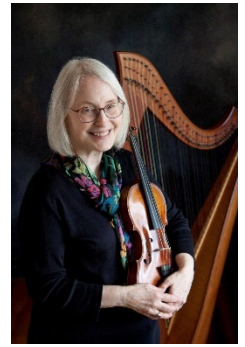


This article by Kathleen Blackwell-Plank was first published in the April 2024 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

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



Kathleen Blackwell-Plank is our featured arranger this month. Here's what she has to say about herself and her music.

From my earliest childhood memories, nature, music, art, and story have been central to my life. My interest in music was kindled by listening to my mother teach piano students. She was also a violinist and grew up in a musical home. My grandmother was a pianist and organist and played viola in her family's string quartet with her siblings. My great-grandmothers were pioneers in Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado. These family matriarchs keenly appreciated education, music, and the arts.

My piano teacher was a refugee from Latvia. I took great joy in our musical relay races during summer music camp at her home. The children lined up in two lines and, upon a signal, ran to one of the two pianos. One child would play a musical question, and the other would provide a musical answer. This was my first venture into improvisation and composition.

In fifth grade, when it was time to choose an instrument for orchestra, I chose the violin. In high school, I joined the Charlotte Symphony Youth Orchestra and formed a string quartet. Our quartet played at churches and retirement communities and even went to a quartet competition at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro.



My interest in art also reemerged during my high school years. I participated in a "college in escrow" program that allowed me to take college courses, and I studied painting with Maud Gatewood, a noted American painter. During my college years, I continued to study music and art, and in 1972 - 1973, I made a violin with John Sipe, a luthier in Charlotte, NC. The violin was such a success I was able to play it in the orchestra.



During my twenties and thirties, I earned my living as a professional violinist, playing with many regional orchestras and the Lyric Arts String Quartet (shown here). This provided the opportunity to play with many acclaimed musicians, such as Itzhak Pearlman, André Watts, Yo-Yo Ma, Ella Fitzgerald, Benny Goodman, and Tony Bennett. I also taught Suzuki violin at the Community School of the Arts. This school made music lessons available to students on a sliding fee basis so that those from economically challenged homes could study music. My students had diverse backgrounds, including Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, African American, and white.

Desiring a more dependable income and a job with benefits, I decided to make a career shift in my thirties. While continuing to work full-time, I earned a Master of Social Work Degree through the University of South Carolina graduate Social Work program. My social work career has focused on working with older adults, caregivers, and families. I joined hospice care in 2000. The patients' stories about the personal importance of music in their lives inspired me to explore ways to incorporate music in end-of-life care.

My mother-in-law, a gifted lever harpist, inspired me to start taking harp lessons. Helen Rifas, the principal harpist with the Winston-Salem and Greensboro symphonies, has been my teacher and mentor. I studied therapeutic music with Laurie Riley and the Harp for Healing Program, and I received my certification in 2006. That year, I founded the Interlude Music Program with hospice, which includes a harp circle and choir, providing comforting music for hospice patients, family caregivers, and healthcare workers.





My need for soothing, culturally sensitive music motivated me to start arranging and composing music for harp, voices, and other instruments. During the COVID pandemic, I prepared my music for digital publication. The shutdown's isolation provided the impetus for me to offer therapeutic music through both live and recorded digital means. I enhanced the therapeutic quality of video recordings by combining my music with my nature photography and art.

As I reflect on telling my story and the current geopolitical situation, it is striking how war and unrest have shaped many of my music teachers', students', and patients' lives. They include the piano teacher who fled Latvia, the viola teacher whose ancestors escaped the pogroms of Russia, the violin teacher who immigrated to America from conflict-ravaged Armenia, the student refugees from Vietnam and China, and patients who fled Burma or war-torn Africa, and the Sikh patient whose many siblings are each living in a different country. The consistent threads of nature, music, art, and awareness of the power of cultural heritage are woven throughout my life and my musical arrangements and compositions.



-- Kathleen Blackwell-Plank