

on the lighter side

Casper Reardon: A Retrospective Portrait

by Elizabeth Reardon Deveau, with Remembrances
by Reinhardt Elster and Margaret Slaff

The demand for a second reprinting of a biography of Casper Reardon offers ample testimony to the esteem in which this great and pioneering artist of the harp is held now, nearly 50 years after his tragically premature death. The late Elizabeth Reardon Deveau was Casper's sister, and she contributed her affectionate portrait of him originally to *Harp News* (spring 1952). That article was used again in an early issue of the *American Harp Journal* (winter 1974) with a few deletions from the original text which have been here restored. I am deeply grateful to Lucile Lawrence for envisioning the form this article would take, to Dewey Owens who located members of the Deveau family, to Reinhardt Elster and Margaret Slaff for their first-person remembrances, and last, but certainly not least, to Thomas C. Deveau for supplying the photographs and family memorabilia, copies of which will be assembled by me for the AHS Repository. Mr. Deveau is Casper Reardon's nephew and son of the author, Elizabeth Deveau; he resides with his wife Rita in Byron, CA.

In the years since the article was first published, we have grown more reluctant to use the word "jazz" to cover all popular styles; I have taken the liberty of altering a few terms to convey more clearly to modern readers the author's intention. Casper Reardon was born on 15 April 1907. —Ed.

Casper, or "Brud" or "Cap" as he was called in the family circle, could dance and sing practically as soon as he could walk and talk. My father and uncle were partners in a small theatrical enterprise comprising two silent movie houses and one legitimate theatre which booked the leading vaudeville and minstrel acts of the day, and, occasionally, a Broadway show. It was a sort of family affair, with my mother playing piano for the movies, my father taking tickets, my grandfather and uncle running the hand-wound movie projectors of those days, and my aunt selling tickets. On Friday nights, Casper and I attended the first show of the movies and ate popcorn!

Dad's pleasing Irish tenor voice, Mother's fine piano playing, my violin, and Brud's versatility were in great demand in local circles for amateur entertainment. When Casper was about six he decided he wanted a certain piece he had heard somewhere used for a dance we were doing in our current act. No one knew the name of it, much to Brud's disgust and impatience, although he hummed the melody over and over again for the family. Finally, in desperation, my father called on a musician who identified the selection as the *Coppelia* waltz; but, the surprising thing was that Cap was humming the melody in the original key and insisted that it be played in that register. Needless to say, we danced to the *Coppelia* waltz and everybody was happy.

My mother decided Casper should take piano lessons, but he had different ideas. He loved music but refused to play anything but a harp. Where he ever got the idea we



Casper Reardon

never knew, as no one in town played anything nearer to the harp than a zither, and I doubt if he had ever seen one outside of a picture. I do remember that we had a violin and harp record of the Houser "Cradle Song" which was one of Brud's early favorites when he was about four or five. In later life he played the piano very well and my mother often reminded him of his early aversion to the instrument.

When Brud was about eight my uncle presented him with a small Irish harp. Since there were no harpists in the vicinity, much of Casper's early knowledge and technique on the harp were self-acquired. He had a few lessons at extended intervals from a young lady who used to go to Syracuse for a lesson once a month, and then came home and taught Brud what she had just learned herself. He spent a great deal of time working out things himself on the instrument, and all this at a time when he was too small to reach the Irish harp except with the legs folded up! He was very annoyed with my violin playing in those early days, and if we were to play anything together it was always his interpretations that won out.

During the month of December 1919 my father took Casper to New York City to see the harps of the genial Mr. Hunt of Lyon & Healy. A style 15 was purchased which Brud triumphantly brought home to be the pride of Schenectady, where we had moved.



A professional portrait

It was Miss Adele Fortin, a fine pianist in the music school located next door to our home, who convinced my parents that Casper should go to a competent teacher. On one of her trips to New York for her own lesson, she took Casper along and he played for Mr. Salzedo some of the original things he had done and some Debussy he had learned by himself. Salzedo was just the person Casper had been waiting for all these years. From that time on Casper went to New York once a month for a lesson. He was 15 at the time and he seemed to know the goal he wanted to attain and could not wait to get out of high school to start earnestly his career. Through diligent study and tutoring he completed the four-year course in three and a half years.

After graduating from high school he won a scholarship in harp with Mr. Salzedo and another one in composition at the Curtis Institute. While at Curtis he acquired orchestra experience under Stokowski and Rodzinski. After graduation from Curtis, at the age of twenty, he played one summer season with the New York Philharmonic at Lewisohn Stadium, and then went to the First Harp Chair of the Cincinnati Symphony under the direction of Fritz Reiner. He remained in Cincinnati five years, playing under Reiner and Goossens, and at the same time heading the Harp Department of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music.

While he was in Cincinnati he became interested in Negro spirituals and authentic Negro "blues." Since there was no precedent for the performance of this type of music on the harp, he worked out appropriate techniques of his own for these and other non-classical styles. However, he was still the little boy with stubborn likes and dislikes, and refused to play real jazz on his instrument which he did not consider suitable or appropriate

COUNTRY'S PREMIER HARPIST.

Distinction Accorded Casper Reardon, a Native of This City.

Old Little Falls friends were glad off the opportunity to greet Casper Reardon last week. He and his sister motored up from New York to visit his uncle, Casper Shults. In connection with his visit the following article regarding Casper, published in The New Yorker, is interesting:

Hot Harpist.

The only swing harpist in the world is Casper Reardon of Little Falls, N. Y., a slender, bespectacled young man of 29. A swing harpist, is, of course, a man who plays swing music on the harp. Mr. Reardon is riding on the crest of the current swing-music craze, playing nightly with this and that dance orchestra, and making frequent vaudeville appearances. Last year he grossed \$8,000 and expects to hit \$11,000 this year. He'll probably pay more income tax than any other harpist in the world, if that's any comfort to him. He comes of a theatrical family, and played upstate towns in a vaudeville skit with his father and sister when he was a child. His father, a vintage Irishman, owned an Irish harp (smaller than a true harp,) and Casper learned on this. In 1922 he came to New York to study with Carlos Salzedo, one of the greatest classical harpists in the world. Then he went to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where his progress was so rapid that in 1927, when he was only 20, he was engaged to play with the Philharmonic during its summer season at the stadium. That winter he went with the Cincinnati Symphony as first harp, and remained there for five years, acting at the same time as head of the harp department of the Cincinnati conservatory.

It was in Cincinnati, on a winter's afternoon in 1929, that Casper first twanged a frivolous harp string. He and a number of his harp students were sitting around after a lesson, and suddenly, for no particular reason Casper struck up "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise." It went fine, and Casper began buying popu-

lar records and accompanying them on the harp. It was Ethel Waters' record of "Shake That Thing!" that converted him to swing. It's still his favorite number. Before he knew it, he was playing jazz over a local radio station, under the catchy pseudonym of "The Arpeggio-Gli-sando." "I still looked down my nose at jazz," he told us, "but I liked it even more than I would admit to myself, and finally got so I could play very dirty." "

In 1932 he returned to New York, as an out-and-out, unabashed hot harpist, and in no time at all was playing with Whiteman and Gerahwin on various Woodbury soap and Kraft cheese hours. Then along came the swing mania, and he was all set. He hasn't completely given up his classical work, and now and again plays slowly and solemnly for a wedding or funeral in one of the big churches. His classical repertoire includes two hundred pieces, ranging from Bach to Stravinski, and his swing repertoire is nearly as large. His favorite swing numbers are "Loveless Love," "Honeysuckle Rose," "Washboard Blues," "Junk Man Rag," "St. Louis Blues," and, of course, "Shake That Thing!" He prefers to play in a fairly slow tempo, and wouldn't dream of attacking such a breathless piece as "Tiger Rag." There are quite a few technical difficulties involved in swing harp music. For one thing, the harp has little sustaining power, and the notes fade quickly—much more quickly than piano notes; you have to work fast to cover this up. Pedalling is another tricky point. Harps have seven pedals, each pedal with three positions. Casper feels that it's his pedalling which makes him as good as he is. He pedals in special shoes, made for him by Abercrombie & Fitch. The worst trial of all is keeping the harp tuned. The strings are very sensitive to changes in temperature. He went thro hell recently when he was playing five shows a day at the Paramount theater. The blast from the air-cooling system raised the pitch of his strings, and then, when the time came for him to play a solo, they put a spotlight on him, and the heat lowered the pitch again. (That's what he says, anyway.) "I was so busy tuning," he said, "that I could hardly concentrate on going to town."

Reardon's visit to family and friends in early October 1936 was proudly noted in the home town newspaper. Of great interest is the quotation of an article from The New Yorker, which consistently designates his chosen style as "swing."

for the harp. I have heard him refuse many a lucrative radio guest appearance because the sponsor wished him to play an arrangement of some "jive" number that he did not think would be effective. His popular style was a purist form, and even when he made appearances by himself without orchestral accompaniment, his arrangements held the elusive, rhythmical swing that is unequalled. Dana Suesse wrote the Suite *Young Man with a Harp* especially for him, and it was performed for the first time by the Philadelphia Orchestra with Casper as soloist in 1939.

He was a regular member of the George Gershwin Radio Program and wrote a special harp cadenza for the opening of the program. He also made frequent guest appearances with Benny Goodman, Paul Whiteman, Alec Templeton, and others. For several seasons he was the featured performer at the swank Ruban Bleu where he frequently played Ravel, Salzedo, and Debussy for the night club patrons. He was featured on the Magic Key Program with Dr. Frank Black, and also played many staff radio shows, including the Eddie Cantor Show, the Fred Allen Show, the Sealtest Show with James Melton,



Casper Reardon's sister Elizabeth, a talented violinist and author of this article

and many others. He wrote and played a special harp sequence in the Rodgers show *I Married An Angel* during its New York run.

Casper had marked attributes other than his musical talent: notably, moral courage and confidence in his own opinions, and he continually surprised his friends with new ideas. He called on Mr. Hunt, after he had resigned from the Cincinnati Symphony and Cincinnati Conservatory, and said he did not care for the "humdrum" routine of the symphony and cared less for teaching. He knew his friends would think him crazy when they learned that he was going to devote several years to developing the harp in the popular idiom. He claimed that jazz, swing, or whatever one wished to call it, was here to stay and that it was "thoroughly American."

He died on 8 March 1941, at the age of not quite thirty-four, after a short illness. Besides music he had a number of hobbies. He was an avid stamp collector, loved to ski and swim, and did higher mathematical problems for fun! He was a great reader, delving into Plato and Aristotle and was quite a student of languages. At the time of his death, he was learning to speak Serbian, and had collected quite a bit of the history and folklore of that country. He left many excellent pupils who are still devoted to him, and wondrous true tales of his proficiency on the harp—it is said that when he played "St. Louis Blues" he would sit at the harp playing his part and then tear madly to the piano and fill in the parts Paul Whiteman and the Orchestra would play. His speed of pedaling was incredible. His hips, from the back view while using pedals, literally moved in rhythm with the music. He wore special shoes to facilitate movement of pedals.

His harp repertoire, with editing and arranging in his own hand, is on file in the Music Branch of the New York Public Library, for it was at the suggestion of Lucile Law-

rence, and through her help, that I was able to accomplish this. It is called the "Casper Reardon Memorial Harp Collection" and was given to the Library in my name and in Cap's memory.

My father died in 1927, just before Casper received his contract with the Cincinnati Symphony. My mother died in August 1940, just a few months before Casper, so she lived to see him attain the fame and acclaim for which she had always known he was destined. Casper lived with my mother, whom he fondly called "Bessie," and their home in Cincinnati was a gathering place for

Untimely End of a Brilliant Music Career

**CASPER REARDON, MASTER
HARPISIT, PASSES AT 33.**

This City Shocked at News of His Demise, Following Emergency Operation in New York City Hospital—Born Here in 1907, His Musical Education Began Early in Life, and He Attained Preeminence in His Field—Formerly With Cincinnati Symphony and Paul Whiteman's Orchestras—Introduced "Swing" Music on the Harp, But Preferred the Classical—Played Before President Roosevelt at the White House, and Made a Movie in Hollywood—Funeral Services in Metropolis Tomorrow and Body Will Be Brought Here to Await Burial in the Spring.

"The silent organ loudest chants
"The master's requiem".
—Emerson.

The harp that gave utterance to sweet music under the master touch of Casper Reardon, native of this city, stands mute today. Casper Reardon is dead.

The soul of the talented young harpist, who was only 33 years old and whose musical skill won him recognition as one of the outstanding artists in the country, took flight Saturday night at Polyclinic hospital in New York city, after a brief illness, following an emergency operation. The first general knowledge in this city of his passing from life came Sunday morning, when prayers for the repose of his soul were offered at the masses at St. Mary's church. News of the untimely ending of so brilliant a career came as a profound shock to relatives and friends in this city, where Casper started on the road that led him to the pinnacle of fame and success in his chosen profession.

It might well be said that love of music was born in Casper Reardon, for his parents, the late John and Elizabeth Shults Reardon, were musically inclined and talented as entertainers. The family resided for some years on West Monroe street, and it was there that Casper was born in 1907. He was educated in the local schools and in Schenectady, to which city the family moved from here. His musical education was continued at Curtis Institute of Music at Philadelphia, to which he won a scholarship.

Choosing one of the oldest and best beloved of all musical instruments, the harp, as his specialty, his mastery of it became so complete that he was welcomed into membership in the Cincinnati Symphony orchestra as first harpist playing with this celebrated orchestra for several seasons and becoming a teacher of the harp at the conservatory of music in that city. Later he joined Paul Whiteman and his orchestra in Cleveland. As it was at this time that "swing" music was coming into popularity, Casper studied "swing" and became the first to utilize it on the harp. His success as a "swing harpist" greatly increased his popular fame, but he personally preferred the classical music and ultimately returned to it as his first love. He often decried the extremists to which the "swing" enthusiasts went with their favorite new type of music.

At the height of his success as a "swing" harpist, he made a number of radio appearances, participated in Broadway shows and made a movie in Hollywood.

Casper had the distinction of playing on a number of notable occasions and before distinguished audiences; but the high light of his career came when he played by invitation before President and Mrs. Roosevelt at the White House. He also played for a time with Leopold Stokowski's Philadelphia symphony orchestra.

About three months ago Casper, who had been residing at 39 West Ninth street, New York, began rehearsals for a musical show at Boston entitled, "Crazy With the Heat", but illness forced him to return to New York city. His condition was not not regarded as serious, however, at the time.

Surviving are a sister, Mrs. Thomas Deveau, who resides at the Hotel Empire, New York city, of which her husband is assistant manager; also an aunt, Mrs. John Mea, and his uncles, Casper Shults and City Clerk Dennis B. Reardon, all of this city. Mr. Shults was called to New York yesterday morning and was accompanied there by his daughter, Mrs. Bernard Ryan.

The remains are reposing in the Regency room of the Abbey, 132 East 70th street. Funeral service will be held from the Blessed Sacrament church, 172 West 71st street, tomorrow morning at 11 o'clock. The body will be brought to this city and placed in St. Mary's vault for interment in the spring in the Reardon-Shults lot in St. Mary's cemetery, town of Herkimer, beside the remains of his parents. Casper's last visit to this city was when he brought the body of his mother here eight months ago for funeral and burial.

City Clerk Reardon plans to leave for the metropolis this afternoon to attend the funeral, and will accompany the remains back to this city.

The obituary notice summarized Reardon's career and carried the names of his nearest relatives. The church of the Blessed Sacrament on 71st Street in New York City was attended by Marcel Grandjany during his residence in this country, and was the site of the funeral services for both of these legendary harpists.

Bert Reardon
Casper Reardon
LYON & HEALY

of Chicago

Announces

the engagement of

Mr. Casper Reardon

as

SOLO HARPIST

with the

CINCINNATI SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

and his appointment as
Director of the Harp Department
of the Cincinnati Conservatory

~~~~~

*An autographed announcement from Lyon & Healy*

numerous guests, for Cap loved to entertain and Bessie was a wonderful hostess. When Casper was engaged to do a spot in a movie in Hollywood in 1937 called *You're a Sweetheart*, starring Alice Faye and Ken Murray, Casper bought a new car and he and mother drove out, so she too could enjoy the trip.

Casper was a "master" of modulation and was preparing to write a textbook on the subject. It is all too tragic that he did not live to fulfill and achieve all of which he was capable. He was a courteous, thoughtful person, planning surprises for his friends, generous almost to a fault, most gracious in assisting young players in mastering the angles of swing music, and always helping someone not as fortunate as himself. All in all, he was a pretty special guy, as an artist, a friend, and a brother.

### *A Remembrance by Reinhardt Elster*

More than a half a century has passed since I had the honor and pleasure of meeting Casper Reardon. He visited Philadelphia when I was a student of Salzedo at the

Curtis Institute. I saw him again for the second and last time in a New York radio studio rehearsing for a broadcast with Paul Whiteman.

I was awed and overwhelmed by his success, and, of course, his great talent and originality. My memory of reality is vague since so many years have passed, but my feelings are still clear and strong. Casper played with style, grace, and elegance in the swing genre of the era. His arrangements were unequaled in their delightful inventiveness and ingenuity. With Casper the harp "swung" for the first time in recorded history. He created a way for the harp to participate in the jazz idiom with taste and without losing its uniqueness.

The harp's potential as a jazz instrument is not as great as that of most other instruments, but it has a special magic. Casper understood this. His sister explained that he "refused to play real jazz . . . which he did not consider suitable or appropriate to the harp," or to play "some 'jive' number that he did not think would be effective." That is most admirable. However, in today's "pop culture" it may be a standard too difficult to maintain for young harpists trying to establish a career. But that is another story.

There is no way to evaluate how much we have lost because of Casper's early death. I imagine the great reservoir of talent that might have enriched us. If he had lived, he might have created a bridge—an evolution of a *harp jazz* style—and we might have been at a more advanced and interesting place today.

[Mr. Elster was for 38 years principal harpist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. —Ed.]

### *A Remembrance by Margaret Slaff*

I met Casper Reardon the summer of 1928, when he was harpist with the Cincinnati Zoo Opera Company: the musicians in this orchestra were members of the Cincinnati Symphony.

Shortly after graduation from high school, I had arrived in Cincinnati to join the Cincinnati Ballet, which was a constituent of the Cincinnati Zoo Opera Company. By 1928, I was in my third summer with the Opera—most of our artists were from the Chicago Opera. Fausto Cleva, who became one of the great Metropolitan Opera conductors, was the chorus director; he was then very young and new to this country.

At our first full rehearsal with the Opera, the girls in the ballet could not wait to tell me that I was to go with them and introduce myself to Casper Reardon. I had heard of him, since I was a member of the National Association of Harpists—I had attended a few Conferences with my teacher, Marrett Savern, who was a Salzedo pupil. However, I was not about to do this. I was out of practice and my harp was back in Louisville, Kentucky, my home town.

What a harpist we now had in the pit! It was 62 years ago, but I remember such wonderful harp playing and to my great delight, I could hear every note. All the singers were so excited about him; the musicians were so pleased with this young man with such great talent; even the stage crew could not believe what they were hearing.

After rehearsals Vladimir Bakaleinikov, who was asso-

ciate conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony under Fritz Reiner, introduced me to Casper Reardon. (Mr. Bakaleinikov was also our Opera Ballet Conductor for special ballets which we performed on Saturday nights.)

Mr. Reardon invited me to come with him to the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music where he was teaching—he wanted to hear me play. I remember I was scared *pink!* He was so kind to me when I told him I had not touched the harp for two weeks—he had me warm up in the studio before he heard me play, and was very patient with me and a fine teacher. During the summer I had more lessons with him. All of these were impromptu, since we both were so busy. He even asked me to come back in the fall to study the harp seriously. I told him I wanted to dance and that I would go on to Chicago, yet we became good friends during that summer. I remember him as being so young, and that he did not play cards to pass time as some of the musicians did.

He would join our ballet group (girls and boys) at the Zoo ballroom and do the Charleston with the rest of us; he loved to sit and listen to the band play. We were so full of energy that we could finish our part in the opera and return to the ballroom to dance some more! Thus passed the summer of 1928.

I will always remember Casper Reardon as a great harpist, a good friend, and a fine person.



# HANDEL

## In a New Series of Arrangements for Harp

### BY ELLIS SCHUMAN

Selected from Original Sources

Little Suite for a Musical Clock

Two Sinfonias from "Saul"

I. Carillon Sinfonia

II. David's Harp Interlude

(A Realization of Handel's Only Authentic Music for Unaccompanied Harp)

Triumphal March from "Scipione"

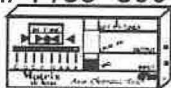
Gavotte from "Semele"

Available From:  
FC PUBLISHING COMPANY  
309 West 6th Avenue  
Ellensburg, Wa 98926  
(509) 962-3620

## TUNERS & METRONOMES AT DISCOUNT PRICES

Call Toll Free 800-722-1199

### SEIKO



**ST 1000 Auto Chromatic Tuner \$79.95**  
7 octave range with LED readout & meter. Also generates 5 octaves of pitches. 1 Yr. warranty.

**ST 900 Auto Chromatic Tuner \$51.50**  
Same as above, except does not generate pitches.

ST 358 Quartz Metronome \$29.95

DM 10 Credit Card iMetronome \$19.95

### MATRIX

**SR 4000 Chromatic Tuner \$34.50**  
LED display shows sharp/flat or in tune. Pitch shift.

MR 500 Quartz Metronome \$24.95

### FRANZ METRONOMES

# 1 Electric Plastic \$36.00

# 7 Quartz W/Vol Control \$48.50



SHIPPING & HANDLING \$2.00 - ADD 3% FOR CHARGES

FREE SHIPPING WITH ORDER OF 3 METRONOMES

FREE CATALOG (Prices subject to change)

**TEACHERS DISCOUNT MUSIC**

PO BOX 390HJ, NEW MARKET, VA 22844

At  
Furman...  
Music



& Much More

A degree in music at Furman University involves more than education in music. It combines comprehensive music training with the study of English, history, math and computer science, the physical and social sciences and the other arts. It prepares you for a career in music and gives you a background of general knowledge essential in any profession.

For more information, contact: Charlotte Smith, chairman, Music Department, Furman University, Greenville, S.C. 29613, (803) 294-2086.

**FURMAN**  
UNIVERSITY