



An Electronic-Journal published for the AAPA

Aire for the Dee String

By Dee Burnlees

I AM NOT VERY MUSICAL. My mother told me that I could not carry the tune for *Jesus Loves Me* until I was ten years old. When we go dancing, I have to ask my husband, "Is this a waltz or a foxtrot?" So how did I end up playing the harp?

It began when I attended a Celtic festival 50 miles away twelve years ago. One vendor was dressed as a French couer de bois complete with ceinture fleche sash and toque. In a long black dress and white mob cap, his wife stirred the cook pot hung from a tripod outside their vending tent. When I entered the tent, my eye was immediately caught by a beautiful piece of furniture sitting on the table. It had a graceful sweeping front pillar, and a lovely walnut wood finish. When I surreptitiously dragged my finger along the strings of the harp, the sound was thrilling. How I yearned to take this beautiful thing home.

"Do you think I could learn to play it?" I asked the costumed vendor, who was also the harp maker. He showed me how it related directly to the piano, and advised me to attend a workshop later that day with harpist, Mary Anderson. After Mary explained about the



levers and I listened to her playing various types of music on her harp, I became hopeful. If she could play the harp so beautifully with one artificial hand, perhaps I could learn to play it with two good hands.

I planned how I could justify this purchase at home, and then wrote a check for the harp, and an instruction video and book by Sylvia Wood. I could hardly wait to tackle my 22 strings. I knew my best sales

pitch to my husband would be to play a few tunes, so I practiced madly. He was returning from Scotland in two weeks. Unfortunately after just one week, I broke my right wrist in a roller skating accident. So then I had to struggle with the cast while wiggling my fingers enough to draw the strings. It probably was a good physiotherapy. Somehow I learned a tune to demonstrate the harp to my husband, and my harp life began.

I play the Irish tunes of Carolan and Scottish traditional tunes arranged by Sue Richards and Allison Kinnaird. Manx and Welsh music has particularly lovely sounds. Some piano tunes are adaptable if they have no accidentals (sharps and flats.) Deb Ethier, a Canadian, arranges interesting classics for lever harp, such as Francois Couperin's Rococo *Folies*, and Baroque *Pavanes*. My favorite of her music is *Fairest Isle* from the 1691 opera, King Arthur by Henry Purcell. I also like to play Brahm's *Lullaby* and Schubert's *Cradle Song* for the children. Cindy Kleinstuber composes serene meandering pieces for the small harp that the listener doesn't recognize, and so can relax to enjoy. I am even working on music written by Saint Hildegard of Bingen of the 12th century. It looks quite different and is more like Gregorian chant.

It was ten years and many books full of music before I realized that 22 strings is somewhat limiting as you have only three octaves. The more interesting music had lower notes, and went up higher. This was the

beginning of my 'harp lust', as it is called on the Internet.

Harps are very addictive, as I heard from the 1700 harpists on the Harplist at Yahoogroups on the Internet. There I researched many different harps made by a number of North American harp makers. Distance for shipping was a factor, as was my need to hear the sound of the harp before committing to an expensive purchase. I did decide that because my arms are fairly short, I should stick with a modest number of strings, not the 46 of a concert harp. I decided that thirty strings would be enough. I wanted the spacing and the medium tension, close to that of my 22 string harp, so that I would have no trouble switching from the large harp at home, to the small harp down at the beach on summer evenings. I found a harp maker just three hours drive away, and he undertook to custom make my Celtic harp. It has levers on all the strings so I can play most music whether it has several sharps or flats. It has a rounded sound box down the back, which is comfortable to straddle and gives it a substantial 'voice'. It also has a special tipping feature so that it does not lean on my right shoulder. The legs are removable so that it will fit across the back seat of the car.

My large harp allows me to play more complicated music, and I enjoy finding the melody with my right hand and rolling chords with my left. Now I can tackle Princess Leia's Theme from Star Wars. No more

limits. The pieces I have played before on the small harp sound that much better when I spread them out on the large harp. I like to spend at least a half hour every day playing tunes. Probably I would do better to 'practice' exercises, but I just like to enjoy the music at my own pace.

Recently I bought a brass 'singing bowl' from Nepal. You drag a rolling stick around the outside edge in a steady way until its bell-like sounds emerge. Then I try to match that sound with my voice. This has served to open me up and I can now sing with my harp, which gives me great pleasure and a new freedom of expression. I have thoughts of composing tunes for my poems one day, when I better understand the structure of music. The more I play, the more sense it makes. My only regret is that I lack the confidence for performance. I stumble as soon as I think anyone is paying any attention. However, I insist any visitors must listen to a few tunes when they come., to give me experience. I can manage simple tunes when I play for my Hospice clients, and they seem to relax and enjoy the music. Time flies when I exercise my mind, heart and hand at the harp.

Dee is lucky that she can sing and accompany herself on the harp. I am not permitted to sing while playing the piano because I have been known to stampede pigs!

In our correspondence, while creating this small e-journal, Dee Burnlees told me about harpist Eduard Klassen whose old order Mennonite parents in Ontario took him as an infant to the jungles of Paraguay to grow up in the absence of modern technology, especially radio. When he first heard radio music at age 12, he decided he wanted to study music. Somehow the community managed to send him to the capital city to study music at the college there. The first day the lecturer called him down to find middle C on the piano. He had never seen a piano before. But following the obvious clue, he pointed out Middle C. Today he tours playing his Paraguayan harp and telling his story in churches.



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The typeface is Hermann Zapf's Palatino.