

This article by Deborah Henson-Conant was first published in the September 2019 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

You can find Deborah's PDFs at [www.harpcenter.com/DHC](http://www.harpcenter.com/DHC)



*When I was seven, I learned to ride a bike and to play the ukulele. That set the scene for my life: music and movement were inextricably combined in my mind.*

*My first public performance was a school assembly: sitting on stage, ten years old, with a baritone uke, looking out on a sea of faces. For the first time in school, I felt like I was where I should be: on stage.*

*That same year there was a tortured month of baffling weekly piano lessons that blew up one day when my teacher gave me yet another song about a happy rooster.*

*"Can't anybody else already play this?" I asked.*

*"Yes, yes, of course," she said. "All my students play it."*

*"Doesn't anyone play it well?" I asked.*

*"YES, many of them play it very well," she said archly.*

*"Well, then why do you need me to play it?" I asked.*

*I wasn't trying to be a jerk. I truly didn't understand why I should play something other people were already playing perfectly well. That job was already being done. I should be doing something nobody else could do.*



*Piano lessons ended shortly after that, and so I asked my mother how chords worked. She showed me: major, minor, how to add a 7th, play the root with your left hand. It was pretty much like learning the rules to any other game -- except that, unlike other games, these rules made perfect sense to me.*

*From then on I played the piano hours a day, like kids today play video games. I gobbled my way through musicals, movie themes, and ballads from the piles of popular sheet music inside the piano bench. I ignored the written notes and played the chords and sang along from memory. This skill would come in very handy when I started playing the harp.*

*When I was 13, my mother became one of the first students at the newly formed North Carolina School of the Performing Arts. She had friends who played nearly every instrument, and all of them tried to teach me. I had five guitar lessons, one on jazz piano, two on flute . . . and six harp lessons. I came up with excuses for why I had to quit every one of them. When I told my mother that I had to quit playing harp because no boy would hold hands with me if I had calluses on my fingers, the writing was on the wall: I just didn't like music lessons. I wanted to write stories with music and make up the music myself. So they left me alone, and I wrote and played, and played and wrote: Bossa Novas, ballads, folk songs, and musicals. I learned to extend chords, add jazzy rhythms, and include dramatic flourishes. Music became my first language. I couldn't read or write actual notes, but that wasn't a big problem. (Plenty of great musicians don't read or write music.) If people wanted to play my music, I just taught it to them.*



*But in my early 20's I started composing a BIG piece of music: a musical. I knew I could never remember the whole thing, so I had to bite the bullet and actually learn to read and write NOTES. So I enrolled in the local junior college, College of Marin, which had a great music department. As it turned out, they needed a harpist for the concert band. Remember those six harp lessons I had? With all that expertise, I became the harpist.*

*For the first time in my life, the discipline of learning notes began to fascinate me, thanks to my teacher, Linda Wood Rollo. I almost immediately started getting jobs in restaurants and events, and I needed them to pay for the used harp I bought. I discovered I could take the minimal amount of classical music I'd learned, combine it with improv patterns, and create enough repertoire to play for four hours a night. Even better, because most of it was improvised, I got to be creative all night. The method I developed then is what I now teach in my online class called ["Hip Harp Toolkit"](#) which starts September 24th!*

From there I got interested in Jazz, fell in love with the lever harp, started a band, and began touring. I collaborated with the world's cutting-edge harp company, CAMAC, to create my own signature instrument, [the "DHC" harp](#). You can see the whole story of that journey in my [TEDx talk](#).

The harp started me on a creative trajectory that was almost dreamlike. By the time I woke up, I had written countless pieces for the instrument:

- one-woman musicals with harp as the sole accompaniment
- chamber music
- a full evening of music for harp and symphony orchestra
- hundreds of solo harp pieces

I also

- Became the first female jazz instrumentalist on the GRP jazz label,
- Got to play one-on-one with musical greats like Mason Williams, Doc Severinsen, Steve Vai, Flora Purim and Aierto Moreira, Bobby McFerrin, and Marvin Hamlisch
- Debuted with the Boston Pops, and premiered compositions with great symphonies around the world
- Had my own PBS music special
- Got a Grammy Nomination!
- Have been featured on many national TV and radio shows including "CBS Sunday Morning," the "Today Show," and PBS "Weekend Edition"
- Have now gotten to actually conduct my own concertos with stellar harp soloists -- which inspires me to write even more music for harp!



All because of the harp!



Marvin Hamlisch



Ray Charles & Seiji Ozawa



Keith Lockhart

I've written dozens of pieces for harp and symphony orchestra, and notating the harp parts are what breaks me every time. The harp is THE hardest instrument to notate — especially the expanded and unusual techniques like strumming, slapping, and bending used in Blues and Flamenco-inspired music. The harp has the capacity for nuances, flourishes, and techniques that are difficult to note with software like Finale -- but oh, do they sound wonderful!



I'm so proud that my music is played around the world. Nearly every day, another new performance of [Baroque Flamenco](#), [New Blues](#), or [The Nightingale](#) is posted on YouTube, and I share them on my blog. [You can see Baroque Flamenco performances here](#). I also love that my concertos, chamber ensemble, and orchestra versions are empowering harpists around the world.



*I promised myself to write music that was empowering, liberating, and inspiring. Every harp player who plays it can inspire their audiences, and hear, "Wow, I didn't know the harp could do THAT!"*

*I also know what it's like to be an adult beginner and want beautiful, fun pieces to play. And so, in all my newer arrangements, I try to include at least three versions of each piece: for advanced beginners, intermediate and professionals. I also make sure that at least one of those is playable on lever harp.*

*I work with many harpists who perform my music, and harpists who long to liberate themselves from the notes on the page. I realized I should pass along more than just the notes. I need to share my entire way of learning and approaching music.*

*In 2014 I started the [Harness Your Muse](#) mentorship program and [Hip Harp Academy](#). Through my online school, I teach other harpists the art of improvisation and liberate them from the notes on the page. They learn the skills I used long ago when I took the art of improv and developed a tiny repertoire of music into full-blown arrangements and improvisations. Visit [HipHarpAcademy.com](#) to learn more!*

*Oh ... and remember when I said I love music and motion? Last year I got to do something I've always wanted to: ride on a bike while playing the harp. I rode the "HarpBike" 12 miles during the 25th Anniversary of the Minuteman Bikeway in Massachusetts. You can see it here on my [blog](#), and in the picture at the right. Just one more harp dream come true!*

*What are your harp dreams?*

*-Deborah*



**Deborah has a special offer for Sylvia Woods Harp Center customers! Take a FREE Mini-Class with Deborah and learn to create your own instant arrangement of the *Happy Birthday* song. This fun class is for fledgling players to advanced. You'll find it at [HaRpyBirthday.com](#).**