



# HARP

## Effortless Playing

by Saul Davis Zlatkovsky

As students and professionals, performing solo recitals is our greatest challenge. There are so many obstacles and challenges involved. How we present our work to the audience is part of its essence. How we prepare is the core of our work beforehand.

We must try not to show limitations when performing, as they may come across as lack of ability, talent or as fear of our instrument. We can try to play in such a way as that it sounds as if we are without limitations. This is a quality that comes through in Carlos Salzedo's recording of his *Ballade*. But then, of course, he had no limitations. It occurred to me after listening to him that perhaps this could be taken as a style of playing. Over the last several years I have tried it and I'm happy to say it has worked. It may be compared to what we so often hear: make it sound easy.

We spend so much time practicing on the edge, trying to push our tempo, coordination, or volume to the limit. Sometimes we have to back away from that limit to where we can do our all-around best. I find that the music always has its own tempo within me, where it is calm and centered and full, and when I can find that, then it sounds true as a performance.

While witnessing the struggle to overcome the technical difficulties of music may be dramatic and make the audience feel involved in the artist's travails, audiences do seem to prefer the awe-inspiring feats of an artist who doesn't seem to have any struggle, whether they are artistic or not. People who appear as great artists seem to have complete mastery of technique and the ability to concentrate solely on artistic dimensions of performance and interpretation. I think that this is due at least in part to their being able to play without showing effort.

When a harpist possesses a healthy harp technique, which consists of proper hand position at all times, full and smooth articulation of the fingers drawing into the palm, and fulsome pleasing tone, then the focus of the harpist should fall on physical/kinetic effort. Effortful playing creates strain and tension, which impedes facility and the harp's natural resonance.

**Rule: it is a fact that physical tension reduces the resonance of an instrument from its optimal vibration. Lessening one's tension increases the instrument's resonance, producing more color and volume of sound.** (I learned this from doctors at a conference on medicine and the arts.)

In my own experience, reducing effort requires careful playing over a lengthy period of time. It is aided by increasing the amount of time spent in exercises and developing coordination, which aids reading. Warming up must be done in at least four tempi, for example one note per beat at  $\text{♩}=60$ , then two notes to a beat, four notes, then eight notes, always using the same exercise (such as Carlos Salzedo's *Conditioning Exercises* 1, 7, 8, 9, 10; or LaRiviere exercises-lengthened) so the concentration is totally on ease of movement. Fingerings should be playable in any combination or sequence. Difficult passages should be prepared with similar exercises to reduce the effort in playing those passages.

It would seem that removing effort from playing equalizes the notes. That increases the flow, ease and tempo of playing. It allows constant concentration on expression and phrasing through articulation, and qualities of movement and touch.

**Rule: Quality of movement = Quality of touch = Articulation of the note.** There must be a constant line of expressiveness, tone, intention and direction (which begins just before playing and ends just after).

The effortless playing of a string begins with the lightest of touches and always seeks the freest possible ringing of the string, which will lead to greater vibration of the wood. (Use no sound-absorbing material such as paper or cottony plugs at the base of the string to hold the knot; only use pieces of string and a knot.) Touch the string with the corner edge of the fingertip and then touch the palm of your hand as immediately as can be, regardless of the tempo. (Young harpists often think that you only need to move the fingers quickly in fast tempi.) As the fingers draws into the hand it will displace the string and set it into motion. Note that this is not slipping off of the string. It

is calmly moving through it as if it weren't there. Use movement of the hand and arm (raising) to free the finger from the string's vicinity, relieving any residual tension resulting from the pressure exerted upon the string. The hand can come away from the string, and rotate or follow-connect to the next string needed.

This process of warming-up must be begun anew each day, eliminating any residual stiffness from the previous day's playing. These principles apply to the human voice as well. A well-produced, well-placed, well-supported tone carries better than a loud one in the harp and the voice. It is also the only way to produce true tone color. However loudly one plays the strings, the pressure is immediately released by the time the fingertip touches the palm.

Though in the Salzedo method beginners are taught to make a fist when closing their fingers, very-advanced player's can release and open their fingers slightly, or go back to playing position rather than keeping the fingers closed in a fist. Carlos Salzedo taught only his most advanced students like Edna Phillips and Lucile Lawrence, when they were finished players, this technique of releasing a tone by releasing the fingers after closing. The arms then carry the tone outward with a supported rising gesture of the hand. Note that the releasing is done on the way up, before reaching the area of the harp's neck. However, this cannot be done unless the tone quality, volume and projection can be sustained and enhanced by this additional process, hence the reserving of it for the most advanced players. The closed fist contains some of a note's resonance; this can be used for dramatic effect. It is emphasized with beginners to make a fist, so that they develop the good habit of closing fingers completely.

Dynamic pressure is created by leaning into the strings with the lower arm. It creates volume, tensile, supple strength and doesn't create tension. The fingers must always close enough to relieve any tension or pressure. (There are many harpists now playing in a manner in which the fingers are not closed, or only partially, or only at the

smaller knuckles toward the fingertip. This is physically wrong, and possibly hazardous. It impedes tone and facility.)

Edna Phillips and Lucile Lawrence are the only teachers I know of who passed this on to their students.

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