

'The Rosen' - a pretty thing, but is it a 'serious' autoharp?

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

A very frequent query in the UK is: *Do you know anything about an old black autoharp with red roses on the front of it? How much is my old autoharp worth?*

- A distinctive black lacquer finish with brightly-coloured decals of red roses on the soundboard is a clear identification: **this is a 'Rosen' autoharp.**

This type of instrument was manufactured in the (former) East Germany, during the time when this country was behind the iron curtain. The manufacturer was almost certainly the Hopf factory, which still makes (rather different-looking) autoharps to this day. However, because private factories weren't allowed to put their factory/family name on their instruments during the socialist era, no identifying maker's mark appears on the instruments with those rose decals. Because of the decoration on the front of the instrument, they have come to be known collectively as 'Rosen' autoharps (for the German word for 'roses').

During the 1960s and 1970s, quite a large number of these German Rosen autoharps made their way into the UK – they are, by far, the most common autoharps to turn up 'second-hand' in this country. You will see them at car boot sales, flea markets, antique fairs, etc.

I have also seen a few older German instruments with rose decals on the sound board, but these tend to be varnished brown or brownish-red - not black. The black 'harps with rose decals are the more recent East German 'harps. They may have labels in the sound-hole which indicate that they were made in 'Saxony' or one of the other German provinces – a clear indication that they are from the late 19th or early 20th century.

The same considerations that apply to 'Rosen' autoharps also hold true for these other older German autoharps.

- **What might a Rosen autoharp be worth?**

The short answer is 'not much' (although some dealers at antique fairs may slap an inappropriately high value on them just because the look 'pretty' and 'old' without knowing a thing about them as a musical instrument).

As a decorative wall hanging they are worth whatever you are prepared to pay.

As an instrument, I wouldn't recommend that anyone pay over £25 for one (less if they could manage it) because these autoharps just are *not* a workable beginner's instrument.

Why? Even if you are fortunate enough to have discovered a 'perfect' Rosen autoharp (i.e. with no cracks on the soundboard or back, no separation of the body parts, immaculate paint-work, no rusty tuning pegs, and all its strings in place) these 'harps aren't very playable. And it can be very hard to locate replacement strings which will fit the instrument, especially the wound bass strings.

Rosens aren't 'serious' musical instruments for a number of reasons:

- The chord-bar action is very cumbersome and noisy,
- Most of them have been stored in places where they have been exposed to extremes of temperature and humidity, so they will be liable to problems with warping, body separation and cracks.
- Like most older and/or inexpensively made autoharps, they often have serious problems with the tuning pegs being too loose, so some strings won't stay in tune.
- Many Rosens have a limited number of chord bars, and those with more bars have the bars set up in an arrangement which is not easy to play.
- They are relatively small-bodied, which means that they have a quiet (but sweet) tone, which will not be heard when playing with other instruments.

So, in summary, **a Rosen is *not* a good instrument for a beginning autoharper.** In particular, the problems with the chord bar action and array will limit any progress a beginner can make, and may well cause medical problems such as the risk of tendonitis with any long-term playing.

Having given all these reasons for *not* trying to play a Rosen, it must be said that some experienced players (and 'tinkerers') have taken Rosen bodies and made significant adaptations (tuned the string schedule differently, added new chord bars with easier 'action', etc.) for experimental projects of their own. I've also heard of Indian musicians removing the chord bars from a Rosen and tuning them to the scale of a rag to strum as a drone behind other instruments. However, even when modified, the instruments still remain relatively 'quiet-voiced'.

The fact that Rosen bodies can often be acquired very cheaply (i.e. under £25) is the main reason that they have been used for such experimental projects.

Another reason why some folks like the Rosens is for use with children. Even the larger Rosen 'harps' are relatively light-weight, because they lack a laminated pin block (one reason why they tend to develop loose tuning pins) and the Rosen body is quite shallow back-to-front. Light weight and somewhat smaller dimensions are an advantage here, making the instrument more suitable for young arms, especially when being held in the upright playing position by a child.

However, difficulties in chord bar action and in tuning on the Rosens are a definite disadvantage because an adult would have to 'maintain' such a 'harp, and it would probably not hold the child's interest for long. There are also a few *very* small-size Rosen 'harps' around, true miniatures with a very limited chord array (typically 5 or 6 bars—like the one pictured on the UKA Website). These 'toy-sized' autoharps can be very attractive to young children, and they might well be the start of a continuing interest in the instrument. Typically these tiny Rosens *may* cost more than their big brothers.

I guess I'm saying that I wouldn't recommend that anyone pay more than about £25 for a Rosen... although some antique dealers etc. will certainly ask a lot more than that.

They *do* make a very pretty wall-hanging.