

the doctor

is in

peter wiley



photo by Peggy Abrams

Self-proclaimed “harp doctor” Peter Wiley loves a challenge. Diagnosing, troubleshooting, and keeping harps in tip-top shape for harpists around the globe is his specialty. Now on his own after working for years as Lyon & Healy’s master harp regulator, Wiley talks about his behind-the-scenes job as one of the harp world’s most valuable players.

by Kimberly Rowe

HARP COLUMN: Why did you decide to become a harp technician?

PETER WILEY: Well, I started at (Lyon & Healy) making trunks. It was my first job. I really got there because a friend of mine who plays bassoon (in high school, I played bassoon also), married a foreman at Lyon & Healy. I met Lyon & Healy through her, and so I started there.

HC: Just like that? Right out of high school?

PW: No, actually I was 24 years old at the time. I had already been going to college for geology, and I was back in town in Chicago, basically trying to make some money—make enough money to go back to college to finish my degree—when I started at the harp company.

HC: Making trunks.

PW: Making trunks, yeah. And you know, I thought it was pretty cool, because I’d studied music all my life. I thought, “Oh, this is pretty cool, working at a harp company.” I thought, “Well, if I were to stay here, I’d want to be a harp maker,” you know? But as time went by, I saw that the regulation department was where they really made the harps. That was where they were strung up and took on their voice and they became musical instruments.

HC: Okay. So you went from harp trunk making to regulating.

PW: In a circuitous route, yeah.

HC: Do you feel like you know everything there is to know about harp technician work, or are you still learning?

PW: Oh, no, I’m still learning. I still come across things that I’ve never encountered before. I come across noises or problems that I haven’t encountered, and those are always really challenging. The basics of regulation are not terribly difficult, but when you start getting into troubleshooting, diagnosing problems, and diagnosing conditions, that’s where it gets to be a real challenge and really interesting. It’s sort of like solving a puzzle. You step on a pedal and you hear a click. Well, you stepped on a pedal and moved 10 feet of moving parts, you know, maybe 200 different pieces just moved. Exactly where did it click? And is it solvable in the field, or does it need to be rebuilt, repaired, or more extensive work done, like re-riveting? So that’s always a challenge.

HC: Describe for us the worst instrument you’ve ever encountered.

PW: Oh, my gosh. Well, I was in a town, and it

was late at night—it was around 11:30. There was a knock on my door at the hotel, and I opened it up to a cheerful harpist, who I’ve known for several years, and she said that she had had an accident with her harp, which she was preparing to bring over to me the next morning. But she had an accident and wanted to know if I would look at it then. Of course, I said yes. She said, “It’s in really bad shape, could you just come down?” So I went to the car to look at the harp, and I found a harp that was in as bad shape as possible, because it had slipped when they were loading it into the car, and had fallen down on some ice. But the car and the harp were kind of on a little slope, and the harp sort of slid underneath the car. The harpist was kind of freaked and panicked, I mean, her harp had just fallen over! And so she went into the car to pull the car off of the harp, because the harp was below the car, and accidentally shifts into reverse...

HC: Oh, no!

PW: And proceeded to attempt to move (the car) off the harp, but was going the wrong direction and backed the car against the harp, and the crown of the harp hit a dumpster. The harp was basically accordioned in the incident. That was the worst condition I have ever seen a harp. It was basically crushed between a car and a dumpster.

HC: I probably shouldn’t laugh, but it’s just irresistible. (Laughs.) Tell us a little bit about your lifestyle. You must spend a large amount of time on the road.

PW: Yes. I’ve traveled a great deal. Last year I was on the road 184 days, which was the most I have ever done. I was averaging around 150 days a year. So my lifestyle is pretty busy. It’s very hectic, because when I’m on the road I work long days, and in the evening my work isn’t done because then I have to go online and communicate with harpists about problems, or set up appointments for my next trip. And when I’m home, my wife and I are always busy, are always active, always doing something. We don’t have time to take each other for granted. Our relationship is very close—when I’m home, we’re together most of the time.

HC: Do you think the average harpist you encounter understands what regulation is all about?

PW: I think the average harpist understands the basic concept of it, and I think that’s good enough. I think they understand that maintenance of their

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harp is a good thing. They don't need to understand the ins and outs of it, like most mechanical things that need some type of periodic service. What I try to tell people is like with the piano, if it isn't maintained, isn't tuned on a regular basis, then it goes out of tune

"I must do 10 harp care classes a year," says Peter Wiley, whose work as a harp technician has taken him around the world. "I've done them in the United States, Australia, in Korea, in Japan. I really do think harpists should be better educated about their harps."

and doesn't sound well. It's a similar thing on the harp. It's not exactly the same, of course, but it's a very similar thing. I think harpists understand that need, but they don't need to understand exactly what goes on. But I'm always happy to tell them what goes on, and let them know about what happens.

HC: I know that a lot of harpists used to regulate their own instruments because they didn't have any choice, because there weren't people like you that traveled around. Is that practical today?

PW: Is it practical? No. Regulation is not an extremely difficult thing to get a grasp of. It is a difficult thing to actually do well. I understand that there was a need. I was surprised when I was first asked to begin my road service program (through Lyon & Healy) in 1988 that there wasn't a system that already existed. I mean, there were some independent guys in different places, but getting your harp regulated wasn't something that harpists could (easily) do. Today it's not always easy—back then it was pretty difficult. I mean, there was Dale Barco out of Los Angeles—he traveled a lot of the country; and Sam Milligan in New York. Sam pretty much just took care of the metro area there. And Ed Galchick—he is a master regulator—started traveling, doing his own independent service the year before, I think it was 1987.

When harpists were taught to do basic regulation, I think it was a good thing for two reasons: one, necessity, and two, for education and understanding. When you understand better what's going on with

the harp, what you're using to create with, I think that's a good thing.

HC: I was kind of taught the basics of how to do regulation, which I'm happy that I know for emergency purposes, but I feel like, personally, I wouldn't want to spend time doing the whole harp myself. But I am glad that if I had to fix my F-sharp in a pinch, at least I know how to do it, you know?

PW: Well, yes, and I'm a big proponent on education for harpists. I give harp care classes all the time. I must do 10 harp care classes a year. I've done them all over the place—in the United States, Australia, in Korea, in Japan. I really do think harpists should be better educated on their harps. The thing about regulation—what is really difficult for some people to grasp—is that they're taught (how to) regulate a second-octave F-natural that is bad. Now, what are you going to regulate? The focus is going to be on getting the F-natural right. That's a correct assumption, (but) that is not the approach to regulation I take. My approach to regulation is that I want to get the interval right. I don't focus on one end of the line, or one dot along the course. It's a matter of getting everything lined up properly. If the second-octave F-natural is sharp, it's not a matter of turning the disc so that the disc makes it less sharp. As a matter of fact, the primary point of regulation is not to even touch the disc, it's actually to touch the string nuts. When you get into moving the string nuts, you can really cause...

HC: You don't know what you're doing.

PW: You just don't know what you're doing; you can really create a bigger problem than you think. Also, along the way, if you adjust the F-natural disc and your F-sharp was fine, well, now you have to adjust the F-sharp also, because you just changed the interval from F-natural to F-sharp. The interval might have been fine from F-natural to F-sharp, but the interval from F-flat to F-natural was wrong.

HC: I have two questions for you. I'm going to ask them both at the same time, and then you can answer one at a time. The first is: what is the single biggest thing a harpist can do to prolong the life of their regulation? And secondly, what is the single most important thing a harpist can do to prolong the life of their harp?

PW: Okay. Well, let's take the second question first. The most important thing that you can do is to treat your harp with love and care. In doing that, you're not going to, you know, bang your harp into doorways. You're not going to drop your harp. You're going to be sure that you're loading it and unloading

it properly, that you're not setting the harp down too hard. Also, you want to have your harp serviced regularly by an experienced person, by a qualified technician, somebody who really does it all the time and who really knows what is going on with your harp.

HC: So what's the most important thing a harpist can do to prolong the life of their regulation?

PW: Regulation includes a couple of different things. It's not just about pitch, it's also taking care of your pedal felts, making sure that the pedal springs are moving properly, that the pedals are moving properly, that the "over-movement" command—some people refer to it as over-motion—from the pedals to the action is proper. Those have to be coordinated together so that the pedals and the action know where (the natural position) is. Both of them have to know where natural is at exactly the same time, and they don't. The regulator can make that adjustment, and over time it changes. Once all these things are done, then you can go through and listen for noises. This is what is done in the process of regulation—listening for noises, string positioning, string centering. Then I'll do metering or intoning the harp and check the pitches.

In terms of maintaining your regulation, have your pedal felts changed on a regular basis when they need to be—you don't need to have them changed every year for most harpists. Have your harp maintained on a regular basis, by a professional, and watch your strings. Make sure that your strings are good.

Actually, a lot of the harpists I work with are very tired of hearing me talk about strings, but the strings are the voice of the harp, and they have a great deal to do with the pitch and with the consistency of the intervals. One of the first comments a harpist will make when they think their harp is out of regulation is that they tune the harp in flat and it's fine, and in natural it's pretty good, and in sharp you have some pitches that are just awful—they're wrong, they're not close. But your harp's been regulated and maintained regularly. Chances are, you don't really have a big regulation problem, you have a string problem. The strings wear out and get worn by the discs, and where they get worn, it changes the pitch of the string, and the harpist will tend to say, "Well, the pitch is wrong with the second-octave F-sharp." If you just changed the string, probably 50 percent of your intonation problem would be gone. That's the big reason why I'm such a stickler on strings. People are demanding correct pitch and high precision, and that precision is based upon the condition of the

strings and the position of the parts. Not only the position of the discs and the amount of grip and the interval control, but the string's actual condition. The condition of the strings is the most important thing a harpist can look at to maintain their intonation on the harp.

I tell 99 percent of harpists I work with about the string problem and how important the strings are. I mean, it would create more business for regulators if the harpists aren't told this, if they just go on ahead and think that the pitch is wrong and they need it regulated. I've had numerous occasions where I've just changed a string, and the pitch is perfect—there's nothing wrong with the regulation.

HC: Do you ever encounter people that are just never satisfied, that you can't please?

PW: Yeah, there are some harpists out there who really are never satisfied.

HC: Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

PW: The bad thing about that is that no harp is ever completely perfect. And that's an idiosyncrasy of the instrument. That is an idiosyncrasy of almost every instrument, that there are some notes that voice better than other notes. That's kind of a bad thing, and it's hard to accept that. But that is also the good thing, too. I'll tell you, I've learned my most important regulation lessons from harpists who were not satisfied, and who I had to just keep working with, and keep working with, and pay attention to how they were playing and what they were asking. It's not always as simple as somebody saying, "Make this pitch right." I can make it right for one type of string attack or articulation, and the pitch might be a little bit different for different harpists who articulate and play the strings differently. So you have to work with that and learn from that. Some of the most important lessons I ever had in regulation were from



Peter Wiley founded Lyon & Healy's road service program in 1988, making harp regulation readily available to harpists throughout the country; the program kept him on the road 184 days last year.

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harpists who had such a perfect sense of what they wanted, and I wanted to please them and I wanted to work hard, that I actually learned a great deal from them.

There are some harpists who I've worked with, and I've worked with, and I've worked with, and who I still can't satisfy enough. That honestly doesn't bother me, except for the fact that I really want to make it right, I want to make it the way that they want it. I want to please them.

My job is to take the instrument out of the way. I don't want to take it out of their hands, but I want to take it out of the way. When I'm working on an instrument, I want to optimize the instrument's "performability." I want to make it so that someone can sit down and push the envelope with the instrument. I wish regulation were an act of perfection, but it's really not. I look at it as being an act of optimization. That's what I try to do, I try to

optimize the instrument's ability to play the way that is needed.

HC: You have clients that love you, and will only have you regulate their harps. Is it useful to have the same person do your harp time after time? I mean, do you know exactly what to do for certain people when you go in because you've been working with them for a long time?

PW: Yes. I'm a strong believer that when a harpist is working with a technician, if they have a good rapport with that technician and a good level of confidence with that technician, that they stay with that person. I like to work with the same people over and over, because then I develop a relationship with them and with their instrument, and I do get to learn about how the instrument's being used. And I do get familiar with certain idiosyncrasies an instrument might have and work to control those so that it's operating in a way that the harpist is comfortable.

HC: You've basically worked with Lyon & Healy for 20 years and have recently decided to strike out on your own. Tell us about that.

PW: I worked with Lyon & Healy for 20 years, a little bit over 20 years, and last year my wife and I relocated to New Mexico in pursuit of life's dreams and enjoyment. I had 20 years at Lyon & Healy where I really grew in a lot of ways. I really think my career blossomed with them, and I'm very, very grateful for that. It was just a wonderful, wonderful journey. Now I'm starting a new chapter in my life with my wife. I also want to start my own company—to grow this company and watch it grow and bear fruit.

My goal with my company, Harp Doctor, is to primarily service harps near where I live, from southern California to Texas. There are a few places outside of that zone that I'll go every year. I'm not against going to other places, but I have a lot of harpists in that area that will bring in work for me, and I want to keep growing those relationships.

HC: Tell us about the road service program you started with Lyon & Healy.

PW: When I first started to do the road

service program—well, it didn't exist. Ed Galchick had done some trips for Lyon & Healy, but it wasn't a full-fledged program, and when they asked me to do it, I wanted to make it my full-time job. I did! It took me a couple of months, but I turned it into my full-time job. I shouldn't say that, it wasn't my full-time job, it was three-quarters of my job. I mean, half my job was traveling, a quarter of it was getting ready to travel, and a quarter of it was still working in the factory.

When I first started (the program), I had to do solicitation, because harpists didn't know about it. So I would send out 300 letters to Philadelphia, and I would get 12 harps. Twelve harpists would reply. I would get the American Harp Society directory and call harpists directly to solicit work so I could get enough.

When I started the road service program, I also started to date Rosalie, who is my wife now. We started dating as I began traveling. I was traveling so much that we didn't have a whole lot of time together. So she put her foot down. She gave me one

of those "listen here" talks. She said she wanted to spend more time with me, and I said, "Well, do you want to come over to my apartment and stuff envelopes?" And she did. There were many evenings where we would sit in my little studio apartment. We'd sit on the floor, and we would fold letters—hundreds of letters—and stuff them in envelopes. That was how we spent evenings—talking and stuffing envelopes so that we could go on my next trip, whenever that was. So Rosalie was with me since the beginning of that.

Probably the most frustrating thing about the road service program was the fact that we couldn't get to everybody that called. I hated to come into town and then go away and then get a letter or a phone call or an e-mail that said, "Well, how come you didn't work on my harp?" And it was never anything personal. Honestly,



"I worked with Lyon & Healy for a little bit over 20 years," says Wiley (right), pictured with colleagues at the Lyon & Healy factory in Chicago. "I really think my career blossomed with them, and I'm very, very grateful for that."

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it’s never been anything personal. I have never avoided even my toughest harpists. I believe in the idea that the toughest critics you have and the toughest situations and the most difficult things that happen to your life are the things that are the most rewarding in the end. They’re hard to go through, they’re difficult to weather during that time, but in the end, those are the things we grow the most from as human beings.

HC: How does somebody get an appointment with you, because I’ve tried... You swoop into town and don’t tell anyone you’re coming, and you duck out, and...

PW: Well, go to www.harpdoc.com, that’s my Web site. Harpdoc.com will have my schedule and where I’m going. And also on the Web site will be information and FAQs—basic questions like, “When do I need to have my harp regulated?” “How do I know I need to have my harp regulated?” “How often?” That stuff.

HC: You’ve probably had a lot of really interesting things that have happened to you on these trips. You’ve gone into concert halls, you’ve gone to schools. Where’s the weirdest or strangest place you’ve ever had to regulate a harp?

PW: What comes to mind when you say that—it’s not a weird place, but it’s a very interesting place, because it is very cool. I was in Hawaii, and I flew to the big island to help a harpist out, and she picked me up at the airport; She was taking me to her house and we were driving along the roads and through a neighborhood, and then we took a little road that looked kind of like I was going to the back of somebody’s property more or less. And there was a calf tied on a rope in this little dirt road and we shooed the calf out of the way and proceeded on up to a dead end.

But there was a gate going into a farm

field, and we opened the gate up and went through the farm field up this bouncy, bouncy road. We were on the side of a volcano now, you have to understand, and we’re bouncing around, and we go up to another gate. I don’t see any house. We open up another gate, we drive through another field, we finally see a house, but we have to go through another field, and in this field there’s a bunch of steer, so we have to shoo the steer out of the way. We go through that, and then we make our way up to the house that was solar-powered—had no electricity, but they had plenty of sun. To me that was just the most interesting place.

HC: What kind of harp did this person have once you got there?

PW: Oh, she had a Salvi electric harp and, I forget the model, but a Lyon & Healy acoustic harp.

HC: Are there any other crazy stories you’ve gathered that you’d like to tell us about?

PW: I remember one time I had to go to Carnegie Hall for the Vienna Philharmonic back in 1988 or 1989. I had just finished a 27-day road trip, and I got back to the Lyon & Healy office and my boss handed me some airline tickets. I figured they were for my next trip, which was in another two weeks or something. She said, “Please look at those tickets.” I looked at the tickets and they were flights to New York that day and back that day! So I flew to New York and rendezvoused at Carnegie Hall with the Vienna Philharmonic. I had to sit and wait and wait and wait for the union to bring me the harp. I was standing on the stage, looking down into the pit (at the harp). But they told me I needed to work on it on stage left and no place else—that was the only place I could work on it. I had to wait for almost two hours for a union stage

hand to pick the harp up, move it three feet, and place it on stage left where I could work on it. Then, to top it off, the real problem I was there for was they had broken a bass wire, and the bass wire had gotten stuck in the soundboard, and in trying to get it out they clipped it flush with the soundboard on the top. And the little bit they could grab onto on the inside had broken off. So the bass wire was stuck in the soundboard, and they hired me to come out and remove it which, since I had the right tools, took me about five minutes.

HC: So you got it out?

PW: Yeah, and then I wrote them a bill for a little over a thousand dollars for five minutes of work. I felt guilty, so I set up my Strobe tuner and I did a regulation. But they really just hired me to come get the bass wire out.

HC: There are more harp technicians available today than there used to be. There are several people out there who come to my mind that are highly skilled, but you are sought after by everybody. Why is that? How did you get that reputation?

PW: Well, I’m very flattered by this. There are some excellent technicians out there. I’m very happy that people are happy with my work. I hope people like my work, that I do good work and that I’m doing it in a way that is making them feel more comfortable on their harp. I’ve worked really hard at that. I hope one of the other reasons, too, is that I try to be as honest and sincere as possible with my advice about their harp.

I think it’s really, really important that a harpist gets advice that suits them in their situation. (For example,) what is the timeline for having a repair? When is it necessary and when is it really not necessary? That is always a matter of opinion from one technician to another. But I always try to take into account the harpist’s personal situation, not just some flat idea. I have never told a harpist flat out that you have to have your harp regulated every year, because it doesn’t suit everyone’s situation. And I think people

appreciate that. People respect that. I’ll say to some customers, “I don’t want to see your harp for three years,” and they say, “But, but...,” and I say, “Look, I really don’t need to see your harp for three years.” If it’s in really good shape and the regulation is holding really well, the type of material they’re playing and the amount they’re playing the instrument just don’t call for it.

HC: I’ve always been told, “Every year, every year, every year,” but when I read the information on your Web site, you say to calculate the hours your harp is spent in use, and base your regulation needs on that. So you might not need to have a regulation every year.

PW: Right.

HC: Has the world of harp regulating changed in the 20 years you’ve been doing this? Harps haven’t really changed.

PW: Oh, yes! By far they’ve changed. Being a technician is not an easy thing, because, like I said before, the basics are fairly simple. If I gave you a one-week

intensive course, I could show you just about all the basics about how to do a regulation. But that would be the equivalent of me coming to a harpist and taking harp lessons for a few months. I might have a half-hour of repertoire or something, but it by no means makes me qualified to play the Ginastera concerto. And it’s kind of the same thing with regulators. You can learn all the basics—you can learn how to use your fingers, your hands, how to use the tools, and how to do stuff, but it’s experience that really gets you there.

I’ve often told people this, and I forget where I learned it, but the first 75 percent of all of your work takes 25 percent of your time. It’s the last 25 percent of the work that takes more and more time, and more and more skill. So the closer you get to making a harp function in the 90th percentile or the 95th percentile range of its ability to work, it’s tougher and tougher, and it takes more and more time, and it really takes more and more experience and skill to get there. ●

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