Harp

The Singing Touch

by Saul Davis

Pianists have long discussed and sought "the singing touch," or the cantabile style of playing. It is a signal musical quality for instrumentalists, prized because it conveys musicality, sincerity, and a human quality to what might otherwise be mechanical. Harpists however tend to take the sustained nature of our instrument for granted, not realizing how much control we can exert over the color, character, and length of the sustaining of a string's tone.

These "aftertones" are the meat of our palette of colors. After the fundamental tone takes its clear shape its overtones begin to appear; and the endless combinations of overtones of multiple strings sounding together produces the infinite subtleties of shimmer, glittering, glistening qualities of which the harp is capable.

Harpists need the cantabile style too. Harp playing can easily become mechanical, a digital exercise routine. Even the most musical players can get more out of the music if they have learned how to make the strings sing.

How do you do it? Simply by making the notes connect, by sustaining a note with intent and gesture until the sounding of the next, and by a thought of their belonging to each other, with a sequential meaning within a phrase. Each note is like a pearl, round and lustrous, but hanging on a continuous thread that connects all the notes.

Articulation is the craft of punctuating musical sentences. The harp is unique among instruments in that we place our fingers on handsful of notes yet to come. In choosing which notes to place we are creating an articulation of their relative meaning and value. We have to decide which notes belong to each other. We also have the choice of not connecting, of coming off the string in a sort of post-attack with its own set of values. We have the emphasis of a fresh attack by replacing our hand within a phrase-group of notes. We have the choice of endlessly connecting every note by placing ahead through an entire phrase. We have the choice of increasing the projection of notes by raising the hand and arm upward after playing. We can selectively silence notes in various ways. We can diminish a note's projection by not raising away from the string. All of these must be carefully considered in interpreting a piece. Some of us have the benefit of teachers who will figure all this out before teaching a piece to us, and give us their markings. Published editions by Grandjany, Salzedo and Lawrence are generally thoroughly marked with their interpretation.

There is also the question of vocal style. Much of the nineteenth-century's music is operatic in style. The Boieldieu *Concerto for Harp* turns the harpist into a coloratura soprano. It is thus instructive to listen to great historic singers. To hear the great Florence Wightman play the *Cadenza and Solo from Lucia di Lammermoor* by Donizetti in a live recording from the old Metropolitan Opera is to hear a grand diva sing it, and she brings down the house! But it is so easy to play it simply and not realize all the opportunities it presents for phrasing in the vocal style.

The use of artificial reverberation on recordings produces a false cantabile, and if you listen closely you can discern whether the harpist is really singing the tones. Most likely they aren't. Using gut strings in the melodic registers of the harp also impedes to this kind of playing as the tones fade away more abruptly.

"Sub-phrasing" is recognizing and articulating the sub-groupings of notes within a slur or phrase, defining their relative values and intensity in the forward musical movement. Think of the old "follow the bouncing ball" sing-a-longs; each note is the ball, and needs energy to travel across the intervals and keep moving. The genius oboist Marcel Tabuteau, of the Philadelphia Orchestra of old, had a 1–8 system of numbering the relative intensity of notes. This is not the same as dynamics, though it could be applied there, too. Especially in Classical music, the musical line prepares enough energy to cross wide intervals. You also see hidden ornaments that are written out, such as appoggiaturas, which require particular articulations to bring out their expressivity.

If you put one note on paper it is static. Two notes have a connection and a relationship. Add one more and you have movement. It's like binary numbers or electric connections. Is the connection between the notes open or closed? Easy or forced? Repeated notes require special attention to keep them from losing intensity. They must have a forward direction and goal, an outcome of all that built-up energy. Some players feel this instinctively, but it still must be applied consistently, and I think it can be learned.

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