



ORCHESTRA

Recruiting and Supporting Harp Players in School Orchestra

by Dan Mollick

What is the first word that comes to mind when you think about the harp? Mysterious is the first word that comes to my mind. I admit before I started having harp students in my orchestras at school, I had never seen a harp up close and definitely had no idea how it worked. What I did know is that they have pedals and are beautiful to both listen to and look at. I've seen them in the back of the Minnesota Orchestra (sometimes two!) and heard them play duets (usually with a flute player).

When I started working at Valley View Middle School in Edina, we had a small folk lever harp tucked away in a storage room. I didn't think anything of it until a colleague from another school district asked to borrow it. I had been given a heads up that a harp player would be joining the Valley View program in a few years, so the folk harp was shipped off to another school and then returned a few years later. Little did I know that this would begin my journey into learning about the harp and how I could incorporate it into our orchestra program.

My first harp student arrived and I was at a loss of where to start. I began to ask: How does one go about starting to learn the harp? How can I help support harpists in my school orchestra program? How can I purchase a pedal harp for our school? How can I recruit more harp players for the orchestra program?

I can tell you that when you include a harpist in the orchestra the string students are really excited to see such a mysterious instrument up close. In fact, I usually have our harpist in each class explain how it works and give a little mini-lesson to those who are interested. I have learned a lot from these students, but I began to realize it was important to reach out to professionals in the community to answer some of my questions.

For this article, I spoke with two wonderful people. **Kate Kowalkoski** is the orchestra teacher at Pioneer Ridge Middle School, Chanhassen High School, and Chaska High School. A trained violinist, she decided to study harp after a harpist joined her orchestra program. "It was a childhood dream to learn to play harp," she shared with me. I also spoke with **Kathy Kienzle** who is the retired principal harpist from the Minnesota Orchestra. Kathy teaches harp at the University of Minnesota.

I asked Kathy how we can support harp players in our orchestra programs. "Choose music that can be somewhat challenging for them but is still playable," she said. And, with a smile, she added, "And give them something that can show them off—like an arpeggio at the end of a piece so everyone knows they are in the orchestra." Kathy encourages orchestra teachers not to be afraid of the harp. In fact, her first youth orchestra conductor would come to the back of the orchestra and help her count. She explained that many harpists do not come to orchestra rehearsal knowing ensemble repertoire. For example, they need to be taught how to count multimeasure rests and focus on entrances.

There are two types of harps: lever and pedal. Lever harps are

named for the little levers that the harpist uses to change the pitch of the strings. It acts as sort of a finger so it's best for pieces that mostly stay in the same key. My experience is that beginning harp players will have difficulty if there are too many accidentals where they need to change the levers. The second type of harp is a pedal harp. This is the harp that you see sticking up in the back of the orchestra. The pedals change the pitches of the strings by rotating disks with studded pegs that pinch the string as the disk turns. It is recommended to have a petite pedal harp for the middle school and a concert harp for the high school level.

Lever harps mainly use nylon strings. Pedal harps mostly use nylon strings in the top octaves, gut strings in the middle octaves, and wire strings in the bottom octave. Kathy recommends keeping a "skeleton set" of strings on hand:

- E, C, A, and F for each octave.
- You can use the E for E or D, and you can use the A for B, A, or G, since they are right next to each other.
- Since Fs and Cs are colored, they can only be used for those notes.
- Generally you do not need to keep wires on hand. They rarely break.
- Unfortunately, local music stores do not carry harp strings in stock so you will need to order them online.

Important tools for your school harpist are an adjustable bench, tuner (make sure they understand how to use it), and a tuning key. It's important that they are given a quiet time in the school day to tune their harp. I usually have my most advanced harpists come in to tune the harp once a week during advisory/homeroom since there is no one in the orchestra room at that time. I assign the harpists a locker to keep the tuning key, tuner, and their music.

Orchestra teachers might be masters at teaching string pedagogy but our knowledge of the basic progression of a beginning harp student might be lacking (or completely zero, like me!). Below is a general outline of how a harp student might progress. Keep in mind that this will vary with each student:

- Beginners start on lever harp and move to the pedal harp based on family resources and availability.
- Start one hand at a time, right hand and left hand separate
- Add two hands with single notes in the left hand
- Continue with two hands with chords in the left hand

Kathy suggests giving beginning harpists the cello part to improve their note reading. "Most beginners are great at reading treble clef but they need to work with the bass clef and orchestra class is a great place to do this," she says.

When it comes to including harpists in a school program, Kate

is the person you want to talk to. Not only does she have experience learning the harp as an adult, but she also arranges music for the harpists in her orchestra. When I asked her about recruiting and including harpists in her orchestra program she emphatically stated, “Don’t shy away from it because you think it will be too much to take on. Having harp in your orchestra will add to the excitement in your program.”

So what music do you give your harpist so they can fully participate in your ensemble? Your first instinct might be to give them the piano part. Kate suggests that is not always the best solution because the piano part was not written for a harp player! Instead, she suggests looking through all of the string parts and finding things that might work well for the harpist. Here are some suggestions:

- Edit parts together. For example, you can take the first or second violin parts and add the cello part to create a harp part.
- Beware of staccato style pieces. Harpists can’t dampen the strings between rapid succession of notes so consider altering the part.
- Consider chromatics or places that might need rapid pedal adjustment. It helps to rewrite the part (or just mark where to only play certain notes in the part)
- Take into consideration what is needed with ensemble, where it could use the most support

There are a number of educational pieces that are written to feature the harp. Keep in mind the harp part may be more difficult than the grade level of the string parts. It is recommended to have a harp teacher look at the part. Here are some ideas:

- *Spring Breezes* by Richard Meyer, Grade 2, Alfred
- *An Irish Farewell* by Turlough O’Carolan/arr. Deborah Baker Monday, Grade 2, Alfred Publications
- *North of the Mountain* by Doug Spata, Grade 2.5, Highland/Etling
- *O Mio Babbino Caro* by Giacomo Puccini/arr. Sandra Dackow, Grade 2, Tempo Press
- *In the Company of Angels* by William Hofeldt, Grade 3.5, Kjos

When thinking about recruiting and retaining harp players in a school orchestra program here are some ideas:

- **Invite a harp player (or arrange for a harp student) to visit the elementary schools and play for some general music classes.** When learning the harp, it’s important to spark interest at a younger age since the progression on the instrument may not match the quicker pace of the school orchestra.
- **Make sure that harp students know that they will get experience that will enhance their private lessons.** Kate makes sure to give harp players valuable feedback about their playing by modifying playing assessments to include the balance between the two hands, posture and technique (closing of the thumb, gestures, and elbows out from the body). It’s helpful to connect with their private teacher to see how you can reinforce things worked on in lessons.
- **Check in with your harpist frequently and to let them know how much you appreciate them being there.** Hang out in the back of the orchestra, sit with them, ask questions, and help them count.

The most important thing that I’ve learned in having harp players in my orchestra is to overcome my fears of knowing very little about the instrument and to embrace that mysterious instrument in the back of the room!

Finally, if you want to enjoy some amazing harp music, Kathy recommends listening to anything by impressionist composers Ravel and Debussy and, of course, she wants you to lose yourself in the *Adagio* movement of Mahler’s *Fifth Symphony*. She recommends listening to artists **Isabelle Moretti** (classical), **Bridget Kibbey** (improvisation and cultural collaborations), and **Edmar Castaneda** (jazz).

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