



Harp

On Arranging Harp Parts for Conductors and Teachers

by Saul Davis

If you have student harpists whom you need to or would like to include in your ensembles, you will probably have to create parts for them. Like any other instrumentalist, they need as much experience as possible in a diverse range of musical styles and genres. If you use harpists only when called for in the score, they won't get enough opportunity for training alongside their peers. Imagine how beneficial it is to learn the basic skills of ensemble playing at the same time as your friends, rather than coming to it later and being perhaps the only one still having to deal with basic techniques.

Harpists have to learn the ensemble skills of tuning, playing rhythmically and together, following the conductor, reading parts without getting lost, counting, counting rests, coming in with and without cues, and coordination of all this with looking at their hands and their music. Also, the harpist is quite often playing something unique, such as chords, arpeggios or glissandi. Arpeggiated chords must finish on the beat, but the harpist isn't always taught this, and how are they supposed to find the beat anyway? The harp speaks immediately, unlike many other instruments, so interpreting the placement of the beat has to be learned as well.

Harpists can play in almost any kind of ensemble: orchestra, band, string ensembles, wind ensembles, jazz band, theater orchestra/band, choir, and even sometimes a brass quintet. In the ASCAP catalog there are several hundred pieces for harp and string orchestra.

Harp are typically used for color, rhythmic definition, texture and fill. They can also be used for melody, often eloquently, especially with doubling another instrument. They double extremely well with flutes, horns, and any of the strings, other winds, and even solo brass or percussion. They contribute best when audible: in tutti passages with dynamics less than forte unless they are filling in with big glissandi or arpeggios, especially with two or more harps. A great effect is when harps double pizzicato strings.

Harp are an authentic continuo instrument in Baroque and Classical music, and part of Early Music as well. Their separation from "mainstream" instruments only occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries. They can play the main notes of a bass line, harmony and melody, or harmony or melody without bass. But don't expect them to play all of a written keyboard part; it is better to create a new one that is appropriate to the instrument and the player.

To begin writing harp parts you should read the sections dealing with the harp in orchestration books (although they are sometimes inaccurate and inadequate). Among the best are those by Hector Berlioz and Gardner Read. I recommend studying harp parts by Rimsky-Korsakov. They are very effective and are within the parameters of basic

technique. Tchaikovsky's are as good, but more challenging and occasionally awkward. An important source is *The ABC of Harp Playing including The Use of the Harp in the Orchestra* by Lucile Lawrence (G. Schirmer). It provides excerpts of typical parts and shows how they've been adapted for playability. A standard text for notation and special tonal effects is *Modern Study of the Harp* by Carlos Salzedo (G. Schirmer).

Guidelines for Writing for the Harp

1. Avoid chromatic notes except in slow succession.

Good OK Bad

A%— \$ B%— \$

2. Avoid quick or continued repetition of the same notes. If the strings are still ringing, it becomes difficult to play a note without a buzzing noise, and the resonant quality becomes deadened. The duration of the string's vibration ranges from about one second to 8 seconds or more, depending on the loudness, as you go from the top to the bass. Middle C rings from 3 to 4 seconds.

8va-----

Good

Bad

3. Harpists never use the fifth finger (pinkie) as it is too short to reach the strings. Avoid 5-note groups in chords, scales and arpeggios. Ten-note arpeggios are possible. These

are safe finger combinations in left and right hands: 43, 44, 443, 444, 4443, and 4444. Chords can be any pairing of 2, 3, or 4.

4. The thumbs, being closest to the body when playing, play the highest notes, so the wider intervals tend to lie at the top of a group. Left-hand chords need to be more open because of the greater resonance of the lower registers of the harp.

5. Don't use both hands simultaneously for arpeggios of more than 4 notes.

6. Harmonics sound an octave higher than played and have a moving ethereal quality. The pitch is notated either where it is played or where it sounds, so please indicate it in the part.

7. Glissandi are indicated by a diagonal wavy line, the same as is used for arpeggiated chords, extending from starting pitch to ending pitch. They need to have clear rhythmic value, which is shown by placement in the bar rather than rests, probably because the whole instrument is ringing. The scale is shown in small notes in parentheses with all accidentals given. You may additionally employ a diagram showing the positions of the pedals, or a chord designation if that is what is sounding, such as B-flat diminished seventh. Generally, the index finger is used going up and the thumb going down. The index and third fingers can be used together to produce a glissando in thirds.

8. The pedal harp uses pedals to change the string pitch by half-steps, from flat to natural to sharp. They do not have to be held in place and can be moved in about half a second. Two can be changed at a time if both feet are used. The right foot controls EFGA and the left BCD and occasionally E. Unpleasant noises will occur, not unlike gears grinding, if the pedals are changed with the same strings ringing. The strings can be muffled with the fingers one at a time, or with the flat hand for an octave or more. This is described most completely by Salzedo.

9. The harps don't project as far as the other instruments, nor are they as loud, so they have to play one or more dynamic degrees louder than other instruments. Their sound-waves are easily blocked or absorbed by objects or sound-waves in front of them, such as people, instruments and even stands.

Following is an example of a harp part I have arranged

for Franz Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* for one or more harps, with some options for experimentation or customizing.

Movement I: The left arm gets tired playing continually in the lowest register. Therefore if the harp will double the bass for all of the first forty measures, it is good to divide the phrases between two harpists.

They could also play downbeats only. The muffle symbol indicates a pizzicato-like effect.

Here the harp doubles the violas and basses, but if it is an octave higher then it can double the clarinets.

An alternative is doubling the winds or the horns.

As these same musical elements recur throughout the rest of the movement, the same doublings can repeat, or just use the harps for chords in the tutti passages.

Movement II: This figure can be divided with Harp I playing the upper octave, and Harp II playing the lower.

Here is another way of deploying two harps.

Here the harps can double the strings, winds or horns.

Saul Davis performs and teaches in Philadelphia. He is a regular contributor to the American Harp Journal. Born in Minnesota, he studied at Macalester College and with Lucile Lawrence at Tanglewood and Manhattan School of Music. He performed at Chautauqua Institute and studied at the Salzedo School with Alice Chalifoux. He has received grants and scholarships from Macalester College, Tanglewood, Chautauqua Institute, the Pultasker Fund and the Presser Foundation. He composes, edits and arranges harp music. This year's columns are dedicated to the memory of Samuel Pultasker. ‡