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Arranging Music for Beginners

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1. Listen to the piece, then jot down the melody, using solfege to hear the intervals in your head. I like the movable *do* for this, pronounced the same as 'D'oh!'. In this system, the notes of a major scale are always *do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do*. A chromatic scale would be *do, di, re, ri, mi, fa, fi, sol, si, la, li, ti, do*. In Europe, they have a different system, in which *do* is always C no matter where it is in the scale. In *The Sound of Music*, *Do* is a deer.
2. Figure out the harmonies and mark them in, i.e. Am for A minor, A for A major. Aaagh means 'Oh, no!'
3. Start with simple ways of filling in the chords in root positions. A chord always sounds pretty good like this, though there are times when you can put the third or the fifth at the bottom of the chord, but they sound different and can sound really unbalanced if they are in the wrong place. Harpists are unbalanced enough as it is.
4. Make an interesting bass line and add some middle voices if you want a thicker texture. Not thick enough to stop a bullet, since with the harp, less is more. When in doubt, leave it out!
5. Vary the registers; see how the melody sounds in a higher or lower octave. Try adding thirds or sixths below the melody here and there. Try weird intervals! Sometimes they work really well. Sometimes.
6. Experiment with adding an introduction and a bridge. This just means a few bars that lead into the melody or link to a new section. The number of bars has to be similar to the number of bars in the phrases in the rest of the piece. If all the other phrases are 8 bars long, then the intro should generally be 8 or 16 bars long, too, but there are always exceptions!
7. Experiment with modulating to different keys by flipping a lever or changing a pedal and see where that takes you. When you sharpen or flatten a note, it can sometimes act as the gateway to a new key.
8. Try different rhythms to vary your arrangement from the original. See how it alters the feeling!
9. Add effects where appropriate, like harmonics, whistling sounds, glissandi of different types, xylophonic sounds, *pres de la table*, etc.
10. Try different left-hand patterns, but they have to fit the meter of the bars! Or you could go wild and throw in a 5/4, but it has to make sense musically. Even better, make dollars.

11. If you are arranging a piano piece, remember that the notation for harp will look different, i.e. we do not have sustaining or dampening pedals. Some things that sound wonderful on piano sound awkward on the harp, and we do not want to inflict that on our audiences, do we? Also, be aware that there are quirky notations for other instruments! If you are arranging a guitar piece for the harp, you have to transpose it down an octave since music for the guitar is written an octave higher than it sounds! Some instruments' music sounds a whole tone higher than it is written, such as B flat clarinets and trumpets. French Horns are in F. You can find 'Transposing Instruments' in Wikipedia if your eyes aren't glazing over at this point and you are still interested.