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BUILDING TECHNICAL HARP SKILLS THROUGH WARM-UP EXERCISES

By Jacqueline Pollauri 

Introduction

In my private studio, I have found much success in the use of warm-up exercises as a way to introduce new technical skills to beginning harp students and refine those of intermediate students. This approach, allowing students to focus exclusively on each technique in an exploratory and pressure-free manner, may easily be tailored to meet a student's individual needs. Through warm-up exercises, students can develop and build their technical skills before they encounter the same skills in etudes and repertoire.

For the majority of my students, I spend the first five to ten minutes of each lesson working with them on a warm-up exercise that focuses on a technical skill. Generally, I introduce each skill without music, instead demonstrating and discussing their new warm-up exercise in an interactive way and providing feedback as the student plays. While these first few minutes do function as a classic warm-up, which helps them to loosen their muscles and focus their mind on the harp, students simultaneously develop their technical abilities. For warm-ups, I cover many areas such as harmonic and melodic intervals, root position and inverted triads, seventh chords, three-finger and four-finger arpeggios, scales, thumb-slides and fourth-finger slides, two-handed trills, and harmonics. The eventual goal of warm-up exercises is for the student to master these skills.

While many pieces and etudes use these standard technical skills, focusing on them through warm-up exercises offers the advantage of an individualized incremental approach. First of all, the student has the freedom to focus exclusively on a single skill and their physical approach to it. Second, the exercise does not need to correspond with their music reading level. Finally, the many parameters intrinsically included in written music, such as rhythm, tempo, register, dynamics, and the pace of the exercises, can be individualized for each student, particularly when each exercise is introduced by rote. Modifications based on a student's abilities and receptiveness may be applied throughout the process.

Benefits to the Warm-Up Exercise Approach

One of the benefits of expanding technical abilities through warm-up exercises is that a student can look at and focus exclusively on their hands, considerably alleviating the burden of looking back and forth between the music stand and their hands on the strings. This allows them to fully engage with their physical approach to the skill in question, such as learning to play a harmonic. Without the mental and visual

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distraction of written music, they can easily focus on their hand position to solidify the new skill within their muscle memory. Small idiosyncrasies of a technique that may escape their notice while focused on reading music now become clear.

In addition, there are many options for exercises when there is no need to match the student's reading level. Sometimes a student makes excellent technical progress and is ready to learn a complex skill, such as playing arpeggios covering four octaves, but their music reading level is not high enough to play such an exercise in a written-out form. Struggling through an exercise that is beyond their reading level generally leaves a student frustrated and focused on the challenges of reading rather than on the new technical skill. Through warm-up exercises, students can avoid this difficulty.

Warm-up exercises also allow for freedom within many parameters. If a beginning student is just learning to play with their fourth finger, they can play as slowly as needed until they feel confident. They may even add their own fermatas throughout the exercise, as there is no external rhythm or tempo that they need to match. However, an intermediate student might be ready for additional challenges. Perhaps they are learning to play thumb slides and are absorbing the skill quite quickly. Their warm-up exercise could be individualized to include a specific tempo, crescendos and decrescendos, and jumping between different octaves of the harp, all while playing thumb slides.

Warm-up exercises may also be modified to match a student's individual pace. When using a quickly moving exercise book, students may feel that their progress is inadequate and become discouraged. For example, within an exercise book, harmonic intervals might progress from seconds through octaves quite rapidly. If a student is struggling with an interval, such as a sixth, they can simply continue with that interval in various exercises until they develop this skill. In addition, they may work on a different skill entirely and come back to the interval of a sixth at a

later point. Students can focus on mastering their current warm-up exercise without negatively comparing their progress to external sources.

Beginning Student Scenario

Many pieces at the beginning level use three-finger root position and inverted triads, both as chords and arpeggios, which include works such as “I Hear a Harp” by Betty Paret, “Reverie” by Susann McDonald, “Elephant Parade” by Ruth K. Inglefield, and “Etude on Triads” from *Harp Exercises for Agility and Speed* by Deborah Friou. In preparation for one of these pieces, I have the student work through a series of warm-up exercises tailored to these skills. The following steps could be used each week for this process, with adjustments to the timeline to suit the individual student.

Step 1. In the first week, I ask the student to play root position triads as block chords in a scale passage with each hand separately.

Step 2. The next week, we move on to first inversion chords, followed by second inversion chords (see Figure 1).

Step 3. Next, we cycle through all these exercises again, but now played as simple arpeggios rather than chords (see Figure 2).

Step 4. Following this, we return to chords, now played with both hands simultaneously, perhaps incorporating rolled rather than block chords (see Figure 3).

Step 5. Once the student is comfortable with chords, we move on to arpeggios with alternating hands (see Figure 4).

Step 6. Finally, I ask the student to work on changing between root position and inverted shapes smoothly, again allowing for variations of block chords, rolled chords, and arpeggios, all alternating between the hands playing separately and simultaneously (see Figure 5).

Throughout this process, I constantly monitor how well a student internalizes these skills and offer feedback on their physical approach, hand position, and sound production. Sometimes they might need more than one week on a warm-up exercise before their muscles develop the necessary

memory, or before they can play the exercise with a consistent tone. If a student is struggling with a particular skill, I break it down into smaller steps, or I might cycle through a progression of steps more than once. At other times, a student might learn a skill so quickly that I can increase the pace of the warm-up exercises and cover multiple steps in one week. Throughout this process, my goal is for the skill of playing triads as chords and arpeggios to develop a degree of automaticity. Once a student has a firm grasp on the technical skill, we begin work on a piece of music that utilizes these skills, such as the previously mentioned examples. The student may now focus on the many other necessary aspects of playing the piece well, such as rhythm, fingering, placing, dynamics, and their overall learning process, without fears and frustrations around the required technical abilities.

When teaching technical skills through warm-up exercises to students at many levels, I generally introduce each exercise without written music, instead using a combination of demonstration and verbal instruction. As the student explores the exercise, I observe their playing, offer suggestions, and if necessary, make individualized modifications to the exercise. Once they are comfortable with the exercise, I add it into their lesson notes by either writing a quick sketch on staff paper, writing a verbal description, or a combination of the two. The notes provide students with a reference for the coming week, so that they can continue to use their warm-up exercise at the start of each practice session (see Figure 6).

Conclusion

Working on technical ability through warm-up exercises is a great approach to help students develop into confident technical musicians. Such warm-up exercises can be used to introduce and refine technical skills preparatory to learning etudes and repertoire that utilize the same skills. Using an individualized incremental pace allows students to learn in a way that suits them best, and modifications may be added throughout the process to suit each student's needs. In the end, students will be well-equipped to meet the many demands of their instrument.



Figure 1. Root position, first inversion and second inversion block triads.



Figure 2. Root position, first inversion and second inversion triad arpeggios.



Figure 3. Root position, first inversion and second inversion rolled triads.



Figure 4. Root position, first inversion and second inversion triad arpeggios alternating hands.



Figure 5. Root position, first inversion and second inversion intertwined triads.



Descending Scales this week. Use 4 fingers, then cross over.
First play hands separately, then together. Play each scale 5 times

Figure 6. Example of written sketch and text for a student's reference in their weekly notes.

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