



HARP

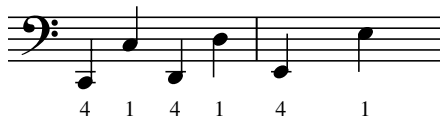
One Approach to Harp Arrangements

by Saul Davis Zlatkovsky

When playing for crowded events like a wedding ceremony, reception or a cocktail party, the crowd affects how the harp is heard. Surrounded by people, the bass notes will probably not carry so well, and are beneath the pitch of voices that people are focused on listening to. Here are some approaches to arranging popular songs for harp in this setting.

Suppose a march for a wedding processional is written with a solid bass with thick chords, and the melody in single notes in the right hand. The bass will sound thick and won't project clearly. What people want to hear is that familiar-sounding melody. Therefore, I recommend playing the melody in octaves, so it rings out clear and strong, and very rhythmically with each accent sharply defined. You need just enough bass to keep it moving and supply the harmony, which means a single note or octave bass line and two to four notes in the right hand.

For popular songs from composers like Gershwin and Kern to more recent ballads, I suggest that the left hand play rhythm patterns with a single bass note on the beat, or just mark chord changes. You want just enough bass notes to keep the harp ringing and support the upper octaves, and provide rhythm or harmony the rest of the time. Another way to "bass it" is to play a walking bass line with thumb only, muffling as you go, or a 4-1-4-1 sequence in octaves and fifths or in tenths.



Break down repeated chords so you play the bass followed by thirds, or into a pattern like 4-2-3-1 fingering, or chord-1-1-1.



Learn some basic rhythm patterns, like the beguine, rumba and foxtrot, and decide how you want to adapt them so they are natural to the harp. It helps to take some basic ballroom dance classes so you know the tempo and feel of each rhythm type and which ones a song falls into naturally, or listen to recordings made specifically for dancing. Carlos Salzedo's *Art of Modulating* includes examples of Latin dance rhythms and sample bridges to modulate between keys. Reinhard Elster's published arrangements show clever ways to play Latin rhythms with very few notes.

You want your patterns to move around the harp, and not vamp in one place for more than, say, a measure, because acoustically, the harp deadens with too much repetition. Note how Elster moves around rather than repeating notes. Exceptionally, a good place to play repeated notes is up high, where the strings stop ringing quickly.

Keep your chord progressions manageable so they don't slow you up with tricky pedalings. You can eliminate some chord tones. If the root of the chord and the third are sounding, you can do without the fifth. If it's a seventh chord, you can eliminate the third or the fifth. Try finding a chordal glissando in every key on the tonic and dominant, by doubling the chord tones. This is also covered in Salzedo's *Art of Modulating*.

Where possible, play the melody in octaves, and when the melody holds a note, a counter-melody/gestural phrase underneath or above it. You can also play with the rhythm of the melody a little, by playing some notes early and some late, or by syncopating it in a dotted or triplet rhythm. Keep

a steady beat at all times, and make sure you are arranging in a way to help that.

Fill is great during pauses, at climaxes, build-ups and between phrases. What is fill? A quick arpeggio up, down or both, a glissando or bunch of them. A fill can also be a scale or series of chords, perhaps a major seventh chord played in each inversion going upward. Aside from its musical function, fill is the distinguishing harp sound that people latch onto and enjoy. Fill tends to stand out. But don't overuse it either, or make it too elaborate because it can quickly become sickeningly sweet. Remember catchy patterns you have heard. *The Fantasticks* has some very good ideas in it for harp, and *This Plum is Too Ripe* is very jazzy.

For a jazzy sound, it's interesting to hear the early recordings of the Paul Whiteman Orchestra featuring Casper Reardon, perhaps the first harpist to play jazz, and I think the first to play in a big band. His approach was unique. I derived from his playing the idea that you can play melodically, and that the harp as a solo instrument can play a groovy bass line like a bass or guitar, and can also play rhythmic singing lines like a lead guitar. I have arranged a few tunes using those devices that turned out very well. Blue notes are very useful for setting a mood. I do not favor that cliché the pedal slide, except if it is part of the harmonic progression and fits the dynamics of the phrase.

Remember you can always repeat what you play a few times with variations. I once heard a trio of violin, cello and harp (including Jim Riccardo and Gladys Hubner) play *Bali Hai* in an atrium for about 10 minutes and when I left, I don't think they had finished it! Usually two times through a song, and then once more in a new key and different rhythm pattern is fine. Play medleys with key changes, or change keys when reprising a melody, just like Barry Manilow.

What makes a song suitable for the harp? It is a waste of energy to play songs

that don't work well. A song with a lot of repeated notes like some samba tunes, or *The Song is You*, *Help*, *Anything Goes* and so on, is not very suitable. A song whose melody moves around, like *Over the Rainbow*, *Smoke Gets in your Eyes*, *Always*, *Yesterday* and so on is far more amenable to the ringing strings of the harp.

There are almost limitless numbers of great songs from what's called the classic era of popular song, from about 1910 to the 1950s. Some composers, such as Cole Porter, Jerome Kern and George Gershwin, have particularly good arrangements in their songbooks. A less-known 20th century songwriter who wrote great music is Alec Wilder. Another one of the very best songwriters, with tricky harmonic changes, is

Vernon Duke. Songs by Kurt Weill, Leonard Bernstein and Leslie Bricusse tend to sound great on the harp. Michel LeGrand is always good, if not too chromatic, and Peter Allen can be a source for more recent songs. We can thank John Williams for two harpistic songs or more from *Harry Potter*.

One way to find more songs is to collect the songbooks of personalities, like Ella Fitzgerald or Nat King Cole, which have songs by many more obscure writers. Songbooks that contain the undiscovered, the rediscovered, or the songs left out of shows are not as good, as some of those songs were left out for a reason. My favorite arrangements are the ones Nelson Riddle did for Ella Fitzgerald, and I recommend listening to lots of those to develop your ear for what

is possible. He is masterful at composing a prelude that sets the mood for the following song, and using French sounds like whole-tone scales that suit the harp so well.

Saul Davis Zlatkovsky, composer-harpist, studied harp at MacPhail, Macalester College, Tanglewood, Manhattan School of Music and the Salzedo Summer Harp Colony. He currently lives in Philadelphia and has coached harp students at the Curtis Institute of Music. His compositions have been performed at the American Harp Society Conference and are published by Da Costa Music House and Harpiana Publications. Saul also serves as Harp Forum editor for ASTA's national American String Teacher magazine. †