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A Guide to Including Young Harpists in Student Chamber Music Settings

by Jacqueline Pollauf

Chamber music experience is an important aspect of development for all young musicians. For student harpists, chamber music is especially valuable as many young harpists lack ensemble experience and skills (Van Hoesen 2016). It is important for student harpists to take advantage of opportunities in chamber music and develop into well-rounded musicians.

While many chamber music coaches see the value of chamber music for young harpists and are open to including them in their programs, they frequently are not experienced enough in working with student harpists to feel confident in their coaching (Bowles 1998). When this is added to the challenge of working with a harpist with little previous chamber music experience, coaching can be daunting. Whether coaches are working with students in a middle school, high school, or a university-level program, many questions arise. What sort of instrumentations work well? What would be appropriate repertoire? What are the differences between the two types of harps? What feedback is most helpful?

This article begins with an explanation of how the harp works, as an understanding of the instrument is crucial for working with young harpists. This is followed by information about chamber music instrumentations, repertoire choices, rehearsal expectations, ways to offer feedback, and some special considerations for the harp. With information and strategies for coaching chamber music with harp, the experience can be worthwhile and enjoyable for all involved.

How a Harp Works: Overview

A harp is a frame with strings stretched across it in a diatonic scale. The strings are color-coded for visual reference. All of the red strings are the pitch class C and the black or blue strings are the pitch class F (Figure 1). The remaining strings are white. Harpists use the thumb and first three fingers of both hands while playing, but neither little finger is used, so groups of four or eight notes are common in harp music. Harpists read the grand staff. The right hand generally plays in the higher registers and the left hand in the lower registers, just the same as the piano (Chaloupka 2002).



Figure 1 – The harp strings in the order of a diatonic scale.

At its full-size, the harp is about six-feet tall and has forty-seven strings, a range of six-and-one-half octaves, from C1 – G7. There are many smaller sizes of harps available, the smallest being around three-feet tall with twenty-two strings, a range of only three octaves (Figure 2). Many harp makers and models exist, but there is no standardization for the different sizes.



Figure 2 – A six-foot pedal harp and a two-and-one-half-foot lever harp.

Besides the differences in size, there are two different categories of harps, lever harps and pedal harps. The two groups have major mechanical differences in their construction and approach to chromaticism. It is paramount to understand these differences and know which type of harp a student is playing at the outset.

How a Harp Works: Lever Harps

The lever harp, also called a Folk, Irish, or Celtic harp, is played by many beginning and intermediate students. It is the simpler of the two instruments and at the top of each string is a lever, which raises the pitch by a half-step when engaged (Figure 3). Each lever must be adjusted individually by hand for accidentals or modulations, which can be a time-consuming process. Consequently, music written for the lever harp tends to be conservative in its use of chromaticism and modulation. (Chaloupka 2002).



Figure 3 – The levers of a lever harp.

Additionally, the lever harp can only play in eight of the major keys, which can be quite limiting. Depending on how the instrument is tuned, there are choices as to which eight keys are possible. It is most common for a lever harp to be tuned in the Key of E-flat, with the possible keys then the Keys of E-flat, B-flat, F, C, G, D, A or E. (Chaloupka 2002).

How a Harp Works: Pedal Harps

Pedal harps are complex mechanical instruments and many students switch from a lever harp to a pedal harp as they progress technically, frequently during middle school or high school. Each individual string is equipped with a set of two rotating discs. These discs are located at the top of the string (Figure 4) and can be engaged to adjust the length of the string by a half-step at a time, allowing the string to be flat, natural, or sharp, depending on the position of each disc.

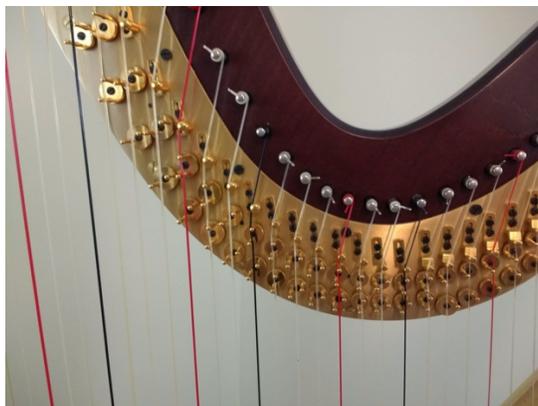


Figure 4 – The discs of a pedal harp.

The discs are connected to a set of seven pedals around the base of the harp (Figure 5) that are controlled with the feet, allowing the player to continue playing while simultaneously adjusting the pitch of the strings as needed. There are seven pedals, each connected to a single pitch class, and adjusting for accidentals or modulations is considerably more efficient on a pedal

harp than on a lever harp. Pedal changes are marked in the music in advance by the harpist and highly chromatic passages require advance preparation and practice (Chaloupka 2002).



Figure 5 – The seven pedals around the base of a pedal harp.

An unusual byproduct of this system is that enharmonic pitches are no longer notational redundancies, but instead are found on adjacent strings. This convoluted approach to chromaticism solves some inherent difficulties, so that seemingly impossible chords can be played through enharmonic solutions. Students with a pedal harp can play in all of the keys and are not as limited in repertoire choices as students with a lever harp.

Chamber Music Instrumentations

One of the first considerations for a coach is what instrumentation to choose for a chamber music group. In broad terms, the harp can play a role similar to that of a piano in a chamber group, as the range is fairly large and harmony and accompaniment suit the harp well. There are a few typical instrumentations that are quite effective.

While not nearly as common as a string quartet, a trio of harp, flute, and viola is a popular instrumentation. Claude Debussy wrote a sonata for this trio in 1915, paving the way for many composers and arrangers to follow suit (Hontos 2013). There is a wealth of repertoire available, although much of it is written at an advanced level.

A duo of harp and flute is also a classic combination, as the two instruments complement each other well and many excellent pieces for this instrumentation are readily available. Another popular option is a chamber music duo pairing the harp with a single-line instrument, such as violin, cello, clarinet, or oboe. There are various options for existing repertoire available for any of these duos. Arranging music to suit such a duo is also possible, and generally quite straightforward.

There are quite a few individual pieces written for unusual instrumentations, such as a trio of harp, flute, and cello, or a quartet of harp, oboe, viola and cello. In these instances it is difficult to find additional repertoire for such rare instrumentations. Due to inherent balance issues, repertoire for harp and brass instruments is not common.

Choosing Repertoire

Choosing repertoire is a crucial part of coaching a chamber group. Naturally a piece that will be within the technical grasp of the young musicians but will still offer some scope for exploration and also work well for a performance is ideal. Harp company websites are a good starting point. See Table 1 for detailed information.

When looking for repertoire on any of these websites, be aware of whether the piece is labeled for lever harp or pedal harp. Almost all lever harp repertoire is also playable on a pedal harp, but the inverse does not hold true. In addition to designating whether a piece is written for lever or pedal harp, most harp music publishers use a system of beginning, intermediate and advanced levels for technical difficulty. Some also designate in between levels, such as early advanced, or beginning-intermediate. In very general terms, most solid high school aged harpists play around an intermediate level, and most undergraduate college students play at an early advanced level.

Frequently there are areas of overlap for instrumentation. Some pieces written for harp and flute might also be playable on harp and violin. This is generally specified by the publisher. See Table 2 for some starting ideas for repertoire. State festival manuals are another possible resources for repertoire ideas.

Sometimes it is possible for a harpist to play a part written originally for the piano, but not all piano parts transpose well. This is too large of a topic to delve into deeply here, but to offer a few brief guidelines, begin by looking for parts that do not use chromaticism extensively and that are on the sparse side, without a lot of contrapuntal activity. Parts that are overly pianistic can be problematic, such as those with extensive five- or ten-note groupings. Lots of melody in the lower registers should also be avoided, as this is a muddy register on the harp. See Figures 6 – 9 for examples of parts that do and do not work well.



The image shows the opening of the musical score for "Sentimental Waltz, op. 51, no. 6" by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. The score is written for cello and piano. The top staff is the cello part, and the bottom two staves are the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked "Tempo di walse [В темпе вальса]". The dynamics are marked "p" (piano) and "p con espressione e dolcezza". The score begins with a cello melody in the right hand and piano accompaniment in the left hand. The piano accompaniment consists of chords and single notes in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

Figure 6 – The opening of “Sentimental Waltz, op. 51, no. 6” by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, for cello and piano. This would work well on the harp, as both the harmonies and the voicings used by Tchaikovsky would translate directly and idiomatically to the harp.



Figure 7 – The return of the theme in “Nocturne, op. 19, no. 4” by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, for cello and piano. This sixteenth note runs would be difficult on the harp and this would not work well as a transcription.



Figure 8 – The opening of “Dans les ruines d’une abbaye” by Gabriel Fauré for voice and piano. The straightforward arpeggios would work well on the harp. This could be a great transcription for flute and harp or violin and harp.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for the piece "Soir" by Gabriel Fauré. Each system consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G major and 3/4 time. The lyrics are: "-rir ? Mets sur mon front tes mains frai . ches comm e une eau pu . . re, Mets sur mes yeux tes mains dou . ces com . me des". The piano accompaniment is marked "sempre pp" and features a complex, chromatic accompaniment with many accidentals and rapid changes in pitch.

Figure 9 – The middle of “Soir” by Gabriel Fauré for voice and piano. This would not work well on the harp, given the chromaticism.

Rehearsal Expectations

As many young harpists have not had much ensemble experience, it can be a challenge to keep a chamber music group moving forward coherently. One of the most difficult aspects is differences in the amount of time needed to learn music, as harpists usually require more time to learn their part than other musicians. A practical solution to this is to give the harpist the music in advance. Sight-reading is typically not a skill that is expected of or practiced by harpists, given the difficulty of doing so with pedal or lever changes. Ideally, give a student harpist the selected piece in a few weeks in advance of the first rehearsal and encourage them to take it to their harp teacher for assistance. Frequently other instrumentalists do not need this advance lead time and might be able to come to the first rehearsal and sight-read their part on par with where the harpist is after advance preparation.

Many student harpists find themselves overwhelmed in chamber music settings. In addition to the usual demands of coordinating both hands with lever or pedal changes, they now have the added demands of listening to and playing responsively with their fellow musicians. If a young harpist has not had much previous ensemble experience, it can be helpful to work on ensemble skills separately from the chosen repertoire. There are a variety of ways to do this, such as working on rhythm through clapping or tapping, playing simple call and response patterns to practice cueing, or playing scales as an ensemble to work on balance.

During rehearsals, many young harpists are overly focused on trying to play every single pitch at the expense of keeping good time. While it may seem like second nature to young musicians who have a great deal of ensemble experience, focusing on rhythm over pitch might be a new concept for a student harpist. It is helpful to be clear about expectations with this, emphasizing

in early rehearsals that it is perfectly acceptable to simplify as needed, such as playing with only one hand, playing only downbeats, playing a chord rather than a full arpeggio, or playing smaller voicings of chords.

As rehearsals continue, some harpists might need a bit more repetition than other members of the group in order to feel really comfortable with a passage, lock in a steady pulse, or adjust well to the other musicians. In order to keep the other members from becoming restless, try to find ways to have them vary their parts slightly, such as trying new articulations or bowings, while the harpist simply focuses on feeling solid in their playing. As with any chamber group, being clear about a plan for each subsequent rehearsal is highly useful, such as what sections or movements will be focused on next, or when a piece should be in the polishing stage.

Offering Feedback

When it comes to feedback, general musical considerations are good starting points, including working on ensemble, difficult rhythms, or playing expressively. However, it can be difficult to offer criticism if you are unsure of where the line lies between a student's capabilities and the intrinsic limitations of the instrument. Experimentation can be a great way to get a sense of where this line is and what a student has to offer. For example, ask the ensemble as a whole to experiment with something broad, such as dynamics. Have them come up with a few different ideas and play through the same passage repeatedly making the agreed upon dynamic changes each time. This would afford a chance to see how responsive the harpist is and what changes they make in their playing. Additionally, sometimes unexpected successful byproducts arise during experimentation, such as the harpist bringing out the melody well, which could then be highlighted and used as a point to move forward.

For more specific problems, a useful approach is to point out a problem and then involve the student in the process of fixing it, rather than offering an immediate solution. Perhaps a student is not playing cleanly, and although you can hear some undesirable buzzing noises in their playing, you might not be sure of either the cause or a way to fix the problem. You could begin by asking the student to play the passage in question again and focus on listening for buzzing noises, having them notice where they occur. You could then ask them for possible solutions, and have them try the passage again, experimenting with their ideas. If the problem remains, you could ask them to try the inverse and see if they can purposefully buzz, which can be illuminating.

Other areas that are more specific to the harp can also be explored as needed. These include general tone production, having an even tone regardless of register or fingering, having smooth and quiet pedal or lever changes, arpeggiating chords at a variety of speeds, or muffling the strings to dampen the sound. With any of these areas, in addition to experimentation, simple and direct feedback can be offered, such as asking the harpist to play louder for balance purposes.

Special Considerations

There are a few logistical concerns to keep in mind when working with a harpist. To begin with, a harp requires more set up time than other instruments prior to a rehearsal. Whereas professional harpists are accustomed to this, it might be necessary to direct a student harpist explicitly to arrive early and be completely ready to play at the start of the rehearsal. A space of about four-square feet is needed for the harp, including a bench and a music stand (Figure 10). Many harpists bring their own adjustable bench or stool to sit on. Alternatively, some might use a piano bench, if one is available, and some just sit on a standard chair. Harpists should tune with an electronic tuner before the rehearsal begins. Most harpists tune to A = 440, using equal temperament (Pratt 1977). It is common for the other instrumentalists to tune to the harp, but they might need guidance in adjusting their intonation to an equally tempered instrument throughout rehearsals. Harps are generally even more sensitive to their surroundings than other instruments, and might need to be re-tuned during a rehearsal or during the intermission of a performance.



Figure 10 – A standard harp set up, including a bench and a music stand.

Strings can break at any time and professional harpists carry extra strings with them to deal with this eventuality. Many young harpists have not yet invested financially in a full set of extra strings, or might not be confident enough in their string changing to affect a quick replacement of a broken string. If this is the case, it is sometimes possible to play the harp part either up or down an octave to avoid the broken string.

Page turns can be difficult for harpists, just as they frequently are for pianists in chamber music settings. Using a page turner is one possible solution. Another is to set up three pages at a time, or perhaps copy and shrink the music, making a new version pasted on cardboard. Generally harpists do not use two stands for long parts, the way other instrumentalists sometimes do, as it is difficult to see the outlying second stand from a stationary instrument.

Many young harpists find adjusting to the visual demands of playing chamber music to be a challenge. Harpists usually alternate between looking to the music stand on their left and looking slightly to the right to see their hand placement on the strings. A harpist might need to choreograph specific points to look up at their fellow musicians throughout a piece, rather than doing so instinctively.

Sometimes adjusting the overall set up of an ensemble can help with visual cues. There is not a standard formation, but for sound purposes, the harp should face towards the audience. For visual cues, setting other musicians on either the harpist's left or right so that they are in line with a natural sight line can work well. Experimentation may be necessary to find the best solution for both sight lines and balance. Sometimes even a small adjustment to the angle of the harp can be surprisingly helpful.

Final Thoughts

Including a student harpist in chamber music can be a great experience. Understanding how a harp works, having some ideas for instrumentation and repertoire, and knowing what to expect of a student harpist in rehearsals can help to make the coaching experience a positive one. For young harpists, the opportunity to develop new musical skills and get to know other young musicians can be really exciting. Many of these other young musicians have not had much chance to be around the harp, and are equally excited to work with a harpist. Additionally, the harp can bring a rich palette of colors to many settings, and other instrumentalists often rise to the occasion and become increasingly sensitive and expressive in their playing. All of the young musicians might have the chance to explore new and sometimes little-known repertoire. All in all, chamber music with harp is well worth the effort and highly rewarding for all.

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