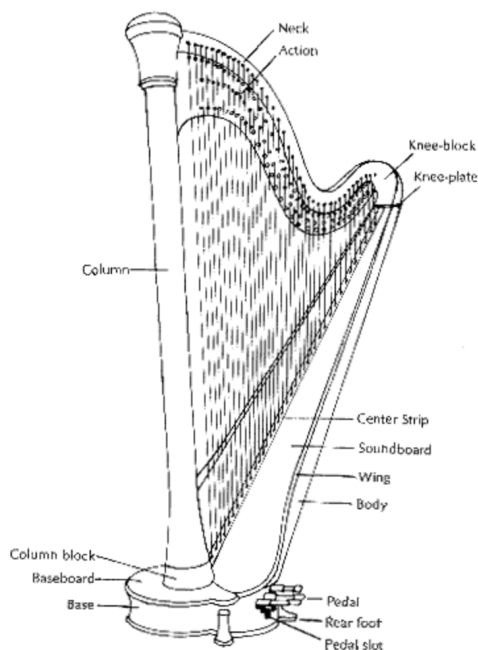


Writing for the harp

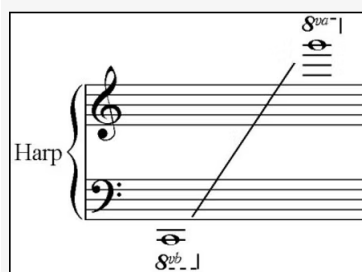
Veronica Klavzar

Pedal harp basics

A full size concert harp has 47 strings, arranged diatonically with seven strings per octave. Range: C1–G7; C4 is middle C. The harp sounds at written pitch. C strings are red; F strings are blue or black. Bass strings are metal wound, middle strings usually gut, and upper strings gut or nylon.



Example 1: Range of the harp



The lowest C and D must be pre-tuned because they have no pedal mechanism; on some harps this also applies to the highest G. The left hand can reach the full range; avoid routine right hand writing below G2.

Four fingers per hand

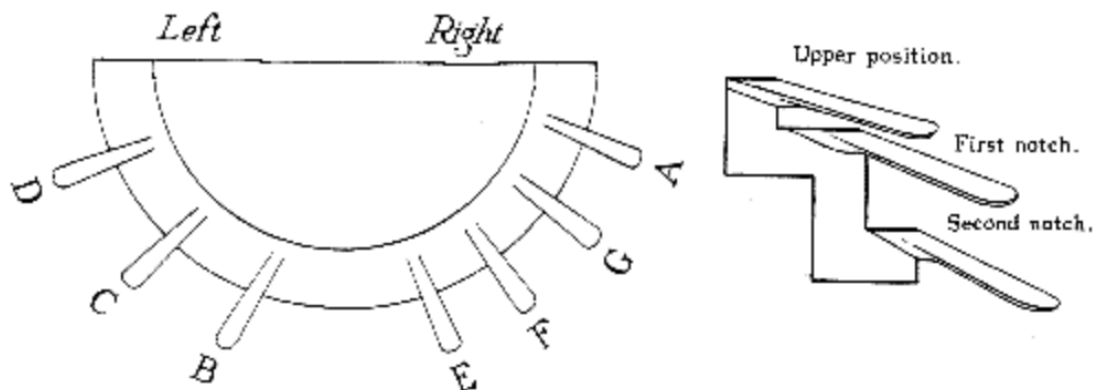
Harpists use the thumb, index, middle and ring fingers, numbered 1–4. A simultaneous chord normally has at most four notes per hand. Plan spans of an octave to a tenth; the comfortable span depends on the player, register and voicing. Wider rolled chords need time.



I am not an octopus! ;)

Pedals

Pedal order from the player's left to right: D C B | E F G A. The left foot operates D C B; the right foot E F G A. Each pedal changes every connected string of that letter name in all octaves.



Top position = flat; middle = natural; bottom = sharp. In the flat position the discs are disengaged and the string has its full vibrating length. There are no double flat or double sharp positions.

One pedal change with each foot can be simultaneous. Changes on the same side normally need to be staggered. Distinguish a one position change from flat to sharp or sharp to flat, which crosses the middle position. Allow time and check the sequence at the actual tempo.

Change a pedal after the last use of the old pitch and before the new pitch is needed. Include strings still ringing: changing their pedal can alter the resonance or cause noise. Give a clear initial setting and the complete setting for each glissando.

Enharmonics and repeated notes

Enharmonic spelling determines which string is played. D $\sharp$ and E $\flat$ can sound the same pitch on two different strings. Alternating these strings can make repeated notes more fluid. On one string, replacing the finger interrupts the vibration, so rapid repetitions sound drier. D $\flat$, G $\sharp$ and A $\sharp$ have no equivalent on another standard pedal harp string.

Flat keys often favour resonance because fewer discs are engaged.

Resonance and staccato

Low strings generally ring longer; high strings decay faster. Dense bass writing can blur. A plucked note can not crescendo after its attack. Specify "let ring" or "l.v." where resonance should continue, and "damp" where an exact cutoff matters.

Staccato needs active damping for a genuinely short sound, especially in the bass. Damping takes a free finger or hand and time; include it when checking the passage's playability.

Harmonics

The usual octave harmonic is made by touching the string at its midpoint and plucking. It sounds one octave above the string pitch. For example, written C4 sounds like C5.

Rapid changes between harmonics and ordinary notes, multiple harmonics and higher partials should be checked with the performer.

What works well and what needs care

Usually approachable: diatonic arpeggios, glissandi with stable pedals, spacious rolled chords, melodies with simple accompaniment and repeating patterns that fit the hand.

Often demanding: rapid chromaticism, frequent pedal changes, five finger piano patterns, rapid repeated chords and large leaps. Tempo and hand distribution matter.

For glissandi, show the pitch collection or pedal setting, direction, starting and ending notes, and duration. For chords, distinguish a simultaneous attack from a roll.

Lever and electric harps

Each lever raises one string by a semitone, independently of other octaves. Confirm the instrument's range, tuning and lever coverage. Give starting settings and mark changes by pitch and octave. Leave time for the hand, usually the left, to operate the levers.

With E flat tuning and all levers disengaged, the strings follow E ♭ F G A ♭ B ♭ C D. Engaging the E, A and B levers raises the flats to naturals; the other strings can be raised to sharps.

The lever operated electric harp follows these same rules. Electric and electroacoustic pedal harps also exist. Specify effects and who controls them; amplification does not remove fingering or pitch change limits.

Sources / Useful Links

[Veronica Klavzar — Playing techniques](#)

[Harp Notation — Manual](#)

[Composing for Harp](#)

[Les signes de l'arc](#)

[Harp Inside Out — Composing for the Harp](#)

[Harp Spectrum — Composing for the Harp](#)