

Elizabeth Volpe Bligh – Orchestra Playing Tips for Beginners

Know what the most common beat patterns look like. Normally, a downward beat is the first beat of a bar and an upward beat is the last beat. Abnormally, you will encounter conductors who have their own personal style, and sometimes it can be confusing. Decode their conducting language as soon as possible. Some beats are subdivided when the tempo slows down; so a 4 can be conducted as 8 eighth notes instead of 4 quarter notes. They should tell you this, but you'll be golden if you can figure it out yourself.

Some pieces start halfway through a bar or on the upbeat. The conductor sets the tempo by giving the previous beat before the starting note. Frequently, the harp part is in triplets and you have to really watch the conductor to make sure your beats are perfectly aligned with theirs. When you see the preparatory beat, start subdividing it in your mind. For example, if your first notes are quadruplets, think "One-ee-and-a", quintuplets: "u-ni-ver-si-ty", sixes: "One-and-a, two-and-a", etc. This also works for tempo changes. When you are learning your part, look carefully for tempo markings, which are most commonly in Italian, French, German or English. Get a music dictionary; it will become your best friend after your dog and your metronome.

Don't depend on the conductor to give you cues. They often forget or may even cue you incorrectly. Listen to a CD, Youtube, iTunes, etc., or study the score, so you really know your entrances. It helps to know the parts that you are accompanying as well. Sing them to yourself when you practise your own parts.

Get there early enough to tune your harp and warm up. Make sure your harp is tuned to the A that your orchestra uses, such as A natural tuned to 441 or 442. Tune the harp in flats, then check the intonation in natural and sharp in case of faulty regulation. You may have to compromise, or tune specifically for the most exposed parts of the piece. I prefer not to go any sharper or the fixed-pitch instruments such as the glockenspiels will get left behind, and we don't want that to happen, do we?

Have at least two erasable pencils with erasers, earplugs, tuner, pickup, an entire set of harp strings, a wire-cutter, set of felt picks (try Petite Pig picks), and anything else you need in a black bag onstage with you at all times. Know how to replace a string quickly and noiselessly.

Get a couple of good orchestra outfits that comply with your orchestra's dress code. The code usually specifies black, long-

sleeved long skirts or dresses for girls, and tuxedos, black suits or tails for boys. It goes without saying that a sturdy, stylish pair of black harp shoes rounds out the look. If you wear a skirt, make sure it does not interfere with the pedals.

Get the harp part as early as possible. Make copies of all the difficult parts you get, catalogue them, and file them away for the future. When a piece is programmed again, you will not have to solve the same problems.

Mark the pedal changes before you start practicing. Draw pedal diagrams at every starting point. They may not match the key signature! Look for chromatic passages and make them more efficient by using enharmonics where possible. Most harpists put the diagrams above the staff to leave room for pedal markings below the staff; it should be very obvious which bar they are attached to. No floating pedal diagrams! The pedals themselves should be clearly marked exactly where they happen. Keep the part tidy! Put the right pedal over the left, either in the middle of the staff or just underneath. Never obliterate notes or important markings by writing pedal changes too close, circling dynamics, writing in cues, etc. Always use lead pencil that is easily erased.

Eliminate awkward page turns by copying a page to be folded out, or write out the next few bars on the bottom of the page.

Use fingerings which allow you to look at the conductor and make the right accents. Split single-line parts between both hands to avoid over-use injuries. Look for patterns, and use the same fingerings for all similar configurations. Avoid jumping around; place whenever possible, and use the same finger on the same note if you can. Consistency is key!

Edit impossible passages. If a part contains ten-note chords, stretches that require hands the size of platters, pedal changes so numerous that you are performing zapateado, lines so far apart that you need a third eye, lines so close together that your left hand is tripping over your right, chord jumps that should be in the Olympics....don't be a hero! Just find a way to get the right effect, with the correct harmony, rhythm and line, and everyone's happy. If there are two harp parts, re-distribute the parts to avoid nasty pedal changes, a host of awkward problems, and frazzled nerves. Remember: it's not about you; it's about making the orchestra sound as good as possible.

Mark the part legibly with measure numbers and cues, using clear terminology. If the part has numbered bars, figure out the bar numbers for all your starting points and mark them in. If you have a

recording of the piece, listen to it, pencil in hand, and mark all the important cues that help you with your entrances. If you have 14 measures to count, and there is a trumpet solo in the fourth bar, write “m4 trpt” in the space provided. This will give you great confidence when you’re performing. NEVER mark in the names of the performers instead of the instruments; it isn't helpful to anyone.

Practise with the metronome almost all the time, and make sure it's on the fastest possible speed that the piece will go. Andante con moto, for example, is almost Allegro. The metronome is the closest thing to a conductor, though with less charisma.

Practice all the pedal changes and practice counting while you're doing them. Keep the metronome going while you do this, so you know exactly how much time you have.

Make sure your hands are placed before it's time to play. This gives you time to look at the conductor for a perfectly timed entrance.

When you practice your part, look up at where the conductor would be in your line of vision.

Memorize or at least be very aware of what notes you're playing. Don't just sight-read. Be really conscious of what key you are in and what pedals you need. Double-check the pedals when you have the time. Be sure you have read the pedal diagrams accurately.

Dampen rhythmically, when the notes are supposed to stop.

At the first rehearsal:

Continue to mark in cues as you hear them and get cues from other musicians’ parts during the breaks. Many conductors don’t give cues.

Write in “solo” over any exposed parts and “covered” over any places where all your hard-practiced notes are obliterated by thick orchestration or enthusiastic brass players. Harpists everywhere will bless you for this.

If the conductor says “We will start at bar 118” and you do not have that marked, start counting “118, 119, 120” until you get to the spot in your music where you do have a numbered bar. Often there is not enough time to do the math to figure out how many bars there are to your next spot.

Mark phrases and cues, especially towards the last bars of repeated patterns. Some pieces repeat the same pattern more than 20 times, and it is very easy to lose count. Write a “1” in the first bar of a lengthy section of repeated bars or patterns, a “2” in the

second, etc., to help you keep track. Odd phrases, hemiolas, and other phrases and accents that do not match the bar lines may confuse you. Write in the melody and sing it as you practice.

If you have marked a cue incorrectly, do not leave it like that in case it trips up the next harpist. Fix it, even if you'll never see it again. Spread the good karma!

Check the tempi! Sometimes a fingering works well at a slow tempo, but becomes completely impossible at the breakneck speed so popular with many conductors. Have a "Plan B" for any awkward passages. It may be necessary to throw away a few notes in order to facilitate beautiful, even playing.

Divide the tacet bars into phrases so they can be counted that way, instead of the odd numbers that are unfortunately in so many parts. In "The Nutcracker", for example, one finds rehearsal letters in bizarre places. It is much easier to count by the phrase rather than by 7, 9 or 15. "Candide" by Bernstein, and "Sleeping Beauty" by Tchaikovsky, are numbered in tens, making them excruciating to count. For some unfathomable reason, a few composers put the rehearsal letters on the last bar of a phrase! Other pieces feature a similar lack of logic. Be forewarned!

Don't trust the part. If it sounds wrong, there is a good chance that it is. Ask the conductor. However, occasionally they may not understand or hear your question, so you should also check the score yourself. If there is a mistake, fix it legibly and permanently, so the next harpist doesn't have to suffer.

Read "The Harp in the Orchestra" by Beatrice Schroeder Rose. It's full of great examples of ways to fix unmanageable parts.

If you have questions about an orchestra part, a good resource is www.harpcolumn.com. Type your question into a search engine such as Google, and you may find your answer on previous chats on that forum, or if not, you can log on and ask a new question.

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