

# The Diatonic Harp Reference: Getting Good Tone

Tone is a frequent topic among harp players, but it is not a simple concept that is well defined. Tone is the Holy Grail of harmonica. It is related to the musical timbre of the instrument, but most often encompasses other playing elements as well.

Tone is about

Notes

*That sound:* good.

Notes

*That sound:* Clean and full and Big and fat and

Round and warm and Sweet and clear. or

*Notes that sound:*

Bitter and shrill or Light and airy or Bright and piercing or

Powerful and edgy...

Notes:

That aren't weak and wimpy or tentative, but that

Speak out and Sing,



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Confidently, with

*Your voice.*

Or softly whisper

*Your secrets.*

Notes:

That rip through you and

Grab your insides and

Tear the emotions out of you.

That's good tone.

Tone production relates to *the whole of playing a note*: how it is attacked, how it is sustained, what (loudness variation) dynamics are applied, how it ends: abruptly or smoothly or tailing off, and what effects are used on it when, such as vibratos and/or tremolos, or slurs or other combinations with other notes. A player with good tone uses many different techniques, timbres, effects, and varieties of *note shaping* to produce his/her notes. Notes shouldn't just happen. *Notes should be willfully created. All of them.*

Phrasing relates to how notes are played in succession, whether smoothly with legato or abruptly with degrees of



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pizzicato or staccato, how dynamics and musical space are used to frame notes and passages and set them apart from other phrases in the music. In grammar, a phrase is a related set of words formed to express an idea. In music, a phrase is a related set of notes used to express a musical idea. Phrasing, while distinct from tone, is not unrelated to it. In much improvised play, it is the musical idea that is maintained from instance to instance of a song, not the precise notes and timing. Just like when you have an opinion or idea to express in words, you don't always say it the same way, using the same words in the same order with the same emphasis—so it goes with musical ideas too. Musical ideas can be replicated in phrases using different notes and timings, so long as the feel remains consistent. What has this got to do with tone? Well, if you take away specific note sequences and timings for the basis of a musical idea, you have reduced the number of musical elements left to worry about. Tone (strictly timbre) is one of those remaining musical elements. Rhythm is another that is partially left.. the groove—the underlying beat pattern and beat emphasis is normally kept consistent to maintain the feel of a phrase, even if the rhythmic patterns of the note durations is not kept the same. The vibrato element of tone is one element that can be used in setting the feel to a phrase. The tone of the notes should be



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appropriate for the phrase being played—the tone should augment the musical expression. The tone can work together with the other phrasing elements—including dynamics, note durations, and rests—to enhance the musical statement that is a phrase.

Tone comes from the entire musical system that produces the note, from the instrument to the player to the setting to the amplification. Of this sound production system, the player is by far the largest most dominant factor when it comes to tone. Through out these pages I talk about techniques that enhance your ability to make different sounds with the harp, and provide a basis for overall good tone. Here are some elements to pay particular attention to, to pick up on when you see them associated with other topics and techniques:

## Common Elements of Good Tone

- Good harmonica tone sounds good with the rest of the music, and changes according to the demands of the



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musical expression.

- Clean single notes. Sloppy play is an enemy of good tone.
- Playing in tune. This includes draw bends, blow bends, intermediate bends, and overbends—all the note types.
  - Also, the tuning system used, such as equal temperament or just intonation or some compromise between the two, affects the tonal characteristics of passages and chords.
- Breathing from the diaphragm helps produce a big fat full tone.
- Resonance works with breathing to produce a loud or complex full bodied tone.
- Effective use of vibrato works with the rhythm of the music to add variety and life to the sound of a note. Consistency of vibrato through the different note types can be a key to maintaining a cohesive tone through a passage, and mask the playing techniques used to create the note.
- *Consistency among note types* in a passage contributes to the sense of a controlled and motivated tone.
- Draws
- Blows
- Draw Bends



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- Blow Bends
- Full bends
- Intermediate bends
- Overblows
- Overdraws
- Single-reed “valve” style closing reed bends.
- Open airways, including the mouth and throat help get the thick round tone. Pinching of the air stream makes a note weaker and thinner and less confident.
- Effective hand cupping techniques add resonance and variety and shape to the note. For amplified play, a tight hand cup fattens up the sound, makes the note louder, adds compression, and contributes to a powerful, edgy distortion. A leaky seal makes the note thinner, softer, more shrill, less biting. A poor cup around the harp and mic can be like playing an electric guitar with the amp turned off. A good tight cup is like turning the amp on.
- Proper equipment for amplification enhances the sound production system—but the player is still the key. If you have poor acoustic tone, expect to have poor amplified tone as well. If you have good acoustic tone you have a chance to get good amplified tone, but you have to master those additional amplified tonal elements



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as well.

- Proper amplification and electronic effects to work *with* the player's tone to enhance the intended feel of the music. For example, if you're going for a big fat full tone, don't use amplification that emphasizes high notes and brittle or piercing sound. If you want to sound like a distorted electric guitar, don't play through a clean rig like an SM57 through the PA. If you want a clean acoustic sound, don't hold a bullet mic cupped tight and play through an overdriven guitar amp using effects pedals.
- Even, consistent, and controlled *volume* (loudness) for all note types, blown, drawn, bent, or overbent. If your notes are not consistent or controlled as to how loud they are relative to each other, the result will sound chunky, choppy, and strained, and the sense of good tone will be greatly diminished.
- Good use of dynamics consistently for all note types contributes to an overall sense of good tone. Dynamics is about controlling loudness, softness, and pulsing of volume, and about changes to the loudness—gradually, or suddenly, playing louder or softer, while keeping any pulsing heartbeat intact.
- Good phrase-related tone adds a sense of *cohesiveness*



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*and consistency* to each phrase and to the music as a whole.

- Effective use of *variety*, especially *among* musical phrases, to add interest, add spice, add color, and convey different feelings *works together with the effective use of consistency* within musical passages to become the work of musical art painted by the tonal palette and different tonal colors. If you can't maintain tonal consistency within a passage, you cannot paint a smooth red stroke; if you can't add variety to your tone, you can only paint in blue.
- Effective use of the *strengths* of the differences among the note types—their individual voices and character adds variety and provides expressive capabilities. Elements you may wish to downplay for the sake of consistency sometimes, you may want to emphasize for the sake of expression or variety at other times.
- Attention to the details of note attack, formation, sustain, and shaping is the key to controlling your tone.
- Tongue slaps for note articulation can help thicken up the sound with *brief* chords and add punch to the rhythmic heartbeat of the music.
- Controlled use of slurs to let in *small* amounts of air



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and sound from adjacent holes can thicken up the sound and add tension.

- Effective use and control of difference tones generated with double-stops (2 notes at a time) can add to the overall sense of musical harmony or dissonance, and thicken up the sound with these created, extra notes. This is an advanced technique that requires very precise control over the bends of both notes when two notes are played at once to “tune” a third note that is automatically generated as a function of the frequencies of the notes being played. Control over difference tones is especially important for amplified play, where the created difference tones are much louder than during acoustic play.
- Good musicianship in general contributes to the overall sense of good tone.

## Effect Combinations

Though the elements of tone are described individually, they are often used in combination to produce the final sound.



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Just because they are discussed separately doesn't mean they are used in isolation. There are lots of examples of effects used in combination.. here are a few:

- Note articulations (including slaps) *start* a note, but don't impact the use of dynamics or vibrato.
- Hand "wahs" are often used in conjunction with bends that are released, which emphasizes the "wah" effect.
- Tremolos and vibratos can be merged, or transformed into one another.
- The depth of tremolos and vibratos can be associated with dynamic changes to the loudness of a note. As a couple of examples, a note could start out soft and straight (no vibrato), increase in volume adding a tremolo wavering of the volume, and end with a loud, pitch-wavering vibrato; or a note could start loud and straight, then fade out with a little vibrato.
- Dynamic pulsing of the volume of vibrato oscillations can work with phrasing, rhythm, timing, the groove, and legato passages to enhance and emphasize them.
- Hand tremolo can be combined with throat vibrato and diaphragm tremolo to produce a tone wavering volume wavering pitch wavering note.



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- Other examples are left as an exercise for the dedicated student.

## Practicing Tone

Practicing tone means practicing all the elements that go into tone production, some of which are mentioned above. It *does not mean playing lots of notes*. It means playing each note for a long time, manipulating it with your mouth and hands and tongue and breath to try to make it sound as good as you can, in as many different ways as you can. Practicing and playing with good tone is *not* hurrying to the next note, *it is lingering on each note to show the details*.

*Practicing tone means* listening to the sound of each note, *and being aware* of the details. The more you know, the more you will notice, the more details you will hear. You can actually practice tone by learning what different playing techniques sound like, and listening to identify what techniques of note formation and shaping are being used. The



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songs Misty and Stormy Sea II are full of examples you can try to identify and analyze to see how the techniques contribute to the tone and the music. The section on diatonic techniques includes sound samples (in Real Audio format) to help you learn to identify and understand what the player *is doing*. Once you can hear and know and think about what can be done, only then can you try to do it.

What the player is doing. Is doing. Try to do it. Doing. Do. Something active, not passive. *Good tone is active*. It is willfully produced, it is not something that just happens because of the harp you use or the amplification equipment you play through. Tone is something the player puts in the note. *Something the player does*, actively, willfully, by exercising control over him/herself, his breathing, her playing, their music.

But the timbre of different instruments, amps, and mics does vary. The degree or possibility of certain kinds of tonal manipulations can be different on different equipment and under different conditions. But remember, good tone is not passive, not just something that happens. Good tone is



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control over notes that is done by the player.

Practice playing one note for a long time, listening to its sound, its voice, its nuances. Change it subtly, change it dramatically, play it soft, play it loud, play it gradually softer and softer, play it gradually louder and louder. Play it straight, play it with vibrato, change the depth of the vibrato, waver the pitch, oscillate the volume, let it fade out, make it end abruptly. Hold it for a long time.

I think it is good to practice tone—especially a big fat full round horn-like tone—on lower key (pitch range) harps (say, key of A or lower is better). The lower notes require a larger resonance chamber, and you have to *open up and get big* on the inside more for low key harps than on higher key harps (say key of C and higher). I even suggest working on extended-range low key harps, like a low D or even a “tenor” C like a Hohner 365. Bends and vibratos on low harps require a tighter grip on the air stream, and larger mouth and muscle movements—and maybe I just like their sound. Since different key harps have their own character, it is good to practice tone on a full range of keys, including low, medium, and high



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harps (say, D and higher). Work on higher key harps requires smaller movements and more subtle control of the muscles. You can't really get a big fat horn-like sound out of a high key harp, and it's harder to get a bright, brittle, piercing, or flute-like sound on a low harp.

Whenever you play, whatever you play, give *each note* its due.



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