From Iconography to Opacity
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The harp’s mythological origins and modern neglect

A Senior Thesis in Music at Haverford College
By Lily Ann Cascio Press
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**Introduction**

This document summarizes my research into the role of the harp in the modern world of classical music. As a harpist myself, I’ve often come into contact with general confusion among composers, musicians, conductors and music historians about the way the modern pedal harp works and the capabilities of the instrument. Of particular relevance to our discussion today has been the most common question I get as a harpist: “why did you decide to play the harp?” I invariably give the same answer; my father used to read me a book about a harpist when I was young and that first encounter with the instrument was my gateway into the world of harp. Two representations from that book, entitled *Gwinna* can be seen on the title page. Obviously the harp that I play today has very little in common with Gwinna’s small folk harp, and to this day I have yet to develop wings or receive instruction from the winds when I practice. The disparity between my early encounter with the harp in the literary realm of folk-tale and my experience as a classical harpist served as the impetus for the research I will present today.

My research examines some of the earliest iconographical and literary examples of the harp and moves on to trace the development of the harp as a gendered salon instrument during the Baroque and early Classical era. I’ll then explore some of the later Romantic examples of the harp as an instrument of affect in the symphony orchestra and discuss some of the harp’s solo repertory. Essentially my task will be to trace with you the harp’s early association with the religious and spiritual and examine how this association continues today.
Origins and Affect: The Harp in Myths, Iconography, and Literary Contexts

The earliest examples of the harp appear in paintings from 3500B.C. in Egypt (Tournier, 13). These harps look very different from the modern orchestral harp, but in reality a harp is classifiable more by its geometrical construction than by its size. The harp is a triangular instrument, formed by the pillar, neck, and soundboard (Rensch, 18). Representations of such an instrument have been found in Sumaria, ancient Egypt, Greece, China, India, Persia, Burma, Afghanistan, North Africa, Assyria, Babylon, and the Middle East (Rimmer, 4; Tournier, 15). Depictions of harps have been found in a Mesopotamian burial chamber at Ur (Figure 1) and the tomb of Rameses II (Figure 2) (Rensch, 9; Rimmer, 4).

Figure 1. Harp of Shabad. Mesopotamia. 3500-300B.C. University Museum (Philadelphia). http://iws.ccccd.edu/Andrade/WorldLit2332/Meso/harp.gif

Figure 2. Lessing, Eric. Wall Painting: Tomb of Nakht. New York: Art Resource, 18th Dynasty.
In many of these sources, the harp is played by religious figures or shown in association with festivals. This leads us to conclude that the social role of the harp (and the instruments pictured with it in these representations) was one of either ritual or ceremony, which is a manifestation of early music’s close relationship to religious and political life. Although some harpists have attempted to use these pictorial representations of the harp in order to determine ‘authentic’ performance techniques used by ancient harpists, it is perhaps most productive to consider these representations of the harp in light of what they reveal about social contexts and iconographical associations for early harps and harpists (Mayer Brown, 22; Grove, 36).

The association of the harp with the ritual and ceremonial world can be found in numerous texts, including the Judeo-Christian Bible. Mentions of the harp abound in the book of Psalms in association with religious celebration. However, the harp was also associated with the curative powers of music: King David, who is credited as the author of many of these Psalms, is described in the Book of Samuel as playing his harp in order to soothe the evil spirit that often possessed his predecessor, King Saul. The Christian Church appropriated this biblical reference and used the triangular harp as a symbol of the Christian Trinity, while also associating the harp with celestial music (Rensch, 32, 46, 48). Angel harpists were often depicted in celestial orchestras – which included many of the ‘bas’ (i.e. soft) instruments of the Renaissance – as iconographical references to this “voice of the holy church” In this painting (Figure 3) by Hans Memling entitled *The Virgin and Child with Angels* we see an angel harpist entertaining the holy family. As we will see, contemporary associations of angels with femininity would influence the gendering of the harp as a female instrument. However, angel harpists were merely

We can see further examples of the historical development of these iconographical traditions in the works of many famous painters. Here we see the 16th-century artist Albrecht Dürer using the harp to represent King David in his painting *The Adoration of the Holy Trinity*. While the Memling painting revealed the harp’s association with an imagined celestial music, this painting focuses more on the association of the harp with the biblical King David. Interestingly Dürer’s father is to known to have played the harp, so this painting may in some aspects reflect the actual construction of 16th-century gothic harps. However, this painting is in many ways similar

![Figure 3. Angel Harpist. Hans Memling. The Virgin and Child with Angels. National Gallery of Art: Andrew W. Mellon Collection, Late 15th century.](image-url)
to the Memling painting in its depiction of the harp as an iconographical symbol rather than a historically accurate depiction of the instrument. (Rensch, 68).

In contrast, Hieronymus Bosch’s famous painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Figure 5) shows a Gothic-style harp that gives the illusion of being carved out of one piece of wood (this is clearly inaccurate and reflects the iconographical nature of this particular portrayal of the harp – the harp was actually constructed out of three pieces of wood) (Kite-Powell, 188). In this example the harp is used to evoke hell – the harp is a sort of rack upon which the damned hangs. The image suggests that while the harp was often associated with the spiritual realm, it could also be inverted to an association with the hypnotic and seductive. Moreover, the jumble of instruments in the portion of this painting depicting Hell could indicate Bosch’s attempt to warn viewers against music’s seductive power (Freedman 2009). The tradition of the harp as an instrument of seduction (and hence the erotic) can also be traced back to ancient Greece, where the symmetrical lyre was preferred over the asymmetrical harp. Here, the harp was a “decadent” instrument played by aulos girls who were hired for the dual role of musicians and prostitutes (Davidson, 38; Rensch, 18).

![Figure 5. Instruments detail. Hieronymus Bosch. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Madrid: Museo del Prado, 1500.](image-url)
While these iconographical and symbolic depictions of the harp in literature and painting reveal some of the functions and associations of early harp, they also provide evidence that the harp was for many years a diatonic instrument, nearly incapably of chromatic pitches unless tuned in advance. Harp-makers experimented with various technological innovations that would permit more chromatic flexibility for harpists such as the one depicted in Figure 6 by the early-17th century artist Domenico Zampieri (1581-1641), which shows King David performing on a harp with three sets of strings (Figure 7) tuned so that each rank of strings allowed the harpist different chromatic options: one rank might be tuned diatonically while another would provide sharps or flats.


Although we have seen that it is necessary to exercise caution when examining iconographical representations of harps in order not to conflate the harp as a symbol with the harp as an instrument, surviving examples of double and triple harps like the one shown here reveal that the instruments were developed in the 17th century in order to cope with the issue of increasingly complex chromaticism in music. However, the harp, one of the oldest instruments in existence, and one of the most literarily and iconographically represented, languished in the late Renaissance and early Baroque period, due to its inability to play chromatic pitches (Rensch, 72). Harpists would wait until the early 19th century for the full-chromatic abilities of double-action pedal harp; in the interim the harp flourished as a gendered instrument of the salon and drawing room where its marginalized status as a diatonic instrument paralleled the marginalized social position of women in the world of musical performance.

Genre and Gender: Social Space and Gendered Contexts of Early Harpists

From the Renaissance, through the 17th century, harp performance remained a primarily domestic and decorative (and hence feminine) pursuit. This marginalization of the harp, its absence from the sphere of public and ‘serious’ performance occurred in tandem with its classification as a ‘female’ instrument. Although the harp was and is played by men as well as women, it was classified as early as 1528 as one of the few instruments women were allowed to play; Baldesar Castiglione’s 1528 “Book of the Courtier” specified that women should not perform on ‘male’ instruments (Steblin, 128). A ‘female’ instrument was one that “allowed them [women] to look graceful when performing” (Macleod, 3). The guitar, harp and piano were all designated part of this
‘feminine’ group of instruments; women were seen as being especially gifted to play music because of their sensitivity and emotional natures, but the weakness that these emotions were believed to be connected to means that women were also considered far too weak for public performances (Macleod, 9). This weakness was understood to be especially strong when it came to orchestra performance; not only were women seen as weak performers, but it was also considered dangerous and distracting to mix the sexes in performance (Macleod, 15). Most of these gendered understandings of the harp were social constructions wedded to the larger context of women’s subjugation, but the relationship between the harp and femininity was much more of an interactive dialogue than simply cause (harp is feminine) and effect (women play the harp).

The interaction between the harp and femininity is perhaps most obvious in the parallels that were often drawn between the soft volume, delicate sound, and high soprano range of the harp and the female voice (Macleod, 10). The grace required of a harpist, arms and body gently curved inward towards their instrument and the way in which a harp was plucked, the fondling and caressing of the strings, was associated not only with the feminine, but with an erotic, over-sexualized femininity (Macleod, 10, Rimmer, 4). In the 1900s, Phillip Hale wrote about the whiteness of the skin and the sensuality of the curves of female harpists; literary evidence of this type reveals the dual association between feminine sexuality and harp performance (Macleod, 10). The association between the harp and sexuality was further augmented by the social stigma surrounding any type of public performance by women. In fact, women who performed in public from the 14th centuries through the Baroque period and even later were often
associated with the public display and commodified sexuality of courtesans and prostitutes (Stras, 154).

One such example of the extreme lengths to which female musicians were forced to go in order to avoid scandal is Laura Peverara, a member of the concerto delle donne at the d’Este court in Ferrara. Peverara, who was primarily a singer, was also a gifted harpist who performed solely for the d’Este court and was quickly married to a noble in order to avoid the social stigma attached to public performance. The harp as a female instrument resurfaced, however, as an appropriately demure instrument of the salon in pre-Revolution Paris, where it was played by Marie Antoinette. The French dauphine took daily lessons and practiced so faithfully that she was admonished by her mother (Empress Maria Theresa) to devote her time to more ‘appropriate’ pursuits (Rensch, 132). This vignette illustrates the fact that harp practice and performance (particularly for royal women) was considered secondary to other more ‘feminine’ pursuits. Aristocratic men were also careful to avoid the stigma of public (i.e. professional) performance, although with the fall of the aristocracy men as professionals became much more an accepted social convention than women as performers. Despite this social handicap, Antoinette and her contemporaries were active in the salon culture in Paris; they performed on single-action harps that were also graceful works of art in the style of the rococo (Gross, 21). Despite her mother’s censure, Marie Antoinette was instrumental in establishing the harp as an aristocratic instrument.

The harp played by these aristocratic women had undergone a variety of technological innovations in order to increase the harp’s chromatic flexibility, including a cross-strung harp designed by Pleyel that crossed a diatonic rank of strings with a set of
chromatic strings that parallel the black keys on a piano. However, the harp’s reappearance in the realm of the salon and the symphony was delayed until the development a system of pedals that changed the length (and hence the pitch) of the strings (Kite-Powell, 190). The single-action pedal harp, so called because these instruments allowed the harpist to raise the pitch of a string a semitone, was perfected by Jacob Hochbrucker in Donauworth, Bavaria where, in 1697, he designed a harp with pedals that manipulated the C,D,F,G, and B strings – the pedal mechanism of the harp will be discussed in more detail later (Clark, 30).

The single-action harp described here became the “focal point of aristocratic salons” where its performance by women led to an increased association between the harp and the feminine, rather than simply a parallel instance of marginalization (Zingel, 4). Antoinette, a trendsetter in many ways in the court of pre-Revolution France, played a single-action pedal harp designed and built by Jean-Henri Naderman (1735-1799) who became one of the premier harp manufacturers in Paris for many years (Rensch, 131). We can see a photograph of this Naderman harp in Figure 8, as well as a portrait of the Queen herself and the salon at Trianon where she most likely practiced and performed on her instrument (Figures 9 and 10).
Marie Antoinette’s incorporation of the harp into the court in France coincides with the instrument’s re-entry into the realm of classical music, as nurtured by the aristocracy of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The harp had been in use during the Baroque era as a continuo instrument. Although harps in this era were for the most part diatonic, a number of Baroque composers, most notably Händel, wrote for harpists who played triple rank harps, allowing for a certain amount of chromatic modulation. However, music was not written out during this period for the harp because it was treated more like a keyboard instrument or used in relation to literary reference (in the case of operas and religious pieces) or for an intended ‘mystical’ affect, as we have already seen (Music, 6). Andrew Lawrence-King, a master of folk harp and a scholar of ‘authentic’
performance practice, argues that instrumental music of all kinds during the Baroque period was not written for a specific instrument, but that at the start of the 17th century, publishers invented the practice of writing for a specific instrument in an effort to encourage sales and marketing value (Lawrence-King, 164; Kite-Powell, 192). Therefore, the appearance of music written specifically for the harp in the 17th century is part of the trajectory along which music was already developing, from craft to art and from pastime to profession independent of its earlier ritual and social contexts. These new social contexts performance led to more autonomy and idiomatic writing for particular instruments.

For the harp, however, the social contexts in which it was played shifted from the religious and the cultic to the domestic and feminine. Therefore, despite the increasing legitimacy of the harp as an instrument for serious classical music, it also became, for women, a useful entrée into society. Madame de Genlis, a French countess (and mistress to the Duc d’Orléans) who taught harp to the Orleans princesses, attributed her skills as a harpist to her entrance into French society (Rensch 134). Although she was more famous for her salacious novels, Madame
de Genlis also published a book of methods for the harp and is credited for implementing the five-finger technique of harp performance (Rensch, 134; Gross, 31). Although most harpists today do not use all five fingers (the pinky finger is almost never used in performance), de Genlis’ technique continued to be used for many years among French harpists.

Following the French Revolution, the harp became even more codified as an instrument of female accomplishment in tandem with the piano. Although the harp was at this point in history already gendered as a feminine instrument, the mark of status that it incurred for female socialites solidified its gendered status. Instances of female professional harpists still remained scarce; a post-Revolution aristocrat, Madame d’Hemard, turned to professional performance in exile (Gross, 29). However, posters advertising concerts by this harpist emphasized the disclaimer that her reduced circumstances forced her to perform for profit, describing “a talent, which, in happier times, would have served only to embellish her education” (Gross, 29). This post-Revolution instance of professional performance occurred in tandem with the harp’s movement down the social ladder. Although the harp in the 18th century had been an instrument of the aristocracy, by the 19th century it was an instrument of the bourgeois (Gross, 30). William M. Thackeray documents this trend in his famous 1846-1848 novel *Vanity Fair*, where he describes the social capital that a woman skilled at the harp gained in the marriage market: “what causes them [young ladies] to labour … to play the harp if they have handsome arms and neat elbows…but that they may bring down some ‘desirable’ young man with those killing bows and arrows of theirs?” (Gross, 28).
The fact that women played the harp to show off their charms reveals that by the 19th century it was firmly established as an instrument through which women could display their physical attributes. However, with the demise of the French aristocracy had come the demise of the salon and the elevation of a new sphere for solo performance: the home. Women could play the harp alone, without any need for accompaniment; therefore, the harp became almost a shackle for bourgeois women – they were kept at home behind their harps rather than being allowed to take an active part in the social or political developments of the day (Gross, 28). The earlier stigma attached to aristocratic performance appears to now have been transferred onto public performances by women.

While women harpists remained at home, male musicians made the excuse that the harp was too expensive to be a suitable instrument for professional performance; the instrument, therefore, became as much of a decoration as the sweet women who remained in their drawing rooms to play it (Zingel, 14). It is not surprising to learn that of the few solo pieces written for harp during the late-Classical and early-Romantic period, “the three composers who made the greatest contribution to the literature of the single-action harp – J.B. Krumptholtz, J.L. Dussek, and Louis Spohr – were all married to harpists” (Grove, 24). J.L. Dussek’s wife was also known to have composed for the harp, although she published her works using only her last name, meaning that most consumers probably assumed that pieces written by her were in fact written by her husband (Rensch, 141). Although this allowed Ms. Dussek to gain a wider audience of performers for her works, it is also indicative to the lengths to which women performers and composers were forced to go in order to avoid the professional handicaps caused by their gender. That said, the wives of the abovementioned composers enjoyed successful solo careers during which
they traveled and performed extensively, protected from impropriety by the presence of their husbands. While the music composed for these women reveals the extent of their virtuosity, the protecting presence of their husbands reflects the general limitations on women in the spheres of performance and professionalism. However, it was not until 1930 that a woman would be given a first-chair position in a professional orchestra. Edna Phillips accomplished this feat when she joined the Philadelphia Orchestra as principal harpist – it is likely that the harp’s earlier associations with the female gender made a female harpist in an all-male orchestra a much more acceptable phenomenon than a female horn player, for example (Rensch, 202).

While harpists today still struggle with the stigma of the harp as a ‘female’ instrument, male performers like Carlos Salzedo, (discussed in more detail later), are credited with “change[ing] the sex of the harp” from “Victorian femininity” into “a man’s instrument, a powerful, virile, instrument worthy of the sterner sex” (Owens, 39; 126). Similarly, Harpo Marx, a member of the Marx Brothers (of the vaudeville stage and Hollywood screen) played an important role in breaking down the image of the harp as feminine; his on-screen performances on a gilded concert harp in a ragged suit and dented top hat are well-known by harpists and non-harpists alike (Gross, 32). Moreover, the appearance of prominent male harpists in the 19th and 20th centuries coincided with increased repertory and prominence given to the instrument in this era.

![Figure 12. Harpo Marx. Screen Still. c. 1930.](http://assets.mog.com/pictures/wikipedia/150095/Harpomarx1.jpg)
Symphonic Music and Harp Technique: Composition Issues and Cult of Personality

This increased prominence is due almost solely to the monumental technical improvements made to the single-action harp by Sebastian Erard, who moved to London during the French Revolution, where in 1811 he perfected the double-action harp (Grove, 35). The development of a double-action pedal mechanism for the harp is still the most revolutionary technical innovation made to the instrument in its history. Erard, who also sold pianos and harpsichords, developed a system of fourchettes (forked discs) which rotated in order to allow the harp’s pedals to make flats, naturals, and sharps (Rensch, 147-148). By 1815 the double-action harp had made its way to Paris, and by the middle of the 19th century, this instrument was firmly established as the instrument upon which all harpists would play.

The ability to play almost limitless chromaticism (with certain restraints, which we will discuss further) meant that the harp was ready to move from the drawing room onto the concert stage, and into the ranks of the modern orchestra.

The harp’s entrance into the modern orchestra did not result in a loss of its early associations with the spiritual, feminine, ethereal or erotic. The association of the harp with these affects can be found in literature by the Romantic composer Hector Berlioz,
who described the instrument as “a siren, lovely neck inclined, and wild hair flowing, uttering music of another world” (Rensch, 159). This harp’s association with “music of another world” was used by many composers predating Berlioz, including Claudio Monteverdi and Christoph Willibald Gluck. Gluck used the harp’s already established associations with spiritual power to soothe the soul in tandem with the Greek myth of Orpheus. Orpheus was believed to have delighted and swayed humans, nature, and the gods with his performance on the lyre or harp. Monteverdi’s opera Orfeo made use of the arpa doppia, a harp with two ranks of parallel strings, some tuned to sharps and flats, to “represent the ancient lyre of Greek mythology and of biblical lore” (Clark, 29).

Orpheus in tandem with the harp as an instrument of spiritual or hypnotic power returns again in the Classical period when Christoph Willibald Gluck became the first Classical composer to include the harp in the orchestra. His 1762 production of the opera Orfeo ed Euridice parallels Monteverdi’s production in that Gluck uses the harp to imitate the lyre of Orpheus. Beethoven’s only ballet, The Creatures of Prometheus (written in 1801), also uses the harp in tandem with libretto references to Orpheus in Act 2, No. 5 where the harp plays chords and arpeggios that reinforce the harmony without being totally overpowered by the rest of the orchestra (Clark, 30). Igor Stravinsky used the harp in his 1910 ballet Firebird where the harp again evokes the mysticism and magic of a forest peopled by fairy-tale creatures (Rensch, 176). The Berceuse in Firebird in particular makes use of harp effects like harmonics in order to emphasize the mysterious lullaby quality of the movement (Rensch, 176). Although these famous composers made use of the harp in an orchestral setting, these examples reveal that the harp throughout
music history has been mostly used in oratorios, operas, and ballet to establish color, depict the elements, or evoke the religious or otherworldly (Zingel, 54).

The development of the double-action pedal harp went a long way towards ensuring the harp’s inclusion in the modern orchestra. Composer Hector Berlioz is responsible for pioneering the use of the harp in the symphony orchestra (Rensch, 173, 175; Grove, 26). The 1830 *Symphonie Fantastique* includes perhaps one of the hardest harp parts in the Western classical music canon, but Berlioz’s idiomatic harp writing in addition to his steady championing of the instrument’s use in pieces such as *Harold en Italie* (1834), where he indicates that the instrument should be placed close to the solo viola in order to maximize the quality of the harp’s sound, reveals the importance of this composer in the history of the harp’s introduction to the modern concert hall.

Berlioz gleaned practical and technical information about the recently developed double-action harp from an early advocate and virtuoso of the instrument: Elias Parish Alvars. Berlioz’s relationship with Parish Alvars proved to be productive not only in influencing Berlioz to write ensemble parts for the double-action harp, but also because Berlioz based much of the information included in his famous treatise on orchestration on the harp technique he learned from Parish Alvars. This standardization of harp technique happened in tandem with Berlioz’s discussion of the harp in his orchestration treatise. Therefore, a relationship between individuals (harpist and composer/theorist) resulted in a codification of harp technique and harp composition (Rensch, 178). When Berlioz claims that “nothing matches the spirit of poetic celebration or religious ceremony better than the sound of a large section of harps” and describes the high register of the harp as “delicate, crystalline sound…delicious freshness…suitable for graceful, fairy effects…for
letting tender melodies whisper their innermost secrets” he is not merely making an arbitrary claim about the affect of an instrument (as he might be claimed to do in the case of the oboe or the viola) (Berlioz/Macdonald, 73, 74). Rather, Berlioz is referring to the sound of a particular performer while referencing the documented iconographical and mythical history of the harp. The inclusion of this bias in an authoritative source on the instrument perpetuates the harp’s role as an instrument of elemental ‘effects’ at the same time as it encodes a technique of harp performance pioneered by a single virtuoso.

The implementation of Parish Alvars’ virtuoso technique resulted in a paradoxical situation. Berlioz demonstrated incredible sensitivity in writing about the harp in his orchestration treatise while simultaneously writing very difficult orchestra parts for harpists – parts that Parish Alvars as a virtuoso may have had no trouble playing, but that have proved difficult for other harpists (Rensch, 158). Berlioz’s orchestration treatise includes an excellent description of the workings of the double-action pedal system, while at the same time claiming that the harp is “anti-chromatic” because it is impossible to play chromatic pitches quickly without being forced to resort to enharmonic equivalents or quick and often noisy pedal changes (Berlioz/Macdonald, 64). Using examples from his own works, in this case the Symphonie Fantastique, Berlioz describes how in a certain section of the second movement where the harps and violins are both playing the same melodic line, he left out several pitches in the melodic line while writing the harp part in order to avoid excess chromaticism (Example 1) – the violins, needless to say, continue to play the melody uninterrupted, even when the harp drops out for a few beats (Berlioz/Macdonald, 67).
The second movement of the *Symphonie Fantastique*, which Berlioz makes frequent reference to in his section on the harp, also provides an interesting example of a little-known trend among modern orchestral harpists. As we have seen, until the time of Berlioz, and even after his treatise appeared, many composers were not aware of the harp’s chromatic or technical limitations. Example 2 is an excerpt from a score that reveals the extensive markings that harpists make on their orchestral parts. In addition to marking pedal changes and drawing pedal diagrams so that they can start anywhere during orchestra rehearsals, harpists mark their parts to indicate sections where the left hand helps out the right hand, where the left hand is cut out entirely, and where it is more helpful to use enharmonically equivalent pitches instead of those written. Furthermore, when a harpist makes the decision to play an F-sharp instead of a G-flat (the pitch will sound exactly the same), the harpist must also ensure that the pedal markings in the part reflect this change. Although other instrumentalists often mark bowings and fingerings into their parts as well, the amount of work a harpist puts in to marking an orchestral part is such that many teachers have passed their orchestral markings on to their students. These particular markings come from Judy Loman, a harpist at Curtis who taught Keety Dolfe, who was my teacher.
Harp Technique and Performance: How to listen to the Harp

The proliferation of parts like the one shown in Example 2, handed down from teacher to teacher, speaks to the nature of a close-knit community of classical harpists that exists today. This has much to do with the relative number of harpists (versus violinists or flautists) but also reflects a certain amount of insularity within the harp world in relation to the world of classical music. This insularity stemmed from the harp’s marginalization from the realm of ‘serious’ music since it was often buried in the orchestra because of its relatively quiet sound or excluded from the recital hall because of the lack of solo pieces written by famous composers. Furthermore, harpists developed a unique vernacular to describe harp notation that was often incomprehensible to non-harpists. In order to dispel some of this mystery, it is useful address the four most common (and often most confusing) aspects of modern harp performance: the use of the pedals, muffling, glissandos, and harmonics.

The pedals of the double-action harp align with the pitches shown in the diagram here. Pedals allow the harpist to play chromatic pitches using the pedals, which will automatically adjust each octave; for example raising or lowering a single pedal changes the pitch of all the C-strings on the instrument. Raising the pedal to the top notch will cause the string to raise a semitone to flat, lowering the pedal to the middle notch corresponds with natural, and the pedal in the lowest notch corresponds to a sharpened pitch (Figure 14). Various
famous harpists have attempted to compose music for the harp that made idiomatic use of
the pedals. Harpist Marcel Tournier, for example, who taught at the Paris Conservatory in
the early half of the 20th century, advocated the use of enharmonic equivalents like C-
sharp and D-flat in order to play trills or other passages making use of repeated notes
(Tournier, 47). Furthermore, harpist Carlos Salzedo, who developed numerous techniques
for the modern harp and helped to found the harp department at the Curtis Institute, wrote
in his book on harp methods that the harpist could cross-pedal. For instance, he suggested
that the harpist could change pedals on the same side of the harp in situations where E
and F needed to be sharp (Salzedo, 7; Owens 119). Salzedo was also one of the first
harpists to compose music making
use of pedal movements in order to
change pitch – plucking a G-octave
and then moving the G pedal
quickly from sharp to natural to flat,
for example, results in a bending of
the pitch chromatically, without the
need to re-pluck the instrument (Salzedo, 24).

The ringing quality of the harp that is capitalized upon in this pitch-bending
 technique leads us to another of the harpist’s most important musical resources: muffling
(Zingel, 26). When watching a harpist play, it is interesting to listen and watch for the
moments when the harp must be “played into silence” (Salzedo, 2). Essentially, muffling
provides a dampening effect on the sound produced; harpists must make space within
their performance to muffle because the ringing of the plucked strings would otherwise
interfere with the forward movement of a piece. Carlos Salzedo, discussed above, and Marcel Grandjany, another famous harpist and composer for harp who taught at the Juilliard School, both advocated judicious muffling in their writing for and about harp – however, it is often the case that solo or orchestral music for harp does not indicate the moments at which a harpist should muffle (Rensch, 203). Rather, it is the responsibility of the harpist to decide when to muffle in order to dampen the sound without interrupting the flow of the music. There are several different ways to muffle; most simply, the harpist can place their flat palm against the ringing strings. However, in order to give a *stacatto* or *seco* effect, the harpist can also muffle the notes by replacing the fingers on the notes just played almost immediately after playing them. This effect can be seen in Donizetti’s *Larghetto and Allegro* for violin and harp in the Allegro movement. Furthermore, in the *Tema con Variazioni*, attributed to G.F. Händel an octave accompaniment in the left hand (which usually includes the wire bass strings which tend to ring more than the nylon or gut strings) requires the harpist to play the octaves with a flat palm in order to dampen the notes just played while simultaneously playing or preparing the next octave.

Another important harp technique, and perhaps the most recognizable to non-harpists, is the glissando. Put simply, a glissando is the running of the fingers over the strings rapidly. Mythologized in literature (much like the harp itself), the glissando has been described as “elemental” because of its association with Aeolian harp played by the wind (Salzedo, 2). Although the wind can play multiple glissandos without penalty, Marcel Tournier writes of the overuse of glissandos in orchestral performance, where they are often “drowned by the orchestra” and, without being heard, overheat and blister the harpists’ fingers (Tournier, 84). Glissandos have been used in orchestral music since

Liszt first included a glissando in an orchestral score. Debussy also made use of the harp’s ability to play enharmonic pitches to write glissandos that were actually chords – like the half-diminished chord on A-sharp that appears in *Prélude à L’après-midi d’un faune* (Rensch, 174).

Carlos Salzedo also developed several new effects for harp that utilized its ability to play glissandos; his Aeolian and gushing chords are short bursts of glissandi, played percussively, that occupy at most the range of an octave; furthermore, Salzedo’s ‘falling hail’ effect for harp is essentially a glissando played with the back of the harpist’s nails (Salzedo, 13). These effects can be heard in Salzedo’s XV Prelude for harp, *Chanson dans la Nuit*, which makes use of all of these techniques, as well as other new techniques for harp performance.


Just as glissandos have been associated with the harp’s elemental affect, harmonics on the harp are often associated with the ethereal affect of the instrument. Harmonics are played by shortening the string to produce a bell-like sound pitched an octave higher than the string upon which it is played. Right-hand harmonics are produced by placing the knuckle of the second finger against the string, while plucking with the
thumb; left-hand harmonics are played by placing the heel of the hand against the strings and again plucking with the thumb. It is also possible to play multiple harmonics (at the most four) with the left hand; this is often used in more contemporary compositions. Interestingly, there is some debate among harp composers about whether to notate harmonics where they sound or where they are played (an octave lower than where they sound). Therefore it is important for the harpist to know which tradition a composer comes from in order to know where to play the harmonics notated in the music. In playing harmonics, it is important for the harpist to be aware of the center of the string (this can change depending on whether the pedal associated with a particular string is in the flat, natural, or sharp position). A harpist will thus employ a strategy known as “Instrumental Esthetics” that was developed by Carlos Salzedo in tandem with Vaslav Nijinsky. This strategy involves moving the hands in such a way that they appear to augment the sound; a graceful arc upwards with the closed hand after playing a harmonic, which can be seen in the Interlude from the Britten Ceremony of Carol. The harmonic has sounded, even if the harpist has miscalculated its location (Owens, 21).
Conclusion

This brief introduction to some of the more common techniques of harp performance can aid the non-harpist in listening to harp performance with an ear more attuned to some of the nuances of the instrument. The harp is often conflated with the modern piano – even described as a sideways keyboard. Although history has often thrown the harp and piano together, the distinctive nature of harp performance and harp technique reveals that this parallel is by no means perfect. Salzedo once described the orchestral literature for harp as having been written as “a sort of compromise between the piano and an imaginary harp” (Salzedo, 35). Harpists often complain about the predominance of the piano and a lack of attention to the uniqueness of their instrument. This discussion has shown that although associations with the keyboard did hinder the development of solo repertory idiomatic to the harp, the associations of the harp with the spiritual, otherworldly and exotic in many ways directed and limited the ways in which the harp would be used in the modern classical orchestra and solo recital hall. This iconographical baggage was perhaps more influential on the harp’s marginalization in the realm of ‘serious’ music than its relationship to the piano.

While the rich historical and literary legacy of the harp can often feel like a burden to modern harpists this legacy has led to the development of a “niche” for harpists. Within this niche, harpists compose, re-compose and transcribe for their instrument with amazing industry and creativity. Furthermore, as Gardner Read writes in his Compendium of Modern Instrumental Techniques, “no modern instrument, not even a member of the vastly enlarged percussion family, has undergone such a metamorphosis in the 20th century as the harp...no longer the delicate embodiment of grace and tonal
refinement…but a modern tonal agent almost totally new in terms of timbre and technical scope” (195). The classical double-action harp is undergoing a renaissance today, especially in the realm of contemporary music, where its bell-like tone and ability to create an aura of ethereal mystery has become an incredible asset. As harpists become increasingly integrated into the classical music world they are still somehow associated with the mythologized folk-tale of a young woman with wings playing the harp under a magical tree. This mythologized past cannot be erased or rewritten; young harpists in the realm of neo-Celtic or indie-rock music in fact invoke the harp’s cultic past as an asset. However, as the classical harpist counts measures at the back of the orchestra, waiting to play a chord that will almost certainly not be heard, the orchestral revolution of the 20th century points towards a future in which the harp is composed for on its own terms, with an awareness of its mythic past that informs but does not limit its musical future.
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