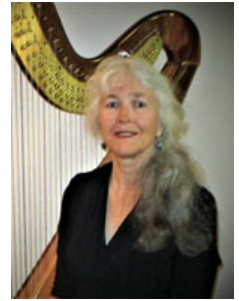


This article by Laura Zaerr was first published in the April 2023 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

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

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



I was five years old when a cute little folk harp appeared in our living room. It was just my size. I peeked under the cover, amazed at this instrument's complexity, potential, and sheer mystery. "The first thing to learning to play the harp," my Dad said, "is to wash your hands." He was my first teacher, although his knowledge was scant. His sister was Marjorie Zaerr Tayloe, known for traveling around the country Von Trapp family style, with harps, handbells, dogs, five children, recorders, violins, and costumes, all very glamorous and exciting to me. My Aunt gave me a few more instructions and a love of Folk music of all sorts.

Five years later, my wise and generous parents hooked me up with regular lessons with Sally Maxwell in Eugene, Oregon. Sally was my long-time mentor and friend for years beyond our student-teacher days. She believed in my abilities as a composer as well. I was always a terrible sight-reader, memorizing my pieces quickly, and / or making up something close. I always thought this creative approach to the written page engendered my compositional mindset. Or maybe it was the other way around.



Sometime in high school, Dad and I undertook to build an Irish Harp based on the old Robinson harp, which was my first instrument. He special-ordered the hardware and had it chrome-plated at a factory. We used Sitka Spruce from a trade Dad made with an OSU colleague in the Forestry Department. We hauled maple wood from a road-clearing operation up the hill from our house. The body was a pre-formed special-order piece of plywood with maple veneer. And the legs came from Bi-Mart.

I spent my undergraduate years studying with Sally at the University of Oregon. I doubled with harp and composition, learning from Derek Healy, my composition mentor. He encouraged me to write in whatever style I was comfortable with, so I experimented with styles of the composers I was learning; Tournier, Britten, Nino Rota, and Hindemith. I cherish the foundation and confidence Derek Healy gave me. When I studied formal composition later at Eastman, I was expected to write what I considered to be "ugly" music, all academic and cerebral. That didn't last long.

Growing up, I idolized Henriette Renie. She had it all; fabulous harpist, gifted composer, independent, and a very kind, intuitive teacher. I wanted to be her, with long flowing gowns and a radiant personality. I got so far as to study in Paris with Bertille Fournier for a year.

I was fortunate to attend Eastman School of Music for my master's degree. I felt somehow lost in the plethora of fine musicians. Maybe it was my lack of confidence that brought me back to Oregon, but I like to think that I needed more space away from the frantic pace of gigging that was necessary in New York. I felt I had breathing room to create music at my own pace back in Oregon.



Enter the Chaillot Harp. I found this broken-down 100-plus-year-old single-action pedal harp in an antique store in Salem. You can read the entire harp restoration story at <https://laurazaerr.com/challiot-harp-restoration/>. For years I recorded and presented historical concerts with this unique instrument. You can hear it at <https://laurazaerr.com/product/lautre-jour/>.

Do you remember cassette tapes? My first recording project gave me a satisfying feeling of substance. I had something tangible to offer when people asked about my music. And for a while, I cranked out CDs regularly.

I was in a succession of Celtic bands, creating arrangements and new tunes. Then one day, I got a call from the director of the Diablo Symphony in Walnut Creek, who had found my Celtic music CD in Tower Records in San Francisco.

"I'd like to arrange some of these pieces for you to play with our symphony for a concert in the Fall."

"Oh," I said, "What if I do the arranging?"

So I spent the next three months writing the *Celtic Concerto*. I enjoyed this process immensely, as it brought together all those endless hours of counting measures jammed in between the piccolo player and the timpani, watching and listening to the other instruments. I drew on my orchestral background to create the orchestration and my Celtic music background for the tunes. Soon afterward, I was semi-commissioned to write what turned into the *Appalachian Concerto* suite for Celtic harp and string trio, using songs my Mom used to sing from her childhood.

I taught at Willamette University in Salem for 14 years. When Sally Maxwell retired from the University of Oregon, I auditioned for the job of harp instructor and stayed there for 18 years. One of my favorite things about the job was the harp ensemble. I had opportunities to arrange and write pieces for the group. I also loved collaborating and bringing in guests for the American Harp Society Young Artist Program and our annual Harp Day celebrations. For several years I co-hosted a retreat in the Cascade Mountains with Rebecca Hilary Smith and had the pleasure of working with guests Kim Robertson, Sunita Stanislow, Julia Jamieson, Phil and Gayle Neuman, and others.

At age 50, I adopted an infant son, and life took a 180-degree turn. Suddenly touring and doing run-outs for workshops and concerts was no longer practical. I morphed into doing local work for Hospice and ArtsCare, an organization that brings art and music into the hospital setting. My ArtsCare colleagues are so talented and creative. I am collaborating with Lisa Lynn and Aryeh Frankfurter. During the pandemic, I also began creating fun videos with my niece: <https://www.youtube.com/@laurazaerr>. Another gift of the pandemic was learning how to manage zoom lessons and distance teaching. I now have several students in different states and host online recitals via zoom.



When people ask me how many harps I have, I generally prevaricate. I then come up with something like, "Well, I need my single row Gothic harp for Medieval music, my Campbell Bray harp for certain things, my Italian arpa dopia for 17th Century continuo, my Welsh triple-strung harp for Welsh tunes, my single-action pedal harp for 18th and 19th century classical, my Thormahlen Ceilidh for Celtic music and hospice work, and my pedal harp for orchestral music and jazz. Plus a few tiny harps to rent out to students." It turns out to be quite a menagerie, but nothing compared to the 100-plus harps my Aunt Margery Zaerr Tayloe hoarded throughout her career.