

This article by Rhett Barnwell was first published in the February 2022 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

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

It seems that many harpists, especially those who play the folk harp, come from an eclectic background, and my journey is no exception. People often ask me, "Where did you grow up?" My answer is "Well, I haven't yet...", but I guess the suitable answer would be "Macon, Georgia, a small town in the middle of nowhere." I sang in the Junior Choir at the Episcopal Church. The church had a beautiful pipe organ with an excellent and venerable organist, and I quickly developed a fascination and love for organ music. My parents loved classical music, and my mother took out her violin once a year at Christmas. But most of my musical exposure was listening to my father's classical, jazz, and easy listening records.



When I was ten, we moved to Greenville, SC, and I was introduced to the cello at school. I fell in love with the instrument, and that love has never abated. I also became fascinated with various other instruments. I bought a clarinet at a pawn shop with the proceeds of a summer candy store in our garage! However, I had virtually no formal training, and as I began to discover more instruments, I just figured out how to play them as best I could. I essentially taught myself the piano from watching my sisters practice for their lessons, and then in middle and high school, I took up the bassoon and French horn. By my senior year, I had decided to take music seriously and had formal lessons on cello and horn; the two "loves of my life" at the time.

I was accepted to a prestigious architectural school for college, but at the last minute, I chose to pursue music as my major. When it became necessary to concentrate on one instrument, I transferred to Florida State University to earn a Bachelor's degree in French horn performance. In my senior year, harp professor Mary Brigid Roman put up posters recruiting students, so I decided to give it a try. The harp studio was next to the horn studio, and it was impossible to resist all those beautiful high-gloss ebony Salvi Diana harps beckoning to me. Ms. Roman, who is still teaching at FSU after more than 50 years, was and is an incredible teacher. She said that I "took to the harp, like a duck to water." I only wish I had discovered the harp sooner, but I was on my way to pursuing a career as a horn player.

After graduating from FSU, I earned a Master's degree in horn performance from St. Louis Conservatory, with a minor in cello. There was no harp studio, so I didn't have a chance to play for some years. I was very fortunate, though, to play horn in some amazing professional situations. I was Principal Horn of the Spoleto Festival Orchestra in Italy and Charleston. I also played with the AIMS Orchestra of Graz, Austria, the Orquesta Sinfonica de Tenerife of Spain, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, South Carolina Philharmonic, and many other orchestras around the U.S.



I eventually settled in Atlanta, Georgia, and wanted to do something with music that had more personal meaning to me and would help others. I voluntarily gave up a promising career as a professional horn player and took a full-time job as a church musician, choral director, and teacher. One day the idea hit me that I should take up the harp again and use it for therapeutic purposes. I had played the harp only sporadically since college and had no money at all to buy one. But, since I felt strongly about this, I ordered a Musicmakers Gothic harp.

Along with my best friend and seminary student and some of her hospice nurse friends, we set off into completely uncharted waters! It was the early 1990s, pre-internet, and I had no idea anyone else was trying to do the same thing with healing music. Although I had no formal training in this kind of work and could barely play the harp, I felt called to assist in any way that I could. A hospice in Atlanta asked my friend and me to play for their patients. We played there every week and at hospitals, nursing homes, and private homes. The AIDS crisis was at its height, and men and women were dying at an alarming rate. At that time, very little music was available for lever harp for this purpose. I will be

forever grateful to Sylvia Woods because her hymns, carols, and classical music arrangements were perfect for this work.

In 1997, I moved to Charleston, South Carolina, to take a part-time position as organist and choirmaster at a lovely Catholic Church right on the water. I intended to use the rest of my time playing the harp in therapeutic situations. In addition to using Sylvia's music, I realized I needed to start "custom-making" my own arrangements. I had never arranged or composed before, but thanks to the theory and composition classes I had taken in college and grad school, I found I could apply that knowledge to harp music.

The harp has always been associated with heavenly creatures. The seraphim, appearing in the writings of both Judaism and Christianity, are the highest order of angels, with unique powers of purification, cleansing, and healing. And so, *Seraphim Music* seemed the perfect name for my company of self-published sacred, classical, meditative, and inspirational arrangements designed for therapeutic music. I must again thank Sylvia Woods for her guidance and support. She encouraged me to assemble my music into a collection, which she graciously agreed to sell, and thus my first book, [A Serenade for the Soul](#), was born.



To further hone and inform my craft and mission, I have continued to study both lever and pedal harp with some of the best teachers in the U.S. I also studied Gregorian chant extensively and spent a year in a Doctor of Musical Arts degree program in Gregorian chant and organ, including study in France at the Monastery of Solesmes and the Taizé Community. I am humbled and blessed that I have been invited to teach and perform at many harp festivals and conferences: the American Harp Society, Somerset Folk Harp Festival, Southeastern Harp Festival, Beginning in the Middle, Harp Journeys, Harp in Worship Conference, and others. I have undertaken several concert tours of Italy and Ireland and plan to do more in the future. I am also honored to be publishing the harp compositions and arrangements of some of my good friends and colleagues, [Sunita Staneslow](#), Vicki Collinsworth, and the late [Brook Boddie](#).

In July of 2019, I made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, spending 12 days in the Old City. I took a small medieval harp with me and composed about a dozen musical settings of the Psalms, which I plan to publish soon. I stayed in a convent on the Via Dolorosa for part of my trip, a block away from the Temple Mount. Knowing that these Psalms would have been sung and played on harps in that very place several thousand years ago made it a powerful and inspiring experience!

Here are my descriptions of the images in this article.

- 1) Playing at Mary Brigid Roman's 50th teaching anniversary celebration at Florida State University, using the harp I learned on!
- 2) My first Sunday returning to church to record Easter service after the initial Covid shutdown in 2020.
- 3) The cover image from my [Requiem for harp and high voice](#) PDF.
- 4) Performing at the Somerset Folk Harp Festival.
- 5) My medieval harp in Jerusalem.

