

on the lighter side

The Angel of Hellman's Angels

by Carrol McLaughlin

Not many harpists can boast of having performed in Sri Lanka (six times!), Calcutta, Hong Kong, Madras, Mysore, and in the New York Subways. The harpist who can is the ingenious Daphne Hellman who, as a soloist or with her jazz ensemble, *Hellman's Angels*, has taken the harp far, both geographically and in her music.

Daphne's beginning on the harp came through classical music. Her mother, a pianist, had heard Mildred Dilling play, and when Daphne was 12, bought her a gold harp. Daphne began lessons with Mildred Dilling, then went abroad to study with Henriette Renié in France.

When she was 16, Daphne stopped playing the harp for several years to give full attention to drama school. Later in her life, she was in a hotel in Haiti, and "heard wonderful music coming through the walls in the hotel." The musician was Nicanor Zabaleta, who was delayed between planes on a concert tour. Daphne's love of the harp was rekindled, and she returned to New York and studied with several harp teachers, including Carlos Salzedo, Mario De Stefano, and Marcel Grandjany, whom she loved because "he knew what you needed, and didn't try to remake your playing."

Daphne started her performing career in a famous New York cabaret, the Reuban Bleu. Jazz harpist Caspar Reardon had been performing at the club, and when he left, Daphne auditioned for Julius Monk, the cabaret's impresario and entrepreneur. Julius Monk was also a well-known jazz piano player, and he accompanied Daphne as she sang "Rum and Coca-Cola." Daphne performed off and on at the Reuban Bleu for twelve years, often sharing the bill with artists such as Billie Holiday.

At this time Daphne also began performing solo classical concerts for the Community Concerts Association. She recalls particularly performances at the Universities of Kansas and Minnesota, and school tours on which she performed three concerts per day. Daphne has always had a passion for Country and Western music, and remembers singing songs not particularly suitable for school children.

In the 1950s, Daphne's manager, Eastman Boomer, suggested that she form a group. Boomer, who also managed Erroll Garner and Anna Russell, helped organize *Hellman's Angels*. The name "Hellman" was borrowed from Daphne's husband, who was a well-known writer with the *New Yorker*. Daphne recalls, "we borrowed his name and the bookings doubled."

Hellman's Angels, consisting of harp, bass, and guitar, first performed overseas in Australia, giving lunchtime concerts in universities. In 1968, the group performed at much larger halls throughout India, including Bombay, New Delhi, Calcutta, and Madras. In 1987 Daphne will again return to India, this marking her seventh concert tour of that country.



Hellman's Angels at the Village Gate, 1986



Daphne Hellman and her group on tour of Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and Australia in 1971

Daphne has taken a total of five tours of Australia. She has also performed at many fascinating hotels, ranging from the Savoy in Finland to the Mandarin Hotel in Hong Kong. Daphne admits, "Actually, I'm a big hustler about jobs." In 1970 Daphne travelled to Viet Nam to work as a photographer's assistant with *Time* magazine, and while there organized a tour for the following year.

In Ireland, Daphne performed on the streets as a Busker. She started out playing on a ferry boat, expanded her experience to a hotel in Wexford where she played for room and board, and graduated to playing on Grafton Street, the center of shopping in Dublin, with a guitar case lying open to collect tips. Back in her native New York, Daphne made New York history in 1986, carting her harp down miles of escalators to perform in the subways.

Daphne also loves to play in Central Park, but these are not by any means her only New York appearances. For the past eighteen years, Daphne has been a regular performer at the Village Gate, where she appears with Hellman's Angels. She has upcoming concerts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and performs several days per week at Kitty O'Shea's restaurant.

Daphne's eyes sparkle when she speaks of the music she loves. She has worked with major jazz artists, and greatly respects their accomplishments. She personally loves to play country, and has a repertoire that includes boogie woogie, jazz, country, and classical music. Her thoughts on performing: "In the first place, not to worry, not to play so fast—to enjoy what you are playing and doing, and realize that what you're doing has worth. Don't worry about the mistakes—in the second place, it's too late!"

on the cover

An Ancient Angular Harp

by Roslyn Rensch Erbes

This angular harp of twenty-one strings, now on exhibition in the Louvre, Paris, was discovered in an Egyptian tomb. While its exact age is uncertain, it is one of the oldest examples (if not *the* oldest) of a form of harp found in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian art representations as early as the second millennium B.C. Composed of a large soundchest or soundbox, and a pole-like bar which serves as a string arm or neck, the instrument, like most ancient harps, lacks a column or fore-pillar.

As evident in the cover photograph, the usual manner of holding this type of angular harp was with the soundchest in a vertical position above the string arm. However some relief carvings, particularly those from the Assyrian palaces of the 9th–7th centuries B.C., include representations of musicians playing similar harps held with the soundchest in a horizontal position. In these examples the harp was held so that the string arm was farthest from the musician's body and the arm often terminated in the carving of a human hand which (thus) pointed heavenward. The strings of horizontally-held angular harps were usually played with a pair of slender, baton-like sticks (plectrums); however, the strings of vertically-held angular harps were most often plucked by the musician's fingers (including the thumbs).

The Louvre angular harp is the best preserved of the known examples of this instrument. The sides of its wooden soundchest are still enclosed in the green leather, part of which also forms the instrument's "soundboard." The harp strings, attached to a wooden

suspension-rod which extends the length of the soundchest (on the underside of the leather "soundboard"), are sewn through the leather. At their lower end these strings are wrapped around the pole-like string arm. The tassel-ended cords which appear as extensions of the harp strings are functional, as well as decorative, since they apparently facilitated the tuning of the strings. The wooden soundchest of the Louvre harp measures about 41 inches (104 cm.) in height; the cylindrical string arm is set at an 85 degree angle. While the scale to which the harp strings were tuned is not certain, the length of the instrument's longest string is four times the length of its shortest string.

When the angular harp was first exhibited in Europe, the instrument was placed with the soundchest *below* the string arm, since, to European eyes, this seemed the normal position for a harp. Even as erudite a scholar as Curt Sachs, in his *Real-Lexikon der Musikinstrumente* (Berlin, 1913), published a drawing showing the instrument in this manner. However holding the harp with the string arm uppermost caused the tassels to hang down among the strings, thus interfering with their vibrations. Subsequent attention to the ancient art monuments which included representations of angular harps provided musicologists with the harp position clue: when the instrument was placed with the soundchest *above* the string arm, the tassels no longer interfered with the vibrating strings. In addition, the harp was more easily carried and played by a walking or dancing musician.