

This article by Robin Fickle was first published in the July 2016 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

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



My love affair with the harp began some years after graduate school. My only regret is that I was not introduced to the harp as a child. At last I had found my instrument. Or maybe the instrument had found me!

Music had always been a part of my life. At age 3 I was singing in the back seat of my parent's car. By age 5 I was taking piano lessons followed by teaching myself guitar at age 13. Piano lessons rambled on and off for a few years until, as an adolescent, I got reasonably serious about it. That happened when my second piano teacher, an elderly lady from Germany, warned me that her piano teacher corrected her using corporeal punishment every time she made a mistake! Feeling threatened, I practiced. Then after singing for my high school graduation ceremony I promptly left for Europe to revel in all of the art and culture. Thereafter I fell totally in love with art history and traveling, a love affair from which I have never recovered. (When in Europe during the summer always look for me in your travels.)

During my undergraduate years at California State University, Fresno I took 3 semesters of advanced piano with a concert pianist, the late Philip Lorenz. But in performance I always followed an extremely gifted young pianist who had already made her debut at a prestigious concert hall and who had a very large following. Convinced that I was not a Carnegie Hall performer, and without the ambition to be a piano teacher, I stopped my piano studies, quickly lost access to a piano and threw myself into art history.

After graduate school at the University of California at Santa Barbara with a specialization in medieval art, and with no full time job openings available, I moved to southern California where I taught art history at many different universities and colleges. I loved the flexibility and change in campus culture that adjunct work provided. But something was definitely missing! Music!

Around that time I went to a Renaissance Faire where I encountered a woman playing hammered dulcimer and another playing a Celtic harp. I was drawn to both instruments, but so undecided. Subsequently I attended a folk harp convention with my husband's hammered dulcimer in hand. As the instructor began his session, I got the overwhelming impression that I was in the wrong place! Embarrassed, I quickly grabbed the dulcimer and speedily ran to the harp booth! With the first plucked sounds of the Celtic harp tears were running down my cheeks. I knew that I had to take up the harp! But where?

The only harp I could find to rent was a Gothic harp. So I rented it for a month until I discovered that one was available through Sylvia Woods. After initial training for two years with Deborah Friou at Sylvia's studio and about 6 months of pedal harp with the late Suzanne Balderston, I completed several years of pedal harp study with JoAnn Turovsky, the Chair of the American Harp Society National Competitions.

Meanwhile I co-partnered with Sylvia Fellows and Allegra Hardulfi to found the Los Angeles Chapter of the International Society of Folk Harpers and Craftsmen. We called ourselves the "Happy Harpers" and that we were! I spent time teaching and leading at some of the "Happy Harpers" meetings. I wrote articles for the *Folk Harp Journal*, performed for harp gigs and gave harp lessons. But another passion also captured my heart during that season as a result of the creative upper division medieval art and humanities courses that I was teaching at universities. These courses included preparing the pageantry, ceremony and culinary delights of the medieval banquet. So to look the part I made very elaborate costumes some of which went on display at the

Laguna Arts Museum. And, of course, no banquet can be held without the proper music. So I then began to seriously explore my new found passion, early music!



In order to perform early music I needed replicas of period instruments. So I assisted my husband in making some medieval instruments that included a plucked psaltery and a nearly exact replica of the very famous 16th century Gothic bray harp in the German National Museum in Nuremburg. Then together with the late Ethan James, the late Will Glenn and Suzanna Giordano we formed the early music performing group, *Decameron*. To further my training I traveled to the Bay Area to participate in workshops with the San Francisco Early Music Society and to the University of British Columbia at Vancouver to study medieval voice with *Sequentia* where, as a grand finale, we gave a concert of the music of Hildegard von Bingen, the *Canticles of Ecstasy*. Those experiences instilled

within me a great love of early music.

My fascination for early music inspired me to publish 3 books of Renaissance music, *Renaissance Gems*, *Renaissance Songes of the Merrie Cavalier* and *Renaissance Songes of the Merrie Jester*. Many are famous lute pieces and a delight to play on harp! My greatest desire was to make this music accessible to ordinary players, not specialists. And so I wrote these books for both Celtic harpers and pedal harpists. Many pieces have not previously been transcribed for harp prior to my publications.

My love of early music inspired me to greatly improvise upon very simple Sephardic, Andalusian and Greek tunes that I recorded long ago on my *Mediterranean Journey CD*. Many harpers have asked me for the written music but, unfortunately, many of the improvised passages are far too complex to score.



I so enjoy Christmas carols, particularly haunting ones, as well as carols not all that familiar. I published a book entitled *Christmas Jewels* for harpists who want to add a truly elegant touch to their holiday repertoire. These carols work beautifully together with the music from the Renaissance books.

My background as a classical harpist inspired me to publish a very thick book for freelance harpists called *Wedding Wishes*. I have included most classical wedding standards plus a selection of Renaissance music as well as early American colonial trumpet tunes for patriots, including an early American bridal processional!

I am currently living in Pennsylvania where I, for over 20 years, have taught harp and have performed for innumerable weddings, occasional local concerts, various restaurants and many private dinner parties. One such performance was on pedal harp in October 2013 at Arcadia University in honor of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. My passions are diverse but I do try to maintain some balance between harp performances, composing, traveling abroad and teaching art history.

As a performer I am completely addicted to harps. I own and love all 7 of them! Thank you, Sylvia, for the two of them that I bought from you! Each harp has a unique voice and special place in my heart. I really enjoy playing Impressionist music on my pedal harp and medieval music on my Gothic harp. And I especially love the mystically sensual tone of my Celtic harps. But as much as I love my harps I have to admit that don't particularly enjoy lugging them around. My husband, who sometimes plays harp "roadie" for me, always says after a performance: "Why didn't you take up the harmonica?" At this point I have to reply that: "I am already divided between art history, travel and music and I am especially divided between 3 different types of harp (forgetting entirely the piano, guitar and singing). And now you want me to add harmonica?" - Robin Fickle

