

This article by Aedan MacDonnell was first published in the September 2015 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

You can find Aedan's PDFs at www.harpcenter.com/Aedan



How it All Began

I loved watching cartoons when I was a kid. Who didn't? My favorites were Mighty Mouse and Bugs Bunny. Not because I liked the story-lines or the artwork, but because of the music. I loved how it made me feel; uplifted, happy. And then I found dance at age 6. My favorite was tap. Being able to make sound to the music I loved, while playing it on my little 45 record player made me feel well, happy.

You can imagine my delight at age 7 when my parents bought an old, black upright piano. It was for my mother, but I found a John Thompson's Piano Book 1 in the bench and taught myself to play and read music. Within a few months my parents scraped together enough money for formal piano lessons. I spent the next 10 years studying classical piano. I was good at it, but never great. My teachers were very strict and the creative side of me wasn't allowed to be expressed, so I never put my heart and soul into it. But I never gave up on it either.

Fast forward another 10 years to the local music store in Glendale, CA. I was browsing music when a book with a tan cover and drawing of a harp caught my eye. It was entitled, "The Celtic Harp, A Collection of the finest Old Airs & Dance Tunes from Ireland, Scotland & Wales ... arranged for easy Harp, also suitable for Piano." I bought it, took it home, played the music on my piano and immediately fell in love with the music. And, I decided I needed a harp. So I went to the yellow pages (we didn't have internet at that time) and found someone who was selling harps in Glendale. I made an appointment and showed up very excited and eager to own my first harp. The lady selling the harps was very nice and played the five harps she had for sale, all sitting in her living room. I said, "I'll take that one," handed her my credit card and took home my first harp. Oh, by the way, the wonderful lady who sold me my first harp in 1987, was the one and only Sylvia Woods!

Sylvia had just stopped taking new students, so she referred me to Deborah Friou, and I studied with her for the next 4 years. The harp gave me the freedom the piano never did. I remember in one of my early lessons I had been moving my body in time to the music. Deborah stopped me and I reverted back to my classical piano days and said, "I know, don't move my body." (One of my piano teachers actually kept a ruler on the piano and used it if you moved anything "inappropriately.") She looked at me with surprise and said, "Oh no! You can absolutely move your body! You just need to keep your thumbs up." I can't describe my happiness when I found out that in folk music you don't have to play every single note as it is written on the page; you can improvise, have fun with it, experiment, be creative.

I do have to say that the classical training did give me an edge I wouldn't have had without it; it gave me the ability to be focused, to be disciplined in my practice, and to have great control over every movement. With that edge, I was able to begin playing in public within a year.



Although I do like classical music, I decided my heart belonged to Celtic so I began studying all styles of Celtic music, leaning heavily on Irish and Scottish. I traveled to Ireland to study at Cairde ne Cruite (Friends of the Irish Harp) with Maire Ni Chathasaigh and Grainne Yeats. I was also fortunate enough to spend time with William Jackson, and Grainne Hambly.

At the Harp Center

One day I went to the Sylvia Woods Harp Center to look for music and to browse. Terri, who was working there at the time, asked me what I was up to. Not much, in between contract assignments - I created databases for companies like Avery and Ernst & Young, my harping was a side job at that time. She asked if I wanted to tune harps, so I did for about a month. At the time Sylvia was in Hawaii, and when she returned, she offered me a job. I accepted and began a wonderful life working at the Sylvia Woods Harp Center for almost 10 years. I learned so much working there. I was able to talk with the harp makers, visit their shops and was taught how they're built, how to take care of them, and how to do minor repairs. I also met a lot of well-known harpers and harpists and received a lot of tips and tricks from them. The amount of knowledge and information I received while working there was invaluable. I also began teaching those wanting to learn the Celtic style.



Harp Therapy



It was at the Harp Center that I was introduced to Stella Benson and harp therapy. I took her program and became a Certified Music Practitioner. I learned how powerful and how healing music can be. I began working with people to help them reduce chronic pain, tension, anxiety. My favorite story is when I was doing an internship at Little Company of Mary hospital in Torrance. They would wheel patients into a large community room so I could play for them. My first day, there was one patient that glared at me from his bed. After about 15 minutes he closed his eyes and fell asleep. I found out that he was a very difficult person and there was only one nurse he would allow to work with him without creating an enormous fuss. They told me that for the next couple hours after I left he allowed any of the nurses to work with him. The

second time I played at the hospital there was a long table in the middle of the room. He and I were at opposite ends of the table. When I began playing, he grabbed the table and began pulling himself closer to me. His reaction to the therapeutic music made a profound impression on me. I quickly found that as we help to heal others, we are also healing ourselves.

On Teaching

I incorporate a basic foundation of technique with theory, expression, improvisation, ergonomics to prevent injury, and reading music with fun. I want my students to have the foundation to be able to play whatever they choose, and to enjoy themselves while learning. I teach private and group lessons, and I also teach by Skype.

Today

Like most self-employed musicians, I teach and play gigs. I also perform at many of the Celtic and Scottish festivals, and other folk-oriented venues. My life is centered around music, dance and teaching - all the things I love. After spending 20+ years in the corporate sector, I'm living my life-long dream working as a professional musician. It's funny how negative events can create positive outcomes that would have never happened without that negative event. It was the security of a regular paycheck (and my family's encouragement) to stay on a payroll, even though I was miserable and unhappy. And even though I got out of the corporate world, and was happy working at the Harp Center, I still wasn't completely living my dream. So when the recession hit and that regular pay check became less and less stable, I decided it was time to live that dream fully. Sylvia was very encouraging and supportive. It didn't go smoothly at first. In order to help pay the bills, I ended up spending two years working as a clairvoyant in a "spiritual house" that wasn't so spiritual. (I've always been interested in the metaphysical realm and have clairvoyant 'ability'.) When they kicked me out after my constantly confronting them about their unethical and illegal practices, that's when the music really started to take off. I just had to believe in myself, and being pushed off the cliff was forced to do just that.



In addition to teaching, gigging and performing, I have a few other projects, just to keep things interesting.



Harp Glen: The past 4 years I've been the Music Director for Clan Currie's Harp Glen at the Ventura Seaside Highland Games - one of the largest Scottish Games in Southern California. All harp players are invited to join us. It's a fun way to learn about Scottish music, meet other harp players, and just have a good time. This year the Games are October 10 & 11.

Meditation: Over the past several years I've given many group harp meditations. Recently I've started on-line harp meditations, in the hopes of helping more people. In working at the hospitals, I began to realize how important it is that taking the time, even 5 minutes, to relax is very important. It helps us to reset, re-energize, think more clearly, and to lower blood pressure, all of which help us to lead a healthier, happier and longer life. Here are two of my YouTube videos.



Books & CD's: I have several meditation CD's. I also have one CD of Celtic music, and am currently working on a second. They can be found on my [www.HarpMuse website](http://www.HarpMuse.com) and many of them on iTunes, Amazon and other on-line sources.

I've written 2 harp publications, and Sylvia sells them both. (And they're part of this month's sale!)

My *Celtic Wedding Book* was 10 years in the making. I did a lot of research and found Celtic music traditionally used for weddings, as well as Celtic music suitable for each part of the wedding ceremony. It also includes information on Celtic wedding customs.

My first publication was inspired while working at the Harp Center. I was trying to explain to a customer why one would tune a harp to something other than the key of C, and how to use the levers. It is a 2-page sheet entitled *Levers at a Glance*.

Celtic Halloween Show: My pet project is an annual Celtic Halloween show. Did you know that many of our Halloween customs, like the Jack O'Lantern and trick or treating come from Ireland? The show, "*Samhain: The Story of Halloween*," tells these stories using traditional music, dance and song. There is an all-star cast of musicians, dancers and singers. And of course, the harp makes an appearance too! This year the show is October 24 in Los Angeles.



Teaching at Camp Kiya: For the past 3 years I've been teaching harp, as well as music theory and step dancing at a wonderful music camp in the Tehachapi mountains. Teaching in this environment is a lot of fun and very fulfilling. A lot of people are interested in the harp, so I bring several of my harps and teach a "Harp from Scratch" class for people that have never played the harp,

as well as a separate class for intermediate to advanced harpers. At the end of camp we all perform, including those in the "From Scratch" class.

Other Stuff: On the non-harp side of things, I'm a member of a Scottish Country Dance Band (the only one in Southern California), called *Speyside*, playing keyboard backup.

I also play harp, accordion, keyboards and percussive dance with the Scottish Fiddlers of Los Angeles.