

## MODERN HARP PLAYING

By Verlye Mills

The harp has proven to be a versatile instrument in the field of modern music. Each year it is gaining in national popularity. Casper Reardon (1907-41) was one of the first harpists to exploit the possibilities of his instrument in the popular idiom. From the late twenties until the time of his death he performed almost exclusively as a member of the popular orchestras of the day. He was a member of the George Gershwin Radio Program, played many staff radio shows and made frequent guest appearances with Benny Goodman, Paul Whiteman, Alec Templeton, and others.

Since the pioneering days of Casper Reardon the harp has taken on a new and cooler look. For instance, it is more characteristic of modern harp to employ a block chordal style of performance as opposed to the arpeggio style of the earlier performing artist. Further, for various effects it is common practice to stop the harp from resonating, that is, stop all strings after each attack. This produces a stronger rhythmic pulse and a cleaner sound in general when this is desired in contrast to the natural overlapping resonance of the harp.

To meet present day demands in harp playing for radio, television and films, the modern harpist must not only have a thorough fundamental knowledge of the principles of harp playing in the symphonic tradition but must add to this a well grounded knowledge of chords and chordal progressions. One must be a fast and accurate reader. It is not uncommon that the modern harpist will be asked to make the transition from one mood or tempo to another, or to improvise a modulation which will be a convincing introduction to a new theme. This requires a harmonic conception, flexibility and facility far different from the demands of traditional schooling in performance. The ability to meet these requirements comes in part from a natural ability to hear chords and to be able to produce them almost intuitively on the harp. However, any harpist with a reasonably good ear can improve upon his chord improvisation if he applies himself to a diligent study of certain basic matters of chord construction.

First: Develop a thorough knowledge of chords. This knowledge includes not only traditional harmonic practices but a knowledge of the current notations of chords in the field of popular music. The following chords should be learned in every key and associated with appropriate pedal settings, (Example A).

The image displays two musical staves in treble clef. The first staff contains seven chords, each represented by a cluster of notes on the staff and a handwritten label below: C<sup>6</sup>, C<sup>7</sup>, C major<sup>7</sup>, C<sup>9</sup>, C<sup>9</sup><sup>b</sup>, C<sup>7</sup> (<sup>5<sup>b</sup></sup>/<sub>9<sup>b</sup></sub>), and C+11. The second staff contains three diminished chords, also with note clusters and labels: C diminished, F diminished, and G diminished.

Example A: Basic Chords

Note that in matters of chord spelling the final test of a chord is in its relationship to other chords. For instance, the above C diminished chord may be spelled in a variety of ways; B<sup>#</sup> diminished, D<sup>#</sup> diminished, E-flat diminished, F<sup>#</sup> diminished, etc., depending upon the context and the use of this chord in the stream of chordal progressions. In other words these chords must be conceived both as chords in themselves and as chord changes and pedal changes in a series; for a harpist must first of all be practical, and the

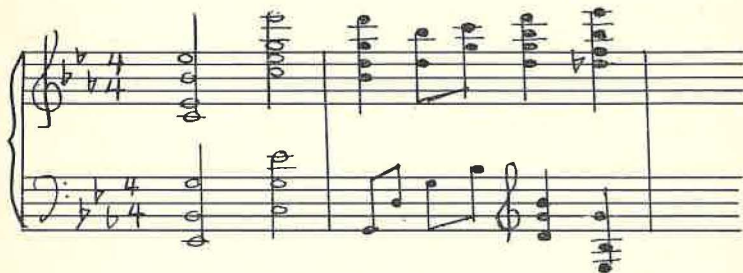
actual spelling of the chord should be dictated by the convenience of the pedal changes rather than by a theoretical conception.

Second: It is helpful to commit to memory certain progressions or series of progressions which might find frequent use. Such memorization is valuable both for its immediate practical application and, probably more important, for the freedom it affords the harpist in thinking chords without being dependent upon the written note. As a practice in this technic one might memorize the chord structure of a familiar song such as *Swanee River* and, using this chordal background, improvise original melodic patterns or even little compositions. It would be valuable also to transpose this exercise into various keys.

Thirdly, it is essential to modern harp playing that the harpist adapt his style of chord-playing to the style of the number at hand. That is, for example, while in rhythm numbers chords should be blocked in close position to increase their rhythmic impact, the fuller and more resonant style of ballads requires a wider spacing within the chord. The following two bars from "Over the Rainbow" illustrate the spacing of each chord over a relatively wide register of the harp in a way appropriate to the ballad style. (Example B.)



VERLYE MILLS



Example B: "Over the Rainbow"

In today's music the modern harpist is finding uses for the harp much beyond the limitations which have been imposed upon this instrument by the cliches of some of those writers for the harp who have dominated the musical scene for the last one hundred years. Far from being restricted in its use to the florid effects of a special nature the harp is now employed in ensemble for purely melodic purposes, for a more or less continuous strengthening of the harmonic structure in a composition, or in the role of a rhythm instrument. It is now less often conceived as merely an accompanying *instrument a plectre* or as a small grand-piano-on-end, and is much more consistently recognized as an instrument of individual personality, rich and varied in its tonal facets.

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#### VERLYE MILLS (BIOGRAPHY)

Verlye Mills started playing the harp at the age of five. She studied with Enrico Tromonti in Chicago, and at the age of ten appeared as soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at a Children's Concert.

Miss Mills began her serious professional life with the Roxy Theatre Symphony Orchestra under Erno Rapee. After a period as first harpist with the Cleveland Sym-

(Continued on Page Twenty-Two)



For a third successive season Rosalie Randall is playing harp with Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians. In December, just before leaving for a four-month tour of the west coast, the band played a "homecoming" engagement in Detroit, which is both Miss Randall's home town and the city where Mr. Waring began his career 30 years ago.

Dean Owens is harpist with the Savannah (Georgia) Symphony Orchestra this season.

Artiss de Volt and her sister, Charlotte de Volt, are giving a number of harp and violin recitals at East Coast colleges this spring.

Bruno Schaefer plays harp with the current season of the San Carlo Opera Company.

Radio Paris carries a series of harp

(Continued from Page Three)

phony, she returned to the Roxy with Fred Waring's Synco-Symphony, "100 Men and a Girl."

The roster of name musicians with whom Verlye Mills has been associated in freelance work is almost a "Who's Who" of the entertainment world: Fred Allen, Arthur Godfrey, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Kate Smith, Perry Como, Patti Page, Julius LaRosa, Mindy Carson, Milton Berle, Nat King Cole, Georgia Gibbs, Eddy Fisher, Gordon Jenkins, Frank Sinatra, Allen Roth, Axel Stordoh, Tony Martin, Ames Brothers, Robert Montgomery, Arthur Murray, Tony Mottola, George Wright, Ivan Ditmar, and so on. In radio she has played such programs as "Show Boat," "Hit Parade," "Stop the Music," "Waltz Time," "We the People," "Texaco," "Pet Milk," "Phillip Morris," "Playhouse"; in T. V. "Big Payoff," "Bride and Groom," "Lucky Strike Hit Parade," "Philco Playhouse," "Stop the Music," "Colgate Comedy Hour," "Kraft Theatre," "Swift Program," "Live Like a Millionaire," "Break the Bank," and others.

Miss Mills has composed many series of original modulations, solos, and background music for Musak and R. C. A., which were spotted all over the country to be played between numbers by local radio and T. V. stations. At the present time she lives in California where, besides playing T. V. in Hollywood, she is busy writing original solos and transcriptions for the harp, and is preparing a book of modern harp music.

music broadcasts which began February 2 and features France Vernillat.

Edith Lundgren plays nightly from 6 to 8 in the dining room of the Hotel Exeter in Seattle, Washington.

Nina Dunkel appeared in recital at the American Embassy in Paris, France, on December 14, and played the Britten *Ceremony of Carols* at the American Church in Paris on Christmas Eve.

Louise Clow played the *Peter Pan* show in Los Angeles and San Francisco this season, and collaborated with Kathryn Thompson and Marcia Johnstone at Warner Brothers Studios on the harp scores for the pictures *The Silver Chalice* and *Helen of Troy*, directed by Max Steiner.

#### RECENT WEDDING

Theodore Cella to Countesse Matilda Mara di Bninska, February 14, 1955.

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