



Early Harps & Continuo
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Research & Education

Introduction to Italian Baroque triple harp (*arpa doppia*)

Early 17th-century technique for *arpa doppia* is built on the foundation of Italian renaissance technique for single-row harp. This introduction shows how that technique is adapted for a larger instrument, for chromaticism, for bass-line playing and for continuo-realisation.

Although it has high notes and a wonderful solo repertoire, like its contemporary the theorbo or *chitarrone* the *arpa doppia* is essentially a bass instrument, optimised for playing basso continuo. Understanding this is the key to mastering the instrument.

Posture

Typically, Italian harp is played seated on a normal chair, so that the player is relatively low and the instrument high. (This is the opposite to Spanish baroque harp, where the player is high and the harp low). At first, you may feel almost overwhelmed by having such a large instrument so high above you, but persevere, because this historical position is the secret to the character of the instrument.

Have the instrument fairly upright (the balance position is usually the best angle), so that there is very little weight on your right shoulder. The base of the harp will be close in towards you: resist the temptation to lower the harp by pushing the base further away!

Push your right foot forwards, so that your right knee and lower leg are against the side of the harp and help to support it. Bring your left foot back, opening your knee away from the harp so that you can reach down to play the extreme bass register *pres de la table*.

You should find that the left-hand register corresponding to the bass clef (FF to c) is directly 'in front of your nose'. This is the most important register, the range of typical bass-lines, and your *arpa doppia* is a bass instrument. By leaning forwards slightly, you can reach down to play the extreme bass strings *pres de la table*: these strings are the special glory of this instrument, comparable to the extra set of extreme bass-strings on the theorbo.

The register corresponding to an alto voice (G to a) lies conveniently for your right hand, and this is the most important register for that hand, the range of early 17th-century continuo realisation. Your *arpa doppia* is a continuo instrument.

The normal *seicento* soprano range (up to the top of the treble clef, about g') is also easily accessible, although the upper notes of this range will feel rather high from your low sitting position. That is how it should be.

Some virtuoso solo pieces call for the very high register of the *arpa doppia*, up to d". These are advanced pieces, and such high notes are needed very seldom. To start with, do not worry about this extreme register, and certainly do not change your basic sitting position, nor the angle of the harp for the sake of these few high notes that are hardly ever needed! Your *arpa doppia* is at heart a bass, continuo-playing instrument!

If your *arpa doppia* is relatively small (shorter than you are), then you might even need to use a small box or stool to raise it off the floor, in order to achieve the optimum position for the bass register, continuo-playing and most solos.

Zampieri's portrait of King David with a large *arpa doppia* (see below) shows how the instrument is significantly higher even than this big man. The top strings are well above and behind the player.

Period posture (look at paintings of Kings seated in majesty) with one foot (for harpists, the left) drawn back, and the other foot forwards to display an elegantly bent leg is historically appropriate and practically effective.

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 Italian harp, the feeling is that you are low, and the instrument is high. Rest the 'heel' of your hands firmly on the soundboard, and relax your elbows so they hang naturally. This will position your fingers low down on the strings, fairly close to the soundboard, a position a modern harpist might label 'pres de la table'. For *arpa doppia*, this is the normal playing position, producing a clear, strong sound, especially in the bass.

Surviving triple harps show marks on the soundboard where the player's hands have rested. Theorbos have similar marks, proving that the strings were plucked very close to the bridge, corresponding to this pres de la table position on the harp. Harpsichords also pluck the strings close to the bridge.

For a more intense sound (e.g. for dissonances) bring your fingers even closer to the soundboard. For a sweeter sound (e.g. for resolutions) move your fingers slightly away from the soundboard.

When necessary, the thumb crosses under the fingers. (This is the opposite to Spanish baroque harp and modern playing, where the thumb crosses over the fingers.) A slow finger-stroke with steady pressure and maximum range of motion will give the best sound.

Repertoire

Although there is a significant repertoire of music specially composed for harp, period sources are unanimous that harpists played the same repertoire as lute-family and keyboard-family instruments: ensemble music and continuo, transcriptions of vocal music, dance-music, toccatas and polyphonic fantasias. It is utterly appropriate to borrow music from keyboard and lute sources.

Chromatics

Play chromatics by pushing a finger (or thumb) between two diatonic strings to reach the chromatic string in the other row, beyond. Rest that finger on the neighbouring diatonic string (so that string cannot sound by mistake) and curl your finger around it to play the chromatic string in the next row, leaving your finger 'inside' after playing. Retrieve the finger afterwards.

Sometimes the hands can assist each other, for example by the left hand taking some awkward chromatics in the treble register, when it is not required for the bass.

More on hand and finger positions

Don't lift the fingers high above the thumb: this is not necessary, and will make your hand tense. 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 in different directions. The thumb moves under the fingers and into the hand, the fingers wrap around the thumb.

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

The basic principles are those of renaissance music. Thumb (1) and middle finger (3) are Good, index (2) is Bad. The patterns for scales alternate Good and Bad fingers to produce a "dooby-dooby-doo" effect.

Upwards scale: 3232321 (prepare two fingers at a time)
Downwards scale: 1212123 (passing the thumb underneath the index)

Set-up

Your *arpa doppia* will be easier to play if you set up the strings to maximise the separation between the rows. You can do this by adjusting how the strings are wound on the tuning pegs. The crucial separation is between left-hand row and middle row in the bass register: second priority is between right-hand row and middle row in the treble register.

This gives more space for fingers as you play in the middle row. This in turns makes it easier to play the chromatics, and allows louder playing.

Bass Lines

I use and teach an adapted technique (modelled on theorbo-playing) for bass-lines, using thumb and index finger only, and with sophisticated control of damping, in order to play loud, clear bass-lines. As you play a note, damp the previous note immediately for normal legato; damp earlier for staccato, damp later for over-legato.

Make sure to create the effect of Good and Bad notes, even with this special bass-line fingering.

Continuo

To start with, find the most effective chord-shapes, with three notes in each hand. In early 17th-century Italian music, the right hand should not rise above “tuning-A” (ie A440, A465 or whatever), so as not to compete with the solo part.

Practise major & minor chords, Perfect cadences (4 3) and Phrygian cadences (7 6) in all possible tonalities.

Cadences imply not only certain harmonies, but also the rhythmic pattern of Good joined to Bad – you will find the same pattern in the word-accentuation of the text you are accompanying. Contrary to most modern performances that slow down at cadences, Caccini (1601) makes it clear that the soloist’s ornaments on the Good penultimate syllable should speed up and run without hesitation into the unaccented final syllable.

Rhythm is an essential ingredient of continuo-playing. Practise with a metronome at about minim (half note) = 60.

Minims in the bass should be realised with chords that are alternately Good and Bad. For a Good chord, make a quick arpeggio with both hands simultaneously, on (no before) the beat: the arpeggio should be so tight that individual notes cannot be discerned. Sustain the sound as long as possible. For a Bad chord, play fewer notes without arpeggio and damp the sound early.

Crotchets (quarter-notes) in the bass should usually be alternately with realisation (on the beat) and without (off beat). So the right hand still plays Good and Bad minims, whilst the left hand moves in crotchets.

Semibreves (whole notes) in the bass can be filled out with a shapely upward arpeggio. Play a low bass-note, pres de la table with index finger, on the beat. Finish with an alto-range note on the second minim beat. Fill out the sound between these two rhythmic points with an arpeggio that makes a crescendo and increases in speed. This corresponds to Kapsberger description for the theorbo of the *arpeggio commune*: the normal or ‘default’ arpeggio.

Three of the earliest treatises on continuo-playing give a good overall picture of the period aesthetic. Viadana (1602) gives basic instructions for accompanying; Bianciardi (1607) shows typical harmonic progressions two chords at a time, looking at the way the bass moves from one note to the next; Aggazzari (1607) describes the role of the *arpa doppia* in relation to other continuo instruments.

The most closely related instrument is the theorbo/chitarrone. Model your continuo-playing on theorbo, as well as (indeed, more than) on keyboard instruments.

The composers of the first ‘operas’ – Cavalieri (*Anima e Corpo*), Peri (*Euridice*), and Monteverdi (*Orfeo*) – insist that continuo for recitative should be simple and without ornamentation. Concentrate on rhythm and the meaning of the words. As Caccini writes in *Le Nuove Musiche* (1601), the priorities are “Text, Rhythm and (last of all) Sound, and not the other way around!”.

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Introduction to *Arpa Doppia*

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Renaissance Fingering

Arpa Doppia

Baroque Bass fingering

Arpa Doppia

Downwards: Play the next note with 2, then damp the previous note with (1)

Upwards: Play the next note with 1, then damp the previous note with (2)

Continuo: Chord shapes (Rule of the Octave)

Arpa Doppia

Continuo: Chord shapes (Rule of the Octave with Bb)

Arpa Doppia

Continuo: Good/Bad & *Arpeggio Commune*

1. Bad notes might not need any chord at all.

2. The notes of this Good chord are only just separated: they are heard together with the bass as a single event on the beat: "Vrr"

3. This is the 'default arpeggio' over two minim beats. After a strong bass note, play the arpeggio with *accelerando* and *crescendo*, but fade the penultimate (highest) note slightly. Choose how strongly to play the final note, according to context

Arpa Doppia

5 Bass plus chord Bass alone Long Short Bass ... arpeggio ... stop

Good Bad Good Bad

Arpeggio commune