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The Triple Harp: The Unsung Hero of Harp History

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Research & Scholarship SYMPOSIUM

The Triple Harp: The Unsung Hero of Harp History

Graced with thousands of years of history, the harp has evolved and adapted to many different musical eras. A prime example of this is the triple harp, a precursor of the modern pedal harp. Before the invention of the pedals, harpists found it difficult to adjust to the increasing chromaticism found in the ornamentation and chord progressions of the Baroque era. However, harp builders were not deterred by this challenge. First built by Italian luthiers in the early 1600's, the triple harp featured three layers of strings stretched parallel to one another. The two outer layers were tuned diatonically to a particular scale while the middle layer was tuned to the half steps absent from that scale. This harp boasted a rich, resonant bass and sparkling treble which could accomplish the duties of basso continuo and solo repertoire equally well. Also referred to as the "Baroque harp" or the "arpa doppia," this new harp was well received by many in Europe. Triple harpists found a welcome place in courts and chamber groups. Several Baroque composers wrote for it, including George Frideric Handel. When harp makers from Wales discovered the triple harp, they crafted a model of their own. The Welsh enthusiastically adopted it as part of their culture. Even after the invention of the pedal harp, Wales continued to compose and perform pieces for their triple harp. To the present day, this instrument remains as a stunning example of human ingenuity in adjusting the harp to society's ever-changing musical climate.