



just roll with it

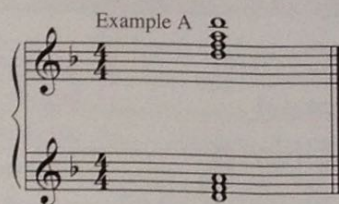
Exploring the array of arpeggiated chords.

by Jaymee Haefner

Harp. Arpeggio. Have you ever thought about the similarity between these words? Arpeggio is a beautiful Italian word that essentially means the same thing as the more mundane term “rolled chord”—playing the notes of a chord in succession rather than simultaneously. Not only is the name of our instrument tied to this musical effect, it’s also one of the most prevalent techniques in harp music. However, not all arpeggios are created equally. There is a plethora of rolled chord styles, and we should be well-versed in the different types, as well as how and when to use them.

ROLLING WITH THE POSSIBILITIES

Consider the following chord.



If you came upon this chord, you’d have several choices: 1.) play the chord “blocked,” with all notes sounding simultaneously; 2.) arpeggiate the chord slowly or quickly, beginning with the lowest note on the beat of the chord; 3.) arpeggiate the chord slowly or quickly, beginning with the lowest note before the beat so that the top note sounds on the beat; 4.) play the chord with both hands rolling the chord at the same time; or in rare cases 5) roll the chord from the top to the bottom. So many choices! Luckily, though, most composers provide clues for how to play chords.

Often, there is no written indication as to whether chords should be broken or blocked. The familiar “squiggly line” started to appear in Baroque music as early as the 17th century and became common by the 19th century. Composers have often included the

squiggly line in sections where the musical interpretation depends on an arpeggiation. But when there is no indication, the performer must decide whether to roll or not. When in doubt, most harpists agree that chords of three or more notes with no specific indication should be rolled at least slightly in order to avoid a dry sound. (See the harp methods written by McDonald/Wood, Salzedo/Lawrence, Renie, Grossi, Kondonassis, and Bochsa for more discussions).

Generally, a squiggly line that is separated between the treble and bass clef staff indicates a roll performed nearly simultaneously with both hands (see example B), whereas a line which is continuous between the two staves indicates a bottom-to-top roll (see example C).

DO A BACKGROUND CHECK

Because the arpeggiation of a chord takes time to play, we are forced to make a choice: should the time be borrowed from the beat before the chord (rolling before the beat), or should the chord use the time following (rolling on the beat)? Begin with the context of the music. Was the piece written during or before the 18th century (think of Handel’s *Concerto*)? If so, the bass note of the chords were especially important. Similar to other ornamentations in the Baroque period, the first note of an arpeggiation often began on the beat, thus placing emphasis on the bottom note. The Classical era was a time of transition, with multiple practices (compare the Mozart Flute and Harp *Concerto* with Spohr’s *Fantaisie*).

By the later 19th century, ornamentations and arpeggiations came to be performed before the beat, thus placing the emphasis on the top note (Pierne’s *Impromptu Caprice*, for example). Music in the 20th and 21st century employs a wide range of techniques, including top-to-bottom rolls (such as those used in Caplet’s *Divertissements*). Other 20th-century

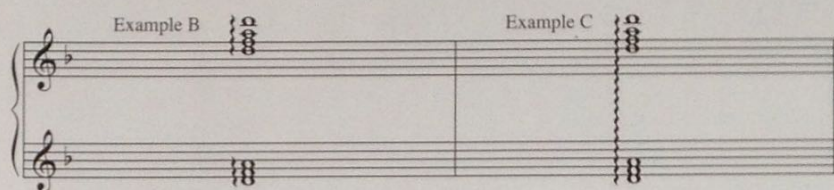
compositions such as Faure's *Impromptu* and Hindemith's *Sonata* utilize large chords that are rolled more tightly, with the right hand beginning its roll before the left hand has completed.

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

Of course, the number of notes to be played and the tempo will often determine how early you must begin the arpeggiation. For example, in the third movement of Houdy's *Sonata*, the large chords must be started well before the downbeat in order to have time for the hands to pass over one another while maintaining a sense of the meter (see example D). Utilizing a similarly large range of notes, the chordal arpeggiations at the beginning of Pierne's *Impromptu Caprice* are traditionally played in a free and flowing manner. Notice how Pierne's notation of these arpeggios suggests rhythmic freedom, because the notes are written linearly rather than vertically and no time signature is indicated (see example E).

A succession of rapidly articulated chords may require shorter arpeggiations, with both hands rolling nearly-simultaneously (similar to example B). Let's look at the opening of Debussy's *Danse sacree*, with chordal planing, or parallel chords (example F). Marked *doux et soutenu* (soft and constant), the writing in this passage lends itself to rolls with both hands. You can experiment with beginning the right hand roll before the left hand has finished, so that the articulation of notes is staggered between both hands. In this passage, a bottom-to-top roll could cloud the quality of the three-octave melody in the bottom, top, and middle of the chord because of the amount of time required to play each chord.

Additionally, the rolls on quarter notes may be played more rapidly than the rolls on the half-notes in this section; some harpists choose to articulate the longer half notes as a bottom-to-top roll. Because Debussy did not make a specific indication as to the quality of the rolls in this passage, we are left to decide which



Example D: Pierick Houdy, *Sonate*, mvt 3, mm 48-52



Example E: Gabriel Pierne, *Impromptu Caprice*, mm 1



Example F: Claude Debussy, I. *Danse sacree*, mm 8-13



best fits the round, consistent phrase structure. By adjusting the speed of the rolls, you'll find that you have even greater control over the subtle dynamic changes as well.

PUMP UP THE VOLUME

One of the advantages to using rolls is that it can make the harp sound louder, because of the prolonged amount of time in articulating a chord. If you are accompanying a Celtic band and play every chord blocked, you are heard for only a nanosecond on each beat. However, by rolling each chord, you are essentially sustaining your sound over a longer period of

time—which can be advantageous since each note's volume decreases as soon as you play it on the harp. For example, listen to the opening of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol* cadenza—would it have the same impact if the opening chords were blocked rather than rolled with *grandeur*?

ADD IT UP

There are many ways to practice rolls. One of the best ways I've found is to place all eight fingers on the strings and begin by playing the left hand 4th finger repeatedly. Then, repeatedly play the left hand

cont. on pg. 14

cont. from pg. 13

4th and 3rd in quick succession. Add the left hand 2nd, and continue adding notes until you have a fully-rolled chord from bottom to top. The advantage is that by adding one note at a time, the roll is rapid and also warm from the beginning. Make sure to focus on the smoothness of the roll from the left hand thumb to the right

hand fourth, and always listen for a warm tone in the right-hand thumb, since it often carries the melody. (See example G.)

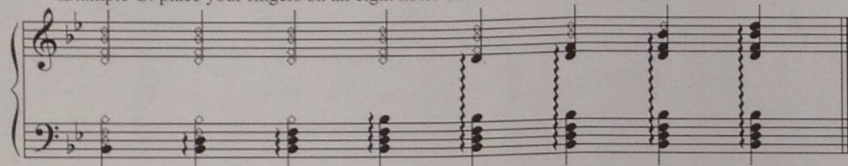
READY TO ROCK AND ROLL!

With a bit of practice, you'll find that your ear will help you find the right amount of arpeggiation to use. If in doubt,

focus on the tone and contour of the phrase. Make sure to try different types of rolls to decide which one fits best. Just like shopping for a perfect pair of shoes, you might need to try on a lot of styles before finding your favorite! ●

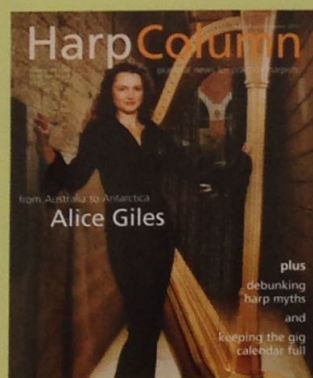
Jaymee Haefner teaches harp and is the Director of Undergraduate Studies at the University of North Texas College of Music in Denton. She currently serves as the Recording Secretary and Southwestern Regional Director for the AHS, Treasurer for the World Harp Congress and National Harp Associations Liaison for the World Harp Congress Review.

Example G: place your fingers on all eight notes of the chord, and roll only the indicated notes



harpcolumn.com

blogs • discussion forums • news • calendar • classified ads



NEW!
download the
current issue
online!

YOUR subscription in **YOUR** hands!

- subscribe
- renew
- change your address
- download current issue

all at **harpcolumn.com**

more DeCray

cont. from pg. 9

delighted in receiving visits from her students' children. Family and friends who were especially close knew her dry wit and became hapless victims of her harmless and funny practical jokes.

The warm home she created with her husband and soul mate Malcolm McAfee, became a place where her students, musicians, and family would gather for music making and passionate political and philosophical discussions, usually over brunch of her delicious strawberry crepes. For many years, She and Malcolm generously hosted the Bay Area Harp Chapter post holiday potluck at their home that included introducing harpists that had just moved to the Bay Area.

Roy Malan, concertmaster of the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra, said, "To me Marcella has always been an inspiration both as a great artist and as a consummate professional. On top of that, she is by far the most admired and beloved member of our orchestra."

A tribute titled "Marcella DeCray—A Life in Music" showcasing the many artistic contributions of Marcella can be seen on YouTube. ●

—by Sarah Voinow, with contributions from Caroline Crawford, Lexi Lowenstein, Lael Lowenstein, and Roy Malan