

LEFT HAND MUFFLES

Muffles are a standard part of pedal harp technique. However, many lever harp players are not familiar with them. This is not surprising, since the bass strings are generally the ones that need muffling, and pedal harps have many more bass strings than lever harps. But if your lever harp has more than about an octave below middle C, muffling is a technique that will make your playing cleaner and more melodious. Which muffles to use, and where to use them, are dictated by personal preference. The muffles I have indicated in this music are suggestions, only. The resonance of your harp, particularly in the bass, and your ear will tell you whether a muffle is needed. Playing these pieces on various lever harps, I have found that some harps require lots of muffling, and some can be played with very few muffles, due to their shorter bass ring.

FLAT HAND MUFFLES

Many of the muffles utilize a flat hand position. Imagine that you are going to push open a swinging door with your left hand. Try it. What does your hand look like? You place your palm flat against the door with your thumb and fingers pointing towards the ceiling. This is pretty much what you will do when playing in a flat hand position. Now let's try it on your harp.

Exercise #1. Place your left hand flat against the strings with your thumb on middle C pointing straight up. Your 4 fingers won't be pointing straight up, they'll be at a slight angle where they are comfortable. Your palm and the full length of all your fingers should be in contact with the string. No gaps are allowed. The bottom part of your hand below your thumb will probably be covering a few strings above middle C. Practice placing your hand like this several times until you can place the entire length of your hand and fingers at the same time. Now let's see how this works to muffle the strings. With your right hand, play some of the strings in that octave below middle C, and then use your left flat hand muffle. Do you hear how the strings are stopped? (Some strings lower on your harp may still be ringing sympathetically.) If some of the strings in the octave that you were trying to muffle still are sounding, your hand isn't FLAT against the strings. If you get buzzes

when you muffle, then you're not placing your hand on the strings with enough conviction! If you wander into the strings, you'll get buzzes. If you place your hand firmly, with all parts of your hand and fingers at the same time, you won't buzz. Practice muffling in this manner until all of the strings stop at the same time.

Exercise #2. Now that you have mastered the flat hand position, we'll pluck some strings at the end of the muffle. Here's a visualization trick that I learned from a wonderful harp teacher, Suzanne Balderston. Look at the big knuckles of your left hand, the ones where your fingers attach to your hand. Imagine that these knuckles are a drawbridge. You're going to raise these knuckles (the drawbridge) while you play. Here's how it works. Start with your flat hand position, with your thumb on middle C (as we did above). As you pluck your thumb, raise the drawbridge. The tips of your 4 fingers should stay on the strings, and the rest of your hand is drawn away from the strings (leading with the drawbridge knuckles). If you don't lift your hand from the strings, you'll get a harmonic (which we don't want here) instead of a nice clear note played with your thumb. Practice this, placing your hand flat and then playing your thumb, until it feels comfortable.

Exercise #3: Flat thumb. In "real life", you actually want to play the thumb AT THE SAME TIME as you muffle the strings (instead of afterwards). It should be one continuous motion. This way, the note played by the thumb will cover up any noises made by the muffling, and the tone will not be interrupted. So your next exercise is to place your hand flat against the strings (as above) and play the thumb at exactly the same time that your hand contacts the strings. Practice this until it is comfortable. In this book, the notation for this is a + sign, instead of a fingering. The + means to muffle with a flat left hand and play the note with your left thumb at the same time.



Exercise #4: Flat thumb scales. Scale-type passages in the bass are often played with a flat thumb, as you practiced in exercise #3. Play middle C with a flat thumb, then move your entire hand down one string and play the B with a flat thumb, etc. When

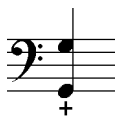
playing scales in this manner, your fingers will just lightly rest on the strings. Be sure you place and play at the same time. Practice playing both ascending and descending scales using a flat thumb. Once again, in this book this is notated with a + instead of a fingering.

A special note for players with small lever harps:

The preceding muffles are hard to play on the very lowest strings of a harp, because there are no strings below to rest your fingers against. Sometimes (depending on the shape of your harp pillar or column, and how close it is to the strings), you can rest your lower fingers against the pillar if you run out of strings.

If your harp only has an octave, or a bit more, below middle C, you might want to play some of the flat thumb scales indicated in the music using the techniques in Exercise #9 instead. Also, since your harp probably doesn't have a lot of bass ring, you can probably leave out many of the muffles, and just play the notes with normal hand position.

Exercise #5: Flat hand octave. Flat octaves are played using the same principles as above. Start with your hand flat on the strings, with your thumb on middle C and your 4th finger on the C below. Now, remembering your drawbridge, pluck both your thumb and 4th fingers at the same time. Your entire hand and fingers will come off the strings. Remember to pull your hand away from the strings (leading with the drawbridge) to avoid harmonics. Practice this by placing your flat left hand and then playing the octave. Once you have mastered that, then place and play AT THE SAME TIME like we did with the thumb previously. This technique is called a "flat octave" and in this book it is notated with + sign placed above or below the octave. (In "Yesterday", the same principle is used with an interval of a 7th, as well as an octave.)



Exercise #6: Flat hand octaves, not played together. Sometimes you'll place your hand for a flat octave, but play the two notes of the octave individually, one at a time, instead of together. In this first example, play a flat 4, then play your thumb. In the second example, play a flat thumb and then your 4th finger.



Exercise #7: Flat 4th. Sometimes you want to play one note and muffle the strings above it at the same time. For this, you'll play with a flat 4th finger. It is the same principle as Exercises #2 and #3, except that you will pluck with the 4th finger instead of the thumb. In this book, this is notated with a + as well as a "4".



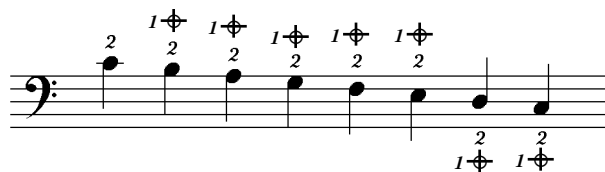
Exercise #8: Low register muffle. When you want to muffle the lower register of the harp, just place your hand flat against the strings you want to muffle, as in Exercise #1. This is the notation for a bass register muffle. You decide which strings to muffle, depending on the music and the range of your harp.



OTHER MUFFLES

The following muffles are NOT played with a flat hand, but with normal hand position.

Exercise #9: Descending scales with finger 2. Descending scale passages are often played with a flat thumb, as in Exercise #5. Another way to play them is with a normal hand position. To play the following scale, pluck each string with your 2nd finger (of your left hand). At exactly the same time that you place and pluck your 2nd finger, you place your thumb on the adjacent string above, muffling that note. For example, when you place and pluck the B string, your thumb will muffle the C string. Your hand just bounces down the harp from one string to the next, plucking and muffling at the same time.



Exercise #10: Muffling one note. Sometimes you just want to muffle one note to clean up the sound of a chord. This is often used at the end of a piece. To do this, just lightly place the tip of your finger on that one string to muffle it.



These explanations and exercises are from Sylvia Woods' Lennon & McCartney for the Harp book.

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