

Harpist - or Harpy?

Harpists are used to going solo or working with other harpists – but how do other instrumentalists or singers find working with them?

“Miss Crawford's attractions did not lessen. The harp arrived, and rather added to her beauty, wit, and good-humour; for she played with the greatest obligingness, with an expression and taste which were peculiarly becoming, and there was something clever to be said at the close of every air. A young woman, pretty, lively, with a harp as elegant as herself, and both placed near a window, cut down to the ground, and opening on a little lawn, surrounded by shrubs in the rich foliage of summer, was enough to catch any man's heart. Fanny could not wonder that Edmund was at the Parsonage every morning”

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

It's difficult to escape the persistent public perception of the harp and the harpist which Austen encapsulates above (though her subtle genius is, of course, at once to describe and gently to mock): this delightful extract is, after all, nearly two hundred years old. As we all know, the harp is the instrument of angels; of golden-haired damsels in Medieval romances; of mystical Celtic songstresses; of overly pointy-eared elf maidens in certain film adaptations of Tolkien... Harps make pretty tinkly noises - don't they? - equally suited to evoke fluffiness or melancholy; and harpists are petite, blond and sweet-natured - aren't they? - always immaculately coiffured and be-ball-gowned...

Now Jane Austen knew a thing or two about beauty and the manners of her time, and you can take her word for it, the harp and a modest facility for playing it were essential ingredients of eligible femininity. One can easily imagine Mozart writing his exquisite concerto for just such a well-presented pair of young ladies.

Of course, the harp was a single action instrument then - nothing too tricky or unwieldy - and Austen was writing before the piano knocked the harp off its pedestal as *the* domestic instrument for fashionable families. But never mind King David (his was an archaic type of lute anyway) or your Minstrel Boy (who couldn't have gone to war with that much clobber slung behind him): by the eighteenth century the harp was an indispensable piece of drawing room furniture, and definitely women's work.

Of course there have been famous male pioneers of the past like Hasselmans and Tournier, and great modern virtuosi whose names we all know. But in the orchestral world, as much today as in the male chauvinist past, the harp is still almost uniquely a woman's monopoly. Witness this next extract:

“Even in orchestras”, writes Norman Del Mar in Anatomy of an Orchestra written just 30 years ago, “where the presence of women is fully recognised, it is still considered undesirable that women should be in too great a preponderance over men, and as a result this is still unofficially taken into broad account in auditions”.

Cor blimey!

“But”, he goes on, “still none of this applies to the harpist whose position, however much it may be invaded by men, as it is today to a great extent in our British symphony orchestras, continues to remain a primarily feminine province.”

So much for the public perception: but what about the perception of the people who know

and work with harpists on a daily basis – that is, their fellow musicians? Well, let's take as a starting point that peerless observer of musicianly traits and foibles, Gerard Hoffnung. His harpist is certainly delicately-featured, in a ball gown with beautifully-arranged hair – but look at what she's playing: a huge, cumbersome Penny Farthing bicycle...!

Now, of course Hoffnung is using his caricaturist's licence here; but it perhaps gets closer to the truth of how non-harpist musicians view the harp and its keeper. What is he actually saying about the harp? For one thing, it's BIG! All musicians grumble occasionally about having to lug their instrument around, whether it's a piccolo or a double bass – but the harp surely takes the biscuit! Most non-harpists are thus in constant awe of the sheer physical dedication and determination which harpists exhibit day in, day out in the pursuit of their careers. Hoffnung deliciously characterises the paradox between the sylph-like player and her unwieldy instrument.

Hand-in-hand with the size aspect is, of course, the volume: as anyone who's shared a house with a harpist will tell you, the harp is LOUD! We'll get onto the chamber musician's views on harmonizing with the harp later, but for now, suffice it to say that for all its perceived Aeolian delicacy, the harp is certainly no shrinking violet. Finally, perhaps Hoffnung also has something to say about the origins of the beast: the Penny Farthing bicycle was developed in the 1870s, when cycling was a New Thing. However, wheeled transport wasn't and the bicycle was a logical extension of the cart. Similarly, the Érard harp was a wonderful reinvention of an ancient instrument, and a natural continuation, opening up all sorts of new paths to explore. Or maybe this is all a bit far-fetched, and Hoffnung is just being cruel: the harp, like the Penny Farthing, is oversized, out-of-date and absurd....

This is not, however, the general view (he says hastily!). Since its reinvention in the 19th Century, symphonic composers have revelled in the sonic possibilities of the harp – an instrument which, as well as giving marvellous scope for great washes of atmospheric sound, also allows for extreme precision and definition. Pianists rarely get a chance to work with harpists, as the two have (before Boulez's *Sur Incises*, at least...) been more or less mutually exclusive; however, in an orchestral context, pianos and harps are often not only sited together, but also required to perform a similar function. One pianist questioned talks about the necessary ability of harpists, pianists and percussionists to anticipate the beat in an orchestral context, because of the precision of the action they perform. So another contradiction to the 'fluffy' image: harpists need to count like machines and pluck right on the nail!

It's interesting to muse further on the harp/piano relationship, particularly in the context of song. In this year of Britten, many harpists will be booked to do the the Canticle and the Folksongs (not to mention later in the year, probably more than ever, the Ceremony!). The singer's natural recital partner is, of course, the piano accompanist and there is a central distinction between this and the solo pianist: accompanists are expert at following, nay anticipating, all the vagaries and whims of their singers. How is it for a harpist, then, for whom this intimacy with the human voice is, in classical music at least, not so common? Singers surveyed love the change in timbre and the flexibility it allows; but while they say harpists are musically bang on, they aren't always so adept at following the *words*... This is a difficulty for all (non-piano) instrumentalists accompanying the voice: we're perfectly alive to all kinds of musical nuance, for that is what we concentrate on. How on earth can one interpret words with an instrument? Now there's something to think about...

Instrumentalists relish the chance to work with a harpist in a chamber context: for one

thing, the repertoire is to die for! However much harpists may groan inwardly at being booked to do yet another *Introduction et Allegro* or *Sonate en trio*, string and wind players can't get enough of them. But what's it like trying to play intimately with a big, loud, plucky thing? Ravel famously declared that the piano and violin were *essentiellement incompatibles*: does the same hold true for the harp, which is, after all, not dissimilar in impact to the piano?

The first thing to say is that the harp is the anchor in any group of this kind. We may pity harpists always having to arrive an hour early to tune, and perhaps scoff at their apparent neurosis in doing so, but it's a tall order having to make sure all those strings are perfectly in tune: look at how long piano tuners take (and just imagine if pianists had to tune their own pianos before each performance!). So chamber music partners have to accept that once the harp's tuned, that's that: you're either in tune with the harp, or you're out of tune.

The viola and the flute are obviously the instrument's most usual associates in chamber music – and what a wonderful, if counter-intuitive, combination this is! “It's something else, playing with a harp”, says one violist; “you feel cushioned by this wonderful feather-bed of sound, and yet all the harpists I've played with are so responsive to every tick of the bow arm”. That essential sense of timing coming to the fore again. And as for the flautist: “It's just an ideal sound world; the harp is like the light but rich sponge, and we're the silvery icing on the top! And the rep: if you've had enough of Ibert and Piazzolla, harpists can pretty much do anything a piano or guitar can!” But balance can be an issue: “It's sometimes quite hard to come through”, continues the violist; “For example, the opening of the third movement of the Debussy, where the viola plays *pizzicato* over those relentless harp notes; it's really hard to speak against the harp, which can be quite overwhelming...”.

And yet: “There's no such thing as a bad harpist”, says one violinist; “if they're playing professionally, then they're good”. This is a vocalisation of the awe with which most non-harpists view the playing of the harp: it seems so difficult! All those strings, and all that pedal jiggery-pokery – how on earth do they do it, with so much to think about at once, and yet continue to play in time?! Most other musicians concur that harpists are a breed apart, with a talent for multi-tasking and an independent streak formed by being the first one in and the last one out.

So in summary: dedicated, precise, occasionally a little overwhelming, self-reliant, holding their own in still something of a man's world, and lugging all that heavy artillery around - formidable creatures indeed, and far from the fluffy image we started with. But is it all good? Can harpist turn harpy in the blink of an eye? “I've come across a few difficult characters in my time”, recalls one conductor. “They can be quite demanding, but who can blame them? The harp's a pretty unforgiving thing to be beholden to: and if you come in wrong, everyone notices!”.

The word “harp” has even developed a negative side itself: Shakespeare has Richard III irritatedly chiding his queen “Harp not on that string, madam!”. But equally the word “Harpy”, you know, can also be a compliment - the ancients were divided as to whether they were repellently gruesome (Aeschylus, Virgil, Dante) or beautiful women with wings (Hesiod, and much Greek pottery).

One of Beecham's classic dicta was “The English don't much care for music – but they like the noise it makes”. To my mind it could hardly be an apter description of harps and harpists, who, whatever they're like as people, are instantly forgiven for the gorgeous noise they make.