

Tips on Preparing Orchestral Harp Parts
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Introduction:

When I started the harp at the ripe old age of seventeen, I dove right into orchestra playing, already being a flautist in the Toronto Youth Symphony Orchestra. What saved me from ignominy was this: I always got there early enough to get the harp in tune (to A 441), I played rhythmically and together with the orchestra, and I was able to fake what I could not play yet. Because I “hit the ground running”, I had to be clever at hiding any gaps in my technique or experience. This turned out to be a very valuable learning experience! That is why I am sharing these tips.

Before the first rehearsal:

- Get the harp part as early as possible. Make copies of all the difficult parts you get, catalogue them, and file them away for the future. When a piece is programmed in a subsequent season, you will not have to solve the same problems again.
- Mark the pedal changes before you start practicing. Draw pedal diagrams at every starting point. They may not match the key signature! Look for chromatic passages and make them more efficient by using enharmonics where possible. Most harpists put the diagrams above the staff; it should be very obvious which bar they are attached to. No floating pedal diagrams!
- Keep the part tidy! Put the right pedal over the left, either in the middle of the staff or just underneath. Never obliterate notes or important markings by writing pedal changes too close, circling dynamics, writing in cues, etc. Always use lead pencil that is easily erased.
- Eliminate awkward page turns by copying a page to be folded out, or write out the next few bars on the bottom of the page.
- Use fingerings which allow you to look at the conductor and make the right accents. Split single-line parts between both hands to avoid over-use injuries. Look for patterns, and use the same fingerings for all similar configurations. Avoid jumping around; place whenever possible, and use the same finger on the same note if you can. Consistency is key! Be very aware of which finger is on the beat.
- Edit impossible passages. If a part contains ten-note chords, stretches that require hands the size of platters, pedal changes so numerous that you are performing zapateado, lines so far apart that you need a third eye, lines so close together that your left hand is tripping over your right, chord jumps that should be in the Olympics....don't be a hero! Just find a way to get the right effect, with the correct harmony, rhythm and line, and everyone's happy. If there are two harp parts, re-distribute the parts to avoid nasty pedal changes, a host of

awkward problems, and frazzled nerves.

- Mark the part legibly with measure numbers and cues, using clear terminology. If the part has numbered bars, figure out the bar numbers for all your starting points and mark them in. If you have a recording of the piece, listen to it, pencil in hand, and mark all the important cues that help you with your entrances. If you have 14 measures to count, and there is a trumpet solo in the fourth bar, write “m4 trpt” in the space provided. This will give you great confidence when you’re performing. NEVER mark in the names of the musicians as cues; only the instruments.

- At the first rehearsal:

- Get there early enough to unload and set up your harp and bench, park the car, tune the harp, and warm up.

- Invest in a good tuner and mic that will enable you to tune when there is noise around you. I used an old analog Peterson Strobetuner until it died, and now I use a Sonic Research Turbo-tuner. The mic is a cheap \$10 conically-shaped one that I hang inside the harp and position differently if it isn’t picking up the harp well.

- Continue to mark in cues as you hear them and get cues from other musicians’ parts during the breaks. Many conductors don’t give cues. Planning and preparation on your part will lead to self-sufficiency and success.

- Write in “solo” over any exposed parts and “covered” over any places where all your hard-practiced notes are obliterated by thick orchestration or enthusiastic brass players. Harpists everywhere will bless you for this.

- If the conductor says “We will start at bar 118” and you do not have that marked, start counting “118, 119, 120” until you get to the spot in your music where you do have a numbered bar. Often there is not enough time to do the math to figure out how many bars there are to your next spot.

- Mark phrases and cues, especially towards the last bars of repeated patterns. Some pieces repeat the same pattern more than 20 times, and it is very easy to lose count. Write a “1” in the first bar of a lengthy section of repeated bars or patterns, a “2” in the second, etc., to help you keep track (contributed by Joyce Rice, Harp Spectrum). Odd phrases, hemiolas, and other phrases and accents that do not match the bar lines may confuse you. Write in the melody and sing it as you practice. Do NOT write in the names of performers as cues; only the instruments.

- If you have marked a cue incorrectly, do not leave it, as it will be a trap for the

next harpist. Fix it, even if you'll never see it again. Spread the good karma!

- Check the tempi! Sometimes a fingering works well at a slow tempo, but becomes completely impossible at the breakneck speed so popular with many conductors. Have a "Plan B" for any awkward passages. It may be necessary to throw away a few notes in order to facilitate beautiful, even playing.
- If you make the same mistake frequently in practice, rehearse a way to recover from it, just in case it happens in performance.
- Divide the tacet bars into phrases so they can be counted that way, instead of the odd numbers that are unfortunately in so many parts. In "The Nutcracker", for example, one finds rehearsal letters in bizarre places. It is much easier to count by the phrase rather than by 7, 9 or 15. "Candide" by Bernstein, and "Sleeping Beauty" by Tchaikovsky, are numbered in tens, making them excruciating to count. For some unfathomable reason, a few composers put the rehearsal letters on the last bar of a phrase! Other pieces feature a similar lack of logic. Be forewarned!
- Don't trust the part. If it sounds wrong, there is a good chance that it is. Ask the conductor. However, occasionally they may not understand or hear your question, so you should also check the score yourself. If there is a mistake, fix it legibly and permanently, so the next harpist doesn't have to suffer.
- Read "The Harp in the Orchestra" by Beatrice Schroeder Rose. It's full of great examples of ways to fix unmanageable parts.
- If you have questions about an orchestra part, a good resource is www.harpcolumn.com. Type your question into a search engine such as Google, and you may find your answer on previous chats on that forum, or if not, you can log on and ask a new question.
- Practice with the metronome almost all the time, and make sure it's on the fastest possible speed that the piece will go. Andante con moto, for example, is almost Allegro. The metronome is the closest thing to a conductor, only without the frowns or blown kisses.
- Practice all the pedal changes and practice counting while you're doing them. Keep the metronome going while you do this, so you know exactly how much time you have.
- Make sure your hands are placed before it's time to play. This gives you time to look at the conductor for a perfectly timed entrance.

- When you practice your part, look up at where the conductor would be in your line of vision.
- Memorize or at least be very aware of what notes you're playing. Don't just sight-read. Be really conscious of what key you are in and what pedals you need. Double-check the pedals when you have the time. Be sure you have read the pedal diagrams accurately.
- Don't forget to dampen rhythmically and when the notes are supposed to stop.
- Manage your time! Sometimes there is too much music, or it arrives too late to learn every note as thoroughly as you would like. Think of it as “triage”, when surgeons have to determine who to treat first. Put the most energy towards the soli, and do what you can with the tutti passages. The conductor may still ask to hear you, though, so always be ready with something serviceable.
- The beginnings and endings of glissandi may be important or not. Generally, in a loud tutti passage, you have more freedom, i.e. #22 of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Dukas.
- Sometimes chords are too big or awkward to play without buzzing. If it's very exposed, you must find a way to avoid the buzz, even if it means leaving out a note or sneaking in a muffle just before.
- Park your ego at the door. Playing in an orchestra is like a team sport; your job is to make the orchestra sound great. So if there is a passage that you cannot guarantee you can play well every time, then it's better to edit it so that it sounds fabulous. The audience will not care if you had to leave out a note so that you could place everything. They will care if you make the leap and miss. They will also care if the rhythm is all wonky because you tried to play every note and there wasn't time.
- Pedal changes should be very carefully planned and practiced the same way every time. You don't want “clunks” in the middle of a quiet rest. It's best to pedal on the beats so that they are camouflaged.
- In very convoluted passages such as the cadenza in “Tzigane”, practice every beat separately so that you know exactly which finger is on the first beat of each tuplet. When you look at the conductor, you will know to coordinate that finger with the baton.