

on the lighter side

Eleanor Fell

by Carrol McLaughlin

When Eleanor Fell was ten years old, the New York Metropolitan Opera Company toured through her home town of Bloomington, Indiana. The harpist with the orchestra, Reinhardt Elster, played pieces for Eleanor such as the jazz standard "Lady Be Good," a type of music she had never before heard on the harp. This inspired the child, who grew to love both opera and popular music on the instrument. Reinhardt gave her his arrangement of "Donkey Serenade," her first popular piece, which served her well in the years to come.

Eleanor was raised in a musical family. Her mother was a professional violinist, and sat with her every day as she practiced the harp. Eleanor's father, a businessman, played the "fiddle," and the two performed in Bloomington, as Eleanor accompanied him by reading from sheet music. Her uncle, Academy Award-winning composer Harry Sukman, also influenced her in later years to enter commercial work.

Eleanor's first harp teacher was Margaret White, with whom she received her Bachelor of Music Degree from Indiana University. Other teachers later included Mildred Dilling and Nicanor Zabaleta, and she spent several summers in Camden, Maine, where she studied with Alice Chalifoux. It was with Miss Chalifoux that Eleanor refined her technique and developed a graceful and thorough style of presentation that she has used both in classical and popular performances and which has been appreciated by audiences internationally.

While at the University, Eleanor gained experience by performing in opera and with orchestras, as well as by playing with artists such as Henry Mancini and Johnny Mathis when they toured through Bloomington. Following graduation, Eleanor held the position of first harpist with the Santa Fe Opera, the North Carolina Orchestra, and the El Paso Symphony, and also taught at the Interlochen Arts Academy.

In 1972 she received an invitation from the Hotel Ivoire in the Ivory Coast of West Africa, asking if she would like to play harp in the hotel's exclusive restaurant. She would have room and board in the hotel and would perform three hours per night, six nights a week.

This was a drastic change from the orchestra performing Eleanor had been doing, but she packed up her harp, her black orchestral gowns, and her music (all classical except for the "Donkey Serenade" arrangement by Reinhardt Elster) and flew to Africa.

The first night on the job a customer requested "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" and Eleanor realized she was not going to be able to play her classical repertoire three hours each night. It was impossible to buy sheet music and the only option was to write out on manuscript paper, by ear, simple arrangements of the pieces people wanted to hear. She recalls that "out of necessity, since I



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Practicing with son Scott, then eight months old, in attendance (Courtesy Photo Communications)

was in Africa for eight months!—the creativity started to flow." Every day she would learn two or three new arrangements, always gaining ideas from the people who came into the restaurant. She remembers enjoying the process—she was doing something new, worthwhile, interesting, and loving it.

While in Africa, Eleanor began writing letters to food-and-beverage managers of Hilton and Inter-Continental



The family ensemble during Eleanor's childhood



In "working clothes" aboard the S. S. Rotterdam

the S.S. Rotterdam's Around-the-World Music Festival Cruise.

When Eleanor returned to the United States she began performing at the prestigious Rainbow Room at Rockefeller Center in New York. She appeared on the *Today* television show, her picture was on the front of *Where* magazine, her engagements were frequently mentioned in the newspapers, and there was a poster displayed on Fifth Avenue highlighting her name. She also appeared at the St. Regis, Americana, and Waldorf-Astoria in New York.

In 1977 Eleanor and her husband, Lee Caulfield, whom she had met in Africa, established the Vanderbilt Music Company selling gut harp strings which were made in Great Britain. The company has now expanded and Eleanor, in addition to working with the business, is writing harp arrangements to share with other harpists. Six of these appear in the Salvi Pop series, and she has several semi-classical arrangements published through Boston Editions including "Opera Themes," "Symphony Themes," and "Rachmaninoff: Themes from the Second Piano Concerto."

Eleanor has also shared her knowledge in numerous workshops and presentations. In 1977 she was the featured artist at the final banquet of the American Harp Society Conference in Boston. She has given presentations at Juilliard, Eastman School of Music, Indiana University, University of Colorado, plus others at several American Harp Society Conferences, and in 1985 at the World Harp Congress in Israel. Eleanor also has been a faculty member of several Salvi International Pop and Jazz Festivals and was a member of the first Lyon & Healy Eastern Pop Festival.

Eleanor puts the same enthusiasm and love for what she is doing into her arranging and presentations that she felt when she was creating her first pop repertoire in Africa. It is a magical enthusiasm that affects all who know her. "I feel a psychological high from sharing what I know," says Eleanor, "and giving back what I have learned. When I share with someone it comes back a thousand-fold."

hotels around the world. She says, "I must have written over two hundred letters—and only received one solid reply. It was from the Zurich Hilton, and I took it." From Zurich Eleanor went on to perform in Hanover, Cologne, Berlin, and also Toyko, Japan. In 1976 she performed on