

## VERY BASIC INTRODUCTION TO THEORY AND ARRANGING

(from workshops given in the past)

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### THEORY

This is a very elementary introduction to theory. I strongly recommend that every harp student take theory courses to fill in the gaps.

#### SCALES:

I use a "movable do" system in which "do" is always the root of any major scale. The major scale consists of: do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do. These notes of the scale are always in the same relation to one another. It's different in the solfège system, in which "do" is always "C" no matter where it fits into the scale. If you split the scale into semi-tones, (which makes a chromatic scale, by the way), it would read C, C#, D, D#, E, F#, G, G#, A, A#, B, C. Therefore, "mi" to "fa", and "ti" to "do" are semi-tones. Do-see-do is a square-dancing move. Where are the E# nor B#, I hear you ask! They are "**enharmonics**" of notes already in the scale: E#=F, and B#=C. Most notes can be written in two different ways, except for D, G, and A natural. The use of enharmonics is really helpful when we want to avoid too many pedal or lever flips. In short, enharmonics make me very happy.

Every **major** scale has a relative **minor**. This simply means that they share the same key signature and alcoholic uncle. The minor scale starts on "la" of the major scale. In a harmonic minor, the second last note is sharpened either in a descending or ascending scale. In melodic minor, (starting on "la"), "fa" and "sol" are both sharpened in the ascending scale but returned to their normal state when descending. Still with me?

How do you figure out which **key** your piece is in? If your key signature has flats in it, the last flat is "fa" in the key. If the signature has sharps in it, the last sharp is "ti". Easy, isn't it? No sharps or flats? Either you're in C major, A minor, or the piece is atonal and you'll be flipping levers or changing pedals like crazy.

The notes of the scale correspond to Roman numerals. "Do" = "I", "re" = "II", etc. **Triads** (three-note-chords) can be built on these notes, and are labeled with the same Roman numerals. The C major triad consists of C, E and G, while the C minor triad has the same three notes, except the E is flat. If you add another third to the top of the triad, then you have a seventh chord, named for the seven notes that it spans. The bottom note is the "root". When we play "inversions" of triads, it's like a game of leapfrog, with the bottom note becoming the top of the next. In inversions, the bottom note can be the third, the fifth or the seventh of the chord.

To figure out the name for **intervals**, count the number of notes, including the bottom note and the top note. C to D is a major second, C to C# is a minor second. A diminished seventh is a stack of four minor thirds on top of each other. A dominant seventh is a major triad with a minor third perched on top.

A major third is just one semi-tone wider than a minor third. And, if your head is exploding, another way to think of them is this: a major third is do, mi, sol. A minor triad is la, do, mi.

Some common harmonic sequences are I-IV-V-I, I-II-V-I, VI-V-VI, I-V-I-V-I, etc.

There are different types of scales besides major, minor and chromatic. There are “**pentatonic**” scales, which consist of five notes, whose relation to each other is the same as the black notes on a piano. You can improvise for hours in a pentatonic scale, because all the notes harmonize, but change other elements such as rhythm and metre, or the sound of the audience’s snores will drown you out anyway.

There is also the **whole-tone** scale, which Debussy used to great effect. In this scale, there are no semi-tones in it at all!

There are also **modes**, which can be found by starting on different notes of the major scale, rendering the relationships between notes different. Dorian starts on II, Phrygian on III, Lydian on IV, Mixolydian on V, Aeolian on VI, and Ionian is just a major scale. Locrian starts on VII. Irish and Scottish music is full of these modes. “My Lagan Love” is in Mixolydian, and “The Mist-Covered Mountains of Home” is in Dorian, etc. “A la mode” refers to ice cream, and “mowed” refers to a lawn.

## ARRANGING

How many times have you been given a recording of a song and been asked to play it on the harp? In order to do this effectively, you have to be able to hear the differences among the harmonies that accompany the melody. You can train your ear by playing different sequences of chords and naming them. You can log onto the computer, google “Ear-Training” and find tests. You should be able to hear the difference between major and minor chords, I, IV and V, and seventh chords. Soon you can ask your ear to “Go, Fetch!”

Kim Robertson’s arrangements are wonderfully inventive. She sometimes uses unexpected harmonies as stepping stones to the right ones. This only works if you know what you’re doing!

**Voicings** are important! You cannot use any old chord structure, even when you have the right harmony. You can’t go wrong using the root of the chord at the bottom, the fifth next, then the third at the top. That spans an interval of a tenth. Plain triads in sequence can sound really boring and unbalanced. Generally, try not to double the thirds. You can have the third of a chord in the bass line only in certain circumstances. The fifth, almost never, except in a sequence of I (with the fifth in the bass) – V – I (with the root in the bass), or with a II or IV thrown in before the V.

Chords should not move in parallel motion unless you are trying to achieve a medieval effect or plagiarize Debussy.

It is possible to start in one key and modulate to another. Since the same chord can be I in one key and V in another, you can use that chord as a “hinge” into the next key. Prokofiev was the master at this device. The most common modulations are from major to minor and back, from I to IV, and from I to V.

Vary the registers, the direction of the accompaniments, the way you roll the chords, etc. Occasionally use harmonics, “*près de la table*” and other effects for colour differences as long as they don’t conflict with the style. Make the second verse more complex by adding more ornamentation, chords, etc. Try the melody upside down or backwards! Throw in your own introductions, breaks and endings. Stay in the same style you started with, though; you don’t want to sound manic.

If you are writing down your piece, be sure to notate it legibly. Keep the treble and bass aligned and make sure the rhythm is easy to read by placing the

notes spatially to reflect the rhythm. Never write 8va over a bass line. Instead, change to the treble clef. Avoid using too many ledger lines by changing clefs or using 8va or 8bas.

Books on this topic:

Arranging for Folk Harp by Kim Robertson

Hands Upon the Harp by Jennifer Pratt-Walter

Cool Chords and Groovy Rhythms by Verlene Schermer