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COMPOSING ADDED HARP PARTS FOR A STUDENT ENSEMBLE

by Jacqueline Pollauf

Introduction

For many young musicians, ensemble playing is at the core of their musical experience. An orchestra can be a place of learning, connection, and fulfillment both on musical and personal levels. However, ensembles are not always able to include student harpists (Van Hoesen 2016). A common difficulty is finding appropriate level repertoire that includes harp parts (Shields 2003). This problem often arises with beginning level ensemble music, but sometimes higher-level ensembles may lack repertoire with harp parts. Frequently in these situations, student harpists are excluded or under-utilized. This loss of valuable ensemble experience can be difficult to recover at a later stage (Pence-Sokoloff 1986).

As a harp teacher of students ages five through adult, I have composed many harp parts that correspond with existing ensemble repertoire to fill these repertoire gaps. I always seek to write a harp part that remains true to the composer's musical work while giving harp students the opportunity to build their ensemble skills. The following guide is intended to assist teachers, especially those without a harp background, in composing added harp parts.

SECTION 1: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Harp Basics and Types of Harps

A basic understanding of the harp is important when writing for the instrument. The strings of the harp are arranged in a diatonic scale, with some strings color-coded for visual reference. All red strings are the pitch class C, and all blue or black strings are the pitch class F, while the remaining strings are white (Figure 1). The harp is a polyphonic instrument, which is played with the thumb and first three fingers of each hand. As the little finger is never used, groups of four and eight notes are common (Chaloupka 2002). Similar to pianists, harpists read the grand staff, and typically use their right hand for the higher registers of the instrument, and their left hand for the lower registers.

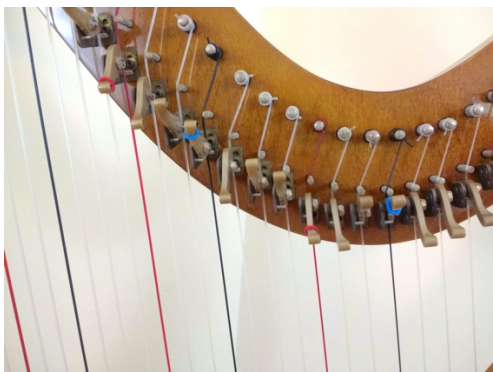


Figure 1 – The harp strings in the order of a diatonic scale and the levers of a lever harp.

The range of the harp varies greatly. Harps can have anywhere from twenty-two strings, a three-octave range, to forty-seven strings, a range of six-and-one-half octaves, from C1 – G7. The smallest harps are roughly three-feet tall while full size harps are six-feet tall, with many intermediary sizes.

It is important to note that there are two different types of harps, the lever harp and the pedal harp, both of which approach chromaticism in a different way (Bundock Moore 1991). The lever harp, also called a Folk, Irish, or Celtic harp, has a mechanical lever at the top of each string. When engaged, this lever raises the pitch by a half-step (Figure 1). As each lever must be adjusted individually for all accidentals, lever harp music does not include much chromaticism. Most commonly the lever harp is tuned in the key of E-flat Major. With this tuning, it is possible to play in eight major keys (and their relative minors), the keys of E-flat, B-flat, F, C, G, D, A and E (Bundock Moore 1991). Given the limitations of the instrument, the lever harp is generally played by beginning and intermediate students within the classical harp world.

Many students switch from a lever harp to a pedal harp after they have a solid foundation, frequently during middle school or high school. Pedal harps are more mechanically complex than lever harps and have two rotating discs at the top of each string (Figure 2). Each disc can raise the string by a half step when engaged, so that a string is in the flat position when no discs are engaged, the natural position with the first disc engaged, and the sharp position with the second disc engaged (Archambo et al. 1992). These discs are then connected to a set of seven pedals around the base of the harp, one pedal per pitch class (Figure 3). Unusually, enharmonically equivalent pitches on the harp are not notational redundancies, but instead are played on adjacent strings. Although this is a convoluted approach to chromaticism, it solves some intrinsic difficulties, as seemingly impossible chords can be played through enharmonic solutions. The pedals are controlled by the feet of the harpist, allowing for efficient adjustment for any needed accidentals or modulations throughout a piece of music. Pedal harps are capable of playing music in any key.

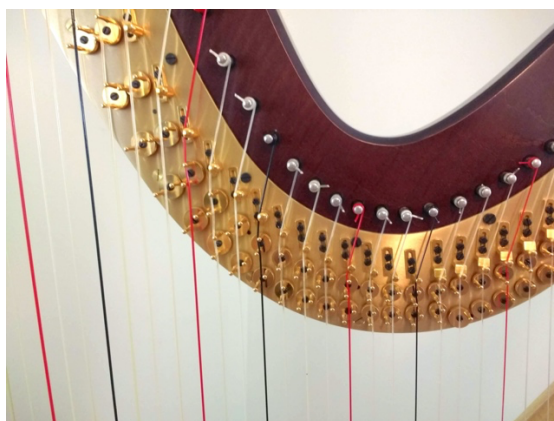


Figure 2 – The discs of a pedal harp.

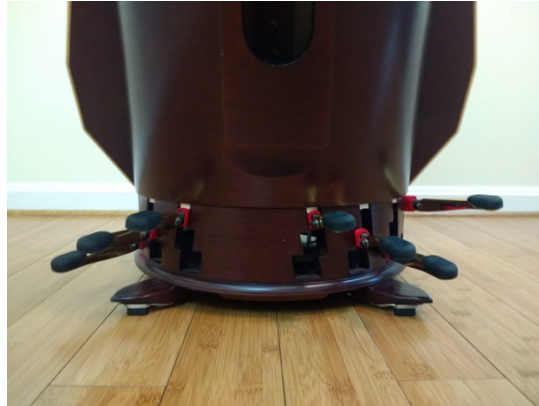


Figure 3 – The seven pedals around the base of a pedal harp.

SECTION 2: PREPARATORY STEPS TO COMPOSING AN ADDED HARP PART

Choosing Repertoire

As the harp is an auxiliary instrument, it does not necessarily need to be used on every piece of a concert program and might instead be used on selected pieces. The time period of the piece can be considered, as the Romantic and Twentieth Century eras are more suited to the harp than the Baroque and Classical eras. If possible, begin with a full score and a recording, and engage in score study and focused listening for a general sense of how the harp might be added. The harp can be an excellent textural addition to the ensemble generally (Pence-Sokoloff 1986).

On occasion, a harp part might be written to feature the harp. For example, a beginning string ensemble might want to feature their harpist on one piece of a holiday concert. An added harp part for a holiday carol could include an extra verse, perhaps written with the first violins playing the melody and the harp prominently accompanying this.

Setting up a Blank Score

Once repertoire is selected, setting up a blank harp part greatly reduces the chance of general errors, such as missing a critical tempo change or inserting a repeat in the wrong measure. Using music notation software (or possibly using staff paper), create a blank harp part with the same number of measures as the score, then add in the rehearsal numbers, tempos, key signature changes, section and movement breaks, and repeats as applicable. Having this structure prior to writing any notes will help verify crucial structural information, particularly if a score does not include measure numbers.

SECTION 3: UNDERSTANDING AND COMPOSING FOR DIFFERENT STUDENT LEVELS

Student Levels

The technical level of harp students can vary widely and must be considered when composing a part. For the purposes of this article, I will divide levels of ability into three categories: beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. As there is a wealth of solo harp repertoire and method books used by harp teachers, these levels have some overlap and

flexibility between them. In the broadest possible terms, students who have been playing for three or less years fall here into the category of beginning harpists, typically elementary school and middle school students. Students who have been studying diligently for three to six years are intermediate level students and are typically high school aged. College-aged students who have been playing for six or more years fall into the advanced level.

Within each level, I will discuss several types of writing: harmony (including intervals, chords and arpeggios), melodic lines, chromaticism, and the coordination of the hands. All of the specifics provided are not intended as concrete rules, but rather as general guidelines to use in the composing process. Ideally when writing for a specific harp student, the student or their private teacher might provide some feedback reflective of the student's individual abilities (Shields 2003).

Composing for Beginning Harp

Generally beginning harpists play a lever harp, rather than a pedal harp. As with any polyphonic instrument, harps can play both harmonic and melodic intervals. Small intervals are easier to play than large intervals, and harmonic intervals are generally more accessible than melodic intervals (Dungan Cunningham 2000). For beginning harpists, intervals that are a sixth and smaller are recommended, with harmonic thirds being the simplest interval technically (Figure 4).

When it comes to chords, triads in root position and inversions are best suited to beginning harpists. These chords should be written with close voicing to remain within the interval of a sixth (Figure 4). Seventh chords and other four note chords are not recommended. Triads on the downbeat of each measure are an excellent accompaniment. Arpeggios of triads in simple patterns with time to reset the hands between groups are both accessible and highly idiomatic for the harp (Bundock Moore, 1991) (Figure 5).



Figure 4 – Beginning level intervals and chords.



Figure 5 – Amazing Grace (Newton 1900) with a harp accompaniment arranged at a beginning level. Playable on lever harp.

Melodic figures should be quite simple, generally using stepwise motion or melodic thirds (Figure 6). Repeated notes in quick succession should be avoided, as it is difficult to play a repeated string cleanly. Chromaticism and accidentals outside of the key signature should not be used at the beginning level.



Figure 6 – The melody of Silent Night (Gruber 1863) arranged at a beginning level. Playable on lever harp.

As the harp is an instrument of preparation, it is advisable to leave plenty of time between figures to allow the student to find their notes and reset their hands. Beginning harpists generally have not yet developed much hand independence, so parallel motion an

octave apart, or alternating between the hands is advised (Bundock Moore 1991).

Composing for Intermediate Harp

Intermediate harpists, who might be playing either a lever or a pedal harp, are capable of playing harmonic and melodic intervals up to an octave comfortably. Four-note chords in close voicing, up to an octave for the outside interval, are also possible (Bundock Moore 1991) (Figure 7). However, passages of quickly repeating large chords are quite challenging and should be avoided. Accompanying figures can include some four-note chords, or possibly continue the use of triads with more complex patterns and at a somewhat faster harmonic rhythm (Figure 8).



Figure 7 – Intermediate level intervals and chords.



Figure 8 – The Water is Wide, originally known as O Waly, Waly (Sharp 1906) with a harp accompaniment arranged at an intermediate level. Playable on lever harp.

Melodic figures should still be fairly simple. Quick repeated notes, rhythmic complexity, and complex contours might make a melodic line challenging for the harp. For any of these areas, the harp could double a simplified version of the melody. In writing such a version, the challenging areas can simply be replaced with longer note values (Figure 9). Like a percussion instrument, the sound of the harp cannot be controlled after the initial attack. As articulations

such as staccatos and slurs do not translate clearly to the harp, these articulations do not need to be shown in a harp part.



Figure 9 – Marche Slave, Op. 31 (Tchaikovsky 1880), Measures 8 – 15. The violin melody is shown with a simplified harp melody below, arranged at an intermediate level by Jacqueline Pollauf. Playable on pedal harp.

Limited accidentals outside of the key signature are possible, as are straightforward modulations, such as modulating to the next key on the circle of fifths. If a student is playing a lever harp, all chromatic notes require time-consuming individual lever changes (Bundock Moore 1991). Several measures of rest are quite helpful when there are multiple levers to change (Figure 10). Intermediate harpists are capable of some hand independence. However, contrary motion or demanding independent parts between the hands remain a challenge.



Figure 10 – An added harp part for Fidelio Overture, Op. 72 (Beethoven 1828), Measures 1 – 27. The added lever harp part is written by Jacqueline Pollauf. Note that several measures of rest are included for lever changes.

Composing Advanced Harp

Advanced harpists can play intervals up to a tenth and can play more complex and open voicings of chords (Figure 11). Most harpists will automatically arpeggiate large chords unless otherwise notated (Kondonassis 2019) which takes advantage of the resonance of the instrument. Arpeggios are idiomatic to the harp at all levels, and advanced harpists are capable of executing complex passages of arpeggios in a perpetual motion pattern with rapid harmonic rhythms (Figure 12).



Figure 11 – Advanced level intervals and chords.



Figure 12 – Coventry Carol (Stainer 1916) with harp accompaniment arranged at an advanced level. Playable on pedal harp.

Almost all advanced classical harpists have a pedal harp, and thus are capable of playing passages with accidentals or modulating quickly (Figure 13). Increased hand independence can allow for passages that might involve complex demands in each hand, such as doubling different instruments in each hand simultaneously (Figure 13). Melodic figures can also be quite complex.



Figure 13 – A passage of Scarborough Fair (ca. 1670) arranged at an advanced level. Playable on pedal harp.

SECTION 4: ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS IN COMPOSING

Working from an Existing Harp Part

Many intermediate level ensembles play works that are simplified arrangements of classical pieces, sometimes excerpting just a well-known theme. When composing an added harp part for such arrangements, it is advisable to see if the original version of the piece included a harp part that the arranger did not include in their simplified version. Examples

include *The Great Gate of Kiev* from “Pictures at an Exhibition” by Modest Mussorgsky, and *Jupiter* from “The Planets” by Gustav Holst, which include harp parts in their original versions, but are frequently arranged in simplified versions without harp parts. In such cases, writing an added harp part might consist primarily of reconstructing this original harp part to fit with the current arrangement.

When reconstructing, transposing might be necessary, as frequently arrangers simplify works by writing them in more accessible keys. It is also common for arrangers to edit out particularly challenging passages for the ensemble, so the arrangement might be significantly shorter than the original. In this case, a full score of the original, a full score of the arrangement, and the original harp part should all be compared to align with the reconstructed harp part properly. Sometimes the resulting harp part might be quite sparse and additional material can be written as needed to create a more robust part.

Working from a Piano Part

Many student ensemble pieces include optional piano parts. Providing a piano part to a student harpist, rather than writing an added part, may seem like a time-saving choice. However, not all piano music works well on the harp, especially given how the two instruments approach chromaticism. An additional major concern is that many piano parts for ensemble pieces are actually a reduction of the score. As reductions are not intended to be played by a student musician, they are far more technically demanding than the other ensemble parts and are frequently beyond the capabilities of a student harpist.

The harp lends itself well to harmony and a piano part can sometimes be simplified and adapted for a student harpist. In these instances, the resulting harp part is generally much sparser than the original piano part, perhaps with a chord on the downbeat of each measure or passages of straightforward arpeggios.

Doubling Possibilities

Aside from the piano, doubling other instruments can offer possibilities in creating an added harp part. (Berkley Gage 1992). As single line instruments, such as the violin or the cello, do not use the full range of the instrument, a combination of doubled lines from different instruments works best. For example, the harp might begin by doubling a treble melody of the main theme, and then double a bass line in a later section. The harp can also be used at times to add color, such as doubling a percussion part or a quick woodwind scale. As discussed in the section on writing for intermediate harp, doubling does not need to be exact, but can be a strategically simplified version of a line.

Passages of Rests

When composing a part, it is helpful to remember that a harpist does not need to play for every measure or every phrase of a piece. Inevitably in advanced existing orchestral literature, harp parts have many rests. Learning to count rests and make an entrance with confidence is a crucial ensemble skill for student harpists and requires practice (Cunningham 2000). In composing a harp part, an occasional passage of rests for the harpist can both help the student develop this ensemble skill and can offer a practical compositional solution to avoid phrases or sections that do not lend themselves to the harp.

SECTION 5: SPECIAL HARP EFFECTS

Glissandos

There are several effects specific to the harp that can be incorporated into harp parts as needed. The glissando, a well-known and idiomatic effect, is an excellent choice. For beginning harpists, all glissandos should be diatonic and used in isolation, without other simultaneous playing (Figure 14). Intermediate harpists are capable of playing more precise diatonic glissandos, and can start and end on specific pitches while incorporating a glissando rhythmically into a passage (Figure 14). Advanced harpists can play glissandos utilizing non-diatonic scales, such as a pentatonic or whole tone scale (Arnaud 1987), and can combine glissandos with other types of playing (Figure 14). For all glissando writing, the first note should indicate the rhythmic length of the glissando. When writing a non-diatonic glissando, writing out the first seven pitches with accidentals is the clearest way to convey the desired pitches.

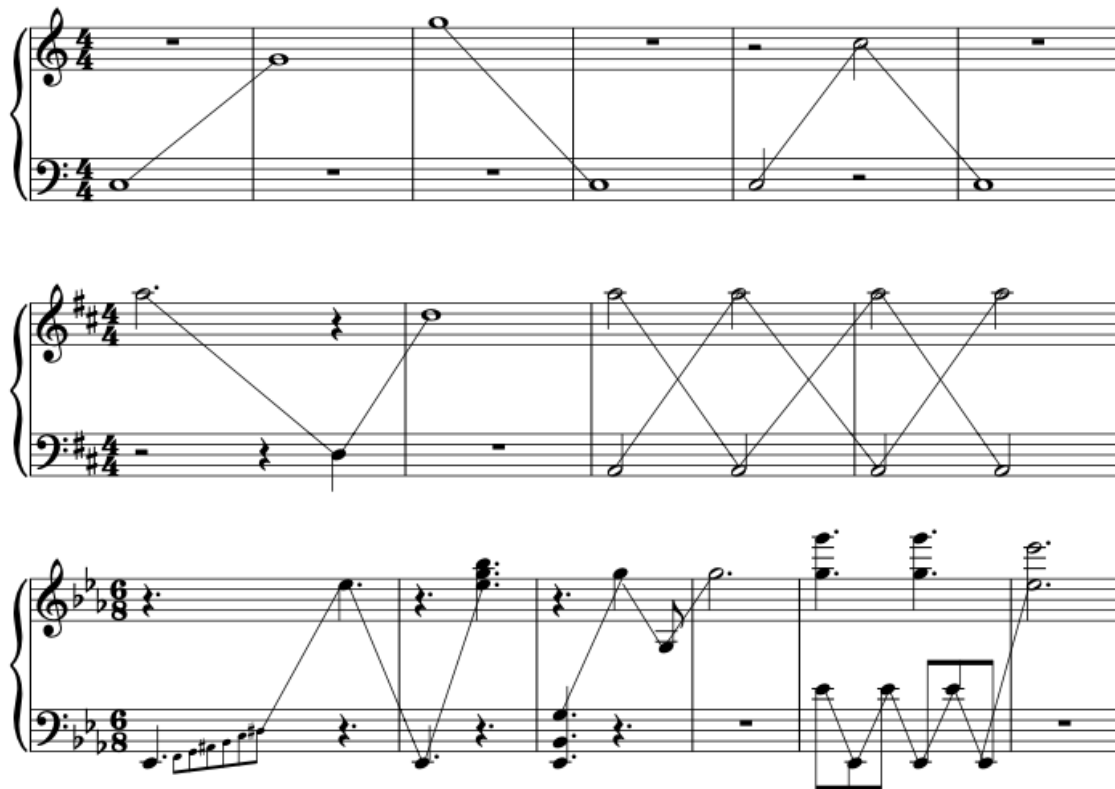


Figure 14 – Glissandos at beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. (Lines 1, 2 and 3 respectively.) Although exact starting and ending pitches are shown for the beginning level, beginning students may not have the necessary technique to execute these with precision.

Tapping on the Soundboard

Tapping on the soundboard is a percussive technique that is used occasionally on the harp (Kondonassis 2019). It is an easily executed technique for harpists of any level. For beginning harp students, tapping on the sound board can be an enjoyable way to focus on rhythm in isolation and is a useful approach when composing for a student who might not yet read pitches well (Figure 15). Intermediate and advanced students are capable of more complex

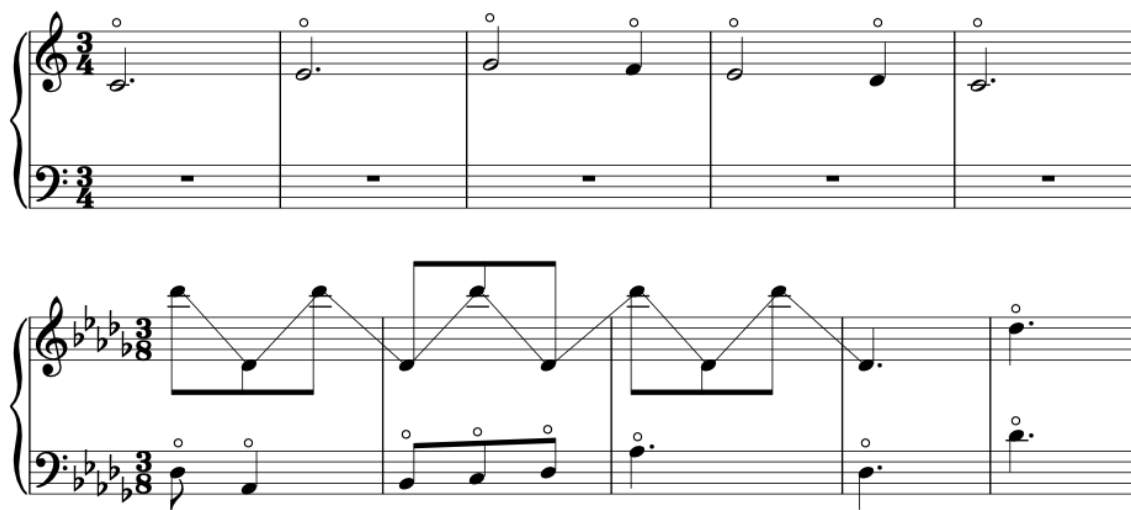
patterns and can combining tapping with other techniques (Figure 15).



Figure 15 – Soundboard tapping at beginning and intermediate levels. (Lines 1 and 2 respectively.) In the intermediate example, the right hand taps on the soundboard while the left hand plays pitches on the harp.

Harmonics

Harmonics on the harp are a common technique and result in a pitch that sounds an octave higher than written (Kondonasis 2019). Harmonics only work well in the middle registers of the harp, generally from G2 to G5. The resulting sound is a clear and bell-like in timbre, but cannot be produced at a mezzo forte or forte dynamic, making it challenging to incorporate harmonics well in large ensembles. Notation for harp harmonics differs substantially from that of other strings instruments (Figure 16). Harmonics are frequently a difficult technique for student harpists and should be avoided for beginning level parts. For intermediate harpists, a passage of simple harmonics is possible (Figure 16). Advanced harpists can play harmonics well, and a passage of glissandos and harmonics can be quite atmospheric (Figure 16).



**Figure 16 – Harmonics at the intermediate and advanced levels. (Lines 1 and 2 respectively.)
The pitch of the harmonics will sound one octave higher than notated.**

For a more thorough discussion of extended techniques, see *Writing for the Pedal Harp* by Ruth K. Inglefield and Lou Anne Neill (2006), and *The Composer's Guide to Writing Well for the Modern Harp* by Yolanda Kondonassis (2019).

CONCLUSION

Although composing an added harp part can take some time and thought, doing so can substantially increase ensemble opportunities for student harpists. Such added parts can help student harpists to reap the benefits of being involved in an ensemble. Harp students can develop crucial ensemble skills, which pave the way for future ensemble enjoyment and success for all involved.

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