

The Five-minute “Anti-Stress” Daily Technique Boost

By Anne Sullivan

Sounds impossible, doesn't it? How can anything boost your technique in just five minutes with no stress? When you think of any of the famous exercise or etude books that you may have studied, one image probably comes to mind: a dark page full of ink representing a lot of notes, notes in finger-bending combinations to be performed at lightning speed. And while there is no question in my mind that I'm a better harpist for having learned my LaRivière, I have to come to an appreciation of a different approach to refreshing my technique on a daily basis.

I need to issue a major disclaimer here. I am a dedicated fan of Salzedo's "Conditioning Exercises," and I use them regularly to keep my technique at its best. But this article is about those times when I want to take things a little easier, or I'm already doing enough heavy playing to keep my fingers in shape, and they just need a little TLC. If you're feeling over-worked or your fingers just need some gentle attention to basics, this technique boost is for you.

The focus of this easy routine is on basic technique, not speed. You will use it to examine closely how your fingers are working and to check every aspect of your approach to the harp from how you sit to the curves of your knuckles. You will concentrate on perfection at a very slow speed so you can be completely relaxed and completely correct.

First, begin with a minute of slow motion hand work. This is similar to the stretching that any athlete would do before working out. Lay your hands on your thighs, palm upward. Count slowly one beat per second (or turn your metronome on to 60) and over the course of four seconds or beats, gently close your hands, making sure your fingers and thumbs all close. Then, counting to four, open your hands again. Your hands should stay totally relaxed, not clenched when they are closed or hyper-extended when they are open. Do this five times. Then decrease the count to three beats instead of four and do that five times.

This is a good opportunity to start thinking about how the rest of your body feels. Be aware of any tension that may be lurking in your shoulders or neck or anywhere else. Allow yourself to relax.

Now we continue the warm-up at the harp with "place and hold" technique review. Pick any four consecutive strings and place all four fingers on the strings. Slowly, play one finger at a time, repeating each finger ten times, while keeping your other fingers resting lightly on the strings. You should be watching each finger as it plays to be sure that every knuckle is behaving the way it should and that your fingers are closing correctly. Your replacing on the string should be clean and noiseless, and be sure to use a round, relaxed sound. Your goal is to reinforce correct technique in all aspects, while staying relaxed. Do one hand and then the other. There is a reason that almost every exercise and etude book begins with this sort of exercise – it works!

Once again, loosen any tension that you feel anywhere in your body. Be sure your harp posture is correct and that your feet are solidly on the floor or the pedals. Remember that technique is not just in the fingers, but comes from your entire body. So don't sit sidesaddle!

Finish up your warm-up with a slow hands together two-octave scale. If you have trouble keeping a slow and careful speed, try setting your metronome at 60, one note per click. Remember your object is flawless technique, not speed. Pay attention to each finger as you play, making sure that it plays correctly and cleanly. Watch your cross-unders and cross-overs carefully and listen for an even tone. Play the scale three times. At the same speed, do a two-octave arpeggio hands together or hands separately. Once again, watch each finger as carefully as your teacher would, and listen closely to your sound. Most importantly, stay relaxed and focused. Play the arpeggio three times.

Your hands are now warmed-up and ready to play. Even better, you've spent a concentrated five minutes on the basics of your technique and reinforced the foundation for all your playing. And you should feel relaxed. Is there a better way to start your day?

For more information on this and other harp-related topics, visit our website, arsmusica.us, where you will find many resources for practicing harpists, from more articles and podcasts, to downloadable courses and sheet music.