

When Fingers Meet Strings: A Defense

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November 3, 2018

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Introduction and Purpose Statement

There is a great need for a current and comprehensive curriculum for young harp students. Most of the available instruction books and volumes are over half a century old, and while they have held up in some ways to the test of time, in many others they have fallen short. The technological advancements in computers and computer software should be used in updating harp curriculum. In her book *Harps and Harpists* Roslyn Rensch comments that, while the computer has been a “blessing” in many ways, it has made the publication process for composers more complicated due to the learning of new and ever-changing software.¹ Many of the great harp composers of the mid-twentieth-century struggled to bring their publications into the computer age, leaving a noticeable generational gap in the current publications available. Even aside from the technological differences from the last century to the current one, the needs of the current generation are much different than that of their predecessors. Because of the rise of social media and the invention of smartphones and tablets, children have lower attention spans than ever before. Children born in Generation Z and Generation Alpha are vastly different in their learning preferences to Generation X and Millennials. A study by Microsoft Corp Canada entitled, *Attention Spans* highlights the effects that a highly digitalized world has had on the human brain.² The study claims that people who have grown up around multiple screen stimuli have an attention span of about eight seconds, which is commonly thought to be the extent of a goldfish’s memory. The study found that the older the participant, the longer their attention span, implying that people’s attention spans are decreasing with each passing generation. Curiosity and self-discovery draw in the younger generation, along with a strong desire for collaborative or

¹Cynthia Zimmer, *Getting to Know Gen Z-Next* (Basking Ridge, NJ: Barnes and Noble College, 2017), 1-10, accessed February 4, 2019, <http://next.bncollege.com/Gen-Z-Research-Report-Final.pdf>.

²Alyson Gausby, *Attention Spans* (Toronto, ON: Microsoft Canada, 2015), 15-44, accessed February 4, 2019, <http://dl.motamem.org/microsoft-attention-spans-research-report.pdf>.

group-based learning.³ Because each generation is different and learns differently, it is vital to keep updating educational material. While much of the curriculum of other instruments has been brought up into the twenty-first century, the harp has been left behind in many ways.

The Evolution of the Modern Harp

Before discussing harp curricula, it is important to lay a foundation about the instrument that this paper revolves around. Many musicians are familiar with the modern-day pedal harp, but very few actually know how that glorious instrument came to be. The harp is one of the oldest instruments known to man. Clay tablets dating back to 2800 B.C. were discovered in ancient Mesopotamia, picturing musicians playing harp-like instruments.⁴ In almost every ancient civilization a version of the harp seemed to exist, with examples of their structure surviving through art, statues, or wall-carvings.



Seated Musician at the Harp, Terracotta Plaque, 2025-1763 (Iraq)⁵

³Zimmer, *Getting to Know Gen Z – Next*, 1-10.

⁴Roslyn Rensch, *Harp and Harpists* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 3.

⁵Rensch, *Harp and Harpists*, 7.



Musician playing a large boat-shaped harp. Eighteenth Dynasty Tomb at Thebes⁶

In Medieval Europe harps underwent many changes, but stayed true to the ancient triangular or “three-sided” form. Front columns became much more common, and harpists sought ways to expand the playing capabilities of their instruments. The double, and even triple-strung harp, was invented to give the performer a wider range of keys to play in without having to retune. The double-strung harp consisted of one diatonic scale on the right side with another row of accidentals on the opposite.⁷ The triple-strung harp consisted of two rows of strings in diatonic scales on the outside, with one row of accidentals in the middle.⁸ The strings had to be plucked by reaching through with the fingers, which created many issues as far as the ease of performing. The hook harp was developed in the Tyrol region of Austria in the late seventeenth century allowing the player to manually raise the pitch of a string by a semitone. “A row of metal hooks was placed along the left side of the neck, with a single row of diatonically tuned strings.”⁹ Although this seemed to provide an alternative for multiple rows of strings, the hook

⁶Rensch, *Harps and Harpists*, 13.

⁷ John Thomas, *History of the Harp from the Earliest Period down to the Present Day* (Bloomington, IN: Vanderbuilt Music Company, 2001), 15.

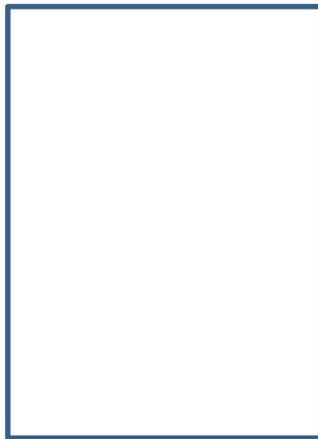
⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rensch, *Harps and Harpists*, 108-110.

harp was still not a completely satisfactory solution. Jacob Hockbrucker (1673-1763) is credited as the inventor of the single-action pedal harp. Hockbrucker built upon the hook mechanism, by connecting them along the right side of the harp neck, with the wires hidden in the soundbox.¹⁰ Originally there were only five pedals for C, D, F, G, and B, but by 1720 pedals for E and A were also added. The pedals had two notches which the player could move up and down. Pedals moved a mechanism linking the octave's activating hooks called *crochets*, which would effectively shorten the strings and raise the pitch.¹¹



Single Action Pedal Diagram¹²



Crochet mechanism used by Hockbrucker¹³

¹⁰ Rensch, *Harps and Harpists*, 127-128.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rensch, *Harps and Harpists*, 129.

If the harp was tuned in C major, a downward movement of the F pedal would raise all F's by a semitone to F#. This allowed harpists to play more advanced music, with accidentals being easier to achieve, although "the imperfection of the instrument as to modulation could not escape the observing mind of Sebastian Erard."¹⁴ Erard noticed that the single-pronged *crochets* often slipped, resulting in inconsistent pitches as the pedals were moved up and down. This "poor design" drove him to create his own patent for the single-action pedal harp. Doing away with the old way of connecting hooks with wires, Erard developed a *Fourchette* or "forked disc" mechanism still in use today.¹⁵ While this helped to stabilize the pitch better than the old *crochets*, Erard still was not satisfied.

In June of 1801, Erard created a patent for what would come to be known as the double-action pedal harp. John Thomas describes this invention best in his book *History of the Harp: From the Earliest Period Down to the Present Day*.

"The double-action harp is of all instruments with fixed sounds the most perfect; and as it possesses twenty-one sounds in the octave, instead of twelve as in the case with keyed instruments, it is susceptible of a much more perfect system of temperament."¹⁶

Instead of the two notches seen on a single-action pedal harp, the double-action pedal harp has three notches, thus allowing every string to be both raised and lowered by a semitone. Although it was clear that the double-action pedal harp had a wider-range than the single-action, there were many notable harpists at the time that openly fought against the new invention, claiming that the single-pedal system was better suited to the instrument.¹⁷ One such figure was Francois Joseph Naderman (1781-1835) who was the first harp teacher ever stationed at the Paris

¹⁴ Thomas, *History of the Harp from the Earliest Period down to the Present Day*, 17.

¹⁵ Rensch, *Harps and Harpists*, 148-149.

¹⁶ Thomas, *History of the Harp from the Earliest Period down to the Present Day*, 18.

¹⁷ Hans Joachim Zingel and Mark Palkovic, *Harp Music in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 5-9.

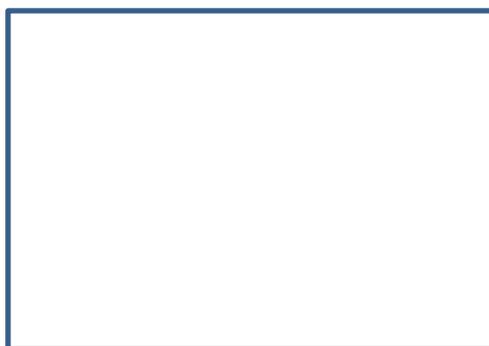
Conservatoire, and a famous harp virtuoso at the time. Despite Naderman's efforts to discredit Erard's new harp, the versatility of the double-action pedal harp eventually won out.



Erard's *Fourchette* mechanism
Single action¹⁸



Fourchette mechanism
Double action¹⁹



Pedal Diagram, Double action²⁰

In the eighteenth century, the single-action pedal harp was mostly a fixture of aristocratic salons, particularly amongst noble women.²¹ There were a few notable concertos written for harp

¹⁸ Rensch, *Harp and Harpists*, 148-149.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Hans Joachim Zingel and Mark Palkovic, *Harp Music in the Nineteenth Century*, 4.

during this period, but it was not until the invention of the double-action pedal harp that repertoire for the harp began to advance, especially for orchestra.

“In the early nineteenth century orchestra, it is noteworthy that the harp did not appear in symphonies, but mainly in opera, oratorio, and ballet scores. It was not until the close of the century that the harp found its place in the scores of symphonic poems and symphonies. At first, the instrument remained in the orchestra as an inheritance from the Classical period. It was an exception to any instrumentation and was used sporadically, if at all, and then only in short sections... By the end of the century, hardly a score could be found that did not contain a part for one of two harps.”²²

Despite a brief moment of popularity from the double or “cross-strung” chromatic harp at the end of the nineteenth century, the double-action harp has largely gone unchallenged in its design. This is perhaps the greatest testament to the genius of Erard’s *fourchette* invention, as nearly two centuries later harps are still being constructed in this manner. Erard’s double-action pedal harp continues to be the choice instrument of most harpists today.

When Fingers Meet Strings: A Curriculum for Young Beginners

Harp pedagogy, or the private instruction of harp technique and performance, has changed dramatically in emphasis over the centuries. In eighteenth century Europe, private harp instruction was a privilege usually available only to the rich and aristocratic. Ladies who could play an instrument were considered well-accomplished, using their talents to woo potential suitors, and the harp was a favorite instrument of the female nobility.²³ After the invention of the double-action pedals, demand for new harp compositions began to rise. No longer was the harp only seen as a parlor instrument, but was now beginning to develop in areas of ensemble, particularly within the orchestra. Although a great deal of harp music was written in the nineteenth century, most of it is “generally held in low esteem today,”²⁴ with a majority of pieces no longer being published. The vast majority of pedagogical harp music in use today comes from

²² Zingel and Palkovic, *Harp Music in the Nineteenth Century*, 54.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Zingel and Palkovic, *Harp Music in the Nineteenth Century*, 80-82.

the last one hundred years. The 20th century was when perhaps some of the most prolific harp performers and composers arose. In the late 19th century Alphonse Hasselmans (1845-1912), a renowned harp composer and teacher, taught a variety of young harpists at the Paris Conservatoire. He is well-known for using the eight-finger technique, despite other prominent harpists of the time still using all ten fingers. This method is universally the most accepted and widely used across the globe today. A handful of his students would become prolific harp composers in the 20th century, such as Marcel Grandjany, Henriette Renie, and Carlos Salzedo. Their amassed compositions and performing techniques survive through their pedagogical styles that are still in use today.

The current harp pedagogy curriculums being used today are very individualistic to the teacher. While a handful of step-by-step curricula exists, such as the Harp Olympics series by Susann McDonald and Linda Wood Rollo, the private instruction that many harpists receive is the result of pieced-together songs or multiple curricula used in tandem with each other. Suzanne Balderston, a famous harp professor and publisher states:

“The subject of Harp Pedagogy, it seems to me, has been seriously neglected. To say that we do not have some excellent harp teachers would not only be an irresponsible statement, but an erroneous one... Most of us have learned to be good teachers through trial and error.”²⁵

In piano pedagogy, books often have a heavy dose of music theory woven throughout the curriculum. This is a sorely neglected aspect in the harp books currently available to teachers. As a result, many harp teachers have opted to use piano theory books for their harp students, as these are more comprehensive and readily available. Go to any music store and one can find at least a handful of comprehensive piano curricula to choose from, each one including concepts

²⁵ Suzanne Balderston, *The Art of Teaching the Harp* (Phoenix, Arizona: The Author, 2001), 1.

like: exercises, theory, visual references, and colorful illustrations. In published harp resources one finds that no such curriculum currently exists. There are no “levels” or method book series that expound on each other, rather, there are a handful of beginning books that drop off at the intermediate level. Moreover, most of these were published nearly half a century ago, and the question arises if they are still meeting the needs of the young harpist in today’s world. It should be noted that method books written by individual harp teachers do exist, however, many of these have never been published, or have been self-published, making them almost impossible to find without having the personal knowledge of how to obtain them.

The curriculum presented within this defense is entitled *When Fingers Meet Strings*. The ultimate goal is for this series is to become a multi-leveled program with at least five volumes ranging from early beginner to early advanced. For the sake of this project, only the first Primary level book in the series is discussed. This particular book is intended for young students, who have no or very little previous musical training. Unlike most of the other beginning harp books available, WFMS starts from the ground up, teaching concepts like note-recognition, sight-reading, and rhythm. While the main content of the Primary book centers on solo pieces, there are components of music theory and strength building exercises throughout.

The Young Beginner

If one asked all the harp teachers in North America at what age they begin accepting harp students, the great majority of them would say no younger than seven. There are a variety of factors as to why younger students are not typically accepted. One potential reason is that younger children may not have the finger strength or the reach needed in order to successfully execute proper technique and articulation. The harp is a very physical instrument to play and manage, even when playing on a small lever harp. This is a frighteningly large responsibility for

harp teachers, hence why potential students are usually encouraged to wait until they are more physically developed. Most young children that show an interest in harp are encouraged to take piano lessons for a few years instead, and then come back for harp lessons when they are older. Perhaps one of the main reasons younger students are turned away, however, is the current lack of a suitable curriculum for them to use. When discussing this particular topic with a group of harp teachers at a local conference, this became the apparent reason for most teachers rejecting students younger than the age of seven.

In her 1976 publication *Teaching the Younger Harpist*, Ruth Inglefield laments the fact that small children are discouraged from learning the harp. She states the following in regards to teachers turning away younger students:

“A number of factors convinced me that this line of thought was both lazy and invalid. First of all, most of my potential students never reappeared; after some success as piano students they were reluctant to start over again as beginners. A second influence was the lively interest which both of my daughters showed from the age of about three years. To my surprise, they seemed quite able to produce a reasonable tone and articulation. Before long I noticed that their small friends were equally just as "talented." An investigation of the latest child development theories yielded much information on the enormous learning capacity of the preschool child and the importance of developing creative experiences before the more structured process of school assignments begins in the third and fourth grades. Many sources referred to the high degree of motor coordination found in most children four to six years old but often neglected, in favor of intellectual growth, until a later age.”²⁶

Clearly, even in 1976 some harp teachers felt that they were not doing enough to encourage younger students on the harp. The curriculum that I am putting forth addresses all of these concerns. Specifically, the concerns are listed as follows:

1. The material is paced too fast for young children to understand.
2. There is not enough playable repertoire geared towards young children.
3. Posture and technique are not described in a way a young child can easily understand.
4. Music theory is seriously neglected in almost all currently available harp curricula.

²⁶ Ruth Inglefield, “Teaching the Younger Harpist,” *American Harp Journal* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1976): 20-22.

In *When Fingers Meet Strings*, the pacing will be appropriate for a young child, proper technique and posture will be addressed, and music theory will be integrated to make sense of any new concepts that may arise. *When Fingers Meet Strings* is a comprehensive harp curriculum that includes music theory, as well as listening and sight-reading exercises, making it a true harp method book. Students should be encouraged to start young, when their joints are more malleable and their enthusiasm for learning to play the harp is high! While some books might say they encourage a young beginner, the flow of the curriculum is too fast, and offers little practical repertoire for younger students to learn past the first few pages. *When Fingers Meet Strings* flows at a natural pace, allowing time for students to understand concepts, build finger strength, and prepares them for greater challenges.

Why Age Matters

Music scholars such as Edwin Gordon and Zoltan Kodaly believed strongly that music education should begin at as early an age as possible. Kodaly even suggested that “music education should begin nine months before the birth of a child.”²⁷ Kodaly held the belief that everyone was capable of learning and producing music, and he focused heavily on aural skills for younger children. He taught the idea of “learning through sequencing.”²⁸ This sequential order started with teaching children as young as possible in what is known as the “kinesthetic” or listening/singing/aural phase. Once a child has grasped the basics, he moves on to the “pictorial or written phase, where children gain an understanding of musical symbols. Visual guides and illustrations are used heavily for children in this learning group. Finally, children move into the reading phase where they learn to read musical notation on a staff.

²⁷Klara Kokas, "Kodaly's Concept of Music Education." *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 22 (Fall 1970): 49-56.

²⁸ Ibid.

The Gordon Music Learning Method also lays out in detail the importance of introducing music to children at a young age. In his various published studies, he determines that the optimal age for introducing formal musical training or education is from 4-6. Gordon also states that “by the time a child reaches approximately age 9, his or her level of music aptitude can no longer be affected by the music environment, even by a music environment of extremely high quality”²⁹ This means that harp teachers who do not accept students younger than seven, are missing the window of opportunity when that child’s brain is most receptive to musical stimuli. Gordon teaches a concept known as “audiation,” a term he coined for bringing thoughtful context to music. His own definition of the term is; “Audiation is to music what thought is to language.”³⁰ Similar to Kodaly, Gordon encourages listening to music as the first step in training a child’s audiation. This training can begin before the child is even born, by playing music for the developing fetus while it is still in the womb. Audiation development advances as a child ages, and around the age of three or four a child may begin trying to recreate his/her music through a variety of methods. The main purpose of the Gordon Learning Method is to start as young as possible, so as to give the child every possible opportunity to reach his/her full musical potential.

Additionally, Maria Montessori is a famous educator whose methods have been rapidly gaining popularity in recent years. The Montessori Method is “learning through experience,”³¹ or a “spontaneous, expansive system designed to afford the child the liberty to move and act in a prepared environment encouraging self-development.”³² Like Zoltan Kodaly and Edwin Gordon, Maria Montessori believed music education should begin as young as possible. She would begin

²⁹Edwin E. Gordon, *The Manifestation of Developmental Music Aptitude in the Audiation of “Same” and “Different” as sound in Music* (Chicago, Illinois: G.I.A. Publications Inc., 1981), 43-46.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Dorothy T. McDonald, “Montessori’s Music for Young Children,” *Young Children’s Journal* 39, no. 1 (November 1983): 58-63.

³² Ibid.

the process of teaching small children about music by having them listen to the “absence of music” or complete silence.³³ “Into the silence, gradual introduction of sounds and noise, using bells (sounds) and drums (noise), for example, leads the children to formulate distinctions between the two.”³⁴

Music should be introduced at as early an age as possible to give the child the maximum potential for growth. There is a small age-range window full of musical potential that has yet to be tapped into by the harp community. *When Fingers Meet Strings* uses the Kodaly/Montessori/Gordon method as inspiration for several of its aspects, specifically in the way it encourages children to learn through self-discovery.

The Importance of Colored Illustrations

With the attention span of children getting shorter, teachers and educators need to use every weapon in their toolbelt to keep their students on track and focused. This is one of the reasons why colored illustrations will be used frequently throughout the curriculum *When Fingers Meet Strings*. Pictures stimulate the imagination and coax creative and emotional responses, especially in young children. According to Charles Elster and Herbert D. Simons in their article *How important are Illustrations in Children’s Readers*, pictures help motivate children to read, or in this case, to learn. Pictures can also help to “bridge the gap from spoken language to written language”³⁵ which is especially helpful when dealing with small children who may not have an extensive vocabulary or full comprehension of written song lyrics. The Amelia Book Company, a children’s book illustrating company located in Atlanta, Georgia,

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Herbert D Simmons, Elster, and Charles, “How Important are Illustrations in Children’s Readers,” *The Reading Teacher* 39, no. 2 (November 1985): 52.

wrote an article about the importance of using illustrations, listing five benefits that using art in your publication can give to a child:

1. They help illuminate the story or the text

Young children have a limited vocabulary, and pictures go a long way in communicating a story to them in a way they can easily understand.³⁶ A young child may not yet be comfortable reading, so visual references can help to bridge the gap. *When Fingers Meet Strings* is full of colorful and imaginative illustrations to help better illuminate the musical notation for young children.

2. It fosters an appreciation of art and literature while they are still young

Art, literature, and music go hand in hand throughout history. Often, they will mimic each other or inspire each other in ways that show an understanding of the times. If children are to have a wholesome musical education, then they must also understand the importance of its connection with the art world and other creative fields.³⁷ While famous artwork cannot be included in *When Fingers Meet Strings* due to copyright infringement, certain styles of art and brushwork are used that link music to abstract artistic ideas such as: impressionism, watercolor, and pop art.

3. It helps children learn through participation

Pictures can also be interactive. In *When Fingers Meet Strings* there are a few color-fill exercises to help with note and symbol recognition. This makes learning fun and easy for small children.³⁸ This approach is used in many piano books geared towards younger beginning students, such as the *Color by Note* series by Sharon Kaplan.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

4. Images spark the imagination

There are good reasons people say that a picture is worth a thousand words. Images stimulate young minds and get them hooked onto the subject material. It is one thing to tell them they are learning a piece about a lion, but it is so much more fun if they can actually see that lion on their page. Effective imagery can be a powerful tool!³⁹

5. Images are double the fun!

Images and illustrations are an easy way to enhance an already colorful story or song. It naturally stimulates creativity and imagination. If there is any doubt to the weight illustrations can carry, try to imagine a Dr. Seuss book without the classic pictures of the cat in the hat, the Grinch, or of Sam I Am and his green eggs and ham. It is easy for us to take these iconic images for granted, but they are the basis of many a sweet childhood memory.⁴⁰

Colored illustrations have limitless benefits to aid in a child's learning, and little to no considerable disadvantages. Colored illustrations are specifically emphasized, as some book illustrations can be nothing more than black-and-white sketches. While these pictures can aid in the five points mentioned above, there has been scientific research done to prove a connection between colors and children's emotional responses. As early as 1939, Goldstein claimed that certain colors elicited certain emotional responses.⁴¹ This is especially true for children as they go through many different stages of cognitive development, particularly when they develop more advanced emotions such as empathy starting around the age of five.

In 1978, a study was done by Cimbalò, Beck, and Sendziak targeting second and third grader's emotional connection to certain colors. In the study, different colors were presented to

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Reenu Varghese, Chris J, and Boyatzis, "Children's Emotional Association with Colors," *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 155, no.1 (November 1993): 77-85.

children and they were asked how that particular color made them feel. In general, the children had a positive reaction to bright colors like red, blue, pink, and yellow, and negative reactions to darker colors such as grey, brown, and black. While darker colors were overall the least favored, boys tended to respond more positively to them than girls. Emotional responses to colors appear around age five, and seem to increase with age.⁴² Although there seemed to be some patterns as to which colors emoted which feeling, much of the research proved that emotional connections with certain colors were mostly subjective based on a number of individual factors. Overall, however, colors have a positive effect on children's minds and cognitive development, and the emotional connection begins to factor in once the child is around five years of age when they begin developing the ability to feel empathy.

Speaking from personal experiences, colorful pictures have always acted as a motivation, and an inspiration for children to learn and work harder. A small piece of art accompanying a song, conjures up dreams and scenarios in young minds that surround the subject matter. To an adult, the use of colored illustrations may seem unnecessary, even juvenile, but to a growing and developing child it can be almost imperative. Popular piano curriculums, such as Alfred or the Faber series, use many such colorful illustrations, but method books such as these seem to be missing from the harp world completely.

Currently Available Curriculum

There are numerous beginning books available to harpists, however, the majority of them are not mainstream, and are often not sold by major harp music websites such as vanderbiltmusic.com or harpcenter.com. The five introductory lesson books discussed in this

⁴² Ibid

paper are prominent fixtures within the harp community that many harp teachers use either as stand-alone curriculum, or more commonly in tandem with each other.

My First Harp Book

My First Harp Book by Betty Paret was first published in 1942 and in many ways is still the golden standard for beginning harp curriculum amongst harp teachers. Betty Paret is known for her beginning to intermediate compositions and arrangements for harp, often pulling from Irish and French influences. Many a harpist can remember learning their first ever glissando piece *Swinging*, from this book, or perhaps the hauntingly beautiful *O Carolan's Air*, or the famous Irish folk song, *The Foggy Dew*.

There are many positive aspects to this book, which is why it is so widely used today. The first few pages only have the student plucking with their second fingers, which gives them time to focus on their technique and posture. There is also a fairly good balance between the left hand and right hand, which ensures equal building of a student's muscle and motor skills. Paret also intersperses finger exercises throughout her book, ranging from placement brackets to intervals, and two-handed scales. While the book is void of any illustrations or pictures, Paret does manage to stir up some creative imagery with the colorful naming of her pieces. Titles such as *Big Brown Bear*, *Autumn Leaves*, *Jumping*, *Swinging*, and *Rocking*, give extra meaning and character to her pieces. They also often indicate a particular technique to use in a way a child could understand. There is a certain charm to her arrangements that makes them endearing to harpists both young and old, which is also perhaps why her book is still being taught from nearly eighty years later.

While there is no doubt about the popularity of this book, it has many downsides. In the preface, Betty Paret very clearly states that this book is not a method book.

“This book is NOT a “Method”. It is a book of carefully graded material which ANY teacher may use in giving a pedagogically sound and fundamentally thorough approach to playing the harp.”⁴³

Her intention was to create a book any teacher using any technique could use, and to her credit she seems to have done just that. The problem previously mentioned, however, is that technique is absolutely vital to playing the harp, especially for a young student just starting. To leave out any mention of harp or finger positioning, and plucking techniques does a disservice to the student, leaving them no point of reference to consult. The exercises, while incredibly helpful, are few and far between, and never come with any kind of explanation as to the exercise’s purpose. No guidance is given whatsoever, rather, all explanations fall completely on the teacher’s shoulders. While the names of her pieces do invoke some feeling of whimsy, the lack of illustrations leaves the pages feeling cold and sterile. Perhaps the biggest complaint about *My First Harp Book* is the pacing. The very first page is a wonderful introduction to the harp that is easy for beginners to understand, but new concepts rapidly pile on by the third page. Glissandos, two-note brackets, three-note brackets, accidentals and lever changes, 3/4 meter, 6/8 time, they all come like a torrential flood that gushes forth without any guidance or explanation from the author. One only needs to look at the last few pages to understand that for a relatively small work entitled “*First Harp Book*” the advancement appears to be rather steep.

Teach Yourself to Play the Folk Harp

Teach yourself to Play the Folk Harp by Sylvia Woods was first published in 1978, and is another introductory book designed for students new to the harp. Perhaps Woods was trying to answer the demand for better curriculum from Ingelfield and other harp teachers of the time when she created this book. This one is not as widely used as Betty Paret’s, possibly because the

⁴³ Betty Paret, *First Harp Book* (Milwaukee, WI: G. Schirmer, Inc.), 1.

word “folk harp” automatically turns away many classical harp teachers. While Sylvia Woods centralizes her focus on the Celtic or folk harp, much of the material inside is applicable to other harp playing techniques and styles. When discussing the positive points of this book, one has to include the very thorough introduction to the harp on pages 8 through 16. Woods includes a brief history of the folk harp, proper hand positioning, and even how to read a grand staff. The introduction is very informational, and provides a good start for a beginning harpist with absolutely no previous musical background. While the technique Woods includes is based largely on the Grandjany or French technique, what is included in her technical instructions can easily cross over to a Salzedo teacher with a little tweaking.

The problems with this book for a younger student are apparent almost from the beginning. Like *My First Harp Book*, the pacing seems very fast. Even though Woods takes the time to clearly discuss the new material before each piece, it is hard to imagine successfully explaining all the concepts in such rapid succession to a young child. One almost gets the sense that this book is geared more towards the older beginner, and for that purpose, it is quite excellent. A teenager or adult might be able to keep up with the rapid learning pace, but a child under the age of twelve might get frustrated and overwhelmed. Another major issue with this book lies in the title. Harp teachers looking to train their students in the classical method and/or plan to eventually move them to a pedal harp might immediately dismiss a book marketing itself as a “Folk Harp” book. While the material inside is actually quite appropriate for classical harpists, there are enough differences in folk style and technique that might dissuade a classical teacher from even getting past the front cover. Additionally, because this book is marketed for folk harpists, it perhaps unintentionally ostracizes students who start learning on a pedal harp. Like the Betty Paret book, there are no illustrations in *Teach Yourself to Play the Folk Harp*.

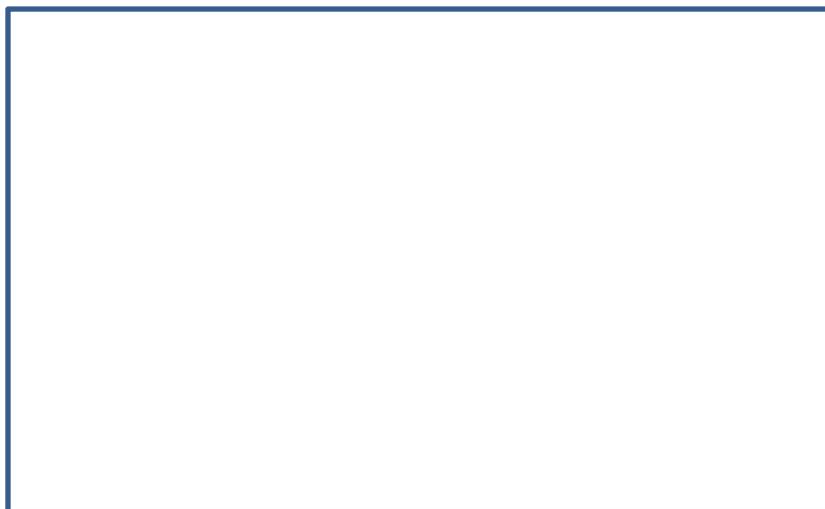
Harp Olympics

One cannot adequately discuss harp instructional books without mentioning the *Harp Olympics* series by Susann McDonald and Linda Wood Rollo published in 1999. One of the newest additions in the world of harp curriculum, *The Harp Olympics* sets out to do what no other harp curriculum has been able to achieve as a true comprehensive and all-inclusive student learning series. Unlike other beginning harp books, *Harp Olympics* actually advances by levels, spread out between five books.

There are many admirable aspects of *Harp Olympics*. For instance, there are plenty of exercises for finger strength, informational harp care pages, built-in games for rudimentary music theory, and slow-paced learning geared towards younger students. Although Susann McDonald is a well-known Grandjany teacher, this series can be easily adapted by teachers using alternative harp techniques. In the first few pages, the details of harp mechanics are laid out, appealing to students using either a lever or a pedal harp. The pacing is refreshingly slow when compared to other introductory books, and new concepts are drilled in through the wide variety of finger exercises. The theory portion does a good job introducing rudimentary concepts to a young student, and the exercises and worksheets included are simple but effective. Students are introduced to notes, rhythm and counting, pedal and lever changes, the major and minor scale, and more. While the theory portion only makes up a small piece of the overall curriculum, it does seem to be well thought out and organized. Additionally, *Harp Olympics* does include some hand-drawn illustrations within its pages.

While *Harp Olympics* does seem to get a lot of things right, there are some negatives. While *Harp Olympics* does include some illustrations, they are black and white drawings, usually

depicting the same cartoon teddy bear in different positions or outfits. Below are some of the illustrations found on pages 49 and 83 of *Harp Olympics Vol. I*.



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While having any illustration at all is beneficial to a child's musical development, these drawings are sparsely dotted throughout the book and serve more as an instructional help rather than to give any context or meaning to the songs. The friendly teddy found in *Harp Olympics* is more akin to the helpful paper clip from Microsoft Word 95 than, say, to the colorful pictures found in a child's reader or bedtime story.

Perhaps the most prominent flaw in this series is its noticeable lack of actual songs. While there are some excellent exercises within its pages, they are what predominantly makes up most of the book. The repertoire section entitled "solos" contain some fine pieces, but they all seem to be more advanced solo songs geared for performance, rather than for personal practice. The amount of finger exercises might seem ideal for teachers developing their student's technique and strength, but it is hard to imagine a young child keeping a high enthusiasm week after week without learning any actual pieces. This may not be such a negative thing if the *Harp Olympics*

⁴⁴ Susann McDonald and Linda Wood Rollo, *Harp Olympics: Stage 1* (Louisville, KY: MusicWorks), 49-83.

series was used in tandem with other instructional material, however, this becomes difficult, though, when one considers the price associated with this series. One Harp Olympics book is priced at \$35 plus shipping, nearly three times the amount of other beginning instructional books. When considering the price tag, it is difficult to imagine telling the parents of prospective students that they will need to purchase additional material to go along with this curriculum, as the costs quickly add up. It is safe to say that Harp Olympics, though it offers some great exercises and solos, is not a comprehensive stand-alone curriculum.

Fun from the First

Fun from The First by Samuel Milligan is another well-known instructional harp book geared towards beginners published in 1962. On the front cover Milligan markets this series for both private lessons, and classroom use. In the preface, he states the following:

*“Fun from The First for the lever harp is designed to be used as a self-help instruction book or for use with a harp teacher for either individual or class teaching. If a harp teacher is not available, students who have little knowledge of music would do well to put themselves under the instruction of a music teacher who, while not being a harpist would be able to see in this method, music that is in common with all musical learning.”*⁴⁵

Milligan spends the first two pages of his book addressing correct posture and finger technique. While the technique he encourages aligns more closely with the Salzedo technique, it is easily adaptable by Grandjany teachers. Helpful pictures are included to make sense of the instructions showing finger placement with both hands on the strings.

Fun from the First seems to live up to its intended use, as the pacing seems well-suited to young beginners with little previous musical experience. The songs are short and easy to read, and Milligan includes wonderful instructions before introducing a new concept or idea. A few exercises are sprinkled throughout helping students understand finger-brackets and intervals. The

⁴⁵ Samuel Milligan, *Fun From the First: Vol 1* (Chicago, IL: Lyon and Healy Harps), 2.

majority of the pieces are very short, simple arrangements of folk tunes from various countries, interspersed with a few Christmas and sacred works.

There are two books or volumes in this series. The first introduces brackets, intervals up to a sixth, and songs written in the keys of C, G, or D Major. The second book discusses multidirectional brackets, 6/8 time, rolled chords, glissandos, and songs written in F Major. The second volume contains more exercises than the first, mostly working on finger-brackets and placing.

Fun from The First has an extremely natural pacing that could work well for a younger student. New concepts are always explained in detail, and songs are interesting without being too lengthy or advancing too quickly. There is a reason this series has been a regular staple for harp teachers since inception in 1962. Like many of its counterparts, though, *Fun from The First* contains no illustrations. There are a handful of black and white photos to help with posture and technique, but the visual guides end there. Though there are two books in this series, they are relatively short, adding up to about twenty-five pages each. While the pacing seems appropriate for a young beginner, it would still be difficult to imagine a child starting this series without having some degree of musical understanding. Milligan does not include any instruction on note-recognition or sight-reading, which would make it a difficult book to use for self-instruction unless one had previously been acquainted with the musical staff.

Beginning at the Harp

Beginning at the Harp by Lucien Thomson was first published in 1969. There are two volumes or books, similar in layout to the *Fun from the First* Series. Although not as commonly used as some of the previously mentioned introductory books, *Beginning at the Harp* offers a unique experience that a teacher might find attractive for students with less previous musical

experience. Although the layout is simple, Thompson includes theory worksheets along with repertoire to help with rudimentary concepts. On page twelve there is a short description of the treble and bass clef, along with a blank staff on which the student might practice drawing each. This helps students who might not be familiar with the musical staff, a factor taken for granted in many other beginner harp books. The pacing of this series is slow and suitable for a younger beginner. The main focus seems to be a 50/50 combination of repertoire and music theory, making this series heavier on the theory than others. As an educator myself, I see the value in providing music theory context to pieces as much as possible, as it helps young students fully understand the piece they are learning. There is a constant debate in the harp community on the necessity for a beginning student to be familiar with music theory. While this is likely to be an ongoing discussion, music theory can only aid in a student's ability to understand and read music, and should therefore be considered an invaluable tool.

The downsides to this particular series is that it leaves the learner lacking. It has many wonderful worksheets and simple easy-to-read songs, but the flow feels disjointed, and it is almost as if many steps were left out to keep the books as "minimal" as possible. In the Foreword the author admits that this is "not intended to be a Method book,"⁴⁶ meaning he is aware that it is not a stand-alone curriculum. He also states very clearly that this series was designed for the "training of children over seven years of age."⁴⁷ This means that by his own admission, *Beginning at the Harp* is not suitable for children under the age of seven. Another problem teachers may find with this particular series is that there are no finger-strengthening exercises. A teacher would, again, have to resort to supplementing this book with another

⁴⁶ Lucien Thomson, *Beginning at the Harp* (New York, NY: O. Pagani & Bro. Inc., 1969), 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid

resource, as these are paramount for a beginning harpist to practice daily. As well, there are no illustrations of any sort in this series, only text and musical examples in black and white.

A Side-by-Side Comparison

Although there are a few books for beginning harpists currently being published, none of them tick all of the boxes, so to speak. Some have excellent pacing but lack musical content. Others have excellent exercises but lack songs and repertoire. Some have a good mix of both but are paced far too quickly for younger children. None of them offer colorful illustrations to help motivate and spur on the imagination of young minds.

Looking at the chart below, one can see that none of the existing beginning harp books meet all of the needed requirements for the targeted student age range. This is exactly why a better curriculum is needed, and this is exactly why *When Fingers Meet Strings* was developed.

	Contains Exercises	Slow Pacing	Suitable for Young Children	Contains Colored Illustrations	Multiple Volumes	Method Book	No Prior Training Needed
First Harp Book	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Teach Yourself to Play the Folk Harp	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Harp Olympics	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Fun from the First	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
Beginning At the Harp	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
When Fingers Meet Strings	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

This chart gives a visual representation of the holes that exist in our current harp curriculum. Most of what is readily available was written decades ago, with little to no reworking or new editions being put forth. As a piano teacher as well as a harp teacher, it is even more obvious to me the difference in quality available to harpists in their method books. The Faber piano company puts forth a new edition almost every decade to stay current. Why are harp teachers still using books from the sixties, fifties, or even forties? Parents of harp students pay a lot of money, much more than for most other instruments, for their children to learn to play the harp. They have to center their whole lives around the instrument, often including the car they drive and the house they live in to accommodate the size and weight of the instrument. Why then should harp curricula not be as good as that of piano curricula? Or a violin curricula? If parents are investing more, then their children should be receiving a well-rounded education, and that requires a great curriculum.

Scope of the Project

Because of time-constraints and other limiting factors, the curriculum currently being developed revolves around the first volume in the series, the Primary level. This volume is estimated to be approximately forty to fifty pages in length, and by the end of the book, students will be familiar with quarter, half, whole, and dotted half notes, as well as quarter rests. The book starts with the assumption that the user is a young beginning student (age 5-8) with little to no previous musical experience. Consequently, a substantial amount of music theory is a prominent aspect in this particular volume. The goal is for this series to be completely comprehensive, and since harp theory books are scarce, this is an essential component to *When Fingers Meet Strings*. Without the addition of music theory, a young student will struggle to understand new concepts, which may result in frustration, and ultimately a loss of interest in the instrument. While it may

be argued that teaching theory falls solely on the individual teacher's shoulders, many teachers can benefit from having a starting ground from which to build a discussion. A harp teacher may have as many as thirty to forty students, and designing a custom theory plan for each of them can be time-consuming and exhausting. For this reason, theory will be woven throughout the series when necessary, including hands-on activities and worksheets to engage the student in learning through self-discovery. The focus is on only adding in the "minimum" amount of theory necessary to push students towards success, without making the entire series into a workbook.

Theory is presented in this volume within the framework of "learning-by-doing." A teacher may present a new concept aurally to their student, but within a matter of minutes if that information is not reinforced in any manner it is easily forgotten. This is especially true when dealing with young children from Generation Z or Generation Alpha, as mentioned previously. The best way to get musical concepts to stick in a child's mind is by allowing the student to utilize the new concepts for themselves immediately after learning them aurally. How this is achieved through my curriculum is by immediately engaging a student after learning a new concept through either drawing, listening, reciting, coloring, or sight-reading. By immediately reinforcing a musical concept after introducing it, a child is much more likely to remember it.

Theory aside, *When Fingers Meet Strings* will mostly be musical repertoire students will learn and practice at home. As well, a handful of finger-strengthening exercises will be scattered throughout. These are for students to practice daily to build up muscle tone and work on using correct technique. Students with poor playing technique or posture can result in long-term chronic pain, so it is important to reinforce proper technique and posture from the beginning. It is also important, however, to find a balance between enforcing proper technique, yet not

discouraging a student in their practice. By assigning a reasonable amount of exercises to practice along with fun songs to learn, this balance is satisfactorily achieved.

Limiting Factors

In a perfect world a team of professionals would be diligently working on this curriculum with all the best materials and technology. Unfortunately, the main driving force behind *When Fingers Meet Strings* is simply a passionate individual behind a computer desk with a basic set of skills and software. All of the artwork and illustrations are original, done with an outline pen, watercolor pencils, and colored markers. The main goal of these illustrations is to provide context for young students and stimulating their imagination and emotions by combining certain colors. The illustrations will serve as a learning tool and motivational factor for the target age range of 5-8. Any other artistic references within the pages are done carefully on Microsoft Paint, with some notation and symbols taken from public domain websites. Photographs included are taken with a personal camera and feature the author and the author's instruments. Finale is the main notation software used for most of the songs and exercises. All songs are either original compositions or songs available from the public domain. This is all done in order to avoid copyright conflicts.

In Conclusion

Why take the time to go through all of these introductory harp books and point out their flaws? The answer is simple. Currently there is not a comprehensive method book available to harp teachers that meets the needs of the modern-day harp student. This is even more true for students younger than seven, who are often discouraged from learning the harp until they are older. By discouraging younger students, teachers are not only pushing them away from the instrument they claim to love, but are discouraging them from learning music during their most

formative years. Research shows that the earlier a child is exposed to music the greater the benefits, so why not capitalize on these immense learning capabilities when they are younger?

The need for a better curriculum is clear, and *When Fingers Meet Strings* can be the trailblazer in this journey towards helping younger students reach their full potential on the harp.

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