often, the collectors of the old tunes would change notes to make them sound "better". Lachlann Dubh is in the key of E minor. D is the seventh note in the E minor scale. At about the time this ancient tune was being collected by Captain Fraser, the fashion was to sharpen the seventh note in the minor key. In fact, it still is.

Some editors recognize this, however, and so put parenthesis around the sharp signs, to show they may be revisions to the original tune. Not all collectors and editors are this conscientious though, so always consider how the tune sounds with the sharps ignored. In many cases, you will be restoring the tune to its ancient form.

There are some melodies that are unplayable even on lever harps if you were to obey all the accidentals. For example, in a series of eighth notes a note may be sharpened, natural, and sharpened again in quick succession. Because the free harper is so willing to ignore them, it's altogether possible we will find ourselves playing music that the levered harpers declare impossible to perform!

Here's an example, taken from Ferintosh, also in the Simon Fraser collection. For this example, you would simply play both the C's natural:



Sometimes, you simply can't ignore an accidental. Sometimes it is the surprise appearance of the accidental that makes the melody memorable.

Here is an example from the O'Carolan canon: the beginning of the B section of the tune Cremona (tune number 192 in O'Sullivan):



As you can see, both G-sharp and G natural are needed in the melody. One solution is to re-tune just one G string to G-sharp before you begin the tune. When you reach the phrase that requires the G-sharp, move that phrase to the octave where you tuned the G-sharp. So, if you chose to re-tune the G just above middle C to G-sharp, you would play thus:



Another approach to the accidental is to skip the note entirely. In the tune Willafjord, for example, there is a C-sharp. Since many wire harpers tune in G Major (only the F is sharpened), one might think they need to skip this tune. Instead, just skip the note! Here is the phrase with the C-sharp accidental:



And here it is with the note skipped...simple! And it sounds just fine. In fact, since most people seem to play this tune with a syncopated accompaniment, it may actually sound better.



Sometimes the tune requires that there be no skip. Perhaps there are words to the tune, and skipping a note leaves out a syllable. Perhaps the rhythm of the tune is lost if the note is skipped. In this case, substitution of the note is a viable option.

The Ash Grove provides a very nice example of this concept. Here is the phrase with the accidental:



Since C-natural appears throughout the song, tuning ahead for this C-sharp will not work. Playing a C-natural may technically be all right, but the tune is so well known that it absolutely sounds wrong. And it might throw off a singer if you just skipped the note.

The best option here is to substitute another note for the one we lack. In fact, in The Ash Grove the substitution is one we've all heard before as singers either try to get a bit fancy with the melody, or are trying to avoid singing the difficult half-step of D to C-sharp. The first substitute to try should always be a third (or a skip) from the problem note. Start with the troublesome C, skip the D, and play the E, as shown here:



A "skip" is a third…you count the first note, the skipped note, and the second note: 1+1+1=3. Another possible substitution is a note an interval of a fifth away. To find a fifth, count the first note, three skipped notes, and the second note: 1+3+1=5. So, for example, a fifth above C is G.

Other intervals that work include fourths and sixths. Compound intervals, which are intervals that are bigger than an octave, also sometimes work. (By the way, an octave is an interval of an eighth.)

Here's an example of a tune in which we can use such a substitution. First, the way the tune is often given:



This tune, Sleep Soond in da Mornin', demands the presence of some note for that G-sharp to keep the rhythm. One idea that works, and maintains the rhythm, is a third below the problem note. Count the offensive G string, skip the F and play the E in place of the G-sharp.



To use a compound interval, play that E an octave lower:



Or, we could have used the first idea presented in this article. Just ignore the sharp and play a G-natural!



## TO SUM UP:

When faced with an accidental (or any sharp or flat you don't have....the missing sharp or flat could also be in the key signature) you have the following options:

- 1. Ignore the sharp or flat
- 2. Re-tune one octave on the harp with the accidental
- 3. Skip the note, put a rest in its place
- 4. Substitute another note