The Technical Development and Cross-Cultural Evolution of the Harp

by

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Dedication

This honors thesis is dedicated to my harp teacher and mentor, Ms. Katherine Newman, who inspired me to take up the instrument and who patiently motivated me to be the best harpist I can be.
Abstract

This paper will survey the history of the development of the harp from pre-history to near-modern times. Particular attention will be paid to (1) the different types of harps that arose in varied cultural contexts and their influence on other cultures, and (2) technological changes in the design of the harp, with particular emphasis on the explosion of innovation prior to the Romantic Period in Europe that spurred the harp's transition from a parlor instrument for the nobility to a popular instrument with its own rich literature.

The cultural contexts to be considered will include:

1. Western and central Asia from prehistory through the second millennium BCE,
2. Mesopotamia and Persia from the third through first millennium BCE,
3. Egypt from the third millennium through the first millennium BCE,
4. The eastern Mediterranean and Levant from the second millennium BCE through classical antiquity, and
5. Europe and the Western Hemisphere from classical antiquity through the post-Romantic period.

In each cultural context, emphasis will be placed upon innovations in design and the cross-cultural transmission of these innovations, especially those that resulted in the evolution of the instrument into its modern form.

It will be shown that the modern harp owes its development to two key juxtapositions of technical innovation with the prevailing cultural climate at the time the innovations were made. Without these critical “inflection points” in the evolution of the instrument, the harp would not have been likely to enjoy its present world-wide dispersal and popularity.
Introduction

The harp enjoys a rich historical and cultural legacy that spans several millennia as well as Eastern and Western civilizations. The instrument has often become popular in one or several contemporary cultures, surviving the slow demise or cataclysmic destruction of empires to re-emerge in other places.

Moving from hand to hand, along caravan routes, or by ship—whether through commerce or by warfare—each culture added its own distinctive character and technical innovation to the basic design of the instrument. Through these embellishments, the harp was adapted to a diverse range of musical styles, performance techniques, and audiences.

To trace the technical and cultural evolution of the harp is to journey through the story of humanity from pre-history to modern times. From a simple, bow-like instrument, the familiar modern harp evolved in technical sophistication and range of musical expression to become valued as a solo instrument with a rich body of musical literature, and as a member of ensembles and orchestras.
Chapter 1: Ancient Origins

The origin of the harp and related ancient chordophonic instruments (those played by plucking strings) such as the lyre, lute, and zither, may be confidently assigned to prehistoric antiquity.¹ Indeed, the inspiration for these musical instruments may be found in the bows of hunters and warriors, who undoubtedly noticed the twang of the released string and reproduced it by plucking the string with the finger.²

Western and Central Asia

The earliest harps originated in central and western Asia more than five thousand years ago. The bow-shaped harp was formed by installing five, seven, or nine strings upon a single bow-stock in such a manner that the curvature of the bow-stock gave to each string a different pitch. The addition of a hollow gourd at one end served to increase the resonance of the instrument. In this form, the instrument migrated into ancient Egypt, and from thence throughout the African continent where modern descendants may be found among some tribal societies.³

A later development in Asia was the angular harp, in which the neck is set into one end of the resonator at a sharp angle. Strings were set at intervals along the length of both the neck and resonator. Angle harps and bow-harps are collectively classified as “open harps” because they lack the fore-pillar associated with more modern instruments.⁴

² Galpin, A Textbook of European Musical Instruments, 79.
³ Galpin, A Textbook of European Musical Instruments, 79.
Mesopotamia

The earliest archaeological evidence of the harp in Mesopotamia comes from the kingdoms of Sumer, Akkad, and Babylon as well as from the later northern Mesopotamian kingdom of Assyria. The popularity of the harp is attested by its continual existence among these kingdoms over more than three thousand years of political strife, warfare, and conquest. 5

In spite of its humble origins in the hunter’s bow, ancient evidence of harps and lyres is most often found in archaeological contexts associated with royal courts. The most famous example is the Standard of Ur, the soundbox of a lyre dating to the third millennium BCE. Both sides of the soundbox are decorated with panels of mosaic inlays—one side depicts combat and the presentation of captives to the victorious ruler, the other side depicts the ruler’s victory banquet accompanied by the music of a lyre. 6

The remains of several stringed instruments, including bow-harps and lyres, were excavated from the Royal Cemetery at Ur in the 1920s. 7 These instruments, which are nearly contemporaneous with the Standard of Ur, were restored and placed in the care of museums around the world. 8 Sadly, the instrument placed in the Baghdad museum was destroyed by looters in the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. 9

Angular harps are represented in terracotta fragments excavated from the Mesopotamian kingdom of Eshnunna. Dating from the second millennium BCE, the fragment depicts a seated


6 Ziffer, “Portraits of Ancient Israelite Kings?,” 46.


musician holding the soundbox against his body, with a string arm attached at an angle at one end. Similar examples from the first millennium BCE have been unearthed at the Assyrian cities of Nineveh and Nimrod.¹⁰

**Ancient Egypt**

The westward conquests and expansions of Mesopotamian empires brought them into contact with the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt. The exchanges of the material culture of these civilizations resulted in the migration of the harp into Egypt in the third millennium BCE.¹¹ Archaeological excavations have revealed tomb art and some complete instruments that illustrate a burst of creative energy that impelled the development of a wide variety of harps.

One of the most impressive representations of the harp comes from wall paintings in the tomb of Rameses III in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes. Nearly 3200 years old, the painting depicts two large, ornately decorated bow-harps, or arch-harps, each played by a standing male musician. The soundboxes are very elaborately carved and embellished, each terminating in a bust of the pharaoh. The positions of the musicians’ hands indicate that the instruments were played by plucking along the length of the strings to achieve varied tonal effects. The strings were likely tuned low in pitch in order to minimize the stress on the bow, though the type of music played on these harps is unknown.¹²

Other variations of Egyptian bow-harps include smaller instruments that could be played while standing, sitting, or kneeling. The smallest of harps is depicted being held against the shoulder of the musician. One particularly sophisticated version had a slight bow with a bottle-

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shaped resonator at one end. This instrument was played by a male musician in a kneeling position with the bow leaning against the left shoulder. Most depictions of this type of harp show it being played with other musicians and accompanied by singers.

A bow-harp with a boat-shaped resonator is thought to be the first instrument with sound holes. Carried on the shoulder, this instrument likely produced a soft sound, which may account for it being used for approximately a century.¹³

Angular harps also underwent a period of creative development in Egypt. The most notable example is currently in the Louvre in Paris. The wooden soundbox is covered with leather and the string arm, which originally held twenty-one strings, is set at an angle of 85 degrees. What is unique about this instrument is that it was played with the resonator at the top rather than at the bottom.

Ancient Israel

The land of ancient Israel, being situated on the eastern Mediterranean coast between Egypt and Mesopotamia, was a frequent trade route between the two regions as well as a battleground for, and frequent victim to, warring empires. The bow-harp, on its eastward migration from Mesopotamia to Egypt, was undoubtedly familiar in ancient Israel.¹⁴ The translators of the Authorized Version of the Bible often rendered the Hebrew word for these instruments as psaltery, viol, and lute.¹⁵ The word translated as “harp” in fact refers to the lyre and is the instrument associated with King David.¹⁶ It is thought that the Jewish lyre was carried

¹³ Rensch, Harps & Harpists, 9.
¹⁴ Braun, Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine, 58.
¹⁵ Galpin, A Textbook of European Musical Instruments, 79.
¹⁶ Rensch, Harps & Harpists, 17.
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by Phoenician traders throughout the Mediterranean world and became the instrument most associated with classical Greece and Rome.\(^\text{17}\)

**Classical Greece and Rome**

Excavators in the Greek islands have uncovered the earliest sculptural representations of harps in the Aegean. These small statuettes most often depict triangular-shaped harps held in such a manner that the soundbox rests along the length of the right thigh. The musician’s left hand holds the diagonal portion of the frame while the right hand plucks the strings. These instruments have been dated to 2700 BCE and have most often been found in grave contexts, suggesting that the instruments may have served a religious purpose, perhaps thought to provide music for the deceased in the afterlife.\(^\text{18}\)

A thousand years later, representations of the harp began appearing on the Greek mainland. By the latter part of the first millennium BCE, the popularity of the instrument is evidenced by its appearance on painted vases and carved gemstones.\(^\text{19}\) In the *Iliad*, Homer (ca. 800 BCE) portrays Achilles soothing his anger by playing a silver harp.\(^\text{20}\) However, if the frequency of occurrence in the archaeological record is any indication, the lyre was far more popular than the harp in classical Greek culture, and Plato condemned them in his *Republic*.\(^\text{21}\)

The conquest of Greece by the Romans saw much of Hellenic culture absorbed into Roman society, though the harp and lyre quickly faded in popularity among the Romans.

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\(^{17}\) Galpin, *A Textbook of European Musical Instruments*, 82.


\(^{19}\) Rensch, *Harps & Harpists*, 20.

\(^{20}\) Homer, *Iliad*, 181.

**Persia**

The harp seems to have enjoyed a reverse migration from Greece and Rome back to Asia, specifically to Persia. The Greeks suffered invasions at the hands of the Medo-Persians during the classical era of the mid-first millennium BCE, and the Romans famously tangled with the Parthian and Sassanian Persians during the Empire (first through fifth centuries CE). A mosaic panel unearthed in the palace of Sassanian king Shapur I (ca. 250 CE) depicts a six-string angular harp played by a seated female musician. Other examples from Sassanian palaces up to the time of the Islamic conquest (seventh century CE) show various styles of harps, all of which were angular and attest to the popularity of that form in central Asia as recently as 1500 years ago.\(^{22}\) However, the arched harp continued to be used in Asia and migrated eastward as observed in sculptures from Buddhist India in the second century CE, in Afghanistan in the third century CE, and in Burma by the fifth century CE. The Silk Road provided a route into China for the angular harp, but it was soon set aside for more popular native instruments. A northward migration may also be observed, as evidenced by a first century CE stone relief of a Scythian musician playing an angular harp.\(^{23}\)

**The Far East**

Having transited from central Asia to the Mediterranean Sea and back to central Asia, the harp may at last be found in the farthest reaches of East Asia:

“There is a tradition in Japan that, when the Sun-Goddess had hidden herself in the recesses of a cave and men no longer enjoyed the blessings of her light, they met together and entreated her to return. She resisted all their efforts until one of them took six long-

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\(^{22}\) Rensch, *Harps & Harpists*, 22-23.

bows and, setting them firmly with the back of the staff in the ground, twanged their strings. As he played the fair goddess listened, and, her limbs swaying, came forth from her hiding to restore light—with music, dance, and song—to the waiting world."^{24}

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Chapter 2: Medieval Europe

The harps of medieval Europe are distinguished from those of the classical world by the addition of a “column” between the resonator and the string arm. This resulted in a triangularly-constructed frame not at all dissimilar to more modern instruments. Whether this innovation was indigenous or was brought to Europe from the East is not known, nor is it likely to be determined with certainty since the earliest extant European harps date from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries.

The need for a column may be easily understood when consideration is given to how an angular harp would be tuned. With strings fixed between the resonator and string arm, tightening any one string would cause all other strings to loosen, and therefore become “flat.” This places an effective upper limit on the number of strings that a harp could support, and therefore a limit to the instrument’s dynamic range, for at some point tuning would become almost impossible.

Manuscript Illustrations

There are numerous representations of harps in illuminated manuscripts that may provide some clues to the evolution of the instrument during this period. This approach is also problematic; artists of the early Middle Ages, who were most often concerned with the creation of religious images, frequently copied representations found in earlier documents that were considered authoritative. Therefore, one can never know with certainty if any particular image is a copy from an earlier work or if it was drawn from an actual model being observed by the artist.

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26 Rensch, Harps & Harpists, 29.
The earliest known European drawing depicting a harp is the Utrecht Psalter, written and illustrated by several artists at a French monastery in the ninth century. Of the ten figures—many of whom are the biblical king David—shown playing a harp, six of the instruments are drawn with columns and four are drawn without columns. Eight of the ten, however, are similar in form and construction to examples of earlier Eastern angular harps. Interestingly, artists preparing a copy of the Utrecht Psalter at Canterbury, England in the eleventh century made a number of changes to the harp illustrations when compared to the original document. This suggests that the amended illustrations may have been copied from other documents, or were perhaps drawn from instruments with which the artists were familiar. Some of these amended drawings show harps with columns and shoulders, closely resembling their modern counterparts.\footnote{Rensch, \textit{Harps \& Harpists}, 47.}

As throughout other parts of medieval Europe, David was frequently presented in works of religious art because he was seen as a “type” of Christ, protecting his sheep from a ravenous lion as Christ protects believers from Satan. So it is fortuitous that the harp was used as a symbol to identify him, and that the depictions of these harps provide possible clues to the evolution of harp construction.\footnote{Latham, \textit{The Oxford Companion to Music}, 564.}

**Relief Carvings**

Relief carvings of this period demonstrate a variety of transitional forms. Most of the carvings come from Celtic lands, particularly Ireland. A notable exception is an eighth-century example from Charlemagne's court showing King David playing a frame harp which has elements often found in earlier Greek instruments. Some of the earliest Irish carvings show
columnless harps which strongly resemble Egyptian examples. Other later examples show a variety of forms, including asymmetrical quadrangular construction and triangular construction.

Stone slabs and wheel crosses from Scotland and the Isle of Man present a rich source of art presenting depictions of harps, again mostly in the context of religious symbols. The harps are generally of framed construction with columns. While some of the extant carvings are of uncertain dating, the most ancient may be placed in the tenth century although some are thought to date pre-Christian times.\(^2^9\)

**Romanesque Examples**

The Romanesque Period (twelfth century) provides more frequent examples of triangular frame harps, mostly on illuminated manuscripts. Another copy of the Utrecht Psalter from this period shows the harp column becoming a more frequent construction element as compared to the tenth century. It is clear from the depictions, however, that several artists participated in preparing the document, some of whom drew the harp as if it were solid and one could not see through the strings to what was behind the instrument. This perhaps indicates that some of the artists sought examples from earlier or contemporary documents because they had not observed a harp in person.\(^3^0\)

Many other examples from Romanesque art and architecture have survived, most often in religious contexts, with King David, Jubal of the Book of Genesis, angels, and the twenty-four elders of the Book of Revelation often depicted. What is notable about this period is that harps began to appear in art having more secular themes, such as minstrels and jugglers. For example,


\(^{3^0}\) Rensch, *Harps & Harpists*, 50.
a cast bronze mirror from Germany features a pair of young lovers with a nearby musician entertaining them with a harp.\textsuperscript{31}

**Late Middle Ages**

Numerous harps are depicted in works of art from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries, and a wide variety of media were used including illuminated manuscripts, stained glass, tiles, tapestries, metal-work, and woodcut prints. The themes, again, were primarily religious with the usual cast of biblical characters, but secular themes became more common than ever before. Further, the evolution of artistic styles and techniques provide more details about the harps that are depicted because this period marks a transition from the old “linear” style of drawing objects “flat” to more meticulous and detailed renderings in natural perspective prior to the Renaissance.

This more detailed artistic style not only provides additional clues to how medieval harps were constructed (e.g. the number of strings and the position of tuning pegs), but also how they were played. Some works of art show the instrument being held against the left shoulder rather than the right, with the performer's hands reversed—the left hand playing the treble strings and the right hand playing the bass strings, a method typical of Celtic harps from earlier centuries. From these artistic representations and the few extant examples, the medieval harp was generally about thirty inches tall and had nineteen strings. English versions may have had as many as twenty-five strings. The instrument was placed on the knee between the player's arms.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} Rensch, *Harps & Harpists*, 55.

\textsuperscript{32} Baines, *The Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments*, 150.
Chapter 3: Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Development

As Europe progressed in time toward the Renaissance, the construction of the harp became more slender and angular, and displayed typical elements of gothic style evolving toward the modern form. However, there was no mass-production of harps, so each was a unique, handcrafted instrument. This sometimes resulted in geographically distinct styles of construction. Irish harps, for example, were constructed with a block extending from the bottom of the resonator. By contrast, Italian harps from about same period exhibit very slender profiles typical of gothic harps. Renaissance harps were larger than medieval harps, being approximately three feet tall and having up to twenty-six strings.

By the Baroque Period, playing the instrument in certain keys often required the movement of a lever or hook attached to each string that changed its pitch by a half-tone. This cumbersome arrangement, still in use today in the lever harp, limited the repertoire that could be played and imposed upon the musician a need to move the hands away from the strings in order to adjust the levers or hooks during the performance.

The Romantic Era brought a surge of interest in the harp, both in composition and performance, made possible by the development of the pedal harp. Early in the eighteenth century, a mechanism was devised by which the hooks could be activated through a linkage to pedals located at the base of the instrument. The first successful implementation of this mechanism was by Jacob Hochbrucker in Bavaria, though other contemporaneous German instrument makers are known to have worked on similar innovations. While the linkage

33 Rensch, Harps & Harpists, 71.
34 Baines, The Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments, 150.
mechanism was originally located on the right side of the instrument and was attached to five pedals placed in the soundbox, successive refinements saw the mechanism placed inside the neck, the linkages placed inside a hollow column, and the number of pedals increased to seven, one for each note in the diatonic scale. The invention of what is today known as the single-action pedal harp was completed by the relocation of the pedals to a pedestal that supported the column and soundbox.

The new harp was well received in the major capitals of Europe, but its most enthusiastic adoption was by the French court and the fashionable segment of Paris society. The instrument makers of Paris soon added their own refinement by replacing the hook with a crochet and bridge mechanism. When a pedal was activated, the link mechanism would move the related crochets inward toward the neck and press the strings against bridges in order to raise the pitch by a half-tone, essentially the same method that a guitarist uses to change the pitch of guitar strings.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, Georges Cousineau and his son Jacques-Georges replaced the crochet mechanism with a system of “crutches,” or bequilles. These were a pair of levers placed on each side of a string—when a pedal was moved down, one lever would turn clockwise and the other counterclockwise, bending the string so as to raise the pitch by a half-tone. By 1792, the Cousineaus produced a harp that could be tuned in C flat and played in all keys through a system of fourteen pedals.

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The French Revolution interrupted the progressive refinements of the Paris instrument makers, one of whom, Sebastian Erard, relocated to London in order to continue his work. In 1810, Erard further improved the pedal harp by replacing the bequilles with a pair of fourchettes, each being a two-pronged disk that, when rotated by activation of a pedal, pressed on opposite sides of a string to produce the necessary half-tone rise in pitch. The pedals were modified to assume three positions. When moved from the top position to the middle position, the upper fourchettes associated with the pedal rotated to raise the pitch a half-tone. When the pedal was moved from the middle position to the lower position, the lower fourchettes associated with the pedal rotated to raise the pitch another half-tone. None of the fourchettes were engaged when the pedal was in the top position. What was particularly notable about this innovation was that the strings stayed in alignment regardless of the position of the fourchettes, greatly adding to the tone quality of the instrument when compared to earlier mechanisms. At the onset of the Romantic Period, the double-action pedal harp had achieved its modern form.

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Chapter 4: Transition from the Court to the Concert Hall

Because the French court established the standard for all the royal courts of Europe, the adoption of the harp by French courtiers in the mid to late eighteenth century guaranteed its dispersion throughout the other music centers on the Continent and in Britain. Intermarriages between the royal houses of Europe often sent a royal instrumentalist to a new court where her performance on the harp induced its adoption by other courtesans and associated nobility.\(^{42}\)

While artwork of the period most often depicts attractive young women playing the harp, most of the performers, teachers, and composers were men.\(^{43}\) Several of the men came to be associated, most often through patronage by a noble, with certain royal capitals. Using their new pedal harp, some descendants of the Hochbrucker family associated themselves with patrons in Vienna, Leipzig, and Freising as well as Paris. Composer Carl Phillipp Emanuel Bach composed a harp solo while associated with the court of Frederick the Great of Prussia. Franz Petrini, a notable harp performer, was also associated with Frederick's court and later with the French court in Paris. Other notable performers were to be found in the courts of London and Vienna.\(^{44}\)

Just prior to the Romantic Period, a number of notable compositions and transcriptions were produced to take advantage of the growing popularity of the pedal harp. Handel's *Concerto in B-flat* was probably intended for the harp. Two concertos for keyboards were noted by their composer, Georg Wagenseil, to sound well when played on the harp. Six sonatas were composed by Jean Bauer for harpsichord and harp, Johann Albrechtsberger produced four concertinos for harp and strings as well as a harp concerto, four concertos for pedal harp were composed by

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\(^{43}\) Rensch, *Harps & Harpists*, 166.

\(^{44}\) Rensch, *Harps & Harpists*, 167.
Johann Schenk, and Wolfgang Mozart composed the popular *Concerto in C Major for Flute and Harp*. Among the more notable transcriptions to harp were six concertos for keyboard and strings by Johann Christian Bach.\(^\text{45}\)

At the beginning of the Romantic period, the pedal harp was firmly established in the music centers of Europe and was the subject of a growing body of musical literature. The translation of this popularity from the court to the public at large was accomplished by the critically-acclaimed performance skills of two virtuosos—Dorothea “Dorette” Schindler Spohr and Robert Nicholas Charles Bochsa.

With her husband—violinist, composer, and conductor Louis Spohr—Dorette Spohr performed at courts and concert halls throughout Europe.\(^\text{46}\) Louis Spohr had briefly studied harp as a boy, so he was familiar with the difficulty of the instrument. He met Dorette when she was eighteen years old, hearing her proficiently perform a technically-difficult harp solo composed by her teacher, Johann Backofen, which induced Spohr to compose a concerto for violin and harp. Upon their subsequent marriage, Louis Spohr resumed his harp studies so he could more effectively compose music for the instrument. A number of duo concertos for violin and harp followed, and the couple began their career as touring musicians. Their performances were always done from memory to the acclaim of music critics. Following the evolutionary trend of the pedal harp, Dorette exchanged her less-than-adequate single-action harp for more capable double-action harps, including one loaned to her by Erard. As her husband became more famous, and the concert touring schedule became more arduous, Dorette began to suffer bouts of ill health that finally lead her to cease performing on the harp. She continued playing the piano with


her husband, but retired altogether from performing by 1822 and succumbed to her health problems in 1834. While she did not compose any music, she inspired the first major ensemble music for harp and violin, some of which are still popularly performed.\footnote{Rensch, \textit{Harps \& Harpists}, 189.}

Robert Bochsa was born in France to Bohemian parents in 1789. He was a musical prodigy who studied flute and composition as a child. Bochsa entered the Paris Conservatory in 1806 where, although he could play any musical instrument, he applied himself to a study of the harp. He was the court harpist for both Napoleon Bonaparte and Louis XVIII, but left France to avoid arrest for forgery.\footnote{Latham, \textit{The Oxford Companion to Music}, 147.} Settling in London, he spent nearly two decades performing for English audiences, and it is largely due to his acclaim that the harp became widely popular in the early nineteenth century.\footnote{Rensch, \textit{Harps \& Harpists}, 190.} Following appointments at the Royal Academy of Music and the King's Theatre, Bochsa eloped with a former student who abandoned her husband and three children to follow Bochsa on a world tour that included the United States and Australia, where he died in 1856. Although Bochsa produced an impressive body of literature for the harp, his compositions are now seldom played.

The rising popular interest in the harp and harp music attracted the interest of a number of composers during the Romantic period. The noted English harpist Elias Parish Alvars, the most prominent of Bochsa's students, attracted the attention of several Romantic composers, most prominently Hector Berlioz, Felix Mendelssohn, and Franz Liszt. Berlioz compared Alvars' harp virtuosity as being comparable with Liszt's virtuosity on the piano. It was said of Alvars that he could play passages that looked impossible to perform when written, such as four-note chords
played ascending or descending in rapid succession (Rensch 193-194). During Alvars' lifetime, the style of music changed from Classicism to Romanticism, and the harp and the music played upon it changed as well, primarily due to the influence of Erard as the pre-eminent harp designer and Alvars as the pre-eminent harp performer.

So captivated was Berlioz by Alvars' technical skill that he became the most ardent champion of the instrument, particularly the double-action pedal harp in which he saw great advantages for a composer. In his writings, he warns against composing extremely chromatic parts and suggests that

“composers warn in advance when pedal changes are needed, recommends writing octaves rather than four-note chords when using the lowest harp strings, cautions against writing parts too close together for the harpist's two hands, and recommends dividing an arpeggio between the hands, rather than writing it for both hands playing simultaneously (as one probably would for the piano). He explains how a shake (trill) can be performed on two strings pitched in unison, … he rhapsodizes over the sound and use of harmonics, and he recommends the use of many harps in orchestra works.”

Chapter 5: Modern Harp Literature

The expanding interest in the harp among composers and the general public meant that it was increasingly studied by musicians with serious professional ambitions. Schools of harp playing arose in the major capitals of Europe, and various established conservatories began to add harp instruction. The most famous center of harp instruction was the Paris Conservatory, which added harp classes in 1825. Among the most prominent of the Paris alumni are the Godefroid brothers, Jules and Felix, both of whom composed for the instrument.\textsuperscript{51} Antoine Prumier, the second harp teacher at the Paris Conservatory, transitioned classes from the single-action harp to the double-action harp, and composed nocturnes for the instrument.\textsuperscript{52} The most revered and most feared teacher was Alphonse Hasselmans, who held three harp classes per week and required that his students prepare two etudes in advance for performance by memory.

Three conservatories arose to prominence in Italy during the nineteenth century. Two pupils of harpist Curzio Marcucci, Filippo Scotti and Angelo Bovio, became professors of harp at the Conservatory of Naples and the Conservatory of Milan respectively, while Marcucci’s son Ferdinando became harp professor at the Academy in Florence. While some original harp pieces were composed by teachers and alumni of the Neapolitan school, much emphasis was placed on the production of beautiful tones. A number of conservatories were founded in South America by teachers who trained in Naples. The school in Milan became the most prominent source of Italian compositions for the harp, as well as several methods for the instrument that were widely used.

\textsuperscript{51} Latham, \textit{The Oxford Companion to Music}, 528.

\textsuperscript{52} Rensch, \textit{Harps & Harpists}, 199-200.
The Development and Evolution of the Harp throughout Europe.\textsuperscript{53} By contrast, the school in Florence produced a number of fine concert harpists for some of the most renowned European orchestras.

During the 1840s, the Italian harpist Antonio Zamara established himself as the harp instructor at the Vienna Conservatory. A number of Zamara's students at Vienna went on to prominent careers in America. Edmund Schuecker, Zamara's successor, published harp solos and five volumes of orchestral studies for the instrument. Edmund's brother and fellow harpist, Heinrich, ultimately became harp instructor at Boston's New England Conservatory of Music.\textsuperscript{54}

Carl Constantine Grimm, a student of Alvars whose skill was lauded by Franz Liszt, became the founder of the Berlin School of harp performance. Among his famous students was Rosalie Spohr, the niece of Louis Spohr. The graduates of this school were widely in demand throughout the opera houses of Europe, and established themselves among the orchestras of America and Russia. The teachers associated with the Berlin School were also renowned for their transcriptions of Liszt and Chopin.\textsuperscript{55}

The Belgian harpist Francois Dizi established himself as a teacher of pedal harp at London's Covent Garden while Robert Bochsa was hired to establish a harp school at Drury Lane Theatre. Due to the French Revolution, Erard's double-action harp was available in London before it was available in Paris, and its adoption by Dizi, Bochsa, and their most prominent student Alvars, led to its early success.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{54} Rensch, \textit{Harps & Harpists}, 204.
\textsuperscript{55} Rensch, \textit{Harps & Harpists}, 206-207.
\textsuperscript{56} Rensch, \textit{Harps & Harpists}, 208.
The most famous harpist of the London school was John Thomas of Wales, who became harpist to Queen Victoria. His compositions for the harp are voluminous, most notably his *Welsh Melodies arranged for the Harp*. He also published editions of Alvars' harp solos and transcriptions of works by Mozart, Beethoven, Handel, and Mendelssohn. His ensemble music included duets for harp and piano, duets for two harps, trios for three harps, and trios for two harps and piano.\(^{57}\)

During the Romantic period, the harp became an important addition in operatic music. Rossini was the first noted operatic composer to utilize the instrument by scoring a harp accompaniment to a tenor solo in *The Barber of Seville*. Berlioz wrote a score for two flutes and harp in his oratorio *L'enfance du Christ*. Bizet incorporated a duet for flute and harp in *Carmen*. Verdi added simple harp accompaniments to *Il trovatore* and *La traviata*.\(^{58}\)

Several notable composers of the late Romantic period incorporated harp passages into their works. Brahms wrote a simple harp passage in his *Requiem*, but some of his later works included harp passages that are nearly impossible to perform as written. Richard Strauss often scored for two harps, as well as duets for harp and violin in some of his later works. Sibelius wrote prominent harp passages in all four movements of his *Symphony No. 1 in E Minor*. Popularly-known cadenzas were composed in late-period works such as Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio espagnol* and, most famously in the ballet music of Tchaikovsky (*Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty*, and the *Waltz of the Flowers* from *Nutcracker*). The second movement of Cesar Franke's *Symphonie in D minor* opens with the harp. Massenet used rich harp chords in his opera *Le Cid*, while Debussy scored the harp in his opera *Pelleas et Milisande*, and divided arpeggios and

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\(^{57}\) Rensch, *Harps & Harpists*, 209.

\(^{58}\) Rensch, *Harps & Harpists*, 211.
glissandos between two harps in *Daphnis et Chloe*. Puccini is also noted for frequent use of the harp in his operas *La Bohème* and *Madame Butterfly*.\(^{59}\)

It is during the Romantic period that the harp became not only a valued solo instrument for the private salon and royal court, but an established member of the orchestra. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a rich and varied literature had been composed for the harp, and the teachers and graduates of the great conservatories of music had provided numerous skilled harpists to chamber, symphonic, and operatic orchestras around the world.

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\(^{59}\) Rensch, *Harps & Harpists*, 212-213.
Conclusion

The harp is one of the most ancient of instruments. Not only has it survived thousands of years of wars, conquests, and social upheavals, it has been seen as desirable enough to carry across vast swaths of land to distant nations where it evolved and adapted to meet the musical and artistic needs of diverse cultures. Indeed, a vast musical literature has been written for the harp, particularly in the last two centuries. This literature comprises a wide range of musical styles and compositional forms.

There are two critical “inflection points” in the evolution of the harp where technical innovations combined with key cultural elements to propel the harp to more widespread acceptance. While it may not be certain if these important innovations occurred in response to the cultural environment, or were just accidentally coincidental, it is quite likely that the modern harp would not enjoy world-wide popularity had these juxtapositions not occurred.

The first of these inflection points occurred in Europe during the early Middle Ages when Christianity was the most important cultural influence. The biblical king David, as a type of Christ, was often associated with music and the harp in works of art. This widespread symbolism, combined with the expansion of the harp’s dynamic range with the addition of a column, spurred interest in the harp throughout the Continent and the British Isles.

The second of these critical inflection points occurred in eighteenth-century Europe with the development of a mechanical means for changing the pitch of the strings through a mechanism operated by foot pedals. This innovation, which occurred during a time when musical composition was rapidly changing to richly ornamental styles, made the harp a highly desirable instrument for solo performance and for ensembles and orchestras. It is remarkable that so venerable an instrument found its genesis in something as humble as the twang of a hunter's bow.
Bibliography


