

on the lighter side

Stella Castellucci

by Carrol McLaughlin

Stella Castellucci is no stranger to the world of jazz music; her love for it began when she was four years old. When she was a child, she had a teenage aunt living next door who played piano, and Stella would sit for hours, listening to her aunt practicing the latest popular music. On the weekends they would go to *matinée* performances at local theaters, Stella particularly enjoying the musicals of such artists as Rita Hayworth and Betty Grable. Because of these experiences, she grew up with all the great standards in her mind, and she was able to play them all “by ear,” or by memory, first on the piano and later on the harp.

Stella began piano lessons at age five. Her father was

course in four-part choral writing from a friend of her father who had studied at St. Cecilia's Academy in Rome, Antonio Cafarella.

Stella credits her ability to arrange for the harp to her study of theory and harmony with her father and, especially, her study of four-part choral writing. These studies made her very aware of “clean voicings” on the harp, or the “sifting of chords,” so that the notes that are really important were there, and everything else was eliminated. Stella believes, “This process, relative to jazz and all modern arranging, is extremely important.”

One year after Stella graduated from high school she became the harpist with the American Broadcasting Company's Staff Radio Orchestra. The job included six days of broadcasting per week, including playing cue music for dramatic shows, accompanying guest artists, and broadcasts with the orchestra—all live. Stella had the oppor-



Stella Castellucci at Trump's Restaurant, Beverly Hills, California

the bass trombonist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and he often took her to symphony concerts. Stella remembers being fascinated by the harp in the orchestra, and would watch the harpist constantly. When she was eleven years old, Stella's father, who had been teaching her solfège, allowed her to begin lessons on the harp.

Stella's first harp instructor was Aida Mulieri Dagort, harpist with the Warner Brothers and Paramount studio orchestras. Her main studies on harp were with Alfred Kastner, and she worked with him until his death, after which she completed her studies with Ann Mason Stockton. Stella also studied with Joseph Zuintilli and Mary Jane Mayhew Barton. She attended the Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles, where she took a private four-year

tunity to work with such artists as Bing Crosby, Dinah Shore, Tony Martin, and Judy Garland.

Stella began freelancing in the motion picture and recording studios in 1951, and in June of 1953 received a telephone call from Pete Condoli, who had been a trumpet player in the ABC staff orchestra with her. Pete said, “I'm at Peggy Lee's. She's opening a show in a week and wants to add harp—come on over, bring your harp and sit in!” Stella has vivid memories of that first “session” with Peggy Lee's jazz group. She remembers, “I just listened to Peggy and the group go through their material and eventually sat in and hung my ear out, as we say in jazz. You're not reading music, you're *making* music. Even though I had never played in a jazz group, a great part of my life since



Stella in high school

age four had been spent listening to and loving jazz and popular music of all kinds. I had stored in my memory an entire world of standards. Knowing the tunes and the changes (harmonic structure) of the songs made fitting in with Peggy's group relatively comfortable for me." Stella was asked to join the group at that first rehearsal, and toured as harpist with the jazz sextet for eight years.

In 1963 Stella began performing in restaurants in Los Angeles, as well as continuing to work in the studios. In her years of working in the recording industry, she has performed with numerous artists, including Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Barbara Streisand.

In 1968, Stella made the acquaintance of harpist Verlye Mills, who heard her playing with a jazz trio, and who asked Stella to become her partner. The two harpists performed many harp recitals together, including a performance at the 1974 American Harp Society Conference in Minnesota. They co-authored a book, entitled *Rhythm for Harp*, and gave a jazz harp workshop for 22 harpists at Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles.

Stella began notating her arrangements in 1978, and has published eight of them in the Salvi Pop Series. In 1983, Stella completed *An Approach to Jazz and Popular Music for Harp*, which is an outstanding, comprehensive book that includes 39 jazz arrangements, studies, and études, as well as biographies of jazz singers and instrumentalists, including harpists.

She is currently freelancing in Los Angeles, and performs five afternoons per week at Trump's Restaurant in West Hollywood. When asked about outstanding moments in her career, Stella recalled an event which happened early in her association with Peggy Lee. In her words, "It was the closing concert of the 1953 Hollywood Bowl Summer



Publicity shot for Peggy Lee with Stella and her harp in the background

Season, and Peggy Lee was the soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. There we were, Peggy and her sextet on front stage center, with the Orchestra in place behind us. That concert will always be the most meaningful event of my career. There was my father, in his place as bass trombonist in the brass section of the Orchestra. What a privileged experience to be on the same stage with him, he in a symphonic orchestra and I in a jazz group!"

As this article is being written, Stella is preparing to travel to Vienna to participate in the World Harp Congress, performing on a concert featuring outstanding popular and jazz harpists from around the world. Once again the knowledge of, and love for, jazz and popular music which began when she was four years old will be brought forth and shared with her fellow musicians.

CLASSIFIED

COMPETITION

The Greater Trenton Symphony Foundation Scholarship Fund, Inc. will hold the Hobin Harp Competition on June, 11, 1988 in Trenton, N.J. for undergraduate college students. Limited to residents of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware and Connecticut.

1st Prize \$1200

2nd Prize \$800

3rd Prize \$340

For details and information:

Greater Trenton Symphony Office—28
West State, St., Trenton, N.J. 08608 Tel.
(609) 394-1338