



Stella Castellucci Looks Back on Her Studies with Alfred Kastner and at Her Career

by Stella Castellucci with Dominique Piana

MY acceptance as a pupil of Alfred Kastner (1870-19480) came late in his life, just three years and eight months before his death. I had previously studied with Aida Mulieri Dagort, Joseph Quintile and Maryjane Mayhew Barton. Having been his last pupil, I feel compelled to humbly honor his memory here.

In his earlier years, Mr. Kastner had many really illustrious pupils who went on to become extraordinary artists and teachers. Among them were May Hogan Cambern, Gertrude Peterson Hustana, Helen Elgin, Nanette Black, Lucy Lewis, Elizabeth Ershoff Hamburger, and Ann Mason Stockton, to whom he referred as “very rare.” Upon his sudden death, the latter kindly took over my studies. At that time, she was a very busy harpist in radio and studio recordings. Not until many years later did I know that I was the only pupil she ever had. One year before his death, she had attended my one and only solo recital at Mr. Kastner’s home in Los Angeles. I was sixteen.

Before that, Mr. Kastner had turned my lessons over to Ann while he went to Mexico City, on invitation as first harpist with the symphony orchestra there for six months.

My remaining time with him, by the grace of God, was like living in another era every Saturday afternoon. His living room and piano were filled with autographed pictures from famed musical artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, representing his affiliations with them: Debussy, Ravel, Tchaikovsky, Elgar, conductors Arthur Nikisch, Sir Henry Wood, Otto Klemperer, Sir Thomas Beecham and so many more whom I cannot recall. Mr. Kastner once told me that, as a boy, he, more than

once, saw Brahms walking on the streets of Vienna, his (Mr. Kastner’s) birthplace.

His teacher was Anton Zamara. He referred to Zamara’s way of playing as the “Italian School.” What that meant, as far as I understood it, was a natural, relaxed position of the hands. I saw it in Mr. Kastner’s playing, and it served me well in my own efforts.

My lessons usually lasted two hours, at the end of which time his daughter, Stephanie, would appear, rolling a tea cart from which we gratefully drank fragrant English tea served with cookies. He was a gentle teacher, even if sometimes my slowness or lack of understanding tried his patience. He expected excellence without being demanding or temperamental. He was always dressed in a suit and tie and had a small goatee beard.

Please allow me to relate a little story reflective of his Victorian personality, entirely unrelated to music. During one of my lessons, a little cat, perhaps a neighbor’s, appeared at the screen of the sill of an open window very near to where he was sitting. He repeatedly tried to shoo the cat away, to no avail. Finally he exclaimed, in a soft voice: “I have never seen such impertinence!”

This supremely beautiful old world in which I



Alfred Kastner photo, inscribed to Stella Castellucci.

lived every Saturday gave me, for as long as it lasted, an education of, or I should say, an introduction to, the classical harp literature of the Romantic Era, in addition to Bach and Mozart. These included Hasselmans' *Petite Valse*, then transcriptions from the piano works of Mendelssohn, Liszt, Saint-Saëns, Beethoven, as well as Wagner's orchestral harp parts from *Götterdämmerung*. There were also pieces by Tournier, de la Presle, Samuel-Rousseau, Pierné, Galeotti and Loukine from Mr. Kastner's enormous library, which was given to me by his daughter after his death, and which is now in the International Harp Archives at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

Mr. Kastner once told me, while teaching me the Debussy *Danses sacrée et profane*, that he played them in London with Debussy conducting and Maud Allen dancing, as the *Danses* were originally intended. One most memorable performance was given at the home of Sir Edgar Speyer, then the manager of the Queen's Hall Orchestra. Kastner and Maggie Teyte were the featured soloists, with Debussy conducting a program of his works in front of numerous dignitaries, a few weeks before the onset of World War I.

Mr. Kastner was never one to extol himself, and he very seldom told me of events concerning his career. However, while teaching me the cadenza from the *Nutcracker Suite*, he did say that he played it at a performance with Tchaikovsky conducting. I wish I could remember the location and the occasion.

Only through his daughter, Stephanie Kastner, do I know the following details of Alfred Kastner professional life:

Professor of Harp:

- Hungarian National Academy of Music, Budapest
- Royal Academy of Music, London, succeeding John Thomas in 1909
- Guild Hall School of Music, London

Member:

- Board of Examiners, Royal Academy of Music, London

Principal Harp:

- Royal Opera House, Dresden, 1889-90
- Polish National Opera, Warsaw, from 1890
- Royal Hungarian Opera, Budapest, from 1893
- Municipal Orchestra, Zurich, from 1899
- Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, 1901-02/1903-04
- Queen's Hall Orchestra, London, from 1904
- New York Philharmonic Orchestra, 1916-1919
- Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, 1919-1936

His stamp on only some of the music from his library is all with which I was familiar. He came to the United States, in 1916, with his wife and children to take the post of first harpist with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1919, he went on to become first harpist with the newly founded Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra and subsequently acquired many pupils. I came to study with him as my father, Louis Castellucci, was bass trombonist in that first orchestra and then again from 1943-1962.

Before giving Mr. Kastner's library to the International Harp Archives, I catalogued it, a copy of which is in the Archives. I was fascinated not only with the original, artistic covers of the European publishers, but also thought of great importance and interest, to include their addresses and, where indicated, in very small print, the names of the engravers.

At the World Harp Congress of 1987 in Vienna, I was privileged to donate to the exhibit honoring the renowned harpist-composers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a poster-collage of Mr. Kastner's pictures and programs given to me by his daughter from her scrapbook of his career. After that Congress, I went on to London and Paris with the addresses of the publishers indicated on the music of his library. It was, for me, a pilgrimage to find those locations and to imagine what the buildings may have looked like. Not surprisingly, they had been replaced by other businesses. Indeed, one of them, in Paris, was then a Chanel dress salon. In London, the former home where Mr. Kastner had performed the

Debussy *Dances*, was still original, but now served as the Japanese Embassy.

After the World Congress in Vienna, before London and Paris, I took, with many fellow harpists from the Congress, a hydrofoil cruise on the Danube River to Budapest and, with Ann Stockton, found the Royal Academy of Music where Mr. Kastner had been Professor of Harp. The building was original, and undergoing renovations, but Ann and I were allowed to take the stairs to the second floor. To our disappointment, the practice rooms were closed.

Concerning the Debussy *Dances*, Mr. Kastner obviously thought enough of my ability to suggest that I play them in the annual spring concert at my high school during my sophomore year, with the string section of the school's orchestra. I was tearfully overwhelmed when he and his daughter, Stephanie, sent flowers to the concert. He took me through the Ravel *Introduction et Allegro*, which I found more difficult than the *Dances*.

Much of what Mr. Kastner gave me to learn is indelibly imprinted in my memory, for which I am grateful. That memory is my only claim to having been a student of classical harp literature. I do, however, insert two themes from the Ravel into my arrangements and improvisations of jazz and popular songs from the American songbook, mostly the ballads. They seem to just sneak themselves in before I realize it and they fit very well. At the same time I always hope that M. Ravel would not mind. Only once did a theme from a piano concerto of Rachmaninoff present itself at the ending of my arrangement of Jerome Kern's ballad "Yesterdays," from the stage production and subsequent movie of his musical *Roberta*, of 1933. In no way whatsoever did I ever presume to associate myself with these great and luminous artists of the classical music world.

Knowing Mr. Kastner's Victorian personality and preferences, I always pray he understands and pardons my defection to jazz and popular music, because I credit what ability I may have in jazz and popular music to my foundation in classical music, theory and harmony, and knowing how to voice a jazz chord through a long and tedious study of pure four-part choral writing, which I cannot



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stress enough in its relationship to jazz. It clearly defines what notes to use or not, in voicing a clear, uncluttered sound.

My love of jazz and the American songbook of popular music, before ever taking piano and eventual harp lessons, started when I was about five years old, sitting in a corner of my grandmother's living room listening to my teenaged aunt's piano lessons. She was not studying classical music, but what was then known as "popular piano." In a period of what must have been at least two or three years, I absorbed in my memory a very great part of the American songbook of that time: Jerome Kern, Rodgers and Hart, Harold Arlen, Irving Berlin, Gershwin and Cole Porter.

I never forgot those beautiful songs, especially the ballads. My love for them coupled itself with my equal love for the study of the harp and its literature. The memory of those songs and my knowledge of every chord of the songs is what made possible my acceptance, in 1953, into the jazz group accompanying famed singer Peggy Lee. This was an ensemble of incredibly virtuosic instrumentalists in their own right. The men treated me as one of their own, with no discrimination toward me for being female. They were always respectful in every way. I was the youngest in the group and had never traveled to the many places Peggy's performance schedule took her. She, in turn, was like a big sister to me and subsequently became a lifelong friend of my family and me. Her interest in adding harp to her

group came from her love of the harp, kindled after hearing harpist Laura Newell's recording of Ravel's *Introduction et Allegro*. She had me playing themes from it as background music as she spoke to the audience between songs.

I consider myself the very lowest rung on the high ladder of fine, longstanding and musically eloquent jazz musicians who also have their roots in classical music. Concurrently, I very humbly do feel, to a lesser degree, qualified to have been a privileged pupil of Alfred Kastner.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Other articles on Kastner include:

M.H. Cambern: "Alfred Kastner, Man, Musician, Pedagogue," *Harp News*, Fall 1954.

A.M. Stockton: "Alfred Kastner," *American Harp Journal*, Volume 1, No. 4, Fall 1968.

A. Lawson Aber-Count: "Kastner, Alfred," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980, 2000.

W.M. Govea: "Kastner, Alfred," *Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Harpists, A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT 1995.

POSTSCRIPT

Schüëcker (1860-1911) Holy (1866-1948) and Kastner (1870-1948) were the three renowned harpists, originally from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, who belonged to the late-romantic generation that crisscrossed Europe and traveled overseas to America to pursue careers as orchestral musicians.

In his memoirs, Alfred Holy mentions how he met—only once—with his colleagues in London in 1906. While on tour with the Vienna Symphony, his host the harp maker Morley arranged for him to go to Erard House and meet with Alfred Kastner. On the recommendation of his good friend Fritz Kreisler, Kastner had moved to London to join the Queen's Hall Orchestra, thereupon also becoming Professor of Harp at the Royal Academy of Music and at the Guildhall School of Music. Right then, by some rare coincidence, Schüëcker joined them, passing through London on his way back from America!

Alfred Kastner (1870-1948): Original Works and Transcriptions for Harp

* to be found at the International Harp Repository at Brigham Young University

STUDY MATERIALS

Ten Etudes for the Harp, op. 2*

197?, 33 p., New York, Kalmus

197?, New York, Lyra Music Co.

10 Etüden für Harfe für vorgeschrittene Spieler: op. 2*

1899, 33 p., Leipzig-New York: Breitkopf & Härtel

Zwei Etüden, op. 7 *

1890, 11 p., Leipzig: Friedrich Hofmeister

50 leichte Übungen f. Pedalharfe i. progress., op. 11*

2 volumes, Heft 1: Übung 1-25 (ohne Pedale – without pedals)

Heft 2: Übung 26-50 (mit Pedalen- with pedals)

1900-1910?, Leipzig: J. H. Zimmermann

50 leichte Uebungen für die einfache Pedalharfe in progressiver Reihenfolge*

(50 easy studies for the single-action pedal harp in progressive order)

1910-1919, Bayreuth: Carl Giessel

25 Easy Studies for pedal and non-pedal harp*

(consists of the first volume of 50 leichte Übungen in progressiver Reihenfolge)

Revised and edited by Kathy Bundock Moore (transposed from Eb to C)

1993, 48 p., Ellensburg, WA: FC Pub. Co.

2002, 48 p., Denver, CO: Harps Nouveau

Richard Wagner: Orchesterstudien aus seiner Bühnen- und Konzertwerken*

Editor A. Kastner, 2 vol.

Vol. 1. Der fliegende Holländer; Tannhäuser; Lohengrin; Tristan und Isolde; Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg

Vol. 2. Das Rheingold; Die Walküre; Siegfried; Götterdämmerung; Parsifal.

1900-1992, Leipzig-New York: Breitkopf & Härtel