

Alleluia Progressions

Progressive Warm-ups for Harp by Marlyn Jensen

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WHAT IS PRESENT: The Basics

Basics could be defined as that which we often take for granted. I am always surprised when I ask my students a “basic” question, and they don’t know the answer (such as what does the top number in a time signature mean, what is a key signature, point to a “clef” sign, etc.).

One “basic” unique to harp is that of directional placement. I created the 2nd progression for one of my students who loves to play sacred music and needs something fairly easy. As I began writing out the melody and simple bass line, I realized how the melody reviews basic finger placement, and each phrase is progressive, or increasing in difficulty.

One of my mottos is “Why play an exercise when we can play a ‘real song’ that accomplishes the same thing?” Hence, the 1st progression reviewing placement in both hands was born. Encourage students to play it with hands alone. Be picky about their technique. Have them repeat each phrase several times. Have them show you mastery before going on to the next phrase.

Then I realized this simple melody would provide the vehicle for exploring common left hand patterns when creating improvised bass lines.

Then I wanted to go back and experiment with intervals in the right hand...then try blocked chords, broken chords, and new chord harmonizations....

WHAT IS NOT PRESENT: Or How to Take it to the Next level

So I have more progressions in mind not documented here, which vary tempo, pitch, even meter. I could write a progression a day and never be finished with the project, so I had to stop somewhere.

What you have are a fraction of the basics. I intentionally kept the melody simple in some progressions so that the student can focus on the new contrasting harmonic idea. What is not present are progressions several generations away from the basics.

Here are ways you can take the ball and run with it!

When I took piano lessons in college, I thought here I am, studying intricate Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven pieces. If I was at a Christmas party and my friends wanted me to play while they sang, I’ll bet I couldn’t even play the accompaniment for Jingle Bells. I’m nothing better than a trained monkey who only reads music....

Well, that thought lasted about 3 seconds before I experimented to see if I could play a carol through, partially by memory and partially by ear. It was a struggle, took me several tries, and certainly wasn't very pretty. So I began to end every classical practice session with trying to play a song without music.

All of this is to say: try teaching your students a couple of the variations by ear, without music. After using these progressions for a while, I hope your students will naturally memorize the melody and basic chord progression, even on their own without your prompting.

While writing this note to you, I just realized "Alleluia" has the most basic chord progression there is: I, IV, V, I. Explain this to your students, that all songs can be harmonized with these basic scale tones.

Once your students memorize the melody & chord progression, you can:

1. Pair a treble clef from one progression with a bass clef from another
2. Transpose any given progression into any key
3. Apply the alternate chord progression to any progression (and explain to your students how I found the alternate chords...not randomly, but by using relative minors)
4. Switch the right and left hands: have right hand play the idea in the left (an octave up), and have left hand play the melody progression an octave down.
5. In progressions with one note at a time (not chords), see if the student can play either hand in octaves (under your close supervision to be sure technique is correct, thereby preventing tendonitis)

As you use these progressions to create your own (even to string favorites together to create your own solo or duet), do email: I'd like to hear about creativity inspired by these exercises.

A note on the discussion question for progression #3: Why are broken chords so very inherent or central to harp playing?

This is a question I often ask myself. There probably isn't just one answer, but this is my thought: the harp is a percussive instrument. As soon as a note is plucked, it dies quickly. By breaking a chord, the sound is spread over more time, creating the illusion that the chord is sustained longer.

Harp playing doesn't have to be difficult to be beautiful. You just have to know how to play chords and how to break them.

(Enough reading. Go play!)