

# Robert Maxwell: A Profile

by June Reig

June Reig is a writer-director-producer for television and the winner of numerous broadcast awards including the Peabody, Ohio State, Christopher and Prix Jeunesse.

Two of her outstanding music specials for NBC-TV are *An Afternoon at Tanglewood* with Erich Leinsdorf and the Boston Symphony and *The Heart of Christmas* with the NBC Symphony, the Robert Shaw Chorale and Robert Maxwell.

Ms. Reig is also an author, a contributor to *The New York Times*' "Arts and Leisure," and has been cited in *Who's Who in America* since 1982 for outstanding achievement in her field.

Before coming to television, Reig was the Producer-Director of the University Theatre at New York University and a teacher there in the Dramatic Arts Department.

Robert Maxwell, trained in the classical tradition to become a classical harpist, dramatically at the age of eighteen moved in the direction of popular music and began a career as brilliant and multi-faceted as a butterfly's eye.

When I first met Robert Maxwell, I knew him only as a famous composer. I had no idea he was also Robert Maxwell the concert performer, supper club jazz harpist, recording artist, conductor, television jingle composer and teacher!

That is not the half of it. I never dreamed that Robert Maxwell would become the prize-winning composer-conductor of my NBC television specials for the next sixteen years.

But I am getting ahead of the story. Back in 1964, I was looking for a composer to score a film I had just written and directed for NBC television.

Robert's agent stopped by my office and asked: "How would you like to have the composer of *Ebb Tide* and *Shangri-La* write your movie score?"

"Would I," I gasped, "I'd love it! Do you think he'd be interested?"

"Call him and see!" he replied.

I felt excited. Not only was *Ebb Tide* my favorite pop song, but it had been the number one song in America for sixteen weeks straight, so the thought of *Ebb Tide*'s composer writing music for my show was tantalizing.

I decided to call him. My heart beat a little faster as I waited for my secretary to say, "Robert Maxwell is on the line for you."

When I picked up my phone and heard the soft-spoken, unassuming and slightly hesitant voice of Robert Maxwell, I relaxed. He did not sound like the usual aggressive self-promoter I was accustomed to dealing with in the television business.

We agreed to meet the next day at 3 p.m. in my NBC office on the seventh floor of the RCA Building.

To my delight, our meeting went extremely well, and after screening my film together Robert said he would indeed like to compose the music. I was elated!



Collector Robert Maxwell with his 18th century Louis Quinze harp trimmed with gold leaf on the crown and chinoiserie tracings on the sound board.

Robert wrote a beautiful and fitting score, and *Kristie* came in a winner with good reviews, good ratings and a good working relationship between Robert and me.

During the weeks of music conferences, recording sessions, editing and the final mix for the show that followed, I learned much more about my composer including the fact that he was also Robert Maxwell the harpist.

## *Music in the Air*

His background goes back to the Bronx, New York, where he was born on 19 April 1921, named Max Rosen and was affectionately called Maxie.

Maxie was the youngest of the three Rosen brothers but would later change his name to Robert Maxwell when beginning his professional career.

When I asked Robert whether his parents were also musicians, he said:

No, but my mother loved music and vowed that her sons would study music. The sounds of the masters emanating from an old wind-up Victrola filled our tenement flat night and day, and in spite of the poverty of those depression years, we had an old upright piano sitting in the living room.

The year 1928 proved to be momentous for seven-year-old Robert and his brothers Myor and Abe who were eleven and twelve respectively. Movers delivered a harp into their living room and stood it between the upright piano and the phonograph machine.

Myor and Abe had entered a music competition that was being offered at their school in the Bronx. After receiving ten trial harp lessons, the harp being the only instrument available for this par-





*Robert Maxwell at the time he performed with the NBC Symphony conducted by Arturo Toscanini, 1938*

ticular competition, they were declared winners. Each of them was rewarded with a Philharmonic Scholarship. Their teacher was Steffy Ormandy, the harpist with the New York Philharmonic. She was also the wife of Eugene Ormandy who was at that time the conductor of the pit orchestra at the Capitol Theater on Broadway.

Scholarships in all symphonic instruments were being offered by the Philharmonic Symphony Society to children in New York City who showed a special gift for music. Their goal was to train young people who would eventually become professional musicians and play with the New York Philharmonic Symphony.

While my brothers were studying to play the harp with Mrs. Ormandy, I started to teach myself by imitating them.

The next spring, when I was eight, Mrs. Ormandy invited my brothers to a matinee performance of the Ringling Brothers Circus at Madison Square Garden. She had planned that they would take their regular Saturday morning harp lesson and then proceed to the circus, but when they told her they had a little brother at home, Mrs. Ormandy graciously invited me as well.

Their harp lesson that day was a disaster! Mrs. Ormandy found fault with everything they did, and the more she scolded the more nervous they became and the worse they played.

"Can't you do anything right?" she screeched at them.

"I can play it," I suddenly found myself saying. Her eyes darted across the room in surprise, apparently having forgotten that I was sitting there.

"You can?" she answered somewhat softer and about two octaves lower. "Come, show me!"

I don't remember being frightened. I must have realized that not much could be expected from one who had never had a harp lesson. I guess I played the sixteen bar exercise fairly well for an eight-year-old.

"Who taught it to you?" she half scolded.

"My brothers," I said.

I still remember that exciting afternoon at the circus and how warmly she treated us.

The following week I got the news that I too would be awarded a Philharmonic Scholarship and would also study with Mrs. Ormandy.

Although I found her to be a warm and affectionate person away from the harp, when lesson time came she turned into a ferocious task master. She really cracked the whip.

### *A Golden Chance*

It was a golden chance for Robert and his brothers that back in the thirties there was such a thing as a Philharmonic Scholarship.

God bless the Philharmonic Symphony Society! I say this now with all due humility. The sponsors of the Scholarship Committee provided us two or three hundred youngsters with the most thorough musical education available anywhere in the world.

During the late twenties and early thirties, many of Europe's greatest musicians and teachers, many fleeing the scourge of Hitler, settled in this country and enriched our music schools as never before.

In addition to our major instrument we students were given thorough training in solfeggio, harmony, piano, counterpoint and composition. Some of us studied at one of the principal music schools and some of us, myself included, studied privately.

The Committee's strategy worked, in our family at least! Myor Rosen is presently the principal harpist with the New York Philharmonic and Abe Rosen has been principal harpist with many orchestras including the Minneapolis and American Symphonies.

Attending public school classes and simultaneously studying all phases of music in private lessons preparatory to becoming a professional musician placed enormous demands on the young student.

Robert would rush through his school assignments perfunctorily during lunch and a study period; do his harmony lesson during the hour-long subway ride from Brooklyn, where the Rosen family had moved, to Manhattan where he took his private classes; work on his counterpoint assignment on the return trip and back at home would practice the harp for a full four hours!

During those years while the other kids his age were outside playing Johnny-on-the-pony, ring-a-levio or stick ball, Robert was inside playing the harp. That was part of the price of creating a career, but then the kids on the street would never get to play Carnegie Hall or the London Palladium.

### *And Carnegie Hall Too!*

1934 would prove to be a most eventful year for the young artist.

Robert had just turned thirteen when he was invited to appear at Carnegie Hall as guest soloist with the National Orchestral Association, an orchestra composed of advanced students training for professional status on the Philharmonic Scholarship Program. The renowned conductor Leon Barzin led the orchestra. The concert took place on the fourth of December in 1934, and Robert performed Debussy's *Danse Sacrée et Danse Profane*.

As *The New York Times* music critic wrote the following day in his review headlined, "Three Prodigies Heard in Virtuoso Roles," this was not children's day at a symphony concert. "The performers were presented by the Association as soloists 'whose exceptional musical gifts entitled them to be heard in public.'"

"The harpist, Max Rosen, a dark sober youth, showed at once a musical personality. It was evident in many a



bold phrase and graceful turn of expression.”<sup>1</sup>

The most important event of the year for Robert, however, was starting to study with the celebrated French harpist Marcel Grandjany.

My brothers and I had heard such wonderful things about him through that infallible source of all news, the harpist's grapevine.

I started studying with Mr. Grandjany in September of 1934 and stayed with him until I left New York for my first professional engagement when I was seventeen.

It was my great fortune to have had Marcel Grandjany as my mentor during those impressionable and formative years.

### *Toscanini?*

The next four years passed quickly enough and, as I remember, rather uneventfully for me until 1938!

From out of the blue, wonderful things started to happen. In September, I had a phone call from Leopold Spitalny, the music contractor for the NBC Symphony! “We’re using four harps this week. Toscanini is doing an all-Wagner program with Lauritz Melchior and Helen Traubel. Can you make it?”

He was so matter of fact about it as if calling me — ME! — was the most ordinary thing to do. I couldn’t believe it! Me? With the NBC Symphony? With Toscanini?

The entire week was magical. In addition to the regular broadcast from the legendary 8-H at NBC, we recorded the program later at Carnegie Hall.

In December of 1938, Robert was engaged as the staff harpist at WTIC in Hartford, Connecticut.

The WTIC Orchestra consisted of twelve strings, organ and harp. We played everything from soaps to light classics to pop tunes. The staff arranger, who actually was little more than a copyist, would use printed band arrangements from which he would transpose the sax and clarinet parts for the string players, give the piano-conductor part to the organist and give me the guitar part containing nothing but chord symbols.

It was sink or swim! I had to learn to “fake” and learn fast. That was the most superlative training in becoming a “commercial” harpist I could have ever gotten. I stayed in Hartford for two years.

### *A Tanglewood Dream*

In the summer of 1940, I became one of Serge Koussevitzky’s “children” as he liked to call us Tanglewood music students.

When Robert read an announcement that the Boston Symphony was holding a Tanglewood Scholarship Contest, he applied immediately. The thought of winning an opportunity to perform under the “baguet” of Serge Koussevitzky, and spend a summer in the Berkshires as well, supplied Robert with dream material for the coming weeks.

In time, he received a notice telling him to come to Symphony Hall in Boston and audition for Bernard Zighéra, the first harpist with the BSO, at 9 a.m. on 27 March 1940!

Since Tremolo, his model A Ford, did not have a heater, his fingers were frozen by the time he went inside to audition, and he felt more than a little worried.

But once inside and put at his ease by Mr. Zighéra, Robert sat down at the harp and performed a work by his teacher, Marcel Grandjany, entitled *Rhapsodie pour la harpe*.

When he had finished playing, Mr. Zighéra announced solemnly: “You will be notified in a few weeks.” Then



*The 13-year-old prodigy at the time of his Carnegie Hall début, 4 December 1934*

after a slight pause he added, “Congratulations!”

Tanglewood that summer proved to be even more wonderful than Robert had imagined.

Koussevitzky conducted our student orchestra while the first chair of each section of the Boston Symphony coached us.

Other students that first year at Tanglewood included Leonard Bernstein and Lukas Foss who studied conducting, and on the teaching staff, in addition to the BSO players, were Paul Hindemith and Aaron Copland.

Tanglewood was an improbable dream come true!

### *Pearl Harbor*

After a heady summer of classical music with the Boston Symphony, Robert returned to New York and started playing pop music again, this time with various dance bands.

Of necessity, he created a sizable repertoire of solo pop arrangements for harp and started to develop a loyal following.

Then came Pearl Harbor and America’s entry into the war in December 1941. In May of 1942, Robert exchanged his black silk dinner jacket for the white cotton middie of the United States Coast Guard.

Once again, good fortune was with Robert. As soon as he had enlisted, he was assigned to the Coast Guard Band at the request of its leader, Rudy Vallee.

Throughout the war years, Robert performed with the band as a featured soloist entertaining troops at home and throughout the South Pacific.

When the war was over and the band was transferred back to the states, they were stationed on the West Coast



*Seaman first class Maxwell standing at the harp as a member of the U.S. Coast Guard Band, Rudy Vallee, Bandmaster (kneeling third from right), 1942 (Photo courtesy U.S. Coast Guard)*

near Los Angeles and luckily for Robert were asked to perform frequently at the Hollywood Canteen.

It was at those performances that Hollywood talent agents discovered Robert Maxwell and while he was still in Coast Guard whites, they started calling him for work. He was contracted to perform in the film *Tars and Spars* and featured on many of the top network radio shows.

Finally, Robert became a civilian once again, and MCA, the leading booking agency at that time, signed him to a contract.

*From N.Y. to L.A.  
From London to Paris*

17 October 1945 was a landmark day for Robert Maxwell. Opening that day at Hollywood's famous showplace, Slapsy Maxie's, Robert began what was to become a legendary career as a jazz harpist.

For the next fifteen years, Robert would tour the U.S.A., Canada and Europe playing the elegant supper clubs in the States from New York's posh Starlight Roof at the Waldorf Astoria and the Rainbow Room atop the RCA Building to Chicago's Empire Room at the Palmer House, to the Top-of-the-Mark in San Francisco, to the Last Frontier in Las Vegas, to Hollywood's Coconut Grove and Cir-o's. Then it was off to Paris and London where he starred at the world famous London Palladium.

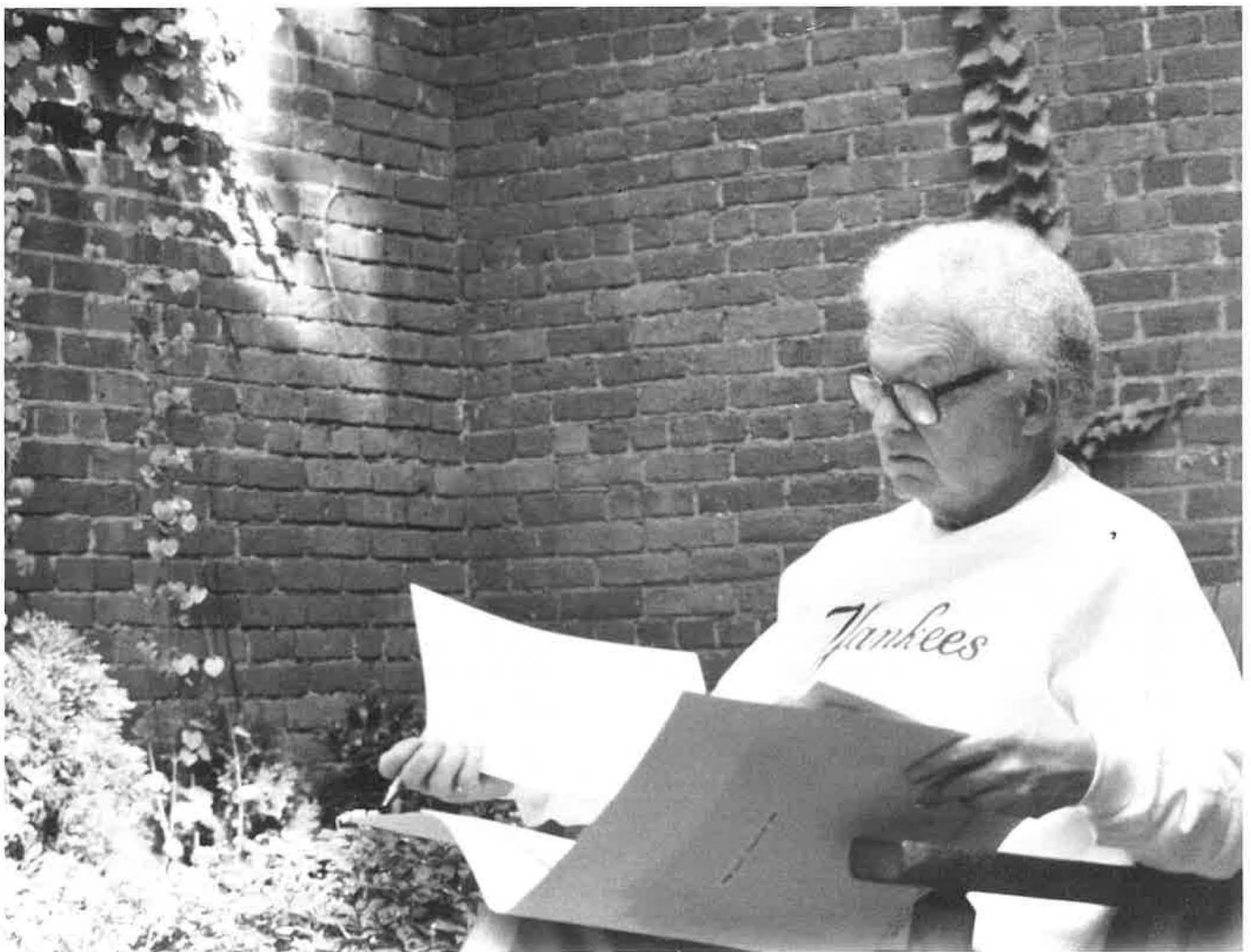
As Robert made the grand tour, critics and audiences alike quickly recognized his style and verve! Will Davidson, the *Chicago Tribune* music critic reported: "To be

succinct, he is wonderful. Maxwell's talent as a harpist is enormous. He is a sincere and exacting artist whose understanding of music and of his instrument gives his performances an authority that too often is missing in the cafe field."<sup>2</sup>



*Robert Maxwell discusses Handel with NBC Symphony conductor Skitch Henderson on the NBC-TV special The Heart of Christmas, 1965 (Photo courtesy NBC)*





*The composer's Manhattan garden offers a peaceful place to work*

In quintessential *Variety* jargon, the show biz bible announced: "Mayfair Room: Another class layout for this society boite and the customers can't get enough. . . . Robert Maxwell warms up on his own boogie composition, then moves into Debussy's *Clair de lune*. Completely without persiflage, the guy plays 'em straight and holds the audience all the way. The Liszt *Second Hungarian*, both classical and swing arrangements, and tricky Jerome Kern medley follow. Closer is an old standby *Chopsticks*. After going overtime Maxwell had to beg off with the aud still not content."<sup>3</sup>

Nicanor Zabaleta, the internationally renowned concert harpist, recalls a Maxwell performance:

In the early fifties, my wife and I had a free evening in New York. Among the many possibilities our choice fell on Robert Maxwell's show at the Waldorf Astoria.

After so many years we are still able to recall the most pleasant evening we spent seeing and hearing him.

His showmanship was superb, with a most varied repertoire of folkloric and popular tunes. A solid technique and musicianship, of course, made all of this possible. He seemed to have a tasteful arrangement for anything the audience asked for.

I am sure he was the successful pioneer of the harp as entertainment in hotels and restaurants throughout the world.<sup>4</sup>

*Time* magazine was one of many to recognize the Maxwell talent. In a feature article, "Swinging the Harp," *Time* declared: "Robert Maxwell is one of the top supper club attractions in Manhattan. . . . The supper club crowd hushed down to devoted silence for Maxwell's twenty-minute performance, even when their glasses stood empty. . . . There is nothing especially unorthodox in Maxwell's technique; the novelty is in what he uses his big harp for and in his arrangements."<sup>5</sup>

Robert recalls that period in his life sighing, "I guess I must have made over a thousand arrangements, everything from the *St. Louis Blues* to a full concert arrangement of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* for harp and orchestra, to the Grieg Piano Concerto.

Walter Winchell summed up Robert's style in his famous succinct way: "Robert Maxwell's specialty . . . he plays a 'hot' harp!"<sup>6</sup>

As I was researching reviews of Robert's supper club engagements, I discovered a credit he had not mentioned to me. It was in Dorothy Kilgallen's "Voice of Broadway" column: "You'll probably be surprised to learn that the harp solos by Harpo Marx in *A Night in Casablanca* were really dubbed in — face of Harpo Marx, music by Robert Maxwell. . . ."<sup>7</sup>



Maxwell conducts members of the London Philharmonic at a recording session of his ballet suite for the NBC-TV special *Little Women*, 1976 (Photo courtesy NBC)

When I questioned Robert about his ghosting, he shrugged it off saying: "It's not the only ghost appearance I ever made! I did the same for Judy Garland, Clifton Webb and Cary Grant when they were filmed also supposedly playing the harp. But I prefer doing my own thing."

During his years on the road, television producers vied to have Robert make guest appearances on their shows when he would come to New York. Jackie Gleason, Milton Berle, Ed Sullivan, Steve Allen, Jack Paar and Johnny Carson have all hosted Robert Maxwell and his harp.

#### *A Turning Point*

Being one of the top supper club attractions, as *Time* magazine described Robert Maxwell, had its pleasures, profits and satisfactions certainly, but success brings its own particular burdens: traveling constantly, living in hotels, doing the obligatory socializing with patrons, packing and unpacking, forever worrying about the harp, would it be delivered in time for the next engagement and in playing condition, not having the leisure or opportunities to listen to music and perhaps most painful of all, that gnawing feeling of not having roots anywhere.

By 1960 all these factors led Robert to consider making a dramatic change in his career and lifestyle. He would give up the road and put down roots in New York.

#### *The NBC Symphony Revisited*

In this new phase of his career, one of Robert's first network television appearances as a serious harp soloist came soon after we had finished *Kristie*. Our next project was the NBC-TV network Christmas Eve Special, *The Heart of Christmas*, that was to precede the midnight mass from St. Peter's in Rome.

Robert performed Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* with the Robert Shaw Chorale and the Handel B-flat Concerto with the NBC Symphony conducted by Skitch Henderson.

On every count, Robert and the show were a great success, attested to by the fact that NBC reran the show every

Christmas Eve for the next five years.

#### *Composing Award Winning Shows and Jingles*

During the following sixteen years, Robert composed and conducted film scores for over two hundred NBC-TV network shows with such stars as Bill Cosby, Ed Begley, Sid Caesar, Johnny Carson, Ed McMahon and Orson Welles.

He also found time to create inventive jingles for television commercials which earned him the coveted Clio Award, Madison Avenue's version of Hollywood's Oscar.

#### *Recording Artist*

To date there are more than thirty-three Robert Maxwell albums featuring many of his original compositions, some of which have become American classics such as *Ebb Tide*, *Shangri-La* and *Song of the Nairobi Trio*. He has recorded for Columbia, MGM, Command, Decca and Mercury.

Ray Charles, Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra and the Boston Pops are a few of those who have recorded Robert Maxwell songs.

#### *Scoring Symphonic Works*

As a serious composer, Robert scored a symphonic suite for an NBC special, a ballet of *Little Women*, which featured the New York City Ballet and Joanne Woodward as narrator. After setting tempi with the principal dancers, he flew to Britain to conduct members of the London Philharmonic in a recording of his score for the film.

This was not Robert's first commission to score and conduct a full symphonic work. That opportunity came in 1961 shortly after he gave up the road.

WTIC in Hartford, Connecticut, the broadcast group where Robert had begun his career some twenty-three years earlier, commissioned him to compose a symphonic suite for the dedication of the station's new Broadcast House.

When Robert's finished symphonic work entitled *The Broadcaster* had its world premiere over WTIC on 27 November 1961, Jack Gould reviewed it the following day in *The New York Times*: "It is both an imaginative and at-

tractive work which the industry might wish to embrace on a broader scale . . . ; the second movement contains a waltz that is lovely indeed and could be a hit in itself.”<sup>8</sup>

### *Memorable Performances*

Although Robert was devoting much of his time to composing and recording, he continued to concertize.

After the death of Robert Kennedy, the NBC television network broadcast a memorial to the slain leader. One of the most moving segments in this award-winning show was Robert Maxwell’s performance of his transcription of the Bach *Chaconne*.

As music critic Robert Jacobson observed: “Many composer-musicians are known for their versatility. Even more are known for their virtuosity. A very few, such as Robert Maxwell, are known for both.”<sup>9</sup>

Later that year when Robert performed the Ravel *Introduction et allegro* with the Master Virtuosi conducted by Gene Forrell at Avery Fisher Hall, the *New York Times*’ music critic Raymond Erickson reported in his review: “The performance and the work of the soloists were on the whole good. Robert Maxwell was outstanding as the harpist in the Ravel.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Most Valuable Contribution*

When I asked Robert what he believes to be his most valuable contribution to music, he answered immediately without hesitation:

My original transcriptions and compositions for the harp!

Years ago when I was one of Koussevitzky’s “children” at Tanglewood, he said something to us students I have never forgotten. I keep a copy of his words framed over my piano. “What is the performer unless the composer writes music for him? How unending is applause — celebrity, success, honors, degrees, medals — and how permanent is the work created by a composer. . . . The notes you produce in your manuscripts will outlast all of us as we are here today.”

I thought back then and I still do today, that those are some of the truest words ever spoken.

I remember the first time I heard the sound of the harp when I was seven and falling in love with it.

But I also remember the terrible feeling of being left out of the mainstream of music making when I made the heartbreaking discovery that the Masters had written almost nothing for the harp!

It was so frustrating. While all the other students I knew who played the piano, cello and violin were happily involved in the performance of the magnificent treasures bequeathed to them by Beethoven, Tschaikowsky, Chopin, Schubert and Rachmaninoff, I felt that I was relegated to the background because of the paucity of great harp compositions.

Robert discussed this situation in depth at an address to a National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences seminar for composing interns at Fordham University:

The plain and simple truth is that harpists are the victims of bad timing. Now that their instrument has been structurally developed to a point where they are able to produce so many unique and wondrous sounds, now that they can play reasonably in tune in all keys, now that they can even navigate complex chromatic passages thanks to an ingenious pedal system which has come such a long way since the days of Sébastien Érard, and now that harpists truly have an instrument that belongs in the mainstream of music making, all the masters are long since dead and gone. I lament

that Beethoven will never write a *Moonlight Sonata* for harp, nor Mozart some *Kleine Nacht Musik*, nor Schubert a few dozen sublime melodies!

But sometimes creation is born out of frustration. It was that terrible feeling of lack of literature for my instrument that impelled me to create my own library of classical and popular transcriptions for harp.

Now it is up to you, the young composers coming up, to take up the torch and create new and significant compositions for this ancient and enduringly marvelous instrument!

It becomes apparent that the usually mild mannered Robert Maxwell can get carried away when he gets up on his soap box and harps on his favorite theme.

Since many of his colleagues and students have urged him to do so, Robert is currently working on compiling, cataloging and rewriting much of his library.

### *A Paderewski Prophecy*

In the Green Room of Avery Fisher Hall after a concert in which Robert performed as guest soloist, I was talking with his mother, Rose, while we waited our turn to congratulate him. She confided a story in me at that time that I had never heard and cautioned me not to tell Robert: “He wouldn’t like it if he knew I told you. You know how modest he is. But, when Maxie was a little boy, I would say he was nine, he performed for the world famous pianist, Ignacy Paderewski.”

In those days, she told me, it was the custom of the Philharmonic Scholarship Committee to hold musicales performed by their young students at the homes of some of their wealthy patrons such as Mrs. Vincent Astor, the Flaglers and the Warburgs.

On one such occasion the honored guest was Ignacy Paderewski, and when it came time for Robert to play, he performed Hasselmans’ *La Source*.

After listening to the nine-year old’s performance, the venerable musician sighed, paused and then said softly, “You will be a great artist someday.”

Fifty-six years later, somewhere, the prescient Paderewski must be smiling.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>“3 Prodigies Heard In Virtuoso Roles,” *New York Times*, 12/5/34, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Will Davidson, “Talented Harpist Now Starring in Mayfair Room,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 4/7/46.

<sup>3</sup>“Mayfair Room, Chicago,” *Variety*, 3/29/46.

<sup>4</sup>Nicanor Zabaleta, letter to June Reig from San Sebastián, Spain, 7/31/86.

<sup>5</sup>“Swinging the Harp,” *Time*, 9/10/51, p. 95.

<sup>6</sup>Walter Winchell, “In New York,” *New York Mirror*, 10/30/46.

<sup>7</sup>Dorothy Kilgallen, “Voice of Broadway,” *New York Journal American*, 5/22/46.

<sup>8</sup>Jack Gould, “Hartford Station Offers a Maxwell Premiere,” *New York Times*, 11/28/61.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Jacobson, “Meet the Artist,” *New York Philharmonic Hall Program*, 11/15/68, p. H.

<sup>10</sup>Raymond Ericson, “Master Virtuosi Offer Potpourri from Paris at the Philharmonic,” *New York Times*, 11/16/68, p. 43.

