Harp

How Can the Harp be heard in a Symphony Orchestra?

by Saul Davis

The interplay of harps with orchestras and ensembles is complex, requiring the addressing of the elements of timbre, balance, and stage placement. Care must be taken with these factors, for while the harp can on rare occasion overpower another instrument, it is usually the other way around. The harp's sound is sustaining in character, unless muffled (stopping the strings by hand), but there is an immediate dropping-off of volume after a note is played, followed by a long diminuendo and dissolving into overtones.

It can take a harpist many years of experience to learn how the harp's tonal properties interweave with other instruments, how they interact with acoustics, and how to deal the with added factor of conductors.A conductor or coach must pay special attention to harp parts because of their unique qualities and role in the orchestral fabric. For sensitizing the ear it is useful to listen to a harp part alone, and then add other instruments one by one, noting the changes in balance, and the point at which the harp begins to be drowned out. Players of other instruments, especially those of a similar group such as bowed strings, have a tendency to play to each other, overestimating the overall balance.This balance is also constantly shifting with the music, the room, the audience, the instruments, individual players, and even the weather.

Harpists must also play their part to the fullest by cultivating a projecting tone quality that is well-placed and round (like a singer), and change their dynamic scale from practice-room intimate to grandly outward. Dynamics in harp parts are written the same as for other instruments, but to be audible harpists generally have to increase their dynamic degree by one or two: at the soft end, mezzo-piano for pianissimo, mezzo-forte for piano; and as much as possible at the loud end. A little trenchancy can help in cutting through a thick tutti, but should be avoided otherwise. Most importantly, only by practicing for this result at home will the harpist be able to call upon it in rehearsal and performance.

The number of harps to be used in a performance was addressed by Hector Berlioz. In his *Treatise on Instrumentation* he says,"the effect of harps increases in proportion to the number employed… The tones, chords and arpeggios of a mass of harps can be heard with extraordinary brilliance above a whole orchestra and chorus." In the Dover edition of Berlioz' book, Richard Strauss adds in his comments, "the harp must always be treated as a solo instrument, also in orchestra, lest one write, unnecessarily, notes which are inaudible… In the tutti of a modern orchestra, only a group of harps is effective." This suggests an intention, where he wrote Harp I and Harp II in his works, he meant Harps I and Harps II, as Berlioz did indicate for his *Symphonie Fantastique*. Lucile Lawrence, harp instructor at Tanglewood, has had the harp part in Strauss' *Don Juan* doubled in concerts there, to acclaim from the audiences and the conductors.

While harps may have become stronger since the 19th century, so have all the other instruments, and modern ears are less sensitive.The great composer Ernest Bloch said in his article *The Future of the Harp* (Eolian Review, December 1921), "Our orchestra lacks an essential and enduring element, that of plucked-string instruments… It is true that the harp has grown to be one of its indispensable component parts; but with what limitations? What can one or two… do against the compact mass of the modern orchestra? Even as the wind instruments have seen their numbers of necessity increase in order to hold their own against the encroaching strings so we can foresee… the permanent foundation of a choir of harps, no longer accessory but an independent group, free and individualized, with a life of its own like the woodwinds and brasses, with which it will combine to furnish the composer with innumerable, with infinite possibilities…

"It is imperative that composers, conductors and performers should become more familiar with this splendid instrument and be initiated in its technique; it is imperative that they become familiar with its riches… classes should be formed." With regard to chamber music, he adds, "better than the piano with its unrelated timbre insusceptible of any of any coalition with the richer resonance of the other groups, the harp accords harmoniously either with the strings or the woodwinds." And the brass, too, though the balance requires extra care. It is helpful for composers to begin by writing for harp ensembles, which would be helped by the wider establishment of harp ensembles of professional ability.

Some might wonder just how harps fit into the orchestra. The harp is a member of a distinct class within the family of stringed instruments, the chordophones.The chordophones are comprised of these classes, according to the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*: zithers, vinas, kotos, lutes and violin relatives, lyres and harps.

The harp's tone projects outward and upward from the angled sounding board. Anything placed in front of it — instruments, music stands, and especially a section of players — blocks the column of sound it produces from projecting, particularly if the block is creating a competing column of sound. It is common for conductors to place the harp between sections, sometimes raised on a podium. Because the harp's sound is so directional, it needs to face toward the audience. In orchestra, it should face outward at a forty-five degree angle, preferably toward a reflecting

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wall, with the sound unimpeded by obstructions. The best place is next to the last stands of first violins, and secondly, next to the cellos. Even in solo performance, the harp should always face out at a sixty-or seventy-degree angle (such as \ when on the violin side); if it faces sideways towards the stage wall (—), the best part of the sound is lost to the audience.

Although the harps sometimes double, or are doubled by, bass lines, the effect can be lost by placing the harps by the basses, the tones being overly merged. This also places the harpist on the audience-side of the instrument (harps are always played resting on the right shoulder), away from the orchestra and more liable to distraction to and from the audience, whereas on stage right, the harpist is on the orchestra's side of the harp.

In this seating, by the violins, the conductor must take care to cue clearly and differentiatedly for the harpist to avoid confusion with the violin cues, to not ignore the harp when its cues are combined with other players, and to overcome the distance, to make them feel involved. For harp students just starting out in orchestra playing, these can be acutely felt issues. Also, since the harp responds immediately to playing, coordination with the slower-to-sound stringed instruments is helped by this seating. If the harp is too close to the conductor, it gives a false impression of its loudness. Relative to other instruments, the harp's sound does not travel as well, diminishing considerably with distance. Thus, having distance from the conductor gives a more realistic impression of balance.

The worse possible place to put the harps is upstage. As much as seventy-five percent of the sound is lost, rendering all but the most soloistic parts inaudible and therefore pointless. It is also inappropriate given that most harp parts feature much solo-type passages.

In chamber ensembles, it is best to seat the harp in the center, facing straight out (|), or angled (/) . If the string or wind players are separated it will help them to hear.

In conclusion, to remedy balance problems, one must listen carefully, double harp parts, and place harps at stage right front.

Some conductors have used the harpists in their orchestra particularly well. Suggested listening: Eugene Ormandy with the Philadelphia Orchestra; Leopold Stokowski with any orchestra; Fritz Reiner and Georg Solti with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; Sir Thomas Beecham's *Carmen* and *La Boheme*. Suggested reading: *The ABC of Harp Playing* by Lucile Lawrence (Hal Leonard) includes *The Use of the Harp in the Orchestra* which illustrates adaptation of harp parts for sound and facility.

Saul Davis is a concert harpist/composer/writer living in Philadelphia. Originally from Minneapolis, he studied harp at MacPhail Center, Macalester College, Tanglewood, and Manhattan School of Music, and conducting with Henry Charles Smith. He performs in chamber music, recitals (several times at Macalester), and orchestrally (including the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra). He has taught at Roosa School, Hebrew Arts Center, Brooklyn Conservatory, and privately. Mr. Davis is founding Harpists Associated for Repertoire Promulgation (H.A.R.P) to develop and promote composers and repertoire for the harp's benefit. ⁑

Grete Wangensteen wins Harp Second Place in National Competition

Grete Wangensteen, grand prize winner of the MNSOTA state competition last fall, took Harp Second Place in the national ASTA WITH NSOA competition in May. Grete, a student of Kathy Kienzle in the Suzuki department of MacPhail Center for the Arts, won $400.

The Eleventh Biennial National Solo Competition took place May 8–12, 2000 at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. The competition featured three days of string playing by fifty of the best and brightest young string musicians from the U.S. and abroad. These students had competed at their state level, then sent tapes for the national semi-finals, and had been selected to compete in person for the final round for a total of $30,000 in cash prizes in the instrumental categories of Violin, Viola, Cello, Double Bass, Classical Guitar and Harp. Players competed in two divisions — Junior division for musicians under the age of 19 as of July 1, 2000 and Senior Division for musicians age 19 through 25 as of July 1, 2000. National finalists were required to perform a repertoire of required works as well as a work or works of their choice during the final competition.

Grete writes about the competition:

> When I was first asked to write a short article on my experiences with my harp, I was eager to accept the challenge. At first there appeared to be many options as to what I might write about, from the pre-competition jitters to the excitement which follows me as I walk offstage. When the time finally came to sit down and put my thoughts on paper, I suddenly realized something — my experiences in performing, in both concerts and competitions, are incredibly personal to me. The whole "performing" process has become almost a sacred ritual to me. However, with every performance and audition I partake in comes a greater sense of ease on stage. I have grown and learned from all of my performing experiences. ⁑