

The Composer's Guide to

Writing Well for the Modern Harp

by Yolanda Kondonassis

A close-up, low-angle photograph of a harp's internal structure. The image shows the wooden frame, the strings, and the dampers. The strings are arranged in a diagonal pattern, creating a strong sense of depth and perspective. The lighting is warm, highlighting the natural wood grain and the texture of the strings. A large, semi-transparent watermark reading 'Sample' is oriented diagonally across the center of the image.

CARL FISCHER

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Introduction

The harp is to the instrumental world what computer technology is to many of us born before 1970. In the latter case, we tend to learn what we can, use it as necessary, and appreciate it because we know it has value. Our confidence in using the technology is often tentative, there is a lot we don't comfortably grasp, and there is much more that we don't even *know* we don't know. For a majority of composers, the harp and all its mysterious intricacies provide a parallel predicament.

Throughout my career as a professional harpist, I have learned that composers tend to have a clear vision of the harp's potential for color and atmosphere, but even the most seasoned among them have a degree of uncertainty when it comes to writing practically and idiomatically for the harp. In fact, a composer's feelings of trepidation are usually the first thing he or she shares with me.

Let's start with that feeling of trepidation, and I will say it's not altogether a bad thing. On the few occasions that I have *not* sensed even a slight bit of trepidation on the part of the composer, the resulting works have often been highly ambitious and relatively unplayable. Some of the most thrilling and memorable moments of my career have come during the process of learning and premiering new works. That said, I have also had experiences that were nothing short of desperation-inducing and I have rewritten more passages than I care to admit in order to make the impossible seem possible.

As a harp soloist, recording artist, author, professor, orchestral harpist, and commissioner of numerous works, my experience spans over thirty years in the field of classical music. In many ways, this book has been writing itself in my head for at least two decades. My motivation to demystify the harp is strong; I would even go so far as to call it a mission. We need superb new works, written with a full and detailed mastery of the harp's capabilities, but in order to achieve that, we need a comprehensive and standardized resource on technique, capability, mechanics, and notation by which both composers and harpists can effectively collaborate.

My goal is not merely to provide a set of rules, lists, and practical suggestions. While I have made a concentrated effort to streamline information and highlight those areas that I consider to be the most valuable and important, this volume should not read like a textbook. It should feel more like a friendly, candid conversation with an experienced harpist who wants to make your writing easier and more successful. For that reason, I would encourage you to read the editorial content as well as the technical material. The text is the backstory that may motivate you to use the practical information in a more artful way.

I have enormous respect for the artistry of today's composers. The field of classical music would stagnate if not for the brilliance in every new generation of music-creators. Enjoy this book, explore the unique capabilities of the harp, and let your imagination partner with a fuller understanding of this magical instrument in all its extraordinary dimensions.

—Yolanda Kondonassis

About the Cartoons

Jeffrey Curnow
Cartoonist



Jeffrey Curnow, Associate Principal Trumpet of the Philadelphia Orchestra, began his career in music as an undergraduate at Temple University. In 1983, he was appointed Principal Trumpet of the New Haven Symphony and soon after became a member of the New York Trumpet Ensemble, recording on the MMG/Vox and Newport Classics labels. Four years later, he joined the internationally-renowned Empire Brass Quintet, with whom he recorded fifteen compact discs for the Angel EMI and Telarc labels. In 1995, he won the position of Principal Trumpet with The Dallas Symphony Orchestra, performing as soloist with that ensemble on several occasions and recording on the Delos label.

Curnow has been cartooning for as long as he could hold a pencil, and his work has appeared in various periodicals from the Berkshire Eagle to the International Trumpet Guild Journal. His cartoons are presently featured each Friday on National Public Radio's Classical Facebook page.

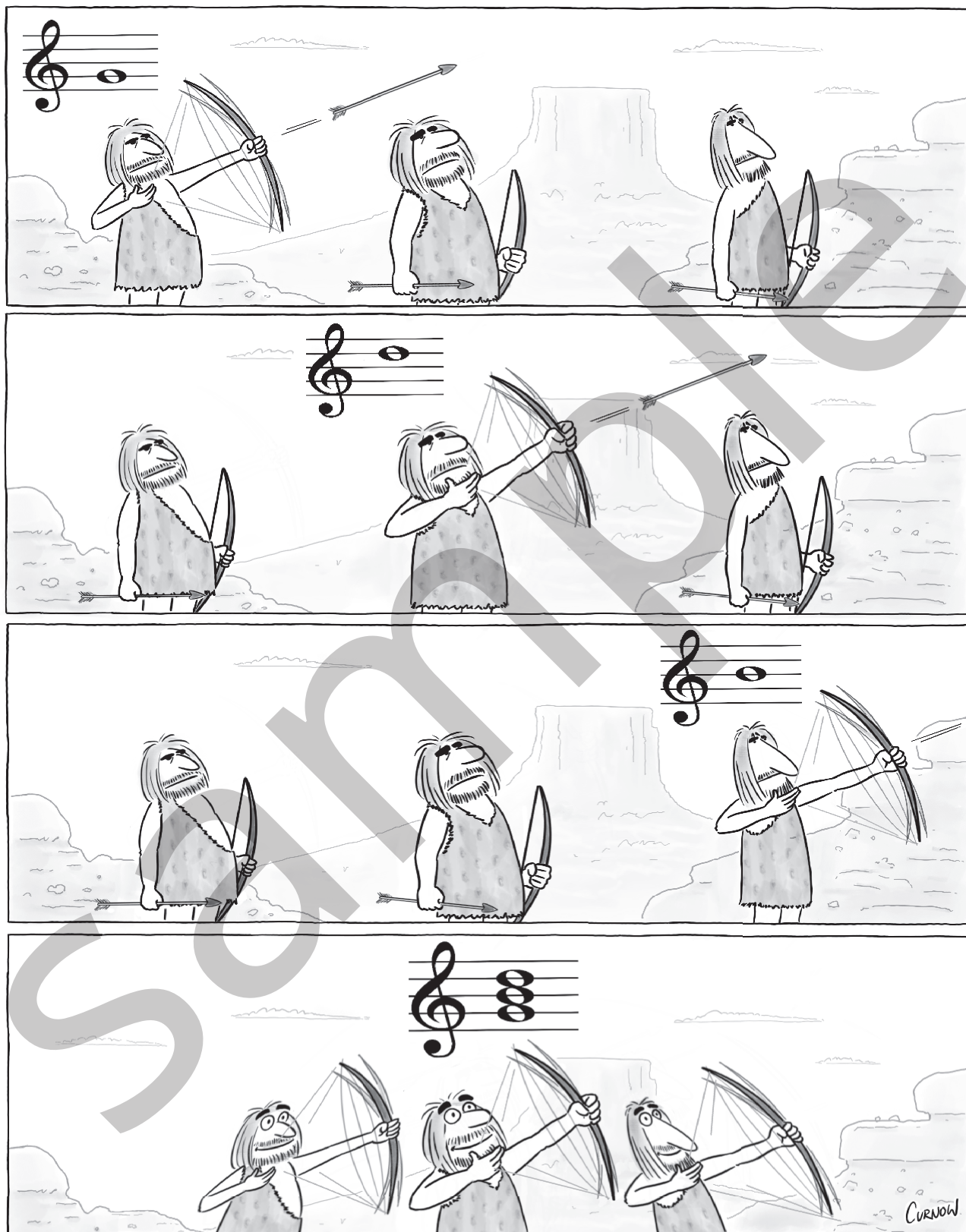
"My purpose isn't to lighten up classical music. I just think up these funny things and I draw them as a hobby...and it's kind of taken off. I have a lot of time onstage when I'm counting measures or rests – thinking about cartoons."

—Jeffrey Curnow

From an interview on WRTI Radio, Philadelphia, PA (September 4, 2017)

Jeffrey Curnow's cartoons may be found on pages 12, 20, 59, 63, 85, and 92. Each cartoon was drawn especially for *The Composer's Guide to Writing Well for the Modern Harp*.

Curnow



Chapter 1

A Brief History

No instrument claims a richer and more diverse history than the harp. From primitive hunting bow to the concert version we use today, the mythical allure of plucked strings has played an important role in the culture, celebration, and ritual of virtually every civilization from ancient to modern times.

One of the earliest innovations in harp design came from the Egyptians, who expanded the simple hunting bow shape of the harp to a more sophisticated construction with a small, widened chamber at the bottom of the bowed frame. The hollow chamber functioned like a soundboard and allowed the wood to vibrate along with the strings to produce a fuller, more resonant sound. With this small adjustment, an extraordinary evolution began.

The next major design improvement occurred during the Middle Ages and was the addition of a “pillar” that helped support the pressure of the strings on the frame. This pillar was the ancestor of what we now call the “column” of the modern harp and was a crucial bit of progress since it strengthened the harp’s basic structure enough to support the increased tension of higher quality strings.

Prior to the eighteenth century, the harp was a popular but weak instrument with substantial limitations in range and pitch. Initial attempts at expanding the harp’s chromaticism included such innovations as the use of manually operated hooks for raising pitches and multiple sets of strings on one harp, but it wasn’t until the early 1700s that the first version of the pedal harp was introduced. The single-action prototype employed a “pedal-lever-hook” system that raised certain pitches by one half-step and allowed the hooks to be controlled by foot pedals. Two staples of the harp repertoire—Handel’s *Concerto in B♭, Op. 4, No. 6* (written in 1736) and Mozart’s *Concerto for Flute and Harp* (written in 1778)—were composed for harps with this type of primitive pedal mechanism.

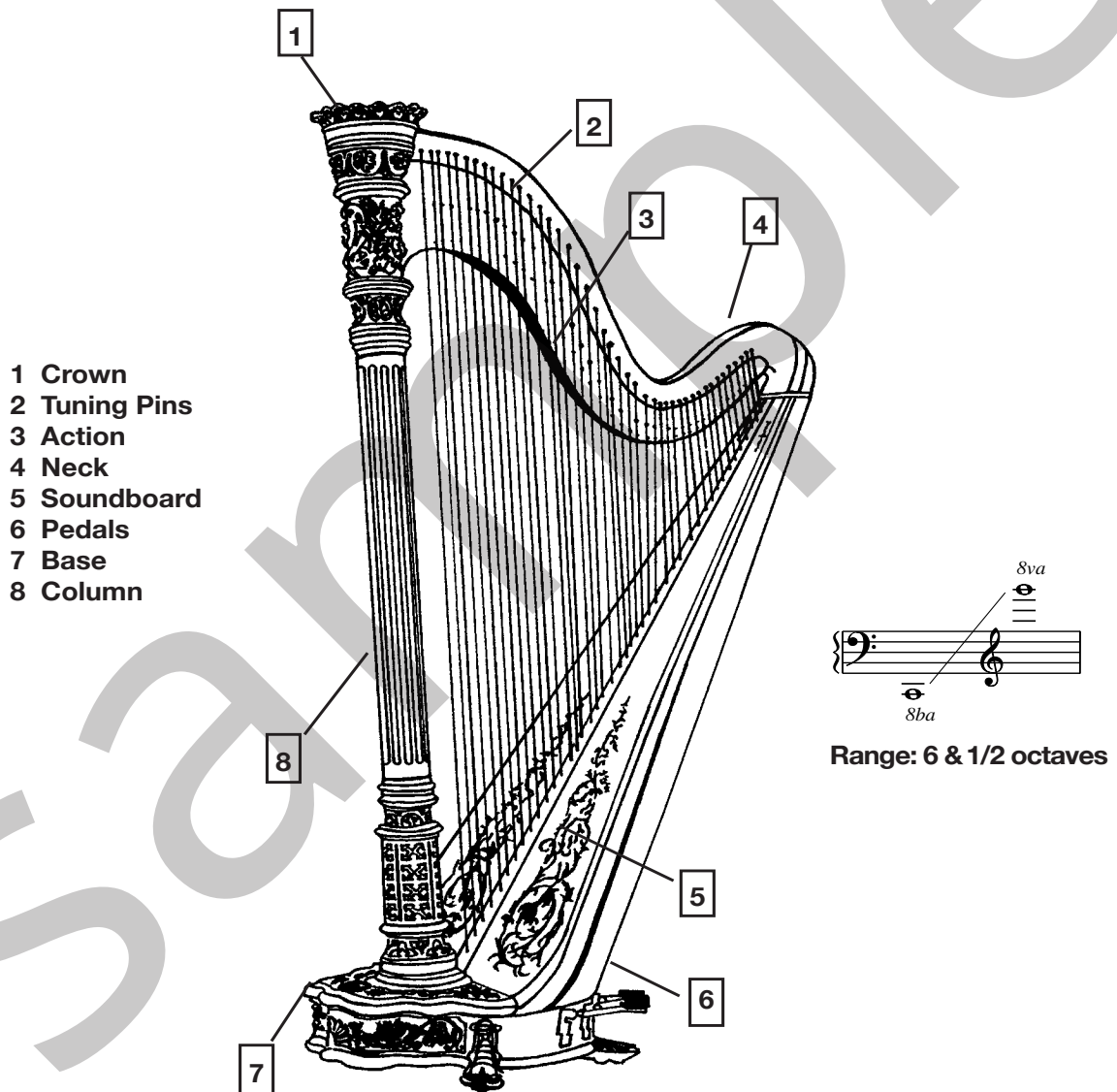
The inventive activity of the 1700s culminated in 1810 with Sébastien Erard’s double-action pedal harp, which would become the model for the modern concert harp we use today. Composers of the nineteenth century were intrigued by the harp’s new chromatic capability and began including the harp in their orchestral writing. Hector Berlioz was one of the first composers to embrace the new possibilities of the harp and began scoring for it in his large orchestral works. Later, composers such as Wagner, Liszt, Verdi, Strauss, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Ravel, Debussy, and Stravinsky followed, making the unmistakable sound of the harp a regular part of their compositions.



Chapter 2

Anatomy of the Concert Harp

Today's concert harp is an extraordinary mixture of ancient tradition and modern technology. Although its beginnings many centuries ago were humble, the contemporary harp is a powerful musical tool with a range and complexity to match its impressive façade. While the inner mechanism of the modern harp looks more like a machine than an instrument, the following line drawing illustrates the major exterior components of a full-sized, concert harp.



Chapter 3

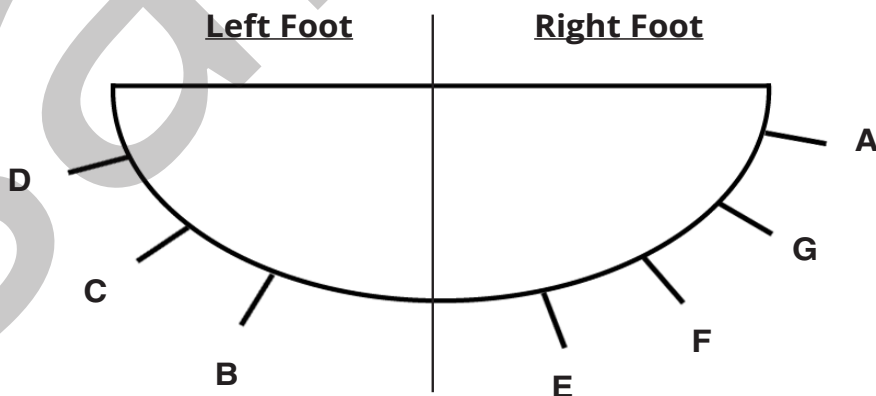
Pedal Basics

In the course of writing this book, I surveyed numerous active composers—from conservatory students to seasoned professionals—and I asked a series of questions related to their experiences in writing for the harp. In almost all cases, the first subject mentioned would be a composer's understanding of (or frustration with) the harp's pedals. While it does present some challenges, the mechanical concept of the pedals is fairly easy to understand, so I'd like to start this chapter's discussion with the most basic of elements.

- There are seven pedals, one for each note of the musical scale: A, B, C, D, E, F, G.
- The D, C and B pedals are moved with the left foot and the E, F, G and A pedals are moved with the right foot.
- The A pedal controls ALL the A strings on the harp, the B pedal controls ALL the B strings, and so on.
- The two lowest strings on the concert harp are not attached to the pedal mechanism, so they must be tuned to the desired pitch (flat, natural or sharp). Please note: *Some older harps may also be missing pedal action on the top G of the harp.*



The following diagram shows the layout of the pedals from the vantage point of standing up near the neck of the harp and looking down.



Chapter 4

Pedals and Chromaticism: Thinking Like a Harpist

Chromaticism is a cornerstone of new music and the double-action pedal harp makes substantial pitch alteration feasible. Because of this, a harpist's feet are often almost as busy as his or her hands. That said, when the feet are actually *busier* than the hands, the results are usually not first-rate.

While the pedal mechanism of the harp lifts many harmonic limitations, it is important to keep in mind that when used in the extreme, **excessive chromatic changes can lead to several negative results:**

- the unpleasant “zinging” noise created when a moving metal disc (initiated by a pedal shift) comes in contact with a still-vibrating string.
- substantial foot/floor/slot noise that can be very distracting and mar the effectiveness of a work.
- a feeling in the harpist that he or she is functioning less as an artist and more as a machine-operator.

So, what would be considered an *excessive* amount of chromatic activity in a work for the harp? Let's try to clarify that question.

I will start with the following guidelines, which I have created as a system of timing boundaries in a general sense. Some players are willing to stretch beyond these parameters if the musical result absolutely demands it and if the pedal work is not relentless.

However, for the practical purpose of knowing what is definitely possible in all cases without causing musical compromise or the certainty of mechanical noise, the following instructions should provide a good resource. We will talk about exceptions to these guidelines later in the chapter.

One great thing to remember: An extremely complex key signature on the harp is no more difficult for the hands than the key of C major when the pedals are set and left accordingly.

Chapter 5

Basic Notation and Traditional Effects

The notation of harp music is quite similar to piano music. The following are some general guidelines for streamlining the visual aspect of your harp compositions.

- Harp music is composed on two staves, using treble and bass clef.
- Avoid split and triple staves whenever possible.
- Do not be too concerned with voicing (S.A.T.B.) as it will not usually affect execution or fingering.
- For the sake of efficient reading, anything beyond four ledger lines is best written with the use of *8va* or *8ba*.
- Be aware that ties cannot be held, but will merely ring like any other string until muffling or decaying.
- Avoid spacing systems too closely together. Harpists need adequate room for marking pedal changes under the bass clef staff. If you choose to include pedal changes in the score, they should be placed under the bass staff, rhythmically aligned with the affected pitches whenever possible, and with right-foot pedals over left-foot pedals. Even when there is only one pedal to indicate, right and left foot pedals should remain on their appropriate graphic planes (please refer to “Chapter 4: Pedals and Chromaticism”).
- Include any special instructions in a footnote or within a legend at the beginning of the score.
- When writing glissandi, please write “gliss.” for clarity and include a pedal diagram if there is any deviation from the key signature within the passage, or write out one octave of the pitches you require for the glissando (please refer to “Chapter 12: Glissandi”).
- Please remember that harpists are managing many levels of logistics at all times, so the easier you make things on the eye, the better your results will be.

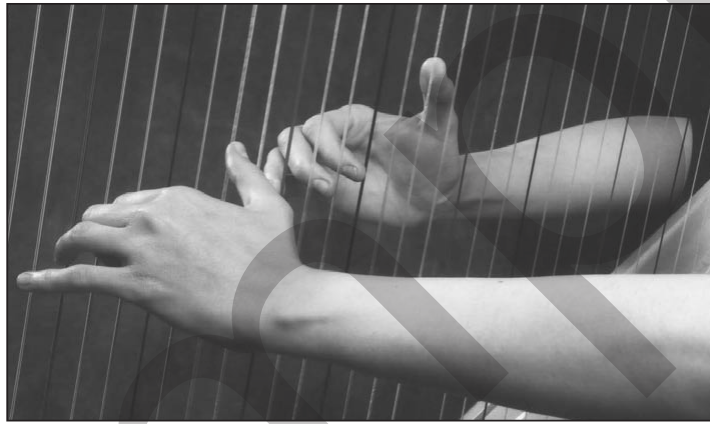


From *Liquid Shadows*, by Yolanda Kondonassis, Carl Fischer Music, 2004

Chapter 6

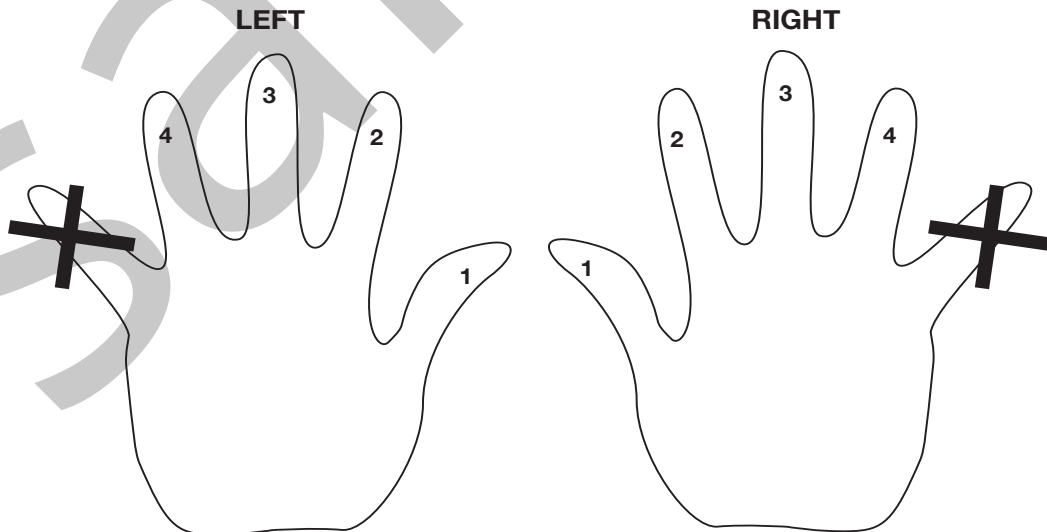
Matters of the Hand

While harp notation may closely resemble scoring for the piano, idiomatic harp writing is a very different task than writing for the piano and requires at least a basic understanding of harp technique. Right-hand/left-hand placement range, the physics of jumping and plucking, hand and interval spans, resonance issues, and other basic technical contrasts make the piano and harp two quite separate animals. Speed, volume, and traversing register distances quickly should be approached with as complete an understanding of physical logistics as possible. The following are some guidelines on practical elements of the hand in relation to the harp. For more information on harp technique, please refer to “Chapter 8: The Physics of Writing Idiomatic Music.”



Unlike pianists, harpists use only four fingers on each hand.

The “pinky,” or fifth finger, is never used for the reason that it is too short and too weak to be functional.



Chapter 8

The Physics of Writing Idiomatic Music

This chapter is divided into three sections:

- Traversing the Strings
- Resonance and Buzzing
- Register Management

Perhaps more than most instruments, the harp requires its player to travel large distances quickly, land accurately, and challenge gravity at almost every turn. In each of the three sections, I've outlined some watch points and suggestions that will help you avoid some of the pitfalls that the sheer physics of the harp present.

Traversing the Strings

This section deals primarily with matters of fingering on the harp, since knowing how a passage may be logically executed will help you envision what is and what is not possible from a technical standpoint.

Groups of Four and the Importance of Two-Hand Teamwork

In surveying a wide selection of harp literature, one can detect a pattern: the four-note group, in every imaginable form. This is because four notes perfectly suit the fact that harpists use only four fingers in each hand. Cascading arpeggios consisting of two-handed, eight-note patterns are the stock and trade of the orchestral harp repertoire. That said, your four-note groups need not sound like a rehash of the *Nutcracker* cadenza. There are many ways of combining groups of two, three, and four notes in each hand to produce interesting patterns. On the harp, it is just as easy to play a sequence of C \flat , D \sharp , E \flat , and F \sharp as it is to play those same strings in C major; it's all in the pedal settings. Most importantly, please be aware that you will have the best results if your writing is fleshed out in such a way that both hands can be involved and help each other out when the number of notes exceeds the available fingers on one hand. A prolonged pattern of five (or more) notes in each hand will most likely have to be rewritten or will be hindered by complex, hand-over-hand fingerings and inevitably dropped notes. Long, connected lines and arpeggios are certainly possible, but remember that the two hands will need to work together to cover all the bases.

Here are some examples of ways that the “effect” of a five-note, repeated pattern in both hands can be made to work smoothly. Please note that the occurrence of a five-note pattern in both hands in a *single* instance is not a problem, as long as the tempo is reasonable. The following are several examples of how to make the idea work in a repeated pattern.

Awkward

♩ = 60

Feasible

The following example presents a configuration of notes in each hand that prohibits teamwork due to the register distance between the hands.

Awkward

♩ = 60

8va

In this revised version of the passage above, the *8va* was eliminated to bring the hands closer together and allow the left hand to help the right hand when needed. Repeated notes and large, disconnected jumps were reconfigured to allow for smooth placing. The registers were also adjusted to remove unnecessary leaps. If the high upper register is compositionally important, then the left hand could be moved up an octave to eliminate the two-octave split.

Feasible

♩ = 60

L.H.