



Early Harps & Continuo
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Research & Education

Introduction to Spanish Baroque (X-strung) harp

In many ways, it can be helpful to think of Spanish harp as the opposite to Italian, so this introduction makes comparisons with Italian renaissance fingerings, with Italian baroque triple-harp, and with early 17th-century Italian continuo-playing. But it also works as a stand-alone introduction to Spanish harp.

Posture

Typically, Spanish harp is played in a standing position, so that the player is high and the instrument low. (This is the opposite to Italian triple harp, where the player is low and the harp high). There is evidence to suggest that Spanish single-row harps were played with both hands high on the string (near the neck), whereas Italian harps were played with both hands low on the string (*pres de la table*).

Have the instrument fairly upright (the balance position is usually the best angle), supported on your right shoulder as you would expect. You can hold the instrument lightly with your right fore-arm, and steady it also with your fingers on the strings.

You will need to adjust the position of your right arm as you move your right hand from one register to another. So accustom yourself to holding the instrument lightly. Don't try to keep it rigidly fixed in one precise position and angle, but feel free to let it move, and to move yourself around it as necessary.

Your right hand should be high on the strings (as close to the top of the strings, as close to the underside of the neck as possible). Your left hand should be in the middle of the strings. In this way, your right hand will be above the level where the strings cross over, and your left hand will be below this level. To start with, you'll need to remind yourself frequently to maintain this unfamiliar separation of the hands.

For loud bass-notes, if there is time, you can bring your left hand up to the top of the string.

Period posture (taking the weight on one foot, the other leg bent, shoulders relaxed and open) is historically appropriate, and practically effective. For any project where you play Spanish harp, you will have to stand for many hours, so it's worth taking time to find a comfortable stance.

Hand shape

As for any early harp, your hand should be relaxed with the fingers gently curved. Make an O-shape with your thumb and index, the other fingers imitate the curve of the index. Now open out that O-shape, just enough that you can shake hands with yourself (gently). This gives you the basic starting position for your fingers.

For Spanish harp, the player is high and the instrument low. So as you bring your hands towards the strings, you should find your fingers horizontal, with the thumb higher than the fingers. (Just as when you shake hands with yourself). Keep your elbows hanging relaxed.

When necessary, the thumb crosses over the fingers. (This is the opposite to Italian harp, where the thumb crosses under the fingers.) The angle of the hands on the strings makes the plucking stroke of the thumb (again, over the fingers) somewhat different from Italian harp. You'll probably find you use a slightly different part of the pad of the thumb to contact the strings. A slow finger-stroke with steady pressure and maximum range of motion will give the best sound.

Chromatics

In the late 20th-century there were suggestions that chromatics could be played by keeping both hands at the level where the strings cross over, but this theory is not supported by historical evidence, and I have not found it to be effective.

You can play the chromatics best if there is a good space between the two rows of strings – but this space is determined by how far away from the cross over level you are playing. So, keep your hands well separated, (right hand high on the strings, left hand low as described above), and play chromatics by pushing a finger (or thumb) between two diatonic strings to reach the chromatic string in the other row, beyond.

It can be effective to play chromatic notes with the left hand at the very top of the string – at this level the chromatic row is immediately available to the left hand. This is a way to play loud bass chromatics, if the music is not moving too fast. It is also a way for the left hand to assist the right hand by playing some awkward chromatics in the treble register, when the left hand is not required in the bass.

More on hand and finger positions

On Spanish harp, the two rows are crossed, not parallel. So the spacing between the rows depends on the level at which your hand is positioned (high or low on the string). Maintaining a consistent level is the secret to finding chromatic notes reliably.

Nevertheless, the secret to expressive playing is small adjustments to the level (especially in the right hand). You will find a more intense sound higher on the string (for dissonances), and a sweeter sound lower on the string, where the string will be less resistant (for resolutions).

Don't lift the thumb too high above the fingers: this is not necessary, and interferes with the control of level previously mentioned. The starting point for the tip of the thumb is very close to the tip of the index finger. Thumb and finger strokes pass fairly close to one another. But avoid also the opposite problem, where the thumb strikes directly onto the index finger: inhibiting the movement of the thumb in this way will ruin tone-production.

Fingering

We have a lot of period information about Spanish harp fingering. As on Italian harp, thumb (1) and middle finger (3) are Good, index (2) is Bad. But the patterns for scales are the opposite to Italian harp:

Upwards scale: 3212121 (crossing the index under the thumb)

Downwards scale: 1232323 (walking the fingers down the strings)

As you play an upwards scale with the right hand, you will have to adjust the position of your fore-arm, where it holds the harp. This needs some practice, and it's important to move your arm sufficiently: otherwise your hand-position gets more and more awkward and tense as the scale continues.

As you play a downwards scale with the right hand, you also have to adjust your fore-arm, but this is easier than going upwards. Your fingers pull your elbow along with them: your elbow should simply not resist. Once again, it's important to move your arm sufficiently: otherwise your fingers will trip.

The challenge for the left hand is that the strings are played in the middle, where there is least resistance and the most movement of the vibrating string. So you need to practice to feel secure on such floppy strings, and to avoid buzzes as your fingers encounter strings that are already moving. Play low, loud, slow-moving basses at the extreme top of the strings, when possible.

As you move from one register to another, make sure that your hands maintain the necessary separation (right hand high, left hand low). It's easy for the right hand to drop, until you become accustomed to the distinctive Spanish playing position.

Baroque *diferencias* (melodic variations) will give you plenty of opportunities to use these fingerings. Ribayaz's *Luz y Norte* (my modern edition is published by the Early Music Company) is an excellent starting-point.

There is also a large repertoire of excellent renaissance polyphony, originally published for harp, keyboards or vihuela, often with fast-moving ornamentation (*glosas*). Venegas de Henestrosa's *Libro de cifra nueva* (available from academic music libraries in the series *Monumentos de la Música Española*) is an ideal introduction to the renaissance style.

Set-up

Your Spanish harp will be easier to play if you set up the strings to maximise the separation between the two rows. You can do this by adjusting how the strings are wound on the tuning pegs. This will lower the position of the cross-over zone, giving more space for your right hand. This in turns makes it easier to play the chromatics, allows louder playing, and increases the tone-colour contrasts available by moving up or down on the strings.

Continuo

As well as teaching fingering patterns and the *diferencias* style of melodic variations, Ribayaz's *Luz y norte* is also the perfect introduction to Spanish continuo-playing. Whereas the Italian harp closely relates to the theorbo, the Spanish harp is close to the guitar (Ribayaz's book covers both instruments).

On Italian harp, the player sits low, concentrates on the bass, and fills out long notes with shapely upward arpeggios. On Spanish harp, the player stands high, is more aware of the low treble register, and fills out long notes with repeated chords, like a strumming guitar. If a long arpeggio is played, on Spanish harp it would run downwards (cf the beginning of the *Fantasia de Ludwico*).

Ribayaz shows effective chord-shapes, with three notes in each hand. For most continuo-playing, the right hand should not rise above "tuning-A" (ie A440, A415 or whatever), so as not to compete with the solo part.

However, mid/late baroque sources also show a higher right-hand register in song accompaniments, with the solo part often doubled by the index finger, i.e. the continuo lies about a third higher than the solo. This seems to reflect a change in the continuo aesthetic in the late 17th century, a change seen also in Italian and German continuo-sources.

Ribayaz explains how to realise Good and Bad beats in continuo-playing: on a Good beat, a chord is played in both hands, corresponding to a down-strum on the guitar. On a Bad beat, only the right hand plays, corresponding to an up-strum on the guitar. Notice that the typical Spanish pattern in triple-metre is Good Good Bad (whereas in Italy it would be Good Bad Good).

In Spanish music, the default metre is triple (whereas in Italy it would be duple). Spanish words and Spanish poetry often end with a stressed syllable (this is rarer in Italian). Very frequently, poetic phrases (and therefore musical phrases too) begin with two upbeats.

Putting all of this together, you will find the typical metric pattern for a four-bar triple-metre phrase, and if you combine this rhythmic pattern with basic harmonies, you will have the *pasacalles*. [See example 3, below]

Practise the *pasacalles* in every tonality, major and minor. Also in duple time.

The most common rhythmic addition is the *repico*, nicknamed in The Harp Consort "Scooby-dooby-doo", which usually runs across the bar-line: 2+ 3+ 1. Ribayaz gives combinations of right and left hand chords with *repicos* as the opening statement for many of the *Luz y norte* dances.

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Fingering

Spanish Harp

The 'Fingering' exercise consists of two staves in 3/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a sequence of eighth notes: G4 (3), F4 (2), E4 (1), D4 (2), C4 (1), B3 (2). The left hand (bass clef) plays a sequence of eighth notes: G3 (3), F3 (2), E3 (1), D3 (2), C3 (1), B2 (2). The exercise is repeated twice.

Arpeggio

Spanish Harp

The 'Arpeggio' exercise consists of two staves in 3/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a dotted quarter note G4, followed by a half note chord of F4 and E4. The left hand (bass clef) plays a dotted quarter note G3, followed by a half note chord of F3 and E3. The exercise is repeated twice.

Pasacalles

Spanish Harp

The 'Pasacalles' exercise consists of two staves in 3/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a sequence of block chords: G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The left hand (bass clef) plays a sequence of block chords: G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2. The exercise is repeated three times.

Repico

Spanish Harp

The 'Repico' exercise consists of two staves in 3/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a sequence of notes: G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The left hand (bass clef) plays a sequence of block chords: G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2. The exercise is repeated four times.

