

Raise your Game: Mastering the Technical Side of Harp Playing
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What is Technique?

Technique is a tool for communication. Reliable technique allows us to effectively organize and nuance our muscles to communicate our musical intentions.

A solid technique enhances the ease of musical delivery and assists us in producing the desirably warm, supple, and sustaining sound we so crave. The culmination of disciplined, thoughtful, and *effortful* work in the end makes music sound and feel spontaneous and... effortless.

Technique is the thing that makes what works in practice work in performance.

A solid technique equates to lengthening our stamina and increasing our control. A sound technique makes us reliable at the harp, allows for the facility necessary to successfully manipulate the harp in order to be musically expressive, and is consistently durable, responsive, and sustainable.

Developing a reliable technique means taking the time to understand and absorb function and to listen critically to the details when you practice. The muscles have to learn their function and this process cannot be hurried. The ear is the ultimate arbiter of whether you and your technique are in sync or working at cross purposes. Attune your practicing to listening and feeling. Assess what you hear and stay vigilant about what you are feeling in your muscles. In this way you can contribute to being the judge of what stays and what goes in your technique.

A few universal truths about harp technique

- All harpists follow through, because all harp playing requires effort to prepare and manipulate the strings
- All harpists gesture, because the gesture is the preparation of the body to come to the strings, and the release of the energy put into striking the string.
- The gesture completes one action and prepares the next
- Rhythm is what suffers when finger strength and facility are uneven or unreliable
- Healthy technique at the harp does not cause pain
- Strong, resilient technique creates the start to a strong and resilient sound

Technique vs. Method

We've all seen harpists whose command at the harp communicates comfort, and security, and puts us instantly at ease. We can focus on what we are hearing and enjoy the musical experience. And we've all witnessed performances where our concern for the welfare of the harp and the harpist prevents us from being able to prioritize listening to the music. When the physical relationship between the harp and harpist seems adversarial, the music suffers.

Posture at the harp is fairly universal. Hand and arm position share some universal traits, yet none of us harpists plays the harp precisely the same way. Every musician over the course of their playing career is going to make changes to how they approach their instrument. The successful marriage of assimilation of a durable and sustainable technique and ownership and adaptation creates a lifetime of happiness at the harp, and in music.

It's at the early point in building a technique where understanding what *method* you want to use to play will be important. A method of playing can define some of the technical approaches to a discipline. Knowing where you want to be on the method spectrum requires some research on your part, clear expectations defined between you and your teacher, and periodic evaluation and review, to ensure you are on the path you want to be on. Oh, and-- see the universal truths above: everyone closes, everyone follows through, and everyone gestures. These are matters that are addressed in individual methods of playing the harp. For the purposes of this class we're going to focus on the technical assimilations instilled in the American dialectic by French harpists Carlos Salzedo and Marcel Grandjany.

POSTURE

Come to the harp with the large muscles of the back and shoulder doing the work of creating the frame for the arms, and subsequently the hands. Think of the posture of a singer, or a dancer. Support the shoulders, neck, arms, and hands by engaging the muscles of the torso and lifting the rib cage. Support the lower back by engaging the thighs in the work of holding the harp (via the right knee, for the most part.) Learn to use the proper muscle groups for the right job: this is the very definition of building stamina at the harp.

If one is approaching holding the harp in any way that is not healthy, your body will let you know! Listen to what you are hearing from these large muscle groups and adjust accordingly. Use the wrong muscle groups for the job and you won't find satisfaction or enjoyment in playing

the harp. Learn and use the proper muscle groups and you will happily be able to play the harp for many years.

It takes a long time to develop the muscles so that every contributing part can do its job and be strong in the right places.

Keep the spine straight, but never rigid

Move from the hips rather than from the waist. When you are still/stiff in the hips the energy from the earth cannot move up your body. Without that energy the sound lacks body and focus, and the lower body becomes disassociated from the upper body. There is a discernable difference in the sound when a musician involves their entire body in the process.

Sitting at the harp is balanced, but not symmetrical. Balance your torso, right to left, but favor the right side to support the harp. The harp sits on the right shoulder/collarbone, not into the hollow of the neck.

To check your seated posture

1. Experiment with balancing the harp on its back feet. There is a point where every (pedal) harp will balance on the back feet, before beginning to move.
2. Position yourself on the bench at the juncture of the hip/pelvic region. Meet the harp with your torso as the harp begins to move past its balance point.
3. Shrug the harp off your right shoulder. It's the three bears:
 - A. Sitting in front of the balance point of the harp, the harp will be so light that it bounces off the shoulder without any effort
 - B. Sitting behind the balance point the harp will be heavy enough on the shoulder that you cannot shrug it off
 - C. When the balance is just right, you control the forward motion of the harp via the shrug
4. On a pedal harp, extend your right leg out so your foot is touching the A pedal. You should be able to depress the pedal into the sharp position using the toes of your right foot without hyper-extending your knee.
5. On a pedal harp your left ankle, with your foot on the B pedal in natural, wants to be at about a 45-degree angle.
6. Stretch your left arm straight out, to the column. Either touch your fingertips to the column or wrap your hand at the joint of the third knuckle around the lowest string on the harp. If you can do this the harp will be properly positioned on your right shoulder.

Many of these same principles apply to playing the lever harp: a straight back, motion from the hips rather than the waist, shoulders that are down, a lifted rib cage for ease of motion, and an angle for the harp that puts some weight resistance on the right shoulder. A lever harp that is positioned too low will require the player to curl around the harp, introducing exceptionally damaging posture and closing off an open airway to the lungs. A lever harp positioned too close to the player will bounce too easily off the shoulder, requiring the player to clench the thighs to hold the instrument steady. Neither of these scenarios will be conducive to creating long term physical comfort at the harp.

HAND AND ARM POSITIONS FOR PLAYING

For the hand and arm focus your technical development on:

1. **Building** muscle strength while not inhibiting the fast twitch muscle action of the fingers, in support of equal and independent finger action.
2. **Learning to balance** the weight and effort in the hand equally over the palm and ALL FIVE fingers, to increase the potential for an even and balanced sound and maximum reach and flexibility.
3. **Creating** and maintaining an open channel in the wrist for the tendons and muscles to contract and release naturally. The wrist shapes the hand, it never leads the hand.
4. **Lengthening** and opening the elbow so that the muscles flow easily into the forearm.

For the shoulders and torso learn to:

5. **Rely on** the shoulder muscles (NOT the forearm) to support the positioning of the arm and the hand.
6. **Lift the rib** cage, not the shoulders. Keeping an open and lifted rib cage brings maximum space to the lungs, and takes the “heat” off the shoulder, for holding the harp. So, the shoulder can focus on being the support for the arms and hands.
7. **Move** from the hips, not the waist.

For the lower body be aware that:

8. **The thighs support** the lower back. Find a seated position where the thighs can be as close to at a right angle with the floor as possible.
9. Pedaling comes from the calves, ankles, and ball of the foot so- stay loose!
10. **At the** pedal harp learn to sit with your feet on the pedals, not on the floor.

11. **For the** lever harp use your calves and feet like the grounded tree trunks they are starting here and feeling connected to the ground will give you freedom all the way up your body to play with ease and confidence.

ARTICULATION

1. **Is the** release of the energy we put in to preparing the string to be played
2. **Articulation happens** at exactly the moment we hear the sound
3. **Articulation is not** related to the length of the printed note
4. **Articulation requires** action from each of the three knuckles:
 - The first knuckle to strike the string
 - The second knuckle to direct volume
 - The third knuckle for follow-through (release, close, finish...)

GESTURES

1. **The gesture** you use to leave a note is the one you will use to start the next note
2. **Gestures correlate** with the length of the printed notes e.g. the quicker the note values, the smaller the gesture. The longer the note values the longer the gesture
3. **The gesture** creates technical stamina and freedom: it's the place where the harpist renews the good muscle energy needed to produce a beautiful sound
4. **Gestures** fill the space between the notes and prepare the arm and hand for the next approach to the strings

SOUND

What the harp likes to do is ring, and what we have to do as harpists is work with the natural voice of our harps to find the ways to get our harp to speak. Listen to the harp and work with the harp to create a sustaining, ringing sound. A dry, brittle or strained sound tells us we are working at cross purposes with the harp, striving and forcing, rather than collaborating.

Sound comes from using your entire body and is produced through a combination of physical awareness: supple in the fingers, firm in the palm, open in the forearms and strong in the shoulders and back, and mental acuity: breathing and singing phrases, listening, and analyzing as we play. A beautiful sound comes first from hearing the sound we want to create, and then working with the muscles and the harp to produce what our ear hears. Pulling will always make a dry and aggressive sound. Pushing in or exerting pressure on the string will produce a wet, warm sound. Get into the string and use a long finger action. Prepare the string before releasing.

The sound doesn't stop when we leave the string, so work to understand what a gesture does to the sound. The gesture also communicates rhythm, to us and to the audience.

Lean into the harp, press into the string, close your fingers on the follow through, and keep the shoulders engaged, but never tense. Listen to what you are hearing, assess what you are hearing and whether it's the sound you intended. Producing the incredibly rich varieties of sound that are possible on the harp comes from engaging your entire body in the process. Hearing, the breath, and touch all have a part to play. We are singers at the harp- that's the goal, anyway.

SOME THOUGHTS FROM MUSICIANS WHO ARE SMARTER THAN I AM

Essential Basics

- Play in tune
- Develop and trust your ears
- Have excellent rhythm
- Have beautiful tone

On the process

- Creativity is risk, the result is expressivity
- Listen to yourself, always
- Art is a growth process
- Practice technique every day
 - I'm really into closing fingers
 - Make every note a special occasion
 - Speed is never more important than making the dynamics
- Be well rounded
- Live and keep interests

Warming up

- Circulation first
- Attend to a good position and closing
- Silence is more important than the pluck; the rhythm happens between the notes, and there is rhythm in silence

Break habits by gentle persistence

Playing is with mind, body, and spirit, not only with our hands

On Performing

- Have a banana 30 minutes before playing, chocolate at intermission
- Leave all your thoughts backstage
- The concert hall is a musician's temple
- Focus on your playing. If you don't focus on your playing the audience cannot either
- Take three deep breaths. Remember how much you love the harp
- Take more than enough time
- Musicality is memorable
- There will always be distractions