

This article by Joy Slavens was first published in the August 2023 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

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

Joy Slavens is our featured arranger this month. Here's what she has to say about herself and her music.

Where did it all begin? The love of music was instilled in me at the early age of five by my grandmother, who was a gifted pianist. She discovered that this little red-headed girl had an ear for picking out tunes on the piano. My grandmother nurtured that gift of ear, beginning the journey for me to love music and know it would always be a part of my life. I started taking piano lessons at age eight and continued through age eighteen. My first piano teacher not only taught me to read music easily but worked with my ear and improvising on the piano.



After marrying and settling in Laurel, Delaware, I began to teach piano lessons. We added a music studio to our home, which helped immensely with my teaching while raising two boys.

I eventually discovered a unique and beautiful instrument — the harp. I saw a pedal harpist at a church and was fascinated. She invited me to sit and try it out. I was hooked! (Yes, the harp vibrates against our chest and heart and calls us to play). Two years later, at age forty-five, I purchased a Dusty Strings Ravenna harp. I couldn't find a harp teacher in our rural Sussex County, Delaware area. I discovered Rebecca (Becky) Smith, who traveled to the Eastern Shore of Maryland and taught several students. Becky is a classical harpist and an outstanding teacher. She taught me how to play and how to teach the harp, as well.

I outgrew the Ravenna in a year and graduated to a Lyon and Healy 85E pedal harp. “Josephine” (yes, I name my harps!) was a dream come true. I had this harp for only two weeks before playing my first wedding. All the pieces were in C major, and I never dared to move a pedal. I started accepting gigs, playing background music, weddings, funerals, teas, and anything that came along.

A new opportunity knocked at my door while studying under Becky. Meg Robinson, a composer and harpist from Annapolis, Maryland, contacted Becky, looking for someone to mentor in the area of writing music. Becky referred her to me. This was life-changing! Meg led me through the process of learning the Finale software program. I had an original tune, *One Tiny Light*, which she suggested I turn into a harp solo.



I took a lesson from Frank Voltz at a harp conference, sharing my *One Tiny Light* solo. Frank's exact words were, “That is a really sweet piece, and you need to publish it.” I was ecstatic! Frank promised to guide me, and he has helped me every step of the way.



As a teacher, I saw a need for interesting beginner music for my students, so I started writing. Some of my first books were [*Joy at Christmas*](#) and [*Joy of Easter*](#), which were specifically written for beginning harp players. As I became more experienced, I branched into intermediate arrangements. I have now published forty pieces of music.

I began traveling to Frank's home for lessons (an eight-hour trip). My husband and I would spend three days in North Carolina while I was being challenged to improvise on the harp. There was not a piece of music to be found. What a fun and motivating experience!

As my number of students increased, I discovered the beauty of playing together. In 2014 I founded the group *Expressions of Joy Harp Ensemble*. The ensemble has had as many as ten members and continues to perform throughout the area.



Then the harp of my dreams came to me! I purchased a gold Lyon and Healy Style 23 pedal harp, which I named Marigold. Oh, I do love my Marigold! I'm sure this means my shopping in the harp department is over!

In 2021 I met an amazing flutist, Margaret Swinchoski, who had played on Broadway for thirty-plus years. We quickly joined together to form "*Duo Dolce*." We have performed throughout the area for the past two years.

In 2021, the Centenary United Methodist Church in Laurel, Delaware, invited me to serve as their music director. I now direct the choir, play piano and harp, assist with bells, direct a praise team, and do whatever is needed.



My musical journey has led me to places I never dreamed of. I am now blessed with a studio of forty students, an active harp ensemble, a career as a harpist, and service as a church music minister. And when I can find the time, I write! The harp has provided a fun, challenging journey.