



HARP

On Muffling

by Saul Davis Zlatkovsky

While listening to a recent recording of harp music by Carlos Salzedo, I was reminded of the importance of muffling correctly. “Muffling” is the harpist’s term for stopping or damping a ringing string.

After a harpist has played a string, it is muffled by stopping it from ringing with a quick touch by a finger or the flat palm of the hand. Strings may be quieted immediately after they have been played, after they have sounded for a beat or more, or simply to prevent noise when changing pedals or replacing the fingers on the strings. Muffles are commonly used to “clean up” the sound by preventing unwanted finger–against–string buzzing, to separate phrases or sections of a piece, or to quiet the bass tones when the harmony or character of a piece has changed and they are still ringing in the previous harmony. Most muffles are notated with a \oplus or with the placement of the French word “étouffée”.

One must be fearless when muffling, because touching the strings incorrectly, timidly, or with anything less than a sure, deft touch can produce unwanted buzzing noises. That’s why we must muffle with vigor, directness, firmness and sureness.

We play the harp because we want to let it ring, naturally. But to make art with its sounds, we have to control them and we have to discriminate, make clear choices, and use clear colors and sounds that reach the audience. The muffle is a most direct act of artful expression. We go against the nature of the harp and silence it. This, naturally, has a very dramatic quality.

When muffling with the palm, it must be pressed flat against the strings it is stopping and come off again quickly and lightly, without a sound. The fingers must be side-by-side, a closed hand, not spread fingers, which look as though they are letting sound leak out, and may lead to accidental noise. You will not muffle a larger number of strings by spreading the fingers, nor stop them any faster. Your reach is as long as the distance from the tip of the third finger to your wrist. For most people that will cover at least an octave, if not a tenth or more.

To muffle all the wire strings, you muffle from C the octave above, and then quickly replace—without sliding—your hand on the lowest octave and remove it. To muffle the whole harp, you muffle with the right hand from middle C upward as the left hand muffles from middle C downward, then move both hands down an octave. That usually muffles all the upper octaves as well. If needed, you replace the right hand an octave higher for its second muffling. You have to muffle the lower strings first, as they make the upper strings ring, and they ring longer. If you slide on the strings at all between muffles, you will create audible sounds not wanted. Fingers executing individual muffles must touch the notes quickly and not linger.

In devising his system of notation for the unique tone colors of the harp that he uncovered, Carlos Salzedo also created specific notation symbols for muffling by attaching the modernized symbol to arrows or lines to indicate exactly what notes or ranges of notes should be muffled. When Carlos Salzedo calls for a series

of muffled notes, he is calling for a distinct sound event. They are not simply stopped strings. If you play a note and then muffle it you are already too late. If you play a note and think of muffling it immediately, you are still too late! It is as tightly done as will still allow the production of a clear tone. That’s why so often the muffle is often done with the other hand, so that it lands upon the string as soon as there is an audible sound. That is because it is not “ring and stop” that you are after, but “ring!”. In other words, like you start to say something and someone claps their hand over your mouth, not letting the final consonant sound, not “what!” but “wha!” This makes it a distinctive sound. Done in this fashion, it is as though the harp has become a different instrument; it is speaking with such a different voice.

The brevity of the muffled notes in a series gives the sound the effect of being a different dialect from the rest of the harp’s tones. Yet another dialect is Salzedo’s Isolated Sounds effect where the previous note is muffled as the next one is played, which creates a unique effect of liaison, a smoothly synthetic sort of legato.

Individual note muffling is done in more than way, all clearly described in Salzedo’s *Modern Study of the Harp* and *Method for the Harp*. Marcel Grandjany has his own way of notating some muffles, which are found in the foreword of some pieces, but not printed in all of his pieces. They are similar to those used by Henriette Renie and other French harpists. They tend to be much less specific about when and where to muffle.

Salzedo believed in very discrete differences in tone colors on the harp. When he calls for “guitaric sounds” or “plectric sounds” they are always to be played in that first inch of string at the very bottom of the harp string, where it disappears into the sounding board. Not two inches higher, and definitely not six inches higher, even though that is much easier. He wanted the strings to be played at the very middle, very bottom or very top, so the differences are clear and distinct, with no segue from one to the other. This is one of the distinctive characteristics of Salzedo’s vision of the harp. It is necessary to know these distinctions in order to play his music and the music of other composers who adopt his approach and achieve the intended sounds.

One important old tradition not invented by Salzedo and handed down orally, is to brush the strings with the left hand as it is ascending into a placed chord. This eliminates the preceding bass note. With the fingers upward, one quickly brushes across it and brings the fingers down toward the palm in order to position on the neighboring note. It is even possible to do this in a descending passage by brushing the thumb across the preceding upper string, though rarely necessary. I indicate these movements as a muffled individual note immediately preceding the next note, and writing 4-4 underneath with a slur/finger-slide curve linking the 4s. This shows you are muffling the first and then sliding onto the second to play it.

Another important muffling technique not notated, (except I do so by writing a K above or below the note), is to rotate the

hand's position so that the second or third or fourth finger's knuckle presses against the preceding lower string that is vibrating and stops it. This is necessary in passages of chords. It also helps when placing in a series of chords to slip the second and third fingers into place before the thumb and fourth finger.

I recommend viewing the video recorded by Lucile Lawrence on *The Method for the Harp* in which she demonstrates vividly, though in her 90s, how to execute all of the effects/tone colors Salzedo

devised. I do not know of anyone who has yet published a compilation of Marcel Grandjany's notations of mufflings and phrasings.

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