

This article by Meg Robinson was first published in the April 2016 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

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

My first time composing music, I was six years old, at a piano recital. I was on the stage at the local women's club, in my small home town in North Carolina. I had been carefully coached to head straight for the piano, play my piece -- something to do with butterflies -- and end with a required curtsy. My turn arrived, and I started to play. Halfway through the piece, I realized there was a problem: I had forgotten the ending. I stopped and restarted several times. I remember thinking rationally that if I didn't come up with an ending, I was never going to get off that stage. And so, I made one up. I was relieved but red-faced as I did some warped version of a curtsy, knees apart, toes pointed outward, and got off that stage as quickly as possible.

Fast forward to age 13, when I got my first guitar and started writing songs. It was the folk era, and I was inspired. I also continued studying piano with the strict Mrs. Kreutzer (who never chided me for that improvised recital). I was a terrible sight reader, but I had a good ear. At my lessons I would pretend to sight read my weekly assignments until Mrs. Kreutzer got wise to me, shrewdly turning the sheet music at the wrong time while I continued to "read" the music. My cover was blown.

In college, I started playing and singing in coffeehouses. Then I formed an eight-piece acoustic band called "OverEasy". I arranged the music, played guitar and was the lead singer. We were popular and performed all over campus. About half our repertoire were pieces I had written.

A few years out of school, I wooed my husband on our first date with one of my songs, "Lay Your Heavy Soul Right Next to Mine." We were married eighteen months later. A few years after that we started our family, which soon came to include four little boys. The songs also multiplied, centered on the ups and downs of the lives of children. I adopted the stage name Potomac Red. The past Artistic Director of the Smithsonian produced a CD of these songs called "Wonder If They Know." One of these songs, "Good Stuff" was adopted as a national Girl Scout theme song retitled "A Girl Can Do Anything." It felt a little ironic to be on stage at the Girl Scouts' jamboree, performing the anthem as a mother of four sons!

For years, I wrote songs as part of a political satire production in Washington, DC called Hexagon. They did about 20 original songs each year. For their 60-year retrospective production recently, two of mine were included. I had a short stint as a banjo player (until my family rebelled), although I thought I was pretty good.

Thirty years ago -- when we first moved into the home in which we raised our boys -- we decorated the front yard with a seven foot high iron abstract statue called "The Harpist." We just liked the sculpture, and at that point, I had no thought of ever playing the harp! But the statue must have had some subliminal effect because, ten years ago (after years with that statue) I decided to take up the harp. My husband, a physician, has aptly diagnosed me as a "Serial Stringed Instrument Player."

My first harp teacher was Astrid Walschot Stapp. She was then the harpist for the Baltimore Symphony. Early on in my studies with her, I would bring in pieces I had written for the harp. Her enthusiasm about my compositions led me to think about getting them published.

Earlier in my career, I did a few years of strategic planning for General Electric. From that experience, I knew that I would need to find the right publisher. Mary Radspinner, owner of Afghan Press, was a major harp publisher. I discovered that



she was leading a 25-person workshop at a harp conference. These were brave, new harpists who would play a piece and Mary would critique their playing. While I had only been studying harp for a year, I had a plan.

When it was my turn, I played my first original harp piece without announcing what it was. When I finished, the first question from the other harpists was "What is that piece you just played?" I answered "*Falling Snow*." The second question followed quickly "Who wrote the piece?" I said "I wrote it." Immediately followed "How can we get a copy of the piece?" Here was the opportunity I had hoped for. I turned to Mary Radspinner who was now on the spot and said "Well, Mary, if *you'll* publish the piece then I guess they could buy it from *you*, right?" She agreed and that was the genesis of a long and fruitful relationship with Afghan Press. Mary continues to be a great mentor, editor and publisher of now some 30 of my pieces.

Early on, when just that first piece had been published, I visited Sylvia Woods' store in California. I asked if she would carry that piece in her store and left her with a copy. She had no idea who I was, but being Sylvia, she was warm and encouraging. I knew what an important figure Sylvia was in the harp world, and so I was particularly honored that she started carrying my compositions and has now asked me to contribute to her newsletter.

Over the years, I have had some exciting projects. I wrote a commissioned solo harp piece (*The Ballet Interlude*) for the Maryland Ballet Theater in which dancers, a harp and harpist are all on stage. I wrote a harp ensemble piece (*Dance of the Harps*) for the opening of Strathmore Hall, a 1,500-seat concert venue in Bethesda, Maryland. Several of my pieces were included in a short live action film which won multiple awards. (You can see the film by going to <https://vimeo.com/162869234>) I have had some great commissions over the years, both private and through the American Harp Society. I also have coached others in writing for harp, always encouraging them to get their music published. We need to keep the harp repertoire growing!

I never know who is performing my music and in what setting. Perhaps the highlight of my career composing for the harp began with a phone call from someone needing to know my birthdate. When asked why she needed this information, she said it had to be included in a program of an upcoming performance of one of my pieces called *Fate*. I asked where it was going to be performed. She said "Carnegie Hall." I was flabbergasted. This resulted in a trip to New York see the performance which took place in Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall. It was an experience I will never forget.

Harp is a difficult instrument. My goal has always been to write melodic music that is accessible but sounds a lot harder and more complicated than it actually is. Remember that formative piano recital?? I feel the pain of slogging through difficult music, and want to offer melodic pieces that could be mastered in a relatively short time. And while I think my compositions are designed for the beginner/intermediate player, I am always surprised and delighted to hear about people who use my harp music for weddings, gigs, harp therapy, recordings, and recitals.

Much to my amazement, I continue to receive emails from people around the globe telling me how my music has been a part of their lives. Honestly, that is the greatest gift of all.

-- Meg Robinson