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Writing for the Pedal Harp

1. The harp is not a piano. Most piano music does not work for the harp. The harp cannot project sound as much as a piano.
2. Harpists use four fingers, not five. Ten-note solid chords are not an option. In running figures, the thumb can be slid onto the note below it, but it is tricky to slide the 4th finger upwards. If a five-note passage is not too fast, a finger can be hopped onto a nearby string.
3. There are seven pedals, one for each note of the diatonic scale. Each pedal can be moved up two slots, which allow for naturals and sharps. The harp is tuned to Cb major, and the pedals move discs into natural and sharp position on each string, except for the bottom C and D. Some smaller harps do not have discs on the top G.
4. Concert grand harps have 47 strings, from a low C up to a top G.
5. The notes ring until they are muffled, especially as they get into the lower register. There is no damper pedal on the harp.
6. Pedals can be moved two at a time, about two per second., or four per second if two are on the right and two are on the left.
7. The pedals are set up in this order: Left foot: D, C, B. Right foot: E, F, G, A.
8. It is not possible to play C and C# at the same time, but it is often possible to substitute an enharmonic note. If you are writing for an orchestra, another instrument can be given that note to avoid making the harpist pedal all the time. Example of bad harp writing for chromatics: Wagner: Magic Fire Music, R. Strauss: Salome's Dance
9. Generally, harpists like to write in their own pedals. Pedal diagrams are very helpful, but only if they are correct. Putting in a box with the pedals' names at starting points is easier for non-harpists.
11. Glissandi must be clearly notated as to the notes and the rhythm. If the gliss goes from the second beat to the fourth beat, the first note should be a half note and the last a quarter note. You cannot leave out a note in a glissando. The only notes that do not have enharmonic equivalents are A, D and G natural.
12. Harpists play mostly by placing their fingers in advance. Large, frequent and fast jumps are very difficult and risky, since there is a much smaller margin of error than on a piano, and the

top notes are beside or behind the harpist's head, and the bottom notes are far away and often in dark light. The right arm cannot reach the bottom strings, and the left arm cannot reach the top strings.

13. Harpists must look where they are going. There are no black keys, but rather the C's are red and the F's are dark blue or black. In dark or tinted lighting, these helpful colours can nearly disappear.

14. Repeated notes or chords are much more difficult than on the piano, because the harpist must pluck the strings, replace, and pluck again. If there is nothing in the bass line, the harpist will frequently alternate hands to accomplish these patterns, or split the lines between the hands.

15. Figures which can be alternated between the hands sound much better. Doubled arpeggios get less sound than a single line arpeggio, since the harpist can pull the strings with more force when there is no need to scrunch underneath the thumb and replace. A single line always sounds more fluid than a doubled line.

16. Arpeggios are best executed if the figures are standard structures rather than each one being different.

17. The average harpist can reach an octave plus two notes with one hand. The space between the notes in between should be reasonable.

18. Notate harp parts on two staves, with the chords split between the two staves the way they would be played on the instrument. It is very hard to read an 8-note chord that is all on one staff. Leave room for pedal markings and fingerings between the two staves. (Most software does this automatically.)

19. Try to stay away from sharp keys, since the harp sounds better with the strings open. In any case, do not go back and forth from sharp notation to flat notation frequently. The harpist will just have to re-write it all in enharmonics.

20. Harmonics can only be heard if they are exposed.

21. Harpists can only play rapid staccato in a single line, since every string must be muffled by the other hand. If they are not too fast, some single line staccato passages can be done by one hand.

22. Special effects can be ineffective if they are used when the whole orchestra is playing. many of them are quite soft.

23. Pedal slides are only effective in the bass of the harp. The higher strings do not ring long enough for the slide to be heard.

24. Put rehearsal marks at the beginning of phrases, not every five or ten bars. Put in lots of recognizable cues, such as oboes or horns, so that the harpist can hear them and enter correctly. It is very good to have bar numbers marked in the part at every multi-rest.
25. Solo or exposed passages should be marked as such. Often, there is a lot to practise and it is best to know on which sections to concentrate the most.
26. Don't write the harp into the entire piece. It is much more effective as colour when it is not in every bar. In many cases, it is just wasted anyway if the orchestration is thick or if the brass are playing.
27. Choose tempi that are playable, recognizing that many composers will go several clicks faster. A part can work perfectly well at one speed and become impossible at a certain point. Metronome markings are much better indications than simply "Allegro" or "With gusto".
28. If you want a really chromatic or busy harp part, or if there is a lot of orchestration, write for two harps.
29. Cross-beam any tricky rhythms across the two staves or across the rests if they are within a beat.
30. Harmonics should be written where they are played, sounding an octave higher.
31. Make sure the notes are aligned and spaced so that they correspond to where they sound in the music. Chords or notes in different staves that are played at the same time should be exactly on top of each other.
32. Two-handed trills work best in orchestra parts. One-handed trills are awkward and cannot be played loudly.

References

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