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Confidence And Encouragement For The Non-Virtuoso Harpist

As a beginning harpist I went to a Harp Convention and the harpist came out and played a major orchestral piece on the harp with all of the parts! And furthermore she did it by memory!! It was beautiful, wonderful, and exciting! And there I sat thinking, “After that, what am I doing calling myself a harpist? I’ll never be able to do something like that!” My self-confidence as a harpist dropped to a great low. Sound familiar?

I grew up in a culture that enjoyed a lot of teasing. The one about music was, “He couldn’t play ‘Come to Jesus’ in whole notes!” Do you worry about what people think about you level of playing on the harp?

(I don’t tease much anymore since I noticed that some people can dish it out but they can’t take it.)

By the end of your reading of this document, I hope that if someone said that you couldn’t play ‘Come to Jesus’ in whole notes, then you would be confident that they did not know what they were talking about! I hope that you would be sure that with your level of technique on the harp, that you could render a musical experience for others! I hope that you will receive encouragement for you to play for others and lead people in worship!

On some instruments I can play whatever is put before me. However, on the harp I am very modest. I started harp late in life. I am not very good with small motor skills. In high school they put me on the tuba which only has 3 buttons to push and it often plays on every other beat. By the time I started playing the harp though, I knew a lot about musicianship which helped me greatly. I know how to put an aesthetic shape into a piece of music and how to design an aesthetic musical experience. I love to get to people musically. But on the harp I have to work within the framework of being very modest technically. I am far from being a virtuoso!!! However, I have performed many places receiving nice unsolicited comments, notes, and calls. I have been asked to play for the dying minutes before their death. There is no self-confidence in a situation like that. Yes, you can pray and play the harp at the same time and still keep your mind on task. I then just played like I was sitting at home playing. Some people in situations like this put an imaginary wall between themselves and the situation and then play as normal. As I found myself blest with modest harpist ability, I found that there was a lot of good music out there within my technique that people liked to hear me play. There is lots of music that does not require great technique.

Let me begin your thinking with something that a music teacher I used to work with wrote on the blackboard for the kids: “The woods would be very silent if only those birds sang which sang best.” (As an aside, did you know that even the loud, harsh sounding crow makes a beautiful singing “whoa” sound like a small child singing when the crow is euphoric?)

Begin by playing for Grandma. She will like it because it is you playing for her. Then branch out to family and friends who are usually a welcoming captive audience who are glad to hear you. Many people have never seen a harp much less hear one! Before long you may find yourself playing for Church with your music selection leading people in Worship.

But you say, I don’t have a very good harp. This may be the very best harp you will ever own which God has put at your disposal. The great musician David in the Bible did amazing things with a harp that had a very few strings. Read the Bible book of Psalms and see what harps they had to use. Along that same line, the Scriptures say that God has works prepared for us to walk in. Certainly God is smart enough to give us works that fit our abilities and harp.

Talk about doing things with low skill, consider the mighty computer. The computer has 2 basic electric skills - - on and off. An electric current switch is either on or off. But when then on and off switches are joined together in patterns we have the wonderful computer! Likewise with the harp you have 2 basic skills - - you pluck a note or play a rest. Can you pluck a note on a harp? I’m sure the answer is “yes”. Can you ply a rest on the harp? I’m sure the answer is “yes”. Great! You are well on your way to being a wonderful harpist! You might be surprised to know that sometimes the hardest part is playing the rests. I once played for an orchestra conductor who after a mistake he would say, “Don’t play your rests so loud!” and then smile. I have worked teaching all ages and directing all kinds of groups. Sometimes we would have to drop a piece well within our ability because we had trouble with the rests and not enough rehearsal time to get it all worked out. They would see some rests and guess O.K. I have rested enough and then play the next note or play it late. Professional musicians work it out with mathematics - - they count!

Think smart: Be prepared, dress up appropriate for the venue (a symphony orchestra dressed up in bikinis does not sound the same as a symphony orchestra dressed up in black and white concert dress), stay within your ability (this is not an acrobat highwire act to see if you will fall – it is a musical experience), say your prayers, love doing things for other people regardless of who they are: do something for someone else not your glory, realize that you may be leading in the worship of God and Jesus Christ.

Don’t be frozen by mistakes. The harp is very forgiving instrument about mistakes. In major and minor chords music the first, third, and fifth note of the chord scale in the harmony will be fine. The second and sixth note of the chord scale sounds like color tones which are beautiful on the harp. The seventh note of the chord scale may also end up sounding like color tones – sometime beautiful ones. The fourth note of the chord scale could sound like a unique color tone depending on how high it is. You cannot play just one note on a harp. It is a very live instrument. You have what is called sympathetic vibrations going on with many strings. Any note has an overtone series working for you. Thus, the harp is nearly always beautiful. If you are playing a well-known melody and miss a note, it may just sound like a variation in the melody and you may

be able to cover it up with things like passing tones, suspensions, etc. which we are not going into here. Also, the listener does not see your score to look for your mistakes. If you make a mistake, don't tell people you made a mistake - - they probably didn't hear it. Furthermore, God is available for support. One of my worst performances in Church was really off the wall. After the Service the Preacher was telling me about the people wiping their eyes with tears. God had me playing something that was not on the paper. On another note, a simple arrangement well played has less chance of a mistake and is more musical to the listener than an arrangement that has a lot to offer but is less well played. I once attended a harp workshop that made arrangements with intros and endings for Church using simple things like open fifths, etc. other than chords. The end result sounded pleasant and good on the harp. Of course, the best thing for mistakes is prevention – Practice! Practice! Practice! One other thing, if you are playing a harp duet or in a harp ensemble and make a mistake, look at the person beside you and people will think that they made it.

Virtuosity (and some day you may have virtuosity, too) gives you more options for a musical experience but any technique should not draw attention to itself rather than drawing attention to aesthetic beauty, power, and eloquence of the music. Make things sound musical. You can reek from every pore with technique and still not make a musical experience for others - - but you can do it musically. Be impressed with your music not your technique. Can you sing the note you are playing? Can you hear a note in your mind before you play it. Do you hear the music in your mind? Do you put some kind of musical shape into your music that fits and balances within the piece? The simplest tune can be played musically – Mary Had A Little Sheep; Starkel, Starkel Little Twink for example. In beginning Band class we had a one line song called Holiday In Paris which we called Holiday In A Bathtub. I've had adult accomplished musicians who still remember and tell me about playing Holiday In A Bathtub. The most requested song at the end of Band class was Mary Had A Little Frankenstein. A discussion of musicianship to make anything sound musical is beyond the scope of this document. Try to get to people musically with your human feeling. You naturally have a lot of musicality in you! You can be musical. Say a thing musically nice. Realize though that you can make a great aesthetic musical experience but the listener chooses to like it or reject it.

Are you confident in your level of ability yet? Based on my experience, I can say with great joy and excitement that I have confidence in what you can do with music! Everybody can learn to make music. I just don't know how good they will get. And I do not know what God has for your future or the world's future. But I have confidence that you can play the harp. Meanwhile, keep on plucking.

You may not have the speaking ability to speak on a great theatrical stage in a great drama but you can say nice things to others. In a like manner, you may not have the musical ability to sing in one of the world's greatest operas or the musical ability to play in one of the world's great symphony orchestras but you can say nice musical things to others. Do it with confidence. Happy Harping!

The Scriptures tell us that there are harpists in heaven. You have a significant eternal future as a harpist. Playing a harp is eternally important! If you have lots of money and possessions, they say that when you die, you can't take it with you. Then I have a curiosity question. Maybe you can help me with it. So, then, when we die and we go to heaven in the Name of Jesus, who issues us a harp? Daniel