

# Notes for “Summertime”

George Gershwin’s 1935 tune from the still-controversial folk opera *Porgy and Bess* was inspired by African-American spirituals, blues, and Ukrainian lullabies. This amalgamation has spawned tens of thousands of recordings in all manner of styles.

My double-strung harp arrangement croons the jazzy melody over a simple accompaniment made bittersweet with accidentals set on the left side.

## Performance notes

- The LH is marked with accents in the first measure so that there is a true echo as both hands play the same notes in the same range.
- Roll most of the three- and four-note chords, but not all of them. For example, the phrase “spread your wings and you’ll take” is more dramatic if you only roll the first and fourth chords, leaving the second and third flat. Experiment, and enjoy thinking about how to enhance your interpretation.
- Be careful to keep the emphasis on the melody, especially when the accompaniment is at a higher range. Be especially gentle with the LH when the accompaniment is higher or at the same range as the melody.
- Take your time in m29-30. The accompaniment suggests one of the unfortunate consequences of taking the sky, which is why the last chord is rolled downwards.
- Emphasize beats 1 and 3 of the outro. Treat the RH notes as pickups to these beats.

## Double-strung finger placement notation

**What do the R and L mean?** My notation generally keeps the accompaniment in the bottom staff and the melody in the top staff. This does not always correspond to which hands are used, particularly when one of the accidentals is needed.

**I use R or L to give special attention to notes that should be played with the “other” hand.**

When the RH helps with the accompaniment, I indicate this with R or R# in the bottom staff. When the LH helps with the melody, it gets L or L# in the top staff.

To make this even more visibly separate, all numbers for the “other” hand are on the inside of the staves, and all numbers for the “expected” hand are on the outside.

Some of the Rs and Ls are recommendations, particularly for echoed notes. But when an accidental is called for, that means you must use the side with the corresponding lever, so the **R** or **L** is bold.

In m22-23, the Ls in the top staff indicate the option of repeating these notes on a new string, leaving the first-plucked string to ring out.

This is optional. Try it to see what the effect is, and then judge for yourself if you want to use it. This does not make or break the song; it's your choice.

However, in m20 and m38, the accompaniment uses a B flat. Your left side is set to B natural, so you can't use your LH for this note. Therefore, the **R** is bold to indicate that you must use your RH.

After flipping the Bb lever on the left in m38, you can create an easy placement with overlapping hands for the outro. Place RH 3 on C, 2 on D, and 1 on E. Now your LH can place a triad going up and down the strings: C-E-G, D-F-A, E-G-Bb, D-F-A, etc.

Again, you have a choice: use this easier hand position, which necessitates a lever flip; or don't flip the lever, and intersperse your hands in a more complicated fashion.

**What do parentheses mean?** Melody notes in parentheses indicate that the note is already accounted for in the LH chord, so duplicating it in the RH is optional.

In m6-7, the first syllables of "livin'" and "easy" are covered by the LH. I've suggested RH fingering for these melody notes, however, because I like the emphasis.

In contrast, eliminating the first syllable of “baby” in m17’s RH means you can more easily place the five-note phrase. You can do the same for “hush” at the beginning.

In my recording, I choose to play every RH note, and you can see how I have to pay extra attention to where that hand is going, all while traversing multiple ranges in the LH. Which way works better for you?

## Analysis

Looking for patterns in the arrangement shows us that a lot of this song is the same. This helps with learning and memorization.

The LH plays half notes for most of the song, which allows you to concentrate on being expressive with the RH melody. The melody repeats itself completely; it’s just an octave higher than the first time.

There are only four LH measures that have rhythms that aren’t repeated elsewhere.

**m1-4: Introduction.** Hands are together for the first two bars, then an octave apart for the second. This establishes both the infant-rocking rhythm of the piece as well as the pattern of jumping octaves.

**m5-8: Verse 1, line 1.** Melody and accompaniment in the lower register.

**m9-12: Verse 1, line 2.** Melody remains in the lower register, and the accompaniment jumps an octave...on the word “jumpin’.” The last four beats make good use of LH accidentals.

**m13-16: Verse 1, line 3.** Same as line 1 of this verse.

**m17-20: Verse 1, line 4.** Melody remains in the lower register, and the accompaniment runs the gamut. The last two bars end with the rhythm in the lower register, like the first two bars of the intro.

**m21-22: Interlude.** Like the second part of the intro, the RH goes up an octave, setting up verse 2.

**m23-26: Verse 2, line 1.** The accompaniment is the same as for verse 1, but now the melody is up an octave.

**m27-30: Verse 2, line 2.** This is the dramatic peak. Although the line seems triumphant (someday, you’re going to take the sky: woo hoo!), the sentiment expressed in line 3 is that *until that day*, nothing can harm you. Your parents can protect you only until you leave the nest. Thus, the accompaniment

of the last two bars reaches, reaches, wobbles, and falls down on the last chord. This is reminiscent of another lullaby: “when the bough breaks...”

**m31-34: Verse 2, line 3.** Same as line 1 of this verse: the accompaniment is the same as for verse 1, and the melody is up an octave.

**m35-38: Verse 2, line 4.** Still the same accompaniment as verse 1, with the melody up an octave.

**m39-44: Outro.** We end with a new rhythm. We’re not rocking the infant anymore so much as watching the mother walk offstage as we reflect on the lesson she’s imparting.

## Background

“Summertime” is from the opera *Porgy and Bess*, produced in 1935 from a 1925 novel. The writers and the composer are white, but the story is about characters who are black. This has never *not* been controversial, with much discussion around whether the characters promote racist stereotypes.

DuBose Heyward’s lyrics were inspired by the spiritual “All My Trials,” which begins, “Hush little baby, don’t you cry; / You know your mama was born to die. / All my trials, Lord, soon be over.”

George Gershwin’s tune was also inspired by spirituals—listen to “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” It also has a smattering of blues and possibly some Ukrainian lullabies. This amalgamation has spawned tens of thousands of recordings in all manner of styles:

- Listen to [Billy Stewart’s up-tempo R&B version](#), which is the most commercially successful of all the recordings so far.
- Listen to [Janis Joplin’s drawn-out, psychedelic blues rock version](#), which sounds like exactly what you’d imagine coming out of San Francisco in the Sixties.
- Listen to [Ella Fitzgerald’s slow-then-sassy version](#), featuring her commentary: “What do you care? Your daddy’s rich, you got a good-looking mother; imagine everybody with a good-looking mother and a rich daddy.... Summertime! That’s what the song says: livin’s easy!”

## What I changed

I referenced the score in Hal Leonard’s [Songs of the 1930s](#). Here’s what I changed:

- **Different key.** The original is Am.
- **Some altered chords:**
  - m11 and m29: I used Dm6 instead of D7#9.
  - m12 and m30 : I used Eb instead of G.
  - m12 and m30: I used Dm6 instead of Gm6/D.
  - m19-20 and m37-m42. I used G9 instead of G7.

- **Some changes to lyrical phrasing.** All singers take liberties with phrasing, especially with pop standards. Please continue this tradition in your own playing.

One thing I did not change is the dialect. The original lyrics have all of those abbreviations for dropped vowels at the ends of many words.

## Suggestions for your own changes

- **Expand it.** Repeat the entire song before playing the outro.
- **Add chords to the melody.** The longer notes might particularly benefit from some chords.
- **Add lower notes.** If your harp has lower strings than are used in this arrangement, see if it sounds appropriate to utilize them.
- **Finger placement.** The reason I don't include brackets is to allow you to more easily change any placements you disagree with. Once you settle on the fingering, draw the brackets in, and draw swoops to emphasize where the "other" hands are helping.
- **Give it a different feel.** If tens of thousands of artists have already recorded this, what kind of spin can you give it? Can you use my setup of preset accidentals to take the rhythm in a whole new direction?

## Or just make it a little easier

- If you don't have the high F in m9, don't worry. I don't have that note, and [you don't miss it in my recording](#). Play the rest of the notes in the chord, and it's fine.
- The L/R fingerings around m28-30 can be greatly simplified if you don't play the lowest G. Eliminating that note allows you to play all of the melody with the RH and all of the accompaniment with the LH. (I still recommend allowing the RH to help with the LH when the RH isn't doing anything else.)
- In m27, the Ab in the RH after the tied F can be eliminated.
- Instead of flipping the lever at the end, create another rhythm pattern, or just repeat the pattern from m37-38 to the end.
- Eliminate the accidentals altogether by just not playing those notes in those chords. (This will also allow you to eliminate the lever flip at the end.)
- Eliminate all chords by playing only the lowest note.
- When I play this tune therapeutically:
  - I smooth out the dotted rhythm.
  - I eliminate the triplet rhythm in m29-30.
  - I pacify the funky outro rhythm.
  - I remove some of the accidentals in the chords to make them stand out less.

- The chord symbols are provided so that you can ignore the bottom staff and use the top as a lead sheet.
- The section above that breaks down the arrangement is provided to help you memorize. A little bit of time spent up front on analysis can make things easier in the long run.
- [Refer back to my recording](#) any time to hear and see how I do it.

## If you like this piece...

- Are there jazzy tunes that you want to arrange for double-strung that would benefit by having the accidentals set only in the LH like this one?
- Can you utilize the overlapping fingers in the four-note rhythm of the outro for a similar pattern in any other tunes in your repertoire?
- Record yourself, and post on YouTube and Facebook, especially the groups for [Double Strung Harp](#), [Celtic Harp](#), and the [Virtual Harp Venue](#).
- [Leave a review](#) on SheetMusicPlus, [like and comment](#) on YouTube, and tell others about my arrangement. Enjoy!