

Introduction - Theory of the Harp



The intersectionality between music theory and harp pedagogy has been largely limited in both standard textbooks and harp-specific resources. Although there have been some attempts to unite the two worlds together, a large majority of the resources either gloss over theoretical topics and simply introduce ideas without harp-specific aides, or rely on previous piano instruction/knowledge at the harp. While the piano is an accessible and straightforward instrument, the harp's structure and layout can benefit from a uniquely stylized approach to music theory.

Often times, young harp students study privately with a teacher outside of their schools, and will be given supplementary music theory resources to learn fundamentals. While many gain an understanding of music theory through generalized instruction, the harp lends itself to a unique pedagogical structure. In studying numerous textbooks and resources, the piano is generally utilized as the standard instrument, and harp repertoire is often highly limited. For example, In the Kostka-Payne "Tonal Harmony" text, one of the current leading harmony texts, there are a total of four examples that utilize the harp, with the earliest example being Tchaikovsky's Waltz of the Flowers, and the rest are works of Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky. Even in harp-specific publications, the piano is used as an example for notation, register, and pitch. While using the piano as a guide in general music instruction is beneficial in its own right, myself and other harpists have wondered, "What if we had a text that used the harp and the harp only? Why do we have to assume that our students already have studied the piano, when the harp and the piano have so many shared principles?"

I believe that there is no need to teach theory through another instrumental lens when the harp presents all of the necessary tools and assets to understand music. The strings are directly in front of the harpist, and we have no medium (besides our own fingers and the instrument's complex mechanism) that can prevent us from understanding and learning about music theory through the instrument. When one ponders the vast majority of harp writing as intervals, chords, and arpeggios as vital elements of the repertoire, what better way to learn about the elements that create our repertoire than with the instrument itself?

In this text, I present a unique ordering that best suits the harp's orientation. Following a brief overview of the harp's system of colored strings, musical notation and note names are connected to the coinciding strings. There is equal treatment of treble and bass clef, as both clefs are vital for a harpist. This text is specifically designed for the double-action pedal harp, the standard instrument that is utilized in solo, chamber, and orchestral settings. These harps utilize a pedal system to control the sharps and flats of each pitch. Immediately after introducing musical notation, pitch alterations are introduced (as well as the limitations of the harp's mechanical system.) A unique aspect of the harp's structure is the ability to somewhat easily introduce enharmonicism, an effect used by composers and a tool for harpists to rewrite difficult or unplayable passages.

In coincidence with new concepts, different harp-specific tools are incorporated into the text. Notes on harp notation are included in several chapters, specifically in regards to standards in fingering (the usage of all fingers except pinkies and the numbering system with fingering),

and pedal notation. These harp-specific elements allow for unique approaches to teaching a variety of fundamentals. For example, tetrachords can be played using the same fingering at the harp, and as long as the correct pedal chart is used, a student can quickly gain a comprehension of how tetrachords and pitch alterations work together to create major and minor scales, amongst many others.

This text is not intended to serve as a technical guide to playing the harp. There are a variety of approaches to technical aspects of harp technique, and this theory text is designed to be used by any harpist from any technical school/background. The fingerings that are included are intended to showcase the elements of music theory at play, and some of the structural limitations of the instrument. For example, a chromatic scale may only be played by a single finger, as this type of scale often requires the repetitions of strings to achieve the full chromatic scale.

In this project, I've taken an approach that is designed to allow harpists to fluently understand the language of music through their instrument. The harp is by no means an easy instrument to play or study, but a thorough theoretical approach designed for the instrument will benefit the player in the long run. From freelancing harpists, private teachers, soloists, and orchestral harpists alike, an understanding of music theory greatly aids the flexibility and insight needed to create musical and interpretive decisions.