Harp

Harpists *versus* Conductors

by Carlos Salzedo

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It would be unreasonable to expect that all orchestral conductors could know everything about each musical instrument. But, there is one in particular about which they know surprisingly little — the *harp*.

In the first place, orchestral leaders do not always reckon with the fact that most symphonic and operatic harp parts are to be partly or fundamentally re-written. Among the great composers, Debussy, Ravel, and Puccini are the only ones whose harp parts are harpistically and intelligently conceived. Two giants, Wagner and Strauss, wrote harp parts just as unplayable as they are useless from the viewpoint of sound. Musicians who are not aware of these facts may wonder what are the causes of them. This is due to three principal factors. Prior to the latter part of the 19th century, the carrying power of the harp was very limited. Then, too, most harpists of the past were bad musicians. As a result, composers were not attracted to compose for that instrument. It took the supersensitiveness of Debussy, Ravel and Puccini to sense the harp, and to give it its proper orchestral function.

In general, conductors approach harpists, or harp problems, from the wrong end. For instance, when a conductor is about to audition a harpist, one of his first queries is whether the harpist is a good sight-reader! This question is unreasonable, and does not speak well for the conductor. Why is it unreasonable? Two reasons. The first one refers to composers. As pointed out above, very few composers wrote playable harp parts; most of them conceived their harp parts at a piano or in their misinformed imaginations. Aside from proverbial arpeggios (in which they have always too many notes), they write passages, more or less pianistic, never realizing that the fingering of the harp is exactly the opposite of that of the piano. A simple example: on the piano we finger the C major scale 1-2-3-1-2-3-4-5; on the harp the fingering is 4-3-2-1-4-3-2-1. How many musicians, conductors included, know that? (Take a bow, Reader!) Also,

on the piano the mixture of black and white keys facilitates hand patterns; certain passages "fall under the fingers." Nothing like that exists on the harp: our forty-seven strings, in spite of having three colors in each octave, have no palpable landmarks and this precludes schemes for hand patterns. The second reason refers to pedals. As everyone knows (or am I presuming too much?), we have seven pedals through which all chromatics are governed; this is a very complicated subject. Of course, there are wizards among harpists, but those harpists have passed the stage of auditioning. I wish to be forgiven for quoting my own case in relation to sight-reading: I have the reputation of being one of the best score readers on the piano; give me a harp part to sight-read and my reputation might vanish instantly. I have pulled many of our young colleagues out of embarrassment by stating this in front of their prospective conductors!

The question of the carrying power of the harp is also greatly miscalculated by most conductors. During my four years at the "Met" (where I was imported from Paris by Toscanini) I came in contact with many conductors. The immortal maestro was the only conductor imbued with a sense of sonorous evaluation. He never distorted or nullified the sound of the harp (or of any other instrument).

Without any thought of mingling internationalism with music, I have always noticed that Italian, French, Hungarian, English and Russian conductors have a much better conception of the harp sound, and a better general understanding of the instrument, than their Teutonic colleagues.

Conductors are not always consistent. The following anecdote may be edifying. During a rehearsal, one of our eminent harpists was repeatedly requested by the conductor to play softer, "more softly," "even softer." In truth, she could hardly hear herself play, and from the auditorium I could not hear her at all. Perplexed by such an unreasonable request, she asked me what to do. I advised her to play almost inaudibly at the next rehearsal and then normally loud at the performance. She did, and the conductor did not even look at her! (Such tricks could not be played on Toscanini — nor would he demand such an unreasonable thing.)

Another typical instance of sonorous miscalculation: A conductor was listening to the rehearsal of his orchestra from the auditorium. He stopped the assistant conductor and shouted, "More harp." My young colleague played louder. After the intermission the head conductor took charge of the rehearsal. When arriving at the same passage he stopped and exclaimed, "Too much harp." I was in the auditorium and can affirm that the harpist had played the passage exactly alike both times! Only the conductor did not seem to realize that a harp twenty feet near by and one

two hundred feet away sound different.

The location of the harp section in symphony orchestras is not always selected beneficially, either for the orchestra or for the audience. Some conductors put the harps toward the back of the orchestra. They pretend that the sound blends better with the other instruments. That antiquated theory is on a par with the proverbial German "papier musik" — an interesting dead matter without sonorous worth. The truth is that, placed way back, the harps are swamped by whatever instruments are around them. Those conductors have no regard for instrumental aesthetics; they fail to realize that the public likes to look at the harps, all the more when enhanced by our attractive lady harpists. Everything well considered, the harp section in a symphony orchestra ought to be at the end of the first row, at the conductor's right.

Tuning is another orchestral problem. Conductors do not always know that a harp can get out of adjustment without notice, and that the best harp tuner in the world is powerless whenever a modulating disk gets out of order; indeed, it puts the whole harp in an untunable condition. Sometimes, too, depending on extreme temperature, strings are liable to become false, thereby untunable. This fortunately happens less frequently since we now use nylon strings from the top of the harp down to middle C.

The pitch of a harp does not agree consistently with that of other instruments; it depends on whether all the woodwinds are properly warmed. The string players, as everyone knows, love to tune too high; this does not facilitate matters. It seems that the only instruments with which the harp is in tuning agreement are cymbals and triangle! While on this subject, I should like to tell a personal story. When we were playing *Meistersingers* at the "Met," I would always go for dinner right after the beginning of the Prelude (if I may confess this now!). Returning from the restaurant in time to play the end of the first act, I had to pull up all my strings a good quartertone higher, notwithstanding the fact that all the other instruments were playing around me. Conductors never have difficulty in keeping their batons in tune.

Carlos Salzedo (1885–1961) was a pre-eminent harpist, teacher and composer. He was also respected as an exceptional pianist and conductor. Born in France, he moved to New York City to be solo harpist at the Metropolitan Opera in 1909. Salzedo then became a prominent concert artist as a soloist, with his harp ensemble, and in trio with Barrere (flute) and Britt (cello). He founded the harp department of the Curtis Institute. Salzedo's compositions range in style from classic and romantic to impressionist and a unique visionary modernism. ❡

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