



come to Munich. And so I went to Bavaria. The harp was very good, exactly what I wanted. So I explained to him where and in which position I wanted the pedal. Meanwhile, Salvi also has harps like that. Salvi copied it, because I played on one of his harps, which also had the damper pedal. Wonderful, very good. Of course, you have to pay an extra price for these harps, they are more expensive.

I don't know if this idea will evolve, because it complicates harp playing tremendously. It complicates it because the seven pedals have the function of chromaticism, raising and lowering notes, while the eighth pedal does not have this chromatic function, but that of damping. It takes a long time to get used to this pedal, unless you start with the eighth pedal right away. That might be possible. But for some particular effects, it's very practical, for certain music, for harpsichord music, for example. We use the harp as an expressive harpsichord, for instance, and it sounds very nice. To differentiate chords, to muffle, to get clarity and cleanliness in certain passages, there are many possibilities. (...) Some harpists accept the damping pedal, others do not. It depends on the opinion of each individual.

**IMA:** In your opinion, what are the most serious technical shortcomings of the harp?

**NZ:** Technical defects? Well, mainly the one we fight against all the time, that you can't mute every note. That can make quite a mess, especially with the big harps. You can pay attention to the low register, and nothing clear or pure comes out. That's the most serious fault with the instrument.

**IMA:** Apart from being a musician, what would you have liked to become?

**NZ:** I would have liked to have been a scientist. No matter what science. Before I went to Paris as a 17-year-old to study music, I had sent a letter to a friend who was studying electrical engineering in Liège. I was very interested in that. But by chance the government of Guipuzcoa gave me this scholarship, and the friend never answered my letter. So I decided to go into music. Things like that happen in life.



Nicanor Zabaleta's last visit to Argentina in 1988. He gave a recital at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires together with guitarist Narciso Yepes.

**IMA:** Now the obligatory last question: do you have any advice for future harpists?

**NZ:** Well, the advice you give to every instrumentalist, no matter what instrument, and hear from every teacher: work, work, work!

**IMA:** Thank you very much for this detailed and personal interview!

#### Endnotes

- 1 Enrique Fernández Arbós (1863-1939), Spanish violinist, conductor and composer.
- 2 Vicenta Tormo de Calvo (1857-1936). Faculty of the Madrid Conservatory.
- 3 Bernard Zighera (1904-1984), harpist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1926 to 1980, teacher at the New England Conservatory and at Tanglewood.
- 4 Jacqueline Borot (1916-1999), student of M. Tournier and professor of harp at Paris Conservatory from 1958 to 1984.
- 5 Lily Laskine (1893-1988), student of A. Hasselmans, harpist with the Paris opera (1909-1926) and professor at Paris Conservatory from 1948 to 1958.
- 6 Artur Rubinsteim (1887-1982), Polish-American pianist, considered one of the greatest pianist, and interpreters of the music of Fr. Chopin.
- 7 Hubert Jelinek (1909-1980), Austrian harpist. Harpist with the Vienna Philharmonic.
- 8 José Iturbi (1895-1980), Spanish conductor, pianist and harpsichord player.
- 9 The "Conciertos Daniel Americas" is an artist agency currently representing artists in the fourth generation of the family. It was founded in 1908 by Ernesto De Quesada in Germany.
- 10 Graciela (Graziela) Torres Alcaide de Zabaleta (1928-2017).
- 11 Hans Joachim Zingel (1904-1978), German harpist and musicologist, Professor of harp in Cologne and harpist with the Gürzenich Orchestra in Cologne.
- 12 Sébastien Erard patented the double pedal harp as early as 1810.
- 13 Zabaleta led the annual summer masterclass at the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, Italy, from 1959 to 1962.
- 14 Josef Obermayer (1879-1966), Maximilian Horngacher (1926-2017), harp builders in Starnberg, Germany.

MARGELA MENDOZA



## Tackling Contemporary Music and Working with Living Composers

by Teresa Suen-Campbell

*Ed. – This is the transcript of the lecture given by Dr. Teresa Suen-Campbell at the 14th World Harp Congress in Cardiff 2022.*

What kind of emotion does the term "Contemporary Music" evoke in you? Excitement?

Anxiety? Challenge? Boredom? Or possibly joy? My lecture today will explore ways by which we can find joy when we work on contemporary harp music. As a performer, I find great satisfaction every time I bring a new work to life. I also feel proud of being a significant part of the creative process when I work with a living composer.

#### Rationale behind this lecture

Tackling contemporary harp music is a topic that is rarely discussed, much less providing resources or academic research in this area, especially from a pedagogical perspective. Over the last three years, we have seen several books and articles emerge discussing contemporary harp music, but when I first generated this topic for the World Harp Congress lecture, they had not yet been published.

In recent years, I have adjudicated at music festival and encountered some really talented young harpists. Some of them possessed great techniques and musicality. However, when they performed twentieth century music, they did not seem to know the correct *style* for performing it nor have any idea as to what the music should sound like.

Moreover, new music is getting more prominent then ever. There are contemporary music ensembles in music conservatories/universities and abundant performance opportunities on the new music scene. In several international harp contests, such as the Israel and USA International Competitions, new works are required repertoire (e.g. Stage one in the 2021 Israel and Stage three of the 2022 USA competitions).

This essay consists of two parts: "Tackling Contemporary Music" and "Working with Living Composers." This essay is based on a lecture which I gave at the World Harp Congress in Cardiff in the summer of 2022, and I have tried to preserve the oral nature of the language I actually used during the lecture. Moreover, this article is based on my actual experiences with contemporary music that have never been published prior to my lecture. Before we dive into tackling new music though, we need to take a brief look at the historical background of the harp as an instrument.

#### History: A Brief Overview

In 1810, the double-action pedal harp was patented. The new invention has led to an increase in the technical possibilities of the harp as an instrument because of its ability to play chromaticism in classical music. In the early nineteenth century, harp virtuosos like Elias Parish-Alvars (1808-1849) also made significant contributions through his harp playing and compositions for the harp. He not only promoted the harp as a solo instrument, but also encouraged composers to compose music for the harp.

By the 1840s, double-action harps were available to most Western composers.

Composers like Liszt, Strauss, Debussy, Tchaikovsky alike all used a lot of harps in their orchestral music. Hector Berlioz wrote his "Treatise on Orchestration" in 1844.

French-American virtuoso harpist Carlos Salzedo (1885-1961), who was also a composer himself, revolutionized modern harp techniques and created new sounds on the harp. He explained these techniques in detail in *Modern Study of the Harp* (1921) and *Method for the Harp* (1929). He is considered "a bridge between traditional usage and 20th Century composition and styles."<sup>1</sup>

In the 1960s, composers like Luciano Berio (1925-2003) redefined the traditionally feminine image of the harp into something bolder and more aggressive in his work for solo harp *Sequenza II* (1963).

All in all, it has been almost a hundred years since anyone has summarized and updated these newly created extended techniques by publishing them into a manual or book. Two books related to contemporary harp music have recently been published in 2019. They are *The Composer's Guide to Writing Well for the Modern Harp* by Yolanda Kondonassis, and *Guide to the Contemporary Harp* by Mathilde Aubat-Andrieu et al.

For this article, I intentionally left out discussion of extended techniques for the harp.

This topic can be found in great detail with explanations in the two books I mentioned above. You can also find well-illustrated videos on the following website by Miriam Overlach and Sabien Canton, composingforharp.com.

However, one important point for performers to take note of is that sometimes, the way certain extended techniques are notated may vary from one composer to another. One should



Figure 1. Different notations on "Bartok pizzicato"



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always study the notes/instructions provided by the composer whose music you are performing and not make any broad assumptions. For example, regarding the technique “Bartok pizzicato,” different composers have different ways of notating the same effect.<sup>2</sup> (figure 1)

### Part I: Guidelines for Tackling New Music

Over years of learning and performing new works written for the harp, I have made several personal observations from my own experience, and thus come up with the following points. They are coming from mainly a pedagogical point of view.

Also, since this is a rather broad topic and many works have been composed since the last century, this is not an attempt to represent or summarize all those works. Examples have been chosen mainly from works by Canadian composers to present my points.

In terms of the level of difficulty, some are more difficult than others. I personally believe that harp students should be exposed to contemporary harp music early in their studies so as to generate interest in this area further down the road and to avert the tendency of being frightened away by it.

#### 1. Do your research

Similar to approaching a work from other musical eras, I have found it particularly helpful to look at the background of the new work and the composer concerned. Whether the composer has or has not written for the harp before, listening to his/her/their other works, definitely helps to get a sense of their musical style etc. Read up on their background and training will help you understand their music better.

#### 2. Improve your rhythmic skills

I found having a solid and strong rhythmic skill set particularly useful when approaching contemporary music. A lot of the composers in the twentieth century tend to compose music that possess, but is not limited to, the following rhythmic characteristics:

- Relatively complex rhythms, such as in groups of 5 and 7; quintuplets & septuplets are also very common
- Use of hybrid meters, such as 7/8, and 11/8, etc.; some well-known examples are Bernard Andrés’ *Absidioles*, Marcel Tournier’s *Jazz Band*, Salzedo’s *Song in the Night*
- Frequent change of meters, from the “Prelude” of *Suite for Harp* by Avner Dorman (2021), required work for first stage of 2021 Israel International Harp Contest.

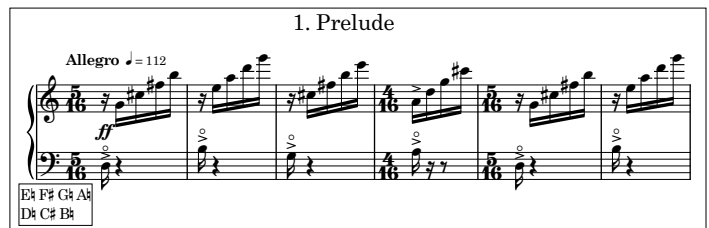


Figure 2. Avner Dorman, „Prelude“ from *Suite for Harp* (2021)

#### 3. Adjust your mindset

- Being a harpist, where most of our standard repertoire comes from the Romantic period, can make us fixated in our minds on what music should sound like, especially with the stereotype of our instrument as “angelic” and

“ethereal” as projected by our society. However, in order to tackle contemporary music properly, one needs to adjust this mindset on what harp music, or music in general, should sound like. In the twentieth century, a lot of the times, composers are more concerned about creating a certain soundscape or sound effect rather than delivering each individual note.

In the work below (figure 3), which I premiered live in 2022 by Canadian composer Alice Ping Yee Ho, the composer wrote a substantial harp part after the electronic tape was played with Amelia Earhart’s voice. Amelia was a famous aviatrix who disappeared after one of her flights in the early twentieth century. Before the lengthy solo harp entrance, we can hear Amelia’s voice on the tape, telling us she was encountering thunderstorms and decided to land on one of the islands. Instead of hearing a showy, extravagant harp solo, here we hear a series of notes that are jumping between different registers of the harp, creating a steady stream of harp notes, expressing the sense of uneasiness and the adventure of the aviatrix, eventually accompanied and surrounded by the eerie sound of the electronics in the background.

- The harp is very also often treated like a percussive instrument in the twentieth century. The music sometimes demands stronger and more aggressive sound from the performer, such as tapping on the soundboard or side of the instrument, playing ornaments with force, frequent change of pedals, (as shown in figure 4, “Quick March”), playing short glissando chords and hitting lower strings with the palm (as shown in figure 5 “Quarks”). Both examples are chosen from *15 pieces for solo harp*, composed by John Weinzwieg.

#### 4. Use your imagination

This is again, a very similar approach to one utilized when approaching music from other musical eras. Contemporary music, in fact, demands equal amounts of imagination, if not more, from the performer to make the music come alive. A lot of the time, the music itself invites the performer to be part of the creative process.

Below is from the work *The Downstairs Spider* by Elizabeth Volpé-Bligh (figure 6). Towards the end, the music depicts the spider escaping from the scenario denoted by notes written in staccato and close to the soundboard, followed by fingers scuttling down the sound board, then around the back of the harp into the nap of the performer, mimicking the spider’s movement. This work is at the intermediate level in terms of difficulty and can elicit interest in music that has more extended techniques and flavor.

#### 5. Be a quick learner

With new commissions, performers sometimes might not have a lot of time to learn the work before its premiere, especially in school settings. It would definitely be beneficial for harpists to be able to digest and learn a piece of music quickly. Improving one’s sight-reading skills and developing an analytical mind for the musical form, structure and rhythmic pattern will definitely help facilitating the learning process.

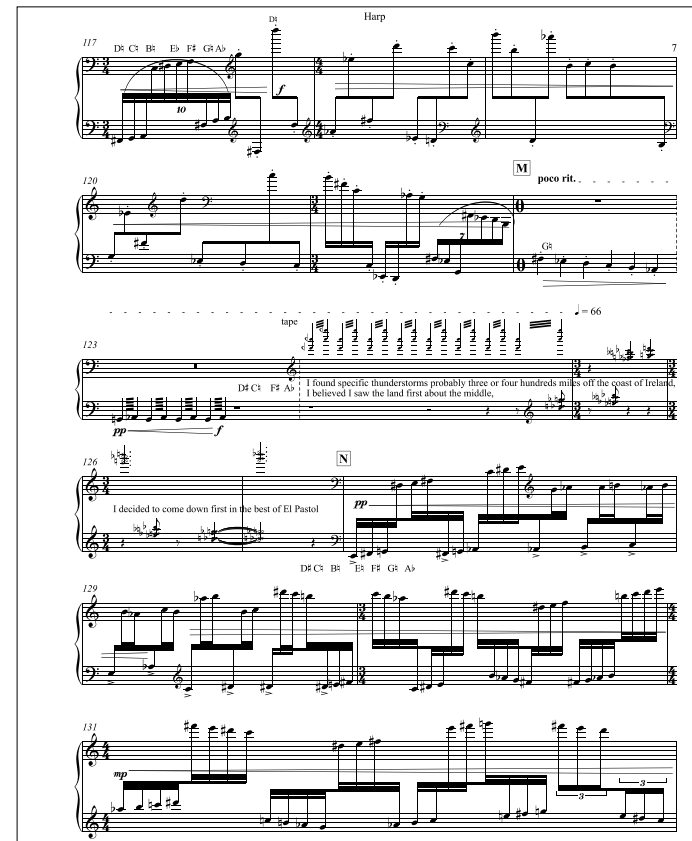


Figure 3. Alice Ping Yee Ho, *Beyond the Erupting Skies Silver Angels Sing Among the Gold Stars*, for solo harp and electronic tape (2021)



Figure 5. John Weinzwieg, “Quarks” from *15 pieces for solo harp* (1983)



Figure 4. John Weinzwieg, “Quick March” from *15 pieces for solo harp* (1983)



Figure 6. Elizabeth Volpé-Bligh, *The Downstairs Spider* (2005)





## 6. Be open-minded

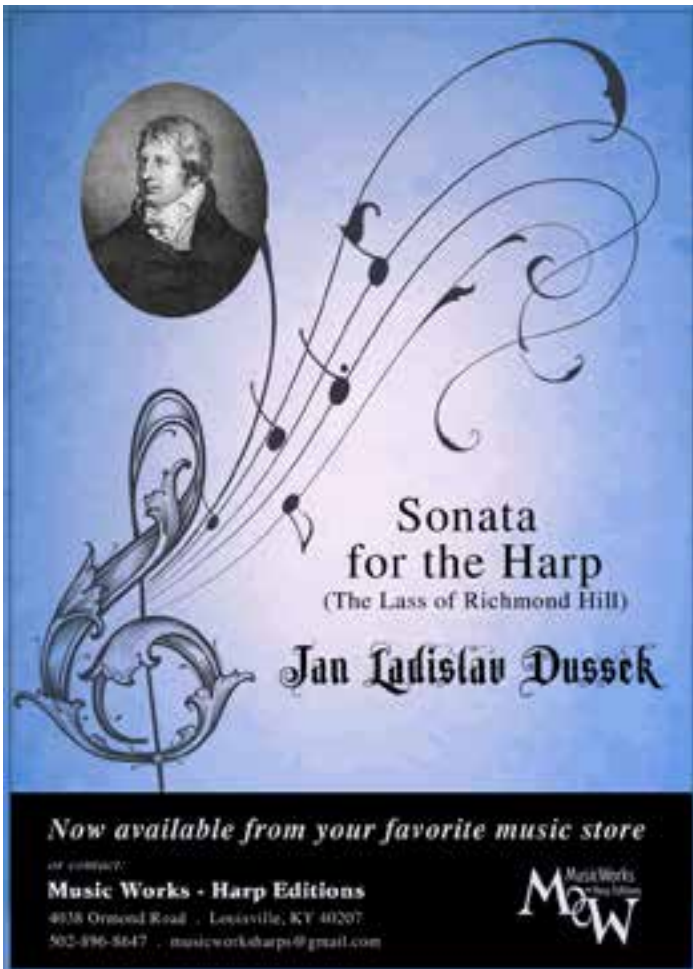
Sometimes, composers might want to push boundaries in their music by adding singing, acting, or the wearing of special costumes, etc. as part of the performance of their works. Being open-minded about new and creative ideas is crucial and to be encouraged. However, one also has to be honest with oneself as to one's own comfort levels. Every performer is different in terms of how far they are willing to go and should discuss this openly with the composer concerned. (Please see the section on "Working with Living Composers" below for a further explanation)

## 7. Be your own teacher

For new premieres, there will not be any existing recordings to listen or learn from. Very often you are given a computer-generated midi-file for learning purpose only. Use your own imagination as to how the work should sound. Develop your own fingerings that works best for yourself and the music. *Think outside the box.*

## 8. Love and own the music

Last but not least, own the music that you perform! Play it with confidence, conviction, and passion. Be assertive with what you are doing, especially when you are playing the extended techniques. If you do not believe in the music that you are performing, nobody else will.



## Part II: Working with (living) composers

Below are some pointers for harpists and performers alike when collaborating with living composers on newly commissioned works. Again, they are generated from my own experience of working with different composers (with different musical backgrounds and cultures) over the years.

### 1. Be confident

Be confident with your harp knowledge and skills. You *are* the expert. Be humble but also honest and upfront about what works and what does not on the harp.

There is a fine line between a passage that is simply too difficult or impossible to play and a passage that is technically challenging but can be overcome with hard work, perseverance and dedication. It takes time and experience for harpists, especially the younger ones, to be able to distinguish the difference.

Also, sometimes you might encounter scores that are not very idiomatic or harp-friendly. It is important to remember that as the commissioner and the harpist, our role is to help composer translate that wonderful music in the composer's mind into a practical and well notated harp part that will fit into our hands so that future harpists will be able to understand and benefit from it.

### 2. Set healthy boundaries

As in any relationships, it is good to set healthy boundaries and expectations in the early stages of the working relationship, such as setting up a reasonable work timeline for both parties (i.e., performer and composer) and expectations (such as the estimated time for completion of the work and the world premiere date so as to allow sufficient time for the performer to practice the music, etc.). This will be further discussed in the section on "legal issues" below.

### 3. Hone your communication skills

Music schools and conservatories do not usually teach us this subject, but it is essential to have effective communication skills. Working with a composer is a creative, collaboration process. It takes negotiation and compromise. Be respectful but honest at the same time regarding one's feedback and comments for the composer concerned. When receiving feedback, be receptive and open-minded. Do not take things personally. Acting professionally always goes a long way.

All in all, there are pros and cons of working with living composers. The upside is, these composers are alive. Give them a call or send them an email if you have questions. Talk to them! The downside is, the collaboration is a real relationship. Successful relationships take time, effort, patience, mutual respect and dedication.

### How and where to start

Below is a step-by-step guide as to how to start commissioning new works for the harp, whether you are a student or a professional harpist.

#### 1. Locate a composer

Start from people that you already know. Perhaps you have a colleague, classmate or friend who is interested in composing for the harp. Listen to their works, and if you like their music, start a conversation. Also, be proactive and

attend classical and contemporary concerts regularly. Meet other colleagues in the city where you live.

Keep networking and building relationships which will help you eventually locate a composer that you would like to work with.

#### 2. Pay the composer

Find out the appropriate commission fee for professional composers in your own country. For instance, in Canada, we have the Canadian League of Composers: composition.org. Apply for grants and funding from government (such as an arts council) or music organizations. Look for corporate sponsorships and private sponsors (such as family and friends) to fund the new work.

#### 3. Get the work premiered

Identify a date and performance venue for the world premiere. Work with the composer and approach different music festivals, conferences and music platforms for their interest in hosting the premiere.

#### 4. Navigate legal issues and rights

There are several important issues to discuss with the composer concerned, such as:

- Tentative schedule for receiving the score and first performance;
- Rights for future performances other than the world premiere. Is it exclusive or not;
- Recording rights;
- Rights to promote and advertise the new work online (via social media platforms and website).

It would be beneficiary to have a verbal or written agreement between the harpist and composer ahead of time. A sample agreement can be found here: [www.composition.org/commissioning/model-contracts/](http://www.composition.org/commissioning/model-contracts/) Navigating these rights ahead of time will facilitate a successful and happy collaboration for both parties concerned.

### Conclusion

I hope my lecture has convinced you that it is indeed possible to be joyful when approaching and commissioning contemporary music for the harp. It is my hope that this great passion will continue to blossom, especially amongst our younger generation of harpists, and that more harpists will come to appreciate the diversity in the style of music written for our beautiful instrument in the twenty-first century. May our collaborations with composers be fruitful and productive so much so that more wonderful works will be written for our ancient and yet amazingly modern instrument.

### About the Author

A new music advocate, Dr. **Teresa Suen-Campbell** has commissioned 3 harp concertos, 2 works for solo harp and a work for harp and electronics. She enjoys a multi-faceted career including performing, teaching, recording, writing and arranging music. As a soloist, she has been featured at Toronto Summer Music, Ottawa Chamberfest, Sinfonia Toronto and with the City Chamber Orchestra of Hong Kong. As an orchestral harpist, she is a member of the Toronto Concert Orchestra and North Bay Symphony.



A dedicated teacher, she is currently harp faculty at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay and maintains a vibrant studio in Oakville, Ontario, Canada.

For more information, please visit her website: [teresasuen.com](http://teresasuen.com)

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